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## Background

### 1.0 Overview

Since this is an intermediate book intended as a follow-up to an introduction to syntax, it presupposes that (before tackling it) readers will already have taken an introductory course in syntax (let's call it *Syntax 101*), and acquired a grounding in the basics of syntax. But just in case *Syntax 101* wasn't quite as memorable as you had hoped, I thought it might be useful to start with a chapter which serves as a reminder of key ideas that will no doubt have been covered in *Syntax 101* (and which are taken as assumed background knowledge in Chapters 2–7). To signpost key terms in this Background chapter, I print them in **bold**.

### 1.1 Basic concepts

This module provides a brief introduction to approaches to syntax, to the nature of data in syntax, and to the role played by categories and features in syntactic description.

#### 1.1.1 Prescriptive and descriptive grammar

Linguists analysing the syntax of a particular language attempt to devise a grammar of the language that describes the range of structures found in the language. However, in order to attain a deeper understanding of the nature of natural (i.e. human) language, they seek to investigate the extent to which the grammar of any given language reflects universal properties (i.e. properties shared by the grammars of all languages), and the extent to which there is variation between different languages. Consequently, the ultimate goal of the study of grammar is to develop a theory of **Universal Grammar/UG** which identifies universal properties shared by all languages on the one hand, and parameters of variation between different languages (or language varieties) on the other.

The goal of a linguist describing the syntax of a specific language (e.g. English, the focus of this book) is to seek to understand the ways in which words are combined together to form phrases, clauses and sentences.

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However, a fundamental methodological question that needs to be resolved at the outset concerns what kind of approach to adopt in studying grammar. One traditional view sees the role of grammar as being essentially **prescriptive** (i.e. prescribing norms for grammatical correctness, linguistic purity and literary excellence). However, a more modern view sees the role of grammar as being inherently **descriptive** (i.e. describing the way people speak or write their native language). We can illustrate the differences between these two approaches in relation to the following TV dialogue between the fictional Oxford detective Morse and his assistant Lewis, as they are examining a dead body (where italics mark items of grammatical interest):

- (1) MORSE: I think he was murdered, Lewis  
 LEWIS: *Who by, sir?*  
 MORSE: *By whom, Lewis, by whom.* Didn't they teach grammar at that comprehensive school of yours?

Morse was educated at a grammar school – that is, an elitist school which sought to give pupils a ‘proper education’ and taught them grammar, so that they could learn to speak and write ‘properly’ (i.e. in a prestigious form of standard English). Lewis, by contrast, was educated at a comprehensive school – that is, a more socially inclusive type of school which admitted pupils from a much broader social spectrum and didn't force-feed them with grammar. The linguistic skirmish between Lewis and Morse in (1) revolves round the grammar of an italicised phrase which comprises the preposition *by* and the pronoun *who(m)*. The differences between what the two men say relates to (i) the form of the pronoun (*who* or *whom*?), and (ii) the position of the pronoun (before or after the preposition *by*?). Lewis uses the pronoun form *who*, and positions the pronoun before the preposition when he asks *Who by?* Morse corrects Lewis and instead uses the pronoun form *whom* and positions the pronoun after the preposition when he says *By whom?* But why does Morse correct Lewis? The answer is that Morse was taught traditional prescriptive grammatical rules at his grammar school, including two which can be outlined informally as follows:

- (2) (i) The form *who* is used as the subject of a finite verb, and *whom* as the object of a verb or preposition  
 (ii) Never end a phrase, clause or sentence with a preposition

When Lewis asks *Who by?* he violates both prescriptive rules. This is because the pronoun *who(m)* is the object of the preposition *by* and rule (2i) stipulates that *whom* must therefore be used, and rule (2ii) specifies that the preposition should not be positioned at the end of a phrase. The corrected

form *By whom?* produced by Morse obeys both rules, in that *whom* is used in conformity with rule (2i), and *by* is positioned in front of its object *whom*, thereby avoiding violation of (2ii).

