24.904
Language Acquisition

Class 12: Passives

Last time

- Root Infinitives:

  - children produce sentences with missing tense and agreement morphology, even though this is unlicensed in adult grammar

  - these sentences are *syntactically* infinitival — not just missing surface morphology

Last time

- Truncation:

  ▶ children produce RIs because they arbitrarily cut-off structure-building before getting to TP

- Today: Agr-Tense Omission Model

  ▶ children optionally omit agreement and/or tense information

Case errors

- Among the ways in which "kids talk funny" are in their use of subject pronouns in English:

(1) Him fall down (Nina 2;3)
    Her have a big mouth (Nina 2;2)
    Her smoking (Sarah 2;9)
    Me working a railroad (Peter 2;1)

- What does this mean with respect to what the children know about syntax? Do they simply not know the right forms for pronouns?

Case errors

- The errors happen at the same time that children are also using root infinitives, ages from 2 to 3.

- What do we make of this temporal overlap?

Illuminating asymmetries

▸ **Localized problem with subject case**; children do not make similar errors with the case on objects or adjuncts (Rispoli 1992, Vainikka 1993, Schutze & Wexler 1996)

▸ Not cross-linguistically widespread; really only English (perhaps French?)

Illuminating asymmetries

- Crucially, there is a striking correlation between case errors and (non)-finiteness.

  ‣ Children do not make subject case errors when the verb form is finite.

  ‣ It's only with the root infinitives that case errors arise
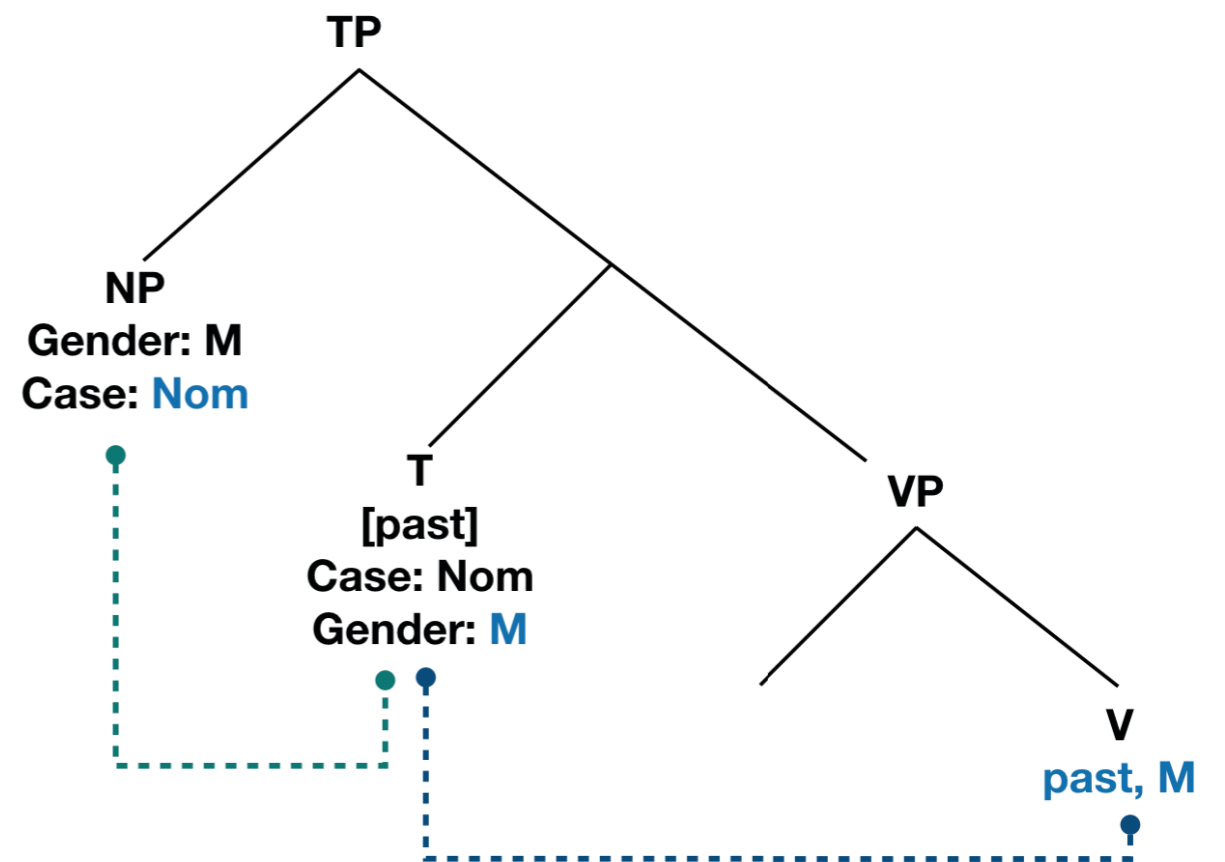
Finiteness and Case

