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Burzio's Generalization, Markedness, and Constraints on Nominative Objects*

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Abstract:

Recent research on Burzio's Generalization converges on a surprising conclusion: what blocks accusative Case in unaccusative constructions has nothing to do with the Case or theta assigning abilities of unaccusative verbs; rather an overriding principle requires sentences to have a nominative Case. But there is little consensus as to how to formulate the relevant principle, and most proposals fail to predict a large range of counterexamples in the form of sentences with no nominative. It is argued here that the relevant principle is markedness: when there is a choice of licensed Cases for a DP, the grammar selects the less marked Case. There are exceptions because markedness is violable and overriding principles may require a more marked Case.

Markedness accounts for the lack of accusative Case on unaccusative subjects, and also for the presence of nominative objects in dative or ergative subject constructions. However, nominative checking on objects is sometimes blocked: in Icelandic, it is blocked when the subject has lexical accusative Case, and in Faroese, it is blocked in all active constructions. The claim is that such blocking is due to constraints on Case checking domains. The ideal Case checking domain contains no DP whose Case is not checked by the head of that domain. However, some languages tolerate deviations from this ideal, with an additional partially checked Case being worse than a completely mismatched Case.

This work is relevant to the general issue, important in syntax and phonology, of whether it is an intervening potential source, target, or both that matters in situations where like blocks like. This paper shows that Case checking can be blocked by a closer potential target (DP), just as movement and binding can be (Rizzi 1990). Since a closer potential source (head) can also block Case checking, we can conclude that both are relevant.

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0. Introduction

Burzio (1986) asks why, if verbs assign accusative Case to their objects, a DP that remains inside the VP in unaccusative constructions cannot have accusative Case:

- (1) All'improvviso è entrato un uomo dalla finestra.
suddenly entered a man[nom/*acc] from the window
Suddenly a man entered from the window. (Belletti 1988 (17))

Noting that unaccusative verbs lack an external (agent) theta role, Burzio links the ability of a verb to assign accusative Case to its ability to assign an external (agent) theta role:

- (2) Burzio's Generalization: All and only the verbs that can assign a \bar{e} -role to the subject can assign accusative Case to an object. (Burzio 1986:178)
[subject = external subject (agent)]

Burzio's generalization is intended to extend to passives as well as to dative subject constructions as in (3) (under the assumption that experiencer subjects are internal arguments).¹

- (3) Barninu batnaði veikin. [Icelandic]
child-dat recovered-from disease-nom (*acc)
The child recovered from the disease. (Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff 1987:223)

Burzio's generalization has been extremely influential, but there is now a large literature addressing both the empirical and theoretical basis of this generalization (e.g. Abraham 1996, Baker 1988, Brandner 1993, 1995, Burzio 1994, 1995, Haider 1985, 1995, Haegeman 1986, Laka 1993, 2000 Legendre et al. 1993, Mahajan 2000, Perlmutter 1978, Nakamura 1997, 1999, Reuland 2000, Sigurðsson 1989, Solá i Pujols 1992, von Stechow 1990, Tsunoda 1981, Woolford 1993, 1997, and Yip, Maling and Jackendoff 1987). Perhaps the most surprising result that emerges from this subsequent literature is a radical change in the view of the nature of the generalization. There is considerable consensus now that the problem has nothing to do with theta roles, nor with the ability of verbs to license accusative Case. Instead (and despite many obvious counterexamples), the generalization that much current work is attempting to explain is that the object gets nominative Case when there is no (nominative) subject (e.g. Yip, Maling and Jackendoff 1987, Brandner 1993, 1995, Laka 1993, 2000, Legendre et al. 1993, Burzio 1994, 1995, Jónsson 1994, 1996, Haider 1995, Schütze 1997, Nakamura 1997, 1999, Mahajan 2000,

¹Despite the influential idea of Belletti (1988) that unaccusative subjects get partitive Case, it is now generally agreed that they actually get nominative Case (e.g. Burzio 1986, 1994, 1995, Sigurðsson 1989, 1992, Brandner 1993, 1995, Chomsky 1995, Haider 1995, Abraham 1996, Mahajan 2000). There have been many proposals for exactly how nominative can be assigned to or checked on an object (see Harbert and Toribio 1991 for one survey of proposals). Within the Minimalist Program, this is possible because Infl c-commands the object, with the Spec-head relation now subsumed under c-command (Chomsky 1998).

Prince 1993, 1999). Second, the question of why checking nominative should have a special status over checking accusative is answered if the relevant principle is markedness: the selection of nominative over accusative follows simply from the fact that nominative is a less marked Case than accusative.

The instances in which markedness is violated are interesting because they reveal the effects of other constraints that can affect Case. This paper will focus on instances in which nominative objects are blocked in Icelandic and Faroese. Icelandic blocks nominative objects when the subject has (lexical) accusative Case, but allows nominative objects with dative subjects. Faroese blocks nominative objects in active constructions but allows them in passives. In contrast, German does not block nominative objects in either situation. I argue that nominative objects are blocked when the resulting Case checking domain would contain an illegal element.³

The question of exactly how to formulate the constraints on Case checking domains is relevant to the more general theoretical question of what kinds of intervening elements count in situations where ‘like blocks like’, as in relativized minimality situations in syntax (e.g. Rizzi 1990, McGinnis 1998) or where intervening elements block vowel harmony in phonology (e.g. Jensen 1974, Benua and Smolensky 2001)). Much of this literature converges on the idea that what can block the relation between a ‘source’ and a ‘target’ is another potential source and/or target. In many situations in syntax and phonology, the question is complicated by the fact that intervening elements often qualify as both potential sources and as potential targets, thus making it hard to separate out the effects of each type of intervening element. Case checking may be able to shed some new light on this problem because there is no such ambiguity: the source is a head and the target is a DP. The blocking effects that are the focus of this paper are due to a closer DP (potential target).

