

# Chomsky on Grammatical Functions

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from:

Noam Chomsky (1981) *Lectures on Government and Binding*. Dordrecht: Foris.

p. 10

Chomsky uses the term “grammatical relations” here instead of “grammatical functions”

“In the general case of theory construction, the primitive basis can be selected in any number of ways, so long as the condition of definability is met, perhaps subject to conditions of simplicity of some sort [fn omitted]. But in the case of UG, other considerations enter. The primitive basis must meet a condition of epistemological priority. That is, still assuming the idealization to instantaneous language acquisition, we want the primitives to be concepts that can plausibly be assumed to provide a preliminary, pre-linguistic analysis of a reasonable selection of presented data, that is, to provide the primary linguistic data that are mapped by the language faculty to a grammar; relaxing the idealization to permit transitional stages, similar considerations still hold [fn omitted]. It would, for example, be reasonable to suppose that such concepts as “precedes” or “is voiced” enter into the primitive basis, and perhaps such notions as “agent-of-action” if one believes, say, that the human conceptual system permits analysis of events in these terms independently of acquired language. But it would be unreasonable to incorporate, for example, such notions as “subject of a sentence” or other grammatical relations within the class of primitive notions, since it is unreasonable to suppose that these notions can be directly applied to linguistically unanalyzed data. Rather, we would expect that such notions would be defined in UG in terms of a primitive basis that meets the condition of epistemological priority. The definition might be complex. For example, it might involve some interaction of syntactic configurations, morphology, and  $\theta$ -roles (e.g., the grammatical subject is the (usual) agent of an action and the direct object the (usual) patient), where the terms that enter into these factors are themselves reducible to an acceptable primitive basis [fn omitted]. Again, an effort to develop a principled theory of UG is surely premature, but considerations of this sort are nevertheless not out of place. They indicate that we should, for example be wary of hypotheses that appear to assign to grammatical relations too much of an independent role in the functioning of the rule system.”

Note also the following (p. 37), from a discussion of selection in idioms:

“We can bring subcategorization [i.e. selection] and  $\theta$ -marking together more closely by inventing a new  $\theta$ -role, call it #, for non-arguments that are subcategorized by heads, e.g. *advantage* in “take advantage of.” Then even in idioms, each subcategorized position is a  $\theta$ -position.”

Does the “ $\theta$  role #” meet the criterion of epistemological priority?