

# Vergnaud's letter to Chomsky & Lasnik

## The birth of Abstract Case

### 1 Setting the scene

Major Goal of the Generative Syntactic Theory

- Building a generative system that can generate well-formed linguistic expressions while banning ill-formed ones.

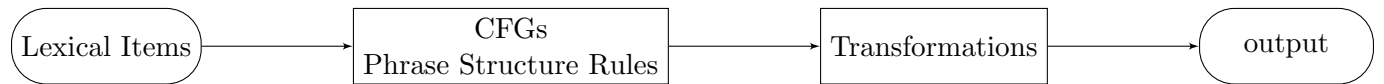
This is no easy feat. Pure permutation of words is not going to make the cut.

- (1) **5! = 120** Atatürk
- Hayatta en hakiki mürşit ilimdir.
  - \*En hayatta hakiki mürşit ilimdir.
  - \*En mürşit hakiki hayatta ilimdir.
  - \*Mürşit hakiki hayatta ilimdir en.
- (2) **16! = 20,922,789,888,000** Nietzsche
- Bir gençliği yozlaştırmannın en iyi yolu onlara kendisi gibi düşünenleri kendisinden farklı düşünenlerden üstün görmesini öğretmektir.

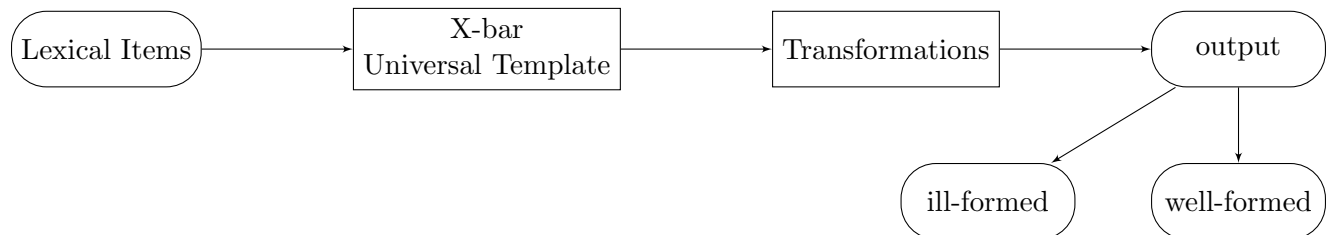
#### Attempt 1



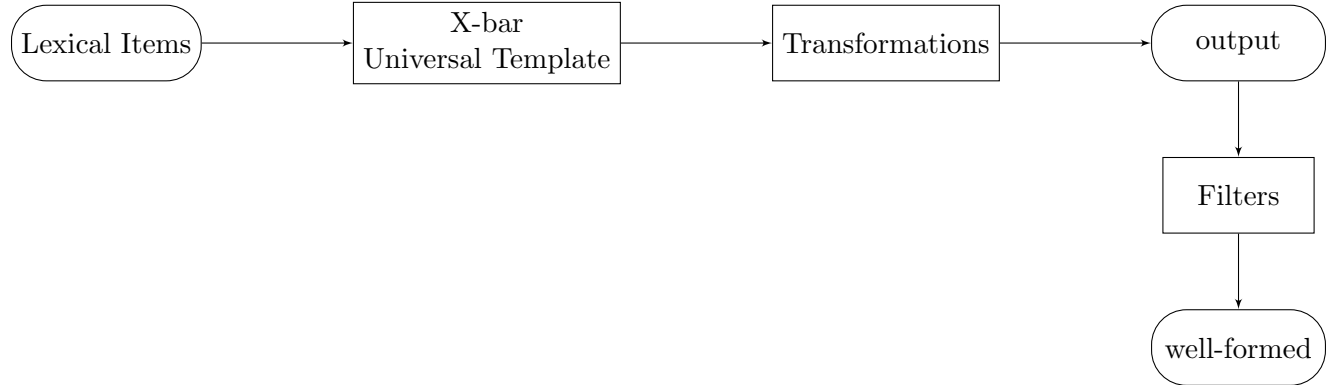
#### Attempt 2



#### Attempt 3



#### Attempt 4



## 2 Filters

Filters are surface structure constraints that “filter out” certain ill-formed outputs. They can be **universal** or **language specific**. The idea of filters goes back to Perlmutter 1968.

