

# Case asymmetries in Marathi

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## Abstract

Languages can be classified on the basis of the morpho-syntactic patterns they show. One criterion used in such parameterisation is of case asymmetry where the uniformity of case-marking over the set of nominals in a particular language is assessed. Pronouns is a domain where most languages have asymmetric case-marking. This paper tries to assess Marathi with this approach. For that, I also discuss the concept of case and how it is dealt with in the literature.

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## 1 Introduction

As Blake (2008) points out, the concept of case and its relation with morphology, semantics and syntax have always been controversial. It is so because the criteria which are used for determining cases are not well defined. Different schools of grammar have different approaches for handling cases. In modern linguistics we see the term ‘case’ being used roughly for markers which denote grammatical relations and in some languages, for markers which denote certain  $\theta$ -roles.

## 2 Case asymmetry

Case asymmetry is a morpho-syntactic parameter which triggers differential case-marking in a class of nominals. Iggesen (2008) defines case asymmetry as follows:

A given language shows case-asymmetry if the inventory of morphological case categories in the least one of its distinct NP-types deviates from the case inventory in its normative system.

A typical example of case asymmetry is of English. The third person masculine pronoun of English when it is in the nominative case is ‘*he*’, but when it comes in the accusative case, it becomes ‘*him*’. On the other hand, if this pronoun is replaced with a masculine proper noun, it remains the same in both the cases. Have a look at the following data which exemplifies the above for the masculine and feminine singular pronouns of English.

- (1) a. John met Mary.  
b. Mary met John.  
c. He met her.  
d. \*Him met she.  
e. She met him.  
f. \*Her met he.

This data tells us that case-assignment in English is not uniform for all types of nouns present in it and hence by looking at the definition of case asymmetry, we can infer that English is a case-asymmetric language.

Iggesen (2008) also describes various sub-types of case-asymmetry which we will use while analysing Marathi, but in order to do that, we will first discuss the *oblique* marker as it poses some interesting questions.

### 2.1 The *oblique* marker

The word *oblique* literally means something that is not straight. Nominals of some Indo-Aryan languages show tweaked forms especially when they are followed

by postpositions. E.g., ‘लड़का’ (/ləɾka/, boy: MSG), a Hindi noun, changes to ‘लड़के’ (/ləɾke/) when followed by postpositions like ‘को’ (/ko/), ‘ने’ (/ne/) etc. These morphemes play an important role in our discussion on case-asymmetry. Let’s have a look at a few features of them.

### 2.1.1 Geographic distribution

An interesting fact about the oblique marker is that it is found only in the western Indo-Aryan languages. A proper geographical divide can be seen from the east to the west of Indian subcontinent with respect to the use of this marker. Eastern Indo-Aryan languages like Bangla, Odia, Assamese and Bhojpuri lack obliques. On the other hand, Marathi, Hindi, Gujarati, Konkani, Kutchi, Sindhi and Punjabi which are located on the western side of India show obliques.

### 2.1.2 Obliques as cases

Different grammarians have adopted different approaches for describing obliques. While describing Hindi case-system, Kachru (2006) only considers nominative, oblique and vocative to be cases. All the other markers denoting  $\theta$ -roles are postpositions according to her. Burgess (1854) takes a similar approach while describing Marathi, whereas Pandharipande (1997) and Dhongde and Wali (2009) consider a set of postpositions, nominative and oblique to be cases. For Gujarati, Suthar (2003) notes two classes of nouns in which one shows oblique forms and one doesn’t. He hasn’t clearly called it an oblique case, but from his grouping it looks like he has clubbed it in the group of adpositional forms which typically are called cases. This shows us that oblique is widely understood as a case in the literature.

But, neither distributionally, nor functionally obliques pattern with other standard cases of these languages. Cross-linguistically marking grammatical relations and/or  $\theta$ -roles is a categorical function of cases. The oblique markers seen in Indo-Aryan languages don’t do this. Obliques are affixal, whereas the other cases are clitics. Obliques only occur when other case-clitics appear after the concerned phrase.

