

Selective spell-out and piece-driven phase

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In the generative tradition (but also elsewhere), the communication between morpho-syntax and the two interpretational devices phonology and semantics is described in terms of cyclic spell-out: rather than as a whole, strings are interpreted successively along morpho-syntactic structure (Chomsky et al 1956: 75). That is, given a string such as [[[A] B] C], phonology will first apply to A, then to AB, finally to ABC. With some variation as to which morpho-syntactic divisions make a (bracket-delineated) cycle, all generative theories subscribe to this kind of inside-out interpretation.

The idea that not all nodes of the morpho-syntactic structure are spelled out has been introduced by Halle & Vergnaud (1987): cycles are not defined by a rigid algorithm, but depend on the (lexical) properties of the pieces involved: depending on B, the spell-out of [[[A] B] C] may either be faithful to the morpho-syntactic structure, or move along [[[A B] C].

This talk traces the concept of selective spell-out through the 20 years of interface theory that have gone by since 1987. It will be shown how selective spell-out interacts with other mechanisms that are used at the interface (such as the Strict Cycle Condition), and which are the coats that it appears in.

Selective spell-out has raised renewed interest in syntactic theory since the minimalist approach in general and Chomsky's (2001) derivation by phase in particular have shifted much explanatory burden from syntax proper to the interface(s): phenomena are now accounted for by constraints that syntactically well-formed items experience at LF and PF. Essential to the phase-based architecture is another phonological invention: interactionism. Interactionism was the central idea of Lexical Phonology: first you concatenate two pieces, then you interpret them, then you add another piece, then you assess the resulting string and so forth. Syntactic effects, then, are produced by Phase Impenetrability, the fact that strings that have already been interpreted "come back frozen".

In this environment, a lively debated question is how the strings that make a phase are defined. Chomsky's initial take that only vP and CP are phase heads has been "atomised": the literature grants that status of a phase to smaller and smaller chunks. I review current contributions to the discussion about phasehood, and point out that one option among the many that are on air remains unconsidered: that phasehood may be a property of lexical items that percolates to nodes (rather than of the labels of nodes). This is precisely the phonological point of view that is traditionally based on English affix class distinctions. One proposal on the syntactic side, however, shows some affinity with piece-driven phase: den Dikken's (2007) Phase Extension. These parallel will be made explicit.

Finally, I show that the edge of a phase, a notion that is relevant in syntactic phase theory, may have a phonological equivalent if a certain view on piece-driven phase is adopted: rather than its own node, the merger of a phasehood-piece triggers the spell-out of its sister.

References

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