

# Contents

|                                      |      |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| <i>Preface to the First Edition</i>  | xiii |
| <i>Preface to the Second Edition</i> | xiv  |
| <i>Preface to the Third Edition</i>  | xv   |

## PART I FUNCTION AND FORM

|  |    |
|--|----|
| <b>Chapter 1 Introduction</b>                          | 3  |
| <i>Key Concepts</i>                                    | 7  |
| <b>Chapter 2 Function</b>                              | 8  |
| 2.1 Subject and Predicate                              | 8  |
| 2.2 Predicator   | 14 |
| 2.3 Direct Object                                      | 15 |
| 2.4 Indirect Object                                    | 18 |
| 2.5 Adjunct  | 20 |
| <i>Key Concepts</i>                                    | 21 |
| <i>Exercises</i>                                       | 21 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>                                 | 23 |
| <b>Chapter 3 Form: Words, Word Classes and Phrases</b> | 24 |
| 3.1 The notion 'word'                                  | 24 |
| 3.2 Nouns and determinatives                           | 25 |
| 3.3 Adjectives   | 31 |
| 3.4 Verbs  | 33 |
| 3.5 Prepositions                                       | 43 |
| 3.6 Adverbs  | 43 |
| 3.7 Conjunctions                                       | 45 |
| 3.8 Interjections                                      | 47 |
| <i>Key Concepts</i>                                    | 48 |
| <i>Exercises</i>                                       | 48 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>                                 | 51 |
| <b>Chapter 4 More on Form: Clauses and Sentences</b>   | 52 |
| 4.1 Clauses and clause hierarchies                     | 52 |

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|                  |   |     |
|------------------|---|-----|
| 4.2              | The rank scale  | 55  |
| 4.3              | Clause types  | 57  |
| 4.3.1            | Declarative clauses                                   | 57  |
| 4.3.2            | Interrogative clauses                                 | 58  |
| 4.3.3            | Imperative clauses                                    | 59  |
| 4.3.4            | Exclamative clauses                                   | 60  |
| 4.3.5            | The pragmatics of the clause types                    | 60  |
| 4.4              | More on tree diagrams                                 | 62  |
|                  | <i>Key Concepts</i>                                   | 66  |
|                  | <i>Exercises</i>                                      | 66  |
|                  | <i>Further Reading</i>                                | 68  |
| <b>Chapter 5</b> | <b>The Function–Form Interface</b>                    | 69  |
| 5.1              | Function–form relationships                           | 69  |
| 5.2              | Realisations of the Subject                           | 70  |
| 5.3              | Realisation of the Predicate and Predicator           | 73  |
| 5.4              | Realisations of the Direct Object                     | 73  |
| 5.5              | Realisations of the Indirect Object                   | 77  |
| 5.6              | Realisations of Adjuncts                              | 77  |
|                  | <i>Key Concepts</i>                                   | 83  |
|                  | <i>Exercises</i>                                      | 84  |
|                  | <i>Further Reading</i>                                | 85  |
| <b>PART II</b>   | <b>ELABORATION</b>                                    |     |
| <b>Chapter 6</b> | <b>Predicates, Arguments and Thematic Roles</b>       | 89  |
| 6.1              | Predicates and arguments                              | 89  |
| 6.2              | Thematic roles  | 92  |
| 6.3              | Grammatical functions and thematic roles              | 94  |
| 6.4              | Selectional restrictions                              | 95  |
| 6.5              | Three levels of description                           | 96  |
|                  | <i>Key Concepts</i>                                   | 97  |
|                  | <i>Exercises</i>                                      | 97  |
|                  | <i>Further Reading</i>                                | 99  |
| <b>Chapter 7</b> | <b>Cross-Categorial Generalisations: X-Bar Syntax</b> | 101 |
| 7.1              | Heads, Complements and Specifiers                     | 101 |
| 7.2              | Adjuncts  | 108 |
| 7.3              | Cross-categorial generalisations                      | 116 |
| 7.4              | Subcategorisation                                     | 118 |
| 7.4.1            | Subcategorisation versus argument/thematic structure  | 120 |

