Maximising Minimal Means: typological, acquisitional and diachronic perspectives
Theresa Biberauer

Abstract

This lecture series will focus an attempt to formulate a genuine "three factors" (Chomsky 2005) model of syntactic variation, its acquisition, and the ways it may vary over time and space. More specifically, the objective will be to set out and consider the novel insights produced by a model in which:

(i) UG (= Factor 1) does not provide more than basic operations (Merge and Agree) and a generalised formal feature template,

(ii) the input/Primary Linguistic Data/PLD (= Factor 2) is coherently defined with reference to the distinction between, on the one hand, the universally agreed arbitrariness defining "word"-level form-meaning correspondences – so-called *Saussurean arbitrariness* – and, on the other, higher-level or "grammatical" form-meaning mappings. The latter are likewise arbitrary in the sense that they could be otherwise, but, when compared to "word"-level arbitrariness, the higher-level mappings exhibit a regular/systematic character, i.e. they constitute *systematic departures from "pure" Saussurean arbitrariness*, which we might expect child acquirers to be particularly sensitive to.

(iii) a general cognitive bias to Maximise Minimal Means (MMM) interacts with Factors 1 and 2 to shape grammar postulation.

We will begin by introducing and motivating the general model, before considering some of the typological predictions it makes. Our initial focus will be on recent research undertaken in the context of the ERC-funded ReCoS project (http://recos-dtal.mml.cam.ac.uk) to probe the nature of syntactic variation and the extent to which this can meaningfully be described as 'parametric'. In this connection, particular attention will be paid to the surprising generalizations that seem to be emerging about word-order variation and (the nature of) its limits (cf. Biberauer, Holmberg & Roberts 2014; Biberauer in press/2017a,b; Sheehan, Biberauer, Holmberg & Roberts in press/2017).

For generativists, the "limits" question has always been very directly connected with the matter of first – and, to a lesser extent, other – language acquisition. Accordingly, we will also consider the predictions that the proposed model makes about how a linguistic system "gets off the ground" and then develops from there. Here the precise nature of the input to which acquirers attend at different learning stages is evidently of crucial importance: it is not enough simply to identify plausible input "cues" for given properties of adult grammars without taking into account the sequence in which these might become significant, a(n extremely challenging) matter we will consider in some detail. The distinction between early- and late-acquired properties therefore also takes on particular significance (see Tsimpli 2014 for recent discussion and references), with specific case studies being discussed to demonstrate how acquirers appear to make maximal use of the means at their disposal at different stages of language acquisition. Given that it is a putative third factor, one would expect the bias to Make Maximal use of Minimal Means also to play a role in later/adult language acquisition/learning – a further position that our discussion will touch on.

Language acquisition is also traditionally viewed as central to syntactic innovation and diachronic change. Again, our model makes a number of predictions in respect of the kinds of innovations and changes that one might expect to see in linguistic systems, and the extent to which these can usefully be thought of as 'parametric' (Biberauer & Roberts 2017). "Recycling" effects of the kind that centrally define grammaticalization and

linguistic cycles (van Gelderen 2011) are entirely expected on this model, for example, and it also predicts certain types of "pragmaticalisation" effects (cf. i.a. Diewald 2011), with the logic of category construction and pre-grammaticalisation feature specification that it entails making novel, and, crucially, phase-sensitive empirical predictions that appear to be borne out.

References

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