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Rethinking symmetry: a note on labelling and the EPP.[1]

I. A puzzle for the EPP

The following sentence stands out as a puzzle for syntactic theory:

(1) * pro è [[una foto del muro] [la causa della rivolta]]
        (pro is a picture of the wall the cause of the riot)

In a pro-drop language like Italian, pro-insertion as an alternative to DP raising should make the sentence grammatical as in the case of passives and unaccusatives satisfying the EPP. The copula, instead, requires raising of either the subject (*una foto del muro*) or the predicate DP (*la causa della rivolta*), yielding a canonical ((2)a) or an inverse ((2)b) copular sentence (in the sense of Moro 1997, 2000):

(2)a   [una foto del muro] è [t [la causa della rivolta]]
        (a picture of the wall is the cause of the riot)
   b   [la causa della rivolta] è [[una foto del muro] t]
        (the cause of the riot is a picture of the wall)

This puzzle may lead to a rethinking of the EPP and the core mechanism of labelling in grammar along the following lines of reasoning.

II. Unlabelled structures

Labels are not given (cf. Chomsky 2006): rather, they are derived computationally, via inspection within the search space of a head. When two maximal projections are Merged (either IM or EM), the resulting {XP, YP} can be either an adjunct structure – where either XP asymmetrically projects turning the other into a specifier – or an unlabelled syntactic object where none projects. If this is the case, such as for copular sentences, it is reasonable to assume

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that the configuration crashes because the search space for any head H that merges with it is ambiguous.

On the other hand, if either XP or YP is targeted by H and then raised (yielding, for example: {YP, {H, {XP, ~~YP~~}}}), the derivation can proceed, because the computational mechanism has overcome the problem of labelling: YP is no longer available for inspection to H - it being a discontinuous constituent - and the label can be properly assigned. This is why pro-insertion does not help in (1).

III. Focus via movement in postcopular environments

Given these premises, the prediction is that there is no necessity to raise either DP to the copula: it is sufficient that either one is raised to *any* head that merges with {XP, YP}, neutralizing the problem given by the absence of a label. This prediction appears to be borne out, once we assume that the process of focalization involves raising to a specialized Foc° head, available in Italian in postverbal positions as suggested by Belletti (1999):

(3)a   pro è [UNA FOTO DEL MURO Foc [t la causa della rivolta]]
         (pro is a picture of the wall the cause of the riot)
   b   pro è [LA CAUSA DELLA RIVOLTA Foc [una foto del muro t]]
         (pro is the cause of the riot a picture of the wall)

In these structures pro-insertion can take place successfully, since the postcopular constituent is not unlabelled any more.

The fact that pro-insertion does not meet the EPP in (1) shows that the EPP phenomena are not due to any special property of preverbal positions but rather they are the consequence of much more general computational mechanisms forcing movement from a symmetrical structure.

References

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