The Romance Inter-Views: Modularity

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The Romance Inter-Views

The Romance Inter-Views are short, multiple Q&A pairs that address key issues, definitions and ideas regarding Romance linguistics or general linguistics from a Romance viewpoint. Prominent exponents of different approaches to the study of
Romance linguistics are asked to answer some general questions. The answers are then assembled so that readers can get a comparative picture of what’s going on in the field.

This is the third Inter-view. The first Inter-view, on Syntax, can be found here. The second Inter-view, on Cartography, can be found here.

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1. The view that syntax and phonology are separate modules (or at least separate and independent components of grammar) is undisputed. What do you think about the other components, like phonetics, morphology, semantics, pragmatics? Are they also separate modules? Do you have evidence from Romance data that supports this view?

**Chabot:** In Romansh (Kamprath 1987: 62, 216ff.), both /j/ and /w/ harden to velar stops in certain morphophonemic contexts, though there is nothing velar in /j/ that could explain why it hardens to [k]. A striking case is Campidanese Sardinian (Chabot, to appear). Several synchronic processes cause gemination of voiceless obstruents, a clear fortition. In those same contexts, voiced stops spirantize. The voiceless series undergoes a clear case of fortition, and while spirantization is phonetically like lenition, supposing that the two alternations are different is a serious loss of generalization given their identical conditioning contexts. Apparent counterexamples to the modular hypothesis in morphophonological interactions present opportunities for novel discoveries (c.f. Newell & Ulsfbjorninn 2021).

**Manzini:** Syntax and interpretation are two different modules. At Transfer, an Externalization (EXT) procedure is responsible for sending phases to PHON – and similarly, an Interpretation (INT) procedure is responsible for sending them to SEM. The modularity of the system is best served by not enforcing Uniformity (i.e. same meaning mapped to same syntactic form). As for morphology, I follow the view of Manzini & Savoia (2005ff.) that postulating a buffer with the sole purpose of readjusting syntax for the use of phonology is hardly explanatory. It is therefore best to abandon it in favor of direct Transfer from syntax to phonology.

**Nevins:** In Arregi & Nevins (2012), we argue that morphology is a distinct module of grammar, separate from syntax. This is based on the observation that microvariation in PF-phenomena among related varieties occurs at later derivational stages than syntactic ones. For example, differences in Spanish mesoclisis and doubling, as well as conditions influencing mesoclisis, are best explained by morphotactic constraints and repairs, such as the Generalized Reduplication model (Harris & Halle, 2005). As we state in Arregi & Nevins (2018: 674): “The temptation to do everything within one module and avoid the apparent ‘redundancy’ of having two similar but distinct modules is a blunt application of Occam’s razor. While one could in fact type an entire novel using only a smartphone (and thus throw away a redundant laptop), arguably there are other tools at hand that remain better-suited for certain labors.”

**Newell:** Strict modularity across-the-board must be the default hypothesis as it easily meets the scientific requirement of falsifiability. Questions around whether morphology and syntax are the same module has led to much recent work on post-
syntactic operations such as lowering (e.g., spanning, Svenonius 2016, generalized head movement, Arregi & Pietraszko 2021), morphology-as-syntax (Collins & Kayne 2020). As to phonology and phonetics, there is good evidence for strict separation between the two (as in Substance Free Phonology, Chabot 2022). One example of this separation from Romance (and other) languages is the behaviour of rhotics, which are often sonorants phonologically but obstruents phonetically.

**Roberts:** I don’t really have anything to say about phonetics or pragmatics, and I would take a fairly standard view of semantics, namely that the C-I interface is input to a mapping which converts a syntactic object into an object that can be evaluated for truth (with all that that does and doesn’t entail). Morphology, however, is a different matter. I’m sympathetic to DM, but more so to the Kayne/Collins view that nearly all morphological phenomena are ultimately syntactic. In Romance, I think Andrea Calabrese’s work on the Latin and Italian verb (and some joint work we never quite finished on the French verb) supports this position.

**Ulfsbjorninn:** Romance provides a diverse data set on Phonologically Conditioned Allomorphy, Determiners/Preposition+Determiner ‘complexes’. Received wisdom is that these require (limited) visibility between syntax-phonology at spell out ensuring the correct insertion of allomorphs e.g. Priority (Bonet et al. 2007), and/or specific post-syntactic, morphology-specific adjustment conditions/rules or operations. Conversely, using Strict CV, we can handle this phonologically, in a fully decompositional, modular manner without any allomorphy (Scheer 2016): Italian (Faust et al. 2018), Haitian (Lahrouchi & Ulfsbjorninn 2024), Galician (Ulfsbjorninn 2020), Llanito (Gibraltar) (Ulfsbjorninn 2022), Ligurian (Balsemin & Pinzin 2024). The more minoritized Romance varieties we study, the more we will understand.

2. What do you think is the role of prosody in syntactic and semantic disambiguation, and how do you envisage the syntax-semantics/prosody interaction?

**Chabot:** A long-standing assumption holds that syntax is phonology-free (Pullum & Zwicky 1986). There is an asymmetry here because it seems the opposite is not true: pitch is exploited as a cue in semantic and syntactic disambiguation and thus it seems difficult to maintain a modular syntax-free phonology. Interestingly, pitch is typically viewed as a suprasegmental phenomenon, represented “above” segmental feature-bundles. We don’t seem to have any cases of FocP being realized as, say, nasality in vowels. The range of ways in which phonology-like phenomena and syntactic and semantic disambiguation interact is severely restrained: it is not true that “anything goes”.

**Manzini:** At the syntax/phonology interface, I understand the question as referring to prosodic phonology – in essence another buffer like morphology (Q1) re-encoding chunks of syntax in terms of primitives readable by phonology. This is hardly explanatory and is again best abandoned in favour of direct Transfer from syntax to phonology. As part of the latter, enrichments may take place. For instance, Scheer and colleagues propose the insertion of extra syllabic (CV) space at phase boundaries. Of course, these enrichments serve to ‘disambiguate’ syntactic structure, precisely by marking phasal chunks.
Prosody is highly important for disambiguation. Consider Marina Nespor’s example *La vecchia legge la regola*, ambiguous between *legge* (V, meaning “reads”) and *regola* (N, “rule”), “The old lady reads the rule”; or *legge* (N, “rule”) and *regola* (V, “regulates”), “The old law regulates it”. This kind of disambiguation is governed by well-formedness considerations of phrasing, including preferences for balanced phrases, and Janet Fodor showed that these considerations play a role even in silent prosody – when reading to ourselves without speaking. Since disambiguation occurs with silent prosody, it must be part of production and integrated into derivational models as post-syntactic scaffolding at PF, based on the type and number of terminals in the tree, with subsequent adjustment in phonology once specific vocabulary items are introduced.

I am of the opinion that the prosody-semantics link is found in the syntax. Clausal prosodic contours relay meanings associated with e.g., clause type, and are therefore introduced late (high) in the derivation. That these morphemes are inserted late and have scope over the clause makes them phonologically well placed to spread over the entire domain of their complement. That syntactically high intonational morphemes have survived cross-linguistically is interesting, and I think might be related to their position which entails that the timing of their insertion is such that they can emerge without being interfered with by later phono-syntactic cycles.

I’ve never worked in this and don’t have a very strong view. The work that relates syntactic phases to prosodic domains in phonology looks really interesting though.

Determiner allomorphy in Galician has invoked prosodic constituents (determining attachment/domains), but this is not necessary in my Strict CV account, based on simple positional factors (Ulfsbjorninn 2020). Kastner (2024) has recently challenged this, but the critique mainly lies in another area, the object clitic. It remains to be seen if Strict CV can insightfully handle this without appealing to prosody. Similarly, Kaplan & Rubin (2022) require the Prosodic hierarchy for the allomorphy of Bolognese clitics, but Lampitelli et al. (2024) show an alternative analysis, which does not invoke the prosodic hierarchy (*inter alia*) and yet is simpler and modular.

Where do you think linearization takes place? Do you have evidence from Romance?

The answer here requires explicitness concerning how phonology and syntax interact (i.e., Direct reference, as in Kaisse 1985, or Prosodic Hierarchies as in for example Nespor & Vogel 1986 or Selkirk 1984). Whether prosodic domains are read directly off syntactic information or if they are non-isomorphic with them (and thus domain specific), phonological theories typically take linearization for granted: the phonological component works over something which has already been linearized. It seems to me that both the direct reference approach and the indirect prosodic hierarchy approach assume that some linearization has already taken place, it must happen at some point prior to phonological operations.

Linearization must be part of EXT for various reasons, one of which is that alternative (Kaynian and cartographic) grammars are too complex. I have recently studied Italian adjectives (As). While in the A1-N-A2 configuration A1 and A2 are ordered, postnominal As are not ordered wrt one another. I suggest that
the A1 position at the nP phase edge is restricted to the gradable class of adjectives. Otherwise, modifiers are merged as unordered sets in the syntax (FormSet, Chomsky 2024) – and ordered only by Linearization at the interface, by ‘third factor’ principles, by prosody – certainly not by syntax or semantics.

**Nevins:** Linearization takes place in PF, after the narrow syntax is complete; syntactic operations build a Calderian mobile which is spinning in the air with only hierarchical relations present, but linearization is the process of laying this mobile flat on the ground, once its construction is finished. Variation in clitic placement (in particular, proclisis, enclisis, and mesoclisis alternations) are sometimes (but not always) purely post-syntactic, and Romance languages that exhibit microvariation that is morphophonologically motivated present evidence that some aspects of linear ordering are post-syntactic.

