VIII. INTERNATIONAL "BAŞKENT" CONGRESS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES PROCEEDINGS BOOK

FEBRUARY 04-06, 2023

ISBN:978-975-00544-3-3

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TÜRKİYE, ALGERIA, ALBANIA, AZERBAIJAN, BANGLADESH, CHINA, ETHIOPIA, FRANCE, IRAN, INDIA, INDONESIA, ITALY, KAZAKHISTAN, KOSOVO, LAOS, MOROCCO, NORTH MACEDONIA, NIGERIA, PAKISTAN, PHILIPPINES, PORTUGAL, POLAND, SOUTH AFRICA, SPAIN, THAILAND, UNITED STATES OF AMERICA, VIETNAM, UZBEKISTAN, UNITED KINGDOM

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(ONLINE & FACE TO FACE PARTICIPATION)

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BZT AKADEMİ YAYINEVİ®
BZT ACADEMY PUBLISHING HOUSE©
TURKEY, GERMANY
TR: +90543 671 0123 GR: +491774586777

8th INTERNATIONAL BASKENT CONGRESS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

FEBRUARY 04-06, 2023

ONLINE & IN-PERSON PARTICIPATION

ZOOM & ANKARA, TURKIYE

EDITORS

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BZT ACADEMY PUBLISHING HOUSE
Publishing Date: 13.02.2023
ISBN: 978-975-00544-3-3

CONGRESS ID

CONGRESS NAME

8TH INTERNATIONAL BASKENT CONGRESS ON HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

DATE AND VENUE

FEBRUARY 04-06, 2023

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SEMANTIC ROLES OF THE SUBJECT IN THE ENGLISH SENTENCES

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ABSTRACT

Linguists are often divided into more or less separate fields of study: phonology - sounds; morphology - the shape of words and a f ixes; syntax - the ways words are combined into larger structures including sentences; semantics - meaning; pragmatics - language in a social context; discourse - language larger than a sentence. This paper will focus primarily on syntax, semantics, and discourse, with brief relation to morphology and pragmatics. Structure and meaning are always inextricably bound. English sentences in detail are important to understand the overall structure of the simple sentence. This paper there will be examined the internal structure of some short, simple sentences. What these sentences will dramatically illustrate is that English speakers exploit a very small number of basic sentence-making structures and these basic structures are used over and over again to create increasingly long and complex utterances.

Key words: English language, subject, sentences, linguistics

INTRODUCTION

Although many of these sentences are closely related, careful scrutiny should convince you that no two are identical in form. And this is the key to the e f iciency of language - the same words can be combined into di f erent structures and di f erent words can be put into the same structures. Theoretically, the speakers of any language can produce an infinite number of sentences with a finite number of words and structures. Authors of syntax textbooks face one significant problem. The structure of any language is immensely complex; every structure seems to be connected to every other structure.

Words and phrases

the bear, Goldy, my porridge, ate, eaten, gave, given, was, to, by

Goldy ate.	Goldy gave the bear my porridge.
Goldy ate my porridge.	Goldy gave my porridge to the bear.
The bear ate.	The bear was given my porridge.
The bear ate my porridge.	My porridge was given to the bear.

Figure 1.1. Words and phrases (Brek, 1999, p.10)

THE SUBJECT

The di f erence between the subject and predicate is probably the first fact of English grammar that any school child learns, and it is a significant fact. The very terms "subject" and "predicate" provide some clue as to the distinction being made. The grammatical subject of the sentence is often the conversational subject, i.e., the person or thing that the sentence is about. The predicate often makes a comment about that subject, i.e., it "predicates." In most languages, a sentence does not require a word or phrase that functions as a subject.

For this reason, English is often called a subject-dominant language. According to one researcher, there are only seven languages in the world in which the main verb is required to have a subject and English is one of them (Gilligan [1987], cited in Lambrecht, 1994, p. 191).

SYNTAX OF THE SUBJECT

The distinction between the subject and predicate is the basic division within the sentence. Grammarians have been aware of this distinction for millennia and in modern times a number of di f erent graphic devices have been employed to capture this division. Early twentieth-century school grammars drew a line between the subject and the predicate.

Children | love animals.

The generative grammars of the 1970s exploited tree diagrams in which the subject (called the NP for noun phrase) branches left and the predicate (called VP for verb phrase) branches right. S stands for sentence. The following graphic says that every sentence contains an NP and a VP, in other words, a subject and a predicate.

