

Reading notes of Cambridge Grammar of English Language

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This note is a reconstruction of the contents The Cambridge Grammar of the English Language (Huddleston and Pullum 2002, henceforth CGEL).

1 Theoretical preliminaries

For the discussion on the underlying theoretical framework, see the relevant chapter in [this note](#). Briefly speaking, the framework is coarse-grained Minimalism: invisible functional heads are erased, but dependency relations created by the functional projections are kept (Fig. 1(a)), and the corresponding CGEL tree is obtained by replacing the name of dependency relations by syntactic function-form pairs (Fig. 1(b)). The head is defined as the dominant *lexical* word. This makes CGEL look like old-fashioned X-bar theory, where a lexical word projects into a phrase (CGEL § 5.2 [5]), but there can be several “maximal projections” headed by the same lexical word (CGEL § 5.2 [11]). This is actually consistent with Minimalism (Fig. 2).

The standard of “lexical”, however, varies from one author to another. A PP and a CaseP (in generative terms) are similar objects, but in the coarse-grained CGEL framework, the latter is definitely an NP, but the status of the first is kind of controversial: should we recognize the preposition as a lexical word, or as a functional word? In the first analysis, a PP in generative terms is still a PP, while in the second analysis, a PP in generative terms is an oblique NP. Choosing between the two analyses is merely a problem of notation. But it is good practice to choose a notation that hints the readers about certain properties of the construction in question. For example, if a PP is analyzed as a PP, then probably the preposition has some predicative properties.

Not all dependency relations can be expressed purely by the context-free phrase structure grammar (Pullum and Rogers, 2008). Movements (or cross-serial dependencies in dependency terms) in Minimalism are represented by a gap (CGEL § 2.2 [5]), or by indirect dependency (CGEL § 5.14.1).

The close relation between CGEL and generative syntax apparently deviates from the common descriptive practice, especially the common descriptive framework extracted and summarized by Dixon (2009, 2010, 2012) and named as Basic Linguistic Theory (BLT) by Dixon, but this distinction is illusory: while BLT assumes a flatter phrase structure, information coded by the binary-branching phrase structure in CGEL is coded by dependency arcs in BLT (Fig. 3).

Though several disagreements with the mainstream generative syntax is raised in CGEL, and much more severe accusations are made in BLT, it can be seen all the three approaches are describing almost the same complexity class of grammars.

2 The clause structure

This section is about the phrase structure of the clause. I will discuss clause dependents, their forms and functions, grammatical systems in the clause, and how everything is put together.

2.1 Types of complements

Clausal (or verbal, since the clause is headed by the verb) complements may be NPs and PPs, and less frequently, adverbs (as in *He treated us [kindly]*).

This section lists some criteria of classification of complements. They are all discussed in CGEL § 4.1.1.

