Swedish predicative case: default or not?

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This article describes and discusses an ongoing change of case marking, NOM(inative) > OBL(ique), in certain predicates in Swedish (type "Then you can be **I**" > "Then you can be **me**"). This change has gone largely unnoticed hitherto. The discussion is based on a large-scale online survey, conducted in May 2016 (4,917 native speaker informants). It was tested whether the change relates to finiteness or to semantics. The results strongly indicate that the latter is the case. The change is found in predicates that express role semantics but nondetectable in predicates with plain identity readings (type "It is I"). In addition, there are strong indications that the change is closely related to another change that is also taking place in Swedish, NOM > OBL in comparative phrases (type "She is bigger than **I**" > "She is bigger than **me**"). The results speak against the hypothesis that OBL is becoming default in Swedish. Instead, it seems that many speakers are reanalyzing role predicates as well as comparative phrases such that they contain a head that is a case assigner, an overt one in comparatives but a silent one in role predicates. The article concludes that Swedish is largely retaining its basic NOM-OBL case system.

1 Introduction

Dialects apart, case-impoverished Germanic languages (Afrikaans, Danish, Dutch, English, Frisian, Norwegian, Swedish) seem at first sight to have simple and almost identical case systems, with only (a phrasal genitive and) a NOM(inative)/OBL(ique) distinction for a handful of pronouns. Nevertheless, there are some a priori surprising differences in the distribution of NOM/OBL in these languages. For example, some of them normally opt for NOM as predicate case (most consistently Swedish and Afrikaans), others for OBL (most consistently English and Danish). This is illustrated in (1).

(1) a. Det är bara ^{ok}**jag**/*mig. *Swedish*
b. Det er kun *jeg/^{ok}**meg**. *Danish*
it is only I/me
'It's only me.'

See Maling & Sprouse (1995), Sigurðsson (2006), and Parrott (2009, 2017). However, closer inspection reveals that the variation is more extensive and complex than this received understanding would seem to suggest. We report on a large-scale online survey on case marking in Swedish. See (2).

(2) The Swedish Case Survey, **SwCS:** May 2016, 85 sentences, 5,315 informants from all

major regions in Sweden and Finland.[1]

The social variables where education, regions, and age. As it turned out, education had minimal effects and regions only limited effects. In contrast, age had dramatic effects. We will only present our age-related (and some of our total) results here. We limit our presentation to native speakers. Of the 5,315 informants, 4.917 were native speakers, and their age distribution was as stated in (3).

(3) Number of native speakers 4,917. Age distribution.

Age	#	%
≤ 24:	265	5%
25-44:	1,979	40%
45-64:	2,045	42%
65≥:	595	12%
Unclear:	33	

Our major findings are that there are three ongoing changes in case marking, as stated in (4).

(4) a. NOM > OBL in certain predicates
b. NOM > OBL (of "subjects") in phrasal comparatives
c. To a lesser extent: OBL > NOM in objects of Vs and Ps

We will focus on the NOM > OBL changes. While NOM > OBL in phrasal comparatives has been widely noticed (see, e.g., Teleman et al. 1999), NOM > OBL in predicates has gone largely unnoticed hitherto.

Section 2 presents our results for predicates. Section 3 discusses and rejects the hypothesis that OBL is becoming default in Swedish; Swedish clearly differs from English and Danish in this respect. Section 4 develops the idea that NOM > OBL in predicates and phrasal comparatives are closely related. In both, OBL is assigned by a head, thus not being assigned by default. Section 5 concludes.

2 NOM > OBL in predicates

[1] SwCS is part of a project supported by Riksbankens Jubileumfond, "Jag vill vara dig: Nominativ och oblik kausus i svenska", RJ P15-0389:1.

As stated above, SwCS contained 85 examples. Of these, 36 involved predicates, 18 finite and 18 nonfinite. A few of the examples are given in (5) and (6).[2]

(5) *A few examples of predicates in finite clauses*:

a. Det är bara **jag/mig**.
it is only I/me.
'It is only me.'

b. Om jag vore **du/dig**, skulle jag åka.
if I were you.NOM/ACC.SG would I go.
'If I were you, I would go.'

c. Den där lilla bebisen på bilden är **jag/mig**.
this there little baby on picture-the is I/me.
'This little baby in the picture is me.'

