Default case without case*

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Abstract: Case systems often include a special member labelled default case (e.g. Schütze 2001). This paper examines a number of distinct case patterns in Kalaallisut (Inuit, Greenland) and argue that they require us to draw a distinction between syntactic last resort case and morphological default case. In Kalaallisut, syntactic last resort case is instrumental, whereas morphological default case is absolutive (Yuan 2018). I further propose that the distribution of the two cases depends on nominal licensing: if a DP is licensed by ϕ-Agree or does not require licensing it is realized as absolutive. If a DP requires Case licensing but is not assigned case by regular means, it surfaces with last resort instrumental. The paper centers on noun incorporation structures, where this distinction is especially clear. I show that the default case analysis captures a number of facts about Kalaallisut morphosyntax, including word order contrasts across distinct incorporation structures, the effect of incorporation on case and agreement, and a bi-absolutive case pattern in non-incorporation copular clauses. At a theoretical level, the analysis affirms and extends the idea that default morphological case does not expone a syntactic case feature (Marantz 1991, Schütze 2001, McFadden 2007, Kornfilt and Preminger 2015, Caha 2023).

Keywords: default case, last resort case, nominal licensing, incorporation, non-verbal clauses

1 Introduction

In Inuit languages, narrow-scope internal arguments are realized with instrumental case, including objects of antipassive verbs (Kalmar 1977, Bittner 1987), objects of notionally transitive verbs with intransitive verbal agreement (Johns 2006:303-304, Fortescue 1984:82), and external modifiers of incorporated nouns (1a) (Johns 2007:541, Sadock 1980:307). Against this back-drop, it is striking that Kalaallisut external modifiers of nouns incorporated into the copular root *-u* do not surface with instrumental case, but instead surface in the morphologically bare absolutive form (2a) that is also found with intransitive subjects and transitive objects. (The copular root is underlyingly /u/, but assimilates in (2a) to a preceeding /a/ by a regular phonological process.) Unless noted otherwise, all data come from the second author.[1]

(1) a. Naja nutaa-mik sikkile-qar-poq.
Naja.abs new-inst bicycle-have-3sg.ind
Naja has a new bicycle.

* We thank Christine Beier, Emily Clem, Richard Compton, Amy Rose Deal, Ksenia Ershova, Vera Gribanova, Martin Haspelmath, Peter Jenks, Laura Kalin, Franco Liu, Jim McCloskey, Johanna Nichols, Jim Wood, and Michelle Yuan.

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[1] abl = ablative; abs = absolutive; acc = accusative; all = allative; ap = antipassive; con = conditional mood; cop = copula; erg = ergative; fut = future; ind = indicative mood; inst = instrumental; nom = nominative; part = participial mood; pl = plural; sg = singular. Though I will argue that there is no absolutive case in Kalaallisut, I gloss the relevant forms as abs for clarity.

In *Proceedings of the Workshop on Structure and Constituency in Languages of the Americas 27*,
University of British Columbia Working Papers in Linguistics,
(eds.). Vancouver, BC: UBCWPL, 2024.

b. *Naja sikkile-qar-poq nutaaq
Naja.abs bicycle-have-3sg.ind new.abs
Intended: Naja has a new bicycle.

(2) a. Naja meera-a-voq angisooq
Naja.abs child-cop-3sg.ind big.abs
Naja is a big child.

b. *Naja angisuu-mik meera-a-voq.
Naja.abs big-inst child-cop-3sg.ind
Intended: Naja is a big child.

This fact has been noted in the literature (e.g. Sadock 1980:32), but not explained. Existing analyses of noun incorporation, predict instrumental case on the modifier in (2a), e.g. van Geenhoven (1998:116). I propose that the case contrast between (1a) and (2a) is due to the predicate nominal, *meeraq angisooq* 'child.abs big.abs' in (2a), being a predicate and not an argument. Only arguments need to be syntactically licensed (Schütze 1997: 20-67, Schütze 2001:230) and therefore the modifier of the predicate incorporee in (2a), *angisooq*, is free to surface in the morphological default absolutive form. The proposed default case analysis casts new light on a range of morpho-syntactic properties of Kalaallisut, specifically the obligatory post-verbal position of absolutive modifiers in incorporation structures, a case contrast between modifiers and complements that are stranded by incorporation, intransitive agreement on the incorporating verb, absolutive case on the subject of the incorporating verb, and bi-absolutive case copular clauses without incorporation. Additionally, the analysis paves the way for an underspecification analysis of nominal inflection in possessive and non-possessive DPs.

