

# Introduction to Generative Grammar

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- Consider the sentence in (1a) and an interrogative counterpart of it in (1b).
  - (1) a. Solfrid has bought **an encyclopedia**.  
b. **What** has Solfrid \_\_ bought \_\_?
- We could formulate the following rule to account for the formation of interrogative sentences in English:
  - (2) Place the leftmost verb *V* of the sentence in the beginning of the sentence. Subsequently, place an interrogative phrase *Q* to the immediate left of *V*.

- Consider the sentence in (1a) and an interrogative counterpart of it in (1b).
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- The application of the rule can be illustrated by the steps in (3).
  - (3) i. Solfrid has bought what?  $\xrightarrow{\text{place leftmost } V \text{ in the beginning of sentence}}$
  - ii. **Has** Solfrid \_\_ bought what?  $\xrightarrow{\text{place } Q \text{ to the left of } V}$
  - iii. **What** has Solfrid \_\_ bought \_\_?

- We can apply our rule to a sentence with a subordinate/embedded clause too (i.e. the clause between brackets in (4)).

- (4) i. Seb will say [that Solfrid has bought what]?  $\xrightarrow{\text{place leftmost } V \text{ in the beginning of sentence}}$   
ii. **Will** Seb \_\_ say [that Solfrid has bought what]?  $\xrightarrow{\text{place } Q \text{ to the left of } V}$   
iii. **What** will Seb \_\_ say [that Solfrid has bought \_\_]?

- What if we tried to apply the same rule to (5)?

(5) i. [That Solfrid has bought what] will surprise Seb?

place leftmost V in the beginning of sentence →

ii. **Has** [that Solfrid \_\_ bought what] will surprise Seb?

place Q to the left of V →

iii. **What** has [that Solfrid \_\_ bought \_\_] will surprise Seb?

- We followed our rule to the letter, but the result in (5) is now ungrammatical.
- The star “\*” is used before a sentence to indicate that it is *not* considered a well-formed example by native speakers or signers of a given language.

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- Speakers of English have quite robust intuition about the ungrammaticality of (5).<sup>1</sup>
- But this intuition is more general:
  - (6) a. Who do you like the book [that \_\_ wrote]?
  - b. Who do you wonder [whether \_\_ wrote *Crying in H Mart*]?
  - c. Who did you invite [ \_\_ and Faatu]?
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- Going back to our question: how do native speakers of English have the robust intuition that the sentences below are ungrammatical?
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  - ① We learn language through formal education.
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  - ③ *Suggestions?*

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### ① We learn language through formal education.

- ▶ Unfortunately, not everyone has access to formal education.
- ▶ Nonetheless, all individuals acquire at least one language (more than one if they are raised in a multicultural environment, e.g. a multilingual country or an immigrant household).

### ② We learn language by copying the linguistic behavior of individuals around us.<sup>2</sup>

- ▶ Language behavior is complex and creative, so it is incompatible with simply copying previous behavior.
  - We are able to utter sentences that we have never heard/seen before.
  - We are able to interpret sentences that we are hearing/seeing for the first time.
  - We do not have access to negative data and, yet, we have robust intuitions about ungrammatical sentences.

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Figure 1: Noam Chomsky (source)

- Noam Chomsky proposed instead that human beings are innately endowed with a **Faculty of Language**.
- In other words, we are born with an inherent capacity for language.
- Because we are born with such a capacity, we do not have to learn language from scratch.
- This faculty underlies the robust intuition mentioned above about which sentences are grammatical and which are not.



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- In this course we will focus on syntax, but the Faculty of Language underlies our knowledge at all levels of linguistic analysis, i.e. phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics & pragmatics.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>To reiterate, English is used here for convenience. We can reproduce this experiment in any language.

- Here is one example from syntax:

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### Exercise

Is the sentence below grammatical or ungrammatical? If it is ungrammatical, how would you fix it?

(7) Martha borged frinkenly a surdepose.

---

- You probably judged this sentence ungrammatical (see the \* in (7), repeated in (8a)), and fixed it by changing the position of *frinkently* (8c):

- (8) a. \* Martha borged **frinkently** a surdepose.  
b. Martha borged a surdepose **frinkently**.  
c. Martha **frinkently** borged a surdepose.

- Besides illustrating syntactic competence, the examples (8) demonstrate that our linguistic knowledge cannot be the result of teaching or imitation for two reasons:
  - ① The above-mentioned sentences are mostly formed with made-up words. You have never been exposed to them at school or at home. Yet, you had clear intuitions about their grammaticality.
  - ② That intuition also involved ungrammatical sentences. This is **negative data**. The data we are exposed to as children acquiring language does *not* include ungrammatical sentences. As such, this type of knowledge is not something we can learn or imitate.

