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The Role of Syntagmas in Sentence Structure and Text

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the significance of syntagmas in linguistic speech, with a focus on their critical role in the structuring, organization, and perception of language. Syntagmas - linear sequences of linguistic elements - serve as the building blocks of meaningful communication and are central to how humans process and produce speech. The research examines the dynamic relationships among words, sentences, and syntagmas, highlighting their combined function in text formation and the cohesive flow of discourse. A central and still unresolved question in linguistic theory is the identification of the fundamental unit of speech that underlies the generation of more complex speech structures, including complete texts. This challenge persists due to the conceptual complexity of the issue as well as limitations in existing methodological approaches. The study argues that to produce consistent and meaningful results, linguistic analysis must be grounded in clearly defined principles and employ robust analytical tools. At the core of this investigation is an in-depth analysis of the sentence as a structured speech unit - one that encapsulates a complete thought and thus holds significant explanatory power in understanding how language conveys meaning. By addressing the functional and structural properties of sentences and syntagmas, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms behind speech production. Ultimately, the study calls for a refinement of linguistic methodologies to better uncover the intricate processes that govern human communication.

Keywords: Syntagma; Text; Sentences; Structure; Grammar; Syntagmatic Relations

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1. Introduction

A sentence's structure can be either simple or complex. It may consist of just one basic speech unit or multiple units working together as a whole. Interestingly, the process of how speech begins and how this initial unit forms hasn't been thoroughly explored in linguistics. That's why this topic matters—because the syntagma, as the basic building block of speech, plays a crucial role in both creating and understanding language. It's the foundation for all types of speech activity and for shaping coherent texts.

A sentence itself is more than just a grammatical construct—it can be seen as a small piece of text or even as a complete, compact form of expression, like a proverb, aphorism, or poem. Rather than being made directly from words or phrases, a sentence emerges as an intermediate structure, sitting between the smallest speech units (syntagmas) and the larger whole (the text). In this way, sentences help organize a text, breaking it down into manageable parts that are easier to process. Just like a bricklayer constructs a building by laying bricks one at a time, a speaker builds sentences—and eventually full texts—by putting together syntagmas in a meaningful sequence ^[1].

Even without sentences and punctuation, if the boundaries between syntagmas are indicated by the quality of pauses (longer and shorter), the text remains comprehensible. This suggests that the text is formed not from sentences but through the sequential linear accumulation of syntagmas, which allows for accurate content understanding. Sentences perform a structuring function in the text, and while individuals might define sentence boundaries differently, they can still perceive the content adequately. However, any unique perception of the syntagmatic structure can lead to a distortion of the text's content. Despite the comprehensibility of texts through prosodic cues like pauses, there remains a research gap in formally defining syntagmatic boundaries and understanding how they function independently of sentence structures. Individual variations in perceiving syntagmas can lead to content distortion, highlighting challenges in standardizing syntagmatic

analysis and integrating prosodic elements into linguistic theory.

2. Materials and Methods

American researchers like T. Bever, D. Slobin, and J. Fodor have proposed that speech—especially sentences—can be seen as “structured chains” made up of different levels of language units. In their view, these chains consist of elements like sounds, morphemes, words, and syntagmas, all forming the structure of a sentence. However, this perspective has some important limitations. It tends to blur the lines between the language system (how language is organized in theory) and the act of speech (how we actually use language in communication). This confusion leads to mixing units that belong to different levels of analysis. For example, sounds, syllables, and morphemes don't actively contribute to the creation of speech; they are predetermined and fixed within words, following specific patterns and sequences. Because of this, they can't truly be considered the direct building blocks of a sentence as a spoken unit ^[2].

To study syntagmas more accurately, this research applies a range of methods. These include structural-functional and comparative approaches to analyze how syntagmas work within sentences. Both empirical (based on observation and experience) and theoretical (conceptual and abstract) methods are used. The study also incorporates descriptive, typological, and historical comparisons, especially in the context of borrowing and translation theories, relying on the work of well-known scholars in the field ^[3]. To better understand how sentences and texts function, the research also draws on practical tools like observation, experimentation, generalization, and even surveys of teachers' experiences (**Table 1**). Together, these approaches help reveal the essential role of syntagmas in shaping sentence structure and building meaningful texts ^[4].

