Case and Agreement in a Corner of Icelandic[[1]](#footnote-1)

Norbert Hornstein

UMD, October 2018

1. The Issue

The *anaphor agreement effect* (AAE) names the fact that (simple) reflexives cannot value unvalued phi features.[[2]](#footnote-2) Two kinds of evidence support the AAE. First, nominative reflexives are barred from positions where agreement is mandatory, most prominently the subject position of finite clauses. Second, reflexives can occur in the subject position of finite clauses if they do not enter into an agreement relation with the unvalued Agr features on finite T (e.g. locally bound dative reflexive subjects exist in Icelandic) or if the finite clause is not coupled with agreement morphology (e.g. finite T in the East Asian languages is without phi features and here too locally bound nominative reflexives are found). Both types of data argue that reflexives are incompatible with agreement.

W:99 further shows that AAE effects are not restricted to nominatives. Reflexives are similarly absent in agreeing accusative positions.[[3]](#footnote-3) W:99’s reasonable conclusion is that agreement, not case, drives the AAE. This makes AAE effects useful probes for unvalued phi-features.[[4]](#footnote-4) For example, the acceptability (and hence putative grammaticality) of reflexives in object positions in languages like English and Icelandic argues against reducing case to a byproduct of phi-agreement. Why? Because if accusative case piggy backs on phi-feature agreement then, given the AAE, object reflexives should not exist, contrary to fact.

A stronger claim is possible given the data, and Preminger (forthcoming) makes it.[[5]](#footnote-5) AAE effects arise when a reflexive must value *overt* phi features. This licenses the following generalization: phi-agreement is *never* abstract (i.e. involving morphologically covert phi-features). Call this Preminger’s Generalizaton (PG).

What follows provides evidence that things are not this simple. In particular, this squib argues for two conclusions: (i) that if AAE is a reliable indicator of agreement, then Icelandic provides evidence that abstract agreement exists (i.e. PG is too strong), and (ii) that classical case theory (CCT), but not dependent case theory (DCT), can explain these AAE effects in Icelandic. Let’s consider the details.

1. The Data[[6]](#footnote-6)

Here is a schematic of the relevant data. Icelandic has nominative objects in quirky case dative subject constructions. Thus structures like (1) are well formed:

1. DPDat T+Fin V DPNom

In structures like (1), T+Fin can bear plural features, which, when they occur, are obligatorily valued by those of DPNom.[[7]](#footnote-7) Furthermore, this feature agreement with DPNom in (1) is morphologically overt and appears on the predicate, presumably due to (some operation analogous to) V to T raising.

1. DP1Dat,pl V+T+Fin, pl (\*1/2) DP2Nom, pl

This is all old hat, and fully expected given standard assumptions.[[8]](#footnote-8) Here’s the new stuff. Icelandic allows infinitives in configurations like (3) where the matrix V is a raising verb:

1. [DP1 Dat T+Fin V [DP2 Dat T-Fin V DP3 Nom]]

The significant facts for our purposes is that the embedded clause is non-finite and bears no overt agreement morphology. And here is the kicker: locally bound simplex nominative reflexives (*sig*) are barred from the DP3 position.[[9]](#footnote-9)

(4) \*[DP1 Dat T+Fin V [DP2 Dat1 T-Fin V [DP3 Reflexive (i.e. sig Nom1)]]]

This suggests that the AAE applies here just as it does in (1). However, for the AAE to hold in the embedded clause requires covert (plural) phi features on the embedded T-Fin.

In sum, we can bring the data in (4) under the purview of the AAE if we assume, contra PG, that the embedded T-Fin has a complement of morphologically covert (plural) phi features in configurations like (3) and (4) (i.e. just as in finite (1)/(2)).

1. Consequences for Case Theory

The data as presented is consistent with dependent case theory (DCT) if we assume that the embedded non-finite T obligatorily comes with the relevant unvalued plural phi features. Here is the story.

The embedded object will be marked nominative given standard DCT assumptions. Furthermore, obligatory agreement will obtain between the unvalued plural phi-features on T-Fin and the nominative case marked DP. This obligatory agreement will then trigger the AAE thereby blocking a simplex nominative reflexive *sig* from appearing in position D.

