

Teaching **Syntax**

Presentation @ the 7th Annual Professional Development Conference

For teachers, by teachers

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by Olga Temple

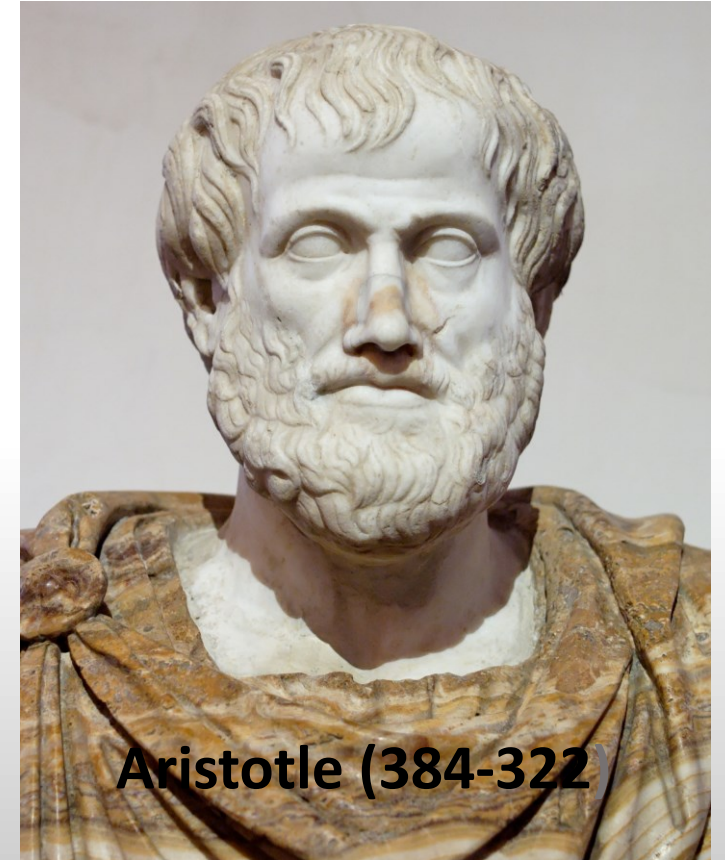
Wisdom = Knowledge of the 'CAUSES'

We do not regard any of the senses as wisdom; yet surely these give the most authoritative knowledge of particulars. But they do not tell us the '*why*' of anything - e.g., *why* fire is hot; they only say that it is hot.

...

Wisdom is knowledge about certain **principles** and **causes**.

Aristotle: Metaphysics, Book I



Aristotle (384-322)

CASAS Competencies & MD Content Standards for Adult ESOL

- Current strategies aim to equip students with the necessary ‘life skills,’ focusing on patterns of conversational exchanges.
- These **interactive**/ ‘communicative’ methods of language teaching, fairly dominant since the 1980s, rely largely on 1st language acquisition mechanisms.
- Yet, adult students have the universal ‘**Language software**’ already ‘installed’ in their brains.

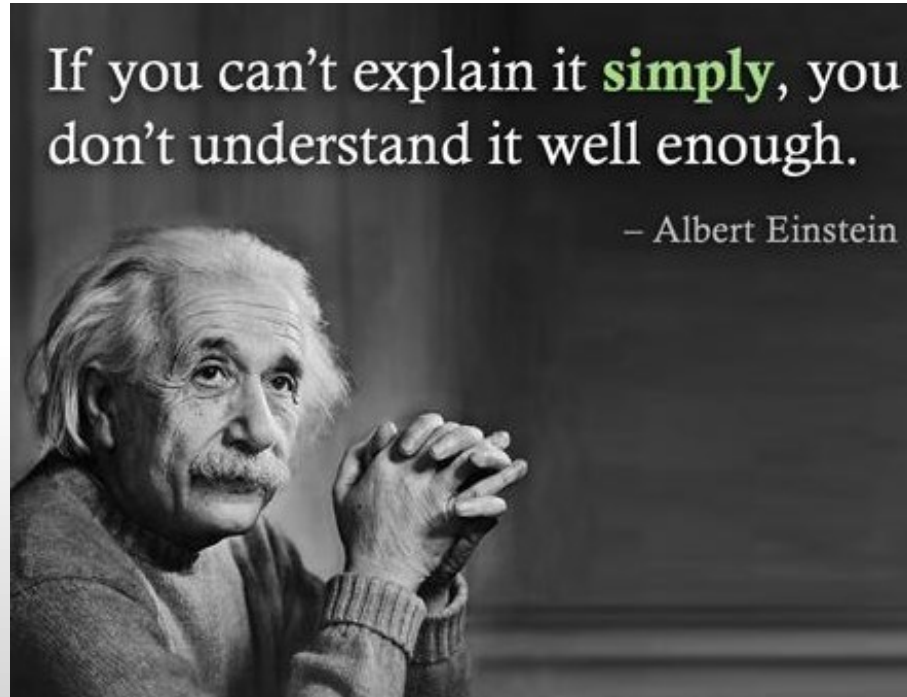
Can we utilize its power in teaching them the ‘*hows* & *whys*’ of word behavior in speech (syntax)?

