

Structural case assignment in Gbagyi language: A government-binding analysis of nominative and accusative patterns

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Abstract

This study investigates structural Case assignment in Gbagyi, a Niger-Congo language spoken predominantly in north-central Nigeria, within the framework of Government and Binding (GB) Theory. Despite its large speaker base, Gbagyi remains underexplored in syntactic theory. The research examines how nominative and accusative Cases are assigned in canonical structures, testing universal principles proposed by Chomsky (1981) and subsequent scholars. Data were collected through interviews with native speakers (aged 18–70) in Kuta and Minna, with particular emphasis on the intuitions of elders, and analyzed using GB Case theory. Findings show that Gbagyi aligns with cross-linguistic patterns of structural Case assignment. Nominative Case is assigned to subject NPs by [+Tense] INFL heads (e.g., *mi* “I” in *mi la pyice* “I have finished”), while accusative Case is assigned by transitive verbs to object NPs (e.g., *ābā* “door” in *Ebi lá ābā guya* “The child closed the door”). Tree diagrams illustrate the role of adjacency and government, confirming that each NP receives exactly one Case from a single assigner. The study concludes that Gbagyi conforms to universal parameters of structural Case assignment, with nominative and accusative distribution paralleling languages such as English and Hausa. This analysis enriches the typological understanding of Nupoid languages and demonstrates the applicability of GB Theory to under-described languages.

Keywords: Gbagyi language, case assignment, government and binding theory, Niger-Congo languages, adjacency condition.

Introduction

The Gbagyi people predominantly inhabit Niger state, Birnin Gwari, Benue, and Kabba of Nigeria. Their settlements extend approximately 200 miles north to south and 100 miles east to west, reaching Birnin Gwari in the north, Lokoja in the south, Zungeru in the west, and Keffi in the east. They constitute the majority ethnic group in Niger State and hold significant presence in Zaria Province, though their numbers are relatively smaller in Benue and Kabba provinces. According to Magaji and Hyman (1970), the Gbagyi population was estimated at 500,000, while Byanyiko (1979) estimated over one million, referencing census figures of 20,000 (1921), 150,000 (1931), and 155,000 (1952). Shekwo (1986) projected four million, based on a 1983 survey by the National Union of Gbagyi Students. Referred to as Gwari by English and Hausa speakers and Gbari by Yoruba and Nupe speakers, they predominantly reside in Minna, Kuta, and parts of Kaduna State, with only Minna being under Gbagyi traditional rulership.

The term “Gbagyi” consists of “Gba,” meaning to consider, worship, or prioritise, and “Gyi,” meaning character or behaviour. Thus, “Gbagyi” conveys the idea of giving importance to character and conduct (Sheshi & Philip, 2004). The ethnonym serves both as an ethnic and linguistic identifier for the Gbagyi people and their language. Despite being spoken by approximately two million people, Gbagyi remains under-described in its phonological, semantic, morphological, and grammatical aspects. The language is spoken across Kaduna, Kwara, Plateau, and Niger states, as well as the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja. Alternative names for the language include Gbari, Gwari, Gbali, and Goali (Shekwo, 1986).

Linguistically, Greenberg (1963) classified Gbagyi language within the Nupe subgroup of the broader Kwa language family. Williamson (1989) referred to the language as “Nupoid,” while Bennett and Sterk (1977) placed Gbagyi among the Central-Niger languages. It is most closely related to Nupe, spoken south of Niger State, with further affinities to Igbirra, Igala, and Yoruba, though it is unrelated to Hausa (Magaji & Hyman, 1970).