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- In addition to these two points, data based on novel forms like *surdepose* or *frinkenly* indicate that **frequency** cannot be a decisive factor in language acquisition either.
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- According to Chomsky's proposal, human beings are endowed with a Faculty of Language.
- Because this faculty is innate, we do not have to rely on *external* instructions (e.g. formal education or linguistic behavior of other individuals, who we would imitate).
- However, linguistic input is crucial for acquisition, for two reasons:
  - ① Even though we have a Faculty of Language, we need appropriate stimuli to develop it (cf. the light input necessary to develop vision).
  - ② It determines which language(s) we will acquire.

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- The sensitivity to the environment defuses potential criticism that Chomsky's Faculty of Language could face.
- If this faculty is shared among all human beings, does this theory predict that there should be just one language?
- *No*: the theory proposes that the Faculty of Language contains two types of rules, Principles and Parameters.

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### Principles and Parameters

- **Principles:** rules that any language should obey.
- **Parameters:** rules that have variable realization.



- An example of a Universal Principle: across different languages, nominal phrases like proper names cannot have the same referent as a pronoun that occurs before it in a sentence:

(9) She<sub>1</sub> supported Faatu<sub>1</sub>.

- ▶ This sentence is only grammatical if *she* refers to a person other than Faatu.
- ▶ The subscripted index in (9) indicates that *she* and *Faatu* (both indexed with '1') are to be interpreted as having the same referent.
- ▶ Compare (9) with (10), a grammatical example because *she* and *Faatu* are not coindexed (i.e. do not have the same referent):

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- Consider now Mongolian. Even though Mongolian is completely unrelated from English, the sentence in (11) is as ungrammatical as (9).<sup>4</sup>

(11) *Mongolian* (Mongolic)

\* Ter<sub>1</sub> Čemeg<sub>1</sub>-in nom-ig ura-san.  
she.NOM Čemeg-GEN book-ACC tear-PST

Intended: 'She<sub>1</sub> tore Čemeg<sub>1</sub>'s book.'

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<sup>4</sup>Data in a language different from the metalanguage (i.e. in the language used for communication, in this case, English) usually has three lines: original data, followed by word-by-word or morpheme-by-morpheme translation and, finally, an appropriate translation in the metalanguage (viz. English).

- Some examples of Parameters:
  - ▶ Position of the head (final or initial)
  - ▶ Position of interrogative phrases (moved to the initial position or same position of non-interrogative counterpart)
- We will examine each in turn.

- Assuming that the verb is a head, English is a head-initial language because the **head** precedes its complement or **object**, the nominal phrase *this book*:

(12) Bat **read** **this book**.

*head-initial*

- In Adyghe, on the other hand, the verb (*jetxə* ‘is.writing’) follows the object (*pisme-r* ‘letter-ABS’). This is a head-final language because the **head** follows its **object**.

(13) *Adyghe* (Northwest Caucasian)

č’ale-m pisme-r jetxə  
boy-ERG letter-ABS is.writing

*head-final*

‘The boy is writing a letter.’



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 boy-ERG letter-ABS is.writing  
 ‘The boy is writing a letter.’

- This is a parameter that determines the position of certain elements like verbs and prepositions and other elements they combine with in the sentence (e.g. their objects).
- Languages have one of two options to choose from, creating cross-linguistic variation between:
  - ▶ Head-initial languages (e.g. English, Brazilian Portuguese, Wolof, etc)
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- Another example: the position of interrogative phrases. We saw in the beginning that, in English, interrogative phrases move to the beginning of the clause:

- (14) a. Solfrid has bought **an encyclopedia**.  
b. **What** has Solfrid buy \_\_\_?

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- ▶ English is, thus, a language with movement of interrogative phrases.

- In Hindi, however, interrogative phrases occur in exactly the same position where their non-interrogative counterpart occurs.

(15) *Hindi* (Indo-Aryan)

a. raam-ne **kelaa** khaayaa.

Ram-ERG banana ate

‘Ram ate a banana.’

b. raam-ne **kyaa ciiz** khaayaa?

Ram-ERG what thing ate

‘What did Ram eat?’

- In these examples, both the non-interrogative object (15a) and the interrogative one (15b) occur before the verb, Mongolian being an SOV language.

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- According to Generative Grammar, we are endowed with a **Faculty of Language**, i.e. an innate capacity for language.
- It explains why we are able to acquire an infinite capacity for language, even though we are exposed to a very much finite linguistic input as babies.
- This is particularly clear when we consider that we have robust intuitions about sentences that we have never encountered before and even sentences formed out of novel words.
- The Faculty of Language is comprised of two types of rules:
  - ▶ **Principles**: rules that any language has.
  - ▶ **Parameters**: rules that all languages also have, but with variable realization.
- The existence of these two types of rules explains why we do not have to rely so much on external stimulus for language acquisition.
- Parameters, additionally, account for why languages vary.

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- This is particularly clear when we consider that we have robust intuitions about sentences that we have never encountered before and even sentences formed out of novel words.
- The Faculty of Language is comprised of two types of rules:
  - ▶ **Principles**: rules that any language has.
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