

**LIN331 - Bejar**

**U of T**

# **Introduction**

## **Some things we know about syntax**

- Syntactic patterns not memorized
- Speakers have knowledge about patterns they have not seen before
  - can assign an interpretation
  - can judge acceptability



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# How do we know what we know about novel sentences?

- 
- 1)
    - a. Imagine you were a whale
    - b. What did you imagine you were?
  - 2)
    - a. Imagine you were a whale and you were breaking up with your whale girlfriend.
    - b. \*What did you imagine you were and you were breaking up with your whale girlfriend?

One suggestion is that our knowledge of novel sentences can be understood in terms generalized cognitive abilities like analogy.

But many linguists argue that this is not sufficiently explanatory. It's possible that we use analogy, but it isn't trivial to say how.

# Analogies can be disfunctional

- 1)    a. An elephant sat on the table.  
      b. The table was sat on by an elephant.
  
- 2)    a. A lamp sat on the table.  
      b. \*The table was sat on by a lamp

(Pesetsy 2003)

- 3) a. Salima seemed to speak French.  
b. It seemed that Salima spoke French.
- 4) a. Salima hoped to speak French.  
b. \* It hoped that Saline spoke French  
≡

(Pesetsy 2003)

- 5) a. Felix promised Salima to take better care of himself.  
b. \*Felix promised Salima to take better care of herself.

Now try with *persuade*

- 6) a. F persuaded S to take better care of herself  
b. \*F persuaded S to take better care of himself

(Pesetsy 2003)

**What's the understood subject of talk?**

- 7) I want someone to talk.**
- 8) I want someone to talk to.**
- 9) I want someone to talk to me.**

(Pesetsy 2003)

## **How do we know these facts?**

- **Why do we not make analogies and generalizations that would lead to the “wrong” grammar?**
- **How do we avoid the wrong grammar when acquiring language in infancy?**

**For further discussion of other issues of this sort, e.g. explanatory power of frequency effects/probabilities, see:**

Adger, David. 2018. “The Autonomy of Syntax.” In *The Autonomy of Syntax*, 153–76. De Gruyter Mouton. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501506925-157>.

## **The view from syntactic theory**

The basic premise of **Syntactic theory** is that knowledge of syntactic patterns is mediated by an abstract system of representations/mechanisms that forms part of our cognitive capacity. We can call this system a **mental grammar**

The rules of grammar must be abstract because they underlie all natural language (full stop), not specific languages.

An important aspect of syntactic theory is addressing the **tension** between the premise that there are fundamental similarities between languages (by virtue of deriving from a common cognitive system) and the empirical fact of cross-linguistic variation.

## **Uniformity and variation**

Cross-linguistic investigation suggests that syntax is partly uniform across natural languages and partly subject to variation.

# Uniformity

An example of uniformity: there is some evidence that the ordering of adverbs, when sorted by meaning, is invariant across languages:

## 10) always > completely

### a. English

He **always** **completely** ruins our plans  
\*He **completely** **always** ruins our plans

### b. Albanian

Ai nuk i kupton      **gjithnjë tërësisht**      vërejtjet  
he not understands    always completely the remark

\*Ai nuk i kupton **tërësisht gjithnjë** vërejtjet

### c. Norwegian

De forstår      **alltid helt**      hva      jeg      snakker om  
they understand    always completely what I say

\*De forstår **helt alltid** hva jeg snakker om

G. Cinque (1999) Adverbs and Functional Heads, Oxford University Press.]

**11) no longer > always**

a. Italian

Da allora, non ha **più sempre** vinto  
Since then, he has no longer always won

\*Da allora, non ha **sempre più** vinto

b. Bosnian

On vise **uvijek** ne pobjedjuje  
he no-longer always not wins

\*On **uvijek vise** ne pobjedjuje

c. Chinese

ta **bu-zai** zongshi gen da-ge zhengcao  
he no-longer always quarrels with Big Brother

\*ta **zongshi bu-zai** gen da-ge zhengcao

# Variation:

## 12) Null subjects

- a. John/\* $\emptyset$  saw that film
- b. Juan/ $\emptyset$  vio esa pelicula

*Sj ani&h*

## 13) Multiple wh-questions

### *English*

- (14) **What** did he give to Mary?

### *Chinese*

- (15) Ta song-le Zhangsan **shenme?**  
he gave John what  
'What did he give to John?'

