TEACHING SYNTAX

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Teaching introductory syntax is simultaneously a great opportunity and an enormous challenge. I think both the opportunity and the challenge are highlighted when syntax is taught interactively, through the sustained investigation of just one language which is known to all the students in the class. Starting from the assumption that there is such a common language — whether it be English, Maori, Chinese, or something else — I survey some of the thrills and spills of an intensive, hands-on, 'learn by doing' approach to teaching syntax to undergraduates. This is the approach that we use in our undergraduate syntax courses at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC). Some of the complications that the approach faces in a linguistically diverse classroom are discussed near the end.

Why does teaching introductory syntax offer such a great opportunity? The answer is simple: students jump into syntax faster, more easily, and more enthusiastically than into any other subfield of linguistics. For whatever reasons — perhaps including prior education, writing conventions, and the size of the units involved — students are more likely to think they have direct access to sentences than to any other type of linguistic object. Every undergraduate can already recognize sentences and words, the building blocks from which sentences are constructed. So students often see syntax as more immediate, more graspable, and less abstract than, say, phonology. (Think of the struggles of teaching a beginning student to distinguish between sounds and letters.) Undergraduates are also fully aware that sentences have meaning. So they can use synonymy, ambiguity, and other aspects of meaning as diagnostic tools, without having to confront any of the hard questions

that arise right away in semantics. Finally, most undergraduates love the extent to which syntactic investigation directly involves *them*. When the language investigated is one that they all speak, they can be simultaneously data-generators and investigators: they can themselves produce, and judge grammatical or ungrammatical, all the sentences that they analyze.

In short, syntax is a great way to introduce undergraduates to linguistics. It is also a perfect vehicle for teaching them *how to reason* about language structure, and this is the source of the challenge. Because linguistics involves not just a body of facts and analyses, but also a distinctive mode of scientific reasoning, teaching it involves communicating a hefty number of *how to*'s. Among them: (a) how to arrive at descriptive generalizations, (b) how to form hypotheses that say why the generalizations are as they are, (c) how to use evidence to decide between competing hypotheses, and (d) how to construct a formal system for representing the conclusions.

In my experience, students learn these techniques most thoroughly and successfully when they are guided to discover them through a combination of structured problem sets and Socratic interaction in the classroom. This version of the Socratic method is labor-intensive for everyone. Because students are supposed to figure out for themselves how a solution works, not 'memorize the answer', it works best if the instructor doesn't lecture and the students don't rely on a textbook. Instead, the instructor provides a problem set which students solve outside of class, either alone or — better — collaborating with one another. Students write up their solutions in essay-style format and submit them at the beginning of the next class. Class time is devoted to discussion of their solutions, with the instructor guiding students to assess the merits of each solution and settle on one solution as superior. At the end of class (in UCSC's intensive syntax course) or the end of the week (in our less intensive syntax course), the cycle begins again, with the instructor providing a problem set that builds on the previous problem set. And so on.

This mode of instruction is the most effective way I know to teach undergraduates how to reason about syntax. It is also the most effective way I know to teach undergraduates how to write. And because it's possible to bring students very far in a very short time, it's enormously rewarding for the instructor.

Socratic teaching is, of course, high-risk. Because the instructor doesn't lecture and the students don't have a textbook to rely on, classroom discussion can quickly get out of control — like a symphony orchestra that has run away from the conductor. Here are some tips for those who would like to try

teaching syntax Socratically and would also like to maximize the 'thrills' and avoid the 'spills'.

The fundamental goal is to guide students to discover the principles of syntax and the techniques of syntactic argumentation on their own. Therefore,

- The problem sets and their order must be very highly structured. You can't ask students to discover subcategorization if they don't know what syntactic categories are. And you can't ask them to analyze infinitives before they've analyzed simple sentences.
- Have a flexible notion of what the optimal solution is. Otherwise, students will end up not trying to figure out the optimal solution, but rather trying to guess what *you* think the optimal solution is.

Some students find it hard to participate in class discussion, perhaps because they are shy, perhaps because they are hesitant to expose their ideas to potential criticism. For this reason,

- Try to encourage everyone to participate; don't let the discussion be dominated by just a few.
- Try to encourage members of every social group to participate: males and females, members of the majority and members of ethnic minorities, and so on.
- Every comment or observation made must be taken very seriously.
- Remember that affirming a student is different from affirming his/her ideas. It can help the dynamics of the classroom to affirm a student even when (or especially when) his/her reasoning is flawed.

Two of the more challenging concepts to teach Socratically are the difference between description and analysis, and the difference between analysis and theory. There is, I think, no way to lead students to discover these differences: they must be talked about explicitly and directly. Still, there are some indirect ways of helping the ideas to sink in:

• Aim for a relatively concrete version of syntactic analysis, not an abstract, deductive version. (The closer the analysis is to the

descriptive generalizations it is supposed to explain, the easier it is for beginning students to make the leap from description to analysis. The more inductive the analysis is, the more creative students can be. As the semester progresses, you can gradually increase the level of abstractness and deductive structure, if desired.)

 Emphasize that in linguistics, as in other sciences, fundamental theoretical concepts are believed, not arrived at empirically. Once the concepts are in place, it can often be decided empirically which of two analyses is superior. But that's a different matter.

Socratic learning requires a lot of energy from everyone, including the instructor. You'll want to

- Assign a lot of (essay-style) homework, and make sure it is turned in on time before the class starts to discuss the solution.
- Grade the homework quickly, supplying as many comments as possible, so that students can learn quickly from their past performance. Comments on homework provide one important type of Socratic guidance. They are also crucial to helping students to improve their writing.
- Improvise as you teach. You'll have to, because who knows what ideas or solutions will emerge from the discussion? And whatever they happen to be, you'll have to move the discussion forward. One consequence of this is that you can't really prepare for class at least, not in the same way you'd prepare a lecture. Another consequence is that you have to (learn to) be quick on your feet.
- Laugh a lot. It'll relax the students, and it'll relax you.

Can the Socratic method of teaching syntax be applied to linguistically diverse classrooms — classrooms in which students have a common language but do not share a first language? I think it can. The key is to encourage dialogue, while taking steps to minimize the linguistic differences between native speakers and non-native speakers. Some steps that can be taken:

• Introduce the notion of linguistic fieldwork and its importance to the study of language structure. Encourage students who don't speak the

common language natively to do fieldwork on that language; this can (and should) be the source of the new sentences they analyze in their homework. Pair a non-native speaker with a native speaker so that fieldwork is institutionalized, inside and outside the classroom.

• If there is one language spoken natively by a substantial minority of students in the class, prepare a couple of problem sets in that language. Then for many pairs of fieldworker and native speaker, the roles will be reversed.

Throughout, the workload for the instructor is significant. But so is the level of satisfaction. It's astonishing how much students have learned by the end of the semester. It also feels great to realize that in the Socratic classroom, students can improve dramatically at any point — even in the last week of classes. It's exciting to be in the classroom: the highs and lows of Socratic teaching have to be experienced to be believed. And, no matter how long you've taught (for me, over 30 years), it's endlessly surprising to see students put an old puzzle together in a completely new way.

One of the student evaluations I value most is from the mid 80's, just after I'd started teaching syntax at UCSC. The student wrote, 'Watching her teach is like listening to jazz.' At the time, I did not understand what he meant. Now that I know more about jazz, I think of this as the highest compliment of all. Copyright of Te Reo is the property of Linguistic Society of New Zealand and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.