In addition to accounting for this range of language-internal facts, the analysis has several broader, theoretical implications. First, it supports Yuan's (2018) theoretical distinction between post-syntactic last resort case and morphological default case and its precursors in Schütze (2001) and McFadden (2007). Second, it supports the idea that nominals can be licensed by either Case or ϕ-Agree. Third, it provides novel empirical support for existing theories of default case as a purely morphological phenomenon. Finally, it extends those theories to their logical endpoint and posits that null default case is simply absence of Vocabulary Insertion and not insertion of a null morph.

2 Background

This section lays out assumptions about case, agreement and noun incorporation in Kalaallisut, all of which are central to the proposed analysis of the case-contrast in (1) and (2).

2.1 Case and agreement

Two core morpho-syntactic features of Kalaallisut are its ergative-absolutive case alignment and indexing of subjects and objects on the verb. These are on display in (3) and (4).

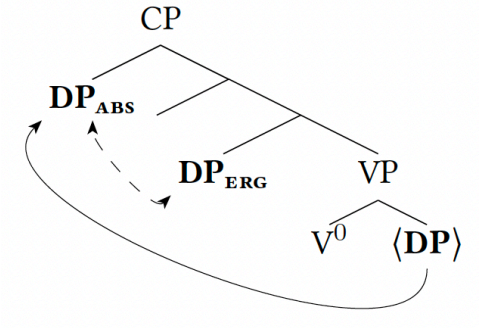
(3) Naja-p Juuna ikior-paa.
Naja-erg Juuna.abs help-3sg>3sg.ind
Naja helped Juuna.

(4) Juuna angerla-jaar-poq.
Juuna.abs go.home-early-3sg.ind
Juuna went home early.

In (3), the transitive subject bears ergative morphology (*-p)*, whereas the transitive object is in the morphologically bare absolutive form. Both are indexed by the portmanteau agreement suffix *-vaa* on the verb. In (4) the intransitive subject is in the morphologically bare absolutive form and controls intransitive agreement on the verb. The examples in (3) and (4) also feature the unmarked S(O)V word order (Fortescue 1993).

Following Yuan (2018) I assume that subjects and objects are licensed by dedicated ϕ-probes in the CP domain, with the object ϕ-probe being higher than the subject ϕ-probe. ϕ-Agree between the higher ϕ-probe and the transitive object triggers movement of the transitive object over the transitive subject to the specifier of the highest projection in the CP domain. Working within Dependent Case Theory (Marantz 1991, Baker 2015 i.a.), Yuan proposes (pp. 109ff) that the transitive object serves as a case competitor for the transitive subject, which is therefore assigned downward dependent ergative case:

(5) Inversion and dependent case assignment (Yuan 2018:19)



The object remains caseless and therefore surfaces in the default morphological absolutive case. Default morphological absolutive case contrasts with morphological instrumental case (= modalis in Yuan's terminology), which has several syntactic sources: it may realize lexical instrumental case (on oblique arguments denoting instruments and on anaphors), structural syntactic case assigned by an antipassive head, or last resort syntactic case assigned post-syntacticlly within vP (p. 235). A transitive object escapes last resort instrumental case, because it moves out of the vP.