This account, however, raises a question: what forces covert plural phi features on the embedded T-Fin? More specifically, what stops the grammar from generating an embedded non-finite T-Fin without the relevant plural phi features? Were this possible, DCT could still assign nominative case to DP3, but the configuration would not trigger the AAE and would thus allow a simplex reflexive in this position, contrary to fact. Thus, though the DCT plus standard agreement theory is compatible with the Icelandic data, it does not explain it. In contrast, CCT can explain these data given other standard empirical assumptions. Here is how.

A core assumption of CCT is that case is a X0-DP relation. For nominative, X0 is T0. A further standard assumption is that non-finite T is not endemically a (nominative) case assigner. However, when non-finite T is augmented with phi features it can assign nominative case (e.g. as found in Brazilian Portuguese with inflected infinitives). So, if we assume (i) that nominative case reflects an underlying T0-DP relation and (ii) that non-finite T requires some unvalued phi features to become case active then the AAE effects in (4) follow. More specifically, the acceptability of configurations like (3) imply that DP3 is case licensed by non finite T0, which requires that T0 bear some unvalued phi features, which triggers the AAE.

What allows CCT to explain the facts in (4) but prevents DCT from doing the same? The main theoretical difference between CCT and DCT is that the former treats all case assignment as a dependency between a case assigning *head* and a DP. The DCT, in contrast, treats case as a DP/DP dependency. This difference becomes crucial given the uniform assumption that agreement is a X0-DP dependency. Specifically, this latter assumption coupled with CCT forces the conclusion that in (3) DPnom *must be* in relation with a nominative assigning head. This implies that T-Fin has abstract (covert) phi features that allow T-Fin to assign nominative case to DP3, T-Fin itself having no endemic case assigning powers. Importantly, this line of reasoning *relies* on a coreassumption that DCT rejects. To wit: DCT treats agreement as a head-DP dependency, but crucially insists that case is not. This means that DCT plus agreement theory does not require phi features on the embedded T-Fin and so fails to explain the apparent AAE effects in (4).

An aside: CCT treats the embedded clause in (3) as Nom-infinitive construction in which the non-finite T is case active due to bearing the requisite agreement feature. Sigurdsson (1996: 2.4) makes a similar proposal for independent reasons. Agreement with the nominative object in mon-clausal structures like (1) is obligatory. This contrasts with structures like (5), where the embedded subject DP2 is nominative. Here plural agreement with the matrix T+Fin is opitional. Thus, in (5) if DP2 is plural then the matrix T can either agree with it or surface in default singular form. In (1), to repeat, if DP2 is plural T+Fin must be as well. Sigurdsson’s (1996) suggestion explains this optionality. If we assume that the T-Fin can optionally bear the requisite unvalued features that activate its nominative case powers. When they are there, agreement is blocked while when they are not there agreement is obligatory. Thus, nominative case can be assigned within the embedded clause by T-Fin with unvalued Pl features or by the matrix T+Fin. In the former construction agreement is not overtly realized on the matrix T, in the latter it is.

1. [DP1 Dat T+Fin V [DP2 NOM T-Fin V…]]

What is relevant here, is that this provides independent motivation for assuming that Icelandic allows non-finite Ts with the requisite unvalued features to assign nominative case.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. A slight revision of Preminger’s Generalization

W:99 suggests treating the AAE as a phi feature detector. Doing so implies that embedded infinitives like those in (3) carry some unvalued phi features that must be valued. This is what triggers the AAE effects in (4). CCT requires that the non-finite embedded T0 in (3) bear such unvalued features in order to be case active (i.e. to be able to assign nominative case). This in turn triggers AAE effects in structures like (4).

This account also permits the adoption of PG in a slightly revised form. Again, consider the details.

PG proposes that there is no covert phi feature agreement. In languages without overt agreement, this implies that there are no unvalued phi-features on *v*, the accusative case assigning head. AAE effects will thus be absent as there are no phi-features present to trigger the AAE.

In the context of CCT, that PG holds for accusative case is sensible. CCT assumes accusative case is the product of a *v0*-DP dependency, (transitive) *v0* being the head that endemically assigns accusative case. If we assume this, however, then adding phi features to *v0*does not endow *v0* with case powers and so phi features on *v0* are optional as regards CCT.