Case	Schütze & Wexler (1996) 3 kids 1;11-3;1		Loeb & Leonard (1991) 7 kids 2;11-3;4	
	Finite	Nonfinite	Finite	Nonfinite
NOM	559	291	436	75
Non-NOM	**21**	155	**4**	28
% non-NOM	**3.6%**	39.4%	**0.9%**	27%

Schutze & Wexler 1996

- S&W explore this connection and propose that in fact these phenomena arise from a common source, explaining why they happen together.

Recall…

- Beyond temporal specification, T is responsible for various things…

  ▸ Subject-verb agreement on the verb

  ▸ Nominative case on the subject

A simple story that doesn't work

- What a truncation theorist might say: If T is responsible for both agreement *and* case, perhaps a missing T explains the finiteness-case-error correlation

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- Problem: a good chunk of children's non-finite utterances consist of NOM subjects!

  (1) She go away

Schutze & Wexler 1996

- **Syntactic assumption:** divvying up the responsibilities

  ‣ A distinct head Agr is responsible for Subj-Verb agreement

  ‣ Tense is responsible for temporal information, e.g. [+past], as before

  ‣ Crucially, Agr assigns NOM case

- **Agr-Tense Omission Model (ATOM):** The grammar of children in the RI-Stage has the non-adult property of permitting the matrix clause to lack Agr and/or T
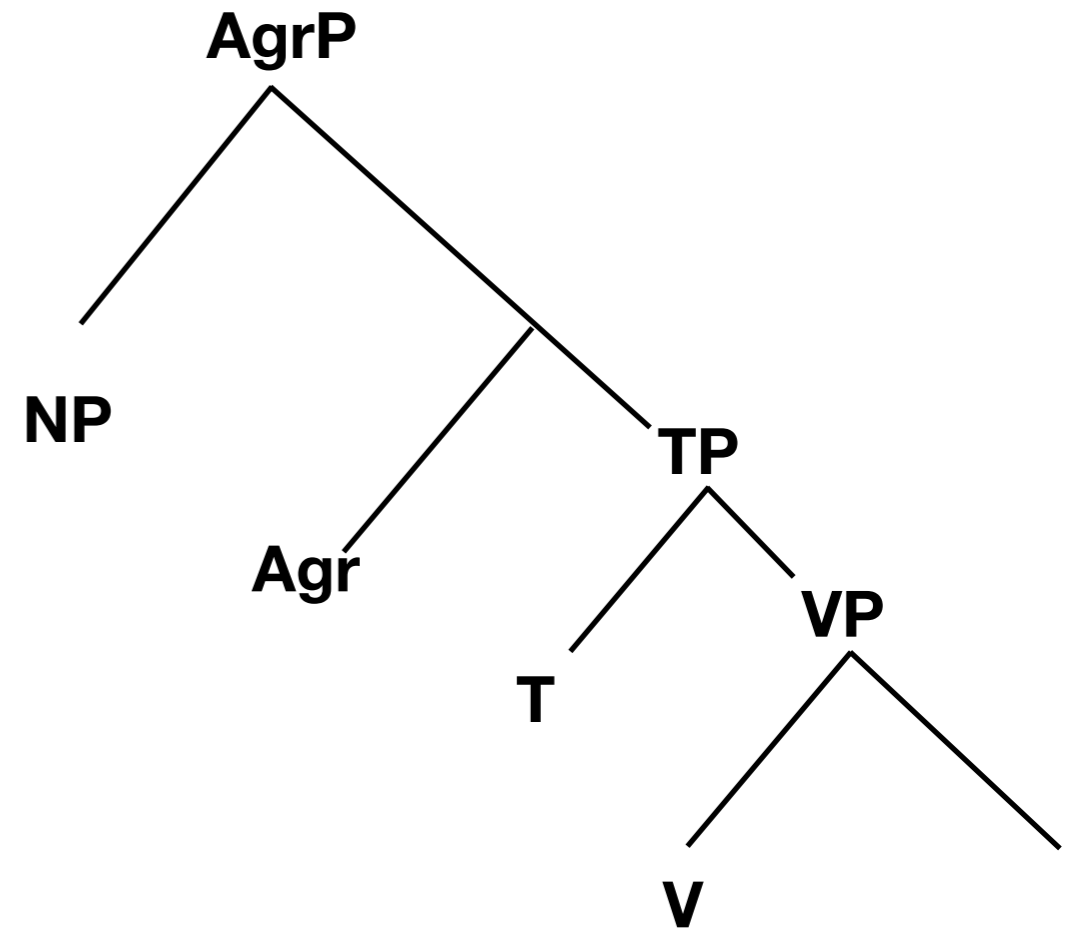
Schutze & Wexler 1996

