Labeling Free Relatives: the complexity problem

Günther Grewendorf & Erich Groat (Universität Frankfurt)

This talk introduces a novel analysis of Free Relatives (FRs), in which a null category heading receives its categorical features by an Agree operation. We examine data from complex FRs in English, German, and Greek, in particular possessive constructions such as *whoever's parents are rich is very lucky,* which are problematic for many current approaches. First, we show that syntactic complexity of a fronted whP does not in itself restrict the possibility for forming Free Relatives, contra many analyses. Rather, the element that determines the syntactic and semantic properties of the FR is the highest element of the left periphery bearing operator features. We analyze this as the effect of merging a CP with a phonologically null head bearing only a formal operator feature, the categorical features of that head being unvalued. This "uncategorized" null head cannot yet serve as a label of the FR; at Transfer, however, it acts as a Probe, and will undergo Agree with the closest Goal bearing operator features, thereby valuing its categorical features. This provides the FR as a whole with its label. The Goal may be fairly deeply embedded in a complex fronted phrase, as long as it is on a phase-edge. The analysis provides an intriguing illustration of Chomsky's (2013) suggestion that a single principle of Minimal Search underlies both the labeling of syntactic objects and finding Goals for Agree.feature valuation and movement: in the case of FRs, both processes are going on at once. Certain heretofore puzzling facts about complex whPs and the effects of the suffix *-ever* are also straightforwardly explained. Finally, we show that certain apparent counterexamples to the analysis do not involve true Free Relatives at all, but regular headed relative clauses in which the *wh*-element serves as a sort of indefinite quantifier (as in Cecchetto & Donati 2011).