Another evidence of it being different from cases is that it is neither restricted to the class of nominals nor does it go hand in hand with them. Consider the following examples.

- (2) a. सलिल पांढऱ्या गाडीत बसला. [Marathi]  
 səlil paɳd̪ʰɾ-ja gaɽi=t̪ bəs-l-a  
 Salil.M.NOM white-OBL car.FSG=LOC sit-PFV-AGR  
 Salil sat in a white car.
- b. सलिल गोड आठवणीत हरवला.  
 səlil goɽ aɽʰwəɳ-i=t̪ hərəw-l-a  
 Salil.M.NOM sweet memory.FSG-OBL=LOC get lost-PFV-AGR  
 Salil got lost in the pleasant memories.

In 2a ‘पांढरी गाडी’ (/paṅd̪ri gaṛi/) is the base phrase which after adding the LOC case ‘-त’ (/=t̪/) becomes ‘पांढऱ्या गाडीत’ (/paṅd̪r̪ja gaṛit/) where the noun doesn’t show any formal change, but the adjective shows. On the other hand, in 2b the base phrase is ‘गोड आठवण’ (/goṭ aṭʰwəṅ/). After adding the same case, it becomes ‘गोड आठवणीत’ (/goṭ aṭʰwəṅiṭ/). This shows us that Marathi has different declension classes in nominals and different ones in adjectivals. Their obliques don’t pattern in the same way. We see true case agreement in languages like Sanskrit. Consider the following example<sup>1</sup>:

- (3) ज्येष्ठाय पुत्राय आम्रफलं देहि [Sanskrit]  
 ɕjɛʂṭʰajə puṭr-ajə amrəpʰəl-əm dehi  
 elder-DAT son-DAT mango-ACC give  
 Give (a) mango to (the) elder son.

The root phrase here is ‘ज्येष्ठः पुत्रः’ (/ɕjɛʂṭʰəhə puṭrəhə/) which after adding the DAT marker ‘-आय’ (/ajə/) becomes ‘ज्येष्ठाय पुत्राय’ (/ɕjɛʂṭʰajə puṭrajə/). This is a true example of case agreement as both the adjective and the modified noun show the exact same form after getting the case. What we saw in 2a and b isn’t quite like this.

## 2.2 The *direct* case

Along with *obliques*, many linguists have analysed direct forms too as cases. This can be traced back till Panini’s description of Sanskrit, since he has a case called ‘प्रथमा विभक्ति’ (/prəṭʰəma wibʰəkti/) which is a close equivalent of the nominative case (Joshi & Roodbergen, 1996, pp. 80–84). It may be argued that obliques and directs are parallel cases since both of them mark declensions. I.e., if the form coming after the adjective in the phrase ‘पांढऱ्या गाडीत’ (/paṅd̪r̪ja gaṛi=t̪/) is marking a declension, the same is done by the form coming after the adjective in the non-cased phrase like ‘पांढरी गाडी’ (/paṅd̪ri gaṛi/) as it changes to a different form in phrases like ‘पांढरा रुमाल’ (/paṅd̪ra rumal/, a white handkerchief).

The noticeable difference between these two is that the latter is triggered by  $\phi$ -features and the forms we see there are predictable. In this case the formal change is triggered by the gender of the forthcoming noun, i.e., F in the former and M in the latter. This is generally not considered to be a declension (Spencer, 1997, p. 11).

Hence I propose that only the oblique markers mark the declension classes of nouns and adjectives. Direct forms are morphologically predictable agreement markers. Since the occurrence of obliques is completely dependent on the true cases of these languages, these markers constitute case-asymmetry in these languages. If we strictly apply the definition of case-asymmetry, we can’t call this declension of obliques as a separate inventory of case-forms as we have discarded obliques from being cases, but still, since obliques are completely dependent on the true case forms, this declension has considerable importance

<sup>1</sup>The Sanskrit data is provided by Dharurkar, C. on 2023-07-27, p.c.