The claim is that an additional DP inside the Case checking domain of a head can cause problems (even if it does not actually intervene between the head and the DP whose Case that head checks) because it disturbs the ideal one-to-one relation between heads and DPs in the domain. An additional DP in the domain is worse if it has a Case that can be partially checked by the head. The nominative Case feature of Infl can partially check an accusative subject because nominative and accusative are both [-oblique], but not a dative because these share no features.

Insights from the literature on Burzio’s Generalization upon which this paper builds are summarized in section 1. Section 2 presents the proposal that Burzio’s Generalization effects follow from markedness and demonstrates it with relevant examples. Section 3 formulates the constraints on Case checking domains that can override markedness and demonstrates how these constraints account for the data patterns of Icelandic, Faroese, and German. Previous approaches to the question of why nominative objects are sometimes blocked are discussed in section 4. These include a locality parameter (Spec-head vs. c-command), multiple Case checking, and Relativized Minimality. Broader theoretical implications of this work, differences between Case and agreement, and questions for future research are the topic of section 5.

³For a discussion of other types of situations in which markedness can be violated with respect to Case choice, see Woolford 2001.

1. Review of the Literature: Progress to date

This section outlines the main points of progress in recent research on Burzio's Generalization. We first look at exceptions to the original generalization that have led researchers to question the role of agents/external arguments in the generalization. We then look at two attempts to reformulate the generalization to improve its empirical accuracy. Finally we turn to the broad range of work that abandons the idea that the problem is about how to prevent unaccusative verbs from licensing accusative Case, and replaces it with the idea that an overriding grammatical principle forces nominative to appear on the object if it does not appear on the subject.

1.1 Questioning the Role of Agents

In the original formulation of Burzio's Generalization, the subject or agent theta role plays a crucial role. "All and only the verbs that can assign a θ -role to the subject can assign accusative Case to an object" (Burzio 1986:178). The generalization predicts that

(6) Predictions of Burzio (1986):

1. No verb without an agent subject can assign accusative Case.
2. Any verb with an agent subject can assign accusative Case.

The subsequent literature points out exceptions to both of these statements:

1.1.1 Verbs without Agents Can Sometimes Assign Accusative Case

Although Burzio's generalization correctly predicts that verbs with one internal argument cannot assign accusative Case, several scholars independently note that verbs with two internal arguments can assign accusative Case to one of these arguments (Haider 1985, 1995; Haegeman 1986; von Stechow 1990; Woolford 1993, 1997). Constructions cited to demonstrate this include psych verbs with two internal arguments (an experiencer and a theme), as in (7), and double object passives, as in (8). We see in (7b) that the second object of a psych verb has accusative Case, because it can be replaced by an accusative clitic. We see in (8) that the first object is the accusative pronoun.⁴

- (7) a. Questo preoccupa Gianni. (Belletti and Rizzi 1988 (98b))
 this worries Gianni
 This worries Gianni.

⁴Passives will generally be set aside in this paper because the complexity of passive constructions cross-linguistically (see Baker 1988, Bresnan and Moshi 1990, Woolford 1993, Goodall 1993) suggests that several additional factors may be operating in passives so that a full account of these complex passive patterns is beyond the scope of this paper.

- b. Questo lo preoccupa. (Belletti and Rizzi 1988 (97))
 this him worries
 This worries him.

(8) The watch was given him for his birthday. (accepted by some speakers)

In this respect, Burzio's generalization is too strong: verbs without an external argument can assign accusative Case, to a second object.

1.1.2 Verbs with Agent Subjects Cannot Always Assign Accusative Case

The presence of an agent/external subject does not guarantee that a verb can assign accusative Case. In languages where the agent subjects of transitive verbs are marked with ergative Case, we often find that the transitive object cannot be accusative. Bok-Bennema (1991) takes the verb's inability to assign accusative Case as a hallmark of ergative languages, and the fact that ergative languages often present counterexamples to Burzio's Generalization is noted in Mahajan 2000 and Woolford 1997.

- (9) Raam-ne rotii khaayii thii.
 Ram-ERG bread(fem)-NOM eat(perf,fem) be(past,fem)
 Ram had eaten bread. (Mahajan 1990:73)

In this respect, Burzio's original generalization is also too strong. It predicts that all verbs with agent subjects should assign accusative Case.

1.2 Reformulating the Generalization for Empirical Accuracy

In response to these exceptions to the original formulation of Burzio's Generalization, Haider 1985 and Woolford 1993, 1997 attempt to reformulate the generalization to improve its empirical accuracy, while still maintaining the basic idea that unaccusative verbs must be prevented from assigning accusative Case. Both agree that whatever is responsible for Burzio's generalization, it affects only one argument (as opposed to all internal arguments), and it has nothing to do with the thematic role of the subject. Under both reformulations, one of the verb's arguments has to be denied structural accusative Case from that verb.

- (10) If a verb has argument(s) needing structural case,
 one must get that case VP externally (Haider 1985).
- (11) V cannot assign accusative Case to its highest argument without lexical Case
 (Woolford 1993, 1997).

The strength of these reformulations is their improved empirical coverage. They cover unaccusative constructions as well as constructions with lexically Cased subjects and/or objects. Moreover, they avoid incorrect predictions with respect to a range of constructions that are

problematic for many of the alternative approaches that we will discuss below.⁵ Nevertheless, although these reformulations describe the generalization more accurately, they do not provide any intuitive explanation of why it should hold.

1.3 Replacing the Generalization

Once it is realized that the arguments that are denied accusative Case under Burzio's Generalization typically surface with nominative Case,⁶ a very different way to approach the problem presents itself: reverse the assumptions concerning cause and effect. Instead of the original view that some principle blocks accusative Case licensing (and thus some other Case must occur instead), reverse it so what the relevant principle does is to force nominative to appear, with the consequence that accusative cannot. The majority of the attempts in the literature to account for the data covered by Burzio's Generalization take some version of this latter approach. Let us briefly survey some of them.

Tsunoda (1981) proposes that there is a universal principle such that every clause has a nominative (or absolutive), because it is the least marked Case (although he notes that there are counterexamples). Other approaches try to tie the need for a nominative to some other principle of grammar. One approach to Case in unaccusative constructions starts with the assumption that all sentences need a subject. When there is no subject, as in unaccusative constructions, the object becomes the subject (either by a change in grammatical relations or (LF) Movement). Since subjects get nominative Case, this object-turned-subject will also (e.g. Perlmutter 1978; Abraham 1996). To extend that approach to constructions with dative and ergative subjects requires claiming that nominative objects are subjects at the level of representation where nominative Case is assigned. Another approach ties the need for a nominative Case to the EPP (Extended Projection Principle) which requires an external subject. This idea is proposed in various forms in Sigurðsson 1989, Solá i Pujols 1992, Burzio 1995, and Mahajan 2000. Because dative and ergative subjects can satisfy the original EPP, this approach essentially adds to the EPP the requirement that nominative must be checked. Along the same lines, Laka (1993, 2000) argues that in languages where Agr-S is active, (nominative-accusative languages) it must check all of its features, so that nominative must be checked.

Other approaches avoid the overly strong prediction that every sentence needs a nominative, since there are many known counterexamples. (For example, Icelandic allows sentences with one argument that takes the dative Case.) Brandner's (1993, 1995) account requires nominative Case only when there is agreement (since sentences with a dative typically show no agreement). Harley (1995:214) formulates a Case assignment rule so that "if one case feature is checked structurally

⁵An additional advantage of these reformulations is that they capture the fact that agent subjects cannot get accusative Case even if they are generated in a VP-internal position that would otherwise be eligible for accusative Case.

⁶Arguments against the very influential idea that unaccusative and passive subjects that remain inside VP get partitive Case (Belletti 1988), rather than nominative Case (as Burzio 1986 maintains) appear in Sigurðsson 1989, Brandner 1993, Burzio 1994, and Chomsky 1995.

in a clause, it is realized as Nominative/Absolutive”. Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff (1987), Legendre et al. (1993), and Nakamura (1997, 1999) order the rules that assign Cases so that lexical Case assignment takes place first, followed by nominative and then accusative.⁷ Marantz (1992) also proposes an order in which Cases are assigned, depending on certain conditions such as the presence of another Case competitor.

A rather different approach to giving nominative priority over accusative is proposed by Haider (1995). He proposes that the effects of Burzio’s generalization are due to an economy principle: Minimize Checking. His idea is that checking by Agr (nominative) simultaneously checks the functional (agreement) features of the verb, whereas checking by V (accusative) requires a separate checking operation to check the functional features. Thus using nominative Case is more economical than using the accusative, but there is no requirement that nominative must always be checked.

The approach that I will argue for maintains the basic idea common to all of the proposals in this section, that some principle causes nominative Case to be selected instead of accusative, when either Case could be licensed on an object. In addition, I take the view of Legendre et al. (1993), Haider (1995), and Nakamura (1997, 1999) that the relevant principle can be violated whenever it is necessary to obey some overriding principle. Finally, this approach incorporates the idea of Tsunoda (1981) that the reason for the priority of nominative is markedness: nominative is the least marked Case.

2. Proposal: BG Effects Stem From Markedness

The intuitive idea of this proposal is simple: if an object can potentially be licensed for either nominative or accusative Case, it will surface with nominative, because all other things being equal, the grammar prefers a less marked Case over a more marked Case.

This simple idea could be integrated into the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995) by adding a ‘Least Marked Case’ constraint to the module of the grammar containing the violable constraints (e.g. economy constraints) which select the best of two (or more) otherwise legitimate versions of a sentence that remain after any inviolable constraints have been applied. When there is a choice of licensed Cases for a DP, that Least Marked Case constraint would select the least marked of these Cases. To use that constraint, one would access the universal Case Markedness hierarchy:

⁷The latter two approaches allow the rule order to vary across languages.

(12) Universal Case Markedness Hierarchy (Grimshaw 2001, Primus 1999, Woolford 2001):

least marked

most marked

nominative < accusative < dative

But within Optimality Theory (Prince and Smolensky 1993, McCarthy and Prince 1993, 1999), notions such as ‘least’ or ‘closest’ are not incorporated into the formulation of constraints; instead they rather follow from the architecture of the theory (see the discussion in McCarthy 2001, sections 1.4.4 and 3.2.3). In addition, it is not necessary to consult the relevant hierarchy each time the constraints are used because the constraints are ranked in a universally fixed way determined by the relevant hierarchy. Thus within Optimality Theory, a series of simple violable Case markedness constraints in a fixed ranking does the job (Woolford 2001):

(13) Universally Ranked Violable Case Markedness Constraints

*dative >> *accusative

Although markedness has effects on Case choice in many other situations (see Woolford 2001), the focus of this paper is on Burzio’s Generalization effects, where an DP inside the VP surfaces with nominative rather than accusative Case. Under this approach,

(14) Burzio’s Generalization reduces to *accusative.

To see how this works, let us first consider the effect of the constraint *accusative in unaccusative constructions such as (15) where the unaccusative subject remains inside the VP.

(15) All'improvviso è entrato un uomo dalla finestra.
suddenly entered a man[NOM] from the window
Suddenly a man entered from the window. (Belletti 1988 (17))

In such constructions, the VP-internal argument can be licensed for Case by either Infl (nominative) or V (accusative). Thus there are two possible versions of this sentence that satisfy the Case Filter, one with a nominative and one with an accusative:

(16) Competing Versions

- a. Suddenly entered a man-NOM from the window.
- b. Suddenly entered a man-ACC from the window. [violates *accusative]

Markedness (*accusative) eliminates the (b) version, so that the version in (a) with nominative Case is what surfaces.

