

Lecture 12: DESCRIPTIVE vs. the DIALECTICAL VIEW OF SYNTAX

I. TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR

Traditionally, word-based prescriptive grammars distinguished EIGHT parts of speech, by ‘what a word does in a sentence’:

	<i>Function</i>	<i>Questions they answer</i>
Nouns	name things	<i>What? Who?</i>
Pronouns	stand instead of nouns	<i>What? Who?</i>
Adjectives	describe (modify) nouns [RESEMBLANCE]	<i>Which? What kind?</i>
Verbs	name actions or states of being, while carrying also the meaning of time: <i>A verb is that which, in addition to its proper meaning, carries with it the notion of time ... It is a sign of something said of something else.</i> Aristotle	
Adverbs	modify/ describe verbs	<i>How? Where? When? Why? etc.</i>
Conjunctions	join similar grammatical items (words, phrases, clauses, etc.)	
Prepositions	show relative ‘positions’ of things in space and time [CONTIGUITY]	
Interjections	expressions of feelings & attitudes interjected, or ‘thrown into’ the midst of a clause: ‘raisins in the cake’	

II. DESCRIPTIVE LINGUISTICS

Descriptive linguistics broadens the *Parts of Speech* concept of to include **groups** of words (**phrases**), in an attempt to capture the various **relationships** between words in the sentence. However, the insidious influence of structuralism has kept the focus of linguistic analysis on the physical structures of language, causing Parts of Speech to be viewed as **categories of lexical items, defined by their morphological or syntactic behavior**. It thus uses the traditional ‘fixed’ concepts of *noun, verb, adjective* and *preposition* and assigns one or another of these functions to a word, and to the phrase it occurs in, based on formal distribution tests, as well as on the word’s morphology. To illustrate this approach, I will use a few extended excerpts from ‘*Understanding Syntax*’ by Maggie Tallerman (1998):

Although ... informal definitions will identify many members of a word class, linguists generally agree that they need to be supplemented by formal tests. One reason is that we may not agree on, say, what counts as a ‘thing’ or an ‘action.’ What sort of nouns are *sincerity* and *turbulence*?

These seem more like states than ‘things,’ yet a word which expresses a state is supposed to be a verb. But a formal distribution test shows clearly that both words are nouns: they fit a typical noun slot such as: _____ *can be frightening*. ...

And how should we classify *misery* in *Lee is misery itself*? Misery seems to describe a property that Lee has, and as Lee is a noun, we might assume *misery* to be a ‘describing’ word: an adjective. But it’s not: it fits a typical noun slot, as in *Misery can be frightening*, and (another FORMAL test) it also takes the plural –(e)s ending of a typical noun – *miseries* – as in *Such miseries are uncommon*, whilst adjectives, such as *squeamish* and *expensive*, don’t behave this way.

What word class do you think *engine* belongs to in *Kim is an engine driver*? It fits the informal definition of both noun and adjective: it’s a thing, so must be a noun, but it also describes what Kim drives – it modifies the noun *driver*, so should be an adjective. Without additional evidence, it’s hard to decide categorically on the word class in this case. In fact, formal tests confirm that *engine* is a noun and not an adjective. First, it doesn’t have the same DISTRIBUTION as typical English adjectives, like *untidy* or *happy*, which fit into slots such as those in (7a). (7b) shows that *engine* doesn’t fit those slots.

- (7) a. Kim looked really _____.
 Kim seems _____.
 Kim’s as _____ as Chris.
 b. *Kim looked really engine.
 *Kim seems engine.
 *Kim’s as engine as Chris.

Second, *engine* can never take the typical adjective endings –*er*, –*est*, as in *untidier*, *happiest* (and nor can we say **more engine*, **most engine*). So *engine* never has the same set of word forms as an adjective either. But it does take the plural –*s* suffix of nouns, as in *Kim drives engines*.

Another way to use distributional evidence is to show that nouns and adjectives are MODIFIED by different word classes: they keep different company. So, like other nouns, *engine* can itself be modified by an adjective, such as *electric*. But it can’t be modified by an ADVERB such as *electrically* (the meaning intended in (8) is that *engine* is electric, not Kim):

- (8) Kim is an **electric engine** driver.
 *Kim is an **electrically engine** driver.