- (3) a. \*the man who that I saw  
b. the man that I saw  
c. the man who I saw  
d. the man I saw

- (4) **doubly-filled comp filter**  
\*[*COMP* wh-phrase complementizer]

Modern-English specific  
(Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 435)

## 3 \*[NP to VP] Filter

In Chomsky and Lasnik (1977), Noam and Howard were trying to figure out the distribution of lexical NPs in infinitival clauses. The goal was to figure out the nature of the **X** in the following template.

- (5) X \_\_\_ to VP

The blank slot above is supposed to be an NP position. The goal was to see what can precede the NP. The immediate observation was that only a **V** or the complementizer **for** can precede the subject NP in infinitival clauses.

### 3.1 Data

- (6) X = V<sup>1</sup>  
a. I **believe** John to be incompetent.
- (7) X = for  
a. I'd prefer **for** John to leave.

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<sup>1</sup>Examples from (6) to (12) are from Chomsky and Lasnik (1977, pp. 457–458).

Anything else leads to ungrammaticality.

- (8) X = N  
 a. his **plan** \*(for) Bill to win  
 b. It bothers **me** \*(for) Bill to win.
- (9) X = Adj  
 a. It is **illegal** \*(for) Bill to take part.
- (10) X = Adverb  
 a. I want **very much** \*(for) Bill to be given a chance.  
 b. he argued **passionately** \*(for) Bill to be given a chance.
- (11) X = PP  
 a. There is someone **at the door** \*(for) you to play with.  
 b. I received a book **on Tuesday** \*(for) you to read.
- (12) X = sentence-initial position  
 a. \*(For) John to take the job would be preferred.  
 b. \*(For) John to be successful would be unlikely.

### 3.2 Creating the right filter

- (13) **Attempt 1:** Filter (93) (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 459)  
 \* $[\alpha$  NP to VP ] unless  
 $\alpha$  is adjacent to and in the domain of a *verb* or *for*

This was good but it referred to a disjunction of features (i.e. V and for), so they redefined it as follows:

- (14) **Attempt 2:** Filter (93') (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 460)  
 \* $[\alpha$  NP to VP ] unless  
 $\alpha$  is adjacent to and in the domain of a [-N]

Filter (93') was good for the data above but it failed to capture the following relative clause data.

- (15) a. \*a man [<sub>comp</sub> who for] [ *t* to fix the sink ] *filtered by df comp filter*  
 b. \*a man [<sub>comp</sub> for] [ *t* to fix the sink ] *filtered by some filter we didn't discuss*  
 c. \*a man [<sub>comp</sub> who] [ *t* to fix the sink ] *filtered by 93/93'*  
 d. a man [<sub>comp</sub> e] [ *t* to fix the sink ] *filtered by 93/93' but shouldn't be*

To capture the data above, the filter was rewritten as follows:

- (16) **Attempt 3:** Filter (107) (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 464)  
 \* $[\alpha$  NP to VP ] unless  $\alpha$  is adjacent to and in the domain of [-N] or  $\alpha =$  NP

Further problems are observed in the following data.  $\phi$  is a complementizer with no overt phonological form. Examples (17-b,c,d) are from Chomsky and Lasnik (1977, p. 472). Notice that X is an adjective in the examples below.

- (17) a. it is certain **for** John to leave.  
 b. \*it is certain  $\phi$  John to leave.  
 c. John is certain  $\phi$   $t$  to leave.  $t = \text{NP-trace}$   
 d. \*who is it certain  $\phi$   $t$  to leave.  $t = \text{Wh-trace}$   
 e. who is certain  $\phi$   $t$  to leave.  $t = \text{Wh-trace}$

- (18) a. \*I believe sincerely John.  
 b. \*I like very much John.

- (19) **Sidenote:** Filter (154) (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 479)  
 \* $[\alpha \text{ V adjunct NP}]$ , where NP is lexical

### Escaping Filter (154)

- (20) a. we want very much [ $^*$ (for) John to win]  
 b. who do you want very much [ $t$  to win]

- (21) Movement salvages ungrammaticality (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 478)  
 a. \*John believes sincerely [Bill to be the best man]  
 b. who does John believe sincerely [ $t$  to be the best man]  $t = \text{Wh trace}$   
 c. \*NP was proven conclusively [John to be the best man]  
 d. John was proven conclusively [ $t$  to be the best man]  
 e. John was proven to us [ $t$  to be the best man]  $t = \text{NP trace}$   
 f. John seems to us [ $t$  to be the best man]  $t = \text{NP trace}$

- (22) **Attempt 4:** Filter (155) (Chomsky and Lasnik 1977, p. 479)  
 \* $[\alpha \text{ NP to VP}]$  unless  $\alpha$  is adjacent to and in the domain of:  
 a. [-N] (adjunct)  
 b. [+V] $\phi$

## 4 Vergnaud's Case Filter

Vergnaud's observation was very simple. The distribution of the **overt lexical NPs** in X \_\_\_ to VP was exactly the same as the distribution of elements that bear **Governed Case**.

