Spec-CP as an A-position: an argument from hyperraising in Mongolian

1. Overview. In Mongolian, the subject of embedded finite clauses can bear NOM or ACC case.

(1) Bat [ margaaash Dulmaa / Dulmaa-g nom unsh-n gej ] khel-sen.
    ‘Bat said that Dulmaa will read a book tomorrow.’

I will propose in (6) that the ACC version is derived by movement of the embedded subject to Spec-CP. From that position, the embedded subject can receive ACC from the matrix v without violating the PIC. Furthermore, movement to Spec-CP extends the binding domain of a reflexive: if a reflexive is attached to the embedded subject, it can only be bound by the matrix subject if the embedded subject is ACC. Finally, movement to Spec-CP explains why the ACC can move into the matrix clause: Spec-CP may act as an escape hatch into the matrix clause. If this analysis is correct, the relevance of Mongolian ACC subjects is that movement through Spec-CP may feed the creation of new antecedents for binding:

(2) a. Öör-iin-kh n’i’ bagsh ouyutan bür-(-iig), sain ouyutan gej khel-sen.
    self-GEN-EPTH POSS.3 teacher student every(-ACC) good student COMP say-PST
    ‘Their teacher said that every student is a good student.’ /variable binding

    student every-ACC self-GEN-EPTH POSS.3 teacher [ t good student COMP ] say-PST
    ‘For every student x, x’s teacher said that x is a good student.’ /variable binding

This is a signature property of A-movement. Spec-CP would have to be an A-position, contrary to the common assumption that this is inherently an A-position. We could, instead, assume that syntactic positions are defined by the features that create them (Obata & Epstein:2011; van Urk:2015).

2. ACC subjects are embedded arguments. The ACC subject in (1) follows an embedded adverb, like the NOM subject. Given the absence of long distance scrambling of adverbs in Mongolian, we may conclude that both subjects in (1) are inside the embedded clause. However, it may not always be clear whether the ACC DP is the embedded subject or a matrix, proleptic argument (Salzmann:2017, i.a.). ACC subjects can be argued to be base-generated inside the embedded clause based on (i) clausal scrambling that includes the ACC subject (not shown); (ii) idiom preservation (not shown); (iii) the possibility of interpreting nonreferential DPs in the scope of the matrix predicate (3); (iv) NPI licensing (4), which must be licensed by clause-mate negation in Mongolian.

(3) Lusyn dagina bodit endalrach bai-deg-güi ch, Navchaa [ lusyn dagina-(-iig) ich
    mermaid real in.life COP-HAB-NEG CH Navchaa [ mermaid(-ACC) come.FUT
    bai-n gej ] khel-sen.
    AUX-N.PST COMP ] say-PST
    ‘Although mermaids don’t exist, Navchaa said that a mermaid is coming.’

(4) Nara khen ch / khen-iig ch iree*(-güi) gej khel-sen.
    Nara who.NOM CH / who-ACC CH come.PST*(-NEG) COMP say-PST
    ‘Nara said that nobody came.’

3. ACC is higher than NOM. Even though ACC subjects are base-generated inside the embedded clause, they occupy a higher position than NOM subjects, which are presumably in Spec-TP. The reflexive possessive -ee obeys Condition A. If it is contained in an embedded NOM subject, the sentence is ungrammatical. This could be explained if the embedded clause is a binding domain for the NOM subject, preventing the matrix subject from binding it. If the embedded subject is ACC, however, the result is grammatical. As in (1), the ACC subject in (5) follows an embedded adverb, suggesting that it still is in the embedded clause. If the ACC subject were occupying the same position as the NOM (Spec-TP) the former should be as bad as the latter. What position could an ACC subject occupy, so that it is inside the embedded clause, but also bound by the matrix subject? I suggest that Spec-CP is this position.

(5) Bat [ margaaash egch-(-iig)-ee ir-ne gej ] khel-sen.
    Bat [ tomorrow sister*(-ACC)-REFL.POSS come-N.PST COMP ] say-PST
    ‘Bat, said that his/her sister is coming tomorrow.’

The same argument can be made based Condition B (not shown). If the embedded subject is a 3rd person NOM pronoun, it can be coindexed with the matrix subject. If it is ACC, it must not.

would make wrong predictions about ACC. If we move to Spec-CP, having moved there, they can, as a byproduct, receive A-features in COMP. This allows the subject to override the binding domain of (5). (Case assignment is not discussed here, but see e.g. Kornfalt & Preminger:2015.)

4. A prediction: movement into the matrix clause. ACC subjects can also be pronounced inside the matrix clause, as we can see in (7) and also in (9a), where ACC is obligatory if the DP interpreted as the embedded subject precedes a matrix adverb.

This is hyperraising (cf. Ura:1994, Tanaka:2002, Yoon:2007, Halpert & Zeller:2015, Bondarenko:2017, Deal:2017, Zyman:2017, i.a.). When pronounced inside the matrix clause, ACC subjects move there from the embedded clause. This conclusion is supported by the fact that an ACC DP pronounced in the matrix clause cannot be associated with a gap inside an island like a coordinated clause, i.a.:

However, other DPs cannot long distance-scramble into the matrix clause. In (9), a NOM subject cannot precede a matrix adverb nor be the leftmost DP. The same holds of embedded arguments that are lower than the subject, like dative DPs and unmarked or differentially marked objects (not shown).

5. Spec-CP as an A-position. When moved to a position before the matrix subject, an embedded ACC subject can create new antecedents for binding (2b) and it does not induce a WCO violation:

By contrast, Wh-movement (an instance of A-movement) does induces a WCO violation, (11). That Wh-phrases in Mongolian move covertly can be inferred from the fact that they cannot be inside islands (e.g. coordinated clause (12), i.a.) and the fact that embedded Wh-phrases take matrix scope (not shown).

If ACC subjects move to Spec-CP, we could conclude that this can be an A-position, otherwise we would make wrong predictions about (2b) and (10). We can assume that syntactic positions are not inherently A or A, but that they are defined by the features that create them (Obata & Epstein:2011, van Urk:2015). Spec-CP in Mongolian HR can be an A-position because COMP in (6) has A-features that trigger the movement of the closest DP. There is empirical evidence that HR can feed A-movement (Tanaka:2002) and it has been proposed that Spec-CP can be an A-position in HR (Takeuchi:2010, Wurmbrand:2017, 2018, who I follow in (6)). The relevance of the Mongolian data is that they continue this trend of research by providing unified evidence for both claims.