

ARGUMENT MOVEMENT IN KÙCÉ: A MINIMALIST APPROACH

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Abstract

Argument movement is a scrambling operation whose properties have been elucidated and its ramifications explored over the last couple of years within the Generative Grammar model. Nevertheless, this scrambling operation has continued to interest scholars particularly because of many parametric variations that exist across languages. This paper therefore investigates Argument movement in Kùcé, a Niger-Congo language spoken in Bassa, Plateau State, North-Central Nigeria, with the aim of determining the properties of the movement operation as well as the triggers responsible for the movement. The study employed the qualitative research methodology, as data were sourced from competent native speakers of Kùcé with the use of a researcher-designed wordlist, Ibadan wordlist containing about five hundred words, and unstructured oral interview. The data were then subjected to descriptive content analysis. Using the Minimalist Program (MP) as a framework, the study found that Argument movement in raising

constructions is essentially to value the Extended Projection Principle (EPP) feature of the superficial subject against the strong EPP feature of subject agreement (AGRS) in a Spec-head configuration before spell out. The study also found that arguments in ergative constructions value their Case in relation to the verb prior to movement, which makes movement not for Case valuation but for satisfying the strong EPP feature of AGRS. In Verb Phrase-Internal-Subject Hypothesis, not only can the EPP features be valued, but also the Nominative Case features of the subject argument. However, strong EPP features essentially constitute the trigger responsible for movement as Nominative Case features are free riders which are valued along with the EPP features to ensure convergence.

Keywords: Argument, Case, EPP, Features, Kùcé, Movement.

Introduction

Arguments, generally, are nominal expressions. According to Baltin (2001, p. 226) Argument movement (A-movement hereafter) is the movement of a nominal element to what is known as an argument position, a position in which an element can be base generated and bear a crucial semantic role with respect to the main predicate of a clause. In other words, A-movement is a form of scrambling which involves movement of a nominal element from one argument position to another within a sentence. The term 'argument' is regarded as a nominal expression in the literature commonly known as a noun phrase (NP). A-movement within the framework of the Minimalist Program is driven by feature-valuation requirements as discussed in the main body of this paper. The features come in two flavors; weak and strong. These features include: Case features, EPP features and other structure relational need such as complement. For

instance, if accusative Case is a weak feature, then it can be checked at Logical Form (LF). If EPP is strong then overt movement is required to check it. Movement serves to eliminate strong features by allowing them to be checked for the structure to converge thereby ensuring Full Interpretation. Feature checking is therefore the elimination of uninterpretable (or unvalued) features, i.e. features that play no role in semantic interpretation. Only interpretable features (i.e. features that play roles in semantic interpretation) eventually get to the LF interface level. Kùcé is a language spoken by one of the minority ethnic groups of Nigeria. Crozier and Blench (1992, p. 3) report that the language is spoken by about 50,000 people in at least 17 villages in Bassa L.G.A, Plateau State, northwest of Jos, Central Nigeria. The common name for the Kùcé language is Rukuba, a Hausa term said to mean 'people of the rocks'. The speakers of this language call themselves Bache and their territory Kiche. The Kiche area is bordered by the Piti to the West, Cara to the North, Izere and Berom to the East and Irigwe to the South. The language is tonal and falls within the Plateau group of the Eastern branch of the South-Central Niger-Congo group (Wilson, 1996, p. 4). Wilson proposes further that languages in the same

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subfamily as Kùcé which share a closer genetic relationship with it are those in the Ninzam group of languages such as Mada, Gwantu, Nindem, Kaningkon and Kanufi (Wilson, 1996, p. 5).

This paper adds to the growing body of literature in the study of movement operation in African languages. It attempts to explain the syntactic operation of A-movement in Kùcé. Its contribution to syntactic theory reinforces some of the theoretical assumptions by providing empirical facts from the Kùcé language. The paper also contributes to the ideas in the Minimalist Program that A-movement in overt syntax is feature-driven based on the facts of Kùcé that when the unvalued features check correctly and are eliminated, the derivation satisfies the syntactic theory constraint known as Full Interpretation (FI), which specifies that a structure must contain only those elements which contribute directly to its interpretation at LF.