---

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 121 |
| <i>Exercises</i>   | 121 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>   | 124 |
| <b>Chapter 8 More on Clauses</b>   | 126 |
| 8.1 The I-node   | 126 |
| 8.2 Subordinate clauses  | 130 |
| 8.2.1 Clauses functioning as Direct Object,<br>Subject and Adjunct                           | 130 |
| 8.2.2 Clauses functioning as Complements<br>within phrases                                   | 133 |
| 8.2.3 Clauses functioning as Adjuncts within NPs   | 134 |
| <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 136 |
| <i>Exercises</i>   | 136 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>   | 137 |
| <b>Chapter 9 Movement</b>  | 139 |
| 9.1 Verb movement: aspectual auxiliaries   | 139 |
| 9.2 NP-movement: passive   | 145 |
| 9.3 NP-movement: Subject-to-Subject raising  | 151 |
| 9.4 Movement in interrogative sentences:<br>Subject–Auxiliary Inversion                      | 153 |
| 9.5 Wh-movement  | 155 |
| 9.6 The structure of sentences containing<br>one or more auxiliaries                         | 159 |
| <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 161 |
| <i>Exercises</i>   | 161 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>   | 164 |
| <b>PART III ARGUMENTATION</b>  |     |
| <b>Chapter 10 Syntactic Argumentation</b>  | 167 |
| 10.1 The art of argumentation  | 167 |
| 10.2 Economy of description: Linguistically Significant<br>Generalisations and Occam’s razor | 170 |
| 10.2.1 Linguistically Significant Generalisations  | 170 |
| 10.2.2 Occam’s razor   | 172 |
| 10.2.2.1 Verb–preposition constructions  | 173 |
| 10.2.2.2 Achieving economy in the domain<br>of functional terminology                        | 177 |
| 10.3 Further constraints on description: elegance<br>and independent justifications          | 179 |

---

|                   |   |     |
|-------------------|---|-----|
| 10.3.1            | Elegance of description                                   | 179 |
| 10.3.2            | Independent justifications                                | 182 |
| 10.4              | Evaluating analyses                                       | 184 |
|                   | <i>Key Concepts</i>                                       | 184 |
|                   | <i>Exercises</i>  | 185 |
|                   | <i>Further Reading</i>                                    | 187 |
| <b>Chapter 11</b> | <b>Constituency: Movement and Substitution</b>            | 189 |
| 11.1              | Movement  | 190 |
| 11.1.1            | Movements to the left                                     | 191 |
| 11.1.1.1          | Topicalisation  | 191 |
| 11.1.1.2          | VP-Preposing  | 192 |
| 11.1.1.3          | <i>Though</i> -Movement                                   | 197 |
| 11.1.2            | Movements to the right                                    | 198 |
| 11.1.2.1          | Heavy-NP-Shift  | 198 |
| 11.1.2.2          | Extrapolation of Subject Clauses                          | 199 |
| 11.1.2.3          | Extrapolation from NP                                     | 199 |
| 11.2              | Substitution  | 201 |
| 11.2.1            | Substitution of nominal projections: NP and N'            | 201 |
| 11.2.2            | Substitution of verbal projections: VP and V'             | 207 |
|                   | <i>Key concepts</i>                                       | 213 |
|                   | <i>Exercises</i>  | 213 |
|                   | <i>Further reading</i>                                    | 218 |
| <b>Chapter 12</b> | <b>Constituency: Some Additional Tests</b>                | 219 |
| 12.1              | Coordination  | 219 |
| 12.2              | Cleft and pseudocleft sentences                           | 222 |
| 12.3              | The Insertion Test  | 223 |
| 12.4              | The Constituent Response Test                             | 224 |
| 12.5              | The Somewhere Else Test                                   | 225 |
| 12.6              | The Meaning Test  | 227 |
| 12.7              | A case study: the <i>Naked Pizza Eating</i> -construction | 228 |
| 12.8              | Some caveats regarding the tests                          | 231 |
|                   | <i>Key Concepts</i>                                       | 232 |
|                   | <i>Exercises</i>  | 232 |
|                   | <i>Further Reading</i>                                    | 235 |
| <b>Chapter 13</b> | <b>Predicates and Arguments Revisited</b>                 | 236 |
| 13.1              | Establishing argumenthood                                 | 236 |
| 13.1.1            | Meaning   | 236 |
| 13.1.2            | Dummy elements and idiom chunks                           | 239 |

