Teaching Syntax

Presentation @ the 7th Annual Professional Development Conference

For teachers, by teachers

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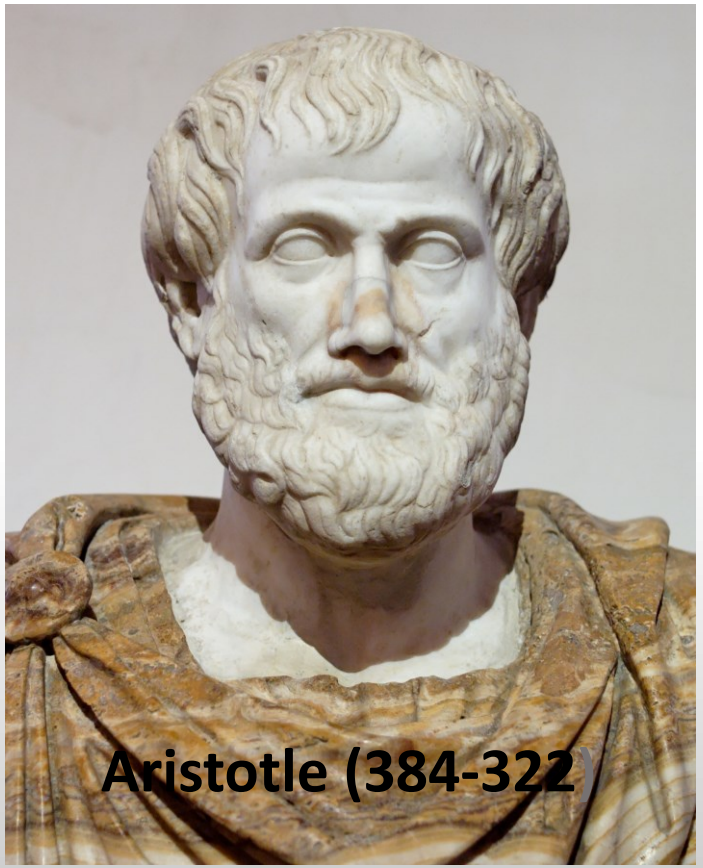
Wisdom = Knowledge of the ‘CAUSES’

We do not regard any of the senses as wisdom; yet surely these give the most authoritative knowledge of particulars. But they do not tell us the '***why***' of anything - e.g., ***why*** fire is hot; they only say that it is hot.

…

Wisdom is knowledge about certain principles and causes.

Aristotle: Metaphysics, Book I



CASAS Competencies & MD Content Standards for Adult ESOL

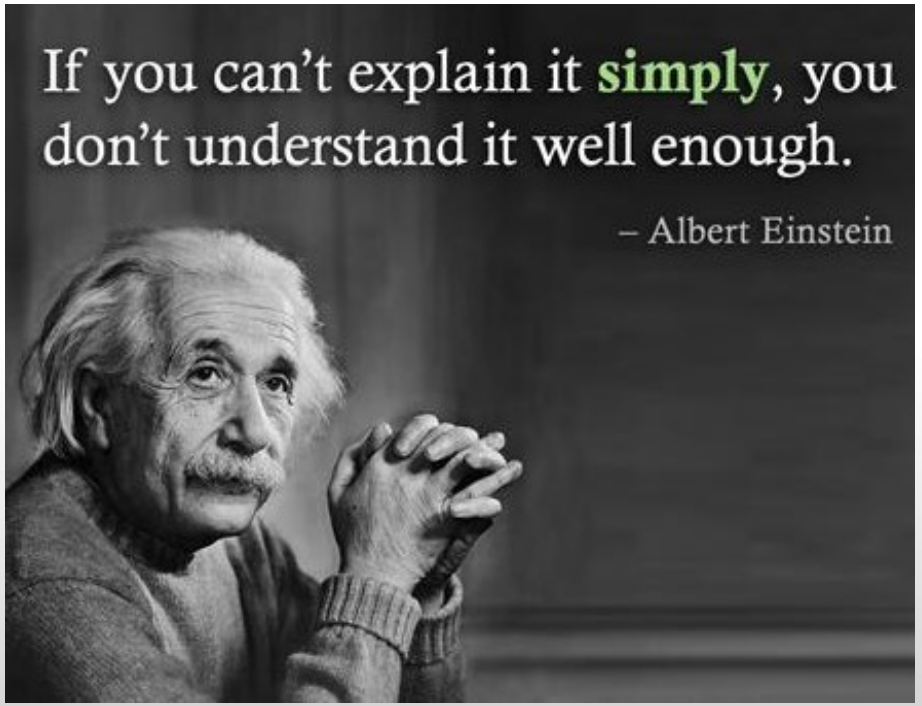
- Current strategies aim to equip students with the necessary 'life skills,' focusing on patterns of conversational exchanges.
- These **interactive**/ 'communicative' methods of language teaching, fairly dominant since the 1980s, rely largely on 1st language acquisition mechanisms.
- Yet, adult students have the universal '**Language software**' already 'installed' in their brains.

