Basics of Language for Language Learners

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In the preceding chapter we looked at noun phrases, which are used to refer to things. Typically, noun phrases form parts of sentences. Generally speaking, sentences express properties of the things that noun phrases refer to or relationships between the things. The precise literal content that a sentence expresses and the communicative function that it performs are dependent on its form, by which we mean the order in which the words appear and whether and how the words are marked grammatically.

We focus in this chapter on the two main contributions of form: (a) the literal content of a sentence, that is, the relationships that the sentence expresses and the properties that are attributed to participants; and (b) the function of the sentence, that is, whether it is a statement, a question, a request, or a command.

Some Errors in English

As before, we begin with some typical errors that learners of English make because the rules of their language are different from those of English. These errors highlight the differences:

_Dutch:_

(1) I must at once my sister see.

1. These errors are taken from Michael Swan and Bernard Smith, _Learner English_ (2001), a rich compendium of errors that native speakers of languages other than English make when learning English.
German:
(2) You speak very well German.
(3) On Tuesday have we a holiday.

French:
(4) She lives not in Paris.
(5) The telephone they repaired it?
(6) She is the woman the most beautiful that I know.

Italian:
(7) Can you suggest us a good restaurant?
(8) Say me the truth.

Spanish:
(9) Do you can swim?
   Maria cans swim.
(10) I no understand.

Russian:
(11) At what are you looking? [grammatical but not colloquial]
    With whom were you talking when I saw you? [grammatical but not colloquial]
(12) New house is building near cinema that is near us.
(13) I have many money.

Polish:
(14) Tell me where are they.
    She wants to know what do you want.

Farsi:
(15) The man, which I saw him, . . .
    The book, which I gave it to you, . . .

Arabic:
(16) I went to the store for buy some clothes.
(17) He was soldier.

Chinese:
(18) This is a very difficult to solve problem.

Korean:
(19) Many foreigners exist in Seoul.
(20) Tomorrow will hot.
These examples demonstrate that there are two basic factors that go into expressing an idea in a language: (a) the particular words that are used and (b) the order in which they appear. For example, in the Dutch example (1), the words are well chosen, but the order is wrong—the verb see should come before my sister, which should come before at once. This error reflects the fact that the order in the Dutch verb phrase is the reverse of the order in the English verb phrase. On the other hand, in the Italian example (8), the error consists of the fact that the verb say does not function like tell: tell me the truth is grammatical, but *say me the truth is not. This error reflects the fact that Italian uses the same word to express both ‘say’ and ‘tell.’

Let’s look more closely at how an English sentence is constructed and at some of the ways in which other languages differ from English.

**Verbs and Verb Phrases**

Verbs are the key to expressing a relation or a property, so we will begin with verbs and the phrases that are built around them. With each verb are associated a number of roles, which distinguish the various participants in a relation. For example, in a sentence like The dog gave its owner the ball, there are three roles: the thing given, the giver, and the recipient.

(21) ball THING GIVEN
dog GIVER
owner RECIPIENT

These roles are associated with the verb and form a central part of the verb’s meaning. There may be several verbs in the language that express the same general type of event; in this case, for example, there are send, sell, lend, and so on. Each verb refers to a relation in which something is going from one individual to another. What differs from verb to verb are the fine details of how this transmission takes place and the nature of the possession involved. So, for example, lend is a non-permanent transfer of possession, sell involves money, send involves some medium of transmission (such as the Internet), and so on. What is fundamentally important is that every language is able to express these relations, and it does so by distinguishing the participants in terms of what we have called ‘form’—the order of words and their grammatical marking. Let’s look closely at verbs and consider how they are used in sentences to express specific meanings.

The verb is the heart of a sentence. It tells us something about the scene, or state of affairs, that is being discussed and something about what the various individuals in the scene are doing and their relationships to one another. For example, if we use the verb kick, then we are talking about some event involving a person (or perhaps animal) performing a particular type of action against some other person or object: Sandy kicked the door.
There are two basic types of verbs: main verbs, which are those that describe the state of affairs; and auxiliary verbs, which express things such as possibility (e.g. *can*), necessity (e.g. *must*), and obligation (e.g. *should*). All languages have main verbs, but not all languages have auxiliary verbs. We will talk about the functions of main verbs here, and those of auxiliary verbs in the second half of this chapter.

We begin with a few simple sentences that we have already discussed. We can create them from the now-familiar Table 9.1 as shown in (22).

(22) The dog barked.
   ☺The dog hissed.
   The dog grunted.
   ☺The dog crowed.

As before, we use the symbol ☺ to indicate that a sentence like *The dog crowed* has an odd meaning. The form of these sentences is not a problem—they are the same as the good sentences, like *The dog barked*. This distinction between whether or not the meaning is good and whether or not the form of the sentence is good is an important one.

Table 9.1 indicates the order in which words may appear so that they constitute a grammatical English sentence. (This is what we have called ‘form.’) We already know something about the noun phrase *the dog*: it is an expression that refers to some dog that we are aware of or have been talking about. It satisfies the Determiner Rule, so it conforms to a rule of English. Since the words of column C appear to function in more or less the same way to help form sentences, it is reasonable to conclude that they form a category. This category is distinct from the category noun: you can’t put a verb into the position occupied by a noun and get a good sentence: *The hissed grunted*. We call this category verb.

Since all of these sentences have certain things in common, it is possible to say in a more general way what a simple English sentence looks like. Consider the sentences *The dog barked* and *The dog chased the cat*. Regardless of what follows the verb in these...
examples, there is a noun phrase preceding the verb. This is true no matter what form the noun phrase takes; we could use the huge dog or the huge howling dog or whatever, and it wouldn’t matter.

(23) The huge dog barked.
The huge dog chased the cat.
The huge howling dog barked.
The huge howling dog chased the cat.

Our intuition is that the thing that this phrase refers to is playing the same role with respect to the action described by the verb. This role, which is that of the initiator of a voluntary act, is called agent. We will have more to say about roles in the next section. Since we have rules that say how to make a noun phrase in English, we do not need to list all of the possible components in separate columns. We can just use one column for all of the noun phrases, as shown in Table 9.2.

What this says is that we can create any noun phrase we want, and then follow it with a verb and so on, and we will get a sentence (perhaps a sentence with a * or a ☒, of course).

You may have also noticed that what follows the verb chased and opened looks like a noun phrase, too. In fact, it is true that because of their meanings, some verbs must or may occur with a second noun phrase; they are called transitive verbs. Other verbs, because of their meaning, cannot have a noun phrase following them. They are called intransitive verbs. In English, the second noun phrase typically follows the transitive verb.

(24) The dog chased the cat.
The dog chased the rooster.
☒ The dog chased the door.
* The dog grunted the cat.
* The dog hissed the door.

We have called the noun phrase that follows the verb the object; it is sometimes called the direct object. We say that some verbs, like chase, select direct objects while others, like hiss, do not.
But notice that if a verb selects an object, the object cannot precede the verb:

(25) **Object before Verb**

*The huge dog the cat chased.
*The huge howling dog the cat chased.
*The cat the door opened.
*My roommate the beer drank.
*The fire the house destroyed.