This observation allows for a modified version of PG: *optional* phi-features must be morphologically overt. In particular, phi features on inherent case assigning heads (e.g. finite T or transitive *v*) must be morphologically overt. This combined with some version of the case filter (as part of UG) licenses *covert* phi features only where case requirements force them to appear. In instances where UG case requirements will be independently met unvalued phi-features will only be licensed if overt. This modified version of PG appears to derive all of the relevant AAE data, including the availability of reflexives with accusative case in languages like English and Icelandic. In other words, PG’s assumption that case and agreement are *generally* decoupled is maintained while predicting that they are tightly coupled in cases like (3), (4) and (5).

1. Conclusion

Linguistics is not chock full of “crucial experiments,” experiments that are designed to test theoretical assumptions but where empirical outcomes are as yet unknown. The above, I believe, constitutes such a case. Here is some personal biography.

A few years ago I ran across the Icelandic configuration in (3) and came to see that it was a good testing ground for DTC coupled with AAE. The straightforward prediction was that nominative reflexives that are otherwise barred in Icelandic should be permissible if case and agreement dependencies were not treated univocally as X0-DP relations. It took me too long to send Halldór Sigurdsson the requisite email to uncover the facts (well uncover them *for* me), but the prediction was clear and, believe it or not, made ahead of the ask. It took little more time to realize that CCT would make the opposite prediction given reasonable additional background assumptions concerning the case powers of case assigning heads. But this too fell into place. The results are those presented above.

Does this mean that DCT is wrong and that CCT is right? No. But, if correct, it does provide one bit of evidence in favor of CCT. Furthermore, it does so in the context of Icelandic quirky case assignment, a domain that some advocates of DCT have argued provide especially powerful evidence for it. If the above argument is solid, it argues that such Icelandic data are better seen as vindicating CCT than trashing it.

Bibliography

Preminger, Omer. Forthcoming. What the PCC tells us about “abstract” agreement, head

movement, and locality. *Glossa*. (prepublication version available here:

[http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003221](http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003221" \t "_blank)).

Sigurdsson, Halldór. 1996. Icelandic Finite Verb Agreement. *Working Papers in*

*Scandinavian Syntax*. 57:1-46.

Woolford, Ellen. 1999. More on the anaphor agreement effect. *Linguistic Inquiry* 30.2

257-287.

1. Thanks to Halldór Sigurdsson for useful discussion and data provision. Thanks to Omer Preminger and Masha Polinsky for comments on an earlier draft. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Woolford (1999), henceforth W:99. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See W:99 section 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See W;99, section 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See  [http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003221](http://ling.auf.net/lingbuzz/003221" \t "_blank) for pre-publication version. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All data vetted and provided by Halldór Sigurdsson. Thx. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. As noted in Sigurdsson (1996:24), agreement with object nominative DPs is restricted to number. Non third person DPs are excluded from position DPNOM in (1). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As noted, the AAE applies to simple reflexives. In many languages (e.g. Greek), more complex reflexives also exist. Icelandic is one of these. These complex reflexives are immune to the AAE. The standard explanation (see W:99, section 3.3) is that the complex reflexive is composed of a pronominal inside a reflexive shell (i.e. [[pronoun] reflexive]) and the phi features on T agree with those of the pronominal rather than the reflexive, thus evading the AAE. Complex reflexives in Icelandic are of this variety and are licit, for example, in (4), where simplex reflexives are barred. Thus, substituting ‘peir sjálfir’ (they-selves) for ‘sig’ in (4) renders the sentence acceptable. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. However, as expected, complex reflexives are fine (see note 8). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Let me be a bit pedantic here. What blocks DP2 in (5) from valuing the matrix T+Fin Pl feature is the unvalued Pl feature on the embedded T-Fin. Effectively, this is an instance of minimality (analogous to what we would expect were the embedded clause headed by T+Fin). Thus, if the embedded T had no Pl feature, minimality would not block valuation of the matrix T and we should expect agreement to be obligatory in (5), contrary to fact. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)