

No case for agreement (as a causer of case)



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Three models of case

m1: case-by-*Agree*_φ (Chomsky 2000, 2001)

m2: configurational case (Yip, Maling & Jackendoff 1987, Marantz 1991, Bittner & Hale 1996)

m3: configurational case + case-by-*Agree*_φ (Baker 2015)

Central claims:

- In terms of expressive power, **m1 < m2 = m3**
- Since **m1** is empirically inadequate;
- And since **m2** is simpler than **m3**;
- All should adopt **m2** forthwith (if they haven't already).

Secondary claims:

- This is not about “abstract” vs. “morphological” case
 - i.e., one cannot salvage **m1** by just giving up on making any predictions about morphological form
- For one thing, **m1** fails *even as a theory of nominal licensing alone*.
 - i.e., even if we absolve it of making any morphological predictions whatsoever
- Moreover, even **m2/m3** themselves cannot be understood as a theory of morphophonological case forms *per se* —
 - they can only be understood as a theory of case features that are intrinsically abstract;
 - and which may or may not receive distinct exponence in the morphophonology.

⇒ In short:

- **m2** is a theory of “abstract” case;
- in fact, pending further developments —
 - **m2** is the theory of “abstract” case;
- and abstract case is, generally speaking, unrelated to nominal licensing.

The structure of the theoretical space – part one

Claim: **m2 = m3**

- i.e., the empirical coverage of **m3** is identical, by definition, to that of **m2**.

Here's why:

- We can construct a “recipe” for translating any **m3** account into an extensionally-equivalent **m2** account.
- But before turning to this recipe —
 - a remark on prepositional complementizers and **m2(/m3)**...

Prepositional complementizers and configurational case

- Marantz's (1991) configurational theory of case cannot readily capture case assigned under prepositional complementizers:
 - it cannot be Marantz's DEPENDENT CASE —
- (1) For him to be late would be rude.
 - *him* is the only DP in (1)
- and it cannot be Marantz's LEXICAL CASE —
 - since *him* in (1) is not an argument of *for*

- ⇒ Even a configurational theory of case must allow for case assigned by a designated X^0 , not under *selection* —
- but instead under something like *closest-c-command*.
 - Call this **X^0 -case**.
 - So called “lexical case” can then be seen as:
 - an instance of X^0 -case that happens to be assigned under sisterhood between X^0 and the case-marked DP

m2 = m3

- We can now demonstrate the equivalence between **m2** and **m3**
- REMINDER: the different between **m2** and **m3** is that the latter also countenances case assigned under $Agree_{\phi}$
 - à la Chomsky (2000, 2001)
- Let C_X be an instance of case assigned under $Agree_{\phi}$ with some head H^0
- “Recipe” for redoing C_X within a purely **m2** system:
 - assume H^0 enters the syntax with unvalued ϕ -features (as is also necessary on the **m3** account)

- and let H^0 be case-relativized to target bearers of C_X only
 - NB: case-relativization of φ -probes is necessary on independent grounds (Bobaljik 2008, Preminger 2014)
 - finally, let C_X be case that is assigned configurationally in some **m2**-compliant way
 - possibly even as X^0 -case assigned by H^0 itself
 - Predictions:
 - we will see φ -agreement on H^0 **iff** there is a C_X -marked DP in H^0 's domain
 - when there is no such DP, φ -probing by H^0 will simply fail
 - which, as we all know, causes no adverse effects
 - and certainly no “crashes”!
- (see Preminger 2014)

A quick demo:
English “nominative”

Consider the so-called “nominative” in English, and its interaction with φ -agreement:

(2) She/*Her arrived on time.

(3) It is possible for her/*she to arrive on time.

- Furthermore, following Sobin (1997) —
 - when we abstract away from prescriptive influences:
 - the forms of pronouns in coordinations reverts to their “objective” forms (*her/him/them/etc.*)

- The clearest way to abstract away from prescriptive edicts is to pick a coordination with a *1sg* pronoun as the first conjunct
 - since that places the utterance clearly outside the bounds of prescriptive norms

(4) Me and Kim / *! I and Kim are coming over.

- So far, these data look like evidence in favor of *Agree_φ* —
 - it seems “nominative” is assigned under finite agreement
 - and what is targeted for finite agreement in (4) is not the individual conjuncts;
 - it is the coordination in its entirety.

