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Government by the Governed

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Government is typically described as “a kind of syntactic linkage whereby one word (or word class) requires a specific morphological form of another word (or class)” (Crystal 1985:139). The most common examples are those of a verb or preposition determining the grammatical case of its noun phrase complement. The purpose of this paper is to examine the general assumption that government is unidirectional, i.e. that the properties of the governed item are irrelevant.¹ In search of a counterexample, I will discuss various instances of verbs and pre/postpositions co-occurring with noun phrases in different cases.

No problems arise if the difference in case can be attributed to features of the governing element, as in Georgian:

- (1a) *mecnier-i c'ers c'eril-s* scholar-NOM writes letter-DAT²
(1b) *mecnier-ma dac'era c'eril-i* scholar-ERG wrote letter-NOM
(1c) *mecnier-s dauc'eria c'eril-i* scholar-DAT has_written letter-NOM

The case of subject and object NPs depends (among other things) on the tense of the verb.

We can also assume different governors in the next example. Some local prepositions in Serbo-Croat are said to take different cases depending on whether a position or a movement is referred to:

- (2a) *na stolic-i* on chair-PREP (position, 'on')
(2b) *na stolic-u* on chair-ACC (movement, 'onto') |⁶¹⁹

The obvious solution is to treat *na* with prepositional and *na* with accusative as homonyms (although dictionaries usually don't).

Sometimes a preposition can be followed by either of two cases without any difference in meaning; this may be true of German *je* 'per':

- (3a) *je tatsächlich geleistet-e* (ACC) *Einzelstunde* 'for each hour actually taught'
(form used by the University of Essen, 1984)
(3b) *je tatsächlich geleistet-er* (DAT) *Einzelstunde* (dto., 1986)

Such “free variation” is fully compatible with directional government.

The question whether cases can be “meaningful” has received a good deal of attention (cf. Mel’čuk 1986: 56-60; Babby 1986: 199-207; Moravcsik 1978). One example of “semantic case” comes from Finnish:

- (4a) *halua-n jäätelö-n* want-1.SG ice_cream-GEN (‘the ice cream’)
 (4b) *halua-n jäätelö-ä* want-1.SG ice_cream-PART (‘some ice cream’)

As the selection of genitive or partitive contributes to the meaning, it cannot be determined by government alone. Further mechanisms of case assignment must be introduced (cf. Mel’čuk 1986: 58; Babby 1986: 201-203), but where government applies, it still works in one direction.

Another widely discussed phenomenon are split ergative systems of the type found in Mangarayi (Australia): “In the distribution of forms over syntactic case functions, masculine and feminine nouns pattern nominative-accusatively, while neuter nouns pattern ergative-absolutively.” (Merlan 1982:56), i.e. we find the following forms:

(5)	transitive subject	intransitive subject	transitive subject
m./f.	NOMINATIVE	NOMINATIVE	ACCUSATIVE
n.	ERGATIVE	ABSOLUTE	ABSOLUTE

In other languages, e.g. Yidiny, the split is between nouns (ergative-absolutive) and pronouns (nominative-accusative). If nouns and pronouns are allowed to have different case systems (cf. Mel’čuk 1986: 52, 82 on English), we could say, for example, that transitive subjects are assigned both the nominative and the ergative. Since nominals in Mangarayi and Yidiny never have both a nominative and an ergative form, no conflict can result. If, however, we require nouns and pronouns (and even more so, nouns of different genders) to have the same paradigms, we must assume a three-way distinction between ergative, accusative and, say, neutral case, with extensive syncretism (cf. Comrie 1986: 92).

A somewhat different situation obtains in Karaim (and several other Turkic languages), where postpositions that follow the (unmarked) nominative form of nouns require certain pronouns to be in the genitive:

- (6a) *koŋlar-y byla* hand-PLUR-3.POSS with (‘with their hands’)
 (6b) *men-im byla* I-GEN with (‘with me’)

Nouns and pronouns have the same set of case distinctions so that the governing properties of *byla* cannot be stated without reference to the governed element unless we set up a new case that coincides with the nominative of nouns and the genitive of pronouns. | 620

Similar considerations apply to the prepositions in Latvian. Government would not be unidirectional if we said that they always occur with plural nouns in the dative, regardless of whether they take the genitive, dative or accusative in the singular:

(7a)	<i>pie gald-a</i>	at table-GEN.SG	(‘at the table’)
(7b)	<i>pie gald-iem</i>	at table-DAT.PL	(‘at the tables’)
(7c)	<i>ar draug-u</i>	with friend-ACC.SG	(‘with a friend’)
(7d)	<i>ar draug-iem</i>	with friend-DAT.PL	(‘with friends’)

Again, the way out is to increase the number of cases, i.e. to set up two genitives and two accusatives: one that occurs after prepositions and one that occurs elsewhere (cf. Comrie 1986: 95f).³

The same “solution” (which is counter-intuitive and violates the “principle of internal autonomy of cases” formulated in Mel’čuk 1986: 66-68) works for Old North Russian, where the object of an infinitive stands in the nominative – except for masculine animate nouns, which remain in the accusative (identical with the genitive):

- (8) *i tobě bylo vь ěxavši v Kievь brať moego (ACC/GEN.SG) jati, isña moes (ACC/GEN. SG) i žena moja (NOM.SG), i domь moj (NOM/ACC.SG) vzjati* ‘it was in mind for you, having entered Kiev, to seize my brother and my son and my wife and to take my house’ (Ipat’evskaja letopis’ of 1149, quoted in Timberlake 1974:65).

All these loopholes fail with some German prepositions. For instance, standard grammars maintain that *trotz* ‘despite’ governs the genitive unless the complement contains a genitive attribute; to avoid a sequence of two genitives the head noun stands in the dative:⁴

- (9a) *trotz des Wetter-s (GEN)* ‘despite the weather’
 (9b) *trotz dem Rat (DAT) des Vater-s* ‘despite [his] father’s advice’

Although the case of the head noun need not be the same as that of the phrase (cf. Babby 1986: 182), it is difficult to imagine how *dem Rat des Vaters* could be an NP in the genitive.

The situation is actually even more complicated, as the following quotations show:

- (10a) *sowohl wegen ihrem Inhalt (DAT.SG), als wegen der guten Einfälle (GEN.PL)* ‘both because of their content and because of the good ideas’ (Johannes von Müller, letter to his brother of 15th May 1789, in *Sämtliche Werke*, 5. Theil, Tübingen: Cotta 1810, 256)
 (10b) *dank ihrer Forschungen (GEN.PL) und dem Sich-umtun (DAT.SG) vor Ort* ‘thanks to their investigations and the looking around on the scene’ (Walter Jens in a speech, Westdeutscher Rundfunk, *Kritisches Tagebuch*, 2nd April 1984)
 (10c) *trotz dem ominösen Poltern und Krachen (DAT.SG) von draußen, und trotz der Wolken (GEN.PL) von Gips* ‘despite the ominous rumbling and banging from outside and despite the clouds of plaster of Paris’ (Janina David, *Ein Stück Erde*, transl. from English by Hannelore Neves, München/Wien: Hanser 1982, 115)

It may be significant that the genitive singular (and the dative plural in 10a) would have been marked by a suffix on the noun; on the other hand, bare plural nouns almost always ⁶²¹ have the dative suffix *-n* where applicable (cf. Gelhaus/Frey/Heyne 1982: 89). We might therefore speculate that a principle of least effort is at work here. At any rate, the choice between genitive and dative appears to involve gender and number (or declension class) as well as constituent structure. If this is still government rather than anarchy, the governed noun phrase must “have a say” in how it is governed.

Notes

- [1](#) In Government-Binding Theory, a distinction is made between *government* (a structural relation between constituents) and *case assignment*. It should be noted that the standard literature describes the latter as a unidirectional process: case is assigned to a noun phrase by another category, normally one that “governs” it (Chomsky 1981: 49-51; cf. Babby 1986: 171).
- [2](#) Other authors use the label DATIVE/ACCUSATIVE or even distinguish between DATIVE in (1c) and ACCUSATIVE (1a) although there never is a formal contrast. The examples from Latvian (6) and Finnish (8) are also interpreted differently, but this does not affect the argument either.
- [3](#) Comrie suggests that “distributional cases” and “formal cases” should be kept apart and related by mapping rules (1986: 98-101). This avoids excessive syncretism, but we still need many “distributional” cases and mapping rules that refer to the number feature of the governed noun.
- [4](#) On some accounts, this is only true if both genitives would have the marker *-s* or *-es*.

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