Gbagyi is divided into two primary dialects with high mutual intelligibility: Gbagyi Matai and Gbagyi Yamma (or Gbagyi Nkwa). Gbagyi Matai is spoken in Niger State (Minna, Kuta, Shiroro, Gussoro, Erna, Alawa, Guni, Gwada, Sarkin Pawa, Kifinkoro, Pina, Wana), Kaduna State (Kaduna town, Birnin-Gwari, Zaria, Chikun, Kakuri), Plateau State

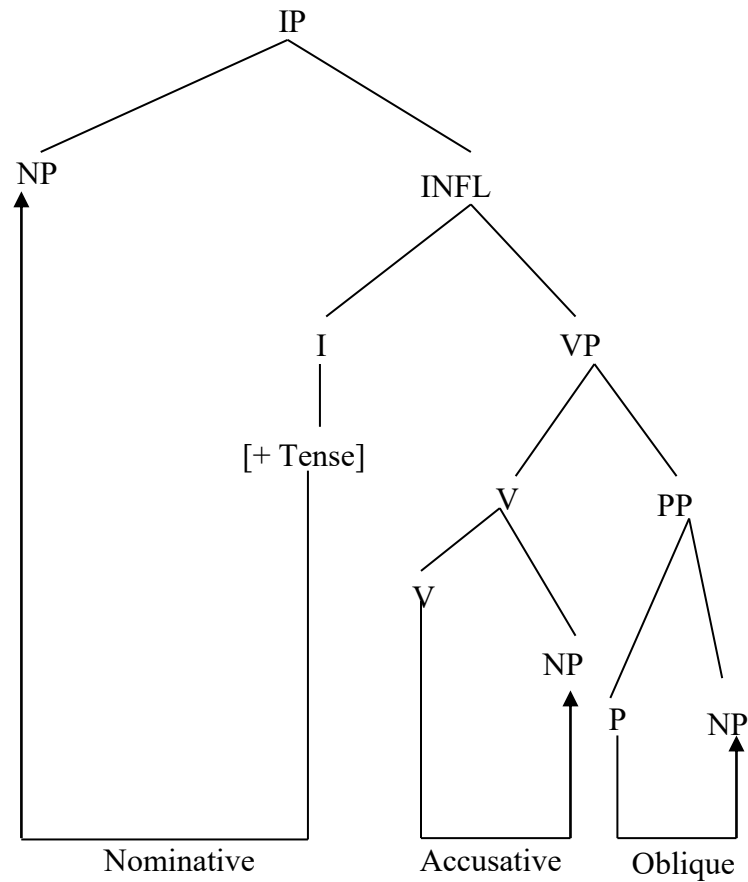
(Nasarawa, Jos, Gadabuke, Toto, Keffi, Gitata, Tamari, Karu, Doma), Kwara State (Jebba, New Bussa), and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja (Abuja, Diko, Suleja, Bwari, Kuje). Gbagyi Yamma is spoken in Maikunkele, Bosso, Paiko, and Gawun. According to Hyman and Magaji (1970), most Gbagyi speakers use a common dialect across their territory, except in a narrow belt along the southern Nupe border, where Maikunkele, Bosso, Paiko, and Gawun form a distinct linguistic group. These groups are differentiated by their greetings, with the larger community using “sanu” or “hanu” (adapted from Hausa), while the smaller group employs “nkwa.” This study focuses on the Kuta dialect, representing various minor regional variants within the larger Gbagyi community.

This paper explores structural case assignment in Gbagyi, specifically nominative and accusative cases. The goal is to provide a unified account of structural case assignment in Gbagyi canonical structures, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Chomsky (1981), Sells (1985), Radford (1997), Yusuf (1991), Ndimele (1992), and Yalwa (1997). The fundamental principles of Case assignment, as outlined in these studies, are:

- (1)
 - a. If INFL is [+Tense], nominative Case is assigned to [NP, IP].
 - b. A verb assigns accusative Case to [NP, VP].
 - c. A preposition assigns oblique Case to [NP, PP].
 - d. Nouns and adjectives (+N categories) do not assign Case.
 - e. Case is assigned under government, except for genitive Case.
 - f. Genitive Case is assigned in the structure [NP-X].
 - g. A Case assigner must be the head of a projection that immediately dominates the NP receiving Case.

