

# THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES OF TAGGING NOUN PHRASE STRUCTURES FOLLOWING DEPENDENCY GRAMMAR FORMALISM

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## 1. Introduction

A treebank is a text corpus in which each sentence has been annotated with its syntactic structure. Although the construction of a treebank is an expensive task, we believe that it is indispensable for the development of real applications in the field of Natural Language Processing (NLP) and also for the development of the Information Society. At purely linguistic level, the treebank is a database essential for the study of the language since the fact that it provides analyzed/annotated examples of real language. The linguistic study directly reverts in the improvement in the quality of several applications, such as Part-Of-Speech (POS) taggers and parsers (Collins 1997, 2000; Charniak 2000), due to the fact that it provides common training and testing material so that different algorithms can be compared and improved.

In the last few years, treebank corpora such as the Penn Treebank (Marcus et al., 1993) or the Prague Dependency Treebank (Böhmová et al. 2003) have become a crucial resource for building and evaluating natural language processing tools and applications. As displayed in Abeillé (2003), there are efforts in progress for Czech, German, French, Japanese, Polish, Spanish and Turkish, to name just a few. In (Kakkonen 2005) we can find the state of the art of dependency-based treebanks.

The Basque Dependency Treebank (BDT) is, in fact, the Reference Corpus for the Processing of Basque (EPEC) annotated at syntactic level. EPEC is a 300,000 word corpus of standard written journal texts which aims to be a training corpus for the development and improvement of several NLP tools. It has been manually tagged at different levels: morphology, lemmatization and surface syntax (Aduriz et al. 2006). Nowadays, in BDT is materialized the next level of tagging: annotation of dependency relations.

In this paper, we describe the annotation of noun phrase (henceforth, NP) constructions in detail following the Dependency Grammar theory (Tesnière 1959). In order to better understand our work let us say that NP for us is a purely descriptive term. We are not concerned with the understanding of the internal structure of NPs. The syntactic description of Basque NPs has been mainly developed within the generative framework by (Goenaga 1980; Eguzkitza 1993; Laka 1993; Artiagoitia 2002;

Trask 2003) and other attempts have been done in applied linguistics (Odrizola & Zabala 1992).

We would like to mention Goenaga (1980) as the first work in which the Basque NP structure is analyzed in detail according to the generative theory. He characterizes the syntactic structure in terms of hierarchically embedded constituents or phrases, namely, they are all derived from the same abstract linguistic approach: phrase-structure theory. Similarly, we present in this paper our work about syntactic annotation based on the dependency model. Concretely, it constitutes the first formalization for the annotation of Basque NP tagging.

Phrase-structure theory and dependency theory are two different methods of conceptualizing the linguistic structure of sentences. Focusing on the second, we would like to emphasize that in grammars constructed within the dependency theory (e.g., Hudson 1990; Mel'cuk, 1988), syntax is handled in terms of grammatical relations between pairs of individual words, such as the relation from the subject to the predicate or from a modifier to a common noun. Grammatical relations are seen as subtypes of a general, asymmetrical dependency relation: one of the words (the head) determines the syntactic and semantic features of the combination. Besides, the head controls the characteristics and placement of the other word (the dependent). The syntactic structure of a sentence as a whole is built up from such dependency relations between individual pairs of words.

In mathematical terms (Nugues 2006), the dependency relation imposes a hierarchical structure on the words of a sentence that has the characteristics of a directed tree. A directed tree is a completely connected, two-dimensional, directed acyclic graph with a single root. Each node of the tree represents a word, and directional arches between the nodes represent the dependency relation, leading from head to dependent. The tree is headed by the highest word in the sentence, the root, which is the word that does not possess a head of its own.

We opted for annotating syntax following the dependency annotation rather than phrase-structure. We justify our choice of dependency annotation in more detail in Section 2.3. In the remainder of Section 2, we present the basic ideas of our annotation scheme and the annotation hierarchy. In Section 3, we describe some noun phrase constructions in detail. We propose the annotation procedure for coordination in Section 4, and we conclude with a discussion of future work in Section 5.

