A phase-based approach to Russian free word order

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SUMMARY OF THE THESIS

This thesis provides a syntactic account of the Information Structure (IS) encoding based on the Derivation by Phase theory (Chomsky 2001, 2005a,b) and the cartographic approach to the Syntax-Pragmatics interface (Aboh 2007a, Belletti 2001, 2004, Benincà and Polletto 2004, Rizzi 1997, 2001a,b). It is claimed that IS is encoded directly in narrow syntax. Adopting the feature checking model of Pesetsky and Torrego (2007), it is shown that [Topic] and [Focus] features must be recognized and that they are checked in the usual way, namely by feature matching with the dedicated functional heads Topo and Foco, respectively. Furthermore, it is argued that the point of junction between Syntax and Pragmatics exists at the level of the CP-phase as well as at the level of the vP-phase. In other words, Topo and Foco can project both within the Edge of CP as well as within the Edge of vP.

The present account was developed on the basis of IS encoding in Russian. In this language IS is reflected primarily in the order of sentence constituents. The claims made in this work were also tested on a number of typologically unrelated languages.

The results of the investigation can be summarized as follows. All languages use the vP- and the CP-phase Edges for IS encoding. Cross-linguistic variation stems from the extent to which the Edges are activated as well as from some IS-independent language-specific grammatical properties.

The thesis starts with the description of certain facts about Russian morphosyntax and the presentation of the theoretical background to this work. It is argued that in an SVO sentence in Russian only the verb and the subject are forced to leave their first-merge positions and move into the inflectional domain due to some IS-independent reasons, i.e. triggered by Agree-type features. Internal arguments, generated in the order Indirect Object > Direct Object, do not undergo any obligatory Agree-motivated movement.

Next, the data on IS encoding in Russian is presented. It is shown that there are two ordering rules that operate in Russian: the IS Ordering rule and the Scrambling rule. The IS Ordering rule requires that sentence constituents occur in the order Topic > Discourse Neutral > Focus. The Scrambling rule says that D-linked elements must be fronted to a position in the preverbal area. The latter rule results in optional preposing of the focus exponent in Colloquial Russian, which in Standard Russian occurs clause-finally. The main claim made here is that D-linking that stands behind focus fronting is a phenomenon of the level different from IS.

After considering the existing approaches to the word order freedom in Russian most of which refused to recognize the existence of [Topic]/[Focus] features and Topo and Foco heads, a new analysis is developed along the lines of the cartographic model.

First, a detailed map of the clausal left periphery is drawn which corresponds to the structure in (1).

(1)  \[[\text{ForceP Force}_o [\text{FrameP Frame}_o [\text{InterP Inter}_o [\text{TopP Top}_o [\text{topP top}_o [\text{FocP Foco}_o [\text{topP top}_o [\text{FinP Fin}_o ]]]]]]]]]
is a modified version of the left periphery skeleton proposed by Rizzi (1997). In the above structure the distinction is made between different types of topics, namely frames, strong, and weak topics. Frames are scene-setting expressions. A strong topic (hosted by TopP) is an "aboutness" topic, i.e. it denotes what the sentence is about. Weak topics (occurring in topP) are simply given, i.e. D-linked, non-focal constituents.

Furthermore, the syntax of canonical clause-final focus in Russian is developed. It is argued that focus encoding in Russian is carried out at the Edge of the vP periphery. The main premise of the present approach is that a phase constitutes a construct consisting of the lexical core, the Domain and the Edge. Both vP and CP are assumed to have this structure. With regard to the Edges of the two phases it is shown that the functional heads within them can be replicated and can project simultaneously. Moreover, the CP and the vP Edge heads can interact with each other. This was shown to hold for FocP in Russian. Even though vP and CP are both assumed to possess the Edge, the internal make-up of these Edges is argued to differ. While the CP Edge in Russian has the architecture given in (1), the vP periphery is relatively impoverished and looks like (2). This fact is of no surprise, given that the two phases are semantically different: the CP-phase is propositional, while the vP-phase is predicational or situational.

Apart from missing a considerable part of the Topic field, the vP Edge also lacks heads responsible for clause-typing, namely Forceo and Intero. This is argued to underlie a certain property of Russian wh-words which makes them special in comparison to wh-words in other languages. Crosslinguistically wh-items tend to display the same distribution as focused constituents. In particular, wh-phrases can occur in the same positions as non-wh focused phrases. Russian wh-words do not show this behavior: they cannot occur in the canonical focus position, i.e. clause-finally. Instead, a wh-word must move to the pre-verbal area, either to the middle field or to the CP periphery. The inability of Russian wh-words to stay in the low FocP is claimed to reflect the fact that a wh-word in this position cannot agree with the Intero head present at the clausal Edge but absent at the vP Edge. Adopting the concept of Phase Extension (Den Dikken 2007, Pesetsky 2007) it is proposed that if a wh-word remains in the low FocP it becomes invisible for Intero because V-movement out of vP extends the first phase and what used to be the Edge becomes part of the Domain. The analysis is shown to also account for the lack of long wh-movement in Russian. The syntax of Russian wh-movement proposed in this work is based on works by Cheng and Rooryck (2000), Cable (2007), and Aboh and Pfau (forthcoming).

Finally, the proposed analysis for IS encoding in Russian is extended to other languages. Data from a number of African languages (Bantu, Gur, and Chadic) supporting the existence of the vP periphery are presented. The described empirical facts lead to the following generalized structure of the vP Edge:
The only obligatory part in (3) is FocP. topP can be activated in some languages but be missing in others. The major conclusion is that the vP Edge is available in all languages. It was further assumed that the clausal left periphery is universally complex and corresponds to the structure given in (4).

(4)  \[[\text{ForceP } \text{Force}^{\circ} \[\text{FrameP } \text{Frame}^{\circ} \[\text{InterP } \text{Inter}^{\circ} \[\text{TopP } \text{Top}^{\circ} \[\text{FocP } \text{Foc}^{\circ} (\{\text{topP } \text{top}^{\circ}\}) \[\text{FinP } \text{Fin}^{\circ}\] ]]]]]

The only real parametric choice a language can make in terms of the CP Edge is to have or not to have topPs. The rest of the functional heads are universally available. Crosslinguistic variation in the surface expression of these positions may result from some IS-independent parametric settings.