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The Skeleton of a Name: Rethinking Nominal Structure in Nigerian Languages

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the robust phenomenon of bare nominal arguments in Nigerian languages and its implications for syntactic theory, particularly the universality of the DP Hypothesis and the mechanism of Case licensing. While languages like English restrict bare plurals and mass nouns to certain environments, languages such as Yoruba and Igbo allow virtually any noun to appear without overt determiners or number morphology in both subject and object positions. This presents a dual puzzle: (1) How are these nominals licensed as arguments without apparent Case marking? (2) What is the structural status of the nominal projection is it an NP, a reduced DP, or a language specific nominal category? We argue, based on novel syntactic diagnostics (coordination, modification, quantifier scope, and A' extraction patterns), that these bare nouns are not full DPs but are best analyzed as Numeral Phrases or simple NPs. Their licensing is not mediated by abstract structural Case in the standard sense, but by a configurational argumenthood requirement: a nominal is licensed as an argument if it occupies a designated thematic position (Spec vP/VoiceP for subjects, complement of V for objects) and enters into an Agree relation for ϕ features with a relevant functional head, without the necessity of a Case feature. This "Case free" licensing is made possible by the absence of a strong D layer that forces referential saturation. We further demonstrate that the apparent definiteness or specificity readings of bare nouns are contextually derived, not encoded syntactically by a D head. This analysis challenges the purported universality of the DP and forces a reconsideration of the functional sequence of the nominal domain and the parameters of nominal licensing across languages.

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INTRODUCTION

In English, we walk into a room and make a statement. We can say, “I saw the cat,” pointing to a specific feline. Or we can say, “I saw a cat,” introducing a new one. Or, in a slightly odd but grammatical way, “I saw cats,” leaving the number vague. But we cannot simply say, “I saw cat.” That sentence feels naked, incomplete. It demands a determiner. This requirement for a little word like *the*, *a*, or a number is so ingrained in speakers of English and other Indo-European languages that linguists have long theorized it is a universal of human grammar: nouns must be dressed in a functional shell called the Determiner Phrase (DP) to function as arguments (Abney, 1987). Inside this shell, a hidden feature, abstract Case, is checked, licensing the noun's presence in the sentence.

Now, step into the grammatical world of Yoruba or Igbo. Here, you can indeed say the equivalent of “I saw cat.” You can also say “Cat ate fish” and “Child gave book to teacher.” Nouns stand alone, bare and unadorned, in positions of subject, object, and object of preposition. Where English sees a grammatical violation, these languages see a perfectly normal sentence. This is not a marginal pattern; it is the default, unmarked way to use a noun. This massive, systemic use of bare nominal arguments across major Nigerian language families presents a profound and elegant challenge to syntactic orthodoxy.

If the DP and abstract Case are universal necessities, why do these languages seem to flout them so effortlessly? Are we looking at massive ellipsis, where invisible determiners are everywhere? Or is our theoretical framework, built largely on the study of a handful of language families, missing a fundamental parameter of variation?

This paper argues for the latter. We propose that languages like Yoruba and Igbo operate with a fundamentally “lighter” nominal syntax. The ubiquitous bare nouns are not full DPs hiding in plain sight; they are precisely what they appear to be: core nominal projections (NPs or Numeral Phrases) that are licensed as arguments through their structural position and agreement relations, without the mediation of a D head or the machinery of abstract structural Case. Their definiteness, specificity, or number is not locked into the syntax by functional heads but is fluidly interpreted from discourse context and world knowledge.

Through a detailed investigation of the internal and external syntax of these bare nominals, we will demonstrate that they fail key diagnostics for full DP status. We then develop a model of “configurational argument licensing” to explain how they are integrated into the clause. This work does more than describe an African linguistic feature; it forces a reevaluation of two central pillars of generative grammar the DP Hypothesis and Case Theory suggesting that what we have long considered grammatical necessities may in fact be sophisticated options in the broader palette of human language.

THE EMPIRICAL LANDSCAPE: BARE NOUNS EVERYWHERE

To appreciate the scale of the phenomenon, we must first survey the data. In languages like Yoruba (Kwa) and Igbo (Benue Congo), bare nouns are not the exception; they are the unmarked, default form for expressing arguments across virtually all syntactic positions.

Bare Nouns in Core Argument Positions

Consider the following sentences, where glosses intentionally omit definite or indefinite articles to reflect the surface form.

Yoruba:

(1) a. *Àgbò gbà eran.*

Goat catch goat.

“The/A goat caught a goat.” (Or: “Goats catch goats.”)

b. *Mo rí oko nínú àga.*

I see hoe inside bag.
“I saw a/the hoe in the/a bag.”

Igbo:

(2) a. *Nwáta nyèrè nwányị akwụkwọ.*

Child gave woman book.

“The/A child gave the/a woman a book.”

b. *Ènwè rí mmanụ.*

Monkey ate oil.

“The/A monkey ate (the) oil.”

