Dropping the F-bomb: An argument for valued features as derivational time-bombs

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For the proceedings of NELS 47 (published in 2017)

1. Introduction

A long tradition in generative syntax holds that nominals have two fundamental licensing needs (Vergnaud 1977/2008, Chomsky 1980 et seq): (i) every nominal needs a semantic role (theta role), and (ii) every nominal needs abstract syntactic licensing, capital C Case. This paper joins a rich body of work that challenges some aspect of the latter component of this picture (Zaenen et al. 1985, Marantz 1991, Carstens 2001, Pesetsky & Torrego 2007, Bobaljik 2008, Danon 2011, Preminger 2011, Arregi & Nevins 2012, Bhatt & Walkow 2013, i.a.). The argument made in this paper is that nominal licensing is not driven by abstract Case, but rather by the valued, so-called “interpretable” features nominals bear.

The motivation for this argument comes from crosslinguistic restrictions on 1st/2nd person and on nominals high in definiteness/animacy. Jewish Zakho (Neo-Aramaic) provides a clear illustration of such restrictions. In the simple perfective, a 3rd person object must be accompanied by agreement if specific, (1a), but must not if nonspecific, (1b), and a 1st/2nd person object is entirely disallowed, accompanied by agreement or not, (1c).

\begin{enumerate}
\item \begin{tabular}{@{}cl}
\textbf{a.} & 'änə zwǐn-ā-li ūlmsa. \hfill \textit{(specific object agrees)} \\
& I buy.PFV-\textbf{OBJ.3FS}-SBJ.1MS flatbread.F \\
& ‘I bought the flatbread.’ \\
\textbf{b.} & 'änə zwǐn-ni ūlmsa. \hfill \textit{(nonspecific object does not agree)} \\
& I buy.PFV-SBJ.1MS flatbread.F \\
& ‘I bought some flatbread.’ \\
\textbf{c.} & "'änə zwǐn(-t)-ti \hfill (\textit{ātta}). \hfill \textit{(1st/2nd person obj. disallowed)} \\
& I buy.PFV(-\textbf{OBJ.2MS})-SBJ.1MS you \\
\end{tabular}
\end{enumerate}

\*Thank you to András Bárány, Jonathan Bobaljik, Chris Collins, Amy Rose Deal, Anoop Mahajan, Troy Messick, Carson Schütze, Adrian Stegojic, Coppe van Urk, Martin Walkow, Lauren Winans, and Susi Wurmbbrand for extremely helpful discussions of and feedback on this work. Thanks also to audiences at GLOW 40, Leipzig University, NELS 45, NYU, Rutgers, UConn, UMass, University of Toronto, USC, and SLE 48.
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The pattern in (1a–b) plausibly falls under the umbrella of Differential Object Marking (Coghill 2014), stated in (2), while (1c) can be seen as an extended instance of the Person Case Constraint (as argued by Doron & Khan 2012, Kalin & van Urk 2015), (3).

(2) **Differential Object Marking (DOM; Comrie 1979, Bosson 1991, *i.a.*):**
Objects high in definiteness/animacy are more likely to need to be overtly marked.

(3) **The Person Case Constraint (PCC; canonical strong version, Bonet 1991):**
In a combination of a weak DO and a weak IO, the DO must be 3rd person.

The PCC and DOM are both extremely common crosslinguistically, surfacing in numerous unrelated languages. Theoretical accounts of the PCC and DOM typically treat the two phenomena as being completely independent of each other, and often appeal to licensing conditions that exist alongside (on top of) traditional abstract Case licensing.

The main goal of this paper is to show that the PCC and DOM are related phenomena that call for a unified account. I begin in §2 by exemplifying the PCC and DOM and noting some recurring features of generative syntactic accounts of these phenomena. §3 composes the core of the paper, comparing the empirical profiles of the PCC and DOM and making a number of novel observations about the ways in which they are parallel. Finally, in §4, I conclude by proposing that we can understand these commonalities if the burden of nominal licensing is shifted to valued features; in other words, the licensing needs of a nominal depend on its “interpretable” features—such features can be derivational time bombs.

