GOMBE SAVANNAH JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES VOL. 5 NO. 2 DECEMBER, 2024

GOMBE SAVANNAH

JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES (GOSAJOLLCOS)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Number 2
December, 2024

SAVANNAH JOURNAL OF LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES (SAJOLLCOS)

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH GOMBE STATE UNIVERSITY

VOLUME 5, NO. 2, DECEMBER 2024

ISSN: ONLINE: 2811-2261, PRINT: 2787-0286

A Publication of Department of English Gombe State University, Gombe State

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(SAJOLLCOS) Gombe State University, Gombe State. Volume 5, No. 2 December, 2024.

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ISSN: 2787-0286 Print & 2811-2261 Online

Printed in Nigeria @Six-Sweet Printers and Publishers
GSU, Gombe, Gombe State.
Phone No: +2348039511789
E-**mail**: alameenalfira@gamil.com

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Savannah Journal of Language, Literature and Communication Studies (SAJOLLCOS)
Vol. 5 No. 2: December, 2024 ISSN: 2787-0286 & 2811-2261 (Online & Print)

Syntax and Semantics Interface

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Abstract

Humans possess the ability to form and understand infinitely many sentences. It is widely assumed that these two abilities are based on two autonomous, recursive procedures: syntax, a procedure that generates sentences, and semantics, a procedure that interprets sentences. Though autonomous, the two procedures aren't unrelated. In particular, the steps of the recursion closely correspond to each other as the relevance of the notion of c-command for both procedures shows. The syntax-semantics interface is the level of grammar where the relationship between syntax and semantics is established. The theory of the syntax-semantics interface determines which aspects of structure and interpretation are related and how this relationship comes about. This is usually done by stating what the representation of an utterance at the interface is and postulating conditions this representation is subject to. This paper, which examines syntax-semantics interface, was conducted by examining theories of syntax and semantics to establish their bonding and otherwise, the outcome of the research revealed that Syntax and Semantics are interwoven.

Introduction

Syntax-Semantics Interface a commonplace observation about language is that it consists of the systematic association of sound patterns with meaning. Syntax studies the structure of well-formed phrases (spelled out as sound sequences); semantics deals with the way syntactic structures are interpreted. However, how to exactly slice the pie between these two disciplines and how to map one onto the other is the subject of controversy. In fact, understanding how syntax and semantics interact (i.e., their interface) constitutes one of the most interesting and central questions in linguistics. Traditionally, phenomena like word order, case marking, agreement, and the like are viewed as part of syntax, whereas things like the meaningfulness of a well-formed string are seen as part of semantics. Thus, for example, "I loves Musa" is ungrammatical because of lack of agreement between the subject and the verb, a phenomenon that pertains to syntax, whereas Chomky's famous "colorless green ideas sleep furiously" (Lasnick citing chomsky 2011) is held to be syntactically well-formed but semantically deviant. In fact, there are two aspects of the picture just sketched that one ought to keep apart. The first pertains to data, the second to theoretical explanation. We may be able on pre-theoretical grounds to classify some linguistic data (i.e., some native speakers' intuitions) as "syntactic" and others as "semantic." But we cannot determine *a priori* whether a certain phenomenon is best explained in syntactic or

semantics terms. So, for example, syntactic accounts of semantic deviance (in terms of mismatches of features) are possible as are conceivable semantic accounts even of phenomena like agreement. To illustrate the latter case, one could maintain that a VP like "loves Musa" denotes a predicate that cannot be true of, say, the speaker. Hence, "loves Musa" predicated of the speaker results in something undefined. This account of the ungrammaticality of "I loves Musa" would qualify as semantic as it crucially uses notions like truth and denotation, which are the building blocks of semantics. What is actually most likely is that agreement is ultimately a cluster of phenomena, whose optimal account will involve the interaction of both syntax and semantics. This is a simple illustration of how issues of interface arise and why they are so important. They concern both data and theory. It is not a matter of terminology but of which component is responsible for which phenomenon and how the modules of each component are set up, something that cannot be settled *a priori* once and for all. Perhaps the key issue at the interface of syntax and semantics concerns the nature of the mapping between the two, which has been at the center of much research within generative grammar. An important approach, pursued especially within categorical grammar and related lexicalist frameworks, has been dubbed by E. Bach the "rule-by-rule" hypothesis. It assumes that for each syntactic rule determining how two or more constituents are put together, there is a corresponding semantic rule determining how the respective meanings are to be composed. On this view, the interface task is to figure out which syntactic rules are mapped onto which semantic composition modes. A somewhat different line is pursued within transformational approaches to syntax such as the Government and Binding framework or the more recent Minimalist Program. Within such approaches, there are no rules in the traditional sense but only very general schemata and principles that interact in yielding pairing of phonetic representations and logical forms. Logical forms (LFs) are syntactic representations where phenomena like scope and anaphoric links are unambiguously represented.

