Does English really have case?

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Does English really have case?

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Does English have morphological case (as opposed to abstract Case)? Evidence is presented which suggests that it may be a completely case-less language like Chinese, contrary to the widely held view that the distinct pronoun forms and the 'genitive' 's involve morphological case. The existence of case in English has recently been accepted almost without question, but the question at least deserves serious discussion as it is easy to find alternative analyses. According to the analysis offered here, I and me are both personal pronouns whereas my, mine and 's are possessive pronouns; and the difference between I and me, like the one between my and mine, is handled by a very specific and local lexical rule which is sensitive to the syntactic structure but does not involve case.

1. Background

Does English have a morphological case system?\(^1\) Some languages clearly do, and others equally clearly do not; but most linguists would presumably agree that English is on the borderline. It may be that nothing very crucial hangs on the answer, since we already know that both case and non-case languages exist; nor, apparently, does this question have much to do with abstract Case, if morphological case is just an optional realization of it. However, it is important to get the answer right for English, as for every other language, and at the end of the paper I shall suggest that bigger things may be at stake as well.

Do we already know the answer? Most of us seem to think we do, but different people assume different answers. At least one person (one of my anonymous reviewers) writes 'I think we already know that English has no morphological case'; but the vast majority of linguists seem to think the contrary. It may therefore be helpful to start with a brief history.

The Latinate grammars of the nineteenth century imagined all the cases of Latin were to be found in English. A fairly typical example is Sweet (1891: 49), which recognizes nominative, vocative, accusative, dative,

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\[^1\] Thanks to John Walmesley for information about Sweet, and to Steven Schaufele, Bob Borsley, Ian Roberts and three anonymous referees for comments on earlier versions of this note.
genitive, instrumental and locative cases for English nouns; for example, the instrumental of *lightning* is by *lightning* (as in *He was struck by lightning*). This ‘functional’ view of case makes it inevitable that English (or any other language) has case, and hardly relates to the actual forms used, as Sweet himself had recognized some years earlier (1875: 495):

...the truth is that, whatever the history may be, the so-called accusative of the personal pronouns is functionally not a case at all, but a special form which may be indifferently nom., acc. or dat., as the case may be. The real difference between ‘I’ and ‘me’ is that ‘I’ is an inseparable prefix used to form finite verbs, while ‘me’ is an independent or absolute pronoun, which can be used without a verb to follow. These distinctions are carried out in vulgar English as strictly as in French, where the distinction between the conjoint ‘je’ and the absolute ‘moi’ is rigidly enforced.

Somewhat later Edward Sapir saw the progressive erosion of case as one of his three ‘drifts’, and concluded that in English case ‘is more seriously undermined than most of us realize’ (1921: 165). He recognized only three cases, subjective, objective and possessive, but even these had lost ‘vitality’. In the same decade Harold Palmer recognized only ‘nominative’ and ‘oblique’ (and these only for pronouns) (1928: 36, 42). His reason for rejecting the genitive was that the genitive ‘s must be an independent word, not an inflection, because it can be separated from the head noun by the rest of the ‘noun-group’, as in *the man I saw yesterday’s father*. However, the most influential English grammarian of the day, Otto Jespersen, took a somewhat more conservative position, with the same three cases as Sapir for pronouns and two for substantives (1924: 173, 180, 182).

It would be hard to claim that we now see things more clearly or more accurately than Sapir, Palmer and Jespersen did sixty years ago. With one exception (see below), the last few decades seem to have seen no serious discussion of morphological case in English (though there has of course been a great deal of discussion of abstract Case of one kind or another). Wherever case is mentioned at all, it is taken for granted as something whose relevance to English is self-evident. Here are some representative quotations:

Personal pronouns...have three different ‘case-forms’...NOMINATIVE...OBJECTIVE...GENITIVE (Radford 1988: 291)

In Latin,...nouns exhibit case feature...In Modern English, only pronouns exhibit such features. (Emonds 1976: 10)

Nouns and most pronouns in English have only two case forms: COMMON case...and GENITIVE case...However, the five personal pronouns...have a further distinction between SUBJECTIVE and OBJECTIVE case. (Quirk et al. 1985: 336)
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Recognition of three NP cases is justified for Middle English (and Modern English) by their formal distinctness in personal pronouns, ... (Denison 1993: 20)

