

Unrealised Possibilities

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Linguists want simple, elegant, and convincing grammatical principles, but the degree to which actual linguistic constraints meet these criteria is often inversely correlated with the amount of their empirical coverage. The problem seems to be particularly strong in the domain of typological generalizations: there are only very few examples of crosslinguistic generalizations that hold without exceptions. Here, I would like to raise the question of whether some of the difficulties can be circumvented if we assume that linguistic communities do not always realize all the possibilities which their grammars allow.

What might constitute an unrealised possibility is perhaps best exemplified by prenominal genitives in German. Often, they are considered ungrammatical, or restricted to non-complex genitives, as (1a) vs. (1b) suggests. (1b) is certainly ungrammatical since it violates the adjacency condition for heads in the prenominal domain that is also exemplified by prenominal adjectives, as the contrast between (1c) and (1d) illustrates. The factor ruling out (1b) does not block complex prenominal genitives. While (1e) and (1f) sound fairly acceptable to a certain extent, slight lexical variation leads to a decrease in acceptability.

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| (1) a. | <i>Marias Mutter</i> | Mary's mother |
| b. | <i>*der Frau mit dem Hut Buch</i> | the woman with the hat's book |
| c. | <i>der auf Julia stolze Vater</i> | the on Julia proud father „the father proud of J.“ |
| d. | <i>*der stolze auf Julia Vater</i> | the proud on Julia father |
| e. | <i>eines jeden Mannes grösster Traum</i> | one each man biggest dream “every man's biggest dream” |
| f. | <i>des Weines Geschmack</i> | the wine taste „the taste of wine“ |
| g. | <i>?jeder zweiten Frau kleines Geheimnis</i> | every second woman small secret „the small secret of every second woman“ |
| h. | <i>?des Potsdamer Bieres Farbe</i> | the Potsdam beer colour „the colour of Potsdam beer” |

There is no convincing formulation of a grammar that rules in (1a), but excludes, say (1g) or (1h), in particular because the length of the prenominal DP plays a role, and such effects are very difficult to capture in the standard grammatical frameworks (Jäger & Rosenbach (to appear)). Since we want to avoid reference to length in our grammars, a more appealing description might be the following: all prenominal genitive DPs are *grammatical*, yet this grammatical possibility is not made use of by speakers of German, simply on the basis of a “stylistic” constraint that may partially (but completely) be grounded in the processing/production problem prenominal genitives may come with.

A similar explanation has been proposed by Barbiers (2005) for a different domain, and also by Fanselow, Kliegl, & Schlesewsky (2006) for long wh-movement in German: there are regional and non-regional differences in German concerning the acceptability of extractions from *dass* “that”-clauses, but such differences can be influenced so easily by confronting speakers with relevant examples that no profound grammatical difference between the dialects can be involved. Rather, long movement again seems to be an “unrealised” option of the grammar of, say, Northern German that is normally blocked on stylistic grounds.

Many linguists may be willing to accept such explanations at the ‘periphery’ of grammar, but can (and must) it be applied in the core of the syntactic system, too? I think we have reason to give a positive answer, since it might, e.g., help to cope with a number of otherwise mysterious observations in the crosslinguistic description of movement. Consider discontinuous noun phrases (DNP) as exemplified by German (2).

- (2) *Bücher liest er viele*
books reads he many
“he reads many books”

The construction is more frequent among the world's languages than its low prominence in the generative discussion suggests. While there are a number of rivaling grammatical descriptions for (2), there appears to be some convergence concerning the licensing conditions for DNPs. First, there is a pragmatic dimension: The two parts of a DNP always fulfil different informational functions. Thus, in (2), *Bücher* can be the contrastive topic, and *viele*, the focus, but *Bücher* can also be the narrow focus

while *liest er viele* is given information. DNP seem possible in those languages only that allow the displacement of topics and/or foci.

In addition, formal properties of DP are equally important. DNP of the type exemplified in (2) arise only if both parts could figure as independent, complete, DPs on their own (see, e.g., Fanselow 1988). For the left part of the DNP in (2), the relevant property is that DPs need not have an overt determiner in the language in question, for the right part, it is crucial that the language does not require the presence of an overt noun in a DP.

Ideally, these two constraints on DNP (possibly complemented by one or the other further principle) already predict which languages have DNP, and which do not. In a principle-based grammar, the set of constructions generated by it is a function of the basic operations (such as movement, applied to phrases with a topic feature) and the setting of various parameters (in the lexicon?) which further determine well-formedness. Once we have identified the pertinent parameters, the grammatical properties of a language are completely defined in the relevant domain.

The two constraints mentioned above predict the distribution of DNP in a fairly satisfactory way. Languages with a 'liberal' DP structure of the sort described above and with free constituent order driven by considerations of information structure such as the Slavic languages, German, Hungarian, Estonian, Finnish, Latin, Greek, Albanian, Turkish, Georgian, Greenlandic, Hindi and Warlpiri have DNP, while English lacks them, probably due to the ungrammaticality of sentences like **I do not buy an expensive* and the general insensitivity of English clause structure to informational distinctions.

One major differentiating factor appears to be the status of nominalized adjectives. In many languages, adjectives have to be augmented by some (nominalizing?) morpheme if the DP they occur in contains no overt noun. Such languages may allow DNP (as Japanese does), or lack them (as Avar does), and we can try to capture this variation in terms of the status of a nominalized adjective relative to the question of whether there are truly nounless DPs in a given language.

