“Move over Move”: Agree-driven syntax in an expanded search domain

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In the Minimalist framework, the compositionality of syntax in human language is thought to be accomplished by two operations: Merge and Move. The concepts of “Merge over Move” and economy were issues central to earlier Minimalist theory, but have subsequently been found to have many problems, both conceptual and empirical (Castillo *et al* 1999, Shima 2000, Hornstein 2009:50). Though in recent years debate on these issues has fallen quiet, the problems inherent to the Merge over Move story remain unsolved. We argue that the Merge versus Move debate is moot, and that the dichotomy is nonexistent. We propose that there is only one operation in the narrow syntax—Agree—and that “Move” and “Merge” are reflexes of (and parasitic on) this operation. “Merge” and “Move” in the traditional sense do not constitute independent operations capable of competition. We further argue that “locality,” broadly construed to cover both local and non-local relations, is the only “economy-like” constraint active in the narrow syntax, and that access to the lexicon is mediated by locality, where the search space of Agree has been expanded to subtrees and syntactic (or lexical) elements beyond the subtree containing the Probe.

Expanding on the Probe and Goal model of Agree (Chomsky 2000), we expand the search space of the Probe beyond the immediate subtree(s) under construction, such that P Agrees with the closest Goal, G, as defined in (1). Departing from Chomsky (2000:122), we suggest that the search domain of P, D(P), is not limited to the sister of P, but includes the non-sister of P. In fact, there are attested cases where the search domain must be expanded beyond the immediate (sub)tree: for example, in certain cases of sideward movement (Nunes 2004). Our system further expands the search domain into the area traditionally labeled the formal lexicon, eliminating the need for mediating constructs such as the Numeration/Subarrays.

Within this system, both “Merge” and “Move” are Agree-driven. Agree is entirely feature-driven, and it may occur with or without movement. “Movement” of a goal, G, to a Probe, P, is triggered when G and P Agree for a feature that has an EPP property (see [2]). Under a probe-driven “Merge” parasitic on Agree (see [3]), “Merge” occurs when there is no Goal within the sister of P bearing feature F which can value F on P. In this case, the Probe continues into the search space of the workspace, which conflates the workspaces of other subtrees along with the formal “lexicon” (which we take, in DM style, to be a collection of formal features without encyclopedic knowledge), to find a lexical item or syntactic object, G_2, which has agreeing features. Such a mechanism is conceptually necessary to account for instances of “first Merge,” providing independent evidence for this proposal.

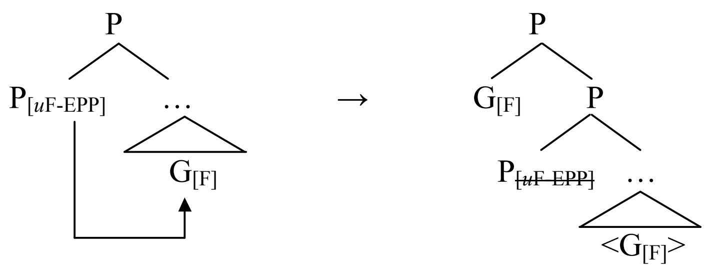
Our system builds on Chomsky’s (2004:110) insight that “ ‘displacement’ […] is ubiquitous in language [… and] is not an ‘imperfection’ of language.” The system capitalizes on the idea that ‘Move’ is neither more complex nor less conceptually necessary than ‘Merge,’ that displacement is somehow primary, and reduces the compositional mechanism of the grammar to “internal Move” and “external Move” (thus reducing the traditional Merge-over-Move asymmetry to the trivial “Move-over-Move”). The formerly independent “external Merge” and “internal Merge” are parasitic on Agree and do not formally compete; empirically, this system will derive effects similar to a traditionally conceived “Move over Merge” system (Shima 2000). Further consequences of this proposal include abandoning concepts of the Numeration, Lexical Subarrays, Global Economy, and multiple workspaces. These simplifications further the methodological goals of the Minimalist Program.

(1) Where P is a Probe, and $G_1, \ldots, G_n$ are potential goals, P Agrees with the closest Goal as follows:

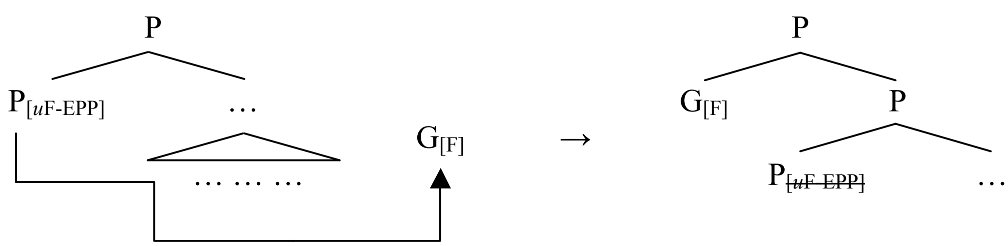
(i) If P c-commands only 1 local Goal, G_1, then G_1 is the closest goal.
(ii) If P c-commands more than 1 local Goal, $G_1, \ldots, G_n$, where G_1 asymmetrically c-commands $G_2, \ldots, G_n$, G_1 is the closest goal.
(iii) If P c-commands no potential goals, a non-local Goal, G_3, is the closest goal,

where two elements are "local" iff there is some node which dominates both elements (and one element is "non-local" to another iff there is no node which dominates both elements).

(2) Probe-driven "Move" parasitic on Agree:



(3) Probe-driven "Merge" parasitic on Agree:



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