- **Morphological assumptions**

  ‣ [tns=pres, agr=3sg] —> -s

  ‣ [tns=past] —> -ed

  ‣ else —> ∅

Predicted Possibilities

▸ +T, +Agr: finite verb, nominative subject

▸ -T, +Agr: nonfinite verb, nominative subject

▸ +T$_{[past]}$, -Agr: past tense verb; no nominative subject

▸ +T$_{[non\text{-}past]}$, -Agr: no marking on verb; no nominative subject

▸ -T, -Agr: no marking on verb, no nominative subject

▸ **Unpredicted**: 3sg present verb, no nominative subject

Schutze & Wexler 1996

- What this explains:

  ▸ why there are so many nominative subjects with root infinitives: those are cases <u>where T was missing but Agr was there.</u>

Schutze & Wexler 1996

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- The piece we're still missing…

  ▸ what exactly happens when nominative can't be assigned?

Default case

- The errors involve replacement of NOM with ACC. But where does ACC come from?

- Conjecture: children's ACC subjects have the **default case form**, i.e. the form that appears when there is no obvious case-assigner.

(1) a. Me/*I like linguistics.
     b. Who did it? Me?*I.
     c. Me/*I too.
     d. Me/*?I and Adele are co-teaching this class.

Default case

- This might explain why subject case errors are so apparent in English but not in other languages. If children are using the default case in subject position, it will be an obvious error in English.

- In many other languages, German for instance, the default case is NOM, so the same as it would have been anyway.

(1) Der, den habe ich gesehen.
   He, him have I seen

Prediction

- On ATOM, children's case errors are taken to reveal a lot of competence:

  ▸ they know that Nominative is assigned by Agr

  ▸ they know that in the absence of licensor, default case (=ACC) shows up

- A prediction: they should never produce NOM when Agr is absent

Prediction

- A place where Agr is absent in adult language: infinitival subordinate clauses, (e.g. "I want him to climb")

- Aravind (2019): children in the RI-stage sometimes do produce structures like the following:

(1) a. I want she to get off (Lara, 3;02)
    b. I want he to be up tree (Aran, 2;07)
    c. I won't let he have it (Aran, 2;9)
    d. Let she sit still (Eleanor, 2;9)

Null subjects

- Subject-drop in English vs. Italian

(1)   a. I speak English
       b. *speak English

(2)   a. Io parlo italiano
       b. ✓parlo italiano

RI vs. non-RI languages

- **RI-languages:** Danish, Dutch, English, Faroese, French, Icelandic, Irish, Norwegian, Russian, Swedish, Czech (mixed), Hebrew (mixed)

- **non-RI languages:** Catalan, Greek, Italian, Polish, Spanish, Tamil

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**The Null-Subject/Root-Infinitive Correlation** (Wexler 1998)
A language goes through an RI-Stage iff that language is not a language that allows null subjects.

Some evidence

- Rhee and Wexler (1995)

  ‣ Modern Hebrew is a NS language for 1st and 2nd person, non-present tense.

  ‣ Everywhere else (3rd past, future, present) subjects are obligatory.

