

# THE GRAMMAR BOOK

An ESL / EFL  
Teacher's Course

SECOND EDITION

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MARIANNE CELCE-MURCIA  
DIANE LARSEN-FREEMAN



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(WITH HOWARD WILLIAMS)

The publication of *The Grammar Book, Second Edition* was directed by the members of the Newbury House ESL/EFL team at Heinle & Heinle:

Erik Gundersen, Editorial Director  
Charlotte Sturdy, Market Development Director  
Maryellen Killeen, Production Services Coordinator  
Stanley J. Galek, Vice President & Publisher  
Amy Lawler, Managing Development Editor

Also participating in the publication of this program were:

Heide Kaldenbach-Montemayor, Assistant Developmental Editor  
Mary Sutton, Associate Market Development Director  
Mary Beth Hennebury, Senior Manufacturing Coordinator  
PC&F, Inc., Interior Designer and Page Production  
Ha Nguyen, Cover Designer  
Jonathan Stark, Image Resources Director  
Evelyn Nelson, Director Global ESL Training & Development  
Amy Terrell, Global Market Development Director

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## ~ TO THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR ~

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We have included more material in this text than you can teach in a one-term course that deals with the structure of English for ESL/EFL teachers. To include less would have been unconscionable since we believe that ESL/EFL teachers need to be familiar with all the topics in this book. A one-term course should then aim not only to deal with a portion of the chapters in the text; it should also lay a foundation that will enable students to continue to make use of the book after the course is completed.

If you do not have a two-term sequence to deal with the structure of English, we recommend teaching certain introductory chapters and then filling out the term by choosing others that you and/or your students feel would be most useful. Any syllabus should include Chapters 1 through 6 in order to give students the tools they will need to work through the other material. Chapter 2 has been written to introduce students who have a limited background in grammar to some basic concepts and terminology. Students who are more knowledgeable about English grammar can skip this chapter.

Students less experienced with English grammar may require more guidance in determining what should be covered in the allotted time. It is our feeling that for these students, in addition to working on Chapters 1–6, a minimal core syllabus would include a thorough grounding in the following:

- verb tense-aspect system (Chapter 7)
- modal auxiliaries (Chapter 8)
- syntactic patterns of simple sentences (Chapters 10–13)
- chapters with basic structures that ESL/EFL students find particularly difficult (articles—Chapter 15, prepositions—Chapter 21, and phrasal verbs—Chapter 22)

Of course, it is also possible to expand upon the material in this text. There are many ways you can encourage your students to go beyond what you are able to do in class. Some examples may include encouraging students to:

- read from the “Suggestions for Further Reading” feature
- write short papers on some particular topic related to an English grammatical structure
- conduct usage studies on the distribution of a particular English structure in authentic discourse
- conduct surveys of native speakers of English to determine their syntactic preferences
- develop teaching suggestions for points not covered in class

One of the greatest challenges in teaching this course is helping students overcome the anxiety toward the study of grammar that they sometimes bring with them. One of the greatest rewards is watching students move from anxiety to curiosity. This does happen. We have been privileged to see it.

Happy teaching!



Marianne Celce-Murcia  
University of California,  
Los Angeles



Diane Larsen-Freeman  
School for International Training  
Brattleboro, Vermont

## ≈ PREFACE ≈

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*The Grammar Book, Second Edition*, is designed to help prospective and practicing teachers of English as a Second or Foreign Language (ESL/EFL) enhance their understanding of English grammar, expand their skills in linguistic analysis, and develop a pedagogical approach to teaching English grammar.

Each chapter in *The Grammar Book, Second Edition*, is designed to lead readers systematically from an understanding of the grammar structure to an ability to use this understanding in the ESL/EFL classroom. After the first two introductory chapters, each chapter includes:

- a core presentation of one particular grammatical structure. Descriptions and examples draw upon the latest linguistics and applied linguistic research and include discussions of problems that ESL/EFL students regularly encounter.
- suggestions for teaching various aspects of each grammar structure to ESL/EFL students
- comprehension and application exercises that enable readers to assess their understanding of the material and practice their ability to apply what was been presented
- a list of references cited
- suggestions for further reading, consisting of ESL/EFL texts, grammar reference guides, and published linguistic research that provide further information regarding the analysis and teaching of the points covered

At the end of the text, we have also included a detailed appendix with suggested answers to the chapter exercises.

## ≈ NEW TO THE SECOND EDITION ≈

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- A new organizational framework, which consists of a systematic presentation of the form, meaning, and use of each grammatical structure, improves readers' ability to access, assimilate, and make pedagogic sense of the material presented
- A new chapter (Chapter 2) introduces readers to foundational grammatical concepts and terminology, and provides a basis of understanding for readers with a limited background in linguistics
- Three new chapters expand the coverage of English grammar: Tense-Aspect-Modality in Discourse, Reference and Possession, and Adverbials
- Completely updated and rewritten chapters include newly synthesized linguistic and applied linguistic research, new exercises, and new references
- Updated teaching suggestions are coded to reflect their form, meaning, and/or use orientation and are connected to the organizational framework of the text

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# INTRODUCTION

## TWO APPROACHES TO TEACHING LANGUAGE

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Over the years, language teachers have alternated between favoring teaching approaches that focus primarily on language use and those that focus on language forms or analysis. The alternation has been due to a fundamental disagreement concerning whether one learns to communicate in a second language by communicating in that language (such as in an immersion experience) or whether one learns to communicate in a second language by learning the *lexicogrammar*—the words and grammatical structures—of the target language. In other words, the argument has been about two different means of achieving the same end.

As with any enduring controversy, the matter is not easily resolved. For one thing, there is evidence to support both points of view. It is not uncommon to find learners who, for whatever reason, find themselves in a new country or a new region of their own country, who need to learn a new language, and who do so without the benefit of formal instruction. If they are postpubescent, they may well retain an accent of some kind, but they can pick up enough language to satisfy their communicative needs. In fact, some are natural acquirers who become highly proficient in this manner. In contrast, there are learners whose entire exposure to the new language comes in the form of classroom instruction in lexicogrammar. Yet they too achieve a measure of communicative proficiency, and certain of these learners become highly proficient as well. What we can infer from this is that humans are amazingly versatile learners and that some people have a natural aptitude for acquiring languages and will succeed no matter what the circumstances.

Of course, it is also true that for other learners, neither approach is entirely successful. Their language development may become arrested in an immersion environment, once their communicative needs have been met. For some, classroom instruction is unduly limiting. Perhaps a more important issue than whether to emphasize language use or language analysis in language teaching, then, is how to help all learners succeed to the extent they want or need. Moreover, we would hope to do so in a manner that improves upon or accelerates what learners are able to accomplish on their own. With regard to these aspirations, we can be less equivocal. We firmly believe that teachers will be better prepared to meet their students' learning needs if they have a firm grounding in the grammar of the language they are teaching.

If the approach focuses on language analysis, the connection should be easy to make. The more teachers know about grammar, the more expeditiously they should be able to raise a learner's consciousness about how the language works. They should be able to focus learner attention on the distinctive features of a particular grammatical form in less time than it would take for the learner to notice them on his or her own. Teachers may accomplish this in an explicit fashion by giving students rules and exercises with the appropriate grammatical terminology, but they can also teach grammar implicitly as well.



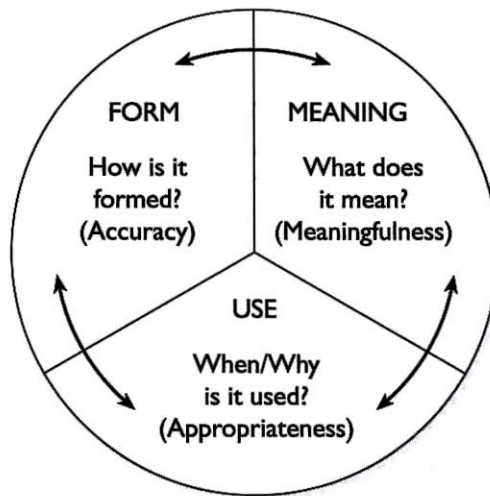




Another one of our firm convictions is that teachers (and consequently, their students) are helped by understanding English when generalizations can be made at the highest possible level of language. Indeed, what we seek to do in this book is to give *reasons, not rules*, for why English grammar functions as it does. Subsentential and sentential rules can sometimes appear arbitrary and make learning more difficult. Giving students reasons for why things are the way they are can aid students in learning English grammar, we believe. It also helps students see how grammar and communication interface, thus addressing, although not entirely solving, the common problem of students' not being able to activate their knowledge of grammar when they are engaged in communication.

### THE THREE DIMENSIONS

Another major departure from some traditional analyses of English grammar, and one we feel is in keeping with attempting to view grammar with a communicative end in mind, is the recognition that grammar is not merely a collection of forms but rather involves the three dimensions of what linguists refer to as (morpho)syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Grammatical structures not only have a morphosyntactic form, they are also used to express meaning (semantics) in context-appropriate use (pragmatics). We refer to these as the dimensions of *form, meaning, and use*. Because the three are interrelated—that is, a change in one will involve a change in another—it is helpful to view the three dimensions as a pie chart, with arrows depicting the interaction among the three.



The question in each wedge of the pie provides further guidance in terms of defining what that wedge represents. In dealing with form, for instance, we are interested in *how* a particular grammar structure is constructed—its morphology and its syntax. When dealing with meaning, we want to know *what* a particular English grammar structure means, what semantic contribution it makes whenever it is used. Its essential meaning might be grammatical: for example, in our sample sentence, *She was walking home from school that day when she ran into a friend*, the past progressive signals a past action in progress. Or its meaning might be lexical (a dictionary definition); for example, the meaning of the phrasal verb *run into* used in our example means “to meet by chance.”

Pragmatics, the domain of the use wedge of our pie, deals with issues concerning the choices that users of a particular language make when using the forms of language in

communication. As such, it is a broad category. We use it in this book to mean the “relations between language and context that are grammaticalized, or encoded in the structure of a language” (Levinson, 1983:9). We can account successfully for the pragmatics governing the use of a particular grammar structure if we can explain *when* it is used or *why* it has been used instead of another structure with the same meaning. For instance, we would look to the use wedge of the pie to help explain why the narrator used the phrase *ran into a friend* instead of *met a friend by chance* (see Chapter 22). To elaborate on another example above, a pragmatic explanation would again be invoked to account for the difference between *I looked up a word in the dictionary* and *I looked a word up in the dictionary*, different versions of the same basic structure. ESL/EFL students need to know not simply how a structure is formed and what it means; they need to know why speakers of English choose to use one form rather than another when both forms have more or less the same grammatical or lexical meaning.

It is admittedly sometimes difficult to establish firm boundaries between the wedges in the pie, especially between the meaning and use wedges; as we have already pointed out, linguistic categories often have fuzzy boundaries. Nevertheless, we have found the three dimensions of the pie chart useful as a conceptual framework for teaching grammar. Since grammar does not deal simply with form, language teachers cannot be content with having students achieve a certain degree of formal accuracy. Language teachers must also help their students to use the structures meaningfully and appropriately as well. Thus, the three dimensions of form, meaning, and use make explicit the need for students to learn to use grammar structures *accurately*, *meaningfully*, and *appropriately*.

## **A PEDAGOGICAL GRAMMAR, NOT A LINGUISTIC GRAMMAR**

In aggregating facts about accuracy, meaningfulness, and appropriateness concerning the grammar structures contained in this book, we have drawn from a number of different linguistic schools of thought. Whereas linguistic grammars strive for internal consistency, pedagogical grammars, such as this one for teachers, are eclectic. We feel that insights into the structure of English can be gleaned from different types of analysis. For instance, certain linguistic theories tend to be formal—most concerned with accounting for well-formed strings or sentences. They can be invoked for explaining sentence-level phenomena such as why the reflexive pronoun *himself* in the following sentence must refer to Paul and not to Steve. (See Chapter 16 for the explanation.)

Steve said that Paul hurt himself in the lacrosse game.

Other theories are more functional, seeking to explain the occurrence of certain linguistic structures by exploring the communicative function they play in the organization of discourse. We had an example of this earlier when we looked at how the present perfect tense in English acts as a “scene setter.” Since we are interested here in accounting for both sentential and discourse-level phenomena, we look to both formal and functional linguistic theories for helpful insights into English.

Then, too, linguistic grammars are often inaccessible except to those specially trained to work within a particular paradigm. We have tried to make available linguistic insights without requiring that our readers bring a great deal of linguistic background knowledge with them. We have adopted some formalism, however. For instance, in elucidating the form dimension we have employed our adaptation of transformational generative grammar trees. Although such trees are no longer as visible in the linguistics literature as they once were, we have found them to be a very effective parsing device in



analyzing sentence-level syntax, and some linguists even claim that they describe sentences better than any other description of English to date (e.g., Lasnik and Uriagereka 1988:6). We also have turned to structural linguistics and corpus linguistics for observations relevant to the form dimension. For an understanding of the meaning dimension, we have drawn on insights in traditional, functional, lexical, cognitive, and case grammars. For the use dimension, our treatment comes from work in discourse and contextual analysis and in systemic functional grammar,<sup>1</sup> and again from corpus linguistics. In addition, many of the facts about English that we synthesize for each of the three dimensions originate with our own research and that of our students.

Finally, while many linguistic grammars go into great depth about a restricted set of structures, pedagogic grammars must be as comprehensive as possible in the number of structures they treat. We have tried, therefore, to cover the most frequently occurring structures with which ESL/EFL teachers have to deal in their classes. At the same time, we have been more selective about the amount of detail we include than a linguistic grammar might be. What we have compiled here is information that ESL/EFL teachers need in order to address the learning challenges of their students.

## ACQUIRING SKILL AS WELL AS KNOWLEDGE

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Many people are under the impression that the facts about a given language are all known. Nothing could be further from the truth. Much is not known about English, particularly at the level of discourse and in the dimension of pragmatics. Thus, one of the reasons we ask readers to work with the formalism and frameworks that we provide is to give them some tools to go beyond the facts presented in this book. We use linguistic terminology for the same reason. Besides giving us a metalanguage with which to investigate English, the use of linguistic terms will allow readers to consult reference grammars and other sources in order to augment their knowledge as new facts become known. We are interested, therefore, not only in readers' acquiring knowledge from our text but also in their developing the means to go beyond what has been presented here. Incidentally, the pie chart has been a useful tool for us personally in helping us expand our knowledge about English. We can map what we know about a particular grammar structure on a pie chart and create our own research agendas for what we don't know. Many linguistic conundrums await solutions. We call explicit attention to some of these throughout the text, and we encourage our readers to join us in the fun of trying to figure them out.

Before going on, though, it is important to underscore a point to which we alluded earlier. Grammar can be implicitly taught to language students. Therefore, the metalanguage and grammatical descriptions featured in this book are for teachers, who we hope will use them as aids in their teaching, not as the object of the teaching itself. What ESL/EFL teachers should be helping students do is *be able to use* the structures of English accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. Thus, ESL/EFL teachers might better think of what they do as teaching "**grammaring**"—a skill—rather than teaching grammar as an area of knowledge (Larsen-Freeman 1991).

In the interest of balance, having said that grammar can be taught implicitly, let us also offer our view that the choice of ways of helping students use English structures accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately is contingent upon a number of factors, not the least of which are the learners' own particular cognitive styles. Teachers may help some students by giving them explicit grammatical descriptions and rules, but doing so may not help others. Our point here is simply that any explicit grammatical information should be a means to an end, not an end in itself. If a student can recite a rule but can't apply it, we will have failed in our "grammaring" efforts.

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## THE LEARNING PROCESS

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No less important to language teachers than understanding the content of what they are teaching is an understanding of the process by which the content is learned. While it is beyond the scope of this book to treat the language acquisition literature in depth here (for books that do, see Larsen-Freeman and Long, 1991; Ellis, 1994), suffice it to say that with anything as complicated as language, it is not likely that the learning process will be a simple, invariant one. That is to say, we sincerely doubt that language acquisition could ever be accounted for by attribution to a single process such as habit formation or rule formation. On the contrary, it is intuitively appealing—to us, at any rate—to attribute language acquisition to a variety of processes, each of which is responsible for some particular aspect of language. For instance, we might hypothesize that habit formation or simple memorization plays a role in the acquisition of formulaic language (lexicogrammatical units such as “How are you?” and “I see what you mean”). On the other hand, hypothesis testing leading to rule formation is a plausible way to describe, although not necessarily explain, the acquisition of generalizations or principles that operate in the language, such as where to place *not* in an English sentence in order to express a negative message. While such attributions are speculative on our part, and we eagerly await the results of the concerted effort that is now being undertaken to research the efficacy of focusing on form,<sup>2</sup> we find the exercise useful for thinking about how one might go about teaching the three dimensions of language. Following the line of reasoning above, one might legitimately expect the different dimensions to be acquired through different means; therefore, it makes sense to think about using a variety of teaching techniques as well.

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## A MULTIFACETED TEACHING APPROACH

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Please note that we do not argue simply for an eclectic teaching approach. Instead, we advocate a multifaceted approach—using different teaching techniques for teaching different aspects of the three dimensions. The choice will be conditioned by the learning challenge. For instance, what we are trying to achieve when we are teaching learners some structural aspect of English is their being able to accurately produce that structure on their own. We submit that what would assist learners to be able to do so is abundant practice with the particular target form. We might even go so far as to say that *purposeful, not rote*, repetition of a particular syntactic pattern, such as having students play “twenty questions” to practice yes/no question formation, should be incorporated into a lesson on some aspect of form.

When working on some part of the meaning wedge of the pie, however, purposeful repetition might be much less important in bringing about the desired objective of having students be able to use a particular form meaningfully. In the place of purposeful repetition, we might recommend an activity in which students are given an opportunity to associate a particular form with its meaning. An example that springs readily to mind is the technique teachers often employ to have students learn to associate the meanings of certain phrasal verbs with their forms. The students first watch the teacher and then, later, perform actions themselves signalled by the teacher’s use of certain phrasal verbs: *Stand up, turn around, sit down*. Such a simple introduction allows the students to forge a meaningful bond between the form of each verb and its meaning.

To practice the use dimension, the activity should require students to make some choice within a context and to receive feedback on the appropriateness of their choice. For instance, after being introduced to the pragmatic difference between *look a word up* and *look up a word*, students might be asked to fill the blanks in a passage, choosing

between the two forms with *look up* as well as the two forms with other phrasal verbs. Further examples of the application of these pedagogical principles will be offered for each structure we treat in this book.<sup>3</sup>

The three previous examples and most of the others we present in this book are practice activities, appropriate to the middle “p” in the “three p” teaching sequence of *present, practice, produce*, which has long guided teachers of grammar as well as teachers of other aspects of language. It should be acknowledged, however, that with the evolution of more communicative approaches, not all teachers adhere rigidly to this sequence. For instance, it might be that the need to teach grammar arises only when teachers notice that students are struggling to produce (the third “p”) a particular grammatical structure during some communicative activity. At this point, a teacher might choose to conduct a practice activity, with or without initially presenting (the first “p”) the structure. Alternatively, many teachers today subscribe to the practice of discovery or inductive learning, letting students figure out for themselves the generalizations about a particular grammatical structure. Thus, one teacher might have students engage in some meaningful consciousness-raising task or practice activity first in order for the students themselves to induce the rule that another teacher, following a more traditional approach, might have presented initially.

## THE SYLLABUS FOR THIS TEXT

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We do not deal explicitly with issues of syllabus design in this text. The issue of learnability, or student readiness to learn a particular aspect of the target language, has important implications for the selecting and sequencing of content for ESL/EFL students. Unfortunately, not enough is known about learnability at this point to move us to endorse one sequence of grammatical structures over another, although we do know that students do not master all aspects of one form before moving on to tackle another. The process of language acquisition is not a matter of simply aggregating one structure after another in linear fashion. The process is a gradual one; and even when learners appear to have mastered a particular structure, backsliding may occur as their attention is diverted to a new learning challenge. Thus, it makes sense to recycle various aspects of the target structures over a period of time: revisit old structures, elaborate on them, and use them for points of contrast as new grammatical distinctions are introduced. It also makes sense to think of a grammar syllabus as a checklist rather than an ordered sequence. In this case, it would be a teacher’s responsibility to see that students learn the checklist of grammatical items by the end of a given course or period of time, but the choice of sequence would be left up to the teacher and would depend on his or her own approach and the students’ needs.

Nevertheless, because this is a text for teachers and because we are teaching *about* the language and not teaching the language itself, we have sequenced the structures with which we deal in an order corresponding to their increasing complexity. While readers may not choose to make their way through the book in a strictly linear fashion, they should be aware that material that appears later in the text often builds upon what has been introduced in earlier chapters.

## WHICH ENGLISH?

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Another issue for which we should make our assumptions explicit has to do with “which English” we analyze here. English is not a single uniform language. Instead, many dialects of English are spoken around the world. As native speakers of North American English,

we have chosen to focus our analysis on this dialect, although we acknowledge that many “Englishes” are spoken elsewhere. Though there may be some grammatical differences among dialects of English, they share a significant central core of grammatical units and relationships that enables us to speak of the grammar of English. We also, however, attempt to call attention to major exceptions to the generalizations we make when they do not apply to other dialects, especially to British English.

But even within a particular regional dialect there is variety. What we describe here is Standard English. Which dialect of English is considered Standard English is really more the result of historical sociopolitical factors than linguistic ones. Thus, there is no inherently superior dialect. It is true, however, that those who can use the standard dialect of any language enjoy access to opportunities that others lack. This alone is a good reason for helping students in an ESL context become bidialectal if Standard English is not their native dialect.

Even within Standard English, we encounter variability. The fact of the matter is that language is both an abstract system and a socially constructed practice. As a social construct, it is fluid, changing as it is used (Larsen-Freeman 1997). Since our grammar is descriptive of what English speakers do, it must reflect the variable performance of its users. We report the variability where we have usage studies that reflect what native speakers judge to be acceptable.

Finally, this is not a prescriptive grammar. We are not prescribing what *should* be said. We are more interested in accounting for what native speakers of English *do* say. Prescriptive grammars tell us to say *It is I*, not *It is me*. They also tell us always to use *whom* in object position. A prescriptive grammar can be abused by those who insist on outdated conventions or those who try to tell others what a form ought to mean rather than the meaning understood in general usage. Nevertheless, we feel that prescriptive grammar has its place in formal writing, at least, and students who are preparing to take standardized examinations like the TOEFL will need to know the prescriptive rules. Thus, while our grammar is mainly descriptive, we will call attention, whenever possible, to different norms where there is an obvious conflict between description and prescription.

All this variability manifests itself most often in gradient, rather than absolute, judgments of acceptability; that is, certain forms sound more acceptable than others. This is especially true of spoken, as opposed to written, discourse. However, we do not want to leave readers with the impression that anything goes in English. Despite the variation, there is still consistency of intuitions among speakers of English about what they consider grammatical concerning core grammatical structures in English.

This leaves us to define what ungrammatical means. In this book we restrict the use of the term “ungrammatical” to mean unacceptable to native speakers of English. For example, only the last form in the following list is ungrammatical:

- He did not say anything. (Standard Dialect of English—prescriptive for writing)
- He didn't say anything. (Standard Dialect of English—descriptive of writing and speaking)
- He didn't say nothing. (Nonstandard Dialect of English)
- \*He no say. (Ungrammatical)

The last item on the list, its ungrammaticality signaled with an asterisk, is characteristic of the “interlanguage” produced by many ESL/EFL students. Such utterances provide important clues to what those students have yet to learn in English.

## DEFINING THE LEARNING CHALLENGE

It is not possible to teach everything about English to ESL/EFL students. Further, as instructional time is usually so limited, it is not even possible to teach ESL/EFL students



all that is presented in this book. Students will need to learn it, but it doesn't all have to be taught. Where we have attempted to be comprehensive, within limits, ESL/EFL teachers of grammar will have to be selective. Teachers have to, therefore, choose what to focus their students' attention on, trusting that students will be able to acquire on their own other aspects of English grammar. Thus, it is important that teachers define students' learning challenges: What is it that students most need to learn about a particular structure that they will not easily pick up on their own?

Knowing something about students' native dialect or language is very helpful in defining students' learning challenges. However, we can't devote sufficient space in this book to report all the findings from contrastive linguistics. What we do is to selectively include information about language typologies—that is, how other types of languages differ from English.

Students' learning challenges will depend not only on what knowledge they bring of their native language or dialect but also upon what they already know about English. Since the most effective instruction builds on what students already know, ESL/EFL teachers should continually assess what their students know about English and know how to do in English.

It also helps to define students' learning challenges by knowing where English is inherently difficult. Difficulties often arise when forms are exceptions to paradigms, when they are infrequent, marked, nonsalient, when one form has many functions, when there are semantic overlaps among forms, when the linguistic behavior of forms defies easy generalization, and so on. We hope to contribute to teachers' knowledge about these learning challenges by providing relevant facts about the form, meaning, and use of each major morphological and syntactic structure of English. With regard to these facts, we have attempted to be as comprehensive as space permits. Knowing, however, that instructional time is so limited, we conclude our treatment of each structure by discussing what our experience has led us to believe are the most challenging aspects of that structure.

## **THE ORGANIZATION OF THE CHAPTERS**

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Each chapter includes our analysis of the form, meaning, and use of a particular grammar structure or cluster of structures and any other pertinent information. Following the analysis, we provide teaching suggestions that illustrate ways of raising students' consciousness about certain aspects of English grammar and providing the necessary structured and communicative practice. We label each of these activities according to the dimension—form, meaning, or use—it addresses. We also include exercises of two types: The first allows readers to check their own comprehension of the material presented in each chapter, and the second asks readers to apply what they have learned to teaching issues. An example of the latter type of exercise is one in which we list actual errors made by ESL/EFL students and invite readers to analyze the errors and then suggest ways in which they might help learners bring their production to closer alignment with the target use. We also include sample answers to the exercises in an appendix at the end of the book. The final feature of each chapter is a list of references that allow readers to explore further the structure in focus.

## **YOU CAN LEARN GRAMMAR!**

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It has been our experience that some readers approach the task of learning grammar with some trepidation. While we understand this feeling, we have learned that by carefully reading the material in each chapter and conscientiously doing the exercises at the end, each reader does develop a working knowledge of English grammar. Moreover, some actually come away from the experience believing, as we do, that learning grammar is fun!

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**Suggestions for Further Reading**

*For readers who would like to investigate different schools of linguistic thought, we can recommend the following:*

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- Herndon, J. (1976). *A Survey of Modern Grammars* (2d ed.) New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

*For readers who would like to investigate different issues for teachers of grammar to consider, we recommend:*

- Bygate, M., A. Tonkyn, and E. Williams (1994). *Grammar and the Language Teacher*. London: Prentice Hall International.
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- For teachers' books containing ESL/EFL grammar teaching activities, we recommend:*
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*For more information on the sociopolitical aspects of dialect use and how social power relationships motivate choices of linguistic form, see:*

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and Power*. London: Longman.

*For a useful summary contrasting English with a number of other languages, consult:*

Swan, M., and B. Smith, eds. (1987). *Learner English: A Teacher's Guide to Interference and Other Problems*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

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## ENDNOTES

1. For those who would like to know more about these various grammars, we have listed some references at the end of this chapter.
2. Although to us, of course, it is an oversimplification to talk about focusing on form without also examining the meaningfulness and appropriate use of the form.
3. Additional examples can also be found in Larsen-Freeman (1991) and the four-volume series for ESL students, *Grammar Dimensions* (1993; 1997), for which Larsen-Freeman served as series director.
4. We are grateful to Francisco Gomes de Matos, personal communication, for recommending this reference.

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# GRAMMATICAL METALANGUAGE

## INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this chapter is to introduce you to a metalanguage—a language to describe language. For many of you, the words in our metalanguage will be familiar, and you may wish only to skim this chapter. For some of you, this chapter provides an initial exposure to some common linguistic terminology, and you may need to study it more closely in order to become familiar with the new terms. Learning the vocabulary of any new language, however, takes time. Be patient. These new terms will become more meaningful as you encounter them in context throughout the book as you explore the grammatical structures of English.

Some ESL/EFL teachers choose not to use grammatical terminology with their students, feeling that it presents an additional learning burden. Other teachers find that by using the terminology, they can call their students' attention to certain aspects of English grammar more efficiently; thus, they conclude that students' time spent learning the terms is a worthwhile investment. Then, too, some teachers find that their students are more fluent in the metalinguistic terms than they are! As we stated in the previous chapter, we do not want to give the impression that knowing the terms is knowing the grammar. Nevertheless, for teachers, knowing the terms can be helpful in several respects.

First of all, the terms provide a discourse, a way of talking about grammar, that helps in the conceptualization of grammar. Use of the terms also serves a referential function, providing a means to identify these concepts when referring to them subsequently. Finally, by learning the metalinguistic terms, teachers will have better access to the many linguistic resources available to them apart from this text.

In the previous chapter, we discussed the three levels of grammar we address in this book: subsentential, sentential, and suprasentential levels. We use this ternary hierarchy in introducing the metalinguistic terminology in this chapter.

## SUBSENTENTIAL TERMINOLOGY

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### THREE CRITERIA: SEMANTIC, STRUCTURAL, AND FUNCTIONAL

It may surprise some readers to learn that even identifying standard parts of speech is an enterprise fraught with difficulty. Consider, for example, the standard definition of a noun with which many of you are familiar: "A noun is the name of a person, place or thing." This definition works for the nouns *Kevin*, *Cincinnati*, and *eraser*, but it becomes problematic when we think about a word such as *blue*. Those of you conversant with part-of-speech terms may immediately identify *blue* as an adjective since it is a descriptive word. But one could

argue that *blue* is the name of a “thing”—a color—and is, therefore, rightfully a noun. The structural or descriptive grammarians, eschewing such traditional *semantic*, or meaning-based, definitions of nouns as the one just given, chose instead to identify word classes through their *structural*, or formal, characteristics: their position in a sentence, adjacent function words, if any, and their constituents. For instance, common nouns in English typically occupy positions such as the following and are preceded by function words such as *the* or *their*.

The \_\_\_\_\_ was very amusing.  
Did you notice their \_\_\_\_\_?

As for the constituents of nouns, a simple noun like *book* is a minimal unit; there is no way to break it down further. As such, we say it has one *morpheme*. A noun like *books*, on the other hand, has two morphemes, *book* and the grammatical morpheme *-s*.

There are two grammatical morphemes that can be used to mark nouns in English. Countable nouns have plural inflections to distinguish between “one” and “more than one” (*boy* vs. *boys*), and all nouns can have possessive inflections (*girl* vs. *girl’s*) to signal possession or a number of other meanings (see Chapter 16). In addition to plural and possessive grammatical morphemes, English nouns often have derivational morphemes that mark nouns derived from other parts of speech (see Chapter 3). For example, adding *-ness* to the adjective *sad* gives us the noun *sadness*. There are several dozen noun derivational morphemes, although some are used only in a few words, such as *-dom* as in *kingdom* and *wisdom* (Roberts 1958), whereas others like *-ness* are frequent and productive.

Not surprisingly, relying on structural criteria for identifying nouns can create problems. Not all nouns have distinctive noun-like morphemes, and even when they do, the words don’t always function as nouns; for example, *wilderness* does not function as a noun in the compound *wilderness park*. Furthermore, many of the words without distinctive morphology would also appear to belong to more than one part of speech, such as *fly* as a noun or a verb and *orange* as a noun or an adjective.

Due to the inadequacy of identifying parts of speech based upon semantic and structural criteria, a third criterion is sometimes employed. Known as a *functional* criterion, it defines a part of speech by the grammatical function it plays in a sentence. For example, from a functional perspective, a noun is a part of speech that can serve as a subject of a verb in a sentence. Thus, in the following sentence we know in part that the word *glass* is a noun because it is the subject of the verb *is*.

The glass is dirty.

The problem here is that a noun such as *glass* can precede a verb and yet not function as subject, but rather can function as an adjective without changing its form (cf. its adjective form, *glassy*) as in

The glass ashtray is dirty.

As can be seen, then, none of these definitions are complete by themselves. They all direct attention to different characteristics of nouns: their common meaning, their form/position, and their grammatical function. It is therefore better to think of a particular part of speech as being determined by a cluster of criteria. Most linguists now acknowledge that it is not simple to define even the most elemental building blocks of grammar, the parts of speech. A further complication for ESL/EFL students is that sometimes there are cross-linguistics differences in parts of speech, for example, the English adjective *tall*

has a noun equivalent in many West African languages. Some linguists would even say that categorizing a word as a noun or a verb is impossible in isolation, apart from the discourse in which it occurs (Hopper and Thompson 1984). Teachers should take heart from the observation, though, that most learners have no difficulty identifying parts of speech inductively when they have become familiar with a variety of typical examples. Ironically, it is not the recognition of a word's part of speech that appears to be problematic—it is the definition of the parts of speech that is elusive. In order to be as thorough as possible, we use all three criteria in defining the following parts of speech.

## PARTS OF SPEECH

The parts of speech are usually grouped into two categories: the major and minor word classes. The major word classes—nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—are termed “major” because they carry most of the content or meaning of a sentence. Such classes are also “open” in that new words are added as they are coined. The other category, the minor word classes, plays a more structural role in a sentence and each of its classes is more “closed,” in that normally no new words are added. Classes in this category include, but are not limited to, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, pronouns, determiners, and conjunctions. These words are sometimes also called “structure” words or “function” words, or even “functors.” To contrast the two categories, notice the difference between the following two sentences:

With the function words (content words deleted):

The \_\_\_\_\_ for \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ in the \_\_\_\_\_.

With the content words (function words deleted):

\_\_\_ broom \_\_\_ sweeping \_\_\_ floor belongs \_\_\_ closet.

Clearly, the central message can be grasped better when the content words are left in than when only the function words remain.

However, it is prudent to be cautious here too. As you saw just a moment ago, grammatical definitions are often not so airtight as they first seem. This observation holds here, too, in the division between the two word classes. To start with, the minor word classes do convey some meaning. Furthermore, not all the major word classes are truly open. Only certain adverbs can be added to the adverb class, namely the “manner” adverbs, which usually end in *-ly*; however, other types of adverbs are rather closed to new members. Then, too, as you have already observed, many words appear to belong to more than one category. A word like *few*, for instance, may function as a determiner (*There were few objections*) or a pronoun (*There were few*), both minor word classes. In spite of these concessions, we will retain the convenient division here and describe the major word classes first, followed by the minor ones.

## Nouns

As we have already treated nouns earlier when illustrating the three criteria of defining parts of speech, much of what follows will either recapitulate or expand upon the earlier discussion. The notional, or semantic, definition of a noun is as you have seen—a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing. Some linguists add “or idea” to account for abstract nouns such as *democracy*, *environment*, and *life*.

As we also noted earlier, nouns have endings or derivational morphemes that formally indicate that a word is a noun; recall the *-ness* of *sadness*. They also have grammatical



morphemes or inflections for plural and possessive. In terms of their position, they are frequently preceded by determiners, such as articles.

As pointed out earlier, nouns serve functionally as subjects of verbs. They can also, however, be:

direct objects of verbs: *He watered his lawn.*

subject noun predicates:<sup>1</sup> *We are all learners.*

object noun predicates: *They elected Ann president.*

indirect objects of verbs: *Ann gave the people confidence.*

appositives: *Albany, capital of New York, is located on the Hudson River.*

objects of prepositions: *Troy is also located on the Hudson River.*

vocatives: *Let me tell you, my friend, grammar is just plain fun!*

Not all these labels may be familiar, but your intuitions alone should be enough to convince you of the multiple functions that nouns fulfill.

Another fact worth knowing about nouns is that there are three types. By far the most frequent in occurrence are *common nouns*, or nouns referring to a kind of person, thing, or idea. Common nouns themselves are divisible into two subcategories: *count* nouns, which take the plural inflection (e.g., *farmers*), and *mass*, or *noncount*, nouns, which don't (e.g., *air*).<sup>2</sup> In contrast to common nouns are *proper nouns*, or names for unique individuals or places (e.g., *Kevin*; *Cincinnati*). Proper nouns can be singular or plural (*Kevin Smith* vs. *the Smiths*). A small number of nouns that refer to groups are called *collective nouns*. Collective nouns seem to differ from other nouns in readily being able to take either singular or plural verb forms, depending on the interpretation given to the noun—that is, whether it is seen as a unit (*The family is together again*) or as a collection of individuals (*The family are all coming for the weekend*).

To conclude this section on nouns, we should note that gender is not an important feature of English grammar as it is in other languages. Gender is only marked in certain pairs of English nouns (e.g., *actor/actress*; *host/hostess*; *widow/widower*) and is evident in some personal pronouns such as *she* versus *he* and *him* versus *her*.

## Verbs

The notional, or semantic, definition of a verb is that it is a word that denotes an action or state of being. Verb morphology in English is richer than noun morphology. Four inflections can be used with English verbs:

1. *-s* of third person singular present tense verbs: *Sue jogs every day.*
2. *-ed* of past tense verbs: *She jogged yesterday.*
3. *-en* of the past participle: *He has seen the movie three times already.*
4. *-ing* of the present participle: *I am teaching three courses this term.*

In terms of their position, verbs follow nouns and may be followed in turn by adjectives, adverbs, or other nouns, as depicted in the following sentences:

	} _____	cautious.
The authorities	} _____	carefully.
	} _____	the plan.

Functionally, adding a verb to a noun is enough to complete a sentence:

Pauline snores.

We discuss a number of different semantic verb types in Chapter 7. Here we simply categorize verbs by what follows them syntactically. According to Chalker (1984), there are six types:

*intransitive verbs*, which take no following object: *Mavis smokes*.

*transitive verbs*, which require an object: *Doug raises llamas*.

*ditransitive verbs*, which take two objects (indirect and direct): *I handed Flo the fax*.

*linking verbs*, where what follows the verb relates back to the subject: *We are teachers*.

*complex transitive verbs*, where what follows the object relates to the object: *They considered the project a waste of time*.

*prepositional verbs*, which require a prepositional phrase to be complete: *Steve glanced at the headlines*.

Two qualities verbs have are tense and aspect. We devote an entire chapter to discussing these characteristics of verbs; therefore, at this point let us simply note that *tense* traditionally refers to the time of an event's occurrence (hence the present, past, or future tenses), while a typical *aspect* distinction denotes whether or not the event has occurred earlier (perfect aspect) or is still in progress (progressive aspect). To illustrate aspect, compare the following two sentences, where the *have* verb + the past participle of the first sentence signals that the action is complete and the *be* verb + the present participle of the second sentence shows the action is in progress, i.e., uncompleted:

John *has written* his term paper.

Now he *is studying* for his final exams.

To conclude our discussion of verbs, we should point out that verbs, too, are marked for number, but only with subjects in the third person singular in the present tense or with the verb *be*. In such instances, subject-verb agreement occurs, and the verb is marked to agree with the singular or plural subject noun. For example:

present tense, subject in third person singular

Josh *loves* chocolate.

She *mows* the lawn on Saturdays.

be verb agreement with subject

I *am* surprised that you said that.

Jack *is* making the punch.

We *are* baking brownies.

Lloyd *was* absent.

They *were* frightened by the storm.

We investigate subject-verb agreement in more detail in Chapter 4.

## Adjectives

The semantic definition of an adjective is that it describes or denotes the qualities of something. Adjectives commonly occur between a determiner and a noun, or after *be* or other linking verbs, although they can also follow a noun. Many adjectives have no typical form, but certain derivational morphemes are associated with adjectives, such as *-able* (*likeable*), *-ish* (*childish*), *-ful* (*thoughtful*) and *-y* (*lazy*) (Chalker 1984).

English adjectives do not agree in number or gender with nouns as they do in some other languages; however, certain of them have inflectional morphemes for comparative and superlative forms such as *happy*, *happier*, *happiest*.

The function of adjectives is to modify or complement nouns. There are two adjective types: *attributive*, which precede nouns, and *predicative*, which follow linking verbs.

attributive: *The old bucket sprang a leak*.

predicative: *He became angry at the very thought*.



The semantic contrast between attributive and predicative adjectives is discussed in Chapter 20.

### Adverbs

Adverbs modify verbs and contribute meaning of various sorts to sentences. Particularly common are adverbs of direction, location, manner, time, and frequency.

direction: *Jim pointed there.*

location: *Isabel shops locally.*

manner: *The choir sang joyfully at the ordination.*

time: *Soon Rachel will retire.*

frequency: *We visit our friends in Detroit occasionally.*

As you can see, adverbs are quite flexible in terms of their location. They can occur in a sentence finally, medially, and initially. *Manner* adverbs are the only ones with distinctive inflections; they usually take the *-ly* ending.

The primary function of adverbs is to modify verbs, as in the previous examples, but they may also modify a whole sentence, as in the following:

*Fortunately*, they arrived home before too much damage had been done.

Traditional grammars also distinguish adverbs of *degree*, which modify adjectives and other adverbs.

It is *too* early to plant a garden.

Ben was *very* late to school.

In our grammar, such modifiers are called *intensifiers* because they signal the degree of intensity of the following word.

Finally, we should note that many phrases and clauses can occupy the same position in a sentence as single-word adverbs and can convey the same meaning as adverbs. Due to their function in the sentence, these multiword constructions are called *adverbials*. For example:

direction: *Jim pointed at the constellation Pisces.*

location: *Isabel shops at the mall.*

manner: *The choir sang as if it was especially inspired.*

time: *Next year Rachel will retire.*

frequency: *We visit our friends in Detroit every once in a while.*

The above discussion of adverbs and adverbials concludes our survey of the major parts of speech. What follows is a more abbreviated introduction to some of the members of the minor word classes.

### Pronouns

Pronouns refer to or replace nouns and noun phrases within a text (e.g., “*my aunt, she . . .*”) or as direct reference to an outside situation (e.g., in response to sudden loud noise, I can say, “*What was that?*”). They occupy the same position as a noun or noun phrase does. There are many different kinds of pronouns: subject (*I, you, he, she, it, we, they*), object (*me, you, him, her, it, us, them*), reflexive (*myself, yourself, himself, herself, itself, ourselves, themselves*), possessive (*mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, theirs*), demonstrative (*this, that, these, those*), and others. The forms within each category are distinguished by number, person (first, second, and third), gender, and in the case of the demonstratives, by number and proximity. (See Chapter 16 for a fuller discussion.)

### Determiners

Older grammars make no special reference to determiners, incorporating them into the adjective word class. We will use the term *determiner* to refer to that special class of words that limit the nouns that follow them. Various types of words fit into this category: articles (*the, a(n)*), demonstratives (*this, that, these, those*), and possessive determiners (*my, your, his, her, its, our, their*), to cite the major ones.<sup>5</sup> They precede an adjective if one is present; otherwise, they are positioned directly in front of a noun.

I put *my* backpack on *the* front porch, and now I can't find it.

### Prepositions

Prepositions connect words to other parts of a sentence and have a close relationship with the word that follows, which is usually a noun. Together a preposition and noun comprise a prepositional phrase. Prepositions are usually one word (*in, to, at*), but sometimes can be two or three (*out of, on top of*). Prepositions prototypically signal spatial relationships, but certain prepositions can also signal the grammatical category of *case*, which is often displayed in other languages through morphological means. Case depicts the role relationship between words. For example:

*dative case:* Marge gave a donation *to* charity. (The preposition *to* marks the dative (“receiver”) function of *charity*.)

*ablative case:* The charity received a donation *from* Marge. (The preposition *from* marks the ablative (“source”) function of *Marge*.)

More is said about the way in which prepositions assign case in Chapter 21.

### Conjunctions

Conjunctions are words that join. There are *coordinating conjunctions*, such as *and, but, and or*, which join elements that are grammatically equal. For example:

Marianne *and* Diane wrote this book.

Diane lives in Vermont, *but* Marianne lives in California.

And there are subordinating conjunctions, which we call *adverbial subordinators*, such as *because* and *although*, which join a subordinate clause to a main one:

It was hard to write a book together *because* they live so far apart.

*Although* Marianne and Diane live far apart, they are still friends.

We realize that we haven't defined *clause* as yet, but we will do so shortly. However, before doing so, we should briefly deal with one other grammatical concept at the sub-sentential level, namely *phrase*. A phrase is a group of words that function together. For example, if you were asked to divide the following sentence into phrases, you would probably not do so as follows:

The impatient/customer was acting very/cranky by the/time he was served.

Our grammatical intuitions tell us that these words grouped this way don't work together. Conversely, the following division is much more satisfying:

The impatient customer/was acting very cranky/by the time/he was served.

—or—

The impatient customer/was acting/very cranky/by the time/he was served.

In the last two versions of these sentences, the words between slash marks somehow cluster together better. If we take the last sentence as an example, we have divided it into four grammatical phrases and a clause. What makes *he was served* a clause is the presence

of a subject-verb relationship. Any construction containing a subject-verb relationship is a clause. We have already noted that a noun and a verb together are sometimes sufficient to form a sentence. What is the difference between a clause and a sentence, then? Clauses that stand independently as sentences are called independent, or main, clauses; clauses that cannot be called dependent, or subordinate, clauses. The latter are typically preceded by an adverbial subordinator. Thus, in the sentence “*Although they live far apart, they are still friends,*” the first clause is a subordinate, or dependent, clause, and the second is the main, or independent, clause.

## SENTENTIAL TERMINOLOGY

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### SIMPLE, COMPOUND, AND COMPLEX SENTENCES

A *simple sentence*, then, contains at least one subject and one verb and can stand alone as an independent clause. Notice that in the previous example, “*they are still friends,*” could stand alone as a complete sentence, whereas the first clause, “*although they live far apart,*” would be a sentence fragment.

There are five basic simple sentence patterns in English:

subject + verb	<i>The building collapsed.</i>
subject + verb + object	<i>They bought a new car.</i>
subject + verb + indirect object + direct object	<i>She wrote him a letter.</i>
subject + verb + subject predicate	<i>Janet's my friend.</i>
subject + verb + object + object predicate	<i>She makes me happy.</i>

In contrast to a simple sentence, a *compound sentence* consists of two or more clauses of equal grammatical importance. As we saw earlier, a coordinating conjunction connects the two clauses:

He went to the party, but I stayed home.

One type of *complex sentence* contains a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses. We have just considered one example describing Marianne and Diane. Here is another:

Peggy frequently calls because she wants to stay in touch.

In this sentence the main clause, “*Peggy frequently calls,*” is followed by a subordinate clause, “*because she wants to stay in touch.*” As you can see in these examples, subordinate clauses are often, although not always, introduced by an adverbial subordinator.

In the second type of complex sentence, a dependent clause is embedded, or included, in an independent clause. Embedded clauses can take the place of a subject:

*That he didn't want to go to the ballet* was obvious. (*It was obvious.*)

or an object:

I argued *that it would be a mistake.* (*I argued my position.*)

or even of an adjective:

The person *who was responsible for the accident* fled. (*The person responsible fled.*)

Thus, when we move beyond the simple or monoclausal sentence, three processes are at work: *coordination*, or the joining of two clauses of equal grammatical stature; *subordination* of one clause to another; and *embedding*, when a dependent clause is included within a main or independent clause.

## SENTENCE MOODS

English sentences are said to display three main moods—*declarative* (sometimes called indicative), *interrogative*, and *imperative*—and two minor moods: *exclamatory* and *subjunctive*. Mood conveys the speaker's attitude toward the factual content of the sentence. For instance, the subjunctive mood can indicate a speaker's uncertainty or the hypotheticality of the propositional content, or meaning of the clause. In the following sentence, the subjunctive mood is signalled by the use of the base form of the *be* verb, rather than the inflected form *is*.

If that be so, I'll leave now.

It can also indicate that something is contrary to fact, or counterfactual, here signalled by the use of the *be* verb in its third person plural past tense form:

If I were a bird, I wouldn't eat worms.

Four of the five moods have sentence type counterparts (see below), but the subjunctive in English can be marked only by using a different form of the verb from the form ordinarily called for. Usually, the subjunctive uses either the uninflected base form or *were*:

declarative (statement sentence type): *Today is Tuesday.*

interrogative (question sentence type): *What are you going to wear to the party?*

imperative (command sentence type): *Pass the milk, please.*

exclamatory (exclamation sentence type): *What a beautiful autumn it is!*

subjunctive (here realized with the *were* form): *I wish I were going with you.*

It has been said that the three main options in the English mood system correspond to the three main communicative functions of language: telling someone something, asking someone something, and getting someone to do something (Allen and Widdowson 1975:75). We should not lose sight of the fact, however, that a sentence type does not necessarily match its function. It is possible to ask someone to do something using any of the following three types, even though the first is a more indirect way than the other two:

statement: *I am thirsty. I wonder what is in the refrigerator to drink.*

question: *Could you bring something from the refrigerator for me to drink?*

command: *Please bring me something to drink from the refrigerator.*

It should be mentioned that the three main sentence types have negative forms as well:

negative statement: *I am not thirsty.*

negative question: *Couldn't you bring me something to drink?*

negative command: *Don't bring me anything to drink.*

It is interesting to see that among these, the negative question, at least, is still capable of accomplishing the same function as its affirmative counterpart. As we will see later in the book, context will determine when affirmative and negative yes/no questions are used.

## THEME/RHEME

English has a fairly fixed word order compared with many other languages; still, some variation is possible. For example:

- (a) The Cub Scouts held the carwash despite the rain.
- (b) The carwash was held by the Cub Scouts despite the rain.
- (c) Despite the rain, the Cub Scouts held the carwash.



The question that should come to mind is this: What is the difference among these three word orders? The sentences appear to have the same propositional content, or core meaning, so what purpose does word order variation serve?

A helpful concept to draw on in answering this question is the distinction that systemic-functional linguistics, following the Prague School of Linguistics, makes between *theme* and *rheme*. According to Halliday (1985:38), the theme provides the “point of departure of the message.” In (a), it is the Cub Scouts; in (b), the carwash; and in (c), the rain. In other words, the theme provides the framework for interpreting what follows. What follows is the rheme, the remainder of the message in the clause.

English, then, typically uses word order to assign the roles of theme and rheme. Since English is a grammatical subject-predicate language—that is, every English sentence is composed of two major constituents, a *subject* and a *predicate*—it is commonly the case that the subject in English will be the theme and the predicate the rheme, as in (a) and (b) (we explicate (c) later).

The Cub Scouts	held the carwash despite the rain.
The car wash	was held by the Cub Scouts despite the rain.
subject	predicate
(here the theme)	(here the rheme)

Other languages use different means for making the theme-rheme distinction. For example, Japanese and Tagalog mark the theme with special particles. In Chinese, referred to as topic-comment language (see Chapter 5), the topic establishes that with which the clause is concerned,<sup>4</sup> but does not necessarily correspond to a grammatical subject.<sup>5</sup>

My back, it hurts.  
topic    comment

Since English does not strictly forbid such word orders, in speech at any rate, and since English even has other topic-like ways of establishing the theme (e.g., *As for fundraising, I prefer bake sales to carwashes*), Chinese and Japanese speakers will need a great deal of practice with subject-predicate sequences in order to avoid overusing such structures in English (Lock 1996).

## MARKEDNESS

As we have just seen, English too, can thematize something other than the subject. Such is the case with (c) above, where the adverbial prepositional phrase *despite the rain* is the theme. Linguists use the term *marked* to refer not only to such instances of thematization of nonsubjects but also to refer to any exceptions from what is very typical, very predictable. It is perhaps better to think of markedness as a continuum from structures that are unmarked, meaning that they are typical, to highly marked structures that are exceptional.

## VOICE

We have not yet accounted for the difference between sentences (a) and (b) above. Both sentences have subjects that are themes; both have the same propositional content or core meaning. The difference between the two lies in their *voice*. Sentence (a) is in the active voice; sentence (b) is in the passive voice. Voice is another linguistic device that languages employ to allow for different constituents to function as themes. In the active voice the subject functions as the theme and is most often the actor or agent of some action, as *the Cub Scouts* in our example. In the passive voice, the thing acted upon by the agent—the

*carwash*—has been made the theme. There are other differences between (a) and (b) as well, and these are dealt with in detail in Chapter 18 on the passive voice. For our purposes here, it will suffice to say that the selection of the passive over the active allows the speaker or writer to thematize noun phrases other than agents.

## SUPRASENTENTIAL TERMINOLOGY

So far we have been discussing terms that are useful for describing subsentence and sentence-level phenomena. We turn now to introducing terminology that applies to the suprasentential, or discourse, level of language.

### BACKGROUNDING AND FOREGROUNDING

It has been observed that in a discourse narrative, certain sentences provide *background* information while others function in the *foreground* to carry the main storyline. What often distinguishes one from another are their verb tenses. For instance, in the following narrative, the past tense is used for the foregrounded information, the present tense for the background.

Yesterday I went to the market. It has lots of fruit that I like. I bought several different kinds of apples. I also found that plums were in season, so I bought two pounds of them. . . .

In this bit of discourse, the foregrounded past narrative is interrupted by the second sentence with a present tense verb. This sentence provides information, here a statement about the market, that is general background information to the story.

### COHESION

Another quality of English grammar at the suprasentential level that we might illustrate with this simple narrative is the fact that texts, units of spoken or written language at the suprasentential level, have an organizational structure of their own. It is not possible to put the second sentence first in the above narrative, for example, and have it mean anything. For the most part, we can no more move sentences around in a paragraph (unless we alter them in some way) than we can move words around in a sentence without making some other modifications.

Five linguistic mechanisms that Halliday and Hasan (1976) point to in order for texts to have *cohesion* or structure at the level of discourse are the following:

reference: *The boy wanted a new bike. One day he . . . (he refers back to the boy)*

ellipsis: *A: Who wrote the letter?*

*B: Marty.* (The response *Marty* elliptically signals that Marty wrote the letter.)

substitution: *I plan to enter college next year. If I do, . . . (do substitutes for enter college)*

conjunction: *Peter needed some money. He, therefore, decided to get a job. (therefore makes explicit the causal relationship between the first and second sentences)*

lexical cohesion: (here through synonymy): *He was grateful for the money he had been given. He slipped the coins into his pocket and hurried down the street. (Coins refer back to money.)*

### REGISTER

Another concept that applies at the suprasentential level is *register*. We used the word *register* in this book earlier to mean the level of formality of language. While this is true enough, it is something of a simplification. According to systemic-functional linguistics



(Halliday 1994), register actually involves three variables: field, tenor, and mode. *Field* refers to the social activity in which the language is being used and what is being talked about. Field is reflected in choices of content words. *Tenor* is concerned with the roles and relationships of interlocutors. For example, one's choice of sentence type to express a request—declarative, interrogative, imperative—would be conditioned by the nature of the relationship between the person making the request and the person being asked to fulfill it. The *mode* refers to the channel of communication, whether the language is written or spoken and, with regard to the latter, whether it is face to face or more remote. Cohesive ties in a text, among other things, will be affected by mode.

## GENRE

A closely aligned linguistic concept to register is *genre*. Genre, too, refers to linguistic variation. Rather than variation due to level of formality, however, the variation is due to the communicative purposes to which the language is put. For example, the language used in a scientific research paper is different from that in a recipe or a letter of recommendation. They differ in their patterns of words, structures, and voice. For instance, in the interest of leaving no room for ambiguity, a legal document is often characterized by “very long sentences containing numerous and elaborate qualifications (all those elements beginning *notwithstanding, in accordance with, without prejudice to, etc.*)” (Swales 1990:63). Teachers whose job it is to teach English for special or academic purposes know full well the challenge of teaching students the necessary patterned structure of a particular genre. It might be said that professional training (including becoming ESL/EFL teachers) involves learning to speak and write a particular genre so that one can join a particular discourse community as a full-fledged member.

## GIVEN/NEW

We conclude this discussion of suprasentential features by revisiting the theme-rheme distinction, which was introduced earlier. While theme-rheme has to do with the structure of clauses, there is a close relationship between this pair and the way information is distributed among sentences in a text. A common pattern of development in written texts is to introduce new information first in the rheme of one clause and then to treat it as given information in the theme or themes of a subsequent clause(s). *Given* information is that which is assumed by the writer to be known by the reader. This assumption is made either because the given information has been previously mentioned or because it is in some way shared between the writer and reader. *New* information, on the other hand, is “newsworthy”—not something the writer can take for granted that the reader knows.

Take, for example, the first five sentences that begin the previous paragraph. The words *theme-rheme distinction* occur in the rheme of the first sentence. They are echoed in the theme of the second sentence. In the rheme of the second sentence, the notion of *texts* is introduced and mentioned again in the theme of the third sentence. In the rheme of the third sentence, the concept of given information is introduced. Given information is treated in the theme of the fourth sentence. In the rheme of the fourth sentence, the words *which is assumed by the writer* occur. The theme of the fifth sentence picks up on this rheme by referring to *this assumption*. In this way, the information flows from rheme to theme, from sentence to sentence, from new to given.

The tendency to place new information toward the end of a clause is called *end focus*. End focus occurs in spoken discourse as well, although speakers have other means at their disposal in speech for flagging new information. Information units in the spoken language are defined by the tone group. Each tone group has a syllable made prominent by pitch movement.

I went to the movies with LUcy.

One syllable in each tone group, the tonic syllable, functions to focus the attention of the listener. While the focus is typically at the end, it need not be.

I went to the MOvies with Lucy.

However, when the prominent syllable is in nonfinal position, one typically interprets the stress as contrastive, that is,

I went to the MOvies with Lucy. (not to the concert)

But while given/new and theme/rheme are related, they arise from a different perspective. Halliday (1985:278) puts it this way:

The Theme is what I, the speaker, choose to take as my point of departure. The Given is what you, the listener, already know about or have accessible to you. Theme + Rheme is speaker-oriented, while Given + New is listener-oriented.

But both are, of course, speaker-selected. It is the speaker who assigns both structures, mapping one on to the other to give a complete texture to the discourse and thereby relate it to its environment.

The speaker's (writer's) choices are thus predicated on what has gone before and what is to come. In this way, the structure of a single sentence both contributes to and depends on the physical context in which it occurs and the discourse around it. As you will see throughout this book, discourse and grammar have this symbiotic relationship in that grammar with lexis (words) is a resource for creating discourse, while the discourse context shapes grammar to accomplish very specific communicative goals.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter by no means previews all the terms that you will find in this book. Its purpose is to lay a foundation upon which you can build. We regularly add terms to those we have introduced here. As we do so, we revisit what has been introduced here and provide you with opportunities to reinforce the understanding you have thus far acquired.

## EXERCISES

### Test your knowledge of what has been introduced.

- Write an original sentence or short text that illustrates each of the following concepts. Underline and label the following pertinent word(s) in your sentence.
 

a. noun	e. pronoun	i. phrase/clause	l. coordination	o. genre
b. verb	f. determiner	j. subject/predicate	m. subordination	p. register
c. adjective	g. preposition	k. simple sentence	n. embedding	q. given-new
d. adverb	h. conjunction			
- Identify the part of speech (noun, verb, determiner, etc.) of each word in the following sentences. Use semantic, structural, and functional criteria as necessary.
  - John and Paul were fighting.
  - John gave Paul a black eye.
  - The principal sent them to his office immediately.

3. List the three major moods in English and write a sentence that corresponds to each type.
4. Illustrate the fact that a pragmatic function, such as a request, doesn't always correspond to a particular sentence type.
5. Give an original example for each of the five ways that Halliday and Hasan (1976) give to describe cohesion in discourse.
6. It is said that the theme is less important than the rheme in terms of its information-bearing status. Explain why this is so.

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

7. Rearrange the sentences in the following short text. What other types of changes do you need to make to re-create the coherence of the original?

There are only two ways to get to Culebra. One is to fly from San Juan. The other is to take a ferry from Fajardo. Unless, of course, you know someone with a boat. If you do, it will be easy.

8. Choose one of the following genres: a newscast, a newspaper article, or an advertisement in a newspaper or on the radio or television. Can you identify any special grammatical or lexical features of the genre you have chosen?
9. Discuss the following in terms of their themes:
  - a. Out of nowhere came a giant blue heron.
  - b. I was given a gold pen by my parents at graduation.
  - c. Concerning homework, I don't believe in it.
10. It is said that language acquirers, whether acquiring their native language (Gruber 1967) or their second language (Givón 1979), go through an initial stage in which all of their utterances are of a topic-comment structure. This has been reported to be true regardless of the type of native or target language. Collect some beginning learner speech data and see if you find this to be the case as well. Consult Fuller and Gundel (1987) for some more background.

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### ENDNOTES

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1. In traditional terms, these have been called subject complements, and for the next function, object complements. However, we refer to them as *subject and object noun predicates*, reserving the term *complement* for embedded clauses of various types (see Chapter 31 on complementation).
2. Actually, nouns have more flexibility in number than this traditional distinction reveals (Reid 1991). See Chapter 4 for further discussion.
3. Here we deal with one type of determiner, core determiners. Other types are introduced in Chapter 16.
4. Although similar, theme and topic are somewhat different concepts (see Fries 1996).
5. Some languages, such as Japanese and Korean, readily use both options—subject/predicate and topic/comment.



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# THE LEXICON

## INTRODUCTION

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In this chapter we briefly treat the lexicon of English. The lexicon has been characterized as a mental inventory of words and productive word derivational processes. We take a considerably broader view of the lexicon; we consider it to comprise not only single words but also word compounds and conventionalized multiword phrases. Despite increasing its breadth, our treatment of the lexicon must be cursory, although some grammarians might even be surprised to find this topic included in a grammar book at all. Traditionally, grammar and lexicon were seen to be two distinct components of language, and indeed they still are treated as such in some grammatical theories. From a pedagogical perspective as well, vocabulary and grammar have usually been viewed as two different areas of language. We believe, however, that it is better to conceive of grammar and lexicon as opposite poles of one continuum, and for this reason, following Halliday (1994), we prefer to think in terms of *lexicogrammar*.

There are three reasons for our preference. First is the interlingual argument: that which is accomplished grammatically in one language can be realized lexically in another. For example, Warao, a language from Venezuela, attaches a grammatical inflection to a verb that corresponds to the modal verb *can*, a separate lexical item in English (Dixon 1991). Second, from an intralingual perspective, in keeping with our broader scope of the lexicon, we note that many multiword lexical units conform to the grammar of a language; that is, they adhere to acceptable word order. For example, in English the lexical order is always *by the way*, not *way by the*. Recent work in computer analyses of large corpora of English texts suggests that these patterned multiword phrases are basic intermediate units between lexis (words) and grammar (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). Third, when we focus on the extremes at the ends of the continuum, the dichotomy between grammar and lexicon seems to hold. For instance, at the grammatical end of the continuum we could place the function words, such as the preposition *of* and the verb *be*. At the other end we could assign content words, such as *garden* and *grow*. If we leave it at this, the distinction seems sensible. However, we soon see that the differences are really matters of degree, and intermediate examples are easy to find. For example, a preposition such as *in* would seem to have more semantic content than a content word such as *thing*. Content words vary enormously in their concreteness of meaning and in their semantic specificity (Langacker 1987). Furthermore, it is our position, articulated in the first chapter of this text, that grammatical units express meaning, as well as having form and use. This is no less true of lexicogrammatical units, as we shall show.

We treat lexical units at three levels: (1) that of the individual word and its components, (2) that of word compounds and co-occurrences, and (3) that of conventionalized multiword phrases. It is not our intent here to teach ESL/EFL teachers how to teach vocabulary. Many excellent books do so, and we include a number of them in our suggested references at the conclusion of this chapter. Nonetheless, it is important that teachers know what a lexicon would consist of in the model of English grammar we are

sketching. As we illustrate in our text, most lexical items appear in the basic structure of a sentence before the application of any rules. This reflects the fact that certain grammatical constructions are compatible with certain words and that a given word must often be used in special grammatical constructions. There are a few exceptions to this generalization about words appearing in the base, such as the addition of *do* in negative sentences and in questions where no auxiliary verb is present and one is needed. These exceptions are discussed at the appropriate time in the course of this book.

### WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO KNOW A WORD?

A question we might reasonably pose to help us understand what is entailed in the lexicon is this: What does it mean to know a word? We might answer as follows. To really know a word, one needs to know its

- spelling (orthography)
- phonetic representation (pronunciation, syllabification, and stress [if multisyllabic])
- morphological irregularity (where applicable)
- syntactic features and restrictions (including part of speech)
- common derivations and collocations (i.e., words with which it co-occurs)
- semantic features and restrictions
- pragmatic features and restrictions

Consider, for example, the form of the word *child*. The knowledge of an English speaker would include its spelling, c-h-i-l-d, and its pronunciation, /čayld/. With respect to morphological irregularity, the speaker would need to know that the noun *child* has an irregular and idiosyncratic plural, *children*, which is not generated by the regular rules for forming plurals in English.<sup>1</sup> Syntactic features and restrictions would include the word's part of speech—a noun—and in particular, the fact that *child* is a common countable noun. Common derivatives include *childlike*, *childish*, and *childhood*, while common collocations include *child's play*, *child labor*, and *child psychology*.

Semantic information would include the concept *human* and also information indicating that the word is neutral regarding gender distinction. It would contrast the term *child* with similar terms for younger humans, such as *infant* and *baby*, and it would also contrast the word with parallel items denoting older humans, such as *adolescent* or *adult*.

Finally, from a pragmatic or use perspective, the speaker would be able to contrast *child* with other words with the same meaning—for example, an informal counterpart, *kid*. Notice that there is a pragmatic restriction on this form, however. While many speakers of English are quite comfortable using the plural version of this informal form, *kids*, they find that its singular form has a certain pejorative connotation:

It's a snow day today. My kids are home from school. (acceptable)  
 It's a snow day today. ?My kid is home from school. (questionable)

Many native speakers of English would prefer to use *son* or *daughter* or some other word when referring to one child.

Speakers of English use this lexical information in various ways. For example, we use orthographic information when we alphabetize words, phonological information when we make words alliterate or rhyme, and syntactic information when we match determiners and nouns appropriately. Here are some examples of the latter:

this child	(not *these child)
these children	(not *this children)
many children	(not *much children)

Semantic information is used when we accept a lexical item in certain combinations as meaningful:

The child slept for two hours.

But we reject it in others as nonsensical—at least in any literal sense:

\*The child evaporated two hours ago.

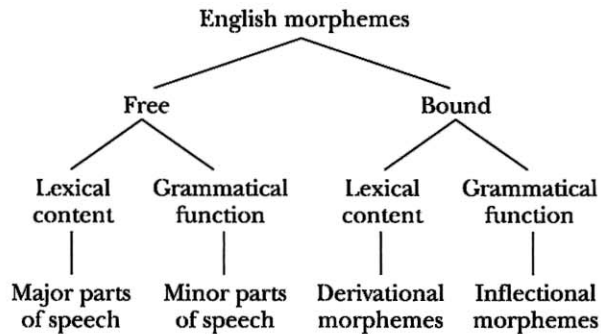
Semantic information also helps to distinguish among words with similar, but not identical, meanings. To truly know a word means to know both how it differs from and how it is similar to others. Pragmatic information is useful when we try to be sensitive to the appropriateness of the register of our lexical choices. It also helps us in the realm of usage—to identify patterns of words that collocate, or go together.

In order to truly know how to use a word appropriately in English, then, a speaker or writer would need to know much more than simply the general “meaning” of the word. We spend the next few sections looking at some of these attributes of words in more detail.

## THE FORM OF WORDS

### MORPHOLOGICAL AFFIXATION

Morphemes can be divided into two basic categories: freestanding words and morphemes that are bound or attached or affixed to other words. Each of these two major categories can be subdivided further into two types: those morphemes that have more lexical content and those that are more grammatical in function, although as we already submitted, the line between the two is sometimes hard to draw. The free morphemes with lexical content represent the major parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. The free grammatical functional morphemes include the minor parts of speech: articles, prepositions, and conjunctions, among others.



The bound morphemes consist of two kinds of affixes: derivational, which are more lexical in nature, and inflectional, which are more grammatical in nature. When a morpheme added to a word results in either a different part of speech or the same part of speech with a different lexical meaning, it is a *derivational* morpheme. Derivational affixes can be prefixes (e.g., *unbend*) and suffixes (e.g., *argument*). When the part of speech changes, as in our example when the verb *argue* becomes the noun *argument*, this is usually the result of adding a suffix rather than a prefix. We say more about derivational affixes in a later discussion of the productive processes of English word formation.





If a morpheme simply adds some element of meaning required by the grammar and changes the form of a word without changing its basic part of speech, then it is called an *inflectional* morpheme. An example of an inflectional ending would be the addition of *-ing* to the verb *watch* in *I am watching television*. *Watch* remains a verb after the *-ing* has been affixed, but the suffix adds a grammatical meaning, namely that the action is an ongoing one.

As you saw in the previous chapter, there are eight inflectional affixes in English:

Four of them involve verbs:

- present participle (*watching*)
- present tense—third person singular (*walks*)
- past tense (*jumped*)
- past participle (*eaten*)

Two are added to nouns:

- possessive (*John's*)
- plural (*books*)

And two of them come at the end of adjectives and adverbs:

- comparative (*clearer; faster*)
- superlative (*clearest; fastest*)

As you see, they are all suffixes. The only inflectional affixes that are not suffixes involve the irregular forms (plurals, past tenses, past participles, comparatives, superlatives), which can have internal vowel changes, no changes at all, or some completely different and historically unrelated (i.e., suppletive) form. For example:

- internal vowel change: *mouse* → *mice* (plural)  
*ring* → *rang* (past tense) → *rung* (past participle)
- no change: *one deer* → several *deer* (zero plural)  
*hit* → *hit* → *hit* (zero past tense and past participle)
- suppletive form: *go* → *went*; *be* → *was* (past tense)  
*good* → *better* (comparative) → *best* (superlative)  
*bad* → *worse* (comparative) → *worst* (superlative)

The pronunciation of several of the regular affixes changes depending upon the phonological environment in which they occur. The regular suffixes for plural, possessive, and third person singular, present tense, all pattern the same way:

	Plural	Possessive	Third person singular present tense
After /s/, /z/, /ʃ/, /ʒ/, /tʃ/, /dʒ/, the suffix is pronounced as /əz/	judges	Rose's	rushes
After all other voiced sounds, the suffix is pronounced as /z/	dogs toys	John's Jay's	runs cries
After all other voiceless sounds, the suffix is pronounced as /s/	cats	Mark's	walks



Similarly, the regular past tense and regular past participle suffixes (they take the same form) are pronounced /əd/ after /t/ and /d/ (e.g., *wanted*, *scolded*) but /d/ after all voiced sounds other than /d/ (e.g., *played*, *judged*), and /t/ after all voiceless sounds other than /t/ (e.g., *walked*, *kissed*).

## SYNTACTICALLY RELEVANT LEXICAL FEATURES

### Determiners/Adjectives Plus Nouns

Nouns, adjectives, and verbs all have syntactically important lexical features. Within noun phrases, determiner-noun restrictions are important because a few determiners co-occur only with uncountable nouns (e.g., *much* and *little*), other determiners co-occur only with singular countable nouns (e.g., *a/an*, *each*), and still others co-occur only with plural countable nouns (e.g., *these*, *many*, *few*). Note that some adjectives also co-occur only with plural nouns (e.g., *various*, *divergent*). There are, of course, also determiners that may occur with all nouns irrespective of countability or number (e.g., *the*, *my*, *his*). However, to ensure that only grammatical sequences are produced, the countability and number restrictions of all determiners and nouns must be explicitly stated in their lexical entries in the inventory of lexical items or the lexicon. Nouns have other features that influence syntactic behavior; for example, singular proper nouns referring to people (e.g., *John*, *Mr. Jackson*, *Albert Einstein*) do not co-occur with articles; however, common nouns referring to people do (e.g., *a man*, *the men*, *some men*). More is said about these matters in Chapter 15, which deals with article usage.

### Adjective-Prepositional Phrase Restrictions

Adjectives that follow the verb *be* or some other copula are similar to verbs in that they may take objects (function transitively); however, unlike verbs, adjectives that take objects must have a preposition before the object noun. Some adjectives are inherently intransitive, which means that they are not usually followed by prepositions and noun objects:

Joe is handsome.  
Mary is graceful.

Other adjectives are intrinsically transitive and cannot occur without an object:

Sue is fond of sweets. (\*Sue is fond.)  
John is related to Ralph. (\*John is related.)

However, some adjectives can be used both transitively and intransitively without a change of meaning in the adjective itself—that is, the noun object limits the scope of the adjective but does not change its meaning. For example:

Sally is nervous. Sally is nervous about the quiz.

All information about the transitivity or intransitivity of adjectives must be included in their lexical entries.

### Verb-noun Restrictions

The most complicated lexical restrictions in English involve verbs. First, we must distinguish between verbs that take objects (i.e., transitive verbs) and verbs that do not take objects (i.e., intransitive verbs). This information is specified in the lexical entries of verbs.

The lexical feature (–transitive) for *disappear* and (+transitive) for *bring* allow us to accept these sentences as grammatical:

The stain disappeared.  
The man brought a gift.

and help us explain the unacceptability of sentences such as these:

\*The drycleaners disappeared the stain.  
\*The man brought.

Some verbs occur both transitively and intransitively with little or no change of meaning. These are ergative or change-of-state verbs, where the direct object in the transitive sentence is the same as the subject of the verb in the intransitive one:

John opened the door. The door opened.  
Inflation increased prices. Prices increased.

These verbs would be marked (+/– transitive) in the lexicon.

There is also a special class of transitive verbs that permits the absence of a partially recoverable, understood noun object:

Bill smokes cigarettes. Bill smokes.  
Harry drinks alcohol. Harry drinks.

Such verbs are, nonetheless, consistently transitive and would be marked as such in the lexicon with the added specification that a semantically recoverable object need not appear in the sentence containing such a verb. The semantic features of the partially recoverable object(s) must also be specified in the lexical entries of such verbs.

Finally, ditransitive, linking, complex transitive, and prepositional verbs (see previous chapter) all have qualities that would have to be indicated in the lexicon. For instance, the fact that prepositional verbs require an adverbial of location, direction, or a recipient (which can often be expressed either as a prepositional object or an indirect object):

location: <i>The child lay on the bed.</i>	* <i>The child lay.</i>
direction: <i>The boy headed home.</i>	* <i>The boy headed.</i>
recipient: <i>I handed the note to John.</i>	* <i>I handed the note.</i>
(or, <i>I handed John the note</i> )	

would also be indicated as a semantic feature of this category of verbs.

### Co-occurrence Restrictions Involving Prepositions

Frequently, a verb or a transitive adjective must be followed by a particular preposition (e.g., *to rely on X*, *to distinguish X from Y*, *to be cognizant of X*). Similarly, a given noun phrase must be preceded by a given preposition (e.g., *in my opinion*, *to my mind*, *from my point of view*) and sometimes followed by one, too (e.g., *in lieu of*, *with regard to*). Whenever new words are introduced to ESL/EFL students, we recommend the prepositions with which they co-occur be introduced as well. With these and other co-occurring forms, ESL/EFL students will need a great deal of practice.

### PRODUCTIVE LEXICAL PROCESSES

In addition to fairly structured lexical information such as we have given in the previous examples, the lexicon also contains rules governing three productive processes of English

word formation; compounding, derivational affixation, and conversion. It is important to understand these as well, for these processes are responsible, in part, for new entries into the lexicon.

### Compounding

Compounding, or putting together existing words to form a new lexical unit (*rain + coat = raincoat*), is a word-formation process that occurs in some languages. For example, the Germanic languages (this includes English) and the Chinese languages make rich use of compounding, whereas other languages make much less use of this process. According to the *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*, almost any noun can modify any other noun in English. Take the noun *house*, for instance. We have *household, housemate, house sitter, houseboat, house arrest, housebound, housebreaking, housebroken, houseguest, housefly, housekeeper, houselights, housewarming, housewife, househusband, housework*, and this list is not exhaustive, by any means. Many parts of speech can be combined in this way, sometimes ending up as one word, sometimes as two or more (e.g., *bathroom towel rack*).

Some of the most frequent English compounding patterns are:

- noun + noun: *stone wall, baby blanket, rainbow*
- noun + verb: *homemade, rainfall, lip-read*
- noun + verb-er: *baby-sitter, can opener, screwdriver*
- adj. + noun: *blackbird, greenhouse, cold cream*
- adj./adv. + noun + -en: *quick-frozen, nearsighted, dim-witted*
- prep. + noun: *overlord, underdog, underworld*
- prep. + verb: *underestimate, undercut, overstep*
- verb + particle: *makeup, breakdown, stakeout*

ESL/EFL students who speak a native language with little word compounding or with very different rules of word compounding may have trouble understanding and using compound words in English. Such learners may paraphrase and say “the sheet of the bed” instead of “the bedsheet” or may even reverse the order of elements in a compound and say “wine table” when they intend to say “tablewine.”

As can be seen, the spelling of compound words proves a further complication because some are written as one word, some as two words, and some are hyphenated. Sometimes the same word is written in more than one way: *baby sitter, baby-sitter, or babysitter*, with the spelling as two words eventually coalescing into one compound word after a period of use. Students have to be taught to use their dictionaries when in doubt about the proper spelling.

### Derivational Affixation

Earlier, we introduced the eight inflectional affixes of English. English words can also have derivational affixes, affixes that combine with stem (or base) forms to derive new words. Derivational affixes can be prefixes, which often change the meaning (*expatriate, unrepentant*), or suffixes, which usually change the part of speech of the word stem (*washable, childish*). In fact, it is possible for a word stem to have both a derivational prefix and suffix (*unthinkable*) or more than one suffix (*governmental*).<sup>2</sup>

ESL/EFL teachers should help their students learn the most common and useful derivational prefixes (e.g., *anti-, bi-, inter-, intra-, pre-, un-*) and suffixes (e.g., *-able, -er, -ism, -ist, -less, -ness*). This will help students expand their productive and receptive vocabularies. It is also worthwhile to spend some time on the common suffixes whose major function is to change one part of speech into another. For example, *-ous, -ary, and -ful* transform nouns into adjectives such as *famous, customary, successful*: and *-ness* and *-ity* transform adjectives into nouns such as *happiness* and *serenity*.

It should be noted, however, that which words take which affixes is not always predictable. Students will sometimes attempt a new form with a derivational suffix that does not work (*\*suggestion*) or will think that a word has a common prefix, when in fact the “prefix” is part of the root (e.g., *relay*; *resent*). There is also potential confusion (on native English speakers’ parts as well) when having to choose between two words with different morphology that seem to be opposites, or at least different, but that actually have very similar meanings (e.g., *invaluable/valuable*; *slow up/slow down*; *admission/admittance*; *joyful/joyous*).

A final point to be made is that when both a derivational and an inflectional suffix are fixed to the same word, the inflectional suffix occurs last.

weaknesses      \*weakness

### Conversion

The other important productive lexical process in English is conversion. This occurs when one part of speech is converted into another part of speech, without any derivational affixation. Most conversion in English takes place when the underlying verb has a very general meaning, and the meaning of a noun object (direct or prepositional) becomes incorporated into the verb to show that something has been (1) added, (2) taken away, or (3) used for something.

1. He put butter on his bread. → He *buttered* his bread.  
He poured water on the plants. → He *watered* the plants.
2. Jo removed dust from the desk. → Jo *dusted* the desk.  
I took the pits out of the dates. → I *pitted* the dates.
3. He cut the log with a saw. → He *sawed* the log.  
Sue gathered the leaves with a rake. → She *raked* the leaves.

This is a very productive process, and new words, or rather new functions for extant words, are always being coined. We recently heard someone say “That book was a good read!” and novel conversions often accompany innovations; for example, we now *e-mail* messages and *fedex* packages.

The example with *read* reminds us to mention that even though the dominant English conversion pattern occurs when noun meanings are incorporated into verbs, sometimes other parts of speech are involved. In the example, the verb *read* is nominalized.<sup>3</sup> In the following case, a prepositional meaning is incorporated into the verb:

Hal walked across the street. → Hal *crossed* the street.

### HOMONYMY AND POLYSEMY

Finally, we should acknowledge here that sometimes words have the same form but different meanings, as in *bear* (an animal, to carry). With such homonyms, there is identity of spelling and sound, but it is possible to have identity with regard to only one of these. When it is sound, it is called *homophony* (*there, their, they’re*), and when it is spelling, it is called *homography* (*wind blowing* versus *wind the clock*). Sometimes the part of speech is the same, but the meaning is different: *live* in *He lives* (= resides) in *Bangor* versus *He lives* (= is alive). In such cases, we have an example of *polysemy*, when one form with the same part of speech has a range of meanings.<sup>4</sup>

Homophones, homographs, and especially, polysemous forms represent problems for ESL/EFL students. Early on in their acquisition of vocabulary, students often adhere to the “one form, one meaning” principle. Since polysemous words are the most



common words in the lexicon, confusion can reign. When students are struggling to understand a particular lexical item, sometimes it makes more sense to use a lower-frequency word to define it in order to avoid the ambiguity that can occur when using a word with more than one meaning. For example, we have found from our own teaching of beginning-level students, the polysemous adjective *hard* gets misconstrued, though the adjective *difficult* does not, when used to describe a question students find challenging.

An additional challenge in working with polysemy with ESL/EFL students is that sometimes a word in one language will share some of the meanings of the word in another language, but not all. Thus, a Spanish speaker learning English might be heard to speak of the *fingers* on his foot, as the Spanish word for fingers includes what English speakers have a separate lexical item for, *toes*. A related problem is the occurrence of *faux amis*, or false cognates—words that look as if they share the same meaning, but do not. For example, the French word *librairie* corresponds to *bookstore*, not *library* in English. These last two examples hint at the difficulties of relying on translation from the lexicon of one language to another. We will have more to say about this when discussing connotations of words.

## THE MEANING OF LEXICAL ITEMS

As must have been apparent in part of our discussion of the processes of derivational affixation and conversion, and certainly in our explanation of polysemy, we have begun to cross the line from the form of lexical items to their meaning. In this section, we will first discuss other aspects of semantic features of words before turning to consider other issues involved with the semantics of the lexicon.

### SEMANTIC FEATURES AND RESTRICTIONS

The information given in lexical entries also allows us to account for semantic well-formedness (or semantic incompatibility) in several types of constructions:

*subject-verb:*

- |                           |                       |
|---------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1. a. The idea developed. | b. *The idea laughed. |
| 2. a. The dog sneezed.    | b. *The worm sneezed. |

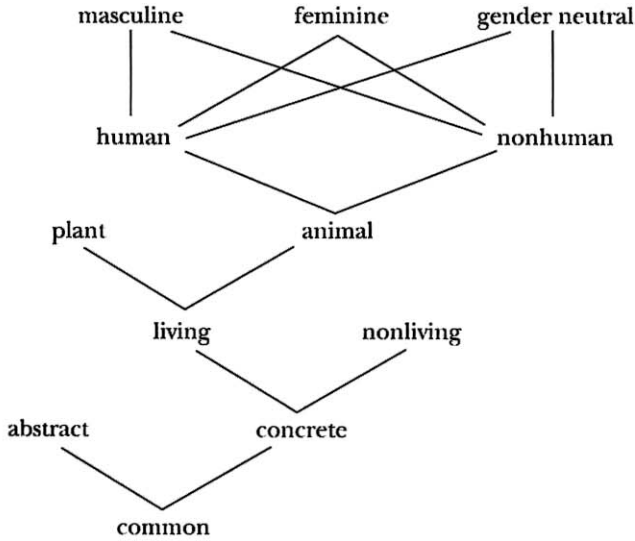
*verb-object:*

- |   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 3. a. The harsh winter killed the plants. | b. *The winter killed the rocks. |
|---|----------------------------------|

*adjective-noun:*

- |                                  |                                  |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 4. a. The basement was mildewed. | b. *The government was mildewed. |
| 5. a. The mare was pregnant.     | b. *The stallion was pregnant.   |

We can account for the above incompatibilities in terms of a hierarchy of semantic features (going from low to high): common nouns are abstract or concrete, and concrete nouns are living or nonliving; living nouns are plant or animal, and animal nouns are human or nonhuman; finally, human and nonhuman animal nouns are masculine, feminine, or gender neutral.<sup>5</sup>



Our hierarchy is simplified, but it will suffice to demonstrate why sentences 1b through 5b are unacceptable. Nouns with features at the bottom of the hierarchy are excluded when a higher feature is required; for example, the verb *laugh* in 1b requires a human subject, so any noun lower on the features hierarchy is excluded semantically. Although not reflected in our hierarchy, it is probably necessary to divide nonhuman animals into higher and lower animals because dogs and horses can “sneeze” or be “intelligent” but worms and centipedes cannot (2b). Only living nouns can literally be killed, so that leaves 3b unacceptable; and only concrete (as opposed to abstract) nouns can literally be involved in action or processes such as falling, breaking, and mildewing, accounting for the unacceptability of 4b (although we admit it has appeal as a metaphor—see the next section in this chapter). Finally, the adjective *pregnant* modifies or describes a mature female animal, hence the unacceptability of 5b. All such semantic co-occurrence restrictions should be entered in the lexicon. The lexical entries of verbs must specify any semantic restrictions regarding the noun subjects and objects they normally take, and the lexical entries of adjectives must specify any semantic restrictions regarding the nouns they can modify.

Most of these semantic restrictions are probably universal and thus are not something we have to teach ESL/EFL learners;<sup>6</sup> however, they still constitute information that is included in the lexical entry of words and is part of lexical meaning. One of the most interesting things about these restrictions is that they are often violated in extension of meaning and figurative usage (e.g., *a pregnant pause*, *a broken heart*). And it is in these meaning extensions that languages differ.

## MEANING EXTENSION

The lexicon is also where general processes of meaning extension should be described, since a great many word meanings are figurative or metaphorical rather than (or in addition to) being literal. Indeed, it is the deliberate violation of these semantic constraints that results in the rich imagery of poetic language. For example, the following examples show how descriptions of natural phenomena can be coded as actions without external agents or even as personified human-like action:

<b>Nature as Action</b>	<b>Nature Personified</b>
The wind blew.	The wind whispered.
The brook flooded.	The brook roared.
The saplings swayed.	The saplings danced.

Ascribing action and personification to nature represent common meaning extensions. Lakoff and Johnson, in their book *Metaphors We Live By*, show just how pervasive our use of metaphoric language is. For example the “container” metaphor is used frequently in English as a normal extension of meaning:

<b>Literal</b>	<b>Metaphoric</b>
Put it into the basket.	Put it into words.
He’s in the garage.	He’s in love.

Sometimes the same expression has both literal and figurative meaning, and the connection between literal and figurative use is not as obvious as in the previous examples. The nonobvious interpretation then becomes an *idiom*, a notoriously difficult type of lexical item for language learners:

It’s in the bag. (= the object is located in the bag)	<i>literal</i>
(= the proposal is a reality/accepted)	<i>idiomatic</i>

Familiarity with the extensions of meaning, the metaphors, and the idioms commonly employed in everyday language (and also, of course, in fable, allegories, poems, etc.) can be a great asset to learners in acquiring a new language.

### DENOTATIONS, CONNOTATIONS, AND CULTURAL ASSOCIATIONS

A word’s *denotation* is its dictionary definition or referential meaning. For example, a cat is a feline quadruped. A *connotation* is the emotional association with a word. This association can be personal (as, for example, positive associations with the month of your birth), or communal. With regard to the latter, Wierzbicka (1986) shows that while *only*, *merely*, and *just* all denote “It is not more than X” in the frame

I am going to buy that pen. It is  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{only} \\ \text{merely} \\ \text{just} \end{array} \right\} 50 \text{ cents.}$

their connotations for English speakers are different. *Only* is more neutral, whereas *merely* is depreciative, and *just* is mildly positive. Another example from Wierzbicka shows this even better: the expression *just for fun* could be used as an advertising slogan, but *merely for fun* wouldn’t work to sell much!

When it comes to the communal or shared connotations of lexical items, we can see how much our frame of reference influences the interpretations we give to words. Fillmore (1995) cites the tongue-in-cheek definition of *boy* from *A Feminist Dictionary*, compiled by Kramarae and Treichler (1985):

**boy.** A male youth (cared for primarily by women) who is in training to support the institutions which state that his caretakers are kindly but otherwise inferior beings.

We can begin to appreciate how difficult it is to expect that a word in one language will have an equivalent in another. Wierzbicka (1988) points out that even concrete concepts such as *mouse* have culture-specific associations, determined by speakers’ interests and attitudes as much as by any denotation. Although students will naturally



resort to translating from their native language, as much as possible the lexical items of English should be learned in their own right and within context.

### LEXICAL ASPECT: SEMANTIC CLASSES OF VERBS

Verbs in any language can be classified according to the type of action or state they describe (Vendler 1967). Some verbs, for example, are inherently punctual, such as *kick* or *hit*, meaning that the action is momentary, having no duration. Another category contains verbs that are inherently durative, such as *live* or *work*; use of these verbs implies that the action takes place over time. This semantic feature is often referred to as “lexical aspect,” a topic we discuss in detail in Chapter 7, which deals with tense and aspect in English. What is significant about the lexical aspect of verbs is that they express different meanings when they combine with certain grammatical morphemes. For example, punctual verbs take on an iterative meaning when they combine with the progressive (*be . . . -ing*), whereas durative verbs take on a sense of “temporariness” with the progressive.

She is hitting the rug with a stick in order to clean it. (repeatedly)

She is working in Halifax for the summer. (temporarily)

We could cite many other categories of verbs in which the meaning of the verb affects other aspects of the sentence, such as what kind of complement structure—gerund or infinitive—follows the verb. We will deal with these categories as they arise in connection with particular grammar structures. For now, though, these observations should remind us of why the term *lexicogrammar* is an appropriate hybrid.

### ARGUMENT STRUCTURE OF VERBS

Closely related to the noun-verb syntactic restrictions and the notions of transitivity we discussed above is the more semantic notion of “argument structure,” a term used by linguists and philosophers to describe the number of nouns or participants (i.e., arguments) typically associated with a verb and the relationship that those nouns have with the verb. If a verb takes one argument, in English it is intransitive and the noun argument functions as the subject.

*One argument:*    Milly jogs.

If the verb takes two arguments, one noun argument will function as the subject; however, the other noun argument could function as a direct object or as a locative prepositional phrase, or it could have some other role.

*Two arguments:*    Lloyd drank the beer.  
                              Andrew lives in Richmond.

If the verb takes three arguments, one noun argument will function as the subject, one will function as the indirect object or recipient, and the other may function as a direct object; or the three arguments might function as subject, direct object, and locative prepositional phrase.

*Three arguments:*    Len gave me a book.  
                              Rhonda put the vase on the table.

Some arguments are optional. For example, a change-of-state verb like *open* must have as an argument the object that opens. Optionally, it can also have an argument that expresses the agent, or cause, of the opening:



One or two arguments:    The door opened.  
    John opened the door.

Finally, some arguments are inherent in the semantic structure of a verb but do not have to be expressed in a specific noun and can be interpreted very generally. For example, the verb *eat* always takes two arguments, but the direct object need not be overtly expressed:

John ate a sandwich.  
 John ate.

Fillmore's approach to distinguishing verb meanings (1968) shows one application of the notion of semantic features and argument structure of verbs that we have been discussing. Beginning with the following examples, Fillmore proceeds to elaborate the semantic distinctions that must be captured in the lexical entries of the verbs *touch*, *strike*, and *break*.

1. Peter touched the window.
2. Peter struck the window.
3. Peter broke the window.

Fillmore points out that *break* in 3 is different from *touch* in 1 and *strike* in 2 in that 3 has a related intransitive sentence that the other two verbs do not have—that is, one of the noun arguments is optional:

4. \*The window touched.
5. \*The window struck.
6. The window broke.

In addition, the verb *break* seems to require that its object be rigid, while *touch* and *strike* do not share this requirement. Consider these examples:

7. Peter touched the dog.
8. Peter struck the dog.
9. ?Peter broke the dog.

In 7 and 8, the dog can be a living animal, and the difference in meaning is one of relative intensity of impact: striking denotes a stronger, sharper impact than touching. In 9, however, the dog has to be an inanimate figure made of something breakable, such as plaster, ceramic, or glass.

Fillmore made several other useful generalizations about these verbs, but these examples demonstrate that understanding a lexical item entails, among other things, knowing precisely how it differs from other similar items. This brings us to the issue of semantic fields.

## SEMANTIC FIELDS

As we have been attempting to show, words can often be really understood only in terms of their relationship to other words. On a very simple level, when an ESL student asks what *wet* means, perhaps the best explanation would be to use its *antonym*, or opposite, and reply, *not dry*. This explanation would not work, of course, unless the student knew the meaning of the antonym.

Another concept that is helpful in defining words in relation to other words is the concept of *semantic field*, a cluster of words that cover a particular semantic area and can best be understood in relation to one another. Examples of semantic fields most often cited are kinship terms and terms for colors in a language. The precise meaning of a color word can best be understood by seeing it in relation to other words that cover the spectrum.

Even though defining colors is difficult, as there isn't necessarily a one-to-one correspondence between languages, they can be illustrated more easily than words in other semantic fields. Take, for example, adjectives denoting physical attractiveness (*beautiful, lovely, pretty, attractive, good-looking, handsome, etc.*), items from the same semantic field, which therefore have some features in common. We could apply a semantic feature analysis (also called a componential analysis) by listing the features across the horizontal axis of a grid and the words belonging to the same semantic field along the vertical axis.

**TABLE 3.1    A SEMANTIC FEATURE ANALYSIS**

	making a pleasant impression on the senses	close to an ideal	suggesting relative smallness	suggesting femininity or delicacy	arousing interest
beautiful	X	X			
pretty	X		X	X	
attractive	X				X

Adapted from Gairns and Redman (1986).

Even this abbreviated analysis of the semantic features shows that we can to some extent become more precise about the meaning of a word. These three words—*beautiful, pretty, attractive*—are not synonyms. Such an analysis, modified for the sake of comprehension, may assist ESL/EFL students who ask about the differences among words in a semantic field. Still, even this level of precision is not very satisfying. While such an analysis can assist us in being able to detect differences among these items, it should also be clear that this type of discrete feature analysis can also be misleading. For one thing, we may not agree on the exact defining features of a word. For another, it may be impossible to pin down all the semantic nuances of a word in sufficient detail. Leech (1981) suggests that most words have “fuzzy” meanings.

### PROTOTYPICALITY

To explore further the fuzziness of meaning, consider the notion of prototypicality. It is well known that mammals have certain characteristics: They are furry, they give birth to live offspring, and they nurse their young, for instance. And yet, it is also well known that certain animals are classified as mammals even though they do not meet all the criteria (e.g., a platypus lays eggs but is considered a mammal). As Givón (1993) reminds us, membership in natural categories is not determined by rigid adherence to all criteria. Rather, membership is determined by a cluster of criteria. Further, some of these criteria are more central than others. Thus we might say that a bear is a more prototypical mammal than a platypus.

To take a linguistic example, there are many verbs of speaking: *say, tell, speak, talk, mention, remark, comment, shout, whisper*, and so on. Were we to perform a componential analysis of these verbs and others in their semantic class, we would find that some of the features are true of some of the verbs but not true of others. You saw this earlier with adjectives of physical attractiveness. We would also see, however, that some of the features are more central for membership in the class than others. For instance, that they all have to do with oracy is central, while the manner in which the oracy is performed is only encoded in two of the verbs and is therefore less central. If someone were to ask us to give an example of a prototypic verb of speech, we would most likely choose one of the first

four on the list. We revisit the concept of prototypicality later in this book. As Lewis (1997) reminds us, considerations of prototypicality are very important when thinking of examples to give ESL/EFL students of a certain lexicogrammatical phenomenon.

## THE USE OF LEXICAL ITEMS

You may be asking yourself why we have not yet mentioned true synonymy—two words with the same meaning. The reason is simple. Rarely will two linguistic forms mean exactly the same thing, for if they did, there would be little reason to have them both in the language. Thus, at best we can talk about partial synonymy. We do not mean to dismiss the use of synonyms, for giving a partial synonym is often the most efficient way of giving students the meaning of a particular word. It is important, though, to remain cognizant of the differences between words and, in the case of more intermediate and advanced students, to highlight the semantic differences. It is also true that what distinguishes words is not always their semantic differences; words can differ because of the area of their use: different dialects (e.g., British English *lorry* versus North American English *truck*); different registers (e.g., *friend* versus *buddy*); or they are age-graded, meaning that a certain age group will use them (e.g., adolescents using *cool* as an adjective of approval); or they are no longer fashionable (e.g., adolescents today would not accept *groovy* as a substitute for *cool*).

Whatever one learns about the meaning and formal requirements of a lexical item, one cannot ignore the context in which it is used. For example, Carter and McCarthy (1988) discuss the example of the word *stocking*, which takes on quite a different meaning when it refers to silk or nylon stockings as opposed to Christmas stockings. The former type of stockings are worn by women, but the latter type are worn by no one. They are simply stocking-shaped containers intended for small Christmas gifts or simply Christmas decorations attached to a fireplace mantle (or a wall or door).

## COLLOCATION

Certain types of word co-occurrences that are governed by conventional use rather than form or meaning have long been studied under the label *collocation*. For example,

adjective-noun: *a tall person or building* (not a “high” one)

adverb-adjective: *statistically significant* (not “important”)

verb-direct object: *ask/answer a question* (not “say”/“tell”)

Some collocations are more fixed than others: binomials, such as *high and dry*, *hat and coat*, and *pick and choose*, and trinomials, such as *a king’s ransom*, *a handsome/pretty price*, and *a raw deal*. The difference between these fixed collocations and idioms has to do with the transparency of meaning. Idioms have meanings that are difficult to retrieve from the lexical items themselves (e.g., *kick the bucket* as a euphemism for *dying*), whereas words that go together in collocations still retain their lexical meaning. Collocations, therefore, should be decipherable, although here again it is probably better to think of them being on a cline—a continuum of idiomaticity (Fillmore, Kay, and O’Connor 1988).

Computer-assisted corpus research has demonstrated that a great deal of text in English is composed of words in common patterns or in slight variants of these patterns (Sinclair 1991). Gillian Francis (1996), reporting on the 320-million-word Cobuild corpus of British, American, and Australian English, claimed that researchers have identified over

700 patterns that are blends of lexical and grammatical elements. One such pattern, for example, consist of patterns with the verb *insist*:

*insist (that)*  
*insist on*  
*insist on Verbing*  
*insist on Noun Phrase*  
*insist + quote*

One conclusion we can derive from this observation is simply that words don't occur randomly. Once you have chosen a word, you are severely limited in your choice of what comes next. The second point underscores what we have alluded to several times already. When it comes to performance, syntax and lexicon are intertwined.

Halliday and Hasan (1976) use the term lexical collocation in another sense. They refer to the expectation that other words will occur in a text (oral or written) once a particular word has occurred. Thus, if the word *professor* occurs in ongoing text, one might expect other words such as *lecture*, *university*, *teach*, or *publish* to occur. However, this is a much more general use of the term lexical collocation, and it seems to refer to related or associated vocabulary on a specific topic rather than the syntactically constrained collocations we have been discussing. One would expect the syntactically constrained collocations to appear as lexical information in the lexicon but not necessarily the more general topic-driven associations.

### LEXICAL PHRASES, OR LEXICALIZED SENTENCE STEMS

Collocations are groups of words that occur together. Lexical phrases are also groups of words that co-occur; the difference is that lexical phrases serve specific functions. For example, the phrase *by the way* serves the function of enabling the speaker to shift the topic in discourse (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). As with collocations, some lexical phrases are more fixed than others: *at any rate* and *what on earth* are fixed; a phrase like *a \_\_\_\_\_ N [+ time] ago* is more open, allowing any noun of time (e.g., *day*, *week*) to fill the slot; also open is *as far as I \_\_\_\_\_*, allowing certain verbs such as *know* or *can tell*, to complete the lexical phrase.

While Nattinger and DeCarrico write of conventionalized form-function composites, Pawley and Syder (1983) use the term "lexicalized sentence stems" for regular form-meaning pairings.<sup>7</sup> They claim that English speakers know hundreds of thousands of such lexical units in which the grammatical form and lexical content are wholly or largely fixed but which are not true idioms.

Lexicalized sentence stems can be clause length or multiclausal:

<i>Clause length:</i>	What's for dinner? Need any help? You would ask that question.
<i>Multiclausal:</i>	I told him, but he wouldn't listen. Be careful what you're doing with that. If I'd known then, what I know now . . .

In addition, according to Pawley and Syder, many semilexicalized (because they are less fixed) sequences possess permissible expansions or substitutions. In such cases, a formula can be extracted that consists of a nucleus of lexical and grammatical morphemes, which normally include the verb and certain of its arguments, as well as one or more structural elements represented by a category symbol such as TENSE, NP (noun phrase), or PRO (pronoun). For example, in the conventional expressions of apology for tardiness,



I'm sorry to keep you waiting.  
 I'm so sorry to have kept you waiting.  
 Mr. X is sorry to keep you waiting all this time.

a recurrent formula can be isolated together with a grammatical frame:

NP be-TENSE sorry to keep-TENSE you waiting

While lexical phrases and lexicalized sentence stems adhere for the most part to rules of English syntax, some are “extragrammatical” (Fillmore, Kay and O'Connor 1988) or “non-canonical” (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992). Consider the phrases *sight unseen*, *all of a sudden*, and *so far, so good*; each has a grammatical structure, but not one predictable from the rules of English. Nevertheless, canonical and noncanonical phrases exist in other languages as well and perform the same functions as they do in English (Nattinger and DeCarrico 1992), so their existence and behavior should not come as a surprise to ESL/EFL students.

It has been known for some time that many beginning first and second language learners make use of large lexical units, giving them a fluency that they wouldn't ordinarily be capable of at such an early stage of acquisition. Bolinger maintains that a child learns collocations by hearing them in a variety of concrete contexts and later analyzing and abstracting the meaning of individual words (Bolinger 1976). Then, too, evidence suggests that by later analyzing the stock of formulas they have acquired, learners are able to induce the grammatical rules and regular patterns of the target language (Wong Fillmore 1976). In addition, no doubt, like native speakers of English, learners retain many of the lexical phrases and sentence stems as wholes because they conveniently fulfill certain functions or convey certain meanings.

## DISCOURSE COMMUNITIES

We mentioned earlier the effect of cultural differences with regard to the connotation of words. Other linguistic differences have been viewed from a cultural perspective as well. For example, Atkinson and Ramanathan (1995) showed the disadvantage that nonnative speakers of English experience when their ESL writing instructors operate with a different set of cultural norms about what academic writing is than do instructors of writing classes for native speakers.

Other differences accompany divergent social practices or discourses (Gee 1990). Within each discourse community, certain norms exist concerning what constitutes appropriate ways of speaking or writing. For example, an educational administrator might say,

*Prior to the administration of the assessment instrument, a skills-level analysis must be conducted to ascertain the critical level of preparedness of the target population.*

whereas a classroom teacher might say,

*Before we give the test, we'd better find out if these particular students are ready for it.*

So, *assessment instruments are administered and tests are given*. The administrator's statement might seem wordy and obscure compared with the teacher's simple and direct way of saying the same thing. However, it is important to remember that language does not serve only to express propositional meaning. A particular discourse functions as “a sort of ‘identity kit’, which comes complete with [ways] to act, talk, and often write, so as to take on a particular social role that others will recognize” (Gee 1990: 42). Clearly, however, knowing a language is not simply knowing a phrase book.

It would seem that when language is formulaic, lexical items and conventions of use (i.e., collocations and lexical phrases) appear to be extremely important, whereas when language is more original and less formulaic, where precision and disambiguation are crucial, then the

grammatical end of the continuum is more important than the lexical. As Nyssönen (1995) notes, it follows that if the learner could make appropriate and effective use of the collocations and lexical phrases that are routinely employed by native speakers in large quantities, and if the learner could also make use of grammar to adapt the patterns as necessary and to achieve contextual fit, his or her language acquisition process would be well served.

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## CONCLUSION

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The information that nonnative speakers of English must master regarding the lexicon is extensive. It is not sufficient simply to know many lexical items and their general meanings. For each item, nonnative speakers must master a network of related information about its form, meaning, and use if they wish to use the item accurately, meaningfully, and appropriately. Also, clearly, we can no longer think of the lexicon as a list of words having specified properties subject to combinatory rules. We must think of the lexicon as being composed of multiword units as well.

Despite the complexity of what we have presented here, we must introduce yet another level of difficulty. We have treated the lexicon as a static inventory. In fact, the lexicon is anything but static. It has been estimated that English increases by about 20,000 words annually. At a more local level, it has also been argued that many of the features and constraints that we have treated here as part of a lexical item, are in fact, mutable in dynamic discourse. For example, Thompson and Hopper (1997) have asserted that argument structure isn't a fixed property of predicates in the mental lexicon but rather is fluid and adaptable to conversational goals. Clearly, language is both product and process. While we deal more with language as product in this book, we acknowledge that both perspectives are necessary, and so we return to consider the dynamism of language at several points further on in this book.

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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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**1. Form.** When teaching vocabulary, it is good not just to teach words but to teach clusters of information that will help students to use the words correctly. For example: use *a/an* when introducing countable nouns (e.g., *a theory*); use *to* when introducing verbs (e.g., *to arrive*); show that verbs are transitive by adding an indefinite object such as *something* (*to propose something*); and use *to be* when introducing adjectives (e.g., *to be naive*). Also indicate any prepositions needed, where relevant (e.g., *to be interested in something*).

**2. Form.** Recommend to students that they use good learners' dictionaries to find grammatical information themselves. In addition, dictionary activities can ask students to find collocations either from the grammatical column of the *Collins Cobuild Dictionary* or from the examples in other dictionaries.

- a. Find two adjectives that can go before the noun *tone*.
- b. What two prepositions can be used after the noun *rejection*?
- c. Is *arouse* a transitive or intransitive verb? Find three nouns that go before or after the verb *arouse*.

**3. Form.** Nation (1990: 151) suggests an inductive method to draw students' attention to the form of words, using exercises like the following:

- a. Look at the word *insanity* in this sentence. What part of speech is it? Is it countable or uncountable? How do you know this?

He saw the beginning of insanity in her.

- b. Look at *inhabit* in this sentence. What part of speech is it followed by?

Woodpeckers inhabit hollow trees.

**4. Form.** Low-intermediate ESL/EFL students often confuse the related forms of a word associated with different parts of speech. If a new vocabulary item has related forms in other parts of speech, these words should also be introduced with example sentences that make the parts of speech easily distinguished but that make the learner actively discriminate with the fill-in-the-blank process. For example:

a theory          to theorize          to be theoretical

Cynthia is very (1) \_\_\_\_\_ about everything. She has just developed a new (2) \_\_\_\_\_. She (3) \_\_\_\_\_ that the less one works, the more one will succeed at certain tasks.

**5. Meaning.** To encourage students to use productive word-formation processes that have been introduced to them, contextualized definition exercises such as the following can be useful:

- A \_\_\_\_\_ is a machine that detects smoke in a home, school, or office building and sounds an alarm.
- Someone who believes in and follows the ideas of Marx is called a \_\_\_\_\_.
- A person who employs others is an (1) \_\_\_\_\_; a person who is employed by someone else is an (2) \_\_\_\_\_.

**6. Meaning.** Intermediate to advanced-level students often confuse related derivations that have the same root and are the same part of speech, such as the following adjectives:

various          discriminating          identifying          fortunate  
varied          discriminatory          identifiable          fortuitous

Exercises that teach students to distinguish such forms provide contexts that call for one or the other, but not both, such as the forms *discriminating* or *discriminatory*:

- The minority students complained because they felt some of the school regulations were \_\_\_\_\_.
- I knew that I could trust his judgment; he has \_\_\_\_\_ taste in such matters.

Students should understand why the words have the same root and part of speech (i.e., what the similarity in meaning is) yet why the words are different (i.e., what the crucial distinction is).

**7. Use.** For more controlled work on collocations, McCarthy and O'Dell (1994:5) suggest using "word forks" or matrices, such as the following:

- a. word fork

original	}	idea
brilliant		
unusual		
great		
excellent		

## b. matrix

	a car	a motorbike	a bus	a horse	a plane
to fly					+
to drive	+		+		
to ride		+		+	

**8. Use.** Norbert Schmitt (in Nation 1994:148) suggests a game of collocation bingo, in which the teacher reads out a list of words, and students have bingo cards containing words that collocate with the teacher's words. Students write the word they hear in the same square as a word on their card that they think collocates with it. The normal game of bingo proceeds.

**9. Use.** As a consciousness-raising activity, bring in, or have your students bring in, several texts, two to three paragraphs in length, that all deal with the same topic in a particular discipline. Guide students in conducting a search for lexical patterns that appear to be norms of the particular discourse community from which the texts come.

## EXERCISES

## Test your understanding of what has been presented.

- Provide an original sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) or word parts in your example.
  - verbs requiring a locative prepositional phrase
  - determiner requiring a mass noun
  - conversion
  - change-of-state verb
  - compound word
  - derivational affix
  - inflectional affix
  - transitive adjective
  - semantic field
  - transitive verb
  - verb with three arguments
  - irregular plural
  - lexical phrase
  - durative verb
  - verb-direct object collocation
  - co-occurrence with a preposition
  - adjective-noun collocation
  - polysemy
- Why are the following sentences ungrammatical?
  - \*The burglar lurked.
  - \*It fascinated the alarm clock.
  - \*I don't like these book.
  - \*There have to be some breakthrough soon.
  - \*Anyone who is a good friend must be trustful.
  - \*My favoritism is for coffee, but I also drink tea.

## Test your ability to apply what you know.

- If your students produce the following utterances, what errors are they making? How would you make them aware of these errors, and what exercises would you prepare to correct them?



- a. \*I got many *informations* from the book.
  - b. \**In* my point of view, I think that's a bad idea.
  - c. ?They are remodeling the streets.
  - d. \*People living in the United States use *crackerfires* on the Fourth of July.
  - e. \*Photography has *passionated* me since I was a child.
  - f. \*Solutions to reduce birth rates, especially within developing countries, need to be met.
  - g. \*Mr. Wilson was not aware *to* his daughter's problems.
  - h. ?*By pure fortune*, we met on the train.
4. How would you answer an ESL/EFL student who asks you what the difference is among the following verbs: *see*, *look*, *watch*, *stare*, *peer*, and *glance*?
  5. How would you answer an ESL/EFL student who asks you why *pretty*, which has to do with beauty, is used with *soon*, in the phrase *pretty soon*.
  6. How would you answer an ESL/EFL student who asked you what the difference was between *owing to* and *due to*?

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*For a thorough analysis of what it takes to know a lexical item, see:*

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For a list of verbs and adjectives followed by particular prepositions, consult:

Clark, R., P. Moran, and A. Burrows (1991). *The ESL Miscellany* (2d ed.). Brattleboro, Vt.: Pro Lingua Associates.

For a list and treatment of prepositional clusters, see:

Frodesen, J., and J. Eyring (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 4. (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

For many examples of compounding patterns, see:

Bolinger, D. (1975). *Aspects of Language*. (2d ed.). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 114–115.

For a list of conversational lexical phrases, see:

Keller, R. (1979). "Gambits: Conversational Strategy Signals." *Journal of Pragmatics* 3: 219–237.

For an example of a pedagogical approach in which words are grouped into semantic sets (groups of related words), take a look at:

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## ENDNOTES

1. The only way that English nouns are morphologically irregular is with respect to plural formation. Only countable nouns, of course, would exhibit such irregularity.

2. Multiple prefixes are unusual but not impossible: *antidisestablishmentarianism*. Note that this word has two prefixes but four suffixes.

**3.** Interestingly, Langacker (1991) notes that there is crosslingual asymmetrical pattern whereby it is normal in languages for another part of speech to be nominalized—that is, made into a noun—without any apparent change in meaning, whereas when a noun is converted into a verb, some new meaning has been added. As we have indicated above, the new meaning might be “add noun” (*to salt*), “remove noun” (*to weed*), “use noun as an instrument” (*to glue*), “turn into noun” (*to liquefy*), and so on.

**4.** It should be noted as a counterpoint that the lexicographer, Charles Ruhl (1989), argues that virtually all polysemy is an illusion. He means that if you get abstract enough you can find a single “general” meaning for each word, which holds regardless of context. We will return to this notion when we consider prepositions, and will thus explore it more fully in Chapter 21.

**5.** Sometimes English speakers will assign feminine gender to nonliving nouns such as cars, ships, and countries.

**6.** Although English speakers will attest to the difficulty of learning the gender assigned to nouns in other languages.

**7.** Thus, although we treat them here in the use category, like single-word lexical items, they can be characterized by form and meaning as well.



# THE COPULA AND SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

## INTRODUCTION

### GRAMMATICAL DESCRIPTION

ESL/EFL learners are exposed to the forms of the copula *be* and the third person singular inflection almost immediately in their earliest English classes or in any English-speaking environment they might be experiencing. The forms are superficially simple to describe and understand, yet they pose problems for learners at all levels. The copula *be* poses the greatest problems at the initial stage. However, research on L2 morpheme acquisition has shown that the third person singular present tense *-s* inflection causes persistent problems for learners even at more advanced stages of proficiency.

In this chapter we will take a close look at these problem areas. They will reemerge regularly in the following chapters; however, we felt that a detailed treatment at this stage would be wise, given the pervasiveness of the learning challenges that these forms entail.

### FORM: THE STRUCTURAL ROLES OF *BE*

*Be* functions as an auxiliary verb as well as a copula, so we should first take stock of these two distinct functions:

Copula: John is  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{a teacher} \\ \text{tall} \\ \text{in Boston} \end{array} \right\}$ .

Auxiliary: John is talking to Susan (progressive aspect)

The copula links nonverbal predicates (i.e., nouns, adjectives, and certain adverbials<sup>1</sup>) with their subjects and serves as a carrier for tense and subject-verb agreement; that is, in the present tense the form of the verb *be* reflects the person and number of the subject noun as well as signaling present tense: *I am, he is, you are*, and so on.

This structural function of *be* as a copula is distinct from the use of *be* in the progressive aspect, where *be* combines with *-ing* to make the action denoted by the main verb more limited (see Chapter 7). Auxiliary *be* always occurs in conjunction with another verb, and it is thus referred to as an auxiliary verb. The progressive aspect is only one of several

auxiliary verb functions that *be* has. It is also an auxiliary element in the passive voice (see Chapter 18) and in a number of phrasal modals (see Chapter 8).

### WHY THE COPULA BE IS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER VERBS

The rule for expanding the verb phrase makes a clear distinction between copular verbs like *be* and all other verbs in English. There are at least four very good reasons for making such a distinction. First of all, *be*, which is the most frequent verb in English, has more distinct forms with respect to person, number, and tense than any other verb in English. The traditional paradigm for *be* compared with that for a lexical verb such as *walk* makes this clear:

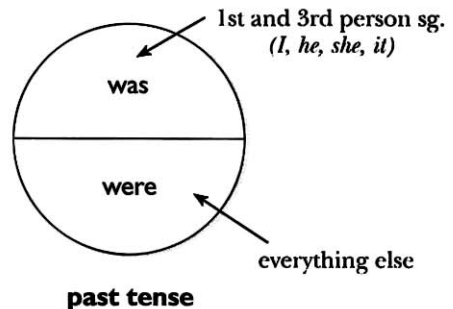
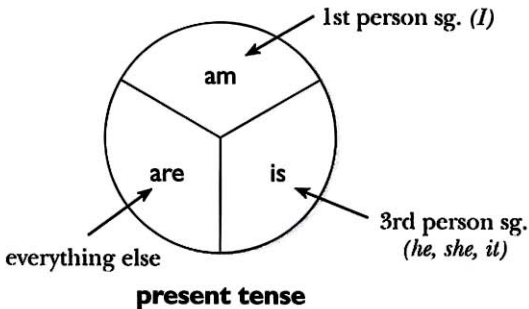
COPULA BE				
Present tense			Past tense	
Person	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1st	I am	we are	I was	we were
2nd	you are	you are	you were	you were
3rd	he/she/it is	they are	he/she/it was	they were

VERB WALK				
Present tense			Past tense	
Person	Singular	Plural	Singular	Plural
1st	I walk	we walk	I walked	we walked
2nd	you walk	you walk	you walked	you walked
3rd	he/she/it walks	they walk	he/she/it walked	they walked

a verb like *walk* has two present-tense forms and one past-tense form:

- Present:** walks—third person singular  
 walk—all other persons and numbers  
**Past:** walked—all persons and numbers

The verb *be*, on the other hand, has three distinct present-tense and two past-tense forms. Some of the forms are more restricted in their range than others, and this is represented in the following diagrams:





Chapter 10), and other constructions, is very different from that of other verbs like *walk*, which require the addition of a *do* auxiliary as the operator if no other auxiliary verb is present.

Hal <b>is</b> an engineer.	Hall walk <b>s</b> to work.
<b>Is</b> Hal an engineer?	<b>Does</b> Hal walk to work?
Hal <b>is</b> n't a teacher.	Hal <b>does</b> n't walk home.

Like the main verb *walk*, copular verbs other than *be* take a *do* auxiliary in questions and negatives:

Did he get taller?  
I don't feel well.

Finally, the copula *be* does not occur in all languages, but all languages have verbs. Especially in the present tense, many languages have nothing equivalent to the copula *be*; speakers of such languages simply express the literal equivalent of sentences like the three below, and this pattern readily transfers to English during their initial learning stage:

\*Hal engineer.      \*Hal in next room.  
\*Hal tall.

In sum, a verb is copular if it is followed by a noun phrase, an adjective phrase, or an adverbial that specifically predicates something about the subject of the verb.

## MEANING

The lack of universality of the copula *be* is understandable if we consider that semantically it is not a necessary form; it is a linking element that carries tense—which can be marked only on verbs—and subject-verb agreement. In fact, children learning English as their mother tongue often omit the *be* copula in their early speech as do many second language learners of all ages when they are first learning English. Second language learners have been observed to omit the copula regardless of whether or not their native language has an equivalent form. All these phenomena are related to the fact that the copula *be* is a marked form.

However, we agree with Langacker (1991:65) that *be* is not merely a semantically empty grammatical operator, as some linguists have suggested. Langacker proposes that the meaning of *be* is primarily temporal and aspectual. It signals that an imperfective state is continuing through time as a stable situation. For Langacker, *be* is a true verb marking a stative relation. It is not semantically specific in any way regarding the relation between the subject noun phrase and the element following *be*, which may be adjectival, nominal, or adverbial (in the latter case, usually a prepositional phrase).

## USE

Besides learning that sentences like the ones above with Hal require the *be* copula, the other use problem for ESL/EFL students is to realize that copula *be* does indeed function as an operator—it does not require the *do* auxiliary. Failure to recognize the special status of the *be* copula in the formation of questions and negative sentences sometimes results in errors such as the following:

\*Do they be happy? (for “Are they happy?”)  
\*We don't be teachers. (for “We aren't teachers.”)

## THE COPULA BE AS A LEARNING PROBLEM

For all the above reasons the ESL/EFL teacher must be sensitive to the problems that his or her learners will have with the copula *be*—especially if the learners are at the beginning



level, since they may have a tendency to omit it. (For those students whose native language has no copula, this initial tendency will be even more pronounced.) The other problem, of course, involves use of the wrong form of *be*. Sufficient opportunity for meaningful practice can overcome both of these problems.

## SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

### FORM

#### Third Person Singular Present

Standard grammatical treatments state that for verbs other than *be*, number agreement between the subject and verb (sometimes referred to as subject-verb concord) poses a problem only in the present tense, where third person singular forms are explicitly inflected while other forms are not.

Person	NUMBER	
	Singular	Plural
1st	I speak French.	We speak French.
2nd	You speak French.	You speak French.
3rd	He/she/it (the parrot) speak-s French.	They speak French.

#### Some Typical Errors

Given the complexity of the choice, the beginning ESL/EFL learner tends to simplify and leave off altogether the third person singular inflection:

\*Sharon live in Seattle.    \*Harry say he will come.

Occasionally, however, some learners will overgeneralize the inflection and apply it to uninflected forms, such as modal auxiliaries, or to verbs following modals (see Chapter 8):

\*Jack cans dance disco.

or

\*Jack can dances disco.

They also may overuse it as an agreement marker with subjects of inappropriate person and/or number:

\*I } goes to Stanford.  
\*They }  
\*You }

Yet another reason why some learners overuse this form is that they interpret the *-s* ending as a plural marker on the verb to be used in agreement with plural subjects:

\*They } goes to the movies often.  
\*The boys }

Finally, it has also been observed that some Spanish speakers tend to initially overuse the verb + *-s* inflection with the second person singular pronoun because a similar form is used in their language when the subject noun reflects this person:



Spanish: Tu habla s inglés.      English: \*You speak s English.

By far the most common error in subject-verb agreement is the first one we mentioned, that of the learner simply omitting the inflection for third person singular. Research in both language typology and second language acquisition can help us understand why this is so.

The languages of the world can be roughly divided into topic-prominent languages with pragmatic word order (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Korean) and subject-prominent languages with grammatical word order (e.g., English, Spanish, Arabic); the former never mark subject-verb agreement, whereas the latter typically do. Thus it seems plausible that learners of English with a topic-prominent first language would find it more difficult to master subject-verb agreement than learners whose native language is subject-prominent like English. However, research in second language acquisition by Fuller & Gundel (1987) suggests that most learners pass through an early topic-prominent stage regardless of their first language. In analyzing the elicited oral narratives produced by low-intermediate learners of English, these researchers found no significant differences between native speakers of topic-prominent languages and those of subject-prominent languages in their use of subject-verb agreement in English. Most of their nonnative speakers made more than 10 errors demonstrating lack of agreement. Yet since speakers of topic-prominent languages are not prepared by their first language to expect the relationship between subject and verb to be marked in any way, it is likely to take them longer to master subject-verb agreement in English than speakers of subject-prominent languages. Further research is needed to see if this hypothesis is correct.

Agreement errors may be due to phonological or perceptual factors rather than syntactic or morphological differences. ESL/EFL teachers should be aware of the fact that some learners of English fully understand the third person singular present ending and can even produce it systematically when they write in English; however, they omit it frequently when they are speaking. One reason for this is because the sound system of their native language tends not to permit final /s/ sounds in particular or final consonants in general. Speakers of French and a variety of other languages have been observed to do this when speaking English.

Of course, other reasons for the slow and late acquisition of the third person singular present inflection on the verb—even when there is no phonological interference from the learner's native language—might be its lack of perceptual saliency<sup>7</sup> and its low frequency of occurrence in native speaker speech (Larsen-Freeman, 1976). The third person singular present tense inflection tends to be omitted for these reasons as well. Also, it is the only inflection in the present tense and has little communicative utility since the person/number is almost always clear from the subject noun phrase, just as it is with the other persons and numbers that do not take any inflection.

## MEANING

### Problems in Subject and Verb Number Choice

Whereas some cases of subject and verb number choice are puzzling mainly to nonnative speakers, several cases cause difficulty for native and nonnative speakers alike. We will now review many of the problematic areas in subject and verb number choice along with the more predictable and obvious rules.

### The General Rule

In the most straightforward cases, the subject and verb number choice will agree: In the present tense we use the third person singular inflection (-s or the *be* form *is*) if the subject refers to one entity, whether it is a singular proper name, a singular common noun, a non-count noun, or a third person singular pronoun. Elsewhere—for nouns or pronouns referring to more than one entity<sup>8</sup> or for first or second person pronouns referring to one entity—no inflection is used in the present tense:

<i>Third person singular inflection on verb</i>	<i>No inflection on verb</i>
John walk[s] to school.	The Smiths walk to church.
The bus stop[s] here.	These books contain good information.
This water taste[s] funny.	I } want an apple.
She want[s] an apple.	You } want an apple.
	We } want an apple.
	You } want an apple.
	They } want an apple.

To this formulation we should add that if the predicate of the sentence begins with an inflectable, tense-bearing auxiliary verb such as *be* or *have*, it is the auxiliary verb that indicates the third person singular inflection (not the main verb):

John [is] walking to school.  
This water [has] boiled for 10 minutes.

Reid (1991) offers an excellent reanalysis of this problematic “rule.” His arguments are based on meaning rather than form, and he emphasizes the fact that form follows from meaning; he believes that the subject-verb agreement “rule” is not grounded in syntactic automaticity but that its use reflects a series of semantic choices and decisions made by the speaker-writer. Reid proposes that all English nouns (in this case nouns that happen to function as subjects) have a number, which is either ONE or MORE THAN ONE. The number MORE THAN ONE can be encoded either lexically (e.g., *people*, *they*) or, more typically, morphologically with the inflection -s<sup>9</sup> (e.g., *several boys*). In some cases, lexical and morphological number can even co-occur and give new meaning to words (e.g., *peoples*).

Similarly, all English verbs have a number. Except for the verb *be*, which encodes number lexically even in the past tense, other English verbs encode number only in the present tense:

Present tense verb ending	Meaning	Example
-s	(ONE)	The boy runs.
-∅	(MORE THAN ONE)	The boys run.

Reid further proposes that the choice of number is made separately for both the subject noun and the verb (*be* or present tense lexical verbs) and that both choices contribute independently to the speaker’s message. This perspective allows Reid to explain why the number of the subject noun and the verb, while most often the same, do not always agree since all combinations are possible though not equally frequent. The most frequent choices, i.e., the agreements, are the examples in the shaded boxes numbered 1 and 4:



		NOUN SUBJECT	
		One	More Than One
VERB	One	The boy likes candy. 1	Ten dollars is not a lot of money. 2
	More Than One	The family are all here 3	The boys like candy. 4

The examples in boxes 2 and 3 are unusual in that an overtly plural subject in 2 is reinterpreted as a singular lump sum, and an overtly singular subject in 3 is reinterpreted as a plural entity. We know this has been done by the speaker/writer because of the verb forms chosen: singular *is* in 2 and plural *are* in 3. The choice is complex, and for Reid it is based on the speaker's message and communicative intent in each case.<sup>10</sup>

We refer to Reid's system when we discuss several of the following problematic cases of subject noun and main verb number agreement/disagreement later in this chapter. We find his system appealing because it helps explain why the "rule" is so difficult for L2 learners to master and why even educated native speakers of English must constantly monitor their production in this area.

Examples of the general agreement rule are easy to understand and cause little or no difficulty—at least not at the conceptual level. However, there are so many special or difficult cases concerning subject and verb number that we must fill several pages with subrules and examples as we try to give you a complete picture of the problem.

### Rules for Persistently Troublesome Cases

1. Collective nouns (see Chapter 17) like the one in box 3 of the preceding matrix may take either a singular or plural verb inflection depending on the meaning.<sup>11</sup> If the subject noun is conceived of as one entity, the verb carries the *-s* inflection; if the subject is felt to be more than one entity, the verb takes no inflection. (Note that other forms showing number agreement (e.g. determiners) may also change to reflect the number selected.)

Our school team has won all its games. (= the team as a whole)

Our school team have won all their games. (= individual team members)

2. Some common and proper nouns ending in *-s*, including *-ics* nouns and certain diseases, are always conceived of as a single entity and take a singular verb inflection.

No news is good news.

This series is very interesting.

Measles is a contagious disease.

Physics is a difficult subject.

Wales is lovely to visit.

3. Titles of books, plays, operas, films, and such works—even when plural in form—take the singular verb inflection because they are perceived as a single entity.

*Great Expectations* was written by Dickens.

*The Pirates of Penzance* is my favorite operetta.



4. Nouns occurring in sets of two take the singular when the noun *pair* is present but take the plural when *pair* is absent—regardless of whether one pair or more is being referred to.

A pair of trousers is on the sofa. This pair of shoes needs new heels.  
 Todd's trousers are on the sofa. These shoes need new heels.

5. A *number of* normally takes the plural, while *the number of* normally takes the singular.

A number of students have dropped that course.  
 The number of students in this school is 2,000.

This generalization holds true most of the time because the noun *number* in the phrase *the number of* generally modifies or implies a single entity such as a sum or a totality, whereas the noun *number* in the phrase *a number of* normally modifies or implies more than one entity, much as the quantifiers *some*, *a few*, or *several* do. However, as Reid (1991) points out, authentic counterexamples do exist for this heuristic—especially if adjectivals that semantically support the opposite number interpretation are modifying the noun *number* so as to make “(the) *number (of)*” reflect more than one entity or make “(a) *number (of)*” reflect a single entity:

“... the increased number of cancers were occurring at radiation exposure levels well below the official limit. . . .” Reid (1991:219)

“A smaller number of steps suggests a growing ability to organize.” Reid (1991:282)

6. Fractions and percentages take a singular verb inflection when modifying a noncount noun and the plural verb inflection when they modify a plural noun; either the singular or the plural verb inflection may be used when they modify a collective noun, depending on the speaker's meaning.

*noncount:* One half of the toxic waste has escaped.  
 Fifty percent of the toxic waste has escaped.

*plural:* Two thirds of the students are satisfied with the class.  
 Sixty-six percent of the students are satisfied with the class.

*collective:* One tenth of the population of Egypt  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is Christian.} \\ \text{are Christians.} \end{array} \right.$   
 Ten percent of the population of Egypt  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{is Christian.} \\ \text{are Christians.} \end{array} \right.$

7. The nouns *majority* and *minority* are variously described as singular, plural, or collective, depending on which reference grammar one consults. The only satisfying description of these words that we found was in Fowler (1965: 349–350, 366). Fowler maintains that *majority* and *minority* have three related but slightly different meanings:

a. An abstract or generic meaning that refers to superiority of numbers; the reference can be human or nonhuman, but the number is always singular. For example:

The great majority is helpless.

b. A specific meaning where one of two or more sets has a numerical plurality (*majority*) or numerical inferiority (*minority*); the examples make reference to political parties, and grammatically these cases are like collectives and can be either singular or plural. For example:

The majority was/were determined to press its/their victory.







	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. None of the negotiations is likely to succeed.	44%	19%	24%
b. None of the negotiations are likely to succeed.	56%	78%	76%
		3%—either	
2. a. None even knows how to tie shoes.	44%	28%	61%
b. None even know how to tie shoes.	56%	69%	39%
		3%—either	

For both questionnaire items, *none* is notionally plural; in the second item, *none* is plural by elliptical reference since it points back (presumably) to some plural noun such as *children*. Except for the response of the Pepsi-Cola truck drivers to item 2, all respondents indicated their preference for plural verb agreement with *none* where *none* modifies or refers to a plural countable noun. Clearly, the traditional prescription that *none* is always singular is inadequate. Additional research based on analysis of tokens from current spoken and written English should be carried out to see if a more descriptively adequate rule of usage exists. In the meantime, ESL/EFL teachers must be aware of the fact that when the subject *none* refers to a plural countable noun, the plural verb inflection may well be used if current usage is any indication.

Although *none* is the most problematic quantifier with respect to subject-verb agreement, ESL/EFL learners also experience problems with the quantifiers *all*, *each*, and *every (one)*.

The rules for subject-verb agreement with *all* are as follows: If the noun that *all* modifies is a noncount subject, then subject-verb agreement is singular:

All (of ) (the) water is polluted.

If *all* modifies a countable plural subject noun, subject-verb agreement is plural:

All (of ) (the) students have arrived.

A problem arises, however, when *all* is used to qualify a collective noun subject (see Chapter 17). Theoretically, one should be able to use either singular or plural subject-verb agreement in such cases. We tested such an item with 40 native speakers of English (graduate students and professors), and the results seem to support this theoretical duality:

All of my family \_\_\_\_\_ present.  
is—55%; are—43%; no response—2%

Many style books, however, admonish us not to use the preposition *of* after the quantifier *all* in our writing. We thus administered a similar item, minus the *of* to the same group of people a week later. The results were as follows:

All my family \_\_\_\_\_ present.  
is—68%; are—26%; used both—6%

Thus the presence or absence of the preposition *of* seems to have an effect on subject-verb agreement, since in the item without *of* our consultants favored singular agreement to a noticeably greater degree.

Peterson (1990:58) followed up on this observation and presented the following questionnaire items to his three groups of consultants:



	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. All of the class is restless today.	63%	89%	70%
b. All of the class are restless today.	37%	11%	30%
2. a. All of the team was caught drinking margaritas.	44%	66%	33%
b. All of the team were caught drinking margaritas.	56%	31%	67%
		3%—either	
3. a. All my family lives in Minnesota.	41%	66%	61%
b. All my family live in Minnesota.	59%	28%	39%
		6%—either	

Peterson did not test the same collective noun for items with and without *of*; however, his results suggest that factors other than the presence or absence of *of* are influencing or coloring these results. Analysis of spontaneous oral and written data showing different tokens of the same collective noun modified by *all (of)* with different types of subject-verb agreement would be useful in determining more precisely what the basis of this variation might be.

When the subject quantifier is *each* or *every (one)*, the rules are more straightforward. When the quantified subject noun is singular, there is no problem: the subject-verb agreement is always singular:

{ Each  
Every  
Each and every } student has a textbook.

However, when the quantified noun refers to a definite plural set, there can be problems since the quantifiers are grammatically singular yet the set they are modifying is notionally plural:

Each of his examples { was  
were } out of context.

Every one of these athletes { runs  
run } the mile in four minutes.

The traditional prescriptive rule maintains that singular subject-verb agreement applies in such cases because *each* and *every (one)* are functioning as grammatically singular subjects. In these cases native speaker preference appears to closely mirror the prescriptive rule, since the same 40 consultants that reported divided usage for *all* were in agreement (93% or greater) that the verbs in the above two sentences should be *was* and *runs*. In contrast to our results, however, it is interesting to see what Peterson (1990:57) found when he surveyed his three groups:

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. Each of them sees many advantages in that plan.	50%	83%	39%
b. Each of them see many advantages in that plan.	50%	11%	61%
		6%—either	

	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
2. a. Each of the children is happy today.	47%	58%	9%
b. Each of the children are happy today.	53%	39%	91%
		3%—either	
3. a. Every one of these four-door cars is ugly.	56%	64%	21%
b. Every one of these four-door cars are ugly.	44%	31%	76%
		5%—either	

Here we see the M.A. students showing a preference for singular agreement on the verb with *each* and *every* as subjects, while the Pepsi-Cola truck drivers strongly prefer plural agreement on the verb. The office workers are fairly evenly split between choosing singular and plural verb agreement. Peterson's results indicate that some consultants are indeed viewing *each* and *every* (*one*) as grammatically singular but that more are viewing these as notionally plural when a plural noun or pronoun intervenes between the quantifier and the verb. We will discuss reasons for this under our discussion of principles that influence subject-verb agreement.

**12. Relative-clause antecedents:** Subject-verb agreement is particularly problematic in certain types of relative clauses. In an example such as the following,

Marsha is one of those rare individuals who \_\_\_\_\_ finished the M.A. early.  
*have/has*

traditional grammars maintain that the antecedent of *who* is *individuals* and thus *have* is the correct verb form. This antecedent rule conflicts with the nonintervention principle (see below); also it does not agree at all with the preferences of the native speakers that van Shaik and Farhady surveyed; most want the relative pronoun to agree with the predicate noun *one*, which they view as the antecedent of *who*:

Jack is one of those rare individuals who \_\_\_\_\_ decided on a definite  
*have—16%; has—84%*  
career. (Farhady, 1977)

He is one of the best students that \_\_\_\_\_ ever come to this school.  
*have—14%; has—86%*

(van Shaik, 1976)

In fact, of the five survey items Van Shaik and Farhady used, only one was a bit weaker than the two above with respect to contradicting the traditional rule for this type of relative clause:

I am one of those who \_\_\_\_\_ equal rights. (van Shaik, 1976)  
*favor—35%; favors—65%*

However, even in this example, where the presence of the *I* subject and pronominal use of *those* appear to be mitigating factors, the rule is still contradicted by an almost 2:1 margin. Clearly, most native speakers are using *one* as the antecedent of *who* or *that*, and the prescriptive rule should probably be revised to reflect actual usage more accurately.

**13. Clausal and phrasal subjects:** Traditional grammars tell us that when a clause functions as a subject, the subject-verb agreement is singular—regardless of any plural noun phrases that occur as part of the subject clause or the verb phrase. For example:

That the children want friends doesn't surprise me.  
 What they want is revolutions everywhere.

We do not have survey information on this type of agreement; however, we suspect that the second type of subject clause cited above causes some difficulty—even among native speakers. This seems especially true when the verb is followed by a plural noun phrase.

This rule also extends to phrasal subjects that are gerunds or infinitives because they also take singular verb agreement; however, they seem to cause fewer learning problems than clausal subjects.

Reading books is my hobby.  
 To err is human.

### Two Heuristic Principles that Influence Subject-Verb Number Agreement

1. The proximity principle: For the correlatives *either . . . or* and *neither . . . nor*, traditional grammarians argue for a proximity rule; that is, subject-verb agreement should occur with the subject noun nearest to the verb:

Either my sister or my brothers are going to do it.	Neither the books nor the movie was helpful.
Either my brothers or my sister is going to do it.	Neither the movie nor the books were helpful.

Do native speakers consistently follow the proximity principle? Not really, but they support it more strongly for *either . . . or* than they do for *neither . . . nor*.

Either your eyesight or your brakes \_\_\_\_\_ at fault (van Shaik, 1976)  
 was—31%; were—69%

Either the professor or her assistants \_\_\_\_\_ explain every lesson.  
 has to—33%; have to—67%

(Farhady, 1977)

Neither the students nor the teacher \_\_\_\_\_ that textbook.  
 likes—49%; like—51%

(van Shaik, 1976)

Apparently, *neither* can easily be perceived as a negative correlative referring to more than one entity, which would explain the slight preference for the plural form that van Shaik's questionnaire elicited.

Personal pronouns pose special problems when used with full correlatives, where the rule of proximity would have us produce *either you or I am*, *neither you nor he is*, and so on. In such cases, Farhady and van Shaik found even less agreement with the proximity principle than they did when correlatives involved lexical nouns:

Neither you nor he \_\_\_\_\_ able to answer the question. (Farhady, 1977)  
 was—40%; were—60%

Neither you nor I \_\_\_\_\_ trained for that job. (van Shaik, 1976)  
 am—12%; is—15%; are—73%

The immediately preceding example is especially interesting because *are* is a colloquial gap-filling substitute for *am* in some other constructions (*I'm going, too, aren't I? Aren't I*





	Ofc. wrkrs. (N = 32)	M.A. stdnts (N = 36)	Truckdrvrs (N = 33)
1. a. Either of the dictionaries is good enough for this.	50%	61%	33%
b. Either of the dictionaries are good enough for this.	50%	33%	67%
		6%—either	
2. a. Either of mine is OK for your system.	63%	66%	36%
b. Either of mine are OK for your system.	37%	25%	64%
3. a. Neither of the salebooks was a good buy.	53%	66%	27%
b. Neither of the salebooks were a good buy.	47%	31%	73%
		5%—either	
4. a. Neither of hers is the same as mine.	53%	58%	42%
b. Neither of hers are the same as mine.	47%	31%	58%

While there are noticeable differences across the three groups, within each group consultants treated *either* and *neither* very similarly except for the office workers' response to item 2, where there was a clear preference for a singular interpretation of *either* that did not occur with the other three items.

One problem with all of the preceding data is that they represent elicited judgments and do not necessarily reflect actual use in situations where people are not made conscious of their production. Therefore, there is a clear need for further studies that examine spontaneous use of subject-verb agreement by native speakers for the problematic cases we have noted.

## CONCLUSION

In many English sentences subject-verb number agreement is straightforward and noncontroversial. However, it is quite clear that a number of unresolved questions remain. In fact, we may well have inadvertently omitted other problems from this discussion. We do not claim to have exhausted the topic.

One of the reasons we have discussed the problems of subject-verb number agreement is that form, meaning, and use are associated with it. When a form is syntactically singular but notionally plural (or vice versa), there is a potential conflict. Agreement based on form is straightforward, but when agreement is driven by meaning or use, this gives rise to the possibility of variation among users. Here Reid's (1991) formulation, which holds that all co-occurrences of subject noun number and of verb number are possible, though not equally frequent, helps to explain many so-called problematic cases in that meaning-driven choices help lead the listener or reader to the intended interpretation.

Our advice to ESL/EFL teachers is that they be aware of the major traditional rules (see teaching suggestion (6) in the following list) and also aware of those instances where current usage seems to clearly deviate from the traditional prescription. Also, teachers should keep in mind that informal contexts permit a greater range of acceptable forms than formal contexts; therefore, they must be flexible about their correction standards, which should be different for formal writing than for informal writing or colloquial speech.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** The copula *be* causes ESL/EFL students trouble because it is the most irregular verb in the English language. A lot of practice will have to be given to all its various forms:

present		past	
<i>I am</i>	<i>we are</i>	<i>I was</i>	<i>we were</i>
<i>you are</i>	<i>you are</i>	<i>you were</i>	<i>you were</i>
<i>he, she, it is</i>	<i>they are</i>	<i>he, she, it was</i>	<i>they were</i>

- a. One technique for practicing *am*, *are*, and *is* in context is to conduct a chain drill with your students' names:

*Student 1:* I am Fatimah. Who are YOU?

*Student 2:* I am José. You are Fatimah. Who are YOU?

*Student 3:* I am Juan. You are José. She is Fatimah. Who are YOU?

Get the learners to contract "I am" to "I'm" as soon as possible.

- b. Sometimes the plural forms can be practiced using nationalities when two or more students in an ESL/EFL class are from the same country.

*Student 1 to 2:* We are from Mexico. Are they from Mexico?

*Student 2:* No, they aren't.

*(to 3 and 4):* Where are you from?

*Students 3 and 4:* We are from Iran.

Get the learners to contract "we are" to "we're" as soon as possible.

- c. The present tense forms of *be* should also be practiced with other adjectives and with prepositional phrases.

*Teacher:* I am (I'm) tired today. Are you tired?

*Student 1:* Yes, I am.

*Teacher:* Is he tired?

*Class:* Yes, he is.

*Student 1:* I am in class. Are you in class?

*Student 2:* Yes, I am. Is Ali in class?

*Student 1:* Yes, he is. Is Miriam in class?

*Student 2:* Yes, she is.

- d. To practice the past-tense forms of *be*, past-time contexts must be created. The teacher can set the pattern and then have students practice with each other, reminding them *be* does not contract in final position.

*Teacher:* I was in class yesterday. Were you?

*Student 1:* Yes, I was.

*Teacher:* Were we in class yesterday?

*Student 1:* Yes, we were.

(Student 1 takes over the role of teacher.)

Teacher: Was Carlos late today?

Class: Yes, he was.

Teacher: Was Kin Lee late?

Class: No, she wasn't.

Teacher: Were they late?

Class: Yes, they were.

(A student then takes over the role of teacher.)

**2. Form.** Badalamenti and Stanchina (1997:10) suggest using the names of famous people from all over the world to practice the copula *be* with country of origin and nationality. For example, the teacher can give one model and then provide only a name.

Sophia Loren is from Italy. She's Italian.

Arnold Schwarzenegger is from Austria. He's Austrian.

Madonna is from the United States. She's American.

Nelson Mandela is from South Africa. He's South African.

**3. Form.** The problematic area with regular present-tense verbs other than *be* involves the third person singular form of the verb. Since the third person singular form of the verb is the only one inflected for person and number agreement, ESL/EFL students frequently and persistently omit the necessary *-s* marker by simplifying or by overgeneralizing the basic pattern to third person singular. Practice with the present tense should thus put a great deal of focus on the third person singular inflection and on the contrast with all other persons. The teacher can introduce a fictional character *Jack* and talk about what he *does* every day.

He gets up at 7 A.M.

He runs in the park at 5:00 P.M.

He eats breakfast at 7:30.

He comes home at 6:00.

He goes to work at 8:00.

etc.

Jack's schedule can be practiced by the class with the teacher using pictures and/or a clock with movable hands as prompts. Then, the practice can extend to classroom interactions, prompted by the teacher as needed.

Teacher: What does Jack do at 7 A.M.?

Student: He gets up.

Teacher: When do you get up?

Student: I get up at 8.

Teacher: Ask Maria when she gets up and then tell us what you found out.

Student: When do you get up, Maria?

Maria: I get up at 6:30.

Student: She gets up at 6:30.

Finally, pairs of students could interview each other about their daily schedules and report findings to the class.

**4. Form.** Riegenbach and Samuda (1997:9–11) suggest that job descriptions and names of occupations be first matched and then generated to practice the third person singular present tense.

- a. He wears a uniform and usually travels many miles a day. He serves food and drinks, but he hardly ever prepares them for himself. He's \_\_\_\_\_.

- b. She wears a uniform and drives many miles a day. She never serves food or drinks. She's \_\_\_\_\_.

a flight attendant	a nurse
a teacher	a bus driver
a librarian	a student

Now students write similar descriptions for the job names that are still left.

**5. Meaning.** To practice with intermediate learners the notion that it is sometimes possible to use a plural or singular verb with a particular noun depending on how the noun is construed, give the students sentences and ask them to respond with “one” when the subject is singular and “more than one” when the subject is plural. They should also specify the entity or unit being referred to.

- a. *Teacher:* The class is going to celebrate at the end of this term.  
*Students:* one (class)
- b. *Teacher:* The 20 minutes are going to pass quickly.  
*Students:* more than one (minute)
- c. *Teacher:* Twenty minutes is not a long time!  
*Students:* one (time unit)
- d. *Teacher:* My old school gang are meeting after work today.  
*Students:* more than one (gang member)  
etc.

**6. Use.** The following is a summary of traditional subject-verb agreement rules based on Frodesen & Eyring (1997:34–51) as well as in material in this chapter. The summary serves as a checklist of rules that ESL/EFL students need to learn or review for TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) preparation or for a formal academic writing course.

- a. Noncount noun subjects take a singular verb:

(The food/John's advice) is good.

- b. In most cases collective noun subjects take singular verbs, but if the group is viewed as individual members, use a plural verb:

The class is going on a field trip.

The class have been arguing about where to go.

- c. Subject nouns that are derived from adjectives and describe people take plural verbs:

The rich are in favor of a tax cut.

- d. Some proper noun subjects that end in -s such as names of courses, diseases, places, as well as book and film titles and the word *news*, take singular verbs:

Wales is a beautiful region.

Mathematics is a difficult subject.

Measles often has side effects.

The news was very good.



- e. Plural subject nouns of distance, time, and money that signal one unit take a singular verb:

Six hundred miles is too far to drive in one day.

- f. Basic arithmetical operations (add, subtract, multiply, divide) take singular verbs:

Four times five equals twenty.

- g. For items that have two parts, when you use the word *pair*, the verb is singular, but without *pair*, the verb is plural:

My pair of scissors is lost.

My scissors are lost.

- h. Clausal subject are singular even if the nouns referred to are plural:

What we need is more reference books.

- i. Gerund (verb + *ing*) and infinitive (*to* + verb) subjects take a singular verb:

Reading books is my hobby.      To err is human.

- j. With fractions, percentages, and the quantifiers *all (of)*, *a lot of*, *lots of*, verb agreement depends on the noun coming after these phrases:

- 1) A singular noun, noun clause, or noncount noun takes a singular verb:

A lot of the (book/information) is about urban poverty.

- 2) A plural noun takes a plural verb:

A lot of computers need to be repaired.

- 3) A collective noun can take either a singular or plural verb depending on the meaning:

All my family (lives/live) in Ohio.

- k. With *each*, *every*, and *every one* as subjects, use a singular verb:

Every student has a lunch box.

- l. With *a number of* as subject, use a plural verb:

A number of students are taking the exam.

- m. With *the number of* as subject, use a singular verb:

The number of students taking the exam is 75.

- n. With *none* as subject, use a singular verb:

None of the magazines is here.

- o. With *either* or *neither* as subject, use a singular verb:

(Either/neither) was acceptable to me.

- p. With correlative subjects *either . . . or* or *neither . . . nor*, the verb agrees with the closest subject:

Either Bob or my cousins are going to do it.

Neither my cousins or Bob is going to do it.

- q. With *there* subjects, the verb is singular or plural depending on whether the noun phrase following the verb is singular or plural:

There is one book on the table.

There are { three books  
a book and a pen } on the table.

Remember that many of these formal prescriptive rules have informal variants that are different and often more frequently used in informal speech and writing. The context in which language is being used and the discourse community of the participants will determine what is acceptable usage.

**7. Use.** Frodesen and Eyring (1997:49) suggest that teachers give students many statements and have them decide which items have verb forms that are appropriate for formal written contexts (i.e., the traditional prescriptive rule) and which would be acceptable for informal written or spoken contexts:

- a. Neither of those political surveys are valid because the sample was not random.
- b. In conclusion, either of the textbooks reviewed above is an excellent choice for an introductory chemistry course.
- c. There's a number of errors in this report.
- d. As far as we know, none of the experiment's results has been duplicated to date.

## EXERCISES

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### Test your knowledge of what has been presented.

1. Provide an original example sentence illustrating each of the following concepts. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your example.
  - a. the copular function of *be*
  - b. a copular verb other than *be*
  - c. an auxiliary function of *be*
  - d. collective noun subject
  - e. noncount noun subject
  - f. third person singular present inflection
  - g. the proximity principle
  - h. the nonintervention principle
  - i. subject-verb agreement with a clausal subject
2. What are two structural reasons for distinguishing the copula *be* from other verbs in English?
3. When does subject-verb agreement apply overtly? In other words, in what instances should your ESL/EFL students be aware that verbs must agree with subjects in person and number? Also, in what instances does subject-verb agreement not apply?
4. Name and illustrate two cases where a traditional subject-verb agreement rule is not supported by current usage.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. The following sentences contain errors that are commonly made by ESL/EFL learners. What is the precise nature of the error? How would you make the learners aware of these problems? What exercises would you use to practice the correct pattern and prevent such errors from recurring?

- a. \*Is you from Mexico?                      d. \*Nora wills read the book.  
b. \*Felix go to school every day.            e. \*They sings in a choir.  
c. \*I tired.                                        f. \*I don't be angry anymore.
6. What will you say to a high intermediate ESL/EFL student who complains to you that you correct mistakes in his compositions when he writes sentences like this one but that he hears native speakers say things like this all the time?
- Either my roommates or my friend Bill are going to buy the refreshments.
7. How would you present the rules for fractions and percentages (see rule 10 on p. 62) to an intermediate-level high school ESL/EFL class? What contexts would you provide to help them have meaningful practice?
8. Some noun plurals are irregular (*men, mice*), and some have a change from *-f* (sg.) to *-ves* (pl.), such as *wife/wives*. How would you review irregular noun plurals with a low-intermediate ESL/EFL class?

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- van Shaik, J. D. (1976). "Subject-Verb Agreement in English: What the Books Say vs. Native Speaker Usage." Unpublished English 215 paper, UCLA.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

*Other reference grammars or handbooks on style or usage with useful descriptions of subject-verb agreement are:*

- Crew, F. (1980). *A Random House Handbook* (3d ed.). New York: Random House.
- House, H. C., and S. E. Harman (1950). *Descriptive English Grammar*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.

Irmscher, W. F. (1972). *The Holt Guide to English*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.  
Perrin, P. G., et al. (1962). *Handbook of Current English*. Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, & Co.  
Quirk, R., et al. (1985). *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*. London: Longman.

*ESL texts with useful discussions and exercises for treating the copula be and subject-verb agreement are:*

Alexander, L. G. (1988). *Longman English Grammar*. London: Longman.

Badalamenti, V., and C. Henner-Stanchina (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 1 (2d ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.

Frodesen, J., and J. Eyring (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 4 (2d ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. These adverbials typically are prepositional phrases and their substitutes (e.g., *in the room, there*).
2. Verbs that are not copulas can be followed only by adverbials and/or noun phrases. They do not take adjective phrases. In colloquial utterances like “He talks funny,” *funny* is functioning adverbially (i.e., “in a funny manner”) and not adjectivally.
3. Participial adjectives are derived from either the *-ing* present participle (e.g., *standing, walking, sleeping*) or the past participle, which takes the *-ed* ending in regular verbs and a variety of endings in irregular verbs (see Chapter 7) (e.g., *protected, forgotten, distraught*).
4. While *become, get, and turn* can take many different adjectives, the other change-of-state copulas tend to take only one or two fixed adjective completions, which we called “collocations” in Chapter 3, such as *fall ill, come undone, grow tall/old, run wild/amuck*.
5. It derives historically from *come to be*.
6. *Turn* is unusual in that it takes article-less nouns: *He turned traitor*. It also can take a preposition, in which case the noun object may take an article: *He turned into a gentleman*.
7. What is meant by the perceptual saliency of a form is whether or not it is easy for learners to hear. Because final consonants and consonant clusters tend to be more weakly articulated in English than initial consonants or clusters, this morpheme is in fact somewhat difficult to hear.
8. Remember that the verb *be* in the present tense would take the form *am* with a first person subject and *are* with a second person subject.
9. The regular morphological plural ending *-s* takes three different forms phonologically: /əz/ after sibilant consonants (consonants produced with friction forced through a narrow opening): *bushes, buses, mazes, peaches, badges*; /s/ after non-sibilant voiceless consonants (consonants where vocal cords are not vibrating): *books, hats, lips*; and /z/ after voiced non-sibilant consonants and vowels (sounds where the vocal cords are vibrating): *bags, gads, ribs, eyes, toes*.



**10.** However, we would like to point out that Reid's system does not properly explain why sentences like these are not acceptable under any circumstances:

- \* The boy like candy.
- \* The boys likes candy.

Some English nouns like *boy* are more individuated and countable than others like *gang*, *dollar*, or *number*. It is less-individuated nouns that have flexibility of number and support Reid's arguments. This is an issue we discuss further in Chapter 15 with reference to Keith Allan's (1980) work on noun number and countability.

**11.** In American English there still is a strong tendency to use the singular verb inflection with a collective noun subject. In British English plural inflections are frequently preferred.

- |                                    |                                    |
|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| (Am. E.) My family is on vacation. | (Br. E.) My family are on holiday. |
| The government is cheating us.     | The government are cheating us.    |

Some collective nouns (i.e., *the police*, and those formed from adjectives that describe people: *the rich*, *the young*, *the privileged*) require a plural verb:

- The police are looking for that man.
- The rich are getting richer all the time!

**12.** It is of course informally acceptable to consider *there* a singular subject for agreement purposes (*There's two people in the room*) rather than referring to the logical subject for agreement (*There are two people in the room*). For further discussion of subject-verb agreement in *there* sentences with all plural subject nouns—not only nonconjoined subjects—see Chapter 23.

# INTRODUCTION TO PHRASE STRUCTURE

## WORD ORDER IN ENGLISH AND OTHER LANGUAGES

In English, word order within sentences is less flexible than it is in many other languages, or than it was in English 1,000 years ago. One reason for this is that English has lost most of its original Germanic system of inflections. This was a system of (1) suffixes on nouns and adjectives that reflected the gender, number, and case of every noun in a sentence and (2) suffixes on verbs that reflected past or present tense as well as the person and number of the subject noun. Without recourse to this full range of inflections to mark subjects (and objects of various kinds), English came to rely on a more fixed word order to distinguish subjects from objects. The basic underlying word order in an English sentence is subject-verb-object (S-V-O):

Example: Joe writes poetry.  
          S      V      O

This rather fixed word order operates in conjunction with prepositions, which help to indicate the semantic functions of certain objects that are not direct objects. For example, in the following sentence the preposition *with* signals that its object noun *Sarah* is in some sense the source of Joe's agreement:

Example: Joe agrees with Sarah.  
          S      V      Prep  O

Thus we say that English is an S-V-O language, like French, Spanish, and many other languages. However, a major difference exists between English and French, on the one hand, and Spanish, on the other: both English and French require that a subject noun of some sort appear in all but certain imperative sentences, whereas Spanish does not have this requirement for sentences with pronominal subjects. For example:

I speak English.      Je parle français.      (Yo) hablo español.  
                                  (I speak French.)      (I speak Spanish.)

In fact the most frequent version of the Spanish example omits the first person subject pronoun, *yo*. Spanish can delete pronominal subjects because it has a rich system of verb inflections that unambiguously indicate the person and number of the subject. If you have studied only languages like English, Spanish, and French, you might assume that all languages more or less follow S-V-O word order; in fact, several languages unrelated to English, Spanish, and French, such as Cantonese and colloquial Egyptian Arabic, are also S-V-O languages.<sup>1</sup>



However, S-V-O is only one of three major orders for sentence constituents in the languages of the world, S-O-V and V-S-O being the two alternatives to S-V-O.<sup>2</sup> Some major languages that follow the S-O-V pattern are Japanese, Korean, Turkish, and Farsi (Persian). Some languages that use the V-S-O pattern are the classical versions of Semitic languages such as Hebrew and Arabic, and Celtic languages like Irish, Welsh, and Breton.

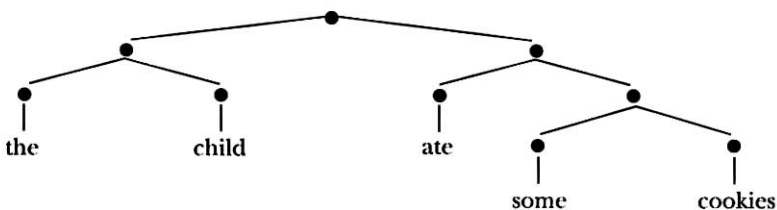
In addition to these sentence-level ordering differences, there also seem to be cross-linguistic differences in word order at the phrasal level depending on whether the object noun precedes or follows the verb (Jacobs, 1995:36 ff.). Jacobs points out that in languages like English, where the verb precedes the object, auxiliary verbs normally precede verbs, prepositions precede their objects, and relative clauses follow the nouns they modify. In contrast, in languages like Japanese and Korean, where objects precede verbs, auxiliary verbs normally follow main verbs (in the form of inflections), postpositions follow their objects, and relative clauses precede the nouns they modify. Such phrase-level ordering differences can also cause problems for learners; we discuss them further in the following chapters where relevant.

### PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES

In this chapter and the next, we will introduce a set of phrase structure rules for English. These rules describe the sentence-level and sub-sentence-level structures of the language. We agree with Jacobs (1995:34 ff.) that phrase structure rules provide us with a parsing device to make explicit three important basic properties of sentence grammar: linearity, hierarchy, and categoriality. The property of linearity accounts for the fact that the words and morphemes of any English sentence need to be produced in some sort of sequence since they cannot all be produced at once. The basic S-V-O word order for English is an example of linearity. The property of rule hierarchy accounts for the fact that it is not sufficient to simply specify the words and morphemes of an English sentence and give their linear order; some words group together, and these groups in turn contribute to other groups and ultimately to a larger whole. Thus in the following sentence,

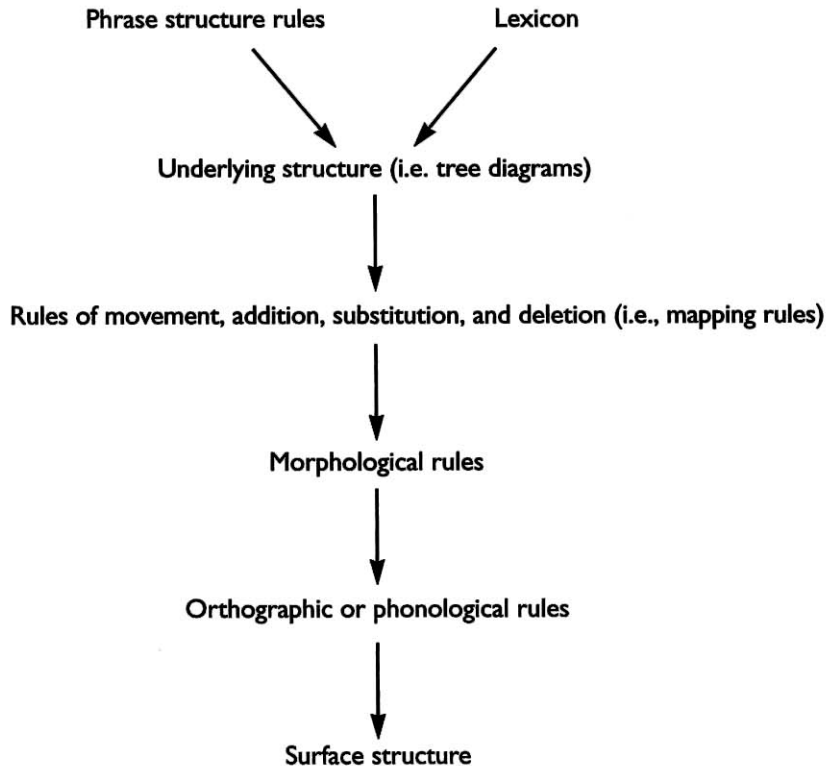
The child ate some cookies.

we can see that two words—*the* and *child*—function together as the subject noun phrase while the remaining words—*ate some cookies*—function together as the predicate. Within the predicate we have the verb *ate*, while the other two words, *some* and *cookies*, form the object noun phrase. Now we have something resembling the following in terms of the hierarchy of our sentence (the exact names of the nodes in the hierarchy will be specified later in the rules):



The remaining property, categoriality, accounts for the fact that some words and groups of words behave grammatically in very similar ways and in ways that are different from other words or groups of words. Words may be similar in their distribution (i.e., in the position they can fill in a sentence) or in the inflections they can take. For example, a countable noun, such as *child* or *cookie*, can take a plural inflection and can function as either a subject or object. A transitive verb, such as *eat*, *buy*, or *want*, co-occurs with both a subject and an object and can be inflected for past tense (*ate*, *bought*, *wanted*). Such nouns and verbs are lexical categories (traditionally referred to as parts of speech). However, there are also phrasal categories such as noun phrases, verb phrases, and prepositional phrases that we account for in our rules.

What is the larger lexico-grammatical system within which the phrase structure rules function?



The phrase structure rules and the lexicon produce the underlying structure, or tree diagrams. The underlying structures first undergo mapping rules of movement, addition, substitution, and deletion as may be needed, and then the resulting structures take morphological rules as needed. Finally, either orthographic or phonological rules, which we do not treat in any detail in this grammar and thus omit from our mappings, are needed to produce a written or spoken surface form.

Through a series of phrase-structure rules, we analyze in greater detail the basic structure of English sentences. The rules are arranged in a hierarchy so that the first rule tells us what the largest unit, the sentence, is composed of. The next rule takes one of the constituents of the sentence and further breaks it down to reveal its composition. In this chapter and the next, we provide a descriptive account of most basic English sentences.



These two chapters differ from those that follow in that phrase structure rules give us a description of language form only, but they are the starting point for our descriptions of the meaning and use of language forms in later chapters.

It is important that you be able to do phrase structure analysis if you wish to develop a thorough understanding of the basic structural units of English. Your students often tend to commit errors of a fundamental nature because they have not yet gained an appreciation for which components of a sentence or phrase in English are obligatory and in what order both obligatory and optional constituents must appear.

Let us now consider our first phrase structure rule:

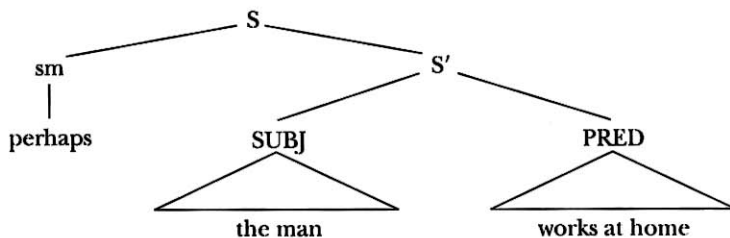
$$1. \quad S \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (sm)^n S' \\ \text{SUBJ PRED} \end{array} \right\}$$

The arrow means that *S* (sentence) is expanded (or rewritten) in one of two ways, which is indicated by the use of the curly brackets to the right of the arrow. In the first instance, *S* is expanded to include one or more optional sentence modifiers *sm*—the parentheses indicate the optionality of this constituent—and an obligatory sentence core, represented here as *S'*. For now we will limit the term *sentence modifier* to words like *perhaps*, *maybe*, *yes*, and *no*. These are sentential adverbs—that is, adverbs that modify an entire sentence. Later, other types of sentence modifiers such as the question marker *Q* and the negation morpheme *not* will also be introduced. This is why the (*sm*) symbol has the superscript *n*, which allows us to generate any number of sentence modifiers. The capital letters used for the *S* to the left of the arrow and the *S'* to the right indicate that if *S* is expanded as (*sm S'*), the *S'* should be viewed as the main constituent and the (*sm*), which is in lower case, as the modifier.

In the second instance, *S* is expanded in rule 1 as the traditional subject (SUBJ) and predicate (PRED). Rule 2 simply makes explicit the fact that *S'* is also expanded as subject and predicate in those cases where (*sm*) has been selected in applying rule 1:

$$2. \quad S' \rightarrow \text{SUBJ PRED}$$

A more graphic way of representing these rules is in a tree diagram. Using the example sentence (e.g., *Perhaps the man works at home*) to illustrate our first two rules, we can construct a tree as follows:



The triangles under SUBJ and PRED indicate that we have not yet completed our analysis of these constituents and must ultimately apply additional rules to complete the task.

### THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF NOUN PHRASES

The third phrase structure rule rewrites SUBJ as NP (or noun phrase):

$$3. \quad \text{SUBJ} \rightarrow \text{NP}$$

The fourth rule rewrites NP in two quite different ways:

$$4. \quad \text{NP} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\text{det})^3 (\text{AP}) \text{N} (-\text{pl}) (\text{PrepP}) \\ \text{pro} \end{array} \right\}$$

In the second instance, NP can be rewritten as a pronoun: *I, you, he, she*, and so on. The first option is more complex in that it allows NP to be expanded in any number of ways. Minimally, it is expanded as an uninflected lexical noun such as *book, rice, or Nancy*, for example. Optionally, it can be expanded:

- as a noun with a plural inflection: *books, children*
- as a noun with up to three determiners: *all his other money*
- as a noun with a preceding adjective phrase:<sup>3</sup> *a very blue sky*
- as a noun with a following prepositional phrase: *a man of honor*
- as a noun with various combinations of the above options:

*the famous city of New York*

*all the little children*

*many very colorful Jack-o-lanterns*

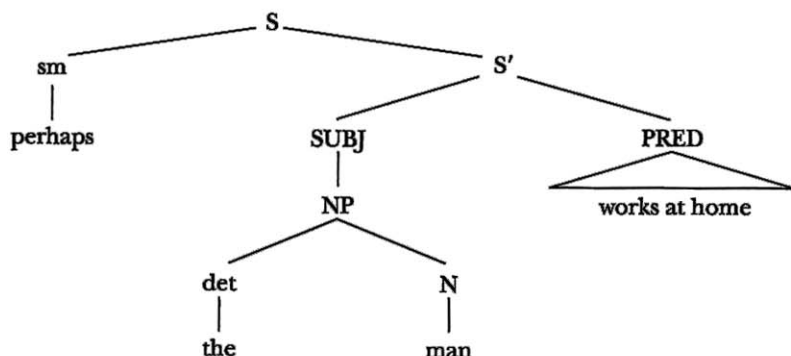
The determiner slot in rule 4 can take up to three words. This seems to be more or less the upper limit in English: *all the other, my other two, the first four*. The determiner slot itself consists of three subcategories: (i) predeterminers (words like *all* and *both*), (ii) core determiners (articles like *a* and *the*, demonstratives like *this* and *that*, and possessives like *my* and *his*<sup>4</sup>), and (iii) postdeterminers (quantifiers like *three* and comparative reference terms like *other*, both of which may occur in either order). There is a more detailed discussion of the different kinds of determiners in Chapter 16.

Since determiners are modifiers of nouns, they are often restricted with respect to the number and/or countability of the head nouns with which they can co-occur. In other words, there are some determiners that occur only with singular count nouns like *a, one, another* and many determiners that occur only with plural count nouns: *these, those, many, both, two, three*, and so on. A few determiners occur only with uncountable nouns: *much, (a) little*; and some determiners occur with either singular or uncountable nouns such as *this* and *that*. There are also determiners that occur with either plural nouns or uncountable nouns: *some, all, no, other*. Some determiners, such as the following, of course, can occur with any kind of common noun and thus are not restricted with regard to the number and countability of the head noun: *the, my, his*. As pointed out in Chapter 3, these agreement features are important information about determiners and nouns that should be included in their lexical entries.

The optional prepositional phrase in rule 4 accounts for those prepositional phrases that cannot have a predicate relationship with the head noun (e.g., *a man of honor, the city of Chicago, two pounds of sugar*, etc.). In other words, we cannot paraphrase such NP + PrepP combinations with an intervening *be* copula: *\*a man is of honor; \*the city is of Chicago*. This contrasts with those prepositional phrases that are semantically predicative, such as *the flowers in the vase* (= the flowers are in the vase), *the books on the table* (= the books are on the table), which have another source.

Noun phrases function in one of three ways in English: as subjects, as objects, and as predicates. Rule 3 accounts only for subject NPs. In the next chapter, we clarify this three-way distinction by showing that where the NP is generated in the sentence determines its grammatical function as a subject, object, or predicate.

Let us now redraw the tree diagram for our example sentence (*Perhaps the man works at home*) using rules 1 through 4 to see the greater specificity we can provide for the subject NP:



Rule 5 allows us to expand any optional adjective phrase (AP) that we may have selected as part of our expansion of NP in rule 4:

5.  $AP \rightarrow (\textit{intens})^n \textit{ADJ}^n (\textit{PrepP})$

The term *intens* stands for the optional but potentially multiple intensifiers that can precede an adjective to specify the degree or extent to which the adjective applies. Sometimes the same intensifier is repeated, which is referred to as reduplication, and sometimes different intensifiers are selected:

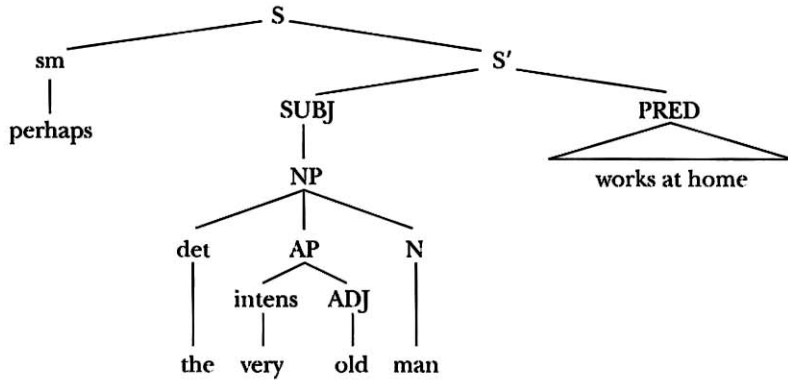
very, very interesting news intens intens    ADJ    N	really very nice clothes intens intens ADJ    N
--	--

Rule 5 also indicates that multiple descriptive adjectives can occur before head nouns (e.g., the *big old yellow* bus). The ordering of these adjectives is discussed in some detail in Chapter 20.

The optional prepositional phrase in rule 5 occurs most often with adjective phrases generated in predicate position—a structure we discuss in the following chapter; however, this type of expansion does occasionally occur before the head noun in noun phrases and is usually represented orthographically as a hyphenated complex adjective when it does occur:

My	good-for-nothing	cousin
det	ADJ	PrepP    N

Let us now expand our example sentence to *Perhaps the very old man works at home* in order to see how the addition of rule 5 affects our tree diagram:



Rule 6 simply expands prepositional phrases as prepositions followed by noun phrases:

$$6. \text{ PrepP} \rightarrow \text{Prep NP}$$

Since NP (noun phrase) has already been expanded in rule 4, we would go back and reapply our earlier rule for NP expansion whenever we have a prepositional phrase.

With the addition of rule 7, we begin to expand the PRED (predicate) constituent:

$$7. \text{ PRED} \rightarrow \text{AUX VP (Advl)}^n$$

This means that the predicate of any English sentence obligatorily consists of an auxiliary constituent (AUX) followed by a verb phrase (VP). In addition, any number of optional adverbials may occur in sentence-final position. We leave the discussion of the auxiliary and the verb phrase for the following chapter and conclude this chapter by considering the types of optional adverbials we can have in sentence-final position in English.

### THE INTERNAL STRUCTURE OF ADVERBIALS

Rule 8 provides us with three syntactic possibilities for each sentence-final adverbial generated by rule 7:

$$8. \text{ Advl} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Advl CL} \\ \text{Advl P} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\}$$

An example of each structural possibility follows:

Advl CL: The boys left **before their father could find them**.

Advl P: The boys work **very quickly**.

PrepP: The boys eat lunch **in the city**.

Remember that the curly brackets indicate that for each adverbial generated, one, but only one, of the three choices must be selected—an adverbial clause (Advl CL); an adverbial phrase (Advl P); or a prepositional phrase (PrepP).

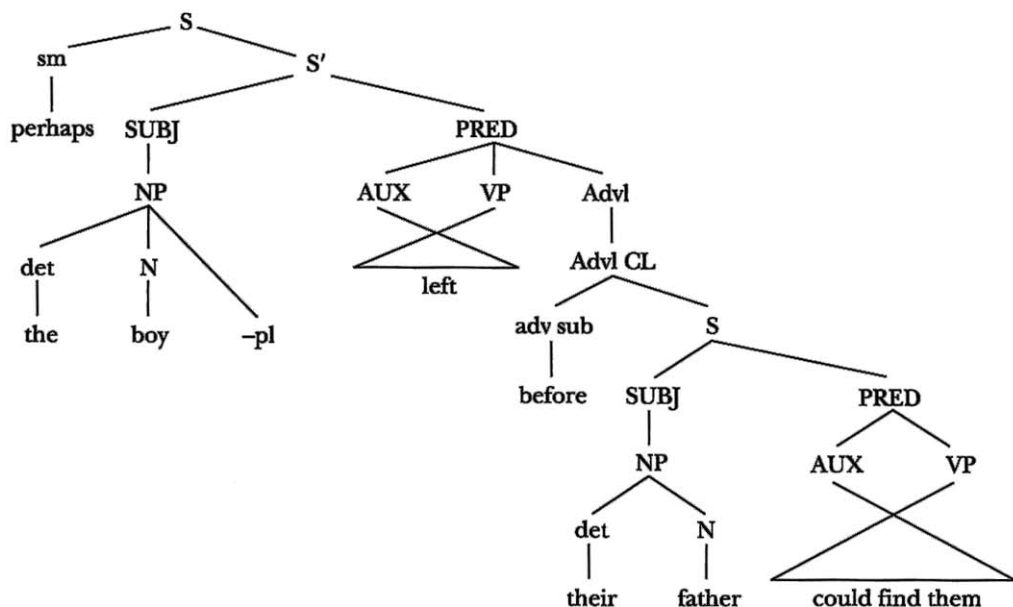


An adverbial clause can be expanded to include an adverbial subordinator (adv sub) followed by a new sentence (S):

9. Advl CL  $\rightarrow$  adv sub S

This rule reintroduces S, a constituent already present in rule 1. To expand the new S, we would go back to rule 1 and begin the process all over again. In other words, phrase structure rules are recursive and can be applied as often as needed. Let us consider the tree diagram for a sentence with an adverbial clause:

Perhaps the boys left before their father could find them.

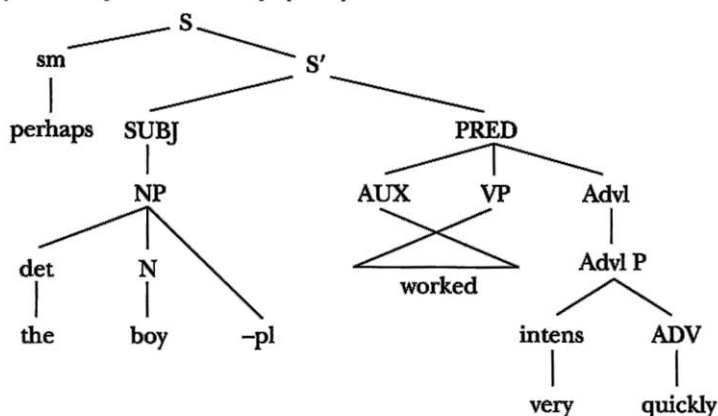


Another possible expansion of the adverbial in rule 8 is an adverbial phrase (Advl P), which is rewritten as follows:

10. Advl P  $\rightarrow$  (intens)<sup>n</sup> ADV

This rule means that an adverbial phrase contains an obligatory adverb, ADV, optionally preceded by one or more intensifiers, *intens*. An intensifier occurs not only before adjectives—as you saw earlier in rule 5—but also before adverbs. The following sentence and tree diagram illustrate a case where the optional intensifier has been selected to modify an adverb:

Perhaps the boys worked very quickly.



The superscript  $n$  after the optional intensifier allows for more than one intensifier to occur. As is also the case with adjective phrases in rule 5, some intensifiers may be repeated, while other series of intensifiers can consist of different lexical items:

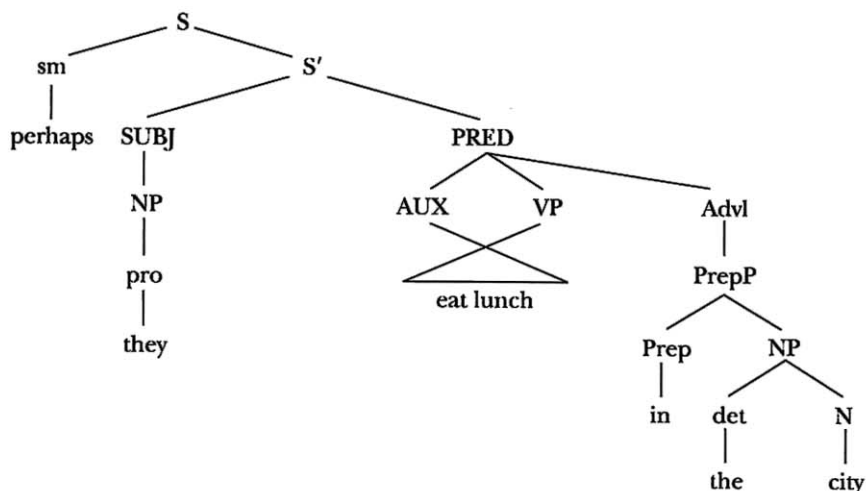
very, very quickly  
really quite eagerly

Finally, an optional adverbial may also be expanded as a prepositional phrase. Rule 6, which was introduced earlier and which is repeated here, would apply in such a case:

#### 6. PrepP $\rightarrow$ Prep NP

We are now in a position to more fully specify the tree diagram for the following sentence:

Perhaps they eat lunch in the city.



### STRUCTURAL VARIATION IN PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Note that in sentence-final adverbials, prepositions are used to give adverbial function to nouns with temporal or locative meaning. As a general rule, nouns do not function on their own as adverbs in English. For example, take the following sentences, where the nouns *Monday* and *home* become adverbial with the help of the preceding prepositions:

Max will stay *until Monday*.      Mr. Green works *at home*.  
Prep    N                                      Prep    N

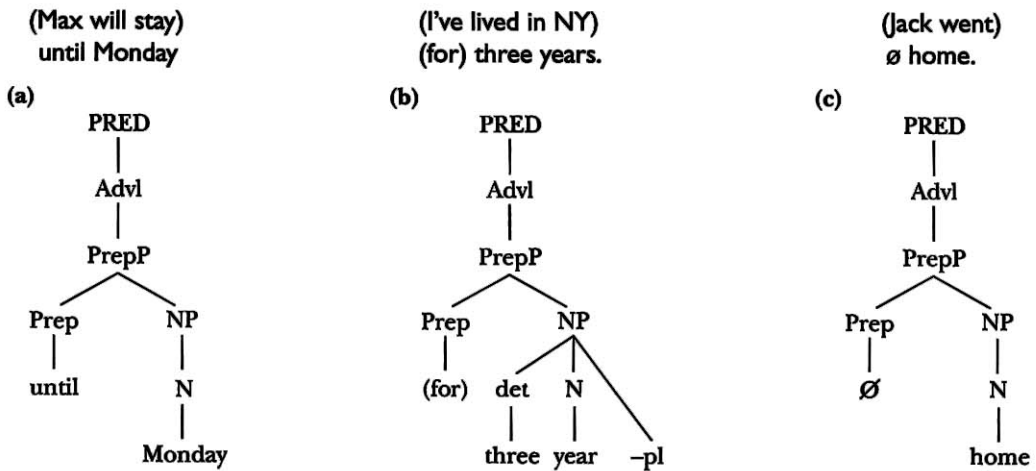
However, in some sentences, such as the following, prepositions are optionally deletable:

I've lived in New York (for) many years.      I'll get the wine (on) Thursday.

And in some sentences, for a variety of reasons, prepositions simply do not occur in English before certain nouns that function adverbially:

Jack went home.      He will return tomorrow.

To preserve the integrity of our phrase structure rules and to show that the adverbials in all three types of sentences above are very similar in their semantic function, we use similar underlying representations for all of them to acknowledge that in some environments prepositions are optional and in others they do not occur:



We emphasize that the previous examples (b) and (c) of optionally deletable and obligatorily suppressed prepositions, respectively, are the exceptional cases. Normally, a sentence in which a noun functions adverbially must have a preposition:

- \*Aaron was born a leap year. (in)
- \*Your belongings are the table. (on)

For further discussion of prepositions, see Chapter 21.

## THE ORDERING OF SENTENCE-FINAL ADVERBIALS

The final point to make about sentence-final adverbials is that when more than one occurs, the ordering is not random. To understand the order, it is important to first establish that there are many semantically different types of sentence-final adverbials (the following list is not exhaustive):

- manner adverbial*: John runs *quickly*.
- direction adverbial*: John ran *to the store*.
- position adverbial*: John is *at home*.
- time adverbial*: Judy eats lunch *at noon*.
- frequency adverbial*: Judy eats lunch *every day*.
- purpose adverbial*: Harry works *to earn money*.
- reason adverbial*: Harry works *because he has to pay bills*.

Some generalizations seem to apply most of the time when more than one adverbial occurs:

### Re: Adverbials of Manner, Direction, and Position:

1. Direction and manner have variable order with respect to each other.
2. Manner and position have variable order with respect to each other.
3. Direction tends to precede position, and they tend to be adjacent.

Example:

He ran { *quickly around the track at the park*. [manner → direction → position] }  
 { *around the track at the park quickly*. [direction → position → manner] }  
 { *?around the track quickly at the park*. [direction → manner → position] }

**Re: Adverbials of Time and Frequency:**

1. Time and frequency tend to follow manner, direction, and position.
2. Time and frequency are variable in order with respect to each other.

Example: She eats lunch *quickly* (*every day at noon/at noon every day*).  
manner frequency time time frequency

**Re: Adverbials of Purpose and Reason:**

1. Purpose and reason tend to follow all other adverbials.
2. Purpose tends to precede reason.

Example: She eats lunch *quickly every day* { 
*in order to have time to read.*  
 purpose  
*because she likes to have time to read.*  
 reason
  }

Jane went to Ohio *to visit her uncle because she hadn't seen him for years*.  
purpose reason

?Jane went to Ohio *because she hadn't seen her uncle for years to visit him*.  
reason purpose

The ordering of sentence-final adverbials thus exhibits some variability, yet it is far from being random, since sequences such as the following are awkward if not ungrammatical:

- ?Marcia walked this morning to the shopping center.
- ?Jane fixes dinner every day quickly.
- ?Harry goes jogging in order to stay fit at noon.

Many nonnative speakers of English order multiple adverbials in unacceptable ways. They also make other common word-order mistakes involving adverbs, such as putting an adverb between the verb and object noun in a verb phrase, which is ungrammatical in English:

- \*Mary speaks fluently French.
- \*Judy eats quickly lunch.

We will come back to the topic of adverbial ordering in Chapter 25.

**CONCLUSION**

This concludes our introduction to some important notions that underlie word order and phrase structure in English. We introduced 10 rules and will complete our inventory of the basic phrase structure rules of English in the next chapter, which focuses on the auxiliary and the verb phrase.

**TEACHING SUGGESTIONS**

As we said earlier, not only do ESL/EFL students have to learn all the parts of an English sentence, they also have to master the order in which these constituents appear. As an ESL/EFL teacher, you would not want to present the phrase structure rules with the

formalism used here; however, you certainly can make use of this information to point out to your students that a constituent has been omitted or rule of order violated.

**1. Form.** For beginning-level students, it might be useful to do some sentence unscrambling, especially if their first languages have S-O-V or V-S-O word order. Stress the basic S-V-O + (advl)<sup>n</sup> word order in English for a variety of statement-form sentence types, giving a scrambled sentence to each pair of students (each major constituent group is on a separate slip of paper).

- a. a fish    we    ate
- b. to Olive Street    Bob    last week    walked
- c. gave    the book    to her father    Mary
- d. for the money    sells    Simon    newspapers

Each pair unscrambles their sentence and writes it on the board for the class to confirm or correct.

**2. Form.** One rule that you would probably want to teach in a lesson is the rule governing the usual order of sentence-final adverbials. The following is one way in which this might be accomplished (an idea suggested by Robin Abramson):

**Step 1:** The teacher makes a statement containing one or two adverbials about himself or herself and asks a question of a student that will elicit the same type of statement.

Example questions:

- a. *Teacher:* I drove to school today. How did *you* get here?  
*Student:* I took the bus (here).
- b. *Teacher:* I come to English class every day. How often do you come (to class)?  
*Student:* I come (to English class) every day.
- c. *Teacher:* I eat lunch in the cafeteria at noon every day. Where do you eat lunch?
- d. *Teacher:* Do you know why I come here at 8:00 every morning? I come here at 8:00 every morning because I want to teach English. Why do you come here?

**Step 2:** The teacher puts the following sentence on the blackboard:

1        2        3        4                    5

Aza comes here promptly at 8:00 every day because she wants to learn English.

**Step 3:** The teacher tells students that each part she or he has underlined is called an adverbial. The teacher then asks students:

- What does number 1 describe? ([to] where—direction)
- What does number 2 describe? (how—manner)
- What does number 3 describe? (when—time)
- What does number 4 describe? (how often—frequency)
- What does number 5 describe? (why—reason)

**Step 4:** The teacher divides the class into three groups. The teacher then passes out a handout. Each handout contains sentences with scrambled adverbials. Each group is to work on one set of sentences and correct any improper order of adverbials. Students may refer to the model on the blackboard. (If more than



one order is acceptable, both orders should be given as answers.) For the purposes of this exercise, only postverbal ordering of the type illustrated in the example in Step 2 should be discussed. Later (in Chapters 25, 27, and 30) we show that some adverbials occur sentence-initially for information management or emphasis (e.g., Because of the bad weather we stayed at home). A few examples of sentences to use for the handout might be:

- a. Mary studies daily there.
- b. The prime minister visited three times last week the United Nations.
- c. She ate lunch because she was hungry quickly in the cafeteria.

**Step 5:** When the groups are finished, students in each group give their answers, and the class or the teacher corrects where necessary.

**3. Form.** Another grammatical point introduced in this chapter is the agreement required between certain determiners and the number of the noun that follows them. Thus, the sequences below on the left are acceptable, while the sequences on the right are not:

this rod	*these rod
these rods	*this rods
that rod	*those rod
those rods	*that rods

The Cuisenaire rods of various lengths and colors, a tool used in the Silent Way approach (see Gattegno, 1976), provide an excellent device for teaching these agreement patterns once all the colors have been learned.

**Step 1:** *Teacher* (holding the rod—one in one hand, two in the other):

This rod is yellow. These (rods) are red.

*Students* (holding the rods—practice using all colors until the agreement pattern is established):

This rod is blue. These (rods) are black. This rod is white. These (rods) are orange.

**Step 2:** *Teacher* (holding one rod and having placed another rod of another color off at a distance):

This rod is light green. That  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{rod} \\ \text{one} \end{array} \right\}$  is brown.

Students manipulate rods of various colors and practice the agreement pattern until it is established.

**Step 3:** *Teacher* (holding two rods of one color and having placed two others of another color off at a distance):

These rods are red. Those (rods) are yellow.

Students manipulate rods of various colors and practice the pattern until it is established.

**Step 4:** *Teacher* stands at a distance from the students to elicit the use of distinct demonstratives based on proximity. Teacher is holding one rod and one student is holding another.



*Teacher:* What color is this rod?

*Student:* It's yellow.

*Teacher:* What color is that rod?

*Student:* It's red.

Students manipulate rods and practice with each other until the pattern is established. The same thing can then be done for the plural (*Teacher:* What color are these rods? *Student:* They're black) followed by extended student practice in pairs or small groups.

**Step 5:** Students ask teacher questions while they and teacher hold rods of various quantities and colors.

*Student:* What color is this rod?

*Teacher:* It's dark green.

*Student:* What color are those rods?

*Teacher:* They're brown.

**Step 6:** Students manipulate rods and structures (numbers and distance) in any combination or sequence they wish and communicate with each other in pairs or small groups using these patterns. Teacher merely supervises at this stage.

## EXERCISES

(*Note:* Since we feel it is often more important for you to provide your students with good examples than with verbal definitions, we ask you to do exercises like the first one below throughout the text.)

### Test your knowledge of the structures introduced.

1. Provide an original example sentence illustrating each of the following concepts.

Underline the pertinent word(s) in your example:

- |                           |                             |
|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| a. noun phrase            | h. sentence modifier        |
| b. adverbial of reason    | i. adverbial clause of time |
| c. adverbial of frequency | j. intensifier              |
| d. adverbial of manner    | k. prepositional phrase     |
| e. adverbial of direction | l. deletable preposition    |
| f. subject                | m. adjective phrase         |
| g. predicate              |                             |

2. Draw partially specified tree diagrams for the following sentences using the rules given in this chapter:

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a. The girls talked after the teachers left.     | d. Fortunately his two brothers work very quietly. |
| b. Surely John exercises on Sunday.              | e. Perhaps Mary studies Latin in the library.      |
| c. The little baby cried because she was hungry. |  |



**ENDNOTES**

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1. Recall that in the previous chapter we distinguished subject-prominent languages from topic-prominent languages. For purposes of the very gross word-order differences we describe here, *subject* and *topic* can be considered roughly equivalent notions.

2. This three-way typology cannot be used too strictly. For many languages, qualifications must be made regarding this typology to explain basic word order patterns. For example, German has mixed word order (S-V-O in main clauses; S-O-V in subordinate clauses), and both Mandarin and Vietnamese appear to have word orders that are shifting from S-V-O to S-O-V. In addition, linguists have found a small number of languages that seem to follow other orders.

3. Someone has pointed out to us that adjective phrases (AP), like descriptive adjectives, seem to occur in strings of two or more. For example:

-a rather old, quite round, very shiny plate (adjective phrases)

versus

-an old round shiny plate (simple descriptive adjectives)

However, we feel that such multiply-occurring adjective phrases derive from conjunctions (see Chapter 24), but that many instances of multiply-occurring descriptive adjectives do not (see phrase structure rule 5 in this chapter as well as Chapter 20).

4. Articles, demonstratives, and possessive determiners are mutually exclusive in English, though not necessarily so in other languages.

# MORE PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES

The preceding chapter introduced 10 rules that specified the form of sentences, noun phrases, and adverbials in English. In this chapter we turn our attention to the phrase structure rules for predicates. The core elements of predicates are auxiliary elements (AUX) and verb phrases (VP).

## THE STRUCTURE OF THE ENGLISH VERB SYSTEM

The verb system of English can be discussed in terms of its forms—or it can be discussed in terms of how it encodes meaning. In this chapter we present only the forms of the verb system (the meanings and uses of the forms are discussed in Chapters 7 through 9).

The tense forms of any language are a selective rendering of the many distinctions—both direct and indirect—that one can make with reference to time, and speaker perspective on time, in the real world. The system is selective because *tense*, in the morphological sense, refers only to the inflections one can use with finite (i.e., inflectable) verbs. Given this perspective, English has only two tense forms—past and present (or as some like to say, “past and nonpast,” where “past” includes reference to remote events as well as past time, while “nonpast” includes references to present and future time as well as cases in which timelessness is intended, such as “two plus two equals four”).<sup>1</sup> If we exclude the irregular verb *be* for the moment, the past tense may be realized through either regular suffixation:

We walk ed to school. (*walk*)

or other irregular vowel and consonant changes:

We saw the principal. (*see*)    We bought some books. (*buy*)

The present tense is explicitly marked only in the case of third person singular subjects:

He walk -s to school.

It is expressed implicitly with a lack of marking for all other subjects:<sup>2</sup>

I	}	walk	<span style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 0 2px;">∅</span>	to school.
you				
they				
we				

The verb *be* is more highly inflected than other verbs in English and can express the present through three forms: *am*, *is*, *are*, and the past through two forms: *was*, *were*. (See Chapter 4 for details.)

Every nonimperative English sentence must have either a modal auxiliary (e.g. *can*, *must*, *will*) or a grammatical tense—past or present. In addition, English has two optional



structural markers of aspect—the progressive and the perfect aspect, which were introduced in Chapter 2 and are further elaborated in Chapter 7.

1. I amwalking to school.  
be . . . -ing (progressive aspect)
2. I haveseen the principal.  
have . . . -en (perfect aspect)

What we need to remember about the progressive and perfect aspects is that the auxiliary verb and the inflection are discontinuous. This is indicated by the three dots in their phrase structure representations. The inflection immediately moves over the following verb to eventually combine with it.

### PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES FOR THE AUXILIARY

The English verb thus has many potential auxiliary elements that must be accounted for in our phrase structure rules. Consider the following sentences:

- |                              |                                   |
|------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. John wrote a book.        | 4. John is writing a book.        |
| 2. John should write a book. | 5. John is going to write a book. |
| 3. John has written a book.  | 6. Write a book!                  |

If we consider the auxiliary (AUX) as everything in the predicate but the verb phrase and cite the verb phrase in its uninflected base form, *write a book*, we see that the auxiliary + the verb *write* in each of the sentences above consists of the following elements:

1. past tense + write = *wrote*
2. modal *should* + write = *should write*
3. pres tense + perfect *have* . . . -en + write = *has written* (-en = past participle)
4. pres tense + progressive *be* . . . -ing + write = *is writing* (-ing = present participle)
5. pres tense + the phrasal modal *be going to* + write = *is going to write*
6. imperative mood + write = *write*

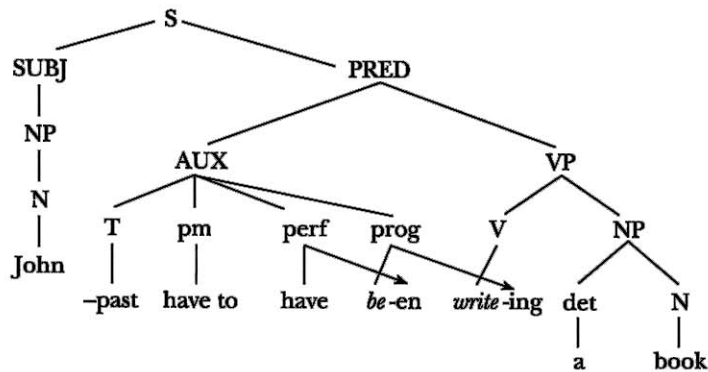
As we previously mentioned, nonimperative English sentences obligatorily take grammatical tense (-past, -pres) or a modal (e.g., *will, can, must, shall, may*). If some auxiliary verb other than a modal is present, it carries the tense. Beyond tense or a modal, three different optional auxiliary verb types may be present: a phrasal modal<sup>3</sup> (e.g., *be going to, have to, be able to*); the perfect aspect (*have* plus the past participle); and the progressive aspect (*be* plus the present participle). If no tense-bearing auxiliary verb is present, the main verb will carry past or present tense (e.g., sentence 1 above).

Sometimes much more than tense or a modal auxiliary occurs in the AUX of a single sentence. For example:

1. John had to be writing a book. (AUX = past tense, phrasal modal, and progressive aspect)
2. John has been writing a book. (AUX = present tense, perfect and progressive aspects)
3. John should have written a book. (AUX = modal and perfect aspect)
4. John will have been writing a book. (AUX = modal, perfect and progressive aspects)
5. John will have to have written a book. (AUX = modal, phrasal modal, and perfect aspect)
6. John had to have been writing a book. (AUX = past tense, phrasal modal, perfect and progressive aspects)

Not all the combinatory possibilities are illustrated here. We discuss others in subsequent chapters. The tree diagram for the sixth example sentence above is

John had to have been writing a book.



As we have just seen, whenever three or more auxiliary elements occur together, the perfect precedes the progressive, and a phrasal modal precedes either of the two aspects. A modal can precede a phrasal modal and also either of the two aspects. If two or more potentially tense-bearing auxiliary verbs are present, only the first of these auxiliary verbs will carry the tense.

These relationships can be summed up in the following rule:

$$11. \text{AUX} \rightarrow \left\{ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{T} \\ \text{M} \end{array} \right\} \begin{array}{l} (\text{pm}) (\text{perf}) (\text{prog}) \\ \text{-imper} \end{array} \right\}$$

Here the auxiliary is AUX. It is made up of either *-imper* (imperative mood) or tense (T) or a modal (M), if (T) or (M) is selected; it can be followed by the other optional auxiliary elements: phrasal modal (pm) and the perfect (perf) and progressive (prog) aspects. (Imperative mood is a tenseless verb form in English, which will be explained in detail in Chapter 12.)

You have already learned that morphological tense in English is either past or present. This choice is stated in phrase structure rule 12:

$$12. \text{T} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{-past} \\ \text{-pres} \end{array} \right\}$$

The perfect and progressive aspects are expanded into their auxiliary verbs and accompanying grammatical inflections in rules 13 and 14 respectively:

$$13. \text{perf} \rightarrow \text{have} \dots \text{-en}$$

$$14. \text{prog} \rightarrow \text{be} \dots \text{-ing}$$

Notice that we are using the *-en* as a symbol for the past participle. Past participles in English are not always formed with an *-en*, as the following examples show:

<b>-en<sup>4</sup></b>	<b>Vowel alternations</b>	<b>Look the same as the past tense form</b>
written	sung	learned
eaten	drunk	read
seen	swum	taught

ESL/EFL students will need ample practice using the various past participles in order for them to master the many forms.

We have been asked why we have a separate node for the auxiliary elements in our phrase structure rules for English. We do this because the auxiliary is syntactically very important in forming interrogative and negative sentences. It also carries tense, mood, modality, and voice and accounts for most of the morphological complexity in English. The subject and verb phrase, on the other hand, account for the propositional content of sentences—a distinction we will return to in later chapters.

### PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES FOR THE VERB PHRASE

Leaving the auxiliary elements aside for the moment, we know that English verb phrases also can be complicated. Consider the following sentences:

- |  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a. John is a teacher.                                | e. Judy studies mathematics.   |
| b. Alice is very pretty./Alice is very, very pretty. | f. He gave the money to Sally. |
| c. The students are in the room.                     | g. He gave Sally the money.    |
| d. Steve snores.                                     | h. Gaby is allergic to cats.   |

A phrase structure rule that would allow us to account for all such structural possibilities follows:

$$15. \text{VP} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{cop} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP} \\ \text{AP} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\} \\ \text{V} \quad \quad \quad (\text{NP})^2 (\text{PrepP}) \end{array} \right\}$$

(cop refers to a copular verb<sup>5</sup>)

Can you determine which instance of the above rule would be used to generate each of the above eight sentences? For example, the first three sentences could be accounted for by the following subrules contained within rule 15:

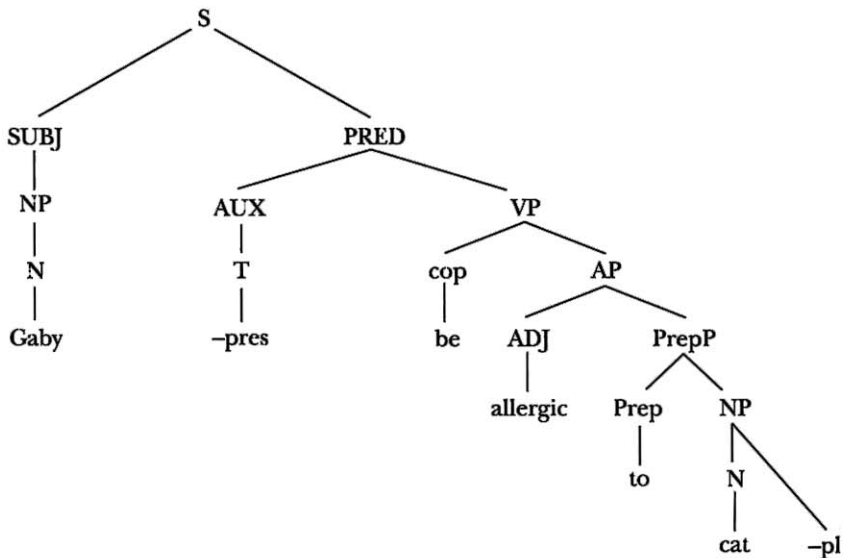
- a.  $\text{VP} \rightarrow \text{cop NP}$
- b.  $\text{VP} \rightarrow \text{cop AP}$
- c.  $\text{VP} \rightarrow \text{cop PrepP}$

See if you can figure out the phrase structure for the verb phrases in sentences (d) and (e). Sentences (g) and (h) convey propositionally equivalent information but are generated by slightly different phrase structure rules for the verb phrase:

- g.  $\text{VP} \rightarrow \text{V NP PrepP}$
- h.  $\text{VP} \rightarrow \text{V NP}_1 \text{ NP}_2$

When option (g) is selected, a special rule of interpretation applies so that we know the first noun phrase is the indirect object and the second the direct object. There is further discussion of this in Chapter 19, which treats sentences that have indirect objects in addition to direct objects. Here is the tree diagram for sentence (h):

Gaby is allergic to cats.

**OBJECT NOUN PREDICATES<sup>6</sup>**

To complete our basic phrase structure rules, we need to discuss one further sentence type: sentences with object noun phrases that take nouns, adjectives, or adverbial prepositional phrases as predicates. Consider the following examples:

	<b>direct object NPs</b>	<b>object predicates</b>
	↓	↓
1. We elected	Sam	<u>treasurer.</u>
2. Lola considers	Forrest	<u>stupid.</u>
3. Sally placed	the book	<u>on the table.</u>

The constituents following the direct objects in these three sentences are the same constituents that can follow a copular verb; however, when they directly follow a copular verb, they refer back to the subject NP (e.g., *Sam is the treasurer*). In the sentences above, the underlined constituents refer to the object NP and predicate something with respect to that object noun phrase:

- 1' Sam is treasurer.
- 2' Forrest is stupid.
- 3' The book is on the table.

To account for this type of sentence, where there is no explicit verb but where a predicative relationship is nonetheless present, we need one further rule<sup>7</sup> that generates such predicates:

$$NP \rightarrow NP' \left\{ \begin{array}{l} NP \\ AP \\ PrepP \end{array} \right\}$$

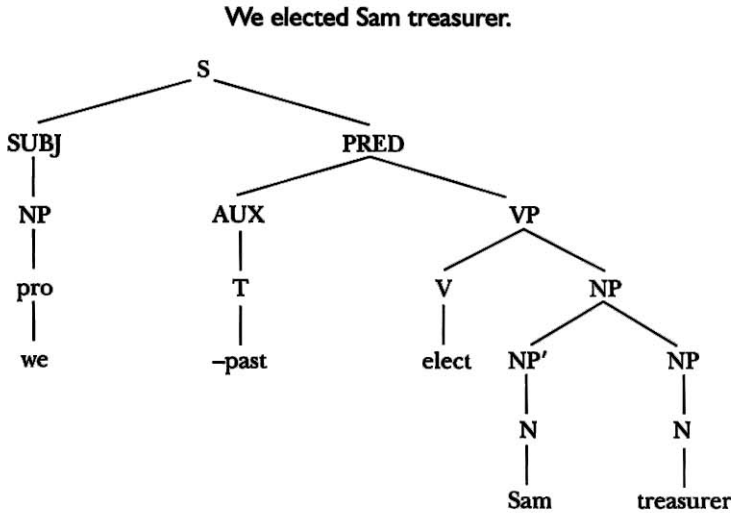
Actually, this rule is an expansion of rule 4, introduced in the preceding chapter. Rule 4 is now as follows:

$$4. \text{ NP} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\text{det})^3 (\text{AP}) \text{ N } (-\text{pl}) \text{ PrepP} \\ \text{pro} \\ \text{NP}' \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP} \\ \text{AP} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\} \end{array} \right\}$$

Our final rule simply spells out the fact that NP' gets expanded exactly the way NP has been previously expanded:

$$16. \text{ NP}' \rightarrow \left\{ (\text{det})^3 (\text{AP}) \text{ N } (-\text{pl}) (\text{PrepP}) \right\}$$

These rules allow us to account for sentences like the three sentences above with object predicates. Below, we diagram the first such sentence as an example:



There is one condition on the third option in rule 4; it applies only to prototypical NP objects (e.g. direct objects). Indirect objects, for example, do not take this type of object noun predication.

### SYNTACTIC ROLES OF NPs IN PRED (PREDICATE)

This is a good time to review the two syntactic roles that noun phrases can have under the predicate (PRED) node. This is in contrast to the noun phrases directly generated under the subject node (SUBJ), which function only as subjects. Under the predicate node (PRED), NPs can function as objects or predicates. They function as three types of objects:

*direct objects:* Jim read a book.

*indirect objects:* Sara gave me some flowers.

*objects of prepositions:* Sam lives in a big house.

