

Syntax Seminar (BBN-ANG-252): Handout 1

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This is a summary of BESE Ch. 1.1-2, partly 1.3, Ch. 2.1.1-2, 2.1.6, 2.1.7, with some additions from Radford (2009) and Carnie (2012).

1 Introduction

- Speakers of a language are able to produce and understand a limitless number of expressions. They also produce and understand utterances that probably have never been produced before.
- Linguistic knowledge is not stored; speakers have “a (finite) set of rules which tell us how to recognise the infinite number of expressions that constitute the language that we speak” (BESE p. 2).
- This finite set of rules is often referred to as grammar.
- Distinction: I-language, which is internal to the mind and consists of a finite system (this is what linguists try to model), and E-language, an infinite set of expressions defined by the I-language that linguists take data from when formulating their grammars.
- Syntax is the study of the way in which phrases and sentences are structured out of words (Radford 2009: 1).
- Studying linguistic variation: parameters (Radford 2009: 22)

Compare the possibility of omitting the subject pronoun in English and Italian in (1). This phenomenon is referred to as ‘*pro*-drop’ and the languages like Italian are called ‘null subject languages’.

- (1) a. Maria thinks that *(they) speak French.¹
b. Maria pensa che parlano francese.
Maria thinks that speak.PRS.3PL French
‘Maria thinks that speak French.’² Italian (Radford 2009: 22)

Apart from the ‘Null-subject Parameter’, we also find other parameters, cf. the word order in *wh*-questions (‘Wh-Parameter’). Compare English and Chinese (2):

- (2) a. **What** do you think he will say?
b. Ni xiang ta hui shuo **shenme**?
you think he will say what
‘What do you think he will say?’ Chinese (Radford 2009: 24)

¹The asterisk (*) marks ungrammatical sentences. In (1a) the notation indicates that the sentence is ungrammatical if *they* is omitted – i.e., that the sentence *Maria thinks that speak French* is ungrammatical. Other symbols used for grammaticality judgements are % ‘interspeaker variation’, ?/?? ‘less acceptable, marginal’ and # ‘semantically odd’.

²The glosses obey the Leipzig Glossing Rules: 3 = third person, PL = plural, PRS = present.

2 Structure, rules, phrases

- “A sentence is obviously made up of a number of words, but [...] it is not true that sentences are formed simply by putting a row of words together.” (BESE: p. 57)

- (3) a. Sid saw Wendy.
b. Yesterday Sid saw Wendy.

What generalizations can we make regarding the linear order in (3)? And how about the meaning of the sentences?

- Sentences are internally structured, words are grouped into units.
- Sentences are built with the help of **rules**. In (4), one sentence contains the other. Thus, syntactic rules can be *recursive*.

- (4) a. This is the house [that Jack built].
b. This is the malt [that lay in the house [that Jack built]].
c. This is the mouse [that ate the malt [that lay in the house [that Jack built]]].

- NB: two types of rules are to be distinguished, *prescriptive* and *descriptive* rules (see Carnie 2012). We are concerned with the later.

Prescriptive rules: telling people how they should speak (e.g., language teachers and copyeditors) → “correct” sentences

Descriptive rules: rules that show how people *actually* speak, whether or not they are speaking “correctly” → grammatical, acceptable sentences (see also fn. 1)

- **Phrases**: structured units that can consist of multiple words and that occur in a specific position in the sentence, i.e., have a specific syntactic distribution. For example, *the postwoman* and *the doctor* fulfill the same role in (5b) as *Prudence* and *Dennis*, respectively.

- (5) a. [Prudence] pestered [Dennis].
b. [The postwoman] pestered [the doctor].

↔ *Prudence* and *the postwoman* have the same syntactic distribution, cf. (6) and (7):

- (6) a. They spoke to Prudence. (7) a. *We Prudence Dennis.
b. They spoke to the postwoman. b. *We the postwoman Dennis.

- Syntactic structure is not “flat”: the sentence is organised in a hierarchical structure.
- The sentences in (8) have two possible interpretations. This is so because they are structurally ambiguous.

↪ For each sentence, define the two interpretations. Mark constituents with square brackets to indicate the different structures and the interpretation they give rise to.

- (8) a. Peter saw the boy with the binoculars.
b. Mary saw tall boys and girls.
c. Mary saw boys and girls who were tall.
d. John said on Friday he would come over.

Homework (challenge): Think about the ambiguities in (9). What are the two possible interpretations of these sentences? Can they be (easily) accounted for in the same way like the examples in (8)?

- (9) a. John drove Mary home drunk.
 b. I saw Mary in New York when she claimed she would arrive.

3 Word categories and types of phrases

- Word categories: words that cluster together based on certain principles

① Thematic (lexical) categories: verbs (V), nouns (N), adjectives (A), prepositions (P)

Provide a few examples for these categories.

② Functional categories: inflections (I), determiners (D), degree adverbs (Deg), complementizers (C)

(10) Inflections

- a. I think that he **could** see me.
 b. I was anxious for him **to** see me.
 c. He swims **everyday**.

(11) Determiners

- a. **the** party
 b. **a** snake
 c. **this** idea of yours
 d. **which** friend of mine

(12) Degree adverbs

- a. **so** light
 b. **more/most** beautiful

(13) Complementizers

- a. I know [**that** I am right].
 b. I was hoping [**for** you to phone].
 c. I wonder [**if** you would lend me the money].

- NB: BESE (p. 30–34) distinguishes between degree adverbs (functional) vs. *-ly* adverbs (derived from adjectives). The latter are treated as adjectival phrases (see below).

- Criteria for determining the category of a word:

✓ morphology

Provide arguments that nouns in English have similar morphological properties.

✓ syntactic distribution

What can be observed regarding the distribution of nouns and verbs based on (6) and (7)?

✗ semantics

- (14) a. the red apple [Adj]
 b. I like dark red. [N]

- (15) a. They always attack us. [V]
 b. We are under attack. [N]

- (16) a. The screen will clear. [V]
 b. Everything is clear now. [Adj]

