

Dieter Wunderlich: Commentaries on Chomsky

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I want to raise the issue that in some important structural aspects, the variation between languages seems to be greater than generative linguists usually assume. If this observation is correct, it should have influence on our conception of UG, and consequently on our view of how the language faculty may have emerged. I will discuss two points: argument asymmetry and the status of morphological objects.

As to the first point, I think there is good reason to conclude that syntactic subject-object asymmetry is not a universal property of language. If it is correct what Chomsky has tried to show us, namely that this kind of asymmetry follows from the assumption of a twofold Merge (external and internal) together with some further minimalist stipulations, including that transitive verbs have a lower and a higher argument, then some of these minimalist assumptions have to be amended.

It is reasonable to distinguish between lexical, morphological and syntactic argument asymmetry. All languages seem to show lexical asymmetry regarding transitive verbs, for instance, agents cross-linguistically outrank patients. Lexical asymmetry is what is preserved in the notion of abstract case, which, morphologically, is realized by pronominal affixes on the head or by morphological case on the dependent. Either the lower argument is marked by accusative, or the higher argument is marked by ergative, and an experiencer being the higher argument could be even more marked by dative. Morphological asymmetry may lead to various forms of syntactic asymmetry, which can be observed also in English in which morphological asymmetry is nearly inexistent. I would like to stress here that the concept of abstract case, even if it holds for the majority of languages, is not exceptionless.

More specifically, I claim that inverse morphology as shown by the Algonquian languages cannot be captured by the notion of abstract case. In these languages, lexical asymmetry is outbalanced by the person scale, so that the morphological realization of arguments is symmetric, and, what is more important, certain kinds of syntactic asymmetry do not arise.

The examples in (1) shows that the direct marker applies if the subject (i.e. the higher argument) is more salient than the object (in terms of person, animacy or proximateness), whereas the inverse marker applies if the object is more salient. There is only one set of person-number affixes, which are arranged always in the same way, regardless of whether they identify the subject or object.

- (1) Morphological subject-object symmetry in Plains Cree (Wolfart & Carroll 1981)
- a. Ni-wāpam-ā-nān atim.
1- see-DIR-1pl dog
'We see the dog.'
 - b. Ni-wāpam-iko-nān atim.
1- see-INV-1pl dog
'The dog sees us.'

Now consider the examples in (2). Not only can the subject bind a possessor of the object (as in (2a)), which is similarly possible in case-marked languages, but also the object can bind a possessor of the subject (as in (2b)), which is not possible in case-marked languages or in English.

- (2) Syntactic subject-object symmetry in Plains Cree (Dahlstrom 1991: 99).
- a. kahkiyaw iskwēw-ak sākīh-ē-w-ak o-tānis-iwāw-a.
 all woman-pl love-**DIR**-3-pl 3P-daughter-3plP-OBV
 ‘All_i women love their_i daughters.’
- b. kahkiyaw iskwēw-ak sākīh-**ik**-w-ak o-tānis-iwāw-a.
 all woman-pl love-**INV**-3-pl 3P-daughter-3plP-OBV
 ‘Their_i daughters love all_i women.’ [≈ all women are loved by their daughters.]
- (3) Another example of subject-object symmetry in Plains Cree:
- a. namōya awiyak wanikiskisitotaw-ē-w o-tawāsimis-a
 no one forget-**DIR**-3 3P-child-OBV
 ‘No one_i forgets his_i child.’
- b. namōya awiyak wanikiskisitotawā-**k** o-tawāsimis-a
 no one forget-**INV** 3P-child-OBV
 ‘His_i children forget no one_i.’ [≈ nobody is forgotten by his children]

Note that the ordering of constituents does not play a role; all positional alternatives get the same interpretation. One furthermore has to notice that the inverse morphology crucially differs from passive: there is no demotion of an argument, and moreover, the Algonquian languages independently have an impersonal passive in which the intransitive verb morphology applies.

Somewhat related to this issue of argument asymmetry is a particular difference between German and Icelandic. Both languages have dative-nominative experiencer verbs: German *gefallen* is similar to Icelandic *líkar* ‘like’. But if these verbs are embedded in a control verb construction, they behave rather differently. In Icelandic, if the construction is acceptable at all, only the highest argument can be controlled (so that the dative on the experiencer must be dropped, as shown in (4a)), whereas in German only the nominative argument can be controlled, even if it is not the highest argument, as shown in (4b).

- (4) Control in Icelandic vs. German
- a. Ég vonast til að ____{DAT} líka thessi bók
 I hope for to ____{DAT} like this book.NOM
 ‘I hope to like this book.’
- b. *Ich hoffe, ____{DAT} das Buch_{NOM} zu gefallen.
 ‘I hope to like this book.’
- c. *Ég vonast til að henni líka ____{NOM}.
 I hope for to she.DAT like ____{NOM}
 ‘I hope to be liked by her.’
- d. Ich hoffe, ihm ____{NOM} zu gefallen.
 I hope he.DAT ____{NOM} to like
 ‘I hope to be liked by him.’

