

On the Grounding of Syntax – and More

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Abstract

Chomskyan generative grammar has long been committed to the ‘double interface’ assumption that ‘language’ is a generative computation serving two interface levels of representation, PF and LF.¹ I explore the consequences of this idea for syntax. What is the grounding, the content, of syntax? There are problems here for the double interface assumption, for Minimalism and for the idea that the human Faculty of Language (FL) is a generative computation. These, I argue, can be resolved by grounding syntax exclusively in semantics, i.e. in conceptual-intentional terms. I argue more generally that FL should be identified as a generative computation describable as ‘the language of thought’ (LOT). While Chomsky’s own recent thinking can be understood as pointing in this direction, the proposition that FL = LOT is inconsistent with the double-interface assumption, which Chomsky continues to regard as conceptually necessary.

As regards the ‘and more’ in my title: the discussion leads to reflections – speculative, but no more so than is generally the case in such enquiry - on conceptual relations among ‘language’, ‘faculty of language’, ‘language of thought’ and ‘language acquisition device’, reflections that are both ontogenetic and phylogenetic.



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¹ See Blevins (2008: 723) on the term ‘Chomskyan generative grammar’. I am using it here to mean grammatical models proposed by Chomsky, up to and including Minimalism. I comment briefly on Distributive Morphology in Note 6 below.