Syntax Seminar (BBN-ANG-252): Handout 3
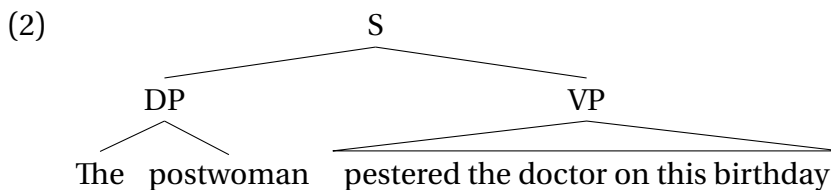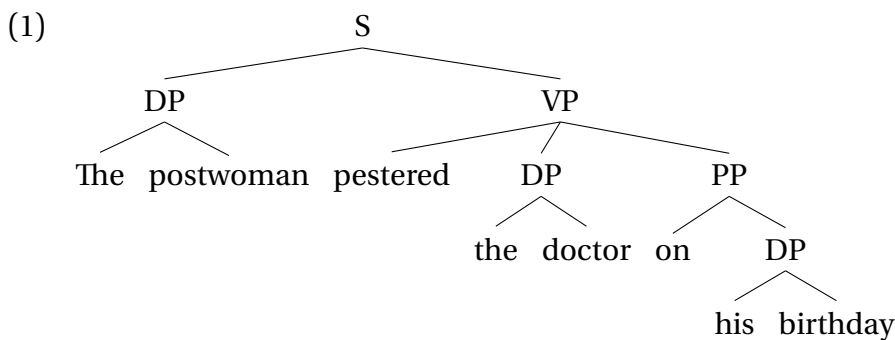
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This is a summary of BESE: Ch. 1.2–3 and Ch. 2.2.

1 More on trees

- There is a way of not representing a part of the tree (for example, when that part is not relevant for the linguistic analysis). This is done by using the **triangle** in (2).

  (1)

  S
  - DP: The postwoman
  - VP: pestered
    - DP: the doctor
    - PP: on
      - DP: his birthday

  (2)

  S
  - DP: The postwoman
  - VP: pestered the doctor on this birthday

- In bracketed structures, we use **ellipsis dots**, as in (4):

  (3) [$_S$ [$_{DP}$ The postwoman] [$_{VP}$ pestered [$_{DP}$ the doctor] [$_{PP}$ on [$_{DP}$ his birthday]]]]

  (4) [$_S$ [$_{DP}$ The postwoman] [$_{VP}$ …]

- **Important: in this course, you are expected to draw the full trees; do not use triangles, unless you are explicitly instructed to do so.**

2 Word categories and argument structure

- The **Lexicon**: the part of I-language that deals with words. It stores specific information about all the words that used in the language (their pronunciation, their meaning, etc.).

- Words fall into different word categories; we determine the category of the word by its morphological properties and syntactic distribution, not by its semantics (see HO1).

  ① Thematic (lexical) categories: verbs (V), nouns (N), adjectives (A), prepositions (P)

  ② Functional categories: inflections (I), determiners (D), degree adverbs (Deg), complementizers (C)

- Categories can be defined in terms of a unique set of features that distinguish them from the other categories. (But they also may share some of the features with other categories, accounting for similarities between them.) These are called **categorial features**.

- [±F] distinguishes between the thematic and functional categories ('F' stands for functional)

↳ thematic categories are [−F], functional categories are [+F]

- [±N] and [±V] are used to distinguish nouns and verbs, as in (5):

(5) a. nouns = [−F, +N, −V]
    b. verbs = [−F, −N, +V]

(6) a. determiners = [+F, +N, −V]
    b. modals = [+F, −N, +V]

(6) captures the intuition that determiners have something in common with nouns and modal auxiliary verbs have something in common with verbs, even though one of these pairs of elements is functional and the other is thematic.

- How about adjectives? They can be used in predicative position, similarly to verbs, but can also modify nouns, as in (7a,b), respectively.

