

On the Definition of X^0 and XP

A Critical Review by Benjamin Keil

0 Introduction

Andrew Carnie's article, "On the Definition of X^0 and XP" (*Syntax*, August 2000) makes a strong claim; he claims that X^0 and XP have no status in formal syntax. He claims that phrase markers exhibit behaviors traditionally assigned to "heads" and "phrases" purely because of other, independently needed mechanisms, like Case and θ marking and inflectional morphology. In contrast, earlier views of "head" and "phrase" have declared them either to be syntactic primitives, or, perhaps, structurally derived.

Carnie's paper is devoted to the exposition of this claim, mainly through examples of Modern Irish, where there seem to be a significant number of phrasal mismatch (i.e., heads behaving like phrases and visa-versa). While the evidence for his claim is strong, it leaves him faced with another question, one which he is barely able to answer: if "head" and "phrase" have no real status in grammar, why, then, do the vast majority of phrase markers behave purely like a traditional head or phrase? This failure, although disappointing, can be seen as the result of biting off more than one can chew. Carnie was, after, advocating the demotion of some of the longest standing primitives in syntax to a non-structurally derived notion.

1 The Evidence

Carnie makes an intelligent move by starting his exposition with an appeal to bare phrase structure. By putting himself in the minimalist framework, he really shifts the

burden of proof away from himself and to those who would want to maintain a definition of phrase and head. Specifically, what Carnie does is show that—in BPS—there is no real difference between a complex head and a phrase. Chomsky stipulates that complex heads (the result of head-to-head movement) are a form of adjunction and that adjunction to a terminal node results in a branching terminal node, but Carnie finds such an explanation highly disappointing, and appeals to minimalism to remove Chomsky’s stipulation. The resulting system—one in which the difference between a complex head and a phrase is completely obscured—is exactly what Carnie is advocating because there are items that are basically “headlike,” but which possess phrasal qualities. Object and subject clitics, for example, often join to verbal heads (presuming that other verbal affixes are joined heads) but are also θ -marked and can skip head positions as they move. If these heads are acting as phrases, Carnie argues, then we should also find phrases acting as heads.

The bulk of the paper is a discussion of phrases with headlike behavior. Carnie draws on several aspects of Modern Irish to show that non-verbal predicates without definiteness and reference undergo head-to-head movement. The discussion of this leads the reader to be fairly comfortable with his analysis, and he uses his very strong argument from Irish non-verbal predicates to show how his analysis can explain clitic placement in Tagalog, construct state nominals in Irish, the *ezafe* construction in Persian, and phrasal verbs in English.

2 The New Phrasality

Having destroyed the previous theory of phrasality, Carnie is obliged to formulate a new one. He uses this chance to reiterate his stance that X^0 and XP have no status at all in the grammar, and that referring to things as X^0 -like and XP-like is merely a matter of

convenience, capturing frequently occurring patterns. He makes another very nice decision with the creation of two new terms, “W-principle” and “P-principle.” Just as going from “deep” and “surface” structures to “D-“ and “S-“ structures allowed us to think more freely about levels in the syntax, I hope that “W-“ and “P-“ principles will allow us to think more freely about types of phrase markers. W-principles are those that trigger X⁰-like behaviors, while P-principles trigger XP-like behaviors. According to Carnie, any phrase marker, then, can behave like a traditional phrase or head depending on what kind of principle is stirring it to action.

3 The Problem

The problem, both with Carnie analysis and with the paper itself lies in what Carnie calls the “Alignment Problem.” Most of the time, phrase-markers only exhibit W-behaviors (behaviors triggered by W-principles) or only exhibit P-behaviors. If phrase and head have no actual status in grammar, then this should not obviously be the case. Carnie blames this on a “coincidental conspiracy” of constraints in the syntax. This is a promising beginning to a solution to the alignment problem, but Carnie is unable to follow through on what it might mean. He suggests that perhaps phrase markers which are unambiguously X⁰-like or XP-like have “all of their features targeted in the same configuration,” but he gives only a weak idea of what relevant features might be and absolutely no indication of what might be entailed under the notion of “configuration.” Despite of his inability to formulate a solution to the problems he faces in his analysis, he maintains that the evidence provided by his cases of phrasal ambiguity are the real results of this coincidental conspiracy breaking down.

4 Conclusions

Andrew Carnie's paper is an exciting development in syntax. The more definitions we can eliminate from the theory, the more elegant and minimal it becomes. Because of his strong and elegant argument that many phrase-markers do exhibit ambiguous behavior, Carnie's claim that X^0 and XP have no status in the grammar at all is not only a very powerful claim, but also a very realistic claim. The fact that his paper leaves questions open regarding how exactly we account for the appearance of a real X^0 or XP does not weaken his argument for their lack of status. Rather, it merely issues the challenge for other scholars to beat him to the solution to the alignment problem.