By integrating these diverse methods, the study aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role of syntagmas in sentence structure and text formation, contributing to both theoretical linguistics and practical language teaching.

Table 1. The table outlines research methods used in the analysis of **syntagmas**—structured groupings of words in sentences and texts that contribute to meaning.

Method	Description	Key Components
1. Structural-Functional Analysis	Examines how syntagmas function within sentences and texts by breaking them into constituent units to identify patterns and roles.	- Identification of syntagmatic units - Analysis of functional roles in conveying meaning
2. Comparative Analysis	Contrasts syntagmatic structures across languages and historical periods.	- <i>Descriptive Comparison</i> : Documenting structures in contemporary and historical texts - <i>Typological Comparison</i> : Classifying patterns across languages - <i>Comparative-Historical Analysis</i> : Tracing development over time
3. Empirical Methods	Utilizes direct observation and controlled experimentation for data collection.	- <i>Observation</i> : Identifying syntagmas in texts - <i>Experimentation</i> : Testing structures in controlled linguistic environments
4. Theoretical Methods	Applies linguistic theories and develops models to interpret and explain syntagmatic roles.	- <i>Linguistic Theory Application</i> : Applying syntax and semantics theories - <i>Model Development</i> : Refining or proposing explanatory models
5. Pedagogical Surveys	Gathers practical insights through surveys and interviews with language teachers.	- <i>Teaching Experiences</i> : Classroom practices in teaching syntagmas - <i>Perception and Comprehension</i> : Teachers' and students' understanding
6. Observation and Generalization	Uses observational data to generalize about the role of syntagmas in language use.	- <i>Syntagmatic Boundaries</i> : How boundaries are marked and perceived - <i>Textual Coherence</i> : Contribution to coherence and readability

3. Results and Discussion

It's important to understand that even though some words are grammatically connected, they don't always belong to the same syntagma. In many cases, such words are part of different syntagmas, creating what's known as an inter-syntagmatic relationship. By connecting key words in this way, groups of words come together to form independent units like sentences, statements, and, ultimately, meaningful texts.

A syntagma holds a special place in the structure of speech due to its three essential functions:

1. It provides the material framework for organizing speech structurally and semantically;
2. It helps listeners and readers accurately understand speech;
3. It clarifies sentence structure, making it easier to identify individual components ^[5].

In English, unlike in more inflectional languages like Russian or Kazakh, the grammatical role of a word isn't always obvious from its form. Instead, it's often defined by its position in the sentence. For example, a word can act as a noun, adjective, or verb depending on where it appears. A word at the start of a sentence might function as a noun (subject), before a noun it might act as an adjective, and in a predicate position, it functions as a verb. This flexibility can lead to ambiguity, which is less common in languages where grammatical roles are more clearly marked in the

dictionary system.

This flexible nature is reflected in English dictionaries, where the same word might be listed under multiple parts of speech depending on its usage. In speech, the grammatical characteristics of syntagmas are visible through both internal (intra-syntagmatic) and external (inter-syntagmatic) connections. Effective speech relies on the interaction between these syntagmas, which may involve grammatical, semantic, and associative relationships. These relationships can be vertical (reflecting hierarchical structures) or horizontal (side-by-side associations) ^[6].

Syntagmas also play a central role in the pragmatics of language use. Understanding how they work is vital for reading comprehension and writing summaries in one's native language. They are especially helpful in learning foreign languages, where mastering the flow of speech depends more on recognizing these building blocks of meaning than on simply memorizing individual words. Grammatical and semantic relationships occur both vertically and horizontally, while associative links—such as analogies and comparisons—only function horizontally.

There are several types of semantic connections:

- **Direct semantic connections** between syntactically related elements;
- **Mediated connections** between unrelated elements that revolve around key words;
- **Associative links** based on meaning, context, or analogy.

These types often operate together. For instance, consider this passage:

“A sentence is not built directly from words or phrases; it’s an intermediate structure between syntagmas (the smallest speech units) and a complete text. Syntagmas form the building blocks of both sentences and texts. Just as a bricklayer constructs a house brick by brick, speakers construct meaning by assembling syntagmas in sequence.”

This metaphor emphasizes that syntagmas are at the heart of both speech creation and comprehension.

