

Unifying Differential Argument Marking through Interpretable Features

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1. Introduction

Differential argument marking (DAM) refers to case patterns where a marked case is assigned only when arguments have a particular semantic property (e.g., specificity, animacy, person). Normally, the marked case is assigned to the argument with the relevant semantic property, but not always. Surprisingly, it is also possible for the case to be assigned to another argument of the same verb. Focusing on patterns involving simple transitive verbs within *nominative-accusative* (NOM-ACC) and *ergative-absolutive* (ERG-ABS) systems, this yields four logically possible DAM patterns, represented schematically in (1-4), where the argument with the DAM-triggering property is in bold. (1) and (2) show patterns where the arguments with the semantic property are case-marked, while (3) and (4) show patterns where the arguments with the semantic property are distinct from the arguments that are case-marked.

- (1) SBJ **OBJ**-ACC (2) **SBJ**-ERG OBJ (3) SBJ-ERG **OBJ** (4) **SBJ** OBJ-ACC

Patterns (1-3) have been discussed in the generative literature on DAM, while (4) has not. The existence of all four patterns is therefore a surprise, and presents a challenge to previous approaches to DAM, which have typically focused only on patterns where the argument with the relevant property is case-marked (1-2), or where case-marking is driven by a property of the object (1, 3). Previous analyses therefore cannot derive all four patterns, and in particular cannot derive the pattern in (4), where the object is case-marked according to a property of the subject. I will develop a new approach that can derive all four patterns as a unified phenomenon, by proposing that all of the patterns are driven by unvalued interpretable features. In section 2, I show that all four patterns are indeed attested. In section 3, I discuss previous approaches to DAM, and in section 4, I present my analysis. Section 5 concludes the paper.

2. Differential argument marking (DAM)

As discussed above, in most DAM patterns, a marked case is assigned to an argument with a particular semantic property, which I call *self-driven* patterns. Some of the most well-known examples of DAM are self-driven *differential object marking* (DOM) patterns, where a property of the object determines the case of that object. Self-driven DOM patterns can be found in languages such as Hindi (Mohan 1994), Spanish (Fábregas 2013), Turkish (Enç 1991), Sakha (Baker & Vinokurova 2010), etc. In Sakha, for example, whether an object receives accusative case is sensitive to the specificity of that object: objects are accusative when they are specific, as shown in (5a), but not when they are nonspecific (5b).

- (5) a. Erel kinige-ni atyylas-ta.
Erel book-ACC buy-PAST.3sS
'Erel bought the book.'
- b. Erel kinige atyylas-ta.
Erel book buy-PAST.3sS
'Erel bought a book/books.'
(Baker & Vinokurova 2010)

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Another type of self-driven DAM pattern is self-driven *differential subject marking* (DSM), where some property of the subject determines its case. Self-driven DSM can be found in languages such as Kham (Coon & Preminger 2012), Folopa, Umpithamu (Fauconnier 2012), etc. In Umpithamu, subjects are ergative when they are focal and/or inanimate. As shown in (6a), when the subject is animate and non-focal, the subject is not ergative. However, the subject *is* ergative when the subject is animate and focal, as shown in (6b-6c), or when the subject is inanimate, as shown in (6d).

- (6) a. Manta eentinti kali-n=iluwa c. Minya-mpal atha-n=ilu-ungkuna
 child small carry-PST=3SG.NOM game.animal-ERG bite-PST=3SG.NOM-2SG.ACC
 ‘The child carried it’ ‘It’s an animal that bit you’
- b. Nhunha-mpal watyun=iluwa d. Yuma-mpal anthi-ku=ingkuna
 other-ERG spear-PST=3SG.NOM fire-ERG burn-POT=2SG.GEN
 ‘Another one speared it’ ‘The fire will burn you.’ (Verstraete 2010)

Interestingly, as discussed above, there are also patterns where some semantic property of one argument determines the case of another argument of the same verb. I call these *externally-driven DAM* patterns. In an externally-driven DSM pattern, a property of the object would determine the case-marking of the subject. This can be found in languages such as Eastern Ostyak, Ika, and Kanuri (Baker 2015). In Eastern Ostyak, subjects are ergative only when the object is definite. In (7a), for example, the object is indefinite, and the subject is not ergative, but in (7b), the object is definite, and the subject is ergative.