Noun phrases function as predicates of subjects when they occur after a copular verb. They function as predicates of objects when an object noun phrase is expanded, (i.e. the third possibility in rule 4 above) to include an object noun predicate:

*subject noun predicate:* Jan is a teacher.

*object noun predicate:* We elected Sam treasurer.



## SYNTACTIC ROLES OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Perhaps the most ubiquitous constituent that we have introduced in our phrase structure rules is the prepositional phrase (PrepP). Prepositional phrases can be generated as parts of noun phrases, verb phrases, adjective phrases, adverbials, or object noun predicates:

*PrepP in NP:* a man of honor, an ounce of vodka

*PrepP in VP:* be in the house, give the book to Mavis

*PrepP in AP:* fond of cats

*PrepP in AdvI:* do laundry on Saturday

*PrepP in object noun predicate:* put the flowers on the table

The three structures with prepositional phrases that are most difficult to distinguish structurally are those where the PrepP is part of the verb phrase, those cases where the PrepP functions as the object noun predicate, and those cases where the PrepP is generated after the verb phrase as an adverbial modifying the whole sentence.

We are going to generate prepositional phrases under the verb phrase only in the following cases:

1. where the PrepP follows the copular verb *be* and predicates something of the subject NP, such as:

John is in his room.

2. where the PrepP is needed to complete the argument structure of a verb. For example:

a. *intransitive verb:* The baby lay in the crib.

b. *ditransitive verb:*<sup>8</sup> Sue handed the letter to Mr. Blake.

Other verbs like *lay* are *lurk*, *live* (= reside), *head* (= set out for), and *arrive*. The verbs *come* and *go* are also of this type; however, the adverbial (often a PrepP) is frequently not explicitly stated because it is understood from the context. Some other verbs like *hand* are *give*, *tell*, *explain*, *send*, *transfer*, *show*, and *deliver*. We normally generate PrepP as the object noun predicate only with verbs like *put*, *place*, *set*, or *stand* and verbs like *elect* and *consider* when they are followed by *as*:

We put the vase on the table.

We elected Tim as the interim chair.

Again, what distinguishes object noun predicates from other object-like constituents is that they predicate something of the direct object: *The vase is on the table; Tim is interim chair*.

All other cases where the PrepP follows the verb are adverbial in origin and are generated under the adverbial node (AdvI):

Mrs. Symms teaches kindergarten in Dallas.

Jack sells auto parts for a living.

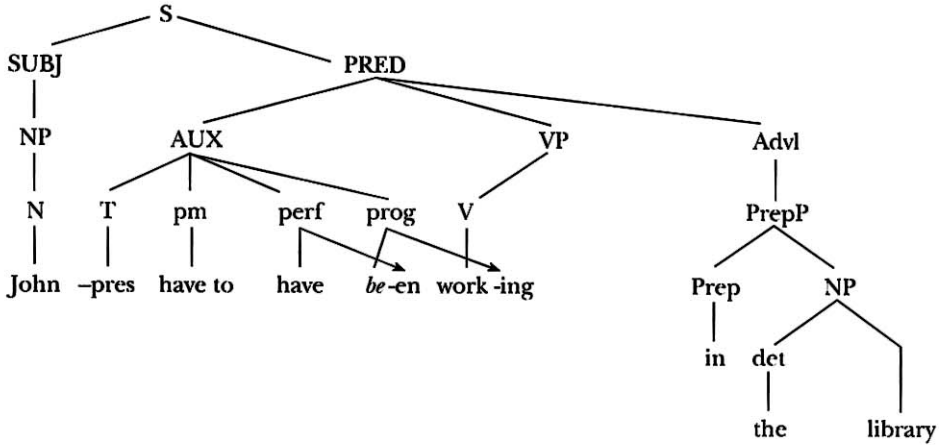
We canceled the picnic after the thunderstorm.

## SENTENCE DERIVATION

Thus far, the only rules that we have applied are phrase structure rules. They generate the basic structure to which lexical items are added to complete the representation of the sentence. In many cases, minor changes must be made on the output of the phrase

structure rules in order to produce grammatical English sentences. This process is called mapping, and the changes are called mapping rules (as opposed to phrase structure rules). Consider the following sentence and its tree diagram:

John has to have been working in the library.



The output of the tree (i.e., the phrase structure rules) is

*output:* John -pres have to have be -en work -ing in the library

The first mapping rule that we apply to any sentence with a tense morpheme is to copy the person (i.e., 1, 2, or 3) and number (i.e., sg or pl) of the subject NP on the tense; this ensures correct subject-verb agreement. We want to emphasize that subject-verb agreement can apply only to sentences that have a tensed auxiliary.<sup>9</sup> In actual fact, though, no verbs other than *be* ever require subject-verb agreement if past tense appears in the AUX rather than present tense. We abbreviate the operation of copying the subject person and number on the tense by writing simply “copy s/t”:

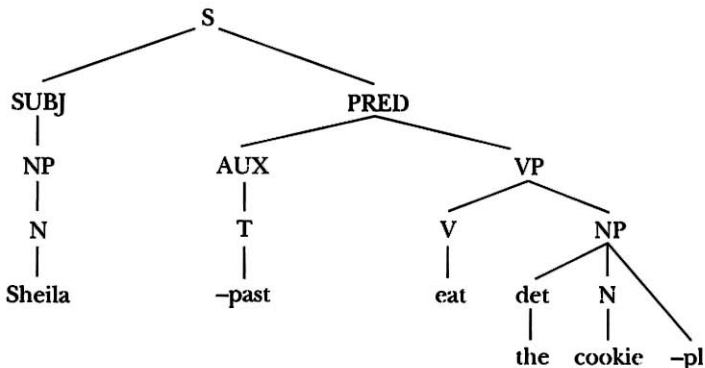
*copy s/t:* John -pres [+ 3 + sg] have to have be -en work -ing in the library

Finally, morphological rules apply to produce the correct surface form.

*morphological rules:* John has to have been working in the library.

Let us consider another example with a less complex auxiliary:

Sheila ate the cookies.



Here, the output of the phrase structure rules is

*output:* Sheila -past eat the cookie -pl

We again copy the person and number of the subject NP on the tense morpheme; however, since the tense is -past and the verb is not *be*, this will not have any morphological consequences in terms of overt subject-verb agreement:

*copy s/t:* Sheila -past [+ 3 + sg] eat the cookie -pl

Then we apply morphological rules and get

*morphological rules:* Sheila ate the cookies.

We provide many more tree diagrams and mappings in subsequent chapters.

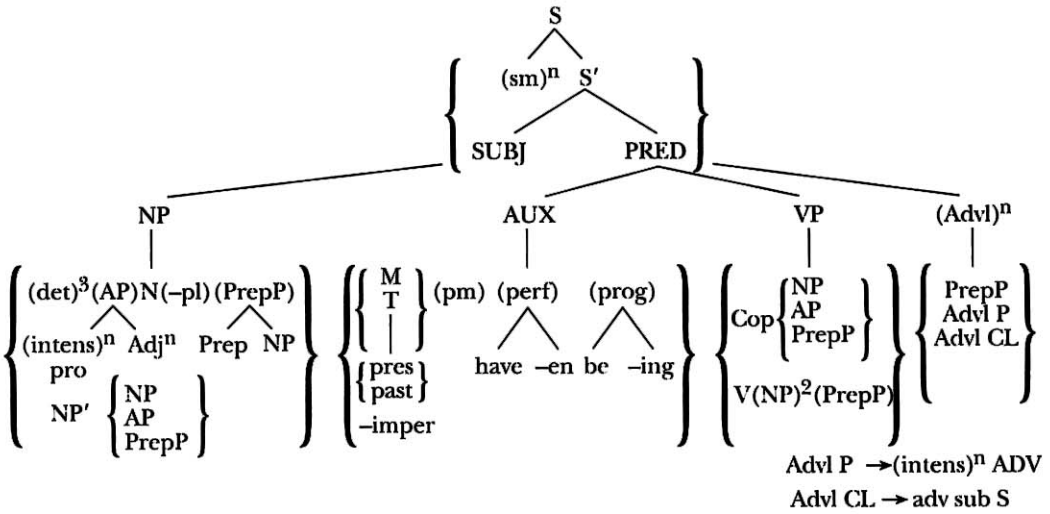
### SUMMARY OF THE PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES

At this point we think it would be useful to list all the phrase structure rules we have introduced and discussed in this chapter and the preceding one:

1.  $S \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (sm)^n S' \\ \text{SUBJ PRED} \end{array} \right\}$
2.  $S' \rightarrow \text{SUBJ PRED}$
3.  $\text{SUBJ} \rightarrow \text{NP}$
4.  $\text{NP} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\text{det})^3 (\text{AP}) \text{N} (-\text{pl}) (\text{PrepP}) \\ \text{pro} \\ \text{NP}' \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP} \\ \text{AP} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\} \end{array} \right\}$
5.  $\text{AP} \rightarrow (\text{intens})^n \text{ADJ}^n (\text{PrepP})$
6.  $\text{PrepP} \rightarrow \text{Prep NP}$
7.  $\text{PRED} \rightarrow \text{AUX VP} (\text{AdvI})^n$
8.  $\text{AdvI} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{AdvI CL} \\ \text{AdvI P} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\}$
9.  $\text{AdvI CL} \rightarrow \text{adv sub S}$
10.  $\text{AdvI P} \rightarrow (\text{intens})^n \text{ADV}$
11.  $\text{AUX} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{T} \\ \text{M} \end{array} \right\} (\text{pm}) (\text{perf}) (\text{prog}) \\ -\text{imper} \end{array} \right\}$
12.  $\text{T} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} -\text{past} \\ -\text{pres} \end{array} \right\}$
13.  $\text{perf} \rightarrow \text{have} \dots -\text{en}$
14.  $\text{prog} \rightarrow \text{be} \dots -\text{ing}$

15.  $VP \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{cop} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} NP \\ AP \\ PrepP \end{array} \right\} \\ V \quad (NP)^2 (PrepP) \end{array} \right\}$
16.  $NP' \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (\text{det})^3 (AP) N (-pl) (PrepP) \\ \text{pro} \end{array} \right\}$

These rules can also be summarized in a tree-like fashion following Clark (1997):



**CONCLUSION**

This concludes our presentation of the basic phrase structure rules of English grammar. Additional rules and further expansions of the rules will be added from time to time in subsequent chapters as needed. To conclude this chapter we refer back to the diagram presented in the preceding chapter which showed how the phrase structure rules—in combination with lexical choices—can describe the underlying structure of all English sentences. The addition of mapping rules and morphological rules, as needed, account for the more familiar surface structure of these sentences. This flow of rules represents the sequence of rules we will be using in this text.

**TEACHING SUGGESTIONS**

**1. Form.** The important thing to stress with the progressive and perfect aspects is that both are formed with two constituents that are not next to each other in the surface structure:

- progressive*—a form of *be* plus the present participle (*-ing*) attached to the main verb
- perfect*—a form of *have* plus the past participle (*-en*) attached to the following verb

A common error committed by ESL/EFL students is to omit one of the two necessary constituents when forming one of the aspects (i.e., the auxiliary verb or the participial inflection). To help your students better understand this fact, ask them to memorize three sentences that you have written on the blackboard. Make sure that the sentences contain

perfect and progressive aspects. Ask the students to close their eyes. While they are not looking, erase certain words or inflections. When the students open their eyes again, they have to guess what is missing. Repeat this procedure several times with different sentences (maybe some of the students can suggest example sentences).

**2. Form.** Another problem arises when the ESL/EFL student has to learn to deal with all the irregular past tense and past participle forms. The regular past participle forms, like the regular past tense, cause no undue hardship. This is because both are formed with the addition of the *ed* inflectional affix for all persons and numbers:

I walked	we walked	I have walked	we have walked
you walked	you walked	you have walked	you have walked
he/she/it walked	they walked	he/she/it has walked	they have walked

However, many different irregular forms of past tense verbs and past participles will have to be presented as separate vocabulary items—a few introduced from time to time in a 10-minute portion of a class hour.

A good way of organizing such a lesson is to introduce together those past tense verbs and past participles that conform to the same phonological pattern. For example:

Verbs that pattern like *blow, blew, blown*  
pres past past participle

These can all be presented together. The following is one way this could be accomplished:

- a. Teacher writes the following paragraph on the blackboard and then reads it out loud.

Yesterday the wind blew very hard. It had never blown that hard before. I knew when it first began that it would be bad for my garden. The plants that grew out in the open were hurt badly. Only a few which had already grown strong survived the windstorm. If I had only known, I would have planted them closer to my house.

- b. Teacher has students read the paragraph once out loud and discusses with class any new vocabulary. Teacher calls particular attention to the past tense and past participle forms of the underlined verbs:

blow    blew    blown  
grow    grew    grown  
know    knew    known

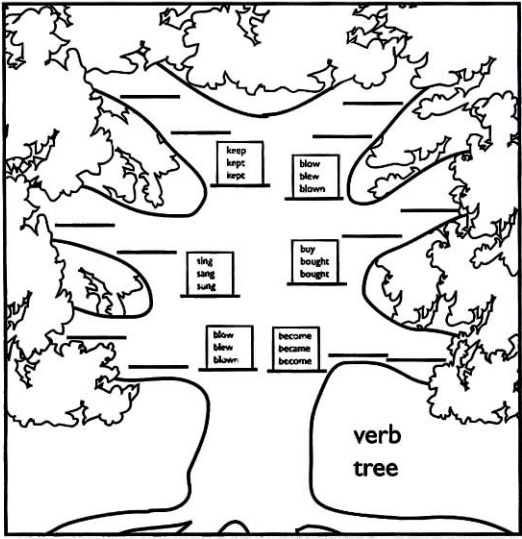
- c. Teacher gives students an exercise where students have to supply the correct form of a given infinitive verb for a number of sentences. For example:

(to grow) I have never \_\_\_\_\_ tulips before.  
(to throw) After waiting a moment, the pitcher \_\_\_\_\_ the ball to the catcher.

**3. Form.** Olson and Shalek (1981) suggest that game-type activities be used to practice past participles. One of their ideas is to use a tree with many branches as a visual prop for a verb conjugation game. Each tree branch has several pockets for cards, and on each branch the pocket closest to the trunk has been filled with a card that gives one example of the verb conjugation pattern that the branch represents. The class (or a group) is then



given a stack of cards that must be put into the remaining pockets in the tree branches. Sample cards are as follows (note that all three verb forms should be visible even when the card is placed in the pocket):



blow  
blew  
blown  
---

sing  
sang  
sung  
--

buy  
bought  
bought  
---

keep  
kept  
kept  
--

become  
became  
become  
---

**4. Form.** With regard to verbs that take an obligatory predicate adverb of direction or position, Valerie Sandoval (personal communication) suggests two exercises:

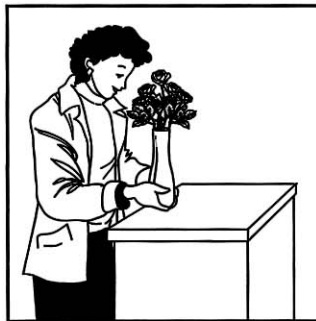
a. Have students identify and complete any ungrammatical sentences, such as the following:

1. John put the books
2. Here are the flowers
3. The baby cried
4. The tired old woman lay

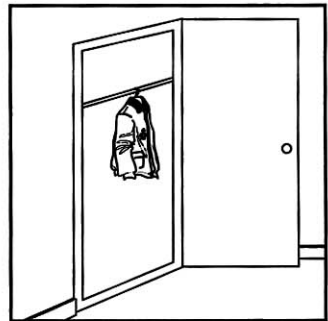
b. Have students complete complete sentences using visual aids such as the following:



The baby lay...



Ann put the flowers...



Roy hung his coat...

**EXERCISES****Test your knowledge of the structures introduced.**

1. Provide an original example sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your example.
 

a. imperative	e. perfect aspect
b. modal	f. progressive aspect
c. verb with two objects	g. object noun predicate
d. phrasal modal	
  
2. Draw tree diagrams for the following sentences, using the phrase structure rules and mapping rules given in this chapter:
 

a. The quiet girls talked after the teachers left.	g. Perhaps Mary has been studying in the library.
b. Surely John exercises on Sunday.	h. We gave some candy to the children.
c. The baby cried because she was hungry.	i. Ralph put the chairs in the hallway.
d. Ian is going to take that class next term.	
e. Anne could have been doing her homework.	
f. Fortunately his brothers work very quietly.	

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

3. The following sentences contain errors that are commonly made by ESL/EFL learners. How would you make your students aware of these problems? What exercises would you use to practice the correct pattern and prevent such errors from recurring?
 

a. *She can swims very fast.	d. *The man been to Chicago twice.
b. *Jane is jump rope.	e. *Sarah put the books.
c. *Bob will to come tomorrow.	
  
4. Although phrase structure rules should not be presented to ESL/EFL students in the forms given in this chapter, they do yield important insights into English structure. One of the insights that should be emphasized in grammar classes has to do with the composition of the progressive aspect. In light of the following errors by different ESL learners attempting to form the progressive aspect, what should be emphasized for each of them?
 

a. *She running now.	b. *She is run now.
----------------------	---------------------
  
5. One of your students asks you why a certain grammar text claims that English has no future tense. This student feels that English *has* a future tense. How would you answer this question?

**BIBLIOGRAPHY****References**

- Clark, R. (1997). Class notes, English Structures. School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vt.
- Olson, C., and S. Shalek (1981). Games and Activities Based on Grammatical Areas Which Are Problems for the Intermediate ESL Student. Unpublished manuscript, School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vt.
- van Riemsdijk, H. and E. Williams (1986). *Introduction to the Theory of Grammar*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

**Suggestions for further reading**

*For the historically original form of phrase structure rules written within a transformational grammar of English, see:*

Chomsky, N. (1957). *Syntactic Structures*. The Hague: Mouton.

Chomsky, N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

*For useful lists of verbs with irregular past tense and past participles, see:*

Clark, R., P. Moran, and A. Burrows (1991). *The ESL Miscellany* (2d ed.). Brattleboro, VT: Pro Lingua Associates. 60–64.

*For a list of phonologically similar irregular verbs, see:*

Celce-Murcia, M., D. Brinton, and J. Goodwin (1996). *Teaching Pronunciation*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 382–385.

**ENDNOTES**

1. From a morphological point of view, English has no future tense, since future time is not expressed inflectionally but periphrastically, using auxiliary verbs (e.g., *John will go*) or adverbs of time in combination with the present tense (e.g., *John goes tomorrow*) instead of a morphological future tense.

2. The symbol  $\emptyset$  represents zero. Here it means no inflection.

3. Modal auxiliaries and phrasal modals and their combinations and interactions with aspect are discussed further in Chapter 8.

4. Those verbs that add *-en* are often phonologically and/or orthographically irregular.

5. As discussed in Chapter 4, the most common English copular verb is *be*; however, other verbs may also have a copular function (i.e., may link subjects with nominal, adjectival, and adverbial predicates); for example: *become, seem, appear, sound*.

6. Some traditional grammars refer to the constructions we discuss here as “object complements.”

7. Many linguists (van Riemsdijk & Williams, 1986:323ff.) refer to such structures as “small clauses” and offer more complicated rules to account for them. We will keep the simpler notation of expanded rule 4 and note that this rule can be used not only to generate predicates of NP objects but also to generate verbless predicates of subject NPs (the man *responsible* is Ralph) and NP objects of prepositions (I talked to those *responsible* for the incident).

8. Recall that ditransitive verbs either require or allow two object noun phrases to complete their argument structure (or meaning). Often there is also a paraphrase of such sentences without the prepositional phrase: *Sue handed Mr. Blake the letter*.

9. In those cases where there is no tense in AUX (i.e., the AUX is a modal (M) or *-imper*, there can never be any subject-verb agreement, since such agreement is possible only in sentences that have a tensed auxiliary.

# THE TENSE AND ASPECT SYSTEM

## INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 6 we presented a form-oriented account of tense and aspect in English and introduced the following phrase structure rule:

$$\text{AUX} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \{T\} \\ \{M\} \\ \text{-imper} \end{array} \right\} (\text{pm}) (\text{perf}) (\text{prog})$$

According to this rule, the auxiliary of a non-imperative English sentence must have either a modal or a tense marker (which a later rule specifies as either *past* or *present*), and it may have several optional components: phrasal modals, perfect aspect, and progressive aspect. The expression “future tense” was viewed as a misnomer since in English finite verb stems<sup>1</sup> are not inflected to express future time, as they are in certain other languages, such as most Romance and Slavic languages. Of course, this does not mean that English speakers cannot talk of future events. They do so by using other means, such as modals, phrasal modals, and adverbials of time, rather than by placing a formal marking on the verb itself.

However, as we have already seen, language teachers need to deal with meaning and use as well as form. It is not enough to say to ESL/EFL students, “English does not have a future tense,” and be done with the matter. Therefore, in this chapter we start by inventorying the forms that English *does* use to deal with the three time periods: present, past, and future. We also discuss perfect and progressive aspects, leaving most of the discussion of modals and phrasal modals to the next chapter. Because the exact mapping of form, meaning, and use varies considerably from language to language, mastering the English tense-aspect system requires considerable effort on the part of ESL/EFL students. Because of its importance and its challenge, we devote two chapters to its consideration. In this first chapter we explore the form, meaning, and use of the English tense-aspect system at the sentence level. Sentence-level use is perhaps the way most teachers first introduce the forms. To really understand how the system functions, however, it is necessary to appreciate its application at the suprasentential, or discourse, level. Without this perspective it is impossible to fully explain the various patterns of tense-aspect combinations that occur, which we do in Chapter 9.

One point we wish to underscore here for teachers is that even at the sentence level a system is operating. We have sometimes seen teachers introduce a tense, yet fail to show students how that tense contrasts with others, let alone how it fits into the system as a whole. In order to see how the system operates, we first describe its form. Next, we propose a core meaning for each of the tenses and aspects of the system and illustrate how the core meaning applies when tenses are used by themselves and when they are



combined with one or both aspects. Finally, we contrast the uses of some of the most commonly confused combinations.

## THE FORMAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE TENSE-ASPECT SYSTEM

Over the years, the important distinction between tense and aspect has become blurred. Instead, English has been said to have 12 “tenses.” We have tried to be careful in the preceding discussion to talk about the *tense-aspect* system and *tense-aspect* combinations. We feel that if the natural division between tense, which relates to *time*,<sup>2</sup> and aspect, which has to do with the internal structure of the action occurring *at any time*, are dealt with separately at first, the system that results from their subsequent combination is much easier to see and, therefore, easier to learn. We do this in the following chart by listing the two tenses, present and past, along the vertical axis. We include the future on this list of tenses as well, for although there is no verb inflection for future time, any description of the English tense-aspect system needs to account for what form-meaning combinations *do* exist that relate to future time. The four aspects—simple (sometimes called zero aspect), perfect, progressive, and their combination, perfect progressive—are arrayed along the horizontal axis. We illustrate the tense-aspect combinations with the irregular verb *write* and the regular verb *walk*.

	Simple ∅	Perfect <i>have + -en</i>	Progressive <i>be + -ing</i>	Perfect Progressive <i>have + -en be + -ing</i>
<b>Present</b>	<i>write/writes</i> <i>walk/walks</i>	<i>has/have written</i> <i>has/have walked</i>	<i>am/is/are writing</i> <i>am/is/are walking</i>	<i>has/have been writing</i> <i>has/have been walking</i>
<b>Past</b>	<i>wrote</i> <i>walked</i>	<i>had written</i> <i>had walked</i>	<i>was/were writing</i> <i>was/were walking</i>	<i>had been writing</i> <i>had been walking</i>
<b>Future</b>	<i>will write</i> <i>will walk</i>	<i>will have written</i> <i>will have walked</i>	<i>will be writing</i> <i>will be walking</i>	<i>will have been writing</i> <i>will have been walking</i>

You can see in the chart that the traditional 12 “tenses” are actually 12 combinations of tense and aspect. They are named by combining a tense with an aspect or aspects, such as present perfect or past perfect progressive. Only the forms in the first column receive their names by first specifying the aspect—simple—and then the tense, such as simple present.<sup>3</sup>

The simple present remains in its base form (*write, walk*) with one exception—the third person singular form, which is made by adding an *-s* to the verb (*writes, walks*). The present perfect is formed with the verb *have* (*has* for third person singular) and the past participle, here symbolized by *-en*. It is important to remember that *-en* is only a symbol. Sometimes the past participle does indeed end in *-en*, as does our example irregular verb, *written*. Other times, the past participle is identical to the past tense form of the verb, as you can see in our other example, where the regular verb *walk* has the past participle *walked*. The present progressive form (sometimes called the present continuous) combines a form of the *be* verb (*am, is, are*), depending on the person and number of the subject, with the present participle, an *-ing* form.<sup>4</sup> Finally, the present perfect progressive can be seen to be a combination of the perfect form with *have + -en* and the progressive form with *be + -ing*. In this case, the *be* verb of the progressive carries the *-en* perfect ending; in other words, it is in its past participle form, *been*.

Reading down the chart, you can see that the various combinations with past tense and aspect pattern in much the same way as the present tense. The past tense in its simple



form in English is formed by using its past irregular form, as in the irregular verb in our chart, *wrote*, or with a regular verb such as *walk* by adding an *-ed* to give us *walked*. One difference from the simple present is that the form of the simple past remains invariant for all persons and numbers. The past perfect form is made with the past form of the *have* verb (i.e., *had*) followed by the past participle of the main verb. The past progressive form combines the past form of the *be* verb, here in two forms—first and third person singular form *was* and all the other persons and numbers with *were*—followed by the present participle. The past perfect progressive is formed with the past form of the *have* verb (i.e., *had*) followed by the past participle of the *be* verb (i.e., *been*) and the present participle of the main verb, here *writing* or *walking*.

For the future line in our matrix, we use the modal *will*, since there is no future tense that appears as a marking on the verb in English. As we have also already noted, however, English uses a number of ways in addition to the use of *will* to indicate that an action or event is to take place in the future. (We discuss these in the section on The Use of the Tense-Aspect System later in this chapter). The future adheres to the same patterns as the present and past in terms of its combination of aspect markers: *will* with the base form for the simple future, *will + have + -en* for the future perfect, *will with be + -ing* for the future progressive, and *will + have + -en + be + -ing* for the future perfect progressive.

Thus, one of the reasons for displaying the tense-aspect combinations in this manner is to demonstrate that the 12 “tenses” are simply combinations of tense and aspect. Since the perfect and progressive aspect markers contribute consistent meanings regardless of tense, in effect, ESL/EFL students have to learn only the form and meaning of the three tenses (in their simple form) and the two aspects (perfect and progressive) to develop an understanding of the tense-aspect system of English. This is why we say that by viewing the tenses and aspects as a system, the learning burden is lessened.

If we think of this matrix as a map of the territory that the tense-aspect system of English covers, we can make some further observations that have pedagogical import. For example, the traffic on our map is focused more in the northwest (including the present progressive) than in other areas. In other words, the frequency with which these tense-aspect combinations are used is greater than in other regions of our map. Such observations can help teachers to decide where to put the limited time they have to best advantage. The southeast, for example, receives very little traffic and consequently should probably not receive as much attention as those combinations in the northwest.

Another point worth making in viewing the semantic territory covered by the tense-aspect system as a map is that the borders between the various regions of the map which prove to be most problematic. Where, for example, does the semantic domain of the past tense end and the present perfect begin? If you were to draw circles on our map to connect those areas with troublesome boundaries, you would find that there are a few that prove particularly challenging to ESL/EFL students. You may wish to try to do this now. We revisit these difficult distinctions in a later section on the use of the tense-aspect system.

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## MEANING IN THE ENGLISH TENSE-ASPECT SYSTEM

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This is an exceedingly important dimension in helping students manage the tense-aspect system. If students are able to develop a feel for the meanings conveyed by components of the system, they will have a tremendous advantage in learning to cope with the boundary problems introduced above and discussed in detail below. In this section, therefore, we attempt to capture the semantic core of each of the components of the system—the three tenses with simple aspect and the two other aspect markers used independently and in tandem.

As we have asserted earlier, understanding the semantics of the tenses in terms of time is inadequate. For instance, if we label the *-ed* marker as a past-tense marker that denotes past time, then we have a hard time explaining its presence in sentences such as the following:

If I walked home after school today, it would take me all afternoon.

They said that they loved grammar.

Host to guest: Did you want something to eat before the game?

Sales clerk to customer: What sort of price did you have in mind?

In the first sentence, the action is hypothetical and hasn't taken place, so obviously the *-ed* is not signifying past time. In the second sentence, an example of reported or indirect speech, the verb in the embedded clause is in past tense, but the expression of their affection for grammar could well still apply—that is, it may not be over and done with. In the third example, the irregular form of the past tense of the verb *do* is used in a present offer; in the fourth, it is used in a question pertaining to the present. We could cite many other examples. The point is that in order to understand the meaning of the tenses, you must go to a deeper level of abstraction than that of temporal meaning. By so doing, you will see what core meaning underlies the use of the past tense in the preceding example sentences and in all other sentences in which it occurs. The *core meaning* of a particular form is the meaning that is most central, primary, or invariant (Hatch and Brown 1995). We begin by analyzing the core meanings of the tenses with simple aspect.

## SIMPLE ASPECT

Hirtle (1967) explains that simple aspect refers to events that are conceptualized as complete wholes. The events are not presented as allowing for further development. This aspect stands in contrast to progressive aspect, which is incomplete or imperfective—where the event or state is viewed as some portion of a whole and where there is room for further development or change. We can see this difference by comparing examples with the simple present tense and present progressive:

Susan and Carl live in Newark.

Susan and Carl are living in Newark.

The simple present in the first sentence presents the fact that Susan and Carl live in Newark as a whole event, not allowing for further development, and with no suggestion of change. The present progressive in the second sentence suggests that their living in Newark may be temporary, thus allowing for the possibility of change. In the second sentence, Susan and Carl's living in Newark is some portion of the whole, in the sense that we understand that they may have lived elsewhere before moving to Newark and will likely in the future move again.

With this explanation of the core meaning of simple aspect as a backdrop, let us consider what core meaning each of the tenses adds.

## Simple Present Tense

The present tense conveys immediate factuality (Lewis 1986):

I skim the *New York Times* at breakfast.

The earth rotates around the sun.

My mother loves daisies.

It is a beautiful day.

Let us now show how the core meanings of the simple present, its complete or unchanging nature, and its immediate factuality, apply.

- a. Habitual actions in the present:

He walks to school every day.

- b. General timeless truths, such as physical laws or customs:

Water freezes at 0 degrees centigrade.

Spaniards eat dinner late.

- c. With *be* and other stative verbs to indicate states:

There is a large house on the corner.

I know Mr. Jackson.

The car belongs to Bill.

or even the inception of states:

Now, I understand.

- d. In the subordinate clauses of time or condition when the main clause contains a future-time verb:<sup>5</sup>

After he finishes work, he'll do the errands.

If Cindy passes the bar exam, she'll be able to practice law.

- e. Expresses future (when a scheduled event is involved, usually with a future-time adverbial):

I have a meeting next Wednesday at that time.

- f. Present event/action (usually in sporting events or demonstrations/procedures of some sort):

Here comes the pitch; Vaughn swings and misses.

Now I add three eggs to the mixture.

- g. Present speech acts (where the action is accomplished in the speaking of it):

I resign from the commission.

- h. Conversational historical present (used to refer to certain past events in narration):

"So he stands up in the boat and waves his arms to catch our attention."

It can be seen then, how each event being reported on in the simple present is complete; we can infer there will be no change. Further, each use is an immediate factual report. Next, let us consider the simple past tense. The same general semantic character for simple aspect holds for the simple past as well. Simple past describes events as wholes, ones not conducive to change or development.

### Simple Past Tense

The simple past also states facts. What the core meaning of the past tense adds is a sense of remoteness (Knowles 1979). The event can be remote in time:

The Toronto Blue Jays won the World Series in 1992.

And even if the event is a recent one, such as

I finished my term paper!

the “remoteness” comes in the feeling that the event is over and done with. As we saw earlier, the feeling of remoteness can apply even to notions other than time:

If I walked home from school, it would take all afternoon.

Here, the remoteness is due to the conditional, hypothetical nature of this statement. In fact, this is an imaginary conditional (see Chapter 27), and remote from reality.<sup>6</sup> In the example sentence given earlier, “They said that they loved grammar,” the remoteness comes from the fact that this is a report of what some other people originally said. It is indirect, not their actual expression of affection. And, in the host’s offer, “Did you want something to eat before the game?” the use of the past-tense form of the *do* verb makes the offer more indirect than it would be if the present-tense form *do* were used. Here indirectness can be a sign of politeness. This same interpretation explains why the clerk used the past tense in his question to the customer about the price she had in mind. Another example of indirectness as social distance conveyed by the past tense occurs in the following preliminary to a request:

I am calling because I wanted to ask you a favor.

Let us now examine uses of the past tense to see how these notions of completeness and remoteness apply:

- a. A definite single completed event/action in the past:

I attended a meeting of that committee last week.

- b. Habitual or repeated action/event in the past:

It snowed almost every weekend last winter.

- c. An event with duration that applied in the past with the implication that it no longer applies in the present:

Professor Nelson taught at Yale for 30 years.

- d. With states in the past:

He appeared to be a creative genius.

He owed me a lot of money.

- e. Imaginative conditional in the subordinate clause (referring to present time—discussed in Chapter 27):

If he took better care of himself, he wouldn’t be absent so often.

- f. Social distancing:

Did you want to sit down and stay a while?

So as we can see, the simple past is used when the speaker conceptualizes a complete event factually, but as remote in some way.

### **Simple Future Tense with *will* (or Contracted *’ll*)**

We have already made the point several times that there are many ways to talk about the future in English. We discuss the alternatives later in this chapter and then again in Chapter 9. For now, the picture we have been painting for simple aspect holds for the simple future as well. In other words, simple future is used when the event is conceptualized as a whole. One

difference in its core meaning is that events in the future time cannot be factually knowable in the same way as those in the past or present can. Therefore, because, strictly speaking, the future can't be reported on factually, *will* is said to be used for strong predictions, not factual reports:

We will cover the first half of the book this term.

We will never know what cures tropical plants possess if we don't become serious about preserving the forests in which they grow.

*Will* has other meanings as well, and these are dealt with in the chapter on modals.

Let us now see how its core meaning of strong predictability applies:

- a. An action to take place at some definite future time:

Joel will take the bar exam next month.

- b. A future habitual action or state:

After October, Judy will take the 7:30 train to Chicago every day.

And even for present habits, about which strong predictions can be made:

Erik is so funny. He'll wake up, and before coming downstairs, he'll start playing with his trains. (example from Lori Gray)

- c. A situation that may obtain in the present and will obtain in the future but with some future termination in sight (notice here it is not the *will* that suggests the limitation on the event, but the subordinate clause):

Nora will live in Caracas until she improves her Spanish.

- d. In the main (result) clause of future conditionals:

If you go, you'll be sorry.

Here again, we should be able to see that the simple tense allows us to talk about events as wholes. Before moving on, then, let us summarize. Simple aspect allows us to talk about events as not open to development or change and to make factual statements or strong predictions about them. This is true despite the tense and is true for both specific facts and general ones.

<i>Specific</i>	<i>General</i>
Joe misses Susie.	Leap year comes every four years.
You slept till noon!	Dinosaurs roamed the earth for millions of years.
I'll be home by 6 P.M.	Oil will float on water.

## PERFECT ASPECT

The core meaning of the perfect is "prior," and it is used in relation to some other point in time. For instance, present perfect is used retrospectively to refer to a time prior to now:

Have you done your homework?

The past perfect offers a retrospective point of view on some past time:

He had left before I arrived.

The future perfect offers a retrospective point of view on some future time:

Mark will have finished all his chores by the time we get there.



Next, we examine in detail the combination of the perfect with the three tenses to see how this core meaning obtains.

### Present Perfect

- a. A situation that began at a prior point in time and continues into the present:

I have been a teacher since 1967.

- b. An action occurring or not occurring at an unspecified prior time that has current relevance

I have already seen that movie.

- c. A very recently completed action (often with *just*):

Mort has just finished his homework.

- d. An action that occurred over a prior time period and that is completed at the moment of speaking:

The value of the Johnson's house has doubled in the last four years.

- e. With verbs in subordinate clauses of time or condition:

She won't be satisfied until she has finished another chapter.<sup>7</sup>  
If you have done your homework, you can watch TV.

### Past Perfect

- a. An action completed in the past prior to some other past event or time:

He had already left before I could offer him a ride.  
She had worked at the post office before 1962.

- b. Imaginative conditional in the subordinate clause (referring to past time):

If Sally had studied harder, she would have passed the exam.

### Future Perfect

- a. A future action that will be completed prior to a specific future time:

I will have finished all this word processing by 5 P.M.

- b. A state or accomplishment that will be completed in the future prior to some other future time or event:

At the end of the summer the Blakes will have been married for 10 years.

Thus, you can see that when it interacts with each of the three tenses, perfect aspect allows us a retrospective point of view from a particular point in time: present, past, and future.

### PROGRESSIVE ASPECT

We have already made the case for the core meaning of progressive aspect as being imperfective, meaning that it portrays an event in a way that allows for it to be incomplete, or somehow limited. You saw how this core meaning was manifest in the contrast between an event of a temporary nature:

Susan and Carl are living in Newark.

in contrast with an ongoing state:

Susan and Carl live in Newark.

Another difference is that while the simple tenses can be used to make generic statements:

Weeds grow like wildfire.

progressive aspect is always specific:

Weeds are growing like wildfire (in my garden).

Here are uses of the tense-progressive combinations, so you can see how the core meaning of the progressive holds for all the tenses:

### **Present Progressive (Sometimes Called Present Continuous)**

- a. Activity in progress:

He is attending a meeting now.

- b. Extended present (action will end and therefore lacks the permanence of the simple present tense):

I'm studying geology at the University of Colorado.

- c. A temporary situation:

Phyllis is living with her parents.

- d. Repetition or iteration in a series of similar ongoing actions:

Henry is kicking the soccer ball around the backyard.

- e. Expresses future (when event is planned; usually with a future-time adverbial):<sup>8</sup>

She's coming tomorrow.

- f. Emotional comment on present habit (usually co-occurring with frequency adverbs *always* or *forever*):

He's always delivering in a clutch situation. (approving)

He's forever acting up at these affairs. (disapproving)

- g. A change in progress:

She's becoming more and more like her mother.

### **Past Progressive**

- a. An action in progress at a specific point of time in the past:

He was walking to school at 8:30 this morning.

- b. Past action simultaneous with some other event that is usually stated in the simple past:

Karen was washing her hair when the phone rang.

While Alex was traveling in Europe, he ran into an old friend.

- c. Repetition or iteration of some ongoing past action:

Jake was coughing all night long.



- d. Social distancing (which comes from the past tense and the tentativeness of the progressive aspect):

I was hoping you could lend me \$10.

### **Future Progressive**

- a. An action that will be in progress at a specific time in the future:

He will be taking a test at 8 A.M. tomorrow.

- b. Duration of some specific future action:

Mavis will be working on her thesis for the next three years.

### **PERFECT PROGRESSIVE ASPECT**

As its name implies, this aspect combines the sense of “prior” of the perfect with the meaning of “incompleteness” inherent in the progressive aspect.

He has been working hard on a special project.

We understand that the event being reported here was begun prior to now and that his hard work is limited—that is, it will not continue indefinitely. Next, we examine how these two core meanings work in tandem for each of the tenses.

### **Present Perfect Progressive**

- a. A situation or habit that began in the past (recent or distant) and that continues up to the present (and possibly into the future):

Burt has been going out with Alice.

- b. An action in progress that is not yet completed:

I have been reading that book.

- c. A state that changes over time:

The students have been getting better and better.

- d. An evaluative comment on something observed over time triggered by current evidence:

You've been drinking again!

### **Past Perfect Progressive**

- a. An action or habit taking place over a period of time in the past prior to some other past event or time:

Carol had been working hard, so her doctor told her to take a vacation. She had been trying to finish her degree that year.

- b. A past action in progress that was interrupted by a more recent past action:

We had been planning to vacation in Maine, but changed our minds after receiving the brochure on Nova Scotia.

- c. An ongoing past action or state that becomes satisfied by some other event:

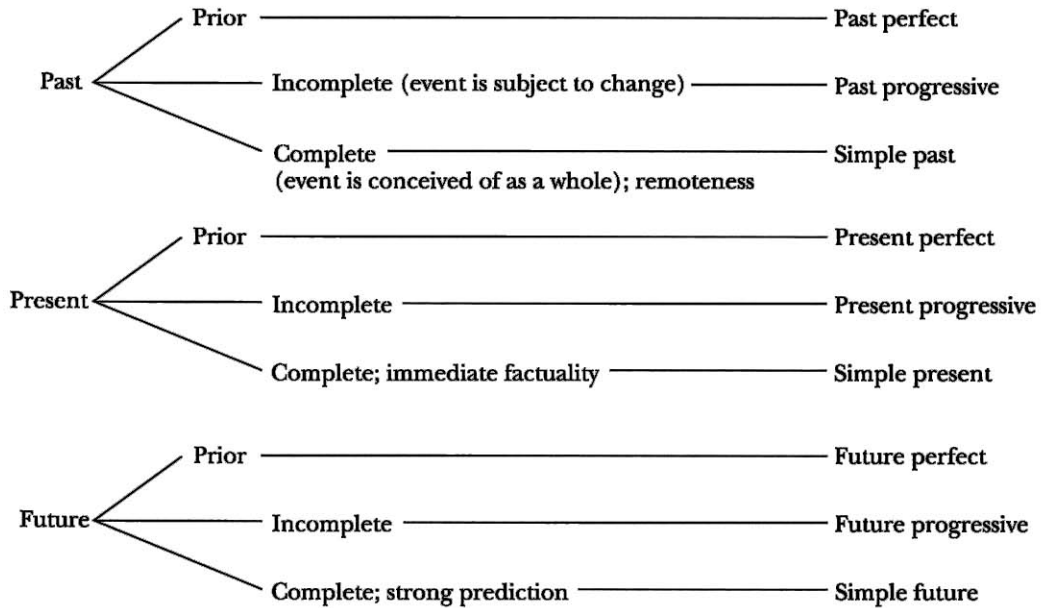
I had been wanting to see that play, so I was pleased when I won the tickets.

### Future Perfect Progressive

Durative or habitual action that is taking place in the present and that will continue into the future up until or through a specific future time:

On Christmas Eve we will have been living in the same house for 20 years.  
He will have been keeping a journal for 10 years next month.

We can sum up our observations so far concerning the core meanings of the English tense-aspect system with this diagram:



While this approach accounts, we feel, for much of the core semantics of the system, it does need some refinement at a more local level. For one thing, the meaning of the grammatical aspect can be affected by the choice of verb since verbs have their own inherent lexical aspect.

### THE LEXICAL ASPECT OF VERBS

As you saw in Chapter 3, verbs have not only grammatical aspect but lexical aspect as well. Verbs can be divided into four categories based on their inherent lexical aspect (Vendler 1967).

<i>Activity</i>	<i>Accomplishment</i>	<i>Achievement (punctual)</i>	<i>State</i> <sup>9</sup>
run	paint (a picture)	recognize (something)	have
walk	make (a chair)	realize (something)	contain
swim	build (a house)	lose (something)	seem
live	write (a novel)	find (something)	want
study	grow up	win the race	like

Activities, accomplishments, and achievements all involve changes of state. Activity verbs are durative and describe an ongoing action. They each have an undefined beginning and end point. Accomplishment verbs, on the other hand, share with activity verbs their durativity but each has a well-defined end point, when the particular action described in the verb phrase is—or is not—completed. Achievement verbs also each have a well-defined end





Alternatively, by stretching out the moment, the speaker can place emphasis on the action associated with the achievement:

The plane is landing right on schedule.

It has been said that stative verbs do not normally take the progressive because of a fundamental semantic conflict between a grammatical aspect that denotes a limited duration and a lexical aspect that expresses a stable state.

\*I am knowing the answer.

However, such an unqualified generalization discounts the frequently made observation that the progressive can occur with stative verbs to achieve certain effects. (See Kesner Bland 1988 for discussion). The progressive turns states into events. As such, “progressive statives” can be used to

- a. intensify the emotion expressed by the verb:

I'm hating this assignment.

I hate this assignment.

- b. indicate current behavior as opposed to general description:

He's being rude.

He's rude.

- c. introduce change in states by focusing on differences in degree across time:

I'm understanding less and less about life, the older I get.

Other uses of progressive statives found by Gavis (1997) are to:

- d. show limited duration

“Are you understanding this?”

- e. emphasize conscious involvement:

“What we are seeing is a red dwarf star.”

- f. show vividness

“One night in the middle of the night, I'm hearing dripping.”

- g. express politeness

“Are you liking it?” (cf. “Do you like it?”)

- h. mitigate criticism

“I like the first piano notes, but I'm not liking it where the strings come in.”  
(cf. . . . “but I do not like it . . .”)

- i. avoid imposition

“I was just wanting to invite you to a gathering . . .” (answering machine message)

The other difficulty we run into in claiming that stative verbs do not take the progressive is that many stative verbs, even the classic verb of state, the copula *be*, have nonstative counterparts that are active in meaning and that may occur with the progressive.

*State (subject is not the agent)*

The steak weighs 12 ounces.

You are a fool.

I taste cinnamon in these rolls.

*Action (subject is the agent)*

The butcher is weighing the steak.

You're being a fool.

We'll be tasting wine at the vineyard.

All this means that we have to think in terms of stative “meanings” rather than stative “verbs” to correctly understand and explain restrictions on the use of the progressive aspect in English.

### **With Perfect Progressive Aspect**

With activity verbs, perfect progressive aspect implies that the action began in the past and has duration at the present time:

Mike has been running for two hours.

or is iterative and/or habitual:

Mike has been running for years.

With accomplishment verbs, the perfect progressive indicates that the action has been going on for some time and is not yet complete:

They have been repairing that bridge for months.

With achievement verbs, perfect progressive aspect is a bit strange if only one action is intended, due to the fact that achievement verbs are punctual:

?Mike has been winning that race for hours.

but not if the achievement is iterative:

Mike has been winning that race for years.

With stative verbs, perfect progressive aspect often appears to be more compatible than progressive aspect alone:

?I am wanting to see you.

I have been wanting to see you.

Here, the perfect adds the notion of inception prior to present time and thus signals that the state has history, or duration.

Besides the obvious implication that lexical aspect interacts with grammatical aspect to affect meaning, another point we should make is that lexical aspect influences the acquisition of the simple tenses as well. Researchers in second language acquisition have discovered that the acquisition of past tense is not a unitary phenomenon but rather proceeds in stages. Typically, learners use the past tense with achievement (punctual) verbs first and then, later, its use spreads to accomplishment verbs and, finally, to activities and states. Another trend is for learners not to use past tense with adverbs of frequency, such as *never* and *always* (Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds 1995). These observations regarding the acquisition of past tense have implications for the selection of example sentences. Teachers may well want to supplement the natural input to which students are exposed and to focus their attention on the use of past tense with activity and stative verbs and its co-occurrence with adverbs of frequency (Bardovi-Harlig and Reynolds 1995).

### **ADVERBS OF TENSE AND TIME**

To conclude our discussion of the meanings associated with the verb tense-aspect system in English, we should point out that because of the semantics of the tense-aspect combinations, certain adverbs of indefinite time (*still, yet, soon, already, anymore, and just*) often co-occur with particular combinations. Consider how they all could be used as different answers to the following question:

Has Chris finished her M.A. thesis?

1. Yes, she has *just* finished it.
2. Yes, she has *already* filed it.
3. No, she hasn't finished it *yet*.
4. No, but she'll finish it *soon*.
5. No, she's *still* working on it.
6. No, she's not working on it *anymore*.

In answer 1, *just* signals recent completion, while in 2, *already* is used to signal a result that occurred previously—perhaps earlier than anticipated. In 3, the adverb *yet* indicates noncompletion. All three occur with the present perfect, although American English, unlike Standard British English, also permits simple past tense to occur with these three adverbs. For example:

1. Yes, she *just* finished it.
2. Yes, she *already* finished it.
3. No, she didn't finish it *yet*.

Like 3, answer 4 also signals noncompletion; however, future completion is implied in *soon*, whereas it is less certain in *yet*. The present progressive with *still* in 5 signals a state of affairs that is somehow persisting in the present—perhaps longer than anticipated—while answer 6 indicates noncompletion, and one is led to believe that the task has been abandoned.

Consider also the following situation. A parent may ask his or her child either

Have you done your homework *already*?

or

Have you done your homework *yet*?

The question with *already* suggests that the parent expects a positive answer but perhaps is surprised because he or she did not expect completion that early. The question with *yet* is more neutral, or it may be used to signal that the parent does not expect the homework to be finished but wants to make the child feel as though it should be.

Note also that *just* and *soon* appear to be complementary retrospective and future markers—signaling recent completion and expected completion in the immediate future, respectively:

Joe has *just* finished his assignment, and I will finish mine *soon*.

A final point is that *anymore*,<sup>10</sup> which negates the past, can be viewed as complementary to *still*,<sup>11</sup> which affirms continuation of the past in the present:

Helen's *still* living in Omaha, but she doesn't go to school *anymore*.

The semantically incomplete connotations of *yet*, *anymore*, and *still* and the semantically complete (or about to be completed) nature of *just*, *soon*, and *already*—as well as the tenses with which these forms co-occur most frequently—are facts about English that you should be prepared to convey to your students. Of course, some of these adverbs have other nontemporal meanings as well, which we discuss in Chapter 25 and elsewhere. We leave the meaning dimension of the tense-aspect system now and turn to the use dimension.

## THE USE OF THE TENSE-ASPECT SYSTEM

In ways that are not true for other structures, the meaning/use distinction in the tense-aspect system is difficult to discern. What we have therefore attempted to do is to anticipate the troublesome boundaries for ESL/EFL students, to which we alluded earlier, and to elucidate the differences by calling upon both semantic and pragmatic resources. Chapter 9 in its entirety is devoted further to issues of use.

## UNDERSTANDING DIFFICULT CONTRASTS IN TENSE-ASPECT COMBINATIONS

### 1. Simple Present Versus Present Progressive

The present progressive is used for limited action in progress, while the simple present is more compatible with states. Thus, this distinction is manifest in the following ways:

- a. Action happening at the moment of speaking versus a habit:

Why are you wearing glasses? (moment of speech—i.e., right now)

Why do you wear glasses? (habitual)

- b. Temporary event versus permanent situation:

Linda is living with her parents. (temporary—until she gets a better job)

Linda lives with her parents. (permanent—because it costs her too much to live alone)

- c. Specific event versus general situation:

What are you doing for Thanksgiving? (one specific Thanksgiving holiday—the forthcoming one)

What do you do for Thanksgiving? (the holiday each year)

- d. Activity versus state (two different lexical entries required):

I am thinking about the answer. (mental activity)

I think it is 144. (mental state/report)

### 2. Present Perfect Versus Present Perfect Progressive

The present perfect progressive emphasizes activity as compared with achievement with the present perfect. Thus, the following distinctions may occur:

- a. Specific and possibly still ongoing activity versus prior event:

I have been visiting my great-grandmother. (possibly still ongoing)

I have visited my great-grandmother. (prior event)

- b. Strong implication of continuation versus continuation being only a possibility:

I have been teaching for 25 years. (and I can't imagine doing anything else)

I have taught for 25 years. (so now it's time to think about doing something else)

Notice, in fact with this pair, that the present perfect progressive implies continuation unless it is contradicted by another clause:

I have been teaching for 25 years, but now I want to do something else.

- c. Single accomplishment, incomplete, versus a completed one:

Gail has been remodeling her home. (incomplete)

Gail has remodeled her home. (complete)

### 3. Simple Past Versus Present Perfect

This distinction is extremely difficult for many ESL/EFL students to make. You could call their attention to some sentence-level contrasts, but this distinction is often best sorted out at the level of discourse (see Chapter 9). One thing is certain: Even though one is a

present tense and the other a past, the choice is not dependent upon the time at which the event took place. As Inoue (1979) has pointed out, the truth value of the present perfect is identical to the past. For example, in the following pair of sentences, the time at which Sheila joined is not different:

Sheila has joined the Sierra Club.

Sheila joined the Sierra Club.

If the time of her joining is the same, what accounts for the difference? We might say that the use of the present perfect has more to do with our present perspective on the event rather than on the actual time at which it took place. This concept is difficult to get across to ESL/EFL students. Therefore, some additional sentence-level ways to help students determine whether to use the present perfect or the simple past tense are the following:

- a. The simple past often occurs with specific past-time adverbials. Recall that the core meaning of the past tense is remoteness. The use of specific past-time adverbials (e.g., *yesterday*, *last year*, *1990*) makes the past tense obligatory. As we have already seen, the use of certain more general temporal adverbials is commonly associated with the perfect (e.g., *already*, *since*, *yet*).
- b. Even if a past-time adverbial isn't explicit, the remoteness may be defined elsewhere in the context or simply implied:

John Lennon was a creative genius.

- c. The past tense is used for a completed historical period versus an incomplete one:

My father lived here all his life. (complete—implies the father has left or is dead)

My father has lived here all his life. (incomplete—the father still lives there)

- d. The present perfect is used for an indefinite versus a definite query:

Have you ever gone to Phoenix?

Did you go to Phoenix? (You said that you traveled to the Southwest last summer)

In fact, you would almost have to have some shared knowledge with your listener to use the specific past tense in such situations. Use of the present perfect in such a context does not presume shared knowledge.

- e. Citing Joos (1967), Knowles (1976) gives us another way to view the differences between the simple past and present perfect. According to Knowles, the function of the present perfect is to change the nature of the relationship between the subject and predicate—it emphasizes the predicated event's result on the grammatical subject. In the following example,

I've been to Japan twice already, but I still don't speak much Japanese.

the speaker is not so much talking about an event as characterizing "I" at the time of the discourse. To know the time of the trips requires additional questions and answers. Thus, the present perfect functions as a "scene setter," a topic we return to in Chapter 9.

#### 4. Simple Past Versus Past Progressive

- a. The past progressive indicates incomplete versus complete action:

He was drowning in the lake, so the lifeguard raced into the water. (incomplete)

He drowned in the lake. (complete)





- b. Simple past sees the event as a totality with no room for change; past progressive indicates that an event has already begun and extends the event in time and thus allows for a change or its interruption:

He left when I came in.

He was leaving when I came in. (and so may have changed his mind and stayed.)

- c. Permanent versus temporary state:

They lived in Baltimore all their lives. (past permanent)

They were living in Baltimore during the seventies. (past temporary)

## 5. Simple Past Versus Past Perfect

- a. The past perfect is used to mark the completion of some event before a past time period:

By the end of the 1920s, women in the United States had won the right to vote.

or before another past event that is in the simple past:

Pat had blamed them for the problem before he considered all the evidence.

However, it is possible to report this same sequence with two events using just the simple past tense for both since the time adverbial *before* makes clear the sequence (cf. endnote 7):

Pat blamed them for the problem before he considered all the evidence.

Even without a time adverbial, the simple past tense can be used with both clauses if the sequence of the clauses follows the sequence of events:

Marion worked in an insurance company for 20 years and retired in 1997.

Only when the clauses report two events out of sequence and there are no time adverbials that indicate the actual order is the past perfect necessary:

When Marion became a photographer, she had finished her degree in fine arts.

- b. Sometimes the past perfect appears to mark the later rather than the earlier of the two events in a two-clause sequence (G. Stevens, personal communication):

I answered before she had asked.

She collected it before I had finished.

Notice here, though, the event in the subordinate clause was not actually completed. In this case, it appears that the past perfect is a kind of implied counterfactual, suggesting that the event in the subordinate clause was not completed or did not occur. Here again, a simple past tense will often do without a change in meaning:

I answered before she asked.

## 6. Simple Future (*will*) Versus Other Ways of Indicating Futurity

- a. Simple future with *will* is used for the following:

Future predictions:

Belinda will be 40 next year.

Spontaneous decision when the person has control over the action:

I'll get the phone.

- b. *Be going to* is used for the following:

Future predictions (more informal than *will*):

Belinda's going to be 40 next year.

Future intentions (based on prior decision):

Randy and Joyce are going to get married in October.

Future certainty based on current condition or present evidence:

Pauline's going to have a baby.

It's going to rain today.

- c. Present progressive is used for the following:

Future plans that have already been made:

I'm marching in the parade next week.

- d. Simple present is used for the following:

Fixed scheduled events:

We get paid next Friday.

Subordinate clauses of time (i.e., those beginning with *when, after, before, etc.*) or condition (i.e., *provided that, if, as long as, etc.*):

If the train arrives on time, we'll beat rush hour getting home.

Some of these uses are very close, and difficulties may arise accordingly. Here are some observations that may help to distinguish some uses:

- a. The distinction between future scheduled events and future plans is sometimes indiscernible, and the same event can be referred to either way—simple present or present progressive. However, the simple present is more formal and impersonal and is not very common except with travel arrangements and fixed timetables.:

Aunt Jeanne arrives today.

Aunt Jeanne is arriving today.

- b. The present progressive is very common and sometimes overlaps with *be going to*. The present progressive, however, emphasizes that the arrangements have already been made, whereas *be going to* focuses more on the speaker's plans or intentions:

I'm staying at the Marriott.

I'm going to stay at the Marriott.

Of course, the present progressive is not likely to be used to express the future with stative verbs or where the subject is inanimate:

\*The red car is belonging to me tomorrow.

The red car is going to belong to me tomorrow.

\*That tree is falling tomorrow.

That tree is going to fall tomorrow.

or any time when no planning or preparation can guarantee the outcome:

\*We are winning the tennis match next weekend.

- c. *Will* and *be going to* are sometimes interchangeable when *be going to* expresses the speaker's certainty and *will* is used to make a strong prediction. However, since *be going to* is a present-tense form, it is used especially when there is evidence in the present to support the prediction; this is not necessarily the case with *will*.

Mark is going to be tall like his dad.

?Mark will be tall like his dad.

And they also differ in that *will* is used for quick, "on-the-spot" decisions, whereas *be going to* is used with more premeditated ones:

What can I give Jill for her birthday? Oh, I know. I'll get her that new novel.

Oh, I know. ?I'm going to get her that new novel.

Finally, when they occur together, the *be going to* tends to come first, to introduce the event, with details supplied with *will* (see Chapter 9).

Tomorrow night we're going to have a cookout. Our guests'll bring something to grill, and we'll supply the rest.

### 7. Simple Future Versus Future Progressive

The future progressive allows for the possibility of change with regard to some future event:

We'll go to Everglades National Park on our vacation. (definite plan)

We'll be going to Everglades National Park on our vacation. (less definite in that it allows for a change in plans; i.e., We'll be going to Everglades National Park unless we run out of time)

We will offer that class next semester. (more definite)

We will be offering that class next semester.<sup>12</sup> (more tentative in that it allows for change—i.e., its cancellation if not enough students enroll in it)

### 8. Simple Future Versus Future Perfect

As do the other perfect aspects, the future perfect marks an event/activity that is complete prior to some other time (in this case, future), or complete prior to some other future event:

By the year 2008, the information superhighway will have become accessible to all.

Megan will have moved by the time she completes her studies.

Simple future alone suggests that the event/activity begins with the time mentioned:

The information superhighway will become accessible to all by the year 2008.

Megan will move when she completes her studies.

### SOME ADDITIONAL FACTS REGARDING USE

In the next chapter, we deal comprehensively with the modal system of English. It is worth calling attention at this point, however, to some modals and phrasal modals whose functions relate to the uses of the tense and aspect markers. There are three observations that we would like to make here.

1. Although we have already shown a number of ways to talk about future events and states, many modals, in addition to *will*, and phrasal modals, in addition to *be going to*, can be used for this purpose as well. Here are just a few of them:

<i>may, could, might</i>	It <i>may/could/might</i> rain tomorrow. (less certain than <i>will</i> )
<i>be to</i>	The recruit <i>is to</i> report at 7 A.M. tomorrow morning.
<i>be about to</i>	Look out! You <i>'re about to</i> step in a puddle.
<i>be supposed to</i>	We <i>'re supposed to</i> go on a field trip tomorrow, but the weather forecast doesn't look good.

Of course, meanings differ among these, and we explore them in the following chapter on modals.

2. We can use the phrasal modal *used to* and the modal *would* to express past habits. When they occur together, *used to* tends to frame the discourse, and *would* serves to elaborate (see Chapter 9).

When we were children, we *used to* swing on the lawn swing for hours. We *would* stop only when we were called for dinner.

3. The past form of the phrasal modal *be going to* can be used to talk about failed future plans from a past perspective:

Pam *was going to* play tennis this weekend, but she sprained her ankle.

## CONCLUSION

This ends our analysis of the form, meaning, and use of the verb tense-aspect system as it operates at the sentence level. We hope this treatment has helped demonstrate some of the systematicity underlying what might seem at first to be disparate facts. Much more of the systematic nature of English tense-aspect is revealed when we examine the use of the tense-aspect system at the discourse level in Chapter 9.

From our perspective, the long-term challenge of learning the English tense-aspect system centers around what we have termed “the boundary problem.” In this regard it is very important that as new tense-aspect combinations are introduced, they are contrasted with what has been presented previously. We have spent time examining the core meanings of the aspects and tenses because we feel that some of the difficulty of discerning the differences between pairs of tense-aspect combinations can be dispelled if students can first be taught to associate the core meanings with the forms; then, they can be helped to understand the more peripheral uses that are not easily explicable from a core-meaning perspective. Furthermore, while it is commonplace to introduce the present progressive by teaching students to associate its core meaning with events that are happening this very minute, this is only part of the story of the present progressive. If teachers are sensitive to the core meanings of the various forms that compose the tense-aspect system, perhaps they will assist their students to develop an understanding of the wider usage of these forms.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. **Form.** An inductive approach to teaching the form of English tense-aspect combinations is to provide students with naturalistic data in which the input has somehow been enhanced (Sharwood Smith 1993) in order to make the verb endings more salient. You

might try, for example, giving your students short reading passages with certain verb endings boldfaced or italicized. You could do this for a period of time before ever formally drawing their attention to any particular tense-aspect combination.

**2. Form.** ESL/EFL students will need to learn the irregular past tense and past participle forms. One suggestion for practicing these is to play the game of concentration. Each group of four or five students will need a set of 30 cards. On 15 of the cards, write the base form of the verb; on the other 15 cards, write the past tense and/or past participle.

Shuffle the cards and place them face down, forming a grid of six cards down and five across. Students take turns turning over two cards at a time. If the two cards make a match—that is, if the base form and past tense and/or past participle are of the same verb—the student keeps the pair of cards. If they do not match, the cards must be replaced, face down, in their original spots. When all the pairs have been matched, the student with the most cards wins. This game can be replayed from time to time as new verbs are introduced.

**3. Meaning.** To teach meaning, we want students to *associate* a form and its meaning. For example, you might bring in a color wheel, or draw one on the board, for practicing the unchanging fact/state core meaning of the simple present tense. Have students make statements about how to form other colors from the primary ones and other combinations:

T: What do red and blue make?

S: Red and blue make purple.

T: What do black and white make?

S: Black and white make gray.

T: What do all the colors together make?

S: All the colors together make black.

T: Now make as many sentences as you can with English words for colors.

**4. Meaning.** One way of getting students to associate forms and meanings is to teach them certain adverbials that frequently occur with particular tenses. For example, give students a list of three adverbials that commonly go together with the present tense-aspect combinations:

*Simple Present*

every (day)

once a week

on (Wednesday)

*Present Perfect*

for X days

up until now

since (Monday)

*Present Progressive*

this day; these days

at the moment

today

Next, give them a blank monthly calendar for the current month. Read to them a paragraph, such as the following, with Jill's activities and appointments for the month. Ask the students to pencil them in.

During the month of \_\_\_\_\_, Jill is very busy. She goes to class every weekday and studies on the weekends too. She has tests once a week on Fridays. These days she is also working. She works on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday evenings after school. She is not working this evening (Wednesday), though, because she is not feeling well. She has been sick since Monday. She has missed school and work for two days. . . .

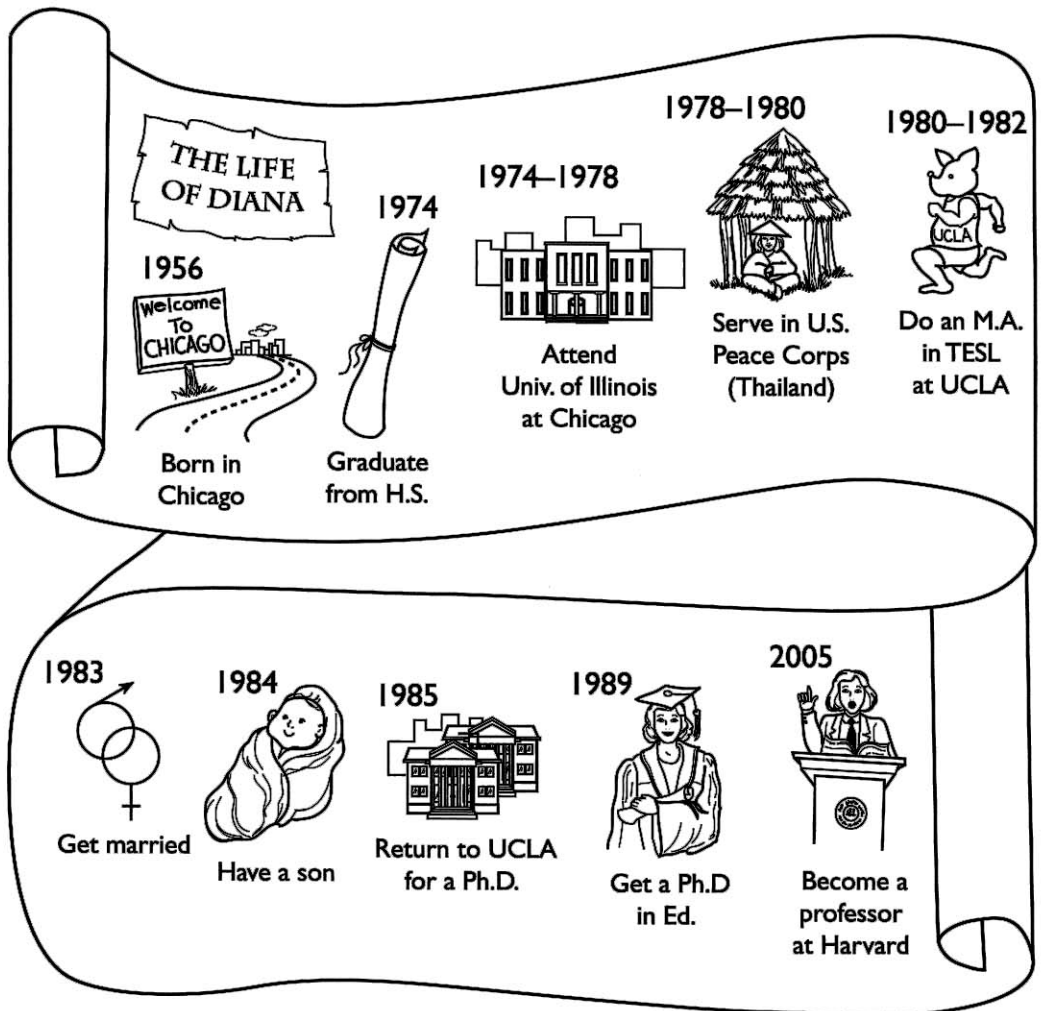
Finally, give students new blank calendars and have them work in pairs to write down their partner's monthly activities.



**5. Meaning.** To teach students to associate meaning with verb forms, you can use a real or imaginary biography that details the events in someone's life. This can be effectively presented in the form of a scroll, which you can slowly unwind as you ask students questions. For example, you might ask questions such as the following that help students understand the meaning of the perfect progressives:

- Present perfect progressive: It's 1970. (For) how long has Diana been living in Chicago?
- Past perfect progressive: In 1976, (for) how long had Diana been attending the University of Illinois?
- Future perfect progressive: In 1987, (for) how many years will Diana have been working on her Ph.D.?

Students can create scrolls of their own lives and ask and answer each other's questions.



**6. Use.** Learning to use the tenses appropriately seems to be the greatest challenge that ESL/EFL students face. To have students see the difference between the simple past and the past progressive, have them think of a famous historical event that took place during their lifetimes. For example, the shooting of Anwar Sadat, the tearing down of the Berlin Wall,

the Kobe earthquake. Ask a student to say what their event was, and then ask other students to tell what they were doing at the time. Have them use the following frame:

When I heard about X, I was Y.

When I heard about Anwar Sadat, I was driving in my car.

**7. Use.** Another problem students commonly wrestle with is choosing between *will* and *be going to* appropriately. Dalglish, Joshee, and Holzer (personal communication) recommend that the teacher write the following two sentences on the board:

She is going to dive into the water.

She will dive into the water.

Show students a picture of a woman perched on the end of a diving board and lean forward, and ask students which sentence correctly describes the picture. The students may intuitively know that the use of *will* in this context is not appropriate. Help them to see that *be going to* here is more appropriate because the woman's posture and position at the end of the diving board indicates a preplanned activity for which there is evidence. *Will*, on the other hand, expresses intention at the immediate moment of decision when the person has control over the action. Next ask students to create appropriate contexts for each sentence of each pair below:

- a. I'll sell my car.  
I'm going to sell my car.
- b. I'll buy her a necklace.  
I'm going to buy her a necklace.
- c. I'll have an omelette and a salad.  
I'm going to have an omelette and a salad.

**8. Use.** To help students practice one difference in usage between the simple past and the present perfect, Gene Parulis and Fiona Cook (personal communication) suggest students role-play a job interview.

A: Have you ever  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{taken shorthand} \\ \text{done any computer programming} \\ \text{written advertisements before} \end{array} \right\} ?$

·  
·  
·

B:  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{No, I haven't, but I have edited a newsletter. I worked . . .} \\ \text{Yes, I have. I worked . . .} \end{array} \right\}$

For students who are less advanced, you could work on the same use difference between present perfect and past by asking each student to think up one question to ask another student in the class, using the frame *Have you ever . . . ?* If the student to whom the question is asked answers affirmatively, then the first student asks a follow-up question. For example:

A: Have you ever eaten cous-cous?

B: Yes, I have.

A: Really? When did you eat it?

B: I ate some last week at a restaurant.

**EXERCISES****Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide original example sentences to illustrate the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples:
 

a. simple future	d. past perfect	g. accomplishment verb
b. present perfect	e. stative verb	h. present perfect progressive
c. past progressive	f. simple present	
2. Do the following sentences differ at all with regard to the ordering of events?
  - a. I had finished my homework before I practiced the piano.
  - b. I finished my homework before I practiced the piano.

Give a reason for your answer.
3. The word *since* does not usually occur with the simple past tense. Why do you think this is so?
4. Compare and contrast the following pairs of sentences:
 

a. I have read the book.	I have been reading the book.
b. Stan sells vacuum cleaners.	Stan is selling vacuum cleaners.
c. Did you go to Yankee Stadium?	Have you gone to Yankee Stadium?

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

5. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical? If your students make these errors, how would you make them aware of the errors, and what activities would you provide to help students avoid these errors?
  - a. \*William has bought it last Saturday.
  - b. \*I'm believing you.
  - c. \*Help! I will fall.
  - d. \*When Larry will come, I will go.
  - e. \*Phyllis was lived with her parents for 20 years.
6. ESL/EFL teachers often associate "now" with the present progressive, but consider the following:
 

He goes to the store now.    Now you've done it!

What interpretation can you give to these sentences that will explain the tense use?
7. Consider the following verbs of internal sensation: *hurt, ache, feel, itch*. Although sometimes these are considered a subcategory of stative verbs, we have not included them because of their special nature with regard to progressive aspect. Explain.
8. Apart from the British and American dialect difference mentioned under Adverbs of Tense and Time, *just* and *already* can occur with the present perfect and/or the simple past. Is there a difference? Would these sentences occur in different contexts?
  - a. Did you just hear the news about the flooding in Georgia?
  - b. Have you just heard the news about the flooding in Georgia?
9. In American English, sometimes the past participle *gotten* appears to be used the same way as *got*.
 

Has he gotten/got over his illness?

Other times they appear to have different meanings:

He has got the following ingredients.

He has gotten the following ingredients.

Can you explain the difference?

10. If a student asks you what the difference between the following two sentences is, how would you answer?
- I have been hearing that melody over and over again.
  - I have been listening to that melody over and over again.

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## ENDNOTES

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1. Finite verbs are verbs that can stand alone in independent or main clauses; nonfinite verb forms, such as infinitives, occur on their own only in embedded or subordinate clauses.

2. This is the dictionary definition of tense. But as you have already seen, by noting the absence of a future tense in English, there is no one-to-one correspondence between tense and time. Indeed, in the section on meaning you will see that the past tense is used for more than past time, the present tense is also used for future time, and so on.

3. In some British English grammars, though, the pattern is preserved by referring to tense first and then aspect, i.e., “present simple.”

4. For a list of the spelling rules that apply to forming the present participle, see Badalamenti and Henner-Stanchina (1997).

5. Even though the whole sentence expresses future, the present tense is used in the subordinate clause. This follows a general principle of historical linguistics that holds that historically older inflectional/grammatical forms and word orders are preserved in subordinate clauses longer than in independent clauses. Since Old English had only two tenses (present and past) and used the present tense to express future time, this principle seems to apply here.

6. Here and with the host’s offer and sales clerk’s question, the past-tense marker has taken over the subjunctive function in English.

7. Notice, though, that the simple present (*finishes*) could also work here (Lori Gray, personal communication). This is in keeping with the fact that the use of perfect aspect is sometimes optional when its notion of prior can be made explicit by other means—here, the use of *until*. You will encounter the optionality of the perfect again when we contrast the simple past with the past perfect.

8. It is difficult to see how the core meaning applies to the uses of the progressive in e and f. Perhaps this is because these are more marked uses of the progressive—that is, using a present tense to speak about a future event in e and using the progressive with habits as in f, normally the domain for simple aspect.

9. This chart has been somewhat altered from the one that appeared in Andersen and Shirai (1994). Dowty (1979) has shown that there is overlap between the accomplishment and activity categories with certain verbs such as *draw* in sentences such as the following:

- a. He drew the picture in an hour. (accomplishment)
- b. He drew the picture for an hour. (activity)

For this reason, Dowty argues that classification should occur with the whole verb phrase. While we would not quarrel with his assessment, for our purposes this categorization of verbs is sufficient.

10. There is a dialect of North American English, spoken mainly in the South, that uses *anymore* to mean *lately* or *these days* (Jaimie Scanlon, personal communication).

*I don’t have time to read the newspaper. I only read books for school anymore.*

11. Although it affirms the persistence of the past in the present, *still* often implies a negative evaluation:

*Is Harold still writing his thesis? (He shouldn’t be; he should have finished it long ago.)*

12. Example from Norbert Gross, personal communication.

# MODAL AUXILIARIES AND RELATED PHRASAL FORMS

## INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 7, all the components of our phrase structure rule for expanding the auxiliary (AUX) in nonimperative sentences that we introduced in Chapter 6 were discussed except for the modal auxiliary (M) and the phrasal modal (pm) forms:

$$\text{AUX} \rightarrow \left\{ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{T} \\ \text{M} \\ \text{-imper} \end{array} \right\} (\text{pm}) (\text{perf}) (\text{prog}) \right\}$$

This chapter completes our discussion of the constituents that compose the AUX, or auxiliary, in nonimperative sentences by describing the form, meaning, and use of modal auxiliaries and some of their most frequent phrasal forms.

## THE FORM OF MODALS

Modal auxiliaries are among the more difficult structures ESL/EFL teachers have to deal with. One of the reasons for this is the form of modals. Some of your students, who have been told time and time again that present-tense verbs with third person singular subjects require an -s ending, overgeneralize this rule to modals—for example, \*He cans play tennis. This overgeneralization results in errors because in English modal auxiliaries (*can, may, shall, will, etc.*) are distinguished from other auxiliary verbs (*be, have, do*) as well as from ordinary verbs by their lack of tense and their resultant lack of subject-verb agreement; that is, modals do not inflect.

In English, modals are derived from verbs that *did* carry tense and take agreement markers during a much earlier stage of the language. Other languages, such as German, French, and Spanish, still carry out tense-marking and/or agreement operations on their equivalents of English modal verbs. It is thus important to emphasize to learners that English no longer inflects modals for tense and number.

Another formal property of modals that may cause your students some trouble is that modals directly precede a verb without the intervening infinitive *to* that is required when two ordinary verbs follow each other in sequence:

<i>Modal + Verb</i>	<i>Verb + Verb</i>
I can go.	I want to go.
*I can to go.	*I want go.

Many of your students will treat modals like ordinary verbs and produce errors by using a superfluous infinitive *to*: \**Jack must to study harder*; \**We should to return the book*.

Another source of difficulty with the form of modals, of course, may be your students' native language(s). Not all languages have modal auxiliaries; in those that do not, regular verbs or adjective/adverbs are used to express the meanings and functions that modals have in English. Students speaking such a first language may feel the need to inflect English modals as if they were ordinary verbs.

In this grammar we describe modals formally as tenseless auxiliaries that take no subject-verb agreement and no infinitive *to* before the following verb. However, we acknowledge that modals do derive historically from ordinary verb forms inflected for either present or past tense because this historically-based relationship still has some semantic implications (see our discussion of meanings of modals below)

<i>Historical Present Tense</i>	<i>Historical Past Tense</i>
can	could
will	would
may	might
shall	should
∅ ←	must, (had to) <sup>1</sup>

Many linguists argue, using data such as the following, that the preceding forms are still marked for present or past tense:

<i>Direct Speech</i>	<i>Indirect (i.e., Reported) Speech</i>
Joe: I can go.	Joe said that he could go.
May: I will leave.	May said that she would leave.
Jim: Shall I stay? <sup>2</sup>	Jim asked if he should stay.
Bill: May I smoke?	Bill asked if he might smoke.
Ann: I must work.	Ann said that she had to work. <sup>3</sup>

The direct-to-indirect speech tense shift is the main piece of evidence cited to support the assignment of tense to modals. However, we demonstrate in Chapter 33, which deals with indirect speech, that the so-called rules of tense shifting are not always followed by native speakers. This is especially true for modals; thus such evidence is somewhat weak. While it is true that the historically present-tense modals *can* and *will* still resist being used in past time frames whether they involve reported speech or not (e.g., \**He can leave yesterday*; \**She told me on March 25 last year that she will leave the following day*), their so-called past tense counterparts, *could* and *would*, don't always work in past-time frames (\**He could leave yesterday*), and they often occur with reference to present time (*Would/Could you pass me the salt?*). Perhaps the strongest current support—other than reported speech—for a semantic relationship between present time and remote past time obtains between *can* and *could* when *could* is used to express ability in the remote past:

I can't speak French now, but I could when I was a child.

However, this is a semantic, not a syntactic, relationship, and it does not hold for other modal pairs; in fact, in some cases so-called present-tense modals refer to past time:

Jim may have been late last night. (past meaning)

Also, in many other cases, so-called past-tense modals refer to present or future time:

That could be Sara. (present meaning)

You should see a doctor. (future meaning)

Given the fact that the “present tense” modals would be the only present tense verb auxiliaries in English that do not take the third person singular inflection, there are few valid syntactic reasons for maintaining the historical description and ascribing past or present tense to modals.

## MODALS AND THEIR PHRASAL MODAL COUNTERPARTS

Multiword forms ending in infinitive *to*, which function semantically like true modals (in certain of their meanings), are called phrasal modals (they are also called periphrastic modals, pseudo modals, or quasi-modals). Every modal seems to have at least one phrasal counterpart, and some modals have several:

<i>Modal</i>	<i>Phrasal Modal</i>
can, could	be able to
will, shall	be going to, be about to
must	have to, have got to
should, ought to <sup>4</sup>	be to, <sup>5</sup> be supposed to
would (= past habit)	used to
may, might	be allowed to, be permitted to

Notice that the phrasal modals do not exhibit the same formal properties as the true modals in that the subject-verb agreement rule must be applied (except for *used to*, which is an inflected past tense<sup>6</sup>) and that all phrasal modals require that a *to* infinitive precede the main verb; that is, the phrasal forms behave syntactically much more like ordinary verbs than they do like true modals.

She { *is able to*  
*is going to*  
*is allowed to*  
*has to*  
*has got to* } go to Fresno tomorrow.

In fact, phrasal forms developed in part because the original class of modals lost their connection to time, and the phrasal forms gave English users a way to mark tense and express modality on one and the same verb form. Phrasal modals, however, differ from lexical verbs in speech in that they have assimilated with *to* and often pronounce *to* as if it were part of a single word with the verb: *gotta*, *gonna*, *hasta*, *hafta*, and so on. Also, it is much more difficult to put an adverb between the verb and the *to* of a phrasal modal than between a regular verb and an infinitive *to*:

? I have often to study.  
I try often to study.

In addition to the true modals and phrasal modals, there are some other modal-like forms in English, such as the following: (*had*) *better* or (*had*) *best* (advisability), *would rather*, *would prefer* (preference), and *would like* (= desire in statements and offers in questions). These must be included in a comprehensive treatment of modals and phrasal forms, and we return to them later.

Another point should be made regarding the formal properties of modals and their phrasal equivalents: The order of these constituents with respect to each other is fixed. Consider the following examples:

- \*We can should study hard.
- He will have to improve his work.
- \*I am able to must do the job.
- I might be able to go there.
- He is going to have to improve his pronunciation.

While further study is needed to determine what all the possible combinations are in standard English, we see in example 1 that modal plus modal<sup>7</sup> cannot occur and in example 3 that phrasal modal plus modal cannot occur. Sequences of three phrasal modals seem to be the upper limit (Sara Weigle, personal communication):

I'm gonna have to be able to do that by Saturday.

We can thus add a superscript three to the (pm) in the AUX rule to describe the upper limit on possible sequences of phrasal modals.<sup>8</sup> However, we still lack a precise description of the combinations of modals and phrasal modals that can occur versus those that cannot.

Another point to make about the form of so-called phrasal modals is that they occasionally appear to take perfect or progressive aspect (Barbara Strodt, personal communication):

I'm having to work harder to lose weight now.

Lately he's been able to run the mile in five minutes.

Our current phrase structure rule does not account for such an order of constituents. Such cases reflect the fact that phrasal modal verbs are tensed and inflected like ordinary verbs. Their relation to modal auxiliaries is a semantic one. When they occur with the aspectual markers, we must treat them syntactically as ordinary verbs taking infinitives rather than as phrasal modals. Many phrasal modals seem to be hovering somewhere between a regular verb and a true phrasal modal.

Phrasal modals have a variety of internal structures. Some of them look like another construction that consists of *be* + adjective + preposition + verb [gerund]:

I am able to go there. (pm + verb [infinitive])

I am used to going there. (be + adj + prep + verb [gerund])

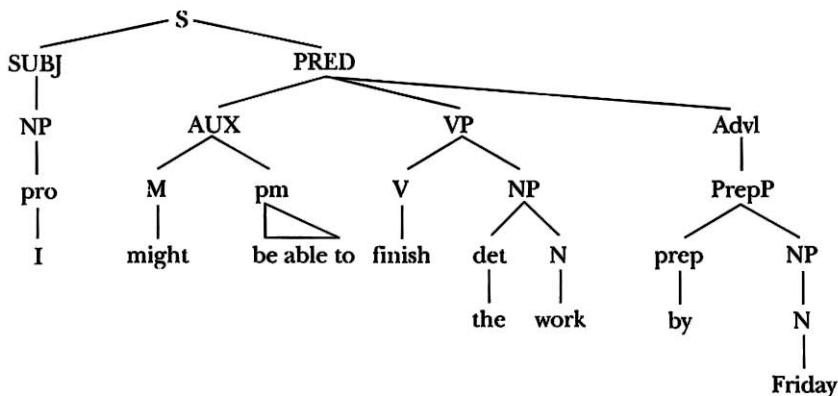
with the result that some learners overgeneralize the pattern with the phrasal modal and produce errors like:

\*I am used to go there

These superficially similar but structurally very different constructions must be properly distinguished for more advanced learners to help them avoid such errors.

To sum up what we have said about the form of modals, and phrasal modals, let us apply the phrase structure rules and mapping rules to one sentence:

I might be able to finish the work by Friday.



The interesting thing about this example is that the mapping is complete without the need for any additional rules. There is no tense morpheme, so we do not copy the person and number



of the subject on the tense. There are no bound inflectional morphemes to map onto the appropriate lexical item. There is no morphology. The output of the phrase structure rules—in this particular case—produces a grammatical surface structure.

## THE MEANINGS OF MODALS

While all of the formal properties above may seem rather complicated, an additional problem in the teaching of modals arises when you attempt to convey to ESL/EFL students the meanings of modals, phrasal modals, and modal-like forms.

Traditional grammar books tend to list or summarize the form and meaning of the modals one by one. Such presentations give a rather fragmented view of modals, since they suggest that they should be learned and taught form by form and meaning by meaning. In our description of the modals (as in our descriptions of tense and aspect) we want to give at least as much consideration to the semantic systems that modals reflect as we do to their individual forms and meanings.

The first thing to notice about the meaning of modals is that they form a semantic opposition with ordinary tensed verb forms. When English speakers use a modal, they interject their own perspective and view a proposition more subjectively than when they simply use present or past tense:

<i>Tense</i>	<i>Modal</i>
John is a teacher.	John may be a teacher.
John was a teacher.	John may have been a teacher.

Modals are used for several reasons: to give a proposition a degree of probability, to express one's attitude, and to perform various social functions, such as expressing politeness or indirectness when making requests, giving advice, or granting permission.

Many linguists and semanticists (Hofmann 1966 and Palmer 1990, among others) have discussed modals as having at least two distinctly different functions: (1) an epistemic meaning expressing logical probability and (2) a deontic function expressing a use related to social interaction. (We will use the terms "logical probability" and "social interaction" here.) Consider the following examples:

- You may leave the room. (*may* expresses granting of permission and thus accomplishes a social interaction)
- It may rain tomorrow. (*may* expresses a degree of logical probability that is weak rather than strong)

When modals are used for social interaction, the person using them must take into account the relevant features of the social situation. For example, in "You may leave the room," the speaker should have sufficient status and authority to be able to grant permission to the interlocutor(s). Furthermore, the situation should be formal rather than informal, or the speaker would have used "can" instead of "may" for granting permission. Knowing all the relevant features of the social situation allows the speaker to select the appropriate modal auxiliary in any given interaction. In contrast, in the sentence "It may rain tomorrow," knowledge of the social situation would have little or no effect on the modal selected. What the speaker is intending to convey is his or her assessment that the probability of rain the following day is relatively low. The speaker would likely use *may* regardless of the interlocutor(s) or the situation.

Like *may*, virtually all the modals can express both logical probability and social interaction. ESL/EFL students should be made aware of this and be given some guidance in

working with the systems operating within both dimensions. In this chapter, we consider the logical probability of modals to be meaning and the social function of modals to be use.

### LOGICAL PROBABILITY MEANINGS OF MODALS

The logical meanings of the modals typically deal with the speaker making an inference or prediction. For example:

**Wilbur:** Someone's knocking at the door.  
**Gertrude:** It may be Sydney.

In fact, we can establish a hierarchy for the logical meanings of modals. What increases is the degree of certainty regarding our inference:

<b>Wilbur:</b>	Someone's knocking.	
<b>Gertrude:</b>	That must be Sydney. <sup>9</sup>	High certainty
	(That will be Sydney.)	↑
	That should be Sydney.	↕
	That may be Sydney.	↓
	That could/might <sup>10</sup> be Sydney.	Low certainty

Only the first two options have informal phrasal equivalents (e.g., *It has to/has got to be Sydney; It's gonna be Sydney*) since, in general, phrasal forms seem to be selected more readily to express social interaction than logical probability. Of the modals in the logical probability hierarchy, *will* and *should* are the most limited in that they do not work well for all situations:

**A:** I have flushed cheeks and a slight fever.  
**B:** You (could/might/may/must/?will/\*should) be coming down with something.

It appears that the speaker requires some special personal knowledge to make a present inference using *will* or *should* as opposed to the other more neutral modals of probability (i.e., *could/might/may/must*).

Present inference can also be stated in negative terms, but this is much less frequent, and the selection and order of forms is somewhat different:

<b>Wilbur:</b>	Someone's knocking at the door. I believe it's Sidney.	
<b>Gertrude:</b>	That might not be Sydney.	Low possibility
	That may not be Sydney.	↑
	That won't/wouldn't be Sydney.	↕
	That can't/couldn't be Sydney.	↓
		Impossibility

*Should* and *must* are absent from the negative inference scale since they are typically used for social functions in the negative—to advise and order others on what not to do:

They shouldn't do that.  
 You mustn't arrive late.

Notice that adjectives and adverbs can often be used to paraphrase the logical uses, but only rarely the social uses, of modals:

must	—necessarily, very certain(ly)	High certainty
will	—fairly certain(ly)	↑
should	—probable, probably, likely	↕
may	—perhaps, maybe, quite possible/ly	↓
could, might	—possible, possibly	Low certainty

The same set of modals can be used for past as well as current inference with the addition of perfect aspect (*have + -en*):

<i>Wilbur:</i>	Someone was asking for you.	
<i>Gertrude:</i>	That must have been Sydney.	High certainty
	That (will/would) have been Sydney.	↑
	That should have been Sydney.	↕
	That may have been Sydney.	↓
	That (could/might) have been Sydney.	Low certainty

Addition of perfect aspect (*have + -en*) follows the discussion of tense and aspect in Chapter 7, where the perfect aspect is a marker of anteriority when used with each tense. It further argues for modals being described as “tenseless” since, like infinitives, modals need perfect aspect to express past inference, whereas the semantically parallel adverbs and adjectives can be used with simple past tense verbs to express the same notions:

It's very certain that was Sydney.  
 It's fairly certain that was Sydney.  
 It's probable/likely that was Sydney.  
 It's quite possible that was Sydney.  
 It's possible that was Sydney.

Again, *should* and *must* do not seem to play a role in expressing negative past inference for the same reasons noted above for negative present inference:

<i>Wilbur:</i>	Someone was asking for you. I believe it was Sydney.	
<i>Gertrude:</i>	That might not have been Sydney.	Low possibility
	That may not have been Sydney.	↑
	That won't/wouldn't have been Sydney.	↕
	That can't/couldn't have been Sydney.	↓
		Impossibility

### Prediction

All of the forms above can be used to express degrees of prediction, with the exception of *must*, perhaps because *must* historically was a past tense verb form and is thus not well suited for prediction, or perhaps because predictions cannot be as strong as current and past inferences:

Question: What did the weatherman say?

Response:	It will rain tomorrow.	Degree of probability
	It should rain tomorrow.	High
	It may rain tomorrow.	↑
	It (could/might) rain tomorrow.	↓
		Low

Of these, only the first sentence has an informal phrasal equivalent: *It's going to rain tomorrow.*

Again, paraphrases with adverbs or adjectives are available (note that the modal auxiliary in the propositional *that* clause is *will* in all four cases):

It is certain that it will rain tomorrow.  
 It is probable/likely that it will rain tomorrow.  
 It is quite possible that it will rain tomorrow.  
 It is possible that it will rain tomorrow.

In the above *that* clauses, *will* seems to be a future tense as much as a logical modal. Also, the use of an adverb with a modal can reinforce or weaken the meaning of the modal; for example, *It probably/possibly will rain*. On the negative predication scale, the forms occur in reverse order, but *could* drops out. Apparently, *couldn't* is more strongly associated with past time frames or present negative inference rather than negative prediction, which has a future time frame:

A: The weatherman said it will rain tomorrow. Do you agree?	
B: (No), it might not rain tomorrow	Low possibility
it may not rain tomorrow	↑
it shouldn't rain tomorrow	↕
it won't rain tomorrow	↓
it can't rain tomorrow	Impossibility
because this new weather pattern is moving in.	

### Necessity

Another reason why *must* is not used for prediction may be that, along with phrasal *have to*, it is often used to express necessity, which—according to Palmer (1990)—can be internal or external in origin:

Internal: I have to see my doctor about this rash.

External: You must fill out the top of this form.

General necessity (the equivalent of a condition) is also often expressed with *must*:

Fully qualified applicants must have a bachelor's degree.

## MODALS AND NEGATION

Modals and phrasal forms interact with *not* in interesting ways. Usually the negation of a modal and the negative of the corresponding phrasal modal have parallel semantic effects:

I cannot do it. / I'm not able to do it.

He will not do it. / He's not going to do it.

You should not lie. / You're not supposed to lie.

However, the following are clearly distinct:

You must not go. / You don't have to go.<sup>11</sup>

In the two immediately preceding examples, the modal expresses prohibition, while the phrasal form offers the addressee a choice (i.e., you can go, but it's not necessary).

## THE USE OF MODALS AND PHRASAL FORMS

### SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF MODALS

#### Making Requests

One major system in the social use of modals entails making requests. These can be requests of a general nature,

Will/Would } you help me with this math problem?  
Can/Could }

or specific requests for permission:

May/Might } I leave the room now?  
Can/Could }

Although both historical present and past forms of these modals can be used in making requests, only the historical present tense forms are likely to be used in responses to requests:

- To general requests:           Yes, I can/\*could; No, I can't/\*couldn't.  
   Yes, I will/\*would; No, I won't/\*wouldn't.
- To requests for permission:   Yes, you may/\*might; No, you may not/\*might not.  
   Yes, you can/\*could; No, you can't/\*couldn't.

The reasons for this distinction is that the historical past forms of modals are considered more polite and less presumptuous than the historical present forms, and thus the person making the request will often use the historical past tense forms to “soften” the request; however, the person being addressed is expected to respond directly and thus uses the less deferential historical present forms. Also, the person responding to a request usually does not want to make the response sound conditional, which is a possible result if the historical past form of the modal is used:

- A: (Can/Could) you help me with this math problem?  
 B: Yes, I could (if you would wait a few minutes while I finish this work).

Many ESL/EFL students, even at an advanced level, do not recognize that they are often perceived by native speakers of English as being abrupt and aggressive with their requests, given the social circumstances. If they learned to soften requests by employing the historical past tense forms of the modals, they might find their requests being better received. For example,

- Could (instead of Can) I talk to you for a minute?  
 Would (instead of Will) you open the door?

There seems to be a subtle difference between *can/could* versus *will/would* in making requests such as those above in that the former seems to ask “is this possible?” whereas the latter seems to query the willingness of the addressee. Further data-based research, however, is needed to show us precisely in what contexts each form is preferred and why.

**Requests for Permission.** When asking for permission, the selection of *may* or *can* is socially significant:

- Can/May I talk to you for a minute?

The greater the addressee’s degree of formal authority (as perceived by the speaker or projected by the addressee), the more likely the use of *may*. In North America there are many situations where there is a lack of clearly defined authority, and *can* tends to be much more widely used than *may* and is often perceived as more polite than *may*: *You (can/may) go now* (Bailey, 1997).

Note that while modals can be used in making requests, phrasal modals are generally used not to make requests but to ask literal questions:

- Will/would you open the door? (possible request)  
 Are you going to open the door? (literal question)

There is, however, a modal-like phrase which can be used to make a polite request:

- Would you mind turning down the volume on that radio?

The interesting thing here is that *do* serves as an informal, more direct, and less polite substitute for *would* in this phrase, whereas *will* is ungrammatical:

- Do you mind turning down the volume on that radio?  
 \*Will you mind turning down the volume on that radio?



As Ney (1978) points out, all request modals show differences in meaning when the negative *not* is contracted to the modal as opposed to when it is uncontracted and precedes the main verb.

- Won't you please get into the pool? (Please do get in.)  
 Will you please not get into the pool? (Please do not get in.)  
 Couldn't I please go to the party? (I want to go; please let me.)  
 Could I please not go to the party? (I don't want to; please don't force me.)

When the negative is contracted with the modal, it serves to amplify or strengthen the request that something should be done; however, if the negative is uncontracted and precedes the verb, the request has the opposite meaning: that something not be done.

### Giving Advice

The other major system in the social interactional use of modals involves the giving of advice. Notice that the systematicity lies in the fact that we can order the modals according to the speaker's degree of authority or the urgency of the advice. For example:

- You must see a doctor.  
 You (should/ought to) see a doctor.  
 You (might/could) see a doctor.
- ↑  
 (Speaker's authority or urgency of  
 the message increases, not  
 necessarily in equal increments.)

The top two options on the above continuum have informal, rough phrasal equivalents (differences in meaning and use are discussed later):

- You (have to/have got to/need to) see a doctor.  
 You (had) better/best see a doctor.  
 You (might/could) see a doctor. (no equivalent)
- ↑

In some situations an offer or invitation initially refused can be recast as urgent advice to make it more emphatic:

You must have another piece of pie!

Advice can, of course, be negative as well as positive. Less formal and weaker expressions of negative advice often involve *should* or its phrasal counterparts with *not*, although other forms are possible:

- You (had) better/best not say things like that.  
 You ought not (to) say things like that. (rare)  
 You shouldn't say things like that.  
 You're not supposed to say things like that.  
 You don't { have } to say things like that.  
 { need }
- Stronger negative advice  
 ↑  
 Weaker negative advice

From our experience, introducing modals in this relative fashion to ESL/EFL students is far more enlightening than simply introducing each form individually and ascribing a number of distinctive meanings and functions to it.

### OTHER MEANINGS AND USES OF MODALS AND MODAL-LIKE FORMS

Here are some other meanings and uses expressed by modals and modal-like forms that do not fit into the logical meanings and social uses described above:

Potential realization—*can, be able to*:

1. “ability” for animate subjects:

I can speak Indonesian.

Superman is able to leap tall buildings with a single bound.

2. “potentiality” for inanimate subjects:

This business can be reorganized.

The car is able to go faster with this fuel.

Desire—*would like (to)* (normally takes a statement form):

Sarah would like to travel around the world.

Ralph would like an apple.

Offer/invitation—*would you like (to)* (normally takes a question form):

Would you like something to drink?

Would you like to dance?

Preference—*would rather (X than Y), would prefer to*:

Brad would rather study languages than mathematics.

Joe would prefer to go to school instead of working.

One could argue that *would like (to)* and *would prefer (to)* are simply sequences describable as: modal + verb + infinitive. For pedagogical purposes, however, we advise teaching these as frozen modal-like lexical chunks to emphasize the unchanging nature of *would* in these expressions to avoid ESL/EFL errors such as:

\*I will prefer to stay here.

\*Will you like some cake?

### CONTEXTS OF MEANING AND USE FOR SOME MODALS AND PHRASAL FORMS

Different degrees of formality tend to hold between use of a modal or a corresponding phrasal form, the latter being more informal, especially when phonologically reduced. Often other word choices in the sentence also reflect this difference in degree of formality:

The United States must conserve its resources. / It has to (hasta) / have got to (gotta) conserve our resources.

The exam will be 50 percent of your grade. / It's going to (gonna) be half your grade.

You should tell your parents about this. / You ought to (oughta) tell your folks.

#### Can Versus Be Able To

The principal exception to the above tendency is *can/be able to*. Here the phrasal form is much less frequent and seems more formal than the modal:

Can you do it?

Are you able to do it?

One reason for the informality of the modal may be the fact that *can* is often the modal first acquired by both native and nonnative speakers of English. It is very necessary for informal conversational English. Additionally, a data-based study (Polio 1988) indicates that in most instances where *be able to* is used, structural constraints prohibit the use of *can*:

—after other modals:

Will you be able to join us?

—after perfect forms (i.e., *be able to* is more like a regular verb in such cases):

I've been able to knit for a long time.

—in gerunds, participles, and infinitives:

Being able to swim is a requirement for this job.

I'd like to be able to swim.

Along with the greater formality of *be able to*, these constraints help explain why *can* is more frequent in the spoken language and is more informal. Zemach (1994) in another data-based study points out that *can* and *be able to* seem equivalent only in those cases where the meaning of “ability”—or “lack of ability” in the negative—is being expressed. This also holds for *could* and past forms of *be able to*:

I left my books at school, so I (couldn't/wasn't able to) do my homework.

Other uses of *can* or *could* that signal potentiality, permission, choice, and so on, cannot be paraphrased with *be able to*, which occurs quite rarely in comparison with *can*. In fact, Zemach's data show that the best environments for use of *be able to* are those that convey special effort or frustration on the part of the grammatical subject (= the agent):

After waiting for an hour, I \_\_\_\_\_ see the doctor.

- a. was finally able to (strongly preferred)
- b. could finally
- c. both (a) and (b)

Going back to Zemach's earlier example about “books” and “homework,” we can now see that the reading with *couldn't* sounds more neutral or matter-of-fact, whereas the reading with *wasn't able to* expresses more concern and frustration about the speaker's inability to complete the work. There is also an asymmetry in the present and immediate past time uses of *can/could* versus *is able to/was able to*, which may result in learner errors:

Today I { *can* / *am able to* } go to Disney World. (= The possibility exists. I may or may not actually go.)

Yesterday I was able to go to Disney World. (= Strongly implies I did go.)

?Yesterday I could go to Disney World. (= unclear—did I go or not?)

Learners often say or write the last sentence with “could” when what they want to say requires “was able to.” If they truly want to say only that the possibility existed, then a very careful paraphrase—or the addition of perfect aspect—is needed instead of the version with *could*:

Yesterday, the possibility existed for me to go to Disney World.

Yesterday, I could have gone to Disney World. (= implies I did not go.)

Note that for expressing remote past ability—in contrast to immediate past—both forms are acceptable:

I { *was able to* / *could* } speak German fluently when I was a child.

Interestingly, when negated, both forms seem acceptable for expressing immediate past-time uses:

Yesterday I wasn't able to go to Disney World. }  
 Yesterday I couldn't go to Disney World. } = I did not go. The possibility  
 did not exist.

### Shall

One modal we have not discussed in any detail is *shall*. Since it is used infrequently in North American English, we prefer to teach this form to most of our students for reception rather than production. For advanced students, we point out that when *shall* does occur, it is usually found in requests for a decision or for advice from the addressee, in tags with *let's*, or in statements establishing new topics:

Shall I call her? (*should* can also be used here)

Let's go, shall we?

Next we shall discuss the difference between *X* and *Y*.

*Shall* does occur in some frozen formulas where it signifies an invitation or a suggestion. In such cases, *should* cannot be substituted for *shall* without a change of meaning:

Shall we dance? (= would you like to dance? i.e., an invitation)

Should we dance? (= is it advisable? i.e., a question)

In formal commands—both affirmative and negative—one occasionally encounters *shall*:

You shall report promptly at 0500 hours.

