

## Variation and creativity with radically afeatural Roots

In this presentation I give arguments for the radically afeatural Root hypothesis (Harley 2014), among them that it provides a coherent model for variation in the meanings of words and idioms, as well as for humorous word coinage. The approach is situated in Minimalist (Chomsky 2013) Distributed Morphology (Embick 2015), adopting a strict Y-model. There is no generative “lexicon” before syntax – “words”, like all hierarchical structure, are first of all the result of Merge (and other hypothesized operations). Roots lack categorial, phonological, or semantic features in the pre-syntactic Formative list, and are distinguished only by a unique (numerical?) index that links them to corresponding entries in the PF Vocabulary and LF Encyclopedia lists.

There is plentiful evidence that the listed pronunciation or interpretation of Root morphemes depends on their local morphosyntactic context. On the PF side, grammatically conditioned suppletion is observed with Roots (1a-b); note that default Root exponents may reappear in a different morphosyntactic context (1c). Therefore, storing irregular, syntactic-context dependent exponents in a pre-syntactic lexicon unnecessarily recapitulates syntax.

- (1) a. *go – went/\*goed* = [ $\sqrt{231}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  /wen/ / [[ $\_\_$  v] T<sub>[+past]</sub>]  
 b. *steal – thief/\*stealer* = [ $\sqrt{348}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  /thief/ / [[ $\_\_$  v] n<sub>-er</sub>]  
 c. *thunder stealer/\*thief* = [ $\sqrt{348}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  /steal/ / [ $\_\_$  v]

In parallel at LF, the truth-conditional interpretation of Roots depends on their morphosyntactic context, as listed in the Encyclopedia. This is evidenced by ‘cranberry’ morphemes (2a); indeed, as Harley (2014) observes, such morphemes need not be bound, appearing in compounds (2b) and coordinate phrases (2c).

- (2) a. *reckless – \*reck/\*reckful* = [ $\sqrt{497}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  ‘caution’ / [ $\_\_$  adj<sub>-less</sub>]  
 b. *chit-chat – \*chit* = [ $\sqrt{559}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  ‘trivial’ / [[ $\_\_$ ][ $\sqrt{\text{CHAT}}$ ]]  
 c. *kit and caboodle – \*caboodle* = [ $\sqrt{238}$ ]  $\Leftrightarrow$  ‘collection’ / [[ $\sqrt{\text{KIT}}$ ][Co<sup>0</sup>[ $\_\_$ ]]]

In phrasal (3a,c) and compound (3b,d) idioms, Roots have special listed interpretations in a morphosyntactically local context (Marantz 1997). In some idioms, both Roots receive a special interpretation in each other’s context (3a-b); in others, only one Root does (3c-d).

- (3) a. *kick* (‘lose’) *the bucket* (‘life’)                      b. *wall* (‘shy’) *flower* (‘person’)  
 c. *take* (‘climb’) *the stairs* (‘stairs’)                      d. *bucket* (‘life’) *list* (‘list’)

However, not everything traditionally called an idiom is technically an idiom in the sense of contextually interpreted Roots. For example, expressions such as *pushing up daisies* or *taking a dirt nap* do not require special interpretations of any Roots. At LF all the Roots are interpreted ‘literally’, i.e. by default, and the understood meaning of ‘dead’ is obtained via pragmatics.

Because numerous examples similar to (1-3) can be adduced in English and cross-linguistically, we are empirically forced to admit at last some kind of mechanism for context-dependent allomorphy and allosemy of Roots (here, it is late insertion of listed Vocabulary and Encyclopedia entries). Pre-syntactic lexical storage of PF, LF, and categorial features of Roots thus constitutes an additional, unforced mechanism, which by parsimony should be eliminated in favor of late insertion for all Roots (Marantz 1996) according to the Subset Principle (Halle 1997). The quantitative question of why many (or most?) Roots do not seem to have special

context-dependent pronunciations or interpretations can plausibly be attributed to more general principles of acquisition (e.g., Yang 2016).

Accepting the radically afeatural Root hypothesis furthermore allows an appealing analysis of linguistic variation and creativity, in contrast to a pre-syntactic lexical black box. The proposal explains how native speakers can be “wrong” about the meanings of words and idioms (e.g., Pinker 2014). For example, *disinterested* can mean ‘not invested’ if an individual has listed in her Encyclopedia a special interpretation for  $\sqrt{\text{INTEREST}}$  in the context of *dis-*; if not, the Root will have the default interpretation, yielding ‘not interested’. For *beg the question*, both  $\sqrt{\text{BEG}}$  and  $\sqrt{\text{QUESTION}}$  can have a special contextual interpretation listed in their respective Encyclopedia entries (‘assume the conclusion’, like *kick the bucket*), or  $\sqrt{\text{BEG}}$  can have a special interpretation while  $\sqrt{\text{QUESTION}}$  gets the default (‘raise the question’, like *take the stairs*). Of course, an individual can always update her Encyclopedia, and moreover she can freely merge Roots with grammatical terminals in novel ways, thereby coining new words or idioms. This can be humorous when a recognizable Root is unexpectedly not listed with the new syntactic context. For example, on “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” characters backform a verb from *cathartic* (e.g., “You catharted hard!”, i.e., [ $\sqrt{\text{CATHAR}} v$ ]) and prohibit “any chits and/or chats” (i.e., [ $\sqrt{\text{CHIT}} n$ ]). Humor can also be generated by taking the default Root interpretation or exponent when a special one is available; for example, a cartoon shows a man running from a building carrying a small flight of stairs with the caption *In case of fire, take stairs*, and the website Funny or Die has a feature called *Goodest Tweets This Week*. Thus, novel or comedic “word” meanings, like syntactic creativity generally, are possible because afeatural Roots are interpreted and expounded in the context of hierarchical structures created by Merge (Berwick & Chomsky 2016).

## Selected References

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