



AN OVERVIEW OF SYNTAX WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF UNIVERSAL GRAMMAR

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Abstract. *Syntax, together with morphology, constitutes one of the two core components of grammatical theory. While morphology explores the internal structure of words and the way morphemes combine to form lexical items, syntax focuses on how words are organized into larger hierarchical units such as phrases and sentences. This paper provides an overview of key perspectives on the study of grammar and situates the discussion within Chomsky's framework of Universal Grammar, which posits that all human languages share underlying structural principles. Within this theoretical foundation, the study aims to highlight how syntactic analysis reveals both the universal and language-specific aspects of grammatical organization.*

Keywords: *Syntax; Universal Grammar; Structure; Language Universals; Language Acquisition; Parameters; Parameter Setting; Competence; Syntactic Operations.*

Annotatsiya. *Sintaksis morfologiya bilan bir qatorda grammatik nazariyaning ikki asosiy yo'nalishidan birini tashkil etadi. Morfologiya so'zlarning ichki tuzilishini hamda morfemalarning leksik birliklarni hosil qilish jarayonini o'rganadi, sintaksis esa so'zlarning ibora va gap kabi yirik ierarxik birliklarga qanday tarzda birlashishini hamda ularni boshqaruvchi grammatik mexanizmlarni tadqiq etadi. Ushbu maqolada grammatikani o'rganishning turli nazariy yondashuvlariga umumiy tahliliy nazar tashlanadi va masala Chomsky tomonidan ilgari surilgan Universal grammatika nazariyasi doirasida ko'rib chiqiladi. Mazkur nazariya barcha tabiiy tillar umumiy tuzilma tamoyillariga ega degan g'oyani ilgari suradi. Shu nazariy asosda maqola sintaktik tahlil orqali grammatik tuzilishning ham universal, ham tildan tilga xos xususiyatlarini aniqlashga qaratilgan.*

Kalit so'zlar: *sintaksis; universal grammatika; tuzilma; til universallar; til o'zlashtirish; parametrlar; parametr sozlash; kompetentsiya; sintaktik operatsiyalar.*

1. Descriptive and Prescriptive Approaches to Grammar

Two fundamentally distinct approaches to the study of grammar are **prescriptive** and **descriptive**. The prescriptive approach seeks to establish and enforce standards of linguistic purity, grammatical accuracy, and formal correctness, whereas the descriptive approach aims to observe and describe the language as it is naturally used by native speakers.

According to Radford (2013), the prescriptive approach has been widely criticized and largely rejected due to several inherent limitations. First, it is elitist and socially divisive. Second, it assumes that the model of grammatical precision and linguistic purity found in classical languages such as Latin should serve as a universal norm, thereby restricting typological diversity across languages. Third, it disregards sociolinguistic variation, failing to account for the range of registers and styles present in languages such as English. Fourth, it neglects the dynamic nature of linguistic



change, overlooking the fact that languages evolve continuously and that certain forms may become archaic over time.

Owing to these drawbacks, the **descriptive approach** has predominated in linguistic research over the past seven decades. As Widdowson (1996) notes, the descriptive approach relies on three principal sources of linguistic data:

1. **Usage-based data** drawn from language corpora;
2. **Grammaticality judgments** based on native speakers' intuition; and
3. **Experimental data** obtained through elicitation of acceptability judgments from groups of speakers.

The first source, corpus-based data, enables linguists to identify and analyze instances of particular grammatical structures through computerized databases such as the *British National Corpus* or online language repositories. However, corpus-based research has several limitations: low-frequency structures are often underrepresented, the identities of contributors are usually unknown, and corpora may contain errors that affect data reliability.

The second source, as proposed by Chomsky (1976), views the study of language as the study of a specific form of cognition. This approach depends on native speakers' introspective judgments, grounded in their **tacit knowledge** of language and their capacity to interpret and produce grammatical sentences. Chomsky introduced the distinction between **grammatical competence**—the speaker-hearer's internalized knowledge of their language—and **grammatical performance**, the actual use of language in real communicative situations, which may be affected by external factors.

