

The Big Mess Construction Straightened Out

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Abstract: Unfortunately, little attention has been paid to the Big Mess Construction (BMC) among researchers of theoretical linguistics for the past one and half decades. The BMC, however, deserves much consideration and study since it exhibits syntactic and semantic idiosyncratic features. Therefore, this paper addresses the following two aims: (i) to examine previous analyses of the BMC within the frameworks of the Minimalist Program (MP) and Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG) pointing out their contributions and problems, and (ii) to show that the BMC and the existential *there*-construction share two properties, implication of contrast and new information, both of which were not acknowledged in previous analyses.

Keywords: Big Mess Construction, syntax, semantics, Minimalist Program, HPSG

1 Introduction

Little attention has been paid to the Big Mess Construction (BMC)¹ among researchers of theoretical linguistics for the past one and half decades, therefore there have been a few previous studies which attempt to reveal syntactic and semantic/pragmatic characteristics of the construction. The BMC, however, deserves much consideration and study since it exhibits syntactic and semantic idiosyncratic features. In this respect, the current paper has two aims. The first

aim is to critically review previous analyses of the BMC in the frameworks of the Minimalist Program (MP) and Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar (HPSG), and then point out their contributions and problems. The second aim is to point out three properties of the BMC, namely (i) stylistic emphasis, (ii) contrastive meaning, and (iii) new information, which have not been recognized in previous studies. It will be also shown that the second and the third properties are also observed in the existential *there*-construction (ETC). The fact that the BMC and the ETC commonly share these properties has not been acknowledged either in any of previous analyses as far as the present author's knowledge goes.

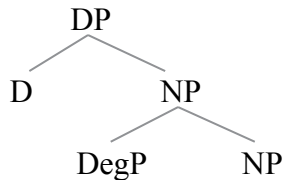
Section 2 critically examines previous studies of the BMC taking one representative analysis within the framework of MP (Kennedy and Merchant 2000), and three HPSG representative analyses (Van Eynde 2007, Kay and Sag 2009, and Kim and Sells 2011). In the course of the critical review in section 2, a set of syntactic properties unique to the BMC suggested by these previous analyses will be highlighted. Moreover, theoretical arguments of the four previous analyses will be also scrutinized, bringing to light contributions and problems. Furthermore, the BMC's three properties together with the similarities with the ETC mentioned above will be examined in detail in section 3 to complement the thrust of this paper.

2 Previous analyses of the BMC: contributions and problems

2.1 Minimalist Program (MP) approach

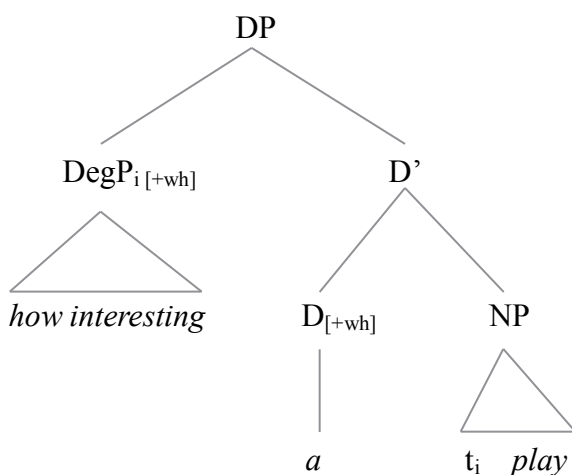
Kennedy and Merchant (2000) offer an MP account of inverted DegPs in attributive comparatives, which are analogous to BMCs. The gist of their analysis can be summarized in two steps. As the first step, following Svenonius's (1994) analysis, Kennedy and Merchant (2000) assume that an attributive DegP is left-adjoined to an NP as shown in (1).

(1)



Given the structure in (1), the extraction of $_{[+wh]}$ DegP from the attributive position can be accounted for as illustrated in (2), using Kennedy and Merchant's (2000) example, *how interesting a play*.