These quotations show how widespread the assumption of case is—in textbooks about grammatical theory, in theoretical monographs, in descriptive works and in historical work (which is particularly relevant in view of Sapir’s ‘drift’). Such quotations are extremely easy to find; in fact, I have found only two dissenting views—the anonymous referee’s which I quoted above, and one that I shall discuss below. The belief in case is not restricted to any particular school or tradition of linguistics. It is espoused by those who are sympathetic to Chomskyan grammar—for example, Haegeman (1991: 142), Fromkin & Rodman (1974/1993: 141)–but also by people who disagree with Chomsky on other issues—for example, Bresnan (1982: 209), Gazdar et al. (1985: 94), Pollard & Sag (1987: 71), Anderson (1992: 118)–or who take an atheoretical or neutral position—Huddleston (1988: 50), O’Grady, Dobrovolsky & Aronoff (1989: 114), Finegan & Besnier (1989: 103), Katamba (1993: 239), Trask (1993: 35). In fact, if one were to look for a matter on which linguists speak with almost one voice, this would be a good example.

Furthermore, there is widespread agreement about what cases there are (though there is rather trivial disagreement about terminology such as ‘subjective’ versus ‘nominative’). All the authors quoted above accept the same three-way distinction as Jespersen: subjective/nominative, objective/accusative, possessive/genitive. There is simply no discussion of the rights and wrongs of this analysis comparable to the discussions published in the 1920s. Are pronouns like my really genitive personal pronouns, rather than possessive ‘adjectives’ (as traditionally assumed)? Is John’s really the genitive of John (in spite of Palmer)? And is John really ambiguous between nominative and accusative just because he and him are distinct?

To summarize the rather gloomy history of the non-debate, linguists have been virtually unanimous in accepting just two views on English case: at one time the orthodoxy was that it had the same six cases as Latin, and now it is the view that it has the three cases presented in the following paradigm:

(1) SUBJECTIVE I John
OBJECTIVE me John
GENITIVE my John’s

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[2] It is true that some say the distinction between subjective and objective applies only to pronouns, while other kinds of NP have a ‘common’ case contrasting with possessive. However this ‘common’ case seems to be just a short-hand for ‘either subjective or objective’, since no rules refer to ‘common’ case as such.
The only recent contribution to the debate is the lone voice of Joseph Emonds. Emonds argues, following Klima (1964), that the choice between I and me is determined solely by their position in the tree, with I used only when directly dominated by the S node. One piece of evidence for this account is that me rather than I is used when the pronoun is coordinated in non-standard examples like (3); this is explained if the coordination introduces an extra node between the pronoun and S (Emonds 1976: 197).

(2) Me and Mary went together.

Admittedly he called the pronoun forms 'cases', as can be seen from the quotation on p. 376 above, but his proposed analysis does not fit comfortably with this terminology. He develops this point later (1985: 220), where he summarizes his earlier discussion as follows:

...the remnants of case found on English pronouns should not be generated by the mechanisms for morphological case... In general, a true case marking rule has to be 'healthy', or it ceases to be a case marking rule at all; i.e., I claim that 'marginal' case phenomena are always vestigial, in the sense that they do not realize any property of the universal theory of case other than being a historical reflex of an earlier system with such properties.

He then gives a general definition of inflectional categories which requires them to be productive (222), which rules out morphological case not only in English but also in French and Spanish. To summarize his argument, the existence of a handful of distinctions in the pronouns is not a sufficient basis for the child to learn that all nouns have case, therefore the child assumes that none of them have case. Instead, he suggests that the child learns a local, language-particular rule which selects I in subject position (that is, in the specifier of V). Otherwise, the default form me is selected.

It should be clear that this discussion goes beyond matters of mere terminology and addresses the nature of the rules responsible for choosing between I and me. These rules, according to Emonds, apply only to personal pronouns, and only to pronouns in one structural position. This is very different from the orthodox analyses in which the choice between I and me is a uniquely visible manifestation of the much more widespread distinction between abstract Case distinctions which apply to all NPs in all positions.

The aim of this note is to add another voice to Edmonds' complaints about the supposed 'subjective' and 'objective' cases, and then to raise once again the question of the so-called 'possessive case'. My conclusion will be that there are CASE-FREE approaches which are reasonable and compatible with all the known facts.
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2. SUBJECTIVE AND OBJECTIVE

The objections to the subjective/objective distinction are four-fold.

