Syntax and Tree Diagram

Submitted to:

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Submitted by:

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1. What is Syntax?

Syntax is generally defined as the arrangement of words and phrases to create well-formed sentences in a language. The word "syntax" comes originally from Greek and literally means "a putting together" or "arrangement". Languages have rules. The rules of a language are called the grammar. The reason for these rules is that a person needs to be able to speak an indeterminately large number of sentences in a lifetime. The effort would be impossibly great if each sentence had to be learnt separately. By learning the rules for connecting words, it is possible to create an infinite number of sentences, all of which are meaningful to a person who knows the syntax. Thus it is possible to construct many sentences that the speaker has never heard before. Yule (2010) defines syntax as:

> Syntax concerns the way that words are arranged into larger units. That is, words are the basic units—the building blocks—of syntactic analysis. The largest unit that syntactic analysis usually considers is the sentence. For this reason, syntax is often equated with the study of sentence structure.
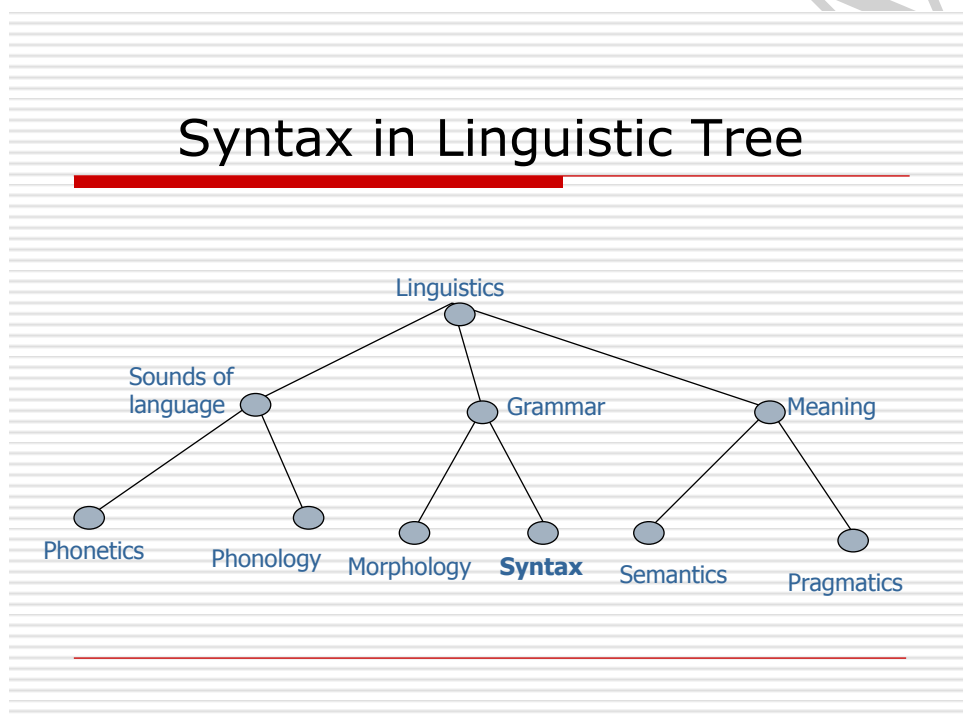
Trask (1999) highlights the importance of syntax in these words:

"The study of syntax became vastly more prominent than formerly; still today, many linguists of a Chomskyan persuasion see syntax as the very core of language structure".

A finite number of rules facilitate an infinite number of sentences that can be simultaneously understood by both the speaker and the listener. In order for this to work with any degree of success, the rules have to be precise and have to be consistently adhered to. The grammar of a language has several components.

These can be described as follows:

a) The phonetics that governs the structure of sounds;

b) The morphology that governs the structure of words;

c) The syntax, which governs the structure of sentences

d) The semantics that governs the meanings of words and sentences.

Syntax in Linguistic Tree

Linguistics

Sounds of language

Grammar

Meaning

Phonetics

Phonology

Morphology

Syntax

Semantics

Pragmatics

2. What is Tree Diagram?

One of the most common ways to create a visual representation of syntactic structure is through tree diagrams. Symbols (Art=article, N = noun, NP = noun phrase) are used to label the parts of the tree to capture the hierarchical organization of those parts in the underlying structure of phrases and sentences.

