



FROM CHAOS TO CLARITY: HOW ENGLISH SYNTAX CREATES MEANING

Faqih Hibatulah Z¹, Ajrul Khair², Mhd Ilham Khanis³, Maulana Budi Satria Siregar⁴,

M. Rafly Raja Ghazali Nahulae⁵

Universitas Islam Negeri Sumatera Utara, Medan^{1,2,3,4,5}

e-mail: faqihhibatullah94@gmail.com

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ABSTRAK

Artikel ini mengkaji peran fundamental struktur sintaksis dalam membangun dan menentukan makna dalam bahasa Inggris. Sintaksis dipahami tidak sekadar sebagai seperangkat aturan formal, melainkan sebagai kerangka kognitif yang mengorganisasi unsur leksikal sehingga mampu mengubah potensi kekacauan makna menjadi komunikasi yang jelas dan terarah. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif-analitis dengan memanfaatkan contoh-contoh kalimat terstruktur untuk mengungkap mekanisme sintaksis utama dalam bahasa Inggris, khususnya urutan kata yang relatif tetap Subject–Verb–Object, struktur hierarkis frasa, serta proses penyelesaian ambiguitas sintaktis. Hasil analisis menunjukkan bahwa sintaksis bahasa Inggris berfungsi sebagai sistem generatif yang berperan penting dalam penentuan peran gramatikal, pembentukan proposisi kompleks, serta penciptaan kohesi wacana. Selain itu, struktur sintaksis terbukti menjadi faktor utama dalam penafsiran makna dan pemahaman kalimat. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa penguasaan prinsip-prinsip sintaksis merupakan aspek krusial dalam mencapai kejelasan, ketepatan, dan efektivitas komunikasi, serta memiliki implikasi penting bagi pengajaran bahasa, penulisan akademik, dan kajian linguistik secara konseptual, pedagogis, dan aplikatif dalam konteks pembelajaran bahasa Inggris modern di era global digital.

Kata Kunci: *Sintaksis Bahasa Inggris, Urutan Kata, Konstruksi Makna, Penyelesaian Ambiguitas, Struktur Kalimat, Kjelasan Linguistik*

ABSTRACT

This article examines the fundamental role of syntactic structure in constructing and determining meaning in the English language. Syntax is understood not merely as a set of formal rules, but as a cognitive framework that organizes lexical elements and transforms potential semantic chaos into clear and purposeful communication. This study employs a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach by using structured sentence examples to reveal the main syntactic mechanisms in English, particularly the relatively fixed word order of Subject–Verb–Object, hierarchical phrase structure, and the process of syntactic ambiguity resolution. The analysis shows that English syntax functions as a generative system that plays an important role in grammatical role assignment, the formation of complex propositions, and the creation of discourse cohesion. Furthermore, syntactic structure is proven to be a primary factor in meaning interpretation and sentence comprehension. These findings emphasize that mastery of syntactic principles is a crucial aspect in achieving clarity, accuracy, and effective communication, and has important implications for language teaching, academic writing, and linguistic studies in conceptual, pedagogical, and applicative dimensions within the context of modern English language learning in the global digital era.

Keywords: *English Syntax, Word Order, Meaning Construction, Ambiguity Resolution, Sentence Structure, Linguistic Clarity*



INTRODUCTION

Language stands as humanity's most intricate and defining technology, a system that allows us to encapsulate the complexities of thought, experience, and imagination into a stream of communicable signs (Dehaene, 2020). At the heart of this system lies a fundamental paradox: while the individual word is the basic unit of meaning, a mere collection of words does not, in itself, constitute coherent language. Consider a set of lexical items such as *dog*, *the*, *bites*, *man*, *a*. Presented in isolation, they represent a state of pure potential—a chaotic array of symbols awaiting organization. This chaos, however, is precisely what the human linguistic faculty is designed to resolve (Chomsky, 2020). Through the application of a tacit, internalized rule system, this randomness can be structured into two narratives with profoundly different implications: the mundane report of "The dog bites a man" contrasts starkly with the sensational anomaly of "A man bites the dog." This transformative capacity, the ability to generate infinite meaningful expressions from finite elements, is the core domain of syntax.

