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A Reanalysis of Double Object Constructions: Varying Approaches with Varying Results

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HONORS THESIS

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I. Introduction

In the field of syntactic theory, there are several enigmas that continue to baffle researchers. One such construction in English is the Double Object construction. Though most native and non-native English speakers are aware of the existence of this construction, many are unaware of the conundrum it presents to syntacticians. Observe the following example sentences:

(1) Mary sent a letter to Jim.

(2) Mary sent Jim a letter.

While the grammaticality of these sentences is unquestioned, the precise inner workings on a syntactic level are the topic of much debate. Quandaries that arise include the applicability of current branching and government theories, the appropriate assignment of abstract case to the noun phrases in each clause, and the comparison of the dative versus double object constructions ((1) and (2) above, respectively). It is with these questions in mind that I intend to apply existing work to the relevant issue(s) and further explore the problem of double object constructions. Finally, I will pose what questions are remaining so that more specific work may be accomplished in this area of syntactic theory.

II. Double Object Constructions (DOC) and Phrase Structure

One of the chief issues in the double object construction (hereafter referred to as the DOC) is the problem of multiple branching as a method for representation of this construction. Barss and Lasnik (1986) bring this conundrum to light through their discussion of anaphor relations and double objects. Barss and Lasnik use sentences like the follow-

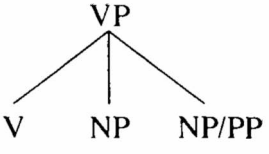
ing to show that the two NPs must have an asymmetric relationship to each other; this is the only viable reason why (3) is grammatical and (4) is not:

(3) I showed $[_{NP}$ John] $[_{NP}$ himself] (in the mirror).

(4) *I showed $[_{NP}$ himself] $[_{NP}$ John] (in the mirror).

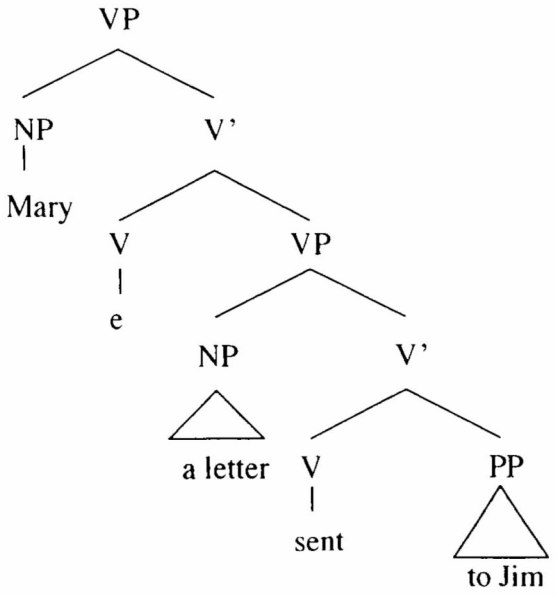
(3) and (4) show that there must a hierarchical difference between NP1 and NP2; otherwise, the (4) should be allowed. Based on their analysis of anaphoric relations and what they term as "asymmetric c-command" (Barss and Lasnik, 1986: 350), the DOC is considered to disallow any sort of ternary or multiple branching as in (5):

(5)



In a structure like (5), the relationship between the two NPs is identical—neither has any special command over the other. Barss and Lasnik are able to discount other options, as well, but are unable to posit any viable structural alternatives of greater efficacy. Richard Larson (1988, 1990) contributes a new theoretical structure for the DOC that calls for embedded VP shells (Larson, 1988), or "Larsonian shells" as they have come to be referred to in the literature. Larson's D-structure for (1) is represented in (6):

(6)



In the representation shown in (6), Larson's binary-branching structure allows for one NP (the deep subject or direct object, *a letter*) to c-command the indirect object NP (*Jim*) while the latter is unable to c-command the former. Therefore, Larson's structure allows for the asymmetrical c-command required by Barss and Lasnik while retaining a branching structure that adheres to current concepts of binary branching structures in syntactic representations. However, one unusual concept in (6) is the maximal projection VP that occurs as a complement to another VP; additionally quizzical is the concept of a VP projection from an empty head. Larson uses the familiar X-bar schema in (7) to account for this VP-shell phenomenon:

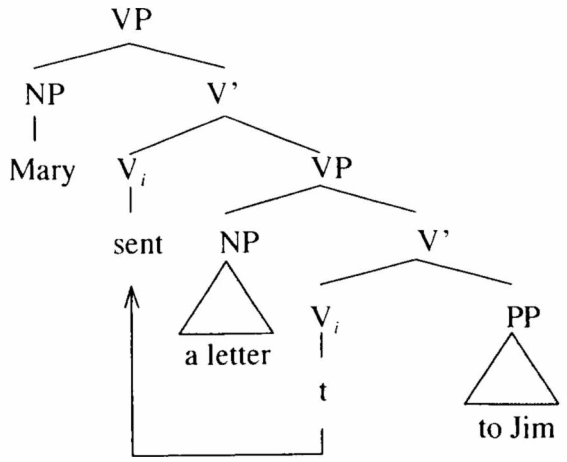
(7) a. XP -> Spec X'

b. X' -> X ZP

In a situation like (6), the VP can only contain one complement per projection, so it forces an upward branching of X-bar structure to allow for a position for the second argument (Larson, 1990: 597-8). The empty V is forced to appear due to principles of X-

bar theory exemplified in (7). The empty V allows for the lower V to raise to the empty position, thus creating the more acceptable S-structure shown in (8):

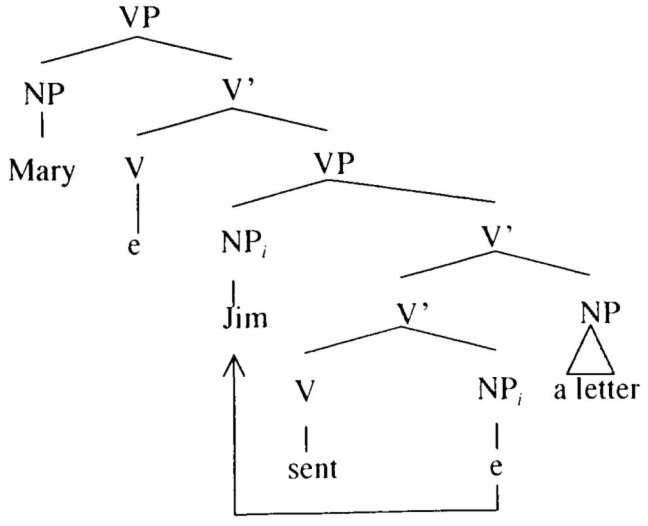
(8)



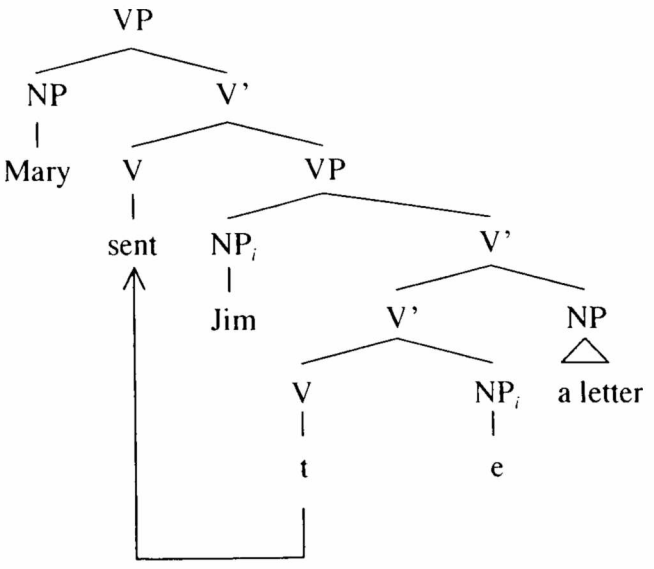
After the V raises to the upper V head position, the direct object (*a letter*) is able to receive objective case and an appropriate θ-role from V. The indirect object in this example receives both its case and θ-role from the preposition *to*. Hence, all overt NPs pass the case filter and the thematic grid for *send* is filled.