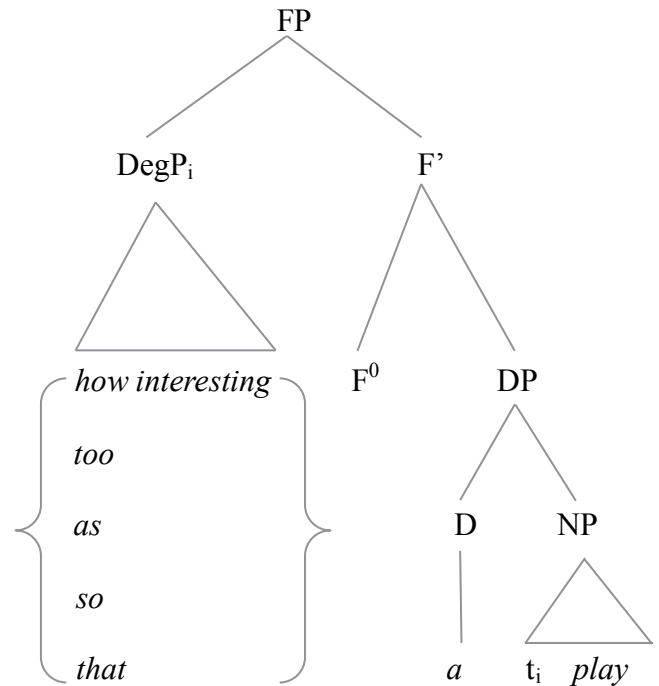
(2)



As the second step, adopting the analyses of Bowers (1987) and Bennis et al. (1998), Kennedy and Merchant (2000) extend their analysis, assuming a higher functional category of FP

as exemplified in (3), thereby accounting for sentences containing a [+wh] feature as illustrated in (4) together with sentences without a [+wh] feature as exemplified in (5) (See Kennedy and Merchant 2000: 124-125).

(3)



(4)

- a. [*How interesting a play*] did Brio write?
- b. [*How tall a forward*] did the Lakers hire?
- c. [*How old a dresser*] did Sheila find at the market?

(5)

- a. I ate [*too big a piece*].
- b. If I ever see [*that disgusting a movie*] again, I'll ask for my money back.
- c. Bob didn't write [*as detailed a proposal*] as Sheila did.
- d. He took [*so big a piece*] that he couldn't finish it.

Although it appears to be aptly constructed, Kennedy and Merchant's (2000) analysis raises at least three problems. First, the legitimacy of the DegP extraction is questionable. As it stands,

the extraction must be obligatory in order to produce well-formed attributive comparatives, otherwise ill-formed counterparts would surface, as substantiated by examples in (6). Here, an asterisk means grammatically ill-formed.

(6)

- a. *[a how interesting play] did Brio write?
- b. *[a how tall forward] did the Lakers hire?
- c. *[a how old dresser] did Sheila find at the market?
- d. I ate *[a too big piece].
- e. If I ever see *[a that disgusting movie] again, I'll ask for my money back.
- f. Bob didn't write *[a as detailed proposal] as Sheila did.
- g. He took *[a so big piece] that he couldn't finish it.

There are, however, examples which show that the DegP extraction is optional as demonstrated by (7) and (8).

(7)

- a. [A more serious problem] came up.
- b. I saw [a less enjoyable movie] than that one.

(8)

- a. [More serious a problem] came up.
- b. I saw [less enjoyable a movie] than that one.

The examples in (7) and (8) question the credibility of Kennedy and Merchant's DegP extraction since the extraction is obligatory in one case and optional in another, so that it cannot explain the facts in a principled way.

Secondly, Kennedy and Merchant's argument for their FP structure is neither as adequate nor convincing as they wish it to be. Kennedy and Merchant produce examples such as those in (9) and claim that their FP structure is valid since "the meaningless element *of* appears in exactly the position we (they) posit for F^0 ."²

(9) Kennedy and Merchant's (2000: 125) examples

- a. [How long of a novel] did Brio write?
- b. [How tall of a forward] did the Lakers hire?
- c. [How dumb of a guy] is he?
- d. I ate [too big of a piece].
- e. If I ever see [that disgusting of a movie] again, I'll ask for my money back.
- f. Bob didn't write [as detailed of a proposal] as Sheila did.
- g. He took [so big of a piece] that he couldn't finish it.

Unfortunately, Kennedy and Merchant claim cannot be validated at least in the following two respects. The first is a lack of strong motivation. If only an optional *of* and no other element can appear under the F^0 node, then the claim would not be supported. The second is that counterexamples can be observed as shown in (10), where the preposition *of* appears to be without semantic content at first glance. Upon close examination, however, the subtle meaning of the preposition emerges. The *of* in (10a) implies an apposition of *that idiot = a boy*; in (10b) it suggests that the speaker's degree of stupidity is in apposition with that of an idiot; in (10c) it carries the meaning of *to*; and in (10d) it conveys the meaning of *on*. Consequently, Kennedy and Merchant's meaningless *of* should be treated as the preposition *of* occurring under a P node rather than the F^0 , contrary to their assumption.

