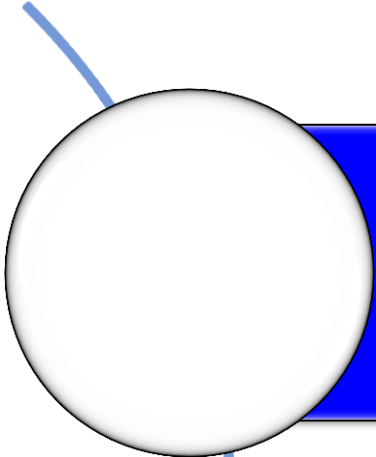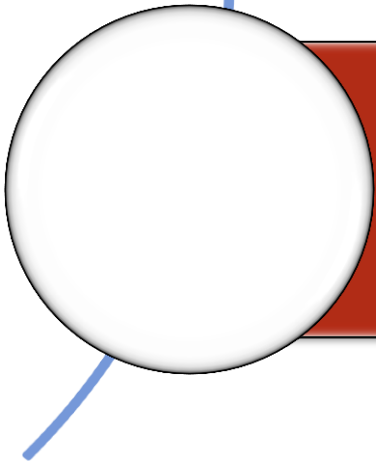# Basic Properties of English Syntax

# THE ESSENCE OF HUMAN LANGUAGE

Language is to convey various kinds of information from the everyday to the highly academic.

Language provides a means for us to describe how to cook, how to remove cherry stains, how to understand English grammar, or how to provide a convincing argument.

# HOWEVER,...

**Without understanding syntax you cannot make a correct sentence and of course you cannot use the language maximally**

# 1. How To Compose a Sentence ?

- 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?

- More importantly, are all of these combinations grammatical sentences? Mathematically, the number of possible combinations of 5 words is 5! (factorial), equalling 120 instances. But among these 120 possible combinations, only 6 form grammatical English sentences.

# GRAMMATICAL SENTENCES

*man*, *ball*, *a*, *the*, and *kicked*

1. The man kicked a ball.

2. A man kicked the ball.

3. The ball kicked a man.

4. A ball kicked the man.

5. The ball, a man kicked.

6. The man, a ball kicked.

**Of 120 combination, only those six sentences are acceptable to native speakers of English.**

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# Ungrammatical Sentences

○ **All the other 114 combinations, a few below are unacceptable to native speakers of English.**

1. *Kicked the man the ball.

2. *Man the ball kicked the.

3. *The man a ball kicked.

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## 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.

# SENTENCE COMBINATION

- Combinatory rules also play important roles in our understanding of the syntax of an example like in *Kim lives in the house Lee sold to her*. Whatever these rules are, they should give a different status to a sentence like below:

  *Kim lives in the house Lee sold it to her*.

  The red example is judged ungrammatical by native speakers even though the intended meaning of the speaker is relatively clear and understandable.

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# LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

- A language speaker can produce an infinite number of grammatical sentences.
- For example, given the simple sentence:
  ### *The man kicked the ball*
- We can make a more complex one like below by adding the adjective *tall*.:
  ### *The tall man kicked the ball*
- To this sentence, we can again add another adjective *handsome* as in the following.
  ### *The handsome tall man kicked the ball*
- We could continue adding adjectives, theoretically enabling us to generate an infinitive number of sentences.
  ### *The handsome, tall, nice man kicked the ball.*

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# THE JOB OF SYNTAX

- **The subject matter of syntactic theory: "*All native speakers have a grammatical competence which can generate an infinite set of grammatical sentences from a finite set of resources*"**

- **The job of syntax is thus to discover and formulate these rules or principles. These rules tell us how words are put together to form grammatical phrases and sentences.**

# 2. How We Discover Rules?

- Find out what the generative rules of English syntax.

- These rules are present in the speakers' minds, but are not consciously accessible; speakers cannot articulate their content, if asked to do so.

- Hence we discover the rules indirectly based on the observed data.

## ❖ Steps work for discovering rules

- **[Step I: Observing Data]** To discover a grammar rule, the first thing we need to do is to check out grammatical and ungrammatical variants of the expression in question. For example, let us look at the usage of the word *evidence*:

a. ***evidence*** cannot be used in the plural.

  *The professor found some strong **evidences** of water on Mars.*

  b. ***evidence*** cannot be used with the indefinite article *a(n)*.

  *The professor was hoping for **a** strong evidence.*

c. *evidence* cannot be referred to by the pronoun *one*.

    *\*The evidence that John found was more helpful than the **one** that Smith found.*

**Find another contrast example**

a. *clue* can be used in the plural.