To get at the **'causes'** of syntax, let us:

1. Consider what
'Language' is & how it
works



2. Discuss different ways
of teaching syntax



If you can't explain it **simply**, you
don't understand it well enough.

– Albert Einstein

3. Practice some
generalizing sentence
analysis (**G-nalysis**)

G-nalysis focuses on
the **logical relationships**
between
word-meanings &
the 'chunks' they form
in the sentence.



Human languages are complex social communication systems.

To understand how a system works, we must identify its smallest **functional unit** & study its properties
– they determine how the units behave in the whole:

- Galaxy : star; organism : cell; college : department; society : family;
- **Language : ...???**

LANGUAGE IS VERBAL THOUGHT

Human LANGUAGE is *qualitatively* different from animal 'languages':

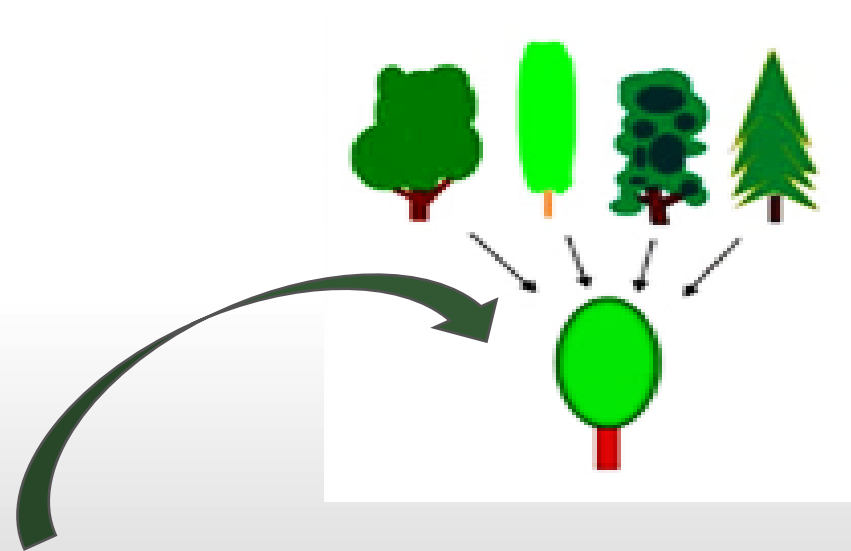
- Biological 'languages' are **instinctive & species-specific** (products of the 'body')
- LANGUAGE is **not** instinctive; it is *verbal thought* (the product of **actively thinking & communicating** human minds):

Each word is already a **generalization** ... a verbal **act of thought**; it reflects reality in quite another way than sensation and perception reflect it.

Vygotsky: Language and Thought, 1934.

Speech = Thought in Words

Every **WORD IS** a **GENERALIZATION** – an **ACT** of **COLLECTIVE SOCIAL THOUGHT** :

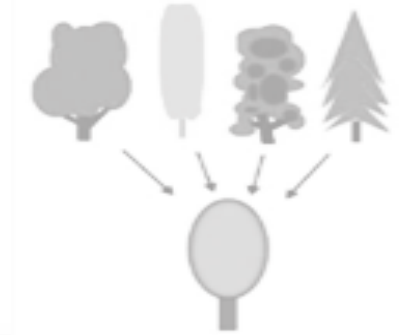


Word = contiguity of concept, **caused** by **perceived resemblance** between experiences, connected in the collective mind of a society

What we call 'Thinking' Is Connecting Ideas by resemblance, contiguity, & cause/effect



David Hume (1711-1776)



All human minds associate ideas by
(1) *resemblance*,
(2) *contiguity* in time/space,
& (3) *Cause/effect*.

Hume:

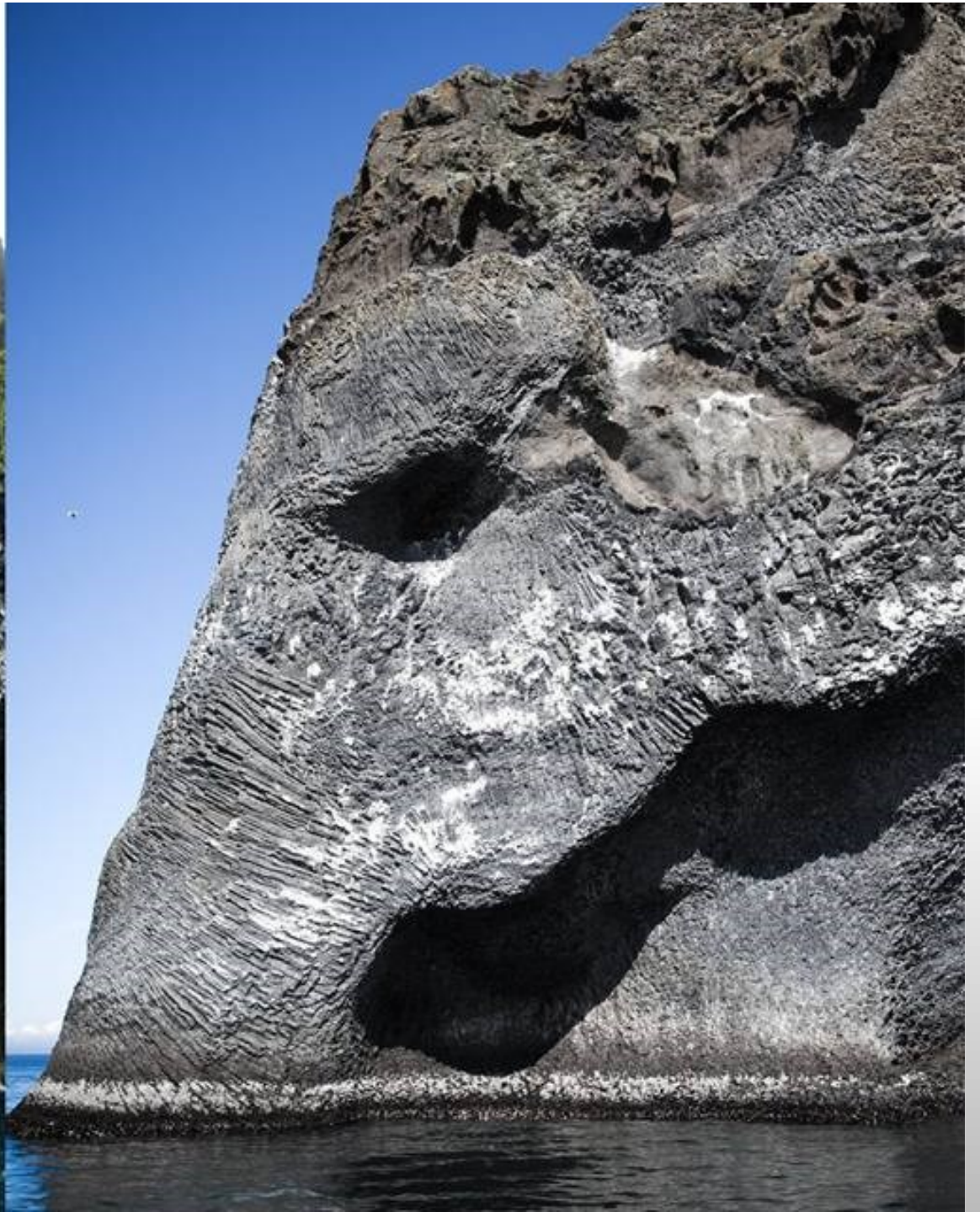
These are the **3 universal principles** of human understanding.

Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding(1748)

Example 1: Why “Hooker’s Lips” ?



Example 2: Why “Elephant” Cliff (Iceland)?



This mechanism of thought explains **pareidolia** [ˌpærɪˈdɒliə] - the imagined perception of a pattern or meaning where it does not actually exist

<http://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/pareidolia>



Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of
nothing new or strange...

Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, 1748.



La segunda venida





‘Broken Hearts’: our generalizing minds create meaning where there is none –
this is the natural way we **think**

(i.e., connect ideas by resemblance, contiguity, & cause/effect)

To **GENERALIZE** = to **CREATE MEANING** = to **MAKE SENSE** of an experience

The Process of Generalization

Generalization involves both synthesis & **analysis**:

To see resemblances, we must also see the differences.



In order to form a concept, we must be able not only to **connect**, but also to **abstract**, to single out its characteristic elements, and to view them separately from the totality of the concrete experience in which they are embedded. ...

Synthesis and analysis presuppose each other, as inhalation presupposes exhalation.

Vygotsky: 1986, p. 135

Language **Is Creating Meaning in Words** –
What IS its **smallest unit** that has all of its properties intact?

Descriptive Linguistics:
Phoneme Is the Smallest Unit of Language.

But ... IS it, really?

Does it have all of its psycho-physical & socio-historical properties?

Do phonemes possess independent **meaning**?

Can we communicate 'in phonemes'? [k]/[k̃]?

Word-Meaning IS the Smallest Functional Unit of Language, because it has all its properties intact:

- **Psychological**: there is no word without **meaning**
- **Physical**: there is no meaning without the **word**; meaning comes into existence through words – they are the physical **signs** of meaning
- **Social**: the double function of every **sign** – to *communicate meaning*
- **Historical**: human minds live and think in time; their thoughts, embodied in words, reflect their ‘worlds.’

