This paper uses case and agreement patterns to argue for a reformulation of Agree (Chomsky 1995, 2000, 2001). Throughout syntactic literature, various proposals that account for the assignment of case and agreement have been made. Chomsky (1991) proposes that different projections are responsible for the two types of features. Case is assigned when a DP moves to Spec,TP, while agreement is established when a DP moves to Spec,AgrP. By contrast, Agree divorces feature checking from movement (Bobaljik and Wurmbrand 2005). Case and agreement are assigned under c-command via the same Agree operation. A head, T, checks the case of a DP with a matching case feature and, in turn, that DP checks the agreement features on T. The prediction, therefore, is that case and agreement should necessarily pattern together: verbs should agree with DPs that are in a case relationship with T. I provide evidence not only that case and agreement features may pattern differently, but also that individual agreement features may pattern differently. As such, I argue that features on heads – not heads themselves – are probes. While I argue that case and phi features are not an indivisible bundle, I maintain the proposal that feature-checking need not force movement, thus eliminating the need for independent agreement projections (contra Sigurðsson and Holmberg 2008).

Case-agreement asymmetries are found in a number of languages. In Icelandic constructions with Nominative objects, the verb optionally agrees with the Nominative, as shown in (1). In Standard Arabic, finite verbs agree in person, gender, and number with pre-verbal (Nominative) subjects, as shown in (2a).0. However, verbs agree in person and gender only with post-verbal subjects, as shown in (2b). In the Warlpiri sentence in (3), the verb agrees with the Ergative DP even though T does not assign Ergative case.

(1) Mér líkuðu/líkaði þessar hugmyndir .  
me.Dat liked.3pl/3sg these ideas.Nom  
‘I liked these ideas.’

(2) a. L-banaat-u darab-na / *-at l-? awlaad-a  
the-girls-Nom hit-past-3fem.pl/*3fem.sg the-boys-Acc  
‘The girls hit the boys.’

b. Darab-at / *-na ?al-banaat-u Zayd-an  
hit-past-3fem.sg / *3fem.pl the-girls-Nom Zayd-Acc  
‘The girls hit Zayd.’  (Samek-Lodovici 2003, EX5)

(3) Ngajulu-rlu ka-rna marlu nya-nyi  
l-Erg pres-1sg kangaroo.Acc see-nonpast  
‘I see the kangaroo.’  (Woolford 2006, EX 18)

I propose that the case and phi features on T probe independently. In (1), there are two possible derivations. In (4a) both [Nom] and [Number] probe the object, which results in agreement. By contrast, in (4b) [Nom] probes the object, while [Number] does not, which results in the default verbal form.

(4) a. T [Nom][Number] DP = agreement  b. T [Nom][Number] DP = default

While the current formulation of Agree requires a c-command relationship, I argue that Agree can hold either under c-command or in a Spec-head configuration. The difference between (2a) and (2b) arises because [Nom], [Person], and [Gender] may probe in either configuration while [Number] can probe only the specifier. In (5a), the subject moves to Spec,TP for EPP and all of the features on T Agree with it. By contrast, in (5b), the subject does not move to Spec,TP and the directionality restrictions on [Number] prevent it from probing the subject.
In (3) only [Person] and [Number] on T probe the subject DP. (Ergative is a non-structural case that is checked by a special v head.) The analysis in (6) is in line with Woolford’s (2006) proposal that the case feature on T may be deleted without being checked while the agreement features remain active.

(6) [TP DP [Erg] T[Abs] [Person] [Number]]

Given the analyses in (4) – (6), I propose that Agree is defined as in (7).

(7) \(\alpha \beta\) Agree \((\alpha, \beta)\), where \(\alpha\) is a feature and \(\beta\) is the closest matching goal, where \(\beta\) is in the specifier of the phrase immediately dominating \(\alpha\) or \(\alpha\) c-commands \(\beta\).

My proposal maintains the standard idea that both case and agreement are determined in the syntax. Several recent proposals – notably Bobaljik (2008) and Sigurðsson (2009) – have argued that both features are determined post-syntactically. The motivation for these proposals is that since both case and agreement features are uninterpretable, they are not present in narrow syntax. However, both Bobaljik’s and Sigurðsson’s accounts acknowledge that case and agreement are sensitive to structural relationships and locality conditions. On both proposals, an operation akin to a probe-goal relation is required. Therefore, removing case and agreement from narrow syntax amounts to Agree applying post-syntactically.

References