

## Handout 5 – Syntactic Categories

## 1. Syntactic Categories (a.k.a. Parts of Speech)

- a. All languages organize their words into structures, and these structures tend to follow very strict rules. For example, in English, we can say *the big red firetruck*, but no English speaker would ever say *\*big firetruck red the*.
- b. Our goal is to characterize the various ways words can combine, but we first need to be able to describe the different kinds of words that different languages use. Then, we can try to describe how those words combine with each other.
- c. Free morphemes (words) fall into two categories: **lexical** and **functional**.
  - i. Lexical morphemes are the nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs of a language.
  - ii. They are often called “content words”. Telegraphic speech usually uses only lexical morphemes.
  - iii. Functional morphemes provide grammatical information; they encode the relationships between the lexical morphemes.
  - iv. Functional morphemes are the prepositions, determiners, conjunctions, etc.
- d. We’ll now make more fine-grained distinctions within these categories.
- e. There are three ways to determine what category a word falls into: meaning, morphological distribution, and syntactic distribution.
  - i. Let’s explore all three.

## 2. Diagnostics for Category Membership

- a. MEANING: Words fall into different categories based on what they mean.
  - i. *Car* is a noun because it refers to a thing in the real world, like *dog* and *pencil*.
  - ii. *Run* is a verb because it refers to an action.
    1. Advantage: native speakers can do this easily.
    2. Disadvantage: There are a lot of problems with this traditional diagnostic!
      - a. Think about *happiness* and *likelihood* and *difficulty*. Are these “things in the real world”? Is it helpful to think of them as “ideas”?
      - b. What about *I went for a run*? Isn’t *run* still referring to an action there?
      - c. What about nonsense words like *blork* in *I usually blork on Tuesdays*? It may be difficult to say what *blork* means, but it is clear that *blork* is a verb.
      - d. The meaning diagnostic will lead you astray!

- b. MORPHOLOGICAL DISTRIBUTION: Words can be categorized according to the kind of morphemes that can appear with them.
  - i. *Car* is a noun because it can appear with the plural morpheme -s; anything that can be pluralized is a noun.
    - 1. Advantage: easily testable by linguists, native speakers have strong intuitions.
    - 2. Disadvantage: not every member of a particular lexical category can combine with the same morpheme: \**moistures*; \**beauties*; \**braveries*.
- c. SYNTACTIC DISTRIBUTION: Words can be categorized according to the categories of words that can appear around them. Certain types of words usually form **constituents** with other types of words.
  - i. So, *car* is a noun because it can follow *the*. Words that can form constituents with determiners, like *the*, are nouns.
    - 1. Advantage: easily testable.
    - 2. Disadvantage: What about *the big car*? Circularity! How do we define “determiner?” This method yields only relative definitions, which means you have to build on what you already know.
- d. Conclusion... We need to use all three, but most linguists rely heavily on morphology.
  - i. See examples on page 40 & 42-43.

### 3. Lexical Categories

- a. NOUNS can be pluralized, possessed. They form constituents (Noun Phrases) with determiners like *the*.
  - i. *boy, peace, shirt, justice, anger, Jose, dogs, plates* are some English nouns.
  - ii. *the boy, the plates, his shirt, our mom, an apple* are some English Noun Phrases.
- b. VERBS can have -ing and past tense morphemes added to them. They can be preceded by modal auxiliaries like *will* or *might*. They denote actions, states, and events. Verb Phrases, or VPs, are the larger units formed by verbs together with their objects.
  - i. *go, walk, attack, run, have, think, feel, explode, build* are some English verbs.
  - ii. *kill the cat, eat the burger, run a mile, fail a test, give Bill a pencil, promise to go home, tell her that I'm bored, persuade them to bring beer* are some VPs.
- c. ADJECTIVES can have the inflectional morpheme -er placed on the end, or *more* at the beginning, and provide descriptive information that modifies a noun.
  - i. *happy, sad, dumb, tall, weird, big, grey, blue* are some examples in English.

- d. ADVERBS are used with verbs, adjectives or other adverbs and provide more information about how, when, or where the action was performed. Often, they are derived from adjectives by the addition of the *-ly* morpheme.

i. *quickly, nicely, well, grumpily, yesterday, tomorrow* are some English adverbs.

#### 4. Functional Categories

- a. PREPOSITIONS are words used with Noun Phrases that indicate relationships between NPs and other phrases. Often this relationship is spatial. The phrase that contains the NP and the preposition is then called a Prepositional Phrase, or PP. Sometimes prepositions are classified as lexical rather than functional.
- i. *in, on, at, over, through, near, until, with* are some English prepositions.
- ii. *with prejudice, to the house, on the table, near death, with a knife, for three seconds* are some English PPs.
- b. DETERMINERS are used with nouns to pick a certain noun out of a group. They are a closed class of morphemes, so they can be easily listed for most languages.
- i. The class of determiners includes articles, deictic articles (demonstratives), some quantifiers, cardinal numbers, possessive pronouns/adjectives, and some *wh*-question words.
- ii. *the, a, an, this, those, my, his, one, which, whose, eight, some* are some of the determiners in English.
- c. CONJUNCTIONS join things of the same category together.
- i. *and, but, and or* are some examples in English.
- d. COMPLEMENTIZERS (a.k.a. subordinating conjunctions) embed sentences inside other sentences.
- i. *that, since, if, because, although* are some English complementizers.
- e. TENSE, for now, consists of the auxiliaries, modals, and the non-finite clause marker. Verbal inflection (like the *-ed* of *walked*) is not in this category at this stage of the theory, but this will be revised soon. The category T is also known as Infl and Aux in earlier versions of the theory.
- i. Auxiliaries: *have, be, do*
- ii. Modals: *will, would, can, could, should, might*, etc.
- iii. Non-finite marker: *to*, as in *to run*

- f. NEG is a special category for the morpheme responsible for sentential negation.
  - i. *not* is its only member.

5. Argument structure and **valency**

- a. Verbs and other **predicates** have specific requirements about the phrases they need to have around them in order to form complete larger syntactic units (Verb Phrases and sentences).
- b. A verb expresses some kind of relation between the phrases that appear around it.
- c. These phrases are typically NPs, PPs, and CPs.
- d. The phrases that participate in such a relation are called **arguments**.
- e. Verbs can be classified according to their **argument structure**: the number and type of arguments they take.