

Book Reviews

Maggie Tallerman
UNDERSTANDING SYNTAX
London: Hodder Education, 2011, 312 pages

Sabina Halupka-Rešetar

Department of English, Faculty of Philosophy, University of Novi Sad, Serbia
E-mail: halupka.resetar@ff.uns.ac.rs

Tallerman's *Understanding Syntax*, now in its third, revised, expanded and improved edition, is a textbook aimed at students with no background in language studies. It is a very accessible, step-by-step introduction to the scientific study of syntax, which not only presents the major concepts and categories associated with this branch of linguistics but also addresses some more advanced issues.

Each of the nine chapters of the book is organized into sections, which makes it easy for the readers to find specific material. Exercises are provided both within the body of the text (separated from it by rows of arrows) and at the end of each chapter. While the answers to the first type of problems are discussed in the text itself and so it is easy for the readers to check their progress and understanding of the section read, the exercises at the end of the chapters are more challenging. The extensive examples in the book come from a wide variety of languages, (including English) and serve the purpose of providing the student with a meaningful comparative understanding of syntax.

The textbook also features a glossary of the most important terms and concepts introduced in it along with their brief definitions, often followed by examples from English, as well as a language index, the aim of which is to give genetic information about the languages used in the examples and the places where they are spoken.

The first chapter sets out to explain the basics of syntax as a science. Data from various languages are used to acquaint the readership with the concept of knowledge of language and show how unrelated languages share many common properties and constructions, suggesting that humans have an innate language faculty. The reasoning behind using examples from different, often unrelated languages is also explained, followed by a section on the layout of examples and the types of information contained in them. The chapter closes with an illustration of the typical syntactic constructions found in languages, demonstrating that languages really do have syntactic structure.

Chapter 2 focuses on the major lexical word classes occurring cross-linguistically, i.e. verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions, along with their distribution, function and morphosyntactic properties, as well as the typical set of grammatical categories they express. The author clearly states that there are languages that do not distinguish all these

word classes and also languages in which not all of these parts of speech form an open class (e.g. Jarawara of southern Amazonia with a closed class of only 14 adjectives or the Yimas language of New Guinea with only three clear examples of words that are unambiguously adjectives) but that all languages distinguish a class of verbs from a class of nouns. This is a somewhat controversial claim. Haspelmath (2001: 16543) points out that "[f]or a few languages, it has been claimed that there is no (or only a very slight) distinction between nouns and verbs, for instance for several North American languages of the Wakashan, Salishan, and Iroquoian families, as well as for a number of Polynesian languages. For instance, in Samoan (a Polynesian language), full words referring to events and things show intriguingly similar behavior. Both thing (or person) words and event words seem to occur in the same predication structures and in argument positions". In a similar vein, Croft (1991) notes that it is not possible to define cross-linguistically applicable notions of noun, adjective, and verb on the basis of semantic and/or formal criteria alone, but it is possible to define nouns, adjectives, and verbs as cross-linguistic prototypes on the basis of the universal markedness patterns, e.g. universally, object words are unmarked when functioning as referring arguments, property words are unmarked when functioning as nominal modifiers, and action words are unmarked when functioning as predicates.

Sentences and their internal structure are first tackled in Chapter 3, where a distinction is made between simple sentences and complex sentences, root and subordinate clauses and some of the main cross-linguistic variations in clause types are examined, including coordination (e.g. in Kambera), nominalization (in numerous South American and Austronesian languages) and serialization (e.g. Chinese, many African languages, etc).

The following chapter discusses heads and the role they play in determining the properties of their dependents within a phrase and introduces the difference between arguments and adjuncts. It then presents the two-way system of classifying languages into head-initial or head-final, based on the position of the head in relation to its complements, followed by the typological distinction into head-marking and dependent-marking languages. Tallerman points out that there are languages which rarely mark the syntactic relationships between head and dependent at all (e.g. Chinese, English) but that among those that do mark these relationships some languages exhibit both head- and dependent-marking constructions (e.g. German).

Chapter 5 uses ambiguous phrases and sentences to demonstrate the existence of syntactic structure and proceeds to show that strings of words can be tested for constituency by applying some syntactic tests, such as the sentence fragment test, the echo question test, the cleft test or the displacement (movement) test. Although these are just some of the commonly used tests, they do show how the intuitions of the native speakers can be captured. Next, the author introduces the idea of representing the structure of sentences using tree diagrams or bracketing and presents some key terms for describing the relationships holding between nodes in a tree.

