The Short Life Cycle of External Arguments in Passive Derivations

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There is substantial evidence for a syntactic approach to passive where the external argument is accessible for syntactic operations; cf. Chomsky (1957), Perlmutter & Postal (1983), Baker, Johnson & Roberts (1989), Sternefeld (1995), Collins (2005), Schaefer (2012), Alexiadou & Doron (2013), Harley (2013), Georgi (2014) and Roberts (2014). However, this evidence is almost exclusively based on *downward accessibility*: The external argument in passive constructions is accessible for items below v’. Based on data taken mainly from German, I will present conflicting evidence suggesting *upward inaccessibility* of external arguments in passive constructions. The goal of the talk will then be to provide a principled account of both downward accessibility and upward inaccessibility of external arguments in passive constructions in German. The key to a solution of the dilemma posed by variable accessibility of external arguments in the passive will be that independently motivated, mainly conceptual considerations in a strictly local derivational model of syntax (like a phase-based minimalist approach) lead one to expect that next to operations that *build* structure (Merge), there should also be elementary operations that *remove* structure (an operation I will refer to as Cut, and that works as the exact opposite of Merge) -- the only constraint that this violates is the Projection Principle (Chomsky (1981)), which has to be abandoned in a minimalist approach for principled reasons. Cut plays a role in the first step of a composite Move operation; it offers a principled approach to the notoriously recalcitrant domain of reanalysis phenomena; and, as I will show in detail, it provides an analysis of passive (and other diatheses, like antipassive) that correctly predicts a very short life cycle of DP arguments, thereby accounting for accessibility from below as well as inaccessibility from above.