(10) Counter examples

- a. Where's that idiot of a boy?
- b. I know now how much of an idiot I was.
- c. a quarter of six o'clock
- d. go fishing of a Sunday³

For further counterevidence, let us consider one more fundamental problem addressed by Kim and Sells (2011). They claim that Kennedy and Merchant's (2000) movement-oriented

analysis does not answer the following question: What motivates the extraction of $_{[+wh]}$ DegP from the attributive position in (2)? After reviewing previous movement-oriented analyses including Kennedy and Merchant (2000), Vikner (2001), Matushansky (2002), Wood (2002), and Wood and Vikner (2011), Kim and Sells (2011) concluded that the movement-oriented analyses do not capture the following three basic characteristics of the BMC: (i) the ordering flexibility of the elements, (ii) the idiosyncrasy of lexical items involved, and (iii) the relevant constructional constraints. Although Kennedy and Merchant (2000) offered a movement-oriented account for consideration, their analysis is found to be unsatisfactory on the basis of the above counterexamples and counterarguments. The next section provides HPSG analyses of the BMC.

2.2 Three HPSG analyses

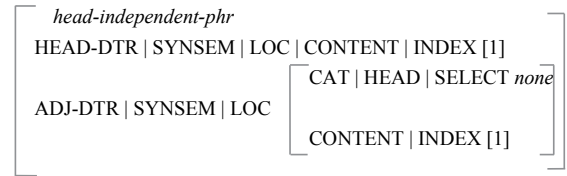
This section critically examines three representative HPSG analyses of the BMC: Van Eynde's (2007), Kay and Sag's (2009), and Kim and Sells's (2011). There are two advantages and two disadvantages found in the three HPSG analyses. The first advantage is that they all recognize two essential features: (i) the BMC allows the indefinite article *a/an* but not the definite article *the*, and (ii) an attributive adjective phrase should contain a degree modifier. The second advantage is that they have all acknowledged the importance of a syntax-semantics interface and put forward interface analyses as will be discussed shortly. On the other hand, at least three shortcomings can be observed in the three HPSG analyses. First, the three HPSG analyses overlook the fact that the BMC carries a structural emphasis. Second, although the HPSG analyses recognize the 'indefinite article condition' of the BMC, they fail to recognize the fact that the BMC and the ETC have in common a 'new information' parameter, which prohibits the use of the definite article *the*.

Furthermore, the HPSG analyses all fail to observe another semantic property that the BMC has an 'implication of contrast (IC)', therefore a semantic clash occurs if the IC is not satisfied. The above points will be discussed in detail after the critical review of the three HPSG analyses in section 3. Before this, we examine the three HPSG analyses in detail one by one, revealing both strong and weak points.

2.2.1 Van Eynde's (2007) analysis

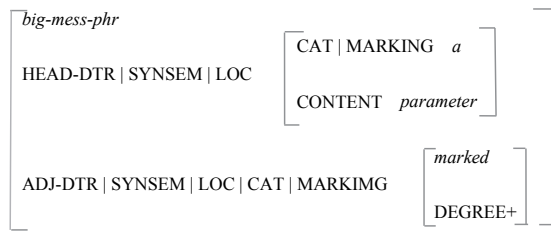
Van Eynde's (2007) analysis of the BMC hinges on three stipulations. First, a non-head daughter does not lexically select its head sister. As a consequence, the value of SELECT is 'none' as illustrated in the inner square brackets of the attributive value matrix (AVM) diagram shown in (11). Second, the head daughter and the sister are connected in terms of the same index [1].

(11) AVM for head independent phrases



Finally, an idiosyncratic phrase type '*big-mess-phr*' is introduced as illustrated in (12) to account for the following two characteristics of the BMC: (i) the lower NP contains the indefinite article '*a*' or '*an*' instead of '*the*', and (ii) the AP must contain an appropriate degree denoting word. Characteristic (i) is captured by the value of MARKING, which is specified as '*a*' at the top of square brackets, whereas characteristic (ii) is accounted for by introducing the value of 'DEGREE+' specified at the bottom of square brackets.

(12) AVM for the Big Mess Construction



The value ‘a’ of the MARKING type excludes ill-formed phrases such as *how warm (nice) water*, *too big some house*, and *how big anyone*. Moreover, due to the CONTENT type value ‘parameter’, the head daughter denotes an object, which must not be a quantified NP. Consequently, ill-formed examples such as *that big a few houses* is blocked. Furthermore, the adjunct daughter is assigned a MARKING value of the type ‘marked’, thereby ruling out examples containing an adjective without an intensifier such as *big a house*, and at the same time getting rid of an adjective with an unmarked functor as seen in examples such as *very big a house*.

