Syntax

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DEFINITION

- Syntax is a part of linguistics that is involved in the study of sentence structure. It is based on three elements of a sentence:

- Syntax can be seen as the governing principles defining which combinations of linguistic symbols are deemed to be correctly structured by natural language speakers.

WHAT DOES IT STUDY?

- The study of syntax is the investigation of the rules, principles, and processes which determine the structure of sentences in human languages.

- Syntax can be seen as the governing principles defining which combinations of linguistic symbols are deemed to be correctly structured by natural language speakers.

THE STUDY OF ENGLISH SYNTAX

- Many people know the meanings of many words, but it is difficult to put the words in a sentence that makes grammatical and logical sense.

- The study of English syntax is the study of rules which generate an infinite number of grammatical sentences.

- How words are put together to form constructions (American Heritage Dictionary)

- Syntax gives power to words to carry the meaning in the form of sentences.

IMPORTANCE OF SYNTAX FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

- The syntactic properties of a language enable easy communication. A learner who does not have a good mastery of syntax properties of a language might end up constructing ambiguous sentences that can be confusing to the listener.

- The study of syntax in linguistics is quite challenging since the learner has to know how to put words in a sentence to make it sensible and avoid ambiguity (Smith, 2015).

- In the classroom clause structure is an area of syntax which many teachers spend a lot of time looking at with learners, especially when practising writing skills.

- Teaching grammar through student's own writing and in read-alouds is a powerful way to make learning about syntax more meaningful, giving them more opportunities to learn what "sounds right."

- Explicit teaching of grammar rules and structures may be necessary for students: pointing out different sentence structures or patterns helps them with learning about syntax- the grammatical and structural basics of English.

WHAT IS A SENTENCE?

- Sentences communicate entire thoughts through combining words and morphemes into phrases.

- Sentences are not merely strings of words arranged into linear order, but they are organised into phrases.

- Sentence formation rules are language specific. Language-specific rules also account for the way in which words may be ordered in a sentence.

- A sentence can be simple, meaning composed of a subject and predicate as an independent clause. Eg; superman loves his cape.

- Compound sentences are composed of two simple sentences.Eg; superman loved his cap so he decided to purchase another one.

THE SENTENCE AND THE CONSTITUENT

- A language is a system for combining its parts in infinitely many ways.

- Sentences are actually combinations of constituents or syntactic units that are arranged in a hierachical order.

- Constituents can be a single word, or a phrase built around a single word. We use constituency tests to determine which words belong to which phrases.

- If a sentence is an arrangement of words and we have 5 words such as man, ball, a, the, and kicked, how many possible combinations can we have from these five words?

- It is clear that there are certain rules in English for combining words.

- These rules constrain which words can be combined together or how they may be ordered, sometimes in groups, with respect to each other.

- The requirement of such combinatory knowledge also provides an argument for the assumption that we use just a finite set of resources in producing grammatical sentences

- Constituents can be a single word, or a phrase built around a single word. We use constituency tests to determine which words belong to which phrases.

- The smaller forms into which a larger form may be analyzed are its constituents and the larger form is a construction.

  For example, the phrase "poor John" is a construction analyzable into, or composed of, the constituents "poor" and "John."

IMMEDIATE CONSTITUENT ANALYSIS

(Ic Analysis Leonard Bloomfield in 1933)

- A system of grammatical analysis that divides sentences into successive layers, or constituents, until, in the final layer, each constituent consists of only a word or meaningful part of a word.

- In a sentence, words form groups on the basis of their relationship with other words in the sentence.(ie; two or more words in a sentence can behave and function as one single unit.). In other words, some words are closer to each other than other words in a sentence. A group of such closely related words together forms a syntactic constituent.

SYNTACTIC AMBIGUITY

- The notion of constituent helps to account for the ambiguity of certain constructions. A classic example is the phrase "old men and women," which may be interpreted in two different ways according to whether one associates "old" with "men and women" or just with "men." Under the first of the two interpretations, the immediate constituents are "old" and "men and women"; under the second, they are "old men" and "women."

- Ambiguity of this kind is referred to as syntactic ambiguity.

THEORIES AND APPROACHES TO SYNTAX

Dependency grammar by Lucien Tesnière (1893–1954)

- It is an approach to sentence structure where syntactic units are arranged according to the dependency relation (dependencies are directed links between words), as opposed to the constituency relation.

- The verb is seen as the root of all clause structure and all the other words in the clause are either directly or indirectly dependent on this root.

Categorial grammar is an approach that attributes the syntactic structure not to rules of grammar, but to the properties of the syntactic categories themselves.

- Syntactic categories may be: phrasal categories such as noun phrase or verb phrase, which can be decomposed to smaller units of word category such as a noun or verb which cannot be further decomposed.

- **Tree-adjoining grammar** is a categorial grammar that adds in partial tree structures to the categories.

- In a tree diagram, a sentence is divided into two parts: a subject and a predicate. They are made up of noun phrases or verb phrases. These are groups of words that include a noun or verb and any words that add as modifiers. The subject is a noun phrase while a predicate is usually a verb phrase.

Functional grammars

- Functionalist models of grammar study the form–function interaction by performing a structural and a functional analysis.

Generative grammar

- This approach to language was pioneered by Noam Chomsky. It focuses on the form of a sentence, rather than its communicative function .

- Most generative theories (although not all of them) assume that syntax is based upon the constituent structure of sentences.

- In transformational and generative grammar, deep structure (also known as deep grammar or D-structure) is the underlying syntactic structure—or level—of a sentence. In contrast to surface structure (the outward form of a sentence), deep structure is an abstract representation that identifies the ways a sentence can be analyzed and interpreted.

- According to the "Oxford Dictionary of English Grammar" (2014): "Deep and surface structure are often used as terms in a simple binary opposition, with the deep structure representing meaning and the surface structure being the actual sentence we see."

Cognitive and usage-based grammars

- It stems from generative grammar but adheres to evolutionary rather than Chomskyan linguistics.Cognitive models often recognise the generative assumption that the object belongs to the verb phrase.

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