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A NOTE ON FREE RELATIVE
CLAUSES IN THE THEORY OF
PHASES

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1 The Problem

The central question for the analysis of ‘‘headless’’ relative clauses, also known as free relatives (henceforth FRs),¹ concerns the position of the *wh*-phrase (*what* in (1)), and in particular whether it raises to a clause-internal or clause-external position (see Van Riemsdijk 2006a for a survey and references).

(1) (I eat) [_{FR} what_i you cook t_i].

The crucial property of (1) is its nominal character: it occurs in a position otherwise restricted to a DP argument. This is the way in which *what you cook* in (1) differs from *what you cook* in (2), where the same string is interpreted as an indirect question.

(2) (I wonder) [_Q what_i you cook t_i].

In languages like German, where nominal elements can occur in the middle field but (finite) clausal categories can do so only very

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¹ I set aside here the special case of so-called transparent FRs, which may be an altogether different construction (see Van Riemsdijk 2006a:363–367).

marginally, the asymmetry between FRs and embedded questions comes out clearly.

- (3) Ich werde [_{FR} was ich gefunden habe] niemandem (t)
 I will what I found have nobody
 zeigen.
 show
 ‘I won’t show to anybody what I found.’
- (4) ??Mir hat sie [_Q wer es gesagt hat] ja nicht (t) gesagt.
 me has she who it said has PRT not said
 ‘She didn’t tell me who said it.’

It is, however, not straightforward to attribute the different distribution of FRs (which can occur as subjects, complements, and adjuncts) and embedded interrogatives to a structural difference, since both exhibit CP properties (see Rooryck 1994, Jacobson 1995). Notice, in particular, that both (1) and (2) require *wh*-movement from the object position of *cook* to the internal left periphery.

The purpose of this squib is to propose a solution to the paradoxical nature of FRs (DP-like distribution vs. CP-like form), based on cyclic Transfer of syntactic structure. I will show that the proposal also sheds light on the differences between FRs and embedded interrogatives, and on properties of FRs more generally.

2 Uninterpretable Features and Cyclic Transfer

Chomsky (2000 et seq.) argues that structure is transferred from the derivational workspace to the interface components cyclically, ‘‘by phase.’’ The effect of Transfer to the phonological component (Spell-Out) is that uninterpretable features of lexical items included in the already-built structure are ‘‘stripped off,’’ in order for the remaining syntactic object to conform to the principle of Full Interpretation—that is, to include only symbols that are interpretable at the semantic interface (Chomsky 1995:219, 2008:154).

For vP and CP as phases, this means that the complements of v and C are transferred; hence, their uninterpretable features are removed from the narrow-syntactic computation. Only the ‘‘edge’’ of the phase (phase head plus specifier) remains present in the derivational workspace at the next cycle (Chomsky 2000:108). (grey shading = transferred material)

- (5) [_{CP} XP_i C [_{TP} . . . t_i . . .]]
- (6) [_{vP} XP_i v [_{VP} . . . t_i . . .]]

For reasons discussed in Richards 2007, the system requires uninterpretable features (such as to-be-valued Agree features) of a phase head v/C to be inherited by a subjacent nonphase head (V or T); see also Chomsky 2008:148. As Richards shows, in order for Transfer and feature valuation to cooccur, only interpretable features can remain on a phase head.

3 Categorical Duality as a Consequence of Head Transfer

Let us now consider what consequences the system of cyclic Transfer and feature inheritance has for the paradox described in section 1.

In an embedded interrogative like (2), T inherits uninterpretable Agree features from C (henceforth C_Q), in order for these features to be valued *at* Transfer. C_Q will however retain a feature, call it Q, which “determines [interrogative] clause type,” hence is “plainly interpretable” (Chomsky 1995:289) and selected by the embedding predicate (Chomsky 2000:102). Crucially, inheritance dislocates *uninterpretable* features only, while interpretable ones (if present) remain on the phase head (Richards 2007:569).

The result is that TP is transferred (along with the now-valued Agree features on T, inherited from C_Q), while the edge of CP remains visible at the next cycle.

(7) [_{VP} wonder [_{CP} what_i C_Q [_{TP} you T_ϕ cook t_i]]] (= (2))

Notice that (7) still allows for the selectional requirements of the matrix predicate to be satisfied: C_Q (with interpretable Q) is part of the matrix-vP cycle, hence visible to *wonder* for selection.

