Thinking Syntactically
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Thinking Syntactically

A Guide to Argumentation and Analysis

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Preface and Acknowledgments

The title of this book is Thinking Syntactically. As the title suggests, the focus of the book is on “thinking about syntax.” Syntax is the component of linguistics that is concerned with the way words are put together to form sentences. This book illustrates one way of thinking about sentence formation.

The Goals of the Book

Over the years, many types of syntactic theories have been developed in an attempt to explain how sentences are formed. An approach that has given rise to a lot of exciting discoveries is the one initiated by the American linguist Noam Chomsky in the 1950s and which is known as “generative grammar.” One of the properties of generative grammar which I think makes it particularly attractive is that it uses a methodology modeled on what is used in the natural sciences. Thus, generative linguists try to “think” about syntax in a scientific way; they elaborate their analyses using a scientific methodology. The emphasis on methodology entails that, when confronted with a syntactic theory or a particular syntactic analysis, syntacticians do not have to accept the proposals as they are, unthinkingly and blindly. Rather, they can examine the logic behind the proposals, evaluate it, and decide on its merits. Ideally, then, learning generative syntax should imply learning this way of thinking about syntax. It should definitely not be rote learning. In practice, I feel syntax has often been reduced to rote learning, and that is why I have written this book.

The goal of the book is not to present all the intricacies of one syntactic theory. Rather, its aim is to reconstruct and to illustrate as explicitly as possible the thinking behind generative syntax. In other words, the aim is to illustrate how to “think syntactically.” Generative syntax is not a spectator sport, where you sit on the sidelines and watch others perform. Rather, I would like to get you involved. I would like you to enter the world and the mindset of the practicing generative syntacticians, to think with them and follow the argumentation as it develops. For instance, sometimes when arguing in favor of one analysis over another, syntacticians will use arguments drawn from language data; such arguments are called empirical arguments. At other times, the syntactician will use arguments which themselves are
drawn from the theory he or she is working in; such arguments are theoretical arguments. Ideally, these empirical and theoretical arguments should converge, but that is not always the case. In such circumstances, in order to evaluate one analysis over another, it is important to be able to assess the nature of the argumentation itself and to compare different arguments.

The result of working your way through this book should be that when you are confronted with syntactic analyses you are able to evaluate the arguments that have led to the analyses, to check the way the arguments have been built up, to examine the argumentation. Indeed, observe in passing that the kind of rigorous thinking explored here may well come in handy in everyday life, as, for instance, when you are deciding who to vote for, whether to buy a house or to rent one, or which job to apply for.

Another aspect that distinguishes this book from many introductions to generative syntax is the kinds of examples used. Very often, syntactic analyses are based on a small set of home-made examples, which seem to have little or no bearing on any kind of language that we meet in everyday life. Though this is a perfectly legitimate move and one that we will sometimes also adopt in this book, to the beginning students of syntax such an approach to language may look rather dry and totally irrelevant. Because of the exclusive use of artificial examples, a syntax course often seems to belong in a separate world, unconnected to the daily linguistic reality. In this book, there will be arguments based on home-made “artificial” examples, but in addition we will also be using a lot of attested examples mainly taken from recent journalistic prose. The reason for introducing such examples is to show how concepts that are relevant to syntactic theory are not outside the real world, but, rather, drawn from and part of the real world.

To my mind, thinking syntactically should not be confined to syntax classes. It should be a way of thinking that is available to you in your daily life, that makes you curious about linguistic phenomena, that makes you interested in the language used around you, and that even makes you more aware of the language you use yourself. I hope that having worked your way through this book, you will have acquired a new linguistic sensitivity, and that in everyday life you will recognize certain patterns discussed in the book and that you will also spot new and different patterns that would perhaps not be accounted for in the book. I hope that in the latter case you become so intrigued by these new data that you will try to figure out how these new data should be analyzed in terms of the system elaborated in this book.

In addition to the many attested examples, it will also often be necessary to construct our own examples in order to test certain hypotheses. In the final chapter of the book we will pay some attention to how such examples are constructed.

Though most examples discussed in this book are drawn from English, there is also material drawn from other languages. The goal is to show that just as we can think in a formal way about the structure of English, we can do the same for other languages. If you are a native speaker of a language other than English you are encouraged to think about your own language in similar terms as those laid out in the book.
The book does not aim at providing a complete survey of a particular theory. Rather, it shows that a theory is the result of a particular way of thinking. But the book also shows that the thinking is never finished. At the end of the book, we will have outlined some components of a theory about sentence formation, but as will become clear in the exercises throughout the book, there remain many questions and problems, and the theory presented is by no means complete. However, this is not only due to the limited scope of this introduction. Even if I had written a book twice as long, and even if I had been able to incorporate all the current proposals in syntactic theory, still, in a few months’ time, if not sooner, there would have come along new proposals challenging some of the hypotheses presented here and invalidating others. Syntactic research is a continuous and continuing enterprise shared by many enthusiastic researchers across the world. If syntacticians really had already formulated an exhaustive and perfect theory of sentence formation, if there really were no questions left, then there would be no practicing syntacticians left, either.

