Free relatives at the syntax-semantics interface

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What is the effect of syntactic cycles/phases on the interfaces? The minimalist T-model assumes that PF and LF are passive depositories of structures created in syntax. Syntax creates a piece of structure and then "hangs" it onto the previously created structure(s), as though they were two pieces of a chain. This seems to suggest that PF and LF cannot distinguish between pieces of structure which *do* and which do *not* correspond to syntactic phases: both PF and LF are just unbroken "chains" of structures. In this talk, I will explore a hypothesis that contradicts this strictly modular architecture of grammar. In particular, I will argue that semantic type-shifting operations, as defined by Partee (1987), only target LF objects that correspond to syntactic phases. Effectively, type-shifting, a semantic operation *par excellence*, is syntactically constrained. I will mainly concentrate on the *iota* type-shifting function, which transforms an $\langle e, t\rangle$ type object to an e type object. The empirical motivation is drawn from the syntax and semantics free relative clauses.

There are two empirical aspects of free relative clauses that have been well-known and well-described but that have so far resisted explanation.

(1) **Fact 1** Free relative clauses are construed as definite DPs.
Fact 2 The main predicate of free relatives must be finite.

The talk will be organized as follows.

1. I will argue that (1) are indeed facts, despite some apparent counterexamples.
2. I will show that Fact 2 entails Fact 1 and that this entailment follows from the more general implications (2):

   (2) For any nominal wh-clause (i.e. a wh-clause that characterizes a set of individuals) it holds that
   (i) if that wh-clause is finite, then it is construed as a definite (it denotes the maximal entity that is characterized by it), and
   (ii) if that wh-clause is non-finite, then it is construed as an indefinite (it simply characterizes a set)

3. If (2) is correct, then none of the existing theories of free relatives are even *descriptively* adequate. This is because none of the theories relate definiteness to finiteness. Both properties are stipulated separately.
4. I will show that the implications in (2) follow from two assumptions: (i) finiteness correlates with phase-hood; (ii) type-shifting only applies to expressions that correspond to syntactic phases (the main claim of the talk).

If the line of argumentation above is correct, it renders the well-accepted D/*pro*+CP analysis of free relative clauses (Harbert 1983; Suñer 1983; Caponigro 2003) obsolete. This is a desirable result, since the presence of an empty nominal category on top of the wh-clause has never received convincing support (as will be demonstrated). Instead, free relative clauses are bare CPs, possibly exhibiting a reprojection of the wh-word (Donati 2006; Ott 2009).

References

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