Van Eynde’s (2007) meticulous analysis enjoys two advantages. The first advantage is simplicity. As Kay and Sag (2009) assert, Van Eynde’s analysis replaces Pollard and Sag’s (1994) feature MOD together with SPEC by a single feature SELECT (SEL), which also makes their SPR feature superfluous.⁴ The second advantage is that it can account for the discontinuous constituents of the BMC. In addition to the above advantages, Van Eynde’s analysis highlights four important idiosyncratic properties of the BMC, which can be summarized as follows: (i) an adjective without an intensifier is prohibited, (ii) the determiner ‘a’ or ‘an’ but not ‘the’ is selected, (iii) a quantified noun phrase is disallowed, and (iv) an unmarked functor is forbidden.

Van Eynde’s (2007) analysis should be credited for bringing to light the above four properties peculiar to the BMC. His analysis, however, has a drawback in failing to recognize four more properties of the BMC; three are

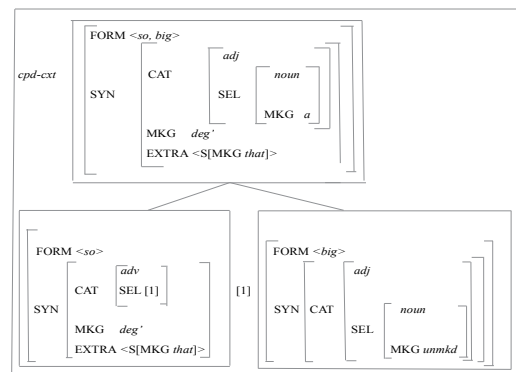
semantic and one is syntactic in nature. The first semantic feature is that the BMC’s inverted word order inherently carries an emphatic meaning. It is important to consider this property in order to make the analysis of the BMC comprehensible. The second feature is that the BMC bears a contrastive meaning. The third characteristic is that like the ETC, the BMC introduces new information. This is the reason why both constructions do not allow the use of the definite article ‘the’. These three semantic properties will be discussed in detail in section 3.

The syntactic limitation of Van Eynde’s analysis is that he does not consider a *that*-clause adjunction on the assumption that it is independent of the BMC analysis. This is a false step since the BMC optionally selects a *that*-clause, and for that reason Kay and Sag (2009) have extended their analysis on this issue as explained in section 2.2.2.

2.2.2 Kay and Sag’s (2009) analysis

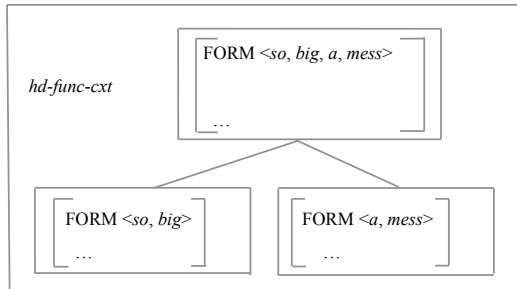
Adopting the basic postulations of Van Eynde’s (2007) analysis, Kay and Sag (2009) offer an extended HPSG analysis of the Complex Pre-determination (CPD) phenomenon, which is alternatively called the Big Mess Construction (BMC). Let us now examine Kay and Sag’s analysis in three steps taking their example, *so big a mess*. First, on the basis of the assumption that ‘so big’ selects a singular indefinite NP, Kay and Sag assume a complex pre-determiner construct as illustrated in the AVM diagram shown in (13).

(13) Complex Pre-determiner Construct (CPD)



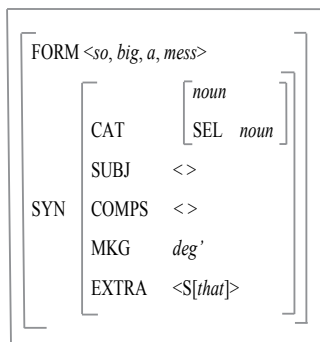
The second step is to combine ‘*so big*’ with ‘*a mess*’ in terms of the Head-Functor Construction (HFC) as illustrated in (14).

(14) Head-Functor Construction (HFC)



The mother of the two daughters in the HFC in (14) bears the properties depicted in (15), where the null angle brackets < > mean an empty list. Notice that the EXTRA value at the bottom is specified as <S[that]>, which means a *that*-clause can be selected as an adjunct. Bearing this in mind, recall that the CPD construct in (13) contains <S[MKG that]>. This guarantees that a *that*-clause is extraposed to the right of the phrase *so big a mess*.

(15)



Kay and Sag’s (2009) analysis has three merits over Van Eynde’s analysis. First, Kay and Sag incorporate <S[that]> in their EXTRA value allowing ‘*so*’ to take a *that*-clause. This was not available in Van Eynde’s analysis. Another merit is that by introducing the HFC in (14), ‘*so big*’ can take a singular indefinite NP. Finally, Kay and Sag’s analysis achieves a uniform account by

assigning exactly the same SEL value to lexical words such as ‘*how*’, ‘*such*’ and ‘*many*’, on the assumption that these words can appear in a pre-determiner position just like ‘*so big*’ does.