2. **Brief overview of the PCC and DOM**

2.1 **The PCC**

The PCC refers to the ungrammaticality of certain person combinations when two “weak” arguments (pronouns, clitics, agreement) occupy some domain. The canonical strong PCC holds between an indirect and direct object (IO, DO) (Bonet 1991, 1994, Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar & Rezac 2003, *i.a.*), (4), as seen in French, (5) (Béjar & Rezac 2003).

(4) **Canonical Strong PCC: *1O > 1/2.DO***

(5) a. **Je la lui ai présent-é. (PCC respected)**

\[ \text{1SG.NOM \textbf{3FS.ACC 3SG.DAT} have.1SG.PRES introduce-PART} \]

‘I introduced her (DO) to him (IO).’

b. ***Je te lui ai présent-é. (PCC violated)**

\[ \text{1SG.NOM \textbf{2SG.ACC 3SG.DAT} have.1SG.PRES introduce-PART} \]

Intended: ‘I introduced you (DO) to him (IO).’

c. ***Elle me lui a présenter-é. (PCC violated)**

\[ \text{3FS.NOM \textbf{1SG.ACC 3SG.DAT} have.3SG.PRES introduce-PART} \]

Intended: ‘She introduced me (DO) to him (IO).’
Abstracting across generative syntactic accounts, PCC effects are typically taken to arise when two arguments compete for the attention of one licensor, (6) (Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar & Rezac 2003, Adger & Harbour 2007, Nevins 2007, Rezac 2008, 2011, Walkow 2013, i.a.). In particular, it has been argued that licencers (modeled as $\varphi$-probes) decompose into separate person ($\pi$) and number (#) licensing components, with $\pi$ searching for a goal first, # second. This ordered probing makes it possible, in a PCC configuration, for the two licensing components of the probe to reach different nominals, (6).

(6) $\pi, # \text{ IO } ... \text{ DO}$

In (6), first the $\pi$-probe probes and agrees with indirect object—this is referred to as “defective intervention”, since the indirect object is itself already licensed (by Appl) and so does not actually need the licensing that is on offer from the $\pi$-probe. The $\pi$-probe removes the indirect object as an intervener (e.g., via an operation of clitic-doubling; Anagnostopoulou 2003, Béjar & Rezac 2003), allowing # to reach the direct object.

While the agreement configuration in (6) is able to license a 3rd person direct object, it is not able to license 1st/2nd person, because of an additional licensing condition, (7).

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

According to these accounts, then, the PCC arises because the direct object in a PCC configuration will never be reached by a $\pi$-probe, and so is limited by the PLC to 3rd person.

### 2.2 DOM

DOM is a widespread phenomenon that differentiates objects into two groups—a group that gets or triggers overt marking and a group that does not (Comrie 1979, Croft 1988, Bossong 1991, Enç 1991, de Hoop 1996, Torrego 1998, Woolford 1999, Aissen 2003, de Swart 2007, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011, i.a.). Objects are mainly differentiated along two scales, (8)–(9) (Silverstein 1976, Moravcsik 1978, Comrie 1979, Croft 1988, i.a.).

(8) **Animacy / person** 1/2 > 3 Pronoun > Name > Human > Animate > Inanimate

(9) **Specificity / definiteness** Pron. > Name > Definite > Specific Indef. > Nonspecific

Objects on the left side of the scale (often considered the “more prominent” or “less canonical” objects) are overtly marked, while those on the right are unmarked. We can see these scales at work in object-marking in Senaya and Palatinate German:
Senaya (Neo-Aramaic): DOM-agreement; specificity-based (Kalin To appear a)

a. Axnii ksuuta kasw-ox.  
   we book.F write.IMPF-SBJ.1PL 'We (will) write a/some book.'

b. Axnii ksuuta kasw-ox-laa.  
   we book.F write.IMPF-SBJ.1PL-OBJ.3FS 'We (will) write a (specific) book.'

Palatinate German: DOM-case; animacy-based (Philipp Weisser p.c.)

a. Du haf de æmA gseje.  
   you have.2SG DEM.NOM bucket see.PRT 'You saw that bucket.'

b. Du haf den man gseje.  
   you have.2SG DEM.ACC man see.PRT 'You saw that man.'

Other factors influencing DOM are affectedness (Næss 2004), and information structure (Woolford 1999, Dalrymple & Nikolaeva 2011).