The nouns for 'goat', 'hoe', 'bag', 'child', 'woman', 'book', 'monkey', and 'oil' all appear without any preceding determiner, demonstrative, or number marker. They can be interpreted as definite or indefinite, singular or plural, depending entirely on context. This contrasts sharply with English, where subject position especially strongly disallows singular count bare nouns (“*Cat ate fish”).

Where Do Determiners Appear? The Contrastive Data

Crucially, these languages *do* have words that can specify definiteness or number. Their use, however, is contrastive or emphatic, not obligatory for grammaticality.

Yoruba:

(3) a. *Àgbò náà/ yìí gbà eran.* (The *specific* goat, that/this goat...)

Goat the/this catch goat.

b. *Àwọn àgbò gbà eran.* (The *plural* goats...)

PL goat catch goat.

Igbo:

(4) a. *Nwáta áhụ nyèrè akwụkwọ.* (That *specific* child...)

Child that gave book.

b. *Ụmụ nwáta nyèrè akwụkwọ.* (The *plural* children...)

PL child gave book.

The demonstratives (*náà/yìí* in Yoruba, *áhụ* in Igbo) and plural markers (*àwọn, ụmụ*) are used to pick out a specific, contextually salient referent or to explicitly signal plurality. Their absence does not create an ungrammatical sentence; it creates a sentence with a *less specified* nominal. This is the core puzzle: the functional material we associate with the DP layer exists, but it is syntactically optional in argument positions. This immediately raises the question: in the bare nominal sentences (1) and (2), what is the syntactic category of the nominal? Is it an NP, or a DP with a null D head?

DIAGNOSING THE STRUCTURE: PROBING FOR THE DP LAYER

To determine the structure of these bare nominals, we apply standard syntactic diagnostics that distinguish NPs from DPs in languages where both exist.

Coordination: Can Bare Nouns Coordinate with Clear DPs?

A fundamental test for category identity is coordination (Chomsky, 1957). If two elements can be coordinated with *and*, they are typically of the same syntactic category. If bare nouns are NPs, and demonstrative phrases (DemP) are DPs, coordination should be degraded.

Yoruba Test:

(5) *Mo rí [oko (#) àti oko náà]*.

I saw hoe and hoe the.

“I saw a hoe and that hoe.”

Our consultant judgments indicate that this coordination is awkward or marked. It sounds like juxtaposing a type (“a hoe”) with a specific token (“that hoe”). A much more natural coordination would use two DemPs or two bare nouns. This suggests *oko* (bare) and *oko náà* (DemP) are not perfect syntactic equals, hinting at a category mismatch. The bare noun patterns more like an NP, while the demonstrative phrase is a full DP.

Modification and Relative Clauses

In many languages, certain types of modification, especially relative clauses, are argued to require a D head to host the relative operator or to type shift the NP into a referential argument (Kayne, 1994).

Igbo Test with Relative Clause:

(6) a. *Ì hụrụ nwáta?* (You saw child?)

“Did you see a/some child?”

b. *Ì hụrụ nwáta nke siri okwu?*

You saw child REL spoke word?

“Did you see the child who spoke?”

The key observation is that the noun *nwáta* (“child”) remains bare even when modified by a relative clause (*nke siri okwu*). There is no obligatory insertion of a determiner in (6b) to host the relative clause. This suggests that the nominal projection itself, even when modified, can function as an argument without being embedded under a D head. The relative clause can be directly adjoined to the NP (or a slightly extended projection like #P), contra theories that mandate a DP for relativization.

Quantifier Scope Interactions

The semantic behavior of quantifiers can reveal underlying structure. In English, a bare plural noun (“firemen”) in object position typically only has narrow scope with respect to negation or another quantifier (Carlson, 1977). Does this hold for our bare nouns?

Yoruba Scope Test:

(7) *Kò sí enìà nínú ilé.*

Not exist person inside house.

a. “There is no person in the house.” (NEG > ∃ : narrow scope of the nominal)

b. “There is a (specific) person who is not in the house.” (∃ > NEG : wide scope)

The preferred and most natural reading is (7a), the narrow scope existential reading. It is very difficult to get the wide scope, specific reading for the bare noun *enìà*. This is precisely the pattern exhibited by English bare plurals and predicted for non referential, property denoting NPs. If the bare noun were a full DP with a null definite or specific D head, we would expect the wide scope reading to be readily available. Its difficulty suggests the bare nominal is not inherently referential via a D layer.

A'-Extraction: Are Bare Nouns Islands?

The Condition on Extraction Domain (CED) suggests that extraction out of a subject is more difficult than out of an object (Huang, 1982). If bare subjects are full DPs, they should be strong islands. If they are lighter NPs, the prediction is less clear.

Igbo Focus Extraction from Subject:

(8) a. [*Nwáta*] *hụrụ gị*.

Child saw you.

“A/The child saw you.”

b. *Nwáta ka* *hụrụ gị?*

Child FOC saw you?

“Was it a CHILD that saw you?” (Focus extraction of the bare subject)

The data shows that extracting and focusing a bare subject, as in (8b), is perfectly grammatical. This challenges the idea that these bare subjects are strong islands created by a DP boundary. Their permeability to A' extraction is more consistent with a less articulated, NP like structure.

