

The modular locus of the Person Case Constraint

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One of the questions raised in the call-for-papers of this workshop is whether the Person-Case Constraint (PCC) is purely *syntactic* (Anagnostopoulou 2003, et seq.; Bejar & Rezac 2003, 2009; Nevins 2007), or involves the *syntax-semantics interface* (Pancheva & Zubizarreta 2018). This framing could be seen as somewhat puzzling, since there is a venerable tradition that claims that the PCC is, in fact, *morphological* (Bonet 1991, 1994). While we will argue against the latter claim, it is important to understand—and take seriously—the factors that led to its proposal. Once this is done, it becomes clear that the PCC is quite inescapably *syntactic*.

- Premises:** (1) a. Distinctions that are exclusively about *meaning* are inaccessible at the PF interface.
b. Distinctions that are exclusively about *sound/sign* are inaccessible at the LF interface.

Distributional evidence: As already observed by Bonet (1991:190ff., using data from Georgian), PCC effects come and go with the presence of overt agreement in phi-features. So, for example, the Basque finite clause in (2a) gives rise to PCC effects, while the non-finite nominalization in (2b) does not, despite containing the very same combination of arguments:

- (2) a.* Zuk **harakin-ari** ni saldu n(a)iozu (*data from Laka 1996*)
you.ERG **butcher-the.DAT** me.ABS sell.PTPL 1.ABS-AUX-sg.ABS-3sg.DAT-2sg.ERG
'You have sold me to the butcher.'
b. Gaizki irudi-tzen Ø-zai-Ø-t [zuk ni harakin-ari sal-tzea]
wrong look-IMPF 3.ABS-AUX-sg.ABS-1sg.DAT [you.ERG me.ABS **butcher-the.DAT** sell-NMZ]
'It seems wrong to me for you to sell me to the butcher.'

Importantly, this cannot be attributed to finiteness *per se*. In a language like Spanish, for example, PCC effects persist in non-finite contexts (compare (3b) and (2b)).

- (3) a.* Juan **me los** recomendó
Juan CL1sg CL3pl recommend.PAST
Intended: 'Juan recommended me to them.' (*ok as:* 'Juan recommended them to me.')
b.* Recomendár-**me-los** es una sorpresa
recommend.INF-CL1sg-CL3pl COP DET.Fsg surprise
Int.: 'Recommending me to them is a surprise.' (*ok:* 'Recommending them to me is a surprise.')

The same intra-linguistic effect seen in (2a–b) can be observed cross-linguistically, as well: by and large, PCC effects are found exactly and only in languages where one finds overt phi-feature agreement with internal arguments (see Preminger 2019 for further discussion). In sum:

- (4) DESCRIPTIVE GENERALIZATION: a construction *C* in language *L* will show PCC effects *iff* verb phrases in *C* show overt phi-feature agreement with at least one internal argument

Argument: We can now show that the PCC is not a syntax-semantics interface effect. For concreteness, let us assume Pancheva & Zubizarreta's 2018 account (henceforth, P&Z; but note that the argument here applies more broadly, to any account of this general type.) On this account, the PCC is about *perspectival agreement*, or more specifically, syntactic agreement in a “p-feature,” which serves to encode semantic perspective within the syntax. For P&Z, it must be the case that non-finite ditransitives like the one in (2b) do not involve perspectival agreement. That is, there is a difference between the syntax-semantics of the ditransitive verb phrases in (2a), (2b), and (3b), on the one hand, and the ditransitive verb phrase in (2b) (as well as its all finite ditransitives, in any language that lacks overt agreement morphology).

Crucially, for this to work, the child must learn that the existence of “p-feature” agreement covaries—even internal to her language—with the presence of overt phi-feature agreement (cf. (2a–b) vs. (3a–b), and, more generally, (4)). But now recall (1b): if our conception of modularity in grammar is correct, and the PCC is a syntax-semantics interface effect, (4) should be unstateable (and, consequently, unlearnable).