You shall not wear sandals in the mess hall.

Certainly the old prescriptive rule—i.e., use *shall* to express future time with *I* and *we*; use *will* elsewhere—no longer holds true for North American English.

### Will Versus Be Going To

Often the choice between semantically similar modals or between modals and phrasal forms will be a matter of usage preference rather than meaning per se. For example, for deciding whether to use *will* or *be going to*, some general guidelines come from work by Stafford (1975), McCarthy and Carter (1995) and others.

First of all, *be going to* is more informal and interpersonal than *will*, which is more formal and neutral as an expression of future time. Thus, one of two friends at a restaurant says to the other friend, "I'm gonna have the mushrooms." However, several minutes later the same speaker says to the waiter, "I'll have the mushrooms." Likewise, an army officer would say to a superior officer, "The war will be over soon" rather than "The war's gonna be over soon" to maintain a proper level of formality.

Secondly, *be going to* is closely tied to action already begun in the present or immediately imminent, given evidence available in the present but over which the speaker has no control (or has lost control). Thus English speakers say things like:

"Help! I'm going to fall."

"Look, it's gonna rain soon."

The equivalents with *will* would sound strange in such statements. The form *will* occurs in conditions and other statements where future outcome is contingent on some other result, is more distant, or involves speaker control:

"If you put your pawn there, he'll win the game."

"Go to the cafe at 9 P.M., and I'll meet you there."

In the immediately preceding example, *will* ('ll) conveys a sense of promise or commitment in the statement, but use of *be going to* would convey a plan or intention instead.

**Should, Ought To, and Be Supposed To**

Sometimes more than two choices are possible. When *should*, *ought to*, and *be supposed to* are compared, one can argue that some sort of expectation or standard—moral or otherwise—is being invoked. Using examples from written discourse, Bouscaren et al. (1992) argue that with *should* the moral judgment stems from the speaker's/writer's own personal criteria, whereas with *ought to* the judgment is based on external rules (social conventions, institutions):

"I felt that I ought to be showing these people where to find food. But should I? If I were to lead them . . ."

—J. Wyndham, *The Day of the Triffids* (context: humanity has become blind except for the narrator who is a witness to the disaster).<sup>12</sup>

Gaskill (1978), citing transcribed oral data, argues that the difference between *should* and *be supposed to* is that *should* invokes internal authority or a higher authority, whereas *be supposed to* invokes a very special type of impersonal external authority, an appeal to some predetermined schedule, plan, or perspective:

A: Physics is, they say, formula plugging—whenever you say that it's formula plugging the teachers always get mad at you and say you're not supposed to look at it like that.

B: Well, if you'll notice, most teachers say you should, uh, take an interest in your subject—you should apply it to life. And you try to, but somehow it doesn't work in most cases. (Carterette and Jones 1974, p. 406, punctuation added)

It seems both Bouscaren et al. and Gaskill argue that *should* expresses someone's internal moral judgment or a higher moral authority; the difference between the external force of *ought to* and *be supposed to* is that *ought to* is a marker of some general external moral or social standard, whereas use of *be supposed to* refers to explicit, externally agreed-upon standards, schedules, or expectations that may be restricted to a certain group (e.g., members of Al Capone's gang were *supposed to* kill people).

**Must, Have To, and Have Got To**

Melrose (1983) found in her study of *must*, *have to*, and *have got to* in spoken American English that most native speakers of American English reserve the use of *must* for expressing inference (present and past):

You must have the wrong number!  
John must have been joking when he said that.

The form *have to* is used in speech to express both external and internal social necessity:

You have to wait here till the doctor gets back.  
Excuse me. I have to go to the powder room.

What Melrose found that was extremely interesting was that the form *have got to*, rather than having its own discrete meaning(s) in opposition to *must* and *have to*, was used to express affect on the part of the speaker. The speaker would use (*have*) *got to*, often reduced to *gotta*, to express either inference or social necessity with a special degree of urgency (real or feigned):

You gotta be kidding me!<sup>13</sup>  
You've gotta lend me \$10. I'm broke!

Thus we have a new use for certain modal forms—the expression of affect or special attitudes or overtones. This use seems to account for the difference between *should* and



(*had*) *better/best*; the latter conveys special affect by sometimes suggesting the possibility of unpleasant consequences, whereas *should* is much more neutral:

You should return that book to the library.

You had  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{better} \\ \text{best} \end{array} \right\}$  return that book to the library.

The use of *had better/best*, however, does not always imply negative consequences; this is especially true if the utterance is self-directed: *I'd better do the dusting before the vacuuming.*

### Use of Can Versus No Modal

Sometimes the use of a modal conveys special affect in contrast to the absence of a modal. Park (1993) argues for such an analysis in a study of *can* with verbs of perception and cognition:<sup>14</sup>

I can see your point.

I see your point.

By doing a qualitative study of many contextualized examples drawn from transcribed conversation, Park found that the use of *can* (or *can't*) was preferred in contexts that were more interactional, affective, and empathy building:

"Yeah, I can understand where she's coming from."

The use of the present tense, on the other hand, is preferred in contexts that are factual, direct, and sometimes abrupt or even argumentative:

"I understand your point. Anything else?"

Sometimes the negative form of *can* with these types of verbs expresses surprise at a fact rather than conveying any literal negation of ability or possibility:

"It's your birthday? I can't believe it!"

The use of *I don't believe it*, which can also express surprise, is preferred in contexts that are more factually-oriented, where the speaker is being direct; it would be used rather than *can't* in those cases where the speaker does not accept the statement as true.

### Used To Versus Be Used To and Get Used To

Sometimes modal-like forms are easily confused with other forms. Students may confuse *used to* (the phrasal equivalent of *would* in its past habitual meaning)<sup>15</sup> with *be used to* and *get used to*. While *used to* suggests a factual report of past habit, *be/get used to* expresses a more affective stance, expressing familiarity and possibly some positive attitude. In *be/get used to* the word *used* = "accustomed." Compare the following sentences:

I used to eat hot food when I was in Thailand. (factual report of past habit)

I got used to eating hot food when I was in Thailand. (change of habit or circumstance in past)

I am used to eating hot food. (current circumstance or habit)

Note that while *used to* expresses only past habit, *be used to* and *get used to* can refer to any time frame by changing the tense of *be* or *get*. Note also that *used to* is followed by bare infinitives, while *be used to* and *get used to* are followed by gerunds.<sup>16</sup>

## CONCLUSION

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This concludes our overview of the modal auxiliaries in English. We freely admit that it is far from complete. For example, we have not fully discussed archaic or shifting modals such as *dare* and *need*. We have not discussed the hypothetical use of the modals *would*, *should*, *could*, and *might*, since this is discussed later in Chapter 27, which deals with conditional sentences. We wish to emphasize again that very few languages have modal auxiliaries in the extreme form that English does—that is, as a separate verbal class that has very different syntactic properties from those of normal verbs.

We have also not discussed in any detail the dialect differences that modals display. For example, *must* is used much more frequently for social uses in British English than in North American English:

You must come over for dinner soon.  
We must correct that problem as soon as possible.

In North American English, *have to* is generally used in such environments, while *must* is reserved for logical inference in the spoken language:

This must be the correct answer.  
He must have heard the news.

Sometimes phrasal modals also exhibit dialect differences. For example, the Southern U.S. form *be fixing to* indicates a much more immediate future than *be going to*:

(speaker with pen and paper in hand): I'm fixing to write a letter.

Although we have a fairly good understanding of the form and meaning of modals and their phrasal forms, we are very far from understanding all there is to know about their uses. English speakers use modals in extremely subtle ways to try to advise or control others, to express affect (positive and negative), to mark attitude or stance, to show authority, and for other purposes. We now need further research on the interactional uses of modals in a variety of different social and institutional settings to make progress in this area.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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**I. Form.** To accustom students to the fact that modal auxiliary verbs are followed directly by the lexical verb without *to*, an adaptation of a technique suggested by Ur (1988) can be used. The teacher can describe an object, animal, or person with sentences using modals, and the students have to guess what it is. This allows them to hear the correct form repeatedly. Writing some of the sentences on the board and drawing students' attention to the form can provide additional reinforcement.

An example in Ur (1988:172), focusing on *can* and *can't*, is the following (where the subject to be guessed is "koala bear"):

It can climb trees.  
It can carry its baby.  
You can't buy one in a shop.

Sentences using other modal verbs could also be used. After this pattern has been established, the technique could be carried out in the way Ur suggests, in which only one student is not told what the chosen subject is, and all the other students participate in giving clues, using modal verbs to do so.

Students could also write their own descriptions, following the same pattern, and the teacher or other students could guess the subjects.

**2. Form/Meaning.** The communication activity “Find someone who . . .” can be used for practice in the production of modal verbs in questions (Een & Badalamenti, 1993). Each sentence should use a modal verb. For example:

- Find someone who can play tennis.
- Find someone who might go to Europe one day.
- Find someone who thinks they should do more exercise.

Each student has a worksheet with a list like the above and moves around the classroom asking questions of their classmates and writing down the name of the person who fits the description in each sentence. To add more interest, this can also be done using a grid, with a sentence in each square. The game is then played like bingo—the first student to get a straight line of squares with a different name in each is the winner.

**3. Meaning.** Teach the modal verbs in systems so that the relationship between them is clear.

- a. One of the uses of the logical probability modals is to predict something such as the chance of rain tomorrow. Show your students what degree of prediction is expressed by each modal (or combination of modal and adverbs[s]):

(possibly)	weak, outside chance	It could/might rain tomorrow.
(perhaps)	stronger chance	It may rain tomorrow.
(probably)	even stronger chance	It may very well rain tomorrow.
(very likely)	very strong chance	It will very likely rain tomorrow.
(certainly)	certainty	It will rain tomorrow.

For oral practice, have students express (using a modal) situations such as the following with the degree of prediction suggested by the context:

- 1) There's a 30 percent chance of rain tomorrow.
- 2) There's an 80 percent chance of rain later today.
- 3) The probability of good weather this coming weekend
- 4) The probability of man landing on Mars within the next 20 years

For written practice, have students read a paragraph or essay using modals predictively. Get them to describe in their own words the degree of each prediction. Have them write their own essay on a parallel topic.

- b. The other main use of the logical modals is to make inferences (guesses) about current or past states/situations. Give your students a modal paradigm for the present or the past, Example (for the present):

Someone's knocking at the door.	
weak inference:	That could/might be Mary.
stronger inference:	That may be Mary.
strong inference:	That should be Mary.
very strong inference:	That must be Mary.

For oral practice, have students react (using a modal) to situations such as the following:

- 1) Student X is not in class today.
- 2) Student Y is falling asleep/is thinking of something else.
- 3) The local football star has not been playing as well as usual.



In academic writing, this use of modals shows the degree of certainty about a statement. Cooper (1979:42) sets this in the context of discussion of cause and effect, using the topic of erosion as one example:

The erosion may have been caused by the wind.

The erosion must have been caused by the wind.

Study of texts that use modals in this way can be followed by writing tasks that require similar patterns. Contexts in which there is some kind of mystery to explain (even a picture to speculate about) are also valuable for eliciting the use of modals to express degrees of certainty (see Riggenbach and Samuda (1997:70–75) for examples).

**4. Meaning.** Modals are frequent in a discussion or written description of job openings that need to be filled. Ur (1988:175) and Thewlis (1997:75–76) each suggest exploiting this situation by asking students to describe a suitable candidate for a particular job, possibly after examining some advertisements from the newspaper. Students could also write their own want ads or job descriptions. For example, Thewlis (1997:80–82) provides three job advertisements and asks the students to identify

- 1) the things that an applicant must be able to do
- 2) the things he or she should be able to do (although they may not be absolutely required)
- 3) some things that are neither required nor recommended but are still characteristics that “the perfect candidate” might have
- 4) what an interested candidate has to do in order to apply for the position

He then asks students to discuss why any of the jobs would or would not interest them.

**5. Meaning/Use.** Appropriate social uses of modals can be practiced with brief role-plays in which students are given hypothetical situations to respond to. They would have to decide whether (a) the situation is formal or informal and (b) which degree of strength is called for. Ask, for example, “What would you say if . . . ?”

- 1) you are a teacher who wants to let a certain student know that it is essential to come to class on time
- 2) you want to tell a close friend who needs money for an emergency that one possibility is for him to sell his car
- 3) a fellow professor is not being paid the proper salary, and you think it would help if he saw the dean

**6. Use.** To practice the use of modals for politeness, Ur (1988:178) suggests presenting a brief dialogue that is abrupt and direct, for example:

A: Hey, you! Open this door!

B: It's locked. Want me to get the key?

A: Yeah. Get it. Fast.

Discuss how it could be made more polite using modals. For example:

A: Excuse me, would you open this door?

B: I'm afraid it's locked. Shall I get the key?

A: Please, if you wouldn't mind, as quickly as you can.

Students can then be asked in groups to compose two parallel dialogues such as the above for different situations (such as getting someone to lend you some money or asking someone to go out with you) and to perform them for the rest of the class.

**7. Use.** For the use of modals in offers, Paula Hidalgo (personal communication) suggests a card game that uses a set of cards containing pairs of problematic situations and suitable solutions that could be offered; for example, a picture of a thirsty person would be matched with one of a glass of water.

Students play in groups of three or four, and each student receives a number of cards, the remainder to be left in a stack. One player calls out a problematic situation for which he or she holds the card (e.g., "I'm thirsty!"), and another player who has the card for a suitable solution is required to make a polite offer (e.g., "Would you like a glass of water?"). The pair of matching cards is then discarded. If the offer is not made politely, play passes to another player to call a situation. If no student has the card for the solution, each of the players (except the one with the problem) picks up a card from the stack until someone gets the solution card. If a player holds both the problem and the solution cards, they immediately discard them.

The winner is the first one to get rid of all their cards. While luck is involved, the students' correct production of polite offers also affects their chances of winning, and this motivates the students to monitor one another's performance. If the offer is not politely made, it is in their interest to point this out so that they have a better chance of winning.

**8. Use.** To teach the different usages of *will* and *be going to*, give your students situations such as the following, which were taken from a paper by Stafford (1975), and ask them to choose (1) or (2). Discuss their choices with them, and they should begin to become sensitive to the differences.

- a. You are on a tour of Disneyland with your friends. As you step off one of the rides, you suddenly lose your balance and shout:

(1) "Help! I will fall!"      (2) "Help! I'm going to (gonna) fall!"

*Difference:* *Be going to* is the preferred form, since it is used with actions or events beyond the control of the subject that are just about to happen.

- b. An army officer is talking to a superior officer. He says,

"Well, sir, if our strategies continue to be successful, the war  
(1) is going to soon be over."      (2) will soon be over."

*Difference:* *Will* is the preferred form when a more formal register is called for.

- c. A shy 17-year-old boy calls up a girl he's been admiring all year. He says,

(1) "Will you meet me at the show this Friday?"  
(2) "Are you going to meet me at the show this Friday?"

*Difference:* *Will* is used for requests/invitations; *be going to* is inappropriate in such contexts.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts. Underline the relevant word(s) in your examples.
  - a. phrasal modal
  - b. social use of a modal





- c. logical probability meaning of a modal
  - d. a combination of more than one modal or phrasal modal
  - e. polite form of a request
  - f. literal question with a phrasal modal
2. Explain the ambiguity of the following sentence:
- His mother says he may go.
3. Explain the semantic difference between the two sentences in each of the following pairs:
- |  |  |
|--|--|
| a. It must be nighttime.                             | It must have been nighttime.                       |
| b. Will you help me with this problem?               | Would you help me with this problem?               |
| c. I was able to go to the library last night.       | I could have gone to the library last night.       |
| d. The ground is wet. It may have rained last night. | The ground is wet. It must have rained last night. |
| e. You should do your homework.                      | You had better do your homework.                   |
4. The meaning of the affirmative sentences in the following pairs is similar. Explain the semantic difference between the negative sentences:
- a. That might be important. → That might not be important.
  - b. That could be important. → That couldn't be important.

#### Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. Students of yours have made the following errors. In each case explain the nature of the error and state what activities you would provide to correct it.
- |   |  |
|---|--|
| a. *You will can go there.                          | e. *I must to speak English.                                   |
| b. *May you cash this check, please?                | f. *This action will good for workers.                         |
| c. *We should study a lot for that class last term. | g. ?Excuse me, Mr. Smith, you gotta give us our homework back. |
| d. *They could be easily to reach the goal.         | h. Would you please close the window?<br>*Of course I would.   |
6. What is the difference in meaning in each of the following pairs of sentences? There may be differences in the presuppositions of the speaker.
- a. Could you tell me how to get to the bus stop?
  - b. Would you tell me how to get to the bus stop?
  - c. Sam should introduce the guest speaker.
  - d. Sam is supposed to introduce the guest speaker.
  - e. The principal said Joe may go.
  - f. The principal said Joe may have gone.
7. Consider the verb forms *need* and *dare*:
- |                           |                           |
|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| a. I need to see him.     | d. Need I bring anything? |
| b. You needn't worry.     | e. I dare you to do that. |
| c. Do we dare think that? |                           |

Are they modals, phrasal modals, regular lexical verbs, or a mixture of these forms?

8. Sometimes, when referring to ability in the past, one can use the phrasal modal but not the true modal:

I was able to pick up the tickets last night. \*I could pick up the tickets last night.

At other times, both the phrasal modal and the true modal are acceptable:

I could read at an early age. I was able to read at an early age.

Furthermore, even the ungrammatical sentence above is acceptable when it is negated:

I couldn't pick up the tickets last night.

Can you think of a generalization that would account for these restrictions on the use of *could*?

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*For useful traditional descriptions of English modal auxiliaries, see:*

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*For a useful discussion of differences between will and going to, see:*

Martin, M. (1978). "Future Shock: A Pedagogical Analysis of *Will* and *Going To*," in J. Schachter and C. H. Blatchford (eds.), *ON TESOL '78*. Washington, D.C.: TESOL.

*For interesting accounts of English modals and for perspectives on the root (social)/epistemic (logical) distinction that differ somewhat from the one presented here, see:*

Cook, W. A. (1978). "Semantic Structure of the English Modals," *TESOL Quarterly* 12:1, 5–15.

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*For good suggestions on the teaching of modal auxiliaries, consult:*

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### ENDNOTES

I. Note that *must*, originally the past tense of Anglo-Saxon *motan*, has no historically related present form. What happened in modern English is that *must* became largely "present" in terms of its meaning potential; as a result, explicit marking of past necessity is

often expressed with the phrasal *had to*, past tense of *have to*. *Had to* was the first phrasal modal to develop in English, and it arose at a time when *must* and *should* had lost their connection to past time and no longer took direct objects.

2. *Should* can be viewed as the past tense of *shall* only if the speaker is asking for advice. When *shall* is used to express the future, *would* functions as a past-time equivalent in North American English:

Joe: I shall see you later.

Joe said that he would (\*should) see us later.

3. See Endnote 1 above for an explanation for the *must/had to* alternation seen here.

4. The form *ought to* is intermediate between a true modal (it doesn't inflect) and a phrasal form (it takes *to*); one can classify it either way. Historically, *ought* is a past form of *owe*; in current usage *ought* may lose its *to* in negative sentences and look more like a true modal, but this does not work for all speakers of North American English:

You oughtn't (*to*) do that. We ought not (*to*) stay longer.

5. Although we indicate that *be to*, which is rare in any case, is a phrasal equivalent of *should*, as in *What am I to do?*, *be to* can also be a phrasal equivalent of *will* (*I am to* leave tomorrow) and *must* (*You are to* report here at 6 A.M.).

6. There is some dialectal variation here in that native speakers represent questions and negatives with *used to* differently. Some write the prescriptively favored "Did you use to?" "You didn't use to" while others write "Did you used to?" "You didn't used to." For the second group, *used to* is on its way to becoming more of an intermediate frozen form like *ought to*, whereas the first group still views *used to* as a normally inflected past-tense form. The second group is probably indicating a future change.

7. There are Southern dialects of North American English where certain modal-plus-modal sequences are possible:

We might could do that.

See Walker (1993) for further discussion.

8. Three also seems to be the limit on multiple modal sequences in those Southern dialects that allow them: *might should ought to* (Steve Nagle, personal communication).

9. Following Halliday (1985), these scales and those that follow present *must* as stronger than *will* or *be going to*. Not everyone will agree with this. In fact, *will* is used only rarely in North American English as an epistemic modal. Such usage sounds British to American ears.

10. An anonymous reviewer has indicated to us that for him/her *might* is the equivalent of *may* rather than *could*. We recognize that such differences are dialectally and idiolectally possible, especially with more rarely used modals such as *might*.

11. Another possible, though less frequent, equivalent for *You don't have to go* is *You needn't go*. *Need* is unusual in that it can function as a modal in negatives and occasionally in questions (*Need I say more?*), but it very rarely if ever functions as a modal in affirmative statements in North American English; instead it functions like an ordinary verb or a phrasal modal (*We need to go*). Another form that is sometimes like a modal in questions and negatives and more often like a regular verb in affirmatives is *dare*: *Dare we ask? We don't dare ask! He dared to be brave.*

12. Cited in Bouscaren et al. (1992: 68).

- 13.** The omission of *have* in *have got to* and of *had* in *had better/best* makes the speaker sound more informal and colloquial.
- 14.** Many grammarians claim there is no difference between use of *can* and simple present tense with such verbs.
- 15.** The patterns of usage for *used to* and *would* to express past habit are described in Chapter 9.
- 16.** This indicates that different structures are involved: *I used to eat*: PM + V; *I was/got used to eating*: BE/GET + adj + prep + gerund.



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# THE TENSE-ASPECT- MODALITY SYSTEM IN DISCOURSE

## INTRODUCTION

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A limitation of sentence-based accounts of English tense, aspect, and modality—even if well contextualized—is that such accounts fail to capture the fact that certain tenses, aspect, and modality combinations tend to occur together in discourse whereas others do not. To help us understand the uses of the tense-aspect-modality system in English discourse, the early work of Bull (1960) is an insightful starting point. After presenting Bull's framework, we also briefly discuss a proposal by Chafe (1972) concerning tense sequences in discourse. The bulk of this chapter, however, reports on a number of more recent data-based studies that are beginning to help us better understand the functions of the tense-aspect-modality (TAM) system in English discourse, both spoken and written. The various approaches we discuss with respect to analyzing TAM in discourse do not necessarily fit together in a unified way; they all, however, offer useful perspectives.

This chapter thus complements the previous two in that it builds on what we have learned about tense and aspect at the sentence level in Chapter 7 and about modal auxiliaries and phrasal modals at the sentence level in Chapter 8 in order to examine the special uses that many of the forms discussed earlier can have at the discourse level. Such an examination of TAM is important because “tense-aspect-modality is one of the major devices coding the connectedness/coherence of sentences in their wider discourse context” (Givón, 1984:269). This whole chapter is thus dedicated to describing the use of TAM in discourse.

First, let us examine some data. Consider the two following narratives:

- A. I have a splitting headache that I've had for two hours. I'm going to take some aspirin.<sup>1</sup>  
B. ?I have a splitting headache that I had for two hours; I will take some aspirin.

In the first example, we find the *present* tense in the first clause, the *present* perfect in the second clause, and *be going to* with a *present* tense *be* in the final clause; that is, the tenses have an orientation to the present throughout the sequence. Unmotivated changes in the tense sequence are not felicitous and, if made, may produce a less coherent piece of discourse. This is what occurs in B above, where the unmotivated tense-switching from present to past to future results in the relative incoherence of the second narrative (i.e., the simple past *had* is used where the present perfect *have had* is preferred).

Similar observations can be made about samples of discourse concerning events reported in past time. Consider the following:

- C. The little girl cried her heart out. She had lost her teddy bear and was convinced she wasn't ever going to find him. (possible substitution: "would never" for "wasn't ever going to")

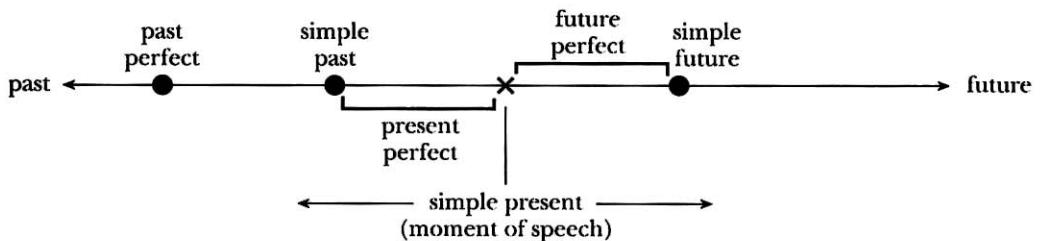
The first clause is simple past, the second clause is the past perfect, and the third is the *be going to* future but with a past tense *be*; that is, a past orientation is maintained throughout the episode. Again, if we make unmotivated changes in the tenses used in the narrative as in D below, these changes may well have negative consequences for the flow of the discourse:

- D. ?The little girl cries her heart out. She lost her teddy bear and is convinced she won't ever find him.

The version in D of the past narrative is comprehensible and not obviously incoherent, but it comes out sounding somewhat disjointed and awkward when compared with the original in C because one does not normally jump from present tense to past tense to future tense in a short piece of discourse. Yet this is precisely what many nonnative speakers of English do when they speak and write in English. One reason for this may be that they have learned the English tense system bit by bit at the sentence level without ever learning how the bits interact in longer pieces of discourse. This chapter directly addresses this teaching/learning problem.

## THE BULL FRAMEWORK

In 1960, William Bull first proposed a framework to describe tense in Spanish; however, he intended that the system be very general and applicable to any language. In this chapter, we apply Bull's framework to English. His framework posits four axes of orientation, or points of view, with respect to time: future, present, past, and hypothetical. We do not deal with Bull's hypothetical axis here but save it for Chapter 27 on conditionals. Bull's framework is quite radical in presenting three distinct time axes (four if we count the hypothetical line); most other accounts of English tense and aspect assume one timeline and try to illustrate all tense-aspect forms in terms of this single line:



Bull forces us to make a conceptual shift and to think in terms of viewing the tense-aspect system as a resource for taking different temporal perspectives on actions, events, and states of affairs. For example, if asked the question:

Would you like something to eat?

one can answer either (a) or (b):

- (a) No thanks. I've already eaten.  
 (b) No thanks. I already ate.

The time of the speaker's meal does not necessarily differ in (a) and (b). Both responses report past events, but the choice allows the speaker to add his/her perspective on the current relevance of the response; this perspective is what conditions the choice rather than any real linear sense of time: (a) is not necessarily more recent within real time than (b).

What (a) signals is the current relevance that the response is believed to have, whereas (b) does not signal any assumption of current relevance. In fact, (b) puts the speaker's last meal squarely in the past rather than the present. Another example that suggests Bull is correct to take us away from a linear perspective on tense and aspect to a three- or four-tiered system is to consider the future perfect, which asks the listener to step into the future and look back. It is quite possible, as the following example shows, for an event/action described with a future perfect (1) to have occurred before one described with the simple past (2):

1. He will have finished all that work months ago. [You don't know John the way I do]
2. I saw John at the market yesterday.

Each axis in Bull's framework has a neutral or basic time slot in the middle and two possible marked slots—one on the left signaling a time before the basic time of the axis and the other on the right signaling a time after the basic time of that axis. Based on this semantic framework, each "tense" of any language can then be placed in the appropriate slot on the appropriate axis. It is quite likely, however, that any given language will not fill each possible slot with a unique form and that any given language might turn out to have some overlap or substitutability of forms across slots.

See Table 9.1 for our interpretation of Bull's axes applied to English and their corresponding verb tense forms (with input from Houts Smith [1993]):

**TABLE 9.1 THE BULL FRAMEWORK**

<b>Axis of orientation</b>	<b>A time before the basic axis time</b>	<b>Basic axis time corresponding to the moment of reference</b>	<b>A time after the basic axis time</b>
Future	By 5:00, he will have finished all the chores. (future perfect)	He { will is going to } eat dinner at 5:00. (simple future)	Upon completion of this work, he { will is going to } watch TV. (no distinct form— use simple future)
Present	He has played golf since 1960. (present perfect)	He plays golf. (simple present)	He is going to play golf next Sunday. (future of the present) Note: <i>Will</i> may be used as a formal substitute
Past	When he left to play golf, he had finished all his chores (past perfect)	He played golf on Saturday afternoon (simple past)	Having finished his golf game, he went out to dinner with his golf buddies.  or Having finished his golf game, he would go out to dinner. (= habitual)

This framework helps us understand quite explicitly why two of the preceding narratives were smoother or more coherent than their alternatives: In the preferred samples of discourse, the author stayed within one axis of orientation—that is, present or past—and

made “before” and “after” time references that were appropriate to that axis; the author did not jump from one axis to the other.

Although the present- and past-time axes are the two axes most frequently used in English, we should at this stage also provide a discourse sample that illustrates the application of the Bull framework to the future axis, which is another temporal point of view the speaker/writer can take:

E. John will (possible substitution: *is going to*) travel to Europe this summer. Before doing that he will have completed his B.S. in Math. When he returns to the States, he will begin graduate work in Management.

Here, the tense sequence moves from *future* to *future perfect*, and the text once again ends with *future*. In the subordinate clause beginning with “when,” the tense is “present” but the whole sentence still expresses future time.<sup>2</sup> The overlap of *will* and *be going to* in both the future axis for the core tense and in the present axis for the “future of the present” is due to many factors, including register (*will* is more formal) and interaction (*be going to* has more interactive immediacy); however, the ability of *be going to* to inflect for present tense and the greater relative ease of combining *will* with perfect aspect in the future axis suggest that the underlying assignment of *will* to future axis and of *be going to* to present axis is indeed valid despite the areas of overlap.

Another unique feature of Bull’s framework is that the so-called perfect aspect in English is shown to be much more closely associated with tense than is the progressive aspect. The perfect aspect signals the “before time” in each axis, (called “prior” time in Chapter 7) whereas the progressive aspect is a truly independent aspectual form that can express notions such as duration, noncompletion, or iteration in combination with all the tense-aspect-modality forms in Table 9.1. By including the *be going to* form, we now have 14 distinct tense-aspect combinations in English instead of the traditional 12:

*Bull System Forms*

will V (will talk)  
will have V + -en (will have talked)  
V -pres (talk(s))  
have V + -en (have/has talked)  
Be-pres going to V (is/am/are  
going to talk)  
V -past (talked)  
had V + -en (had talked)

*Bull Forms plus Progressive Aspect*

will be V -ing (will be talking)  
will have been V -ing (will have been talking)  
Be -pres V -ing (is/are/am talking)  
have been V -ing (has/has been talking)  
Be -pres going to be V -ing<sup>3</sup> (is/am/are  
going to be talking)  
Be -past V -ing (was/were talking)  
had been V -ing (had been talking)

## THE BULL FRAMEWORK VERSUS PREVIOUS ACCOUNTS

Teachers might wonder whether the Bull framework differs substantially from previous analyses of the English tense-aspect system, and if so, how. We feel that the Bull framework permits an analysis that is like traditional accounts such as Jespersen’s (1924), in that meaning has priority over form and also that it retains much of the traditional grammatical terminology for describing the tenses. Bull’s system, however, is considerably more complex in that not just one but three parallel time lines (i.e., the three axes of orientation) are used to illustrate and explicate the tense system—*tense*, in any language, is a grammatical system that uses notions of time to reflect the user’s perspective on events. Bull’s system begins to account for tense sequences in discourse as well as accounting for tense in isolated sentences, and teachers can refer to the axes to show students how tenses should relate to each other in discourse; that is, students should perhaps learn the tenses

one axis at a time rather than one form at a time. Bull's framework is also more sophisticated and subtle than the usual structural account of the English tense-aspect system in that it shows clearly how the so-called perfect aspect consistently functions as a marker of "a time before" with respect to the basic English tense in each of the three axes, with the result that the progressive appears to be a more flexible and genuine marker of aspect than the perfect in English because it interacts with each form in Bull's matrix to signal duration, noncompletion, or iteration and is not restricted to "a time before."<sup>4</sup>

### CHAFE'S OBSERVATIONS ON TENSES IN DISCOURSE

To provide a more complete accounting for tense sequences in discourse, Chafe (1972) introduces the notion of generic tenses—which we describe in Chapter 2 as backgrounding. He provides the following piece of discourse (pp. 48–49) along with his accompanying tense analysis:

<b>F. Discourse Sequence</b>	<b>Chafe's Tense Analysis</b>
a. I went to a concert last night.	a. past
b. They played Beethoven's second.	b. past
c. You don't hear that very often.	c. generic
d. I enjoyed it.	d. past
e. Next Friday I'm going to another concert.	e. future
f. They're playing something by Stravinsky.	f. future

Using this illustration, Chafe makes several important points: When a tense or time has been established in a piece of discourse, this tense must be maintained unless:

1. A "generic" tense (usually the simple present) is used for a comment or aside, as in (c) above and temporarily suspends the past tense requirement followed in (a), (b), and (d).
2. A new explicit time marker—or a clearly implied shift—is introduced into the discourse, which terminates the old tense and replaces it with another, as happens with "Next Friday" initiating clause (e) with a subsequent new tense in (e) and (f).

In discourse sequence F, we would like to point out that Chafe uses "future" to label the tense forms in (e) and (f) that are considered "present" in Bull's framework. Using *will*, a more general marker of the future that is not tied to the present axis, would sound much less appropriate than the present axis forms Chafe actually used in (e) and (f). This is because the time phrase *Next Friday* is deictic (i.e., its interpretation is tied to the speaker's here and now, like *this* and *that*) and thus depends on the time of speaking (i.e., present time) for its interpretation. Also, in Chapter 2, Chafe's generic tense as in line (c) was described as backgrounding in narrative. In what follows we refer to tenses used for backgrounding instead of using Chafe's term, i.e., generic tenses.

The following is an authentic example of the simple present used to provide background in oral narrative to provide evaluation and express speaker stance (lines 2 and 3) in between two past-tense forms that are the foreground and represent the main story line (lines 1 and 4):<sup>5</sup>

- G. "Skiing over a cliff"
1. So my front skis bent down
  2. Interestingly enough, when something like this happens
  3. all these thoughts flash in your mind
  4. I managed to flash my whole life in front of me.



## LABOV'S STRUCTURE FOR NARRATIVE

To better explain tense shifts in narrative, we refer from time to time to Labov's (1972) narrative structure, which posits six elements for any narrative, three of which are obligatory and bulleted and thus more important than the others in parentheses, which are optional:

<i>Six Elements of Narrative</i> <sup>6</sup> (the abstract)	<i>Description of Each Element</i>
• orientation	who and what the narrative is about
• complicating action (evaluation)	the background for the narrative
• result or resolution (coda)	the conflict or problem in the story asides or comments from the narrator
	the outcome of the narrative an epilogue or the moral of the story

A simple constructed example of this narrative sequence follows:

abst.: This is about a prince, a witch, and a princess.

orient.: Once upon a time there was a handsome prince.

compl.: A wicked witch turned him into a frog.

eval.: That's not nice, is it?

resol.: A beautiful princess broke the witch's spell by kissing the frog.

coda: The prince and princess lived happily ever after.

Different parts of a narrative tend to be realized with different tenses. For example, an evaluation, as we have seen above in lines 2 and 3 in the skiing story in G and in the fourth line of the fairy tale above, will often be in the simple present because it is background, whereas the result or resolution tends to occur in the simple past because it is foreground (i.e., part of the main story line).

## HISTORICAL PRESENT TENSE AND TENSE SHIFTING

An additional complication in understanding tense sequencing is a particular function of the simple present tense known as "the historical present" (see Chapter 7). It uses the present tense to relate a past event and is very common in oral narrative. Labov (1972), Schiffrin (1981), Wolfson (1981), and Baquedano-López (1994) have all examined the role of the historical present tense. It is different from the backgrounding use of the present tense discussed in texts F and G above in that it refers to a specific event in the past, not a background statement or evaluation, and is a stylistic device employed by the speaker to accomplish any of several things. Both the historical present and backgrounding present occur in the following authentic oral narrative:

### H. "Driving home"<sup>7</sup>

1. So Dad decides that he's gonna pass these cars
2. And, uh, he pulls out in the other lane
3. And starts passing them.
4. And all of a sudden we see this big truck, you know, this truck coming for us.
5. And, uh, this guy was going pretty fast
6. And we had passed one car
7. And there's no way we can get over
8. And this trucker's coming
9. And he's just sort of bearing down on us honking his horn
10. He wasn't slowing down.
11. So you know it gets to the point where you're halfway past the second car

12. And it becomes apparent that we might hit this truck.
13. You know, my mom was sitting in the front seat
14. And my sister and I are in the back seat
15. And all of a sudden we see this truck
16. And thought for sure we were gonna hit it.
17. And I went "Well this is it," you know
18. And my sister and I just started yelling
19. And we ducked.

In this narrative, the historical present tense is used initially in lines 1–4 and then the tense switches to the past progressive in line 5 (and even the past perfect in line 6) to signal an ongoing complicating action. A tense shift back to historical present (simple or progressive) in lines 7–10 continues the story line. A backgrounding present tense in lines 11 and 12 interjects the speaker's evaluation before he switches the tense back to past progressive in line 13 and the historical present in lines 14 and 15 to get back to the story line. The remaining lines (16–19) switch back to past tense and relate the thoughts, words, and actions of the participants. Note that the reported speech in line 17 is present tense but the reporting verb *went* is past tense.

The historical present and backgrounding present can occur in the same episode since lines 11 and 12 above are arguably backgrounding present, given the pronominal shifts from previous references to *he* (= *dad*) or *we/us* (= *family*) to the line 11 reference to *you* (= *whoever is trying to pass a line of cars on a road*). Examples such as the above demonstrate that tense shifts in authentic oral narrative are extremely complex. As Baquedano-López (1994) points out, they can mark boundaries between elements within the narrative itself, but they also can function much more locally to mark contrasts such as main story vs. speaker aside, agent *x* vs. agent *y*, or narrative storyline vs. reported speech/thought, etc.

### SUH'S FRAME-ELABORATION HYPOTHESIS

A rather different perspective on the use of tense-aspect-modality sequences in discourse is taken up in Kyung-Hee Suh's research. Drawing on a number of existing databases, Suh (1992a) noticed that in the course of constructing oral narratives, English speakers often use one tense-aspect-modality form to very generally introduce (or sometimes to close) a type of narrative or an episode, and then they switch for the remainder of the episode to another form to elaborate the episode and provide the details.

#### Tense and Aspect Sequences

In this regard, one pattern Suh noticed was that the present perfect tense can be used to either introduce or sum up a habitual present-tense narrative. Observe how this pattern is illustrated in the following two examples:

1. Jazz musician<sup>8</sup>
  1. There's been a lot of untruths told about improvisation.
  2. Men just don't get up on the stage and improvise on things they're not familiar with.
  3. True improvisation comes out of hard work.
  4. When you're practicing at home, you work on a theme, and you work out all the possibilities of that theme.
  5. Since it's in your head, it comes out when you play.
  6. You don't get out on the stage and just improvise,
  7. Not knowing what the hell you're doing.<sup>9</sup>
  8. It doesn't work out that way.

J. "Now that dad has retired"<sup>10</sup>

1. When my father gets up, he showers and shaves.
2. Then he eats breakfast and reads the newspaper while he slowly drinks his coffee.
3. After that he walks the dog.
4. That's the way it's been ever since he retired.

In narrative I, the present perfect initiates the episode in line 1, and the simple present—interrupted by two present progressives in lines 4 and 7 that seem to be background information—completes the episode. In narrative J, the simple present occurs in all but the final clause of line 4, where the present perfect serves to tie the details together and relate the entire episode to the moment of speech.

Suh (1992a) noticed even more cases in oral narrative where the present perfect provides a transition from the moment of speaking (i.e., Bull's present axis) and introduces or frames a specific past experience, the details of which are then reported in the simple past. Two narratives exemplifying this frame-elaboration pattern follow:

K. "Gas-meter reader"<sup>11</sup>

1. I've been bit once already by a German shepherd.
2. And that was something.
3. It was really scary.
4. It was an outside meter the woman had.
5. I read the gas meter and was walking back out and heard a woman yell.
6. I turned around, and this German shepherd was coming at me.
7. The first thing I thought of was that he might go for my throat, like the movies.
8. So I sort of crouched down and gave him my arm;
9. Instead of my neck, he grabbed a hold of my arm, bit that, turned around.
10. My arm was kinda soft so I thought I'd give him something harder.
11. So I gave him my hand, a little more bone in that.
12. So he bit my hand.
13. I gave it to him so that he wouldn't bite my throat.
14. I didn't want him to grab hold of my face.

L. "Airline stewardess"<sup>12</sup> [Note: The first two lines are simply background]

1. . . . Here I'm thinking, what if I die today? I've got<sup>13</sup> too much to do.
2. I can't die today. I use it as a joke.
3. I've had emergencies where I've had to evacuate the aircraft.
4. I was coming back from Las Vegas and being a lively stewardess.
5. I'd stayed up all night, gambled. We had a full load of passengers.
6. The captain tells me we're going to have an emergency landing in Chicago because we lost<sup>14</sup> a pin in the nose gear.
7. When we land, the nose gear is gonna collapse.
8. He wants me to prepare the whole cabin for the landing, but not for two more hours.
9. And not to tell the other stewardesses.
10. Because they were new girls and would get all excited.
11. So I had to keep this in me for two more hours,
12. Wondering, "Am I gonna die today?"

In both of the excerpts above, the present perfect introduces or frames the specific past event and the simple past (or historical present) is used to elaborate and give the details. The immediately preceding example, L, is especially interesting since the stewardess' thoughts, fears, and her reported inner speech are all in the historical present tense (lines 1, 2, and 12) with progressive aspect added to express duration in lines 1 and 12.

Also, what the captain tells the stewardess to do is reported with the historical present (lines 6–9), while causes or reasons for his orders are simple past (lines 10 and 11). Such tense shifts help to separate thoughts and reports from the sequence of more specific events pertaining to the emergency itself. The *going to* and *gonna* tokens in lines 6, 7, and 12 are considered present tense (future of present) forms in the spirit of the Bull framework. They reflect possible future consequences of the events being reported.

### Modal and Phrasal Modal Sequences

In addition to tense and aspect sequences like the two illustrated above, Suh's frame-elaboration hypothesis also works for two other interesting cases that involve modals and phrasal modals: the use of *used to* and *would* for past habitual narratives and *be going to* and *will* for future scenarios.

Previously, researchers have had problems distinguishing *used to* and *would* at the sentence level, for it seemed that pairs such as the following were more or less equivalent in terms of stating habitual actions or states in the past:

- M. a. My father used to exercise every morning.  
b. My father would exercise every morning.

Certainly one difference is that (a) can signal only habitual past action whereas (b) can also be conditional given appropriate context (i.e., "If he had time"). However, without further context, (a) and (b) cannot be distinguished at the sentence level. In collecting many instances of spontaneous oral narratives with past habitual time references, Suh (1992b) noticed that the temporally more explicit *used to* tends to mark an episode boundary or set up a frame for a past habitual event, whereas the more contingent form *would* (or *'d*) marks the details or elaborates the topic, with the simple past also occurring as an alternative to *would*.

Consider the following examples:

N. "Farm worker"<sup>15</sup>

1. The bad thing was they used to laugh at us, the
2. Anglo kids. They would laugh because we'd bring tortillas
3. and frijoles to lunch. They would have their nice little
4. compact lunch boxes with cold milk in their thermos and
5. they'd laugh at us because all we had was dried tortillas.
6. Not only would they laugh at us, but the kids would pick fights.

O. "Cabdriver"<sup>16</sup>

[Note: The cabdriver was formerly in the Merchant Marines. The first four lines are background to the target episode, which starts in line 5.]

1. The big topic at sea is still exploits with women.
2. Because there's always loneliness. A traveling salesman,
3. he has a means of picking up a phone. But a seaman is one
4. month to three months before he'll get a letter from his wife.
- 5. I used to phone my wife three, four times every
6. trip. In Calcutta I waited five hours to get a phone
7. call through. If I didn't get it through one night,
8. I'd call again and wait three, four hours the next morning.
9. The feeling you get, just hearing her voice. . .
10. I'd stand on the phone and just actually choke up.
11. My wife would be crying on the other end, and I'd say,
12. "Woman, listen, I'm spending too much money on this phone call.
13. Stop crying."

Note the backgrounding present tense used in line 9 in the preceding text for expressing the seaman's emotions, the simple past tense used in lines 6 and 7 for the specific events that happened once when he was in Calcutta, and also the quoted speech of the last two lines marked by present tense. Other than these forms, the frame with *used to* and the elaboration with *would* alternating with past tense account for the tense-aspect-modal sequences in both of the two texts above.

In contrast to the relatively longer texts in the habitual past that Suh (1992b) described, such as the two above, many shorter texts exist in which patterns with *used to* are also discernible. In the following examples in P, *used to* occurs in the first clause and is followed by a second and possibly third clause in the present, present progressive, present perfect, or present perfect (progressive) tense. These noninitial clauses typically follow *but* and contrast with and negate the past habitual event or state expressed in the first clause with *used to*:

- P.    a. Alice used to be a kindergarten teacher, but she doesn't work anymore. She's now a mother and homemaker.  
       b. Jack used to live in Chicago, but since 1992, he's been working in Los Angeles.

We feel that such shorter frames should also be identified, described, and presented and practiced pedagogically.

Suh (1992a) also found many examples of future narratives that lend further support to her frame-elaboration hypothesis. She found that oral narratives that express possible future scenarios tend to be framed by *be going to*, which makes a bridge from the present moment of speaking to the future. These narratives are then elaborated with *will* (*ʷ*), which express more remote future contingencies. Consider the following examples:

Q. "Gastric restriction"<sup>17</sup>

[A doctor informally explains the surgical procedure he performs on the morbidly obese.]

1. They're going to go in and, uh, have their gut
2. slit open, their stomach exposed, and have it stapled off
3. so that there'll be two pou—/ an upper pouch in the
4. stomach which will hold about two ounces of food,
5. it's got a little hole right in—in the middle of that
6. pouch where—where food when it's finally ground up
7. will slowly go through.

R. White House transcripts (1974), p. 68 [John Dean is speaking.]

1. I think what is going to happen on the civil
2. case is that the judge is going to dismiss the complaint
3. that is down there right now. They will then file a new
4. complaint which will come back to Ritchie again. That will
5. probably happen the 20th, 21st, 22nd. Then 20 days will
6. run before any answers have to be filed and the depositions
7. will be commenced. So we are eating up an awful lot of time.

In passage Q the initial *be going to* holds for the first two lines, after which the speaker switches to *will* (*ʷ*) except for the background aside given in the simple present in lines 5 and 6. In passage R, the frame (i.e., *be going to*) occurs twice in the first two lines, which happens occasionally especially in a case like this where a *wh*-cleft occurs (see Chapter 30) and the same tense tends to appear on both sides of *be*. The elaborations then occur with *will* until the final clause in line 7, which switches to the present progressive to give the speaker's personal evaluation of the ongoing situation rather than projecting any additional future events.



In contrast to these longer future scenarios described by Suh (1992a), we would also like to point out shorter texts where *be going to* expresses a future planned action; the subsequent clause often begins with *so* and is elaborated with *can* or *will* to express the justification, purpose, or expected outcome of the planned action:

- S. a. Patrick O'Brien is going to marry his American girlfriend so he can get a green card.  
 b. I'm going to study in Spain for a year next year so I'll be fluent in Spanish.

Once again, we feel that such shorter frames, when they can be described and documented, are also very useful for pedagogical purposes. Their brevity makes them accessible even to beginners, who can understand them and create meaningful short texts by referring to frames like these early in their language-learning experience.

Perhaps it would be useful at this stage to summarize the various frames that Suh and the authors have described above for oral narratives:

habitual present narrative	(frame: present perfect elaboration: simple present)
specific past narratives	(frame: present perfect elaboration: simple past)
past habitual narratives	(frame: <i>used to</i> elaboration: <i>would</i> ('d) sometimes simple past)
short contrasts (past vs. present)	(frame: <i>used to</i> conjunction: <i>but</i> elaboration: present (progressive and/or perfect aspect acceptable, too)
future scenarios	(frame: <i>be going to</i> elaboration: <i>will</i> ('ll))
short future plan + expected outcome	(frame: <i>be going to</i> conjunction: <i>so</i> elaboration: <i>can</i> or <i>will</i> )

These discourse frames are of course not the only way these types of oral narratives can be accomplished; however, they are sufficiently frequent and salient in English speakers' spontaneous discourse to merit pedagogical attention.

### TENSE-ASPECT-MODALITY AND INTERACTION IN ORAL DISCOURSE

The patterns discussed above were for more or less monologic oral narrative. When two or more speakers are engaged in conversation, however, the dynamics are often different such that we can note other ways in which tense-aspect-modality forms are used.

For example, Suh (1992a) noticed that when an interrogative structure with present perfect tense is inserted in the middle of a story-telling sequence, the speaker is often checking the interlocutor's knowledge before proceeding further.<sup>18</sup>

T. Conversation data used by Suh (1992a:94).

Ken: We went down into Juarez and through El Paso, and oh, we had a ball.

Louise: Really?

Ken: Yeah. Have you ever been t— have you ever hearda Juarez?

Louise: I've hearda both of 'em because my girlfriend's old boyfriend was stationed in El Paso.

Ken: Well we went to Juarez . . .

In this example, Ken uses the present perfect in his second turn to interrupt his past-tense narrative in order to check Louise's knowledge of the places he is talking about. Louise also uses the present perfect in her response in order to display her knowledge. Here the shift from simple past to present perfect is interactionally motivated rather than being driven by the structure of the narrative Ken is relating.

McCarthy and Carter (1995) have noticed that some instances of variation between *be going to* and *will* are interactionally driven in that *be going to* expresses greater personal involvement on the part of the speaker, whereas *will* is a more neutral, detached and formal option. One of their examples is:

U. "BBC radio weather forecast"

Temperatures will be below freezing, and it's going to be icy on those country roads, so do take care if you're driving.

(McCarthy and Carter 1995:24)

Here, McCarthy and Carter feel that their interactional explanation describes the form shifts occurring in such informal weather forecasts given on radio and TV, where *will* is used for neutral prediction whereas *be going to* signals the forecaster's more interpersonal evaluation. We noted in Chapter 3 that argument structure is more fluid in conversation than in written discourse. Similarly, McCarthy and Carter conclude, ". . . real spoken data pushes us away from considerations of the semantics of time and more towards interactive interpretations of verb-form choices" (1995:114).

In a study of related interest, Schwarz (1988) had consultants place 24 oral and written texts along a continuum ranging from "involved, interactive" to "detached, no interaction" and found that the frequency of the progressive aspect was much higher in texts that demonstrate interaction and involvement than in texts that do not. Here are the numbers for four texts representing the two extremes on the continuum:

<i>Text</i>	<i>Frequency of progressive</i>
conversation between good friends	30/1,000 words
personal letters to friends	20/1,000 words
phonetics textbook	1.3/1,000 words
economics textbook	1/1,000 words

There was near perfect correlation between where the texts fell on the continuum and the frequency of the progressive aspect, which means that native English speakers make systematic use of the progressive to signal involvement and interaction or to signal detachment, formality, and lack of interaction by not using the progressive.

Batstone (1995) argues that tense and aspect are used covertly in written discourse to signal pragmatic notions such as negative attitude (e.g., past tense = "this idea is passé") or positive attitude (e.g., present tense = "this idea is relevant"). Similarly, he proposes that a simple tense by virtue of signaling a neutral, unchanging situation can bring about different results from the same tense with progressive aspect, which signals potential for change:

- a. Sheila says she doesn't want to come.
- b. Sheila is saying she doesn't want to come.

In Batstone's data, the (b) version occurred in the conversation, and the two interlocutors quickly shifted to a discussion of how to get Sheila to change her mind. Had the (a) version occurred, Batstone feels the speaker would have signaled that Sheila's position was not open to change and a different conversation would have ensued.

We agree with Suh (1992a), McCarthy and Carter (1995), Schwarz (1988), and Batstone (1995) concerning the importance of examining oral language in interaction for special uses of tense-aspect-modality forms. However, by referring to our earlier discussion

of the Bull framework, we point out that it is not accidental that present-axis forms (present perfect and *be going to* future) are frequently used to accomplish interactive functions. Interaction relates to the “here and now,” in contrast to the simple past, which relates past events, or the form *will*, which makes neutral future predictions.

### Two Other Types of Tense Patterning in Written Discourse

Sentence-level accounts of tense and aspect tell us that the past perfect generally marks an event occurring prior to some other time or event in the past (e.g., *Before John came, I had finished my dinner.*)<sup>19</sup> However, in informal written discourse we have found that the past perfect can be used to mark a climax—that is, to state a purpose for relating a prior series of actions and events narrated in the simple past. This function is probably an instance of the “result/resolution” in Labov’s narrative structure. Consider the two following examples:

#### V. “The convocation”<sup>20</sup>

The students sat in the bleachers of Pauley Pavilion watching the faculty enter in their caps and gowns. Dignitaries continued to arrive while the band played a festive melody for the onlookers. To the cheers of the crowd, President Clinton came in and took his assigned seat on the podium . . . UCLA’s 75th anniversary *had begun*.

#### W. “The case of Koko”<sup>21</sup>

In the 1980s, researchers at Stanford University were trying to teach American Sign Language to Koko, a gorilla. Koko was well cared for and was surrounded by interesting objects. Her caretakers continually exposed her to signs for the foods and toys in her environment. Koko particularly loved eating bananas and playing with kittens. One day she was hungry but couldn’t find any bananas. She went to the researcher and made a good approximation of the sign for “banana.” Koko was rewarded with a banana and the research team knew that Koko *had made* the connection between a sign and the object it represented.

This pattern is thus similar to the six that Suh (1992a) and the authors identified above; however, here the past perfect is used to terminate a narrative episode given in the simple past rather than to initiate the narrative episode because it is functioning to mark the outcome or resolution. It is certainly not being used to mark a prior action or event.

Another systematic use of tense shift in written discourse has been noted by Brinton (1994), who prepared grammar exercises to accompany an introductory college-level psychology text by Huffman, Vernoy, and Vernoy (1994). Brinton noticed that the authors of this psychology text frequently presented a real-life illustration of a phenomenon in a paragraph written in the past tense:

- X. In 1848, Phineas Gage suffered a bizarre accident when an explosion happened at his work place. As a result of the explosion, an iron rod entered his skull and pierced his frontal lobe. Phineas recovered physically from this accident, but his personality changed forever. (Brinton 1994:9)

The story or anecdote then becomes the basis for the authors’ discussion in the following paragraph of the significance of the anecdote and other similar events. This more general discussion invariably occurs in the present tense:

- Y. From the case study of Phineas Gage, it appears that the frontal lobe controls much of our individual personality and defines our ability to make decisions. We now know that the frontal lobe helps us to plan and change actions. (Brinton 1994:9)

Although the order above is preferred for presenting anecdotes and generalizations in this particular textbook, sometimes the reverse order occurs—the generalization paragraph comes before the anecdote paragraph:

- Z. The difference between an obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and milder forms of compulsion is that OCD behaviors are much more extreme, appear irrational to almost everyone, and interfere considerably with everyday life. Individuals with OCD sometimes wash their hands hundreds of times a day or spend hours performing senseless rituals of organizing and cleaning. Billionaire Howard Hughes provides an example of obsessive-compulsive behavior.  
(Huffman, Vernoy, and Vernoy 1994:522)

After this general description of OCD, the following paragraph provides the specific case description (i.e., Howard Hughes):

- Z. Due to his unreasonable fear of germs, he made people who worked with him wear white gloves, sometimes several pairs, when handling documents he would later touch. When newspapers were brought to him, they had to be in stacks of three so he could slide the middle one out by grasping it with Kleenex. To escape contamination by dust, he ordered that masking tape be put around the doors and windows of his cars and houses.  
(Huffman, Vernoy, and Vernoy, 1994:522)

Whichever order occurs, the real-life illustration is in the simple past tense, which includes historically past-tense modal forms (e.g., *would* and *could*), and the authors' generalizations and discussion are in the simple present tense. This discourse-level use of these tenses is in fact similar to their sentence-level uses since simple past tense is often used to relate a past event and the simple present is used to express generalizations. If this pattern occurs widely enough in other social science textbooks, it is one that can and should be taught explicitly to ESL/EFL readers and writers who are using such a textbook in their content classes.

## CONCLUSION

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All the findings reported above suggest that the uses of the tense-aspect-modality forms described in this chapter can be fully grasped only when we consider their discourse-pragmatic and interactional features as well as their formal and semantic features. The challenge of the English TAM system, as represented in this chapter, is on *use*. It provides a way of helping learners see where one form is preferred over another, especially in cases where two or more forms can often be used at the sentence level to “mean” essentially the same thing:

pres perfect/simple past  
*be going to/will*  
*used to/would*

The findings reported above have pedagogical implications because the patterns of use reported here have the potential to serve as templates or discourse “scripts” regarding certain discourse functions of these forms. Such information can readily be applied in materials development. Teachers (and learners) will encounter authentic materials that contain segments conforming to a large extent to the patterns we have described. Suh found them occurring frequently in comic strips and novels as well as

transcribed conversational data. There are of course other patterns as well; Lori Gray (personal communication) has reminded us that teachers of English for specific purposes might be interested in knowing how tenses are used in different disciplines. In a science report, for example, the introduction is usually in the present tense, whereas the methods section is normally written in the past tense. For an art class, a student would use the present tense to describe a painting. Other tense patterns will occur in other disciplines.

Teachers need to help learners understand how the English tense-aspect-modality system works in relation to different discourse types and to realize that it operates differently in different languages; that is, the discourse conventions of learners' native language tense-aspect-modality system will most likely not transfer positively to English. In fact, in examining tense choice in essays and cloze passages completed by native and nonnative speakers of English,<sup>22</sup> Hinkel (1997) found that the past-tense selections of these two groups differed significantly due to different styles of rhetorical development and temporal organization as well as culturally different ways of framing events. She concludes that the way past time frames are conventionalized in English is not always obvious to nonnative speakers because boundaries of objective time and tense are conventionalized differently within discourse frames in different cultures.

Finally, further research is needed to help complete and refine the very preliminary sketch we have given here of the uses of tense-aspect-modality in English discourse. The studies we have presented constitute neither a complete nor a unified account; however, they do constitute a useful beginning that we hope others will be able to extend and refine.

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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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*Note:* All focus on use.

1. Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988:80) suggest that students bring in postcards of scenic places in their country (or pictures of any places they would like to visit) to elicit discussion of travel plans. The teacher should have some extra postcards and pictures available. Each student presents a card or picture (or several) and gives a short narrative about travel plans or suggestions using *be going to* to frame and *will/'ll for elaboration*; the student should also give a reason and can use *because* to signal the reason. The teacher should model a sample narrative for the class, using appropriate postcards or pictures:

I'm going to visit the Tuscany region of Italy on my vacation. I'll go to Florence, Pisa, and Arezzo because these are interesting old towns with beautiful art and historical architecture.

2. Making explicit use of the Bull framework, Kathi Bailey (personal communication) devised a lesson for simultaneous review of the past perfect and the future perfect for high-intermediate students. In this lesson, Bailey used many examples to show the semantic relationships and adverbial markers that the two tenses share in the past axis and future axis respectively. For example:

Monday (future axis): John will arrive at 9 P.M. tomorrow. (By that time/Before then) I will have finished reading the book you lent me.

[Tuesday: John arrives at 9 P.M.]

Wednesday (past axis): John arrived at 9 P.M. yesterday. (By that time/Before then) I had finished reading the book you lent me.





3. Have each student make a list of 10 things they did when they were 10 years old. Next, ask them if they still do each of these things now. For every item on the list that states something they no longer do, students should generate short texts with *used to* marking the past habitual action or state and with the simple present tense and/or the present perfect expressing the present contrast. For example,

I used to rollerskate when I was 10 years old, but I no longer do.

I used to speak Spanish when I was 10 years old, but now I can't. I've forgotten my Spanish.

4. Ask students to write a brief story about an experience they had in the past. They should be told to stay in the past axis when they write. For example:

In 1968, I spent the summer with my uncle, who lived on a farm. I learned to milk cows, bring in the hay, and feed the chickens. It was a very good experience.

After getting feedback and correction from the instructor or from peers, the students should then rewrite their story in either the present or the future axis, changing time markers as appropriate.

5. Students can be given several texts (at least three) that exhibit the same pattern, for example, the *used to . . . would ('d)* framework-elaboration pattern often used in past habitual narrative. They should work in pairs or small groups in order to figure out the function of *used to* and *would/'d* in the narratives. The reports of the various groups, with appropriate input from the teacher, should result in an informal version of Suh's (1992b) framework-elaboration hypothesis. Here are example texts you might use:

- a. My older brother used to do most of the fighting for us, and he'd come home with black eyes all the time. (Terkel 1974:32)
- b. We used to joke about him in the office. We'd call him Mr. Straight because he was Mr. Straight—a man who'd never invite me to have a drink after work. He would never invite me to lunch alone. Would never, never make an overture to me. (Terkel 1974:107)
- c. We used to have these things when I was a kid up in Northern California. The flowers—after the flower would wilt—this little pea-like structure would come, and it would form kind of a coil, and the seed would grow inside it. . . . (transcribed conversation cited in Suh 1992b:8)

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts. Underline the relevant word(s) in your examples. You may need to write a short series of sentences for some of the terms.
  - a. historical present
  - b. backgrounding tense
  - c. past time axis
  - d. future time plus progressive aspect
  - e. interactive use of the present perfect
  - f. frame-elaboration pattern for
    - (i)—specific past events
    - (ii)—past habitual narrative
    - (iii)—future scenario

2. Explain the difference in meaning between the italicized parts of the following two sentences:
- I see him* every day at school.
  - The other day, I'm walking home from school and *I see him* coming up the road.
3. Explain the problem with the following sequence of sentences:

When I was little, I would take my brother to school each day. I used to hate it.  
I've taken him for three years and I walk really slowly.

4. Analyze the following passage from a short story in terms of both Bull's framework and Suh's frame-elaboration hypothesis. Divide the passage into episodes. Look for patterns within each small episode of the narrative:

In those days we went into the wild to hunt. I had come from the city to stay with my grandparents in Zitilchen for my holidays, and I'd already made some friends. From the low hill that rises south of town, Chidra, the half-breed Mayan, would first go to call for Crispin. When he reached the house, he gave a long whistle and out Crispin came: short, nervous, cunning. Then they came to fetch me. . . .

When they got to our farm Chidra whistled again, and my grandfather would come to the door to let them in. Chidra lived in the wild, and had eaten no food. Not so Crispin. He lived a few streets away, and I knew he had had a good breakfast. Both, however, accepted the hot chocolate and rolls my grandmother offered them. While we ate, my grandfather, tall but stooping, joked gravely with us, as was his manner. With Crispin particularly: the old man was very fond of Crispin. He used to call him "Don Crispin," and every now and then he'd suggest jobs for him inspired by his diminutive stature and resilient character. (Zavala 1989:148)

5. Explain the reason for the tense changes in the following excerpt from a short story:

There's a man in the habit of hitting me on the head with an umbrella. It is five years to the day since he began hitting me on the head with his umbrella. At first I couldn't stand it; now I've grown accustomed to it.

I don't know his name. I know he's an ordinary man, with a plain suit, graying at the temples, and a nondescript face. I met him one sultry morning five years ago. I was sitting peacefully on a bench in Palermo park, reading the newspaper in the shade of a tree. All of a sudden I felt something touch my head. It was this same man who now, as I write, automatically and impassively keeps striking me blows with his umbrella.

That first time I turned around full of indignation (I become terribly annoyed when I'm bothered while reading the paper); he went right on, calmly hitting me. (Sorrentino 1989:233).

6. What difference in effect is there in the following excerpt from a short story when the simple past tense is changed to the historical present?

I was a little girl, nine years old, in 1961. You'd left my father and me only two years before. Four months after leaving, you sent me—always me, never him—your first postcard, of a turnpike in the Midwest, postmarked Enid, Oklahoma. You called me "My little angel" and said that the sunflowers by the side of the road were tall and very pretty. (Kaplan 1989:85)

I am a little girl, nine years old, in 1961. You've left my father and me only two years before. Four months after leaving, you send me—always me, never him—your first

postcard, of a turnpike in the Midwest, postmarked Enid, Oklahoma. You call me “My little angel” and say that the sunflowers by the side of the road are tall and very pretty.

7. What tense is used as a marker to show the shift in topic in the following extract of oral narrative?

When I was a little kid I wanted to be a baseball pitcher. I went through Little League, Pony League, and went to college for a year and a half, when I got drafted. Baseball would have been nice. Good yearly sum (laughs). The gas company’s really been good with the pay. Out of every two weeks I’ll make about \$250 clear after taxes—which isn’t bad. (Gas-meter reader in Terkel 1979:369)

### Test your ability to apply what you know

8. Students of yours have written the following problematic tense sequences in their essays. In each case, explain the nature of the problem and state what activities you would provide to correct it.
- ?Now that John had won the nomination, he is going to campaign for the election.
  - ?*Fatal Attraction* was a film that had affected the way that I thought about marriage.
  - ?Some people could handle societal change, but could not handle economic change, especially when the stock market was introduced. People will lose their minds.
  - ?After I learned this, I suddenly realize that my working thesis was too large in scope.
  - ?I have come from China in 1991 and I am here for six years. I have some problems. My biggest problem was English. I used to hate speaking, and I used to just sit quietly. I used to go to English class every day, but I didn’t learn much. The teacher used to ask me questions, but I used to hate it. Now, I’m much better at speaking and I will talk in class today.
9. A student is unsure about the tense changes she has used in the following section of an essay she is writing. She asks you to correct her tenses. How will you respond?

After 1978, a great number of Asian women came to the United States and looked for jobs to support their families. The garment industry has become a place where these Asian are oppressed because garment workers do not need to speak English and do not even have to be U.S. citizens.

10. Explain the difference in meaning between the following:
- I’m going to study in Spain for a year next year, so I’ll be fluent in Spanish.
  - I’m going to study in Spain for a year next year, so I’m going to be fluent in Spanish.

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**Suggestions for further reading**

*For an alternative interpretation of the Bull framework, see the following:*

Houts Smith, L. (1993). "An Investigation of the Bull Framework: One Teacher's Personal Inquiry into the English Tense System." Independent Professional Project, School for International Training, Brattleboro, Vermont.

Tregidgo, P. S. (1974). "English Tense Usage: A Bull's Eye View." *English Language Teaching* 28:2, 97–107.

*For a comprehensive introduction to the historical present tense, see Wolfson (1982) in the references above.*

*For pedagogical suggestions on teaching tense-aspect-modality (and other features of oral grammar) to language learners, see McCarthy and Carter (1995) in the references above.*

*For creative pedagogical suggestions for applying the Bull framework to exercises and activities for ESL learners, see:*

Frodesen, J. and J. Eyring (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 4 (2d ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1–33.

Thewlis, S. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 3 (2d ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 6–12 and 23–26.

**ENDNOTES**

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1. One can substitute *I will* or *I'll* for *I'm going to* in this narrative. However, such a substitution expresses a future action contingent upon the present circumstances and is less clearly tied to the present than *I'm going to*.

2. This follows a general principle of historical linguistics which holds that historically older forms and word orders are preserved longer in subordinate clauses than in independent clauses. Old English had only two tense forms (past and present) and used the present tense to express future time; this principle thus seems to apply here. For further discussion of tense subordination, see Tregidgo (1979).

3. Some readers have questioned the validity of this combination; however, we have seen and heard many examples of it, such as "I'm gonna be visiting my cousin next week."

4. Recall that the perfect aspect signals a "before time" not just with the basic tenses but also with modals, infinitives, and other nonfinite forms.

5. This is only a short excerpt from a longer narrative. It is from data collected by Keenan and Bennett (1977) for a research project.

6. According to Halliday and Hasan (1989), only the orientation and complicating action are obligatory because many authentic oral narratives have no clear result or resolution.

7. From the database used to produce the research reported in Keenan and Bennett (1977).

8. This is from Terkel (1974), *Working*: 598–599.

9. The first *-ing* form in this line (*knowing*) is a participle, not a progressive (See Chapter 25). The second (*doing*) is a progressive form.

10. This is from data the authors have collected.

11. This is from Terkel (1974), *Working*: 365–366.

12. This is from Terkel (1974). *Working*: 80.



13. *I've got* looks like the present perfect but it is not; it is merely the formulaic *I have got* . . . in the present tense.
14. Note that according to the Bull framework, this should be *have lost* not *lost*; however, in informal usage, Americans often simplify and use the simple past instead of the present perfect.
15. This is from Terkel (1974), *Working*: 32.
16. This is from Terkel (1974), *Working*: 267.
17. This passage is from the UCLA oral corpus, an in-house database.
18. Larsen-Freeman and Long (1991) call these “confirmation checks.” They are common in discourse between native and nonnative speakers, where they are cited as an example of interactional modification employed by native speakers.
19. There are, of course, cases where the past perfect marks some later noncompleted event (Gini Stevens, personal communication); e.g., *The instructor collected the papers before I had finished the exam*. In such cases we say that the past perfect is signaling a counterfactual clause in that “before I had finished = I did not finish.”
20. Excerpted and adapted from the UCLA *Daily Bruin*, May 25, 1994.
21. Author data.
22. The nonnative speakers in Hinkel’s study had only first languages that do not mark verbs for tense, such as Chinese, Thai, Yoruba.

## NEGATION

## INTRODUCTION

Negation in English is a very broad topic, it affects words, phrases, and sentences. Many of our comments here are restricted to the simple sentence level; that is, to the means of constructing negative rather than affirmative (also known as positive) simple English sentences:

<i>Affirmative</i>		<i>Negative</i>
Cynthia likes to fish.	→	Cynthia <i>does not/doesn't</i> like to fish.
Danielle is an editor.	→	Danielle <i>is not/isn't</i> an editor.
Robby can cook well.	→	Robby <i>cannot/can't</i> cook well.

although we discuss lexical and phrasal negation as well. We also, of course, deal with the meaning and use of negation in English. In this chapter we mention only in passing negative questions, negative commands, and negative compound/complex sentences. Those negative structures are examined in detail in other parts of this book.

## PROBLEMS FOR ESL/EFL STUDENTS

Many of your ESL/EFL students will find syntactic negation problematic, especially if they are at the beginning level. One reason is that different languages tend to place their negative particle in different positions in the sentence:

Spanish (preverbal):	Juan	<i>no</i>	habla	inglés.	“John doesn't speak English.”
	(John)	NOT	(speaks)	(English)	
German (postverbal):	Johann	geht	<i>nicht</i>	zur Schule.	“John doesn't go to school.”
	(John)	(goes)	NOT	(to)	(school)
English (postauxiliary):	John	{	will	}	<i>not</i> talk to Judy.
		{	does	}	

Also, many languages allow multiple negation in one sentence, which was historically acceptable in English but which today, depending on the scope of the negation, usually produces nonstandard sentences such as “I didn't say *nothing* to *nobody*!”

An additional problem involves the form of the negative particle. Some languages do not have distinct forms for expressing their equivalents of English *not* and *no*. Some have more than two negative particles.<sup>1</sup> Finally, English usually contracts *not* in speech and in informal writing, which few other languages do with their negative particle. This makes it harder for learners to understand and acquire *not* than if it were consistently produced as a separate, uncontracted word.

## THE NEGATION SYSTEM: ITS FORMS

### THE LEXICAL LEVEL

At the word, or lexical, level, one can simply use a negative affix in English to convey negativity. The way to make many adjectives and adverbs negative is to add a negative derivational prefix to a word:

happy	→	unhappy	happily	→	unhappily
appropriate	→	inappropriate	appropriately	→	inappropriately
possible	→	impossible	possibly	→	impossibly
logical	→	illogical	logically	→	illogically
relevant	→	irrelevant	relevantly	→	irrelevantly
ordered	→	disordered	orderly	→	disorderly
typical	→	atypical	typically	→	atypically

The variety derives in part from the fact that different affixes were borrowed from different languages. For example, while *un-* is a native English prefix, *in-* with its allomorphs (different forms of the same morpheme), *im-/il-/ir-*, come from Latin, *dis-* comes from Greek, and *a-* from Greek through Latin.

Other parts of speech can also take some of these prefixes to make them negative; for example, *dis-* combines with verbs to make *dislike* and *distrust*.

The negative prefix *non-* is used to form certain negative nouns and adjectives:

#### Nouns

*non-* + sense = *nonsense*

*non-* + intervention = *nonintervention*

#### Adjectives (non- + verb)

*non-* + drip = *non-drip* (as in *non-drip* paint)

*non-* + stick = *non-stick* (as in *non-stick* surface)<sup>2</sup>

Some of these prefixes can have more than one meaning. *Un-*, for instance, does not always indicate negativity. Consider verbs such as *unfasten* and *unwrap*, in which the *un-* means a reversal of the process denoted by the stem. The use of the *un-* to signal this other meaning, however, is not as frequent as the use of the *un-* prefix to mean “not” with all the gradable adjectives (those denoting a property that can be possessed in varying degrees) as in *unreasonable*, *unwise*, and *unkind*. Nevertheless, *un-* is still subject to various restrictions; in particular, it is not used where some etymologically unrelated opposite is available (we say *bad*, not \**ungood*), where some other less-productive prefix is established (*disloyal* rather than \**unloyal*), or with “strong” adjectives—that is, adjectives that express the same notion to a stronger degree (*unhappy*, but not \**unecstatic*).

Determining which prefix to use with which stem is not always predictable. Further, the rules about which negative prefix to use when more than one is possible are not absolute, but we can make the following generalization: *in-*, *dis-*, and (less so) *un-* tend to be pejoratively evaluative of the stems to which they attach, while *non-* and *a-* prefixes are more descriptive or objective (Horn 1989). Some minimal pairs that illustrate this contrast are:

<i>Pejorative/Evaluative</i>	<i>Descriptive/Objective</i>
irrational	nonrational
disbeliever	nonbeliever
disfunctional	nonfunctional
unprofessional	nonprofessional
unprofitable	nonprofit
untheoretical	atheoretical
immoral	amoral

The choice of *in-*, *im-*, *il-* or *ir-* is phonologically conditioned by the consonant which follows it. *In-* is most common, but *im-* is used if the following consonant is a bilabial (*b*, *p*, *m*), *il-* with a stem beginning with *l*, and *ir-* when the adjective begins with *r*.<sup>3</sup>

There is also a negative suffix, *-less*, which can be used to negate nouns by expressing their absence or nonexistence, thus forming adjectives such as *hopeless*, *penniless*, *speechless*, *lifeless*, and *shameless*. Howell (personal communication) has pointed out that there is a similar suffix *-free* with a more positive connotation (cf. *careless* vs. *carefree*): *smoke-free workplace*, *fat-free foods*.

Certain indefinite pronouns and an adverb beginning with *no-* can also be used to give a negative meaning:

<i>no + thing = nothing</i>	<i>Nothing</i> has been done.
<i>no + body = nobody</i>	<i>Nobody</i> is home.
<i>no + one = no one</i> (two words) <sup>4</sup>	<i>No one</i> seems concerned.
<i>no + where = nowhere</i>	They were <i>nowhere</i> to be seen.

However, not all words can be made negative with the use of affixes. Lexical gaps exist; some words have no single-word negative counterparts. For instance, we say *not unique*, not *\*ununique*. It works the opposite way as well. Some words exist in negative forms that have no affirmative counterparts, as the following humorous excerpt from Jack Winter's essay in the *New Yorker*, (July 25, 1984, volume 75, page 82) entitled "How I Met My Wife" makes clear:

It had been a rough day, so when I walked into the party I was very *chalant*, despite my efforts to appear *grunted* and *consolate*.

I was *furling* my *wieldy* umbrella for the coat check when I saw her standing alone in a corner. She was a *descript* person, a woman in a state of total *array*. Her hair was *kempt*, her clothing *shelled*, and she moved in a *gainly* way.

Other formally negative items are the negative adverb of frequency *never* (*not + ever*), the negative coordinating conjunction *nor* (*and + not*), and the negative correlative conjunctions *neither . . . nor* (*not + either*). Functional items that are not formally marked for negation but that connote negativity are the quantifiers *little* and *few*, as opposed to the positive quantifiers *a little* and *a few*, the negative adverbial subordinator of conditionals *unless*, the negative adverb of time *yet*, the negative intensifier *too*, and adverbs of frequency *seldom*, *rarely*, *scarcely*, and *hardly*. There are also lexical items that Jespersen (1917) calls "inherent negatives." These are content words that have a negative meaning but that appear positive in form—for example, *fail*, *forget*, *lack*, *exclude*, and *absent*. All these lexical and functional items are dealt with later in this chapter or in other places in this book.

## THE PHRASE LEVEL

At the phrase level, *no* can function as a negative determiner in a noun phrase:

I am surprised that *no* alternative was proposed.

*No* plans have been made.

Many idioms take this form; for example, *no way*, *no wonder*, *no sweat*. Another common idiomatic phrase with *no* is *no + gerund*, which may be used to indicate that something is prohibited—*no smoking*, *no parking*, *no running*—or unexpected, such as, *no kidding*, *no fooling*.

Before infinitive verbs in infinitive phrases (i.e., a sequence of *to + verb* that follows an inflected verb), *not* is used to make the phrase negative:

Marge has decided *not* to pay her income tax this year.

Although prescriptively prohibited, we have noticed that many native speakers of English will split the infinitive with the negative particle in an infinitive phrase, presumably to emphasize the negative action in the phrase:

Marge has decided to *not* pay her income tax this year.

### THE SENTENCE LEVEL

*Not* is the main sentence-level negator:

	<i>Not</i>	<i>Not, Contracted</i> (more common)
Statements	John is not at home.	John isn't at home.
Questions:	Are you not going?	Aren't you going?
Commands:	Do not move!	Don't move!
Exclamations	Is that not grand!	Isn't that grand!

However, *no* can also make a sentence negative, especially when it negates the subject:

No one was home to sign for the package.

*No* and *not* are also negative substitutes. *No* can be a negative substitute for an entire sentence:

A: Are you going to town after class?

B: No. I have got to meet Larry in the library.

and *not* can substitute for a negative subordinate clause (parallel to *so* substituting for an affirmative subordinate clause):

Are you coming? { If not, please let me know.  
If so, please bring something to drink.

Are you coming? { I think not.  
I think so.

### SUMMARY

The following table summarizes the basic formal markers of negation in English.

#### A SUMMARY OF BASIC NEGATIVE FORMS IN ENGLISH

Affix-Negation	No-Negation	Not-Negation
a-	<i>no</i>	<i>not, -n't</i>
dis-	<i>nothing</i>	<i>never (not + ever)</i>
in-/im-/il-/ir-	<i>nobody</i>	<i>neither (not + either)</i>
non-	<i>no one</i>	<i>nor (and + not)</i>
un-	<i>nowhere</i>	
-less		
-free		

### A SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF SENTENCE-LEVEL NEGATION

Here we deal with negation in statements, returning to negation in other simple sentence types as well as compound and complex sentences (in examples of reported speech) in later chapters.



**With Auxiliary Verbs**

Consider the following sentences:

- |                                       |  |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. (a) I can swim.                    | (b) I cannot swim.                     |
| 2. (a) It is going to rain on Monday. | (b) It is not going to rain on Monday. |
| 3. (a) We have done our homework.     | (b) We haven't done our homework.      |
| 4. (a) Philip is taking a nap.        | (b) Philip isn't taking a nap.         |

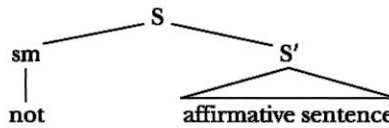
It is clear that what distinguishes the form of the (b) sentences from the form of the (a) sentences is the presence of the negative particle *not* or its contracted and suffixed form *-n't*. As we noted above, English has postauxiliary negation, and these sentences illustrate that generalization. Auxiliary verbs such as modals, phrasal modals, the perfect *have*, and the progressive *be* are all followed by the *not* particle. Moreover, if more than one auxiliary verb is present, as in 5 (*have* and *be*), it is the *first* auxiliary verb that is followed by the negative particle.

5. (a) Pam has been working hard. (b) Pam hasn't been working hard.

Following Quirk et. al (1985), we call the first or only auxiliary verb the “operator,” in that this verb performs several operational functions in English that involve relating major syntactic structures.<sup>5</sup>

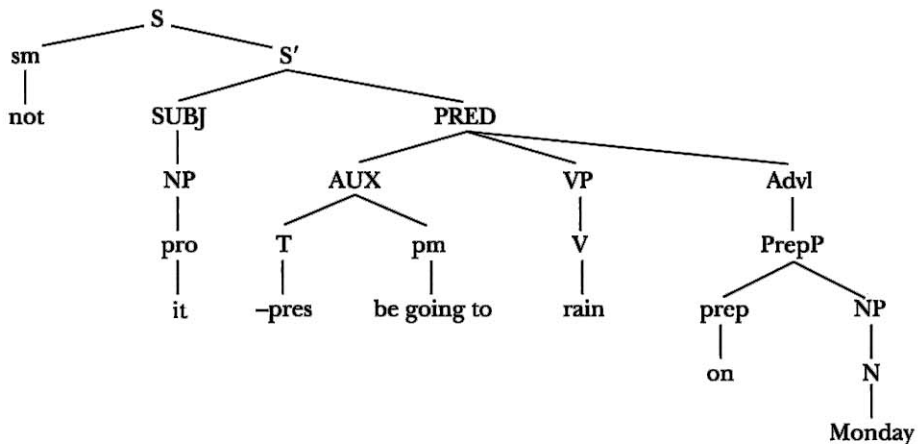
Since in all of our sentence-level examples thus far the negation applies to the entire sentence, not just the auxiliary verb, we depict *not* as a sentence modifier.

A schematic representation of this would be as follows:

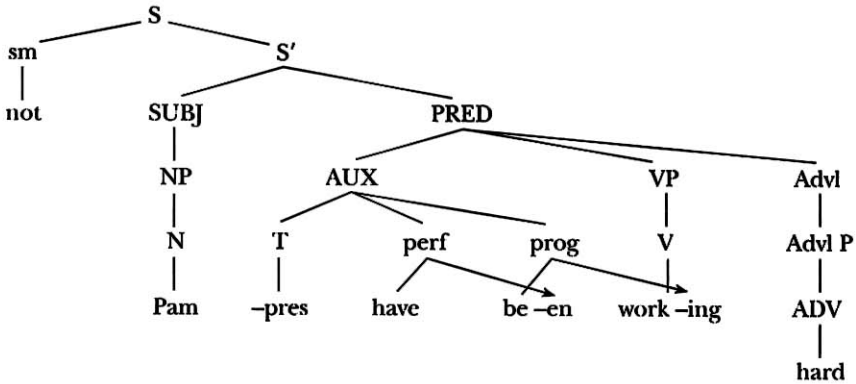


To be more precise, the basic structure for sentences 2(b) and 5(b) are as follows:

2. (b) It is not going to rain on Monday.



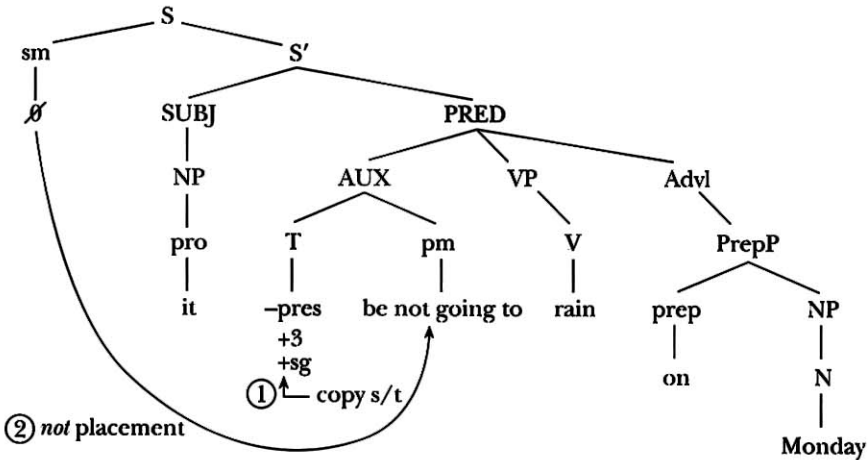
5. (b) Pam hasn't been working hard.



**Not Placement**

To derive the surface structure from the base we must call upon the *not* placement rule. Its function is to place the *not* particle in its proper position in English—after the operator.

It is not going to rain on Monday.



What would also have to happen is for subject features to be copied on the tense before *not* placement and then for morphology (which includes subject-verb agreement) to apply after it. The rules would apply in this order:

- output of base: not it -pres be going to rain on Monday
- copy s/t: not it -pres [+ 3 + sg] be going to rain on Monday
- not placement: it -pres [+ 3 + sg] be not going to rain on Monday
- morphology: It is not going to rain on Monday.

**Not Contraction**

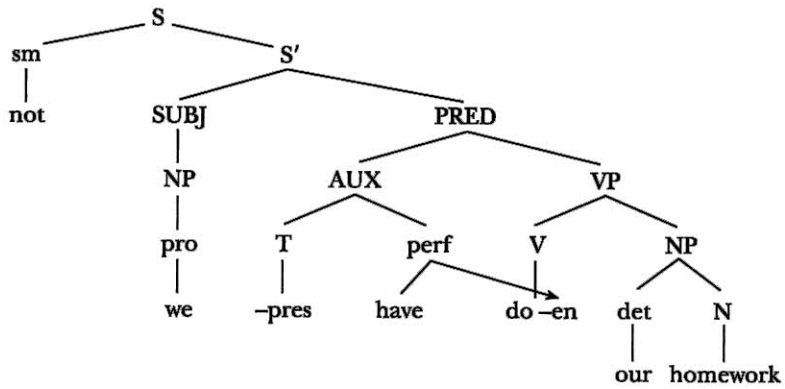
We also need an optional rule<sup>6</sup> that reduces *not* to *-n't* and attaches it to the appropriate verb. This rule will account for the contracted form of *not* found in sentences 3(b), 4(b), and 5(b). Many combinations of *-n't* with an auxiliary verb are regular, but some are irregular:<sup>7</sup>

*Regular—disyllabic negatives*  
 did + n't → didn't  
 would + n't → wouldn't  
 have + n't → haven't  
 etc.

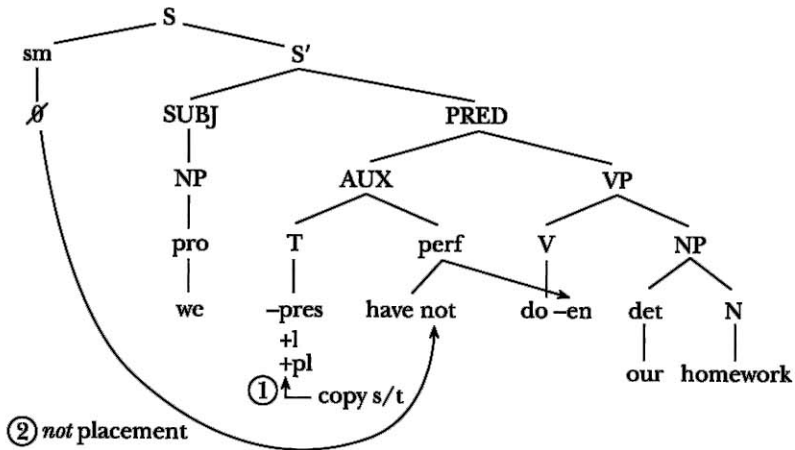
*Irregular (orthographically and/or phonologically)—monosyllabic negatives*  
 will + n't → won't ("ll" is lost, vowel changes)  
 can + n't → can't (one "n" lost)  
 do + n't → don't (vowel sound changes)

With this *not* contraction rule we can now also produce sentences such as 3(b), 4(b), and 5(b). For example, here is the tree for sentence 3(b):

We haven't done our homework.



And now this is what it would look like after copy s/t and *not* placement:





### With Other Main Verbs

Another aspect of English that has changed over the years is the fact that it is no longer grammatical, as it was in the Elizabethan period, to place the negative particle after a main verb other than *be*.<sup>8</sup>

\*I go not.

Instead, the *do* verb of modern English, already extant in the fifteenth century, had become standard for forming negatives by the seventeenth:

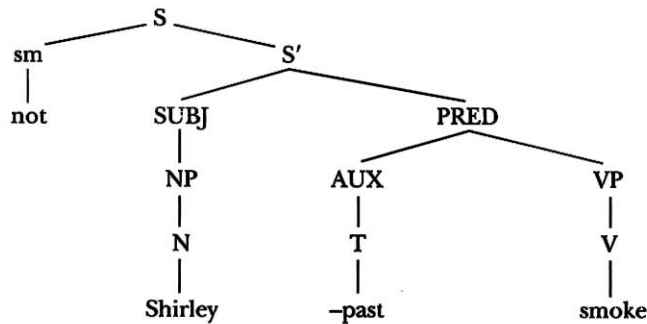
I do not go.

Thus, in modern English, when there is no other operator in a negative sentence, we insert the auxiliary verb *do* to perform the function of operator, to carry the tense and permit the negative to attach to it in contracted form.

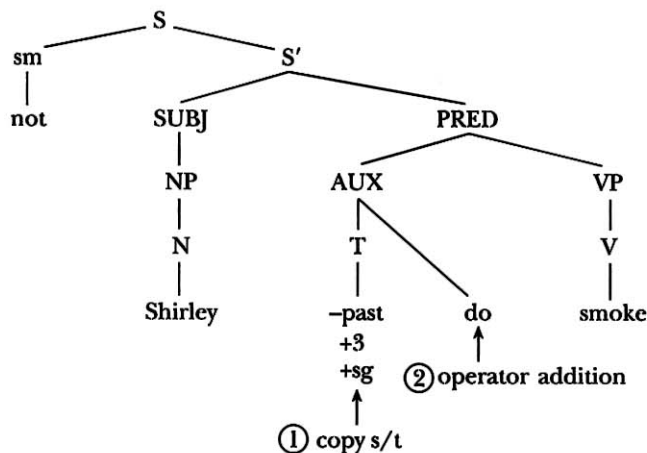
9. (a) Muriel plays the piano.      (b) Muriel does not/doesn't play the piano.  
10. (a) Shirley smoked.            (b) Shirley did not smoke/didn't smoke.

This type of sentence negation is accomplished through a mapping rule called operator addition. Here's an example of a tree for a negative sentence with *do*:

Shirley didn't smoke.

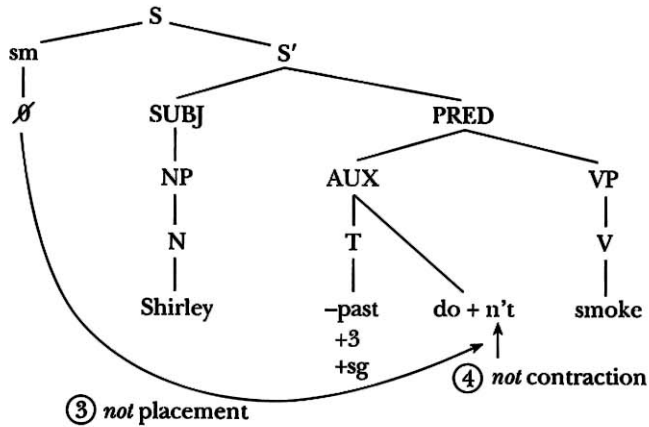


Here's how it looks after copy *s/t* and operator addition:





After *not* placement and *not* contraction, the tree would look like this:



Here's how the mapping rules would apply:

output of base: not Shirley -past smoke  
 copy s/t: not Shirley -past [+ 3 + sg] smoke  
 operator addition: not Shirley -past [+ 3 + sg] do smoke  
 not placement: Shirley -past [+ 3 + sg] do not smoke  
 not contraction: Shirley -past [+ 3 + sg] do + n't smoke  
 morphology: Shirley didn't smoke

One dialect difference that we should note is that in the stative possessive use of the verb *have*, American English prefers the *do* auxiliary in negatives while British English treats the *have* verb itself as an auxiliary:

Audrey doesn't have a clue. (American English)  
 Audrey hasn't a clue. (British English)

A more colloquial form of this sentence used in both dialects employs *have got* where the *have* behaves as an operator.

Audrey hasn't got a clue.

## THE MEANING OF NEGATION

Logicians would say there is a symmetry between affirmative and negative propositions:

affirmative statement: It is the case that . . .

negative statement: It is *not* the case that . . .

As you will see in this section and the one that follows, however, the meaning and use of negatives are not as straightforward as this analysis makes it seem. Accordingly, we begin this section of the chapter by acknowledging that the negative particle can have different meanings. Bloom (1970), in her pioneering study of the acquisition of negation by children whose first language is English, observed that most children in her study learned the word *no* rather quickly (certainly by the "terrible two's"!), but used it for a variety of meanings/purposes. For instance, in the data that Bloom collected, the children said "*No*" for nonexistence, rejection, and denial:

"No pocket."	[There are no pockets]	(nonexistence)
"No dirty soap."	[I don't want . . .]	(rejection)
"No truck."	[This isn't a truck.]	(denial)

While acknowledging that a developmental psychologist might need to distinguish the meaning of nonexistence from denial, linguist Tottie (1991) sees nonexistence as a subcategory of denial. Saying something doesn't exist is denying the (at least implicit) assertion that it does exist. In other words, "No truck," is a denial of the (possibly implicit) assertion "This is a truck." Denials, then, may be either explicitly expressed or contextually inferred. Compare the following from Tottie (1991:21):

A: John is married.            X: John's wife is a teacher.  
 B: John isn't. (married)    Y: John isn't even married.

*B* denies what *A* has just explicitly stated, but *Y* merely denies the implicit presupposition of *X*, the belief of *X* that John is married. Thus, we may sum up Tottie's treatment of the meaning of negation in English in the following way. There are two meanings of negation in English, rejection and denial, with denial being either explicit or implicit.

- |                                   |             |   |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|---|
| 1. Rejection (including refusals) |             | A: Would you care for scotch?<br>B: No, thanks. I don't drink.  |
| 2. Denial                         | a. Explicit | A: That dress must have been very expensive.<br>B: It wasn't (expensive). In fact, I bought it at a sale. |
|                                   | b. Implicit | A: Bill seems to have got lost.<br>B: Yeah. He must not have driven this way before.                      |

Tottie also mentions a category she calls "supports," in which listeners signal that the information speakers are giving them is received.

A: but I left that out because  
 B: yes  
 A: it wasn't typical  
 B: no

This category, however, represents only about 8 percent of Tottie's data.

As his own refinement of the denial category, Horn (1989) notes that by denying something, a person can be denying (1) the truth value of the previous proposition or (2) its form. Horn calls examples of the latter "metalinguistic" (p. 371):

"I didn't manage to trap two mongeese, I managed to trap two mongooses."

where the morphological form of the prior assertion is challenged, and

"Grandpa isn't feeling lousy, Johnny, he's just a tad indisposed."

where the register or stylistic level is being corrected.

## THE SCOPE OF NEGATION

When we are concerned with the meaning of the negative in English, we must also be concerned with its scope. It is usually said that what is negated in a sentence is everything that comes after the negative particle until the end of the clause.<sup>9</sup> Thus, there is a meaning contrast in the following pair of sentences:

Joe obviously hasn't understood a word. (It is obvious that he did not.)  
 Joe hasn't obviously understood a word. (It is not obvious that he did.)

It follows then that typically the subject of an English sentence will be outside the scope of sentential negation, but it can, of course, be negated with the negative determiner *no*.

\*Not anyone was planning to come.  
No one was planning to come.

We have already pointed out that negation can occur at three levels. Thus, the first sentence in the following set exemplifies lexical negation, the second sentence illustrates phrasal negation, and the third sentential negation.

1. Harry is uncoordinated.
2. Marge has decided not to pay her taxes.
3. John is not at home.

We can demonstrate that only the third sentence has negation that is sentential in scope by adding a tag question to each. When tag questions in their unmarked form are negative, the sentence is affirmative; when they are affirmative, the sentence is negative.

1. Harry is uncoordinated, isn't he?
2. Marge has decided not to pay her taxes, hasn't she?
3. John is not at home, is he?

The same question tag test can show that while *no* is only a determiner, its scope can be sentential.

No one came to fix the plumbing, did they?

The same is true for the other negative forms associated with *no*:

Nothing is going right, is it?

and with *not*:

They never answered, did they?

We have already noted that unlike other languages, Standard English does not permit double negation.

I didn't buy no books. (non-standard)

This is a somewhat simplified rule, however, because although it isn't possible to have two negatives that are sentential in scope, it is possible to have a lexical with a phrasal negative or a phrasal or lexical negative with a sentential negative. Here are two examples: the first from the autobiographical account *Crossing to Avalon* (Bolen 1994: 105), and the second from the sports pages of a local newspaper (1/16/95). We have added the italics.

*Unable to not go on*, she was then confronted with the necessity of accomplishing a series of initially impossible tasks.

[National Football League cornerback] Darrien Gordon said, "The one thing you *don't want to feel is not respected*."

## A SHIFT IN MEANING

Usually, when you negate something, the basic meaning of the proposition is maintained in its negative form. In English, however, this is not true in at least three cases:

1. In the affirmative, *must* can convey obligation, as can its phrasal counterpart *have to*:

We *must* be on time. (obligation)  
We *have to* be on time. (obligation)

In the negative, however, the meaning of *must* shifts.

We *mustn't* be at school until 9:00. (It's prohibited that we arrive before 9:00.)  
 We *don't have to* be at school until 9:00. (no obligation)

2. Although there can be synonymy between affixal and nonaffixal negation,

I dislike lima beans. = I don't like lima beans.

often they are not semantic equivalents. Semantic nonequivalence occurs when there is a middle condition:

He is unhappy. ≠ He is not happy. (He could be not happy, and not unhappy too.)

or when there is an adverbial intensifier:

This is totally untrue. ≠ This is not totally true.  
 His laugh was so unreal. ≠ His laugh wasn't so real.

Semantic nonequivalence can also occur in the interaction of *not-* versus *no-*negation with quantifiers:

All the guests didn't drink wine. ≠ All the guests drank no wine.

between sentential negation and negation in prepositional phrases,

My aerobics class isn't continuing for any clear reason. ≠ My aerobics class is continuing for no clear reason.

and before "non-pejorative" nouns (Bailey 1997):

He's not a doctor. ≠ He's no doctor.

Here *no-*negation assumes that he is a doctor, but not a very satisfactory one.

3. Finally, there is semantic nonequivalence between positive comparatives and negative equatives with negative polarity adjectives:<sup>10</sup>

Fran is older than Emily. (positive comparative)  
 Fran is not as young as Emily. (negative equative)

With the comparative we have no real idea about the age of the two people involved. They could be young or elderly or any age in between. With the negative equative, however, the implication is that both people are young. We will have more to say about negative equatives in the section of this chapter on the use of the negative system.

### SOME VERSUS ANY

The last area we need to deal with regarding meaning and the system of negation has to do with words that accompany the negative particle. Many textbooks point out that following a negative particle, *some* in an affirmative sentence changes to *any* in a negative one.

Laura bought *some* cheese.      Laura didn't buy *any* cheese.

This is true even when *some* is part of an indefinite compound pronoun:

Stan has *something* to wear to the party.      Stan doesn't have *anything* to wear to the party.

While this is probably a useful generalization to offer beginning-level students, more advanced-level students should know that this is not always the case. *Some* and *any* have actually two main meanings, and one of the meanings is compatible with negation. It is, in fact, possible for *some* to occur in a negative sentence when a meaning of identity is invoked:

I don't eat *some* foods—lima beans, for example.

In a negative sentence, the *some* is stressed. When *some/any* refer to an indefinite quantity or amount (such as in the sentences above with Laura and Stan), *some* is weakly stressed and occurs with positive sentences. It is not used with ordinary negative statements. It is also possible for stressed *any* to occur in an affirmative sentence:

Anyone can do that.

Here, *any* refers to a person of such unspecified identity that it refers to virtually all persons.

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## USE OF THE NEGATIVE SYSTEM

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### SOCIAL FUNCTIONS

It is said that while affirmatives and negatives often have a logical semantic symmetry, they have a functional asymmetry: while affirmatives are standardly used to introduce propositions, the chief use of negatives is directed at a proposition already in the discourse (Horn 1989: 202–203). The claim is that negatives are used more to respond than to initiate. In social interaction, then, a negative assertion can be a contrary, denying speech act (Givón 1993: 193). As such, we might expect its use to vary with regard to the relative social position of interlocutors; and when there is a marked difference between them, we might expect the subordinate-status speaker to use other means of registering disagreement, such as “Perhaps you may wish to consider an alternative.”

This expectation was supported by Yaeger-Dror (1985), who has shown that when the negative utterance can be construed as showing disagreement, it is generally realized with reduced intensity and nonprominent pitch on the negative elements. Although one might expect that the negative, being new information, would receive prominent stress, in fact the stress is reduced to mitigate the disagreement, presumably in the interest of maintaining social harmony. Interestingly enough, when negatives are used in disagreeing with oneself or when agreeing with the previous speaker, they are realized with prominent pitch on the negative, often accompanied by enhanced intensity. Here is an example of a prominent negative showing agreement, adapted from Yaeger-Dror (1985:216):

A: You see the fault I am getting at with the schools, they haven't got an answer to the problem.

B: No! They don't.

A: But they think they do.

B: I agree with you.

This is an apt time to remind readers that speech acts come in many forms. For example, we have seen that one of the meanings of the negative is refusal. It does not follow, though, that all refusals have to be negative in form. In investigating refusals made by English and Arabic speakers, Stevens (1993) found very few outright *no*'s in the responses of native-speaking subjects in either language. Nonetheless, there were “pragmatic failures” among the refusal strategies adopted by Arabic speakers speaking in English. For instance, the chiding strategy (reprimanding someone as a way of refusing an offer) that works in Arabic is pragmatically inappropriate in English.



Don't make me mad; keep your money with you. (a refusal to another's offer to pay his/her own share of a movie admission)<sup>11</sup>

Similarly, Snipp (1992), studying refusal strategies of Japanese EFL speakers, found that the speakers' intended refusals were sometimes misconstrued by native English speakers because of their indirectness.

For instance B, a native Japanese speaker, is indirectly refusing A's request. A, an English speaker, does not necessarily understand that she is being refused.

A: Nice scarf! Can I borrow it to wear to the dance tomorrow?

B: It is new.

A: Yes. I didn't think I saw you wearing it before.

