

COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF SYNTACTIC STRUCTURES

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In this article, it is investigated how the way we structure our sentences plays a crucial role in communication, highlighting the relationship between grammar and the context of the ongoing conversation. Moreover, the main idea is that Syntax is not just a set of formal rules, but the choices we make in our sentence structures are deeply influenced by our need to communicate effectively and navigate social situations. To support this view, some specific examples will be analyzed using concepts from Austin's speech act theory, Grice's Cooperative Principle, and Leech's politeness strategies. Our analysis shows that the way we construct sentences is not random - it's a deliberate strategy to convey meaning, manage how information is shared, shape our social identities, and handle the complexities of conversation. In conclusion, that truly understanding language requires us to consider both its structural elements and the practical ways it functions in real-life interaction.

Syntactic structures are essential linguistic units that not only ensure correct grammatical order but also play a crucial role in shaping meaning. Scholars from various fields have differing viewpoints on syntactic structures. Noam Chomsky posits that these structures arise from an innate and universal grammar— a system of rules and principles hardwired into the human brain. According to Chomsky, these structures are generated by a set of formal rules, and the primary goal of linguistics is to uncover these underlying principles.

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In contrast, M.A.K. Halliday emphasizes the social dimension of language, stating, "Language is a social semiotic; a resource for meaning, and meaning is made in social contexts." This perspective highlights that meaning is constructed within social interactions, illustrating the interplay between syntax and context in the creation of meaning. Together, these viewpoints reflect the complexity of syntactic structures and their significance in both individual cognition and social communication. Halliday offers a functionalist perspective, viewing syntactic structures as resources for making meaning in social contexts. He argues that grammar is not an autonomous system but is intimately linked to the communicative functions that language serves. Syntactic choices are determined by the speaker's intentions and the social situation, and the analysis of syntax must take into account these factors. This perspective emphasizes the relationship between language, context, and social meaning. According to Construction Grammar, "A construction is a stored pairing of form and function; constructions are the basic units of language." – (Adele E. Goldberg, *Constructions: A Construction Grammar Approach to Argument Structure* (1995)).

Goldberg's Construction Grammar²¹ offers a different view, arguing that syntactic structures are best understood as stored pairings of form, meaning, and function. These pairings, called constructions, are the basic units of language, and they range from simple words to complex clauses. Speakers learn these constructions through exposure to language use, and they use syntactic constructions to build and interpret sentences. This approach challenges the traditional generative view of syntax as being derived from a set of abstract rules.

Furthermore, as Laurence R. Horn once wrote, "The meaning of a syntactic construction is not exhausted by its semantic content; it also carries pragmatic information about how it is to be used in discourse."²² Syntactic constructions, for instance, can serve different discourse functions, such as introducing new information, highlighting given information, signaling topic shifts, or expressing speaker's attitude.

In terms of definitions mentioned above, it can be concluded that syntactic constructions are one of the main elements of the language which carry developed meaning at the same time delivering speaker's intention. This means beyond their formal properties, syntactic constructions carry inherent semantic contributions that influence the interpretation of utterances in communicative context²³. These contributions relate to the meaning potential of the construction and the thematic roles assigned to its constituent elements. Syntactic constructions are not simply neutral frameworks into which words are inserted but they also possess inherent semantic properties that shape the overall meaning of the sentence. This

²¹ Goldberg's Construction Grammar (CxG), primarily developed by Adele E. Goldberg (1995, 2006), is a non-modular, usage-based cognitive theory of grammar that treats language as an inventory of form–meaning pairings called "constructions."

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“meaning potential,” as termed by Fillmore (1988), represents a range of semantic possibilities associated with a particular construction, albeit constrained by its inherent structure and the lexical items with which it combines. Each syntactic construction has a certain range of meanings associated with it. This meaning potential is not fixed but rather represents a set of semantic possibilities that are constrained by the construction’s structure and the lexical items that it combines with. For example, the passive construction (e.g., "The ball was kicked by the boy") inherently conveys a meaning of affectedness or undergone action, shifting the focus from the agent (the boy) to the patient (the ball).

The functional behavior of syntactic constructions encompasses their role in discourse and the constraints that govern their use in different contexts. These properties relate to how constructions are employed to achieve communicative goals and how their distribution is affected by factors such as register, style, and speaker intention.

Moreover, syntactic constructions can serve different discourse functions, such as introducing new information, highlighting given information, signaling topic shifts, or expressing speaker attitude. For example, topicalization (e.g., "That book, I haven't read yet") is used to bring a specific element to the forefront of the discourse, signaling its relevance to the ongoing conversation. Similarly, cleft sentences (e.g., "It was John who broke the vase") are used to emphasize a particular element and contrast it with other possibilities. The use of syntactic constructions is often subject to various constraints, including syntactic constraints, semantic constraints, pragmatic constraints, and stylistic preferences. Syntactic constraints relate to the grammatical requirements of the construction, such as the need for specific word order or morphological marking. Semantic constraints relate to the compatibility of the construction’s meaning with the meanings of the lexical items that it combines with. Pragmatic constraints relate to the appropriateness of the construction in a given communicative context. Stylistic preferences relate to the choice of construction based on factors such as register, formality, and speaker intention.

