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On Feature Interpretability and Inheritance

Feature inheritance (FI henceforth) has been at the forefront of current research in minimalist syntax since Chomsky (2008). The aim of this paper is to evaluate in detail the theoretical motivations given for FI, and the workings and distribution of FI. I will demonstrate that the standard motivations for FI in the literature are not tenable. If, as Richards (2007) argues, the need for FI follows from the requirement that Value and Transfer happen together, the theory predicts a root/non-root contrast in the realm of FI: Value and Transfer of C's features automatically go together if CP is itself the root, so FI should not be necessary in root-CPs. This dichotomy between root and non-root clauses with respect to FI is spurious, however. Moreover, the underlying idea that Value and Transfer have to happen together is itself poorly motivated. If what makes uninterpretable features different from interpretable ones is the fact that they are not inherently valued (Chomsky 2001), then valued uninterpretable features are indistinguishable from interpretable features. But if indeed they are indistinguishable from interpretable features once valued, there should be no formal problem with them staying on indefinitely. With uninterpretable defined as lack of an inherent value, therefore, there should be no problem if Value and Transfer did not happen together. Since the rationale for FI given in the literature is based on the requirement that Value and Transfer happen at the same time, and since this requirement falls through, FI cannot be derived in this way. One can instead enforce FI as the only way to meet a constraint on the satisfaction of the EPP: the EPP property of a phase head must be satisfied within the minimal structure created by Merge of the phase head with its complement. As long as 'EPP' is necessary and is defined as a Spec-Head relation, syntax requires FI. But 'EPP' might not be quite as ineliminable as it has been made out to be, nor does EPP satisfaction necessarily implicate the Spec-Head relation. The question of whether 'EPP' is indeed a fact of life, and the question of whether the predicates '(un)interpretable' and '(un)valued' both need to be recognised will be critically reviewed in the discussion.