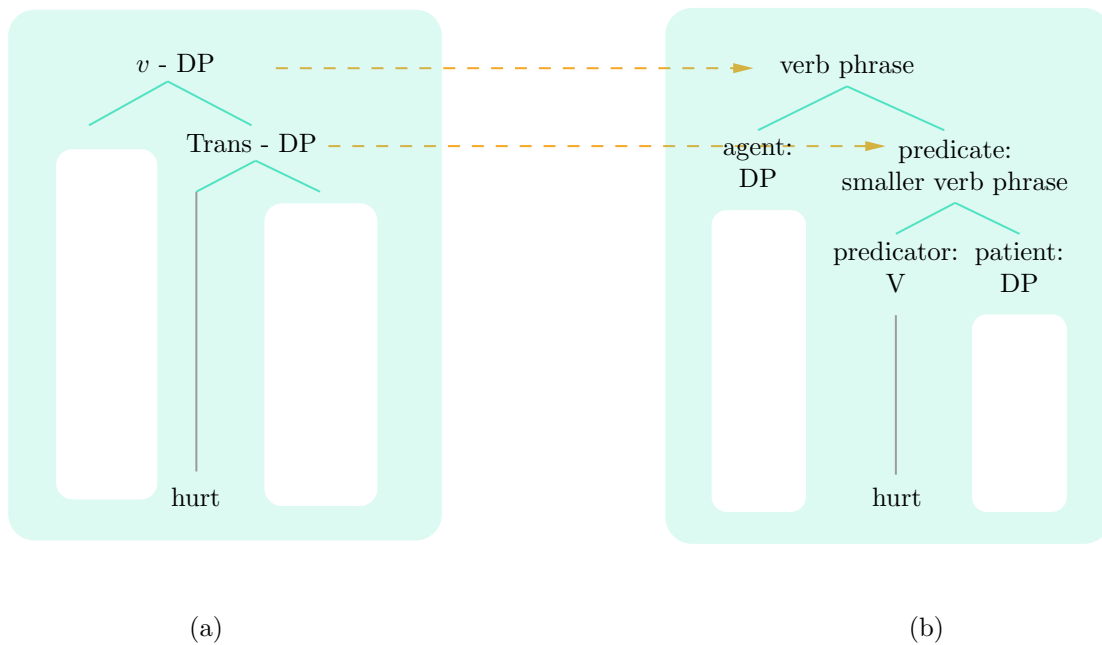


Figure 1: From coarse-grained Minimalist derivational tree to CGEL tree

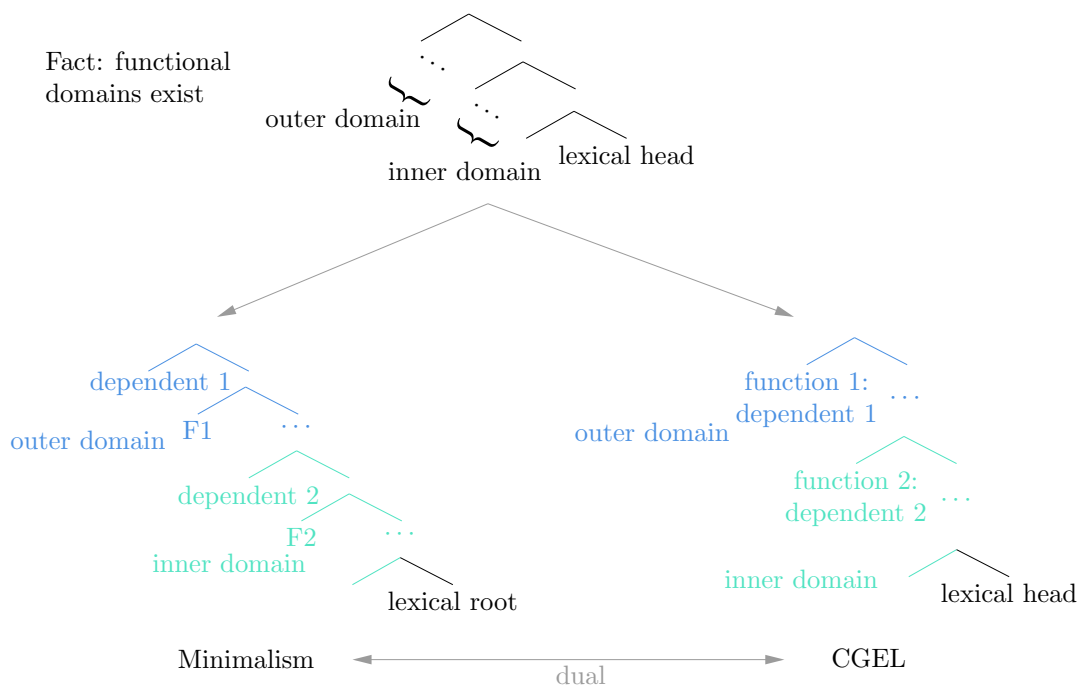


Figure 2: Duality between CGEL and Minimalism

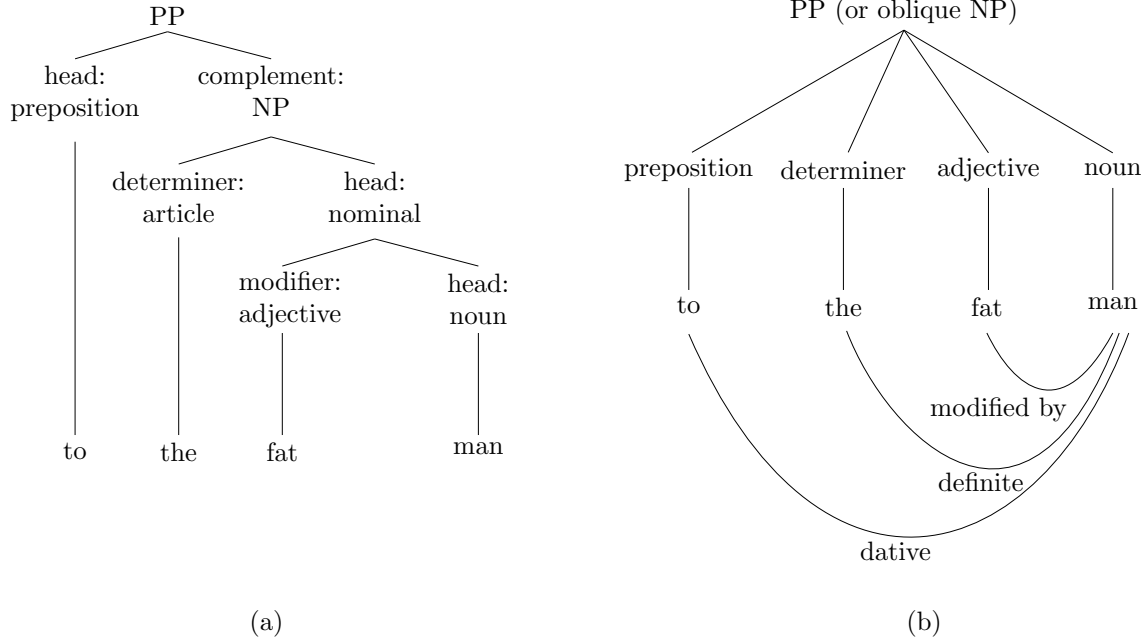


Figure 3: Comparison between the CGEL and BLT analyses of *to the fat man*

2.1.1 Core v.s. oblique

One classification standard is the make up of the complement. A **core** complement is a complement with similar morphosyntactic properties of NP complements. A **non-core** complement is a complement with similar morphosyntactic properties of PP complements. If a non-core complement itself takes an NP complement (or something with similar morphosyntactic properties), the latter is called an **oblique**.

Note that in CGEL, the term *argument* is reserved for purely semantic objects. A clausal complement is therefore the syntactic incarnation of an argument, but itself is not an argument. This is *not* the way *argument* is used in BLT.

It should also be noted that in CGEL, the terms *non-core* and *oblique* are reserved for clausal complements and the NP part of PP clausal complements. They *do not* include adjuncts with similar forms. On the other hand, in BLT, the term *peripheral argument* covers both complements and adjuncts.

The prototypical definition of *core* and *oblique* complements are based on syntactic forms instead of functions, while the definition is extended by analog with respect to syntactic functions. Whether these terms are useful is a question we need to wait and see.

2.1.2 External and internal

3 The verb category

References

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