

Seeking Alternative Truths: A Postmodern Reading of Minimalism

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1 Introduction

I begin with a personal note. Noam Chomsky wrote to me in response to how his presence at a conference I was organizing would help boost the study of syntax in India, an email that I reproduce a part of below (italics mine):

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--- Noam Chomsky <chomsky@mit.edu> wrote: >  
Date: Wed, 26 May 2004 18:11:58 -0400  
> To: Tanmoy Bhattacharya
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> It's not just India. It's simply less demanding to do "cognitive  
> linguistics," or sociolinguistics, or many other things. And the  
> postmodern craze (not least in India) has made it much worse.
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Just a month prior to this, in April 2004, I had finished delivering a talk in Udaipur,¹ which, among other things, presented a postmodern reading of Chomsky's latest major work in Syntax, *The Minimalist Program*.² Swallowing my embarrassment, I continue to believe that Minimalism is a break from the tradition (or is it? see note 7) in putting in disarray monolithic superstructures that overshadow the possibility of seeking alternative truths.

In fact, I have a poetic image of the miracle Minimalism seemed to have performed. In its effect it is as if a huge cloth covering has slowly come down on the beautiful secret city that was not visible earlier. As if someone punctured the airtight covering and with the fall of the covering over the structures, the outline of the city became suddenly visible. In other words, questions (structures) that could not be raised (seen) earlier became suddenly possible (visible).

This recalls the moment of the 60s when students all over Europe (and a little later in the North-East and the East of India) protested against the established order, against icons that had taken deep roots in socio-political system of the country. It was also not a mere accident that the rise of post-structuralism erupted around the same time. In my reading (and mine only), Minimalism shows sure signs of destabilising the received icons, the superstructures of Syntax. In a way, the fact that there are only a few genuine minimalist papers being written today is, to a great extent, due to the unconsumable nature of the programme itself. The questions we are raising today with regards to the boundaries of syntax from *within* the syntactic research community were not possible during the earlier periods³ precisely because the superstructures blinded us from seeking alternatives.

¹ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2005. With Eyes Wide Shut: Sharing as Freedom. In *Construction of Knowledge*, ed. by Rama Kant Agnihotri and Tista Bagchi. Vidya Bhavan Society, Udaipur.

² Chomsky, Noam. 1995. *The Minimalist Program*. MIT Press, Cambridge:MA.

³ From mid-50s to late 80s, the latter period overshadowed by a plethora of research papers on intricacies of (mostly) European languages based on the Government and Binding framework of Chomsky 1981 (Chomsky, Noam. 1981. *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Foris Publication:

2 Interstices

Seeking alternative truths leads us to the concept of interstices that Umberto Eco uses in his philosophical work.⁴ The spaces that silence covers is what Eco finds philosophically interesting. In my reading of Minimalism, I am emphasising on finding interesting (if not truer) paths, new ways of doing things rather than the accepted and expected way of doing things.

Something else that I have been thinking of in this connection for some years now, ever since reading, and writing on, Adam Phillips, that wonderful essayist who is also a psychiatrist, is to do with flirtations, how they are accidental discoveries of alternatives — and I'd say alternative truths — about love and of course, life. The question that flirtation poses is what does commitment leave out of the picture that we might want? Since our sexuality is tyrannized by stories of committed purpose – sex as reproduction, sex as heterosexual intercourse, sex as intimacy – flirtation puts in disarray our sense of an ending. “In flirtation you never know whether the beginning of the story – the story of relationship – will be the end; flirtation, that is to say, exploits the idea of surprise” (Phillips 1994: xix).⁵

In Bhattacharya (2005),⁶ I identify the concern for full coverage, full account of the data, the totalitarian desire for completeness as a kind of empiricism, a positivistic desire, a desire to find the roots/ genesis and therefore differences between groups, races etc., who came first, who built temple first etc., a desire to reach this starting point because only that can provide a full account – starting from the starting point. Perhaps this is in-built because one lesson that you learn (thus not so in-built?) that things start from something and grow/ develop into something – a bigger, modified, derived form of the original. The logic of life itself is this – a point to point travel. This way, a life “cycle” is made so evident in front of us, all around us, we are only led to see these so-called cycles repeating themselves in plant life, ecology, stories of revenge etc. We are blinded by the “logic” of the start-to-finish cycle. As if this is all, this is all there is to life and there's nothing beyond it.

