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ESSENTIALS OF ENGLISH SYNTAX
THE SIMPLE SENTENCE



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

A	Adverbial
AdjP	Adjective Phrase
AdvP	Adverbial Phrase
Det	Determiner
DO	Direct Object
IO	Indirect Object
Man	Manner
N	Noun
NP	Noun Phrase
O	Object
Part	Particle
Perf	Perfective
PO	Prepositional Object
Progr	Progressive
S	Sentence
Vi	Intransitive verb
Vt	Transitive verb
VP	Verb Phrase

PART ONE

INTRODUCTION

An Outline of English Syntax

Most of the grammars written in the 19th and 20th centuries reflected the traditional attitude that stems from the 18th century grammarians. They were rather rigid and dogmatic, tended to reject actual usage, and were quite frequently under the influence of Latin grammars. We find a different attitude in H. Sweet's *New English Grammar, Logical and Historical* (vol. I 1892, vol. II 1898). Sweet had the attitude of an explorer rather than that of a legislator. He wrote "In considering the use of grammar as a corrective of what are called ungrammatical expressions, it must be borne in mind that the rules of grammar have no value except as statements of facts: whatever is in general use in a language is for that very reason grammatically correct"¹. Apart from Sweet's works, the most elaborate presentations of English grammar have been made by some grammarians in the Netherlands and Scandinavia: E. Kruisinga, *A Handbook of Present - Day English* (1911), H. Poutsma, *A Grammar of Late Modern English* (1926), O. Jespersen, *A Modern English Grammar on Historical Principles* (7 volumes: 1909-1949). These grammars are fully documented, considerable attention is paid to the history of the language, and meaning is the main basis of treatment of syntax.

The past decades have witnessed - to a certain extent in Britain and to a larger extent in the United States - an increasingly changed attitude, viz. the rejection of old conventions based on "reason", the observance of actual usage, as well as modern and the progressive methods of study. Since the nineteen thirties there have been several approaches which have differed significantly from that of traditional grammars.

¹ H. Sweet, *A New English Grammar*, p. 5.

One of the first of these was the *structural grammar*, associated chiefly with the name of the American linguist, L. Bloomfield (*Language*, 1933). As its name suggests, the main thesis of this school was that language has a structure. This structure can and must be discovered by a set of rigorously defined procedures (“discovery procedures”). One of the procedures most emphasized was substitution in a frame, to find out what particular class a word belongs to. For instance, in a sentence *The birds are singing* we substitute other words such as *children, people, crickets* for birds. The words which remain unchanged *The – are singing* provide the frame in which the substitution takes place. The words which can be substituted for *birds* are members of the same class. The most extensive use for this procedure may be found in Ch. Fries *The Structure of English* (1952). The chief characteristic of this approach was a rigid exclusion of considerations of meaning. The structural method considers the traditional type of sentence analysis unscientific because it starts from the total meaning of the sentence and bases the whole analysis on this meaning: it therefore labels instead of analysing. Fries points out that the meaning of a sentence is not just the sum of the meaning of all the words. It is a combination of the lexical meanings plus the structural meanings, i.e. the relationships of the words to each other.

As well as the emphasis on procedures, structural grammars developed the technique of immediate constituent (IC) analysis. This is a technique for breaking down a sentence into its immediate constituents; in turn, these constituents are broken into their immediate constituents. Eventually, constituents are reached which cannot be divided up further; these are the ultimate constituents. An illustration of IC analysis is provided by the following sentence:

The | trees | were | lying | on | the | ground.

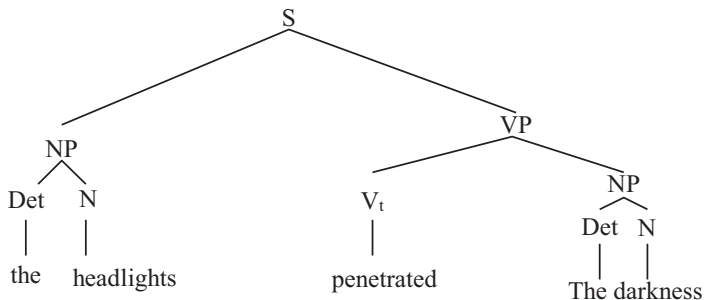
The most comprehensive grammars based on the principle of IC analysis are E. Nida, *A Synopsis of English Syntax* (1960) and B. Strang, *Modern English Structure*

(1962). In structural grammars, linguistic systems are considered as ensembles formed of elements subordinate to combination laws which characterize the whole ensemble. Attention is focused not on the individual unit as such, but on the relations holding between units. The definition of individual units through their position in the (whole) structure of the language presupposes a clear notion of the organization of language into hierarchical levels and a clear conception of the relations holding between the different hierarchical levels of language. The hierarchical levels of language are interrelated and they have isomorphic organization.

The most influential of all modern linguistic theories is *transformational – generative grammar*, *TG* for shorts. This theory was first made public through *Syntactic Structures* (1957) by N. Chomsky. He has pointed out that a grammar must satisfy various requirements: it must be based upon accurate observation of actual language and also satisfy the native speaker's intuition about language. It must, for example, be able to account for his intuitions that:

- some sentences are related to each other (e.g. active-passive)
- some sentences are grammatically ambiguous: cases of syntactic ambiguity show that one and the same string of words may represent entirely different constituent organizations, correlated with different meanings. For instance, the sentence *The chicken is ready to eat* has two readings depending on the function of the word *chicken*: subject or direct object (*to eat = to be eaten*).
- some pairs of sentences, though alike on the surface, are different at a deeper level. The sentences *The man was eager to please* and *The man was easy to please* show the same arrangement of constituents in their surface structure but they are understood in different ways because there hold different functional relations between these constituents in the two sentences. In the first sentence *the man* is understood as subject of the verb *to please*, while in the second *the man* is decoded as direct object of the verb *please*.

Chomsky offered the view that grammar is a set of rules for forming sentences. A sentence (S) such as *The headlights penetrated the darkness* consists of a noun phrase (NP) followed by a verb phrase (VP). In turn, the VP consists of a transitive verb (V_t) and an NP; the last NP consists of a Det and a N. This information can be represented in a tree diagram:



Such an analysis becomes generative when it is expressed in the form of rules:

1. S → NP + VP
2. VP → V_t + NP
3. NP → Det + N
4. V_t → penetrate
5. Det → the
6. N → darkness, headlights

Rules such as those which allow for a single symbol at a time to be rewritten or replaced by another symbol are known as phrase structure rules. By applying these rules it would be possible to produce, to “generate” the sentence that we wanted.

The question of generation concerns the contrast between competence and performance: the TG grammarians are interested not in the actual utterances of the speaker (which are a matter only of “performance”) but in what is linguistically possible, in what the speaker can say (his “competence”).

The new grammar focused on two major problems: linguistic creativity and the learnability of grammars which lead to the conclusion that they are finite devices. Chomsky