Is composite [A'/A] probing extended A-movement?

In the last ten years of syntactic research, composite [A'/A] probes have been employed to account for a variety of unrelated phenomena: i) topicalization, focalization, wh-extraction, relativization with A-properties (van Urk 2015, Ostrove 2018, Scott 2021, Chen 2023), ii) passivization/raising with A'-properties (Wurmbrand 2019, Colley & Privoznov 2020, Lohninger et al. 2022, Chen 2023), iii) A'-extraction restrictions to the closest DP (Erlewine 2018, Branan & Erlewine 2020, Coon et al 2021, Branan 2022), iv) φ-agreement sensitive to information-structure (Mursell 2021, Bárány 2023).

In this talk, I focus on the phenomena i)-ii) and present a comparative investigation of Dinka extraction (van Urk 2015), Mandarin Chinese BEI passives and low foci/topics (Chen 2023), Khanty passives (Colley & Privoznov 2020), and Balinese and Malagasy promotion to pivot (Erlewine, Levin & van Urk 2019, Lohninger & Katochoritis to appear). I explore whether these constructions exhibit random mixtures of A'- and A-properties or systematic distributions thereof and show that they follow a highly predictable pattern: whilst composite A'/A constructions resemble A-movement in most respects (creation of new antecedents for anaphor/variable binding, lack of reconstruction for principle C, feeding case, agreement and subsequent A-movement), they differ from classical A-chains in three relevant aspects: i) the ability to skip intervening DPs, ii) obligatory information-structural or clause-typing effects and iii) the landing-site at a phase edge.

I present a syntactic analysis that allows to account for the observed pattern and render the notion of "mixed A'/A movement" obsolete: Assuming that standardly, [A'] probes (like [top], [foc], [rel] or [wh]) occur on phasal heads, whilst [A] probes ([D] or [φ]) appear lower heads, composite [A'/A] probes depict an exception to the norm: they instantiate (rare?) cases in which [A] features ended up on phasal heads together with [A']. Even though such a probe then searches for a goal fitting both its needs, it eventually induces A-movement of that goal to its specifier, correctly deriving the A-properties associated with these constructions. I propose that this follows if we assume that A-operations precede A'-operations and thereby, if a probe CAN induce an A-movement chain, it MUST do so. Under my account, an [A'/A] phase head can be understood as a way of extending the time window for A-movement to the phase-edge (as opposed to the usual case where A-operations are completed before the phase head is reached in structure-builing). Based on this analysis, the distribution of A'- and A-properties in composite constructions becomes highly predictable, which counteracts the seemingly anything-goes impression [A'/A] probes might sometimes create