

Amahuaca nominative marking: Case, focus, or both?

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In this paper, based on original fieldwork, I argue that nominative case marking in Amahuaca (Panoan, Peru) is exponence of a focus feature and an abstract nominative feature. Both features must be present for a DP to be marked nominative, resulting in a typologically uncommon interaction of information structure, word order, and case exponence.

Amahuaca has a tripartite case system in which ergative DPs can bear overt case-marking and accusative DPs always remain morphologically unmarked. Nominative DPs also remain morphologically unmarked unless they are focused, as seen in the contrast between (1) and (2).

- (1) Verb focus: *'What are the women doing?'*
oxa=mun=tax **xano-vo**=ki=nu
sleep=COMP=PERF **woman-PL**=3.PRES=DECL
'The **women** are SLEEPING.'
- (2) Intransitive subject focus: *'Who is sleeping?'*
xano-vaux=mun oxa=hax=ki=nu
woman-PL.NOM=COMP sleep=PERF=3.PRES=DECL
'The **WOMEN** are sleeping.'

In (1) when a *wh*-question triggers verb focus, the intransitive subject is unmarked, but in (2) when a *wh*-question triggers subject focus, the DP receives nominative marking. This marking is not triggered by word order alone, since intransitive initial subjects remain unmarked in pragmatically neutral contexts, (3).

- (3) Pragmatically neutral context
xano(#=x)=mun koshi ka=hi=ki=nu
woman=NOM=COMP quickly go=IPFV=3.PRES=DECL
'The woman is running.'

Furthermore, this marking is not simply focus marking since it is ungrammatical on other focused DPs, as in (4) with a focused object.

- (4) Object focus: *'What is the woman washing?'*
kari(*=x)=mun choka=hi jan=ki=nu
yam=NOM=COMP wash=IPFV 3.SG=3.PRES=DECL
'She is washing **YAMS**.'

I argue that the marker =x/-vaux expones the combination of two features when they are both present on a DP: an abstract nominative feature and a focus feature. The abstract case feature is present on intransitive subjects, regardless of whether they bear overt morphological marking, and accounts for differences in behavior between different types of unmarked DPs (i.e. intransitive subjects and objects). For example, nominative subjects, even when morphologically unmarked, still trigger nominative switch reference marking in dependent clauses, while unmarked objects trigger accusative switch reference marking. While this abstract case feature differentiates intransitive subjects, only when a DP also has a focus feature does it appear with overt case marking.

These Amahuaca data thus provide evidence for abstract featural case differences between DPs, even when they are morphologically unmarked, and demonstrate that it is possible for the morphological exponence of case to depend on information structure. This pattern also lends support to the view that Amahuaca case marking expones multiple features on the same DP.