

Proposal for the construction of *Squibnet*:
a wiki of short linguistic notes

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Squibs are short notes that call attention to some aspect of language that is either unexpected (it would contradict what current theory would predict), or mysterious in one way or another.

For instance, some verbs behave kinkily with respect to negation and tenses: the verb *chance* is one. While most verbs can be affirmative or negative, and can appear in the present, the past, the present progressive and the future (cf. (1))

- (1) a. Jock [makes / doesn't make] pizza.
- b. Jock [made / didn't make] pizza.
- c. Jock [is / is not] making pizza.
- d. Jock [will / will not] make pizza.

the sentences in (2) show that *chance* is a horse of a different color. [NB: linguists indicate the weirdness of examples by prefixing them with an asterisk (for examples that sound hopelessly bad) or a question mark (for others which seem closer to standard sentences).]

- (2) a. *Jock [chances / doesn't chance] to make pizza.
- b. Jock [chanced to make / ?didn't chance to make] pizza.
- c. *Jock is (not) chancing to make pizza.
- d. *Jock will (not) chance to make pizza.

Another example concerns a case in which the usual contrast between *who* and *what*, the first to refer to humans, the second to non-humans (cf. (3)),

- (3) a. Who / *What he obeyed was Terry.
- b. What / *Who he photographed was my motorcycle.

exhibits a loophole: *what* can sometimes refer to the logical object of a verb that is a human being (cf. (4a)), though not to its subject (cf. *(4b)):

- (4) a. Who/What he wants to marry is a Norwegian.
- b. Who / *What wants to marry him is a Norwegian.

At least four professional journals have sections for squibs (*Linguistic Inquiry*, *Glott International*, *The Canadian Journal of Linguistics*, and *Computational Linguistics*) and there is also an online journal, *Snippets*, which is devoted entirely to squibs. I have published around a dozen squibs myself, and I was one of two founding co-editors for the

squibs section of *Linguistic Inquiry* for the first two years of this journal. Also, George Lakoff and I were coeditors of the squibs section of *Studies in Language*, from 1980-85. Squibs have played an important role in recent work in syntax, and it seems that they will continue to serve as harbingers of coming syntactic attractions.

I have continued to collect squibs over the decades; I estimate I have written between five and ten thousand of them. Several thousand of my unpublished squibs, which are currently in handwritten form, have been scanned, and are available [here](#) in several directories of pdf files, corresponding to the original volumes and dates of composition. As can be seen, they are mostly too hard to read to be helpfully made public in their present condition.

I request a grant of \$1000 from UNT, with which I will hire a graduate student of linguistics, Tyler Utt, to transcribe these in html format so that they can be put on my web page and made available to the larger linguistic world. While the final format to be used for the web publication of *Squibnet* has not yet been determined, I would like it to be an unmonitored piece of hypertext, which anyone could download and republish any part of, and which anyone could comment on, to refine the analytic suggestions, objections, etc.

Likewise, though the server and final address of *Squibnet* have similarly not been decided, we begin by hosting the files at <http://www.umich.edu/~jlawler/haj/Squibnet/>. As *Squibnet* moves, this address will always point to it. At the moment, it hosts only large page scans of handwritten notes.

I anticipate a considerable number of hits from students of syntax, who, having to write term papers, are always on the lookout for such loose ends to try to tie them down. Since many of the sentences in my squibs are constructed to illustrate arcane points of syntactic structure, I would not be surprised if the whole body of squibs were to become a mecca for corpus linguists and/or construction grammarians who were looking for certain complex arrays of fact.

Following the web-launching of *Squibnet*, I plan to approach the NSF and other agencies for funds to scan and transcribe the whole of my collection of squibs.

The transcription itself is trivial and quickly done; the systematization and cross-linking between squibs, creating a hyperlinked data base which will interconnect squibs to each other and to related research by other scholars, will take several years.

Squibnet will be of immediate use to syntax students at UNT and elsewhere, and since many of the sentences in my squibs are constructed to illustrate arcane points of syntactic structure, it may well prove to be a fruitful corpus to be searched for unusually complex sentences by construction grammarians and other scholars interested in cognition.