Can we utilize its power in teaching them the '***hows*** & ***whys***' of word behavior in speech (syntax)?

To get at the ‘causes’ of syntax, let us:

1. Consider what ‘Language’ is & how it works

2. Discuss different ways of teaching syntax



3. Practice some generalizing sentence analysis (G-nalysis)

G-nalysis focuses on the logical relationships between word-meanings & the ‘chunks’ they form in the sentence.

Human languages are complex social communication systems.

To understand how a system works, we must identify its smallest ***functional unit*** & study its properties – they determine how the units behave in the whole:

- Galaxy : star; organism : cell; college : department; society : family;
- **Language : …???**

LANGUAGE IS VERBAL THOUGHT

Human LANGUAGE is *qualitatively* different from animal 'languages':

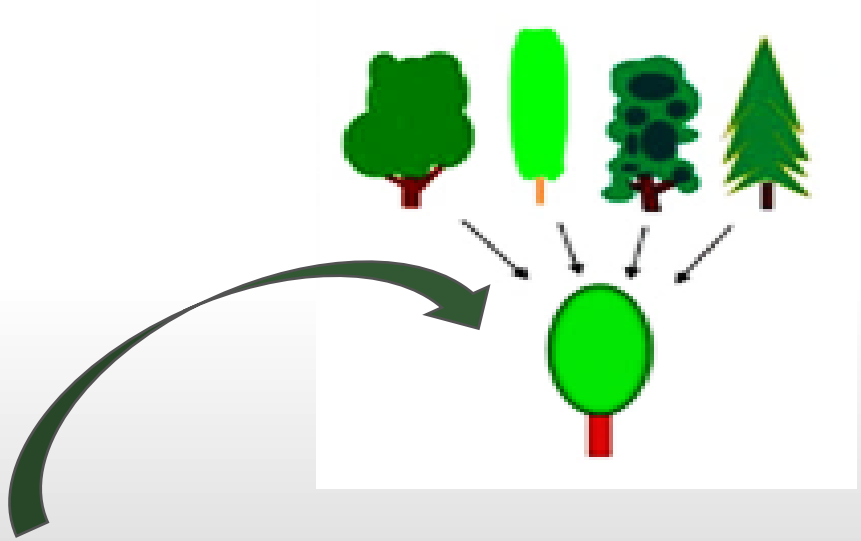
- **Biological** 'languages' are **instinctive & species-specific** (products of the 'body')
- **LANGUAGE** is **not** instinctive; it is ***verbal thought*** (the product of actively thinking & communicating human minds):

Each word is already a **generalization** … a verbal **act** of **thought**;
it reflects reality in quite another way than sensation and perception reflect it.

Vygotsky: Language and Thought, 1934.

Speech = Thought in Words

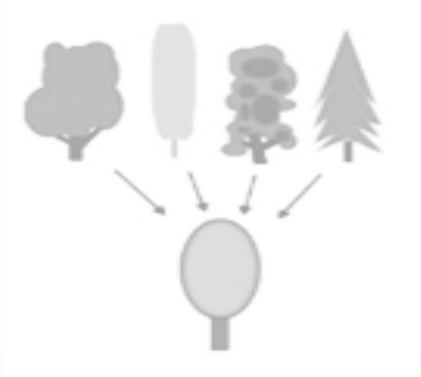
Every **WORD IS** a **GENERALIZATION** – an **ACT** of **COLLECTIVE SOCIAL THOUGHT** :



Word = contiguity of concept, ***caused*** by perceived ***resemblance*** between experiences, connected in the collective mind of a society

What we call ‘Thinking’ Is Connecting Ideas
by resemblance, contiguity, & cause/effect

David Hume (1711-1776)



All human minds associate ideas by
(1) *resemblance*,
(2) *contiguity* in time/space,
& (3) *Cause/effect*.

Hume:

These are the **3 universal principles** of human understanding.

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding(1748)

Example 1: Why “Hooker’s Lips” ?

Example 2: Why “Elephant” Cliff (Iceland)?

This mechanism of thought explains **pareidolia** [ˌpæraɪˈdəʊlɪə] - the imagined perception of a pattern or meaning where it does not actually exist

http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pareidolia

Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange…

Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748.



La segunda venida

‘Broken Hearts’: our generalizing minds create meaning where there is none – this is the natural way we **think**

(i.e., connect ideas by resemblance, contiguity, & cause/effect)

To **GENERALIZE** = to **CREATE MEANING** = to **MAKE SENSE** of an experience

The Process of Generalization

Generalization involves both synthesis & analysis:

To see resemblances, we must also see the differences.

In order to form a concept, we must be able not only to **connect**, but also to **abstract**, to single out its characteristic elements, and to view them separately from the totality of the concrete experience in which they are embedded. …

Synthesis and analysis presuppose each other, as inhalation presupposes exhalation.

Vygotsky: 1986, p. 135

Language Is Creating Meaning in Words –
What IS its smallest unit that has all of its properties intact?

