

## Dropping the F bomb: An argument for valued features as derivational time bombs Laura Kalin

**1. Introduction:** Originating with Vergnaud 1977/2008, Chomsky 1980, a rich tradition in generative syntax holds that, in addition to bearing a theta role, nominals need to be formally licensed by receiving abstract Case. The prevailing model since Chomsky 2000, 2001 is that all nominals have an uninterpretable/unvalued Case feature, as well as valued/interpretable phi-features. The Case feature is a “derivational time bomb” (in the Preminger 2011 sense): it needs to be deleted (via valuation) for the derivation to converge.

Based on novel observations about parallels between the Person Case Constraint and Differential Object Marking, I turn this paradigm on its head. I argue that nominal licensing is driven by the needs of certain valued (“interpretable”) phi-features, rather than by abstract Case; whether a nominal needs licensing—and in what configurations a nominal can be licensed—therefore depends on its phi-features. In other words, certain valued phi-features are derivational time bombs, and abstract Case is not a derivational time bomb.

**2. Data:** If all nominals bear an uninterpretable/unvalued Case feature, as in the traditional view, then all nominals ought to behave alike. However, what we find in language after language is that—based on their phi-features—nominals behave differently with respect to licensing, morphological case, and phi-agreement. I use the Neo-Aramaic language Jewish Zakho to illustrate. First, we can observe that a *3rd person* object triggers agreement (boxed) if it is *specific*, (1a). If the object is *nonspecific*, then it does not trigger agreement, (1b). Finally, a *1st/2nd person* object is disallowed (whether or not it triggers agreement), (1c).

- (1) a. 'āna zwīn-ā-li                      t̪lɪmsa.  
       I    buy.PFV[-OBJ.3FS]-SBJ.1MS flatbread.F  
       ‘I bought the flatbread.’ (*specific object; must trigger agreement*)
- b. 'āna zwīn-ni                      t̪lɪmsa.  
       I    buy.PFV-SBJ.1MS flatbread.F  
       ‘I bought some flatbread.’ (*nonspecific object; must not trigger agreement*)
- c. \*'āna zwīn-it̪-ti.  
       I    buy.PFV[-OBJ.2MS]-SBJ.1MS  
       Intended: ‘I bought you.’ (*1st/2nd person object; disallowed*)

The (1a)–(1b) contrast is Differential Object Marking, (2a). The restriction in (1c) can be seen as an (extended) instance of the Person Case Constraint (Doron and Khan 2012, Kalin and van Urk 2015), (2b).

- (2) a. Differential Object Marking (DOM; Comrie 1979, Bossong 1991, Aissen 2003, *i.a.*): Objects high in definiteness/animacy are more likely to need to be overtly marked via case or agreement.
- b. The Person Case Constraint (PCC; canonical strong version, Bonet 1991): In a combination of a weak direct object and a weak indirect object, the direct object has to be third person.

**3. Earlier accounts:** Why do nominals behave differently depending on their features? Previous accounts hold that some nominals have additional licensing needs beyond Case and a theta role. A typical answer for why *specific nominals* are special is that such nominals must leave VP (Diesing 1992, Bhatt and Anagnostopoulou 1996, Baker and Vinokurova 2010, *i.a.*). A typical answer for why *1st/2nd person nominals* are special is that interpretable person features need licensing (Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar and Rezac 2003, Adger and Harbour 2007, Preminger 2011, *i.a.*), *i.e.*, person features are derivational time bombs, (3).

- (3) Person Licensing Condition (Béjar and Rezac 2003): Interpretable 1st/2nd-person features must be licensed by entering into an Agree relation with an appropriate functional category.

**4. New observations:** DOM and the PCC have too much in common to be accounted for in distinct ways.

- (4) *Commonalities between DOM and the PCC*
- a. Two arguments involved (DOM: subj and dir. obj.; PCC: canonically, ind. obj. and dir. obj.)
- b. The restriction associated with the phenomenon (DOM: marking requirement; PCC: no 1st/2nd person) holds over the lower of the two arguments, the direct object.
- c. The higher argument (DOM: subj.; PCC; ind. obj.) is immune to the effect.

