More on 'Lexical DP Blocking' effects in the PCC: Evidence from Mixtec*

Michelle Yuan

University of California, Los Angeles

1. Introduction

Many languages display the Person-Case Constraint (PCC), a family of person-based restrictions on combinations of two pronominal clitics (Perlmutter 1971, et seq.). A common approach to the PCC is that it arises from a single probe attempting to Agree both clitics, though individual analyses vary in the exact mechanics of the Agree operation, the locus of the probe, and whether both clitics are successfully Agreed with in PCC-violating configurations.[1] Sichel and Toosarvandani (to appear) (henceforth, 'S&T') show that, in the Southeastern Sierra varieties of Zapotec (henceforth, 'SSZ'), the PCC restricts combinations of monotransitive subjects and objects.[2] Importantly, S&T also observe that the SSZ displays another PCC-like pattern, previously unattested in the typology of PCC effects: object clitics of *all persons* are banned when the subject is a lexical DP rather than a pronominal clitic, shown in (1)-(2).[3]

(1) Dza^{3}la^{3}lle'^{3} Xwanh^{1}=a'^{3} **lhe'^{1}**
forgot Juana=DEF 2SG
'Juana forgot you.' (*2SG =*u'^{3}*)

(2) Blenh^{3} Xwanh^{1}=a'^{3} **leb^{13}**
carried Juana=DEF 3AN
'Juana carried it.' (*3AN =*eb^{3}*)

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[1] In addition to the analyses discussed in this paper, see Anagnostopoulou 2003, Nevins 2011, Pancheva and Zubizarreta 2018, and Coon and Keine 2021.

[2] This paper focuses primarily on Sichel and Toosarvandani to appear (S&T), which builds on Sichel and Toosarvandani 2020 and Foley and Toosarvandani 2022. Uncited SSZ data come from S&T. SSZ refers to multiple Northern Zapotec varieties from the southeastern Sierra Norte region of Oaxaca, Mexico.

[3] Throughout this paper, tones are encoded as superscript numerals, though the conventions differ across languages. For SSZ data from S&T, there are three level of tones (which may combine to form contour tones), where V^{1} = highest and V^{3} = lowest. For SJPM data, V^{1} = lowest and V^{5} = highest. See Caballero, Duarte Bórquez, Juárez Chávez, and Yuan to appear for an overview of the tone system of SJPM.

S&T frame the latter as *Lexical DP Blocking (LDB)*: the subject DP is a defective intervener that blocks a higher probe from Agreeing with the pronominal object clitic. This paper aims to clarify the status of lexical DPs within existing typologies and theories of the PCC. Drawing on comparative evidence from San Juan Piñas Mixtec (SJPM), related to SSZ, I develop an alternative account that recasts the LDB as a *subject licensing failure*. SJPM also displays the PCC and LDB—but the exact patterns are difficult to accommodate under the intervention-based logic of S&T. DP subjects do not block all instances of object cliticization, and the locus of the probe responsible for object cliticization is low, beneath the subject. Building on Deal 2024, I develop an *object preference* account of the PCC and LDB, in that the initial step of Agree with the object may bleed second-cycle Agree with the subject, the Agreeing probe's specifier—not the other way around. As such, DP subjects are not defective interveners. Instead, I propose that the LDB in both SSZ and SJPM arises from independent consequences of their shared *verb-initial word order*, which delimits the functional heads in the clause available for argument licensing (as opposed to verb-raising). The only possible licensor for the subject is the head that introduces it as its specifier—so the blocking of second-cycle Agree ultimately results in a Case Filter violation.

2. Lexical DP blocking in (Southeastern Sierra) Zapotec

Zapotec belongs to the Eastern branch of the Otomanguean language family. SSZ has a base V(erb Phrase)-S(ubject)-O(bject) word order. In addition to the LDB, illustrated in (1)-(2), SSZ displays a strong PCC effect restricting 1st/2nd person but not 3rd person object clitics in the presence of a subject clitic, (3)-(4).[4] In the examples presented thus far, the LDB and PCC may be obviated by expressing the object as a tonic (strong) pronoun.

