Last Resort case licensing in Inuktitut

Overview: The traditional Case Filter (Vergnaud 1977, et seq.) regulates the syntactic distribution of nominals, by preventing them from surfacing in positions where they are inaccessible to licensing. Yet, languages often permit nominals to surface in such positions anyway via Last Resort case licensing (e.g. Harley & Noyer 1998, Rezac 2011, Levin 2015, van Urk 2015). This process is characterized as countercyclic and as a repair, applying only after the Case Filter is evaluated at the end of the derivation. This is illustrated with English of-insertion in nominalizations (Harley & Noyer 1998):

(1) a. John mixed drugs and alcohol b. John’s mixing of drugs and alcohol

In this talk, I argue for the existence of Last Resort licensing in Inuktitut (Inuit; Eskimo-Aleut), which occurs when the language’s core nominal licensing strategy, \( \phi \)-agreement, is unavailable. In such contexts, a PP layer is countercyclically Merged directly to the unlicensed nominal, exponed as MOD (‘modalis’) case morphology. Crucially, the countercyclic nature of this process is particularly transparent in Inuktitut: because \( \phi \)-agreement is structurally high, in the CP-domain, that a nominal has failed to be licensed by agreement is only evident once the clause has been built. More broadly, this talk also unifies MOD case as a Last Resort licenser with other reported functions of MOD (e.g. structural and inherent case), by taking MOD to be the spell-out of an underspecified P0.

Licensing strategies: Each transitive clause in Inuktitut may contain up to two \( \phi \)-probes, targeting the subject and highest internal argument, which surface as ERG and ABS respectively, (2). Based on morpheme order and sensitivity to clause type, it is generally assumed that \( \phi \)-agreement is in the CP-domain (e.g. Compton 2017). Note, however, that in the direct object of the DOC in (2) bears MOD case, boxed. I propose that this is an instance of the Last Resort P0-insertion process outlined above. Because each clause contains maximum two \( \phi \)-probes, the lowest argument of a ditransitive can never be licensed by \( \phi \)-agreement, and must thus be licensed by other means.

(2) 

\[
\text{Miali-up Jaani \ tuni-qau-janga \ uqalimaagar-} \text{mik}
\]


‘Miali gave Jaani the book.’

Below, I extend this logic to two clearer cases of Last Resort licensing. In both configurations, a nominal that we might expect to surface as ABS is instead realized as MOD. Crucially, this occurs whenever \( \phi \)-agreement by C0 is blocked or disrupted.

A. High nominalizations: Inuktitut has a nominalizing morpheme -lik ‘one that has’ that may attach to bare stems as well as larger constituents. Like other nouns, the -lik-marked element may function as a predicate of a copular construction, (3).

(3) a. uvanga\textsubscript{subj} ilisaij\textsubscript{pred} 1S teacher ‘I am a teacher.’

b. Jaani\textsubscript{subj} nunasiuti-lik\textsubscript{pred} Jaani.ABS car-have.NMZ ‘J. has a car.’ (Lit: ‘J. is one that has a car.’)

Crucially, -lik may also attach at the clause-level, above tense, negation, and mood morphology (the latter two shown here). Of interest to us is the case morphology on the object of the nominalized verb. The presence of a transitivizing morpheme -gi normally triggers a ERG-ABS case frame with S/O \( \phi \)-agreement, (4a-b). However, if the clause is nominalized, the object is obligatorily MOD, (4c), even though MOD objects are otherwise impossible with -gi. I propose that this is due to the loss of \( \phi \)-agreement in C0, resulting in an unlicensed object. This is resolved through countercyclic P0-insertion, realized as MOD case. (I assume that the structure of (4c) is analogous to the constructions in (3); the ABS nominal ‘Taiviti’ is the subject of a copular construction and takes the nominalized clause as a predicate.)
receives MOD in C0 restriction on its possessee complement.) The pivot may either trigger a definiteness restriction on the pivot (Milsark 1974, et seq.). (Possessive

a. pingasu-nik-agreement do not also require case assignment, so they are spelled out with their default form, φ

b. *Taiwiti Carol-mik nagli-gi-nggit-tuq
Taiwiti.MOD love-TR-NEG-3S.S
Intended: ‘Taiwiti loves Carol.’