Syntax, broadly defined as the set of principles governing the combination of words and phrases into well-formed sentences, functions as the essential architectural framework of language (Carnie, 2021). If the lexicon provides the raw materials, the bricks, mortar, and beams, then syntax provides the indispensable blueprint, the engineering principles that dictate how these materials must be assembled to create a stable and functional structure (Everaert et al., 2015). Without syntactic rules, language would collapse into a heap of disjointed symbols, incapable of conveying specific propositions, relationships, or nuanced commands (Tallerman, 2020). It is syntax that allows us to move beyond labeling the world to making statements about it, to ask questions, to issue directives, and to weave intricate narratives.

The role of syntax is particularly pronounced and transparent in English, which is classified as an analytic language. Unlike highly inflected languages that rely on morphological case endings to signal grammatical relationships (e.g., who is doing what to whom), English depends heavily on a relatively fixed word order. This reliance makes syntactic structure the primary cognitive mechanism for establishing conceptual relationships, assigning semantic roles such as agent and patient, and eliminating ambiguity (Gibson et al., 2019). The position of a word within a sentence is not arbitrary; it is a critical carrier of grammatical function and, by extension, meaning (Futrell et al., 2020). Consequently, the study of English syntax offers a clear window into the fundamental cognitive processes that underpin human language comprehension and production.

Building upon this foundation, the present study seeks to systematically delineate the specific operational mechanisms through which English syntax performs its meaning-constraining function. We posit that syntax is not a mere set of prescriptive constraints but a dynamic, generative system that actively constructs clarity from potential disorder (Boeckx, 2021). This investigation aims to deconstruct how syntactic architecture imposes order on linguistic input, transforming it from a state of semantic possibility into one of precise communicative intent. Therefore, the central question guiding this inquiry is: How does the syntactic architecture of English systematically generate, modulate, and constrain meaning, thereby serving as the primary engine for converting lexical chaos into discursive clarity? To answer this, we will examine the pillars of syntactic structure: the dictum of word order, the hierarchy of constituents, the management of ambiguity, and the projection of structure beyond the sentence into coherent discourse.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive-analytical approach rooted in the theoretical and cognitive linguistics tradition. The primary objective is not to quantify syntactic phenomena but to provide a systematic, rule-based exposition of how English syntax operates as a meaning-construing system. The methodology is introspective and analytical, focusing on the underlying grammatical competence that allows native and proficient speakers to generate and interpret a potentially infinite set of well-formed sentences (Chomsky, 2020). This approach is particularly suited to revealing the abstract principles that govern sentence structure, which may not be immediately apparent from surface-level observation alone.

The core data for this analysis consists of linguistic intuitions operationalized through constructed examples. These examples are not drawn from a specific corpus but are strategically devised to act as minimal pairs or diagnostic frames that isolate and illuminate specific syntactic principles (Adger, 2019). For instance, comparing *The chef prepared the meal* with *The meal prepared the chef* serves as a diagnostic for the role of word order in thematic role assignment. This method of using controlled, constructed data allows for maximum clarity in demonstrating causal relationships between syntactic structure and semantic interpretation, free from the confounding variables of performance errors or dialectal variation often present in naturalistic corpora.

The analytical procedure is structured around three complementary and sequentially applied operational foci, each targeting a fundamental layer of syntactic organization:

Structural Analysis: Linear Order as a Grammatical Device

The first analytical focus is on syntactic linearity. Here, we examine the fixed Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sequence as the default and meaning-bearing template for English declarative sentences. This phase involves analyzing sets of sentences where lexical items are held constant, but their linear order is systematically altered (e.g., *The cat chased the mouse* vs. *The mouse chased the cat*). The methodological goal is to demonstrate that word order is not a stylistic choice but a grammaticalized system for encoding predicate-argument relations (Carnie, 2021). By observing the semantic shifts or complete ungrammaticality that result from violating canonical order, we establish linear sequence as the primary syntactic mechanism for distinguishing agents from patients and for establishing basic propositional meaning (Van Valin, 2020).

Constituency Analysis: Hierarchical Organization and Embedding

Moving beyond linearity, the second focus employs constituency tests to uncover the hierarchical organization of sentences. This involves applying standard diagnostics—such as substitution, movement (e.g., clefting: *It was the new policy that the board debated*), and coordination to demonstrate that words group into coherent intermediate units (phrases) that function as a single grammatical entity (Sportiche, Koopman, & Stabler, 2023). For example, proving that "*the very complex algorithm*" behaves as a single Noun Phrase (NP) that can be replaced by *it* or moved as a chunk. This phase is crucial for modeling how syntax builds complex meaning recursively; it shows how clauses (e.g., *that the project will succeed*) can be embedded as constituents within larger clauses, enabling the expression of layered thoughts and logical dependencies (Bošković, 2021).