• This distinction is only manifest in five personal pronouns (ME, HIM, HER, US, THEM) and (for some speakers) WHO— in Emonds’ terms, it is not ‘productive’. For a language like Latin, there is really no alternative to the case categories such as NOMINATIVE and ACCUSATIVE which bring together words of widely differing forms but similar functions; it would be quite impossible to write a grammar of such a language without recognizing these categories. For English, on the other hand, the situation is quite different. It is certainly possible to recognize case categories such that I and me are distinguished, but it is not necessary to do so; in fact, it is very easy indeed to make do with some rule such as Emonds’ that applies only to pronouns and that relates the forms to their grammatical functions.

It is immaterial what we call the pronoun forms—whether we call I ‘subjective’, ‘nominative’ or ‘subject-form’—but what is important is the nature of the rules that control them. According to the case-based account, every single NP, without exception, is given a case label by some rule (or principle) that is sensitive to the NP’s function (whether grammatical, for example, as subject or object, or semantic, for example, as an expression of duration). The rule for I versus me simply refers to this case label which is imposed on the NP by the rules concerned. In contrast, according to the case-free account most NPs have no such case labels and the relevant rules apply only to the personal pronouns, or perhaps even only to those personal pronouns that have distinct forms. The two approaches are radically different. Neither is obviously better than the other, and in particular we can’t assume that a single accurately targeted bullet is better than a global peppering from a shot-gun. Global rules which sprinkle redundant case features over all NPs are cheap, and may turn out to be cheaper than rules for pronouns only. The point is simply that the existence of distinct forms in personal pronouns does not in itself constitute evidence for case distinctions in other NPs; if we want to clinch the point, we have to compare the two kinds of rule and show that one is better than the other.

• The supposed case distinctions in personal pronouns are even more reduced in some non-standard dialects of English. Hughes & Trudgill (1979/1987: 18) note

the existence in the eastern south-west region of a system of personal pronouns in which the form of the pronoun is not for the most part determined by subject versus object function but by weak or strong stress position. For example (different systems occur in different places):
**Strong** | **Weak**
---|---
You | ee
He | er (subject) 'n (object)
She | er
We | us
They | 'm

Thus:
You wouldn't do that, would ee?
He wouldn't do that, would er?
No, give'n to he.
She wouldn't do that, would er?
No, give'n to she.
We wouldn't do that, would us?
No, give'n to we.
They wouldn't do that, would'm?
No, give'n to they.

In the system quoted, the only pronoun that could be said to have distinct 'cases' for subject and object is he. Would this really be sufficient grounds for recognizing distinct subjective and objective cases throughout the NP system? And would it not be a safe bet that some dialect, somewhere, has (or had) no subject/object distinctions at all?

A third objection to the subjective/objective distinction is that the distribution of subjective forms follows quite a different pattern from what we find in languages that have proper morphological case. Once again the evidence has been reviewed thoroughly by Emonds (1986: 237ff.), but the clearest and most troublesome evidence involves the effects of coordination, as in the following example:³

(3) Yeah but me and Catherine really don't talk about you know.

The point to note about this example is the use of *me* as the subject of a tensed verb. This seems to be the only possible pattern for most young people in Britain, and according to Emonds the same is true in the United States; but of course none of these young people would dream of using *me* for a non-coordinated subject, as witness the following sentence from the same speaker:

(4) Well what have I said about you then?...

For these speakers, *I* must be used if it is the only subject (that is, the entire subject) of a tensed verb, and *me* is required in all other cases. Nothing like

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³ The example is taken from a conversation recorded as part of the Corpus of London Teenager Language which was funded by Longman and made available to me by Gisle Andersen and Anna-Brita Stenström.
this has been reported in any language that has morphological case, since coordination is generally transparent to case-requirements.\(^4\)

It is not at all clear how we should explain these facts, or even what the facts are. As usual, we know far more about standard English than about the non-standard versions, although the latter are much more widely spoken. Do all the pronouns behave in the same way? Is position in the coordination relevant? What about the prescriptive rule (which most standard speakers obey) about listing oneself last (you, he and I rather than I, you and he)? And how do the normal non-standard rules relate to those which allow examples like (5), from Shakespeare (via Emonds 1986: 238, quoting Fowler 1965)?

(5) All debts are cleared between you and I.

