

OBLIQUE DEPENDENTS IN ESTONIAN: AN LFG PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

The status of indirect or oblique dependents in Estonian has long been a matter of controversy. One approach (Kure 1959, Klaas 1988, Nemvalts 2004) classifies them as a class of ‘indirect objects’, which represent indirectly affected participants. Another approach (Vääri 1959, Erelt 1989, 2004, Erelt et al. 1993) disputes the usefulness of this distinction, and assigns all grammatical dependents other than subjects and direct objects to a large and heterogeneous class of ‘adverbials’, based on the fact that indirect dependents are similar in form to adverbial modifiers. The present paper takes up this traditional issue from a contemporary theoretical perspective, and argues that Lexical Mapping Theory (Bresnan & Zaenen 1990) clarifies a basic syntactic contrast between oblique functions (the ‘object’ or ‘governed’ adverbials in current Estonian grammar) and ungoverned adverbial modifiers. The general dissociation between form and function in LFG also clarifies how a single semantic case form can function syntactically either as a modifying adverbial or as a governed oblique function.

1. Introduction¹

Estonian has no single case, like the dative, for marking indirectly affected participants. Instead, indirectly affected participants are encoded by the same ‘local’ case forms that are used with adverbial dependents to express a range of mainly spatial relations.² This is illustrated in (1):

- (1) a. *Mees istus diivanile.* (adverbial allative)
man.NOM sat sofa.ALLA
‘A man sat onto the sofa.’
- b. *Emal andis lapsele raha.* (oblique allative)
mother.NOM gave child.ALLA money.PART
‘The mother gave money to the child.’

While an allative dependent such as *diivanile* ‘onto the sofa’ in (1a) functions as an ungoverned adverbial in construction with a motion verb such as *istuma* ‘sit’, the same case form expresses an indirectly affected participant in construction with a ditransitive such as *andma* ‘give’ in (1b). The basic contrast between the role of *diivanile* in (1a) and *lapsele* in (1b) can be expressed in any model that distinguishes a class of ‘indirect objects’ or governed oblique dependents from subjects and objects on one hand, and from adverbial elements on the other. The present paper takes this traditional issue from a more theoretical perspective, and argues that the classification of grammatical functions in Lexical Mapping Theory (Bresnan & Zaenen 1990) clarifies the grammatical contrast between formally parallel elements. Accordingly, *diivanile* functions as an adverbial and *lapsele* as an oblique.

2. Two traditional views of oblique dependents in Estonian

The status of indirectly affected participants like *lapsele* in (1b) in Estonian has long been a matter of controversy. Some linguists (Kure 1959, Mihkla 1959, Klaas 1988, Nemvalts 2004) analyse such instances as a class of indirect objects, which represent indirectly affected participants. For instance, Klaas (1988) distinguishes three subclasses of indirect objects: ‘indirect relative object’, ‘indirect partner object’ and ‘indirect possessive object’. In all cases, the ‘local’

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2 Estonian has 14 cases. Nominative, genitive and partitive are abstract grammatical cases. Illative, inessive, elative, allative, adessive and ablative are ‘local’ semantic cases, and translative, terminative, essive, abessive and comitative make up the remaining semantic cases.

semantic cases are used to mark an indirectly affected participant, which make them different from the direct object in its morphology as well as in semantics.

Other linguists (Vääri 1959, Erelt 1989, 2004, Erelt et al. 1993) dispute the usefulness of this distinction, and assign all grammatical dependents other than subjects and direct objects to a large and heterogeneous class of ‘adverbials’, based on the observation that indirect dependents are similar in form to adverbial modifiers. The fact that ‘indirect objects’ bear the same ‘local’ cases is one of the main critical arguments against distinguishing them as a separate class of arguments. Moreover, Erelt (2002: 37) states that ‘indirect objects’ demonstrate no “specific syntactic behaviour”. However, the fact that the instances like (1b) actually have some object-like properties is reflected in the names ‘object adverbials’ or ‘government adverbials’ used by the opponents of ‘indirect objects’. Each of these ‘object-like properties’, which are described below, distinguishes governed obliques from adverbial elements. A genuinely adverbial dependent is not governed by a predicate but is subject to a looser requirement of ‘semantic compatibility’. For example, the adverbial allative case in (1a) can be replaced by other semantically appropriate local expressions, as illustrated in (2).