Baker (1998) defines tree diagrams in these words:

> "Tree diagrams are used quite widely in scholarly works and textbooks. Their major justification is that they provide quick and efficient representations of some important organizational properties of individual sentences".

3. Symbols used in Syntactic Analysis

There are symbols that are used as abbreviations for syntactic categories. Examples are "S" (= sentence), "NP" (= noun phrase), "N" (= noun), "Art" (= article), "V" (= verb) and "VP" (= verb phrase), "PP" (= prepositional phrase). There are three more symbols that are commonly used in syntactic description. Yule (2010) gives detail of these symbols as:

> (i) The first is in the form of an arrow →. It can be interpreted as "consists of". For example, **NP → Art N**

> (ii) The second symbol is a pair of round brackets **( )**. Whatever occurs inside these round brackets will be treated as an optional constituent. For example **NP → Art (Adj) N**

> (iii) The third symbol is in the form of curly brackets **{ }.** These indicate that only one of the elements enclosed within the curly brackets must be selected. We use these types of brackets when we want to indicate that there is a choice from two or more constituents. For Example,

$$\begin{array}{lll} NP \rightarrow Art\ N & & \\ NP \rightarrow Pro & NP \rightarrow & \left\{ \begin{array}{l} Art\ N \\ Pro \\ PN \end{array} \right\} \qquad NP \rightarrow \{Art\ N,\ Pro,\ PN\} \\ NP \rightarrow PN & & \end{array}$$
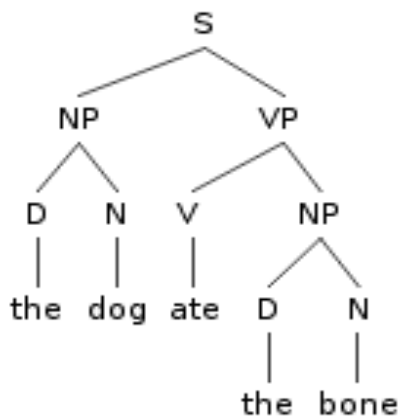
List of symbols used in tree diagram is given below.

S = Sentence, **NP** = Noun phrase, PN = Proper noun

N = Noun, VP = Verb phrase, Adv = Adverb
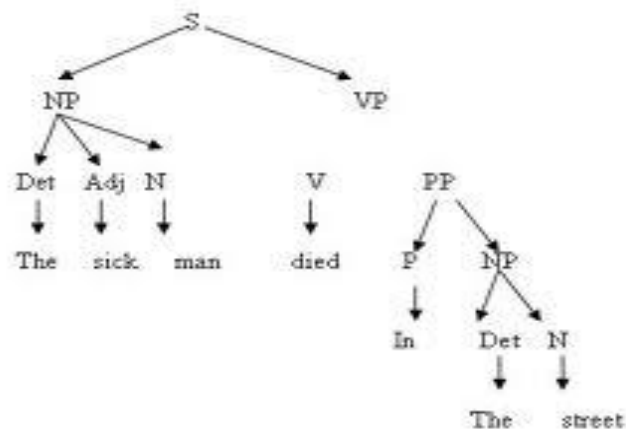
V = Verb, Adj = Adjective, Prep = Preposition

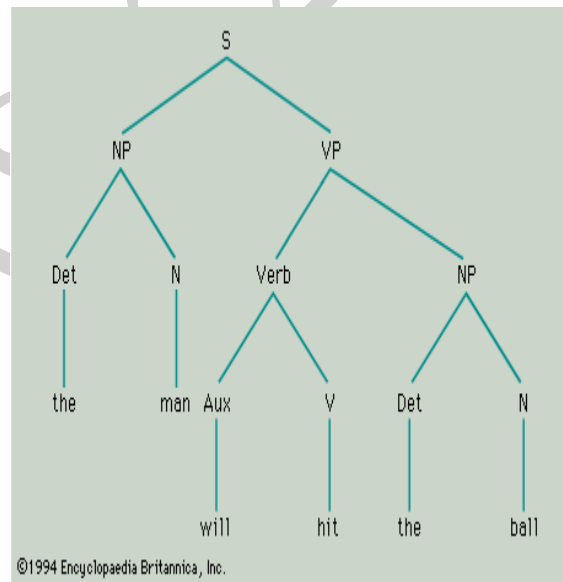Art = Article, Pro = Pronoun, PP = Prepositional phrase

Here are some examples of tree diagrams.

