

Gatekeeping, Hazing, or Rigor? The impact of teaching practices in theoretical syntax

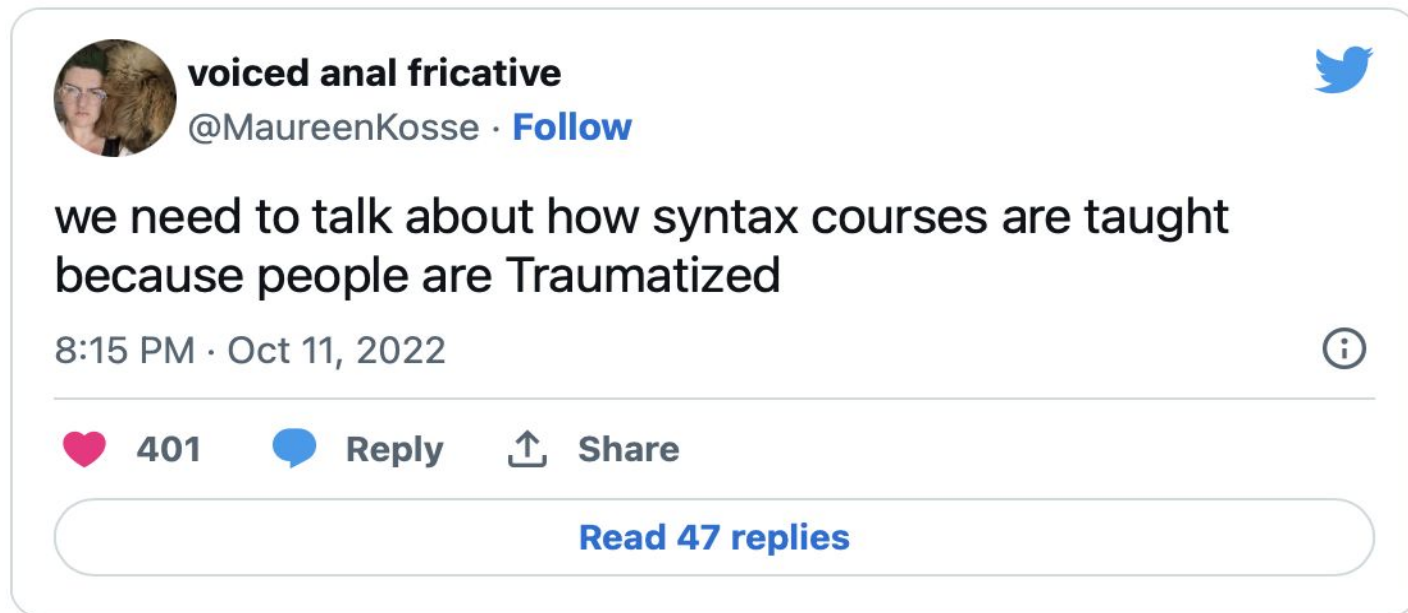
Bronwyn Bjorkman (she/her, Queen's University at Kingston)

Caitl Light (they/them, Loyola University Chicago)

Laura R. Bailey (she/her, University of Kent)

Kirby Conrod (they/them, Swarthmore College)

It started on Twitter...



...and continued



Dr. Sakshi Bhatia ਸਾਕਸ਼ੀ ਭਾਟਿਆ · Oct 13, 2022



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Reading all these posts about people being unhappy with 'theoretical' linguistics teaching, particularly for syntax, i'm thinking I pretty much lucked out in having great teachers at DU, UMass and LISSIMs. (1/n)



Dr. Sakshi Bhatia ਸਾਕਸ਼ੀ ਭਾਟਿਆ

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I am optimistic the current generation of syntax teachers is mindful of this pedagogical concern, so hoping folks don't paint the whole field by the same brush & hold off on judging us for the sins of past. (2/n)

12:24 AM · Oct 13, 2022



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Getting in on the "why do people hate Syntax" discussion. I had two reasons:

1. Abusive teaching that was cruel and viewed Syntax as a university sanctioned hazing

11:45 AM · Oct 12, 2022



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Nicole Holliday (mixedlinguist@bsky.social)

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Replying to @MaureenKosse

The closest I came to dropping out of grad school was when I was barely hanging on in syntax and was told I couldn't work on AAE, and then that I had to humiliatingly drop the grad class and take the undergrad version to spare the feelings of toxic prof. He never taught it again.

