

APPROACHES TO LANGUAGE



Lecture 4: The Grammatical System

What is grammar?



Grammar

- Morphosyntax (morphology + syntax)
- Prescriptive grammars – ‘prescribe’ usage
– are evaluative
- Descriptive grammars – ‘describe’ actual
usage – are non-evaluative



All grammars are equal

- **Prescriptive grammarians:** Language ‘purists’; teaching ‘correct’, appropriate, polite forms that educated people should use in speaking and writing; prescription of grammatical rules and NOT description; Language change is a threat
- Prescriptive rules are taught/learned
- Linguistic/scientific perspective: there are no superior or inferior grammars and language change is a natural process

Activity

- ▶ List some prescriptive rules of English grammar
e.g. You should never use prepositions to end sentences with.
- ▶ What is the rationale behind the rule?
- ▶ What are the grammatical rules that create the phenomenon?

Prescriptive rules in English

- “Don’t split infinitives!”
(infinitive ‘to’ is separated from its verb by other words, e.g. ‘to boldly go’ (rather than ‘to go boldly’).



- “Don’t use double negatives!”

e.g. ‘I don’t know nothing’.

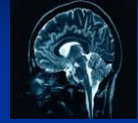
An interesting saying...

A zoologist may like frogs and detest snakes, but he cannot profess such an opinion in his capacity as a scientist. Just as there are no ugly/useless/bad animals in zoology, in linguistics it makes no sense to talk about ugly/useless/bad language.

(Adam Nadasdy, *linguist and poet*)

Mentalist vs functionalist approaches

- Mentalists
 - transformational-generative grammar
- Functionalists
 - systemic-functional grammar: a theory of grammar concerned with the social and pragmatic functions of language



- 'Linguistic theory is primarily concerned with an ideal speaker-listener, in a completely homogenous community, who knows its language perfectly and is unaffected by such grammatically irrelevant conditions as memory limitations, distractions, shifts of attention and interest, and errors (random or characteristic) in applying his knowledge of the language to actual performance.'

(Chomsky 1965:3)



Mental grammar

- **Mental grammar (or descriptive grammar):** a description (and explanation) of the rules of language; description of the basic linguistic knowledge a person has when she can speak, understand and make grammatical judgments about grammatical and ungrammatical sentences
- Knowledge of rules of language: a. rules for combining sounds into words, b. rules of forming words, c. rules for combining words into phrases and phrases into sentences, d. rules for assigning meaning
- Grammar + mental lexicon = linguistic competence

Linguistic knowledge: Linguistic competence vs. Linguistic performance

- Linguistic competence: our knowledge of words and grammar of a particular language; Knowledge of the rules that govern sounds, words, sentences in our language (what is possible vs. impossible); tacit knowledge
- Linguistic performance: the way we use this knowledge in speech production and comprehension
- We study linguistic competence by observing speakers' linguistic performance

Knowledge of Language

- Knowledge of language: knowledge of the sound system, knowledge of the words, knowledge of sentences and nonsentences
- Creativity of linguistic knowledge (linguistic creativity): the ability to produce and understand novel sentences never spoken/read/heard before; universal property of human language

Knowledge of Language

A person who knows a language has mastered a system of rules that assigns sound and meaning in a definite way for an infinite class of possible sentences.

NOAM CHOMSKY, *Language and Mind*, 1968

- Linguistic creativity: being able to distinguish grammatical from ungrammatical sentences (novel sentences)

- a. *John went home early.*
- b. **John early home went.*

Speakers can produce a limitless number of sentences

- I always hated learning about grammar at school
- I always **loved** learning about grammar at school
- I **never** loved learning about grammar at school
- I always hated learning [...] at school
- I always hated learning about grammar [...]

Syntax vs. semantics

1. Colourless **green** ideas sleep furiously (Chomsky, 1957)

* Furiously sleep ideas green colourless

2. Good ideas evolve slowly

- Grammaticality vs. meaningfulness: sentences about unicorns can be grammatical; grammaticality does not depend on the truth of sentences
- Unconscious syntactic knowledge

Syntactic rules

- Syntactic rules: specification of grammatical relations of a sentence, e.g. S+O
- Your dog chased my cat vs. My cat chased your dog

Syntactic rules

- Syntactic rules: how do words form groups in a sentence?