## 2. Framework for the syntactic annotation of the corpus

Syntactic annotation is the practice of adding syntactic information to a text by incorporating into it markers that informs about the syntactic structure of the sentences: e.g. labelled bracketing, or symbols indicating dependency relations between words. Although they differ in the labels and, in some cases, the function of various nodes in the tree, most annotation schemes provide a similar constituency-based representation of relations among syntactic components (see Abeillé 2003). In contrast, dependency schemes (e.g., Sleator & Temperley 1993; Tapanainen & Järvinen 1997; Bunt et al. 2004) do not provide a constituency analysis but rather specify grammatical relations among elements explicitly.

### 2.1 Constituency-based formalism

In this type of formalism, every single constituent that makes up a syntactic constituent is tagged, including the syntactic category itself; thus, the final result derives from defining the emerging constituents and their categories (noun phrases, sentences...).

The most complete and most widely-used English corpus, namely the *Penn Treebank* (Marcus et al. 1993), employs this sort of tagging. Here is an illustration of how a sentence would be represented in this corpus:

- (1) *John tried to open the window*<sup>1</sup>  
 (S (NP (N1 (N John\_NP1)))  
 (VP (V tried\_VVD)  
 (VP (V to\_TO)  
 (VP (V open\_VVO)  
 (NP (DT the\_AT)  
 (N1 (N window\_NN1) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) )

Three are the outstanding properties of this method:

1. It is based on linear word order; that is to say, the order of syntactic components reflects the order in which they appear in the sentence.
2. Hierarchical information is made explicit.
3. The information function that is implicit is irrelevant.

### 2.2 Dependency-based formalism

Unlike in the Constituency-based approach, the Dependency-based formalism (Järvinen & Tapanainen, 1997) describes the relations between the components. This tagging formalism has been used for German (*NEGRA*) (Brants et al. 2003) and Czech (*PDT*) corpora<sup>2</sup>, among others. In this formalism, the representation for (1) above would be the following:



The properties of this method include:

1. The relevance of word order is minimized.
2. It is a method strongly based on hierarchical relations.
3. The functional information is extremely important.

### 2.3 Constituency-based vs. dependency-based formalism

The debate whether a constituency-based or a dependency-based formalism should be employed in completing the Treebank is still open. Between these two op-

<sup>1</sup> Example taken from Carroll et al. 1998.

<sup>2</sup> [http://ufal.mff.cuni.cz/pcedt/doc/PCEDT\\_main.html](http://ufal.mff.cuni.cz/pcedt/doc/PCEDT_main.html)

tions, some researchers have taken a middle-ground position, as in (Montemagni et al. 2003), where they employ the dependency-based approach only to combine the basic components of the sentence (noun phrases, prepositional phrases and the verb), without reaching the word-level for dependency purposes.

The above described formalisms may be suitable in general, but the success and influence they may exert on applications highly depends on the language under consideration.

Considering a number of trials reflected in (Skut et al. 1997; Tapanainen & Järvinen, 1998 and Oflazer et al. 1999), in order to deal with the free word-order displayed by Basque syntax, we have decided to follow the dependency-based procedure. Apart from that, the facts below have influenced us critically on our decision:

- Dependency-based formalism provides a way of expressing semantic relations that will constitute a good base for affording next steps in the analysis-chain such as verb valence and thematic role studies (Agirre et al. 2006).
- We consider that the computational tools developed so far in Natural Language Processing for Basque will serve to achieve dependency relations. Besides, the rich information involved would allow the transformation from trees to other ways of representation.
- From our viewpoint, it is more straightforward to evaluate the relation between the elements that compose a sentence than the relation of elements included in parentheses, for the latter involves the additional task of determining where the parenthesis start and end.
- In our opinion, the dependency-based formalism is a more accurate method for annotating empty elements, such as *pro*<sup>3</sup>, long-distance dependencies and discontinuous constructions.

