CHAPTER 3

Object Case in Modern Finnic Languages

1 Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction from grammars and linguistic literature to the material in the present study, forming a basis for the subsequent direct comparison of the different languages in Chapter 4. Most of the material in this chapter will be well known to Finnic language speakers, but as a significant proportion of the literature is in Finnish or Estonian, it will not be readily accessible to non-speakers.

In the Finnic languages there is no single distinct morphological form for the case of the object, the nominative, genitive, -t accusative and partitive case being used (VISK §925). In Finnish these cases are easily distinguished due to distinctive morphology. The only confusion which arises is between the nominative singular and plural and the genitive singular when a possessive suffix is added, when these cases are completely syncretic. In Estonian, on the other hand, there are a number of nouns, which have the same morphology in the genitive and partitive, and sometimes also nominative case. Here disambiguation is sometimes possible syntactically or by the case of a modifying adjective, which agrees with the noun it modifies, or simply by native knowledge of the language as to which case is possible. In a very small number of instances in modern Estonian, it is not obvious which case is meant. In Karelian the cases are distinct. In Veps the singular partitive and the plural nominative are often homonymous, and in Livonian the nominative and genitive are very often identical in the singular and always so in the plural. Votic also has ambiguities.

Object case alternates between the partitive and the group of non-partitive object cases. The factors involved in this alternation are discussed in detail in Section 4. There is often a need to refer to the non-partitive object cases as a group. Most Estonian and many Finnish linguists use the term ‘total object’ to refer to this group (EKG II 1993: 46; VISK §925). The terms ‘total’ and ‘partial’ can be misleading. Rajandi and Metslang (1979: 28) have pointed out that while a total object presupposes a whole object, the partial object does not necessarily denote a part of the object. There are many situations where a non-divisible object is in the partitive case. The term ‘accusative’ is used by many linguists, for example Heinämäki (1984), Kiparsky (1998) and Sands and Campbell (2001) as a blanket term for the non-partitive object case. Karlsson (1966: 21) mentions in his detailed discussion of the accusative case in Finnish that Setälä
in 1880 was the first to lump all total objects together under the term ‘accusative’. However, this term is somewhat controversial, as there is no specific morphology for such a case, apart from the -t accusative for personal pronouns in Finnish. Tveite (2004: 13) has given good reasons for using the term 'accusative' for the non-partitive object case in his discussion of Livonian, and I will also use this term. Most Estonian linguists prefer to avoid it.

Briefly, the accusative object occurs in situations where the action is finished and the whole object affected, otherwise the partitive is used. Before coming to the discussion of the factors involved in the partitive-accusative alternation, I will describe briefly how the various morphological forms of the accusative are used.

The discussion in this chapter relies mainly on Estonian and Finnish, but brings in the other languages also.

2 Choice of Case Form from the Accusative Group

These choices are dependent on syntax, including word category, number, and verbal construction.

2.1 Word Category

Personal pronouns in Finnish always appear in the -t accusative, and never in the genitive or nominative form in the modern language, as discussed in Chapter 1, Section 4.2.1. For the other languages the choices are discussed in Chapter 4, Section 2.

Cardinal numbers greater than one as heads of a quantifier phrase in the object position are in the nominative singular form rather than the genitive. This may relate to the fact that although numbers are singular syntactically, they are semantically plural (Hakulinen and Karlsson 1975: 356, 363). They are declinable and can be used in the partitive case in appropriate environments, such as negation, but the tendency is for them to be nominative also in unbounded situations. Itkonen (1971–2: 184) suggests that the use of the nominative case for numeral objects was probably of ancient origin. Non-declinable quantifiers have been excluded from the present study. Other quantifiers are mentioned in Section 2.3.3 below.

Singular and plural noun objects differ in the accusative case form as discussed below. Proper names are declined like common nouns. Non-personal pronouns also mostly follow the same pattern.