

## Understanding of Philosophical Notions that Constitute the Structure within English Syntax

**Ali Siddiqui**

MPhil scholar, English Language Development Centre (ELDC)  
Mehran University of Engineering and Technology (MUET)  
Jamshoro, Sindh, Pakistan

### Abstract

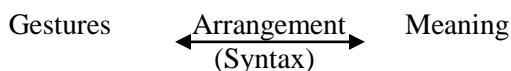
*The study of Syntax is the core subject of Linguistics that has become the part of language learning and researching with concern to language teaching. It is the building pillar of knowing actual construction to languages around the world. There are many facts that have been explored while knowing nature of syntax towards contributing aspects that tend to constitute it. Many theories have been arguing either supporting or disapproving one extreme notion onto the other and vice-versa. The two extreme notions (i.e., Formal and Semantic-functional) are the central points of building future vistas for studying the syntax through parallel paradigms that are bind to each other. This small contribution is one of the ways to consolidate different aspects to learn syntax of the English language as course of sample to explain. It will highlight the earlier contributions on syntax within linguistics. Syntax is the invincible pot of linguistics study.*

**Keywords:** Philosophical notion, Formal, Semantic, English Syntax

### 1. Introduction

#### 1.1. General Remarks on nature of Syntax”:

One of the most important functions with any language of the world is to carry the set of information that levels from the free routine conversation to a strict academic discipline. Within a language, the core structure that shapes its structure is “**syntax**”. The logic that creates it a separate branch of a language subject is of “**language function to have infinite from finite set of rules or principles**”. This later championed the cause to let rise of sub-branch of syntax that is “**generative linguistics**” around 20th of century (cf. Chomsky 1965). According to Robert D Van Valin, JR, “Syntax of any language is the arrangement of the meaning bearing elements that are combined differently to express different meanings”. The meaning bearing elements are gestures that convey an appropriate meaning.



To further elaborate this statement of Valin JR, one can exemplify with two set of same meaning bearing elements that are differently arranged, like; Ali gave Asma a book to read. On the other hand, Asma gave Ali a book to read. Both of them are same in terms of the words that convey the message, however with different arrangement. This led to define syntax by citing (Matthews 1982:1) that states: “Term Syntax is of ancient Greek origin “*syntaxis*” that denotatively refers to arrangement. Earlier, it was tend to mean the branch of grammar that means to deal with ways of arranging different sort of words with their appropriate inflections that sums up to correct meaning formation.” So is the fact observed about deviations found within languages that make them distinct from the other is only order of word arrangement. For example:

“Many languages have yes-no questions without any inversion move of transformation. Just like wh-questions (Korean, Tamil, Chinese, Japanese and Thai). Example from “Thai” language:

Thai: (Khun? Aan? Aray? )

(Translation: You read what).

Whereas in English, it is (“What do you read?”). So, unlike English language, Thai does not front any “wh” word that could designate it as a question tag.

## 1.2. “Syntax” as a way to analyze the contrastive attitude of languages around the world:

The next to present is stating briefly about the finite set of rules that centers with three meaningful elements (Subject, Verb and Direct object). These finite sets tend to have different course of arrangement in different languages that makes their identity independent from each other. To further validate this statement, one can take the example of simple utterance from Lakhota (a Siouan language of North America, to observe the fact that subject and direct object does precede the verb (SOV). It contrasts completely with Toba Batak (an Austronesian language of Indonesia Schachter 1984b) in a way that both subject and direct object follows the verb (VOS). Where, in English language one can experience the arrangement that is likewise as Subject verb and direct object (SVO).

Examples:

Lakhota: (Wauspekhiyekiwowpiwayawawa)

(Teacher the book a read)

Toba Batak: (Manjabuku guru i)

(Read book teacher the)

English: (The teacher is reading a book)

The different types of word arrangement that have been exemplified moreover have tended to highlight further the particular linguistic discourses. It reflects the idea of general thinking about universal grammar. They are studied under a proper theoretical perspective that lays the ground for research on any language. It is through paradigm of cross linguistic studies or by theoretical framework for core linguistic studies.

## 2. Theories that tend to define “Syntax”

### 2.1. Philosophical notions to perceive “syntax” itself:

There are number of theories proposed to define syntax. However, very few tend to dominate the large number of other theories. Commonly, they are categorized into two major philosophical aspects, namely; the formal and functional. The formal extreme version defines syntax as a grammar that is perceived as an abstract algebraic equation bind to the particular convinced strings of symbolic interaction forming an independent system. It relates no function with meaning convey process. Contrastively, the functional extreme version defines the formation of syntax merely on functional or meaning convey aspect of word arrangement. The rest of other theories lie between the two. However two of the relations are not purely separate. It is as one cannot shape grammatical relations apart from language structure itself that conveys the meaning.

### 2.2. Journey of contributive steps by acknowledged linguists to study define “syntax”

According to Saussurean these grammatical relations are characteristics that cannot be separated from the language form and its meaning. Therefore, syntax is there only to make the meaning. The semantic approach of perceiving syntax has its origin to Saussure’s course (1959/ 1974, first published in 1916). It laid the path of new journey for further theories to emerge with some implicit arguments in hand. Naming the few; cognitive grammar (Langacker, 1987, 1991), Applicative grammar (Shaumyan, 1987), Systematic functional grammar (Halliday, 1985, third edition, 2004) and construction grammar (Goldberg, 1995). Likewise, the differences of opinion by theorists to define the dimension of syntax have tuned another mode of describing the syntax. Majority of the syntacticians does agree with the limitations bound within the dimensions of the syntax that belongs to different languages. They base their argument on abstract notion of single universal grammar that underlies within all languages of the world. On the other hand, the contrastive argument by some linguists is based on the perception that there are universals of syntax not necessarily a one. Exploring this view further have opened a new vista of demarcating the boundaries to syntactic structure, for that small number of theories like “Word Grammar” (Hudson 1984; Hudson and Langendonck, 1991) and “Lexicase” (Starosta, 1988) states that syntax is not universally accepted if it is above the word level of one or two but below to the clause level (i.e., must have subject, verb and its direct object to satisfy the condition). Therefore, phrase-sized units does not exist for syntactic feature.

### 2.3. “Phrases”- Are they Syntactical structures as a whole or just the part of whole (syntax):

The phrases are defined as;

“*May have one word or more*” (Sujatna, 2007).

“Phrase is the collection of words that may consist of nouns or verbals. However, it does not consist of subject performing the verbs” (Wheeler). It is with this view that validates phrase to be featured as against to that of clause” (Halliday, 2004).

There are further eight categories of phrases to define that depend on their distinct lexical character that reflects their functional nature, Namely; Noun Phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), adjective phrase (AP), prepositional phrase (PP), adverbial phrase (AP) infinitive Phrase, Gerund Phrase and Participle Phrase. These phrases are collectively known as syntactic categories that work with the grammatical functions (i.e., SUBJ (Subject), OBJ (Object), MOD (Modifier), PRED (Predicate)) in order to be justified for being categorized on a level of syntax.

### 3. Aspects that constitute “Syntax”

#### 3.1. “Constituent structure”- The principle of dependencies

So far, it has been accounted for the syntax that it shall be described in terms of words that are in constituent relation with each other. These relations are in the form of dependencies, where one word is either subordinated or in return subordinating to the top hierarchical word. These dependencies are in the form of units known as “constituents”. The overall constituents make a relation within a whole syntactic structure known as “constituent structure”. Where, one of the important phenomenon that have been observed while studying the structure of syntax reveals that each of the word does not necessarily corresponds a direct relation to the every other word in a whole syntactic structure like the strings. However, one word corresponds to the other with adjacent relation that connects to dignify the characteristic position of the other word. (Like; determiners that are attached to a noun) in a whole syntactic structure makes it a noun phrase (example; the car) providing it the distinct position in a sentence given below.