- (7) a. Mä t’əkäjäylämnä ula mənɣäləm
 we.DU.NOM younger.sister.COM berry pick.PAST.1pS
 ‘I went to pick berries with my younger sister.’
- b. Mə-ŋən ləyə əllə juɣ kanɲa aməyaloy
 we-ERG them large tree beside put.PAST.3pO/1pS
 ‘We put them (pots of berries) beside a big tree.’ (Gulya 1966)

Finally, although rarely discussed in the case literature, and ignored in the generative literature on DAM, the reverse pattern, externally-driven DOM, is also attested. In this pattern, a property of the subject determines the case of the object. This is attested in Ik, where the case of the object is determined by the person of the subject (König 2008, Schrock 2017, Daniel 2022). When the subject is 1P or 2P, as shown in (8a-8b), the object is nominative. However, when the subject is 3P, the object is accusative (8c).

- (8) a. ŋk-í-á təbɔŋ-a=na. c. ŋka təbɔŋ-á=na.
 eat-1SG-a mush-NOM=this eat:3SG mush-ACC=this
 ‘I eat this meal mush.’ ‘She eats this meal mush.’
- b. ŋk-íd-a təbɔŋ-a=na. (Schrock 2017)
 eat-2SG-a mush-NOM=this
 ‘You eat this meal mush.’

To summarize, although only some of these patterns have received serious attention in the literature, all four of the logically possible DAM patterns outlined in (1-4) are attested, as shown in table (9) below.

	self-driven	externally-driven
(9) object-driven	✓	✓
subject-driven	✓	✓

3. Previous approaches

The patterns in (1-4) have not received uniform treatment in previous approaches to DAM, which have typically focused on different subsets of the DAM patterns. These approaches can roughly be divided into two, according to which subset of patterns they address. According to some researchers, the

case-marking of the argument is essentially a reflex of its semantic properties. For Haspelmath (2021), for example, ‘marked’ cases like accusative and ergative are a direct morphological reflex of arguments having more ‘marked’ semantics. For Kalin (2018), the reflex is indirect: she argues that arguments with more marked semantics have additional syntactic licensing requirements relative to arguments with less marked semantics, and that marked case-marking is one possible realization of that syntactic licensing. Both of these analyses are designed to capture self-driven DAM patterns like (1) and (2), where the case-marking and marked semantic property are on the same argument, but not externally-driven DAM patterns like (3) and (4), where the two are on different arguments, as summarized in table (10).

(10)

	self-driven	externally-driven
object-driven	✓	✗
subject-driven	✓	✗

According to another approach, case-marking is a consequence of movement of the object, which is often assumed to undergo object shift when it is semantically marked. Baker (2015), for example, adopts a Dependent Case approach to case assignment, where a ‘dependent case,’ accusative or ergative, is assigned when one non-case-marked argument c-commands another within the same case domain. According to Baker, object shift puts the object in the same case domain as the subject, which triggers the assignment of accusative case in an NOM-ACC system, or ergative case in an ERG-ABS system. This type of approach therefore captures object-driven patterns where a property of the object influences the case of either the object or the subject, including both self-driven DOM patterns (1), and externally-driven DSM patterns (3). However, it does not address subject-driven patterns where a property of the subject influences the case of either the subject (2) or the object (4). This is represented in table (11).

(11)

	self-driven	externally-driven
object-driven	✓	✓
subject-driven	✗	✗

To summarize, both of these approaches account only for a subset of the four attested DAM patterns, so neither one treats them as a unified phenomenon. Furthermore, note that neither existing approach can account for the pattern found in Ik (8): this pattern is externally-driven, which is problematic for the first approach, and it is subject-driven, which is problematic for the second approach. Even excluding this pattern, the two existing approaches generally have to treat at least one pattern as a different phenomenon from the rest. However, note that all four patterns have in common that they conform to NOM-ACC or ERG-ABS systems, except that case-assignment is additionally conditioned by a semantic property of the subject or object. There is no reason to exclude any of the patterns in a principled way: I therefore argue that if a unified treatment is possible, it should be preferred to one that treats any of these patterns as a separate phenomenon. In the following section, I show that a unified analysis of the four DAM patterns is indeed possible within a framework where case assignment and certain interpretational properties are associated with valuation of an argument’s interpretable feature.

