

UG, cross-family comparison, and the antisymmetry of the Basque DP

Contrary to epistemologically simplistic approaches to language universals (most notably Evans&Levinson 2009), we claim that even if there were no surface patterns identical in all languages, a strong argument for UG would come from the possibility of pursuing a meaningful global comparative grammar across different language pairs and, especially, different families in terms of the *same* recurrent constitutive elements, e.g. parameters and parameter formats: in particular, intensionalist theories of parameters (Longobardi 2005, Biberauer 2019, Crisma et al. 2020, 2025) suggest that abstract formats of variation are universal, while parametric choices and specific parameter values emerge through the PLD in acquisition. To prove the feasibility of this approach, we show that several traits of Basque DPs (see (1)) reduce to a peculiar combination of settings of parameters independently needed to capture well-attested distinctions between languages from other families:

- (1) a. *Jon-ek sagar (gorri)-a jaten ari da*
Jon-ERG apple red-ART.SG eating PROGR is
'Jon is eating the/an red apple'
- b. *Jon-ek sagar (gorri)-ak jaten ari da*
Jon-ERG apple red -ART.PL eating PROGR is
'Jon is eating (the) red apples'
- c. * *Jon-ek sagar (gorri) jaten ari da*
- d. *hiru etxeko partida(*-ak)* e. *etxeko hiru partida-ak*
three at-home game-ART.PL at-home three game-ART.PL
'three home games' only indef. 'the three home games', only def.

- The Basque morpheme *-a/-ak*, commonly labelled 'article', is always enclitic; this is a property observed also in some IE languages in the Balkans and in Scandinavia.

Parameter 1: [± enclitic article]

[+] Basque, Romanian, Bulgarian, Danish, Swedish; [-] Italian, English, Greek, ...

- Unlike the article of Romanian and Bulgarian, which is enclitic on the leftmost word of the DP, *-a/-ak* cliticizes on the rightmost one. Correspondingly, in Basque other elements arguably surfacing in D occupy the rightmost position. These ordering distinctions can for the time being be descriptively captured by a superficially linear parametrization, which, however, must not be interpreted as governing an external Merge operation (see discussion below):

Parameter 2: [± D precedes NP]

[+] Italian, English, French, ... ; [-] Basque, Wolof

- In Basque, *-a/-ak* is always present in nominal arguments headed by a common noun not accompanied by another determiner (a numeral, a demonstrative or an indefinite quantifier). The possibility of having bare arguments headed by plural and mass nouns rests on pronounced Number morphology on N (cf. Delfitto and Schrotten 1991); since in Basque there is no Number morphology on N, the ungrammaticality of bare common nouns is expected.

Parameter 3: [± Number exponence on N]

[+] Italian, English, ... ; [-] Basque, French, Wolof

- While in some languages the definite/indefinite interpretation is always unambiguously encoded in nominal arguments, in others one observes systematic ambiguity. In IE, languages of the latter kind, e.g. Polish, typically do not have articles; Basque displays the same definite/indefinite ambiguity as Polish, for *-a/-ak* does not encode definiteness; the overt morpheme in D will be required in Basque due to *Parameter 3* (see 1a-c).

Parameter 4: [± grammaticalized definiteness]

[+] Italian, English, French, ... ; [-] Basque, Polish, Latin, ...

- In Romance, different from English, kind names in argument function are always introduced by the article, and proper names either occur with a visible article or they are raised to D crossing over possessives and other modifiers; the correlation of the two properties, both characterizing referential nouns, has been reduced to a unified parametric theory of the syntax of reference (Longobardi 1994). Basque kind names in argument function are always introduced by the article, as in Romance and different from English; this property is not due to *Parameter 3*, as shown by the fact that in Wolof (which patterns with Basque w.r.t. *Parameter 3*) kind names occur bare like proper names. Basque proper names preceded by a possessive do not occur with articles, thus the sequence *Poss-Prop N* is superficially identical to English rather than Romance. However, given the opposite setting of *Parameter 2* in English and Romance vs. Basque, the similarity is only apparent: Basque exhibits the Romance syntax of referential nouns, corroborating the correlation above.

Parameter 5: [\pm Long-distance reference to D]

[+] English, Wolof, ... ; [-] Basque, Romance, ...

- The distribution of numerals in (1d-e) does not immediately fit into this picture. In IE, numerals used as indefinite *quantifiers* are raised to the leftmost position, arguably D or the D-field (Crisma 1991, 2012). When they remain low, they have a *non-quantificational*, adjectival interpretation, most often in definite DPs. This is true even in [-grammaticalized definiteness] languages (*Parameter 4*), such as Polish: in these languages, which do not have articles, the numeral has a quantificational reading only if it occupies the leftmost position. Surprisingly, in Basque, where D surfaces as the rightmost element (see *Parameter 2*), numerals with quantificational reading (with the exception of *bat* ‘one’ and in some dialects *bi* ‘two’, always phrase-final) still move, though not to the rightmost position, but to the left edge, see (1d), while numerals with an adjectival reading remain in a low position, see (1e). This pattern can be explained in two steps. First, we falsify two possible analyses of Basque DP as symmetric w.r.t. IE, showing that both a mirror-image approach and one based on a Head-Compl parameter make wrong predictions. We conclude that the phrase-final position of D (*Parameter 2*) is derived via raising of its complement to its Spec, therefore Basque confirms that D-NP and NP-D are not generated as mirror images through some simple linear order parameter at the SM interface (Kayne 1994). Next, we account for Basque higher numerals assuming that they also must be fronted to the edge of the complement raised to Spec,D because only the edge position may establish an interpretive relation with the relevant head D acting as a Probe. This movement may be governed by another parameter, formulated on the model of an attested format, which distinguishes between two types of WH-pied-piping constructions in Indo-European: in some languages (e.g. Italian and English), a WH-relative pronoun contained in a larger constituent pied-piped to Spec,C remains *in situ* within this constituent; in others (Latin) it must itself be overtly fronted within the moved phrase (prolepsis of the relative). Basque numerals relate to D in the same way as Latin relative pronouns relate to C. It remains to be seen whether in other languages raising NP to Spec,D numeral quantifiers *in situ* establish a Long-distance connection with D.

Parameter (schema) 6: [\pm Long-distance ϕ to H]

for ϕ = relative WH, and H = C

[+] Italian, English ; [-] Latin, ...

for ϕ = Q, and H = D

[+] ? ; [-] Basque

We conclude then that the Basque DP turns out to simply instantiate an original combination of parameter values attested in other languages; this result emerges from, and supports, two general hypotheses: (a) the D-NP/NP-D orders are not symmetric and support Kayne (1994); (b) parametric syntax does allow a global comparative grammar across quite different families.

References

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