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|                            |  |            |
|----------------------------|--|------------|
| 13.1.3                     | Passivisation  | 240        |
| 13.2                       | Two further types of verb + NP + <i>to</i> -infinitive construction: <i>persuade</i> and <i>want</i> | 241        |
| 13.2.1                     | <i>Persuade</i>  | 241        |
| 13.2.2                     | <i>Want</i>  | 243        |
| 13.2.3                     | Overview   | 244        |
| 13.3                       | Concluding remarks   | 246        |
|                            | <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 246        |
|                            | <i>Exercises</i>   | 246        |
|                            | <i>Further Reading</i>   | 249        |
| <b>PART IV APPLICATION</b> |  |            |
| <b>Chapter 14</b>          | <b>Grammatical Indeterminacy</b>   | <b>253</b> |
| 14.1                       | Category boundaries and gradience  | 253        |
| 14.2                       | Subjective Gradience   | 254        |
| 14.2.1                     | Nouns  | 254        |
| 14.2.2                     | Adjectives   | 255        |
| 14.2.3                     | Verbs  | 256        |
| 14.2.4                     | Prepositions   | 256        |
| 14.3                       | Intersective Gradience   | 257        |
| 14.3.1                     | Word classes: adjective or adverb?   | 257        |
| 14.3.2                     | Word classes: verb or noun?  | 258        |
| 14.3.3                     | Phrases: Adjective Phrase or Prepositional Phrase?   | 259        |
| 14.3.4                     | Constructional gradience   | 260        |
| 14.4                       | Concluding remarks   | 261        |
|                            | <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 261        |
|                            | <i>Exercises</i>   | 261        |
|                            | <i>Further Reading</i>   | 262        |
| <b>Chapter 15</b>          | <b>Case Studies</b>  | <b>263</b> |
| 15.1                       | Negated modal auxiliaries  | 263        |
| 15.2                       | Noun Phrase structure  | 267        |
| 15.2.1                     | <i>A lot of books</i>  | 267        |
| 15.2.2                     | <i>A giant of a man</i>  | 271        |
| 15.3                       | Verb complementation   | 276        |
| 15.3.1                     | Verb + <i>to</i> -infinitive   | 278        |
| 15.3.2                     | Verb + NP + <i>to</i> -infinitive constructions involving <i>allow</i>                               | 281        |
| 15.3.3                     | Verb + NP + {NP/AP/PP}   | 286        |
| 15.4                       | Subordinating conjunctions and prepositions  | 289        |
| 15.5                       | Concluding remarks   | 290        |

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <i>Key Concepts</i>  | 291 |
| <i>Exercises</i>   | 291 |
| <i>Further Reading</i>   | 291 |
| <br>   |     |
| <i>Glossary</i>  | 293 |
| <i>Reference Works: Dictionaries, Encyclopedias,</i>           |     |
| <i>Grammars and Other Publications on the English Language</i> | 307 |
| <i>Bibliography</i>  | 313 |
| <i>Index</i>   | 317 |

