Oblique governed verbal arguments in Estonian: A corpus-based approach

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Making the distinction between syntactic arguments and adjuncts is a long-standing issue in syntax. Most analyses link syntactic roles to particular cases, causing oblique governed arguments to be categorized as adverbials. I present evidence that in Estonian certain oblique governed arguments bearing one of the six locative morphological cases are empirically virtually indistinguishable from verbal arguments in morphological cases regarded as syntactic. On one hand this raises questions about the validity of the assumption that all case systems can be divided into syntactic and semantic sections. On the other hand it raises questions on the categorical nature of argumenthood.

The structuralist function-based framework of case systems by Kuryłowicz (1964) assigns each case a primary and secondary meaning. The system is broadly endorsed by modern approaches (Blake 2001; Butt 2006), emphasising the fun-damental asymmetry between grammatical and oblique arguments. Modern ap-proaches in Estonian generally follow the structuralist framework and oblique arguments are often classified as adverbials. Only three cases – nominative, partitive and genitive – are regarded as syntactic cases (Veismann et al. 2017; Rätsep 1978). The structuralist approach is rejected by Nichols (1983) and Bickel & Nichols (2008), proposing that language vary in the way their case sys-tems are linked to the encoding of syntactic roles. While in some it can indeed be noted that certain cases refer to certain roles, in other languages all cases can mark both arguments and adjuncts.

Oblique governed case is a widespread phenomenon in Estonian and all six loca-tive cases can be found in complement positions. This work will use the Estonian examples to demonstrate that morphological case may prove an ill-adviced test to determine the distinction between arguments and adjuncts, suggesting that Estonian cases are better described as multifunctional encoding devices, some merely marking the syntactic role of an argument while others encode argu-menthood together with various other, systematic semantic features (Nichols 1983, 1984).

First, a list of all Estonian verbs governing locative case was created, based on previously compiled verb frame lists (Rätsep 1978) and a frequency study, outlining how frequently each Estonian verb occurs in the same sentence with specific locative cases. These verbs include *vabanema* ("to get rid of sth"), *lähenema* ("to approach sth") and *kahtlema* ("to doubt sth"), governing non-

canonical objects in the elative, allative and inessive case respectively, but also *puuduma* ("to lack") governing a non-canonical subject in the adessive case.

The following study, currently in work, only looks at the 70 verbs which were determined as occurring with the governed locative argument in more than 50 per cent of the cases. It is conducted on a 15 million word Estonian Balanced Corpus and its aim is to observe various factors which could affect the frequency of the verb occurring with its locative argument, such as the distance between the NP and the main verb, animacy, semantic roles, frequency of pronouns and negation, tense, etc. In order to gain a profound comparative perspective with arguments bearing "syntactic" case and adjuncts bearing locative case, compar-ative studies were conducted. The study confirms that empirically there is no basis to differentiate between the frequent locative arguments and arguments bearing cases considered to be syntactic. Hence, Estonian case cannot be re-garded as a reliable indicator of the syntactic role.

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