

The Syntax of Arguments in Sukuma

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Abstract

Previous studies have primarily focused on the phonological, morphological, and morphosyntactic aspects of the Sukuma language (cf., e.g., Batibo, 1985; Matondo, 2003, 2006; Jackson, 2013; Alqarni, 2017; Luhende, 2018; Simon & Masanja, 2025), but a significant gap remains in relation to syntactic argument structure and movement processes. Hence, this study fills this gap by analysing the syntactic positions of arguments, their movement patterns, and the role of INFL in Case assignment, as accounted for within the Government and Binding (GB) framework. A sample of four native Sukuma speakers was deliberately selected based on their proficiency in the language. Data were collected using documentary review and unstructured interview. The study adopted a qualitative approach and a case study design, using the Kimunasukuma dialect as a representative of other Sukuma dialects. Sentences are analysed using syntactic trees that reflect the three levels of projection represented in the X-bar schema. The study reveals that the type of verb determines the number of arguments used in a sentence. Additionally, a syntactic argument may be moved from a non-Case-receiving position to a Case-receiving position to satisfy the Case filter. It is also shown that the moved element leaves a co-indexed trace (t_i) to fulfil the requirements of the structural preserving principle. Furthermore, the study displays that INFL assigns nominative Case to external arguments while verbs and prepositions are used to assign accusative and oblique Case to internal arguments, respectively. Consequently, the article contributes to the field of linguistics by examining the syntactic properties of arguments, an area that has been least explored in Sukuma grammar.

Keywords: A-movement, Case, Sukuma, Predicate, Syntactic Argument

1 Introduction

The term "argument" is not only commonly used in our daily conversations but also in various fields of study (cf. Harley, 2006; Radford, 2009). In the field of linguistics and syntax, in particular, the term 'argument' is understood and habitually used beyond its principal meaning of disagreement/debate. Radford (2009) affirms that linguists borrowed the term "argument" from philosophy, specifically from predicate calculus, to describe the role played by certain expressions within the semantic structure of sentences. For instance, in the sentence "Masanja applauded Kabula," the overall statement can be understood as a proposition composed of the predicate

"applauded" and its two arguments, "Masanja" and "Kabula." Syntactic arguments, typically noun phrases, are essential components of a sentence, functioning as subjects and/or objects. The term predicate argument structure refers to the number of arguments a specific predicate requires, also known as its valency. For example, predicates that take only one argument exhibit a valency of one (cf. Katamba & Stonham, 2006; Carnie, 2006). Intransitive verbs have a valency of one, with the subject as the only argument, while transitive verbs require both a subject and a direct object. Ditransitive verbs can accommodate three syntactic arguments: the subject, a direct object, and an indirect object (Carnie, 2006; Katamba & Stonham, 2006). Therefore, the type of verb used in a sentence serves as a determinant for the number of syntactic arguments.

Syntactic arguments can also be moved between certain syntactic positions. Van Valin (2004) describes NP-movement as an operation involving the relocation of XPs from positions devoid of Case assignment to positions where they can receive Case, thereby fulfilling the Case filter. NP movement is often done to satisfy the requirement that every NP in a sentence must be assigned Case (Radford, 1988; Chomsky, 1988; Cowper, 1992; Haegeman, 1994; Carnie, 2006). Furthermore, Haegeman (1994) claims that the NP movement is connected to passive structures, where an NP is moved into an empty subject position. Different types of movements depend on the element being moved, which can either be a head or a full phrase. For instance, verb movement entails head movement, while NP and WH movement involve a full phrase or maximal projection (cf. Radford, 1988; Cowper, 1992; Haegeman, 1994; Carnie, 2006).

