

Syntactic category

A **syntactic category** is a type of syntactic unit that theories of syntax assume.^[1]

Word classes, largely corresponding to traditional parts of speech (e.g. noun, verb, preposition, etc.), are syntactic categories.

In phrase structure grammars, the *phrasal categories* (e.g. noun phrase, verb phrase, prepositional phrase, etc.) are also syntactic categories. Dependency

grammars, however, do not acknowledge phrasal categories (at least not in the traditional sense).

Word classes considered as syntactic categories may be called *lexical categories*, as distinct from phrasal categories. The terminology here is by no means consistent, however. Many grammars also draw a distinction between *lexical categories* (which tend to consist of content words, or phrases headed by them) and *functional categories* (which tend to consist of function words or

abstract functional elements, or phrases headed by them). The term *lexical category* therefore has two distinct meanings. Moreover, syntactic categories should not be confused with grammatical categories (also known as grammatical features), which are properties such as tense, gender, etc.

Defining criteria

At least three criteria are used in defining syntactic categories:

1. The type of meaning it expresses

2. The type of affixes it takes

3. The structure in which it occurs

For instance, many nouns in English denote concrete entities, they are pluralized with the suffix -s, and they occur as subjects and objects in clauses. Many verbs denote actions or states, they are conjugated with agreement suffixes (e.g. -s of the third person singular in English), and in English they tend to show up in medial positions of the clauses in which they appear.

The third criterion is also known as *distribution*. The distribution of a given syntactic unit determines the syntactic category to which it belongs. The distributional behavior of syntactic units is identified by substitution.^[2] Like syntactic units can be substituted for each other.

Additionally, there are also informal criteria one can use in order to determine syntactic categories. For example, one informal means of determining if an item is lexical, as opposed to functional, is to see if it is left behind in "telegraphic speech"

(that is, the way a telegram would be written; e.g., *Pants fire. Bring water, need help.*)^[3]

Lexical categories vs. phrasal categories

The traditional parts of speech are lexical categories, in one meaning of that term.^[4]

Traditional grammars tend to acknowledge approximately eight to twelve lexical categories, e.g.

Lexical categories

adjective (A), adposition (preposition, postposition, circumposition) (P), adverb (Adv), coordinate conjunction (C), determiner (D), interjection (I), noun (N), particle (Par), pronoun (Pr), subordinate conjunction (Sub), verb (V), etc.

The lexical categories that a given grammar assumes will likely vary from this list. Certainly numerous subcategories can be acknowledged. For instance, one can view pronouns as a subtype of noun, and verbs can be divided into finite verbs and non-finite verbs (e.g. gerund, infinitive,

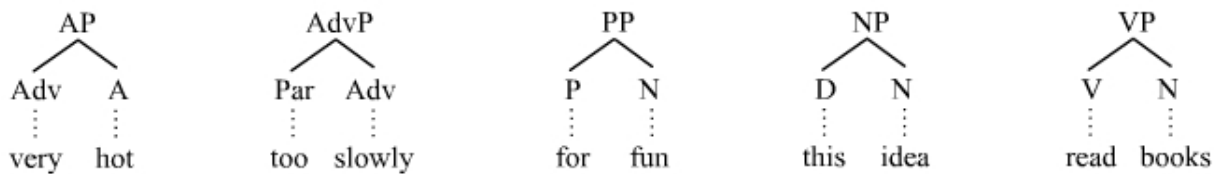
participle, etc.). The central lexical categories give rise to corresponding phrasal categories:[5]

Phrasal categories

Adjective phrase (AP), adverb phrase (AdvP), adposition phrase (PP), noun phrase (NP), verb phrase (VP), etc.