How do these properties of word-meanings
shape their **behavior in use**?

We do not typically communicate in single words.

Born of mental **associations**, word-meanings readily **associate** with others, forming **chunks of meaning*** **in use** by living, thinking, and communicating human minds.

*Collocations, phrases, clauses, sentences, etc.

Sentence: Words which **say** something **about** something

We communicate in sentences, the generalizations of our individual minds:

Every thought tends to connect something with something else, to establish a **relationship** between things.

Every thought moves, grows and develops, fulfills a function, solves a problem.

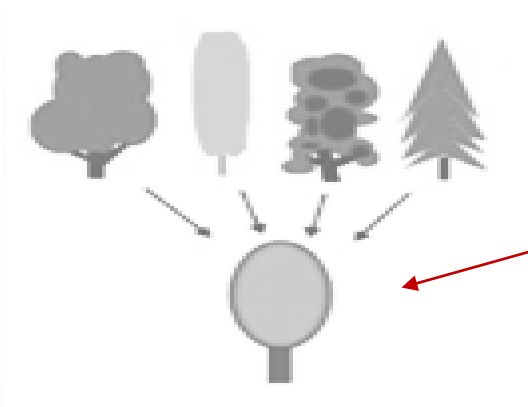
Lev Vygotsky: 1934

Sentence-mosaics are complex **generalizations.**



In **use**, word-meanings are associated by perceived resemblance

Collectively, we 'make sense' of the world, creating the words of our language: *tree*, *FB*, etc.



Word = Contiguity of **concept**, **caused** by perceived **resemblance** between experiences, connected in the collective memory of a society

Individually, we connect the words that we learned from society into sentences (word-mosaics), each with its own meaning:

Peter eats squid : Squid eats Peter

The chicken comes before the egg : The egg comes before the chicken



Synthesis + Analysis = generalization

Synthesis & Analysis:

2 universal principles of

creating the meaning:

not only of words & phrases,

but also of

whole word-mosaics (sentences)

GENERALIZATION: the Mechanism of human understanding

If we can't see those logical *connections* between ideas, we can't 'make sense' of what we hear:

Everytime I see a math word problem it looks like this:
If I have 10 ice cubes and you have 11 apples,
How many pancakes will fit on the roof?

Answer:

Purple because aliens
don't wear hats.



arrg!  ecards

The **rational** language mechanism

This **Mechanism of Generalization** (Synthesis & **Analysis** of ideas) is the **Mechanism of Language** (Synthesis & **Analysis** of words).

This simple **mechanism of SYNTHESIS & ANALYSIS** of word-meanings in speakers' minds

is KEY to **UNDERSTANDING** both
SYNTAX & SEMANTICS

The 1st Principle of Sentence Structure: synthesis

Every sentence-mosaic is a **synthesis** of what we talk about (S) & what we say about it (predicate): the Verb with all the words that go with it), forming the composite meaning of the whole **S/V/C** nexus:



- **Subject**, or ‘what the sentence is about’

- **Verb**, or what we say **about** the subject:

A verb is that which, in addition to its proper meaning, **carries with it the notion of time. ... it is a sign of something said of something else.**

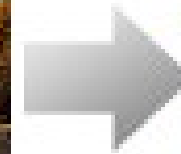
Aristotle: On Interpretation, Part 3

- **Compliment**: this ‘slot’ in the nexus may be left empty, but it can also be filled with direct/indirect objects (DO/IO), predicate nouns (PN), or predicate adjectives (PA).

The 2nd Principle of Sentence Structure: **analysis**

ANALYSIS (*recursion*) puts 'meat' on the 'bones' of the S/V/C nexus:

it adds detail, **color**, 'pixels' to parts of the sentence mosaic, zooming in on the nexus constituents, describing (or naming) them through associations by resemblance, contiguity in space and time, and cause/effect.



Psycho-physical & Socio-historical properties of word-meanings: →

PURPOSE of their use

We use words to build & to communicate composite **meanings** –
complex generalizations.

Depending on their perceived **purpose** (synthesis or analysis),
word-meanings/chunks of word-meanings
carry out different **functions** in the sentence, called

PARTS OF SPEECH

3 principles of human understanding & 8 parts of speech

To think /communicate our individual thoughts

(i.e., our personal associations by resemblance, contiguity in space/time, & cause/effect),

we use words to **name** things/actions (**noun**/pronoun functions) and

to **describe** them(**adjective**/**adverb** functions)

.

Words, thus functioning, form the 'body' of each sentence-mosaic, its 'bones' & 'meat' which are held together by the 'connective tissue' of **conjunctions** & **prepositions**.

