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**ENGLISH SYNTAX:
A MINIMALIST APPROACH**



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CORINA MIHAELA GEANĂ

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A MINIMALIST APPROACH**

FOREWORD

English Syntax: A Minimalist Approach is a course book and a reference grammar not only for students who have English as their major or minor fields of study, but also for other learners who want to deepen their knowledge of the English syntax.

Our theoretical approach, together with plenty of illustrative examples, is divided into two parts. The first part deals with the syntax of the simple sentence, while the second part is focused on the syntax of English complex sentences.

Each chapter has been structured to include a theoretical presentation of the various issues of interest from the syntactical point of view. The sentence, either we refer to a simple sentence or to a complex or compound sentence, is a reflection of people's thoughts, attitudes or judgements. Syntax is the branch of linguistics which studies the functions of words and clauses in the act of speech and which establishes the correct arrangement by which the strings of words are combined into *simple sentences* and the *simple sentences* into *compound sentences* or *complex sentences*.

As regards the footnotes, we have referred, where necessary, to certain textbooks (or treatises) or on-line sources. The footnotes also contain some words or phrases which we thought we should explain for a better understanding of the term(s).

The Author

PART I

THE SIMPLE SENTENCE

CHAPTER I

CLASSIFICATION OF SENTENCES

While morphology studies the morphemic structure of words, syntax is concerned with how words are combined into larger structures: phrases, clauses or sentences.

There are different criteria which we can make use of when we classify different types of sentences:

- A. classification in point of purpose of communication;
- B. classification in point of structure of communication or of composition;
- C. classification in point of status or grammatical dependence.

A. The first criterion refers to the semantic as well as to the logical and psychological content of the sentences. Thus, sentences are divided into:

- 1.1. *Declarative sentences*;
- 1.2. *Interrogative sentences*;
- 1.3. *Imperative sentences*;
- 1.4. *Exclamatory sentences*.

1.1. *Declarative sentences* are also called *statements* and they are used in order to affirm, declare or state something, in the affirmative or negative form. They normally end in a period and are uttered in a falling tone.

1.1.1. *Positive (Affirmative) sentences* are sentences in which the subject is present and normally precedes the verb; the predicate is in the affirmative form.

e.g. *I prefer going to the sea, while my brother likes going to the mountains.*

1.1.2. *Negative sentences*

The negation is accomplished in two ways:

- by negating the verb: the negative particle NOT is attached to the tense (modal)-bearing element of the VP (be, have, modals).

e.g. *Tom is not driving to work now. Tom hasn't been driving to work lately. Tom shouldn't have been driving to work at the time.*

When the verb is in the simple present or past tense form, the auxiliary DO is introduced.

e.g. *She **does not** want ice cream.*

*They **did not** see Mark coming.*

- by negating another part of the sentence; negative pronouns, adjectives or adverbs can be used (*no one, none, neither, nothing, nowhere, never*), followed by the verb in the affirmative form.

e.g. ***No one** wanted to wait for the bus.*

*I expect **nothing** from him.*

1.1.2.1. *Polarity Items*

Generally speaking, for any affirmative statement there is a negative counterpart, usually obtained by negating the verb.

e.g. *I enjoyed that play. – I did **not** enjoy that play.*

However, this is not always the case. There are affirmative sentences which have no negative counterpart and vice versa. This fact is due to the occurrence in such statements of certain grammatical and lexical items, which require only an affirmative or only a negative context. Such items have been called *polarity items*. If they occur in affirmative contexts they are called *affirmative polarity items*; if they occur in negative contexts they are called *negative polarity items*. They are subclassified into:

a. lexical items which occur:

- only in affirmative contexts: *pretty, far, long since*.

e.g. *She is **pretty** tall.* - **She isn't **pretty** tall.*

*He is **far** smarter than his sister.* **He isn't **far** smarter than his sister.*