The situation is similar in dative subject constructions in Icelandic. The object can be licensed

for either nominative Case (from Infl) or accusative Case (from V), just as in the unaccusative example above.⁸

- (17) Barninu batnaði veikin. [Icelandic]
child-DAT recovered-from disease-NOM (*ACC)
The child recovered from the disease. (Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff 1987:223)

(18) Competing Versions

- a. child-DAT recovered-from disease-NOM
b. child-DAT recovered-from disease-ACC [violates *accusative]

In Icelandic, markedness makes the decision between these two otherwise legitimate versions of this sentence, rejecting the version with the more marked accusative and thus selecting the remaining version with a nominative object.⁹

Ergative subject constructions such as the one from Hindi below work in the same way. Either nominative or accusative Case can be licensed on the object, but markedness selects the version with nominative over the one with the more marked accusative object.¹⁰

⁸The dative subject occupies the external subject position due to the EPP; Case no longer drives movement in the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1998, 1999). Agreement is always with the nominative, but non-local agreement is subject to more stringent restrictions than Case is (see section 5).

⁹ECM constructions show a similar pattern for most Icelandic speakers. Contrary to standard assumptions, nominative Case is available in infinitival complement clauses (Jónsson 1994, 1996, Taraldsen 1996, Schütze 1997) and it can surface on the object when the subject is dative (although some Icelandic speakers allow or prefer an accusative object in tenseless clauses with a dative subject (Sigurðsson 1993, Jónsson 1996)).

- (i) Hann taldi [Jón-i líka þessir sokkar].
He believed John-dat to-like these socks-nom (Jónsson 1996)

But when the ECM subject is accusative, it blocks a nominative object:

- (ii) Ég tel [stúdentana lesa bækur].
I believe the students-acc to-read books-acc (*nom)

¹⁰When the object is specific in Hindi, it does not surface with nominative Case; instead it is marked with the dative case morpheme *-ko*, which is often labeled accusative in this usage. This is just one of many types of counterexamples to the descriptive generalization that the object will be nominative whenever the subject is not. The existence of such counterexamples indicates that the principle that requires a nominative is violable, obeyed only when no other principles/constraints take precedence over it. See Woolford 2001 for a discussion of constraints that can take precedence over markedness in situations such as this, as well as in situations where lexically licensed Cases surface instead of less marked Cases.

(19) Raam-ne rotii khaayii thii.
 Ram-ERG bread(fem)-NOM eat(perf,fem) be(past,fem)
 Ram had eaten bread. (Mahajan 1990:73)

(20) Competing Versions

- a. Ram-ERG bread-NOM ...
- b. Ram-ERG bread-ACC ... [violates *accusative]

Although markedness makes the decision in these instances, resulting in a nominative object, nominative objects are sometimes blocked due to overriding constraints on Case checking domains.

3. Blocking Nominative Objects

Although the generalization that the object is nominative when the subject is not often holds true, there are well-documented exceptions that have been noted by scholars working on the problem of nominative objects, especially in Icelandic and Faroese (e.g. Andrews 1982, Zaenen and Maling 1984, Barnes 1986, Collberg 1986, Sigurðsson 1989, 1992, 1993, Jónsson 1994, 1996, Taraldsen 1996, Schütze 1997). In Icelandic, dative subject constructions, as in (a)), allow nominative objects, but constructions with a lexical accusative subject do not, as in (b) (Andrews 1982, Collberg 1986, Sigurðsson 1989):

- (21) a. Barninu batnaði veikin. [Icelandic]
 child-dat recovered-from disease-nom (*acc)
 The child recovered from the disease. (Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff 1987:223)
- b. Drengina vantar mat.
 the boys-acc lacks food-acc (*nom)
 The boys lack food. (Andrews 1982:462)

Faroese, although closely related to Icelandic, disallows nominative objects even in dative subject constructions:

- (22) a. Mær líkar henda filmin.
 me-DAT likes this film-ACC (*nom)
 I like this film. (Barnes 1986 (12))

German, however, allows nominative objects with both dative and lexical accusative subjects.

- (23)a. ... daß mir der Streit mißfällt
 that me-dative the quarrel-nom displeases

b. ... daß mich der Streit anödet
 that me-acc the quarrel-nom bores (Bayer 2001)

We can summarize this typological variation in the following chart:

(24) Typological Variation in Nominative Objects (Active Constructions)

Nominative Objects Allowed With		
Language	Dative Subjects	Accusative Subjects
German	yes	yes
Icelandic	yes	no
Faroese	no	no

Intuitively, the problem with having a nominative object in a dative subject construction is that there is a foreign Case in the nominative Case checking domain, the dative subject. Making the object accusative instead of nominative avoids this problem, simply by removing the need for having a nominative Case checking domain at all.

The idea of this approach is that violations of markedness may be necessary in order to achieve a different goal, a uniform Case checking domain wherein the head checks the Case of any DP in that domain. However, languages differ with respect to whether and how they are willing to deviate from this ideal in order to respect other constraints such as markedness.

Two violable constraints are formulated in section 3.1 which push languages toward the ideal uniform Case checking domain and regulate the kind of deviation tolerated. Because one way to avoid an imperfect Case checking domain is to shrink the domain so that it no longer includes a ‘foreign’ Case, a discussion of what region of structure is included in Case checking domains is included in section 3.2. We then see in sections 3.3 through 3.5 how these constraints interact with markedness to produce the patterns of data seen in Icelandic, Faroese, and German.

3.1 Constraints on Case Checking Domains: No Potential or Partial Targets

Ideally, the Case checking domain of a head is uniform in the following sense: a head must check the Case of any DP(s) in its Case checking domain. A DP in the domain of a head whose Case is not checked by the head disturbs this ideal state. In the proposed account, two violable constraints push Case checking domains toward this ideal state by punishing deviations from it.

In general terms which may be applicable to domains besides just Case checking, one constraint bars any potential target in the domain that is not an actual target, while the other bars partial targets. For Case checking domains, the first constraint bars any ‘foreign’ DP inside a Case checking domain, while the second bars only partially checked DPs.

(25) Violable Constraints on Case Checking Domains

- a. *Potential Target: Any potential target in a source-target domain must be an actual target. For Case checking domains, assign one violation mark (*) for any DP in the domain whose Case is not checked by the head.
- b. *Partial Target: A source-target domain must not contain any partial targets. For Case checking domains, assign one violation mark (*) for any DP whose Case features are partially checked by that head.