What is the difference between this case and a FR? Embedded C_Q in (7) bears a Q-feature signaling interrogative force, selected by the matrix verb and attracting the *wh*-element. By contrast, in a FR like (1), C (henceforth C_{FR}) does not bear any interpretable features and is not selected by the matrix predicate.²

First, consider the fact that FRs, unlike embedded questions, do not have a clause type (or force) but merely ‘replace’ DP/PP arguments. One consequence of this is that German embedded questions, but not FRs, allow internal modal particles (which are sensitive to C-related clause-type features; see Struckmeier, to appear).

(8) Ich habe Peter gefragt, was du (wohl) empfehlen wirst.
I have Peter asked what you _{PRT} recommend will
‘I asked Peter what you will recommend.’

(9) Ich lese was du (*wohl) empfiehlst.
I read what you _{PRT} recommend
‘I read what you recommend.’

Second, notice that C_{FR} is never selected by a matrix predicate, as evidenced by the fact that FRs are CPs occurring in DP positions,

² The only “feature” of C_{FR} is the edge feature, which triggers *wh*-movement (Chomsky 2008:148). Edge features, however, are not bona fide features; in particular, they are not (un)valued and merely encode an element’s ability to be merged. They are clearly not interpretable and can be assumed to delete after triggering movement.

selected as nominals.³ This directly contrasts with C_Q in an embedded question (pace Donati 2006:33), where the matrix predicate selects for the interrogative property of that head.

We conclude that C_{FR} —unlike C_Q —bears no interpretable formal features but only uninterpretable (unvalued) ones—in particular, Agree features. Consequently, *all* formal features of C_{FR} will be inherited by T. Crucially now, assuming the logic of Full Interpretation, a phase head that does not bear any interpretable features after inheritance ought to be removed from the workspace along with its complement upon Transfer. I propose that this is what happens to C_{FR} in a FR.⁴

(10) (I eat) [CP what_i C_{FR} [TP you T_{Φ} cook t_i]] (= (1))

Notice that in (10), the *wh*-phrase is included in CP. But if the label of a phrase is identical to the projecting element in that phrase (Chomsky 1995:244, 2008:145), the CP label is lost upon Transfer of uninterpretable C_{FR} . Therefore, at the next cycle (matrix vP), only the *wh*-phrase remains visible.

(11) [vP eat [DP what_i C_{FR} [TP you T_{Φ} cook t_i]]]

Given that the *wh*-phrase is nominal (cf. Donati 2006:31; see also Caponigro and Pearl 2009), this means in effect that owing to Transfer of the head of CP along with its complement, the remaining edge element is all that is visible at the next phase, yielding the DP-like distribution of FRs. We can now explain the dual nature of FRs: because of the uninterpretability of C_{FR} , a FR is a CP up to the derivational stage where both its head and its complement are transferred (as required by Full Interpretation); after this cycle, the FR effectively becomes a DP (or PP; see footnote 3), since the CP label is lost at this stage.⁵ Phase theory thus allows for a natural and coherent statement of the seemingly paradoxical situation that the *wh*-phrase is *both* internal to the FR (as per Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981) and external to it (as per Bresnan and Grimshaw 1978): it is both, but at different derivational stages.

³ This is a simplification, since a FR can be headed by a PP containing the *wh*-phrase.

(i) (I'll live) [FR [PP in whatever town]_i you live t_i]

This is not a problem for the analysis developed below, which predicts that the FR assumes the category of whatever element is moved to its edge.

⁴ This presupposes a further assumption, which however follows from the system outlined by Chomsky and Richards: (*wh*-)movement coincides with valuation and Transfer (see Chomsky 2008:143).

⁵ A problem for this view is that extraposition—which, in German, targets CP and PP, but not DP—is available for FRs and does not separate the *wh*-phrase from the rest of the FR. One solution to this problem would be that extraposition applies postsyntactically (Truckenbrodt 1995), after the phases are reassembled and the FR is again clausal for purposes of intonational phrasing. Another would be to assume that “extraposed” CPs are in fact base-generated in right-peripheral position and can move leftward (Kayne 1994:chap. 9), which is unproblematic for non-CPs.

By contrast, Transfer of the C head is impossible in embedded interrogatives, since C_Q retains an interpretable Q-feature that is not inherited by T. Consequently, embedded interrogatives—unlike FRs—retain CP-hood across derivational cycles. The asymmetry between these closely related yet different structures thus reduces to an asymmetry of Transfer, resulting from the (un)interpretability of the phasal C heads involved.

