

Dependency and Directionality

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Chapter 6

Conclusion

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We have come to the end of a long and complex exercise aimed at developing an extended argument, based on a variety of different empirical and theoretical matters, for a top-down model for the construction of syntactic structures and the dependencies that can arise within them.

The investigation started with a close look at the merits of the first argument ever given in generative syntactic theory for a particular direction of derivation — the bottom-up approach. The discussion of that argument, based on the cycle, led us to a syntax of the transitive v -VP in which precisely the kinds of clausal recursion constructions for which the first generative analysis had postulated a non-cyclic derivation actually turned out to supply us with an argument in favour of a top-down grammar.

Clausal recursion constructions also gave us an important clue in deciphering the complex locality constraints imposed on syntactic dependencies — both agreement and filler-gap dependencies. We discovered that agreement relations and filler-gap dependencies can only go beyond the boundaries of a subordinate clause if that clause serves as a goal in an Agree relationship with a c -commanding probe. This finding guided us to an algorithmic approach to the computation of absolute islands for syntactic dependencies, rooted in a definition of absolute opacity that identifies any domain that does not serve as a goal in an Agree relationship with an asymmetrically c -commanding probe as an opaque domain. Opaque domains are absolute islands across which no direct dependencies can be established in syntax. Domains that are not declared opaque are transparent in principle to all syntactic dependencies. There is no role to play in this system for so-called ‘successive-cyclic movement’: direct filler-gap dependencies either fail or succeed; no number of extra copies of the filler could make an opaque domain transparent. The Agree-based definition of opacity was found to deliver precise and reliable results for the entire range of absolute island effects. It works optimally in a top-down system.

In the absence of absolute opacity, a filler-gap dependency can still be obstructed by an element intervening between the filler and the gap that is of the same type as the filler. Such intervention islands, while peculiar from the perspective of a bottom-up derivational model using the copy theory, fall out naturally from a top-down approach to the construction of filler-gap dependencies employing uploading, downloading, and the possibility (specific to θ -role bearing fillers) of re-uploading onto the stack of an intervener. The inherent cost of re-uploading and the fact that this operation is by its nature the privilege of argumental fillers provides a simple perspective on subjacency as well as the argument/non-argument asymmetry encoded by the Empty Category Principle of early principles-and-parameters theory.

Alongside direct and re-uploading dependencies, Universal Grammar also presents us with a variety of other ways in which to link an operator in an \bar{A} -position in the left periphery of a clause to a gap inside a lower clause. Some of these strategies exploit prolepsis, which is a natural phenomenon in a syntactic model that constructs its trees from the top down. The detailed examination in this book of the properties of the various types of long-distance \bar{A} -dependencies has given rise to empirical as well as theoretical advances.

A special spotlight was shone at the end of this book on the challenges brought by the subject — the most studied but at the same time least understood grammatical function. The top-down approach to syntactic structure building was shown to be able to integrate the requirement that clauses have a structural subject (included in the original Extended Projection Principle), the restricted distribution of traces in subject positions (covered inefficiently by the Empty Category Principle), and the Case Filter in the form of an overarching principle governing the licensing of specifiers. The distribution of PRO (in both A- and \bar{A} -positions) was also folded into this picture, via a constraint barring it from licensed specifier positions.

Much has been gained, it seems to me, from the adoption of a top-down model of syntax. There is, to my knowledge, no bottom-up derivational or strictly representational approach available in the literature that can cover as much ground with as simple a toolkit as the system laid out in the preceding pages. But much still remains to be done as well. It is my hope that those who, reading these words after having made their way through the four substantive chapters, find that the top-down approach has much to recommend it will take it further, well beyond the foci of this book, and will eventually succeed in integrating the grammar and the parser — a promise that only a top-down theory of syntax could plausibly fulfil.