Mentalism put a stop to this in its initial pronouncement that we all have the same starting point – the innateness hypothesis. There is no way to start from anywhere before that. The differences are parametric and are only so. There is no difference to start with. This is the terrain of Chomskyian linguistics.

It's a natural extension of this tradition⁷ to ignore the desire to map everything, instead the logic of the tradition demands looking for interesting aspects of a particular language which are unmapped or even unmappable but something which lies beyond the web of parametric differences, something which probably gives an idea of the innate starting point, the initial state. For example, the phenomenon of parasitic gaps – the fact that you can drop the pronoun *it* in *Which article did you file without reading it?* – is extremely rare in adult speech, yet every child knows when you can or cannot drop the pronoun.⁸

Dordrecht).

⁴ “...we have a lot of empty spaces in our lives. I call them interstices. Say you are coming over to my place. You are in an elevator and while you are coming up, I am waiting for you. This is an interstice, an empty space. I work in empty spaces.” Eco interview in *The Hindu* 23 Oct., 2005.

⁵ Phillips, Adam. 1994. *On Flirtation*. Faber and Faber: London/ Boston.

⁶ See note 1

⁷ Therefore, not such a radical break from the tradition as expressed in section 1.

⁸ E.g. one cannot say *John was killed by a rock falling on in place of John was killed by a rock falling on **him**.

Phenomena like this are like illicit relationships – something beyond the “cycle” (so to speak) but infinitely more interesting, which may lead to a far more inspiring truth. We are blinded by traditional relations all the time which keeps us from seeking alternative truths. Minimalism, in my reading, connects to this current of seeking alternative paths to “truth” by first destabilising received superstructures and by deferring the moment of speech and then by recognising plurality of interface levels.

3 Destabilising Categories

Though perhaps out of place, let us see what do we gain by taking a Postmodern stance. One conceivable criticism that can be levelled against a rationalistic scientific discipline like syntax is with regards to the notion of subjectivity. If the repressive logic of *presence* is what shaped the history and discourse of western philosophy, then it is quite likely that the lack/ impossibility of subjectivity in the history of syntax has shaped the discourse of syntax in a way that minimalism, in my reading, is a striving to leave it behind. Minimalism achieves it by destabilising “received superstructures” which had come to occupy logophoric status even in such a relatively younger discipline like linguistics/ syntax. Minimalism does it at various levels, one by doing away with such pre-determined superstructures like D(eep)-structure, S(urface)-structure and Government at a technical level, and two, by maintaining that the “moment of speaking”, the Spell-Out point, is ever slippery (deferred). On the other hand, the most striking subversion is attempted in questioning the functional role of language itself by asserting that language is *not* for communication.

Furthermore, the development of the theory so far in other directions, especially in terms of Uriagereka’s Multiple Spell-Out model (MSO)⁹ and Platzack’s Multiple Interface model (MI)¹⁰ further destabilises through plurality any monolithic role that the notions interfaces might have ended up acquiring given the central role that the interfaces play (see section 4) in shaping language design. Minimalism thus sows the seeds of the possibility that spell-out can be at several points and that there can also be several points of interfaces: “... perhaps some give instructions at one point and then there could be more phonological computation, then another instruction is given and so on. It could be a distributed system in this sense. .. Why should Biology be set up so that there is one fixed point in the computation at which you have an interface? Interpretation could be on-line and cyclic ...” (Uriagereka 1999: 30). This path of development of the theory has come about as a result of the underlying concern for the “absence” referred to above which is (the concern is) now somehow hardwired in the architecture of the theory.