(6) *A few examples of nonfinite predicates*:

a. Då kan du vara **jag/mig**!
then can you.SG be I/me!
'Then you can be me!'

b. Jag låtas inte vara **du/dig**.
I pretend not be you.NOM.SG/ACC.SG
'I do not pretend to be you.'

c. Den där lilla bebisen på bilden ser ut att vara **jag/mig**.
this there little baby on picture-the looks out to be I/me.
'This little baby in the picture seems to be me.'

In the generative tradition (Chomsky 1981 and much related work) nominative case has commonly been taken to relate to finiteness. This has repeatedly been argued against by many researchers, including Sigurðsson (see 2012a, 2012b and the references there). Nevertheless, Sigurðsson (2006:40) observes that "Dutch and Alemannic shift from nominative to accusative [in predicates] in (at least many) infinitives and so does e.g. Italian". In view of this, it seemed a priori possible that predicative NOM > OBL in Swedish is primarily confined to nonfinite predicates. Another possibility is that the change relates to semantics (as case marking commonly has semantic correlates). We thus included both finite and nonfinite examples in order to test the hypotheses in (7).

[2] We tested examples with predicates in all three persons in the singular. The third person examples were largely confined to the feminine *hon/henne* (the masculine singular *han* is the descendent of a syncretic NOM/ACC form, and is still used as an accusative in some nonstandard varieties). All the examples and results are published in Sigurðsson & de Weijer (2017).

(7) a. Hypothesis A: Predicative NOM > OBL relates to finiteness.
b. Hypothesis B: Predicative NOM > OBL relates to semantics.

As it turned out, the data strongly support Hypothesis B, refuting Hypothesis A. Predicative NOM > OBL is largely absent from examples that express plain *deictic identity* (roughly equative in the sense of Higgins 1973, see further Adger & Ramchand 2003, Heycock 2012, Roy 2013, Bartošová 2017). Some of our results are presented in (8) and (9). All numbers (throughout) are % for "Feels natural. I would say so myself".[3]

		Finite; deictic identity:	NOM	OBL
(8)	a.	Det är bara **jag/mig**. it is only I/me	93%	1%
	b.	Jaså, det är bara **du/dig**. oh it is only you.NOM.SG/OBL.SG 'Oh, it is only you.'	99%	1%
	c.	Den där lilla bebisen på bilden är **jag**/**mig**. this there little baby-the on picture-the is I/me	97%	1%

(9)	*Non-finite; deictic identity*:		NOM	OBL
	Den där lilla bebisen på bilden ser ut att vara **jag/mig**. this there little baby-the on picture-the looks out to be I/me		97%	2%

The change is taking place in contexts where the predicate expresses *role semantics* (the predicate taking on the role or psyche of the subject, rather than its plain deictic identity). See the results in (10) and (11).

			NOM	OBL
(10)	*Finite; role semantics*:			
	a.	Nu är du **mig**, jag är **dig**! now are you me, I am you.OBL.SG 'Now you are me, I am you!'		**20%**
	b.	Om jag vore **du/dig**, if I were you.NOM.SG/OBL.SG skulle jag åka.	90%	**33%**

[3] "Känns naturlig. Så skulle jag uttrycka mig" (the participants were informed that the only relevant variety was the one they would use in their everyday language with family and friends). The other alternatives were "Känns lite märklig. Jag skulle knappast säga så" ('Feels a bit odd. I would hardly say so'), and "Känns inte bra. Så skulle jag inte saga" ('Does not feel good. I would not say so').

	would I go			
c.	Jag är bara **jag/mig** själv.		6%	**99%**
	I am only I/me self			
	'I'm only being myself.'			

(11)	*Non-finite; role semantics*:		NOM	OBL
a.	Då kan du vara **jag/mig**!		73%	**22%**
	then can you be I/me			
b.	Jag låtas inte vara **du/dig**.		73%	**32%**
	I pretend not be you.NOM.SG/OBL.SG			
c.	Nej, jag skulle aldrig vilja vara **hon/henne**.		45%	**59%**
	no, I would never want be she/her			
	'No, I would never want to be her.'			
d.	Jag försöker bara vara **jag/mig** själv.		1%	**99%**
	I try only be I/me self			
	'I'm only trying to be myself.'			