The construction grammars of the 1990s use the term predicate and exploit boxes to illustrate the division between the subject and the predicate. A simple subject is always a noun phrase and a noun phrase is a proper name, a pronoun, a noun, or a noun plus its modifiers.

The basic structure of a noun phrase

noun	rice	music	boys	hatred
noun + modifiers	a book some books	this bike these bikes	that idiot those idiots	the dog two dogs
proper	Jane Smith	Chicago	George Washington	

Figure 1.2. The basic structure of NP (Brek, 1999, p.12)

Pronouns di f er from other noun phrases in that they are used only after the noun to which they refer, i.e., the referent, has already been introduced into the narrative or conversation.

Examples:

I can't eat mango.

They give me a rash.

I like Angelina Jolie.

He is a fine actor.

The dog is upset.

She doesn't want to go to the party.

In many European languages (e.g., Russian, Greek, and Lithuanian), the subject receives a special su f ix to mark its subject (or nominative) status. Modern English subjects carry no special endings, but they are usually the first structure in the sentence.

Subject	Predicate
Josephine	danced all night.
Your kids	ate all the candy.
The flood	destroyed their new condo.
Skill	is essential.
It	isn't important.
She	offered me her new bike.

Figure 1.3. Subject and predicate (Brek, 1999, p.12)

Putting the predicate first in any one of these sentences produces an ungrammatical utterance—danced * all night Josephine; *Ate all the candy your kids, *lsn't important it.

A subject is a far simpler structure than a predicate. In a simple sentence, a subject is a single structure, while a predicate can have internal structure, i.e., structures within structures.

Figure 1.4. Subject and predicate (Brek, 1999, p.13)

English subjects have a profound effect on other grammatical categories in the sentence. In some instances, the subject controls the form of the verb. If a subject is singular (and third person) and the verb is in the present tense, that verb must carry a special singular marker (-s) as in *Sue smokes and My brother lies.* The subject also has a special role in the creation of questions that are typically answered "yes" or "no." Notice what happens when the following statements are turned into yes/no questions. (In these examples the verbs are in boldface and the subject is double underlined.)

Lars **can attend** the party.	**Can** Lars **attend** the party?
Kate **is repairing** your computer.	**Is** Kate **repairing** your computer?
Your teacher **was fired**.	**Was** your teacher **fired**?
Erin **has finished** her homework.	**Has** Erin **finished** her homework?

Figure 1.5. Subjects and predicates (Brek, 1999, p.14)

In each case, when the question is produced, the first verb (i.e., the auxiliary verb) is moved to a position in front of the subject, leaving the second verb behind. As a result, the subject of the question is surrounded by verbs. Of course native or fuent speakers of English never have to think about all this in constructing a question; they unconsciously identify the subject and place the auxiliary verb in front of it. The subject also controls the structure of so-called tag questions, those little questions speakers put at the end of a statement in order to seek confirmation:

- *Luka likes Stela, doesn't he? Sia left, didn't she?*

Note that he refects the male status of the subject Luka, and she refects the female status of Sia. Speakers of English couldn't perform any of these operations unless they could intuitively identify the subject of the sentence. Number agreement and the creation of a question or tag question are true diagnostics for subjecthood. Only subjects stand in these relationships to the verb. While word order is not a definitive diagnostic, it is extremely useful. All of the graphic devices displayed above indicate a subject followed by a predicate. These graphics refect prototypical word order. While there are certainly exceptions, e.g., A Corvette he wants now, the first NP in an English sentence is typically the subject. When speakers choose to put an NP other than the subject first in the sentence it is almost always because they want to signal something special like surprise or annoyance.

SEMANTIC ROLES OF THE SUBJECT

It is of course the semantic component of the subject that is most salient to speakers. Even small children intuitively recognize some sort of division between a "doer" and an "action." In *Jack yelled, Bonnie studied all night,* and *The child put the candy in her pocket, Jack,* Bonnie, and the child are all "doers" engaging in some activity. This division between the doer and the action is often what people point to when they distinguish between the subject and the predicate. But to define the subject as a doer and the predicate as an action would be misleading. In the following sentences, the subject is in no way doing anything - Susan is tall; The wall looked dirty; My mother was mugged last night. If the subject is not necessarily a doer, what is it? Subjects play a number of diferent semantic roles in English and "doer of the action" is only one of them. (These roles are also called thematic or theta roles in some syntactic models.) There is an identifcation below of some of the most common semantic roles played

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