A head partially checks a Case if it matches that Case in some feature(s), but not all. It is proposed here that nominative feature of Infl will partially check a (lexical) accusative subject, but not a dative subject, because both nominative and accusative have the feature [-oblique], whereas dative is [+oblique].

It is proposed here that nominative, accusative, and dative Cases are distinguished by two features: [+/-oblique] and [+/-LxHd].

(26) Cases and Their Features

nominative	accusative	dative
[-oblique]	[-oblique]	[+oblique]
[-LxHd]	[+LxHd]	[+LxHd]

Distinguishing datives from nominatives and accusative with the feature [+/- oblique] is already established in the literature. The behavior of Case in various contexts in Icelandic motivates the idea that Cases fall into two types, [+/-oblique], independent of how the Case is licensed (structurally or lexically) (Andrews 1982, Zaenen and Maling 1984).¹¹ Although the standard assumption has been that nominative and accusative are structurally licensed, while dative is lexically licensed, there are many claims in the literature that dative is structurally licensed in certain situations (e.g. Czepluch 1988, von Stechow (1990), Broekhuis and Cornips (1994), Webelhuth 1995, Broekhuis and Gronemeyer 1997), and we know that structural Cases (at least accusative) are lexically licensed in certain situations. Thus the theory must distinguish the type of a Case, [+/-oblique], from the way it is licensed:¹²

¹¹In Icelandic, each of these two ways of distinguishing Cases is crucial in different contexts: Subjects with oblique Case (datives) allow nominative objects, but subjects without oblique Case (nominative, structural accusative, lexical accusative) do not. In contrast, subjects with structurally licensed Case (nominative, structural accusative) trigger participle agreement, but subjects with lexically licensed Case (dative, lexical accusative) do not. (See Andrews 1982).

¹²I follow Zaenen and Maling 1984 in referring to dative as an *oblique Case*, even though this may lead to confusion since the term *oblique* has been used in many different ways in the literature, e.g. as synonymous with adjunct. See the discussion in Nichols 1983 of different uses of the terms *direct* and *oblique* in the structuralist literature.

(27) Distinguishing [+/-Oblique] from the Manner of Licensing¹³

	Structurally Licensed	Lexically Licensed (Lexically selected)
[-oblique]	nominative structural accusative	lexical accusative
[+oblique]	structural dative structural ergative	lexical dative lexical ergative

The feature [+/-LxHd] refers to the type of head that licenses that Case, lexical or functional. Nominative is licensed by a functional head (Infl), whereas accusative and dative are licensed by lexical heads (V and P). Thus nominative has the value [-LxHd], and accusative and dative are [+LxHd].

These features correctly predict the markedness hierarchy for these three Cases, if the positive value of each feature is taken as more marked than the negative value. Nominative is negative for both features, accusative is negative for one feature, and dative is positive for both.

3.2 Case Checking Domains: The Region Included

For this proposal, it is necessary to distinguish the maximum potential size of a Case checking domain from its actual size in a particular construction. For example, we know that in languages such as Icelandic which allow nominative objects, the Case checking domain of Infl can include the entire clause, as in (28a). However, Icelandic also has ordinary nominative-accusative sentences and here we want to say that the Case checking domain of Infl is smaller, not including the VP, as shown in (28b). In the extreme situation, such a domain can shrink down to nothing, if there is no Case checked by the head. We see this in the Icelandic pattern in (28c) with a lexical accusative subject and an accusative object. Here Infl has no Case checking domain at all.

(28) Example Case Checking Domains for Infl: (domain is underlined)

- a. Subject-dative Infl V object-nom
- b. Subject-nom Infl V object-acc
- c. Subject-acc Infl V object-acc

¹³In a sense, all Cases are structurally licensed since all Cases are licensed by a head in a proper structural configuration. In earlier versions of the theory, lexical Case was licensed at D-structure in conjunction with theta role assignment, while structural Case was licensed at S-structure, but these levels are no longer present in the theory (Chomsky 1995). At this point, a lexical Case (a lexically licensed Case, a lexically selected Case) is simply one whose presence is lexically selected by the verb, either idiosyncratically or based on its theta role. A structural Case is not lexically selected by the verb.

Making a Case checking domain larger than necessary just leads to unnecessary problems, because it may then include an additional foreign DP not checked by that head, violating the constraints established above. Thus, in the candidates to be compared below, each candidate will be shown with the best sized domain for its purposes.

However, the size of Case checking domains is not completely flexible. In addition to a certain maximum size,¹⁴ a Case checking domain must include the entire region between two maximal projections.

(29) A Case checking domain includes the entire region between two maximal projections.

For example, the Case checking domain of Infl cannot exclude Spec Infl, while including a nominative object inside VP.

(30) Impossible domain for Infl: Subject-dative Infl V object-nom

We are now ready to see how this approach predicts when nominative objects are and are not allowed in Icelandic, Faroese, and German.

3.3 Icelandic

As noted above, Icelandic takes a nominative object with a dative subject, but not with a lexical accusative subject (Andrews 1982, Collberg 1986, Sigurðsson 1989).

(31) Barninu batnaði veikin. [Icelandic]
 child-DAT recovered-from disease-NOM (*ACC)
 The child recovered from the disease. (Yip, Maling, and Jackendoff 1987: 223)

(32) a. Mig klæjar lófann.
 me-acc itches the palm-acc (Andrews 1982:461)

 b. Drengina vantar mat.
 the boys-acc lacks food-acc (Andrews 1982:462)

Under this approach, the reason for this difference is that Infl can partially check an accusative subject (even a lexical accusative) because of the shared feature [-oblique], but Infl cannot partially check a dative. Icelandic will not tolerate partial targets in Case checking domains, even if that means passing up the chance to use a less marked Case (a nominative object). That is, Icelandic will allow violations of *accusative in order to obey *Partial Target. (The Case checking domain of Infl is underlined.)

