

# Case in 2017: some thoughts

Omer Preminger



UMD Department of Linguistics &  
Maryland Language Science Center



*Workshop in Honor of David Pesetsky's 60th Birthday*

# Overview

*What I have to say...*

- (i) enough with Abstract Case already
- (ii) so-called “m-case” is syntactic
- (iii) nominative  $\equiv$  the absence of case
- (iv) only 2 kinds of real ( $\equiv$  non-nominative) case:  
dependent case, and case assigned under closest-c-command by  $H^0$

## Abstract Case: what it's supposed to be

- A theory of the distribution of overt nominals
  - motivated by data like these:
    - (1) John tried (\*Bill/\*himself/him) to win.
    - (2) John is fond \*(of) Mary.
    - (3) the destruction \*(of) the city
    - (4) It is impossible \*(for) Bill to win.

*[Chomsky & Lasnik 1977, Vergnaud 1977, Chomsky 1981 et seq.]*

- Abstract Case has nothing to say about data like the following:
  - (5) a. John is fond of \*/for Mary.
  - b. the destruction of \*/for the city
  - c. It is impossible for \*/of Bill to win.
  - these are typically handled by an appeal to **c-selection**

## Abstract Case: what it's supposed to be *(cont.)*

➤ But c-selection is not only *necessary* to account for data like (6a–c) —

(6) a. John is fond { of/\*for/\* $\emptyset$  } Mary.

b. the destruction { of/\*for/\* $\emptyset$  } the city

c. It is impossible { for/\*of/\* $\emptyset$  } Bill to win.

— it is also *sufficient* (Sundaresan & McFadden 2009).

⇒ That leaves (1):

(1) John tried (\*Bill/\*himself\*/him) to win.

○ *but Abstract Case is not a particularly interesting or successful account of (1)...*

## wager-verbs (Pesetsky 1991, Postal 1974)

- There is a class of verbs which take an infinitival complement —
  - for which having an “in situ” subject of that infinitive is impossible:
- (7) \* John wagered Secretariat to win.
  - but passive( $\equiv A$ -movement) allows this same noun phrase to be overt:
- (8) Secretariat was wagered *t* to win.
  - and, crucially, so does *A*-bar movement:
- (9) Which horse did John wager *t* to win?

## wager-verbs (Pesetsky 1991, Postal 1974) (cont.)

- (7) \* John wagered Secretariat to win.
- (8) Secretariat was wagered *t* to win.
- (9) Which horse did John wager *t* to win?
  - Importantly, the theory of Abstract Case must maintain that A-bar movement is “Case-neutral” —
- (10) \* Mary asked who John tried *t* to win.
  - otherwise examples like (10) are predicted to be okay

**NB:** On the Abstract Case theory, both *ask* and *try* (or clauses where these are the main verbs) must be considered viable “Case assigners”:

- (11) a. Mary asked [a question].
- b. John tried [the pie].

⇒ the movement in (10) should, all else being equal, bring the moving phrase into the domain of Case assignment

## wager-verbs (Pesetsky 1991, Postal 1974) (cont.)

- (7) \* John wagered Secretariat to win.
- (8) Secretariat was wagered *t* to win.
- (9) Which horse did John wager *t* to win?
- Given that A-bar movement is Case-neutral, the contrast between (7) and (9) cannot be Case-theoretic;
- ⇒ There must be a separate constraint at play, ruling out (7).

# Infinitives reconsidered

- The badness of (7) is a subcase of a broader pattern:

(12) *infinitival subjects...*

that are “in situ”	that have vacated by A-mvmt	that have vacated by A-bar mvmt	
✓	✓	✓	John expected Secretariat to win. Secretariat was expected <i>t</i> to win. Which horse did John expect <i>t</i> to win?
✗	✓	✓	* John wagered Secretariat to win. Secretariat was wagered <i>t</i> to win. Which horse did John wager <i>t</i> to win?
✗	✗	✗	* John tried Secretariat to win. * Secretariat was tried <i>t</i> to win. * Which horse did John try <i>t</i> to win?

- things marked with a ✗ cannot be accounted for with Abstract Case
- ➡ in terms of scientific method, inventing a *sui generis* explanation *just* for the boxed cell is just about the last thing we should entertain.



