

Word Grammar

Richard Hudson

for International Encyclopedia of Linguistics, Second Edition

This theory of language structure is called ‘Word Grammar’ (**WG**) because of the central role of the word as the only unit of syntax. Syntactic structure is based, not on the part-whole relationships of phrase structure, but on the dependencies between pairs of words; so WG is part of the very old linguistic tradition of dependency grammar. Figure 1 gives a WG analysis of the syntactic structure of example (1).

(1) Syntactic structure may consist of dependencies between single words.

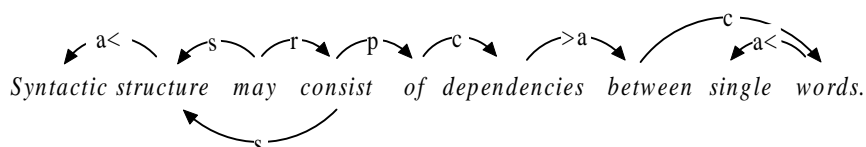


Figure 1

The dependencies are shown by arrows which point to the dependent word, and which carry an abbreviated label for the dependency type (subject, complement, prepositional complement, adjunct and ‘sharer’, with > and < for post- and pre-dependents). This subclassification of ‘dependent’ is equivalent to the ‘grammatical functions’ in other theories. The analysis of *structure* as a dependent of both *may* and *consist* corresponds to structure sharing or movement in other theories; the possibility of such rich dependency structure is what allows WG analyses of most of the familiar challenges for syntactic theories such as raising and extraction.

Dependency analysis is not just a notational variant of phrase structure, and some evidence favours it; for example, it is common for one word to select another single word (e.g. *consist* selects just the word *of*), which is expected in dependency analysis but not in phrase structure analysis (where *of* is only indirectly related to *consist*). However it remains to be seen whether the same is true for all the phenomena which have been claimed to support phrase structure (e.g. those which involve ‘command’ relations based on phrase structure).

Another basic tenet of WG is the logic of **multiple default inheritance**, which in turn is based on the elementary relation called ‘isa’ which underlies classificatory hierarchies. Inheritance is the mechanism which allows generalisation, and is equivalent to ‘schematicity’ in other cognitive theories. It goes beyond mere unification because it allows exceptions to override defaults. For example, the default form for a noun (which consists of its stem alone) is overridden for the sub-class Plural by the inflectional pattern ‘Stem + s’. Similarly, the default order of a words is dependent-second, but this is overridden for subjects (and certain other dependencies). These patterns are shown (in simplified form) in Figure 2. (The fully inflected form of a word is its ‘whole’, in contrast with its stem. The order of words is shown by a separate relationship ‘<’, used as in other theories to mean ‘earlier’.) According to this analysis, *words* isa Plural, whose morphology overrides the default for Word; and *may* inherits its subject dependency from Verb, which overrides the default order for dependents. Thus the same logic underlies both inflectional morphology and syntactic word order.

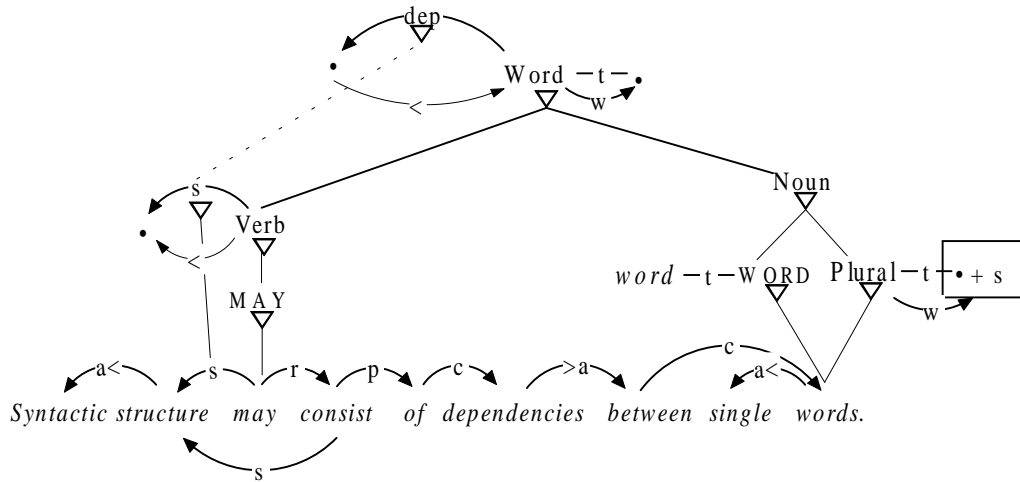


Figure 2

The example illustrates the WG view that language is a **network**. This view is typical of ‘cognitive’ theories of language which emphasise the continuities between language and non-linguistic knowledge, and contrasts with the view that language is a distinct module of the mind.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

The Web site <http://www.phon.ucl.ac.uk/home/dick/wg.htm> contains a great deal of downloadable material (including an ‘Encyclopedia of Word Grammar and English’)