

No Case Licensing: Evidence from Uyghur

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Two views on case dominate the current generative landscape. The case-licensing view (Chomsky 1981 and its descendants) holds that all NPs need structural or inherent case, which is assigned by heads, and if an NP lacks case the derivation crashes. The case-competition view (Marantz 2000, Bobaljik 2008) suggests that there is no such thing as case-licensing and morphological case (for NPs without inherent case) is determined post-syntactically by some algorithm that counts all the NPs eligible for case-assignment within some domain. We propose, on the bases of data from Uyghur (Turkic, North China and Kazakhstan), that the traditional dichotomy is wrong, and that while linguistic theory needs structural case (case assigned by heads), at least in some languages with structural case there is no case filter. Specifically we propose that in Uyghur, nominative case is a default case, available to any NP, while accusative is a structural case, assigned to NPs with particular features by functional heads.

Our main tool for examining case marking in Uyghur are the subjects embedded in finite complement clauses, which, unlike matrix subjects, can optionally receive accusative case (1). Following Shklovsky and Sudo 2009 for Uyghur and Şener 2008 for Turkish, we demonstrate that the embedded accusative subjects are generated in the embedded clause and that they are raised to a higher position than embedded nominative subjects. Unlike the claims in Şener 2008, there is evidence that Uyghur embedded accusative subjects do not receive case from the embedding verb: the evidence comes from passivized embedding verbs (2), embedding verbs that assign lexical case to their complements (3), and behavior with respect to double accusative constraint (4). We propose therefore, that embedded accusative subjects receive accusative case from the embedded complementizer.

The situation in the clausal domain parallels the situation in the VP domain: the fact that objects in Turkic languages can either receive accusative or no case marking has been known since at least Enç, 1991. Accusative objects both in Turkish and Uyghur may appear in positions further away from the verb, whereas objects lacking case marking must be adjacent to the verb word. Two main types of analysis have been proposed for this phenomenon in Turkish: noun-incorporation (Mithun 1984, Kornfilt 2003, Aydemir 2004 *inter alia*) or Niuean-style (Massam, 2005) pseudo noun incorporation (Öztürk, 2005). Evidence from causativization, adjectival modification, and coordination argues strongly against noun incorporation theory both in Turkish (Öztürk, 2005) and Uyghur. The pseudo noun incorporation proposal, (PNI) suggests that bare NP objects (that is, those lacking accusative case) lack a DP projection and thus are not referential, but are syntactically active. We demonstrate, however, that in Uyghur, embedded objects lacking case marking can be referential, and therefore, there is no empirical support for the pseudo noun incorporation theory.

We argue that the fact that subjects and objects lacking accusative case receive same morphological exponents is not an accident, but rather a fact begging for an explanation. We observe that both in the domain of VP and CP, a particular NP can be either in a lower position and caseless (or “nominative”) or in a high position and accusative. The same has been proposed for Spanish differential object marking in Torrego 1998, and Rodríguez-Mondoñedo, 2007. Following these proposals we argue that accusative case (on objects or embedded subjects) is a consequence of a head probing for a (possibly abstract) feature in its complement domain. If an appropriate goal NP is found (such as an object bearing [+specific] feature) then agree takes place and the NP receives accusative case. What is new in our proposal is the account of what happens if such structural case assignment does not take place: we argue that when an NP does not receive structural (accusative) case from a functional head, it receives nominative as a default. Neither the standard theory of case-assignment nor the case competition theory, we argue, can account for Uyghur facts without resorting to additional unsupported stipulations.

We argue, therefore, that case assignment does not necessarily equals case-licensing, and that while the proponents of case-competition approaches are correct to argue that case-licensing is not a necessity, the linguistic theory still needs structural case-assignment.

- (1) a. Tursun [oqughuchi ket-ti dep] bil-du
Tursun.NOM [student.NOM left.PAST.3 C] know.IMPF.3
'Tursun knows that a student left'
- b. Tursun [oqughuchi-ni ket-ti dep] bil-du
Tursun.NOM [student-ACC left.PAST.3 C] know.IMPF.3
'Tursun knows that a student left'
- c. oqughuchi-(*ni) ket-ti
student-(*ACC) left.PAST.3
'A student left'
- (2) a. oqughuchi-(ni) ket-ti bil-en-di
student-NOM left-PAST.3 know-PASS-PAST.3
'It was known that a student left'
- (3) a. Ahmet [Aslan-ning kit-ken-liq-i-din] guman kil-di
Ahmet [Aslan-GEN leave-REL-NMLZ-3-ABL] suspect do-PAST.3
'Ahmet suspected that Aslan left'
- b. Ahmet [Aslan-ni ket-ti dep] guman kil-di
Ahmet [Aslan-ACC leave-PAST.3 C] suspect do-PAST.3
'Ahmet suspected that Aslan left'
- (4) a. Tursun [oqughuchi-(*ni) profesor süy-di dep] bil-du
Tursun.NOM [student-(*ACC) professor-ACC left.PAST.3 C] know.IMPF.3
'Tursun knows that a student kissed a professor'
- b. Tursun [oqughuchi-ni profesor-(*ni) süy-di dep] bil-du
Tursun.NOM [student-ACC professor-(*ACC) left.PAST.3 C] know.IMPF.3
'Tursun knows that a student kissed a professor'
- c. Tursun [oqughuchi-ni imtihan-din ött-di dep] bil-du
Tursun.NOM [student-ACC test-ABL pass.PAST.3 C] know.IMPF.3
'Tursun knows that a student passed a test'

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