Not only can negatives seem to be too direct for certain speech acts; paradoxically, negatives can be used to soften other speech acts in the presence of a perceived social status gap:

Won't you come in, please? (Come in.)

I don't suppose you've had the chance yet. (Have you had the chance yet?)

## NOT VERSUS NO

Earlier, we spoke of the semantic nonequivalence of the negative particles *not* and *no* in certain structures, such as those with quantifiers. At other occasions, though, it is difficult to discern a meaning difference between them.

I don't have any time to help this weekend.

I have no time to help this weekend.

What, then, constitutes the difference?

From an examination of the conversations in the London-Lund Corpus and of written prose in the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen Corpus,<sup>12</sup> a significantly different distribution of the two types of negation in the spoken and written samples was found. The proportions of *not*-negation and *no*-negation were almost exactly reversed in speech and writing. In speech there was 66 percent *not*-negation and 34 percent *no*-negation, and in writing, there was 37 percent *not*-negation and 63 percent *no*-negation. This difference is significant at  $p < .001$  (Tottie 1991:321).

The reason for this discrepancy is presumably due to the fact that *no*-negation antedates *not*-negation, and thus the older form is preserved in writing, which is more formal and conservative than speech. When *no*-negation occurs, it is often in collocations such as *see no reason*; *no more*, *no less*; *no longer*; in implicit denials in existential constructions (*There is no milk in the house*) as compared with contrastive *not*-negation in explicit denials (*There isn't any milk in the house*); and in object noun phrases of high-frequency lexical verbs such as *have* (stative possessive), *make*, *give*, and *do* (as a main verb)—for example, *She has no excuse*.

A contextual analysis of North American English by Tai (1995) bears out Tottie's findings. Although they are trends, not absolutes, *not any* is more likely to occur in speaking and explicit denials. Tai also found the trends to hold for the distribution of *not anything* and *nothing* (i.e., *not anything* tended to be found more in speaking and explicit denials), although the trends were somewhat weaker. What was an additional factor with this pair, though, was syntactic complexity. While *not anything* goes with shorter modifiers, *nothing* goes with long modifiers.

Most mail these days could consist of nothing that could truly be called a letter.

It's just as well, because we can't do anything with it. (Tai 1995)

## AFFIXAL VERSUS NONAFFIXAL NEGATION

The most pertinent finding in Tottie's study on the usage difference between affixal and nonaffixal negation was that affixal negation was far more prevalent in writing than in speech. In fact, two-thirds of the negatives in the written sample were affixal negatives, whereas two-thirds of the negatives in the spoken sample were nonaffixal. A great many of the affixal negatives were prenominal adjectives, such as *impossible* as in *the impossible dream*. Tottie attributes this finding to the fact that different discourse strategies are used in speaking and writing due to differences in production conditions, such as online production under time pressure in conversation, in contrast to more planning time available in the writing process. Because of the greater pressure imposed on speakers, they tend to produce utterances where one idea follows another in a fragmented discourse, whereas writers typically have more time to combine and superimpose ideas and can, therefore, mold their thoughts into a more integrated discourse (cf. Chafe, 1982). The use of prenominal or attributive adjectives constitutes "the single most prevalent feature of written language," according to Chafe (1982:42). Even when they use adjectives as subject predicates (*The dream is impossible*) rather than as premodifiers, writers prefer to use the more integrated type with affixal negation.

Another reason that affixal negation is favored in writing is that it is used in conjoined structures (*difficult and unbearable*/\**difficult and not bearable*), and conjoined phrases and complex clauses are more characteristic of writing than speaking.

## CONTRACTED VERSUS UNCONTRACTED NEGATIVES

A way to give prominence to the negative is to keep it in its uncontracted form:

Maureen hasn't decided to sell her house.

Maureen has not decided to sell her house.

In addition to giving the negative more emphasis, the sentence with the uncontracted *not* is considered more formal. This formality is the reason for the prescriptive rule warning against the use of contractions in writing. It seems, though, that American English is becoming more accepting (at least compared with British English) when it comes to using contractions in writing (cf. Biber 1988), and we have chosen to use them in this text.

An informal way of still giving prominence to the negative would be to contract the subject and the auxiliary verb rather than the auxiliary verb and *not*:

They're not going to be able to make it.

Because the negative is retained in its full form, it is more emphatic than its contracted *not* counterpart. For this reason, uncontracted *not* is often used in statements that contradict or correct a misunderstanding.

(Two people looking at a photograph)    A: And that must be your brother.

B: That's not my brother—it's my cousin.

## NEGATIVE EQUATIVES

Returning briefly to our discussion concerning the contrast between comparatives and negative equatives, we should comment on their potential different uses. In general, it is considered more tactful to use negative equatives rather than comparatives, when the adjective has negative polarity. For example, in the following, the negative polarity adjective *dumb* is very rude in the comparative, whereas its positive polarity counterpart in a negative equative is considered more indirect and less rude:

Moe is dumber than Curly.

Moe is not as intelligent as Curly.

## FUNCTIONAL NEGATIVES

We conclude this use section of the chapter by pointing out that just as words need not be marked affixally in order to convey negativity (cf. Jespersen's inherent negatives), so, too, can positive statements and questions have negative meaning, depending on the discourse context.

*Joe: Did you ace the final, Ray?*

*Ray: Are you kidding? I'm lucky I passed!*

In other words, although the question and statement in Ray's response are formally positive, they function as negatives.<sup>13</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter provides an introduction to the negative system in English. As you no doubt can tell, because of the many words and structures that are included in the system, you will encounter the topic of negation repeatedly in the chapters that follow. Students will need a great deal of practice with the form of the negative, which in our experience represents their greatest long-term challenge.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** When students are first learning to place the negative particle *not* in its correct position in sentences, it is useful for them to practice unscrambling sentences with auxiliary verbs and the copula *be*. Write 12 to 15 sentences. Put one word of each sentence on a card or slip of paper.

JEAN-GUY	MAY	NOT	BE	GOING	TO	FRANCE	NEXT	SUMMER
BUDI	IS	NOT	AN	ENGINEER				
NORIKO	HAS	NOT	VISITED	CANADA				

Shuffle the cards for each sentence and give three sets of shuffled cards to each small group of students. The students' task is to unscramble each of the three sentences and put them in grammatical order. When the groups are finished, they should mix the cards for each sentence again and swap cards with another group. The procedure should be repeated several times so that each group gets to practice unscrambling at least 12 sentences. Afterwards, you can ask the students to make their observations concerning the placement of the *not* in sentences with auxiliary or *be* verbs.

**2. Use.** Tell students the sentences they made are accurate, but an English speaker would probably not use the full form of the negative. Have students remove the card with the *not* on it in each of the final set of three sentences they were working on, turn it over and write the contraction *-n't* on the reverse side. Students should put the contraction next to the verb to which it is attached. They should then read the sentences out loud. You can correct their pronunciation of the contracted form as needed.

**3. Form.** As a presentation activity, to introduce your students to the need for the operator *do*, a flannelboard with words and inflections on slips of paper or an overhead projector with words and inflections on individual pieces of plastic comes in handy. Present the class with the following:

JOHN   CAN   SWIM

Next, put strips of paper or plastic with NOT and DIVE above the sentence and ask students to place them in the sentence properly. After practicing a few of these familiar sentences with the *be* verb or other auxiliary verbs, you can introduce the *do* beginning with plural subjects such as the following:

CHILDREN   LIKE   CANDY

Then CANDY is changed to HOMEWORK, and DO and NOT are placed above the new sentence. Students are asked where the new words go. You should help students see that the *do* verb is carrying the tense and showing number agreement with the subject. This might become clearer when you introduce the next sentence:

MARIA   SPEAKS   S   SPANISH

After SPANISH has been changed to CHINESE, the DO and NOT are again placed above the sentence and students asked to put them in the right position in the new sentence. Then the S on speaks is moved over to follow DO (the first verb form in the sentence), at which point a newly introduced form, DOES, can be substituted for the two strips DO and S. Students should have an opportunity to practice several more of these sentences together before doing them on their own.

Notice that even when working on form, we don't ignore meaning. By changing the sentence from "John can swim" to "John cannot dive," rather than "John cannot swim," the truth value of the negative is upheld.

**4. Meaning.** Students can practice contradicting when you or other students deliberately make statements about members of the class that are not true (along with a few that are true). For example:

*Teacher:* Maria comes from China.

The class answers:

*Students:* No, she doesn't. She comes from Argentina.

*Teacher:* The person behind Paulo is Jorge.

The class answers:

*Students:* No, it isn't. It's Wu Min.

*Teacher:* Boris is married.

*Students:* Yes, Boris is married.

**5. Meaning.** Show students two pictures that have differences between them. Ask students to find the differences and use negative sentences to define them. In other words, they have to say what is not in one picture as contrasted with another. Later, divide the group into pairs and give each student a picture, which the student is not allowed to

show. Each student has to converse with his/her partner to discover the differences between their pictures without showing the pictures (adapted from Ur 1988). For example:

A: There are two cars in picture A.

B: There are not two cars in picture B. There is one car.

**6. Form.** While students will need practice in producing all the contracted forms of negation, one form that may give them special difficulty in listening is the colloquial English *don't* in *I da wanna go* and *I dunno*. Another is *can't*, since English speakers distinguish *He can come* from *He can't come* more from its rhythmic structure and vowel quality than from its other segmental sounds.

He can come [hiy kən kʌm]

He can't come [hiy kæn kʌm]

Give students practice listening to you say one or the other of these with regard to a particular skill. You can hold up contrasting pictures and ask students to point to the one that shows what she says.

T: (holds up two pictures) He can play the piano.

Students point to one of the pictures.

T: Yes. (holds up two new pictures) He can't swim.

Students point to one of the pictures.

etc.

**7. Meaning.** In practicing the difference between *don't have to* and *must not*, students could be asked to make comparative statements about classroom manners in the countries they come from and the United States. For example:

In Malaysia, you must stand when the teacher enters the classroom, but in the United States, you don't have to.

In Malaysia, you mustn't speak unless the teacher calls on you. That's sometimes true in the United States too.

**8. Use.** Intermediate-level students could learn to make tactful comparisons using negative equatives. They could be asked to bring in one or two pictures of famous people that they cut out of magazines. They could then hang the pictures up and make statements like the following:

Madonna is not as talented as Meryl Streep.

Arnold Schwarzenegger's new movie is not as good as his last one.

etc.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide original example sentences to illustrate the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples:
 

a. sentence-level negation	d. operator addition	g. negative equative
b. phrasal negation	e. <i>not</i> contraction	h. negative indefinite pronoun
c. lexical negation	f. <i>no</i> determiner	



2. Draw the trees and say which mapping rules apply:
  - a. Alice doesn't laugh at my jokes.
  - b. They have no children.
  - c. Meg is not about to listen to you.
  - d. I can't understand the lyrics.
  - e. The boys aren't playing football this year.
3. In what way are the following sentences in each set related? How are they different?
  - a. Sam is not working these days.  
Sam's not working these days.  
Sam isn't working these days.
  - b. Bill is shorter than Richard.  
Bill is not as tall as Richard.
  - c. Trudy doesn't remember anyone.  
Trudy remembers no one.
  - d. I would say that is inadvisable.  
I would say that is not advisable.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

4. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct them?
  - a. \*That boy no like me.
  - b. \*I not understand.
  - c. \*Seth is very unpatient.
  - d. He don't worry. (nonstandard)
  - e. I didn't do nothing. (nonstandard)
  - f. \*Not any students will come to school today.
5. What is the difference between the following two sentences:

They might not have tried before.  
They might have not tried before.
6. A few years ago, a way of negating in English was jokingly used in the movie "Wayne's World":

You're my best friend . . . not.

Actually, this form has been around for a number of years (Sheidlower and Lighter 1993). How does this form of negation differ from Standard English and what is its purpose?
7. A student tells you that he has been told that *any* is always used in place of *some* in a negative sentence, but that he heard another teacher say the following: *I can't recall some of their names*. The student asks you if this is grammatical. What would you say?
8. Many relatively advanced ESL/EFL students systematically refuse to contract the negative particle in their speech. How would you teach them the fact that contraction is normally used in speech and informal writing?
9. Early on in this chapter we listed some verbs that are inherently negative. Besides the semantics of verbs like *fail*, what sort of syntactic evidence can you adduce that would demonstrate their negativity?

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- Yaeger-Dror, M. (1985). "Intonational Prominence on Negatives in English." *Language and Speech* 28:197–230.

### Suggestions for Further Reading

*For a classic early transformational treatment of negation, see:*

Klima, E. (1964). "Negation in English." In J. Fodor and J. Katz (eds.), *The Structure of Language*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 246–323.

*For another helpful analysis of negation, see*

Dahl, O. (1979). "Typology of Sentence Negation." *Linguistics* 17:79–106.

*For pedagogical help with basic negative formation, see:*

Badalamenti, V., and C. Henner Stanchina (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 1 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass: Heinle & Heinle.

*For pedagogical suggestions with negative equatives, see:*

Riggenbach, H., and V. Samuda (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 2 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass: Heinle & Heinle.

### ENDNOTES:

1. For example, in Bahasa Indonesia, *bukan* is used to negate a nominal; *tidak* negates verbs, adjectives, and adverbials; and *belum* negates a past action, event, or state and could be glossed as "not yet."

2. A similar sort of pattern is the use of *no-* as an adjective-forming prefix as in, for example, *no-fault insurance*, *no-wax floors*, *no-good rascal*, *no-win situation*, and so on.

3. Sometimes this assimilation is overgeneralized to other parts of speech where the same *in-* is not used as a negative prefix. For example, you may hear people say /imput/ instead of /input/ for *input*.

4. Readers might expect to see *none* on this list. Actually, *none* is foremost a quantifier (see Chapter 17) and only incidentally pronominal.
5. Close (1992) identifies six such operations:
- To make negatives: *I haven't done my homework.*
  - To make questions: *Have you done your homework?*
  - To make negative questions: *Haven't you done your homework?*
  - To make tag questions: *You've done your homework, haven't you?*
  - To emphasize: *I háve done my homework.*  
(the operator is stressed)
  - To substitute for the whole predicate: *My brother hasn't done his homework, but I have.*  
(in order to avoid repetition)
6. A mapping rule that must be applied to produce a grammatical sentence is “obligatory.” Such is the case with *not*-placement. A mapping rule that may be applied to a grammatical sequence to produce a stylistic variation is “optional.”
7. And some are rarely if ever contracted; e.g., \**mayn't*, ?*oughtn't*. Horn (1989:480) argues that for this reason, as well as for others, contracted auxiliary verbs should be analyzed as separate lexical items rather than syntactic combinations of sentential *not* and the first auxiliary verb. While Horn's contention has linguistic merit, for ESL/EFL pedagogical reasons it seems to make sense to treat the contracted auxiliary verb as being syntactically derived from *not* + auxiliary verb.
8. One exception is its use in stylized rhetoric. Remember John F. Kennedy's exhortation when he was inaugurated President of the United States: “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.” It is also used in certain other formulaic utterances, such as, *I kid you not*, *She loves me not*.
9. As Givón (1993) points out, it is possible for negation of a main clause or negation of a complement clause to yield similar, if not identical, meanings:

I don't think that she came.  
I think that she didn't come.

This is not true for all verbs, however. Common verbs that follow this pattern are *believe*, *expect*, *feel*, *imagine*, *intend*, *plan*, *propose*, *reckon*, *suppose*, *think*, *want*, and *wish*.

10. *Old* is perceived as positive and *young* as negative for age in that we always ask, “How old are you?” See the discussions in Chapters 20 and 34 for more on the polarity feature of adjectives.
11. Stevens attributes this strategy to the fact that it is not culturally appropriate in Arab society to go “Dutch treat.”
12. These are British-English corpora but the findings are believed to hold for American English as well, with the possible exception that American English favors *not*-negation even more than British English.
13. Conversely, some formal negatives function as ironic positive statements rather than negatives—for example,

I can't believe it!

# YES/NO QUESTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

Yes/no questions are often defined as questions for which either “yes” or “no” is the expected answer:

Are you going to the party?  $\begin{cases} \text{Yes (I am).} \\ \text{No (I'm not).} \end{cases}$

A syntactic rule inverting the subject and operator gives rise to the characteristic form of yes/no questions in English

Lucille is studying in Ypsilanti this semester.  
Is Lucille studying in Ypsilanti this semester? [+ inversion + rising intonation]

Inversion such as this is relatively rare among the world’s languages. A few languages other than English use inversion in making questions—German, for example—but on the whole, most languages do not use inversion to form questions. Instead, as Ultan (1978) reports in a typological study of 79 languages from differing language families and areas of the world, most languages use a distinctive intonation pattern for questions.<sup>1</sup> The second most popular option among the languages Ultan studied was the inclusion of a special interrogative particle either at the beginning or end of the question to signal its interrogative status.

It is not surprising, then, that inversion in English yes/no questions is problematic for ESL/EFL students. Inversion has not always been used in English questions, however. At an early stage in the history of English, questions were made with the use of rising intonation alone. Only much later did inversion in question formation come into being. And the earliest form of this inversion was with the subject and the verb:

Know you the way to Ipswich?

It took much longer for the rule requiring subject and operator inversion to become standard.

Todeva (1991) has pointed out the parallelism between the evolution of the English language and the acquisition of English as either a first or second language: learners of English are known to first use rising intonation; only after several more stages do they completely master inversion to signal that they are asking a question. The following is the developmental pattern that has been observed for ESL learners, whose pseudonyms are in parentheses (Hatch and Wagner-Gough 1976):



Stage I: Rising intonation

You go? (Zoila)

(either transferred from the learners' first language, the L1, or the result of an interlanguage communicative strategy)

Stage II: Tag questions

George come school, no? (Ken)

Stage III: Modal inversion

Can I play? (Paul)

Stage IV: *Be* inversion

Are you play? (Homer)

Stage V: *Do* support

Do you like ice cream?

Of course, as with all second language (L2) data, these stages are not discrete or categorical, and within each there is certainly individual variation. Nonetheless, it can generally be said that the rule of inversion is the major formal challenge for students, and its mastery takes a while. The challenge is no doubt made more difficult by the fact that native speakers frequently do not invert questions in conversational English; hence, the input to which ESL/EFL learners are exposed is heterogeneous with regard to inversion. We return to this point later.

In this chapter, then, we begin by examining the inversion rule in English under the heading of form. Other comments about form are made with regard to the intonation pattern of yes/no questions and the structure of short answers. As is our custom, we also comment on the meaning of yes/no questions and their formal variants: negative yes/no questions, focused yes/no questions, and uninverted yes/no questions. Next, we revisit the distinction between *some* and *any* that we introduced in the previous chapter. In the section on use, we make some observations about short answers to yes/no questions. We also discuss contraction in negative questions and the use of elliptical questions. We conclude this chapter by pointing out other functions that yes/no questions can fulfill. In Chapter 13, we deal with *wh*- questions that ask for information. Later in the book, in Chapter 33, we discuss embedded questions.

## THE FORM OF YES/NO QUESTIONS

### SUBJECT-OPERATOR INVERSION

#### With an Auxiliary Verb

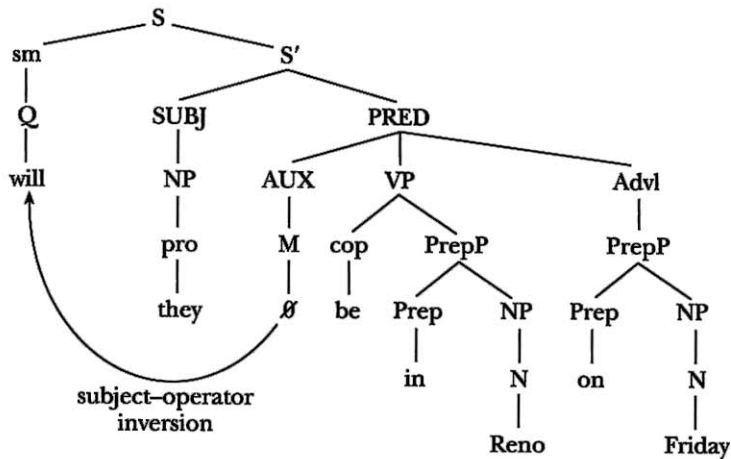
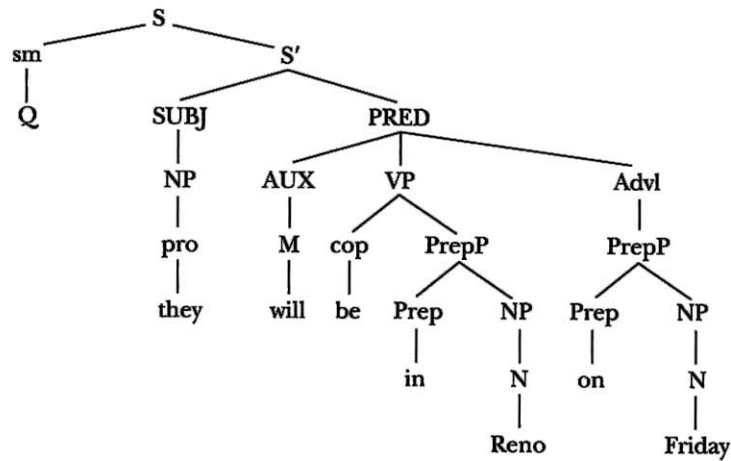
Consider the following questions:

1. Will they be in Reno on Friday?
2. Was she able to finish in time?
3. Has Alice gone home?
4. Are you doing anything tomorrow?

Each of these four questions begins with an auxiliary verb. The mapping rule that accounts for the auxiliary verbs at the head of each sentence is a movement rule called subject-operator inversion. This rule moves the operator and the tense marker, if there is one present, to a position before the subject. Here is an example of how the rule operates when it is applied to the base structure underlying the first question:

Will they be in Reno on Friday?





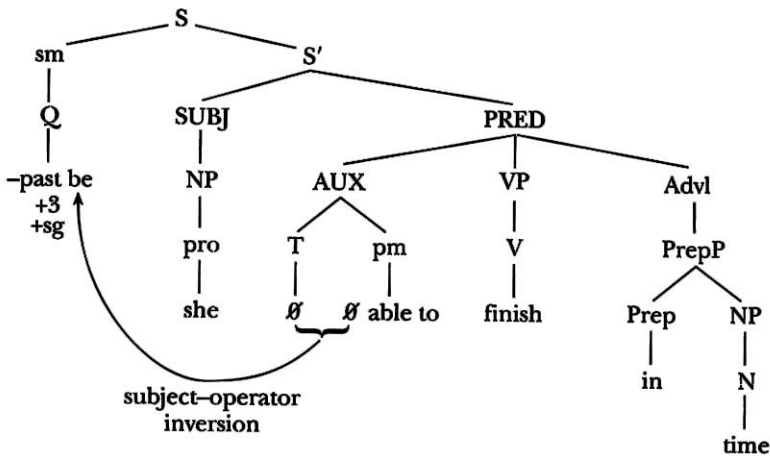
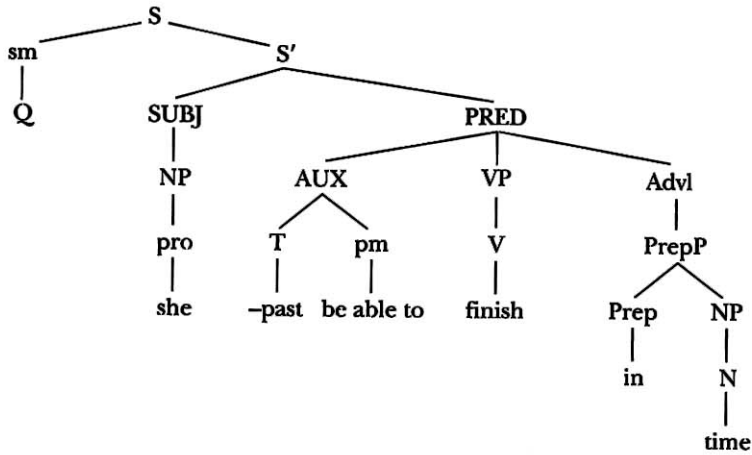
The Q marker is treated as a sentence marker because its scope applies to the whole sentence. You can think of it as a device that triggers subject-operator inversion and ensures acceptable yes/no question intonation (which we discuss below).

Notice that if this sentence had two auxiliary verbs—for example, if we were to add *be + ing* to the *will* in question 1—it is only the *first* auxiliary verb in the auxiliary string, the

**Will they be gambling in Reno on Friday?**

operator, that is inverted with the subject. Furthermore, if the auxiliary has more than one element, as does the phrasal modal in question 2, then it is only the *first* of the elements in the first auxiliary verb, again the operator, which, along with the tense marker, if there is one, is inverted with the subject. Here are the trees for question 2 as an illustration of this last point.

**Was she able to finish in time?**



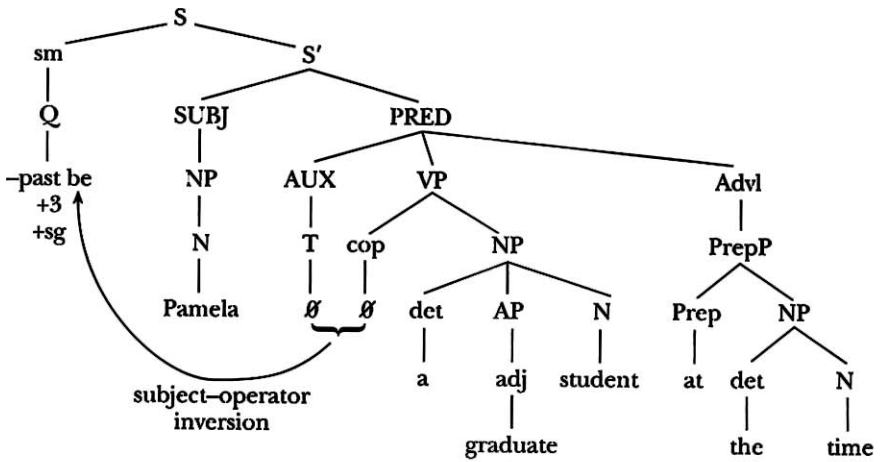
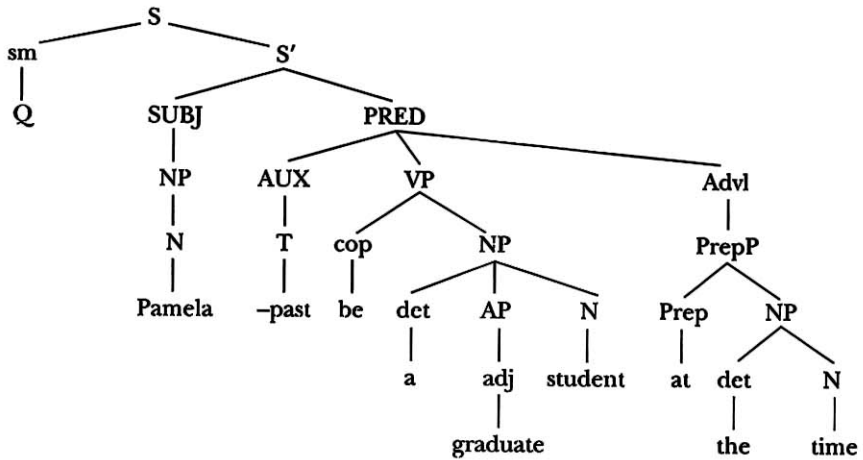
Here is how it would look with all the mapping rules:

- output of base: Q she -past be able to finish in time
- copy s/t: Q she -past [+ 3 + sg ] be able to finish in time
- subject-operator inversion: -past [+ 3 + sg] she be able to finish in time
- morphology: Was she able to finish in time?

### With the Be Copula

As you saw in the previous chapter on negation, the negative particle (adverb) *not* is placed after the first auxiliary verb. In this chapter you have learned that it is also the first auxiliary verb that is involved in question formation. Similarly, just as the *not* follows the *be* copula verb when no auxiliary verb is present in negative sentences, so does the *be* copula verb serve as the inverted operator when no auxiliary verb is present in yes/no question formation.

- Pamela was a graduate student at the time.
- Was Pamela a graduate student at the time?



**With Other Verbs**

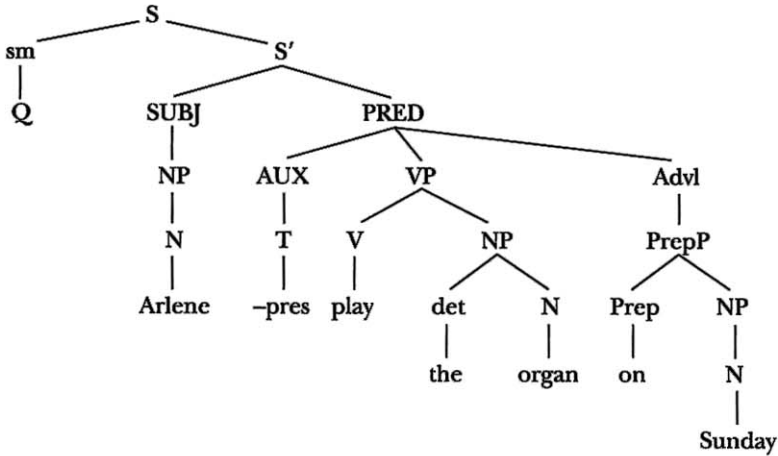
When a sentence has no auxiliary or *be* verb, a different condition obtains. Notice that we cannot simply invert the subject and the verb as we did with the *be* verb to form a grammatical question:

Arlene plays the organ on Sunday.  
 \*Plays Arlene the organ on Sunday?

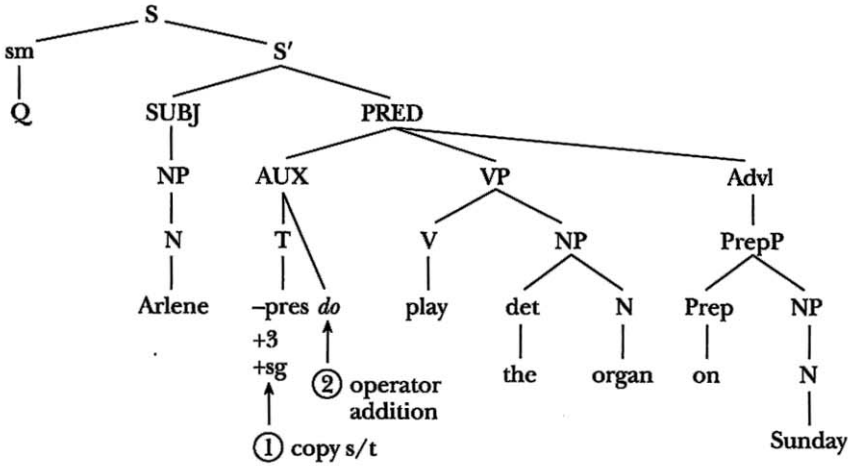
Although, as we have already noted, such forms were acceptable in historically earlier forms of English, and their equivalents are grammatical in certain languages today, such as the German and Scandinavian languages, main verb inversion with the subject is not grammatical in modern English.<sup>2</sup>

Once again we can point to the parallelism between negation and yes/no question formation. Recall that to make a sentence negative when it has no auxiliary verb or *be* verb, the verb *do* is introduced as an operator. We can invoke the same rule—namely, operator addition—to introduce the *do* to function as an operator in yes/no questions for which there is no auxiliary verb or *be* copula verb to perform this function.

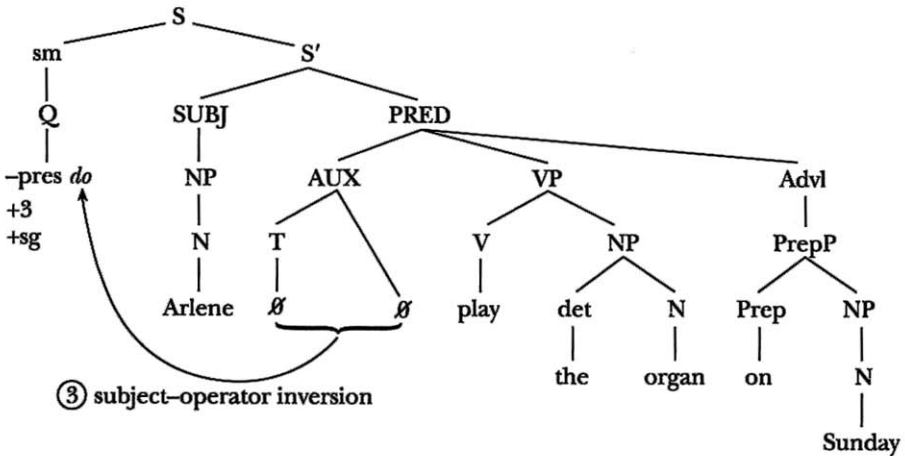
Does Arlene play the organ on Sunday?



This is how it looks after copy s/t and operator addition:



and then after subject-operator inversion:



Since subject-operator inversion cannot apply without some auxiliary verb or *be* copula that can function as an operator, the *do* verb is added to make subject-operator inversion possible.

Here is the sequence of mapping rules:

output of base: Q Arlene -pres play the organ on Sunday  
 copy s/t: Q Arlene-pres [+ 3 + sg ] play the organ on Sunday  
 operator addition: Q Arlene -pres [+ 3 + sg ] do play the organ on Sunday  
 subject-operator inversion: -pres [+ 3 + sg ] do arlene play the organ on sunday  
 morphology: Does Arlene play the organ on Sunday?

Operator addition is also needed for a few phrasal modals:

*used to* Did you use to go skiing when you lived in Vermont?  
*have to* Does Brent have to work on weekends?

In most cases, however, the first element in phrasal modals is the operator and inverts with the subject when subject-operator inversion is applied:

*be to* Are you to report tomorrow?

Notions such as subject-operator inversion and using *do* as a surrogate operator help us to gain insight into the process of question formation in English. We would not necessarily be doing our ESL/EFL students a service, however, by using such terminology. What generalizations about the form of yes/no questions can we make, then, that would be useful for our students?

ESL/EFL students need to know that in a yes/no question the first auxiliary verb in the sentence should appear before the subject and carry the tense of the question (if there is tense). If there is no auxiliary verb, the *be* copula should be moved before the subject. If there is no auxiliary verb or *be* copula, then *do* must be introduced in the auxiliary to make subject-operator inversion possible.

## INTONATION IN YES/NO QUESTIONS

In addition to inverted word order and sometimes the addition of the *do* operator, English also uses intonation to mark yes/no questions. Yes/no questions typically display a raised, nonterminal intonation.<sup>3</sup> To understand how this is articulated, consider that statement intonation in English usually rises on the last stressed syllable of the last content word and then falls on that word in the sentence. For example:


  
 Muriel is learning to use a computer.

Unmarked yes/no question intonation typically rises through the same stressed syllable and then stays high.


  
 Is Muriel learning to use a computer?



**SHORT ANSWERS TO YES/NO QUESTIONS**

It is unlikely that the response to a yes/no question will be in the form of a full sentence:

Is Ramon an engineering student?

Yes.  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{He is} \\ \text{He's} \end{array} \right\}$  an engineering student.

No. He isn't an engineering student.

Although these answers are possible, such replies may give the listener the impression that the speaker is annoyed by the question. ESL/EFL teachers should be aware of the possible negative affect expressed by a full-sentence answer to a yes/no question and not always insist on their students answering questions with full sentences, as teachers sometimes do. A more common form of answer, although this too is restricted in its distribution, as you will see in a later section on use, is the short answer:

Is Ramon an engineering student?

Yes, he is.

No, he isn't.

If the yes/no question begins with the copula *be*, as in our example sentence, the short answer is formed with the same form of the *be* verb that appeared in the question. Notice that *be* cannot be contracted in an affirmative short answer. All affirmative short answers must be followed by at least one other word, or else the full form of *be* must be used.

\*Yes, he's.

Yes, he's studying electrical engineering.

Yes, he is.

When the yes/no question contains an auxiliary verb, that operator is used in the short answer.

With a modal	Can she go?	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Yes, she can} \\ \text{No, she can't.} \end{array} \right.$
With a phrasal modal (the first element)	Is she able to go?	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Yes, she is.} \\ \text{No, she isn't.} \end{array} \right.$
With perfect aspect	Has she gone?	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Yes, she has.} \\ \text{No, she hasn't.} \end{array} \right.$
With progressive aspect	Is she going?	$\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{Yes, she is.} \\ \text{No, she isn't.} \end{array} \right.$

If the sentence contains more than one auxiliary verb, the short answer may also contain an auxiliary verb in addition to the operator, although when the second or third auxiliary verb is some form of *be*, the speaker usually omits it; for example,

With modal and perfect	Will she have gone?	Yes, she $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{will have.} \\ \text{will've.} \end{array} \right.$
		No, she $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{won't have.} \\ \text{won't've.} \end{array} \right.$
With modal, perfect, and progressive	Will she have been worrying?	Yes, she will have (been). No, she won't have (been).



## FOCUSED YES/NO QUESTIONS

So far we have been considering yes/no questions where the whole state, activity, or event is being queried. Sometimes, however, yes/no questions can be more focused in their query. A proposition may be thought to be true in general, but one of its specific components—subject, verb, object, adverbial—may be still in doubt. The uncertain element is then queried in a focused way. Consider, for example, questions below where contrastive stress is used to mark the focused elements (Givón 1993:247–248). Unlike unmarked yes/no questions, which are open with regard to the proposition being expressed, the truth of the presupposition in a focused question is presupposed but contains an indeterminate element in the focused position.

Did Megan play a practical joke on Pat? (or did *someone else*?)

Did Megan *play* a practical joke on Pat? (or only *plan* one?)

Did Megan play *a practical joke* on Pat? (or did she play *something else*, such as a trick?)

Did Megan play a practical joke *on Pat*? (or was it played *on someone else*?)

When an optional adverbial is present in the question, it automatically attracts and focuses attention in yes/no questions, because of its final position in the clause (see Chapter 2). Thus, the following focused questions query the adverbial:

Did Megan play a trick on Pat *deliberately*? { (or was it *an accident*?)  
(\*or did she not do it?)

Did Megan play a trick on Pat *last Sunday*? { (or was it on *Monday*?)  
(\*or did she not do it?)

Did Megan play a trick on Pat *at the mall*? { (or was it *somewhere else*?)  
(\*or did she not do it?)

That the interrogative focus is attracted to optional constituents is further supported by the fact that when an optional adverbial is present, stressing the optional adverbial is natural. In contrast, stressing another constituent in the clause is odd:

Did Megan play a trick on Pat *deliberately*? (or was it an accident?)

Did Megan play a trick on Pat *deliberately*? (?or did someone else do it deliberately?)

Two observations have emerged from our discussion so far regarding meaning and yes/no questions. The first is that speakers may differ in their expectations of negative or positive responses concerning the entire proposition. The second is that speakers have varying reasons for uncertainty about the proposition. The use of contrastive stress is one device speakers can resort to to identify more specifically the locus of their uncertainty.

## UNINVERTED QUESTIONS

Another structure that speaks to the first observation—a speaker's presupposition with regard to an expected reply—is a statement-form, or uninverted, question. This type of question is also marked in the sense that the speaker who poses the question is anticipating confirmation of either a positive or a negative presupposition:

A: I just got back from San Francisco.

B: You had a good time there? (expecting confirmation of positive presupposition)

B's reply with accompanying rising question intonation suggests that B's hunch was that the answer would be "yes." Had B chosen instead to use the unmarked, neutral, inverted question, we might assume that B had uncertainty about what A's reply would be:

A: I just got back from San Francisco.

B: Did you have a good time? (uncertain expectation)

A negative uninverted question could reflect the fact that new information has just been received that runs counter to an earlier presupposition:

(Person A returns home early from a shopping trip)

B: The stores weren't open late? (expecting confirmation of negative presupposition)

A's early return contradicts B's presupposition that A would be shopping until later.

Weber (1989) and Williams (1989) both report that uninverted questions are much more common than one might suppose.<sup>4</sup> In her analysis of face-to-face and telephone conversations, Weber found that as many as 41 percent of all the questions in the data were either uninverted, of the sort we have just considered, or nonclausal forms such as the following (Weber 1989:181):

A: I've got so much work that I don't believe it, so I'm just not thinking about that.

B: In school, you mean?

In this nonclausal example, B questions with a prepositional phrase plus the clause tag *you mean*. Uninverted forms with rising intonation, with and without tags, serve, as we see in this example, as comprehension checks (Williams 1990).

In addition to comprehension checks, nonclausal questions often function as "next turn repair initiators" (Schegloff, Jefferson, and Sacks 1977:367). *Repair* refers to the efforts of participants to deal with trouble in hearing or understanding, and *next turn* indicates that the repair occurs in the conversational turn after the "trouble source" turn. Here is another example from Weber (1989:170):

A: What's the dark green thing?

B: Pardon?

A: What's this?

B: That's Japanese eggplant.

In this example, B's production of *pardon*, a next turn repair initiator, displays some trouble with hearing or understanding A's entire question. A recasts her somewhat modified question. This time its meaning is clear, and B responds to the question. Williams (1989) contributes evidence from her own investigation that full clausal uninverted questions also function as clarification requests.

One variant of an uninverted question is an *echo question*, which simply repeats, or modifies in some minor fashion, a previous utterance with rising intonation. If the intonation is rising, as it is for unmarked yes/no questions, then the purpose for using the echo question would simply be to seek confirmation of the preceding speaker's remark:

A. My sister is going out with Lou.

B: { Your sister is }  
 { She's } going out with Lou? (seeking confirmation that the previous remark has been understood)

If, on the other hand, the pitch of the intonation rises beyond the usual range, then the echo question can express counterexpectation—surprise, or disbelief (see VanderBrook, Schlue, and Campbell 1980 for further discussion):

2                      3 ~~4~~  
 B: Your sister is going out with Lou?

### SOME VERSUS ANY

The last point in our discussion of the meaning of yes/no questions has to do with the use of *some* and *any*, a contrast you first encountered in the previous chapter on negation. Many ESL/EFL grammar texts say that *any* is used in questions as well as negatives. This is true with regard to open or unmarked questions, such as:

Do you have *any* paper I can borrow?

However, you also saw in the chapter on negation that weakly stressed *some* suggests a positive quantity. It is therefore used in questions that in some way expect a positive answer, such as with an offer:

A waiter to a customer in a restaurant: Would you like *some* dessert? (to encourage the answer “yes”)

Just as we saw in our discussion with negatives, we must therefore be cautious about what we say about the distribution of *some* and *any* as they can both occur with different question types, depending on the meaning (partly based on Chalker 1984:15):

Is there some news?	(expecting the answer “yes”)
Is there any news?	(open or neutral question)
Isn't there some news?	(Surely there is.)
Isn't there any news?	} (I had hoped there would be.)
Is there no news?	

### ISSUES OF USE CONCERNING YES/NO QUESTIONS

We now turn to our last section, where we deal with issues pertaining to use: when speakers have two or more question forms with the same meaning to choose from, what factors condition their choice—that is, why do they prefer one form to another?

#### THE USE OF SHORT ANSWERS

Earlier we discussed the form of standard short answers in English (*Yes, it is. No, it isn't*). While these short-answer forms are worth teaching ESL/EFL students, one should bear in mind that even these forms do not occur frequently as responses to yes/no questions. In Richards (1977), replies to yes/no questions containing auxiliary or verb repetition made up less than 20 percent of the written corpus and less than 10 percent of the spoken English corpus. Similarly, in a discourse analysis of speech samples collected from a wide variety of contexts, Winn-Bell Olsen (1980) found that standard short forms were used rather infrequently by native English speakers—in fact, only 8 percent of the time—as answers to yes/no questions in her data (26 out of 329 instances).

She discovered that native speakers were much more likely to answer questions with a direct “yes” (or its colloquial variants, e.g., “yup,” “yeah,” “uh huh”) or a direct “no” (or its variants, e.g., “nah,” “nope,” “uh uh,” “not yet”), each often followed by some sort of expansion. Indirect affirmations, denials, or hedges (e.g., “Does it make you uncomfortable to talk about this problem?” “I guess maybe it does.”) accounted for a rather large

percentage of the answers, as well. Finally, a significant portion of the answers were formulaic expressions of confirmation or denial (e.g., “I doubt it.”). Since 23 out of 26 occurrences of standard short-form answers in her data were found in conversations between strangers or in self-conscious speech, Winn-Bell Olsen hypothesizes that the more distant the relationship between speakers or the more uncomfortable the situation, the more frequently speakers tend to use standard short-form answers.

### UNINVERTED YES/NO QUESTIONS

The use of uninverted yes/no questions might also be said to relate to issues of social familiarity or distance. Recall that uninverted questions are used when the speaker expects confirmation of a positive or negative presupposition. Using an uninverted question thus suggests that the person asking the question knows the other person well enough to predict the other’s answer. Such intimacy often may not exist, and the use of uninverted questions could then appear to be presumptuous.

Worker to supervisor: You’re going to the dance?

### ELLIPTICAL QUESTIONS

At some point, teachers will want to expose their intermediate- and advanced-level students to informal yes/no questions that occur without an overt initial auxiliary. Such questions are fairly frequent in informal conversations between native speakers and are different from uninverted yes/no questions in that they presuppose no answer or express no particular emotion.

(Are) You going to the movies?

(Has) She been feeling better?

(Do) You know Fred Callahan?

If *you* is the subject, it can also be deleted in most cases, along with the operator.

(Do you) Wanna study together?

In such questions, the operator and subject are optionally deletable because they are recoverable from other grammatical and lexical information in the question and from the discourse context. It would probably not be of high priority for your students to practice using such elliptical yes/no questions, but they should develop comprehension of this form and perhaps an ability to automatically supply the missing operator or operator and subject.

### CONTRACTED VERSUS UNCONTRACTED NEGATIVES IN NEGATIVE QUESTIONS

In English negative yes/no questions, the negative may appear in both contracted and uncontracted forms. Only the contracted form, however, may appear sentence-initially as part of an operator;

Isn’t it appropriate to ask?

Is it not appropriate to ask?

The question with the uncontracted negative after the subject is more formal than its counterpart with a question-initial contracted negative.

In a usage study, Kontra (1981) has documented the occurrence in contemporary English of uncontracted negative questions such as the following:



Is not linguistics a branch of psychology?

Here, the *not* appears before the subject in its uncontracted form. While such questions do occasionally occur, we view this type of question as a stylistically formal and somewhat archaic vestige of an earlier stage of English. Evidence for our position comes from the fact that the uncontracted *not* in pre-subject position has a rather limited distribution; for example, the subject of such a question can rarely be a pronoun:

\*Is not it a branch of psychology?

Nevertheless, Kontra (1993) has found evidence of the existence of even this form in British English. Such a question, Kontra believes, is used when the speaker is inviting the listener to agree with the speaker's assumption that the expressed proposition is self-evidently true. One example he cites is the following excerpt from a discussion in the British Parliament: (Kontra 1993:340)

Is not it an outrage that the Minister has not even tried to answer the question? . . .  
Does not the Minister think that he has a duty to tell people the facts before they vote?

This word order would be highly unusual in North American English.

### THE USE OF AREN'T AS A GAP-FILLER

A final note on contracted negative yes/no questions concerns the lexical gap that occurs in the first person singular. All of the following are acceptable contracted negative questions and short answers:

Isn't he/she/it?      He/she/it isn't.  
Aren't we/you/they?    We/you/they aren't.

However, we cannot contract the verb *be* and the *not* in *I am not* unless we use nonstandard *I ain't*. What speakers of English do in negative yes/no questions (but not in short answers) is to substitute *are* for *am* and contract. Thus:

Aren't I?    I am not.  
                  I'm not.

This illogical gap-filler arose because there were strong social and educational stigmas against the use of *ain't*. *Aren't I* is mainly a colloquialism, but it may puzzle ESL/EFL students when they encounter it; so you should be prepared to explain why sometimes *aren't* is used with the first person singular pronoun in negative yes/no questions.

### OTHER FUNCTIONS

We have been dealing with questions whose function is primarily to seek new information or to clarify or confirm given or shared information. Yes/no questions can perform a number of other functions, of course. You have already seen in Chapter 8 how questions with modal forms can be used in requests for assistance:

Can I get a ride home with you? (direct request)

As we also saw in the chapter on modals, the "past-tense" form of *can* softens this a bit:

Could I get a ride home with you? (less direct)

An even more polite form of request uses an embedded question (about which we have more to say in Chapter 33):

I wonder if I could get a ride home with you. (least direct, therefore most polite)

You also saw in Chapter 8 how yes/no question forms could be used in making offers or invitations:

Would you like to sit for a while?

They can also be used as commands:

Would you please stand up straight?

as reprimands:

Aren't you a little old to be doing that?

as complaints:

Have you ever stayed home all day with a two-year-old?

and many other functions. Clearly, the function of a yes/no question is going to depend on the context and the speaker's intention.

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## CONCLUSION

As we have indicated, the main challenge for most ESL/EFL students will be to learn about inversion in yes/no questions—both the syntactic rules and the social conditions in which they are appropriate. Because the *do* operator is not a morpheme with many equivalents in the languages of the world, its use in yes/no questions may require some special attention. Students may also need some understanding of how to respond to yes/no questions as well, particularly negative yes/no questions. Finally, we should remember that not all yes/no questions are inverted. As you have seen in this chapter, many conversational yes/no questions are uninverted, elliptical, or nonclausal in form. While we might not specifically teach ESL/EFL students to produce these forms, students may be confused by them, and you may need to help them understand their use.

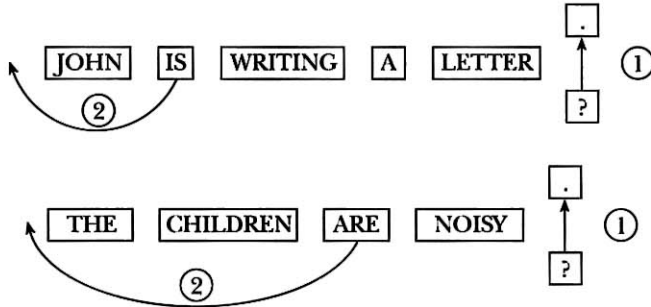
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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** To expose students to yes/no questions before they are asked to form them on their own, surveys can be used. Surveys in which students learn something about themselves and their classmates work well. Depending on the ages and backgrounds of your students, you can use various survey themes: for example, health habits (Do you exercise?), eating habits (Do you eat rice for breakfast?), or study strategies (Do you speak English with your friends?). You can give students a survey form that you have prepared, or they can create one with you. They then complete the survey themselves and ask the questions of one or more other students.

**2. Form.** As suggested in the chapter on negation, a flannelboard or overhead projector is a useful device for presenting rules for the addition of function words and syntactic movement. To introduce inversion in sentences containing an auxiliary verb or *be*, you can

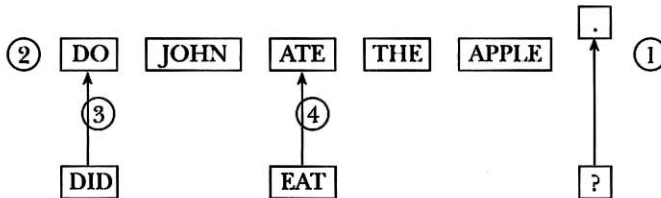
substitute a question-mark card for the period card and then move the first auxiliary verb or *be* verb card to sentence-initial position.



Later, in order to introduce students to the formation of yes/no questions without an auxiliary verb or *be*, you will need to place a DO card at the front of a sentence after substituting a question mark card for the period card. For example:



Next, you can explain to students that the *do* verb carries the tense for the question. This can be demonstrated by replacing the DO card with DID and the ATE card with EAT after substituting the [?] for the [.] . Thus:



Cards could also be used to show that the *do* carries the tense and person markings with the simple present tense.

- ① Put these on the flannelboard. JOHN EAT S APPLES.
- ② Substitute [?] at the end of the sentence and introduce DO to the front.
- ③ Show that the [S] of *eats* gets moved to the initial [DO] by moving the [S] from its position after [EATS] to a position following [DO]. Immediately replace [DO] [S] with a new card [DOES] explaining that rewriting *do* plus third person singular present as *does* is a convention in English. After several examples have been done, it is good to have student volunteers come up and practice forming questions by moving and substituting the cards. To give students additional practice, prepare (or have students prepare) pieces of paper with the words, question marks, and morphemes for each student (or pairs of students) to manipulate at his or her desk.

**3. Form.** It is often easier to make up activities in which students answer yes/no questions than activities in which students practice asking the questions. Guessing games can give students good practice in both asking and responding to questions.

- a. For example, the game “Twenty Questions” provides an engaging way to practice forming and answering yes/no questions. The rules are simple. Someone thinks of an animal (including human beings), a vegetable (any living nonanimal), or a mineral (anything inanimate). The other players then can use up to 20 yes/no questions in an attempt to guess what it is the person is thinking of. If they can’t guess after using all 20 questions, the person wins.

A more concrete version for younger learners would be to have someone put an object in a paper sack, out of sight of the other players. They then get 20 yes/no questions to guess what is in the sack. For example:

T: I have put something in this sack. Try to guess what it is, using questions that can be answered only with a *yes* or *no*.

S1: Is it round?

T: Yes, it is.

S2: Is it hard?

T: No, it isn’t.

S3: Is it a ball?

T: No, it isn’t.

S4: Can we eat it?

T: No, you can’t.

etc.

The person who guesses correctly can be the person to hide the next object. If students are in the early stages of learning to form yes/no questions, you may want to restrict the questions to those with modals and the *be* verb. Also, if they are beginners, they might need some help from you in accurately forming the questions they want to ask.

- b. Another guessing game that encourages the use of yes/no questions is “What’s My Line?”, in which members of the class select occupations for themselves, and the rest of the class must try to guess the occupation.
- c. A similar game is one in which students play “Who Am I?”, where a class member pretends to be a well-known contemporary or historical figure. The other members of the class ask yes/no questions to guess the identity of the figure.
- 4. Form.** Each student is given an assignment on a card. The assignment is to find someone in the class who is characterized by the particular trait written on the card. For example, one card might say, “Find someone who can play the drums.” Another might say, “Find someone who is a good cook.” Students must ask each other yes/no questions to find at least one person in the class for whom the trait is true.

**5. Form.** Getting students to ask each other questions about their native countries, academic majors, hobbies, favorite foods, and so on can be useful for practicing questions and helping students to get to know one another better. One of the techniques of the method “Suggestopedia” that encourages fluency is to have a student pose a question and then toss a ball to another student. That student catches the ball, answers the question, poses another question, and tosses the ball to a third student.

S1: Are you from Mexico? (tossing the ball to S2)

S2: (catching the ball) No; I am not. I am from Guatemala.

S2: Do you study engineering? (tossing the ball to S3)

S3: (catching the ball) Yes, I do.

S3: Do you enjoy disco dancing? (tossing the ball to S4)

S4: (catching the ball) No, I don’t.

etc.

For students with a low level of proficiency in English, this same activity can be done in a chain-drill form, in which the same question is asked of and answered by every student in the room, one by one, thereby creating a chain; for example:

S1: Are you from Mexico?  
 S2: No. I'm not. I am from Guatemala.  
 S2: Are you from Vietnam?  
 S3: No, I'm not. I am from Laos.  
 S3: Are you from Morocco?  
 S4: Yes, I am.  
 etc.

**6. Form.** Sometimes reciting verse or poetry can be a pleasant way to practice the intonation and grammatical form of yes/no questions. Of course, the verse would have to be something that could be made comprehensible to students. Several of Christina Rossetti's poems make repeated use of yes/no questions. They lend themselves to reading aloud in pairs or groups—one can ask the question, the other can answer it.

**7. Meaning.** To give students the necessary practice in asking and answering negative yes/no questions as native speakers of English do (responding to the presupposition, not the form), you can tell students a short story twice. During the second telling, change a few of the details. The students' task is to listen to the story intently and, after you have told it twice, to use focused negative yes/no questions to ask about details in the second telling that did not coincide with the first. For instance:

(First story) *T*: A man walked out the front door and tripped over his son's wagon. He scolded his son and told him to put the wagon in the garage. The boy did this. A while later, the man went into the garage and tripped over his son's wagon again.

(Second story) *T*: A man walked out the back door and tripped over his son's bicycle. He scolded his son and told him to put the bicycle in the shed. The boy did this. A week later, the man went into the shed and tripped over his son's bicycle again.

S1: Wasn't it the *back* door?  
 T: Yes, it was.  
 S2: Wasn't it a *wagon*?  
 T: Yes, it was.  
 S3: Didn't the father *trip* over the wagon?  
 T: Yes, he did.  
 S4: Wasn't it a *day* later?  
 T: No, it wasn't.  
 etc.

Students will need to make up and tell their own versions of two stories to receive practice in answering the focused negative yes/no questions of their classmates.

**8. Use.** To give students practice in using yes/no questions in making polite requests, have students write down five requests they would like to make. They should each then make the request of another student in the class. Only if the request is in a polite form, should the second student agree to comply with the request. For example:

S1: Hey, Pablo, can I have some scrap paper?  
 S2: Sorry. No.  
 S1: Pablo, could I borrow some scrap paper, please?  
 S2: Sure. Here's some.

## EXERCISES

**Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts.
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. unmarked yes/no question</li> <li>b. negative yes/no question</li> <li>c. <i>some</i> in a yes/no question</li> <li>d. uncontracted negative yes/no question</li> <li>e. yes/no question with <i>do</i></li> <li>f. uninverted question</li> <li>g. focused yes-no question</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>h. standard short-form answer</li> <li>i. formulaic short answer</li> <li>j. yes/no question with phrasal modal and <i>do</i></li> <li>k. echo question (showing surprise)</li> <li>l. elliptical yes/no question</li> <li>m. nonclausal question as a next turn repair initiator</li> </ol>
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2. Give the basic structures and state which mapping rules apply to derive the following questions:
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Was she in class yesterday?</li> <li>b. Did he write the letter?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. Will her brother come to the party?</li> <li>d. Have you been living in Tampa?</li> </ol>
---	---
3. What rules have been violated as the following questions were formed?
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. *Do she went?</li> <li>b. *Could have he gone?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. *Runs he fast?</li> <li>d. *Do they be happy?</li> </ol>
---	--
4. What do the *not* placement rule and the subject-operator inversion rule have in common?

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

5. If your students produce the following questions, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct them?
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. *Saw you the movie?</li> <li>b. *Did you threw the ball?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. *Is not she intelligent?</li> <li>d. Do you like ice cream? *Yes, I like.</li> </ol>
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6. Negative yes/no questions present an interesting problem with regard to the application of mapping rules. Draw the tree for the first question below. Which order of the three rules (*not* placement, *not* contraction, subject-operator inversion) works to generate the first two questions—but not the third—as acceptable negative yes/no question forms in English?
 

Can't you wait?  
Can you not wait?  
\*Can not you wait?
7. You have a student who never inverts yes/no questions but simply uses an uninverted question with question intonation. When you tell him that he should invert, he replies that he often hears native speakers use uninverted questions. What would you say to this student?
8. An old joke arises from the fact that yes/no questions can serve more than one function. A wants to know the time and sees that B is wearing a wristwatch.
 

A: Do you have a watch?  
B: Yes. (and keeps on walking)

Explain the misunderstanding.



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**Suggestions for further reading**

*For discussion of interrogatives in other languages, see:*

Chisolm, W. (ed.) (1984). *Interrogativity*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

*For a functional classification of questions, see:*

Tsui, A. (1992). "A Functional Description of Questions." In M. Coulthard (ed.), *Advances in Spoken Discourse Analysis*. London: Routledge, 89–110.

*For pedagogical exercises, see:*

Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English: Your Second Language* (2d ed.).

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## ENDNOTES

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1. English does this as well in its “statement-form,” or uninverted, question (“*You’re a teacher?*”). However, such questions serve a different purpose than do ordinary unmarked yes/no questions in English. This is discussed in the portion of this chapter devoted to meaning.
2. It can be done, though, in British English with the main verb *have* as in *Have you the time?* and in some lexicalized sentence stems in American English, such as, *Have you any idea . . . ?*
3. It should be acknowledged that there is no *unique* question intonation, although some tones may be more common in questions than others (Cruttenden 1986:59).
4. Of the 637 questions in Weber’s data, 108 were uninverted forms and 153 were nonclausal forms.

# IMPERATIVES

## INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 2 we established the fact that there are three main moods for English sentences: declarative (sometimes called indicative), interrogative, and imperative. We have examined aspects of the first two moods when dealing with basic word order in declarative sentences (Chapter 5) and with yes/no questions (Chapter 11). Obviously, there is a great deal more to say about qualities of these two main sentence moods; however, before we proceed to do this, it is time to introduce the final main sentence mood, that of the imperative. In Chapter 2 we also made the point that there are a number of syntactic ways that the communicative function of “getting someone to do something” can be accomplished; nevertheless, the sentence type that is normally associated with the imperative mood is the command.

When we examine commands such as

**Go away. Be quiet.**

we are struck by the fact that there is no obvious (overt) subject noun phrase. Such sentences would seem to be in violation of one of our fundamental phrase structure rules, which indicates that every English sentence must have both a subject (i.e., NP) and a predicate (i.e., everything that follows the subject NP in a sentence—AUX VP (Advl):

**S → SUBJ PRED**

Another idiosyncrasy of imperatives is that they are tenseless and take no modals. Notice that to capture this fact, our phrase structure rule for the auxiliary offers a choice between tense/modal and -imper:

$$\text{AUX} \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{T} \\ \text{M} \end{array} \right\} (\text{pm}) (-\text{perf}) (-\text{prog}) \\ -\text{imper} \end{array} \right\}$$

This rule also indicates that -imper occurs with no pm, -perf, or -prog. While this is true for the most part, it is possible, though rare, to have an imperative with progressive aspect:

**Be watching tomorrow night for the conclusion to the show.**

We must also address the question, “When is it appropriate to use imperatives in English?” The traditional answer to this question offered in many ESL/EFL texts is that imperatives are used when there is a status difference between the speaker and listener such that the speaker has the power to order or command the listener to do something. For example, the military officer is often portrayed as “barking commands” at service personnel of lesser rank, using imperatives such as “Listen up!”

Given our attempt in this teacher's text to be comprehensive, we intend to show that the status difference between speaker and listener is only one of the factors that plays a role in determining when imperatives are used. The late rock idol Elvis Presley's plea to "Love me tender" seems a far cry from a military bark; nonetheless, his plea and the military order above share a common syntactic form. Sociolinguistic factors governing use of imperatives are investigated in the use section, which follows our analysis of their form and meaning.

## THE FORM OF IMPERATIVES

You have just seen how the fact that imperatives are subjectless presents us with a dilemma as far as our phrase structure rule for S. We could, of course, modify our phrase structure rule for S by putting parentheses around the SUBJ, thus signifying its optionality. However, our intuition tells us that a subject actually does underlie imperative sentences; it simply does not usually surface.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional grammarians have referred to the underlying subject of imperative sentences as the "understood *you*." In other words, the subject of an unmarked form of an imperative is the second person singular or plural subject pronoun, *you*.

(You) listen up!

While such an explanation is intuitively satisfying, we can go even further and use syntactic evidence to corroborate the traditional grammarians' assertion that an understood *you* is the subject of an imperative. Although we do not fully examine reflexive pronouns until Chapter 16, suffice it to say here that the object of a reflexive verb must be identical in reference to the subject of the same sentence; that is, in the following sentence, *Ann* and the reflexive pronoun *herself* are co-referential—they refer to the same person:

*Ann* prided *herself* on her accomplishments.

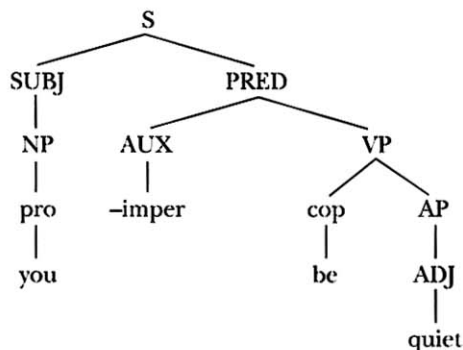
Now notice the form of the reflexive pronoun when it occurs in object position in an imperative.

Watch yourself! Watch yourselves!

If basic structure subjects other than second person singular or plural were possible in imperative sentences, the following imperatives would also be acceptable; however, they are not:

\*Watch myself! \*Watch itself!  
 \*Watch himself! \*Watch ourselves!  
 \*Watch herself! \*Watch themselves!

Thus, this syntactic evidence supports our intuition that the subject of imperative sentences is *you*. Here is the tree for *Be quiet!* to illustrate this point.



The tree illustrates another point we should make about the form of imperatives. Recall that our phrase structure rule draws a sharp distinction between imperative and nonimperative sentences based on the contention stated earlier in this chapter that imperative sentences are “tenseless.” The strongest evidence in favor of this analysis are those imperatives formed with the copula *be*:

You be quiet!    Be on time!

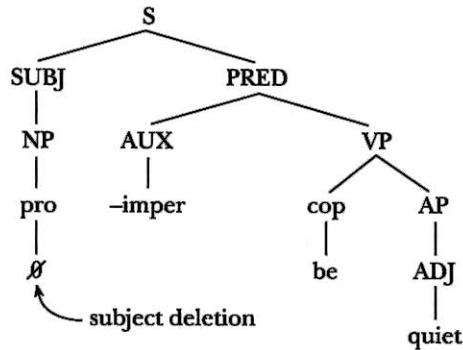
If these sentences had a “present tense” instead of an -imper auxiliary in their basic structure, we would expect to find the second person form of the *be* verb, *are*, after subject-verb agreement and morphological rules have applied:

output of base: you pres be quiet  
copy *s/t*: you pres [+2+sg] be quiet  
morphology: You are quiet.

Since such strings do not occur as imperatives, we can assume that imperatives do not contain a tensed auxiliary and that the morphology rule joins -imper to the following verb to produce the base, or uninflected, form, i.e., *be*.

Finally, since *you* sometimes is present in an imperative (e.g., *You take care, now*), we need to call upon an optional subject deletion rule to delete the *you* only in derivations where the subject is not present on the surface.

Be quiet.



## NEGATIVE IMPERATIVES

### With Do

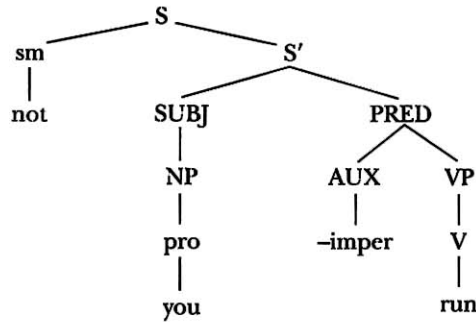
Negative imperatives are somewhat more complicated than their affirmative counterparts. Three types of negative imperatives occur:

1. Don't you run! (contracted negative; subject present)
2. Don't run! (contracted negative; subject absent)
3. Do not run! (uncontracted negative; subject absent)

A fourth combination, with an uncontracted negative and subject present, does not occur:

4. \*Do { not you }  
          { you not } run!

The three grammatical negative imperatives all derive from a common basic structure:



Then, by applying our derivation rules, we can produce the three acceptable forms:<sup>2</sup>

	<i>Sentence 1</i>	<i>Sentence 2</i>	<i>Sentence 3</i>
output of base:	not you -imper run	not you -imper run	not you -imper run
operator addition:	not you -imper do run	not you -imper do run	not you -imper do run
<i>not</i> placement:	you -imper do not run	you -imper do not run	you -imper do not run
<i>not</i> contraction:	you -imper do + n't run	you -imper do + n't run	(does not apply)
subject-operator inversion:	-imper do + n't you run	(does not apply)	(does not apply)
subject deletion:	(does not apply)	-imper do+n't run	-imper do not run
morphology:	Don't you run!	Don't run!	Do not run!

By making sure that the *not* contracts with the *do* before subject-operator inversion applies, the ungrammatical forms in 4 above could never be produced.

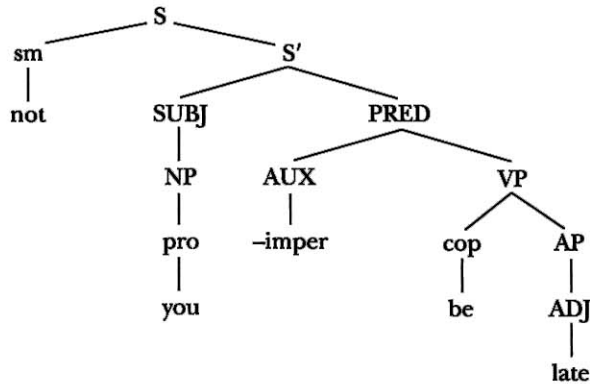
### With Be

An examination of the following set of sentences reveals that the rule of *not* placement operates differently in negative imperatives from the way it operates in negative declarative sentences and in interrogatives.

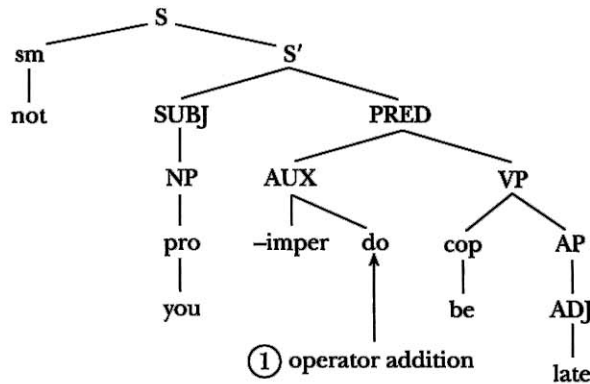
5. Don't you be late!
6. Don't be late!
7. Do not be late!
8. \*Do { not you }  
          { you not } be late.

Even when the copula *be* is the main verb, there is a *do* verb. This is a departure from our earlier observation in the chapter on negatives and again in the one on yes/no questions—that English declarative sentences treat copula *be* as an operator, and therefore, sentences with copula *be* do not require the addition of the *do* operator to carry the tense.<sup>3</sup> With negative imperatives, the operator-addition rule must apply because the -imper auxiliary cannot combine with the particle *not*. It must attach to an operator, so the operator *do* is needed to fill this void. Here's an example of a tree and the derivation of the sentence in 6 above:

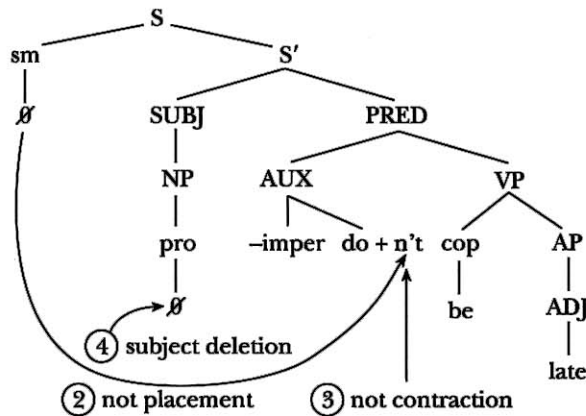




With operator addition:



With *not* placement, *not* contraction and subject deletion:



The related imperative with an uncontracted *not* particle (i.e., 7, "Do not be late!") would share the set of rules above except that the optional rule for *not* contraction would be omitted. To produce 5, subject-operator inversion would take place after *not* contraction. Note that if the *not* is uncontracted, then the *you* must be omitted, or else the ungrammatical forms found in 8 would result.

A final observation is that it is possible to produce a negative imperative by using the preverbal adverb of frequency, "never," in initial position without the *do* verb:

Never be late again! (Don't you ever be late again!)

## ELLIPTICAL IMPERATIVES

As in other structures you have seen, imperatives can be used in truncated fashion in normal conversational interaction. Kuehn (1993) reported that in three hours of transcribed conversation among employees and between the supervisor and employees in a dishwashing room of a small-town college, of the 25 imperatives that occurred, fewer than half (11) were in their full form. In the 14 others, verbs or objects were deleted. Deletion was especially prevalent where an object was being held or something was being demonstrated.

Kuehn offers the following examples:

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| Trays!     | (Put your trays on the conveyor belt.)    |
| These two. | (Put these two trays together.)           |
| Switch!    | (Switch garbage disposal covers with me.) |

As Kuehn points out, certainly for workers in a noisy work environment with a fairly standard work routine, even elliptical imperatives with such deletions would be quite clear.

## MEANING AND THE ENGLISH IMPERATIVE

Earlier, we said that imperatives are commands, also known as directives, whose function is to get someone to do something. It is time now to revisit the question of who that someone is. We have made the case for imperatives having second person subjects; that is, the command is directed at the “you” present in the environment. There are, however, several other addressees of imperatives. In addition, we want to be specific about when and when not to use *you* in English imperatives. These issues seem to us to relate more to meaning than to use, although the line between the two is admittedly more permeable here than elsewhere.

### YOU: ITS RETENTION AND ITS DELETION

As you have seen, when we use an imperative without a subject, we might be addressing one or more persons. If we want to make it clear that we are speaking to someone in particular, we can add an unstressed *you* (e.g., *You wait here for a moment*). For the same reason, the *you* is also often retained when one is giving instructions to a particular child and wants to be explicit, such as saying, “You come here” (with a gesture to indicate which child). To further reduce ambiguity, a vocative, here the addressee’s name, can also be used before the imperative, such as, “Mr. Holmes, you sit over there.” Notice that *you* is still the subject of this imperative, with *Mr. Holmes* having the distinctive rising-falling intonation of English vocatives. It is also possible to move the vocative to the end of the sentence, “You sit there, Mr. Holmes.” Unlike these other examples, if the *you* subject is being stressed, annoyance is conveyed; for example: “*You* cut that out!”

### DIFFUSE IMPERATIVES

Related to the issue of addressee is a special kind of imperative called the *diffuse imperative*. Diffuse imperatives are directed at anyone and everyone who is present:

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| Somebody open the door. | ( <i>somebody</i> = one of you here)       |
| Don’t anybody move!     | ( <i>not + anybody</i> = none of you here) |

Note that diffuse imperatives would be inappropriate if two people were conversing. A speaker alone, however, who is addressing an imaginary or wished-for audience can use a diffuse imperative (e.g., “Somebody help me!”). Note that diffuse imperatives are

different from more specific imperatives that begin with a vocative, the name of the person being addressed:

Mac, open the door.

In such cases a *you* can also occur, as we have just seen:

Mac, you open the door.

However, this cannot be done with diffuse imperatives because their subjects are indefinite third person pronouns, not the definite second person pronoun:

\*Somebody, you open the door.

### LET'S

In addition to the imperatives above, some grammarians describe an *inclusive imperative*, an imperative that includes the speaker with the addressee(s):

Let's go to the movies.

And here is its negative form:

Let's not stay here any longer.

(or, less likely) Don't let's stay here any longer.

These, of course, function often as suggestions, not commands. They can be seen as functioning more like commands, however, when the *us* is not contracted and the *Let us* is seen as an exhortation to follow the speaker's instructions or to agree with the judgment that the speaker expresses:

Let us pray.

Let us never forget the brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice.

Finally, another kind of imperative-like sentence that makes use of the *let* but is not inclusive (contains no *us*) is the kind of proclamation that only a deity, a sovereign or an authority figure is allowed to make; that is, the mere fact that such a power or authority would utter the proclamation ensures that what is said will occur:

Let there be light! Let the word go forth.

A weaker form of this *let* can mean *may*, as in the following toast:

Let this be a new start for both of us.

## THE USE OF IMPERATIVES

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### FUNCTION AND FORM

At the risk of redundancy, we once again acknowledge that the form and function link between imperatives and directives is not a categorical one—that is, one can command or, less forcefully, request without using an imperative form:

Imperative: *Help me, please.*

Declarative: *I need some help.*

Interrogative: *Could/Can you give me a hand?*

And, conversely, the following list illustrates some of the functions in addition to commands that imperatives can be used for, depending on the situational context:

*Other Uses of Imperatives (in addition to commands)*

Offers: *Have another biscuit.*

Suggestions: *Let's go to a movie tonight.*

Requests: *Close the door, please.*

Advice: *Don't forget Mother's Day.*

Directions: *Go left at the next corner.*

Prohibitions: *Do not pick the flowers.*

Warnings: *Watch out!*

Procedures: *Add a teaspoon of baking powder to the flour.*

Invitations: *Come in.*

Threats: *Watch your step.*

Wishes: *Have a great day!*

## POLITENESS AND THE USE OF THE IMPERATIVES

With regard to the three moods, what advice might we be able to give ESL/EFL students on when to use the imperative mood in giving commands or making requests and when to use other forms? Carrell and Konneker (1981) found considerable agreement among native speakers and learners of English as to which forms were considered the most polite in making requests. The forms varied among three dimensions: sentence mood (declarative, interrogative, and imperative), presence or absence of a modal, and the tense used. Here is their hierarchy of politeness, around which there was considerable native-speaker/nonnative-speaker consensus:

<b>Least Polite</b> (most direct)	Imperative—elliptical	A glass of water.
	Imperative	Give me a glass of water.
	Declarative—no modal ( <i>want/need</i> )	I want a glass of water.
	Declarative—historically present tense modal <sup>4</sup>	I'll have a glass of water.
	Declarative—historically past tense modal	I'd like a glass of water.
	Interrogative—no modal	Do you have a glass of water?
<b>Most Polite</b> (least direct)	Interrogative—historically present tense modal	Can you give me a glass of water?
	Interrogative—historically past tense modal	Could you give me a glass of water?

According to the subjects in Carrell and Konneker's study, sentence mood contributes the most to the order of the politeness hierarchy: interrogative—most polite; declarative—next most polite; imperative—least polite. Presence of modals contributes next to politeness; modals don't add much to the politeness of the already-very-polite interrogative, but they do contribute more to the politeness of the not-as-polite declarative. Finally, if the modal is in historically past tense, this adds a small additional degree of politeness.

### Increasing the politeness

While Carrell and Konneker did not explicitly examine the politeness contribution of *please*, it could be noted that the effect of adding *please* to an imperative does contribute to its being more polite. Compare, for example,

Give me a glass of water.

versus

Please give me a glass of water. or Give me a glass of water, please.

Notice that if there is a *you* subject, the addition of *please* seems odd:

- \*Please you give me a glass of water.
- ?You please give me a glass of water.
- ?You give me a glass of water please.

*Kindly* can also be used to make an imperative more polite.

Kindly hand me the wrench.

Another way to enhance the politeness of imperatives when they are used as offers, wishes, or invitations is to use the *do* auxiliary verb, which makes the wish or offer more emphatic:

- |                             |                    |
|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| Have a good time.           | Come in.           |
| <i>Do</i> have a good time. | <i>Do</i> come in. |

In contrast to polite imperatives with *please*, imperatives with *just* adds affect that can be either negative, as in *Just (you) wait and see*, or positive, as in *Just be patient; everything will work out*.

### On Politeness and Rudeness

To provide some balance here, we must also acknowledge that although we want to help our students to be as polite in English as they want to be, we do not want to give ESL/EFL students the impression that they should *always* opt for the most polite form possible. Beebe (1996P), for instance, advises teaching students how to be rude so that they can deal with people appropriately when the situation calls for it—for instance, when they feel they are being taken advantage of. Moreover, undue politeness can have a distancing effect of its own. Perhaps the rule of thumb here should be the principle that Ervin-Tripp (1982) laid out with respect to the use of imperatives. It is not so much that a power differential between speaker and listener conditions the use of an imperative; it is more the case that imperatives are used when “cooperation is assumed.” For example, it can be assumed that a private in the army will cooperate with an officer; accordingly, an imperative is appropriate. If the cooperation of one’s peers can be assumed, imperatives are also appropriate. For instance, telling someone to “Pass the catsup” at the dinner table is perfectly acceptable because there is no reason to assume lack of cooperation. Of course, the use of *please* is almost always appropriate (as parents are forever telling their children). To cite another example, when giving a warning, such as *Watch out!*, cooperation can certainly be assumed. And we would prefer to receive such a warning in the shortest possible form rather than a longer one with all the politeness markers intact. Wouldn’t you?

## CONCLUSION

Learning the form, meaning, and use of the imperative mood is challenging for ESL/EFL students. Except for negative imperatives, form is perhaps less challenging because students need not concern themselves about typical verb morphological problems such as tense and subject-verb agreement. Nevertheless, the subtle distinctions among English imperatives require that students receive practice in using their forms appropriately. Giving students help with understanding commands might be important as well. Considering the variety of forms that are used to give a command, it is not surprising that nonnative speakers struggle to understand them. Kuehn (1993) cites the example of the nonnative speaker of English who did not recognize “Can you take this and load it?” as a command from his supervisor and who replied that he didn’t know how. While the worker was no doubt speaking honestly, Kuehn notes that the supervisor’s question was not a yes/no

question, as this young and inexperienced employee seemed to think it was, nor was it a polite request, as demonstrated by the fact that the supervisor next said, “Better learn!”

Regarding use, helping students be as polite as they want to be without appearing obsequious or standoffish is no easy feat. Whatever help in the form of direct instruction or feedback in the appropriate use of the imperative that ESL/EFL teachers can provide their students will be valuable.

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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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**1. Form.** James Asher (1977) has developed a methodology for teaching a second language that he calls “Total Physical Response.” Within this methodology, the second language learner carries out commands issued solely in imperative form in the target language by the teacher. By gradually building up a syntactic and lexical repertoire, the learner is increasingly able to respond appropriately. We find that when students act out commands as a first step in learning imperatives, it helps them associate the syntactic pattern with action. Commands such as “Stand up,” “Turn around,” “Turn left,” “Turn right,” “Point to the board,” “Sit down,” and so on could be taught from the very earliest days of instruction. Later, to get practice in production, students can give commands with which the teacher and the other students are asked to comply.

**2. Form.** For practice in using both affirmative and negative imperatives, the class can play an adaptation of the children’s game “Simon Says,” in which students have to do whatever is commanded unless the negative is present (note that the pace must be quick in order to make this a bit of a challenge). Here’s an example:

T: Simon says, “Stand up.” (Students stand up.)

T: Simon says, “Turn around.” (Students turn around.)

T: Simon says, “Don’t sit down.”

Anyone who sits down after this third command is eliminated from the game, which continues until the class has one or two “winners” remaining.

This game can also give students practice in forming negative imperatives. After students become more proficient in forming negatives, students can lead “Simon Says.”

**3. Meaning.** To practice comprehension and then production of imperatives, the teacher can ask students to follow certain procedures; later, students direct similar procedures. The following steps in an “operation” ( a simple, self-contained procedure) are suggested by Pat Moran:

- a. The teacher models a chain of commands and accompanying actions that perform an “operation.” For example, an operation might be to write and mail a letter. The steps would be to pick up a pen, write a letter, sign the letter, fold the letter, address the envelope, put the letter into the envelope, seal the envelope, put a stamp on the envelope, and mail the letter.
- b. The teacher repeats the operation once again, pantomiming the steps and giving the commands.
- c. Students then “perform” the operation in response to commands from the teacher.
- d. Students give the directions to the teacher.
- e. Students give the directions to each other.



**4. Use.** As we pointed out in this chapter, students will need to learn when a request is being made of them. This is particularly challenging when the syntactic form of the request seems to suggest that some other function is being communicated. To begin to address this challenge, teachers might read a list of sentences (including interrogatives and imperatives) to their students. After each one, students should respond not to the *form*, but to the *function* of the sentence. For example:

T: Felipe, do you have a pen I can use?

Felipe should learn, of course, that this is a request to borrow a pen, not a request for information. Thus, in this exercise, he should offer a pen to the teacher.

T: Miquel, how do you like the weather here in Winnipeg?

Miquel needs to recognize that this is a request for information and respond accordingly—“It’s cold.”

T: Somebody, turn off the lights.

Here everyone should attempt to comply, or at least those sitting near the light switches.

T: Phiang, should you be chewing gum in class?

Phiang needs to know to take out the gum.

**5. Use.** To give students practice with polite commands, ask students to pair up, and give each member of each pair a task that he or she will ask the other member of the pair to do. Also assign each a role. For example, in the first pair, A is told that B is her friend and that she wants B to help her with her homework. B is told that she is A’s friend and that she would like A to give her a ride home after school.

The pair of students then role-play this simple interaction. Students are told to agree to the other’s request only when they are satisfied that the other has been sufficiently polite. For example:

A: Help me with my homework, please.

B: Sorry. I can’t.

A: I need some help with my homework.

B: Sorry. I can’t.

A: Could you please help me with my homework?

B: All right/Okay/No problem/Certainly/Of course.

Notice that this sort of exercise also gives students practice in responding to the requests that others make.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

- I. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples.
  - a. imperative
    - (i) affirmative
    - (ii) negative



- |   |   |
|---|---|
| b. inclusive imperative                 | f. <i>you</i> retention                 |
| c. diffuse imperative                   | g. <i>you</i> deletion                  |
| d. <i>let</i> (noninclusive) imperative | h. imperative with <i>please</i>        |
| e. elliptical imperative                | i. emphatic <i>do</i> to add politeness |
2. Give the basic structures and then state which rules would apply to derive the following sentences:
 

a. Take a break.	c. Don't be mad.
b. Don't forget her birthday.	d. You come here.
  3. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical?
 

a. *She go away.	c. *Leaves the room.
b. *Don't angry.	d. *Do not you take offense.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

4. Review the syntactic arguments for claiming that imperatives are tenseless. Do likewise for the syntactic arguments that underlying imperatives is an understood *you*. See if you can explain these arguments in your own words.
5. As you saw in the chapter on yes/no questions and as Schaffer (1993) points out, a number of different types of sentences in colloquial, spoken English are subjectless, such as the following:

Nice day.	(It's a nice day.)
Going to the party?	(Are you going to the party?)
Got too much work to do.	(I've got too much work to do.)

What is the difference between these subjectless sentences and the subjectlessness of the imperative in English?

6. Sometimes ESL/EFL teachers have difficulty convincing students to use imperatives because the students feel that they are rude. What would you do to convince your students that imperatives are often appropriate?
7. We have discussed a number of ways through which imperatives can be made more polite. List those we have already mentioned. Then see if you can add any more.
8. Some transformational analyses of the imperative (e.g., Liles 1971) have suggested that the underlying structure of all imperatives contains *will* because *will* often occurs in imperative tags—for example, *Come in, won't you?* The output of the base for *Be quiet* in such an analysis would be *you will be quiet*. One could make both a semantic and a syntactic argument against such an analysis, however. Can you figure out what those arguments are?

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- Liles, B. (1971). *An Introductory Transformational Grammar*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Schaffer, K. (1993). "Subject omission in Written English." A paper written in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the M.A. degree in Linguistics at the University of Minnesota, June 10, 1993.

### Suggestions for further reading

*For a good summary and evaluation of all the various linguistic analyses that have been proposed to account for imperative sentences, see this source:*

Stockwell, R., P. Schachter, and B. Partee (1973). *The Major Syntactic Structures of English*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 663–670.

*For additional ideas on using "operations" to practice imperatives, see:*

Nelson, G., and T. Winters (1980). *ESL Operations: Techniques for Learning While Doing*. Rowley, Mass: Newbury House.

*For classroom exercises on recognizing appropriate commands and requests, see:*

Badalamenti, V., and C. Henner Stanchina (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 1 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass: Heinle & Heinle.

Danielson, D., and P. Porter (with R. Hayden) (1990). *Using English: Your Second Language* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Regents, 82–85.

### ENDNOTES

1. In the meaning section we discuss the conditions for its appearance.
2. We use three different notations to show derivations in this book. One is to show how trees are changed by the application of mapping rules (as you saw with *Be quiet* after subject deletion). A second is to simply mention the mapping rules that apply, and a third is to use a line-by-line list of the various rules, as we do in what follows. We do this in order to accommodate readers' different learning styles.
3. Notice that the copula *be* used in affirmative imperatives is not really stative because here it means something like "become" (e.g., *Be strong*) or "act like" (e.g., *Be a dear and get me something to drink*). We cannot use copula *be* with its stative meaning in imperatives (e.g., \**Be thin*). Negative imperatives with *be* are less limited and therefore more common (e.g., *Don't be mad*). Other normally stative verbs can be used in the imperative mood when they have a more dynamic meaning, such as *Love it or leave it*.
4. Carrell and Konneker did not test for any distinction among the modal verbs themselves, since the hierarchy was based on syntactic rather than semantic markers. For the same reason, the use of *please* and other lexical distinctions were also omitted from the hierarchy.

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# WH-QUESTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

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*Wh*-questions are very important structures for ESL/EFL students. They are used to request specific information, so the need to use them arises often. For instance, *wh*-questions are used in social interaction (*What's your name?*), for getting directions (*Where's the post office?*), in seeking explanations (*Why is the plane late?*), for eliciting vocabulary (*What's this?*), and so forth. Notice that while yes/no questions query an entire proposition, *wh*-questions are used when the speaker is missing one specific piece of information.

*Did someone walk the dog?* (general query about the truth of the proposition)

*Who walked the dog?* (speaker is asking for the name of the person who walked the dog)

The nature of the missing piece of information conditions the selection of the question word, which most often, although not always, begins with *wh*.

Second language acquisition research tells us that English *wh*-questions, despite their usefulness, are not acquired especially early. This is presumably due to their variety and to the fact that English has two basic structures for *wh*-questions—one requiring inversion and one not. Thus, students struggle with inversion, and errors such as *\*Where you are going?* are common even at intermediate stages of acquisition.

It is also true, however, that *wh*-questions sometimes appear accurately in the interlanguage of language learners long before the learners have mastered the syntactic rules for their formation, presumably because learners have memorized frequently occurring question forms as lexicalized units (e.g., *How are you? Where are you from?*). Because of their usefulness and their frequency, we feel *wh*-questions should be taught from the very beginning of instruction, even if holophrastically at first.

## THE FORM OF WH-QUESTIONS

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As we stated above, there are really two fundamental issues to be aware of regarding the form of *wh*-questions. The first has to do with the variety of constituents that can be queried with *wh*-questions. The second has to do with the two basic word orders for unmarked *wh*-questions.

### VARIETY OF CONSTITUENTS

Consider the following sentence:

Lee wrote an angry memo to his boss before he quit.

A variety of constituents can be queried in a *wh*-question:

Subject NP: *Who wrote an angry memo to his boss before he quit?* (*Lee*)

Object NP: *What did Lee write to his boss before he quit?* (*an angry memo*)

Object of the prep.: *To whom did Lee write an angry memo before he quit?* (*his boss*)

or

*Who(m) did Lee write an angry memo to before he quit?* (*his boss*)

Verb phrase: *What did Lee do before he quit?* (*He wrote an angry memo to his boss.*)

Determiner: *Whose boss did Lee write an angry memo to before he quit?* (*his boss*)

Adjective: *What kind of memo did Lee write?* (*an angry memo*)

Adverbial: *When did Lee write the angry memo to his boss?* (*before he quit*)

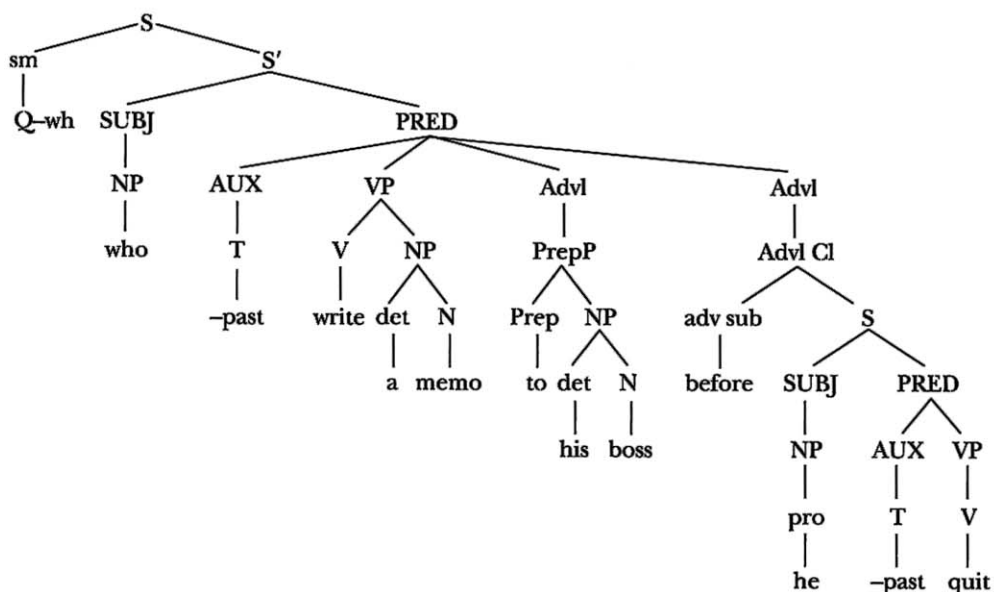
As can be seen, the scope of what is being queried can range widely—from a whole verb phrase, for instance, to part of a noun phrase (as small as a possessive determiner, for example). The focus of inquiry in a *wh*-question is narrower than that of a yes/no question, however. In fact, we might almost say that *wh*-questions are statements with an information gap. The fact that English *wh*-questions have the same intonation pattern as statements supports this contention.

②    ③ ①  
Where is he going?

②    ③ ①  
He's going to the zoo.

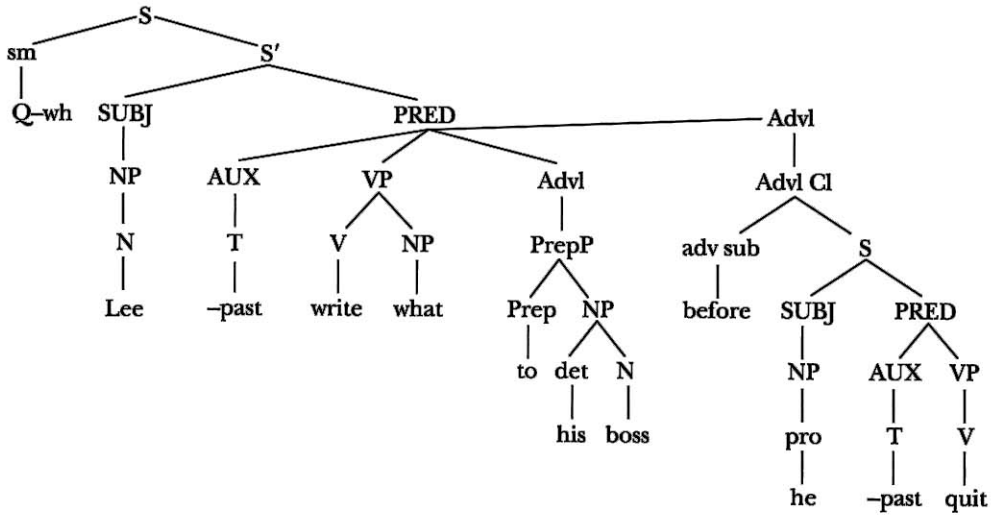
Underlying a *wh*-question is the assumption that some event/action has taken place or some state of affairs exists. The proposition expressing this assumption forms the basis for the tree diagram. For example, the tree structure for a question where the information gap is represented by the subject is as follows, with the Q marked *wh* to reflect its more limited scope.

Who wrote a memo to his boss before he quit?



Here's another one. The information gap for this question exists in the object NP.

What did Lee write to his boss before he quit?



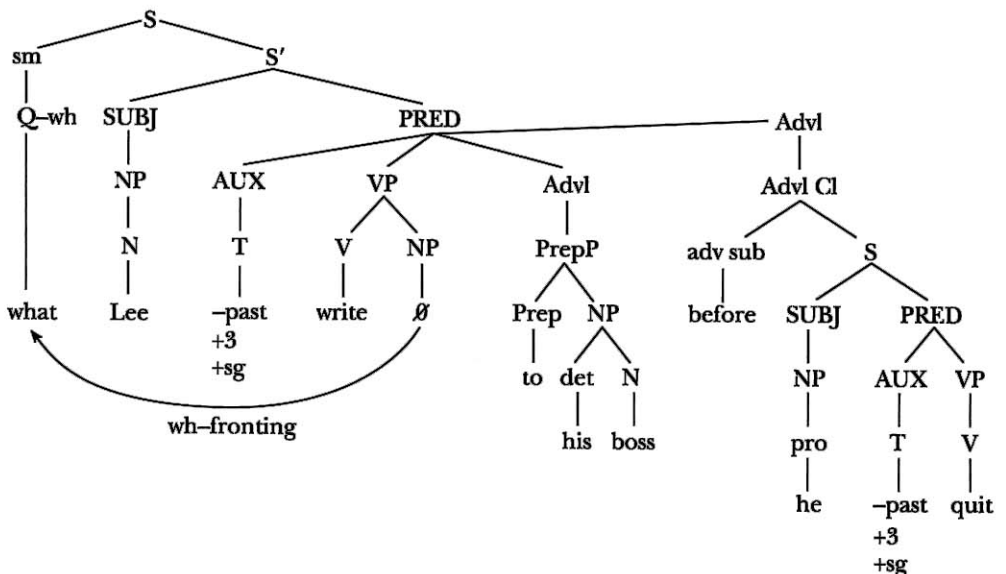
**SUBJECT *WH*-QUESTIONS VERSUS PREDICATE *WH*-QUESTIONS**

Notice the fundamental difference between the two previous example questions. The derivation of the first one is straightforward. Since it is the subject that is being queried, and since the subject is already in initial position in a sentence, only the rules to copy subject person and number on tense, and morphology are needed to derive the surface structure.

Who wrote a memo to his boss before he quit?

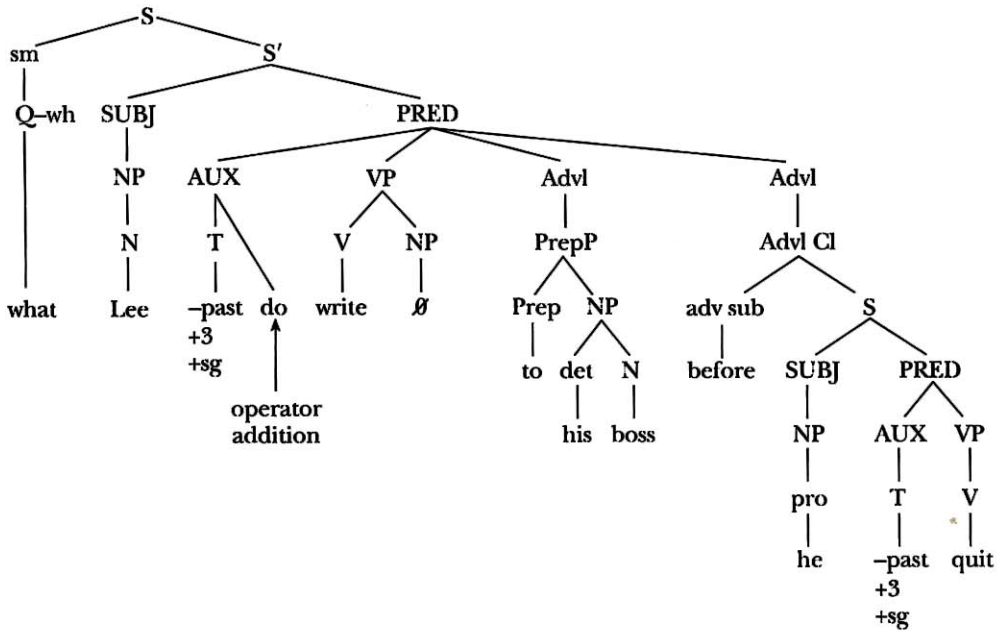
output of base: who -past write a memo to his boss before he -past quit  
 copy s/t: who -past [+ 3, + sg] write a memo to his boss before he -past [+ 3, + sg] quit  
 morphology: Who wrote a memo to his boss before he quit?

It is a different story with the second question, where it is the object NP that is being queried. In this tree, we see that the information gap is in the predicate; thus, the *wh*-question word is not in the position it normally occupies in English. In order to deal with this matter, we will have to move the *wh*-question word to the front of the sentence, applying the derivation rule of *wh*-fronting.

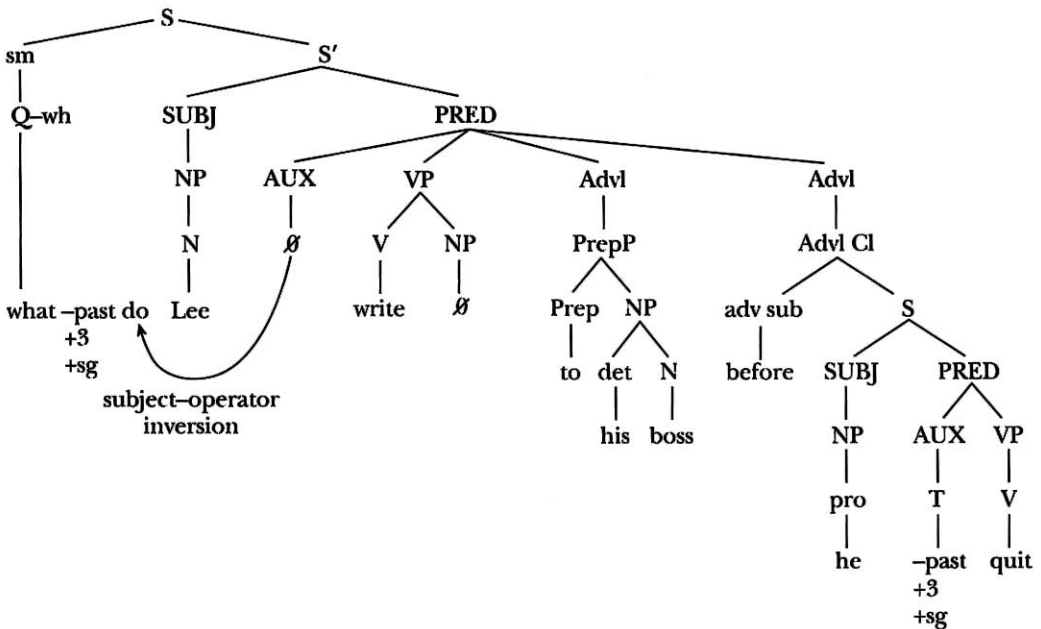




We cannot apply morphology at this point, however. You will note that every question we generated above, save the subject-based *wh*-question, contains the *do* verb. This is because of the requirement in English that we invert the subject and operator if we have moved a *wh*-word from a position in the predicate to initial position. If there is no operator present, one must be added by means of the operator addition rule.

