

## *“The grammar of backing and the application of meaning”*

How does a child know their language is SOV? What are the audible cues that lead to the acquisition of syntactic structure? These are two of the questions we consider with respect to two nominally Altaic languages, Khakas and Japanese.

We begin by examining instances of so-called ‘backing’ in Khakas (Siberian Turkic), taken from Borgoyakova, Topoyev & Knapp (2002). This phenomenon entails the unexpected appearance of core, as well as peripheral constituents in post-verbal position. Various kinds of backing from a narrative discourse are considered, along with their associated functional meaning. The first involves ‘defocused’ (object) NPs. Such structures would most likely require movement of a remnant VP (minus the defocused NP) to some favored position higher up the tree than the stranded object. In Japanese, similar constructions are marked by a discernable lowering of voice-pitch. Another is a so-called ‘afterthought’, in which a serial verb clause (similar to a gerund) occurs in sentence-final position. Here too, a corresponding Japanese construction would have a distinctive intonation contour signaling its relationship to the main clause. A third type of backing in Khakas is assigned the (functional) meaning of ‘refocus’, in order to “raise [the] importance [of the backed elements] above other participants” (p.247). The authors themselves point to the stress and intonation of the spoken form in this case. A feature-matching or movement account of these examples is first sketched out, but for technical as well as pragmatic reasons, is deemed to be inadequate. In mainstream (i.e. Minimalist) terms, backing should probably be regarded as a strictly PF phenomenon.

How then do post-verbal constituents in an SOV language receive their interpretation? Not surprisingly, the human voice plays an important role: a drop in acoustic intensity is a common feature, much like a parenthetical. The real issue is how these items interact with logical forms that pertain to reference, co-reference and the like. Syntactic variables are supposed to be the province of LF. If so-called backed elements have any bearing on logical meaning—which apparently they do—the interface between sound and meaning, PF and LF, will have to be reformulated.

A second issue is how different functional meanings can be ascribed to the same constructions in different situations. While obviously pragmatic in nature—hence beyond the pale of narrow syntax—it raises the question of whether mapping ‘many-to-one’ might not also be possible at that level of representation. With regard to binding, this would represent a challenge to the structural premises on which syntactic analyses are based, even threaten the autonomy of the syntactic component itself. Our proposal is that the meanings ascribed to ‘defocus’ ‘refocus’ and ‘afterthought’ in Khakas—and by extension to post-verbal elements in other SOV languages like Japanese—are assigned pragmatically in the discourse, but that the latter informs their interpretation at LF. It may thus be that the world of sound is sufficiently rich for a first language learner to assemble a grammar, rather than to assume one. The hard-wiring of many erstwhile functional categories can also be drastically reduced, as well as superfluous constructs such as specifiers, etc.

References ('The grammar of backing')

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