2.2 Noun incorporation

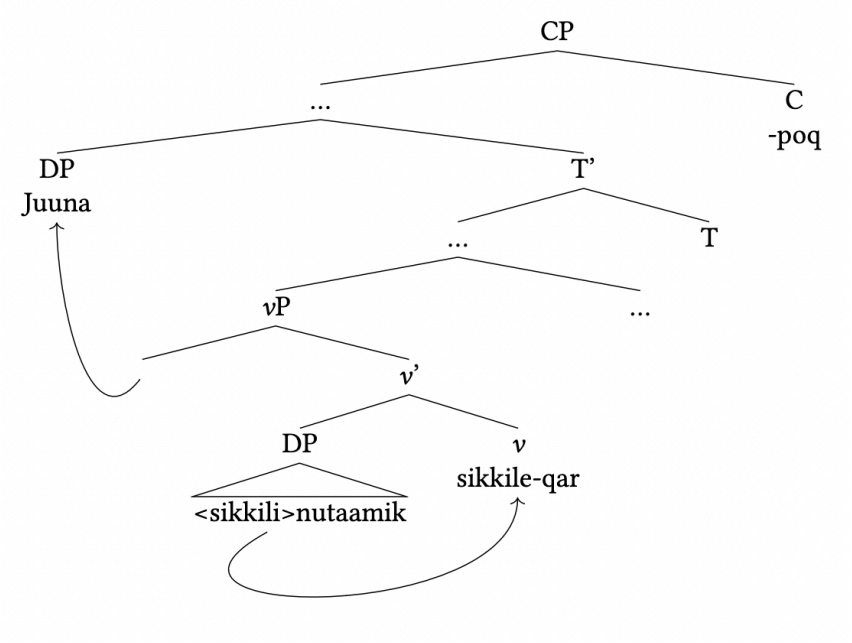
Broadly speaking, noun incorporation refers to "a N stem … compounded with a V stem to yield a larger, derived V stem" (Mithun 2014:847). This is illustrated in the Chukchi example in (6), in which the noun *ré'w* 'whale' has compounded with the verb *qin* 'hunt' to form a complex verb stem *ré'w-qin* that is then inflected for subject person and number.

(6) ni-ré'w-qin.
3.sg-whale-hunted
He whale-hunted. Bogoras 1910, via Mithun 1984:861

As Mithun shows, noun incorporation is wide-spread among the world's languages and likely has several distinct subtypes. As a result, the literature on noun incorporation is vast. One of the central issues in that body of work is the nature of the "compounding" referenced in Mithun's definition above: for a given language is noun incorporation presyntactic word formation (e.g. Rosen 1989), syntactic base-generation of a complex head (e.g. van Geenhoven 1998), morpho-syntactic co-analysis (Sadock 1980, 1986), syntactic head movement (e.g. Baker 1988, Johns 2007), syntactic phrasal movement (Barrie and Mathieu 2016), post-syntactic Merger (Yuan 2018) or post-syntactic word formation (Compton and Pittman 2010)? I will not attempt to settle this debate for Kalaallisut, but for concreteness I will assume that noun incorporation is the result on syntactic head movement of N to a morphologically bound light verb, v. That is, I take the post-movement structure of (7) to be as in (8):[2]

(7) Naja nutaa-mik **sikkile**-qar-poq.
Naja.abs new-inst bicycle-have-3sg.ind
Naja has a new bicycle.

(8) Structure for non-copular noun incorporation



Importantly for what follows, incorporation can strand a dependent of the incorporee. These stranded dependents include complements to the incorporee (9), possessors (10), adjectives (11), and numerals (12).

(9) Robert Peterseni-mit atuaga-qar-punga.
Robert Petersen-abl book-have-1sg
I have a book from Robert Petersen.

[2] This is Johns' 2007 analysis of Inuktitut, except that in my analysis N is moving to v and not to to C.

(10) Tuttu-p neqi-tor-punga.
reindeer-erg meat-eat-1sg.ind
I ate reindeer meat. Lit. I ate reindeer's meet. Sadock (1980:309)

(11) Nutaa-mik sikkili-sior-punga.
new-inst bicycle-look.for-1sg.ind
I am looking for a new bicycle.

(12) Pingasu-nik qimme-qar-punga.
three-inst.pl dog-have-1sg.ind
I have three dogs.

In terms of case, complements surface in whatever oblique case they regularly have (allative in (9)), possessors in their characteristic ergative case, and adjectives and numerals in instrumental case. In what follows I focus on case marking on stranded adjectives.

3 Deriving the case contrast

This section develops an analysis of the case contrast between absolutive modifiers in copular incoporation structures and instrumental modifiers in non-copular incorporation structures. The heart of the analysis is Yuan's distinction between last resort syntactic instrumental case and default morphological absolutive case. Before presenting the analysis, I lay out the assumptions that underlie it.