The more general question raised by our discussion here is the following. When studying syntax, should we adopt a descriptive approach and describe what ordinary people like Lewis actually say, or should we adopt a prescriptive approach and prescribe what people like Morse think they ought to say? There are several reasons for rejecting the prescriptive approach. For one thing, it is elitist and socially divisive in that a privileged elite attempts to lay down grammatical norms and impose them on everyone else in society. Secondly, the grammatical norms which prescriptivists seek to impose are often derived from structures found in ‘dead’ languages like Latin, which is somehow regarded as a model of grammatical precision and linguistic purity: and so, because Latin made a distinction between subject and object forms of pronouns, English must do so as well; and because Latin (generally) positioned prepositions before their objects, English must do so as well. Such an approach fails to recognise typological diversity in languages – that is, that there are many different types of structure found in the world’s 8,000 or so known languages. Thirdly, the prescriptive approach fails to recognise sociolinguistic variation – that is, that different types of structure are found in different styles and varieties of English (e.g. *By whom?* is used in formal styles of English, and *Who by?* or *By who* in non-formal styles). Fourthly, the prescriptive approach also fails to recognise that languages are constantly evolving, and that structures used centuries ago may no longer be in use today (e.g. *whom* is an archaic form which has largely dropped out of use and is no longer part of the grammar of teenagers today). And fifthly, prescriptive rules are very often oversimplistic, in the sense that they paint an oversimplified picture of what is in fact a more complex linguistic reality (as our discussion of *by who/m* and *who by* illustrates). For reasons such as these, the approach taken to grammar in work over the past sixty years or so has been descriptive.

What this means is that in attempting to devise a grammar of (for example) English, contemporary linguists aim to describe the range of grammatical structures found in present-day English. But how do we determine what is or isn’t grammatical in present-day English? What kinds of data can we use? This is the question addressed in the next section.

### 1.1.2 Syntactic data

One way of collecting syntactic data is to study **usage** (i.e. the range of structures used by people when they speak or write). Contemporary linguists who adopt this kind of approach rely on data from a **corpus** (e.g. a computerised

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database such as the British National Corpus) containing authentic examples of spoken or written English. Such corpora offer the advantage that they contain millions of sentences, and the sentences have usually been codified/tagged by a team of researchers, so simplifying the task of searching for examples of a particular construction. Some linguists treat the web as a form of corpus, and use a search engine to find examples from the internet of the kind of structures they are interested in.

However, although usage data (from corpora or the web) provide a useful source of information about what people say or write, there are some downsides associated with a usage-based approach. For one thing, a corpus may contain relatively few examples of low-frequency structures. Secondly, it is generally not possible to ask the speakers who produced the sentences in the corpus questions (e.g. ‘How would you negate this sentence?’). Thirdly, a corpus may contain examples of production errors (slips of the tongue, or pen, or keyboard) which would probably be judged as unacceptable even by the people who produced them. And (in the case of internet examples), it is sometimes unclear whether someone producing a given sentence (who may use an identity-concealing pseudonym like *CutiePie* or *MasterBlaster* as their name) is a native speaker of English or not (i.e. someone who has acquired and used English as a first language in an English-speaking environment from birth or early childhood, and who speaks the language fluently), and if so what variety/dialect of English they speak.

A very different approach to grammaticality is to rely on **introspective judgements** by native speakers (i.e. their ‘gut feelings’ or ‘intuitions’ about whether a particular sentence is or isn’t grammatical in their native language). For example, any native speaker of English would readily accept *I don’t like syntax* as a grammatical sentence of English, but not *\*I no like syntax* (where the asterisk marks ungrammaticality). Consequently, an approach widely used by linguists over the past seven decades (particularly by Noam Chomsky and his followers) has been to devise grammars on the basis of native-speaker intuitions about grammaticality. Where linguists are describing aspects of their own native language, they often rely primarily on their own introspective grammaticality judgements.

However, although extensively used, this approach of relying on introspective judgements about the grammaticality of sentences has been criticised by some as being unscientific (hence yielding potentially unreliable results). One problem is that people are sometimes (whether consciously or subconsciously) influenced by prescriptive rules inculcated at school, and hence may give a prescriptive judgement about the grammaticality of a particular sentence which reflects the ‘proper English’ they were taught to use at school, rather than a descriptive judgement about the ‘real English’ which they actually use when talking to their friends.