**Object after Verb**

The huge dog chased the cat.
The huge howling dog chased the cat.
The cat opened the door.
My roommate drank the beer.
The fire destroyed the house.

Notice also that if the verb is transitive, the specific action expressed by the sentence is expressed not just by the verb but by the verb together with the object. So *chased the cat* is one action, and *chased the rooster* is a different action.

And notice that where the noun phrase goes determines what role the object that it refers to plays in the event. In *The dog chases the cat*, the agent is the dog, and the thing chased is the cat, not the other way around. This is a very simple but important illustration of how form is used in a language to convey meaning.

These observations suggest several things. First, like the noun, the verb appears in a phrase, and it is the verb phrase (that is, the verb plus the object if it selects one) that describes the action. We can use the method of columns from Table 9.3 to summarize the form of a verb phrase in English.

What this says is that verb phrases can be formed from verbs alone (like *hissed* and *grunted*) or by combining a verb with a following noun phrase (like *chased the cat*).

Second, whether a verb phrase can consist of an intransitive verb alone or a transitive verb and an object depends largely on the meaning of the verb.

The rule for the verb phrase is stated in the following box.

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**Verb Phrase Rule for English**

A verb phrase consists of a verb, possibly followed by a noun phrase (the direct object).

*Restrictions:*

- A verb has a direct object in the verb phrase only if the meaning of the verb allows for a direct object.
- A verb cannot have a direct object if its meaning does not allow for a direct object.

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2. There are some verbs, like *eat* and *drink*, that may be either transitive or intransitive, with essentially the same meaning.
Identifying the Participants in an Event or State

As we have noted, an important function of grammar concerns the roles the participants play in an action expressed by a sentence and the way these roles match up with the phrases in the sentence. Let's now look at this function in more detail.

To see how important it is to get the roles of the various individuals right, consider the automatic translation, done by software, from English to German and back to English shown in Table 9.4. The German sentences correspond word for word to the English ones: die ‘the,’ Kinder ‘children,’ bereit ‘ready,’ zu ‘to,’ essen ‘eat, have dinner.’

The bad translation of The potatoes are ready to eat, and the comparison of the examples, illustrate this very central function of verbs. The difference between #1 and #2 is that in #1, the children are the ones that will be performing the action of eating (they are agents), and in #2, the potatoes are, by contrast, the things that will be eaten; they will have something done to them (we say that the potatoes are the theme of the eating event). But the automatic translation software does not pick this distinction up and treats potatoes as though they were performing an action.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>To German</th>
<th>Back to English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. The children are ready</td>
<td>Die Kinder sind bereit</td>
<td>The children are ready</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to eat.</td>
<td>zu essen.</td>
<td>to have dinner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. The potatoes are ready</td>
<td>Die Kartoffeln sind bereit</td>
<td>The potatoes are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to eat.</td>
<td>zu essen.</td>
<td>ready to have dinner.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

BASIC ROLES

There are many verbs that involve only one participant. In these cases, the phrase that refers to the participant always occupies the subject position in an English sentence.

(26) Robin is snoring.
    Someone called.
    Albert fell.
    The bomb exploded.
    My goldfish died.

Some events just happen, while others are caused. When a sentence describes an event that is caused by a living creature, such as a person or an animal, the cause is called the agent. Robin is an agent in Robin is snoring, and someone is an agent in Someone
called. But, as these examples show, there are many sentences where the cause is not mentioned, yet something happens. Albert falls, moving from a higher position to a lower position (ouch!). The bomb explodes, changing from an intact bomb into a bunch of pieces. My goldfish goes from the state of being alive to the state of being dead. The thing that changes state in sentences like these is also called the theme.

In addition, actions can be caused by inanimate things. For example, we can say The rock broke the window. In this case the rock was the instrument that caused the breaking of the window, but not an agent, because it did not act on its own to break the window.

Recall these examples:

(27) The dog chased the cat.
    The cat chased the dog.

The verb chase expresses a direct action, where one individual affects the other. The phrase to the left of chased refers to the individual that causes or initiates the action—the chaser, in this case, or, more generally, the agent. The phrase to the right of chased refers to the individual that is affected by the action—the “chasee,” in this case, or, more generally, once again the theme.³

In English, the positions to the left and the right of the verb are special. The phrase to the left is what we have called the subject, and the one to the right is the (direct) object. These are called the grammatical functions. We see that the subject of the sentence plays the agent role in the event of chasing, while the object plays the theme role in this event. By distinguishing subject and object, speakers of English are able to keep track of the participants in a direct action: the agent of chasing is expressed as the subject, and the theme is expressed as the object.

This matching up of subject with agent and object with theme holds for the vast majority of English verbs that express direct actions. But the positions in a sentence are used to keep track of other roles as well, for example, the role of verbs that do not express direct actions but states and various types of events. So in the sentence I received

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**Basic Roles**

- **Agent:** The individual (animate thing) that causes or initiates an action.
- **Theme:** The entity that undergoes a change of state or is acted on by an agent.
- **Instrument:** An inanimate thing that brings about a change.

³ The definition of theme given in the box is an approximate definition and sidesteps a number of complex issues that would divert us from our main concerns.
a letter, the subject does not cause the action and is not an agent; it is a recipient. This sentence has the same word order and structure as I wrote a letter, in which the subject I is an agent. The role of I is different in the two sentences.

For this reason, we have to distinguish the positions and the grammatical relations from the roles. Being a subject has to do with the form, while being an agent or having some other role has to do with the meaning. The subject in English is simply the noun phrase that precedes the verb and agrees with it. Its role depends on the particular verb.

Similarly, if you feel the rain on your face, you are not initiating any action, but you know that the subject of feel refers to the individual who is experiencing the sensation.

(28) I feel the rain on my face.

So you are not an agent in this case. But the verb is transitive: it has a subject (I) and a direct object (the rain).

In the following sentence the students are agents of the action, but the room is not physically changed by this action, so it is not a theme:

(29) The students entered the room.

The noun phrase the students is the subject, and the room is a direct object, just as it would be in the following:

(30) The students painted the room.

In (30), the room is the theme of paint, because it is physically changed by the action.

In summary, it is possible to distinguish many different roles that individuals can play, and there are more roles than we have illustrated here. The roles are part of the meaning of a verb, and they are associated with particular phrases in a sentence on the basis of the structure of the sentence. The box below summarizes our discussion thus far.

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**Grammatical Functions**

- An English sentence typically has a **subject**.
- A sentence with an **intransitive** verb has a **subject**; a sentence with a **transitive** verb has a **subject** and an **object**.
- The **roles** associated with a subject and an object depend on the **meaning** of the verb.
GOVERNING ROLES

We say that a verb governs the roles that depend on it. Some verbs, like snore, govern one role, that of agent. Some verbs, like bite, govern two roles, agent and theme. In a simple case such as this, one role is associated with the subject, and a second role is associated with the object. But the situation can be more complicated. In some cases, a verb governs more than two roles. And when this occurs, one of the roles is associated with a phrase that is neither the subject nor the direct object, but something else.

Here is an example in which there are three roles:

(31) Robin gave Pat the book.