3.1 Analytic assumptions

The analysis to be developed below rests on three independently motivated assumptions:

(13) licensing: Only arguments need syntactic licensing in the forms of syntactic case or ϕ-Agree (Yuan 2018, Schutze 2001),

(14) arguments

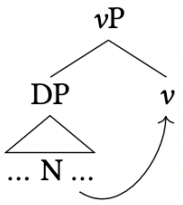
- an argument is Merged as a complement or specifier of a head along the clausal spine (V, v, Appl, Voice,…)
- a non-verbal predicate is Merged as the complement of a Pred head (Bowers 1993)

(15) selection

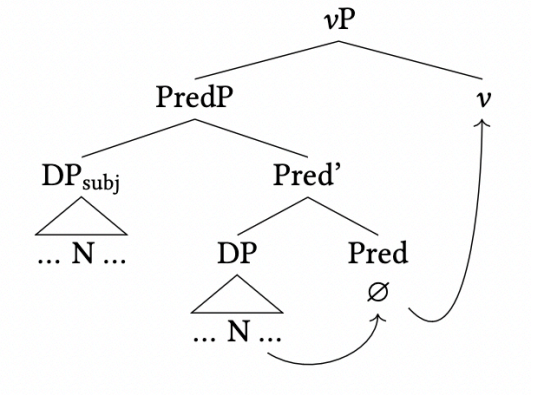
- a non-copular incorporating v selects for a DP (Johns 2007)
- a copular v selects for a PredP (Citko 2011).

These assumptions support the incorporation structures in (16) and (17):

(16) non-copular incorporation



(17) copular incorporation



In (16), a non-copular incorporating root Merges with a DP whose lexical head, N, head moves to v. In (17), the copular v Merges with a PredP, which in turn contains the surface subject and the predicate nominal. The subject DP is inside a specifier and therefore its lexical N head cannot move to v on pain of violating the Head Movement Constraint. The predicate complement, however, is in a complement position and therefore its N head can move to the next head up, Pred, and the resulting complex N-Pred head can move to v.

3.2 Absolutive vs. instrumental case

As non-arguments, predicates nominals in copular clauses are not subject to nominal licensing and therefore do not need syntactic case. Their caselessness is observed in stranded modifiers which surface in the morphological default absolutive form. In contrast, internal arguments of non-copular incorporating roots are Merged directly with the incorporating v. They are therefore arguments and hence require syntactic case or ϕ-Agree to be licensed. For reasons to be detailed in the next section an incorporating DP cannot be licensed by syntactic case nor ϕ-Agree. Consequently the incorporee in (16) is licensed by last resort instrumental post syntactic case assignment. Thus the case difference between (18) and (19) comes down to a difference in the grammatical function of the incorporee: argument (= instrumental) vs. predicate (= absolutive).

(18) a. Naja nutaa-mik sikkile-qar-poq.
Naja.abs new-inst bicycle-have-3sg.ind
Naja has a new bicycle.

b. *Naja sikkile-qar-poq nutaaq
Naja.abs bicycle-have-3sg.ind new.abs

Intended: Naja has a new bicycle.

(19) a. Naja meera-a-voq angisooq
Naja.abs child-cop-3sg.ind big.abs
Naja is a big child.

b. *Naja angisuu-mik meera-a-voq.
Naja.abs big-inst child-cop-3sg.ind
Intended: Naja is a big child.

3.3 Subject case, agreement and word order

In addition to absolutive case on stranded modifers, Kalaallisut copular clauses are characterized by i) an absolutive subject, ii) intransitive agreement, and iii) obligatory post-verbal position of a stranded modifier of the incorporee, as seen in (20).

(20) Naja meera-a-voq angisooq
Naja.abs child-cop-3sg.ind big.abs
Naja is a big child.

The first two properties follow from the impossibility of remnant movement of the non-subject DP: because its lexical head, N, has moved out to incorporate into v, the DP cannot undergo further movement (Takano 2000). As a consequence there is no case-competitor for the transitive subject in its vP-external case domain and the subject surfaces in the absolutive case. Intransitive agreement likewise follows from the lack of movement: because the non-subject nominal is frozen in place it is inaccessible to the object ϕ-probe in the CP domain. (This explanation assumes that Agree respects the Phase Impenetrability Condition and that regular transitive objects object-shift to the edge of vP before being targeted for ϕ-Agree.) The same analysis accounts for absolutive subject case and intransitive agreement in the non-copular incorporation structure in (2a).

