

Multiple case assignment and the English pseudo-passive*

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Previous literature on pseudo-passives (see van Riemsdijk 1978, Chomsky 1981, Hornstein & Weinberg 1981, Baker et al. 1989, Baltin & Postal 1996, Bruening 2011, Drummond & Kush 2015, and much other work) often notes that English pseudo-passives typically require the verb and the stranded preposition to be adjacent:¹

- (1) a. The movie was talked (***today**) about.
- b. This bed was slept (***recently**) in.

In this squib I will offer an account of this constraint. The account will rest mainly on two ideas: first, that nominals may receive Case arbitrarily many times, and second, that pseudo-passives involve functionally impoverished PPs, in which the usual machinery responsible for assigning Case to the object of P is missing.

1 Case stacking and passive

Some work on Case assignment (for example, Babby 1984, McCreight 1988, Bejar & Massam 1999, Yoon 2004, Merchant 2006, Richards 2012, Pesetsky 2013, Levin 2017) explores the possibility that Case may be assigned to a nominal more than once. There may be variation, both across languages and within a given language, in how multiple Case assignment is realized morphologically. We find instances of ‘Case stacking’, in which each assigned Case is apparently realized as a Case morpheme, and other examples in which only one of the Cases assigned is morphologically expressed. To be more specific, we find languages in which, when a Case is assigned to a nominal that already bears a Case, the new Case typically ‘overwrites’ the existing one.

An approach of this kind makes available a new picture of the syntax of passives. We can think of the passive as only affecting the expression of the subject’s theta-role. The object of a passive, on this view, can get Accusative case as usual, and

* I’m very grateful to David Pesetsky for comments on this approach, and to Kyle Johnson for making linguistics in general, and the syntactic end of it in particular, a richer, more interesting, more snappily dressed, and generally more satisfying place to be. Responsibility for the remaining shortcomings of this paper is mine.

¹ Exceptions to this generally involve idioms (e.g., *John was taken advantage of*), though see Mills (2008) for discussion of a more general class of exceptions that appear for some English speakers.

then subsequently receive Nominative case, which replaces the previously assigned Accusative.

This idea would predict, for English, that the sentence in (2) should be represented as in (2a), rather than (2b).

- (2) a. The cookies were eaten __ **quickly**.
 b. The cookies were eaten **quickly** __.

That is, if *the cookies* in (2) is to receive Accusative case as well as Nominative, then it must satisfy the conditions on assignment of Accusative case—which include, in English, a requirement that the object be roughly adjacent to the verb:

- (3) a. We ate the cookies **quickly**.
 b. *We ate **quickly** the cookies.

However the contrast in (3) is to be accounted for, we expect (2) to have to satisfy the same condition; *the cookies* must move to subject position from a position adjacent to the verb, where it can receive Accusative case before finally becoming Nominative.

In (2), of course, it is difficult to determine whether (2a) or (2b) is the correct representation. I now turn to an area where the facts are clearer.

2 Pseudo-passives

Consider English pseudo-passives:

- (4) a. The movie was talked about.
 b. This bed was slept in.

A reasonable approach to the syntax of pseudo-passives, it seems to me,² would treat them like long passives in German:

- (5) ...dass der Traktor zu reparieren versucht wurde
 ...that the.NOM tractor to repair tried was
 ‘... that they tried to reponair the tractor’

Wurmbrand (2001, and following), in her work on restructuring, presents long passives as a piece of evidence in favor of approaches in which the object gets its theta-role from one head (V), and its case from a different head (*v*); we can contrast these with the classic GB-era approaches in which the verb is responsible for both

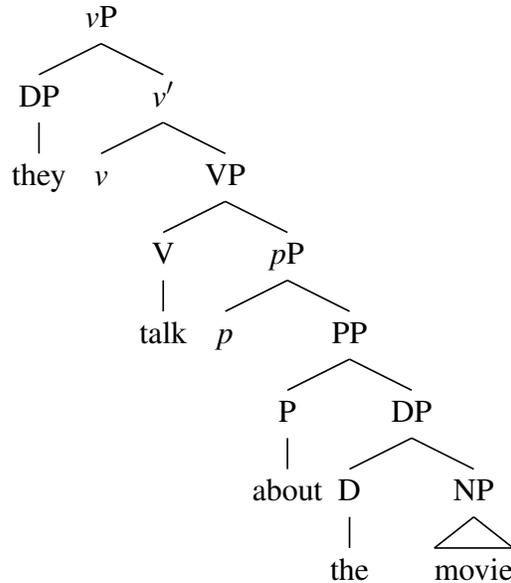
² I have not yet seen this idea in print, but I’m sure it’s not mine. Other people I have heard expressing this idea include Jason Merchant and David Pesetsky (p.c.).

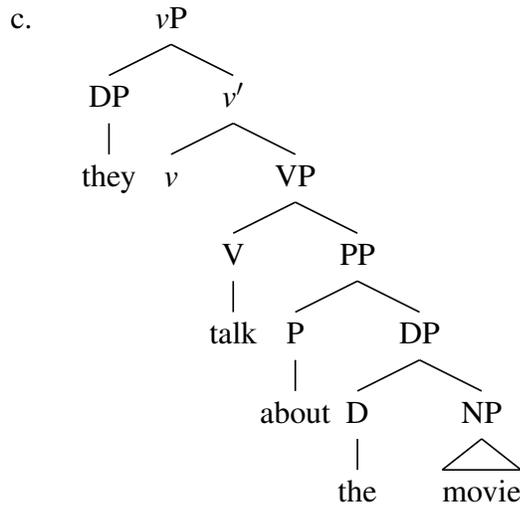
of these kinds of licensing. In long passives, the account goes, we can see objects getting theta-roles from an embedded verb, but having case licensed by the higher verb (so that passive morphology on the higher verb affects the morphology and syntax of the object of the lower verb).

