

Università di Cagliari



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The Structure of the English Sentence



Syntax is the way in which words are arranged to show relationships of meaning within sentences. It is the study of sentence structure, in other words

Sentences are constructions that can stand on their own as statements or utterances, and have a syntactic structure, generally made of a subject and a predicate.

The Structure of the English Sentence



1. She asked for a book
2. Come in
3. The horse ran away because the train was noisy.

The sentence is the largest unit to which syntactic rules apply.

SENTENCE WORD ORDER

The English language generally follows a strict word order in the affirmative and interrogative sentences:

AFFIRMATIVE SENTENCES

Subject/Verb/Object (Predicate): SVO

HE DRIVES A CAR

THEY FOLLOW THE ROAD

THE DOCTOR IS COMING (*translate into Italian*)

IT IS A BEAUTIFUL DAY (*translate into Italian*)

Why?

Lack of inflection

SENTENCE WORD ORDER

QUESTIONS OR INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES HAVE INVERTED WORD ORDER.

THEY MUST ALWAYS CONTAIN AN AUXILIARY VERB;

Verb/Subject/ Object:

ARE THEY HAPPY?

Aux. Verb/S/Verb/ Obj.

DOES HE DRIVE A CAR?

WAS HE TALKING TO YOU?

SENTENCES (PERIODO-FRASE) BEGIN WITH A CAPITAL LETTER AND END WITH A FULL STOP.

AND NOW FOR SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT

A sentence is something which begins with a capital letter and ends with a full stop? This traditional definition, which applies only to the written language, is faulty on three counts.

- We have to allow for question marks and exclamation marks as well (as in the first sentence of this caption).
- Punctuation is often not used in writing, and yet we still know when a construction is a sentence. Many advertisements, public notices, newspaper headlines, and legal documents lack punctuation marks.
- People disagree about the best way to punctuate a text. In particular, some manuals of style say we should never end a

sentence before such words as *and* or *but*, and this rule is often taught in schools. Its source lies in the uncontrolled way in which young children use *and* in their early written work, reflecting its frequency in natural conversation. But there are other manuals which accept that authors often do begin sentences in this way (usually to emphasize a contrast in meaning), and these do not condemn the usage. It is a regular feature of the style of the present author, who finds it on occasion a much more dramatic and rhythmical way of drawing a contrast than to use the various alternatives available. To replace *but* by *however* two sentences above, for example, would be to slow down the movement of the paragraph quite noticeably – in his view an unnecessary change of pace in a piece of text which wishes to make its point quickly and economically.

SENTENCE WORD ORDER

for and Macintosh Windows available
Hot Potatoes is

HOT POTATOES IS AVAILABLE FOR MACINTOSH
AND WINDOWS

went skating Mark and Sally on Saturday

MARK AND SALLY WENT SKATING ON SATURDAY

way cool ice cream eating is to good
off a

EATING ICE CREAM IS A GOOD WAY TO COOL OFF

SENTENCE WORD ORDER

swimming go ? Kelly and I allowed are to

the and walked store candy Mary some bought
to .

ice
cream nuts top on like and I chocolate with
syrup

TYPES OF SENTENCES



Major sentences are the most frequent. They can be broken down into a specific and logical pattern of elements: **Subject/Verb/Object**

The stock broker **bought many shares** for his client;

The price of petrol **has been rising**

MINOR SENTENCES

Minor sentences are not constructed in a regular way. They use abnormal patterns which cannot be clearly analysed into a sequence of clause elements, as can major sentences. There are only a few minor sentence types, but instances of each type are frequently used in everyday conversation and when conversations are represented in fiction. They are also common in certain types of written language, such as notices, headlines, labels, advertisements, sub-headings, and other settings where a message is presented as a 'block'.

Minor sentences do not follow all the rules of grammar. For example, in a major sentence the verbs can change their persons: *How do you manage?* > *How does he manage?* But the greeting *How do you do?* is a minor sentence, and we cannot change the person to **How does he do?* (without changing the sense

into something quite different). Nor can we change the tense and ask **How did you do?* The sentence has to be learned as a whole, and used as an idiom (p.162).

