

## REVIEW OF LASNIK & URIAGEREKA (2005)

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

*A Course in Minimalist Syntax* presents the minimalist program in a textbook intended primarily for classroom use. However, the book can also be a stand-alone introduction for those looking for a theoretical update. As its subtitle suggests, the work does not present minimalism as a finished product, but rather as a collective process of inquiry into the nature of the language faculty. It acknowledges that many theoretical issues are still unresolved, but sets the goal of showing overarching objectives and why they are worth pursuing. As a textbook, it seems most suited for an advanced (possibly graduate level) syntax class. In what follows, I summarize the main points of the book and provide a personal assessment of its merits. I do so in my capacity as an outsider to syntax, which means that I will leave it to others to discuss the accuracy with which minimalism is conveyed. My evaluation is mostly based on the book's potential to reach outside the confines of the subfield. My status as an informed novice may make my opinions of interest to those thinking about adopting it as a textbook, since they are likely to represent those of other non-initiates.

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## 2. SUMMARY

In the first chapter, Lasnik *et al.* (henceforth L.) set out to explain the general desiderata of minimalist syntax and how they are both a continuation and a departure from previous linguistic exploration by generative grammarians for the past half century (e.g., the Principles and Parameters model). They also stress that the program is not a completed project and that many problems posed in later chapters remain unsolved. Like all generative models, minimalism tries to account for certain features of natural language acquisition avoiding *redundancy*, i.e., covering the most facts with the fewest assumptions. Another desideratum of the model is *simplicity*, something which is illustrated with the debate over the number of levels of representation. Whereas the nature of language requires interfaces with phonology and semantics (PF and LF), it is not obvious that it requires a language-internal S-structure. The latter may not be a level in the model but something like the golden mean proportion in the physical world, i.e., a result of the optimal interaction of other components among themselves. The notion of *symmetry* is illustrated with the X'-schema, which allows generalizations across substantive and functional categories. However, although elimination of redundancy makes the model more elegant, it is of course only valid if it also accounts for facts. The unsuccessful attempts to replace the Extended Projection Principle by other modules (theta criterion, Case theory) show that, in some instances, facts are not amenable to elegant principles. Sometimes, even after the general desiderata of a 'weak' minimalist thesis are followed – naturalness, elegance, and so on – there may still be different avenues to achieve its goals, some more unconstrained than others. However, Chomsky settles for a 'strong' minimalist thesis which, for instance, restricts movements through the axiom of 'last resort.' The chapter closes with a consideration of the relationship between minimalism and its biological underpinnings.

Chapter 2 recasts in the new framework some notions that minimalism inherited from the Principles and Parameters model regarding the linearization of constituents and phrasal representation more generally. One difference between the two approaches is the emphasis of minimalism not just on a feasible model of language acquisition, but also on the elimination of system redundancies. L. illustrates alternative constructivist and restrictivist explanations, i.e., recipes for the generation of acceptable structures and systems that reject constructions that violate principles, respectively. Of the two, the latter are shown to provide more far-reaching

solutions. For example, to account for the facts of linearization of sounds and syntax, the simplest move is Kayne's proposal of universal asymmetric c-command. With the elimination of intermediate S-structure it makes sense to propose that spell-out – the fork on the road at which items undergo phonological and semantic interpretation – does not happen all at once but in chunks (in more traditional terms, the derivational cycle). This results in portions of structure becoming unanalyzable flat structures. The chapter ends with a more radical minimalist proposal of eliminating X' as a theoretical primitive, since it is an intermediate level with no empirical basis. It is replaced by the simplest relationship between combined elements, or merge, defined as the labeling of the whole with the identity of one of its parts.

Chapter 3 also takes on a historicist approach to tackle the observation that structures undergo displacements, and the efforts of generativism to characterize them. It illustrates the first approach to the phenomenon with affix hopping ([past[walk]<sub>VP</sub>]<sub>TP</sub> → walk-ed). Later, the process is redefined so that only upwards movements are possible, as a way to account for parametric variation. This allows L. to introduce what is arguably the most important difference between movement in Principles and Parameters and in minimalism, namely, that if alternatives are present, the system will procrastinate by opting for the most economical one. Movement is only obligatory in languages where a category is 'morphologically strong' and attracts the lower lexical head. English and French contrast as regards the position of the verb with respect to negation: *\*John loves not Mary* vs. *Jean aime pas Marie*. English inflection is not strong, and thus can't force movement of the verb to check its agreement features, whereas French inflection is and does. In the absence of something to force movement, the English verb will stay in place (technically, procrastinate). However, the notion of least effort is not a filter. This allows a language to resort to non-economical measures, such as *do*-support, if necessary to salvage a free floating affix (*Does John love Mary?*). Economy favors the least steps and also the least language-specific steps, two principles which may be at odds. The discussion then moves on to the Minimal Link Condition, an economy restriction which involves defining the conditions under which an element can or cannot be attracted out of its original locus. The chapter finally connects successive-cyclic movement over bounding nodes with multiple spell-out. If chunks are sent to interpretation when cyclic points are reached, then it follows that they will be inaccessible for extraction after that.