10:58 PM · Oct 11, 2022



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A gap in SoTL for Syntax

- Growing field investigating SoTL across scientific fields (cf. McDonald 2016)
- Comparatively new in linguistics—and very little focusing specifically on syntax
 - Lasnik (2013) on reflection on grad teaching
 - Macaulay and Bruce (1997) and Cépeda et al. (2021) on gender bias in textbook examples
- However: the strong affective responses on social media suggest that questions of SOTL are particularly pressing for syntax.

- Sciences generally seen as ‘hard subjects’ due in part to more abstract content but also to choices made in how science is taught (Millar 1991).
 - Though there is a common assumption that more academically able students will self-select into such subjects (Leslie 2003), social factors (including race, gender, and class) strongly influence which students choose to pursue ‘difficult’ fields (Shiner & Noden 2015)

A new project investigating syntax pedagogy

- Questions:
 - Are teaching styles of syntax are indeed different than those of other subfields?
 - Are there patterns or correlations in how instructors and students think about syntax in educational settings in comparison with other subfields of linguistics?
- We introduce a newly-launched project that investigates:
 - **Methods of instruction** in teaching syntax at the university level in Canada, the UK and the US
 - **Attitudes towards the role of syntax** in linguistics education, among both instructors and students

Exploratory pilot: May to June 2023

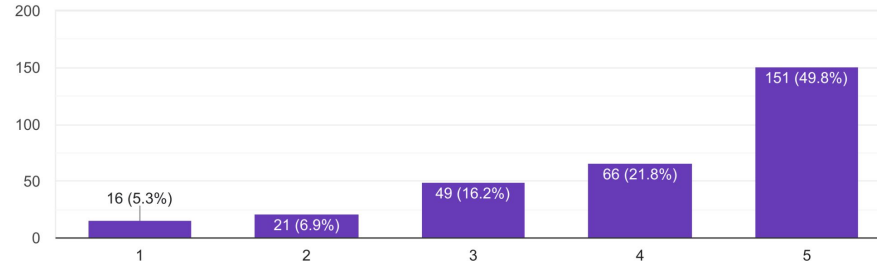
Online survey (n=306, as of June 26) including Likert scale questions and free-response questions.

- Questions about being a student in a syntax class
- Questions about feelings about syntax as a subdiscipline
- Questions about being an instructor of a syntax class
- Demographics

Responses to Likert questions (1/2)

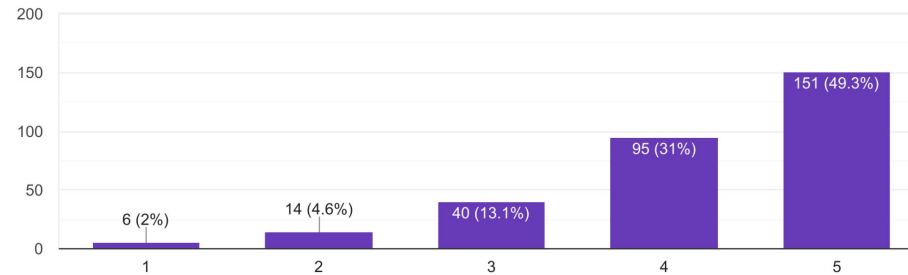
My syntax instructor was/is a skilled teacher.

303 responses



In my opinion, a degree in linguistics must include coursework in syntax.

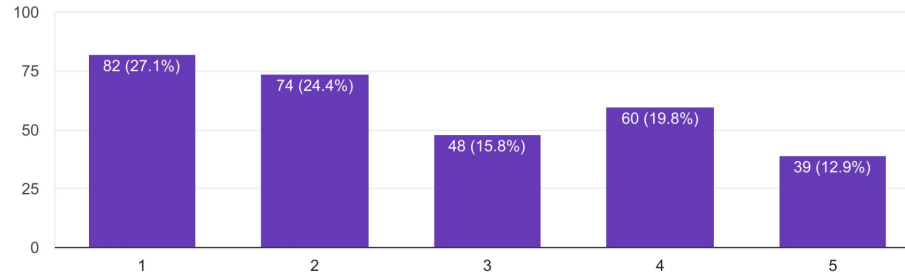
306 responses



Responses to Likert questions (2/2)

