

Review of "Grammatiktheorie" for Oxford University Press

Overall recommendation: not suitable for publication

Overview:

The book has appeared in German and I was asked to evaluate whether it would be suitable for translation into English.

The book presents an overview of several different syntactic theories and attempts a theoretical discussion of their respective advantages. It consists of two main parts: first on pages 59 to 273 a presentation a series of chapters of between 20 and 50 pages each presenting seven individual syntactic theories that have been prominent in the last 30 years: GB/Minimalism, GPSG, LFG, HPSG, Categorical Grammar, Construction Grammar, and TAG. The second part (p. 275 - 433) discusses some topics that have been assumed to be relevant for the choice between the different models of syntax; primarily Innateness, generation/constraints, competence/performance, language acquisition, and empty elements.

The book has several aspects to like, in particular the following:

- author well established in the HPSG syntax community
- no comparable work available as far as I know
- nice compact presentation of syntactic theories the author is familiar with
- excellent coverage of the German syntax literature

Overall, however, I think these are far outweighed by a series of shortcomings. The most significant, in my view, are the following:

- most of the discussion is focussed on general topics that the syntactic theories agree on
- important differences with respect to general movement vs. divided approach to word-order variants not discussed
- no clear discussion of notational variants vs. substantive differences
- superficial and out-of-date discussion of GB/MP
- many aspects very German specific (example sentences, literature coverage, selection of topics)
- unclear target audience for the book

Of the two parts, the second, discussion part is in my view substantially weaker than the first. The first part also doesn't really stand on its own as it is and has several problems on its own,

so I cannot recommend publication of that part in a more focussed form either. However, I could imagine a reworked version of part 1 that is more geared towards a clear presentation of the basics of each theory presented to be a feasible book.

In the following, I expand these six issues in some more detail, and then mention a list of smaller issues.

The first point concerns the discussion in the second part of the book, over 150 pages. As far as I could see, the issues that are discussed there are almost orthogonal to the theory diversity presented in the first part since all the theories discussed with the possible exception of Construction Grammar agree that some aspects of grammar are innate, that there is a competence/performance distinction, and that language acquisition takes place in a UG-constrained search space, and that syntax is recursive. The author himself says so in some places, for example, at the end of the discussion in 11.3 of on 341 that all theories can be combined with plausible processing models, and similarly at the end of the acquisition chapter, the differences between the syntactic theories introduced play no role anymore.

Complementary to that point, what I think is the most important difference between theories aiming at a generalized transformation unification of transformation, primarily, MP and TAG, and those that reject generalized transformations like GB, HPSG, and LFG is not discussed. This omission is ingrained in the structure of the individual chapters in part 1, where in each of them, passive, flexible word order/scrambling, and long-distance movement are discussed in separate sections without establishing a connection between. In current MP syntax, however, A and A-bar movement are mostly unified under a single remerge process and passive, raising and local scrambling are generally understood to be only specific instances of A-movement. Other frameworks, specifically HPSG, reject this unification, and propose three distinct processes for the passive (a lexical rule), object scrambling, and wh-extraction from the object position. From my point of view, this should be a central issue of any discussion of current syntactic frameworks and would lead to many interesting phenomena like overt/covert movement, semantic effects including reconstruction, and phonological effects like the interaction with stress placement. This glaring omission alone would probably ensure that no syntactician on the MP or TAG side of the fence would recommend the present book.

The third issue I mention is the question as to what extent the different syntactic theories are notational variants of each other. It is a widespread assumption that the differences between the theories are entirely notational, and that the reasons for their existence are primarily

sociological (i.e. creation of smaller, less competitive research communities). The present book mentions in a number of places result that with some limits support this assumption: work on the translation of grammars with into grammars without empty categories, work on the translation of fragments of HPSG into TAG and vice versa, and the numerous examples of work restating analyses of GB/MP within other frameworks. Given this wide-spread assumption, I missed one central place where the notional variants assumption is taken on.

The present book is, of course, only of interest if there are some substantive differences between the frameworks, the author must also believe that it's more than just notation. One kind of position that would naturally fit with the structure of the book would be that the phrase structural base rules are common among the syntactic theories, and that the debate is only about the transformations. However, that's not what the author says -- that much is clear to me, even though I'm less clear on what he actually says. In sum this is an important issue for the discussion of different syntactic that isn't addressed properly here.

