EL 3201

Morphology and Syntax

Department of English, Language, and Literature,
National University of Singapore

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URL: http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/ellmd/classes.html, then click on the correct link.

Tutor: me again

Unit worth: 4 points

Prerequisites: EL 1101E

Textbooks: There is no one textbook that covers the ground that we’ll be going over this semester, partly because of the diverse range of material we want to cover, and partly because of issues in analysis (there’s a lot of disagreement out there in syntax world, and I expect/hope that this class will mirror that). We’ll work mainly from one books, the assigned textbook, and will have a range of different chapters in photocopied form from other books; I’ll take care of this, as needs arise. Any first- or second-year handouts on syntax, especially the how and the why of argumentation, will be very useful. The main textbook is:


The extras are these next two. We’ll bits from Aarts and bits from Andrews, to provide other ways of explaining some of the things that Kroeger discusses. Aarts is very useful for argumentation and style.


If you can get hold of a copy, Aarts’ book is worth owning, though expensive (I’ve seen it in Kinokuniya). Avery’s one is too, but it’s not been published yet. Kroeger should be in the bookshop. The readings handed out in Tara Mohanan’s 2000-level syntax course will be very useful.

Other necessary readings will be suggested, or given out, in lectures. Section 4 of this handout contains lists of other possible readings.

Lectures: Tuesday at 12 - 2 pm, room AS-xxxxxx.

Tutorials: once per week, to be arranged, Friday morning at 10 or 11.

Exam: April xxx, 2005, afternoon.

1. Goals

Syntax and morphology are about the organisation in languages at levels above the individual sound and syllable. Morphology is the description of organisation up to the word level – we’re not going to look into that except as far as it impinges on a discussion of greater-than-word
level grammar. Syntax is the description of the combinations of words that form larger units (the names for these units are, variously, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, texts). The study of syntax alone isn’t enough to let us determine the structure of flowing speech, but it is an essential element in that study.

This course will introduce the basic principles of argumentation and codification of structures found in English, and extends into the typological variation found in the syntactic structures of different languages. We will look at structures in English for a grounding, to learn about the kinds of things that are relevant to syntactic argumentation, and how to present that argumentation. Following this we shall examine a small range of other languages to develop a feel for the kind of variation that a broad theory of syntax needs to account for.

2. Assessment

Syntax is a subject best learned through practice. Lots of practice. The assessment scheme that I’d like us to follow for this course reflects that: most of the assessment will be by regular problems, which should be completed individually. Problems for discussion and group solution will also be part of the course, preparing you for the discussion in the tutorials.

In addition to the assessed problems, a series of unassessed problems will be assigned, which you can do either individually or in a group, and these don’t earn you any points, but failure to do them at least nominally will lose you points. These ‘semi-assignments’ should be handed in, and then the issues that were raised in them will be discussed in the tutorials. Failure to demonstrate at least an attempt at these problems will result in penalties to your final grade.

There’s room for class bargaining or individual flexibility in the assessment; what I’m planning on giving out to you includes:

1. **3 Problem Sets** (10% each for a maximum total of 20%)
   I’ll assign three topical problem sets. They must be handed in within one week days of being assigned. One thing about these: they’re small, both in terms of the amount of paper I’ll give to you, and the amount of writing from you that I expect to get back. Brevity, clarity, and argumentation are important: practise. Of the three problems, I’ll count your mark for the best two, and ignore the third one. If you like, you can omit doing one of the three for no penalty.

2. **4 More Smaller Problem Sets** (0%)
   In addition to the assessed problems, a series of unassessed problems will be assigned, which you can do either individually or in a group. These don’t earn you any points towards your grade, but failure to do them at least nominally (that is, at least try, even if you don’t have time to complete the answer) will lose you points.

   If you want, you can do these, and submit them, as a group. You should keep a copy of your ‘solution’, but also hand a copy in in class. The issues that were raised in them will be discussed in the tutorials. Failure to demonstrate at least an attempt at these problems will result in penalties. This is serious: DO ALL OF THESE PROBLEM SETS. They are there to ensure you get necessary practise.
3. **ESSAY/PROJECT-LIKE THING (20% + 10%)** (alternative: **MAJOR PROBLEM SET**)
   
   Write a ± 1500-word essay on something relevant to the course (provided the topic has been discussed with me before you commence writing), and providing commentary on someone else’s essay. The timeline for this essay is as follows:

   1. Select essay topic
   2. Discuss the essay topic with me; essays written on unapproved topics will not be treated favourably.
   3. Write essay and submit one copy to me and one copy to your designated commenter.
   4. Commenter provides written commentary on the essay you’ve written, and submits one copy to me and one copy to you, the original author.
   5. Revise essay, addressing the issues raised by the commenter.

