

Week 1: The purpose of (studying) grammar

1. Preliminaries

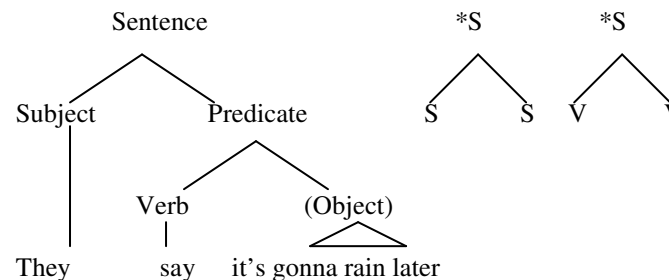
- Term 1: grammar of English → syntax and morphology, as they are related to (motivated by, cf. Givón) meaning and use
- theory, analysis
- variation: history
- week by week contents, see separate handout
- Term 2: phonetics & phonology of English
- theory, transcription
- variation: accents
- week by week contents: tba

2. The purpose of grammar

- language has a range of functions, e.g. expressive, ceremonial, phatic, informative (coherent communication of ideas)
- grammar: systematic packaging of ideas (coherence → discourse structure)
- what needs to be packaged? → nature of thought: entities and events (what happens to them or what they do), i.e. PROPOSITIONS (Givón 1993:22ff) → roughly speaking, sentences require SUBJECTS and PREDICATES:

(1) Starsky: They say it's gonna rain later.
Hutch: Yeah, that's what I heard.

(2) *They. Rain. Later.
*That. What I.



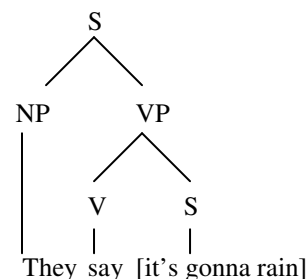
(3) Yeah, Ø like it a lot!

→ subjects, verbs and other constituents may be understood rather than explicit

- CONSTITUENCY:

(4) They [say [it's gonna rain]]

(5) *They it's say gonna rain.



→ units of sense tend to be kept together syntactically (universally)

- WORD ORDER:

(6) *They it's gonna rain say.

→ SVO not SOV (*not* universal, see e.g. Turkish)

- sentence structure (syntax) plays an important role in language processing (comprehension *and* production), contributing greatly to communicative efficiency:

(7) Yoda: Around the survivors [_oa perimeter] [_vcreate].

→ CONTEXT + FRAME KNOWLEDGE

- Prep-NP vs. *NP-Prep → conventions (“grammatical rules”)

(8) þa cwæð se gingra to hys fæder. fæder syle me mynne dæl
the said the younger to his father father give me my part
mynre æhte. þe me to gebyrð.
of-my property that me to belongs

‘Then the youngest one said to his father: “Father, give me my part of my property, which belongs to me”.’

→ conventions/rules of English (any language for that matter) subject to change

- diachrony only one of many dimensions of variation, cf. Givón (1993:7ff): geography (regional, urban vs. rural dialects), age (older vs. younger), medium (written vs. spoken), education (educated vs. uneducated), formality (formal vs. informal), social class (high-status vs. low-status), ethnicity (majority vs. minority subcultures), individual (this individual of this family vs. that one), native skill (native vs. non-native speakers)
- (9) Instruction: To hold one box, open at cooling (...) To drain the put in the shells, to furnish of farce clase-border, to passt at over hot one quarter time about. (Instructions on the back of French tin of snails [B&B 2001:4])
- (10) Retire his ticket. (Instruction on the screen of a ticket machine in a coach station in Madrid)
- grammaticality → PRESCRIPTIVISM vs. DESCRIPTIVISM

3. Why study grammar?

- general knowledge
- support for other areas of linguistics, e.g. sociolinguistics, typology, historical linguistics, language acquisition, speech therapy, language teaching, stylistics
- window onto cognition → grammatical distinctions and categories are not random by are grounded in conceptual distinctions, Sg vs. Pl, Sg vs. Du vs. Pl, constituent structure (psycholinguistics, psychology)

4. The nature of grammatical analysis

- visual representation: TREES, indispensable in more advanced linguistics
 - argumentation: tests → structure and semantics
 - example: subject
 - structure: subject-operator inversion in *yes-no* question
 - semantics: ‘doer’ → AGENTIVITY
- (11) Cadence: So, can I see the ring?
Steve Stifler: Nope. **I** promised to keep it safe. **It**’s not leaving my pocket.
Cadence: Okay, Frodo.
(American Wedding)
- (12) **It** is kept safe.

(→ semantic criteria not always readily available → importance of formal tests)

- psychological status of formal syntactic analysis: it seems plausible that our linguistic knowledge contains things somehow parallel to trees, though exactly what shape these representations take, neurologically, is far from certain.

5. Concluding remarks

- language serves (primarily) to express ideas (propositions) in a coherent fashion
- the structure of our conceptualisations plays a fundamental role in the way we talk about them, both in terms of the elements that a sentence (CLAUSE) contains (e.g. typically at least S, Pred), and in terms of the structural properties of a sentence (e.g. contiguity/proximity Det, N) → these properties tend to be relatively stable diachronically (and not restricted to English)
- this does not imply that semantics fully determines structure, e.g. Prep-NP is not necessarily a more natural representation of prepositional relations than NP-Prep (though there are clear communicative benefits to be gained from a degree of regularity in this regard) → in cases like this, the particular patterns displayed by English may well have been subject to change in the history of the language (and should not be expected to be universal)
- in analysing the structure of English (or of any other language) it is advisable to supplement semantic criteria with formal tests, since the functional basis of a certain aspect of the grammar may be very hard or even impossible to define/retrieve

- syntactic tests and semantic criteria allow one to analyse sentences into their smaller components (and subcomponents); it is convenient and conventional to display the observed structure using tree diagrams
- a thorough knowledge of the structure of (the English) language is useful in all kinds of areas, ranging from purely theoretical to more applied ones

References

- Aitchison, Jean. 1991. *Language change: Progress or decay?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Börjars, Kersti & Kate Burridge. 2001. *Introducing English grammar*. London: Arnold, Ch. 1.
- Givón, Talmy. 1993. *English grammar: a function-based introduction*. Vol. I. Amsterdam: John Benjamins, Ch.1.