In terms of phrase structure rules, phrasal categories can occur to the left of the arrow while lexical categories cannot, e.g. NP → D N. Traditionally, a phrasal category should consist of two or more words, although conventions vary in this

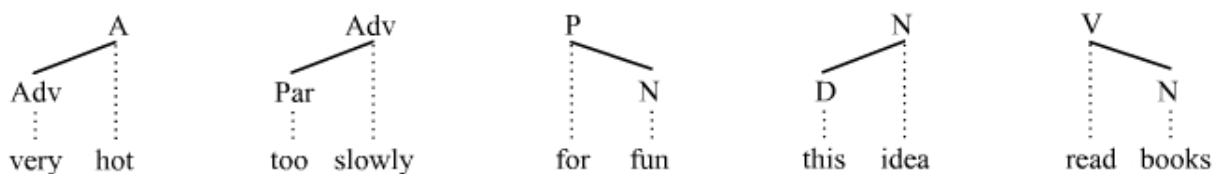
area. X-bar theory, for instance, often sees individual words corresponding to phrasal categories. Phrasal categories are illustrated with the following trees:



The lexical and phrasal categories are identified according to the node labels, phrasal categories receiving the "P" designation.

Lexical categories only

Dependency grammars do not acknowledge phrasal categories in the way that phrase structure grammars do. What this means is that the distinction between lexical and phrasal categories disappears, the result being that only lexical categories are acknowledged. The tree representations are simpler because the number of nodes and categories is reduced, e.g.



The distinction between lexical and phrasal categories is absent here. The

number of nodes is reduced by removing all nodes marked with "P". Note, however, that phrases can still be acknowledged insofar as any subtree that contains two or more words will qualify as a phrase.

Lexical categories vs. functional categories

Many grammars draw a distinction between *lexical categories* and *functional categories*.^[6] This distinction is orthogonal to the distinction between lexical categories and phrasal categories. In this

context, the term *lexical category* applies only to those parts of speech and their phrasal counterparts that form open classes and have full semantic content. The parts of speech that form closed classes and have mainly just functional content are called *functional categories*:

Lexical categories

Adjective (A) and adjective phrase (AP), adverb (Adv) and adverb phrase (AdvP), noun (N) and noun phrase (NP), verb and verb phrase (VP),

preposition and prepositional phrase
(PP)

Functional categories

Coordinate conjunction (C),
determiner (D), negation (Neg),
particle (Par), preposition (P) and
prepositional phrase (PP), subordinate
conjunction (Sub), etc.

There is disagreement in certain areas, for instance concerning the status of prepositions. The distinction between lexical and functional categories plays a big role in Chomskyan grammars (Transformational Grammar, Government

and Binding Theory, Minimalist Program), where the role of the functional categories is large. Many phrasal categories are assumed that do not correspond directly to a specific part of speech, e.g. inflection phrase (IP), tense phrase (TP), agreement phrase (AgrP), focus phrase (FP), etc. (see also Phrase → Functional categories). In order to acknowledge such functional categories, one has to assume that the constellation is a primitive of the theory and that it exists separately from the words that appear. As a consequence, many grammar frameworks do not

acknowledge such functional categories,
e.g. Head Driven Phrase Structure
Grammar, Dependency Grammar, etc.

*Note: The abbreviations for these
categories vary across systems; see
Part-of-speech tagging.§Tag sets.*

See also

- Dependency grammar
- Empty category.
- Grammatical category.
- Lexical category (part of speech)
- Phrase

- Phrase structure grammar
- Syntax

Notes

1. *For the general reasoning behind syntactic categories, see Bach (1974:70-71) and Haegeman (1994:36).*
2. *See Culicover (1982:8ff.).*
3. *Carnie, Andrew (2013). Syntax A Generative Introduction . MA, USA: Wiley-Blackwell. p. 52.*

4. *See for instance Emonds (1976:14), Culicover (1982:12), Brown and Miller (1991:24, 105), Cowper (1992:20, 173), Napoli (1993:169, 52), Haegeman (1994:38), Culicover (1997:19), Brinton (2000:169).*
5. *See for instance Emonds (1976:12), Culicover (1982:13), Brown and Miller (1991:107), Cowper (1992:20), Napoli(1993:165), Haegeman (1994:38).*
6. *For examples of grammars that draw a distinction between lexical and functional categories, see for instance*

Fowler (1971:36, 40), Emonds (1976:13), Cowper (1992:173ff.), Culicover (1997:142), Haegeman and Guéron (1999:58), Falk (2001:34ff.), Carnie (2007:45f.).

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