Notice that the assumption that Transfer can, in certain circumstances, target more than the complement of the phase head is independently needed for root clauses, which must be spelled out in full, including their edge (cf. Chomsky 2004:108).

4 Empirical Consequences

The standardly observed properties of FRs follow immediately from the account given above (for further discussion and examples of the following properties, see the references in Van Riemsdijk 2006a).

FRs are straightforwardly predicted to have the distribution of DPs: a DP is what remains at the next-higher phase level, that is, after Transfer of unselected C_{FR} (but see also footnote 3). On the present account, no resort to a stipulated null nominal layer above the FR (as in Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981 and Harbert 1983) is necessary. The proposal developed here thus avoids the problems of these former proposals—in particular, their inability to explain why the putative nominal head is obligatorily null, and the equally awkward assumption that CP adjoined to the null-nominal head is an ‘‘obligatory adjunct.’’

Likewise, the present approach straightforwardly predicts matching effects to occur with FRs (see Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981), although a detailed discussion of this phenomenon is beyond the scope of this squib. The *wh*-phrase at the edge of the FR has to match selectional requirements of both matrix and embedded environments: the phrase is ‘‘shared’’ between the two predicates, each imposing separate requirements.⁶ This shared nature of the *wh*-phrase follows directly from the present proposal, since it is assumed to be part of different derivational cycles: it satisfies selectional (categorial/Case) requirements of the embedded predicate at the embedded-vP cycle and those of the matrix predicate after it is turned into a complement of the matrix predicate, following Transfer of its sister [C_{FR} [$TP \dots$]]. No recourse to Groos and Van Riemsdijk’s (1981) parameterized ‘‘COMP-accessibility,’’ Caponigro’s (2002) empty-D licensing, or other stipulative mechanisms is necessary.

For essentially the same reason, FRs thus analyzed do not require a weakening of the θ -Criterion, which requires a unique bidirectional mapping from arguments to thematic roles. Earlier proposals were

⁶ Vogel (2001) points out that certain mismatches are relatively acceptable in German. I set aside this additional complication here.

unable to explain how it is possible for the *wh*-phrase in a FR to be θ -marked twice, first by the embedded predicate and again by the matrix predicate (Van Riemsdijk 2006a:348).⁷ The problem vanishes once the θ -Criterion is construed as an interface condition that applies at the vP phase level (cf. Chomsky 2004:123, 2007:18, Landau 2007:153): the *wh*-element in a FR is θ -marked once per vP.

All of these properties follow rather naturally from the head-Transfer account, which derives and rationalizes the shared nature of the edge of a FR.⁸

As a further consequence, notice that since FRs are DPs after Transfer of C_{FR} , extractions from FRs are similar to extractions from complex noun phrases. This prediction of the account developed here is borne out: extractions from FRs are generally much worse than extractions from embedded questions (*wh*-islands). Consider the following contrasts from English (Rooryck 1994), Italian (Caponigro 2002), and German:

- (12) a. *These are the readers to whom_i I buy [_{FR} whatever books the *New York Times* recommends t_i].
 b. ??These are the readers to whom_i I know [_Q what books the *New York Times* recommends].
- (13) a. *Queste sono le ragazze_i che odio [_{FR} chi ha these are the girls that I.hate who have invitato t_i].
 invited
 'These are the girls such that I hate the person they invited.'
 b. Queste sono le ragazze_i che so [_Q chi ha these are the girls who I.know who have invitato t_i].
 invited
 'These are the girls such that I know which person they invited.'
- (14) a. *Diesen Lesern_i kaufe ich [_{FR} was auch immer these readers buy I whatever *Der Spiegel* t_i empfiehlt].
Der Spiegel recommends
 'As for these readers, I buy whatever *Der Spiegel* recommends to them.'

⁷ Harbert (1983) attempts to circumvent this problem by assuming that FRs are headed by PRO/pro. No such assumption is necessary on the present account.

⁸ Van Riemsdijk (2006b) implements sharing in terms of multidominance ('grafts'). Since it is unclear how this powerful mechanism can be properly constrained (but see De Vries 2009), I take it to be a virtue of the present proposal that it avoids such complications.

- b. ?Diesen Lesern_i weiß ich [_Q was *Der Spiegel* t_i
 these readers know I what *Der Spiegel*
 empfiehlt].
 recommends
 ‘As for these readers, I know what *Der Spiegel* recom-
 mends to them.’