Abstracting across generative syntactic accounts, marked objects are taken (i) to have more internal structure (or features) than unmarked objects do (Danon 2006, Lidz 2006, Rodriguez-Mondoñedo 2007, Richards 2008, López 2012, Lyutikova & Pereltsvaig 2015, i.a.), (12), and/or (ii) to raise out of VP, while unmarked objects do not (Bhatt & Anagnostopoulou 1996, de Hoop 1996, Woolford 1999, Bhatt 2007, Baker & Vinokurova 2010, Richards 2010, López 2012, Ormazabal & Romero 2013, Baker 2014b, i.a.), (13).

(12) a. DP (marked)  
    \[D \rightarrow NP \]  
    \([\varphi:VAL]\]  
    \([\text{Case: }]\]  
    N

b. NP (unmarked)  
    \[N\]  
    [VP V \[\] ]

(13) \[TP T ... [marked object ... [VP V \[\] ]]\]

Taken together, (12) and (13) can derive DOM: DPs are structurally high and bear Case/\varphi-features, which makes them require Case-licensing and/or makes them visible/accessible to Case-licensing. NPs are structurally low and do not bear Case/\varphi-features, which makes them invisible and/or inaccessible to Case/agreement processes. Accounts differ as to what they take such low NP objects to need in terms of licensing—perhaps they need no licensing at all (Massam 2001, Danon 2006, Ormazabal & Romero 2013), perhaps they need licensing by being adjacent to the verb (Baker 1988, Baker & Vinokurova 2010), or perhaps they in fact do get Case, it’s just morphologically zero (Laka 1993, Bhatt 2007, Rodriguez-Mondoñedo 2007).
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3. The PCC and DOM are closely related phenomena

As seen in §2, the PCC and DOM are typically taken to be independent phenomena, and are given very different sorts of analyses. In this section, I will make the case for treating the PCC and DOM as closely related and therefore meriting a unified analysis.

3.1 Configuration

A preliminary set of PCC/DOM commonalities has to do with the number and relative height of nominals targeted (and not targeted) by the phenomenon. First, both the PCC and DOM crucially involve two arguments. For the PCC, this is explicitly stated in the definition of the phenomenon: in the context of an indirect object, the direct object must be 3rd person. For DOM, this is somewhat less obvious, but nonetheless, making reference to an “object” typically implies the presence of another nominal, the subject.

Second, of the two nominals involved in the phenomenon, both DOM and the PCC target the lower nominal, which is canonically the direct object. The PCC restricts the lower nominal to 3rd person, while DOM requires that the lower nominal be marked if it is high in definiteness/animacy (and not otherwise). In contrast to the lower nominal, the higher nominal in a PCC or DOM configuration is (canonically) immune from the effect. In strong PCC configurations, the higher nominal (typically the IO) can freely be 1st, 2nd, or 3rd person. In DOM configurations, subjects are (typically) not differentiated from each other; subjects all behave uniformly—all are marked, or all are unmarked.\(^1\)

Third, for both the PCC and DOM, it is ultimately the above-described configurations that matter, not the grammatical roles of the nominals involved. PCC effects surface in double unaccusatives in Chinook (Rezac 2011, Ch. 5), in simple transitives in Jewish Zakho (Kalin & van Urk 2015), and in scrambled DO>IO configurations in Slovenian (Stegovec 2015). Differential marking can appear on subjects of nominalized clauses, e.g., in Turkish (Kornfilt 2008), and on arguments of certain adjectives in Hebrew (Danon 2006).\(^2\)

3.2 Intervention

The configurational facts discussed above—that the lower nominal of two is restricted in some way—suggest that the PCC and DOM might be due to intervention of some sort by the higher nominal. We can test whether intervention is involved by removing the higher nominal from the triggering configuration.

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\(^1\)The fact that the higher argument in the configuration is typically immune from differential marking and person restrictions has led most of the accounts discussed in §2 to posit featural asymmetries across arguments with different grammatical roles. Classic syntactic accounts of the PCC need indirect objects to always have a person feature (such that they always intervene for person), while direct objects only have a person feature (only need person licensing) when they are 1st or 2nd person. Classic syntactic accounts of DOM need to say that subjects always have \(\phi\)-features/a Case feature (and so are always visible to Case/agreement), while direct objects only have these features when they are high in definiteness/animacy.

