A Default Theory of Default Case

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Schütze (2001) argues that UG makes use of the so-called Default Case (DEF). The notion refers to "case forms used to spell out nominals that do not receive a case specification in the syntax". The current paper presents a theory of Default Case in Schütze's spirit, but one that is more restrictive in terms of the case values allowed for Default Case and its syntactic distribution.

*ABA and Cumulative Decomposition. This paper combines Schütze's idea that Default Case is the absence of case with recent work on case syncretism. Specifically, it has been argued (Caha 2009, Smith et. al. 2019) that case syncretism in NOM-ACC languages is restricted to contiguous regions in the sequence NOM − ACC − OBL. A common approach in the literature is to understand this restriction as an effect of the so-called cumulative decomposition, depicted in (1b-d).

(1)

a.	DEFAULT	=	DP
b.	NOM	=	DP + [K1]
c.	ACC	=	DP + [K1 K2]
d.	OBL	=	DP + [K1 K2 K3]

(2)
a. Who wants to try this? - **Me/*I**.
b. What did everyone eat? – **Me/*I**, beans; him/*he, rice.
c. **Me/*I**, I like beans.
d. The real **me/*I** is finally emerging.
e. **Her** and **us** have been friends...

In the context of cumulative decomposition, Schütze's idea that DEF is the absence of case features can be depicted as in (1a). This anchors DEF within the case sequence as the first case (**DEF**-NOM-ACC-OBL), which predicts that DEF must be universally syncretic with NOM. This constrains Schütze's original proposal, where any case can be DEF. Restricting the Default is, on the one hand, a welcome result, since in the majority of languages, DEF is indeed NOM. However, there are also languages where Schütze argues DEF to be ACC. This paper investigates English as a representative language and argues that despite appearances, the Default in English is, in fact, NOM. In effect, I argue that the restrictive theory of Default Case in (1) is compatible with the facts of English, and correctly predicts that the Default is always NOM.

Default in English. Schütze (2001) argues that Default environments in English are: fragment answers (2a), gapping (2b), topicalisations (2c), pronoun modification (2d), coordination (2e). In all of these, an apparent accusative form shows up despite the fact that these are subject-related environments. However, there is a confound here, since all these environments are also strong-pronoun environments (Cardinaletti 1999, Cardinaletti & Starke 1999, Quinn 2005). Therefore, the unexpected *me/her/us* does not need to be explained in terms of ACC. Rather, if *I/she/we* are weak NOM pronouns, they will be excluded in (2) regardless of case. The pronouns that appear there would be case-invariant strong pronouns, see (3). The case-invariant strong pronoun is syncretic with weak ACC (similar to French, where case-invariant strong *lui* 'lui' are syncretic with weak DAT).

(3)

	1.SG. WEAK	1.SG. STRONG
DEFAULT	—	me
NOM	I	me
ACC	me	me

(4) Me (STRONG) / *I (WEAK), I like beans.
(5) They beamed [ɪm] up. (him)
(6) { [hɪm] / *[ɪm] } I like.
(7) *It, I think is implausible.

Left Dislocation (2c). Let me explain the logic of my argument on left dislocation (2c). Schütze's idea is that the DEFAULT is ACC, and that is why the NOM *I* can't be used in (2c). I offer an alternative explanation, depicted in (4). In this alternative, left-dislocated positions require strong pronouns, and this is why *I* (a weak pronoun) cannot be used. Instead, the case-invariant strong *me* is used. The proposal is not ad hoc: Left-dislocated positions require strong pronouns both

cross-linguistically and English internally. Cross-linguistically, "deficient pronouns cannot occur in a series of left peripheral positions" Cardinaletti & Starke (1999:151). English-internally, deficient pronouns may undergo phonological reduction, see (5). This is impossible in left-dislocated positions, see (6). Similarly, Cardinaletti (1999:60) observes that *it* is a deficient pronoun (lacking human reference). As such, *it* cannot appear in left-dislocated positions, see (7). (7) cannot be explained by case and shows that left-dislocated positions require strong pronouns; *it* is impossible here because it is weak. The same logic applies in all other cases.