The special status of examples with *själv* 'self' is striking. To 'be oneself' reflects on the role or psyche of the subject, which is incompatible with an identity reading.[4]

Predicative NOM > OBL correlates strongly with age; it is rapidly gaining ground. Consider the age-related results in (12) and (13).

			Age			
(12)	*Finite; role semantics*:		*≤24*	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
a.	Nu är du **mig**, jag är **dig**!		**35%**	25%	14%	12%
	now are you me, I am you.OBL.SG					
b.	Om jag vore **dig**,		36%	**38%**	33%	17%
	if I were you.OBL.SG					
	skulle jag åka.					
	would I go					

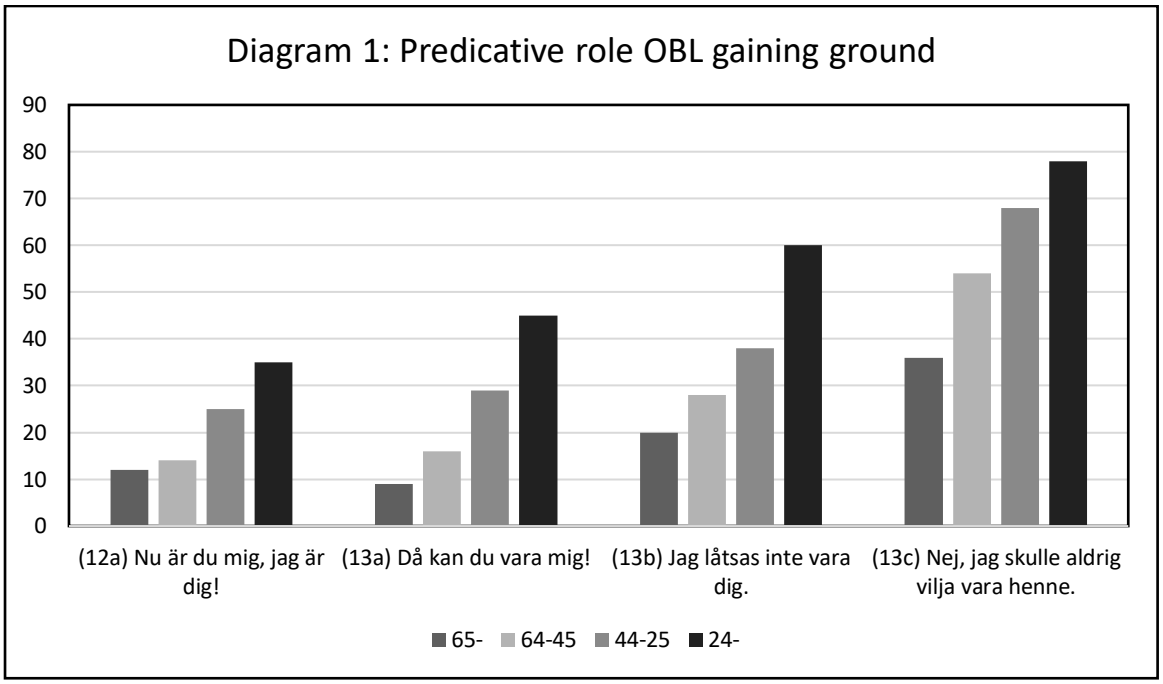
(13)	*Non-finite; role semantics*:	*≤24*	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
a.	Då kan du vara **mig**!	**45%**	29%	16%	9%
	then can you be me				
b.	Jag låtas inte vara **dig**.	**50%**	38%	28%	20%
	I pretend not be you.OBL.SG				

[4] We found much the same for the third person; that is, 96% acceptance for *Hon är inte längre **sig** själv*, lit. "she is not longer sig.OBL self", 'She is no longer (being) herself'. However, 5% accepted NOM *hon själv* in *Hon är inte längre **hon** själv*, and 6% accepted OBL *henne själv* in *Hon är inte längre henne själv*. We also tested first person examples without *själv*, that is, *Jag är bara **jag*** (85%) vs. *Jag är bara **mig*** (12%), "I am only I/me".

