Linguistics 120
Introduction to Syntax

Autumn 2013

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Course Staff

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Course website

- http://www.stanford.edu/~danlass/linguist120/
- Accessible through the “Teaching” section of my website (easy to find under my name on Google)
- Refer regularly to this website for up-to-date reading and assignment schedule

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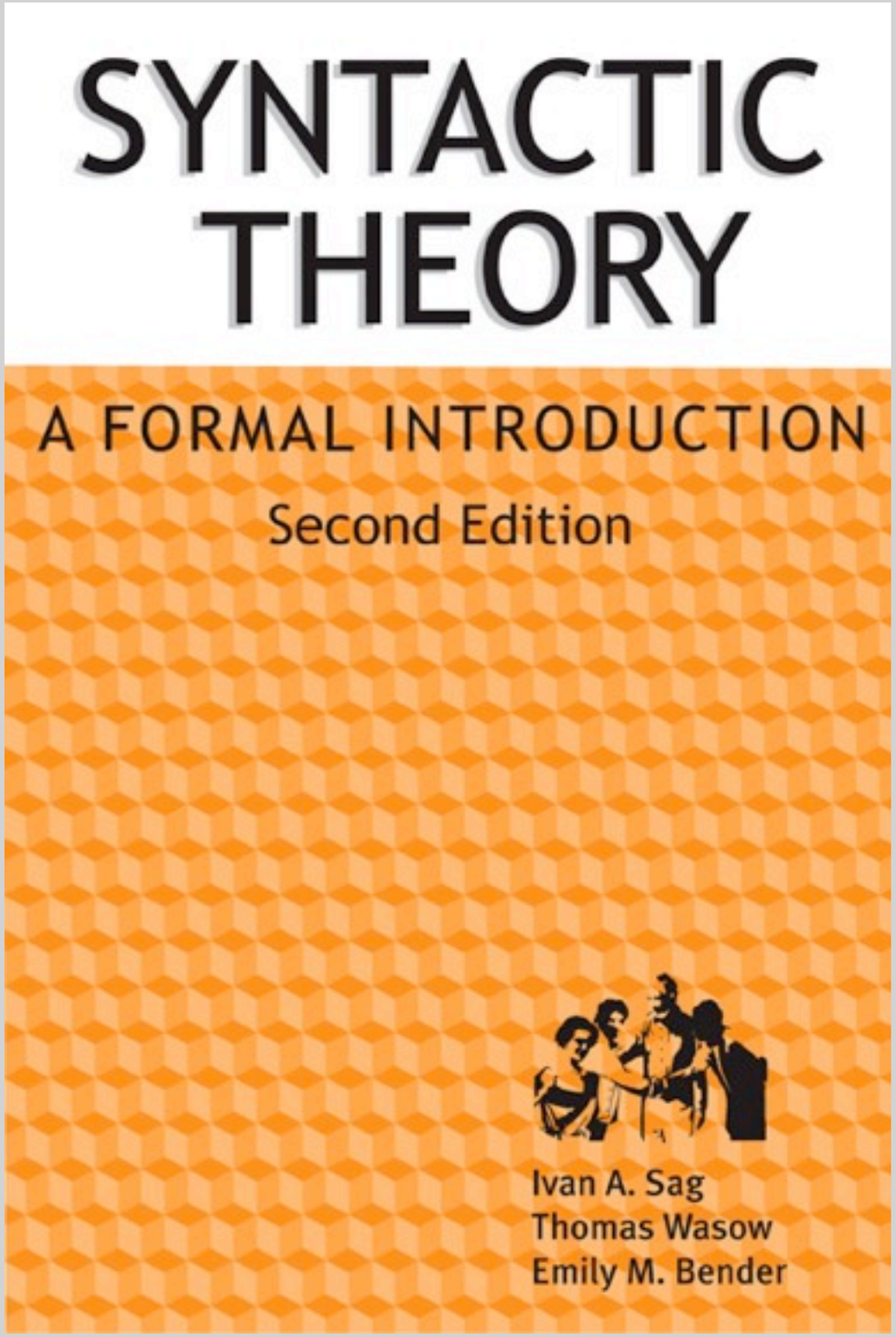
Textbook



- We follow the textbook closely.
- Most homework problems come from the book
- Don’t get the first edition (by just Sag & Wasow)!