Existing Sukuma studies predominantly focus on noun phrases in their phrasal aspects, analysing nouns primarily from phonological and semantic perspectives (see e.g. Matondo, 2003; 2006; Shigini, 2020). On the other hand, the surveyed studies on Sukuma syntax are restricted to meanings and roles played by functional words within sentences. For instance, Simon and Masanja (2025) provide a syntactic description of conjunctions in Sukuma, focusing on the roles and meaning they play in sentences. Alternatively, Jackson (2013) analyses Sukuma sentences focusing on prepositions with their spatial orientations and meanings within sentences. To put it another way, past studies by many Bantu linguists, such as those on the Sukuma language, have not focused on nouns and noun phrases within the context of sentences. Consequently, there is limited research on nouns, particularly in terms of their syntactic roles within the Sukuma language. This article aimed to fill the existed gap by describing noun phrases (syntactic arguments) within Sukuma simple sentences, focusing on two specific objectives: argument structures and A-movement. To address the first objective, Predication Theory, a sub-theory associated with the Government-Binding Model (GB), was utilised. To address the second objective, Case Theory, which is also subsumed in GB, was used to assign nominative, accusative and/or oblique Case to argument(s) depending on their syntactic position.

2 Review of literature

Sukuma is routinely spoken in the Western part of Tanzania (Welch, 1974). Sukuma or Kisukuma is a member of the Niger-Congo family, falling under the F.21 Sukuma group within the F.20 Sukuma-Nyamwezi classification (cf. Maho, 2009; Nurse & Philippson, 2014). According to Mradi wa Lugha za Tanzania (2009, p. 2), Sukuma has the highest number of native speakers among ethnic community languages in Tanzania. Josiah (2019) asserts that the cardinal points of the world govern the naming of the Sukuma dialects. That is, the code spoken in the Northern Sukuma land is called Sukuma; in the South, it is called Dakama; in the East, it is called Kiiya; and in the West, it is called

Ng'weeli. Maho (2009), following Guthrie (1948; 1967-71), classifies Sukuma as F21, with its dialects enumerated as follows: North (Kimunasukuma), F21A; West (Kimunang'weeli), F21B; East (Kimunakiiya), F21C; and South (Kimunadakama), F21D. The study is confined to Kimunasukuma – the standard dialect of the language in question. Sukuma embodies many characteristics typical of Bantu languages. Phonologically, it features a seven-vowel system, closely resembling the Proto-Bantu system, and is classified as a tonal language (cf. Nurse & Philippson, 2014). Morphologically, Sukuma adheres to the agglutinative nature of Bantu languages, with nouns structured as Pref – Base, comprising 18 noun classes arranged in singular-plural pairs. The verbal structure follows the Bantu template SM-TAM-OM-VR-VE-FV (cf. Matondo, 2003; Mchombo, 2004; Jerro, 2016; Alqarni, 2017; Luhende, 2018). Syntactically, the word order of Sukuma, as in most Bantu, is typically S (Aux) VO (Adjunct) (cf. Jackson 2013; Nurse & Philippson, 2014).

The reviewed literature on Sukuma syntax has not adequately covered the aspects of arguments. That is, the analyses of sentence constructions are based on elements other than nouns/noun phrases. For instance, Jackson (2013) analysed Sukuma spatial prepositions using Image Schema Theory, employing sentences to elucidate the meanings of various Sukuma prepositions. His analysis included several word categories, including nouns (syntactic arguments). However, his work was limited to spatial prepositions, creating a gap in noun phrases (syntactic arguments), which play a crucial role within sentences – a gap that this article aims to address. Additionally, Simon and Masanja (2025) described conjunctions using sentences to provide meanings within Sukuma constructions. The results have openly indicated the roles of both coordinate and subordinate conjunctions in Sukuma sentences. The analysed sentences contained noun phrases, but the study was limited to conjunctions, thereby creating a gap that was addressed in this study.

On the other hand, researchers who have conducted studies on Sukuma nouns and/or noun phrases have primarily focused on tone and semantic orientations attributed to nouns. For example, Matondo (2006) focused on tonal transfer in Sukuma, specifically the reduplication of nominals with mobile H tone. He noted that in two-syllable nominal stems, the mobile H tone is actualised on the initial syllable of the second stem during reduplication, as exemplified in Data 1:

- | | | | | | |
|----|----|-----------|---------------|-----------------------|--------------------|
| 1. | a) | kèèndà | 'nine' | (keenda + kéé)nda | 'nine by nine' |
| | b) | ma-sààngù | 'cooked corn' | (ma-(saangu + sáá)ngu | 'like cooked corn' |

The results indicate the predictable nature of tonal analysis in the Sukuma language. From this finding, we conclude that nominals can also be studied from a syntactic perspective, as they serve as the subjects and objects of sentences based on their grammatical functions. Moreover, nominals may be repositioned within the syntactic structure to comply with the Case filter, a gap that the present study intended to fill.

