

8. A Word and Its Structure

The Structure of Words (Ling 350)

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Fall 2025

Heads

- Identify the head in the following words:

off-color

war-weary

barkeep

off-white

busboy

mail-order

- What does the head do, in terms of syntax?
- How about in terms of semantics?
- Identify the head in the following words:

colorize

weariness

keeper

whiten

boyhood

orderly



Heads

- In most English compounds, the head is the rightmost element.
- Sometimes, the head can come at the left, especially in loanwords from French.

attorney general

surgeon general

- In most derived words in English, the head is also the rightmost element, typically a suffix.

- Is this always the case?

“The only prefixes that are unequivocally heads are those that change word class.” (79)

- Identify the head in the following words:

arrangement

enslave

buttonable

unbutton

joyful

enjoy



- Consider the following words:

TOMB_N

ENTOMB_V



- Consider the following words:

TRAP_V



TRAP_N



TRAPPER_N

ENTRAP_V

- Do activity 1 on your sheets.

Internal Structure

- Which of the following words is structurally ambiguous?

ungovernable

governmentally

forgetfulness

unforgettable

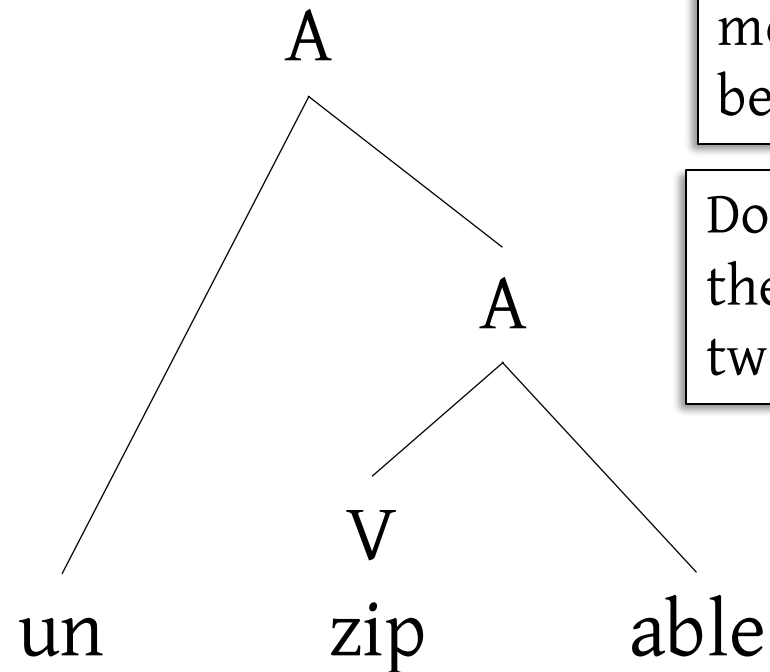
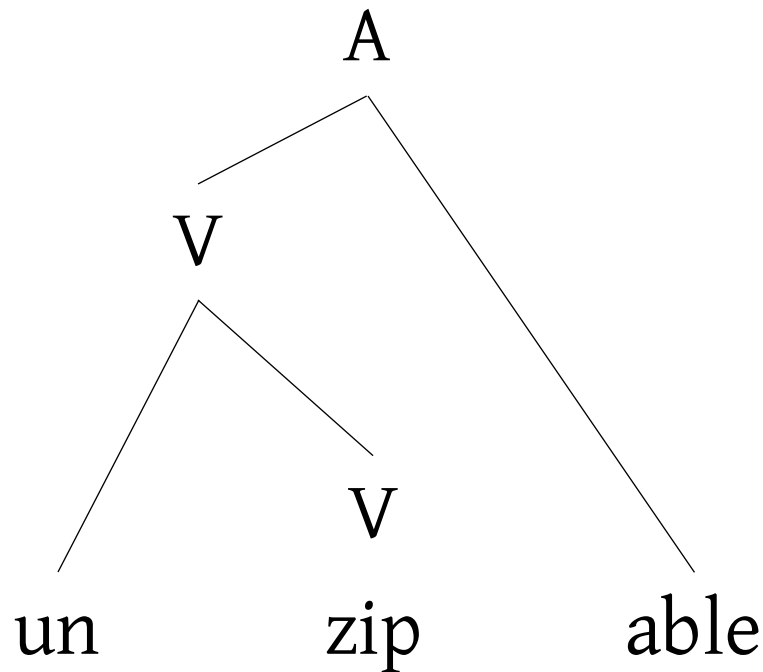
unzippable

zippability

- Why?