This is typical behavior for a noun. But adjectives behave in just the opposite way: they aren’t modified by other adjectives – such as *unbelievable* in (9) – but by adverbs, such as *unbelievably*.

- (9) *Kim is an **unbelievable skillful** driver.
 Kim is an **unbelievably skillful** driver.

This distributional test distinguishes adjectives like *skillful* from nouns like *engine*. To account for all the examples seen here, we simply need to say that nouns such as *driver* can be modified either by adjectives, or by other nouns.

The formal tests linguists use to identify word classes concentrate both on MORPHOLOGICAL criteria and on SYNTACTIC criteria. ... Recurring patterns in the form of words, particularly in the affixes that they take, indicate that a group of words belong to the same class. ... the observation that only verbs can take all three endings *-ed*, *-s*, and *-ing* [is an example]. Syntactic criteria prove that each word class has a unique pattern of distribution. First, there are certain slots in a sentence that can only be filled by members of one class, as illustrated in (7). Second, each word class has its own specific set of modifying words – words that can or must accompany it, as in (8) or (9). And third, ... each word class has a particular role in relation to other parts of the sentence: this is its function.

To summarize:

(10) **Linguistic criteria for identifying word classes**

- (a) What are the different forms the word can have? (**MORPHOLOGY**)
- (b) Whereabouts in a phrase or sentence does the word occur? (**DISTRIBUTION**)
- (c) What work does the word perform in a phrase or sentence? (**FUNCTION**)

(Tallerman, M.: 1998, p. 31)

Tallerman does note that in some languages (Chinese, Vietnamese, or Korean) there simply isn't much morphology, and that, therefore, word forms can't help much in the identification of a word class. Syntactic evidence to distinguish word classes, however, is typically available: 'each word class fits into certain slots which are unique to it, and each class co-occurs with (keeps the company of) specific words from other classes' (Ibid., p. 35).

In her discussion of the typical behavior, distribution and function of the major word classes, Tallerman focuses on **verbs**, **nouns**, **adjectives** and **prepositions**.

Verbs are subdivided into *intransitive* (one argument), *transitive* (two arguments) and *ditransitive* (three arguments), with focus on the relationships between verbs and their arguments making up the *verb phrase*.

Nouns within the noun phrase (**NP**) are then discussed with the closed class of **determiners** (***the/a; this/that; these/those; which; my/your/his/her/our/their; both; all***, etc.). Tallerman concedes that 'determiner' isn't 'one of the word classes used in traditional grammar' and that 'at first glance, you may think that the words in bold ... are just a subclass of adjectives, since both can precede a noun: *white cats* or *those cats*.' She argues, though, that determiners should be seen as a separate word class, for these reasons:

1. They 'don't have the same distribution as adjectives' – they always precede adjectives; 'in fact, any determiner always occurs at the beginning of the noun phrase';

2. There is generally only one determiner in each NP, as in '**Which** old, flea-ridden skinny ... white cat?' (*which this cat);
3. Morphological evidence: determiners don't combine with the suffixes *-er* and *-est*, or with *more/most* which are used to form the comparative/ superlative degrees of adjectives: 'we can say *older*, *skinniest* but not **manier*, **allest*.'

Tallerman disagrees with those linguists who include PERSONAL PRONOUNS in the class of determiners, for the reason that 'pronouns do not co-occur with the determiners (**the she*)' which, according to her, 'is evidence that pronouns aren't nouns.' She suggests that 'pronouns and determiners may be in the same word class,' because 'pronouns can often *replace* determiners.' She uses the following examples:

- (25) **We/Us linguists** aren't stupid. (Compare: These linguists ...)
I'll give **you boys** three hours to finish this job! (Compare: those boys ...)

One of the properties of such 'determiners' (we, us, you) is that they can occur without a following noun:

- (26) We aren't stupid.
I'll give you three hours to finish the job!

