Generalized Functional Heads

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Functional categories in natural language often involve extensive homophony, In English, for example, 'to' occurs as a marker of nonfinite tense and also as a directional preposition; 'have' occurs as an aspect marker and also a verb of possession; -s occurs as a plural marker and also as a marker of third person singular agreement. In Navajo 'ni' occurs as second person agreement and also as terminative aspect, 'yi' occurs as third person object agreement and also as imperfective aspect. In Korean, -ess occurs as a tense marker and also as an evidential marker.

Some of the homophony may be completely accidental. For example, the English plural and third person singular arose from different historical sources via different phonological processes. However, recent studies of diverse functional categories of the left periphery such as evidentiality, illocutionary mood and focus suggest that these systems share a common system of hierarchical organization with "lower" functional categories, such as tense/aspect. modals and person. In this talk, I will argue that to a large extent the widespread homophony among functional heads is not accidental, but reflects a common core underlying the grammar of person, tense, spatial deixis and mood. Building upon recent work on tense, aspect, counterfactuals and evidentiality, I will claim that functional heads project asymmetric structures encoding precedence and inclusion relations. The identity of a given functional head as "agreement", "tense", "evidential", etc. is not a primitive, but is the reflex of the type of arguments taken by the head: individuals (person), times (tense, aspect), locations (spatial deixis) worlds (mood, evidentiality). This approach captures crosslinguistic patterns of homophony (evidentials homophonous with aspect, illocutionary mood homophonous with focus, conditionals homophonous with tense), and also captures the fact that most functional categories are not only closed-class but are also limited to a paradigm of four to six possible values. I explore the possibility that limits on the size of functional structures are due to general cognitive limits on pattern recognition.