Internal Structure

- We can represent the two different possible structures of *unzippable* using a **tree diagram**.

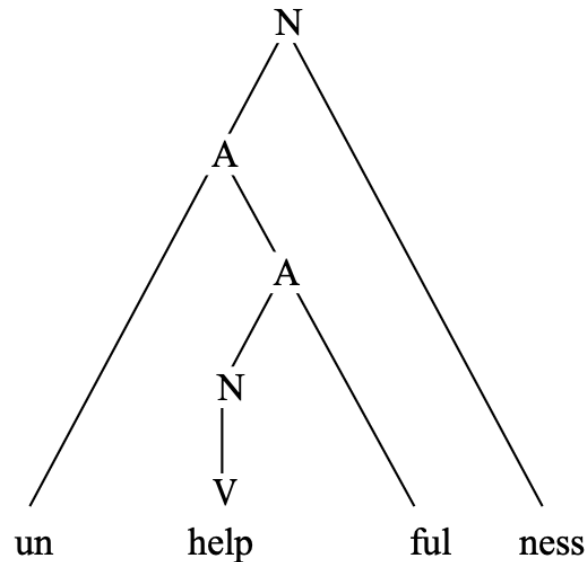
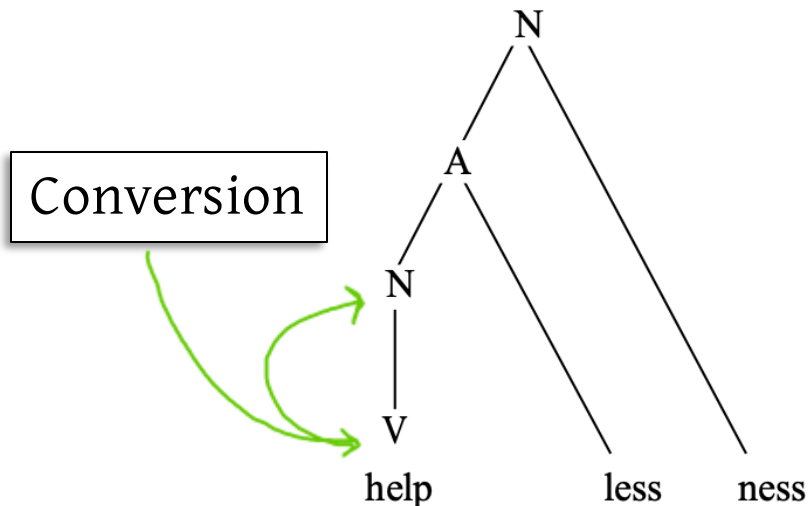


Which one of these means “not able to be zipped”?

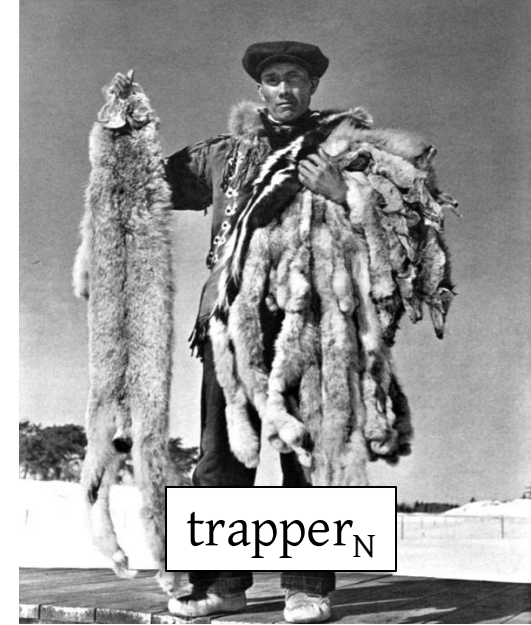
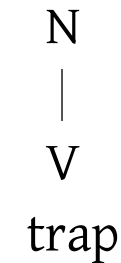
Do these words have the same head, or two different heads?

