

CASE CATEGORY OF NOUN IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Abstract: The given article is devoted to the phenomenon of case. It deals with the problem of the category of case in the English language. The article presents the origin of the term “case”, definition of the notion and various approaches to the category of case in the English language study: “the theory of positional cases”, “the theory of prepositional cases”, “the theory of limited case”, “the theory of possessive postposition”; their critical assessment.

Key words: case, case category, common case, possessive (genitive) case, positional case, prepositional case, limited case, possessive postposition.

The term “case” is from Latin casus 'fall(ing)', which is in turn a translation of the Greek ptōsis 'fall(ing)' (cf. loan translations in other languages such as German Fall, Russian падеж, from пад-'fall'). The idea seems to have been that of "falling away from an assumed standard form" (Blake, 2001).

“Case is the morphological category of the noun manifested in the forms of noun declension and showing the relations of the noun referent to other objects and phenomena. Thus, the case form of the noun, or contractedly its "case" (in the narrow sense of the word), is a morphological-declensional form” (Блох, 2000).

The category of case in English constitutes a great linguistic problem. Linguists argue, first, whether the category of case really exists in modern English, and, second, if it does exist, how many case forms of the noun can be distinguished in English.

This category is expressed in English by the opposition of the form -'s, usually called the possessive case, or more traditionally, the genitive case, to the unfeatured form of the noun, usually called the common case. The apostrophized -s serves to distinguish in writing the singular noun in the possessive case from the plural noun in the common case: the man's duty, the President's decision. The possessive of the bulk of plural nouns remains phonetically unexpressed: the few exceptions concern only some of the irregular plurals: the actresses' dresses, the mates' help, the children's room.

Functionally, the forms of the English nouns designated as “case forms” relate to one another in an extremely peculiar way. The peculiarity is that the common form is absolutely indefinite from the semantic point of view, whereas the possessive form is restricted to the functions which have a parallel expression by prepositional constructions. Thus, the common form is also capable of rendering the possessive semantics, which makes the whole of the possessive case into a kind of subsidiary element in the grammatical system of the English noun.

There is no wonder that in the course of linguistic investigation the category of case in English has become one of the vexed problems of theoretical discussion.

Four special views advanced at various times by different scholars should be considered as successive stages in the analysis of this problem.

The first view may be called the “theory of positional cases”. This theory is directly connected with the old grammatical tradition, and its traces can be seen in many contemporary school textbooks in the English-speaking countries. Linguistic formulations of this theory may be found in the works of Nesfield, Deutschbein, Bryant and others.

In accord with the theory of positional cases, the unchangeable forms of the noun are differentiated as different cases by virtue of the functional positions occupied by the noun in the sentence. Thus, the English noun, on the analogy of classical Latin grammar, would distinguish, besides the inflectional possessive case, also the non-inflectional, i.e. purely positional cases:

nominative, vocative, dative and accusative. The uninflectional cases of the noun are taken to be supported by the parallel inflectional cases of the personal pronouns:

Nominative (subject)	<i>Rain falls</i>
Vocative (address)	<i>Will you be there, Ann?</i>
Dative (indirect object)	<i>I gave John a penny.</i>
Accusative (direct object)	<i>They killed a bear.</i>
Or prepositional object	<i>They broke the window with a stone.</i>

The blunder of this theory is that it substitutes the functional characteristics of the part of the sentence for the morphological features of the word class, whereas the case form, by definition, is a variable morphological form of the noun. What this theory does prove is that the functional meanings rendered by cases can be expressed in language by other grammatical means, in particular, by word-order.

The second view may be called the “theory of prepositional cases”. It is also connected with the old school grammar teaching, and was advanced as a logical supplement to the positional view of the case.

In accord with the prepositional theory, combinations of nouns with prepositions in certain object and attributive collocations should be understood as morphological case forms. To these belong first of all the “dative” case (to + N, for + N) and the possessive case (of + N). These prepositions are inflectional prepositions, i.e. grammatical elements equivalent to case forms. The would-be prepositional cases are generally taken as coexisting with positional cases, together with the classical inflectional genitive completing the case system of the English noun. The prepositional theory, though somewhat better grounded than the positional theory, nevertheless can hardly pass a serious linguistic trial. In other languages all prepositions do require definite cases of nouns (prepositional case-government). It should follow from this that not only the of, to and for-phrases but also all other prepositional phrases in English must be regarded as “analytical” cases. As a result of this approach, illogical redundancy in terminology would arise: each prepositional phrase would bear then another, additional name of “prepositional case”, the total number of the “said” cases running into dozens upon dozens without any gain either to theory or practice (Ильиш, 1971).

Besides, prepositions may have various meanings depending on the context, which makes it possible for a preposition to correlate with several cases. For example, in English the preposition by, formerly a purely local form (He stood by the window) came to acquire a sense of means or instrument. The Oxford English Dictionary suggests that this preposition acquired its instrumental sense via expressions such as She read by candlelight where the by-phrase, originally a locative (Where did she read?), was reinterpreted as instrumental (How did she read it?). It is not hard to find situations that allow a locative or instrumental interpretation and which could facilitate a locative or instrumental form adopting both functions. Here are some examples: wash the cloth in/with water, cook meat on/in/with fire, come on/by horse.

