1 Word order phenomena

There are an astronomical\(^1\) number of ways words can be sequenced. Only some of them are recognizable as English. What’s the difference between the acceptable and the unacceptable sequences?

(1) review:

* (“star”) means that native speakers say the sentence is Not part of their language grammatical category name of substitution class e.g. \{V, A, Adv, N, Name, D, P, Prn, Aux\}

(2) Can you pick members of a grammatical category to make an acceptable sentence out of any of these randomly-generated templates?

1. Name — Adv — A — Aux — Aux
2. P — P — D — Aux — Prn
3. Name — Prn — A — N — P
4. A — Aux — Adv — Prn — N
5. P — Name — P — A — V
6. Aux — Adv — Prn — A — Aux
7. P — Name — P — Adv — Name
8. D — Name — A — P — Adv
10. P — Aux — Aux — Prn — V

Which of these should have stars in front of them?

CNN will conduct three debates.
Bush has embarrassed some supporters.

(3) word substitutability: Name – Aux – V – D – N

Dennis might lose the election
Carol should cast a vote

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Carol should cast a vote} & \quad \text{Name} \\
\text{She should cast a vote} & \quad \text{Prn} \\
\text{The woman should cast a vote} & \quad \text{determiner phrase (DP)} \\
\text{The African-American woman} & \quad \text{DP} \\
\text{should cast a vote} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

(4) phrase substitutability:

The one person who has a prayer of changing things in this country should cast a vote

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The one person who has a} & \quad \text{DP} \\
\text{prayer of changing things in} & \quad \\
\text{this country should cast a vote} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

\(^1\)Using the nine categories from Fromkin, there are \(5^9\) or about 1.9 million possible ‘templates’ for five-word English sentences.
DP is just the tip of the iceberg

VP cast a vote, rise to the occasion
AP despondent about her boyfriend, eager for victory
NP candidate, candidate for president
PP about her boyfriend, for victory
CP that she’s going to St. Tropez, if W. will win

Phrases XP headed by word of category X. e.g. NPs don’t have determiners at the beginning, but rather nouns.

2 Theta theory

It would be nice for grammars to not only distinguish the acceptable and unacceptable sentences, but also give some insight about how their structure contributes to their meaning. To a first approximation, DPs refer to real or imagined entities in the world, and verbs predicate properties of these entities.

Bush beats Clark  \text{AGENT}=\text{incumbent president George W. Bush}, \text{PATIENT}=\text{former General Wesley Clark}

Clark beats Bush  \text{AGENT}=\text{former General Wesley Clark}, \text{PATIENT}=\text{incumbent president George W. Bush}

The same entities can participate in the same event in different ways. We can describe this in terms of different thematic ($\theta$) roles (AGENT, PATIENT,....) being “assigned” to different participants in the situation the sentence is about. Shorthand: $\theta$-role $T$ is assigned to argument phrase XP. The specific assignment depends on particular assigners and the particular environment.

The recall thrills Schwarzenegger.

thrills assigns THEME to the DP “The recall” and EXPERIENCER to the Name “Schwarzenegger”

Schwarzenegger loves the recall.

loves assigns THEME to the DP “the recall” and EXPERIENCER to the Name “Schwarzenegger”

Judy passed the mic to Joe Lieberman.

passed assigns GOAL to the PP “to Joe Lieberman” and PATIENT to the DP “the mic”

Judy passed Joe Lieberman the mic.

passed assigns GOAL to the Name “Joe Lieberman” and PATIENT to the DP “the mic”

English grammatical roles like subject, direct object, indirect object, dative are distinguishable by position. In Latin, Japanese, Russian etc. they are indicated by case-marking morphemes in a wide range of positions. We have a budget version of this with the possessive morpheme ’s.

Schwarzenegger’s handlers should have warned him about the media.

’s assigns POSSESSOR to the Name “Schwarzenegger”

Verbs are not the only $\theta$-assigners, predicative adjectives also do:
(12) The spinmeisters were crafty.  
    *crafty assigns THEME to the DP “The spinmeisters”

so do prepositions

(13) Jenna’s sister is in St. Tropez.  
    in assigns LOCATION to the DP “Jenna’s sister”

(14) transitivity: number of arguments a verb takes obligatorily

      intransitive 1  
      transitive 2  
      ditransitive 3

non-argument complements called **adjuncts** are not required for acceptability

    * Judy handed the mic
    Judy handed the mic to Joe  
    Judy handed the mic to Joe at the debate

    [PP to Joe] is an argument of *handed*

    * PP at the debate* isn’t