

BOECKX / URIAGEREKA (2007): “Minimalism”.
(see Bibliography)

Some basic assumptions seem to be:

- *Human Language is to be understood in terms of a faculty (Faculty of Language (FL)).*
- *Underlying the development of this Faculty of Language are biological factors.* (p. 541)

The **Interface Conditions** we talked about the last time (i.e. PF~A-P / LF~C-I – simplified for the current purposes) shape the FL to some extent. How much emphasis is placed on Interface Conditions is a matter of point of view.¹

Chomsky’s Generative and later Minimalist Enterprise goes beyond “behavioural adequacy” (my term), but in the early days of the Generative Enterprise, he had to face harsh criticism:

“[...] but the claim that linguistic structures are innate was deemed too irrational to be worth considering” (p. 544).

What generally happened in Chomsky’s post-*Aspects* era was a profound reformulation of DS in terms of a degrading or lowering of its importance. Since the advance of LF, DS was not any longer responsible for *propositional interpretation of truth conditional judgements* – eventually it was renamed D-Structure, which simply granted it the assignment of thematic relations.

Since Chomsky has always focussed on the mind of an individual speaker-hearer, the notion of **I-language** is a crucial one.

“Chomsky [...] took the view that the science of linguistics should care about describing what he termed I-language (I standing for an ‘internal’ mental procedure), as opposed to E-language (E standing for an “external” data collection)” (p. 546).

What is an **I-language**? Ever since Jerry Fodor’s *Language of Thought*², much ink has been spilled

over the nature of an internal somehow language-like procedure that underlies the actual output language we can perceive. As of yet, nobody knows whether it is a purely **computational procedure**, or whether it is a more “**associative process**”. As far as I did get with, for example, Fodor (2000), I know that he thinks it is not a **computational operation** of some sort – he actually appears to believe that all computational approaches to the mind have failed as of yet.³ Anyway: **An I-Language is an “idealization” and a “generative procedure”** (p. 547). It is a system in an ideal human mind. I-language may be called a guiding principle. In fact, Boeckx and Uriagereka say exactly this: “The concept I-language provides a sharp divide between construction-based and principle-based linguistics” (p. 548).⁴ *Within the P&P approach, an I-language could be defined as a set of parametric options.*

In order to seek an even deeper explanatory level, the **Minimalist Programme (MP)** postulates a fourth level, in addition to the three classic ones: **observational adequacy, descriptive adequacy, explanatory adequacy**. This is the level of so-called **natural adequacy**.

What is it, and how is it motivated? One of the most salient assumptions in MP is that the world is recognizable in some sense and thus is orderly to some degree. If you now want to model the competence system and leave the performance system to itself, and if the competence system is understood as being a natural phenomenon, and if natural phenomena are orderly, maybe even near being optimally designed, then the assumption of the competence system being also of a good design nature cannot be too far off track. Even more: Imagine competence and performance will some day become unified.

“This is not immediately problematic in a competence system that does not attempt to model actual human performance, but it seems unappealing, if only because linguists hope that competence and performance eventually

¹ As far as I can recall, Hinzen (2006) criticises Chomsky as to his interpretation of the importance of the Interface Conditions on the shaping of FL. Emphasis on Interface Conditions in Hinzen is not of that important a nature as it is for Chomsky.

² Note that there is a noisy second edition or something along that line out: *Language of Thought 2*. See references – Whoever has the time should go for it.

³ One of his arguments is that computers are still hopelessly helpless when it comes to modelling the finer points of semantics. The other arguments *nobody* can recall – oh my, I’m writing like him.

⁴ It is an interesting question as to whether, and if so how, one base can be likened to Functionalism and the other to Formalism/Generativism.

will be unified as each is better understood” (p.552).

Simplicity is the notion to which it boils down. Simplicity of rule application (*last-resort*) and *economy of derivation/representation*.⁵ Now one could ask: Why should language be elegant? After all, it all too often leaves us in quite a mess – one could only think of all the communication breakdowns due to sloppiness or “illogical usage”.⁶ Two, one should say celebrities, at the forefront of the “language-is-a-mess” thesis are Pinker and Jackendoff (cf. 554). If I remember correctly, the argument is that if language developed out of evolutionary pressure, then it must reflect all the contingencies of that pressure, hence be not orderly. Of course, the argumentation is much more intricate, making language not into that messy a thing. The adaptationist approach to language normally views it from all sorts **communicative perspectives** – interpreting it as a good tool in **interactive processes**. Pinker and Jackendoff do not believe that language is an optimal realization of the form-content mapping subjected to Interface Conditions.

The train of thought endorsed by MP proponents is that language developed under “constraints imposed by the physical channel in which evolution takes place” (p. 554).⁷ In fact, this forces the FL to be structurally optimal – the **Strong Minimalist Thesis (SMT)**. Form has only a limited channel in which it can emerge; if it emerges at all, the assumption is that it is an optimal realization of the “channel-conditions”.

The empirical side: An outlook through a case study of **Expletive Constructions** reveals how concrete progress could be achieved.

- Agree becomes a process of long-distance feature checking (valuation).
- Perhaps the EPP can be eliminated.
- Perhaps [Spec, Head] relations can be eliminated (favouring [Spec, Comp] relations).
- Introduction of lexical sub-arrays (phases).

To conclude, once again it shall be remarked: depth of explanation, rather than (mere) empirical coverage.

For the future: (i) How to compare derivational alternatives. (ii) How dynamic or static is the system? (iii) Is it a complex dynamism or a mathematical construct of the nature underlying physical laws (cf. p. 568)?

References

- CARSTAIRS-MCCARTHY, ANDREW (2007): “Language Evolution: What Linguists Can Contribute”. In: *Lingua* (Vol. 117): 503-509.
- FODOR, JERRY (2000): *The Mind Doesn't Work That Way: The Scope and Limits of Computational Psychology*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- (2008): *LOT2: The Language of Thought Revisited*. Oxford: OUP.
- HINZEN, WOLFRAM (2006): *Mind Design and Minimal Syntax*. Oxford: OUP.

⁵ I would find it very interesting to have the notions *representation* and *derivation* disentangled at some time.

⁶ Note that these are performance notions, but as is the case so frequently, performance and competence notions are conflated in communication-based approaches.

⁷ See also Carstairs-McCarthy (2007).