⇒ But let us now apply our recipe:

- assume that so-called "nominative" in English is assigned configurationally under *closest c-command by finite T⁰*
- carry over the assumption that T⁰ comes into the derivation bearing unvalued φ -features
- if the coordination itself counts as a target for the computation of *closest c-command* —
 - we can recoup Sobin's account of the contrast between (2) and (4):

(2) She/*Her arrived on time.

(4) Me and Kim / *! I and Kim are coming over.

➤ *Okay, at this juncture you might be asking yourself...*

- *Isn't this just a bit of theory-internal rejiggering?*
 - in one sense, the answer is an obvious “yes” —
 - I'm giving an argument for an equivalence in expressive power between two proposals (**m2** and **m3**)
 - but, assuming you are now convinced of the equivalence in question:
 - when two formalisms are expressively equivalent, we usually adjudicate based on —
 - i. **simplicity of the proposal unto itself**
(cf. *Minimum Description Length*)
 - ii. **perspicuity / explanatory adequacy**
(i.e., how reasonable – and, crucially, straightforward to *acquire* – are the “maneuvers” needed to fit the proposal to attested data)

- It is a truism that **m2** beats **m3** on the *simplicity* metric
 - since **m3 = m2 + Agree_φ**
- What I'd like to show you now is that **m2** also beats **m3** on the *perspicuity / explanatory adequacy* metric

Consider the English subjunctive:

(5) I demanded that he/*him be on time.

(6) She demanded that me and Kim/*I and Kim be on time.

- Some points to keep in mind:
 - this construction is probably rare-to-nonexistent in child-directed speech
 - nevertheless, we all attain the same pattern of competence, exemplified by (5, 6)

- Crucially:
The behavior of pronouns in (or inside) the subject position of subjunctives is identical to their finite-clause counterparts.
 - However, in the subjunctive, there is no finite agreement morphology to speak of.
- Now, it is logically possible that subjunctives like (5, 6) have a phonologically-null counterpart of the overt agreement in (2, 4)
- But in taking such a view, we risk losing our account of the contrast between (2) and (3):
(2) She/*Her arrived on time.
(3) It is possible for her/*she to arrive on time.

- Put another way: an **m3**-style account (or any other case-by-*Agree_φ* account) requires a distinction between:
 - *null agreement* (for subjunctives; (5, 6))
 - *no agreement at all* (for infinitives; (3))
- This looks like a rather dubious distinction, methodologically speaking
- And it also poses non-trivial challenges for language acquisition
 - given that, cross-linguistically, there exist:
 - agreeing & non-agreeing subjunctives
 - agreeing & non-agreeing infinitives
- Finally, it runs afoul of the *no-null-agreement generalization* (Preminger 2017)

- Now consider the **m2** alternative:
 - the relevant cut is between —
 - infinitival T^0 : lacks the ability to assign C_X (“nominative”) under closest c-command
 - all other instances of T^0 : have the ability to assign C_X (“nominative”) under closest c-command
 - the learner still needs to figure out that subjunctive T^0 is not equipped with unvalued ϕ -features, while finite T^0 is
 - but, crucially, that fact is a surface-evident one

English “nominative”: epilogue

- So-called “nominative” in English ($=C_X$) is assigned configurationally
 - under closest c-command by any finite T^0
- This account is extensionally equivalent to an **m3**-style account, which avails itself of case-by-*Agree* _{ϕ}
- However, it is arguably:
 - simpler (fewer ways to get case)
 - better from an explanatory-adequacy perspective

- Interestingly, so-called “nominative” in English ends up looking nothing like UNMARKED CASE (in the Marantz/Bobaljik sense)
 - hence the scare-quotes around “nominative” throughout
- Instead, C_X in English is a dedicated finite- T^0 case
 - call it, e.g., *subjective*
- Whereas real nominative(=configurationally UNMARKED) case in English is the one typically called “accusative”
 - in line with the age-old observation that the case with the elsewhere distribution in English is the *her/him/them* case

The structure of the theoretical space – part two

Claim: $m1 < m2$

- i.e., anything that **m1** can generate can be generated by **m2**, but not vice versa

Here's why:

- The previous section (“part one”) provided a recipe for redoing any instance of case-by-*Agree*_φ in purely configurational, **m2** terms
 $\Rightarrow m1 \leq m2$
- But we know of plenty of empirical domains that cannot be handled by a pure **m1** account
 - case on objects in Icelandic quirky-subject constructions (Yip, Maling & Jackendoff 1987, Marantz 1991)
 - the distribution of accusative case in Sakha [Turkic] (Baker & Vinokurova 2010)

