SYNTAX

- Miller Jim An Introduction to English Syntax Edinburgh University Press 2002 (Edinburgh Textbooks on the English Language).

- Tallerman, Maggie (1998), Understanding Syntax, London: Arnold.

- Crystal, David (1995), Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Biber, Douglas, Stig Johansson, Geoffrey Leech, Susan Conrad and Edward Finegan (1999), Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English, London: Longman.

- Quirk, Randolph and Sidney Greenbaum (1973), A University Grammar of English, London: Longman.

- Quirk, Randolph, Sidney Greenbaum, Geoffrey Leech and Jan Svartvik (1985), A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language, London: Longman.

The above three books are not textbooks for reading but grammars to be dipped into. They are for the reader interested in investigating particular points of English grammar.

- Syntax has to do with how words are put together to build phrases, with how phrases are put together to build clauses or bigger phrases, and with how clauses are put together to build sentences.

- In small and familiar situations, humans could communicate using single words and many gestures, particularly when dealing with other members of the same social grouping (family and so on). But complex messages for complex situations or complex ideas require more than just single words; every human language has devices with which its speakers can construct phrases and clauses.

PHRASE: Heads and modifiers

- Two central ideas:
- The first, is that certain relationships hold between words whereby one word, the head, controls the other words, the modifiers. A given head may have more than one modifier, and may have no modifier.

- The second idea is that words are grouped into phrases and that groupings typically bring together heads and their modifiers. In *the large dog*, the word dog is the head, and *the* and *large* are its modifiers. In *barked loudly*, the word *barked* is the head and *loudly* the modifier.

- A phrase, then, is a group of interrelated words.
- In such groups we recognise various links among the words, between heads and their modifiers. This relationship of modification is fundamental in syntax.

- How are we to understand the statement ‘one word, the head, controls the other words, the modifiers’? Consider the sentences in (1)–(2), which also introduce the use of the asterisk – ‘*’ – to mark unacceptable examples.
- (1) a. Jane was sitting at her desk.
- b. *The Jane was sitting at her desk.
- (2) a. *Accountant was sitting at her desk.
- b. The accountant was sitting at her desk.
- c. Accountants audit our finances every year.

- Example (1a *Jane was sitting at her desk*.) is a grammatical sentence of English, but (1b *The Jane was sitting at her desk*.) is not grammatical (at least as an example of standard English). Jane is a type of noun that typically excludes words such as *the* and *a*.

- Accountant is a different type of noun; if it is singular, as in (2a*Accountant was sitting at her desk.), it requires a word such as *the* or *a*. In (2c Accountants audit our finances every year.), accountants consists of accountant plus the inflection -s and denotes more than one accountant. It does not require *the*.

- Another type of noun, which includes words such as salt, sand and water, can occur without any word such as *the*, *a* or *some*, as in (3a), and can occur in the plural but only with a large change in meaning. Example (3b) can only mean that different types of salt were spread.
- (3) a. The gritter spread salt.
- b. The gritter spread salts.

- gritter NOUN British A vehicle or machine for spreading grit and often salt on roads in icy or potentially icy weather.

- Note too that a plural noun such as *gritters* allows either *less* or *fewer*, as in (4d) and (4c), whereas *salt* requires *less* and excludes *fewer*, as in (4a) and (4b).
- (5) a. *This gritter spread less salt than that one*.
- b. **This gritter spread fewer salt than that one*.
- c. *There are fewer gritters on the motorway this winter.*
- d. *There are less gritters on the motorway this winter.*

- The central property of the above examples is that *Jane*, *accountant*, *salt* and *gritter* permit or exclude words such as *the, a, some, less* and *fewer* – note that *Jane* excludes *the, a, some, less* and *fewer*; *salt* in excludes *a* and *fewer*; *gritters* excludes a; *accountant* allows both *the* and *a*, and so on.

- We have looked at phrases with nouns as the controlling word, but other types of word exercise similar control. Many adjectives such as *sad* or *big* allow words such as *very* to modify them – *very sad, very big* – but exclude words such as *more* – *sadder* is fine but *more sad* is at the very least unusual. Other adjectives, such as *wooden*, exclude *very* and *more* – **very wooden*, **more wooden*. That is, *wooden* excludes *very* and *more* in its literal meaning, but note that *very* is acceptable when *wooden* has a metaphorical meaning, as in *The policeman had a very wooden expression*.

- Even a preposition can be the controlling word in a group. Prepositions link nouns to nouns (*books about antiques*), adjectives to nouns (*rich in minerals*) and verbs to nouns (*aimed at the target*). Most prepositions must be followed by a group of words containing a noun, or by a noun on its own, as in (*They sat*) *round the table*, (*Claude painted*) *with this paint-brush*, (*I've bought a present*) *for the children*. A small number of prepositions allow another preposition between them and the noun: *In behind the woodpile* (*was a hedgehog.*)

Heads, modifiers and meaning

- The distinction between heads and modifiers has been put in terms of one word, the head, that controls the other words in a phrase, the modifiers. If we think of language as a way of conveying information – which is what every speaker does with language some of the time – we can consider the head as conveying a central piece of information and the modifiers as conveying extra information.