The post-verbal position of the absolutive modifier, I propose, is the result of obligatory extraposition of the modifier to right-adjoin to CP. This extraposition can be understood as a grammaticalization of a disambiguation strategy: if left in situ the external modifier in (2a), *angisooq* 'big.abs', can be parsed as a modifier of the absolutive subject or of the absolutive incorporee. Extraposition eliminates the first parse.[3] Note that extraposition does not run afoul of Tanako's (2000) condition on remnant movement, since it is not the remnant DP that moves, only the modifier. Nor does it lead to ergative case on the subject: the ergative case assignment rule references DPs and the modifier is an AP. Even if the case assignment rule could reference an AP, the CP-adjoined modifier is outside the vP-external case-domain, which stretches from vP to C, i.e. from vP to the next phrase-head up. Finally, at no point in the derivation can the modifier Agree with the object ϕ-probe which is located in the CP domain (Yuan 2018). Prior to extraposition, the modifier is inside the vP phase and therefore inaccessible to a ϕ-Agree from outside vP. After extraposition, the modifier is adjoined to CP and therefore not in the search domain of the object ϕ-probe either. (I am assuming that failed Agree does not trigger probe reprojection.)

[3] This disambiguation analysis was first proposed in Kleinschmidt (1851:86) and then further developed in Sadock (1980:313) and Bok-Bennema and Groos (1991). See also Fortescue (1984:71).

Support for obligatory extraposition of the modifier of an *-u* incorporee comes from the observation that a post-verbal absolutive modifier is off-set prosodically, suggesting that it forms its own intonational unit. While experimental evidence for this claim is lacking at present, there is indirect support from it from an interaction between the presence of such modifers in embedded clauses and the relative order of the embedded clause and the embedding verb. As a baseline, we observe that embedded clauses may follow (21) or precede (22) the embedding verb:

(21) Eqqaama-vara [Naja meera-a-soq].
remember-1sg>3sg.ind Naja child-cop-3sg.part
I remember that Naja was a child.

(22) [Naja meera-a-soq] eqqaama-vara.
Naja child-cop-3sg.part remember-1sg>3sg.ind
I remember that Naja was a child.

However, if a postverbal absolutive modifier is present, the embedded clause cannot precede the embedding verb:[4]

(23) Eqqaama-vara [Naja meera-a-soq angisooq].
remember-1sg>3sg.ind Naja.abs child-cop-3sg.part big.abs
I remember that Naja was a big child.

(24) *[Naja meera-a-soq angisooq] eqqaama-vara.
Naja.abs child-cop-3sg.part big.abs remember-1sg>3sg.ind
I remember that Naja was a big child.

Fortesque's (1984:34-35) discussion of preverbal complement clauses suggests that they form a prosodic unit with the embedding verb, whereas post-verbal complement clauses need not. I thus propose that the ill-formedness of (24) is due to the prosodically off-set embedded modifier preventing the embedded clause from forming an intonational unit with the embedding verb. The prosodic off-set, in turn, reflects syntactic extrapostion (Aissen 1992, Büring 2013: 870-872, Royer 2021).

4 Last resort vs. default case

The account of the case contrast between modifiers in copular vs. non-copular incorporation structures rests on the distinction between last resort instrumental and default absolutive case. Following Yuan (2018:235), I take last resort instrumental case to be assigned by a counter-cyclically Merged P-head at the final stage in the syntactic derivation. This takes place when an argument fails to be licensed—by Agree or case assignment—in the narrow syntax. As a result, the lowest DP bears an instrumental case features as it enters the morphology. At Vocabulary Insertion that syntactic case feature is exchanged for instrumental case morphology (*-mik*); see below.

In contrast, I propose, absolutive forms arise from lack of Vocabulary Insertion and not from a syntactic case feature. In particular, the case paradigm in Table 1 is due to the Vocabulary Items in (25).