Larson's new framework meets with criticism when he posits the D-structure and S-structure for double NP constructions like that in (2), as shown in (9) and (10):

(9)

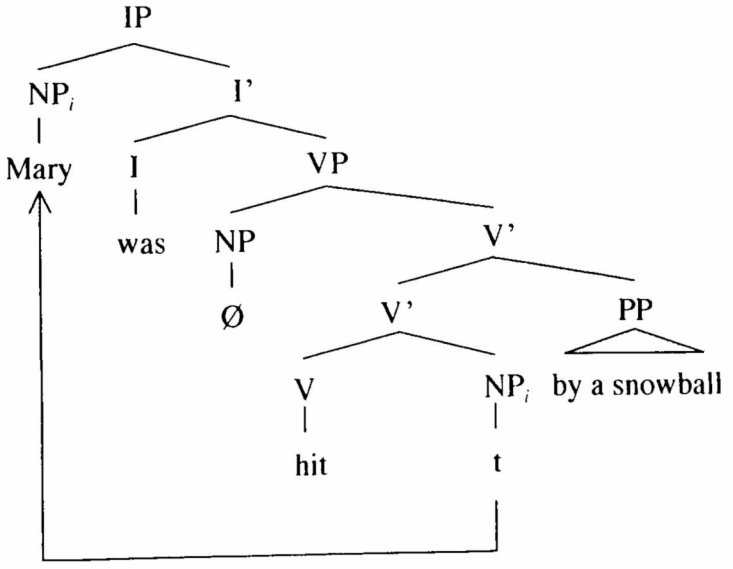


(10)



Larson likens this process to that of English passivization, in which the subject position's θ-role is suppressed and the object position's case is absorbed. This in turn motivates the deep subject to be generated in an adjunct position to the verb while the object must move to the [Spec] position to acquire its missing case. Consider the structure for passivization given in (11):

(11)



In (11), *Mary* moves to acquire the case that was absorbed; *a snowball* is generated in the adjunct position because the deep subject position's θ-role has been suppressed and it must find a new role. A similar situation occurs in Larson's double-NP constructions: the deep subject (direct object) is generated as a VP adjunct by way of the suppression of the θ-role in the [Spec] position. However, in a passive construction, the V-adjunct deep subject (*a snowball*) is able to receive new case and AGENT θ-role from the preposition *by*; this is not the situation for constructions like (9) and (10). Since each case assigner can assign only one abstract case, there is no assigner left in (10) to assign abstract case to the adjunct direct object since we must assume that the verb assigns objective case to the V-adjacent indirect object, *Jim*. Therefore, Larson's only solution to the case assignment for the direct object is an *ad hoc* one at best and leads to further questions for DOC case assignment.

III. DOC and Case Assignment

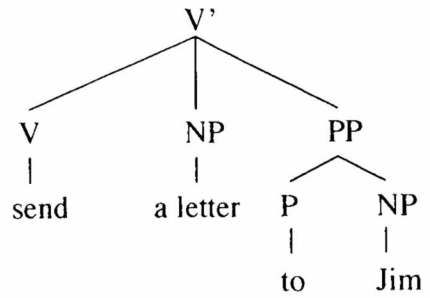
Joseph Emonds (1985) proposes an approach to the lack of case assignment in DOC in his concept of indirect object NPs being base-generated in a PP that is headed by a null P. According to this method, the PP-internal NP (in this case, the D-structure position of the NP *Jim*) is assigned abstract case by the empty P in the head. Whether the preposition is phonologically realized is based on the Empty Head Principle, posed by Emonds (1985):

(12) *Emonds' Empty Head Principle*

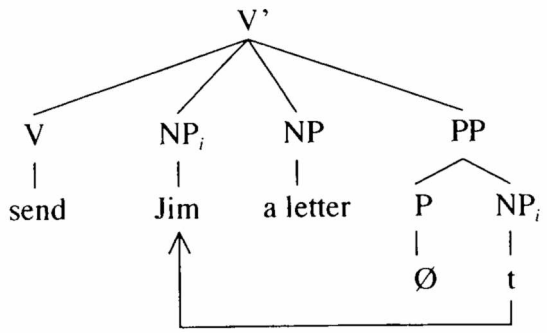
If an empty head X^0 induced by subcategorization c-commands an adjacent empty and caseless Y^{max}, X^0 has no phonetic realization. (Emonds, 1985: 113)

According to (12), P will *not* dominate a lexical item if it c-commands an empty and caseless maximal projection, such as an NP-trace. Observe the VP trees for (1) and (2):

(13)



(14)



In A-movement (or argument NP-movement), current theory calls for the use of *chains* to maintain a link between the moved phrase and its traces. Most frequently, these chains are able to "share" case that has been assigned before the movement. Applying this concept to (12), we can account for the phonological realization of P in (15):

(15) It's John$_i$ they will send a present to $[_{NPi}$ Ø].