- Thus in the phrase *expensive books* the head word *books* indicates the very large set of things that count as books, while *expensive* indicates that the speaker is drawing attention not to the whole set but to the subset of books that are expensive. In the longer phrase *the expensive books*, the word *the* signals that the speaker is referring to a set of books which have already been mentioned or are otherwise obvious in a particular context.

- The same narrowing-down of meaning applies to phrases containing verbs. Different verbs have different powers of control. Some verbs, as in (6a), exclude a direct object, other verbs require a direct object, as in (6b), and a third set of verbs allows a direct object but does not require one, as in (6c).
- (6) a. *The White Rabbit vanished his watch / The White Rabbit vanished.
- b. Dogs chase cats / *Dogs chase.
- c. Flora cooks / Flora cooks gourmet meals.

- Consider the examples *drove* and *drove a Volvo*. *Drove* indicates *driving in general*; *drove a Volvo* narrows down the activity to driving a particular make of car.

- Heads may have several modifiers. This is most easily illustrated with verbs; the phrase *bought a present for Jeanie in Jenners last Tuesday* contains four modifiers of bought – *a present*, *for Jeanie*, *in Jenners* and *last Tuesday*. *A present* signals what was bought and narrows down the activity from just buying to buying *a present* as opposed, say, to buying *the weekly groceries*. For Jeanie narrows the meaning down further – not just 'buy a present' but 'buy a present for Jeanie', and similarly for the phrases *in Jenners* and *last Tuesday*.

Complements and adjuncts

- Modifiers fall into two classes – obligatory modifiers, known as complements, and optional modifiers, known as adjuncts.

- The distinction was first developed for the phrases that modify verbs, and indeed applies most easily to the modifiers of verbs, but the distinction is also applied to the modifiers of nouns.

- The verb can be seen as controlling every other phrase in the clause. Consider:

- *My mother bought a present for Jeanie in Jenners last Tuesday*.

- *(My) mother* is the subject of the verb. The subject of a clause plays an important role; nonetheless, in a given clause the verb controls the subject noun too. Bought requires a human subject noun; that is, it does in everyday language but behaves differently in the language of fairy stories, which narrate events that are unconstrained by the biological and physical laws of this world.

- A verb such as *flow* requires a subject noun denoting a liquid; if in a given clause it has a subject noun denoting some other kind of entity, *flow* imposes an interpretation of that entity as a liquid. Thus people talk of a *crowd flowing along a road*, of *traffic flowing smoothly* or of *ideas flowing freely*.

- Returning to the clause *My mother bought a present for Jeanie in Jenners last Tuesday*, we will say that the verb bought controls all the other phrases in the clause and is the head of the clause. It requires a human noun to its left, here *mother*; it requires a noun to its right that denotes something concrete (although we talk figuratively of buying ideas in the sense of agreeing with them). It allows, but does not require, time expressions such as *last Tuesday* and place expressions such as *in Jenners*.

- Such expressions convey information about the time when some event happened and about the place where it happened. With verbs, such time and place expressions are always optional and are held to be adjuncts.

- Phrases that are obligatory are called complements. (The term ‘complement’ derives from a Latin verb ‘to fill’; the idea conveyed by ‘complement’ is that a complement expression fills out the verb (or noun and so on), filling it out or completing it with respect to syntax but also with respect to meaning.

- The term ‘adjunct’ derives from the Latin verb ‘join’ or ‘add’ and simply means ‘something adjoined’, tacked on and not part of the essential structure of clauses.)

- The relationships between heads and modifiers are called dependencies or dependency relations. Heads have been described as controlling modifiers; modifiers are said to depend on, or to be dependent on, their heads. Heads and their modifiers typically cluster together to form a phrase.

- In accordance with a long tradition in Europe, verbs are treated as the head, not just of phrases, but of whole clauses (Miller Jim An Introduction to English Syntax Edinburgh University Press 2002).

- In clauses, the verb and its complements tend to occur close together, with the adjuncts pushed towards the outside of the clause, as shown by the examples in (9).
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- (9) a. *Maisie drove her car from Morningside to Leith on Wednesday.*
- b. *On Wednesday Maisie drove her car from Morningside to Leith*.
- c. *Maisie drove her car on Wednesday from Morningside to Leith*.

Constituent structure

Heads, modifiers and arrangements of words

- The relations between heads and modifiers were labelled as ‘dependencies’. Dependencies are central to syntax. To make sense of a clause or sentence in written language or of a series of clauses in spontaneous speech, we have to pick out each head and the words that modify it. This task is made easier by the organisation of words into phrases and clauses.