Case in 2017: some thoughts

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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/*\emptyset \} Mary.
    
    b. the destruction \{ of/*for/*\emptyset \} the city
    
    c. It is impossible \{ for/*of/*\emptyset \} Bill to win.

— it is also *sufficient* (Sundareshan & 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(≡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 * to win.

(9) Which horse did John wager * 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 contrast 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>
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<td>*</td>
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<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:
    - 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

– 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 ⇒ 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]
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Claim (14) is false.

- Bobaljik (2008): agreement in φ-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 φ-features
  - moreover, movement to canonical subject position has LF consequences (e.g. it is scope-expanding)

⇒ both agreement in φ-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 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 \(t₁\) 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]

- 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 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-ni [ bügün t₁ kyaj-yax-xyt ] dien erem-mit-im
    I youACC 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 weACC 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
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. \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
Other types of (m-)case (cont.)

(18) a. He\textsubscript{c1} is here on time.
    b. Her\textsubscript{c2} and him\textsubscript{c2} are here on time.

Note, importantly, that \textsubscript{c1} has nothing to do with agreement:

(19) a. I demand that he\textsubscript{c1} be here on time.
    b. I demand that her\textsubscript{c2} and him\textsubscript{c2} be here on time.

⇒ \textsubscript{c1} is case assigned by T\textsuperscript{0} under closest-c-command;
    \textsubscript{c2} is caselessness(≡ unmarked case)

  in other words, insofar as English has anything you’d want to call
  ‘nominative’ —
  – it’s \textsubscript{c2}, i.e., the thing we’ve been calling ‘accusative’ or
    ‘objective’ case
Happy Birthday David!

And thank you all for listening!