¹⁴Case checking domains cannot cross certain boundaries such as PP or DP. In addition, they are bounded above by the fact that the head must c-command everything in its domain (where c-command is redefined as in Chomsky 1998 to include the specifier of a head in addition to what is traditionally covered by c-command).

- (33) a. * Subject-acc Infl V Object-nom (violates *Partial Target)
 b. Subject-acc Infl V Object-acc (violates *accusative)

However, the fact that Icelandic tolerates a dative inside the nominative Case checking domain indicates that Icelandic will not allow violations of *accusative simply to obey *Potential Target.

- (34) a. Subject-dative Infl V Object-nom (violates *Potential Target)
 b. *Subject-dative Infl V Object-acc (violates *accusative)

Thus the pattern we observe in Icelandic is produced by the following constraint ranking:

(35) Constraint Ranking in Icelandic

*Partial Target >> *accusative >> *Potential Target

We can demonstrate this with the following tableaux:

(36) Icelandic accusative subject construction

Candidates:	* Partial Target	*accusative	*Potential Target
a. <u>DP-acc Infl V DP-nom</u>	*!		
b. DP-acc DP-acc Infl V DP-acc		*	

In the accusative subject construction, *Partial Target makes the decision. The (a) version contains a partial target (the accusative subject) inside the Case checking domain of Infl, so that version is rejected. In the (b) version, the problem is removed by removing the nominative, so that Infl need have no Case checking domain at all. (Removing the lexical accusative subject, which would also fix the problem, is not possible due to a higher constraint. See Woolford 2001).

(37) Icelandic dative subject construction

Candidates:	*Partial Target	*accusative	*Potential Target
a. me DP-dative Infl V DP-nom			*
b. DP-dative Infl V DP-acc		*!	

In the dative subject construction, *Partial Target has no effect because dative shares no features with nominative. The decision is made by the next lower constraint, *accusative. As a result, the construction takes a nominative object. *Potential Target never gets a chance to have an effect on the outcome.

Let us now turn to a language that is closely related to Icelandic, Faroese.

3.4 Faroese

Faroese differs from Icelandic in disallowing nominative objects in dative subject constructions. Instead, the object is accusative (Barnes 1986, Taraldsen 1996).¹⁵

- (38) Mær líkar henda filmin.
 me-DAT likes this film-ACC
 I like this film. (Barnes 1986 (12))

Why doesn't markedness require a nominative object instead? Unlike Icelandic, Faroese insists on maintaining an ideal Case checking domain even if it means using less marked Cases. That is, Faroese ranks *Potential Target above *accusative. *Potential Target prohibits any additional DP inside the Case checking domain of Infl.

- (39) Constraint Ranking in Faroese: *Potential Target >> *accusative¹⁶

- (40) a. *me-DAT Infl likes this film-NOM [violates *Potential target]
 b. me-DAT Infl likes this film-ACC [violates *accusative]

¹⁵There is no reason to think that the object Case in Faroese is anything other than ordinary structural accusative Case. It does not depend on the particular verb, nor does it depend on the semantic features of the object.

¹⁶*Partial Target can be ranked anywhere with no empirical difference for this data, because every sentence that violates *Partial Target also violates *Potential target.

(41) active construction in Faroese

Candidates:	*Potential Target	*accusative
a. <u>DP-dative Infl V DP-nom</u>	*!	
b. <u>DP-dative Infl V DP-acc</u>		*

In candidate (a), the presence of even this dative subject is intolerable inside the nominative checking domain of Infl because it violates *Potential target. Faroese avoids this violation by not using a nominative object, thus removing the need for a nominative checking domain in this construction. The alternative in (b) of using an accusative object is thus preferred, even though it involves a more marked Case, violating *accusative.

Up to this point, we have seen good evidence that *accusative is a violable constraint, but one might have the impression that the constraints on Case checking domains could simply be parameterized variants of an overriding inviolable principle, with the *Potential Target variant active in Faroese and the *Partial Target variant active in Icelandic. However, when we look at passives in Faroese, we see evidence that the domain constraints are also violable. While *Potential target is obeyed in actives in Faroese, it is violated in passives. In contrast to the active dative subject construction we just examined, passive constructions with dative subjects in Faroese take nominative objects (Holmberg 1994).

(42) a. Siggu dámar bókina. [active]

Sigga-dat likes the-book-acc (*nom)

Sigga likes the book.

b. Siggu blivu givnar trýggjar bøkur. [passive]

Suggu-dat were given three books-nom

Sigga was given three books. (Holmberg 1994:47)

Why should there be this difference in the Case patterns of active and passive dative subject constructions? The answer involves the fact that the passive morpheme absorbs accusative Case (Baker 1988).¹⁷ In the passive construction in (42b), the verb's accusative Case feature is absorbed by the passive morpheme and thus it is not available to the object. The best remaining option is to use a nominative object, even though that makes the construction violate *Potential Target. The fact that *Potential Target can be violated in Faroese supports the view taken in this paper that the constraints on Case checking domains belong in the portion of the grammar containing the violable constraints.

¹⁷The requirement that the passive morpheme absorbs accusative is also violable. See Sobin 1985, Baker 1988, Goodall 1993, and Woolford 1993.

Now let us turn to German, a language allowing nominative objects with both dative and lexical accusative subjects.

3.5 German

German is like Icelandic in allowing nominative objects in dative subject constructions, as in (43a).¹⁸ However, German differs from Icelandic in allowing a nominative object in constructions with a lexical accusative subject (43b).

- (43) a. ... daß mir der Streit mißfällt
 that me-dative the quarrel-nom displeases
- b. ... daß mich der Streit anödet
 that me-acc the quarrel-nom bores (Bayer 2001)

This pattern of data is predicted under the account put forth above, because there should be a language that ranks *accusative above both of the Case checking domain constraints. This ranking predicts that a nominative object is always selected over an accusative object when nominative has not been used for the subject.