(3) Wdill=**ba' nada'**
stung=3AN 1SG
'It stung me.' (*1SG =*a'*)
(López and Newberg 2005)

(4) Blenh^{3}=**ba'^{4}=b^{3}**
carried=3HU=3AN
'S/he carried it.'

Assuming that Agree is a precondition for pronominal cliticization, S&T argue that the PCC and LDB uniformly involve *featural intervention*: the subject's features may prevent a higher Agreeing probe from also targeting the object. In much prior work, the PCC arises from the different feature representations of 1st/2nd (PART) vs. 3rd person (lacking PART) (e.g. Harley and Ritter 2002). Since lexical DPs also participate in such effects, S&T propose an extended feature geometry as in (5): all DPs bear [δ], and pronouns (of all persons) additionally bear [π] (Béjar 2003, Sichel and Wiltschko 2021).

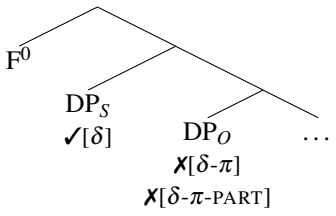
(5) a. Lexical DP: [δ] b. 3: [δ-π] c. 1/2: [δ-π-PART]

To derive both restrictions, S&T propose that a single probe, F^{0} in (6) (to be identified in Section 6), c-commands both subject and object and may undergo a second round of Agree

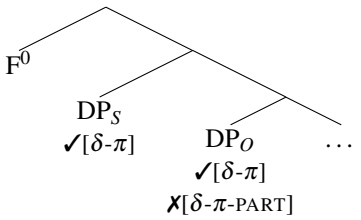
[4]SSZ also displays so-called 'Gender Case Constraint' effects (Foley and Toosarvandani 2022), which prevent 3rd person object clitics from outranking 3rd person subject clitics along an animacy hierarchy (not discussed in this paper for space reasons).

only if the lower argument, the object, is *not* more featurally specified than the subject. The second round of Agree is thus Greed-based, taking place to satisfy requirements of the goal (a pronominal clitic requiring licensing). For instance, (6) depicts the LDB: if the subject bears only [δ], F^0 cannot Agree with any pronominal objects (which bear [π]), so they cannot be realized as clitics. In contrast, (7) depicts the configurations in (4) and (3), respectively. In the former, F^0 may undergo Agree with both arguments, generating two pronominal clitics; in the latter, F^0 may only generate a subject clitic.[5]

(6)



(7)



This model of Agree captures S&T's generalization that, in SSZ, lexical DP subjects are incompatible with *all* object clitics, while subject clitics are only incompatible with [PART]-bearing object clitics.

3. Comparison with (San Juan Piñas) Mixtec

The Eastern Otomanguean subfamily contains a number of other languages, including Mixtec. This paper mostly focuses on the San Juan Piñas variety of Mixtec, based on the author's fieldwork, though the general pattern discussed here has been (briefly) described in some other Mixtec varieties (Macaulay 1987, Penner 2019, Mantenuto 2020). SJPM is spoken in the town of San Juan Piñas, Santiago Juxtlahuaca, Oaxaca, and is classified as part of the Southern Baja Mixtec linguistic region (Josserand 1983).

Like Zapotec, SJPM displays V(P)-S-O word order and displays both the strong PCC and the LDB among subject/object combinations; moreover, the illicit combinations involve the use of a tonic pronoun in object position.[6] Unlike SSZ, there are no animacy-based restrictions among 3rd person clitic combinations in SJPM.

(8) ʃi^{13}ni^{31}=**ti^{5} ^{n}do^{5}ʔo^{1}**
saw=3AN 2PL
'It saw you (pl.).' (*2PL =$^{n}do^{5}$)

(9) ʃi^{13}ni^{31}=**ti^{5}=ra^{3}**
saw=3AN=3MSG
'It saw him.'