Descriptive Linguistics:

Phoneme Is the Smallest Unit of Language.

But … **IS** it, really?

Does it have all of its psycho-physical & socio-historical properties?

Do phonemes possess independent meaning?

Can we communicate ‘in phonemes’? [k]/[ñ]?

Word-Meaning IS the Smallest Functional Unit of Language, because it has all its properties intact:

- **Psychological**: there is no word without **meaning**
- **Physical**: there is no meaning without the **word**; meaning comes into existence through words – they are the physical **signs** of meaning
- **Social**: the double function of every **sign** – to ***communicate*** **meaning**
- **Historical**: human minds live and think in time; their thoughts, embodied in words, reflect their 'worlds.'

How do these properties of word-meanings shape their **behavior in use**?

We do not typically communicate in single words.

Born of mental **associations**, word-meanings readily **associate** with others, forming **chunks of meaning* in use** by living, thinking, and communicating human minds.

*Collocations, phrases, clauses, sentences, etc.

Sentence: Words which say something about something

We communicate in sentences, the generalizations of our individual minds:

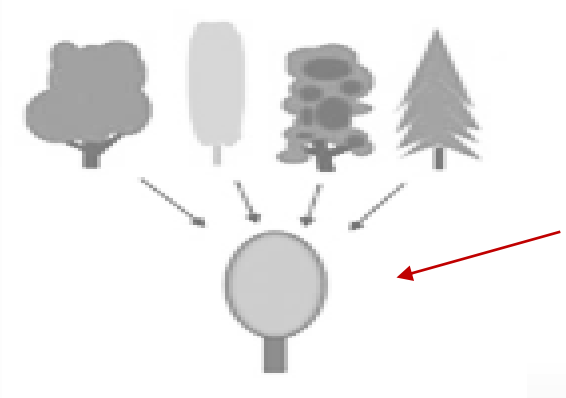
Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a relationship between things. Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem.

Lev Vygotsky: 1934

Sentence-mosaics are complex generalizations.

In use, word-meanings are associated by perceived resemblance

Collectively, we 'make sense' of the world, creating the words of our language: *tree, FB,* etc.



Word = Contiguity of **concept**, ***caused*** by perceived ***resemblance*** between experiences, connected in the collective memory of a society

Individually, we connect the words that we learned from society into sentences (word-mosaics), each with its own meaning:

Peter eats squid : Squid eats Peter

The chicken comes before the egg : The egg comes before the chicken

Synthesis + Analysis = generalization

Synthesis & Analysis:

2 universal principles of

creating the meaning:

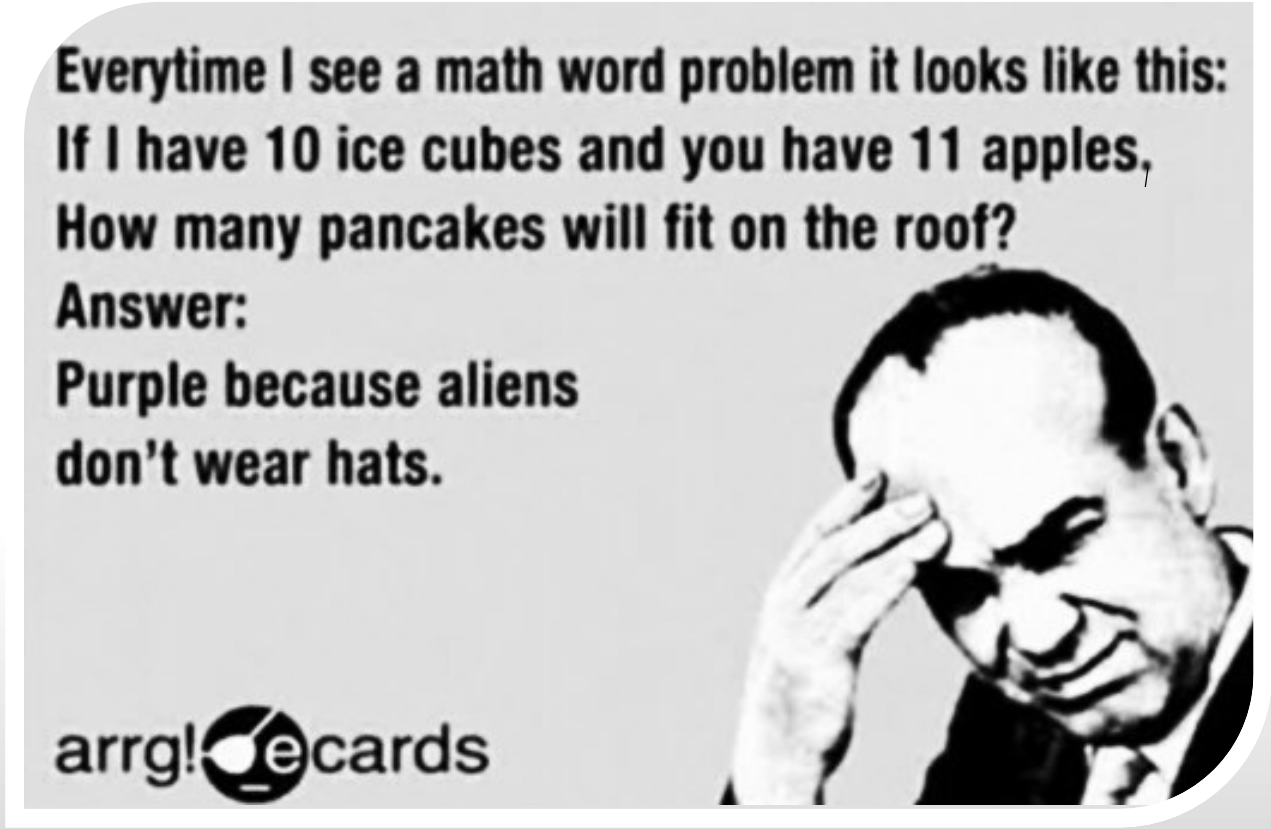
not only of words & phrases,

but **also of**

whole word-mosaics (**sentences**)

GENERALIZATION: the Mechanism of human understanding

If we can't see those logical ***connections*** between ideas, we can't 'make sense' of what we hear:



The rational language mechanism

This **Mechanism of Generalization** (Synthesis & Analysis of ideas) is the **Mechanism of Language** (Synthesis & Analysis of words).

This simple **mechanism of SYNTHESIS & ANALYSIS** of word-meanings in speakers' minds

is KEY to UNDERSTANDING both

SYNTAX & SEMANTICS

The 1st Principle of Sentence Structure: synthesis

Every sentence-mosaic is a **synthesis** of **what** we talk about (S) & **what** we say about it (predicate: the Verb with all the words that go with it), forming the composite meaning of the whole **S/V/C** nexus:

- **Subject**, or 'what the sentence is about'

- **Verb**, or what we say about the subject:

> 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.
>
> Aristotle: *On Interpretation*, Part 3

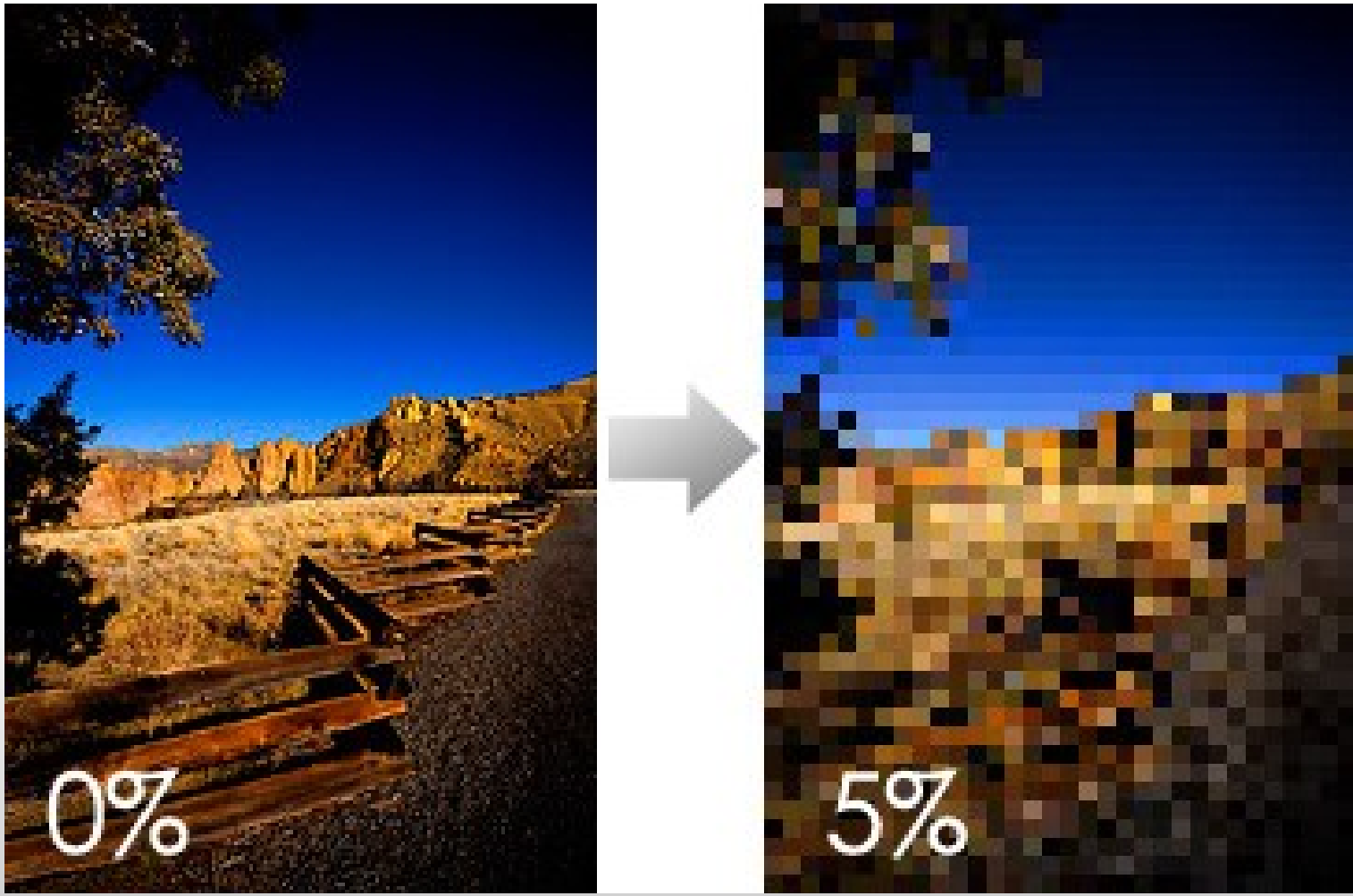
- **Compliment**: this 'slot' in the nexus may be left empty, but it can also be filled with direct/indirect objects (DO/IO), predicate nouns (PN), or predicate adjectives (PA).