Internal Structure

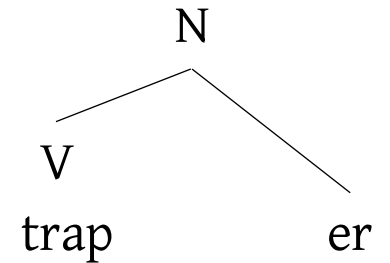
- This can be very simple.
- But when the word has a lot of affixes, especially a mix of prefixes and suffixes, it can be more complex.



trap_N

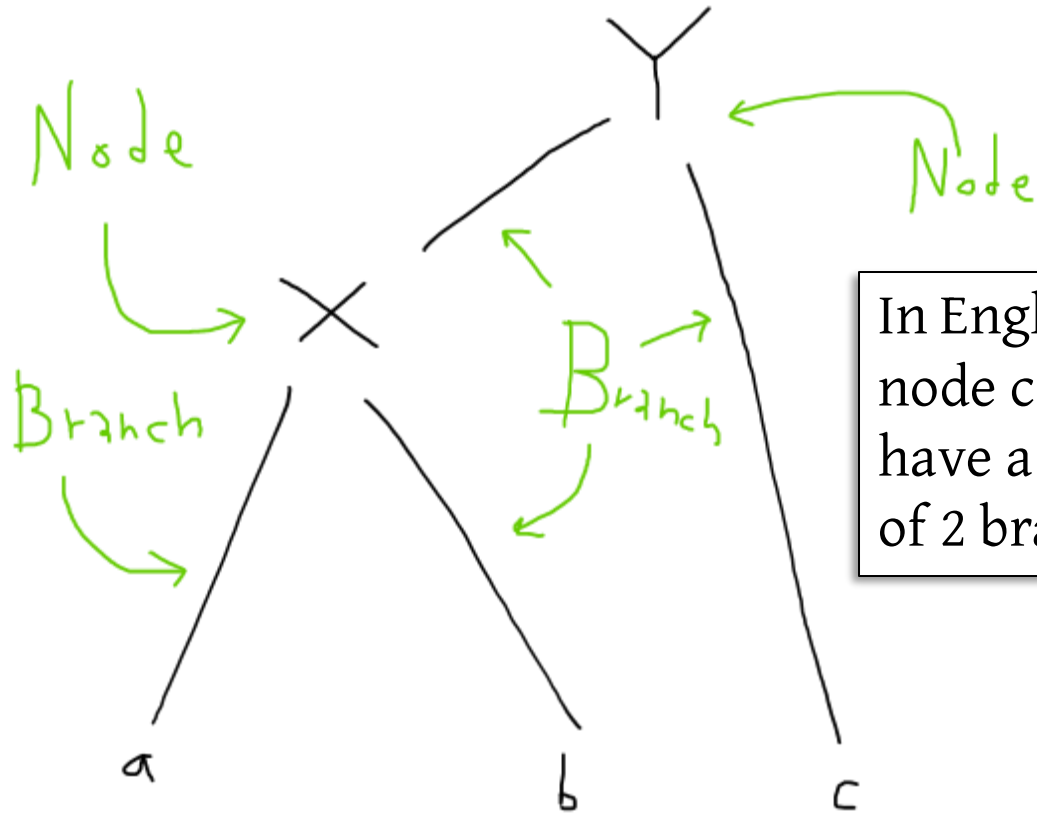


trapper_N



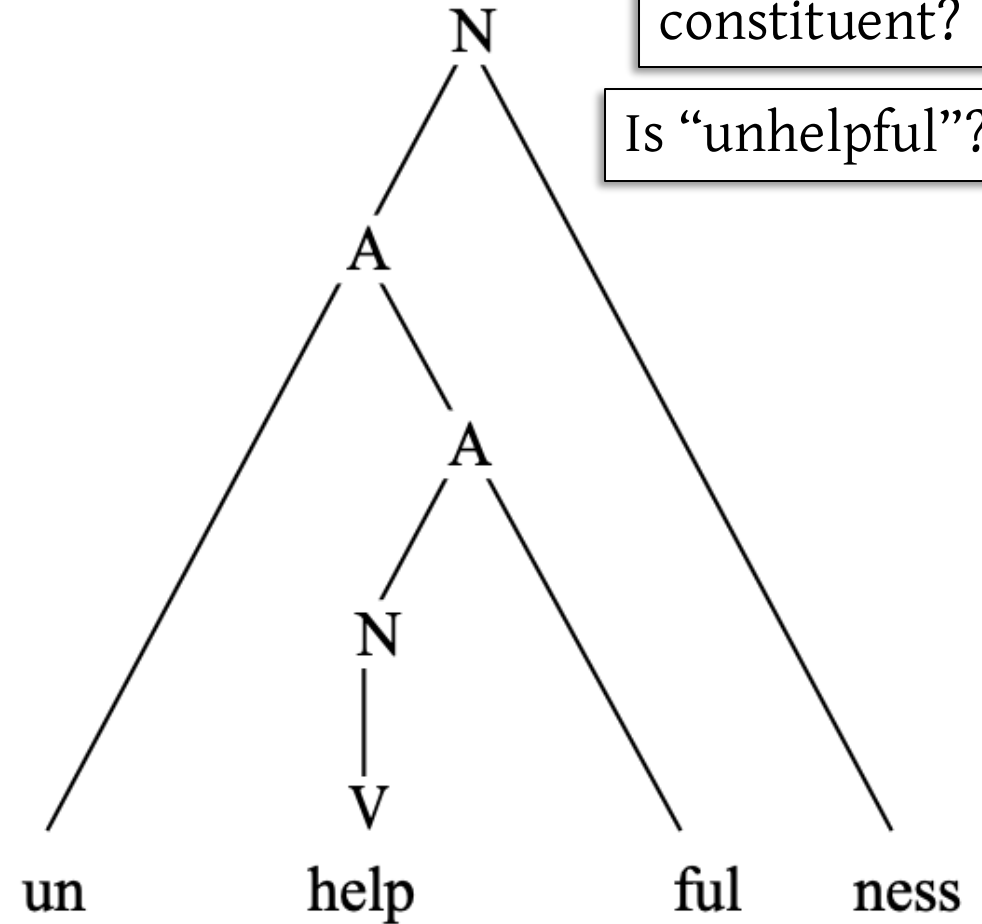
- Do activity 2 on your sheets.

Nodes, Branches, and Constituents



In English, each node can only have a maximum of 2 branches.

Whatever descends from a single node is a constituent. There are often constituents within constituents.



Is “helpful” a constituent?

Is “fulness” a constituent?

