Overview

The first edition of *Understanding Syntax* by Maggie Tallerman appeared in 1998, and the second edition in 2005, both published by Hodder Arnold. The third edition was published in 2011 by Routledge, and is part of the “Understanding Language Series” which aims to introduce students to major topics in linguistics without assuming any prior introduction to the field.

The front matter presents the abbreviations used and a ‘Note to the student,’ explaining some linguistic conventions and how examples are presented in the text. Reference material at the back includes a complete list of sources cited in examples, a list of references, an index of the 109 languages mentioned in the text, a subject index, and a glossary of 59 key terms.

The text maintains an informal style and introduces technical terms in context, usually with an informal definition or example, e.g. ‘UNIVERSAL – common to all languages’ (p. 5) and ‘VERBS (words like liquefy, learn, enjoy and grow)’ (p. 12). Many sections include one or more exercises within the body of the text itself, followed by a discussion of the answer. Every major section ends with a brief summary, and every chapter concludes with a section of ‘Further reading’ and several pages of exercises.

Summary of chapters

Chapter one gives an overview of the scope of syntax, amply illustrated with examples which show the importance of word order, syntactic units, and the difference between non-standard utterances and non-grammatical utterances. Most of the examples in this chapter are from English, but interestingly several are from British dialects which allow structures that are not found in standard English, such as a tag question ‘init?’ derived from ‘isn’t it’: ‘We still lost in the end, init?’ (p. 9). There is also a discussion of dative shift in English and Indonesian which shows how unrelated languages can have similar syntactic structure; this part will challenge beginning linguists as the author acknowledges with the statement, ‘you should be able to understand it if you read it through more than once, stopping to work out each stage as you go’ (p. 7).
The second chapter begins with examples of how verbs can be identified as a word class in English based on their distribution. This section emphasizes the need for formal tests for word classes, based on morphology, distribution, and function. The chapter moves on to the syntactic tests for several word classes (verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions/adpositions) in English and other languages. This includes the grammatical categories (properties) associated with each word class, like tense and aspect for verbs, and number and gender for nouns. The noun phrase, adjective phrase, and preposition phrase are introduced along the way.

The major sections in chapter three cover ‘Finiteness and auxiliaries,’ ‘Introduction to subordination,’ and ‘Major cross-linguistic variations.’ The first two of these sections are straight-forward; they introduce the concepts of the clause, finite and non-finite verbs, and matrix and subordinate clauses. The discussion of subordinate clauses concentrates on complement clauses, devoting less than a page of explanation to adjunct clauses. Relative clauses are mentioned in passing as a type of adjunct clause which is treated at length in chapter eight. The final section, cross-linguistic variation in complex sentences, introduces co-ordinated clauses, nominalization, and serial verbs.

Chapter four consists of three major sections: ‘Heads and their dependents,’ ‘Where does the head occur in a phrase? Head-initial and head-final languages,’ and ‘Head-marking and dependent-marking languages.’ The first section presents the distinction between adjuncts and complements as well as exemplifying how verbs, prepositions, adjectives, nouns, and complementizers function as heads. The last two sections focus on typology.

Chapter five, ‘How do we identify constituents?’ starts with an analysis of ambiguous sentences like ‘Black cab drivers went on strike’ (p. 141), and informally defines a constituent as ‘a set of words that forms a phrase in a sentence’ (p. 142). The reader is introduced to four syntactic tests for constituency: sentence fragments, echo questions, clefts, and displacement. (Proforms like ‘do so’ are introduced later in the chapter as another test for constituency.) Each test is illustrated with pairs of contrasting sentences, and tree diagrams are introduced along the way. Much of the discussion focuses on the difference between phrasal verbs, e.g. ‘Those smugglers [shook off [their pursuers]]’ and prepositional verbs, e.g. ‘Those smugglers [relied on the weather forecast]’ (p. 157ff.). Although fully showing the necessity of syntactic tests, the author acknowledges that not all tests work all the time; the researcher must apply different tests and consider the results together when making judgments about structure. For example, the existence of a VP constituent can not be supported with the cleft test (*It’s shake off their pursuers that those smugglers did): ‘This does not mean the cleft test is unreliable; it just means that VPs can’t be focused like this in English’ (p. 160). Ellipsis and coordination are introduced as constituency tests for VPs.

