

Unboxing the Miracle Creed

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This talk recapitulates basic aspects of the syntactic system laid out in Chomsky 2024 (MC), whose main concern is the distinction between copies and repetitions. One of its principles is that Merge be theta-related: only its external kind (EM) creates theta-structures and its internal kind (IM) targets theta-structures – and only them. IM thereby carries over argument (“propositional”) structures to “clausal” ones.

With so heavy a restriction on IM, an obvious question is how to account for many instances of displacement. For example, the hypothesis of successive-cyclic A'-movement (qua IM applying to its own output) is dropped altogether, see den Dikken (2009) for related suggestions. MC introduces the idea that phase heads cyclically access dedicated domains for interpretation and externalization in the phase head or its SPEC: XPs IM-ed into theta-positions, a conflict between representation and derivation resolved in favor of the latter. MC dubs such elements “boxed,” indicating the immunity of these clausal element to theta-marking. It is natural to identify different realizations of access to these domains as one locus of cross-linguistic variation.

I suggest a slight modification of the MC-system that seeks to maximally retain the intuition of cyclicity: Access by phase heads targets phase edges only, irrespective of how the edge is derived (*pace* Kitahara & Seely 2025). It follows that non-phase edges are either opaque or displacement of XPs therein must resort to IM. I propose that some phase edges be contextually conceived (Bošković 2014, 2016; Chomsky 2015) and show how various empirical phenomena can be accommodated whose analytical fate within the framework is unclear without the modification: (i) wh-subjects and their (non-)displacement in English-type vs. Italian-type languages, (ii) the Left Branch Condition in English-type languages and Left Branch Extraction as in most of Slavic, and possibly (iii) R-pronouns, immobile in English, but mobile in Dutch and German. I show how the relevant cross- and intra-linguistic contrasts are derivable with a largely uniform syntax that gets externalized in varying ways.

Time allowing, I will address some of the triggers of Merge to edge domains.

References:

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