Week 4: Grammatical functions

1. Recap

- one way of looking at the parts of sentences → syntactic categories of words (word class, part of speech) and phrases
- syntactic categories: major (N, V, A, Adv) vs. minor (P, Conj, Det)
- criteria: function (semantics: what sorts of things category members tend to describe) & form (morphology: inflectional, derivational; syntax: position in sentence)
- word classes fuzzy categories, with more and less prototypical members (e.g. for category A *happy* vs. *real*)
- phrasal categories: NP, VP, AP, AdvP, PP

2. Functions in the sentence

> Anybody who's ever played football has been inside these changing rooms. Scuffled tiles on the floor, the smell of disinfectant drifting up from around your ankles. Lines of narrow grey lockers for which you need our own little padlock, their doors stiff from years of being slammed shut a few minutes before kick-off, and one or two missing altogether. Benches in rows so close you'd struggle to slump down opposite a team-mate after a game. One locker door is hanging open at the far end: mine. In the gloom of the changing room, the brilliant white of the Real Madrid shirt hooked over it is luminous (…). Shorts and socks folded neatly beneath on the bench. I'm all alone. I can hear muffled conversations going on at the far end of the room, around the door I'd come in. I take my time getting changed, folding my clothes up next to the kit that's been left for me. A half-open door leads out to the training pitch. Beside it, there's a full-length mirror bolted to the wall. I look the bloke up and down. The all-white Real strip seems to make me look big. Makes me feel big. *This is a kit and a half.* I catch the sound of excited voices. Suddenly I'm aware that I'm looking into my future. There's a rush of satisfaction, nerves stood on end. *I'm here.*
>
> (David Beckham, *My Side*)

- aka GRAMMATICAL RELATIONS, GRAMMATICAL ROLES

(1) $[_{NP}$*I*$]$ $[_{VP}$*catch* $[_{NP}$*the sound of excited voices*$]]$

- NP1: subject; NP2: direct object → same category but different function → in analysing the function of a constituent the whole clause must be considered
- sentences normally contain a subject (§2.1) and predicate (§2.2) but may in addition have extra elements: conjuncts or disjuncts (§2.3)

2.1 The subject

- subjects describe the primary TOPIC of the clause → the most important participant of the discourse at the point when the clause is processed (Givón 1993:94; see also B&B 2001:86-7)
- subjects often AGENTS, i.e. instigators of the action/event described by the predicate (B&B 2001:85, cf. Givón 1993:93 for more information):

(2) $[_{Subj}$I$]$ look the bloke up and down.

- …but see (1) above or (3) below for an illustration that they're not always instigators:

(3) $[_{Subj}$The all-white Real strip$]$ seems to make me look big.

- structural properties (→ tests for subjecthood):

(i) subject-operator inversion: Subj is the constituent that inverts with the verb in *yes-no* question

(4) I can hear muffled conversations.
(5) Can *I* hear muffled conversations?

→ at least for AUXILIARIES; but compare LEXICAL verbs:

(6) I take my time.
(7) Do *I* take my time?

→ subject sandwiched in between *do* and the lexical verb

(8) Romeo: What say'st thou, my dear nurse? (Shakespeare, *Romeo & Juliet*, II, 4)
(9) Aragorn: Fight for us and regain your honour. What say you? WHAT SAY YOU? (*LOTR The Return of the King*)

(ii) verb agreement → if the verb is *be* then there are 3 morphologically distinct forms (at least in the simple present, *am, are, is*); for other verbs only 3Sg is distinct (*-s*):

(10) One locker door *is* hanging open…
(11) Two locker doors *are* hanging open

(iii) case: pronouns → 1/3, Sg/Pl personal pronouns have distinct forms depending on whether they're the subject or the object (compare OE, where *all* nouns were inflected for case (see also Week 2)

(12) *I* catch the sound of excited voices.
(13) They admire *me*.

(iv) phrasal category → almost always NP, sometimes clause (and, exceptionally, PP, see B&B 2001:90)

(14) [$_{Subj=S}$That there are muffled conversations going on] doesn't surprise me.