Given these principles, the study examines syntactic configurations in Gbagyi to establish a cross-linguistic framework for Case assignment.

(2)



(Adopted from Yalwa, 1997)

In the above, the [+Tense] INFL governs and assigns nominative Case to the subject NP. The Verb (V) on the other hand, governs and assigns Accusative Case to its object NP, and the preposition (P) also governs and assigns oblique Case to its NP. If the above syntactic configuration is again observed, one can see that each case assigner assigns one and only one case to an NP and each NP receives one and only one-case, from a case assignor.

Case criterion

Following Chomsky and others, Ndimele (1992) gives a constraint on case assignment which is known *case criterion* as follows:

3) *i- Each NP bears one and only one case*

ii- Each case is assigned to one and only one NP

The case criterion stated above expresses that it is not possible for an NP to bear more than one Case from the same Case assigner and nor is it possible for a given case assigner to assign case to more than one NP (Ndimele 1992:25).

The work elicits data through primary and secondary methodologies. The primary procedure of data collection is based on interviews and personal observation. Similarly, some books on Gbagyi and GB theory have been referred to. As such, this work relies heavily on the native speakers' intuition.

The samples (sentences) are drawn from a population of men and women living in *Kuta* and *Minna* towns. These respondents have been chosen from those who are adult speakers of the Gbagyi language, ranging from 18 and above. However, the researcher pays a close attention on those who are 40-70 years, as it is from such speakers that the strong intuition of the language is more likely to be seen. Both men and women could be working full- or part-time, or unemployed. All participants are fluent in Gbagyi language with strong competence of English language or Hausa

The study uses the Case sub module of the GB in analyzing the data obtained. First, Gbagyi sentences are presented, and each sentence has an interlinear glossing. This is immediately followed by Case assignment conforming to the specifications proposed by Chomsky (1981). Some of the sentences are analyzed using tree diagrams or labeled brackets, depending on the quest at hand.

Case assignment within Gbagyi noun phrases

Case Theory deals with how Case is assigned to NPs, and in the Government and Binding Theory, Cases are assigned under government. According to Chomsky (1986b) "if a category has a Case to assign, it may assign it to an element that it governs". Case theory is an important theory in studying sentence structure. It helps us to recognize the grammaticality of a sentence. It also helps us determine what element or constituent to be used in a particular form. Four types of Cases are discussed below. They are: Nominative Case, Accusative Case, Oblique Case and Genitive Case.

Case assigners are V and P to which Chomsky (1986a and b) refers as [-N] categories. Without these Case assigners in any structure, the sentence is rendered ungrammatical. The relationship between the Case assignee and Case assigner is very important in determining the grammaticality of sentences. This is of course, one of the importance of Case theory, determining the well-formedness of structures in languages. This means that only tense in Gbagyi, Agr in several other language, verbs, prepositions and possessives can assign Case.

Nominative case assignment in Gbagyi

Nominative Case assignment in the Gbagyi language adheres to specific syntactic configurations, primarily governed by the principles of government outlined in Chomsky (1981), Haegeman (1994) and Yalwa (1997). In nominative Case assignment, the subject position NP is typically assigned nominative Case. This assignment is facilitated by the governor, which is identified as the head of the inflectional phrase (INFL), marked by [+Tense] in English. Similarly, Yusuf (1991) holds thus: *NP is Nominative if governed by AGR* as typically found in the Hausa language. (See also Tuller 1986, Yalwa 1989, 1995, 1997 and references cited there). Consider the following Gbagyi examples:

- (4). a- $[_{IP} [_{NP} \text{mi}] \quad [_{Infl} \text{la} \quad [_{VP} \text{pyice}]]]$.
 Pron Tns finish
 NOM
 “I have finished”
- b- $[_{IP} [_{NP} \text{dnai}] \quad [_{Infl} \text{la} \quad [_{VP} [_{NP} \text{shaknu wyi}]]]]]$.
 coward Tns pot steal
 NOM
 “The coward has stolen a pot”
- c- $[_{IP} [_{NP} \text{Zankwoci}] \quad [_{Infl} \text{ku} \quad [_{VP} [_{NP} \text{nyagyi} \quad \text{gyi}]]]]]$.
 man Tns food eat
 NOM
 “The man has eaten food”
- d- $[_{IP} [_{NP} \text{Zakwoi}] \quad [_{Infl} \text{ku} \quad [_{VP} \text{be o} \quad \text{bai}]]]$.
 Elderly-man Tns come Prep Pron
 NOM
 “The oldman has come with them”

In (4a), *mi* ‘I’ functions as the subject NP and is assigned the nominative Case. According to Case Theory, the assignment of nominative Case is governed by the head of the inflectional phrase (INFL) in the sentence. In this instance, *la* serves as the auxiliary verb indicating the past tense, acting as the head of the INFL phrase. The INFL, marked by [+Tense], m-commands the subject NP *mi*, fulfilling the condition of adjacency by ensuring that the nominative Case is assigned directly from the INFL head to the subject NP. The proximity of the INFL head and the subject NP facilitates proper Case assignment.

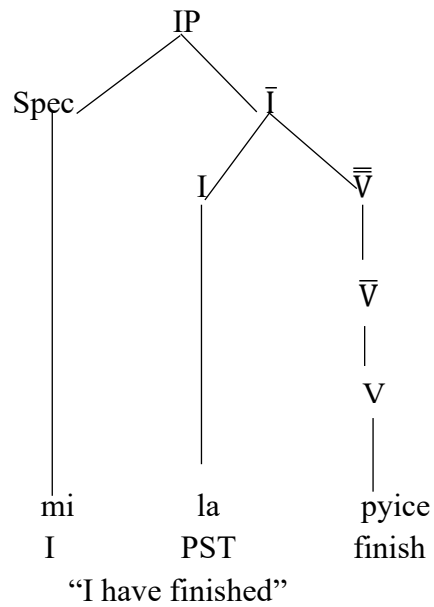
Similarly, in (4b), the subject NP *Dnai* ‘coward’ is assigned nominative Case by the head of the INFL phrase. Here, *la* functions as the past tense marker, governing the subject NP through the principle of adjacency. The close relationship between the INFL and the subject NP ensures that the nominative Case is correctly assigned.

Moving on to (4c), the subject NP *Zankwoci* ‘man’ is also assigned nominative Case by the head of the inflectional phrase. In this Case, *ku* is the auxiliary verb marking the past tense, which governs the subject NP through the condition of adjacency. The INFL head *ku* ensures that the nominative Case is assigned to *Zankwoci* by being in close proximity, adhering to established principles of Case Theory.

In (4d), the subject NP *Zakwoi* ‘elderly-man’ is governed by the INFL marker *ku* (past tense) in a similar manner. The INFL head *ku* provides the necessary Case assignment to *Zakwoi*, maintaining the principle of adjacency as the INFL and the subject NP exist in a direct relationship. This direct connection ensures proper Case assignment in accordance with Case Theory principle.

The structural relationship between the governor (INFL) and the subject NP can be depicted using a tree diagram:

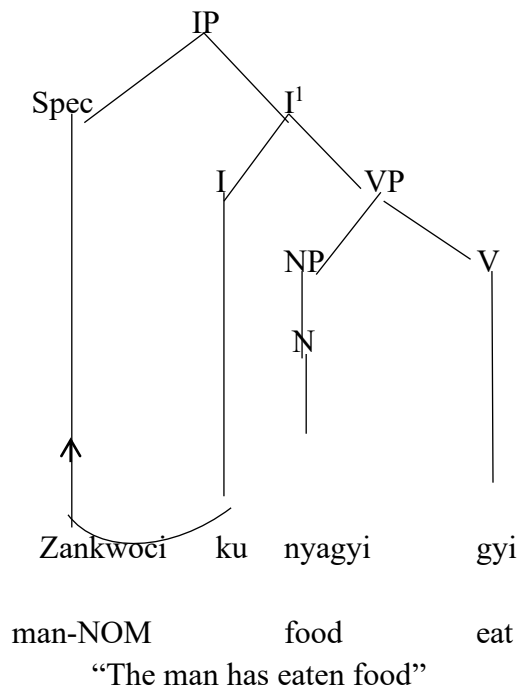
(5).



