ANALYSING SENTENCES

AN INTRODUCTION

NOEL BURTON-ROBERTS

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Analysing Sentences
An Introduction to English Syntax

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Introduction

Attempting to describe the language you speak is about as difficult as attempting to describe yourself as a person. Your language is very much part of you and your thinking. You use your language so instinctively that it is difficult to stand outside yourself and think of it as something that is independent of you, something which you know and which can be described. You may even feel inclined to say that your language is not something you know, you just speak it, and that's all there is to it. But as the native speaker of a language, there is an important sense in which you do know all that there is to know about that language. This is not to deny that there are almost certainly words with which you are not familiar. Perhaps you don't know the meaning of the word *lagophthalmic*. If so, your (understandable) ignorance of this is more medical ignorance than ignorance about the English language, and is anyway quickly remedied with the help of a dictionary. But there is much more to a language than its words. There is much more that you do know about your language which cannot so conveniently be looked up, and which you were never explicitly taught. And this is knowledge of a more fundamental and systematic kind than knowledge of the meanings of individual words. The more fundamental such knowledge is, the more difficult it is to become consciously aware of it.

We are brought up sharply against our own knowledge of the language when, for example, we hear a foreigner make a mistake. You may have had the frustrating experience of knowing that something is wrong but not being able to say precisely what it is, beyond saying 'We just don't say it like that.' The very deep-seated character of a speaker's knowledge of his language makes it extremely difficult for him to explain what it is that he knows in knowing the language.

Here are some examples to illustrate the point. As a speaker of

English, you will agree that [1] and [2] are good English sentences:

[1] Dick believes himself to be a genius.
[2] Dick believes he is a genius.

but that there is something wrong with [3] and [4]:

[3] Dick believes he to be a genius.
[4] Dick believes himself is a genius.

It is interesting that, simply on the basis of assuming you speak English, and knowing nothing else about you, I can predict that you will judge [1] and [2] to be good and [3] and [4] to be odd, even though these sentences are something you may never have considered before.

In attempting to answer the question 'Is this an example of a good English sentence or not?' we are obliged to go to speakers of the language and ask them whether they would accept it as such. (If we ourselves speak the language, then we may ask ourselves.) It is difficult to see how else we could decide what is and what is not a sentence of English. Yet, if this is so, our agreement about [1]–[4] constitutes a fact about the English language. In a real sense, then, all the facts about the language lie inside the heads of its speakers.

But can you give an explanation for the oddity of [3] and [4] – beyond saying that we just don't say it like that?

Here is another example. If the negative of [5] is [6],

[5] They were jumping on it.
[6] They weren't jumping on it.

why isn't [8] the negative of [7]?

[7] They tried jumping on it.
[8] They triedn't jumping on it.

And another example: Since [9] is a good English sentence, why aren't [10] and [11]?

[9] Bevis mended his car in the garage and Max did so in the lay-by.
[10] Bevis put his car in the garage and Max did so in the lay-by.
[11] Bevis went to the circus and Max did so to the zoo.

Finally, we can say [12]

[12] Those charming atomic scientists called round again.

but [13] sounds odd:

[13] Those atomic charming scientists called round again.

These are just a tiny sample of a large body of facts, mysteries, and puzzles offered by the English language. Some of the puzzles have been solved (to our present satisfaction, at least). Others remain puzzles, or there is disagreement as to what the most appropriate explanation might be. And, as we find out more about the language, we should expect to discover further puzzles, and perhaps even find things puzzling which we thought we had understood.

The aim of this book is to encourage you to stand outside yourself and confront just one aspect of your largely unconscious knowledge of English. It does not discuss, let alone offer solutions to, all the puzzles known to exist, nor even to give very detailed accounts of intricacies like those above. But it will introduce you to a method of describing the language, and provide you with a vocabulary with which to start thinking about the language in terms of which the puzzles can be identified and solutions sought.