(7) a. Rick is running / rich.
    b. the rich / running robber

↳ adjectives can therefore be categorised as (8):

(8) adjectives = [−F, +N, +V]

- Prepositions are categorized as (9) (see BESE: p. 13–14 for arguments in favour of this).

(9) prepositions = [−F, −N, −V]

- Degree adverbs modify adjectives in a very similar way to how determiners modify nouns:

(10) degree adverbs = [+F, +N, +V]

- Complementizers can be viewed as functional prepositions:

(11) complementizers = [+F, −N, −V]

- In sum, we get the following typology:

[−F]	[+N]	[−N]
[+V]	A	V
[−V]	N	P

[+F]	[+N]	[−N]
[+V]	Deg	Infl
[−V]	D	C

- Importantly, all the categories discussed above are fully specified for all the features. **Underspecification of features** is a situation in which one or more features is not specified for its value (see BESE: 1.3.6 for discussion).

3   Predicates and arguments

- Distinction between **predicates** and **arguments**:

  (12) a.   Selena   slept.
        argument predicate
     b.   Tom   is tall.
        argument predicate
     c.   Percy   placed   the penguin on the podium.
        argument predicate argument   argument

- Important clarifications (not fully explained in the textbook, E.G.):

  Thematic categories function as arguments or predicates; functional categories do not.

  [+V] categories can only be used as predicates; [−V] categories are more flexibly used: either as predicates (13a)–(14a) or arguments (13b)–(14b).

  (13) a.   They are [football players].
     b.   Peter likes [football players].

  (14) a.   The date is [in the future].
     b.   Peter believes [in the future].

  (15) a.   They are [tall].
     b.   *Peter likes [tall] / believes in [tall].

- Based on the number of arguments, we distinguish between
  ① one-place predicates (e.g., *sleep*)
  ② two-place predicates (e.g., *see*)
  ③ three-place predicates (e.g., *put*)

- The arguments in (16a,b) play different roles in the two events:

  (16) a.   Harold hit Henry.
     b.   Sam saw Simon.

- ↪ **Thematic roles** (theta-roles, θ-roles): *agent, patient, experiencer, theme, location, beneficiary* … (see BESE: p. 52 and Glossary)

  agent: the argument deliberately performs an action

  experiencer: the argument experiences some physical or mental state

  patient: the argument is affected by the action described by the verb

  theme: the argument is not affected by the action described by the verb

  ✍ Let's try to determine the theta-roles in (16).

- The theta-roles assigned by the predicate are lexically determined. Thus, the lexical entry of a predicate has a part called its **theta-grid**.

  (17) a.   sleep θ-grid: <agent>
     b.   place θ-grid: <agent, patient, location>

✍ Let's try to write the theta-grids for *hit* and *see*.

(18) a.   hit θ-grid: <   ,   >
     b.   see θ-grid: <   ,   >

- Adjectives also have a theta-grid.
  ✍ Based on the examples in (19), provide the theta-grids for the adjectives.

(19) a.   Tom is tall.
     b.   Fred is fond of Fiona.

(20) a.   tall θ-grid: <   >
     b.   fond θ-grid: <   ,   >

- Some nouns can also have a theta-grid (but see BESE: p. 16–17 for discussion):

(21) a.   Picasso's painting of petunias
     b.   painting: θ-grid: <agent, theme>

- The so-called Theta Criterion regulates the theta role assignment (more on this in Ch. 3):

(22) **The Theta Criterion**:
     a.   Each argument is assigned one and only one theta role.
     b.   Each theta role is assigned to one and only one argument.

- Importantly, the theta-grid contains only the obligatory arguments, but not the adjuncts. Adjuncts are optional modifiers. *John* and *Peter* are arguments in (23), while *on Monday* is an adjunct.

(23) John saw Peter (on Monday).

Arguments	**Adjuncts**
obligatory participants	optional modifiers
theta-role ✓	theta-role ✗
multiplied without coordination ✗	multiplied without coordination ✓
do so ✗	*do so* ✓
VP-fronting ✗	VP-fronting ✓

(24) a.   Mary met John on Monday, in the disco.
     b.   Mary met John *(and) Peter.

