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Emma L. Pavey
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1 Introduction

KEY TOPICS

- Language for communication
- The structure of this book

Most of the time, if not all of the time, we communicate with each other using language without considering the complex activity we are undertaking, forming complex words and sentences in a split second. We know immediately when someone uses language structures that are inappropriate or incorrect because we have learned the rules that govern the language(s) we use. In this book, we will look at the structures we use in more detail, in order to help us to understand the structures we find in languages that may be arranged in ways quite different from English.

There are many approaches to the study of language. Some linguists are more interested in discovering the basic, innate structures that we all have in our brains, regardless of which language(s) we speak. Linguists working in what is known as the **GENERATIVE** tradition seek to understand **UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR**, the structures that human languages have in common and that we may be born with the capacity to use. The generative approach focuses on the **FORMAL** characteristics of language structure, seeking to uncover the rules that 'generate' well-formed sentences. Other linguists take a more **FUNCTIONAL** approach, studying language use in context; in other words, what actually comes out of our mouths rather than what may be stored in our heads. Functional approaches seek to incorporate the meaning and broader context of language in order to fully understand language structure.

In this book I present a practical, functional approach to describing and explaining language structure. In chapter 2, I present a step-by-step approach to analysing the structure of words: the study of morphology. Chapters 3 to 8 draw specifically on Role and Reference Grammar theory (RRG) to help us understand the structure of sentences by looking at form (syntax), meaning (semantics) and function (pragmatics) (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997, Van Valin 2005). As well as being a functional theory interested in language as a means of communication, RRG theory seeks to be typologically adequate, to present a level playing field for the analysis of all languages. This book does not cover every aspect of RRG theory; for that, the reader is directed to the references. Rather, this book is an

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introduction to the analysis of language structure, and I will make use of aspects of RRG theory as a useful tool for that purpose.

In order to study language you need to look both at the big picture and the small component parts of language. To take an analogy, consider psychologists and neurosurgeons. Both are 'head doctors', examining the way the brain works. However, while a neurosurgeon might cut you open and look at different parts of your brain, a psychologist is more likely to examine your behaviour and how you actually use your brain. Both are essential (as well as lots of other types of 'head doctors') for a complete understanding of the brain, and both do different things well to that end: however, the psychologist cannot help you much with a tumour, and a neurosurgeon cannot cure you of compulsively eating chocolate cake. In this book, I will 'cut language up' into component parts in each chapter in order to ultimately have a better understanding of how it functions as a whole, integrated thing in the minds, mouths and hands of speakers.

In the next section I will introduce some general features of language, and then move on to a description of the contents of the book.

1. Language for communication

1.1 A symbolic gesture

Onomatopoeia describes words that sound like their meaning, such as *buzz*, *click* and *meow*. Onomatopoeia is one type of **ICONICITY**; something is iconic in this sense if it resembles its meaning in some way. This: . . . ✂ . . . is an iconic sign because it resembles the thing it is representing. There is a direct relationship between the form of the word and the thing it represents.

However, for the vast majority of words in any language the relationship is arbitrary. The sound of a word bears no direct relationship to the meaning it represents. Thus *bird*, *oiseau*, *pájaro* and *ndege* are arbitrary sequences of sounds used to represent the idea of a bird (in English, French, Spanish and Swahili respectively).

Our ability to deal with arbitrary symbols means we can use language as an abstract system; we can talk about things that are not physically present because we can associate the word with the referent even though there is only an arbitrary connection between the form and the meaning. When we manipulate such arbitrary symbols, it is more than a Pavlovian response (Deacon 1997: 68). As an abstract system, we can also use language to talk about events in the past, events within events (e.g. *the man I saw last week is waving at me*) or even events in the imagination.

In terms of language structure, we also find some arbitrariness: some languages put the verb last in a sentence, while others put it at the beginning. At the same

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time, as we will see in chapters 7 to 9 in particular, we do find some iconicity in the connection between certain sentence structures and the meanings they express.

1.2 Do you know what I mean?

If you hear someone speak, or watch someone sign, in a language that you do not know, what thoughts cross your mind? Can you tell where the words begin and end? Do you consider it borderline miraculous that another person could take any kind of meaning from that stream of sound or signs? The reality is that practically every human being gleans a great deal of meaning from such streams of communication in at least one language, and without a great deal of conscious thought about the structure of the words and sentences they are using.

