Syntax Glossary

This is a very informal glossary of syntax terms that you may run across. It was created by Prof. Speas for UMass syntax classes and is meant to be helpful rather than completely thorough or precise.

Absolutive: The case assigned in some languages to the Subject of intransitive verbs and the Object of transitive verbs.

Abstract Case: The structural relationship between a head and a particular argument even in languages where there are no overt case markers on nouns. For example, it is assumed that all Subjects in English get abstract nominative Case even though only pronouns have morphological nominative forms (I, we, he, she).

Accusative: The case assigned to Objects

AGR: The head that instantiates agreement.

Anaphora: Relations of coreference between Noun Phrases.

Anaphor: A word that must have an antecedent: eg. herself, himself, myself, each other.

Antipassive: A construction in some languages where the Object has been deleted, which usually changes either verbal morphology or the Case marking on the Subject.

Argument: A phrase whose role in a sentence is determined by the verb. A transitive verb takes two arguments.

Argument Structure: The structure that shows which argument of a verb is to be projected within the VP and which is to be projected in Subject position.


Antisymmetry: Theory argued for in Kayne (1994) The Antisymmetry of Syntax. The main idea is that c-command universally corresponds to precedence, so that a phrase always precedes anything that is c-commands.

Barriers: Chomsky’s 1986 book Barriers proposed an alternative to the earlier theories of islands. It did away with Subjacency and Bounding Nodes, with a theory that derived the bounding status of a node from its relationship to a governing head.
Binding: Coindexing with a c-commanding antecedent. Binding Theory is the theory of the syntactic conditions on coreference.

Bound: Coindexed with a c-commanding antecedent.

Bounding: Bounding theory was the theory of "Bounding Nodes", this is, which nodes block long-distance movement.

Bound Pronoun: A pronoun that is coindexed with a c-commanding antecedent. Usually refers to pronouns bound by a quantifier, and so can be interpreted as referring to more than one person. eg. The "bound reading" of *Every woman thinks she is intelligent* is one where *she* refers to each of the women.

Case: Morphosyntactic marking of the grammatical function of a Noun Phrase.

C-Command: Stands for "constituent command." X c-commands Y iff every node dominating X also dominates Y.

Cleft construction: A construction that focuses a phrase by separating morphosyntactically from the rest of its sentence. In English, these take the form "It was X who/that S" eg. *It was Mary who John saw; It was on the porch that John saw a horse.*

Comparative Construction: Comparative with a than-phrase. eg. *Slippers are more comfortable than hiking boots; Michele is taller than Hillary.*

Complex NP: A noun phrase that contains a sentence. This can be a Noun Phrase with a relative clause modifying it (*the book that I read*) or a Noun Phrase whose head noun selects a sentence complement (*The fact that Chomsky is a linguist*).

Concord: Agreement in some features; The term is used instead of agreement when the agreement is not necessarily determined by a relationship between a specifier and a head. eg. In *We told the teachers that they were idiots*, there is concord between *teachers* and *idiots.* *"We told the teachers that they were an idiot."*

Connectedness: Theory outlined in Kayne’s 1984 book *Connectedness and Binary Branching* (which is a collection of earlier articles). The leading idea is that long-distance relations are constrained not by island conditions or bounding nodes, but by a path of related nodes in a tree. Chomsky’s *Barriers* theory was based on Kayne’s idea.

Covert Movement (aka LF movement) Movement that affects interpretation but not word order. For example, in some languages, wh-phrases don’t appear to move
in questions, and yet they seem to obey constraints on movement such as island conditions, so we say that there is covert movement.

D-Structure: The structure that results from syntactically representing the lexical features of words, prior to any movement. In Chomsky’s early work this was called “Deep Structure”, but people misinterpreted it as meaning profound, so he changed the term to D-Structure.

Dative: The case assigned to indirect objects.

Discourse Configurational Language: A language whose word order is determined by topic and focus rather than subject and object.