#### 2.4. Theoretical and methodological basis

Taking into account the literature on tagging corpora in different languages, we decided to deal with certain parameters for determining the theoretical and methodological basis that are necessary to build the Treebank. The basic decisions include the following:

##### 2.4.1. Which elements will be tagged?

Our object of study is the sentence; that is, in other words, the text that is included between two full stops (and also some other punctuation marks like the exclamation, question mark and so on). Besides, apart from the explicit elements that make up the sentence, we have considered certain elided elements such as the so-called *pro*. Empty elements, such as *pro*, long-distance dependencies and discontinuous constructions can be intuitively annotated. In theoretical terms, we could

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<sup>3</sup> *pro*: elided syntactic arguments that typically arise when the predicate displays agreement with the elided argument *pro* itself

annotate the empty elements following the dependency model. We also consider multiwords, entities and complex postpositions as analysis units. The sentences below exemplify different types of analysis units represented in bold:

- (2) *Proposamenarekin **bat egin** zuen Espilondok.*  
(Espilondo join the proposition.)
- (3) ***Henriette Airek** olerki unibertsalari buruzko bere gogoetak azalduko ditu.*  
(Henriette Aire will explain her thoughts about universal poetry.)
- (4) *Leihoko **kartelen artetik** begiratzten du.*  
(He/she looks through the window afixes.)

#### 2.4.2. *Do we follow any theory?*

An annotation scheme usually has to be *theory-independent* in order to allow different interpretations of the tagged texts in different linguistic frameworks. The advantage of assuming a particular theory is that it possibly solves many problems. The inconvenience, however, is that theories are unable to predict many aspects contained in a corpus. But in general, there is always a way to fill the gaps that the theory shows sometimes with respect to handling real texts. Therefore and thinking that the advantage is more positive in absolute terms than the disadvantage, we have somewhat followed the generative approach in certain aspects, for instance, when analysing empty categories (such as *pro*).

#### 2.4.3. *Definition of the annotation scheme employed*

In order to define the tagging system we have assumed the hierarchy proposed in (Carroll et al. 1998). They propose an annotation scheme in which each sentence in the corpus is marked up with a set of grammatical relations, specifying the syntactic dependency which holds between each head and its dependent(s). Following this line of work, we have developed a tag set based on hierarchies of grammatical relations (see Figure 1). In this paper we will focus on those related with NP.

The dependency grammatical relations corresponding to NP: can be described from two perspectives: i) NP head non-clausal relations (that will be explained in detail in section 3): *ncsubj*, *ncobj*, *nczobj*, *ncmod*, *ncpred* and *itj\_out* (see Table 1) and ii) the non-clausal modifiers of NP heads: *detmod*, *ncmod*, *aponcmmod* and *gradmod* (see Table 2).

### 3. Noun Phrase structure: noun heads with their dependents

As said before we are not concerned with the understanding of the internal structure of noun phrases. NP stands for a dependency relation headed by a noun although, as Artiagoitia (2002) points out that definition fails to fill the explanation of NPs structure.

Our approach is envisioned to provide consistent argument labelling that would facilitate automatic extraction of relational data, without attempting to justify any theory.

