

Philosophy of language (PHIL UA-9085)

Brief overview of of syntax & semantics 2

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Plan for today

Syntax as arrangement

Linguistic signs get arranged into propositions

A sentence is not a string of words

- **Traditional grammar:** Syntax+Morphology (aka Morphosyntax)
- Although it is true that language is a systematic correlation between certain types of gestures and meaning, sentences consist of meaning-bearing units arranged in a certain order.
- Languages differ in the the phonemes they select, in the meaning-bearing units they have in stock, and also in the arrangements that result in sentences.

S = subject

V = verb

O = direct object

- English : **SVO**

- Lakhota: **SOV**

- Toba Batak: **VOS**

- Russian: **all of the above!**

A sentence is not a string of words 2

- There are infinitely many sentences because:

- there are potentially infinitely many words,
- there are potentially infinitely many simple sentences,
- there are potentially infinitely many complex sentences.

- A string which does not follow the rules for admissible arrangements for a given language results in an **ungrammatical** or **ill-formed sentence**... or rather, in a string that is not a sentence at all!
- Here is a nice definition of **nonsense**:

Well-formed sentences are those that are in accord with the syntactic rules of the language; this does not entail that they always make sense semantically. For example, the sentence “the book is reading the teacher” is nonsensical in terms of its meaning, but it violates no syntactic rules or principles of English [...]. Hence it is grammatical (well-formed), despite being semantically odd. (Van Valin, Jr. (2001), p. 4)

Aspects of syntactic structure

- Grammatical relations, aka **relational structure**, includes:

- Subject
- Direct object
- Modifier-modified
- Possessor-possessioned

- **Constituent structure** is the hierarchical organisation of constituents or units, it includes:

- Noun phrase (noun+article)
- Prepositional phrase (preposition+NP)
- Verb phrase (verb+NP)

- Relational and constituent structure are different, yet interrelated.

Lexical categories

- Parts of speech, or **lexical categories**, **cannot** be characterised in terms of their semantic content. As categories they may be **open** or **closed**.

- **Nouns** (open): common vs proper nouns (or proper names), mass vs count nouns.
- **Pronouns** (closed): a.o. personal, possessive, reflexive, indefinite, demonstrative, relative, distributive
- **Verbs** (open): transitive, intransitive, ditransitive
- **Adpositions** (closed): prepositions, postpositions
- **Adjectives** (open): inherent vs non-inherent, gradable vs non-gradable
- **Adverbs** (open): manner, temporal, degree modifiers
- **Determiners** (closed): demonstratives, articles, quantifiers, classifiers, conjunctions, complementisers

- Every language has **noun** and **verb** as lexical categories.
- One is tempted to, but should **not**, correlate the semantics of words with syntactic functions such as **argument** and **predicate** (expressing a state of affairs that the referents of arguments are involved in).

Semantics

- Semantic meaning (lexicon+grammar) different from speaker's meaning (semantic meaning in a context of use).
- Semantics gets interesting when we compare and contrast the ways in which meaning gets expressed in various languages.
- **Fundamental concepts:**

Synonymy, Antonymy, Hyponymy, Hypernymy, Ambiguity, Entailment, Tautology, Contradiction

- The **principle of compositionality** is a fundamental notion in semantics. It applies to sentences, to constituents, to words...
- Most sentences are composed of **a subject and a predicate**.
The subject is what we are saying something of,
the predicate is what we say of the subject.

- Often (but not always), a subject in English would be a noun phrase.
- A predicate can be composed by a verb, adjective, noun, or prepositional phrase.
Often it contains one or more arguments.

Semantics (cont. 1)

- An important distinction:

- **Extension**: the object, set of objects, set of ordered pairs, that an expression (word, phrase, sentence) refers to. Two expressions may be co-extensional, but have different meanings!
- **Intension** comes closer to the intuitive notion of meaning any competent speaker may have, it specifies the necessary and sufficient conditions (i.e. the criteria) for when an expression (word, phrase, sentence) should be used.

- The meaning of a (declarative) sentence is called a **proposition**, often described in terms of truth conditions.
- Subject and predicate can be complex, including **modifiers**, a.o. adjectives, adverbs, adverbials.
- A kind of subject which has been widely studied, given Aristotle's pioneering work, are **quantifiers**.
- **Tense and aspect** are semantic categories that have to do with time, e.g., past/present/future, progressive/perfect.

What's next?

Session 10: Thursday 22 February 2024

Topic: Brief overview of semantics 2

Readings: Stuart C. Poole (1999), ch. 3, Portner (2006)

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