

23.

Oblique and Genitive Constructions in Gbagyi: A Case Theory Perspective

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Abstract

This study examines Oblique Case and Genitive Case assignment in Gbagyi within the framework of Government and Binding Theory, particularly Case Theory as proposed by Chomsky (1981). Oblique Case in Gbagyi is assigned to noun phrases functioning as objects of prepositions, adhering to the adjacency condition and principles of government. Data from the language demonstrate that the preposition *o* governs the noun phrase, assigning it the Oblique Case. This pattern aligns with theoretical assumptions that prepositions act as Case assigners within their local domain. Similarly, Genitive Case in Gbagyi follows a prenominal genitive pattern, where the possessor precedes the possessed noun. The study categorises genitive constructions into possessive, partitive, subjective, objective, and descriptive types. The analysis reveals that Gbagyi employs abstract genitive marking rather than an overt genitive particle, with word order serving as the primary indicator of possession. This study contributes to the understanding of Case assignment in Gbagyi, highlighting its syntactic structures and the theoretical implications for cross-linguistic studies. The findings reinforce the universality of Government and Binding Theory in accounting for Case assignment, demonstrating that while Gbagyi exhibits language-specific structural variations, it adheres to general syntactic principles. The study concludes that both Oblique and Genitive Cases in Gbagyi follow well-defined syntactic rules, confirming the preposition as a Case assigner and the possessor as governing the possessed noun.

Keywords: Gbagyi, Case, Oblique, Genitive, GB.

Introduction

Gbagyi, a Niger-Congo language spoken primarily in northcentral Nigeria, exhibits rich syntactic features, particularly in its Case assignment system. The study of Oblique and Genitive Cases in Gbagyi provides insights into the syntactic structures governing noun phrases. Oblique Case, assigned to noun phrases governed by prepositions, plays a crucial role in establishing spatial and directional relations. As Tuller (1986) and Yalwa (1997) note, Oblique Case is structurally conditioned by prepositional governance, aligning with Case Theory principles. The adjacency condition, which requires that the Case assigner and the Case assignee be in close syntactic proximity, is consistently observed in Gbagyi constructions.

Genitive Case in Gbagyi follows a prenominal structure, where the possessor noun phrase precedes the possessed noun. This pattern, common in various languages such as Japanese and Turkish, reflects an underlying syntactic principle where possession is encoded structurally rather than morphologically. Following Haegeman (1994) and Yalwa (1997), this study identifies multiple subtypes of Genitive Case in Gbagyi, including possessive, partitive, subjective, objective, and descriptive genitives. These categories highlight the diverse ways in which possession and association are syntactically encoded in the language.

The study applies Government and Binding Theory, particularly Case Theory, to analyse the syntactic structure of Oblique and Genitive Cases in Gbagyi. By examining native speaker data, the research seeks to determine the rules governing Case assignment and how they align with theoretical predictions. The findings contribute to the broader understanding of Case marking systems in Niger-Congo languages, shedding light on the syntactic principles that underpin Case assignment in Gbagyi.

Literature Review

Several studies have explored Case Theory and its application to various languages. The following works are particularly relevant to this study,

Chomsky (1981) introduced Case Theory within the Government and Binding framework, outlining structural conditions for Case assignment, including the adjacency condition and government principle.

Pesetsky (1982) examines Case assignment mechanisms using cross-linguistic data to develop a theoretical model. This study on Gbagyi aligns with his view that nominative and accusative cases are assigned by INFL (Tense) and the verb, respectively, while also supporting Yalwa (1997), who notes that nominative case can be assigned by Agreement (Agr) in some languages. Pesetsky's analysis of genitive negation informs the treatment of genitive and oblique cases in Gbagyi, strengthening the understanding of noun phrase case marking. This research suggests that Gbagyi follows a case assignment pattern similar to English while differing from languages like Russian, which rely on Agr for nominative case marking.

Arokoyo (2004) explores Case Theory and Focus, emphasising Case as a key property of Noun Phrases in Government and Binding Theory. She traces the term "Case" to Greek and Roman grammar, outlining six universal cases and illustrating them with examples from Turkish. Noting that Owé, like Gbagyi, marks Case structurally, she aligns with Chomsky (1981) on Case assignment under government. This study on Gbagyi supports her view, analysing how Nominative, Accusative, Genitive, and Oblique Cases are assigned by INFL, verbs, and prepositions.