The Icelandic data show that lexical asymmetry is projected into syntax. By contrast, the German data seem to counterbalance lexical asymmetry. The higher argument in the lexical item does not need to be the more prominent argument morphologically, and consequently, a syntactic chain can be made in which the lower argument is the controlled one (being the trace, which is involved in the external phase).

My second point concerns the status of morphological objects. Serial verbs seem to be a borderline case between morphology and syntax. Semantically, they always behave like verbal compounds because they only can refer to a single coherent event, unlike coordination, which can refer to two independent events. Otherwise, in a serial verb construction the common object argument is often placed between the two verbs, which suggests a syntactic nature but could also be interpreted as a kind of syntactic infix. It seems that serial verbs are more fused than syntactic objects. Moreover, they seem to behave as a complex morphological object rather than a syntactic object, for which I will give three kinds of evidence.

First, as example (5a) shows, the verb ‘kill’ in Thai (similar to its English counterpart) entails that someone gets dead as the result of a certain action. However, if the Thai verb is used in a serial verb construction (as in (5b)), it only refers to a killing action, while the entailed result is replaced by the result expressed by the second verb.

- (5) Coordination vs. serial verb in Thai: Incremental vs. non-incremental interpretation
- a. **Khaw khaa malææŋ tææ malææŋ may taay.*
 he killed bugs but bugs not dead/die
 *‘He killed bugs, but the bugs did not die.’
 - b. *Khaw khaa malææŋ may taay.*
 He killed bugs not die/dead.
 ‘He was going to kill bugs, but they did not die.’

One usually assumes that the interpretation of syntactic structures is incremental: it is not possible to make the interpretation of ‘kill’ dependent of the syntactic context. This suggests that the serial verb construction must be another type of object than a syntactic one. It rather seems to be more alike a morphological object, where the two verbs together determine the interpretation, have a common argument pool, etc.

Second, (6b) with the literal interpretation ‘Uyi pushed the goat, and the goat entered a hole’ shows that an argument of the second verb can be extracted if it is focused on. This indicates that the serial verb ‘*push enter*’ behaves differently from a syntactic coordination where such an extraction would be impossible. Let us assume that morphological objects do not obey syntactic constraints on movement.

- (6) Extraction from serial verb construction in Edo (Baker & Stewart 1999)
- a. *Úyi sùá èwé lá ùvún*
 Uyi *push* goat *enter* hole
 ‘Uyi pushed the goat into a hole.’
 - b. *Ùvún òré [Úyi sú!á èwé lá -]*
 hole FOC Uyi *push* goat *enter*
 ‘It was a hole Uyi pushed the goat into.’

Third, serial verbs in Akan have to agree, as shown in (7a). But this requirement obviously violates a selection condition, shown in (7b); it is not possible to apply the verb ‘flow’ on a single individuated object. Moreover, the most certain interpretation of (7a) is that the corn flowed into water, and not the speaker who performed the action. Again, this kind of agreement concordance can best be explained by the assumption that the serial verb ‘*take flow*’ is a single morphological object, and the subject of the fused morphological object has to be marked on each relevant part of it.

- (7) Agreement in a serial verb construction in Akan, violating the selection condition of the second verb (Schachter)
- a. me-de aburow mi-gu nsum.
I-take corn *I-flow* water-in
 ‘I threw the corn into water.’
 - b. * mi-gu nsum
 I-flow water-in; violates the selection condition [+mass noun] of *gu*
 - c. aburow gu nsum.
 corn flow water-in
 ‘The corn flowed into water.’

Summarizing, I find that there is good reason to make a distinction between lexical, morphological and syntactic structures, and only in the ideal language all the interesting properties of these structures coincide.

Recently, much descriptive technology has been developed to integrate morphology into generative syntax, but not always successful. One point is that the technology developed in enterprises such as distributive morphology is far from being due to minimalist standards. This might be justified by saying that spell-out often is a quite idiosyncratic mapping. However, if one considers languages with rich morphology, especially those showing some amount of noun-incorporation and serial verb formation, languages with polysynthesis, one has to conclude that morphology is on par with syntax, hierarchically organised and allowing iterative-recursive operations – it is therefore misleading to delegate morphology to some kind of spell-out. What one needs is minimalist morphology, based on a lexical inventory of morphemes which can freely be combined, and subjected to a few general constraints. It seems that in a way minimalist morphology is simpler than minimalist syntax.

Why is that so? If one looks at complex morphological objects (hierarchically organised) one never finds indication of extractions or movements: instead one finds strict positions of elements, no agreement between elements, and also no word-internal possibilities to express topic or focus. Thus, morphological objects are in a way simpler than syntactic ones because they lack the concept of movement. In Chomskyan terms, they are produced by external Merge only.

The documented narrative texts in many minor (and often endangered) languages show that speakers of these languages mainly work within the domain of morphology; these texts do not exhibit much syntactic structuring.

The question, then, is the following: Is morphology, defined as a full-fledged language faculty without movement, a predecessor of the language faculty described by Chomsky's minimalist program? I would like to stress the possibility that movement, and consequently also internal Merge together with the production of copies, is a secondary invention, and not the invention that characterizes the great leap by which homo sapiens departed more than 100.000 years ago.