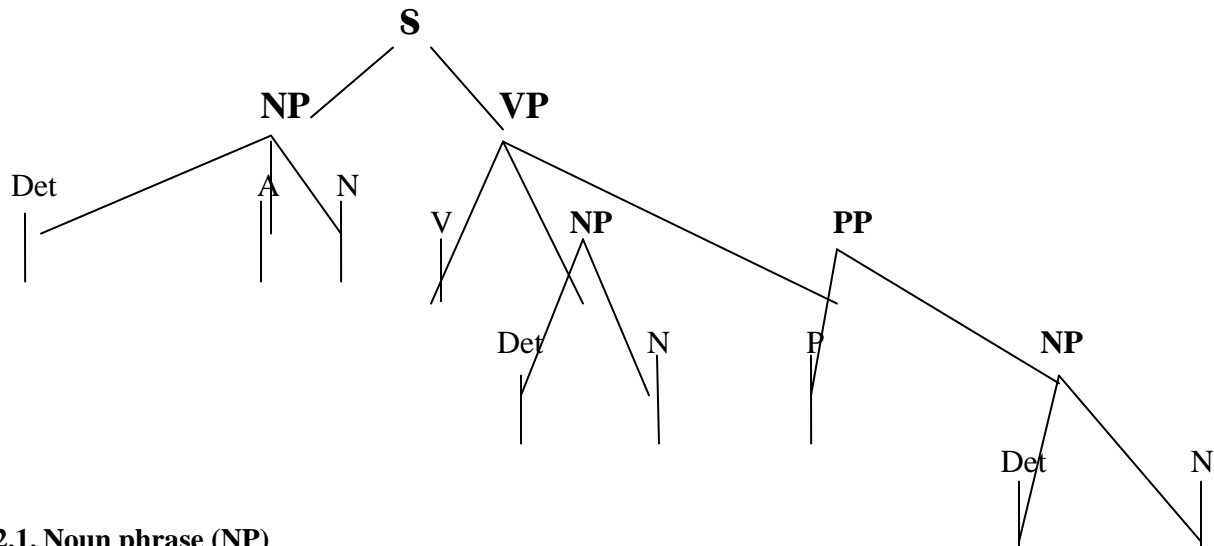
Sentence: The car was been driven by my father.

#### 3.2. Formal “Rules that are governed to constitute the syntactic structure”:

The Rules work on the implicit principle to moralize the adjacent relations between different lexical phrases with grammar to shape the entire sentence. These encompasses of the following relations like as; (**Possessor-Possessed**: Karan’s book, Karan’s = possessor and book = possessed) or (**Modifier-Modified**: blue car, Reading slowly, in cupboard, the suit. (Where; Blue, slowly, the = are the modifiers) while, (Car, Reading, suit = are the modified). “In” is the preposition that works as the modifier here that modifies the object “cupboard”.

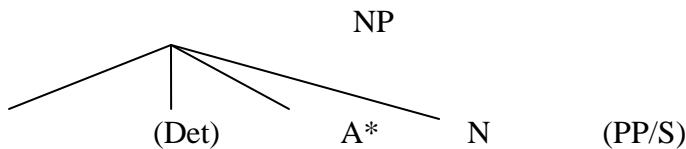
The typical syntactic structure that is denoted with (S) has the following set of rules to govern within itself;

S	—————>	NP VP	
NP	—————>	(Det) A* N (PP/S)	(where, A* is the adjective (modifier) that is optional)
VP	—————>	V (NP) (PP/S/VP)	(where, V is the verb)
AP	—————>	A (PP/S)	(where, A is the adjective)
AdvP	—————>	(AdvP) Adv	(where, Adv is the adverb)
PP	—————>	NP	(where, P is the preposition)



**3.2.1. Noun phrase (NP)**

Noun phrase is the most centered phrase of any syntactic structure, where the head word is either noun or pronoun. (Chaer, 2007) . This **phrase** at times is also associated with some modifiers that tend to modify the given noun or pronoun of phrase. Like the noun, this phrase can act as a subject, even object of the verb in verbal phrase or as a subject with either object complement, to as the object of a prepositional phrase. (MacFadyen) . Therefore, as per the rule, NP may have an optional (Determiner), the number of optional (A), the obligatory N, and lastly to optional PP with either modifying S.