He further asserts that grammar as a scientific inquiry should focus primarily on competence rather than performance.

Despite its theoretical significance, the introspective method has also been subject to criticism. Reliance on a single informant's intuition may produce unreliable data; the same speaker may offer inconsistent judgments across contexts; and sentence judgments made in isolation can be problematic due to the absence of contextual cues. Moreover, grammaticality is often a matter of degree rather than an absolute property. Non-linguist native speakers may also lack metalinguistic awareness of grammaticality, and their judgments may differ significantly from those of trained linguists, who might consciously or unconsciously adjust their responses to support their analyses. Finally, the experimental approach to grammatical judgment collection offers the advantage of systematic data gathering through controlled methods.

Nevertheless, such experiments are typically time-consuming, require financial resources, and often focus on narrowly defined linguistic phenomena. Additionally, the



findings may sometimes misrepresent natural language use due to the artificial conditions of data elicitation.

In summary, while each source of descriptive linguistic data has its limitations, together they provide a comprehensive empirical foundation for understanding the structure and use of language as it occurs in authentic contexts.

2. Universals

In order to understand the nature of language, linguists must investigate the extent to which the universal properties of language are reflected in the grammatical systems of individual languages. Accordingly, the ultimate objective of grammatical study is to develop a theory of **Universal Grammar (UG)** that accounts for the fundamental principles underlying all natural human languages. The theory of Universal Grammar seeks to identify the essential characteristics that distinguish the grammars of natural

languages from those of artificial or non-human communication systems, such as animal languages.

It should be noted that the term *universal* does not imply that all natural languages share identical grammatical categories. Rather, universal categories are understood to occur across a wide range of languages, though not necessarily in every language. For instance, a simple comparison between English and Japanese demonstrates that the former possesses determiners, such as articles, whereas the latter does not. Nevertheless, all natural languages exhibit core lexical categories such as nouns, adjectives, and verbs.

In addition to universal categories, linguists have identified four universal sets of syntactic operations that are common across languages. According to contemporary syntactic theory, particularly within the framework of generative grammar, four universal syntactic operations are observed across natural languages: **Merge**, **Movement**, **Agreement**, and **Ellipsis**. Each operation plays a central role in sentence formation and interpretation, as outlined below.

1. Merge

Merge is the fundamental operation that combines individual words (lexical items) to form larger syntactic units such as phrases and sentences. It is **recursive**, meaning that it can apply repeatedly to build increasingly complex hierarchical structures.

• **Label:** The resulting constituent formed by merging two syntactic units is assigned a **label**, which determines its grammatical category.

Example:

[the + book] → *the book* (a noun phrase labeled as NP)
[read + the book] → *read the book* (a verb phrase labeled as VP)

Through recursive applications of Merge, sentences such as *The student read the book* can be constructed from smaller constituents.



2. Movement

Movement refers to the displacement of a syntactic constituent from one position in a sentence to another, typically to satisfy structural or interpretive requirements.

- **Subject–Auxiliary Inversion:** In English interrogative sentences, the auxiliary verb moves in front of the subject.

- **Example:**

Declarative: *She is reading a book.*

Interrogative: *Is she reading a book?*

- **Wh-Movement:** *Wh*-words (e.g., *who*, *what*, *where*) move to the initial position of the clause in questions.

- **Example:**

Declarative: *You bought what?*

Interrogative: *What did you buy?*

3. Agreement

Agreement (or **concord**) involves the requirement that certain elements within a sentence correspond in grammatical features such as person, number, gender, or case.

- **Subject–Auxiliary Agreement:** The auxiliary must agree with the subject in person and number.

- **Example:**

He runs fast. vs. *They run fast.*

- **Concord:** Nouns and their modifiers must agree in number and, in some languages, gender or case.