The three major ways in which grammatical relations may be represented cross-linguistically, namely constituent order (basic and marked), case (nominative/accusative vs. ergative/absolutive systems and split systems) and agreement and cross-referencing are dealt with in Chapter 6, which investigates the relationships between verbs and their noun phrase arguments within the clause. The core relations of subject and object are also examined in an attempt to determine whether there are any grammatical relations that could be considered universal.

The next chapter shows that the grammatical relations between the verb and its arguments are not static and presents the best-known processes of changing the valency of a verb by promoting objects to become subjects or by demoting subjects to an oblique phrase or even deleting them. Thus, the passive construction and its ergative-system counterpart, the antipassive, involve a decrease in the number of core arguments of the verb, while the applicative and the causative are processes which result in an increase in the number of core arguments.

Chapter 8 focuses on operations which do not cause any change in the grammatical function of the elements they affect, namely the possibility of moving phrases around within a clause. Two such instances of movement are dealt with, *wh*-questions (where languages differ with respect to whether they front the *wh*-element(s) or not) and relative clauses (which may also take on different forms and use various strategies cross-linguistically). The chapter closes with a section on focus movement and scrambling, generally regarded as being related to *wh*-constructions.

The book ends with the intentionally ambiguously titled chapter *Asking questions about syntax*, which not only outlines the kinds of questions one needs to ask in attempting to construct a basic syntactic description of a language and gives an illustration of how these questions could be answered (by providing a short case study of Welsh), but it also informs the reader of the issues and questions currently widely debated in linguistics and points to possible further directions of syntactic study.

On the whole, the textbook is self-explanatory, user-friendly and covers the major topics in syntax, usually providing illustrative examples from a wide range of languages. However, this truly comparative approach sometimes unnecessarily complicates things (e.g. on p. 129, in the discussion of double genitive marking a Latin or German example would probably have been closer to the readership than the Ayacucho construction cited). Also, the author does not commit herself to a particular theoretical framework, which might be considered advantageous for an introductory textbook, but also runs the risk of giving no more than a very broad and general overview and as such, being fit mostly for an undergraduate level general linguistics programme, or perhaps as a supplementary reading for an introductory course in comparative syntax. Related to this point is also the fact that Tallerman employs the pre-GB theory-type of sentence structure with the S label on top, suggesting that sentences are exocentric (p. 149 and later). Also, ignoring X-bar theory fails to stress the fact that all phrases appear to be structured in the same way (although X-bar theory is referred to briefly and indirectly in Section 4.1.8). On p. 118 the author acknowledges the view that a determiner is really the head of the 'noun phrase' but she continues "to refer to a phrase like *this box of dates* as a 'noun phrase' without taking a stance on the DP hypothesis", despite the fact that the DP-hypothesis has generally been accepted (if questioned in some article-less languages, see Bošković 2008; Corver 1992; Chierchia 1998; Cheng and Sybesma 1999; Lyons 1999; Baker 2003 among others) since the late 1980s. Similarly, Tallerman claims (p. 165) that there is no VP in Hungarian but the standard claim is that there is (see e.g. Kiefer 1992; É. Kiss 2002, among others).

On the other hand, the questions about syntax raised in the last chapter which actually give the reader guidelines for constructing a basic syntactic description of a language (as the author does for Welsh) are extremely helpful and enlightening; no less exciting are the issues tackled in section 9.3. There is a Further reading section at the end of each chapter, which helps the keen reader build on the knowledge gained through the text. Also, hints are often provided for solving the exercises at the end of the chapters. The

textbook has a lengthy list of up-to-date references as is technically next to perfect (there are virtually no typos except some inconsistencies in the References section).

As the author points out in the concluding section, "[h]aving completed this introduction, you are now ready to further your study of syntax" (p. 285), which she suggests might take various (overlapping) paths, one of which is by looking at syntactic theory in order to explain the syntactic differences and similarities between languages. It is exactly this path I had in mind when I chose *Understanding syntax* as one of the obligatory readings for a course in Comparative syntax and it has lived up to my expectations.

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