Homework 2: More on Constituents

Due Friday, September 23rd, 2016

1 Tests on Constituency

Sentences are made up of parts that we call constituents. Constituents can either be single words or groupings of words that form a unit. There are many ways to test where a subgroup of words in a given sentence is a constituent. Some of these tests are described below. Important to note, that if the test works for a grouping of words, then you know that this grouping constitutes a constituent. But if not, then it could be the case that another test is needed.

Clefting

Clefting is a particular syntactic structure as shown here:

It was ___ that ___

The word or grouping of words that you are interested in testing would be extracted from your original sentence and place after “It was”. If the whole sentence still sounds acceptable to a native speaker, then the grouping is a constituent.

For example, let’s say I want to test whether “in the garden” in the sentence “The dog buried the bone in the garden.”

It was in the garden was that the dog buried the bone.

Since the above sentence still sounds good, we know that “in the garden” is a grouping that works as one unit in the whole sentence. In particular, “in the garden” is a prepositional phrase. We can mark this either as a tree or in brackets as shown below.

\[
\begin{align*}
PP & \\
| & \\
P & \quad NP \\
| & \\
in & \quad \text{Det} & \quad N \\
| & \\
\text{the} & \quad \text{garden} \\
| & \\
&P \quad [NP \quad \text{the garden]} \\
\end{align*}
\]

As William mentioned in class, the cleft test is inappropriate with some kinds of structures. The next two tests described will get at two kinds of constituents that would fail the cleft test.

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1Phrases in syntax are usually named after the “head” of the phrase which essentially means that it is the most important element of that phrase. Why a preposition would be the head of “in the garden” is an empirical issue which we can discuss if you want. But for now, it’s sufficient for you to know that a preposition is the head of a prepositional phrase.

2Note that I haven’t shown you why “the garden” is its own unit (i.e. an NP) but you can prove this yourself by using the same cleft test.
“Do so too”

You can substitute a grouping of words in a sentence with the phrase “Do so too” to test whether or not the grouping is a constituent. If the sentence still makes sense, then your grouping works as a unit in your sentence.

For example:

Mary ate an apple.
Mary ate an apple and Bill did so too.

And it works! Now you know that “ate an apple” is a constituent. In this case, you have a grouping that works as a verb phrase in your sentence as shown below:

\[
[VP \text{ ate } [NP \text{ an apple}]]
\]

“One” substitution

This last constituency test is another substitution test where you just replace the phrase you are testing with the phrase “one”.

For example:

I want a big blue boat and he wants a small one.
I want a big blue boat and he wants a small red one.

Exercise

(1) For the “One” substitution described above, what label(s) should we give to the constituents that pass the test?

(2) When you come up with the label(s), either diagram or bracket the constituents as I have done in the first two tests above.

(3) Use the constituency tests to break up the following sentences into its syntactic constituents and either diagram the sentence or give me the sentence where the constituents are in brackets. If you’re unsure about some of the labels, use “??”.

An intelligent student went to Rome to study Italian.
I learned about research in language acquisition this weekend in Oak Hall.
John made breakfast and washed his car.

There may be some phrases that feel like they should be constituents but they don’t work with any of the tests that I’ve given you. If this is the case, diagram/bracket/label them anyways.

2 “LIKE”-Insertion

There seems to be a systematic way that people use the discourse marker “like” in a given sentence even though it may sound like so totally random!
Exercise

(4) Find a native English speaker to be your consultant. If you are a native English speaker, great! You can do this on your own if you want.

(5) For the sentence below, test out where “like” can appear by inserting it before each word and seeing if the sentence sounds good to your consultant.

William said that the valley girl accent originated from a song by Frank Zappa.

(6) Briefly describe to me what you found in terms of constituents. Which constituents can’t “like” appear in?