4. Deriving DAM

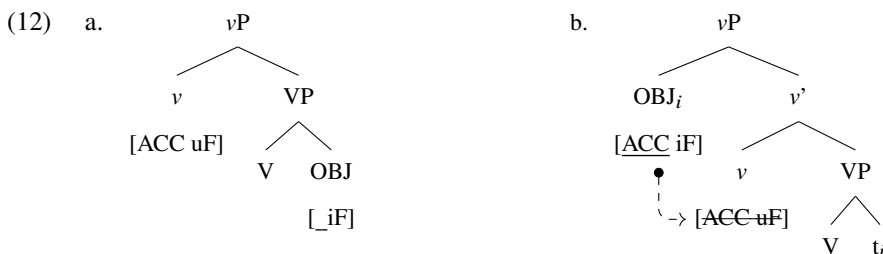
Before presenting the derivations of the different DAM patterns, I will provide an overview of some important background assumptions I make about feature valuation and case assignment. Crucially, I propose that DAM is the result of valuation of interpretable features, where I follow Bošković (2011) in assuming a dissociation between valuation and interpretability: in other words, according to Bošković (contra Chomsky 2000), it is possible for a single feature to be valued and uninterpretable, or unvalued and interpretable. Whether a feature is valued or unvalued depends on whether its value is always the same, or whether its value is context-dependent. Interpretability, on the other hand, depends on whether a feature has semantic import. Since what unifies all DAM patterns is that they are driven by semantic properties of an argument, a natural way to implement this is to attribute case-marking to *interpretable* features ([iF]) that encode those properties. Furthermore, note that DAM is context dependent: whether

an argument receives case-marking depends not only on its interpretation, but whether it is in a particular syntactic context. In object-driven patterns, for example, not just any argument with the relevant semantic interpretation can trigger case-marking: only arguments in the relevant syntactic context can, in this case objects. To capture this context dependence, I propose that the interpretable features enter the derivation *unvalued*, so their interpretation depends on whether they become valued over the course of the derivation, and what value they receive. In all DAM patterns, case assignment is thus a consequence of whether an argument receives a particular interpretation, which is itself a consequence of valuation of its interpretable feature. Valuation proceeds when an unvalued feature successfully agrees with a *valued* counterpart. Within Bošković's system, unvalued features function as probes, and must enter an agree relation with an appropriate goal: a matching, valued feature that it c-commands.

I propose that the four different DAM patterns arise from variation in the argument that carries the [iF], the case-assigning head, and the relationship between v and Voice. Variation in the argument carrying the [iF] (subject or object) yields the difference between subject-driven and object-driven patterns. The difference between DOM and DSM can be derived from the difference in whether v of Voice is the case-assigning head: I adopt an approach to case assignment where case is assigned via agreement between an argument and a functional head (Chomsky 1995, 2000, Bošković 2007, 2011), and I specifically assume that accusative case is assigned via agreement with v , while ergative case is assigned via agreement with Voice. Finally, the difference in the relationship between Voice and v will yield the difference between self-driven and externally-driven patterns: if there is a close relationship between the two heads, properties of the subject and object will be able to interact with one another. In the following subsections, I will show how each of the four different patterns can be derived within this system.

4.1. Self-driven DAM patterns

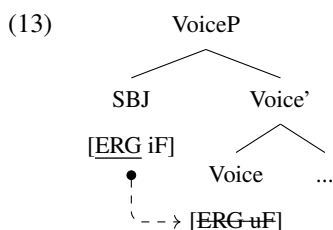
The self-driven DAM patterns can be derived by assuming that the relevant argument receives case when its *unvalued* [iF] is valued. This is essentially a version of the first approach discussed in section 3, where case-marking is a realization of marked semantics on an argument. Here, the marked semantics of an argument are implemented as an [iF] on that argument, and case-marking is a reflex of its valuation.¹ Object-driven DOM patterns can be derived by also modifying the second approach in section 3, where object-driven patterns are the result of object shift (Diesing 1992, Bhatt & Anagnostopoulou 1996, Baker 2015). I propose that object shift is actually driven by valuation of an object's [iF] by the *valued uninterpretable* feature ([uF]) on v . In particular, recall that *unvalued* features function as probes, which must c-command their goal. I assume the *valued* counterpart of the object's [iF] is located on a v -head, following a number of authors who argue that valued ϕ -features are sometimes located on v -heads in some languages (Kratzer 2009, Legate 2014, Stegovec 2019, 2020), and that it is *uninterpretable* because it is not interpreted on the verb. The object must therefore raise to a position from which it c-commands the valued [uF] on v , namely Spec, v P. The object will then be able to successfully agree and value its [iF]. As a result, because I assume that accusative case is assigned via agree with v (Chomsky 1995, Kratzer 1996, Chomsky 2000), the object also receives accusative case. This is demonstrated in (12).