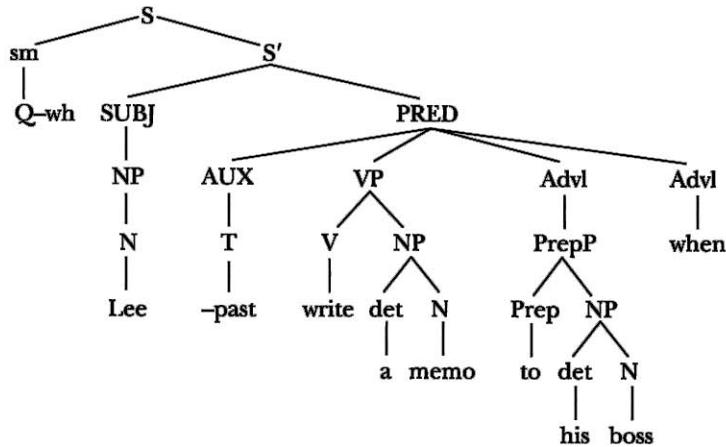


Then, subject and operator can be inverted:

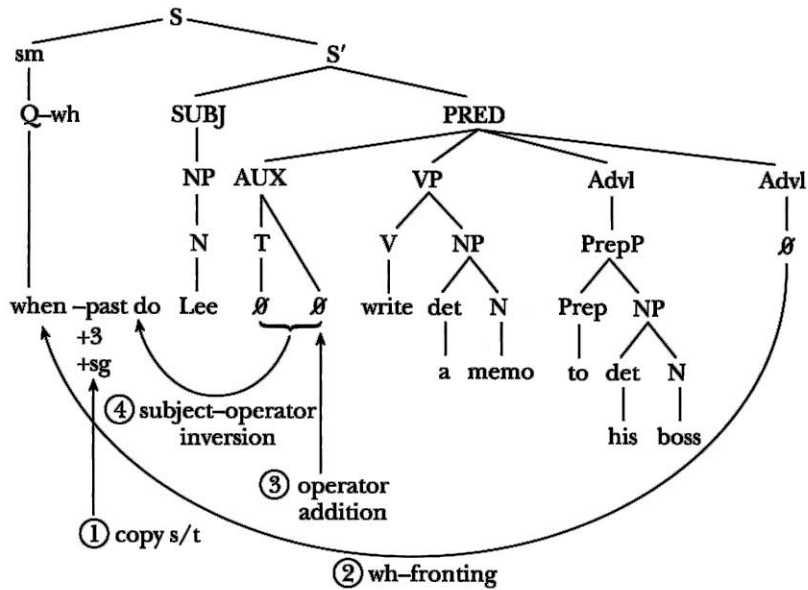


Here's another example of a derivation where the missing information occurs in the predicate position in the underlying proposition—the adverbial of time is being queried:

When did Lee write a memo to his boss?



With copy s/t, *wh*-fronting, operator addition, and subject-operator inversion, this is how the tree would look:



Here is the order of the mapping rules:

output of base: Q-wh Lee -past write a memo to his boss when

copy s/t: Q-wh Lee -past [+ 3 + sg] write a memo to his boss when

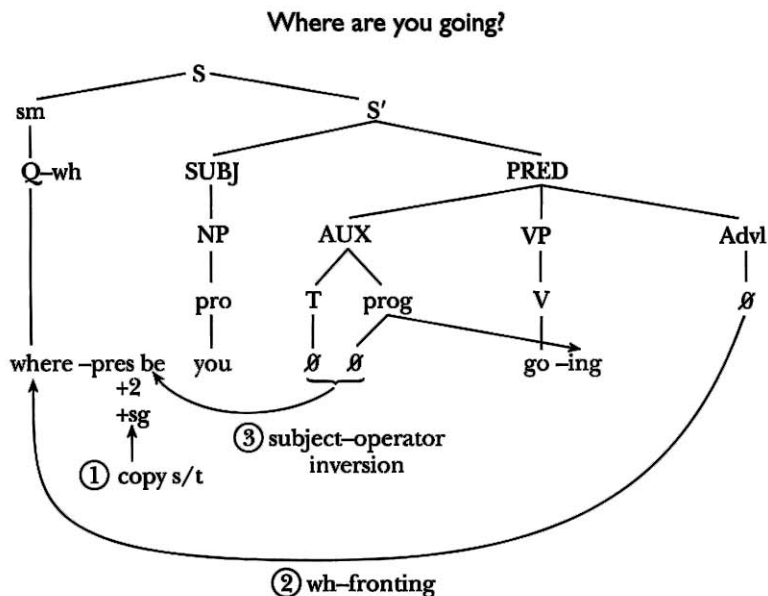
wh-fronting: when Lee -past [+ 3 + sg] write a memo to his boss

operator addition: when Lee -past [+ 3 + sg] do write a memo to his boss

subject-operator inversion: when -past [+ 3 + sg] do Lee write a memo to his boss

morphology: When did Lee write a memo to his boss?

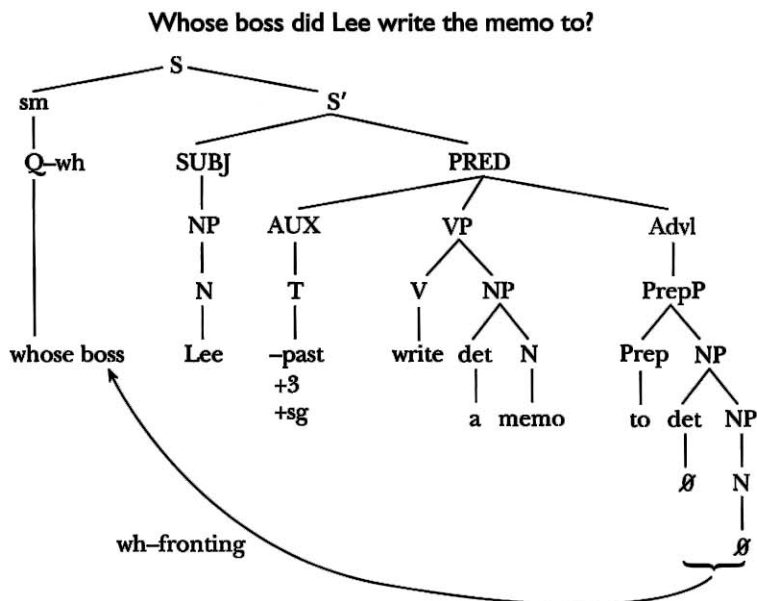
Of course, if an auxiliary verb is present, then it will move when subject-operator inversion is applied. It will carry the tense, and operator addition will be unnecessary.



In sum, then, *wh*-questions in which some constituent in the subject is being queried are simpler syntactically than those in which something in the predicate is being queried. The former requires merely selecting the appropriate *wh*-question word (see below), given the inquiry focus. The latter involves the additional operations of fronting the *wh*-word, inverting the subject and operator, and adding the operator *do* if no other operator is present.

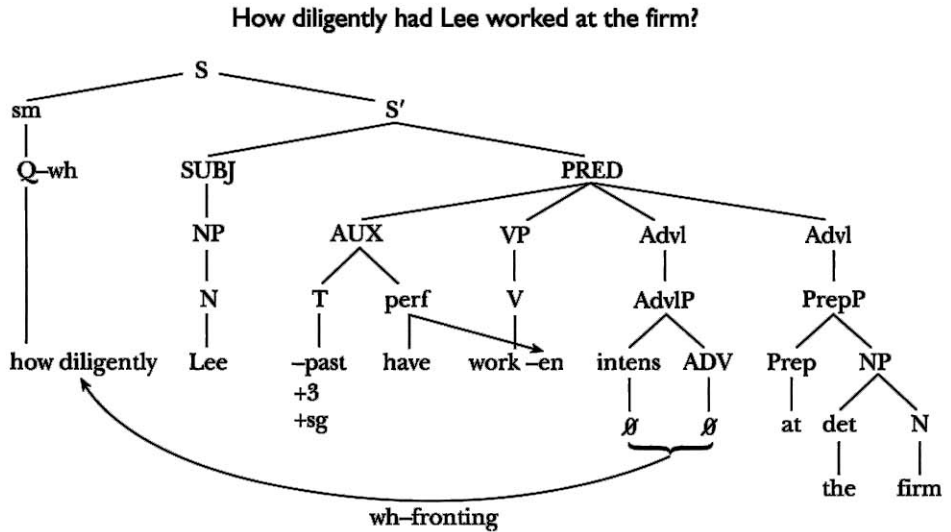
### SPECIAL CASES INVOLVING WH-FRONTING

The *wh*-fronting rule introduced above is a rule that has some special cases and exceptions. One such case involves determiners and intensifiers. If a determiner or intensifier is the focus of a *wh*-question word, the constituent it modifies must be moved to the front of the string along with the determiner or intensifier. This can be seen in the following question:



Because it is the possessive determiner that is being queried, the determiner and the constituent it modifies (here, the noun head *boss*) must be moved to the front of the sentence with *wh*-fronting.

The same holds true when it is an intensifier that is being queried:



*Diligently* moves along with the intensifier being queried, i.e., *how*, through *wh*-fronting. Notice also in this question that there is no need for operator addition since the auxiliary verb *have* is there to serve as operator for subject-operator inversion.

Another special case exists when the object of the preposition is the unknown element. When *wh*-fronting is applied, the preposition may either be left behind or be moved up to the front of the string along with the NP. While this choice is syntactically optional, you will note a difference in register depending on its application, with the first option being more formal than the second:

To whom did Lee write an angry memo before he quit?  
 Who(m) did Lee write an angry memo to before he quit?

Finally, we occasionally encounter a *wh*-question where the question word is the object of a preposition within another prepositional phrase:

By virtue of what authority did Lee do that?

In such a case, the entire prepositional complex must be fronted; the preposition *of* or the words *by virtue of* cannot be left behind when *wh*-fronting takes place.

### WH-QUESTIONS WITH THE COPULA BE

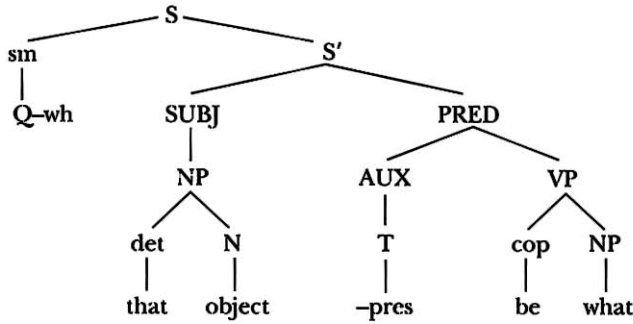
Before concluding our analysis of major *wh*-question types, let us also consider this example:

What is that object?

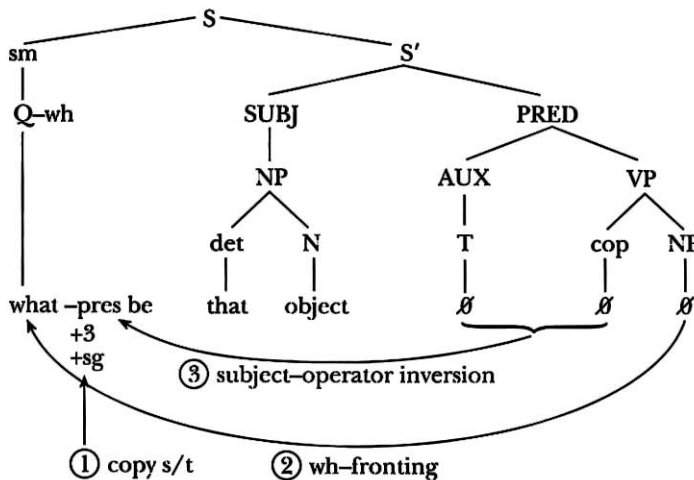
Some of you may think at first that the subject NP is being questioned. However, you should ask yourselves what the underlying proposition is—that is, whether it more closely resembles proposition a or b:

- a. That object is a stethoscope.      b. A stethoscope is that object.

The answer of course is *a*; the predicate noun, not the subject noun, is being questioned. The correct basic structure for this question is:



There is no need for operator addition for we have seen that the copula *be* can serve as an operator. Thus with copy s/t, *wh*-fronting, and subject-operator inversion we get:



Here is the list of mapping rules:

- output of base: Q-wh that object -pres be what
- copy s/t: Q-wh that object -pres [+ 3 + sg ] be what
- wh*-fronting: what that object -pres [+ 3 + sg ] be
- subject-operator inversion: what -pres [+ 3 + sg ] be that object
- morphology: What is that object?

The lesson here is that one must always fully reconstruct the underlying proposition when analyzing the meaning and derivation of a *wh*-question.

## THE MEANING OF WH-QUESTIONS

### CHOOSING A WH-QUESTION WORD

One of the areas concerning meaning is one's choice of a question word. The determination is really a lexical choice which involves selecting the appropriate *wh*-question word depending on the semantic character of the inquiry focus. The following is an inventory of common *wh*-words and their syntactic/semantic correspondences:

Subject NP [+ human]	→ who	Who did it?
Subject NP [- human]	→ what	What went wrong?
Subject Noun Predicate [+ human]	→ who	Who is that?
Subject Noun Predicate [- human]	→ what	What is that?
Object NP [+ human]	→ who(m) <sup>1</sup>	Who(m) did you tell To whom did you tell the story?
Object NP [-human]	→ what	What did she say?
det [possessive]	→ whose + NP	Whose idea was it?
det [demonstrative]	→ { which + NP what + NP }	Which excuse did they give? What alibi did they use?
det [quantifier; - count]	→ how much + (NP)	How much (money) did they get?
det [quantifier; + count]	→ how many + (NP)	How many thieves were there?
det [quantifier] + measure word <sup>2</sup>	→ how long	How long did it take them?
ADJ [quality]	→ { how what . . . like }	How did they look? What did they look like?
ADJ [type]	→ what kind of (NP)	What kind of mask did he wear?
ADJ [color, size, nationality]	→ what + NP	What color was it?
intensifier	→ { how + } ADJ { how + } ADV	How calm did they seem? How fast did they work?
VP	→ what . . . do	What did they do next?
Advl [means]	→ how	How did they get away?
Advl [direction]	→ where	Where did they go?
Advl [position]	→ where	Where did they hide?
Advl [time]	→ when	When were they discovered?
Advl [manner]	→ how	How did she take the news?
Advl [reason]	→ why	Why did they confess?
Advl [purpose]	→ what . . . for	What did they do that for?
Advl [frequency]	→ how often	How often does it end this way?

Several observations need to be made about the list above. First of all, as we said, these are general *wh*-words. It is also possible to ask very specific *wh*-questions about the same semantic domains. For instance, if we want to make a general query about the time of a specific event, we could ask,

**When is the concert?**

but we could also ask about the time of a specific event, using more specific *wh*-questions:

**What date is the concert?**

**Which day is the concert?**

**What time is the concert?**



Similarly, we could ask a question about direction using *where*, but we could also ask a more precise question using *which way*:

Where did they go?  
Which way did they go?

The same is true at the clausal level. We can ask a very general *wh*-question about an event:

What happened?

Or we can ask more specific questions about the event:

What did the thieves do?

Or even just about the action—that is, the verb:

What did the thieves do to the bank teller?

### UNINVERTED *WH*-QUESTIONS

As with yes/no questions, it is also possible to have uninverted *wh*-questions. For such *wh*-questions, both *wh*-fronting and subject-operator inversion would be suppressed. Sometimes these are just “echo” questions in which the listener is signaling to the speaker that he or she didn’t hear a part of what just was said:

A: I expect to be going to Hawaii for the holidays.  
B: You expect to be going where for the holidays?  
A: To Hawaii.

Or just the *wh*-question word can be used as a repair to signal that something was not heard (Weber 1989):

A: I expect to be going to Hawaii for the holidays.  
B: Where?  
A: To Hawaii.

However, if B’s reply had been said with pitch above the normal range (especially on *where*), then A would have interpreted B’s uninverted question as expressing surprise or disbelief:

A: I am going to Hawaii for the holidays.  
B: You’re going *where* for the holidays?  
A: I know. Lucky me!

It is even possible to mark more than one constituent + Q -*wh* (e.g., *Who said what to whom?*) in uninverted *wh*-questions.

### EMPHATIC QUESTIONS WITH *EVER*

English speakers use *ever* with *wh*-questions to make them emphatic. Such questions express a variety of emotions:

Dismay: *Wherever did you get that idea?*  
Admiration: *However did you manage it?*  
Perplexity: *Whatever does she see in him?*

We use *ever* after all *wh*-question words except *which* and *whose*, and we often put heavy stress on it in spoken questions:

*Wherever* did you pick that up?

### NEGATIVE WH-QUESTIONS

We have already seen the semantic difference between negative and affirmative yes/no questions. Such can be the case with *wh*-questions as well. Negative questions can be neutral, like affirmative *wh*-questions:

Who hasn't gotten their assignment back?

However, they can also connote a negative judgment:

What did John say? (unmarked neutral question)

What didn't John say? (could imply that he talked a great deal or that he withheld information)

Why didn't you answer when I called?  
Why haven't I been invited? } (They accuse the interlocutor of an omission.)

Where didn't you go? (You seemed to go everywhere.)  
What didn't happen? (Everything seemed to happen.) } (They comment on the lack of any omission.)

Notice also, as with yes/no questions, there are two acceptable forms of negative *wh*-questions depending on whether *not* has been contracted:

When isn't it a good time?

When is it not a good time?

## THE USE OF WH-QUESTIONS

### YES/NO QUESTIONS VERSUS WH-QUESTIONS

As mentioned in the introduction, yes/no questions query a whole proposition, and *wh*-questions query a specific part of the proposition. In other words, the pragmatic context for using most *wh*-question words is one in which the speaker already assumes that the listener knows the proposition. If this knowledge cannot be assumed, the speaker would use a yes/no question to establish the proposition. Once this is done, *wh*-questions would be employed to provide specific details:

A: Did you go to the concert last night?

B: Yeah.

A: How was it?

Notice that if A had incorrectly assumed shared knowledge of the proposition, and thus began with a *wh*-question, a communication breakdown might have occurred. Had A assumed too much, this would have necessitated some sort of communicative repair:

A: How was the concert?

B: What concert?

## SOCIAL USES

Of some pedagogical import is the fact that certain fixed formulaic *wh*-questions serve social functions. These would certainly seem to be candidates for the holophrastic learning of which we spoke in the Introduction. Among them are certain combinations with *how* and *what*:

Introductions: *How do you do? What do you do?*

Greetings: *How are you? How have you been? What's new? What's up? What's happening?*

Eliciting personal reactions: *How was the X?* (e.g., *How was the test?*)

and one with *why*:

Making suggestions: *Why don't you X?* (e.g., *Why don't you ask?*)

A subset of these formulaic questions might be called truncated *wh*-questions (Schonbeck 1982) because they are actually question fragments, which appear to be used for particular functions in informal conversations. While they may not be used exclusively for these functions, the following are common:

Making a suggestion: *How about X?* (e.g., *How about a movie?*)

Responding positively to a suggestion: *Why not?*

Expressing exasperation: *What now?* or *Now what?*

Seeking another's opinion: *How about you?*

Challenging another's opinion: *How come? What for? Since when?*

Expressing perplexity: *What to do?*

Asking for clarification/expansion: *What about it?*

## UNINVERTED WH-QUESTIONS

In Chapter 11 we made the point that uninverted questions can seem offensive because they imply a certain level of social familiarity. Anecdotal evidence suggests that caution would be in order when using uninverted *wh*-questions as well. One ESL teacher told us that he had taught uninverted *wh*-questions to his students. One of them was called to the dean's office soon thereafter. The dean talked about something he had done recently, and the student asked for clarification with "*You did what?*" The dean told the student that he was being rude by asking the question this way, and the ESL teacher reports that the student returned to class feeling somewhat betrayed!

## ELLIPTICAL QUESTIONS

In very informal conversations it is also possible to encounter *wh*-question fragments that focus on the predicate and have a deleted auxiliary, such as these:

<b>Question</b>	<b>Deleted Auxiliary</b>
Where you been hiding?	(have)
What you (Whatcha) doing?	(are)
How we going to (gonna) do that?	(are)

Like the elliptical *yes/no* questions, these *wh*-questions have auxiliaries that are recoverable from other information in the sentences. In very informal contexts, redundant function words such as auxiliaries tend to be deleted, and other phonological reductions take place.

## WHO/WHOM

Earlier, we noted that *who* is the *wh*-question word that queries the subject and *whom* queries the object. While this is prescriptively correct, your ESL/EFL students will encounter *who* being used for both roles. It is common for native speakers of English to use *who* for both when speaking:

Who asked? (subject focus)  
Who did you tell? (object focus)

However, when the *wh*-question word is querying the object of a preposition, and the preposition has been fronted through *wh*-fronting, *whom* should be used:

To whom was the message delivered?  
\*To who was the message delivered?

## DISPLAY QUESTIONS

Teachers and parents/caretakers are fond of using uninverted *wh*-questions with their students or children. Such questions are referred to as display questions in that teachers and caretakers use them to ask students and children to display their knowledge.

Teacher: So this story is about what?

The teacher already knows the answer to the display question, but uses it as a device to elicit students' response so their comprehension can be checked:

So you have learned what about *wh*-questions?  
They are used when?  
They are formed how?  
They are different from yes/no questions in which ways?

Display questions can, of course, also take the form of inverted *wh*-questions:

Teacher: What is the capital of Virginia?

and this is the common form of display questions used in writing conferences (Hilder 1997):

Teacher: Why might we want to use a transition word here?

## CONCLUSION

We started out in this chapter by making the claim that *wh*-questions should be taught early on to ESL/EFL students, even if only formulaically. We think so because *wh*-questions serve many useful purposes in general and, more specifically, can be used by language students to advance their knowledge further. Aside from problems with inversion, we expect beginners to have few problems in acquiring some rudimentary questions and in learning to reply to certain others. More advanced students need to be systematically introduced to the more marked forms such as negative, uninverted, and elliptical *wh*-questions. For them, the challenge lies in mastering their meaning and use.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** When working with beginning students, it is advisable to do some early work with subject NP focus in *wh*-questions so that they can become familiar with some common *wh*-words without worrying about subject-operator inversion at the same time:

Who is writing on the board?      What happened?

One way of practicing such questions is to ask everyone in the room to keep doing something different from the others. The teacher can then establish the pattern with the present progressive:

T: Who is opening the windows?      T: Who is tapping her pencil?  
Ss: Ramon (is).      Ss: Michele (is).

Then the students can take over the activity:

S1: Who is drawing pictures?      S2: Who is sleeping?  
S2: Ali (is)      S3: Yen-Mai (is).

**2. Use.** As we said in this chapter, students at the beginning levels of instruction will probably learn inverted questions as lexicalized units. Useful questions of this type to teach are those that students can use to further their knowledge of English. We have in mind such questions as these:

What is the meaning of X? or What does X mean?  
How do you spell X?  
How do you pronounce X?  
How do you say Y in English? (where Y = something in the student's L1)

A teacher might give students practice with these by giving each student in class a vocabulary word and its definition on a card. Students have to circulate and ask questions and take notes on each other's vocabulary items. For example:

S1: What is your word?  
S2: Butcher.  
S1: How do you spell "butcher"?  
S2: B . . u . . t . . c . . h . . e . . r .  
S1: What does "butcher" mean?  
S2: (reading) A person who sells meat.


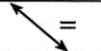

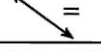
**3. Form.** The easiest and most frequent *wh*-questions involving subject-operator inversion contain the *be* copula. To facilitate practice of this pattern, the teacher can bring in several bags of kitchen utensils and gadgets. Each small group of students is given a bag. Beginning-level students will not likely have full control of the vocabulary. Students can work in small groups, and individuals can ask others in the group questions such as:

S1: What's this? (holding up something he or she has picked from the bag)  
S2: A can opener. (selecting something else)  
S2: What's this?  
S3: A funnel.  
S3: What are these?  
S4: Measuring spoons.

If no one in the group can identify one or more items, they will need to ask other groups for assistance. They should identify all the objects in the bag that they can and then get together with another group to teach them the names of things they might not know and to ask them for help with the names of things that they have not yet identified.

**4. Form.** The biggest problem for beginning students—and often intermediate students too—is forming a *wh*-question that requires subject/operator inversion with a main verb other than the *be* copula.

Nancy Reed (personal communication) has developed a useful strategy for relating information students have already learned about subject-operator inversion in yes/no questions to the generation of *wh*-questions. Using charts or a flannelboard or the overhead projector to provide visual as well as aural reinforcement, she asks students yes/no questions and then follows up each yes/no question immediately with a more specific *wh*-question structurally related to the yes/no question. Here's an example:

- T: Are you studying at NYU ?
- S: Yes. 
- T: What are you studying ?
- S: Law.
- T: Will you be a lawyer someday ?
- S: Yes. 
- T: When will you be one ?
- S: In two years.
- T: Do you live in New York ?
- S: Yes. 
- T: What area do you live in ?
- S: Greenwich Village.
- T: Did you take the English placement test ?
- S: Yes. 
- T: When did you take it ?
- S: September 15.

Using these paradigms, Ms. Reed then cues a student to ask another student a yes/no question, which he or she then follows up with another appropriate *wh*-question that the teacher can cue if necessary; for example:

- T: Juan, ask Ming-Lee if she is increasing her English vocabulary.
- J: Are you increasing your English vocabulary ?
- M-L: Yes.
- T: Ask her *how* she's doing it.
- J: How are you doing it ?
- M-L: By reading.



Eventually, the students are able to carry on such dialogues without cues, and they get a lot of practice using *wh*-questions that require subject-operator inversion and, where needed, the addition of *do*. The relationship between yes/no questions and these types of *wh*-questions has been made explicit. And the recurrence of common question formation errors such as *\*What you are doing?* can thus be reduced.

**5. Meaning.** Information-gap activities are ideal for working with the meaning of a variety of *wh*-question words. The teacher prepares a class information sheet with the names of categories on the horizontal axis and the names of some students on the vertical axis. Some of the cells of the grid are completed, but not all of them. One half of the class is given this sheet. A similar sheet is prepared for the other half of the class. On this sheet the cells missing the information on the first sheet are filled, but other cells are empty. In pairs, students have to ask and answer each other questions in order to complete their class information sheets. For example:

Sheet A

Student	Native Country	Native Language	How long studying English	Major
Ketut Sudha	Indonesia	<input type="text"/>	10 years	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	Mexico	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	Nursing
<input type="text"/>	Japan	Japanese	12 years	<input type="text"/>

Sheet B

Student	Native Country	Native Language	How long studying English	Major
Ketut Sudha	<input type="text"/>	Indonesian	<input type="text"/>	Biology
Nina Rojas	<input type="text"/>	Spanish	8 years	<input type="text"/>
Eiko Watanabe	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	Music

S1: What language does Ketut speak?

S2: Indonesian. Where does Nina come from?

S1: Mexico. Who comes from Japan?

S2: Eiko. How long has she been studying English?

**6. Meaning.** Write a number of *wh*-questions down one side of a piece of paper and their answers down the other side. Cut the paper apart vertically, so the answers are separate from the questions. Now cut the answers up and scramble them, and do the same with the questions. Have each student take one slip of paper from each pile. The students must go around the room asking the question on their pieces of paper to each other until they find an answer that matches. When a student has found a match for both answer and question, he or she should come to you and get a new pair. Do this until all of the questions and answers have been matched (adapted from Ur 1988).

**7. Use.** Role plays are helpful for practicing the social use of truncated *wh*-questions. For example, a teacher might set up a situation where three friends are trying to decide what to do that evening. We might expect language of the following sort to be used:

A: How about a movie?

B: Sounds good to me. How about you, C?

C: Sure. Why not? What about the one at the Paramount?

A: I have seen it already. Why don't we try the First Cinema?

## EXERCISES

**Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following concepts.
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. <i>wh</i>-question focusing on the subject</li> <li>b. <i>wh</i>-question focusing on an object of a preposition (Give both versions.)</li> <li>c. <i>wh</i>-question focusing on a determiner:               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i.) possessive</li> <li>(ii.) demonstrative</li> <li>(iii.) quantifier</li> </ol> </li> <li>d. uninverted <i>wh</i>-question</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>e. negative <i>wh</i>-question               <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i.) contracted</li> <li>(ii.) uncontracted</li> </ol> </li> <li>f. formulaic <i>wh</i>-question (lexicalized unit)</li> <li>g. <i>wh</i>-question with ellipsis of the auxiliary</li> </ol>
---	---
2. Draw tree diagrams and state the mapping rules that would apply to form each of the following *wh*-questions:
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. How is your father today?</li> <li>b. Whom should we invite to the party?</li> <li>c. How long is the table?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d. What did you understand?</li> <li>e. Where does your brother study physics?</li> </ol>
---	--
3. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical?
 

\*Which did he buy car?      \*Whose did he steal handbag?
4. The general *wh*-question word for Advl [position] is *where*.
 

Where do you live?

What are some specific *wh*-questions we use to ask about position?

**Test your ability to apply what you know**

5. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct the errors?
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. *Where you are going?</li> <li>b. *What you want?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>c. *To whom did he say that to?</li> <li>d. *Where Benny?</li> </ol>
--	---
6. It has been suggested that *why*, *what . . . for*, and *how come* are *wh*-question words that all may be used to ask the same question.
 

Why did he say that?      What did he say that for?      How come he said that?

What are some differences in structure, meaning, and register among these expressions? Cite cases where they cannot be used to paraphrase one another.
7. The following *wh*-questions have been written on the blackboard of an ESL/EFL classroom. The object of the class is to review *wh*-questions in the simple past.
 

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. What did you do yesterday?</li> <li>b. Where did you go?</li> <li>c. What happened?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>d. Who went with you?</li> <li>e. When did you get home?</li> </ol>
--	--

One of the students asks the teacher why three of the questions have a *did* while the other two do not. If you were the teacher, how would you answer this student's question?



8. See if you can draw the tree and derive the surface structure for the negative *wh*-question: *Why didn't you buy the car.* (Hint: Apply all the mapping rules involving the negative particle first.)
9. A student asks you why there are two *do* verbs in *What do you do?* How would you answer?

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

*For a useful linguistic description of wh-questions, see:*

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Chisolm Jr., William (ed.) (1984). *Interrogativity*. Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

*For suggestions on how to teach wh-questions, see:*

Abbott, G. (1980). "Teaching the Learner to Ask for Information." *TESOL Quarterly* 14:1, 21–38.

Pennington, M. (ed.) (1995). *New Ways in Teaching Grammar*. Arlington, Va.: TESOL, 155–167.

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## ENDNOTES

1. See later discussion of *who/whom* in the section on the use of *wh*-questions.
2. Other common measure words in combination with *how* are: *deep, old, high, long, big, far*. Answers to such questions would be in appropriate units, such as *feet, years, miles*.

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# OTHER STRUCTURES THAT LOOK LIKE QUESTIONS

## INTRODUCTION

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In this chapter we discuss four structures that look like questions but that function differently from the *yes/no* and *wh*-questions we have examined in Chapters 11 and 13, respectively. The four structures are tag questions, alternative questions, exclamatory questions, and rhetorical questions. Despite the “question” label, you will see that these structures really are not necessarily used to seek information. They are common enough, though, that ESL/EFL students should be able to recognize them and learn how to respond to them appropriately. Indeed, these structures may cause as many problems for ESL/EFL students in comprehension as they do in production.

## TAG QUESTIONS

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### AN ANALYSIS OF THE FORM OF TAG QUESTIONS

#### Why the Form of Tag Questions Is Problematic

A tag question is a short question form appended to a statement. The tag question generally contrasts in polarity with the statement; that is, when the statement is affirmative, the tag is negative, and vice versa.

Your aunt *is* visiting from Tennessee, *isn't she?*

Your aunt *isn't* visiting from Tennessee, *is she?*

While most other languages have a structure equivalent to the English question tag, the equivalent is often invariant and thus is far simpler to master than the English tag. For example, French has *n'est-ce pas*, German has *nicht wahr*, and Mandarin Chinese has *ma*, spoken with a rising tone. Consequently, native speakers of such languages have been known to overgeneralize one frequently occurring tag in English:

\*She's coming today, *isn't it?*

In some languages the tag-formation convention consists merely of adding to a statement the equivalent for *no* or *yes* with rising intonation. Translated literally into English, this convention produces utterances like the following, which are not uncommon among ESL/EFL learners:

\*We don't have homework today, yes?<sup>1</sup>

Then, too, not all languages use clause-final tags. For example, question tag particles may appear before the clause in Polish, after the first constituent in Ute, or after the focused constituent in Russian (Weber 1989).

### The Syntax and Morphology of Tag Questions in English

In English, tag questions are normally clause final. When a sentence is written, a comma separates the main clause from the tag. If a tag question is sentence medial, commas set off the tag, and the terminal punctuation is still a question mark:

It's human, isn't it, to hope that peace among all people in the world is possible?

Tag questions are syntactically like abbreviated unmarked yes/no questions in that they require subject-operator inversion.

They can't do that, *can they?* (\*they can?)

He's the one you wish to speak to, *isn't he?* (\*he isn't?)

When there is no auxiliary verb or *be* verb in the main clause, then a *do* verb must be introduced as an operator to carry the tense.

She assigned homework, *didn't she?*

Unlike yes/no questions, however, additional steps must be taken to form tag questions. First of all, as you have already seen, if the main clause is affirmative, the tag is negative; if the main clause is negative, the tag is affirmative.<sup>2</sup> The main clause can be negative by virtue of having a negative preverbal adverb of frequency, such as *never*:

Budi has never seen snow, has he?

Negative tags have two forms. By far the more common is the contracted form. It is also syntactically possible, although stylistically formal, to have a full, uncontracted negative; in this case, however, the negative must be separated from the verb:

You have missed a lot of practices, haven't you?

You have missed a lot of practices, have you not?

\*You have missed a lot of practices, have not you?

Second, if the subject of the main clause is not a pronoun, then it must be pronominalized in the tag.

Megan is quite a basketball player, isn't she? (\*isn't Megan?)

The only word that can be used as the subject in the tag that is not a personal pronoun is the nonreferential *there* (see Chapter 23).

There are a lot of social events at this time of year, aren't there?

### The Intonation of Tag Questions

Two different intonation patterns are used with tag questions:

1. Rising-falling: Ethan wanted to play, didn't he?

2. Rising: Ethan wanted to play, didn't he?

We discuss the differences between these forms in a later section on meaning.

### Idiosyncratic Tag Questions

One further note should be made here with regard to the form of tag questions. Certain tags are idiosyncratic:

Let's go, shall we?                      I am going, aren't I?  
We ought to go, shouldn't we?      Open the door, won't you?<sup>3</sup>

Also, numerous unsystematic lexical-type tags are used informally:

You aren't going, right?      You are going, O.K.?  
You aren't going, huh?      You are going, eh?<sup>4</sup>  
You are going, no?

All of these unsystematic tag questions occur with rising intonation.

### Responding to Tag Questions

As we hinted in the Introduction to this chapter, it may be more important for ESL/EFL students to know how to reply to tag questions than to be able to produce the full form accurately. It is worth noting, then, that tag questions are rarely responded to with short answers in discourse between native speakers. In other words, the following response to a tag question is somewhat unusual:

A: She's a brilliant chess player, isn't she?  
B: Yes, she is.

Out of 80 tag questions in her extensive corpus of oral and written data, Brown (1981) found only three instances of such a traditional short answer, and only one of these consisted simply of a *yes* or *no* and the short form. In her corpus, 30 percent of the tags received no answer at all. Others received affirmative answers, such as *That's right*, or some reply in which additional information would be offered:

A: Science is your favorite subject, isn't it?  
B: Has been since I was five. (Carterette and Jones 1974:262, cited in Brown 1981)

When listeners disagreed with the speaker, they would give an explanation for the disagreement:

A: . . . They can't get that big, can they, Wendy?  
B: Well, when they stretch, yes.

The forms of responses to tag questions are mentioned not only for their pedagogical implications but also because they hint at one of the differences between tag questions and other "confirmers." We have more to say about this when we discuss the use of tag questions. First, we should make some comments about their meaning.

### THE MEANING OF TAG QUESTIONS

The meaning of tag questions is reflected in their form: A tag question is a question attached to a statement. In other words, something is being asserted to which the listener is invited to respond. Quirk et al. (1985) suggest that it is important to distinguish the assumption underlying the main clause from the expectation expressed in the tag question. These two intersect with the two intonation patterns introduced earlier to give us four possible combinations:



<i>Polarity</i>		<i>Intonation</i>	<i>Assumption</i>	<i>Expectation</i>
<i>Main Cl.</i>	<i>Tag</i>		<i>Main Cl.</i>	<i>Tag</i>
affirm.	neg.	rising	positive	neutral
neg.	affirm.	rising	negative	neutral
affirm.	neg.	rising-falling	positive	positive
neg.	affirm.	rising-falling	negative	negative

Huang (1980) provides a succinct explanation for these two intonation patterns. He feels that the speaker's intonation indicates how strong his or her presupposition is that the assumption—positive or negative—will be confirmed by the listener. If the speaker uses rising intonation, the expectation is weak. If he or she uses rising-falling intonation, the presupposition of confirmation is strong.

Tag questions thus enrich the scale of the certainty of the truth of the underlying proposition in both directions:

*Strongest bias toward negative certainty*

↑ Sally didn't finish her report, did she? (rising-falling intonation)

Sally didn't finish her report, did she? (rising intonation)

Did Sally finish her report?

Didn't Sally finish her report?

Sally finished her report, didn't she? (rising intonation)

↓ Sally finished her report, didn't she? (rising-falling intonation)

*Strongest bias toward positive certainty*<sup>5</sup>

### Marked Tag Questions

Although far less common than their unmarked counterparts, marked tag questions, instead of having a polar contrast in the affirmative-negative or negative-affirmative marking of the main clause and tag, have a main clause and tag that are nonpolar, or noncontrasting:

*affirmative*

*affirmative*

You're an accountant, are you?<sup>6</sup>

You call yourself a writer, do you?

*negative* *negative*

So I can't, can't I?

In order to make sense of these nonpolar tags in North American English, we interpret them as conveying some additional nuance of meaning. For example, the first could be a confirmation check expressing some doubt or reservation; the second might be sarcasm; the third could be a dare. Thus, it seems that marked tags in North American English have emotional overtones.

### THE USE OF TAG QUESTIONS

As we have already asserted, tag questions are generally not used to seek information, regardless of their intonation. According to Huang (1980), intonation makes a difference only in presuppositional strength, not in actual function. What, then, is the purpose of a tag question?

First of all, we should note that tag questions occur much more frequently in oral discourse than in written discourse. In Brown's 1981 corpus of oral and written data, she found nine times as many tags in spoken discourse as in written, and the latter included mainly tags in reported language (see Chapter 33).

Brown also found that tag questions fulfilled five major functions:

1. Indicating inference (43 instances): *So, therefore, that proves malice, doesn't it?*
2. Seeking agreement (43): *They keep coming back, don't they?*
3. Inviting confirmation (36): *Science is your favorite subject, isn't it?*
4. Expressing doubt (27): *They can't get that big, can they?*
5. Expressing opinion (21): *But that makes a mockery of belief, doesn't it?*

and six minor functions:

Keeping the conversation going (5 cases)	Beginning a conversation (3)
Expressing interest (5)	Making a polite request (3)
Expressing humor or sarcasm (5)	Expressing surprise (3)

Thus, according to Brown, tag questions seem to be a way that the speaker has of seeking confirmation of his or her assertion. This explains why there are more negative than affirmative tags in Brown's data: speakers use negative tags to invite correction. Another fact about form that this function helps explain is the infrequent use of the first person. A person is the best source of information about opinions or inferences about himself or herself; consequently, he or she would generally not seek confirmation of such information from another, although people occasionally add tags like the following, perhaps inviting disconfirmation:

I'm being silly, aren't I?

### Difference Between Tags and Other Confirmers

English speakers can also employ other confirmers, including complete sentences:

- A: The moon is supposed to be full tonight. *Isn't that right?*  
 B: Yeah, that's right.

Speakers apparently use full-form confirmers when they want explicit confirmation that what they said is correct. All the full-sentence confirmers in Brown's corpus were answered, compared with the 30 percent of the tags in Brown's corpus that went unanswered.

## ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS

### YES/NO VERSUS ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS

Various referred to as alternative questions, choice questions, and *or*-questions, this questionlike form offers listeners a choice between two alternatives:

- A: Would you rather study physics or chemistry next semester?  
 B: Chemistry, I think.

While the syntax is that of a yes/no question, the intonation pattern is not. Clearly, therefore, a *yes* or *no* answer would be inappropriate, yet this is often the response given by ESL/EFL students.

- A: Would you like regular or decaf?  
 B: \*Yes, please.

ESL/EFL students need to learn the intonational differences between yes/no questions with conjoined objects and true alternative questions. Whereas the former rise in intonation at the end, the latter rise on the first of the two alternatives and have rising-falling on the second:

## Yes/No Question

A: Would you like coffee or tea?

B: Yes, please.

## Alternative Question

A: Would you like coffee or tea?

B: Coffee, please.

Lest we leave readers assuming that only near-identical alternatives can be conjoined, consider the following alternative question with different subjects:

Did you buy it, or did someone give it to you?

Three conjuncts are also possible with rising tone on each of the alternatives except the last:

Did you buy it, did someone give it to you, or did you find it?

And even clauses with different tenses and subjects can appear as alternatives:

Did you buy it, or am I going to have to?

It is also possible to have an alternative question where the second of the two alternatives is an elliptical negative clause:

Did you buy it, or not?

As use of a yes/no question already presumes the inevitability of one of these two alternatives, the alternative question form with the redundant *or not* seems to be petulant. The degree of speaker irritation appears to increase with the amount of redundancy expressed in the second alternative:

Did you buy it, or not?

Did you buy it, or didn't you?

Did you buy it, or didn't you buy it?

Did you buy it, or did you not buy it?

However, the connotation of petulance is speculative on our part. Intonation would also be a factor, and we would need to do a discourse analysis of questions like these to determine the differences among them.

In sum, we note that alternative questions result when listeners are given a choice between two or more options and when the truth value of only one of the two or more alternatives is presumed. This is different from a yes/no question with objects conjoined by *or*, which does not necessarily exclude either alternative. The semantic difference is signalled by an intonational difference.

**ALTERNATIVE WH-QUESTION COMBINATIONS**

While probably few ESL/EFL students will speak languages that have alternative questions of the type we have just examined, they will likely be familiar with the kind that takes the form of a *wh*-question combined with an elliptical alternative question:

What would you like—coffee, tea or milk?

Where do you live—in Queens or Brooklyn?

In many languages of the world, only this form of alternative question is permitted. Perhaps introducing this alternative *wh*-question hybrid first will ease your students into the new forms of alternative questions they will encounter most frequently in English.

## EXCLAMATORY QUESTIONS

An exclamatory question is not really a question at all. It is an exclamation. It gets its name from the fact that like questions in English, it undergoes subject-operator inversion.

Isn't that grand!

Notice, however, that in writing, it is usually punctuated with an exclamation mark.

Quirk et al. (1985:811) liken exclamatory questions to tag questions with falling intonation. While exclamatory questions are more emphatic than tag questions, they both invite confirmation of the underlying proposition. Compare:

Wasn't she angry! (exclamatory question)

She was angry, wasn't she? (tag question with falling intonation)

It is also possible to have exclamatory questions that look like *wh*-questions:

What a good idea (that is)!

How silly (it all seems)!

As can be seen in the two examples, these usually take the form of *what a* + noun + (clause) or *How* + adjective + (clause).

As Tsui (1992) notes, it is also possible to use exclamatory questions that do not seek confirmation:

Am I hungry!

Since such exclamations report a personal experience, they would be only acknowledged (e.g., *Dinner will be ready soon*), not confirmed.

## RHETORICAL QUESTIONS

A rhetorical question is similar to an exclamatory question in that it is interrogative in form but not in function. It is used by the speaker to assert something without anticipating a response from the listener.

Just because you've failed the first test, is that any reason to give up?

The speaker's message here is "*Surely, no—that is no reason to give up.*" Sometimes the speaker actually answers the question as part of a monologue. Sometimes the answer is merely implicit. In either case, the speaker is not asking the listener for information or for a *yes* or *no* response.

According to Frodesen and Eyring (1997), rhetorical questions may be employed by a speaker or writer for two main purposes:

- |                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| To introduce/shift a topic: | Can the Democrats save Medicare?<br>Remember the great fluoride debate?                   |
| To focus on a main point:   | Haven't we had enough wars?<br>How much longer can we ignore the signs of global warming? |

Interestingly, the authors point out that the second function of rhetorical questions can be paraphrased by tag questions with rising-falling intonation:



mind some of the form-frequency patterns Brown (1981) found in her study. Tag questions are overwhelmingly in the present tense, and they occur most often with the copula *be* or with the operator *do*. Most subjects are third person singular or second person, and 75 percent of all tag questions have an affirmative statement with a negative tag.

*Hal:* Hi, Sue. Good to see you again. It's a nice day today, isn't it?

*Sue:* Hi, Hal. It sure is. Say you look good. You've lost some weight, haven't you?

*Hal:* I'm trying hard. What have you been up to?

*Sue:* I've been studying for my midterm exams in economics and calculus.

*Hal:* Wow! You take tough courses, don't you?

*Sue:* Yeah, but I enjoy the challenge.

**3. Form/Meaning.** To help your ESL/EFL students become familiar with the intonation pattern of alternative questions and to make them aware of the contrast between it and the intonation of syntactically similar yes/no questions, you can give your students a worksheet with 10 pairs of answers. Next, read a question and ask your students to circle the letter of the appropriate corresponding pair of answers. In order to answer correctly, your students will have to recognize whether the question you are giving them has the intonation of an alternative question or a yes/no question. Here's an example:

Teacher reads out loud: I. Are you studying English or history?

Students circle correct reply: I. A. Yes, I am.  
B. Just English now.

**4. Meaning.** You can give your students practice in producing alternative questions by giving them "breakfast menus" that you have prepared. For each category, there might be two or three items from which to choose; for example:

Cold Beverages: Orange Juice	Hot Beverages: Coffee
Grapefruit Juice	Tea

Entrees: Scrambled Eggs	Side Dishes: Hash Brown Potatoes
Pancakes	Bacon
Oatmeal	Ham

Pairs of students take turns role-playing servers and restaurant customers. The server might ask a yes/no question, such as

Would you like a cold beverage?

or

Would you like orange juice or grapefruit juice?

or an alternative question:

Would you like orange juice or grapefruit juice?

Depending on the type of question, the "customer" would give an appropriate answer. For instance, if it was the yes/no question, the customer would reply,

Yes, please. I'll have orange juice.

If, on the other hand, the server used the intonation of an alternative question, the customer would answer:

Orange juice, please.





**5. Use.** After explaining what rhetorical questions are and providing a number of examples, ask your intermediate or advanced ESL/EFL students to find and bring to class one example of a rhetorical question from a newspaper editorial or advertisement, a published speech, a textbook, or an essay. Ask the class to decide why the speaker or writer used a rhetorical question. See if the students can figure out the implied answer for any rhetorical question that the speaker or writer does not answer himself or herself.

**6. Use.** If possible, ask each student to tape-record a conversation between him or her and a native speaker of English. Have the student pick out and categorize the different questions the native speaker uses. Are they all “questions,” or are some of them the structures discussed in this chapter that only *look* like questions?

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

- Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples.
 

a. tag question	b. alternative question
(i.) unmarked	c. alternative <i>wh</i> -question combination
(ii.) idiosyncratic	d. exclamatory “question”
(iii.) marked	e. rhetorical question
- Why are the following sentences ungrammatical?
 

a. *John wants to go, didn't he?	c. *He left, did not he?
b. *Susan never laughs, doesn't she?	d. *Is not that wonderful!
- What would the complete form of these utterances be?
 

a. Is Janet blue-eyed or not?	c. Was it Bill or was it Bob who
b. Looking forward to vacation, aren't you?	wrote this letter?

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

- If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of their errors, and what exercises will you prepare to help your students correct these errors?
 

a. *We're going, isn't it?	
b. *This is nice music, yes?	
c. Native speaker: <u>Would you like coffee or tea?</u>	
ESL/EFL student: *Yes.	
- Under what circumstances might an English speaker utter question 2 rather than question 1 in the following pairs? Discuss both options in your response.
 

a. 1. It is going to rain, isn't it?	2. It isn't going to rain, is it?
b. 1. Do you want to go or not?	2. Do you want to go or do you not want to go?
c. 1. You did, <u>didn't you?</u>	2. You did, <u>did you?</u>
d. 1. <u>There isn't much to do, is there?</u>	2. <u>There isn't much to do, is there?</u>
e. 1. <u>Isn't that good?</u>	2. <u>Isn't that good!</u>
f. 1. Max sings well, doesn't he?	2. Max sings well, don't you think?

6. John Henry Newman wrote a famous essay entitled “What Is a University?” Why do you suppose he chose a question for his title?
7. If an ESL/EFL student asks you what the difference is between the following, how would you answer?

Open the door, won't you?

Open the door, will you?

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

*For an analysis of tag questions, see:*

- Hintikka, J. 1982. “Tag Questions and Grammatical Acceptability.” *Journal of Nordic Linguistics* 5:2, 129–132.

*For exercises on intonation of tag questions and alternative questions, see:*

- Celce-Murcia, M., D. Brinton, and J. Goodwin (1996). *Teaching Pronunciation: A Course for Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Riggenbach, H., and V. Samuda (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 2 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

*For pedagogical suggestions on how to work with rhetorical questions, see:*

- Frodesen, J., and J. Eyring (1997). *Grammar Dimensions; Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 4 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

**ENDNOTES**

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1. It is possible in informal English to use *no* as a tag with an affirmative main clause: e.g., *We have homework today, no?* but not *yes* with a negative main clause.
2. There are exceptions to this convention, which we discuss later in this chapter when we deal with marked tag questions.
3. Notice that tags are sometimes added to imperatives to soften them or to make them more like requests or invitations: e.g., *Come in, won't you?*
4. The *eh* tag—often pronounced /ey/—is commonly used in Canadian English.
5. This scale has been adapted from Givón (1993).
6. Affirmative main clauses and tags are apparently used in unmarked ways in British English to verify the proposition expressed in the first clause.
7. A t-unit is an independent clause and any subordinate clauses or nonclausal structures associated with it.
8. Utterances by two speakers printed on the same line indicates an overlap.

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# ARTICLES

## INTRODUCTION

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The English articles (i.e., definite *the*, indefinite *a/an*, and unstressed *some* /səm/—as well as the use of no article at all) are part of a larger system of reference and determination that we continue to discuss in the next chapter. However, the learning difficulty and frequency of the articles<sup>1</sup> has convinced us to treat them as a separate topic before taking on the larger systems in which they function.

Articles are understandably problematic from a cross-linguistic perspective: most Asian and Slavic languages and many African languages have no articles. Even those languages that do have articles or article-like morphemes (e.g., French, Spanish, Farsi, the Scandinavian languages, and the Semitic languages) often use these morphemes in ways that differ from English. For example, many of these article-using languages mark the generic use of an abstract noun with their equivalent of the definite article. Thus, instead of saying *Beauty is truth*, as the English poet Keats did, the literal equivalent of this sentence in many of these languages would be *\*The beauty is the truth*. Also, some of these languages (e.g., Farsi and some Scandinavian languages) can indicate definiteness or indefiniteness with a suffix or morpheme following the noun, as opposed to the invariant prenominal position that articles have in English.

You may be wondering at this point how languages without articles can signal definiteness or indefiniteness. The most common means is word order; that is, the noun in topic position is definite, whereas a noun in comment position tends to be indefinite.<sup>2</sup> Thompson (1978) gives us a functional explanation for the evolution of the English article system: She says that languages like English that use word order to signal grammatical relations such as “subject” and “object” tend to develop articles because given versus new information cannot be consistently signaled through word order, as they are in topic-comment languages like Russian and Chinese, which tend not to have articles. In topic-comment languages, word order signals given versus new information: the topic comes first, signaling given information, and the comment comes later, signaling new information. Thus as was pointed out in Chapter 2, the definite and indefinite articles in languages like English help us to identify new and given information: given information, tends to take the definite article, while new information, somewhat independently of word order, tends to take the indefinite article.

The historical development of articles in English is similar to that of most other languages that have developed an article system: the definite article *the* derives from the demonstrative signaling distance (i.e., *that*), while the indefinite article derives from the numeral *one*; it is in fact still possible to use *one* as a stressed emphatic variant of *a/an*:

**That's one big bug!**

## FORM: STRUCTURAL FACTS ABOUT ARTICLES

### PRONUNCIATION OF THE ARTICLES

Although the definite article has an invariant spelling, *the*, it has four different pronunciations. The two pronunciations that are most frequent and occur in normal speech in unstressed form are:

/ðə/ before consonant sounds <sup>3</sup>	/ði/ before vowel sounds (less preferred /ðə <sup>9</sup> / also occurs)
the book	the apple
the unit	the orange
the song	the elephant

The third and fourth pronunciations—stressed /ð^/ and stressed /ði/—are the stressed versions of the above forms, which alternate as possible citation forms. Emphatic use of the definite article is pronounced as stressed /ði/:

Citation:	The word <i>the</i> has four pronunciations. (stressed /ð^/ or /ði/)
Emphatic:	I met <b>THE</b> Elizabeth Taylor. (the actress, not someone else with the same name) (stressed /ði/)

The history of the indefinite article *a/an* helps explain why, before a word with an initial vowel sound, its form is *an*, and before a word with an initial consonant sound, its form is *a*—that is, the *n* sound in *one* and *an* are historically related:

/ə/ before a consonant sound <sup>4</sup>	/ən/ before a vowel sound
a book	an apple
a unit	an idea
a student	an ear

The stressed form of the indefinite article is /eɪ/ and is usually a citation form:

The indefinite article is most frequently realized as *a*.

However, on rare occasions this stressed form also occurs as an emphatic or contrastive form in natural speech, as in the Peanuts cartoon script we cite later on p. 281 (Not “A” dog . . . “The” dog).

The plural counterpart of *a/an* (*some*) is generally unstressed /səm/ when used as an article. This article function should be distinguished from three other determiner functions of *some* that are stressed:

Partitive/quantifier:	Some of the people left early. ( <i>some</i> = part of the set)
Emphatic:	That was <b>some</b> party!
Presentative:	Some guy came to the door and tried to sell me a vacuum cleaner. ( <i>some</i> = a certain one and often conveys negative affect.)

### CLASSIFICATION OF NOUNS

	Nouns					
	Common			Proper (are inherently definite)		
	Count		Noncount			
	sg.	pl.		sg.	pl.	
DEFINITE	the	the	the	∅	the	
INDEFINITE	a/an	some/∅	some/∅			



Most of the strictly form-based information about English articles depends on the English noun classification system. All English nouns are classified as either common nouns (e.g., *a boy, a country, a planet*) or proper nouns (e.g., *Bob Robertson, Denmark, Saturn*). In addition, all common nouns can be further classified as noncount nouns (e.g., *water, clothing, luggage*) or count nouns (*a beverage, a shirt, a suitcase*). Noncount nouns are singular in number for purposes of subject-verb agreement but cannot take the indefinite article and the plural inflection as common count nouns do:

<i>Noncount</i>	<i>Count (common)</i>
*a water, *some waters	a beverage, some beverages
*a luggage, *some luggages	a suitcase, some suitcases

Noncount nouns and plural count nouns do, however, share the possibility of taking the zero article or indefinite *some*:

<i>Noncount</i>	<i>Count (plural)</i>
water	suitcases
some water	some suitcases

Proper nouns are a special case: they are like common count nouns because they are countable, but they are different because they are inherently definite and thus never take the indefinite article when they function as true proper nouns. When they take the plural inflection, they require the definite article to retain proper noun status:<sup>5</sup>

<i>Count (proper)</i>
Mr. Wayne, *a John Wayne, the (two) Waynes (= John and Patrick)
America, *an America, the (two) Americas (= North and South, or Anglo and Latin)

Even though both the proper/common and the count/noncount classifications seem to overlap in certain cases, the conceptual distinctions involved are basic to mastery of the English article system.

### The Count-Noncount Distinction

The lexical classification of English common nouns into count and noncount nouns is a very important preliminary to correct use of articles. It is a conceptual distinction that accounts for many systematic patterns in article usage. The distinction is problematic for ESL/EFL learners in that many languages make use of a similar concept; however, what is countable and what is uncountable is somewhat arbitrary and varies to some extent from language to language. For example, *information* and *furniture* are noncount nouns in English but count nouns in French and Spanish, and *chalk* is a noncount noun in English but a count noun in Japanese. Also, even within English itself many nouns can be used either as count or noncount nouns, which is something we discuss below.

Most English nouns, however, tend to be viewed as either uncountable (e.g., *bacon*) or countable (e.g., *boy*). Examine the following paradigms:

- Noncount (a to e are ungrammatical)*
- \*The bacon (a singular unit) is lying next to another one.
  - \*A bacon fell onto my plate.
  - \*The bacons got cold.
  - \*Some bacons were in the cupboard.
  - \*Bacon is for eating.
  - The bacon was too salty.
  - Some bacon was found in the cupboard.
  - Bacon is naturally salty.



*Count* (*f* to *h* are ungrammatical)

- a. The boy played in the street.
- b. A boy played in the street.
- c. The boys played in the street.
- d. Some boys played in the street.
- e. Boys are made of snails and puppy-dog tails.
- f. \*The boy (uncountable amount) wasn't enough for the scout troop.
- g. \*Some boy made up the scout troop.
- h. \*Boy is made of snails and puppy-dog tails.

These paradigms are useful and help clarify the difference between archetypical noncount nouns such as *bacon* and archetypical count nouns such as *boy*. However, the paradigms and the count/noncount terminology suggest a strict dichotomy where there is very likely a continuum of sorts. Allan (1980), for example, applies a series of syntactic "tests" to demonstrate that the noun *car* is more countable than the noun *cattle*, which has no singular form, and that the noncount noun *mankind*, which has a collective sense, is less of a noncount noun than the noun *equipment*, which does not. Allan, in fact, argues for eight discrete levels of countability. However, despite our basic agreement with Allan's analysis, we continue, for pedagogical reasons, to view nouns as either basically countable (i.e., singular, plural) or basically uncountable.

As an extension of our simplified count/noncount analysis, we note that there are many abstract noncount nouns (e.g., *beauty*, *truth*, *crime*, *law*, *education*) that we can conceive of in a more individuated way and thus we make them countable without substantially changing the meaning:

life (the general notion):

Life can be beautiful. (the noncountable use)

a life (a human being as a specific instance of the general notion):

The quick-thinking police officer saved a life. (the countable use)

With their dual count-noncount function, such nouns can be used in every slot in the paradigm we cited above to structurally differentiate *bacon* and *boy*:

	<i>Noncount</i> → <i>Count</i>
count	{
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. The life of the old man was forfeited.</li> <li>b. A life is not proper payment for that.</li> <li>c. The lives lost in the war were wasted.</li> <li>d. Some lives were saved.</li> <li>e. Lives are always lost in war.</li> </ol>
noncount	{
	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>f. The life in the old man was fading fast.</li> <li>g. Some life could be detected in the old man.</li> <li>h. Life can be difficult at times.</li> </ol>

It is useful to distinguish abstract noncount nouns from more concrete, substance-like noncount nouns. Therefore, in the rest of this chapter we distinguish abstract noncount nouns (*life*, *beauty*, *education*, etc.) from mass noncount nouns (*cheese*, *coffee*, *bacon*), often referring to them simply as abstract nouns or mass nouns.

### Mass-to-Count Noun Shifts

In addition to the above noncount-to-count shift that many abstract nouns can undergo, a number of other similar mass→count shifts<sup>6</sup> involve more concrete noncount mass nouns.

If we conceive of such a noun as “a kind or a type of,” we make it countable, as in the following example:

<i>Mass</i>	→	<i>Count</i>	
(generic)		(type)	
cheese		a cheese	cheeses
wine		a wine	wines
tea		a tea	teas

Likewise, if we conceive of the mass noun as “a unit or a serving of” we make it countable, as in the following examples:

<i>Mass</i>	→	<i>Count</i>	
(substance)		(unit or serving)	
coffee		a coffee	two coffees
aspirin		an aspirin	two aspirins
chocolate		a chocolate	some chocolates

Often the same mass noun can occur with both of the above count noun interpretations, depending on the context; for example:

How many different teas do they sell here? (types)  
 We'll have two teas with lemon. (servings)

Of course, many idiosyncratic meaning relationships involving mass noncount and count nouns must be learned independent of any such regular semantic shifts; in these cases, the meaning change is not predictable, so the combinations and their meanings must be learned as individual lexical items:

<i>Mass</i>	<i>Count—Singular</i>	<i>Count—Plural</i>
air (the atmosphere)	an air (melody)	airs (mannerisms)
glass (the silicate-based substance)	a glass (water tumbler)	glasses (spectacles)
iron (the metal)	an iron (for pressing clothes)	irons (golf clubs)

### Distinguishing Between Proper and Common Nouns

Proper nouns, which include personal names, geographical names, and some other minor categories, also pose a few special problems in terms of noun classification and category shifting. Proper nouns are always definite, yet with the exception of a few instances, which can be accounted for as borrowings (e.g., *The Hague*, *The Matterhorn*), they do not take the definite article in the singular unless the speaker is being extremely emphatic and using stressed *the* (e.g., *THE Elizabeth Taylor* [to distinguish the actress from all other women with the same name]). Plural proper names always take the definite article: *the Johnsons*, *the Azores*, and so on. and are semantically collective. In fact, some proper collective nouns, such as *The United Kingdom* or *The Vatican* take the definite article without an explicit plural. (See Chapter 17 for further discussion of collective nouns.)

### Shifts Involving Proper and Common Nouns

When proper nouns are used in common noun patterns, they are no longer functioning as true proper nouns; they have become common nouns by virtue of an understood head noun; for example, *the man called George* → *the George*. All the following sentences contain proper nouns that are being used as common nouns:

The George that called yesterday called again today.  
 Some Ernests can surely be found in this crowd!

A Robert spoke to me all night long at the party.  
 Nine Marys were on the list.

Personal names are not the only proper nouns that can shift to common noun use. Trade names are also a common source of such a shift:

Kleenex → a kleenex (= a paper tissue)  
 Xerox → a xerox of something (= a photocopy)  
 Kodak → a kodak (= a camera)

If we turn to geographical names, the opposite shift seems to occur just as often. Geographical names can experience a shift over time whereby unique common nouns—that is, nouns which take *the* because of their cultural or situational uniqueness—become proper nouns. This has happened in some cases where regions or territories have become countries:

<i>Unique Common Noun</i> <sup>7</sup>	→	<i>Proper Noun</i>
the Sudan	→	Sudan
the Gambia	→	Gambia
the Ukraine	→	Ukraine

This shift has also happened in the case of local geographical names (or place names). When English speakers become personally acquainted with a geographical term and hear it mentioned frequently, they tend to drop the definite article and thereby create a proper name:

<i>Unique Common Noun</i>	→	<i>Proper Noun</i>
the green park	→	Green Park
the river road	→	River Road
the Brookfield Zoo	→	Brookfield Zoo

In such cases, two alternatives sometimes exist side by side (e.g., *the Brentwood Country Club*; *Brentwood Country Club*); the unique common noun is used by speakers who are less personally familiar with the place concerned, and the proper name is used by those who have close affiliation with and make frequent mention of the place.

In rare cases, it is possible for the same speaker to refer to the same entity as either a proper noun or a unique common noun:

Earth → the earth

Used as a proper name, “Earth” fits the same paradigm as the other planets in our solar system—*Venus*, *Mars*, *Saturn*, and so on; it is also used poetically or in personifications as a proper noun: (*Mother*) *Earth*. Used as a unique common noun, *the earth* relates to *the sun*, *the moon*, *the land*, and *the sea* as part of our immediately visible environment. Thus speakers can sometimes have different frames of reference for one and the same entity, and they reflect this in their article usage, a topic we discuss further under the use of articles.

The important thing to remember about both noncount-count shifts and common-proper shifts is that the lexical classification of English nouns is important information for article usage but that there is always a degree of flux that can be explained by speaker reconceptualization of a classification and by usage in context.

## THE SYNTAX OF ARTICLES AND OTHER DETERMINERS

The definite article, like demonstratives and possessive determiners, is considered a core determiner and thus can optionally be preceded by one predeterminer and followed by one or two postdeterminers (recall that the upper limit on total number of determiners seems to be three):

<i>Predeterminer</i>	<i>Core</i>	<i>Postdeterminer</i>	<i>Head Noun</i>
all	the	other	boys
	the	first, three	cars

The indefinite article *a/an* has a more idiosyncratic distribution because it derives from a number (*one*). The following are some common patterns involving the co-occurrence of *a/an* with other determiners (see also Chapters 16 and 17):

1. In fractions and frequencies in the sense of *each, every, per*:

half a gallon  
twice a day

2. After *what* and *such* and before singular nouns in exclamations:

What a day!  
Such a nuisance!

3. Before the quantifiers *few* and *little* to impart a positive rather than a negative sense of quantity:

Jake has (a) few friends.  
(A) little money was missing.

4. A necessary part of *lot of, number of, great/good deal of* when these are used as quantifiers:

a lot of energy  
a (large) number of boats  
a great deal of money

## THE MEANING OF ARTICLES

Each of the articles can signal a number of meanings. To understand the meanings, it is helpful to begin with some basic concepts. First of all, articles can convey *generic* meaning, in which all or most members of a set are referred to.

The lion is a ferocious animal.  
A lion is a ferocious animal.  
∅ Lions are ferocious animals.

The article + noun in these sentences tell us that it is the lion species that is being commented upon. We discuss the differences among these generic forms in the Use section of this chapter.

Far more common, however, is the *nongeneric* meaning of articles, in which one or more individual members of a set are being referred to.

The lion escaped from the zoo.  
A lion escaped from the zoo.  
∅ Lions escaped from the zoo.

In these examples, we understand that an individual animal or animals are being commented upon—not all lions.

To distinguish among the nongeneric uses of articles, we need to make the distinction between specific and nonspecific noun phrases. A *specific* noun phrase is one in which the identity of individual member(s) is clear. In the example *The lion escaped from the zoo*, a particular lion is being referred to; for instance, there may have been only one lion in the zoo so its identity is clear. A *nonspecific* noun phrase is one where the identity of a member of the set is not clear, e.g.:

Have you ever seen a lion in the wild?

## THE MEANING OF THE INDEFINITE ARTICLES

Nonspecific noun phrases can only be marked with indefinite articles (*a/an, some, ø*):

Let's rent *a* movie or listen to *some/ø* music.

The identity of the movie or music is not clear.

I need *some/ø* stamps.

In other words, the speaker is saying that any stamps will do.

The difference between *some* and *ø* here can be accounted for by noting that the zero article expresses a nonspecific, semigeneric meaning:

I need stamps.

The speaker is concerned with the qualitative meaning of the noun, i.e. the quantity is irrelevant (Christophersen 1939). Use of *some* seems to impose a limit on the number of stamps needed, even though the precise number of stamps remains unspecified.

I need *some* stamps.

Another difference between *some* and *ø* exists when a subject noun predicate is being used to classify, i.e., to represent a particular type or class as opposed to another type or class. To classify, the singular indefinite article is used:

John is a teacher.

This is a pencil.

However, with a plural subject noun predicate, only the *ø* article can be used.

John and Bill are teachers.

These are pencils.

\*John and Bill are *some* teachers.

\*These are *some* pencils.

Sometimes the status of an NP preceded by an indefinite article is ambiguous. This is because it is possible to use an indefinite article when the noun being referred to by the speaker is either specific or nonspecific:

I needed a stamp.  So I took one. (nonspecific)  
So I took it. (specific)

I needed *some/ø* stamps.  So I took some. (nonspecific)  
So I took them. (specific)

The situational context or the discourse context may help to disambiguate whether nonspecific or specific meaning is intended.

Finally, as we have already seen in our examples with the lion, the indefinite singular noun and the zero article can be used generically. This is not true of *some*.

A stamp can be very valuable.

Dolphins are intelligent. (plural count noun)

Water sustains life. (noncount noun)

\*Some dolphins are intelligent. (Notice that here *some* is being used as a quantifier.

See Chapter 17.)

\*Some water sustains life.

We will have more to say about the zero article after our discussion of the meaning of the definite article.

## THE MEANINGS OF THE DEFINITE ARTICLE

The definite article *the* can also signal a generic function like the singular indefinite forms and the zero article. With singular nouns, this generic usage of *the* is formal and abstract:

*The lion* is the king of beasts.

With plural or collective nouns, the definite article signals a sense of generic collectivity:

*The Germans* now realize that reunification has come with problems. (plural)

*The clergy* are divided on that issue. (collective)

Most instances of *the* are nongeneric, and Hawkins (1978) provides a useful perspective on the nongeneric meaning of the definite article in English. He argues that a number of definite article types that people have claimed to be different are simply instances of the same strategy. He proposes his “location theory” to account for all instances of nongeneric *the*: When a speaker/writer uses *the*, he instructs the hearer/reader to locate the referent in the same shared mental set of objects. The instruction to locate may have a situational-cultural, a textual, or a structural basis.<sup>8</sup>

Examples of situational-cultural instructions to locate the referent include the five following subcategories, which have often been proposed as distinct uses of *the*:

1. *General cultural* use (the referent is unique for all members of the speech community):

*the sun, the moon, the earth*

2. *Immediate situational* use:

Don't go in there. *The dog* will bite you.

3. *Perceptual situational* use (the referent is uniquely visible, audible, etc.):

Pass me *the salt*, please.

4. *Local* use (general knowledge—unique for members of the same family or village):

*the car, the church, the pub*

5. *Local* use (specific knowledge—unique for members of a specific community):

[In *the town of Halifax*,] there is a type of gallows called *the gibbett*, which exists nowhere else.

There are three textual subcategories for use of *the*, which can all be grouped together as instructions to the listener or reader to locate the co-referent in the text:



1. *Anaphoric use* (prior mention):

Fred left a book on his desk this morning. He returned home in the afternoon to get *the book*.

2. *Deductive anaphoric use* (prior mention of a schematically-related notion):

Fred bought a book at Duttons. He later spoke to *the author* about it.

3. *Cataphoric use* (subsequent mention of something related):

Here's *the bottom line*: you don't get to take the exam again.

The two structurally based instructions to locate the referent are:

1. *Usage with post-modifiers* (relative clauses, prepositional phrases, appositives):

*The person (he dated) was nasty to him.*  
I remember *the beginning (of the war)* very well.  
*The number (seven)* is considered lucky.

## 2. Usage with ranking determiners and adjectives:

*The first European in America* was Scandinavian.  
What is *the next book* you plan to read?

Some idiomatic and formulaic usages are difficult to explain in terms of any principle of form, meaning, or use:

That's *the ticket!*  
He's right on *the mark*.

Halliday and Hasan's account (1976:74) for the nongeneric meaning of *the* is quite similar to that of Hawkins:

Its meaning is that the noun it modifies has a specific referent, and that the information required for identifying this referent is available. . . it does not say where the information is to be located. It will be found somewhere in the environment, provided that we interpret "environment" in the broadest sense: to include the structure, the text, the situation, and the culture.

In other words, article "meanings" and the uses to which articles are put are very abstract and general with a potential for change from one context to another. Also, some uses are truly culture bound, which makes them particularly difficult for learners who do not share the culture behind the language.

## CONTRASTING ZERO ARTICLE WITH A/AN AND THE

Master (1997) reminds us that there are really two "zero" articles in English. One occurs with nonspecific or generic noncount and plural nouns (e.g., *milk, eggs*) and is referred to as the zero article (Chesterman 1991), and the other occurs with certain singular count and proper nouns (e.g., *London, lunch*) and is referred to as the null article. The zero article is the most indefinite of English articles, whereas the null article is the most definite (the following continuum is adapted from Chesterman 1991):

(least definite) zero → some → a/an → the → null (most definite)

The zero article seems to alternate with the indefinite article in several contexts where the zero article is more general and the indefinite article more individuated:

1. Zero signals noncount, and *a/an* signals count:

The boys ate (a) chicken.

2. Zero signals general, and *a/an* particular:

He sells (a) cheese of uncommon flavor.

3. Zero signals abstract, and *a/an* concrete:

(A) Prison dehumanizes its inmates.

The null article seems to alternate with the definite article in three contexts with slightly different meanings being expressed (Master, 1997):

1. Null article names, and *the* describes:

Mr. Phillips was appointed (the) treasurer.

2. Null article is vague, while *the* is focused:

It usually snows here in (the) winter.

3. Null article is familiar, while *the* is less familiar:

(The) Lunch was quite uneventful.

## USES OF THE ARTICLES

Ultimately, articles must be understood in terms of their use more than their structure or meaning. Their use is not simply an independent decision made by the speaker/writer but rather a reflection of shared knowledge between the interactants in any act of ongoing communication. The speaker/writer must assess the interlocutor's background knowledge and make a series of assumptions regarding the information he or she shares (or does not share) with the interlocutor. Pica (1983) notes that in the sentence-level examples given in grammars and textbooks, *a* and *the* can often be interchanged without any loss of grammaticality; however, in natural data that are grammatically acceptable, she notes that communication breaks down when articles are used with reference to items that exist in one participant's experience but not in the other's. Here is an example we have found of the phenomenon that Pica discusses:

A: Where's the dessert?

B: What dessert?

C: You were supposed to bring the dessert.

Differences in the perspectives or experiences of participants can also be a source of humor:

"Peanuts" cartoon:

Frame 1: Girl standing at front door with Snoopy says:

There's a dog here who wants to come in.

Frame 2: Snoopy thinks:

Not "A" dog . . . "The" dog!

## USE OF NONGENERIC COMMON NOUNS IN INTERACTION AND DISCOURSE

Brown (1973) gives us a good way of visualizing the interaction of the speaker/writer and the listener/reader with regard to article usage of nongeneric common nouns in English:

		Speaker (Writer)	
		specific referent	nonspecific referent
L. i s t e n e r ( R e a d e r )	specific referent	definite: Can I have the car?	indefinite: There's a spy hiding in your cellar. I heard you once wrote an article on X.
	nonspecific referent	indefinite: I saw a funny looking dog today	indefinite: I don't have a car. I need a new belt.

As Brown's matrix indicates, the definite article is used properly only when the noun being discussed has a specific, identical referent (from the speaker/writer's point of view) within the speaker/writer's and the listener/reader's knowledge base.

The usage described in Brown's matrix is generally reflected in realistic dialogues. Read the following dialogue (adapted by Linda Chan-Rapp from usages she observed) and try to choose the appropriate article by applying Brown's matrix to each blank:

*Student:* How did I do on (1) \_\_\_\_\_ test?

*Teacher:* Well, actually you didn't do very well. Don't you have (2) \_\_\_\_\_ tutor?

*Student:* Yes. Mary's been tutoring me for two weeks now. It's been difficult to meet though, because I don't have (3) \_\_\_\_\_ car. Mary does have (4) \_\_\_\_\_ small Toyota, but it isn't always reliable.

Here, only the first blank takes the definite article because the test is specific for both the speaker and the listener. Each of the other blanks takes *a/an*, with each reflecting a different quadrant in Brown's matrix (2—nonspecific for speaker; 3—nonspecific for both; 4—nonspecific for listener).<sup>9</sup>

## FIRST VERSUS SUBSEQUENT MENTION IN NARRATIVES

Often, specific discourse genres develop their own conventions of article usage. For example, in traditional narratives, it is common to introduce participants with an indefinite article and to use the definite article or a personal pronoun for subsequent mentions of the same participant. This first mention→subsequent mention principle often works well in simple narratives such as those found in fables or folktales. In the following rendition of the "Fox and Crow" fable from Aesop (adapted from Celce-Murcia and Hilles 1988:152–153), the key noun participants are: *crow*, *cheese*, *tree*, and *fox*. The first mention→subsequent mention principle works well for these nouns:

There was once *a crow* who stole *a wedge of cheese* from *a kitchen window*. She flew off with *the cheese* to *a nearby tree*. *A fox* saw what *the crow* had done, and he walked over to *the tree*.

“Oh, Mistress Crow, you have such lovely black feathers, such slender feet, such a beautiful yellow beak, and such fine black eyes! You must have a *beautiful voice*. Would you please sing for me?”

*The crow* felt very proud. She opened her beak and sang CAW-CAW-CAW. Of course *the cheese* fell down, and *the fox* snatched it up and ate every bite.

Other forms of discourse can be much more complicated in terms of article usage. The “Fox and Crow” fable by Aesop is a good example of a “canonical” use of articles in written discourse. A more complicated example that seems to break the rules; is the opening paragraph from William Faulkner’s (1931) *Sanctuary* (p. 3):

From beyond the screen of bushes which surrounded the spring, Popeye watched the man drinking. A faint path led from the road to the spring. Popeye watched the man—a tall, thin man, hatless, in worn gray flannel trousers and carrying a tweed coat under his arm—emerge from the path and kneel to drink at the spring.

Right from the beginning, the reader gets *the man* and *the spring* and *the road*; after the person is called the man in line 1, he is referred to as a man in line 3. This sort of opening (which is common in literature), rather than alienating the reader (as the hearer is alienated in the “dessert” example on p. 281), is actually intended to draw the reader *into* the story, as if he or she were already familiar with the participants and locale.<sup>10</sup>

Whatever type of text is used to illustrate article usage, it is, however, imperative that discussions of usage go beyond the sentence level to include discourse and context.

### USE OF GENERIC NOUNS IN DISCOURSE

- |                                 |                               |
|---------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1. the _____ (sg.).<br>(noun)   | 3. the _____ (pl.).<br>(noun) |
| 2. a/an _____ (sg.).<br>(noun)  | 4. Ø _____ (pl.)<br>(noun)    |
| 5. Ø _____ (noncount)<br>(noun) |                               |

Many reference grammars and ESL/EFL texts (e.g., Quirk and Greenbaum, 1973) cite examples such as the following that state that all four patterns express generic meaning—the implication being that they share the same meaning and use:

- |                |   |                     |
|----------------|---|---------------------|
| 1. The German  | } | is a good musician. |
| 2. A German    |   |                     |
| 3. The Germans | } | are good musicians. |
| 4. Germans     |   |                     |

The examples above deal only with countable nouns. Noncount nouns can also be used generically and this would add a fifth pattern to the above list:

5. Water is essential for life.

However, since this fifth pattern is the only one we can use for noncount nouns, there is less variation according to usage and context unless a mass-to-count shift occurs, which is the case in the study by Bergsnev (1976) that we report below.

Research by Stern (1977) indicates that the four generic patterns for countable nouns have very different distributions in discourse and that a great deal depends on whether generic statements are being made about humans, animals, plants, historical inventions/devices, or less significant inanimate objects and whether the context is formal or informal.

The first pattern 

The _____ (sg.) (noun)
---------------------------

 represents formal usage. It describes

generically classes of humans, animals, body organs, plants, and countable inanimate objects that are presented as human inventions whose origins can be traced: the gaslamp, the can opener, the laser, the computer, and so on. It is not appropriate as a generic pattern for countable inanimate objects that gradually developed over time and are not thought of as having been invented: the book, the window, the table, the chair, the bottle, and so forth.<sup>11</sup>

\*The book fills leisure time for many people.

To express such a proposition, either pattern 2 

a _____ (sg.) (noun)
-------------------------

 or

4 

Ø _____ (pl.) (noun)
-------------------------

 would be appropriate:

A book fills } leisure time for many people.  
Books fill }

Pattern 1 

the _____ (sg.) (noun)
---------------------------

 occurs, for example, in informative or technical writing

on plants, animals, musical instruments, and complex inventions or devices. Words like *class*, *symbol*, *representation*, *image*, and *stereotype/prototype* also tend to occur in discourse making use of this pattern.

In a relevant study of article usage in articles published in *Scientific American*, Master (1987) found that the first pattern was the one most likely to occur with noun subjects and to mark the topic of the essay; this pattern was also more likely to occur in first sentences of paragraphs and in introductions and conclusions of essays than elsewhere. Master (p. 165) felt that these usages “appear to reflect the . . . focused . . . nature of generic *the*” in contrast to the other more descriptive generic patterns.

Stern (1977) found that the third pattern above 

the _____ (pl.) (noun)
---------------------------

 is the most

limited of the four. It usually expresses generic facts about human groups<sup>12</sup> that have a religious, political, national,<sup>13</sup> linguistic, social, or occupation/professional basis. Group affiliation is critical. This was not true in pattern 1, where science-based class membership rather than social group affiliation was the criterion. Thus the following are not acceptable as generic statements (they are, however, acceptable as specific statements):

\*The tigers are ferocious beasts.

\*The roses need water.

\*The pianos are splendid instruments.

However, any of the other three patterns for countable nouns (i.e., 1, 2, and 4) would produce acceptable generic statements for these examples. Some grammarians would claim that pattern 3 is not really generic, that it applies to plural proper names that express a collective meaning. Nonetheless, since this form is often used in formal writing in the social sciences instead of pattern 1, and since the pattern can be used with both specific and generic meaning, we believe it should be discussed and considered along with the other three patterns.

The pattern illustrated in sentence 4  $\emptyset$  \_\_\_\_\_ (pl.)  
(noun) above is slightly less formal

than the pattern in 1 the \_\_\_\_\_ (sg.)  
(noun). In speech, it definitely occurs more

frequently than pattern 1. In fact, it can be used in almost all the discourse environments where pattern 1 occurs; in addition, it can be used to make generic statements about simple inanimate objects:

Books fill leisure time for many people.

It is more concrete and frequent than pattern 1 in that it generalizes via pluralization rather than abstract classification. It is important because it can be used in virtually all contexts and because it ranges from semiformal to informal register.

Pattern 2 a/an \_\_\_\_\_ (sg.)  
(noun) is the most concrete and colloquial way of

expressing a generality. It is used most appropriately when the context is specific:

(Mrs. X to Mrs. Y) I don't know about you, but I think *a husband* should help out with the housework.

It can be used to express informal generalities for all semantic contexts except those where collectivity or group cohesiveness is being expressed. In other words, one could substitute "husbands" or "the husband" for "a husband," and the register would change but not the meaning.<sup>14</sup>

Related to Stern's observations on the distribution of article and noun number patterns in generic usage, Bergsnev (1976) showed that abstract nouns deriving from verbs and adjectives often have both a noncount and a count form<sup>15</sup> with *a/an* available to express a generality; for example:

Dependence on drugs is increasing.

A dependence on drugs is increasing

Increase in input produces dramatic changes in output.

An increase in input produces a dramatic change in (the) output.

Some of the other abstract nouns that Bergsnev noted being used both ways include: *acceleration*, *achievement*, *deceleration*, *decrease*, *demand*, *depression*, *emphasis*, *equilibrium*, *expenditure*, *growth*, *priority*, *retardation*, *strain*, and *success*.

Noting that written texts in the hard sciences seem to prefer the abstract zero-article use, whereas written texts in the humanities seem to favor the countable form use with *a/an*, Bergsnev concluded that hard-and-fast rules were not realistic but that some guidelines were possible: The more concrete and informal the context, the better the countable form sounds with the indefinite article:

Bill, don't you know that doctors say weight gain can put (a strain/?strain) on your heart?





Conversely, the more abstract and formal the context, the better the version without the article sounds:

Demographic change often causes (population dispersion/?a population dispersion).

## TOPIC-SPECIFIC USES OF ARTICLES

Patterns of article usage are sometimes relatively fixed for given disciplines and topics, which is of some comfort to those who teach English for specific purposes. For example, in medicine, anatomy, and biology, only two patterns seem to be used for both specific and generic references to organs or parts of the body:

### BODY PARTS

<i>Pattern 1 (the + noun)</i> (for singular body parts)	<i>Pattern 3 (the + noun + pl.)</i> (for plural or paired body parts)
the heart	the ears
the liver	the eyes
the stomach	the lungs
the bladder	the teeth

The names of physical ailments and diseases, however, present a much greater learning problem because of the variety of article patterns and the singular and plural forms they take; they run the whole gamut of article and noun number patterns, the only overlap being the option of using either pattern 3 or pattern 4 for certain diseases:

### DISEASES

<i>Pattern 1</i> <i>the + noun</i>	<i>Pattern 2</i> <i>a/an + noun<sup>16</sup></i>	<i>Pattern 3</i> <i>the + noun + pl.</i>	or	<i>Pattern 4</i> <i>noun + pl.</i>	<i>Pattern 5</i> <i>mass noun</i>
the flu	a cold			(the) bends	influenza
the gout	a hernia		(the) mumps		pneumonia
the plague	a headache		(the) measles		malaria
⋮	an earache		(the) chickenpox		cancer
⋮	a backache		(x = ks)		⋮
	⋮		⋮		⋮

Occasionally, the same disease has two different names occurring in two different patterns:

*Pattern 1: the flu*  
*Pattern 5: influenza*

Thus, the use of articles with body parts can involve the teaching of a system; however, the name of a disease and its article and noun number usage pattern should be mastered as a lexical unit if ESL/EFL students are to avoid making recurring errors when they refer to ailments and diseases, because no straightforward system underlies their usage.

### Geographical Names

Geographical names are usually proper nouns and, as such, occur with no article if they are singular and with the definite article if they are plural and/or collective. Here are the major semantic categories for singular geographical proper names:

continent: Asia, South America, Africa, . . .  
 country: Canada, France, Nigeria, . . .  
 county: Nassau County, Cook County, . . .  
 city: Dallas, London, Tokyo, . . . (exception: The Hague)  
 mountain: Mount Whitney, Mount Aetna . . . (exception: The Matterhorn)  
 lake: Lake Michigan, Lake Baikal (exception: The Great Salt Lake) . . .  
 island: Catalina Island, Staten Island, . . .  
 point: Point Dume, Point Mugu, . . .  
 bay: San Francisco Bay, Tampa Bay, . . .  
 cape: Cape Cod, Cape Canaveral, . . .  
 park: Yosemite National Park, Douglas Park, . . .  
 region: Appalachia, Alsace, Siberia, . . .  
 street, road, avenue, boulevard, and so on: Downing Street, Wilshire Boulevard, Fifth Avenue, . . .  
 square: Trafalgar Square, Union Square, . . .

For plural or collective geographical names, the following categories are relevant and are consistent with plural proper noun conventions, which require use of *the*

countries (if viewed as unions, federations, collections of islands): the U.S.A., the United Kingdom, the Philippines, . . .  
 lakes (if they form a geological group): the Great Lakes, the Finger Lakes, . . .  
 mountain ranges: the Rocky Mountains (or the Rockies), the Alps, the Andes, . . .  
 islands (if viewed as a group): the Canary Islands, the Azores, the Bahamas, . . .

However, a number of singular geographical names function as unique common nouns (as opposed to true proper nouns) and take the definite article. Consider the following list; the head noun is indicated in parentheses when deletion is possible:

regions: the Caucasus, the Crimea, the Rousillon, . . .  
 deserts: the Sahara (Desert), the Mohave (Desert), . . .  
 peninsulas: the Monterey Peninsula, the Iberian Peninsula, . . .  
 oceans and seas: the Pacific (Ocean), the Black Sea, . . .  
 gulfs: the Gulf of Mexico, the Persian Gulf, . . .  
 rivers: the Mississippi (River), the Amazon (River), . . .  
 canals: the Erie Canal, the Suez Canal, the Panama Canal, . . .

With the exception of “regions,” which seem to be divided between proper names and unique common nouns, geographical names seem to pattern fairly neatly according to their geographical features. The unique common nouns in the last set, according to Hewson (1972), seem to be harder to define than the proper nouns. They are large and hard-to-define bodies of water (e.g., oceans, seas, gulfs—as opposed to lakes). Still others represent flowing water or strips of water used for navigation or irrigation (e.g., rivers and canals). The remaining categories are land masses or areas that are hard to define. For example:

regions—as opposed to countries or cities (where exactly does a given region begin or end?)  
 deserts—as opposed to arable land (where exactly does the desert end and the arable land begin?)  
 peninsula—as opposed to an island or the mainland (where exactly does the peninsula end and the mainland begin?)

While Hewson’s generalization is useful, it is not perfect, since one might well wonder why oceans, seas, gulfs, and peninsulas—which are unique common names—are harder

to define than bays, points, and capes, which are proper names. Perhaps, as Hewson suggests, size is a factor here, and smaller places are more likely to be familiar and to have proper names. In any case, Hewson's observations may help learners recall geographical names properly. Correct article usage with place names depends on correct assignment to the proper noun category (singular or plural/collective) or to the unique common noun category.

### RESIDUAL PROBLEMS INVOLVING ARTICLE USAGE

In this chapter, we have established that for countable common nouns the definite article can be predicted in those cases where a noun referent is specific for both the speaker and the listener owing to situational uniqueness, textual co-reference, or structural and lexical information. It can also be explained if a noun is being used as a plural proper name or used generically in formal exposition to refer to a noun class. In this section, we want to mention briefly two uses of the definite article that do not appear to fit any of these categories very neatly.

#### Mechanical Inventions and Devices

Consider the following examples:

We listened to the news on *the radio*.<sup>17</sup>  
 I talked to Burt on *the phone*.  
 I took *the train* to Boston.

In such cases, the hearer does not know the specific, radio, phone, or train that is being referred to (sometimes even the speaker does not know); however, it is clear that a specific radio, phone, or train has to be involved if these events take place in real time. We would thus expect an indefinite article here (we assume there has been no prior mention in the given communication), yet the definite article is being used in a way that seems to approach generic usage. However, this is quite different from true generic usage (e.g., the world's largest land mammal is *the elephant*) where no specific entity is involved. Perhaps this type of usage is close to the diseases we discussed above, since when we say,

John has the flu.

we mean that John has an instance of the flu. Likewise, when we say,

Alice took the train to Boston.

we mean that Alice took one specific instance of the noun class TRAIN to Boston.

#### Locations Associated with Activities

Examples such as the following are also problematic in a similar way:

I'm going to  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the store/mall.} \\ \text{the doctor/the } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{doctor's} \\ \text{dentist's} \end{array} \right\} \text{ office.} \\ \text{the bank.} \\ \text{the park.} \\ \text{the movies (Br.: the cinema).} \\ \text{the beach.} \end{array} \right\}$

In such cases, the hearer may well know but does not need to know the specific store, office, bank, and so on that is involved. For communication, such specificity does not seem to be essential; so why is the definite article used instead of the indefinite article or no article? Perhaps we are again approaching generic usage here, for when we say,

I'm going to the store.

We actually mean that we are going to the store that we typically or habitually go to for shopping. We can, of course, also say:

I'm going to a store.

but that would occur in much more constrained contexts such as the following:

I'm going to a store { that Nancy recommended. }  
 { I've never been to before. }

where the speaker in all likelihood is not yet familiar with the location being referred to.

Closely related to the above examples are those few cases where no article is used:

I'm going to school/church/temple, . . .<sup>18</sup>

In such sentences, we are focusing on the activity (i.e., studying/learning; worshipping/praying) rather than the location. Focus on the physical location itself would require the use of an article:

I'm going to a/the school.

We recognize that our explanations for the above residual usages of articles are tentative; however, such expressions do occur frequently, and at some point every ESL/EFL teacher must find a way to present and explain them to his or her students.

## CONCLUSION

Much more, of course, needs to be said about article usage in English. We hope that this chapter provides a foundation. We discuss article usage again from time to time when it overlaps other grammatical topics. For example, in Chapter 4 under subject-verb agreement, we discussed the difference between phrases where the use of *a* or *the* often triggers a difference in number:

a number of people are . . .      the number of people is . . .

Likewise, in Chapter 17 under quantifiers, we discuss the difference between pairs such as these where the presence of an indefinite article changes the meaning:

few/a few      little/a little

Then, in Chapter 23, we observe that most sentences with *there* in subject position contain noun phrases with *a/an* or other indefinite determiners after the copula *be*:

There's a snake in the bathtub!  
 There is another problem we should discuss now.

We also mention articles again when we discuss the superlative degree in Chapter 35, since the definite article typically co-occurs with this construction:

Tom is *the tallest (one)* in the class. We own *the oldest house* on the block.

In other words, article usage cannot be compartmentalized. Articles are everywhere in English, and the definite article is the most frequently used word in the English language (Francis and Kučera 1982). As an ESL/EFL teacher, you must be prepared to cope with the varied learning problems that your students will have related to the use of articles.

Some applied linguists (Dulay, Burt, and Krashen 1982) argue that the English articles are unteachable and can be acquired only through exposure. Others (Master

1994) have shown that focused instruction (i.e., systematic presentation in a hierarchy of manageable segments with built-in recycling) can make a difference and can help learners improve their use of articles. We agree with Master. Although the article system in English is extremely complex, many aspects of it are teachable. In the teaching suggestions that follow, we provide some exercises that we have found to be useful.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** To practice the difference between count and noncount nouns, use a grid with count and noncount headings and ask learners to sort the words into the proper columns, instructing them to put words that describe things as wholes under “Noncount” and words that can be counted under “Count.”

<i>Count</i>	<i>Noncount</i>
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">           money, an egg, dresses, furniture, a table, coins, clothing, food         </div>	

(adapted from Badalamenti and Henner-Stanchina 1997)

**2. Form/Meaning.** Indefinite article:

- a. Use the indefinite article to teach identification—first to distinguish *a* from *an* and then the singular form from the article-less plural.

This is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_. (sg.) (orange, book)

This is a(n) \_\_\_\_\_. (sg.)/These are \_\_\_\_\_. (pl.) (a book/books)

For advanced students, Master (1990:198–199) suggests focusing on the use of the indefinite article with “classifying” or “defining” postmodification, in contrast to the use of the definite article with “identifying” postmodification, suggesting that these predictable patterns (among others) “might provide students with easily applied rules of thumb.” Master gives the following examples:

“classifying” A thermometer is an instrument that measures temperature.

“identifying” The water in this glass is dirty.

- b. To stress normal indefinite noun usage—as opposed to the predicate noun usage shown above in suggestion 2a—have your students practice describing their possessions using *a/an* for singular nouns and unstressed *some* for mass or plural nouns.

I have a \_\_\_\_\_. What do you have? I have some \_\_\_\_\_. What do you have?

**3. Form/Meaning.** Modified cloze dialogs such as the following can be used for both teaching and testing purposes (developed by Linda Chan-Rapp (personal communication)—based on Brown’s matrix):

Instructions: Fill in the blanks with *the* or *a/an*.

Son: Hey, Dad, can I have (1) \_\_\_\_\_ car Friday night? I want to take Sally to (2) \_\_\_\_\_ school dance.

Dad: Well, that depends. Don’t you have (3) \_\_\_\_\_ paper to write?

- Son: Yeah, but it's almost done, and besides, (4) \_\_\_\_\_ friend told me Miss Fittich postponed it to next Friday.
- Dad: Well, okay. But be back by 12:30.
- Son: Thanks, Dad. Er . . . by the way, could I go buy (5) \_\_\_\_\_ new shirt for (6) \_\_\_\_\_ dance?

Cloze passages of academic prose can be valuable for advanced students.

**4. Form/Meaning.** After a range of article uses have been introduced, a common activity which uses authentic materials is to ask students to expand newspaper headlines into complete sentences. This would then be followed by a discussion of the articles chosen. Riggensbach and Samuda (1997:307) give the example: "Blizzard of '96 paralyzes East Coast," which can be expanded to "The Blizzard of '96 paralyzes the East Coast." Other headlines could be "Man bites dog" (which would use indefinite articles), or "UFO lands on White House," (which would use an indefinite and a definite article).

**5. Form/Meaning.** Give students a checklist for editing their own writing, such as the following:

- a. Underline all the nouns in your writing.
- b. If you have no article before the noun, is it
  - i) a noncount noun (e.g., enrollment growth)?
  - ii) a plural count noun (e.g., student numbers)?
  - iii) a proper noun?
- c. Draw boxes around the nouns with the article *the*.
- d. If you have the article *the* + noun, does this refer to someone or something that is specified by
  - i) the context (including common shared knowledge)?
  - ii) previous mention?
  - iii) mention within a noun group?
- e. Circle the nouns with the article *a*.
- f. If you have the article *a* + noun, does this refer to someone or something that is singular and:
  - i) is not specified?
  - ii) is being mentioned for the first time?
  - iii) is being classified? (e.g., This piece of apparatus is *a Bunsen burner*.)

**6. Meaning.** Give your students practice in expressing generic usage with the zero article (especially abstract nouns) with the following activities, suggested by Ur (1988) and by Riggensbach and Samuda (1997), respectively:

- a. Have the class write a "cooperative poem." Give students a poetic title that is likely to be rich in associations (Ur suggests "Night" and "Home"). Ask students to write a noun phrase that describes an association that the topic has for them and write the suggestions up on the board to form a poem. This provides a great deal of repetition of the noun chosen with correct article usage.
- b. Ask students to interview people about what they think is most important for achieving happiness. Prior to the activity, elicit from students or provide them with a list of possible abstract nouns such as *love, romance, money, success, health, religion*. Discuss the appropriateness of zero article usage. Students then report their results to the class, monitoring themselves and being monitored by their peers for correct article usage.



**7. Meaning.** Give your students practice in category shifting from mass (generic) to count (specific) nouns:

tea    →    a tea/teas

Tea is a healthy beverage.      This is a nice tea. Try it.  
Sri Lanka produces many teas.

Other nouns that could be used are: *wine, coffee, cheese, beer, bread, pasta*, and so on.

**8. Use.** Give your students practice in expressing generic concepts appropriate to different registers:

cue: elephant/gigantic

- a. Formal—*The elephant* is gigantic/a gigantic land mammal.
- b. Less formal—*Elephants* are gigantic/gigantic animals.
- c. Colloquial—*An elephant* is huge.

**9. Use.** Develop students' awareness of the article system at higher levels, especially for academic purposes, by studying texts from the students' disciplines together in class. This can uncover specific patterns of usage, such as the patterns of use for medical language.

**10. Use.** Master (1995) suggests systematic consciousness raising to improve the article usage of advanced students. Providing constant feedback on article usage in students' written work, having brief class discussions of article usage patterns, and asking students to keep records of their article errors—these are all methods he has used.

**11. Use.** Howard Williams (personal communication) suggests that teachers of academic English spend some time teaching those common nouns or descriptions that are unique by definition and where *the* works practically 100 percent of the time:

Draw a line with 10 points along it on the board and draw students' attention to these mathematical concepts:

the first point	the second to the last point
the last point	the next point
the second point	the previous point
⋮	
⋮	
⋮	
the tenth point	

By drawing a loop from one point back to that point illustrate:  
the same point

Show students that these "points" can be rhetorical as well as literal/mathematical and that one can use these determiners with many other head nouns: *argument, example, draft, case, page, line, paragraph*, and so on.

**12. Use.** The informal generic use of the indefinite article could be practical and taught using dialogs like these:

**Teacher:** If you could be anything or anybody in the world, what or who would you want to be?

**Student:** I'd want to be an eagle.

**Teacher:** Why would you want to be an eagle?

**Student:** Because eagles soar.

**EXERCISES****Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide original example sentences that illustrate the following terms. Underline the relevant word(s) in your examples. You may need to write more than one sentence to properly illustrate some terms:
  - a. noncount noun
    - (i) mass noun
    - (ii) abstract noun
  - b. count noun
  - c. definite article
    - (i) —with textual co-reference
    - (ii) —with situational/cultural reference
    - (iii) —with structural reference
  - d. first mention/subsequent mention principle
  - e. indefinite article
    - (i) —with generic usage
    - (ii) —with predicate noun
  - f. indefinite noun
    - (i) —specific
    - (ii) —nonspecific
  - g. idiomatic article usage
  - h. zero article use with generic meaning
  - i. null article use with definite meaning
2. Develop your own example sentences for each quadrant of Brown's matrix.
3. Classify the following definite articles according to Hawkins' classification system—(1)situational/cultural reference; (2)textual reference; (3)structural reference:
  - a. I went to New York City last week. *The* traffic is awful.
  - b. Hurry up and put *the* car in *the* garage!
  - c. I did a grammar course last year. My friend is going to do *the* course next year.
  - d. *The* brick house on the corner is mine.
4. Explain the ungrammaticality of the following sentences:
  - a. \*She has a coffee on her dress.
  - b. \*They gave us many informations.
  - c. \*I have examination in French today.

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

5. Students of yours have made the following errors. In each case, explain the nature of the error, and state what activities you would provide to correct it.
  - a. \*Change takes a long times.
  - b. \*This is an exclusive product in Taiwan travel industry.
  - c. \*We have to make the detailed travel plan.
  - d. \*Nowadays, personal computer isn't luxury anymore.
  - e. \*When I went to the Europe . . .
  - f. \*I enjoy writing the poetry. It's my hobby.
  - g. \*My brother is student.
6. In what two ways can the following sentence be interpreted?
 

John is interested in buying a car.

7. Explain the different speaker conceptualizations for the noun *coffee* in the following sentences:
  - a. Coffee is a stimulant.
  - b. I'd like a coffee, please.
  - c. The coffee here is good.
  - d. This café has dozens of different coffees.
8. Imagine you are writing a letter home to your family from a foreign country that no one in your family has ever visited. Under what conditions would you write each of the following:
  - a. I went to the beach today.
  - b. I went to a beach today.

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### Suggestions for further reading

*For the best traditional account of the English article system, see:*

Christophersen, P. (1939). *The Articles: A Study of Their Theory and Use in English*. Copenhagen: Einar Munksgaard.

*For a good recent synopsis of article use in English with excellent exercises, see:*

Berry, R. (1993). "Articles." *Collins COBUILD English Guides No. 3*. London: HarperCollins.

*For a somewhat alternative perspective on articles and many good teaching suggestions, see:*

Master, P. (1990). "Teaching the English Articles as a Binary System." *TESOL Quarterly* 24 :3, 461–498.

Master, P. (1996). *Systems in English Grammar*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall. See especially pp. 215–228 for both explanation and exercises.

### ENDNOTES

1. Covitt (1976) did a survey of ESL teachers in the Los Angeles area in the mid seventies and found that article usage was their number one teaching problem. We feel that this result would still be true today if the survey were repeated.
2. Another way to signal given vs. new information in many languages (both topic-prominent and subject-prominent) is through contrastive stress; e.g. JOHN took the money. Here, the fact that John rather than someone else was the agent is new information because of contrastive stress, even though the noun in the subject position often is old or given information.
3. Note that this rule applies to the initial *sound* of the following word, not the initial *letter*, which may be a vowel letter representing a consonant sound.
4. See footnote 3.
5. Historically significant eras often take the definite article and pattern very much like plural proper names (i.e., the head noun is either plural or singular but semantically collective in meaning): the 1990's, the Roaring Twenties, the War Years, the Great Depression, the Renaissance.
6. We focus on mass-to-count shifts here. The opposite shift (count-to-mass) is, of course, also possible: e.g., an egg→He's got egg on his tie. However, our emphasis reflects the higher frequency of mass-to-count shifts; this tendency occurs perhaps because the countable common noun is the prototypical or unmarked "noun" class toward which the other noun types tend to shift in English.
7. These cases normally have a capital letter both as a unique common noun and as a proper noun because both refer to geographical territory.

**8.** In the following discussion, we draw on Hawkins' theory as well as many of his examples but have added a few subcategories and examples of our own to make the account as comprehensive as possible.

**9.** Whatever exercises the teacher provides, the native-like acquisition of articles is extremely difficult. A learner might actually put *the* in the second blank of Chan-Rapp's exercise on the assumption the teacher and student know there is just one tutor. But *the* will not work as idiomatic English here because the teacher does not know who the tutor is. This is the kind of mistake learners can make when trying to apply the "rules."

**10.** This style may be somewhat regional; people from the South or other rural areas in the United States have a tendency to refer to objects and places and people in the presence of a newcomer as if they were already familiar to the newcomer.)

**11.** Such simple inanimate objects can, however, be used with *the* by anthropologists or historians who present them as a significant invention: for example, "The wheel represented a step forward for this culture/mankind."

**12.** On rare occasions, plants or animals will attain the necessary group status and affiliation to merit use of pattern 3:

Save the whales.

The redwoods must be preserved forever.

Such cases, however, appear to be exceptions.

**13.** Generally, the adjective form of a nationality is used with the definite article to function as the generic collective nouns in pattern 3 (e.g., The Germans). If the adjective ends in *n* or *i*, then a regular plural ending is added: the Canadians, the Israelis, the Saudis. If the adjective ends in a sibilant sound (e.g., *s*, *z*, *(t)ch*, *dge*, *sh*), no plural ending is added: the English, the Chinese, the Welsh, the Dutch). If the adjective ends in *-ish*, usually the stem minus the suffix is used with a plural ending to form the generic collective noun: Polish/the Poles, Swedish/the Swedes, Finnish/the Finns. However, "English" appears to be an exception to the *-ish* pattern in that we say "English/the English;" i.e., the sibilant pattern applies here.

**14.** Someone has pointed out to us that the meaning potential would indeed change in cultures where a wife can have more than one husband. In such cases, there would be a difference in meaning between a generic statement with "a husband/the husband" vs. "husbands" vs. "the husbands." This again points out the role of shared cultural knowledge in article use and interpretation.

**15.** This would correspond to a choice between pattern 2 and pattern 5.

**16.** In British English, all of the *-ache* compounds in this pattern except *headache* can also occur without the indefinite article, such as, *Joe has earache*; however, there is considerable variation from region to region. The interested reader should consult Swan (1980) for discussion of British usage in this area.

**17.** Note that television is treated differently in British and American English. In British usage we see a program "on the television (the telly, the tube)" but in American usage we see it "on television (on TV)."

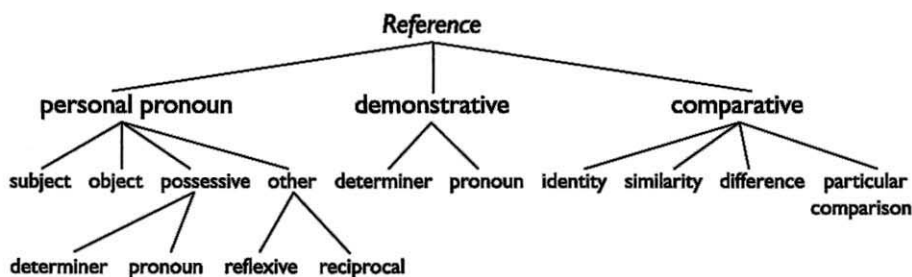
**18.** Note that "mosque" is an exception to this pattern. We would say "I'm going to the mosque" not \*I'm going to mosque," which suggests that English speakers classify *mosque* as a building (similar to their use of *cathedral*, *tabernacle*, etc.). However, we have been told that English-speaking Muslims are likely to say, "I'm going to mosque," so this may well be a matter of what one's religion is.



# REFERENCE AND POSSESSION

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we describe the forms, meanings, and uses of the grammatical resources that express reference and possession in English. Referential forms point to people or objects in the real world or to other forms called “antecedents” and include the various types of personal pronouns, the demonstratives, and a number of other referring forms. Possession can be expressed inflectionally (*'s*), periphrastically (*x of y*), or referentially (via possessive determiners or pronouns). We will first treat reference, topics under which are diagrammed below:



## FORMS THAT EXPRESS REFERENCE

Halliday and Hasan (1976) distinguish three types of reference in English: personal reference, demonstrative reference, and comparative reference.

### PERSONAL REFERENCE

The personal pronouns in their various permutations constitute the personal reference system in English.

#### Subject and Object Pronouns

The following are the subject and object forms of the personal pronouns in English:





	SUBJECT		OBJECT	
	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
1st person	I	we	me	us
2nd person	you	you	you	you
3rd person	she/he/it	they	her/him/it	them
	(one) <sup>1</sup>		(one) <sup>1</sup>	

The subject pronouns function as subject NPs; the object pronoun forms can function as direct, indirect, or prepositional objects.

Both the subject and object pronouns can function as subject predicate nouns:

A: Who's there?

B: It is I./It's me.

(subj. (obj.  
pro.) pro.)

In this environment, the subject pronoun is the historically older and formally prescriptive form, but the object pronoun is currently more frequently used and is certainly favored in informal speech. There is more discussion of this issue later in the section on meaning and use.

### Possessive Determiners and Pronouns

The possessive pronoun forms are also part of the personal reference system in English. They perform two syntactic functions: a possessive form can serve as a possessive determiner before a noun, or it can replace an entire possessive NP. (In the former case, it is called a possessive adjective in traditional grammars):

This is Sheila's book. → This is *her* book. (possessive determiner)

This book is Sheila's. → This book is *hers*. (possessive pronoun)

Depending on whether it precedes a noun or stands alone as a pronoun, two slightly different forms exist in all cases except the third person singular masculine form, which does not change:

	DETERMINER FUNCTION		PRONOMINAL FUNCTION	
	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>	<i>singular</i>	<i>plural</i>
1st person	my	our	mine	ours
2nd person	your	your	yours	yours
3rd person	her/his/its	their	hers/his/ø <sup>2</sup>	theirs
	one's		ø <sup>2</sup>	

As mentioned earlier in Chapter 5, the possessive determiners are core determiners like the definite article and the demonstratives and thus can be preceded by a predeterminer and followed by a postdeterminer:

pre core post noun head  
all his other books

The possessive pronouns, however, replace an entire noun phrase and can function as subjects or objects:

A: Hal has an excellent word processing program.

B: Really? *Mine* has more options.

(subject)

A: Do you like Joe's new car?

B: I prefer *yours*.

(object)

The *wh*-question word routinely associated with these referential possessive forms is *whose*; it is used most frequently as a determiner but occasionally occurs as a pronoun:

Whose (umbrella) is this?

### Reflexive Pronouns

The other major set of forms that function as personal reference pronouns are the reflexive pronouns:

	SINGULAR	PLURAL
1st person	myself	ourselves
2nd person	yourself	yourselves
3rd person	herself, himself, itself	themselves
	 oneself	

Can you see anything unusual about the forms of the pronouns that precede the stem *self/selves*? It should be apparent that the third person masculine singular reflexive pronoun *himself*, the third person plural reflexive pronoun *themselves*, and the neutral, formal third person pronoun *oneself* are formed differently from the others in that they contain the object form of the personal pronoun + *self/selves*, whereas the others consist of the possessive determiner + *self/selves*. This is a possible source of error for ESL/EFL students who imagine the paradigm to be regular and thus erroneously produce *\*hissself* and *\*theirselves*, forms that also occur in some nonstandard dialects of English.

When used in their underlying reflexive sense, reflexive pronouns replace NP objects that have the same referent as the subject of the sentence:

(subject) (object)  
Sally cut herself.

### Reciprocal Pronouns

Two other phrasal forms routinely used to express personal reference are the reciprocal pronouns, *each other* and *one another*. Like reflexive pronouns, both replace NP objects that typically refer back to NP subjects in the same sentence. However, for these forms the subject must be conjoined or plural:

Bob and Dick can't stand *each other*.

The five children in that family helped *one another* throughout their lives.

**DEMONSTRATIVE REFERENCE<sup>3</sup>**

The demonstrative determiners of English vary along two dimensions: proximity and number.

	<i>SINGULAR</i>	<i>PLURAL</i>
Near	this	these
Far	that	those

Like the possessives, the demonstratives can also function as pronouns as well as determiners and can represent an entire subject or object NP. Thus, one can say,

Please fill  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{this form} \\ \text{these forms} \end{array} \right\}$  out. (determiner function)

or, if the context makes the noun “form(s)” clear, simply say,

Please fill  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{this} \\ \text{these} \end{array} \right\}$  out. (pronominal function)

Like the possessive determiners and the definite article, the demonstrative determiners are core determiners that can co-occur with a predeterminer and a post determiner:

pre	core	post	head noun
all	these	other	issues

The *wh*-question word most closely associated with demonstratives is *which*; it can readily serve either a determiner function or a pronominal function:

Which (dress) did Margaret buy?

Sufficient context is required for the pronominal use to be interpretable.

**COMPARATIVE REFERENCE**

A rather amorphous set of forms come together under the rubric of Halliday and Hasan’s (1976) comparative reference. This type of reference includes forms that express identity, general similarity, difference, and particular comparison.

**Identity**

The forms expressing referential identity—*same* and *self-same*—are used mainly as determiners:<sup>4</sup>

The young vagrant loitered on the corner.  
The  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{same} \\ \text{self-same} \end{array} \right\}$  young man had been there the day before.

**General Similarity**

The referential forms expressing general similarity—*such*, *so*, and *likewise*—have different grammatical functions. *Such* is a determiner. As shown by the three different ways of continuing the dialogue started by speaker A, it can directly precede noncount nouns

(B1) and plural count nouns (B2), but it is unusual among determiners in that it must be followed by *a/an* when it modifies a singular count noun (B3):

- A: Did you like Professor Grogan's lecture?  
 B1: No, such argumentation tends to bore me.  
 B2: No, such lectures bore me.  
 B3: No, such a lecture tends to bore me.

The referential form *so*, when used to express general similarity, is quite parallel to *this* used adverbially:

Our table is  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{so} \\ \text{this} \end{array} \right\}$  long.

Do it like  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{so.} \\ \text{this.} \end{array} \right\}$

Both *this* and *so*, when used as comparative referential forms, generally co-occur with some sort of physical gesture or demonstration on the part of the speaker. *Likewise* is a referential adverb expressing general similarity; it often co-occurs with the pro-verb *do*, and together they refer to a previously occurring verb phrase:

Mrs. Allison made a generous donation to the Cancer Society. We were hoping you would do likewise.

### Difference

The referential forms of difference are *other*—including its related forms (*the*) *others* and *another*—and *else*,<sup>5</sup> and are frequent and important words in English. They tell the listener/reader that one speaker/writer is referring to some target item other than the antecedent:

1. Have you had a cookie? Yes? Have another!
2. I needed some help, and I couldn't find Ralph, so I looked for someone else.

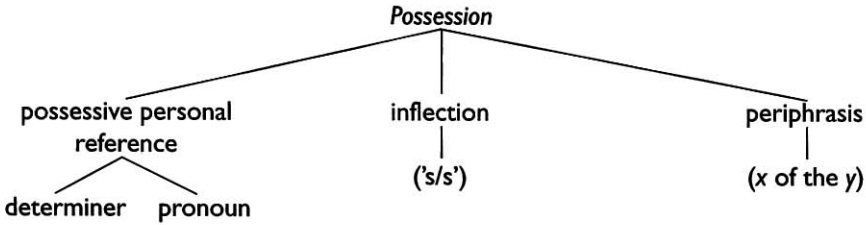
In 1, *another* is used referentially to mean “another cookie,” that is, something in addition to but different from the antecedent (i.e., *a cookie*). In 2, *else* in combination with *someone* refers back to *Ralph* but means “a person other than or different from Ralph.”

### Particular Comparison

The particular comparatives (e.g., *more*, *less*, *better*, *worse*, etc.) can be used like pronouns or adverbs to refer to something in prior discourse:

3. I finished my coffee. Amy offered me more.  
 4. A: How are you feeling?  
 B: Better.

In 3, the “more” means “more coffee,” in addition to what the speaker had finished, and in 4, the response “better” means “I’m feeling better than before.” Note that many of the comparative reference forms allow us to say something more elliptically and concisely; thus, we can avoid repetition.



## POSSESSIVE FORMS<sup>6</sup>

In addition to the possessive determiners and possessive pronouns already discussed above, as part of reference, there are two other major ways of signaling possession in English:

In writing, the first is by inflecting regular singular nouns and irregular plural nouns not ending in *s* with 's, as in

the baby's crib      the women's room

or by adding an apostrophe after the *s* ending of regular plural nouns and singular forms that already end in the sound *s*:

the boys' trip      Kansas' farmlands<sup>7</sup>,

The apostrophe added to regular plural nouns and singular nouns ending in *s* does nothing to alter the pronunciation of the word; however, the addition of the 's to singular and irregular plural nouns is realized in speech as /s/ when it occurs after voiceless consonants, /z/ when it follows voiced consonants and vowels, and /əz/ after sibilants (i.e., /s/, /z/, /ʒ/, /ʒ/, /ʒ/, and /ʒ/):

Mac's	/mæks/
Sam's	/sæmz/
Grace's	/greysəz/

The other way of signaling possession is by using the periphrastic *of* possessive form where the possessor and thing possessed are inverted if one compares this order with that of the inflected 's form.

the man's name → the name of the man

From the example above, you might infer that the 's possessive and *of* possessive forms are interchangeable. This is not usually the case, as you will see below when we discuss this contrast again under use.

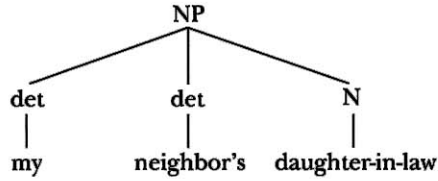
When the nouns involved are relatively short, double possessive inflections are possible:

Bob's brother's car

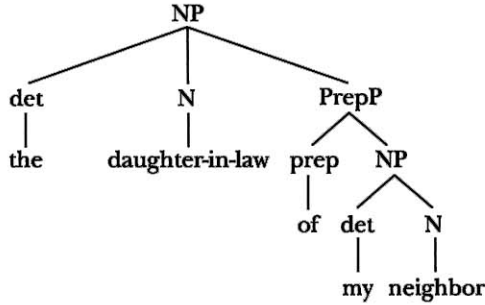
Double and even triple periphrastic possessives are also possible, regardless of whether the nouns involved are long or short:

the cover of the folio of the sonnets of Shakespeare

Syntactically, we treat a noun inflected with the possessive 's as a determiner, but a possessive determiner would always precede a possessive noun determiner. (recall that up to three determiners are possible):



The periphrastic possessive with *of* is generated as a noun phrase with a modifier prepositional phrase following the head noun:



One of the most interesting structural facts about the possessive inflection is that it may be an inflection on complex or compound noun phrases as well as on simple nouns:

the mayor of San Diego 's car

Sally and John 's new baby

### THE SCOPE OF REFERENTIAL FORMS

The basic difference between the reflexive and reciprocal pronouns and all the other personal pronouns is that the antecedent for reflexive and reciprocal pronouns must be in the same sentence or clause:

*John can take care of himself.*

↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↓

*Bob and Dick can't stand each other.*

↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↓

For possessive pronouns, the antecedent can be either within the same clause/sentence or in an earlier clause:

Greg loves *his* dog. (same clause)

↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↓

Do you know Greg? I walk *his* dog. (prior clause).

↑ \_\_\_\_\_ ↓

Subject and object personal pronouns, however, typically refer to an antecedent in a preceding clause:<sup>8</sup>



Do you know Sara? She's just moved to Atlanta.



Do you know Sara? Yes, I've been acquainted with her for ten years.



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## THE MEANING, ACQUISITION, AND USE OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT PRONOUNS

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Subject and object pronoun forms do not usually cause undue learning hardship for ESL/EFL students, since the English pronominal system is far simpler than that of many other languages. There are only a few problems that ESL/EFL teachers need to be aware of. Many non-English speakers have told us that they find the presence of only one second personal pronoun form—*you*—disconcerting and too direct. English has no way to be either formal or intimate linguistically and no way to explicitly mark singular or plural number. Another source of initial confusion, due to the simplicity of the English pronoun system, might occur for students whose native language has inclusive and exclusive forms of the first person plural pronoun. Having two such forms is typical of languages of the Malayo-Polynesian family. Indonesian speakers, for example, use *kita* to mean *we* when the person addressed is included, as in

We should (all) go to the movies next Saturday.

whereas *kami* means *we*, excluding the person addressed:

Are we late? (addressed to person who has been waiting)

Since inclusive and exclusive meanings are both contained in the English first person plural pronouns, students who distinguish these forms in their native languages should have no problems once they recognize that one form is used to express both meanings in English.

A more serious problem arises for students whose native language makes no gender distinction for third person singular pronouns. Such students understand the use of *he* or *she/him* or *her*, of course, but since they are not accustomed to observing the distinction in their mother tongue, they often use the English third person pronouns inappropriately. Mere rule explication will probably do little to aid in this area; however, contextualized practice in using the various third person pronouns should help heighten student awareness. This same problem, of course, applies to the third person singular possessive and reflexive personal pronouns.

### SOME ODDITIES OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT PRONOUN USE

ESL/EFL students will have to learn that certain inanimate objects are sometimes referred to with a feminine pronoun form, although the use of *it* is more common today. This has been true for ships, countries, cars, and until recently, hurricanes, which now are given alternative masculine and feminine names and referred to as *he* or *she* as appropriate. (Note that once an animal or anything else has been given a gender-marked proper name, the appropriate feminine or masculine pronoun tends to be used.)

Of course, the controversy continues as to whether or not it is sexist (or discriminatory) to use the third person singular masculine form when one intends to include both the meaning of *he* and *she*, as in

When a person first arrives in a new country, he has many adjustments to make.

For now, this controversy will have to be resolved by each individual. Even if you yourself do not find such references offensive, you might explain to your ESL/EFL students that some people do and that stylistic alternatives are possible and often preferred. (The use of “singular” *they* in such cases is discussed later.)

When a person first arrives in a new country, he or she has many adjustments to make. (use of “he or she”)

When people first arrive in a new country, they have many adjustments to make. (use of plural)

In verbless or elliptical utterances, the object pronoun sometimes replaces the subject form, which would be expected in a complete sentence or in a partially reduced sentence with a verb form.

Who received the letter?  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{I received the letter.} \\ \text{I did.} \\ \text{Me.} \end{array} \right.$

As mentioned previously, in full sentences with the copula *be*, personal pronouns functioning as subject noun predicates used to take the subject form in formal English:

It is I. This is she.

This usage is now changing even in formal English, and in informal English, the object form of the pronoun is definitely preferred:

It's me.  
That's her.

However, the desire to use formal English and be “correct” has led some native speakers to use *I* even as a conjoined direct object or a conjoined object of a preposition.

?This concerns only you and I.      ?The article was written by Nancy and I.  
?Between you and I, he's a fool.

These forms are becoming colloquially acceptable, and they are occurring with ever-increasing frequency even though they are prescriptively incorrect.

## INDEFINITE PRONOUNS

Even though the so-called indefinite pronouns are not referential in and of themselves, they often serve as antecedents for referential forms or co-occur with referential forms like *else*. We introduce them here in order to discuss some interesting features of use associated with these forms:

The indefinite pronouns occur as compound forms:<sup>9</sup>

	<i>some</i>	<i>any</i>	<i>no</i>	<i>every</i>
-body	somebody	anybody	nobody	everybody
-one	someone	anyone	no one	everyone
-thing	something	anything	nothing	everything

Notice that they all are written as single words except for the phrase *no one*. *-Body* and *-one* mean “person” in general. *-Thing*, however, refers to an inanimate or abstract concept, or to an entity not clearly identifiable as a person (e.g., “Shhh! *Something* moved”). Whenever



To test Bolinger's hypothesis, Roth (1991) examined over three hundred contextualized tokens of *someone* and *somebody* occurring in written and spoken English sources and largely confirmed but also extended Bolinger's proposals. She found that *somebody* occurred with significant frequency in contexts that were hypothetical, general, distant, and where the speaker/writer expressed neutral or negative stance towards the NP. *Someone*, on the other hand, occurred with significant frequency in contexts that were concrete, proximate, intimate, and where the speaker/writer expressed positive stance towards the NP. Roth also found something Bolinger had not hypothesized: *someone* occurred very frequently with verbs of communication such as *say* and *tell* in her oral data:

Years ago when I worked in Hollywood, someone said, "You don't understand. This town is run on fear." (Roth, p. 19)

### THE MEANING OF DEMONSTRATIVES

When we introduced the demonstrative determiners, we said that *this/these* had a sense of "nearness" and *that/those* a sense of "distance." What we did not explain was that the nearness or distance being conveyed could be spatial, temporal (*this* = now vs. *that* = then), psychological (*this* = more preferred vs. *that* = less preferred), or simply sequential (*this* = first mention vs. *that* = second mention):

- spatial: I like *this* car better than *that* one <sup>11</sup> over there.
- temporal: I like *this* movie better than *that* concert last night.
- psychological: I like *this* candidate, which is why I didn't vote for *that* one.
- sequential: This dress is less attractive than *that* one.

Further functions of the demonstratives in discourse are discussed below.

### USE OF DEMONSTRATIVES IN DISCOURSE

Demonstratives seem to follow somewhat different patterns of use in spoken and written English. Strauss (1993) looked at spoken data, where it is important to distinguish situational (i.e., deictic or exophoric [reference to people and things outside the text]) uses of demonstratives from textual (i.e., anaphoric [backwards pointing] and cataphoric [forward pointing]) uses. Using 37 different data sets and over 40,000 transcribed words, Strauss concluded that it was necessary to include *it* along with *this/these* and *that/those* to give an accurate account for her data. Her overall analysis follows:

FORM(s)	DATA FREQUENCY	MEANING	HEARER	REFERENT
<i>this/these</i>	15%	high focus	new information (not shared)	important
<i>that/those</i>	30%	med. focus	↓	↑
<i>it</i>	55%	low focus	old information (shared)	unimportant

By "focus," Strauss, drawing on Kirsner's (1979) work, means the degree of attention the listener should pay to the referent. Strauss found that *that/those* and *it* were used overwhelmingly with anaphoric textual reference in her data (91% and 97%, respectively):

[Caller to a radio talk show on gardening]

Hi. I have a very old kind of a vine-type rose. I think that *it* grows—it's actually in my next-door neighbor's vacant yard and, uhm, I don't really know how to prune *that* thing. *It* gets—seems like a floribunda type.

(Strauss 1993:407)

*This/these*, on the other hand, were used anaphorically in her oral corpus only 51 percent of the time since these forms also are used in the following ways (examples from pp. 405–407):

*Cataphorically* (7%) (to point forward):

[another radio talk show]

Again we come back to *this*: Murder is the act of killing someone. . . .

*Exophorically* (22%) (to point outside the text at something):

[teacher is lecturing]

Yeah. The border states, specifically [pulls down map] we've looked at *this* before. . . .

*Nonreferentially* (20%) (to introduce or present new information like *a/an*):

Bee: They stuck us in *this* crazy building that they juh—they're not even finished with it.

The other interesting pattern that Strauss found was that *this/these* occurred as determiners about 60 percent of the time and as pronouns about 40 percent of the time, whereas *that/those* occurred as pronouns about 70 percent of the time and as determiners only 30 percent of the time. Strauss feels that this reinforces her analysis of *this/these* as high-focus, new-information signals where the whole noun referent tends to be mentioned; however, *that* is more like *it* and occurs more often pronominally to signal a lower degree of focus and a greater degree of shared information.

The use of demonstrative determiners and pronouns in written English was the focus of a study by Nishimura (1995). She compared published book notices and short essays by native English-speaking authors published in the *TESOL Quarterly* and found that use of demonstratives was highly constrained in the book-notice genre. The vast majority of tokens were modifier uses of *this/these* with very few tokens of *that/those*: *this text*, *this book*, *this level*, and so forth. The short essays, however, followed a different pattern. Demonstratives were used not only to refer to prior noun phrases but to whole clauses and groups of clauses.<sup>12</sup> Although *this/these* still occurred more often than *that/those*, the essay had a greater variety of functions for and a higher number of *that/those* tokens; pronominal uses occurred alongside the more frequent determiner uses:

In *these* comments I have expanded on DuFon's discussion of the sixth area of the TESOL guidelines. Research has a world view. It can be dishonestly executed to serve the aims of others, although . . . I believe *that* is truly rare. . . .

(Davidson 1993:162, cited in Nishimura 1995)

The determiner *these* above is in the opening sentence of a final paragraph and refers to the author's own entire essay (i.e., *these comments*). Then the demonstrative pronoun *that* is used to refer to an entire proposition, "[research can be] dishonestly executed to serve the aims of others." Nishimura concluded that because the use of demonstratives was so constrained in the book-notice genre while the academic essay genre allowed room for rhetorical effect and personal style suggests that demonstrative usage may be quite genre specific in written discourse. This area needs further study.

### INTERACTION OF DEMONSTRATIVES, PERSONAL PRONOUNS, AND ARTICLES

Frodesen and Eyring (1997:108) point out that it is important to understand how the demonstratives and personal pronouns interact with the articles. They give the following examples to show that these forms are often equally grammatical choices but that the choice depends on the speaker's or writer's intentions or what she or he expects the listener/reader to know:

Oh, I've heard  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{that joke} \\ \text{the joke} \\ \text{it} \end{array} \right\}$  before.

Moya told us  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the jokes.} \\ \text{those jokes.} \\ \text{them.} \end{array} \right\}$

With the following two example sets, Frodesen and Eyring show that demonstratives give the referent more emphasis (or "focus" as Strauss says) than use of an article or pronoun:

I heard a speaker on campus this afternoon . . .

(1) *The speaker* was talking about the dangers of nuclear power.

(2) *This speaker* was the best I've heard regarding the nuclear power issue.

Here the definite article in (1) emphasizes the topic of nuclear power while the demonstrative in (2) emphasizes the speaker.

I'm not sure if I'll type my paper myself . . .

(3) If I do, *it* will probably take all day.

(4) I have more important things to do than *that!*

The *it* in (3) gives less emphasis to the antecedent—type my paper myself—and more to the fact that it will take all day; the *that* in (4) gives the antecedent more emphasis, which is reinforced by the sentence-final position of *that*.

The other point that Frodesen and Eyring make is that personal and demonstrative pronouns are often used to avoid repetition and wordiness when antecedents are in adjacent clauses:

(5) I asked my instructor if I needed to submit a bibliography with my draft.

She told me  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{that} \\ \text{?the bibliography} \end{array} \right\}$  would be unnecessary.

(6) This paper is the best I've written. I'm sure my classmates will

enjoy  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{it} \\ \text{?the paper} \end{array} \right\}$ .

### THE MEANING AND USE OF REFLEXIVE AND RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS

A potential cross-linguistic problem derives from the distinction English makes between plural reflexive pronouns and reciprocal pronouns.

The children hit themselves. 

The children hit each other. 



Many languages (e.g., Spanish and Yoruba) can use virtually the same forms to refer to both the reflexive and reciprocal meaning and allow the context to disambiguate. Learners speaking such first languages may unintentionally produce English sentences such as the following:

\*After ten years, she and Ted were happy to see themselves again.

### ASYSTEMATIC USES OF REFLEXIVE PRONOUNS

In a series of studies, Staczek (1986, 1987) has made observations about unpredicted uses of reflexive pronouns in English.

First, the reflexive pronoun seems to be alternating with subject and object pronouns in ways that are not semantically reflexive.<sup>13</sup>

What about yourself?  
(= you)

We expected yourself to take the lead.  
(= you)

The text was first copyedited by my mother and myself.  
(= me)

Mr. Dennison, Mr. Pappas, and myself have spent hundreds of hours . . .  
(= I)

On behalf of myself and Delta Airlines, . . .  
(= me)

From a syntactic view, such uses of reflexives are a form of asystematic variation, according to Staczek. They may at times reflect the speaker's or the writer's insecurity over whether to use the subject or object pronoun or a reflexive pronoun, or their desire to use a phonetically more salient form in juxtaposition with one or more proper names. These may also be instances where a first-person narrator is interacting with several other people and uses "ourselves" instead of "us" to capture the interactive, dual, speaker-listener role that everyone is experiencing:

I'd like to remind ourselves . . . (Staczek 1987:118)

Second, Staczek (1988) has looked at the variation in the use of the plural reflexives *-self/-selves* and suggests that increasing colloquial use of the *-self* forms as plural reflexives—which he documents (examples below)—is evidence that English is undergoing a change and that the now prescriptively required *-selves* forms may eventually be lost:

How we portray ourself influences the way we behave.

I'm sure many of you have played this head game with yourself.

We encourage people to give themself credit for the labor in remodeling.

These examples are reminiscent of Lagunoff's (1992, 1997) work on singular "they."

### THE USE OF RECIPROCAL PRONOUNS

Prescriptive tradition and some current grammar books (e.g., Cook and Suter 1980) state that the rule for distinguishing the two reciprocal pronoun phrases, *each other* and *one another*, is dependent on the number of participants involved: *each other* should be used with two participants and *one another* with more than two:

Bob and George dislike each other.  
The three sisters are devoted to one another.

Quirk et al. (1985) reject this rule and offer an explanation based on register rather than number: *each other* is informal, and *one another* is used in more formal contexts. The American Heritage Dictionary (1992) states that *one another* is preferred over *each other* in temporally ordered series of events or things:

The waiters followed one another into the room.

Amundson (1994) analyzed 55 authentic tokens of reciprocal pronouns (46—*each other*; 9—*one another*) and was able to demonstrate that neither the number of participants nor the temporally ordered sequence of items offered any valid explanation for her naturally occurring data. She noted that modality may offer a partial explanation in that only one of nine tokens of *one another* came from a spoken source, whereas there were 16 spoken tokens and 30 written tokens of *each other*. The written mode, therefore, seems more amenable to the use of *one another* than the spoken mode, whereas modality seems to be much less of an issue in the case of *each other*, which appears to occur freely in both speech and writing.

Another factor in the use of reciprocal pronouns appears to be the animacy—or even humanness—of the referents. For *one another*, all nine sets of subject participants were animate and eight were human,<sup>14</sup> whereas nine of the 46 sets of participants were inanimate in the case of *each other*.

These sentences have nothing to do with each other.

We feel there is a case to be made for certain genres favoring the use of *one another*; for example, passages from the Bible frequently favor the use of *one another*.<sup>15</sup>

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

—John 13:34 and 35<sup>16</sup>

To sum up, *each other* is clearly the more frequent and flexible reciprocal pronoun; in fact, it seems to be used by some English speakers and writers to the exclusion of *one another*.

## THE MEANING AND USE OF POSSESSIVE FORMS

What does the “possessive” inflection or form mean?

In many traditional grammars, the possessive inflection is referred to as the genitive case. This is perhaps appropriate given that the ’s inflection or a possessive form, while often expressing possession:

- POSSESSION:                      John’s car                      her book

can also be used to express many other meanings:

- AGENCY/SOURCE:                      Shakespeare’s sonnets                      his ideas
- HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS:
  - a. kinship                      Bob’s cousin                      my father
  - b. professional:                      Joe’s teacher                      their doctor
  - c. other social:                      Anne’s neighbor                      your girlfriend



We should also mention two special syntactic constructions—one using the possessive determiner, the other using the possessive pronoun—which appear similar yet are slightly different in meaning:

Philip is one of our friends. Philip is a friend of ours.

The first sentence means that we have an unspecified number of friends and that Philip is one of them. The second sentence makes no reference to our other friends but instead means that Philip is our friend and suggests that he may also be a friend of other people. Some reference grammars and ESL/EFL texts erroneously state or imply that such sentences are completely synonymous.

Nouns marked with the possessive inflection have two main uses: (1) they may be definite determiners, such as

my cousin's father  
some people's opinions

or (2) they may be a modifier more closely associated with the head noun and behave much like part of a compound noun:

several women's universities  
a ship's doctor

Han (1996) in a data-based study of possessives in spoken English found that about 70 percent of her more than 250 tokens were definite determiners and about 23 percent had the more lexicalized modifier function (with the remaining 7 percent representing four other minor functions). We will focus here on the definite determiner use and see how such possessives<sup>17</sup> are used in discourse.

What types of nouns most typically occur together as inflected possessive determiners and head nouns in oral discourse? In her oral corpus, Han found that the possessive determiners modifying head nouns were of three types:

- personal names (71%), e.g. *Bob, Mr. Smith*  
example: *Bob's house*
- personal roles (19%), e.g. *teacher, child*  
example: *the teacher's report*
- collective or institutional nouns (10%), e.g. *team, the company*  
example: *the company's report*

The head nouns modified by possessive determiners were of five types in Han's corpus:

- nouns of internal possession (26%), e.g., *information, problem, opinion*  
example: *Bob's problem*
- personal roles (26%), e.g., *doctor, secretary, wife*  
example: *Mr. Smith's doctor*
- locative nouns (19%), e.g., *lawn, office, garage*  
example: *the teacher's office*
- physical objects (14%), e.g., *desk, box, book*  
example: *the professor's book*
- other (15%) includes partitive nouns, animals, and institutional and collective nouns  
example: *Billy's dog*

Thus, personal names used as possessive determiners followed by head nouns that refer to an internal possession or a personal role accounted for the majority of noun phrases that were inflected for possession in Han's oral corpus.

Most possessive determiners (along with their head nouns) signal new information and tend to occur in the predicate (i.e., toward the end of the sentence) and function as direct objects, objects of prepositions, and predicates of subject nouns. In Han's oral corpus, about 77 percent of the NPs inflected for possession perform these various predicate functions, while about 19 percent function as subjects.<sup>18</sup> However, she found that the NPs inflected for possession that were subjects tended to repeat or summarize previously mentioned (i.e., given) information and thus were anaphoric in nature.

The following excerpt from a radio broadcast (CBS, August 4, 1997) illustrates some typical discourse functions of possessives:

Jeanne Calment, who had the distinction of being  
the world's oldest person,  
died today in Arles, France, at the  
age of 122. . . . Born on February 21 in 1875,  
Calment was Arles' greatest attraction  
since Vincent Van Gogh, who spent a year  
there in 1888. She met him when he  
came to her uncle's shop to buy paints. . . .

This excerpt from the news bulletin contains three noun phrases inflected for the possessive:

the world's oldest person  
Arles' greatest attraction  
her uncle's shop

All three noun phrases are in predicate position and provide new information for listeners not previously familiar with Jeanne Calment, her age, and her life. The third token is instructive in that it shows us that a possessive determiner can precede and modify a noun inflected for possession and that together they form a complex possessive determiner modifying the head noun. The fact that superlatives are included as post-determiners in two of the noun phrases can be explained by virtue of Jeanne Calment's record age.

One final observation that should be made about the 's possessive form is that, like possessive pronouns, the noun that follows the inflected noun may be deleted if it can be inferred from context:

Where is your car?  
It's being repaired, so I borrowed Ted's. (i.e., Ted's car)

### The Use of Inflected Versus Periphrastic Possessives

Many ESL/EFL texts will tell the learner to use the 's form with human head nouns and the *of* form with nonhuman head nouns. Such a rule accounts for examples like these:

Martine's *husband* (human head noun)  
*the end of the road* (nonhuman head noun)

but not for these:

The works of Shakespeare fill an enormous volume.  
The dog's tail is wagging.

According to a study conducted by Khampang (1973) in which he tested native English speakers' preference for the 's possessive versus the *of* form, the native speakers preferred the 's form whenever the head noun was animate. Moreover, the native speakers preferred the 's form even with inanimate head nouns when the noun could be viewed as performing an action. For example,

The train's arrival was delayed.

was preferred over

The arrival of the train was delayed.

To these fairly general applications of the 's possessive, we should add a few less common ones, such as

<i>double possessives:</i>	Hank's brother's car
<i>nouns of special interest to human activity:</i>	the game's history
	London's water supply
<i>natural phenomena:</i>	the earth's rotation

The *of* possessive, on the other hand, is preferred in all other instances, most commonly with inanimate objects:

He stood at the foot of the bed. \*He stood at the bed's foot.

But, according to Khampang, the *of* possessive may be used even with human head nouns when the modifier noun is long.<sup>19</sup> For example,

He's the son of the well-known politician.

was preferred over

He's the well-known politician's son.

or with long double possessives which, when short, normally both take 's (e.g., Hank's brother's car); for example,

What can I do for the husband of Dr. Smith's daughter?

was preferred over

What can I do for Dr. Smith's daughter's husband?

Likewise, if formality is desired, the *of* possessive is preferred, whereas 's signals informality where both versions are possible:

Shakespeare's sonnets (informal)    the sonnets of Shakespeare (formal)

Thus, the fact that there are these two ways to signal possessive forms in English and the fact that the rules for distinguishing their usage are not clear-cut may be some reasons why ESL/EFL students often use possessive forms incorrectly. Another reason may be that the 's form occurs relatively infrequently in English compared with other inflectional morphemes such as the plural, the past tense, and the progressive; that is, we know that when a morpheme is of low frequency in the input that learners receive, it is acquired later than the more frequently occurring morphemes are (Larsen-Freeman 1976). Yet another reason may be interference from the student's native language. Regardless of the source of difficulty, two typical patterns of error are overgeneralization of the *of* form:

\*The car of my friend is new.



and simplification, when students omit the 's altogether and simply signal possession by juxtaposition of two NPs.

\*My friend car is new.

### SOME USES OF POSSESSIVE DETERMINERS

It would be useful to have a data-based analysis of the possessive determiner forms (*my, your, his, her, one, their*) similar to Han's study of lexical nouns with the possessive inflection. We know that these determiners can be used both for sentence-internal reference to avoid repetition (John lost his keys) and for cross-sentential or cross-clausal reference as in the last sentence of the text above about Jeanne Calment. Note that there are four mentions of Calment, who is the topic of the news bulletin:

Jeanne Calment  
Calment  
She  
her uncle's shop

In the last mention, the possessive pronoun is used not only for purposes of topic continuity but also as a means of introducing a new noun phrase (the uncle's shop) into the discourse. It would be useful to know how frequently possessive determiners are used in this and other ways and which of their uses are most typical.

### Social Uses of Possessive Determiners

We do know from work by Staczek (forthcoming) that at least two possessive determiners, *your* and *our*, are used in nonliteral, socially motivated ways in spoken English in a variety of settings. It seems that speakers are trying to identify with and engage the listener(s)<sup>20</sup> through these special uses of *your* and *our*:

You get your fan, your temperature gauge . . . These are your fog lamps in the front.  
[Volvo salesman to potential customer] (p. 3)

The chicken is not your real hot Mexican food. [chef to TV audience on PBS cooking program.] (p. 6)

Here's a look at your local weather. [local meteorologist on the All Weather Channel] (p. 9)

We're gonna go ahead and put our fertilizer down. [radio gardening expert to caller] (p. 2)

What are we going to do with our certificate of deposit? [bank officer to customer] (p. 2)

In most of these cases, the possessive determiner can be paraphrased with either a definite article or no article at all.<sup>21</sup> Staczek notes that he has found such uses of *your* and *our* in instructional settings, sales/marketing situations, scripted TV comedies, weather forecasts, and even in fifteenth-century cookbooks ("*and cover them with thy lids and let them bake . . .*" [p. 12]). We feel that nonpossessive pronominal forms (especially, *we*) can also be used similarly:

[doctor to patient]: How are we today?

The use of *we* in the preceding sentence and of *our* in the bank officer's question above, respectively, can sometimes be perceived by the listener as condescending speech on the

part of the user, i.e., the bank officer and doctor appear to be treating the bank customer and the patient like children. Where the speaker clearly has the right to instruct someone or demonstrate something (i.e., the gardening expert), the use of *we/our* and *your* seems less condescending and more in the nature of building informal relationships.

## CONCLUSION

The English pronoun system is not as complicated as that of many other languages. Nevertheless, there is considerable detail for your students to master in learning the forms and uses of the pronoun system and of English demonstratives, possessives, and other referential forms. Your job will require that you give your students continued exposure and meaningful practice to aid them in their acquisition and use of these forms.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form/Meaning.** Cuisenaire rods can be very useful for introducing and practicing subject and object pronouns, since the rods can make the meaning clear. (Recall that a teaching suggestion using these rods to teach demonstratives was presented in Chapter 5.)

### *Subject Pronouns*

Give a green rod to Pheng.

What did Esteban do?

He gave a green rod to Pheng.

Give two blue rods to Paolo.

What did Antonella do?

She gave two blue rods to Paolo.

### *Object Pronouns*

Give a green rod to her.

Give it to Antonella.

Give two blue rods to him.

Give them to Paolo.

Take the red rods from them.

Take them from Paolo and Antonella.

**2. Form/Meaning.** A good way for children to practice the possessive determiners with parts of the body is to play “Simon Says” and to amplify the game with questions. For example:

T: Simon says, touch your head.

T: What did you (sg.) do?/What did you (pl.) do?

S1: I touched my head./We touched our heads.

or

T: What did he do?

S2: He touched his head.

**3. Meaning/Use.** Kealey and Inness (1997:80–83) suggest the following activity for practicing possessive forms. Students are each given a sentence with possessives in it and are asked to memorize it (individually, in pairs, in groups—depending on the size of the class). The sentences are all descriptions of a child’s face. The students are given a family picture with the child’s mother and father clearly depicted but with the child’s face missing. They have to circulate around the room and tell each other their sentences in order to complete the child’s face and thus the family portrait. Sample sentences: He has his mother’s hair. He has his father’s eyes. He has his mother’s chin.

**4. Form.** A substitution drill may be useful for demonstrating and practicing the correspondence between possessive determiners and pronouns.

Your book is red	→	Yours is red.
My book is blue.	→	Mine is blue.
My car is green.	→	Mine is green.
Their car is orange.	→	Theirs is orange.

**5. Form/Meaning.** Penny Larson (1977) suggests preparing flash cards as an aid to teaching the 's possessive form. On each flash card (no smaller than 5 by 8 inches), paste a picture of a person and a picture of an item (Larson says "The Sears catalog is good for pictures of people and any discount catalogs are good for pictures of items"). Print a name on the card under the picture of the person. Use common American names or the names of your students. Be sure you have both singular and plural items and people. Then teach the new pattern by holding up a flash card and asking:

T: What's this?	Students: It's a book.
T: Who's this?	Students: It's John.
T: Whose book is this?	Students: It's John's book.
	or
	It's John's.

Go through the cards once with the teacher asking and the students answering. Then, ask the students to ask you the "Who's/Whose" questions. When they are comfortable with the pattern, they can ask and answer each other. Pass out the cards, keeping a couple yourself so they can practice *this/that*.

**6. Use.** Give your students a passage in which the possessives followed by head nouns have been replaced with a blank line and two NPs in parentheses. Have them write the correct form of the possessive on each line, inflectional or periphrastic, explaining why they made the choices they did. For example:

Last Saturday I went shopping. It was (1) \_\_\_\_\_ (my friend/birthday) and I wanted to buy a gift. I drove (2) \_\_\_\_\_ (my father/car) to town. When I arrived, I realized (3) \_\_\_\_\_ (the center/shopping district) was already quite crowded. . . .

**7. Meaning.** To practice distinguishing *his* and *her*, Celce-Murcia and Hilles (1988) suggest giving learners a black-and-white sketch of a boy and girl (or man and woman, if learners are adults). The male and female are similarly dressed (in T-shirts and shorts). Each learner should have a small box of crayons. The teacher then gives a series of commands (learners are told not to look at any sketch but their own): Color his hair red; color her hair brown; color her shorts green; color his shorts black; and so on. When the exercise is finished, the learners can compare their results.

**8. Use.** Have pairs of students work at completing short dialogs with blanks where *this/these, that/those, or it* is required. The students should be prepared to explain their choices:

- a. X: Let's go camping next weekend.  
Y: \_\_\_\_\_'s a great idea! I like \_\_\_\_\_.
- b. X: Listen to \_\_\_\_\_: Mark won the lottery!  
Y: What's he going to do with all \_\_\_\_\_ money?

- c. X: [two women at a store] Which of \_\_\_\_\_ two dresses should I buy?  
 Y: \_\_\_\_\_ dress looks nicer on you than \_\_\_\_\_ one.

**9. Form/Meaning.** As a way of introducing students to the syntactic and semantic elements inherent in the use of the reciprocal pronoun *each other*, Marie Bedell (personal communication) suggests the following procedure. (The sentences should be written on the board after they have been produced orally.)

**Teacher:** (introduces a sentence) I saw Albert.

(Teacher asks a student to reverse the action.)

**Student 1:** Albert saw me.

(Teacher asks another student to combine the two sentences.)

**Student 2:** I saw Albert and Albert saw me.

Teacher explains that whenever we have two sentences that are the reverse of each other, we can avoid the repetition by conjoining the subjects and using *each other* as a substitute for the objects;

Albert and I saw each other.

The teacher then provides several other sentences that the students can (a) reverse, (b) combine, and (c) paraphrase with *each other*;

Phil hit George.      Sally likes Sam.

**10. Use.** Sports commentators make frequent use of reciprocal pronouns during their broadcasts.

“The Boston Celtics have faced the New York Knicks many times before, but never have they played each other with the fervor we’ve seen tonight.”

If you are in a situation where your students can listen to English language sports broadcasts, have them collect examples of reciprocal pronouns used in such contexts.

In an EFL (or ESL) situation, supply your students with a nonpictorial visual aid (Shaw and Taylor 1978) such as a summary of the results of the last two decades of World Cup Soccer championships. Have them generate sentences with reciprocal pronouns based on the information they’ve been given; for example:

Brazil and Italy have never played each other in a championship game.

Uruguay and England have faced each other twice recently.

(*Note:* Be aware that in informal usage even native English speakers sometimes use reflexive pronouns in sentences where the meaning is clearly reciprocal: ?The players congratulated *themselves* after they had won such a close game.)

## EXERCISES

**Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide your own sentences to illustrate the following terms. Underline the word(s) illustrating the term:

- |                          |                             |                                |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------|
| a. subject pronoun       | e. demonstrative pronoun    | i. indefinite compound pronoun |
| b. object pronoun        | f. demonstrative determiner | j. singular “they”             |
| c. possessive pronoun    | g. reciprocal pronoun       | k. ’s possessive               |
| d. possessive determiner | h. reflexive pronoun        | l. of possessive               |



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## ENDNOTES

1. The personal pronoun *one* is a formal, general third-person pronoun that neutralizes the gender distinction in *she/he* or *her/him*. Since it is formal, it is of lower frequency than the other personal pronouns.

2. For all practical purposes, there are no possessive pronouns *its* and *one's*. The possessive determiners *its* and *one's* in the following sentences do not have pronominal counterparts.

The cat is going to eat its dinner.      One should take care of one's health.

\*This dinner is its.

\*Regarding health, one should take care of one's.

The acceptable version in the pair on the right is more typically British than American. In American English, we would more likely say "One should take care of his health" or—to avoid sexist language—"People should take care of their health."

3. Halliday and Hasan (1976) also include the definite article *the* (which derives etymologically from *that*) and the pro-adverbs (i.e., pro-forms that replace and refer to adverbials) *here*, *there*, *now*, and *then* as part of demonstrative reference.

4. When "(the) same" functions pronominally, there is usually no co-reference; instead, there is substitution for a member of the same class (or what Halliday and Hasan [1989] refer to as co-classification).

A: I'll have a hamburger and fries.

B: I'll have the same.

5. *Else* has a related adverbial form *elsewhere*, which is used to direct the listener or reader away from the antecedent and to some other place or condition: *If the answer to the problem isn't in the back of the book, you'll have to find it elsewhere.*

6. In other grammatical descriptions, this form is sometimes called the genitive inflection, since many other meanings besides possession are signaled by it, as we indicate later in this chapter.

7. When singular nouns ending in *s* are monosyllabic and used informally, one now also sees spellings such as *Bess's*, *Russ's*, which more closely mirror pronunciation. Some writers now use *'s* after all singular nouns ending in *s*.

8. Initial subordinate clauses followed by main clauses may either follow this pattern or reverse it:

When Sara moved to Atlanta, she started a new job.

When she moved to Atlanta, Sara started a new job.

This flexibility of referential direction is not possible when the subordinate clause follows the main clause; in this case, the antecedent must precede the referring form:

Sara started a new job when she moved to Atlanta.

\*She started a new job when Sara moved to Atlanta.

(\* = *she* and *Sara* are not co-referential)

9. These indefinite "pronouns" are not true pronouns; syntactically, they behave much like regular nouns and take adjectives and prepositional phrases: *a certain someone*, *somebody with a gun*. There are also related indefinite pro-adverbs:

Somewhere/someplace    anywhere/anyplace    nowhere/noplace    everywhere/everyplace

10. This last example is interesting in that we can see that use of nouns with overtly masculine or feminine gender (mother/father) does not preclude use of singular *they* so long as they are used generically.

11. The nominal substitute *one* (pl. *ones*) often co-occurs with referential determiners to avoid repetition of lexical nouns. For more information on the nominal substitute *one*, see Halliday & Hasan (1976:91–105).

12. Halliday and Hasan (1976:66ff) also point out that *this*, *that*, and *it* can be used for extended reference to refer to an entire clause or extended passage of text, not just to noun phrases.

13. Other semantically nonreflexive uses of reflexives are for emphasis (1) and used adverbially to mean “alone,” “without assistance” (2):

1. John himself will tell you the news.
2. The child wanted to solve the puzzle by himself.

14. The one nonhuman, animate example referred to “horses” in a context that one could argue involved personification.

15. This so-called genre-based use of *one another* probably is something more general than Biblical style; the one oral token of *one another* that Amundson (1994) found came from a transcript of a marital counseling session and occurred in a question asked by the marriage counselor of the couple undergoing the counseling:

How do you support and love one another?

This suggests the larger genre—or speech activity—is one of prescribing or facilitating moral behavior and love between human beings that are associated through marriage, religion, or in some other way.

16. This passage was taken from a Sunday service Bible reading insert prepared by the U.S. Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod.

17. We say “possessives,” and indeed, Han (1996) found that possession was the most frequent meaning of this inflection in her oral corpus (i.e., about 46 percent). However, she also found that agency was expressed for about 26 percent of the tokens and description in about another 11 percent. The remaining 17 percent of tokens represented measurements, appositives, and several other minor relationships.

18. The remaining 4 percent of tokens occurred in fragments where the precise grammatical function (subject, object, etc.) was hard to identify.

19. Notice the reverse can also be true: that is, the ’s possessive can be used with inanimate nouns, where it normally would not occur, in order to avoid an awkward sequence of two *of* phrases:

Many of the book’s pages were torn.

was preferred over

Many of the pages of the book were torn.

Here the motivation for the preference appears to be stylistic or prosodic (i.e., rules and constraints related to stress and rhythm of spoken language) rather than semantic.

20. Examples and page numbers are from Staczek’s manuscript.

21. Staczek notes the opposite pattern also may occur: the definite articles can be used where the possessive determiner is expected: *I forgot to buy the wife a gift* (p. 14); however, he gave no explanation or analysis for this use.

# PARTITIVES, COLLECTIVES, AND QUANTIFIERS

## INTRODUCTION

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Being able to communicate the quantity or amount of something is an important human need that we satisfy through language. If we need to be precise, we can refer to quantities by using numbers of various types:

Cardinal number: We have class for *two* hours a day.

Fraction: I have to leave in (*a*) *half* an hour.

Percentage: *Fifty percent* of the class was out with the flu.<sup>1</sup>

Multiplier: They have offered to *double* my salary if I join their firm.

But due to the importance of this concept, we employ many other linguistic devices for quantification besides numbers. To illustrate this, here is a partial inventory of the different linguistic means English speakers use to express *approximations* of quantity (based on Kennedy 1987).

- First of all, we have terms in each of the four major parts of speech:
  - Nouns: *average, estimate, neighborhood, vicinity*
  - Verbs: *say, guess, verge on*
  - Adjectives: (*50*)-*odd, inexact, approximate*
  - Adverbs: *approximately, roughly, nearly*
- Then, too, minor parts of speech can be used to give an approximation of quantity:
  - Prepositions: *about, around, near*
  - Determiners: *some (50) . . .*
- Plural numbers: *dozens of, hundreds of*
- Affixes:
  - Suffix: (*50*)-*ish*
  - Prefix: *quasi-universal*
- Phrases:
  - Conjoined prepositional phrases: *from (50) to (60), between (50) and (60)*

Lexicalized phrases: *more or less, or so, or more, or thereabouts, something like, within a hair's breadth of, within spitting distance of, at (the) most, on the order of*

- Clauses: *If you said (50), you wouldn't be far wrong.*

Finally, three linguistic devices exist purely to deal with issues of quantification—how we can talk about quantity, amount, or proportion and how we can impose limits on wholes. Here is an example of each type of device as it used for approximation:

Partitives: *the best part of*

Collectives: *group*

Quantifiers: *almost all*

These last three syntactic constructions are the focus of this chapter.

## PARTITIVES

We have already seen how English distinguishes between nouns that can be made plural (count nouns) and those that can't (noncount nouns). This does not mean, however, that there is no way of quantifying noncount nouns.

Both count and noncount nouns can be modified by partitive constructions—that is, constructions denoting a part of a whole. A partitive is a phrase, typically consisting of a count noun followed by *of* that precedes another noun.

(det) noun of  
a grain of

The same pattern can be used to quantify noncount nouns:

(det) \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ e.g., a drop of water  
[partitive noun] [noncount noun] two drops of water

and to delimit the quantity of count nouns as well:

(det) \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_ e.g., a deck of cards  
[partitive noun] [count noun] two decks of cards

Partitives can modify both nonspecific nouns:

I need *a deck of cards* to show you my new magic trick. (any deck—nonspecific)

and specific nouns:

Will *a deck of these cards* do?

When the partitive noun is part of the subject, the verb agrees with it. If the partitive noun is singular, the verb is singular. If the partitive noun is plural, the verb is also plural:<sup>2</sup>

A mountain of dirty laundry was piled up after our vacation.

Mountains of dirty laundry were piled up after our vacation.

In order to capture the array of common types of partitives, we group them by categories (although some may overlap).

- Precise measure phrases (Many ESL/EFL students are more familiar with metric measure phrases):

a gallon of gas      a yard of fabric  
two cups of sugar    two spoonfuls of cough syrup

- Container-based:<sup>3</sup>

a bottle of catsup      a jar of jam  
two cartons of books    two cans of oil

- Portion-based:

a slice of bread              a dollop of whipped cream  
two helpings of potatoes    two servings of ice cream

- Individual members of a category (of course more than one can be referred to when a number is used):

a word of advice      an item of information  
two pieces of luggage    two articles of clothing

- Parts or fractions:

a segment of society      a part of life  
two portions of the budget    two sections of the newspaper

- Shape of:

a ball of yarn              a column of smoke  
two streams of water    two sticks of butter

- Pair of:

Some plural count nouns without a singular form are viewed strictly as pairs—things having two equal parts—and the partitive count noun *pair*<sup>4</sup> is used with these nouns; for example:

a pair of  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{trousers} \\ \text{scissors} \\ \text{tongs} \end{array} \right\}$       \*a  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{trouser} \\ \text{scissor} \\ \text{tong} \end{array} \right\}$

- Idiomatic partitives:

*Vegetables*

a head of  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{lettuce} \\ \text{cabbage} \end{array} \right\}$   
an ear of corn  
a stalk of celery

*Other food items*

a bunch of grapes  
a loaf of bread  
a clove of garlic  
a sprig of parsley

*Animals*

a herd of cattle  
a flock of birds  
a school of fish  
a pride of lions

*People*

a gang of thieves  
a troupe of actors  
a team of ball players  
a crew of helpers

- *The whole of, the rest of, the remainder of:*

These three partitives, with a definite determiner, are used to express an entire thing (the whole of) or some specific part thereof.

I'd like  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the whole of} \\ \text{the rest of} \\ \text{the remainder of} \end{array} \right\}$  that piece of meat.

(Quirk et al. 1985)<sup>5</sup>





The whole of Quebec is francophone.

In { the rest of  
the remainder of } the country, English is spoken.

- *A majority of, the majority of, a minority of:*

These partitives are used to show proportion of some explicit set. *A majority of* and *the majority of* are used with quantities greater than half. *A minority of* is used to signal less (or fewer) than half.

A majority of the people feel that educational reform is a priority.

- A few “partitives” can even be used to express a quality or subtype, rather than quantity, of a particular thing:

a sort of appliance    new kinds of media

a type of bird

## EXCEPTION WITH NUMBERS

Certain numbers can be used as nouns in partitive constructions as well, with one important structural difference. When the number is specific, and the second noun is not, no *of* is used. This is a small point, but it does cause ESL/EFL students understandable difficulty.

hundreds of people (nonspecific plural number; as you already have seen, nonspecific plural numbers can be used to approximate)<sup>6</sup>

\*a hundred of people (specific numbers preceding nonspecific nouns cannot be followed by *of*)

a hundred people

Compounding the problem is the fact that *of* must be used when both the partitive number noun and the noun being modified are specific:

a hundred of the old people    three hundred of them

Note that *hundred* remains singular with a specific number even when the number preceding it is more than one.

\*three hundreds of them

We return to consider the use of the word *of* later in this chapter.

## COLLECTIVES

### COLLECTIVE NOUNS

One special group of nouns rightfully belong with any discussion of partitives. These are the collectives. The count nouns that can be used in partitive constructions to refer to groups of people and animals (see above) are one type of collective noun.

a team of ball players    a flock of birds

Collective nouns are the exception to the normal rule of subject-verb agreement, to which we referred earlier, in that, as subjects, they may take either singular or plural subject-verb agreement.

The team has been outstanding this year.  
 The team have been outstanding this year.

Although American English speakers favor the singular form, in British English plural subject-verb agreement occurs much more frequently. In both dialects, however, speakers can choose to interpret the noun as a whole unit or as the individual members or components that compose the unit:

A flock of birds was circling the field. { It was looking for prey.  
 They were looking for prey.

The duality of number is, of course, also observable in other anaphoric forms, such as reflexive pronouns, possessive determiners, and relative pronouns;

The committee blamed { itself.  
 themselves.

The committee blamed { its } chairperson.  
 their }

My audience, { which was } very supportive, ...  
 who were }

Although modern English prefers more general collectives for animals (e.g., *herd*, *flock*, *swarm*), older forms of English had many more of these idiomatic collectives for animals, *a brace of partridges*, *a gaggle of geese*, *a pod of whales*, *a leap of leopards*, and so on.

According to Celce (1970), there are actually three main types of collective nouns. The first comprises common collectives, some of which can enter into partitive constructions, as you have just seen. They might be referred to as “particularizing” nouns because they talk about a particular collection of people or animals. The other types are the unique collectives, which represent the sole member of a particular set, and the generic collectives, which refer to all members of a class.

<i>1. Common Collectives</i>	<i>2. Unique Collectives</i>	<i>3. Generic Collectives</i>
(a/the) class	the Vatican	the clergy
(a/the) team	the Kremlin	the bourgeoisie
(a/the) herd	(the) Congress	the intelligensia
(a/the) government	(the) Parliament	the aristocracy

Thus, each of these collective nouns can be seen to be a single entity or a collection of individuals. One’s perspective, in North American English, at least, is most frequently signalled by the use of singular or plural anaphoric reference.

### Collective Nouns Derived from Adjectives

In addition to these three types of collective nouns, a number of adjectivally derived nouns in English may be considered as generic collectives. Nouns like *the meek*, *the dead*, *the rich*, when they have human reference, resemble generic collective nouns in a number of ways: they are always preceded by *the*, they are not overtly singular or plural, and they may refer to a whole group in general terms rather than to a particular or unique group.

An important difference between these collective nouns derived from adjectives and the other categories of collective nouns is that the adjective-based collectives always take plural verbs.<sup>7</sup>

The elderly are increasingly asserting their rights.  
 \*The elderly is increasingly asserting its rights.

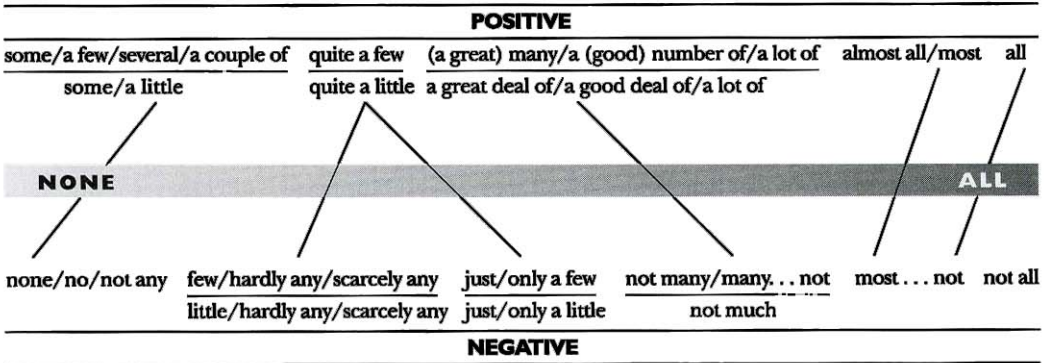
## QUANTIFIERS

As we have already noted, a third syntactic construction is used when we want to talk about amount or quantity. Quantifiers indicate a nonspecific amount or quantity of the noun that follows.<sup>8</sup> Quantifiers can be determiners or when the referent is clear, pronouns.

A: I want some ice cream.

B: I want some too.

It is helpful to arrange quantifiers showing increasing amounts along two continua—one positive and one negative.<sup>9</sup> The diagonal lines connect items or sets of items that logically contradict each other. Quantifiers that modify count nouns are above the horizontal lines; those used with noncount nouns are below the lines. Where there are no lines, the quantifier can be used with count and noncount nouns alike. We explore each of these distinctions in more detail below the continua.



### DIFFERING AMOUNTS

Going from left to right on the continua are increasing amounts of the noun being modified. To illustrate this, here is one progression from along the positive continuum.

- Some packages have been brought in from the car.
- Quite a few packages have been brought in.
- A lot of packages have been brought in.
- Almost all packages have been brought in.
- All packages have been brought in.

We said earlier that quantifiers can be determiners or pronouns. This is easily seen in all these example sentences save the middle one. *A lot of* cannot be a pronoun, but *a lot* can.

- Some have been brought in from the car.
- Quite a few have been brought in.
- A lot have been brought in.
- Almost all have been brought in
- All have been brought in.

### POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE CONTINUA

The reason for the two continua is that the negative quantifiers not only convey quantity but also convey a negative assessment of the quantity. The speaker or writer's negative stance is overtly marked by the negative particle *not* in many of the negative quantifiers:

All people were created equal.  
Not all people were created equal.

With other quantifiers on the negative continuum, there is no negative particle; nonetheless, they have a negative connotation. These examples make the connotations explicit:

He took *a few* (= some, several) biscuits, with the result that *few* (= hardly any) were left for the rest of us.  
He then took *a little* (= some) butter, with the result that *little* (= hardly any) was left for the rest of us.

As our continua show, the quantifiers in these pairs (*a few* vs. *few*; *a little* vs. *little*) do not directly contradict each other but rather convey different meanings. Notice that the way to capture the negative connotation in the second quantifier in each of the pairs above would be to paraphrase *few* and *little* as *hardly any* or *scarcely any*.

Another difference between *a few* or *a little* and *few* or *little* is that the former can occur in the first utterance in a discourse; for example:

Do you have { a few minutes }  
                  { a little time }?

There are a few apples in the kitchen if you'd like one.  
There's a little cake in the kitchen if you'd like some.

*Few* and *little*, however, generally require more context, because a negative or contradictory tone must be established:

Harold was lonely and desperate; he had few friends and little money.

Many ESL/EFL students omit the indefinite article when they use *a few* or *a little*. While the result is not necessarily an ungrammatical sentence, the listener or reader is likely to be confused by the use of an implicitly negative quantifier when a positive one seems to be required by the discourse:

?! I have few good friends back home. They write to me often.

Details such as these are subtle; however, they are understood and used by all native speakers of English and will, therefore, have to be taught and practiced in the ESL/EFL classroom.

### MINIMAL CONTRADICTIONS WITH QUANTIFIERS

As we have stated, the diagonal lines indicate the quantifiers that express a minimal contradiction with respect to each other. Here are some examples:

A: There were *some* musicians at the party.  
B: That's not true. There were *no* musicians.

A: He has *quite a few* days of vacation.  
B: Not really. He has *only a few* more than most people do.

A: Jason must have *a lot* of friends.  
B: No, actually, he doesn't have that *many*.

A: *Almost all* of our tomatoes have ripened.  
B: Really! I'd say *most* of ours haven't.

A: *All* the dancers wore red shirts.  
B: No, *not all*. Some wore yellow shirts.

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In other words, these phrasal quantifiers are determiners, as we have already observed, not the partitive noun + *of* construction.

### USING OF BEFORE SPECIFIC NOUNS

Notice that just as you saw earlier with numerals, the quantifiers can be made to modify specific noun phrases, too, by adding *of* and the definite article before a specific noun phrase:

<i>a few sophomores</i>	<i>*a few of sophomores</i>
<i>a few of the sophomores</i>	<i>*a few the sophomores</i>

This change of form changes the meaning:

<i>some first-year students</i>	(a small number of nonspecific students)
<i>some of the first-year students</i>	(a segment of a specific group of students)

Prescriptive grammarians have insisted that it is unnecessary to use the *of* after the quantifiers *all* and *both* (we deal with the latter below) except when they precede a pronoun, in which case *of* is required. It is true that neither *all* nor *both* need *of* to signal a specific noun following them, because the semantics of *all* and *both* demand that the noun be specific.

*All (the) juniors will register tomorrow.*  
*All of them*  
*Both (the) seniors were inducted into the Honor Society.*  
*Both of them*

However, the use of *of* with *all* and *both* is quite common, especially in North American English, as you saw in Chapter 4, presumably by analogy with the other quantifiers.

*All of the juniors will register tomorrow.*  
*Both of the seniors were inducted into the Honor Society.*

### COMPARATIVE QUANTIFIERS

We have much to say about comparatives later in this book, but it is appropriate at this juncture to point out that even though they are determiners or pronouns and not adjectives, several quantifiers have comparative and superlative forms like adjectives.

	<i>Comparative</i>	<i>Superlative</i>
much	more	most
many	more	most
few	fewer	fewest
little	less	least

Whereas many of the quantifiers on the continua above are absolute, the comparative and superlative forms are relative.<sup>12</sup>

Many people are telecommuting these days.  
 Still, more people prefer to work in an office in the company of others.  
 And most people don't have a choice.

I have few homework assignments these days.  
 I have fewer homework assignments than I did at the beginning of the term.  
 I have the fewest homework assignments of anyone I know.<sup>13</sup>



Note that although prescriptively speaking, *less* is reserved for noncount nouns, *less* is increasingly used for both count nouns and noncount nouns, especially in informal discourse.

This beer has fewer calories.

?This beer has less calories.

We have more to say about the use of these quantifiers in Chapters 34 and 35.

### QUANTIFIERS WITH SPECIAL SEMANTIC CHARACTERISTICS

Other quantifiers are excluded from our continua because of their special semantic nature: *any*, *both*, *each*, *every*, *either*, *neither*, and *enough*.

- *Any*, as you saw in earlier chapters, is used in negatives and questions as a counterpart to the unstressed article *some*. *Any* can also be used in affirmative statements as a quantifier, and when it is, it refers to “one or more, no matter which.”

(Jespersen 1933:181)

Any of those answers will do.

Any household detergent works.

Bolinger (1960) notes that such sentences are related to conditionals; that is, *if something is a household detergent, it will work*. The conditional sense of *any* extends to sentences such as:

Any of the pasta left at the end of the meal will be put in a casserole.

A paraphrase of this example would be *pasta, if there is any*.

- *Both* is a predeterminer having a dual number. As such, it can be followed only by plural nouns signaling quantities of two.

Two boys and a girl were accused of setting off a false alarm. Both (of the) boys felt ashamed of what they had done.

- *Each* refers to all members of a group, but does so individually, rather than collectively. It therefore modifies a singular noun and takes a singular verb.

Each one of the special effects was created by a different computer programmer.

- *Every* is much like *each* in its meaning but is more collective. It too takes a singular verb. Unlike *each*, however, *every* must be followed by a noun or *one*; i.e., it can never function as a pronoun.

Every one of the special effects was created by a different programmer.

Each of the special effects was created by a different programmer.

\*Every of the special effects was created by a different programmer.

- *Either* and *neither* are like *both* in that two members of a set are being considered. In fact, sometimes *either* can substitute for *both*. However, both *either* and *neither* take singular verbs (see Chapter 4).

Either date is preferable to September 7. (i.e., both dates are preferable)

*Either* can also offer a choice between two alternatives:

When you are through, you can ask either of us to help you clean up.





## ISSUES OF USE WITH QUANTIFIERS

### MUCH AND MANY WITH QUESTIONS AND NEGATIVES

Grammar books will often say that *much* has a restricted use—that it is used in questions and negatives, but *a lot of* is preferred in affirmative statements.

Does Jake have many friends?	Does Jake have much fun?
Jake doesn't have many friends.	Jake doesn't have much fun.
Jake has many friends.	*Jake has much fun.
Jake has a lot of friends.	Jake has a lot of fun.

While this is a good rule of thumb for beginning and low-intermediate-level ESL/EFL students, it is not the whole story. Neumann (1975) found that in formal written contexts, *much* can be used in affirmative statements.

(in a job application) I have much experience in the skills you have listed as required for the position.

Even here, though, Neumann found that native speakers preferred *a great deal of* in such a context. She also reports that native speakers prefer *many* over *a lot of* in formal contexts, even in affirmative statements.

Today, more people are raising children alone, and many individuals are discovering that the act of being the sole parent can be very difficult.

Notice, too, that unmodified *much* and *many* cannot readily be used in short answers to questions:

How much money does it cost? { \*Much.  
Not much.  
A little. }

How many books do you have? { ?Many.  
Not many.  
(Quite) A few. }

### REGISTER WITH PARTITIVES

We have already alluded to the matter of register in discussing the use of *many* and *much* in affirmative sentences. Register has an impact on the use of partitives as well. The partitives we have listed so far would presumably be appropriate for most registers. However, there are clearly other partitives that have a distinctively informal flavor. Here, for example, are some informal partitives equivalent in meaning to *a lot of*:

When I win the lottery, I'll have a lot of money. (appropriate in all but the most formal contexts)

When I win the lottery, I'll have { lots of  
plenty of  
heaps of  
oodles of  
truckloads of  
etc. } money. (informal contexts)

### DISCOURSE CONSIDERATIONS IN THE USE OF QUANTIFIERS

In a contextual analysis of *some*, (*a*) *few*, and (*a*) *little*, Hsu (1995) found that these quantifiers were distributed differently, depending on genre. For example, Hsu investigated *some*:

- In its prototypical use as a quantifier:  
(from a novel) They had let *some* reporters use their phone, but they would no longer.
- In its partitive use:  
(from a mathematics text) In concluding this section, we should like to give an example which illustrates *some* of the ideas of the primary decomposition theorem.
- As a pronoun for its quantifier use:  
(from a government document) Some weapon systems have become obsolescent while still in production, and *some* while still under development.
- As a pronoun for its partitive use:  
(from a novel) The yards, front and back, were narrow; *some* were trash dumps, *some* had flower gardens.
- As an indefinite determiner (not a quantifier):  
(from a social science text) . . . to their own future family life stages, various crises which could be expected to confront them at *some* time or other.
- As an approximator (not a quantifier):  
(from a social science text) *Some* 30,000 completed schedules with 20 items . . . have been tabulated.

What Hsu found is that mathematics texts used *some* considerably more often as an indefinite determiner than as a quantifier. The opposite was true for social science texts. *Some* as a quantifier was also more prevalent than *some* as an indefinite determiner in government documents and letters to the editor. The least degree of difference was found in novels, where quantifier and nonquantifier uses were more closely balanced.

Hsu conducted a similar type of analysis with (*a*) *few* and (*a*) *little*. Perhaps, not surprisingly, given its greater scope as a quantifier, total tokens and tokens of quantifier *some* far surpassed tokens of (*a*) *few* and (*a*) *little*. Further, while overall (*a*) *little* occurs more often than (*a*) *few*, (*a*) *few* is more often used as a quantifier, since *little* is used more frequently as an adjective.

### CONCLUSION

Our treatment of the linguistic devices English speakers use in quantification has been limited. Still, it is apparent that there is a lot to learn. We hope that it has also been clear that these devices are quite common. Indeed, we found that we have used a lot of (!) quantifiers, collectives, and partitives to talk about quantifiers, collectives, and partitives! We should also point out that while the core quantifiers constitute a closed class, partitives are an open class. Indeed the pattern for partitives is very productive, which means it can be extended to create new expressions all the time.

ESL/EFL students should have no trouble grasping the semantic concepts of these linguistic devices in general. They will, however, struggle with some of the details of form, the difference in positive and negative connotations as depicted on our two continua, and perhaps with the development of a large enough repertoire of these expressions to provide both variety and appropriateness in the ways in which they express quantification in English.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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- 1. Form/Meaning.** To have students practice partitives, play the “(super)market” game. A student starts the game by saying “I went to the supermarket and I bought . . .” completing the sentence with a partitive and a noun beginning with the letter A; for example, “a bag of apples.” The second student must repeat the sentence and add to it with a partitive and a noun beginning with the letter B; for example, “I went to the supermarket and I bought a bag of apples and a bunch of bananas.” The third student might add: “I went to the supermarket and I bought a bag of apples, a bunch of bananas, and a box of cookies.” The game continues until all students have had a chance, or all 26 letters have been used, or when the teacher and students are stumped in finding examples!
- 2. Form/Meaning.** Have your students bring in their favorite recipes and share them with one another. This will give them good practice in using measure quantifiers. Collect the recipes and “publish” a class cookbook. If possible, prepare some of the recipes together.
- 3. Form/Meaning.** Plan a party with your class. Have students figure out what they would like to serve and how much they will need of each item. Draw up a shopping list. If practical, go on a shopping trip together, using the opportunity to introduce some of the idiomatic partitives for fruits and vegetables you find.
- 4. Form/Meaning.** Nancy Marwin (personal communication) suggests the following scenario for practicing collective nouns in a context. First, divide the class into small groups and then distribute a handout with the essential material for a story-writing exercise.

The setting is a courtroom where a gang of thieves, all members of the same family (the Braysons), are on trial. Outside, a crowd of people have gathered: a group of reporters, a crew of photographers, and dozens of bystanders. Inside are the other participants: a team of lawyers, the judge, and the jury.

The groups of students are then instructed to write a story using this material, including the collective nouns, and to focus on both units and individuals where appropriate. They are told to be careful to use correct number agreement based on the meaning when they refer to collective nouns.

- 5. Meaning.** Here are two books that students might enjoy perusing. Intended for children, they have great lists of collective nouns:
  - *Beasts by the Bunches*, by A. Mifflin Lowe (Garden City, New York: Doubleday), in which the author has written a poem for each collective noun.
  - *A Cache of Jewels and Other Collective Nouns*, by Ruth Heller, 1987 (New York: Scholastic, Inc.), which has great illustrations and which also shows the variety of collective nouns that can be used for the same animal group.<sup>14</sup>

**6. Form/Meaning.** For fun, have your students create their own collective nouns. Readers of *National Wildlife* magazine were asked to write in and suggest names for groups of animals. Here are some they came up with:

- a union of carpenter ants
- a pinch of crabs
- a battery of electric eels
- a syndicate of killer whales

See also Thewlis (1997) for a similar idea as applied to groups of humans, such as, *a scoop of journalists, a rash of dermatologists*.

**7. Meaning.** To work on the semantic differences among the quantifiers, ask the students to paraphrase the quantifier in one sentence with that of another. For example:

- T: 1a. There was little money left after the shopping spree.  
 SS: 1b. There wasn't much money left after the shopping spree.
- T: 2a. A majority of the items we bought were purchased in the first hour.  
 SS: 2b. More than half of the items we bought were purchased in the first hour.
- T: 3a. However, a few items were purchased later.  
 SS: 3b. However, some items were purchased later.

**8. Use.** Ask students to conduct a survey of their classmates' preferences. In small groups, students should decide which preferences they would like to survey, such as type of music, type of book, food, movie, and so on. Staying in their small groups, students should design a questionnaire to collect the information they wish to learn. After the questionnaires have been distributed and completed, the group should compile the information and report their findings to the rest of the class. They should use quantifiers first and then use percentages to be more precise. For example:

Our survey shows that some students in our class prefer rock music, some prefer classical music, and a few prefer jazz. Forty percent chose rock music, . . .

## EXERCISES

**Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide an original sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your example.
 

a. partitive noun	e. quantifier
b. idiomatic partitive noun	f. quantifier with negative connotation
c. collective noun	g. quantifier for count nouns
d. collective noun derived from adjective	h. phrasal quantifier
2. Account for the ungrammaticality or semantic problems in each of the following sentences:
  - a. \*Chalk are on blackboard tray.
  - b. \*A lot people were at the garage sale.
  - c. \*Although he had few close friends, he was very lonely.
  - d. \*He has a deal of energy today.
  - e. \*Almost people like Chinese food.



3. Explain the difference between (1) and (2) in each of the following pairs of sentences.
- (1) Many of the workers at the plant lost their jobs due to downsizing.  
(2) Many workers lost their jobs due to downsizing.
  - (1) The class didn't quiet down; it was in a boisterous mood.  
(2) The class didn't quiet down; they were in a boisterous mood.
  - (1) Thanks a lot.  
(2) Thanks lots.
  - (1) I got a speck of dust in my eye.  
(2) I got a piece of dust in my eye.

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

4. The following sentences contain errors that ESL/EFL students sometimes make. Account for the ungrammaticality or awkwardness of each sentence, and explain how you would make your students aware of such errors.
- \*I still have much problem in learning English.
  - \*Larry bought a dozen of eggs.
  - \*Peg needs to get some informations for her term paper.
  - ?We have much homework tonight.
  - \*Some my friends are going camping this weekend.
  - \*Katie likes the song "Five Hundreds Miles."
  - \*I need a couple a minutes.
  - \*Some of books on the table may be yours.
5. How are the following partitive nouns the same? How are they structurally different?
- a head of cattle  
a head of lettuce
6. Explain the plural use of the number-based noun in the following newspaper headline:
- Greece: A Centuries-Old Framework for Contemporary Living
7. A student asks you to explain why in one instance *several* is followed by *of* and in another instance it isn't. How would you explain? Note that you can use suprasentential information to help you.
- The Chinese have given a pair of pandas to the Bronx Zoo. They have had several offspring. Several of the offspring have been sent to other zoos around the country.
8. There are two ways of making a noun specific when it is preceded by a partitive. One is to use a definite determiner with the partitive noun. Alternatively, a definite article can be used with the following noun.

Will { *this deck of cards* } do?  
      { *a deck of these cards* }

What is the difference between them? It will help to answer this question if you generate some of your own examples.

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- Thewlis, S. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 4 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

### Suggestions for further reading

*For linguistic analyses of quantification, see:*

- Hintikka, J. (1974). "Quantifiers and Quantification Theory." *Linguistic Inquiry* 5: 151–157.
- Hogg, R. (1977). *English Quantifier Systems*. Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company.

*For a usage study on quantifiers, see:*

- Behre, F. (1967). *Studies in Agatha Christie's Writings: The Behavior of A Good (Great) Deal, A Lot, Lots, Much, Plenty, Many, A Good (Great) Many*. Gothenberg Studies in English. Göteborg: Elanders Boktryckeri Aktiebolag.

*For pedagogical suggestions in teaching partitives and quantifiers, consult:*

- Badalamenti, V., and C. Henner Stanchina (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 1 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.
- Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English: Your Second Language* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Riggenbach, H., and V. Samuda (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 2 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

*For pedagogical ideas for teaching quantifiers and collective nouns, see:*

- Byrd, P., and B. Benson (1989). *Improving the Grammar of Written English: The Handbook*. Belmont, Calif: Wadsworth.
- Thewlis, S. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 3 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

### ENDNOTES

1. You may wish to review the rules presented in Chapter 4 for subject-verb agreement for fractions and percentages.
2. Some partitive nouns are always singular.

A bit of humor always improves the classroom ambience.

\*Twenty bits of humor always improve the classroom ambience.

Here *a bit of* means a small amount. *A bit of* can also mean *a piece of*, in which case, the partitive noun is plural.

Bits of paper were strewn about the street as if there had been a tickertape parade the day before.

3. You can add *-ful* to partitives of containers:

a boxful of chocolates    a bagful of chips

You can also add *-ful* to some other partitives:

a mouthful of food    a houseful of company

Notice that some measure words require it:

a spoonful of medicine

\*a spoon of medicine

4. The count noun *pair* also occurs with other nouns that are usually in pairs, but these nouns may also occur in the singular:

a pair of shoes    an old shoe

a pair of earrings    a jade earring

5. The difference between *the whole of* and the quantifier *all* is very complicated. See Quirk et al. (1985) for the details.

6. Notice that with large nonspecific numbers, such as

Tens of thousands of fans sought tickets to the rock concert.

the partitive is preceded by another number + *of*.

7. Other nouns that have no plural marking but are used as plurals are *police, people, cattle, vermin*. These are not normally considered collective nouns, however.

8. Except for *all* and *none*, which are at the extreme ends of the scale.

9. The quantifiers on the continua are among the most frequently used. Not all quantifiers are represented. We discuss others with special semantic character later in this chapter.

10. Normally, partitives don't follow other partitives, although it is possible for a quantity partitive to be included within the scope of a quality partitive:

Two types of bars of soap

\*Two bars of types of soap

11. As you saw earlier, this is not the case with the true partitives, whose nouns determine number agreement with the verb when the partitive is in subject position.

A pile of dishes was in the sink.

Two piles of dishes were in the sink.

12. Another quantifier that is relative is *all*. *All* is relative in the sense that it specifies a quantity in relation to a reference quantity. Langacker (1991) shows that in response to a question asking *how many* an absolute quantifier would be acceptable, but a relative one would not:

How many California condors still exist?

Several

A few (absolute quantifiers)

Nineteen

\*All

\*Most (relative quantifiers)

\*Each

13. Since *fewest* is a superlative form, it requires the definite article. See Chapter 35.

14. This is true of other quantifying expression as well. For instance, French (1992) shows that some English speakers prefer the partitive *a clove of garlic*, others *a bulb of* and still others make a distinction between the two, with *bulb* used for several *cloves* clumped together.

# THE PASSIVE VOICE

## INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we look at a linguistic device that is different from the others we have explored thus far. It is the grammatical feature of *voice*, which pertains to who or what serves as the subject in a clause. You are well acquainted with the active voice because it is the one we have been investigating to this point. In the active voice, the subject of a clause is most often the agent, or doer, of some action.

Darwin studied the fauna of the Galapagos Islands.

At other times, speakers/writers of English will have reason to put the receiver or undergoer of the action into subject position. One way to do so is to use the passive voice.

The fauna of the Galapagos Islands was studied by Darwin.

As Langacker (1987) has pointed out, the difference between active and passive is a focal adjustment analogous to the difference between:

The cat is under the blanket.  
The blanket is over the cat.

In other words, using the passive allows speakers to make a kind of figure/ground reversal.

Most languages in the world employ different voices to put different constituents in initial position. For example, in the Bantu languages, the passive is used if the agent is inanimate and the patient or receiver is animate. Thus, many Bantu languages would avoid the equivalent of the active voice in a statement such as:

The election bothered Nancy.

and would strongly prefer the passive voice, thus:

Nancy was bothered by the election.

Another example comes from Japanese. Japanese is said to have an adversative passive, in which the subject is adversely affected by the action portrayed in the verb (Wierzbicka 1988). For example:

John     ga       ame   ni   fur-are-ta.  
John (topic marker) rain   by   fall (passive) (past)

The literal translation of this sentence, *John was fallen by rain*, is interpreted to mean that John was adversely affected by rain. Although “neutral” passives are possible in Japanese, adversative passives are common enough that Japanese students may puzzle over when to use the passive voice in English.



**THE PASSIVE WITH TENSE AND ASPECT**

What we have illustrated so far is the simple passive. It is also possible for the passive voice to interact with other elements in the auxiliary.<sup>2</sup> For illustrative purposes, here are a few of the combinations that exist:

- With modals:

Diamonds can be mined in South Africa.

- With simple present:

Diamonds are mined in South Africa.

- With present perfect:

Diamonds have been mined in South Africa.

- With present progressive:

Diamonds are being mined in South Africa.

- With simple past:

Diamonds were mined in South Africa.

- With past progressive:

Diamonds were being mined in South Africa.

- With *be going to* for future:

Diamonds are going to be mined in Botswana.

The perfect progressive forms of the *be*-passive are possible for some speakers of North American English, but rare, since the two *be* verbs in a row make this combination difficult to process:

Diamonds have been being mined in South Africa for years.

Notice that in all of the above, the passive was the last verb to appear in the string, thereby earning its position in our phrase structure rule as the final optional auxiliary element.

**OTHER PASSIVE VERBS**

It is important to recognize that although *be* is the prototypical auxiliary verb of the passive, it is possible to have other verbs fulfill this function.

**Get**

The *get*-passive is quite common in informal, conversational English. Here's an example in the simple past.

Barry got invited to the party.

In order to account for such examples, our phrase structure rule will have to include *get* as an alternative to *be*. One important structural difference to note between the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive is that *get* does not function as a true auxiliary in questions and negatives the way that *be* does. As a result of this, *do* must serve as an operator for *get* in questions and negatives:

*be*-passive

A: Was Bruno arrested?

B: No. He wasn't even caught.

*get*-passive

A: Did Bruno get arrested?

B: No. He didn't even get caught.



Another difference that exists between the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive is that the latter can occur more readily with the perfect progressives:

His plans have been getting sidetracked for years.  
 ?His plans have been being sidetracked for years.

The *get*-passive should not be confused with the main verb *get* followed by an adjective when it is used to mark a change of state.

Unfortunately, Lou got sick just before the big game.

Sometimes the adjective is in the form of a past participle, which makes it more difficult to distinguish main verb *get* from passive auxiliary verb *get*.

Unfortunately, Lou got indisposed just before the big game. (*get* is main verb followed by a past participle, which is an adjective)

We return to this point later in this chapter.

### Have

It is also possible for *have* to function as a passive auxiliary. When it does, we refer to it as the experiential *have* to distinguish it from the causative *have*, which we examine in Chapter 32.

Mary had her purse snatched

- passive (experiential—The purse-snatching happened to her. It was beyond her control.)
- causative (Mary arranged for someone to snatch her purse—perhaps to file a fraudulent insurance claim.)

Note that the *have*-passive is a bit more complicated than the *be*-passive and the *get*-passive in that the pattern for the *have*-passive includes an intervening noun phrase: *have* . . . NP . . . -*en*.

### Be (in complex passives)

The *be*-passive can also interact with complements such as *that*-clauses and infinitives, producing complex passives.

It is rumored that he will get the job.  
 That he will get the job has been decided.  
 John is thought to be intelligent.

We consider these fully in Chapters 31 and 32 .

### PASSIVE ONLY

The passive is more limited than the active voice in that only transitive verbs may be in the passive. In fact, some passive sentences in English have no active voice counterpart, such as

Mehdi was born in Tehran.  
 ?His mother bore Medhi in Tehran.

There is of course the active verb “*to bear*,” as in “*The lioness bore three cubs*.” However, for all intents and purposes, there is no active voice counterpart to *to be born* to talk about facts concerning human birth. Other verbs that occur commonly in the passive are *be deemed*, *be fined*, *be hospitalized*, *be jailed*, *be scheduled*, *be shipped*, *be staffed*, *be suspended*.

Similarly, some verbs readily enter into complex passives that have no variant in the active voice:

It is rumored that he is on his way out.

\*Someone rumors that he is on his way out.

For these reasons, and for reasons we give in the meaning and use sections, we feel justified in positing a base structure for passive sentences that is different from active sentences.

## THE MEANING OF THE PASSIVE

The passive can be said to have a grammatical meaning rather than a lexical one. It is a focus construction that exists to put the patient, i.e., the receiver or undergoer of an action, in subject position. The subject is acted upon and is thus “passive.” Indeed, Shibitani (1985) has shown that the passive “defocuses” the agent. No matter when it is used or what its form, then, it will always have this core meaning. However, there are issues related to this core meaning about which ESL/EFL students need to know. In the remainder of this chapter, we address these.

### SEMANTIC CONSTRAINTS ON USING THE PASSIVE

As stated earlier, the passive requires a transitive verb. This is not to say, however, that every passive sentence with a transitive verb is acceptable. Langacker (1987), for example, shows that the acceptability of passive sentences is influenced by several factors:

1. The more definite the subject is, the more acceptable the sentence in passive form is:

This poem was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

?Poems were written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

2. With stative verbs, the more indefinite the object in the *by* phrase is, the more likely it is to be acceptable in its passive form.

Arthur Ashe was liked by everybody.

?Arthur Ashe was liked by me.

The movie has been seen by everyone in town.

?The movie has been seen by Jim.

3. The more the verb denotes a physical action, as opposed to a state, the more acceptable its use in a passive sentence is:

The ball was kicked over the goalposts.

?The ball was wanted by the other team.<sup>3</sup>

Notice, though, that if factors 1 and 2 are honored, then a stative verb like *want* can more easily be used in the passive voice.

This old jalopy of mine must be wanted by somebody!

Presumably the first two observations can be accounted for by recognizing that the information status of constituents appearing in initial position and in predicate position in English sentences is different. As you have already seen several times in this book, the

subject NP is typically more definite than any predicate NP because it represents given information—what the predicate is about. We have more to say about this in the section on use.

The third observation stems from the fact that the subject of a passive sentence needs to be somehow affected by the action of the verb. Thus, certain transitive verbs, when used statively, are not likely to occur in the passive voice.<sup>4</sup> This is true, for example, of the following verbs:

- verbs of containing (e.g., *contain, hold, comprise*):  
\*Two gallons of water are held by the watering can.
- verbs of measure (e.g., *weigh, cost, contain, last*):  
\*Five dollars is cost by the parking fine.
- reciprocal verbs (e.g., *resemble, look like, equal*):  
\*Lori is resembled by her father.
- verbs of fitting (e.g., *fit, suit*):  
\*He is suited by the plan.
- verbs of possession (e.g., *have, belong*):  
\*A car is had by him.

and others.

### MEANING DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE ACTIVE AND PASSIVE

At other times, both active and passive voice can be used, but there is a difference in meaning. This is especially true when numerals or quantifiers are used and in generic statements:

Everyone in the room speaks two languages. (i.e., any two languages per person)  
Two languages are spoken by everyone in the room. (i.e., two specific languages that everybody speaks) (Chomsky 1965)

Few people read many books. (i.e., There are few people in this world who read lots of books.)

Many books are read by few people. (i.e., There are many books that are read by few people.) (Lakoff 1968)

Moles dig tunnels. (A true statement about all moles)

Tunnels are dug by moles. (This is not true. Not all tunnels are dug by moles.)

### BE-PASSIVES VERSUS GET-PASSIVES

We offered an explanation for the difference between the passive *have* and the causative *have* by saying that the passive *have* talks about the subject as experiencer. Next, we turn to the semantic distinction between *be* and *get*.

As we said earlier, the *be*-passive is the prototypical passive verb. It is unmarked and thus semantically neutral, which is not true of the *get*-passive. According to Carter and McCarthy (1997), the English *get*-passive, like the Japanese passive, overwhelmingly tends to be used adversely (124 of 139 occurrences in their corpus of slightly over one million running words of informal spoken English). Here are some examples from their data:

A: And er she had gone in the house because I gave her the key.

B: Yeah.

A: And for some reason don't ask me why but she couldn't get out.

B: Oh no. She *got locked in*.

A: And I lost my second eldest brother.

B: Ahh yeah yeah

A: He was er sergeant and er

B: [Yes, mm]

A: [he got killed [B: Mm] trying to save some other man, some other soldier.]

The adversative nature of the *get*-passive was also borne out in a contextual analysis by Yim (1998). Yim found that the *get*-passive occurred with verbs from semantic categories such as physical assault (*get hit*), hindrance (*get trapped*), transference (*get snatched*), and verbs of emotional or mental strain (*get punished*). Yim suggests that the *get*-passive's affinity for affective connotations is consistent with its colloquial nature.

Other characteristics of the *get*-passive noted by Carter and McCarthy were its lack of expressed agent (130 of 139 *get*-passives had no explicitly stated agent; and likewise, in Yim's data 119 of 125 *get*-passives had no *by* phrases) and the fact that *get*-passives could not replace *be*-passives with nondynamic verbs:

This bed had not been slept in.

\*This bed had not got slept in.

Joe hasn't been seen for years.

\*Joe hasn't got(ten) seen for years.

Yim's data support this observation. It appears that *get*-passives are predominantly associated with verbs that emphasize actions or processes. Consequently, they are also more likely to occur with adverbs of frequency:

This man continually got wiped out.

Finally, Yim notes that the overwhelming majority of *get*-passives in her data had human subjects (90.4%), which is not true of *be* passives.

### PAST PARTICIPLES: ADJECTIVES OR PASSIVE?

Most of the time the distinction between a past participle functioning as a passive verb and one serving as an adjective will be obvious. However, the distinction is not always clear-cut. Willis (1994) points out that in a sentence such as:

The windows were broken.

the past participle *broken* could be regarded as either adjectival or passive.

The house was a mess. The paintwork was peeling and the windows were *broken*.  
(participle is adjectival)

The windows were *broken* by the force of the explosion. (participle is passive)

In the first interpretation, the past participle is descriptive, or stative, and thus adjectival. In the second, the past participle is dynamic and thus passive. However, you will see in Chapter 20 that adjectives can sometimes be dynamic. Thus, in the end, in cases of ambiguity, the only distinguishing sentence-level feature we are left with is the use of *by* with a noun phrase to mark an agent in the passive voice, if there is one:

The beans were *refried*. { by someone (passive)  
present state of the beans (adjective)

The fact that not all adjectival and passive participle pairs are homophonous, even though their spelling makes them appear so, suggests that adjectives and passives have a different origin:

The suspect was *alleged* to have taken the money. [ə l eɪ d]  
The *alleged* thief . . . [ə l eɪ d]

This was confirmed by Dubinsky and Simango (1996), who note that in Old English there were two distinct affixes that have merged into the modern spelling *-ed*.

The congregation was *blessed*. { verb [b l e s t]  
adjective [b l e s t d]

## A MIDDLE VOICE

We hinted in the introduction to this chapter of the existence of a means besides the passive to put a nonagentive NP into subject position. There is, in fact, a “middle voice,” intermediate between active and passive voices. The middle voice allows the subject of a sentence to be nonagentive, as in the passive voice, but the morphology of the verb to be in the active voice.

1. Her high C shattered the glass. (active voice)
2. The glass was shattered by her high C. (passive voice)
3. The glass shattered. (middle voice)

As Lock (1996) puts it, English allows a representation of processes not only in terms of actions (1 and 2) but also in terms of happenings (3). Other languages, of course, can report happenings as well. Some do so with the use of reflexives (examples from Shibatani 1985):

Spanish	French	Russian
Se abrió la puerta. (Refl. open the door.)	La porte s'est ouverte. (the door Refl.-is opened.)	Lekcija načalas'. (lecture began Refl.)
The door opened.	The door opened.	The lecture began.

Instead, English uses special verbs to express spontaneous occurrences. Such verbs, which allow the object of a transitive clause to be a subject of an intransitive clause without changing voice, are called *ergative*, or *change-of-state*, verbs. Ergative verbs, such as *shatter*, can appear in all three voices and thus take either agents or undergoers of the action (sometimes called patients or themes) as subjects. There are several hundred ergative verbs, common enough so that students will encounter them frequently.

Many ergative verbs, like *shatter*, suggest changes of state: *age, begin, bend, break, burst, change, close, cool, condense, decrease, develop, drop, dry, empty, end, evaporate, finish, grow, increase, melt, open, sink, slow, spread, start, stop, tear*, and others.

Three other categories of ergative verbs are mentioned in *Collins Cobuild English Grammar*:

- Verbs of cooking (*bake, boil, cook, defrost, fry, roast, thicken*, etc.):

I'm baking a cake.  
The cake is baking.  
The cake is being baked by her friends.

- Verbs of physical movement (*move, rock, shake, spin, swing, turn, etc.*):

The boy spun the top.  
The top spun.  
The top was spun by the boy.

- Verbs that involve vehicles (*drive, fly, park, reverse, run, sail, etc.*):

She drove the car.  
The car drives well.  
The car was driven all the way to Tallahassee.

Rutherford (1987) tells us that ESL/EFL students, for whom the idea of an ergative verb is new, sometimes object to such sentences as

The window broke.

The students argue that windows can't break themselves, and thus they feel obliged to use the passive or express an agent.

The window was broken.  
Someone broke the window.

While such sentences are not wrong, of course, the active voice sentence with a nonagentive subject is perfectly permissible in English with ergative verbs. The difference between the two options is that the passive sentence suggests the existence of an agent, even if the agent is not explicit. The verb used ergatively does not permit an agent. This can be shown by the addition of a *by* phrase

The window was broken. (passive)	The window broke. (ergative)
The window was broken by the gang.	*The window broke by the gang.

Thus, the following are situations in which agentless “change-of-state” sentences are preferred to passive sentences with an explicit or implicit agent:

1. When the focus is on the change of state, and the agent is irrelevant.

The bank closes at 5 P.M.

2. When the writer's or speaker's objective is to create an aura of mystery or suspense—that is, things seem to be happening without the intervention of an agent:

We were sitting quietly after dinner, when suddenly the door opened.

3. When the subject is something so fragile or unstable that it can break, change, dissolve, and so on without any apparent intervention on the part of any agent:

Left hanging on the fence, the red balloon suddenly burst.

4. When it is natural to expect change to occur (i.e., physical, social, or psychological “laws” seem to be involved):

The ice on the pond melted earlier than usual.

5. When there are so many possible causes for a change of state that it would be misleading to imply a single agent:

Prices increased due to a variety of factors.





Another challenge for ESL/EFL students is to learn which verbs are ergative. Lock (1996) notes that students may make errors such as

**\*Many of the old buildings in the center of town have recently demolished.**

—not because they have trouble with the passive voice, but rather because they have incorrectly assumed that the verb *demolish* can be used ergatively.

In addition to verbs that can occur in all three voices, the middle voice can also be expressed by intransitive verbs that take the focus of the process as subjects.

- Verbs of occurrence: *happen, occur, take place*

The incident occurred before anyone knew what was happening.

- Verbs of inherently directed motion (Rosen 1984): *arrive, fall, rise, emerge, go*

The dough rose.

- Verbs of description: *appear, disappear, vanish*

The trail disappeared into the woods.

Since these verbs have no transitive counterparts, they do not occur in the passive voice. These intransitive verbs in the active voice with nonagentive subjects cause problems for ESL/EFL students who sometimes overgeneralize the passive voice and write:

**\*The accident was happened last night.**

Yip (1995) reports that these errors occur in Chinese students' interlanguage possibly because students have been taught that sentences with grammatical subjects that are not the agent require the passive in English. This is simply not the case, and ESL/EFL students will need to learn about this middle voice.

Other languages treat the thing or person who has been affected or has undergone the process with case endings (e.g., Japanese) or word order (e.g., Italian) to distinguish subjects of active intransitives from subjects of intransitives that are events or happenings (Zobl 1989).

Giovanni telefona.	(The subject-verb order indicates that the subject of the
Giovanni telephones.	intransitive verb is an agent, therefore, the verb denotes an
	action.)

Arriva Giovanni.	(The verb-subject order indicates that the subject is
Giovanni arrives.	nonagentive, denoting a happening, not an action.)

English, with its restricted word order, will not permit such permutations, of course. Nevertheless, it does have a middle voice, which affords English speakers yet another option for achieving theme-rheme requirements in discourse (Rutherford 1987).

## THE USE OF THE PASSIVE

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Rutherford's observation provides a convenient segue into a discussion on the use of the passive. Two matters concern us here: knowing when English speakers use the passive, as opposed to the active, or middle voice; and knowing when they include an explicit agent in a passive sentence. As you will see, these two issues overlap considerably.

### ACTIVE VERSUS PASSIVE

Again, we should remember that most languages have a means of shifting focus in a sentence. The English passive is not unique in this regard. What will be problematic,

though, is that not all languages use the passive or equivalent focus constructions for the same reasons. We have already noted that most often the Japanese passive is adversative. While the English passive can be used to report adversity as well (especially the *get*-passive), the passive in English has a wider distribution than in many other languages. Nevertheless, the passive is the marked voice; English speakers normally select the agent as subject and use the active voice. Just when, then, is the passive preferred?

We have already indicated that the passive is used when we want to defocus the agent. The following are three specific times when this might be warranted (Thompson 1987).

1. The passive is used when the agent is not to be mentioned because

- it is redundant or easy to supply:

Pineapples are grown in Hawaii.

- it is unknown:

The bank was robbed yesterday.

- it is very general (example from Hayes 1992):

By the end of the 1960s, the United States could no longer be described as a white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant nation.

- the speaker/writer is being tactful:

Margaret was given some bad advice about selecting courses.

- the speaker is being evasive:

An error was made in the budget.

2a. The passive is used when the nonagent is more closely related than the agent to the theme of the text (i.e., what it is about):

I was a young Columbia man while I worked in a cafeteria from 6:30 A.M. to 3:00 P.M. *I was much respected by the management*, even though I drove the people I worked with insane, because I had standards they couldn't cope with.

(Example from Terkel's *Working*, found in Thompson 1987:503. Italics added.)

The nonagent *I* in the italicized clause is more thematic than the agent *the management*. In other words, the passive topicalizes the patient or receiver/undergoer of the action.

Here is another example where the thematic status of the agent and nonagent is critical to the decision to use the passive:

The ends of a spindle were suspended from a bracket protruding to one side of the sledge frame.

We suspended the ends of a spindle from a bracket protruding to one side of the sledge frame.

The first sentence in the passive voice, which has been adapted from Banks (1997), was culled from a corpus of 11 research articles having to do with oceanography. The second sentence is one that Banks constructed. Banks argues that scientists choose to use the passive not so much due to their desire to sound objective as to the fact that the theme of scientific writing deals with the apparatus or results of a study rather than the person conducting the investigation.<sup>5</sup>

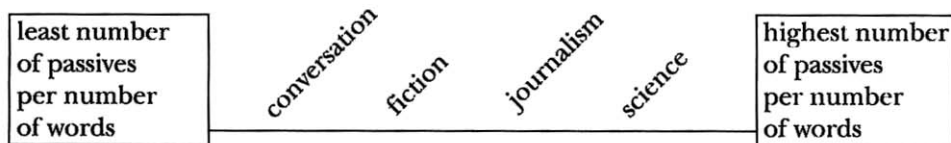
**2b.** The passive is used when the nonagent is a participant in the immediately preceding sentence. Here is an example, again cited in Thompson 1987:506, taken from *The Explorers of the Mississippi*, page 145.

