Chapter 5: Concluding Remarks

This work has addressed the consequences of recent developments in generative syntax for the analysis of five nonagreeing predicate types in (Balto-)Slavic: Standard Russian impersonal predicates and the (etymologically) passive-participial -no/-to constructions in Polish, Ukrainian, North Russian dialects, and Lithuanian. The main generalization that emerges is that under the minimalist reformulation of the EPP as a feature-checking (or selectional) property of Tense, a surprisingly strong case can be made for this obligatory subject positional constraint in Slavic. The EPP has been shown to hold as an independent property of the clause regardless of both the main predicate’s argument structure and the availability of non-referential expletive pronouns as a lexical resource. Nonagreeing predicates provide an appropriate testing ground for an independent EPP feature since the latter can be seen to operate in predicates whose subject is either non-thematic or non-NOM. It is precisely in Balto-Slavic that the EPP emerges as truly non-redundant with case and agreement. Note that it has also been shown that movement to a dedicated EPP-position is similarly non-redundant with discourse interpretation. That is, the EPP is not merely a subcase of topicalization or discourse-motivated movement, more generally.

A second point of considerable interest is the class of accusative-case-assigning unaccusatives, exemplified by Russian Adversity Impersonals and Ukrainian -no/-to. It was suggested that such predicate types instantiate Burzio-style movement without the Burzio-style motivation. That is, Burzio’s Generalization holds that ACC case cannot be assigned to an internal argument if a theta role is not assigned to an external one. This is a well-known crosslinguistic generalization that states a case-motivated source for raising
in passives and basic unaccusatives. At first blush, Burzio’s Generalization appears to be immediately falsified by Slavic accusative unaccusatives. However, under the analysis of the EPP developed in this work, “raising” to the specifier of the Tense projection is instantiated even though the constituent undergoing movement is already (structurally-) case-marked. That is, movement takes place without the motivation initially attributed to it. Without the EPP, such movement would stand in violation of Last Resort. The broader implication of this finding is that it suggests an EPP-motivation for other, more standard instances of raising in passives and basic unaccusatives, with NOM case being checked, when necessary, as a “free rider.”

Note that according to the case-checking assumptions of recent work, the class of accusative unaccusatives should not exist. Under an analysis in which the ACC case feature is hosted by a functional projection (vP) dedicated to the introduction of external arguments, it would be expected that, in the absence of an external argument, its dedicated functional projection would also be absent, thus deriving, in a phrase-structural sense, the lack of an ACC case feature for unaccusatives (see, especially, Martin 1999). In light of the licit instances of accusative unaccusatives discussed in chapters 2 and 3, it is clear that this phrase-structural derivation of Burzio’s Generalization must be revised. I have suggested that the ACC case feature is simply hosted by lexical (transitive, non-quirky-case-assigning) V. There is no requirement that V adjoin to light-v (or AgrO, in earlier terms) to discharge its case. This has the effect of removing the stipulation of strict complementarity between the processes of feature-checking and theta-assignment assumed in Chomsky 1995a, whereby feature-checking was assumed to take place
exclusively in the functional domain of the tree. More importantly, it removes the phrase-
structural prohibition on the licit checking of ACC case in the absence of a vP.

It remains to properly constrain this ACC-case-checking mechanism. I have suggested
that potentially all instances of transitive (and unaccusative) V can check ACC case. In
standard cases of unaccusativity, checking ACC on the predicate’s sole argument will
result in the failure of T’s agreement features to be checked (only NOM NPs check
agreement on T) and, thus, a non-convergent derivation. In the absence of agreement
features on T, that is, in the case of nonagreeing predicates, the prohibition on
unaccusative V checking ACC is removed. Under this kind of analysis, what is
exceptional about accusative unaccusatives is not the verb’s ability to check case on its
internal argument, but rather T’s impoverished feature inventory with respect to
agreement. In such a way, the mysterious notion of “case absorption” has been shown to
reduce to the checking requirements of the lexical items involved in the derivation.

In contrast to Ukrainian -no/-to, the corresponding construction in Polish was shown
to have a fully-thematic subject with a pro-arb interpretation. It follows that Polish -no/-to
is not passive and, thus, is not a derived unaccusative like its Ukrainian counterpart. The
Polish construction was shown to exhibit a wide range of seemingly unrelated properties,
which, upon initial inspection, appeared to present a significant obstacle for principled
unification. These properties include those mentioned above, namely, an ACC direct
object and a fully-thematic subject, along with the non-occurrence of overt, tense-
marking auxiliaries and passive by-phrases. It was proposed that the /-no/-to/ morpheme
has been reanalyzed as an auxiliary-like element heading Tense, with the immediate
consequence that Polish -no/-to, unlike its Ukrainian counterpart, contains no passive
participial morphology. Now, the lack of both ACC case-absorption and dethematization of the external argument fall out automatically, along with the lack of auxiliaries and by-phrases. The fact that only Polish -no/-to obligatorily bears a past-tense reading provides additional support for this analysis. To be sure, the basic idea is not that the predicate raises overtly along with its word-final morphology to T, but rather that the /-no/-to/ morpheme is interpreted in this higher position, while being pronounced “low,” as part of the verb-stem. This has been described as a case of “abstract reanalysis” (borrowing the term from Baker 1988); /-no/-to/ is pronounced as part of the verb-stem as an historical artifact. That is, the full effect of this reanalysis has not yet been fully “actualized.”

Polish -no/-to provides an unusual example of the more familiar phenomenon in syntax whereby elements are pronounced in a position structurally distinct from where they are interpreted. More generally, Polish and Ukrainian -no/-to provide strong evidence for the hypothesis that major crosslinguistic variation between closely related languages can be the result of relatively minor differences in the categorial or featural status of lexical items (in this case, of etymologically-related, homophonous morphemes).

This point was made more dramatically on the basis of -no/-to in North Russian and its cognate form in Lithuanian. Here, /-no/-to/, while, like Polish, also being interpreted higher in the tree, has an additional selectional property according to which quirky case is assigned externally. This is quirky-case-assignment of subjects, along the well-known Icelandic pattern, though in North Russian and Lithuanian, quirky case is assigned as a lexical idiosyncrasy of an affix, rather than of a particular verb. Meanwhile, the object, following the predictions of the Case-in-Tiers model (Yip, et al. 1987), appears in the NOM. The oblique subject plus NOM object, correlating, as it does with a particular
tense/mood distinction (marked by the /-no/-to/ affix), has the immediate feel of an emerging split-ergative construction. The fact that the oblique case assigned by the affix appears to have arisen as a possessive predication, suggests, as we have seen, that an ergative analysis is typologically-motivated.

While treating the assignment of oblique case to the subject as an unremarkable instance of quirky case (licensed as a lexical idiosyncrasy, in this case, of a morpheme), the formal licensing of the NOM object remains a problem under current assumptions. The Case-in-Tiers and, subsequent, Dependent-Case (Marantz 1991, Harley 1995) algorithms make the correct predictions, thought they seem to be of an “extra-derivational” nature. I have suggested that the Case-Dependency discussed in chapter 4 reduces to a dependency on the thematic saturation of predicates. That is, the assignment of /-no/-to/’s quirky case was shown to be “delayed” until all thematic relations were discharged. The presence of an external argument, for example, would take V+Af out of a checking relation with the direct object (by virtue of adjunction to v) and into a local relation with the external argument, generated in v’s specifier. Alternatively, in those cases in which the initial instance of Merge (of V plus its complement) saturates the predicate’s sole theta role, the affix’s quirky case is assigned to the object, as the predicate’s thematically most prominent argument. This latter strategy holds of unaccusatives. To summarize, postponing the assignment of /-no/-to/’s quirky case until all thematic relations have been merged out has the effect of accounting for the distribution of the quirky case derivationally, rather than merely defining it as a filter on well-formedness.

This dissertation leaves open many areas for future investigation. The following problems are particularly significant. First, in light of Chomsky’s (1998) recent proposal
that all “core functional projections” contain an EPP-feature as a selectional property of
the functional head, it would be reasonable to explore a finer-grained approach to the
position direct objects. The primary question here is whether the specifier of $v$ is truly
privileged in the same sense as the specifier of $T$. In other words, is there any evidence in
Slavic for overt Object Shift (cf. Lasnik 1999a, b, c, on English)? Next, it would be
interesting to explore to what extent the link between nonagreement and the class of
accusative unaccusatives can be extended to other languages. Finally, the problem of
NOM objects and case-dependencies, in general, requires significantly more attention,
especially under more strictly derivational approaches to syntax.