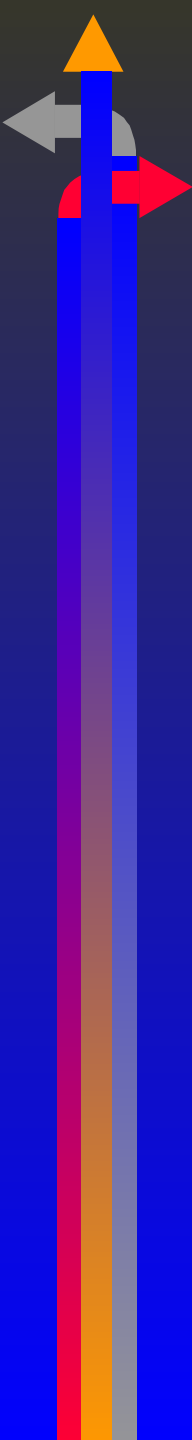




# Constituency

The basic units of sentence structure

*Teaching material by Andrew Carnie*



# Meaning of a sentence is more than the sum of its words.

- ⇒ The puppy hit the rock
- ⇒ The rock hit the puppy.
- ⇒ The + puppy + hit + the + rock  $\neq$  the + rock + hit + the + puppy.
  - ⇒ (cf.  $2 + 3 = 3 + 2$ )

This fact is captured by the notion constituent

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# Constituents represent semantically related material

⇒ In the sentence:

The elephant snorted a bowl of peanuts

⇒ There is the intuition that *the & elephant* are more closely related than *peanuts* and *snorted*.

⇒ This intuition is captured with constituency

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# Constituent

⇒ Constituent is a group of words that *functions as a unit*.

The elephant

snorted

the bowl of peanuts



# Constituency Tests: Modification

- ⇒ If one word modifies another, then they are probably part of the same constituent:
  - ⇒ I bought a red balloon
  - ⇒ ‘a’ and ‘red’ both modify ‘balloon’ so they are all part of the same constituent [a red balloon]



# Constituency Tests: Movement

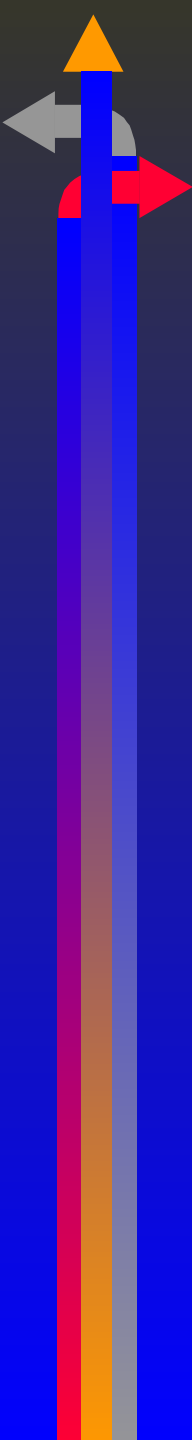
- ⇒ If you can move a group of words, they are functioning as a unit -- and are a constituent:
  - ⇒ **Clefting**: It is/was \_\_\_\_\_ that ...  
It was [a brand new car] that he bought
  - ⇒ **Preposing**: [Big bowls of beans] are what I like.
  - ⇒ **Passive**: [The big boy] was kissed by the slobbering dog.

There are other kinds of movement!



# Constituency Tests: Replacement

- ⇒ If you can replace a group of words with a single word (keeping the meaning roughly the same) then they form a constituent:
  - ⇒ I've always loved [the man in a natty suit]
  - ⇒ I've always loved [John]

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# Constituency Tests: *Pro*-form Replacement

- ⇒ If you can replace a group of words with a pro-form (pronoun, pro-verb, pro-adjective etc.) (keeping the meaning roughly the same) then they form a constituent:
  - ⇒ I've always loved [the man in a natty suit]
    - ⇒ I've always loved [him]
  - ⇒ Susan [bought a truck with mag wheels]
    - ⇒ Susan [did so (too)]





# Constituency Tests: Ellipsis

- ⇒ This is a special constituency test for a constituent called a Verb Phrase (VP). If an item is a VP, then it can be deleted under identity with another VP
  - ⇒ Bill [found a gold nugget in the stream] but I don't think John will [find a gold nugget in the stream]



# Constituency Tests: Stand Alone (sentence fragment)

⇒ Can the group of words serve as a sentence fragment in response to a question?

Q: What did Heidi buy at the flea market?

A: [A bag of moldy vacuum cleaner parts]



# Constituency Tests: Conjunction

- ⇒ If the group of words can be coordinated (or conjoined) with another string, then it is a constituent of the same type:

[John] and [the man] went to the store

\*[John] and [very blue] went to the store

**LINGUISTICS GENERAL'S WARNING:** There are a \*lot\* of situations where the conjunction test will give you false results. Use it sparingly and with caution!



## Caution:

- ⇒ The constituency tests are NOT fool proof. You should always apply at least two to any given string of words, just in case you have got false results for some reason.



# John [eats at really fancy restaurants]

## ⇒ Stand Alone?

⇒ What does John do in his spare time?

⇒ Eat at really fancy restaurants.