Example: The small boy

(Det) (A) (N)

**3.2.2. Verb Phrase (VP)**

This phrase confines verbs to characteristically act as the head word of the phrases. Again, there are two categories of the verbs:

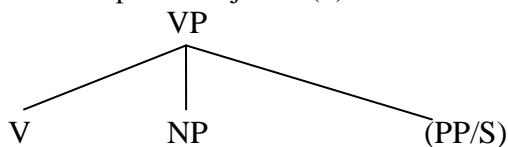
I. Main verbs: Run, Wash, Work, Play, etc.

II. Auxiliary verbs:

Primary: do, be, have etc.

Modals: might, could, shall, should etc.

According to the VP rule it consists of an obligatory Verb that is followed by an optional “NP” and then to the number of PPs to an optional adjacent (S).

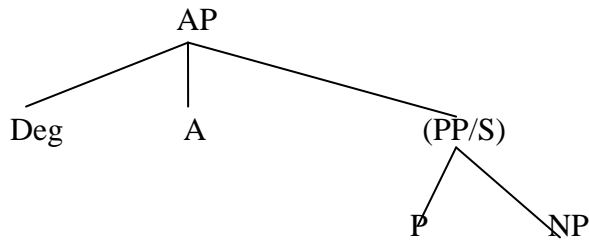


Example: Saw George with

(V) (NP) (PP)

**3.2.3. Adjective Phrase (AP)**

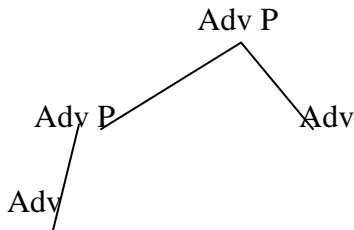
This phrase functions characteristically for either describing or modifying the noun. Adjective head is the word of adjective phrases. They commonly occur as in the form of ‘linking verb’. The rule follows as “A” is attached to PP or (VP) with either modifying (S). (Deg) is optional that is concerned with modifying the noun in a phrase.



Example: a crazy dog

**3.2.4. Adverbial Phrase (Adv P)**

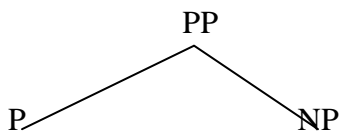
This phrase functions characteristically for either to describe or to modify the verbs, adjectives, event or adverbs themselves. These phrases are in relation to state the “time, place or manner”. Adverbs characteristically function as the head word of the adverb phrases. The rule follows as:



Example: Recent + ly = recently  
 (Time)+ Manner = Adverb phrase

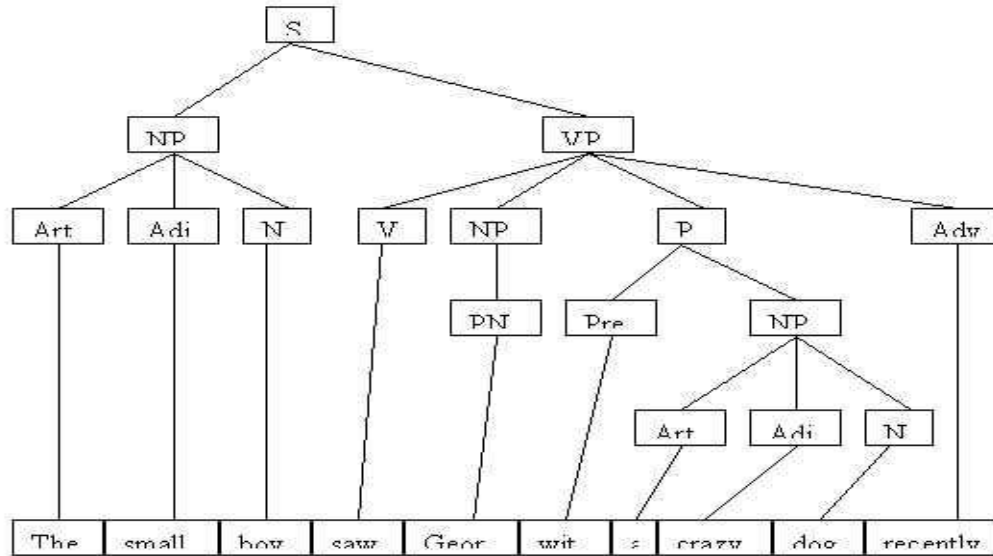
**3.2.5. Preposition Phrase (PP):**

This phrase functions characteristically with generally consisting of preposition along with NP. The rule follows as:



Example: With a crazy dog  
 (Preposition) (Det) (A) (Noun)

➤ Combining all the structures of the given lexical phrases together will give us the shape of a whole syntactic structure that shall go likewise as:  
 “The small boy saw George with a crazy dog recently”

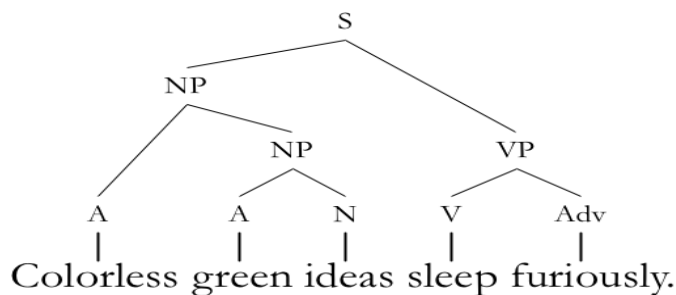


**3.2.6. Is the Formal notion justified?**

It is through analyzing by the ‘Dependency principle’ that validates about this typical clause structure of following principle that every other lexical item is dependent onto the other item. It is satisfied either through the pre-positioning or post-positioning balances with the construction of the same sentential structure. The above discussed “rule-governing principles” did satisfy the major philosophical extreme notion of formalism. It goes with defining of syntax as an independent system of abstract algebraic equations that are bind to the particular convinced strings of symbolic interactions. However, there are still some of the notions where the formal aspect of defining syntax goes null and void. Although to justify them with same “rule-governing principles”, still lacks the definition of the functional aspect that conveys the appropriate notion of contextual meaning.

Taking the example of the chomskian quote from his book *Syntactic Structures* of highlighting the sentence that is grammatically correct, however semantically it is nonsensical. It proves the clear demarcation between the two, as the formal aspect of defining syntax with that of functional aspect to define syntax that is semantics.

**Sentence:** “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously” (1957)



**3.3. “Semantic provisions that provide conditions for functional aspect of syntax”:**

So far the appropriate generalizations with respect to relation between grammatical functions to their semantic roles cannot be principled on regular patterns. It is because of the subtle properties that are underlying with semantic roles in a way interacting in different forms with certain grammatical structures.

Some of the relevant thematic provisions that provide different functional aspects of syntax are as:

- a. **Agent:** Participant having the meaning of verb to specify of either doing or causing something. It is intentional.  
Example: He hit the man etc. He is an agent.
- b. **Patient:** Participant having the meaning of verb to characterize that something happened to it. Or, it is affected by the action of agent.

Example: The man was hit by him. The man is patient.

**c. Experience-r:** Participant, who perceives something. It is based on perception.  
Example: The boy felt curious to hit the man. The boy is experience-r.

**d. Theme:** Participant that satisfies any state of change with position or condition.  
Example: Hit. The condition to fulfill is "hit".

**e. Benefactive:** Entity that is being benefited from any action or is stated for compliments. It is predicator.  
Example: He was gifted a golden watch. Gift is benefaction.

**f. Source:** It is the main center of any action.

Example: Rich man supplied goods to poor community. Rich man is the source.

**g. Goal:** It is the end point of action to be acted on.

Example: The poor community received goods from a rich man. The poor community is the goal.

**h. Location:** It is the theme that is connected with NP to reveal the point in a sentence to a view of verb.

Example: Air forces are launching their helicopters from the helipad. From the helipad is the location.

**i. Instrument:** A middle course through which an action is denoted by the predicator that is carrying. It is an oblique complement of *an action*.

