

EXPLANATIONS AND “ENGINEERING SOLUTIONS”? ON THE RELATION BETWEEN MINIMALISM AND HPSG

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It seems likely that many syntacticians in constraint-based frameworks think life is too short to bother with Minimalism. However, it remains the most influential approach to syntax, and this is likely to continue if it is not challenged. It is important, therefore, to identify the central features of Minimalism and to show why they are dubious. The issues are clouded by rhetoric, but it is possible to make meaningful comparisons. There are a number of prominent features of Minimalism which are not essential in the sense that it would still be the same framework if they were abandoned. These include its lack of detailed formal analyses, its often cavalier attitude to data, and its procedural idiom. In contrast, the abstractness of Minimalist analyses seems an essential property, without which it would be a very different framework. Also essential is the idea that the properties of syntactic structures stem from their lexical ingredients. Since the grammar is just a few very general mechanisms, there is no real alternative. This contrasts sharply with HPSG with its complex hierarchies of phrase types/constructions. The Minimalist position is in fact not well developed, and there is no reason to think that it is preferable to the HPSG position. A further feature of Minimalism which seems essential is the Move/Internal Merge approach to unbounded dependencies. This works well with typical unbounded dependency examples, but compares poorly with HPSG's SLASH mechanism where less typical examples are concerned. Thus, it is possible to compare Minimalism and HPSG, and the comparisons favour HPSG.