Literature Review

A-movement is a form of scrambling that displaces an argument (or nominal expression) from one argument position to another within the same clause. Argument position implies subject or object position. Typical examples of A-movement in the literature include object-to-subject raising in passive structures, subject-to-subject raising in raising constructions, object-to-subject raising in ergative structures and subject-to-subject raising in verb phrase-internal-subject hypothesis.

There are few works on A-movement in Nigerian languages within the broad framework of generative grammar. For instance, Amaechi (2019, p. 6) studied the operation of subject-object reversal in Igbo with a subclass of Inherent Complement Verbs (ICVs) such as *tù'be'*. She argued that the reversal involves A-movement, as illustrated in the example below:

- (1) (a) $\bar{Q} \quad t\bar{Q} \quad -r\bar{Q} \quad \bar{Q}\bar{Q}$
3SG.NOMICV-SFX fear
'S/he was afraid'
(b) $\bar{Q}\bar{Q} \quad t\bar{Q} \quad -r\bar{Q} \quad ya$
Fear ICV-SFX 3SG.ACC
'S/he was afraid'

Amaechi's analysis suggests that finding pronominal arguments with identical thematic roles in two different surface positions induces A-movement analysis in that the movement of the pronominal

argument is to a specifier position of the clause. This is consistent with the Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH) of Baker (1988, p. 46). However, Amaechi's analysis is based on the principles and parameters approach, as nothing is said about minimalist assumptions in her analysis.

Yusuf (1997, pp. 84-85) examined the ergative structures of Hausa, arguing that the object of a transitive verb moves to the specifier position of the ergative sentence. The point is illustrated in the examples below:

- 2 (a) *abinci yaa dafu*
Food AGR-be cook
'Food is ready'
(b) *lemu yaa sayu*
orange AGR-be sell well
'Oranges sell real good'
(c) *dan shugaba kasa yaa rasu*
son-of leader land 3SG-be totally lost
'The president's son has died'

The examples in (2a-c) are ergative structures assumed to be derived from the underlying structures in (3a-c) via movement of the arguments *abinci*, *lemu*, and *dan shugaba kasa*

- 3 (a) [ϵ] *yaa dafu abinci*
(b) [ϵ] *yaa sayu lemu*
(c) [ϵ] *yaa rasu dan shugaba kasa*

From the underlying structures in (3a-c) the assumption is that the verbs, similar to the passive verbs will not assign Case to their internal arguments. In order to ensure that the sentences are well formed the internal arguments move to occupy the empty specifier position where they are assigned nominative Case. So far, however, there has been no application of minimalist principles and assumptions in Yusuf's analysis.

Jayeola (2016, p. 147), in his study of the phenomenon of double object constructions in Zarma maintained that it is permissible for either the indirect object or direct object to scramble across the verb. This scrambling effect entails movement of an argument. This is shown in the examples below:

- 4 (a) *à nà Akeem nó mótò*
3SG PERF Akeem give motor car
'S/he has given Akeem a motor car'
(b) *à nà mótò nó Akeem*
3SG PERF motor car give Akeem
'S/he has given Akeem a motor car'

Jayeola's analysis indicates that either of the internal arguments of a ditransitive verb such as 'give' can move to the outer specifier position of the light verb to check its accusative Case feature under the Split VP hypothesis. He argued further that the movement of either of the arguments out of the c-commanding position of the verb is permissible due to the fact that no previous movement has occurred.

Apart from Jayeola (2016, p. 147), there is a general lack of research in A-movement of African languages based on the Minimalist Program. This study, therefore attempts to describe the movement of arguments in Kùcè via the lens of the Minimalist Program.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Minimalist Program (MP, hereafter) outlined in Chomsky (1995, 2001) among other scholars. MP continues the trend in Universal Grammar (UG) which started in the late 1950s with the ultimate goal of shifting from construction-specific rules that describe syntactic structures to more general principles, which interact to explain syntactic phenomena. The MP presents the syntax of a language as a computational system that makes use of a limited set of descriptive tools and principles to provide adequate explanation of syntactic structures. Essentially the MP is a departure from the Government and Binding (GB) Theory, dispensing with the abstract levels D-structure and S-structure, under the assumption that these abstract levels are redundant and unnatural. Scholars believe they are the most remote from 'experience' in that they are furthest removed from a sentence's observable properties – its sound and meaning. Within the MP, therefore, the Phonetic Form (PF) and the Logical Form (LF) of GB are the only levels conceptually necessary as they simply mirror the fact that sentences are pairings of sound and meaning. The PF and LF are read by the articulatory-perceptual (A-P) and the conceptual-intentional (C-I) systems respectively.