### *Bulgarian like English*

- (16) **Kakvo** e dal na Ivan?  
what he-has given to John  
'What did he give to John?'

### *English*

- (17) **What** did he give to **whom**?

### *Chinese*

- (18) Ta song-le shei **shenme?**  
he gave who what  
'What did he give to whom?'

### *Bulgarian not like English*

- (19) **Kakvo** na kogo e dal?  
what to whom he-has given  
'What did he give to whom?'

# Principles and Parameters

The theory of Principles and Parameters (P&P) is a theory of syntax developed by Noam Chomsky (and others) in the tradition of generative grammar.

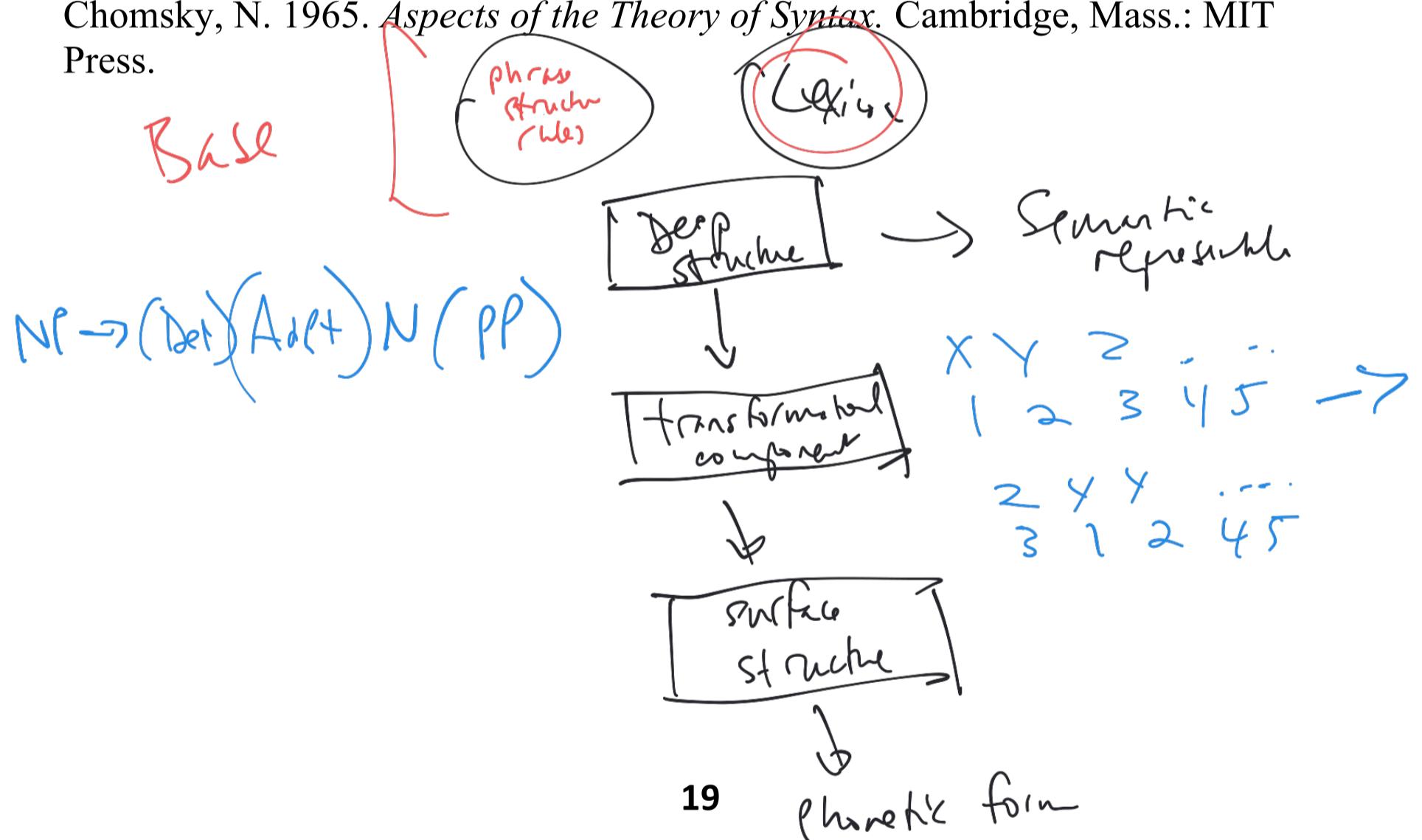
Principles (account for uniformity)