In Robin gave Pat the book, Robin is the agent, and the book is the theme. But what about Pat? Since Pat is the one who ends up with the book, the role is neither agent nor theme—it is a third role, which we call goal. The book changes possession from Robin to Pat.

Notice that there are two noun phrases following the verb, but only one can be the direct object; in this case, it is the book, which is the theme, because it undergoes a change of state (in particular, possession). The noun phrase that refers to the goal is typically called the indirect object. Notice also that the indirect object precedes the direct object in English.

Exercise 1: Roles and Grammatical Functions

Each of the following sentences has a subject, and some have direct objects as well. Try to explain what the differences are in the roles associated with the subjects and objects.

a. Sandy opened the door.
b. The door opened.
c. The key opened the door.
d. The tree died.
e. The farmer killed the tree.
f. The tree killed the farmer.
g. I fear the Abominable Snowman.
h. The Abominable Snowman frightens me.
i. It frightens me, all this talk about the Abominable Snowman.
Subject and Object across Languages

The roles assigned to the participants referred to in a sentence are part of the literal content of the sentence. How each role gets assigned depends on the form of the sentence. The need to express the roles of individuals in an event or a state is not a special property of English. It is something that all languages do, because talking about events and states is what people use language for (among other things). So all languages must have a way of indicating in a sentence which participant is the agent, which is the theme, and so on. Typically, languages do this by distinguishing the noun phrases in terms of their form.

There are three main ways in which languages distinguish subject and object. As we have just noted, English does it by position (also called word order). Other languages do it by case, which is a marking on the noun phrase, and by agreement. We illustrate each of these below.

**WORD ORDER**

French is similar to English in the way it uses word order to distinguish subject and object. But in French, there are no indirect objects like there are in English. Consider the examples in (32). As before, the asterisk indicates that the sentence is not grammatical in the language.

\[(32) \quad \text{Je donne le livre à Marie.} \quad \text{I give the book to Mary.}\]

\[\text{*Je donne Marie le livre.} \quad \text{I give Mary the book.}\]

So we would say that in French, the goal role is marked by the preposition à:

\[(33) \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Je donne le livre à Marie} \\
\text{agent theorem goal}
\end{array}\]

In Ojibwa, the direct object comes before the indirect object. The subject is incorporated into the verb in this example:

\[(34) \quad \begin{array}{c}
\text{Ojibwa (Algonquian)}^4 \\
\text{Ng:i:mina: mzhignan Ža:bdi:s} \\
\text{I-gave-it book John}
\end{array}\]

4. Examples from Y. N. Falk, “Ditransitive Constructions.”
And in Palauan and Kinyarwanda, the indirect object comes before the direct object, just as in English:

(35) **Palauan:**  
Ak milstęrir a ręşęčľik a hong.  
I give my friends a book

agent goal theme  
'I give my friends a book.'

(36) **Kinyarwanda:**  
Umugóre aréerekə ábáana amashusho.  
woman shows children pictures

agent goal theme  
The woman is showing the children pictures.'

Notice two things about these examples. First, the roles associated with the verb are the same to the extent that the verbs mean the same things. This is because these verbs express typical relationships that exist in all human societies, such as giving and showing, and all languages have words for these relationships. But different languages use different word orders to designate which part of the sentence corresponds to which role. As we see in the next section, there are languages in which word order is not used for this function; rather, it is done by marking the noun phrases to indicate their grammatical functions.

**CASE**

**Case** is used to mark the function of phrase in a sentence, regardless of where it is located. Consider again these examples from Japanese:

(37) John **ga** sono tegami **o** yon- da  
John that letter read-past

'John read that letter.'

John **ga** sono tegami **o** yon- da- **ka**  
John that letter read- past- question

'Did John read that letter?'

Notice that we did not say earlier what the meanings of **ga** and **o** are. That is because they have no meanings. The particle **ga** indicates that **John** is the subject of **yon-da ‘read’**
while the particle \( o \) indicates that \textit{sono tegami} ‘that letter’ is the object. Therefore, \textit{John} gets the agent role, and \textit{sono tegami} gets the theme role.

Because of this fact, the Japanese subject and object can be in a different order with respect to one another in the sentence, and it is still possible to figure out who is causing the action and what is undergoing it.

(38) \textit{Sono tegami} \( o \) \textit{John} ga yon- da.
\textit{that} \textit{letter} \textit{John} read-past
‘John read that letter.’

\textit{Sono tegami} \( o \) \textit{John} ga yon- da- ka
\textit{that} \textit{letter} \textit{John} read-past-question
‘Did John read that letter?’

Similarly, when there is a direct object and an indirect object, either order of objects is possible.

(39) \textit{John} ga \textit{Mary} ni \textit{sono hon} \( o \) miseta.
\textit{John} \textit{Mary to} \textit{that book} showed
‘John showed that book to Mary.’

\textit{John} ga \textit{sono hon} \( o \) \textit{Mary} ni miseta.
\textit{John} \textit{that book} \textit{Mary to} showed
‘John showed that book to Mary.’

Notice here that the noun phrase that refers to the goal is marked with the case marker \textit{ni}, which we translate as ‘to.’

This flexibility of word order is found in many other languages that use case, for example, Russian and German. In such languages, case is indicated not by particles, as it is in Japanese, but by modifications in the form of words, or their “morphology.” For example, here are some forms used in Russian for the subject and object:

(40) \textbf{Russian:}

\begin{tabular}{|l|l|l|}
\hline
 & \textbf{Subject (Nominative Case)} & \textbf{Object (Accusative Case)} \\
\hline
‘book’ & kn\textit{iga} & kn\textit{igu} \\
‘man’ & ot\textit{ets} & o\textit{tsa} \\
‘beer’ & p\textit{ivo} & p\textit{ivo} \\
\hline
\end{tabular}

5. In the standard transliteration of Russian, the symbol ‘ is used to indicate palatalization. So \textit{t'e} is pronounced “tye.” Similarly, \textit{Igor’} in Example (41) below is pronounced “Igorya.”
So if you say 'the book fell' in Russian, you use the form *kniga* to refer to the book, since it is the subject, but if you say 'I read the book,' you use the form *knigu*, since it is the direct object.

In addition to nominative (nom) and accusative (acc) case, Russian has four other cases: dative (dat), instrumental (inst), genitive (gen), and prepositional (prep). All of these have many uses. The dative case is a typical way to indicate the goal of giving, instrumental case can be used to indicate how some action was accomplished, and genitive case is used to express possession, among other things. Example (41) shows a sentence in which five of the cases are used. We give the Russian sentence using the Russian alphabet and then transliterate it into the Roman alphabet, just for fun.

\[(41) \text{Anna rukami dala Ivanu golubuju knigu Igo'ra.}
\]

\['Anna gave Igor's blue book to Ivan with her hands.'\]

Notice that both *golubuju* 'blue' and *knigu* 'book' are marked with the accusative case. We say that they must “agree” with one another in case. This type of agreement is similar to what we saw in Chapter 8 with respect to gender and number agreement in French and Italian noun phrases.

### Exercise 2: English Case

English shows a remnant of an earlier case system in the form of the pronouns, such as *I, me, she, her, he, him, his, we, us, they, them, who, whom, whose*, but it does so nowhere else in the language.

