Adventures in English Syntax

For anyone who wants to become a more effective writer, a more perceptive reader, and a more precise thinker, an understanding of English sentence structure is indispensable. This book shows you how to begin. Using clear and engaging examples from English, it introduces the basic concepts of syntactic structure to readers with no background in linguistics. Starting with simple, familiar phrases, and progressing to more complex sentences, it builds on what we already intuitively know, to provide a step-by-step account of why we understand these examples as we do. It then shows how that understanding can be applied to writing, helping us to avoid some of the common hallmarks of ‘bad writing’, such as ambiguity, redundancy, and vagueness. A unique and valuable resource, this book will enrich your understanding of English in ways that will make you a more effective user of the language.

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Adventures in English Syntax

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Preface

The seed for this book was planted more than 55 years ago when my 10th grade English teacher, Harriet Perl, taught us the elements of English sentence structure: prepositional phrases and relative clauses; finite vs. infinitival and gerundive clauses; compound vs. complex sentences (and thus the difference between coordination and subordination). For me, this was a revelation – leading to a 50-year career in linguistics as a syntactician. My high school understanding of English sentence structure allowed me to engage with my own writing at a fundamental level where I could view my sentences as syntactic structures that connected to other syntactic structures, and thus to different sentences for expressing the same thoughts – providing a basis for comparison/evaluation. From the 10th grade on, I had an intellectual tool for crafting inevitably imperfect first drafts into prose that presented my thoughts clearly. The process of writing became a way to clarify my thinking on the topic I was writing about – what Francis Bacon had in mind when he wrote in “Of Studies” (1625) that writing makes an exact man. Externalizing thoughts in black and white is perhaps the best way to discover what is unclear, illogical, or based on questionable assumptions – if you are paying attention. And as a result, writing is never surprise-free. It ceases to be a chore, and becomes instead fun and interesting – if you enjoy exploring your thoughts and how best to express them.

On the usefulness of understanding the elements of sentence structure, Henry Watson Fowler, author of one of the most important and most celebrated commentaries on the English language in the twentieth century, wrote in 1906:

… sentence analysis – the taking of a sentence to pieces and determining the exact relation of each piece to the rest – has a very practical value for every one who would either write without blunders or be sure of a writer’s meaning.¹

¹ From the first paragraph of the preface to Sentence Analysis for the Lower Forms of Public Schools (Oxford, 1906). Fowler’s celebrated commentary is A Dictionary of Modern English Usage (Oxford, 1926).
Fowler is making the point here that an understanding of sentence structure is useful to both writers and readers. And being sure of a writer’s meaning applies to what you write (does your syntax clearly express what you intend to say?) as well as to what you read (what is the meaning conveyed by the syntax of the sentences you are reading?, a question that applies equally to what you write). The writer Lee Child makes this point more generally as a question:

How can you write – or even just read – and not be attentive to language and how it’s put together?

– a question that applies to all of us.

How the elements of sentence structure fit together constitutes the syntax of a language. And while the study of syntax has been an important and lively subfield in linguistics for more than sixty years, beginning with Noam Chomsky’s famous 1957 monograph Syntactic Structures, what has been learned from linguistics about the syntactic structure of English is almost never discussed in books about writing. Moreover, the subject of syntax seems to have had virtually no place in the teaching of English in elementary or secondary education since the early 1960s, or even college writing programs. Consider, for example, how Grammar Alive!: A Guide for Teachers (2003) describes this situation:

At the start of this new millennium, throughout much of the K-12 English curriculum, grammar is a broken subject. If you find yourself just not knowing what to do about grammar – how to teach it, how to apply it, how to learn what you yourself were never taught – you are not alone. Grammar is often ignored, broken off altogether from the teaching of literature, rhetoric, drama, composition, and creative writing. Grammar is the skunk at the garden party of the language arts.

Grammar Alive! was published as an attempt to repair this situation, and although it proposes as one goal that

Every student will complete school with the ability to analyze the grammatical structure of sentences within English texts, using grammatical terminology correctly and
demonstrating knowledge of how sentence-level grammatical structure contributes to the coherence of paragraphs and texts,

the syntactic analysis in the book employs outmoded late nineteenth-century technology (Reed–Kellogg diagrams⁶) for representing sentence structure.

