Minimalism and a Meaning First View

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Version of October 18, 2021

Abstract
[no abstract requested]

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1 Introduction

In this article, we take a look at Minimalism from a variant thereof that is based on a modification of one of its basic assumptions: the status of the central structure building operation Merge. Merge in Minimalism is understood as the central biological innovation underlying the faculty of language in humans. We have instead explore an approach where Merge is not part of language, but an operation of a language-independent, conceptual system (Sauerland and Alexiadou 2020), which we have called this the Meaning First Approach.

The Meaning First Approach, though it rejects a central tenet of Minimalism, is an exploration building on the insights of Minimalism and shares a lot of its properties. The Minimalist Program seeks to solve the central puzzle of language: how could such a uniquely complex system could have evolved in our species within what is in evolutionary terms a very brief time period? Minimalism has developed into an extraordinarily productive and rich research paradigm as the contributions in this volume no doubt attest. Minimalism also has generated a number of predictions that were then confirmed by later research, such as the copy theory of movement and the reducibility of many analyses to interface properties. The Meaning First Approach seeks to preserve these insights, even as it rejects the assumption of the centrality of Merge for language. At this point, our exploration of the Meaning First Approach is only at the beginning, and perhaps one of its initial benefits may be to promote discussion of the role of Merge within the intellectual bundle of assumptions that is the Minimalist Program.¹

Our contribution first reviews the Meaning First Approach, highlighting differences with standard Minimalism. The we discuss the status of what in Minimalist analyses are purely syntactic properties in the Meaning First Approach. And thirdly, we sketch an Meaning First Approach to explaining human uniqueness.

¹Within Minimalism, architectures similar to MFA have been discussed by Bobaljik and Wurmbrand (2012), Csirmaz (2005), and others. Our proposal to locate Merge outside of language goes further than these existing proposals, but there is substantial overlap in the predictions.
The Meaning First Approach (MFA in the following) rests on several assumptions that are shared with Minimalism, but differs on two central assumptions: 1) that merge applies at the conceptual level creating complex conceptual representations and 2) that language provides a compression function that can map conceptual representations to an external realization of the type used in human communication. The second of these assumptions is a corollary to the first, but we feel is important to discuss. Before we discuss these two differences in more detail, briefly consider a key assumption that the MFA adopts from standard minimalism: Both assume that language is closely related to recursive data structures that represent thoughts. The MFA also endorses that the role of the recursive structures in communication is only a secondary function, and that their primary function is thought (Everaert et al. 2015, and others). In fact, the initial motivation for the MFA in Sauerland (2018) derives from the observation that some constraints apply at the thought level independent of their realization in language. Thus, the MFA takes the thought-language relation to extend beyond constituency and include other aspects of logicality of language (Chierchia 2013).

The first defining assumption of the MFA is that the operation building complex structures is not part of language, but applies in the conceptual system to form conceptual representations (CRs). Otherwise our operation Merge is akin to the Minimalist operation Merge. Given a set \( P \) of primitives, we assume that the set of unordered binary tree structures over \( P \) is the set of all potential concepts \( C \). In this perspective, Merge maps any two concepts, \( a \) and \( b \), onto a single concept \( a : b \), and is commutative (i.e. \( a : b = b : a \)). \( C \) can also be described as the commutative free magma over \( P \). Of course, minimalist Merge is a recursive operation within language and its output is “interpreted at two interfaces, conceptual-intentional (C-I) and sensorimotor (SM)—the former yielding a ‘language of thought’ (LOT), perhaps the only such LOT.” (Chomsky 2015). We identify the LOT of Fodor (2008) and Chomsky’s with a subset of \( C \) that contains licit CRs (we discuss the efficiency constraint on LOT below).

In difference to the Minimalist conception of Merge, we assume that CR-structures are primary and then mapped to an articulation. One immediate consequence is that the Meaning First Architecture assumes a dif-
ferent structure of grammar: Minimalism in all its current variants assumes
the T-structure Chomsky describes above. The Meaning First Architecture
assumes instead a straight arrow from the CR-structure to the articulation
similarly to what was assumed in early generative grammar (Chomsky 1965,
Lakoff 1971, McCawley 1995), though in difference to these views, CRs on
our view are non-linguistic objects and can be much more complex than
their articulations because of compression. A cyclic operation is equally
compatible with both conceptions. Consider for example the complement
clause in (1): On either the MFA or standard minimalism, a structure repres-
enting underlying the complement clause and its articulation *the climb will
be easy* in one cycle. In a later cycle, a reference to the CR/LOT represen-
tation of the complement and its articulation are used to activate relevant
aspects thereof. Furthermore Sauerland (2020) suggests that cyclic com-
pression may also support complex thought: namely, a highly compressed
verbal sequence of a complex thought may play a facilitating role in complex
non-verbal processing, e.g. for theory of mind.

