

Henk van Riemsdijk (Arezzo):

**Attraction and Repulsion in Grammar:
towards a privative representational system**

Over the past decade or so the notion of ‘third factor’ has played a considerable role in discussions of foundational issues in linguistics. The idea that UG and ambient data are the two factors that together are responsible for the process of language acquisition has become somewhat problematic, not least in view of the radical narrowing down of UG to little more than recursion. At the same time, it was always a bit strange to consider very central principles such as locality and economy part of UG, because, quite obviously, such principles play a crucial role in other fields of science: physics, chemistry, biology. It is therefore more reasonable to consider such principles to be ‘general principles of (physical , *in casu* biological) design’.

What is a bit disturbing is that there has not exactly been an abundance of such principles. Indeed, in linguistics, they have been largely limited to exactly these: locality and economy (where one might even go further and assume that locality is subsumed by economy). In my own work, reaching back to well before the introduction in linguistics of the notion ‘third factor’, I have been much inspired by the idea that attraction and repulsion are important general principles determining a wide variety of phenomena in language structure. And it is easy to see that attraction and repulsion are general principles of design found in physics (magnetism, for example, or immune reactions).

In my talk I will review some of the core instances of processes in grammar that are guided by attraction and repulsion. In phonology, the OCP (obligatory contour principle) is a typical example of repulsion, and so are haplological effects (in the widest sense) in morphology and syntax. See for example Van Riemsdijk, 2008). Attraction can often be interpreted as a way to avoid repulsion. In phonology, both assimilation and dissimilation can be seen as attraction effects. In syntax fusional processes such as restructuring, clause union and the like are typical examples of attraction.

One fundamental principle of syntactic organization that I consider to be absolutely important, but which has not received the attention that it deserves, is the idea that the position of maximal extended projections in complex syntactic objects is determined by attraction and repulsion. More specifically, the idea is that the internal cohesion (attraction) of the nodes that together make up a complex maximal extended projection (Grimshaw, 1991, 2005, Van Riemsdijk, 1990, 1998) is forced by the Categorical Identity Thesis (CIT), an instantiation of attraction. Inversely, the immediate syntactic environment in which maximal extended projections are tolerated are determined by a requirement of categorial non-identity (repulsion). Some important early ideas include Longobardi’s (1980) *VV (cf. also Van Riemsdijk, 1984); Vergnaud’s (2008, orig 1977) Case Theory (*N-NP); Kayne’s GLOW talk (1982); Hoekstra’s Unlike Category Constraint (UCC) (1984). The Unlike Category Constraint, however, suffers from some fundamental inadequacies, see for example Van Riemsdijk’s (1988) critique of the UCC to the effect that P-PP should not be excluded, leading to an alternative proposal, the Unlike Feature Constraint (UFC).

There is, to me at least, a satisfying feel of symmetry to the idea that Maximal Extended Projections are internally characterized by categorial identity and externally by categorial distinctness. An attempt to capture this symmetry was made in Van Riemsdijk (1998), but it failed miserably. In fact, the resulting “principle” (the Law of Categorical Magnetism) was conceptually inelegant, too complex, and contained several disjunctions. In retrospect, the mistake was to use the standard binary features. It completely ignored the suggestion in Van Riemsdijk (1988) to adopt a mono-valued,

privative feature system for the characterization of the categories N,V, A, and P. Ignoring that possibility was probably the most serious mistake I made in my whole career as a linguist.

In my talk, I will discuss what I consider the central insights and present a very programmatic sketch of how one might go about developing a theory of syntactic (and indeed phonological) representation in which attraction and repulsion are organically embedded. An extension of phonological Element Theory will play a crucial role in such a program (cf. Harris, 1994, Harris and Lindsey, 1995, Kaye et al., 1985, Kaye et al., 1990).

References (recommended reading in bold)

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