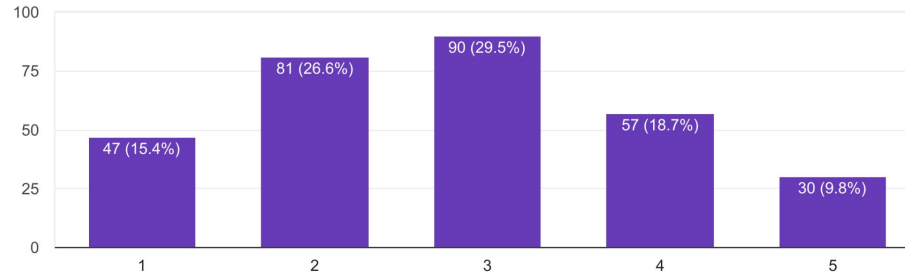
Syntax was/is more difficult for me than other courses in linguistics.

303 responses



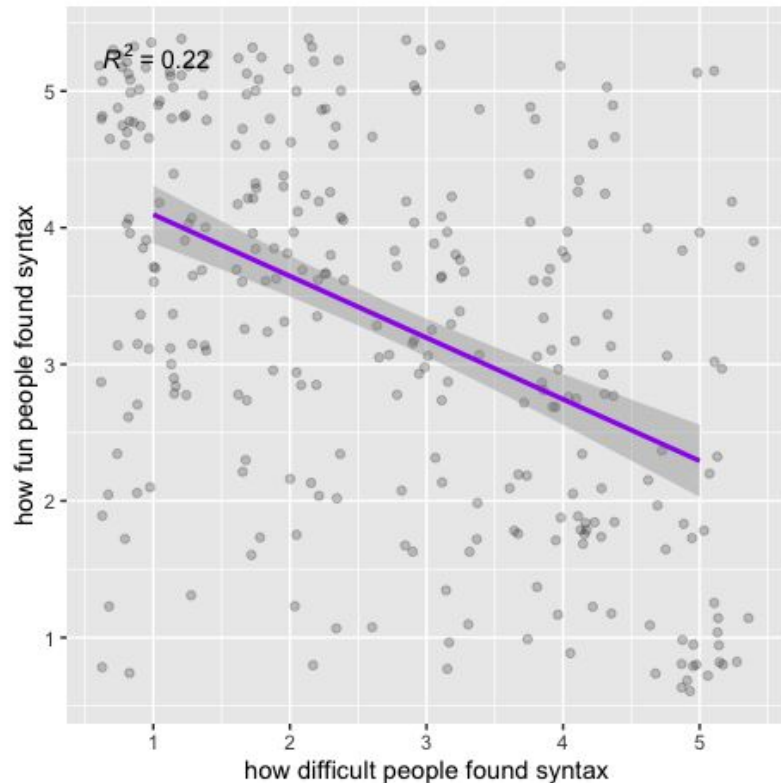
Syntax is more difficult than other subfields of linguistics.

305 responses

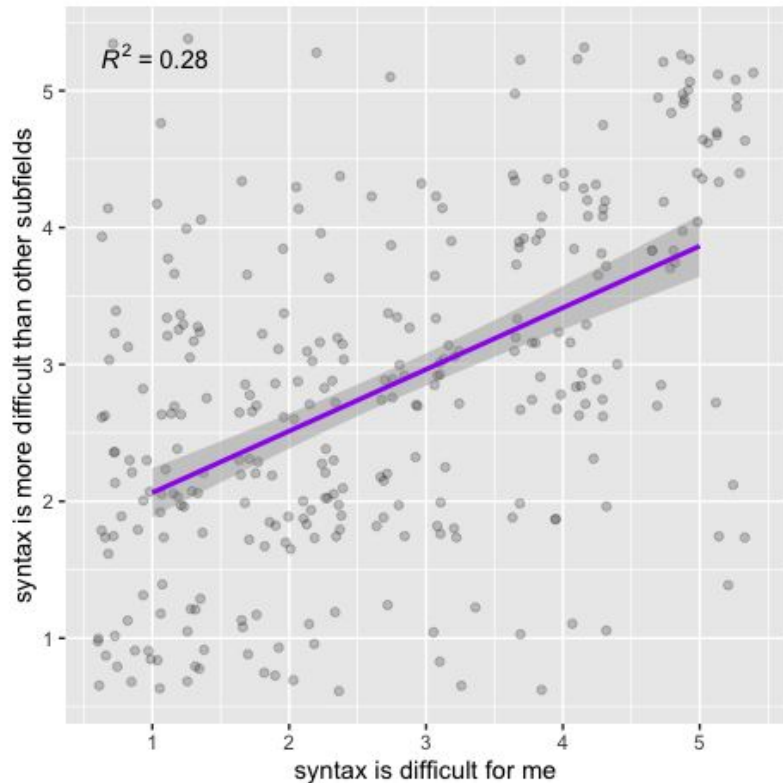


If it's difficult for me, it's less fun for me (surprise!)