- Which of the above pronouns are nominative case forms (used for subject), which are accusative (used for object), and which are genitive (used for possession)?
- Using your answer to this question, explain why the following sentences are ungrammatical:
  a. *Me like you very much.*
  b. *Please give it to I.*
  c. *Whom is hungry?*
AGREEMENT

*Agreement* between the noun phrases and the verb is yet a third way to indicate the function of a phrase.

In a language that uses this type of agreement, the form of a noun is the same regardless of whether it is subject or object, just as in English. But the verb has a form that is determined by particular properties of the subject and, in some languages, the properties of the object.

As we noted in Chapter 8, Swahili has 15 noun classes. Interestingly, in a sentence, the verb typically displays a marker that is the same as the class marker of the subject and another marker that is the same as the class marker of the object. The verb is said to *agree* with subject and object. Agreement means that the forms match according to specific rules of the language.

Here are some examples from Swahili. The class marker is indicated by a number. Once again, sg means singular and pl means ‘plural’.

(42) Juma a-li-mw-on-a          Mariam.
    Juma 3sg-past-3sg-see-INDIC Mariam
    ‘Juma saw Mariam’

M-toto     a-ni-ki-soma       ki-tabu.
1sg-child 1sg-PP-7sg-read 7sg-book
‘The child is reading the book’

Ki-tabu    wa-na-ki-soma    wa-toto.
7sg-book 2pl-PP-7sg-read 2pl-child
‘The children are reading the book.’

While the precise shape of the class markers attached to a verb may be different from that attached to a noun, the class marker attached to the verb is specifically chosen for the class of the noun that it agrees with.

PREPOSITIONS

In English some roles may be expressed by another type of phrase, called a *prepositional phrase*. Some examples are given in (43). The words marked in boldface are members of the category *preposition*. The prepositional phrases are underlined.

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6. In these examples, **INDIC** means “indicative,” which means roughly that the sentence is about a concrete reality and is not a hypothetical or an imperative, and PP means “present progressive.”
(43) a. Sandy sailed to Salem.
   agent          goal

b. Sandy smashed the window with a hammer.
   agent               theme          instrument

Here is another example with three roles:

(44) I borrowed this book from the library.

In this sentence, the role of one of the participants in the scene, the library, is identified by using a preposition. The preposition from in this sentence identifies the source of the book. The source is the origin of the change. Notice that this role is associated not with either subject or object, but with a preposition.

The reason why this example is important is that it shows that verbs and prepositions can work together to identify certain roles in the sentence. The verb governs certain roles directly, through the subject and object, and the prepositions supply the others.

We have seen that the position of a noun phrase can perform this function in English—for example, the subject of give is the agent, and there can be two objects. But while the concept of borrowing involves three roles—an agent, a theme, and a source—borrow does not appear with two objects.

(45) *I borrowed the library the book.

The proposition from has to be used to mark the source on behalf of the verb borrow.

The phenomenon that we see here is very widespread. It is so important because in order to use a verb correctly, it is necessary to know how to identify all of the participants in the scene described by the verb.

The box below summarizes the roles that we have discussed.

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**Summary of Roles**

**Agent:** The individual (animate thing) that causes or initiates an action.

**Theme:** The entity that undergoes a change of state or is acted upon by an agent.

**Instrument:** The inanimate thing that brings about a change.

**Goal:** The direction toward which a change of position, possession, or state moves.

**Source:** The original location of a change.

**Experiencer:** The individual that has a perception, thought, or feeling.
Actives and Passives

In most languages there is more than one way to identify the roles governed by a verb. Thinking about the sentences that we have discussed, we see that there is one general pattern, which we will state as a rule. First, let’s consider the pattern illustrated by the following examples:

(46) a. Robin was snoring  
b. The dog bit the cat.  
c. The bomb exploded.

In the first example, the subject refers to the agent, and there is no theme. In the second example, the subject refers to the agent, and there is a theme. In the third example, there is no agent, and the subject is the theme.

These examples illustrate a general pattern: the subject is reserved for the agent if there is one; if there is no agent, the subject can identify other roles. So we do not expect to find a simple sentence of English with an agent where the agent is not the subject. We summarize our observations in the form of the Agent/Theme Rule (see box below).

The exceptions to #3 of the Agent/Theme Rule involve verbs such as receive, which expresses its theme as direct object and a role other than agent as subject, as illustrated in (47):

(47) I | received | some email | today (from Pat).
    goal                         theme         source

These exceptions have to be learned as part of the meaning of the particular verb.

The Agent/Theme Rule seems a bit rigid, because it says that if there is an agent, it must be the subject. Fortunately, many languages, including English, have ways to get around such rigid rules and introduce some flexibility and variety in how the roles are

Agent/Theme Rule for English

1. If a verb governs the agent role, this role is expressed by the subject.
2. If a verb governs the theme role, and if there is an agent, this role is expressed by:
   a. the direct object or
   b. the object of a preposition, depending on the verb.
3. If there is no agent, the theme is expressed by the subject.

Restriction:
• Clause #3 has exceptions.
identified. In English this flexibility is achieved through the use of the **passive**, illustrated by the following pairs of sentences:

(48) The dog bit the cat.
The cat was bitten by the dog.

Pat opened the door.
The door was opened by Pat.

In the first pair of sentences, the agent is the dog; in the second pair, the agent is Pat. But in *The cat was bitten by the dog*, the subject is not the agent but the theme. And the agent is the object of the preposition *by*. A similar observation can be made about the second pair of sentences.

Looking closely at these sentences, we see that there is a pattern. We can use Figure 9.1 to pick out the significant features that participate in this pattern. What we see is that we can put the direct object into the subject position, and the subject into the preposition phrase with *by*, if we also change the verb *chased* into *was chased*. These two ways of identifying the roles governed by a verb are called **active** and **passive**.

The form of the verb in the passive is that of the past tense in English for regular verbs, and a special form for irregular verbs. We call this form the **passive participle**; some examples are given in (49):

(49) **Present Past** | **Passive Participle**
---|---
**Irregular:**
eat | ate | *(was) eaten*
saw | saw | *(was) seen*
write | wrote | *(was) written*
know | knew | *(was) known*

**Regular:**
chase | chased | *(was) chased*

![Diagram of passive construction](image)

**Figure 9.1** Roles of the passive construction.
deliver  delivered  (was) delivered
carry  carried  (was) carried
toss  tossed  (was) tossed

Active and passive are very general. For almost every active there is a passive, and vice versa, with some limited exceptions. The subject does not have to be an agent; it can be a recipient, as with receive, or an experiencer, as with see, hear:

(50) Robin received some email.
Some email was received by Robin.

Leslie saw the dog.
The dog was seen by Leslie.

Pat heard the music.
The music was heard by Pat.

Now, here is something very important to observe about the passive. Suppose that you wanted to express the idea that something chased the cat, but you didn’t know who or what the agent was. You could say:

(51) Something chased the cat.

But you couldn’t say:

(52) *Chased the cat.

as a full sentence because of the requirement that every non-imperative sentence in English has an explicit subject.

