

“I’m done my homework.” – Case assignment in a stative passive

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The Puzzle and Main Claims We present an analysis of an underdescribed construction common to Canadian and Philadelphian English dialects which appears to involve an instance of the copula/passive auxiliary *be*, a participial form of *finish* or *do*, and a DP complement receiving accusative Case (see Yerastov 2010 for a description and discussion of its geographical distribution). This construction, which is fully productive and non-idiomatic, is illustrated in (1). The construction raises a number of problems for the theory of Case-assignment and argument structure, including (i) what is the category of the phrase headed by the passive participle?; (ii) where is the external argument (*I* in example (1)) introduced?; (iii) where does the accusative Case of the internal argument (*my homework* in (1)) come from, given the apparently passive structure?; and, (iv) why is this construction lexically restricted to the participles of *do* and *finish*? We will argue that the structure of examples like (1) is as shown in (2). The answer to question (i) is therefore that the construction involves a resultative adjectival passive, rather than a full eventive passive or an active past participle, i.e. that there is no Voice head present in the participial phrase (we follow Lundquist 2012 in taking participles to be adjectival in nature, and Embick (2004) in taking resultative participles to involve an event-introducing little-*v*, which we take to be distinct from Chomsky’s (2001) *v**/Kratzer’s (1996) Voice). This means (ii) that the external argument is therefore introduced not in spec-VoiceP (which is absent) but in the subject position of the adjectival small clause (which we depict here as spec-aP). We argue in answer to question (iii) that the accusative Case of the internal argument is assigned by a little-*a* head. Such Case assignment by little-*a* is already known to be lexically restricted in English (in Standard English it is apparently restricted to exactly one context- that of the root *worth*), so that (iv) also receives a natural answer: our proposal is that the relevant dialects extend the distribution of the Case-assigning little-*a* head slightly beyond *worth* to include structures containing the roots *do* and *finish*.

Motivation The adjectival passive nature of the phrase headed by the past participle is made clear by its syntactic distribution. Firstly, as shown by Yerastov (2010:45), the construction is compatible with the use of *all* as a degree modifier, which is possible for adjectives but not active participles (3). Secondly, it can appear under verbs like *seem* and *look* (4a&b), a classic diagnostic for adjectivehood which also rules out the possibility that the structure involves a full eventive passive (which are impossible under *seem*- see (4c)). The argument that little-*a* is responsible for the accusative Case-assignment in this construction will be made by process of elimination. We will argue that the Case-assigner cannot be below *done/finished* in the form of a silent P *with* or a silent gerundive verb, since the [be done/finished DP] construction does not have an instrumental reading which would be predicted to be available if a silent *with* were in the structure, and nor does it allow manner adverbs, as shown in (5). The Case assigner cannot be identified as the copular verb *be* either, as might be thought possible given Lohndal’s (2006) argument that the copula assigns accusative Case in some languages. This is because the small clause predicate [*done/finished my homework*] is grammatical in the relevant dialects in environments where no copula is present, as in (6). The presence of the external argument inside the italicized small clauses in (6) also strongly supports our contention that this argument is introduced in the subject position of the small clause, as depicted in (2). We thus conclude that little-*a* is responsible for assigning accusative Case to the internal argument in this construction. That this Case assignment by little-*a* is possible in principle (albeit in a very lexically restricted way, at least in English) is suggested by the existence of the adjective *worth*, which even in Standard English can take DP complements, as demonstrated in (7). We propose that the relevant Philadelphian and Canadian dialects differ from other dialects of English only in having a slightly wider distribution of Case-assigning little-*a*. This correctly predicts that other dialects of English should permit a structure similar to (2) so long as there is no internal argument (as in (8a)), the internal argument does not require Case (as is the case with the gerundive complement in (8b)), or some alternative Case assigner is present (such as the preposition in (8c)). The ungrammaticality of (1) in these other English dialects follows because only non-Case assigning little-*a* can appear in these environments in the relevant dialects, leaving the internal argument unlicensed.

Conclusion A range of syntactic tests indicate that constructions of the sort in (1) in Philadelphian and Canadian English have the structure in (2), involving Case-assignment by a little-*a* head. Little-*a* thus shows itself to be able in principle to assign accusative Case, suggesting that this capacity is not fundamental to

the distinction between adjectives and verbs.

- (1) I am done/finished my homework.
- (2) [TP [DP I] [T' am [aP [~~DP~~ I] [a' [a -ed] [vP v+do/finish [DP my homework]]]]]]
- (3)
 - a. I am *all* ready for school.
 - b. I am *all* done/finished my homework.
 - c. *I have *all* done my homework.
- (4)
 - a. John looks done/finished his homework.
 - b. ? John seems done/finished his homework.
 - c. *The homework seems done/finished by John.
- (5)
 - a. I am done/finished with the computer. (✓using / ✓constructing)
 - b. I am done/finished the computer. (*using / ✓constructing)
 - c. I am done/finished reading this book attentatively. (I'll skim from now on.)
 - d. I am done/finished this book (*attentively.) (I'll skim from now on.)
- (6)
 - a. So, you did your chemistry exam this morning. That makes *you done your exams*, right?
 - b. With *John at long last done his homework*, we can go out and have fun.
- (7)
 - a. This appliance is certainly worth the money.
 - b. Reading this book is not worth my time.
- (8)
 - a. I'm done/finished.
 - b. I'm done/finished eating.
 - c. I'm done/finished with my food.

References

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