

FILE 5.0

What Is Syntax?

Words in a sentence are more than just a string of items that can be put together any which way. There are patterns and regularities to the ways in which they can be combined. Syntax studies the organization of words into phrases, and likewise the organization of phrases into sentences.

Linguists are interested in understanding the kinds of rules that govern phrase and sentence formation because they tell us something about what it means to use language, and moreover about what it means to be human. We find that although the rules for how words may be combined syntactically differ from language to language, there are many similarities as well. As we discussed in File 1.2, the rules for language use are stored in the human mind. Therefore, by understanding how rules of sentence formation work in various languages, we can understand something about how the human mind works: the sorts of structures that the human mind is able to process and store.

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Introduces five main concepts in syntax: word order, phrase structure, constituency, lexical categories, and agreement.
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- 5.3 **Lexical Categories**
Introduces eight lexical categories, providing ways to identify them based on morphological, syntactic, and semantic criteria.
- 5.4 **Phrase Structure**
Provides examples of rules for how words can combine together to form phrases in a sentence, and shows how these rules and phrases and their resultant structures can be represented in tree structure diagrams.
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Investigates aspects of word order within hierarchical structures that can differ from language to language.
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Provides exercises, discussion questions, and activities related to syntax.

FILE 5.1

Basic Ideas of Syntax

5.1.1 Phrases, Sentences, and Structure

In this chapter we ask the question, "What determines whether a string of words in a language is a sentence or simply a string of **unrelated** words?" We emphasize **unrelated** because one of the key properties that makes a string of words a sentence is that the words are related to one another in particular ways. That is, a sentence is not just an arbitrary list of words. A sentence of a particular language is a sequence of words whose ordering with respect to one another follows certain rules. Of course, in order for speakers to be able to produce sentences according to these rules, the rules must be part of what speakers know about their language.

The study of syntax is the study of how words combine to form phrases and ultimately sentences in languages. Because it consists of phrases that are put together in a particular way, a sentence has a structure. The structure consists of the **way** in which the words are organized into phrases and the phrases are organized into larger phrases. Different languages structure sentences in different ways. For example, in Malagasy (an Austronesian language spoken in Madagascar), a sentence meaning 'The man washes clothes with the soap' is arranged with the verb corresponding to 'washes' at the beginning of the sentence and the subject corresponding to 'the man' at the end, as shown in (1).

- (1) Manasa lamba amin'ny savony ny lehilahy
 washes *clothes* *with the soap* *the man*
 'The man washes clothes with the soap.'

Obviously, the rules for the syntax of Malagasy differ from those for the syntax of English.

As we proceed through this file and chapter, we will explore various aspects of these sorts of rules and their implications for language use. This file can stand alone as an essential introduction to syntax. The remaining files focus more closely on some, though not all, of the aspects of syntax introduced in this file.

5.1.2 Word Order

One of the most obvious aspects of syntax is word order. In (1) above, we saw how rules for word order can differ from language to language. That these rules must exist, though, is clear. If we translated the Malagasy sentence in (1) word for word into English, we would wind up with (2), which is certainly not a possible English sentence, even though that same word order was acceptable in Malagasy.

- (2) *Washes clothes with the soap the man.

Thus, we see that not every string of words in a language is a sentence in that language.

As a further example, we can see by rearranging the words used in (3a) that some

orders, such as (3b), are sentences, but most are unacceptable. They are not possible sentences of English.

- (3) a. The cat is on the mat.
 b. The mat is on the cat.
 c. *The is cat on the mat.
 d. *Mat on is the cat the mat.
 e. *The cat on is the mat.
 f. *The cat on the is mat.
 g. *The cat on the mat is.
 h. *Mat the on is cat the.

Strings of words that form possible sentences of a language are said to be **grammatical**. They conform to the rules of that language. Sentences that are impossible either because the words are in the wrong order with respect to one another or for some other reason are said to be **ungrammatical**. We represent the ungrammaticality (impossibility) of particular word sequences with the symbol *.

We conclude from (2) and (3) that word order is an important part of determining grammaticality (at least for English and some large number of other languages) and therefore is an important element to consider when studying syntax.

5.1.3 Lexical Categories

A second critical component of syntax is the notion of **lexical categories**, also called **syntactic categories**. You have likely heard lexical categories referred to by the name "parts of speech." A lexical category is a group of words that can function in the same way in a sentence. A good way to determine whether or not two words are of the same lexical category is to see whether they can be substituted for one another in a grammatical sentence to yield another grammatical sentence. We have shown this test five times in (4).

- (4) a. I want to read a book.
 b. *But want to read a book.
 You want to read a book.
 c. *I purple to read a book.
 I hate to read a book.
 d. *I want to sometimes a book.
 I want to acquire a book.
 e. *I want to read never book.
 I want to read the book.
 f. *I want to read a today.
 I want to read a magazine.

By comparing (4a) with (4b), we can conclude that *you* is the same lexical category as *I* but that *but* is a member of a different lexical category. We can draw similar conclusions from examining (4c) through (4f).

Not all languages have exactly the same kinds of lexical categories, but common lexical categories include nouns and verbs. More information about lexical categories can be found in File 5.3.

5.1.4 Agreement

One aspect of syntax that is related to the notion of lexical categories is that of **agreement**. Although we will not have much to say about agreement in this book, it is worth mention-