

Completeness vs (in)completeness

In natural conversation, no notion of “complete sentence” is required: (a) non-sentential utterances are adequate to underpin people’s coordination, and (b) all linguistic dependencies are resolvable across more than one turn:

- (1) Angus: But, Domenica, Cyril is an intelligent and entirely well-behaved dog who
Domenica: happens to smell [radio play, 44 Scotland Street]
- (2) A: I’m pretty sure that the:
B: programmed visits?
A: programmed visits, yes, I think they’ll have been debt inspections. [BNC]

Most standard grammar formalisms have problems accounting for such data because their notions of ‘constituency’ and ‘syntactic domain’ are independent of performance considerations.

Moreover, no notion of “full proposition” is necessary for successful interaction. Strings, contents, and speech acts can emerge incrementally without any participant having envisaged in advance the result of the interaction:

- (3) Eleni: Is this yours or
Yo: Yours. [natural data]
- (4) Lawyer: And you left your husband because ...
Client: we had nothing in common any more
- (5) Hester Collyer: It’s for me.
Mrs Elton the landlady: And Mr. Page?
Hester Collyer: is not my husband. But I would rather you continue to think of me as Mrs. Page.
[The Deep Blue Sea (film)]

However, morphosyntactic and semantic licensing mechanisms apply as usual in non-sentential utterances. For example, in morphologically-rich languages, speech acts with subsentential/subpropositional elements require appropriate case morphemes and, in all languages, binding restrictions are observed according to current contextual parameters:

- (6) A: I heard a bang. Did you hurt
B: myself? No but Mary is in a state

This shows that grammatical licensing and semantic processing are performed incrementally subsententially online, at each step affording possibilities for further extension by interlocutors’ actions or the situational context. Moreover, a level of abstract syntax, divorced from the conceptual structure, impedes a natural account of such phenomena. For these reasons, we argue that we need a view of natural language as a “skill” employing domain-general mechanisms rather than fixed form-meaning mappings. We provide a sketch of a Dynamic Syntax architecture combined with incrementally-induced conceptual representations within which underspecification and time-relative update of meanings and utterances constitute the sole concept of “syntax”.