

Intransitive Argument Encoding in Transitive Clauses: Φ -less Nominals in Nez Perce and Niuean

Main Claim: I argue that noun phrases may not only be partially defective w.r.t. their ϕ -features but also completely defective. Evidence for this claim comes from Nez Perce (Sahaptian) and Niuean (Oceanic). Containing no goal features, such DPs may not undergo Agree, thus receiving no case. Defective DPs nevertheless indirectly block Agree with non-defective DPs, strongly reminiscent of Icelandic *Defective Intervention* (Chomsky 2000, 2001). This is accounted for by the assumptions that defective and non-defective DPs are categorically identical and that (internal and external) Merge is only triggered by categorical features, hence incapable of distinguishing between both types of DPs.

Empirical Evidence: In Nez Perce, a three-way aligning language, the subject of intransitive clauses is zero marked and triggers person and number agreement on the verb (cf. (1a)). In transitives, the subject and the object are overtly case marked and both trigger person and number agreement (cf. (1b)). Crucially, transitives may also appear in a different form: Both subject and object are not overtly case marked and the verb only agrees with the subject (for both person and number), just as in intransitive clauses. Notably, the object never bears a plural marker in this construction and is invariably interpreted as indefinite (compare the default transitive in (2a) and its counterpart in (2b)). This construction is analyzed as an antipassive by Rude (1985). However, as shown by Woolford (1997), it has none of the properties standardly associated with antipassives. Since the object may be phrasal, an analysis in terms of noun incorporation is not available either. The same phenomenon is also attested for Niuean (Seiter 1980, Massam 2001). Given the fact that Niuean does not contain a zero case marker, the observation that the object bears no marker in these structure suggests that it is not case marked syntactically. I claim that this also holds for Nez Perce. The subject is marked with the absolutive (see the contrast in (3)). (3b) shows that the object bears no plural marker in these constructions. Furthermore, the default VSO order is changed to VOS.

Theoretical Background: I assume a Minimalist framework with case being a reflex of ϕ -Agree (Chomsky 2000, 2001) and multiple Spell-Out (Chomsky 2004, 2008). The computational space is restricted by the *Phase Impenetrability Condition* (Chomsky 2000), according to which the domain of a phase head is transferred upon merging the next-higher (non-phase) head. Nominals may be defective w.r.t. their ϕ -features, as has been proposed for datives (containing only a person feature) and third person DPs (lacking person). Following Richards (2004, 2008), I assume that a person specification for indefinite nominals is redundant. Consequently, if language is a perfect solution for interface conditions, indefinites lack person.

Proposal: I argue that the observed case and agreement pattern can be straightforwardly derived under current Minimalist assumptions if nominals are allowed to lack ϕ -features completely. Given that the object in the structures under consideration is invariably indefinite, it plausibly contains no person feature. In light of the systematic absence of number markers, it is claimed to lack number as well (cf. DP_{DEF} in (4)). As a consequence, DP_{DEF} may not undergo ϕ -Agree and is hence not assigned case. Therefore, these DPs never trigger verbal agreement and are not case marked. Furthermore, ϕ -Agree-driven movement of objects does hence not take place, leading to the word order difference in Niuean (Massam 2000). The convergence of these structures suggests that unvalued case is not a property of nominals themselves but of ϕ -sets (Richards 2004) or the spell-out of the Agree relation itself. For concreteness, the available probes on T and v are given in (5) (The only crucial point is that T is active in intransitives). Combinations yield the observed three-way alignment (cf. Legate 2008 for arguments that Niuean has a three-way case system underlyingly). Selection of two DP_{DEF} 's provides no goal, hence yields a crash. If $Subj=DP_{COMP}$ and $Obj=DP_{DEF}$, only (5b) converges, resulting in an intransitive agreement and case pattern. If $Subj=DP_{DEF}$ and $Obj=DP_{COMP}$, T has to agree with DP_{COMP} . Given the PIC, this is only possible if DP_{COMP} has moved to Spec- vP . As Merge is not sensitive to ϕ -features (these being no structure-building features), the intervening DP_{DEF} blocks edge movement of DP_{COMP} , their categorical features being identical (Chomsky 2007). This derives a defective intervention effect: A non-goal blocks Agree with a goal. Under the present analysis, this is derived as a consequence of non-defective intervention w.r.t edge movement. As a result, DP_{COMP} undergoes Spell-Out as soon as T is merged, leaving its case feature and T's probes unchecked.

Consequences: The account for the intervention of DP_{DEF} can be extended to Icelandic, in view of the fact that here as well the intervener is categorically identical to the goal. Additional evidence for the present approach comes from embedded clauses and long-distance agreement in Basque. Preminger (2009) argues that embedded clauses receive structural case if they contain ϕ -features; otherwise they are not case marked. This instantiates the same pattern as observed above, suggesting that it may be a more common phenomenon underlyingly.

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| <p>(1) a. núun \emptyset-pa-páay-na
we 1/2-PL_{subj}-arrive-PERF
‘We arrived.’ [Rude 1985: 85]</p> | <p>b. ?e-pe-nées-hex-ne
1/2>3-PL_{subj}-PL_{obj}-see-ASP
‘We see them.’ [Rude 1985: 39]</p> |
| <p>(2) a. ’ipí-nm pée-qn’íi-see qeqíit-ne
she-ERG 3>3-dig-INC edible.root-OBJV
‘She is digging the qeqíit.’</p> | <p>b. ’ipí hii-qn’íi-see qeqíit
she 3-dig-INC edible.root
‘She is digging qeqíit.’
[Crook 1999: 238]</p> |
| <p>(3) a. Kua tā he tama e tau fakatino
PERF draw ERG child ABS PL picture
‘The child has been drawing pictures.’</p> | <p>b. Kua tā fakatino e tama
PERF draw picture ABS child
‘The child has been drawing pictures/doing art-work.’
[Seiter 1980: 70]</p> |
| <p>(4) a. DP_{COMP} [person, number]</p> | <p>b. DP_{DEF} []</p> |
| <p>(5) a. T_{COMP} [*person*, *number*]
v_{COMP} [*person*, *number*]</p> | <p>b. T_{DEF} [*number*]
v_{DEF} [*person*]</p> |

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