- (2) a. *Mees istus autosse.* (adverbial illative)
 man.NOM sat car.ILLA
 ‘A man sat into the car.’
- b. *Mees istus diivanil.* (adverbial adessive)
 man.NOM sat sofa.ADES
 ‘A man sat on the sofa.’
- c. *Mees istus autos.* (adverbial inessive)
 man.NOM sat car.INES
 ‘A man sat in the car.’

Which cases are compatible will depend on the type of action expressed by the verb, but also by the physical properties of the dependents that stand in the relation specified by a given case.

Yet, one must agree with the opponents of ‘indirect object’ that ‘indirect objects’ do not form a unified class as ‘subjects’ and ‘direct objects’ do in Estonian. At the same time the notion of ‘indirect object’ as a third grammatical argument may reflect a typological bias based on dative dependents in Indo-European, and thus would not apply to Estonian in the same sense.

3. An LFG approach to oblique dependents in Estonian

Building on previous studies, the following sections identify a number of syntactic respects in which ‘object adverbials’ in Estonian behave like governed grammatical functions and unlike the adverbials in (2). An analysis of Estonian ‘object adverbials’ within LFG helps to clarify their status by highlighting parallels between their syntactic behaviour and the behaviour of other types of governed grammatical functions. In addition, the separation of form and function in LFG permits a compromise between the two alternatives set out in Section 2. An LFG account can represent the similarity in form and even meaning between oblique dependents and adverbials without assigning the same functional analysis to these elements. Obliques are a type of governed grammatical function, whereas adverbials fall within the class of adjuncts. More specifically, oblique dependents can be treated as thematically restricted obliques (i.e. as [+r, -o] functions in LMT, following Bresnan & Kanerva 1989, Bresnan & Zaenen 1990). Individual predicates may govern particular oblique functions (as in (1b)). Oblique functions may also serve as antecedents in anaphoric control constructions. The case of oblique functions may even alternate with structural subject and object cases.

Although they have distinct syntactic functions, oblique dependents and adverbials are united by the fact that their similarity in form is associated with common thematic properties. While the allative in (1a) represents literal movement in space onto a point of reference, the allative in (1b) expresses metaphorical movement towards a recipient/goal. An LFG analysis can capture the types of syntactic properties that motivated the treatment of ‘object adverbials’ as indirect objects. At the same time, the analysis can express the formal and semantic similarities that lead others to group object adverbials within a class of formally and semantically similar adverbials. By factoring the properties of these elements, one can avoid the need for the choice in Section 2.

4. Syntactic contrasts between obliques and adverbials

4.1 Verb government

The behaviour of object adverbials differs from that of adverbial modifiers. The case of a particular object adverbial is governed by a verb, just as the case of a subject or direct object is. Verbs such as *mõtlima* ‘think’ or *rääkima* ‘talk’ can govern an elative dependent that expresses the propositional content of the verb or an allative dependent that expresses the thing thought about or the person spoken to. Verbs such as *helistama* ‘telephone’ or *andma* ‘give’ govern an allative argument, corresponding to the recipient of the call or the goal of the giving. Other classes of verbs govern particular cases for grammatical dependents that express various types of ‘indirectly affected’ participants (Klaas 1988). Unlike genuinely adverbial uses of ‘semantic’ cases, these verbs select a particular governed case, not a semantically compatible class of cases.

The examples in (3) and (4) illustrate this contrast. The verbs *helistama* ‘telephone’, *kirjutama* ‘write’ and *kuuluma* ‘belong to’ in (3) all govern the allative.

- (3) a. *Emä helistas tütrele.* (oblique allative)
 mother.NOM called daughter.ALLA
 ‘The mother called her daughter.’
- b. *Sõber kirjutas nendele.* (oblique allative)
 friend.NOM wrote them.ALLA
 ‘A friend wrote to them.’
- c. *Auto kuulub isale.* (oblique allative)
 car.NOM belongs father.ALLA
 ‘The car belongs to the father.’

In (4), *armuma* ‘fall in love’, *puutuma* ‘concern’ and *uskuma* ‘believe in’ govern the illative.

- (4) a. *Poiss armus tüdrukusse.* (oblique illative)
 boy.NOM fell in love girl.ILLA
 ‘The boy fell in love with the girl.’
- b. *See puutub ka temasse.* (oblique illative)
 That.NOM concerns also him/her.ILLA
 ‘That also concerns him/her.’
- c. *Isa uskus pojasse.* (oblique illative)
 Father.NOM believed son.ILLA
 ‘The father believed his son.’

