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Introduction to the linguistic Variation yearbook

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Introduction*

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1. Some remarks on the status of linguistic variation within the Minimalist Program

This first issue of the *Linguistic Variation Yearbook* brings together a set of articles which illustrate current theoretical issues concerning the scope and nature of linguistic variation raised within the *Minimalist Program* (MP), as currently developed in the generative framework. It is not the goal here to present an overview of the Minimalist Program. However, we would like to stress some radical changes that the MP might bring to the study of linguistic variation, as well as emphasizing the importance of the study of linguistic variation in the formulation of MP itself.

While the *Language Faculty* is uniform across human languages, the considerable variation in the world's languages shows that it must be what we might call 'flexible'. One consequence of this flexibility was supposed to allow for a wealth of metalinguistic objects (constructions, levels, rules, labels, etc.), raising tension between *explanatory* and *descriptive* adequacy.¹

The *Principle and Parameters* framework reduced the number of these metalinguistic objects. Constructions and rules, for example, were then seen as artefacts resulting from the interaction of a highly constrained theory of the Language Faculty with a small number of independent principles, known as *parameters* (see, in particular, Chomsky 1981).

The tension between the need for the extreme uniformity of the Language Faculty and the extreme variation in (I)-languages was resolved by postulating a small number of what can be called *meta-parameters* [eg. the Null Subject Parameter, the Polysynthesis parameter (see Jaeggli & Safir 1989, Baker 1996, among many others)]. Twenty years of intensive descriptive and theoretical

research has shown, in our opinion, that such meta-parameters do not exist, or, if they do exist, be seen as artefacts of the ‘conspiracy’ of several micro-parameters (see among others, Kayne 2000).

Partly as a consequence of this, the Minimalist Program views parameters as *micro-parameters* tied to the presence of certain distinct functional categories (such as Number, Case, etc) while the invariant properties of the Computational System (restricted to recursive Narrow Syntax — Merge and Move) force us to reduce variation to the *lexicon* (the numerations) that Merge and Move access.^{2,3}

This move allows a radical simplification of the nature and design of UG yielding a model where the notion of ‘level’ is largely reduced to S-structure whose semantics and phonological properties are built derivationally. (See, among many others, Chomsky 1994, Collins 2001, Kayne 1988, Nissenbaum 1992, and Uriagereka 1999). If it is true that the most prominent property of the Language Faculty resides in its recursive character; one should, however, bear in mind that many aspects of Universal Grammar as defined in the PP framework do **not** belong to the Faculty of Language in this restricted sense. For example the *theta-criterion* is not part of the Language Faculty in this restricted sense, but is probably part of the module that makes up the C/I system and might be part of the Faculty of language in an extended sense (see Hauser & al. 2002).

The same type of question is raised by the distinction between what might be called ‘Deep semantics’ and ‘Surface Semantics’ (Chomsky 2001a), as illustrated by the difference between dislocated and non dislocated elements — perhaps identified through different functional categories, as Rizzi (1997) suggests.

The distinction between dislocated and non-dislocated element raises questions of ‘optimal design’ both at the level of the Language Faculty in the restricted and non restricted sense, since as Chomsky puts it — they suggest that external systems distinguish among various kind of semantic relations. This suggests, in our opinion that the notion of functional category might not constitute a homogeneous class.

Whether interfaces can be seen as sets of instructions to external performance systems or not, that is to language use, the C/I, the Articulatory/Perceptual, the Sensory-MotorInterface, as well as the performance system itself seem to be more structurally complex domains as previously assumed, to which the internal-external distinction might apply again (see on this issue Chomsky 2000a).

It is crucial within this framework to ascertain whether variation is (is not) restricted to the *Lexicon* (and its articulation with NS), or whether variation occurs within other domains, such as, what we shall call the C/I Faculty.

The properties of the Thought System in which such a notion such as situational beliefs plays a role, to just take one example, which are in our opinion, poorly understood, since it is hard to find anything about this system considered apart from its interaction with the Language Faculty raise interesting questions. Even if no internal variation was to be found within the C/I domain, in a strict sense (as generally assumed by linguists) a non trivial type of *external variation* could still derive from the interaction of lexicon with the proprieties of the C/I domain, as certain constructions suggest (see, for a relevant discussion, Moro 1997, Chiercha 1988, Longobardi 2001, among many others).

