Asymmetry in N-N combinations: A theoretical and acquisition perspective
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NN compounds and early NN utterances are two independent domains for which it has been argued that grammar is not active, since they would both instantiate a case of direct phonology-semantics mapping. In particular, as to NN compounds, Jackendoff (2009) claimed they are linguistic fossils of a protolinguistic style of computation; whereas, regarding the two-word stage of language acquisition, discourse principles rather than morphosyntactic principles have been invoked to explain word order and other properties of these constructs (see among others Clark 2009).

In this talk, I will endorse the opposite idea according to which both NN compounds and early child utterances are (minimal) domains of syntactic computation. In particular, I contend that the NN combinations at issue represent a specific mode of syntactic computation, whereby two structurally identical syntactic objects get merged in a parallel fashion hence yielding a symmetric configuration that would prevent label projection. The ways in which such otherwise symmetric configurations get ‘corrected’ and the derivations rescued determine the attested variation in both domains.

Case study 1. Root (or primary) NN compounds in typologically unrelated (adult) languages.¹

On the grounds of a crosslinguistic approach, I will propose that the contrasting morphosyntactic and interpretive properties of root compounds across different languages can be explained in compliance with narrow syntax conditions on Merge and Projection. More specifically, the source of variation cannot be reduced to language-specific rules of word (compound) formations, but essentially depends on the language-specific feature endowment of lexical items in compliance with the asymmetry requirement on Merge (see Kayne 1994, Moro 2000/2008, Di Sciullo and Isac 2008).

Case study 2. Early two-word NN utterances in Child Italian.²

This corpus (CHILDES) study on Child Italian reveals a varied picture where both left- and right-headed NN utterances are produced at the same stage (1;7 – 2;1), in contrast with the tendentially left-headed pattern of the input. However, a fine-grained phonological analysis reveals that each of the NN schemas is characterized by a dedicated prosodic pattern. The line of investigation pursued here aims at showing that both classes of data actually conform to the asymmetry requirement on syntactic structure. Further, it is also argued that these early merging strategies avoid projection of functional categories and feature-triggered movement; hence, new evidence is brought to the ‘economy of acquisition’ approach (see Lebeaux 1988 as a main reference on this issue). To conclude, an explanation is advanced for capturing the striking similarities between right-headed NN utterances in Child Italian and NN compounding in English, based on the feature endowment of the elements involved in these combinations.

¹ This case study reports partial results of Delfitto & Melloni (2009), Delfitto, Fabregas & Melloni (2011), Basciano, Kula & Melloni (2011).
² This case study reports partial results of Torregrossa & Melloni (in press).