Like *Grammar Alive!*, one goal of this book is to provide readers with an understanding of how basic English sentence structure contributes to both interpretation of sentences and the coherence of paragraphs. And while the analysis of sentence structure in the chapters that follow comes from contemporary linguistics, reading this book requires no prior knowledge of either linguistics or traditional grammar. The book’s analyses of key examples will provide you with an understanding of how English sentences are put together that you can use to improve both your writing and your comprehension of complicated syntax in the texts you are reading. This understanding serves as a solid basis for evaluating criticism of the English language in the form of prescriptive ‘rules of grammar’ (about not splitting infinitives or ending sentences with prepositions) and prescriptions for good style like avoiding the passive voice – based mostly on false characterizations of English syntax. Plus, focusing on the details of sentence structure in great literature is one way to reveal and appreciate the artistry of its language – demonstrated in Chapter 6.

Each chapter of this book is titled with an English expression that is then analyzed in detail. The first three chapters and the first part of the fourth concern the syntactic structure of English expressions that are not complete sentences, but nonetheless illustrate fundamental properties of syntax that generalize to sentences. The remainder of the book is about sentences, as the chapter titles show.

The very short Chapter 1 concerns the ambiguity of the words that title a famous children’s book by Dr. Seuss, starting with the latter two *fish* (singular or plural?) and extending to how the 4 modifier-noun pairs of the title relate to one another. It demonstrates how our understanding of a tiny piece of English syntax, consisting of 8 words (2 numbers and 2 colors plus 4 instances of the same word *fish*), is determined by an intricate computation that we perform automatically and unconsciously.

Chapter 2 continues the investigation of ambiguity in English syntax, where in this case a single string of words corresponds to more than one syntactic structure. Chapter 2 focuses on nouns and their modifiers in coordinate structures formed with the conjunction *and*. The chapter ends with a

⁶ Reed & Kellogg (1887). See more recently Martha Kolln, Loretta Gray, and Joseph Salvatore, *Understanding English Grammar*, 10th edition (Pearson, 2016). For an example along with some discussion, see Chapter 4, footnote 1.
demonstration of how using multiple conjunctions in a coordinate construction also creates ambiguities that result from differences in syntactic structure. This chapter shows how such ambiguities arising from the use of conjunctions can be eliminated.

Chapter 3 further develops the theme of ambiguity in coordinate structures through a detailed analysis of the title of the introductory linguistics course at Princeton University. This leads to the question of the interpretation of the two nouns the title coordinates: *language* and *linguistics* – and their relation. The chapter concludes with a discussion of both the usefulness of coordination in writing and also how the use of the conjunction *and* invites not only ambiguity, but also redundancy and vagueness – all hallmarks of poor writing. Surprisingly, the misuse of *and* – a persistent problem in students’ writing – is not discussed in books on grammar or writing, from the first prescriptive grammars of the eighteenth century to the books on writing of the previous and present centuries.

Chapter 4 begins with an ambiguity in the interpretation of prepositional phrase modifiers in complex noun phrases – those that contain multiple nouns, another ambiguity grounded in syntactic structure. This ambiguity extends to clauses that modify nouns (relative clauses), leading to the syntactic analysis of clauses via relative clauses, which can be finite or non-finite (infinitival). Infinitival relative clauses in English sometimes require ending the clause with a preposition, contrary to the prescriptive rule. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how various prescriptive prohibitions against certain grammatical structures (ending a clause with a preposition, ‘splitting’ an infinitive, and using *which* in restrictive relative clauses) distorts our natural understanding of English syntax.