The chapters that follow are concerned with English SYNTAX. *Syntax* is traditionally the name given to the study of the form, positioning, and grouping, of the elements that go to make up sentences. In a word, it is about the STRUCTURE of sentences. In studying a language, there is of course a lot else to talk about besides its syntax. For example, we can investigate the form and grouping of the elements within words themselves. The systematic study of word-structure is called MORPHOLOGY. Or we can concentrate on the meaning of sentences and how their meaning is related to the meaning of the words they contain. This is called SEMANTICS. Or we can concentrate on what they can sound like when spoken. This is called PHONOLOGY.

I shall say nothing about the phonology of English, and not much about meaning, but it should become clear just how closely the form (syntax) and the meaning (semantics) of English sentences are related. Occasionally, it will be necessary to look at the form of words themselves (morphology), but the book does not pretend to offer a systematic introduction to morphology.

The book is an introduction to the practical analysis of English sentences rather than an introduction to linguistic theory. But since we will be concerned with a language and its syntax, some of the concepts, aims and methods of linguistics are relevant. For anyone who is interested in discovering more about linguistic

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theory, finding out something of the syntax of a language he knows well seems an appropriate (indeed indispensible) way to start. Chapter 11 is included with such readers in mind. It is designed to place the description of English offered in the previous chapters in a wider context and raise some questions about the general aims and principles of syntactic analysis.

Finally, a word or two about the description offered here. In a book of this length, it hardly needs pointing out that the description is not exhaustive. Nevertheless, the range of structures covered is intended to be comprehensive enough for the book to serve not only as the basis for more exhaustive and specialised study but as a self-contained description for non-specialists who need a practical, and appliable, system of analysis for the major structures.

Since this last aim is important, I have concentrated on presenting a single, more or less traditional, analysis of each structure considered, without overburdening the reader with too much discussion of how that analysis might or might not be justified in the light of further evidence. This might give the misleading impression that there is just one possible analysis and that there is universal agreement that it is the one in this book! This is far from being the case. But sometimes the evidence that might support an alternative analysis is complex and indirect and its discussion would be inappropriate in such an introduction. The reader should bear in mind, then, that we are never irrevocably committed to a particular analysis but are free to amend it in the light of further evidence. Finding that evidence, and deciding between competing analyses on the basis of such evidence is, in the end, what 'doing syntax' is all about.

The organisation of the chapters

Chapters 1, 2, and 3 have a dual purpose: they introduce general ideas relevant to the analysis of sentences while simultaneously beginning the analysis itself.

Chapters 4 and 5 complete the general overview of the simple sentence.

Chapters 6 and 7 each go into more detail on certain aspects of the structure of simple sentences.

Chapters 8, 9, and 10 deal with different kinds of subordinate clause in the complex sentence.

Chapter 11 is a more general discussion of the background to and purpose of the kind of analysis presented in Chapters 1 to 10.

A note on how to read this book

There are end-of-chapter exercises which are followed immediately by answer/discussion sections. Some of them recapitulate material discussed in the Chapter, but others develop that material. These exercises, then, should be considered as an important part of each Chapter and not just an optional extra. In addition, there are small exercises within the text of each chapter, forming an integral part of its discussion. Try doing these exercises as and when they occur before reading further. As often as not, the discussion that follows depends on your having done the exercise. A line has been ruled at the point where it is suggested you stop and do the exercise. (You may find it helpful to have pencil and paper to hand.) Doing these should make your reading of the book more productive and interesting than attempting to absorb the material passively.

CHAPTER 1

Sentence Structure: Constituents

Structure

The concept of STRUCTURE is fundamental to the study of syntax. But it is a very general concept that can be applied to any complex thing, whether it be a bicycle, a commercial company, or a carbon molecule. When we say of a thing that it is COMPLEX we mean, not that it is complicated (though of course it may be), but that

(a) it is divisible into parts (called CONSTITUENTS),
(b) there are different kinds of parts (different CATEGORIES of constituents),
(c) The constituents are ARRANGED in a specifiable way,
(d) that each constituent has a certain specifiable FUNCTION in the structure of the thing as a whole.

When anything can be analysed in this way, we say that it has structure. And in considering structure it is important to note that, more often than not, the constituents of a complex thing are themselves complex. In other words, the parts themselves consist of parts which may in turn consist of further parts. When this is so we may speak of a HIERARCHY of parts and HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE.