This perhaps is too generous a Postmodern reading of minimalism, but at least it is taking us somewhere, in the true spirit of minimalism. If the collapse of Marxism is due to its over insistence on identifying antagonism in a society through the singularity of class struggle, then minimalism offers a glimpse of the shape of a post-Marxist plurality of antagonism by giving up the singularly monolithic construction that language is for communication.

⁹ Uriagereka, Juan. 1999. Multiple Spell Out. In *Working Minimalism*, ed. by Nerbert Harnstein and Samuel Epstein, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

¹⁰ Platzack, Christer. 1999. Multiple Interfaces. In U. Nikanne and E. van der Zee (eds.) *Conceptual Structure and Its Interfaces with other Modules of Representation*. The Oxford University Press, Oxford.

4 The Importance of Interface

The decade of 90s in the study of languages, according to Chomsky (2002),¹¹ was marked by a shift from methodologically-driven research paradigm to a substantively-driven one, from constructing the best theory to looking at the possibility of whether the object of enquiry itself has some kind of optimal design. The “Galilean style”, identified as the methodologically driven enterprise, put the emphasis on trying to understand how a certain thing works and not just describe a lot of phenomena, the latter, for example, is most easily identifiable with the typological (areal or genealogical) mode of language study. This mirrors the situation in Physics today where 90% of the matter in the universe is considered to be dark matter. Related to and a part of the Galilean style is the Post-Newtonian style, i.e., a search for better theories in terms of understanding and not coverage. However, the Minimalist Program (MP) raises the new question of substantively-driven enquiry: *How well designed the system is.*

In terms of this perspective, the question of optimal design is raised. The new question that MP is raising is: Is language well designed from the perspective of internal structure? In order to seek an answer, forgetting the use to which language has been put (i.e., communication) helps to clarify the interaction of language with other cognitive systems of the brain. For example, the human liver is perhaps not meant to be put to the kind of use that it has been. It was perhaps meant to communicate well with the other internal organs and operating systems but not with what humans accidentally have put it to use. However, from the perspective of natural selection, it must be, on the other hand, well designed enough in terms of the outside system too so as to get by.

This notion of optimal design encourages comparison with the situation in Ecological Psychology. Consider the following quote from the ecological psychologist Roger Barker:

A unit in the middle range of a nesting structure is simultaneously both circumjacent and interjacent, both whole and part, both entity and environment. An organ -- the liver, for example -- is whole in relation to its own component pattern of cells, and is a part in relation to the circumjacent organism that it, with other organs, composes; it forms the environment of its cells, and is, itself, environed by the organism. (Barker 1968: 154)¹²

That is, language in this view is well designed with respect to the communication with the relevant cognitive systems like the sensorimotor and the conceptual-intentional parts of the brain but may not be well designed for communication outside the brain.

Chomsky’s view is that FL is inserted (embedded) into already existing “external” systems: the sensorimotor system and some kind of system of thought (conception, intention etc.) both of which are somewhat independent of language. The faculty of language (FL) has to interact with these systems, otherwise it won’t be usable (like, if the liver produced something else, not bile, that is not usable by the rest of the organs of the body, then it wouldn’t be useful). So the question that MP raises is: Is the FL well designed for interaction with those systems? In answering this question, a different set of answers and conditions emerge. Given that language is

¹¹ Chomsky, Noam. 2002. “An interview on Minimalism”, in Belletti, Adriana and Rizzi, Luigi (eds.) *On Nature and Language*, CUP.

¹² Barker, Roger. 1968. *Ecological Psychology, Concepts and Methods for Studying the Environment of Human Behaviour*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

essentially an information system, the only condition that clearly emerges is that the information it stores must be accessible to the other systems with which it interacts. The question is thus reformulated to find out whether language is well designed to meet the condition of accessibility to the systems in which it is embedded.

With regards to the external systems, the situation may be comparable to the suggestion in Bhattacharya (2003)¹³ that Coherence or Centering (of Grosz, Joshi and Weinstein 1995)¹⁴ is a cognitive phenomenon *independent of language*, perhaps a part of the module responsible for general cognitive abilities like concept formation, intention and the like. The requirement that such a concept as Coherence may impose on the FL is manifested in ways the notion of Centering surfaces in discourse segments through a choice of referring expressions. That is, the structuring of the discourse is a response to the global/ local interface requirement of Coherence.

