Syntax 2
Homework 2: *v*P and Theta-Roles
Due 10/20

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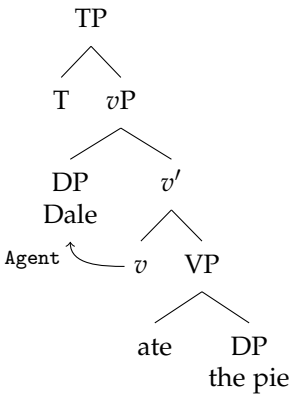
Above the VP, we now posit that there is a phrase *v*P, headed by *v*. *v* serves the primary function of introducing the agent DP:

(1)



1 Accusative Case and *v*P

In GB-terms, Luigi Burzio noted that unaccusative verbs cannot assign accusative Case. However, transitive verbs do. In other words, there's a connection between the assignment of the agent theta role and accusative Case. This is called **Burzio's Generalization**:

(2) **Burzio's Generalization:** Verbs that do not assign accusative Case do not assign the agent theta-role.

A.) (15 points.) Give a data point that demonstrates that Burzio's generalization is true. (**Hint:** Suppose that Burzio's generalization were *false*, then tell me what we expect to be grammatical. Show me that this sentence is in fact ungrammatical, implying that Burzio's generalization must be true.)

Burzio's generalization was stated as a property of verbs, i.e., each lexical entry for each verb stated which theta role it could assign and which Case it could assign. In GB terms, Burzio's

generalization was highlighting a serious redundancy in the lexicon. The lexical entries would look like this:

(3) **Transitive Verbs**:
   a. ⟨eat,Case:Accusative,Theta:{Agent,Theme}⟩
   b. ⟨make,Case:Accusative,Theta:{Agent,Theme}⟩

(4) **Unaccusative Verbs**:
   a. ⟨break,Case:None,Theta:{Theme}⟩
   b. ⟨fall,Case:None,Theta:{Theme}⟩

(5) **Unergative Verbs**:
   a. ⟨jump,Case:None,Theta:{Agent}⟩
   b. ⟨swim,Case:None,Theta:{Agent}⟩

B.) (15 points). With the *v*P hypothesis, we no longer say that the agent theta role is assigned by the verb. Instead, it is checked by *v*. With this in mind, how might we use the *v*P hypothesis then to capture Burzio's observation about the connection between agent theta role and accusative Case?

At this point in "early Minimalism", we check all features under Merge. That is, either a phrase checks its features (including accusative Case) in its base position, or by later moving to a higher position to check that feature. Suppose now that accusative DPs must check their accusative Case against *v*P.

C.) (15 points). This analaysis does not predict the correct word order for English. Explain the problem by giving a tree for a derivation where an accusative-marked DP checks its feature, and telling me whether this predicts the correct word order.

For the moment, let's put aside the word order problem. Is there any evidence that accusative Case is checked in a higher position? Examine the following data:

(6) The lawyers proved the defendants$_i$ to be guilty during each others'$_i$ trials

In this sentence, *the defendants* can bind *each others'*. Typically, binding requires c-command. Thus, we infer that *the defendants* must be higher in the tree than *each others'*. Importantly, this interpretation is still available when *during each others' trials* is a modifer of the main clause VP. That is, *the defendants* appears to bind into a main clause adjunct. In GB, this is surprising, because we postulated that *the defendants* received its accusative Case from the main verb in its base Spec,TP position:

(7) The lawyers [$_{\text{VP}}$ proved [$_{\text{TP}}$ the defendants$_i$ to be guilty during] [each others'$_i$ trials]]

This is predicted to be bad, because *the defendants* does not c-command into main clause VP adjuncts from this position.

D.) (15 points). Ignoring word order difficulties for the moment, explain how the *v*P analysis might fix this. (**Hint**: In this clause, what position might *the defendants* move to in order to check accusative Case, and does it bind into matrix VPs from this position?)

If you have the correct analysis, you should predict that *the defendants* can bind into the matrix VP adjunct *during each others' trials*, **however**, you should predict the incorrect word order. We'll address this word order tension when we discuss Agree.

2 Ergative Case

Next, we'll examine how the vP hypothesis helps us understand ergative Case.

First, let's remind ourselves what egative/absolutive Case assignment patterns are. Traditionally, ergative/absolutive alignment patterns are described as case patterns wherein the subject of an intransitive clause is marked the same way as the subject of a transitive clause.

To illustrate, we see that the subject of the verb 'fall' in Hindi and Basque

(8) a. Rām girā
Ram.Abs fell
'Ram fell' (Hindi)

b. Miren etorri da
Mary arrive is
'Mary arrived' (Basque)

(9) a. Rām-ne ām khāyā
Ram-Erg mango ate
'Ram ate a mango' (Hindi)

b. Miren-ek sagar-ra jan du
Miren-Erg apple-Abs eat has
'Mary has eaten an apple' (Basque)

However, for many languages, this generalization is wrong. Instead, we see that ergative case is assigned to the subjects of transitive verbs and the subjects of unergative verbs:

(10) a. Rām-ne khub dauṛā
Ram-Erg very ran
'Ram ran a lot' (Hindi)

b. Miren-ek oso lan egin du
Miren-Erg much work v_{DO} has
'Mary has worked a lot' (Basque)

E.) (15 points) Using the vP hypothesis, state a hypothesis of how ergative Case is assigned in these languages. (**Hint:** What do the subjects of transitive verbs and unergative verbs have in common in the vP hypothesis, but not the subject of unaccusative verbs?)

In some contexts, the ergative case-marker in Hindi is optional. For instance, both sentences in **??** are possible in Hindi. However, the sentence in (11-b) implies that Ram coughed on purpose (e.g., in a doctor's office), wheras the sentence in (11-a) does not.

(11) a. Rām khāsā
Ram coughed

'Ram coughed' (Hindi)

b. Rām-ne khāsā
Ram-ERG coughed
'Ram coughed (on purpose)' (Hindi)

F.) (15 points) Given what you said for question **E.**, how might you explain this optionality? Is it a coincidence that ergative case is paired with an agentive interpretation?

G.) (10 points) Ask me any question you have about the readings or materials in class.