(44) German Constraint Ranking:

*accusative >> *Partial Target, *Potential Target

3.6 Typology

The six logically possible rankings of *accusative, *Partial Target and *Potential Target produce only the 3 empirically different patterns of nominative objects, all of which we have seen in this section:

(45) Predicted typological patterns for active constructions:

1. *accusative >> *Partial Target, *Potential Target German

 Pattern: nominative objects with both dative and lexical acc subjects

2. *Partial Target >> *accusative >> *Potential Target Icelandic

 Pattern: nominative objects with dative, but not lexical acc subjects

¹⁸'Subject' here refers to the first argument of the verb. Dative subjects in German lack some of the subject properties that dative subjects in Icelandic have, and some doubt that the dative subject in German moves to the external subject position. But the exact location of the dative subject is not relevant here, because it will have the same effect on the nominative licensing domain regardless of where it is in that domain.

3. *Potential Target >> *accusative
(with *Partial Target ranked anywhere)

Faroese

Pattern: no nominative objects with either dative or lexical acc subjects

Note that this approach predicts that there is no language that allows nominative objects when the subject is a lexical accusative, but not when it is dative. To my knowledge, no such language occurs.¹⁹

Let us now examine some other approaches in the literature to the problem of why nominative objects are sometimes blocked.

4. Other Approaches to Blocking Nominative Objects

In this section, we examine three other proposals in the literature for addressing the problem of why nominative objects are sometimes disallowed. These include a locality parameter, an approach in which some DPs carry two Cases, and Relativized Minimality.

4.1 A Parameter of Nominative Case Checking: Spec-Head vs. c-command

A simple way to try to capture the fact that some languages do not allow nominative objects is to propose a parameter restricting nominative Case checking to Spec Infl in some languages. Versions of such a nominative Case parameter have been proposed by various scholars, including Sportiche (1988), Hoekstra and Mulder (1990), Masullo (1992).²⁰

(46) Parameter of Nominative Case Checking:

All languages allow nominative checking in a Spec-head relationship,
but there is a parameter setting with respect to whether a language will also
allow nominative Case checking by c-command (government).

But setting a parameter for a language as a whole does not capture the fact that some Icelandic and Faroese constructions allow nominative objects and others block them. Recall that Icelandic

¹⁹Although ergative languages will not be discussed in this paper, the prediction is that the same two sorts of variant Case patterns should exist among ergative languages. That is, some ergative languages will allow nominative objects, but others will not. This prediction is correct: Hindi is an ergative language that allows nominative objects, as we saw above, whereas Nez Perce is a language that does not (Woolford 1997).

²⁰These scholars proposed this parameter to account for rather different data than is being discussed here. Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) use this parameter to derive the fact that in English, there insertions are restricted to verbs that do not take external subjects, whereas there is no such restriction in Dutch. Dumitrescu and Masullo 1996 use this parameter to distinguish languages that do and do not allow non-nominative subjects. Thus because of the presence of dative subjects, both Icelandic and Faroese would set the parameter to allow nominative checking by c-command/government; thus the parameter would not account for differences between these languages with respect to when objects can be nominative.

allows nominative objects with dative subjects but not with (lexical) accusative subjects. And Faroese allows nominative objects in passives but not in actives. Moreover, this parameter makes an unlikely prediction: there should be languages in which the Case of an unaccusative subject depends on its position. That is, if an unaccusative subject remains in the VP, it would get accusative Case, whereas if it moved to Spec IP, it would get nominative. The prediction that unaccusative subjects do get accusative Case in some languages would be an exception to the core observation that motivated Burzio's generalization: unaccusative subjects cannot be accusative. I know of no such languages.²¹

4.2 Multiple Case Checking

A very different approach to the question of why nominative objects are sometimes blocked involves multiple Case checking. Schütze (1997) proposes that one DP can have more than one Case, so that it is possible for what looks like a non-nominative subject to check nominative Case, thus rendering it unavailable to the object. Schütze uses this idea to explain why ECM constructions with accusative subjects do not have nominative objects in Icelandic, while ECM constructions with a dative subject do (see the data in footnote 9). He argues that the accusative subjects also have a second Case, nominative, but that the dative subjects cannot also be nominative because structural and lexical Case are incompatible on a single DP (because one requires agreement and one is incompatible with agreement).

Although this proposal is based on an attractive intuition, that nominative is available unless it is checked, it is difficult to see how to extend it beyond the data Schütze discusses. The proposal appears to predict that lexical accusative subjects should behave like dative subjects in Icelandic and allow nominative objects, but they do not. In addition, it is difficult to see why other languages such as Faroese and German should be different with respect to which sorts of non-nominative subjects allow nominative objects.

Nevertheless, one aspect of Schütze's proposal seems right: the reason that an accusative subject blocks a nominative object in Icelandic, while a dative subject does not, is because accusative Case is more similar to nominative than dative is. In Schütze's proposal, as in the one proposed here, an accusative subject blocks a nominative object by (partially) checking the nominative feature of Infl.

4.3 Deriving Case Locality From Relativized Minimality

Another way to try block nominative checking on objects would be to make use of the idea that a closer head blocks Case checking by a further head. Under Rizzi's (1990) Relativized Minimality principle, a closer potential governor blocks a further governor. This explains, according to Rizzi, why V cannot assign Case inside a PP; P is a closer governor of the object of the preposition than V is. An additional consequence discussed by Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) is that Infl should be

²¹One can find instances of passives where all VP-internal arguments remain accusative, but passives have additional complexities which will not be addressed here.

blocked from checking nominative Case on a DP inside VP because of the presence of V, a closer governor. They note that this problem disappears if V raises to Infl so that the two heads are equally close, so that the prediction is that only languages with V raising should allow nominative checking by government (c-command).

However, Hoekstra and Mulder (1990) point out (based on the behavior of French) that while V raising may be necessary before nominative checking into VP is possible, it is not sufficient. We can make the same point based on Icelandic and Faroese. We know V raises in Icelandic, so nominative objects should be possible in that language; but that does not explain why they are blocked when there is a lexical accusative subject. For Faroese, V Raising is optional according to Holmberg 1994, so nominative objects ought to be optional; yet we have seen that they are prohibited in active constructions, although they do occur in passives. Thus Relativized Minimality does not cover the Case locality effects that are the focus of this paper.

