

Jaakola, Minna & Onikki-Rantajääskö, Tiina (eds.). 2023. *The Finnish case system: Cognitive linguistic perspectives*. (Studia Fennica Linguistica 23). Helsinki: Finnish Literature Society. Pp. 388. <https://doi.org/10.21435/sflin.23>

Reviewed by Max Wahlström

## 1 An ambitious volume on the Finnish case system

*The Finnish case system: Cognitive linguistic perspectives* is a collective volume dealing with the Finnish case system. The systematic coverage of key areas of the case system in the book suggests it may have potential as a state-of-the-art English language descriptive reference work – this question will be kept in mind throughout the review.

The subtitle *Cognitive linguistic perspectives* implies a shared theoretical basis for the discussions. To contextualize this volume is yet somewhat difficult. Cognitive Linguistics has its origins in a U.S.-centered critical reaction to generative grammar. The two influential strains of Cognitive Linguistics, Langackerian Cognitive Grammar (CG) and Construction Grammar (CxG) both figure in this book, with the majority of articles utilizing Langacker's concepts. Nevertheless, the terminology used in the volume to refer to the morphology and syntax of Finnish does not depart from the mainstream descriptive practice as showcased, for instance, by the pre-eminent journal in the study of Finnish, *Virittäjä*. Nothing in the choice of topics either betrays a particular Cognitive Linguistic agenda or focus. In acknowledgement of this duality, I will mostly hold my assessments of the role of Cognitive Linguistics until the end of this review.

Before moving to the articles of the book, I wish to lay out some considerations for an expert reader who is however not familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the Finnish case system and its study. Finnish is sometimes described as a fairly agglutinative language, with a moderate amount of fused morphemes and relatively little allomorphy (for Finnish in this regard, but also criticism of the Agglutination Hypothesis, see Haspelmath 2009). However, the current case suffixes have developed over a long period of time, and they are sometimes of very different ages. A single nominal often requires different stems to host case morphemes, which is a major factor leading to complexity on morpheme boundaries.

The traditional number of 14 or 15 cases means that not all of them pertain to the marking of core grammatical roles. Yet any attempt to divide the cases into core and adverbial is problematic. Of the “adverbial” local cases the allative encodes the recipient of ditransitives, the elative the complements of verbs of liking, and the adessive the possessor in default predicative possession. However, what is sometimes taken as the fifteenth case, abessive, derives, in fact, an adverb from nouns (*autoi-tta* ‘[doing something] without cars’) and a noun in abessive cannot productively head a noun phrase (NP). The introduction to the book does briefly discuss the inflection–derivation question and notes that in the tradition of the grammatical description of Finnish, inflection and derivation have been seen to form a continuum (p. 26–27).

Another reason why a predominantly derivative morpheme is thought of in terms of case is that almost all non-finite verb forms are morphosyntactically on the nominal spectrum and may be inflected for a few or more forms, which are polysemous with cases – these include for instance the abessive, giving these two uses a significantly higher

frequency together than the abessive as a mere derivative marker. Three non-finite stems called infinitives accept only a limited number of the case-like markers, cannot head an NP, and are clearly semantically verbs sometimes being able to encode arguments with possessive suffixes or genitive NPs. Yet the suffixes of these verbs are often equated with nominal cases (e.g., Example 1e, p. 59; see, however, also p. 153 acknowledging some of these complexities).

Additionally, there are two descriptive traditions differing in whether case should be treated as a syntactic or a morphological category. Therefore “accusative” can alternatively encompass two differential object marking phenomena involving three morphological cases or it can designate a single morphological case. This book predominantly gravitates toward a syntactically based nomenclature (see, especially, Jaakola in the volume), arguing that how cases are defined is not a mere didactic choice.

The book is structured as follows: The introduction to the book, authored by Tuomas Huumo and the two editors of the volume, Minna Jaakola and Tiina Onikki-Rantajääskö, gives a short overview of the Finnish case and introduces the Cognitive linguistic perspective on case. The first part of the book “Cases and core arguments” has two chapters dealing with the partitive and the genitive, respectively. Altogether five chapters make up the second part, entitled “Adverbial cases,” and the third part consists of a variety of well-motivated studies, yet slightly more tangential to case. This last part is named “Cases and related phenomena.”