- a. *Elena and Mary ran up the hill*
- b. **Elena and Mary ran the bill up*
- c. *Up the hill ran Elena and Mary*

- Sentences are not just strings of words: different syntactic structures associated with phrases

- *Up the hill*: these words form a unit:

He ran [up the hill] → this is why we can move it to the beginning of the sentence BUT we cannot separate the subparts (b)

Hierarchical structure of words: Structural Ambiguity

- Eye drops off shelf → ambiguity: there are two ways to group the words

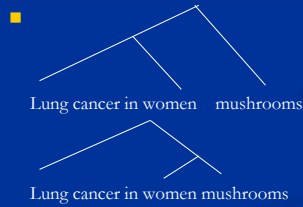


- Sentences have hierarchical organisation: they are grouped into units vs. 'flat structures'

http://www.fun-with-words.com/ambiguous_headlines.html

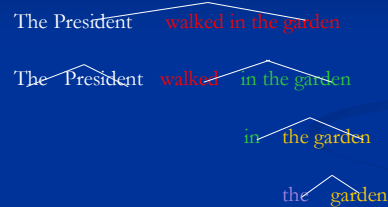
Illustrate the two possible structures

- Lung cancer in women mushrooms



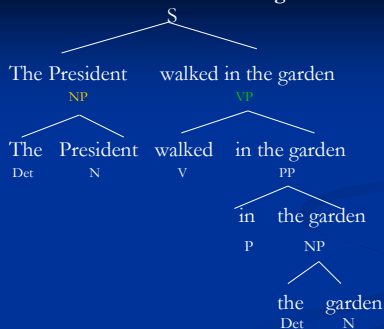
Sentence structure

The President walked in the garden



Tree: groupings and subgroupings of the words of the sentence

The President walked in the garden



The lecturer put a book in the bag

Syntactic category: part of a speaker's knowledge of syntax

- *John found the cat*
 - NP subject: John
 - NP object: the cat
 - VP: found the cat
 - VP: phrases that can complete the sentence; VP always contains a verb and it may contain other categories, e.g. PP (Prep+NP: *in the park*)
- 'John_____'

Heads & complements

- [VP **ran** (head) miles down the road]
- [PP **into** (head) the hills]
- [NP young **man** (head)]
- [AP **tired** (head) of tales]

Head: the core of every phrase is a lexical category of its same syntactic type

The phrase refers to what ever the head refers to:
e.g. VP '*ran miles down the road*': 'running' event

Heads & complements

- [VP **ran** miles down the road]
[PP **into** the hills]
[NP young **man**]
[AP **tired** of tales]
- A diary of the war
A photo of Mark
A child who excelled at school

Complements

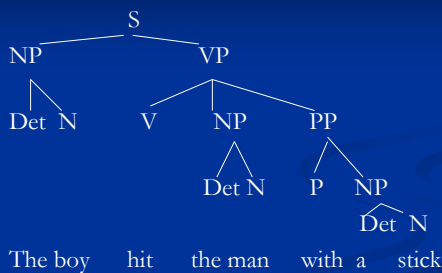
- Transitive verbs – take an NP complement –, e.g.
'find' – 'I found the earring'
- Intransitive verbs – do not take an NP complement,
e.g. 'sleep' – 'I slept'
- Complement: a phrasal category next to a head;
specifies further the meaning of the head
- [PP **into(head)** the hills (NP= complement)]

Head and Complements

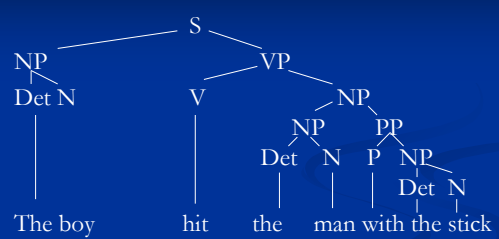
Head + complement: under the same node of the tree
(the point where branches join); complement= **sister** to
the head

The boy hit the man with a stick

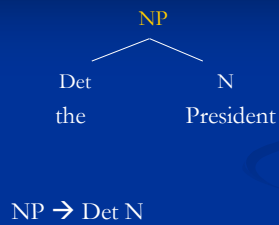
Ambiguous sentences/utterances



Ambiguous sentences/utterances



- V+NP (complement)



What would be the phrase structure rule for the VP 'walked in the garden'?

VP →

Optional elements

'ran into the house'

VP → V (PP)

Or

'a diary of the war'

NP → Det N (PP)

Post-class reading & references

- Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, Chapter 4
- Crystal, Chapters 36 & 39
- Nunan, Chapter 4

Concepts Introduced

- Ambiguous phrases/utterances
- Descriptive grammar
- Phrase structure trees/rules
- Prescriptive grammar
- Mentalist/functionalist approaches