Shigini (2020) examined the significance of names bestowed by Sukuma parents on their children, demonstrating the meaningfulness of African names. His research revealed that many names assigned to Sukuma children encapsulate the experiences of their parents, drawn from events prior to or during pregnancy, and even at the moment of birth. Some examples of Sukuma names indicating life experiences are presented in Data 2:

- | | Names | Semantic Content | Situation at birth |
|----|--------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 2. | a) Bugumba | 'bareness' | Prolonged childlessness moment |

b) Njile	‘disappear’ or die’	Preceded by the death of other children
c) Mayanga	‘problems’ or ‘sufferings’	Disaster/death

In Shigini's work, nouns are analysed primarily from a semantic perspective, yet these nouns can also fulfil different syntactic roles in sentences. To address this gap, this article aims to enrich our understanding of noun phrases (syntactic arguments) within Sukuma syntax.

3 Theory of the study

This article employs Predication and Case sub-theories of the Government-Binding Model, a successor to the Extended Standard Model. Government-Binding Model (GB) as a theory of universal applicability, abandoned the rule-based approach and adopted the principles and parameters approach, which was considered more general and applicable to every human language. As we pointed out earlier, Predication Theory covers the first objective, as it posits that a predicate necessitates a subject. As argued by Crystal (2008), a predicate is classified based on the number of NPs it combines with to form an atomic proposition, categorised as one, two, or three places based on the number of arguments in a sentence construction. Apart from Predication Theory, this article also employed Case Theory. As contended by Chomsky (1988), Case Theory requires every NP in a sentence to be assigned to a Case. He further provides the fundamental properties of Case-assignment as follows:

- i) NP is nominative if governed by AGR.
- ii) NP is objective if governed by V with the sub-categorisation feature: - NP (i.e., transitive).
- iii) NP is oblique if governed by P.

The theta role and Case assignment in GB is done as indicated in Figure 1:

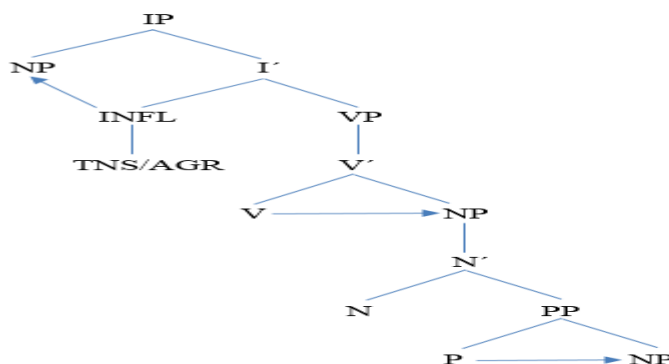


Figure 1: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

Case filter, as the main principle of Case Theory, requires every NP to be assigned Case (Chomsky, 1988; Van Valin, 2004; Carnie, 2006). The Case assigner must govern the NP to which Case is assigned. INFL governs the external argument, and it is assumed to have both the tense and agreement morpheme that assigns nominative Case to the external argument. The transitive verb

governs the NP (object) and assigns the accusative Case. Preposition assigns oblique Case to the internal argument it governs (Van Valin, 2004). GB is a constraint satisfaction model. The Projection Principle, X-bar Schema, Case Filter, and Structural Preservation Principle are specific examples of principles that must be fulfilled in GB (see, e.g., Chomsky, 1988; Cowper, 1992; Haegeman, 1994; Van Valin, 2004; Carnie, 2006). The following requirements must be fulfilled in the aforesaid principles:

3.1 The Projection Principle

It requires that the syntactic environment in which a verb or other head occurs matches its sub-categorisation frame. Van Valin (2004) argues that the principle demands that if a verb, e.g. kill, takes an internal argument in its sub-categorisation frame, then it must have an internal argument at D-structure, S-structure and Logical Form. The Extended Projection Principle subsumes the Projection Principle and adds the requirement that all predicates must have subjects; in structural terms, it means that all VPs must be associated with an external argument (Van Valin, 2004).