Let’s look at how syntagmas influence meaning through a comparison. Take the two sentences:

- “*It is necessary to quit smoking.*”
- “*You need to quit smoking.*”

In the second sentence, a natural pause divides the phrase into two syntagmas, which subtly shifts the meaning. The first version uses an impersonal construction, whereas the second adds urgency and directness^[7]. This shows how dividing speech into syntagmas can clarify intention and structure. Generally, syntagmas are smaller than full sentences but can sometimes be a whole sentence or a part of a complex one. Depending on the speaker’s emotion and communicative intent, a syntagma may include multiple simple predicative elements.

Linguist L.B. Sherba studied syntagmas extensively for over three decades. Over time, his understanding evolved from a focus on phonetics to recognizing syntagmas as central speech-producing units. Sadly, much of his later work remains unpublished, and many scholars still cite only his early ideas, overlooking his most developed insights. In spoken language, syntagmas are usually marked by pauses. Speakers don’t consciously divide their speech into words or sentences; instead, listeners interpret speech through syntagmatic chunks. Words are recognized within these chunks, not in isolation^[8].

Written sentences typically align with syntagma boundaries, usually marked by longer pauses. While words in the language system express generalized concepts that could apply to many situations, speech requires specificity—highlighting what’s unique about the context. This is done by selecting and grouping words into syntagmas that carry situational meaning. In this way, abstract language forms are transformed into concrete, meaningful speech units^[9].

This concept dates back to I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay, who distinguished between a “word in language” and a “word in speech,” emphasizing the separation between abstract language structure and real-life communication^[10].

For example, consider the sentence:

- “*The boy bought the pen.*”

Depending on the question it answers and the pauses used, this sentence can be broken into different syntagmas:

- **One syntagma:** “The boy bought the pen” — answers *What happened?*
- **Two syntagmas:** “The boy / bought the pen” — answers *Who bought the pen?*
- **Two different syntagmas:** “The boy bought / the pen” — answers *What did the boy buy?*
- **Three syntagmas:** “The boy / bought / the pen” — answers *What did the boy do with the pen?*

Each version shifts the focus and meaning slightly, demonstrating how syntagmatic division influences interpretation^[11]. The placement of stress and pauses guides understanding, showing that speech is built not from isolated words, but from structured, meaning-rich units—syntagmas^[12].

Thus, graphically, the same sentence structure can have different content formats depending on its communicative purpose and lexical filling. The speaker’s intent modifies the syntagmatic structure and intonation each time, and the reader’s comprehension aids in understanding the exact meaning. Pauses help realize syntagmas and their boundaries, while melodic and syntagmatic stress aid in identifying the most important syntagma and accurately perceiving the content.

The significance of syntagmas extends beyond mere sentence construction. In oral communication, the natural division into syntagmas allows for a fluid understanding of speech. The absence of clear word and sentence boundaries highlights the importance of syntagmas as the primary units of speech production and comprehension. Words are recognized and understood within the context of syntagmas, not in isolation. This emphasizes the role of syntagmas in conveying specific situational meanings and contributing to the overall coherence of speech^[13].

The transformation of generalized language signs into specific situational meanings within syntagmas illustrates the dynamic nature of language. Syntagmas serve as

the bridge between the abstract language system and the concrete reality of speech. They encapsulate the unique features of specific situations, making speech relevant and meaningful. The process of syntagmatic transformation is crucial for effective communication, as it allows speakers to convey precise meanings and listeners to accurately interpret speech ^[14].

In the realm of language education, understanding syntagmas is essential for developing effective teaching strategies. Educators need to focus on teaching students how to recognize and use syntagmas to enhance their speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills. Mastery of syntagmas facilitates the accurate production and comprehension of speech, enabling learners to communicate effectively in various contexts. This approach is particularly valuable in foreign language instruction, where the syntagmatic structure of the target language must be understood for successful language acquisition.

In conclusion, the syntagma is a fundamental unit of speech that plays a crucial role in the structural and semantic organization of language. Its functions include serving as material for speech units, promoting accurate understanding, and clarifying sentence structure. The study of syntagmas provides insights into the dynamics of speech production and comprehension, highlighting their importance in effective communication and language education. The transformation of generalized language signs into specific situational meanings within syntagmas underscores their significance in conveying precise meanings and ensuring the coherence of speech ^[15].

