

Basic Syntax

A very brief summary

Instructor: Irina Burukina

irina.burukina@btk.elte.hu

BESE, Chapters 1 – 3 and 5 – 7.

1 Constituents and Phrases

Syntax – system of rules; these rules tell us how to combine words together into larger units – phrases.

Phrases – single units (constituents).

Every phrase has a **head**. The head of a phrase determines the syntactic distribution of the phrase and its label. The head is the central element of a phrase. The head determines the category of the phrase.

Nominal Phrase (NP) – [*a nice **girl***] – a noun is the head

Verbal Phrase (VP) – [***jump** quickly*] – a verb is the head

Adjectival Phrase (AP) – [*most **beautiful***] – an adjective is the head

Prepositional Phrase (PP) – [***on** the table*] – a preposition is the head

Functional elements can also be heads: *Tense Phrase* (TP), the head is usually an auxiliary or a tense/agreement morpheme.

Constituency tests:

- Substitution by pro(nominal)-forms
- Movement (topic, focus)
- *Wh*-questions and short answers
- *It* clefts

2 Thematic roles and arguments

Predicates describe a situation (event, state, relation between the participants).

Obligatory dependents = **arguments** (participants).

- (1) a. **The cow** injured **the farmer**.
← 2 participants, transitive
- b. **The cow** danced.
← 1 participant, intransitive

- c. The cow showed the farmer to Mary.
 ← 3 participants, ditransitive

Arguments receive / are assigned **thematic roles**:

Theme, Patient, Agent, Experiencer, Goal, Instrument, etc.

send <Agent, Theme, Goal>

- (2) [John] sends [letters] [to Mary].

<...> – thematic grid

Agent – an active participant, does something deliberately, on purpose.

Theme – a passive participant whose state changes as the result of the event.

Goal – addressee, destination.

Theta criterion:

- a) Each argument is assigned one and only one theta role.
 b) Each theta role is assigned to one and only one argument.

Arguments are obligatory participants. Optional information – modifiers – **adjuncts** (usually, time, location, purpose, reason, instrument, etc.).

*Thematic roles vs. grammatical functions.

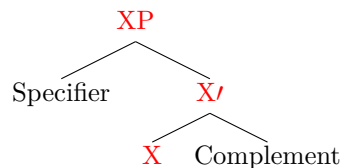
Grammatical functions:

subject > direct object > indirect object > oblique

- (3) a. The girl put a donut on the table.
 b. [*Agent* The girl] put [*Theme* a donut]
 [*Location* on the table]
 ← Semantic Level
 c. [*SubjNP* The girl] put [*DirectObjNP* a donut]
 [*ObliquePP* on the table]
 ← Syntactic Structure

3 X-bar theory

- (4)



There can be only one Specifier and one Complement in a phrase.

These positions are usually occupied by arguments. They can also be occupied by unique, obligatory dependents (for example, the determiner phrases such as *the* in *the cat*). They are never occupied by adjuncts!

X-bar structure rules:

1. The specifier rule: $XP \rightarrow \text{Specifier } X'$
2. The complement rule: $X' \rightarrow X \text{ Complement}$
3. The adjunct rule (optional, recursive): $XP \rightarrow XP, \text{ Adjunct}$ **OR** $X' \rightarrow X', \text{ Adjunct}$

UTAH: Uniformity of Theta Assignment Hypothesis – same thematic roles are assigned to the same structural positions.

Within VP: **internal arguments**, passive participants – Theme, Patient, Location, Goal, etc.

Theme – **Specifier, VP** (Spec,VP).

Patient – **Complement, VP** (Comp,VP).

*Recall: Theme and Patient – passive participants. Theme participant undergoes some change (location, state). Patient participant does not change.