You might doubt that this is a general property of determiners, since ***The/a** ____ could be problematic. However, plenty of other determiners *can* occur without a noun and, as (27) shows, they have just the same distribution (=are found in the same places) as the full noun phrase:

- (27) These/Those ____ are good!
I'll give some ____ to Lee.
I'll give that/this ____ away.

For reasons like these, some linguists propose that noun phrases are really '*determiner phrases*.'

(Ibid., p. 38)

NOUN PHRASES

Noun phrases (NPs), according to Tallerman's descriptive approach, 'most typically function as the arguments of predicates. NP arguments can be classified either in terms of their semantic functions, or in terms of their syntactic functions. The SEMANTIC ROLE of a NP depends on what verb it's an argument of. For example, in *Lee handed the letter to Kim*, the subject NP *Lee* is an AGENT – an animate being deliberately performing an action. The object NP, *the letter*, is a THEME; this 'undergoes' the action of the verb. The INDIRECT OBJECT, *Kim*, is a GOAL: *Kim* is the entity towards which the handing over event is directed. Verbs which are in the same sub-class don't necessarily share the same semantic roles. For example, in *Kim bought the book*, *Kim* is again agent and *the book* is a theme. But not all transitive verbs are the same: for example, *love* and *detest* have an EXPERIENCER subject – the animate being that experiences love or hatred. This is the role of the NP *Kim* in *Kim loves sprouts*. The verb *love* also takes a THEME, the role borne by *sprouts* here' (Ibid., p. 39).

'SUBJECTHOOD' TESTS IN ENGLISH:

1. In English, subjects control SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT: verbs must match or 'agree with' particular features of the subject, such as person and number. The **SUBJECT/VERB AGREEMENT TEST confirms that subjects are defined by their syntactic properties, not by their semantic roles.**
2. **CASE MARKING:** Pronouns have a special form in English which is restricted to the subject position. CASE means that the form of a noun phrase changes according to its grammatical relation. In the pronoun pairs *we/us, he/him, she/her, they/them* the first member is always a subject, so these forms can be used to test for subjecthood in English. Full NPs don't change in form; word order usually differentiates subjects from objects (English is an S/V/O language). Objects of verbs – often called **DIRECT OBJECTS** – fulfill the requirement of a transitive verb for a second argument, other than the subject. A third grammatical relation is that of **PREPOSITIONAL OBJECT**, taken by the NPs in *on the bus, by train, with three friends* and by the object of the preposition *to*.
3. We can also use the grammatical relations to test whether or not a phrase is a NP, because the 'ability to be a subject' (or an object) is an important distributional test for NPs.

NP FUNCTIONS

'Although the most typical function of NPs is as arguments, NPs can also be predicates:

- (35) a. Zainal guru saya. (Malay)
 Zainal teacher my
 'Zainal is my teacher'
- b. Maksim student. (Russian)
 Maxim student
 'Maxim is a student'

The English translations also have NP predicates, but they are linked to the subject by the link verb is (a.k.a. COPULA verbs). Omission of copulas is common in many languages; even in English, it can be omitted to show disbelief, as in: *Maxim – a student?!*

In summary,

1. Cross-linguistically, nouns are frequently paired with a closed class of words known as determiners.
2. NPs most often function as arguments or participants of verbal predicates.
3. NPs can be classified in terms of their semantic functions (agent, theme, etc.) or in terms of their syntactic functions, known as grammatical relations (i.e., subject, object, and prepositional object).

(Ibid., p.43)

THE ADJECTIVE PHRASE & THE CLOSED CLASS OF DEGREE MODIFIERS

The term ‘degree modifier’ indicates that the closed class word specifies the extent or degree of quality; within the AP, degree modifiers occur either initially (*very/too full*) or finally (*full too/very*).

POSITIONS & BASIC FUNCTIONS OF ADJECTIVE PHRASES:

1. **ATTRIBUTIVE APs** modify a noun, and normally have a fixed position (before or after the noun)
2. **PREDICATIVE APs** fit into the slot after the verb; as with predicate nominals, the copula is often omitted, as in ‘*Ali marah*’ [‘Ali is angry’ in Malay].

ARE ADJECTIVES ESSENTIAL?