  ‣ Hebrew-learning 2-year-olds produced root infinitives everywhere **except in 1/2 non-present**
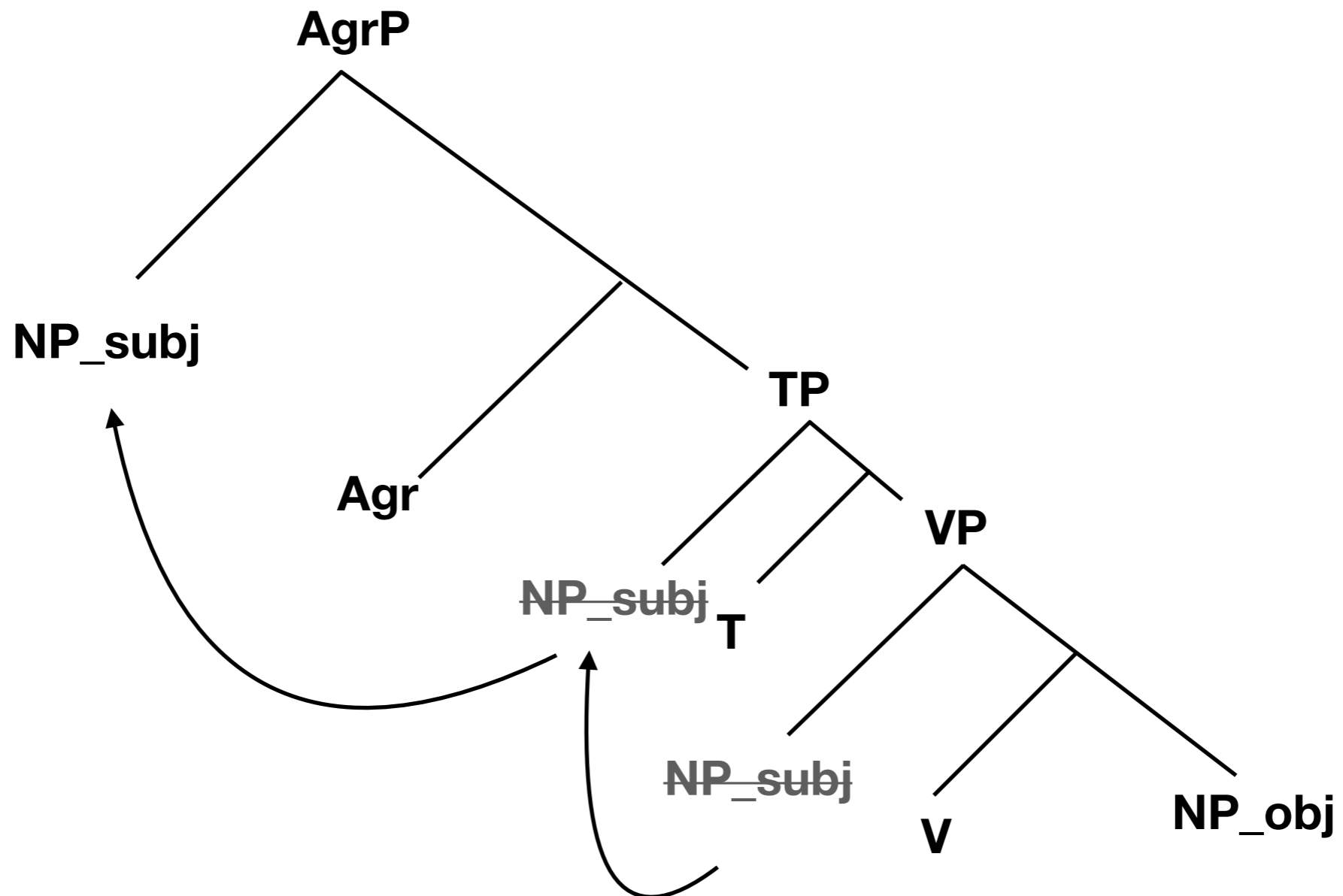
Explaining the correlation