As for explanations of the non-standard facts, Emonds has suggested two different formal accounts (1976: 198; 1986: 239). In the first explanation, \(I\) is allowed only when immediately dominated by \(S\), and in the second only when immediately followed by the inflected verb. In neither case is it clear how the explanation generalizes to examples like (6) where \(I\) is separated from the tensed verb by an adverb or located after it.

(6) (a) I always pay my debts.
(b) Have I offended you?

In any case, these explanations are only as convincing as the theoretical frameworks in which they are embedded. I cannot claim to have a better alternative to offer (in spite of the discussion in Hudson (1990: 232)) but it is reasonably clear what we are looking for: a theory of syntax which will allow some restrictions to be blocked by coordination. It is no help at all to assume that the restriction on \(I\) is a matter of case, because case-restrictions are clearly NOT blocked by coordination in other languages.

• The last objection is bound to the theory of abstract Case, so it is irrelevant to those who reject this theory. If the difference between \(I\) and \(me\) really was a difference of case, then language learners ought to see it as a manifestation of abstract Case. Admittedly it is hard to find any clear statement of the relation between abstract Case and morphological case except for the fundamental principle that Case need not be manifested by case; but although Case without case is permitted, so far as I know the reverse mismatch is not. Clear examples of morphological case are always assumed to be surface manifestations of abstract Case.

Imagine a child learning English who uses sentences like \(I\) want an ice-cream and Give me an ice-cream. If Case theory is right, \(I\) has the Case feature Subjective (or Nominative); and if \(I\) really does have the morphological case
subjective, it is very easy for the child to assume that all NPs whose Case is Subjective also have subjective as their morphological case. Furthermore, general experience of coordinate sentences confirms what UG may lead the child to expect, namely that coordination is transparent to externally imposed constraints. For example, if a catenative verb takes present participles as its complement, this applies as much to coordinated complements as to single ones:

(7) (a) He keeps on talking/*talk.
(b) He keeps on talking/*talk and waving/*wave his hands.

These two observations together should push the child very strongly to use I rather than me for all subjects, regardless of whether or not they are coordinated. So far as I know this is precisely what happens when children are learning languages that really do have morphological case; but not when they are learning English. As we have just seen, English-speaking children show an extremely clear tendency to use me in coordination, regardless of grammatical function.

The theoretical problem is not simply that Case theory throws no light on the role of coordination in choosing pronoun forms; it is that Case theory strongly predicts just the opposite of what we find. One possible conclusion is that I is not in fact in the subjective (or any other) case, but it is not clear that this actually solves the problem for Case theory, because it still leaves unexplained why I and me are not interpreted by children in terms of Cases. If I always has Subjective Case and me typically has some other Case, why not assume that they also have different morphological cases? And yet, as we have seen, children in fact assume some analysis (as yet unknown) that avoids any link to Case. This very odd behaviour is not at all what we might expect, so the data reviewed here cast some indirect doubt on the theory of abstract Case itself.

Paradoxically, then, the facts about coordination and pronoun choice force us to choose between morphological case and abstract Case. If we abandon abstract Case, the present objection to morphological case disappears (though the other three persist, of course). But abandoning morphological case is not in itself enough to save the theory of abstract Case.

3. POSSESSIVE: MY AND MINE

The candidates for ‘possessive’ (or genitive) case are the pronoun forms such as my and mine, and full NPs marked by ’s.

(8) (a) My book is the red one.
(b) The other student’s book is the red one.

How good is the evidence that these are indeed case forms? Before addressing this question, we should notice that there are plausible alternatives to this
analysis. *My* and *mine* are traditionally classified as a possessive adjective and a possessive pronoun, and more recently at least one of them, *my*, has been accepted as a determiner (Quirk et al. 1985: 256). We shall return below to the question of how they should be classified, but for the time being the only important point is that these analyses put *my* and *mine* into a completely different word class from *I* and *me* – ‘possessive determiner’ as opposed to personal pronoun. And until recently it has been widely accepted that the *other student’s* is a combination of a full NP and a separate word, ‘s. (As we saw above, Palmer accepted this analysis as early as 1928.) Once again, whatever the details of this analysis may be, it is quite different from an analysis in terms of case; if *my* is not a personal pronoun, a fortiori it is not a possessive personal pronoun. It is against the background of these alternatives that we have to assess the case-based analysis.