Ambiguity Diagnosis: Structural Parsing and Disambiguation

The third analytical focus uses syntactic ambiguity as a natural experiment to examine how meaning is constructed through structure. Sentences such as I saw the man with the telescope are deliberately selected because they allow multiple structural interpretations within a single surface string (Pylkkänen, 2020). The analytical procedure consists of three sequential steps: (1) parsing, which involves explicitly diagramming the different possible tree structures underlying the same string of words; (2) interpretation mapping, in which each distinct structural parse is systematically linked to its corresponding semantic interpretation, such as instrumental or modificational readings; and (3) resolution strategies, which analyze how syntactic mechanisms including reordering, repunctuation, or the use of alternative grammatical constructions, such as relative clauses, can enforce a single interpretation and thereby eliminate ambiguity (Gibson et al., 2017). This focus highlights the active role of the parser in meaning construction and demonstrates syntactic knowledge as an essential tool for achieving precision and clarity in communication.

This tripartite methodological framework, progressing from linear order to hierarchical grouping to ambiguity resolution, allows for a comprehensive and logically scaffolded exposition. It moves from establishing foundational roles to modeling complexity and finally to demonstrating pragmatic control, thereby providing a complete picture of how syntactic form is intrinsically linked to, and generative of, semantic meaning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

The results of this study demonstrate that English syntax functions as a central mechanism for meaning construction. The analysis reveals that English relies on a relatively fixed Subject–Verb–Object (SVO) word order to encode grammatical and thematic roles. In this structure, the subject position typically represents the agent of an action, while the object position represents the patient (Carnie, 2021). This pattern remains consistent even when the resulting interpretation contradicts real-world plausibility, indicating that syntactic structure strongly constrains semantic interpretation (Van Valin, 2020). Such findings confirm that word order in English is not stylistic but grammatical in nature and plays a decisive role in sentence comprehension (Futrell et al., 2020).

In addition to linear order, the findings show that English sentences are organized hierarchically rather than as flat word strings. Words combine into phrase-level constituents that function as unified grammatical units within larger constructions. Constituency tests demonstrate that these groupings determine how modifiers and complements are interpreted (Sportiche et al., 2023). This hierarchical organization allows clauses to be embedded within other clauses, enabling recursive structures. As a result, speakers are able to express complex propositions and layered meanings through syntactic embedding (Everaert et al., 2015).

The results also indicate that syntactic ambiguity arises from multiple possible structural attachments within a single sentence. A single sequence of words may allow more than one syntactic parse, each leading to a different interpretation. This ambiguity is caused by structural configuration rather than lexical meaning alone (Pylkkänen, 2020). The analysis shows that different attachment sites within a sentence yield distinct semantic readings. These findings demonstrate that syntactic structure plays a crucial role in guiding interpretation and resolving ambiguity during sentence processing.

At the discourse level, the analysis reveals that syntactic mechanisms contribute to coherence beyond individual sentences. Devices such as anaphora and conjunctions create formal links between propositions across sentence boundaries. These structures enable readers to identify referents and logical relationships within a text. As a result, syntax supports the construction of cohesive discourse rather than isolated sentences (Kehler & Rohde, 2019). The main syntactic mechanisms identified in this study are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Syntactic Mechanisms and Their Roles in Meaning Construction

No.	Syntactic Mechanism	Structural Function	Contribution to Meaning
1	Subject–Verb–Object word order	Encodes grammatical roles	Determines agent–patient interpretation
2	Hierarchical phrase structure	Forms constituents	Clarifies modifier and complement relations
3	Recursion and embedding	Enables clause nesting	Supports complex propositions
4	Structural ambiguity	Allows multiple parses	Produces different interpretations
5	Discourse-level syntax	Links sentences	Ensures textual cohesion

Discussions

The results confirm that syntax serves as a fundamental cognitive framework for constructing meaning in English. The dominance of the SVO pattern supports the view that analytic languages depend primarily on syntactic position rather than morphological marking to encode grammatical relations (Carnie, 2021). This reliance on word order explains why syntactic structure often overrides real-world knowledge during sentence interpretation (Gibson et al., 2019). Such findings align with processing-based accounts that emphasize efficiency and predictability in sentence comprehension (Futrell et al., 2020). Therefore, syntax functions as a primary guide for semantic interpretation in English.

