

Introducing Syntax

Syntax is the system of rules that we subconsciously follow when we build sentences. Whereas the grammar of English (or other languages) might look like a rather chaotic set of arbitrary patterns, linguistic science has revealed that these patterns can actually be understood as the result of a small number of grammatical principles. This lively introductory textbook is designed for undergraduate students in linguistics, English and modern languages with relatively little background in the subject, offering the necessary tools for the analysis of phrases and sentences while at the same time introducing state-of-the-art syntactic theory in an accessible and engaging way. Guiding students through a variety of intriguing puzzles, striking facts and novel ideas, *Introducing Syntax* presents contemporary insights into syntactic theory in one clear and coherent narrative, avoiding unnecessary detail and enabling readers to understand the rationale behind technicalities. Aids to learning include highlighted key terms, suggestions for further reading and numerous exercises, placing syntax in a broader grammatical perspective.

OLAF KOENEMAN is Assistant Professor of English Linguistics at Radboud Universiteit Nijmegen.

HEDDE ZEIJLSTRA is Professor of English Syntax at Georg-August-Universität Göttingen.

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Contents

| | |
|---|---------|
| <i>About this Book</i> | vii |
| <i>Foreword</i> | xi |
| <i>Acknowledgements</i> | xii |
| Introduction: The Language Machine | 1 |
| 1 Categories and Features | 7 |
| 1.1 Insight: Words and Categories | 8 |
| 1.2 Implementation: Categories and Features | 10 |
| 1.3 Consequences: Features and Subfeatures | 17 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 29 |
| <i>Further Reading</i> | 29 |
| 2 Merge | 30 |
| 2.1 Insight: Constituents Are Headed | 31 |
| 2.2 Implementation: Operation Merge | 35 |
| 2.3 Consequences: Testing the Predictions of Merge | 43 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 52 |
| <i>Further Reading</i> | 53 |
| 3 Theta Theory (θ-Theory) | 54 |
| 3.1 Insight: Merge and the Meaning of Verbs and Nouns | 55 |
| 3.2 Implementation: Theta Theory (θ-Theory) | 56 |
| 3.3 Consequences: Missing Arguments – Passives, Ergatives and PRO | 68 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 76 |
| <i>Further Reading</i> | 76 |
| 4 Case Theory | 78 |
| 4.1 Insight: Case as a Filter on Syntactic Structures | 79 |
| 4.2 Implementation: Case-Assigning Heads | 82 |
| 4.3 Consequences: Functional Projections | 100 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 108 |
| <i>Further Reading</i> | 109 |
| 5 Agreement and Uninterpretable Features | 110 |
| 5.1 Insight: Agreement Reflects Syntactic Dependencies | 111 |
| 5.2 Implementation: Agreement as Feature Dependency | 113 |
| 5.3 Consequences: Binding, C-Command and Agreement | 124 |
| <i>Summary</i> | 136 |
| <i>Further Reading</i> | 137 |

| | | |
|-----------|--|-----|
| 6 | Movement and Rmerge | 138 |
| 6.1 | Insight: Constituents Can Move | 139 |
| 6.2 | Implementation: Movement as Rmerge | 143 |
| 6.3 | Consequences: The VP-Internal Subject Hypothesis | 154 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 162 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 163 |
| 7 | Unifying Movement and Agreement | 164 |
| 7.1 | Insight: Agreement Triggers Rmerge | 165 |
| 7.2 | Implementation: Triggering Rmerge | 167 |
| 7.3 | Consequences: Layered VPs | 181 |
| 7.4 | Taking Stock | 192 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 193 |
| 8 | Syntax and Morphology | 194 |
| 8.1 | Insight: Morphology and Syntax are Different Grammatical Modules | 195 |
| 8.2 | Implementation: The Interaction between Syntax and Morphology | 197 |
| 8.3 | Consequences | 205 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 218 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 219 |
| 9 | Syntax and Phonology | 220 |
| 9.1 | Insight: Syntax is not about Word Order | 221 |
| 9.2 | Implementation: A Linearisation Algorithm | 224 |
| 9.3 | Consequences: The Linearisation of Remerged Constituents | 235 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 241 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 243 |
| 10 | Syntax and Semantics | 244 |
| 10.1 | Insight: Compositionality | 245 |
| 10.2 | Implementation: The Scope–C-Command Principle | 247 |
| 10.3 | Consequences: Overt Movement and Syntactic Locality | 258 |
| | Conditions | 258 |
| | <i>Summary</i> | 266 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 267 |
| | Afterword | 268 |
| | Hybrid Verbs | 270 |
| | <i>Wh</i> -Subjects | 272 |
| | The Uniformity of Syntactic Dependencies: | |
| | What about Selection? | 275 |
| | Syntactic Islands | 276 |
| | Final Remarks | 278 |
| | <i>Further Reading</i> | 279 |
| | <i>Glossary</i> | 280 |
| | <i>References</i> | 294 |
| | <i>Index</i> | 298 |