people who find syntax difficult are less likely to find it fun

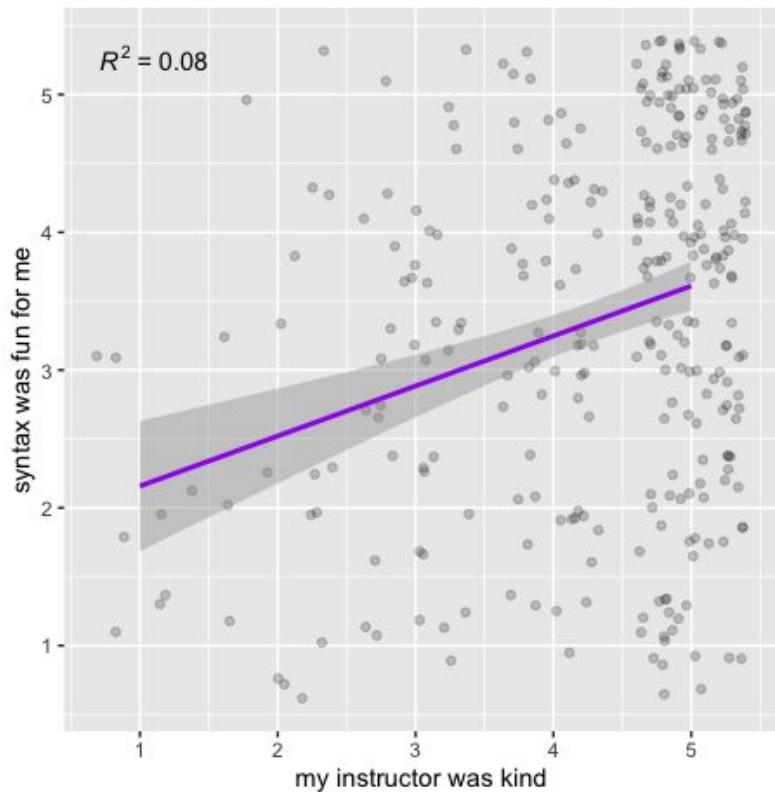


people who find syntax difficult think it's difficult in general

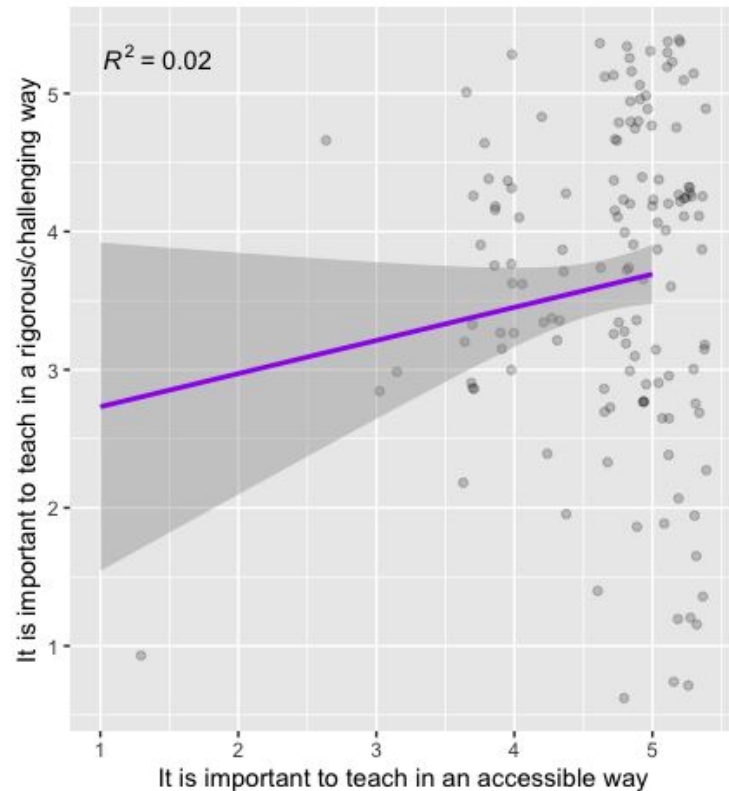


No correlations in properties of individual instructors

not a strong relationship between fun / kind instructor



syntax instructors think it should be both rigorous and acces:



Free Response Comments: Some Themes

- Syntax just “clicks” for some people and not others
- Racist and/or misogynist classroom environments
- Syntax (or “real” syntax) is treated as the most important by syntacticians

The comments: it just clicks, or it doesn't

“Syntax was exhausting and frustrating and I hated it. I desperately hope that what you're working on can help with that; in my experience, **students either had the knack, or we didn't**, and there was nearly no middle ground.”

“I feel that the way I was taught (rigorously making us re-discover key principles for ourselves based on datasets) was **great training for syntacticians and a huge hurdle for anyone else.**”

“**Students seem to vary widely in whether they like syntax.** When I first began teaching I tried very hard to make it accessible to everyone. This worked great for grad classes. For undergrad classes, my efforts to make it accessible to everyone often shortchanged the students who were really excited about syntax. I gradually started focusing undergrad syntax classes on the students who wanted to learn it. Would, of course, help any student who wanted help and tried to make it accessible, but focused on material that the enthusiastic students wanted and needed.”

The comments: racist and misogynistic classrooms

“I love syntax! **Black linguists aren't allowed to be syntacticians.**”

“I was studying in my native language but in a different dialect area, and **was often made fun of for having different judgements...**

The casual making fun of languages that were less commonly studied (as though something wasn't real unless it was in English) was also really offputting.”

“**Syntax was the class most dominated by men in my entire linguistics degree.** The dynamic of the classroom felt unwelcoming and a situation where the men present, including the lecturer, were trying to show off their knowledge. Questions were ignored, and "comments" were dwelled upon.”

The comments: syntax is the “most important”

“I think many instructors make syntax seem more difficult than other subfields, and lots of **syntacticians look down on other subfields.**”

“I think **knowledge of the structure of language is key** in a Linguistics degree.”

“I care a lot about function but find form kind of boring. **Am I a real syntactician? Do I teach syntax?** The fact that the survey authors don't feel the need to address these issues -- they assume that of course everyone knows what they mean by syntax -- reminds me why I always found the North American **syntax "community" so unpleasant.**”

The Plan: the full study (Fall 2023)

1. Surveying Programs

- Where are linguistics programs housed, requirements, etc.
- Via department websites or a program lead
- Differences/similarities across/within three countries

2. Surveying People

- Instructors and students
- Probe teaching styles, classroom environments, materials, linguistics background, attitudes to and experiences with syntax teaching
- Likert questions, agreement Likert, free response questions
- Some demographic information

3. Focus Groups

- Expand on the themes emerging from the longer survey
- Explore subtleties evident from the free response comments in the pilot
- Target specific groups (inc. those who deliberately chose not to take more syntax)

The Plan

- Share findings
 - Of student responses (in aggregate)?
 - Via professional bodies
- Make recommendations
 - Best practice
 - Curriculum guidelines
 - Strategies that work well
- Resources

Works cited

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Thank you! Questions? Feedback? Ideas?

We will take notes of your questions and comments on this slide :)

Type of syntax? Functional etc. Can we probe that?

Can we probe personal narrative vs. "truth" of "I'm a p-side/s-side" person

Kristin Syrett: Problem starts before the class, I see it in the field and with syntax colleagues, on search committees and letters of reference, etc. Message that's sent about what's prioritized with candidates.

Rich Hallett: Syntacticians hate being confused with real facts.

Reed: Would skills-based grading be a way to figure out which students it "clicked" for?

Appendix A: all the wording of the questions in the pilot

Criteria: you consider yourself a linguist, and are over 18, and feel comfortable enough in English to take the survey without difficulty.

Informed consent:

- We will not collect identifying information or attempt to identify respondents.
- If you choose to share individually-identifying information (such as names of institutions or individuals) we will anonymize them.

Agree/disagree

1. Syntax is a core subdiscipline of linguistics.
2. In my opinion, a degree in linguistics must include coursework in certain core subdisciplines.
3. Syntax is more difficult than other subfields of linguistics.
4. In my opinion, a degree in linguistics must include coursework in syntax.
5. **Free response:** Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the questions in this section?

