Parameterizing Case Theory: Raising verbs in Bantu

Raising verbs have long been central to theories of abstract Case, revealing the relationship between finiteness and noun phrase licensing (Chomsky 1981, George & Kornfilt 1981, Chomsky 2000, among others). In the Minimalist Program, an uninterpretable Case feature (uCASE) makes NPs active for (agreement and consequently) raising operations (Chomsky 2000), and its valuation is crucial to NP-licensing. This paper proposes that Case Theory does not suffice to account for raising constructions and NP positions in Bantu languages, and therefore its role must be parameterized. We suggest that in Bantu languages, a uGENDER feature renders NPs active, rather than a uCASE feature.

The traditional Case analysis for raising verbs is that an NP subject is licensed by finite T°: if a lower clause is non-finite, its subject may instead be licensed by the matrix finite T°. This accounts for why the embedded subject appears in the matrix clause in (1)b. Once an NP’s Case is checked, however, it cannot undergo further Agree/Move operations, accounting for the unacceptability of (1)c.

1  a. It seems that John is sick
   b. John seems to be sick
   c. *John seems that is sick

But this paradigm is not universal: in Bantu languages, raising verbs can take finite, fully inflected complements (see also Harford Perez 1985). The Lubukusu data in (2) demonstrate this pattern:

(2)  a. ka-lolekhana (mbo) John ka-kwa  
    6S-appears (that)  1S.PAST-fell
    “It seems like John fell”
   b. John a-lolekhana (mbo) ka-kwa  
    1S-appears (that)  1S.PAST-fell
    “John seems like he fell”

As suggested by the translations in (2), these constructions superficially resemble the oft-forgotten cousin of the English raising constructions in (1), that is, the copy raising construction (Potsdam & Runner 2001), which shares the property of apparent raising out of a tensed embedded clause, though with a pronoun filling the gap in English (which could arguably be pro in (2) for Lubukusu).

In contrast to the English copy-raising construction, however, the Lubukusu raising construction consistently allows low-scope readings of the raised subject. For (2), this is realized in a situation where the speaker is inspecting the scene of an accident, and from the physical evidence deduces that John, the subject of her investigation, must have fallen down. The Lubukusu examples in (2) are acceptable in this situation, whereas the English copy-raising equivalent in the translation in (2)b is not. This contrasts with super-raising constructions, which are also acceptable in Lubukusu, but which permit only high-scope interpretations of the subject:

(3)  ka-lolekhana mbo ba-somi ba-many-ile mbo mw-alimu a-lwala  
    6S-appears that  2-students 2S-know-PFV COMP 1-teacher 1S-be-sick
    “It seems like the students know that the teacher is sick”
(4)  mw-alimu a-lolekhana mbo ba-somi ba-many-ile mbo a-lwala  
    1-teacher 1S-appears that  2-students 2S-know-PFV COMP 1S-be-sick
    “The teacher seems like the students know he is sick”

The apparent super-raising case in (4) is acceptable only when the teacher is the source of the evidence – something about the teacher’s appearance or actions betrays that his students know he is sick. Example (4) indicates that there is a locality requirement for low-scope readings to occur as they do in (2), as is expected for movement constructions. This locality requirement, together with the general acceptability of low-scope readings, suggests that the relevant construction in Lubukusu (and potentially other Bantu languages) is truly a case of raising from a tensed clause to matrix subject position. This conclusion is further supported by the existence of passive-raising constructions, where the subject of a downstairs predicate raises to subject of a passive verb (see also Harford-Perez 1985):

(5)  ekhaafu e-buli-khe mbo (*e-li) e-fw-ile  
    9-cow  9S-reveal-STAT that  (*9-comp) 9S-die-PFV
    “A cow was revealed that it died”

The analysis of Lubukusu raising as A-movement from embedded subject position to matrix subject position presents two major theoretical difficulties: first, an NP which has triggered an agreement relation in a tensed clause ought to be rendered inactive for further movement/agreement operations (Chomsky 2000, 2001). This is clearly not true in Lubukusu raising, however, a property of Bantu
which has been termed “hyperactivity” in (Author, to appear). Furthermore, standard assumptions also hold that a finite clause is a phase, and should be impenetrable to higher operations, including Agree and A-movement (Chomsky 2000; 2001).