'I'm not pretending to be you.'

c. Nej, jag skulle aldrig vilja vara **henne**. **78%** 68% 54% 36%
no, I would never want be her

The acceptance of predicative role OBL increases almost monotonically with decreased age (the sentence in (12b) was the only exception). This is further illustrated in Diagram 1.



3 Default case?

Schütze (2001) famously develops an analysis of English case marking, where OBL is commonly *default* (syntactically "no case"), as for example in dislocation, ellipsis, and coordination. Some of his examples and judgments are given in (14)–(16).

(14) *Dislocation and apposition*:

a. **Me**/*I, I like beans.

b. The best athlete, **her**/*she, should win.

(15) *Ellipsis*:

Who wants to try this game?

a. **Me** (too). /*I (too).

b. **Me** next! /*I next!

c. Not **us**. /*Not we.

(16) *Coordination*:

a. **Us and them**/*We and they are gonna rumble tonight.

b. **Her and us**/ *She and we have been friends for ages.

To this, we can add case mismatches between coordinated pronouns (not considered by Schütze), such as *him and I*, both as subjects and objects (Johannessen 1998, Quinn 2005, Parrott 2009, 2017).

Schütze does not assume that predicative case is default (see his appendix), but Parrott (2009, 2017) extends Schütze's analysis to predicates in English and Danish, and suggests, conversely, that NOM is default in Swedish. According to Parrott (2017), Swedish generally applies the PF case-marking rules in (17) (somewhat simplified here; v* heads transitive VPs):

(17) a. x DP > x DP_{OBL} x = v*, p, …

b. DP > DP_{NOM} elsewhere

On this understanding, NOM *is* default in Swedish. Parrott does not claim that Swedish predicative NOM is default, though, pointing out that it might involve case agreement or matching.[5] Nevertheless, it might seem possible to analyze the Swedish predicative NOM/OBL variation as resulting from OBL replacing NOM as default case. We state this hypothesis explicitly in (18).

(18) The default NOM > OBL hypothesis:
For many speakers OBL is replacing NOM as the default case.

However, this default NOM > OBL hypothesis is *not* supported by our results. First, the strong correlation of OBL predicates with role semantics indicates that copular constructions may contain a head that is a potential case assigner (as also suggested by predicative case in other languages).[6] Another argument against (18) comes from the fact that there are no signs that predicative OBL speakers are extending OBL to those non-predicative constructions that are argued to involve default OBL in English by Schütze or in English and Danish by Parrott. We illustrate this in (19)–(22).

[5] Case agreement is difficult to test in a language with only pronominal case. Speakers commonly find it very hard to pass judgments on examples like *Han trodde mig vara **hon**/**henne*** "he believed me be she/her", where OBL *henne* might be taken to indicate case agreement (with *mig*). The native speakers we have consulted frown upon examples of this sort, nevertheless judging the OBL *henne* as "less bad" than the NOM *hon*.

[6] Predicative INSTR in Polish and Russian, ACC in Arabic, the citation form in Japanese, PART, ESS and TRANSL in Finnish (in addition to NOM). See Comrie 1997, Pereltsveig 2007, Matushansky 2008, Bailyn 2012.

First, there are no indications of NOM > OBL in dislocation and apposition in Swedish, as illustrated in (19).

(19) a. **Jag**/*Mig, jag gillar bönor.
I/Me, I like beans
'Me, I like beans.'

b. Den bästa atleten, **hon**/*henne, borde vinna.
the best athlete she/her should win
'The best athlete, her, should win.'

OBL is also excluded in ellipsis, as shown in (20) and (21).

(20) Vem vill prova det här spelet?
who wants try this here game-the
'Who wants to try this game?'

a. **Jag**/*Mig (också).
I/Me (too)

b. Inte **vi**/*oss.
not we/us

One ellipsis example was included in SwCS. The total result was 1.1%; the age-related results are given in (21).[7]

	≤ 24	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
(21) Vem vill prova? **Mig**. (who wants (to) try me)	0.8%	0.6%	1.2%	2.9%

In addition, coordinated subjects are NOM & NOM in Swedish. A few examples of coordinated subject pronouns were included in SwCS. The age-related results are shown in (22) (the totals were 0.4%, 0.8%, 0.3%, respectively).