# **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

# Index

- action, 9
- active sentences, 17–18
- adjective phrases, 32–3
  - intersective gradience, 259–60
  - as Subjects, 71
- adjectives
  - characteristics, 31
  - distributional characteristics, 32
  - forms, 31–2
  - gradable, 31–2
  - intersective gradience, 257–8
  - and linking verbs, 32
  - and nouns, 27
  - position, 32
  - subjective gradience, 255
- adjunction, 110
- adjunctisers, 47
- Adjuncts (A), 20–1, 108–16
  - realisations, 77–81
  - stackable, 115
- adverb phrases (Adv P), 45
  - as Adjunct, 77–8
  - as Subjects, 71
- adverbials, 23
- adverbs
  - circumstantial, 44
  - degree, 44
  - description, 43–4
  - intersective gradience, 257–8
  - scope, 44
  - sentence, 44
  - subclasses, 44–5
- affix hopping, 128
- Agent, 8, 92
- agentive role, Direct Object, 15
- agreement, Subject-verb, 11
- allow*, argumenthood, 281–6
- alternative interrogative, 59
- alternative questions, 61–2
- ambiguity, structural, 3
- analyses, evaluating, 184
- animals, communication, 3
- argument structure, 91
- argumenthood
  - allow*, 281–6
  - believe*, 239–41
- dummy elements and idiom chunks,
  - 239–40
  - establishing, 236–41
  - meanings, 236–8
  - passivisation, 240–1
  - persuade*, 241–3
  - want*, 243–4
- arguments
  - external, 90
  - internal, 90
  - and Predicates, 89–91
- Aristotle, view of classification, 253
- aspect
  - perfective, 36–7
  - progressive, 36
- aspectual auxiliary verbs, 36, 139–45
- asyndetic coordination, 46
- attested data, 169
- attributive position, of adjectives, 32
- auxiliary verbs, 35–6 *see also* modal auxiliary
  - verbs, verbs
  - aspectual, 139–45
  - characteristics, 41–2
  - combinations, 146
  - combining, 41
  - as distinct from main verbs, 40–1
  - dummy auxiliary, 39–40
  - emphasis, 40
  - finite and nonfinite, 41
  - I-node, 129–30
  - modal, 145, 154
  - negative, 38
  - NICE properties, 40–1
  - passive, 38
  - sentence structure, 159–61
  - syntactic behaviour, 146
- bare infinitive clause, 54
  - as Adjunct, 80
  - as Direct Objects, 76
  - as Subjects, 72–3
- base form, of verbs, 11
- believe*, argumenthood, 239–41
- Beneficiary/Benefactive, 19, 92
- binary features, 172
- by*-phrases, 20

- case studies: *naked pizza eating*, 228–31
- case studies: negated modal auxiliaries, 263–7
- case studies: noun phrase structure, 267–76
- cleft construction, 270
- coordination, 270
- a giant of a man*, 271–6
- a lot of books*, 267–9
- movement, 269
- case studies: subordinating conjunctions and prepositions, 289–90
- case studies: verb complementation, 276–89
- cleft and pseudocleft sentences, 280, 285
- constituent response test, 281, 285
- coordination, 280, 285
- patterns, 277–8
- somewhere else test, 281, 285
- V + NP + {NP/AP/PP}, 286–9
- V + NP + *to*-infinitive constructions involving allow, 281–6
- V + *to*-infinitive, 278–81
- categorisation, 253–4
- constructional gradience, 260
- intersective gradience, 257–61
- subjective gradience, 254–7
- category boundaries, and gradience, 253
- Chomsky, Noam, 7
- circumstantial adverbs, 44
- clause hierarchies, 52–5
- clauses, 52–5
- bare infinitive, 54
- declarative, 57–8
- ed* participle, 54
- exclamative, 60
- finite, 53–4
- finite subordinate, 54
- functioning as Adjuncts within NPs, 134–6
- functioning as complements within phrases, 133–4
- imperative, 59–60
- ing* participle, 54
- interrogative, 58–9
- matrix, 52–3
- nonfinite, 53–4
- nonfinite subordinate, 54
- nonrestrictive relative, 135
- pragmatics, 60–2
- relative, 134–5
- restrictive relative, 135
- small, 54
- subordinate, 52–3
- to*-infinitive, 54
- types, 57–62
- verbless, 54
- cleft and pseudocleft sentences, 230
- as diagnostic of constituency, 222–3
- cliticisation, 38
- clothes hangers, 64
- code, 40
- common nouns, 28, 29
- communication, animal, 3
- complementisers, 47
- Complements, 101–8
- adjective phrases, 33
- and Adjuncts, 110–13
- definition, 18
- Direct Object, 15–18
- and Heads, 115, 118–21
- Indirect Object, 18–20
- Object, 178–9
- Subject, 178
- conjoins, 45
- conjunctions, 45–7
- constituency
- caveats regarding tests, 231
- cleft and pseudocleft sentences, 230
- cleft and pseudocleft sentences as diagnostic, 222–3
- constituent response test, 224–5, 230
- insertion test, 223–4, 230
- movement as diagnostic, 190–201
- ordinary coordination, 230
- right-node-raising, 230
- somewhere else test, 225–7, 231
- substitution as diagnostic, 190–201
- though*-movement, 229
- VP-deletion, 229
- VP-preposing, 229
- constituent response test, 224–5, 230
- constituents, 4, 63–5, 189–90
- coordination as diagnostic, 219–21
- grammatical functions, 65
- immediate, 63
- meaning test, 227
- S-constituents, 224
- constructional gradience, 260
- contrast, 5
- coordinating conjunctions (coordinators), 45–6
- coordination, 45–6
- as diagnostic of constituency, 219–21
- ordinary, 220
- right-node-raising, 221
- copula, 32
- cross-categorial generalisations, 116–18
- current relevance, 36–7