The mapping usually employs three things: the lexical meaning of the words; a few universal semantic operations (like function application and abstraction); and a limited set of type-shifting or coercion mechanisms. The lexical meaning of words is drawn from a restricted set of semantic types that correspond in systematic ways to syntactic categories. For example, the syntactic category "NP" encodes certain patterns of distribution (namely, the possibility of occurring in certain slots in the clause, like subject, object, prepositional object, etc.). The corresponding semantic type will be that of individuals (in the case of referential NPs like "John Musa") or generalized quantifiers (in case of quantificational NPs like "at most two tenors" or "every red cat"). Similarly for the other syntactic categories: VPs will denote functions from individuals into truth values, and so on. In

interpreting complex structures, say, for example [S Zainab [VP sings well] one first checks the semantic type of the meaning of the constituents. Generally, one finds a function and an argument that can be combined by functional application. If, however, types don't match, something will have to be done. One possibility is resorting to a limited set of mechanisms that make the types fit (type shifting or coercion).

Literature Review

Type-driven interpretation is a procedure proposed by Klein and Sag (1985). The main differences between them are mostly traceable to the different conceptions of syntactic structure that they are tailored on. Live issues at the syntax-semantic interface include the following: What are the universal rules of semantic composition? What kinds of type-shifting operations (besides aspect-related ones like literate) are there? Is type shifting restricted to the lexicon or is it also used in the compositional part of the semantics? What are the mappings from syntactic categories into semantic types? Is there any cross-linguistic variation in any of the above?

Chomsky (1957) asserts that syntax-semantics mapping plays in acquisition. To illustrate the variation issue, consider for example the status of mass nouns in English the following paradigm is representative in this example “Gold is rare”. “the gold is rare” In English, mass nouns like gold have the same syntactic distribution as proper names and can occur without a determiner in the canonical argumental positions (subject, object, object of preposition, etc.). In Italian (or French), mass nouns behave instead just like singular-count common nouns in that they can never occur in subject or object position without a determiner. This difference might be syntactic in nature (gold and Oro belong to two different syntactic categories). Or, it is also conceivable that they belong to the same syntactic category (say, the category N) but their semantic type is different. In English mass nouns might be names of substances, which would explain their proper noun-like behavior. This second approach is based on the assumption that there is a certain degree of variability across languages in the way items belonging to the same syntactic category are mapped into the corresponding meanings.

Research methodology

This paper is a descriptive research, based on descriptive grammar is the linguistic approach that studies a language in a descriptive and implied manner, as opposed to prescriptive, which declares what a language should be like. In other words, descriptive grammarians focus analysis on how Language is conventionally used and comes up with the standard process on how language should be used. Hence, this is a descriptive research that aims in describing the syntax and semantics interface.

Data presentation

From the above considerations in literature review, it should be clear why questions that arise at the

syntax-semantics interface are fundamental. The empirical domains where one can hope to find answers to such questions are very broad. They range from the study of quantification and anaphora, to tense and aspect, to the study of thematic roles, and much more. Anybody who speaks English knows that the sentence below is a English sentence, and also has quite a precise idea about what the sentence means. The data for this research constitutes sentences that are semantically deviant but syntactically acceptable and vice versa.

1. Every boy is holding a block
2. The book is holding by everybody*

English speakers know for infinitely many sentences that they are sentences of English, and they also know the meaning of these infinitely many sentences. A central idea of Generative Syntax is that the structure of a sentence is given by a recursive procedure, as this provides the means to derive our knowledge about the infinite number of sentences with finite means. For the same reason, semanticists have developed recursive procedures that assign a meaning to sentences based on the meaning of its parts.

The syntax-semantics interface establishes a relationship between these two recursive procedures. An interface between syntax and semantics becomes necessary only if the two indeed constitute two autonomous systems. Indeed this is widely assumed to be the case, though not entirely uncontroversial. Consider two arguments brought forth in favour of the assumption that syntax is autonomous: One is that there are apparently purely formal requirements for the well-formedness of sentences. For example 2 above, lack of agreement as in example 1 renders.