A second problem which arises from asking native speakers whether such-and-such a sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical in their variety of English arises in relation to so-called **marginal sentences** – that is, sentences of doubtful grammaticality, such as the following:

- (3) a. He ought to apologise, *oughtn't he?*  
b. He ought to apologise, *shouldn't he?*

Such sentences are referred to as tag questions (with the italicised part of the sentence following the comma being the tag). Normally in tag questions, the auxiliary in the tag is a (contracted negative) copy of that used in main clause (i.e. the part of the sentence preceding the comma). However, use of the *oughtn't* tag in (3a) results in a relatively degraded sentence for speakers like me, simply because the contracted negative form *oughtn't* is obsolete in my variety of English. Instead, I'd prefer to use *should* in the tag (which can freely have the contracted negative form *shouldn't*), as in (3b): but since this results in a structure with mismatching auxiliaries (*ought* in the main clause, *shouldn't* in the tag), it still feels ungainly. Thus the problem posed by asking people to make a judgement on whether a given sentence is grammatical or ungrammatical is that such a binary judgement is problematic for marginal sentences like (3a, 3b) which are neither clearly grammatical nor clearly ungrammatical. More generally, marginal sentences pose a problem for the use of introspective judgements about sentence acceptability for a number of reasons. Firstly, different individuals may disagree in their judgements of particular sentences (and may have different tolerance thresholds): this means that relying on the intuitions of one person alone could give misleading results. Secondly, the same individual may sometimes give conflicting judgements about the same sentence on different occasions. Thirdly, it can sometimes be very difficult to judge the grammaticality of a sentence in isolation (without an appropriate context). Fourthly, grammaticality is sometimes a matter of degree rather than an absolute property (e.g. a given sentence may be more acceptable than some sentences but less acceptable than others). Fifthly, native speakers who are not linguists very often have no clear idea what it means for a sentence to be 'grammatical' or not (since grammaticality is a technical term which non-linguists may have little conception of): rather, all that non-experts can do is say how acceptable they find a sentence, and this may depend on a range of factors which have little to do with grammaticality, including how frequent a given structure is, whether it contains taboo language or concepts, and so on. And sixthly, linguists who rely on their own grammaticality judgements tend to give different judgements from non-linguists, and are vulnerable to the accusation that (however unwittingly) they may tailor their grammaticality judgements to fit their analysis (e.g. they may

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judge a given sentence to be grammatical because their analysis predicts that it should be).

Because of the potential unreliability of informal intuitions, some linguists prefer to adopt an **experimental approach** to eliciting native-speaker judgements, particularly when dealing with marginal structures whose grammaticality status is not clearcut. One type of experiment involves asking a group of native speakers to judge the grammaticality of a large set of test sentences which are flashed up on a computer screen one at a time, with subjects being asked to rate the acceptability of each sentence on a seven-point scale on which 7 means ‘completely acceptable’ and 1 means ‘completely unacceptable’. Using this scale, a marginal sentence might be rated as 4, for example.

However, it should be acknowledged that there are a number of drawbacks to experimental studies. For one thing, they require considerable time and money to set up: it can take months to design an experiment, collect the data, and process the results; and a design flaw (or problematic results) may require the whole experiment to be re-designed and subsequently re-run. Moreover, it is in the nature of experiments that (in order to meet stringent methodological requirements on experimental design) they can only be used to collect data relating to a specific (and narrow) set of phenomena. Furthermore, experiments can sometimes produce results which are skewed by the design of the experiment. In addition, how acceptable (or otherwise) people perceive a sentence to be may depend on a whole range of extraneous factors other than its grammaticality: these extraneous factors include, for example, how interesting it is, how long it is, how plausible it is, how frequent the relevant type of structure is, how easy it is to imagine a context where it could be used, and whether or not the sentence expresses ideas which offend cultural or religious sensibilities or contains taboo words. Furthermore, the results which experiments yield can be far from straightforward to interpret: for example, they sometimes produce results which represent acceptability in terms of many different shades of grey, rather than as a black-and-white issue. Moreover, in order to achieve statistical significance in results, it may be necessary to discard outliers (i.e. atypical results).

The approach that I will adopt in this book is a hybrid one, combining my own introspective judgements with usage data I have collected from live unscripted radio and TV broadcasts, supplemented with internet-sourced examples. I should add two caveats to this. The first is that I tend to accept a wider range of structures than many other people do: for example, one reviewer noted that he found some of the examples of complex structures in Chapter 4 unacceptable in his English. And the second is that my corpus data reveal many types of structure which are widely considered to be

ungrammatical in standard English. For example, below are a few types of non-standard structures reported in earlier books of mine:

- (4)
- a. *What a mine of useless information that* I am (Sir Terry Wogan, BBC Radio 2; Radford 1988: 501)
  - b. That's the guy *who* I think's *sister* is the lead singer in a new band (Radio presenter, Top Shop, Oxford Street, London; Radford 1988: 526)
  - c. *What* is thought *has* happened to him? (Reporter, BBC Radio 5; Radford 2004a: 429)
  - d. *To which* of these groups do you consider that you belong to? (Form issued by the Council in the town where I live; Radford 2009a: 233)
  - e. This is a team [*which* Fabio Capello has seen *them* play] (Gabriel Marcotti, BBC Radio 5; Radford 2019: 90)

