

When nominatives fail more than to agree

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A Syntax 101 theory of case assignment posits that nominative is an abstract case assigned by finite T. Yet, nominatives appear in environments where they cannot be licensed by finite T (as in Icelandic infinitival complements), or there can be more than one nominative noun phrase per finite T (as in NP-NP copular clauses). However, if a nominative phrase is in nominative, it triggers agreement, interacts with other DPs in PCC constructions, and shows restrictions on person in general. Morphological case theories have an easier time with the distribution of nominative forms in the structure but equally do not provide much insight as to why nominatives exhibit these consistent syntactic properties. In other words, there seems to be a notion of nominative-ness independent of case licensing.

I provide novel empirical evidence that this notion of nominative-ness corresponds to a nominal structure labeled by a D head (Chomsky 2013) where that the core labeling feature formally corresponds to CI licensing of [+PERSON] feature (see also Sudo 2012, Longobardi 2008, Landau 2010). This work thus provides new empirical evidence for a formal connection between Case and PERSON (Schutze 1997, Martin 1999, Chomsky 2000, Bejar and Rezac 2003, Richards 2008, a.o.). The core empirical evidence for the proposal comes from a case micro-variation in Slavic numeral constructions. As we will see, if the internal structure of the numeral blocks PERSON from labelling the structure, the resulting structure may appear in argument positions typically occupied by nominatives, but they fail to agree, license secondary predicates and interact with person features of other DPs.