

Marked default via feature overspecification: oblique themes in Kazym Khanty

Claim: In this talk, I present new fieldwork data from the Kazym dialect of Northern Khanty (Ob-Ugric, Uralic) that provide new insights into the mechanism of case assignment. Kazym Khanty allows to argue for the existence of a marked default case (cf. e.g. Caha 2023). To model this, I propose that arguments are inherently overspecified for case features, a subset of which are checked during case assignment via Agree.

Data: Kazym Khanty is a Nom-Acc language. In applicative and causative clauses, it allows both indirective and secundative alignment (Malchukov et al. 2010) (1). In indirective alignment, the indirect object (IO, recipient or causee) is marked with Dative and the theme (DO) - with Accusative (∅-marked on nouns). In secundative alignment, the IO is marked with Accusative, and the DO - with oblique Locative-Instrumental case. Note that oblique DO is obligatory present in the structure and, therefore, not an adjunct.

- (1) a. Kašəŋ χujat λəχs-əλ-a lipət mə-s
 Every person.[NOM] friend-POSS.3SG-DAT flower.[ACC] give-PST.[3SG]
- b. Kašəŋ χujat λəχs-əλ lipət-ən mə-s-λe
 Every person.[NOM] friend-POSS.3SG.[ACC] flower-LOC give-PST-3SG>SG
 ‘Everyone gave a flower/flowers to his friend.’

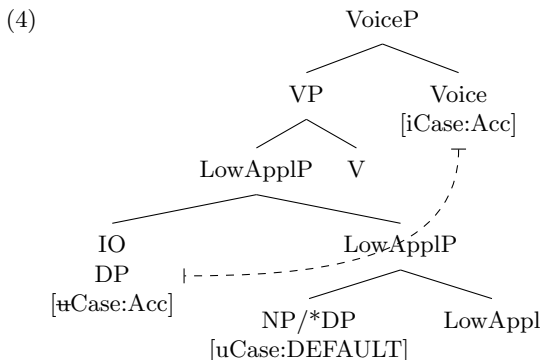
Secundative alignment is used, when the indirect object is topical (e.g. Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011) and the theme is structurally reduced, i.e. smaller than DP. As Khanty is a language without articles, the presence of the DP-projection is not directly visible. Nevertheless, the DP-restriction is evident from the ungrammaticality of DP-level modifiers, e.g. demonstratives (2) or possessive markers (3). This restriction is not an indefiniteness requirement on the theme (as opposed to topicality of the recipient): a possessive marker allows for a non-unique and non-specific – i.e. indefinite – interpretation (Mikhailov 2023), but is still ungrammatical on a secundative theme (3).

- (2) *Nurum təm kińška-(jət)-n tɛλ pun-s-ɛm
 shelf.[ACC] this book-(PL)-LOC entirely put-PST-1SG>SG
 Intend.: ‘I’ve filled the shelf with this/these book(s)’
- (3) *Vasja-jen aŋk-eλ mułsər an-əλ-ən mə-s-λe
 Vasya-POSS.2SG.[NOM] mother-POSS.3SG.[ACC] some cup-POSS.3SG-LOC give-PST-3SG>SG
 Intend.: ‘Vasya gave his mother one of his cups.’

The DP-restriction co-occurring with an oblique case is unexpected both in the Case-under-Agree model (Chomsky 2001, Bárány 2017, Clem & Deal 2024) and Dependent Case theory (Baker & Vinokurova 2010).

Analysis: There are two related questions regarding the secundative theme: (i) what triggers the DP-restriction, and (ii) what is the origin of the Locative-Instrumental marking. I propose a model where both are explained by the absence of syntactic case licensing.

The analysis is based on the assumption that NP-sized arguments can survive the derivation without being licensed, while DP-sized arguments require obligatory licensing (e.g. Kalin 2018, Lyutikova & Pereltsvaig 2015). Furthermore, I follow theories that link syntactic licensing to case assignment (e.g. van der Wal 2022). For the clauses in (1), I assume a low applicative structure (Pylkkänen 2008 etc.) and propose the derivation in (4) for secundative alignment. Here, both objects are introduced as a DP/NP and Voice case-licenses the highest caseless nominal in its c-command domain, i.e. the IO. This prevents Voice from agreeing for Case