(10) ʃi^{13}ni^{31} [**ti^{5} k^{w}a^{5}ʒu^{1}**] **^{n}do^{5}ʔo^{1}**
saw CLF.3AN horse 2PL
'The horse saw you (pl.).' (*2PL =ndo^{5})

[5]To capture *[PART]/[PART] combinations characteristic of the strong PCC, S&T appeal to additional features such as [SPKR] that differentiate 1st from 2nd person.

[6]In this paper, I primarily illustrate these effects using 2P pronouns for purely morphophonological reasons. As discussed in Yuan to appear, SJPM independently restricts vowel-initial clitics from cliticizing in certain environments. In contrast, the 2P clitic is consonant-initial.

The occurrence of the LDB in SJPM is typologically notable: although the LDB is considered by S&T to be otherwise unattested, LDB may in fact be a general property of Eastern Otomanguean languages (verifiable in future research). Strikingly, however, SJPM differs from SSZ in one crucial respect, visible by comparing (10) vs. (11)-(12): only *1st/2nd person object clitics* are banned when the subject is a lexical DP. The examples below also show that 3rd person object clitics simply encliticize to the preceding DP subjects.[7]

(11) ʃi^{13}ni^{31} [**ti^{5}** **vi^{3}lu^{5}**]**=ra^{3}**
saw CLF.3AN cat =3MSG
'The cat saw him.'

(12) ʃi^{13}ni^{31} [**ti^{5}** **k^{w}a^{5}ʒu^{1}**]**=ra^{1}**
saw CLF.3AN horse =3MSG
'The horse saw him.'

The PCC and LDB patterns found in SJPM are summarized as in (13), with the crucial divergence from SSZ boxed.

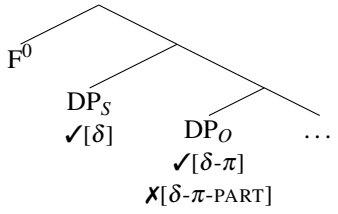
(13)

Subj.	2	1	3	3	DP	DP	DP	3	2	1
Obj.	1	2	1	2	1	2	3	3	3	3
	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✗	✓	✓	✓	✓

4. Against subject intervention

The point of variation seen in (13) should be analyzed as micro-parameterization within an otherwise common grammatical system. However, I argue that S&T's analysis of SSZ cannot be readily extended to SJPM. Recall from Section 2 that S&T's analysis has three interacting components: (i) a high probe, F^{0}, c-commanding both arguments, (ii) a feature geometry, δ-π-PART, differentiating lexical DPs and 3rd person vs. 1st/2nd person pronouns, and (iii) the inability for F^{0} to Agree with the object if it bears any features not also found on the subject. The critical issue here is that, in SJPM, lexical DP subjects ([δ]) block 1st/2nd person object clitics ([δ-π-PART]) but not 3rd person ones ([δ-π]). This contradictory behaviour is schematized in (14).

(14)



[7] That the 3rd person pronominal objects are in fact clitics is indicated by rightward low-tone spreading from the subject, a process that only applies within prosodic words. In (11), the clitic *=ra^{3}* bears a mid tone, while in (12), the same clitic is realized as *=ra^{1}* (low), due to the final low tone of *k^{w}a^{5}ʒu^{1}* 'horse.'

In addition, if the position of the clitic indicates the locus of the probe responsible for cliticization, the examples in (11)-(12) reveal that the probe is actually structurally low—*beneath the subject*. S&T's assumption that the probe is high is primarily motivated by the appearance of subject intervention, as discussed above. However, clear *empirical* evidence for this assumption is lacking. Configurations like (4), which show two clitics attaching to the verb, are uninformative either way; configurations containing a lexical DP subject and clitic object are ill-formed, regardless of the surface morpheme order:

(15) *Bdel=**b** **Maria**
hugged=3AN Maria
Intended: 'Maria hugged it.'