- **Assumption:** VP-internal subject hypothesis

  - Subjects start out in a lower position, inside the verbal domain, but somehow end up in Spec, AgrP
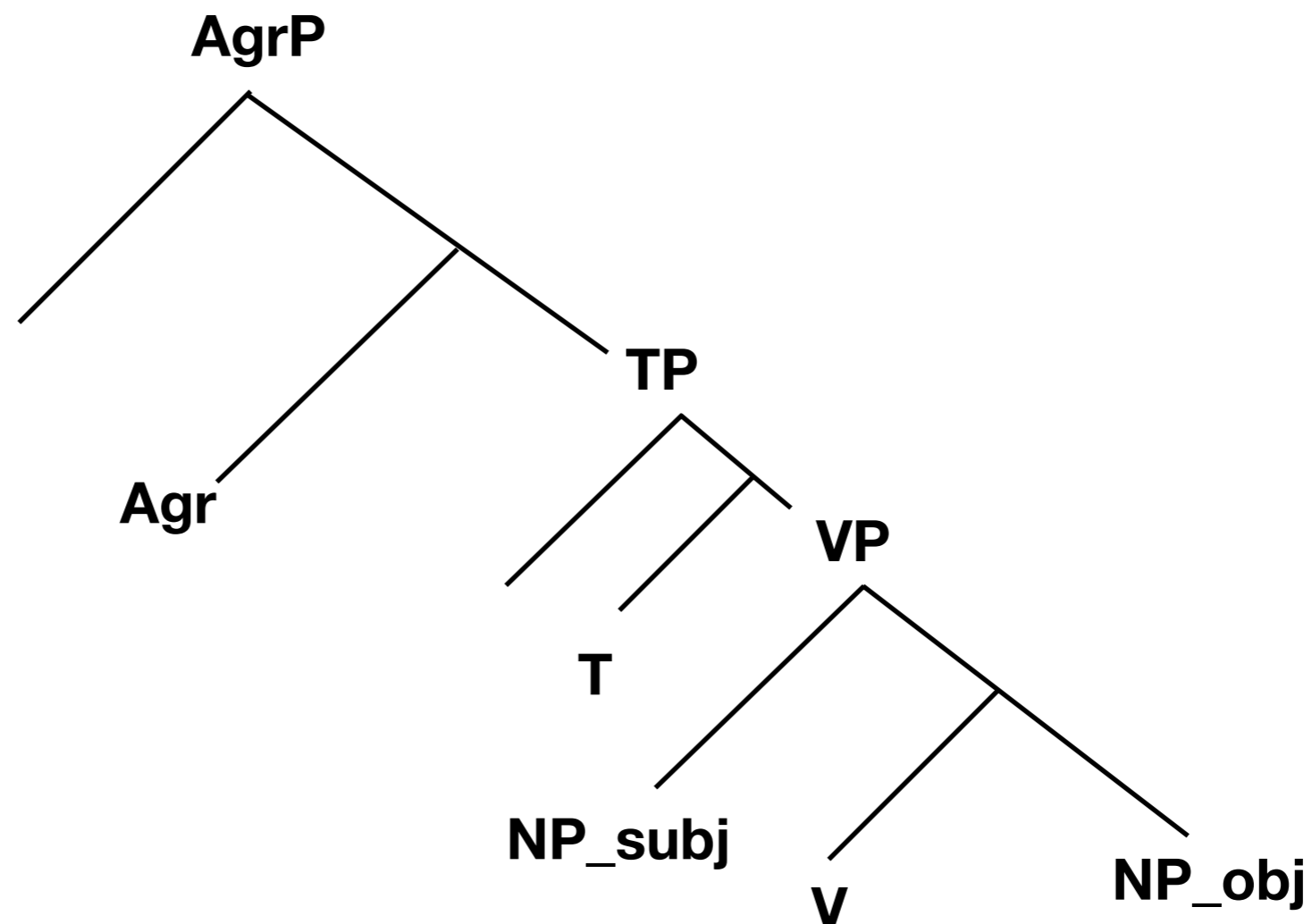
Explaining the correlation

- Wexler 1998: In English-type languages, the subject moves through Spec, TP and finally lands in Spec, AgrP

Explaining the correlation

- Unique Checking Constraint (UCC): child grammar only allows one such dependency step.

  - Reason behind Age-Tense Omission

Explaining the correlation

- A common analysis of null-subject languages is that their agreement suffixes are actually, in some sense, 'pronominals' that double the subject

- A consequence, according to Wexler (1998): the subject DP never needs to move to Spec, AgrP and the child isn't forced to omit the phrase

