Foundations of Syntax

Comprehension vs production. Prescription vs description. Data.

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Previously in this course

Language = signs + rules
Language = lexicon + syntax
Human Language:

- Compositionality:
  A + B = meaning A + meaning B
- Complexity
- Infinite number of possible combinations

One rule to rule them all

We can construct infinite number of grammatical sentences.

(1)   a. Katy will call Ann.

        b. Bill promised [that Katy would call Ann].

        c. John said [that Bill had promised [that Katy would call Ann]].

        d. Yesterday Mary told me [that John had said [that Bill had promised [that Katy would call Ann]]].

(2)   [SENTENCE 1 [SENTENCE 2 [SENTENCE 3 …]]]] (Scheherazade's stories)

One rule to rule them all

Recursion – the ability to use the output of a rule as the input of the same rule.

(3)   S(entence) + S(entence) = S(sentence)

Universal property.

One rule to rule them all

Recursion is everywhere:

- Cyclic definitions
- The Fibonacci sequence:
  1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34, 55, 89, 144 ...
- Coding (factorial)
- Matryoshka doll

One rule to rule them all

Recursion is everywhere:

- Droste effect

One rule to rule them all

Recursion in linguistics:

Broad sense: Phrase + Phrase = Phrase
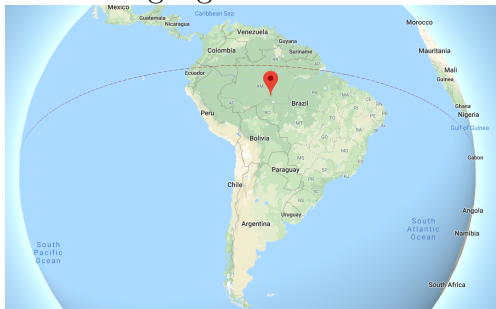
Narrow sense: Phrase X + Phrase A = Phrase X

A constituent contains a constituent of the same type.

$\rightarrow$ Universal principle; recursion is found in all human languages $\rightarrow$ Universal Grammar (Noam Chomsky)

One rule to rule them all

Daniel Everett against recursion:
Pirahã language – no recursion

One rule to rule them all

Daniel Everett against recursion:

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Book "Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle" by Everett

Opposed by many world-famous linguists, including David Pesetsky (MIT), Andrew Nevins (Harvard), Cilene Rodrigues (Universidade Estadual de Campinas).

REF: "Pirahã Exceptionality: a Reassessment" <pdf>

Question 1: Can you find the recursion rule in a text-book of, for example, English?

Question 2: Why not?

Prescription vs. description

Prescriptive rules – how a language should be used (for instance, how to speak 'proper' English).
→ 'correct' sentences

Prescription vs. description

Descriptive rules – how a language is used.
$\rightarrow$ grammatical, acceptable sentences

Prescription vs. description

Prescriptive rule: NO split infinitives

(4) a. I want to quickly go there. – BAD
     b. I want to go there quickly. – GOOD

Example [Carnie:36]:
"But still, the policy of the Army at that time was not to send –
was specifically to not send – women into combat roles."
→ No such descriptive rule.

Descriptive rules

Descriptive rules ← actual language data:

1. Corpora
2. Elicitation

1. Corpora – production
2. Elicitation – comprehension

Corpora

Corpus – collection of written / spoken texts.
We can find positive information in a corpus.

Elicitation

Elicitation – collecting data (often grammaticality judgments) directly from a native speaker.

By eliciting grammaticality judgments from native speakers we can get negative information about a language.

Elicitation

Grammaticality/acceptability judgments:

(5) a. Mary does not know anything.
    b. *Mary know not anything.
       unacceptable
    c. %Mary does not know nothing.
       variation
    d. ?Peter Mary does not know.
       marginal

(6) a. Mary kissed Bill.
       = (b)?
    b. #Bill kissed Mary.
       semantically 'wrong'

Field work

Armchair linguistics – relies on introspection.
Empirical methods – elicitation, often during field work.

For example, my field research on Kaqchikel (Mayan) in Patzún, Guatemala, in 2017–2019.

Field work

Elicitation techniques:

- Completion of target language utterances;
- Translation;
- Judgment (well-formedness, truth, felicity).

Field work

Elicitation techniques:

- Explication by paraphrase, scenario;
- Production in a given contextual scenario;
- Description;
- Demonstration of referents.

Exercise

Can you find more examples of recursion in English?

Exercise

Recursion in English:

(7)   a. great-great-great-...-great-mother
       b. to re-re-read this book
       c. John's brother's cat

Descriptive rules: example

How do speakers use reflexive pronouns (himself, myself, yourself, etc.)?

Prescriptive rules

LearnEnglish website:

The reflexive pronouns are:

singular: myself yourself himself herself itself

plural: ourselves yourselves themselves

We use a reflexive pronoun as a direct object when the object is the same as the subject of the verb:

I am teaching myself to play the piano.

Be careful with that knife. You might cut yourself.

Descriptive rules

(8)   a. Mary likes herself.

   b. *Herself likes Mary.

$\rightarrow$ Draft rule 1: The antecedent (in red) must be the subject and the reflexive (in blue) must be the object.

Descriptive rules

(9)   a. I showed Mary to herself.

   b. *I showed herself to Mary.

→ Draft rule 2: The antecedent (in red) must be to the left (= must linearly precede) the reflexive (in blue).

Descriptive rules

(10) a. *Mary asked John to kiss herself.

  b. *Mary knew that John likes herself.

→ Draft rule 3: The antecedent (in red) must linearly precede the reflexive (in blue) and they must be in the same clause (simple sentence with one verb).

Descriptive rules

(11)   a.   Mary likes herself.

        b.   *A friend of Mary likes herself.

$\rightarrow$ Descriptive Rule (informal): The antecedent must precede the reflexive and they must be related to the same verb.