**Newell:** Allomorphy demonstrates that linearization occurs at latest before Vocabulary Insertion (Kalin 2022). One phenomenon from French that speaks to the timing of linearization and VI is the alternation of de le \( \rightarrow \) du. Namely, the linearization and VI of le is dependent on the following noun (C-initial le garçon vs V-initial l'amie). The insertion of the portmanteaux du is bled only by the latter (e.g., de l’ami, *du ami) and therefore poses questions about the timing of linearization and vocabulary insertion. I believe that this look-ahead problem will ultimately lead us to conclude that these ‘portmanteau’ morphemes are derived phonologically.

**Roberts:** I take the view in Bare Phrase Structure that the hierarchical structures created by Merge are linearised by (a version of) the LCA in the mapping to PF. The evidence from Romance stems from Kayne’s observations in the early 90s that we get the best account of clitic placement across Romance – including enclisis – if we assume that clitics are linearised as left-adjoining to their hosts.

**Ulfshjorninn:** I haven’t worked on this area. I am, however, impressed by Branigan’s (2023) model of Multiple Head Movement, which generates both an impressive typological coverage and detailed language specific analyses, while it attentively navigates architectural and modular considerations. Much of the book is dedicated to the complex analysis of Innu-Aimun, but it also discusses Romance clitics and related phenomena.

4. What is PF and what does it contain? Do you have evidence from Romance supporting this view?

**Chabot:** I do not think the characterization of PF being the sensory-motor interpretation of syntax is correct. Phonology is between the physical world of the sensory-motor system and syntax; it organizes linguistic sound, but it is not linguistic sound.

PF is an interface and not a computational domain—it interprets the output of syntax. Linearization must come about as an interface effect, an acquired, language-specific mapping between syntactic structure and linear order. PF is also where vocabulary insertion happens in non-lexicalist approaches. Elucidating PF will require collaboration between syntacticians and phonologists using insights from both syntactic and phonological theory.

**Manzini:** The interface between syntax and phonology is defined by the EXT procedure. The latter contains at least Linearization (Q3) and ellipsis. There is ongoing discussion on the nature of the latter; one possibility No Transfer – i.e.
some syntactic feature bundles are simply not Spelled-Out. In the Romance domain, this is a possible modelling of pro-drop – namely pronouns are not transferred to PHON (under appropriate conditions). Another candidate for a place in EXT is Phase Space (Q2): Manzini and Scheer recently model enclitic/proclitic alternations in terms of an extra CV at the phase edge (in enclisis), avoiding recourse to allomorphies.

**Nevins:** This is closely related to the discussion above, in which we envision PF as a sequentially ordered set of operations that include linearization, morphotactic constraints on the position of particular morphemes, and repairs that enact these constraints, many of which implicate a role for morphotactically-specific markedness. In the book *Morphotactics* (Arregi & Nevins 2012), we present a fully articulated model of ‘the structure of spellout’, in which post-syntactic operations such as impoverishment are ordered earlier than post-syntactic operations such as morpheme displacement, and in the approach to Spanish mesoclisis described above, these operations take place within this order.

**Newell:** I believe PF to begin at Vocabulary Insertion, and to be restricted to modifying phonological structure (e.g., syllabification, assimilation). Cyclic derivation clarifies that PF cycles must be computed in a Continuous-Feeding model (c.f. Pak 2008): In a bi-cyclic derivation [B [A]], A is included in the computation of B, even if it was computed previously. This is seen in patterns of assibilation in Quebec French (Beausoleil & Newell 2022), which is sensitive to distinctions in nestedness, demonstrated by the absence of assibilation in [[la petite DP] [ignore vP] … CP] → [lapəʁiˈtɪɲɔʁ] vs. its presence in [cette image DP] → [sɛtˈima3]).

**Roberts:** Again I don’t really have my own take on this: I more or less follow the standard view that PF takes the hierarchical structures created by Merge, linearises them following the LCA, maps syntactic domains (phases) onto prosodic domains, and ultimately realises some heads segmentally. Also, at least postlexical phonological operations apply in PF. On the other hand, I’m sceptical about late insertion. In the work with Calabrese that I alluded to above we almost had an argument that some phonological processes precede the core syntactic derivation, but that still needs some work.

**Ulfsbjorninn:** I cannot comment much on this, except for noting the misleading early nomenclature: ‘phonetic form’. According to the Strong Minimalist Thesis (Chomsky 2000 and subsequent), PF is understood as all of externalization. This would therefore presumably cover post-syntax, word-order/linearization, and it would be modality-neutral (spoken language, sign language). This structure though must then spell out into a fully phonological vocabulary (Scheer 2012; D’Alessandro & Scheer 2015), which is itself then spelled out into phonetic implementation (Chabot 2022 and papers mentioned in this interview).

**References**


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