Nominal licensing without abstract Case

Minimalist approaches often implicitly assume some version of the Case Filter (Chomsky 1981, Vergnaud 1977), whereby, even in languages lacking morphological case, overt DPs must be Case-licensed. ‘Case’ thus potentially accounts for the distribution of (overt) DPs and motivates phenomena such as A-movement (passivization, raising and, for some, Control). Recent proposals, however, have argued against the usefulness of abstract Case as a licensing mechanism (Marantz 1991, McFadden 2004, Landau 2006), or have argued for the parameterisation of abstract Case (Harford Perez 1985, Markmann 2009, Diercks 2012 and to some extent Baker in press). The time seems ripe, then, for a reconsideration of the original empirical motivations for abstract Case in terms of (i) to what extent they hold cross-linguistically and (ii) to the extent that they do, how they can be accounted for in some other, more explanatory, way.

We take 10 traditional diagnostics for ‘the Case property’ which deal with: the presence/absence of morphological case, agreement patterns and activity, subjects in non-finite clauses, agents in passive clauses, noun/adjective vs. verb/adposition contrasts, CP/DP complementation, anaphora, subject/object asymmetries, and ditransitive alignment. We show that, despite the significant challenges associated with comparing typologically distinct languages, the diagnostics are nonetheless robust in consistently identifying a language as having or lacking the abstract Case property. Of the six languages we investigate, Luganda appears to lack this property, whereas Mandarin Chinese, Thai, Yoruba, Makhuwa and Jamaican Creole all have it, despite almost totally lacking morphological case. The data come from elicitation based on a uniform questionnaire and the available literature. Space restrictions preclude a full exposition of the ten diagnostics, but we illustrate here with three examples.

1. **Non-finite clauses.** If it is true that at least in some cases non-finite T fails to value Case, the Case Filter should prohibit subject DPs in non-finite clauses. If a language consistently permits overt DP subjects in non-finite clauses, then this argues for the absence of the Case property. We test this diagnostic in the complements of raising and control verbs (controlling for Exceptional Case Marking) and sentential subjects. In Luganda, an overt subject DP is consistently allowed in these environments (1), but in Thai, Jamaican Creole (2) Yoruba (3), Makhuwa, and Mandarin overt DP subjects are consistently banned, unless licensed by an overt complementiser:

1. (1) Ki-kkiriz-ibwa Tenhwa okutambul-ira mu-mazzi?
   7SM-allow-PASS 1.Tenhwa 15.walk-APPL 18-6.water
   ‘Is it allowed (for) Tenhwa to walk in the water?’ [Luganda]

2. (2) *(Fi) Joel (fi) go mek mistiek strienj.
   fi Joel INF go make mistake strange
   ‘For Joel to make mistakes is strange.’ [Jamaican Creole]

3. (3) Õ jë ohun ajëji *(fûn) Dôtun láti ṣè ašiše
   it be thing strange for Dotun to make mistake
   ‘It’s a strange thing for Dotun to make mistakes.’ [Yoruba]

An obvious difficulty with this diagnostic is the fact that it is difficult to distinguish between finite and non-finite clauses in languages without verbal inflection (all the non-Bantu languages). We nonetheless show that there are language-specific diagnostics for finiteness in all the languages and that where there is a ban on overt DPs, this occurs in independently diagnosable non-finite clauses.

2. **Passives.** On standard accounts, the agent-DP of a passive undergoes demotion and does not receive nominative case. The grammaticality of the (optional) overt agent DP without an alternative Case-licenser such as a preposition ‘by’, as in (4), again argues for the absence of the Case property in Luganda.

   7.book 7SM-PST-read-PASS 2.children
   ‘The book was read (by) the children.’ [Luganda]
The cross-linguistic application of this test is limited because in Chinese the status of the “passive” morpheme bei is debatable and Thai and Yoruba lack a passive. Moreover, although Jamaican Creole has a passive (Winford 1993), it does not allow for an overt agent. However, we do see evidence for the Case property in Makhuwa, which requires an overt preposition in such contexts:

(5) Ìí, koo-vár-iya *(ni) khwátte! [Makhuwa]
 ii 1SG.SM.PERF.DJ-grab-PASS by 1.fox
‘Ii, I am caught by the fox!’

3. **Ditransitives.** Assuming (i) that recipients are externally merged above themes (Pylkkänen 2008), and (ii) some version of the LCA regulates linearization (Kayne 1994), it follows that the recipient > theme order will be default in ditransitives. We assume that the non-superiority based order theme > recipient (without a locative semantics) can only be derived by movement, due to either information structure or Case. If a language displays only theme > recipient order in its information-structural neutral word order, like Thai (6) and Mandarin, we conclude that the theme raises past the recipient for Case-related reasons. Luganda has recipient > theme ditransitives, which by itself is inconclusive as regards Case. Nonetheless, they are symmetrical in terms of passivisation (Pak 2008), which again follows if it lacks Case.

(6) a. chân hâj nãŋsütu kãamen b. *chân hâj kãamen nãŋsütu
 1SG give book Carmen 1SG give Carmen book

The implications are that 1) diagnostics need to be treated with care, but broad cross-linguistic comparison of this kind is possible (see Baker & McCloskey 2007); 2) there is some kind of parameterization in this domain; 3) yet there is a cluster of properties associated with ‘nominal licensing’ traditionally related to Case that needs to be accounted for in an explanatory manner.

Given that the languages under discussion lack morphological case and/or verbal agreement, tying nominal licensing to uninterpretable phi and Case features seems rather stipulative. This is even more so given the additional problems facing Case theory (the lack of any interface motivation for Case, the look-ahead problem associated with specific case values such as [nominative], the stipulative nature of the class of assigners and assignees, etc.). As such, we propose an alternative account of the requirement for ‘nominal licensing’ based on the following principle:

(7) **EXTEND:** as far as possible all heads must be part of a complete extended projection.

We depart minimally from Grimshaw (1990) in assuming that heads in extended projections can differ in categorial (N/V) features (following Abney 1987). For this reason truncated nominal projections (DPs) lacking a P layer will seek to become part of a higher extended projection, be it verbal or nominal, by agreeing with the closest e-commanding functional head. In clauses, this gives rise to dependencies between DP and v (acc) or T (nom), and in DPs with D (gen). On the other hand, PPs and CPs, as full extended projections, are autonomous and will not require ‘licensing’. We show that (7) derives many of the stipulations of Case theory but also makes further, apparently supported predictions: (i) bare NPs, as even more truncated nominals, will need to join the verbal extended projection at an even lower level (Longobardi 1994), and (ii) truncated clauses will also require ‘licensing’ of the same kind, giving rise to ‘restructuring’ whereby an embedded truncated clause shares the functional structure of a selecting clause (Wurmbrand 2014). We submit that EXTEND is not parameterised, which makes the apparent lack of a nominal licensing requirement in Luganda and some other Bantu languages unexpected. Instead, we propose that this variation stems from a difference in nominal structure, following Halpert (2012): the augment in some Bantu languages can serve to complete the extended projection, predicting that only augmentless (truncated) nominals, need ‘licensing’ within the vP (Halpert 2012).