1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the way that syntactic features, the building blocks of syntactic categories, are dealt with by interface systems. The core proposal is that the syntax morphology and syntax semantics interfaces both invoke feature interpretability but that the configurations in which they do so are different: the LF interface interprets syntactic features that are in spec-head or head-adjoined relations, whereas the interface with morphology, in addition, interprets syntactic features in adjacency relations.

The main empirical focus is on the position of subjects in Irish and Scottish Gaelic. There is strong evidence that these VSO languages are SVO underlyingly, with V raising to a higher functional position (McCloskey, 1983, and subsequent work). Further evidence points to this position being the highest functional head below C (McCloskey, 1996a). The descriptive question, then, is whether the subject remains in situ in the verb phrase (VP) or whether it raises to the specifier of a higher functional head. A deeper question is how the subject is licensed: does it simply procrastinate (raising to its licensing position at LF) as argued by Bobalijk and Carnie (1996), or does it raise overtly to a specifier position to check case (McCloskey, 1996b) or EPP requirements?

This chapter will show that the solution to these problems bears upon a more fundamental question: what mechanisms are at play in determining the surface
position of DP arguments, and are these mechanisms purely syntactic or do they involve one or other of the interface systems? The standard minimalist line is that the position of an argument is determined by the strength of the features on its case checker (this theoretical viewpoint is taken by both Bobaljik and Carnie, 1996, and by McCloskey, 1996b). In this chapter I return to an older conception of what gives rise to the surface position of at least some arguments and argue that morphological requirements on the interpretability of features play a significant role. More specifically, I will argue that the final position of subjects in Irish and Scottish Gaelic is an adjacency configuration that results from movement motivated by the need to give a morphological interpretation to case features.

This position is somewhat of a hybrid between McCloskey (1996b) and McCloskey (1991). In the latter, McCloskey argues that the subject remains inside VP, where it is governed by the V in I; in the former he argues that the subject raises into the specifier of an optional agreement head. The empirical data that shows that the subject raises is extremely strong, but that does not solve the problem of how to characterize the target of the raising or its motivation. I argue here that the subject raises from the VP into a position where it is immediately subjacent to the finite inflection, and that this movement takes place to satisfy morphological interpretability requirements on Case. This proposal, of course, has broader empirical implications, some of which will be briefly explored.

The chapter is organized as follows: section 2 outlines a particular way of conceptualizing syntactic feature checking that treats checking and the locality configurations involved in checking as ways of rendering LF uninterpretable features acceptable to the Conceptual-Intentional interface. The idea is that a checking configuration always allows a feature to be interpreted. I then show how that same conception of feature checking can be applied to morphologically (un)interpretable features, and propose that a relevant configuration here is one of adjacency. The general consequences of adopting this framework are briefly explored. In section 3 the particular problem posed by subjects in VSO structures is introduced, and a number of analytical and theoretical problems with McCloskey’s (1996b) analysis are discussed. The alternative proposal is that the subject raises in VSO in order to set up an adjacency configuration with its case assigner. A range of favorable consequences follow. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the idea that the notion of interpretability of syntactic features should be generalized to both interfaces.

2. FEATURE CHECKING

2.1. Checking Features and the LF Interface

Chomsky (1995, chapter 4) conceives of movement in the following way (see Adger et al., 1999, for discussion): ²