Case in 2017: some thoughts

Omer Preminger

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.


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

(6)  
   a. John is fond \{ of/*for/*Ø \} Mary.
   b. the destruction \{ of/*for/*Ø \} the city
   c. It is impossible \{ for/*of/*Ø \} Bill to win.

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

⇒ That leaves (1):

(1)  
   John tried ( *Bill/*himself*/h) 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(≡A-movement) allows this same noun phrase to be overt:

(8)  Secretariat was wagered \textit{t} to win.

  - and, crucially, so does A-bar movement:

(9)  Which horse did John wager \textit{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;

\[ \Rightarrow \] 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* . . .

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>that are “in situ”</th>
<th>that have vacated by A-mvmt</th>
<th>that have vacated by A-bar mvmt</th>
<th>John expected Secretariat to win. Secretariat was expected <em>t</em> to win. Which horse did John expect <em>t</em> to win?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>*John wagered Secretariat to win. Secretariat was wagered <em>t</em> to win. Which horse did John wager <em>t</em> to win?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>*John tried Secretariat to win. *Secretariat was tried <em>t</em> to win. *Which horse did John try <em>t</em> to win?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- things marked with a red circle 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
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

→ 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 ⇒ 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]
There are no properties that must be located in syntax proper and which make unambiguous reference to m-case. \[\text{[Marantz 1991]}\]

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)

\[\Rightarrow\] 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**
⇒ In other words, m-case is itself an abstract system of categories
  ○ that may or may not be exponed 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’ ≡ “my case features have not been valued”:
  - 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*
- 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 ehigi₁-ni [ bügün \( t_1 \) kyaj-yax-xyt ] dien erem-mit-im
   I you-ACC today win-fut-\textbf{2pl.subj} that hope-pst-1sg.subj
   ‘I hoped you would win today.’

b. ehigi bihigi₁-ni [ \( t_1 \) kyajtar-dy-byt ] dien xomoj-du-gut
   you we-ACC lose-pst-\textbf{1pl.subj} that become.sad-pst-2pl.subj
   ‘Y’all were disappointed that we lost.’

• these are instances of **raising** per se (Baker & Vinokurova 2010)
  \( \Rightarrow \) 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
  \( ◀\Rightarrow \) how and why is that generalization violated here?
‘Nominative’ as caselessness (cont.)

(15) a. min ehigi₁-ni [ bügün t₁ 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 bihigi₁-ni [ t₁ 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 ehigi₁- nin bügün t₁ kyaj-yax-xyt] dien erem-mit-im
    you-acc today win-fut-2pl.subj that hope-pst-1sg.subj
    ‘I hoped you would win today.’

    b. bihigi₁- nin t₁ 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.’

◦ 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
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 —

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. $\text{He}_{c_1}$ is here on time.

  b. $\text{Her}_{c_2}$ and $\text{him}_{c_2}$ 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
(18) a. $\text{He}_{c_1}$ is here on time.
    
b. $\text{Her}_{c_2}$ and $\text{him}_{c_2}$ are here on time.

Note, importantly, that $\text{c}_1$ has nothing to do with agreement:

(19) a. I demand that $\text{he}_{c_1}$ be here on time.
    
b. I demand that $\text{her}_{c_2}$ and $\text{him}_{c_2}$ be here on time.

$\Rightarrow$  $\text{c}_1$ is case assigned by $T^0$ under closest-c-command;
$\text{c}_2$ is caselessness($\equiv$ unmarked case)

- in other words, insofar as English has anything you’d want to call ‘nominative’ —
  - it’s $\text{c}_2$, i.e., the thing we’ve been calling ‘accusative’ or ‘objective’ case
Happy Birthday David!

And thank you all for listening!
References