(16) *Bdel **Maria=b**
hugged Maria=3AN
Intended: 'Maria hugged it.'
(S&T 2020:108)

S&T's high probe analysis requires that the intended configuration be (15), with the object clitic moving past the lexical DP subject. This may, at first blush, be supported by (17), which S&T analyze (in earlier work) as a 3HU object clitic raising past a tonic pronoun subject, which itself is clitic-doubled (Sichel and Toosarvandani 2020).[8] This would be problematic for the low probe account of this paper if the tonic pronoun subject is in fact in situ. However, the equivalent construction in SJPM, given in (18), shows that 3rd person object clitics *follow* (and encliticize to) in situ focused tonic pronoun subjects. I suggest that the SSZ example in (17) may actually instantiate clitic right dislocation, rather than object clitic doubling past a tonic pronoun subject.

(17) Betw=**a'=ba' neda'**
hit=1SG=3HU 1SG
'I hit her/him.'
(SSZ; S&T 2020:114)

(18) no^{3}mi^{3} **^{n}du^{1ʔ}u^{1}=ra^{1}**
will.hug 1PL.EXCL=3MSG
'We (ex.) will hug him.' (SJPM)

In the absence of additional adjudicating data from SSZ, it seems that S&T's analysis cannot easily accommodate the LDB in SJPM. But a low probe analysis, illustrated in the the next section, may account for *both* SSZ and SJPM. This would involve a probe, F^0, asymmetrically c-commanding the object and taking the subject as its specifier. Assuming that Agree obeys strict c-command, F^0 should *first* encounter the object before targeting its specifier through a second cycle of Agree; the latter takes place through *cyclic expansion* of F^0's search domain (Béjar and Rezac 2009).

An important consequence of this alternative is that the subject is never an intervener between F^0 and the object, contrary to S&T's framing of the LDB. Indeed, a low probe structure allows us to generalize that the PCC and LDB are contingent solely on the *object's ϕ-features*—and are insensitive to the subject's. Specifically, the PCC and LDB arise whenever F^0 Agrees with a [PART]-bearing object, which blocks F^0 from cyclically expanding its search domain to probe for the subject.

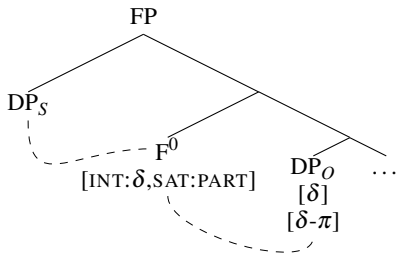
[8] According to Sichel and Toosarvandani (2020), this construction is used in non-neutral contexts; clitic-doubling of the tonic subject pronoun is obligatory.

5. Analysis

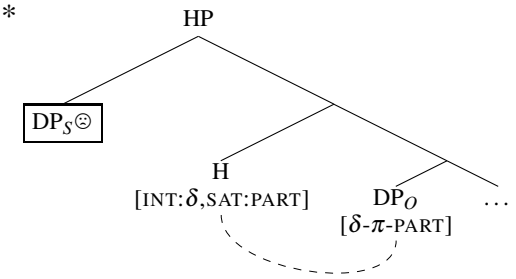
The *interaction/satisfaction* theory of the PCC developed by Deal (2024) is well-equipped to account for the logic developed above, as object preference of the probe is central to her account. In this theory, probes are specified for interaction and satisfaction conditions (rather than unvalued or uninterpretable features), which dictate which features of the goal are *copied* back to the probe vs. which additionally *halt further probing* (Deal 2015). For instance, Deal takes the strong PCC to arise if F^0 bears [INT:π,SAT:PART], such that F^0 may copy any π-feature it encounters, but probing will be halted if it finds a goal bearing [PART]. Ill-formed clitic combinations are due to F^0's satisfaction by [PART] in the first cycle of Agree, preventing second-cycle Agree with the subject. In contrast, well-formed clitic combinations (e.g., PART/3) are ones that permit interaction with both goals.