If you have taken any syntax coursework in syntax: (agree/disagree) Answer about your FIRST EVER syntax-specific course. (I.e., not Introduction to Linguistics, but Syntax 1)

6. Syntax was/is more difficult for me than other courses in linguistics.
7. Syntax was/is more fun for me than other courses in linguistics.
8. My syntax instructor was/is a skilled teacher.
9. My syntax instructor was/is kind to students.
10. The grading or evaluation of my work in syntax classes was fair and transparent.
11. I took my syntax courses because I wanted to.
12. I took my syntax courses because they were required for the program I was in.
13. **Free response:** Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the questions in this section?

If you have taught any syntax courses: (agree/disagree)

1. It is important to teach syntax in a rigorous and challenging way.
2. It is important to teach syntax in an accessible way.
3. I am confident in my abilities as a teacher.
4. My students like me.
5. My students like syntax.
6. **Free response:** Is there anything more you would like to tell us about the questions in this section?

Demo/background:

1. What is the highest degree you have?
2. What is the highest degree you have *in linguistics*? (None; I have one in progress right now)
3. What subfield is your highest degree in linguistics specializing in? (None is okay)
4. What year did you complete your highest degree in linguistics?
5. What year did you take your first course in syntax?
6. If you are or have been an instructor:
 - a. What year did you first teach a syntax course in linguistics?
 - b. What is your academic rank/position right now?
7. What is your race/ethnicity? (Free response)
8. What is your gender? (Free response)

Free response: Is there anything else you would like to share with us as we investigate teaching styles of syntax as a subdiscipline of linguistics? Please feel free to share (anonymous) personal experiences or your observations about trends in the field.

Appendix B: More themes

- Syntax as monolith (or not)
 - Syntax = generative (assumed chomskyan minimalist) syntax
- Difficult to hold multiple theories/systems in my head
 - Why did we learn old theories and not the current thing right away?
 - Dislike the way that there's beef between theories/approaches – combative vibes
 - Students can't look stuff up bc there's no consensus
 - I liked the course that told me about the history of the different theories
- "I love syntax! Black linguists aren't allowed to be syntacticians."
- Misogyny from instructors
- It just "clicks" for some people and not others
 - Maybe I clicked because of my neurodivergence
- Syntacticians look down on other fields
 - Syntacticians say sociolinguistics isn't real
 - Syntacticians are proud that syntax is hard
- Weed-out course
- Quality of teacher is VERY IMPORTANT
 - When people like it it's because the teacher was good (& converse)
 - Students get turned off by confusing teaching / bad pacing
 - First class / first impression is very important for liking syntax later
- Syntax is difficult because it's abstract
 - (or: not necessarily more difficult, but definitely more abstract)
 - Syntacticians don't define/explain fundamental concepts
- Syntax classes are english-centric
- 'I don't like syntax because it's about the part of language that I'm not interested in'
- What do we mean by...
 - Does grammar count as syntax in this survey??
 - Core to what?
 - Essential for what?
- Contesting the notion of "core" vs. non-core
- "Santa cruz style"
 - It's good
 - It's bad
- Syntax research is inaccessible if you don't have a syntax background
 - Terminology is hard
- Syntax class teaches methods but not facts
 - It's good
 - It's bad
- Specific textbooks mentioned
 - Carnie Generative Introduction
 - Adger Core Syntax
- My students vary a lot and I can't generalize
- I think syntactic theory (as I was taught it) is not empirically valid
 - It is bad at variation
 - The null heads are fake and bad
- We told you not to put names in but you did anyways
 - 3 positive mentions, 1 called "famously a shithead"
- Contesting that there are (or should be) core / periphery subfields in linguistics

Appendix C: More quotes

- “My impression is that it’s a very anglophone-centric idea to distinguish syntax from grammar... To the extent that L1 speakers of other languages learn syntax, it’s almost always going to be as a portion of a more general grammar course (eg “Linguistics of Xhosa”).”
- “My grad syntax course was with a Big Name, and had a reputation for being a difficult weeder-type course.”

Appendix C: More quotes (syntax is nice actually)

“My best memory of my syntax instructor is that when I questioned introspection as a valid research method, they took my critique seriously and offered me supplemental readings by syntacticians who had investigated this issue empirically.”

“Although I ended up not really enjoying it or being able to see how study of syntax specifically would benefit me, I learned a lot from my course, such as the ability to understand the logical structure of academic papers.”

“It was fun and I loved finding patterns especially cross-linguistically.”