Towards a minimalist theory of theta roles and case

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes to derive major insights of theta theory and case theory as developed in the earlier Principles and Parameters framework of generative syntax (Chomsky 1981) within the current minimalist framework (Chomsky 1995 and later). It defines thematic roles as features of *verbs* (rather than noun phrases), which are *interpretable* but initially *unvalued*, and hence open to feature valuation by a (c-commanding) noun phrase. It follows that noun phrase arguments cannot be required to carry a theta role, as demanded by Theta Criterion of the Principles and Parameters framework.

On the other hand, Case (in the sense of 'abstract Case' of the Principles and Parameters framework) is defined as a function of Merge (cf. Epstein et al 1999), in the sense that the order in which noun phrases are merged is reflected in a grammatical function hierarchy (cf. Zwart 2006, following Jakobson 1935). Since case in this sense is automatically tied to grammatical functions, a requirement that relevant noun phrases have Case (like the Case Filter of the Principles and Parameters framework) is trivially met.

Taken together, the mechanism that emerges is that verbs will be interpreted as having a feature that expresses a matching of thematic roles and grammatical functions. This paper aims to show that this recasting of case- and theta theory incurs no loss of empirical coverage. At the same time, it casts a new light on some of the core areas of syntactic analysis, such as passive, binding, and control.

A key observation is that when grammatical functions (GFs) and thematic roles (th-roles) are unevenly matched, interpretation is affected in various ways. When no GF is available for a particular th-role, the result is not necessarily ungrammatical (as with pseudotransitives, which acquire a particular aspectual reading in such cases), but when the GFs outnumber the th-roles, the result does not compute. This appears to be a contrast of unbound variables vs. vacuous quantification. The traditional approach to Case and theta roles has no way of accounting for this contrast.

Grammatical function changing operations, such as passive, can be understood (on the approach contemplated here) by assuming a voice element Voice outside VP that regulates the association of GFs with th-roles. In passives, Voice ensures that the highest GF values a lower (internal) th-role, bypassing the higher (external) th-role, yielding another case of an 'unbound variable'. In that case, there can be no secondary (accusative) GF, as there would not be a th-role for that GF to bind, yielding another case of 'vacuous quantification' and stark ungrammaticality. This derives the Burzio Generalization (¬EXT > ¬ACC), without assuming any particular agency of 'little v'. It also accounts for the exceptions to the Burzio Generalization noted in Zwart (2001), where a secondary GF can be shown to appear in the matrix clause of an infinitival complementation construction with an unaccusative matrix verb ('raising').

I argue that, on this approach, control needs to be recast as a relation between th-roles. This is because the external th-role of a passive verb can act as a controller (cf. Landau 2000:169f). And then so must binding, as the controlled th-role in a control infinitive can act as an antecedent in a binding relation. It follows that no silent subject needs to be assumed in control infinitives.