

SYNTAX

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Summary

As a traditional linguistic term, the label syntax is generally used to refer to the study of the ways in which words may be combined to form larger grammatical units, i.e. phrases, and sentences, simple or complex ones. Syntax is usually opposed to morphology, which deals with the structure of words, i.e. with inflection and derivation of words. The word syntax itself comes from Greek, where it literally meant ‘putting together.’ Informally, we could say that syntax is about the togetherness of grammatical units or constructions of various types. Two fundamental questions seem to follow from such an understanding of syntax: 1. How do grammatical units hang together, or put more specifically, what grammatical phenomena (syntactic arrangements, operations, mechanisms, or organizational principles in general) hold these grammatical units together? 2. What are the grammatical units held together by these operations or mechanisms? Part 2 identifies the basic grammatical mechanisms keeping grammatical units together, constituency and dependency. Part 3 is concerned with syntactic units of vari-

ous types and how they embody basic principles of syntactic organization and function within larger wholes.

1. Introduction

As a traditional linguistic term, the label syntax is generally used to refer to the study of the ways in which words may be combined to form larger grammatical units, i.e. phrases, and sentences, simple or complex ones. Within grammar as a more general traditional area of study in linguistics, syntax is usually opposed to morphology, which deals with the structure of words, i.e. with inflection and derivation of words.

The word syntax itself comes from Greek, where it literally meant ‘putting together.’ Informally, we could say that syntax is about the togetherness of grammatical units or constructions of various types. Two fundamental questions seem to follow from such an understanding of syntax:

- How do grammatical units hang together, or put more specifically, what grammatical phenomena (syntactic arrangements, operations, mechanisms, or organizational principles in general) hold these grammatical units together?
- What are the grammatical units held together by these operations or mechanisms?

These two questions account for the basic structure of the present article. In Part 2, we identify the basic grammatical mechanisms keeping grammatical units together, which can be more or less conspicuous or central at other levels of linguistic organization as well, and focus on their syntactic aspects. It must be pointed out that more or less the same basic syntactic arrangements (as well as most concepts, terms and procedures used in syntactic descriptions) are found not only in all areas of syntax independently of the size of syntactic units, but also in other areas of study, e.g. in morphology. Simplifying things to a degree, we may concur with Bolinger (1968: 136) when he suggests that the first rule of syntax is that what belongs together will stay together. In other words, it is possible to identify certain chunks in utterances that form grammatical units or constituents that are parts of larger wholes, while they themselves may be internally complex and in turn contain some constituents in the above sense. Typically, the elements that enter a construction, i.e. form a constituent will tend to be adjacent to each other. However, they are recognized as entering a construction not only because they are adjacent to each other (note that constructions can be discontinuous as well) but also because there are certain types of functional and more or less visible formal relations holding between elements. It will be claimed that formal relations holding between elements (visible or invisible), such as constituency, word order, agreement, etc. are derivatives of functional dependency relations as one of the most important form of the instantiation of syntagmatic relations. However, the other fundamental axis in the organization of human languages, the paradigmatic one, is no less important. Syntactic structures can be expanded by embedding them into other syntactic structures of the same or some other type, resulting in subordination, or by juxtaposition, resulting in coordination. Both subordination and coordination are recursive operations, i.e. they can be in principle repeated any number of times.

In Part 3, we take a look at syntactic units of various types and study how they embody

basic principles of syntactic organization and how they function within larger wholes. The units in question may be phrases or clauses and sentences. It is customary to distinguish between two branches of syntax, according to the size of syntactic units they focus on—phrasal syntax, on the one hand, and clausal syntax, on the other, the latter also dealing with complex and compound sentences.

2. Basic syntactic concepts

2.1. Organizational principles of grammatical structure

Grammatical structure, and therefore structure in syntax as well, is not just the product of linguistic analysis—it exhibits undisputable signs of cognitive and observational reality. According to Givón (1995: 177), the best proof that grammar has observable reality is the fact that the speaker/listener is able to segment the apparently continuous stream of speech. In doing so the speaker/listener relies on four basic types of signals that are accessible to him or her:

- a. linear order
- b. nested hierarchical structure
- c. grammatical morphology
- d. rhythmic: intonation and pauses

It will be seen that out of these four signals proposed by Givón only the first and the last one are immediately accessible. Linear order is a fairly good indicator of syntactic structure, provided we can determine the nature of linearly ordered units. It is demonstrated in 2.2 that words as intuitively most plausible linguistic units are not necessarily the only, or the best units in terms of which syntactic structures should be described, and this also applies to linear order (although grammarians commonly talk about word order). It appears that linear order is an epiphenomenon of a more abstract grammatical structure, i.e. it is a reflex of it and can be sensibly talked about only once that abstract organization is discovered.

Grammatical morphology must be abstracted away on the basis of recurrent regularities concerning the linear order that appear to obtain within a reliable sample of actual language usage events. The formal exponents of grammatical morphology are easier to identify than their functions. This also applies to free grammatical morphemes, such as prepositions, articles, etc., which can also be subsumed under grammatical morphology. But again, grammatical morphology is just a way of signalling structure and does not produce structure in its own right. Just like linear order, it is also an epiphenomenon of a more abstract grammatical structure. Free and bound grammatical morphemes, i.e. function words and inflections, will be discussed here only insofar as their functions are concerned.

It is also obvious that what has been said above about linear order and grammatical morphology also applies to prosodic phenomena. Although it is immediately observable, it is clear that intonation and pauses are a consequence of syntactic structure and not its source. Pauses indicate syntactic boundaries but do not create them. Intonation, on the other hand, signals discourse functions of syntactic units but the latter exist independ-

ently of particular intonation and discourse function.

The second type of Givón's signal, what he calls nested hierarchical structure, is closely "confounded" with other more immediately observable types of signals—and again cannot be observed directly. It can only be inferred a posteriori on the basis of the observed behaviour of serially-ordered adjacent segments, i.e. thanks to the fact that these segments can be observed, again within a reliable sample of actual usage events, to appear adjacent to each other.

The fact that we appear to have a whole utterance on the one hand, and recurrent chunks of segments that hang together on the other, already bears testimony to the existence of hierarchical structure—the relationship between the whole on the one hand and what appears to function as parts on the other can only be hierarchical, such that the whole is hierarchically dominant. Such wholes in syntax (and elsewhere in grammar) are called constructions, and their parts are said to enter into a construction.

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Biographical Sketches

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