

Reconstruction for Principle C: The view from Nilotic

Introduction: Some types of movement (e.g., English *wh*-movement) obligatorily reconstruct for Principle C, while others (e.g., English raising to subject) do not. A growing consensus holds that reconstruction depends on whether the noun phrase can be merged late. Two major implementations—Wholesale Late Merger (WLM; Takahashi & Hulsey 2009) and Layering with External Rmerge (Thoms & Heycock 2022)—propose that only part of a DP is merged in its base position (D in WLM; *n*P in Layering), with the remaining structure merged later, above the R-expression relevant for Principle C. Late Merge is standardly assumed to be constrained by a version of the Case filter: a nominal may merge above its base position only if it can receive Case (e.g., Takahashi & Hulsey 2009, Thoms & Heycock 2022, Gong 2025, Keine & Bhatt 2025). In this talk, I examine Principle C reconstruction in two understudied Nilotic languages (Kipsigis and Dinka) and show that ϕ -agreement—not Case—restricts the availability of WLM/External Rmerge. **The pre-verbal position in Dinka** (all data come from van Urk 2015): The language exhibits V2 word order (1), with movement to the pre-verbal position being the example *par excellence* of movement with mixed A- and $\bar{A}$ -properties: movement is associated with information structure effects (focus/topic) and is long-distance, but it is restricted to nominals, affects case and agreement, and generally patterns with A-movement for binding. I follow van Urk (2015) in assuming that the pre-verbal position in Dinka is SpecCP, with C hosting both ϕ -features and $\bar{A}$ -features.

- (1) a. Àyén à-**càm** cuñ nẹ pǎal. b. Cuñ à-**cěm** Áyén nẹ pǎal.
 Ayen 3S-eat.SV food P knife food 3S-eat.OV Ayen.GEN P food
 ‘Ayen is eating food with a knife.’ ‘Food, Ayen is eating with a knife.’

Three properties are important for our purposes: First, subjects display a case alternation: post-verbally, they are marked with genitive case (1-b) – usually called ‘marked nominative’ in other Nilotic languages – but they are unmarked for case pre-verbally (1-a). Case is marked tonally. Second, the verb/auxiliary agrees in ϕ -features with the DP in SpecCP (1)–(2), which is explained by the presence of a ϕ -probe on C. Third, there is no reconstruction for Principle C (3).

- (2) a. **Yiin** [Ø]-cě miir ṭiij. b. **Yiin** [Ø]-c̣i ṃoc ṭiij.
 you 2-PRF.SV giraffe see.NF you 2-PRF.OV man.GEN see.NF
 ‘You have seen a giraffe.’ ‘You, the man has seen.’
- (3) [_{DP} Mánh è **Máyèn** kù **Àyén_i**] c̣iiḳẹ̀ ____ ṭiij.
 brother.CS P Mayen.GEN and Ayen PRF.3PL see.NF
 ‘The brother of Mayen and Ayen_i, they_i have seen.’

The pre-verbal position in Kipsigis (all data come from original fieldwork): Kipsigis is generally verb-initial (4-a), but it has a pre-verbal topic position (4-b). There is evidence that topicalization involves movement to SpecCP, with the marker *ko* spelling out C (Driemel & Kouneli 2022, Kouneli 2024a). The position also has a ‘V2 effect’: only one DP can ever precede the verb.

- (4) a. Ø-ám-è **Kíbê:t** kíṃjé:t. b. **Kíbê:t** kó Ø-ám-è kíṃjé:t.
 3-eat-IPFV Kibeet.NOM ugali Kibeet TOP 3-eat-IPFV ugali
 ‘Kibeet is eating ugali.’ ‘Kibeet is eating ugali.’

Similar to Dinka, it exhibits mixed A- and $\bar{A}$ - properties. It is driven by information structure features and is long-distance, but it is restricted to nominals, with subject DPs exhibiting the same case alternation as in Dinka: post-verbally they bear marked nominative (4-b), but are unmarked for case in SpecCP (4-a). We find two important differences from Dinka: First, agreement in Kipsigis is always with the subject, and not with

the DP that occupies SpecCP (5); C is realized by the invariable marker *ko*. Second, there is obligatory reconstruction for Principle C (6).

- (5) a. á-ké:r-é là:kwé:t. b. là:kwé:t kó á-ké:r-é.
 1SG-see-IPFV child child TOP 1SG-see-IPFV
 ‘I see the child.’ ‘The child, I see it.’
- (6) pɪtʃaɪt-à:p Kibé:t_i kó kò:-Ø-ké:r iné:ndèt*_{i/k} ____.
 picture-POSS Kibeet TOP PST.REC-3-see 3SG.NOM
 ‘Kibeet’s picture, he saw it.’

The table below summarizes the properties of movement to SpecCP in the two languages, including data not shown in the abstract for reasons of space. Differences are highlighted.

	Kipsigis	Dinka
Long-distance	✓	✓
Driven by information structure	✓	✓
Restricted to nominals	✓	✓
Weak Crossover	×	×
Reconstruction for quantifier variable binding	✓	✓
Case alternation for subjects	✓	✓
Reconstruction for Principle C	✓	×
Phi-agreement between C and its specifier	×	✓

Analysis: Building on the parallels with Dinka, I propose that movement to SpecCP in Kipsigis is also triggered by a composite probe on C, but with a different featural makeup:

- (7) a. C in Dinka: [ϕ , $\bar{A}$] b. C in Kipsigis: [D, top]

In Dinka, both topics and foci can move (a general $\bar{A}$ feature), and C shows ϕ -agreement. In Kipsigis, only topics move (a top feature), and SpecCP simply requires a nominal (a D feature). van Urk (2015) links the absence of Principle C reconstruction in Dinka to the availability of WLM: the NP can merge late in SpecCP because C assigns nominative case via ϕ -agreement. But this approach cannot extend to Kipsigis: the two languages pattern identically in their case system, yet Kipsigis does show obligatory reconstruction. This indicates that WLM is not available in Kipsigis. I argue that what enables WLM/External Rmerge is not Case, but ϕ -agreement. Following Nie (2020), nominals must be syntactically licensed via Agree with a functional head (whether or not agreement is morphologically expressed). Dinka C bears a ϕ -probe and therefore licenses nominals in SpecCP, permitting late Merge. Kipsigis C lacks a ϕ -probe, so no such licensing is possible; the DP must be fully merged in its base position, yielding obligatory reconstruction. The case alternation in Kipsigis-Dinka (which is also observed in all Nilo-Saharan languages with a marked nominative system) follows independently. I propose that unmarked nouns receive no syntactic Case; the only Case assigned is the post-verbal marked nominative, treated as inherent ergative in SpecVoiceP (Kouneli 2024b). Case assignment creates a K-layer (Deal 2025), but C in both languages targets bare DPs, stranding the K head. Evidence for stripping functional structure in SpecCP movement comes from Dinka PP movement, where P incorporates into C and the DP alone raises (van Urk 2015).

Selected References: Deal, A.R. 2025. Case sensitivity reflects case structure, Handout, MIT. Gong, Z.M. 2025. Case in Wholesale Late Merger: Evidence from Mongolian Scrambling. LI. Keine, S. & R.Bhatt. 2025. Crossover asymmetries. STAR. Kouneli, M. 2024b. Marked nominative as a type of ergative, Handout, WCCFL 42. van Urk, C. 2015. *A uniform syntax for phrasal movement: A case study of Dinka Bor*. MIT thesis