- only in negative contexts: verbs such as *abide, bother, care*, adverbs such as *at all, a bit, in the least*.

e.g. **It bothers me at all.* – *It **doesn't bother** me at all.*

b. grammatical items

For the indefinite pronoun *some* and its compounds there are two corresponding items in the negative sentence: non-assertive items and negative items.

e.g. *I have **something** to tell you.* – *I haven't **anything** (non-assertive item) to tell you.* / *I have **nothing** (negative item) to tell you.*

*We could stop **somewhere**.* – *We couldn't stop **anywhere** (non-assertive item).* / *We could stop **nowhere** (negative item).*

Other negative polarity items are restrictive adverbs such as: *hardly, barely, scarcely, rarely, seldom, little*. Sentences which contain these words are negative sentences and they are followed by non-assertive forms or they correlate with positive tag-questions.

e.g. *He **seldom** orders **anything** new.*

*She could **hardly** sit still, **could she**?*

On the other hand, there are words which are negative in meaning but not in form: verbs like *deny, forget, prevent*, adjectives like *hard, difficult* or negative affixes like *a-, in-, non-, im-, -less*. These words realize negation at word level, but allow the verb in the negative form.

e.g. *I forgot I **wasn't** there.*

*This exercise is **not hard**.*

*It is **not useless** to keep on trying.*

1.1.2.2. *Negative intensification (Emphasis)*

A negative word can be given emphasis by placing it in front position. This leads to the inversion of subject and operator¹.

e.g. **Never** will I forget your kindness.

Nowhere were to be found such beautiful landscapes.

Emotive emphasis can be rendered in several ways:

- negative determiners and pronouns are given emphasis by *by any means, a bit, whatever, at all*.

e.g. *This chair is **not** at all comfortable.*

- the combinations *not one, not a* are emphatic alternatives to *no* as a countable determiner.

e.g. **Not a** day goes by that I do not think of you.

- other familiar emotive expressions of negation are exemplified by the following lexical negative polarity items: *a wink, a damn*.

e.g. *I barely slept **a wink**.*

*He didn't give **a damn** what she thought.*

1.1.2.3. *Double negatives*

Two negatives that occur together in the same sentence cancel each other and produce an affirmative. In linguistics, just like in logic, two negations are equivalent to an assertion.

e.g. *I **can't not** see you everyday – I need to see you every day.*

1.2. *Interrogative sentences*

Interrogative sentences are normally used to ask questions. They are subdivided into: *General questions, Special questions, Alternative questions, Disjunctive questions* and *Echo questions*.

¹ The notion of *operator* refers to the tense (modal)-bearing element of the Verb Phrase (VP).

1.2.1. *General questions (Yes/No questions)* involve a general statement (a whole sentence) and a general answer, which is usually reduced to *yes* or *no*, or, more frequently, to a subject-pronoun and an auxiliary or a modal verb.

e.g. general question *Have you done your homework?*

general answer *Yes. / Yes, I did. / No. / No, I didn't.*

general question *Can you speak English?*

general answer *Yes, I can.*

General questions are formed by means of Subject-Operator inversion. There is either full inversion, when the predicate is expressed by the verbs *be*, *have* in a simple form, or a partial inversion, when the predicate is in a compound form or comprises a modal verb.

e.g. *Are the children at school?*

Are they working now?

Will you shut the door?

When the sentence contains no operator, namely when the verb is in the Simple Present or Past Tense, the auxiliary DO / DID is used.

e.g. *Do you work every Saturday? / Did you find your glasses?*

The sentence may be kept in its initial organization, as a general statement, only if it is marked as a question by using an appropriate intonation (a rising intonation ↑) and punctuation.

e.g. *You found your glasses?↑*

Subject-Operator inversion also applies if the interrogative sentence contains the negative particle. However, if a contracted form of the negative particle is used, this is moved with the operator.

e.g. *Does he not work every Saturday?*

Didn't you find your glasses?