Theories of syntax

The linguistic landscape is littered with literally hundreds if not thousands of theories of syntax, many with no more than a handful of adherents, a smallish number with considerable numbers of practitioners; just a few theories dominate over the rest, and account for the majority of syntacticians. Syntactic theories are commonly grouped into two broad types, formal and functional (see §1.5). Formal theories of syntax focus on linguistic form, relegating meaning to a peripheral position. Functional theories by contrast tend to focus on the functions language serves, and the ways that syntax is organised to serve these functions; meaning plays a central role.

Within both camps can be found an enormous range of variation in the extent to which theories are formal or functional. In extreme versions of formal syntax, grammar tends to be conceptualised as an abstract algebraic system specifying the acceptable strings of symbols making up a language. Meaning is considered irrelevant, and syntax (in whole or part) is seen as constituting an autonomous system. Extreme functional syntaxes by contrast recognise only meanings or functions, and deny the existence of structure in syntax. The majority of theories fall somewhere between the two poles.

Where does the approach outlined in Chapter 5 fit? It is formal in that syntactic form is accorded a central place. At the same time it is heavily functional: not only are grammatical relations (sometimes also called functions) recognised, but they are linked to general functions (uses) of language, in terms of three types of meaning, experiential, interpersonal, and textural.

The division into formal and functional theories obscures a more fundamental point. It was suggested in §5.4 (see p. 118) that we need the notion of grammatical relations as well as units to adequately describe the syntax of a language. These relations are not purely formal phenomena; nor are they purely functional. Rather, both aspects are central to them. Grammatical relations can't be identified or distinguished without taking language structure into account; nor can they be recognised without paying attention to meaning. Grammatical relations are signs in the Saussurean sense: they are characterised by an indissoluble association between a linguistic form and a meaning. In this conception, meaning is not a mere add-on to syntax, but is central to it – syntax is all about making meaning. That's why it's there.

This semiotic perspective on syntax is shared by a small but growing group of grammatical theories, including Cognitive Grammar (Langacker 1987, 1991), Applicative Grammar (Shaumyan 1987), Systemic Functional Grammar (at least in the standard Hallidayan version – Halliday 1985, third edition Halliday 2004), and Construction Grammar (Goldberg 1995). (The theories differ, however, in what they take to be syntactic

signs, as well as what they call them.) But the seeds of the semiotic perspective have been around for a long time, and are arguably implicit in Saussure's *Course* (1959/1974, first published 1916).

Syntactic theories and theorists differ on other dimensions as well. These days, most syntacticians agree that there are limits on the range of syntactic variation possible among languages. Some take a strong universalist stance, arguing that there is a single abstract universal system underlying the syntax of all languages. Opinions differ on the nature of this universal grammar. Other linguists take the view that there are universals of syntax, though not necessarily any universal system of syntax. (See further §11.2 in the textbook.)

Even the idea that there is structure above the word and below the clause is not universally accepted. A smallish group of theories including Word Grammar (Hudson 1984; Hudson and Langendonck 1991) and Lexicase (Starosta 1988) argue that phrase-sized units do not exist. Syntax can be accounted for, according to these theories, entirely in terms of words and the relations among them. These are relations of dependency, in which one word, the dependent, is subordinate to another, the head; typically the dependent modifies the head, indicating its type. A typical clause has a verb as its head, with words such as determiners, nouns, and prepositions or postpositions as its dependent. These dependents may in turn have their own dependents. The diagram below illustrates a possible dependency analysis of example (5-7), p. 107; compare this with the constituency analyses shown in (5-8) and (5-9), p. 108, and the elaborated labelled analysis of (5-25) p. 111.

The train chugged along the line through the mountains

(Note that in this dependency diagram the arrowheads point to dependents.)

Although relatively few grammarians agree with strong versions of dependency theory that do away with phrases, the need for dependency relations somewhere within syntax is widely agreed to. Thus most theories accept that dependency relations are fundamental to the structure of NPs. Opinions differ, however, as to whether the head is the noun or a determiner, and there is no more agreement on dependency analysis than there is on the hierarchical structure of clauses into units. Dependency is a highly problematic and contentious notion.

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