Chapter 4 deals with the economy of representations, i.e., the need to limit the symbols used in the theory and their various patterns. It starts with Full Interpretation, i.e., the conditions that allow a derivation to be legible at the interface with PF and LF. L. clears up the terminology of crashed, convergent, and terminated derivations and distinguishes head, argument, and non-argument positions/chains. It discusses the issue of chain uniformity – the requirement that chains be uniform with respect to a given property – and several problematic cases, such as Wh-chains. It proceeds with the conservation of interpretable structural units, which restricts movement from head to head and from maximal projection to maximal projection. This is achieved through a condition on incorporation according to which, if an XP is incorporated into a head, it is no longer in the dimension of syntax. Head incorporation is applied to solve the linearization of terminal branches which do not asymmetrically c-command each other: incorporating one of the non-linearized terminals into the head of the other provides a tie-break. Issues of linearization are also responsible for the invisibility of traces in PF, since if they were pronounced, they would pose paradoxical c-command situations. Finally, L. illustrates the issue of visibility at LF by considering Case. It concludes that Case checking is not related to whether a category is pronounced or not, but to its status as an argument. Thus, a passive NP trace is Case-less, but a PRO subject has Case because it occupies an argument position. The chapter closes with some reflections on the syntax/semantics interface, in particular the problem posed by claiming that syntax converges optimally on a semantic representation that we have no independent access to.

Chapter 5 discusses ‘last resort’ operations, those where the language salvages a structure through uneconomical rules (pleonastic *do*) or apparently unmotivated movement. The discussion focuses on the reasons why objects satisfy Case requirements by moving at LF, i.e., covertly, whereas subjects must do so for the same reasons but overtly. Under the assumption that movement will be delayed as long as possible, it is hypothesized that the earlier subject movement is motivated by the need to check a strong feature at the T or Agr, whereas no such feature is present in V. In unaccusatives with pleonastic overt subjects, of the type “*There arrived a man*”, the associate (*a man*) must raise to subject position at LF, since *there* is uninterpretable. However, in so doing it is not meeting any of its own Case needs, but saving the rest of the derivation, and itself only indirectly (Enlightened Self-Interest). On the other hand, it can be argued that if *there* has checked the feature of T, then there is really nothing for the

associate to check Case against, so a motivation other than Case checking must be found for the raising of *a man*. Chomsky's proposal is that *there* is actually a bound affix in LF, and *a man* moves to adjoin to it. However, in LF movement can involve just the relevant features, and needn't drag along *a man*. L. then evaluates the relative cost of merge and move operations, by introducing and applying the notion of numeration, i.e., the array of lexical tokens that participates in a derivation.

Chapter 6 focuses on LF, the syntax-semantics interface. It examines proposals according to which quantifier scope and quantifier scope interaction could be accounted for through mechanisms independently motivated in syntax, such as movement (which in LF must be covert). The remainder of the chapter seeks to identify which type of movement best accounts for LF processes and whether the notion of last resort applies here, too. L. uses as a case study Antecedent-Contained Deletion, i.e., structures of the type *John loves everything that Bill does*, analyzed as having undergone quantifier raising at LF: *[[everything that Bill does] John loves]*. Several alternatives are discussed and each one is shown to have problems. One proposal is that the quantifier undergoes A-movement to Spec of AgrO, but this is problematic if the moved element is not of the kind that must satisfy Case requirements. Another possibility is that quantifier raising is A'-movement to a scope-taking quantificational site. Here the problem is that differences in scope are based on the possibility of two instances of raising. However, if QR obeys last resort considerations and checks some 'strong' feature, only one such raising is called for, on economy grounds. Another proposal tries to limit quantifier raising only to cases where different interpretations result. Finally, L. presents reconstruction, the process whereby LF has two sites available for interpretation of a variable (original and copy).

The book closes with a more open-ended, speculative chapter, which goes back over some previously discussed topics and raises some more questions, together with some admittedly tentative and imperfect answers. First it discusses whether thematic roles should be defined in lexical semantic terms. It explores the simplest possibility, i.e., limiting thematic roles by matching them one-on-one with arguments, but notes that this would fail to account for the hierarchical order in which arguments are given thematic roles across languages. Chapter 7 also explores how binding conditions on different kinds of anaphors can be restated in a system with no government. Different derivational phases are discussed as possible cycles in spell-out, interpretation, and binding, such as CP, vP, and DP. Because the possibility of movement outside

of these islands needs to be maintained, it is proposed that the specifier of a higher phrase, when it involves an unchecked uninterpretable feature is the *phrase edge*, which acts as an escape hatch. L. discusses whether cyclic domains for movement and locality domains for the construal of nominals can be reduced to one another. Perhaps the most interesting part of the chapter is the discussion of the differences between adjunct and argument chains, both in terms of their observed behavior and the explanation provided for these differences. They are presented as ‘loosely activated’ elements disconnected from what they modify semantically and syntactically and compatible with a flat conjunctive structure. On the other hand, this doesn’t explain why they can establish antecedence, for which c-command relations are normally assumed. This leads L. to propose that representational antecedence and derivational accessibility are not synonymous.