(1) The girl thinks the climb will be easy.

A second consequence of the MFA is that while Minimalism allows uninter-
pretatable or semantically vacuous elements to be among the basic units Merge
operates upon, the MFA is more restrictive: Because the primitive concepts
in $P$ are language independent, they must have some semantic content. In
practice this means that while Minimalism works with an interpretation
function mapping syntactic entities to concepts, syntactic primitives do not
exist in the MFA. The terminal nodes of the binary tree structures in $P$ are
semantic objects. Therefore no semantic evaluation function is assumed for
simple CRs, and the value of complex CRs is determined by their parts and
their structure. But simple CRs must be mapped to an articulated form
by an articulation mechanism akin to lexical insertion of Halle and Marantz
(1993).

Finally the primitives $P$ divide up into logical primitives independent
of experience and non-logical primitives derived from experience. For some
primitives like the tenses or the degree concept, it is an empirical question
whether they are logical or non-logical in our sense. The meaning of content
words such *tree* is generally decomposed into logical primitives such as *object*
and *state* and a non-logical, root meaning *tree*. As we discuss in the
following, the logical/non-logical division is reflected in language in multiple
ways.

The second central assumption mentioned above, Compression, concerns
to the mapping from CR to articulation. We illustrate the conception of the
compressor by the means of the concrete example *We like linguistics*, though
many of the details remain speculation.

Here and in the following, we use two different typefaces for the two types of primitives.
1. Truth Conditions $p$ with intent $I$, for example:
   
   $p = $ the set of all possible worlds where linguists including me and you like linguistics, $I = $ I want us to add $p$ to our shared beliefs

2. Generator: $p$ is mapped to the optimal conceptual representation $C$ that has those truth conditions. For our example the resulting representation is so complex that we introduce abbreviations to aid comprehension.\(^6\)
   
   \[ C = \lambda w \ [ \text{exists} \ [ \text{present}(w) \text{ and part }[ \text{‘we’}] \text{ and cause } \lambda w \ [ \text{exists} \ [ \text{‘like’} \text{ and } [ \text{part } [ \text{linguistics’}] ] ] ]], \]
   
   where ‘we’, ‘like’, and ‘linguistics’ abbreviate respectively the following:
   
   ‘we’ = [\( \max \ [ \text{exh} \text{ (true, singular)} \text{ and } \text{author}(w) \text{ plus exh} \text{ (participant}(w), \text{author}(w)) \text{ and object and animate and stable and } \text{LINGUIST}(w) ] ]\],
   
   ‘like’ = \text{stable and liking} \text{(w)}, and
   
   ‘linguistics’ = \text{theme} [\( \max \ [ \text{singular and object and exh} \text{(true, animate) and stable and } \text{LINGUISTICS}(w) ] ]\]

3. Linearization: Linearize all nodes of $C$ (the example is already presented in its linear order in the previous step)

4. Realization: Insert the $C$ for every node all its possible direct realizations and form resulting candidate outputs. For example:\(^7\)
   
   “...”
   
   ”We like it”
   
   ”We do”
   
   ”We do like it”
   
   ”We like linguistics”
   
   ”We do like linguistics”
   
   ”The linguists like linguistics”
   
   ”We the linguists like linguistics”
   
   ”The linguists like the linguistics”, ...

5. Compression: Select the shortest (or otherwise optimal) realization $r$ of $C$ that has sufficient likelihood of satisfying intent $I$ for articulation. For example:
   
   $r = $ ”We like linguistics.”
   