	Base form	Cased form
M	‘हत्ती’ (/həʈːi/, elephant)	‘हत्तीला’ (/həʈːi=la/, elephant-OBL=ACC/DAT)
	‘शिंपी’ (/ʃimpi/, tailor)	‘शिंप्याला’ (/ʃimp-ja=la/, tailor-OBL=ACC/DAT)
F	‘पिंक’ (/piŋkə/, spittle)	‘पिकेने’ (/piŋk-e=ne/, spittle-OBL=ERG/INS)
	‘गोष्ट’ (/goʃtə/, story)	‘गोष्टीने’ (/goʃt-i=ne/, story-OBL=ERG/INS)
N	‘पत्र’ (/pəʈrə/, letter)	‘पत्रात’ (/pəʈr-a=t/, letter-OBL=LOC)
	‘डोक’ (/døkə/, head)	‘डोक्यात’ (/døk-ja=t/, head-OBL=LOC)

Table 1: Examples of declension classes in Marathi obliques

while describing case-asymmetry. Keeping this in mind now we will have a look at the Marathi data and determine the types of case-asymmetry in it.

### 3 Marathi

As seen in example number 2, Marathi shows obliques in nominals and adjectivals. It is completely declension-led. Marathi shows morphological declensions in various morpho-syntactic environments. It has a grammatical gender system, i.e., which noun will belong to which gender is not constrained by semantics and phonology of that noun. E.g., There is no semantic or phonological reason for ‘दगड’ (/dʌgəʈ/, M), ‘दरड’ (/dʌrəʈ/, F) and ‘धरण’ (/dʰəʈəʈ/, N) to be in their respective genders, but interestingly, even in such morphological genders, Marathi shows declensions in obliques when case forms are attached. Have a look at table 1 for examples. One may notice that in all the three genders, I have provided pairs of phonologically similar and semantically unrelated words, which take different oblique forms.

The declensions that we see in feminine and neuter gender are still examples of allomorphy. Systemically they still don’t form a difference, whereas what we observe in the masculine gender is slightly different. We have an environment in which we expect oblique markers to appear because of words like ‘शिंपी’ (/ʃimpi/), but in a small declension class (the class in which ‘हत्ती’ (/həʈːi/) lies), we observe absence no formal change. Note that ‘no formal change’ isn’t leading to asymmetry. E.g., even in feminine gender all the words ending in vowel /i/ show no change in oblique, i.e., the ACC case-form of ‘गोळी’ (/goʈi/) is ‘गोळीला’ (/goʈi=la/). This doesn’t trigger asymmetry as it is a phonological condition on the allomorphy. The examples from the masculine gender with the same phonological patterns also show a lack of formal change in a declension. This then deviates from the normative system and hence is an example of subtractive asymmetry.

Marathi shows subtractive asymmetry even in the pronominal domain. Table 2 exemplifies this claim. Where a nominal must get the ERG marker, the first and second person pronouns do not show that form. Thus leading to a subtraction of a formal pattern seen evidently in the normative system.

Base form	Cased form
‘ललित’ (/ləlit̪/)	‘ललितने’ (/ləlit̪=ne/, Lalit=ERG)
‘मी’ (/mi/)	-
‘तू’ (/t̪u/)	-

Table 2: Subtractive asymmetry in Marathi

Notice that only 1 and 2 person pronouns show this asymmetry. Third person pronouns show the forms seen in the normative system. Interestingly, no case other than GEN, DAT and ACC is allowed to occur directly with first and second person. ERG is blocked completely, but other cases also need the GEN case to occur first, then the oblique and then the required case. Have a look at table 3 for the examples.