The Minimalist position is that everything is questionable, about everything that you look at, the question should be: Why is it there? The obvious importance of interfaces is discussed with empirical evidence based on my work in the domain of Cleft questions in Meiteilon.¹⁵ The focus in this discussion is on finding existential reasons for a construction *within* the particular language and to see it as arising out of interface pressures.

5 Phase

In another respect where Minimalism has made a radical departure from the earlier models is in its conception of the idea of a Phase. For the past few years, much of my research energy has been directed at exploring a concept of syntax which is fairly new but has already come to occupy an important place in the way syntax is perceived. The face of syntax is subtly but surely changing. In time, X⁰/ XP movement will be replaced by movement of partial/ whole structures. The idea of a PHASE incorporates this notion and more. Phases may turn out to be lumps of thoughts where the computation really begins. The notion is familiar to psychologists (Gestalt) and logicians (multi-valued or vague/ fuzzy logic). I believe Chomsky's use of it in his 1998 and 1999 manuscripts¹⁶ is not an accident but rather an invitation to perhaps explore the boundaries of formal syntax yet again.

Phases are syntactic equivalent to a proposition on the meaning side. That is, certain parts of a clause are somehow "complete". This constitutes the verb and all its (internal) arguments and the full sentence itself. They can thus be crudely considered to be "chunks of thought", and these chunks are organised in a certain fashion within the numeration set.¹⁷ The implicit claim seems to be that we access a chunk at a time and we build up the structure (= we compute or derive the sentence) incrementally by chunks; not any other chunks but chunks which are thought-like. In other words, thought is probably phasal. This notion of thought is claimed to reduce computational complexity.¹⁸

¹³ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2003. The Role of Interfaces in Language Design: Destabilising Categories. Talk at IIT, Kanpur. (September).

¹⁴ Grosz, Barbara, Arvind Joshi and Scott Weinstein. 1995. Centering: A Framework for Modelling the Local Coherence of Discourse. *Computational Linguistics* 21.2: 203-225.

¹⁵ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy and Thangjam Hindustani Devi. 2004. 'Why cleft?', *CSLI* Publication, Stanford.

¹⁶ Chomsky, Noam. 1998. Minimalist Inquiries: The Framework. *MIT Occasional Papers in Linguistics*, Cambridge, MA: MIT; Chomsky, Noam. 1999. Derivation by Phase, *MIT Working Papers in Linguistics* 18, Cambridge, MA: MIT.

¹⁷ Simply put, the initial set of words and features somehow associated with speaker's intention.

¹⁸ In Bhattacharya (2002a) [Minimal Look-Ahead. *Yearbook of South Asian Languages and Linguistics*

5.1 Phonetic Independence of Phases

In Chomsky (1998) it is suggested that one of the empirical basis for the concept of Phase is that Phases seem to have a degree of phonetic independence. In this connection, one renowned test is the Nuclear Stress Rule (NSR) of Bresnan (1972).¹⁹ For Bresnan, the domains of application for the NSR are S(entence) and N(oun)P(hrase). In view of the current notion, NSR can be argued to be applicable at the level of the verb phrase. Consider (1). In (1a), *what* is the object of the embedded verb *create*. Bresnan shows that indefinites like *what* cannot bear primary phrasal stress even when final in the verb phrase. Instead, the primary stress is assigned to the rightmost element which can bear the stress, the verb *create*. In (1b) the object of the embedded verb is *what suffering* where *suffering* is assigned the primary stress. When the *Wh*-phrase is moved to the beginning of the embedded clause on the subsequent cycle (=phase), *suffering* carries its primary stress with it. NSR therefore seems to treat the embedded proposition as a domain of operation, i.e. a phase.

- (1) a. The parable shows what (suffering men) can create.
 b. The parable shows [(what suffering)_i [_{s2} men can create t_i]]

This notion of Phase actually assumes a MSO type of model whereby thoughts are “worked on” at different workspaces and are accessed as phases at the time of computing the final structure.

