On the meaning of movement

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I consider what might differentiate a representational from a derivational version of the Minimalist Program (MP). In the process I consider possible interpretations of 'movement' within MP.

0 INTRODUCTION

This paper is an investigation into the nature of movement in the Minimalist Program (MP). I take it that MP is a framework that attempts to account for natural language grammars by specifying what syntactic structures and operations are available. Within this framework particular theories can be formulated to account for observed phenomena. The exact form of the framework is to be determined, but it will specify among other things what movement looks like (for example, whether it is copying, or leaves a trace), and whether derivations or representations are primary. For both of these questions, I propose in this paper to ask what if anything are the implications of accepting one answer rather than another.

Formally, a movement is an operation that relates one phrase marker, P_1 say, to another one, P_2, by 'moving' (in some sense, which may in fact be copying or something else) a constituent X from one position, p_1, to another, p_2. Chomsky has always stated that the goal of the generative grammar project, of which MP is the current incarnation, is to describe theoretical structures which correspond to actual structures in the minds of language users.[1] Presuming this is supposed to be true of the notion of movement, three possible interpretations of it suggest themselves. Ordered from strongest to weakest, they are:

(1)   The movement represents an actual real-time transition from a mental structure (in speakers, or hearers, or both[2]) homologous to P_1 to one homologous to P_2.
(2)   It represents some (other unspecified) relation between structural homologues of P_1 and P_2.
(3)   It is a formal device to represent the relation of X to the two points p_1 and p_2 in a homologue of the phrase-marker (P, say) which is the final product of the derivation that it is a part of.

There is of course a fourth possibility, namely that movement corresponds to nothing in the minds of speakers and has no place in a correct theory of syntax; and perhaps others. I shan't pursue them here.

By the way, referring to a mental homologue of some parse-structure doesn't commit us to any view of what this homologue might look like, or in particular to the idea that it exists in its entirety as a mental structure at a single instant of time. It would certainly make sense to refer to such a homologue if it were distributed in the brain, rather than existing in a small locality; so why not allow that it might be distributed in time? Indeed, there is evidence that exact syntactic structure is held in memory only for a very short time; perhaps too short

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[1]   For example, Chomsky (1995), chapter 1: 'A theory of UG is correct if (or to the extent that) it correctly describes the initial state of the language faculty'; 'We assume that the system described by UG is a real component of the mind/brain'.
[2]   Reference to 'speakers' etc is not intended to restrict the discussion to verbal language; I take it to cover 'signers'.