¹ There are at least two possibilities for how case is realized when the [iF] is valued: one is that the same feature is responsible for both interpretation and case-marking. Another possibility is that there is a separate case feature on the argument, which is valued when the [iF] is valued. I will adopt the former for ease of demonstration, but the current analysis is compatible with both options, and I leave it to future research to tease the two apart.

The object begins with an *unvalued* [iF]. Since this unvalued [iF] acts as a probe that must c-command its goal, the object then moves to Spec,vP where it values its [iF] by undergoing agree with the *valued* [uF] on *v*. The valuation of the [iF] results in the relevant semantic interpretation of the object, as well as its accusative case-marking. If an object does *not* carry an unvalued [iF], however, no movement or valuation will occur, so that object will not receive accusative case or the relevant semantic interpretation.

The other self-driven pattern, subject-driven DSM, is similar, except that since it is found in ERG-ABS systems, it is the subject that carries the *unvalued* [iF]. I assume that the head that carries the *valued* [uF] and assigns ergative case is the head that licenses the external argument (Woolford 2006, Legate 2012), which I assume to be transitive Voice (Kratzer 1996, Legate 2014). Successful valuation of the subject's [iF] via agreement with Voice results in the relevant semantic interpretation and ergative case of the subject, shown in (13). However, if a subject does *not* carry an [iF], it will not receive the relevant semantic interpretation or ergative case.

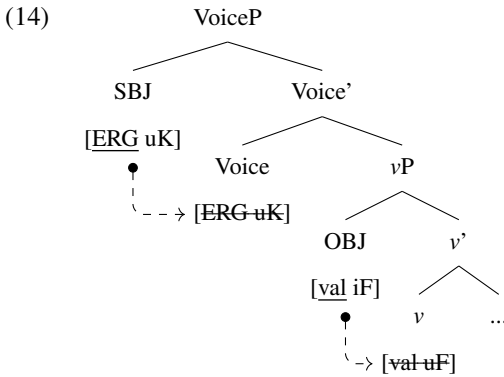


While the argument with the [iF] and the case-assigning head vary, what both of these self-driven patterns have in common is that the arguments themselves receive case when their *unvalued* [iF] is valued via agreement with a functional head. Note that both of these derivations are essentially like regular accusative and ergative case assignment by *v* and Voice, respectively, except that the features being valued are *interpretable*, so case assignment is additionally conditioned by interpretation.