The passive gives us another way to avoid mentioning the agent in this type of case, because in the passive, the requirement that there be a subject is satisfied by the noun phrase that expresses the theme (in the case of chase), that is, the direct object. We can

---

**Active/Passive Rule for English**

A statement can be:
1. active, with roles expressed by subject and object or
2. passive, with:
   a. a form of be followed by the passive participle,
   b. the direct object role identified by the subject, and
   c. the subject role identified by the object of by (which does not have to be included in the sentence).
leave out the prepositional phrase and express just the idea that we want:

(53) The cat was (or was being) chased.

Because a different role is identified by the subject, the sentence has a somewhat different emphasis than the active and can be used for stylistic variety.

Notice that this trick can be used regardless of what role the direct object of the active expresses. For example, we can say the following:

(54) The door was opened.
    Some email was received.
    The dog was seen.
    The music was heard.

The role that is associated with the direct object in the active is associated with the subject in the passive. This observation gets us to our next rule, the Active/Passive Rule (see the box at the bottom of page 150).

There are two additional observations to make about the passive. First, notice that sometimes the passive can be formed when the subject corresponds to the object of a preposition:

(55) We looked at the clowns.
    The clowns were looked at.

    We talked about the proposal.
    The proposal was talked about.

    We sat on the chair.
    The chair was sat on.

What this tells us is that sometimes the preposition combines with the verb to identify the direct object. In other words, the direct object doesn't have to be a noun phrase that immediately follows the verb; it can follow a preposition that is governed by the verb.

Second, the following examples show that the subject of the passive does not have to correspond to a direct object; it can correspond to an indirect object:

(56) I gave Pat a passing grade.
    Pat was given a passing grade.

    You sold me a lemon.
    I was sold a lemon.

And when there is an indirect object, the direct object cannot become the subject of
Exercise 3: Passives

In the following groups of three sentences, there is an active, a passive, and a third type of sentence. While the roles expressed are the same, the grammatical properties of the sentences are different. Describe the grammatical differences between the first, second, and third sentence in each group of three. Which one is passive? Why?

1. The storm sank the boat.
   The boat was sunk by the storm.
   The boat sunk in the storm.

2. The wind opened the door.
   The door was opened by the wind.
   The door opened in the wind.

3. Sandy sent Leslie a letter.
   Leslie was sent a letter by Sandy.
   Leslie got a letter from Sandy.

the passive for many speakers.

(57) (*) A passing grade was given Pat.
     (*) A lemon was sold me.

What this means is that, strictly speaking, clause #2b of the Active/Passive Rule should refer not to the direct object but to the first object noun phrase following the verb.

Time and Truth

As we have seen thus far, a sentence expresses a relationship or a property. We have not yet discussed two other important aspects of sentences that many languages also express: the time of a relationship and the truth of a description. These are complex topics, and we will only scratch the surface here. As a language learner, you will have to come to terms with the different ways in which your native language and the language you are learning carry out these functions.

To get a feel for how this part of the language works, let’s take a look at some more examples showing a “foreign accent” in English:

(58) a. They still discuss the problem.
     b. I study here for a year.
     c. She avoids to go.
     d. I want that you stay.
e. I can't to fix that!

Compare these to the correct forms:

(59) a. They are still discussing the problem
b. I have been studying here for a year.
c. She avoids to going.
d. I want that you to stay.
e. I can't to fix that!

Example (59a) shows that in order to talk about an ongoing event, it is necessary to use a form of the verb be and a verb with -ing. For something spanning a period of time that includes the present, have been . . . -ing is necessary, as shown by example (59b).

The other three examples illustrate other fine details about what form of the verb appears in various contexts. The verb avoid occurs with a verb in the -ing form, as contrasted, for example, with try, which occurs either with -ing or to, and manage, which occurs only with to:

(60) a. She tried to go.
   b. She tried going.
   c. She managed to call.
   d. *She managed calling.

The verb want occurs with to, and not with a full clause that begins with that. In other languages, such as German, the literal translation of (58d) would be the way to say this:

(61) Ich will, dass du bleibst.
    I want that you stay
    ‘I want you to stay.’

And the verb can't appears with the 'bare' form of the verb, that is, one that lacks 'to.' In many languages, such as German, the form of the verb that appears with the counterpart to can is translated as the English infinitival to:

(62) Ich kann nicht das reparieren!
    I can not that to-repair
    ‘I can't fix that.’

Getting this aspect of the grammar right, in English and in other languages, is an important part of speaking without an “accent.” Moreover, it is one of the most difficult areas of grammar for non-natives to master. Let’s take a look at the kinds of meaning differences that are expressed by differences in verb form.
TENSE AND ASPECT

When a sentence is a statement, its verb can have different forms. We will use the most extreme English case to illustrate this phenomenon, that of the verb *to be*:

(63) I am here now.
    You are there now.
    He is here now.
    We are here now.
    They are there now.

I was here yesterday.
You were here yesterday.
He was here yesterday.
We were here yesterday.
They were there yesterday.

Five different forms of the verb are used in sentences like these: *am, was, is, were,* and *are.* Notice that while we say that the verb is “(to) be,” the form *be* does not actually appear in this list. Moreover, some of the verb forms are used to refer to a situation in the present (*am, is, are*), while others are used to refer to a situation in the past (*was, were*).

The different forms of a word make up its *inflections.* The inflections of a verb make up its *conjugation.* The part of the conjugation (that is, the particular form) that plays a role in expressing the time is called *tense.* In these examples we have illustrated present tense and past tense. Present tense of the verb *be* is expressed by *am, is,* and *are.* Past tense is illustrated by *was* and *were.*

The reason to focus on English conjugations is, of course, not to teach you about how English works but to highlight the fact that verb form can be a critical part of what makes up a grammatical sentence in a language. Other languages have conjugations too, and they are more elaborate than those of English. The above English conjugation is translated into French in (64). The verb forms are underlined. *Vous* means ‘you,’ *il* means ‘he,’ *nous* means ‘we,’ and *ils* means ‘they.’ *Maintenant* means ‘now,’ and *hier* means ‘yesterday.’

(64) Je suis ici maintenant.
    ‘I am here now.’
    Vous êtes ici maintenant.
    ‘You are here now.’
    Il est ici maintenant.
    ‘He is here now.’
    Nous sommes ici maintenant.
    ‘We are here now.’
    Ils sont ici maintenant.
    ‘They are here now.’

J’étais ici hier.
‘I was here yesterday.’ (etc.)
Vous étiez ici hier.
Il était ici hier.
Nous étions ici hier.
Ils étaient ici hier.

And such languages are more complex in cases where English is simple. The present tense of *sourire* ‘to smile’ is shown in (65). Notice that the French verb takes a number of different forms, while the English verb takes only two forms.

(65) French
    Je souris.

English
    I smile.
It is important to recognize that tense has to do with the form of a verb. This formal aspect of the verb must be distinguished from time, which has to do with meaning. In English we can express reference to many different times, including the future, but we do not use different forms of the verb in every case. For example, to express the future of *I see my friend* we could say the following:

(66) I am seeing my friend tomorrow.
    I will see my friend tomorrow.
    I am going to see my friend tomorrow.
    or even
    I see my friend tomorrow.
    or
    I am about to see my friend tomorrow.
    I am to see my friend tomorrow.