\(^2\)Although these latter configurations don’t obviously involve two nominals, they do plausibly involve intervention by something like a phase boundary; the brief proposal in §4 is compatible with this.
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For the PCC, it is clear that the effect goes away when the higher nominal is removed. Take, for example, the French example in (14), cf. the ungrammatical version in (5b).

(14) Je t’ai présenté.
1SG.NOM 2SG.ACC-have introduce-PART
‘I introduced you (DO).’

In French, if the IO is supplied from context, it need not be syntactically expressed, and the direct object can be then freely be 1st or 2nd person. Along the same lines, a direct object clitic in simple transitives (no indirect object at all) is not restricted to 3rd person.

The case is murkier for DOM, as removing the higher nominal (the subject) typically leads to promotion of the object. Nevertheless, we can see that when an internal argument is not under a higher nominal, the internal argument is not marked differentially (i.e., there is uniform marking or lack of marking). First consider Senaya. When the internal argument stays an internal argument, as in an active transitive clause, it is subject to differential marking, (10). When there is no external argument, (15), the exact same nominal (boxed below) that would have been unmarked as an object (cf. (10a)) is marked (and is a subject).

(15) Xa ksuuta mpel-aa.
one book.F fall.PFV-SBJ.3FS
‘A/some book fell.’

We can see the same leveling of marking in passives in Palatinate German. An internal argument that gets nominative case (unmarked) as an object, (16a), nevertheless participates in agreement (marking) when it is promoted to subject, (16b) (Philipp Weisser, p.c.).

you have.2SG DEM.NOM bucket and DEM.NOM tractor see.PRT
‘You saw the bucket and the tractor.’ (Object is non-human, no ACC)

b. Dea ëma un dea treka sin gseje wəbe.
DEM.NOM bucket and DEM.NOM tractor be.3PL see.PRT AUX.PASS
‘The bucket and the tractor were seen.’ (Subject is non-human, but agrees)

If the external argument is demoted (passives) or absent (unaccusatives), the differentiation of internal arguments disappears.

In the typical case, then, removing the higher nominal involved in a PCC or DOM configuration obviates the restriction on the lower nominal. This strongly suggests that there is indeed intervention by the higher nominal involved in both phenomena.

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3There are some exceptions to this generalization in Hebrew and Hindi—where the internal argument can remain differentially marked even when it looks like the external argument is absent—which merit a closer look in future work. Thank you to Hagit Borer and Ethan Poole for bringing these to my attention.

4This example features coordinated singular nominals so that (i) case is evident on the demonstratives and (ii) there is non-3rd-singular agreement (i.e., agreement that is not potentially default) on the verb when the object is promoted to subject.
3.3 Valued features

Both PCC effects and DOM effects are modulated by valued features on nominals. There are two ways we can see this. First, it is valued features that are responsible for determining whether a particular configuration of nominals is grammatical or ungrammatical. The configuration ruled out by the PCC is clearly featural: a weak direct object bearing 1st or 2nd person features is disallowed, so grammaticality comes and goes with whether the lower nominal bears those features, (5).

While it is less obvious for DOM that grammaticality is featurally-determined, this is still so: DOM is a generalization about objects with certain features requiring marking. Crucially, if an object that bears those features goes unmarked, then the result is ungrammaticality. Recall Senaya’s specificity-based DOM, (10). In Senaya, an unambiguously specific object, like that in (17a), causes a crash if it is unmarked (if it fails to occur with agreement). How can we tell that it is the object’s features that are responsible for the ungrammaticality of (17a)? If we minimally change the features of the object, then the sentence becomes grammatical, (17b). Just as (5b)–(5c) can be seen as PCC “violations”, so can (17a) be seen as a DOM “violation”.

(17) a. *Axnii oo ksuta kasw-ox. (DOM “violated”)
   we that book.F write.IMPF-SBJ.1PL
   Intended: ‘We (will) write that book.’

   b. Axnii xa ksuta kasw-ox. (DOM “respected”)
   we that book.F write.IMPF-SBJ.1PL
   ‘We (will) write a book.’

