

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: a PP is therefore more like a VP, not an NP with case marking (or “CaseP” in generative terms, especially in theories focusing on morphosyntax and do not make sharp contrast between syntax and morphology). If, however, prepositions in a language work just like case markers, the argumentation raised in Basic Linguistic Theory (BLT) § 1.11, § 5.4 is then attempting: we should recognize the prepositions as case markers with standalone phonological realizations. Which analysis to choose should be decided according to observed phenomena. This is summarized by the slogan “describing a language in its own terms” – but the slogan does not go into conflict with generativism.

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 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.

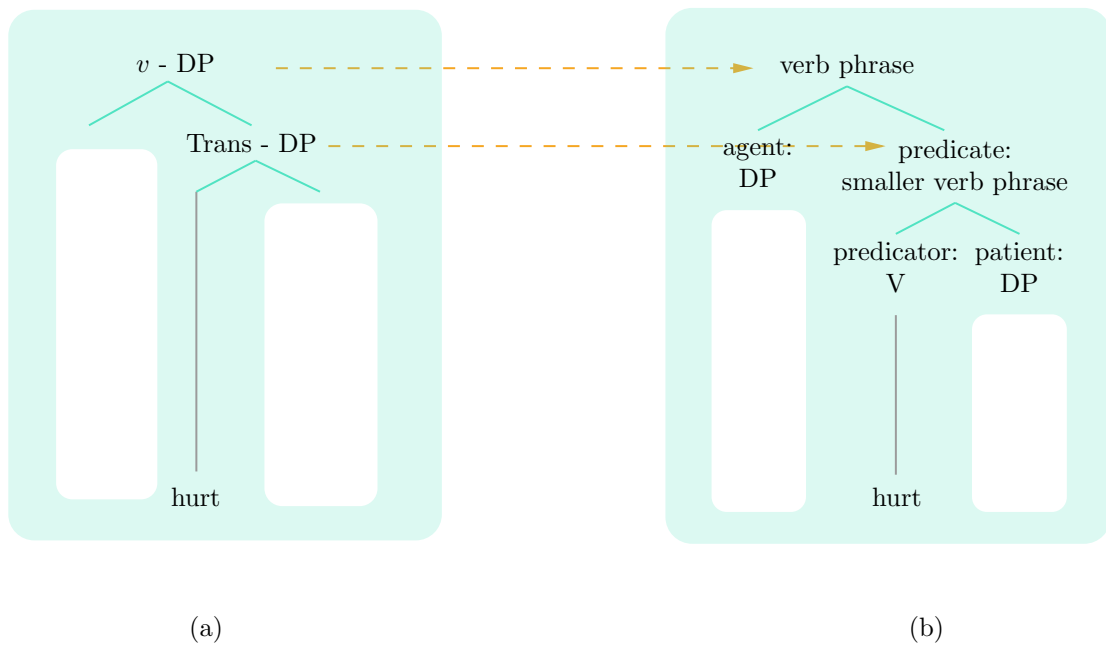


Figure 1: From coarse-grained Minimalist derivational tree to CGEL tree

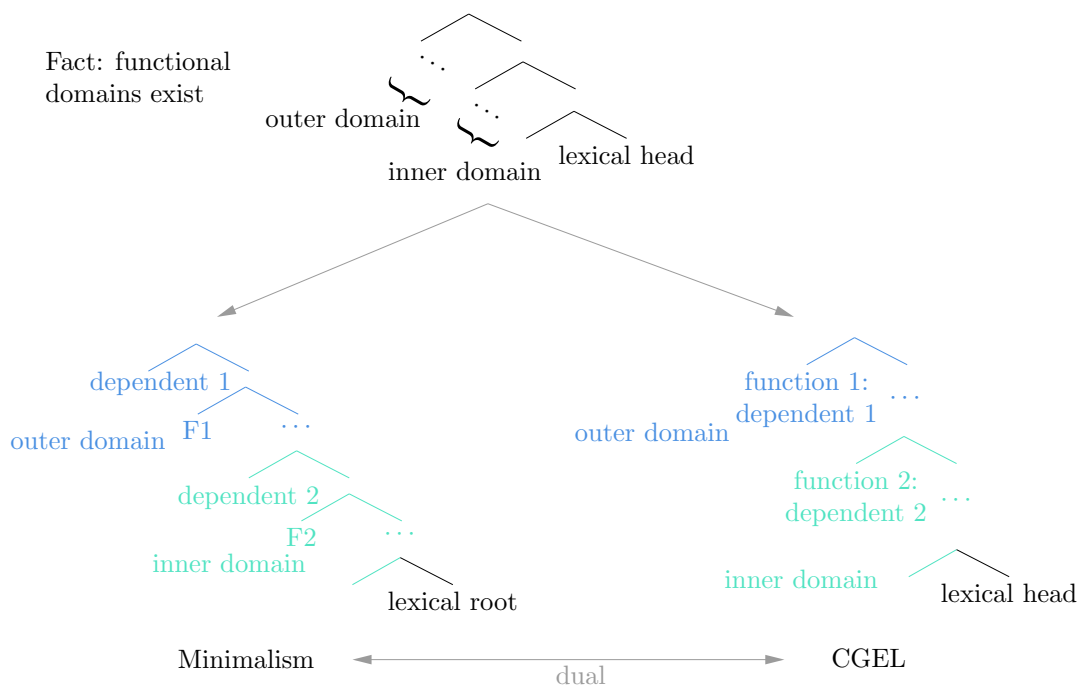


Figure 2: Duality between CGEL and Minimalism

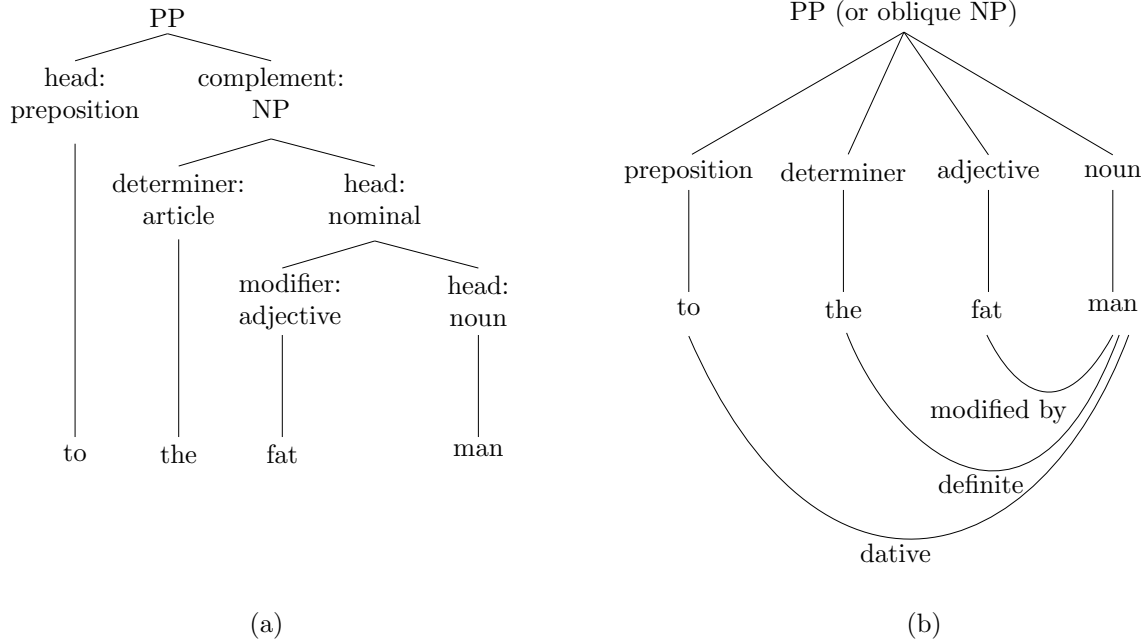


Figure 3: Comparison between the CGEL and BLT analyses of *to the fat man*

2.1 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.

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 term *oblique* is often associated with *oblique cases*. In traditional Latin grammar, cases other than the nominative and the vocative cases are all called oblique cases. In other usages, oblique cases exclude the accusative case. In English the case system has largely collapsed, and the name *oblique* does not have much morphological consequences: an oblique complement is never nominative as we will see, and that is all.

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

English is a *subject-prominent* language. This is to say, in a canonical clause there is a **subject** which is usually filled by an agent-like argument and is somehow “higher” in the clause structure, and therefore is subject to several types of extraction, including relativization and coordination pivot.

In typological terms, this means English is a syntactic nominative-accusative language, because its syntactic obligatory topic (something somehow “higher” in the clause structure, but not the topic in topicalization) is identical to the agent-like argument.¹ In ergative languages the notion of *subject* is more complicated, because in transitive clauses, the two do not coincide. But this is not the case for English.

The subject is an **external** complement, .

3 The verb category

References

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- Robert MW Dixon. *Basic linguistic theory volume 1: Methodology*, volume 1. OUP Oxford, 2009.
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¹In languages like Chinese, though when a semantically obvious agent is present, it is always the syntactic obligatory topic, there are quite common clauses in which the subject is not agent-like at all, like the famous *tai shang zuo zhe zhu xi tuan*. But a deeper analysis will show that this can be attributed to the rich light verb inventory of Chinese, which may be understood as “mini-voice” in more descriptive terms, and therefore does not impose any threat to the nominative-accusative status of Chinese.