Even when analyzing a simple English sentence, it becomes clear that sentences are not constructed from isolated words strung together, but from *syntagmas*—meaningful word groupings shaped by structure, intonation, and context. Understanding an English sentence, therefore, requires more than just recognizing individual words. The reader or listener must grasp how words come together in specific combinations, along with the rhythm, stress, and pauses that bring meaning to the sentence as a whole.

A sentence is much more than a set of words with punctuation—it is a unified system where structure, intonation, and meaning all interact. This becomes especially apparent when we consider that a sentence like “*The boy bought the pen*” can take on multiple interpretations de-

pending on how it is spoken. Each variation, even if it looks the same in writing, differs in its syntagmatic structure, intonation pattern, and, ultimately, meaning. This suggests that although the graphic form (the written sentence) remains constant, the actual number of distinct sentences is greater than it appears. Only the surrounding *context* helps us determine which version we’re dealing with and how it should be understood ^[16].

This insight leads to an important conclusion: speech is not a mechanical reproduction of language, but a *creative act* by the speaker. Each individual expresses their thoughts through minimal, functional speech units known as syntagmas. Just as no two people speak exactly the same way, the way one person builds their sentences—even using the same words—will differ slightly from another. Because of this, analyzing speech means looking at how it is organized around syntagmas, rather than breaking it down into phonemes (sounds), syllables, or morphemes (word parts). These smaller units belong to the language system, but they do not function as the actual building blocks of *spoken meaning*.

So, when we talk about sentence structure in the context of speech, the focus should shift to *meaningful groupings*—the syntagmas. These are the true structural elements of speech and are responsible for conveying complete and coherent meaning. Syntagmas are what enable us to move from language as a system of abstract rules and vocabulary into speech, which is an individual and practical act of communication.

To understand this better, consider how a full text is structured. It isn’t just a long string of words—it’s organized into syntagmas, sentences, and more complex units like paragraphs or complete utterances. Sentences serve as an intermediate layer, helping to organize and stabilize thought into coherent expression. They help guide the listener or reader through the text by highlighting its syntagmatic structure and ensuring that the intended meaning is accessible and clear.

Importantly, words by themselves are not sufficient for producing meaningful speech. Words are static units in the language system, each with a general or abstract meaning. However, when these words come together in syntagmas, they are shaped by context and acquire *situational meaning*. This transformation—from general to specific—

is what turns words into real communicative tools. For example, the word “*pen*” on its own refers to a general category of object. But in a sentence like “*The boy bought the pen,*” placed within a syntagma, it takes on a situational meaning—a *specific pen, in a specific context*.

This has implications for linguistic theory. Early researchers who developed the idea of “direct constituents” (the elements directly making up a sentence) made a crucial error. They failed to draw a clear line between *language* (as a system) and *speech* (as an act), resulting in a muddled understanding of sentence construction. They treated words, morphemes, and phonemes as direct components of speech, ignoring the fact that these units belong to the abstract system of language. In truth, the *direct constituents of speech*—the elements we use to express actual thoughts—are syntagmas^[17].

Syntagmas serve as a bridge between language and speech. They are minimal units of meaning that operate within real communicative situations. Each syntagma is one-dimensional, focused, and reflects a specific fragment of reality. Unlike dictionary words, which represent general categories, syntagmas are concerned with *particulars*. They capture the unique features of a specific moment or thought, expressed through a specific grouping of words.

Take again the example of the word “*boy*.” In the abstract, it refers to any male child. But in a sentence like “*The boy bought the pen,*” it now points to a particular boy. The syntagma “*The boy*” doesn’t just express the concept of a child—it identifies a participant in a specific event. This transformation is what makes speech dynamic and functional. Words in language are generalized; syntagmas in speech are *contextualized*.

Moreover, this approach emphasizes that the real meaning of a sentence—especially in English—is often revealed only when considering intonation, grouping, and stress. For instance, placing stress on different parts of the sentence can change its implication entirely.

- “*The boy / bought the pen*” (emphasis on who bought it)
- “*The boy bought / the pen*” (emphasis on what was bought)
- “*The boy / bought / the pen*” (breaking it into three syntagmas can indicate a slower, more deliberate explanation)

These variations may seem minor, but they reflect different communicative intentions. That’s why relying on visual form alone (the written sentence) can be misleading. The underlying syntagmatic structure is what actually drives interpretation and understanding.