We start with *my* and *mine*, where the choice is between a case-based analysis and a class-based one. In one analysis *my* is the possessive case of the personal pronouns *me/I* and in the other it belongs to a word class other than personal pronoun. In both analyses we shall have to decide what to do with *mine*.

• Some of the most powerful (and best-known) generalizations in English grammar mention the word class ‘determiner’. One such generalization is that any singular countable common noun must (normally) be accompanied by a determiner.

(9) I bought *(a/the/every) cheap book.

The words which qualify as determiners by this rule include *my* and the other ‘possessive pronouns’ *his, their* and so on – but not (in general) the personal pronouns such as *him* and *them*. If ‘determiner’ is a distinct word class from ‘personal pronoun’, it follows that *my* cannot be a personal pronoun. Conversely, if *my* is a personal pronoun, it follows that our generalization is wrong; what a singular countable common noun needs is EITHER a determiner OR a possessive personal pronoun (or NP, if ‘s is a possessive case-marker).

• Another generalization about English determiners is that only one determiner is allowed per NP,\(^5\) even though translation equivalents in other languages may have two separate words (for example *the my house* corresponds to *la mia casa* in Italian). Once again the words that count as determiners under this generalization include *my*, so we are faced with a choice between an analysis in which *my* really is a determiner, and one in which *my* is a (possessive) personal pronoun and the generalization contains

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\(^5\) It is true that there are apparent counter-examples in which determiners cooccur – *his every word, the one problem*. However these are severely restricted, both grammatically and stylistically: *every* is ungrammatical with anything but a possessive and cannot be replaced by any other determiner except *one*, and *his every* is decidedly high style.
a disjunction: an NP may not contain two words which are both either determiners or possessive personal pronouns. Under this analysis, it is striking that the generalization mentions the same disjunction of word classes as the previous one did.

- The alternation between my and mine is conditioned in exactly the same way as that between no and none:

  (10) (a) My/no books cost too much.
  (b) Mine/none cost to much.

The same pattern applies, of course, to most of the ‘possessive pronouns’: your/yours, her/hers, it/its, our/ours and their/their. In each pair, the first member is used when there is an overt common noun, and the second when the common noun is ellided. One obvious (and problem-free) analysis deals with this alternation in the lexicon as a kind of allomorphy comparable with the alternation between a and an in a pear versus an apple. But however we treat the alternation, the analysis will surely be more convincing if no and my belong to the same word-class. If my is a personal pronoun, they don’t, but if it is a determiner they do.

- There can be no universal requirement for words like my to be classified as case-marked personal pronouns, because it is very clear from languages such as German and Latin that they are not. In both these languages the equivalent of my takes the same case as the whole NP, just like an adjective.

  (11) (a) Er liebt seinen Sohn.
  he loves his-ACC son
  (b) Er gibt seinem Sohne Geschenke.
  he gives his-DAT son-DAT presents

  (12) (b) Suum filium amat.
  his-ACC son-ACC he-loves
  (b) Suo filio dona dat.
  his-DAT son-DAT gifts he-gives

Any analysis in which my receives possessive case (or abstract possessive Case) within its own NP would be hard to generalize directly to languages of this kind. This is an unfortunate conclusion given that German and Latin are among the languages most widely accepted as having genuine morphological case systems. In contrast, the other analysis fares much better. If my and I belong to different word classes in English, they fit into the same general pattern as German and Latin where the translation equivalents also belong to different word classes: my and its equivalents are classified like other determiners while I is a personal pronoun.

- It could be objected that my and I must belong to the same word class because they seem to reflect the same basic paradigm of personal contrasts (three persons, two numbers and gender in the third person). This similarity
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Table 1.
The related 'personal' pronoun forms

is easy to explain if they are distinguished only in terms of case, but harder under the case-free analysis. But as Table 1 shows, by the same argument we should bring myself into the paradigm as yet another case form. So far as I know no-one has suggested that reflexive pronouns are uniquely identifiable in terms of case, and I assume it is an absurd conclusion. If so, we can't assume that each row in the table corresponds to a single lexeme and each column to a case.

These weaknesses of the case-based approach show that we need much stronger evidence for it than has been offered to date.

