

Book Reviews



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Review: **Carnie, Andrew.** *Syntax: A Generative Introduction*, 2nd Edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007. 400 pp., paperback. ISBN 1-4051-3384-8. \$44.95. Reviewed by **Michelle J. Moosally**, Ph.D., Department of English, University of Houston-Downtown, Houston, Texas.

This is not a grammar textbook, nor is it particularly a book about English. It is an introductory text about a theory that models syntactic structures of human language. Specifically, Carnie presents the key elements of a theory known as Principles and Parameters, the iteration of Chomskyan generative syntactic theory that precedes and underlies the current Minimalist Program approach. (If that was a meaningless string of unhelpful description for you, stay tuned—the book does offer some value for non-theoreticians.) Overall the book is accessible and well-organized, guiding the reader to understand a broad, complex theory in manageable increments. Designed for an introductory syntax course in a linguistics program at the undergraduate or graduate level, it would also serve as a resource for those who have an interest and background in language study and would like a glimpse of what theory is all about.

The Principles and Parameters (P&P) approach assumes that, because all humans can acquire any language (e.g., that they are not pre-programmed for a particular language), humans share a universal grammar that is gradually refined to a specific language based on exposure to language input. The mechanism for this narrowing of the grammar is a universal set of switches or *parameters* that get turned on or off, depending on how a language works. As an oversimplified example, consider the appearance of sentential subjects cross-linguistically. English sentences require subjects, but other languages like Italian do not. In a P&P approach this is handled by a universal parameter which might say something like “sentences need an overt subject.” After sufficient language input, an English-speaking child would keep the parameter set to “on” (sentences need overt subjects) and an Italian-speaking child would turn “off” the parameter, allowing sentences without overt subjects. It is an elegant theory and one of the most dominant in the field, presented convincingly by Carnie, though the actual implementation of it has proven to be quite complex. The model is by no means complete or agreed upon by all linguists, as evidenced by the range of alternative models such as Lexical Functional Grammar and Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (which Carnie describes briefly in the last two chapters).

One strong feature of the text is organization and clarity of presentation. The seventeen chapters are grouped into five parts: Preliminaries, The Base, Movement, Advanced Topics, and Alternatives. In each chapter, Carnie carefully constructs the arguments that serve as a foundation for the theory, aided by an informal writing style that is user-friendly. He is particularly good about noting which concepts have been presented in final form and which ones will be revisited in later discussion. Summaries

and lists of new concepts at the end of each chapter make handy quick-reference guides for key content. As is common in introductory syntax texts, the primary data are uncomplicated English sentences, supplemented by an impressive range of data from other languages (Nootka, Irish, Turkish, Japanese, Hungarian, etc.) as the theory stretches to become a model of universal grammar. However, users of the text would benefit from more examples of each type of construction.

The first part, *Preliminaries*, includes an introduction to basic syntactic theory concepts, including rules, data collection/analysis, parts of speech, constituency, and tree drawing.

The parts of speech section is packed with concepts, promoting the use of morphological and functional criteria to distinguish among categories with negligible mention of semantic features; unfortunately, Carnie does not spend much time demonstrating how to apply the criteria, and the paragraphed presentation decreases its utility as a quick reference for later use. In a bit of a contrast, the third chapter on constituency and trees is a wonderful how-to guide, one of few detailed treatments on the market that explains exactly how phrase structure rules are mapped onto tree structures in a step-by-step process and how constituency is determined. For anyone who wants to understand trees, this is a great resource. Also in this third chapter is a valuable appendix on how to approach cross-linguistic data.

Chapter 4 begins the more strictly theoretical material with structural relations in trees, such as c-command. Chapter 5 covers Binding Theory, an explanation of the distribution and interpretation of anaphors, pronouns, and nouns. (For example, it addresses why the word *her* in *Jane likes her* cannot refer to Jane, but it can in *Jane knows that Bill likes her*.)

The Base (part two, chapters 6-8) introduces X-bar Theory for both content and function categories, as well as theta roles and the lexicon. X-bar Theory is essentially a more complex constrained theory of tree structures, using binary branching and distinguishing among specifiers, complements, and adjuncts via position in the structure.

Despite the technical nature of the material, part two can still be followed by motivated readers who have some language study background. However, the remainder of the text, while well-presented, rapidly creates a potentially overwhelming array of abstract movement steps on the trees, multiple language data, and several levels of rule application. Carnie also delves into some advanced topics such as control, object shift, and gapping. It is learnable from this text, but is best in smaller doses, supplemented by guided discussion and related readings that Carnie suggests.

Another strength of *Syntax* is that, while the book promotes P&P and universal grammar as a good (if not the best) model of natural language syntax, the exercises and discussion point out challenges and encourage the learner to question the theory and examine these problem areas. Numerous, interesting exercises appear at the end of each chapter, grouped by difficulty level, which leads to applicability for different learner levels. Furthermore, throughout the chapter, Carnie notes which exercises the reader is prepared to address after each section. (While there are no answers given in the text, Blackwell apparently offers online materials as well as an instructor's manual.)

With an easy style and step-by-step approach, Carnie ably guides users through the multi-pronged data and reasoning that underpin a widely-used theory of syntactic structure. Of value not only to students and instructors in the field, portions of *Syntax: A Generative Introduction* offer palatable bites of theory for all. «AJ»