   I won’t comment on essays until they’re handed in (that is, I won’t read a draft), but I’m happy to recommend directions, point out limitations, make suggestions, and I’m happy to discuss essays with the commenter. The essay can be produced individually, or by up to a three-person team; if there’s more than one of you writing, I’ll expect 20% more words per person (so, a three-person project = roughly a 2400 word essay). Examples and references do not count towards the word limit. The initial essay is worth 10%; you get the other 20% based on the value of comments you provide for the essay you read (10%), and 10% more for your final revised essay, based on the improvement it shows over the original essay. See below for possible project topics. The final revised essay will be due in at the end of the second-last week of semester. The other dates are subject to negotiation and agreement between the author and the commenter, and should not be any of my business, if things go smoothly.

   If you wish, you can, instead of writing an essay (= doing a project), you can do a major assignment. This assignment will be harder, and longer, and will require you to provide a significant level of argumentation to back up the solution you present. If at any time you feel like pointing out weaknesses in your arguments, that’s a good thing; it saves me time, and proves that you’ve thought about the issues properly. I’ll hand out this assignment, only to those who want to do it, three weeks before it’s due. No in-class presentation required.

   Regardless of the option chosen, it’s due on the Friday of the second last week of semester, and lateness will be penalised fiercely. Be on time!

   General: If you hand in an assignment late, and still want to get a mark, you will have to firstly show good reason why you couldn’t hand it in on time (in order to be given a grade), and then do a catch-up assignment in its place, since the solution might have been discussed in the class of the day on which it’s due. Or you can just lose the marks, though this isn’t recommended. Handing in an assignment late is **not an option**.

4. **A QUIZ**  
   (10%)
   
   This will be administered in-class, and, unlike the exam, will be closed book.

5. **AN EXAM**  
   (30%)
   
   The usual deal, two hours of work. Please, read the instructions before answering questions. I know everyone says this, but I mean it. This is, unfortunately, the one part of the assessment
that is non-negotiable (because of university regulations). The exam will be open-book to the extent I can make it: you can bring any notes or reference words you wish into the exam, computers only being exempted.

6. **Class Participation**

Active participation in the tutorials is required, and ten percent of the final assessed mark is based on the tutor's evaluation of the student's participation in tutorials. This involves discussion of problem sets, working through exercises, and, of course, turning up! If you feel that there’s some good reason why you shouldn’t need to participate in this way, then let’s discuss things and see what we can do. But it’ll have to be a pretty impressive reason.

3. **Syllabus**

The following is a rough guide to the material that we’ll be covering, and in what order, though looking over the textbook chapters is obviously also a useful guide. The exact ‘when’ depends on how we go. We’ll be compromising between this, levels of confusion and understanding, and the order in the textbook.

1. **Noise**

   noise ~ sound ~ meaning ~ word

   (if you don’t allow that there’s a correlation between sound and meaning, then we’re stuck; we’re primarily dealing with sound, not writing, because in all known cases sound is prior, and in all known cases writing systems are at least partially representative of sound)

2. **Words**

   Can you construct a grammar based on the word: much better than grammar not based on the word.

   (why? could go in two other directions, base it on whole phrases/clauses/sentences, or base it on whole morphemes: why is the ‘word’ a better basis?)

   What about a grammar based on *kinds* of words: a different principle, economy/elegance. You don’t need to refer to classes of words, but it’s easier and more efficient to do so.

3. **Phrases**

   Words appear to be organised hierarchically; ambiguities, scope restrictions, and ‘coherence’ in various alternative coding constructions, show that this is the most ‘elegant’ and ‘efficient’ way to

4. **Ungrammaticality**

   A strange concept: personal; systemic; produceability, not acceptability (since we’re all multidialectal to some extent, and often more so)

   Not the same as sensicality: *Colourless green ideas slept furiously*, famously. Discussion of reasons for grammaticality judgements, based on usage and familiarity.

   Phrase structure grammar: what we need: Xs, XP; also X’, though this is trickier, evidence-wise.

