Pro-drop and emergent parameter hierarchies

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This talk considers the status of pro-drop (null-argument) phenomena in the context of an approach to parametric variation in which parameters are not assumed to be hard-wired as part of Universal Grammar. In terms of the kind of emergentist approach to parameters being pursued by the "Rethinking Comparative Syntax" (RecoS) group, the interaction of Chomsky (2005)'s three factors, as sketched in (1), produces adult grammars that can be characterised and compared with one another in parametric terms. Additionally, the assumption is that the interaction of the factors in (1) determines the structure of the acquirer's learning path, thereby fulfilling the acquisition-"steering" role of classic GB parameters, with the paths for different languages corresponding to different "stopping points" along emergent parametric hierarchies (the combination of which can be employed by linguists to probe the structure of the overall parametric space and, thus, the nature of and limits on syntactic variation).

(1)   a.   **Factor 1**: an underspecified Universal Grammar (UG), crucially lacking the rich parametric specification assumed during the pre-minimalist era;

        b.   **Factor 2**: key aspects of the Primary Linguistic Data (PLD), notably, movement, doubling/agreement, ellipsis, and multi-functionality – i.e. departures from one-to-one form-meaning mappings; and

        c.   **Factor 3**: interacting acquisition biases, notably, Feature Economy/FE and Input Generalization/IG, which, in tandem, drive the acquirer to make maximal use of minimal means

Here I will illustrate this approach on the basis of a credible parametric hierarchy for [negation], before turning, via a consideration of a comparable hierarchy for [number], to the question of what a null-argument hierarchy might look like (see Roberts & Holmberg 2010 for one proposal), and how this squares with our current understanding of null-argument phenomena.

References

Chomsky, N. (2005). Three factors in language design. *Linguistic Inquiry* 36(1): 1-22.

Roberts, I. & A. Holmberg (2010). Introduction. In: T. Biberauer, A. Holmberg, I. Roberts & M. Sheehan. *Parametric Variation. Null subjects and minimalist theory*. Cambridge: CUP, 1-57.