3.2 The X-bar Schema

The concept of X-bar appeared first in Chomsky in 1970 and was clearly expounded in Ray Jackendoff published in 1977 (Carnie, 2006). X-bar theory focuses on the head as the only obligatory element of the phrase, while the other elements associated with the head are considered optional (Haegeman, 1994; Carnie, 2006). The Theory of X-bar has three main levels of projections, i.e. XP or X^{''} stands for maximal (phrasal) projection, X' stands for intermediate projection, and X stands for minimal (head) projection. The letter X represents any word category, i.e. N, V, Adj, Adv, Det, etc. There are two general X-bar schemas, one for phrases and the other for clause/sentence structures. Figure 2 offers the general X-bar structure for clauses/sentences.

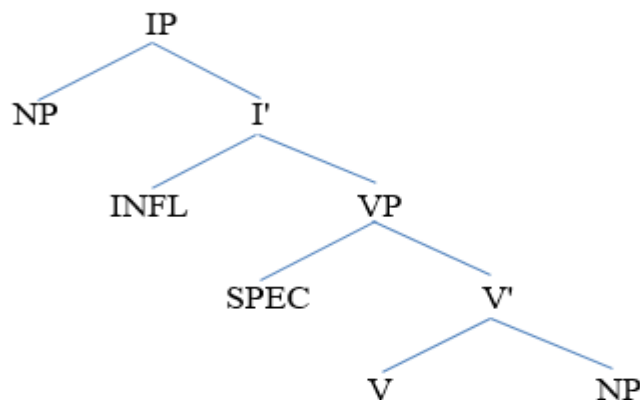


Figure 2: General X-bar configuration for simple sentences

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

As shown in Figure 2, INFL (Inflexion) serves as the home of tense and agreement morphemes. The complement of INFL is the VP, and its maximal projection is IP (inflexion phrase), which corresponds to the sentence.

3.3 The Structural Preserving Principle

According to Van Valin (2004), the structure-preservation principle requires that if the NP in internal argument position moves to external argument position, the structural position from which it moved should leave a trace that is co-indexed with the moved element. Following the requirements of the aforementioned principles of the GB model, the analysis of sentence construction provided in this article has evidently satisfied the requirements of each principle.

4 Methodology

This study was conducted at Misungwi District, Mwanza Region, Tanzania. The study area was carefully chosen because its inhabitants are predominantly native speakers of the Sukuma language. The study involved a deliberate selection of four native Sukuma speakers based on their language proficiency, which was associated with their long-term residence and upbringing in the study area. Data were collected through interview and documentary review, and the results were recorded through handwritten notes. Qualitative approach was adopted, employing a case study design that sought an in-depth investigation to realise rich descriptions of the data. According to Creswell (2012), a case can include one or multiple individuals. This study used Kimunasukuma as a case example, representing the broader spectrum of Sukuma dialects. The case study design facilitates the generation of generalizable results from a limited area. To enhance the credibility and dependability of the findings, triangulation of multiple data sources, review of related literature, and member checking were employed. Data analysis implemented syntactic trees reflecting the three levels of projections outlined in the X-bar framework.