Parameters (account for variation)

X Subject can be null

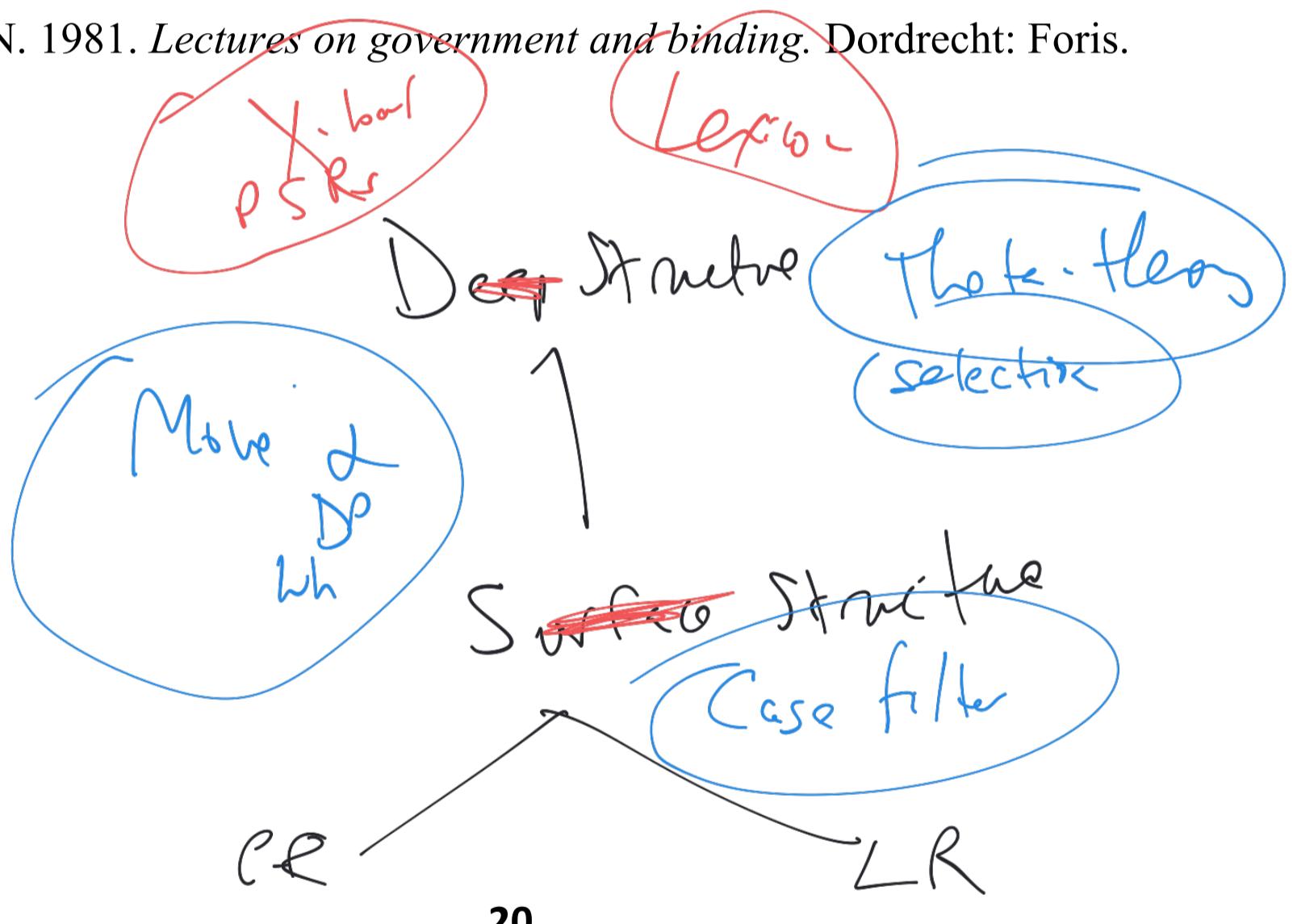
# (Extended) Standard Theory

Chomsky, N. 1965. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.



# Government and Binding Theory

Chomsky, N. 1981. *Lectures on government and binding*. Dordrecht: Foris.