   Excluded because of low recoverability of $I$ are: ”...”, ”We like it”, ”We do”, and ”We do like it”. Excluded because of high effort are: ”The linguists like linguistics”, ”We the linguists like linguistics”, and ”The linguists like the linguistics”, and others.
We highlight two aspects of the MFA-mechanism (the Compressor) relating CRs to articulation: that is applies after the formation of a CR and can lose information the CR contains. The MFA is wedded to a realizational perspective where linear order and the phonological content of both lexical and functional concepts must be determined after a structure is formed, while Minimalism is compatible with many different options. Minimalist models for the PF-realization where linear order (Fox and Pesetsky 2005, and others) and phonological content (Halle and Marantz 1993) are determined late have nevertheless been widely adopted. The MFA builds on these conceptions. The second highlight, the information-theoretic aspect of compression builds further on Chomsky’s insight that structure generation is not well adapted to be used in communication. The MFA assumes that articulation is constrained in a way that CRs are not: A CR is assumed to be a complex internal data structure that is entirely unsuited for communication: It not only lacks serial order and it may contain representational redundancies – elements that facilitate the internal, mental processing, but the presence of which is predictable for a fellow human from a partial representation of the CR structure. In communication, humans do their best to use their body to quickly share a CR with others by linearizing it and by not articulating any recoverable parts of it. Two examples of compression are cases NP-minimization and pronoun deletion. Schlenker (2005) points out that the full noun phrase the linguist in (2) can receive a bound interpretation if use of a possessive pronoun instead of the full noun phrase would result in an ambiguity. On our view, non-pronunciation of the NP would result in articulation of the pronoun (Sauerland 2008) and this non-pronunciation is obligatory unless pronunciation of the full NP avoids an ambiguity.

(2) A linguist working on Binding Theory was so devoid of any moral sense that he forced {a physicist working on particles / *me} to hire the linguist’s girlfriend in his lab.

7For the logical constants, we assume values that are similar to the lexical entries of related works in distributed morphology and semantics. Concretely, we assume in the order of occurrence: exists = λSS ∀x ∈ S \ y ∈ S y ⊑ x, and = λS, T S ⊓ T, present(w) = \ e \ p \ in \ the \ present \ time \ of \ w, part(x) = \ e \ p \ takes \ part \ in \ e \ = λx \ p \ in \ atom(x), true = \ e \ p \ e = x, author(w) = \ f \ x \ p \ contains \ the \ center \ of \ w, plus = λx, y x p y, participant(w) = \ f \ x \ p \ contains \ the \ center \ or \ the \ addressee \ of \ w, object = \ e \ p \ is \ an \ object, animate = \ e \ p \ is \ animate, and stable = \ e \ p \ is \ temporarily \ stable.

7We assume that the possible realizations are compositionally derived from more elementary realization mappings such as the following sketch: LINGUIST \mapsto "linguist", \mapsto "—", exph(true, singular) \mapsto "s", "-ren", "-", author(w) plus exph(participant(w), author(w)) \mapsto "we", "they", "—", max \mapsto "the", "it", "they", "—", liking \mapsto "like", "—", linguistics \mapsto "linguistics", "—", and present \mapsto "do", "—".

5
The second example comes from the Overt Pronoun Constraint of Montalbetti (1984). The constraint predicts, for example, that the overt pronoun elias in (3) cannot be interpreted as a bound variable, while the unpronounced pronoun can. The effect of the Overt Pronoun Constraint can be captured as an effect of compression if non-pronunciation of a bound pronoun becomes obligatory in a language like Spanish when it is allowed and the bound interpretation has a high likelihood of being assigned to the null argument counterpart.

(3) Muchos plomeros creen que pro₁ / *elias₁ compraron un pulpo.
    ‘Many plumbers think they bought an octopus.’ (Montalbetti 1984, p. 77-78)

Compression predicts ellipsis to be obligatory whenever it occurs. Obligatoriness is required for the correct predictions in (2) and (3), it seems at odds with most cases of ellipsis recognized by Minimalism such as comparative ellipsis in (4) (Lechner 2004 and others), where ellipsis is assumed to be optional. But even in Minimalism several varieties of obligatorily unpronounced material exists – traces, silent pronouns, silent operators, and incorporated heads. The MFA assumes that these unpronounce elements and the cases discussed above are the representative cases of ellipsis, and that optionality is only apparent in other cases. Subtle differences in emphasis, need for clarity, and other factors must account for the variation.

(4) The table is taller than the door is (tall)/wide.

