

Top-down derivation as flexible syntax
Jan-Wouter Zwart and Marjolein Wietske Talsma
University of Groningen, July 2024

Neeleman and Weerman's theory of Flexible Syntax (Neeleman and Weerman 1999, hence NW) proposed a novel definition of the relation between grammatical functions and thematic roles. This proposal, while still nonstandard, has lost none of its relevance today. Deviating from traditional Government and Binding thinking, NW argue that subject and objects are 'base-generated' in their grammatical function positions ('case positions'). The association between grammatical functions and thematic roles is established in a postsyntactic component dealing with meaning (traditionally called 'LF'). This entails a more flexible syntax and essentially eliminates A-movement. As NW note (1999:3), this flexible approach to syntax is quite compatible with the minimalist program (which replaced the Government and Binding theory from 1991 on). Yet the 'rigid' theory continues to inform mainstream thinking about syntax today. In fact, the idea that subjects and objects are generated in theta positions is crucial to the version of minimalist theory espoused in Chomsky et al. (2023), where theta positions are created by 'external merge' alone (Chomsky et al. 2023:33). In this talk we side with NW on this topic, and show how the basic tenets of flexible syntax fall out from the top-down derivational system introduced in Zwart (2009), in particular in the implementation to theta theory of Talsma (to appear).