In other words the NS/Interface distinction forces us to distinguish between the properties and (and perhaps the allowed variations) that belong to the language faculty in a narrow sense and those that are imposed by the systems within which the language is embedded.

The very same question arises, in our opinion, even with respect to the study of Phonology the study of articulatory/acoustic phonetics (see Halle 1983) — where the notion of internal sound features seems also at stake (Chomsky 2003b), and where some variation might relate to the lexicon in non trivial ways, as the work of certain scholars suggest (see Pensalfini 1997b).

Coming back to the notion of *optimal design* it is important, as we saw before, to know whether it means the same thing when applied to NS as when applied to a more external level of the interfaces.

The question then becomes, as Chomsky puts it, that of knowing what it means to say that language is ‘well designed from the point of view of internal structure (Chomsky 2001a) raising beyond the issue of explanatory adequacy, the question of what we might call *internal adequacy*, and its relation to the study of what we might call *internal linguistic variation vs external linguistic variation*.^{4,5}

Likewise, knowing whether the notion of internal optimal design of NS which — as Gould & Lewonstin would have it, appears to be (using an architectural metaphor) a *sprandel* (arise from side consequences), whose unique properties might involve both physical and biological traits (Chomsky 1991a & 1991b) — is the same as the one involved in external domains, has become an important field of research.⁶

In a more general sense, while the notion of elegance and simplicity have always been guiding principles of scientific inquiry, their success within the

study of language and in particular within the study NS might indicate that NS is a unique object with particular properties — a fact perhaps ultimately related to the ‘weak’ (internal’) character of the interfaces, in Fodor’s sense (2000).

Whether or not ideas developed in this introduction which does not claim to cover all issues are on the right track, it should be clear that issues raised by the MP are clearly of much importance for various domains not conventionally related to linguistics such as the domain of the study of complex systems.

While a serious study of the topic falls outside the scope of the Linguistic Variation Yearbook it is the hope of the editor that the study of variation will contribute to a better understanding of what is at stake — as the articles of this first volume indicate.

2. Some remarks about the contributions to this volume

While authors contributing to this volume adopt new metalinguistic tools and devices, most authors of the present volume nevertheless adopt a type of model in which a wide range of semantic and phonological properties are built in parallel with the syntactic derivation from the bottom upwards (see Nissenbaum 2002 for a general overview), hereby reducing the number of linguistic levels, and thus augmenting simplicity.

This is true of Martha McGinnis’s article, which derives many syntactic and morpho-phonological properties of ‘high’ applicative constructions in a wide range of languages from an analysis according to which high applicatives are *phases* — that is syntactic chunks incrementally sent to spell out (in the sense of Chomsky 2000c).

The puzzling relations between syntax and phonology are also examined by Tal Siloni who claims, developing a traditional insight of Gesenius (1910) that the analysis of Construct State in Hebrew does in fact provide evidence for the fact that a *phonological domain* can provide a domain for Case Checking.

While Željko Bošković adopts an analysis with an independent Logical Form level, he shows that the difference between Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian cannot be linked to the distinction between overt vs covert movement. Instead, this difference should be derived from the phonological status of the *C affix*, which is ultimately related to the interpretation of the *wh*-word in the two languages.

Couched in the framework of auto-lexical syntax, which in our opinion is

close to the framework of Distributed Morphology, Robert Pensalfini's provocative article addresses the problems of *bracketing paradoxes* in Jingulu which might suggest that a post-spell-out domain is at stake. He investigates the idea that some element might not be visible to the computational component at all since it expresses *encyclopedic content* (see also Pensalfini 1997a, 2000).

The non-existence on an independent Logical Form level advocated by McGinnis is also claimed, in different terms, by Nicola Munaro, Cecilia Poletto, and Jean-Yves Pollock. They reanalyze traditional accounts of Stylistic inversion in terms of *remnant movement* of IP to CP (Kayne 1994). They investigate puzzling variations in of wh-constructions between French and Bellunese which are ultimately linked to the existence of non-assertive clitics in Bellunese.