Other differences between Minimalism and the MFA proposal of Sauerland and Alexiadou (2020) are in our view orthogonal to the two central differences we discussed in this section. In particular this holds for the MFA assumption that a third interface between language and other cognitive system accounts for some aspects of socio-emotive meaning. Sauerland and Alexiadou (2020) assume that social and emotional signalling extends beyond humans and beyond language, but that this mechanism in humans can intrude in interesting ways upon the expression of logical thought by language. But should this turn out to be disconfirmed, the MFA could omit the third interface – in fact, some work seems to be open to this possibility: "So construed, language is I-language (internal language), a state of the computational system of the mind/brain that generates structured expressions, each of which can be taken to be a set of instructions for the interface systems within which the faculty of language is embedded. There are at least two such interfaces:

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8Both sentences in (3) allow the ‘coreferential’ interpretation translated as Many plumbers think that many plumbers bought an octopus.
the systems of thought that use linguistic expressions for reasoning, interpretation, organizing action, and other mental acts; and the sensorimotor systems that externalize expressions in production and construct them from sensory data in perception.” (Chomsky 2007, emphasis ours)

3 Purely Syntactic Entities

Syntax is the origin of formal work in linguistics, and is the core component of many grammatical frameworks. In the Minimalist Program, however, a number of phenomena (for example, binding, scope, ellipsis) were seen to be better accounted for as being properties of the semantics-syntax interface. But for other phenomena, specifically movement, case and agreement, syntax is seen as crucial, and the notion of a syntactic feature is linked to the account of both. The MFA leaves only room for language-independent, conceptual properties to enter structure formation. While the MFA can built on some aspects of minimalist proposals, the MFA perspective requires a rethinking of these phenomena in terms of conceptual structure building and compression. Fully worked out solutions will take time, and we hint at some directions we find interesting to pursue and we consider movement first, then syntactic features, and finally case and agreement.

Movement: In early transformational grammar, movement transformations characterized a broad class of phenomena. But in minimalist analysis, ‘movement’ is a descriptive term not necessarily indicating a shared mechanism. For example, ‘head movement’ in minimalism is frequently analyzed differently from the core cases of phrasal movement (Chomsky 2015). We will only consider a few cases of phrasal movement here. We attempt to capture overt movement on the MFA within the broader realm of compression phenomena, along similar lines as pronominalization. Our account builds on the minimalist insight that ‘movement’ involves multiple occurrences of the same material as illustrated in (5):

(5) Which boy did the girl like?
   [which boy] did the girl like [which boy]?

However standard Minimalism furthermore assumes that the two occurrences of which boy in (5) are identical in a special way – the represent ‘copies’ or a ‘shared structure’. Minimalists distinguish the strict notion of identity from a looser one that also applies to the two occurrences of which boy in Which boy did Ann like and which boy did Sue like?. Drawing a distinction between strict and loose identity in this way is a theoretical choice though, not a necessity. Similarly, we may say 1 = 1 in a loose sense, but 1 ≠ 1 in a strict sense since there are two distinct signs ‘1’ on the paper. But arithmetic as a system only contains the first notion of identity. If successful,
our account would allow a simplification of the Minimalist understanding of identity.

At this point, we cannot with confidence present a full conceptual representation of (5), but only a variant of the classical Karttunen (1977) analysis with the movement dependency analyzed as obligatory ellipsis of a definite description. We assume that the evaluation of CRs uses a mechanism akin to assignment sequences, i.e. a relation between places (represented by natural numbers) and entities, and that in $n$ denotes the property of being in place $n$. We assume that there is a presupposition accommodation mechanism accommodate that extends the local context by a single place-individual pairing. We furthermore assume that accommodated local contexts are projected across a conjunction. Since this is not the space to present a full system, we only spell out a syncategorematic interpretation rule for accommodate in a conjunction:

\[(6) \quad \text{[accommodate } R \text{ ]}(f) \text{ and } S \]
\[= \exists \{ f' \supseteq f : \exists x \; r(f') = x \land \#(f' \setminus f) = 1 \} \cap \{ f' \mid \exists y \; s(f') = y \}\]

With this shorthand, the conceptual representation (7) containing two descriptions the boy has the desired value: the set of propositions that are potential answers to the question.

\[(7) \quad \lambda p \; \text{[accommodate } \text{max } (w) \text{ in 1 } ] \text{ and } [ p = \lambda w \; \text{exists } [ \text{part max } \text{girl}(w) ] \text{ and } \text{cause } \lambda w \; \text{exists } [ 'like'(w) \text{ and } \text{part max } \text{boy}(w) \text{ in 1 } ] ] ] ] ] ] ]

The second occurrence of max boy must not be realized in (7) follows from compression. Note that since compression does not care about the recovery of a specific form of CR but just the semantic value, a CR where location index 2 was used instead of 1 would also be possible. To allow resumptive elements, compression further needs to account for exceptions to the non-realization of trace copies. Namely, in some complex structures it is blocked in English, and some languages must always realize traces as resumptive pronouns more generally.

