

Looking for foundations of functional sequences

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The cartographic approach to syntax claims sequences of functional projections play a very important role in syntax, they provide space for attachment of various elements like adjectives and adverbs and determine the kind of movements involving these elements are allowed. Functional sequences are also argued to be at the basis of the observed universal adjective ordering (cf. Hetzron 1978, Sproat and Shih 1991, Cinque 1994, Scott 2002 etc.). Concretely, Scott (2002) presents a universal hierarchy of functional projections inside the DP; the part that is responsible for hosting specific adjectives is reproduced here: ... SUBJECTIVE COMMENT > EVIDENTIAL > SIZE > LENGTH > HEIGHT > SPEED > DEPTH > WIDTH > WEIGHT > TEMPERATURE > WETNESS > AGE > SHAPE > COLOR > NATIONALITY/ORIGIN > MATERIAL ...

Cinque and Rizzi (2008) discuss possible origins of the many hierarchies of functional projections and give general cognition as one of the possible answers to the question. If cognition and its restrictions are behind the hierarchy, then the order of projections hosting adjectives should be reflected in various non-linguistic cognitive processes.

Focusing on the hierarchy of adjectives inside the noun phrase, we explore the basis of the order of the adjectives for size, color, and shape. These three classes of adjectives universally come in the order SIZE > SHAPE > COLOR (cf. Scott 2002 among others). Assuming that syntactic structure is built and acquired bottom-up (Radford 1996 etc.), we predict there will be some sort of bias for the properties expressed on the lower functional projections (as they should also appear earlier in acquisition). For example, we expect that when defining an object, the speakers will choose color and shape over size as the most prominent property. We prepared several experiments to test this hypothesis.