DIMENSIONS AND LEVELS OF LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS: SYNTAGMATIC AND PARADIGMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN LINGUAL UNITS

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Abstract

This article distinguishes levels of linguistic analysis from the dimensions of combination and selection. Constructed English examples show how phonemes, morphemes, words, and clauses acquire functions through their relations. The discussion argues that syntagmatic and paradigmatic analysis should be used together, while recognising that grammatical interchangeability does not guarantee equivalent meaning.

Keywords: linguistic levels; syntagmatic relations; paradigmatic relations; linguistic units; structural analysis.

Introduction

A sentence is more than a collection of words, and a word is more than a sequence of sounds. Speakers recognise patterns that allow particular units to combine, while also choosing among alternatives. Linguistic analysis therefore asks two related questions: what units constitute an expression, and what relations give those units their place in the language system? The distinction between combination and selection provides a useful starting point.

Saussure's account of syntagmatic and associative relations established an influential framework for studying language relationally (Saussure, 1959). The term

paradigmatic is commonly used for relations among alternatives, although Saussure's associative relations also include broader connections through sound and meaning. This article offers a conceptual discussion rather than an empirical study. Its central claim is that levels and dimensions should be distinguished: levels identify the domain of analysis, whereas dimensions describe relationships within and across that domain.

Levels and units of linguistic analysis

Introductory descriptions commonly distinguish phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics (Anderson, 2018). These are analytical domains rather than identical steps in a single hierarchy. Phonetics examines the production and perception of speech sounds; phonology investigates their organisation and contrast within a language. Morphology concerns word structure, while syntax considers how words and phrases form larger constructions. Semantics examines meaning, and pragmatics studies interpretation in relation to use and context.

Different units answer different analytical questions. In English, the contrast between /p/ and /b/ distinguishes pat from bat, illustrating a phonological opposition. In cats, the plural suffix contributes grammatical meaning and can be analysed as a morpheme. In the phrase those small cats, the words occupy distinct structural positions. Yet phonemes do not normally carry meaning individually, and morphemes need not occur as independent words. Calling every unit a small meaningful element would obscure these differences.

The relationship between levels is consequently more complex than simple accumulation. The plural ending in cats, dogs, and horses has different spoken forms, although it expresses the same grammatical category. Morphological analysis identifies the plural function, while phonological analysis helps explain its realisation. Similarly, a syntactic description can identify a sentence as declarative without determining whether it functions as a statement, a warning, or an indirect request.

Syntagmatic relations

Syntagmatic relations concern the combination of units in an expression. In the sentence The student read the article, the subject phrase combines with a verb phrase, and the verb combines with its object. Reversing the two noun phrases produces The article read the student. The sequence may preserve a familiar grammatical pattern, but its ordinary interpretation becomes anomalous. Combination therefore involves both structural organisation and restrictions on plausible meaning.

Syntagmatic analysis cannot be reduced to adjacency. In The student who arrived late read the article, student and read are separated by a relative clause, yet the subject phrase still stands in a grammatical relation to the main verb. A linear sequence records the order of words; a structural analysis identifies their grouping and dependencies. This distinction matters because neighbouring words do not necessarily form a constituent.

Paradigmatic relations

Paradigmatic relations concern alternatives that can occupy a comparable position. In The student read the article, student may be replaced by teacher, researcher, or child. These substitutions preserve the basic construction but change its reference. Replacing read with discussed also preserves the broad pattern while changing the event described. The available alternatives are organised by grammatical class, meaning, and the requirements of the surrounding construction.

A paradigm is not simply a list of synonyms. Student and teacher are not synonymous, yet they can function as alternatives in the same noun position. Conversely, near-synonymous verbs may differ in their patterns of complementation: discuss the issue is standard, whereas talk normally requires about before the issue. Semantic resemblance does not guarantee structural interchangeability. A substitution test must therefore specify the relevant frame and the aspect of similarity being tested.

Inflection supplies another clear case. The forms writes, wrote, and will write express alternatives associated with tense and related grammatical choices, although

will write is a multiword construction rather than an inflected word. At the phonological level, replacing /p/ with /b/ in pat creates a different lexical item. This contrast illustrates selection among sound units; it does not imply that every imaginable substitution produces an existing word.

Interaction between combination and selection

The two dimensions constrain one another. In She gave the child a book, replacing gave with donated does not normally preserve the same construction in standard English. A more natural expression is She donated a book to the library. The choice of verb affects the pattern in which other units combine. Equally, an established syntactic frame limits the verbs that can occupy it. Selection and combination are therefore interdependent analytical perspectives.

Conclusion

Levels of linguistic analysis identify the kinds of units and properties under investigation. Syntagmatic and paradigmatic dimensions explain how those units combine and how they contrast with possible alternatives. Together, these perspectives connect sound patterns, word formation, sentence structure, and interpretation. Their value lies in precise questions: which units form a construction, what can replace them, and what changes when a replacement is made? Treating language as a system of relations makes analysis more explanatory, provided that structural patterns are considered alongside meaning and context.

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