The first half of Chapter 5 focuses on the phenomenon of displacement – in this case, involving the syntactic subject of a clause that is interpreted as if it occupied another syntactic position. The chapter begins with the structure and interpretation of infinitival clauses, and then expands the discussion to displacement of clauses, displacement with passive voice, and displacement in complex noun phrases built on a noun that corresponds to a verb (for example, the nouns *indictment* and *indicting*, which correspond to the verb *indict*). The second part of the chapter considers the utility of displacement, including a brief history of the criticism of the passive voice, which is shown to be essentially unfounded because every example of a ‘bad’ passive sentence cited in these criticisms turns out to be problematic for other reasons. This leads to a consideration of the role of displacement in discourse, which in writing concerns of the structure of paragraphs. The chapter concludes with a very useful structural analysis of the paragraph.

Chapter 6 employs the syntax discussed in the previous chapters in an extended analysis of the opening sentence in Jane Austen’s *Pride and
Prejudice, an analysis which reveals something about the artistry of sentence structure by comparing it to the millions (!) of variant sentences she could have written.

The title of Chapter 7 returns to the theme of ambiguity in syntax, focusing here on the syntax of questions. The ambiguity of the title concerns which of the two verbs the adverb modifies, where each of the two possible interpretations corresponds to a distinct syntactic structure. The title, which is itself a question, also involves what appears to be a displacement of the finite auxiliary *does* in front of the subject. The chapter analyzes the syntactic structure of questions – both direct and indirect – and extends this analysis to the displacement of *wh*-elements (for example, *who* and *what*) in both interrogative constructions (for example, *who have they invited?*) and non-interrogative constructions (relative clauses, cleft and pseudo-cleft constructions).

Chapter 8 examines the phenomenon of ellipsis, where certain parts of sentences in coordinate and subordinate clauses are understood but not pronounced or written. The focus and title of this chapter is an example from Henry Fowler’s discussion of problematic passive constructions. The chapter begins with Fowler’s analysis of the example and continues with a more detailed syntactic analysis of the title that reveals the syntactic complexity of this example and, in the process, uncovers something surprising about how ellipsis works in English.

To the extent that this book demonstrates the utility of understanding the elements of English sentence structure for writing and reading, it offers readers an intellectual tool for controlling and ultimately improving their own use of language. In this way, having some knowledge of modern linguistics (the syntactic analysis of English) might contribute to improving a person’s effective use of language. This intriguing conjecture comes from the late Paul Campbell Jr., who spent his career as an investment banker on Wall Street. Imagine, Paul would say, if such knowledge could improve your use of language just a few percent each year, what that would mean over a lifetime. This book is an attempt to demonstrate that Campbell’s Conjecture may be valid.

This is primarily a book about English sentence structure, a topic that connects naturally to questions of composition, including criticism of English usage. It also connects to the study of syntax in linguistics, which Chomsky defined more than sixty years ago in the first sentence of the first chapter of *Syntactic Structures*:

*Syntax is the study of the principles and processes by which sentences are constructed in particular languages.*

– what has come to be known as *generative grammar*. But although some of these processes and principles are briefly mentioned in the book, the primary
focus remains the sentence structure that results from their application to the English lexicon. To the extent that an understanding of the insights into sentence structure of English gained from the study of syntax is useful for writing and reading, this book demonstrates the general usefulness of generative grammar.

In terms of just writing well, understanding how a sentence is constructed contributes to one of the prerequisites: Good writing requires a certain confidence. In addition to having the confidence that you have something to say and that you know what you are talking about – which no book on writing will give you, there is also the confidence that you can express your ideas in clear prose – which is what understanding the workings of English syntax can provide.

When I began writing this book, the plan was to start with the words in the Dr. Seuss title, which is at first sight deceptively simple, and proceed to incrementally more complex examples, ultimately to complex sentences, questions, and finally to ellipsis. Along the way, writing each chapter turned into an unexpected adventure: discovering new connections within familiar material in syntax, and exploring unfamiliar areas (like the history of prescriptive grammar, and literary criticism via syntactic analysis) – hence the title Adventures in English Syntax. My hope is that you, the reader of this book, will also experience these chapters as adventures, and that the understanding gained from them will equip you for your own adventures with the sentences you write and read.

7 See Freidin (2012) for an introduction to these principles and processes, and how they apply in the analysis of languages.
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