Interjections are not parts of the sentence – they are 'thrown in' to give the 'body' its 'odor' - or 'fragrance' 😊

THESE **FUNCTIONS** of WORD-MEANINGS ARE UNIVERSAL

Despite the diversity of forms, the structures of all of world's languages serve the same functions, expressing the 3 principles human understanding/verbal thought.

Because these functions of words (and groups of words) reflect the relationships between them (according to our **human understanding**) 'parts of speech' are equally '**parts of thought**' in words and are, thus, the same in all of the world's languages.

The **Rational** Language Mechanism - **GENERALIZATION**

Each Language Has Its Own “Units” & “Rules” for making word-mosaics,

BUT

all of them share the same ‘**mechanism**’ of creating meaning –

Connecting Word-Meanings by

Resemblance, Contiguity in Space/Time, & Cause/Effect.

'Chunks' of words can function as one part of speech

In all languages, single word-meanings, as well as groups of word-meanings (phrases and clauses) can serve one purpose (function as one part of speech), i.e.:

Man is an animal suspended in the webs of significance he himself has spun.

Max Weber (1864-1920)

Language – a social ‘spinning wheel’

“Language is **social means of thought**”

(Vygotsky: 1934).

As individuals, we all learn to use this **social tool**, the ‘spinning wheel’ of Language, to spin our individual

‘webs of significance’

out of the yarn of word-meanings we share.





Our

'webs of significance'

The more complex our
thoughts,

the more complex
the **mosaic images**
we create.

Grouper Swallowing Fisherman – Roman
mosaic (Tunis)

To Use a tool, we must learn **how** it works

To use my new camcorder, I had to read the instructions booklet.

To speak well, our students must learn
how language works & **why** it does so.

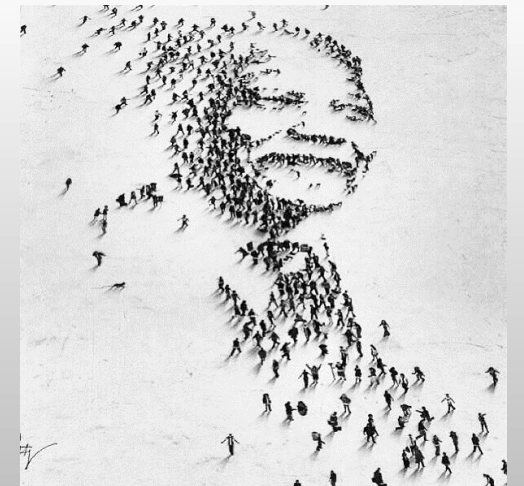
How can we explain **how language works SIMPLY?**

Viewed as the natural expression of
the way we **think**,
syntax becomes easy –
to understand, and to teach.

My teaching strategy:

I. To Explain the concepts of

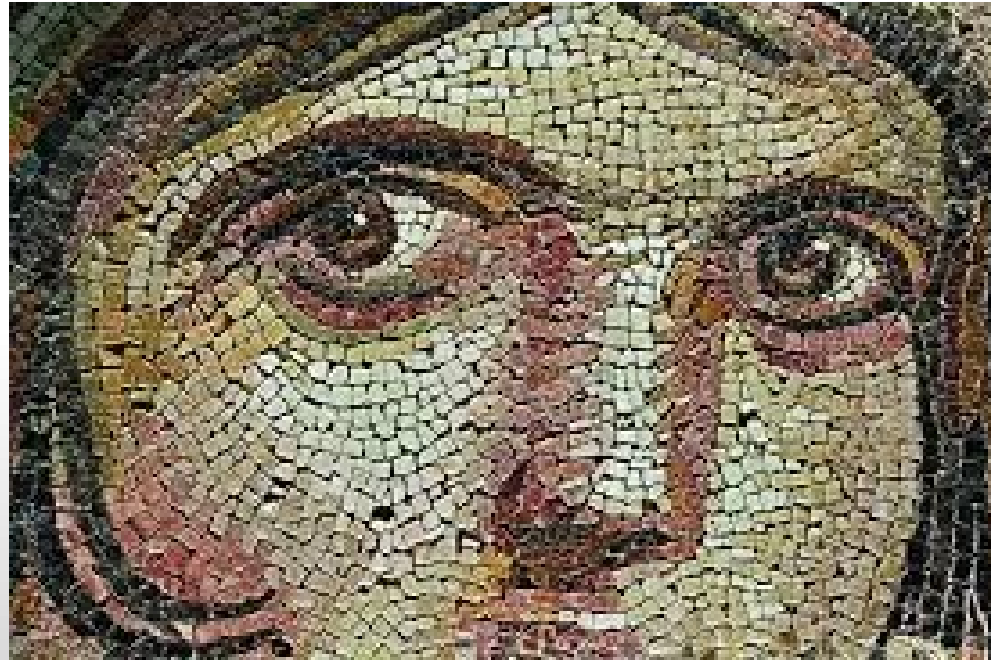
1. **Language as verbal thought**; 'word' as the smallest unit of language – the generalization of our collective mind
2. **'sentence'** mosaic – a unit of 'individualizes' meaning; its universal 'parts' (**SVC**); **importance of verb conjugation**
3. different languages – different 'units & rules,'
But the same **'rational mechanism'**



All mosaics express the artist's meaning:

But I love you \neq I love you, but...