It is obvious, for example, that a complex thing like a bicycle is not just a collection of randomly assembled bits and pieces. Suppose you gathered together all the components of a bicycle: metal tubes, hubs, spokes, chain, cable, and so on. Now try to imagine all the possible objects you could construct by fixing these components together. Would they all be bicycles? Surely not. Some of them would no doubt be excellent bicycles, while others wouldn't remotely resemble a bicycle (though they might make interesting sculptures). And, of course, there would be inter-

mediate cases, things which we would probably want to say were bicycles, if only because they resembled bicycles more than anything else.

So, only some of the possible ways of fitting bicycle components together produce a bicycle. A bicycle consists not just of its components but, much more importantly, in **the STRUCTURE that results from fitting them together in a particular way.**

When we turn to linguistic expressions, we find a similar state of affairs. Suppose you have a collection of words, say all the words in a dictionary. Can you imagine all the possible word-sequences you could construct by putting these words together? The possibilities are endless. Clearly not all the sequences would be acceptable expressions or sentences of English. And again, some would be odder than others. When a sequence of words fails to constitute a good expression in the language, I shall describe it as being UNGRAMMATICAL (or ILL-FORMED) and mark it with an asterisk (*). Here are some examples:

[1a] *the nevertheless procrastinate in foxtrot
[1b] *and and if
[1c] *disappears none girls of the students
[1d] *put Mary
[1e] *Max will bought a frying pans.

More subtle examples of ungrammatical sentences were given in the introduction.

Ultimately, a full syntactic description of the English language (indeed, of any language) consists in explaining why some strings of words of the language are well-formed expressions and why others are not. Just how this ultimate (and very ambitious) goal might be attempted is discussed in Chapter 11. For the moment it is enough to say that it could not be achieved without recognising the importance of structure. Just as the concept of structure was required in distinguishing between the bicycles and the would-be bicycles, so the concept of structure is essential in distinguishing between the strings of words that are well-formed expressions in the language and those that are not.

We can use diagrams to show how things can be analysed into their constituent parts. For instance, [2] says that a bicycle can be analysed into two wheels, a frame, a chain, handlebars, among other things (the dots mean 'and other things'):

[2]

Such diagrams are called TREE-DIAGRAMS; as conventionally represented, however, the trees are upside-down.

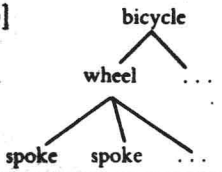
I have mentioned that the constituents of a complex thing can themselves be complex. An example of this is a bicycle wheel. It is itself a constituent of the bicycle, but in turn consists of hub, spokes, rim, tyre, etc. Although it is true that spokes are constituents of bicycles, it is more important to note that they are constituents of bicycles only because they are constituents of the wheel which, in turn, is a constituent of the bicycle. The relation between spoke and bicycle is indirect, mediated by wheel. We might express this by saying that, though the spoke is a constituent of the bicycle, it is not an IMMEDIATE CONSTITUENT of it. It is important to recognise the indirectness of the relationship between bicycle and spoke because, in giving a description of the structure of bicycles, we need to be able to say that wheels are parts of bicycles. But if we were to allow that spokes were immediate constituents of bicycles rather than of wheels this would leave wheels rather out of the picture. It would imply that bicycles could have spokes independently of the fact that they have wheels, and that spokes were not a necessary part of the structure of wheels.

As mentioned, specifying the FUNCTION of constituents is an important part of structural analysis. Notice that if we were to represent spokes as immediate constituents of bicycles, it would be impossible to specify correctly what the function of the spokes is – for the spokes don't have a function in respect of the bicycle directly, but only in respect of the wheels of which they are part. In talking of the function of the spokes, then, we are going to have to mention the wheels anyway.

Which of the following tree-diagrams best represents the structural relationship between bicycle and spoke just discussed?

[3a]

[3b]



Although each tree-diagram is incomplete, [3b] more accurately reflects the structural relationship between bicycle and

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