

When Simplest Merge meets Transfer

This paper identifies a logical inconsistency of recent Minimalist theorizing. It is shown that Transfer transforms the legitimate syntactic objects formed by Simplest Merge into illegitimate ones. This problem has largely gone unnoticed.¹ Possible solutions and their empirical consequences are subsequently explored.

S(implest) M(erge) takes L(exical) I(tems) and (previously constructed) S(yntactic) O(bjects), and puts them into binary sets (Chomsky 2004): $\text{Merge}(\alpha, \beta)$, α and β each an LI or SO, yields $\{\alpha, \beta\}$. Each successive application of SM yields a legitimate SO. Therefore, SOs are (1) LIs or (2) of the form $\{a, b\}$, where a and b are SOs (Chomsky 1995). Syntactic structures are incrementally sent to the interfaces for interpretation such that once the phases CP and v^*P are each complete, their complements undergo Transfer to the interfaces (Chomsky 2000).

Given these proposals and Chomsky (2008)'s Feature-Inheritance model, Transfer applied to (1) yields (2).

(1) $\{C, \{T, \{\text{Subj}, \{v^*, \{V, \text{Obj}\}\}\}\}\}$

(2) $\{C, \{T, \{\text{Subj}, \{v^*\}\}\}\}$

However, (2) is an illegitimate SO: it contains a term, namely $\{v^*\}$, which is neither an LI nor of the form $\{a, b\}$. Consequently, the derivation is cancelled (Chomsky 1995). Transfer, then, always results in the appearance of illegitimate SOs, thus always cancelling the derivation.

After arguing on theoretical and empirical grounds that the illegitimate SO cannot survive and be repaired later in the derivation, and that modifying Transfer (in a manner to be defined) does not solve the problem, it is proposed that lifting a stipulation on SM entirely dissolves the issue. If SM may apply such that α and β are identical (Adger 2013), the SO $\{v^*\}$ becomes legitimate.

¹Although, see Epstein 2007 and Epstein and Shim 2013.

References

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