

MORPHOLOGICAL AND SYNTACTIC CASE MARKING IN BASSA LANGUAGE: A GOVERNMENT AND BINDING APPROACH / LE CAS MORPHOLOGIQUE ET SYNTAXIQUE EN LANGUE BASSE: UNE APPROCHE GÉNÉRATIVE TRANSFORMATIONNELLE / MARCAREA CAZULUI MORFOLOGIC ȘI SINTACTIC ÎN LIMBA BASĂ: O ABORDARE GENERATIV-TRANSFORMAȚIONALĂ¹

Abstract: This work studies the syntactic Case in the Bassa language. It describes the process of Case assignment as it applies to Bassa language as a way of making a contribution to scholarship in an area that is highly under-described. Case refers to a noun or pronoun that shows relation to other words in a sentence. This category encodes information about a word's grammatical role. This property of language is associated with syntactic functions of arguments such as subject, direct object, indirect object, and possessor, etc. but morphologically motivated. The investigation is situated within the Government and Binding model of the Transformational Generative theory which argues that NP/DPs are assigned Case if and only if they appear in specific positions in the sentence. It also states that the nominative Case is assigned to the specifier of finite T, the accusative is assigned by the verb, and prepositions also assign the dative Case to their complement NP/DP, all of which are determined by their positions. This study discovered that Bassa is characterized by three syntactic Cases such as the nominative, accusative and genitive Cases. Each argument in these syntactic locations has a special form which is the focus of this paper.

Key words: morphology, syntax, case, Bassa, Government and Binding.

Introduction

This work studies the Case system as it applies to Bassa language. The Bassa people are in all the Federal Capital Councils: Kwali, Abaji, Gwagwalada, Kuje, Bwari, Municipal, Kogi, Nasarawa, Niger, and Benue States. Crozier and Blench (1992:32) classify Bassa as belonging to the Kainji family under the sub-phylum Western Kainji as Rubasa (Bassa Benue).

Case^c refers to a noun or a pronoun that shows its relationship to other words in a sentence (Crystal 2008; Aronof & Fudeman 2005). In many languages, nouns that bear certain grammatical relations are characterized by special forms for their relations and their position in a grammatical structure. This category encodes information about grammatical functions of words. It is generally a property of language which is associated with the grammatical function (relations) of arguments (e.g., subject, direct object, indirect object, possessor, etc.).

Review of Some Relevant Literature

Crystal (2008: 66) defines case as a grammatical category used in the analysis of word-classes to identify the syntactic relationship between words in a sentence such as nominative, accusative, etc. The traditional classification, such as is found in Latin grammar, is expressed based on the morphological forms of words. He describes this as a paradigm of words, which he exemplifies in the Latin lexeme "Puella", *Puellam, Puellae, puella*, the singular Case forms for 'girl' nominative, vocative, accusative, genitive, dative

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and ablative, respectively. Each form is inflected based on its function in the argument positions, still; all of them are forms of the singular base *puel*, ‘girl’. He further asserts that each form is analyzed in terms of a specific range of meaning; e.g. the nominative is primarily the case of the grammatical subject of the sentence, the genitive refers to such notions as possession, origin, etc. Asbury (2008:7) quotes Blake (1994:1) saying that the —variations in the form of the noun relative to argument structure. In the examples above, which show the various forms of the noun root *puel* ‘girl’, the noun forms vary from their base on account of their Case roles in various particular locations.

Case is the relationship between the verb and its argument which is better accounted for in terms of Case role (Anagbogu 1990:34; Fillmore 1968a; Nilsen 1977; and Uwalaka 1981). Case is usually marked by inflecting the head of the NP, which is always a noun or a pronoun (O’Grady, Dobrovolsky and Katamba 1996:260). O’Grady, et al. (1996) point out that a somewhat richer system of contrast is found in English pronouns whose forms reflect a three-way Case distinction. This they exemplify as follows:

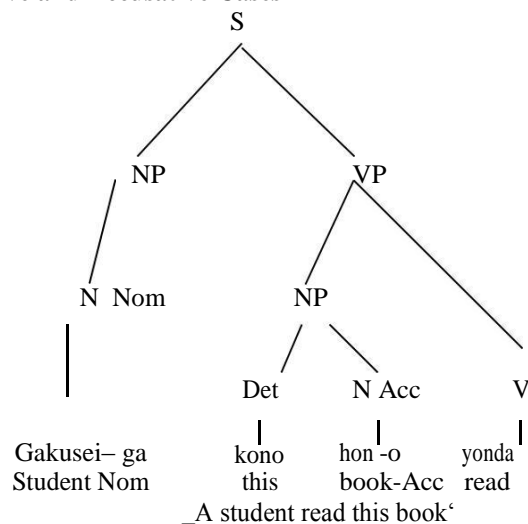
(1) A Case for the 3rd person singular masculine pronoun in English

Form	name	function	example
He	nominative	subject	he left
His	genitive	specifier of NP	his book
Him	accusative	complement of NP	Mary saw him

O’Grady et al. (1996:260) further reports that Japanese also makes a three-way distinction with the nominative case *-ga* used for the subject, the genitive suffix *-no* for the specifier of N, and the accusative suffix *-o* for a complement of V. These he illustrates with the following diagrams.

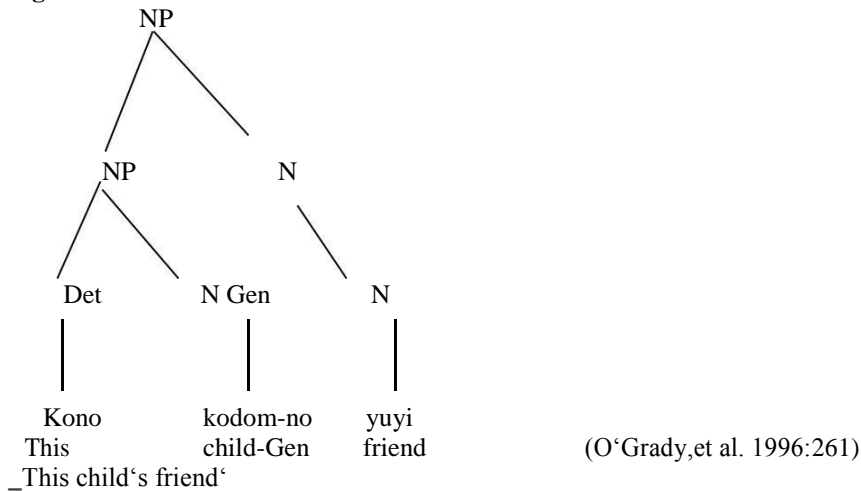
Fig. 1.

a. Nominative and Accusative Cases



b) Genitive Case

Fig 2.



This kind of syntactic phenomenon exists in Bassa. Similarly, a three-way Case contrast can be distinguished with the nominative prefix *ga-* used for the subject (name and some pronouns). The Nominative Case marker of Japanese *-ga* and the Nominative Case marker of Bassa *ga-* are both similar in form but contrast in their positions. In Japanese, the nominative morpheme is a suffix, whereas it is a prefix in Bassa (see Imoh 2011). The accusative is marked by a zero affixal phenomenon (tone contrast) to indicate this grammatical role. Dryer (2005a:108) confirms this operation in his research on some African languages although he did not exemplify this phenomenon. He reports that, —Case is coded by tone in several African languages such as Maba and Shilluk (Nilotic, Sudan) and by stem changes in nouns in Dinka and Nuer (Western Nilotic Sudan)].

Van Valin (1997:352) shares O'Grady's position with regards to Case by saying that: —The external argument receives Nominative Case; the internal argument receives Accusative Case. He presents a Case assignment rule in German as follows:

- (2) a. Assign nominative case to the privileged syntactic argument
- b. Assign accusative case to the undergoer
- c. Assign dative case to the direct core argument.

He exemplifies these rules with the following German examples:

(3) i. Der junge ha-t den Apfel gegessen

The MSG-NOM boy have SG-PRES-the-MSG ACC-apple eat-PST
The boy ate the apple

ii. Der Apfel wurdeø Von dem junge-n
the-MSG-NOM apple became-PST 3SG by the MSG DAT-boy
gegessen
eat PSTP
The apple was eaten by the boy.

- iii. Mein- ø freund ha-t mir ein-en
 my MSG-NOM friend have 3SG PRESS 1SG DAT
 Hut gesshictm
 MSG ACC- Hat sendPSTP
 _My friend sent me a hat.'