In most of these cases, the form of the verb *see* is simply *see*, without any inflection. Moreover, the forms that are used in all of these examples are present tense: *am* and *see*. The form *will* is an auxiliary verb (see later discussion) and is also in the present tense. The use of *will* + verb, along with expressions like *am/is/are going to*, here used in the present tense form, express reference to the future, but, it is important to note, they do not do it by using future tense.

The difference between tense and time is very significant, and it is important not to confuse them. As we will see, all languages can refer to time, but not all languages use tense in order to do this. Or they may use tense in some cases (for example, present tense *see*, past tense *saw*), as in English, but may use another means in other cases (for example, future reference but present tense *will see*). **English has no future tense.**

---

**Tense**

Tense has to do with the form of a verb; reference to time has to do with the meaning of a sentence. The meaning may depend on the tense, but it may depend on other things as well, such as expressions that refer to actual times.
VARIATIONS IN VERB FORM

Having come this far, we can begin to imagine other ways in which a language might be different from English. Here are some questions that we could investigate:

- How does the language indicate present time and past time? Do the verbs have inflections for tense in these cases?
- How does the language indicate future time? Do the verbs have inflections for tense in this case?
- How does the language indicate commands? Is there a special command inflection of the verb?
- What is the form of a verb phrase with a transitive verb? Does the direct object go after the verb, as in English, or before it? Or both?
- How is the subject identified? Does the subject precede or follow the verb phrase, or both? Is there perhaps some other way to express the subject?

The more we find out about how English and other languages work, the more questions we can ask, and the more possibilities we can imagine.

Every language has verbs, because every language has to be able to talk about the sorts of things that verbs express—relations between individuals with different roles, states of affairs, events, and so on. Because the verb is the heart of a sentence, it expresses the core of the idea that is expressed by the sentence. The noun phrases express the various players and assorted details about the setting, the time, the place, and so on.

We said earlier that English has only two tenses, present and past, while other languages have future as well. Here's an illustration, using Spanish next to English:

(67) The dog barked at the cat.  El  perro ladró en el gato.
the dog  barked to the cat

Exercise 4: Time and Tense

For each of these sentences, say what the time is and what the tense is:

a. We welcome your inquiries.
b. Did you hear that?
c. How long have you lived here?
d. When are you going to stop smoking?
e. [Phone rings.] That will be the cable guy.
f. So then he goes, “Yuck!”
g. Can you stop by tomorrow at around 3 P.M.?
You can see that where English uses an extra (auxiliary) verb, Spanish simply uses another form of the verb (and thus does inflect for and have future tense). This is one of the main differences between English and other languages. Let’s see how things work in Russian:

(68) ‘The dog barked at the cat.’ Sobaka lajala v kote.
    ‘The dog barks at the cat.’ Sobaka laet v kote.
    ‘The dog will bark at the cat.’ Sobaka budet lajat’ v kote.
    Russian uses a present tense form of the verb be plus the verb to refer to the future in this case, and it is thus similar to English in not having a future tense and in using other means to refer to future time. For another class of verbs (the perfectives), Russian expresses the future by using the present tense of the verb itself:

(69) ‘The dog will bark at the cat.’ Sobaka zalajet v kote.

There are other languages that do not have tense at all. We would translate reference to different times in Chinese as shown in (70). The form le is a particle that denotes completion of the event or what is called “perfective aspect.”

(70) Wo zuotian qu kan dian ying le.
    I yesterday go watch movie PERF
    ‘I went to the movies yesterday.’

    Wo xianzai qu kan dian ying.
    I today go watch movie
    ‘I am going to the movies now.’

    Wo mingtian yao qu kan dian ying.
    I tomorrow go watch movie
    ‘I will go to the movies tomorrow.’

These examples show that there is no inflection for tense in Chinese—the same form of the verb is used regardless of the time referred to, and the time is expressed directly by an adverb.
What these examples also show is that languages can refer to the present, the past, and the future, whether or not they have verb forms (that is, tenses) that specifically pick out a certain time. The commonly held notion that some languages cannot express the future, and that speakers therefore are unable to think about the future, is mistaken. All people can think about and refer to the future, but different languages provide different grammatical means of doing this. Some use inflectional forms, and some do not.

**ASPECT**

Verb forms are used to refer not only to the time of an event but also to properties of the event. The most common properties are whether or not the event has been completed and whether the event occurred at a particular point in time or over an extended period of time. These properties are called **aspect**. A completed event is said to have **perfect** aspect, and an ongoing event is **progressive**.

We saw some aspect errors earlier, in (58). Here are some more, with the correct forms in brackets:

(71) a. I have **seen** him yesterday. [saw]  
    b. All my nineteenth-century ancestors **have lived** here. [lived]  
    c. I **know** him for five years. [have known]  
    d. I **live** in Amsterdam since I was a child. [have lived]  
    e. I **have** a lot of trouble with John at the moment. [am having]  
    f. This house is **belonging** to my father. [belongs]

This area of grammar is a very difficult one in every language for the language learner. Either the other language marks the distinctions differently from the way the learner's language does, or it doesn't mark them at all. Boiling the problem down to its essentials, it is the "problem of aspect" described in the box below.

### The Problem of Aspect

In English,

- when do we use the simple present: I wash
- when do we use the progressive: I am washing
- when do we use the simple past: I washed
- when do we use the perfect: I have washed
- how do we express these differences in languages that do not have exactly the same distinctions?

---

Consider an event that uses the verb *wash*, for example, washing a window. If you say what is happening at the moment that it occurs, you might say *I am washing the window*. This conveys the idea that the action is ongoing—it started in the past, is occurring now, and will continue for a while. If, however, you are speaking now of what happened in the past, you might say *I washed the window*. If there is a question of whether it is still an ongoing event, you might say *I have washed the window (already)*. If you shift your perspective into the past and describe your ongoing action from your current position, you might say *I was washing the window*. But if you say *I wash the window*, this must mean that you do it habitually.

Given all of this, what must *I have been washing* mean? Why?

Aspect in English is expressed by combining *be* and the verb with *-ing* added to it (this is called the **progressive** form of the verb because it expresses progressive aspect), or by combining *have* and the verb with *-ed* or *-en* added to it (this is called **perfect** form because it expresses perfect aspect). All of the forms of *wash* in the present and past tense are summarized in Table 9.5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I wash</td>
<td>habitual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am washing</td>
<td>ongoing now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have washed</td>
<td>completed in the past, relevant to the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I washed</td>
<td>completed in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I was washing</td>
<td>ongoing in the past</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have been washing</td>
<td>ongoing in the past extending into the present</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I had been washing</td>
<td>ongoing in the past extending into a later time in the past</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other languages mark tense and aspect using form, but not all of them do it in the same way that English does. For example, Arabic does not mark tense and aspect by adding forms to the beginning or the end of the basic verb. Rather, it changes the pattern of vowels while holding the consonants constant:

(72)  \[ \text{kt\'ab} \text{ \ 'write'} \quad \text{ak\'tub} \text{ \ 'write (completed)'} \]

The basic form of the verb is *k-t-b*, and the various tenses and aspects (and other forms as well) are made by putting particular vowels in the slots before, after, or between consonants.
Exercise 5

The verb *go* is used in colloquial English to refer to speaking: “So she goes, ‘what did you do with my notebook?’” Can all forms of *go* be used in this way, or are there restrictions? If so, what are they? Give examples.

