DISCOURSE FEATURES IN THE SYNTACTIC DERIVATION: ON CORE INTENTIONAL FEATURES

GOAL: To explore the role of informational structure in the derivation of the canonical structure of the sentence.

PROPOSAL: There is a set of discourse features which are context independent and present in the derivation of every sentence. I’ll term them core-intentional features and assume that they are edge features which sit on the relevant phases and drive the derivation so that a sentence constitutes an adequate discourse by itself and a legible object at the interfaces, even in the absence of a presupposed context. Core-intentional features will therefore have the same status as formal or semantic features, all of them co-operating to obtain a fully convergent (structurally, semantically and intentionally) object (cf. Chomsky 2008, 2013).

There must be (at least) one core intentional feature in each phase: one in CP to mark the informational intention of the sentence, and one in vP to mark its informational focus (in the sense of Kiss 1998). Here I focus on the former, which I’ll term [DI] (discourse intention). This feature serves to organize the information in one of the two ways initially defended by the philosophers Brentano and Marty in the XIX century and standardly adopted after the work of Kuroda (1972) (see Sasse 1987 for references and discussion): as a double judgement where an entity is named and something is predicated about it (i.e. a categorical statement), or as a single logically-unstructured complex which merely expresses a state of affairs located in some spatio-temporal coordinates (i.e. a thetic statement). Therefore [DI] will have to be valued either by a category denoting an existing reference (a categorical statement following), or by a category with a [loc] feature which provides some spatio-temporal frame for the event (a thetic statement being obtained). This process of valuation will be regulated by the computational mechanism only attending to the particular output of external merge and to conditions of structural and/or semantic prominence. Valuation of [DI] will then be a matter of computational efficiency, an optimal way to link the structure with the intentional module.

EMPIRICAL CASE: THE CANONICAL POSITION OF THE SUBJECT IN SPANISH: Being part of the inventory of UG, [DI] is subject to parametric variation. In line with Jiménez-Fernández and Miyagawa (2014) I assume that in discourse prominent languages such as Spanish, [DI] is inherited by T and will then force the internal merge of an adequate constituent in TP, thus contributing to determine the canonical constituent structure of the sentence.

The derivation of a sentence in Spanish roughly proceeds as follows. External Merge combines the lexical items in the numeration to form a (conceptually legible) verbal projection hierarchically organized in terms of thematic prominence, with the external argument in the specifier of the light v*P (cf. Larson 1988, Bresnan and Kanerva 1989, Carrier-Duncan 1985, Grimshaw 1990 and Levin and Rappaport 1995, among others). The verbal projection then merges with T, which in Spanish inherits both formal and core-intentional EFs from C. T also establishes an AGREE relation (with no further attraction) with a DP bearing Case and person and number features in its local c-command domain. This morphological subject can be the external argument of the predicate (1), the internal argument of a predicate which has a PP external argument (2) (vid. Fernández Soriano 1999 for a description of these cases) or the internal argument of an unaccusative verb (3):

1. \([\text{TP}[\text{DI}] \ T [\text{vP \ DP person/number \ V* \ [\text{vP \ DP \ V \ ...]}]]]\)
2. \([\text{TP}[\text{DI}] \ T [\text{vP \ PP \ V* \ [\text{DP person/number \ V \ ...}]]]\)
3. \([\text{TP}[\text{DI}] \ T [\text{vP \ DP person/number \ V \ (PP) }]]\)

Although Spanish is classified as a SVO language, the morphological subject is not always preverbal in canonical (context-independent) sentences. If my proposal is on the right track
the prediction is that the subject, in the absence of contextual conditions, will sit in TP (and be preverbal) only when it is the category selected to value [DI]. This will always be the case in the structural configuration in (1), given that the subject is here the most prominent constituent structurally (# represents inappropriate in context-independent sentences):

(4) Juan ha comprado un regalo / #Ha comprado Juan un regalo. ‘John has bought a present’

On the contrary, the subject cannot be targeted in structure (2), since the external argument in v*P is more prominent and will provoke an intervention effect; it will thus not be preverbal in these cases:

(5) A Juan le preocupa tu salud / #Tu salud le preocupa a Juan. ‘Your health worries John’

Finally, in the structure in (3) v*P does not project and therefore all the constituents in the VP are equally prominent (i.e. structurally equidistant for an external attractor), and thus potential candidates to value [DI]. The subject then competes with the verbal predicate as a possible goal here; if the subject is targeted a categorical statement follows (6a), whereas if the verb is targeted the reading will be thetic (6b). This latter case is only possible when the verb has entered the derivation in the perfective or progressive aspect, that is, with a [loc] feature that makes it an adequate category to value [DI] (on the locative reading of perfective and progressive forms see Demirdache & Uribe-Etxebarria 1999, 2000, 2002; Mateu Fontanals and Amada Simon 1999, among others):

(6) a. *El tren nocturno ha llegado/está llegando/llega a la estación central
   b. Ha llegado/está llegando/#llega el tren nocturno a la estación central

‘The night train has arrived / is arriving / arrives at central station’

The paper addresses some other aspects which condition valuation of [DI] and therefore the eventual position of the subject, such as prominence in the scale of referentiality (defined along the following hierarchy: human<specific<generic<existential; cf. Strawson 1950):

(7) Juan ha llegado a la estación central / #Ha llegado Juan a la estación central. ‘John has arrived at central station’

(8) Han venido estudiantes (pero no profesores) / #Estudiantes han venido, *(pero no profesores). ‘Students have come, but professors have not’

Note that the position of the subject in (7) would be different if the prepositional complement of the unaccusative had not been projected, a fact that will also be addressed in the paper:

(9) #Juan ha llegado / Ha llegado Juan ‘John has arrived’

In sum, the proposal advocated here in terms of the core intentional feature [DI] makes explicit the role of information structure as an integral part of the grammar, with no need to resort to a discourse-based articulation of the sentence (i.e. the focus structure in Erteschik-Shir 1997 or Breul 2014), or to pragmatic features such as (the different types of) topic or focus, which clearly pertain to performance (in line with Fabregas et al., 2015).

SELECTED REFERENCES: