LINGUISTICS 305: INTRODUCTION TO SYNTAX

Professor Ken Safir - Syllabus

General Course Description

The basic objectives of this course are (A) to familiarize students with the basic goals and assumptions of generative grammar, (B) to train students in the rudiments of syntactic analysis and syntactic theorizing and argumentation and (C) to familiarize students with the major syntactic structures of English and their relevance to linguistic theory.

The central goal of Generative Grammar is to understand what a person knows when he or she knows a language, and to understand how it is that people acquire this knowledge. Syntax is that portion of what we know about our language that deals with the structure and word order of sentences. Most of this "knowledge" is actually unconscious, that is to say, native speakers of English "know" what sounds to them like a perfectly normal English sentence, but when native speakers hear a sentence that sounds "ungrammatical" to them, they rarely can say exactly why. In fact the greatest portion of our linguistic knowledge has never been explicitly taught to us, rather we have acquired it because we have human brains, and human brains are specially equipped to learn certain kinds of languages. Linguistics, from this perspective, is a "cognitive" science, like much of psychology, dedicated to understanding how our brains work in a particularly human way.

Part of the charm of investigating the syntax of one's native language is that it is often not necessary to go to the library to amass the facts. Each native speaker of English knows what sounds like a good sentence of English, and native speakers agree about this much more than they disagree. For example, a sentence like (A) "Who did Mary say that she saw?" is a typical question which one might answer by saying, "Mary said that she saw Joe," but a question like (B) "Who did Mary see the film which pleased?" sounds terrible, although one could imagine a logical response like "Mary saw the film which pleased Joe." The curious fact about sentences like the ungrammatical question just mentioned is that no one is ever taught not to say it. In fact, a native speaker of French or Swahili will not have to be instructed not to say such a sentence either, as sentences with a "structure" like that in (B) are ungrammatical in every language in the world. English, or, for that matter, Swahili, are learnable precisely because children do not have to even consider the possible existence of sentences like (A). What humans "know" without being taught is what is of particular interest to linguists who want to understand what "knowledge" we are born with, and how it affects what we know after we have "learned" the language we know as adults.

The study of syntax is a very young science that has nonetheless made a remarkable degree of progress in understanding just how rich, complex and systematic the mind is. Advances in syntactic theory have led to much more subtle descriptions

and understanding of the grammar of particular languages, such as English, Chinese, Swahili, and Warlpiri, as well as to the discovery of linguistic universals, i.e., properties true of every human language. But as a young science, this sort of linguistics as cognitive science has barely come of age, and some of the most exciting questions about human potential are just beginning to be asked.

English has been the most intensely studied of all the natural languages, so most of the interesting issues in theoretical syntax can be presented using structures familiar to every speaker of English. As time allows, less familiar languages will also be discussed for comparison. Though most of the major syntactic structures of English will be analyzed, the presentation of the course is designed to illustrate theoretical concepts and to provide practice in syntactic analysis rather than to present a complete a description of English syntax.

This course is likely to be of interest to students in computer science, anthropology, language studies, philosophy and psychology as well as students in linguistics.

Course Prerequisites: Linguistics 201 or permission of instructor

Course Requirements: Students will receive frequent problem sets and reading assignments. The problem sets will be discussed in class the day they are due. For this reason it is VERY IMPORTANT to keep up, especially as each assignment builds on the last, and most of class discussion is based on the problem sets. Some of the readings will be drawn from texts that will be provided to you in photocopies, but almost all of the reading will come from "Class Review Notes" (CRN) distributed in class. If you do fall behind, it is quite possible to catch up if the difference is only one or two classes, but it is twice as much work, because it is harder to benefit from class when you are behind. If you miss three classes in a row it is hard to pass.

Grades: Grades will be decided on the basis of the following procedure. First consideration will be the quality and punctual submission of problem sets (60%), the final exam (30%), and class participation (a highly subjective 10%). Students will receive a grade based on the material they have handed in as of the final class (i.e., no incompletes). I reserve the right to juggle with the percentages within five or ten percent if I think a fairer grade will result. There is probably no midterm exam, unless I think it would be a useful exercise, and then the grading formula will probably change some.

Organization of the Lesson Plan: The organization of the lectures will be based on the presentation of conceptual and grammatical principles of generative syntax, and to this end, examples of constructions that best illustrate theoretical and analytic points will be presented first. We will probably move a little more slowly than the plan indicates, and occasionally some areas will be presented in a slightly different sequence. Nonetheless, if you miss some classes it will give you an idea of what you have to catch up on. We get as far along in this sequence as we manage to get and the final exam is adjusted

accordingly.

Week 1-2: Goals of Generative Grammar

What does one know when one knows a language? How do we account for linguistic creativity, and for the speed and nature of language acquisition? What does it mean to claim that a theory of grammar is "psychologically real"? How does one go about investigating these questions? Some Idealizations: The data base, native speaker judgements of acceptability of sentences, competence vs. performance, homogeneous speech community. Further idealizations: A discrete language faculty and the notion "modularity", Humans vs. animals, explanatory elegance, parametric variation. Expressing recursivity.

Week 2-3: The Structure of Components: Phrase structure rules

The justification of phrase structure rules. Recursivity, relatedness, syntactic arguments. The notion "independent motivation." Phrase structure rules of English. The role of lexical insertion. Statements made in terms of PS-rules. The conjunction argument. Coreference as evidence for structure.

Week 3-4: The Structure of Components: The Lexicon

Grammatical mapping and the lexicon. Justifying syntactic categories (derivational and inflectional morphology) Subcategorization and selectional restrictions. Exceptions and learning in grammatical theory.

Week 4-5: The Notion of Grammatical Level

Wh-questions and the format of transformational rules. Unboundedness and syntactic variables in structural descriptions. D-structure and S-structure. The significance of abstract levels of cognition. Case theory and Theta theory (before movement theory)

Week 6: Constraints on Rules

What is the psychological significance of constraints on grammar? Can they be learned? Some constraints: Complex NP Constraint, Coordinate Structure Constraint, Wh-island Constraint(?). Some diagnostic properties of Wh-mvt. Generalized wh-movement, explanatory elegance.

Week 7-8: Raising, Control and Empty Categories

The motivation for abstract phonetically null entities. Trace theory and anaphora. Other empty elements, control verbs (want, try, promise, persuade). Case theory. Infinitives, "understood subject" and control. Binding Conditions (Principles A and B). The significance of abstract entities for learning.

Week 9-10: Motivating movement - conspiracies

At what level does Case theory apply? Review grammatical mapping. Extending the notion "modularity." Introduce raising <u>seem</u> contrasted with control, passive. Review of the similarity of rule formats, components. Trace theory and anaphora. Theta Theorem.

Week 10-11: Grammatical levels and empty categories revisited

More on traces and anaphora. Raising, passive. Summary of NP-movement and its relation to Wh-movement. Diagnostics for wh-movement. Diagnostics for empty categories. The PRO theorem. Levels and filters. Move alpha and simplification.

Week 11-12: A'-binding and A-binding, Government, syntactic variables.

Exceptional Casemarking environments, contrasted with French. Parameters and learnability. X' theory. Unifying the theory. Descriptive power vs. explanatory power.

Week 13: Subjacency

Reducing the effects of several constraints to a single principle. More on the structure of CP.

Week 14: Parameters

Comparison with French, Chinese, Hindi. Impersonal constructions and Case Theory (there-insertion, il-impersonals, Dutch and German). Illustrations of LF (Logical Form). Evaluating the explanatory force of linguistic theory.

Final Exam