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Ablative as a marker of benefaction

Beneficiaries are coded in a number of ways in and across languages. Beneficiaries may, e.g., be marked with case affixes or adpositions, or they may be introduced to clauses via applicativization of the verb. As for case marking, dative or a similar case is usually is employed for coding Beneficiary. The Recipient also receives the same formal treatment in a number of languages. This kind of polysemous use of the dative is rather frequent cross-linguistically, which is not unduly surprising given the semantic features Beneficiaries and Recipients have in common. Also the polysemy of Beneficiary and Maleficiary is frequently attested. In the languages in which this occurs, the use of a Beneficiary marker seems to have extended to expressing Maleficiaries as well. This is not very surprising either, since benefaction and malefaction form a kind of continuum instead of being fully mutually exclusive notions. It is therefore possible to interpret a Beneficiary marker as a marker of Maleficiary in favourable conditions.

By contrast to the frequently attested polysemies noted above, languages in which Source and Recipient and/or Source and Beneficiary are lumped together are clearly less common. Especially infrequent are languages in which a marker originally used for Source coding (such as the ablative case) takes over beneficiary coding as well. One of the reasons for the rare occurrence of this polysemy is probably found in the clear semantic differences between the roles of Source and Beneficiary. There are, however, few languages in which this kind of polysemy is attested, even though these languages are clearly in the minority. Examples include Kuuk Thaayorre (Alice Gaby, p.c.), Gawwada (Mauro Tosco, p.c.), Mekeo (Alan Jones, p.c.) and Finnish.

My paper focusses on discussing the use of ablative in the function of coding benefaction in Finnish. Data from other languages is also occasionally used for making the argumentation more relevant cross-linguistically. First, I will discuss the contexts in which the ablative can be used for Beneficiary coding in Finnish (the use is far from being fully productive). Second, the paper discusses the reasons for the rare occurrence of the Beneficiary/Source polysemy. It will be shown that a grammaticalization path that produces this polysemy is less natural than the (rather frequent) grammaticalization process as a result of which the use of dative (or a similar case) extends to coding malefaction. Third, the paper also discusses some potential explanations for the emergence of the examined polysemy. The contexts in which this kind of polysemy is possible are less frequent than contexts in which dative can be used to code malefaction. At a more general level, the paper aims at making a contribution to our understanding of grammaticalization. The question it addresses in this respect is why certain kinds of grammaticalization processes are more likely to occur than others.