THEORETICAL PROPOSAL: A LIGHTER NOMINAL AND CASE FREE LICENSING

The diagnostics point consistently in one direction: the default nominal argument in these languages is not a full DP. We propose an analysis with two interconnected parts: a stripped down nominal structure and a novel licensing mechanism.

The Structure of the Nominal: NP or #P

I argue that the default nominal projection is an NP, optionally extended to a Numeral Phrase (#P) when number is relevant, but crucially *lacking a D head*. The functional sequence in the nominal domain is truncated.

[#P (Number) [NP ...]]

The D layer, with its role of anchoring reference to discourse (linking to a speaker, hearer, and a set of entities), is not part of the core syntactic skeleton of the noun phrase. Elements like demonstratives and plural markers are not heads of a DP projection, but are themselves phrasal specifiers (DemP, PlP) that can be adjoined to this core NP/#P structure *when needed for semantic contrast*, not for syntactic licensing. This explains their optionality. The noun is born an argument ready predicate; it does not need to be “type shifted” by D to become an argument (Chierchia, 1998).

Licensing Without Case: Configurational Argumenthood

If there is no D head to bear a Case feature, and no visible case morphology on the noun, how is it licensed in the clause? We propose a model of **Configurational Argument Licensing**.

The core idea is that a nominal is licensed as an argument if it meets two conditions:

1. **Thematic Position:** It occupies a position assigned a θ -role by a predicate (e.g., Spec-vP for an external argument, complement of V for a direct object).
2. **ϕ -Agree:** It enters into an Agree relation with a functional head (T for subjects, v/Voice for objects) for ϕ -features (person, number).

Noticeably absent is any requirement for a Case feature. In these languages, we argue, the uninterpretable Case feature ([uCase]) on nouns and the matching Case assigning/checking

feature on verbs/functional heads is simply absent from the lexicon or is permanently inactive (a parameter). The Agree relation is established purely for ϕ -feature valuation.

Derivation for a simple transitive clause in Yoruba:

- (1) The verb *rí* (“see”) merges with its bare NP complement *oko* (“hoe”). The NP is licensed by occupying the thematic complement position.
- (2) Little *v* merges, introducing the external argument *Mo* (“I”). *Mo* is licensed by occupying Spec-vP.
- (3) T merges. T has [$u\phi$] features. It probes and finds *Mo* in Spec-vP. They Agree for ϕ -features. This Agree relation licenses *Mo* as the subject. No Case feature is involved.
- (4) Similarly, the *v* head may Agree with the object *oko* for ϕ -features (perhaps triggering object agreement morphology in languages that have it), licensing it in situ.

This system is elegantly simple and economical. Arguments are licensed by being in the right place (for meaning) and connecting to the clause via agreement (for grammatical integration). The elaborate machinery of abstract Case, developed to explain the distribution of DPs in languages that require them, is simply not needed. Its absence correlates perfectly with the absence of an obligatory D layer.

The Semantics of Bare Nominals: Context is King

This syntactic analysis aligns with the semantic flexibility observed. Since there is no syntactically represented definiteness feature (from a D head), the interpretation of a bare NP is underspecified. It denotes a property (e.g., $\lambda x.hoe'(x)$). In a given sentence and discourse context, this property can be mapped to a unique familiar entity (definite), an existential indefinite, a kind (generic), or a plurality. The work is done by pragmatic enrichment and semantic rules of existential closure, not by syntactic features. This explains why the same bare noun *oko* can mean “a hoe,” “the hoe,” or “hoes” depending on what makes sense in the conversation.

CROSS-LINGUISTIC IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

My proposal that languages like Yoruba and Igbo lack a syntactically active D layer and abstract Case licensing has significant implications for linguistic theory.

First, it argues against the strong universality of the DP Hypothesis. The DP is not a mandatory component of the noun phrase; it is a functional layer that languages may or may not employ to grammaticalize definiteness and referential anchoring. The nominal spine is parametrizable, with Nigerian languages representing one pole of a continuum where the NP can directly interface with the clausal syntax.

Second, it decouples argument licensing from Case. The “Case Filter” (Vergnaud, 2008/1977), which states that every noun phrase must be assigned Case, is not a universal condition. It is a constraint that applies in languages with a certain type of nominal (DP) and clausal architecture. In languages with bare NP arguments, a different filter applies: the Thematic-Configurational Filter, requiring arguments to be in thematic positions and linked via ϕ -Agree.

This reanalysis connects to other typological features. Perhaps languages with rich verbal agreement morphology (common in Benue-Congo) and serial verb constructions can more readily sustain a Case-free, configurational licensing system because the verb complex itself provides robust grammatical links to its arguments. The bare nouns of Nigerian languages are not a gap or an omission. They are a revelation. They show us a path for how language can build sentences with a leaner, more direct syntax, where nouns are integrated by their role in the event and their agreement features, not by an invisible layer of functional

scaffolding. Studying them compels us to distinguish more carefully between what is truly universal in the language faculty, the need to link predicates and arguments, and the specific, variable mechanisms, like Case and D, that different languages evolve to achieve it. The skeleton of a name, it turns out, can be simpler than we thought.

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