- d. If the higher argument is removed, effect disappears (DOM: if dir. obj. is promoted to subj., the argument is not marked differentially; PCC: if no ind. obj., then no restriction on the dir. obj.).
  - e. Features of the lower argument can cause ungrammaticality (DOM: if (e.g.) specific dir. obj. is not marked, then derivation crashes; PCC: if dir. obj. is 1st/2nd person, then derivation crashes).
  - f. Problematic configurations in (4e) are fixed via “repair”, through addition of a licenser, (5)–(6).
- (5) Bes-ó                   \*(a) **María**.  
kiss-3SG.PAST   **P** **Mary**  
‘He kissed Mary.’ (*DOM repair in Spanish; Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2007*)
- (6) M’ha recomanat   \*(a) **tu** per a la feina la subdirectora.  
1-has recommended   **P** **2** for the job the deputy.director  
‘The deputy director has recommended you to me for the job.’ (*PCC repair in Catalan; Bonet 2002*)

**5. Proposal:** I propose that DOM and the PCC are conspiring to tell us that they are related, and that nominal features are what matter for licensing. DOM and the PCC can be understood in a unified way by reversing the burden of licensing: valued phi-features are derivational time bombs while abstract Case is an innocent bystander. Concretely, I propose that the feature [PARTICIPANT] is universally a derivational time bomb, i.e., needs licensing, cf. (3). Further, I propose that the crosslinguistic variability of DOM tells us that (i) other nominal features can be derivational time bombs, and (ii) which nominal features are derivational time bombs is language-specific. Phi-features on nominals can thus be categorized and represented as in (7):

- (7) *Types of valued features on nominals*
- a. [F] = does not need licensing; not a derivational time bomb (e.g., [PLURAL], [FEMININE])
  - b. [F<sup>☉</sup>] = needs licensing; derivational time bomb (e.g., [PARTICIPANT<sup>☉</sup>], [DEFINITE<sup>☉</sup>])

When a nominal bears a feature that is a derivational time bomb, i.e., an [F<sup>☉</sup>], that nominal needs licensing. A feature is licensed (as is traditional) through Agree. Once the impetus for licensing is transferred to phi-features, having abstract Case be a derivational time bomb becomes superfluous in some instances and undesirable in others. In particular, I argue that abstract Case is not a derivational time bomb, and that nominals bearing no [F<sup>☉</sup>] do not require abstract licensing (beyond a theta role).

The final piece of the puzzle is understanding the different environments in which differential marking and person restrictions occur. Crucial here are (i) a distinction between obligatory and secondary licensing loci (Levin and Massam 1985, Bobaljik 1993, Rezac 2011, *i.a.*), with secondary licensers activated only when a feature that is a derivational time bomb would otherwise go unlicensed, and (ii) an account of defective intervention (Chomsky 2000, Béjar and Rezac 2003, Preminger 2011, *i.a.*), such that in certain contexts, Agree with [PARTICIPANT<sup>☉</sup>] is blocked, while Agree with other nominal features is possible.

Combining these earlier proposals with my proposal can derive both DOM and PCC effects. In (very) brief, DOM environments are those where a nominal cannot be reached by the obligatory licenser (e.g., T), and so requires activation of a secondary licenser (e.g., v, Appl, or P), as in (1a) and (5); unmarked objects in DOM systems are in fact unlicensed, as in (1b). PCC environments are those where a nominal is separated from a licenser by a defective intervener, and so [PARTICIPANT<sup>☉</sup>] cannot be licensed in this position, as in (1c); to license such a [PARTICIPANT<sup>☉</sup>], a secondary licenser must be activated, as in (6).

**6. Implications:** This proposal reanalyzes two licensing phenomena that are typically considered non-canonical—but are in fact common crosslinguistically—as core instantiations of licensing, and does away with the proliferation of licensing conditions typically needed for accommodating DOM and the PCC. Why should so-called “interpretable” phi-features need licensing? I suggest that this reflects the need for certain features to be anchored to the speech act (in the spirit of Ritter and Wiltschko 2014) in order to be interpreted.

**Selected references:** Béjar and Rezac 2003. Person licensing and the derivation of PCC effects. In *Romance linguistics: theory and acquisition*.—Bobaljik 1993. On ergativity and ergative unergatives. MITWPL.—Diesing 1992. *Indefinites*. MIT Press.—Preminger 2011. Agreement as a fallible operation. PhD Thesis.