[4] The order in (24) was accepted on three occasions out of sixteen. This could either suggest that an alternative syntax-prosodic mapping is available or simply be due to the general variability of well-formedness judgements.

	absolutive	ergative	instrumental
'house'	illu	illu-p	illu-mik
'houses'	illu-t	illu-t	illu-nik

Table 1: Representative Kalaallisut case forms

(25) case vocabulary items
  a. {3sg erg} ↔ -p
  b. {3pl inst} ↔ -nik
  c. {inst} ↔ -mik
  d. {pl} ↔ -t

First consider the derivation of *illu-p* (house-erg). This DP bears the features 3, sg and erg. As such it perfectly matches the Vocabulary Item in (25a), and *-p* is inserted.[5] Second, the form *illu-nik* (house-inst.pl) is specified for 3, pl and inst, which matches Vocabulary Item (25b) and *-nik* is inserted. Underspecified *-mik* cannot be inserted for the plural instrumental, because *-nik* matches a greater number of features (person, number and case).[6] *-mik* **can** be inserted for a singular instrumental, since there is no more specified conforming Vocabulary Item ((25b) matches in case and person but conflicts in number). What remains to be accounted for are the non-oblique plural forms ending in *-t* and the bare singular form. I propose that neither of these forms expones case. The *-t* suffix in *illu-t* expones plural (25d) only. Finally there is no person, number, case Vocabulary Insertion for the bare form *illu* (house) at all, making it the ultimate default form.

5 Predictions

Caseless environments If nominals are not embedded in overt or covert syntactic structure, they are not arguments and do not receive a syntactic case feature (there is no case-assigning head that could give rise to oblique case nor a case competitor that could give rise to dependent ergative case). The present account predicts that they should therefore be realized with morphological default absolutive case, i.e. bare. One such context is a speaker teaching a learner a new word, accompanied by pointing to the object. In this context the only possible form of the nominal is indeed absolutive:

(26) pointing to a dog: qimmeq / #qimmi-mik (dog-inst) / #qimmi-up (dog-erg)

***tassa* copula clauses** If predicate nominals are not subject to nominal licensing, we expect predicate nominals in other copular constructions to be absolutive as well. This is borne out by copular clauses formed with the particle copula *tassa* (Fortescue 1984:72ff)

(27) Pisortaq tassa Hansi/*Hansi-mik.
  boss.abs cop Hansi.abs/*Hansi-inst
  The boss is Hansi.

[5] For concreteness I will assume that case features reside on D, though the analysis is compatible with case features residing in a higher position, such as a dedicated K head.

[6] Instumental forms of local person pronouns complicate this part of the analysis. The complication does not affect the central point that there is no absolutive case feature and I will therefore set it aside.

Stranded complements If absolutive reflects the absence of case, it should not be able to "override" a case. This prediction is born out by obligatory oblique case on standed complements in copular incorporation. Complements to nouns generally surface in some oblique case, e.g. the allative in (28)

(28) Naalakkersuisu-nut/*Naalakkersuisut ilaasortaq naapip-para.
parliament-all/parliament.abs member.abs meet-1sg>3sg
I met a member of parliament.

We find the exact same case pattern when the complement is stranded by incorporation. The stranded complement must be in the relevant oblique case and cannot be morphologically bare, whether it precedes or follows the verb:

(29) Naalakkersuisu-nut ila-a-voq
parliament-all member-cop-3sg.ind
She is a member of parliament.

(30) *{Naalakkersuisut} ila-a-voq {naalakkersuisut}
parliament.abs member-cop-3sg.ind parliament.abs
Intended: She is a member of parliament.

On the present analysis, (30) is impossible because the stranded complement has received oblique case and absolutive only arises due to lack of case.

This brings to a close the analysis of the absolutive-instrumental case contrast in Kalaallisut incorporation structures. In the remainder of the paper, I discuss how the proposed conception of default case in Kalaallisut extends and refines existing theories of default case.

