

## Assignment 2: Introducing Constituency

### 1 Topicalization as a Constituency Test

Constituency is one of the most fundamental concepts in natural language syntax. Constituents are the building blocks of sentences. Our ability to break sentences up into smaller, simpler chunks is essential for our ability to understand sentences we have never heard before (which is something we do all the time — you're doing it right now). Constituency tests - i.e. tests that allow us to determine the constituent structure of a sentence - are therefore essential component of any syntactician's toolbox. In this assignment, we will examine one such test.

English permits us to perform an operation that I'll call *topicalization*. (It is sometimes called 'fronting' or 'preposing'.) Here are a few examples, with the topicalized constituents underlined:

- (1) a. Bagels, I like. Hot dogs, I can't stand.
- b. I'll accept that pigs can fly. That they have a language, I just can't believe.
- c. Until 10:30 pm, the party raged on.

Topicalization forms the basis for a useful constituency test:

- (T) **Hypothesis:** A string of words  $X$  can be topicalized in a sentence  $S$  if, and only if,  $X$  is a constituent in  $S$ .

According to hypothesis (T), we will never find a string of words that is a constituent but doesn't topicalize, and we will never find something topicalized that is not a constituent.

**Your task** Assess hypothesis (T) by topicalizing the underlined portions of the examples in 1–2f:

- (2) a. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.
- b. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.
- c. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.
- d. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.
- e. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.
- f. I could sell my psychology textbook on the black market.

For each example, provide the topicalized version and answer at least the following questions about it:

- 1. Is it grammatical?
- 2. If it is grammatical, what can we conclude about the underlined phrase, based on (T)?
- 3. If it is ungrammatical, what can we conclude about the underlined phrase, based on (T)?

Topicalization is context dependent: you need to make the meaning of your topicalized element a topic of discussion, else the results are likely to sound strange. You can reliably make something

into a topic by contrasting it with a preceding element in the discourse. For instance, in example 1a, I contrast bagels with hot dogs. In example 1b, I contrast *that pigs can fly* with *that they have a language*.

I encourage you to test hypothesis (T) using sentences of your own devising. This is not required but will lead to better understanding of this test.

You might find that hypothesis (T) has exceptions. If you see a way to revise the hypothesis so as to bring it in line with the exceptions, please note that.