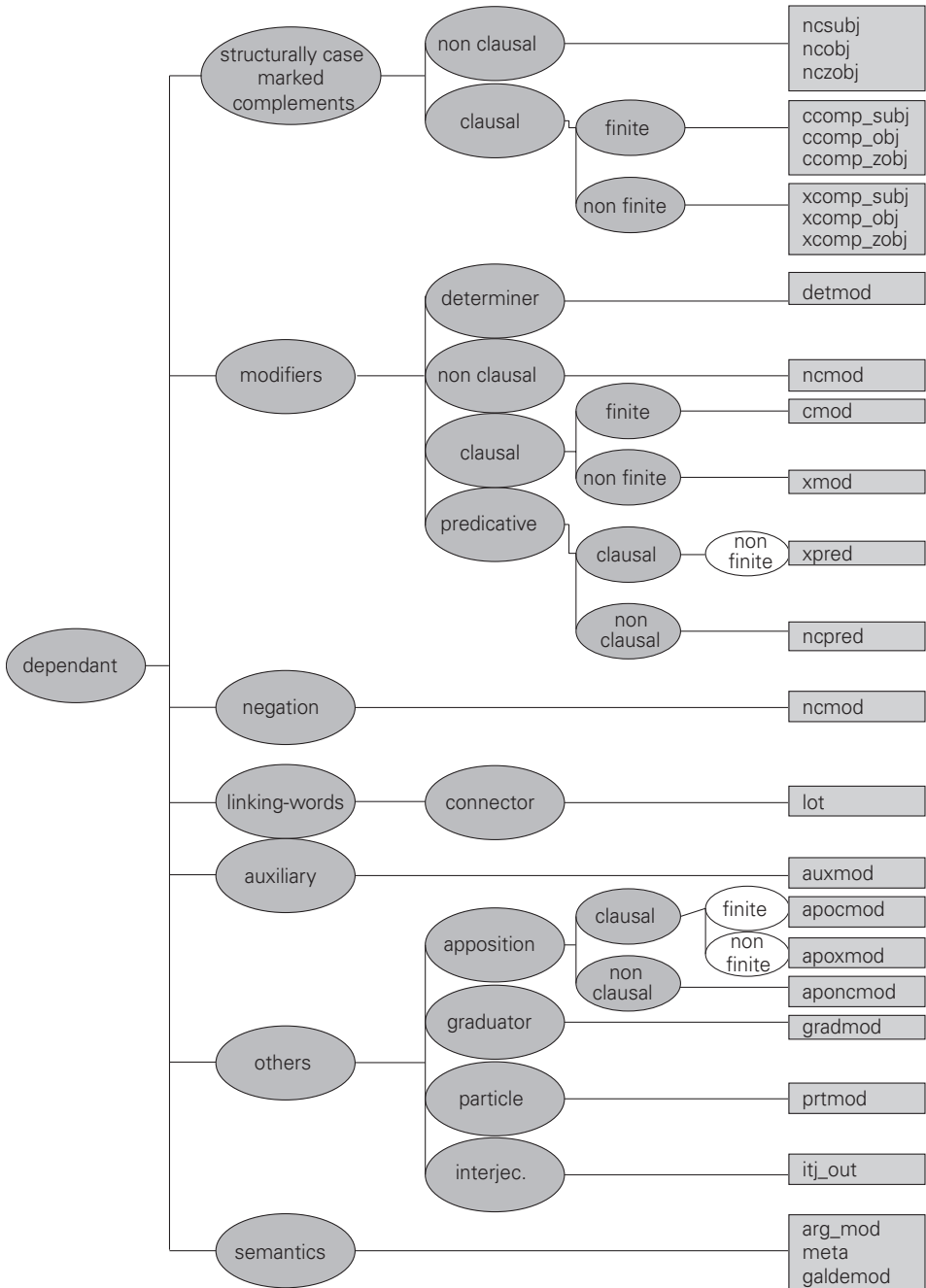


Figure 1  
Hierarchy of grammatical relations

### 3.1. Which component of the NP will be the Head?

Basque is a so-called ‘head-final’ language, for heads tending to appear placed at the right end of phrases. If we consider the structure of phrases in Basque, we will notice that such a morphological marker is placed in the last component of the phrase that carries it regardless of the POS. Therefore, the case marker can appear attached to the head as in (5) or to a modifier of the head such as an adjective as in (6) and sometimes to the determiner, as in (7)

- (5) *Zenbait zalantzak ezusteko bidetik lortu zuten argia.*  
(Some doubts were solved in an unexpected way.)
- (6) *Edozein mutil altuk (ergative case marker) egiten du.*  
(Any boy tall does it.)
- (7) *Zalantza horiek ezusteko bidetik lortu zuten argia.*  
(Those doubts were solved in an unexpected way.)