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Reading & Lectures

- Class will be more interesting & informative if you do the reading **before** the lecture.
- Then I can spend class time on gaining a deeper understanding, answering questions, and covering additional material.
- If you haven't done the reading,the course will be slower and shallower, and you won't understand as well.
- Ask questions!

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Evaluation

- Homework in class most Fridays
  - Homework can be time-consuming – budget your time accordingly!
- Midterm, final open book/notes
- Refer to course site for details and late homework policy

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Two Conceptions of Grammar

PRESCRIPTIVE

- Rules against certain usages. Few if any rules for what **is** allowed
- Proscribed forms in common use
- Explicitly normative enterprise

DESCRIPTIVE

- Rules characterizing what people actually say
- Goal to characterize all and only what speakers find acceptable
- Tries to be scientific

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Uses of Grammar

PRESCRIPTIVE

- Identify speaker's socioeconomic class, region, education level, ...
- Identify level of formality of a particular usage
- Feeds into negative stereotypes about, discrimination against regional, social & ethnic groups

DESCRIPTIVE

- Understand how people produce & understand language
- Identify similarities & differences across languages/dialects
- Feeds into
  - language technologies
  - cognitive science

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Example of Prescriptivism, from Dear Abby, April 9, 2002

It has been nearly 10 years since these rules of basic grammar appeared in my column -- and we can all use this refresher course….

…. My pet peeve -- double negatives: “I don’t know nothing” and “We don’t go nowhere” are the worst offenders.

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Prescriptivist propaganda: using two negatives in a sentence to convey a negative is illogical

- So you're not supposed to say *I don't owe you nothing* to mean you are free of debts to your addressee.
- But many dialects of English, and also "official" forms of many other languages, do just this:
- ***Marysia niczego nie dala Jankowi*** (Polish)

  Mary nothing not gave John

  'Mary did not give John anything'

  No dije nada (Spanish)

  Not say-PST-1SG nothing

  'I did not say anything to you'

  cf. 'I didn't say nothing' (English dial.)

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Fill in the blanks

Everyone drives ___ own car to work.

Everyone insisted that ___ record was unblemished.

Everyone was happy because ___ passed the test.

Everyone left the room, didn't ___?

Everyone left early. ___ seemed happy to get home.

- Who taught you this?
- How did you learn it?

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Descriptive Grammar: an example

F--- you!

F--- yourself!

Go f--- yourself!

*Go f--- you!

- Who taught you this?
- How did you learn it?

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Kinds of Things We'll Worry About

- The distribution of reflexives (e.g. *myself*) vs. ordinary pronouns (*I* or *me*) in English
- Agreement (e.g. *We sing* vs. **We sings*)
- Word order (e.g. **Sing we*)
- Case (e.g. **Us sing*)
- Coordinate conjunction (e.g. *We sing and dance*)
- Formation of questions, imperatives, negatives…
- …and much more

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Some Areas of Linguistics

- Phonetics: The study of speech sounds
- Phonology: The study of sound systems
- Morphology: The study of word structure
- **Syntax: The study of sentence structure**
- Semantics: The study of literal meaning
- Pragmatics: The study of conveyed meaning

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Some History

- Writings on grammar go back about 3000 years
- Until 200 years ago, almost all of it was prescriptive
- Until 50 years ago, most linguistic work concerned sound systems (phonology), word structure (morphology), and the historical relationships among languages

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The Generative Revolution

- Noam Chomsky's work in the 1950s radically changed linguistics, making syntax central.
- Chomsky has been the dominant figure in linguistics ever since.
- The theory we will develop is in the tradition started by Chomsky, but diverges from his work in many ways.

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Main Tenets of Generative Grammar

- Grammars should be formulated precisely and explicitly
- Languages are infinite, so grammars must be tested against invented data, not just attested examples.
  - “Colorless green ideas sleep furiously”
- The theory of grammar is a theory of human linguistic abilities, and so in large part a subfield of psychology [cognitive and social].

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Some of Chomsky's Controversial Claims

- The superficial diversity of human languages masks their underlying similarity.
- All languages are fundamentally alike because linguistic knowledge is largely innate.
- The central problem for linguistics is explaining how children can learn language so quickly and easily.