## A note on the Case Filter

- In Chomsky (2000, 2001), the Case Filter is recapitulated as checking condition on ‘uninterpretable’ Case features located on D(P)
  - the idea being that you get the Case Filter “for free” from the assumption that Case is a feature — because:
    - (13) unchecked/unvalued/undeleted features cause a “crash”(=ungrammaticality) at the interfaces.
- Preminger 2014: (13) is demonstrably false
- ⇒ Whatever you want to say about the Case Filter, you certainly can no longer say it comes “for free” from the mechanisms of feature-checking/valuation.

## What else does(n't) Abstract Case do?

- *Obligatory A-movement (as in passives & raising)?*
    - even if we were to adopt the theory of Abstract Case —
      - there are well-established cases of obligatory A-movement that cannot possibly be explained in terms of this theory
    - ex.: Object Shift (in Scandinavian)
      - involves obligatory A-movement from positions that Abstract Case theory would have to characterize as already-Case-marked (as evinced by the behavior of the shifted nominals' non-specific / non-pronominal / ... counterparts, which do not shift)
- ⇒ even Abstract Case theory must resort to an obligatory A-movement operation having nothing to do with “Case”; therefore —
- **obligatory A-movement in passives & raising is in no way an argument in favor of Abstract Case.**

## What else does(n't) Abstract Case do? (cont.)

- *Determine (or help determine) morphological form?*
  - Abstract Case has nothing to do with overt case morphology
    - some would point out that Abstract Case *often* makes the right predictions concerning overt case
      - I actually think that's a gross idealization;
      - but even if we grant it, it's hardly redeeming
    - our criterion for a successful theory isn't, and shouldn't be, "X gets a lot of the facts right"
    - associationist/connectionist approaches to language get a lot of the facts right, too
      - but that doesn't lead us to adopt Google Translate as our theory of grammar

## What else does(n't) Abstract Case do? *(cont.)*

- we generativists see a profundity in the kinds of errors that associationist/connectionist systems make
  - and we take these errors to be indicative that the logic of these systems is fundamentally off
- look no further than Icelandic to see that, when it comes to overt case morphology, the logic of Abstract Case is fundamentally off
  - an observation that has been around since the late-80s, by the way
    - Zaenen et al. (1985), Yip et al. (1987), Marantz (1991)

## What else does(n't) Abstract Case do? *(cont.)*

- most importantly, if you look at what one does need to say to accurately predict case morphology —
  - (probably some version of configurational case assignment)
  - you get a system that:
    - (i) makes no reference to whatsoever to the primitives of Abstract Case
    - (ii) is (much) simpler than what you'd need to say to “fix” the morphological mispredictions that Abstract Case generates
      - cf. Legate 2008
- ⇒ and so I think I am entirely justified when I say that **Abstract Case is of no use whatsoever in predicting overt case morphology**

In closing...

*Enough already with Abstract Case.*

## So-called “m-case”

- What it refers to:
  - an empirically adequate system that determines the case of nominals
    - **in a way that actually matches what we see** in languages with case morphology
  - includes *dependent case*  $\Rightarrow$  is (at least partially) configurational
    - what that means: case is assigned to (some) noun phrases by virtue of their structural relation to other noun phrases
      - not (just) by virtue of their structural relation to designated functional heads

So-called “m-case” (*cont.*)

- Marantz (1991): **m-case** is, well, morphological
  - what he means by this:
    - it is computed on the **PF branch**, after the PF-LF split
      - in the same part of the derivation where what we (pre-theoretically) call ‘morphology’ is
  - what he does **not** mean by this:
    - **m-case** only exists where it is morpho-phonologically visible (more on this shortly)
  
- This statement about the modular locus of **m-case** is justified in terms of the following claim:
 

(14) There are no properties that must be located in syntax proper and which make unambiguous reference to **m-case**. [Marantz 1991]



So-called “m-case” (*cont.*)

(14) There are no properties that must be located in syntax proper and which make unambiguous reference to m-case. [Marantz 1991]

↪ Claim (14) is **false**.