The 2nd Principle of Sentence Structure: analysis

ANALYSIS (*recursion*) **puts 'meat' on the 'bones' of the S/V/C nexus**:

it adds detail, **color**, '**pixels**' to parts of the sentence mosaic, zooming in on the nexus constituents, describing (or naming) them through associations by

resemblance, contiguity in space and time, and cause/effect.



Psycho-physical & Socio-historical properties of word-meanings: →

PURPOSE of their use

We **use words** to **build** & to **communicate** composite **meanings** – complex generalizations.

Depending on their perceived **purpose** (synthesis or analysis),

word-meanings/chunks of word-meanings

carry out different **functions** in the sentence, called

PARTS OF SPEECH

3 principles of human understanding & 8 parts of speech

To think /communicate our individual thoughts

(i.e., our personal associations by resemblance, contiguity in space/time, & cause/effect),

we use words to ***name*** things/actions (**noun/**pronoun functions) and

to ***describe*** them(**adjective**/**adverb** functions)

.

Words, thus functioning, form the 'body' of each sentence-mosaic, its 'bones' & 'meat' which are held together by the 'connective tissue' of **conjunctions** & **prepositions.**

Interjections are not parts of the sentence – they are 'thrown in' to give the 'body' its 'odor' - or 'fragrance' ☺

THESE FUNCTIONS of WORD-MEANINGS ARE UNIVERSAL

Despite the diversity of forms, the structures of all of world's languages serve the same functions, expressing the 3 principles human understanding/verbal thought.

Because these functions of words (and groups of words) reflect the relationships between them (according to our **human understanding**) '**parts of speech**' are equally '**parts of thought**' in words and are, thus, the same in all of the world's languages.

The Rational Language Mechanism - GENERALIZATION

Each Language Has Its Own “Units” & “Rules” for making word-mosaics,

BUT

all of them share the same ‘mechanism’ of creating meaning –

Connecting Word-Meanings by

Resemblance, Contiguity in Space/Time, & Cause/Effect.

‘Chunks’ of words can function as one part of speech

In all languages, single word–meanings, as well as groups of word-meanings (phrases and clauses) can serve one purpose (function as one part of speech), i.e.:

Man is an animal suspended in the webs *of significance* he himself has spun.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Language – a social ‘spinning wheel’

“Language is **social *means* of thought**”

(Vygotsky: 1934).

As individuals, we all learn to use this **social tool**, the ‘spinning wheel’ of Language, to spin our individual

‘webs of significance’

out of the yarn of word-meanings we share.

Our

‘webs of significance’

The more complex our thoughts,

the more complex

the **mosaic images**

we create.

Grouper Swallowing Fisherman – Roman mosaic (Tunis)

To Use a tool, we must learn how it works

To use my new camcorder, I had to read the instructions booklet.

To speak well, our students must learn

how language works & **why** it does so.

How can we explain how language works SIMPLY?

Viewed as the natural expression of

the way we think,

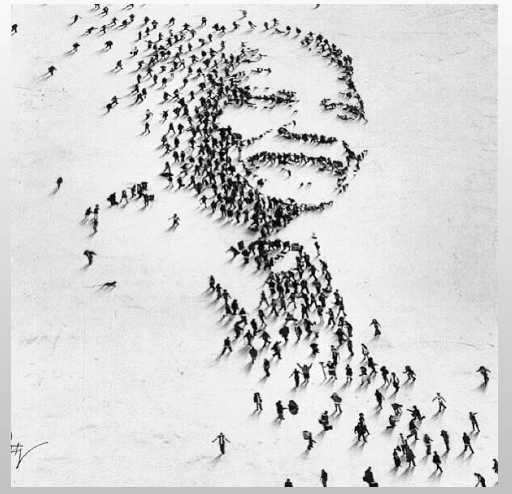
syntax becomes easy –

to understand, and to teach.