One of the most central factors that governs all language structures and communication is the tension between understandability and economy. Essentially, this tension refers to the fact that we would like to get our message across as clearly as possible with as little effort as possible.

In addition, language speakers are constantly creating new language forms, primarily words but also structures. We can process and produce sentences we have never heard or spoken before, because we know how to interpret the words and structures we hear. We will examine in the next section how this is possible.

1.3 What it is and what it's for

When we study the component parts of a language, we are interested, then, in two things: what the parts do and what they look like; in other words, the **FUNCTION** and the **FORM**. Think of a pencil. We can describe the basic formal features of a pencil: it is a long, thin, pointed implement with a non-ink based marker enclosed in wood. Its basic function, on the other hand, is as an instrument for writing and drawing. So it is with language. The form of a word (or sign), for example, is its phonological shape. Its function is what we do with the word; in other words, how we use it to communicate.

We will see that it is important to be aware that we can use other things, things with a different form, to perform the same function. Instead of a pencil, for example, you could write with a pen or a piece of chalk or with paint. In addition, you could use your pencil for other functions, such as pointing to something or scratching your back. Once again, we can draw an analogy with language: in the examples in (1), we see the same 'form' *a tall student* being used in two different functions.

(1) (a) A tall student stole my stapler.
(b) Norman is a tall student.

In (1a), the sequence of words *a tall student* has the function of picking out a particular **REFERENT**; in other words, it is used to tell us something about the

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identity of the one who stole the stapler. In (1b), on the other hand, *a tall student* does not pick out a particular referent; instead, it gives us more descriptive information about the referent picked out by *Norman*. Do not worry if this distinction is not totally clear at this point; we will be returning to this difference in chapter 3.

In the sentences in (2), on the other hand, we see different forms performing the same function.

(2) (a) That Norman stole my stapler saddens me.
(b) Stealing saddens me.
(c) Norman saddens me.

In every case, the function of the underlined element is to pick out the thing that saddens me, even though the form of the underlined element is different: we have a clause in (a), a verb in (b) and a noun in (c). We need to make sure we look not only at the shape or form of an element but also at the function(s) it can have in the sentence.

Section summary

In this section you have learned:

- the approach to analysing language structure adopted in this book,
- to understand the arbitrary relationship between words and meaning,
- to distinguish between form and function.
- **KEY TERMS:** generative, universal grammar, formal, functional, typological adequacy, iconicity, understandability, economy, function, form, referent

2 The structure of language – a preview

This book is designed to be read progressively, from chapter 1 through to chapter 9. The concepts we will encounter are supported and illustrated by data from over 225 signed and spoken languages. In addition, at the end of each chapter there are two sets of exercises, one set based on English and one with data from a wide variety of other languages. These are graded for their level of difficulty: one asterisk * indicates an easier exercise, while those with two asterisks ** are more challenging.

When we seek to analyse a language, particularly a little-known language, we do not always have access to lists of pre-selected data in nice, neat lists, as we see in most of the exercises in this book. In fact, it is advisable, in seeking to elicit 'natural' data, to record various types of texts rather than isolated sentences. In learning about language structures, it is best to begin by practising with neat sets of data, but I have also included text-based exercises so that you can practise both types of analysis.

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2.1 The chapters

In this book I begin with the smallest meaningful units of language structure and move all the way through to examining complex sentences. In terms of the study of linguistics as a whole, we begin our linguistic journey on the outskirts of phonology (the study of sound patterns) and march right up to the borders of discourse (the study of how whole texts are structured). In this section, I will briefly introduce the topics of each chapter.

2.1.1 Chapter 2: the structure of words

In the next chapter, we will examine **MORPHOLOGY**, which is the study of parts of words. Many words can be divided into pieces (**MORPHEMES**), each of which conveys a different part of the meaning of the whole. For example, if you were to chop up the word *underfunded* you would probably end up with *under-fund-ed*, and you would no doubt also be able to describe the meaning of each part of the word as it contributes to the whole.

In this chapter we will learn how to 'find' various types of morphemes and how to describe the ways in which they fit together to form words in different languages.

2.1.2 Chapter 3: the structure of sentences

In chapter 3, we build on our knowledge of morphology to study **SYNTAX**, which is the study of sentence structure. We will see how the meaning of a sentence and the way it is expressed are closely connected and that there are certain core components that all languages have in common. We will also learn a way to represent the syntactic structures that we find.

