

Why to syntax

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“There are some enterprises in which
 a careful disorderliness
 is the true method.”

Herman Melville

This note comes from what Valerie Koontz, a student in our course on syntax, this Spring of 2000, wrote as a response to my charge to the students, which was to say, in a non-formal way, how they had intersected with, what they had learned from, syntax, what syntax had to do with them. We will start with what Valerie wrote, because it so accurately describes the kind of interaction with the heart of syntax which is what I hope I will be lucky enough to midwife in any of my syntactic encounters with anyone, whether that person is officially a student (whose definition is supposedly completely and most importantly given by the fact that I am put in a position of having to evaluate their performance in a course, or a degree program, etc., an absurdity which I will try not to foam further at the mouth about), or a colleague, or one of my teachers. In short, any fellow being.

Needless to say, many times, my invisibly structured (not to say chaotic) “methods” of shooting for this particular star leave many of my fellow conversants dismayed, angry, confused, thinking that I am a flake, that nothing is going on except a waste of their time. And in all honesty, I think that there are certainly far too many people who come through “my” classes badly bummed out. I had in fact learned that that was the case this semester in another class, and was discouraged, though I had felt that our syntaxing together had worked in general pretty well in the class of which Valerie was a member.

So when I read what follows, I was very happy, and I wrote to her what you will see after what she wrote.

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Syntax – What Have You Learned and How Will You Use It

You proposed the question and this is one of many responses from one of many students that has progressed from feeling lost and confused to knowing a little and desiring to know a lot more.

The problem for me with this paper and with syntax was where to begin. With such a mammoth subject to conquer, I was a bit overwhelmed in the beginning. It seemed as if syntax was a bottomless pit or that infinite number of stacking turtles that you described on the first day. “Shooting for the stars” seemed like an impossible task that only true scholars would ever be able to accomplish. As

the semester progressed, I soon came to realize that the true joy of syntax was finding those stars and analyzing those turtles.

That is what I find to be the most true - the joy and frustration of syntax is taking structures and sentences apart and figuring them out. By figuring them out, I mean discovering what they can and cannot do. This is true even if you do not know why they can or cannot do what they can or cannot do. The joy comes in being able to take a sentence through various transformations and discovering what the deep structure really was and being able to explain how it went from that deep structure to the surface structure we use in everyday conversation or literature. Another aspect of that joy is being free to express new ideas about how or why certain structures perform the way they do and discuss those thoughts with others who are equally interested in the topic. Along with that joy also comes a kind of frustration when you cannot explain why it does not follow a certain rule or does not undergo a transformation that seems completely logical. But the frustration is minimal and motivates you to continue digging and working towards a solution.

For me, this class taught so much more than syntax. Sure, we talked about transformations, parts of speech, valence, selection, thematic roles, sentence families, grammatical relations, centrality, recursion, coordination, complements, negative polarity items, etc, etc, etc. True, it gave excellent information on all of these things that are so vital to the world of syntax. However, at the same time, it challenged me to develop my own thoughts and ideas about the way syntax should or might work instead of saying that there was only one way to "do" syntax. The plethora of knowledge and information that came from you and other students was insightful as well as challenging. It's so nice to know that the world of linguistics can revolve around someone other than Chomsky and his followers.

Upon reflection, I really just want to say thank you to you for opening a new door and making a scary, frightening topic into one that is now fascinating and intriguing. Thank you for introducing books and authors as suggested reading to enlighten the mind and challenge the preexisting thoughts that seem so difficult to overcome. I can't wait to spend some time this summer looking at Tajik and the way the rules and theories I've learned in this class apply to this particular language.

So the answer to your question is all of the above. This class does have applications and implications far beyond the doors of the language building at UNT and I will use what I learned to expand my research and help me gain a better understanding of language in this country and others.

Have a wonderful time in Germany and thanks again.

Sincerely,

Valerie Koontz

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Hi Valerie -

Just a quick note of thanks for your lovely thing, which I didn't get a chance to read till I got over here to Munich. The kind of take you had on our time together star-shooting is just what I hope for whenever I start a class. I think that what you did with the time we had to learn together is exactly right. You have

learned what it is like to walk around inside a syntactician's head a little. You didn't have to actually be a syntactician permanently – but I think you have come to see: syntax is a language. When we learn Gilyak or ASL, we do not do it so that we can sell more shoes to speakers of those languages, the popular “justification” for teaching Spanish etc. We do it as cerebral calisthenics – so that our world becomes bigger, because we have found a new set of goggles which we know how to see the world anew through, if we should ever want to. Better: we have found a new place to play. Languages often come with physical geography, but sometimes there is only personal geography – the language is a dead one, or one you learned from someone who was not in a place where that language was spoken. That language – maybe Hungarian, which you spoke when you were a child, and only with Aunt Leila, who loved you a lot, as you loved her – that language may remain a bit like a secret garden, a noetic “place” of love and nostalgia.

