

Nominal licensing is driven by valued (phi-)features

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The prevailing model of nominal licensing since Chomsky 2000, 2001 is that all nominals have an “uninterpretable” (and unvalued) Case feature, as well as “interpretable” (and valued) phi-features. Nominals need abstract licensing because Case must be deleted for the derivation to converge—Case is not a legible feature at LF.

However, in language after language, we find that nominals behave differently based on which features they bear, in particular, phi-features and features related to definiteness and animacy. Based on novel observations about parallels between the Person Case Constraint and Differential Object Marking, I argue for a shift in the traditional paradigm: nominal licensing is driven by the needs of the valued (“interpretable”, legible at LF) features that nominals carry, rather than by abstract Case; whether a nominal needs licensing—and in what configurations a nominal can be licensed—therefore depends on its (phi-)features.

I will show that this small change in our toolbox significantly simplifies the model of nominal licensing while also extending its coverage to a larger set of empirical phenomena.