Swedish case marking

Swedish is a relatively case poor language, with case-marking of only pronouns (disregarding the phrasal genitive). In this respect, Swedish is much like Norwegian and Danish, as well as English, North Frisian, West Frisian, Dutch and Afrikaans. In contrast, Icelandic, Faroese, German, and Yiddish are relatively case rich, with case marking of full NPs (see Sigurðsson 2006).

There are many differences in case-marking within these two subgroups of Germanic languages. For example, genitive marking is more marginal in Faroese than in the other three case rich languages (Thráinsson et al. 2004), whereas case agreement is more robust in Icelandic and also in Faroese than in German and Yiddish, the latter for instance not having any predicative agreement (of adjectives and participles). In spite of the overall similarities of the poor Germanic case systems, there are some striking dissimilarities among them too. Thus, English and Danish (and Norwegian to an extent) allow (certain types of) case mismatches in coordinated NPs and accusative marking of predicative pronouns (the latter with some irregular exceptions in formal English registers; see Quinn 2005, inter alia). This is exemplified in (1) and (2).

(1) a. Him and I went to the movies yesterday.  
    b. Min bror og mig er gode venner.  
    my brother and me are good friends

(2) a. It's just me.  
    b. Det er kun mig.  
    It is just me

These phenomena have been widely discussed with respect to English (Huddleston and Pullum 2002) and also to an extent with respect to Danish (Parrot 2009, Hansen and Heltoft 2011).

Swedish (as Afrikaans and largely also Frisian and Dutch) behaves more like the Germanic case rich languages with respect to these phenomena, as illustrated in (3) and (4).

(3) a. Min bröder och jag/*/mig är goda vänner.  
    my brother and I/me are good friends
    b. Mein Bruder und ich/*/mich sind gute Freunde.  
    my brother and I/me are good friends

(4) a. Jo, det är hon/*/henne!  
    yes, it is she/her
    b. Jú, það er hún/*/hana.  
    yes, it is she/her
Nevertheless, Swedish shows some interesting case variation, both across constructions and varieties. Some of the variation found for predicative pronominal NPs is illustrated in (5)-(7). The numbers to the right are the results of two small informant surveys, conducted in March 2009. The informants were Southern-Swedish university students 19-30 years old, 45 and 31 in number, respectively. However, the results do not seem to be specific or special for Southern-Swedish speakers (most of them concur with the judgments of colleagues from other parts of Sweden)—notwithstanding the fact that there is also some regional variation in Swedish case-marking, not discernible in this particular survey.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>OK</th>
<th>?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>a. Vem är det? Det är bara <strong>jag</strong>. who is it? it is just I 45</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Vem är det? Det är bara <strong>mig</strong>. who is it? it is just me</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>a. Det är inte lätt att vara <strong>jag</strong>. it is not easy to be I 23</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Det är inte lätt att vara <strong>mig</strong>. it is not easy to be me</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>a. Jag försöker bara vara <strong>jag</strong> själv I try just be I self –</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>b. Jag försöker bara vara <strong>mig</strong> själv I try just be me self</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>–</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>‘I’m just trying to be myself.’</td>
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Other constructions tested included comparative constructions (“Taller than I/me”), cleft constructions (“It is I/me they should respect”, “It is I/me who should respect them”) modal constructions (“If you were I/me, you would go there”), and so on, altogether 45 clauses. Many of the results (such as that in (7)) were striking and have not been generally discussed by linguists (Swedish or non-Swedish).

The literature on Swedish case marking is surprisingly sparse (for example, there is no mention of predicative case in SAG, the Swedish Academy Grammar in 4 volumes). The paper discusses the existing literature (Reinhammer 1973, Eklund 1982, Holmberg 1986, Sigurðsson 2006, and a few more) as well as the above described survey, arguing that Swedish case marking reflects a number of properties, in addition to argument structure, including modality and an identity vs. role distinction. Finally, time permitting, the paper also discusses some of the methodological and, not least, theoretical issues that arise in relation to linguistic data elicitation (addressing, among other things, the question of whether or to what extent we should “forget about the facts” and also the question of what counts as a “fact”).

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1 “Fine, I would say so to my friends” = OK, “Strange” = ?, “Wrong, I would never say this” = *. 