In order to maintain coherence in each relation when the element carrying the case/determiner and the noun head are not coincident, we decide to include together both elements<sup>4</sup> explicitly. Consequently we use a list of tuples to represent head/modifier relations in the dependency tree. For example, a structurally case-marked complement in which the complement is nc (non-clausal) has the following format:

- Case: the case-marker by means of what the relation is established among the head and the head of the NP.
- Head: the governor of NP.
- Head dependent.
- Case-marker: the component of the NP that carries the case.
- Syntactic function: the syntactic label assigned to the relationship

The analyses of the NP included in the following sentences exemplify this formalization. In the NP “zenbait zalantzak” in the example (5), “zalantzak” is the element that carries the case marker and, at the same time, constitutes the head of NP, so, the subject relation looks like the ncsbj dependency shown below.

detmod (-, zalantzak, zenbait)  
ncsubj (erg, lortu, zalantzak, zalantzak, subj)

In example (7), the phrase “zalantza horiek”, “zalantza” is the head of the NP, and then we would add the component that carries the case marker, namely “horiek”. Some of the relations associated to the NP follow:

ncsubj (erg, lortu, zalantza, horiek, subj)  
detmod (-, zalantza, horiek)

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<sup>4</sup> The decision, however, is not specific of Basque but more generally, it arises in the word-based Constraint Grammar analyzer (Karlsson et al. 1995). Our manual tagging aims to be as compatible as possible with output obtained by the parser, for evaluation purposes. Therefore, the easiest way to do it required to adapt the original tag-set as proposed by Carroll et al. (1998), including, in some cases, an additional slot. Note that we do not change the dependency initial philosophy; we just accommodate it to our needs

### 3.2. The NPs annotated in the corpus

In this section we will explain by means of examples the two different perspectives used to tag NPs: i) the relations established between the noun and the verb (ncsubj, ncobj, nczobj, ncmmod, ncpred and itj\_out, see Table 1) and ii) the modifiers of NP heads (detmod, ncmmod, aponcmmod and gradmod, see Table 2).

Let us begin with the first group. Following the classification presented in Figure 1, the relations presented in the Table 1 can be grouped as typical case-marker complements (ncsubj, ncobj, nczobj), modifiers (ncmmod), predicative modifier (ncpred) and others (itj\_out).

In order to better understand the examples we represent the heads of the NP in bold and their governors underlined. If we look at the underlined elements we can see that these dependency relations are established with respect to the main element of the sentence. For this reason in all cases the governors are the verbs. Besides, brackets are used to represent phrases.

**Table 1**

Examples with relations headed by verbs

Examples	Dependency tag
1. [ <i>Orduan</i> ] [ <b>Francine</b> ] [ <i>gizonaren begiez</i> ] <u>arduratu</u> zen. (Then, Francine took care of the man's eyes.)	ncsubj
2. [ <i>Nekez</i> ] <u>ahaztuko</u> dituzte [ <b>askok</b> ] [ <i>egun haiek</i> ] (Many people will not forget those days easily.)	
3. [ <i>Nhamdi-k</i> ] [ <b>ukabilak</b> ] <u>estutu</u> zituen. (Nhamdi clenched his fists.)	ncobj
4. [ <i>Astero astero</i> ] esan zaie <u>bertaratu</u> diren [ <b>talde</b> guzti-guztiei] (It has been said every week to all the groups that have come round.)	nczobj
5. [ <i>Seminariora</i> ] <u>zihoa</u> n [ <i>berrira</i> ]. (He was going to the seminar again.)	ncmmod
6. [ <i>Zuk</i> ] <u>galdua</u> zenion [ <i>beldurra</i> ] [ <i>itsasoari</i> ] [ <i>txiki-txikitatik</i> ]. (You lost fear to the sea since your childhood.)	
7. [ <i>Iritzi hau</i> ] [ <i>naturaren behaketa zuzenaren</i> ] <b>fruitu</b> zen. (This opinion was fruit of the nature's straight contemplation.)	ncpred
8. [ <i>Euriak</i> ] ez zaitu <u>bustitzen</u> . [ <b>Valentine</b> ]. (Rain is not wetting your, Valentine.)	itj-out

All the examples except the 4<sup>th</sup> one have as a characteristic that the element of the phrase linked to the verb contains the case marker. In 4, the noun “talde” is linked to the verb by means of “nczobj” dependency relation although the case marker is included in the determiner that modifies the noun. In all those phrases when the noun is elided, the determiner (example 2) or the adjective (6) are considered as heads. In this first approach we don't distinguish between the noun predicative and verb predi-



cative; this is the reason to find in example (7) the noun “fruitu” linked to the verb instead to the noun “iritzi”. In a near future we will refine this analysis.

