

Lecture 11 : Syntax

Introduction:

Syntax means “*sentence construction*”. That is, how words group together to make phrases and sentences. Some people tend to use the term “*Grammar*” to mean the same as syntax, although most linguists follow the more recent practice whereby the grammar of a language includes all of its organizing principles: information about the sound system, about the form of words, how we adjust language according to context, and so on; syntax is only one part of this grammar.

1. What is Syntax?

According to Hana (2011), Syntax comes from the Greek word “syntaxis” from syn (together) + taxis (arrangement). Syntax – the part of linguistics that studies sentence structure including:

- word order:
e.g, I want these books.
- Agreement – subject and verb, determiner and noun, . . . often must agree:
e.g, He wants this book.
e.g, I want these books.
- How many complements, which prepositions and forms (cases):
e.g, I give Mary a book.
e.g, I see her.
- Hierarchical structure – what modifies what
e.g, We need more (intelligent leaders). (more of intelligent leaders)
e.g, We need (more intelligent) leaders. (leaders that are more intelligent)
- Syntax is not about meaning! Sentences can have no sense and still be grammatically correct:
 - Colorless green ideas sleep furiously. – nonsense, but grammatically correct

This sentence was composed by Noam Chomsky in 1957 as an example of a sentence whose grammar is correct but whose meaning is nonsensical.

2. Sentences and phrases

Since **Syntax** is the study of sentence structure , it is necessary to distinguish between “*sentence*” and “*phrase*”. **Sentences** are composed not directly out of words but of **constituents** which may consist of more than one word, called phrases. A **phrase** is an expression which is a constituent in a sentence and is the expansion of a head (i.e. key word)., For example in (a), the constituent *the king*, or the constituents *my brother* and *an expensive car* in (b) are Noun Phrases, abbreviated as NPs, because their key elements are the nouns (Ns) *king*, *brother* and *car*, respectively (Varga, 2010).

- a. The king laughed.
- b. My brother bought an expensive car.

Note that a phrase can be realised by a single word or a pronoun. For instance the NPs *John*, *Mary* and *apples* in (c) consist of the Ns “*John*”, “*Mary*” and “*apples*”, and “*nothing else*”. In (d) “*he*” is a special NP because its head is a pronoun rather than a noun.

c. John gave Mary apples.

d. He went home.

3. Sentences and clauses:

The terms sentence and clause can be used synonymously. A sentence or clause is an expression which minimally contains a subject and a predicate, and which may also contain other types of elements. For instance,

- Example (a):

It consists of just a subject and a predicate. The NP “*the king*” is the subject, and the Verb Phrase (VP) which is composed of a single verb (V) “*laughed*,” is the predicate.

4. Complements

According to Varga, “A complement is a constituent whose presence is structurally “dictated” (required or licensed) by a particular word. The presence of the complement “follows” from the presence of the word which it is a complement of” (Varga, 2010). Consider the previously mentioned examples:

- Example (b):

The NP my brother is the subject, the V bought is the predicate, and the NP an expensive car is a complement (direct object, of the verb “*bought*”).

- Example (c):

The subject is the NP “*John*”, the predicate is the V “*gave*”, and there are two complements, the NP “*Mary*”, functioning as an indirect object, and the NP “*apples*” functioning as a direct object.

- Example (d):

The complement of the V “*went*” is the Adverb Phrase (AdvP) “*home*”, consisting of the single adverb (Adv) “*home*”.

5. Adjuncts

The sentence or clause may also contain constituents which are not structurally required by the verb but add optional information about *place*, *time*, *manner*, *purpose*, etc. Those constituents are known as adjuncts.

6. Grammatical functions Vs syntactic categories

The terms subject, predicate, object (direct and indirect), adverbial, attribute; complement and adjunct refer to **grammatical functions** which constituents may perform in the sentence. The terms such as NP, VP, AP, AdvP, PP, N, V, A, Adv, P, etc. refer to **syntactic categories**, they name the grammatical category to which the constituent belongs (Varga, 2010).

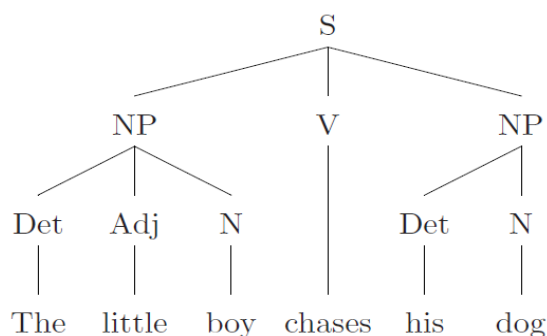
7. Representation

Sentences consist of structural units larger than lexical categories, these sentence constituents are called phrases. The constituent structure of sentences can be represented in two ways: **tree diagrams**, and **bracketings**.

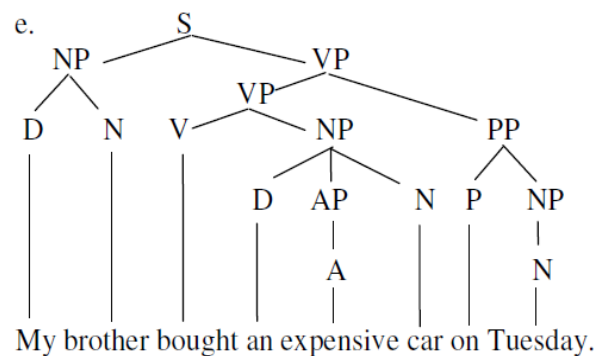
a. Tree diagram:

One of the most common ways to create a visual representation of syntactic structure is through tree diagrams Yule (2010). Yule added that a set of the symbols can be used to label parts of the tree as a try to

capture the hierarchical organization of those parts in the underlying structure of phrases and sentences. The following figures are examples of a tree diagram:



(Hana, 2011)



(Varga, 2010)

b. Bracketings

Labeled bracketing is a way of representing the structure of an expression by writing square brackets ('[' and ']') to the left and right hand side of its component parts, i.e. words or constituents. The brackets carry subscripts, so-called labels, which state the category of the unit in question. 1) and 2) are examples of Labeled bracketing:

- 1) [S[NP[Det My][N friend]] [VP[V ran] [Adv home]]].
- 2) [S[NP[D My][N brother]] [VP [VP[V bought][NP[D an][AP[A expensive]] [N car]]] [PP[P on][NP[N Tuesday]]]]].

- Although the two ways of representation are logically equivalent, we prefer tree diagrams because they help visualise structure better than bracketings do. Tree diagrams are like uprooted trees, with branches and nodes. The nodes in a tree diagram are the topmost point, the bottom points, and all those intermediate points at which the tree branches. The labels are the abbreviated names of the categories to which the constituents belong (Varga, 2010).

8. Deep structure and surface structure

Deep structure and surface structure concepts are used in linguistics, specifically in the study of syntax in the Chomskyan tradition of transformational generative grammar.

- Surface structure** can be defined as the syntactic form they take as actual sentences. In the other words, it is forms of sentences resulted from modification/ transformation. Consider these sentences:
 - (1) You close the door.
 - (2) The door is closed by you.
 - (3) Close the door!
- Deep structure** is defined as an abstract level of structural organization in which all the elements determining structural interpretation are represented. Deep structure is what you wish to express and surface structure how you express it in with the help of words and sentence.

9. Structural ambiguity

Structural or syntactic ambiguity is the potential of multiple interpretations for a piece of written or spoken language because of the way words or phrases are organized. It means that two distinct underlying interpretations that have to be represented differently in deep structure. One of the classic examples is:

e.g : The chicken is ready to eat”

1st interpretation: a live chicken is hungry.

2nd interpretation: a prepared chicken is ready to serve for dinner.

References:

Yule, George. (2010). *The study of language* . Cambridge, UK ; Cambridge University Press.

László, Varga. (2010). *Introduction to English Linguistics*, Eötvös Loránd University.

Jirka Hana (2011). *Introduction to Linguistics – Syntax 1*