Anna DI SCIULLO, *Asymmetry in Morphology*

MIT Press, 2005, 234 pages

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REFERENCES

Anna Di Sciullo

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- 1 This is an ambitious and thought-provoking book that proposes a major hypothesis concerning the architecture of the language faculty, namely that asymmetric relations are basic in linguistic computation, and the only ones allowed in morphology (the Asymmetry Hypothesis), considered as an independent module of grammar. The author develops this hypothesis through a set of explicit assumptions, based on the framework of the Minimalist Program (Chomsky 1995), and on her own Asymmetric Theory. From the former, she borrows a derivational model that takes lexical items and processes them to yield linguistic objects understandable at the auditory-articulatory and conceptual-intentional interfaces through an operation labeled Spell-out. From the latter, she assumes the existence of a multiplanar derivational model, where syntax and morphology are two independent components of grammar that work in parallel - even though each domain may interact with the other, a point which we will return to later -, with different requirements concerning the primitives, the specific implementation of generic operations, and the nature of interface representations.
- 2 The book is clearly organized in eight chapters with concluding remarks. The first three chapters introduce the fundamental precepts of Asymmetry Theory, whose basic machinery and main empirical and theoretical consequences are developed in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 1 thus introduces us to the role of asymmetry in grammar, extending the basic insights of (Kayne 1994); chapter 2 formulates the three generic rules of grammar, Shift, Link, and Flip; and chapter 3 introduces the basic

structure of morphological objects, M-shells, which is, in my opinion, the most original and important contribution of Di Sciullo's book to an explanatory model of the morphological component.

- 3 This becomes more apparent when considering the book as a whole, for chapters 4, 5, and 6 are devoted to an application of the concept of M-shell to argument, aspect, and operator-variable features respectively. If we take chapter 3 into account, this amounts to half the book. Moreover, it is in these chapters that sophisticated analyses are developed for a wide range of empirical problems, emphasizing the case for the autonomy of morphology with respect to syntax. For example, she offers illuminating insights on apparent idiosyncratic patterns of deverbal derivation (chapter 4), aspectual verbal prefixes in Italian, and their role in Aktionsart (chapter 5), or on the internal structure of demonstratives and *wh*- words (chapter 6). Leaving aside technicalities, this section proposes thoughtful morphological reflections, as well as a genuine foretaste of the possible contribution of articulated theory of the morphology component to a better understanding of the computational system of the language faculty.
- 4 The two last chapters take the asymmetry hypothesis one step further, by considering its role at the interfaces (chapter 7), and its persistence across variation (chapter 8). Unfortunately, Di Sciullo is much too succinct concerning the articulation of interface connections. Nothing is said about morphology and phonology interactions, nor about the role of the lexicon in the overall picture. For instance, she borrows Chomsky's notion of lexical array as input to both morphology and syntax, even though its elements are of morphological nature — roots and affixes —, and hence unsuitable for syntactic computation, which requires prior application of word formation. More precisely, she predicts both components to feed each other, but she can only mention one case where syntax feeds morphology: syntactic words (page 182 n. 4) like *prêt-à-porter*, which are formed in syntax and transferred to morphology, where an undefined reanalysis operation converts the syntactic structure into a M-shell. Yet, the exact explanation of the complex set of morphology-syntax interactions would have merited a longer note, and the reader remains in the dark as to the precise limits of Di Sciullo's system, for instance, concerning recursive morphology ↔ syntax ↔ morphology... interactions (would verbal discontinuous idioms be one such case?).
- 5 The lack of a developed argument concerning the interfaces is also applicable to the main hypothesis of the book: the source of the intrinsic asymmetric nature of morphology, which is discussed in a highly speculative fashion in the last five pages of the book. On the one hand, it is argued to derive from a legibility condition at the interfaces, for it facilitates processing —a claim for which no empirical support is provided. Yet, this cannot be the whole story, for its statement as a bare output condition, to use Chomsky's term, would allow symmetry during the derivation, as long as it disappears before spell-out, just as happens with syntax. As a result, the author is forced to introduce a second source, sloppy as well: global economy. Since derivation in parallel is claimed to be the best solution on design grounds, the connection between the planes of derivations should be facilitated, and asymmetric relations turn out to be the best solution. In other words, she introduces an internal legibility condition between the components of the computational system. However, the theoretical problem remains unchallenged: if asymmetry is a legibility condition at the interfaces, why should it be imposed on morphology before the transfer to other components? Her

only suggestion is to resort to the miraculous all-purpose Earliness Principle by David Pesetsky, supposed to ensure that asymmetry be satisfied as soon as possible in the derivation. In other words, Di Sciullo resorts to three different mechanisms to ensure the very same goal: calling this an example of optimal model design would seem to be dubious.

- 6 To sum up, this is a very thought-provoking and, in many senses, a groundbreaking proposal for a principled and autonomous model of morphology, with consequences worth studying for the overall design of the language faculty, although a more detailed articulation of the model at the interfaces is lacking, particularly concerning the lexicon — which, incidentally, does not even merit an entry in the index. Thus, on the whole, this is a book that merits reflective reading by morphologists, who will derive inspiration, high-level linguistic analyses, and a real taste of what a minimalist theory of morphology should look like from it.

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