Lack of ambition as explanation when a clause is reduced

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In this talk, I suggest a non-standard strategy for explaining the limited range of semantics available to constructions in which certain elements of a normal finite TP are phonologically absent. These include Englisk AUX-drop questions and infinitival clauses, where the proposal suggests an answer to a particularly vexing question arising from the derivational theory of infinitivization that I have advanced elsewhere.

AUX-drop: Fitzpatrick (2006) studied a type of yes/no question common in colloquial English, which he called the AUX-*drop construction*, in which the auxiliary verb that is moved to C is omitted:

(1) a. Anyone own that car? 'Does anyone own that car?'
b. Anyone buy that car? 'Did anyone buy that car?'

Fitzpatrick provided several arguments that an AUX-drop clause is generated as a full interrogative CP, in which an auxiliary verb is raised to C. He proposed that the CP layer is unpronounced because of a quirk of Chomsky's (2001) proposal that merger of a phase head triggers spell-out of its complement. This requires a special rule to interpret the very top of the tree. Fitzpatrick propose that this rule is optional, yielding optional non-pronunciation of the root CP layer. What about semantic interpretation? Fitzpatrick discovered that AUX-drop shows a *factative effect* (Déchaine 1991), whereby in the absence of visible tense, a non-eventive (e.g. stative) verb is interpreted as PRESENT (cf. (1a) but an eventive verb may be interpreted as PAST (cf. (1b). He took this effect to argue for Chomsky's (2004) claim that phonological and semantic interpretation pattern together, constituting a single rule of TRANSFER — so if phonological interpretation of the top layer structural layer is skipped, semantic interpretation is also be skipped, yielding the factative effect.

This proposal, however, embroiled him in a paradox, since the evidence adduced for generating a full CP in the first place included semantic properties such as the interrogativity of C and its role in the NPI licensing seen in (1). I propose that this paradox can be avoided if we drop the semantic side of Fitzpatrick's proposal. The absence of phonological interpretation of the CP layer does *not* entail the absence of semantic interpretation. AUX-drop clauses undergo full semantic interpretation, and it is their phonological deficit that is responsible for the *factative effect*. What accounts for the factative effect is a fact about how a hearer's language faculty deals with the task of *reverse-engineering* the speaker's syntactic derivation when deprived of crucial information about the contents of the CP layer. I suggest that the hearer is constrained by the human language faculty to be extraordinarily unambitious, with the factative effect a result of that lack of ambition, resolving the paradox:

(2) **Principle of Unambitious Reverse Engineering (PURE)**
When determining the identity of unpronounced material in the course of reverse-engineering a speaker's syntactic derivation, the hearer considers only the minimally semantically contentful possibilities compatible with the morphosyntactic environment.

Infinitives: I then turn to a puzzle in the analysis of English infinitival constructions that I believe is illuminated by this result. In Pesetsky (2019), I presented a number of arguments favoring a derivational theory of clause size. According to this proposal, non-finite clauses are generated as full and finite CPs, but are obligatorily reduced to complementizerless and tenseless *to*Ps by a rule of *Exfoliation* as a response to cross-clausal interaction between an external probe and a goal occupying the specifier of *to*P. I argued that this proposal permitted an account superior to standard alternatives of the distribution of subjects in infinitival clauses, including case-theoretic paradoxes — and permitted a unification with the puzzle of complementizer-trace effects (now analyzable as *Exfoliation* eliminating the CP layer but

retaining the TP layer). Another set of arguments involved *derivational opacity*: well-known puzzles in Icelandic (with English corollaries) which feature a NOM object in a Raising infinitive, often taken to counterexemplify theories in which finite T assigns NOM. On an Exfoliation approach, NOM was assigned by finite T before Exfoliation deleted the assigner (an instance of derivational opacity).

We do not, however, appear to observe similar derivational opacity when it comes to the *semantics* of English infinitival clauses, whose tense interpretation is notably restricted compared to their finite counterparts. Wurmbrand (2014) charted these differences in depth, and argued on the basis of their patterning that English infinitival complements lack tense entirely, even in cases where it has been argued otherwise. Following Wurmbrand's own presentation very closely, I will argue that the exact opposite conclusion is in fact tenable: that an infinitival complement begins its derivational life fully tensed, with the contents of T free to range over the possibilities observed in finite clauses. The fact that the tense semantics of infinitives appears to be so massively restricted does not reflect deep tenselessness. Instead, it reflects instead the severely limitated ambitiousness of the hearer's language faculty, when tasked with the job of reverse-engineering a speaker's derivation in which Exfoliation deleted the entire TP layer (as well as the CP layer). That is, it reflects the conseqences of PURE as stated in (2).

I conclude with a few speculations concerning other areas in which the overall explanatory strategy suggested here might be informative: for example, offering a new approach to reconstruction and covert movement, if it might be supposed that there are some respects in which the hearer's reverse engineering process is permitted to be mildly ambitious after all.