AgrP

pro

Agr

NP_subj

TP

T

VP

~~NP_subj~~

V

NP_obj
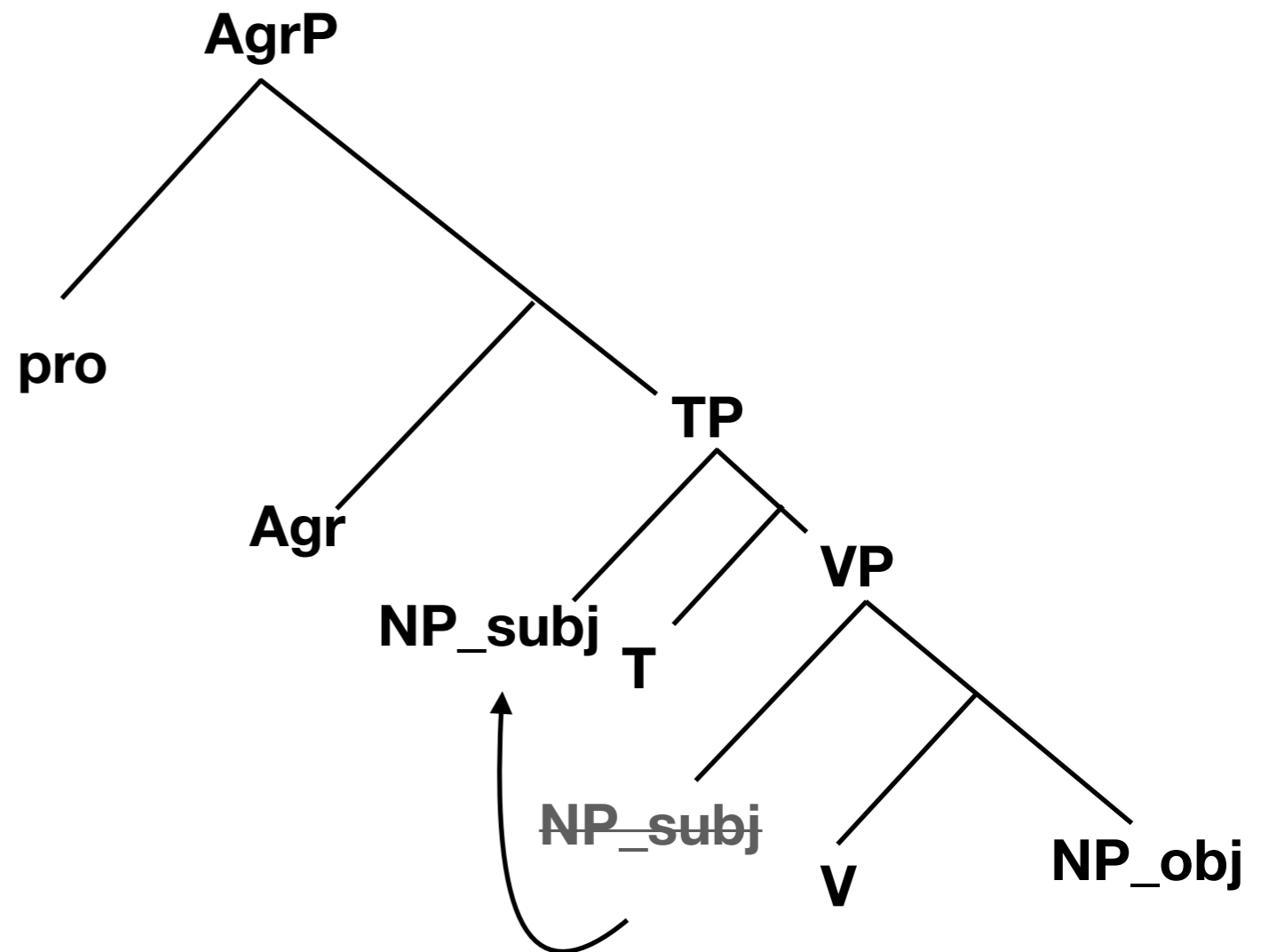
Summary

- Two accounts of RIs

  ▸ **Truncation:** Children can (relatively arbitrarily) stop building their trees short of CP, with the consequences that go with that.

  ▸ **ATOM:** Agr is tied to subject case, verbal morphology depends on features of both Agr and T, children might omit either Agr or T.

- There are pros, there are cons.

Summary

- Somewhat different structure simplification mechanisms:

  - Unlike Truncation, ATOM hypothesizes that children in the RI-stage know that matrix clauses must be CPs. Under certain conditions, they simply cannot build structures containing both Tense and Agreement.

  ▸ In this regard, ATOM predicts non-monotonicity: omission of projections from the middle of the tree is licensed.

Summary

- Different explanations for RI vs. non-RI

  ‣ truncation: link between verb-movement and RI

  ‣ not clear how truncation can explain the null subject/non-RI correlation

Things to think about

- Are RIs really child-language specific?

- There are specific 'registers' in adult language that allows for similar sorts of thing

  ‣ Headlinese and *be*-drop: "Prisoners [are] 'Terrified' as Coronavirus Spreads Behind Bars" (NYTimes, 3/31/2020)

  ‣ Missing tense information in Y/N questions (Fitzpatrick 2006):

    (1) a. [Did] Anyone go to the game last night?
        b. [Did] He throw a tantrum?

up next

- Acquisition of **movement phenomena**

  - passives: 3/17

  - wh-questions: after spring break

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