By incorporating their innovations into the basic assumptions of Van Eynde’s account, Kay and Sag (2009) have expanded the explanatory power of their analysis of the BMC. However, like Van Eynde’s account, Kay and Sag’s analysis failed to recognize and account for the three semantic properties mentioned at the beginning of section 2.2: (i) the BMC carries an emphatic meaning in terms of stylistic inversion, (ii) the BMC bears a contrastive meaning, and (iii) the BMC introduces new information like the ETC.⁵

2.2.3. Kim and Sells’s (2011) analysis

Unlike Van Eynde’s (2007) and Kay and Sag’s (2009) analyses, both of which assume a combinatorial power at the phrasal level, Kim and Sells (2011) suggest that *so*-type degree words are assigned a special building block property in order to produce a BMC. It should be noted here that Kim and Sells (2011: 353) analyze *so*-type degree words on a par with *such*-type degree words as illustrated in (16):

(16) Examples

a. *so*-type: *so, as, too, this, that, how(ever)*

as good a singer, how strange a story, too hot a day, how(ever) brave a soldier, far cheaper a method,...

b. *such*-type: *what, many, half,...*

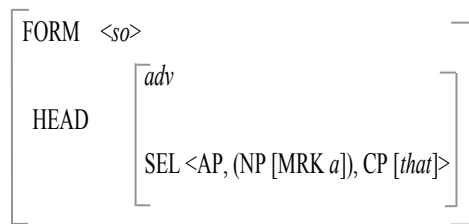
many a time, such a disgrace, what a pity, half an hour,...

However, *such*-type words prohibit examples such as **many good a time*, **such delicious a pizza*, **what fun a book*, **half sharp an hour*, etc. Moreover, *so*-type words do not combine with a bare NP, while *such*-type words do: *You have been [*so/such good friends] to the students; You are in*

[**so/such good shape*] (see Kim and Sells, 2011: 356). Therefore, *such*-type words do not conform to the BMC pattern of [Deg_{modif} AP_{indef} NP], where the initial element means a degree modifier; the second, an adjective phrase; and the third, an indefinite noun phrase. For this reason, the *such*-type constructions are considered irrelevant and therefore, they are beyond the scope of this paper.

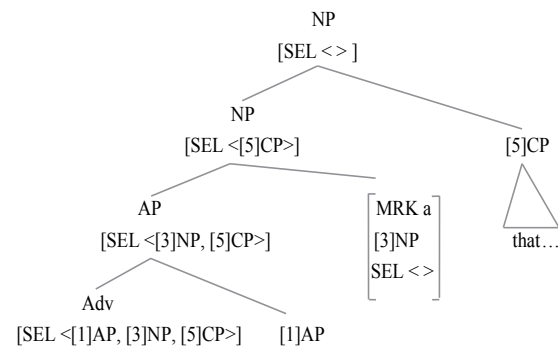
Let us now take ‘*so*’ as a representative and show an overview of Kim and Sells’ (2011) analysis. As the lexical information in (17) illustrates, the adverbial functor ‘*so*’ can select three elements: an obligatory AP; an optional indefinite NP with an indefinite article *a/an*; and an optional CP headed by *that*.

(17) Lexical information of *so* (Kim and Sells 2011: 354)



In Kim and Sells’ (2011: 355) analysis, the core of BMC is a degree word which is ‘*so*’ in (17). Kim and Sells’ derivation of a BMC can be described as follows. At the onset, the core [*so*] combines with [*big*] creating a bigger chunk [*so big*], which in turn fuses with [*a mess*] producing the head-functor construction [*so big a mess*], which is then united with a discontinuous modifier headed by [*that*], satisfying all the requirements of the feature SEL as pictured in (18). This assumption is a point of departure from Kay and Sag’s (2009) analysis in which the AP together with the following NP, [*so big*] is initially a single whole.

