Special Lecture
The ELSJ 3rd International Spring Forum

Relations in Minimalism

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In this paper, after reviewing the two distinct approaches to syntactic relations: Epstein et. al's (1998) derivational approach and Chomsky's (2000) compositional approach, I point out that, given Epstein, Kitahara, and Seely's (2009) law of conservation of relations, which subsumes Chomsky's (2007, 2008) no-tampering condition, these two approaches become empirically equivalent. I then discuss Chomsky's (2007, 2008) suggestion, under which c-command is dispensable from the narrow syntax, in favor of probe-goal and minimal search conditions.

Suppose there is no empirical difference between the derivational approach and the compositional approach. Is there any way we can construct a conceptual argument, which separates these two approaches? At a first glance, it is not clear whether we can. The derivational approach argues that unavoidable derivation is sufficient to provide syntactically significant relations (in particular, c-command), and the compositional approach argues that syntactic operations and composition of relations are the minimal assumptions about the available relations.

In his recent work, however, Chomsky (2008:141) suggests: "whether c-command plays a role within the computation to the C-I interface is an open question." More specifically, he suggests that c-command is not required in binding theory. He argues that binding relations can be reformulated as probe-goal relations. Chomsky (2007:18) presents as the most important case, Reuland's (2005) discovery: the binding relation holds between the antecedent XP and the reflexive R in the structures of the form [T...XP...R], where XP does not c-command R, but both are c-commanded by the head T that agrees with XP. Note this is the case of probe-goal by T, not c-command by XP. Suppose such reformulation of binding relations is possible. Then, c-command looses its strong empirical support. But still a question remains: if not c-command, what guarantees the observed relation between the probe and the goal?

Chomsky (2007:9) answers: "restricted to heads (probes), c-command reduces to minimal search," given "minimal search conditions limit the goal of the probe to its complement, the smallest searchable domain." I argue his answer is on the right track. Take K={H, XP}. Suppose NS accesses K and identifies H as the probe. What will be the search domain of the probe H? Given K is a two-membered set, the simplest option will be its co-member: if one becomes a probe, then the other becomes a search domain. Thus, the natural searchable domain of the probe H will be the one and only one co-member XP, the complement of the probe H. Under these assumptions, c-command is (arguably) dispensable from the computation to the C-I interface, in favor of probe-goal and minimal search conditions.

If probe-goal and minimal search conditions are sufficient to determine what we have been calling c-command, then any further characterization of c-command appears to be redundant.

Selected References

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