

Free Merge in the Architecture of Syntactic Theory

Ken Safir – Seminar in Syntax – Spring, 2016

One of the key intuitions that informs minimalist approaches to linguistic theory is that Merge is the principal, if not the unique, evolutionary innovation that resulted in the emergence of the human language faculty (HLF). The strongest version of this hypothesis is that Merge is maximally simple and that its output is the sum total of the syntactic contribution to structure formation. Most current versions of minimalism assume that internal Merge (movement) is feature-driven, that is, Agree and feature distributions play a role in how structures are built. Feature-driven derivations are typically proposed to capture correlations between movement and agreement, to limit syntactic outputs, or to insure deterministic derivations. It will be argued that none of these motivations are convincing and that an approach more consistent with the leading idea of minimalism is that Merge applies freely to build structures and that the semantic and morphophonological interfaces interpret the output, and in so doing filter those outputs.

The leading idea, as I will formulate it, is to confine the generative capacity (recursive embedding) of grammars to Merge, thereby stripping all non-Merge properties from structure-generation. This approach to Merge removes vestiges of the distinction between internal and external Merge inherited from an era when movement was a distinct structure-building operation from what is now considered external Merge. As a result, all feature relations and criterial relations are properties that arise from the way that the interfaces interpret the (limited amount of) structure they can see with consequences for Case, agreement, linearization, labeling morphological composition (especially in agglutinative languages) and post-lexical insertion as well as scope, thematic assignment, selection and anaphoric interpretation. These consequences will be unevenly explored in class, but offer opportunities for research projects for those who are interested in pursuing the leading idea in this way.

Insofar as Merge is the sole operation that delivers structure to the interfaces, what it can and cannot generate plays an even larger role in what is available to the interfaces to interpret. It is argued that Merge itself should be reformulated (according to the Peak Novelty Condition proposed in Safir, 2015) so as to restrict, in some ways, and expand, in others, what the interfaces have to work with, namely, the structural relations within a phase. This reformulation of Merge (codifying what has been surprisingly unprincipled current practice) will permit the A-/A'-distinction to be completely derived with consequences for the analysis of reconstruction, head movement, anaphor-binding, weak crossover and superiority, as well as removing the possibility of post-syntactic movement in either of the interfaces.

If the free merge program is feasible, it would bolster the plausibility of minimalist notion that Merge is the key factor in the emergence of HLF, but if the program is to be an explanatory advance, then we would expect that reorganizing much of the descriptive power of grammar into interface interpretation should yield deeper generalizations that are not as elegantly formulable in the triggered movement theory. The possibility of this latter result is part of what will be explored in the course of the semester.