In the foregoing, the _privileged' syntactic argument stands for the subject of the sentence; the _undergoer', the object of a transitive verb and _direct core argument' an indirect object. He explains that the privileged syntactic argument is *der Junge* 'the boy' in (3.i), *der apfel* 'the apple' in (3.ii), *mein freund* 'my friend' and in (3.iii) and each privileged syntactic argument NP bears Nominative Case. The _undergoer' in (i) and (iii) are in the Accusative Case, *den apfel* 'the apple' in (iii) *einen Hut*, 'a hat' in the accusative. In each of the examples above, an inflectional ending is assigned to the root of the base forms according to the function of the noun and its location in the sentence. The same noun may have different inflectional endings based on its function.

Carnie (2006:234) argues that, if indeed Case is a syntactic property, then it should have a structure trigger. This work is based on the GB framework of Transformational Generative Grammar, which argues that NP/DPs are Case marked if and only if they appear in specific positions in the sentence. Chomsky (1981) asserts that, in particular, the Nominative Case is assigned in the specifier of finite T, and the accusative is assigned as sister of the verb, and prepositions also assign dative Case to their complement NP/DP. He specifies the phenomenon as follows:

- (4) i. NOMinative Case specifier of finite T
 ii. ACCusative Case sister of transitive V
 iii. DATive Case assigned by a preposition
 iii. The genitive Case is the —specifier of Nl (O'Grady's (1996)

Carnie (2006:234) opines that Case serves as the motivation for NP/DP movement. He thinks in the line of Case being like a driver's license, and a license is only obtainable at the —Department of Motor Vehicle. Anyone concerned must go there to obtain one. An NP/DP, he asserts, needs a license to surface in the sentence, and it can only get a license (Case) in specific positions. His analogy is that an NP/DP without Case cannot drive. This he refers to Case filter.

Case Filter

Case filter refers to the three rules outlined by Case assignment which do not specify a Case for every imaginable position in syntactic structure; for instance, the complements of verbs and prepositions receive Accusative Case, no rule specifying an adjective or noun, that is Case filter restricts the range of sentences which can be generated in this way (O'Grady, Dobrovolsky, & Katamba, 1996:262; Crystal, 2008:67). All NP/DPs must be marked with a Case. —If an NP/DP doesn't get Case the derivation must crash! Carnie (2006:234). Feature checking is one of the standard ways of implementing Case filter. It states that the idea of words is composed of atomic features. A word like *he* is made up of features that refer to its person, number and gender (for gender languages). Carnie (2006:234) represents the features in a matrix as follows:

- (5) he
 masculine
 3rd person
 Singular
 Nominative

The Case assigner like T is claimed to have a feature matrix:

- (6) is
 present
 3rd person
 Singular
 Nominative (Carnie, 2006:235)

It is observable that both these feature matrices have the feature *nominative*. The Case Filter becomes a requirement that a noun like *he* should be close enough to a Case assigner *is*, to verify that the noun has the right features.

Case Assignment in Bassa Nominative Case

Nominative Case is attested in Bassa language. For personal names and some personal pronouns occurring in the subject position, i.e. specifier of T (Chomsky, 1981), or as privileged syntactic arguments (Van Valin, 1997), the prefix *ga-* is used to mark Nominative Case, but where it is just a common noun, the base form to be listed in a grammatical paradigm, or dictionary which is always unmarked is used (Crystal, 2008:328). In Bassa language, the subject is ratified by a nominative marker. If two or more NPs have the same person and number, the agreement on the V will not distinguish which NP is the subject. In such an instance, Case alone indicated by a prefix can do the job of telling us which one is the subject (Napoli, 1996:323). For example in Bassa language:

- (7) Gè- Bwè ni jibi ø Shièn
 Nom name beat-PST AGR-S name-OBJ
 ‘Bweni beat Shien’

In the example above, *g-* before *w ni* indicates Nominative Case. *w ni* and *Shie n* are both third person singular, the prefix *g-* before *w ni* shows that *Bw ni* acted upon *Shi n* in the sentence and not vice-versa or *w ni* is the specifier of T. If we wanted to say that *Shien* acted upon *w ni*, we would use the following sentence or permutation of the two NPs and prefix *Shi n* with the Nominative Case marker *g-*, e.g.,

- (8) Gè- Shièn jibi g- Bw ni
 NOM name beat-PST AGR-S name-OBJ
 ‘Shien beat Bwè ni’

In this case, *g-* which is prefixed to *shì n* shows that it is no longer *w ni* that acted upon *Shi n* but *Shi n* that acted on *w ni* and that *Shi n* is the specifier of T in this case. So the fact that *w ni* is in the Nominative Case while *Shi n* is in the Accusative or

vice-versa is marked by the prefix *g* - that shows that *w ni* is the subject in (7) and *Shien* the subject in (8).

