Why the Ablative, Locative, and Instrumental Cases Fell Together in Latin

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Sihler (1995:253, 285) finds it odd that the ablative and locative cases fell together in Latin, since their meanings are nearly opposite, place-from-which and place-in-which. But they did fall together, and the instrumental case joined them, as the Sanskrit-like eight-case system of late Indo-European developed into the six-case system of Latin.[1]

The syncretism was not phonologically or morphologically motivated,

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since the inherited endings of the three cases were, in general, distinct, and the resulting Latin ablative endings came from any of the three original cases, depending on inflectional class. First-, second-, and third-declension *-ā(d)* *-ō(d)* *-ī(d)* generalize an inherited ablative pattern, as do the *-bus* plurals, but fifth-declension *-ē* (never attested with *d*) appears to be instrumental, and third-declension *-e* is originally locative, or possibly instrumental (so Sihler 1995:285, who balks at deriving it from the locative on semantic grounds). If there had been a syncretism based on similar endings, it would have merged the ablative with the dative (which it always matches in the plural) or with the genitive (which it matched in most of the originally inherited singular forms).

There is, however, one obvious similarity between the ablative, locative, and instrumental cases: syntax. They all mark the same syntactic relation, that of optional modifiers to the verb. Compared to its eight-case ancestor, what Latin did was eliminate semantic case distinctions; the remaining Latin cases are all syntactically defined.

The only exception to this generalization is the accusative of place-to-which, as in *īre Rōmam*, where, because of its meaning, an optional modifier of the verb appears in the accusative rather than the ablative. However, even in classical Latin this usage was apparently a lexically restricted archaism, and it died out postclassically.

In claiming that Latin case became purely syntactic, I do not mean that

the cases had no semantic content, nor that they all corresponded to obligatory argument positions. Ernout (1953:5) says that the nominative, vocative, and dative are "cas grammaticaux," the ablative is a "cas à valeur concrète ou réelle," and the genitive and accusative are sometimes one type and sometimes the other. What he means, I think, is the following: The vocative is a purely syntactic case because it is used for direct address outside the clause. The nominative, accusative (of direct object), dative, and occasionally the genitive are subcategorized arguments of the verb, again purely syntactic (grammatical) functions. The genitive modifying a noun, the accusative of place-to-which, and the ablative are optional modifiers, hence classified as "concrete" or semantic (compare Kuryłowicz 1964:179). In this sense the ablative, locative, and instrumental merged because they were all "concrete," but, crucially, the motivation for the merger was syntactic; that is why opposing meanings were lumped together and why the genitive, modifying nouns insead of verbs, did not join them.

In fact, the three cases that merged, ablative, locative, and instrumental, all occupy the same slot on the noun phrase accessibility hierarchy of Keenan and Comrie (1977):[2]

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[2]The hierarchy has a sixth element, OCOMP (object of comparison), below GEN, but Keenan and Comrie (1977:90) and Maxwell (1979) cite evidence that some languages lump OCOMP with OBL. Latin is such a language; its OCOMPs are in the ablative.

SU	Nominative	Argument of 1-place (intransitive) verbs
DO	Accusative	Additional argument of 2-place (transitive) verbs
IO	Dative	Additional argument of 3-place (ditransitive) verbs
OBL	Abl./Loc./Ins.	Noun phrase in other relationship to main verb
GEN	Genitive	Noun phrase modifying noun phrase

This hierarchy reflects a measure of obliqueness that correlates with numerous syntactic phenomena in many languages (for summary see Croft 1990:101-111). It also correlates with many, though not all, of the case ambiguities in Latin: ablatives and datives, adjacent in the hierarchy, match in the plural; nominatives and accusatives match in the third-declension plural and in all neuter forms; and in the fourth-declension neuter singular, all cases have the same form except the genitive. In each of these situations, adjacent positions on the hierarchy are conflated. As Ringe (1995) points out, not one of these ambiguities is an actual syncretism; all are phonological in origin. Still, Latin speakers found them acceptable and perpetuated them.

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