

Picturing a Sentence

I remember us spending quite a bit of time on diagramming sentences in English classes -- especially in grades 6-9. I don't remember diagramming that much in high school. Personally, I can see some value to diagramming relatively simple sentences -- at least as you are learning the parts of speech (noun, verb, pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, etc.) and how they fit into a sentence... I occasionally still catch myself looking at a complex sentence and wondering to myself -- "How in the world would you diagram that?" The exercise of discovering what is truly the subject, verb, subordinate clauses, etc. is still occasionally useful to me!

When sentences start getting more and more complex, it seems the usefulness of diagramming breaks down -- it becomes more of a challenge (almost a puzzle, really) to figure out how to represent things on the diagram.

To me, the real beauty of diagramming is that it takes a very illogical and exception-laden language (English) and attempts to explain it logically -- to make English repeatable, understandable, and predictable.

The software engineer in me hates to see diagramming completely fade away. I can see how it might help someone develop an application that receives spoken or written sentences, breaks the sentences down into its parts via "diagrams," and then translates that information into something a computer can understand and process. But I suppose diagramming is not necessary for doing this, since there are many speech-recognition and text-interpretation applications out there already. For example, when you take your iPhone in hand and ask: "Siri, can you locate the nearest Italian restaurant?" -- I doubt that Siri takes our question and diagrams it... but then again, at some level, maybe she does.

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