- Bobaljik (2008): agreement in  $\varphi$ -features (PERSON, NUMBER, GENDER/NOUN-CLASS) requires unambiguous reference to **m-case**
    - in a way that cannot be subsumed by ‘grammatical function’, ‘theta role’, ‘position’, etc.
  - Preminger 2014: movement to canonical subject position (in a subset of languages) requires unambiguous reference to **agreement in  $\varphi$ -features**
    - moreover, movement to canonical subject position has LF consequences (e.g. it is scope-expanding)
- ⇒ both **agreement in  $\varphi$ -features** and **m-case** must reside within syntax proper.

## An all-too-frequent caricature of m-case

- In the literature, **m-case** is often simply interpreted as: “case you can see(=hear)”
- ➔ It is abundantly clear that this cannot be right; here’s why:
  - one of the crowning achievements of **m-case** is correctly predicting the distribution of nominative case in Icelandic
  - in particular, the fact that when the subject is exceptionally ACC/DAT/GEN —
    - the object gets marked with NOM instead of the usual ACC
  - as noted by Bobaljik (2008), finite agreement in Icelandic tracks NOM
  - now, several nominal paradigms (incl. pronouns) in Icelandic show various cross-case syncretisms
  - **but a (syntactically) non-NOM subject in Icelandic that happens to be (morphologically) syncretic with its NOM counterpart is not suddenly able to control agreement**

## An all-too-frequent caricature of m-case *(cont.)*

- ⇒ In other words, **m-case** is itself an abstract system of categories
- that may or may not be expounded in a way that tracks every single syntactically-relevant distinction
  - Or, to put it in the form of a slogan: “m-case is abstract.”

## ‘Nominative’: the traditional view

- The traditional view of ‘nominative’ —
    - (no doubt inspired by older philological traditions, but largely persistent to this day)
    - takes ‘nominative’ to be an extant grammatical primitive.
  - One then finds various discussions in the literature about how & when nominative is “assigned”
    - see, e.g., Chomsky 1981 *et seq.*
- ➡ *I have argued that this is fundamentally mistaken...*

## ‘Nominative’ as caselessness

Preminger 2014, Kornfilt & Preminger 2015:

(i) Everything preempts nominative

Viewing (m-)case assignment as run-of-the-mill feature valuation, and ‘nominative’ as caselessness —

we derive the fact, which had to be stipulated in Marantz 1991, that nominative comes “last” in the case assignment hierarchy

- if ‘nominative’  $\equiv$  “my case features have not been valued”:
  - $\Rightarrow$  any contentful assignment of case to a nominal would make it impossible for that nominal to subsequently be ‘nominative’
    - this is precisely the kind of preemption that Marantz had to stipulate as part of his *disjunctive case hierarchy*
- $\rightarrow$  and remember: we already know that features remaining unvalued through the end of the derivation is okay (Preminger 2014)

# ‘Nominative’ as caselessness (*cont.*)

## (ii) Raising-to-ACC

(15) a. min ehigi<sub>1</sub>-**ni** [ бүгүн **t<sub>1</sub>** kyaj-yax-**xyt** ] dien erem-mit-im  
 I you-**ACC** today win-FUT-**2pl.SUBJ** that hope-PST-1sg.SUBJ  
 ‘I hoped you would win today.’

b. ehigi bihigi<sub>1</sub>-**ni** [ **t<sub>1</sub>** kyajtar-dy-**byt** ] dien xomoj-du-gut  
 you we-**ACC** lose-PST-**1pl.SUBJ** that become.sad-PST-2pl.SUBJ  
 ‘Y’all were disappointed that we lost.’ [Sakha (*Turkic*); V05:369]

- these are instances of **raising** per se (Baker & Vinokurova 2010)  
 ⇒ the trigger for subject-agreement in the embedded clause is the very nominal that shows up bearing ACC in the matrix
- outside of this construction, subject agreement in Sakha adheres to a strict **NOM** ⇔ **finite agr** generalization  
 ➔ *how and why is that generalization violated here?*

‘Nominative’ as caselessness (*cont.*)