4. WHAT WORD-CLASS DOES MY/MINE BELONG TO?

It will help the discussion of 's if we can come to some specific conclusions about the class-membership of my/mine (Hudson 1990: 268–282), though it is not essential to agree on this. The discussion above mentioned 'determiner' and 'posessive adjective' as options for my, and 'possessive pronoun' as the traditional name for mine. We have seen some evidence that my is indeed a determiner, and certainly not an 'adjective' of any kind. We have also seen that the difference between my and mine is probably a rather low-level morphological alternation triggered by the presence or absence of a following common noun. If my and mine are morphological alternants of a single lexical item, a fortiori they must belong to the same word class. But how can mine be a determiner if it can never be used before a common noun, which is after all the typical function of a determiner? The answer to this question depends on how we treat ordinary determiners such as some or this when they occur without a common noun:

(13) (a) The pudding looked good so I took some.
        (b) That book is better than this.
The obvious answer is that *some* and *this* are still determiners even in these cases, with an ellided common noun. The same can be said of examples like (15), where *mine* is the form triggered by the ellision of the common noun.

(14) You can borrow *mine*.

The conclusion so far, then, is that both *my* and *mine* are determiners, in contrast with *I* and *me*, which are both personal pronouns. I think this conclusion is uncontroversial.

However, there is also a more general question about how the word class "determiner" fits into the overall system of English word classes. If we allow determiners to occur with ellided common nouns our determiners will include many examples which have traditionally been called pronouns (for example *some*, *this* and *mine* in the examples above). One conclusion which can be drawn from this is that determiners are in fact just a subset of pronouns that allow common nouns as complements; and if pronouns are a subclass of nouns (as most linguists assume these days), then determiners are also nouns. This analysis has a number of advantages (Hudson 1990: 268–276), one of which is that it allows us to treat all of the highlighted items below as noun phrases headed by an overt noun:

(15) (a) I need *some* books.
(b) I need *books*.
(c) I need *some*.

The distinction between determiners and other pronouns is a matter of valency (that is, subcategorization), and not of word class; the relevant word classes for subdividing the larger class of pronouns/determiners include categories like "wh" (relative, interrogative), "demonstrative", "reflexive", "compound", "negative" – and "personal" and "possessive". In short, we have almost brought *I/me* and *my/mine* back together again, as members of closely related subclasses of "pronoun".

To summarize, then, the earlier discussion showed that the difference between *my* and *I/me* is not a matter of case, but of word class, and that *my* and *mine* are syntactically conditioned allomorphs of the same lexeme. In the last few paragraphs I have suggested that the word class to which *my/mine* belongs is "possessive pronoun". I shall assume this classification to make the

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[6] It is interesting to note that Quirk et al. (1985: 256) classify *my* both as a possessive pronoun and also as a determiner, having distinguished the word-class "determiner" from the grammatical function "determinative". In a later section (361) they say that possessive pronouns can have a "determinative" function, which seems more consistent.

[7] The DP analysis introduced by Abney (1986, 1987) also takes *book* as the complement of the determiner *this*, but treats "determiner" as a distinct word class so that the resultant phrase is a Determiner phrase, not a Noun phrase as in my analysis. This means that simpler phrases (e.g. just *books*) that function like these DPs have to be given a "zero" determiner to make them into full DPs.
following discussion more concrete, but the correct classification is less important than the general conclusion that classification rather than case inflection is the correct machinery for distinguishing *my* from *I/me.*

5. **Possessives: 's**

It is embarrassing for us as a profession that we are still debating whether John's is the inflectional possessive (or genitive) of John, considering how long it is since grammarians noticed that 's is attached to the whole NP, rather than to the head noun. This was one of the points that Palmer made in 1928, and it has been made repeatedly since then. To take an example almost at random, Gleason (1965: 164) says of the pattern found in examples like Fred's and the King of England's wife:

This is traditionally treated as a case form – one of only two – a last remnant of the characteristic Indo-European noun inflection. This it is historically, but it has been very basically reoriented in modern English. His conclusion (166) is that 's should be treated like a postposition, that is, as a syntactically separate element from the NP to which it is attached.