5 Results and discussion

The findings of this study are grounded in the two aspects of syntactic arguments: predicates and the quantity of syntactic arguments permissible in Sukuma sentences, alongside A-movement. Data analysis was conducted using Predication and Case theories, both components of Government and Binding Theory (GB). Each aspect is analysed through syntactic trees that encapsulate the X-bar schema. We initiate our discussion with the first objective of the study:

5.1 Argument structures in Sukuma

The number of syntactic arguments within a sentence is determined by the type of verb employed. Certain verbs in Sukuma accommodate a single syntactic argument, while others permit two to three arguments. The following syntactic argument structures are recognised:

5.1.1 One-place predicates

Verbs classified as one-place predicates allow for only one syntactic argument, which positions them as intransitive verbs. For instance, consider the following sentence in (3):

3. Aβanhɔ βaane βalilɪla
 A-βa-nhɔ βa-ane βa-lɪ-lɪl-a
 Aug-2-person NCP-POSS AGR-PRES-cry-FV
 ‘My people are crying.’

The sentence in 3 can be represented in a syntactic tree given in Figure 3 as follows:

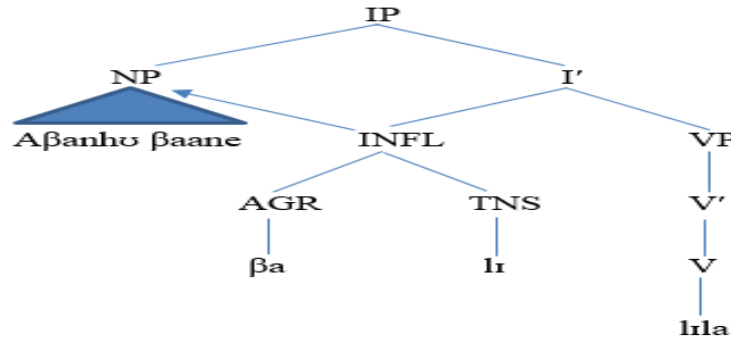


Figure 3: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

The tree depicted in Figure 3 contains only one NP (argument). The verb "*lila*" (cry) in (3) is categorised as [V'—], indicating that the verb accommodates a single syntactic argument located in the subject position. Additionally, it is observed that the external argument *aβanhũ βaane* 'my people' is assigned nominative Case by INFL to satisfy the Case filter.

Bantu languages, including Sukuma, are characterised by diverse derivative morphemes known as verb extensions, which may be appended to the verb stem. Adding these extensions modifies the verb's associated syntactic frame (cf. Mchombo, 2004; Nurse & Philippson, 2014). In Bantu languages, verbal extensions adjust the valency of the verb by either increasing or decreasing the number of arguments. Causative, benefactive, dative, instrumental, and locative are valency-increasing, while passive, reciprocal, and stative morphemes are valency-decreasing (cf. Lusekelo 2012). In Sukuma, for instance, an intransitive verb can expand the number of arguments through verbal extension, as illustrated in (4):

4. aβanhũ βaane βalililila shitaβo.
 a-βa-nhũ βa-ane βa-li-lil-il-a shi-taβo
 Aug-2-person NCP-POSS AGR-PRES-cry-CAUS-FV 8-book
 'My people are crying for books.'

The sentence in 4 can be represented in a syntactic tree given in Figure 4 as follows:

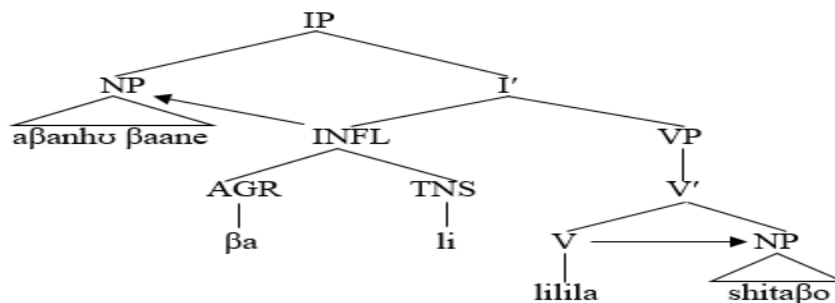


Figure 4: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

The syntactic tree in Figure 4 encompasses two NPs (arguments). The verb's sub-categorisation frame would be represented as $[V' \text{---} NP]$. The NP in the subject position receives a nominative Case from INFL, as indicated by an arrow. Meanwhile, the second NP results from verbal extension; in this case, the causative morpheme *-il-* triggers the addition of an internal argument that receives an accusative Case from the verb. Similar findings were obtained by Lusekelo (2012). His findings indicate that the one-argument verb permits the causative suffix to add another argument to form a two-place predicate. Thus, the causative extension in Sukuma, as is the case in Kinyakyusa, is very productive as it increases the number of arguments to the verb.

