Keeping movement motivated: optionality without the tears[*]

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Optionality in movement operations is widely held to be fundamentally incompatible with a feature-driven approach to displacement in which movement must be triggered and triggered movement is obligatory. We argue that semantically-vacuous alternations in surface order are not an imperfection of the language system but fall out on principled grounds once movement is viewed as internal merge. Minimalist economy principles are then predicted to allow for indeterminacies in the application of movement operations in exactly the same way as they do for external merge: as long as the relevant formal trigger is motivated, the grammar cannot discern between two (or more) legitimate options for satisfying it, yielding the effect of 'true optionality'. We demonstrate the validity of this prediction with two case studies from the empirical domain of EPP-satisfaction in Germanic: optional verb movement in Afrikaans embedded clauses, and optional expletives in impersonal passives in Afrikaans, Dutch and Faroese.

1.   INTRODUCTION: A FAMILIAR PROBLEM

The Minimalist Program (MP) of Chomsky 1995 *et seq.*[1] seeks to eliminate language-specific properties of the computational system by reducing them, so far as possible, to principled explanation in terms of interface conditions (and other general properties). In this light, economy principles reduce to the requirement that elements and operations must contribute to interface interpretations − elements and operations that have no such effects are superfluous and unmotivated (cf. MI: 99). Two antagonistic principles thus emerge, representing the two logical poles of superfluousness: (a) "don't do too much" (cf. Thráinsson 2003: 152), which can be termed Last Resort (LR), and (b) "don't do too little", the principle of Full Interpretation (FI), whose force is captured in such statements as "Minimize superfluous symbols" and "α enters the numeration only if it has an effect on output" (MP: 294(76))[2]. The operation Move (internal Merge) is therefore rigidly constrained: LR dictates that movement is necessarily motivated, so that an element cannot move in the absence of a feature triggering its displacement (the EPP-feature of MI, DbP, BEA; the strong (D-)feature of MP), whilst FI ensures that an element is *obliged* to move if such a(n EPP-)feature is present (i.e. it cannot *not* move). Together, LR and FI imply that a given set of lexical items, as defined by the numeration, cannot exhibit optionality of the form 'move vs. don't move'. Since movement is the operation that feeds the surface order of constituents, it follows that word-order alternations involving (what appears to be) the same set of lexical items should not exist. Of

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[1]   In the following, MP = Chomsky 1995, MI = Chomsky 1998, DbP = Chomsky 1999, BEA = Chomsky 2001.

[2]   LR and FI thus roughly subsume the principles of derivational and representational economy, respectively.