Real English: The Syntax of Language Use

Winter 2002-3

Linguistics 128/228
MW 4:15–5:45 p.m.
Room 200–105 (History Corner)

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Course description: This course introduces syntax through the study of natural spoken and written syntactic data including spontaneous conversations as well as newspaper reportage, using tagged and parsed corpora such as the Penn Treebank. Topics include standard subject matter suitable for a syntax introduction, but each of the core topics is investigated empirically in natural English with hands-on corpus investigations.

Required for this course:

Each student should have a SUNet account enabling access to the campus AFS distributed file system. Students must also sign up for to use the Linguistics Department corpus collection which is on /afs/ir/data/linguistic-data/. Permission to access these corpora must be requested from Susanne Riehemann (sr@csl.stanford.edu). Instructions on how to do all this is provided on this webpage:

http://help-csli.stanford.edu/corpora/corpora.html

We will be using these two groups of corpora:
Students should also purchase or photocopy the following text (which may be ordered in class):


**Class project:** The final class project will consist of presenting a fully syntactically annotated mini-corpus together with a short essay on patterns or generalizations you have discovered in your investigations of English data.

**Syllabus**

The central project of the class is for you to construct your own annotated mini-corpus of spoken English to test the analysis of syntactic constructions as they are discussed in the text and in class. The weekly assignments include the gradual expansion of your analysis of your individual mini-corpus.

Note: unless otherwise indicated, all assignments are due on the next class meeting after the day they are assigned.

**Week #1 Why study spoken English?**  [Joan, Annie]

- **Wednesday, Jan 8:** Motivation for the course: why study spoken English? Current syntactic theory is based almost entirely on written English, with only lip service paid to spoken English. Does spoken English have distinctive syntactic properties? Research on languages such as French and Thai shows that spoken language often differs strikingly from written language.

- **Assignment:** Find a conversation from the unparsed Switchboard transcripts—

  `/afs/ir/data/linguistic-data/Switchboard/Switchboard-Transcripts`

  —and translate it into written English suitable for publication in a newspaper or magazine article as an interview. Discuss any differences you see between the spoken and the written versions. Due on Monday of Week #2.
Week #2 What structures occur in spoken English?  [Annie, Joan]

- **Monday, Jan 13:** We discuss the differences found between written and spoken English.

- **Reading:** Chapters 1 and 2 of Kroeger (basic concepts and constituent structure)

- **Wednesday, Jan 15:** We do an example syntactic analysis of the tree structures in our written and spoken passages from Switchboard, and we list the main points of difference. Time permitting, we introduce tgrep.

- **Assignment:** Annotate the tree structures of the written passage you created and also the spoken original. Mend disfluencies. Due Wednesday, Jan 22.

- **Assignment:** Each student sets herself up to use tgrep on AFS. As an exercise, the student uses tgrep to find various constituents and prints out the results. [We will provide detailed instructions.]

Week #3 Building forests and finding trees.  [Annie, Joan]

- **Monday, Jan 20:** Martin Luther King Day. No classes.

- **Wednesday, Jan 22:** Annotated passages due. We discuss spoken vs. written syntax. We give a lesson on tgrep pattern syntax.

- **Assignment:** Make a ranked frequency list of all verbs in the parsed Switchbaord corpus vs. the Wall Street Journal corpus. Also personal pronouns. What does this tell us about spontaneous conversation and business reporting? due on Monday, January 29.

- **Reading:** Ch. 3 of Kroeger (the material on datives).

Week #4 Datives.  [Joan]

- **Monday, Jan 27:** The NP dative and PP dative in English. Semantics of different verb classes.

- **Assignment:** Find all ditransitive constructions in your mini-corpus and annotate them. Due Wednesday, Jan 29.
• **Wednesday, Jan 29:** More on the dative. Quantitative study.

• **Assignment to be given**

• **Reading:** Ch. 3 of Kroeger (just the material on passives).

**Week #5 Passives**  [Joan]

• **Monday, Feb 3:** Why are passives used? Agentful and agentless passives and generalized subject actives. Indefinite ‘you’ vs ‘they’.

• **Assignment:** Find all active transitives and passives in your mini-corpus and annotate them. What do they show about how and why passives are used? How many indefinite uses of ‘you’ and ‘they’ occur in your mini-corpus, compared to specific uses of these pronouns? Due Wednesday, Feb 5.

• **Wednesday, Feb 5:** Quantitative study of passives.

• **Assignment:** Make a ranked frequency list of all transitive verbs in the parsed Switchboard corpus and then make one for the WSJ corpus. Make another pair of ranked frequency lists of all intransitive verbs in both corpora. For each corpus, look at the verbs that occur on both lists; is the relation between both kinds always the same? Is there a difference between the Switchboard and the WSJ corpus?

**Week #6 Transitivity**  [Annie]

• **Monday, Feb 10:** Transitivity and intransitivity (different forms of object deletion, different types of object promotion)

• **Assignment:** Find and annotate all intransitive verbs in your mini-corpus. Due Feb. 12.

• **Wednesday, Feb 12:** Discussion of transitivity and intransitivity.

• **Assignment:** Read Chs. 4 and 5 of Kroeger. Pull out reflexives in the parsed Switchboard corpus, and classify them as emphatic, bound anaphor, or other.
Week #7 Reflexives and Control  [Joan; Annie away this week]

- Monday, Feb 17: President’s Day. No class.
- Wednesday, Feb 19: Discuss reflexives assignment.
- Assignment: Annotate all reflexives in your mini-corpus. How can you annotate the relation between a reflexive and its antecedent?
- Assignment to be given

Week #8 Discourse structure phenomena: Topic, Left and right dislocation, clefts  [Annie]

- Monday, Feb 24: Topicalization.
- Reading: Ch. 6 of Kroeger.
- Wednesday, Feb 26: Dislocation and clefts.
- Assignment to be given

Week #9 Relativization.

- Monday, March 3
- Reading: Ch. 7 of Kroeger.
- Assignment to be given
- Wednesday, March 5

Week #10 Presentation and Discussion of Class projects

- Monday, March 10:
- Wednesday, March 12: