

Generative Syntax in the Twenty-First Century: The Road Ahead

Athens, Greece
May 28-30, 2015

Generative Syntax in the Twenty-First Century: The Road Ahead will be a 3-day round-table taking stock of generative syntax and discussing the future of the field. It will take place in Athens, Greece, and feature discussions and a poster session.

Goals

We want to incite a high-level discussion of foundational issues with a group practical in size and with a reasonable number of shared background assumptions in hopes of producing a concrete result in the space of three days. Ideally we are aiming for a white paper which will reaffirm the theoretical core of the discipline; that is, outline major assumptions and concepts that we believe are shared by most transformational generative syntacticians today. We think this may be helpful for the field in addressing the three challenges mentioned below.

We also want to identify major outstanding research questions. We want to attempt to identify the major burning questions concerning syntax and its interfaces. This is not in order to determine the research agenda of individual researchers. Rather, we believe that it is part and parcel of taking stock to also think about what lies ahead.

In addition to plenary and group discussions, there will be a poster session, in which in particular young and early-career-stage researchers will be encouraged to participate. We very much want to hear what these are working on, and in addition we think they will make valuable contributions to the plenary discussions. A formal call for papers for this session will be distributed via Linguist List in due time.

Format

We envisage the following schedule for the event, which will be organized by way of topic-specific workshops (symposia).

May 28

09:00–10:30 SYMPOSIUM 1A
11:00–12:30 SYMPOSIUM 1B
12:30–14:30 Lunch
14:30–16:00 SYMPOSIUM 2A
16:30–18:00 SYMPOSIUM 2B
18:00–19:00 Poster session

May 29

09:00–10:30 SYMPOSIUM 3A
11:00–12:30 SYMPOSIUM 3B
12:30–14:30 Lunch
14:30–16:00 SYMPOSIUM 4A
16:30–18:00 SYMPOSIUM 4B
18:00–19:00 Poster session

May 30

- 09:30–11:00 Reports from the moderators on the symposia
11:30–12:30 Discussion of the most debated topics
12:30–14:30 Lunch
14:30–16:00 Plenary discussion of the road ahead
16:30–18:00 Work on the white paper

The invited speakers will be asked in advance to send in short statements addressing one or more of the questions below ('themes for the symposia'). We encourage people to focus on what they are passionate about and have original ideas about rather than trying to provide a statement for each question. If a speaker feels that a crucial question is missing, s/he is welcome to add that question and provide a statement about his/her own question. The organizers will try to accommodate this into a suitable symposium.

Participants will be assigned to particular symposia on the basis of their written feedback. A single participant can take part in more than one symposium.

Each symposium will decide on how to organize the time that they have been allotted. One or two moderators will be assigned to each symposium and they will help organize the symposium.

Themes for the symposia

1 STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

- A 'What have been the main strengths of generative-syntactic research, with particular emphasis on the early 21st century, and what do you think is wrong with the field of generative syntax today?'
B 'How do you think the field could/should go about addressing its current problems?'

2 CENTRAL UNRESOLVED THEORETICAL ISSUES

- A 'What are the major open questions in the theory of generative syntax today?'
B 'What is or ought (not) to be in the field's common theoretical core?'

3 SYNTAX IN RELATION TO OTHER FIELDS OF LINGUISTIC INQUIRY

- A 'What are the main success stories and bottlenecks in the interaction between syntax and the other core-theoretical subdisciplines (semantics, phonology, morphology)?'
B 'What are the main success stories and bottlenecks in the interaction between syntax and the experimental subdisciplines (language acquisition, sentence processing, neurolinguistics), and how can syntax be more useful to those?'

4 THE ROAD AHEAD

- A 'What do you see as the biggest challenges for generative-syntactic research in the coming years/decades?'
B 'In which direction(s) would you like to see the field proceed, and where would you like the field to be in ten or twenty years' time?'

Rationale

Generative syntax has made important contributions to our understanding of language, and with it, the human mind. The field continues to be fecund and vibrant and new discoveries and developments continue apace. However, the rapid growth and development of this still-young field leaves it without a clear and uncontroversial canon, especially in syntax. In principle, there is nothing wrong with this. However, it raises a few challenges, three of which we will briefly outline here.

A major challenge concerns the coherence of the field. Given the large number of different analytic approaches, it has resulted in small groups working on x, y, or z. From a scientific point of view, this is not problematic, but it raises difficulties when it comes to interaction, funding, recruitment and external visibility. We want to discuss ways of improving this situation. We believe that this is especially important given that linguistics and generative syntax are not major fields compared to e.g., psychology or physics. In addition to being problematic in its own right, the proliferation of approaches further exacerbates the problem of teaching and supervision.

Another challenge is related to teaching and supervision. During the time when Government and Binding (GB) was pursued, Liliane Haegeman's and Andrew Radford's widely used textbooks were sources that quickly enabled students to read original research papers. Given the proliferation of different assumptions within the Minimalist Program (MP), the situation is different today. Different textbooks build on different assumptions, and they differ significantly when it comes to how much they explain the transition from GB to the MP. This in turn makes it increasingly difficult for students to make the jump from reading textbooks to the original research literature. Our impression is that this was easier two decades ago and we would like to discuss if it is possible to fix this.

A third challenge is related to publications. Because minimalist syntacticians generally cannot rely on a shared core of hypotheses and principles, each paper has to build its case from the ground up. This has already resulted in extremely long papers, much longer than in most other sciences. It is not clear that this is benefitting the field.

Invited contributors

Elena Anagnostopoulou (Greece)

Mark Baker (USA)

Jonathan Bobaljik (USA)

Lisa Cheng (the Netherlands)

Rose-Marie Déchaine (Canada)

Janet Dean Fodor (USA)

Sabine Iatridou (USA)

Julie Anne Legate (USA)

Joan Maling (USA)

Alec Marantz (USA)

Jim McCloskey (USA)

Gereon Müller (Germany)

David Pesetsky (USA)

Maria Polinsky (USA)

Gillian Ramchand (Norway)

Henk van Riemsdijk (Italy)

Luigi Rizzi (Italy)
Ian Roberts (England)
Peter Sells (England)
Ivy Sichel (Israel)
Spyridoula Varlokosta (Greece)

Background

The project originated from a discussion concerning ways in which a conference could be organized in Greece in order to signal support for the linguistics community in the southern Balkans, a group of people who has severe difficulties attending conferences and partake in discussions due to the current economic situation; money for research-related activities is all but gone and salary cuts have been severe. So a guiding idea was to bring a conference to Greece. Along with the potential benefits the event might have on a local level, another motive in the background was the ongoing pursuit of strategies for getting EU-level research funding for collaborative projects with Greek linguists.

Organizers

Artemis Alexiadou (Germany)
Marcel den Dikken (USA/Hungary)
Winfried Lechner (Greece)
Terje Lohndal (Norway)
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