Syntactic structures are intimately linked to the performance of speech acts, enabling speakers to not only convey information but also to accomplish specific actions through language. The most obvious example is the use of imperative sentences to issue commands or make requests. "Close the door" directly instructs the listener to perform the action. Similarly, the formation of questions, through specific syntactic patterns like subject-auxiliary inversion in English, signals the intention to elicit information. However, the relationship between syntax and speech acts goes beyond these direct correspondences. As Austin famously noted in *How to Do Things with Words*, utterances are not just descriptive but performative, enacting actions through the very act of speaking. Often, speakers use indirect speech acts, leveraging syntactic complexity to convey their intentions in a more subtle or polite manner. For example, asking "Could you please pass the salt?" is syntactically a question about the listener's ability, but pragmatically functions as a polite

request. This indirectness allows speakers to mitigate potential face-threatening acts and maintain social harmony. As Grice argued, communication is guided by a Cooperative Principle, where speakers and listeners tacitly agree to contribute relevant, truthful, informative, and clear utterances. This is what leads to implicature, furthermore, syntax can also be used to signal promises, warnings, and other performative utterances. For instance, "I promise to be there on time" employs a specific syntactic pattern with the performative verb "promise" to create a binding commitment. These examples demonstrate that syntactic structures are not simply tools for conveying information, but powerful instruments for enacting social and communicative intentions. It also to accomplish specific actions through language. The most obvious example is the use of imperative sentences to issue commands or make requests. "Close the door" directly instructs the listener to perform the action. Similarly, the formation of questions, through specific syntactic patterns like subject-auxiliary inversion in English, signals the intention to elicit information.

The selection of specific syntactic constructions is often guided by considerations of politeness and social appropriateness. Speakers strategically adjust their language to reflect their relationship with the listener, to maintain social harmony, and to avoid causing offense. For example, using more complex syntax and hedging devices can soften requests or criticisms, making them less direct and more polite. Saying "I'm not entirely sure I agree with that" is a more indirect and less confrontational way of disagreeing than simply stating "You're wrong." This also highlights Grice's notion of a co-operative principle where a speaker is attempting to fulfill the listener's expectations.

Syntactic structures, often perceived as the rigid scaffolding of language, are in reality dynamic and versatile instruments meticulously employed by speakers to orchestrate meaning, manage information flow, and navigate the intricate terrain of social interaction. Far from being mere conduits of semantic content, these grammatical arrangements are strategically leveraged as potent tools to shape communicative outcomes, revealing a sophisticated interplay between syntax and pragmatics. As Austin (1962) compellingly argued in *How to Do Things with Words*, utterances transcend the limitations of simply being descriptive; they are inherently performative, enacting actions through the very act of articulation. This perspective fundamentally shifts our understanding of language, emphasizing its capacity to not only represent reality but also to actively shape it. Syntactic choices, therefore, become pivotal in realizing these performative goals, enabling speakers to not only convey information but also to accomplish specific actions, from issuing commands to making promises and expressing apologies.

This strategic deployment of syntactic constructions enables speakers to transcend the limitations of direct expression, conveying subtle intentions and shaping the listener's interpretation through indirect speech acts. A seemingly simple interrogative, such as "Could you please pass the salt?", serves as a prime example. Syntactically, it poses a

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question about the listener's ability, but pragmatically, it functions as a polite request, leveraging the indirectness to mitigate the potential imposition. This ability to convey meaning indirectly is crucial for navigating the complexities of social interaction, allowing speakers to achieve their communicative goals while minimizing the risk of causing offense or violating social norms.

Indeed, the selection of specific syntactic constructions is often guided by considerations of politeness and social appropriateness, reflecting a delicate balancing act between clarity and sensitivity. As Leech (1983) insightfully highlights in *Principles of Pragmatics*, speakers strategically employ syntactic complexity, hedging devices, and indirect strategies to achieve politeness and relational goals. The choice to phrase a disagreement as "I'm not entirely sure I agree with that" rather than "You're wrong" is a testament to this careful calibration, where syntactic sophistication serves to soften the blow of disagreement and preserve social harmony. This reflects a deep understanding that communication is not merely about conveying information but also about managing relationships and maintaining positive face.

Underlying this intricate interplay between syntax and pragmatics is Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, which posits that communication is governed by a tacit agreement between speakers and listeners to cooperate in achieving a shared understanding. This principle dictates that speakers should strive to make their contributions relevant, truthful, informative, and clear. By adhering to these maxims, speakers create a framework of shared expectations that allows listeners to infer implicit meanings and intentions. When a speaker deliberately flouts these maxims, they trigger implicatures, allowing for the conveyance of subtle nuances and indirect messages. The ability to skillfully manipulate syntax in accordance with the Cooperative Principle is essential for effective communication, enabling speakers to convey complex ideas and navigate the intricacies of social interaction with precision and grace.

In conclusion, the insights gleaned from this investigation into the communicative functions of syntactic structures have significant implications for both linguistic theory and practical applications. Theoretically, it supports a usage-based perspective on language, emphasizing the importance of considering communicative context and frequency effects in understanding the evolution and acquisition of grammatical knowledge. Practically, it highlights the need for language learners to develop not only syntactic competence but also pragmatic awareness, enabling them to effectively navigate the complexities of real-world communication. By recognizing the strategic and adaptive nature of language use, we can gain a deeper appreciation for the power of syntax to shape meaning and facilitate successful interaction.

References

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