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 ≠ the + rock + hit + the + puppy.
  (cf. 2 + 3 = 3 + 2)

This fact is captured by the notion constituent
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
Constituent

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

The elephant *snorted* the bowl *of peanuts*
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!
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]
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)]
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.

The man eats at fancy restaurants.

[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!