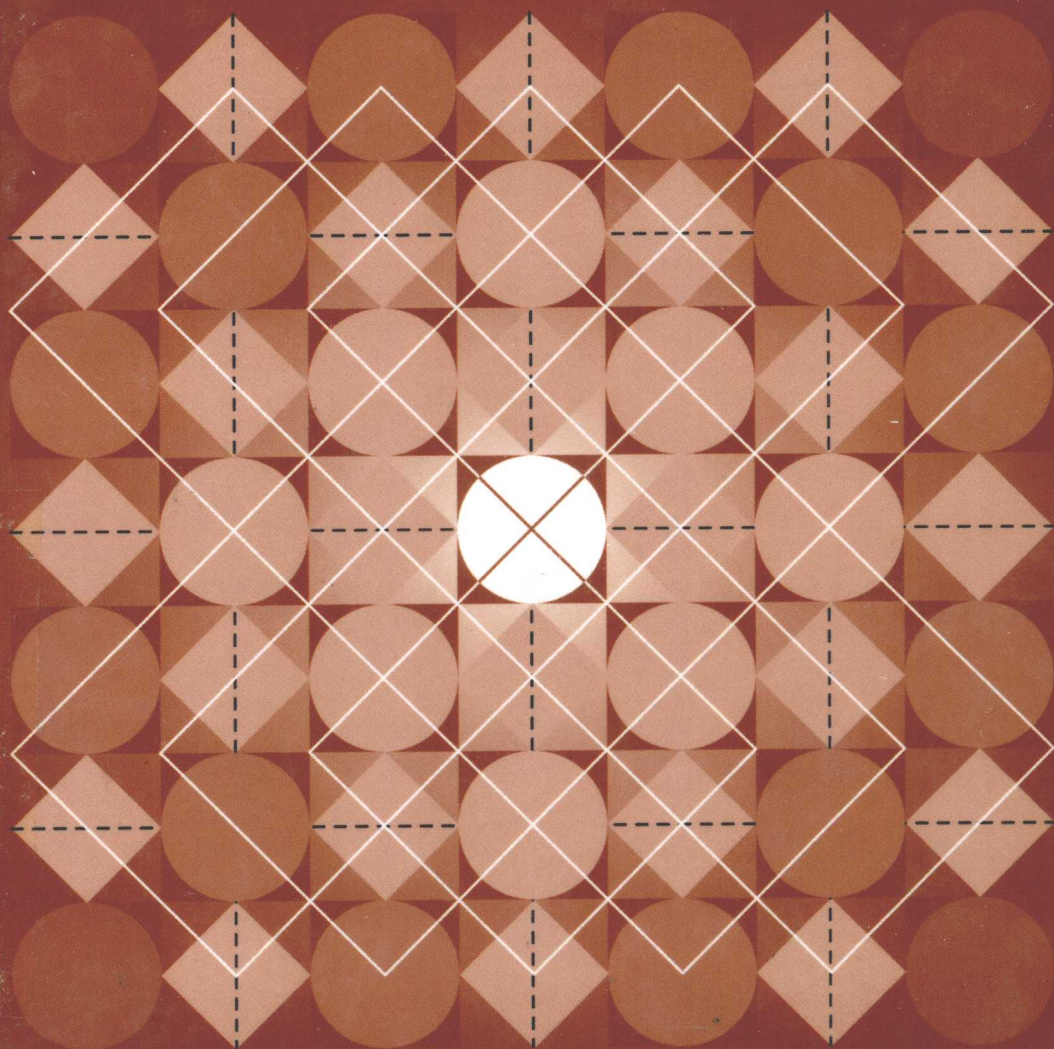# Meaningful Arrangement

Exploring the Syntactic Description of Texts

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Functional Linguistics

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Briefing

The subtitle of this book promises an 'exploration' that brings together two concepts – syntax and text – normally treated separately, and shows how they can best be understood in relation to each other. It offers an intellectual journey to take apart and problematise the whole process of understanding the patterns formed by words with other words in connected discourse. As such, it covers a rather different range of questions, and deals with them in different ways, from most books which explain how to 'do syntax'. So before we set out exploring, it would be useful to examine how 'syntax' is usually defined and how it tends to be 'done'.

If we take a number of introductions to the study of syntax published recently, they tend to cover a fairly consistent range of concerns. Radford's *Syntax: A Minimalist Introduction* (1997) gives a widely accepted definition of the scope of the subject with its stress on distinguishing grammatical from ungrammatical sentences, in other words, what can be said and what can't (Radford 1997: 1):

> Syntax is concerned with the ways in which words can be combined
> together to form phrases and sentences, and so addresses questions like
> 'Why is it OK in English to say *Who did you see Mary with?*, but not
> OK to say **Who did you see Mary and?'*... 'What kinds of principles
> determine the ways in which we can and cannot combine words together
> to form phrases and sentences?'