Unlike the adverbial uses of allative and illative phrases, the governed dependents in (3) and (4) are ‘strictly subcategorized’ by particular verbs. Interchanging these cases does not produce a difference in meaning, but leads instead to unacceptability, as the sentences in (5) show.

- (5) a. **Ema helistas tüttresse.*
(mother called daughter.ILLA)
b. **Sõber kirjutas nendesse.*
(friend wrote them.ILLA)
c. **Auto kuulub isasse.*
(car belongs father.ILLA)
d. **Poiss armus tüdrukule.*
(boy fell in love with girl.ALLA)
e. **See puutub ka temale.*
(that concerns also him/her.ALLA)
f. **Isa uskus pojale.*
(father believed son.ALLA)

The government of oblique dependents is not lexically idiosyncratic or ‘quirky’ but reflects an abstract or metaphorical sense of their adverbial meaning. This is particularly clear in the case of the allative in (3a) and (3b), which marks the transfer or abstract motion toward a goal dependent. As noted earlier, this metaphorical usage is extended in ditransitive constructions in (6), where the allative expresses the recipient or goal of the action.

- (6) a. *Õpetaja andis õpilastele uue ülesande.* (oblique allative)
teacher.NOM gave students.ALLA new assignment.GEN
‘The teacher gave the students a new assignment.’
b. *Ma tõin teile hea uudise.* (oblique allative)
I brought you.ALLA good news.GEN
‘I brought you good news.’
c. *Sõber saadab sulle raamatu.* (oblique allative)
friend.NOM sends you.ALLA book.GEN
‘A friend is sending you a book.’ (examples from Klaas 1988: 41)

4.2 Anaphoric control

Some ‘object adverbials’ may act as antecedents in obligatory control constructions, which provides further confirmation that they are not adverbials but function as obliques. An obligatory anaphoric control construction involves coreference between an argument of the superordinate clause and the controlled position in the subordinate clause (Dalrymple 2001: 324). It might also be possible to treat the examples below as cases of functional control if obliques are allowed to act as functional controllers (as Cook suggests elsewhere in this volume). However, this alternative would strengthen the claim that ‘object adverbials’ may participate in constructions that allow governed functions but disallow genuine adverbial dependents.

Sentences in (7) illustrate object control constructions. The object control verbs *paluma* ‘ask’ and *aitama* ‘help’ take an adessive dependent, which functions as the controller of the implicit subject of the dependent infinitive.

- (7) a. *Direktor palus sekretäriil asja selgitada.*
director.NOM asked secretary.ADES thing.PART explain.INF
‘The director asked the secretary to explain the issue.’
b. *Lapsed aitavad emal nõusid pesta.*
children.NOM help mother.ADES dishes.PART wash.INF
‘The children help their mother wash the dishes.’

In these control structures, the adessive dependents *sekretäriil* ‘secretary’ and *emal* ‘mother’ are again strictly governed by the verb, and other semantic cases cannot be substituted. In addi-

tion, these dependents also play a critical role in a grammatical dependency, by serving as the obligatory antecedent for the subject of the dependent infinitive.

The modal verbs *tarvitsema* and *pruukima* ‘need’ may occur in subject control constructions where they take an adessive dependent that antecedes the subject of a dependent infinitive. In these constructions, illustrated in (8), the controlling ‘object adverbial’ shows the same degree of integration in the functional structure of a clause as subject or direct object controllers.

- (8) *Sul pruugib/tarvitseb ainult seda raamatut lugeda.*
 you.ADES need only this.PART book.PART read.INF
 ‘You need only read this book.’

The control constructions in (7) and (8) clearly distinguish governed uses of semantic cases from their adverbial uses. Semantic case forms in an adverbial function have a much looser connection to the argument structure of the clauses in which they occur and adverbials never serve as obligatory anaphoric (or functional) controllers.

4.3 Case variation with structural cases

The functional similarity between ‘object adverbials’ and subjects and objects in control constructions is reinforced by systematic patterns of case variation. In one pattern, the case of an ‘object adverbial’ controller may alternate with a structural partitive. As illustrated in (9), the adessive controller governed by an object control verb like *paluma* or *aitama* may also occur in the partitive, which is the default direct object case in Estonian.

