West Circassian bare nouns are full DPs: Evidence from nominal possession

The literature on bare nouns and pseudo-noun incorporation (PNI, Massam 2001; Öztürk 2005; 2009) offers a compelling size-based explanation for the non-(co-)occurrence of number and case in bare nouns: they are structurally smaller (nPs) compared to full DPs, lacking both NumP and DP. West Circassian (WC) represents a highly ambiguous case of theoretical importance, where bare nouns exhibit an unusually broad distribution for PNIed nominals.

Recently, Arkadiev and Testelets (2019; hereafter AT2019) argue that WC bare nouns generally align with expectations for PNIed nominals and analyze them as nPs based on their indefinite interpretation, low scope, and number neutrality. However, WC nominals show a list of properties atypical for PNIed elements, such as free word order, full agreement, and the absence of interaction with case marking on other nominals (i.e., no detransitivizing effects).

Bagirokova et al. (2022) characterize bare nouns as an instance of general number (Corbett 2000). We argue that this is represented syntactically: ***nominal arguments are uniformly DPs in WC, but NumP can be omitted, resulting in number neutrality*** (Wiltschko 2008, Kramer 2017). The bare noun pattern results from allomorphy on D. Support for this approach comes from interactions between overt case marking and number in possessed nominals: the absence of NumP leads to number-neutral interpretations and allomorphy on D triggered by Poss. When NumP is present, this allomorphy is disrupted and no number neutrality is observed.

This study breaks down the correlation between overt exponence and syntactic structure. In WC, the omission of number morphology correlates with the absence of NumP. However, the non-exponence of case morphology does not indicate the absence of DP. Correspondingly, this challenges the utility of number neutrality as a diagnostic for DP-level structure.

Bare nominals in West Circassian. In WC, case may be omitted in all syntactic positions, resulting in an indefinite/nonspecific interpretation (1).

(1) a. ʔaze-deʁʷə**-m** w-jə-ʁe-χʷəž'ə-š't
doctor-good**-ERG** 2SG.ABS-3SG.ERG-CAUS-recover-FUT
'The good doctor will cure you.' (AT2019:726)

b. **ʔaze-deʁʷ** jeʁaâ̱e-m Ø-**j-**e-ʁe-χʷəž'ə
doctor-good always-OBL 3ABS-**3SG.ERG-**CAUS-recover
'S/he is always treated by good doctors. (Bagirokova et al. 2021:288)'

Bare nominals are number neutral and may refer either to a plural, or a singular individual (2) (see also Bagirokova et al. 2022). Overt number morphology must be accompanied with overt case marking (3), which AT2019 connect to the absence of NumP in unmarked nominals, and its obligatory presence in full DPs.

(2) stolə-m txəλ Ø-tje-λ
table-OBL book 3ABS-LOC-lie
'There is a book on the table / there are books on the table.' (AT2019:731)

(3) č̣'ale-xe-r, č̣'ale-xe-m vs. *č̣'ale-xe
boy-PL-ABS boy-PL-OBL boy-PL (*ibid.*)

Based on these properties (and low scope), AT2019 analyze bare nominals as lacking a DP layer, analogous to pseudo-incorporation of arguments in e.g. Turkish (Öztürk 2005).

Wide distribution of bare nominals in West Circassian. Unlike PNI, unmarked nominals need not be adjacent to the predicate, trigger normal ϕ-agreement, and are not limited to internal arguments, as can be see for the ergative agent in (1b). They also do not affect case assignment possibilities (no detransitivization): e.g. the agent in (4) bears ergative case and the bare nominal is not verb-adjacent. Also, while unmarked nominals frequently correlate with low scope (as argued by AT2019), this is not universally so (4).

(4) **txəλ** ç’el-jə-š’**-me** Ø-q-a-hə-ʁ
book boy-LNK-three**-PL.ERG** 3ABS-DIR-3ERG.PL-bring-PST
‘The three boys brought a book.’ (all three boys are sharing the same book; INDEF > 3)

Based on similar observations, AT2019 propose that bare nominals, despite lacking the DP layer, may appear in all positions associated with DPs, are assigned case and control agreement.

The analogy with PNI is further challenged by the morphosyntactic behavior of possessed nominals, which, in the absence of overt number morphology, are incompatible with case marking (5) and display number neutrality (6; Bagirokova et al. 2022).

(5) **sjə-**nəbʒeʁʷə**(*-m)**
1SG.POSS-friend(*-OBL)
‘my friend’ (Rogava and Keraševa 1966:70)

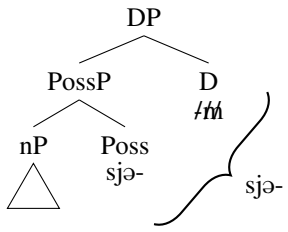
(6) [mə bzəλfəʁe-m **jə-ha**] Ø-z-ʁe-šxe-n-ew
this woman-OBL **3SG.POSS-dog** 3ABS-1SG.ERG-CAUS-eat-MOD-ADV
Ø-je-z-ʁe-ž’a-ʁ
3ABS-DAT-1SG.ERG-CAUS-begin-PST
‘I began feeding this woman’s dog / dogs.’

Full DPs with null D. We argue that this cluster of properties is best accounted for by abandoning the nP/DP distinction claim. Instead, similarly to Kramer’s (2017) analysis of Amharic, ***full DPs may lack NumP***, resulting in number neutrality. The indefinite, number neutral interpretation of bare nominals results from the absence of NumP, combined with an indefinite D, which is spelled out as a null morpheme. Overt case suffixes correspondingly expone definite D, combined with the case feature assigned to the full DP (e.g. ERG in 1a and 4).

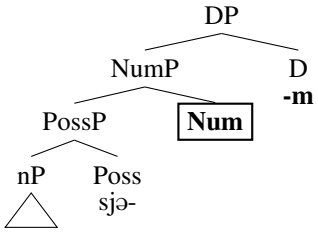
Evidence for this approach comes from the interaction between case exponence and number marking in possessed nominals (5-6): a definite determiner undergoes fusion with the adjacent Poss head, resulting in the absence of overt case morphology: [Poss]-[D] → [Poss,D] (7).

If NumP is present, this fusion is disrupted by the intervening Num head (8): thus, D is spelled out as an overt case suffix in the presence of a plural suffix (9) or numerals (10).

(7)



(8)



(9) **sjə-**nəbʒeʁʷə**-xe-m**
1SG.POSS-friend-PL-OBL
‘my friends’ (adyghe.web-corpora.net)

(10) jə-**zə-**šolk-ʒene-daxe**-r**
POSS-**one-**silk-dress-beautiful**-ABS**
‘one beautiful silk dress of hers’
(Lander 2017:84)

Extension: Other DPs without case. The DP analysis of bare nouns is further supported by personal pronouns and proper names, which are incompatible with overt case (11). Similarly to possessed nominals, D is structurally present, but unpronounced.

(11) **te** **məjeqʷape** mə bzəλfəʁe-m jə-mašjəne-ç’e tə-qe-ḳʷa-ʁ
we(ABS) **Maykop(OBL)** this woman-OBL 3SG.POSS-car-INS 1SG.ABS-DIR-go-PST
‘We went to Maykop in this woman’s car.’

Select references. • Arkadiev & Testelets 2019. *Studies in Language*. • Bagirokova, Lander & Phelan 2022. In *Number in the World’s Languages*. • Öztürk 2009. *Lingua*.