



## Discussion

# The grammar of binding in the languages of the world: A response to Reuland



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## ABSTRACT

Cole, Hermon, and Yanti (2015) argue that the empirical facts related to anaphoric binding in two dialects of Jambi Malay undermine the Classical Binding Theory. Reuland (2017) agrees with this conclusion but argues that the data are easily accounted for by his alternative Universal Grammar-based approach to Binding. In this response, we demonstrate that the alternative proposal for Jambi Malay rests on claims about the language that are incorrect. While we do not, indeed cannot, demonstrate that it is impossible for a Universal Grammar based proposal to account for the facts as outlined in CHY (2015), we conclude that those facts remain an outstanding challenge.

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## 1. Introduction

In Cole, Hermon, and Yanti (2015, hereafter CHY) we challenged the proposal that the anaphoric system of natural language, including that of “exotic” and understudied languages, is determined primarily by a component of “Universal Grammar” (UG), the Binding Theory, a component of grammar that is claimed to specify the core properties of two types of anaphoric elements, reflexives and pronouns. Specifically, CHY argues that the principles of grammar commonly referred to as the Classical Binding Theory (Chomsky, 1981, 1986 *inter alia*) do not provide an adequate account for the systems of anaphoric Binding found in a number of languages spoken in Indonesia, specifically the Peranakan Javanese of Semarang (PJS) and the Malayic varieties spoken in and around Jambi City, Sumatra (Jambi Malay, JM). In his response to CHY, Reuland (2017) agrees that Classical Binding Theory (CBT) is “too bad to be true”, and that the facts discussed by CHY are highly problematic for the Classical Binding Theory (CBT). He argues, however, that more recent UG based approaches, among them that of Reuland (2011) and other works in that framework, while eliminating Binding Theory as a component of grammar, are able to account for the patterns reported by CHY on the basis

of a universal set of principles with language specific variation limited to features of individual lexical items (the so-called Borer-Chomsky conjecture, which Reuland takes as one of the “leading ideas” of the Minimalist approach to the grammar of human languages).

We are pleased that Reuland agrees with the main conclusion of our earlier work, that the Classical Binding Theory (and perhaps Binding Theory generally), should not be posited as a component of “Universal Grammar”. Reuland criticizes our choice in CHY of focusing our attention on the Classical Binding Theory, rather than on newer approaches to Binding.<sup>1</sup> We made this choice because, in our view, the general outlines of the CBT are still widely accepted in the field. To consider just one example illustrating the contemporary influence of the CBT, in the current edition of Andrew Carnie’s widely used introduction to syntax (Carnie, 2013), an early foundational chapter is devoted to an elementary presentation of the Classical Binding Theory. In subsequent chapters, the Classical Binding Theory is treated as established, providing the basis for the analysis of other aspects of syntax. An additional full chapter, found later in the book among the “advanced topics”, is devoted to issues and problems specific to the Classical Binding Theory (drawn largely from Chomsky, 1986). This is not the way an outmoded and discredited theory would be presented in an influential mainstream textbook.

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<sup>1</sup> We did include a brief discussion of Reinhart and Reuland (1993) but we did not give serious consideration to Reuland’s current work (e.g. 2011).

CHY was not intended to be an evaluation of other Generative approaches to anaphora, and we agree with Reuland's claim that arguments against the adequacy of an approach based on the Classical Binding Theory do not entail that other Generative approaches to Binding are inadequate as well. Each alternative requires an independent evaluation. One such approach is that of Reuland (2011) (and Reuland, 2017). Reuland's work on Binding is of particular interest because, unlike much earlier work on Binding, he attempts to incorporate diverse and seemingly incompatible facts from a wide range of languages while at the same time preserving core Minimalist principles. Reuland's general claim is that assuming the right choice of linguistic principles, it is possible to give an illuminating account of the seemingly contradictory facts surrounding Binding in human language, among them, the facts of PJS and JM. It is our contention, however, that, while Reuland's general goals make his work worthy of serious examination, the concrete application of his approach to the languages discussed in CHY is flawed. As a result, the arguments put forward by Reuland (2017) with respect to the languages discussed in CHY do not add credence to his general proposals. Thus, as far as we know, the facts presented in CHY remain an outstanding challenge to attempts to account for Binding by means of the machinery of the Minimalist framework. Due to strict space limitations, the present response concentrates on why the proposals suggested by Reuland fail to adequately account for the empirical facts, particularly in Jambi Malay. While we would welcome the opportunity to discuss the many other issues raised by Reuland, that is not possible in the present work.

