How likely to be viable a PF theory for A-reconstruction is?

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Reconstruction in A-chains is still one of the definitely understudied topics of syntactic theory. My aim in this talk is relatively narrow, as compared to the scope of the problem as a whole. I put under scrutiny one of the most popular theories for A-reconstruction - the one by Sauerland & Elbourne (2002), and its predictions about one of the three data sets they argue support their theory.

Sauerland and Elbourne argue that what we call A-reconstruction is actually what happens when a phrase stays in a lower position at LF but moves up at PF, thus making its scope position different from the visible position. They assume a Y-theory of syntax, and distinguish movements done in the ``stem" - in the part of derivation before the split into LF and PF branches - and in separate LF and PF branches. Crucially, stem movement precedes LF and PF movement.

One of the three pieces of evidence with which Sauerland and Elbourne support their theory is so-called Barss's generalization. While in (1) LIKELY and EVERY can scope over SOME, in (2), after a wh-movement takes place, they cannot. Only narrow scope with respect to SOME remains possible.

(1) [Some politician] is likely to t address every rally.
(2) [How likely to t address every rally] is [some politician]t ?

Their explanation works as follows: ``some politician" has to move to the higher subject position before wh-movement occurs, or else it would have to move downwards. Wh-movement must occur in the stem, therefore, movement of the subject, preceding it, also must occur in the stem. After wh-phrase has moved, the resulting configuration is unsatisfactory for LF: there is an unbound subject trace in the higher copy of the wh-phrase. Therefore the wh-phrase, except for the question word, must A'-reconstruct to its base position at LF, in order to prevent crash. In the resulting configuration, the subject is higher than the A'-reconstructed LIKELY and EVERY. Hence they never outscope the subject.

I argue that this story is way too simple. There are many derivational options that Sauerland and Elbourne do not consider that would derive the undesired scope reading. For example, they do not show that partial A'-reconstruction of the wh-phrase must always involve LIKELY. In fact, assuming the copy theory of movement in its unrestricted version, saying that all the grammar does is erasing all but one copy, this is completely unexpected. Similarly, the universal quantifier could in principle QR out of the wh-phrase and remain in the higher position, leaving a trace in the reconstructing part of the wh-phrase. While such issues may in fact turn out not to be problematic, that is clearly not self-evident; hence the purpose of this talk - to look at those problems, find which further assumptions are needed in order for Sauerland and Elbourne's theory to work, and whether the result will look like a viable theory at all.