Tallerman argues that not all languages have an open class of adjectives (Kwamera of Vanuatu), and that other major word classes can take over adjective functions:

(44) pukah u r-asori
 Pig this 3-SG-big
 ‘This pig is big’

‘Since they take the same prefixes,’ argues Tallerman, ‘it appears the words for ‘big’ and ‘small’ in predicative positions are actually verbs. In Japanese, too, adjectives are very similar to verbs in terms of their distribution and the closed classes they co-occur with. Basically, languages may either use verbs in place of (some or all) adjectives, or they may use nouns, for example, by saying *Kim has kindness* rather than *Kim is kind*.’ She concludes, therefore, that adjectives are not an essential word class, ‘although they are certainly widespread cross-linguistically’ (Ibid., p. 45).

THE PREPOSITIONAL PHRASE

‘In English, though not in all languages, we find phrases like *under the floor, towards that conclusion, outside my house*, where a **PREPOSITION** (*under, toward, outside*) has combined with a NP to form a preposition phrase (**PP**).’ In these examples, the prepositions are transitive: they take an **object NP**. Some prepositions can be used intransitively (= without an object), for example, *before, after(wards)* and *underneath*: *That student was here before, Look underneath!* etc. Just like nouns and adjectives, prepositions pair up with their own closed class modifiers, such as *well, straight, and right*.’

These modifiers are a test for preposition status; we can thus identify many other words as prepositions (i.e., upstairs, overhead, etc.; these traditionally were termed adverbs, but are really prepositions, because they can be modified by *right*).

The traditional ‘verbal particles’ are also classified as prepositions by the right test: *Put it right back!*
Lee ran his apartment right down.

In English, NPs follow the transitive prepositions, but in some languages (like Japanese), NPs precede the transitive P: *tookyoo kara* – from Tokyo; *sono hito to* – ‘that person with’ [so in Japanese they are POSTPOSITIONS].

POSTPOSITIONS + PREPOSITIONS = ADPOSITIONS**The FUNCTIONS of PPs**

1. Adpositions are used to mark particular grammatical relations, i.e., to canbe used to mark an **INDIRECT OBJECT** [the 3rd argument of a ditransitive verb, i.e., lend, give, etc.]
2. A 2nd function of PPs is **LOCATIVE**: they mark location in time or space. Kwamera has only 2 locative prepositions, and Igbo & Yoruba [both Benue-Congo languages of Nigeria] each have only one all-purpose locative preposition.
3. A 3rd function of PPs is the **ADVERBIAL** function: they modify the verb, as in *He walked with a limp, She sang in a loud voice*, etc. This does not mean that prepositions are from the same class as adverbs; it means that the adverbial function is not restricted to the class of adverbs.

ADVERBS

Thus, Tallerman argues that the traditional definition of Parts of Speech as functions of words in the sentence is trumped by morphology and syntax. **Adverbs**, on this view, are not a major word class – they belong with adjectives, because:

1. Adverbs and adjectives occur in complementary distribution;
2. They share some common grammatical properties (i.e., modifiers *very/quite/most/ unusually*);
3. They can both occur in the ‘*as _____ as*’ comparative construction;
4. The comparative suffixes *-er, -est* occur on some adverbs, as well as on adjectives (i.e., *sooner, soonest*).

‘In traditional grammar, words like *today, tomorrow, yesterday* and *tonight* are also considered to be adverbs. Certainly, they can fulfill the adverbial function, just like PPs can: *We’re leaving today/tomorrow*. Here, then, *today* and *tomorrow* are adverbials: that is their function. But this doesn’t mean that they are members of the adverb word class. In fact, they are clearly nouns, since they can occur in all typical NP positions, as subjects (57a), objects (57b), and as the objects of prepositions (57c):

- (57) a. *Today/tomorrow/tonight* seems fine.
 b. I planned *tomorrow* very carefully.
 c. I’ll finish it by *tonight*.

And they can take the *-’s* possessive ending, like other NPs: *today’s bike ride, tomorrow’s lectures*. But, unlike adverbs, they don’t take the modifiers *very, quite* and so on. So we can conclude that these are not adverbs at all.