Similarly, the existence of pseudo-passives in English might make us suspect that the object of a preposition receives its theta-role and its Case from different sources; a PP is generally dominated by the projection of a functional head *p* which is responsible for assigning Case to the object. In English, moreover, we can posit something equivalent to restructuring of the Wurmbrand 2001 type; a PP may be functionally impoverished, lacking its *pP*, in which case the object of the preposition receives Case from a higher *v*.

On this view, a sentence like (6a) is structurally ambiguous, potentially containing either of the partial structures in (6b-c):

- (6) a. They are talking about the movie.
 b.





The two potential trees in (6b)–(6c) differ in whether the PP equivalent of restructuring has taken place; just in (6c), the PP is missing its *pP*, and Case for the object of about comes from *v*. Our understanding of Case Adjacency must be liberal enough to allow structures like (6c) to satisfy it, which is presumably necessary anyway in light of the possibility of placing particles between the object and the verb:

- (7) a. She turned the machine **on**.
 b. She turned **on** the machine.

On the other hand, we should expect Case Adjacency to ban restructuring in (8):

- (8) They are talking **today** about the movie.

The example in (8) should only have a structure like the one in (6b), and not the restructuring structure in (6c); *v* should be blocked from licensing Case on the object past the intervening adverb, thanks to Case Adjacency.³

³ Note that we cannot account for the ill-formedness of (9a) below simply by positing PP restructuring; restructuring does not, in general, require the heads involved to be adjacent, a point made by Rizzi (1982: 38):

- (i) Maria è dovuta **immediatamente** tornare a casa.
 Maria is must.FEM.SG immediately return.INF to home
 ‘Maria had to come back home immediately.’

In (i), the use of the ‘be’ auxiliary shows that restructuring has taken place, but an adverb intervenes between the two participating verbs.

3 Case Adjacency in Pseudo-passives

The reasoning above can account for the contrast in (9):

- (9) a. *The movie is being talked **today** about.
b. The movie is being talked about **today**.

In Section 1, I proposed that subjects of passives receive Case twice: first they receive Accusative case, as usual, and then are assigned a Nominative Case that overwrites the previous Accusative. If this is correct, then the subjects of the passives in (9) must be in the right configurations to receive, not only Nominative case, but also Accusative. In Section 2, I proposed that pseudo-passives involve a kind of restructuring applied to PP: the object of a preposition in English may receive Case from v , and passivizing this v has the same effect on objects of Restructured prepositions that it would have on an object.

Taking these two ideas together, we arrive at an account of the facts in (9). In (9a), the adverb *today* blocks Case Adjacency for assignment of Accusative Case to the DP *the movie*. If, as I proposed above, this DP must in fact get Accusative Case before moving up to receive Nominative Case, then we can appeal to the condition of Case Adjacency to rule the example out. We must also crucially assume that failure to assign Accusative Case correctly is fatal, even in derivations in which Accusative is later overwritten by Nominative.

This last assumption will need to be stated carefully, in order to avoid ruling out examples like (10):

- (10) They are talking.

Assuming that v in (10) has the same properties as v in (9), we will need to make sure that failure of v to assign Accusative in (10) does not lead to ungrammaticality. Alternatively, of course, we could posit a kind of v which does not need to assign Accusative case at all, but having posited such a v for (10), it will be difficult to avoid using in (9). A more promising alternative, I think, will be to distinguish between instances of v which have no DPs in their search domain (like the one in (10)) from instances of v which do have potential targets for Accusative case, but are blocked from assigning Accusative to them by the adjacency requirement on case assignment in English. See [Preminger 2014](#) for discussion of similar issues.

Another potential derivation of the string in (9a) must also be ruled out. Suppose *the movie* were to receive its first Case, not from v , but from p ? That is, suppose we simply refrained from performing restructuring of PP? Since the proposal of Section 1 has been that nominals may receive Case multiple times, such a derivation could not simply be ruled out by a ban on assigning Nominative to an object which

had previously received Case from *p*. An alternative would be to appeal to locality conditions on Case assignment; if *pP* is a phase, for example, then we could perhaps rely on it, together with the *vP* phase, to make the object inaccessible to further Case assignment by T.

4 Conclusions

In this squib I have attempted to account for contrasts like the one in (11):

- (11) a. The movie is being talked about **today**.
 b. *The movie is being talked **today** about.

Classic accounts of (11) have sometimes posited a notion of ‘reanalysis’, which allows the creation of a single predicate *talk about* in (11a), but not in (11b). Baltin & Postal (1996) offer arguments, which seem to me to be compelling, against theories which literally create a single word out of the verb and the preposition in (11a). For example, they note that prepositions which participate in pseudo-passives can be coordinated with other prepositions:

- (12) The bridge was flown **over**, and then, but only then, **under**.

In place of reanalysis, I have proposed that the prepositions participating in pseudo-passive have undergone a kind of prepositional equivalent of restructuring, which strips them of the functional material necessary to license case on their objects; the object is licensed by *v*, and is therefore compelled to be adjacent to the verb (modulo the preposition). If we also assume, as I have, that the object of a passive must get both Accusative and Nominative case, then the facts in (11) follow, given the general English requirement that Accusative case be assigned under adjacency.

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