

## **Linguistics 5309: Generative Syntax Spring '20**

**Lecturer:** Prof. Nicholas Sobin

**Office & hours:** LART 113; 2-3:25 p.m. M&W, and by appointment

**Primary text:** Adger, David (2003) Core Syntax: A minimalist approach. Oxford.

**General description:** This course assumes a basic background in syntactic analysis. In this course, we will deal with concepts in syntax which are key to dealing with the Principles and Parameters framework and to minimalist analysis. Linguistic theory seeks to understand the elements and principles of natural language architecture, and it is not only of considerable interest in its own right, but also relates strongly to work in other areas such as discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, speech pathology, cognitive psychology, computer science (natural language processing) and current issues and practices in language pedagogy, both native and foreign.

**Goals:** In successfully completing this course, you should have acquired knowledge/skills in the following areas:

- analysis of sentence structure within the theory/ies studied;
- knowledge of important terms, ideas, and structural concepts; and
- understanding of the arguments/motivation for or against particular syntactic proposals

Beyond these learning outcomes, a major aim of this course is to foster the ability to read primary sources for purposes such as becoming informed about areas/theories of syntax not covered here, learning the results of new research, and conducting your own research.

**Course overview:** The course will be offered in a lecture/discussion format. Questions are not only encouraged, but essential. Your questions, observations, and ideas are very important to gaining a proper understanding of this material. Please feel free to ask questions both in class and outside of class during my office hours. Readings for most of the course will be primarily from Adger (above) and lectures/discussions will be aimed at the topics found in those readings, as sketched immediately below.

### **Readings/lecture/discussion content:**

#### **The Adger text:**

Ch1: Offers background for syntactic analysis, including data considerations, the nature of language and language acquisition, and using data to develop hypotheses and theories of linguistic structure and meaning

Ch2: Deals with the analysis of morpho-syntactic features, features which appear in the morphology and may arguably play a role in the syntax of a language

Ch3: Introduces the basics of sentence structuring in Chomsky's Minimalist Program, including semantic selection, category selection, and the notion 'merge', the means of combining constituents into more complex syntactic structures

Ch 4: Deals with a more extended analysis of 'merge', category-neutral syntax and the arguments for it, the relation of c-command, and abstract functional heads such as 'little' v.

Ch 5: Introduces the functional category hypothesis, extends category neutral syntax to include functional categories, and introduces one type of 'transformation', head movement

Ch 6: Offers arguments for the VP-internal subject hypothesis, with consequences for the analysis of unaccusative constructions and passive constructions

Ch 7: Extends the functional category hypothesis to include determiners as the head of what were formerly called NPs

Ch 8: Further extends the functional category hypothesis to include complementizers, raising issues of the various sentence types that are found in natural languages; null elements (ones with no phonetic realization) are dealt with extensively

Ch 9: Offers an introduction to the minimalist analysis of question formation and an introduction to A-bar movement--movement of phrases to non-argument positions; many of the problematic aspects of question formation are treated, including long movement, non-movement, superiority, and cross-linguistic variation in question formation

Ch 10: Deals with further aspects of question formation including locality of movement, and island phenomena (blockage to long movement).

We will cover the first five chapters in the first seven-week part of the course, and then the latter chapters (possibly excluding chapter 7) in the second part. We may also discuss certain new developments in syntax not covered in the text. As an additional exercise, we may read one or two outside articles to get used to reading primary sources in syntax.

**Grade:** The grade for the course will be based on a midterm exam (45%), a final exam (45%), and on class participation/contribution (10%). The **midterm exam** will consist of questions of analysis and argumentation taken from chapters 1-5 as sketched above. It will be written out of class but without consultation, and handed in. For the **final exam**, students will be given questions to prepare on various aspects of the analysis of linguistic structure as sketched in the outline above for chapters 6-10 and asked to write their prepared answers in class but with no outside materials. The **class contribution** portion of the mark will be based on the student's active questions, contributions to class discussion, and presentation of analyses in class. This

part of the mark is not ‘competitive’, and is only intended to encourage class participation and understanding of the material.

**The subject matter:** In addition to the list of topics above, it may be helpful at this point to attempt to characterize the general approach to syntax that we will be considering, the Minimalist Program, an approach to doing syntax within what is often termed the Principles & Parameters (P&P) theory.

### •What is P&P theory?

P&P theory embodies the general assumption that knowledge of language (*linguistic competence*) in good part consists of principles (features/aspects of grammatical architecture which are invariant across human languages and which are hard-wired) and parameters (features/aspects of grammatical structure which are also hard-wired, but which contain ‘settings’, that is, they may vary within a predetermined range, which is also hard-wired). The P&P idea is conceptually nice from the standpoint of language acquisition. If really abstract aspects of grammar are hard-wired, then it is not a mystery how children come to know them – their own biology gives it to them! The tough part is discovering exactly what these principles and parameters are.

### •What is the Minimalist Program?

What is called the ‘Minimalist Program’ in syntax has evolved from about 1990 and continues to evolve. It is a research program in syntax and morphology that puts a premium on concepts like economy and simplicity. All of science does this, of course, but there are some different twists here. MP poses the question of whether human language systems might be ‘perfect’ in the sense that they involve nothing superfluous or arbitrary, but only the barest essential elements and operations necessary to producing human language, that is, elements and operations which are in some sense ‘logical necessities’. Chomsky characterizes the MP as a ‘research program’ rather than as a ‘theory’. It asks us to look at proposed mechanisms or principles that we may have posited under other theoretical assumptions and to ask whether that mechanism or principle is in fact ‘stipulative’/arbitrary, and whether it might be eliminated in favour of something less stipulative, e.g., whether it might somehow be reduced to/derived from something else which is absolutely necessary to the operation of the system. To take a specific example, the MP tries to address such questions as why there is such a thing as movement/displacement in human languages, an apparent ‘imperfection’ – something that seems unnecessary. Why, for instance, in forming a question (e.g. Which door did Jane choose \_ ?) does a *wh*-phrase appear moved from its apparent site of origin? Is there a rule Move *Wh* (a rule for which there is no obvious motivation beyond the fact that *wh*-phrases appear to move), or is there instead something about the basic nature of the syntactic system which demands that such a movement take place, basically rendering a specific and somewhat arbitrary rule Move *Wh* unnecessary? Could there be *wh* movement but not a rule Move *Wh* per se?

One feature of this approach to syntax is that it extends a hypothesis developed in earlier approaches to syntax known as the Functional Category Hypothesis--the hypothesis that the

functional or grammatical categories (such as tense affixes and complementizers, as opposed to the lexical categories such as *noun* and *verb*) play a (or perhaps *the*) key role in driving sentence formation. Given the apparent obscurity of such categories, such a finding that functional categories are key to operating the syntax would seem to make it even more likely that the innateness hypothesis (the hypothesis that much of human language syntax, morphology, etc. is 'hard-wired' rather than learned from experience) is correct. If something like the MP approach is correct, it raises very different questions about how bilingual phenomena such as second language acquisition and code switching might work.

The MP is difficult to get through casual reading, hence the value of a course in it, given how dominant it is becoming in the syntax literature. In this course, we'll follow the main text fairly closely. We may digress at points to talk about other earlier approaches to the facts we're considering, and possibly some later approaches. It may be that the MP isn't correct and that earlier ideas or totally different ideas are better. When you're doing science, that's something that you can't know beforehand. You've simply got to work the theory and see how things turn out. Scientists often hit dead ends. It may seem a cruel fact, but that's the cost of trying to figure out what's really out there. There is no easy or foolproof way to do that.

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