No case for agreement (as a causer of case)

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Bobaljik (2008) shows that case cannot in general be causally dependent on φ-agreement. That is because the computation of φ-agreement requires, as its input, the configuration of already-case-marked noun phrases in a given domain. Preminger (2014) shows furthermore that the notions of ‘case’ and ‘φ-agreement’ relevant to Bobaljik’s results must be syntax-internal ones (contrary to Bobaljik’s own claims, as well as Marantz 1991, McFadden 2004, i.a.). However, Baker (2015) argues that there are nevertheless instances of case that are assigned as a by-product of φ-agreement. Here, I dispute Baker’s claim, and argue that there is no evidence for a mode of case assignment that is causally dependent on φ-agreement.

Structure of the Argument: I will give a “recipe” for reanalyzing any putative evidence in favor of Baker’s position in terms of Bobaljik’s original system, without recourse to φ-dependent case. Importantly, this recipe makes use of nothing beyond Bobaljik’s and Preminger’s independently motivated results (that at least some φ-agreement is computed after case, and that agreement operations can fail without causing “crashes”). I will then demonstrate this recipe as it applies to the case-marking of English subjects.

Given this recipe, there can be no empirical argument in favor of Baker’s position. The question is then which of the approaches, the Baker approach or the Bobaljik-Preminger one, is preferable on theoretical grounds. I will suggest that there is reason to prefer the latter.

A “recipe” for recasting any Baker (2015)-type analysis in Bobaljik-Preminger terms:

Suppose we have an instance in which some case Cx is claimed to be assigned under φ-agreement. Modulo syncretism of Cx with something else, this means that for every instance of a DP α bearing case Cx, it must be that α has entered into φ-agreement with a designated Cx-assigning head—let us call that head H₀.

Assume instead that every instance of H₀ comes equipped with unvalued φ-features, and that as a φ-probe, H₀ is case-relativized to target only those noun phrases bearing case Cx (Cx now reanalyzed as configurationally-assigned case of a normal sort; and recall that case-relativization of φ-probes is needed on independent grounds, as shown by Bobaljik). When there is a DP α marked with case Cx in the domain of H₀, the latter will by hypothesis agree with the former. When there is no such α, agreement will fail, but no “crash” will arise.

An example: Consider so-called “nominative” case in English, and its interaction with finite verb agreement. The basic facts are well known; the distribution of “nominative” forms (she/he/they/etc.) seems to track with finite agreement:

(1) She/*Her arrives on time.
(2) It is possible for her/*she to arrive on time.
(3) Me and Kim/*I and Kim are coming over.

So far, these data look like a boon for Baker’s position: “nominative” in English is assigned under φ-agreement with finite T₀, and the pronouns in (2–3) are not themselves targeted for
agreement by an instance of finite $T^0$ (what is targeted in (3) is the entire coordination).
Hence, these pronouns cannot occur in the “nominative” form.

But let us now apply the aforementioned recipe. Assume that so-called “nominative” in
English is a case $Cx$ that is assigned configurationally, under `closest c-command` by finite $T^0$.
Assume furthermore that finite $T^0$ comes into the derivation with unvalued $\phi$-features, and is
case-relativized to target for $\phi$-agreement only those noun phrases that bear case $Cx$. If the
coordination itself counts as far as the computation of `closest c-command` is concerned, we
can recoup Sobin’s analysis of the contrast between (1) and (3).

So far, this might seem like little more than theory-internal rejiggering. But in fact, the
alternative just sketched has more going for it; consider the English subjunctive:

(4) I demanded that he/*him be on time.
(5) She demanded that me and Kim/*I and Kim be on time.

The behavior of pronouns in (or inside) the subject position of subjunctives is identical to that
of their finite-clause counterparts (cf. (1, 3)). But in (4–5), there is no finite agreement to
speak of. It is logically possible, of course, that subjunctive clauses have a phonologically
null counterpart of the $\phi$-agreement seen in (1, 3); but taking such a view, we risk losing the
account of the contrast between (1) and (2). To put this another way, a Baker-style (or really,
Chomsky 2000/2001-style) approach to (4–5) requires a distinction between null agreement
(for (4–5)) and no agreement at all (for (2)). This looks like a rather dubious distinction,
methodologically speaking, and it also poses nontrivial challenges for language acquisition.

The alternative, `closest-c-command`-based account now seems much simpler: the relevant
cut is between infinitival $T^0$ (as in (2)) and all other instance of $T^0$. Infinitival $T^0$ lacks the
capacity to assign $Cx$ (“nominative”) under closest c-command, and all other instances of $T^0$
have this capacity. The learner still needs to figure out that subjunctive $T^0$ is not equipped
with unvalued $\phi$-features whereas regular finite $T^0$ is; but this fact is a surface-evident one.

Interestingly, “nominative” in English comes out looking much like the case assigned by,
e.g., a prepositional complementizer (also assigned under closest c-command by designated
heads), and not really like run-of-the-mill nominative (as in, e.g., ‘unmarked’ case in the
Marantz/Bobaljik sense). This is why I have been using scare-quotes around “nominative” as
it applies to English. In fact, it is an age-old observation that the case with the elsewhere
distribution in English is the one we typically call “objective.” On the view espoused here,
we can treat so-called “objective” in English as unmarked case (=nominative(!)), with so-
called “nominative” actually being case assigned under c-command by $T^0$ (=T-case).

Balancing the theoretical scales: Given that any Baker-style account can be translated into
Bobaljik-Preminger terms, we should now ask whether there is any theoretical reason to
prefer one of the two. One could argue that the null hypothesis is that $\phi$-agreement and case
can be freely ordered with respect to one another. Alternatively, one might consider a theory
where all case assignment in a given syntactic domain must precede the computation of
$\phi$-agreement to be a simpler one. But crucially, we already know that the ordering of case
and $\phi$-agreement cannot be truly free: at least some instances of $\phi$-agreement must follow at
least some instances of case-assignment (Bobaljik’s result). We could achieve this by
stipulating something about these particular instances of case assignment and these particular
instances of $\phi$-agreement; but at this point, simplicity appears to favor Bobaljik’s model, in
which all instances of case assignment precede all $\phi$-agreement in a given syntactic domain.