There are basically two operations in the MP, and they are operation *select* and operation *merge*. These operations work one after the other. Operation *select* picks lexical items (heads and their complements) from the lexicon while *merge* unites these lexical items in a pair-wise fashion. A fundamental aspect of

Operation *merge* which is germane to our discussion in this study is internal merge which handles lexical items that have entered the derivation and are undergoing scrambling (or movement). The scrambling operation is to help in the understanding of how the linguistic system works at a certain level of abstraction. The reason for movement in our analysis is to check features possessed by a probe (specifically the Inflectional head tense or agreement) in a derivation, while the moving category serves as the goal. These features include, Case features, EPP features etc. Fakihi (2006, p. 39) argued that the Inflectional categories T(ense) and Agr(eement) perform dual functions which include checking features of the verb that move to them and checking properties of the noun phrase that raise to their specifier position. This means that T and Agr do not have only the function of checking V-features of the verb, but also, they function by checking the NP-features of the argument that raise to their specifier position.

Methodology

The corpus for the study consist of two sets of data. The first set comprises Ibadan word list, containing about five hundred expressions ranging from words to clauses of different types. About ten native speakers of Kùcè aged between fifty and sixty-five years were interviewed lasting about eight hours in length. The interview was audio-recorded with the consent of the participants. The second set comprises a researcher-designed wordlist containing Kùcè proper nouns, common nouns, pronouns and expressions instantiating movement of nominal expressions. On the basis of the wordlist, utterances from spontaneous speech of five native speakers of Kùcè were recorded in an interview carried out in the King's Palace in Bassa L.G.A of Plateau State. The data in both sets were transcribed, and the transcripts were categorized. Only utterances instantiating movement of nominal expressions, were utilized in the study. To provide detailed syntactic structures of the data, clauses illustrating A-movement are presented as examples in this study in a three-line format. The first line represents the clause in the form it was recorded; the second line provides the interlinear glossing and the third line, the English translation of the clauses. In some cases, the use of tree diagrams as phrase markers are used to represent syntactic structures.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Verb Phrase-Internal-Subject Hypothesis

The Verb Phrase-Internal-Subject Hypothesis (VPISH, hereafter) is a fundamental which assumes that subject arguments originate internally within the verb phrase as theta-marked arguments of the verb. The claim is that external theta roles cannot be assigned under the head-complement relation which is the same domain for theta-marking internal arguments. This follows that all theta-roles associated with a verb are assigned within the maximal projection of the verb. The implication is that spec-IP is uniformly assumed to be a non-theta position since the theta-role requirement of the moved subject has already been satisfied VP-internally, as VP exclusively contains all thematic material. To satisfy features such as Case and EPP, VPISH further assumes that the subject, within its base position is moved to the specifier of IP. The general assumption is that the movement of the subject is triggered by the need to value or check syntactic objects with uninterpretable (or unvalued) features via *agree* between a *probe* and a *goal*. Consider the examples below:

- 5 (a) Kíkú ā tí kūsān
Kíkú 3SG.FUT do play
'Kíkú will play'
- (b) Àshóm â tí àghók
Àshóm 3SG.PST do dance
'Àshóm danced'
- (c) Àntú á -tá lú ikpú
Àntú 3SG-HAB cook food
'Àntú does cook food'
- (d) àtākàrdá á shībū ùmátù ngí
book 3SG be in car the
'The book was in the car'
- (e) Àsáīy à shī-kì tīsī kūsān
Àsáīy 3SG.PRSNT be-PROG do play
'Àsáīy is playing'