## 2 Core arguments

Tuomas Huumo’s chapter on the partitive begins with a well-thought-out and concise presentation of the functions of the partitive as a verbal argument. Huumo argues for four interrelated semantic functions of the partitive: quantification, indication of mass status, aspect, and negation. While this presentation no doubt summarizes two decades of research into the topic, the thought-provoking analyses are nevertheless highly accessible. Only on page 55, I cannot follow his argumentation: In the context of partitive marked S-arguments of the existential clause, Huumo discusses mass nouns that refer to a kind (*milk is good for you*) and states that these types of nouns cannot take the partitive, only the nominative. I take issue with an example he uses: *maito.NOM on hyväksi sinulle* ‘milk is good for you’. This is not an existential expression, it requires verbal agreement, and it does not allow partitive subjects (cf. Vilkuna et al. 2008: § 893), no matter what the referential scope of the noun as S-argument is or whether it is a count or a mass noun. I agree that kind-referring mass nouns cannot be used as the partitive S-arguments of the existential clause. Yet this has nothing to do with their mass-denoting character: no kind-referring generic expression can be used in existential constructions in the first place, a limitation known, among other, as the definiteness restriction of existential clauses (Milsark 1977: 45). This in mind, Huumo’s conclusion that “q-partitives”, the partitive marked S-arguments of existential clauses indicate indefiniteness, seems perhaps unsurprising.

Minna Jaakola’s chapter makes an intriguing attempt to operationalize the Cognitive Grammar (CG) concept of reference-point construction regarding the adnominal use of the genitive. My summary of what the concept entails is that, allegedly, humans perceive things in binary terms: attention is focused on something familiar, accessible, or recognizable that then in turn helps to define a less familiar entity. This “access point” is termed a reference-point, and, in the case of the adnominal genitive, the genitive marked NP is considered the reference-point, and a concrete linguistic element called

the landmark, contrasting with the head, called the trajector. The reference-point model therefore establishes a structurally stable organization across the grammar, not sensitive to, say, information-structural or semantically motivated considerations. This allows Jaakola to contrast the referents of the proposed landmarks and trajectors in a corpus, and these are classified on a referential hierarchy from inanimates through institutions to humans.

The analysis reveals that the type of referents as genitive modifiers and heads is highly genre-dependent, but the big picture is that humans appear more often as genitive modifiers than heads. After this, Jaakola evaluates the discourse salience of the referents both through assigning them a givenness status and by tracking cataphoric reference. I feel that the results should have been statistically verified, especially in contrast to the type of referents. Statistical testing could reveal otherwise hidden dependencies and perhaps more detailed observations, although I do not doubt the author's broader conclusions: most of the genitive modifiers are identifiable and reference continuity is more often carried by the genitive modifier than the head. I will address the theoretical implications of this analysis later in the review, but a note about the remainder of the chapter: Jaakola assumes that the diachrony of the genitive S-arguments of the necessive clauses is irrefutably established in Inaba (2015). The study is groundbreaking in its material and methodological depth and sets a very high bar for any other study on the topic, but in my view, several key questions still remain open (see Pantermöller 2016).

### 3 Adverbial cases

Tiina Onikki-Rantajääskö's chapter on the local cases is a clear candidate for an excellent up-to-date description with an extensive bibliography for anybody interested in, for instance, the lexical typological profile of Finnish constructions originating in local expressions. It is an accessible yet detailed account of the local cases with both their more grammatical uses, on the one hand, and abstract, on the other. The article also offers an opportunity to observe another interpretation of the conceptual pair landmark/trajector in action. It seems that the terms are used in the chapter to mechanically name the subject-like arguments as trajectors and the adverbial locative expressions as landmarks. This same use is adopted also in Ojutkangas toward the end of the book. When moving toward more abstract uses of the local cases, one sees fewer references to the landmark. I wonder how the author would treat subject-like uses of elative in expressing the experiencer (e.g. *minu-sta.ELA tuntuu hyvä-ltä.ABL* 'I feel good'), not addressed in this article.

The chapter by Eero Voutilainen questions an interpretation laid out in the introduction: The authors of the introduction repurpose an old category of "general local cases" that has been used to represent a set of three historical local cases, essive (location), partitive (source), and translative (goal) (Hakulinen 1979: 100–102). In the modern language, none of these cases mark local relations productively and they have been replaced in these roles by the external and internal sets of local cases. Jaakola, Onikki-Rantajääskö, and Huumo leave the partitive out of their "general" local cases and present essive and translative in terms of local cases. They choose among the current uses *opettaja-na.ESS* 'as a teacher' and *opettaja-ksi.TRANSL* '[become] a teacher'.<sup>1</sup> They argue that the translative represents a metaphorical "goal".