Sag and Wasow's *Syntactic Theory: A Formal Introduction* (1999) adds a familiar note when it distinguishes between the traditional 'prescriptive grammar' that is (or used to be) taught in schools and the 'grammar' (in this sense subsuming syntax) that they are concerned with (Sag & Wasow 1999: 1):

> As modern linguists we think that prescriptive grammar is for the most
> part a pointless activity. We view human language as a phenomenon
> amenable to scientific investigation, rather than something to be regulated
> by the decrees of authorities.

Sag and Wasow then go on to specify the 'authority' to which they will be appealing in sorting out the 'grammatical' (also known as 'well-formed') from the 'ungrammatical' (Sag & Wasow 1999: 3):

> Every normal speaker of any natural language has acquired an immensely rich and systematic body of unconscious knowledge, which can be investigated by consulting speakers' intuitive judgments.

This then allows them to define what sort of 'science' it is they are doing (Sag & Wasow 1999: 3):

> Languages are phenomena of considerable complexity, which can be studied scientifically. That is, we can formulate general hypotheses about linguistic structure and test them against the facts of particular languages. The study of grammar on this conception is a field in which hypothesis-testing is particularly easy: the linguist can simply ask native speakers whether the predictions regarding well-formedness of crucial sentences are correct.

So the study of syntax is concerned with 'hypotheses' as to what is 'well-formed' or not, and these 'facts' are to be determined by consulting 'normal speakers'? Put this way, the so-called 'scientific investigation' of language begins to look not so different from the laying down of rules practised by traditional grammarians. Where do these 'facts' come from? Who counts as a 'normal speaker'. Who or what decides whether something is 'well-formed' or not? Is the process of forming and testing hypotheses like that practised in the physical sciences, as the use of those terms would suggest, or is it of a different nature? Why the focus on 'linguistic structure' rather than, say, 'linguistic meaning'? And what are the understandings of language and language use that lie behind the way these questions are framed and answered?

I believe that the way such questions are answered in many current treatments of syntax simplifies the genuine complexity involved here, and that we have in fact been rather premature in claiming a 'scientific' status for this branch of study. There are three main reasons why I would argue that the study of syntax needs to be broadened beyond its currently accepted boundaries. These reasons relate to the three pillars of scientific method – data, description, and theory – and are dealt with respectively in the three parts of this book under the headings of processing the text, analysing the clause, and theorising syntax.

Firstly: **data – processing the text**. Most accounts of syntax start off by assuming a division between syntax (how words are combined) and morphology (the forms words take). Not only does such a division have clear roots in one particular linguistic tradition – that of Graeco-Roman antiquity – which

will not necessarily be relevant for the particular language or languages we are dealing with, it also begs a whole range of questions. It depends on getting the data in such a form that we can define what a 'word' is (see Chapter 4 for an example of the complexity of this in one language, Mandarin Chinese), and tends to utilise a particular 'bricks-and-mortar' model of language that is not at all the 'common-sense' it is normally taken to be (see Chapter 5). But more than that, it also requires a whole lot of prior 'cleaning up' of the data which in itself embodies – and normally disguises – a whole lot of theoretical and descriptive assumptions (see Chapter 2). So Part 1 of this book focuses on the process of getting texts ready for syntactic analysis, and making explicit the choices that have to be made in doing so. The point is not that we can somehow access the 'real data' directly – we can't. The data needs to be mediated through our processing of the text, so we have to be aware of the nature of that processing and its effects on our subsequent analysis.

Secondly: **description – analysing the clause**. This part deals with what would normally be expected to be included in any syntactic description. It attempts to give an idea of the relevant phenomena that need to be explained and the sorts of concepts used to explain them. As the main focus of 'syntax proper', this is an area where concepts and frameworks proliferate to a confusing degree. The strategy adopted here to open a path through the tangled forest of syntactic theories has been to rely on two main guides: Lucien Tesnière and P.H. Matthews.