In the diagram above, the INFL is the head of the inflectional phrase (IP) and serves as the governor, assigning nominative Case to the subject NP *mi*.

Consider the structure represented in the following diagram:

(6).



Similarly, in the above diagram, *Zankwoci* ‘man’ is assigned nominative Case, facilitated by the tense INFL *ku*.

Accusative case assignment in Gbagyi

Accusative Case assignment in Gbagyi is primarily facilitated by verbs, which assigns accusative Case to their complements. According to Chomsky (1981), Yusuf (1991), Tuller (1986), Yalwa (1997), an NP is accusative if it is governed by a verb.

Consider the following examples to illustrate how accusative Case is assigned structurally in Gbagyi:

- (7). a- $\left[\begin{array}{c} \text{IP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \text{ E} \acute{\text{b}} \text{i} \\ \text{child} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Infl} \text{ l} \acute{\text{a}} \\ \text{INFL} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{VP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{ā} \text{b} \bar{\text{ā}} \\ \text{doors} \\ \text{ACC} \end{array} \right] \text{ gu} \text{y} \text{a} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{close (V)} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$
 “the child has closed the door”
- b- $\left[\begin{array}{c} \text{IP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \text{ w} \acute{\text{o}} \\ \text{s/he} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Infl} \text{ l} \acute{\text{a}} \\ \text{INFL} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{VP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{shn} \acute{\text{i}} \text{n} \text{w} \bar{\text{ā}} \\ \text{tree} \\ \text{ACC} \end{array} \right] \text{ gy} \bar{\text{i}} \text{ n} \acute{\text{a}} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{burn(V)} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$
 “S/He has burned the tree”
- c- $\left[\begin{array}{c} \text{IP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \text{ A} \text{z} \text{a} \\ \text{people} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{Infl} \text{ k} \acute{\text{u}} \\ \text{INFL} \end{array} \right] \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{NP} \left[\begin{array}{c} \text{ā} \text{sh} \acute{\text{a}} \text{k} \text{n} \bar{\text{u}} \\ \text{pot (pl)} \\ \text{ACC} \end{array} \right] \text{ ḡ} \text{ā} \text{ y} \text{a} \end{array} \right] \\ \text{break} \end{array} \right] \end{array} \right]$
 “The people have broken the pots”

In the provided examples (7a) through (7c), the assignment of accusative Case is governed by the transitive verbs, consistent with Chomsky’s Case Theory and the principles of government.

In sentence (7a), *Ebi lá [ābā gu ya]* ‘the child has closed the door’, the verb *gu* ‘to close’ is the transitive verb assigning accusative Case to its direct object *ābā* ‘the door’. Here, *ābā* is an NP receiving the accusative Case, marking it as the object of the action performed by the subject *Ebi* ‘the child’. The verb *gu* directly governs its complement *ābā*, satisfying the syntactic requirement for accusative Case assignment. The adjacency condition is

