Why nominative is special: stem-allomorphy and case structures

Thomas McFadden, Zentrum für allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft (ZAS), Berlin

Finnish nouns like *ihminen* 'person' show a stem alternation between *-nen* in the Nom and *-s(e)-* in all other cases, e.g. Gen *ihmi-se-n*. Unlike with other stem alternations (e.g. the 'consonant gradation' in Nom *katu* 'street' vs. Gen *kadu-n*), the conditioning with *-nen* can't be stated phonologically, but must make reference to case categories. Such alternations are found in many languages, but with an apparent restriction: in Nom-Acc languages, case-sensitive stem allomorphy may distinguish Nom from all other cases, but may **not** distinguish among any of the other cases. Where non-Nom cases differ in stem shape, this seems to be triggered by the phonology of the endings, not their category. So *katu* also has Part *katu-a*, because the stem weakening is triggered in closed syllables, but with *ihminen*, all non-Nom cases have the stem *ihmi-s(e)-*, including the Part *ihmi-s-tä* (Table 1). Why should Nom be special? One possibility is that the alternations are sensitive not to case per se, but to the presence of a suffix, and Nom tends strongly to endinglessness across languages. While this may be at work in some examples, it cannot be the whole story. First, in languages like Icelandic and Latin, Nom **is** marked by a suffix, yet is still singled out for special stem treatment. E.g. Icelandic *mað-ur* 'man' has the Nom ending *-ur* but has the irregular stem *mað-*, distinct from the *mann-* found in the other case forms (Table 2). Similarly, Latin *senex* 'old (man)' has the regular overt Nom ending *-s* for the 3rd declension added to a stem *senec-*, distinct from the stem *sen-* found in all other case forms (Table 3). Second, in Tamil, Noms are endingless, but so is one form of the Gen, yet with nouns that show a case-based stem alternation, the endingless Gen patterns with the non-Nom cases. E.g. nouns like *maram* 'tree' have a Nom stem in *-m*, vs. *-tt-* elsewhere (Table 4). The endingless Gen is crucially *mara-tt-∅*, thus the alternation must be conditioned by case, not by the mere presence of any ending. Another possibility is that Nom, as the least marked case category, is simply most susceptible to irregularity, i.e. this is part of the often observed pattern that irregularity is most common in the most frequent forms. Indeed, such a state of affairs might be expected as the outcome of sound changes mangling the stems of Nom forms, which due to their frequent endinglessness are often in absolute final position. Changes of this sort (in Proto-Indo-European) are e.g. responsible for the alternation found in Latin 'man', Nom *hom-ō*, Gen *hom-in-is*. Such an explanation would lead us to expect a tendency, i.e. that the Nom would be most frequently distinguished, but that the other cases would sometimes have irregular stems as well. However, a survey of all noun declension patterns in Finnish, Icelandic, Latin and Tamil (and a preliminary survey of patterns in Russian) has turned up a series of alternations that distinguish Nom from all others, but **no** other kinds of case-based stem irregularity. In each language this pattern could be accidental, but its replication across all four, representing three families and both agglutinative and fusional types, suggests something more systematic. If this stands up as a solid cross-linguistic generalization, it is analogous to what Bobaljik (2012) uncovers for stem suppletion in comparatives and superlatives, and can tell us something about the nature and structure of case categories: **some** case distinctions can trigger stem allomorphy, but others can't. I propose that we can make sense of this if we adopt Caha (2009)'s proposal that the cases correspond to nested structures, such that Acc is Nom plus a piece of structure, Gen is Acc plus a further piece etc. (Tree 1). Thus all cases but Nom have the head labeled B in common, and it is the presence of B that can trigger non-Nom stem forms. So far, this parallels Bobaljik's account of the fact that comparative and superlative suppletion always go together, in terms of the superlative being built on top of the comparative (Tree (2)). But we must go one step further, because while Bobaljik found examples with distinct suppletive stems in comparative and superlative (Latin *bonus* ∼ *melior* ∼ *optimus*), I have found no such patterns for case, e.g. with distinct stems for Nom, Acc and Gen. I.e.