By prefixing the sentence with an asterisk(*), though subject-verb agreement doesn't seem to make any contribution to the meaning.

3.*Every boy hold a block.

The special role of uninterpretable features for syntax comes out most sharply in recent work by Chomsky (1995), who regards it as one of the main purposes of syntax to eliminate such uninterpretable features before a sentence is interpreted. On the other hand, there are also sentences that are syntactically well-formed, but don't make any sense semantically (often marked by prefixing the sentence with a hatch mark). Famous example in (3a) makes this point, and so does;

4. a. Colorless green ideas sleep furiously.
   b. She arrived for an hour.

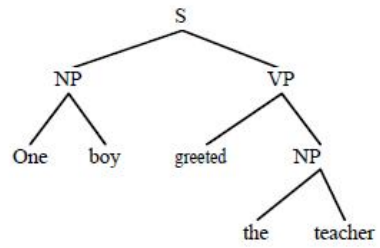
Independent of the value of these arguments, the separation of syntax and semantics has led to tremendous progress in the field. So, at the minimum it has been a successful methodological principle.

Basic Assumptions

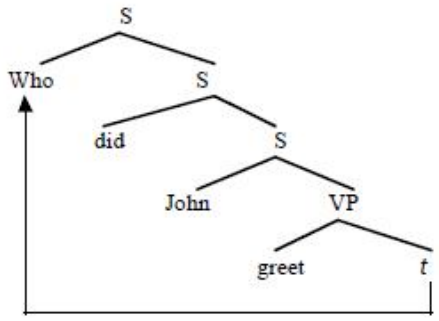
Work on the syntax-semantics interface by necessity proceeds from certain assumptions about syntax and semantics. For the syntax, we assume that sentences have a hierarchical constituent structure that groups words and sub-constituents into

constituents. Also, we assume that constituents can be moved from one place of the tree structure to another subject to constraints of the kind Ross (1967) first described. The constituent structure of a sentence is captured by the kind of phrase structure tree illustrated in (4a). (4b) shows a phrase structure tree with a movement relation.

(4) a.



b.



The task of semantics is to capture the meaning of a sentence. Consider first the term "meaning". In colloquial use, "meaning" includes vague associations speakers may have with a sentence that don't exist for all speakers of a language: e.g. the sentence "I have a dream" may have a special meaning in this colloquial sense to people familiar with Martin Luther King.

Semantics, however, is at present concerned only with reproducible aspects of sentence meaning. In particular, semanticists have focused on the question of whether a sentence is judged true or false in a certain situation. Part of what any speaker of English knows about the meaning of (1) is that it is true in the situation shown in picture A, but false in the situation shown in picture B.

5. Every boy is holding a block.

Any speaker of English is equipped with certain mental mechanisms that enables him to make this truth value judgment for (1) and similar judgments for infinitely many other sentences.

An explicit theory can be given using techniques similar to those used in mathematical logic. In this approach, the meaning of a constituent is modeled by a mathematical object (a individual, a function, a set, or a more complicated object). Complete declarative sentences such as (1) correspond to functions that assign possible situations one of the truth values – True or False. The basic intuition of entailment between sentences as in (6) is captured if for every situation to which the meanings of the premises (5a) and (5b) assign True, the meaning of the conclusion (5c) is also assigns True

(6) a. Every boy is holding a block.
b. John is a boy.
c. Therefore, John is holding a block.

Syntax-semantics correspondences

Though Syntax and Semantics are two autonomous recursive procedures,

most researchers assume that there's a relationship between the two to be captured by the theory of the syntax-semantics interface. In particular, it seems to be the case that the steps of the recursion are largely the same. In other words, two phrases that form a syntactic constituent usually form a semantic constituent as well. Syntacticians have argued that the subject and the object in (6) form constituents, which we call Noun Phrases (abbreviated as NPs). We see in (6) that the adjective that occurs in a NP also makes semantic contribution to that NP. This is not just the case in English: As far as we know, there's no language where adjectives occurring with the subject modify the object, and vice versa.

Further evidence for the close relation of syntactic and semantic constituency comes from such a number of phenomena that we cannot discuss them all. Briefly consider the case of idioms. On the one hand, an idiom is a semantically opaque unit whose meaning doesn't derive from the interpretation of its parts in a transparent way. One the other hand, an idiom is syntactically complex. Consider (8).