Tesnière is someone whose work is not as well-known in English-language scholarship as it deserves to be, and the fact that he died before the publication of his main work, *Éléments de syntaxe structurale* (1959), as well the overlap of its appearance with that of Chomsky's highly influential *Syntactic Structures* (1957) perhaps explains his relative neglect. But Tesnière's work is a wide-ranging and original re-evaluation of the nature and goals of syntactic analysis which provides a bridge between traditional ideas about grammar in the Western tradition and the more systematic focus of modern linguistics. His basic metaphor of the clause as a little 'drama' involving 'actors' and 'setting' (Tesnière 1959: 102) has proven to be a highly influential – if often unacknowledged – model, and provides a very insightful way of linking syntactic structures to their meanings. P.H. Matthews in effect takes up where Tesnière left off. As one of the most perceptive observers and critics of the 'explosion' in syntactic theorising in the second half of the twentieth century, and in particular the most famous 'brand' of syntax, transformational-generative grammar, as it developed through the 1960s and 1970s, his textbook *Syntax* (1981) both sums up the achievements and limitations of that tradition and provides a still unsurpassed general account of what he calls 'the nature of syntactic relations and the fundamental types of construction' (Matthews 1981: xvii).

But syntactic analysis is not just about theories, it is about languages. One of the unfortunate side-effects of the move away from 'description' to 'explanation' in much syntactic work since the 1960s, with the concomitant focus on so-called 'universal' features of language, has been a comparative neglect of the ways in which languages differ. In its extreme form, this has led to the notion that syntax can somehow be 'carried out' on just one language, as Radford explains in justifying the restriction of his data to English examples: 'many students on syntax courses are primarily interested in English, and may have a relatively limited knowledge of (or interest in) the syntax of other languages' (Radford 1997: i). As I noted above, and explain in more detail in Chapter 1, many of the assumptions of syntax in the Western tradition derive from the specific form of the Latin and Greek languages, and it would be naive to suppose that the 'language under description' does not have an effect on the 'language of description' (see Chapter 2) and the theories that are written in it.

Van Valin's *An Introduction to Syntax* (2001) provides a salutary contrast to this descriptive monolingualism, billing itself as 'first and foremost an exploration of the variety of human languages, with examples drawn from every part of the globe'; and Lockwood's *Syntactic Analysis and Description* (2002) takes a similar approach. The current book's focus on texts as data doesn't allow it to be quite so wide-ranging. It therefore confines itself to (a) analysing texts in two languages I am reasonably familiar with, and which coincidentally happen to derive from the two opposite ends of Eurasia – Scottish Gaelic and Mandarin Chinese; (b) using the language of description – English – as the language under description, with the occasional excursion into Old English; and (c) making regular reference to Latin, as one of the key influences in the development of syntactic theories in the Western tradition.

Thirdly: **theorising syntax**. The experienced reader may have already noted a more 'ideological' tone to the current book than is customary. This is not, I believe, because it *is* more ideologically slanted than most such books, only that it is more upfront about the stance it takes. Just as the nature of the processing of the text reveals – or conceals – particular notions about language, so the analysis of the clause depends inescapably on a certain conceptualisation of syntactic categories and relations. While introductions to syntax tend to be more explicit about the assumptions of their analysis than they are about their processing, they are still faced with the problem of the 'tangled forest' of syntactic theories referred to above.

Given this situation, most such books adopt one of a number of strategies. They concentrate on one particular theory and deal with others only in passing if at all: for example, Radford 1997 and Sag and Wasow 1999 each cover different

brands of generative grammar; Halliday 1985 / 1994 and Fawcett 2000 different brands of systemic functional grammar. Alternatively they treat a number of theories, in most cases, ones that are theoretically fairly inter-consistent: for example, Van Valin 2001 provides an introduction to basic syntactic concepts shared by theories deriving from the generative tradition, and finishes up with brief accounts of how four particular theories differ at a more specific level. Very occasionally they attempt a synthesis of different theories: for example Lockwood 2002 draws on stratificational grammar, tagmemics, and systemic functional linguistics to provide an account 'centered around the notion of the syntactic construction' (Lockwood 2002: ix).

This book takes a different approach by focusing not so much on constructing a theory as on identifying the range of phenomena any theory has to deal with. However, this does not mean it is 'pre-theoretical' or 'non-theoretical': such terms are basically nonsensical. Even the most avowedly descriptively-oriented account takes a theoretical stance – however implicitly – in its aims and techniques. The approach taken here can be summed up in the title of a 1966 article by Halliday 'Syntax and the Consumer'; or more gnomically 'syntax is as syntax does'. The form taken by any theory of syntax reflects the purposes for which syntactic analysis is envisaged, and the wider concerns to which it relates. So Part 3 tries to give a sketch – and it can only be a sketch – of the range of approaches available for the 'consumer', some of the themes that have emerged in syntactic studies over the last half-century, and what different theories set out to do. In the study of syntax, as in any area, a historical perspective is a valuable corrective to theoretical blinkeredness: I would even go so far as to say that is an essential element of the genuine understanding of any one single theory. As the historian of science Thomas Kuhn (Kuhn 1962 / 1970: 10–22) has described in relation to the physical sciences, the messiness of historical developments in a discipline is often hidden from the student in the way introductions to the 'state of the art' are written, with all predecessors seen as leading inexorably up to whatever framework is being put forward as the 'right' one.

