

Textbook: Mark Newson et al, Basic English Syntax with Exercises, Budapest, 2006

Syntax

Syntax relates form and meaning. (Professor Szécsényi, 1st Syntax lecture)

Syntax – a set of rules, principles, and processes that govern the structure of sentences in a given language.

*Not only natural languages: formal logic, computer languages.

Structure

Syntax: The study of sentence and phrase structure. (Professor Szécsényi, 1st Syntax lecture)

1. Recursion

We can construct infinite amount of grammatical sentences

→ language is not about enumeration, it is about rules and constituents.

(1) *Yesterday Mary told me, that John had said, that Bill had promised ...*

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

Recursion – the ability to place one component inside another component of the same kind. A linguistic rule can be applied to the result of the application of the same rule. Universal property.

2. Phrases

“We must acknowledge the existence of units in a sentence which are bigger than words.” (BESE, p. 57)

Words belong together.

(2) *Peter met Mary in the park yesterday.*

A sentence is a phrase.

[Peter met Mary in the park yesterday]

SENTENCE → SUBJECT PREDICATE

[[Peter] [met Mary in the park]]

[[Peter] [met [Mary] [in [the park]]]]

Phrases can include one another but they cannot overlap: if a word belongs to two phrases than one of these phrases includes the other one.

► Ambiguity. Exercise 1

(3) *Wanted: Man to take care of cow that does not smoke or drink.*

► Phrases. Exercise 2

(4) a. *The postman lost his key yesterday.*

b. *The student who has just passed the exam is very happy.*

c. *This theory of language acquisition is easy for students who understand mathematics.*

3. Constituency tests

[[Peter met] [Mary in] [the park yesterday]] ← why not this way?

- Substitution by pro-forms

(5) a. [The little boy] fed [the cat]. → [He] fed [her].

b. [The little boy] with a ball fed [the cat] without a tail. → *[He] with a ball fed [her] without a tail.

- Movement (topicalization)

(6) Ali Baba returned home [wiser than before]. → [Wiser than before], Ali Baba returned home.

- Wh-questions and short answers
- It clefts

(7) [Ordinary cats] like the smell of meat. → It is [ordinary cats] that like the smell of meat.

!!! Sometimes a constituent can **fail** a test:

- it is a word rather than a phrase ← not all constituents are phrases!
- it is finite

(8) Peter [met Mary in the park yesterday]. // Peter could [meet Mary in the park yesterday].

- it is contained within a syntactic island

(9) Peter met Mary and Jane in the park yesterday.

*These are the most common cases for a constituent to fail a test. Other ‘failures’ are relevant and significant.

Cf. **Exercise 3 (11)** – [in the park yesterday] can pass the topicalization test and the it-cleft test. But the results of the substitution test and the wh-question test are negative; this is crucial as the considered sequence has ‘no excuse’ to fail these tests.

► Constituents. Exercise 3

(10) *The postman lost his key yesterday.*

[his key] – a single constituent?

(11) *Peter met Mary in the park yesterday.*

[in the park yesterday] – a single constituent?

(12) *Ordinary cats detest the smell of citrus fruits.*

[detest the smell] – a single constituent?