These sentences are unusual from the perspective of standard English in several respects. For instance, the use of *that* in (4a) is odd because *that* is neither used in main clauses nor in *wh*-clauses in standard varieties. In (4b), the affix *'s* is separated from its potential host *who*, resulting in (non-standard) affix stranding (whereas standard English requires 'That's the guy *whose* sister I think is the lead singer in a new band'). In (4c), the pronoun *what* has undergone a Passivisation operation which moves it from being the subject of *has* to a position at the front of the main clause, in spite of the widespread claim that subjects can't be extracted out of finite clauses in standard English. In (4d), we find (non-standard) preposition doubling, resulting in one copy of the preposition *to* being placed at the beginning of the sentence, and another at the end. In (4e), we find use of the resumptive pronoun *them* to reprise the relative pronoun *which*, so giving rise to a (nonstandard) resumptive relative structure.

Sentences like those in (4) raise important questions about whether such sentences are grammatical in English. One perspective is that they are ungrammatical, and are perhaps the result of accidental processing errors. On this view, we might conjecture that people who produce preposition doubling structures like (4d) forget that they already fronted the preposition *to* along with *which*, and so spell out the preposition again at the end of the sentence – and indeed, a processing account of this kind is outlined in Radford et al. (2012). Still, it is much less obvious what kind of processing errors could give rise to the other types of sentences in (4). Moreover, some of the structures in (4) are relatively frequent (in that I have collected hundreds of examples of them): for example, one linguist told me (after finishing a PhD on relative clauses!) that his initial reaction to resumptive relatives was to treat them as ungrammatical, but that after reading my

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(2019) book on relative clauses in everyday English, he began to notice just how frequent they are in everyday conversation. Of course, it might be that some of the structures in (4) originated as processing errors, and then became grammaticalised (i.e. treated as part of the grammar) in some varieties.

An alternative perspective (which I defend in a book-length study in Radford 2018) is to suppose that what we are dealing with in sentences like (4) is microvariation between different varieties of English: for example, there are varieties of English (including mine) which allow use of *that* in exclamatives in main and subordinate clauses alike; there are varieties (including mine) which allow resumptive relatives; there are varieties (including mine) which allow subjects to be extracted out of certain finite clauses; there are varieties (not including mine) which allow affix-stranding in possessive structures, and so on. In this book, I will adopt the microvariation approach, and accordingly some of the sentences discussed in the core of the book (or set as exercises in the Workbook modules) involve analysing interesting non-standard structures in English.

### 1.1.3 Categories and features

As noted at the beginning of §1.1.1, the goal of a linguist describing the syntax of a given language is to seek to understand the ways in which words are combined together to form larger structures (phrases, clauses and sentences). Properties of individual words determine the range of structures they can appear in, and these properties for centuries have been described by grouping words into **categories** on the basis of grammatical properties they share in common. Traditional categories include nouns like *dog* (denoting an object), verbs like *sing* (denoting an action), adjectives like *happy* (denoting a state), adverbs like *cleverly* (denoting the manner in which something is done), and prepositions like *under* (denoting a location): these are generally termed **lexical categories** because most lexical items (= dictionary items = words) belong to categories like these. Lexical categories typically have a very large membership: for example, there are dozens of prepositions in English, and thousands of nouns. Words belonging to lexical categories are traditionally called **content words** because they have descriptive content (e.g. *dog* is a noun, and it's easy enough to draw a picture of a dog).

Work since the 1950s, however, has placed increasing emphasis on so-called **functional categories** – that is, categories whose members are words with a grammatical function, serving to mark properties such as definiteness, tense, mood, aspect, clause type etc. These include determiners like *the/this/that/these/those*, quantifiers like *all/both/each/several/many*, auxiliaries/auxiliary verbs such as *will/would/can/could/may/might*, and



complementisers (i.e. clause-introducing particles) like the italicised words at the beginning of the bracketed clause below:

- (5) I didn't know [*that/if/whether* she would be there]

Functional categories tend to have a very small membership: for example, there are only around a dozen auxiliaries in English. It has become standard practice to abbreviate the names of categories using capital letters, and employ (for example) N for noun, V for verb, P for preposition, A for adjective, ADVP for adverb, D for determiner, Q for quantifier, AUX for auxiliary, and C for complementiser.

