

# How English Works: Introduction to Syntax

## July 7

### *What is syntax?*

Syntax is the study of how sentences are put together.

In this course, you will learn...

- The (subconscious) rules by which sentences are put together.
- How these rules are at work in English sentences and why English looks the way that it does.
- The ways in which languages differ from each other and the ways in which they do not.
- How to explain some of the differences between English and other languages, such as Japanese and German.

Here's an example of a **syntactic difference** between languages that you will understand at the end of this course, to do with *negation*. Look at the following German sentences:

- (1) German:
- a. Ich lese das Buch.  
I read that book  
'I read that book.'
  - b. Ich lese das Buch nicht.  
I read that book not  
'I do not read that book.'

Now look at these English sentences:

- (2) English:
- a. I read that book.
  - b. I did not read that book.

What do you notice?

## 1 Correctness and grammaticality

What we will not be concerned with in this course: What English *should* look like.

Consider:

- (3) a. to boldly go where no man has gone before  
b. to go boldly where no man has gone before
- (4) a. He's the kind of person you cannot rely on.  
b. He's the kind of person on whom you cannot rely.
- (5) a. Me and John bought cookies.  
b. John and I bought cookies.

You may have been told at some point that the (a) sentences are not the “correct” way to say these things. We are going to make a distinction between this idea of “correctness” and the the notion of *grammaticality*.

Specifically, we are going to be interested in those sentences that *you just cannot say*:

- (6) a. Mary read a book.  
b. Which book did Mary read?  
c. Mary read a newspaper and a book.  
d. \*Which book did Mary read and a newspaper?
- (7) a. John is eager to please.  
b. What is John eager to do?  
c. John is easy to please.  
d. \*What is John easy to do?

The sentences in (6d) and (7d) are what we call *ungrammatical*. We use \* to mark that a sentence is ungrammatical.

## 2 Grammaticality and understanding

Whether a sentence is grammatical has nothing to do with whether it is understandable. There are also sentences which are easily understandable, but are nonetheless *not* grammatical English sentences.

- (8) Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.

What about the following sentences?

- (9) a. The child is sleeping.
- b. The child seems to be sleeping.
- c. The child seems sleeping.
- (10) a. John read the book that Mary bought for him.
- b. John read the book that Mary bought it for him.

### 3 Different kinds of words: Parts of speech

Syntactic rules often care about the *parts of speech* in sentences. Here's a few categories:

- (11) a. Noun = *cat, chickens, pencil, industry, ...*
- b. Adjective = *red, big, funny, industrial, ...*
- c. Verb = *is, eat, run, industrialize, ...*
- d. Adverb = *quick, terribly, ...*

What goes in the gap?

- (12) a. Pandas often \_\_\_\_\_.
- b. The birdwatchers spotted \_\_\_\_\_.
- c. The \_\_\_\_\_ ate a sandwich.
- d. \_\_\_\_\_ are in the garden.

There are also other kinds of words:

- (13) a. Determiner = *this, that, the, a, ...*
- b. Preposition = *to, from, with, ...*
- c. Conjunction = *and, but, ...*

Some words can act as more than one part of speech.

- (14) a. This morning, I went for a long *run*. (noun)
- b. Every morning, I *run* for twenty minutes. (verb)

We can tell what *part of speech* a word is based on the context it occurs in. Here are some rules for verbs and nouns:

- (15) a. **Verbs** can be marked for tense (like *-ed* in the past).  
b. **Nouns** are often accompanied by Ds like *the, this, that*.

*Can you come up with some more?*

### *Jabberwocky*

The following is a selection from a poem called *Jabberwocky*, by Lewis Carroll. Most of the words in this poem aren't real English words, but the poem uses real English syntax.

*What parts of the speech are the **bolded** words?*

- (16) a. Twas brillig and the **slithy toves**  
Did gyre and **gimble** in the **wabe**;  
All mimsy were the borogoves,  
And the **mome** raths **outgrabe**.
- b. "Beware the Jabberwock, my son!  
The jaws that bite, the claws that catch!  
Beware the **Jubjub** bird, and shun  
the **frumious bandersnatch!**"
- c. He took his **vorpal** sword in hand:  
Long time the **manxome** foe he sought —  
So rested he by the **tumtum** tree  
**and** stood a while in **thought**.

Do you notice anything about the parts of speech of the "made-up" words?

## 4 The structure of sentences: Constituents

Aside from *parts of speech*, the way in which sentences are put together affects their meaning. Putting words in a different order, for example, changes the meaning:

- (17) a. John fed the cat.  
b. The cat fed John.

We treat this as an effect of **syntactic structure**, or the hierarchy by which sentences are organized.

Evidence for syntactic structure comes from the existence of **structural ambiguity**, cases in which a sentence can have multiple structures, giving rise to different meanings.

Consider the sentences in (18). What meanings do they have?

- (18) a. I saw the man with binoculars.  
b. **Wanted:** Man to take care of cat that does not smoke or drink.  
c. Squad helps dog bite victims.

These ambiguities come about because words may be grouped together in different ways. We can see this also in unambiguous sentences, because we have intuitions about which words “belong together.” If we look at a sentence like (19), we have the strong intuition that the first *the* belongs with *dog*, but not with *did*, even though *the* is adjacent to both.

- (19) Did the dog chase the cat?

Similarly, the second *the* in (19) belongs with *cat* and not with *chase*. We can indicate these groupings using [brackets]:

- (20) Did [the dog] chase [the cat]?

We call these chunks **constituents**.

We can use this to show how ambiguity reflects different structures. Use [brackets] to indicate the two meanings of (21):

- (21) **Wanted:** Man to take care of cat that does not smoke or drink.

The following sentence (and most sentences!) has many constituents:

(22) The big, green aloe plant eats children.

To decide if something is or isn't a constituent, you can apply some of the following tests:

(23) **Substitute a pronoun (like *one*, *it*, or *did so*)**

- a. The big *one* eats children.
- b. *It* eats children.
- c. The big, green aloe plant *does so*.

(24) **Conjoin it with something else:**

- a. The [big [[green aloe plant] and [purple orchid]]] eat children.
- b. [[The big, green aloe plant] and [that small, ugly ficus]] eat children.
- c. The big, green aloe plant [[eats children] and [will rot soon.]]

*What are the constituents in (22)?*

## A homework exercise

There is a class of words called *auxiliaries*, which are like verbs in that they can often combine with past tense morphology or otherwise express tense:

- (25) a. I **was** asleep.  
b. John **had** left already.  
c. Mary **will** go to the store.

Despite this, we treat auxiliaries as a different class of words than verbs. Come up with two diagnostics for distinguishing auxiliaries from verbs:

- (26) a. \_\_\_\_\_  
b. \_\_\_\_\_

You can use the following examples:

- (27) a. I slept.  
b. Did I sleep?  
c. \*Slept I?  
d. I was asleep.  
e. Was I asleep?
- (28) a. I had bought cookies.  
b. I had not bought cookies.  
c. I bought cookies.  
d. \*I bought not cookies.  
e. I did not buy cookies.
- (29) a. I was asleep and John was too.  
b. John had bought cookies, but Mary hadn't.  
c. \*Mary slept and John too.  
d. \*John bought cookies, but Mary not.

Now that you have your diagnostics, look at the two types of *have* in (30a–b), perfect *have* (30a), and possessive *have* (30b):

- (30) a. She **has** eaten two donuts.  
b. He **has** two cats.

Are they both auxiliaries?