

Session Notes 1 (29.02.2008)

We started to look at some of the background of the participants of the SCIMS. We think it important to be able to apply the approach we will be investigating during the course of the SCIMS to real-life examples – and maybe even be able to see where a Minimalist Approach could fall short of explanatory power. During this background brainstorming, one concrete case of language organization already came up: the issue of language typology.

Regarding morphology, languages generally fall into four broad categories: (i) *Isolating* (analytic), (ii) *Polysynthetic*, (iii) *Agglutinating*, (iv) *Inflectional* (Fusional). Mohawk and Warlpiri, e.g., are instances of polysynthetic languages. Words in these languages are often very long and are associated with whole meanings. Take a look at (1), which is an example from Inuktitut (ContLing: 303).

(1) Quasuirsarvigssarsingitluinarnarpuq.

Quasu -iir -sar -vig -ssar -si -ngit-luinar -nar -puq

What it means is: “Someone did not find a completely suitable resting place.”

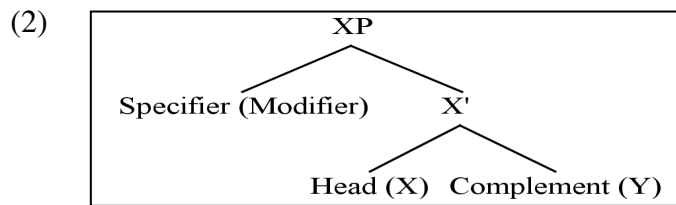
The syntactic approach that we will be pursuing in the SCIMS should also be able to account for such outlandish examples.

Another topic we discussed was the distinction between *Cognitive-Functional Approaches* and the *Generative Grammar (GG) Approach* to language. Remember that the Minimalist Approach is a part of the GG Approach – maybe it’s the most state-of-the-art version, if you will. The *Cognitive-Functional Approach* is essentially based on the assumption that language should be explained by its meaning and that all kinds of so-called cognitive domains should be taken into accounts to provide a comprehensive explanation. The interconnection and interdependence of all the cognitive domains such as hearing, vision, touching, basically all the sensory systems, come into play when language is perceived or produced. The main focus in GG is on the structure and/or form of the language. Followers of GG believe that language should (and could) be studied in its own right and that, at least the core of the language, is independent from other sensory systems. It is therefore also called a modular approach. Other systems may interact with the language system. Interfaces are responsible for this interaction.

In his book *Core Syntax* (CoSyn), David Adger outlines how syntax can be explained using a Minimalist Approach. The methodological and epistemological cornerstones of this (what/how he wants to do (it), what he wants to know) can be summarized in a nutshell in three global points:

(i) **Coherent** theory about syntax. This means that not only isolated items are to be considered, but that a coherent and comprehensive theory be sought. Many grammars like to list phenomena and then attribute particular structures to all of them. There is no overt attempt at unification, for example. Minimalism seeks to do exactly this to the highest degree – unifying structures and show that many of them can be derived from simpler ones. One structure of crucial

importance here is the so-called X' (X-Bar) construction with a head, complement and specifier (modifier). This structure is given in (2).



This structure is said to hold across the board in all of the world's actual and possible languages. The technicalities of this shall not bother us for the time being. It shall suffice to have this concrete example in mind as a universal syntactic structure.

(ii) The centrality of **core data**. Some very common structures of English belong there, like control structures ("I want to study language."), passives and questions (wh- and yes/no-questions). The background assumption is that language consists of a rule-governed core and a somewhat unruly, exceptional and idiomatic periphery. Surely, this is not an absolute and principled distinction; it rather constitutes a continuum. Irregular verbs, e.g., show, despite them being irregular, some regular features such as a lowering of the vowel in *sing – sang – sung*, *ring – rang – rung* and *sink – sank – sunk*. Some linguists believe that this has something to do with the temporal remoteness of the event. Compare also *here – there* or the German *hier – da*, which indicates spatial remoteness.

(iii) **Rigour**. Rigour means that coherent theories should be formalized theories. Items in a particular syntactic system should be characterized by the position they normally maintain in the system. Constituent tests, for example, can tell us something about particular items (constituents) within a syntactic system. Items in the system can be characterized by *features*. During the course of the SCIMS, we will see how important features are for syntactic analysis and how syntactic items may be characterized as *feature bundles*. If you will, features can be described as the smallest (syntactic) building blocks of language.