Under this approach, we may derive the PCC and LDB in SJPM by imbuing F^0 with [INT:δ,SAT:PART]. If the object only bears [δ-π] or [δ], F^0 is able to continue to probe for the subject in its specifier, (19). However, if the object's feature geometry contains [PART], F^0 is satisfied upon finding the object and ceases probing, (20). As noted above, the choice of subject does not factor into the PCC and LDB in SJPM.

(19)



(20) *



For SSZ, F^0 may likewise be specified for [INT:δ,SAT:PART]. However, the SSZ pattern may be characterized as two PCC patterns operating concurrently: the strong PCC restricting combinations of multiple clitics and a version of the weak PCC in LDB contexts.[9] In Deal 2024, the weak PCC may be captured using the notion of *dynamic interaction*, in that the interaction conditions of a probe may change in the course of the derivation. For SSZ, if F^0 encounters a goal bearing [π] and if [π] is dynamic, F^0's specification gets updated from [INT:δ,SAT:PART] to [INT:π,SAT:PART]. As such, subsequent Agree with the subject is possible only if it bears [π]—thus ruling out DP subjects.

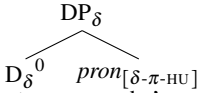
Turning now to the use of tonic pronouns in object position, I suggest that pronominal clitics and tonic pronouns are not derivationally related, so either could in principle be Merged into the structure (modulo various morphosyntactic and prosodic constraints, cf. Cardinaletti and Starke 1999). Specifically, I propose that tonic pronouns are formed when pronouns are properly enclosed in an *outer DP-layer*, represented in the structures below. If F^0 Agrees with a tonic pronoun, only [δ] is copied; the ϕ-features of the DP-

[9] The weak PCC canonically states that, if there is one 3rd person clitic, it must be in direct object position. To capture the LDB in SSZ, this would be restated to: "if there is one DP, it must be in direct object position", ruling out both DP/PART and DP/3 configurations.

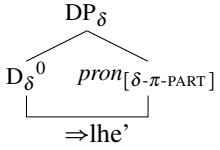
internal pronoun are inaccessible to F^0.[10] In contrast, pronominal clitics are *not* enclosed within such DPs and require licensing by Agree with some functional head. Importantly, a [δ] tonic pronoun object would not satisfy nor dynamically update F^0. This would then counterbleed (i.e., permit) second-cycle Agree between F^0 and the subject.

Indeed, in SSZ, the 3rd person tonic pronouns are transparently decomposable into a morpheme *le* and the enclitic form, (21) (Marlett 2010, Sichel and Toosarvandani 2020). I suggest that the 1st/2nd person tonic pronouns have the same structure, but are morphologically realized as portmanteaux, (22). This is also plausible for Mixtec. In SJPM, all tonic pronouns are portmanteaux; however, in the closely related San Sebastián del Monte (SSMM) variety (as described by Mantenuto 2020), the extra DP shell *is* morphologically visible just for the 2.HON form, which uniquely lacks a dedicated tonic pronoun portmanteau. The 2.HON tonic pronoun in SSMM is decomposable into a morpheme *mee* and the 2.HON clitic, (23), comparable to the SSZ decomposition given in (21).[11]

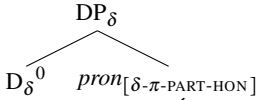
(21) 3S.HU in SSZ:



(22) 2S in SSZ:



(23) 2S.HON in SSMM:



In sum, I have proposed that the PCC and LDB in both languages can be derived with structurally low probe, which always Agrees with the object but not necessarily the subject.

6. Low subject licensing

However, we have not yet addressed *why* the inability to Agree with a lexical DP subject should yield ungrammaticality. Note also that this does not automatically fall out from the system of Deal 2024, which allows for failed Agree if there are no goals that match F^0's int/sat conditions. I now propose that the LDB is effectively a Case Filter violation (Chomsky 2000). Let us assume that any head bearing an A-probe is a possible licensor for a DP; the derivation crashes if the DP is not Agreed with by any such head.