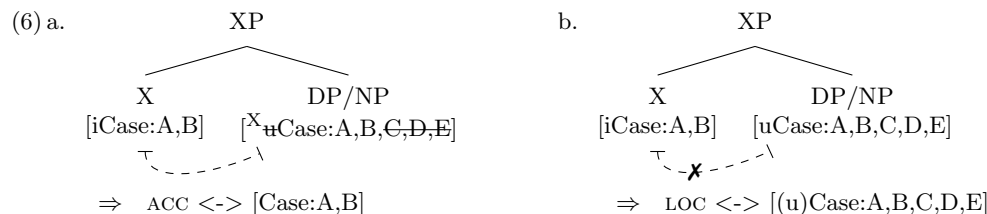
with the theme, which remains unlicensed and bears a marked default case. Importantly, the oblique-marked theme has all the properties of pseudo-incorporated nouns, except the absence of case marking (e.g. Massam 2009, Driemel 2020), e.g. a reduced structure, inability to bind or scramble etc. The current analysis is able to account for these properties, as unlicensed nouns are expected to stay in situ and be syntactically inactive. The only unexpected property of the secundative themes is the oblique case marking. I propose a notion of a marked default case, in order to account for this.

Marked default case: In the present analysis, a marked case acts as a default. This is unexpected for the current theories of default case, where the least marked case is predicted to be default (e.g. Weisser 2020,

Caha 2023). Importantly, the marked default is not just any oblique case (as in Schütze 2001), but the most marked case in the case hierarchy (5) (e.g. Bárány 2017, 2021, Caha 2009, 2023 etc.):

(5) [[[[[NOM/ABS] > ACC/ERG] > GEN] > DAT] > LOC/INSTR]

In order to explain the LOC/INSTR-marking on unlicensed themes in secundative alignment, I suggest that arguments are inherently overspecified for case features. Under Agree, a subset of the case features is checked and spelled out at PF. The unchecked features are deleted or deactivated (6a). If Agree has failed and no case features have been checked, all (unchecked) features survive to the morphology (6b).



This proposal goes against the common view that nouns enter derivation with unvalued case feature and receive specific values during derivation (e.g. Chomsky 2001, Bárány 2017, Baker & Vinokurova 2010 a.o.). In this view, if arguments are not assigned case in the syntax, they lack case features altogether and are morphologically \emptyset -marked (e.g. Luytikova & Pereltsvaig 2015). In particular, it has been suggested for pseudo-incorporated nouns (e.g. Massam 2009). However, Driemel (2020) argues that pseudo-incorporated nouns are assigned syntactic case, that is impoverished at PF. Crucially, German and Hungarian do not have the impoverishment rule and provide evidence that pseudo-incorporated nouns are indeed assigned case. I argue, therefore, that secundative alignment provides a better test for default case marking, and that nominal arguments are inherently overspecified for case features. Note that there is a number of recent proposals, that various features can be overspecified either inherently or due to overassignment (e.g. Sigurðsson & Wood 2024 for case, Harbour 2014 for number, Stojković & Simonović 2024 for phonological features).

Alternative analyses: (i) LOC-INSTR on the theme can be analyzed as an inherent (lexical) case. This is implausible, since inherently case-marked nominals never have a DP-restriction, both in Kazym Khanty and cross-linguistically. (ii) Second alternative: the secundative theme is introduced within a PP with selectional restrictions on DPs (comp. e.g. the comitative preposition in Ossetic, Erschler 2019). There are two variants of this analysis: either the LOC-INSTR marker is the P-head itself, cliticized to its complement, or LOC-INSTR is the case assigned by a silent P. Both options run into the same problem: LOC-INSTR does not have the DP-restriction in any other uses. Locative and instrumental adjuncts (7), as well as agents in passives (8) are marked with LOC-INSTR, but can be full DPs. Therefore, in order to maintain the PP-analysis for secundative themes, a phonologically zero P or a homophonous P with unique selectional restrictions has to be stipulated. Furthermore, this PP can only be merged if the IO is going to be topical, which creates a lookahead problem – at least in causative clauses, where the DO and the causee-IO are base-generated in two different projections.

(7) Lexical Case

- a. Ar joχ tām woš-ən wəλ-λ-ət. b. Kartλujk ma səŋkəp-əm-ən šiw sɛŋk-e.
 many people this town-LOC be-NPST-3PL nail.[ACC] I hammer-POSS.1SG-LOC there.PREV hit-IMP
 ‘There live many people in this village/town.’ ‘Hit (the/a) nail with my hammer.’

- (8) Maw-λ-am Maša-jen-ən nāwrem-əm-a mā-s-i-jət.
 candy-PL-POSS.1SG.[NOM] Masha-POSS.2SG-LOC child-POSS.1SG-DAT give-PST-PASS-3PL
 ‘My candy was given by Masha to my kid.’ (Colley & Privoznov 2020)

Consequences for Case theory: I propose that Case is inherently overspecified on the arguments in Kazym Khanty. This allows to explain the otherwise unexpected marked default case on a theme in the secundative alignment. Furthermore, the overspecification proposal has certain consequences for Case theory. In particular, it requires case assignment to be analysed not as valuation, but as a checking relation between two valued features (cf. Bošković 2006).

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