This line of research makes use of a wide range of functional projections within the CP domain, much in the spirit of Rizzi (1997). The same idea is advocated in Legate's article on Warlpiri which claims, criticizing previous LFG accounts, that this so-called non-configurational language is in fact configurational. Her claim is illustrated by the study of applicative constructions which conform to the functional hierarchy of adverbs proposed by Cinque (1999).

Investigating various languages of the world, Julien shows that various distinct syntactic types of verb order are not coextensive with the groups that result from traditional studies such as Greenberg (1963). Adopting a syntactic analysis inspired by Kayne antisymmetry's framework (1994), she proposes a new typology accounting for most of Dryer's (1992) observations. She investigates in detail the main phonological and morphological consequences of her work as well as the status of head movement.

Keiko Muromatsu offers an alternative to Cinque's (1994) analysis of adjective placement, which suggested a hierarchy of adjectives partly based on functional categories. She argues that the ordering of some adjectives derives from the count/mass distinction whose syntactic nature allows different kinds of *adjunction* much in the spirit of Chomsky's suggestion for adverbs and treatment of relative clauses (see Chomsky 2001b, partly an extension of Lebeaux 1988, 2000).

The tensions between the different approaches proposed by each article should not be underestimated. We consider such tensions to be a healthy sign illustrating the vitality of the field. The fact that all articles refer explicitly to at least one interface is in our opinion crucial for the understanding of Narrow Syntax. A better understanding of NS is, as we suggested before, crucial for the understanding of other faculties of the mind/brain which in turn might bring new insight into the Faculty of Language, in a narrow sense.

The results obtained within the MP could be taken to indicate that this is indeed the case. They certainly suggest that an inquiry into the nature of *Narrow syntax* and its interface with other domains of the mind/brain, together with the study of the nature of linguistic variation, is of wider interest than has been assumed before — as the work mentioned in the bibliography already indicates.

Notes

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1. See in particular the consequence of this for the so-called *X'*-theory and the notion of feature — as developed in Chomsky (1995) among others. On the distinction between strong and weak features see Chomsky (1995) and its relation to the interpretable vs non interpretable features see Chomsky (1992, 2000c). It should be noted that the issue is important to determine what kind of movement takes place in *Narrow Syntax* (has semantic import or not), or in *Phonology* (see Chomsky 2003a, as well as Kayne 1994), notably about the status of head movement — and references cited there.

2. Bouchard (2001) proposes a theory according to which most if not all of linguistic variation might derive from interface conditions. While this might be too strong a hypothesis, it suggests that the number of parameters allowed in NS might be drastically reduced (See also Baker 2001 for a reduction of parameters, along very different lines).

3. See Chomsky (2003a) according to which ‘*Copy*’ is ‘*Internal Merge*’ and *deletion* a special case of *Economy*.

4. On the notion of *Optimal Design* and its relationship with similar notions in other sciences (a relation which might suggest that a new ‘reunification of science’ might be needed; (see Uriagareka 1988, Jenkins 1999, and various articles in Jenkins in press).

5. On the issue of ‘*Internalism*’, see Chomsky (1993, 1997, 2000a); and various articles in Antony and Hornstein (2003).

6. On the notion of *Economy*, and its relation to Language Use (see Chomsky 1989, 1996, 1998, reviving ideas already present in Chomsky 1955); and for somewhat different views, Collins (1995, 1997), as well as Frampton & Gutman (1999).

One obvious question is related to the notion of economy and its relation to locality and how economy may, or not, apply to semantic interpretation (see Fox 1999, among others).

The question is important and had wide implications bearing on the formulation of the Language Faculty in its extended sense, on the Nature of Thought system and on that of *Narrow Syntax*.

Note that Fox observations might be reduced to the effect of the derivational aspect of Narrow syntax (see the notion of *Phase*) and to the nature of multiple spell-out.

The same question applies to Phonology, reviving the idea of a phonology cycle (Chomsky & Halle 1968) vs. global principles such as those advocated by Optimality theory to which the internal/external distinction does not apply (see Barbosa & al 1998 for a review).

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