And yet most of the modern authors that I quoted above assume that non-pronominal nouns have an inflected possessive/genitive case. Here is a typical example:

In English, the overt morphological realization of case in full lexical noun phrases is restricted to the genitive case. (Haegeman 1991: 142)

However, it is important to be clear that Chomsky himself shares much the same view as Gleason:

Genitive Case is realized morphologically by affixation of some element to the NP: of in complement position, the possessive element POSS [that is, 's] in subject position. (1986: 194)

Nor is it only Chomsky's followers who see 's as a case inflection:

Nouns and most pronouns in English have only two forms: common case... and genitive case... (Quirk et al. 1985: 336)

What is striking about all the recent views on the supposed possessive case is that they are just that – views, without any attempt at justification. None of the authors quoted even mentions that an alternative has been suggested.

It may be helpful to remind ourselves briefly of the evidence for the non-case analysis. It is very easy to show that the 's attaches to the whole NP rather than to its head noun by quoting examples like the following:

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[8] In the last section I suggested that the determiner is in fact the head of its NP, so man is only 'loosely speaking' the head noun in the man over there.
This is quite different from the behaviour of inflectional cases in languages like Latin, German and Old English, where the genitive inflection is clearly attached to the head noun and indeed varies from one noun to another (for example, the genitive singular in Latin is marked by -i in some nouns and -is in others). If 's attaches to the whole NP, it must be a sister of the whole NP, which means in turn that the NP and 's must be combined in the syntax. Terminal nodes in syntax are typically words, so it has the same status as a preposition or postposition. The facts lend virtually no support to analysis in terms of conventional case.

The NP + 's analysis has three potential weak points which we must consider before we can consider the matter closed: the lack of substance in the supposed word 's; the restrictions on the words with which it can combine; and the unsatisfactory classification of 's as a postposition.

• The first objection is that what I am calling 's is too short to be a word. Indeed, when the NP before it is a plural like my friends it disappears altogether from the pronunciation and is represented in spelling only by the apostrophe: my friends'. The standard answer is that 's is a clitic, just like the 'j in He's finished. If the latter is long enough to count as a separate word, why not the one in John's hat? Moreover, it is common in other languages for adpositions to be clitics (for example Russian v 'in'), so if 's is like an adposition, its brevity fits into a more general pattern. As for the plural, the 's 'disappears' only if we allow ourselves to be guided by the orthography. If we consider the pronunciation itself, we could just as well say that the plural -s disappears before 's; or even that the plural -s and 's fuse into a single morph, in the same way that French de and le fuse into du (de Paris, le village, de la maison but du/*de le village). According to the latter analysis, it would be better to write my friends' as my friends's, with a background rule that the sequence -s's is pronounced /z/.

• The second objection is more substantial, and has been discussed in detail by Zwicky (1987) who concludes that the truth lies somewhere between the two views that I have been contrasting. Zwicky points out that the pronunciation of 's is affected by the morphology of the NP's last word. If this word already ends in a morpheme -s or 's, we don't pronounce the extra 's:

(19) (a) everyone at Harry's/*Harry's's ideas
(b) a friend of my children's/*children's's ideas
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(20) (a) people who hurry's ideas
(b) people who are hurrying's ideas
(c) everyone who hurried's ideas
(d) everyone who hurries'/*hurries's ideas

From these examples he draws the conclusion that 's is in fact an inflection of the last word, but one which (exceptionally) is passed down to this word from the whole NP - a 'phrasal affix', rather than a separate word.

These facts are certainly problematic for the NP + 's analysis which treats 's as a sister of the whole NP, without any special link to the letter's last word. However, Zwicky's conclusion has some rather unattractive side-effects which need to be recognized. In particular, it spoils most of the generalizations that can otherwise be made about English inflectional morphology. One such generalization is that no English word contains more than one inflectional affix (Hudson 1990: 183). If we follow Zwicky, then words like hurrying's and hurried's in (20) will contain two. Another generalization is that only nouns and verbs have any inflections (with some uncertainty about comparison in adjectives and adverbs); but according to Zwicky any word that can end an NP before 's can be inflected, including particles or prepositions like about and with in the following:

(21) (a) The man we were talking about's name is Fred.
(b) The man she lives with's former wife has just joined them.

It is worth considering other solutions before accepting Zwicky's conclusions. Why not extend the rule for pronouncing -s's to these cases as well? Admittedly this raises theoretical problems because the relevant morphemes need not be closely related in syntactic structure, but this is no more problematic than allowing affixes as sisters of phrases.