## ⇒ Replace by a Pro-form (pronoun, pro-verb)?

⇒ John [eats at really fancy restaurants] and Bill [**does so too**]

## ⇒ Move?

⇒ Eating at really fancy restaurants, that's John's favorite pastime.



# John [eats at really] fancy restaurants

## ⇒ Stand Alone?

⇒ What does John do in his spare time?

⇒ \*Eat at really.

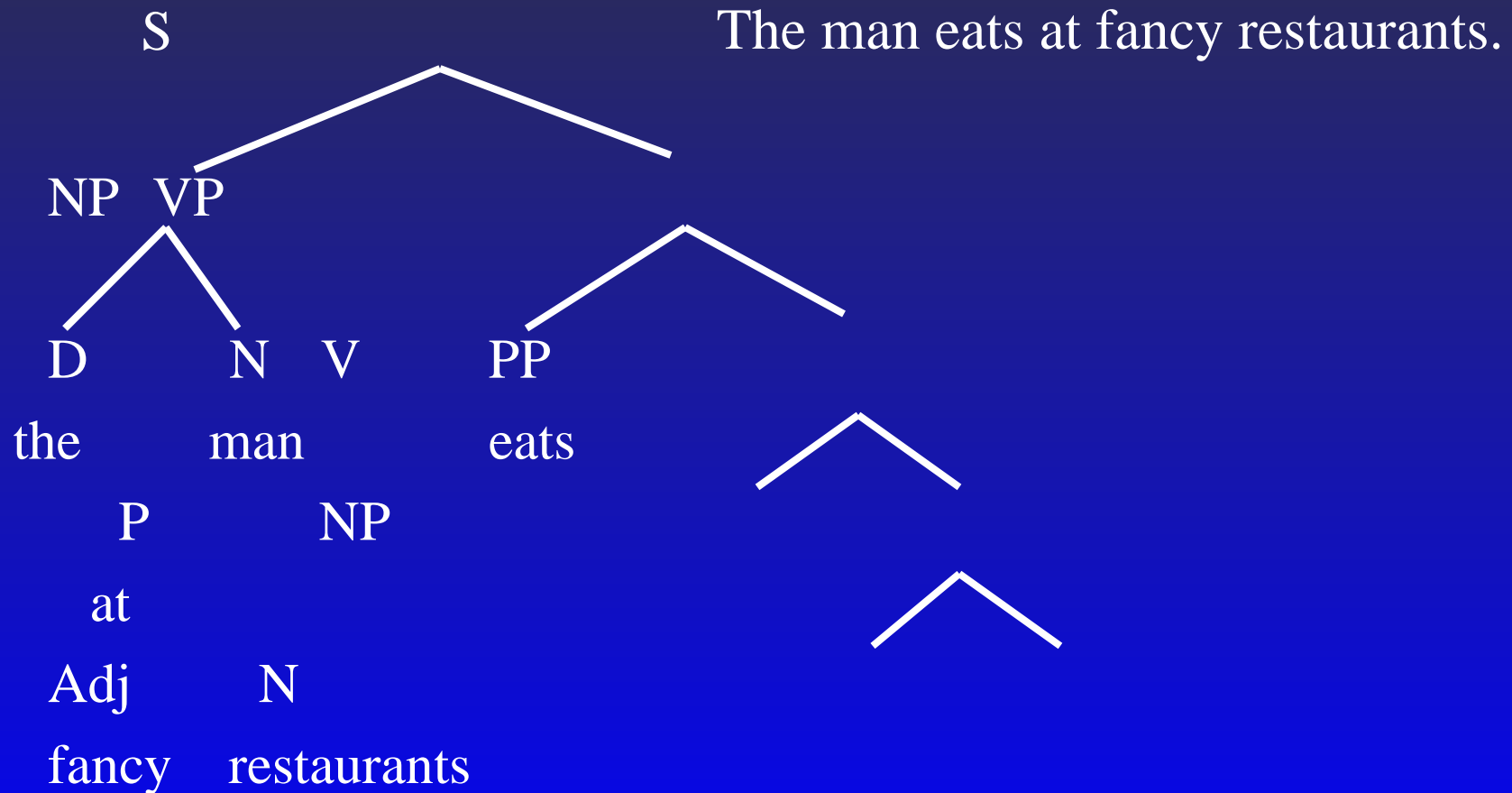
## ⇒ Replace by a Pro-form (pronoun, proverb)?

⇒ \*John [eats at really] fancy restaurants and Bill [does so too] fancy restaurants

## ⇒ Move?

⇒ \*Eating at really, that's John's favorite pastime.

# Constituents are hierarchically organized



[S [NP [D the] [N man]] [VP [V eats] [PP [P at] [NP [Adj fancy] [N restaurants]]]]]



# Summary: Constituency

- ⇒ **Constituent:** A group of words that functions as a unit.
- ⇒ Captures judgements about the relatedness of words, and about the hierarchical structure of sentences





# Summary: Constituency

## ⇒ Constituency tests:

⇒ Modification

⇒ Movement

⇒ Replacement (single word & *pro*-form)

⇒ Ellipsis (for VPs)

⇒ Stand Alone (Sentence Fragment)

⇒ Co-ordination/Conjunction

⇒ Tests are NOT infallible. Use more than 1!