Ga- can also be attached to a second person singular pronoun to mark Nominative Case. For example:

(9) i **G**ábo bó yajé ukuribi
 NOM-2SG 2SG have money
 ‘It is you that owns the money’

ii. Ûkuribi she unàa bó
 money is POSS 2SG
 ‘The money is yours’

In (i) where the pronoun *bø* ‘you’ occurs as the subject (external argument), it is prefixed with a Nominative Case marker as the privileged argument and specifier of T, but in (ii) where it occurs as the object, it is not. In this language, pronouns are also Case-marked. For second person plural, there is no overt affixation, rather, there is a tone contrast between the subject (external argument) and the object (internal argument). Examples:

(10) i Hí yajé utákàda
 2PL-SUB have book
 ‘You have a book’

ii. È hi peni utákàda
 3PL-SUB 2PL-OBJ give book
 ‘They gave you a book’

In Bassa, the basic word order is SVO, but when one addresses a second person whether singular or plural, the word order changes to SOV where the object immediately follows the subject. The same order applies to a sentence where the speaker refers to him/herself or themselves, especially in reflexive constructions where there is still the same tone contrast between the subject NP (Nominative) and the object NP (Objective Case).

Examples:

(11) i. Ñ yajé ɔdɔcè ya
 1SG-SUB (NOM) have wealth
 ‘I have wealth’

ii. B m` peni ɔdɔcè ya
 3SG-NOM 1SG-ACC give-PST wealth
 ‘S/he gave me wealth’

First person plural nominative contrasts with first person plural accusative with tone, for example:

(12) i. Tí hi peni ukuribi
 1PL-Nom 2PL-ACC give-PST money
 ‘We gave you some money’

- ii. Gà- jàsà (i) tí peni ukuribi NOM name AGR-S
 1PL-ACC give-PST money
 ‘_Jasa gave us money’

In the foregoing examples, the first person personal pronoun is *tí* ‘we’. When it occurs at the subject (Nominative Case) position, it is marked with a high tone (*tí*), but when it occurs at the object position (Accusative Case) as the object of a transitive verb, it is characterized by a low tone (*ti*). Hence, in (i) it is *tí* whereas in (ii) it is *ti*. These pronouns, though characterized by the same person and number, are variable based on their Cases; their shapes may also be determined by their phonetic environment. This can further be illustrated with a tree diagram:

Fig. 3. Nouns

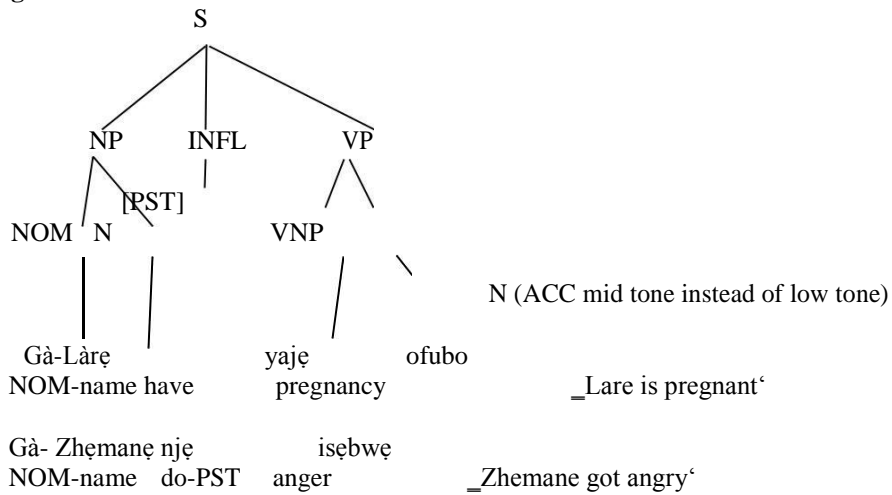
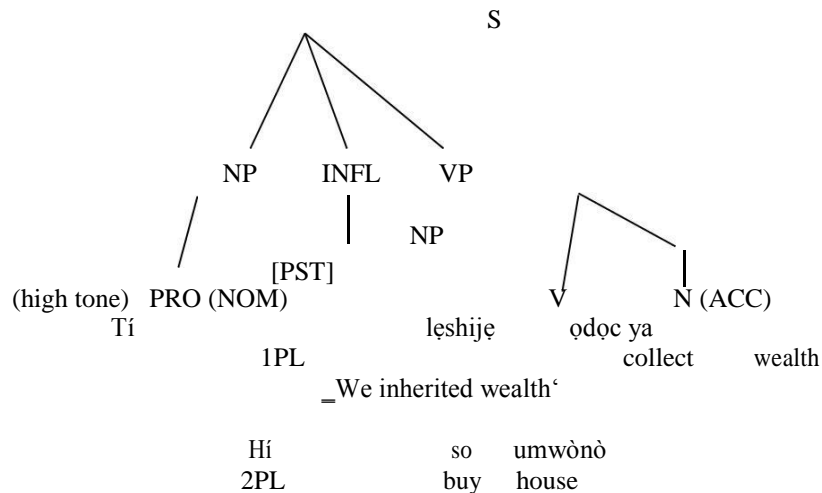
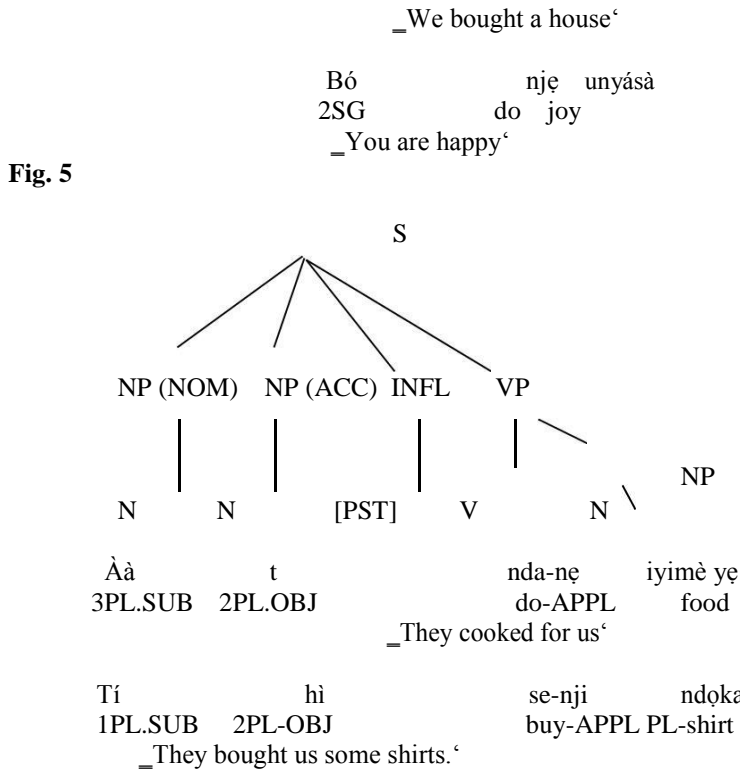


Fig. 4. Pronouns





Genitive Case

This is a Case whose basic role is to mark nouns or noun phrases which are dependent on another noun; that is, this grammatical relation expresses a possessive relationship where one noun belongs to the other ratified by an affix (Crystal, 2008:210, Matthews, 2007:157).

Bassa nouns take a form to express this grammatical relation by means of inflection. The Genitive Case in Bassa typically expresses a possessive relationship by affixing a noun stem with the prefix *o-*. This *o-* prefix is akin to the post-modifying genitive marker of English, e.g. *book of the boys* (→the boys' book) but in the case of Bassa *o-* is a bound morpheme that cannot stand as a lexeme, but may have different allomorphs based on the conditioning environment preceding the possessed noun. Examples:

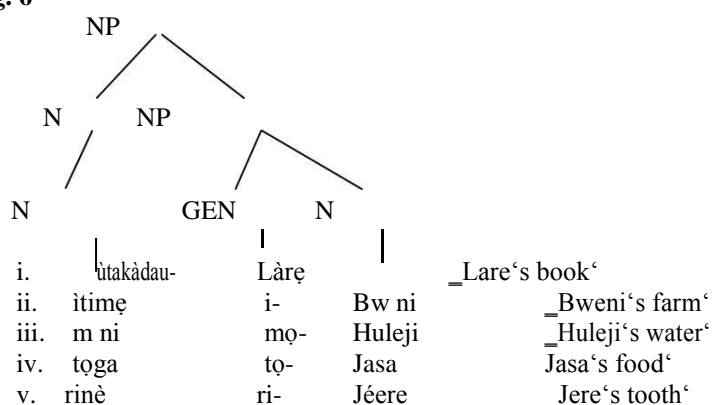
- (13) i. ùtákàda u-Làre
book GEN-name
_Lare's book'
- ii. ìtime i-Bwè ni _Bweni's farm'
- farm GEN-Bw ni
- iii. m ni mọ- Huleji _Huleji's water'
- Water GEN-name

vi. t ga tọ- sheneni

food GEN name	_Sheneni's food'
v. rinè ri-Jéere	
tooth GEN-name	_Jere's tooth'

In Bassa, genitive affixes show agreement with their preceding nouns, as we can see from the examples above, i.e. the preceding noun determines the variant form of the genitival affix. In the foregoing examples, the features of the possessed nouns are imposed on the genitival affix thereby making them possess their phonetic properties. We can further illustrate this with a tree diagram as shown below:

Fig. 6



In the foregoing examples, the choice of the genitival affix is determined by the phonetic properties of the possessed noun. In (i), *ùtakàda* chooses *u* as its allomorph in consonance with its initial sound, in (ii), it is characterized by *i* following *itim*, in (iii), it is marked by *mɔ* which is characteristic of the possessed noun *mèni*, in (iv), *tɔ* agrees with *tga*, and in (v), *rinè* selects the genitival allomorph *ri*. All of these variants are for agreement marking with the preceding nouns

Objective/Accusative Case

Accusative Case is the Case whose basic role is to mark a direct object, i.e. it refers to the form taken by a noun phrase when it is the direct object of a verb. In Bassa, there is no overt marker for the Accusative Case. It is indicated by tone contrast. Examples:

(14) ùtakàda _book'
 Tú so utákàda
 1PL-Nom buy-PST book ACC
 _We bought a book'

(15) mònyigò _urine'
 B nyizhi monyingò
 3SG-NOM urinate-PST urine ACC

_S/he urinated'

The tone contrast is clearer in imperative constructions. Examples:

(16) i. Sá utákàda

buy book ACC

_Buy a book'

ii.* Sá ùtákada

buy book ACC

_Buy a book'

(17) i. Nyízó monyingò

urinate urine ACC

_urinate'

ii. *Nyízó mòngyingò

Basically, abstract Case is assigned by either the main verb (in the case of Accusative Case) or by a preposition (in the case of Oblique Case) but the argument in the discussion is that, in Bassa where an argument is assigned an Accusative Case, it loses its base tone and steps up. For instance, the nouns in (16 & 17) above are characterized by an initial low tone, but when they are in the Accusative Case they assume a mid tone (unmarked) hence examples (ii) are asterisked as ungrammatical because they maintain their base tone.

Each argument must be close, and licensed by its assigner. If the argument and the Case assigner are not local i.e., the noun is not in the specifier or complement of the Case assigner, then the case won't be checked and the Case filter will be violated (Carnie, 2006), thereby making a structure ungovernable and consequently ungrammatical.

Conclusion

This paper discusses syntactic cases that are morphologically motivated, a grammatical characteristic of many languages where a morphological category encodes information about a word's grammatical roles such as subject, direct object, indirect object, possessor, etc. Every argument bears a particular grammatical relation with other parts of the sentence, which results in nouns taking different inflectional forms for the purpose of fulfilling such grammatical relations. This study focuses on three Cases i.e., Nominative Case (syntactically occurring as the subject); the Genitive Case (specifying the possessor/possessed relation), and the Accusative (where the unmarked argument is sister or object of a transitive verb). The study discovered that the prefix *ga-* attaches to some proper names and personal pronouns to mark them for Nominative Case, the tone of the argument in the Accusative Case is alternated to indicate this grammatical relation and the Genitive Case is marked by a prefix attached to an argument which takes different forms (allomorpha) based on the phonetic properties of the possessed noun.

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