6 Multiple Spell Out

In Uriagereka (1996)²⁰, the idea of *Multiple Spell-Out* (MSO) appeals to a *Dynamically Split Model* in which a derivation spells out different chunks of structures in steps. Once a particular unit is spelled out to an intermediate PF (and LF) sequence, it is no longer possible to access its internal constituent structure. It can nonetheless participate in further Merge but only as an inaccessible whole unit. This model therefore provides a reduction of the derivational workspace in the true sense. MSO extends the Chomskyan architecture by conjecturing the possibility of “spelling out” a chunk whenever it is “complete”. The insistence here is on more than one point of Spell-Out, unlike in the Chomsky model. If this is correct then there should be some evidence; Bhattacharya (2002b)²¹, discussing the phenomenon of the complementiser (*je*) appearing inside the complement clause in Bangla,²² is a demonstration of the usefulness of the notion of Phase.

7 Multiple Interface

Platzack (1999)²³ is yet another modification of this model. He argues for a multiple interfaces model rather than multiple spell-out points. He further relates this

4, London /Delhi: Sage Publication] it is shown that the claim in Minimalism of reduction of computational complexity is somewhat vacuous given that if derivations are supposed to proceed via phases they cannot be constructs of the lexicon but rather of the Numeration.

¹⁹Bresnan, Joan. 1972. “On Sentence Stress and Syntactic Transformations”, *Contributions to Generative Phonology*, ed. by Michael Brame, 73-107. Austin: University of Texas Press.

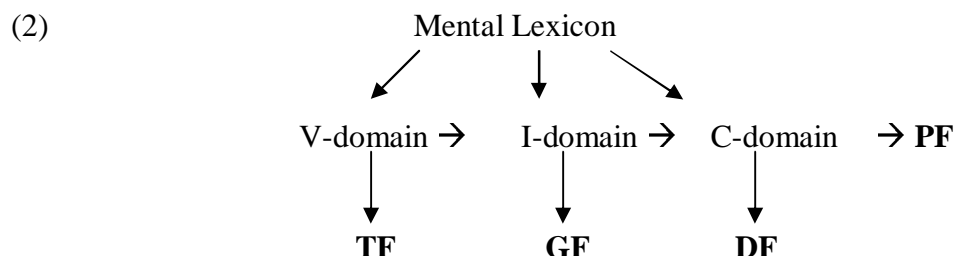
²⁰ See note 9

²¹ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy. 2002b. Peripheral and Clause-internal Complementizers in Bangla: A Case for Remnant Movement. *Proceedings of Western Conference in Linguistics 2000*, 100-112, Fresno, CA.

²² As in John [ma **je** aSben] jane.

²³ See note 10.

multiplicity with boundaries within the clause (Phases to some extent though not completely isomorphic), namely, CP, IP and VP.²⁴ In Platzack these three clausal pieces are interpreted at separate interface levels which are respectively Theme-related, Event-related and Discourse-related. The interfaces in such a system thus amount to Thematic Form (TF), Grammatical Form (GF) and Discourse Form (DF) apart from the PF level:



TF is the interface where the structural information of the V-domain is exchanged with semantic information. **GF** is the interface level where the language system and the systems of thought exchange information concerning grammatical meaning, i.e. the type of information in the choice of mood, voice, aspect, as well as the choice of subject and object. **DF** is the interface where information regarding the possible particular contexts of a sentence is evaluated and exchanged. These include discourse phenomena like topic and focus and speech act phenomena.

These three broad divisions within the clause have also been independently claimed to have different semantics (Bhattacharya and Weskott, 2001)²⁵ who propose a characterization of the semantic contribution of the three informational domains that is dependent on what each of the domains contains (what material). So, in the unmarked case, the VP contains what one could call the propositional core content, which doesn't contain any referential info, just sortal stuff like "x of type P and y of type Q stand in relation of type R." This can be captured by the language of first order predicate calculus (PC1). Then, in the hazy middlefield, there is referential information added to that: R is an (instance of an) event and took place at time t and so on. For this, PC1 doesn't suffice anymore -- some kind of intensional logic is required. And then there's the CP-domain, with all its topicality and Force and what not going on there, and to capture that you need an even more sophisticated formal apparatus. Since this area seems to function as the connection to discourse context, something like dynamic logic of DRT (Discourse Representation Theory) seems to be a good guess.

