

LANGTIME CHAT, EPISODE 47

A PLACE FOR THEORY

What Theories Do

**identify and describe
the patterns underlying
language and its use**

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language and its use**

What Theories Do

**model human
linguistic
knowledge**

Competing Theories

**same data, different
analyses**

Competing Theories

**same data, different
analyses**

**analyses don't affect
the data, though**

Competing Theories

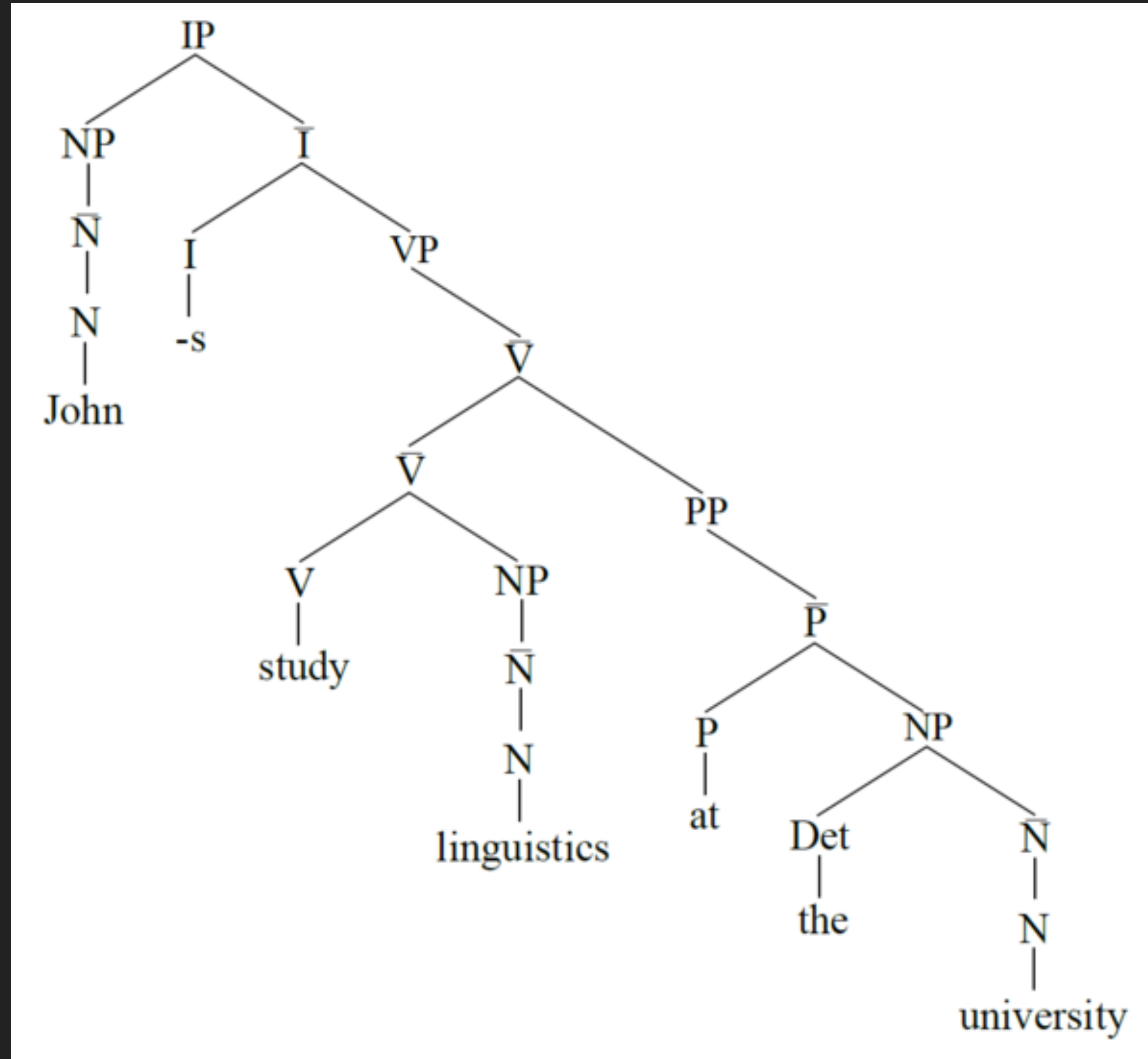
**same data, different
analyses**

**analyses don't affect
the data, though**

Competing Theories

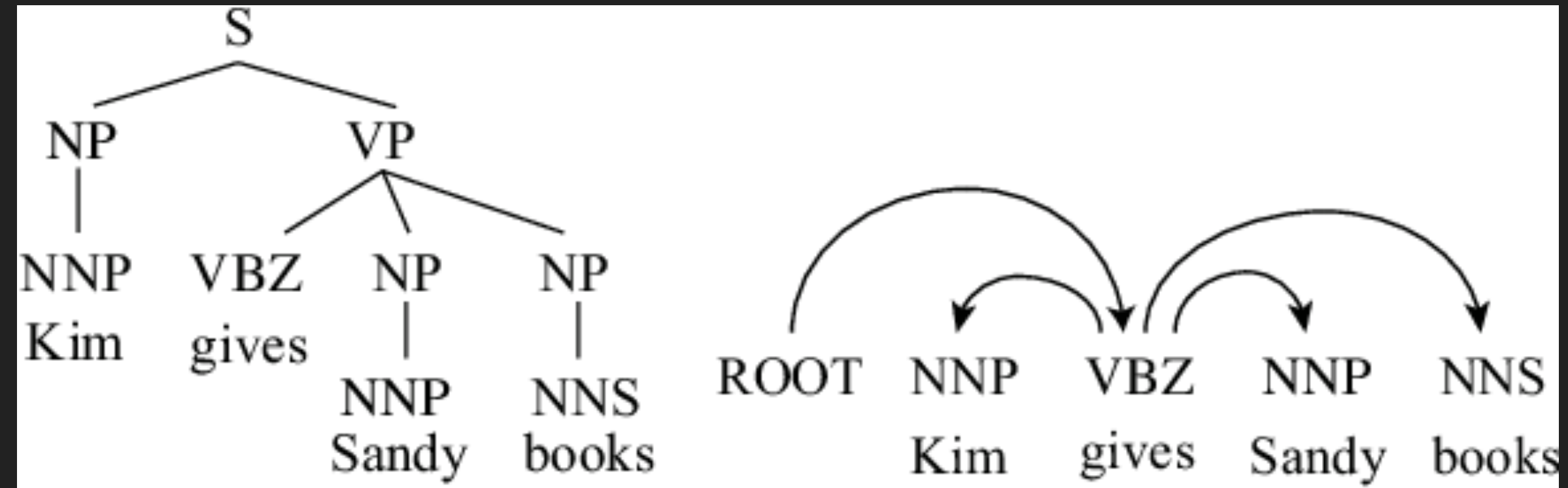