	≤ 24	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
(22) a. Du och **henne** är mina bästa vänner. (you.SG and her are my best friends)	2.6%	0.3%	0.2%	0.5%
b. Anna och **mig** ska på bio ikväll. (Anna and me shall on movies tonight)	0.4%	0.5%	0.8%	1.3%

[7] Some of the positive responses might be the result of a misunderstanding, where the example was interpreted as meaning 'Who wants to try me?' A better example would have been *Vem vill prova detta? Mig*. 'Who wants to try this? Me'.

c.	Jag	och	**dig**	har			0.8%	0.2%	0.2%	0.5%
	I	and	you.SG	have						
	nog	inte	så	mycket	gemensamt.					
	probably	not	so	much	common					

A third argument against the default NOM > OBL hypothesis is the following: Recall that there is an ongoing opposite change in (mainly 3rd person) objects (of V/Ps), OBL > NOM. A few typical examples and the age-related results for these are given in (23) (the totals were 15% for (23a), 7% for (23b), and 23% for (23c)).

								≤24	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
(23)	a.	Jag	har	inte	sett	**han**	idag.	**27%**	21%	11%	4%
		I	have	not	seen	he	today				
	b.	Jag	har	inte	sett	**hon**	idag.	**13%**	9%	5%	2%
		I	have	not	seen	she	today				
	c.	**Hon**	har	jag	faktiskt	inte	sett idag.	**40%**	29%	18%	15%
		she	have	I	actually	not	seen today				

It seems safe to conclude that the increase of predicative Role OBL in Swedish cannot be explained as a result of a general switch of default case from NOM to OBL.

4 A silent case assigner analysis

In view of the fact that OBL is not becoming default in Swedish, we need to look for an alternative understanding. There must be something in the structure of role predicates that is triggering OBL assignment. An obvious possibility is that the copula is being reinterpreted as a case assigner in predicate constructions, v > *v (Sigurðsson 2006). However, this is non-explanatory as it does not capture the relation with role semantics. Instead, we pursue the hypothesis in (24).

(24) Role predicates contain or may contain a silent *som*-like head (*som* = 'as, like'), closely related to comparative *som* and functioning as a role connector (roughly as a relator in the sense of den Dikken 2006). Many speakers are reanalyzing this connector as a case assigner.

In many cases, *som* may actually be spelled out in OBL role predicates, and this seems to have only vague semantic effects. We illustrate this in (25).

(25) a. Jag låtas inte vara *[som]* **dig**.

I pretend not be [like] you.OBL.SG
'I'm not pretending to be you / to be like you.'

b. Nej, jag skulle aldrig vilja vara *[som]* **henne**.
no, I would never want be [like] her
'No, I would never want to be her / to be like her.'

c. Om jag vore *[som]* **dig**, skulle jag åka.
if I were [as] you.OBL.SG would I go
'If I were (as) you, I would go.'

Plausibly, the reason why insertion of *som* in OBL predicates has only vague semantic effects is that the structure in OBL predicates contains a role connector regardless of whether it is spelled out or not. In contrast, insertion of *som* in NOM predicates (*Jag låtsas inte vara som du*, etc.) clearly adds comparative semantics ('like you, similar to you') that is not there or need not be there in the absence of *som*. That is, NOM structures with overt *som* are presumably underlyingly different from plain NOM predicates.[8]

Recall that there is also an ongoing NOM > OBL change in phrasal comparatives, with *som* and *än* 'than' as connectors. A few of our results for *som*-examples are given in (26).[9]

			NOM	OBL
(26)	a.	Hon är inte lika stor som **du/dig**. she is not as big as you.SG	94%	30%
	b.	De respekterar nog en person som **du/dig**. they respect probably a person like you.SG	66%	48%
	c.	Jag är inte lika smart som **han/honom**. I am not as smart as he/him	64%	54%

The age-related results for the OBL examples are given in (27).