- (15) a. min ehigi<sub>1</sub>-ni [ бүгүн *t*<sub>1</sub> kyaj-yax-xyt ] dien erem-mit-im  
 I you-ACC today win-FUT-2pl.SUBJ that hope-PST-1sg.SUBJ  
 ‘I hoped you would win today.’
- b. ehigi bihigi<sub>1</sub>-ni [ *t*<sub>1</sub> kyajtar-dy-byt ] dien xomoj-du-gut  
 you we-ACC lose-PST-1pl.SUBJ that become.sad-PST-2pl.SUBJ  
 ‘Y’all were disappointed that we lost.’ [Sakha (Turkic); V05:369]

- **A reasonable solution:** the relevant nominals go from being nominative (in the embedded clause) to being accusative (in the matrix)
  - Baker & Vinokurova (2010): they do so by means of “case-stacking”  
 (16) [[[DP]-NOM]-ACC]
  - Kornfilt & Preminger (2015): Contrary what (16) requires, Sakha does not allow already-case-marked nominals to participate in subsequent *dependent case* relations

## ‘Nominative’ as caselessness (*cont.*)

- (15) a. min ehigi<sub>1</sub>-ni [ бүгүн *t*<sub>1</sub> kyaj-yax-xyt ] dien erem-mit-im  
 I you-ACC today win-FUT-2pl.SUBJ that hope-PST-1sg.SUBJ  
 ‘I hoped you would win today.’
- b. ehigi bihigi<sub>1</sub>-ni [ *t*<sub>1</sub> kyajtar-dy-byt ] dien xomoj-du-gut  
 you we-ACC lose-PST-1pl.SUBJ that become.sad-PST-2pl.SUBJ  
 ‘Y’all were disappointed that we lost.’ [Sakha (Turkic); V05:369]
- since ACC in Sakha is *dependent case*, the only way something can “become ACC” is if it was previously caseless
    - and that’s what being nominative is.



## Other types of (m-)case

- So we've seen that so-called 'nominative' is just the absence of case;
- And we've mentioned *dependent case* —
  - case is assigned to a noun phrase by virtue of its structural proximity to another as-of-yet-caseless noun phrase

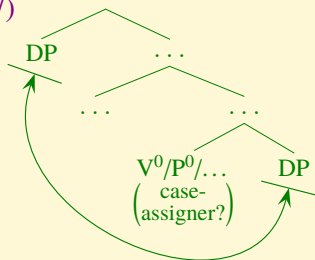
⇒ What else is there?

- For Marantz 1991, there is only one other category:  
*lexically governed case*
  - which, for him, meant case assigned to a nominal by the head that selects it

## Other types of (m-)case *(cont.)*

- For Marantz, *lexically governed case* must preempt *dependent case*
  - in Preminger 2014, I showed that viewing (m-)case assignment as run-of-the-mill valuation derives this instance of preemption, as well
- That's because, on a bottom-up model of structure building —

(17)



- the sisterhood relation in question will obtain before the necessary configuration for **DEPENDENT** case assignment

## Other types of (m-)case *(cont.)*

- However, I no longer think this story is correct —
    - or rather, I don't think it is complete
  - For one thing, there are certain kinds of case that Marantz's (1991) system, as stated, is a very poor fit for
    - most notably, case associated with prepositional complementizers
      - which is a very poor fit for *dependent case*, but is assigned to a nominal not selected by the prepositional complementizer
- ⇒ As a result, I no longer think *lexical(ly governed) case* should be restricted to the sisterhood relation
- rather, it is case associated with the lexical identity of a particular head, **and assigned under closest-c-command**

## Other types of (m-)case (*cont.*)

- When *lexical case* is discharged under sisterhood —
  - the earlier results (preemption of *dependent case*) still obtain
- But now we can account for case assigned by prepositional complementizers
- As well as... *case in English!*

(18) a. He<sub>c1</sub> is here on time.

b. Her<sub>c2</sub> and him<sub>c2</sub> are here on time.

- ➔ I'm assuming, with Sobin (1997), that the other forms are just prescriptive (hyper)correction
  - that they exist doesn't mean we should shove them in the grammar
  - any more than the existence of "*Numeral NP do/does not a NP make*" means we should make the grammar of English verb-final

## Other types of (m-)case *(cont.)*

(18) a. **He**<sub>c1</sub> is here on time.

b. **Her**<sub>c2</sub> and **him**<sub>c2</sub> are here on time.

