

IDENTIFYING RECURSION: THE *PREFER* TEST

Carlo Cecchetto

SFL (CNRS & Paris VIII) and University of Milan-Bicocca

carlo.cecchetto123@gmail.com

There is a sense in which the issue of recursion in natural languages is trivial. If the operation Merge exists, by definition the output of any application of Merge must be able to become the input of a new application of the same operation, and this by itself grants recursion. This is the notion of recursion that Hauser, Chomsky and Fitch (2002) take to be a crucial and recent innovation in the evolution of language. Given this notion, all natural languages show evidence of recursion. However, a stricter notion of recursion is iterative embedding of a category inside another category *with the same label* (for example, NP recursion or CP recursion). I will call this form of recursion ‘label preserving self-embedding’. It is not obvious that label preserving self-embedding is a language universal (for example, if a given language adopts nominalization of the embedded clause as its strategy of clausal embedding, that language might lack CP-within-CP recursion). It is therefore very useful to have diagnostics to identify label preserving self-embedding cross-linguistically. In this talk, I will propose a simple test, which I will call ‘*prefer*-test’, that allows to do so also in languages that are relatively under-investigated.

Consider the case of relative clause stacking in (3) and the two simplified structural analyses in (3’) and (3’’).

(3) The dress that I bought that I never use (is that one)

(3’) [NP the dress [CP that I bought t_{dress}] [CP that I never use t_{dress}]]

(3’’) [NP₂ [NP₁ dress [CP that I bought t_{dress}]]] [CP that I never use t_{NP1}]]

The structural analysis in (3’’) illustrates a paradigmatic case of label preserving self-embedding since a given set of transformations (let’s call it ‘relativization operation’) is first applied to a category with label N (the noun ‘dress’) and the nominal constituent which results (‘dress that I bought’) becomes the input of a second application of the relativization operation. The final result is a category with same label N (‘dress that I bought that I never use’). The same does not hold for the structural analysis in (3’), as two separate and independent operations of relativization target the noun ‘dress’. Given a sentence like (3), it is difficult to choose between the label preserving self-embedding configuration (3’) and (3’’).

However, suppose that the predicate in the second relative clause is the verb ‘prefer’ as in (4). (4) is used to pick out the dress that I prefer *among the ones that I bought*, namely the structural analysis in (4’’) is forced. Given the analysis in (4’’), the sentence is correctly predicted to be true also in a situation in which the dress that I prefer among the ones that I bought is not the dress that I prefer in absolute terms. On the other hand, the structural analysis in (4’) is excluded because it cannot capture this meaning.

(4) The dress that I bought that I prefer (is that one)

(4’) *[NP dress [CP that I bought t_{dress}] [CP that I prefer t_{dress}]]

(4’’) [NP₂ [NP₁ dress [CP that I bought t_{dress}]]] [CP that I prefer t_{NP1}]]

Therefore, the *prefer*-test can unambiguously identify N-preserving self-embedding. Assuming that all languages lexicalize the concept associate to the verb ‘prefer’, the *prefer*-test can be easily applied cross-linguistically, at least if a description of relative clauses in the given language is available. If time allows, in order to illustrate its usefulness I will apply the *prefer*-test to a relatively under-investigated language, namely LIS (Italian Sign Language).

References

Hauser, M., N. Chomsky & T. Fitch 2002. The Faculty of Language: What Is It, Who Has It, and How Did It Evolve?, *Science* 298, 1569-1579.