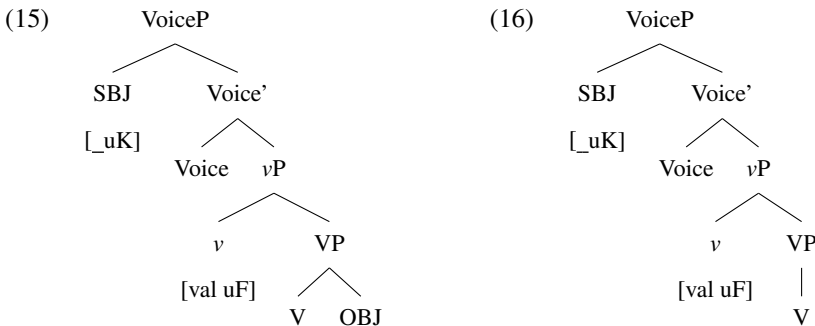
4.2. Externally-driven DAM patterns

Externally-driven patterns also involve valuation of [iF]s, but instead of being realized as case on that argument, valuation feeds or bleeds case assignment to the other argument, depending on the relationship between the head that values the [iF] and the head that values case, which is a distinct, *uninterpretable* feature ([uK]) in these patterns. In object-driven DSM, I propose a *selectional* relationship between Voice and *v*: Voice assigns ergative case to the subject only when it selects for a vP where the object has valued its [iF] on *v*. As a result, valuation of the object's [iF] *feeds* ergative case assignment. This pattern can thus be derived through a combination of the previous two derivations, except the [iF] that drives movement of the object is morphologically inert. Note that this is also essentially a modification of standard ergative case assignment, where instead of the Voice-head that assigns ergative selecting for a vP with an object (i.e., a vP of a transitive verb), it selects for a vP with a particular *kind* of object. To make the parallel with standard ERG-ABS patterns even stronger, I specifically propose that the Voice-head that assigns ergative case selects for a *v* with no features, while the Voice-head that does not assign ergative case selects for a *v* with a [uF], which I will show also derives the absence of ergative case with intransitive verbs.

To give an example, recall that in Eastern Ostyak, the subject receives ergative case when the object is definite. I assume that in Eastern Ostyak, only definite objects carry an *unvalued* [iF], and *v* is the locus of the *valued* [uF] counterpart. As a result, like in (12), only these objects will raise to value their [iF] on *v*, which is what gives them their definite interpretation. Unlike in (12), however, valuation of this [iF] does not have a morphological reflex on the object. Furthermore, since Eastern Ostyak has an ERG-ABS system, I assume that the subject must value its *unvalued case feature* ([uK]) on Voice in order to receive ergative case. As discussed above, I propose that, due to the selectional relationship between Voice and *v*, Voice will only be able to value the subject's [uK] when *v* does not have any features. I assume that the [uF] on *v* is deleted immediately upon valuation of the object, so *v* is featureless at the point in the derivation when Voice is introduced. The Voice-head that selects for a featureless *v* will therefore be introduced, which is the Voice-head that bears a *valued* [uK]. The subject will therefore be able to value its *unvalued* [uK] on Voice, which is realized as ergative case. This is illustrated in (14).



If, on the other hand, the object does *not* carry an unvalued [iF], it will not undergo valuation with v , so it will not receive a definite interpretation and the [uF] on v will not be deleted.² As a result, the Voice-head that selects for a v -head *with* a valued [uF] will be introduced. This Voice-head does *not* have a valued [uK], so it will be unable to assign ergative case to the subject, as shown in (15). Note also that if there is *no* object, the derivation will proceed the same way: the valued [uF] on v will not be deleted, so once again, the Voice-head with no [uK] will be introduced, and the subject will be unable to receive ergative case (16). This derives the parallel between intransitive subjects and subjects of verbs with indefinite objects in a language like Eastern Ostyak. Note that the relationship between Voice-heads and the feature on v also captures the spirit of Baker's (2015) analysis, where case assignment to the subject is associated with object shift, since in the current analysis, object shift occurs with the same v -head that is selected by the ergative-assigning Voice-head.



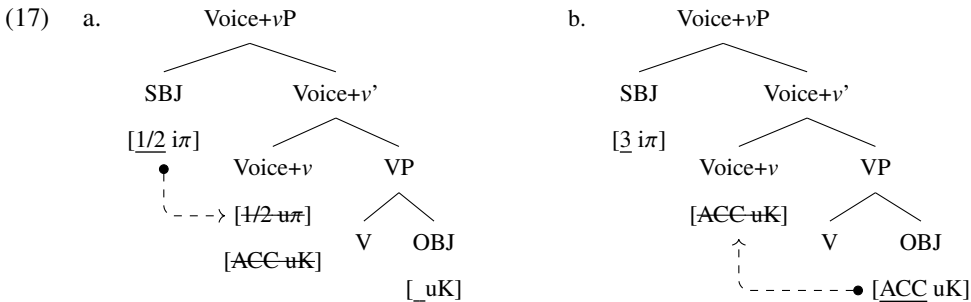
Finally, while in the previous derivation, valuation of the object's [iF] feeds case assignment to the subject, I argue that in subject-driven DOM, valuation of the subject's [iF] *bleeds* case assignment to the object. I argue that this is possible due to an even tighter relationship between Voice and v , specifically that they are in a *bundling* relationship (see Pykkänen 2008, Harley 2017, who discuss the bundling of Voice and v -heads), where they act as a single head, which I represent as Voice+ v .

