

An Introduction to Syntactic Theory

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What syntax is all about

Syntax is the subfield of linguistics that studies the principles by which sentences are composed of words and phrases.

Fascinating problem

Native speakers know that (1a) is grammatical and (1b) is ungrammatical:

- (1) a. Kim smokes.
- b. * Smokes Kim.

Question: How do they do this?

Fascinating problem, 2

Question: How do they do this? Do they look up the grammatical sentences in a memorized list?

No. That is implausible for at least two reasons:

1) There are too many grammatical sentences to memorize them all:

- (2) a. It rained.
b. It rained and rained.
c. It rained and rained and rained.
d. **and so on**
- (3) a. Sandy is smart.
b. He is convinced that Sandy is smart.
c. He thinks that he is convinced that Sandy is smart.
d. **and so on**
- (4) a. One is a natural number.
b. Two is a natural number.
c. Three is a natural number.
d. **and so on**

Fascinating problem, 3

Question: How do they do this? Do they look up the grammatical sentences in a memorized list?

No. That is implausible for at least two reasons:

2) People can recognize sentences as grammatical that they have never encountered:

- (5) a. Books featuring Native Americans, on-the-run alien lovers, gay penguins and middle school theater geeks top the American Library Association's 2014 list of most challenged books.
- b. In all, the association said, it received notice of 311 formal written complaints in 2014 questioning the availability of books for myriad reasons: sex, drug use, homosexual themes, politics and offensive language, mostly.

These sentences appeared in the news article *Graphic novels, diverse worlds top list of 2014's most challenged books* on the CNN website on April 15, 2015.

Fascinating problem, 4

Native speakers know that (6a) is grammatical and (6b) is ungrammatical:

- (6) a. Kim smokes.
b. * Smokes Kim.

Question: So, how **do** people do this?

Answer:

- They know the **grammar** of English.
- And it is the grammar of English that determines for every one of the infinitely many strings of words, whether they are English or not.

Fascinating problem, 5: Grammar and language

What is a language?

For the purposes of our class, we can think of a language as simply all and only the strings of words which are grammatical.

There are too many such sentences to memorize them.

What is a grammar?

A grammar is made up of two lists:

- 1 A list of words of the language: **the lexicon**.
- 2 A list of rules for forming phrases and sentences: **the syntax**.

How big is the grammar?

- 1 Average speakers have a lexicon of between 40000-70000 lexical items.
- 2 There are many fewer syntactic rules than there are lexical items.
- 3 **These numbers are small enough for the whole grammar to be memorized!**

Fascinating problem, 6:

Native speakers of English have intuitions for any string of words whether it is part of English or not.

Question: What underlies that intuition?

Answer:

- Native speakers know whether all the words in the string are in the lexicon of their grammar.
- And they can determine whether the words in the string are combined in accordance with the syntactic rules of their grammar.

**So, in this course, we are going to study
the grammar of English: its lexicon and its syntax.**