Russian also marks aspect differently than English does. Verbs in Russian come in two varieties, called “imperfective” and “perfective.” The same meaning may be expressed by two verbs, an imperfective verb and a perfective verb, and the two verbs would be translated the same into English. For example, there are *pisat’/na-pisat’*, both meaning ‘to write.’ Typically, an imperfective verb in Russian is used in the present tense to express a habitual or ongoing action in the present, while the perfective is typically used to refer to future time when it is in the present tense. Used in the past tense, the imperfective indicates a habitual or ongoing action in the past, while the perfective is used in the past tense to indicate a completed action. Here are the present and past tense forms of the Russian verb meaning ‘to write’:

(73) **pisat**

- *(s/he) writes, is writing’
- **napisat** *(s/he) will write’

(74) **pisal**

- ‘wrote, was writing’
- **napisal** ‘wrote (once)’

A few more pairs of verbs are listed in (75). You can see from these examples not only that the perfective is related to the imperfective in form, but also that the relationship is not a regular and predictable one.

(75) **Imperfective** | **Perfective**
---|---
**delat’** | **s-delat’** ‘to do’
**prosit’** | **po-prosit’** ‘to ask’

Exercise 6

Why does the present tense form of the Russian perfective refer to future time?

---

8. The term “perfective” as used with respect to Russian verbs is not the same as the term “perfect” used above for English.

davat’  dat’  ‘to give’
Ja delaju  ‘I do, I am doing’
Ja sdelaju  ‘I will do’

**English Auxiliary Verbs**

We said that English has two tenses, past and present. But we also said that all languages have ways to refer to all types of time, regardless of the forms that they use. Past tense is used to refer to events in the past, and present tense is used to refer to events in the present. But there are other times that we need to refer to, such as the future. We noted that English can use a variety of expressions for referring to the future, none of which are future tense. Here are some examples:

(76) I am seeing my friend tomorrow.
    I will see my friend tomorrow.
    I am going to see my friend tomorrow.
    I see my friend tomorrow.
    I am about to see my friend tomorrow.
    I am to see my friend tomorrow.

Let’s focus on the first two examples, which are special.

The first example involves the progressive form. One key meaning expressed by the progressive is that of an event under way or in progress (which is why it’s called the progressive). We can see that if meeting my friend tomorrow is in some sense already under way now, perhaps because it has already been arranged, then we can use a statement about the present to refer to an event in the future.

The progressive is complex in form; it is a **verbal cluster** made by adding -ing to the bare form of the verb and placing this verb after a form of the verb be. The -ing form is called the present (or progressive) participle. In this particular example, the verb be is inflected for present tense, so we get

(77) am going, is going, are going

The progressive can also be used with past tense to refer to an action that was under way in the past:

(78) was going, were going

A verbal cluster in English typically involves two verbs, although there can be more than two. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the last verb in the sequence is called the **main verb**; the other verb or verbs are **auxiliary verbs**. The main verb expresses the
basic scenario and, in particular, expresses the roles of the participants. The auxiliary verb expresses some aspect of this scenario that does not have to do specifically with the type of event or state of affairs involved.

Notice that there is a rule of English that says where the auxiliary verb goes in the sentence in relation to the main verb. We will come back to this in the next section.

English has a number of auxiliary verbs that express necessity, obligation, possibility, and time: must, should, can, could, will, would. These verbs are called modal verbs, or modals. They appear before the verb in a typical statement. In English, the position of the auxiliary verb is an indicator of the function of a sentence (that is, whether it is a statement, a question, or an imperative); other languages use other formal devices for expressing the function, as we see in the next section.

Expressing Sentence Function

THE MAJOR FUNCTIONS

The major functions of sentences are making statements, asking questions, and making requests or issuing orders, as shown in Table 9.6. The form of the sentence typically indicates what its function is.

There are particular rules that govern the form that a sentence must have in order to be understood as having a particular function. Here are some typical errors that German learners of English make that highlight how important these rules are:

(79) a. When begins the class?
   b. Bought you the textbook?
   c. Where goes this train?
   d. Speaks Ted English?
   e. Why said you that?
9: Expressing Meaning

What is happening here? Compare these questions with the correct English forms:

(80) a. When does the class begin?
    b. Did you buy the textbook?
    c. Where does this train go?
    d. Does Ted speak English?
    e. Why did you say that?

In each of the German sentences, the main verb, that is, the verb that expresses the relation or action, precedes the subject of the sentence:

(81) when begins the class
    1 2 3

But in the correct English sentence, the main verb follows the subject, and an auxiliary verb precedes the subject:

(82) when does the class begin
    1 2 3 4

Notice also that does/did appears only if there is no other auxiliary verb:

(83) when will the class begin
    1 2 3 4

We cannot say *When does the class will begin? or *When does will the class begin?
Rules such as these are challenges for learners of English. Correspondingly, English speakers learning a language such as German have to recognize that there is no do in German questions. The word orders in (79) reflect the normal order of German, as illustrated in (84).

(84) a. Wenn beginnt die Klasse?
   when begins the class
   ‘When does the class begin?’

   b. Kauftest du das Lehrbuch?
   bought you the textbook
   ‘Did you buy the textbook?’

QUESTIONS

There are two types of questions: yes-no or YN-questions, e.g. Are you hungry?, and wh-questions. The competent speaker of English knows implicitly how these functions are expressed in English. Before going on, try Exercise 8 at the bottom of the page to see if you can state explicitly what the basic differences in form are between these three types of sentences (we have already discussed some of these differences).

As we have seen, a statement in English has the following basic form: First, there is a phrase that (usually) refers to something, which is typically called the subject of the sentence. It is followed by one or more verbs, like can, am, is, drinks, drank, and drinking. One of these verbs expresses some kind of relationship or property involving the subject (like drinks) and perhaps other things, like time or necessity. The verb that expresses this relationship may be followed by other things, depending on the verb and the meaning to be expressed. Hence we may have the following:

(85) I can drink that cup of coffee.
I am drinking.

Exercise 8: English Auxiliary Verbs

Suppose you are trying to explain to someone who is learning English how to make statements, questions, and imperatives. Fill in the blank for each of the following:
1. In order to form a statement, _____________________________.
2. In order to form a yes-no question, _____________________________.
3. In order to form an imperative, _____________________________.

*Hint*: Start with the statement, and describe the question and imperative in terms of it. (Your explanation will probably take up more space than the blanks do here.)
She is drinking quickly.
A fish drinks water in the lake.
We drank it all.

In order to keep track of our observations about what we know about English sentences, we introduce the following chart. What appears between parentheses indicates material that is possible but not necessary in a sentence of this type.

***Form of an English statement:***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>ENGLISH FORM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Subject—(Auxiliary Verb)—Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now we see that an English question has a form that distinguishes it from the corresponding statement. While the auxiliary verb follows the subject in the statement, it precedes the subject in the question, as we saw in our discussion of errors in questions. So we have the questions in (86) which correspond to the statements in (85). Notice again that if the statement does not have an auxiliary verb, the corresponding question has the auxiliary verb do/does/did.

