

Tracking case 'loss' in Balkan Slavic with corpus data

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This colloquium talk examines the nature of the relationship of morphological case and adpositions through the case study of diachronic Balkan Slavic.

The Balkan Sprachbund is well-known for its long and intense contact situation and the many shared morphosyntactic 'Balkanisms' which do not appear to have arisen through (internal) language shift (Wahlström, 2015 a.o.) The diachronic loss of case in several of the Balkan languages is one such Balkanism. Lindstedt (2019) argues that the interplay of the sociolinguistic factors found in the Balkans predicts the simplification of the case systems. This happened most sharply in the Balkan Slavic languages (e.g. modern Bulgarian and Macedonian).

It is argued here firstly that case is 'L2-difficult' in the Walkden and Breitbarth (2019) sense, in that it is challenging for particularly adult L2 speakers to acquire. Secondly, it is this L2-difficulty in combination with the high numbers of L2 adult speakers postulated for Balkan Slavic that motivated the sharp loss of case in comparison to the other Sprachbund languages.

I use the Diachronic Corpus of Pre-standardized Balkan Slavic to analyse the nature of this case loss, with the theoretical background of Caha's (2009) 'exploded KP'. As is well known, there is a shared functional load between adpositions and morphological case marking cross-linguistically. The KP approach taken aims to account for this shared functional load, predicting that when a case marker is lost, an adposition takes over in expressing the case's function. The synchronic and diachronic predictions made here are the same that follow from applying the Final-Over-Final Condition (Biberauer, Holmberg and Roberts, 2014).

The talk details how the corpus data is in line with this predicted diachrony: it is the more semantic cases that are lost earlier, and the proportion of adpositional realisation decreases as one moves down the tree/hierarchy diachronically. Case and adposition syncretisms too follow the expected patterns: they must occur only with adjacent segments of the hierarchy: e.g. an accusative and genitive syncretism is licit but not an accusative and dative to the exclusion of genitive.

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