- **Example (English):**

This student / These students

- **Example (Spanish):**

El niño pequeño (“the small boy”) vs. *Los niños pequeños* (“the small boys”)

4. Ellipsis

Ellipsis involves the omission (deletion) of redundant elements in a sentence when their meaning can be recovered from context. It is a universal phenomenon, though its application varies across languages.

- **VP Ellipsis:** Deletion of a verb phrase.

- **Example:**

She can play the piano, and he can [play the piano] too.

- **Sluicing:** Deletion of an entire clause except for the *wh*-phrase.

Example:

Someone called, but I don't know who [called].



- **Gapping:** Deletion of a verb in a coordinated structure, leaving a “gap.”

Example:

John likes coffee, and Mary [likes] tea.

- **Antecedent:** The expression that corresponds to or provides the meaning for the deleted constituent.

- **Example:**

In *John can play the guitar, and Mary can [Ø] too*, the antecedent of \emptyset is *play the guitar*.

3. Parameters

This section discusses three major language parameters: the **Null Subject Parameter (NSP)**—previously referred to as the *Pro-Drop Parameter*—the **Wh-Parameter**, and the **Head Position Parameter (HPP)**. In linguistic theory, *parameters* are dimensions of grammatical variation that account for cross-linguistic differences among natural languages (Chomsky, 1981, 1986). Although universal grammatical principles are assumed to be innate and part of the human *Faculty of Language*, parameters represent those aspects that must be acquired through exposure to linguistic input.

The parameters discussed in this section are defined as follows:

- **Null Subject Parameter (NSP):** This parameter determines whether a language allows the omission of overt subjects in finite clauses. For example, Italian permits null subjects (*Parla bene* – “speaks well”), whereas English requires an explicit subject (*He speaks well*).

- **Wh-Parameter:** This parameter specifies whether *wh*-elements (e.g., *who*, *what*, *where*) are fronted or remain in situ. English, for instance, exhibits *wh*-fronting (*What did you see?*), whereas Chinese permits *wh*-in-situ constructions (*Nǐ kànjiàn shéi?* – “You saw who?”) (Huang, 1982).

- **Head Position Parameter (HPP):** This parameter determines whether complements appear before or after their heads. In English, heads precede their complements (*read a book*), while in Korean, complements typically precede their heads (책읽다 – “book read”). However, some languages, such as German, exhibit mixed head-directionality, permitting both head-initial and head-final structures (Haegeman, 1994).

It is generally hypothesized that parameters exhibit **binary settings**, meaning that for each parameter, only two possible values exist (e.g., [+null subject] vs. [–null subject]). These settings are regarded as inherent properties of the language faculty rather than arbitrary or accidental features.

4. Parameter Setting



The process of **language acquisition** involves both lexical and grammatical learning. According to the *Principles and Parameters Theory (PPT)* proposed by Chomsky (1981, 1986), while universal grammatical principles are innately available, parameter settings must be determined through linguistic experience. Children thus acquire a specific grammar by selecting the appropriate parameter values based on the input they receive.

Because parameters are binary in nature, this model posits that parameter setting requires relatively little effort. Once a child encounters sufficient linguistic evidence, the relevant parameter value is fixed. The author further supports this claim with examples illustrating how children acquire parameter settings across languages.

An important discussion within this framework concerns the **Null Subject Parameter**. Hyams (1986) argues that the omission of subjects in early child English arises from the mis-setting of the NSP—children initially assume a [+null subject] grammar similar to that of Italian. However, this claim has been challenged by subsequent research, which suggests that subject omission in child language is not the result of parameter mis-setting but rather of **truncation**—the omission of one or more unstressed or functional elements at the beginning of an utterance (Rizzi, 1994; Valian, 1990).

Conclusion

This study has underscored the significance of syntax as a central component of linguistic theory in the broader analysis of grammatical structure. Within this analytical framework, Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar emerges as a unifying model that explains both the shared and language-specific features of grammar. The discussion affirms that syntactic analysis, informed by Universal Grammar, offers valuable insights into the cognitive mechanisms that govern language acquisition and use, thereby contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of human linguistic competence.

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