This paper presents a unified analysis of partitive case-marking in Estonian using the notion of macroroles, as employed in Role and Reference Grammar (RRG, Van Valin & LaPolla 1997). The partitive case has been described as a default object-marking case in both Finnish and Estonian (Sulkala 1996:170, Tauli 1968:216, Heinämäki 1984). It marks ‘partial objects’, signalling primarily partiality and low transitivity (related to but not limited to partial affectedness of the object, Helasvuoto 1996), and it alternates with an abstract ‘accusative’ total object case (realised as either nominative or genitive, Hiietam 2002).

The fact that partitive case marks low transitivity can be called upon to partially account for a few facts about Estonian grammar, such as the following:

- While ‘total objects’ are marked with nominative case in the absence of an overt nominative subject, as in impersonal and imperative clauses, partial objects are consistently marked with partitive case, e.g. in impersonals and imperatives.
- Partitive case marks non-canonical ‘subjects’ in existential clauses. These clauses involve intransitive verbs and are low in transitivity (à la Hopper & Thompson 1980), expressing the existence of something in a locative or temporal space and representing a state, not an action (Sands & Campbell 2001: 263).

However, this explanation does not account for the differential behavior of partitive objects among predicates which only assign partitive case, as shown in examples (1) and (2).

(1) a. ma üllatan sind
   1SG.NOM surprise.PRS.1SG  2SG.PAR
   ‘I surprise you/ I’ll surprise you’
   b. sa oled üllatatud
   2SG.NOM be.PRS.2SG surprise.2PTC
   ‘you are surprised’

(2) a. ma näen sind
   1SG.NOM see.PRS.1SG  2SG.PAR
   ‘I see you’
   b. #sa oled nähtud
   2SG.NOM be.PRS.2SG see.2PTC
   ‘you are seen’

The verbs in these examples both only take partitive objects. Personal passivisation promotes even partitive objects to full subjects, but it does not apply equally to these two predicates. While (1b) shows that the passive counterpart of (1a), with üllatama ‘surprise’, is natural and grammatical, the passive of (2a) requires a very particular interpretation, acquiring semantics unrelated to the active clause. Example (2a) would be understood to mean “you are caught”, rather than the stative “you are seen”. Rajandi (1999) also mentions examples like that repeated in (3), of transitive verbs with human subject referents which can be impersonalised (as in 3a) but not passivised (3b).

(3) a. aimati õnnetust
   sense.IMP.PST accident.PAR.SG
   ‘people guessed an accident/ one imagined there’d been an accident’
   b. *õnnetus oli aimatud
   accident.NOM.SG be.PST.3SG sense.2PTC
   ‘the accident was sensed/ guessed at’

There is no explanation for why this verb is ungrammatical in the personal passive in Rajandi (1999). However, these facts fall out of an analysis using macroroles with no further stipulation: the puzzle of bivalent verbs which cannot be passivised is easily explained by the theory of macroroles.
Semantic macroroles derive from the assumption that thematic roles can be ordered in a hierarchical continuum. The RRG notion of transitivity reflects the number of macrorole arguments a verb takes. Verbs can have a maximum of two macrorole (MR) arguments, the generalised actor MR and the generalised undergoer MR. The actor MR includes semantic roles on the agentive side of the thematic role hierarchy (such as agent, experiencer, instrument), while the undergoer MR covers pati entive roles (such as patient, theme, recipient). Macrorole selection is based on the logical structures of verbs, which can include zero, one or two macroroles.

Not all core arguments have macrorole functions. The maximum number of macroroles a predicate can have is two, namely the actor and the undergoer. Just as there are verbs which take one syntactic argument which is not a macrorole (e.g. English *rain*), so are there also verbs which have two core arguments, both syntactic and semantic, yet only one macrorole argument.

An example of this relation between logical structure and the number of macroroles is a verb like *eat*, which in many languages can take either one or two core arguments. In Estonian, its second core argument also exhibits case alternation. Importantly, the object argument of *eat* has been claimed not to always fill a macrorole. This verb has both variable transitivity and variable Aktionsart, e.g. in Italian and Estonian. The bivalent form of *eat* can align itself with either transitive or intransitive predicates in terms of syntactic behavior, and this is crucial for macrorole allocation and valency operations. Van Valin & LaPolla claim that “the majority of activity verbs, regardless of how many arguments they have, take no more than one macrorole” (1997:153). The Estonian data fits this generalisation, tying in with partitive object marking.

The second argument of the activity predicate when it is not assigned a macrorole function is an inherent argument: it “serves to characterize the action rather than pick out any of the participants... If it does not refer to any specific participant in a state of affairs, it cannot be an undergoer” (1997:149). The partitive object is lower in transitivity and sometimes does not fill a macrorole function, serving merely to characterise the activity rather than denoting an independent object affected by the activity.

An object with undergoer MR status is licensed for more syntactic object-related operations than one without MR status. Personal passivisation in Estonian is one of the syntactic operations that require an undergoer MR object. This explains the different behaviour under passivisation of the object of *nägema* ‘see’ and *üllatama* ‘surprise’, in examples (1–2). *Nägema* ‘see’ – a stative verb – does not assign MR status to its object. If that object is promoted to subject in a personal passive, the aspectual class of the predicate is forced to change, as the object of stative *nägema* is simply not available for passivisation. The object is coerced into a macrorole status (and hence, a higher-transitivity affected undergoer semantic role) by the simple operation of being promoted through passivisation. The object of *üllatama* ‘surprise’, on the other hand, is available for passive promotion. This is an achievement verb which assigns affected undergoer MR status to its patient.

The explanation using MRs also accounts nicely for the ungrammaticality of the personal passive in (3). It is not only variable verbs like *sõöma* ‘eat’, but also invariable bivalent verbs with only one MR (*nägema, aimama*), which do not allow passivisation. The verb in (3), *aimama* ‘guess at, divine’, clearly does not have a semantically affected patient. This non-affected object, in turn, does not have MR status, and hence is unavailable for passive promotion to subject. The macrorole explanation is entirely compatible with the general facts about partitive case as well as the idiosyncratic facts mentioned above. It derives from semantic explanations using the scalar notion of transitivity, but, as this paper shows, it is more powerful than previous semantic explanations have proved to be.

REFERENCES


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