

Diachronic stability of case functions: oblique in Romani dialects

It is well known that case marking is susceptible to change as a result of internal development and language contact (Johanson 2009). In this study I show how different functions of a case form are lost and preserved in Romani, an Indo-Aryan language that has been spoken in Europe since the Middle Ages (Matras 2002).

Structurally, the Romani case system is similar to those found in other new Indo-Aryan languages (NIA) and consists of several layers (Masica 1991). The first layer distinguishes between direct and oblique forms, and the second layer of case markers is attached to the oblique form, cf. Table 1.

Table 1. Case marking in Romani (Kalderash dialect)

Case	<i>manúš</i> ‘person’		<i>bakró</i> ‘sheep’	
	SG	PL	SG	PL
DIR	<i>manúš</i>	<i>manúš</i>	<i>bakr-ó</i>	<i>bakr-é</i>
OBL	<i>manuš-és</i>	<i>manuš-én</i>	<i>bakr-és</i>	<i>bakr-én</i>
ABL	<i>manuš-és-tar</i>	<i>manuš-én-dar</i>	<i>bakr-és-tar</i>	<i>bakr-én-dar</i>
DAT	<i>manuš-és-ke</i>	<i>manuš-én-ge</i>	<i>bakr-és-ke</i>	<i>bakr-én-ge</i>
...				

In most NIA languages, the oblique serves exclusively as a base form for secondary cases and cannot be used independently. In Romani, however, the oblique has several distinguished functions, as it marks i) animate direct objects, ii) possessor, iii) the recipient of the verb ‘give’, and iv) the experiencer of certain verbs (‘feel pain’, ‘like’) (Matras 2002: 85–87). This range of functions is arguably inherited from Middle Indo-Aryan (MIA) stage, as Romani oblique affixes are continuation of the MIA oblique forms (Beníšek 2009).

The goal of the study is to establish how the different functions of the oblique are preserved across Romani dialects. The data come from the Romani Morpho-Syntax database (RMS; <https://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/rms/>) which contains questionnaire-based elicited data on various Romani dialects from 120 locations in Europe. Table 2 summarizes the distribution of case marking among the aforementioned functions of the oblique in the dataset.

Table 2. Case marking in the contexts typical for the oblique in RMS.

Function	OBL	DAT	LOC	Other
Experiencer, ‘like’	12,5%	25%	—	64% = DIR
Experiencer, ‘feel pain’	45%	4%	24%	23% = possessive pronouns
Recipient, ‘give’	50%	50%	28%	—
Possessor	58%	2%	30%	—
Animate direct objects	88%	—	—	not marked

I suggest that the three main factors which determine the stability of the oblique marking are i) type- and token frequency of the functions in speech, ii) the availability of other marking for similar semantic roles, and iii) case marking in contact languages. The lexically determined oblique marking (‘like’, ‘feel’, ‘give’) is less stable than the construction related oblique marking (possessor). This is especially clear with the verb ‘like’ which is often borrowed together with the argument structure of the source language. As usually the semantic roles of ‘recipient’ and ‘experiencer’ are marked in Romani with the dative, there is no wonder that the same marking is found alongside the oblique in these contexts. When the dative marking is additionally supported via language contact, the oblique marking can become obsolete (as it happens in the Romani dialects of Eastern Europe). Finally, the function of the oblique related to the differential object marking is very frequent in speech and cannot be replaced by other cases. That is why the oblique is usually preserved unless the differential object marking is lost altogether (sometimes together with the inflectional case systems as it happens in the Romani dialects of Italy).

References

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