The Phase Impenetrability Condition, successive cyclicity, and the direction of structure building

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When a syntactic object undergoes Spell-Out, it is 'handed over' to PF, and its valued uninterpretable features are 'stripped away'. In current parlance, the stages through which syntactic derivations evolve are called 'phases', and the derivational model that incorporates this philosophy is accordingly called 'derivation by phase'. Considering the way it has been operationalised, however, the name 'derivation by phase' for this theoretical model of incremental structure building and manipulation is misleading. The syntactic objects that undergo Spell-Out are usually not the phases themselves. Though entire phases are spelled out *en bloc* if they constitute the root of the tree, in all other contexts it is only the complement domain of the phase head that is standardly assumed to be 'handed over' to the interpretive components. Its name notwithstanding, the PIC does not state that phases are impenetrable; it only declares the phase head's complement opaque. The obvious stumbling block for the idea that the entire phase is 'stripped' and 'frozen' upon completion is that it appears that parts of the phase remain accessible later in the syntactic derivation. But I will argue that we do not actually need to exempt the head and the edge of the phase from Spell-Out at the phase level. A re-evaulation of the notion of 'head movement' renders head exemption redundant; and a critical reappraisal of the idea that long-distance movement dependencies proceed in a successive-cyclic manner, from phase to phase, leads to the conclusion that it should be fundamentally rethought in such a way that so-called successive-cyclic movement is modelled as fell-swoop long-distance movement dependent on successive-cyclic Agree relations between potential phases and higher probes. With these conclusions in place, I then proceed to an investigation of the broader theoretical consequences of the idea that Agree between a potential phase and the next probe up the tree 'extends' the lower phase up to the projection of the higher probe. This notion of 'phase extension' is both principled and empirically adequate, providing a simple perspective on strong islands. But it fits in poorly with the idea that syntactic structure is built incrementally from bottom to top. In this light, I explore the prospects of a top-down left-to-right structure-building model for syntactic computation, providing a new outlook on the relationship between *wh*-scope marking and parasitic gap constructions along the way. Time permitting, I will review the other recent top-down approaches to syntax.