Scrambling for Case: Accusative in Mongolian

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The distribution of accusative in Mongolian is problematic to account for as a purely-structural case: it appears on objects, as well as the subjects of complement clauses and adjoined clauses under converbs, adverbial subordinators or in oblique case-marked positions (Guntsetseg, 2016). The appearance of ACC is furthermore sensitive to referentiality: definite, specific nominals receive ACC, while indefinite, non-specific ones remain unmarked. In fact, ACC may appear even when the clause contains no ACC-assigning verbs, as in (1). We propose that Mongolian ACC is the result of scrambling into a functional projection just out-side the VP, and outside the domain of existential closure. This resembles object shift in its motivation (cf. Diesing, 1996; Vikner, 2005), but instead crucially involves A-bar movement, resolving scopal relations of quantificational NP's by PF. Once in the higher phase above VP, ACC may be assigned morphologically in competition with other cases, as in Dependant Case Theory.

(1) *Surγaγuli-iin jahirul-du*   *[Tuyaγa-i ire-gsen]-i*   *mede-gd-egsen*
     School-GEN   director-DAT [Tuya-ACC come-VRN.PST]-ACC know-PASS-VRN.PST

   'That Tuya had come was known by the chancellor.'

Evidence that ACC correlates with movement into a functional projection outside of the VP comes from movement tests. When direct objects are moved above indirect objects in ditransitives, ACC is obligatory; likewise when objects are fronted for information-structure purposes. The height of this movement can be disambiguated with adverbs as in (2): ACC is obligatory when objects appear above agent-oriented adverbs, but marginal or only possible with contrastive focus readings below. This extends to embedded subjects as well, which may appear outside of their embedded clauses and above matrix obliques and adverbials, but crucially with ACC, as in (3).

(2) *Baγator (miha-*(yi)) hinamaγai*
     Baatar   (meat-ACC)   diligently

     (miha-(?yi)) cabci-ju   bai-na
     (meat-ACC)   chop-CVB be-NPST

   'Baatar is diligently chopping meat

(3) *Bolod **Hasa-*(yi)** yege tagün-iyer [ebedcidei bayi-na geju]*
     Bolod **Hasa-ACC**   many voice-INST sick   be-NPST that

     hel-gsen
     say-VRN.PST

   'Bolod said loudly that Hasa was sick.'

Diesing (1996) proposes that the clause is mapped into two domains: below and above the VP respec-tively correspond to the nuclear scope and the restriction of an existential quantifier, and only nominals with an existential interpretation (i.e. non-specific indefinites) may remain within the domain of the VP (or: 'existential closure'). This has been taken to motivate object-shift in Scandinavian languages (Diesing, 1997; Vikner, 2005), and resolving these scopal requirements provides an explanatory account for the sen-sitivity to referentiality in shifted arguments in Mongolian. Unlike object shift in Scandinavian however, we propose A-bar scrambling as the mechanism of movement in Mongolian: this accounts for the movement of subjects out of adjoined clauses, and predicts that this movement should be sensitive to A-bar effects. In fact, one of the only places ACC is banned in Mongolian includes the subjects of object-gap relative clauses, which are in fact WH-islands, while converbial and other adjoined subordinate positions are not.

Similar distributions of ACC have been described e.g. in Sakha (Turkic; Siberia) by utilising Depen-dant Case Theory (Baker & Vinokurova, 2010), positing that both objects and subjects in these configu-rations have undergone object-shift into the same phase as the matrix subject, triggering dependant-ACC assignment. Allowing that ACC in Mongolian may be assigned in a dependant fashion sidesteps the issue of improper movement that arises as we observe case assignment apparently being fed by A-bar scrambling. However, this analysis refines the Dependant Case Theory explanation by providing a rationale and mech-anism for the movement required in these theories. In this way, we also place Mongolian in the typology of argument-shift languages as one which feeds morphological case assignment through scrambling.

References

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