

SYNTAX: A Grammar of Sentences



Syntax is the study of the principles and rules for constructing sentences in natural languages. It examines how words can be combined to form grammatical sentences. We can think of it like the rules of a game. Just as each game has its own set of rules for play, each language has a set of rules that govern how words can be put together.

Key Syntactic Properties:

Syntax deals with two key properties that govern sentence structure:

- **Word Order:** This refers to the specific arrangement of words in a sentence. Languages can have different word orders, such as Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order in English ("The dog chased the cat") or Subject-Object-Verb (SOV) order in Japanese.
- **Co-occurrence:** The way in which certain words or word classes can appear together in a sentence. For example, verbs typically require subjects, and adjectives usually modify nouns. Understanding co-occurrence restrictions helps determine if a sentence is grammatically correct.

Generative Grammar:

Generative grammar is a theoretical approach that seeks to describe the mental rules speakers use to construct and understand sentences. It aims to capture the infinite creative potential of language by defining a finite set of rules that can generate all and only the grammatical sentences of a language.

Core Concepts in Generative Grammar:

- **Deep Structure vs. Surface Structure:** Generative grammar proposes that sentences have an underlying deep structure, which represents the core meaning and relationships between words. This deep structure is then transformed into the observable surface structure through a series of grammatical rules. For example, the sentence "The ball was thrown by the boy" might have a deep structure where "the

boy" is the agent performing the action, even though it appears after the verb in the surface structure.

- **Structural Ambiguity:**



A single sentence can sometimes have multiple possible deep structures, leading to different interpretations. For instance, the sentence "The woman saw the man with the telescope" can be ambiguous depending on whether "with the telescope" modifies "the woman" (she was using the telescope) or "the man" (he was holding the telescope). "Flying planes can be dangerous" can be ambiguous—is it dangerous to fly planes, or are the planes that are flying dangerous?

- **Recursion:** One of the key features of human language is its ability to repeatedly create complex, nested sentences. Generative grammar allows for the recursive application of syntactic rules, meaning a phrase can contain another phrase of the same type within it. This enables the construction of sentences like "The girl that the boy chased saw a bird," where the relative clause "that the boy chased" modifies the noun "girl."

Transformational Grammar

Transformational grammar, a subfield of generative grammar, focuses on the specific transformations that convert deep structures into surface structures. These transformations include:

- **Passivization:** Changing the subject of a sentence into a passive object, as in "The cake was eaten by the children" (originally "The children ate the cake").

- **Topicalization:** Moving a phrase to the beginning of the sentence for emphasis, as in "The dog, John chased it."
- **Relativization:** Converting a noun phrase into a relative clause, as in "The book that is on the table belongs to me."

Practice Exercises:

1. **Identify the syntactic category (noun, verb, adjective, etc.) of each word in the following sentences:**
 - The cat chased the mouse across the garden.
 - The red balloon floated high in the sky.
2. **Explain the concept of deep structure and surface structure using an example sentence.**
3. **Identify an example of structural ambiguity in a sentence and explain the possible interpretations.**
4. **Provide an example of a sentence that demonstrates recursion (nested phrases).**

References

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