Interestingly, Relativized Minimality tries to unify what may be two rather different sorts of blocking effects. Relativized Minimality is intended to unify blocking in head government (e.g. Case) relationships with blocking in antecedent government (e.g. movement, binding) relationships. Calling both relationships government (standard in ECP work at the time) makes that unification seem very reasonable, but it may be more beneficial to separate these types of blocking effects and understand how their properties differ. In antecedent government relationships, the ‘governor’ is the *target* of the movement or binding relationship, whereas in head government relationships such as Case checking, the governor is the *source*. See in this light, Relativized Minimality is trying to unify the blocking effect of a closer source in one kind of relationship with the blocking effect of a closer target in another kind of relationship. What is being argued for in this paper is essentially that what Rizzi says about antecedent government (movement and binding relationships) is also right for head government (Case checking): a closer potential target can block all such relationships.

5. Theoretical Implications and Questions for Future Research

Reducing Burzio’s Generalization to the violable markedness constraint *accusative solves many of the empirical and theoretical problems associated with the original formulation of that generalization. Removing the hypothesized link between an external theta role and accusative Case removes the exception posed by ergative languages (where verbs with agents don’t take accusative objects) and psych verb constructions (where verbs without agents do take accusative objects) and it removes the need for the theory to link agents and accusatives in some way. Moreover, it allows the theory to capture the broader generalization that sentences seem to require a nominative Case, providing an answer to why nominative should be special in this regard, and why there are exceptions to that generalization.

The exceptions that are the focus of this paper are argued to be the result of locality restrictions on nominative Case licensing and thus the solution proposed here has implications for the general topic of locality in syntax and phonology. In particular, it is relevant to the question

of whether, in situations where ‘like blocks like’, it is an intervening potential source or target that blocks source-target relationships. Case licensing may provide a special insight into this issue because it always clear whether an intervening element is a potential source or target, unlike many other locality situations (e.g. movement, vowel harmony) where an intervening element could qualify as both a potential source or a potential target (e.g. see Rizzi 1990 and McGinnis 1998 on the issue of whether it is an intervening source or target that blocks Wh Movement). In Case licensing, the source is a head and the target is a DP. Rizzi (1990) discusses instances where a potential source (head) blocks Case checking, and we now see from the results of the present paper that a potential target (DP) can also block Case checking. This suggests that in any similar situation, we may expect to find blocking effects from either a potential source or a potential target.

The idea that Cases have features such as [+/- oblique] has theoretical consequences, two of which have been discussed here. We have seen that it enables us to capture the fact that a partially checked Case (one that matches the head in some features but not others) is worse than a completely unchecked Case inside a domain. In addition, we have seen that this feature system predicts the markedness hierarchy for the three Cases nominative, accusative, and dative, under the assumption that negative values are less marked.

One additional insight provided by this study of what blocks Case licensing is that we now see that a blocking element need not actually intervene between the source (head) and target (DP), contra the prediction of the formulation of Relativized Minimality in Rizzi 1990. A DP in Spec IP is sufficient to block Infl from licensing Case on an object, even though Spec IP does not intervene between the head and the object. Thus the proper approach must not define a potential blocker as intervening element. This problem is avoided if potential blockers are defined simply as elements that lie within the relevant domain.

An important question for future research is to what extent locality restrictions involving different phenomena in syntax and phonology (e.g. Wh Movement, NP Movement, Binding, Case licensing, agreement, vowel harmony) are the same. This work unifies Case checking with the antecedent government relationships discussed in Rizzi 1990 in the sense that a potential target can block the relationship. It will be interesting to see whether in movement and binding, as claimed here for Case, a potential target is more likely to be a blocker if it qualifies as a partial target, and whether the effect of a potential target in a particular language depends on the relative ranking of the relevant domain constraints with respect to other constraints.

One might expect agreement to be the most likely phenomenon to parallel Case checking, especially given the often observed parallels between nominative Case and subject agreement. However recent work indicates that agreement with nominatives inside VP may be subject to additional locality conditions. In Icelandic, for example, we have seen that nominative Case can be licensed on the object when the subject is dative, but agreement with nominative objects is more restricted, as Sigurðsson 1996 shows. In general, recent work on agreement summarized in Samek-Lodovici 2000 indicates that subject agreement is often more restricted when the subject remains inside VP. Nevertheless, it appears that agreement must also be subject to the same

domain constraints that hold of Case checking, given that agreement is never licensed unless nominative Case is in languages such as Icelandic.

6. Conclusion

There is a clear consensus in the recent literature that Burzio's Generalization effects follow from some principle of grammar that requires sentences to have a nominative Case, but there has been little consensus on how to formulate that principle and little attention paid to the large number of exceptions. The approach argued for here involves markedness: whenever an object could be licensed for either nominative or accusative Case, markedness favors nominative because it is the least marked Case. There are many exceptions because markedness belongs with the violable constraints that are only obeyed when other constraints do not take precedence over them.

This paper focuses on exceptions where nominative licensing to the object is blocked due to constraints on Case checking domains. Ideally there is a one-to-one relation between a head and the DP whose Case that head checks, with additional DPs inside the Case checking domain threatening this one-to-one relationship. Languages vary as to what sorts of deviations from the ideal domain they tolerate. Faroese insists on maintaining ideal Case checking domains in active clauses, but allows violations in passives. Icelandic tolerates an additional DP in a Case checking domain as long as that Case is not partially checked by the head. German sacrifices the ideal Case checking domain in order to obey markedness with respect to Case choice.

This work is relevant to the general question of whether situations in which 'like blocks like' involve blocking by a closer potential source or target, or both. The Case blocking phenomena discussed here all involve a closer potential target (DP). Adding this to the known instances in which Case checking is blocked by a closer potential source (head) from Rizzi (1990), we can conclude that for Case checking at least, either a closer potential source or target can block a source-target relationship.

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