

# Introduction \* \* \* \* \*

## Overview

*The Syntax Handbook: Everything You Learned about Syntax (But Forgot)* provides you with a reader-friendly review of the syntactic terms most frequently encountered and used by language interventionists. With eight chapters devoted to syntactic form and four to syntactic function, plus developmental data on children's attainment of significant syntactic structures, this text was written especially for professionals concerned with language development and disorders. Exercises (with answer keys) are provided to review key vocabulary and to practice applying the information from each chapter to your work as a language interventionist. A glossary and a number of helpful appendices are also included for your convenience. This practical book simplifies syntax for the beginning university student, yet offers insight and quick reference to the seasoned professional.

## Target Audience

People who may find this work particularly useful include:

- Speech-language pathologists and special educators working with individuals with language disorders
- Undergraduate students completing coursework in language development and disorders
- Graduate students completing coursework and clinical requirements for certification in speech-language pathology or special education
- Instructors of language development, language disorders, and other courses requiring students to have a basic understanding of syntactic structures and analysis
- Individuals who desire to enhance their working knowledge of syntactic forms and functions

Throughout this text, we use the term *language interventionist* to refer to the wide array of professionals who work with children and adults exhibiting language disorders.

These professionals include (but are not limited to) speech-language pathologists, special educators, general educators, and psychologists. We recognize that some of the terminology used within this text, such as *client*, *clinical goal*, and *service delivery*, may not represent the terms most commonly used by some of these professionals. Our choice of terms stems from our own experiences as speech-language pathologists, and hence our familiarity with the vernacular of our profession.

## Background

Broadly speaking, syntax refers to “the architecture of phrases, clauses, and sentences” in a language (Shapiro, 1997, p. 254). In other words, syntax is the combination of words into sentences on the basis of rules inherent to a language. A consideration of syntax must take into account two distinct levels of analysis: syntactic form and syntactic function (Williams, 1999). *Syntactic form* refers to the grammatical category in which a particular word falls, which is generally independent of the word’s role in a sentence. Syntactic forms are also known as the “parts of speech” (noun, pronoun, verb, and so on), which most of us remember learning about in elementary school, though the details of each probably escape us now. *Syntactic function*, on the other hand, refers to the role of a word or a group of words in relation to the rest of the elements in a phrase, clause, or sentence. Take the word *apple*, for instance. The word *apple* nearly always has the same syntactic form (noun) across different sentences, but its function can differ based on its role in a particular sentence. In the sentence *The apple is rotten*, *apple* functions as the subject. Contrast this with the function of *apple* in *I picked the apple for you*, in which *apple* is no longer the subject, but rather the object of the sentence.

A discussion of syntactic form uses terms such as *noun*, *pronoun*, *verb*, *adjective*, and *adverb*. A discussion of syntactic function uses terms such as *subject*, *object*, *predicate*, *clause*, and *phrase*. Opdycke (1965) provides a lively rationale for students of language to understand both the parts of speech (form) as well as the parts of sentences (function):

The sentence is the unit of speech, that is, of expression. The isolated word or part of speech is, in the main, a detached tool only, to be kept handy and ready for use in association or relation with other words or parts of speech....

The word—the part of speech—in and of itself is indeed nothing but a cold combination of letters. It usually needs the society of other words—other parts of speech—to give it vital spark. (p. 219)

## Organization

This text is organized to consider both syntactic form and function. The first eight chapters (Part I) of *The Syntax Handbook* focus predominantly on elements of form. The last four chapters (Part II) focus primarily on elements of function. Each chapter within these two parts is organized so as to provide:

- A description of key syntactic terms and structures pertinent to the chapter's content
- A section of “Developmental Notes” containing a brief description of children's attainment of the syntactic structures targeted in the chapter (In these sections, we often use Roger Brown's (1973) stages of early language development as an organizational scheme for describing specific syntactic advances. Brown's seminal work organized children's major linguistic advances in the preschool period into a five-stage process.)
- Exercises to review the chapter's vocabulary and to tie the material covered to the process of syntactic analysis (The first several exercises in each chapter have you review key syntactic terms and concepts. The rest are application exercises, in which you apply your knowledge of syntax to activities common to the work of the language interventionist.)
- An answer key for selected exercises (Answers to some exercises are not included, particularly those that focus on application. The answers are not always definitive, due to the dynamic nature of syntactic analysis.)