Finally, let’s consider words like *still* (as in *I am still waiting*), *yet, always, already* and *sometimes*. These aren’t related to any adjective, and can’t take any of the typical adjective/adverb modifiers: **very already, *more sometimes*. However, since they modify verbs and adjectives (*always late, still happy*), we can, indeed, consider them to be a sub-class of adverbs’ (Ibid., p.49).

CONCLUSION

The major word classes [VERB, NOUN, ADJECTIVE, & PREPOSITION] are distinguished by their morphology, their functions, and by their patterns of distribution [this covers both the slots the words can appear in and the modifiers that co-occur with them].

'I showed that groups of closed class words often pair up with a specific lexical word, such as noun or an adjective. To count as a distinct word class, a set of words must have some properties which distinguish them from other word classes in the language. If we don't find any such properties, then it would be unscientific to make artificial divisions in the data.

It is important, then, not to expect all languages to look the same. For instance, we shouldn't think that just because, say, English and Italian have an open class of adjectives, then all languages must have one. On the other hand, linguists now know that languages don't vary from each other at random. We can expect there to be a finite set of possible different word classes, from which each language 'selects' its own set of classes' (Ibid., p. 49).

III. DIALECTICAL APPROACH TO SYNTAX

As we have seen, the descriptive approach uses 'fixed' **formal** criteria to define abstract word-class categories, and then applies pseudo-'objective' morphological and syntactic 'tests' to identify the constituent structure of the sentence (NPs, VPs, Aps, PPs, etc.) and then 'grow' elaborate 'constituent structure trees.' Phrase structure analysis 'crumbles' phrases into single words, thus shifting the focus of analysis from the **words' common purpose** to their individual physical forms.

Dialectical analysis focuses on the **composite mosaic of sentence meaning** as the product of word **synthesis** into the nexus of the sentence [**S/V/C**] and **analysis** (modification) of the major nexus constituents (a.k.a. *recursion*). Each sentence is a mosaic image, created/ viewed by speakers' minds.

Parts of Speech are the **functions** of words in the sentence, and these include the traditional eight 'jobs' (noun, pronoun, adjective, verb, adverb, preposition, conjunction, & interjection). In contrast to traditional school grammar, however, dialectical analysis recognizes that three of these functions – **adjective, adverb, and noun** – can be performed not only by single words, but also by **groups of words** (phrases & clauses).