- (9) a. *Direktor palus sekretäri asja selgitada.*
 director.NOM asked secretary.PART thing.PART explain.INF
 ‘The director asked the secretary to explain the issue.’
 b. *Lapsed aitavad ema nõusid pesta.*
 children.NOM help mother.PART dishes.PART wash.INF
 ‘The children help their mother wash the dishes.’

In another pattern, the adessive controller governed by a negative modal such as *ei tarvitse* or *ei pruugi* ‘need not’ alternates with a nominative subject, as illustrated by the examples in (10).

- (10) *Sa ei pruugi/tarvitse seda raamatut läbi lugeda.*
 you.NOM not need this.PART book.PART through read.INF
 ‘You do not need to read this book through.’

The alternations between ‘semantic’ cases and governed structural cases are restricted to dependents functioning as governed functions, and are never possible for genuine adverbials.

In short, at least some classes of semantic cases have two quite different syntactic functions. When they occur as unselected modifiers, these cases have an adverbial function. But when they are governed by a particular verb (or construction), exactly the same case forms may function as oblique dependents, representing goals or other indirectly affected arguments of a verb. Other languages show similar formal overlaps, as illustrated, for example by the use of accusative case to mark direct objects or temporal adverbials in many Indo-European languages. However, the pattern is more pronounced in Estonian, due to a much richer inventory of adverbial cases.

5. On ‘object adverbials’ in LFG

The theoretical perspective of modern syntactic models helps to clarify the status of governed semantic cases. Theories with an explicit focus on grammatical functions are particularly rele-

vant. Relational grammar (RG; Perlmutter 1983) and Lexical Functional Grammar (LFG; Kaplan & Bresnan 1982, Bresnan 2001) are the best-known theories of this kind. LFG makes the status of ‘object adverbials’ especially clear, because these elements correspond to a type of ‘thematically restricted’ oblique dependent. The general dissociation between form and function in LFG clarifies how a single semantic case form can be associated with a general case meaning and yet function either as a modifying adverbial or as a governed oblique function.

Unlike RG, which associates different types of indirectly affected participants with a single indirect object relation, 3, the feature system in (10) defines two classes of thematically restricted functions. The first is the class of thematically restricted objects, OBJ_θ, which are assigned the features [+r, +o]. This class is normally understood to contain structurally case-marked objects that are subject to a semantic restriction, so it is not appropriate for the semantically casemarked arguments in Estonian. The second class of thematically restricted dependents are the oblique functions OBL_θ, which are assigned the features [+r, -o]. Obliques in this sense are often realised by dependents marked by adpositions, which is appropriate in Estonian, given that that semantic case markers are derived fairly recently from postpositions.

(11) LMT feature analysis of grammatical functions

	(-restricted)	(+restricted)
(-objective)	SUBJ	OBL _θ
(+objective)	OBJ	OBJ _θ

The LMT feature analysis of grammatical functions expresses the key insight that the notion ‘oblique’ does not designate a single grammatical function, like ‘subject’ or ‘direct object’, but refers to a family of thematically restricted functions. The table in (12) shows how one and the same semantic case form may function as an adverbial modifier or as a governed dependent. In their governed use, ‘object adverbials’ serve as oblique grammatical functions. Like ‘indirect objects’ in other languages, ‘object adverbials’ in Estonian are often interpreted as goals, recipients or as other types of ‘indirectly affected participants’. In their adverbial uses, the same case forms express the more concrete spatial relations usually associated with ‘local’ cases.

(12) Polyfunctional semantic cases in Estonian

CASE	OBL _θ (OBLIQUE)	ADVERBIAL
ALLATIVE	<i>helistama, kirjutama, andma, ...</i>	<i>istuma, hüppama, ...</i>
ILLATIVE	<i>armuma, puutuma, uskuma, ...</i>	
ADESSIVE	<i>paluma, aitama, tarvitsema, ...</i>	

5.1 Adverbial uses of semantic cases

The standard LFG analysis of adjuncts applies to adverbial dependents of the sort illustrated by the examples in (2). In the analysis assigned to (2b) in diagram 1, only the subject *mees* ‘man’ is governed by the verb *istuma* ‘sit’. This is indicated by the fact that the PRED value of *istuma* contains only a SUBJ function. The adessive adverbial *diivanil* ‘on the sofa’ is not governed by the verb, but occurs in the set of ungoverned adjuncts that are the value of the ADJ(UNCT) function.

