A well-known cross-linguistic generalization is that languages with extensive morphological case tend to have greater freedom of word order than those without. How and to what extent this should be captured within grammatical theory has been the subject of much recent research, especially within historical syntax. A number of attempts have been made to encode the correlation in the synchronic grammar by allowing m-case to play an important role in the syntax (e.g. Roberts, 1997; Kiparsky, 1997; Neeleman and Weerman, 1999). Attractive as this is, I will argue that, given current views on the syntax-morphology interface (Halle and Marantz, 1993 etc.) and the demonstration that m-case is actually independent of what is usually called syntactic Case (Marantz, 2000; Schutze, 1997 etc.), any theory where m-case directly affects the synchronic syntax faces grave theoretical problems. I will then consider a series of empirical arguments that have been made in favor of such theories and show that they rest on empirical errors and analyses that are not sufficiently deep. I will argue that the real correlation between case and word order is to be explained not in the synchronic grammar, but in the effect on language change of the role of m-case in parsing and disambiguation, especially for the learner.

For example, it is frequently claimed that DO-IO order is ungrammatical in Dutch double objects because Dutch lacks m-case. In fact, it is grammatical, but subject to intonational and contextual restrictions related to disambiguation from IO-DO (Zwart, 1997). In other instances, it turns out that m-case reflects the presence of independently motivated additional structure, and that it is this structure that is responsible for word-order effects. In particular, in a number of constructions, case-marked DPs in languages like German and Finnish are syntactically identical to PPs in languages like English, differing only in the morphology, e.g. semantic-case-marked DPs in Finnish (Nikanne, 1993) and certain inherent case and double object constructions in German (McFadden, to appear). Other phenomena, like scrambling, turn out to correlate not with m-case, but with OV word order (consider scrambling Dutch and non-scrambling Icelandic). Finally, the gradient nature of case-marking cross-linguistically and historically can be handled better in the historical account, with its tendential morphology-syntax correlation, than with the synchronic account, which must somehow encode how much morphology is necessary to have syntactic consequences, making precise and correct predictions for all languages at all times, an arguably impossible task.

References


