

# Defining Program Syntax

# Syntax And Semantics

- Programming language syntax: how programs look, their form and structure
  - Syntax is defined using a kind of formal grammar
- Programming language semantics: what programs do, their behavior and meaning
  - Semantics is harder to define—more on this in Chapter 23

# Outline

- Grammar and parse tree examples
- BNF and parse tree definitions
- Constructing grammars
- Phrase structure and lexical structure
- Other grammar forms

# An English Grammar

A sentence is a noun phrase, a verb, and a noun phrase.

$$\langle S \rangle ::= \langle NP \rangle \langle V \rangle \langle NP \rangle$$

A noun phrase is an article and a noun.

$$\langle NP \rangle ::= \langle A \rangle \langle N \rangle$$

A verb is...

$$\langle V \rangle ::= \text{loves} \mid \text{hates} \mid \text{eats}$$

An article is...

$$\langle A \rangle ::= \text{a} \mid \text{the}$$

A noun is...

$$\langle N \rangle ::= \text{dog} \mid \text{cat} \mid \text{rat}$$

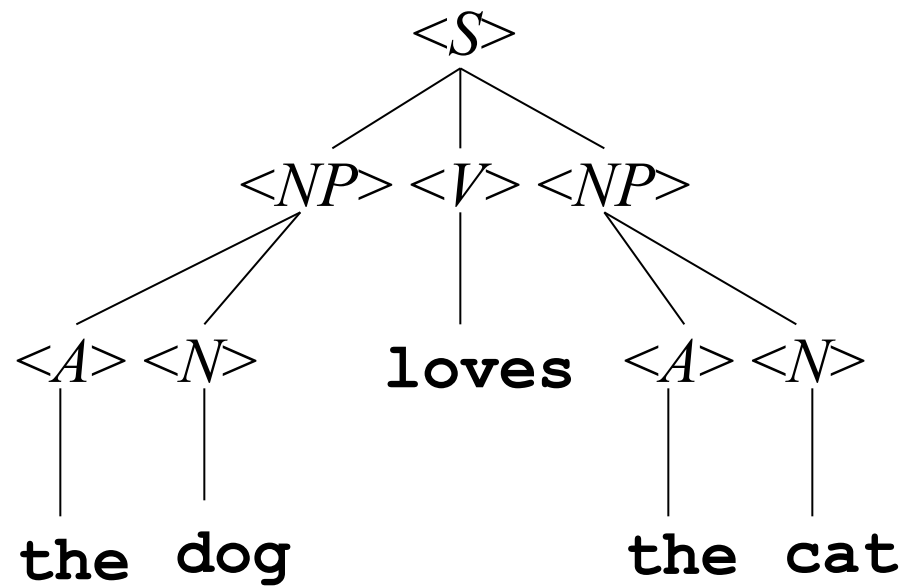
# How The Grammar Works

- The grammar is a set of rules that say how to build a tree—a *parse tree*
- You put  $\langle S \rangle$  at the root of the tree
- The grammar's rules say how children can be added at any point in the tree
- For instance, the rule

$$\langle S \rangle ::= \langle NP \rangle \langle V \rangle \langle NP \rangle$$

says you can add nodes  $\langle NP \rangle$ ,  $\langle V \rangle$ , and  $\langle NP \rangle$ , in that order, as children of  $\langle S \rangle$

# A Parse Tree



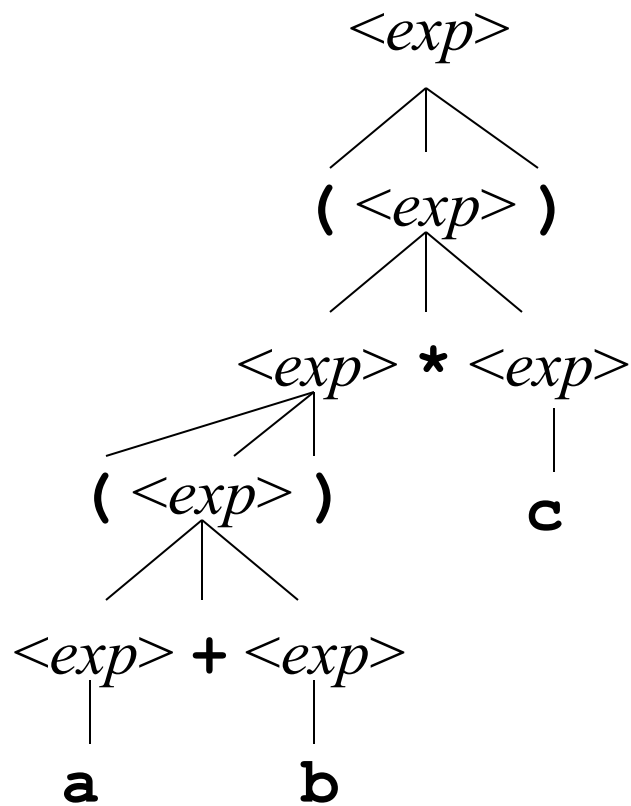
# A Programming Language Grammar

$$\langle exp \rangle ::= \langle exp \rangle + \langle exp \rangle \mid \langle exp \rangle * \langle exp \rangle \mid ( \langle exp \rangle )$$
$$\mid \mathbf{a} \mid \mathbf{b} \mid \mathbf{c}$$

- An expression can be the sum of two expressions, or the product of two expressions, or a parenthesized subexpression
- Or it can be one of the variables **a**, **b** or **c**