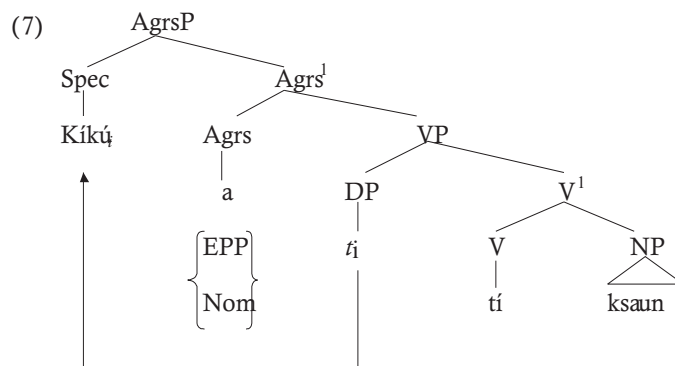
The data in (5a-e) according to VPISH is considered to have derived in the manner (6a-e) respectively:

- 6 (a) [_{VP} Kíkú [_V ¹tí kūsān]]
(b) [_{VP} Àshóm [_V ¹tí àghók]]
(c) [_{VP} Àntú [_V ¹lú ikpú]]
(d) [_{VP} àtākàrdá [_V ¹shībū ùmátù ngí]]
(e) [_{VP} Àsáīy [_V ¹tīsī kūsān]]

The subjects *Kíkú*, *Àshóm*, *Àntú*, *àtākàrdá* and *Àsáīy* are regarded as the base-generated VP subjects realized

within the VP and are assigned their θ -roles from the main verbs *tí*, *tí*, *lú*, *shī* and *tīsī*, respectively.

The inflectional category (T)ense in Kùcé is realized on the subject agreement pronoun bearing different tones. Present tense is indicated by a low-tone (ˊ) on the subject agreement marker, while future tense is indicated by a mid-tone (ˋ) realized on the subject agreement marker. Immediate past and indefinite past tenses are realized as falling (ˋ) and high (ˊ) tones respectively on the subject agreement pronoun. This agreement head carries strong EPP and nominative Case features which force the subject argument with matching features to move to its specifier position at the left periphery for the purpose of feature checking. (6a) for instance will have the structure below:



The strong EPP feature of the Agrs head, *ā*, serving as a probe triggers overt movement of the subject argument *Kíkú*, the goal. The idea is that this strong EPP feature must be checked off before spell out as it cannot be tolerated at PF. This implies that the subject argument gets to the specifier position of AgrsP via movement given that Agrs in Kùcé has a strong EPP feature which attracts the subject argument with matching features that must be appropriately checked in a spec-head configuration before spell-out. In this position (i.e. spec-head) not only can the strong EPP feature of Agrs be checked, but also can the nominative Case feature of the subject argument. However, we argue that Case checking is essentially not the reason why movement took place at this point in the derivation, as Case features in Kùcé are not strong in that they are features on thematic elements. We therefore align the position of this study with Cook and Newson (2008) who argued that 'a feature which is checked under a movement motivated by the checking requirements of another feature is known as a free rider: they get a free ride on the moving element to their own checking positions'. In this connection, nominative Case

features in Kùcé are free riders which get checked along with the EPP features.

Raising Constructions

Raising construction in Kùcé involves movement of a target nominal expression out of subject position of a subordinate clause into the subject position of the matrix clause. This implies that raising constructions instantiate subject-to-subject movement. The element that sanctions this movement operation is the raising predicate *ítísí* 'seem/appear'. Aligning the argument of this study with Taiwo and Angitso (2013, p. 247), 'raising can be motivated semantically by scope because any argument position in the matrix clause has scope over those in the embedded clause'. It is important to note that the raising verb is not semantically related to the argument involved in the movement. This therefore implies that the verb does not assign a thematic role to the argument. The implication is that the predicate *ítísí* has no subject of its own but allows the subject of the subordinate clause to move to its own subject position, thus becoming the superficial subject of the matrix clause. The parametric variation is that the scope position, which is the subject position of the raising predicate in Kùcé is left empty due to the fact that expletives such as 'it' and 'there' are not attested in the language. Consider the examples below:

- 8 (a) [_{TP} *ítísí* [_{TP} *Àtilèk* à *mūlōk* *Àmary*]]
[_{TP} look like [_{TP} *Àtilèk* 3SG.PRSNT like Mary]]
'It appears *Àtilèk* likes Mary'
(b) [_{TP} *Àtilèk*, *ítísí* [_{TP} *t_i* à *mūlōk* *Àmary*]]
[_{TP} *Àtilèk*, look like [_{TP} *t_i* 3SG.PRSNT like Mary]]
'*Àtilèk* seems to like Mary'
- 9 (a) [_{TP} *ítísí* [_{TP} *Àshóm* á -*tá* *tèt* à *bùrō*]]
[_{TP} look like [_{TP} *Àshóm* 3SG-do tell lie]]
'It seems *Àshóm* has been lying]
(b) [_{TP} *Àshóm*, *ítísí* [_{TP} *t_i* á -*tá* *tèt* à *bùrō*]]
[_{TP} *Àshóm*, look like [_{TP} *t_i* 3SG-do tell lie]]
'*Àshóm* seems to have been lying'
- 10 (a) [_{TP} *ítísí* [_{TP} *bà* *mūlō-ú*]]

[_{TP} look like [_{TP} 3PL.PRSNT like-3SG]]

'It appears they like her'

(b) [_{TP} *bà*, *ítísí* [_{TP} *t_i* *bà* *mūlō-ú*]]

[_{TP} 3SG_i look like [_{TP} *t_i* 3SG.PRSNT like-3SG]]

'They appear to like her'

11 (a) [_{TP} *ítísí* [_{TP} *Àjón* à *shí* à *bāyīwāk* à *gágái*]]

[_{TP} look like [_{TP} John 3SG.PRSNT be student good]]

'It seems like John is a good student'

(b) [_{TP} *Àjón*, *ítísí* [_{TP} *t_i* à *shí* à *bāyīwāk* à *gágái*]]

[_{TP} John, look like [_{TP} *t_i* 3SG.PRSNT be student good]]

'John seems to be a good student'

12 (a) [_{TP} *ítísí* [_{TP} *ìcìkàtí* *ì shí*]]

[_{TP} look like [_{TP} moving front 3SG.PRSNT be]]

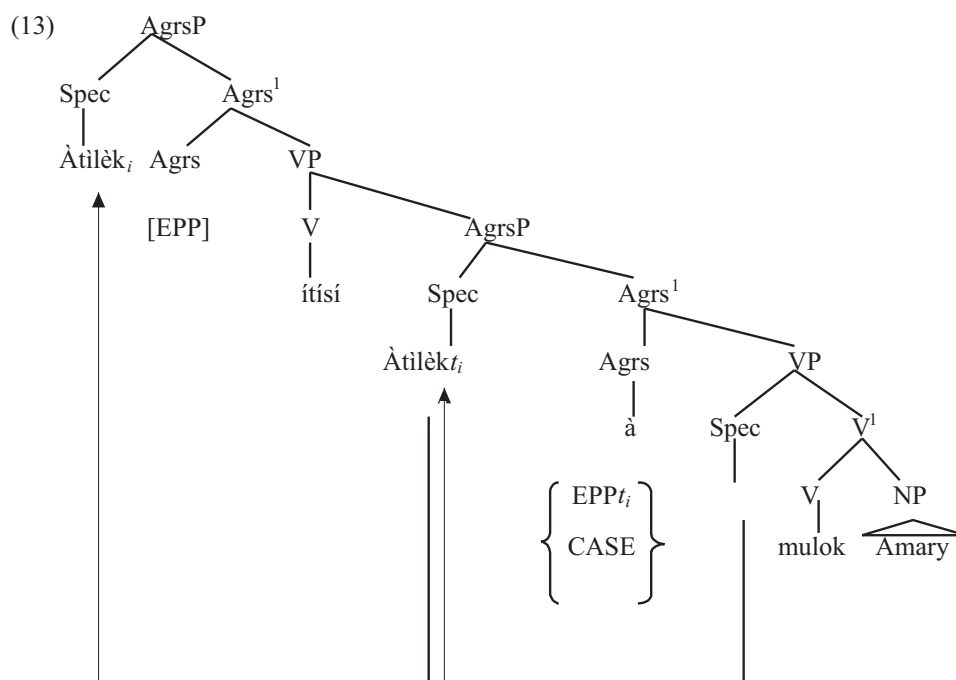
'It appears like there is progress'