Appendix A provides a useful overview of Brown's (1973) stages, as well as major syntactic advances occurring during these stages, as presented in Retherford (2000). You may find it useful to study this appendix if you are unfamiliar with Brown's stages of linguistic growth. Appendix B is a table of the major syntactic forms addressed in this book, and Appendix C is a table of the major syntactic functions covered in this text; these

appendices may prove helpful when working through each chapter's exercises. A glossary of important terms is included at the end of the text for quick reference as needed.

Given the overall magnitude of the topic of syntax, this text does not encompass all aspects of form and function, but rather may serve as a foundational work to broaden interventionists' capabilities in using syntactic terminology and analysis within the context of service delivery. It should also be noted that theories of syntax are not addressed. Readers interested in syntactic theory should refer to Shapiro (1997) for a brief overview of this topic and to Williams (1999) for a more comprehensive discussion.

## Rationale

Speech-language pathologists, special educators, and other professionals who provide educational services, clinical services, or both to individuals with language disorders require a sophisticated knowledge of syntax. Although many individuals exhibiting disordered language experience difficulties transcending the array of linguistic domains (e.g., pragmatics, semantics, and phonology), language disorders nearly always have an adverse impact on individuals' syntactic or grammatical systems.

Consider, for instance, a 4-year-old child with specific language impairment (a language disorder with no known etiology). The child may speak with a "telegraphic quality," such that key syntactic structures are omitted. For instance, the child might say, *Me go* instead of *I am going*, *Give me cat* for *Give me the cat*, or *That girl* in place of *That is a girl*. Analysis of the child's expressive language would suggest difficulties with using nominative pronouns (using *me* for *I*), auxiliary verbs (omitting *am*), verb tense inflections (*go* for *going*), articles (omitting *the* and *a*), and copular *be* (omitting *is*). This type of analysis is a commonplace activity for the language interventionist and is an important tool for preventing, identifying, and remediating language disorders. Familiarity with key syntactic structures is thus a clear requisite to being an effective language interventionist.

Knowledge of syntax is required for assessing an individual's language abilities, for formulating short-term objectives and long-term educational or clinical goals, for monitoring progress, and for evaluating the outcomes of language intervention. To illustrate (using examples from the field of communication disorders), short-term clinical objectives for children or adults with language disorders may look something like this:

- (Child) will use the present tense copular form of *be* (*is, am, are*) in 90% of obligatory contexts given an eliciting prompt by the interventionist.
- (Child) will use 10 complex noun phrases joined by the conjunction *and* in each of six consecutive sessions given models by the interventionist.
- Given an array of objects, (child) will act out irreversible passive present tense sentences spoken by the interventionist with 90% accuracy.
- (Child) will produce a third person regular present tense verb in 9 out of 10 trials given an eliciting prompt by the interventionist.
- (Child) will use articles and conjunctions during conversational speech with 80% accuracy.
- (Child) will use compound and complex sentences in spontaneous speech during classroom activities with 90% accuracy.
- (Child) will inflect verbs to denote past and future tense with 75% accuracy.

Likewise, a long-term goal for a school-age child with a language disorder, as stated in the individualized education program (IEP), may emphasize the child's development of "age-appropriate syntactic structures."

Because syntactic terms are so frequently used to establish and monitor educational or clinical goals, language interventionists must be prepared to define and illustrate these terms for caregivers of children or adults with a language disorder so that syntactic acquisition may be facilitated in the home or caregiving environment. Likewise, language interventionists must also be able to explain the use of these terms and their reference to educational or clinical goals and intervention outcomes to other professionals, including occupational and physical therapists, psychologists, teachers, nurses, and physicians. *The Syntax Handbook* can help you master your understanding of important syntactic terms, making it easier for you to discuss syntactic goals and objectives with parents, caregivers, and colleagues.