4 VP and vP

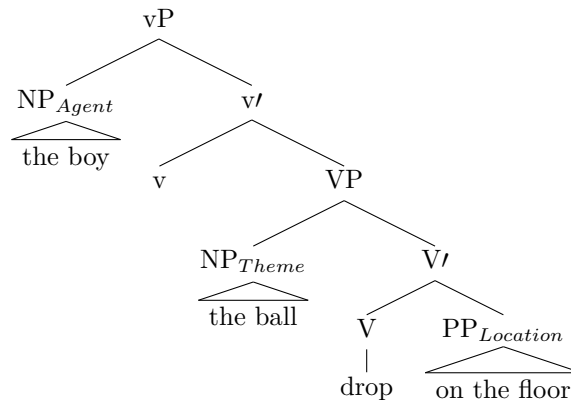
drop (ditransitive) <Agent, Theme, Location>

Agent – [the girl], Theme – [the ball], Location – [on the floor]

But! There are only two positions available for arguments within VP – one Specifier and one Complement.
UTAH → Specifier,VP – for Theme; Complement,VP – for Location.

Agents and Causers are introduced by **v** (little v) head in vP. Agent and Causers – **external arguments**, active participants; they are always outside of VP, in vP.

(5)



vP is very useful:

- vP hosts external arguments (active participants);
- v head can be overt (*make, let* in *John made/let the ball drop on the floor* – notice that the lexical head here is 'drop' and 'make'/'let' merely expresses causality);
- vP hosts Agent-oriented modifiers (*deliberately, intentionally, on purpose* + purpose clauses);
- v head assigns Accusative Case to an internal argument.

Intransitive verbs with one external argument = **unergative** verbs: *run, walk, smile*.

Intransitive verbs with one internal argument = **unaccusative** verbs: *fall, sleep*.

5 Cases. TP/IP

In Indo-European and Uralic languages: subjects – nominative (cf. English *he, she, they*), direct objects – accusative (cf. English *him, her, them*).

Nominative and accusative = **structural Cases**. They depend not on a predicate / thematic roles but on the structural position of an NP. They are assigned always by a functional head.

Accusative = structural case. Direct objects are only available in clauses with an external argument. → v^0 is responsible for them.

Burzio's Generalization:

if there is little v^0 introducing an external argument, Accusative Case can be assigned.

Case Filter – every NP must be assigned Case.

Nominative Case – structural; no adjacency requirement, not together with a specific thematic role or to a specific argument. → Nominative Case is assigned by a new functional head – **I⁰ (IP)** (otherwise known as **T⁰, TP**)

! T = Tense, I = Inflection.

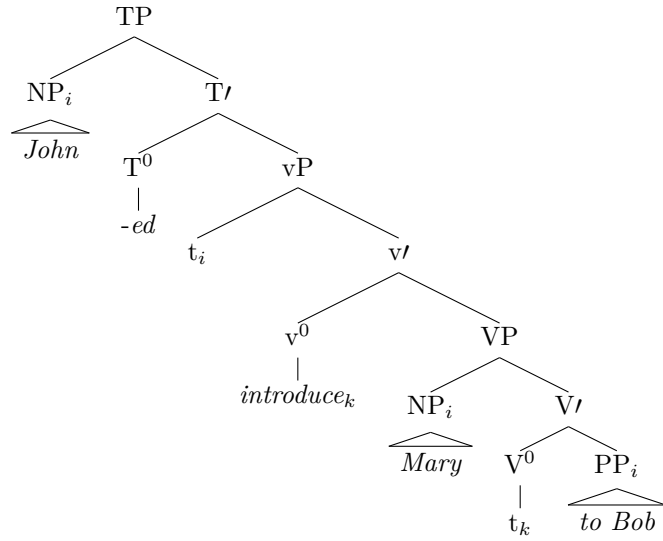
TP/IP is very useful:

- **T⁰/I⁰**: information about tense and agreement. Auxiliaries (*will, be*), inflections (*-ed, -s*) = **T⁰/I⁰**.
Do insertion with clausal negation: **The glass shattered not.* **The glass not shattered.* *The glass did not shatter.*
- **TP/IP level modifiers**: ‘speaker’-oriented modifiers (*probably, certainly, unfortunately*).

Specifier-Head Agreement:

A nominal phrase moves into Spec,IP to get Case and to agree. → word order: *John did not do this.* vs **Did John not do this.* and **Did not John do this.*

- (6) a. John introduced Mary to Bob.
 b.



- (7) a. John knows that Mary jumped in the garden.
 b.