the data is what it is

X-Bar



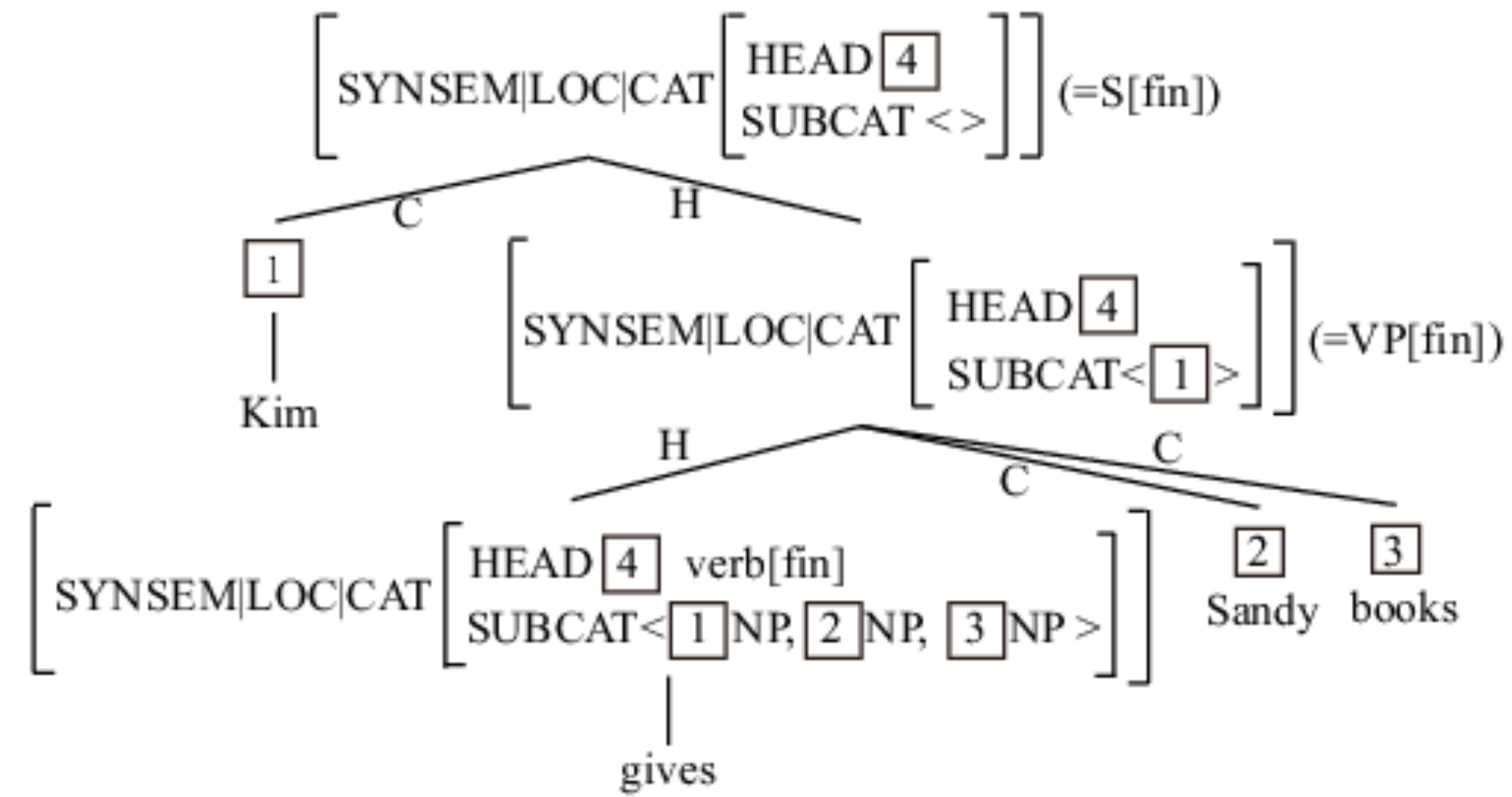
Chomsky

HPSG



(a) Constituent

(b) Dependency



(c) HPSG

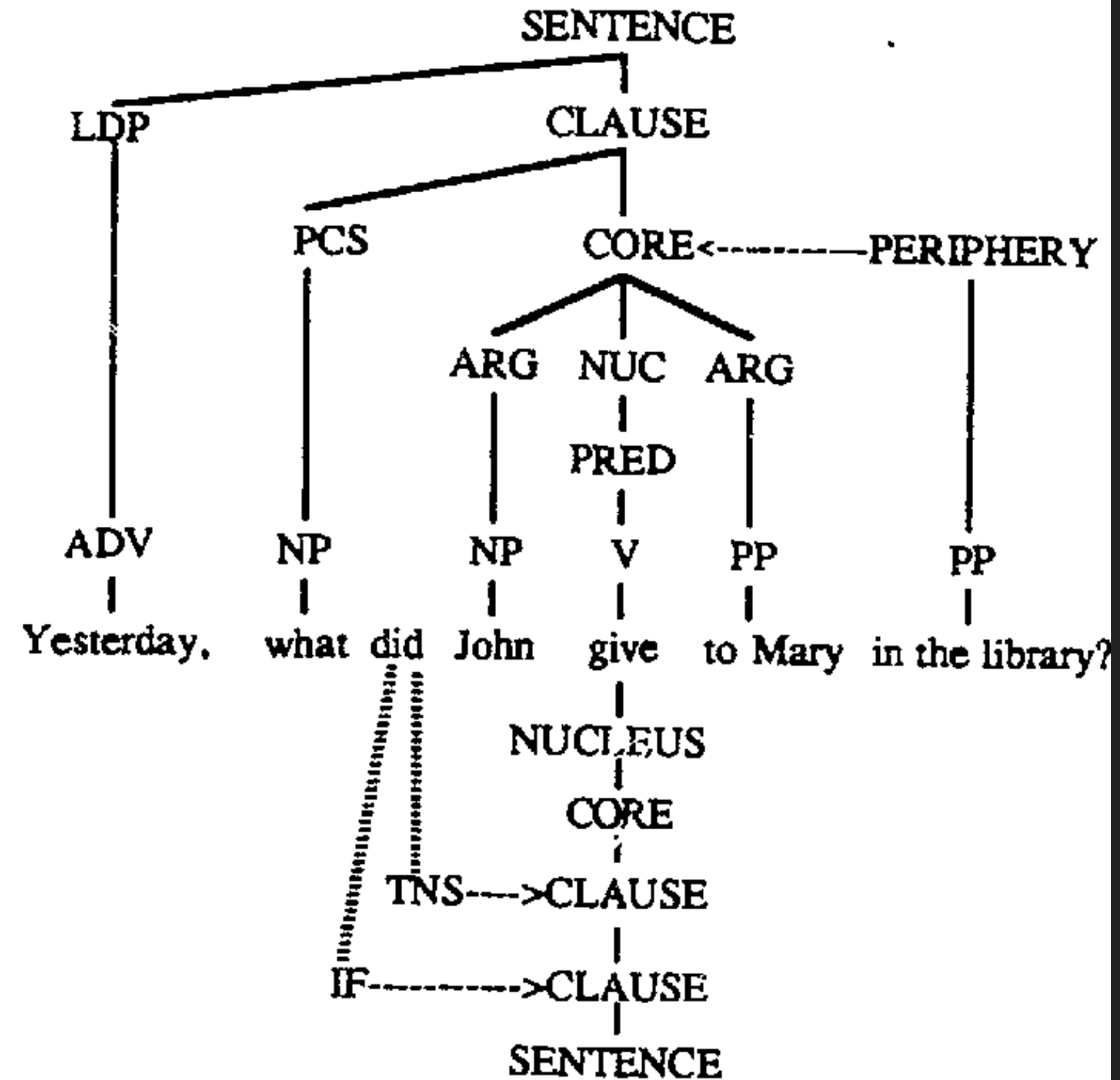
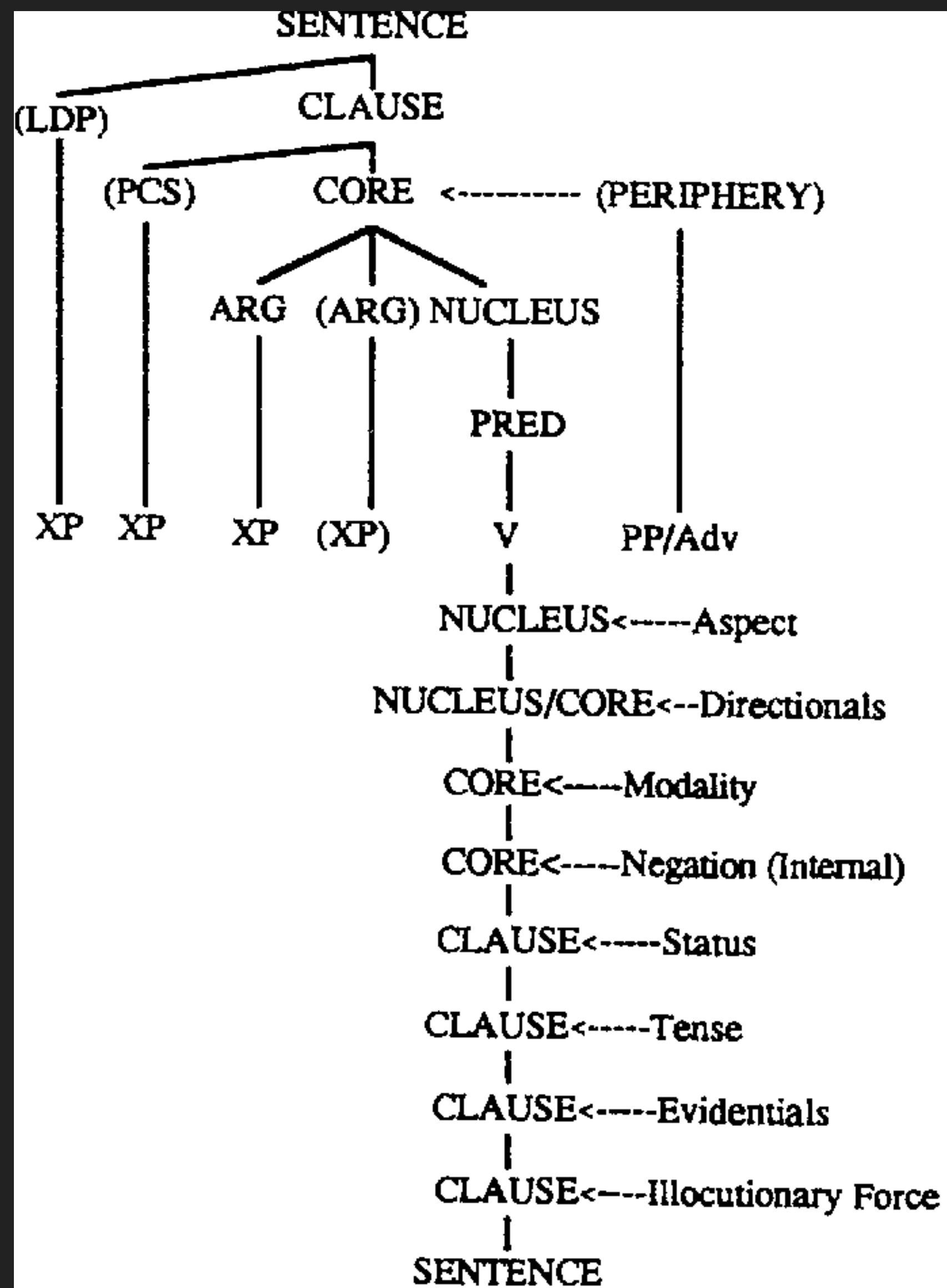