(18) Kim and Sells’s (2011: 355) binary-branching structure



Kim and Sells’ (2011) lexical, construction-based analysis should be credited for acknowledging the importance and superiority of a lexically-based approach without resorting to movement-oriented devices of any kind. It is important to note that they went a step further than Kay and Sag (2009) and assigned degree words such as ‘*so*’ an essential role as the source of BMC. Kim and Sells’ (2011) analysis, however, poses a couple of problems. First, their analysis did not go far enough to achieve a lexical generalization. Kim and Sells’ analysis hinges on the assumption that a limited set of degree words such as ‘*so*’ is assigned a special function as the source of the BMC. If this line of reasoning were followed, then it would lead to further complication of the lexicon. An extra special allomorph for each of the *so*-type words has to be assumed for the sake of accounting for the BMC. Second, Kim and Sells’s assumption in the lexical information in (17) raises a problem with respect to the selectional restriction of BMC elements. Recall that Kim and Sells (2011: 354) claimed that ‘*so*’ can select three elements: one obligatory dependent AP; two optional dependents of an indefinite NP; and a CP headed by *that*. This assumption does not correspond with fact. Putting aside the key element, ‘*so*’ and the optional ‘*of*’, a BMC requires two ‘obligatory’ elements contra to Kim and Sells claim: a degree adjective, and an indefinite NP with an indefinite article *a/an*. This point is borne out by all the acceptable BMC

examples provided so far in this paper: (4a,b,c), (5a,b,c,d), (8a,b), (9a,b,c,d,e,f,g), and (10b).

To sum up the discussions in section 2, the MP analysis and the HPSG analyses have extended researchers' understanding of the BMC to some degree. The previous analyses, however, all share three problems. Although the BMC's syntactic idiosyncratic properties are accounted for, the MP analysis and the HPSG analyses all failed to acknowledge and incorporate the three fundamental semantic properties: (i) the BMC's inverted word order bears a stylistic emphasis, (ii) the BMC carries a contrastive meaning, and (iii) the BMC introduces new information like the ETC does, therefore the use of definite article '*the*' is prohibited. These unique semantic properties are now examined in detail in the next section.

3 Semantic properties of the BMC

There are at least two ways to achieve emphasis linguistically: sound and form. Phonologically, there are well-known means such as placing primary stress on a nucleus of a syllable and producing a rising or a rising-falling intonation. Morphological and syntactic ways for producing emphasis include the use of words such as '*must*' or the exclamation symbol '!', or a WH-exclamation such as *What a nice tie you are wearing!* A stylistic inversion of words is another way of producing an emphatic effect. The noticeable visual characteristic of the BMC is its inverted element order of ' $ADV_{intensity}+ADJ_{deg}+(of)+D+N$ ', where the first constituent is an intensifying adverb of a limited set such as *so, too, such, that*, etc.; the second, a degree adjective; the third, an optional preposition *of*; the fourth, a determiner '*a*' or '*an*'; and finally, a noun. In this connection, consider the examples given in (19) and notice that the inverted constituent order is a favored and common means of achieving an emphasis.

(19)

- a. *Long live the king!* (cf. *The king (should) live long.*)
- b. *Not only does this Japanese sake taste great but it also goes well with sushi.*
(cf. *This Japanese sake tastes great and it also goes well with sushi.*)
- c. *What a fine piece of paper art he made!* (cf. *He made a fine piece of paper art.*)
- d. *How wonderful your dream is!* (cf. *Your dream is wonderful.*)

In (19a), a wish for the longevity of the king is highlighted and emphasized. Sentence (19b) employs the emphatic phrase of '*not only...but also...*' and proclaims the goodness of the Japanese sake in question. In (19c), the result of his paper work is praised and emphasized by the use of interjectional '*what*' and the inverted word order together with an interjection marker '!'. (19d) employs the stylistic inversion, the interjectional word '*How*' as well as the marker '!'. Likewise in the BMC, the stylistic inversion and the use of an intensifier together with a degree adjective produce a similar effect as the examples in (20) illustrate. For instance, speakers or writers use examples (20b) and (20d) rather than (20a) and (20c) in order to achieve emphasis in a more effective way.

(20)

- a. *It is [a more serious problem] than others.*
- b. *It is [more serious a problem] than others.*
- c. *I have never seen [a big mess] like this before.*
- d. *I have never seen [so big a mess] like this before.*

Closely connected to the above stylistic emphasis is the fact that the BMC expresses a contrastive meaning.⁶ In order to see this semantic property clearly, compare two types of examples given in (21). One is a stranded noun phrase and the other is an inverted noun phrase which is equivalent to the BMC. Notice that the stranded

NP allows either an indefinite article or a definite article as exemplified in (21a), whereas the inverted NP allows only an indefinite article as illustrated in (21b).

(21)

- a. *A/The poem is too difficult to read.* (Stranded NP)
- b. *This is too difficult a/*the poem to read.* (Inverted NP = BMC)

Although this phenomenon has been known, the reason why only the indefinite article ‘*a*’ or ‘*an*’ is allowed instead of the definite article ‘*the*’ has been a mystery whose solution none of the previous analyses were able to produce. The current author provides below a viable explanation for this puzzling phenomenon in terms of two conditions: contrastive meaning and new information.