5.1.2 Two-place predicates

Verbs classified as two-place predicates necessitate two obligatory syntactic arguments, represented in their sub-categorisation frame as $[V' \text{---} NP]$. Thus, one argument appears in the subject position, while the other occupies the object position. Monotransitive verbs exemplify this category. For instance, consider the sentence in (5):

5. umaami wane akagula shilatu shipya
 u-maami u-ane a-ka-gol-a shi-lato shi-pya
 Aug-1-uncle NCP-POSS AGR-PAST-buy-FV 8-shoes NCP-new
 'My uncle bought new shoes.'

The representation of this sentence in a syntactic tree is illustrated in Figure 5:

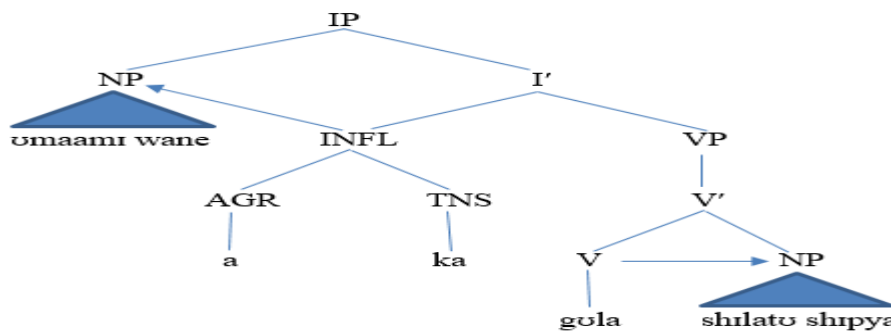


Figure 5: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

The tree depicted in Figure 5 includes two NPs, confirming that the verb "gula" (buy) accommodates two syntactic arguments characteristic of two-place predicates. INFL assigns nominative Case to the external argument "umaami wane" (my uncle), while the verb "gula" assigns accusative Case to the internal argument "shilatu shipya" (new shoes).

5.1.3 Three-place predicates

Verbs classified as three-place predicates allow for three syntactic arguments. Their sub-categorisation frame is characterised as $[V' \text{---} NP, PP]$, meaning that the first syntactic argument appears in the subject position, followed by the remaining arguments in object positions. Consider the sentence in (6):

6. uKulwa akoβucha ishitaβo sha Kisukuma
 u-Kulwa a-ku-βuch-a i-shi-taβo sha Kisukuma
 Aug-1-Kulwa AGR-FUT-carry-FV Aug-7-book Prep Sukuma
 ‘Kulwa will carry a book of Sukuma.’

The representation of this sentence in a syntactic tree is depicted in Figure 6:

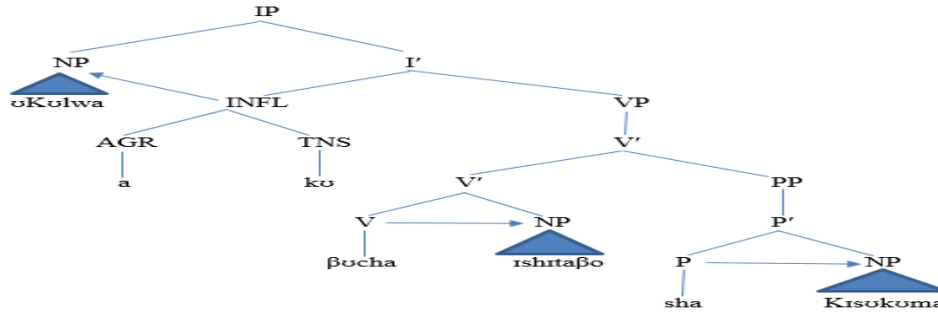


Figure 6: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

As shown in Figure 6, INFL assigns nominative Case to the external argument "Kulwa"; the verb "βucha" (carry) assigns accusative Case to the internal argument "ishitaβo" (a book), while the preposition "sha" (of) assigns oblique Case to the NP argument "Kisukuma".