About this Book

Introducing Syntax

Whereas the grammar of English (or other languages) might look like a rather chaotic set of different patterns, syntactic theory has revealed that these patterns can actually be understood as the result of a small number of grammatical operations. Unravelling these is the science of syntax. This textbook describes state-of-the-art syntactic theory by addressing how and why certain combinations of words are ‘proper’ English sentences whereas other combinations are not. What is the mechanism behind that? What grammatical rules does English have and why? How is grammar related to meaning and to how sentences are expressed?

In this book we guide students through a variety of intriguing puzzles, striking facts and novel ideas, and let them discover the beauty of syntactic theory in both a bottom-up (data-driven) and a top-down (theory-driven) fashion. This book is primarily intended for students for whom this is a first (and hopefully not last) encounter with syntax and/or linguistic theory. We will primarily focus on the important insights that have been achieved in contemporary syntax. *Introducing Syntax* will offer students all the necessary tools to do this, without going into unnecessary technical detail.

Introducing Syntax is not the only available textbook on this topic. Why, then, the need for a new one? Introductory courses to (English) syntactic theory generally face three key challenges:

- First, syntax (and especially its level of formalisation and abstraction) can quite often be a surprise for students, especially those enrolled in an (English) language and literature/culture programme. The challenge is to make this formal theory accessible and interesting *without* oversimplifying.
- Second, since syntactic theory is formal, students have to learn a number of technical notions. A potential danger is that they learn the technicalities without understanding the insights behind them.
- Third, (English) syntactic theory deals with a number of phenomena that have shaped it. Many of these phenomena are part of the canon, and students have to know about them. However, they could be perceived as an arbitrary set of topics. It is a challenge to introduce all of these topics without losing the overall narrative that connects them in a coherent way.

On the basis of our teaching experience, we have felt a strong demand for an introductory textbook in syntactic theory that aims at addressing

these three challenges. Such a textbook should be fully accessible, understandable and enjoyable for every student of English while reaching the same theoretical level as can be expected of textbooks in general linguistics programmes. We feel that our approach differs from existing ones in at least the following three respects:

- It offers insight beyond technical implementation. Textbooks often feel the need to be technically accurate and up-to-date, which can be detrimental to the clarity of the insights that syntax has to offer. In the worst case, they read like instruction manuals, and the explanations look as complicated as what they are trying to explain. In this book, particular subjects and phenomena are discussed not just because they are part of the syntactic canon but because (i) we can explicitly show how they have contributed to a crucial aspect of syntactic theory, and (ii) they clearly have the potential to intrigue students of modern languages, who as a result more readily acquire the relevant knowledge and skills.
- It begins with the state of the art. Although a historical perspective can be insightful, this book shows syntax as the present-day science that it is from the start, and overcomes the difficulties for student beginners by letting current insights prevail over technicalities.
- Most textbooks cover a range of syntactic topics treated in distinct thematic chapters. Although *Introducing Syntax* does not deviate from such a topical approach, it pays significantly more attention to an overall narrative that explains how these separate topics are related to one another and what exactly their role is in the general theory of syntax. This means that some of the topics and notions are introduced in different places from usual simply because we feel this better serves the development of the narrative. The desire to let the narrative prevail at all times has also forced us to make particular theoretical choices. Sometimes we have made fairly standard choices, sometimes more controversial ones. Whenever we had to make such choices, the narrative has been our guide, and less so our own theoretical preferences; and in all such cases we address these choices in the ‘further reading’ section at the end of every chapter.

Introducing Syntax, then, combines a *top-down* narrative, which connects the chapters and book parts, with a *bottom-up* data-driven discovery of intriguing syntactic regularities that feed syntactic theorising. It makes little sense to present an insight in the absence of data. Therefore, the insight is often very naturally introduced in a bottom-up fashion in which empirical – that is, data-driven – considerations pave the way to a particular insight. Ultimately, we don’t want to just teach syntax, we want to teach how a syntactic theory is built up. Given these considerations, each chapter has the following tripartite structure:

(i) *Insight*

In this part we will present the major linguistic insight that forms the core of the chapter, the idea that aims to explain some key property of language. Insights are always justified: we show the central data that have led to them.

