

Syntactic Structures

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Syntactic Structures is the name of an influential book by Noam Chomsky first published in 1957. Widely regarded as one of the most important texts in the field of linguistics,^[1] this work laid the foundation of Chomsky's idea of transformational grammar. The book contains the well-known example of a sentence that is completely grammatical, yet completely nonsensical in "Colorless green ideas sleep furiously."^[2]

The publishing of *Syntactic Structures* is believed by many academics to be a watershed moment in the annals of modern linguistics. In a review of the book, linguist Robert Lees wrote that the book is

“ One of the first serious attempts on the part of a linguist to construct within the tradition of theory-construction a comprehensive theory of language which may be understood in the same sense that a chemical, biological theory is ordinarily understood by experts in those fields. It's not a mere reorganization of the data into a new kind of library catalog, nor another speculative philosophy about the nature of Man and Language, but a rather rigorous explanation of our intuitions about language in terms of an overt axiom system, the theorems derivable from it, explicit results which may be compared with new data and other intuitions, all based plainly on an overt theory of the internal structure of languages.^[3] ”

Trivia

- Famous computer scientist Donald Knuth admits to reading *Syntactic Structures* during his honeymoon and being greatly influenced by it.^[4]

References

1. ^ For example, see Cohn, Neil. 2003. "Visual Syntactic Structures." Emaki Productions. [1] (<http://www.emaki.net/essays/VSS1.pdf#search=%22%22syntactic%20structures%22%22>) , p. 3.
2. ^ Chomsky, Noam. 1957. *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague/Paris: Mouton, p. 15.
3. ^ Lees, Robert (1957). "Review of *Syntactic Structures*". *Language* **33** (3): 375–408. doi:10.2307/411160.
4. ^ From the preface of Knuth's book *Selected Papers on Computer Languages* (2003): "...researchers in linguistics were beginning to formulate rules of grammar that were considerably more mathematical than before. And people began to realize that such methods are highly relevant to the artificial languages that were becoming popular for computer programming, even though natural languages like English remained intractable. I found the mathematical approach to grammar immediately appealing---so much so, in fact, that I must admit to taking a copy of Noam Chomsky's *Syntactic Structures* along with me on my honeymoon in 1961. During odd moments, while crossing the Atlantic in an ocean liner and while camping in Europe, I read that book rather thoroughly and tried to answer some basic

theoretical questions. Here was a marvelous thing: a mathematical theory of language in which I could use a computer programmer's intuition! The mathematical, linguistic, and algorithmic parts of my life had previously been totally separate. During the ensuing years those three aspects became steadily more intertwined; and by the end of the 1960s I found myself a Professor of Computer Science at Stanford University, primarily because of work that I had done with respect to languages for computer programming.”

External links

- 50 years of Syntactic Structures (<http://semantics-online.org/2007/02/50-years-of-syntactic-structures>)

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