When a speaker or writer wants to highlight a concrete or abstract object in terms of the BMC, a highlighted object is contrasted with other possible object(s). In order to express this, the BMC requires the use of the indefinite article ‘*a/an*’⁷ instead of ‘*the*’. Unlike the former article, the use of the latter article indicates that a highlighted object is clearly defined and implies the meaning of ‘the one and only’. This uniqueness is incompatible with the act of contrasting under the situation at issue, therefore a semantic clash results giving rise to an unacceptable statement such as (21b), which contains the asterisked phrase **the poem to read*. Let us now consider two more BMC examples and demonstrate the validity of the above claim. Consider the examples in (22).

(22)

- a. *How interesting a play/*the play did Brio write?*
- b. *This is so complicated a problem /*the problem that I don’t want to get involved.*

In (22a), ‘*a play*’ is contrasted with another

play or other plays in the degree of interestingness, while in the case of ‘*the play*’ the contrast is nullified, thereby giving rise to anomaly in the BMC context. Analogously, in (22b) the use of the indefinite article ‘*a*’ assumes that ‘*a problem*’ is in contrast to other problems with respect to the degree of complexity, whereas the use of ‘*the problem*’ annuls the possibility of contrast in the context under consideration, resulting in an anomalous sentence. Therefore, ‘*the play*’ and ‘*the problem*’ in (22a) and (22b), respectively eliminate the possibility of contrast due to the unique reference resulting from the use of the definite determiner ‘*the*’. Let us call this condition, an ‘implication of contrast parameter (ICP)’. The effect of the ICP is also seen in exclamatory sentences as shown in (23) although the contrast might be considered weak. Notice that in (23a), an object the speaker is looking at stands out in contrast to other flowers and not as ‘the one and only flower’ within the speaker’s view or in her/his mental space. The same line of reasoning also applies to (23b).

(23)

- a. *What a/*the beautiful flower (this is)!*
- b. *What an/*the interesting story I heard this morning!*

It should be noted here that the ICP is not unique to English since other languages also exhibit the same phenomenon as exemplified in (24).

(24) Cross-linguistic examples

- a. Japanese counterpart of (23a), where ‘CON, stands for the contrastive marker’; ‘UNI, uniqueness marker’:
この花は/*が、なんて美しいだろう。⁸
‘*kono hana wa/*ga nante utsukusiin-daro*’
‘this-flower-CON/*UNI-what-beautiful-is’
‘What a/*the beautiful flower this is.’

- b. Korean counterpart of (23a), where TOP or SUB-P represents the topic or subject particle; IDT or SUB-P, the identifier or subject particle:
*이 꽃은/*가 왜 이렇게 아름다운 것인가!*
 ‘this-flower-TOP or SUB-P/*IDT or SUB-P-what-beautiful-is’
 ‘What a/*the beautiful flower this is.’
- c. Chinese counterpart of (23a), where CLS signifies a classifier meaning ‘a piece of flower’:
这朵花 怎么这么 漂亮 呢!
 ‘this-CLS-flower-what-beautiful-is’
 ‘What a beautiful flower this is.’

The Japanese example (24a) substantiates that it is grammatical and acceptable to use the topic marker with contrastive meaning ‘*は* (*wa*)’ in the given context, while it is ungrammatical and unacceptable if the uniqueness marker ‘*が* (*ga*)’ is used (see Aniya (1987: 57) for an in-depth analysis of ‘*wa*’ and ‘*ga*’). Likewise, the Korean example (24b) shows that a particle ‘*은* (analogous to ‘*wa*’)’ instead of a particle ‘*가* (analogous to ‘*ga*’)’ is used to produce a grammatical and acceptable counterpart. On the other hand, the Chinese example (24c) lacks a counterpart to the Japanese ‘*は*’ or Korean ‘*은*’, therefore it does not seem to stand on a par with the examples of (24a) and (24b). The current author believes that the ICP is universal, therefore it would be reasonable to assume that a competent Chinese speaker unconsciously or consciously is aware of the fact, in the context under consideration, that the flower she/he is looking at is a particular flower which has come into view against a background of other possible flower(s) either in sight or in her/his mental space. This assumption has been verified. Chinese language informants confirmed that they do get an impression of contrast in the sentence given in (24c).⁹

Another semantic condition imposed on the BMC is that a highlighted object is new

information rather than old information. Let us call this condition, a ‘new information parameter (NIP)’. This is another reason why the BMC prohibits the use of the definite determiner ‘*the*’, which is used for introducing old information to express the uniqueness meaning of ‘the one and only object’. A well-known construction type for introducing new information is the existential *there*-construction (ETC), in which the use of the definite article ‘*the*’ is prohibited.¹⁰ This is the case since the ETC introduces some new information to the hearer/reader for the first time. Therefore, new information that the speaker/writer intends to convey should be a non-anaphoric and non-unique reference. In this connection, let us consider BMC examples in (25) in comparison with ETC examples in (26). Notice that the two types of examples exhibit the same pattern. An introduced entity or object exhibits the characteristic of [+contrastive, +new information], thereby allowing the use of ‘*a*’, but prohibiting the definite article ‘*the*’.