Lastly we come to the question of classification. If 's really is a separate word, what word-class (if any) does it belong to? As we have seen, Gleason, Chomsky and others compare 's to of and other prepositions, but there are alternatives which deserve to be considered. One alternative (Hudson 1990: 276ff.) is to take 's as a possessive pronoun (as defined in the discussion at the end of the section on my). More precisely, 's would belong to the same word-class as my, his and so on, and like them it would be allowed to take a common noun as its complement; but unlike them it would also have to take a full NP (defining the 'possessor') as a kind of pre-complement. We have a choice, then, between taking 's as a postposition and taking it as a pronoun, so what are the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives? We shall see that the postposition analysis has very little to commend it when compared with the pronoun analysis.

The most obvious disadvantage of the postposition analysis is that it denies the similarities between 's and my. If one is a postposition and the other is a pronoun, why is it that they are so similar in their distribution?
Indeed, I know of only one difference between them, and even that seems to be vanishing through change. For some speakers (myself included) 's can be used, without a common noun, to mean 'at the place of' (like French chez, German bei and so on), but this is not possible for mine and other pronouns:

(22) Why don't you all come to John's/my brother's/% mine.

However I find that younger people at least in London seem to use mine as easily as John's in this way, so maybe in a generation or two the same will be true for all English speakers. Apart from this one restriction, NP + 's can be used in any syntactic position where my or mine can be used.

One particular example of this similarity is that 's qualifies as a determiner for exactly the same reasons as my/mine does: a singular count common noun is just as grammatical with John's as with my, and John's is just as incompatible with another determiner as my is. According to the arguments presented above, determiners are just pronouns that take common nouns as complements, so 's must also be a pronoun. None of these similarities between 's and my can be explained in a postpositional analysis, and they are all explained by the pronoun analysis.

The conclusion of this discussion of 's would seem to be that it is a separate word attached (externally) to the 'possessor' NP, and that it is a possessive pronoun like my, his and so on. This conclusion is not undermined by the rather weak evidence in favour of an inflectional affix attached to the NP's last word. Important and interesting problems remain, of course; the fact is that the NP + 's construction is a new arrival and we are still living through the ensuing change. For example, some people are much more tolerant than others of NP + 's with an inanimate NP (for example % the NP's last word, which I wrote above), and there is great uncertainty over examples like the person next to me's breath. However there is no reason to suppose that any of these problems will be easier to solve if we treat 's as a possessive inflection.

6. Conclusion

Our survey of the alleged morphological cases of English has drawn a complete blank. We have considered all the possible candidates – I, me, my, mine and 's – but contrary to the widely held (but never argued) view that English has three distinct cases in pronouns and two in other nouns, we have found virtually no evidence in favour of treating any of these distinctions in terms of cases. Worse still, we have found good reasons for not doing so. Such evidence as there is seems to favour analyses in which these distinctions are made by very specific lexical rules or in terms of word classes:

(23) (a) I and me are forms of the personal pronoun I/me which are selected by a minor lexical rule sensitive to the word's function (subject of a tensed verb?) and also to coordination (next to and?).
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(b) *My* and *mine* are forms of the possessive pronoun *my/mine*, chosen again by a minor lexical rule sensitive to the presence of a common noun as complement.

(c) *'s* is a possessive pronoun which exceptionally needs a preceding NP; its pronunciation is controlled by a rule which fuses the pronunciations of adjacent *s* morphemes.

Do any of these conclusions have any theoretical interest beyond the analysis of English? In particular, does anything important follow for the notion of abstract Case in theories where this plays an important part? An immediate reaction would be that we already know that some languages have no morphological case, so it makes no difference whether English does or not.

However, on second thoughts the English facts that we have reviewed do seem very odd when seen in the context of universal abstract Case, if we make the reasonable assumption that where morphological case does exist it is always put into the service of abstract Case; for example, a morphological genitive (say) can only occur as a manifestation of abstract genitive, rather than via some completely unrelated rules. On this assumption, it is rather surprising that the relics of English case have been allowed to drift so far from abstract Case. Why did our ancestors start to pay attention to coordination in choosing between subject and object pronoun forms, when it would have been so much easier to take these forms simply as realizations of Case? And why did they let the possessive inflection turn into a separate word when, as language learners, they were looking for morphological reflexes of abstract genitive Case?

Whatever the merits of the analyses for which I have argued here, I hope to have shown that the questions which I have raised at least deserve more discussion than they have been given in recent years.

REFERENCES


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