Fakih (2015) analyses structural Case assignment in Standard Arabic, focusing on nominative and accusative Cases in different sentence structures. He challenges the traditional Government and Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981) by arguing that TP and VP are not phases in Arabic and that the phase head C of CP, rather than T, assigns structural Case. While his study does not address inherent Cases, it provides insights applicable to Gbagyi, particularly in structural Case assignment.

Kosta and Zimmerling (2022) explore Case assignment across languages within generative grammar, distinguishing between morphological Case (m-Case) and syntactic Case (s-Case). Their study on Slavonic languages, covering prepositions, clitics, and syncretic forms, is relevant to Gbagyi, which exhibits structural and inherent Cases without extensive morphological inflection. Their framework aids in analysing Case assignment in Gbagyi noun phrases.

Ejeba (2020) examines transitivity and Case assignment in Ígálá, addressing both structural and inherent Cases. His discussion on transitivity aligns with studies on Gbagyi, where nominative, accusative, genitive, dative, and locative Cases are assigned through both morphological and syntactic means.

Methodology

This study employs a descriptive and theoretical approach, analysing Gbagyi sentence structures to determine Case assignment rules. Data were elicited from native speakers using structured interviews and translation exercises. Sentences were recorded, transcribed, and analysed within the framework of Government and Binding Theory. The study focused on identifying patterns of Case assignment in natural speech, ensuring that theoretical observations were grounded in empirical evidence.

Syntactic labellings were used to illustrate the hierarchical structure of noun phrases and the role of prepositions in governing Oblique Case. The analysis of Genitive Case relied on data categorisation, identifying patterns of

possessive relationships. The findings were compared with existing literature on Case Theory to assess theoretical alignment.

Oblique Case Assignment in Gbagyi: -

In Gbagyi, the assignment of Oblique Case is a notable aspect of its syntactic structure. Oblique Case is typically assigned to noun phrases (NPs) that function as objects of prepositions.

Following Munkaila, (1985), Tuller (1986), Yusuf (1991), Yalwa (1997), ‘NP is oblique if governed by a Preposition.’ Oblique Case is assigned when a noun phrase serves as the object of a preposition. For instance, in constructions like “on the table” or “with the book,” the noun phrases “the table” and “the book” receive Oblique Case due to their role as objects of prepositions (“on” and “with,” respectively). Consider the following examples in Gbagyi language:

- (1).
- | | | | | | | |
|----|--------------------------------|--------|------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------|
| a- | [_{IP} Azo | dna | lo | [_{PP} [_P o | shaknu]]]. | |
| | Beans | | place | Tns | Prep pot | |
| | | | | | Oblique | |
| | “Beans are in the pot” | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| b- | [_{IP} Goro | fyi | lo | [_{PP} [_P o | okni]]]. | |
| | Kolanut | put-in | | Tns | Prep ground | |
| | | | | | Oblique | |
| | “The kolanut is on the ground” | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| c- | [_{IP} Owa | ya shi | | lo | [_{PP} [_P o | kni]]]. |
| | Snake | | in-care of | Tns | Prep container | |
| | | | | | Oblique | |
| | “The snake is in a container” | | | | | |

In examples (1a) through (1c), the preposition *o* functions as a Case-assigning element, specifically assigning Oblique Case to its complements. This analysis can be contextualised within Chomsky’s (1981) framework, particularly regarding the principles of Case Theory and Government.

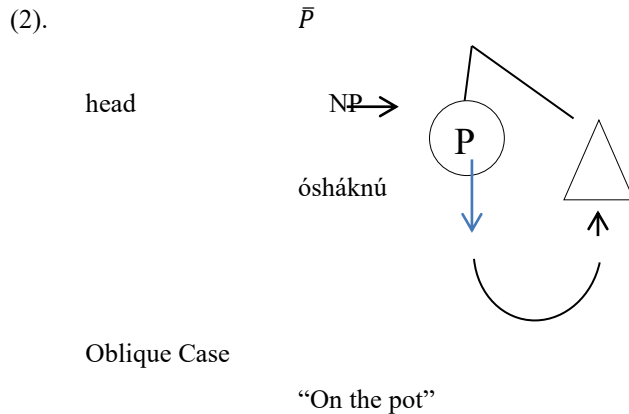
In sentence (1a), *Azodna lo [o shaknu]* ‘beans are in the pot’, the preposition *o* governs the noun *shaknu* ‘pot’, assigning it the Oblique Case. According to Chomsky (1981), this reflects the preposition’s role in establishing a locative relationship, with *shaknu* serving as a complement to the preposition. The NP *shaknu* is clearly an Oblique Case NP, fulfilling the syntactic requirement of specifying the location of the action denoted by the verb *dna* ‘to place’. The adjacency condition is satisfied as the preposition *o* directly precedes its complement, adhering to the requirement that the Case assigner and the Case assignee are in immediate proximity to each other.