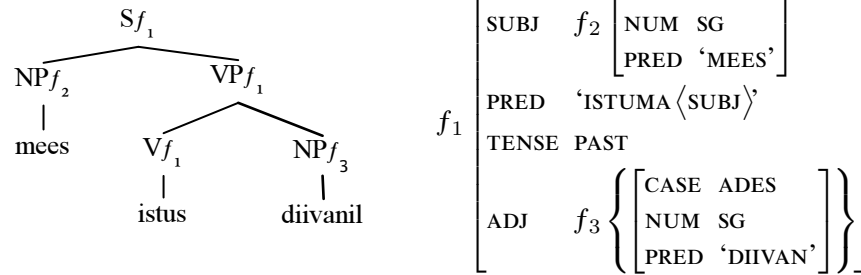


Diagram 1. C-structure and f-structure for sentence (2b) with ungoverned adverbial

The ‘compatibility’ between the verb and adjunct is not represented in the c(onstituent)-structure on the left or in the f(eature)-structure on the right, because this relation is semantic rather than syntactic, and both of the structures in Diagram 1 are syntactic representations.

5.2 Governed uses of object adverbials

The analysis in Diagram 2 shows how obliques are, like subjects and objects, integrated into the argument structure of a clause. The allative dependent *õpilastele* ‘students’ is governed by the verb *andma* ‘give’ and occurs as the value of the thematically restricted function OBL_{alla} in Diagram 2.

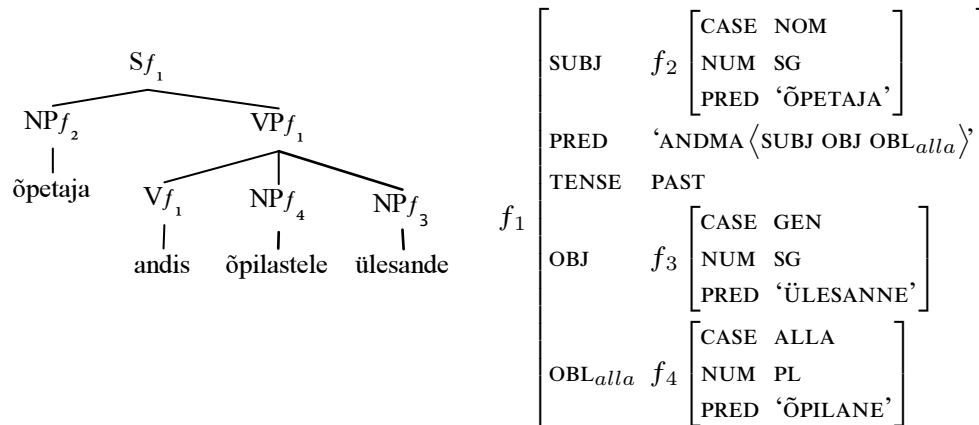


Diagram 2. C-structure and f-structure for sentence (6a) with governed allative oblique

5.3 Anaphoric control by obliques

The analysis assigned to (7a) in Diagram 3 also shows how obliques function as obligatory controllers in anaphoric control constructions. The control relation is represented by the subscripting of the PRED value of the adessive antecedent *sekretäril* ‘secretary’ and the controlled pronominal subject ‘PRO’ in the dependent infinitive in Diagram 3.

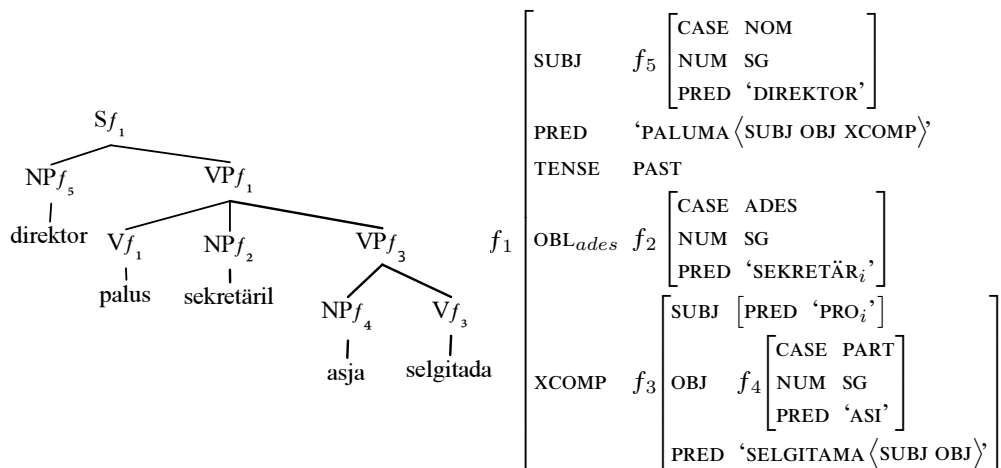


Diagram 3. C-structure and f-structure for sentence (7a) with an adessive oblique controller