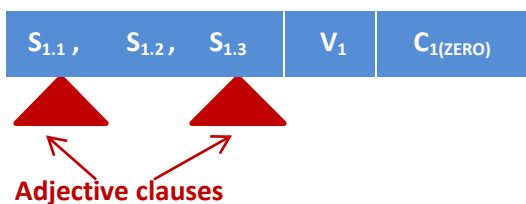
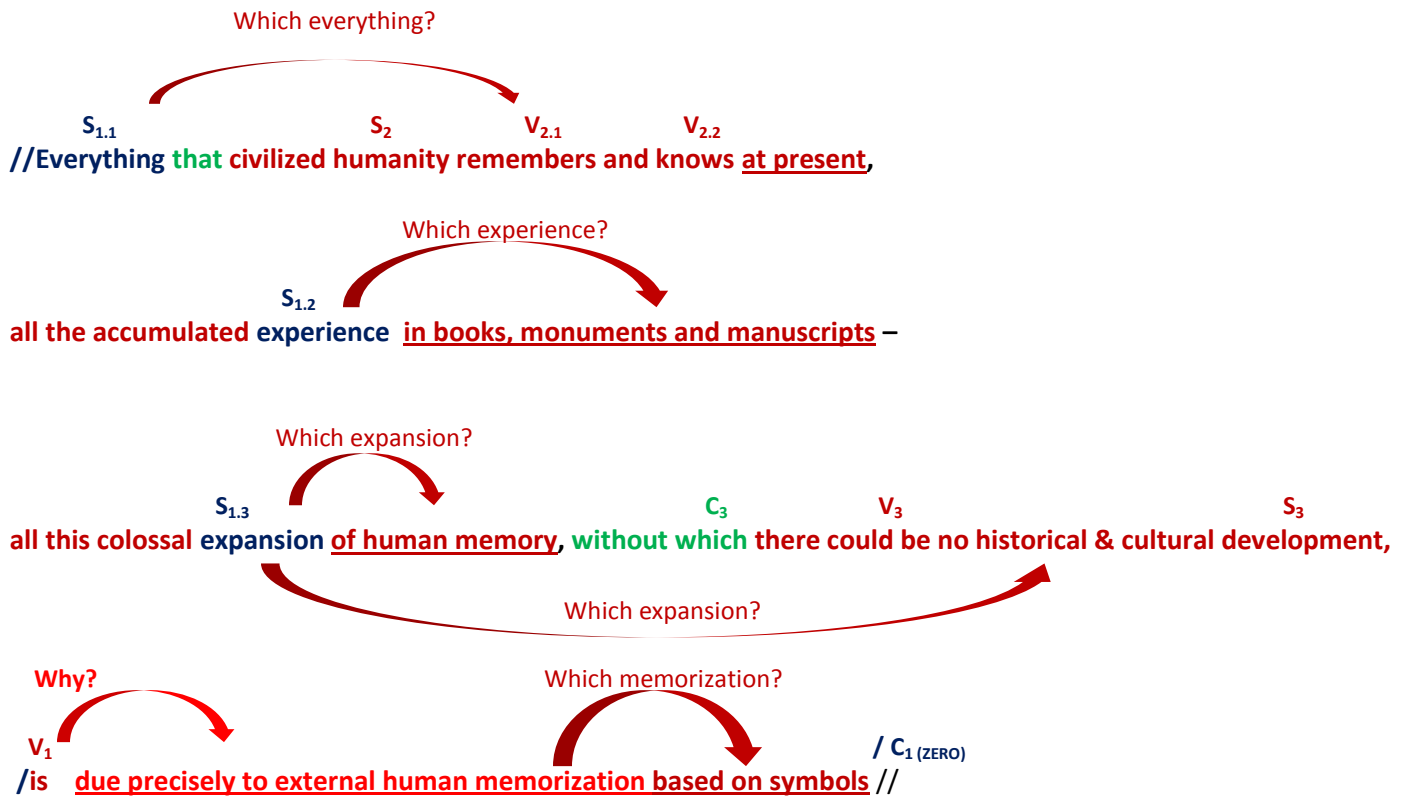
Thus, it is the **common function, purpose** (i.e., *meaning*) of word-meanings, **working together, that binds them into a unit of compound meaning**, either naming something in the nexus (noun function) or describing/adding detail to another sentence constituent (adjective or adverb function). These functions of words and groups of words, working together, are viewed strictly in the context of the sentence – external syntactic or morphological tests cannot determine their function in a particular nexal pattern (sentence-mosaic). **Phrases are different from dependent clauses only structurally**: while clauses have their own nexal patterns [S/V/Cs], phrases do not; both phrases and dependent clauses are defined by their common function: words in them work together as one part of speech (noun, adjective, or adverb).

Dialectical sentence analysis is based on the **sense** words and groups of words make together in the nexus of a concrete sentence, not on which ‘slots’ they can fill or on which words they can co-occur with in other possible sentences. It makes generalizations about the **logical relationships** between words and groups of words in the sentence, using the universal principles of human understanding (associations by resemblance, contiguity in space/time, & cause/effect).

