Emonds (1991) claims that many phenomena that I attribute to the effects of conceptual structure on syntax in Jackendoff (1987a) are more properly accounted for in terms of syntax alone. The present paper shows that Emonds has misconstrued the role intended for conceptual structure in the interface between language and cognition. It then specifies precisely where Emonds’s approach to argument selection differs technically from mine, and shows that the technical differences favor my approach as further developed in Jackendoff (1990). Finally, an improved account of the semantic selection of oblique arguments is proposed, but it is shown that still not all syntactic argument selection can be eliminated from lexical entries of verbs.

Emonds (1991) examines the theory of conceptual structure proposed in Jackendoff (1987a), and claims that a number of grammatical phenomena attributed there to the effects of conceptual structure on syntax are actually properties of syntax alone. The present paper questions Emonds’s claims, and in the process attempts to clarify some of the issues at stake. Its purpose is not just to respond to Emonds. Rather, his paper encapsulates nicely a number of misconceptions about conceptual structure that seem to me to be lurking unstated in the literature; I am taking this as an opportunity to bring some of this dialogue into the open.

Emonds’s claims are as follows, ordered in terms of increasing specificity:

A. Syntax is the mental representation of ‘connected thought’ – whatever mental processes distinguish human from animal reasoning.
B. Scientific parsimony hence requires a linguistic theory with only one combinatorial level: syntax; an independent linguistic level of conceptual structure with its own combinatorial properties is unnecessary.
C. Properties of argument selection that allegedly depend on conceptual

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structure can in fact be restated, without losing generality, in syntactic terms. Because of claim B, the syntactic solution is preferable.

I will take these up in turn.

1. Do Animals Have 'Connected Thought'?

To be sure, without syntax and phonology (or its signed language counterpart), a society of organisms could not have myths, history, gossip, slander, poetry, philosophy, legal systems, or psychoanalysis. Emonds suggests that

...a reflective non-linguist might plausibly entertain the hypothesis that [the] categories of syntax are also the categories of connected thought. Or, since language seems to resist facile solutions, that the categories of non-obvious canonical syntactic representations discovered through linguistic argument might also serve as the principal (though perhaps insufficiently elaborated) elements of thought. Such a language of connected thought can also be called (propositional) semantics.\(^1\) (Emonds 1991, p. 370)

...there is no propositional or even phrasal thought without syntax... [E]xternal stimuli or even an internal state can evoke non-propositional groupings of concepts or 'conceptual structures' (e.g. dog, chase, child), but only syntactically connected words have a meaning which can be checked for truth and appropriateness. For instance, the above triple can, in the sight of a dog chasing a child, appropriately give rise equally well to do children ever chase dogs? or that dog is chasing the child or a chased child is like a dog... [The semantics of lexical items is entirely atomic... and non-concatenative. (Emonds 1991, pp. 425-6)

What does Emonds mean here by 'connected thought' and 'propositional thought'? He suggests (personal communication) that 'connected thought' is whatever "goes on in human heads when they make investment decisions, plan dinner parties, and call football plays" – more generally, whatever reasoning humans can do that animals cannot. In other words, whatever thinking is done by animals is 'non-connected, nonpropositional thought', and therefore according to Emonds's claim should not depend on human syntax for its formal expression.

But suppose one approaches the ethological literature from the point of view of a linguist, asking what an animal must know – what principles of perception and behavior it has available unconsciously – in order to carry out the tasks it does. Such an early work as Köhler (1927) more or less explicitly takes this point of view in discussing the behavior of

\(^1\) One such 'reflective non-linguist' is Jerry Fodor. His view (1983, re-articulated in an MIT colloquium in fall 1991), is that the 'language of thought' is a combinatorial system in which the terminal symbols are word-sized conceptual monads, devoid of any further semantic decomposition. I have dealt with Fodor's arguments elsewhere (Jackendoff 1983, chapter 7; Jackendoff 1987b, chapter 8; Jackendoff 1990, chapter 1) and will not go into them here.