5.2 A-movement in Sukuma

Syntactic arguments can be repositioned from one syntactic position to another vacant NP position within a sentence. The Case filter mandates that every NP must receive Case. This requirement can be illustrated using two levels of syntactic representation: D-structure and S-structure. D-structure is transformed into S-structure by the rule move alpha, which licenses the movement of any category to arbitrary positions (Van Valin, 2004). Consider the following passive structure presented in Data (7):

7. βokagulwa [uβogota] na maayu
 βu-ka-gul-w-a u-βogota na maayu
 AGR-PAST-buy-PASS-FV Aug-14-medicine Prep 1-mother
 ‘Were bought [medicine] by mother’

The D-structure for this sentence can be represented in Figure 7:

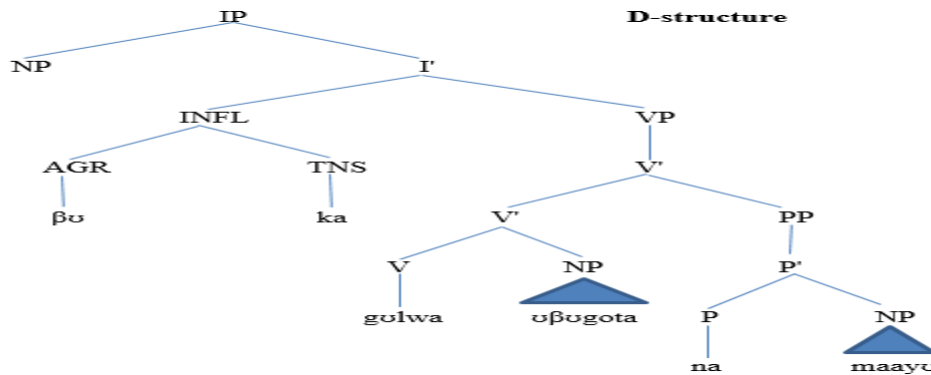


Figure 7: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

Figure 7 illustrates an NP "uβugota" (medicine) preceded by the passive verb "gulwa" (bought). Notably, passive verbs are unable to assign Case (Haegeman, 1994), necessitating those syntactic arguments preceding a passive verb to be relocated to a Case-receiving position. This is depicted in Data (8) and illustrated in Figure 8:

8. uβugota βukagulwa na maayu
 u-βugota βu-ka-gul-w-a na maayu
 Aug-14-medicine AGR-PAST-buy-PASS-FV Prep 1-mother
 'Medicines were bought by mother.'

The syntactic representation of this sentence is displayed in Figure 8:

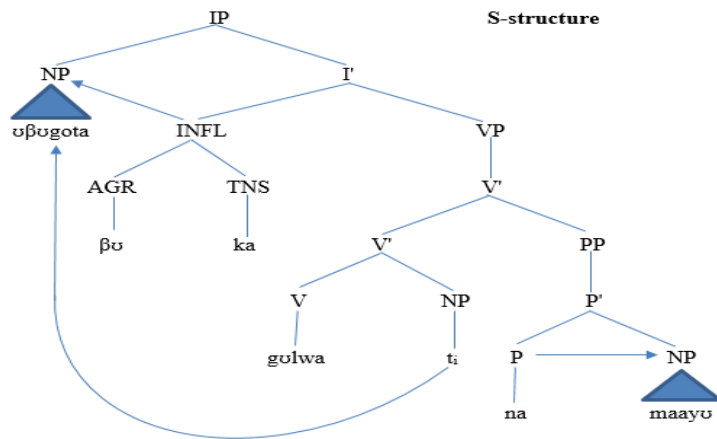


Figure 8: Case assignment in GB

Source: Adapted from Van Valin (2004)

In Figure 8, the NP "uβugota" (medicine) is relocated from a non-Case-receiving position to a Case-receiving position, where it is assigned a nominative Case by INFL. The NP "maayu" (mother) receives an oblique Case from the preposition "na" (by), as signified by arrows. The NP in Figure 8 has moved from the object position to the subject position to comply with the Case Filter and the

Extended Projection Principle. Additionally, the moved NP is co-indexed with the vacated position to satisfy the structural preservation principle, which necessitates that moved elements leave a trace. Correspondingly, Kaburo (2022) presented findings on raising structures in Kĩmũthambĩ. His findings indicate that NP movement is motivated by Case assignments.

