

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 H^0 .

Assume instead that every instance of H^0 comes equipped with unvalued ϕ -features, and that as a ϕ -probe, H^0 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 H^0 , 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.

Furthermore, following Sobin (1997), when we abstract away from prescriptive influences, the case form of pronouns reverts to the “objective” form whenever they are part of a coordination—even if the coordination itself is still the target of finite agreement. The clearest way to demonstrate this is to pick a coordination with a 1st person singular pronoun in the position of first conjunct. The relevant prescriptive edicts mandate against referring to the speaker in the first conjunct. Consequently, data like (3) are clearly outside of the relevant prescriptive norms, and are thus more likely to reflect the workings of the non-prescriptive grammar (see Sobin 1997 for further discussion).

- (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 T^0 , 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 C_x that is assigned configurationally, under *closest c-command* by finite T^0 . Assume furthermore that finite T^0 comes into the derivation with unvalued ϕ -features, and is case-relativized to target for ϕ -agreement only those noun phrases that bear case C_x . 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 ϕ -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 C_x (“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 ϕ -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 (\equiv nominative(!)), with so-called “nominative” actually being case assigned under *c-command* by T^0 (\equiv 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 ϕ -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 ϕ -agreement to be a simpler one. But crucially, we already know that the ordering of case and ϕ -agreement cannot be truly free: at least some instances of ϕ -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 ϕ -agreement; but at this point, simplicity appears to favor Bobaljik’s model, in which all instances of case assignment precede all ϕ -agreement in a given syntactic domain.