

Chapter 1: Some Basic Properties of English Syntax

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Two important properties

- There is **no motivated relationship between sounds and meanings**. This is simply observed in the fact that the same meaning is usually expressed by a different sounding-word in a different language (think of *house*, *maison*, *casa*). For words such as *hotdog*, *house*, *desk*, *dog*, *bike*, *hamburger*, *cranberry*, *sweetbread*, their meanings have nothing to do with their shapes.
- Language makes infinite use of finite set rules or principles, the observation of which led the development of **generative linguistics** in the 20th century (cf. Chomsky 1965). A language is a system for combining its parts in infinitely many ways.

Combinatorial Possibilities

- Five words: kicked, the, man, a, ball
 - Possible combinations: total 120 but only 6 are grammatical
- (1)
- a. The man kicked a ball.
 - b. A man kicked the ball.
 - c. The ball kicked a man.
 - d. A ball kicked the man.
 - e. The ball, a man kicked.
 - f. The man, a ball kicked.
- (2)
- a. *Kicked the man the ball.
 - b. *Man the ball kicked the.
 - c. *The man a ball kicked.

Combinatory Rules in Syntax

The combinatory rules also play important roles in our understanding of the syntax. Whatever these rules are, they should give a different status to (3)b, an example which is judged ungrammatical by native speakers even though the intended meaning of the speaker is relatively clear and understandable.

- (3) a. Kim lives in the house Lee sold to her.
- b. *Kim lives in the house Lee sold it to her.
- (4) a. *Kim fond of Lee.
- b. Kim is fond of Lee.

Evidence of the 'finite set of rules and principles': creativity 1

- able to understand a new sentence
 - (5) In January 2002, a dull star in an obscure constellation suddenly became 600,000 times more luminous than our Sun, temporarily making it the brightest star in our galaxy.

Evidence of the 'finite set of rules and principles': creativity 2

- able to generate an infinite number of grammatical sentences
 - (6) a. The man kicked the ball.
b. The tall man kicked the ball.
c. The handsome, tall man kicked the ball.
d. The handsome, tall, nice man kicked the ball.
e. ...
 - (7) a. Some sentences can go on.
b. Some sentences can go on and on.
c. Some sentences can go on and on and on.
d. Some sentences can go on and on and on and on.
e. ...

Competence & Generative Grammar

- Feasible Hypothesis:
 - (8) All native speakers have a **grammatical competence** which can generate an infinite set of grammatical sentences from a finite set of resources.
- Linking the competence to grammar
 - (9) Generative Grammar:
An English generative grammar is the one that can generate an infinite set of well-formed English sentences from a finite set of rules or principles.

Steps for doing empirical research

- Step I: Data collection and observation.
- Step II: Make a hypothesis to cover the first set of data.
- Step III: Check the hypothesis with more data.
- Step IV: Revise the hypothesis, if necessary.

[Step I: Observing Data 1]

(10) Data Set 1:

- a. *The professor gave John some good advices.
- b. *The president was hoping for a good advice.
- c. *The advice that John got was more helpful than the one that Smith got.

(11) Observation 1:

- a. *advice* cannot be used in the plural.
- b. *advice* cannot be used with the indefinite article *a(n)*.
- c. *advice* cannot be referred to by the pronoun *one*.

[Step I: Observing Data 2]

(12) Data Set 2:

- a. *We had hoped to get three new furniture every month, but we only had enough money to get a furniture every two weeks.
- b. *The furniture we bought last year was more expensive than the one we bought this year.

(13) Observation 2:

- a. *advice/furniture* cannot be used in the plural.
- b. *advice/furniture* cannot be used with the indefinite article *a(n)*.
- c. *advice/furniture* cannot be referred to by the pronoun *one*.

[Step I: Observing Data 3]

- (14) Data Set 3: *suggestion*
- a. The mayor gave John some good suggestions.
 - b. The president was hoping for a good suggestion.
 - c. The suggestion that John got was more helpful than the one that Smith got.
- (15) Data Set 4: *armchair*
- a. The mayor gave John some good armchairs.
 - b. The president was hoping for a good armchair.
 - c. The armchair that Jones got was more helpful than the one that Smith got.

[Step I: Observing Data 4]

- (16) Observation 3:
- a. *suggestion/armchair* can be used in the plural.
 - b. *suggestion/armchair* can be used with the indefinite article *a(n)*.
 - c. *suggestion/armchair* can be referred to by the pronoun *one*.

[Step II: Forming a Hypothesis]

- (17) First 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 II: Checking the Hypothesis 1]

- (18) a. much information, much furniture, much advice
 b. *much suggestion, *much armchair, *much clue
- (19) a. *many information, *many furniture, *many advice
 b. many suggestions, many armchairs, many clues
- (20) a. little furniture, little advice, little information
 b. *little suggestion, *little armchair, *little clue
- (21) a. *few furniture, *few advice, *few information
 b. few suggestions, few armchairs, few clues

[Step II: Checking the Hypothesis 2]

- (22) a. The mayor gave John some good cakes.
 b. The president was hoping for a good cake.
 c. The cake that Jones got was more delicious than the one that Smith got.
- (23) a. The bartender gave John some good beers.
 b. No one knows how to tell from a good beer to a bad one.
- (24) a. My pastor says I ate too much cake.
 b. The students drank too much beer last night.
- (25) a. We recommend to eat less cake and pastry.
 b. People now drink less beer.

[Step IV: Revising the Hypothesis]

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

Why do we study syntax

- 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.

An example: agreement

- an informal rule for English subject-verb agreement.
 - (27) In English, the main verb agrees with the head element of the subject.
- data
 - (28) 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.
 - (29) 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.

More examples: preposition & ambiguity

- preposition

- (30) a. *Despite of his limited educational opportunities, Abraham Lincoln became one of the greatest intellectuals in the world.
- b. *A pastor was executed, notwithstanding on many applications in favor of him.

- structural and lexical ambiguity

- (31) a. Visiting relatives can be boring.
- b. I saw that gas can explode.

- (32) He said that that 'that' that that man used was wrong.