(b) [_{TP} *ìcìkàtí*, *ítísí* [_{TP} *t_i* *ì shí*]]

[_{TP} moving front_i look like [_{TP} *t_i* 3SG.PRSNT be]]

'Progress appears to be made'

The data in (8a-12a) show that raising constructions in Kùcé do not carry an expletive subject at the underlying level before movement. This suggests that the subject position is empty- hence it is a null subject construction. At this underlying level, the nominative Case feature of the thematic argument is already checked in the embedded clause. The data in (8b-12b) show that A-movement in raising constructions is from a finite embedded clause to a finite matrix clause. This is because the subject agreement marker/pronoun is present in all clauses. This argument gains support from Heusing (1999, pp. 83-84) who states that 'The category I(nflection) is taken as being responsible for the finiteness of a sentence due to the fact that it is said to carry the features aspect, tense, agreement and negation. Whenever these features are absent the resulting sentence is nonfinite; whenever at least one feature is present the result is a finite sentence'. The embedded clauses in our data are therefore finite due to the presence of the agreement pronoun. The structure of (8b) for instance will have the configuration depicted below:



The configuration in (13) shows that the thematic subject of the subordinate clause moves from its underlying position as subject of VP to the subject position of the embedded clause where its nominative Case feature is valued based on VPISH. Furthermore, the EPP feature carried by the null Agrs in the matrix clause requires it to have a superficial subject which further triggers movement of the closest nominal element c-commanded by the null Agrs, in this instance, *Àtìlèk* from being the thematic subject of *mūlōk*, to becoming the superficial subject of the null Agrs in the matrix clause. Each movement of the argument leaves behind a trace *t* (a phonologically null version of the moved element) at the extraction site. The point being emphasized here is that A-movement in raising constructions is essentially to meet the requirement of EPP and semantically for scope. The analysis also indicates that the verb *ítísí* is a one-place predicate whose only argument is its finite AgrsP complement, where it is assigned a θ -role. This justifies the position of this study that the VP headed by *ítísí* has no thematic subject. The implication is that the raising verb *ítísí* does not θ -mark the argument *Àtìlèk* because *Àtìlèk* has already been θ -marked by the lexical verb *mūlōk*, thus satisfying the θ -criterion which rules out the possibility of any argument being θ -marked by more than one predicate. The configuration in (13) further reveals that Case features are not primarily responsible for A-movement – hence whether or not

they are checked does not affect movement taking place.

Ergative Constructions

According to Ndimele (1992, p. 107) 'An ergative structure is one in which there is a formal parallel between the object of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive one'. Similarly, Radford (1988, p. 446) affirmed that an ergative (or unaccusative) construction is 'an intransitive clause which has a transitive counterpart in which the transitive object corresponds to the ergative subject. In the literature, the subject of the intransitive verb is referred to as ergative while the subject of the transitive verb is called absolutive.

Ergative structures in Kùcé are productive. This is because structures in which there is a parallel between the object of a transitive verb and the subject of an intransitive one are attested. Consider the examples below:

- (14) a. *bā ṇára ì glás*
3PL.FUT break the glass
'They will break the glass'
b. *ì glás ī ṇára*
the glass 3SG.FUT break
'The glass will break'
- (15) a. *â zírí kítàì bì ìgúl-ì*
3SG.PST roll down stone from hill-the
'He rolled the stone down the hill'

- b. *kitài kî zírí bì ìgúl-ì*
stone 3SG.PST roll down from hill-the
'The stone rolled down the hill'

The examples in (14a and 15a) are transitive structures in that the arguments *ì glás* 'the glass' and *kitài* 'stone' are in their underlying positions where they are assigned a role by the verbs *ḡárá* 'break' and *zírí* 'roll down'. Unlike the transitive structures, the ergative structures in (14b and 15b) have non-thematic subjects in that they are not theta-marked arguments of the verbs. The application of the Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis (UTAH) entails that the structures in (14a-b) and (15a-b) have the underlying structures in (16a-b) and (17a-b) respectively:

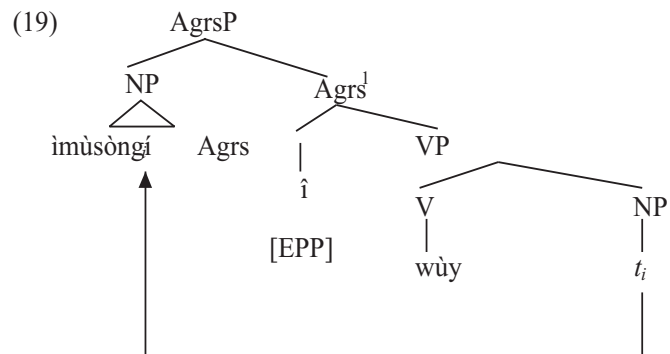
- (16) a. [_{AgrSP} Agrs *bā* [_{VP} *ḡárá* *ì glás*]]
b. [_{AgrSP} *ì glás*_i Agr *ī* [_{VP} *ḡárá* *t_i*]]
(17) a. [_{AgrSP} Agrs *â* [_{VP} *zírí* *kitài* *bì ìgúl-ì*]]
b. [_{AgrSP} *kitài*_i Agr *kî* [_{VP} *zírí* *t_i* *bì ìgúl-ì*]]

The structures in (16b and 17b) are analyzed via A-movement from a thematic position to a non-thematic (or superficial) position, where the latter is a specifier position of the functional head Agrs. The application of UTAH to the structures provides evidence that the arguments with identical Θ -roles in two different surface positions triggers an A-movement analysis – movement of the relevant nominal elements to a specifier position of a functional head. The data in (16 and 17) further indicate that the uninterpretable Case feature of the subjects has been valued or checked off by the interpretable Case feature of the ergative verbs via agreement prior to movement. Therefore, the reason for movement of the arguments *ì glás* and *kitài* is essentially to satisfy the EPP feature of Agrs. Further examples in (18) justify the point:

- (18) a. [*ìmùsò ngí*]_i *î* wùy_{t_i}
meeting_i the_i 3SG.PERF start *t_i*
'The meeting has commenced'
b. [*ìdū*]_i *í* wùy_{t_i}
fight_i 3SG.PST start *t_i*
'A fight occurred'
c. [*ũmbà*]_i *ù tī cǎp* *t_i*
time_i 3SG.PRSNT remain small *t_i*
'Little time remains'

To meet the requirement of the EPP, the Agrs head *î* in (18a) for instance will attract the closest c-

commanding nominal element to move to spec-AgrSP in conformity with the Attract Closest Principle. Since the only argument is the NP *ìmùsò ngí* 'the meeting', Agrs attracts this NP to move to spec-AgrSP in the manner illustrated below:



Since Agrs has a strong EPP feature requiring it to project a specifier, the NP *ìmùsò ngí* 'the meeting' moves to the specifier position of AgrSP, leaving behind a trace *t* at its extraction site. The EPP requirement of the strong Agrs makes it possible for the Agrs to value its unvalued agreement features of number and concordial marker with the nearest nominal element serving as a goal. The claim, therefore, is that the strong Agrs probes downwards and attracts the nearest c-commanding argument thereby triggering the argument to move to the specifier position of AgrSP.

Conclusion

This study has examined the application of A-movement to different syntactic environments in Kùcè from a Minimalist perspective. The syntactic environments identified include the Verb Phrase-Internal-Subject Hypothesis (VPISH), raising constructions and ergative constructions. Within VPISH, the subject argument within the VP gets to the specifier position of AgrSP via movement given that Agrs in Kùcè has a strong EPP feature which attracts the subject argument. The EPP feature is appropriately checked off in a spec-head configuration before spell out. Nominative Case features are free riders which get checked off along with the strong EPP feature. In raising constructions, movement of the argument is from subject position of an embedded clause to subject position of the matrix clause where its scope and EPP features are valued. As a matter of fact, the strong EPP feature of Agrs is essentially responsible for overt movement of the argument before the point of spell out. In ergative structures, movement of the argument

to the superficial subject position is triggered by the strong EPP feature of Agrs. Case features are not a trigger for the overt movement in this context as the uninterpretable Case feature of the subject argument has already been valued or checked off by the interpretable Case feature of the ergative verb.

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