The above accounts for A'-movement phenomena that are present in the conceptual structure. Adapting a proposal by Takahashi and Hulsey (2009), we propose that A-movement requires that the non-logical material be only present in the structurally higher position of the dependency as illustrated in (8), where ‘be winning the game’ is left unanalyzed.

\[(8) \quad \text{A couple seems to be winning the game.} \]
\[\quad \text{[ [ accommodate max } \text{couple}(w) \text{ and object and in 1 ] ] ] and [ ]}

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9The distinction by number indices is a commonly assumed, but is actually not needed for (5) and we are optimistic that these can be generally eliminated (see Sauerland 2007).
Sentences that can be analyzed as A-movement furthermore can also often involve a different CR with total reconstruction. Following Sauerland and Elbourne (2002), we assume that total reconstruction involves a CR without a dependency, and is analyzed as linearization not fully conforming to the conceptual constituency, i.e. PF-movement.

**Syntactic Features:** A syntactic feature in Minimalist syntax is a feature that is accessible syntax. For example, having an initial vowel or being edible are not syntactic features, while person, tense, case and agreement are. The set of syntactic features in Minimalism is generally stipulated as a list. If lexical information such as an initial vowel are represented during syntactic structure building, it furthermore needs to be stipulated that no structure building operation can access the non-syntactic features. Morphological theories such as Distributed Morphology of Halle and Marantz (1993) have proposed to eliminate the second stipulation by assuming instead that structure building applies prior to lexical insertion. But Distributed Morphology and related approaches do not answer the question why structure building should be selective about which features it can access.

The MFA addresses this question: structure building accesses only semantic concepts, so it is predicted to be sensitive only to semantic properties of the items. Phonological properties like having an initial vowel are similarly excluded from structure building. But furthermore, non-logical semantic properties like being edible don’t affect structure building. The division between concepts like animate and edible is difficult to understand even on the MFA. First of all, we suggest that logical concepts shouldn’t be only characterized by permutation invariance (van Benthem 1989), but as a core concepts being present in the mind independently of experience (Carey 2009, Spelke and Kinzler 2007). Our intuition then is that classifying objects as animate is mentally present to humans in this sense while edibility arises from experience. The experience-based concepts furthermore typically vary substantially between individuals, though there are exceptions – (Sauerland and Alexiadou 2020) discuss the property of symmetry. For structure building, we propose that experience based concepts are not as accessible as logical concepts are. Though gaps remain in our understanding at this point, the logical characterization of the notion of syntactic feature is more explanatory than the list provided by Minimalism. Some strands of Minimalism furthermore stipulate a linear order of the syntactic features in sequence. It remains to be seen whether alternative accounts e.g. in terms of entailment or likelihood may be possible.

We mentioned above that the account of logicality beyond mere constituency is a core motivation for the MFA. Logical properties of structure
affect what structures can be formed. Meyer (2013, 2015) argues that her principle of efficiency blocks a structure if a more efficient structure is available to account for data like the following:

(9) # Mary didn’t study math or physics or both. (Meyer 2015)

Sauerland (2018) extends the efficiency analysis to different scopal structures, in particular reducing scope and binding economy of Fox (2000) to Meyer’s efficiency. Sauerland (2018) furthermore suggests generalizations of Meyer’s proposal to account for superiority phenomena, for restrictions on type changing morphemes, and also for ungrammatical analytic sentences as studies by Gajewski (2009), Chierchia (2013), Del Pinal (2019), and others.

Case and Agreement  Over the past 30 years, the analysis of Case and agreement has been central to work in the Minimalist program. We can’t foresee at this point whether the MFA can be even remotely as fruitful in this domain of phenomena. What the MFA might provide insights on though is the decomposition of verbs and other predicates. Since case and agreement are frequently related to argument structure, the decomposition of argument structure may provides a starting point for understanding case and agreement.

Different ideas about the mereological entities and primitive concepts underlying argument structure are compatible with the MFA. We distinguish though between two conceptions of complex predicates: On a lexicalist analysis such as Montague grammar, a verb like break is analyzed as a semantic unit that would take two individuals as arguments in (10). On a decompositional analysis, the verb break in (10) is instead analyzed as consisting of at least a causative make part and an anticausative break part.

(10) The woman broke her record.