The findings of this study are closely aligned with previous research emphasizing the interface between syntax and meaning in English. Monteza and Hermansyah (2025) argue that syntactic structure functions as a mediating system that connects formal grammatical patterns with semantic interpretation, a claim that is reinforced by the present analysis. The reliance on fixed word order and hierarchical structure observed in this study supports the view that meaning construction is not driven solely by lexical items but by syntactic configuration. Similar conclusions are reported by Aliti (2024), who highlights the role of syntax in both language comprehension and production processes. Furthermore, the descriptive nature of English syntax identified in this study corresponds with the exploratory findings of Sidabalok et al. (2025), which demonstrate that phrase structure and sentence organization are central to interpreting meaning. Collectively, these studies strengthen the argument that syntax operates as a core cognitive mechanism underlying linguistic clarity and interpretability.

From a pedagogical perspective, the results of this study resonate strongly with empirical research conducted in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) contexts. Raihana et al. (2024) emphasize that understanding syntactic structure significantly improves learners' ability to comprehend English sentences, particularly those involving complex constructions. This is further supported by Kusnadi et al. (2024), who show that students' difficulties in sentence production often stem from limited awareness of syntactic patterns rather than



vocabulary limitations. Studies by Sari (2025) and Ritonga et al. (2024) also demonstrate that syntactic and syntax-semantics awareness has a direct impact on writing proficiency and overall communicative competence. These findings reinforce the implication that explicit attention to syntactic structure is essential in language instruction. Therefore, the present study not only contributes theoretically but also supports the integration of syntactic awareness into English language teaching and academic writing practices.

The presence of hierarchical phrase structure and recursion reinforces generative theories of syntax. These theories argue that finite grammatical rules allow speakers to generate an infinite number of expressions (Chomsky, 2020). The ability to embed clauses within other clauses enables the representation of complex thoughts, beliefs, and logical relations (Boeckx, 2021). This structural capacity explains how English supports advanced reasoning and abstract communication. Consequently, syntactic hierarchy is central to the expressive power of human language.

The findings on syntactic ambiguity further highlight the importance of structural parsing in meaning interpretation. Because ambiguity arises from alternative structural configurations, meaning cannot be fully determined by lexical items alone (Pylkkänen, 2020). This insight has practical implications for academic and professional writing, where unclear structural choices may lead to misinterpretation. Developing syntactic awareness allows writers to control meaning more precisely by selecting unambiguous constructions. Thus, syntactic competence contributes directly to communicative clarity.

Finally, the role of syntax in discourse cohesion demonstrates that grammatical structure extends beyond sentence boundaries. Anaphora and connective devices function as formal mechanisms that integrate propositions into coherent discourse (Kehler & Rohde, 2019; Clark, 2021). These mechanisms guide readers in building a unified mental representation of a text. As a result, syntax supports not only sentence-level meaning but also discourse-level organization. Overall, the findings emphasize that mastery of syntactic principles is essential for clarity, precision, and effective communication in English.

CONCLUSION

This study has delineated the principal mechanisms by which English syntax constructs meaning: through mandatory word order (SVO), hierarchical phrase structure, the management of ambiguity, and the creation of discourse cohesion. This study demonstrates that syntax serves as an indispensable cognitive framework that organizes lexical units and transforms them into clear, structured, and purposeful communication. Mastery of these syntactic principles is fundamental to precise and effective language use.

SUGGESTION

For Language Pedagogy: English language teaching should move beyond rote grammar exercises to emphasize the *functional* consequences of syntax. Instruction should highlight how word order choices alter meaning and how different syntactic structures (e.g., active vs. passive, relative clauses) serve different communicative purposes.

For Academic and Professional Writing: Writers should cultivate syntactic awareness to avoid ambiguity. Proactively revising sentences to clarify modifier attachment and using appropriate cohesive devices can significantly enhance the clarity and persuasiveness of texts.

For Further Research: Future studies could employ empirical methods, such as eye-tracking during reading or neuroimaging (fMRI), to validate the cognitive reality of these



syntactic processes. Comparative studies with languages exhibiting freer word order (e.g., Turkish, Japanese) could further illuminate the unique role of fixed syntax in English meaning construction.

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