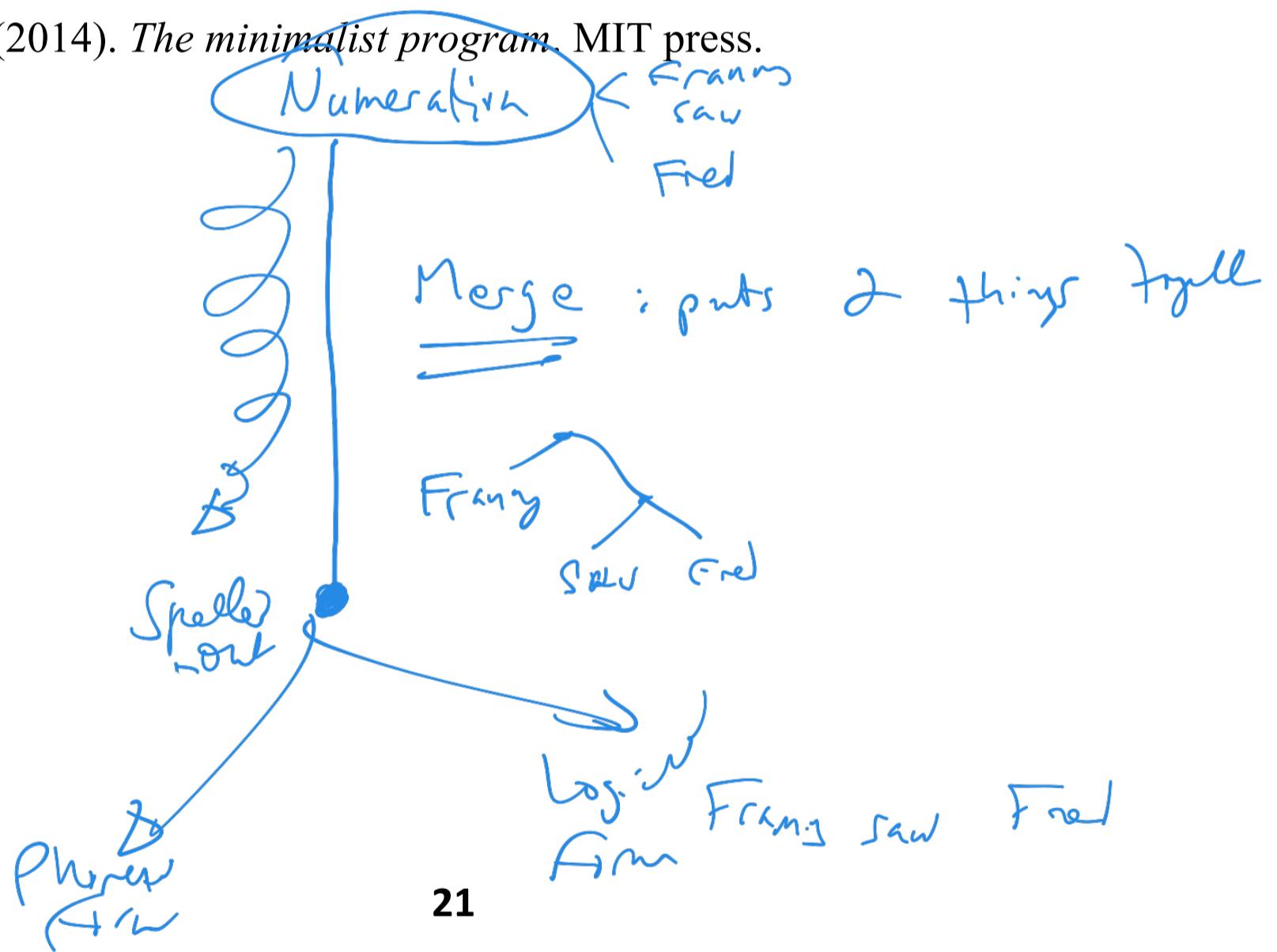
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# Minimalism

Chomsky, N. (2014). *The minimalist program*. MIT press.



# Our goals in the course

- To survey some historically important topics (and moments) in syntactic theory, within the tradition of generative grammar.
- To develop theoretical tools for analysis of a range of syntactic phenomena.
- To build (fragment) grammars that succeed in modeling both uniformity and variation for our target phenomena.
- To practice hypothesis formation and argumentation relating to syntactic theory and specific syntactic structures.
- To practice reading and critiquing primary literature in syntactic theory.