Fourth, I found the discussion of GB/MP rather out of date. Of course, it is difficult to provide an overview of such a big framework in 50 something pages. But already the decision to stick GB and MP into one chapter while GPSG and HPSG are accorded separate chapters is hardly justifiable on content. In addition, basic works such as David Adger's textbook "Core Syntax" by Oxford UP are not in the list of references. As I already mentioned the structure is also worthy of critique, discussion syntactic movement phenomena in separate places without comment. In this range, there is one comment on page 104 that relates to the further subdivision of auxiliary movement into up-to ten separate processes in HPSG, however, the discussion is rather shallow mentioning possible semantic differences (no specifics given) and concludes "no reason to prefer one theory to another". Among the aspects I find objectionable about this discussion (also the shallowness and the sloppy expression) is that the author overlooks, that differences are always easy to capture, it's the commonalities that are difficult to describe. Finally, no serious attempt is made to survey the theoretical diversity within current MP work ranging, e.g ranging from representational approaches to approaches with a movement transformation or those trying to reduce movement to a kind of deletion. This may be a difference of temperament, though; the author instead critiques the rapid development of the theory as not conducive for computational applications.

My fifth point is that the much of the discussion is very specific to the German context. Most of the examples are German, so these would be rather difficult to translate. Especially, the translation would also require a redrawing of all the diagrams, which are so intricate that the author reports in the preface adopting some of the TAG diagrams from original sources. Also

the literature cited is about 50% literature on German, while German in the international syntax scene represents possibly only 10% or less. Mostly this means that many important references not from German researchers and/or not on German are not represented. Overall, the book would not be suitable for a non-German audience without a serious rewriting effort.

My final point is that it's difficult for me to see what audience the book would attract. Most researchers in syntax are wedded to one particular theory and the type of overview offered in this book would not be of great interest. Of course, some of them, may want to take the occasional view across the fence, but my feeling would be that they might rather pick up a overview article on Minimalism or TAG written by an insider instead of the present book. That would leave students and researchers from outside syntax as a possible audience. However, these groups both generally approach syntax without a bias for one theory or another either because they are interested in specific phenomena where an existing analysis making use of theory of syntax is particularly relevant or they work with an advisor or collaborator who has a preference for a particular theory of syntax. The value this book (part 1) might have, though, is to provide researchers and students with the basics of several syntactic theories. This would be of interest to researchers and students who need some access to the literature that is based on the seven syntactic theories discussed. Such a book would be restricted to part 1 of the book, and that would need to be rewritten to include less discussion of potential advantage/disadvantages of the theories, and instead a clearer more comprehensive coverage of the theories themselves. These should be extended at least to control/raising/ECM phenomena in all theories. It should also seek to be much more student oriented, and make arguments and analyses explicit, rather than just mention them by citation.

Some individual points:

p. 64: The mention of wanna-contraction without the argument for traces it makes is odd.

p. 69: claim "The work in mainstream generative grammar is very strongly imprinted by English." Wrong as far as I am aware. In fact, the analysis of basic English sentences with affix-hopping from Infl to V is rather less straightforward than that of German V2.

p. 115: Claim that GPSG and the like are refuting the need for transformations. Clear from the start that transformations or something else need to be added to phrase structure grammar.

p. 123: Passive generally suppresses accusative: Not the case crosslinguistically ("John was given a book"). German long passives not covered ("Nur einer wurde zu töten versucht.")

p. 141-143: Could mention results on computational inefficiency of unification? Also Ristad's complexity results would be relevant somewhere.

p. 149: "West Coast Ling." -- Bresnan was at MIT when she started work on LFG.

p. 169/70: Discussion of subject function, could lead into a discussion of split of subject functions across several DPs as in possessor raising, dative subject constructions, and similar.

p. 181/182: Island phenomena are not explained by the categorial grammar here.

p. 187: odd that HSPG is separated from GPSG by two chapters

p. 271: "LTAG is lexicalized." Could easily state "S NP> VP>" tree where substitution must apply twice.

p. 275: Discussion of innateness: Some references would be necessary to substantiate claims being made here. All mainstream syntactic theories except construction grammar assume some innateness, how else could there be a general syntactic theory. E.g. HPSG assumes that transformations are unlearnable by humans because of innateness.

p. 292: Claim that language is finite: As far as I can tell, the author is alone in claiming that English is a finite language. All syntactic theories including construction grammar aim to explain the infinity of the number of potential sentences. And we can easily imagine a novel of more than 100,000 words consisting of just one sentence -- processing doesn't wait until the end of a sentence.

p. 350/51: phenomena where parameter setting seems broad interesting consequences across different domains of grammar: William Snyder's work on the resultative acquisition