

Locality in Minimalist Syntax

Thomas S. Stroik

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Preface

In its largest sense, my book is a study of the optimal design of human language (HL). Although I will focus on what Chomsky (2000b) calls the “displacement property” of language, I use my investigations of this property to expose the nature of the computational system that generates language.

Since Saussure first inaugurated the study of synchronic linguistics at the end of the nineteenth century, theoretical linguists have attempted to ascertain and explain the structural and logical properties of human language. Although we have made significant headway in our understanding of some of the processes humans engage in to compute and compile large, complex syntactic units from simple lexical terms (words), we still cannot fully explain the cognitive operations we use to arrange grammatical constituents into complex sentential patterns. Particularly problematic for our understanding of the design of HL is the fact that language permits a single constituent to be associated with more than one grammatical function or structural position (Chomsky calls this property the “displacement property” of HL). Given that the displacement property is a salient property of language, we will not have a working theory of language until we have a viable explanation for this property.

Several theorists have recently proposed mechanisms to account for the displacement property; however, these various mechanisms are ad hoc solutions to the displacement problem because they merely posit “displacement” operations to explain “displacement” facts. The theoretical gain here is negligible—that is, explaining displacement properties in terms of displacement operations themselves leaves us with the problem of explaining the properties of the displacement operations (we have replaced a first-order problem with a second-order problem). Subsequent inquiry into the properties of displacement operations has led theorists to posit economy conditions (a third generation of constructs) to account for

the behavior of displacement operations, thereby leaving us with the (next) problem of explaining the properties of economy conditions. This solution to the displacement problem is an extremely costly one, requiring a design that multiplies theoretical ontologies.

In this book, I show that the displacement property of human language is not, as Chomsky (2001) argues, a special property of language; rather, as I demonstrate, it follows from the same combinatory operations that compile large, complex syntactic units from the merger of small lexical units. That is, all grammatical operations reduce to a single type of locally defined feature-checking operation, and all grammatical properties, no matter how displaced and dislocated they may seem, are the cumulative effects of local grammatical operations. Hence, displacement arises from iterated local operations. The significance of my analysis is not only that it offers a compelling reanalysis of the displacement problem that has long troubled grammatical theories, but also that it argues for a radically simple design for the computational system of human language—one that restricts computational operations to a single type of local operation.

This book grows out of many long hours of discussion with Luis Lopez when we taught together at the University of Missouri–Columbia. Our discussions led me to see some of the inherent problematics with minimalist assumptions and arguments (which I write about in Stroik 2000), but also to see ways to respond to these inherent problematics, as I do in this book. I cannot thank Luis enough for all his help with the earliest stages of this book project. My most recent work on the book has been shaped by some long discussions with Elly van Gelderen and especially with Michael Putnam, with whom I have subsequently collaborated on several projects related to the analysis I propose in this book. I owe Elly and Michael much for the generosity they have extended to me as I have struggled with my reanalysis of minimalism. I want to thank them profusely for all their support.

I would also like to thank the University of Missouri system for giving me a research grant to write this book. And finally, I would like to thank the editors of *Linguistic Analysis* for allowing me to include work in chapter 2 that they previously published (Stroik 1999).

And finally, I would like to thank my wife, Michelle Boisseau, for her unflagging love and her enduring support. This book is dedicated to her.