THE NEED FOR ASYMMETRY AS A SOURCE OF INVARIANCE

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One of the major aims of the biolinguistic program is to determine the source of language universals. To what extent do they reflect specific properties of the design of the language system, and to what extent can they be derived from more general properties of mental computation? I will focus on the question of why, cross-linguistically, reflexive predicates must be licensed (see Schladt 2000 for a selection of strategies languages employ to license reflexivity). This is effectively condition B in the sense of Reinhart and Reuland (1993). I will argue that this requirement follows from a trivial property of computations, namely the impossibility to distinguish indistinguishables (IDI). Crucial is that a linguistic representation of a truly reflexive instantiation of a transitive predicate should contain two occurrences of one variable. We may assume that QR of the subject creates the configuration on which binding is defined (Reinhart 2006). For a transitive predicate such as *haten* 'hate' the output of narrow syntax after QR will then be (i) *DP ... (λx) [$_{VP}$ x [$_{V'}$ Vx]]* (metalinguistically the relation between DP and VP may be represented via a λ-abstract). The two tokens of x represent two different occurrences by virtue of the structural asymmetry resulting from the order of merge (order, as a PF property is taken not to be available in Narrow Syntax representations). At the C-I interface only interpretable objects are visible. This entails that only those asymmetries are preserved at the interface that involve interpretable objects. Assuming with Chomsky (1995) that only heads and maximal projections are terms that are visible to the interpretive system, the latter can only see DP, VP, V, and x, yielding (the equivalent of) (ii) *DP (λx) [$_{VP}$ V x]*. That is, the computational space (no order, no hierarchy except in terms of what is semantically visible) does not offer the means to distinguish the two indistinguishable tokens of x. This creates a mismatch between the arity of V (V is still a binary predicate) and the number of arguments (only one). Hence, ill-formedness results. Natural languages employ two strategies to cope with the effect of IDI: i) guarantee that an asymmetry sufficient to distinguish two occurrences of x is preserved in the handover to the interpretive system by embedding one occurrence of x in a SELF-anaphor, bodypart-anaphor, etc., that makes a sufficient contribution to interpretation to be visible, as in (iii) *DP (λx) [$_{VP}$ V x f(x)]*; ii) by an operation on the argument structure of the predicate (along the lines discussed in Reinhart 2002, Reinhart and Siloni (2005), reducing the arity of the predicate and bundling the theta-roles, thus avoiding the mismatch by a different route. So, a significant property of language can be explained on the basis of a principle that is itself independent of natural language as such. A number of empirical consequences will be explored, including properties of languages that might prima facie mask the effects of IDI. The issue will be embedded in a general discussion of the means to encode interpretive dependencies in narrow syntax - specifically Agree - and the role of economy.

References

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