# A Parse Tree

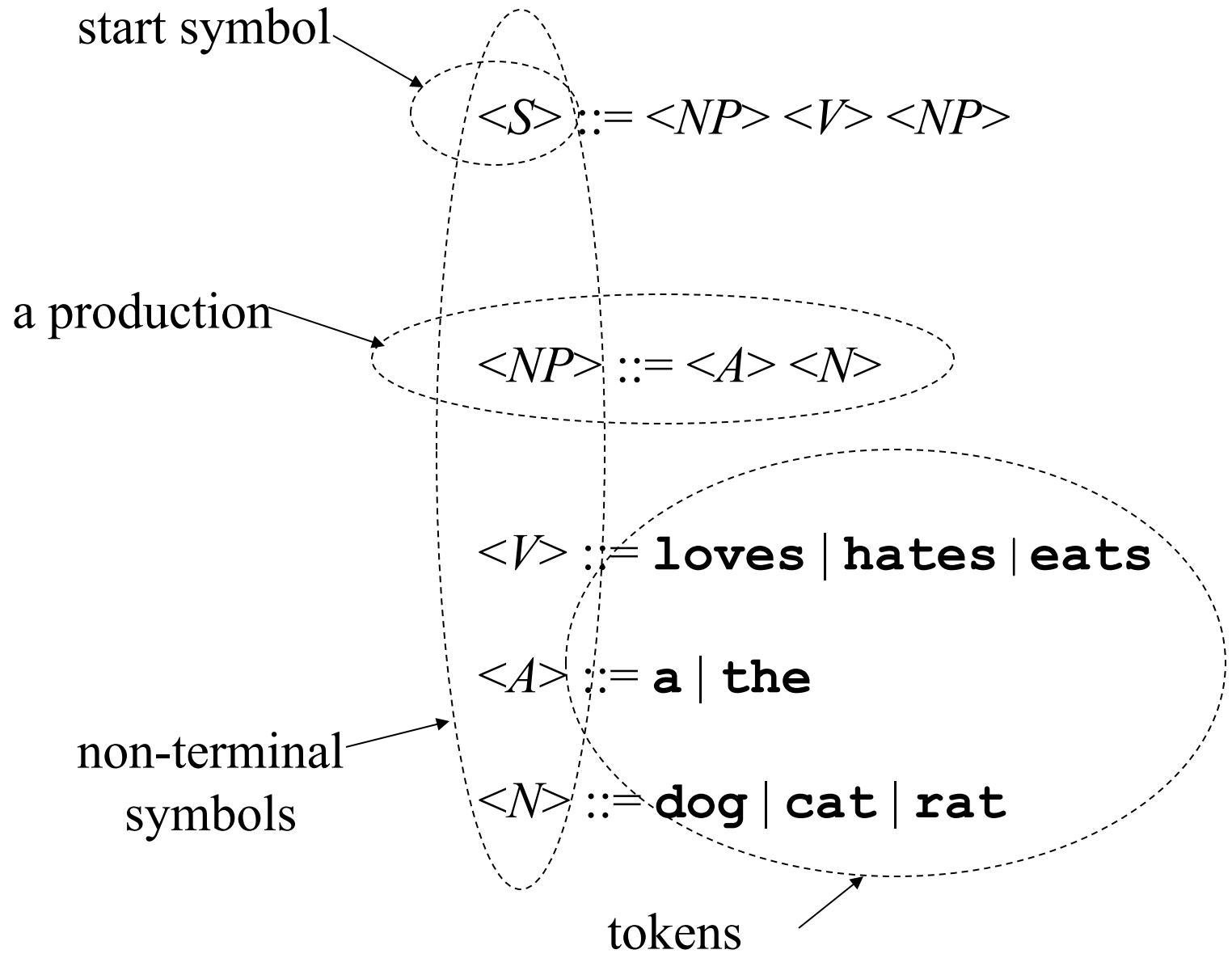
**( (a+b) \* c )**





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# BNF Grammar Definition

- A BNF grammar consists of four parts:
  - The set of *tokens*
  - The set of *non-terminal symbols*
  - The *start symbol*
  - The set of *productions*

# Definition, Continued

- The *tokens* are the smallest units of syntax
  - Strings of one or more characters of program text
  - They are atomic: not treated as being composed from smaller parts
- The *non-terminal symbols* stand for larger pieces of syntax
  - They are strings enclosed in angle brackets, as in  $\langle NP \rangle$
  - They are not strings that occur literally in program text
  - The grammar says how they can be expanded into strings of tokens
- The *start symbol* is the particular non-terminal that forms the root of any parse tree for the grammar

# Definition, Continued

- The *productions* are the tree-building rules
- Each one has a left-hand side, the separator  $::=$ , and a right-hand side
  - The left-hand side is a single non-terminal
  - The right-hand side is a sequence of one or more things, each of which can be either a token or a non-terminal
- A production gives one possible way of building a parse tree: it permits the non-terminal symbol on the left-hand side to have the things on the right-hand side, in order, as its children in a parse tree

# Alternatives

- When there is more than one production with the same left-hand side, an abbreviated form can be used
- The BNF grammar can give the left-hand side, the separator  $::=$ , and then a list of possible right-hand sides separated by the special symbol  $|$

# Example

$$\begin{aligned} \langle exp \rangle ::= \langle exp \rangle + \langle exp \rangle & \mid \langle exp \rangle * \langle exp \rangle \mid ( \langle exp \rangle ) \\ & \mid \mathbf{a} \mid \mathbf{b} \mid \mathbf{c} \end{aligned}$$

Note that there are six productions in this grammar.  
It is equivalent to this one:

$$\begin{aligned} \langle exp \rangle &::= \langle exp \rangle + \langle exp \rangle \\ \langle exp \rangle &::= \langle exp \rangle * \langle exp \rangle \\ \langle exp \rangle &::= ( \langle exp \rangle ) \\ \langle exp \rangle &::= \mathbf{a} \\ \langle exp \rangle &::= \mathbf{b} \\ \langle exp \rangle &::= \mathbf{c} \end{aligned}$$

# Empty

- The special nonterminal *<empty>* is for places where you want the grammar to generate nothing
- For example, this grammar defines a typical if-then construct with an optional else part:

*<if-stmt>* ::= **if** *<expr>* **then** *<stmt>* *<else-part>*  
*<else-part>* ::= **else** *<stmt>* | *<empty>*



# Parse Trees

- To build a parse tree, put the start symbol at the root
- Add children to every non-terminal, *following any one of the productions for that non-terminal in the grammar*
- Done when all the leaves are tokens
- Read off leaves from left to right—that is the string derived by the tree

# Practice

$$\langle exp \rangle ::= \langle exp \rangle + \langle exp \rangle \mid \langle exp \rangle * \langle exp \rangle \mid ( \langle exp \rangle )$$
$$\mid \mathbf{a} \mid \mathbf{b} \mid \mathbf{c}$$

Show a parse tree for each of these strings:

**a+b**

**a\*b+c**

**(a+b)**

**(a+ (b) )**

# Compiler Note

- What we just did is *parsing*: trying to find a parse tree for a given string
- That's what compilers do for every program you try to compile: try to build a parse tree for your program, using the grammar for whatever language you used
- Take a course in compiler construction to learn about algorithms for doing this efficiently

# Language Definition

- We use grammars to define the syntax of programming languages
- The language defined by a grammar is the set of all strings that can be derived by some parse tree for the grammar
- As in the previous example, that set is often infinite (though grammars are finite)
- Constructing grammars is a little like programming...

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# Constructing Grammars

- Most important trick: divide and conquer
- Example: the language of Java declarations:  
a type name, a list of variables separated by commas, and a semicolon
- Each variable can be followed by an initializer:

```
float a;  
boolean a,b,c;  
int a=1, b, c=1+2;
```

# Example, Continued

- Easy if we postpone defining the comma-separated list of variables with initializers:

*<var-dec>* ::= *<type-name>* *<declarator-list>* ;

- Primitive type names are easy enough too:

*<type-name>* ::= **boolean** | **byte** | **short** | **int**  
                                  | **long** | **char** | **float** | **double**

- (Note: skipping constructed types: class names, interface names, and array types)

# Example, Continued

- That leaves the comma-separated list of variables with initializers
- Again, postpone defining variables with initializers, and just do the comma-separated list part:

$$\begin{aligned} \langle \textit{declarator-list} \rangle &::= \langle \textit{declarator} \rangle \\ &\quad | \langle \textit{declarator} \rangle , \langle \textit{declarator-list} \rangle \end{aligned}$$



# Example, Continued

- That leaves the variables with initializers:

$$\begin{array}{l} \langle declarator \rangle ::= \langle variable-name \rangle \\ \quad \quad \quad | \langle variable-name \rangle = \langle expr \rangle \end{array}$$

- For full Java, we would need to allow pairs of square brackets after the variable name
- There is also a syntax for array initializers
- And definitions for  $\langle variable-name \rangle$  and  $\langle expr \rangle$

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# Where Do Tokens Come From?

- Tokens are pieces of program text that we do not choose to think of as being built from smaller pieces
- Identifiers (**count**), keywords (**if**), operators (**==**), constants (**123.4**), etc.
- Programs stored in files are just sequences of characters
- How is such a file divided into a sequence of tokens?

# Lexical Structure And Phrase Structure

- Grammars so far have defined *phrase structure*: how a program is built from a sequence of tokens
- We also need to define *lexical structure*: how a text file is divided into tokens

# One Grammar For Both

- You could do it all with one grammar by using characters as the only tokens
- Not done in practice: things like white space and comments would make the grammar too messy to be readable

```
<if-stmt> ::= if <white-space> <expr> <white-space>  
           then <white-space>  
           <stmt> <white-space> <else-part>  
<else-part> ::= else <white-space> <stmt> | <empty>
```

# Separate Grammars

- Usually there are two separate grammars
  - One says how to construct a sequence of tokens from a file of characters
  - One says how to construct a parse tree from a sequence of tokens

*<program-file> ::= <end-of-file> | <element> <program-file>*

*<element> ::= <token> | <one-white-space> | <comment>*

*<one-white-space> ::= <space> | <tab> | <end-of-line>*

*<token> ::= <identifier> | <operator> | <constant> | ...*

# Separate Compiler Passes

- The *scanner* reads the input file and divides it into tokens according to the first grammar
- The scanner discards white space and comments
- The *parser* constructs a parse tree (or at least goes through the motions—more about this later) from the token stream according to the second grammar

# Historical Note #1

- Early languages sometimes did not separate lexical structure from phrase structure
  - Early Fortran and Algol dialects allowed spaces anywhere, even in the middle of a keyword
  - Other languages like PL/I allow keywords to be used as identifiers
- This makes them harder to scan and parse
- It also reduces readability



# Historical Note #2

- Some languages have a *fixed-format* lexical structure—column positions are significant
  - One statement per line (i.e. per card)
  - First few columns for statement label
  - Etc.
- Early dialects of Fortran, Cobol, and Basic
- Most modern languages are *free-format*: column positions are ignored

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# Other Grammar Forms

- BNF variations
- EBNF variations
- Syntax diagrams

# BNF Variations

- Some use  $\rightarrow$  or  $=$  instead of  $::=$
- Some leave out the angle brackets and use a distinct typeface for tokens
- Some allow single quotes around tokens, for example to distinguish ‘|’ as a token from | as a meta-symbol

# EBNF Variations

- Additional syntax to simplify some grammar chores:
  - $\{x\}$  to mean zero or more repetitions of  $x$
  - $[x]$  to mean  $x$  is optional (i.e.  $x \mid \langle empty \rangle$ )
  - $()$  for grouping
  - $|$  anywhere to mean a choice among alternatives
  - Quotes around tokens, if necessary, to distinguish from all these meta-symbols

# EBNF Examples

$\langle \text{if-stmt} \rangle ::= \text{if } \langle \text{expr} \rangle \text{ then } \langle \text{stmt} \rangle [\text{else } \langle \text{stmt} \rangle]$

$\langle \text{stmt-list} \rangle ::= \{ \langle \text{stmt} \rangle ; \}$

$\langle \text{thing-list} \rangle ::= \{ (\langle \text{stmt} \rangle \mid \langle \text{declaration} \rangle) ; \}$

$\langle \text{mystery1} \rangle ::= \mathbf{a[1]}$

$\langle \text{mystery2} \rangle ::= \mathbf{'a[1]'}$

- Anything that extends BNF this way is called an Extended BNF: EBNF
- There are many variations

# Syntax Diagrams

- Syntax diagrams (“railroad diagrams”)
- Start with an EBNF grammar
- A simple production is just a chain of boxes (for nonterminals) and ovals (for terminals):

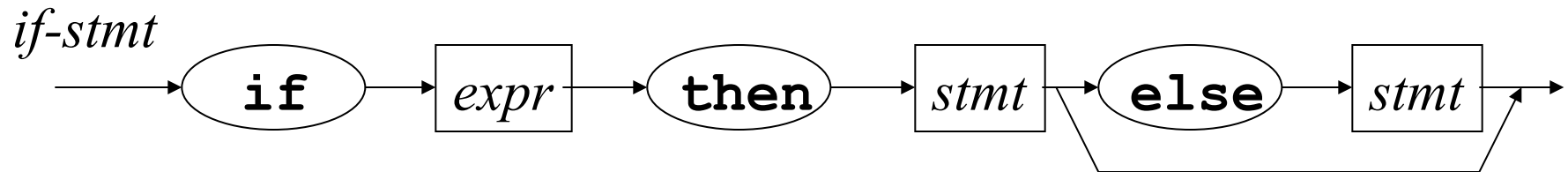
$\langle \text{if-stmt} \rangle ::= \text{if } \langle \text{expr} \rangle \text{ then } \langle \text{stmt} \rangle \text{ else } \langle \text{stmt} \rangle$



# Bypasses

- Square-bracket pieces from the EBNF get paths that bypass them

$\langle if\text{-}stmt \rangle ::= \mathbf{if} \ \langle expr \rangle \ \mathbf{then} \ \langle stmt \rangle \ [\mathbf{else} \ \langle stmt \rangle]$

