LAD Conferences

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Recursion as an epiphenomenon

The recursivity of grammatical rules has been a central part of the generative enterprise since its very beginning. With the advent of the Minimalist program, it has risen to the status of the unique design feature characterizing human language against other communication and cognitive systems. I argue that recursion, in the sense of an infinitely self-applicative function, is an idealization that does not appropriately characterize or illuminate the workings of narrow syntax. From a biolinguistic rather than formal language perspective we need to understand how and why recursion emerges. I argue that the forms of recursion that we find should be seen as the result of an interplay between narrow syntax and the syntax-discourse interface. What gives rise to these forms is a number of different and more primitive underlying factors in language design such as the finiteness of the system's categorial resources and the interleaving of intensionally and extensionally interpreted chunks of syntactic structure in the course of a syntactic derivation. Syntax in isolation is non-recursive: it becomes recursive once it is able to import syntactically simple elements that depend on the discourse material they are associated with. This analysis makes principled empirical sense of apparently universal restrictions on recursion that we find, like that it appears to be always 'indirect' rather than 'direct': nothing in language directly embeds in itself, perhaps surprisingly. The proposal has various interesting consequences for our conception of the syntax-semantics interface and the origin and nature of basic semantic categories such as 'truth'.

Wolfram Hinzen obtained a PhD from the University of Bern and a Habilitation from the University of Regensburg. He became an Assistant Professor at the Universiteit van Amsterdam in 2003, and Professor of Philosophy of Language at the University of Durham in 2006. His research is broadly placed in the biolinguistic program and addresses issues of grammatical architecture with a view on their implications for human nature and the human mind. His books include Mind Design and Minimal Syntax (OUP, 2006), an edited volume on interdisciplinary perspectives on psycho-physical dualism (published in the journal Erkenntnis), and a volume co-edited with Hans Rott on belief and meaning (Hansel-Hohenhausen, 2003).

Selected Publications

Hinzen, W. 2007. An Essay on Naming and Truth. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Hinzen, W. 2006. Mind Design and Minimal Syntax. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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