Free alternations across modules: Theoretical consequences

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Grammatical theories have a modular architecture with defined interfaces. The opportunity for one-to-many mappings arises across the interfaces: There are well known syntactic and semantic alternations that are "free" as far as the phonological interface is concerned: Textbook examples are structural and scope ambiguities. There is no strong a priori reason to restrict such one-to-many relations in one direction. Corresponding to structural ambiguities (syntactic structure underdetermined by phonology), there could also be 'linear ambiguities' (syntax underdetermines output strings, as suggested in various places). Underdetermination could also arise at the syntax-semantics interface. Cases where multiple syntactic structures map onto the same semantic representation are sometimes discussed under the heading of spurious ambiguities. Also, syntactic structures could provide underdetermined input to semantic interpretation, resulting in structurally unconditioned ambiguities. This leads quite naturally to the idea that scrambling and prefield positioning in German are such operations: Both are semantically heterogeneous but syntactically homogenous. Thus, at least in German, we do not find the dedicated functional projections postulated in the cartographic literature.

The talk will discuss the question of whether cross-linguistic justifications advanced in support of these projections (and specifically, dedicated focus heads) stand up to scrutiny. I argue that some languages often taken to exhibit left peripheral focus heads (Gungbe, Tuki, etc.) can or should be given alternative analyses. More damagingly, left peripheral focus heads do not account for the cross-linguistic ordering typology of the analyzed markers. These heads always appear adjacent to the focus, but if they occupied a position in the clausal spine, they should potentially separate linearly from the focused phrase on a par with clause-final question particles. Also, hypothesized focus heads do not seem to select, be selected, or create opacity for selection, unlike uncontroversial left-peripheral heads. The syntax of left-peripheral focus never seems to be dedicated to focus, again unlike uncontroversial cases of dedicated feature-driven syntax. Finally, fine-grained left-peripheral positions create wrong expectations regarding V2 systems.