ABSTRACT. We argue that in Germanic languages, predicate NPs always receive case structurally. In some languages (English, Frisian, Danish and Norwegian), the copula verb is itself an accusative case assigner; in other languages (Icelandic, Swedish and German), case features from a higher case-assigner are able to penetrate into the VP containing the predicate NP. Under this view, any apparent case 'agreement' between subject and predicate NP is epiphenomenal, due not to a rule of agreement under coindexation, but rather to the fact that both NPs are dependent on I for case, through Spec-head agreement on the one hand, but under government on the other. The hypotheses that predicate NPs are caseless or that they receive default case are shown to be untenable. The Structural Case Hypothesis is shown to provide a simple account of some complex case alternations in Icelandic.

0. INTRODUCTION

The question of how predicate NPs get case has received undeservedly little attention in the generative literature; mention has by and large been relegated to footnotes. We hope to show in this paper that they deserve better. Not surprising, perhaps, is the lack of consensus. Consider a simple example, such as (1):

(1) [IP Pat [I' [I will] [VP be [a doctor]]]]

A survey of the literature reveals a wide range of possible analyses as to the source of the m(orphological)-case on the predicate NP:

(2) Possible sources of m-case on Predicate NPs:
   a. 'Caseless' (Safir 1985: 77, Chomsky 1986: 95, Authier 1991: 726, fn. 5)
   b. Default case (Babby 1980: 171 ff., Freidin and Babby 1984: 96, fn. 4)

According to the Caselessness Hypothesis (2a), predicate NPs like a doctor in (1) are exempt from the Case Filter. According to the Default Case Hypothesis (2b), they receive case through some default or last-resort mechanism, because they have no other source of case. Under the Agreement Hypothesis (2c), they 'inherit' nominative case via coindexation with the subject NP Pat.
1. THE STRUCTURAL CASE HYPOTHESIS

In this paper we argue that a relatively unified analysis of predicate NPs is possible if it is assumed that in the Germanic languages such NPs are always assigned morphological case as an instance of structural case (2d). Under our analysis the basic parameter dividing the Germanic languages is whether or not the copula is itself a source of structural case in a given language. When it is not, we assume that the domain of the copula is transparent to structural case assignment from an external governor.

According to the Structural Case Hypothesis, predicate NPs are assigned structural case in the same way as argument NPs. In some languages, e.g. Danish, Norwegian and English, the copula is clearly a case assigner and assigns accusative case to the predicate NP, just as a transitive verb assigns accusative to its complement:

(3) a. Han ser mig/*jeg
    he sees me-ACC/*I-NOM

b. Det er mig/*jeg
    it is me-ACC/*I-NOM

c. Hvis jeg var dig/*du, . . .
    if I were you-ACC/*NOM

d. He sees me/*I.

    English

e. That’s me/*I in the picture.

f. What would you do if you were me/*I?

g. You can be me/*I in the play.

In (3b,c,e–g) the copula assigns accusative case to the predicate NPs, just as the transitive verb assigns accusative case to its complement in (3a,d).

However, in other languages, e.g. Icelandic, Swedish, and German, the predicate NP gets nominative case. We assume that in such languages, Infl (I) is the source of the nominative case. Under the Case Minimality Hypothesis (Sigurðsson 1989, Lee 1989, 1992), Infl can govern into a VP headed by a non-case-assigning verb and therefore assign case to a VP-internal nominal. Consider the Icelandic example in (4) (see Appendix for discussion of Swedish and German):

(4) a. Hún er kennari/*kennara.
    she-NOM is teacher-NOM/*ACC