The last example illustrates to the “itj\_out” relation. This relation differs from the others in the fact that it doesn’t represent a function in the sentence structure but, considering that it relates a noun “Valentine” and a verb “bustitzen”, it has been included in this group.

Table 2 shows internal relations of NP, that is, the dependents of NP head. Similarly to what we have done in Table 1, we represent the heads of the NP underlined and their modifiers in bold. Some types of NP structures have been included in order to show their internal dependency relations. Examples 1 to 3 exemplified “ncmod”; all of them are linked to the noun by means of the same relation although the dependents belongs to different categories: “atmosferaikoari” is an adjective (example 1), “Arrasateko”, in 2, is a noun modifier and “nekazari” is part of a compound noun. In example 4 the demonstrative “hori” appears to the right of the noun while in 5 the ordinal “bigarren” precede the noun. Both elements are linked by the “detmod” dependency relation. In the 6<sup>th</sup> example we have the apposition structure classified as others in Figure 1. It represents the relation between a noun and the head of the preceding NP. In that case it is the relation between the heads of two phrases. In the modifier relation expressed by “aponcmod” the modifier is “idazle” and the head “Axularrek”.

Finally, in 7, we show an example about “gradmod” relation that share with the others the idea of being a relation between a noun head and a modifier that is a graduator (“oso”).

**Table 2**

Examples with internal NP relations

Example	Dependency tag
1. [Nola] deitzen zaio [ <u>zirkulazio</u> <b>atmosferaikoari</b> ]? (How is it called the atmospheric circulation?)	ncmod
2. [ <b>Arrasateko</b> zenbait <u>familiak</u> ] [ <b>bigarren</b> <u>tarifa hau</u> ] kontratatu zuen. (Some families from Arrasate hired this second rate.) [Astelehenean] [ <b>nekazari</b> <u>manifestaldi</u> bat] izan zen. (There was a farmer demonstration on Monday.)	
3. [Zertara] zetorren [ <u>erretolika</u> <b>hori</b> ]? (Why did that argument come out?) [ <b>Bigarren</b> <u>kanpamentu</u> <b>bartatik</b> ] [ <u>sarjentu</u> ] atera zen (From that second camp he came out sergeant.)	detmod
4. [ <u>Axularrek</u> ], [ <u>gure</u> <b>idazle</b> <u>handiak</u> ], idatzi zuen [ <u>liburu</u> <u>hori</u> ] (Axular, our great writer, wrote that book.)	aponcmod
5. [Azken biak] [ <b>oso</b> <u>itsusiak</u> ] ziren. (The last two were really ugly.)	gradmod

The above tables have been written from a purely dependency relation perspective, so that the different elements that constitute the NP are grouped in terms of dependency tags. With the aim of giving a general view of the structure of a sentence

following the Dependency formalism, Figure 2 shows the example 2 of Table 2 with all the dependency relations displayed.

