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Part I

Function and Form

1 Introduction

Along with sleeping, eating and drinking, talking is one of the most common of human activities. Hardly a day goes by when we don't talk, if only to ourselves! When we speak, we utter a stream of sounds with a certain meaning, which our interlocutors can process and understand, provided they speak the same language of course. Naturally, language also exists in written form. It then consists of a string of letters which form words, which in turn make up sentences. Why is the study of language worthwhile? Well, first and foremost the capacity for using language is uniquely human, and if we know how language works we get to know something about ourselves. Other animals also communicate with each other, to be sure, but their communicative and expressive powers are very limited. Thus, while dogs and cats can signal pleasure by wagging their tails or purring, there's no way for them to tell you something more complicated, for example that although they are generally content, they wouldn't mind if you turned the heating up a little. By contrast, we humans can communicate just about any meaning we wish, however complex, using language. As an example, consider the utterance *Had Nick been here on time, we would not have missed the train*. This is a perfectly straightforward and easily intelligible sentence, though to understand it we have to do a bit of mental computing by creating in our minds a 'picture' of a situation that did *not* obtain, a situation in which Nick *was* on time, and we did *not* miss our train. Or consider the sentence *I went to a conference on language in France*. Have you noticed that it's ambiguous? Under one reading I went to a conference on language which took place in France; under the second reading I went to a conference which was about 'language in France', which could have taken place anywhere. This is called a *structural ambiguity*, because we can group the words together differently to bring out the two meanings. There are of course many other reasons to be fascinated by language. If you're a student of literature, you cannot really grasp the totality of meaning that a work of literary art communicates without knowing how language works. And if you're interested in interpersonal relationships you might wonder why there are so many ways to ask someone to open the window: 'Open the window!', 'Can you open the window (please)?', 'Could you open the window (please)?', 'I was wondering whether you could possibly open the window?' and 'I'm hot'. The last example is especially interesting, because at first sight it's a simple statement about one's physical condition. For the hearer to get to the meaning 'open the window, please', some mental computation is again involved. I could continue endlessly to give more examples to illustrate the many fascinating aspects of the field of language studies, called *linguistics*. In this book we focus on the *structure* of English. Now, if you have thought about language, you will have realised that whether it is spoken or written, it is not a

hotchpotch of randomly distributed elements. Instead, the linguistic ingredients that language is made up of are arranged in accordance with a set of rules. This set of rules we call the *grammar* of a language. Grammar is a vast domain of inquiry and it will be necessary to limit ourselves to a subdomain. In this book we will only be concerned with the part of grammar that concerns itself with the structure of sentences. This is called *syntax*.

How can we go about describing the structure of sentences? Well, before we can even start, we will need to specify what we mean by ‘sentence’. This is not as straightforward a question as it may seem, and linguists have come up with a variety of definitions. In this book we will say that a sentence is a string of words that begins in a capital letter and ends in a full stop, and is typically used to express a state of affairs in the world. This definition is not unproblematic, but will suffice for present purposes.

Let’s now see what kinds of issues syntax deals with. First of all, one of the principal concerns of syntax is the *order* of words. In English we cannot string words into a sentence randomly. For example, we can have (1), but not (2) or (3):

- (1) The President ate a doughnut.
- (2) *The President a doughnut ate.
- (3) *Doughnut President the ate a.

NB: An asterisk (*) placed before a sentence indicates that it is not a possible structure in English.

The contrast between (1) and (2) shows that in English the word that denotes the activity of eating (*ate*) must precede the word (or string of words) that refers to the entity that was being eaten (*a doughnut*). Furthermore, if we compare (2) and (3) we see that not only must *ate* precede *a doughnut*, but we must also ensure that the two elements *the* and *a* precede *President* and *doughnut*, respectively. It seems that *the* and *President* together form a unit, in the same way that *a* and *doughnut* do. Our syntactic framework will have to be able to explain why it is that words group themselves together. We will use the term *constituent* for strings of one or more words that syntactically and semantically (i.e. meaningwise) behave as units.

Consider next sentence (4):

- (4) The cat devoured the rat.

It is possible to rearrange the words in this sentence as follows:

- (5) The rat devoured the cat.

Notice that this is still a good sentence of English, but its meaning is different from (4), despite the fact that both sentences contain exactly the same words. In (4) the agent (perpetrator) of the attack is *the cat* and the undergoer (victim) is *the*

rat. In (5) these roles are reversed. Our rules of syntax must be set up in such a way that they can account for the fact that native speakers of English *know* that a reordering of elements like we have in (4) and (5) leads to a difference in meaning.