My teaching strategy:

I. **<u>To Explain the concepts of</u>**

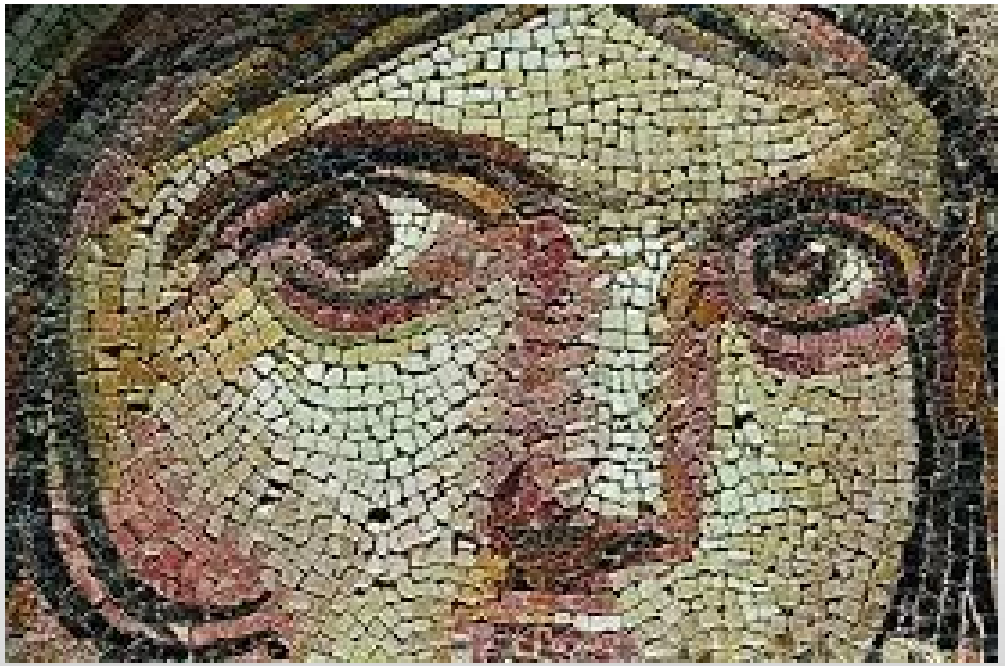
1. Language as verbal thought; ‘word’ as the smallest unit of language – the generalization of our collective mind
2. ‘sentence’ mosaic – a unit of ‘individualizes’ meaning; its universal ‘parts’ (SVC); importance of verb conjugation
3. different languages – different ‘units & rules,’
   But the same ‘rational mechanism’



All mosaics express the artist's meaning:

But I love you ≠ I love you, but…

[practical: building mosaics/ puzzles in class]



"TOOLBOX" FOR SENTENCE ANALYSIS: BASIC CONCEPTS

- Sentence = word-mosaic saying something about something
- Parts of speech = functions of words/ chunks of words in the sentence
- Phrase = a 'chunk' of words functioning as one adjective, adverb or noun
- Clause = a phrase that has sentence structure s/v/c

My teaching strategy:

II. To Explain

1. **Functions of words in the sentence**: reflections of human understanding (parts of speech);
2. **Phrases & clauses:** groups of words can **function as one** noun, adjective or adverb
3. **Two principles** of sentence structure: synthesis & analysis
4. **Practical sentence analysis**:
   - 'Putting meat on the bones'
   - **G-nalysis** of 'live' sentences;
   - **Gnalysis step 1** aims to identify
     - All s/v/cs in the sentence &
     - How all words/'chunks' of word-meanings relate to each other (by asking the logical 'journalistic' questions: what/who? Which? How? when/? Where? Why?
   - **Gnalysis step 2** - diagram all svcs:
     - independent – 
     - Dependent -  (N, Adj., adv.)

Examples of G-nalysis:

What?

S V C(PN + IO)

// A yawn / is / a silent scream for coffee //

Adj.

Simple clause

Verbal nouns can take Direct/ Indirect Objects

Practical gnalysis

S_2 V_2 $C_{2(PN)}$

$C_{1(DO)}$ S_1 V_1 S_3 V_3

//What you allow / is / what will continue //

S_2 V_2 $C_{2(PN)}$

$C_1S_1V_1$ V_2 $S_3V_3C_{3(zero)}$

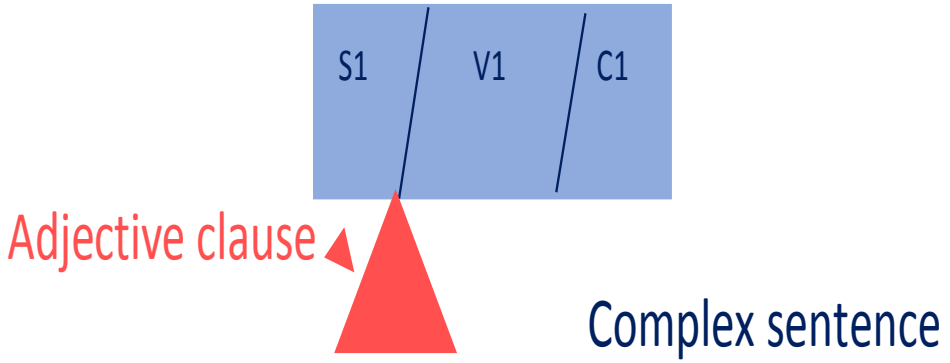
Complex sentence: 2 embedded Noun clauses