8 Socio-Syntax: Code Mixing

Finally, in this section²⁶ I would like to explore a virgin area which, for reasons that will become clear, I am identifying as Socio-Syntax, from the perspective of the theory of Phase. Consider the following sentence:

²⁴ A complete clause is composed of these three phrases as follows:

(i) ami jani [_{CP} je [_{IP} ma [_{VP} phOl bhalobaSen]]]

Here, CP = Complement Phrase, IP = Inflectional Phrase and VP = Verb Phrase.

²⁵ Bhattacharya, Tanmoy and Weskott, Thomas. 2001. The truth is in between. Ms. Universität Leipzig.

²⁶ Some of the ideas were explored in my MPhil class of August 2003 (*Current Trends in Syntax*); I especially thank Suaranjana Barua for raising the right questions and for participating in discussing with me issues for a term paper later.

- (3) a. John ate a banana
 b. $PH_1 = [\triangle \text{ate a banana}]$

If we apply the Phase theory to (3a), we might want to say that *ate a banana* is a chunk of thought and *John* which is derived in a separate work space is plugged into the main derivation skeleton that contains the phase PH_1 . Compare this derivation with the following derivation:

- (4) a. John kicked the ball
 b. $PH_1 = [\triangle \text{kicked the ball}]$

Here, similarly the first phase is PH_1 and *John* the subject. The question arises as to the similarity or lack thereof between these two derivations. The Numeration set N_1 for the first derivation is a different Numeration set than the one for the second derivation. N_2 , the set for the second derivation, does not contain any of the LIs selected for the first sentence. If the derivation for the first set is Σ_1 and for the second set, Σ_2 , then if at some point of Σ_1 we “decide” to “change” it to the second sentence, then, we are resorting to the entirely new derivation Σ_2 . The first derivation, in that case, is dead. In other words, when we “change our mind” in this case, we are actually going back to the drawing board, so to speak.

Notice that this “change of mind” can also be posed as the sociolinguistic artefact of code mixing. If code mixing is a multilingual phenomenon, we can think of our case as code mixing within a monolingual situation. What I would like to claim is that this cannot be an example of code mixing, and that in fact, the architecture of the grammar derives this prediction for us. Consider, for example, the possible, code mixing in Σ_1 as in the following:

- (5) John ate a *kOla*

Let us denote this derivation as Σ_3 . Notice also the fact that it’s very unlikely that code can be mixed at the level of the event denoted by the verb *eating*. In other words, something like the following is very unlikely:

- (6) #John *kheyeche* a banana

That is, it is only possible to switch/ mix codes when you are inside the Phase. Σ_3 , therefore, I would suggest, is not a different derivation, but is rather a modification of Σ_1 achieved through by accessing a different LI (*kOla*) somewhere between N_1 and forming the phase PH_1 . That is, the thought-chunk is already formed and is retained even when access to a different LI is made. Viewed from this novel perspective, instead of *John ate a banana*, I end up saying *John ate an apple*, then, in my view, I am code mixing in a monolingual situation, whereas Σ_2 is different derivation with a different starting point altogether.

However the point about the monolingual mixes or switches to styles or intonation or variation may also point to an interesting issue that engages minimalist researches within generative syntax equally. This has to do with computation at PF, within the present discussion of socio-syntax, resorting to intonation, is a matter of the PF component. If the question posed in the preceding paragraph is *How far back will the derivation go in order to accommodate code mixing?*, then switching to a different style of intonation happens after the Spell-Out point. However, it is then impossible

for the computation to access an alternative lexicon or revert back to the old, albeit a mixed, one. This then implies that there are in fact several spell-out points (MSO) and that only part of the derivation “is sent” to the PF interface when it’s complete in some sense.