**A minimalist approach to roots**

As is well known, roots need to be assigned a category: they cannot be freely inserted in syntax (Baker, 2003: 268; Embick and Marantz, 2008: 6; Acquaviva, 2008). If they are indeed unexceptional syntactically (taking complements, merging as specifiers or, even, projecting their own phrases) as in Marantz (2000; 2006) and Harley (2007; 2009; 2011), then the obligatory categorization of roots is due to roots needing something that can be supplied by categorizers like \( n \) and \( v \).

Panagiotidis (2011), following Arad (2005: Ch.3) and Borer (2009) argues that roots are *semantically impoverished / underspecified*. As a result, free roots are not adequately specified to stand on their own as legitimate LF-objects: they require the categorizers’ features ([\( N \)] on \( n \) for sortality; [\( V \)] on \( v \) for extending-into-time) in order to provide them with interpretive perspectives within a syntactic context. It is precisely in this syntactic context where Conceptual-Intentional systems will be able associate the root with conceptual content. Hence, the categorization of roots is not a narrow-syntactic requirement, but a requirement at the interface between syntax and the conceptual-intentional systems following “from the general architecture of the grammar” (Embick & Marantz 2008: 6). Additionally, it is the *semantic impoverishment / underspecification* of roots that makes sub-categorial (i.e. ‘lexical’) meaning idiosyncratic and canonically non-compositional (Chomsky 1970).

However, surveying even a small sample of languages, one quickly realizes that not all roots appear to be equally underspecified (E. Doron, p.c.); they *all* need categorization though. Still, if we adhere to a conception of roots as forms that contain a core of meaning, then we run into trouble with respect to a) massive homonymy of roots or massive polysemy (consider *run* in English); b) the fact that, as Borer (2009) shows, the Encyclopedia doesn’t reassign meaning to the constituent formed after *every* cycle; c) the semantic contribution of roots is typically opaque unless the grammatical context is well defined (Acquaviva 2009).

A way out of this is to argue that roots *do not* denote concepts of any sort and that lexical information is largely root-external (Acquaviva 2008: 5); this is something to be expected if ‘lexical-semantic’ information is assigned to grammatical structures by the Encyclopedia: we cannot do lexical semantics with roots (already in Arad 2005: 57-71). In other words, roots are not *forms*, but indices / addresses, instructions to fetch a concept within a particular morpho-syntactic context. In this way, we can do syntactic decomposition without semantic decomposition: taking (“abstract”) roots to be indices / addresses for concepts is consistent with Fodor’s conceptual atomism. So, Fodor (1970) and Fodor & Lepore (1996) are right that lexical concepts can’t be decomposed, but Fodor and Lepore (1996; 1998) are wrong to think that syntactic decomposition *necessarily* breaks down a concept into smaller concepts.
References


Fodor, Jerry & Lepore, Ernest. 1996. The red herring and the pet fish: why concepts still can’t be prototypes. *Cognition* 58. 253-270


Marantz Alec. 2006. Phases and words. Unpublished ms. NYU.