Distributed Morphology: A theory in which abstract features are not spelled out with morphemes until after they have undergone syntactic movement.

Double Object Construction: A verb with two NP objects, eg. gave Tom the book

Ergative: In certain languages, the case assigned only to the Subject of transitive verbs.

Existential Quantifier: Quantifier meaning ‘some’ or ‘there is’. Expressed in English with words like a, some, one.

Free: Not bound

Generative Grammar: A theory whose goal is to determine what a human knows that allows him/her to generate, i.e.,create, any and all sentences of a language. Also, a linguist’s model of these rules.

Govern: Similar to c-command, only narrower. X governs Y iff X and Y are dominated by all the same maximal projections.

Governing Category: The category within which an anaphor must be bound and a pronoun must be free. In theories in the 1970s and 80s, this category was defined in terms of government.

Government and Binding Theory (GB): Chomsky’s theory circa 1980. The theory consisted of subsets of principles for different domains of grammar. Binding for the relations between NPs, Government for the relations between heads and complements, Bounding for long distance relations, Theta theory for theta roles, etc. There was no special status for government or binding, but the name arose from the fact that the book about it was based on lectures by Chomsky that did tend to focus on these two.
Head: The word in a phrase that gives that phrase its part of speech. V is the head of VP, N is the head of NP, etc.

Headless relative clause: A phrase that is just like a relative clause except that the NP it modifies is absent and the relative pronoun “stands for” that NP., eg. I’ll eat what she’s eating.

HPSG (aka GPSG): Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (aka Generalized Phrase Structure Grammar). A theory developed in the 1980s to do away with movement transformations. Instead, there were rules that allowed features to “percolate” up trees from the basic position to the displaced position, but the structures were base-generated which all words in their surface positions.

Index: A notation that indicates whether two phrases are related to each other. In some theories it has been proposed that indices are not just notational but are actual primitives of the grammar.

INFL: The head that hosts tense and agreement inflection.

Island: A structure that cannot be moved out of.

Larsonian structure: A structure proposed by Richard Larson for dative and double object constructions in which there are two verbal heads and the direct object originates in the lower one.

Lexicon: The mental list of the properties of words.

Lexical Category: Verb, Noun, Adjective, Adverb, Preposition (as opposed to Functional Categories)

Lexical Conceptual Structure: The semantic structure of certain words whose meaning seems internally complex. For example, ‘open’ has one meaning that is something like ‘X caused Y to open’ but another that just means ‘Y opens.’ These two meanings would have two different lexical conceptual structures.

LF: Logical Form, the linguistic representation of the semantic properties of a sentence.

LFG: Lexical Functional Grammar. A theory developed in the 1970s and 1980s which posited that some semantic structure does not correspond to syntactic structure, so, for example, some languages have no VP, while others do.

LF Movement: Covert Movement; Movement that takes place after the sentence has interfaced with the phonological spellout.
Left Periphery: Heads and phrases that occur before the Subject, such as Topics, Focused phrases, complementizers, some adverbs.


Minimalist Program: Chomsky’s current framework, in which there are very few explicit rules of grammar, but only basic and universal principles of structure-creation and language-particular rules of spellout.

Mirror Principle: Developed by Mark Baker in the late 1980s, this principle states that the order of morphemes in a word mirrors the scope order in which the morphemes are interpreted.

Move Alpha: A rule in late versions of GB, that just says “move anything” and then other constraints rule out bad instances of movement.

Nominative: The case assigned to Subjects of tensed sentences.

Nonconfigurational language: A language that has little or no syntactic structure. Most linguists these days believe that all languages are configurational, but in the 1980s it was proposed that certain languages have a flat syntactic structure and morphology such as case particles mediate the mapping to interpretation.

Oblique Case: The case assigned to things that aren’t Subjects or Objects.

Optimality Theory (OT): A theory first developed in phonology, but applied by some to syntax. In OT, all languages have the same constraints, and languages differ only in the order in which constraints are ranked for relative importance.