6 Theories of default case

There is a persistent intuition in the literature that what we call default case is what arises when a nominal is not assigned a syntactic case by regular means (Marantz 1991, Schütze 2001, McFadden 2007, Legate 2008, Kornfilt and Preminger 2015, Caha 2023). On this view, default case is a morphological construct and does not reflect Vocabulary Insertion for a specific syntactic case feature, like acc. Caha (2023) is perhaps most explicit about how default case morphology comes about without syntactic case: default case is the result of Vocabulary Insertion for ϕ-features and ϕ-features only. Every other case form expones ϕ **and** case. For instance, in the German pronominal system 3sg feminine *sie* expones only those ϕ-features, whereas 3sg feminine *ihr* expones case as well (Caha 2023:11).[7]

The present investigation of default absolutive in Kalaallisut extends this line of theorizing in three ways. First, it adds absolutive as a morphological default case alongside nominative. Second, it demonstrates that default case need not reflect Vocabulary Insertion for ϕ-features, but can reflect the absence of Vocabulary Insertion altogether. Thirdly, as I will show below, inflection on possessive DPs in Kalaallisut adds a new dimension to the hypothesis that default case can be the exponent of ϕ-features only.

[7] Caha is working within the theory of 'cumulative case decompositon' which operates with abstract combinable case features rather than primitive case features like acc and erg. Since the present concern is the contrast between inserting for case vs. inserting for ϕ-only, I set this aspect of Caha's theory aside here.

Absolutive as a morphological default case Existing accounts of default morphological case without syntactic case tend to concentrate on the status of nominative case in languages with nominative-accusative alignment (McFadden 2007, Kornfilt and Preminger 2015, Caha 2023). The present study shows that the same syntax-free analysis can be extended to the absolutive in an ergative-absolutive case system.[8] This means that the notion of default case is not tied to a particular case-alignment system, but is a more general category, which can be given a uniform analysis.

Null default case and lack of Vocabulary Insertion Caha's insertion-for-ϕ-analysis of default case is motivated by pronoun systems, where ϕ-features are clearly exponed. Caha's insight is that one form, the default form, expones only ϕ-features, where the others expone ϕ **and** case features. In Kalaallisut the absolutive form is systematically null, which opens the door to a more radical analysis: there is no Vocabulary Insertion at all. In other words, the analysis of the absolutive form *qimmeq* is *qimmeq* 'dog' not *qimmeq-Ø* 'dog-3sg'. Empirically, it is difficult to tell apart the two analyses. Nonetheless, we can advance as a hypothesis that all null default forms are due to no Vocabulary Insertion and do not involve insertion of null morphology.

Default insertion for double ϕ Caha (2023) proposes that default case forms are due to insertion for ϕ-features of the nominal in question with no reference to case. Here I argue that inflection on Kalaallisut possessive DPs provides new support for this proposal. In particular, default case forms of possessive DPs do not expone case; they expone a complex set of ϕ-features resulting from Agree between possessor and possessee. While Caha does not discuss this possibility, it falls entirely within his general approach and thus extends the coverage of his theory.

As seen in (31)-(33), Kalaallisut possessees inflect for the person-number features of the possessor and the number of the possessee (possessees are always 3rd person). (The x>y gloss indicates features of possessor (x) and possessee (y).)

(31) qimmer-a
dog-[1sg>3sg]
my dog

(32) qimmer-put
dog-[1pl>3sg]
our dog

(33) qimmi-kka
dog-[1sg>3pl]
my dogs

Once we look at possessive DPs in their syntactic context we see that the exponents of this possession relationship is sensitive to the syntactic environment of the possessive DP:

(34) [Qimmer-a] napparsima-voq.
dog-1sg>3sg sick-3sg.ind
My dog is sick.

[8] Legate 2008 identifies ergative-absolutive systems where absolutive is a default case, but treats it as Vocabulary Insertion for an underspecified case feature [case].

(35) Naja-p qimmer-a aaqqiitip-paa.
Naja-erg dog-1sg>3sg cure-3sg>3sg.ind
Naja cured my dog.

(36) Qimmer-ma kii-vaatit.
dog-1sg>3sg bite-3sg>2sg
My dog bit you (sg).

(37) Naja-p uanga qimmi-nnut saanikoq tunniup-paa.
Naja-erg 1sg dog-1sg>3sg bone give-3sg>3sg.ind
Naja gave a bone to my dog.