Figure 1

Optimality theory

	/input/	CONSTRAINT 1	CONSTRAINT 2	CONSTRAINT 3
a.	☞ Candidate A	*	*	***
b.	Candidate B	*	**!	

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Optimality_Theory_Violation_Tableau.png

Prince & Smolensky

Are They Helpful?

**may help linguists gain
insights about language**

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**can provide ways to
visualize language data**

Are They Helpful?

**may help linguists gain
insights about language**

**can provide ways to
visualize language data**

Are They Helpful?

don't necessarily help conlangers

What *Is* Helpful?

The Data

The Data

**most interesting
and helpful for
conlangers**

Atheoretical?

**every label is technically
theoretical**

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**Dryer's Basic Linguistic
Theory**

Atheoretical?

**every label is technically
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**Dryer's Basic Linguistic
Theory**

Atheoretical?

**use what's necessary
to describe features
and patterns**

**every label is technically
theoretical**

**Dryer's Basic Linguistic
Theory**

Atheoretical?

**use what's necessary
to describe features
and patterns**

**Why I like a
construction
approach**

Construction

Grammar

Construction

FORM

- 🌀 pronunciation
- 🌀 word structure (e.g. root, affixes)
- 🌀 grammatical features (e.g. word order within a phrase)



MEANING

- 🌀 semantic
- 🌀 pragmatic
- 🌀 discourse-functional

Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

tossed => past tense


S V O PP

⋮

MEANING

TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

How it is
produced



Construction

FORM

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TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

How it is produced

What extra info is included in a word form

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tossed => past tense

S V O PP

⋮

MEANING

TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

she => third-
person singular,
feminine,
animate

it => third-
person singular,
inanimate

window =>
definite, singular,
common count
noun

How it is
produced

What extra info
is included in a
word form

Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

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TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

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What structures there are

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⋮

MEANING

TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

How it is produced

What extra info is included in a word form

What structures there are

"BIG IDEAS"

interchangeable pieces

*She tossed it,
and it went
through the
window to the
outside.*

Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

tossed => past tense

S V O PP

⋮

MEANING

TOSS (she, it); GO-OUT (it, window)

