

The small and the large catastrophe

The loss of morphological case is a language change that has happened in many European Languages, but it is only in a few of them that we may study the process in detail. The two languages where this can be done in detail are English and Swedish.

In my talk I will describe the development in Old Swedish (1225-1526). I identify two main periods of change, which I call the small catastrophe (around 1300) and the big catastrophe (around 1450). In the small catastrophe there is some leveling of the case paradigms, but the four case system is retained. In the big catastrophe the whole system breaks down and all case distinctions are in principle lost on nouns and attributive elements, whereas the personal pronouns retains a nominative-oblique distinction (still retained in Modern Swedish).

My talk contains two main claims. First I will claim that what happens in the small catastrophe is that the case system is made syntactically redundant. Before 1300 the case pattern of many verbs are quite idiosyncratic. They may be divided into 9 main argument structures, where there are 16 different case patterns combined with these (NOM-DAT-ACC, NOM-ACC-GEN, NOM-GEN etc). In the small catastrophe the patterns are tidied up, so that DAT becomes the only lexical case, which becomes predictable from the thematic role, whereas the two structural cases (as before) will be predictable from the structural position. This means that genitive is lost as a verbal/adjectival case, and that accusative ceases to be a lexical case and becomes only structural.

In a situation where morphological case has become more or less redundant (i.e. predictable from a combination of thematic roles and structural positions) the case system becomes vulnerable. In a socially stable environment, the four case system could in principle live on forever, but social disturbances such as great demographic changes, migrations, language contact, etc. would threaten the system. I claim that the German influence on Swedish during the period 1350-1500 consists the main reason for the big catastrophe, where the four case system breaks down. I will show that the loss of case starts out in Stockholm and that it is also early in Kalmar, the two Swedish Hanseatic cities where we have texts that can be investigate.

Basically, I claim that case must become redundant before it may be lost. I will end my talk with a discussion of how the loss of case in Faeroese and Mainland Scandinavian dialects can be understood in the light of these claims.