Accusative Subject Licensing in Modern Inner Mongolian

1. Introduction: In the generative literature, abstract Case assigners/licensors are considered to be D, v, and I. These are functional categories. The question then arises as to whether C, another instance of functional categories, can be an abstract Case assigner/licensor in human language. To address this research question, this paper investigates the environments in which accusative Case is assigned/licensed in modern Inner Mongolian (Mongolian, hereafter), and argues, based on the newly found data, that C is actually an abstract accusative Case assigner/licensor in this language. This paper thus contributes to elaborating Case Theory in the framework of generative grammar.

2. Background: We will first see the distribution of genitive subject in Mongolian as a background to the subsequent sections. First, (1)-(2) show that genitive subject needs to co-occur with an outer nominal element. In the following examples, AND = adnominal and CON = conclusive.

(2) nidunun Ulagan-ø/-nu pro₁ biči-gsen/*-jei nom₁ last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen write-past.ADN/-past.CON book ‘the book which Ulagan wrote last year’

Second, (3)-(6) show that long distance genitive subject licensing by an outer nominal element is possible when the nominal originates from the same clause as the genitive subject.

(4) Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/-nu pro₁ biči-gsen/*-jei geji] Bayatur-Nom last year Ulayan-Nom/-Gen write-past.ADN/-past.CON that kele-gsen nom₁ say-past.ADN book ‘the book which Bagatur said that Ulayan wrote last year’
(5) nidunun Ulagan-ø/-nu nom-ø biči-gsen/*-jei šiltaɣan/učir last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen book-Acc write-past.ADN/-past.CON reason/fact ‘the reason/fact that Ulagan wrote a book last year’
(6) Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/*nu nom-ø biči-gsen geji] Bayatur-Nom last year Ulayan-Nom/-Gen book-Acc write-past.ADN that kele-gsen šiltaɣan/učir say-past.ADN reason/fact ‘the reason/fact that Bagatur said that Ulayan wrote a book last year’

Based on these data, Maki et al. (2011) claim that percolation of a [+N] feature takes place from pro to the corresponding outer nominal, and the heads on the path have the [+N] feature. Then, the COMP geji ‘that’ with the [+N] feature can license the genitive subject in (4), but not in (6).

3. Data: Let us now consider the distribution of accusative subject in Mongolian. Maki et al. (2010) show that accusative subject is possible in adjunct clauses, and the generalization on the distribution of accusative subject is (7).

(7) Generalization about the Distribution of Accusative Subject in Mongolian

Accusative subject may appear in adjunct clauses whose heads are not nominal.

(8)-(10) show that accusative subject is allowed in a temporal, conditional, and reason clause.

(8) a. Yaɣaru-ber Ulayan-ø/*-i almurad-ø ide-jei. hastily Ulayan-Nom/-Acc apple-Acc eat-past.CON ‘Ulayan ate an apple hastily.’

b. Yaɣaru-ber Ulayan-ø/-i almurad-ø ide-gsen-nu daraɣa, Bayatur-ø hastily Ulayan-Nom/-Acc apple-Acc eat-past.ADN-Gen after Bagatur-Nom jurji-ø ide-jei. orange-Acc eat-past.CON ‘After Ulayan had eaten an apple hastily, Bagatur ate an orange’

(9) a. Quyar ğay-un daraɣa Ulayan-ø/*-i ende ire-jei. two hour-Gen after Ulayan-Nom/-Acc here come-past.CON ‘Ulagan came here in two hours.’

b. Quyar ğay-un daraɣa Ulayan-ø/-i ende ire-bel, bógüdeger-ø yaciɣdana.
two hour-Gen after Ulagan-Nom/-Acc here come-if everyone-Nom trouble
‘If Ulagan comes here in two hours, everybody will be in trouble.
(10) a. Öçügedür Ulayan-ø/*-i suryayuli-du ire-gsen ügüi.
yesterday Ulagan-Nom/-Acc school-to come-past.ADN not
‘Ulagan did not come to school yesterday.’
b. Öçügedür Ulayan-ø/*-i suryayuli-du ire-gsen ügüii üçir-eçe, bogüdeger-ø
yesterday Ulagan-Nom/-Acc school-to come-past.ADN not because everyone-Nom
heart worry-past.CON
‘Because Ulagan did not come to school yesterday, everybody was worried.’
However, it is not allowed in relative clauses, as shown in (11).
(11) nidunun Ulayan-ø/-nu/*-i biçi-gsen nom
last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen/-Acc write-past.ADN book
‘the book which Ulagan wrote last year’
Accusative subject is also allowed in complement clauses, as shown in (12).
(12) Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/-i nom-o biçi-gsen/-jei gejü] kele-jei.
Bagatur-Nom last year Ulagan-Nom/-Acc book write-past.ADN/-past.CON that say-past
‘Bagatur said that Ulagan wrote a book last year.’
However, it is not allowed in a relative clause in which the nominal element originates from the same
clause as it, as shown in (13-14).
(13) a. Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/-nu/*-i proi biçi-gsen/-jei gejü] kele-gsen nom1
Bagatur-Nom last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen/-Acc write-past.ADN that say-past book
‘the book which Bagatur said that Ulagan wrote last year’
b. Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/*-nu/*-i proi biçi-jei gejü] kele-gsen nom1
Bagatur-Nom last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen/-Acc write-past.ADN that say-past book
(14) a. Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/*-nu/*-i nom-ø biçi-gsen gejü] kele-gsen
Bagatur-Nom last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen/-Acc book ACC write-past.ADN that say-past
šiltayın/uçir
reason/fact ‘the reason/fact that Bagatur said that Ulagan wrote a book last year’
b. Bayatur-ø [nidunun Ulayan-ø/*-nu/*-i nom-ø biçi-jei gejü] kele-gsen
Bagatur-Nom last year Ulagan-Nom/-Gen/-Acc book ACC write-past.ADN that say-past
šiltayın/uçir
reason/fact

4. Discussion: Let us consider what the above data suggest. We claim that they suggest that what
licenses accusative subject/what assigns accusative Case to accusative subject is COMP without a
[+N] feature. (8b)-(10b) with accusative subject are allowed, because the head of the adjunct clauses is
COMP without a [+N] feature. (8a)-(10a) and (11) with accusative subject are ungrammatical, because
there is no such COMP in the structures. (12) with accusative subject is grammatical due to the COMP
without a [+N] feature. (13a, b) with accusative subject are ungrammatical, because the COMP has a
[+N] feature by percolation of the feature from pro to the head noun. Finally, (14a, b) with accusative
subject are grammatical, because they involve gap-less prenominal modifiers, so that the relevant
COMP does not have a [+N] feature.

One may argue against the above argument, however, because verbs such as kele ‘say’ take
accusative object, as shown in (15), so that these verbs actually assign/license accusative subject in
examples such as (12), as in the raising-to-object construction in English.
(15) Bañatur-ø Ulayan-nu uçir-i Batu-du kele-jei.
Bagatur-Nom Ulagan-Gen thing-Acc Batu-to say-past
‘Bagatur told to Ulagan things about Batu.’

However, this argument does not hold for examples such as (8b), in which the matrix verb ide ‘eat’
does not have more than one accusative Case to assign/license. Therefore, in order to give a consistent
account for the entire data shown above, we have to admit that C can assign/license accusative Case. If
this argument is correct, Case assignment/licensing system looks like (16).
Therefore, the present study contributes to elaborating Case Theory in generative grammar.