It will be seen from this example that some types of minor sentence look quite complex – so much so that on a first impression they might be thought to be displaying a major pattern. But in each case there is something 'odd' about them. For example, one type uses an archaic verb form (the subjunctive) to express wishes, as in *God save the Queen!* and *Heaven forbid!* Another type uses question words idiosyncratically: *How come she's gone out?* These are minor sentences because it is not possible to introduce the full range of normal grammatical changes into their structure, to produce such forms as *God saves the Queen* or *God doesn't save the Queen*. Only major sentences allow systematic variations of this kind.

SOME MINOR SENTENCE TYPES

- Formulae for stereotyped social situations, such as *Hello, How do you do?, Thanks, and Cheers!*
- Emotional or functional noises (traditionally called *interjections*), many of which do not follow the normal pronunciation patterns of the language, such as *Eh?, Ugh!, Owl!, Tut tut, and Shh!*
- Proverbs or pithy sayings (*aphorisms*, p. 163), such as *Easy come, easy go* or *Least said, soonest mended.*
- Abbreviated forms, such as are used in postcards, instructions, or commentaries, as in *Wish you were here, Mix well, and One lap more.*
- Words and phrases used as exclamations, questions, and commands, such as *Nice day!, Taxi?, and All aboard!*

EXIT

NO SMOKING

FINANCIAL TIMES

Monday July 10 1989

FOR SALE

Ford Fiesta 1.1 1988 50000
more than 100000 miles
also 1988 Ford Fiesta 1.1 1988 50000
more than 100000 miles
also 1988 Ford Fiesta 1.1 1988 50000
more than 100000 miles
also 1988 Ford Fiesta 1.1 1988 50000
more than 100000 miles

NO PARKING

TAXI

RAMSEY STREET

THE SENTENCE

IT MUST CONTAIN ONE OR MORE CLAUSES (PROPOSIZIONE):

I (S) quickly (A) shut (V) the door.

I (S) quickly (A) shut (V) the door
(**INDEPENDENT CLAUSE**), before the dog could
come in (**DEPENDENT CLAUSE**).

CLAUSES

The clause (proposizione) is a unit that can be analysed into the elements S, V, C, O and A (Subject, Verb, Complement, Object and Adverbial)

It usually contains more than one element but must always contain a verb.

SUBJECT, VERB AND OBJECT are the usual components of a clause.

My father gave me this watch;

John was listening to his radio.

DISCOURSE LEVEL

Sentence Connectivity

larger than the sentence text

We arrived at the shop just as the butcher was clearing away. As a result the big dogs enjoyed their unexpected bones, and the little puppies liked the scraps.

SENTENCE LEVEL

Sentence

the big dogs enjoyed their unexpected bones, and the little puppies liked the scraps.

CLAUSE LEVEL

Clause

the big dogs enjoyed their unexpected bones

PHRASE LEVEL

Phrase

their unexpected bones

WORD LEVEL

Word

un- expect -ed

CLAUSE ELEMENTS

5 types of clause elements, each expressing a particular kind of meaning.

The President has nominated Mr. Monti Prime Minister last year

The first element is the Subject, which identifies the theme or topic of the clause;

The Verb expresses a wide range of meanings: actions, sensations, states of being;

The Object identifies who or what has been affected by the action of the verb;

The Complement gives extra information about another clause element;

The Adverbial adds information about the situation (Cfr. 221)

SENTENCES

Examples of simple (ONE VERB)
sentence (or clause) structures:

**John (S) carefully (A) searched (V) the
room (O)**

**The girl (S) is (V) now (A) a student (C) at
a large university (A)**

**His brother (S) grew (V) happier (C)
gradually (A)**

It (S) rained (V) steadily (A) all day (A)

SIMPLE SENTENCES

SIMPLE SENTENCES consist of one finite clause.

The length of a simple sentence is not determinant.

The noun phrases which form the subject, object or adverbial of the sentence do not limit its simplicity:

A number of people saw the terrible accident in the early afternoon

FINITE VERBS



Finite verbs, sometimes called **main verbs**, are limited by time (tense), person, and number.

Who **killed** the president?