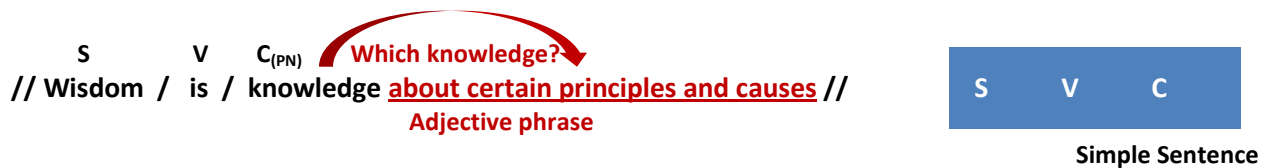
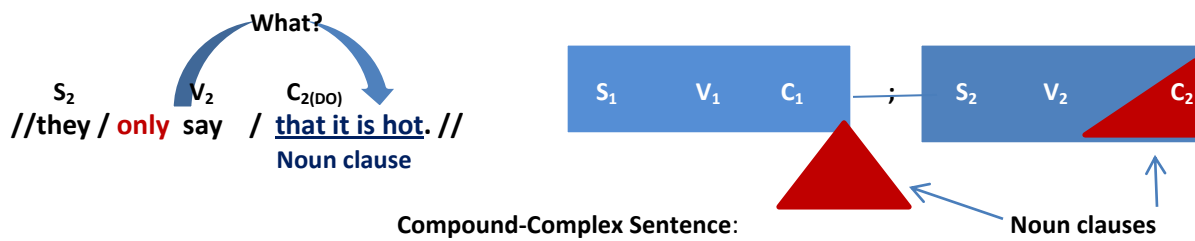
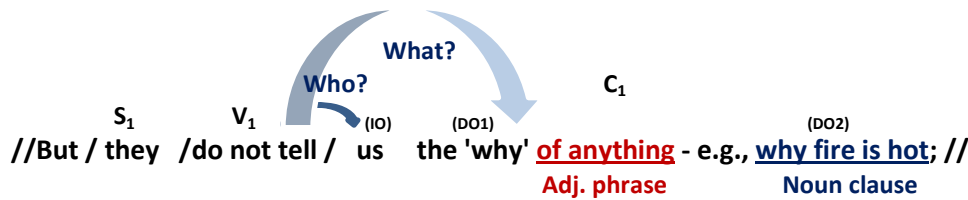
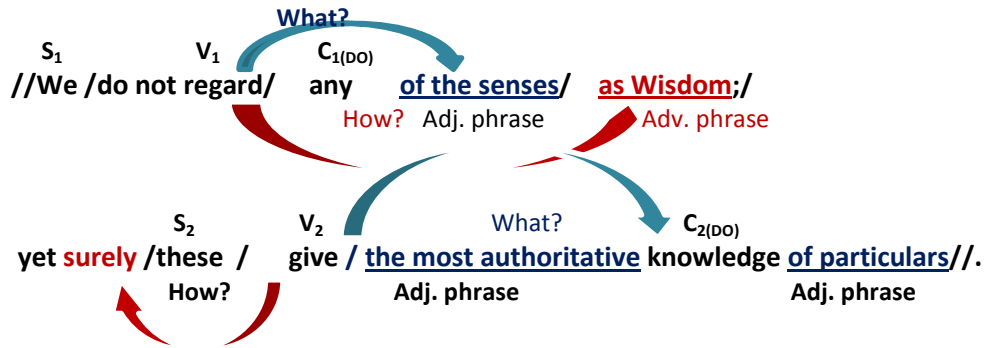
Just as denotative (socially assigned) word-meanings acquire their true meanings ‘live’ – in use (**meaning-as-use**), so they also acquire their individual / group functions in use (**functions-as-use**). The purpose of the **GENERALIZING SENTENCE ANALYSIS (G-nalysis)** is to

1. Identify all the nexal patterns in the sentence, and
2. Determine how all of the clauses (S/V/Cs), phrases (groups of words that function as adjectives, adverbs, or nouns), as well as individual words relate to each other.

G-nalysis discovers these relationships through asking logical, common sense questions:



As you can see, independent nexal patterns [S/V/Cs] are represented as quadrangles in sentence diagrams, and dependent clauses – as triangles. Phrases, whether they act as nouns, adjectives, or adverbs, are simply underlined:



Through asking natural, common sense questions, G-nalysis discovers the grammatical relationships between words and groups of words, **because they reflect the logical connections between them.**

Dialectics views syntactic structures as the ‘flesh’ of verbal thought and uses our knowledge of the universal mechanism of human thought (generalization) to analyze and understand linguistic structures.

Dialectical linguistics is a relatively new approach to the study of language; it has not yet 'won the hearts and minds' of descriptive linguists and the adherents of structuralism/ neo-structuralism in all their permutations. However, it will, undoubtedly, gain influence in the near future, for no other reason than – IT MAKES SENSE!

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