

**AN INTRODUCTION TO SYNTAX.  
FUNDAMENTALS  
OF  
SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS**

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## PREFACE

### 1. Goals

What kind of syntax should be taught in an introductory syntax course? Different textbooks offer different alternatives. Most authors select a single approach; others feel that students should be exposed to a variety of points of view and present more than one framework; and there are a few books that search for a shared middle ground among the various syntactic theories.

This book takes this third tack by offering a theory-neutral framework designed as a simple tool for a convenient abbreviatory record of syntactic facts. The approach is theory-neutral in that it is founded only on two assumptions about language, both shared by all syntactic theories. One assumption is that sentences are **semiotic objects** - i.e., they have form and meaning; the other is that syntactic forms are **complex objects** - i.e., they consist of parts that fall into categories.

The book is intended as a textbook for undergraduate and graduate courses. A first course in linguistics is presupposed. Some of the relevant terminology is introduced in the text and defined in the glossary in the back, other terms are assumed. For basic terms of syntactic analysis, the following works are particularly useful references:

James R. Hurford: Grammar. A student's guide. 1994. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Robert Lawrence Trask: A dictionary of grammatical terms in linguistics. 1993. London: Routledge.

### 2. Focal points

Here are five points that the approach is based on, described for prospective instructors (for student readers, this section may not be fully understandable because of unfamiliar terminology). The idea behind the first four points is that, in order to explore a relationship between two things, each must be described independently of the other.

(a) The syntactic form of sentences can be and must be described **apart from their meanings**

It is both possible and necessary to describe syntax independently of meaning. That this is possible is shown by many analogous examples: one can describe the syntax of manual gestures of sign languages independently of what they express, or the formal composition of a rosary without specifying what prayers the beads stand for. The necessity of describing form independently of meaning is in turn dictated by the further goal of accounting for the relationship between form and meaning and

exploring the ways in which meaning shapes form. This is because, as noted above, one cannot study the relationship between two entities unless each is first characterized independently of the other.

(b) Sentences can be and must be described **apart from their functions**

The possibility of describing sentences regardless of the various uses they are put to is again suggested by analogous instances of other symbol systems. For example, one can describe the forms and meanings of traffic signs without considering how they function in actual use. The necessity of describing objects apart from their functions in turn follows from the further goal of wanting to account for the relationship between structure and function and to explore the extent to which function explains structure.

(c) Sentences can be and must be described **apart from the psychological and physical mechanisms** underlying their structure and use

From the perspective taken here, sentences are objects: more like artifacts - tools - than like activities. Describing language in this way is seen as a necessary prerequisite for the further step of studying the ways in which the structure and use of language are anchored in human cognition and physiology.

(d) Sentences can be and must be described **apart from how they change**

Just as any object can be described without regard to how it arises and how it evolves, sentences, too, can be analyzed in purely synchronic terms. Traffic signs may serve as an example once again: one can describe both the form and the meaning of traffic signs without considering how they were first created, how they subsequently evolved in history, and how their form, meaning, and use are acquired by children. The purely synchronic description of objects is necessitated by the further goal of describing change. If describing change means specifying the directed relationships between synchronic states, then each synchronic state needs to be first described independently of the others.

(e) Syntax can be described in a relatively **theory-neutral** way and such descriptions have some utility

Any account of any set of facts must, by definition, be based on some assumptions; no account can be entirely theory-neutral. Nonetheless, as noted above, the approach taken in this book is neutral to theories of syntax in that it does not make any

assumptions about language other than two uncontroversial ones. These are: that sentences have form and meaning and that syntactic form is complex (i.e., analyzable into parts which in turn fall into categories).

Accordingly, syntactic accounts as viewed in this book consist of four kinds of information: the **inventory** of syntactic categories, **selectional dependencies** among categories in sentences, their **linear order**, and the **symbolic correspondence** relations between syntactic form and meaning, and syntactic form and sound form.

The usefulness of theory-neutral descriptions is seen in the relatively objective record of the facts that they provide, on which theories may be built; and in serving as a common denominator for the comparison of different theories. Also, since the framework is applicable not only to describing syntax but also to describing other complex objects and other semiotic objects, it highlights a basic similarity between language and many other things in the world.

### 3. Overview

**Chapter 1** illustrates what syntax is about and situates syntactic analysis within the context of linguistic research and human inquiry in general.

The topic of Chapters 2-5 is synchronic syntactic description. Proceeding from the more obvious to the more abstract, **Chapter 2** discusses linear order, **Chapter 3** takes up selection, and **Chapter 4** motivates syntactic categories. **Chapter 5** is about the relationship of syntactic form to meaning, on the other hand, and to sound form, on the other.

**Chapter 6** takes up syntactic variation and change, both historical and developmental. **Chapter 7** proceeds from description to explanation: it discusses and illustrates three ways of explaining syntactic patterns.

Following each chapter, there is a set of questions for students to work on.

### 4. Acknowledgments

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Joseph Greenberg's pioneering oeuvre encompassing many fields of linguistics and anthropology is well-known. In this book, I have mostly relied on his work in language typology, major highlights of which are the recognition and fruitful use of implicational statements as the principal means of capturing

constraints on language variation, and the elaboration of the claims of markedness theory.

Gerald Sanders' 1972 book Equational Grammar presents a comprehensive theory of grammar. In it, several ideas that have since been independently proposed and now prominently figure in several current syntactic approaches were first put forth and synthesized within a coherent and principled framework. These include the insights that syntactic and phonological rules, just as lexical entries, express symbolic equivalence relations between meaning and form; that rules of syntactic selection and linear order must be separately formulated; that linear order be recognized as a feature of phonetic form; that order statements be surface-true and thus invariant in the course of grammatical derivations; that the application of rules should be motivated by the requirement of full phonetic and semantic interpretability; and that the discourse, rather than the sentence, is the proper domain of linguistics.

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