[**practical:** building mosaics/ puzzles in class]





“**TOOLBOX**” FOR SENTENCE ANALYSIS: BASIC CONCEPTS

- **Sentence** = word-mosaic saying something about something
- **Parts of speech** = functions of words/ chunks of words in the sentence
- **Phrase** = a ‘chunk’ of words functioning as one adjective, adverb or noun
- **Clause** = a phrase that has sentence structure s/v/c

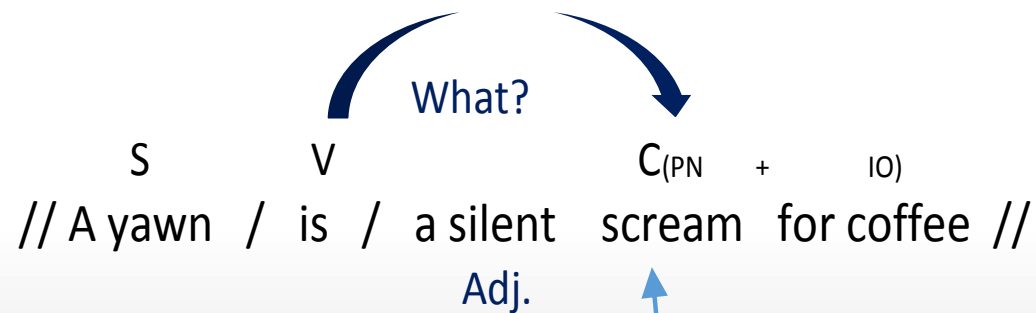
My teaching strategy:

II. To Explain

1. **Functions of words in the sentence**: reflections of human understanding (parts of speech);
2. **Phrases & clauses**: groups of words can **function as one** noun, adjective or adverb
3. **Two principles** of sentence structure: synthesis & **analysis**
4. **Practical sentence analysis**:
 - 'Putting meat on the bones'
 - **G-nalysis** of 'live' sentences;
 - **Gnalysis step 1** aims to identify
 - All *s/v/cs* in the sentence &
 - How all words/'chunks' of word-meanings relate to each other (by asking the logical 'journalistic' questions: what/who? Which? How? when/? Where? Why?)
 - **Gnalysis step 2** - diagram all svcs:
 - independent – 
 - Dependent -  (N, Adj., adv.)

Examples of G-analysis:

**A yawn
is a silent
scream for
coffee •**



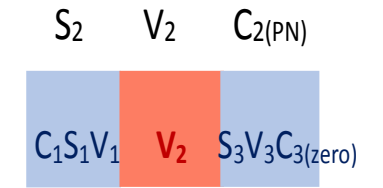
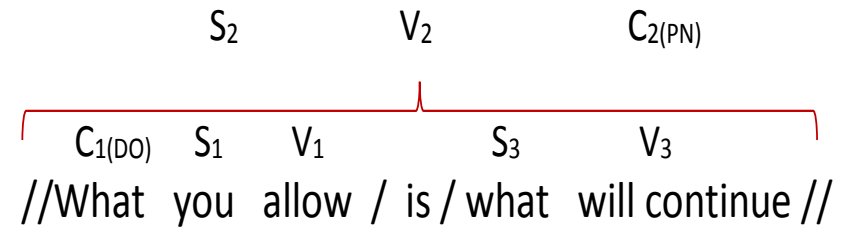
Verbal nouns can take Direct/ Indirect Objects

Simple clause



Practical gnanalysis

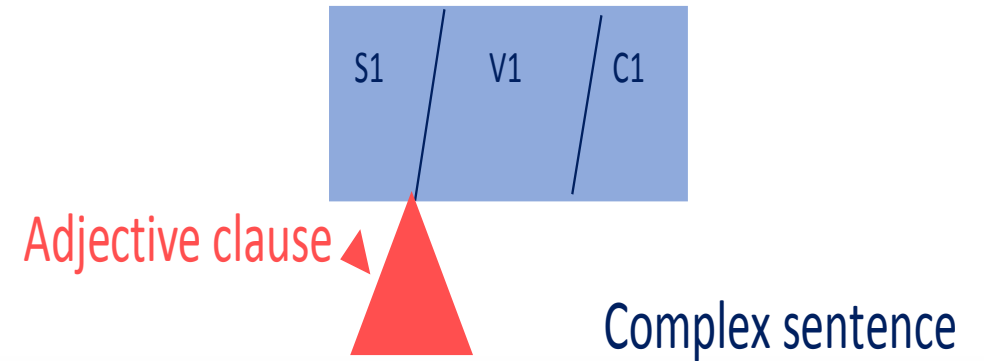
What you allow,
is what will continue.