Voutilainen convincingly argues that the uses of the translative can be divided into 1) expressions of actual change (see the previous example), 2) expressions of "fictive" change, as in expressing things turning out to be something, and 3) other closely related

phenomena. Voutilainen himself contrasts these change-centered analyses with the “localist” interpretation offered in the introduction. However, Voutilainen overcomes the seeming discrepancy between these analyses by, in fact, subsuming the traditional six local cases under another division that encompasses also the proposed “general” local cases. Voutilainen categorizes both the essive and the two local cases inessive and adessive as static cases, whereas the rest of the local cases and the translative are grouped as dynamic cases.

Emmi Hynönen’s chapter deals with the essive case, which in its primary function expresses non-permanent states such as roles and properties. Unlike several other articles in the volume that revolve around Langacker as their theoretical center of gravity, Hynönen also leans on Laura Janda. Janda’s idea, applied here by Hynönen, is to examine those uses of the case that overlap or border that of other cases. The author finds several such instances and, in addition, more complex competing constructions.

Maija Belliard’s article reports a data-driven take on the comitative case. Addressing the functions of the case from the perspective of corpus data proves to be fruitful. The findings challenge two common assumptions about the comitative, namely, that the comitative would be most frequently used in its prototypical function expressing accompaniment by a human referent and that the postposition *kanssa* ‘with’, thought to compete within the same semantic domain, would soon replace the comitative. Belliard shows both that the non-prototypical uses of the comitative outnumber the prototypical and that the uses of *kanssa* only partially overlap with those of the comitative, and, due to the separate domains, comitative is not threatened by extinction.

This part of the book is concluded by Auroora Vihervalli’s and Tiina Onikki-Rantajääskö’s chapter on the abessive. The paper is in an important contribution to the discussion about the more marginal cases, as it discusses several key characteristics that distinguish ablative from the full-fledged cases. Interestingly, for the authors, productivity seems to be a key argument for case-hood, but its function as deriving adverbs or inability to head an NP are not considered arguments against it. Based on their online discussion data, the authors challenge some previous claims about abessive’s unlimited productivity. They find that abessive is overwhelmingly used in specialized and even lexicalized meanings. Yet, like Belliard, the authors do not predict the demise of their case any time soon.

#### 4 Related phenomena

The final part of the book contains four more contributions to the overall discussion about cases. First, Mari Siirainen’s chapter offers a refreshing take on a marginal construction of Finnish expressing change-of-state, *puuro.NOM tuli sakea-a.PART* ‘the porridge turned thick’. Unlike other articles in the volume, Siirainen uses dialectal and historical data but discusses the construction also in the context of other Finnic languages. This variety of data allows the author to convincingly demonstrate that the construction deemed marginal in some descriptions was widespread in certain dialects not that long time ago.

The following article by Krista Ojutkangas discusses the co-occurrence of multiple dynamic local cases (in the sense of Voutilainen, same volume). Ojutkangas presents some typological claims about the distribution of source and goal expressions and sets

---

<sup>1</sup> The table includes also elative in parenthesis ‘from [being] a teacher’; a tiny note: the cells for translative and elative have switched places on p. 23.

out to assess these. Yet there is not enough elaboration of these claims to see whether the author operationalizes them in a meaningful way. Some of the results are potentially valuable, but their linguistic motivation remains likewise unclear.

The chapter by Minna Jaakola and Krista Ojutkangas presents interesting details about the system of postpositions in Finnish. Their claim that postpositions are an open class that accepts new expressions without them having to go through additional steps of grammaticalization is intriguing. My intuition is that parallel phenomena with partially open construction types can be found in other European languages that do not have postpositions, but this requires more research.

The closing chapter of the book by Anni Jääskeläinen analyses the *-sti* suffix that derives adverbs mainly from adjectives. In brief, in Finnish, there are a handful of derivative suffixes that forge adverbs, among which *-sti* is the most productive deriving adverbs of manner. In addition to adjectives, the suffix attaches to cardinal numbers forming adverbs of absolute frequency (*kahde-sti* ‘twice’) and, among nouns, to curse words (*se sattui saatana-sti* ‘it hurt like hell’). Since the function of *-sti* seems clearcut, it is perhaps surprising that the investigation is centered around the question of whether as a morpheme attaching to a nominal, *-sti* should be thought of in terms of a nominal case or a derivative suffix. However, as we have seen in this volume, in the descriptive tradition of Finnish, inflection and derivation have been thought of in terms of a continuum.