The present book tries to find a way of giving a sense of developments in the field not by dealing with the usual 'schools' of formalism versus functionalism, but by showing how some traditional morphological concepts have been reinterpreted for syntactic analysis (Chapters 14–15), and by picking up on concepts already introduced in earlier parts – such as the key complementarity between syntagmatic and paradigmatic (Chapters 16–17) – to characterise the emphases and biases of different theories. To bring things back to earth, this account of different theories finishes up with a case study of one particular theory being applied to a particular descriptive challenge – developing a functional account of the verb in Chinese (Chapter 18).

The overall approach taken in this book – what it sets out to provide that most such studies don't – can be summed up by unpicking the key words in the title.

The first key word is **arrangement**. This is a fairly close translation of the Greek *syntaxis* from which the term 'syntax' derives, applied originally to soldiers lined up for battle, and then subsequently to words lined up in order. As a semiotic system linking sound and meaning, language exhibits patterning on many levels. The type of arrangement dealt with in this book is that where sound and meaning come together into meaningful 'chunks' that vary and interact in meaningful ways. Such a formulation suggests that the second key word must be **meaningful**. The general approach adopted here is that of J.R. Firth, who saw meaning as involved in all levels of language, not just to be hived off in a separate box called 'semantics'. So for Firth there was phonetic meaning and phonological meaning – how we interpret and distinguish sounds; lexical and grammatical meaning – how we interpret different patterns of wording; and contextual meaning – how we make sense of wordings in their contexts of use.

Firth's approach to analysing lexical and grammatical meaning was what he referred to as 'the word process in the sentence' (Firth 1957 / 1968: 175), and this provides a pretty good definition of the third key word **syntactic**. If we look at the sentence – or more technically what will here be called the clause – as meaningful, what sorts of patterns do we see? Firth pointed out that these patterns are of two kinds: lexical relations between words – what he referred to as 'collocation'; and grammatical relations between categories – 'colligation' (Chapter 3). If we take two words like 'say poetry' (see Chapter 1) they relate lexically in a way we could paraphrase as 'uttering words'; as well as grammatically in terms of functions we can call 'predicator' and 'complement' (see Chapters 7 & 8). The notion of 'syntactic' is most commonly taken to cover only the second type of relation, but both types have separate and equal contributions to make to the meaningful patterning of sentences.

And so to the fourth key word: **texts**. In contrast to perhaps the majority of approaches to syntax, this book sees syntactic organisation as one of the levels of organisation of texts, that is, of coherent pieces of discourse functioning in context. Isolated sentences taken out of context may be adequate for explaining certain features of syntactic patterning, but accounts based on such examples tend to fall down when it comes to explaining *why* a particular syntactic pattern is chosen instead of another. Traditional descriptive accounts of syntax have always used texts as sources of examples, but the move to self-proclaimed 'explanatory' models of syntax in the last half century for some reason seems to have seen texts regarded as a distraction rather than the basic data which need to be accounted for.

Which brings us to the fifth key word: **description**. Why should we be interested in understanding syntactic patterning? Again, there are as many answers to this question as there are definitions of 'syntax', but the starting point for this book is a desire to describe both the forms syntactic patterning takes and how they are used. This approach assumes that we are interested first of all in making sense of the meaningful patterning of texts, in ways that can be related to their material expression in sound or visual symbols, on the one hand, and their contexts of use, whether social or cognitive, on the other.

The final key word is an unusual one as such book titles go: **exploring**. It's unusual for a couple of reasons. It suggests a rather *tentative* approach, as though we're setting out on a journey without being exactly sure what will turn up. It also suggests a *process* of finding out, rather than a delimiting of what is already known. It is written in the spirit of Hockett's (1987) reflective reconsidering of the American linguistic tradition subtitled *Elementary linguistics from an advanced point of view*: to borrow the description by Yuen Ren Chao of his *Grammar of Spoken Chinese* (1968: viii), this is 'a discussion book and not an instruction book to learn [syntax] from'. As I noted above, I believe that we have been somewhat hasty and over-confident in claiming a scientific status for this subject, and that some of what Hockett recommended as *Refurbishing our Foundations* (1987) is urgently necessary here. So this book can perhaps be seen as a 'prelude' rather than an 'introduction' to the study of syntax: it does not provide a ready-made framework that can be immediately taken away and applied to the data, rather it explores the main 'themes' that are developed more technically in other syntax textbooks, such as the ones already mentioned above.

