Referential strategies in the C domain

For some time, generative grammar neglected grammatical investigations relating to reference and truth on the basis that they were considered pragmatic phenomena out of its scope. However, as research on C progressed over the last 20 years, many pragmatic phenomena, like for instance information structure, were shown to have a grammatical explanation (Valdúvi 1990 and subsequent literature). In this presentation we aim at contributing to this debate by putting forth a unified phasal theory specifying a hierarchy of linguistic reference with a focus on the C domain.

We present a system in which truth and reference are not lexical (conceptual) matters (Hinzen 2007; Arsenijević & Hinzen 2012), but rather the result of grammatical (intentional) (Uriagereka 1999; Hinzen 2007) derivations by phase (Chomsky 2001 and sequels). In standard minimalism, phases are syntactic units that maximize computational efficiency by successively treating small chunks of structure as molecular wholes. One and only one phase is processed at a time and then sent to the interfaces with conceptual-intentional and externalization systems. As a result, phases are structurally opaque with respect to elements outside them, and long-distance cyclic movement must use phase edges as procedural landing sites (cf. Gallego 2012 for review). The motivation for phases is thus mostly syntactic, although semantic arguments are sometimes also offered, in for example considering that they are propositionally complete with full argument structure (v*) and full information structure (C) (Chomsky 2001, 2008).

In this talk, we contest the widespread minimalist notion that syntax is a separate system from semantics, and present phases as units of referential significance (Arsenijević & Hinzen 2012). In our view, grammar is a principled factor in the organization of meaning, understood as intentional reference. Computing phases amounts to deriving structures that can be used in acts of reference to entities of different formal ontological types (Arsenijević 2016), such as nominals like Obama’s smile or clauses like Obama smiles, that although might refer to the same, differ grammatically. As in Longobardi (1994, 2005), topological mapping principles attribute referential import to specific positions in the syntactic structure, but in our proposal, the relevant syntactic loci are provided by phasal structure [1], and apply to the nominal (D), verbal (v), and clausal (C) phases alike: the phase interior (head + complement, in our view) yields conceptual (intensional) descriptions (including quantification), and the phase edge yields intensional reference by means of deixis, understood as perspective from the center of the deictic frame (Bühler 1934). In a sense, information structure (intentionality, in our sense) is defined at the edge of every phase once conceptual information has been satisfied, as stated in the call for papers of this workshop.

In this talk, we apply this system to analyze the referential possibilities of the C phase, which we relate to clausal intensionality, or more precisely to the formal ontological category of propositions. The ontology of C has often been linked to concepts like clause-typing (Cheng 1997) or illocutionary force (Truckenbrodt 2006), but in the generative/cartographic tradition, it has mostly been used to account for information structure (topic-focus, old-new information, etc.) and operatorhood (Chomsky 2000), in both of which the C area is used to interpret nominals in particular ways: as foci, topics, etc. We value these proposals but we would like to add to them by putting forth a unified account that also explains: (i) the syntax and semantics of clause-typing, (ii) alethic modalities, (iii) the relation between clauses and context, (iv) factivity and (v) intensionality, among other things.

We thus put forth an approach that offers a comprehensive picture of these phenomena under the phase-based system summarized in [2] below (based on Sheehan & Hinzen 2011). We do so by focusing on two main claims that substantiate our thesis: (i) A sentence like He loves her can’t be a proposition (a statement susceptible of having truth conditions) until its deictics are
indexed to a context (Kaplan 1989), for which, we claim, C is required. Such a sentence is indeed a TP in that it presents a nominative subject, an inflected verb, and full argument/event structure. However, it is not a proposition before it gets deictic anchoring, including that of their temporal operator T (Sigurðsson 2004). We show in particular that root C is not only conceptually necessary to provide such anchoring, but also empirically visible in languages such as Gascon (Campos 1992), Irish (McCloskey 2007) or Spanish (Demonte & Fernández-Soriano 2014); (ii) We posit a deictic edge of C (which we call W, for world) responsible for the truth assessment of clauses by assigning them world values (Stalnaker 1978; Kaplan 1989). Through W, propositions are evaluated either with respect to the actual world (w0) in matrix declaratives, or to wi (with i possibly different to 0) in any other case. Embedded clauses (including factives) are never assertive, and therefore not evaluated for truth in themselves. They are rather part of higher phases for which they provide descriptive (conceptual) content. Empirically, we examine this point by seeing that W offers a unified account for morphological facts like inflected Cs in West Flemish (Haegeman & van Koppen 2012), syntactic facts (e.g. clauses nominalized through C), and semantic facts (factivity/intensionality/modality; Hinzen 2007, 2012).

Finally, it follows from our proposal that edges are paramount to not only establishing the reference of phases, but also to connecting sortal domains (Ramchand & Svenonius 2014) both grammatically and ontologically (Reichard 2013). We clearly see this in the other phases: K, the edge of D (Bittner & Hale 1996), rather than D itself (Szabolcsi 1994, Alexiadou et al. 2007), allows nominals to become part-of the eventualities introduced by their selecting v (as arguments or adjuncts); and T, the edge of v in our view, allows eventualities to become part-of the propositions introduced by their selecting Cs. It should then be W, as the edge of C, rather than C itself, what allows clauses to become part-of higher phases. We examine the latter point at the end of our talk by comparing our proposal with Pesetsky & Torrego 2001.