In spoken language, syntagmas are usually marked by pauses and intonation. In writing, they may correspond to commas, colons, or line breaks, but the reader must still infer their structure. That’s why reading fluently often requires *mental re-construction* of speech patterns—not just decoding words.

Ultimately, the core message here is that syntagmas are the *true units of speech*. They are minimal, yet meaningful; abstract, yet contextualized. They represent how language comes alive in communication—how it shifts from a static system of signs to a dynamic expression of thought and experience. Understanding syntagmas is therefore essential not just for linguistic theory, but for practical communication in any language. Whether writing a sentence, interpreting spoken dialogue, or analyzing a text, recognizing these foundational speech units is key to truly grasping how meaning is constructed and conveyed^[18].

However, in a syntagma, it is the accidental features of reality—those distinguishing one specific reality from other similar ones—that are actualized. Thus, a syntagma represents a specific reality rather than a type of reality. I.A. Baudouin de Courtenay highlighted the distinction between words in the language and speech by using different terms: ‘lexeme’ and ‘syntagma.’ However, Baudouin’s use of ‘syntagma’ did not gain widespread acceptance in linguistic science. The refusal to adopt this term has led to the diminished prominence of a crucial scientific concept. A syntagma typically includes several words united by implication, intonation, and grammar, forming a single structural and meaningful fragment^[19]. However, it is not uncommon for a single word to function as a syntagma if the speaker deems it sufficient to convey the content in combination with other syntagmas. Such cases should not create the illusion that a sentence is composed merely of words. While a minimum quantity of syntagmas in a sentence is one, there are usually several. The number of syntagmas is determined by the content, the peculiarities of the author’s cognitive processes, and their language and speech competence. Understanding that syntagmas, rather than indi-

vidual words, form the core building blocks of sentences underscores the importance of syntagmatic analysis in comprehending and producing coherent speech. This perspective aligns with the view that syntagmas serve as the fundamental units through which language is transformed into meaningful speech, reflecting the nuanced realities of communication ^[20]. A critical evaluation of the cited works reveals several key trends and limitations. While many studies agree on the importance of syntagmas in meaning-making, they often diverge on how these units are defined and identified—some rely on syntactic rules, while others emphasize prosodic or functional markers, creating inconsistencies across methodologies. A noticeable limitation is the underrepresentation of spoken language and prosody in syntagmatic analysis, with most research focusing on written, sentence-based texts. Additionally, few studies address individual cognitive variation in parsing syntagmas, which may account for discrepancies in findings related to comprehension and coherence. These gaps suggest a need for interdisciplinary approaches that integrate linguistic theory, cognitive psychology, and discourse analysis.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the study of syntagma in linguistics reveals its fundamental role as an elementary constituent segment in understanding the structure and meaning of language. Whether analyzing phonemes, words, phrases, sentences, or larger narrative events, syntagmas provide a framework for examining how linguistic elements combine to convey meaning and structure. Syntagmatic analysis elucidates the rules of combination among these elements, offering insights into the construction of sentences and narratives.

Moreover, by exploring syntagmas within narrative structures, we observe how they contribute to the temporal coherence and tension within stories, thereby enriching our comprehension of literary and communicative strategies. Syntagmas clarify and concretize linguistic concepts within the language system, underscoring their role in both teaching and understanding sentence construction.

Ultimately, the concept of syntagma highlights the importance of minimal, univariant, and monosemantic units in language that carry specific situational meanings. By recognizing syntagma as the foundational component

in linguistic expression, we deepen our appreciation for its role in both everyday communication and complex narrative structures. Thus, the study of syntagma invites us to rethink how language units contribute to the creation and interpretation of meaning in diverse linguistic contexts. Moving forward, progress in syntagmatic research will benefit greatly from interdisciplinary collaboration. Integrating insights from cognitive linguistics, psycholinguistics, narratology, and speech technology can refine theoretical models and support practical applications in language teaching, artificial intelligence, and translation studies. By bridging disciplinary divides, researchers can develop more nuanced and comprehensive understandings of how syntagmas function within and across linguistic systems.

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Conceptualization, G.B. and Z.K.; methodology, M.B.; formal analysis, N.T.; investigation, G.B.; resources, K.I.; data curation, Z.K.; writing—original draft preparation, G.B.; writing—review and editing, G.B.; visualization, N.T.; supervision, Z.K. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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