In sentence (1b), *Gorofyi lo [o okni]* ‘the kolanut is on the ground’, the preposition *o* assigns Oblique Case to *okni* ‘ground’. The NP *okni* functions as the prepositional complement of *o*, demonstrating the spatial relationship of the subject *Goro* ‘kolanut’ to its location. Here, the government principle and adjacency condition is again observed, as *o* is immediately adjacent to its complement *okni*, aligning with Chomsky’s notion that the

Case assigner and the Case assignee must be in a close syntactic relationship to maintain proper Case assignment.

In sentence (1c), *Owayashi lo [o kni]* ‘the snake is in a container’, the preposition *o* assigns Oblique Case to *kni* ‘container’. The preposition governs *kni*, marking it as the location where the state or action of the subject *Owa* ‘snake’ is realised. Consistent with the previous examples, the adjacency condition is met, with *o* and *kni* being directly linked. This structure underscores the role of the Preposition *o* as a Case assigner that specifies the spatial context of the sentence.

Consider the tree diagram below illustrating how the Oblique Case is assigned:



The diagram above shows how the Case assigner P assigns Oblique Case to its assignee; i.e the object NP. It also shows clearly the directionality of government as well as the adjacency condition.

Genitive Case in Gbagyi

In Gbagyi, genitive constructions follow the **prenominal genitive** pattern, where the **possessor** containing an abstract possessor precedes the **possessed** noun. The language uses a structure similar to that seen in **Turkish** and **Japanese**, where the possessor comes before the noun, and there is no explicit possessive marker like “of” in English, relying instead on word order to convey the possessive relationship. Following Yalwa (1997) and Haegeman (1994), the Genitive Case is primarily used to express relationships of possession, origin, or association between a noun (the possessor) and another noun (the possessed or related entity). In Gbagyi language as with several other languages, the genitive Case is assigned to the possessor noun phrase (NP), indicating that it governs the other noun phrase in the sentence. In Gbagyi, The possessed N is preceded by the possessor N. Thus, the configuration of [NP-NP] is maintained. In syntactic theory, especially in Government and Binding (GB) Theory, the genitive Case is typically assigned by an abstract possessor or Determiner Phrases (DP) that govern the possessor NP. The possessor in the genitive Case usually forms part of a larger noun phrase, with the genitive NP modifying or qualifying the head noun.

Types of Genitive Case in Gbagyi:

Based on the data from the Gbagyi language, the genitive Case can be categorised into subtypes that reflect the nature of the relationships they signify, as presented below:

- i. Possessive Genitive: This is the most common type, indicating that one entity possesses or owns another. Consider the following examples:

- a. [NP[NJen][NPwaknu]].

Jane bag
 “Jane’s bag”

- b. [NP[N*Azhi*bei][N*nyagi*]].
 guest (pl) meal
 ‘The guests meal / food’
- c. [NP[N*E*bi][N*gbodo*]].
 ‘child’s blanket’
- d. [NP[N*Osu*][N*gbegbe*]].
 chief groundnut
 “Chief’s groundnut”
- e. [NP[N*Ovyi*][N*shnama*]].
 thief yam
 “thief’s yam”

