This paper considers the nature of specifiers formed by movement from the perspective of wh-questions in English. It attempts to address the question of why specifiers are formed at all within a syntactic theory that involves a mechanism of feature checking/Agree at a distance. Minimalist approaches toward overt movement to a Spec position have taken it to be a consequence of (a) a requirement that a Spec be created by overt movement to check a strong feature (Chomsky 1995), or (b) simply the property that certain heads require Specs (Chomsky 2000, Lasnik 2001). These approaches (particularly (b)) have the effect of generalizing what is known as the Extended Projection Principle or EPP to all (functional) heads that require a Spec. However, the EPP requirement (or “Spec requirement”) itself remains unmotivated and mysterious. The goal of the paper is to attempt to elucidate the nature of the EPP by examining the behavior of wh-elements as specifiers. It is argued that evidence from wh-subjects in English and from other constructions involving wh-movement suggest that the EPP or ‘Spec requirement’ for functional heads may in fact be just a reflex of Lexical Integrity. This independent motivation for the creation of Specs via movement becomes available in a theory where Feature Movement and Category Movement constitute separate but related operations in the overt syntax.

The main empirical argument comes from the paradoxical behavior of wh-subjects in English. The classical Vacuous Movement Hypothesis [VMH; George 1980, Chomsky 1986, Lasnik and Saito 1992] states that, in the case of local wh-extraction, subjects remain in-situ despite the general existence of overt wh-movement in a language. On the surface, subject questions in English do not seem to involve displacement of the wh-element (i.e., they do not leave a “gap” in Chomsky’s (1977) terms), thus suggesting that (overt) movement does not occur.

Several well-known facts seem to lend support for the VMH. Lasnik and Saito (1992) point out that local topicalization of subjects is impossible in English (1).

Moreover, null operator/relative pronoun deletion is generally not possible with subject clefts and relatives (2), (3). This latter fact is arguably linked to the impossibility of null subjects in languages like English.

However, one well-known problem for the classic VMH is the wh-island effect created by embedded subject questions in English (4). In fact, such an effect was one of the original diagnostics of wh-movement observed in Chomsky 1977:

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Paradoxically, the wh-subject of the embedded clause appears to occupy the lower [Spec, CP] position, despite distributional evidence to the contrary.
I argue that this asymmetry is best viewed as an EPP asymmetry, given the view of overt movement as the effect of two separate operations: Move-$F$ and Pied-Pipe. Move-$F$ extracts the feature $F$ (to be checked) of a category $\alpha$ and adjoins it to a functional head $H$ for the purpose of checking (5a); Pied-Pipe merges $\alpha$ as the Spec of $H$ (5b).

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{(5)} \\
\text{a) HP} & \text{b) HP} \\
\text{3} & \text{3} \\
\text{H 3} & \text{H 3} \\
\text{1 6} & \text{H 6} \\
\text{F H [t\ldots]} & \text{1} \\
\text{F H} \end{array}
\]

This analysis immediately eliminates the apparent paradox for the VMH and may shed light on why category displacement (Pied-Pipe) should apply at all in conjunction with feature checking. It is the operation Pied-Pipe that yields the effect of the EPP. Pied-Pipe is induced by a PF restriction on the scattering of a category’s features: $F$ and its associated category are required to be adjacent prior to Spell-Out, so that no ‘foreign’ lexical material intervenes between them (which follows from the notion of Lexical Integrity). I suggest that the VMH be restated as follows: for local questions with wh-subjects, Move $F$ applies and Pied-Pipe is blocked. Pied-Pipe is blocked by a simple Economy principle: Avoid superfluous steps. Since the category and the extracted feature are already adjacent, the application of Pied-Pipe is blocked, yielding (6) (where $C$ is phonetically null).

\[
\begin{array}{l}
\text{(6)} \\
\text{3 CP} \\
\text{C 3} \\
\text{1 3} \\
\text{[wh] C who 6} \\
\text{left} \end{array}
\]

The apparently troublesome island effect induced by wh-subjects in-situ results from the locality condition on feature chains, which constrains Move $F$, but not Pied-Pipe.

This leads us to the following conclusions: (a) Move $F$ satisfies the needs of the attracting head $H$. Pied-Pipe (i.e., movement to Spec) satisfies the needs of the category whose feature is extracted by Move $F$ (reminiscent of “Greed”, Chomsky 1993). If this is the case, then the ‘Spec requirement’ (call it “EPP”) is not a requirement of $H$, but may be a means of respecting Lexical Integrity; the features of a category must not be “scattered”.

Decomposing overt movement operations in this manner also has other surprising results. The analysis has some important extensions to the behavior of embedded topics, the overt/covert asymmetry of island effects first noted by Huang (1982), and some unexpected ellipsis phenomena with wh-questions.