

Deducing Transfer from Merge

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[1] Background: The Minimalist Program (Chomsky [1] et seq.) has shifted toward simplifying UG and minimizing the grammar as much as possible, assuming as the basic hypothesis the Strong Minimalist Thesis (SMT). Against this background, I further explore the eliminative or reductionist minimalism and argue that Transfer, currently considered an independent operation which ships off derived syntactic objects (SOs) to interface components, can be subject to deeper explanation.

[2] Proposal: I propose that Transfer is reducible to Merge; to be more specific, Transfer moves the SO to interface (semantic & phonological) components and it is nothing other than Internal Merge (IM). Notice that Transfer overlaps with IM: both operations move the SO to somewhere else, the only difference being that IM dislocates the SO within derivation or narrow syntax while Transfer dislocates it out of narrow syntax (i.e., to interface components). Given that the two operations share the same property of displacement, one should be reducible to the other under the reductionist minimalism. Considering that Merge is assumed as the irreducible and bare minimum part of UG (a “virtual conceptual necessity”), the reasonable conclusion is that Transfer is reduced to Merge. I submit that Transfer is deducible from Merge, eliminating Transfer as an independent operation.

- (1) IM within narrow syntax (\rightarrow “movement”)
[SO ... [... [... ⟨SO⟩ ...]]] : Narrow Syntax
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(2) IM out of narrow syntax (\rightarrow “Transfer”)
[... [... ⟨[so ...]⟩]] : Narrow Syntax
 ↓
 [so ...] : Interface Components

[3] Consequences: The proposed deduction brings two consequences. One is that transferred SOs are invisible to computation. IM yields copies, which are invisible to computation as they are part of a discontinuous element; only a discontinuous element as a whole (hence, the head of a discontinuous element) is syntactically visible. This is evidenced by intervention effects, which lower copies do not induce (Chomsky [2,5], Sigurðsson & Holmberg [9]) as well as by labeling (Chomsky [5], Ott [8]). If Transfer is IM, then it will create copies in derivation and invisibility of transferred SOs (e.g., impenetrability of phase complements) naturally follows. The stipulation can be removed that transferred SOs are invisible to computation. Notice that the proposal can also remove another overlap of Transfer with movement: lower copies and transferred SOs are both opaque to computation. This supports the argument that Transfer is reducible to IM.

The second consequence is that Transfer can apply freely, given that IM (or Merge) applies freely. This suggests that Transfer can apply or not apply at any point in derivation, which removes the assumption that Transfer applies at the phase level. I argue that transfer of phase complements is forced by labeling. Consider (3). Unless the subject moves from its first-merged position, labeling of α will fail for XP-YP; likewise, λ will not be labeled for weakness of T as a label. If it does move, α and λ can be labeled (Chomsky [4,5]) but unless λ is transferred, the derivation will fail as the movement applies counter-cyclically at the phase level (Epstein, et al. [6], Mizuguchi [7]). Transfer of phase complements follows from Full Interpretation under free Transfer (i.e., IM).

- (3) a. [C [λ T [α Sub [v^* VP]]]] b. Transfer of $\lambda \rightarrow$ [C [Sub [λ T [α t [v^* VP]]]]]

[4] Conclusion: The proposed deduction further propels the eliminative or reductionist minimalism, reaching deeper explanation of the language faculty through reduction. This paper not only argues that Transfer is reducible to Merge; it also strengthens the role of Merge in the language faculty, upholding the view that language keeps to Merge and interfaces, thus SMT (Chomsky [3]).

References

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