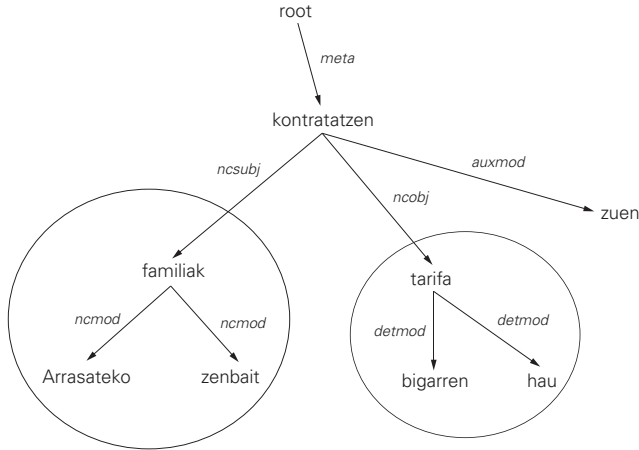


Figure 2

Example of the dependency tree of a sentence

#### 4. Analysis of coordinate noun phrases

Coordination is as problematic for the Dependency Grammar formalism as for other theoretical traditions. In order to capture the idea that the constituents that are coordinated are at the same level, we have considered two options extensively explained in the literature (Böhmová et al. 2003) (Järvinen et al. 1997): i) to suppose one of the elements coordinated depends from the other and ii) to add a new imaginary node maintaining the coordinated elements at the same level. In our case, for computational reasons, we opt for the second that it is expressed by considering the coordination element as a head of the coordinate phrase.

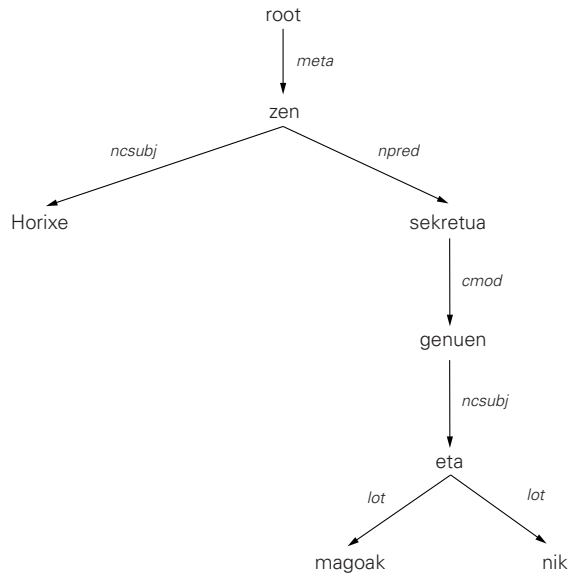
Figure 3 shows an example of coordination at the level of the noun phrase that illustrates our choice.

- (8) *Horixe zen magoak eta nik genuen sekretua.*  
 (That was the secret the illusionist and me had.)

In (8), the coordinated elements “magoak” and “nik” are represented at the same level and they have as their governor the connective “eta” that takes the dependency relation with respect to the verb, in this case “ncsubj”.

The dependencies associated to this phenomenon in the example are the following:

- lot (emen, eta, magoak)
- lot (emen, eta, nik)
- ncsubj (erg, genuen, eta, nik, subj)



**Figure 3**

Example of the dependency tree of NP coordination

The first slot in “lot” relation expresses the type of coordination. So we use “emen” for copulative coordination, “aurk” for adversative, “haut” disjunctive, “espl” for explicative and so on.

What have been said is generalized to the case of being coordination of more than two elements.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper has described the noun phrase structure by means of the Dependency Grammar theory. It constitutes the first formalization for the annotation of Basque NP as part of a more general work which aim is the description of all the syntactic phenomena and that will be the basis for the development of NLP applications.

First, we have pointed out the reasons for creating BDT Treebank, i.e., a syntactically tagged corpus. After considering and analyzing the main existing possibilities, we have decided to follow the formalism based on dependency relations for basically two reasons: first, because it is known to be more suitable for languages with a free word-order like Basque, and second, because, apart from being intuitive and easy, its flexibility allows the introduction of new types of tags such as those corresponding to thematic roles. The later is an important aspect for any research we will engage in the future.

We have taken the step of analyzing the syntactic structures by expressing the relation between the head and the dependent in an explicit manner. Additionally, we have found solutions to problems that have emerged in doing this analysis (such as,

coordination). During the annotation process we are carrying out (at this moment we have 100,000 words tagged and we plan to analyze 300.000 words), new refinements and proposals will be needed. To conclude, we would like to stress the urging necessity of a syntactically tagged corpus, which would serve to evaluate and improve the *parser* for Basque that we are developing in the group. And it will be also a key ingredient for syntactic studies from a theoretical point of view. The *treebank* can be used to check our linguistic intuitions.

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