In the provided examples (3a) through (3e), the possessive genitive construction in Gbagyi is exemplified, illustrating a structural relationship where one noun serves as the possessor of another. Each instance follows the syntactic pattern where the possessor noun precedes the possessed noun, reflecting a clear hierarchy in the noun phrase (NP). In (51a), [NP [N *Jen*] [N *pwaknu*]] translates to “Jane’s bag.” Here, *Jen* ‘Jane’ functions as the possessor, with the genitive Case assigned to it, while *pwaknu* ‘bag’ is the possessed noun. The possessive relationship is established through the immediate adjacency of the two nouns, adhering to the principles of Government and Binding Theory, where the possessor is marked as the genitive. In (3b), [NP [N *Azhi*bei] [N *nyagi*]] translates to “the guests’ meal/food.” In this Case, *Azhi*bei ‘guests’ acts as the possessor, and *nyagi* ‘meal/food’ is the possessed noun. The same pattern is observed, with the possessor in the genitive Case preceding the noun that it possesses. In (51c), [NP [N *E*bi] [N *gbodo*]] means “child’s blanket.” Here, *E*bi ‘child’ is the possessor and is marked by the genitive, governing *gbodo* (blanket), which is the object of possession. In (51d), [NP [N *Osu*] [N *gbegbe*]] translates to “chief’s groundnut.” Again, *Osu* ‘chief’ is the possessor, and the possessive construction is maintained through the genitive Case assignment. Finally, in (51e), [NP [N *Ovyi*] [N *shnama*]] means “thief’s yam.” In this example, *Ovyi* ‘thief’ serves as the possessor, with *shnama* (yam) as the possessed entity, preserving the structure where the possessor precedes the possessed noun.

- ii. Partitive Genitive: Indicates that the noun in the genitive Case represents a part of a whole. Consider the following example:

- (4). a. [NP[N Shnama][N tokwu]].
yam half
“A piece of yam”
- b. [NP[Nmi][tukwo]].
Mytop
“My head”
- c. [NP[Ntebul][she]].
table sky
“top of the table”

In the partitive genitive construction (4a) [NP [N Shnama] [N tokwu]] 'a piece of yam', the genitive Case is assigned to *Shnama* 'yam', the whole entity, while *tokwu* 'half' denotes a part of it. This Case assignment establishes a clear syntactic and semantic relationship between the whole and its part within the NP structure. In example (4b), *mi* ('my') refers to possession in which the abstract possessor resides, while *tukwo* 'top' is part of a whole, indicating "my head." The noun *mi* assigns genitive Case to *tukwo*, establishing a possessive relationship between the person and their head, which is part of the whole body.

In example (4c), *tebul* 'table' is the whole, and *she* 'sky' or 'top' refers to a specific part of it, making "top of the table." Here, *tebul* in the genitive form establishes the syntactic and semantic relationship that binds the part *she* and the whole *tebul* within the NP structure.

- iii. Subjective Genitive: The genitive NP refers to the subject of an action. Consider the following example:

- (5). a. [NP[N Abaiyaɓyi][N susyui]].
student-Pl arrival
“The student's arrival”
- b. [NP[Nmi][Nshnasi]].
my yam-buying
“The buying of my yam”

In the subjective genitive construction (5a) [NP [N Abaiyaɓyi] [N susyui]] 'the students' arrival', the genitive Case is assigned to *Abaiyaɓyi* 'students', marking it as the possessor of the noun *susyui* 'arrival'. In this context, *susyui* serves as an event noun, with the genitive Case indicating the students' involvement in the event of arriving. This construction establishes a syntactic link between the abstract possessor and the event, emphasising the students' association with the action conveyed by *susyui*.

In (5b), *mi* 'my' serves as the possessor, while *shnasi* 'yam-buying' denotes the action related to the possession. The structure conveys the idea that the buying action is associated with *my yam*, further establishing the possessive relationship between the subject and the event.

- iv. Objective Genitive: The genitive NP refers to the object of an action. Consider the following example:

(6). a. [NP[N yeye][N anyanya]].
love-N music
"The love of music"

b. [NP[NOza][Nyasa]].
Man banana
"The man's banana"

c. [NP[NOza][Npa]].
Man skin
"The man's skin"

In (6) above, [NP [N yeye] [N anyanya]] 'the love of music' exemplifies an objective genitive construction, where the genitive Case is assigned to *anyanya* 'music', functioning as the object of *yeye* 'love'. In this context, *anyanya* is not a possessor but rather the entity that is the target of the emotion conveyed by *yeye*. This genitive Case establishes a syntactic link between *yeye* containing the abstract possessor and *anyanya*, indicating that the affection denoted by *yeye* is directed towards *anyanya*. In examples (6b) and (6c), *oza* 'man' is the main noun, while *yasa* 'banana' and *pa* 'skin' are also in a possessive structure. In these instances, *yasa* and *pa* are seen as belonging to the man, illustrating a more straightforward possessive relationship.