(v) position → usually clause-initial, right before the predicate though sometimes adverbs precede the subject, as in (15), or intervene between subject and predicate

(15) Suddenly I'm aware…

- non-prototypical subjects: DUMMY subjects (STRUCTURAL subjects)

(16) *There*'s a rush of satisfaction

- very little meaning, "empty place holders" (B&B 2001:86), special pronunciation (can't be stressed) → used purely for grammatical purposes: PDE sentences require a subject (see B&B 2001:91-3 for subjecthood tests performed on this use of *there*)
- a rare instance where the grammar does not seem to be motivated by meaning!
- consider also the similar use of *it* in (see further Week 8):

(17) It doesn't surprise me that there are muffled conversations going on.

2.2 The predicate

- COMPLEMENTS vs. MODIFIERS
- describes what "happens to" the subject → (usually) what is left of the sentence after you've removed the subject (exception: disjuncts, conjuncts; see §2.3 below)
- always a VP, i.e. consists of a V minimally, but often the verb will be accompanied by complements (direct object, indirect object, subject complement, object complement, adverbial complement)
- sometimes even more information is given in the predicate → adjunct (a type of adverbial; not a complement but a modifier)

2.2.1 The direct and indirect object

- indirect objects describe who receives or benefits from something (RECIPIENTS, BENEFACTORS); direct objects tend to be the entities most affected by the action described by the verb (PATIENT) → characterisation works well for indirect objects but direct objects not always clearly affected:

(18) They've given [$O_i$me] [$O_d$my all-white strip].

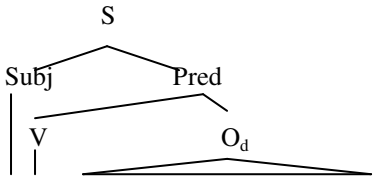
- recipients/benefactors often appear in PPs headed by *to*, in which case they're not called indirect objects but ADVERBIAL COMPLEMENTS (see §2.2.3 below)
- structural properties:

(i) PASSIVISATION → if a sentence can be passivised then constituents that can become the subject of the passive are objects in the original (active) sentence (NB not every object can become the subject of the passive; sometimes active sentences with objects can't be passivised → Week 10):

(19) [$_S$My all-white strip] was given to me (by them).
(20) [$_S$I] was given my all white strip (by them).

(ii) case, see ex. (12) vs. (13), above
(iii) phrasal category: NP, less commonly clause
(iv) basic position: SVO (with O_d and O_i usually SVO_iO_d, see e.g. (18))

- tree structure analysis of a sentence with a direct object:

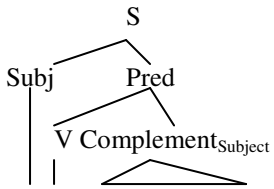


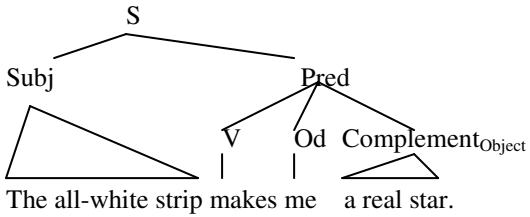
I catch the sound of excited voices.

2.2.2 Predicative complements: subject complement & object complement

- say ('predicate') something about the subject or object (subject and subject complement, and object and object complement, refer to the same entity)

(21) [$_{Subj}$This] is [$_{ComplementSubject}$ a kit and a half].
(22) The all-white strip makes [$_{Objd}$me] [$_{ComplementObject}$a real star].





- structural properties:

  (i) number agreement (arises from coreference):

(23) [*These*] are [*two kits*].
(24) The all-white strip makes [*them*] [*real stars*].

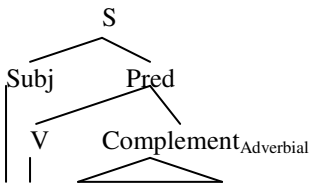
  (ii) phrasal category: NP or AP

(25) [The all-white kit] is [$_{AP}$spectacular].

2.2.3 The adverbial complement

(26) I'm *here*.
(27) I look *into my future*.