- data, introspective and attested, 169  
 daughter nodes, 63  
 declarative clauses, 57–8  
 degree adverbs, 44  
 deletion, 208  
   V'-deletion, 212  
   VP-deletion, 229, 263–7  
 description  
   economy of, 170–9  
   elegance of, 179–82  
 determinatives, 26–7  
 Direct Object (DO), 15–18  
   agentive role, 15  
   as Complement, 15–18  
   implicit, 17  
   not noun phrase, 53  
   passive sentences, 20  
   Patient role, 15  
   propositions as, 81–2  
   realisations, 73–7  
   semantic definition, 15  
   syntactic definition, 16–18  
 distributional tests, 12  
 ditransitive verbs, 19  
*do so*-substitution, 209–13  
*do*-support, 39  
 dummy auxiliary verb - *do*, 36, 39–40, 154–5  
 dummy elements and idiom chunks,  
   argumenthood, 239–40  
 dyadic predicates, 90  
 dynamic Predicate, 9  
  
 economy of description, 170–9  
 -*ed* participle clauses, 54  
   as Adjunct, 81  
   as Direct Objects, 76–7  
 elegance of description, 179–82  
 evaluating analyses, 184  
 exclamations, 61  
 exclamative sentences, 60  
 exercises  
   active and passive sentences, 18  
   Adjunct clauses, 79  
   Adjuncts, 114  
   auxiliary verbs, 35, 38, 40, 42  
   case studies, 289–90  
   categorisation, 260–2  
   clauses, 66–8, 136–7  
   cleft and pseudocleft sentences, 223  
   combining auxiliaries, 147  
   constituency: movement and substitution,  
     213–18  
   constituency tests, 231–5  
   constituents, 84, 227  
   Direct Object, 82  
   dummy auxiliary verb - *do*, 155  
   flat representations, 105  
   form labelling, 85  
   functions of constituents, 21–3  
   intersective gradience, 258  
   labelled bracketings, 65  
   movement, 161–3  
   noun phrase constituents, 202  
   noun phrase movement, 149–51  
   noun phrase structure, 271–2, 273, 276  
   *one*-substitution, 205, 207  
   perfective aspect, 37  
   phrasal categories, 203  
   predicates and arguments, 246–9  
   predicates, arguments and thematic roles, 97–9  
   pronouns, 30  
   realisations, 84  
   subcategorisation, 121  
   subcategorisation frames, 120  
   subdivision, 6  
   Subject, 13, 14  
   Subject and Predicate, 9  
   Subject-auxiliary inversion, 154  
   subordinating conjunctions and prepositions,  
     289–90  
   subjunctive gradience, 255  
   substitution, 209  
   syntactic argumentation, 185–7  
   tenses, 37  
   thematic roles, 92  
   tree diagrams, 64, 85, 106–7, 133  
   V' constituents, 211  
   verb complementation, 278, 279, 280, 283,  
     285, 286–9  
   verb movement, 142, 143  
   verb phrases, 42–3  
   VP-preposing, 195, 196–7  
   Wh-movement, 157, 158  
   word classes, 48–51  
   X-bar theory, 121, 123  
 existential there, 10  
 Experiencer, 92  
 external arguments, 90  
 extraposition from noun phrases, 199–201  
 extraposition of Subject clauses, 199  
  
 finite clauses, 53–4  
   as Adjuncts, 78–9  
   as Direct Objects, 74–5  
   I-node, 127–8  
   as Subjects, 71

