Formal vs. Functional

Two Fundamentally Different Approaches to Syntax
What is Syntax?

• “Biologist” approach (T. Givon)
  – Syntax is the study of a unique and complex coding system, which includes the coding devices (structure) and the coded messages (function). It resembles the study of biology.

• Mentalist approach (N. Chomsky)
  – Syntax is a model of the linguistic abilities of the native speakers of a language which enable them to speak and understand the language fluently.
Theory-Building Process

• DATA → Observation → Description → Explanation

• Syntactic Theory
  – Syntactic theory is to observe, describe, and explain syntax.
  – The issue is: What is syntax? What kind of ‘language properties’ count as the ‘object’ for syntactic study?
Assumption 1 of Formal Syntax

• Competence vs. Performance
  – Competence
    • Speaker’s internalized grammar of his unconscious knowledge
  – Performance
    • Speaker’s actual use of language on particular occasions.
    • Properties determined by the rules of speakers’ internalized grammars and derived from factors such as memory limitation, drunkenness, nervousness, etc.
Assumption 2 of Formal Syntax

• Data and Grammaticality
  – Concerning with possible and impossible phrases of human language
  – Introspective intuitions and judgments of native speakers
  – In matters such as grammatical structure, well-formedness, paraphrase relations, ambiguity, etc.
  – A language cannot be equated with a set of actual utterances, however large.
Assumption 3 of Formal Syntax

• Autonomous Syntax
  – Syntax, Semantics and Phonology should all be treated as autonomous of each other, and studied independently.
  – Arguments:
    • Phonologically well-formed, but… ➔ *Tee aire tu sular*
    • Phonologically and Syntactically well-formed, but… ➔ *Colorless green ideas sleep furiously*
    • Semantically and phonologically well-formed, but… ➔ *I want to go home yours.*
Functional Syntax – Assumption 1

• The study of the language system must take place within the framework of language use:
  – ‘Syntax codes what people do the most.’
  – For and function are two sides of the same coin.
  – Structural regularities are conventionalized strategies responding to communicative needs.
Functional Syntax – Assumption 2

• Naturally-occurring or corpus data are to be examined to establish the form-function correlation, since language derives from social interactions
Functional Syntax - Assumption 3

• Syntax is not autonomous:
  There are *functional motivations* behind structural regularities and changes:
  – Cognitive-semantic motivations
  – Discourse-pragmatic motivations
• Syntax is correlated with semantics and pragmatics
• Syntax emerges from and is shaped by discourse-level factors
Language Universals

• Formal: regarded as innate structural properties wired in the human organism

• Functional: to be explained in terms of functional constraints inherent in
  – The goals of communication
  – The biological and cognitive mechanisms of language users
  – The settings in which language is used