

## On Accusative First

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**The problem.** Research into Case as a morphosyntactic system reveals the inadequacy of the traditional “government” view of case assignment as an absolute association between NPs and syntactic positions. Stemming at least from Yip, Maling & Jackendoff (1987), it has been argued instead that choice of case is contingent upon what other targets for case marking are available in the structure. Their system first assigns nominative, then accusative only if nominative has already been deployed. Marantz (1991), on the other hand, expresses the “nominative first” intuition by treating accusative as “dependent”: it is assigned to the lower NP in some domain when there are two NPs in need of case, the second subsequently becoming nominative by default. Neither approach is compatible with the phase-based multiple spell-out theory of Chomsky (2001): the former assumes a left-to-right mapping (but could be sensibly recast into a top-down system), while the latter requires simultaneous inspection of the entire structure. Sigurdsson (2006) does offer a bottom-up solution, achieving the “nominative first” effect by literally merging the nominative argument first in the derivation, below the accusative. In this paper we adopt a more intuitive phase-based solution that exploits the standard “accusative first” architecture. We show how an “accusative first” approach can resolve empirical problems in the analysis of transitive impersonal constructions in Slavic, exploiting the “agnostic movement” of Franks & Lavine (2006).

**Two types of unaccusative.** Phase-based syntax was developed, in part, as an analytical tool to account for the assignment (valuation) of nominative on non-local, postverbal NPs in unaccusative constructions. Nominative is regarded as the reflex of uninterpretable  $\phi$ -features on Tense (cf. Pesetsky & Torrego 2001), which probe the goal NP and value its case features. This expresses nominative-first, but leaves unanswered the question as to how the accusative survives in Russian and Ukrainian constructions such as (1) and (2):

- (1) Olenja      ubilo                      mašinoj.  
deer:ACC killed:[-AGR]    car:INST  
'A deer was killed by a car.'
- (2) Inozemcja      bulo    posadženo                      do v'jaznyci.  
foreigner:ACC was    placed:PART.[-AGR] to    prison  
'A foreigner was put in prison.'

(1) is a ditransitive unaccusative and (2) a derived unaccusative (passive), where accusative is assigned first, and nominative is not assigned at all. As noted by Tsedryk (2004), one peculiar fact about this case distribution is that it holds of some unaccusatives, but not of others, namely Experiencer (psych) verbs, which appear with nominative rather than accusative Themes. Our principal observation is that this apparent anomalous case distribution is a consequence of predication. The Russian psych VP in (3) is predicated of the Experiencer argument in a way that (1) and (2) are not predicated of the Theme.

- (3) Mne      nadoela      gazeta.  
me:DAT bored:F.SG newspaper:NOM.F.SG  
'I am tired of the newspaper.'

It follows that predication is not merely the semantic correlate of EPP satisfaction: the latter is instantiated in both cases (see Bailyn 2004; Lavine & Freidin 2002), while only the former is implicated in the nominative/accusative alternation on unaccusative Themes. We account for these facts by assuming that the properties traditionally ascribed to  $v^0$  are distributed across two functional projections, Pr(edication) and Tr(ansitivity), following Bowers (2002):

- (4) [<sub>TP</sub> T [<sub>PrP</sub> Pr [<sub>TrP</sub> Tr [<sub>VP</sub> ... ]]]]

Agents are merged directly in Spec,Pr. Dative Experiencers move to Spec,Pr from a lower position in which they are assigned case by lexical  $V^0$ . Pr<sup>0</sup> in this system replaces  $v^0$  as a phase head. Its specifier indicates what the VP event or state is about (i.e., is predicated of). Note crucially that T<sup>0</sup>'s nominative

probe cannot “see” into the opaque domain of  $Pr^0$ . The only way for the Theme argument in (1) and (2) to survive the derivation is to be valued locally by the accusative probe in  $Tr^0$ . We therefore unify the nominative/accusative case alternation with the presence or absence of a thematic predication. The Theme arguments in (1) and (2) lack the “prominence” of the dative Experiencer in (3); no thematic predication is instantiated. They appear only as high as Spec,Tr, a position too low to be visible to the nominative probe in  $T^0$ . Despite the discourse-neutral preverbal position of these Theme arguments, the clause is not partitioned in the usual sense; (1) and (2) are optionally interpreted with maximally wide focus (a “thetic” judgment, in Tsedryk’s account). The Theme thus fails to move to Spec,Pr on purely conceptual grounds: it is not sufficiently prominent to instantiate predication.

For psych verbs as in (3), on the other hand, the Experiencer argument is merged in Spec,V, where it is marked dative “inherently” by lexical  $V^0$ . In this position it intervenes between the Theme (merged as  $V^0$ ’s complement) and the accusative probe in  $Tr^0$ , thus blocking accusative valuation. The Theme in VP subsequently moves “agnostically” to an outer Spec of  $Pr^0$ . ( $Pr^0$  contains no  $\phi$ -features; movement to  $Pr^0$ ’s outer Spec is agnostic in that it serves no immediate purpose—like intermediate *wh*-movement, it is not feature-driven in the conventional sense, but is instead driven by persistent unvalued features. Failure of the Theme argument to move would result in its being sent off to the PF interface caseless, thus, uninterpretable.) The Experiencer argument then moves to Spec,T, where it satisfies  $T^0$ ’s EPP feature, and  $V^0$  moves through  $Tr^0$  and  $Pr^0$  to  $T^0$ , following Bailyn’s (2004) analysis of verb movement in those cases when the EPP is satisfied by a non-nominative NP. This yields the standard word order exemplified by (3).

**Life at the end of the phase.** Observe that our solution to deriving “accusative first” syntax is to build subarrays derivationally, such that the product of merging all the members of one subarray becomes, in effect, a lexical item which is either spelled out, in the case of non-contingent accusative, or literally added into the subarray associated with some other phase head, eventually yielding a nominative Theme. This formalization of multiple spell-out requires that the output of each phase must remain active by preserving some unvalued feature. Moreover, in order to be visible to some higher probe, that unvalued feature must be at the top (=left edge) of the phase, analogous to the accessible outermost layer of a morphological word. What we have called “agnostic” movement is thus a version of Lasnik’s “enlightened self-interest”: by moving and saving itself, the element also preserves the phase to which it belongs.

## References

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