

From Theoretical Linguistics to Bilingualistics

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A different perspective on minimalism

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1 Abstract

The overarching theme of the course is not minimalism (despite its subtitle). The true focus of the course is the challenge posed by interdisciplinarity: How could we integrate the findings of theoretical linguistics with the the rest of cognitive science and indeed with biology, or the natural sciences at large. Although generative grammarians have always advocated a cognitive science/biolinguistics perspective, in practice few concrete attempts have been made at genuine collaboration. Like many, theoretical linguists have given way to ‘isolationist’ tendencies, by emphasizing modular (i.e., non-interface-based) explanations. This is most clearly the case in the realm of syntax, where features (which are nothing more than small modules) play a central role.

In this course I would like to find out how many properties of the language faculty can be captured by appealing to a very minimal set of features. Most syntacticians (not only within minimalism, but also in other frameworks such as HPSG, or LFG) would say that this enterprise is doomed from the start. I will try to show you that they would be wrong to say this. Quite a bit can be captured without features, and in fact, quite a bit can be explained better without features.

The mode of explanation I am advocating has serious repercussions, especially in the way we think of the lexicon, ‘meaning,’ and variation. A good chunk of the course will therefore be devoted to the nature of variation, and the role of parameters in linguistics.

I am a syntactician. Accordingly, my focus in this course will be on syntax, but I'll have quite a few things to say about semantics, language acquisition, psycholinguistics, neurolinguistics and biology.

2 Goals

My goal is to offer you a view of syntax that is not only more explanatory than what you can find in the literature, but also more amenable to genuine exchanges with researchers in other disciplines. I think that once you have taken the class you will also be better equipped to evaluate proposals in theoretical syntax, and minimalism in particular.

3 Prerequisites & suggested readings

The course does not require any knowledge of minimalism, but it does require some familiarity with basic syntactic notions (constituency, movement/displacement, etc.) — the sort of material covered in standard syntax textbooks.

If you are interested in this course, I would urge you to read the following classics before coming to class:

1. Hauser, Chomsky, and Fitch (2002)
2. Chomsky (1965, chap.1)
3. Chomsky (1981, Introduction)

For the more advanced students, I would encourage you to read (or re-read) the following:

1. Chomsky (1993)
2. Hale and Keyser (1993)
3. Halle and Marantz (1993)

If some of you would like works to serve as guides to the above readings, I think the following two would be helpful:

1. Boeckx (2006)
2. Boeckx (2010)

References

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- Hauser, M. D., N. Chomsky, and W. T. Fitch. 2002. The Faculty of Language: What is it, who has it, and how did it evolve? *Science* 298:1569–1579.