The third view of the English noun case recognizes a limited inflectional system of two cases in English, one of them featured and the other one un-featured. This view may be called the “limited case theory”. This theory is at present most broadly accepted among linguists both in this country and abroad. It was formulated by such scholars as Sweet, Jespersen, and has since been radically developed by Smirnitky, Barkhudarov and others.

The limited case theory is based on the explicit oppositional approach to the recognition of grammatical categories. In the system of the English case the functional mark is defined, which differentiates the two case forms: the possessive or genitive form as the strong member of the categorical opposition and the common, or “non-genitive” form as the weak member of the categorical opposition. The opposition is shown as being effected in full with animate nouns, though a restricted use with inanimate nouns is also taken into account.

Another view of the problem of the English noun cases has been put forward which sharply counters the theories hitherto observed. This view approaches the English noun as having completely lost the category of case in the course of its historical development. All the nounal cases, including the much spoken of genitive, are considered as extinct, and the lingual unit that is named the genitive case by force of tradition, would be in reality a combination of a noun with a preposition (i.e. a relational

word with the preposition-like function). This view, advanced by Vorontsova (Воронцова, 2006), may be called the theory of the possessive postposition (postpositional theory).

Of the various reasons substantiating the postpositional theory the following two should be considered as the main ones.

First, the postpositional element -'s is but loosely connected with the noun, which finds the clearest expression in its use not only with a single noun, but also with whole word-groups of various status: the man we saw yesterday's daughter, the man over there's dog.

Second, there is an indisputable parallelism of functions between the possessive postpositional constructions and the prepositional constructions, resulting in the optional use of the former: the daughter of the man we saw yesterday.

However rigorously this theory observes the lingual data, still one can't but acknowledge that the noun form in -'s is systematically, i.e. on strictly structural-functional basis, contrasted against the unfeatured form of the noun, which does turn the whole correlation of the noun forms into a grammatical category of case-like order, however specific it might be. Thus, within the expression of the possessive in English, two subtypes are to be recognized: the first (principal) is the word possessive; the second (of a minor order) is the phrase possessive.

As the basic arguments for the recognition of the noun form in -'s in the capacity of grammatical case, besides the oppositional nature of the general functional correlation of the featured and unfeatured forms of the noun, we will name the following two.

Firstly, the broader phrasal uses of the postpositional -'s display a clearly expressive stylistic colouring; they are stylistically marked which fact proves their transpositional nature. According to the data obtained by Khaimovich and Rogovskaya, the -'s sign is attached to individual nouns in as many as 96 % of its total textual occurrence (Хаймович; Роговская, 1987).

Secondly, the -'s sign from the point of view of its segmental status in language differs from ordinary functional words. It is morpheme-like by its phonetic properties; it is strictly postpositional unlike the prepositions; it is semantically a far more bound element than a preposition, which prevented it from being entered as a separate word into dictionaries.

As for the fact that the "possessive postpositional construction" is correlated with a parallel prepositional construction, it only shows the functional peculiarity of the form, but cannot disprove its case-like nature, since cases of nouns in general render much the same functional semantics as prepositional phrases.

Speaking of the possessive case, it is necessary to mention some restrictions on its use. Nouns in the possessive case perform only one function in a sentence – that of an attribute. In other words, the possessive case may only appear in a noun+noun phrase. However, the common case may also be used in this function. Semantic difference between these syntactically identical forms is quite obvious: the possessive case expresses an individual characteristic, whereas the common case denotes the result of generalization – a peculiarity of a class. Therefore animate nouns are typically associated with the possessive case: Shakespeare's sonnets, Austen's novels. This is the reasons for the use of a person's name in the common case: the Shakespeare National Theatre, the Austen manner. The possessive in these phrases expresses generalized qualities, taken in abstraction from the persons. Consequently, names of living beings usually appear in this form (the woman's car, the cat's mat). Names of inanimate entities may be used in the possessive case quite rarely, when these are names of some concrete things: the car's door, the door's support.

The majority of abstract nouns have no possessive form: his career's progress. However, the use of names of seasons, distance, and price are quite frequent: week's notice, at a mile's distance, a dollar's worth of coffee.

Such uses of the possessive as St.Paul's, at the baker's cannot be neglected. In these phrases the possessive form of the nouns represents the head-noun rather than its modifier (compare Paul's house, the baker's shop). Some scientists treat such cases as lexicalization of a noun in the possessive case.

The use of the possessive case of nouns in plural is limited in speech because, as it has been mentioned, the form is impossible to distinguish phonetically from the possessive singular: the girl's room, the girls' room. The only exception is nouns that have preserved their inner inflection in plural: men's, children's.

All the above-mentioned restrictions are arguments for the claim that the possessive and the common forms realize a category more narrow than that of the case. Those linguists that support this point of view believe that this “nounal category” belongs to the sphere of syntax as soon as it is able to form syntactic groups (Mary and Sarah’s house, the man over there’s dog). The scholars suppose that the possessive case has undergone the process of syntacticalization: the ending - ‘s separated from the stem and modifying word combinations has turned into a syntactic marker. Though the claim concerning “penetration” of the morphological marker into syntax may be disputable; however, regarding this marker as morphological is equivalent of admitting in morphology non-analytical forms.

On the other hand, the basic form has no morphological features of the case and is not opposed to anything but the attributive word combination, its function in the sentence is not correlated with any morphological markers, it is only defined in terms of sentence parts. These observations lead some scholars to believe that the category of case in English has disappeared.

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