Example:

The sick man died in the street
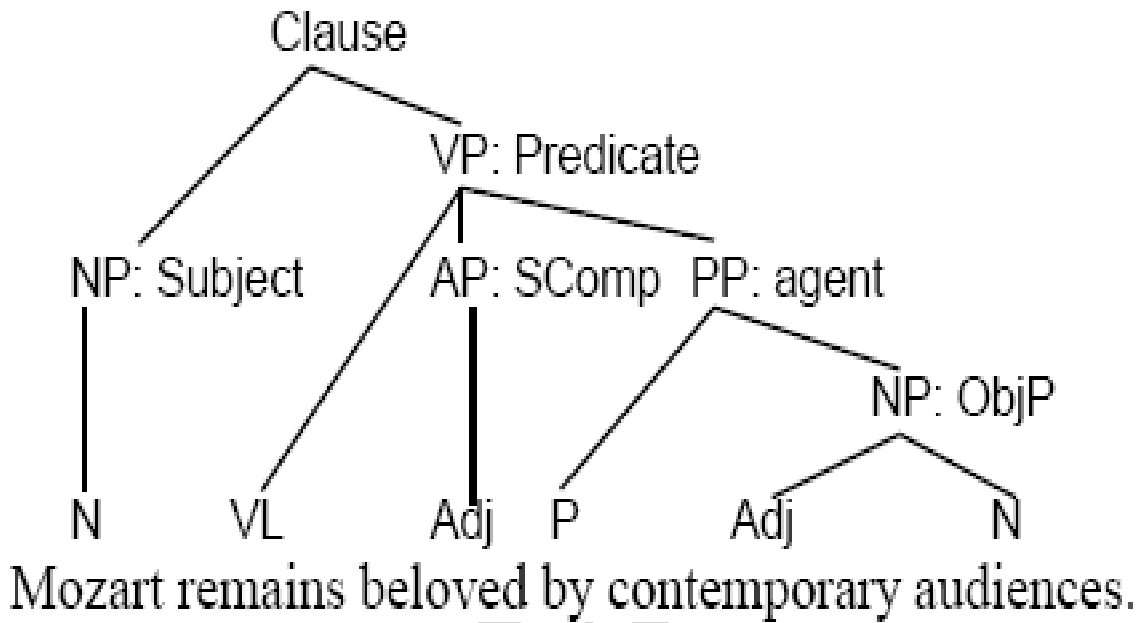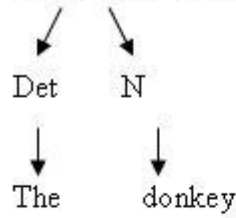
Clause

VP: Predicate

NP: Subject   AP: SComp   PP: agent

NP: ObjP

N   VL   Adj   P   Adj   N

Mozart remains beloved by contemporary audiences.

S

NP   VP

Det   N   Verb   NP

the   man   Aux   V   Det   N

will   hit   the   ball

The donkey (NP)