• Note, importantly, that **c1** has nothing to do with agreement:

(19) a. I demand that **he**<sub>c1</sub> be here on time.

b. I demand that **her**<sub>c2</sub> and **him**<sub>c2</sub> be here on time.

⇒ **c1** is case assigned by  $T^0$  under closest-c-command;








**c2** is caselessness(≡ unmarked case)

- in other words, insofar as English has anything you'd want to call 'nominative' —
  - it's **c2**, i.e., the thing we've been calling 'accusative' or 'objective' case










**Happy Birthday David!**

**And thank you all for listening!**

# References

-  Baker, Mark C. & Nadya Vinokurova. 2010. **Two modalities of Case assignment: Case in Sakha.**, *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 28:593–642, DOI: 10.1007/s11049-010-9105-1.
-  Bobaljik, Jonathan David. 2008. **Where's phi? Agreement as a post-syntactic operation.**, in *Phi Theory: phi-features across interfaces and modules*, eds. Daniel Harbour, David Adger & Susana Béjar, 295–328. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
-  Chomsky, Noam. 1981. *Lectures on government and binding.*, Dordrecht: Foris.
-  Chomsky, Noam. 2000. **Minimalist inquiries: the framework.**, in *Step by step: essays on minimalist syntax in honor of Howard Lasnik*, eds. Roger Martin, David Michaels & Juan Uriagereka, 89–155. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
-  Chomsky, Noam. 2001. **Derivation by phase.**, in *Ken Hale: a life in language*, ed. Michael Kenstowicz, 1–52. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
-  Chomsky, Noam & Howard Lasnik. 1977. **Filters and control.**, *Linguistic Inquiry* 8:425–504.
-  Kornfilt, Jaklin & Omer Preminger. 2015. **Nominative as no case at all: an argument from raising-to-acc in Sakha.**, in *Proceedings of the 9th Workshop on Altaic Formal Linguistics (WAFSL 9)*, eds. Andrew Joseph & Esra Predolac, MIT Working Papers in Linguistics 76, Cambridge, MA: MITWPL, 109–120.
-  Legate, Julie Anne. 2008. **Morphological and abstract case.**, *Linguistic Inquiry* 39:55–101, DOI: 10.1162/ling.2008.39.1.55.

## References (cont.)

-  Marantz, Alec. 1991. *Case and licensing.*, in *Proceedings of the 8th Eastern States Conference on Linguistics (ESCOL 8)*, eds. German Westphal, Benjamin Ao & Hee-Rahk Chae, Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications, 234–253.
-  Pesetsky, David. 1991. *Zero syntax, vol. 2: infinitives.*, Ms., Cambridge, MA: MIT.
-  Postal, Paul M. 1974. *On raising: one rule of grammar and its theoretical implications.*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
-  Preminger, Omer. 2014. *Agreement and its failures.*, Linguistic Inquiry Monographs 68, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
-  Sobin, Nicholas. 1997. *Agreement, default rules, and grammatical viruses.*, *Linguistic Inquiry* 28:318–343.
-  Sundaresan, Sandhya & Thomas McFadden. 2009. *DP distribution, finiteness and control in tamil and other languages: selection vs. Case.*, *Journal of South Asian Linguistics* 2:5–34.
-  Vergnaud, Jean-Roger. 1977. *Open letter to Chomsky and Lasnik.*, April 1977, available at <http://ling.auf.net/lingBuzz/000461>.
-  Vinokurova, Nadya. 2005. *Lexical categories and argument structure: a study with reference to Sakha.*, Doctoral dissertation, Utrecht: UiL-OTS. LOT dissertation series.
-  Yip, Moira, Joan Maling & Ray Jackendoff. 1987. *Case in tiers.*, *Language* 63:217–250.



# References *(cont.)*



Zaenen, Annie, Joan Maling & Höskuldur Thráinsson. 1985. **Case and grammatical functions: the Icelandic passive.**, *Natural Language & Linguistic Theory* 3:441–483.