Emonds distinguishes the A'-movement (non-argument NP-movement) in (14) from this type of A-movement that is often used in English to topicalize or front an embedded NP. In cases of the latter, the NP-trace shares the case with its coindexed overt NP (*John*) and thus, due to (12), the head of PP must remain overt in sentences like (15). However, in cases of A'-movement as shown in (14), in moving to a non-argument (non-case-marked) position, the indirect object NP retains the case assigned by P, and thus the NP-trace is

now both caseless and empty. Therefore, according to the EHP, the P remains empty and we do not have VP constructions in English like *_____ *sent Jim a letter to.*

One issue with Emonds' work is his prolific use of multiple branching structures where current syntacticians adhere strictly to the binary branching presented earlier. This creates a difficulty in Emonds' framework to account for asymmetrical anaphor relations as described by Barss and Lasnik (1986, see Section II). Nevertheless, Emonds is able to overcome the inconsistencies of Larson's case assignment by allowing for the indirect object to be base-generated in a PP, thus acquiring case from the preposition. It would be logical at this point to attempt to insert Emonds' Empty-P proposal into a more current structural framework like Larson's, but many of the motivations for movement in Larson's structural construct would be rendered unnecessary due to the case filter being fulfilled.

IV. Dative versus Double-NP Constructions

One last difficulty surrounding the DOC is the comparison of and relation between the dative DOC and the double-NP DOC—as exemplified in (1) and (2), respectively. As has been shown, Larson's process for arriving at the double-NP construction from what appears in his theory to be a base-generated dative D-structure (see (9) and (10)) is not without problems. While the correlation to passive is certainly worth consideration, there exist issues with the requirements of case assignment in Larson's construct. Emonds, however, is able to account for the differences in the dative and double-NP constructions through the idea that the latter of the two is simply a transformationally related construc-

tion to the former—the only difference being the lack of phonologically realized preposition due to (12). Emonds' use of multiple branching does cause problems in other areas, but the concepts related to the Empty-P approach maintain a certain economy that Larson fails to achieve.

V. Conclusions and Further Questions

The double object construction is notorious for posing several difficult problems for syntacticians. The problems I have chosen to address in this paper have dealt with case assignment, branching (binary and otherwise), and a comparison of dative constructions and double-NP constructions. For case assignment, it is clear that there are proposals in the literature (see Larson, 1988) that seek to fix other problems while paying less attention to that of case assignment for arguments of the VP, especially Larson's treatment of the direct object in a double-NP construction as seen in (9) and (10). Emonds, however, is able to overcome certain issues of case assignment, though he encounters other issues in other areas, namely branching and c-command (see Barss and Lasnik, 1986). With regard to branching, it is Larson's concept of the VP-shells that affords the best explanation for the asymmetric c-command phenomenon, but the motivation and execution of the projection of a VP from an empty head is unclear. Finally, Emonds rebounds with his treatment of the comparison between dative and double-NP constructions ((13) and (14)), but again falls short concerning the current adherence to binary branching structures.

As mentioned before, one might wonder if a conflation of the two theories would allow for the strengths of each to bolster the weaknesses of the other. However, this approach

would encounter difficulties of its own. First, many of Larson's requisite phrase movements would need to be motivated by other means because Emonds' Empty-P would be able to satisfy case filter issues present in Larson's construct. Additionally, there would still exist a problem in a double-NP construction because the direct object would still be far removed from the V, and thus outside of its case-assigning domain. An appropriate solution, therefore, would require the simplicity of Emonds combined with the relevance of Larson, and would yet need to avoid the problems that plague the theories of both. This solution is conceivable, but is as yet unavailable in the current literature.

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