- v. Descriptive Genitive: The genitive NP describes a characteristic of the related noun. Consider the following example:

(7). [NP[NOza][Nawyimwa]].
man wisdom
"A man of great wisdom"

In (7) above, [NP [N Oza] [N awyimwa]] ('a man of wisdom') illustrates a descriptive genitive construction, where the genitive Case is assigned to *awyimwa* 'wisdom', which characterises the noun *Oza* ('man'). In this context, *awyimwa* functions as a descriptor, specifying a quality or attribute associated with *Oza*. This Case assignment highlights the descriptive relationship, with *awyimwa* containing the abstract possessor providing additional information about the nature or quality possessed by *Oza*.

- vi. Genitive of Origin: Refers to where something originates or belongs. Consider the following example:

(8). [NP[N Oje][N Najeriyaanya]].
Wine Nigeria
"The wines of Nigeria"

In (8) above, *[NP [N Oje] [N Najeriyaanya]]* ('the wines of Nigeria') exemplifies a genitive of origin construction, where the genitive Case is assigned to *Najeriyaanya* 'Nigeria', indicating the source of *Oje* 'wine'. This relationship denotes provenance, linking *Oje* to Nigeria. Under Government and Binding Theory, the genitive Case emphasises the source, illustrating how *Najeriyaanya* specifies the origin of *Oje* within the noun phrase.

- vii. Attributive Genitive: Used to attribute certain qualities or characteristics to the possessed entity. Consider the following example:

(9). a. *[NP [N Yinkwoza] [N byamiya]]*.

Woman beauty

"The beauty of the woman"

b. *[NP [N ebi] [N tnubwa]]*.

child ear

"The child's ear"

c. *[NP [N wo] [N tnubwa]]*.

his/her ear

"His/Her ear"

In (9) above, *[NP [N Yinkwoza] [N byamiya]]* 'the beauty of the woman' illustrates an attributive genitive construction, where the genitive Case is assigned to *Yinkwoza* 'woman', signifying possession of the attribute *byamiya* 'beauty'. This relationship highlights the quality associated with the possessor within the noun phrase. Similarly, in example (9b), *ebi* 'child' is the possessor of *tnubwa* 'ear', indicating that the ear belongs to the child. In example (9c), *wo* 'his/her' denotes possession of *tnubwa* 'ear', reinforcing the ownership implied in the structure.

- viii. Genitive of Measure: Refers to quantities or measures associated with a noun. Consider the following example:

[NP [N Nuwa] [N obwoi]].

(9). Water cup
"A cup of water"

In (9) above, *[NP [N Nuwa] [N obwoi]]* ('a cup of water') exemplifies the genitive of measure construction, where the genitive Case is assigned to *Nuwa* 'water', denoting the specific quantity associated with *obwoi* 'cup'. This relationship emphasises the measurement aspect within the noun phrase structure.

Discussion of Major Findings

The analysis reveals that Oblique Case in Gbagyi is assigned by prepositions, consistent with Case Theory predictions. The adjacency condition is strictly observed, as prepositions must be immediately followed by their noun phrase complements. The data confirm that *o* functions as a Case assigner, governing its complement and

marking it as Oblique Case. This aligns with Chomsky's (1981) notion that Case assigners must be in a local syntactic relationship with their assignees.

Genitive Case assignment follows a prenominal pattern, where the possessor precedes the possessed noun. Unlike English, which employs a possessive marker ('s), Gbagyi relies on word order to indicate possession. The classification of genitive constructions into possessive, partitive, subjective, objective, and descriptive subtypes highlights the functional diversity of Genitive Case in the language. This categorisation supports cross-linguistic findings on genitive structures, showing similarities with languages like Japanese and Turkish.

The study also demonstrates that Gbagyi genitive constructions conform to Government and Binding principles, particularly in how possessors govern possessed nouns. The lack of an overt possessive marker suggests that Genitive Case in Gbagyi is assigned abstractly, aligning with theoretical assumptions about Case marking in non-configurational languages.

Conclusion

This study has examined Oblique and Genitive Case assignment in Gbagyi, demonstrating that both follow systematic syntactic principles. Oblique Case is assigned by prepositions, adhering to adjacency and government conditions, while Genitive Case follows a prenominal structure, with possessors governing possessed nouns. The findings align with Government and Binding Theory, supporting the notion that Case assignment operates under universal syntactic constraints.

The study contributes to linguistic research by highlighting the structural properties of Gbagyi Case assignment and reinforcing the applicability of Case Theory to African languages. Further research could explore the interaction between Case assignment and other syntactic processes, such as agreement and movement, to provide a more comprehensive understanding of Gbagyi grammar.

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