The broker **bought** shares in Wall Street

NON-FINITE VERBS

A nonfinite verb form - such as a participle, infinitive, or gerund - is not limited by time (tense), person, and number.

The shares **bought** in Wall Street soon lost their original value;

Going to the airport I met Julia

To save time, I ran towards the station

SENTENCE FUNCTIONS

4 Classical types of sentence function:

STATEMENT, QUESTION, COMMAND, EXCLAMATION

A statement is a sentence whose purpose is to state, i.e. to convey information. Statements traditionally have a declarative structure, in the sense that they declare or make something known

SENTENCE FUNCTIONS



A question is a sentence which seeks information.

3 types of questions:

- a) Yes-no questions
- b) Wh-questions
- c) Alternative questions (containing the connective *or*).

SENTENCE FUNCTIONS



Commands or directives are sentences which instruct someone to do something.

Commanding, Inviting, Warning, Pleading,
Suggesting, Advising, Permitting, Requesting,
Mediating, Expressing good wishes, Expressing an
imprecation

SENTENCE FUNCTIONS



Exclamations are sentences which show that a person has been impressed or roused by something.

Single word or short phrase:

Oh Dear!

Gosh!

What a mess!

How nice!

Multiple Sentences

As we mentioned earlier, sentences which contain only one clause are called simple sentences.

Multiple sentences can be analysed into more than one clause and are the majority in formal writing.

Multiple sentences are of two broad kinds: compound and complex

Multiple Sentences

A COMPOUND SENTENCE consists of more finite clauses linked together by a co-ordinating conjunction (and, or, but):

He has quarrelled with the chairman and he has resigned;

The baby was crying but his mother wasn't listening.

He returned from work and immediately went to bed.

Complex Sentences

A COMPLEX SENTENCE contains two or more finite clauses linked together so that one clause is an integral part of the other:

Grammatical S.: *It is late* (simple independent sentence)

Ungrammatical S.: *Because it is late* (subordinate or dependent clause)

Grammatical: *I am going home because it is late* (complex sentence: independent with dependent).

Complex Sentences

I am going home because it is late

The clause *because it is late* forms the **ADVERBIAL** (or prepositional phrase) of the **dependent clause**.

The **adverbial** tells us the reason why the subject is *GOING HOME*.

It is the **subordinate** or **dependent clause**.

Complex Sentences

He locked the gate before letting the clients out.

The clause *before letting the clients out* forms the **ADVERBIAL** (or prepositional phrase) of the **dependent clause**.

The adverbial tells us which action happened before the subject ***LOCKED THE GATE.***

It is the subordinate or dependent clause.

Subordinate Clauses

SUBORDINATE CLAUSES are not always adverbials.

They can be **relative clauses**, or clauses that function as subjects or objects.

The heavy rain which had fallen the night before caused many damages to the town;

That he won the marathon surprised everyone;

We asked her what to do;

THE PHRASE



Phrases are larger structural units that come between the word and the clause (or sentence).

They represent the SUBJECT, VERB, OBJECT, COMPLEMENT OR ADVERBIAL of the clause.

That boy / can not open / that heavy door

THE PHRASE

Phrases are normally multi-words, but also single words can be regarded as phrases, as long as they are expandable into a larger unit:

SUPPER, OUR SUPPER, THE BIG SUPPER

The second and third examples must be considered as expansions of a central element or HEAD.

THE PHRASE



Hilary/ couldn't open/ the big windows
/for a long time

If the central word - or head- of a phrase is a noun, then we call it a NOUN PHRASE.

Conversely, if its head is a verb, we would call it a VERB PHRASE.

THE PHRASE



⌘ the nice neighbor (noun phrase)

⌘ were waiting for the movie (verb phrase)

None of these examples contains a subject doing an action (subject-verb). Therefore, each example is merely a group of words called a **PHRASE**.

THE PHRASE



NOUN PHRASE (*It, John, the girl, that beautiful blue-eyed boy*);

VERB PHRASE (*gave, has been challenged, having been pushed*);

ADJECTIVE PHRASE (*very much happier, nice, rather happy*);

PREPOSITIONAL / ADVERBIAL PHRASE
(*at a large university, for me ; carefully, steadily, all day, every year, for a long time*).