Case	Nominal+Case	Nominal+GEN+Case
INS	‘रामने’ (/ram=ne/)	‘रामच्याने’ (/ram=ʃ-ja=ne/)
	‘त्याने’ (/t̪-ja=ne/)	‘त्याच्याने’ (/t̪-ja=ʃ-ja=ne/)
	-	‘माझ्याने’ (/ma=ɕʰ-ja=ne/)
	-	‘तुझ्याने’ (/t̪u=ɕʰ-ja=ne/)
ABL	‘कवीहून’ (/kəwi=hun/)	‘कवीच्याहून’ (/kəwi=ʃ-ja=hun/)
	‘त्याहून’ (/t̪-ja=hun/)	‘त्याच्याहून’ (/t̪-ja=ʃ-ja=hun/)
	-	‘माझ्याहून’ (/ma=ɕʰ-ja=hun/)
	-	‘तुझ्याहून’ (/t̪u=ɕʰ-ja=hun/)
LOC	‘हत्तीत’ (/hət̪:i=t̪/)	‘हत्तीच्यात’ (/hət̪:i=ʃ-ja=t̪/)
	‘त्यात’ (/t̪-ja=t̪/)	‘त्याच्यात’ (/t̪-ja=ʃ-ja=t̪/)
	-	‘माझ्यात’ (/ma=ɕʰ-ja=t̪/)
	-	‘तुझ्यात’ (/t̪u=ɕʰ-ja=t̪/)

Table 3: Examples of additive case asymmetry in Marathi

These are examples of additive asymmetry as a subset of nouns are getting case-markers only in a particular domain and everywhere else, they remain unchanged resulting in an addition in the formal patterns when compared to the normative system.

These two persons show qualitative asymmetry too in the GEN case. The normative system shows /ts/ or /ʃ/ depending on the agreement marker followed by the GEN, but in first and second persons, we see the voiced and murmured versions of these two, i.e., /ɕʰ/ and /ɕʰ̤/.

Marathi shows lexically triggered subtractive asymmetry as borrowed words don’t show oblique forms. Marathi speakers seem to have a subtle understanding of foreign words and they don’t get any oblique markers. E.g., ‘मोबाईल’ (/mobail/, M, mobile phone) patterns phonologically with ‘दगड’ (/d̪əgəɽ/), but if we add, say LOC case after it, the prior doesn’t show an oblique, i.e., ‘मोबाईलला’ (/mobail=la/),

but the latter does. I.e., ‘दगडाला’ (/d̪əgɽ-a=la/). This asymmetry is not seen in Konkani. Every nominal has to get the oblique marker irrespective of whether it is native or borrowed.

## 4 Conclusion

The data suggests that Marathi shows several types of case asymmetry. It also shows declensional variation in oblique marking. Obliques cannot be called cases. They are categorically different than cases. Marathi first and second person pronouns show significantly different patterns than the third person pronouns. The third person pronouns pattern with the general class of nominals.

## Glossary

<b>1</b>	First person <b>6</b>	<b>INS</b>	Instrumental <b>5, 6</b>
<b>2</b>	Second person <b>6</b>	<b>LOC</b>	Locative <b>3, 5, 6</b>
<b>ABL</b>	Ablative <b>6</b>	<b>M</b>	Masculine <b>2–6</b>
<b>ACC</b>	Accusative <b>4–6</b>	<b>N</b>	Neuter <b>5</b>
<b>AGR</b>	Agreement <b>3</b>	<b>NOM</b>	Nominative <b>3</b>
<b>DAT</b>	Dative <b>4–6</b>	<b>OBL</b>	Oblique <b>3, 5</b>
<b>ERG</b>	Ergative <b>5, 6</b>	<b>PFV</b>	Perfective <b>3</b>
<b>F</b>	Feminine <b>3–5</b>	<b>SG</b>	Singular <b>2, 3</b>
<b>GEN</b>	Genitive <b>6</b>		

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