Module: Linguistics

Level: L1- FILA

Time Allotted: 90 min

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Lecture 11: Syntax

1. **Definition**

In [linguistics](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-are-linguistics-1691241), syntax refers to the [rules](https://www.thoughtco.com/rules-of-english-1691922) that govern the ways in which [words](https://www.thoughtco.com/word-english-language-1692612) combine (word formation) to form [phrases](https://www.thoughtco.com/phrase-grammar-1691625), [clauses](https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-clause-grammar-1689850), and [sentences](https://www.thoughtco.com/sentence-grammar-1692087). In other words, it is the study of how words combine to form sentences and the rules which govern the formation of sentences. In its simplest definition, syntax refers to sentence construction.

Syntactic rules in a grammar account for the grammaticality of sentences, and the ordering of words and morphemes.

Syntax is not about meaning but rather about grammar: "Colourless green ideas sleep furiously." (Linguist Noam Chomsky created this sentence-which is grammatically correct but incomprehensible-to demonstrate that the rules governing syntax are distinct from the meanings words convey.)

1. **Constituents**

A constituent is one of two or more grammatical units that enter syntactically or morphologically into a construction at any level (Crystal, 1985).

**Examples:**

In the complex noun phrase *the dog that killed the cat,* each of the following items are immediate constituents:

* *the*
* *dog*
* *that killed the cat*

**3. Syntactic constructions**

-A sentence is generally made up of two main constituents: a subject and a predicate: the subject is the topic of the sentence. The predicate is the assertion or statementmade about the topic, as it provides information about the subject or topic of the sentence.

Example: the cat / is sleeping on the couch.

Subject predicate

1. **Syntactic Functions**

A syntactic function is the grammatical relationship of one [constituent](https://glossary.sil.org/term/constituent) to another within a syntactic construction (Crystal, 1985). In other words, it refers to how each element in a sentence contributes to the organization of the sentence. Common syntactic functions are: subject, verb, object, complement, adverbial.

1. **Syntactic Categories-Lexical categories**

These categories are termed open class because new terms can be added. Lexical categories are: nouns, verbs,adjectives, and adverbs.

• Noun (N):cat, car.

A noun (except for proper names like Mike) forms plural (some do not): cats, cars

A noun has a determiner and is modified by an adjective: a small cat, a new car

• Verb (V):speak, gain.

At a morphological level, verbs have different forms: third person singular-past tense-past participle-present participle

-Speaks, spoke, spoken, speaking- gains, gained, gained, gaining

A verb can combine with an auxiliary: can speak, should gain

• Adjective (A) beautiful, smart

An adjective can form comparative and superlative forms: more beautiful, most beautiful- smarter, smartest.

When the suffix “ly” is added to some adjectives they change into adverbs: beautifully, smartly.

An adjective can modify a noun: a small cat, a new car

• Adverb (Adv) swiftly, yesterday

Some adverbs are formed from adjective by adding the suffix “ly”: quick- quicly

Some adverbs modify:

V: often smoke-Adj: very good-Adv: very swiftly.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Typical Morphology | Typical Syntax | Typical Semantics |
| Noun | Plural  house – houses | D (Adj)–  the big house | thing, person, place |
| Verb | tenses, . . .  walk – walked | combines with an Aux  would walk | action |
| Adj | comparative, superlative  big – bigger – biggest | D –N  the big house | quality, property |
| Adverb | often has -ly suffix  really, but: well | modifies V, Adj, Adv  a really big house | manner, degree, . . . |

**Open Class: Lexical categories(Jirka Hana, 2011)**

1. **Syntactic Categories -Non-lexical categories**

These categories are termed closed class because new terms cannot be added. Non -lexical categories are:

* Determiner (Det): determiners in English can be articles (a, the), and quantifiers (some, any, few) possessive ( my, your, our)
* Auxiliary (Aux) e.g. should, will, would, may, can

They are usually followed by a verb: you should speak

They are negated directly: you shouldn’t speak. But not: you don’t should speak

* Pronouns(pron): functionwords that are used inplace of a noun or nounphrase: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, them
* Prepositions (P): function words that usually occur before nouns , pronouns, or noun phrase to form a prepositional phrase: on, at , under, into, in, of, to. E.g. under the ground.
* Conjunctions (Con): function words that serve to join words, phrases, clauses, or sentences.e.g.and, or, but,

Cats and dogs (noun with noun)- eat or speak (verb with verb)- rare but real (adj with adj)- we sweep the floor and you do the dishes (sentence with sentence)

**7. Phrase**

A phrase is a syntactic structure that consists of more than one word but lacks the subject-predicate organization of a clause (Crystal, 1985).

-The head of the phrase is the word that determines the syntactic or phrasal category of the phrase- whether the phrase functions as NP, VP, PP…….

• Noun Phrases are abbreviated as NPs because the essential components are the nouns.eg. The tree, a beautiful girl

• VP: Verb Phrase.eg. find a way, save money

• PP: Prepositional Phrase e.g. in the woods, over the clouds

• AP: Adjective Phrase.eg. deeply committed, exceptionally dedicated

• Adv P: Adverb phrase.eg. extremely rapidly

**8. Analysis of Sentence Structure**

Example: The catchased the mouse under the bed

**S**

NP VP

DET N V NP PP

DET N P NP

DET N

The cat chased the mouse under the bed

**9. Structural Ambiguities**

In syntax, structural ambiguity is used to refer to a construction with more than one grammatical interpretation due to its syntactic construction (Crystal, 1985). Crystal gives the following example to explain structural ambiguities in constructions:

*Old men and women*; this construction is structurally ambiguous and the possible analyses are: only the men are old or both themen and women are old.

Other examples with structural ambiguitiesare:

1-The boy saw the man with a telescope: The two interpretations can be: The boy used the telescope to see the man or the boy saw the man who had a telescope.

2- I thought you were absent yesterday: the two meanings can be: The act of thinking was yesterday or the absence was yesterday.

**10. Types of sentences- clauses (syntactic constructions)**

\*A simple sentence: a subject + a predicate (Aristotle was the first Greek to divide sentences into subjects and predicates (Trask , 1999). It is a sentence that has one independent clause only and no coordinate clauses or subordinate clauses.

\*A compound sentence: it is composed of at least two simple sentences joined by a coordinating conjunction—and, but, for, or, nor, yet, so…etc

\*A complex sentence: it is composed of at least one main clause and one subordinate clause.

\*A compound complex sentence: it is composed of one or more independent clauses and at least one dependent clause.

\*An independent clause: it has a subject and a verb, and can stand alone because it is a complete sentence.

\*A dependent clause: has a subject and a predicate but cannot stand alone as a complete sentence but rather depends on an independent clause to make it complete.