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Grammar of Binding in the languages of the world: Innate or learned?

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ABSTRACT

Languages around the world often appear to manifest nearly identical grammatical properties, but, at the same time, the grammatical differences can also be great, sometimes even seeming to support Joos's (1958) claim that "languages can differ from each other without limit and in unpredictable way" (p. 96). This state of affairs provides a puzzle for both nativist approaches to language like Generative Grammar that posit a fixed "Universal Grammar", and for approaches that minimize the contribution of innate grammatical structure. We approach this puzzling state of affairs by looking at one area of grammar, "Binding", the system of local and long distance anaphoric elements in a language. This is an area of grammar that has long been central to the Generative approach to language structure. We compare the anaphoric systems found in "familiar" (European-like) languages that contain dedicated classes of bound and free anaphors (pronouns and reflexives) with the anaphoric systems in endangered Austronesian languages of Indonesia, languages in which there is overlap or no distinction between pronouns and reflexives (Peranakan Javanese and Jambi Malay). What is of special interest about Jambi anaphora is not only that conservative dialects of Jambi Malay do not distinguish between pronouns and reflexives, but that Jambi anaphora appear to constitute a live snapshot of a unitary class of anaphora in the process of grammaticalization as a distinct system of pronouns and reflexives.

We argue that the facts of Jambi anaphora cannot be explained by theories positing a Universal Grammar of Binding. Thus, these facts provide evidence that complex grammatical systems like Binding cannot be innate. Our results from Austronesian languages are confirmed by data from signed and creole languages. Our conclusion is that the human language learning capacity must include the ability to model the full complexity found in the syntax of the world's languages. From the perspective of child language acquisition, these conclusions suggest that Universal Grammar does not provide a general solution to the problem of poverty of the stimulus, and the solution to that problem must reside at least in part in special properties of the grammar construction tools available to the language learner rather than simply in a fixed set of grammatical rules hard wired into the brains of speakers.

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1. Introduction

Unrelated languages in diverse parts of the world are often very similar in many aspects of their grammatical structure, but, despite this, the range of structural differences can be startlingly great.[1] Linguists have responded to this conundrum in different ways. At one end of the spectrum, Joos (1958) is famous for having made the often derided claim that "languages can differ from each other without limit and in unpredictable ways" (p. 96). This position has been reaffirmed by Evans and Levinson (2009), who state that "languages differ so fundamentally from one another at every level of description (sound, grammar, lexicon, meaning) that it is very hard to find any single structural property they share. The claims of Universal Grammar... are either empirically false, unfalsifiable, or misleading in that they refer to tendencies rather than strict universals" (p. 429).

At the other end of the spectrum, within Generative Grammar, the emphasis has been on explaining the recurring similarities among languages and on attempting to demonstrate that the dissimilarities are more apparent than real. Crain, Khlentzos, and Thornton (2010) sees the core problem for linguistic theory to be that of providing an explanation for "the fact that the same cluster of linguistic properties crops up in language after language, including typologically different languages" (p. 2671).

Prior to *The Minimalist Program* (Chomsky, 1995) it was widely assumed among Generative linguists that it is the initial state for infants acquiring their native language that is invariant, leading to the claim that many properties of language are hard wired in the "language acquisition device" and constitute Universal Grammar (UG). While the initial state of the language learner was assumed to be invariant, this state was assumed to be subject to alternation on the basis of experience (exposure of the child language learner to actual languages), resulting in adult languages that could be very different from the initial state dictated by UG. In *The Minimalist Program* this stance was strengthened, and the claim was put forward that "the primary [task of linguistics] is to show that the apparent richness and diversity of linguistic phenomena is illusory and epiphenomenal, the result of interaction of fixed principles under slightly varying conditions" (Chomsky, 1995, p. 8). The existence of "fixed principles" is taken to mean that all languages share the same grammatical rules and constraints, and that the seeming differences among rules in different languages are in fact only attributable to properties of the vocabulary items found in each individual language rather than to variations in the rule systems themselves: Languages are hypothesized not to exhibit differences in rule systems despite appearances to the contrary[2]:

> The standard idealized model of language acquisition takes the initial state S_0 to be a function mapping experience (primary linguistic data, PLD) to a language. UG is concerned with the invariant principles of S_0 and the range of permissible variation. Variation must be determined by what is "visible" to the child acquiring language, that is, by the PLD. It is not surprising, then, to find a degree of variation in the PF [phonetic form] component, and in aspects of the lexicon: Saussurean arbitrariness (association of concepts with phonological matrices), properties of grammatical formatives (inflection, etc.), and readily detectable properties that hold of lexical items generally (e.g., the head parameter). Variation in the overt syntax or LF component would be more problematic, since evidence could only be quite indirect. **A narrow conjecture is that there is no such variation: beyond PF options and lexical arbitrariness (which I henceforth ignore), variation is limited to nonsubstantive parts of the lexicon and general properties of lexical items.** If so, there is only one computational system and one lexicon apart from this limited kind of variety. Let us tentatively adopt that assumption—extreme perhaps but it seems not implausible—as another element of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky, 1995, pp. 169–170, emphasis added).

Thus, with respect to the rule system, UG is taken to fully determine the syntactic system of natural languages: at least with regard to syntactic principles, all languages are fundamentally the same.

The Minimalist view that all languages are essentially the same is motivated by theoretical considerations, but not by theoretical considerations alone. This stance, in fact, reflects an experience that is shared by linguists of all stripes, the experience that when a new language is examined, the vast majority of the structurally properties of the language will be familiar, once idiosyncratic aspects of the language like morphology and the lexicon are factored out and attention is turned to the syntax and semantics. For instance, to anticipate the topic of this paper, it is unsurprising to linguists when there exist in a language two types of anaphoric forms, those requiring c-commanding antecedents and subject to stringent locality restrictions (reflexives like *himself*), and those that cannot be used when there is a c-commanding, local antecedent (pronouns like *him*).[3] From the familiar division between reflexives and pronouns it is a short step to the assumption typically made by Generative linguists (an assumption often is not shared by non-linguists or by non-Generative linguists) that the similarities found among languages with respect to the properties of anaphoric elements are due to the existence of a module of an innate language faculty (UG), specifically to some variant of the principles of the "Binding Theory". The Generative approach is to be contrasted with an alternative approach to explaining these facts, one that does not claim that these properties are determined

[1] This contrast was expressed clearly by Emmon Bach, in his Presidential Address at the 1996 Annual Meeting of the Linguistic Society of America in San Diego.

[2] This is a much stronger position than the claim that "universal grammar" provides the initial state for the acquisition of grammar, but that children modify this initial state, and, as adults, end up with rule systems that can be quite different from each other.

[3] C-command is a structural relationship between elements in a syntactic tree: A c-commands B iff the lowest branching node that dominates A also dominates B. C-command has been shown to be fundamental to specifying the syntactic relations that are required between grammatical elements (e.g. Frank, 2002). Locality restrictions specify how far in the tree elements of a particular type may be from each other.

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