The valued features of the lower nominal modulate grammaticality in DOM configurations.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the plausibility of specificity-related features, as specificity is often taken to be emergent, e.g., based on the syntactic height of a nominal (Diesing 1992). However, there is strong morphological and semantic evidence that the feature [specific] is needed, for example, (i) to characterize the distribution of determiners and classifiers crosslinguistically (Hopper 1997, Lyons 1999, Cowper & Hall 2002, Ionin 2006, Simpson et al. 2011, Cowper & Hall 2014), (ii) to delimit the different types of indefinite pronouns found across languages (Diesing 1997), and (iii) to account for specific interpretations of in situ indefinites (Fodor & Sag 1982). Animacy-related features are also robustly attested crosslinguistically, for example, in verbal-marking in Algonquian languages (Piggott 1989, Wiltschko & Ritter 2014, i.a.) and Abkhaz (Hewitt 1979, cited by Mithun 1986), nominal marking in Selayar (Finner 1997), and impersonal pronouns crosslinguistically (Sigurðsson & Egerland 2009, Fenger 2015).

Taking the existence of the relevant nominal features as a starting point, the second way we can see that such features are crucially implicated in the PCC and DOM is that different languages care about different combinations of valued features both for the PCC and for DOM. The PCC comes in many flavors, which rule out different combinations of indirect object/direct object pairings based on their features, (18).
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(18) *Some varieties of the PCC*
   a. Super strong (*1/2/3.IO > 1/2.DO; *3.IO > 3.DO)—*Kambera* (Doliana 2013)
   b. Strong (*1/2/3.IO > 1/2.DO)—*Greek* (Anagnostopoulou 2003)
   c. Weak (*3.IO > 1/2.DO)—*Sambaa* (Riedel 2009)
   d. Me-first (*2/3.IO > 1.DO)—*Romanian* (Nevins 2007)

DOM also comes in different flavors based on which features (or feature combinations) require the direct object to be marked, (19).5

(19) *Some varieties of DOM*
   a. [specific] objects marked—*Senaya* (Kalin To appear a)
   b. [definite] objects marked—*Hebrew* (Danon 2006)
   c. [human] objects marked—*Palatinate German* (Philipp Weisser, p.c.)
   d. [human, specific] objects marked—*Spanish* (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2007)
   e. [animate] objects and [specific] objects marked—*Kannada* (Lidz 2006)

What is clear from these facts is that the PCC and DOM are both modulated by language-specific restrictions on valued features on nominals; languages differ in which features, on the lower of two nominals, are allowed and/or require marking.

3.4 Repairs

Finally, starting from the observation that both the PCC and DOM can be seen as ruling out “violations” of certain featural configurations (cf. (5)/(17)), both can also be seen as involving “repairs” for these illicit configurations.

Let’s start with PCC repairs. In order to express the featural configurations that are ruled out by the PCC, such as 3.IO > 1.DO, languages make use of several different strategies that can target the higher or lower nominal in the configuration (Bonet 1991, 1994, Rezac 2011, Walkow 2013): (i) the repair could target the IO, such that the IO is licensed in some non-canonical way, e.g., with an adposition (and IO as a strong pronoun) as in French, (20) (Rezac 2011, 180), or (ii) the repair could target the DO, such that the DO is licensed in some non-canonical way, e.g., with an adposition (and DO as a strong pronoun) as in Catalan, (21) (Bonet 2002, 953, cited by Walkow 2013, 66). (In the examples below, the DO whose features are (potentially) problematic is bolded and the repair is boxed.)

(20) a. *Lucille* nous leur présent-era. * (PCC violation)
    Lucy *PL.ACC* them.DAT introduce-3SG.FUT
    Intended: ‘Lucy will introduce us (DO) to them (IO).’

5 An apparent difference here between the PCC and DOM seems to be that certain PCC configurations care about the features of the higher nominal, whereas DOM cares only about the features of the lower nominal. However, there are languages with global case and/or agreement splits, where object-marking is in fact affected by the subject’s features, e.g., Hungarian (Bárány 2015). It might be, then, that this is not in fact a meaningful difference between the two phenomena.
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b. Lucille nous présent-era elles.
   Lucy 1.PL.ACC introduce-3SG.FUT to them
   ‘Lucy will introduce us (DO) to them (IO).’