One form for 'my dog', *qimmer-a*, is used for intransitive subjects (34) and transitive objects (35), a second, *qimmer-ma*, for transitive subjects (36), and a third, *qimmi-nnut*, for the oblique goal argument in (37).[9]

At first blush, this looks like a problem for the analysis of absolutive as default case. If there is no syntactic absolutive case feature how is *qimmer-a* in (34) and (35) derived as distinct from the ergative *qimmer-ma* (36) and allative *qimmi-nnut* (37)? I propose to analyze *-a* as the underspecified form within the possessive inflection paradigm.[10] Concretely, I propose the Vocabulary Items in (38)-(40):

(38) {{1 sg}, {3 sg}} ⇔ /-a/

(39) {{1 sg}, {3 sg erg}} ⇔ /-ma/

(40) {{1 sg}, {3 sg all}} ⇔ /-nnut/

Each feature bundle is internally complex, containing two sets of features separated by a comma.[11] The initial feature set that recur in each bundle, {1 sg}, is the result of ϕ-Agree between the 1sg possessor and the possessee (see Langr (2014) for a specific implementation). The second feature set contains the inherent ϕ-features of the possessee and, in (36)-(37), a case feature due to external case assignment. Now consider the derivations of (34)-(37). In (37) the possessee is 3sg and receives 1sg through Agree with the possessor. The entire possessive DP is assigned lexical allative case. As a result the possessee bears exactly the feature specification in (40) and Vocabulary Insertion inserts the suffix /-nnut/. A parallel derivation takes place for the transitive subject possessive DP in (36), except that the possessive DP is assigned dependent ergative case. At the end of the syntactic derivation the transitive subject therefore bears 1sg (reflecting ϕ-Agree with the possessor), 3sg (inherent ϕ-features) and erg (through dependent case assignment). This feature set matches the Vocabulary Item in (39) and /-ma/ is inserted. Finally, consider the derivation of the possessive DPs in (34) and (35). As a intransitive subject and transitive object respectively, these DPs are licensed by ϕ-Agree and do not receive syntactic case. I propose that their possessive inflections reflect their caselessness, specifically the absence of an abs case feature on the possessee. This is articulated in the Vocabulary Item in (38). As with the allative and ergative Vocabulary Item, the

[9] In addition to the allative form in (37), there are dedicated possessive suffixes for each of the five other oblique cases. The analysis developed below extends straightforwardly to these.

[10] This analysis is inspired by a remark made to me by Emily Clem.

[11] Other phenomena that have been modelled with multiple sets of ϕ-features on a single head include complementizer agreement (Deal 2015), switch reference (Clem 2022), and ergative case (Clem and Deal 2024).

syntactic specification of (38) contains the ϕ-features of the possessor (1sg, obtained by Agree) and the inherent ϕ-features (3sg), but, in contrast with the ergative and allative Vocabulary Items, the inherent ϕ-features are not accompanied by a case feature. In other words, *-a* expones only ϕ-features, and not case.

This analysis affirms Caha's hypothesis that default case can be the exponent of just ϕ-features. The novelty is that the default form expones not just a single set of ϕ-features but a **complex set of ϕ-features** that result from Agree between possessor and possessee.

This discussion leads to three hypotheses:

(41) No default syntactic case: Morphological default case never expones a syntactic case feature. (Marantz 1991, McFadden 2007, Schutze, Kornfilt and Preminger, caha)

(42) Overt default case expones ϕ: Overt default case morphology expones ϕ-features (Caha 2023)

(43) Null default case = no insertion: Null default case reflects a lack of Vocabulary Insertion.

The first hypothesis is broadly supported in the literature and in line with the analysis of default case developed above for Kalaallisut. Caha (2023) makes a number of empirical and theoretical arguments for the second hypothesis which is further corroborated by the Kalaallisut possessive inflection paradigms reviewed above. Empirical arguments for the third hypothesis are hard to to come by: it would require a phenomenon that could tease apart the presence of a null morph from the absence of a morph altogether. In the absence of such arguments, I will simply point to the fact that we don't have to posit insertion of a null morph for a null default case form. No Vocabulary Insertion will yield the same form with a smaller Vocabulary and simpler derivation.

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