Syntactic cartography and the syntacticisation of scope-discourse semantics

Luigi Rizzi
University of Siena, Italy, University of Geneva, Switzerland

The cartography of syntactic structures is the attempt to draw maps as precise and complete as possible of syntactic configurations. Cartographic studies over more than a decade have brought to light the complexity of the structure of sentences and phrases, but also the simplicity of the underlying generative mechanisms: complex representations arise from the recursive application of a very elementary combinatorial procedure ("Merge" in Minimalist terminology: Chomsky 1995) operating on the substantive lexicon (nouns, verbs, adjectives,…) and on a very rich functional lexicon (see Cinque & Rizzi 2010, Shlonsky 2010 for recent assessments of the cartographic projects).

While cartographic representations may be a little remote from the philosopher's preoccupations, I believe the interface between syntax and interpretation is not. So, in this paper I will concentrate on the role that cartographic representations have in the expression of semantic properties and in the organization of the information packaging (Vallduvi 1995) of the sentence. The interpretation of natural language expressions revolves around two broad kinds of interpretive properties:

1. Properties of argumental semantics: who does what to whom in the event referred to by a sentence, what thematic roles are expressed, etc.
2. Properties of scope-discourse semantics: the scope of operators and the expression of discourse related properties linked to the informational organization of the sentence, such as topicality and focus.

There is little doubt that properties of argumental semantics are expressed through basic morpho-syntactic means. Certain lexical elements, primarily verbs, assign thematic roles to their immediate dependents. For instance, a verb like *hit* assigns the role of agent to its specifier and the role of patient to its complement, and the basic argument structure of *John **hit** Bill* is thus fixed.

More controversial is the syntactic expression of scope-discourse semantic properties. A view congenial to the cartographic studies is that such properties as topicality, (left-peripheral) focus and the scope of operators is expressed by an equally transparent syntactic mechanism: there is a set of dedicated elements in the functional lexicon which assign scope-discourse properties to their immediate dependents (specifiers and complements). For instance, a Top(ic) head comes with the interpretive routine "interpret my specifier as the Topic and my complement as the Comment", so that a configuration like *Your book **Top**, I will read tomorrow* ___ is directly interpreted as a Topic – Comment articulation ; similarly for the Focus – Presupposition articulation, for the scope position of an interrogative operator and its scope domain, etc. This view has been characterized as the attempt to "syntacticise" as much as possible aspects of scope-discourse semantics, in that fundamental scope-discourse interpretive properties are traced back to basic syntactic configuration in a transparent and straightforward manner.