

Syntactic variation in nominal root compounding

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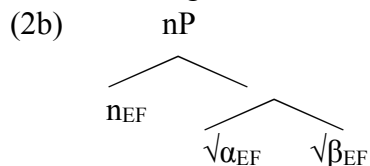
According to what is known as the Borer-Chomsky conjecture all syntactic variation can eventually be attributed to differences in the specification of features on functional heads in the lexicon. This paper looks at syntactic variation that can be found in nominal root compounding and argues against the standardly made parametric distinction between what is known as the Romance pattern and the Germanic pattern in the literature (cf. e.g. Roeper, Snyder & Hiramatsu 2002; Roeper & Snyder 2005; Delfitto, Fábregas & Melloni 2008). Contrary to common assumptions Romance does have a productive pattern of phrasal compounding (e.g. French: *tasse à café* ‘coffee cup’) and Germanic has very clear instances of non-compositional highly drifted compounds (e.g. German: *Kindbett* ‘childbed’; English: *redneck*, *catbird seat*). In other words, these languages display clear instances of word formation processes that go against the alleged parameter setting (cf. *ibid*). Similarly, e.g. Chinese uses both compounding patterns in breakable compounds (cf. Zhang 2007), which behave either as a word or as a phrase (e.g. *dan xin* ‘worry’ lit. ‘carry heart’) which would suggest that Chinese, in contrast to other languages, does not display a clear parameter setting. Boeckx (2010) argues against such macroparameters and even goes so far as claiming that the notion of Parameter is devoid of any meaningful content. The understanding of parameter is according to him deeply influenced by P&P Theory and no longer compatible with current minimalist theorizing. On the other hand, Roberts (2010) argues for a set of micro-parameters with distinctive characteristics. I follow this approach present an analysis that is based on a Phase-theoretic approach to compounding. According to Chomsky (2008) the only prerequisite for Merge is that the lexical item (LI) be specified for an edge feature (EF). Provided that roots are specified only for EFs - which is the null assumption, because otherwise they could not enter the derivation at any stage - it is in principle possible to Merge two uncategorized roots (*pace* Delfitto, Fábregas & Melloni 2008). Provided further that categorizing *x*-heads are Phase heads (cf. Marantz 2007), Merger of two roots does not involve a Phase (cf. 1).

(1a) Merge $\{\alpha\}$ and $\{\beta\} \rightarrow$ no Phase:



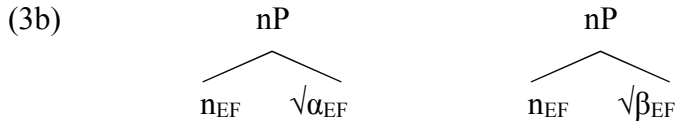
When the complex root that results from the Merger in (1) is merged with a categorizing *x*-head, say *n*, the complement of the Phase-head is Spelled-Out. In this case, however, none of the roots is Spelled-Out independently and a drifted lexicalized reading ensues (cf. 2).

(2a) Merger of categorizing little *x*-head (*n* in this case) \rightarrow Spell-Out of complement of the Phase head \rightarrow no independent meaning realization of roots α and β : drifted reading



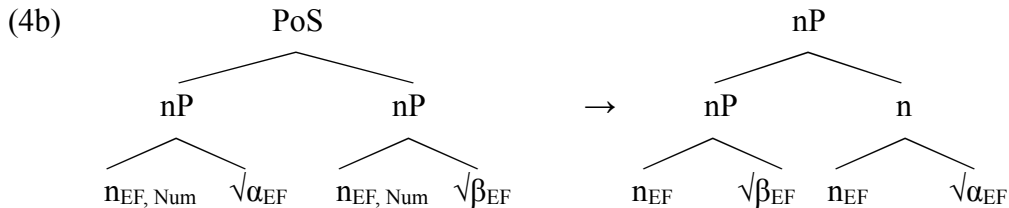
If, however, an uncategorized root is merged with a categorizing Phase-head prior to Merger with another LI, the complement domain of the Phase-head is Spelled-Out and thus the root is independently interpreted, yielding a compositional reading (cf. 3).

- (3a) Merger of root α and β respectively with categorizing little x -head (n in this case)
 → Spell-Out of complement of the Phase head → independent meaning realization of root α and root β respectively: compositional reading



Both types of Merger lead to a point of symmetry (PoS), that has the capacity of stalling the derivation when it remains unresolved. However, the PoS get resolved for both types, albeit differently: Merger of two roots, as in (2a,b) leads to a PoS that is dissolved at PF by dynamic antisymmetry (cf. Kayne 1994; Moro 2000). This is possible, because no feature-checking operations are involved in this type of compounding. Merger of a categorized Phase-head with another LI involves feature-checking and thus excludes a dynamic antisymmetry approach to PoS-resolution. Here the PoS is resolved by a clitic-incorporation style of head-movement (cf. Roberts 2010) that ensues from checking the number feature on the categorized n (cf. 4).

- (4a) Number checking on n → incorporation ensues (cf. Roberts 2010)



Thus, the analysis for root-compounding presented here is one that is not only in line with the SMT and minimalist theorizing and that does not make use of unmotivated features or principles, but also one that ties the cross-linguistic differences between the two patterns of compounding to a microparameter that is sensitive to the properties of number-checking.

(Selected) References:

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