The derivation of the fourth pattern, found in Ik, builds upon my previous analysis of Ik DOM (Daniel 2022), which falls within the framework outlined here, since the pattern is driven by the valuation of an interpretable feature. In this case, the relevant feature is an *unvalued* interpretable person feature ([i π]), since the relevant semantic property is person. As an overview, like in the previous subject-driven pattern we saw (13), the subject needs to agree with a *valued* feature in order to value its own *unvalued* feature. However, like in the other externally-driven pattern we saw (14), the other argument, in this case the object, needs to value its *unvalued case feature*. Crucially, both the *valued person feature* necessary to value the subject's [i π] and the *valued case feature* necessary to value the object's [uK] are located on the same head, Voice+ v . Furthermore, following Stegovec (2019), I assume that θ -role assigning heads,

² As an uninterpretable feature, the [uF] on v must be deleted prior to Spell-Out, since it cannot be interpreted at LF. Given that valuation is the prerequisite for deletion, within Bošković's (2011) system, it will be possible for the [uF] on v to be deleted before Spell-Out even though it does not undergo Agree, since it is already a *valued* feature.

such as Voice, cannot participate in agreement until their θ -roles are assigned. Because Voice and v are bundled, this means the object cannot undergo case-agreement until after the subject is introduced.³ When the subject *is* introduced, I assume that it may immediately probe Voice+ v to value its $[i\pi]$. This creates the bleeding configuration: the two arguments compete for valuation from the same head, but the subject has the opportunity to value its feature before the object does.

Turning to the derivation, I assume that Voice+ v may have valued 1/2P features, or may lack person features altogether. When Voice+ v has 1/2P features, the subject values its $[i\pi]$, which is realized as 1/2P, and deletes both the person *and* case features on Voice+ v . As a result, the object cannot value its $[uK]$, as shown in (17a). However, when Voice+ v *lacks* person features, the subject cannot value its $[i\pi]$. I assume that 3P is the absence of person features (see e.g., Kayne 2000), so when the subject cannot value its $[i\pi]$, it receives 3P by default, and does not delete any of Voice+ v 's features. The valued $[uK]$ on Voice+ v therefore remains, so the object can value its $[uK]$ and receive accusative case, as shown in (17b).



Note that this pattern will only arise when the subject requires valuation of an $[iF]$, *and* when Voice and v are bundled, which could explain why it is attested only in one language, since it requires this exact combination of properties. If both the subject *and* the object have an unvalued $[iF]$, one would expect a pattern where semantic properties of *both* arguments would have an influence on case-marking, since both arguments would be competing for valuation of the same $[iF]$, in addition to one argument's $[uK]$. Interestingly, this is exactly what is observed with *global case splits*, which are case patterns where interpretational properties of both the subject *and* object affect case-marking (Georgi 2012, Bány 2017). Given the role of semantic properties in these patterns, an extension of the current analysis to global case splits would be a welcome result, and details of this extension will be explored in future work.

5. Conclusion

I have shown that all four logically possible DAM patterns are attested, and I have provided an analysis that can derive all four through limited variation among the following parameters (which are independently necessary to account for basic case patterns): (i) which argument carries the unvalued $[iF]$ (the object in object-driven patterns, and the subject in subject-driven patterns), (ii) which head is the case-assigner (v in DOM, and Voice in DSM), and (iii) the relationship between Voice and v (independent in self-driven patterns, selectional in object-driven DSM, and bundled in subject-driven DOM). This analysis has the advantage of treating all four DAM patterns as a unified phenomenon, while also accounting for their differences, and capturing the fact that each pattern is a variant of standard NOM-ACC and ERG-ABS systems with additional interpretational effects. Furthermore, the proposed system captures insights of previous analyses of DAM, while also providing empirical coverage of all four DAM patterns, including, most importantly, the previously unaccounted for subject-driven DOM pattern in Ik.

³ Note that in Daniel (2022), the relevant functional head is v , not Voice+ v . Given proposals for the existence of multiple v -heads, or ‘flavors’ of v (e.g. Folli & Harley 2005), and that Voice itself is sometimes treated as one such head, labeling the relevant head as v is compatible with the current analysis, where the Voice+ v -head may simply be thought of as a type of v -head. Additionally, note that the current analysis has the advantage of providing insight into why the v -head in Daniel (2022) interacts with both the subject and the object, given that introducing an external argument subject is a property typically associated with Voice, while assigning accusative case to the object is a property typically associated with v , as discussed above.

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