(8) a. Paul kicked the bucket. ('Paul died.')

b. The shit hit the fan. ('Things went really wrong.')

The examples in (8) show a verb-object idiom and a subject-verb-object idiom. What about a subject-verb idiom that is then transparently combined with the object? Marantz (1984, pp. 24-28) claims that there are no examples of this type in English. Since syntacticians have argued that the verb and the object form a constituent that doesn't include the subject (the VP in (4)), Marantz's generalization corroborates the claim that idioms are always syntactic constituents which follows from the close relationship between syntax and semantics. If the syntactic and semantic recursion are as closely related as we claim, an important question is the semantic equivalent of syntactic constituent formation. In other words, what processes can derive the interpretation of a syntactically complex phrase from the interpretation of its parts. Specifically, the most elementary case is that of a constituent that has two parts.

Constituency

Predication as functional application: an old intuition about sentences is that the verb has a special relationship with the subject and the objects. Amongst the terms that have been used for this phenomenon, are "Predication" which we adopt.

9. John gave Mary "Brothers Karamazov"

One basic property of predication is a one-to-one relation of potential argument positions of a predicate and actually filled argument positions. For example, the subject position of a predicate can only contain one nominal: shows that two nominals are too many, and (10b) shows that none is not enough.

(10) a. *John Bill gave Mary "Brothers Karamazov"

b. *gave Mary "Brothers Karamazov"

Chomsky (1981) states this one-to-one requirement between predication position and noun phrases filling this position as the theta-criterion. The relationship between "gave" and the three NPs in (9) is also a basic semantic question. The observed one-to-one correspondence has motivated an analysis of verbs as mathematical functions. A mathematical function maps an argument to a result. Crucially, a function must take exactly one argument to yield a result, and therefore the one-to-one property of predication is explained. So, for example the meaning of "gave Mary 'brothers K.'" in (10) would be captured as a function that takes one argument and yields either true or false as result, depending on whether the sentence is true or false.

The phrase "gave Mary 'brothers K'" (the verb phrase) in (9) is itself semantically complex, and involves two further predication relations. The meaning of the verb phrase, however, is a function. Therefore, the semantic analysis of the verb phrase requires us to adopt higher order functions of the kind explored in mathematical work by Schšnfinkel (1924) and Curry (1930).

Syntax-semantics mismatches

Subject quantifiers

When we consider the semantics of quantifiers in more detail, it turns out, that the view that predication in syntax and functional application in semantics stand in a one-to-one correspondence, which we expressed above is too simple. Consider example (11), which is repeated from (1).

11 Every boy is holding a block

Assume that the verb phrase "is holding a block" is a one-place predicate that is true of any individual that's holding a block. Our expectation is then that the interpretation of (11) is achieved by applying this predicate to an individual that represents the interpretation of the subject "every boy". But, some reflection shows that this is impossible to accomplish Ñ. The only worthwhile suggestion to capture the contribution of "every boy" to sentence meaning by means of one individual is that "every boy" is interpreted as the group of all boys. But, the examples in (12) show that "every boy" cannot be interpreted in this way.

(12) Every boy (*together) weighs 50 kilo

All the boys (together) weigh 50 kilo.

The interpretation of (12) cannot be achieved by applying the predicate that represents the VP meaning to any individual. It can also be seen that predicate modification cannot be used to assign the right interpretation to examples like (12).

Discussion of findings

Based on the examples presented above, we conclude that syntax and semantics are interwoven. The syntax-semantics interface is currently a topic of very lively research where substantial progress has been made in recent years. Within the space constraints of this paper, I could only give an overview of the basic questions and results of this

field. I have based my discussion on the view that syntax and semantics are autonomous, and that there is a mapping from syntactic structures to interpretation. Other approaches, however, make use of function composition and more complex mathematical processes to eliminate lambda abstraction (Jacobson (1999) and others). In a separate debate, Sauerland (1998) challenges the assumption that movement in relative should be interpreted as involving binding of a plain variable in the base position of movement. While the properties of scope and binding reviewed in this paper are to our knowledge uncontroversial, current work extends this analysis to similar phenomena like modal verbs, tense morphemes, comparatives and many other topics.

Research activity on the syntax-semantics interface is currently expanding greatly, as an increasing number of researchers is proficient in the basic assumptions and the formal models of both fields, syntax and semantics

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