(86) Can I drink that cup of coffee?
    Am I drinking?
    Is she drinking quickly?
    Does a fish drink water in the lake?
    Did we drink it all?

So let’s add questions to the chart:

***Forms of English statements and questions:***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>ENGLISH FORM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Subject—(Auxiliary Verb)—Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YN-Question</td>
<td>Auxiliary Verb—Subject—Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, as we have said, other languages must express the same functions, but they may use different forms. We have already looked at German. Here are some examples from Chinese:

(87) Ni shuo Yingyu.
    you speak English
    ‘You speak English.’
Ni shuo-bu-shuo Yingyu?
you speak-not-speak English
‘Do you speak English?’

Ni hui shuo Yingyu.
you can speak English
‘You can speak English.’

Ni hui-bu-hui shuo Yingyu?
you can-not-can speak English
‘Can you speak English?’

For comparison, here are some YN-questions from Japanese; they are very different in form from those in English, German, and Chinese:

(88) Eigo o hanashi-masu.
English obj speak-POLITE
‘You speak English.’

Eigo o hanashi-masu-ka?
English obj speak-POLITE-QUESTION
‘Do you speak English?’

Eigo o hanas-e-masu.
English obj speak-can-POLITE
‘You can speak English.’

Eigo o hanas-e-masu-ka?
English obj speak-can-POLITE-QUESTION
‘Can you speak English?’

We notice four main characteristics of these Japanese sentences:

1. The subject is missing. In Japanese, the subject and other things that are under discussion do not have to be mentioned if they are known from the conversation or the context. Since the subject is ‘you,’ it is known from the context.
2. The verb always comes at the end of the sentence.
3. The auxiliary verb and the main verb are not separate verbs; they form a single complex verb.
4. The YN-question is formed by adding -ka to the verb.
The following chart summarizes:

*Basic Japanese sentence structure:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>FUNCTION</th>
<th>JAPANESE FORM</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>(Subject)—(Other Stuff)—(Complex) Verb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YN-Question</td>
<td>(Subject)—(Other Stuff)—(Complex) Verb—ka</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**WH-QUESTIONS**

Finally, there are questions that ask about the identity of a participant in a relation or about such things as the manner, reason, time, or place. For example, suppose there used to be some ice cream in the freezer, and now there is an empty ice cream container on the kitchen table. We may be pretty certain that someone ate the ice cream. And “someone ate the ice cream” is the content of a sentence that we can express. But we have a particular way of phrasing a question in English to determine the identity of the person who ate the ice cream:

(89) Who ate the ice cream?

This type of question (as mentioned previously) is called a **wh-question**, because it is formed with question words that all begin with *wh-* (*how* is an exception).

Every language has a means for eliciting the specific content of a relation whose general outlines are known (or suspected). That is, every language has wh-questions. But the form of a wh-question varies from language to language. The major variable is whether the wh-word or wh-phrase is in the initial position in the sentence or whether it remains in place.

Here, for comparison, are some wh-questions from other languages with their English translations. Note where the wh-phrases appear:

(90) **Chinese:**

hufei mai-le shenme (ne).
Hufei buy-perf what PRT
‘What did Hufei buy?’

Lisi weishenme cizhi?
Lisi why resign
‘Why did Lisi resign?’

Ni renwei Lisi weishenme cizhi?
you think Lisi why resign
Exercise 9
Give an explicit statement of the rule for forming wh-questions in English.

‘Why do you think Lisi resigned?’
(= ‘What is the reason why Lisi resigned?’)

(91) French:
Jean a acheté quoi?
John has bought what
‘What has John bought?’

Quel livre John a-t-il acheté?
which book John has-he bought
‘Which book did John buy?’

(92) Korean:
Chelswu-ka mues-ul po-ass-ni?
Chelswu-NOM what-ACC see-PAST-Q
‘What did Chelswu see?’

(93) Japanese:
John ga nani o kaimasita-ka?
John subj what obj bought-POLITE Q
‘What did John buy?’

In French, there are two ways to make wh-questions, including one similar to English in that the wh-phrase moves to the front of the sentence. In the other languages illustrated, the wh-phrase does not move to the front of the sentence.

IMPERATIVES

The last basic sentence form is the imperative, which has the function of making a request or giving an order. Before going on, try to say explicitly what the general form of the English imperative is—just keep in mind that there are no auxiliary verbs in the imperative, except do in the negative.

The imperative in many other languages is similar in form to that of English. Here are a few more examples of imperatives from other languages. For each one, try to identify the particular aspect of form that indicates that it is an imperative:
Summary

In this chapter we looked at the content of a sentence, in particular, the relationships that the sentence expresses and the properties that are attributed to participants. We discussed how roles such as theme, agent, and goal can be expressed by case, particles, word order, or verbal agreement in different languages. Then we looked at how the form of a verb plays a role in determining the content and function of the sentence. We compared how this is done in English with how it is done in other languages. Verbs in some languages use inflection to mark distinctions of time and aspect. The verb is also typically involved in marking whether a sentence is a statement, an imperative, or a question.

| TABLE 9.7 |
| Forms of major English sentence functions. |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>English Form</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement</td>
<td>Subject—(Auxiliary Verb)—Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YN-Question</td>
<td>Auxiliary Verb—Subject—Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperative</td>
<td>Main Verb—(Other Stuff)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Additional Exercises

1. Examples (1)–(20) in the text illustrate some typical errors that non-native speakers of English make in English. We have already discussed (1) and (8). For the remaining errors, say what the error consists of (that is, what the speaker did wrong), how to correct the error, and why you think the error occurred. In some cases, the error may show something about the speaker's language, while in other cases, the speaker may be misapplying a rule of English. Try to describe what aspect of English is being modified by the non-native speaker and what the differences are in the way that English and the other language carry out the same function. (You can say what the grammatical English variant would be, but also try to describe what the difference is in a general way.)

2. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. How is the relation expressed by the English word afraid expressed in this language? Does the language designate who is afraid and what she is afraid of in the same way as English?

3. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. How is the relation expressed by the English word likes expressed in this language? Does the language designate who does the liking and what that person likes in the same way as English?

4. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. How are the roles expressed by the arguments of words such as give, tell, sell, send in English designated in this language? Compare this with how English designates these arguments.

5. One of the most difficult challenges in any language is to convey the relationship between the time of speaking and the time of an event. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. How does this language express the future with respect to the time of speaking? Does it systematically distinguish the near future and the more distant future using grammatical form? Does English make this distinction, and if so, how?

6. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. As precisely as you can, describe how to make YN-questions in this language.

7. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. As precisely as you can, describe how to make wh-questions in this language. For example: Where does the wh-phrase go? Are there special orderings of other words in the sentence? What happens when a prepositional phrase is being questioned? What is the relationship between the form of a wh-question and the form of a YN-question in this language? Contrast how this language forms questions with how English forms questions.

8. Choose a language other than English that you are familiar with. As precisely as you can, describe how to form imperatives in this language. Compare with how imperatives are formed in English.
References