(25) BMC examples

- a. *I have never had so enjoyable a/*the time that I could not forget.*
 b. *My son has produced far more sophisticated a/*the program than anybody else.*

(26) ETC examples

- a. *There is a/*the rainbow in the sky.*
 b. *There was a/*the time when I was at the top of the world.*

In sum, there are three semantic parameters imposed on the BMC: (i) stylistic emphasis, (ii) implication of contrast parameter (ICP), and (iii) new information parameter (NIP). The ICP and the NIP are common properties shared by the BMC and the ETC, therefore the use of the definite article ‘*the*’ is disallowed.

4 Concluding remarks

The current paper has critically reviewed four previous analyses of the Big Mess Construction within the frameworks of the Minimalist Program and Head-driven Phrase Structure Grammar, and then highlighted their contributions and problems. It has also discussed three previously unrecognized semantic properties of the BMC, two of which are also observed in the existential *there*-construction. If the three semantic properties had been addressed and incorporated, then the previous analyses would have been more comprehensive. The current paper has neither offered a solution to each of the problems of the previous analyses within their theoretical frameworks nor provided an alternative analysis to them within a different grammar model. These issues, both challenging and inviting, will be addressed in future research.

Notes

- ¹ For the use of the term ‘Big Mess Construction (BMC)’, see Van Eynde (2007), Kim and Sells (2011), and Kay and Sag (2012). The BMC is also referred to as Complex Pre-determination (Kay and Sag, 2009, 2012).
- ² See Kennedy and Merchant (2000: 125). The word *they* in parentheses is added by the current author in order to avoid ambiguity.
- ³ Some speakers of English only allow ‘*on*’ and not ‘*of*’.
- ⁴ The feature MOD signifies ‘modifier; SPEC, ‘specified’; and SPR, ‘specifier’.
- ⁵ In their latest work, Kay and Sag (2012) advanced a more extended analysis, which accounts for both the discontinuous dependent phenomenon and the complex pre-determination (also referred to as the Big Mess Construction) phenomenon in a general way. Their analysis, however, explains none of the three semantic characteristics of the BMC discussed in the current paper.
- ⁶ Referring to examples taken from Grano and Kennedy (2012) and Fleisher (2011), an anonymous reviewer

points out that adjectives intrinsically have a contrastive meaning. The BMC naturally carries a contrastive meaning since it obligatorily contains an adjective together with a degree word such as ‘*so*’.

- ⁷ The indefinite article ‘*a*’ can have either a non-specific or a specific reference. Notice that the reference of ‘*a Norwegian woman*’ in the following example can be either ‘*any Norwegian woman*’ or ‘*a particular Norwegian woman (who Bill knows)*’: *Bill wants to marry a Norwegian woman.* (The example is taken from Fromkin et al. 2014: 180). See also Aniya (1992: 160) for the specific reference use of the indefinite article ‘*a/an*’. The ETC allows the use of ‘*the*’ if a post-verbal argument is distinguishable and uniquely identifiable by both the speaker and hearer (Aniya (1992: 158)). If the BMC and the ETC share this characteristic, then we find one more similarity between the two constructions. The present author, however, has not found a native speaker informant who allows the use of ‘*the*’ in the BMC examples discussed in this paper.
- ⁸ This Japanese counterpart can be replaced by the equivalent translation, “これは/*が*なんて美しい花だ!”. An anonymous reviewer questions the contrastive meaning in (24a) on the ground that if ‘*は*’ is contrastive, then it is pronounced in high pitch and the following constituents get low pitch as in the following example: ‘太郎は昨日ここに来た。’. This sentence is declarative, whereas (24a) is exclamatory. It seems to be the case that the exclamatory word ‘*なんて*’ has priority over ‘*は*’ in emphasis, therefore the former word gets a higher pitch than the latter.
- ⁹ I am indebted to my native speaker language informants for providing grammaticality judgements: Ms. Xulian and her Chinese and Korean friends in the Graduate School of Integrated Arts and Sciences at Hiroshima University.
- ¹⁰ See Aniya (1992) for a detailed discussion of the ETC. The ETC should not be confused with the list *there*-construction which allows the use of the definite article ‘*the*’.

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