The categorial status of a word determines its **distribution** – that is, what range of positions it can occupy in sentences. For example, consider what kind of single word can occur in the gap ( – ) position in a sentence like the following:

- (6) He – go home early

The answer is: an auxiliary like *will/would/can/could/may/might/must/did*, but not, for example, a determiner like *the*, or a complementiser like *if*, or an adjective like *happy* (and so on).

However, categories alone aren't sufficient to describe the grammatical properties of words. This is because many words have different forms, depending on the types of structure in which they occur. By way of illustration, consider the words *this* and *that*. These both belong to the category D/determiner, and yet they have different forms in different uses – as can be illustrated by the examples below (where a prefixed asterisk indicates ungrammaticality):

- (7) a. Do you like *this/that*/\**these*/\**those* dress?  
 b. Do you like *these/those*/\**this*/\**that* dresses?

In (7a), we can fill the italicised position with *this/that* but not *these/those*, whereas conversely in (7b) we can fill the italicised position with *these/those* but not *this/that*. Why should this be? The answer does not lie in the categorial status of the words (both are determiners), but rather in a finer-grained property which is generally described in terms of the grammatical **features** carried by words. More specifically, the forms *this/that* are singular forms which are used to modify a singular noun like *dress*, whereas *these/those* are plural forms used to modify a plural noun like *dresses*. One way of handling this is to suppose that nouns and determiners inflect for **number**, and carry the feature [singular-number] in sentences like (7a), and the feature [plural-number] in sentences like (7b). Determiners and the nouns they modify agree in number (i.e. they have the same number value – for example, a plural determiner modifies a plural noun), and this type of agreement between a noun and a determiner modifying it is traditionally termed **concord**. Features

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are enclosed in square brackets, and are often abbreviated to save space: they typically comprise an attribute/property and a value – as in [Sg-Num] ‘singular number’, where [Num] is the attribute and [Sg] the value.

Another class of words whose subcategorical properties can be described in terms of features are pronouns like *I/we/you/he/she/it/they*. Although these are traditionally categorised as personal pronouns, they differ from each other in a number of respects. For example, *I* is a singular pronoun and *we* a plural pronoun, and this difference can be captured by positing that *I* carries the number feature [Sg-Num], and *we* [Pl-Num]. Likewise, *he* is a masculine pronoun, *she* a feminine one, and *it* a neuter/inanimate pronoun; these differences can be captured by treating them as carrying gender features, with *he* being [Masc-Gen], *she* [Fem-Gen] and *it* [Inan-Gen]. A further difference between the various types of pronoun relates to their person properties: the pronouns *I/we* are first person pronouns denoting the speaker/s, *you* is a second person pronoun denoting the addressee/s (i.e. the person or persons being spoken to), and *he/she/it/they* are third person pronouns denoting one or more entities that are neither speaking nor being addressed. These differences can be captured by supposing that *I/we* carry the person feature [1-Pers], *you* [2-Pers], and *he/she/it/they* [3-Pers].

An additional property of pronouns which can be captured in terms of features is that they inflect for case, as can be illustrated in terms of the italicised items below:

(8) *He* says that *his* house has bankrupted *him*

The pronoun HE is traditionally said to have three distinct case forms: the nominative form *he*, the accusative form *him* and the genitive form *his*. These differences can be captured by supposing that *he* carries the feature [Nom-Case], *him* [Acc-Case], and *his* [Gen-Case]. It can also be argued that nouns too carry case – for example, a noun like JOHN has the common nominative/accusative form *John*, and the genitive form *John’s*: see case in the Glossary at the end of the book for a table of the different case forms of nouns and pronouns in English.

Another class of words which have a complex range of different forms that can be captured in terms of features are verbs. These are traditionally divided into two distinct types – namely lexical verbs and auxiliary verbs. Lexical verbs are verbs which have inherent descriptive content (e.g. *pour* describes an action, *die* an event, and *think* a cognitive state), whereas auxiliary verbs have no descriptive content but rather mark grammatical properties such as tense, mood and aspect. Auxiliaries also differ from lexical verbs in their syntactic properties. For example, an auxiliary like *will* can undergo Inversion (and move to a position in front of its bold-printed subject) in a question like (9a) below, but a lexical verb like *want* cannot (as