We will look at the basic elements of the sentence that tell us about what happened and who was involved, and examine different ways that languages express these parts of meaning. In addition, we will look at the modifying elements that give more detail of various kinds, such as when it happened (tense) or indeed whether it happened or not (negation).

2.1.3 Chapter 4: the structure of meaning

If syntactic structure is one half of a coin, the meaning of a sentence is the other. This is the study of **SEMANTICS**, and we shall examine it further in chapter 4.

We will look at a way to describe the various types of events and situations that sentences describe, and a method for representing those types that can be used for any language. We will see that there is a close connection between the type of event and the roles of the participants in that event.

2.1.4 Chapter 5: integrating language structure

The background that we establish in chapters 3 and 4 will enable us to examine **GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS** in chapter 5. We will look at how languages express

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who did what to whom in their morphology and syntax, and how this ties in with the meaning of the sentence and the roles of the participants.

We will find several general patterns across languages and will learn ways to describe and account for the patterns we find. We will also look at ways that languages play with their basic pattern, using **VOICE** constructions, for example, to focus on different participants in an event.

2.1.5 Chapter 6: the structure of phrases

In chapter 6, we focus particularly on the structure of two types of elements in language, **NOUN PHRASES** like *the blue balloon* and **ADPOSITIONAL PHRASES** like *on the roof* and *after many attempts*.

We will look at the different elements that can occur in noun phrases and the ways that languages express these. We will also look at the different semantic roles that adpositional phrases can have and the ways these too are expressed. This chapter also features a look at other types of phrases that modify the main event in some way.

2.1.6 Chapter 7: complex structures

With an understanding of basic sentences under our belts, in chapter 7 we turn to more complex structures, sentences that describe more than one event. We will examine the different parts of sentences that can be combined, and the different relationships between those connected parts.

We then take a closer look at two common types of complex constructions. We look at **SERIAL VERB CONSTRUCTIONS**, where a sequence of more than one verb is used to describe a single event, and also at types of **RELATIVE CLAUSES**, which tell us more about a noun, such as *who made this sweater* in *the child who made this sweater*.

2.1.7 Chapter 8: the structure of information

In chapter 8 we add a third string to our bow, a string that works alongside syntax and semantics in determining how we formulate our sentences: the study of **PRAGMATICS**, or information structure. The 'new' and 'old' information in what we want to communicate affects how we choose to express what we want to say. For example, it makes the difference between choosing to say *I spray-painted your cat* and *It was* ME *who spray-painted your cat*.

We will see how the structure of information affects how we describe participants (e.g. *he*, *that guy*, *Bob*, etc.) and how sentences are structured in all languages. In addition, we take a closer look at how languages form different types of questions and how they form commands.

2.1.8 Chapter 9: language structure in context

In the final chapter, we broaden the scope of our study to look at language in context, in the context of how we think and process, the context of the culture in which it is spoken, and the context of what we know about languages in general.

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We look at ways of categorizing languages based on certain features that they have or do not have and how this leads us to place them into 'families'. We also take a look at some examples of influences between the structure of a language and the culture in which it is spoken.

Finally we touch on aspects of language change, both processes internal to language and those prompted by contact with other languages.

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2 The structure of words

KEY TOPICS

- Parts of words
- Analysing morphology
- Derivation and inflection
- Non-linear morphology
- Clitics

1 What is a word?

In this chapter we will look at the parts that words are made from: morphemes. We will learn to recognize them and will introduce some terms to describe them. In this section we discuss what we mean by a word, and how we might find words.

As members of a literate language community, we might think that defining a word is easy, but when we speak, of course, we do not mark word breaks. In a language that we do not know, we need a strategy for locating the boundaries between words.

In general terms, when we talk about a **WORD** we mean a separate, independent phonological unit.[1] However, when we talk we run our words together and, despite what written conventions suggest, there usually are not audible pauses between our words. So how can we determine where words begin and end?

One feature of words is that they can be said on their own, in isolation. A speaker of English would be happy to pronounce the sequence /hapi/ *happy* on its own and call it a word, but would almost certainly not feel the same about /v/ *ve* or /ə/ (as in *could've* or *coulda).*

Secondly, when we do pause during natural speech, that pause always occurs between words, not in the middle of phonological words, as illustrated in (1).