5.2.1 Movement of arguments to empty NP slots

A-movement moves an NP from the object position to an empty NP subject position. That is, NP-movement is possible by virtue of the availability of a vacant NP position. The NP element is moved to the empty NP position, not elsewhere. The researcher agrees with Cowper (1992), who asserts that the D-structure of a passive sentence has an empty subject position which allows an NP to move from the object position and fill the empty subject position. That is, the empty subject position at D-structure is where the internal argument, preceded by a passive verb, has to be moved to fill the empty position.

5.2.2 Movement of arguments upward

The internal argument appears at the bottom node in the tree diagram. When an active sentence is passivised, the internal argument preceded by the passive verb at D-structure, as in Figure 7, has to be moved to fill the vacant NP position at S-structure, as is indicated in Figure 8. The internal argument is moved from the bottom node to fill the NP position, which was empty at D-structure. As it is observed in a tree, the internal argument *ũβũgota* ‘medicines’ is moved from the lower node to an empty upper node and not vice versa. Similarly, results on Kĩmũthambĩ indicate relocation of NPs from the bottom to the top node in syntactic trees (cf. Kaburo 2022).

5.2.3 Movement of arguments to a Case-receiving position

A-movement moves an NP from the object position where it cannot receive Case to a Case-receiving position. NPs preceded by passive verbs lack the ability to be assigned a Case. Such NPs have to be moved to empty NPs for them to be Case-marked by INFL to the subject positions (Radford, 1988; Haegeman, 1994). That is, the internal argument *ũβũgota* ‘medicines’ is moved from a non-Case position (a position after a passive verb) to a Case receiving position. The moved element leaves a trace, and it is co-indexed to form a chain $\langle \text{ũβũgotai}, t_i \rangle$.

6 Conclusion and recommendations

This study has clarified the syntactic properties of argument structures and A-movement phenomena in Sukuma using the Government and Binding Framework. The findings demonstrate that Sukuma adheres to universal syntactic principles, notably that argument movement is primarily driven by the requirement to satisfy Case licensing constraints. Noun phrase arguments originate in non-Case positions and are subsequently moved to Case-licensing positions, leaving behind co-indexed traces that preserve structural integrity. Furthermore, the investigation confirms that transitivity significantly influences the number and syntactic realisation of arguments, with intransitive, transitive, and ditransitive predicates exhibiting distinct argument structures. The study also highlights the role of INFL in assigning nominative Case to external arguments, while verbs and prepositions assign Cases to internal arguments. For further research, we recommend investigating the following areas: verb-movement and its interaction with argument movement, the syntactic behaviour of arguments in complex and embedded sentences, dialectal differences and their

syntactic implications, and cross-linguistic comparisons with other Bantu languages to distinguish common and unique syntactic argument properties.

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Notes

¹The term 'Case' is usually capitalised as a technical term in syntactic theory. It is used when referring to abstract Cases (e.g., nominative Case, accusative Case, Case checking, and Case assignment). Carnie (2006, p. 295) affirms that "Abstract Case normally has a capital C to distinguish it from morphological case." In this article, the term Case with a capital C has been used as a norm of referring to abstract Case within the Government and Binding (GB) framework

²The language names are generally set without prefixes. The use of a prefix is grammatically obligatory in any specific Bantu language (cf. Welch, 1974; Maho, 2009). Therefore, the terms "Sukuma" and "Kisukuma" refer to the same language and may be used interchangeably. Kisukuma is commonly used in Mwanza, Geita, Shinyanga and Simiyu regions in the southeast of Lake Victoria. It is also used in some areas of the Tabora, Singida, Rukwa, and Kigoma regions of the United Republic of Tanzania.