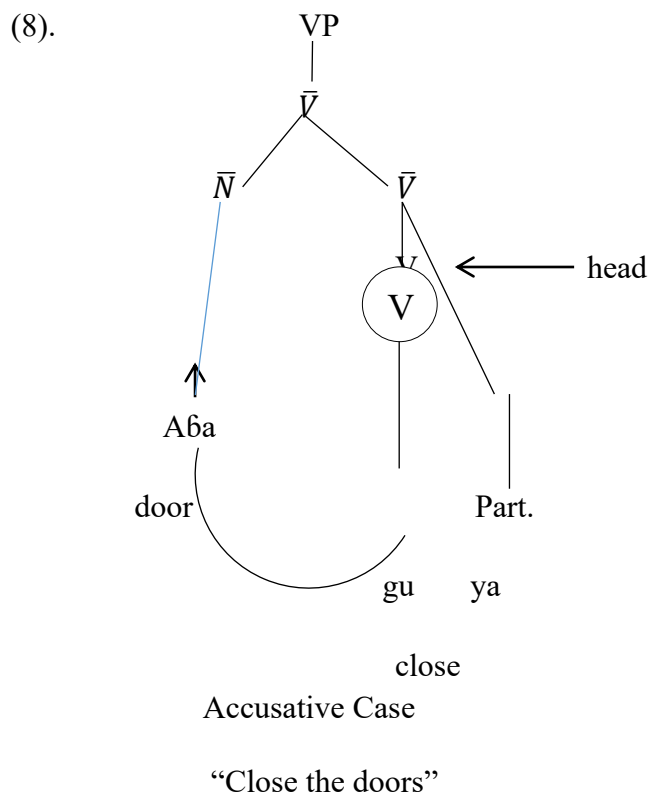
maintained, as the Case assigner (the verb) and the Case assignee are immediately adjacent to each other.

In sentence (7b), *wó lá [shnínwâ gyī ná]* ‘s/he has burned the tree’, the verb *gyíná* ‘to burn’ assigns accusative Case to *shnínwâ* (the tree). The verb *gyī ná* operates transitively, governing *shnínwâ* and marking it as the object of the action. This assignment aligns with the principles of government, where the verb governs its complement and assigns the appropriate Case. The adjacency condition is observed as the accusative Case assigner (the verb) and the Case receiver (the NP) are immediately adjacent to each other.

In sentence (7c), *Aza kú [āsháknû bā ya]* ‘the people have broken the pots’, the verb *bāya* ‘to break’ assigns accusative Case to *āsháknû* ‘the pots’. The verb *bā ya* is a transitive verb that governs its direct object *āsháknû*, which is marked with the accusative Case. This assignment reflects the syntactic relationship where the verb governs its complement, in line with Chomsky’s principles of government and Case Theory. The adjacency condition is also met here, with the Case assigner and Case assignee being syntactically close to each other.

Thus, the analysis demonstrates how transitive verbs in Gbagyi assign accusative Case to their complements, illustrating the application of Case Theory and government principles. The structural relationships are marked by direct adjacency between the Case assigner and the Case receiver under government relationship, consistent with the syntactic requirements outlined in Chomsky’s framework.

Consider the structure represented in the following diagram:



The tree in (8) above illustrates the structural relationship between the Case assigner and its assignee within the VP, where the verb *gu* ‘close’ functions as the head of the verb phrase and assigns Accusative Case to its complement NP *ya* ‘doors’. According to Case Theory (Chomsky, 1981), verbs assign structural Case to their internal arguments under government, and here, *gu* c-commands and properly governs *ya*, allowing it to receive Accusative Case. The imperative subject *aba* ‘you’ appears outside the VP, likely as a vocative rather than a syntactic subject receiving Nominative Case. This structure satisfies the Case Filter by ensuring that all overt NPs are Case-marked, thus yielding a grammatical imperative sentence in Fulfulde.

Conclusion

The paper investigated Structural Case assignment in the Gbagyi language, establishing that the distribution of Case marking in the language rests on structural grounds. The findings confirm that Case assignment in Gbagyi operates within the Government submodule of Government and Binding (GB) Theory. Specifically, both Nominative and Accusative Cases are assigned in accordance with Chomsky’s (1981) parametric principles: (a) if INFL

is [+Tense], Nominative Case is assigned to the subject NP in [Spec, IP]; and (b) a verb assigns Accusative Case to the object NP in [Comp, VP]. These observations demonstrate that Gbagyi aligns with the universal mechanisms of structural Case assignment.

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