Complex sentence: 2 embedded Noun clauses

gnalysis

S₁ Which those? V₁ C₁(DO)
S₂ V₂
//Those /, who do not move / do not notice / their chains //.



G-analysis

It's always fun
listening to
someone's lie
when you already
know the truth.



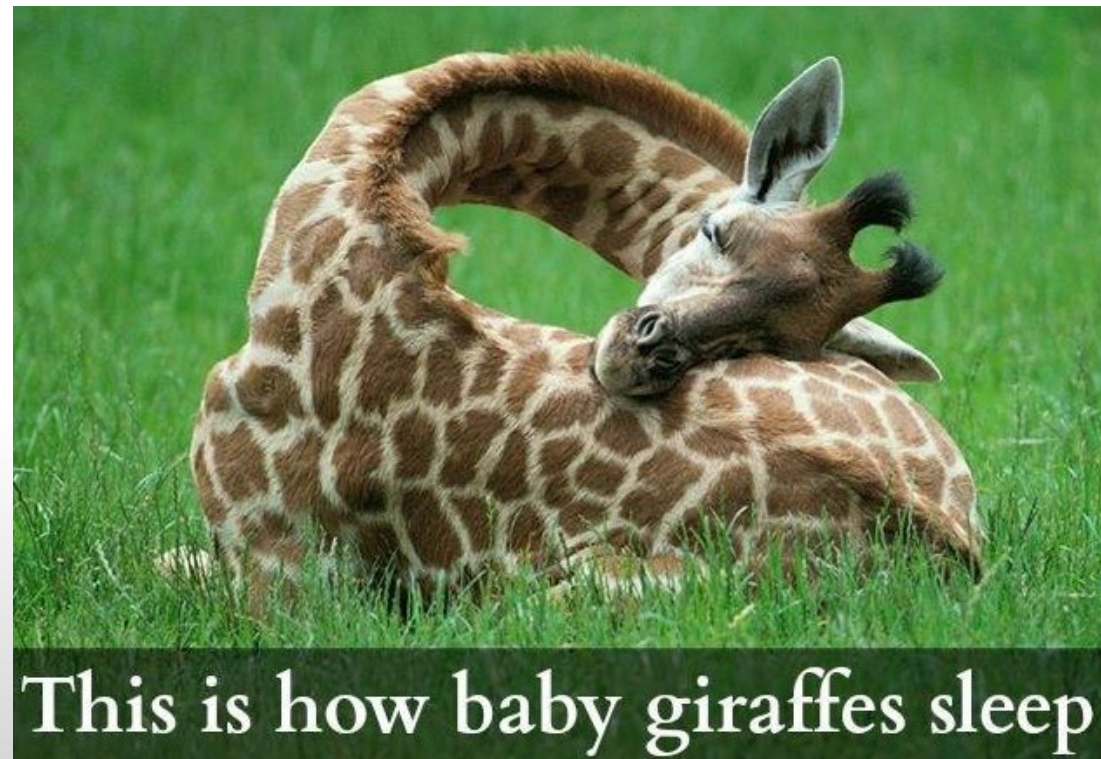
Dummy S₁ V₁ C₁(PN) + (PN + DO) S₂ V₂ C₂(DO)
// It's always / fun listening to someone's lie // when / you / already know / the truth //.

