Form and meaning in the sentence.
Brinton pp.103-134, Giusti pp. 37-68.

1. How and why we build sentences.

Our mind builds sentences by combining \textit{words}, in order to express \textit{meanings}. Notice that the form of a word does not directly depend on its meaning: We say that the relationship between form and meaning is \textit{arbitrary}. In other words there is nothing in \textit{table} that makes it refer to an object which is a piece of furniture of a certain kind, can be round or square, has a variable number of legs (usually four), etc. The same we can observe with word order in the sentence. Italian can have preverbal or postverbal subjects while English can only have preverbal subjects:

(1) a. Ha appena telefonato \textit{un mio amico}.
    b. E' appena ritornato \textit{mio fratello}.

(2) a. \textit{A friend of mine} has just called.
    b. \textit{My brother} has just come back.

There is nothing in the \textit{meaning} of the sentences in (2) that forces the subject to be preverbal; and in fact the subject can be postverbal in (1). If we try in English to have the same order as in Italian we obtain an ungrammatical sentence (which we mark with a star):

(3) a. *Has just called \textit{A friend of mine}.
    b. *H as just come back \textit{My brother}.

\textbf{However meaning IS encoded in word order even if in an arbitrary way.} Consider the following pairs of sentences:

(4) a. Cats eat bats.
    b. Bats eat cats.

(5) a. I gatti mangiano i pipistrelli.
    b. I pipistrelli mangiano i gatti.

The sentences is (4a) e (5a) have a meaning that corresponds to our knowledge of the world. The sentences in (4b) e (5b) don’t have a correspondence to what we know happens in nature, however they are possible sentences and they are possibly more interesting than the previous ones, since they convey information that is not known.

We can say that the preverbal position of the verb \textit{eat/mangiare} is reserve to the \textit{EATER} (or, more generally to the \textit{AGENT}); while the postverbal position is reserved to the \textit{EATEN} (or, more generally to the \textit{PATIENT});. We call these elements \textit{arguments} of the verb. And we see that the arguments play a role in the action or expressed by the verb \textit{eat/mangiare}. The position of the arguments is related to their role. (We will call these roles “thematic roles” or briefly “theta-roles” also written with the greek letter \(\theta\): \textit{\(\theta\)-roles}).\footnote{N.B.: There are many other verbs that do not express an action but other kinds of events, and these verbs assign different \(\theta\)-roles, which we will observe in the next lessons.}

\textbf{We can conclude that we build sentences combining words in a conventional order.}
2. Lexical and functional categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>lexical categories</th>
<th>functional categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>nouns</td>
<td>articles, demonstratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>verbs</td>
<td>auxiliaries, modals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adjectives</td>
<td>prepositions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>adverbials</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prepositions</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Observe the following case:

(1)  
   a. The boy will hit a class mate and walk away.  
   b. ___ boy ___ hit ___ class mate ___ walk away.  
   c. The ___ will ___ a ________ and __________.  

If we omit functional words as in (1b) we preserve the lexical meaning: we preserve the meaning of the events (hit, walk away), and the kind of elements that play a role (boy, class mate). We just miss the TENSE (present, future, past) and the ASPECT (progressive, perfective) of the event and the REFERENCE of the role-players.

On the other hand, if we omit lexical words as in (1c) we have information on the TENSE (present, future, past) and the ASPECT (progressive, perfective) of the event and the REFERENCE of the role-players, but we have no idea of the kind of event that the sentence expresses.

*The lexicon of the language is the ordered inventory of the lexical words and is open to new entries.*

We can form new words by applying the rules of inflectional and compositional morphology, by introducing words from other languages, or even inventing new words which just obey the phonological principle of the languages.

*The syntax of a language is related to the properties of functional words that must be fixed during acquisition.* We cannot invent new articles, or new auxiliaries. We cannot change the order of the functional elements with respect to the lexical ones. For example:

(2)  
   a. Has Mary recently met my brother?  
   b. *Ha Maria visto mio fratello ultimamente?  
   c.  

(3)  
   a. Perché deve lavorare.  
   b. Because he must work.  
   c. Weil er arbeiten muss.  

(4)  
   a.  
      1’uomo
      omul
   b.  
      the man
      mannen

We can conclude that when we learn a foreign language, we must focalize on the properties of the functional words of that language and observe the parallelisms and the differences with our mother tongue in the order of words.  

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2 N.B.: an order which we assume to be arbitrary with respect to the function of the element, but which it is fixed in the language.