gnalysis

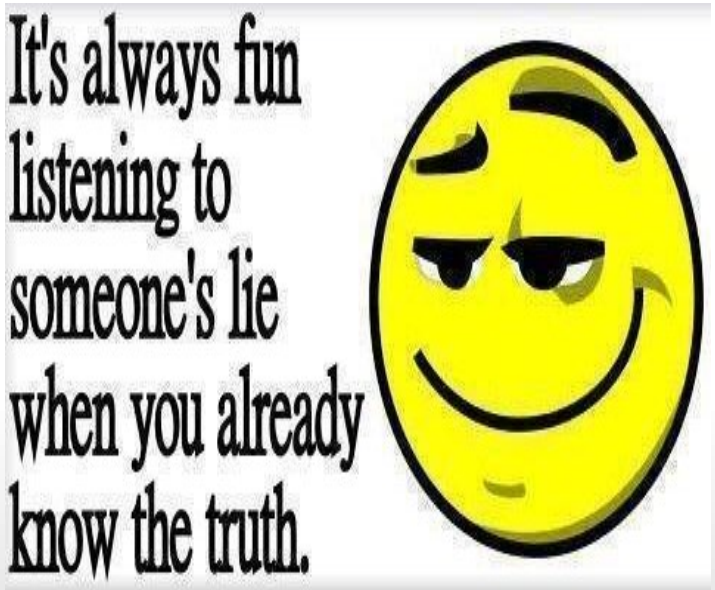
S_1 Which those? V_1 $C_{1(DO)}$

S_2 V_2

//Those / who do not move / do not notice / their chains //.



G-nalysis

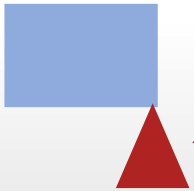


When?

Dummy S_1 V_1 $C_{1(PN)}$ + (PN + DO) S_2 V_2 $C_{2(DO)}$

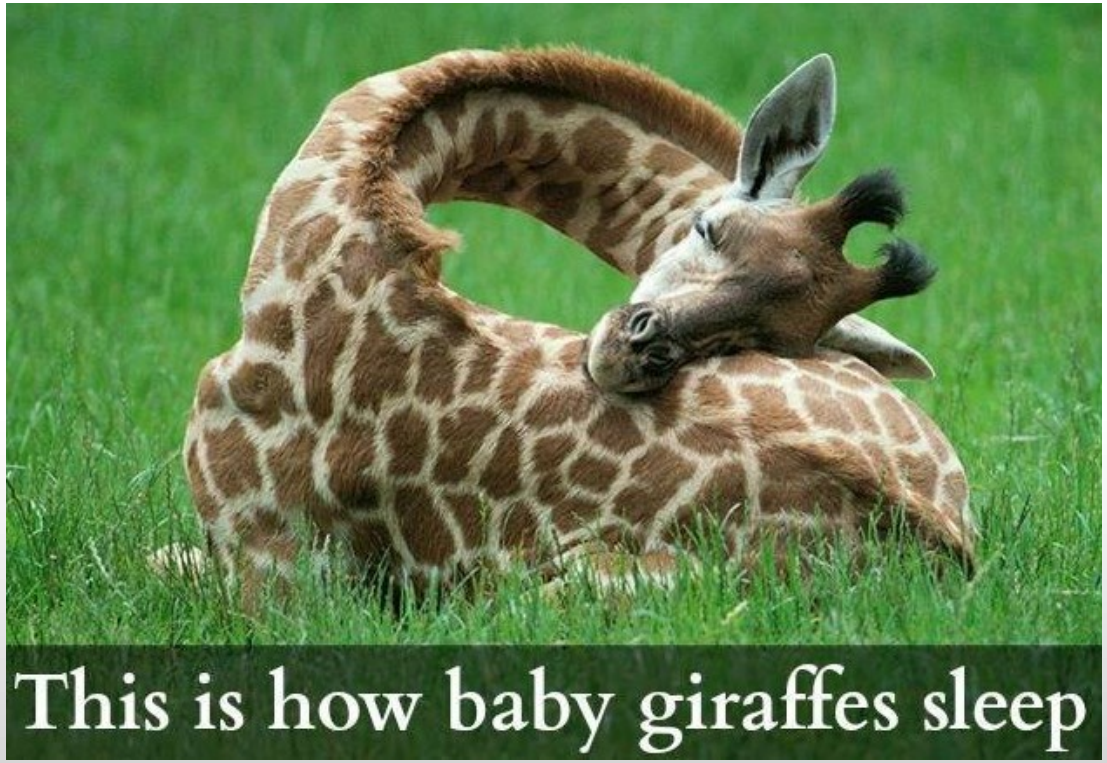
// It's always / fun listening to someone's lie // when /you / already know / the truth //.