- finite subordinate clauses, 54  
 finite verbs, 34  
 finite Wh-clauses, as Direct Objects, 74  
 form, 69–70  
 function–form relationships, 69–70, 83  
 functional terminology, economy of use, 172–3, 177–9  
 functions of constituents, 69  
 further reading  
   argumenthood, 249  
   from case studies, 291–2  
   clauses, 68, 138  
   complementisers, 137–8  
   constituency, 218  
   constituency tests, 235  
   function–form relationships, 85  
   grammatical functions, 23  
   grammatical indeterminacies, 262  
   I-node (inflection node), 137  
   movement, 164  
   predicates, arguments and thematic roles, 99–100  
   syntactic argumentation, 187–8  
   word classes, 51  
   X'-syntax, 124
- generalisations, linguistically significant (LSG), 170–2  
 Goal, 19, 92  
 gradience, and category boundaries, 253  
 grammar, 3–4  
 grammatical functions  
   constituents, 65  
   and thematic roles, 94–5  
 grammatical indeterminacies, 253
- Head + Complement sequence, 102  
 Heads, 101–8  
   and Adjuncts, 110–13  
   and Complements, 115, 118–21  
 heavy-NP-shift (HNPS), 198–9  
 hypotaxis, 46  
 hypothesis, in process of argumentation, 167–9
- I-node (inflection node), 126–36  
   auxiliary verbs, 129–30  
   finite clauses, 127–8  
   nonfinite clauses, 128–9  
   subordinate clauses, 130–6
- idiom chunks, 239–40  
 immediate constituents, 63  
 imperative clauses, 59–60  
 implicit argument, 183
- independent justifications, 182–4  
 Indirect Object, 18–20  
   as beneficiary/Goal/receiver, 19  
   as Complement, 18–20  
   implicit argument, 91  
   order in sentences, 19  
   in passive sentences, 19–20  
   realisations, 77  
 infinitival particle, 41  
 inflection node (I-node) *see* I-node (inflection node)  
 inflections, tense, 33  
 -*ing* participle clauses, 54  
   as Adjuncts, 80  
 insertion test, 223–4, 230  
 Instrument, 92  
 interjections, 47  
 internal arguments, 90  
 interrogative clauses, 58–9  
 interrogative forms of sentences, 39  
   Subject-auxiliary inversion, 153–5  
   Wh-movement, 155–9  
 intersective gradience  
   classification: adjectives/adverbs, 257–8  
   classification: verbs/nouns, 258–9  
   phrases: adjective/prepositional, 259–60  
 intransitive prepositions, 174  
 intransitive verbs, 16–17  
 introspective data, 169  
*it*, referential and nonreferential, 10
- justifications, independent, 182–4  
 KISS principle *see* Occam's razor
- labelled bracketings, 55–7, 65  
 language, as human, 3  
 lexemes, 24, 127  
 lexical verbs, 34  
 LINGUIST list, 100  
 linguistically significant generalisations (LSGs), 170–2  
 linguistics, 3  
 linking verb, 32  
 locative there, 10  
 LSGs *see* linguistically significant generalisations (LSGs)
- main verbs, 34  
   as distinct from auxiliary verbs, 40–1  
 matrix clauses, 52–3  
 meaning test, 227

