Understanding the role of locality in grammar

One of the fundamental discoveries of Generative linguistics has been that, contrary to appearances, syntactic dependencies are always relatively local. Much work since the 1970s has focused on understanding the principles that regulate syntactic locality. In the last thirty years or so, there has also been increased interest in leveraging syntactic locality domains to explain locality effects at the interfaces with form and meaning.

In the first part of the talk, I present some of my dissertation work (Bešlin 2025), which aims to eliminate the apparent tension and redundancy between two kinds of syntactic locality theories: absolute locality theories such as Phase Theory, and relative locality theories such as (Featural Relativized) Minimality. Taking a bird's eye view of the (kinds of) arguments found in the literature in favor of having both kinds of locality in the syntax, I argue that absolute locality theories should be dispensed with, for the following reasons: (a) some absolute locality effects are only apparent, (b) some absolute locality effects can and should be reinterpreted in relative terms, and (c) there are relative locality effects which cannot be reinterpreted in absolute terms. I conclude that (Featural Relativized) Minimality is the only syntax-internal locality principle.

In the second part of the talk, I discuss locality effects at the form interface. While one of the ambitions of Phase theory is to be a unified theory of (syntax-internal and interface) locality, I show that this idea faces both conceptual and empirical difficulties. Additionally, there is work arguing on independent grounds that the kinds of opacity effects expected to arise in a grammar constrained by Phase theory are not found in the phonology (see in particular Embick 2014, Newell 2017, to appear). Yet, theories of the syntax-phonology interface still routinely invoke spell-out induced opacity to account for patterns of (im)possible interactions among morphemes. Focusing on morpho-syntactically conditioned allomorphy, I argue that Phase theory is not necessary to account for locality conditions at the form interface. Instead, this kind of allomorphy is constrained by structural adjacency, a notion that is independently needed in the domain of c-selection (Hornstein 2024). Collectively, the two lines of work presented here make a strong case for eliminating Phase theory from the grammar altogether.

References:

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