- while adverbials sometimes provide extra, "optional" information (see adjuncts, §2.2.4) they may also be necessary to complement a verb → **I'm,*I look*

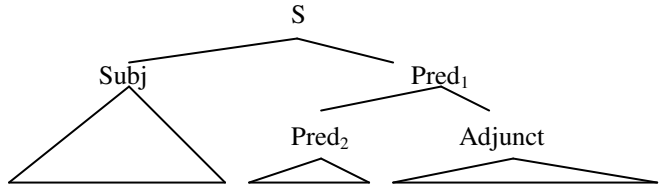


2.2.4 Adjuncts: extra information within the predicate

- adjuncts are adverbials that provide extra information about the event described by the predicate, i.e. about the circumstances (where?, when?, how often?, how?)
- information provided by adjuncts frequently only adds extra details rather than absolutely essential information so you can leave them out (which makes them modifiers not complements); this characteristic may be used to recognise them:

(28) Muffled conversations are going on *at the far end of the room*
(29) Muffled conversations are going on.

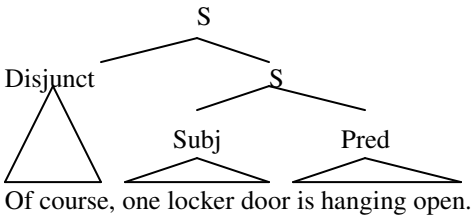
- in (28) *at the far end of the room* says something about the 'going on' of the conversations (part of the predicate) → ADJUNCT



2.3 Adverbials that are not part of the predicate: disjuncts and conjuncts

(30) *Of course*, one locker door is hanging open.
(31) *However*, one locker door is hanging open.

- *of course* in (30) doesn't say anything about (and therefore is not part of!!) the predicate, but it provides a comment (speaker's evaluation/attitude) to what is expressed by the whole sentence → DISJUNCT



- in (31) *however* doesn't specify anything about (and so isn't part of) the predicate, nor about the speaker, so it's no disjunct either; rather it shows how

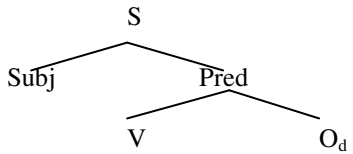
the sentence fits in with the wider context (some sort of opposition with what has been said before) → CONJUNCT

3. Recognising functions: changes since Old English

- in PDE word order is a major clue to determine grammatical function
- but languages may be also rely on inflectional morphology (and the use of prepositions) → interplay between (inflectional) morphology and syntax
- subjects and direct objects in Old vs. Present-day English → OE, like all Germanic languages historically, had a rich system of inflectional morphology, including case marking on nouns; this system gradually collapsed in the course of the Middle English period (see also handout Week 2):

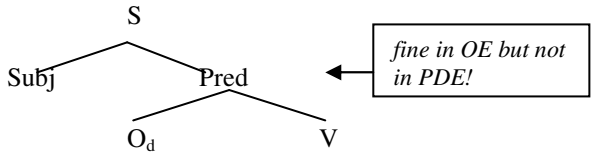
(34) Se guma syhð þone huntan
the man-NOM (S) sees (V) the hunter-ACC (O)
'The man (S) sees (V) the hunter (O)'

(35) Se hunta syhð þone guman
the hunter-NOM (S) sees (V) the man-ACC (O)
'The hunter (S) sees (V) the man (O)'



(36) Se guma þone huntan syhð
the man.NOM (S) the hunter.ACC (O) sees (V)
'The man (S) sees (V) the hunter (O)'

(37) *The man the hunter sees.



→ OE relied on inflectional morphology to mark syntactic function
→ the collapse of the system of inflectional morphology brought with it an increased reliance on WORD ORDER to signal syntactic function (also prepostions)

4. Concluding remarks

- in analysing the functions (subject, direct object, etc.) of constituents we shouldn't just look at their category (NP, VP, etc.) but also at the relation they have to other constituents in the sentence
- the functions have certain semantic-pragmatic and structural properties (morphology, syntax)
- …which can be used as tests when analysing sentences
- the marking of functions in English has changed considerably over the course of the history of the language, with the decline of the system of inflectional morphology occurring hand in hand with an increasing reliance on word order

References

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