The Organization of the Book

The exercises

The book contains five chapters, each elaborating a step toward the formulation of a theory of sentence structure. With each chapter comes a set of exercises. The exercise headings are accompanied by the abbreviations (T), (L), and (E). The abbreviation (T) stands for “tie in,” and indicates that a particular exercise ties in with the material in the preceding chapter. Tie-in exercises are signaled by footnotes in the chapter. Whenever a footnote points toward an exercise, it means that the exercise can be tackled at that point in the chapter. The abbreviation (L) stands for “look ahead” and it signals that the material covered in the exercise will be taken up in a later chapter of the book. Look-ahead exercises also contain cross-references to the later point at which the material is tackled. The abbreviation (E) stands for “expansion” and signals that the material covered in these exercises goes beyond that covered in the book. Again references to further reading will be included in them. Since the material contained in T-exercises has been covered in the text, T-exercises will tend to be “easier” than L-exercises or E-exercises.

The format of some of the E-exercises and the L-exercises is quite different from the standard exercise format that you may expect to find in a textbook. In particular, some exercises are longer, they contain lots of text, and they look more like work-book sections. The reason why such discursive exercises have not been included in the main body of the text is that they are only intended here as additional illustrations of how certain issues are problematic and how they can be or have been pursued using the argumentation developed in the associated chapter. These discursive exercises typically will not offer an exhaustive or definitive treatment of the issues in question. Rather, they illustrate how a hypothesis is challenged and
how it may have to be reworked in the light of new data or of new theoretical proposals.

When, having worked your way through a chapter, you want a quick rehearsal of the material in the chapter, you will probably mainly want to revise using the T-exercises. If you want to know what is to come later in the book, you could also try the L-exercises. If you want to discover more intriguing problems which go beyond the discussions in the present book, you should try the E-exercises.

The footnotes in the chapters and in the exercises also contain references to the scientific linguistics literature. However, for the student-reader many of the publications referred to will be too advanced and too technical and they should not be tackled until you have reached the end of the book. Some more accessible references are pointed out when they are available.

The chapters

The first chapter of the book offers an introduction to scientific methodology and how it can be applied to the study of syntax. Among other things, this chapter introduces the hypothesis that the meaning of a sentence is calculated on the basis of its component parts and their relations in the structure. This hypothesis about the mapping of form onto meaning will be one of our guidelines throughout the book. The first chapter also provides an overview of some patterns of question formation in English and French.

Chapter 2 introduces the key tools for identifying the constituents of a sentence. It is shown that two of the main constituents of the sentence are its subject and its verb phrase. The verb phrase is a constituent whose head is a verb. It is a “projection” of the verb. The verb denotes the action or state depicted by the sentence; it has a lot of descriptive content and it is called a lexical head. The projection of the verb is a lexical projection.

Chapter 3 shows how subject and verb phrase are related through a linking element, the inflection of the verb. This chapter introduces the hypothesis that the inflection of the finite verb heads its own projection. The inflection is a “functional” head; it does not have the same kind of descriptive content as a lexical head. Projections of functional elements are called functional projections.

In Chapter 4 we pursue one of the consequences of the hypothesis that the meaning of the sentence is worked out on the basis of its component parts and their structural relations. We will discover that for this hypothesis to be maintained, the sentences must have more than one subject position. We introduce the hypothesis that the subject is first inserted inside the VP and is then moved to the subject position outside the VP.

The final chapter of the book returns to question formation and we show how the system elaborated in the first four chapters of the book can be implemented to derive the word order in English questions. This chapter focuses on the importance of the movement operation for the formation of sentences.
A Note to the Teacher

This book targets introductory syntax classes. It could be the first step in a syntax program that will lead onto more theoretical work or it could be the starting point of a more empirically oriented approach with a generative basis. The exercises try to illustrate these two directions.

Though there are many exercises in the book, I hope that the exercises will also provide inspiration for additional exercises along the format of those in the book. This may be particularly relevant for teachers whose students are native speakers of languages other than English. Exercises in the students’ own language can be provided modeled on those in the book. One type of exercise which is not provided in the exercise sections but is a natural spin-off from the way the book is written is to ask students to look for particular patterns in their own reading. From my own experience, though, I have found that it is important to define such research tasks rather narrowly, so that they can be tied to the teaching. The attested data in the exercises in this book can be taken as a guideline for the students’ own search. Such research exercises can be devised both for English and for other languages.

References in footnotes of the text signal the relevant literature and they are intended to make up for the inevitable shortcuts that have to be part and parcel of a fairly basic introduction. Both older “classic” texts in the generative literature and more recent minimalist texts have been included.

The textbook should cover an introductory semester-long course in syntax. The chapters can also be the basis for self-study. The text can be complemented with additional readings, and suitable supplementary reading can be of various types. By way of illustration, I offer some suggestions here, but the choice will depend very much on the overall orientation of the linguistics program into which this book is being integrated. For instance, since a lot of the discussion hinges around functional structure and the subject, the course could lead up to a study of some of the recent discussions of the position of subjects or of verbs. Accessible overview papers on this area can be found in many of the syntax handbooks that have been published recently. McCloskey (1997), for instance, would be a very good follow-up to Chapter 4. Another possible extension would be to take the students beyond the proposals in the book and to explore the concept of “Predicate Phrase” (Bowers 2001). Yet another possibility would be to extend the discussion to the structure of the nominal projection, an issue which is not touched upon very much here. Bernstein (2001) could be the basis for such an extension. Some more advanced theoretical papers written against a Minimalist background might also be used, though these will probably require more input from the teacher.

The book might be suitably complemented with papers in neighboring areas of interest. For instance, the discussion of functional categories might be linked to papers on the question of language acquisition and on the question of how much of such structure is present in the early grammar. To mention but two examples, one might choose some of the papers in Clahsen (1996) or in Friedemann and Rizzi...