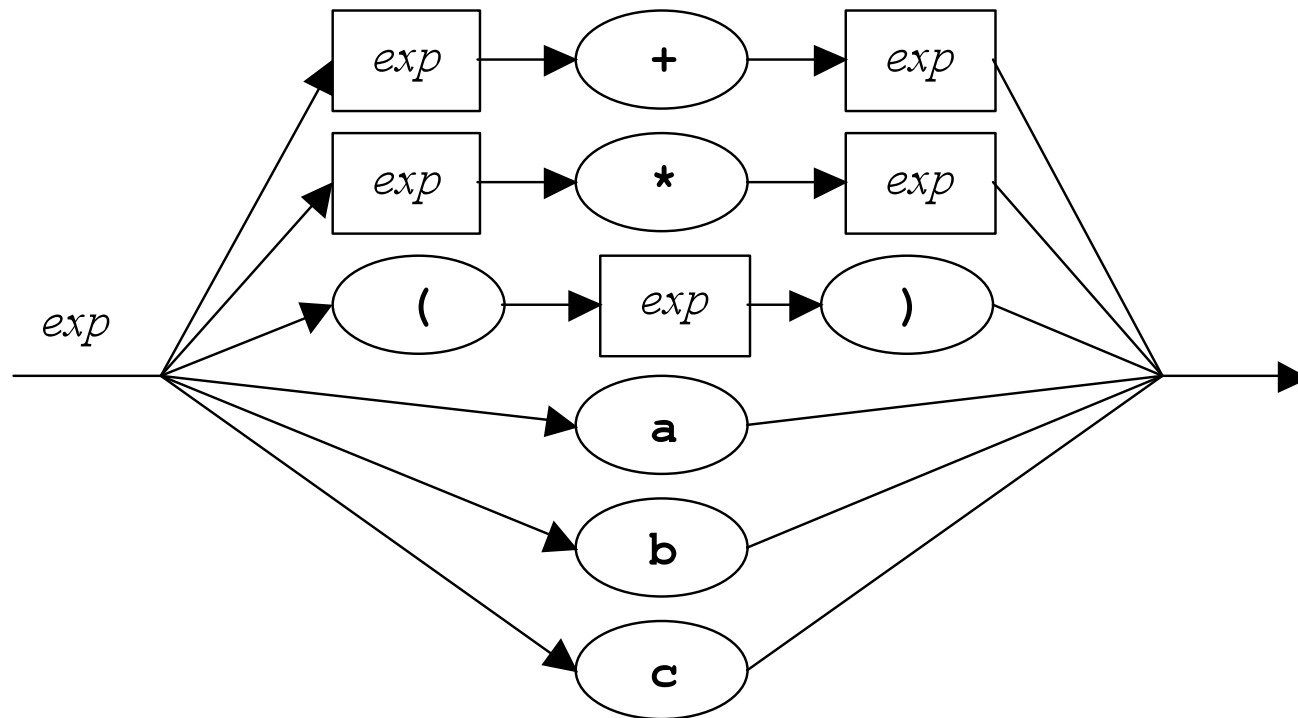




# Branching

- Use branching for multiple productions

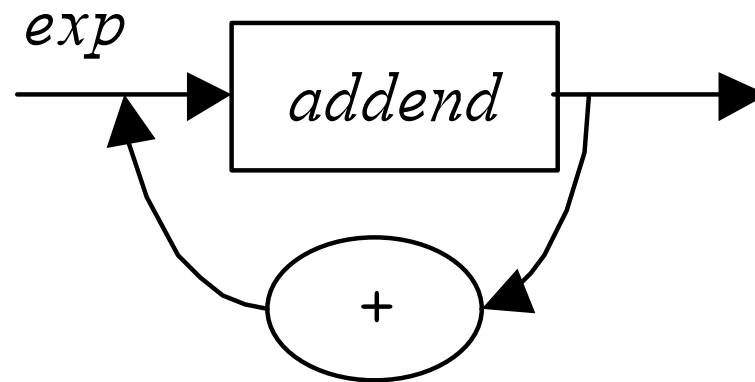
$\langle exp \rangle ::= \langle exp \rangle + \langle exp \rangle \mid \langle exp \rangle * \langle exp \rangle \mid ( \langle exp \rangle )$   
 $\mid \mathbf{a} \mid \mathbf{b} \mid \mathbf{c}$



# Loops

- Use loops for EBNF curly brackets

$\langle exp \rangle ::= \langle addend \rangle \{ + \langle addend \rangle \}$



# Syntax Diagrams, Pro and Con

- Easier for people to read casually
- Harder to read precisely: what will the parse tree look like?
- Harder to make machine readable (for automatic parser-generators)

# Formal Context-Free Grammars

- In the study of formal languages and automata, grammars are expressed in yet another notation:

$$\begin{aligned} S &\rightarrow aSb \mid X \\ X &\rightarrow cX \mid \varepsilon \end{aligned}$$

- These are called *context-free grammars*
- Other kinds of grammars are also studied: *regular grammars* (weaker), *context-sensitive grammars* (stronger), etc.

# Many Other Variations

- BNF and EBNF ideas are widely used
- Exact notation differs, in spite of occasional efforts to get uniformity
- But as long as you understand the ideas, differences in notation are easy to pick up

# Example

*WhileStatement:*

while ( *Expression* ) *Statement*

*DoStatement:*

do *Statement* while ( *Expression* ) ;

*BasicForStatement:*

for ( *ForInit*<sub>opt</sub> ; *Expression*<sub>opt</sub> ; *ForUpdate*<sub>opt</sub> )  
    *Statement*

[from *The Java™ Language Specification*,  
Third Edition, James Gosling et. al.]

# Conclusion

- We use grammars to define programming language syntax, both lexical structure and phrase structure
- Connection between theory and practice
  - Two grammars, two compiler passes
  - Parser-generators can write code for those two passes automatically from grammars

# Conclusion, Continued

- Multiple audiences for a grammar
  - Novices want to find out what legal programs look like
  - Experts—advanced users and language system implementers—want an exact, detailed definition
  - Tools—parser and scanner generators—want an exact, detailed definition in a particular, machine-readable form