Complex sentence



Adverb of Time

gnalysis



Plurality of interpretations:

S_1 V_1 $C_{1(PN)}$ (S_2 V_2)

1. // This / is / how / baby giraffes / sleep //

What?

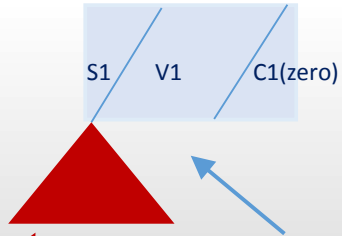
Noun clause

Complex sentence

S_1 V_1 $C_{1(ZERO)}$ (S_2 V_2)

2. // This / is how / baby giraffes / sleep //

How?



Adverb of Manner Clause

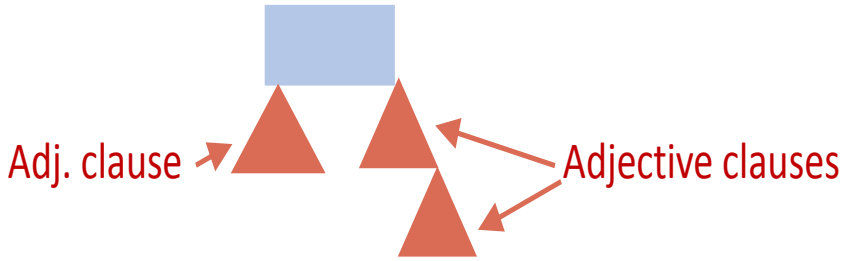
Complex sentence

gnalysis

Which scandal? Which one? Which one?

S_1 S_2 V_2 $C_{2(DO)}$ V_1 $C_{1(PN)}$ S_3 V_3 $C_{3(PN)}$ S_4 V_4

// The scandal *that has legs* / is / the GSA one – / that/'s / the one / *that* /*sticks* //.



gnalysis

Which scandal? Which one?

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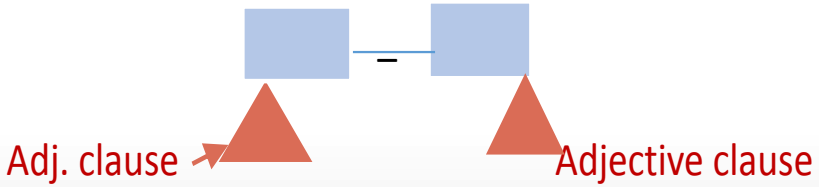


gnalysis

//All /who were there/saw /what /happened//.

S/V/C # 1: All saw [what happened]
S/V/C # 2: Who were there
S/V/C # 3: what happened

Main S/V/C: All saw what happened.

Dependent SVCs:

- who were there = Adjective clause (describes 'All')
- what happened = Noun clause (names what all saw)

“We make a living from what we get. We make a life from what we give” - Winston Churchill

G-nalysis1:

C_1

S_1 V_1 DO + IO

$C_{2(DO)}$ S_2 V_2

// We / make / a living /from what / we / get //.

C_1

S_1 V_1 DO + IO

$C_{2(DO)}$ S_2 V_2

// We / make / a life /from what / we / give //.

Complex sentence

G-nalysis 2:

"We make a living from what we get. We make a life from what we give" - Winston Churchill

S_1 V_1 C_1 (DO)

$C_{2(DO)}$ S_2 V_2

// We / make / a living /from what / we / get //.

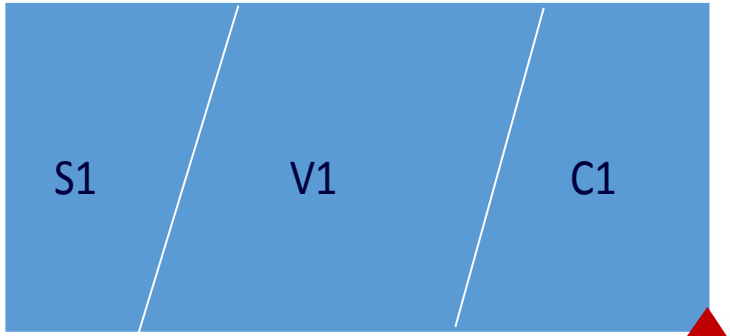
How?

S_1 V_1 C_1 (DO)

$C_{2(DO)}$ S_2 V_2

// We / make / a life /from what / we / give //.

Complex sentences



Adverb of Manner clause

To Conclude: major generalizations

- Syntax is the study of word-meaning behavior in the sentence.
- Speakers build composite ‘chunks’ of meaning (phrases, clauses & sentences) out of word-meanings (born of associations by resemblance, contiguity in space/time, & cause/effect in the collective mind of a society) by the same principal associations (the universal principles of human understanding).
- 2 basic principles of sentence structure in all human languages:
  - Synthesis (S+V+C), &
  - Analysis (‘recursion’)
- Gnalysis helps students see the logical relationships between words & ‘chunks’ of word-meanings in the sentence – it makes syntax logically comprehensible.

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