While the combination of our pragmatic and our formal constraints work well in the case of many languages, it is not too difficult to find languages which cannot be captured in this way. First, there may be exceptions of a very systematic nature: Baker (1995) claims that polysynthetic languages (in the strict sense) do not have DNP on principled grounds. If correct, his generalization just forces us to augment the set of criteria in our grammar, and thus poses no principled problem for explaining DNP exclusively in terms of principle-based grammars. Unfortunately, there are less systematic (and therefore more problematic) exceptional cases as well.

Consider, e.g., Basque. Basque does not require that there be an overt noun in a DP, and it clearly belongs to those languages in which word order serves to express distinctions of information structure. Basque thus should possess the major ingredients for DNP, yet, DNP are ungrammatical in this language. At first glance, the observation may appear to be helpful that Basque DPs require determiners in considerably more circumstances than, e.g., their English counterparts do. Consequently, one half of the formal constraint on the well-formedness of DNP, viz., that determinerless DPs must be possible, might not be met in Basque. But the problem which Basque poses goes beyond DNP. It is not just the case that DPs cannot be split up in the way exemplified in (2). DPs are also islands for extraction (say, of PPs) in general, they must *always* be contiguous. Of course, Basque DPs can be declared absolute islands for movement in one way or the other, but thereby, we merely reformulate what we want to understand. So far, satisfactory solutions have not been found (Itziar Laka, p.c.)

A general ban against movement out of DPs would not be descriptively adequate for Icelandic. PPs can be extracted from DP objects. Icelandic DPs need no overt realization of a noun, and, just as in the other Germanic V/2 languages, we find informationally driven movement to Spec,CP in Icelandic. Again, all factors licensing DNP in other languages are operative in Icelandic as well, yet DNP are ungrammatical. It is hard to see what property of Icelandic could be blamed for the ungrammaticality of DNP. Most of the languages with DNP are of the scrambling type, and many of them have an underlying SOV order. While Icelandic differs from, e.g., German in terms of basic word order (SVO vs. SOV) and of the availability of scrambling (impossible in Icelandic, possible in German), we must not make either of the two properties responsible for the absence of DNP: like Icelandic, Swedish is an SVO language without scrambling, yet DNP are well-formed. That Old Icelandic allowed DNP, but did not differ dramatically from modern Icelandic in syntactic terms (Rögnvaldsson 1995) narrows down the options for linking the ungrammaticality of DNP in modern Icelandic to some other property even further. In particular, the differences between Old and Modern

Icelandic that Rögnvaldsson identifies would also distinguish Swedish from Old Icelandic. Again, it seems that we can find no satisfying answer to the question of why Icelandic has no DNP *within* the grammatical system.

There is at least one more language, viz., Modern Hebrew, that falls in the same category: DNP should be ok because all the licensing conditions for DNP are met, but DNP do not exist. Of course, one cannot exclude that grammatical factors ruling DNP out in these languages will be identified in the future, but I consider this unlikely. The factors discussed above are inherently related to the construction: there must be a force driving the two parts of the DNP apart, and this force is related to information structure, and the resulting parts must match the grammatical constraints on DPs. Thus, the grammatical ingredients translate themselves directly into the constraints we have discussed, and any further constraint would have to be an unrelated, *ad hoc* addition to the grammar of the construction. In other words, Basque, Hebrew, and Icelandic pose an interesting problem: in its most general form, the grammar of these languages specifies processes (viz., movement of topic or focus categories) that should create DNP (since the resulting structure would not violate independently motivated constraints of the language), yet DNP are ungrammatical. The grammatical possibility is simply not realized. It is blocked by a (strong form of a) stylistic constraint.

There is more evidence for this interpretation. Often, Dutch is characterized as a language lacking DNP, and when we compare it to German, we certainly note that, e.g., scrambling is much more constrained in Dutch, but Swedish has already taught us that DNP do not presuppose scrambling. Furthermore, DNP *are* okay in Brabant Dutch (van Hoof 2005), and a survey among Dutch linguists has revealed that the acceptance of DNPs is not geographically bound: some Dutch speakers coming from other dialect areas tolerate DNPs, others do not. We have little reason to believe that there is an additional, major grammatical factor distinguishing the DNP-speakers from the others.

German and Sorbian illustrate the same from a different angle. German is productive with respect to the DNP type (2), but sentences such as (3) are ungrammatical. In contrast to nearly all Slavic languages, only the lowest overt head of a DP can move in a DNP. I see no grammatical difference between Polish, Russian, and further languages such as Georgian on the one hand, and German on the other that might be able to account for the difference between (2) and (3). To a limited extent, dialects allow Slavic-like constructions (as in (4)), an observation that also militates against the view that (3) is excluded from Standard German for profound reasons.

- (3) a. **Viele liest er Bücher*
 many reads he books
 b. **Interessante las er Bücher*
 Interesting read he books
 (4) *wie viel habt Ihr Schweine*
 how many have you pigs

Sorbian behaves like German (dialects) in allowing (4) but forbidding (2), contrasting in that respect with the neighboring Slavic languages with which it otherwise has much in common.

Basque, Dutch, German, Hebrew, Icelandic, and Sorbian have idiosyncratic properties in the domain of DNP, and one would prefer to not have to explain them in terms of principle-based grammar. Can stylistic constraints be extended such that they can cover these facts instead?

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