Parameter: A setting for a universal principle, which captures how languages may vary.

Passive: A construction in which the underlying Object is promoted to Subject position. The police arrested John is active voice, and John was arrested by the police is passive voice.

PF: Phonological/Phonetic Form; The representation that has all the information needed to spell the sentence out phonologically.

Principle A: The principle that states that anaphors like *myself, herself* etc. must have an antecedent in a specific structural position. In GB, stated as: “An anaphor must be bound in its governing category.”

Principle B: The principle that states where pronouns may have antecedents. In GB, stated as: “A pronoun must be free in its governing category.”

Principle C: The principle that states that a full NP (aka “referring expression” or “R-expression” or “Name”) cannot have a c-commanding antecedent. In GB, stated as “An R-Expression must be free.”


PRO (“big PRO”): The unpronounced Subject of an infinitive.

pro (“little pro”): The unpronounced Subject in languages like Italian and Spanish, where Subjects may be dropped when agreement is rich.

Pro-drop language: A language in which pronouns may be dropped if agreement (or something else) makes their interpretation clear.

Pseudocleft: A sentence where a phrase is focused by using a wh word: *What we need is more cowbell.*

Quantifier: A word like *every, some, most, many* that makes a phrase refer to a quantity of individuals.

Quantifier Raising (QR): Movement of a quantifier, usually covertly, that causes a sentence like “Some girl likes every boy” to have an interpretation where *every boy* takes scope over *some girl*. That is, the sentence can mean “For every boy, there is some girl such that that boy likes that girl.” QR moves *every boy* to the beginning of the sentence.

Reconstruction: Undoing of movement prior to interpretation.

Referring Expression (R-expression): A noun phrase that isn’t a pronoun, anaphor or quantifier. eg. *Bob, the boy next door, my hamster, Noam Chomsky, the quick brown fox.*

Relative Clause: A clause that modifies a Noun Phrase. eg. *the book that I am reading.*

S-Structure: The structure that has all the words in the order they will be pronounced. Originally called “Surface Structure.”
Scope: The range of phrases over which a word or phrase has control or semantic prominence.

Sentential Subject: A Subject that is a sentence. eg. *That you would leave me shows that you have no heart.*

Sluicing: Deleting all of a sentence except a wh-phrase. eg. *John is bringing someone to the party but I don’t know who______________*

Split INFL: The theory that Tense and Agreement head distinct phrasal projections.

Split VP: The theory that some Verb Phrases are composed of two verbal heads, so that a verb like ‘open’ has one head that indicates causation and another than indicates the opening action or state.

Subjacency: In GB, the principle that constrained long distance movement. Such movement was said to be restricted to crossing no more than one Bounding Node, where Bounding Nodes in English were TP/IP and DP/NP.

T-model: The model of grammar under GB, where words were projected to the D-Structure, then underwent movement to S-Structure, at which point the derivation split with certain operations applying between SS and PF, and others between SS and LF. Usually drawn as an upside down T or Y:

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D-Structure
  |   |
  |   |
PF---------S-Structure --------- LF
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Deep(D-) Structures were generated by Phrase Structure rules, and then transformations applied to these structures or strings to derive Surface (S-) Structure.

Unaccusative: A verb that has an underlying Object and no underlying Subject.

Unergative: A verb that has an underlying Subject and no underlying Object.
Universal Quantifier

WH island: An embedded WH clause, which is one of the types of phrase that cannot be moved out of. (*What did you wonder who bought ____*)

X-Bar Theory: The theory that all phrases have essentially the same structure, with a head, specifier and complement, and internal branching structure that we call N’ ("N-bar"), V’ ("V-bar"), etc, 

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NP
/  \
 det N’ ("N bar")
/  \ the
   /  \ Adj N’
   /  \ big
   /  \    N PP
   /  \  dog in the yard
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Specifier

Complement

Adjunct

Heavy NP Shift

Comparative Construction

E-Language

I-Language

Interface level

Legibility