- meanings  
  argumenthood, 236–8  
  modal, 36
- mental lexicon, 127
- modal auxiliary verbs, 35, 145 *see also*  
  auxiliary verbs, verbs  
  characteristics, 154
- modal meanings, 36
- monadic predicates, 90
- movement  
  as diagnostic of constituency, 190–201  
  to left, 191–8  
  principle of, 190  
  to right, 201  
  *though*, 197–8  
  topicalisation, 191–2  
  VP-preposing, 192–7
- negated modal verbs, 263
- NICE properties, of auxiliary verbs, 40–1
- nodes, 62
- nominal projections, substitution of, 201–7
- nonfinite clauses, 53–4  
  as Adjunct, 79–80  
  as Direct Objects, 75–6  
  I-node, 128–9  
  as Subjects, 71–3
- nonfinite subordinate clauses, 54
- nonfinite verbs, 34
- nonreferential *it*, 10
- nonrestrictive relative clauses, 135
- noun phrase movement  
  passive, 145–51  
  Subject-to-Subject raising, 151–3
- noun phrases (NP), 10–11  
  as Adjunct, 78  
  definition, 30–1  
  as Direct Objects, 73–4  
  extraposition from, 199–201  
  as Indirect Object, 77  
  as Subjects, 70–3
- nouns, 10  
  and adjectives, 27  
  common, 28, 29  
  and determinatives, 26–7  
  distributional criteria, 26  
  formal criteria, 26  
  intersective gradience, 258–9  
  morphological criteria, 26–7  
  notional definition, 25–6, 27  
  prefixes, 26–7  
  proper, 28, 29  
  subclasses, 28  
  subjective gradience, 254  
  suffixes, 26–7  
  null proform, 208
- Object Complements, 178–9
- Obligatory Predication Adjunct, 178
- Occam's razor, 172–3, 177–9
- one-place predicates, 90
- one*-substitution, 204–7
- open interrogatives, 58
- open questions, 61
- order, of words, 4
- ordinary coordination, 220, 230
- orthographic words, 24
- overt proform, 208
- parataxis, 45
- parenthetical elements, 223
- particles, 174
- parts of speech, 25
- passive auxiliaries, 38
- passive auxiliary verb - *be*, 36
- passive sentences, 17–18  
  Direct Object, 20  
  Indirect Object, 19–20
- passivisation, argumenthood, 240–1
- past participle, 38  
  distinct from past tense, 41–2
- past perfect tense, 37
- past tense, 37  
  distinct from past participle, 41–2
- Patient role, 92  
  Direct Object, 15
- perfective aspect, 36
- peripherality, 13
- persons, of verbs, 33–4
- persuade*, argumenthood, 241–3
- phrasal verbs, 173–7
- phrases, levels of structure, 105
- pragmatics  
  of clauses, 60–2  
  definition, 61
- Predicate, 8–15  
  and arguments, 89–91  
  definition, 8–9  
  dynamic, 9  
  internal structure, 9  
  realisation, 73  
  stative, 9
- predicate logic, 90
- predicates *see also* argumenthood  
  dyadic, 90  
  monadic, 90

- predicates – *continued*  
   one-place, 90  
   semantic sense, 90–4  
   three-place, 90  
   triadic, 90  
   two-place, 90  
 predicative position, of adjectives, 32  
 predictor  
   elements, 14–15  
   realisation, 73  
 prefixes, 26–7  
 prepositional Complement, 43  
 prepositional Object, 43  
 prepositional phrases (PP), 43  
   as Adjunct, 78  
   as Direct Objects, 74  
   intersective gradience, 259–60  
   as Subjects, 70–1  
 prepositional verbs, 173–4  
 prepositions  
   description, 43  
   intransitive, 174  
   subjective gradience, 256–7  
   transitive, 175  
 present perfect, 37  
 proform substitution, principle of, 201  
 progressive aspect, 36  
 projections, of the Head, 105  
 pronouns, 12  
   classes of, 28–9  
   as noun substitutes, 29–30  
 proper nouns, 28, 29  
 Proposition, 92  
  
 questions  
   alternative, 61–2  
   open, 61  
   tag, 12  
   yes/no, 11, 61  
  
 rank scale, 55–7  
 realisations  
   of Adjuncts, 77–81  
   of Direct Object, 73–7  
   Indirect Object, 77  
   of Subjects, 70–3  
 Receiver, 19  
 referent, 8  
 referential *it*, 10  
 relative clauses, 134–5  
   nonrestrictive, 135  
   restrictive, 135  
  
   restrictive relative clauses, 135  
   right-node-raising, 230  
   right node raising coordination, 221  
  