(21) a. *Te m’ha recomanat per a la feina la subdirectora. (PCC violation)
   2 1-has recommended for the job the deputy.director
   ‘The deputy director has recommended you (DO) to me (IO) for the job.’

b. M’ha recomanat tu per a la feina la subdirectora. (PCC repair)
   1-has recommended P 2 for the job the deputy.director
   ‘The deputy director has recommended you (DO) to me (IO) for the job.’

While repair-by-adposition seems to be the most common, other attested repairs involve using a camouflage reflexive (e.g., as found in PCC repairs in Georgian and Greek), and using Case with a strong pronoun (e.g., as found in PCC repairs in Arabic).

Turning now to DOM “repairs”, these, like PCC repairs, often take the form of an adposition, but at first glance seem to target only the lower nominal. Take, for example, the Spanish DOM repair in (22) (Rodríguez-Mondoñedo 2007, 16).

(22) a. *Bes-ó María. (DOM violation)
   kiss-3SG.PAST Mary
   Intended: ‘He kissed Mary.’

b. Bes-ó María. (DOM repair)
   kiss-3SG.PAST P Mary
   ‘He kissed Mary.’

Other DO repairs (i.e., DOM strategies) include case-marking (e.g., P. German, Turkish, and Hebrew), cliticization (e.g., Macedonian), and agreement (e.g., Swahili, Senaya).

Can DOM repairs also target the higher nominal in a DOM configuration, like a PCC repair can, cf. (20)? While not referred to as DOM, it is well-known that features like specificity on an object can induce ergative marking on a subject; what this looks like is differential marking of subjects, but it is actually still determined by the lower nominal’s features. We see this sort of ergative marking in Niuean (Massam 2000, cited in Woolford 2015), (23), and Eastern Ostyak (Gulya 1966, cited in Baker 2014a), (24).

(23) a. Ne inu kofe a Sione. (indefinite DO; no ERG)
   PAST drink coffee ABS Sione
   ‘Sione drank coffee.’

b. Ne inu Sione e kofe. (definite DO; ERG)
   PAST drink ERG Sione ABS coffee
   ‘Sione drank the coffee.’

6This is also compatible with the interpretation “the deputy director has recommended me to you for the job”, i.e., with an IO repair, but the DO-repair interpretation is preferred (Victoria Mateu, p.c.).
Taking into account the full range of repairs above highlights this final parallel, (25). Note that one of the reasons these parallels have failed to be drawn in the past may be that the PCC is named for the violation, while DOM is named for the repair.

(25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PCC</th>
<th>Repair lower nom.</th>
<th>Repair higher nom.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Catalan, Arabic</td>
<td>French, Basque</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>

DOM | Spanish, P. German | Niuean, E. Ostyak |

4. Where this leaves us

At the right level of abstraction, a number of commonalities between DOM and the PCC become apparent. The PCC and DOM are about licensing: both involve the lower of two arguments being restricted featurally, with overlapping strategies of “repair” surfacing to lift the restriction. The PCC and DOM arise due to intervention: the higher argument is typically immune from the effect, and if it is removed, the effect goes away. The PCC and DOM are triggered by valued features and are general, configurational effects.

While the PCC and DOM have too much in common to be completely unrelated, examples like those in (1) show that a complete unification is not possible, because (e.g.) specific nominals are not blocked in all environments that block 1st/2nd person. What, then, differentiates the PCC from DOM? The following restatements of the PCC and DOM bring out their commonalities while revealing the direction forward for an account.

(26)  a. The PCC: In the context DP₁ > DP₂ where DP₁ is a defective intervener, if DP₂ is 1st/2nd person, then DP₁ or DP₂ must be specially licensed.

b. DOM: In the context DP₁ > DP₂ where DP₁ is a non-defective intervener, if DP₂ is high in definiteness/animacy, DP₁ or DP₂ must be specially licensed.

I propose that DOM and the PCC are conspiring to tell us that valued nominal features are what crucially matter for licensing—they can be derivational time bombs—and that certain syntactic positions are (at least partially) inaccessible to canonical licensing. DOM environments are those where any nominal that requires licensing (bears any valued nominal feature that is a derivational time bomb) will require a special licencer to merge for the derivation to converge; PCC environments are those where only partial licensing is possible, and so any nominal with participant features will require a special licencer to merge for the derivation to converge. The details of such an account are left for future work.
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