The approach taken here also departs from tradition in that it deliberately does *not* employ the favored scientific mode of explanation in the West since the 17th century, the reductive method, which works by breaking down large structures into their component bits. In practice, this tends to mean 'building up' from small pieces into large structures; in linguistics, the reductive approach has been taken to its logical extreme in Zellig Harris's *Methods in Structural Linguistics* (Harris 1951). Instead it takes the opposite mode of starting off with the broad brush general picture and then gradually 'focusing in'. For example, rather than starting with words and 'building them up' into phrases and clauses, it works the other way: starting by analysing whole clauses, and only discussing the structure of words and phrases after the structure of the clause has already been sketched in. This method of explanation goes along with, and is in many ways required by the emphasis on using as data whole texts, rather than single sentences. An explanation of a text, a piece of discourse, needs to be itself discursive, to be 'worked through' rather than 'taken in' at

a glance. The use of texts also highlights the complexity of the whole process of dealing with language syntactically, and the contingent nature of making descriptive decisions, of weighing up different tendencies in the data against each other.

The general approach taken in Parts 1 and 2 could thus be characterised as 'processual' rather than 'declarative': in other words, the discussion attempts to lead the reader through the process of establishing syntactic categories and developing syntactic descriptions, rather than simply putting them forward as givens. Such an approach is not uncommon in syntax textbooks, where the focus tends to be on argumentation as much as – or sometimes more than – description; but this book does not first establish the relevant categories and then proceed to employ them, it instead attempts to derive categories in the course of the discussion. This may occasionally cause the reader some headaches, but hopefully the pay-off will be a better understanding of the genuine complexity of the process of coming up with a description of any language.

Part 3 takes a more reflective approach in exploring the implications of Firth's notion of linguistics, and therefore of syntax as one part of linguistics, being 'language turned back on itself' (Firth 1950 /1957: 181). Having already gone through a process of necessary linguistic navel-gazing to develop a **meta-language** for this purpose in Parts 1 and 2 – that is, a language to talk about language, a theory of language – Part 3 attempts to develop what we might call a 'meta-metalanguage': in other words, a language to talk about theories of language. For this purpose, it is important to understand the **historical context** of the development of ideas about 'doing syntax', to get an idea of the previous and concurrent work different scholars have drawn on in devising their own theories of syntax, and to be aware of the sorts of rhetorical strategies theoreticians use to promote their own ideas and (just as importantly) downgrade those of their opponents. It is also crucial to understand the **context of application** for syntactic theories: that is, the purposes for which theorists have seen their theories being useful, in line with Halliday's notion of a theory as a 'means of action', a way of carrying out particular work. An essential element of 'doing syntax', in my view, is developing a cross-theoretical awareness: to understand that not only are some of the *answers* different – something already widely acknowledged – but that often the *questions* are different as well.

In the last fifty years, the term 'syntax' has become inextricably associated with the name of Noam Chomsky. It may therefore strike many readers as strange that no mention of Chomsky's work is made until we reach Part 3. There are a number of reasons for this apparent omission. Firstly, Chomsky has tended to set himself against the idea that there might be different questions, as well as different answers, in doing syntax, characteristically dismissing other accounts of syntax, even those developed by scholars working within his own general

framework, as being of little or no significance. So Chomsky does not have much useful contribution to make to an account of syntactic study that seeks to go across different theories, particularly those stemming from traditions different to his own. Secondly, from the very beginning of his work on syntax, Chomsky took over the categories of traditional (Latin) grammar without justification, and saw his task as formalising the insights contained in that framework, which he explicitly cast as universal. He therefore has little to say on the question of problematising those categories, or whether the description of different languages may in fact call for different categories. Thirdly, in a book like this that seeks to reevaluate current wisdom in the field of syntactic studies and to call for rethinking on some key points, I wanted to show that there *are* actually viable syntactic frameworks outside the Chomskyan tradition. Once we reach Part 3, Chomsky must of course make an appearance; not, however, in the role of revolutionary in which he is usually cast, but as a development of a particular theoretical tradition within linguistics, a tradition which must be taken seriously, but not regarded as the be-all and end-all of syntax. To rephrase Saussure's dictum on linguistics and linguists, 'syntax is too important to be left to the (usual) syntacticians'.

All in all, this is a book for raising questions, not providing answers; for suggesting different possible alternatives, not defending one entrenched position; for problematising rather than assuming. I hope that it may contribute to broadening the debate on the nature and uses of syntactic study, and suggest some ways out for a discipline that seems to have driven itself into a corner.