

## Strengths and weaknesses

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One of the strengths of generative-syntactic research is that with the analytical tools we have had over the years, we have been able to ask the right questions, leading to new observations, correlations and generalisations. This covers a wide range of topics as well as a wide range of languages, including comparative syntactic observations and generalisations. I think that this is a contribution that is agreed upon. Van de Auwera (p.c.), a typologist, considers the new facts we uncover to be “collateral” advantage of having generative-syntax.

However, one of the main weaknesses of the field is that there is no criterion concerning what counts as an explanation or an analysis. Take cartography as an example. Do cartographic analyses count as explanations? Is this really the direction generative syntax should go? It is useful to figure out the relative position of elements (precedence or hierarchical relations). However, by expanding to a continuously longer list of projections, and putting various elements in these projections, does it really explain anything? This allows the practitioners the possibility of avoiding having to pose certain questions – especially the *why* question. It does not lead to any deeper insight, let alone the question of how children learn language, or how language system works.

Another problem which I consider very serious is that there is very little consensus about anything in syntax, making it very difficult to make progress and to measure progress. The list of assumptions that we make while writing a paper seems to grow longer as the years go by – the readers might or might not share the same set of assumptions, ranging from T-inheritance, AGREE, phases, to LCA, constituent structure, etc. The volume *Diagnosing Syntax* was an attempt to get some consensus in a number of topics concerning the diagnostic tools. If we cannot even agree upon our diagnostic tools, it would be very hard to obtain other consensus. Thus, the first step towards a stronger future for syntax, is to agree upon a set of assumptions, i.e., we have to work on syntactic problems using a set of shared assumptions. It is of course possible to eventually drop some assumptions. But at least, the starting point has to be shared.

## Syntax-phonology interface

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There is quite a lot of work on the syntax-phonology interface, but the work seems to be divided into two camps: syntacticians and phonologists. The syntacticians take a syntax-centered perspective while the phonologists take a phonology-centered perspectives. There are very few shared assumptions, starting with what we should assume about the structure of a sentence – phonologists tend to still use rather elementary structures.

Syntacticians on the other hand, are ready to test out “Spell-out domains”, ignoring many phonological considerations, and less ready to consider that we might learn something about syntactic structures from prosodic evidence, or the prosodic data is based on intuition than available techniques (though there are now some exceptions). This is probably due to the fact that the standard model puts PF on a branch, feeding off syntactic structures. But progress would not be made if we are not willing to reconsider this syntax-centered perspective.

One way to adjust the syntax-centered perspective is to for syntacticians to collaborate with phonologists. Though it takes time to get to a shared framework, it is definitely worth doing.

Furthermore, the standard model also needs to be reconsidered. Currently, there is very little room to implement PF-LF interactions: syntax becomes heavily enriched with all sorts of semantic features, which can then be “interpreted” in the PF component, e.g., focus feature, givenness feature, etc. On the other hand, it is important to consider whether prosodic considerations can really drive syntactic operations. If they can, it is important to figure what kind of syntactic operations are amenable to prosodic considerations and which kind not.

One such possibility was mentioned in Cheng and Downing’s work in Zulu (immediately after the verb focus in Zulu), or recent work by Norvin Richards. In Cheng and Downing, the basic idea is that a focused element needs to have prominence at the right edge of a prosodic phrase, essentially making the focused element the only element in the prosodic phrase. This requires that everything else in the prosodic phrase move out. If we do not want to allow look-ahead in syntax, then we have to reconsider how to implement such relations.

## Experimental subdisciplines

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If one had the chance to do some experimental work, it would be immediately clear that what can be tested is actually very little. This has to do with the tools that are available and what is known up to date as to how the brain or how the parser works.

If we would like to be more “useful” to experimental disciplines, the syntactic work has to be more accessible, to those who are not able to keep track of all the developments in the fields. Further, if there is very little consensus in the field, it is also very difficult to be useful to the experimental fields. Often, what is tested and the assumptions behind what is tested are based on framework established in the 80’s.

One important thing that syntacticians should seriously devote their attention to is to test pure syntactic operations. Is it possible to find a syntax-only operation that can be tested experimentally? That is, it has to be an operation that has no semantic consequence. This again required shared assumptions such that we can “look for” such operations if they exist.