Det   N

The   donkey

The donkey in the zoo

NP

Det   N   PP

The   donkey   P   NP

In   Det   N

The   zoo

S

NP   VP

Det   N   V   NP

The   *duck*   *left*

Det   N

the   *pool*

```
                              S
                   ┌──────────┴──────────┐
                  NP                      VP
              ┌────┴────┐           ┌──────┴──────┐
            ADJ         N           V             NP
             │          │           │         ┌───┴───┐
           Happy    linguists     make       DET      N
                                              │        │
                                              a     diagram.
```

```
                        S
            ┌───────────┴───────────┐
           NP                        VP
        ┌───┴───┐            ┌────┬───┴────┐
       Art       N          Aux   V        NP
        │        │           │    │     ┌───┴───┐
                                       Art      N
                                        │       │
       The      boy         will  read  the    book
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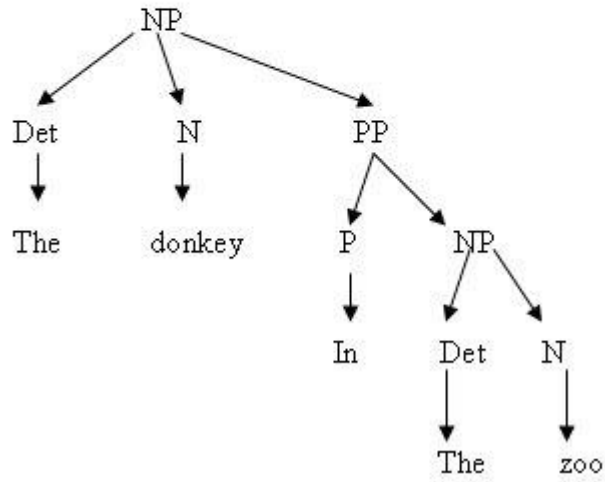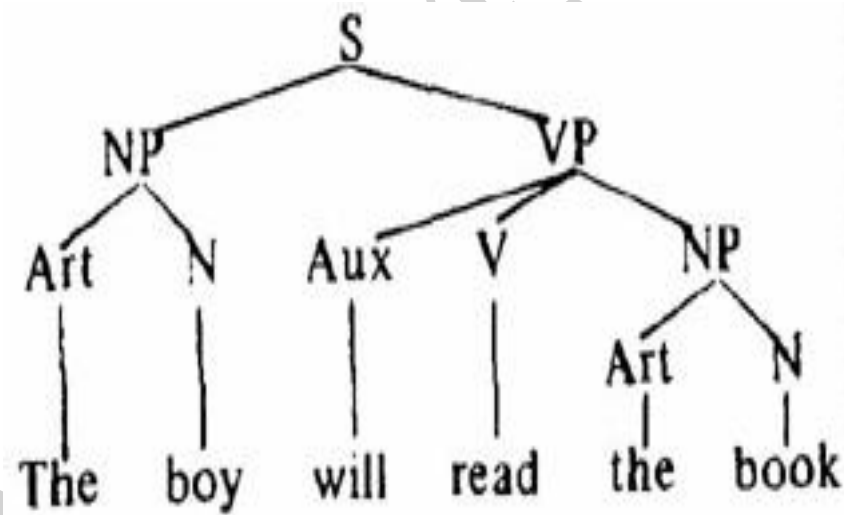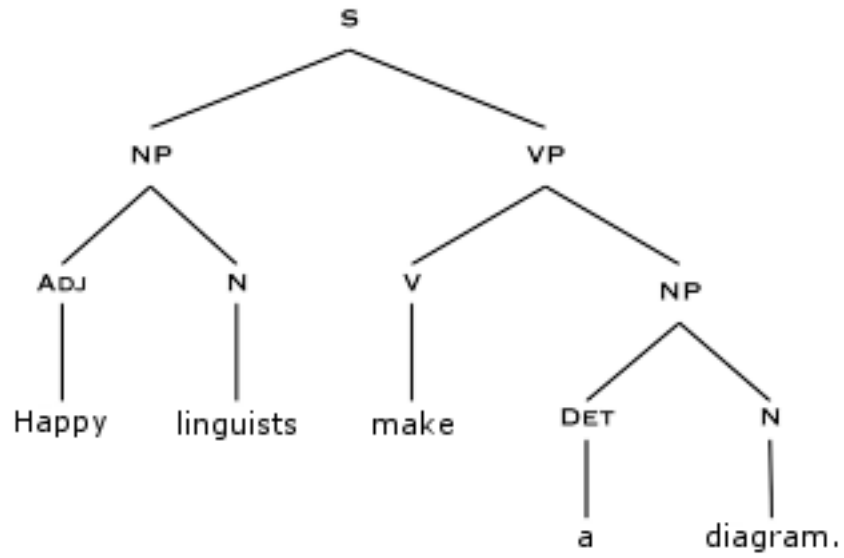
4. References

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Trask, R. (1999). *KEY CONCEPTS IN LANGUAGE AND LINGUISTICS.* New York: The Routledge Publishers.

Yule, G. (2010). *The Study of Language.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thank You