What do syntacticians do exactly?

Syntacticians don't sit around drawing trees all day. Pick up any primary reading on syntax, e.g., a book or paper by Chomsky, and you might be surprised at how few trees are in the text.

Instead, syntacticians are interested in uncovering the unconscious rules of how words combine to form sentences. Trees are simply a graphical representation of the output of those rules, and serve to provide an explicit hypothesis about what types of information must combine and how.

What types of rules are we interested in? Consider the word *ever*, which is what we call a 'Negative Polarity Item' (NPI) …

We have clear intuitions that there are restrictions or 'rules' on the use of *ever*. Based on the examples above, it would seem as though *ever* must occur with negation to be used appropriately (hence the description 'negative polarity item').

But what are those rules exactly? What status do they have in the mind/brain? Why do they exist? Do they follow from any deep property of the mental grammar or organization of the mind/brain? These are the questions that syntacticians seek to address.

We can get a deeper understanding of what syntacticians do by working through an example.

Discovering the rules of reflexives

Suppose we are interested in the use of *reflexives* in English. As we'll see, there are clear restrictions/rules about when and where reflexives can be used in a sentence. So how do we go about 'discovering' those rules? We follow the scientific method:

1. Collect a set of data
2. Hypothesize a set of principles (i.e., rules) which account for the data
3. Test the hypothesized rules against further data
4. Repeat until satisfied or stuck

Step 1: Collect data

Let's begin by collecting examples of sentences in which reflexives can be used. Take a minute to write 3 acceptable sentences (i.e., sentences that a native English speaker would say and understand without difficulty) that contain a reflexive from our list on the board.

(1) _____

(2) _____

(3) _____

Step 2: Hypothesize

Looking at our data set, try and formulate some principle which determines when reflexives are used. Things a syntactician might consider include word position, co-occurrences. Hypothesize a rule to capture as much of the data as possible (note you might not be able to capture *every* example). Your rule can take the form of *reflexives must ...* or *reflexives require ...* or *reflexives cannot ...*

State your rule: _____

Step 3: Test your hypothesis

Good hypotheses make predictions, i.e., they are testable. Specifically, your hypothesis should make predictions about the (un)acceptability of a new set of sentences. Let's see how your theory fairs….