The next chapter covers basic word order, case systems, and grammatical agreement. The presentation of word order is very brief, just over a page, citing three criteria to follow when trying to determine basic word order: frequency, neutrality, and native speaker intuition. (Compare to Kroeger 2004, which gives five distinct criteria). The section on case systems will surely challenge beginning linguists, introducing in short order nominative/accusative, ergative/absolutive, and split systems. The discussion of grammatical agreement concentrates on subjects in Icelandic (a nominative/accusative language with quirky case), Lezgian
(morphologically ergative with some syntactic accusativity), and Tagalog (a topic-marking language). Data on the first two languages includes several instances in which attention is focused on arguments with dative case, although the identification of the dative is only given in the glosses, not discussed or supported with any proof.

Chapter seven is ‘Processes that change grammatical relations,’ describing the passive and impersonals, antipassive, applicative, and causative. There is no mention of reflexive, reciprocal, adversative, and other processes that change grammatical relations.

Chapter eight covers ‘ways of moving phrases around within the clause without changing their grammatical relations’ (p. 243): Wh-questions, relative clauses, and focus movements. The section on focus is very brief and there is no ‘Further reading’ about focus or movement.

The closing chapter outlines thirteen topics that should be considered when writing a syntactic description of a language, followed by a brief sketch of colloquial Welsh that highlights unusual features. The chapter also introduces three interesting questions currently being debated in linguistics: Why is it so hard for adults to learn a new language? Are all languages equally complex? and Do all languages manifest broadly the same syntactic properties?

**Evalutative comments**

*Understanding Syntax* is an appealing book, slim in format and clear in its prose. It was very interesting to me as an intermediate student of linguistics, having completed an M.A. just a few years ago. I learned a lot, especially about ergativity. I enjoyed the focus on basic unifying principles, which accomplishes the goal stated on the back cover, to emphasize ‘understanding of the essential notions rather than arguing for a particular theoretical position.’

From the perspective of a teacher of beginning linguistics students, I see several features of particular value. These include the ‘Note to the student,’ the introduction of new terms in non-technical language, and the glossary. Several sections of the text stand out as particularly well-suited for novice linguists. Chapter one, for example, clearly introduces the presentation of interlinear examples. The illustration at the beginning of chapter two (using distribution as a test for identifying verbs) is contrasted with standard classroom definitions of noun, verb, and adjective. The beginning students, therefore, will be able to see the weakness of informal definitions and are prepared for the discussion of English adjectives which follows and then the overview of the three basic formal tests used for identifying word classes.

Overall, however, I feel that the text covers the basics too briefly in favor of concentrating on unusual phenomena or advanced arguments. There are few examples of basic, simple structures and many examples of complex ones. In chapter four, the discussions about adjectives that take complements (e.g. fond of fruit, p. 116) and complementizers which take a clausal complement (Mel said [that she was leaving], p. 117) stand out to me as advanced topics for an introductory text. The second and third parts of the same chapter are also advanced, focusing on the typology of head-marking and dependent-marking. The examples in this section are longer than most, with ample discussion, but the subject matter may be too advanced for any but the brightest and most
persevering students. Similarly, the discussions concerning ergativity in chapter six are more extensive than most beginning students would be able to grasp.

The author acknowledges the help of extensive feedback that she received about the second edition, and it appears that some of those comments concerned the advanced nature of the text: this third edition has longer introductions and conclusions than the second edition, and two of the most advanced topics in the previous edition (inflected infinitival clauses and bar notation) have been removed.

**Reference**