Jääskeläinen gives the formation of adverbs from comparatives and superlatives and adverbs of absolute frequency as a “strong” argument in favor of the case-like character of *-sti*: it behaves morphosyntactically in a similar manner as traditional case desinences. Yet all Finnish suffixes that derive adverbs attach to one of the same nominal stems used by cases as well, do not allow intervening morphemes, and adapt to vowel harmony. They cannot be used with numerals or comparatives and superlatives (apart from *-in* that in so doing also behaves like *-sti*) – but that is a distributional, not a morphosyntactic property. In the discussion (p. 377), Jääskeläinen presents an important point about *-sti* as a potential case marker: not all the 15 canonical cases of Finnish mark verbal complements. In other words, if we discount *-sti* as a case based on perhaps the most used definition of case, the marking of dependent nouns in relation to their verbal, adpositional, or nominal heads, we should exclude the abessive, at the very least. Also, the abessive cannot generally be used in complex NPs. Jääskeläinen’s arguments will likely remain without wider support, but the discussion in this chapter should not be dismissed. It highlights many crucial aspects of the debate involving the more marginal cases of Finnish and case in general.

## 5 It is not cognitive, but what is it then?

Here I attempt to summarize my criticism regarding the role of Cognitive Linguistics in this volume. Yet a word of contextualization: as has hopefully transpired already, my overall impression of the book is overwhelmingly positive, and the following words do not alter this general judgement.

My first complaints are subjective and perhaps predominantly aesthetic. As a rule, I found it harder to interpret the various diagrams illustrating the semantics of both local and more grammatical uses of case than their explanations in prose. In almost all instances, the text beats the drawing. I understand that the authors do not use these diagrams blindly only because of the traditions of CG; they may genuinely provide information more quickly for a trained reader. In her article, Jääskeläinen argues that the suffix *-sti* contributes to three separate constructions, and, to me, the constructional representation

of the intensifying adverbs, derived from curse words and a handful of adjectives (Fig. 3, p. 376), is informative, compact, and elegant. However, the constructional representations of the adverbs of manner (Fig. 1, p. 370) and adverbs of absolute frequency (called “multiplicative” by Jääskeläinen, a perfectly adequate term as well; Fig. 2, p. 373), seem contrived: these functions of the suffix *-sti* seem merely additive in nature.

Moving toward more conceptual questions, I have tried to track the use of the terminological pair landmark–trajector throughout the book. Whereas the introduction (p. 15) claims that the trajector/landmark alignment “often coincides with the categories of traditional syntax”, of all authors Jaakola seems to offer the most elaborated treatment of the landmark–trajector pair, and, in fact, ties this into the basic argumentation of the study reported in the chapter. Jaakola presents a hypothesis: the two syntactic components of the adnominal genitive phrase can be thought of in terms of reference point asymmetry. The extent to which reference point asymmetry represents anything observable regarding human cognition is a further question I will come back to but let us assume for now it does. Whether the reference point is equated with landmark and the target with trajector remains slightly unclear. Yet to me, their definitions seem almost identical, respectively. However, landmark and trajector are predetermined regarding syntax: modifiers are landmarks, whereas heads are trajectors. The last step in the operationalization of the hypothesis is to choose a classification of the inherent salience of referents and metrics to determine the referents’ salience in discourse as well.

But then what do the results – genitive marked adnominal nouns are more often human-like than the head noun and they are more often discourse-given and can be picked up easier cataphorically – tell us? A human can potentially be said to possess almost anything, but when *a car* is used adnominally, it cannot signal possession in the same sense. Is it really because humans allegedly conceptualize certain things as the reference point and others as the target that a construction used to signal possession, albeit also various other relations between two nominals, shows certain statistical distributional asymmetries whereby one participant is, on average, more often human-like? Or is it because we simply live in societies where humans possess things and cars do not?

I previously noted a problem with an example in Huumo’s paper on partitives – or rather what it is used to illustrate. The discussion on kind-referring mass nouns is preceded by a discussion (pp. 53–55) on the CG account of mass nouns. Huumo refers to Langacker’s (2016: 85) claim that proper names and kind-referring mass nouns (*milk is good for you*) both have a “unique reference”. This is because, Huumo paraphrasing Langacker, these mass nouns name a substance as an “undifferentiated whole” that is “maximally inclusive”. According to Langacker, these mass nouns are “characterized by quality” rather than a spatial manifestation, and therefore the “mass noun referent is unique”. Langacker, however, seems to define referential uniqueness quite traditionally, assuming that proper names refer to unique objects. Huumo perhaps identifies the motivation behind Langacker’s extraordinary equation of the reference of proper names and kind-referring mass nouns, noting on page 54 that in English the article is omitted from these mass nouns, as well as with proper names. It is not sure whether this indeed prompts Langacker’s analysis, but article omission in proper names and kind-referring mass nouns are two unconnected, language-specific diachronic outcomes that must be discussed in the context of the English definite article.