Modified pronouns (2d). Quinn (2005: 74) points out that pronouns premodified by adjectives cannot be phonologically reduced, see (8). The weak pronoun *it* cannot be modified by adjectives either, see (9) (Fukui 1988:264). This construction thus requires strong pronouns.

(8)   Poor h$\underset{\cup}{\text{ɪ}}$m / *Poor $\underset{\cap}{\text{ɪ}}$m

(9)   *big it

(10)   *What strikes you as implausible? It.

(11)   *It and the other one are nice.

(12)   a.   *Rob saw [[əm] and [əs]] …
         b.   Rob saw [[ðem] and [ʌs]] …

Coordination (2e). Quinn (2005:75) notes that ə*m* (for *them*) is unavailable in coordinations, see (12a). Only strong non-reduced forms are acceptable, see (12b). Similarly, the weak *it* is excluded from coordination regardless of case, see (11) from Cardinaletti and Starke (1999:217).

Fragment answers (2a). Schütze analyses fragment answers in terms of Default Case. However, Cardinaletti (1999:60) notes that weak pronouns cannot be used in short replies either, see (10).

Gapping (2b). Schütze analyses gapping in terms of a default accusative (2b). However, Colley & Bassi (2022) point out that weak object pronouns are unavailable in gapping constructions. Colley & Bassi (p.c.) observe that also subject pronouns must be strong in gapping. In (13a), the pronoun is weak and the sentence is ungrammatical. (13b) shows that a strong pronoun is acceptable. (Kayne 2000:169 notes the same for French.)

(13)   a.   *Mary ate the fish, Tim$_1$ the steak, and Tim$_1$/*him$_1$ the hamburger as well.
         b.   Mary ate the fish, Tim$_1$ the steak, and him$_2$ the hamburger.

Interim summary. All environments with the alleged Default ACC are strong-pronoun environments. The data is therefore compatible with the analysis in (3), where the Default Case is identical to the NOM of a strong pronoun (and the strong NOM is identical to the weak ACC).

The syntax of Default. The proposal leads to a more uniform syntax of the Default across languages. Schütze notes that German uses the default NOM only on left-dislocated DPs, see (14).

(14)   { Der   / *Den } Hans, an den   erinnere   ich mich   nicht.
          the-NOM   *ACC   Hans of him-ACC remember I   myself not   (Schütze 2001:224)

However, "in bare DP answers to questions, German [...] always uses the case that would appear in the corresponding full sentence." This is noted as a general cross-linguistic property in Merchant (2005:676). But if English pronouns in fragment answers are Default, English would be a counterexample. Under the analysis explored here, Merchant's generalisation can be extended also to English pronouns. To see how, consider the table below.

	German	1SG STRONG
DEF	hanging topic	*me*
NOM	subject fragment	*me*
ACC	object fragment	*me*

Going top down, the table lists the DEF, NOM and ACC. The table further states where the relevant cases are found in German. The final column shows that the case-invariant strong pronoun is expected in all these contexts.

However, this is not because all these environments show Default, but because the strong pronoun is invariant in English due to syncretism. This account thus maintains Merchant's generalisation (English fragments have the same case as the corresponding DP in a full sentence), and minimises the differences in the syntax of English and German. It achieves this by reducing the differences to surface properties of morphological paradigms (subject to the *ABA restriction).

Ref: Cardinaletti 1999. *Pronouns in Germanic and Romance.* Cardin-Starke 1999. *The typology of structural deficiency.* Colley, Bassi. 2022. *A prosodic theory of ellipsis remnants.* Kayne 2000. *Parameters and Universals.* Merchant 2005. *Fragments and ellipsis.* Quinn 2005. *The distribution of pronoun case forms.* Schütze 2001. *On the nature of Default.* Smith 2019. *Case and number suppletion in pronouns.*