An Animated and Narrated Glossary of Terms used in Linguistics

presents

C-command

Definition

• There are many definitions for the term. Let’s begin with a commonly used one.

• A c-commands B if
  – the first branching node that dominates A also dominates B; and
  – A does not dominate B, and B does not dominate A.
**Unpacking the definition**

- As you can see, c-command is a very abstract relationship between nodes on a tree.
- It is commonly used in syntax and sometimes in other areas as well.

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**Dominance**

- Imagine entities A, B and C.

The lines connecting the nodes B, C to A indicate a part-whole relationship (or any asymmetrical relationship)

A dominates B and C.
B does not dominate C. C does not dominate B. Neither B nor C dominates A.

- Suppose A stands in some asymmetrical relationship with B and C. For instance, A is composed of B and C.
Branching

- A is a node that branches into B and C. A is a branching node.
- B immediately dominates nothing else but D. B does not branch. B is not a branching node.

Recall …

- A c-commands B if
  - the first branching node that dominates A also dominates B; and
  - A does not dominate B, and B does not dominate A.
Illustration

Slide 7

• B c-commands C?
• C c-commands B?
• D c-commands C?
• C c-commands D?

YES!!
YES!!
YES!!

Illustration

Slide 8

• B c-commands C, E and F.
• C c-commands B and D.
• D c-commands C, E and F.
• E c-commands F only.
• F c-commands E only.
C-command

• Any node A c-commands node B, no matter how many layers of structure there may be, as long as
  – The first branching node that dominates A also dominates B; and
  – A does not dominate B, and B does not dominate A.

Other definitions

• X c-commands Y if
  – the node that immediately dominates X also dominates Y; and
  – X does not dominate Y, and Y does not dominate X.

By this definition, D does not c-command C, but C c-commands D.
Other definitions

• There are a number of other definitions of c-command.
• There are also other notions that relate to c-command (such as m-command or f-command).
• The main idea is to work out the definition carefully in the same way presented here.

Using c-command

• In syntax for example, reflexives (herself, himself, themselves, etc) and reciprocals (each other) are always c-commanded by their antecedent.
Further reading


The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
Hong Kong Baptist University.