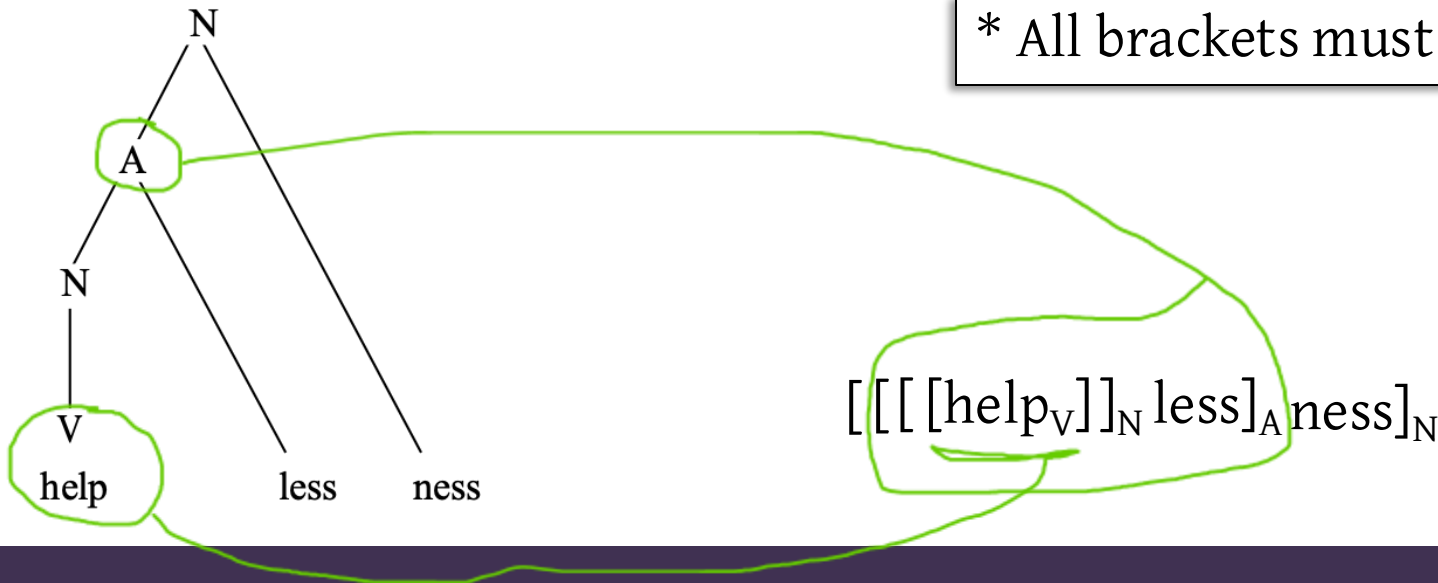
Is “unhelpful”?

Let's identify the nodes, branches, and constituents in the trees that you wrote up here.

Brackets

- Any tree can also be represented using **bracket notation**, a.k.a. labelled bracketing.
- In this method, each pair of brackets corresponds to one node in the tree. Constituents will thus be grouped together in a pair of brackets.

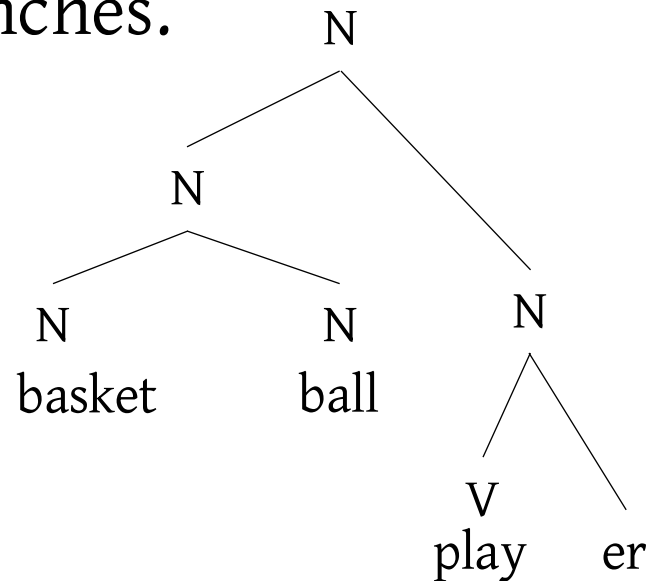
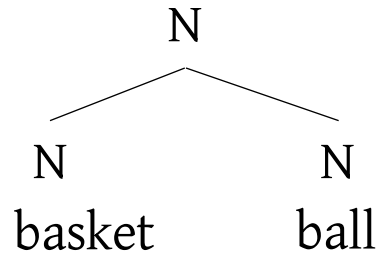
* All brackets must be paired. No singleton brackets.



- Do activity 3 on your sheets.

Compounds

- Trees can be drawn for compounds in the same way as they can for derived words.
- The same rules all apply, including that nodes may only have a maximum of 2 branches.



- Do activity 4 on your sheets.
- Do activity 5 on your sheets.

For next time:

- Read chapter 8 in Carstairs-McCarthy. We'll be returning to in-class quizzes next week.