(25) a.   Mary met John one day. She did so [on Monday].
     b.   *Mary met someone one day. She did so [John].

(26) a.   Meet John Mary did [on Sunday].
     b.   *Meet on Sunday Mary did [John].

- BESE: 1.3.4 contains a very detailed discussion of the thematic categories. Here I summarize only parts of it; you will need to study the rest on your own.

- Arguments which follow the verb are called internal arguments or **complements**.

  (27) [$_S$ [$_{DP}$ Peter   ] [$_{VP}$ saw [$_{DP}$ James   ]]]
             external argument   internal argument

- Verbs can be classified based on the type of the complement:
  ① transitive verbs: nominal complement (e.g., *await*)
  ② intransitive verbs: no complement (e.g., *laugh*)
  ③ prepositional verbs: a non-nominal complement (e.g., *wait (for)*)
  ⑤ ditransitive verbs: two nominal complements (e.g., *give*)
  ⑥ complex transitive verbs: a nominal and a prepositional complement (e.g., *place*)

- Both *wait* and *await* are two-place predicates, but they take different types of complements:

  (28) a.   The villain awaited his trial / *for his trial.
        b.   The villain waited *his trial / for his trial.

- Where do we indicate the difference between *wait* and *await*? Their theta-grids show that they both have two arguments. But the lexical entry of a verb contains a part that states the categorial status of the complement; this is the so-called **subcategorisation frame**.

  NB: The predicate can select one external argument – NOT present in the subcategorization frame.

- The lexical entries of *await* (transitive), *wait* (prepositional), *give* (ditransitive) and *place* (complex transitive) are given below.

  (29) await
        category: [−F, −N, +V]
        θ-grid: <agent, goal>
        subcat: [nominal]

  (30) wait
        category: [−F, −N, +V]
        θ-grid: <agent, goal>
        subcat: [prepositional]

  (31) give
        category: [−F, −N, +V]
        θ-grid: <agent, goal, theme>
        subcat: [nominal, nominal]

  (32) place
        category: [−F, –N, +V]
        θ-grid: <agent, theme, location>
        subcat: [nominal, prepositional]

  (For lexical entries of nouns and adjectives consult the textbook.)

4   Grammatical functions

- Unlike theta-roles, grammatical functions are purely syntactic: subject, direct object, indirect object.

- Subject: the argument that precedes the VP; triggers agreement on the verb. In English, it is obligatorily present. Expletive subjects.

- Object; prepositional object; indirect object; double object construction

5 Homework

- **Carefully study Chapter 1 and 2 of the textbook.** I also strongly recommend reading Chapter 3 for the next class so that we can focus on the more difficult aspects of the theory.

- Determine the theta-roles in (33).
  NB: adjuncts are not assigned a theta role.

  (33) a. Peter loves Mary.
  b. The door opened.
  c. The purse was stolen.
  d. Mary wrote a letter to John the following day.
  e. John received a letter from Mary.
  f. They wondered what to do.
  g. Mary is beautiful.
  h. John is in Paris.

- Provide the lexical entries for the following verbs.
  NB: adjuncts are not assigned a theta role.

  (34) a. Peter **danced** yesterday.
  b. Peter **injured** his knee in the gym.
  c. Peter **believes** in the future.
  d. Peter **passed** John the book that I recommended to them.
  e. Peter **said** John left in the morning.
  f. Peter **put** the letter on the table.

- Provide the bracketed structure (with labels) and draw the trees for (34).
  NB: use the triangle for the relative clause in (34d).

- Explain why the following sentences are ungrammatical (you may as well provide the grammatical variant of each sentence). Hint: constituency tests.

  (35) a. *That novel, she read by Hemmingway.
  b. *It is John the book that Peter gave.
  c. *She believes in the future and in the morning.
  d. *Peter danced on Monday, and John danced it, too.

- Explain why these sentences are ungrammatical. Hint: thematic roles and the Theta criterion.

  (36) a. *Peter Mary saw John.
  b. *Peter met.
  c. *Peter introduced to his family.
  d. *Peter placed a book.
  e. *Danced on Monday.