

Semantic Evidence and Syntactic Theory

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Throughout most of its history, what has distinguished generative syntax from virtually all other approaches to grammar is the hypothesis of the autonomy of syntax (AS), namely the idea that the rules (principles, constraints, etc.) that determine the combinatorial possibilities of the formal elements of a language make no reference to constructs from meaning, discourse, or language use. AS has a methodological counterpart, namely that semantic *evidence* (i.e., judgments of paraphrase, ambiguity, scope, nuances of aspect and the nature of events, etc.) is in general inappropriate as data for the construction of a syntactic theory. My purpose in this talk is to reaffirm the correctness of the methodological counterpart.

The ‘prohibition’ against semantic evidence has been based largely on the fact that the nature of the form-meaning interface is one of the most difficult problems in linguistics. The worst thing, therefore, would be to *presuppose* that such evidence is relevant to syntactic theory. Also, by avoiding semantic evidence, one can use form to get at meaning: ‘In general, as syntactic description becomes deeper, what appear to be semantic questions fall increasingly within its scope...’ (Chomsky 1964: 936). For example, Chomsky (1957) motivated the passive transformation purely on its formal properties. The rough paraphrase relation between actives and passives was *not* one of Chomsky’s motivations. Hence, Chomsky felt comfortable concluding that his analysis *explained* why actives and passives are largely synonymous. And later (Chomsky 1973), a constrained theory of movement rules led to the Specified Subject Condition and Tensed-S Condition, which led to the trace theory of movement rules, which led to surface interpretation of meaning, which led to capturing certain aspects of quantifier scope structurally (May 1977).

In the past 20 years, however, the methodological corollary to AS has been increasingly violated. Routinely now, projections (NegP, TopP, FocP, AspP, etc.) are proposed purely on evidence deriving from the meanings or discourse properties of the items involved. Likewise scope differences and differences in event interpretations drive the proposed hierarchical orderings among these projections. The remainder of the talk is devoted to demonstrating the negative consequences of using semantic evidence within syntactic theory.

I begin with English modal auxiliaries. The structural generalizations have been known for many years:

- (1) a. They occur before all other auxiliaries (*must have gone*; **have must gone*)
- b. They do not occur in sequence (in Standard English) (**might could*)
- c. They take neither infinitive marker nor inflection (**to would*; **woulded*)
- d. They must be followed by non-finite form of the verb or auxiliary (**I must had gone*)
- e. They invert in questions and are followed by the negative morpheme.
- f. (1a-e) apply equally to root and epistemic modals.

Much current work (Stowell 2004; Zagana forthcoming-a; b) ignores (1a-f). The goal has become to represent the subtle scopal differences between root and epistemic modals structurally. As I demonstrate, the downside is that (1a-f) become next to impossible to capture.

I turn next to English derived nominalizations (DNs) (*refusal*, *height*, *aggression*, etc.). It has been known since Chomsky (1970) that underived nouns and DNs have identical structures in relevant respects (2a-b). Also, DNs occur in DPs corresponding to base structures, but not to transformationally derived structures (3a-b):

- (2) a. *Mary's three boring books about tennis*
- b. *Mary's three unexpected refusals of the offer*
- (3) a. *Harry was certain to win the prize.*
- b. **Harry's certainty to win the prize* (no Raising within DP)

These profound formal generalizations are all but ignored in a lot of current work. Instead, the goal has become to capture subtle event reading generalizations structurally (see Borer 2003, Alexiadou 2001). (4b) is Borer's derivation of (4a):

- (4) a. *Kim's destruction of the vase*
- b. $[_{NP} \text{-tion}_{NOM} [_{EP} \text{Kim} [_{Arg-SPQ} \text{the vase} [_{VP} \text{destroy}]]]]]$

I show that the generalizations represented in (2-3) are next to impossible to capture if a VP node underlies the DN *destruction*.

I turn then to a critique of the (crosslinguistic) projection NegP, which is typically posited using exclusively semantic evidence. As I show, negation can pattern structurally with complement-taking verbs (Tongan); with auxiliaries (Estonian); with derivational affixes (Turkish); with nouns (Evenki); and with adverbs (English). If all negative elements are heads of the NegP projection, then these language-particular patterns are unaccounted for.

I conclude with a brief discussion of why semantic evidence has become increasingly used by syntacticians. I suggest that it is due in large part to the fact that there has never been a formal semantic theory that has meshed comfortably with mainstream generative syntax. The tendency then has been to expand syntax to encompass what is naturally the domain of semantic theory or of interface conditions linking syntax and semantics.

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