## 2. Jambi Malay

Reuland bases his discussion of JM on a master's thesis written under his supervision by Kartono (2013), who reconfirms the description of the facts as reported in CHY and applies the theory of anaphora found in Reuland (2011) to the facts. Traditional JM (TJM) is a challenge for Reuland because the language appears to violate two core principles posited by his theory, the Chain Condition and the IDI:

- (1) Chain Condition  
Only the highest element in a syntactic dependency (a 'chain') can be fully specified for syntactic features.
- (2) Inability to Distinguish Indistinguishables (IDI)  
The linguistic computational system has trouble handling fully identical occurrences of expressions in a local domain – and hence avoids these (due to the Inability to Distinguish Indistinguishables...).

(Examples illustrating both the Chain Condition and the IDI are provided below.)

Reuland argues that there are solutions to both apparent difficulties, and a large part of his article is devoted to showing how the analysis of JM could work in his framework. However, we shall show that Reuland's suggested solutions make incorrect factual predictions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Reuland states that the solutions he discusses might not be the only analyses that would be possible within his general framework, and, indeed, that the analyses in Reuland (2017) might well be viewed as suggestions for research rather than as strongly held proposals; however, these are apparently the analyses that Reuland considers most promising, and much of Reuland (2017) is devoted to presenting these analyses, so they should be examined seriously. While the possibility cannot be ruled out that other, yet to be developed analyses within Reuland's framework, may be more successful than those that Reuland put forward here, we share with Reuland the view that it is preferable to base discussions on actually held positions and facts, rather than to make conjectures about strawman analyses, so we will refrain from speculating on other analyses that might be compatible with Reuland's general framework.

## 3. The chain condition

We turn now to the details of Reuland's analysis, which, for convenience, we shall refer to as Reuland's Binding Constraints (RBC). Per the RBC, the two arguments of a reflexive predicate are related by Agree, forming a syntactic chain, a process in which the two arguments of the reflexive predicate share all grammatical features. This, in the RBC, can only occur when the pronoun is underspecified with regard to grammatical features. This often blocks the use of personal pronouns as reflexives, as in English,

- (3) **Mary** saw **her** in the mirror. (*Mary = her*)

because in English the pronoun *her* is fully specified for grammatical features including number.

Reuland suggests, however, that TJM differs from Jambi City Malay (JCM) in that in TJM the third person pronoun *dio?* is not specified for number, and, hence, can be used for either singular and plural. He claims that, in contrast, in JCM, *dio?* is restricted to singular 'him/her', and the pronoun *mereka* 'they' is plural. Critically, in the RBC account, it is the fact that in TJM *dio?* is underspecified for number that permits *dio?* to function as a reflexive in sentences like:

- (4) TJM  

<b>dio?</b>	nejo?	<b>dio?</b>	di	kaco
3	n.see	3	LOC	mirror

 'He/she/they saw themselves in the mirror.'<sup>3</sup>  
 [The first and second instance of *dio?* can refer to the same individual or different individuals.]

In contrast, in JCM, (4) could only receive a non-reflexive interpretation 'He/she saw him/her in the mirror'. Reuland's suggested solution hinges on the claim that *dio?* is necessarily singular in JCM. However, according to Yanti, the first author of the present article (a native speaker), *dio?* can be used as singular or plural in both Jambi City and in rural dialects (Yanti 2010; Table 14). This judgment was reconfirmed by an acceptability survey administered to 8 native speakers, as is explained in detail below.

So as not to leave any doubt regarding the potential interpretations of *dio?*, we decided not to simply rely on Yanti's judgment and her earlier data collection, but to recheck the relevant judgments with additional native speaker consultants. In order that the reader better understand what we found, it is useful to describe the sociolinguistic makeup of Jambi City. Jambi City is located to the south of the Batanghari River, while the villages in which TJM originated are located on the north side of the river. The city is primarily populated by two major groups, ethnic Malays, with roots in the villages to the north of the river, and ethnic Chinese, whose families immigrated to Jambi City in the late 19th-early 20th century. As might be expected, although they currently reside in Jambi City, the ethnic Malays in Jambi City remain in daily contact with their families in the villages, and speak a dialect that is essentially the same as that of the villages in which they originated (TJM).

In contrast, the ethnic Chinese do not have any ties to the villages. Most ethnic Chinese also speak JM as their everyday language for both intergroup communication, and for intragroup communication. (The older generation of Chinese also speak Chinese dialects [mainly Teochew, Hokkien, or Hakka], but

<sup>3</sup> This sentence may require an appropriate context to permit a plural interpretation.

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