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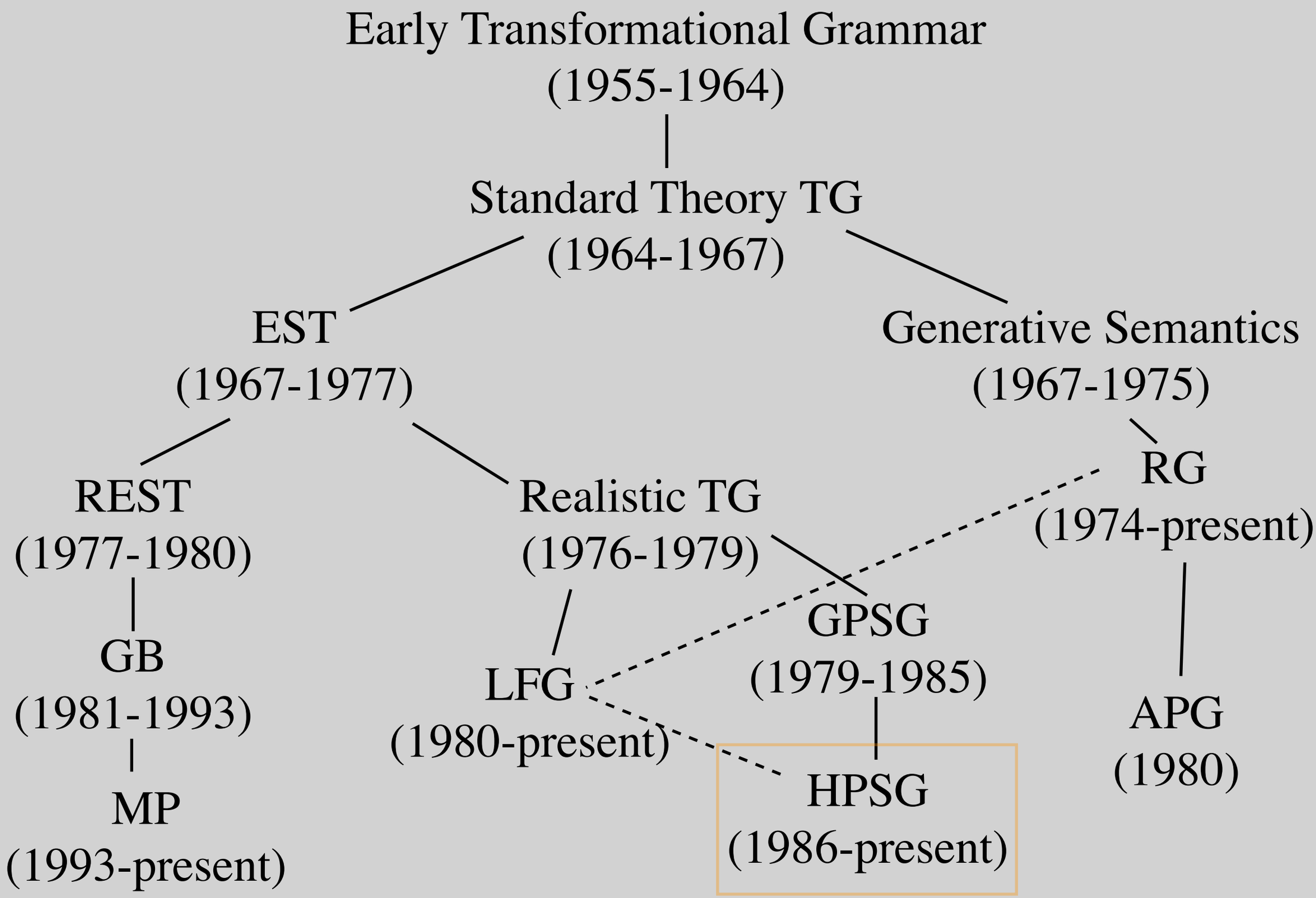
Family Tree of Syntactic Theories



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Homework 1

- Posted (like all homework) on website
- Due in class on Friday, September 27
  - Find an example of ambiguity in a newspaper or other forum and discuss whether that ambiguity is easy or hard to resolve and why. [website]
  - Chapter 1, Problem 1
  - Chapter 2, Problems 1 and 6

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Question for the Rest of Today

- What determines when we use an ordinary pronoun (say, *I* or *me*) vs. a reflexive (*myself*)?
- You suggest hypotheses, and make up examples to support them. Others try to think of counterexamples. (If you don't, the TAs & I will)
- With luck, we'll gradually refine our hypotheses to something with pretty good coverage.

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