stem allomorphy is sensitive to whatever distinguishes Acc (and all other cases) from Nom, but not to whatever distinguishes Gen from Acc etc. I propose that this is a locality effect, due to an Embick (2010) style cyclic node between B and C in Tree (1). When the form of the stem is determined, B is visible, but C (and the others) is not. This can be derived if we assume that Nom actually involves the **lack** of a case head (overt 'Nom' suffixes must thus realize something else, perhaps 'dissociated morphemes', Embick and Noyer, 2001) so that B is the first head above the position where stem exponence is realized, and that there is a phase boundary above B, corresponding to that proposed for PP by e.g. Abels (2003); Řezáč (2008) on syntactic grounds. We thus have converging morphological and syntactic evidence for cross-modular locality domains. The only exceptions that I have found are nouns like Latin *iter* 'journey', where the split falls between Nom and Acc (both *it-er*) and all other cases (Table 3). However, this occurs only when Acc is fully syncretic with Nom (i.e. not just sharing a stem shape, this applies also to Russian nouns like *mat'* 'mother', stem *mater-* outside the Nom/Acc). Note that this favors accounts of such syncretisms involving the underlying features as opposed to just their surface realization. That is, the 'Acc' forms of nouns like *iter* must be structurally Nom, at least at the stage of the derivation when stem allomorphy is determined, rather than being structurally Acc, but realized by an underspecified Nom/Acc exponent.

Table 1: Finnish

	'street'	'person'
Nom	katu	ihmi-nen
Gen	kadu-n	ihmi-se-n
Part	katu-a	ihmi-s-tä
Iness	kadu-ssa	ihmi-se-ssä

Table 2: Icelandic

	'horse'	'man'
Nom	hest-ur	mað-ur
Acc	hest	mann
Gen	hest-s	mann-s
Dat	hest-i	mann-i

Table 3: Latin

	'old man'	'man'	'journey'
Nom	senex	hom-ō	it-er
Acc	sen-em	hom-in-em	it-er
Gen	sen-is	hom-in-is	it-iner-is
Dat	sen-ī	hom-in-ī	it-iner-ī

Table 4: Tamil

	'tree'
Nom	maram
Acc	maratt-ai
Dat	maratt-ukku
Gen	maratt-ooḍa/maratt-∅

(1)
```
          Comitative
          /\
      F  Instrumental
         /\
       E   Dative
           /\
         D   Genitive
             /\
           C  Accusative
              /\
            B  Nominative
               /\
             A   NP
                 /‾\
                 ...
```

(2)
```
            s
           /\
       SPRL   c
             /\
         CMPR   a
                |
               ADJ
```
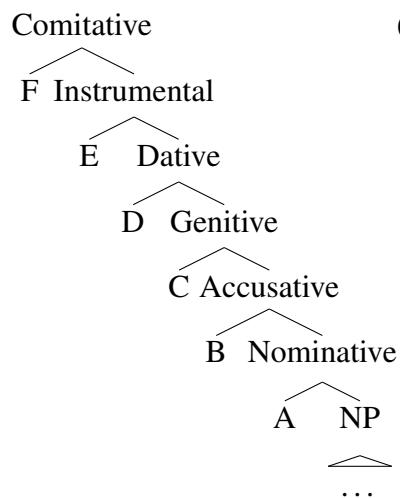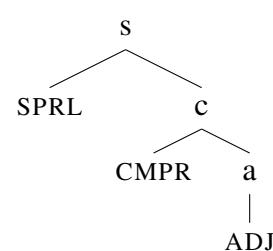
Selected References ● **Bobaljik, JD. 2012.** *Universals in comparative morphology.* MIT Press. **Caha, P.** The nanosyntax of case. PhD Diss., Tromsø. **Embick, D. 2010.** *Localism versus globalism in morphology and phonology.* MIT Press. **Řezáč, M. 2008.** Phi-agree and theta-related case. In Harbour et al., eds., *Phi-features across modules and interfaces.* OUP.