### **3. ASSESSMENT**

The first obvious asset of L. is that it was written by two of the most preeminent theoreticians of minimalism. The fact that it took them seven years to complete is evidence both of the difficulties inherent in trying to capture a moving theoretical target and the tenacity and sense of duty of its authors. Because they have first-hand experience of the evolution of the ideas they present, theoretical argumentation is laid out following the chronology in which it unfolded. As a result, the book reads not so much as a treatise but as a novel, impressing a fundamental lesson – which goes much beyond minimalism, or even linguistics – that the essence of a theory is not its completeness but its inherent provisional status. This book is about what minimalism does, rather than about what it is. If the latter is likely to change, the former has remained constant since the inception of generativism in the late 1950s. For that itself, the book is valuable, especially since L. is disarmingly honest about false starts, blind alleys, and mechanical malfunctions along the way (cf. p. 167).

Another of the highlights of the book is that the authors are seasoned teachers, who don’t shy away from metaphor to support their very abstract musings in graphic terms. The phrase marker as a Calder mobile (p. 35), the magnet analogy for the Minimal Link Condition (p. 79),

the ant and Russian dolls as a simile for bounding nodes (p. 86), and the proposal that adjuncts ‘surf up’ the derivational tree (p. 258) all come to mind.

That said, it is also true that *L.* is not an easy read. It is densely packed, and some portions have to be read several times before they yield all their content. This is obviously partly due to the decision to fit the content so that it can be used over a semester-long course without dumbing down the subject matter. This has only been possible by making many assumptions about previous knowledge, not just of syntax but also of generativism. Several notions are not defined or explained at first mention, making some early portions particularly opaque. For example, the notion of covert movement is mentioned on p. 26, but only fully explored in Chapter 6. The difference between lexical and structural Case is mentioned when discussing the interaction between unaccusatives and expletive *there* (p. 151), but not defined clearly anywhere in the book. The reader may at times feel overwhelmed by the lack of balance between old and new information. In that regard, one must question the wisdom of the publishers in presenting the book as an introduction to syntax, which it most certainly wasn’t intended to be (cf. Randall Hendrick’s quote on the back cover). In my opinion it would be best to stress *L.*’s really strong points (e.g., authoritativeness, open-endedness, intellectual stimulation), rather than creating false expectations of simplicity.

I realize that some of the issues of readability have to do with the subject matter, and may very well be inevitable given *L.*’s stated objectives. Other issues are more easily fixed, and could be in subsequent editions. For example, it might help to have a panoramic view by contrasting the new proposal with its predecessors not just in aims and objectives, but also in overall architecture. The individual chapters provide very detailed accounts from very close to the ground, but sometimes the reader loses sight of the big picture. At other times, confusion over abstract concepts could be cleared with more exemplification. For instance, to distinguish illegible, unintelligible, and terminated derivations, it would be useful for each definition to be accompanied by an example (only illegibility is exemplified explicitly on p. 105). The extensive notes prepared by Cedric Boeckx are very thorough and allow the more enterprising reader to follow up on points that can’t be considered in depth in the text. However, the discourse sometimes weaves back and forth between main text and notes, breaking the flow of thought (cf. the references to notes 18 and 20 on p. 161 for an example). It would help the reader if the marginalia were more crisply separated from the main thrust of the argumentation.

One of my pet peeves with syntactese is the use and abuse of acronyms. I realize that one of the pedagogical responsibilities of the authors is to familiarize readers with some (even many) abbreviations which have become standard names for central concepts in the field. On the other hand, it should be clear that the more abbreviations in the text, the more opaque it becomes for novices. In this regard, it seems unnecessary to present abbreviations that have a low yield in the text itself (e.g., PC, which is used briefly for a putative ‘parallelism constraint’). It might also be preferable to present Chomsky’s work in the standard format used for all other authors (name and date), rather than the more cryptic title initials. Additionally, given that abbreviations may come up again several chapters after their first mention, it would be very useful to have an independent glossary including their expansions and brief definitions. In its present format, the process of checking abbreviations is quite convoluted, since it entails looking them up on a short list in the front matter to establish their full form, finding the full form in the index, and finally, locating the definition in one of the pages listed (not always the first one).

L. is a substantial read, at times exhilarating and always as fascinating and complex as its subject matter. It amply fulfills its stated objectives of presenting the theory as an evolving set of questions. It also shows how to frame the answers and how to choose among them in minimalist terms. These are important matters, with significance for the study of language as a whole. The comments above should be interpreted in the friendly spirit in which they were intended, as possible ways to increase the book’s appeal beyond the confines of syntactic theory.

LASNIK, Howard; URIAGEREKA, Juan (with Cedric BOECKX). *A Course in Minimalist Syntax. Foundations and Prospects*. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005.