In the (a) examples, extraction presupposes probing into a DP containing a previously transferred CP. By contrast, the (b) examples are relatively acceptable violations of Relativized Minimality. The present proposal thus shares this prediction with NP-over-CP analyses of FRs (e.g., Groos and Van Riemsdijk 1981) while avoiding their inherent problems (such as the FR’s status as an ‘obligatory adjunct’’).

5 A Comparison with Donati’s (2006) Account

The account developed above is somewhat different from that of Donati (2006), who argues that *wh*-movement in FRs can reproject because the moving element is a head, that is, a *wh*-phrase with X^0 status (see Bury 1998; also Iatridou, Anagnostopoulou, and Izvorski 2001). According to Donati, movement of a *wh*-head to the edge of CP then results in a labeling ambiguity: the resulting structure is either a CP (if C projects) or a nominal FR (if the *wh*-phrase projects).

The proposals are similar in that they do not assign different internal structures to FRs and embedded interrogatives. However, Donati’s account relies on the assumption that the *wh*-phrase in FRs is always a head (X^0); only then is ‘reprojection’ assumed to be possible. By contrast, the present proposal allows for the moved *wh*-element in FRs to be an XP. That this prediction is desirable is suggested by *whatever*-type FRs, where the *wh*-phrase includes further (optional) material, including a head noun, as shown in the following German example:⁹

- (15) Ich lese [_{FR} [was (für Bücher auch immer)]_i *Der Spiegel*
 I read what(-ever books) *Der Spiegel*
 empfiehlt t_i.
 recommends
 ‘I read whatever books *Der Spiegel* recommends.’

To maintain Donati’s analysis, one might assume that *für Bücher auch immer* is an adjunct ‘‘on a different plane,’’ so that the *wh*-phrase is still internally simple from the point of view of narrow syntax (Noam Chomsky, pers. comm.). This assumption is problematic, however, in

⁹ De Vries (2004) refers to these FRs as ‘‘head-internal free relatives.’’ See his paper for further discussion of the construction.

light of the fact that the complex *wh*-phrase is transparent for extraction.¹⁰

- (16) [Über dieses Thema]_i liest Hans [_{FR} [was für Bücher _{t_i}
about this topic reads Hans whatever books
auch immer]_j] *Der Spiegel* empfiehlt _{t_j}].

Der Spiegel recommends

‘As for this topic, Hans reads whatever books about it *Der Spiegel* recommends.’

This fact cannot be reconciled with Donati’s account, while it follows directly from the alternative developed in this squib. See Citko 2008:931ff. for further evidence that those FRs with simple and those with complex *wh*-phrases behave syntactically alike, making a unified analysis such as the present one desirable.

Similarly, since Donati’s analysis is restricted to *wh*-heads, it cannot derive PP FRs (see footnote 3). By contrast, on the present account the category of the XP in the edge of the FR is unproblematic: it is the only part of the FR that remains visible at the matrix-*vP* cycle. It seems, then, that the account developed here is empirically superior to Donati’s, in that it does not restrict “reprojection” to moved *X*⁰ categories.¹¹

6 Conclusion

In this squib, I have argued that the dual nature of FRs is a consequence of cyclic Transfer. FRs are clausal in that they are headed by a C head; however, since this C head does not bear any interpretable features, it does not “survive” Transfer, leaving its specifier as the only remaining material at the next cycle (matrix *vP*). As indicated in section 4, this analysis, which draws on independently motivated concepts, is well equipped to derive various crucial properties of FRs (such as matching effects, their compliance with the θ -Criterion, and opaqueness of the interior for extraction). In addition, the account provides a natural explanation for the observed asymmetries between FRs and embedded interrogatives, which were argued to be solely determined by the choice of C (uninterpretable *C*_{FR} in FRs, interpretable *C*_Q in embedded interrogatives).

¹⁰ To be precise, extraction is possible whenever it is permitted by the matrix predicate, a general constraint on extraction from DPs (see, e.g., Müller 1995:43). This shows again that FRs behave exactly like other complement DPs at higher derivational cycles.

¹¹ A further potential advantage is that the proposal made here is compatible with head movement being a PF operation (see Boeckx and Stjepanović 2001, Chomsky 2001:38), while Donati’s analysis requires it to take place in narrow syntax.

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