5.4 Case variation with oblique and partitive controllers

The grammatical parallel between obligatory oblique controllers and obligatory subject and object controllers is reinforced by the fact that the adessive *sekretäriil* in Diagram 3 may alternate with partitive *sekretäri*, as illustrated by example (9a) above and the corresponding Diagram 4.

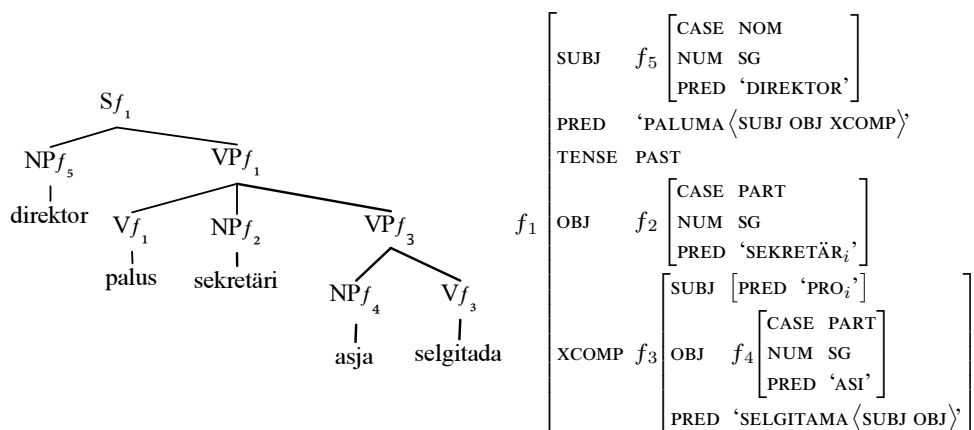


Diagram 4. C-structure and f-structure for sentence (9a) with a partitive controller

Each of the properties illustrated in Diagrams 2–4 distinguishes at least a class of oblique dependents from the type of free adverbials that occur in the structure in Diagram 1.

6. Conclusion

The present article studied a controversial issue in Estonian grammar, that is, the status of so-called ‘object adverbials’. There is no agreement in this matter, as some linguists analyse them as ‘indirect objects’, while others include them in a heterogeneous class of adverbials. The latter view is what is accepted in Modern Estonian Grammar (Erelt et al. 1993).

However, the preceding sections argue that these ‘object adverbials’ behave more like grammatical arguments than adverbial modifiers, in three main respects. All of them are strictly governed by a particular verb, and some of them may also function as controllers in anaphoric control constructions and demonstrate case variation with structural cases. None of these properties characterise semantically casemarked elements that function as genuine ‘adverbials’. Instead, adverbial elements can be integrated into a clause if they show some semantic ‘compatibility’ with the main verb.

The general dissociation between form and function in LFG clarifies how a single semantic case form can function either as a modifying adverbial or as a governed oblique function. The model of Lexical Mapping Theory (LMT) incorporated within current versions of LFG (Bresnan & Zaenen 1990) offers an elegant analysis of the diverse class of obliques in Estonian. The fact that Estonian ‘object adverbials’ are governed obliques accounts for their integration into the argument structure of a clause. The thematic restrictions on each type of oblique corresponds to the meanings of semantic cases such as illative, allative or adessive. A given case form may thus function as an oblique dependent when it is governed by a verb, and as an adverbial when it occurs with a compatible motion verb. Furthermore, unlike models such as RG, the fine-grained classification of functions provided by semantic restrictions allows a predicate to govern multiple obliques, provided that each is assigned a different thematic interpretation. In sum, this paper shows how an LFG-based analysis of ‘object adverbials’ can account for their affinity in form to adverbials while bringing out the syntactic behaviour that identifies them as obliques.

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