Regarding the first problem, we propose that the source of hyperactivity lies in the features which render an NP “active”. Whereas in Indo-European languages this feature is a uCASE feature, we claim that the relevant feature in Bantu languages is the (meaningless and thus) uninterpretable GENDER component of Noun Class. We assume that deactivation goes hand in hand with valuation (Chomsky 2000); hence because the GENDER of noun (phrases) does not obtain its value through AGREE relations, AGREE does not render it inactive (see Author 2008, Boskovic 2008 for arguments that gender is uF and that it does not require deletion through AGREE). This analysis of raising is supported by the agreement and licensing properties of a variety of unrelated constructions in Bantu languages, including compound tenses, possible-constructions, transitive expletive constructions, and locative inversion. For illustration, the compound tense construction in (6) shows that a single NP can trigger multiple agreement relations, a property dubbed ‘hyperagreement’ in (Author to appear): if uCASE (alone) made an NP active, we would expect only a single agreement operation (Carstens 2001). The facts follow directly, however, if the relevant feature for NP activity (and, therefore, licensing) is the uninterpretable but intrinsically valued nominal GENDER feature, rather than uCASE.

(6) Juma a-li-kuwa a-me-pika chakula [Swahili]
   J. 1S-PST-be 1S-PREF-cook 7.food (Carstens 2001, (5))
   “Juma had cooked food”

The second problem posed by Lubukusu raising constructions is that of A-movement out of a phase; towards a solution, we propose distinguishing tensed clauses from phases, at least for Bantu languages. There have been many proposals in recent years that CP is composed of multiple projections (Rizzi 1997 and much subsequent work). In this light, we propose that the phase head in Lubukusu is a high CP head, possibly Force° (Rizzi 1997). Raising verbs, crucially, do not select for this higher C (phase) head. Evidence comes from Lubukusu complementizer agreement; as (7) shows, Lubukusu has a complementizer that agrees with the matrix subject in noun class:

(7) Alfredi a-a-bolela baba-andu a-li ba-kha-bile
    1.Alfredi 1S-PST-tell 2-person 1-COMP 2S-FUT-conquer
    “Alfred told the people that they will win.”

This contrasts with various non-agreeing complementizers that may occur, including mbo. Evidence from both exclamatives and ‘because’-phrases suggests that mbo is a lower complementizer, whereas the agreeing complementizer is a higher complementizer which is ruled out in these cases, potentially due to competition for the same position with sikila, in contrast to mbo in a lower position:

(8) Alfred a-li-ko acha sikila mbo (*a-li) a-liko a-elekesia Sifuna
    Alfred 1-PROG 1-leave because that (*1-comp) 1S-PROG 1S-escort Sifuna
    “Michael is leaving because he is escorting Sifuna”

The relevance to our point has to do with the complementizer that appears in raising constructions in Lubukusu: the agreeing complementizer is not available, whereas the non-agreeing COMP is. This is evident in (5) above, as well as below in (9):

(9) Samy a-lolekhana mbo (*a-li) a-liko a-lwala [Lubukusu]
    Samy 1S-appears that (*1-COMP) 1S-PROG 1S-be.sick
    “Samy appears to be sick” (lit. “Samy appears that is sick”)

On our account, this is because the high position where the agreeing complementizer occurs is a phase head, and hence is incompatible with A-movement out of the tensed clause.

Lubukusu raising constructions therefore provide important evidence that Case theory is not universally adequate to explain NP distribution, whereas the facts are explained by recognizing nominal gender as an “activity” feature that does not need to be valued through AGREE. The constructions discussed here also argue that clarifying the properties of specific heads within the CP field can yield important insights into cross-linguistic variation with respect to movement phenomena and A-relations.