5. **Grammatical functions**

   Subject: what is it, why is it? Is it enough? Objects, adjuncts, obliques.

   Tests: agreement, case, word order, tag questions, question word orders, …

   … control across clauses, and the discourse-basis for grammatical functions.

   Things that change grammatical functions: passives.

6. **Odd things, problems**

   Presentational clauses: there is/ there are … it seems …
(weather verbs and locative inversion)

7 Lexicon
So what is it? If we’re so hung up about the word, what *is* a word? What information does it entail? How do we refer to it? How does it affect the syntax?

8 Some tricky things
Extraposition: XPs only, not Xs, so the phrase is real, in some way

4. How to do well
Pay attention. That’s the big thing: listen, read, question. But, also, please, don’t believe things. This extends to don’t believe anything I tell you. Do not trust your lecturer. This course does not aim to see you rote-learning things, for repetition. If you approach this course thinking that a lot of memorisation and rote learning is the way to go, then you’re likely to fail. A good memory is a great asset, of course. But it’s not enough. If you finish this course and can remember none of the conclusions and terminology that we developed and used over the semester, then you will be ideally equipped for the exam, and I’ll consider the course to have been a success. If you can remember how to argue. A good educational experience aims to teach you HOW and WHY not WHAT, and that’s what we’ll try to do in this course. If you can’t remember what we did, but you can reconstruct how we did it, and understand why that was a good methodology, then not only will some of the details of syntax have remained with you, but you will also have absorbed the real lesson: analytical thinking.

To that end, the real aims of the course:

• refine your skills as pattern recognition;
• refine your skills at general problem-solving, and principles for choosing between alternative analyses;
• constructing arguments for and against propositions.

I’m a linguist, and so the grounding for this course will be in linguistic material. We will examine that material, assess what is important and what isn’t, and develop models that account for the data we’ve seen, and make predictions about what we haven’t seen. This sounds like going out on a limb, and that’s exactly right: if you don’t turn out to be ‘wrong’ at least once in this course, I’ll consider myself to have failed. There will be more than enough chances to get things ‘right’, so you might as well be daring as well. and try out being wrong once in a while, when it doesn’t matter.

Other reading
Any descriptive grammar of a language. See me for a list of works in our library that are worth examining, or else you’re welcome to browse my personal bookshelves.


Browsing-reading

Harder reading


5. Possible projects

This is NOT intended to be an exhaustive list, just a list of some possibilities: things that could work, that would be of the right sort of size.

The essays are about applying what you have learned in this course to material in some language, and writing a short article about it. They are NOT intended to be literature review essays, or summaries of articles, except in so far as you present arguments from different authors. The Bresnan and Kanerva article on Locative Inversion and the Bresnan and Moshi article on Applicatives are good examples of well-argued well-organised articles analysing a construction within a theoretical framework. Look at the structure and the arguments to get an idea of how to proceed with your own. Note also:

(i) Be explicit about your data source -- is it from your own intuition, is it from texts, is it from elicitation, is the material comparable (for instance, treating nineteenth century written English on a par with modern spoken English is acceptable for some grammatical constructions but not for all).

(ii) Acknowledge the ideas of other people explicitly, both in the text and in the bibliography. You are expected to present a professional bibliography, with adequate citation of sources. Examples can be seen in

1. Select some phenomenon discussed in class and investigate its behaviour in a language other than one that has been used in class or in the textbook to exemplify that phenomenon. For instance, you might want to describe and analyse the passive in a language that either you are familiar with, or you have access to resources about.

2. Adjuncts — What are they? (How) can they be distinguished from arguments?

3. Types of adjectives, eg. intensional adjectives, predicative adjectives. Their phrase structure, their functions, their complements

4. Argue for (or against) the notion of a VP in a language you know

5. Discuss the Mirror Principle with respect to some language you know


6. Is passive simply a lexical item or is it a rule?

7. Discuss complements to nouns

8. Consider the evidence for and against postulating grammatical functions in some language other than English.

Here are some examples of applying arguments for grammatical functions in different languages. You should choose some other language for your project.

Argument against universality of grammatical functions:

9. How seriously should we take the assertion that there is a universal list of grammatical features?

10. Select a phenomenon in a language that either you know, you know someone who knows [it], or you have access to a good description of, and analyse it in terms of the principles we’ve discussed in class. See me earlier for this one than with the other possible projects, as we’ll need to discuss the appropriateness of your materials.