 S-constituents, 224  
 scope, adverbs, 44  
 scope properties, negative elements,  
   267  
 selectional restrictions, 95–6  
 semantic predicates, 90–4  
 sentence adverbs, 44  
 sentences  
   active and passive, 17–18  
   containing auxiliaries, 159–61  
   exclamative, 60  
   interrogative forms, 39  
   subdivision, 4–7, 9  
   three levels of description, 96  
   word order, 4  
 sister nodes, 63  
 small clauses (SC), 54  
   as Adjunct, 81  
   as Direct Objects, 77  
   as Subjects, 73  
 somewhere else test, 225–7  
 Specifiers, 102–8  
   and Adjuncts, 110  
 stative predicate, 9  
 structural ambiguity, 3  
 structure, 3  
 subcategorisation, 43, 118–21  
   compared with argument/thematic  
   structure, 120–1  
   transitive and intransitive verbs, 147  
 subcategorisation frames, 118  
 subdivision, of sentences, 4–7, 9  
 Subject (S), 8–15  
   definition, 8, 9  
   identifying, 12  
   meaningless, 10  
   problematic identification, 13–14  
   realisations, 70  
   semantic definition, 10  
 Subject-auxiliary inversion, 39  
 Subject clauses, extraposition, 199  
 Subject Complements, 178  
 Subject-verb agreement, 11  
 subordinate clauses, 46, 52–3  
   functioning as Direct Object, Subject and  
   Adjunct, 130–3  
   I-node, 130–6  
 subordinating conjunctions (subordinators), 46

- subjective gradience  
   adjectives, 255  
   nouns, 254  
   prepositions, 256–7  
   verbs, 256  
 substitution, 201–13  
   as diagnostic of constituency, 190–201  
   *do so*-substitution, 209–13  
   of nominal projections, 201–7  
   *one*-substitution, 204–7  
   verbal projections, 207–13  
 suffixes, 26–7  
 suppletion, 31–2  
 syndetic coordination, 46  
 syntactic argumentation, 7  
   process, 167–9  
 syntactic features, 171–2  
 syntactic framework, 4  
 syntactic notions, 90  
 syntax, definition, 4
- tag questions, 12  
 taxonomies, 170  
 tense inflections, 33  
 tense phrases (TP), 138  
 tenses, 33  
   past, 37  
   positive and negative values, 127  
 tests, distributional, 12  
*that*-clause, 53  
   as Direct Object, 74  
 thematic roles, 92–4  
   and grammatical functions, 94–5  
 thematic structure, 93  
 Theme, 92, 94  
*there*, existential and locative, 10  
 theta roles *see* thematic roles  
 though movement, 197–8, 229  
 three-place predicates, 90  
*to*-infinitive clause, 54  
   as Adjunct, 79–80  
   as Direct Objects, 75–6  
   as Subjects, 72  
*to*-phrases, 19–20  
 topicalisation, 191–2  
 transitive prepositions, 175  
 transitive verbs, 16–17  
 tree diagrams, 56–7, 62–6  
 triadic predicates, 90  
 triangles, 64  
 two-place predicates, 90
- V'-deletion (V-bar), 212, 263  
 V'-substitution (V-bar), 208–13  
 verb complementation, 276–89  
 verb movement, 139–45  
 verb phrases (VP), 42–3  
 verb-preposition constructions, 173–7  
 verbal projections, substitution, 207–13  
 verbless clauses, 54  
 verb + NP + *to* infinitive constructions,  
   239–46  
 verbs, 8 *see also* auxiliary verbs, modal  
   auxiliary verbs  
   base form, 11, 34  
   classification, 277  
   definition, 33  
   ditransitive, 19  
   finite, 34  
   intersective gradience, 258–9  
   intransitive, 16–17  
   lexical, 34  
   linking, 32  
   main, 34  
   negative auxiliary, 38  
   nonfinite, 34, 41  
   past perfect, 37  
   persons, 33–4  
   phrasal, 173  
   prepositional, 173  
   present perfect, 37  
   subcategorisation, 118–19  
   subjective gradience, 256  
   transitive, 16–17  
 VP-deletion, 229, 263–7  
 VP-preposing, 229  
 VP-substitution, 207–8
- want, argumenthood, 243–4  
 Wh-clauses, as Indirect  
   Object, 77  
 word classes, 25  
 word endings, 27  
 word-forms, 24  
 words  
   as linguistic units, 24–5  
   order of, 4
- X'-syntax, 116–18  
 X' (X-bar), 103
- Yes/no interrogative clause, 58–9  
 yes/no questions, 11, 61