(1) (a) You're just being . . . um . . . pedantic.
(b) ??You're just be . . . um . . . ing pedantic.

Thirdly, phonological words have to consist of at least one syllable each, so when you learn the permissible syllable structures in a language, you can

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determine where those boundaries lie. There will also be other phonological rules that only apply within words, so examining where they occur in sequences of sounds can help to determine where word boundaries are. In this book I focus on morphology and syntax but, as you can see, phonology and morphology are not separate, mutually exclusive areas of study. There is a great deal of overlap, just as morphology also overlaps with syntax, and the more study we can do in all these areas, the more thorough our analysis will be.

2 Parts of words

2.1 Morphemes

Fill in the gaps in the sentences in (2) and (3). Use the correct form of the underlined word in the (a) examples.

(2) (a) Henry only has one bleek.
(b) Sally, on the other hand, has two _____.

(3) (a) Today, Maria is happily pleeping.
(b) Yesterday, Maria happily _____.

What is a *bleek?* Is it better to have one or two? And what is *pleeping*? Is it legal? And, more importantly here, how do you know how the word should look in the gaps? By changing the form of the word you are using your knowledge of English morphology. As a proficient speaker of English you know how the word needs to change to fit both its place in the sentence and its meaning; you know which parts of the word to chop off and which to add.

You probably had *bleeks* in (2b) and *pleeped* in (3b). You knew that *bleek* was a noun and needed a plural *-s* and that *pleep* was a verb and probably needed *-ed* in the past tense.[2] These smaller parts of words that we chop words into are called morphemes. Morphemes are defined as the minimal units of grammatical or lexical meaning in a sentence.

Minimal does not necessarily mean small; it means that the unit cannot be broken down further into meaningful pieces (in the sense described below). Many morphemes are small, but some can have several syllables, such as *caterpillar*.

Meaningful: Morphemes give us grammatical or lexical information. They might, for example, tell us the name of a thing or action (**LEXICAL MEANING**). Alternatively, they might tell us how many of something there were or when something happened, like the *s* in *bleeks* or the *ed* in *pleeped* (**GRAMMATICAL MEANING**).

In this chapter we will look at both these areas of morphology in more detail.

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2.2 Basic types of morphemes

Look at the English words in (4), which have been cut up into morphemes.

(4) (a) kicked kick ✂ -ed
(b) dogs dog ✂ -s
(c) unkindly un- ✂ kind ✂ -ly

The 'core' of the word, the morpheme with the main lexical meaning, is called the **ROOT**. In each example above, the root of each word is underlined. Roots have a lexical meaning: we might expect to find these words (typically nouns, verbs and adjectives) by themselves in a dictionary. Lexical morphemes also form **OPEN SETS**, which means we expect to be able to invent new members, new items of this type.[3] Finally, roots are usually **FREE MORPHEMES**; they can occur by themselves, without other morphemes attached (but see the examples below in (7) and (8)).

The other morphemes in (4), on the other hand, cannot occur on their own: they have to be attached, or 'fixed' to another morpheme. For this reason they are called **AFFIXES**. An affix that occurs before the main lexical morpheme is a **PREFIX** while an affix that occurs after it is a **SUFFIX**; we see both in example (4c). The hyphen occurs on the side of the morpheme where it is attached to the root, as we see in (5). Notice too that free morphemes, such as *kind* in (5), are written without hyphens.

(5)

un-	**kind**	-ly
PREFIX	**ROOT**	SUFFIX

Morphemes such as affixes that cannot stand on their own are **BOUND MORPHEMES**. Affixes are also examples of grammatical morphemes: rather than naming a thing or an action, grammatical morphemes may provide information about features like the time an event occurred (*-ed*) or number (*-s*) or they might change the meaning of a word (*un-*). Grammatical morphemes form **CLOSED SETS**: it is very rare that languages invent new ways of marking the past tense or plurals or other grammatical meanings.

All these distinctions are illustrated with the English example in (6).

(6) *played* consists of

play	+	*-ed*
root		affix (suffix)
lexical		grammatical
free		bound
open set		closed set

This may seem like a lot of labels for a small thing, but they are all useful at different times.

It is important to note that not all roots are free. Even in English, some roots cannot appear in isolation: one can be *unkempt* but can one be *kempt*? Other

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