(23) **Case**

- a. Subject Case (i.e. Nom)
- b. Genitive Case (i.e. Acc)
- c. *Governed Case*

(24) **Governed Case**

Governed Case is the case found on pronouns that are complement to V, P, etc.

- (25)
- a. \*I saw he
  - b. I saw him
  - c. \*about he
  - d. about him

(26) *Replacing Lexical NP with pronouns*

Vergnaud's key move

- a. I **believe** him to be incompetent.
- b. I'd prefer **for** him to leave.
- c. his plan **for** him to win.
- d. I want very much **for** him to be given a chance.
- e. **For** him to take this job would be preferred.

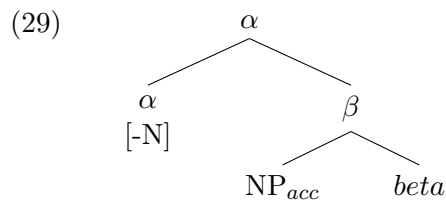
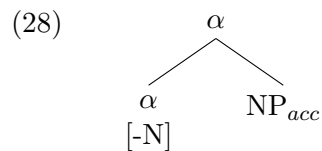
(27) **Case Filter**

Vergnaud's Filter

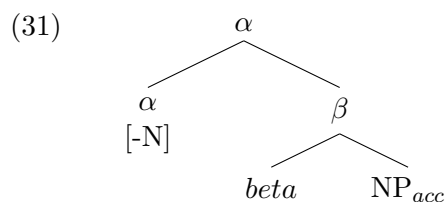
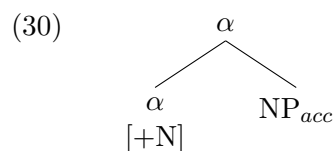
A structure of the form ...[ $\alpha$  ...NP...],..., where NP is in the **Governed Case** and a is the first branching node above NP, is ungrammatical unless:

- a. a is the domain of [-N] or
- b. a is adjacent to and in the domain of [-N].

**well formed**



**ill formed**



Case Filter applies to overt lexical NPs and pronouns only. Traces are not subject to the Case Filter.<sup>2</sup>

## 5 Significance of Vergnaud’s Case Filter

Vergnaud’s key proposal was that lexical NPs get case even when we don’t see any overt reflection of case. This was the birth of Abstract Case, which dominated the field for about 20+ years and it is still assumed to be true by many, although it is now fading.<sup>3</sup>

### 5.1 Distribution of NPs

Vergnaud’s perspective was that NPs with Governed Case can occur only in positions where they can be governed.

### 5.2 Licensing

In Chomsky (1981), this insight was somewhat reversed as Case Licensing.

- (32) Case Filter (Chomsky 1981, p. 49)  
\*NP if NP has phonetic content and has no Case

Case Filter was used as one of the key licensers of NPs in the clause along with the  $\theta$ -Theory.

- (33) a. \*John saw out by  $\theta$ -Theory  
b. John saw Bill.  
c. \*was seen Bill. out by Case Filter  
d. \*It was seen Bill. out by Case Filter  
e. Bill was seen

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<sup>2</sup>Legate (2008) suggests that Vergnaud’s Case Filter applies to Lexical NPs and Wh-traces but not PRO or NP traces. I believe this follows from Theory AII but not Theory AI, which was Vergnaud’s own preference.

<sup>3</sup>See our next meeting where we plan to discuss Alec Marantz’s seminal conference paper on Abstract Case. (Marantz 1991)

## References

- Chomsky, Noam (1981). *Lectures on Government and Binding: The Pisa Lectures*. Foris Publications.
- Chomsky, Noam and Howard Lasnik (1977). “Filters and control”. In: *Linguistic inquiry* 8.3, pp. 425–504.
- Legate, Julie Anne (2008). “Morphological and abstract case”. In: *Linguistic inquiry* 39.1, pp. 55–101.
- Marantz, Alec (1991). “Case and Licensing”. In: *Proceedings of the 8th Eastern States Conference on Linguistics*. Ed. by Benjamin Westphal and Hee-Rahk Chae. Ithaca, NY: CLC Publications, pp. 234–253.