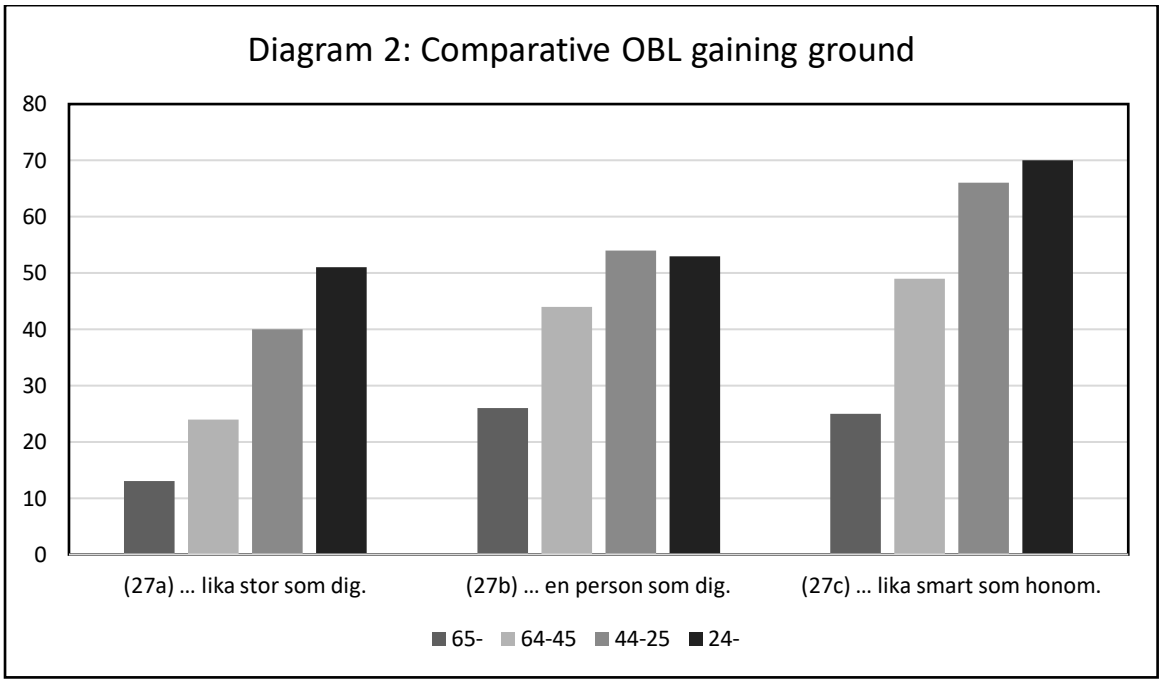
			≤ 24	*25-44*	*45-64*	*65≥*
(27)	a.	Hon är inte lika stor som **dig**.	**51%**	40%	24%	13%

[8] Consider also the difference between *Hon är en briljant forskare* 'She is a brilliant researcher' and *Hon är briljant **som** forskare* 'She is brilliant **as** a researcher' (in the latter example *som* must be spelled out).

[9] Interestingly, NOM is more widely accepted than OBL in all cases. It has been commonly assumed that NOM in comparative ("subject") phrases mainly belongs to the written language while OBL is typical of spoken language (see Teleman et al. 1999:673). At first sight, one might be tempted to believe that NOM is regaining ground in comparative phrases, due to formal schooling. However, our age-related results show that this is not the case. It seems that grammarians have overestimated the frequency of OBL in comparative ("subject") phrases in colloquial Swedish. Nevertheless, NOM > OBL is presumably an older and a farther developed change in comparative phrases than in predicates.

b.	De respekterar nog en person som **dig**.	53%	**54%**	44%	36%
c.	Jag är inte lika smart som **honom**.	**70%**	66%	49%	25%

The correlation with age is very strong; generally, the acceptance of comparative "subject" OBL increases radically with decreased age. This is further illustrated in Diagram 2.



Moreover, there is a strong covariation of the two NOM > OBL changes. The Pearson correlation coefficients are shown in (28).[10]

(28)	a.	Comparative OBL - Predictive OBL:	0.62
	b.	Comparative NOM - Predictive NOM:	0.48
	c.	Comparative OBL - Predictive NOM:	–0.19
	d.	Comparative NOM - Predictive OBL:	–0.25

In addition, both changes show intra-speaker variation; that is, some speakers accept both NOM and OBL in both role predicates and phrasal comparatives.