    *The professor gave John **some** good **clues** for the question.*

b. *clue* can be used with the indefinite article *a(n)*.

    *The student was hoping for **a** good **clue**.*

c. *clue* can be referred to by the pronoun *one*.

    *The **clue** that John got was more helpful than the **one** that Smith got.*

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- Unlike *evidence*, the noun *clue* can be used in the test linguistic contexts we set up.

**[Step II: Forming a Hypothesis]** From the data and observations we have made so far, can we make any hypothesis about the English grammar rule in question? One hypothesis that we can make is something like the following:

**Hypothesis**:

**"English has at least two groups of nouns, Group I (count nouns) and Group II (non-count nouns), diagnosed by tests of plurality, the indefinite article, and the pronoun *one*".**

**[Step III: Checking the Hypothesis]** Once we have formed such a hypothesis, we need to check out if it is true of other data, and also see if it can bring other analytical consequences.

- A little further thought allows us to find support for the two-way distinction for nouns. For example, consider the usage of *much* and *many*:

  a. *much evidence, *much clue*

  b. **many evidence, many clues*

- As observed here, count nouns can occur only with *many*, whereas non-count nouns can combine with *much*. Similar support can be found from the usage of *little* and *few*:

  a. *little evidence, *little clue*

  b. **few evidence, few clues*

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# *Temporary Conclusion:*

- The word *little* can occur with non-count nouns like *evidence*, yet *few* cannot. Meanwhile, *few* occurs only with count nouns.

- Consider the following examples with *cake*:

  a. **The mayor gave John some good cakes**.

  b. **The president was hoping for a good cake**.

  c. **My mom says I ate too much cake**.

  d. **We recommend to eat less cake and pastry**.

- The data mean that *cake* can also be used as non-count nouns since that can be used with *less* or *much*.

**[Step IV: Revising the Hypothesis]:**

The previous examples imply that there is another group of nouns that can be used as both count and non-count nouns. This leads us to revise the hypothesis in the following:

*"There are at least three groups of nouns: Group 1 (count nouns), Group 2 (non-count nouns), and Group 3 (count and non-count)".*

# 3. WHY DO WE STUDY SYNTAX AND WHAT IS IT GOOD FOR?

To help us to illustrate the patterns of English more effectively and clearly.

To enable us to analyze the structure of English sentences in a systematic and explicit way.

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# *WRONG SENTENCES:

**a**. *The recent strike by pilots have cost the country a great deal of money from tourism and so on.

**b**. *The average age at which people begin to need eyeglasses vary considerably.

Either example can be made into a grammatical version by pluralizing the head noun of the subject.

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# THIS IS TO SAY THAT:

By knowing syntax we know the ungrammatical sentences we made

# INTERPRET THIS !

*a. Visiting relatives can be boring.*

*b. I saw that gas can explode.*

**These examples each have more than one interpretation [or double interpretation]**

*a1. Relatives who make a visit can be boring*

*a2. To visit relatives can be boring.*

*b1. In general, gas can explode.*

*b2. Any certain gas can explode.*

↗ **Here is another example of a sentence which requires certain syntactic knowledge**:

"He said **that that that that that** man used was wrong".

# CONCLUSION

**1.**
- Knowledge of English syntax can be a great help.

**2.**
- Syntactic or structural knowledge helps us to understand simple as well as complex English sentences in a systematic way.

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# WHY DO WE STUDY SYNTAX?

- We are humans, it's in our nature to study things and understand how they work.
- Studying syntax is relevant to a lot of subject areas in linguistics.
  - We must study syntax to understand how children acquire their language,
  - how they start constructing sentences and what stage do they learn the tacit syntactic rules of the language.
  - It's also good to study syntax so we can understand how bilingual and multilingual speakers are able to construct their sentences despite having different structures for different languages. The sentence structure isn't the same in English as it is in Japanese!
  - Studying syntax gives us many answers which are necessary for understanding how languages work,
  - as well as being the doorway to future research and theories on all aspects of linguistics!

# WHY DO WE STUDY SYNTAX? (CONT.)

- We also study syntax to develop set rules and constraints on the language.
    - We call these **parameters**.
      These parameters limit what we can and can't do in a language, helping us establish an effective and working communicative system.
    - Some linguists believe that all languages have the same parameters.
    - This idea is called **universal grammar**, and was a theory developed by **Chomsky** in the 1960s.
    - From these ideas of linguistic parameters, we can learn, use and teach the correct way to make sentences. Basically, so we can all understand each other!

# THANK YOU