Most of the chapters of the book refer to CG concepts, and by doing so, to Langacker. His academic prose uses virtually no references, not to other linguists, nor to cognitive scientists or psychologists. Langacker’s *Nominal structure in cognitive grammar* (2016)

is, nevertheless exceptional because it is compiled from lectures, and each chapter ends with a question–answer session. I will use one of his answers in hope to shed some light on his thinking.

**Question:** In the beginning of your talk you talked about *this rock* as an instance of grouping. Is there any evidence coming from language psychology that it's really something that is done.

**Langacker:** Well, surely the answer is no. What psychologist would take seriously this characterization, these outlandish notions, and try to test them out? There's no motivation for people to take up this challenge. All I'm telling you is a pretty story – but it's a coherent story and everything fits. (Langacker 2016: 99.)

In all fairness, Langacker goes on for a few sentences to repeat his account of grouping. Yet he openly admits that his concept of grouping is not based on what is known in psychology about cognition but rather he tells people: “trust me, I know”. I have highlighted a few assumptions about human cognition made in the book – not because I do not intuitively believe them or that I could prove otherwise, but because no empirical evidence is presented in their support. In concrete terms, an overwhelming majority of the higher theoretical concepts used in this volume refer to Langacker, but Langacker, in turn, refers to no one.

The volume does distance itself to a degree from making cognitive claims. The authors of the introduction present a cautious formulation in this respect: “this volume focuses on meaning organization construed by the case system of the Finnish language but does not make claims as to its relation to cognition”. As I have shown, this is not necessarily true regarding all chapters. Continuing on the topic of the relationship of Cognitive Linguistics with cognition, Silvennoinen (2023) asks whether Construction Grammar is, in fact, cognitive. Drawing from a selection of corpus-based CxG studies, Silvennoinen recommends that “corpus-based construction grammarians can content themselves with describing language as a social phenomenon; argumentative leaps to mental representations should be treated with caution”.

## 6 Final remarks

I set out to evaluate this collective volume as an up-to-date reference work. *The Finnish case system: Cognitive linguistic perspectives* has a coordinated organization and shares key terminology – and explicitly discusses differing terminological and descriptive choices in the literature. It presents both original research and tries to exhaustively present and describe key areas of the case system. In addition, this volume contains an enormous number of glossed examples with English translations and other contextualized data regarding Finnish. I have a sense that this volume will earn a place as a popular reference for typologists and other scholars interested in Finnish. While this volume is exhaustive, some lacunae remain regarding the Finnish case and adjacent phenomena. A second volume could, perhaps, address the diachronic aspects of the case system, its interplay with the possessive suffix, and analyses of the polysemous markers on verbs, originating in nominal cases.

## References

- Hakulinen, Lauri. 1979. *Suomen kielen rakenne ja kehitys*. 4th edn. Helsinki: Otava.
- Haspelmath, Martin. 2009. An empirical test of the Agglutination Hypothesis. In Scalise, Sergio & Magni, Elisabetta & Bisetto, Antonietta (eds.), *Universals of Language Today*. Heidelberg: Springer.
- Inaba, Nobufumi. 2015. *Suomen dativigenetiivin juuret vertailevan menetelmän valossa*. Helsinki: Suomalais-Ugrilainen Seura.
- Langacker, Ronald W. 2016. *Nominal structure in cognitive grammar: The Lublin lectures, edited by Adam Glaz, Hubert Kowalewski, Przemysław Łozowski*. Lublin: Maria Curie-Skłodowska University Press.
- Milsark, Gary L. 1977. Toward an explanation of certain peculiarities of the existential construction in English. *Linguistic analysis* 3(2). 1–29.
- Pantermöller, Marko. 2016. Dativigenetiivi – ikivanhaa perintöä vai vanhan suomen nuori uudennos? *Virittäjä* 120(3). 441–447.
- Silvennoinen, Olli O. 2023. Is construction grammar cognitive? *Constructions* 15(1). 1–17.
- Hakulinen, Auli & Vilkuna, Maria & Korhonen, Riitta & Koivisto, Vesa & Heinonen, Tarja Riitta & Alho, Irja. 2008. *Iso suomen kielioppi* [verkkoversio]. Helsinki: Suomalaisen Kirjallisuuden Seura. <https://kaino.kotus.fi/visk/etusivu.php> (30 May, 2023).

## Contact information:

Max Wahlström  
Department of Languages  
University of Helsinki  
[max.wahlstrom@helsinki.fi](mailto:max.wahlstrom@helsinki.fi)