

Chapter 2

Phrase and Sentence Structure

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ABSTRACT

This chapter surveys the basics of the syntax of main clauses, with special attention to English. Readers are guided through the process of doing syntactic analysis with the aid of syntactic trees that model the properties of linearity, hierarchy, and recursion that characterize the syntax of human languages. The model used is a somewhat simplified version of X-bar syntax, which is currently the best-known and best-tested model of phrase structure within the subfield of syntax and which combines the virtues of simplicity, breadth, and predictive power. There is a section on the theory of grammatical relations and its relationship to phrase structure theory, as well as a section providing an overview of basic world constituent orders.

WHAT IS SYNTAX?

No matter how difficult it may be to define a term as basic as ‘word’ in a precise way, it is taken as assumed that a sentence in any language is a collection of units, most of which are words. Some of these units are verbs, some are nouns, some are adjectives and so on, and some represent larger entities. Languages also differ in certain respects. For example, some languages permit prepositions to stand as free words while others use bound affixes to represent English prepositional meanings; some languages make regular use of pronouns while others avoid them; some languages turn concepts into verbs that English would denote through the use of adjectives. However, no language creates sentences simply by stringing words together without some higher level of organization. This higher level of organization is called a **syntax**. While each language has a syntax that is unique to that language, there are common features that recur across languages, and the observation of these commonalities has led many linguists over the years to seek a ‘skeleton key’ that will reveal a universal structure common to natural (i.e., human) languages.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the linguist Joseph Greenberg surveyed large numbers of languages with the goal of finding what he called **language universals**, i.e., statistical generalizations that generate predictions about features of the next language we might study, once we learn a few facts about the language (Greenberg, 1966). From the 1960s onward, linguist Noam Chomsky took the idea of universality a step

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further in attempting to ground human language in cognition with the goal of specifying basic features of syntactic structure that are part of our biological inheritance. The goal has been to characterize a **universal grammar** (UG) that transcends, but is reflected in, the surface-level differences among world languages (Chomsky, 1957, 1968, 1986). In general, the ‘core’ of UG represents the common platform or matrix of principles upon which language learning takes place; this platform includes language features which are unlikely to be taught explicitly as part of a second-language classroom syllabus because they are already shared by the first language. One key principle is that sentences have organizational **structures** of a type that will be sketched in this chapter, using English as the raw data for analysis; the basic framework is held to be biologically given. However, some structural facts are also highly idiosyncratic to individual languages. To take one example, there seems no reason why the fourth sentence below, which seems organized in a way parallel to the other three, should be unacceptable to those who learned English from an early age:

*I don't know **the place where** she went.*

*I don't know **the time when** she left.*

*I don't know **the reason why** she left.*

I don't know **the way how to find her.*

Yet speakers of most dialects of English do not produce **the way how**; if they are presented with the last sentence above, they will judge it to be ungrammatical (or at least odd) in a way that the other three sentences are not. In the absence of a better explanation, this ‘hole’ in the system can only be described as a quasi-random **language-particular** fact that warrants special attention by teachers of English as a second language. It does not seem predictable by any general principles.

In between universal principles and language-specific facts lie what Chomsky (1981, 1986) has called **parameters**, or universal alternations between two basic structural options which tend to split world languages into large, fairly uniform groups. For example, languages tend to branch in two directions where the formation of informational questions is concerned – i.e., questions that use words like **who**, **when**, or **where**. Some languages (such as English, Spanish, and German) place these words at the beginning of questions, as in **Where** are you sitting? Other languages (such as Mandarin, Japanese, and Korean) leave these **wh**-words in the same place in a sentence where the corresponding non-**wh** nouns or adverbs would appear (as in *I'm sitting here. You're sitting where?*). In general, a learner will not be challenged by universal **principles** in the process of learning a new language since they hold more or less constant across very different languages. However, the learner will be confronted with **parametric** differences from an early stage of learning and be forced to make major shifts in orientation toward such things as **wh**-questions. As for **language-particular** facts, learners will find them challenging throughout the acquisition process.

THE NATURE OF PHRASES

To say that every language has a syntax is essentially to say that the sentences of each language have a structure. What does this structure look like? This chapter will look in detail at the basic architecture of English sentences on the assumption that readers of this book have sufficient knowledge of English to make judgments of their own about grammatical (“OK”) sentences of English and ungrammatical (“not

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