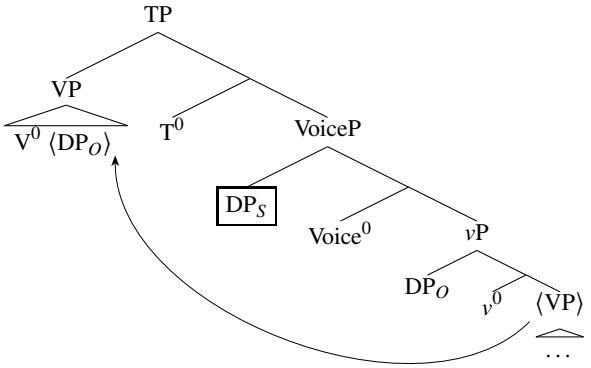
Crucially, in SSZ and SJPM, the only head that *could* license the subject is F^0—if second-cycle Agree is permitted. This, I argue, is directly due to the derivation of verb-initiality of these languages. Both languages display V(P)-S-O word order, derived by object shift out of the verb phrase, followed by remnant movement of the verbal constituent to a pre-subject position (for evidence, see Lee 2006 and Adler et al. 2018 for Zapotec and Hedding and Yuan to appear for Mixtec). Concretely, we may take the subject to be generated in Spec-VoiceP, object shift to target Spec-*v*P, and VP-fronting to target Spec-TP, (24). Therefore, our abstract head "F^0" bearing [INT:δ,SAT:PART] is Voice^0.[12]

[10] This proposal is in the spirit of certain analyses of the Anaphor Agreement Effect (e.g. Woolford 1999, Yuan 2023), which capitalize on the observation that anaphors may, in certain languages, be properly enclosed in complex structure, so that they cannot be directly Agreed with.

[11] Following Cline 2018, *mee* (and its various cognates across Mixtec) is an overt D^0.

[12] The'VP', '*v*P', and 'TP' labels are mainly chosen for expository ease.

(24)



In SJPM, there is simply no positive evidence that subjects are targeted by any functional heads *other than Voice*^{0}. There is no overt case or ϕ-agreement in the language, and there is no evidence for A-movement of the subject, either. For instance, the language wholly lacks raising-to-subject constructions, and, while there are passive-like constructions, these are impersonals (Ostrove 2021).[13] This conclusion seems plausible for SSZ, as well, as it similarly lacks case and agreement morphology: Zapotec languages are known to lack passives (Pickett 1960, et seq.), and I am not aware of any other constructions in Zapotec that target subjects for A-movement.

This is a corollary of the analysis of verb-initial word order laid out above. As proposed for other verb-initial languages (Alexiadou and Anagnostopoulou 1998, Doner 2019), T^0 is solely responsible for predicate fronting and thus does not Agree with low DP subjects in Spec-VoiceP; the absence of other typical hallmarks of A-dependencies moreover suggests that there are no other potential A-probes outside of the VoiceP domain. As a result, subjects in Spec-VoiceP may only be licensed by Voice^0—a circumstance constrained by Voice^0's [PART]-sensitive probe specification.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I have presented an alternative to S&T's analysis of the LDB, in which DP subjects block a high probe from licensing object clitics. On the basis of new data from SJPM, I have argued for the opposite logic—objects may prevent a low probe from licensing DP subjects. Under this alternative, the LDB amounts to a conspiracy between two interacting factors: (i) a structurally low probe not guaranteed to Agree with the subject (Deal 2024), and (ii) no other licensing heads available to Agree with the subject.

Finally, SSZ and SJPM are argued to have a common syntactic structure, with variation in the LDB resulting from slightly different probe specifications in Voice^0. We may expect to find the LDB elsewhere in Eastern Otomanguean, as well, with future comparative work potentially uncovering finer-grained typologies.

[13] Moreover, although subjects in Mixtec languages may occur preverbally (yielding SVO), this is arguably derived by Ā-movement as it has information-structural correlates (Hedding 2022).

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Michelle Yuan
yuanm@ucla.edu