(ii) *Implementation*

Here the focus will be on the (technical) implementation of the insight, where students will learn to apply basic analytical skills.

(iii) *Consequences*

Here it is shown what predictions the insight and/or its implementation make(s) beyond the original data which gave rise to it/them and how these predictions can be confirmed.

We feel it is important that the insight is clearly distinguished from the implementation. First of all, this immediately reduces the risk of the insight getting buried under technicalities and details, because it clearly sets apart the idea which we want to turn into a fully-fledged theory. The implementation serves the purpose of developing the insight, and of making it more precise, but it is not the insight itself. After all, a particular insight may be correct but the implementation wrong. It is often the case that the insight is there, generally accepted, whereas the implementation is work in progress. By distinguishing the insight from the implementation we aim to make clear what their relation is. The consequences section is there to show what the benefits are of a particular implementation: 'If we do it this way, then we expect the following.' By distinguishing the implementation from the consequences, we aim to show that a particular implementation is never arbitrary. The way in which one shapes an insight into a fully-fledged theory has certain consequences, and leads to certain predictions rather than others. These consequences and predictions can be explored.

Every chapter also contains a number of exercises. These exercises will help students to recapitulate some of the main points raised in the chapter, and can also lead them to the conclusion that the theory leaves some data unexplained. Exercises are divided into categories A, B and C. 'A' questions typically involve tasks that can be carried out and questions that can be answered with the help of the main text. They help students train their basic syntactic understanding and skills, and apply the technique to concrete language data. 'B' questions are slightly harder, as they may involve additional examples or phenomena, but are still doable if one reads the text carefully. Students who do well on the 'A' questions and most of the 'B' questions can expect to pass an exam based on the book. 'C' questions, finally, are harder, and invite students to apply their knowledge and skills to novel phenomena or to point out potential counter-examples to the theory presented (and to hint at a solution to the theoretical problem). They generally require a more profound understanding of the theory. 'C' exercises are intended for more advanced or motivated students who seek an extra challenge or want to learn more about syntactic theory.

As a final note, what we derive in this book is a simple theory of something as complex as human language. Naturally, some of this simplicity follows from the fact that we have not discussed every phenomenon in its full complexity, and dismissed apparent counter-examples to the theory that are more likely to arise in a linguist’s, than in a student’s, head. After all, this is an introduction. Although additional data and studies might necessitate future revisions of this simple theory (as we explicitly illustrate in the afterword), it is nevertheless a striking fact about the organisation of the human mind that most of the complexity of human grammatical knowledge follows from a small number of simple operations. Reducing complex patterns to simple structures is the essence of beauty in science. It is this beauty that we hope to show in this book.

Foreword

This book is based on the syntactic approach known as minimalism and follows the generative paradigm as devised by Noam Chomsky. The literature on minimalist syntax is enormous and it is impossible to present a complete overview of all the relevant literature. In the main text we have spelled out what the major sources are for each chapter, as well as options for further reading. Please realise, though, that often we have simplified particular analyses for didactic or presentational

purposes or represented them from another angle. Also realise that many of the references may not be easy to read (Chomsky's writings in particular can sometimes be very hard). For more accessible texts, we refer you to certain syntactic handbooks (e.g. Den Dikken 2013, Everaert et al. 2013 and Alexiadou & Kiss 2015) or the introductory works of our fellow syntax textbook writers, most notably Adger (2003), Haegeman (2006), Radford (2009), Tallerman (2011) and Carnie (2013).

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Ans van Kemenade advised us to contact Cambridge University Press about our idea for a new introduction to syntax at a time when our ambitions were rather more modest. We are glad that she did. We wish to thank her and Marion Elenbaas, Kees Hengeveld, Marjo van Koppen and the five anonymous reviewers invited by CUP for providing valuable comments on our book proposal.

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deserves our praise for her tremendously thorough editing work, and for pointing out so many aspects and textual details that have benefited from improvement. We feel humbled by her dedication and patience and have learned quite a bit from her during our collaboration.

This book is in large part a synthesis of lecture notes, assignments and ideas about how to teach syntax developed and used in our teaching over the years. This means that our own students, more than anybody else, have helped us shape this introduction into the form it now has, and we thank them for that. They have been, and will always be, a great source of inspiration and the main reason we like teaching syntax so much. We hope that we have succeeded in writing an introduction that reflects our enthusiasm for the classroom and that it will inspire students, including our own, for years to come.

Finally, we would like to thank Petra, Hedde's beloved partner, for having shared her home on Fridays for more than two years with two syntacticians dedicated to finishing the book that is now in your hands.

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Olaf Koeneman and Hedde Zeijlstra