- I'd like to highlight, in particular, the latter empirical domain:
 - Sakha has unaccusatives, wherein the single argument cannot bear accusative
 - * DP-ACC V_{unacc}
 - i.e., there is no functional head associated with these verbs that can “assign accusative”
 - **however**, a clause headed by an unaccusative verb can host a DP raised out of an embedded clause
 - whereupon that DP is assigned accusative
 - ✓ DP_1 DP_2 -ACC [... t_2 ...] V_{unacc}

- turning to Sakha ditransitives, these never show a NOM-ACC-ACC case pattern:
 - * $DP_1 DP_2\text{-ACC} DP_3\text{-ACC} V_{\text{ditrans}}$
 - i.e., the functional material in a Sakha clause cannot “assign accusative” more than once
- **however**, raising into a monotransitive clause that already has an accusative argument in it yields:
 - ✓ $DP_1 DP_2\text{-ACC} DP_3\text{-ACC} [\dots t_3 \dots] V_{\text{monotrans}}$

➤ Overall:

- **m2** (configurational case) can do things that **m1** (case-by-*Agree_φ*) cannot;
- and the facts favor the less restrictive theory, i.e., **m2**.

Abstractness

Can we find a use for *case-by-Agree_φ* by resorting to “abstractness”?

- We’ve seen that *case-by-Agree_φ* should be discarded in favor of a configurational theory of case
 - in particular, **m2**
- A common refrain:
 - yes yes, but that only holds for the actual case forms that we see
 - behind the scenes / under the hood, *case-by-Agree_φ* still churns along —
 - having no impact whatsoever on the forms of nominals (we know this to be the case);
 - but determining where (overt?) nominals can and cannot occur, i.e., determining nominal licensing.

- There are two main problems with this view:
 - i. case-by- $Agree_{\phi}$ is an inadequate theory of nominal licensing, too
 - ii. the thing we just used **m2** to derive isn't "morphological case" (in any meaningful sense of the term "morphological")
 - it cannot be understood as a theory of forms *per se*;
 - and it must be computed within syntax proper.
- Regarding (i), we know that there are full DPs in positions that could not have been targeted by agreement of any kind
 - see Preminger 2011a, 2014 on K'ichean and, in particular, Preminger 2011b on Basque

- Regarding (ii), consider quirky-subject verbs in Icelandic, for example:
 - famously, these involve inhibiting the assignment of ACC to the direct object, in favor of NOM
 - as captured in the DEPENDENT CASE approach
 - as well as agreement with the NOM object instead of with the (non-NOM) subject
 - as captured in the *case-discrimination* approach (Bobaljik 2008)
- now, consider:
 - there are nominals in Icelandic that are syncretic between NOM and another case (e.g. DAT)
 - when those nominals are placed in the subject position of a clause with a quirky-subject verb —
 - it is not suddenly possible to mark the object with ACC just because the subject is syncretic-with-NOM
 - and it is not suddenly possible to agree with the subject, just because it is syncretic-with-NOM

- ⇒ **m2** is a theory of “abstract” case
- insofar as it is not a theory of *case forms*;
 - it is a theory of abstract case features
 - which may or may not receive distinct morpho-phonological realization in the language (or the lexical item) in question
- Of course, **m2** is not an adequate theory of nominal licensing
- but neither is *case-by-Agree_φ*...
 - so that isn't an argument one way or another.

- Finally, as shown in Preminger 2014, **m2** must be computed within syntax proper
 - the argument goes as follows:
 - i. Bobaljik 2008: φ -agreement tracks the outputs of **m2**;
 - ii. Preminger 2014: φ -agreement is causally implicated in (some instances of) movement to canonical subject position;
 - iii. movement to canonical subject position is necessarily syntactic (it affects both pronunciation and, e.g., scope);
therefore –
 - iv. **m2** must be computed within syntax, not “post-syntactically” or “at PF”

Conclusions

Conclusions

- In terms of expressive power —
 - **m2** (configurational case) = **m3** (case-by- $Agree_{\phi}$ + m2)
 - **m1** (case-by- $Agree_{\phi}$) < **m2** (configurational case)
- In terms of the empirical landscape:
 - **m2** is required
- Neither **m1** nor **m2** is a(n adequate) theory of nominal licensing
- The primitives of **m2** are “abstract” in the sense that:
 - they may or may not be expounded in a particular language (or a particular derivation)
 - and they are computed within syntax proper

Thank you!