c. Taiwiti Carol-mik nagli-gi-nggit-ta-lik
Taiwiti.MOD love-TR-NEG-MOOD-have.NMZ
‘Taiwiti loves Carol.’ (Lit.: ‘Taiwiti is one that has not loving of Carol.’)

Proposed structure: Taiwiti

B. Case in existentials: Inuktitut has existential constructions built from the verb -qaq ‘have,’ which triggers a definiteness restriction on the pivot (Milsark 1974, et seq.). (Possessive -qaq imposes the same restriction on its possessee complement.) The pivot may either be MOD, occurring with invariant 3S φ-agreement, or ABS and targeted by agreement, (5)-(6). That the definiteness restriction holds regardless of case/agreement suggests that MOD and ABS pivots are both generated under the existential verb.

(5) a. pingasut tikit-tu-qaq-tuq
three-MOD arrive-PART-have-3S.S
‘There arrived three (people).’

b. *Miali-mik tikit-tu-qaq-tuq
Miali.MOD arrive-PART-have-3S.S
Intended: ‘There arrived Miali.’

(6) a. pingasu-nik tikit-tu-qaq-tuq
three-MOD arrive-PART-have-3S.S
‘There arrived three (people).’

b. *Miali tikit-tu-qaq-tuq
Miali.ABS arrive-PART-have-3S.S
Intended: ‘Miali arrived.’

I propose that the MOD vs. ABS pattern is derived from whether Inuktitut’s subject/EPP position, assumed here to be Spec-TP, is filled by a null expletive or by A-moving the pivot itself, as suggested by the translations in (5)-(6). That an expletive is present in the MOD construction is evidenced by its ability to be cross-referenced by object φ-agreement under ECM, (7).

(7) [ pingasu-nik tikit-tu-qa qu-jara ]
three-MOD arrive-PART-have -wantecm-1S.S/3S.O
‘I want there to arrive three (people).’

MOD case on the pivot may be again analyzed as the result of Last Resort licensing. When φ-agreement in C0 targets an expletive under closest c-command, this blocks the in situ pivot from being licensed, so it receives MOD case. However, the pivot may also raise to Spec-TP itself and be licensed by φ-agreement (and be realized as ABS). This again is countercyclic in nature: the grammar cannot determine whether the pivot requires MOD case until after the TP layer has been built and an expletive has been Merged.

Against default case: The instances of MOD case shown above are truly assigned to nominals—not default case on nominals that do not get assigned case (e.g. Schütze 2001). As shown in (8), default case in Inuktitut is actually ABS (cf. English ‘to me’ vs. ‘me’). I suggest that this, in turn, motivates a view of so-called ‘ABS case’ as caselessness (Kornfilt & Preminger 2015). Nominals that are licensed by φ-agreement do not also require case assignment, so they are spelled out with their default form, ABS.

(8) Q: Carol kina-mut uqalla-mmat?  A: uvang-nut / uvanga
Carol.ABS who-DAT talk.to-CAUS.3S.S 1S-DAT / 1S.ABS
‘Who is Carol talking to?’  ‘To me’ / ‘me.’

Multiple functions of MOD: MOD case has also been analyzed as structural Case in antipassives and inherent case on anaphors (Spreng 2012, Yuan 2017). The Last Resort analysis of MOD case is, in fact, compatible with these other proposals. I propose that MOD is the spell-out of an underspecified P0 (in contrast, Inuktitut’s oblique cases spell out P0 with additional spatiotemporal features). The various functions of MOD thus only differ in when and where P0 is Merged into the structure.