Languages can be merely intellectual affairs, but most often, a language involves a way of being in the world, a way of moving, negotiating, being friendly or distant, a way of seeing the world and of holding yourself in answer to it.

And of course, any discipline is also a language – chemistry is one, history is, music is, jazz is, track is, cooking is –

For us linguists, speaking linguistics is what we learn, not only in our undergraduate and graduate programs, but also as we move through the linguistics world, doing research, giving papers, seeing brilliant fellow linguists, and also jackasses, seeing great and wise and humble people, and also confused, lonely, vicious, open people, every kind of human being can walk through the door of a fascination with language.

And each subdiscipline of linguistics is also a language, has its big fish stories, its liars, its geniuses, its Ordinary Working Grammarians, a wonderful coinage due to one of the greatest living linguists, Chuck Fillmore, a man who is mostly a pragmatactician, but one who speaks a lot of kinds of linguistics.

All of which being to say: of **course** syntax is a language. And what I have hoped to show to you and anyone else who has played with me in the syntax sandbox is that syntax is fun and humbling, vast, mysterious, unknown, a worthy desert to try to cross.

I have you to thank for coming to say this in this way. I have previously said that what one learns in linguistics courses is:

how to linguist

That is a helpful way for me to say what I hope people will learn in an introductory linguistics course. And I have even written about this, said that chemistry is a language, history is, math is. But for some reason this (obvious to me) truth had never sunk into my heart of linguistic hearts – in the depths of the syntactic Big Woods.

So syntax is a language, and we study it so that we can live in a bigger noetic universe. Not for any utilitarian purpose. We study it as we study the fugue, because if we do not know what is going on in a crab fugue (the one that has one Satz that goes backwards from the way another one goes) we will not be able to hear it, we will miss the beauty. It takes a lot of “work” to be able to “read” xrays, to be able to hear that some far-out abstract jazzperson is playing a twelve-bar blues, even though the chords are pushed way outside the usual envelope. It takes “work” to learn how to putt, to photograph, to knit, to cook, to be a parent, to teach. It is the same stretching and engrossing, like eating, sorta, which makes us bigger, because we have “gotten our minds around” a subject, equivalently: we have gotten far into it.

How wild! That what true learning consists of is going beyond the usual polarity of inside/outside. For times when we are simultaneously inside something AND wrapped around it! For when we have merged with it, when we are “consubstantial” with it, to use (perhaps incorrectly) what I believe is Conor Cruse O'Brien's word, which I think he means to have us understand as being not only a term for art, but also for the true merging of spirit which is at the core of all re-ligion – the root of this beautiful word is ***lig**, cognate with "league, ligament, link" – the picture is that when we are truly in the experience of living spirit we have reconnected, linked up again. But what is the valence of *connect*?

One might say that it is a simple transitive – but there is I think a deeper way of seeing its valence: *connect* takes an NP* - it is a set predicate, as we see from such sentences as

In the deepest place, art, science, heart and spirit connect.

So what are the members of the set which the framer of the image behind “religion” wants us to hook together again, to merge with?

Maybe the easy answer here is: everything. In the popular dream that only the Beings of Light among us succeed in the Great Work of waking up out of, we walk around seeing ourselves as different from our cat, our tools, our shoes, that carrot, those little brown people who we think we can bomb back to the Stone Age without bombing ourselves at the same time. When we “come back to ourselves,” we are atoned, we are at One with what we used to think was outside our Self. Our Self has just expanded to become con-sub-stant-ial with, to become one substance with, each stuff of existence. Here in this sentence are two beautiful other etymologies: “sub-stance” and “ex-ist,” both of which being formed on the Latin (and Indo-European) root for “stand” – which has ***sta**, or something like it in it.

What is it to ex-ist? It is to stand out. We deem those things to ex-ist which we see as projecting out of the measureless, beginningless, featureless, unnameability and ineffability, from the raw energy, which is the ground of being. We call it the ground of being, a way of seeing which rhymes with that of the framer of “sub-sta-ent” – who saw that what we think of as ex-isting, as standing out, is what stands below us. “Substance” is part for part identical with what some Germanic sage saw by framing “under + stand + ing.”

I see this as a beautiful philosophy, love of the wise. We come to see that the “three” words

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these "three" are One, as are all *phenomena* (a word which comes from a Greek root which means "to appear") that can seem to seem distinct, until we have awoken to resee the interconnectedness of All That Is.

"Where" are we? In the middle of understanding what it is to syntax – it is to expand until we surround every syntactic phenomenon, to shrink until we vanish into its tiniest details.

When we are inter-est-ed in a thing, we *est*, the Latin word for being, *inter*, "among" that thing – we are among it, it is among us. We become more intel-lig-ent we link inter all things (the 'intel' is just an assimilant of *inter*). In other words, when we interconnect everything, when we interbe (with) it, we have come Home.

That is probably about seventy times more than enough for today, but I had just never seen so well some of these connections, etymological and otherwise, which come from learning to syntax together with our friends as deeply as we can.