Finally, OBL > NOM in objects covaries with NOM > OBL in both role predicates and phrasal comparatives. The Pearson correlation coefficients are given in (29).

(29)	a.	Predictive OBL - Object NOM:	0.39

[10] 1 = highest positive correlation, 0 = no correlation, –1 strongest negative correlation; the results would be even more striking if identity predicates were not included. Values over 0.40 can be interpreted as showing a very strong correlation.

b.	Comparative OBL - Object NOM:	0.46
c.	Predictive OBL - Object OBL:	0.03
d.	Comparative OBL - Object OBL	0.00

OBL > NOM in objects does not seem to be structurally or linguistically related to the NOM > OBL changes. We abstain from taking a stand on the issue here. What matters for our purposes is only the plain fact that many speakers who accept OBL in comparatives and role predicates tend to also accept object NOM.[11]

In sum, none of the facts discussed in this section are compatible with a general default case switch analysis. Rather, they suggest that OBL predicates contain a role connector that is being reanalyzed by many speakers as a potential case assigner, on a par with comparative *som*.

5 Concluding remarks

There are some differences between the connector in phrasal *som*-comparatives and role predicates. Most centrally, the connector must be spelled out in comparatives, while it is commonly not spelled out in predicates, see (30).

(30) a. Hon är inte lika stor *(som) du/dig.
she is not as big as you
'She is not as big as you.'

b. Jag låtsas inte vara (som) du/dig.
I pretend not be (like) you
'I am not pretending to be you / like you.'

With respect to case, though, there is a tendency to treat the silent connector in predicates on a par with the overt one in comparatives. Speakers seem to be reanalyzing "*som*-connectors", overt or silent, as case assigners, yielding NOM > OBL in both role predicates and phrasal comparatives. This is a minor change, while a general default case switch from NOM to OBL would be a fundamental change. Swedish retains its basic NOM-OBL case system, it seems.

[11] With the exception of (parts of) Norrland (see Eklund 1982, Holmberg 1986) OBL > NOM in objects is largely confined to 3rd person objects. Rather than involving a change in case assignment, it might involve a general loss of case in the 3rd person (on a par with *den, det* 'it' and plural *dom* 'they'). We thank Marit Julien for pointing this out to us. Nevertheless, our results show that OBL > NOM in objects is correlated to NOM > OBL in predicates and comparatives, at least socially if not linguistically. Possibly, NOM objects and OBL predicates and comparatives belong to a "youth register", but we will not pursue the issue.

Thus, it adheres to Burzio's Generalization, by exclusively assigning NOM to subjects in passive and unaccusative constructions.[12]

An intriguing question is whether our analysis bears on NOM > OBL in phrasal comparatives and predicates in other case-impoverished Germanic languages. Dutch and West Frisian show similar tendencies as does Swedish, generally with NOM in identity predicates but with NOM/OBL variation in role predicates and phrasal comparatives (Sigurðsson 2006, Lindenbergh 2016). It thus seems possible that Swedish, Dutch, and West Frisian are in an intermediate state on the "English/Danish route", suggesting, if true, that the English/Danish development did not involve a one fell swoop default case switch. In addition, it seems that analyses in terms of an overall-default OBL are overgeneralizing, even for present-day English and Danish (see Huddleston & Pullum 2002, and also Heltoft 2017, who shows that there is a NOM/OBL variation for even non-coordinated subjects in Danish). Also, both languages behave like Swedish in that they adhere to Burzio's Generalization.

Possibly, the development in Danish and (Early Modern to Modern) English also went through a stage where role predicates and phrasal comparatives were treated differently (OBL) from identity predicates (NOM), but, as far as we are aware of, this is unknown; the question has, to our knowledge, not been raised before.

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[12] Burzio's Generalization says that all and only the verbs that assign a thematic role to the subject can assign ACC (or OBL) to an object, which precludes passive and unaccusative subjects from being assigned OBL, even though they are underlyingly objects. See Burzio (1986:178).

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