Complex sentence

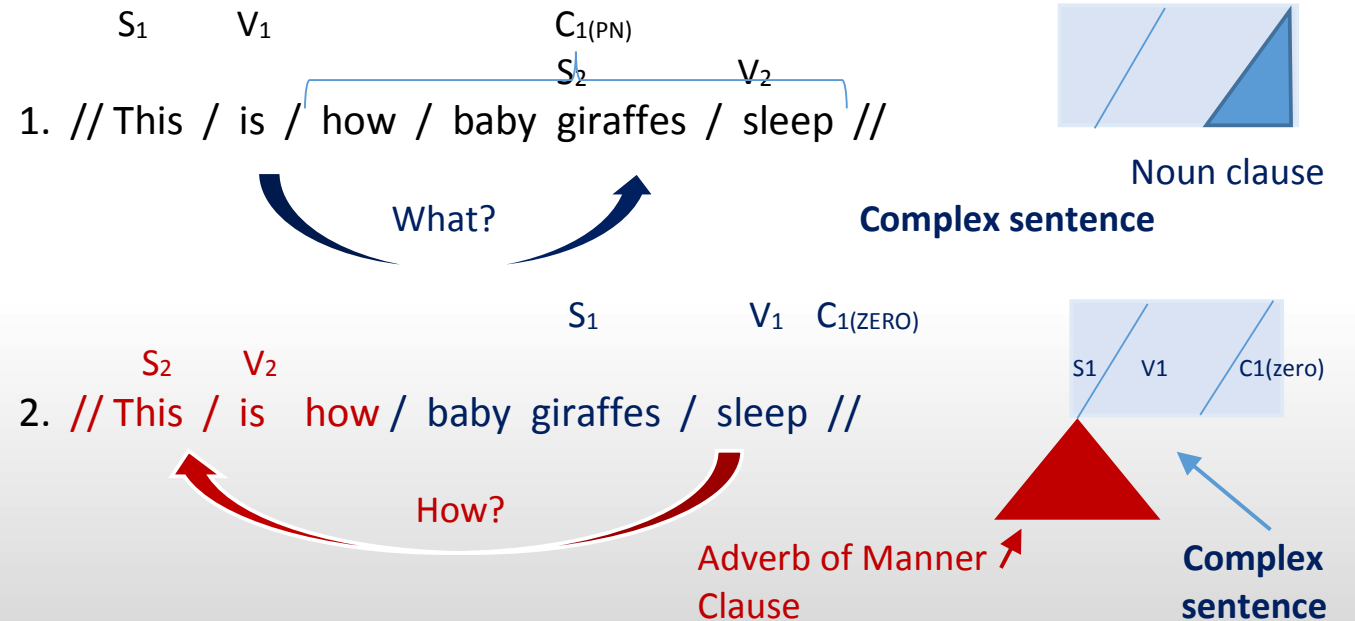


Adverb of Time

gnalysis

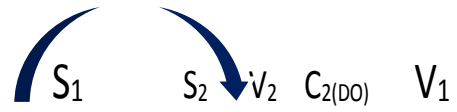


Plurality of interpretations:

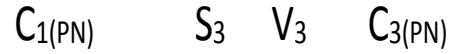


gnalysis

Which scandal?



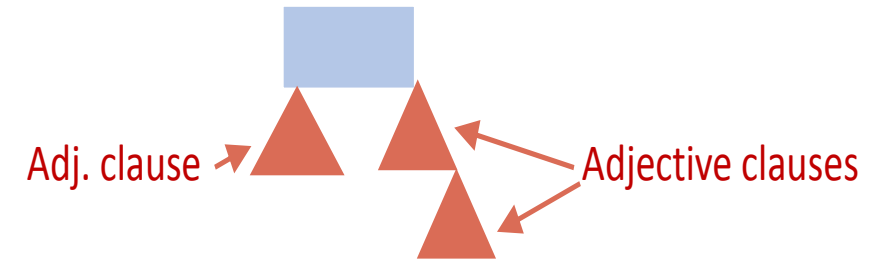
Which one?



Which one?

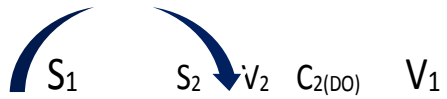


// The scandal that has legs / is / the GSA one – / that's / the one / that sticks //.



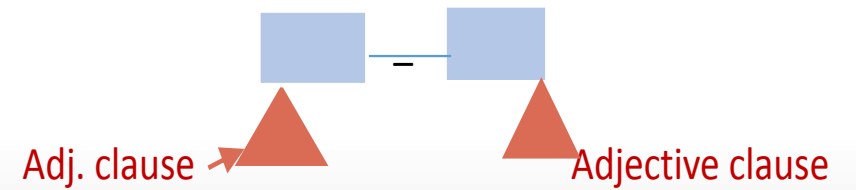
gnalysis

Which scandal?



// The scandal that has legs / is / the GSA one – / that's / the one / that sticks //.

Which one?



gnalysis


//All /who were there/saw /what /happened//.

S/V/C # 1: All saw [what happened]

S/V/C # 2: Who were there

S/V/C # 3: what happened

Main S/V/C: All saw what happened.

Dependent SVCs:

- who were there = Adjective clause (describes 'All')
- what happened = Noun clause (names what all saw)



To Conclude: major generalizations

- Syntax is the study of word-meaning behavior in the sentence.
- Speakers build composite 'chunks' of meaning (phrases, clauses & sentences) out of word-meanings (born of associations by resemblance, contiguity in space/time, & cause/effect in the collective mind of a society) by the same principal associations (the universal principles of human understanding).
- 2 basic principles of sentence structure in all human languages:
 - Synthesis (S+V+C), &
 - Analysis ('recursion')
- Analysis helps students see the logical relationships between words & 'chunks' of word-meanings in the sentence – it makes syntax logically comprehensible.

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