However, not all reorderings lead to a difference in meaning. An alternative ordering for (4) is given in (6) below:

(6) The RAT, the cat devoured.

Sentences of this type are commonly used for contrast. For example, (6) might be uttered in denial of someone saying *The cat devoured the mouse*. Again, the syntactic rules of our grammar must be able to characterise the regrouping that has transformed (4) into (6), and they must also be able to explain why in this case there is no change in meaning.

The examples we have looked at so far make clear that syntax deals with the way in which we can carve up sentences into smaller constituent parts which consist of single words or of larger units of two or more words, and the way in which these units can be combined and/or rearranged.

Let us look at some further simple sentences and see how we can analyse them in terms of their constituent parts. Consider (7) below. How could we plausibly subdivide this sentence into constituents?

(7) The President blushed.

One possible subdivision is to separate the sentence into words:

(8) The — President — blushed

However, clearly (8) is not a particularly enlightening way to analyse (7), because such a dissection tells us nothing about the relationships between the individual words. Intuitively the words *the* and *President* together form a unit, while *blushed* is a second unit that stands alone, as in (9):

(9) [The President] — [blushed]

We will use square brackets to indicate groups of words that belong together. One way in which we can also *show* that the string *the President* is a unit is by replacing it with *he*:

(10) [He] — [blushed]

The subdivision in (9) makes good sense from the point of view of meaning too: the word-group *the President* has a specific function in that it refers (in a particular context of utterance) to an individual whose job is Head of State. Similarly, the word *blushed* has a clear function in that it tells us what happened to the President.

Let us now turn to a slightly more complex example. Consider the sentence below:

(11) Our vicar likes fast cars.

If we want to set about analysing the structure of this sentence, we can of course divide it up into words, in the way we did in (8), as follows:

(12) Our — vicar — likes — fast — cars

But again, you will agree, this is of limited interest for the same reason as that given above: an analysis into strings of individual words leaves the relationships between words completely unaccounted for.

Exercise

Can you think of a different way of analysing this sentence into subparts which accounts for our intuition that certain words belong together?

Intuitively the words *our* and *vicar* belong together, as do *fast* and *cars*. The word *likes* seems to stand alone. We end up with (13):

(13) [Our vicar] — [likes] — [fast cars]

Again, just as in (10), we can also *show* that the bracketed strings behave as units, by replacing them:

(14) [He] — [likes] — [them]

An analysis along the lines of (13) of a simple sentence like (11) has been widely adopted, but there are in fact reasons for analysing (11) differently, namely as in (15):

(15) [Our vicar] — [[likes] — [fast cars]]

Like (13), (15) brings out the fact that *our* and *vicar* belong together, as do *fast* and *cars*, but it also reflects the fact that *likes* forms a constituent with *fast cars*. Why would that be? There are a number of reasons for this which will be discussed in detail in later chapters, but we will look at one of them now. Notice that *like* requires the presence of a constituent that specifies what is being liked. In (11) that constituent is *fast cars*. The sentence in (16), which provides no clue as to what is being liked by the vicar, is *ungrammatical*, i.e. not part of the grammar of English.

(16) *Our vicar likes.

Likes and *fast cars* are taken together as a constituent in (15) to bring out the fact that there is a close bond between *like* and the constituent that specifies what is being liked (i.e. the constituent that is required to complete the meaning of *like*). Notice that *blush* in (7) does *not* require the presence of another constituent to complete its meaning.

Much of this book, especially Part III, will be concerned with finding reasons why one analysis is to be preferred over another in much the same way that reasons have been given for preferring (15) over (13). Giving motivated reasons for adopting certain structures and rejecting others is called *syntactic argumentation*. One aim of this book is to train you in the art of being able to set up a coherent syntactic argument. We will almost exclusively be concerned with the syntax of English, not because other languages are not interesting, but because studying the syntactic properties of other languages requires a wider framework than we can deal with here. The general syntactic framework I have adopted is inspired by the theory of language developed by the American linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky over the last fifty years. The main aim of the book is to make you familiar with the basics of English syntax and, as noted above, with the fundamentals of syntactic argumentation. A further aim is to enable you to move on to more advanced books and articles on theoretical syntax.

Key Concepts in this Chapter

linguistics
structure
grammar
syntax
constituent
syntactic argumentation

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