

Decomposing Merge: The sources of hierarchical recursion

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How's a Minimalist to understand the notion 'linguistic universal.' *Not* in a Greenbergian sense as an evident surface pattern exemplified in all (or most, or many) of the world's languages. *Not* in GB terms as a specification of the structural properties of the Faculty of Language (FL). Rather, 'UG' names those characteristics of FL that are proprietary to language. MP's intellectual conceit is that it is possible to factor the properties of FL into those that are distinctively linguistic and those that are more cognitively and/or computationally generic. The idea is that the set of such specifically linguistic principles (UG) is very small and that in combination with the cognitively and computationally more generic principles it is possible to derive the properties of FL.

One way of implementing the MP research program is to "minimalize" a candidate theory of UG and attempt the decomposition. As I believe that GB was a pretty good broad brush stroke guestimate of what FL might look like, trying to reduce the properties of GB to a more palatable conceptual account is a good way of pursuing the Minimalist Program.

One important feature of GB (indeed of all generative theories since the mid 1950s) is the fact that Gs generate unbounded hierarchically structured syntactic objects, i.e. the fact of hierarchical recursion. One success of MP has been to discover what kind of operation achieves this (Merge) and how we can understand broad properties of Gs as by-products of this system of recursion.

This talk argues that endocentricity is a defining characteristic of syntactic expressions. I understand this to mean that classical X' theory was roughly correct. In the context of MP, this means that labeling is a key grammatical operation. I want to argue that it is also key to understanding how recursion works in natural language grammars. The approach here contrasts with Chomsky's recent thinking on the topic in that it treats labels as important for the derivation and not merely important for the mapping of derived structures to the CI interface. For Chomsky, labels titivate hierarchically structured objects generated by Merge. Here, they are instrumental in allowing the derivation of hierarchically structured objects at all.