Example: He drank the water with a straw. With a straw is the instrument

There are many theoretical issues that are involved in practicing of semantic roles to grammatical constructions with few advantages of using them.

As if, one can make proper generalizations about the grammatical constructions of language. It typically goes with taking 'agent' to a subject position, while to NP as following the word *that is* used as the 'source'.

#### 4. Why do we study syntax?(Importance of Syntax):

There are many reasons to study syntax that ranges from level of humanistic approach towards the behavioral motivations to learn. Some of the more particular goals to cite are as:

1. In order to know the strategy for children to acquire any particular language, with aspects to highlight the pattern of constructing structures. The stage binding tactics that learners tend to learn of any language.
2. It is of proper understanding for the bilingual and multilingual speakers who are in transient phase of constructing new sentences, despite of awareness with difference of structures. The forming of structure is not same in English as in Urdu or Sindhi.
3. Its study opens the new vista to know the actual working parameters of languages around the world.
4. It is new paradigm of doing the future research work to practice in different aspects of central theories related to syntax in linguistics.
5. The study of syntax assists to maintain set principles of any language known as "parameters". These criteria bound one to explore what are do's and don'ts 's' of any language. They tend to establish the continuing of objectives behind the communicative system. The basic notion of universal grammar that was introduced in 1960s. These language parameters if learnt can be use and further taught in the acceptable way to create new structures. It is for understanding clearly each other.

#### 5. Conclusion

Syntax is the study of words in a group that are in relation to one another. There are still many queries unresolved to define the phenomenon behind corporal relation between different lexical items. The subject of Linguistics as the major study have positively contributed to reveal the practical approach of finding many queries that are related to syntactic studies through scientific canonical steps.

#### References

- Chaer, A. (2007). *Linguistik Umum*. Jakarta: PT RINEKA CIPTA.
- Chomsky, Noam. 1965. *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Chomsky, Noam (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton. p. 15. ISBN 3-11-017279-8.
- Goldberg, A.E. (1995), *Constructions: a construction grammar approach to argument structure*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago press
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1985), *An introduction to functional grammar*. London: Edward Arnold
- Halliday, M.A.K. (2004), *An introduction to functional grammar*. Third edition .London: Edward Arnold
- Hudson, R. (1984), *Word Grammar*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell

- Hudson and Langendonck, W.van (1991), 'word grammar', in F.G. Droste and J.E Joseph(eds.), Linguistic theory and grammatical description. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, pp. 307-335
- Langacker, R.W. (1987), Foundations of cognitive grammar. Volume-1 Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Langacker R.W. (1991), 'Cognitive grammar' F.G. Droste and J.E Joseph (eds.), Linguistic theory and grammatical description. Amsterdam: John Benjamin, pp. 275-306
- MacFadyen, H. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.writingcentre.uottawa.ca/hypergrammar/phrfunc.html>
- Matthews. 1982:1 cited in Valin, JR, Robert D. Van, and Randy J. LaPolla. 1997. Syntax: Structure, Meaning, and Function. Cambridge.
- Robert D Van Valin, JR. "An Introduction to Linguistics". Department of Linguistics, University of Buffalo, the state University of New York.
- Saussure, Ferdinand de. 1916. *Course of General Linguistics*.
- Saussure, F de. 1959/ 1974. *Course of General Linguistics. Translated by Baskin, W.Glasgow: Collins*
- Schachter, Paul, ed. (1984b): Studies in the Structure of Toba Batak. UCLA Occasional Papers in Linguistics, Number 5.
- Shaumyan, S (1987), A semiotic theory of Language. Bloomington and Indianapolis. Indiana University Press.
- Starosta, S (1988), The Case for Lexicase: an outline of Lexicase grammatical theory. Open Linguistics Series. London and New York: Pinter.
- Sujatna, D. E. (2007). *English Syntax for beginners*. Jatinangor: UVULA PRESS.
- Wheeler, D. (n.d.). Retrieved from Welcome to Dr. Wheeler's Website: <http://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/index.html>