

Evidence for abstract Case in Bantu

Jenneke van der Wal*

University of Cambridge, United Kingdom

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Abstract

In his paper 'Parameterizing Case: evidence from Bantu', [Diercks \(2012\)](#) proposes a parameterized theory of abstract Case, where some languages do have Case, and others do not. Bantu languages, according to him, do not have uninterpretable Case features in their feature inventories. This paper shows, first, that the Bantu languages Makhuwa and Matengo are interesting counterexamples, concluding that – although Case may be parameterized – microvariation within the Bantu language family shows that it is not correct to characterize the whole language family as Caseless. Secondly, the question is addressed what kind of evidence is needed for postulating a system of abstract Case in a particular language, concluding that Makhuwa and Matengo, unlike the languages [Diercks \(2012\)](#) analyses, plausibly give sufficiently rich and unambiguous evidence for postulating an abstract nominal licensing system, for the language learner as well as for the linguist.

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1. Introduction: parameterizing Case

The Minimalist Program has inherited from Government and Binding some version of the Case Filter ([Chomsky, 1981](#); [Vergnaud, 1977](#)): even in languages lacking morphological case, it is assumed that overt DPs need to be Case-licensed. This abstract Case is semi-independent of the many different surface manifestations of morphological case and is taken to account for the distribution of (overt) DPs as well as phenomena such as A-movement. In Minimalism, Case is often reduced to an Agree relation ([Chomsky, 2000](#)),¹ where nominals enter the derivation with an uninterpretable Case feature [uCase] that needs to be valued in the course of the derivation. [Diercks \(2012\)](#) critically evaluates the universality of Case theory in his paper 'Parameterizing Case: evidence from Bantu'. If Case is a feature like any other grammatical feature, [Diercks \(2012\)](#) reasons, languages can vary as to whether they have this feature, just like languages can optionally select other features (like mood or evidentiality). Logically, this leads to the parameterization of Case, where some languages do and some do not select [uCase] in their inventories:

- (1) Case Parameter:
Uninterpretable Case features are/are not present in a language

* Correspondence to: Faculty of Modern and Medieval Languages, Sidgwick Avenue, Cambridge CB3 9DA, United Kingdom.
Tel.: +44 (0)1223 760820.

E-mail addresses: gjv23@cam.ac.uk, jennekevanderwal@gmail.com.

¹ There is a debate about how Case should be treated in a Minimalist theory of syntax (cf. [Chomsky, 2000](#); [Pesetsky and Torrego, 2001](#)). In this paper I shall leave these to one side and keep to [Diercks' \(2012\)](#) interpretation of Case.

His proposal for parameterization is inspired by Perez's [Harford] (1985) claim that Case is inoperative in Bantu languages. As Bantu languages do not have morphological case marking on nouns, the question of abstract Case has not been addressed much in Bantu linguistics, but Diercks (2012:254) makes the claim explicit by arguing that "Bantu languages do not have uninterpretable Case features in their feature inventories" (Diercks, 2012:254).

- (2) Case Parameter setting for Bantu:
Uninterpretable Case features are not present

Diercks examines 4 phenomena where Case may be expected to play a role, showing that the Bantu languages that he studies do not display the expected behavior if Case licensing were required for every overt DP. These phenomena can be taken as diagnostics for abstract Case in linguistic theory (cf. Sheehan and van der Wal, Submitted), but should equally be seen as cues for the language learner to discover the licensing mechanism. A major question for linguists as well as first language acquirers is thus what kind of evidence is needed for postulating a system of abstract Case in a particular language.

This paper addresses that question by following up on a footnote in Diercks (2012:254), which is a qualification on the Case parameter setting for Bantu (2): "such macroparametric claims must be tempered by allowing individual language differences". Such microvariation is indeed found, as shown by the data from Matengo and Makhuwa in this paper. The four diagnostics applied by Diercks (2012) show that Matengo and Makhuwa pattern different from the languages discussed by Diercks, and a novel diagnostic also indicates that in these two languages there may be enough evidence in the input for language learners (and linguists) to detect a licensing system of abstract Case. Furthermore, this diagnostic also suggests that the presence or absence of Case may not be a macroparameter, but can be absent in one area of the language (here: nominative) but present elsewhere (e.g. the prepositional domain).

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses how morphological marking on nominals, which one may think of as morphological Case marking, is largely unrelated to abstract Case in Bantu languages. Section 3 addresses the link between (subject) agreement and (nominative) Case, which is absent in the languages Diercks studies, but consistent in Matengo and Makhuwa. A third diagnostic used by Diercks is the occurrence of overt subject DPs in non-finite clauses, where nominative Case is not licensed, which is discussed in Section 4. This section also addresses the issue of which aspect of finiteness might be related to Case marking. Section 5 introduces an additional diagnostic which concerns the licensing of an overt agent DP in a passive clause. Finally, Section 6 addresses [uCase] as an activity feature, relating to the phenomenon of 'hyperactivity' (Carstens, 2011) where DPs move through multiple Case positions. For the last four diagnostics, Matengo and Makhuwa are shown to behave differently from the languages Diercks (2012) analyses, displaying evidence for the presence of Case. The conclusion is that these languages, unlike the languages Diercks (2012) analyses, plausibly exhibit enough concrete evidence to postulate an abstract Case system, for the language learner as well as for the linguist.

2. Absence of morphological case in Bantu

The first diagnostic Diercks (2012) applies is the presence/absence of morphological case. Even if there may crosslinguistically not be a one-to-one mapping between abstract Case and morphological case realization, there must be *some* relation (Legate, 2008), hence morphological case should be indicative of abstract Case. However, this diagnostic only holds in one direction: if a language shows morphological case, it is assumed to have abstract Case (or else the morphological component has nothing to spell out), but the absence of morphological case is compatible with either presence or absence of abstract Case.

The Bantu languages "display no morphological case – that is, noun phrases appear in the same form whether they are a subject, a primary object, a secondary object, or an oblique" (Diercks, 2012:355). This is illustrated in (3) where the noun *omuwala* 'girl' has the same form in subject and object function.

- (3) a. Y-à-lábà òmùwálà. Luganda (JE15)²
1_{SM}-PST-see 1.girl
'He saw the girl.'
- b. Òmùwálà y-à-mú-làbà.
1.girl 1_{SM}-PST-1_{OM}-see
'The girl saw him.'

² The Bantu languages are conventionally classified by a letter and a number, the letters referring to geographical zones, according to the updated Guthrie (1948) classification by Maho (2009).

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