Much recent work has empirically corroborated the decompositional view (Levin and Hovav 2011, Alexiadou et al. 2015). What though would block a lexicalist, binary predicate break from being available? On the MFA though, we may expect that a) the inventory of logical primitives to be minimal and b) experience based predicates to be limited in type. Namely, both a) and b) would contribute to an efficient system where CRs are binairely identifiable with truth conditions. Aron Hirsch (p.c.) suggest that, taken together, a) and b) can be summarized as the principle (11) evidently favoring decomposition analyses.

(11) Decompose if you can!

Since parts of the meaning of verbal concepts like causation, agency, and change-of-state are also present as primitives, then verbal decomposition is
forced. This is in line with the work of e.g., Levin and Hovav (2011) and Alexiadou et al. (2015) among many others. Further evidence for obligatory decomposition comes for example from adjectival antonyms (Rett 2014).

Beyond decomposition, the work on case and agreement by Bobaljik (2008) may be promising starting point for a fuller account with the MFA. In this contribution Bobaljik (2008) argues that not only morphological case, as proposed in Marantz (1991), but also Agreement is orthogonal to the basic syntactic licensing mechanisms that regulate the distribution of NPs. Bobaljik (2008) is critical of analyses that motivate A-movement in terms of feature checking as they seem circular. In recent literature arguments have been brought to the fore that syntactic movement for EPP reasons, i.e. to fulfill the requirement that the subject position must be filled in languages such as English is misguided (McFadden and Sundaresan 2018). Rather the factors that condition this seem to be phonological in nature.

4 Human Uniqueness

Especially since (Hauser et al. 2002), work in the Minimalist Program has sought to address what Everaert et al. (2015) refer to as the Evolutionary puzzle. The puzzle, as we see it, is posed by a mismatch between biology and the geo-sciences. Biologically humans are in unremarkable by standard measures of the brain (Herculano-Houzel 2009, and others). But geo-scientists have seen it fit to speak of the Anthropocene because of the enormous impact of humanity on the planet (Crutzen 2002, and others). The answer to the puzzle standard Minimalism (Chomsky 2013) provides is the evolution of Merge in humans. Specifically, Merge may have only required a single evolutionary change, and this step would have enabled simultaneously complex language and thought to the new line of homo. One this view, Merge provides a plausible answer to the evolutionary puzzle.

The terms of the Minimalist solution to the evolutionary puzzle are not compatible with the MFA, since Merge would exist independent of language. But we speculate that a similarly attractive solution could be given within the MFA. First reconsider the tight link between complex thought structures and language standard Minimalism predicts. The link has received some support: for example, Spelke (2003) proposes that only the compositional semantics of language makes complex concepts available. But as far as we understand, recent work on animal cognition has shown many unexpected abilities (e.g. Weir and Kacelnik 2006) and the field is equivocal on whether non-human animals can form complex thoughts (Andrews 2014). There are also debates concerning animals’ ability to communicate sequences with internal complex structure comparable to the sentences of language (Schlenker et al. 2016, Sauerland 2016).

What alternative solution for the evolutionary puzzle would be compat-
ible with the MFA? If Merge has arisen independently of language and in species other than humans, other properties of language need to provide the answer for the evolutionary puzzle. Two possible candidates compatible with the MFA would be compression and linearization. The latter seems more plausible to us. Since linearization is a counterpart of Merge, but logically independent, linearization would address the evolutionary puzzle much the standard Minimalist answer does. If linearization is on the right track it might indicate that the two components of a non-linearized merged thought structure are contemporaneous in the mind and that breaking the temporal symmetry for articulation is more difficult than we intuitively appreciate. In sum, we have argued that, while the MFA is not compatible standard Minimalist answer to the evolutionary puzzle, MFA-compatible alternatives are not wholly devoid of plausibility.

5 Conclusion

We have summarized and extended the Meaning First Approach (MFA) (Sauerland and Alexiadou 2020), and highlighted some key differences to standard Minimalism: conceptual structure building, compression, the rejection of the T-structure, different accounts of movement, syntactic features, case and agreement, and finally of human uniqueness. Nevertheless we see a lot of common ground and expect that it will not be easy to discern between the two views. One insight from our preliminary exploration of the Meaning First Approach is though the following: The significant consequences of changing essentially only one assumption of Minimalism – assuming that compression is necessitated by relocated merge to the conceptual system – shows how tightly woven an intellectual package Minimalism is, to its great credit.

A Acknowledgments / Funding

A CC BY license is applied to the Author Accepted Manuscript (AAM) arising from this submission.

This project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 856421).

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