What to make of perspectival effects in ditransitives: Just as we have preached to take seriously the data that motivated Bonet to claim that the PCC is morphological, one should not dismiss the data that motivated P&Z to claim that the PCC arises at the syntax-semantics interface. Just like (2–4), the data is real and we must contend with it. To take a representative example, consider (5a–b) (from Ormazabal & Romero 2007, cited by P&Z, ultimately attributing the observation to Roca 1992):

- (5) a. Mateo; piensa que se *lo*i_j* entregaste a la policía. (Spanish)
 Mateo thinks that CL.DAT CL3sg.ACC handed.2sg to the police
 ‘Mateo thinks that you handed him over to the police.’
- b. El paquete; especifica que se *lo_i* entregues al portero.
 the package specifies that CL.DAT CL3sg.ACC hand-SBJNC.2sg to.the doorman
 ‘The package specifies that you should hand it over to the doorman.’

In (5a), the accusative clitic *lo* cannot refer to a perspective-holder – *Mateo* – even though there is nothing binding-theoretically wrong with this clitic referring to the matrix subject, as binding by the inanimate matrix subject in (5b) shows. P&Z, following Charnavel & Mateu 2015, take this to indicate that the PCC is not about person features *per se*, but about perspective holders (with the proviso that 1st and 2nd person are perspective holders by definition).

This last step, however, is logically underdetermined. That certain perspectival effects are found in a construction *C* in no way means that *C* involves agreement in perspective-related morphosyntactic features. An analogy with a less controversial empirical domain may help clarify: Pullum (2014) shows that, in the English passive, the grammatical subject must be at least as old, information-structurally, as the NP in the *by*-phrase. This is demonstrated in (6a–b):

- (6) a. Have you heard the news about YouTube? It was bought by Google.
 b. Have you heard the news about Google? *YouTube was bought by it/them.

No one (we would hope) would take these data to suggest that the English passive involves syntactic agreement in [\pm newinfo] or [\pm given]. The lesson that (6a–b) teaches us is that, once morphosyntax makes some structure (in this case, the passive) available, semantics and/or pragmatics can overlay additional usage conditions—above and beyond morphosyntactic well-formedness—upon the use of this structure.

In the same vein, what P&Z (and Charnavel & Mateu) have shown is that ditransitives—or, more accurately, applicative phrases—trigger an extra semantico-pragmatic usage condition, limiting the number of perspective holders allowed in this structure. This is a real and interesting discovery; but what facts like (6a–b) demonstrate is that such findings do not, in and of themselves, justify the leap to reifying these effects in morphosyntactic feature agreement. Given that the latter step, as it pertains to PCC effects, runs into the problems surveyed above (cf. (2–4))—it is a step that should be rejected in this case.

Against a morphological account: So far, we have seen evidence against conceiving of the PCC as a *syntax-semantics interface phenomenon*. Does this warrant a return to Bonet’s *morphological* conception of the effect? Here, we call on work by Albizu (1997) and Rezac (2008), showing that the PCC in Basque is sensitive to the local c-command relationship between the absolute and dative arguments. Space limitations preclude a detailed discussion here, but a summary is given in (7):

- (7) a. DAT \gg ABS → PCC effects. (where ‘ \gg ’ means asymmetric c-command)
 b. ABS \gg DAT → No PCC effects.

Under any contentful definition of how “morphology” differs from “syntax,” c-command is the purview of the latter, not the former. Thus, these findings militate against a morphological account of the PCC, at least in Basque. Consequently, no morphological account can lay claim to being a general account of the PCC, any more than a syntax-semantics account can. We are hemmed in, then, from both sides: the PCC must be a result of purely syntactic factors.

Conclusion: Ditransitives, the empirical domain where PCC effects typically arise, show perspectival effects (P&Z, Charnavel & Mateu 2015). This alone, however, does not suffice to show that perspective is in any way involved in the morphosyntax of the construction and, specifically, in the morphosyntax of PCC effects. A view where the syntax-semantics interface is involved in the PCC turns out to be incompatible with the facts concerning its cross- and intra-linguistic distribution, which closely tracks with PF information: the occurrence of overt phi-feature agreement. Given that a morphological approach is also untenable (Albizu 1997, Rezac 2008), the only remaining option is the one already put forth by Anagnostopoulou (2003, et seq.), Bejar & Rezac (2003, 2009), and Nevins (2007): the PCC is a syntactic effect, and more specifically, one that arises via the mechanisms of phi-feature agreement in syntax.