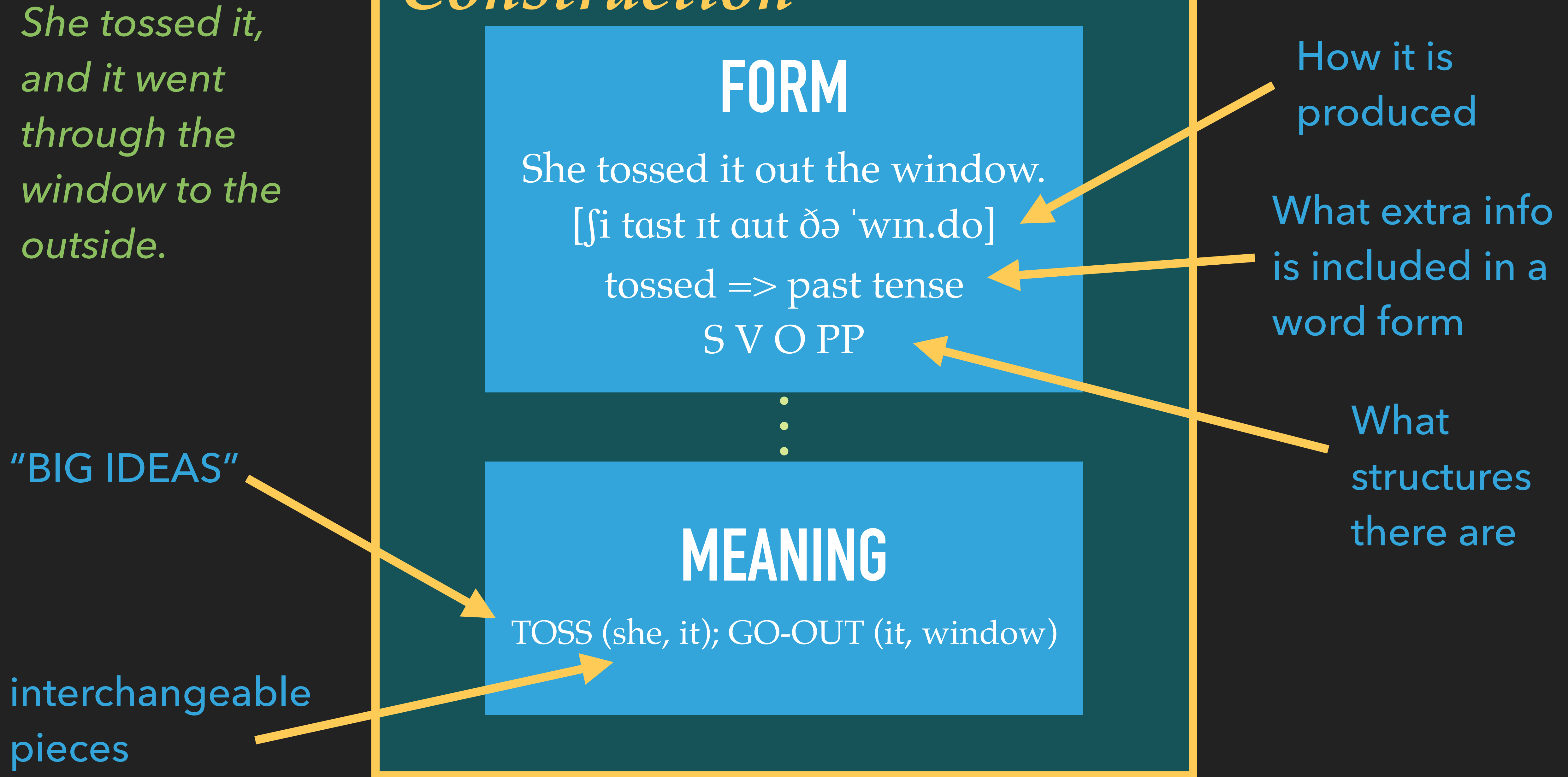
How it is produced

What extra info is included in a word form

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Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

tossed => past tense

*S VP*_{idiom}

⋮

MEANING

STOP-CONSIDERING (she, it)

Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

tossed => past tense

S VP idiom

⋮

MEANING

STOP-CONSIDERING (she, it)

The window is not an interchangeable unit in this construction.

Construction

FORM

She tossed it out the window.

[ʃi tɔst ɪt aʊt ðə 'wɪn.dəʊ]

tossed => past tense

S VP idiom

⋮

MEANING

STOP-CONSIDERING (she, it)

*She stopped
thinking about
it or stopped
using it.*

The window is
not an
interchangeable
unit in this
construction.

Moral

**Theories can give you
ways to talk about
language.**

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Moral

**But the important bits for a conlanger
are focusing on describing the patterns
that are there and *how* those patterns
mean (or make meaning) in context.**

Theories can give you ways to talk about language.

If the theory abstracts language to the point of obscuring the data, it is no longer useful for conlanging.

Moral

But the important bits for a conlanger are focusing on describing the patterns that are there and *how* those patterns *mean* (or make meaning) in context.