The nP Hypothesis

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This paper builds on an account of the structure of nominal phrases (e.g. *the dog*), first proposed by Chomsky (2007), in which the noun is an argument of the determiner, following Abney (1987)'s DP hypothesis, while the noun remains as the head of the nominal phrase, as the traditional NP hypothesis argues. A functional head, little n, takes a DP as its complement, akin to the two-tiered structure of verbs, vP and VP. This forces us to assume that the determiner is not the most fundamental element of a nominal phrase; it is the noun. Following Chomsky, we must then assume that there is a parallel between verbs and nominals. The objectives of this paper are to provide a modern reconsideration of the theoretical foundations of the DP hypothesis and a crosslinguistic analysis of this aforementioned structure. It provides a more minimalist approach to nominals as opposed to ones where there are multiple functional projections (e.g. number).

Though the DP hypothesis is taken for granted by linguists of the generative tradition, arguments in favor of it date back to X-bar theory. If we drew a more modern parallel between nominals and verbs, as opposed to the previous parallel between clauses and phrases, we would then expect all nominals to be headed by a little nP shell. Moreover, Bruening (2009) notes that verbs that select for clausal complements always select for C and not V. We would then expect verbs that select for nominal complements to select for N, and not D. This is the case.

(1)   Sue thinks that/*whether the world is flat.

(2)   Sue wonders *that/whether the world is flat.

(3)   *I gathered the student.

(4)   I gathered the students.

(5)   I gathered the French Club. (it is more plausible that the noun bears semantic number)

Further, Chomsky's (2007) proposed structure has yet to be analyzed crosslinguistically to see if it can account for various phenomena. Abney (1987) argues that nominals with multiple determiners cannot exist in English because they occupy the same syntactic slot. But these nominals exist in other languages such as Turkish. In particular, demonstratives and possessives may appear together in varied orders.

(6)   şu   benim köpeğim
       this cat   my

(7)   benim şu   köpeğim
       my   this dog

(8)   şu   köpeğim benim   Turkish
       this dog   my

This paper builds on the nP account of nominal phrases by providing relatively simple derivations of the aforementioned nominals and more. If one postulates that DPs may have multiple specifiers, this is at odds with empirical facts in these languages, which do not allow multiple specifiers in other contexts. If one takes a Cartographic approach as in Alexiadou et al. (2007), in which the existence of numerous functional categories is posited, this leads to an unnecessarily large *ad hoc* structure that the simpler structure proposed in this paper can also account for.

Rather, the reason is because of a nominal version of Doubly-Filled COMP filter: English, unlike these languages, does not allow multiple determiners to be pronounced. I assume a structure of possessive phrases following an intermediate TP layer, following Szabolcsi (1994). The different structures are derived by different syntactic features driving Movement on the functional head n rather than additional functional projections. I conclude that the NP and DP hypothesis do not need to rule each other out; it is possible to combine the best of these two hypotheses.

References

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