Lorenzo arrived in Paris as a down-at-heel political refugee without friends or money; luckily for him, *France at that time was ruled by an Italian*, Cardinal Mazarin . . .

In this example, France is not the theme of the passage, but it does relate to Paris in the previous clause. You saw in Chapter 2 how new information is introduced in the rheme of one sentence and then becomes the theme of the next sentence. As we noted at the end of the section on meaning, passive and middle voices are devices that promote this thematic cohesion. Thus, as Thompson points out, strategies 2a and 2b above are related. They are illustrations of the same cohesive principle of thematic unity with strategy 2a simply applying to a larger stretch of text than strategy 2b. Thompson (1987:501) concludes:

It appears that users of English are content to code the agent as subject unless broadly thematic or more local cross-clausal considerations require an alternative coding.

Not surprisingly, distributions of the passive differ among genres. Where more focus is on the outcome or what happened, such as with scientific or journalistic writing, passives are more frequent than with fictional and conversational English. Pioneering work by Huddleston (1971) and Shintani (1979) attest to this.



It is worth noting that although not as many passives occur in conversations as in written genres, there is a way in informal English to defocus the agent without using the passive voice. Interlocutors often use the nonanaphoric *they* with active voice where the passive would also be possible (Thompson 1987):

They forecast a snowy winter this year.  
A snowy winter was forecast this year.

The *they* is nonanaphoric because it has no antecedent. The exact identity of the agent is unimportant. Thus, the discourse function of nonanaphoric *they* can be said to overlap partially with agentless passives. This brings us to the question of the conditions governing naming an agent. As we said earlier, reasons for when to use the passive overlap considerably with issues concerning whether or not to mention the agent. This is the other major use issue concerning the passive voice.

### AGENTED PASSIVES

Since the function of the passive is to defocus the agent (Shibatani 1985), we may rightfully inquire as to when the agent does appear. In fact, the answer is that it appears surprisingly infrequently. Most analyses show that only about 15 to 20 percent of the passives occurring in texts explicitly include agents. Because of their infrequency, Shintani (1979) suggests that we teach our ESL/EFL students when and why to retain the agent in those approximately 15 percent of passive sentences that have explicit agents—rather

than trying to give them rules for omitting the agent in those 85 percent of passives that are agentless. She examined a large number of agents that were overtly expressed in passive sentences occurring in written and spoken discourse, and she concluded that almost all these agents could be explained by one of three generalizations.

Agented passives are used:

1. When the agent is new information:

While Jill was walking down the street, her purse was snatched by a young man.

2. When the agent is nonhuman (i.e., we expect agents to be human):

All the lights and appliances in the Albertson household are switched on and off daily by this electrical device.

3. When the agent is a well-known personage and should be included as propositional information:

The Mona Lisa was painted by *da Vinci*.

Several issues concerning the use of the passive were researched by Tomlin (1985). Tomlin investigated the relationship between information structure and clausal grammar by studying ice hockey broadcasts.

Here is an excerpt from one sportscast:

Quick pass ahead to Errol Thompson, trying to work past Lapointe, it came back to Polonich. Polonich never got the shot away, checked by Lapointe. (1985:70).

Confirming what you have seen so far, the passive is used in the last clause (*checked by Lapointe*) because the subject of this passive clause (i.e., Polonich) is nonagentive and thematic both in terms of the whole event—Polonich as the person with the puck and thus a potential scorer—and in terms of Polonich's being a participant in the previous clause. An agented passive is used because the agent (Lapointe) is new information in the discourse; that is, the fact that it was Lapointe who did the checking is new information that listeners need to know in order to follow the flow of the game.

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## CONCLUSION

Early transformational grammar accounts and many ESL/EFL texts tended to treat the passive voice as if it were a syntactic variant of the active voice. We have attempted to argue against this characterization of the passive. In fact, use of the two voices is motivated by different reasons. One would find a passive in a discourse for which an active voice sentence would not be appropriate. For this reason, we think that it is misleading to students to present the passive as if it were derived from the active voice. Learning when to use the passive is a challenge to ESL/EFL students, who will tend to over- or under-use it depending on its frequency of occurrence and its functions in their native languages. Therefore, it is better from the start to introduce the passive as a grammatical structure with a particular use of its own.

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## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

1. **Form.** Willis (1994) suggests that since the *be* + past participle pattern will be familiar to students from the pattern for copular verbs followed by adjectives, this pattern can be



used as a starting point for teaching students the passive voice. Ask students to look around the room and choose five objects. Then they are to ask classmates what they are made of. For example:

- A: What is the desk made of?  
 B: The desk is made of wood.  
 B: What are the windows made of?  
 C: The windows are made of glass.  
 C: What are the chairs made of?  
 D: The chairs are made of plastic and metal.  
 D: What is the blackboard made of?

Next, to introduce the passive, ask students to talk about what they are wearing or carrying with them and where it was made. For example:

- My shoes were made in Italy.  
 My blouse was made in the Philippines.  
 My calculator was made in Japan.

To reinforce the dynamic sense of the second set of statements, you can point out to students that the second set of sentences is used in the past tense and can be followed by a *by* phrase with the agent or doer of the action.

My shoes were made in Italy by shoemakers.

However, the sentences in the first set cannot be followed by the agent because the past participle is being used adjectivally—that is, to describe the state of the object, not the result of a process.

\*The desk is made of wood by furniture makers.

**2. Form.** (present perfect passive) Ask students to close their eyes. Change five things about the room. Ask students to open their eyes and to guess what changes have been made. For example:

- The lights have been turned off.  
 The desk has been cleared off.  
 The chair has been turned upside down.

**3. Form.** (past passive) Have students play the card game “Concentration.” Make 12 pairs of cards. On one card of each pair, put the name of a famous painter, author, inventor, for example. On the other card in the pair, put the name of the painting, book, invention, and so on for which the person is famous. Make up pairs of cards such as the following:

Agatha Christie	Murder on the Orient Express
Beethoven	The Moonlight Sonata
Shakespeare	Romeo and Juliet
Alexander Graham Bell	The telephone
Picasso	Guernica

Give each small group of students a deck of cards that has been shuffled and ask them to place the cards face down. Students should take turns. The first student should turn over two cards. If the cards match, the student should make an active or passive sentence—an active voice sentence if the agent was the first card that the student turned over, or a passive voice sentence if the agent was the second card. If the student is able to make a match and a correct sentence, he or she keeps the pair of cards and can turn over another

pair. If not, both cards are turned face down again and it is the next student's turn to try. The game continues until all the pairs have been matched. The student with the most matched pairs wins the game.

**4. Form/Meaning.** To have students practice the *get*-passive, as it is used adversatively, tell students to imagine that they are children. They have had some friends over. The friends have left, but the place is a mess. Their parents have returned, and the "children" have to explain what happened. Give students a list of problems to explain or have them brainstorm a list themselves. Have them role-play the parent-child interaction. For example:

*Parent:* What happened to the curtain?

*Child:* It got stepped on.

*Parent:* And what happened to the rug?

*Child:* It got spilled on.

**5. Meaning.** Show students two photographs of the same place—one taken many years ago and one taken recently. Ask them to say what changes have occurred.

Then ask them to predict what changes they think will occur in the future.

A new highway was opened.

New houses will be built.

**6. Meaning.** To familiarize students with change-of-state verbs, have them conduct or imagine conducting an experiment that demonstrates that water evaporates when heated and condenses when cooled. Have them write up or talk through the steps of the experiment.

**7. Use.** Ask students to pretend that they are newspaper reporters. They have been called to the scene of a fire. Describe the scene to them, or have them imagine one of their own. Ask them to write a newspaper account of the incident. For example:

Late last night, a fire broke out at 212 Main Street. All of the people who lived there were rescued, but unfortunately, two pets were killed by the smoke. Firefighters were called shortly before midnight. When they arrived . . .

**8. Use.** Find a short article on science from a publication such as *Science News*. Ask students to read the article, locate the passive sentences, and say why they think the author used the passive. Also, they should try to explain why an agent has been mentioned, if it has.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide an original sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples:

- |                             |   |
|-----------------------------|---|
| a. active voice             | e. a verb that is always passive                |
| b. passive voice            | f. a verb that is never passive                 |
| c. passive voice with agent | g. middle voice (ergative)                      |
| d. the <i>get</i> -passive  | h. an intransitive verb with a nonagent subject |

2. Draw tree diagrams for the following sentences:
- a. The report is being studied by the committee.



- b. The work isn't going to be completed on time.
  - c. Was the play written by O'Neill?
  - d. John got arrested yesterday.
3. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical or at least unacceptable?
- a. \*Horace will be had tested on his Spanish proficiency.
  - b. \*Two liters were contained by the bottle.
  - c. \*In the bus was eaten a sandwich by Bill.
  - d. ?Three cars were bought by the customer.
4. When there are two *be* verbs in a row in a passive sentence, one of them is passive. Which one is the passive *be* and how do you know?

The food for the festival has been being prepared for days.

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

5. Examine the directions following the examples in Teaching Suggestion 3. Explain why the passive was used where it was.
6. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare for your students to correct them?
- a. \*I born in Seoul in 1970.
  - b. \*The song was sang several times by the choir.
  - c. \*Brazil was slowed down its inflation.
  - d. \*She got hurted by his remarks.
  - e. \*My cat must have been died by a car.
  - f. \*It was disappeared two weeks ago.
7. In light of what has been discussed in this chapter, see if you can account for the difference between the following pairs of verbs, infamous for causing native speakers of English problems.
- |      |       |
|------|-------|
| rise | raise |
| lie  | lay   |
| sit  | seat  |

8. One of your students asks you to distinguish between *be married* and *get married*. What would you say? How about *have married* and *have been married*?
9. Although we didn't specifically discuss how the length of the *by* phrase affects the choice of active or passive, it clearly does. Remember, though, that we are looking for *reasons* to give our students. What is the reason for a lengthy *by* phrase and how does its length affect a decision to use the passive? Here is an example, cited in Gilbert (1992), from Annie Dillard's *A Trip to the Mountains* (*Harper's*, August 1991).

That night, on the journey to the Skagit village, he was wakened in his blanket by the dark force of something he had heard and neglected to consider.

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### Suggestions for further reading

*For further information on the roles of participants in English sentences, see:*

- Dowty, D. (1991). "Thematic Proto-Roles and Argument Selection." *Language* 67:3, 547–619.

Roca, I. M. (ed.) (1992). *Thematic Structure: Its Role in Grammar*. Berlin and New York: Foris.

*For more on ergativity, also known as unaccusativity, see:*

Balcom, P. (1997). "Why Is This Happened? Passive Morphology and Unaccusativity." *Second Language Research* 13, 1.

Levin, B. (1993). *English Verb Classes and Alternations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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Van Valin Jr., R. (1990). "Semantic Parameters of Split Intransitivity." *Language* 66:2, 221–260.

*For additional references on the get-passive, consult:*

Givón, T., and L. Yang (1994). "The Rise of the English *Get*-Passive." In B. Fox and P. Hopper (eds.), *Voice: Form and Function*. Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 119–149.

Vanrespaille, M. (1991). "A Semantic Analysis of the English *Get*-Passive." *Interface* 5:2, 95–112.

*For pedagogical suggestions, see:*

Byrd, P., and B. Benson (1992). *Applied English Grammar*. Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English, Your Second Language* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.

Frodesen, J., and J. Eyring. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 4 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

Riggenbach, H., and V. Samuda (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 2 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

Thewlis, S. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 3 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

*For pedagogical suggestions, particularly for teaching ergative verbs, see:*

Pennington, M. (ed.) (1995). *New Ways in Teaching Grammar*. Alexandria, VA: TESOL

## ENDNOTES

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1. This rule works to account for the structure of most passive sentences. It does fail, however, to produce passive imperatives, which are rare but possible in English (Quirk et al. 1985), although it could be argued that *seated* is an adjective participle:

Be seated.

If we were to move *-imper* up into the curly brackets with T and M, we could account for passive imperatives, but other problems would arise. For now, therefore, we will stick with this rendition of the phrase structure rule.

2. Warner (1995) shows that the progressive passive is relatively new to English, the first attested instance appearing in the latter half of the eighteenth century. He goes on to claim that the progressive passive did not originate from the merging of the passive voice with progressive aspect, but rather resulted from other changes in the auxiliary.

3. Notice that in *Butch Cassidy was wanted by the law*, *want* has a special meaning.

4. The reason we say *certain* stative verbs do not take the passive voice is that some stative verbs that involve mental states passivize easily, such as *be believed to*, *be thought to*.

# SENTENCES WITH INDIRECT OBJECTS

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional grammars define an indirect object as a second noun object that tells us *to whom* or *for whom* the action expressed in the verb is being carried out. This second noun object occurs in addition to the direct object, which identifies the thing or person being acted upon. There are also some indirect objects that tell us *of whom* the action expressed in the verb is being requested. (Admittedly, there are far fewer indirect objects of this third form in English than there are of the first two.)

Joe gave	<i>a book</i>	to	<i>Sally.</i>
	direct object		indirect object
Joe made	<i>a bookcase</i>	for	<i>Sally.</i>
	direct object		indirect object
Joe asked	<i>a question</i>	of	<i>Sally.</i>
	direct object		indirect object

Notice that another form of these sentences is also possible with the recipient NP in immediate postverbal position:

Joe gave Sally a book.  
Joe made Sally a bookcase.  
Joe asked Sally a question.

We discuss the analysis of sentences of this type below.

Furthermore, many verbs taking both a direct and indirect object have a second option for the subject noun phrase of a passive sentence. In the active voice, the agent NP of such verbs serves as the subject (*Joe gave a book to Sally*). However, in the passive voice either the NP being acted upon or the recipient NP can serve as the subject:

The book was given to Sally (by Joe).  
Sally was given the book (by Joe).

## PROBLEMS FOR ESL/EFL STUDENTS

Why do sentences with indirect objects sometimes cause problems for ESL/EFL students? First of all, students must be able to sort out whether a given verb takes an indirect object preceded by a *to*, *for*, or *of* when the indirect object occurs in a prepositional phrase. Then they must learn which English verbs permit indirect object alternation. Those students whose native languages allow the indirect object to occur rather freely next to the verb (e.g., French and Spanish) may produce ungrammatical sentences such as “\*John opened me the door” instead of “John opened the door for me.” Many students will be confused by the fact that one of two verbs with similar meanings does not allow the indirect object to occur next to the verb. Thus by analogy with

He told me the answer.

students will incorrectly produce

\*He said me the answer.

In fact, according to Mazurkewich and White (1984), children acquiring English as their first language also seem to have some problems learning all the constraints on indirect object alternation.

## THE FORM OF SENTENCES WITH INDIRECT OBJECTS

### THE SURFACE GRAMMAR OF VERBS THAT TAKE INDIRECT OBJECTS

The verbs that take indirect objects in English share certain similarities and differences. One important difference is that for some of these verbs, the indirect object is indispensable to the meaning and the structure of the sentence; for example:

\*Joe gave a book.<sup>1</sup>

Joe gave { a book to Mel. }  
          { Mel a book. }

\*Morgan handed the letter.

Morgan handed { the letter to Peter. }  
                  { Peter the letter. }

In other instances the meaning of the entire sentence, not just the verb, must be considered, since the indirect object may not be structurally required, but the sentence will have a different meaning depending on whether or not the indirect object is present; for example:

Mr. Jensen found { a job for me. } ≠ Mr. Jensen found a job. (i.e., for himself)  
                          { me a job. }

### Verbs with Implied Indirect Objects

There are also many cases where the indirect object is not structurally essential but where it is strongly implied and thus seems to be present semantically. In addition, the meaning of these sentences does not change markedly if the indirect object is not overtly expressed; for example:

Sam sold the car. (i.e., to someone)

Barbara asked a question. (i.e., of someone)

### Verbs with Optional Post-Prepositional Indirect Objects

In the above two examples with *give* and *hand*, we can say that the indirect object is closely associated with the meaning of the sentence as a whole and the verb phrase in particular. However, in contrast to such cases, there are also instances where the indirect object is optional both structurally and semantically. In such a case we would have a complete sentence without the indirect object. If the indirect object is not explicitly stated, it is not even strongly implied. The two following sentences, for example, have optional indirect objects that seem much less closely related to the rest of the sentence than those in the two immediately preceding examples:

Bob made a bookcase (for Sally).    The teller cashed the check (for me).

### Verbs with Optional Indirect Objects in Postverbal Position

There are also cases where a postverbal indirect object seems to be optionally and redundantly added to sentences to indicate that there is a specific recipient of the action involving the direct object (this is often the speaker or a group including the speaker):

Go find (me) a pencil.  
Get (me) a bumper sticker.

### Verbs with Obligatory Versus Deletable Direct Objects

As a related matter, we must also consider the role of the direct object in sentences that contain both a direct and an indirect object. First, there are cases where the direct object cannot be deleted whether or not the preposition preceding the indirect object is present; for example:

Peter gave the book to Alice.    \*Peter gave Alice. (≠ donate)  
\*Peter gave to Alice. (≠ donate)

In such a case, both the direct and indirect object are interdependent, indispensable elements in the sentence. Second, in some cases, the direct object can be deleted, but only if the indirect object comes directly after the verb and before the understood direct object.

We paid the money to Harry.    \*We paid to Harry.  
We paid Harry (the money).

Furthermore, there are cases where the direct object can be deleted, but the preposition preceding the indirect object must be retained. If the preposition is not retained, the meaning of the sentence changes, since the direct object is a required or understood constituent and the indirect object is optional or additional (i.e., the indirect object is reinterpreted as a direct object when it is the only object in postverbal position).

Sara cooks (dinner) for us.    ≠    ?Sara cooks us.

In such instances we can say that the direct object is implied whether overtly stated or not, and the indirect object is not as closely linked to the meaning of the verb as it was in the two preceding cases with *give* and *pay*. Rather, the role of the indirect object is optional and similar to what it was in one of the sentences in the introduction:

Joe made    a bookcase    for Sally.  
                 [direct object]    [indirect object]



### Subcategorization of English Verbs that Take Indirect Objects

Many common English verbs can take indirect objects in two different syntactic configurations:

postverbal position (V NP<sub>x</sub> NP)

John gave *Mary* the book.

postprepositional position (V NP Prep NP<sub>x</sub>)

John gave the book *to Mary*.

Other verbs that behave like *give* are *hand*, *tell*, *pass*, *sell*, *send*, *get*, *show*, *throw*, *lend*, *teach*, *offer*, *fax*, and *wire*, among others.

Many verbs can take indirect objects only in the postprepositional position:

\*I explained *Mary* the problem.

I explained the problem *to Mary*.

Other verbs that behave like *explain* are *donate*, *announce*, *recommend*, *reveal*, *confess*, *introduce*, *narrate*, *describe*, *transmit*, *refuse*, *deny*, and so on.

Finally, a small number of verbs take only the immediate postverbal position and allow no indirect object in postprepositional position:

The book cost me \$10.

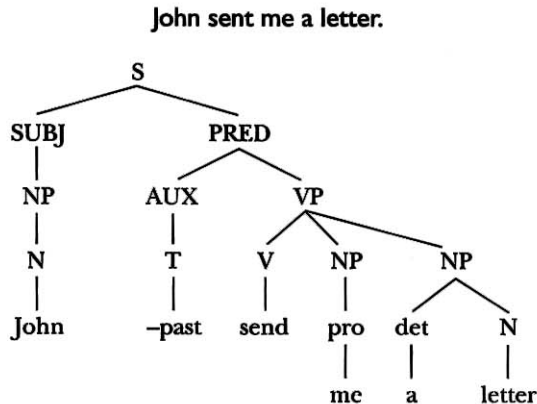
\*The book cost \$10 *to me*.

A few other verbs that seem to behave like *cost* are *bill* and *(over)charge*.

Therefore, verbs taking indirect objects need to be marked in the lexicon according to which syntactic configuration(s) they may or may not occur in. In general, monosyllabic verbs—which are generally of Germanic origin—take indirect objects in immediate postverbal position more readily than do multisyllabic verbs, which tend to be of Latinate origin and which tend not to allow indirect objects in postverbal position.

### THE SYNTAX OF SENTENCES WITH INDIRECT OBJECTS

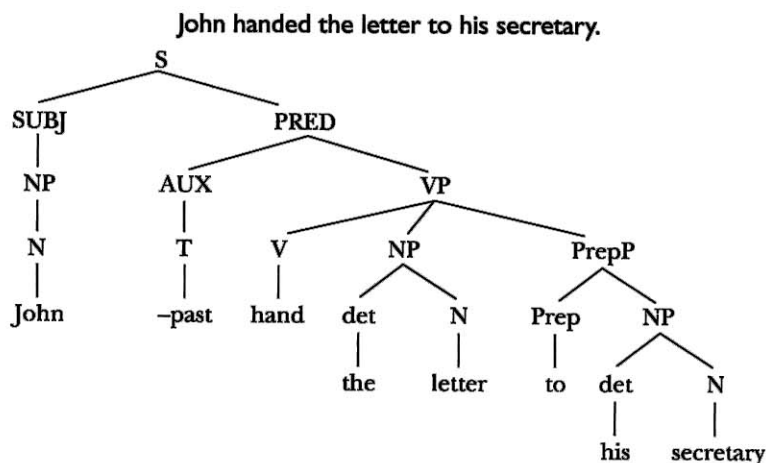
Even if verbs are properly subcategorized, we will still need to generate indirect objects in different ways. For verbs that either permit or require the immediate postverbal position for indirect objects, the following structure applies:



This structure also works for sentences like:

The book cost me a fortune.  
 Joe gave Sue some candy.  
 The boy handed me a telegram.

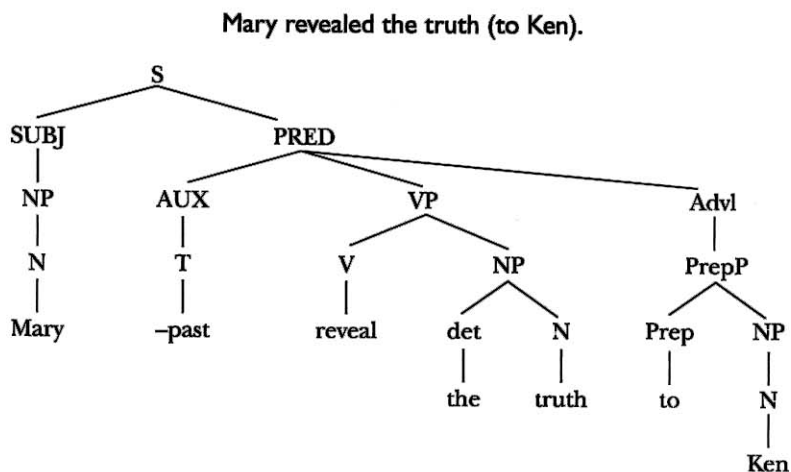
For verbs that require an indirect object and either permit or require the indirect object to occur after the direct object in a prepositional phrase, the following structure applies:



The structure also works for sentences like:

Mr. Smith gave a note to his neighbor.  
 Joe passed the salt to Susie.  
 My mother lent her ballgown to Sarah.

Finally, for verbs that optionally allow but do not require prepositional indirect objects in order to complete their argument structure, the following structure applies:



This tree structure also works for sentences like:

The teacher explained the problem to the students.  
 The magician performed a trick for us.  
 The lawyer announced the news to his colleagues.

We shall see later that the syntactic differences between the last two structures become helpful in understanding whether or not the recipient NP can function as the subject of a passive voice sentence.

## MEANING ISSUES WITH INDIRECT OBJECTS

### THE MEANING OF VERB-INDIRECT OBJECT COMBINATIONS

Jacobson (1966) arranges the verbs that take indirect objects<sup>3</sup> into three semantic groups: “dative”<sup>3</sup> verbs such as *give*, “benefactive” verbs such as *make*, and “eliciting” verbs such as *ask*. Each group of verbs can be associated with the type of prepositional phrase that follows it.<sup>4</sup> ESL/EFL students would learn, then, that they must select *to* + NP in the case of the dative verbs (*give*, *say*, *sell*, *explain*, etc.), *for* + NP in the case of the benefactive verbs (*make*, *buy*, *cook*, *prepare*, etc.), and *of* + NP in the case of the “eliciting” verbs (*ask*, *request*, etc.). The “dative” verbs compose the largest category, the “eliciting” verbs the smallest. Of course, students must learn to take into account the meaning of the verb as it is used in sentences, because some verbs will occur in more than one of Jacobson’s semantic categories, depending on how they are used; however, in such cases two different meanings of the verb form are involved; for example:

- I'll get this to him. (dative) = “deliver”  
I'll get this for him. (benefactive) = “fetch, obtain”

### The Ambiguity of *for* Phrases

One related point to consider is that sentences with prepositional objects preceded by *for*, such as the following, may be ambiguous:

John bought the book for me.

There are two possible interpretations of this sentence:

- Proxy*: John bought it for me (i.e., he acted on my behalf) because I didn't have time to buy it myself.  
*Benefactive*: John bought it for me because my birthday was coming up and he wanted to give me a gift.

However, if the indirect object occurs directly after the verb in the above sentence (i.e., *John bought me the book*), only the benefactive interpretation seems to be possible.

This double meaning of *for* helps explain why the indirect object can come immediately after the verb *open* in the first sentence below (where *for* is benefactive) but not the second:

- Benefactive*: Open me a beer, please.  
(The addressee will presumably open a can/bottle of beer and give it to the speaker.)  
*Proxy*: Open the door for me, please.  
\*Open me the door.  
(The addressee does not give the door to the speaker, but merely opens the door on his/her behalf.)

### Semantics of Verbs Followed by Indirect Objects

Wierzbicka (1988)—drawing on Green (1974)—offers a detailed set of eight semantic subcategories for verbs that can be immediately followed by indirect objects.<sup>5</sup>

1. Verbs of transfer (e.g.: *throw, buy, send, lend, sell, give, hand, pass*, etc.)  
     Jim threw Betty an apple.  
     I passed Joe the salt.
2. Verbs that speak of the recipient's future possession or nonpossession of something (e.g.: *promise, offer, allow, allot, refuse, deny*, etc.)  
     Bill promised Sue a watch.  
     Jack refused Jill an ice cream.
3. Verbs of making or creating (e.g.: *bake, knit, carve, make, fix, draw, write*, etc.)  
     Jill knitted Jack a sweater.  
     I'll draw you a picture.
4. Verbs of preparing something for use (e.g.: *fry, roast, grill, iron, butter, peel*, etc.)  
     I'll grill you a trout.  
     Daddy peeled Sally an orange.
5. Verbs of entertaining (e.g.: *read, sing, tell, play*, etc.)  
     Read me a story.  
     Sing me a song.
6. Verbs of telling or transmitting messages (e.g.: *phone, wire, fax, tell, telex*, etc.)  
     Bill wired Sue the news.  
     I'll fax you that letter.
7. Verbs of teaching someone to do something (e.g.: *teach, show*, etc.)  
     Sam taught Fido a trick.  
     I'll show you the solution.
8. Verbs of showing something so someone can see it (e.g.: *show*)  
     Tim showed Sam a picture.

As the last four of Wierzbicka's subcategories make clear, a verb form can belong to more than one subcategory:

*Tell* can be a verb of entertaining or a verb of transmitting messages.

*Show* can be a verb of teaching or of showing (i.e., making visible).

Of course there are also many verbs semantically related to one of these eight subcategories that do not take an immediate postverbal indirect object because the verb concerned takes only prepositional indirect objects:

(telling a message) \*She announced them the news.

She announced the news to them.

(entertaining) \*The magician performed the boys a trick.

The magician performed a trick for the boys.

(preparing for use) \*He decorated her the room.

He decorated the room for her.

In these cases the etymology and syllable structure of the verbs concerned seem to override their semantic properties. Wierzbicka also argues that the indirect object seems much less essential with such verbs, since the sentences are perfectly complete with no indirect object:

She announced the news.  
 The magician performed a trick.  
 He decorated the room.

However, to this we would add that many of the sentences above in the eight subcategories taking postverbal indirect objects also seem complete without the indirect object:

I'll draw a picture.  
 I'll grill a trout.  
 I'll sing a song.

### Semantics Governing Postverbal Position for Indirect Objects

Going beyond the semantic categorization of verbs to the interpretation of sentences, Goldsmith (1980) and Stowell (1981) have proposed that postverbal position for indirect objects is limited semantically to cases where the indirect object is "animate" and is a "projected possessor" of the direct object. Thus we can explain the acceptable and unacceptable alternations in the following sets:

1. a. Joe sent a letter to Sue.  
    b. Joe sent Sue a letter.  
    c. Joe sent a letter to Cincinnati.  
    d. \*Joe sent Cincinnati a letter.
2. a. I opened a beer for Sam.  
    b. I opened Sam a beer.  
    c. I opened the door for Sam.  
    d. \*I opened Sam the door.

In 1b *Sue* is the animate, projected possessor of the letter, whereas in 1d, *Cincinnati* is merely the location of the letter. In 2b, *Sam* is the animate, projected possessor of a beer, whereas in 2d, *Sam*, while animate, is not the projected possessor of the door.

## ISSUES OF USE

### EXPLANATIONS FOR INDIRECT OBJECT ALTERNATION

We have already given several examples in this chapter of the alternation of the indirect object in postverbal or postprepositional position. In this section we will discuss the function of indirect object alternation.

#### Function of Indirect Object Alternation

Erteschik-Shir (1979) has proposed a discourse principle, which is useful for understanding the function of indirect object alternation. It is the concept of *dominance*. Basically, a dominant constituent in a sentence is the one that a speaker has chosen to highlight, to call to his or her listener's attention. It is this constituent in a sentence that will probably be the topic of further conversation if there is to be any. Furthermore, in the string:

$$V \quad NP1 \quad \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{to} \\ \text{for} \\ \text{of} \end{array} \right\} \quad NP2,$$

NP2 (i.e., the indirect object) is the dominant noun phrase. If the speaker wants to give prominence to NP1 (the direct object) instead, the alternate pattern is selected, if lexically possible, and NP2 precedes NP1, allowing NP1 to be the dominant noun phrase (the preposition drops out in this case).

To illustrate, the only context where

Pass the salt to me, please.

V NP1  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{to} \\ \text{for} \end{array} \right\}$  NP2

would be appropriate is one in which the speaker's request is directed to a listener who is (1) holding a salt shaker and (2) obviously not knowing to whom to pass it. The listener might then reply, "Oh, I heard the request for the salt, but I didn't know who said it." Most contexts define the important part of the sentence as being the speaker's desire for salt, and therefore one more frequently hears:

Pass me the salt, please.

or—since the speaker is generally the indirect object by implication—simply:

Pass the salt, please.

If the person who complies with this request says anything at all, he or she would be likely to comment upon the direct object—the salt—not upon the one who initiated the request, that is, "Sure. Here it is."<sup>6</sup>

### CONDITIONS ON INDIRECT OBJECT ALTERNATION

Erteschik-Shir's notion of dominance helps us understand why certain conditions such as the following are placed on indirect object alternation:

1. For many, though not all dialects of English, the indirect object cannot be postverbal if the direct object is a pronoun (especially *it*) and the indirect object is a noun.

We sent it to John.      \*We sent John it.<sup>7</sup>

On the other hand, when the indirect object is a pronoun and the direct object is a noun (especially an indefinite one), the alternate pattern is likely to be selected.

We sent him a package.

These observations can be explained by noting that pronouns are, as a rule, less dominant than nouns. Since pronouns usually have an anaphoric referent or a referent in the immediate physical environment, it is unlikely that a speaker would need to direct attention to them—their meaning is already clear from the text or context. This is not to say that an indirect object that is a pronoun would never occupy the dominant position, but when this does occur, a different interpretation would be necessary—for example, a contrastive one.

We sent a package to *him*. (not *her*)

All other noun-pronoun combinations of direct and indirect objects are syntactically possible, although the intentions of the speaker will dictate the order.

We sent John the book.

We sent him ('im) it. (acceptable to most if the indirect object is phonologically reduced)

2. If the direct object is a long complex phrase or clause (i.e., dominant), a postverbal indirect object is necessary to avoid awkwardness:

?/\* I told that John would be coming to his girlfriend.

I told John's girlfriend that he would be coming.



Clauses are always more dominant than NPs, and so the clausal direct object moves to the dominant position. On the other hand, if the indirect object is heavily modified, postverbal position is less likely:

I bought a present for my new little niece, the first daughter of my eldest brother.  
 ?/\* I bought my new little niece, the first daughter of my eldest brother, a present.

The speaker who elaborates either the direct or indirect object has already given it dominance. Such objects, therefore, move to the dominant final position if the verb permits the preferred order.

3. The main verb must belong to the class of verbs permitting both postverbal and post-prepositional position for indirect objects. Verbs like *give*, *send*, *ask*, *sell*, *pay*, *tell*, *hand*, *lend*, *show*, *offer*, and *teach* all readily accept the above conventions; however, *explain*, *reveal*, and *announce*, for example, do not.

Explain the answer to me.  
 \*Explain me the answer.

All verbs that take indirect objects have to be marked in the lexicon according to whether or not they occur in postverbal position, postprepositional position, or both.

+ alternation	+ postprepositional position only	+ postverbal position only
give	announce	cost
send	explain	charge
lend	describe	bill
teach	say	.
tell	mention	.
.	.	.
.	.	.

We should note here that some of those verbs that do not allow postverbal position do, in fact, still allow the indirect object to precede the direct object, especially if the latter is elaborated (e.g., is several phrases long or is a clause). In such a case, however, the indirect object always retains its preposition so we know that some stylistic option other than indirect object alternation has occurred in such cases:

They mentioned the new restaurant on Putney Road to me.  
 \*They mentioned me the new restaurant on Putney Road.  
 They mentioned to me the new restaurant on Putney Road.

Authentic examples of this stylistic option are rare and almost always occur in writing rather than speech (Williams, 1994).

4. Lakoff (1969) notes that in conjoined sentences there are also constraints on indirect object alternation. If the verb is deleted in the second sentence, both sentences must have their indirect objects in the same position:

I gave John a book, and Bill a bicycle.      \*I gave John a book, and a bicycle to Bill.  
 I gave a book to John, and a bicycle to Bill.      \*I gave a book to John, and Bill a bicycle.

If the verb is retained in both parts of the conjunction, this constraint does not hold.

I gave a book to John, and gave Bill a bicycle.      I gave John a book, and gave a bicycle to Bill.

### WHERE IS THE INDIRECT OBJECT MOST LIKELY TO OCCUR?

Thompson (1988) examines the problem of dative alternation<sup>8</sup> more narrowly than Erteschik-Shir (1979) with her principle of dominance. Specifically, Thompson focuses on the recipient (the indirect object) and makes two proposals concerning English sentences with indirect objects (we have reworded Thompson's proposals to conform to our terminology<sup>9</sup>):

1. Indirect objects are more topic-like<sup>10</sup> (i.e., more like subjects) than direct objects.
2. Postverbal indirect objects are more topic-like than postprepositional indirect objects.

Generally, the most topic-like constituent (i.e., the constituent with given information) in an English sentence occurs in subject position; however, in sentences where there are three NP participants, the second participant (i.e., the one in immediate postverbal position) is generally more topic-like than the third participant, which occurs at the end. For Thompson, a constituent is topic-like if it has as many of the following features as possible: animacy, pronominality, specificity, identifiability, proper noun status, short length, and activated status (i.e., presumably in the addressee's consciousness at time of utterance).

Using a written database consisting of two mystery novels and one personal narrative (nonfiction), Thompson tested her two hypotheses against 196 tokens of sentences having both direct and indirect objects and grammatically allowing both the postverbal and postprepositional position for indirect objects. She found that the indirect objects as a group were indeed much more topic-like than the direct objects.

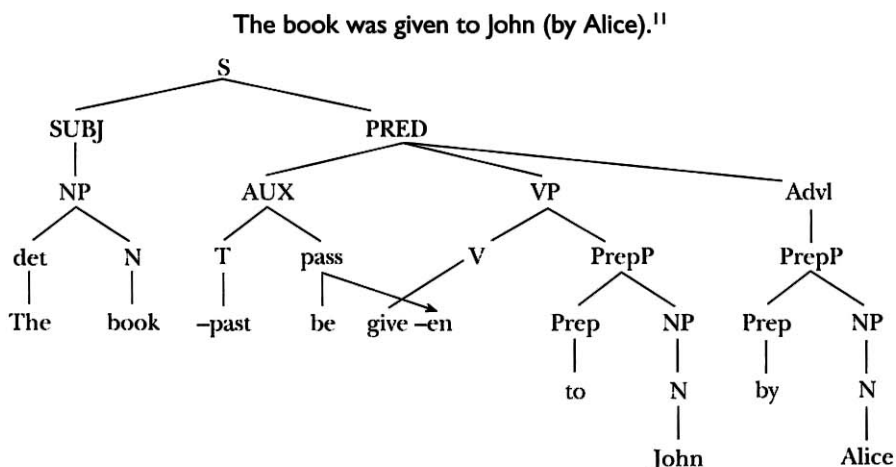
By eliminating 11 sentences that had the postverbal direct objects *it* and *them*, pronouns that seem to occur categorically in this position, Thompson had 185 potentially flexible tokens to analyze. Of these, 132 sentences had indirect objects (i.e., the more topic-like of the two object constituents) that occurred in postverbal position with the direct objects occurring at the end. Of the remaining 53 tokens where the indirect object was in postprepositional position (with the direct object in postverbal position), the indirect object tended to be a full noun phrase that was not a proper noun, or it tended to occur at the end because it was nonspecific, inanimate, nonactive, or inordinately long (or a combination of these factors). Indirect objects in postprepositional position were pronouns (other than *it* or *them*) or proper names only when used contrastively:

She had chosen to tell her story *to me*.  
He made that shoe for *Mr. Alexis*.

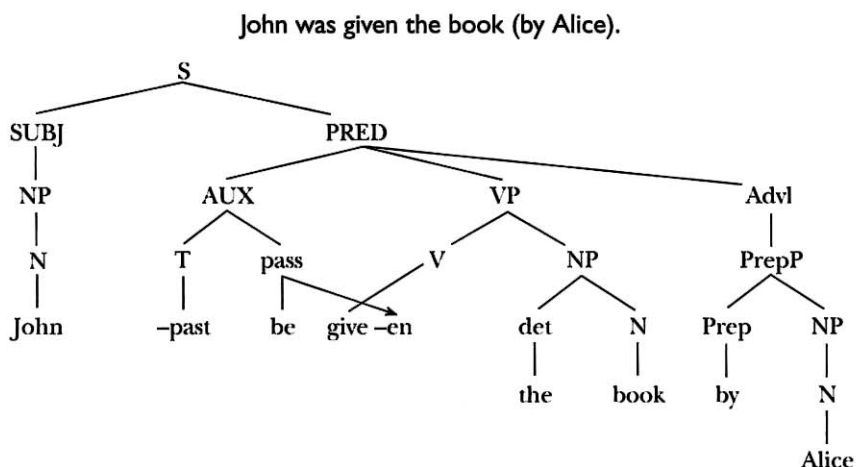
Thus Thompson concludes that indirect objects are indeed more topic-like than direct objects and that indirect objects in postverbal position are more topic-like than those occurring in postprepositional position. These conclusions led Thompson to make two additional suggestions: (1) postverbal position is a favored site for topic-like nonsubjects, and (2) grammatical regularities may be shaped by extragrammatical factors, such as the way speakers manage the flow of information.

### SENTENCES WITH INDIRECT OBJECTS IN THE PASSIVE VOICE

We have already noted that English has more passive voice alternatives for sentences with indirect objects than some other languages do. Thus the active voice sentence "Alice gave John the book," has two passive voice paraphrases; one option selects the direct object as the subject of the passive:



The other option selects the indirect object as the subject of the passive:



Some languages resist selecting the indirect object as the subject of a passive sentence. For example, the literal translation of “John was given the book (by Alice)” would be ungrammatical in German. (In German the direct object or accusative case can become the nominative subject of the passive; however, the dative case cannot.) Students coming from such language backgrounds will need practice in forming English passive sentences where dative, benefactive, and eliciting NPs function as subjects.

Not all sentences containing indirect objects allow two passive paraphrases as readily as the preceding one. When indirect objects are structurally optional constituents in an active sentence, they do not easily serve as the subject of a passive sentence. For example, the active sentence “Mary revealed the truth to Ken” readily accepts the direct object as subject of a passive counterpart:

The truth was revealed to Ken (by Mary).

However, many native speakers of English find that if the indirect object is the subject of the passive, the sentence becomes awkward if not ungrammatical:

?Ken was revealed the truth (by Mary).

Some readers will speculate that since *reveal* does not permit postverbal indirect objects, this may account for the questionable nature of the passive sentence above. However, there are also cases where the active voice counterpart permits alternation:

Arlene made Sandra this dress.  
Arlene made this dress for Sandra.

And the passive counterpart with the direct object as subject is fully acceptable:

This dress was made for Sandra (by Arlene).

However, the version with the indirect object as subject is much more questionable:

?Sandra was made this dress (by Arlene).<sup>12</sup>

Those sentences where the indirect object is an obligatory component of a ditransitive verb readily allow the indirect object to serve as the subject in the passive voice; however, in those sentences where the indirect object is optional—that is, the verb is transitive but requires only a direct object—the indirect object cannot readily serve as the subject of the passive. This is why we put such indirect objects outside the verb phrase in tree diagrams such as the third one in this chapter for “Mary revealed the truth to Ken.” There are disagreements among native speakers regarding the acceptability of such sentences because the closeness of the association between the indirect object and the verb often is a matter of degree rather than a categorical obligatory or optional distinction.

## CONCLUSION

As we have seen many times before, the more closely we examine a structure, the more complicated it seems to become. As usual, more research is needed; for example: is there a principle (or set of principles) to help us better determine which verbs allow indirect object alternation and which do not?

In the meantime, it would seem sensible for you to concentrate your efforts on the following three teaching challenges: (1) whether verbs take dative, benefactive, or eliciting indirect objects and (2) which verbs do—and which do not—allow both indirect object patterns and (3) the fact that only verbs taking dative *to*, benefactive *for*, and eliciting *of* as their prepositions can have postverbal indirect objects in English that retain the same meaning as the paraphrase with the preposition. It will also be helpful if you can give your students some understanding of the discourse principle of dominance so that they have some guidance when trying to decide whether to put the indirect object in postverbal position or in postprepositional position in those cases where both structures are possible.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** To develop your students’ sense of when indirect object alternation is appropriate or inappropriate, group them in pairs to manipulate and discuss sentences with words such as the following written on cards or strips. Then ask students to decide whether or not the *to* can be deleted and what any subsequent word order changes would be.

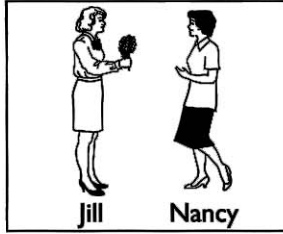
John gave	it	to	Mr. Jones
John gave	the new encyclopedia	to	me

Mary described    the movie    to    me

Sam told    that the meeting was postponed    to    us

This exercise can also be done very effectively with the entire class by using an overhead projector and strips of transparency for the words or groups of words.

**2. Use.** Sketch pictures or clip pictures from magazines that naturally elicit indirect objects; such as the following:



Teacher: What is Jill doing?

Student: She's giving { Nancy (some) flowers. }  
{ (some) flowers to Nancy. }

(Either word order would be an appropriate response.) With more advanced students, the teacher should continue:

Teacher: (removes card from view) Do you think Nancy is happy?

Student: Yes.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because Jill gave her flowers! (The word order with *to* would be less appropriate.)

**3. Form.** To help students develop a sense of using the *to* preposition in those contexts where the indirect object is emphasized in a response, try a drill like this:

- a. S1: Would you lend me your car?  
S2: I can't. I've already promised to lend it to Harvey.
- b. S1: Would you lend me your textbook?  
S2: I can't. I've already promised to lend it to Judy.

**4. Form.** Using verbs like *buy* and *make*, you can elicit addition of a benefactive *for* phrase in the following manner:

- |                                  |                              |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------|
| a. T: John bought some candy.    | b. S2: Sarah made a dress.   |
| S: Who did he buy it for?        | S3: Who did she make it for? |
| T: Himself.                      | S2: Me.                      |
| S: Oh, he bought it for himself! | S3: Oh, she made it for you! |

**5. Form.** To practice the use of direct objects as passive subjects, students can give things—that the teacher provides—to each other with an appropriate follow-up question (Who was the \_\_\_\_\_ given to?):

- a. T: Paolo, give the candy to Maria.    b. T: Said, give the ruler to Roberto.  
 S1: Who was the candy given to?        S3: Who was the ruler given to?  
 S2: It was given to Maria.                S4: It was given to Roberto.

**6. Form.** To practice the use of indirect objects as passive subjects, use consumer gripes as a context. One student can role-play the consumer affairs officer and the others can state their complaints.

- a. S1: What's your  $\left. \begin{array}{l} \text{complaint} \\ \text{problem} \\ \text{gripe} \end{array} \right\}$ ?  
 S2: I was sold a bad car by AZ Used Cars.  
 b. S1: What's your \_\_\_\_\_?  
 S3: I was sold a defective TV set by Jones Appliances.  
 c. S1: What's your \_\_\_\_\_?  
 S4: I was sold a fake diamond by Bijou Jewelers.

**7. Meaning.** To help learners practice deciding whether verbs take *to*, *for*, or *of* with indirect objects, have students paraphrase sentences like the following so that the indirect object becomes the most important (i.e., new or dominant) information. They should imagine dialogues where *A* first says the indirect objects very softly or mumbles them.

- A: I gave Mary the book.  
 B: Who?  
 A: I gave the book to *Mary*.  
 A: I baked Harry a pie.  
 B: Who?  
 A: I baked a pie for *Harry*.

Other sentences that could be used for this exercise are:

- I asked Bill a question.  
 I sold Jane my car.  
 I read Susie a story.

## EXERCISES

**Test your understanding of what has been presented.**

1. Provide original example sentences to illustrate the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples.
- |  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| a. direct object                           | g. indirect object alternation |
| b. eliciting indirect object               | h. benefactive <i>for</i>      |
| c. benefactive indirect object             | i. proxy <i>for</i>            |
| d. dative indirect object                  | j. verb of transfer            |
| e. passive with indirect object as subject | k. verb of future possession   |
| f. dominance                               |                                |





2. Give tree diagrams and mapping rules for the following sentences:
  - a. I handed Sue the note.
  - b. He was offered a job by the supervisor.
  - c. The information was given to him yesterday.
  - d. We bought Horace a watch.
  - e. Did Martha ask George a question?
3. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical (or at best awkward)?
  - a. \*John hasn't sent his brother it.
  - b. \*Mary bought for me the book.
  - c. \*Roger asked a question to Phyllis.
4. List all the active and passive sentences—with and without indirect object alternation—that would be related to the following information.
  - a. verb: send (past tense); agent: mother; direct object: the parcel; directional indirect object: Bob.
  - b. verb: bring (past tense); agent: Bill; direct objects: some flowers; benefactive indirect object: Agnes.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct the errors?
  - a. \*Explain me that rule again, please.
  - b. \*Are you going to give to me an answer?
  - c. \*Why didn't you open him the door?
  - d. \*We didn't know, so we asked to Harry.
  - e. \*Please excuse me my poor English.
6. Bruce Fraser (personal communication) has suggested that the indirect object alternation rule for verbs taking the preposition *to* is based on phonological considerations and will apply *only* if the verb is:
  - a. monosyllabic; or
  - b. disyllabic with stress on the initial syllable; for example:
 

Tell John the answer.	*Explain John the answer.
Offer us something else.	*Communicate Ann the answer.
?Whisper Ann the answer.	

Can you think of any exceptions to this rule? What about verbs that take the prepositions *for* and *of*?

7. ESL/EFL students sometimes have difficulty in distinguishing pairs such as the following—especially when they are listening. Think of ways that would help students learn what to watch for to clearly distinguish such sentences.

Mary was giving a sweater to John  
Mary was given a sweater by John.

8. One of your students asks you what kind of verb *beg* is (dative? benefactive? eliciting?) and whether or not it can take an indirect object. How will you respond?

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- Wierzbicka, A. (1988). *The Semantics of Grammar*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins (see pp. 353–389).
- Williams, R. S. (1994). "A Statistical Analysis of Double Object Alternation." *Issues in Applied Linguistics* 5:1, 35–59.

**Suggestions for further reading**

*For excellent discussions of the interaction of the passive voice and indirect object alternation, see:*

- Fillmore, C. J. (1965). *Indirect Object Constructions in English and the Ordering of Transformations*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Fillmore, C. J. (1968). "The Case for Case." In E. Bach and R. Harms (eds.), *Universals in Linguistic Theory*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

*For good traditional discussion of indirect objects, see:*

- Frank, M. (1993). *Modern English* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Regents.
- Jespersen, O. (1964). *Essentials of English Grammar*. University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 111–116.

*For two useful articles dealing with the use of indirect objects (R. S. Williams) and their acquisition (W. D. Davies) see the June, 1994 (vol. 5:1) Issues in Applied Linguistics.*

*For a study focusing on the L2 acquisition of dative alternation in English by speakers of Chinese and Japanese, see:*

- Inagaki, S. (1997). Japanese and Chinese Learners' Acquisition of the Narrow-Range Rules for Dative Alternation in English. *Language Learning* 47:4, 637–669

*For good lists and patterns for verbs taking indirect objects, see:*

- Praninskas, J. (1975). *Rapid Review of English Grammar*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 202–203.

For some examples of exercises for teaching indirect objects, see:

- Badalamenti, V., and C. Henner Stanchina (1997). *Grammar Dimensions: Form, Meaning, and Use*. Book 1 (2d ed.). Boston: Heinle & Heinle (unit 13, pp. 187–204).
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## ENDNOTES

1. Here we interpret *give* as the specific transfer of something from one person to another—not as the general *give*, which means “to donate.” In this latter general sense, of course, an explicit indirect object, while possible, is not required. These two meanings of *give* would have separate lexical entries.

2. Jacobson, however, does not refer to them as verbs that take indirect objects; rather, he considers them verbs that take direct objects plus complements.

3. “Dative” is the term used by Fillmore (1968) for such indirect objects, while Jacobson refers to them as “directional.” You may want to consider following Jacobson’s terminology for pedagogical purposes.

4. Students have asked us why objects of *from* and *with* in sentences like the following are not also considered indirect objects:

- a. I took the book from her.
- b. I left the book with her.

In sentence (a), *from her* expresses the source, not the recipient of the book. We would not be able to say “I took her the book” and have the same meaning as in (a). In (b) the *with her* expresses the location of the book rather than receivership or possession of it. If we say “I left her the book,” what we really mean is “I left the book for her,” where she is indeed the intended recipient. From examination of sentences such as these, it can be concluded that only verbs taking the prepositions *to*, *for*, and *of* can have indirect objects in English. The students’ first language may often be the source of these questions and of the related errors they make in English. For example, in German it is possible to have a postverbal—in this case postauxiliary—indirect object expressing the equivalent of “steal from”: *Er hat mir das Auto gestohlen* = *He stole the car from me*. Literally, this is *He has me the car stolen*, which can be more freely translated as *He stole me the car*. In English this sentence would mean, “He stole the car for me,” not “He stole the car from me.”

5. Wierzbicka’s term for this construction is “internal dative,” but since she includes benefactive and eliciting verbs along with dative verbs, we feel that “internal dative” is a syntactic rather than a semantic notion.

6. Of course, “dominance” can also be achieved by phonological means (i.e., stress) just as it can through syntax. For example, contrary to Erteschik-Shir’s syntactic principle, one could say:

Pass *the salt* to me. (i.e., not the pepper!)    Pass *me* the salt. (i.e., not Roger!)

7. Sentences of this form are apparently much more acceptable in British than American English.
8. “Dative alternation” is called “dative shift” by Thompson.
9. Thompson refers to “recipients” rather than indirect objects and to “patients” rather than direct objects.
10. Thompson’s term here is “topicworthy.”
11. In some dialects of English—especially British—*The book was given John (by Alice)* is another acceptable version of this sentence. In American English, retention of the preposition *to* is preferred.
12. Again, several native speakers of British English have indicated to us that this sentence is acceptable in their dialect. For most speakers of American English, this is not the case.

# ADJECTIVES

## INTRODUCTION

As you saw in Chapter 2, adjectives are words that describe a quality of a noun. Adjectives remain invariant in form, no matter what position they occupy in a sentence.

The moon is *full* tonight.  
The *full* moon shone brightly.

The forms of adjectives in English are not as complicated as they are in some other languages. Although they once did, English adjectives no longer inflect for gender, person, or number.

Although this seems easy enough, ESL/EFL learners do have to learn certain things about English adjectives. Some adjectives can occur only before a noun; others only after a copular verb. Many adjectives can occupy more than one position, but depending on where they are placed, they may convey different meanings. Finally, when more than one adjective is used, as in

A *spectacular full* moon seemed to rise from the sea.

they often must be sequenced a particular way, which may cause problems for students.

## THE FORM OF ADJECTIVES

As we saw in Chapters 2 and 3, adjectives do not have any typical form; however, derivational affixes commonly associated with adjectives include *-al* (*mental, special*), *-able/-ible* (*commendable, possible*), *-ar* (*particular, popular*), *-ful/-less* (*hopeful, hopeless*), *-ic* (*scientific, basic*), *-ive* (*attractive, expensive*), *-ous* (*dangerous, delicious*), and *-y* (*pretty, dirty*) (Leech 1989).

Adjectives also have two inflectional morphemes: the *-er* of the comparative (*larger*) and the *-est* (*largest*) of the superlative. We will say no more at this point about these inflectional morphemes because we devote two full chapters to issues of comparison and degree (Chapters 34 and 35).

The syntax of adjectives is another matter. As we saw in our phrase structure rules, there are two basic positions for adjectives in a sentence:

### I. Attributive position (before a noun)

NP → (det) (AP) N (-pl) (PrepP)  
the *funny* clowns  
a *perfect* match

2. Predicative position (after *be* copula and other copular or linking verbs—*seem, appear, feel, look, etc.*)

VP → cop AP  
 The clowns are *funny*.  
 The weather turned *cold*.

Sometimes the copular verb is deleted, here in its infinitive form, so that the adjective follows a noun directly; the same string can be directly generated as an object noun predicate:

They considered Stuart [to be] *mad*.

A predicative adjective in postnominal position can also result from a reduced relative clause (discussed below):

The news [that is] *available* at this time is not good.

In the following sections, we go into further detail with regard to the two basic positions of adjectives in English clauses.

## ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES

Prenominal, or attributive, position is the most characteristic position for English adjectives. Although many adjectives can appear in both positions, certain ones, called reference adjectives, must occur prenominal. The following list details the eight categories of adjectives that occur exclusively in attributive position (based on Bolinger 1967).

### Reference Adjectives

1. Those adjectives that show the reference of the head noun has already been determined:

the  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{very} \\ \text{particular} \\ \text{same} \\ \text{self-same} \\ \text{exact} \end{array} \right\}$  man I was seeking

2. Those adjectives that show us the importance or rank of the head noun:

their  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{main} \\ \text{prime} \\ \text{principal} \\ \text{chief} \end{array} \right\}$  faults

3. Those adjectives that show the head noun is recognized by law or custom:

the  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{lawful} \\ \text{rightful} \\ \text{legal} \\ \text{true} \end{array} \right\}$  heir

4. Those adjectives that identify the reference of the noun itself—that is, they, tell us (in part) what the noun means—and that may not occur after the copula *be*.

a medical doctor	*a doctor is medical
an atomic physicist	*a physicist is atomic
a reserve officer	*an officer is reserve





As we have already seen, predicative adjectives can also occur directly after a noun when the copular verb has been deleted. There are two kinds. The first kind of postnominal adjective consists of adjectives modifying object nouns:

They considered Stuart mad.

This pattern occurs only with certain verbs. One group are verbs showing mental assessments or personal preferences, such as *consider*, *like*, *think*, *prefer*, *declare*, *report*, *believe*, *imagine*, *hold*, *want*, *call*, and so on.

Sandy thought it odd.

They declared him sane.

They held him accountable.

As we observed earlier, the adjective occurs directly following the NP because an object noun predicate has been generated or because the copula in its infinitive form has been deleted. The pattern with the infinitive is discussed further in Chapter 31 on complementation.

Another group of verbs that permit the adjective to follow the object directly are certain causative verbs such as *make*, *turn*, *get*, *keep*:

Hay fever makes me crazy.

The frost turned the leaves brown.

His diet kept him healthy.

No deleted infinitive copula is posited for such sentences. Notice, however, that these sentences can be paraphrased by inserting the verb *cause* and a copula infinitive:

Hay fever causes me to be crazy.

The frost causes the leaves to turn brown.

His diet causes him to keep healthy.

See Chapter 32 for more on the special characteristics of causative verbs.

The second kind of postnominal adjective can be said to be derived from relative clauses (see Chapter 29). Suffice it to say here that they follow the noun directly, having lost the relative pronoun and the *be* verb of the relative clause:

The news available at this time is not good.

↑  
[that is]

Here are two more examples:

People strong in character should run for political office.

↑  
[who are]

Join the committee concerned with local development issues.

↑  
[that is]

It should be apparent why relative clauses are sometimes called adjective clauses. Adjectives and relative clauses serve similar functions in providing qualifying information about nouns.

As with the other positions, a few categories of adjectives always occur in postnominal position (Chalker 1984).

#### I. Adjectives in phrases of measurement:

He is six feet tall.

The ruler is twelve inches long.

Note that entire adjectival measure phrases can appear before a noun, but when they do, the noun is in its singular form, regardless of the cardinal number expressed:

They have a one-year-old child.  
 He is a six-foot-tall man.  
 It is a twelve-inch-long ruler.

Actually this is true of more than measure phrases. Nouns serving to modify other nouns are unmarked for number in prenominal position. This is a minor point, but a source of errors for ESL/EFL students.

I need an egg carton.      This shoe box will do.  
 \*I need an eggs carton.    \*This shoes box will do.<sup>3</sup>

**2. Adjectives in certain fixed expressions (mostly borrowed from French):**

attorney *general*    heir *apparent*  
 president-*elect*    notary *public*

**3. Adjectives following indefinite pronouns, where the adjective derives from a reduced relative clause:**

Let's do something [that is] *more interesting*.  
 I can't think of anything [that is] *exciting* to do.

**PARTICIPLES**

You may have noticed that the adjectives in our last two examples end in *-ing*. We have encountered this form previously only as progressive aspect, where we knew it as a present participle. It is indeed a present participle here as well, although here it serves an adjectival, as opposed to a verbal, function. As such, it can be found in the positions that other adjectives can fill:

Attributive:      *He has led an interesting life.*  
 Predicative:     *His life has been interesting.*  
 Predicative:     *Marshall has made life interesting.*  
 (post-nominal)

Before we distinguish present participles functioning as adjectives from present participles functioning as verbs, remember in the chapter on passives we saw that the past participle (*-en*) can also function both adjectivally and verbally. You may have noticed this in the use of past participial adjectives in some of the examples above, such as *concerned* and *inclined*. Past participles functioning as adjectives can occupy the same positions as many other adjectives:

Attributive:      *The well-worn book was a favorite of all the children.*  
 Predicative:     *The book was well worn.*  
 Predicative:     *The book, well worn from much use, was a favorite.*  
 (post-nominal)

In addition, both present and past participles can be modified by nouns or adverbs to create compound participial adjectives:

noun + present participle—*a man-eating tiger*  
 noun + past participle—*a flea-bitten dog*  
 adverb + present participle—*a fast-rising star*  
 adverb (intensifier) + past participle—*a much-loved story*

## Distinguishing Adjectival Participles from Verbal Participles

*-ing* adjective: The magician is *amazing*.

*-ing* verb: The magician is *amazing* us with his magic tricks.

*-en* adjective: The security guard was *relieved*. (i.e., he stopped worrying)

*-en* verb: The security guard was *relieved* by the night watchman. (i.e., replaced)

One way to differentiate adjectival participles from verbal participles is to add the intensifier *very* before the italicized forms in the above sentences. Since we know that intensifiers can precede adjectives but not verbs, sentences having verbs with intensifiers before them are ungrammatical.

The magician is very amazing.

\*The magician is very amazing us with his magic tricks.

The security guard was very relieved.

\*The security guard was very relieved by the night watchman.

This test is more successful in distinguishing identical *-ing* forms than it is identical *-en* forms, however, as there appears to be increasing acceptance of the use of intensifiers with a *by* phrase that would normally mark a passive use of the past participle.

Her behavior shocked all of us.

We were all (very) shocked by her behavior.

In other cases, where there is only one form, the intensifier test works to identify past participles serving as passive verbs:

I was paid for my efforts.

\*I was very paid for my efforts.    } (past participle is verbal: it fails the intensifier test,  
I was well paid for my efforts.    } but can be modified by the adverb *well*, which in  
turn can be modified by *very*.)

I was very discontented with my pay. (past participle is adjectival)

Some adjectives look as if they were past participles, but they actually aren't:

the one-legged man	the crooked lane
the naked truth	the wicked witch
the green-eyed monster	the bearded iris

As we saw in Chapter 18, the pronunciation of certain of these adjectives (*legged*, *crooked*, *naked*, *wicked*) is distinctive. Where phonological rules wouldn't predict it, the *-ed* is pronounced syllabically as /ɪd/. Sometimes the only thing that determines whether an attributive adjective is a past participle or not is its pronunciation:

a learned behavior	a learned scholar
(/lɜːnd/ is a past participle)	(/lɜːnɪd/ is not a past participle)

The intensifier test will also work to distinguish postnominal participles that are adjectives from postnominal participles that are verbal. Here are some participles that result from reduced relative clauses but fail the intensifier test and, therefore, are not adjectival participles:<sup>4</sup>

Who is that person waving at us?

\*Who is that person very waving at us?

The man, robbed of his passport, went immediately to the embassy.

\*The man, very robbed of his passport, went immediately to the embassy.

An additional test to determine whether the *-en* form is adjectival or verbal is to look at the preposition following it. *-En* forms functioning as adjectives take a variety of prepositions (e.g., *amazed at*, *interested in*, etc.), whereas *-en* forms functioning as passive verbs normally take only the *by* phrase; although, as you saw above, having a *by* phrase is no guarantee that the past participle is a verb.

adjective:        *We were amazed at his success.*  
 adjective/verb?: *We were (very) amazed by his performance.* (no explicit agent in *by* phrase)  
 verb:            *He was greeted by his many fans after the show.* (explicit agents in *by* phrase)

The identity of form can sometimes create ambiguous sentences.

*Martha Stewart is entertaining.*  
 adjective:    *She is an entertaining person.*  
 verb:         *She is entertaining guests.*

*We were relieved.*  
 adjective:    *We felt a sense of relief.*  
 verb:         *We were relieved by other workers. (i.e., they came to take our places.)*

Of course, when these sentences occur in context, it's highly unlikely that they will be perceived as ambiguous.

## OTHER STRUCTURAL FACTS

As you can see in our phrase structure rule

AP → (intens)<sup>n</sup> ADJ<sup>n</sup> (PrepP)

an adjective can be optionally preceded by one or more intensifiers:

Lennox china is very expensive.  
 Wedgewood china is really very expensive.

And a predicative or postnominal adjective can be followed by a prepositional phrase:

I was really surprised at her appearance.  
 She got me interested in quilting.

For certain adjectives, the prepositional phrase is obligatory:

\*He was averse.  
 He was averse to my suggestion.

Some adjectives always co-occur with the same preposition (e.g., *conscious of*); others take a variety of prepositions, often with a shift of meaning, such as *good with*, *good to*, *good for*, *good at*.

We also know from our phrase structure rules, that some noun phrases can also take prepositional phrases:

a man of honor

These seem very similar semantically to attributive adjectives:

an honorable man

The function of prepositional phrases following nouns is adjectival, unlike that of prepositional phrases in the verb phrase, which is adverbial.

## THE MEANING OF ADJECTIVES

### ATTRIBUTIVE VERSUS PREDICATIVE POSITION

Now that we have shifted our attention to semantic considerations, it is time to investigate the meaning of adjectives. As we said earlier, many adjectives can appear in both attributive and predicative position; however, with a few adjectives, there is a change in meaning.

That responsible person. (trustworthy)  
That person is responsible. (trustworthy, or to blame)

Bolinger (1967) noted that there is often something semantically more permanent or characteristic about the attributive adjectives that directly precede nouns than the post-nominal adjectives that directly follow nouns, which tend to reflect temporary states or specific events; for example:

The stolen jewels (a characteristic of the jewels)  
The jewels stolen (identified by a specific act—maybe they were recovered later)

The only navigable river (usual fact about a given region)  
The only river navigable (temporary state due to a drought or some other event)

The guilty people (a characteristic, classifying modifier of the people)  
The people guilty (the people are described in terms of one act or event)

Predicative adjectives are potentially ambiguous, since if we say:

These jewels are stolen.  
The river is navigable.  
These people are guilty.

we cannot tell whether the adjective is being used to describe something that is permanent and characteristic of the subject noun or something that is temporary or occasional. Changing the adjective to either attributive position or immediate postnominal position can disambiguate in such cases. As Bolinger points out, attributive position tends to reject the temporary and the occasional; for example:

The house was pink in the sunset  $\neq$  The pink house

This is further borne out by the fact that health adjectives are usually used predicatively, as you have seen.

He is sick.

If we change the adjective to attributive position, the quality is construed as much more enduring:

He is a sick man.

Attributive position also favors negatives that characterize:

the departed relative	*the arrived relative
your absent friend	*your present friend

Compound attributive adjectives formed with present participles tend to reflect habitual or customary action as opposed to isolated events;<sup>5</sup>

Your friend writes plays.  $\rightarrow$  Your play-writing friend  
The man broke a leg.  $\rightarrow$  \*The leg-breaking man



Carnivores are animals that eat meat. → Carnivores are meat-eating animals.  
 My brother bought a house. → \*My house-buying brother

Other languages use adjective position to mark meaningful differences, of course. In Spanish, for instance, prenominal or postnominal adjectives can differ in meaning.

*El viejo amigo* describes a friend you have had for a long time.  
*El amigo viejo* describes a friend who is elderly.

Compare this with the three-way ambiguity of the English phrase “*an old friend*,” which obliges English speakers to paraphrase it with a relative clause to make its meaning clear.

an old friend { a friend who is old  
 a friend whom I have had for a long time  
 a former friend (i.e., a person who is no longer my friend)

### PARTICIPLES (PRESENT VERSUS PAST)

A problem for many nonnative speakers of English is the adjectival use of *-ing* and *-en* participles derived from “emotive” verbs. The term “emotive” is used to refer to verbs such as the following:

aggravate	bore	convince	frighten	mislead	shock
alarm	calm	defeat	insult	mystify	stagger
amaze	captivate	disappoint	interest	overwhelm	surprise
amuse	charm	disturb	intrigue	please	terrify
annoy	comfort	embarrass	involve <sup>6</sup>	puzzle	tire
astonish	concern <sup>6</sup>	encourage	love	satisfy	worry
bewilder	confuse	excite			

A tendency that many nonnative speakers have is to overgeneralize the *-ing* participle and produce sentences such as the following:

\*I am interesting in sports. (i.e., *interesting* for *interested*)

Students have to learn that when they want to use an adjective to refer to the experiencer—the one experiencing the emotion—then the *-en* participle should be used. If they want to use an adjective to refer to the cause of the experience, the *-ing* participle should be used. There is a semantically related sentence that contains the emotive verb without a participial form.<sup>7</sup>

<i>Emotive Verb</i>	<i>-en</i> participle refers to the experiencer (the object of the active sentence with the emotive verb)	<i>-ing</i> participle refers to the cause (the subject of the active sentence with the emotive verb)
Sports interest Francis.	Francis is interested in sports.	Sports are interesting to Francis.
Ethnic jokes don't amuse Kowalski.	Kowalski is not amused by ethnic jokes.	Ethnic jokes aren't amusing (to Kowalski).
Ted's loud stereo annoys his neighbors.	Ted's neighbors are annoyed by his loud stereo.	Ted's loud stereo is annoying (to his neighbors).



**POLARITY**

Earlier, in Chapter 10, we spoke of adjectives of negative and positive polarity. Polarity merely refers to positive and negative contrasts in a language. Thus, adjectives can be paired by contrasting poles:

<i>Positive Polarity (unmarked)</i>	<i>Negative Polarity (marked)</i>
big	small; little
old	young
old	new
long	short
good	bad
hard	soft
fast	slow
tall	short
wide	narrow
high	low
loud	quiet
rough	smooth

The adjectives with positive polarity are unmarked because they are used more frequently in a given language, learned earlier by children, and used in neutral contexts, such as

How old are you?

The adjectives of negative polarity, on the other hand, are marked, meaning that they are less frequently used, being reserved for unusual contexts.

You say that your daughter is too young to pay full fare. Just how young is she?

Notice the asymmetry is also displayed in answers to questions with adjectives of different polarity.

How old are you? (unmarked)	{ Very old. Very young.
How young are you? (marked)	{ *Very old. Very young.

We say more about the polarity of adjectives in the discussion of comparisons.

**GRADABILITY**

Earlier in this chapter, we suggested that the intensifier test could be used to test to see if a participle was acting as a verb or adjective. In fact, many adjectives can be placed on a continuum of intensity, with the intensity increasing or decreasing depending on the intensifier chosen.

[less intense]	[more intense]
somewhat rare, rare, quite rare, very rare, extremely rare	

While this works well for many adjectives, not all adjectives can be so modified. Some adjectives, in fact, are not gradable, such as the following:

## 1. Reference adjectives:

- \*The very former senator from the state of Washington
- \*The very symphonic concert

## 2. Adjectives with an absolute meaning:

- \*A very alternative way of looking at the matter

## 3. Adjectives of nationality

- \*She is very Scottish. (We can say, of course, “She is very Scottish,” if we are referring to some aspect of her behavior, such as her pronunciation. [Chalker 1984])

## ISSUES OF USE

### ORDER OF ATTRIBUTIVE ADJECTIVES

Our phrase structure rule for defining adjective phrases allows for more than one adjective in a sequence:

AP → (intens)<sup>n</sup> ADJ<sup>n</sup> (PrepP)

The order of two or more attributive adjectives is a point of English grammar that is a minor source of error for nonnative speakers of English. This is partly so because not all languages follow a prenominal order the way English does. For instance, some languages, like French, have a mixed order: some attributive adjectives referring to age, size, and evaluation precede the noun, while other attributive adjectives referring to color or origin follow. For example:

une grande voiture jaune	une vieille femme Italienne
(big) (car) (yellow)	(old) (woman) (Italian)
“a big yellow car”	“an old Italian woman”

In certain cases, two adjectives may precede a noun in French and one may follow:

une jolie petite voiture jaune
(pretty) (little) (car) (yellow)
“a pretty little yellow car”

French also seems to permit no more than two adjectives following a noun:

une voiture Japonaise jaune
(car) (Japanese) (yellow)
“a yellow Japanese car”

Even this seems stylistically awkward to many French speakers, who would prefer to avoid such a construction altogether.

In Arabic, according to Svatko (1979), *all* attributive adjectives come after the noun, and up to three adjectives are possible in this position; however, Svatko adds that the Arabic ordering system is less rigid than the English one; as a result of all these differences, Arabic speakers beginning their study of English make adjective ordering errors in their English speech and writing; for example,

\*an American interesting movie    \*a wooden big bowl

In her study Svatko found that more advanced Arabic speakers of English made fewer errors of this type and were able to more closely approximate the English system.

Adjective order has been discussed by traditional and structural linguists for some time. Sledd (1959), for example, in his structurally based introduction to English grammar, gives the following order (which we have adapted somewhat) for elements in a noun phrase:

1. predeterminer
2. core determiner
3. post determiner
4. intensifier
5. descriptive adjective
6. noun adjunct or modifier
7. head noun (the noun being modified)

Some example sentences making use of this order are:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
All (of)	the	dozen	very	long-stemmed	American-beauty	roses
Both (of)	John's	last	quite	rare	history	books

Kathleen Bailey (1975), in an empirical investigation of attributive adjective ordering in English, points out that Sledd's fifth category (descriptive adjectives) has several subcategories, some of which are:

- a. coloration
- b. measurement (*tiny, short*)
- c. shape (*irregular, round*)
- d. subjective evaluation (*nice, sweet*)

Bailey's data, which included (1) analysis of both transcribed speech and written texts, (2) a card-sorting task, and (3) speech samples that were elicited with visual prompts, show that most of these subcategories have a relatively fixed ordering with respect to one another that is seldom violated. This ordering of elements in the noun phrase is as follows:

1. determiner
2. subjective or evaluative adjective
3. measurement adjective
4. coloration adjective
5. material adjective
6. head noun

Examples:

1	2	3	4	5	6
The	poor	little	pink	plastic	doll
An	ugly	old	gray	wooden	statue

Svatko's (1979) study of adjective ordering in English starts with the description given in Praninskas (1975:262), which Svátko selects as the best one available. It is more detailed than Bailey's in that seven rather than four distinct semantic categories of descriptive adjectives are listed. (Note, however, that material adjectives are not distinguished from geographical origin—Indonesian, Egyptian, etc.—adjectives in this system.)<sup>9</sup>

det	opinion	size	shape	condition	age	color	origin	noun
an	ugly	big	round	chipped	old	blue	French	vase

Both Praninskas and Svatko point out that sequences of more than three adjectives seldom occur in speech or writing and that two-adjective sequences are the most typical ones. When more than one occurs, however, they should follow this order.

Svatko's study tested Praninskas' ordering rule by using a series of questionnaires with items such as the following, which presented two, three, or four adjectives that respondents were then asked to order with respect to each other in a given context:

This is a/an \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ car.  
 large  
 American  
 red

This is a/an \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_ test.  
 short  
 easy

Based on the responses of 30 native speakers of English, correlations were calculated to determine the strength of the relationship between the predicted position (i.e., Praninskas' order) and the observed position (i.e., the order emerging from the responses of the native speakers) for each semantic category of pronominal adjectives. The results were as follows:

opinion	size	shape	condition	age	color	origin	noun
.80	.96	.66	.79	.85	.77	1.0	

For adjectives referring to origin, speaker performance matched order prediction 100 percent of the time; that is, there was a perfect correlation. Adjectives of size exhibited a strong correlation, while adjectives of age, opinion, condition, and color also exhibited fairly strong correlations. Adjectives of shape exhibited the weakest correlation between the predicted and the observed order. These results indicate that while the established order is valid, it is not equally fixed for all types of adjectives.

Another point we should mention about adjective order is that attributive adjectives are sometimes conjoined with *and* when there are two adjectives from the same category that both partially modify the same noun (i.e., using either of the two adjectives alone would be semantically misleading):

an orange and white marble  
 a wooden and metal implement

Also, two or more attributive adjectives are sometimes separated by commas in writing if there is repetition (intensification) or if the two adjectives are from the same class and are not incompatible (i.e., it would not be semantically misleading to use only one of them); for example:

a big, big ice cream cone  
 a charming, attractive host



## CASES WITH VARIABLE ORDER

Certain adjectives Bailey (1979) described have a variable order:

1. Proper adjectives<sup>10</sup> and the way they order with material adjectives such as *wooden*, *brick*, and *glassy*; for example:

These  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{wooden Japanese} \\ \text{Japanese wooden} \end{array} \right\}$  chests      A large  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{porcelain Chinese} \\ \text{Chinese porcelain} \end{array} \right\}$  vase

2. Proper adjectives and adjectives of color, such as

A  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{German white} \\ \text{white German} \end{array} \right\}$  wine

3. Adjectives denoting shape—such words as *round*, *oblong*, *wide*, and *flat*—may, in combinations with other adjectives, be rearranged according to the demands of the context:

a  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{large} \\ \text{yellow} \end{array} \right\}$  oblong box / an oblong  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{large} \\ \text{yellow} \end{array} \right\}$  box  
 a round  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{blue} \\ \text{small} \end{array} \right\}$  table / a  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{blue} \\ \text{small} \end{array} \right\}$  round table

Further study is needed to determine the semantic constraints and discourse contexts that will explain the variable order for these types of adjectives.

## THE PRIMARY STRESS RULE

Another interesting finding of Bailey's study is that subjects produced strings such as the following in two different contexts with different stress patterns:

Context 1: Three large triangles—one blue, one red, and one yellow—produced “*the large YELLOW triangle.*”

Context 2: Three yellow triangles—two small and one large—produced “*the LARGE yellow triangle.*”

That is to say, the ordering of measurement and color adjectives is more or less fixed, but English speakers assign primary stress to one adjective or the other depending on context; that is, the adjective that most clearly limits and defines the noun with respect to the other nouns in the same context gets primary stress.

## CONCLUSION

Although English adjectives aren't complicated, compared with those in other languages, some teachable points can help ESL/EFL students master them more efficiently. Primary among these are matters of meaning and use, particularly the meaning of adjectives associated with particular positions, the meaning differences between present and past participles, and the sequencing of descriptive adjectives of different types when using more than one in attributive position.



## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** Tim Butterworth and Darlene Schultz suggest that a teacher who wants to have students practice adjectives should put on a desk a number of different objects. Then the teacher tells students to concentrate on the objects. After a few minutes, the teacher covers the objects with a cloth. Students are then asked to remember as many of the objects as they can and describe them; for example:

a gold(en) cufflink  
a little blue stuffed animal

**2. Form.** Firstin and Killian (1994) recommend a role play in which one person plays the role of a traveler at an airport or train station who has lost his or her luggage, while another student plays the role of an agent in the “Lost-and-Found” office. The agent has to ask very specific questions about the lost luggage and its contents, and the traveler has to be able to answer the question in great detail.

**3. Form.** To work with the need to hyphenate prenominal measure phrases, tell students to treat the hyphens as if they were parentheses in math, where the inner (i.e. hyphenated) material is interpreted first, before the larger phrase.

four year old children  
four [year-old] children  
[four-year-old] children

Have them hyphenate other measure phrases depending on the meaning, such as

five hundred pound wrestlers (Hyphenate this to describe sumo wrestlers.)  
two foot long hot dogs (Hyphenate this to show what is so famous about hot dogs from Coney Island.)

**4. Meaning.** In order to give high-intermediate or advanced ESL/EFL students a feeling for attributive versus postnominal position of those adjectives that can occur in both positions, exercises such as the following should be provided. The students should be asked to put the adjective specified in attributive position if a characteristic or permanent meaning is conveyed, and in postnominal position if a temporary or specific interpretation is called for.

- a. *available.* We didn't purchase any new equipment last month because there was so little (1)\_\_\_\_\_ money (2)\_\_\_\_\_.
- b. *elected.* At the beginning of each board meeting, the chairperson introduces the (1)\_\_\_\_\_ officers (2)\_\_\_\_\_.
- c. *assigned.* Jack has decided to take History 100 instead of History 121 next semester because the professor teaching History 100 says there will be no (1)\_\_\_\_\_ term projects (2)\_\_\_\_\_.

**5. Meaning.** To help students understand the meaning of present participle versus past participle adjectives, Steve Thewlis (1997) says to give students a short list of some common emotions or feelings, such as boredom, confusion, depression, excitement, and embarrassment. They then form groups and make two lists—(1) situations that may cause them to feel this way and (2) their reactions when they do. For example, *boredom*:

*Boring Situations*  
long meetings

*Bored Reactions*  
doodle

movies I have seen already    fall asleep  
 some lectures                    think about other things

The groups then compare their responses and discuss similarities and differences.

**6. Form/Meaning.** For more advanced students, give them the following passage from Mark Twain's *Life on the Mississippi*.

After all of these years I can still picture that old time to myself now, just as it was then: the town drowsing in the sunshine on a summer's morning; the streets empty, or pretty nearly so; one or two clerks sitting in front of the Water Street stores with their splint-bottomed chairs tilted back against the walls, chins on breasts, hats slouched over their faces, asleep . . . ; two or three wood flats at the end of the wharf, but nobody to listen to the peaceful lapping of the wavelets against them; the great Mississippi, rolling its mile-wide tide along, point above the town and the point below, bounding the river-glimpse and burning it into a sort of sea, and withal a very still and brilliant and lonely one.

Ask students to identify the adjectives and discuss their position.

**7. Meaning.** The teacher might try a variation of "Mad-Libs." To do this the teacher writes a passage, leaving blanks where adjectives belong. Without showing the passage to the class, the teacher elicits an adjective of color, an adjective of shape, a proper adjective, an adjective with *-ing*, an adjective with *-en*, an adjective that can be preceded by *very*, and so on. Then the students fill in the blanks using the adjectives that have been elicited. Usually, a humorous story results. Following this class exercise, the students prepare their own similar passages (individually or in groups) and have other students supply them with adjectives to fill in the blanks.

**8. Use.** Penny Ur (1988) suggests giving each student a copy of several grids. Across the horizontal axis are two adjectives of different types in the correct order plus a noun. In each column of the grid are adjectives of the same type. Students have to choose an adjective from each of the first two columns and a noun from the third column. They check one box in each column. Then, they try to find their "twin"—someone else in the class who has made the same choices. For example:

**Grid 1**

I have a . . .

big	black	dog
small	brown	mouse
fat	white	cat

*Student A:* Do you have a big white cat?

*Student B:* No, I don't.

**Grid 2**

I have some . . .

expensive	French	paintings
cheap	Spanish	vases
rare	Italian	glasses

*Student A:* Do you have some expensive Italian vases?

*Student B:* Yes, I do. You're my twin!

**9. Use.** Have each student in the class write a sentence that describes another student, using two or more adjectives. The other students have to guess who is being described; for example:

He is an athletic, eighteen-year-old Mexican student.



## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide an original sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) or word parts in your example.
 

a. attributive adjective	e. present participle adjective
b. predicate adjective	f. past participle adjective
c. postnominal adjective	g. restrictive adjective
d. reference adjective	h. gradable adjective
2. Why are the following sentences ungrammatical?
  - a. \*The asleep children can have lunch later.
  - b. \*This problem is main.
  - c. \*An overly fond of chocolate person is called a "chocoholic."
  - d. \*Jessica is my thirteen-years-old friend.
3. How is the following sentence ambiguous?  
 Hazel is trying.
4. Explain the difference:  
 Tom Sawyer painted the fence white.  
 Tom Sawyer painted the white fence.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

5. If your students make any of the following errors, how would you help them become aware of the errors, and what exercise could you develop to help students correct them?
  - a. \*She received a big nice bunch of roses for Valentine's Day.
  - b. \*Snowball is my white hairs cat.
  - c. \*I am boring in algebra class.
6. Why is the following amusing?  
 A: How good are the Boston Red Sox this year?  
 B: (disgusted fan) You mean how bad are they.
7. A student asks you to explain why she heard a native speaker say,  
 She avoided things unfamiliar. . . .  
 instead of  
 She avoided unfamiliar things.  
 How would you answer?

8. Examine the following. How is *quite* different from other intensifiers?

Erik was quite generous.	Erik was quite a generous man.
Erik was very generous.	Erik was a very generous man.
Erik was extremely generous.	Erik was an extremely generous man.

9. A student asks you to explain the difference between *used to* and *be used to*. What test could you use?

I used to eat spicy Indian food.
I am used to spicy Indian food.

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

For discussions of the attributive and predicative functions of adjectives in English, see:

- Bolinger, D. (1967). "Adjectives in English: Attribution and Predication," *Lingua* 18, 1–34.
- Bolinger, D. (1972). *Degree Words*. The Hague: Mouton.

For a discussion about the complexity of adjective order in English, see:

- Gruber, J. (1967). *Functions of the Lexicon in Formal Descriptive Grammars*. Santa Monica, Calif.: System Development Corporation.

For explanations and exercises on the ordering of attributive adjectives, see:

- Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English: Your Second Language* (2d ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Thewlis, S. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 3 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.
- Winer, L. (1995). "Adjective Order with Buttons." In M. Pennington (ed.), *New Ways in Teaching Grammar*, Alexandria, Va.: TESOL.

For exercises that work on the differences between present participle and past participle adjectives, consult:

- Riggenbach, H., and V. Samuda. (1997). *Grammar Dimensions*. Book 2 (2d ed.). Boston, Mass.: Heinle & Heinle.

## ENDNOTES

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1. What we mean is that it is syntactically possible. Presumably, for any given sentence the information status of the adjective would influence where it is placed. For instance, when the quality of a noun is new information, the adjective modifying it is likely to be included in the predicate.

2. There are even a few adjectives that don't have the same etymology, but by analogy, are treated in the same way:

The children were afraid of the thunderstorm.

\*The afraid children

3. There are, however, a few exceptions. We do say, for example, *the parts department*.

4. We should acknowledge that not all postnominal adjectives can be said to derive from reduced relative clauses.

The Johnsons have bought a house resembling a barn.

\*The Johnsons have bought a house that is resembling a barn.

The man in line in front of me purchased several items totaling \$205.

\*The man in line in front of me purchased several items that were totaling \$205.

See Chapter 29 for further discussion.

5. We agree with Bolinger (1967) that customary action is one source of compound adjectives, but would also cite isolated events as another source, provided they have some historical significance or newsworthiness and are not mundane isolated events such as those in the starred sentences cited below:

He batted in the run that won the game. → The game-winning run

Her time in the race broke a record. → Her record-breaking time

6. *Concern* and *involve* appear as adjectives only in their past participle form.

7. It may also be useful to point out to students that both the *-ing* and *-en* forms can function as manner adverbs if an *-ly* suffix is added:

Ted's stereo is annoyingly loud most of the time.

Corey stared excitedly at the hand he had just been dealt.

8. Givón's continuum provides a functional explanation for the notion of parts of speech, and also helps to explain cross-linguistic differences in parts of speech, such as, why the English adjective *tall* has a noun equivalent in many West African languages, why Japanese inflects some adjectives the same as verbs, and why many adjectives in English can also function as nouns (*Blue is my favorite color*). In other words, adjacent categories may overlap in certain ways.

9. Note also that size can be an opinion or evaluative category as well. When this is the case, size can appear earlier in the sentence separated by other opinion adjectives with a comma:

Atlanta is a big, welcoming city. (The positive quality is reflected in *big*.)

A big, ugly beetle had somehow gone undetected. (Here the size is interpreted as negative.)

10. Proper adjectives—"adjectives of origin" in the Praninskas system—refer to nationalities, religions, geographical regions, and directions (sometimes even cities—*Venetian*), months, seasons of the year, etc. They are often written with a capital letter.





## THE FORM OF PREPOSITIONS

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### BASIC CHARACTERISTICS

You have encountered prepositions in prepositional phrases many times thus far in this book. You have seen that prepositions make nouns adverbial (*He gets off work at night.*) and create noun modifiers (*the mayor of Philadelphia.*). You have also seen that prepositional phrases follow verbs (*She is in school.*) and adjectives (*She is good at math.*). By reviewing the phrase structure rule for a prepositional phrase, we can make several observations about the form of prepositions.

PrepP → Prep NP

First of all, English prepositions are free morphemes, not bound inflectional affixes as they are in many other languages. The reason that prepositions have the name they do is that they precede nouns—they are *pre*-positions. This contrasts with other languages, such as Japanese, that have postpositions, which follow nouns. This is not to say that English prepositions must always come before nouns. As you have already seen in Chapter 13, it is possible for a preposition to be “stranded” when a *wh*-question word is fronted:

Who(m) are you speaking to?

Second, the rule tells us that prepositions are followed by NPs. Since the NP is the “object” of the preposition, if it is a pronoun, it is an object pronoun.

for us / to me

Third, the symbol Prep in our rule does not necessarily represent a single word. Although many prepositions are single words, some complex prepositions consist of two or more words that function as single prepositions, such as *because of*, *out of*, *on top of*, *in front of*.<sup>1</sup> In fact, some prepositions that once existed as two words have coalesced: *into* and *onto* are examples that spring readily to mind.

The other phrase structure rules that are relevant to our discussion of the form of prepositions are the ones that demonstrate that prepositional phrases follow copular verbs and certain intransitive verbs and transitive adjectives, where they are needed to complete the VP and AP, respectively:

Cop + Prep: *The car is in the garage.*

Verb + Prep: *He lay on his side.*

Adj + Prep: *I am averse to the idea.*

### CO-OCCURRENCE WITH VERBS, ADJECTIVES, AND NOUNS

We have already pointed out in Chapter 3, but it bears repeating here, that a number of verbs and adjectives co-occur with particular prepositions. As such, they should be taught along with the verbs and adjectives. Here are some examples:

#### Verb + Prep<sup>2,3</sup>

*to rely on*  
*to detract from*  
*to consist of*  
*to substitute for*  
*to part with*

#### Adj + Prep

*to be dependent on*  
*to be free from/of*  
*to be afraid of*  
*to be sorry for*  
*to be content with*

Sometimes the same verb with two different prepositions will have significantly different meanings; for example:

*provide for*: You should provide for your old age now. (make provisions for)  
*provide NP with*: The Red Cross provided us with blankets. (gave blankets to us)

However, sometimes two different prepositions can be used with the same verb with little or no change of meaning:

Joe competes  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{with} \\ \text{against} \end{array} \right\}$  his older brother too much.

Finally, it is possible for some verbs to be optionally followed by a preposition:

I believe that.      It wasn't at all what she had planned.  
 I believe in that.    It wasn't at all what she had planned on.

Here, however, there is a meaning difference. Further, the preposition has the effect of lessening the transitivity of the verb creating a distance between the verb and its arguments (O'Dowd 1994).

In addition, if certain noun phrases are preceded or followed by a preposition, there may be only one possible option; examples are *in my opinion*, *to my mind*, *from my point of view*, *objection to*, *awareness of*, *belief in*. Sometimes, noun phrases are both preceded and followed by prepositions to form multiword clusters, such as *with respect to*, *at odds with*, *in return for*. Some of these multiword preposition clusters include the following combinations (based on Frodesen and Eyring 1997):

<i>in + noun + of</i>	<i>on + noun + of</i>	<i>in the + noun + of</i>	<i>on the + noun + of</i>
<i>in case of</i>	<i>on account of</i>	<i>in the course of</i>	<i>on the advice of</i>
<i>in charge of</i>	<i>on behalf of</i>	<i>in the habit of</i>	<i>on the basis of</i>
<i>in favor of</i>	<i>on grounds of</i>	<i>in the name of</i>	<i>on the strength of</i>

## LEXICAL COMPOUNDING

We cited an example of a lexical compound with prepositions in Chapter 3—preposition + noun, such as *underdog*. As a reminder of the frequent employment of prepositions in compounding, we offer here four prepositions commonly involved in verb compounds; for example:

<i>out + verb</i>	<i>over + verb</i>	<i>under + verb</i>	<i>down + verb</i>
outdo	overdo	underestimate	downplay
outrun	overrate	underrate	downgrade
outlast	overeat	underscore	downshift
outgrow	overcome	underwrite	downsize

## DELETION OF PREPOSITIONS

Again, as we have seen before, it is possible to delete the preposition. Sometimes the deletion is optional; at other times, the preposition must be deleted.

Optional deletion:

- When the preposition *for* expresses a span of time:

We have lived here (for) 12 years.  
 (For) how long have you owned this house?

- When the preposition *on* is used before days of the week (when the day is used alone or when the day of the week modifies another temporal noun such as *morning*, *afternoon*, *night*):

Brent went cross-country skiing (on) Saturday.  
He bought a new pair of skis (on) Friday night.

This is not an acceptable option in British English.

- In responses to questions that would cue temporal use of *in*, *at*, *on*, or *for*:

How long have you lived here? (For) two years.  
When do you wake up? (At) 6 A.M.

Obligatory deletion:

- When the temporal noun phrase contains a determiner used deictically (i.e., as seen from the perspective of the speaker such as *last*, *next*, *this*<sup>4</sup>) or when the head noun of the noun phrase contains *before*, *after*, *next*, *last*, or *this* as part of its meaning (e.g., *yesterday*, *tomorrow*, *today*, *tonight*).

I was busy (\*on) last Friday.  
We will be in Eugene (\*on) tonight.

- When the temporal noun phrase contains a universal quantifier like *every* or *all*:  
We stayed in Provo (\*for) all week.
- When a locative noun, such as *home* or *downtown*, or the pro-adverbs *here* and *there* are used with a verb of motion or direction:<sup>5</sup>

We went (\*to) home.  
Phyllis walks (\*to) here every day.

## THE MEANING OF PREPOSITIONS

### ON ABSTRACT DEFINITIONS VERSUS PROTOTYPES

As we indicated earlier, one of the greatest learning challenges presented by prepositions is their meaning, since languages carve up semantic territory in different ways. Moreover, even within a particular language, it is sometimes difficult to ascribe a meaning to a preposition that would account for all its instantiations. Prepositions are indeed polysemous (Taylor 1993). For example, what possible meaning could *in* have that would hold in all of the following possible instances?

Stephanie is *in* the room.  
The room is *in* a mess.  
Seth is *in* trouble.  
*In* running out of the room, he knocked over the vase.  
He'll be back *in* an hour.

Linguists have in fact been able, in most cases, to abstract from particular instantiations of a preposition its general meaning, or a few fundamental meanings. For instance, for all instances of *in* above we might say that *in* conveys a general notion of boundedness within an enclosure. The enclosure is more literal in the first instance, but more abstract, metaphorical, or extended in the other instances. It should be clear that a problem with

giving such abstract definitions to ESL/EFL students is that the definition is often more difficult to comprehend and apply than the form itself! Sometimes a more helpful alternative is to use concrete examples, rather than definitions.

It is time to keep the promise we made in Chapter 3 to return to the concept of prototypicality. You will recall that prototypical examples are the best exemplars of characteristics that the members of a particular category have in common. Thus, for example, a robin, to North American English speakers at least, would be a more prototypical bird than a penguin. Relating this observation to our present concern, we note that many prepositions prototypically deal with locating objects in space. While often their meanings are extended beyond space, experience has shown that anchoring the meaning of prepositions in spatial relationships is the first step to helping students learn to deal with areas where the meaning is more abstract. Associating spatial schemata with prepositions, where possible, also helps teachers avoid a common pitfall, which is to define a preposition using other prepositions. Therefore, we begin by delving into the underlying semantics of common prepositions in the spatial domain.

### LOCATING OBJECTS IN SPACE

Locating an object in space involves two or more entities. For example, in our first example with *in* above, the two entities are *Stephanie* and *room*. Taylor (1993) notes that the relationship between the two entities is inherently asymmetrical, in that one entity is selected for foregrounding, while the other entity serves as a background. The former has been variously referred to as the figure, or trajector, and the latter is called the ground, or landmark.

The analysis below comes from Dirven (1993).<sup>6</sup> According to Dirven, *at*, *on*, and *in* are the basic and most general place prepositions:

- *at* denotes place as a point of orientation

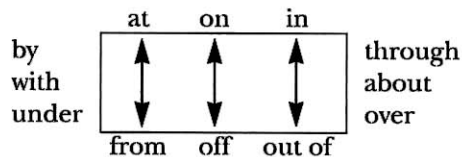
Meet me at the corner.

- *on* denotes physical contact between trajector and landmark, necessitating viewing the landmark as a one-dimensional space (a line) or two-dimensional space (a surface)

Don't sit on the desk.

- *in* denotes the enclosure of the trajector in the landmark and, therefore, views the landmark as two- or three-dimensional space (a surface or a volume)

Stephanie is in the room.



The three source prepositions: *from*, *off*, and *out of* involve the notion of separation from place and hence are connected by two-pointed arrows with the basic place prepositions in the diagram. For example:

- *from* denotes separation from a point of orientation

He took it from me.

- *off* denotes separation from contact with a line or surface

The vase fell off the table.

- *out of* denotes separation from inside of a landmark

The water spilled out of the vase.

*By* and *with* are the proximity prepositions, which are adjacent to *at* on the diagram because they locate the trajector in relation to a point of orientation, just as *at* does.

- *by* denotes the idea of “connection”<sup>7</sup>

Doug lives by me.

- *with* denotes both a point of orientation and the idea of connection but may do so in a more abstract way to mean association and/or accompaniment. In its spatial sense, *with* can occur only with animate nouns as a landmark.

He walks with me to school.

*Through* and *about* require the landmark to be seen as a surface or a volume and are therefore positioned on the diagram next to *in*.

- *through* structures space as a tunnel or channel

Take the first path through the woods.

- *about* denotes spatial movement in any direction

He walked about the room searching for where he had left his keys.

*Under* and *over* are vertical space prepositions.

- *under* denotes a trajector that is at a lower point than a landmark

Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me.

- *over* denotes a trajector that is at a higher point than a landmark

We peered over the fence.

*Under* and *over* don't fit as neatly as the other prepositions in the picture that Dirven draws; nevertheless, Dirven justifies their inclusion and their placement on the bottom of the vertical axes by noting that *over* can overlap in some domains with *through* and *about*; that *under* is similar to *from*, *off*, and *out of* in that all four denote a negative polarity; and that *under* negates the positive polarity preposition *over*.

It is important to note that many prepositions can be used to describe not only stative relationships but also dynamic ones. In keeping with this observation, Taylor (1993) suggests that three categories of relations<sup>8</sup> are expressed by prepositions: place, path, goal. Some prepositions can serve more than one category.<sup>9</sup>

The picture is over the sofa. (place)

The crop duster flew over the cornfield. (path)

Hang the picture over the sofa. (goal—endpoint of path)

Taylor also allows for a fourth category, source, based on Dirven's analysis:

The catsup flowed out of the bottle. (source)

Not all prepositions can serve all of these relationships. For example, *toward* is exclusively a path preposition. Nonetheless, these four categories might provide additional semantic hooks for ESL/EFL students to hold onto when dealing with the amorphous nature of space.



## MEANING EXTENSIONS OF SPATIAL PREPOSITIONS

Dirven's and Taylor's analyses can be used to support our longstanding contention that while the spatial sense of these prepositions is most prototypical, their spatial meanings can be extended metaphorically from physical to mental space. Further, the "extensions of meanings of a preposition from physical space via time into more abstract domains do not occur in any haphazard way but follow a path of gradually increasing abstractions, whereby the link with each prior meaning remains obvious and may account for most, if not all, co-occurrence restrictions between trajector and landmark" (Dirven 1993:76).

Thus, when prepositions are used in a nonspatial sense, their meanings are not random but rather are highly motivated. We will first attempt to demonstrate this by analyzing the meaning of one preposition. Then, we will provide analyses of an additional nineteen prepositions arrived at using the same general approach.

We begin with *at*. Dirven shows how *at* extends from an orientation point in space to one in time, and then beyond into state, area, manner, circumstance, and cause:

- a. point as place: *at the station*
- b. time point: *at six o'clock*
- c. state: *at work*
- d. area: *good at guessing*
- e. manner: *at full speed*
- f. circumstance: *at these words (he left)*
- g. cause: *laugh at, irritation at*

The notion that *at* involves some sort of orientation point is easily perceived in the dimensions of space (a) and time (b). Furthermore, this core meaning can also obtain in the less prototypical extensions into state (c), such as *at play*, *at work*, *at rest*, and with regard to area (d), in which area is construed as a context or field within which an event is seen. Thus, one can be good within the field of guessing. *At* can denote a point along a scale exemplified above in its use in manner (e). More abstract is the use of *at* in circumstances (f), where human actions become the reference point. Such a relationship is made explicit in the causal use of *at* (g), where the object of the preposition is the cause or trigger of an emotional state.

Although her work was done earlier, Hudson's (1979) findings are consistent with Dirven's observations. Hudson reviewed linguistic studies and the lexical entries of unabridged dictionaries. By collapsing categories and synthesizing definitions, Hudson came up with seven meanings for *at* that she felt were optimally general but detailed enough to make all the important distinctions:

1. Used to locate an object in space  
The paper was lying at my feet.
2. Used to locate an object in time  
He was here at one o'clock.
3. Used to indicate a state, condition, or engagement in a particular activity  
I'm never at ease when taking a test.
4. Used to indicate a cause or a source of an action or state  
She wept at the bad news.

5. Used to indicate direction toward a goal or objective

The man over there is pointing at us.

6. Used to express skill (or lack of it) in relation to a particular activity or occupation

She's a whiz at poker.

7. Used to indicate relative amount, degree, rate, value, ordinal relationship, or position on a scale

He retired at 65.

Having identified 305 common so-called idioms using *at*, which Hudson had drawn from several sources, Hudson asked 20 native speakers of English to sort these idioms into one of nine categories—the seven categories given above and the two following:

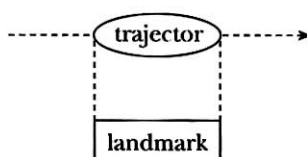
8. Does not mean the same as or fit any of the categories.  
9. I do not understand or use this expression.

Of the 305 items using *at*, 216 were put into the same category by the 20 subjects at the  $p < .005$  level of significance.

Then, in a reverse of this procedure, Hudson took the seven lists of significant items identified by her 20 subjects, and she asked 10 other subjects if they could describe the meaning of *at* for each of the seven lists. With the exception of the definition for category 4, which Hudson later recommended changing to “Used to express a reaction to someone or something,” good approximations of the other six definitions were reconstructed 80 percent of the time or more. Thus, six of Hudson’s seven meanings were verified, and the seventh underwent a minor adjustment.

One could come away after reading this sort of research by concluding that since the tiny word *at* is so polysemous, it is hopeless to expect ESL/EFL students to ever learn all of the meanings of the prepositions. While we would understand this interpretation, that is not our message. First of all, not all the meanings of prepositions are equally important. Certain meanings are more frequent than others. Parker (1993) and Heitzman (1993) surveyed written texts to see how Hudson’s meanings of *at* were distributed. Parker and Heitzman both found that the locative meaning predominated—in a psychology text (Parker) and in an issue of *Newsweek* magazine (Heitzman). The position-on-a-scale meaning (7 in the list above) was used most often in a linguistics text, although this result is skewed by the fact that the collocation *at least* accounted for 54 percent of the tokens illustrating scalar position (Parker 1993). It bears repeating, then, that one of the meanings of a preposition is usually more central, more prototypical, and that the others somehow derive from it.

Lakoff (1987), in a reanalysis of Brugman’s (1981) study of *over*, shows how the central sense of *over* combining elements of both *above* and *across* can be depicted in an image schema such as the following:

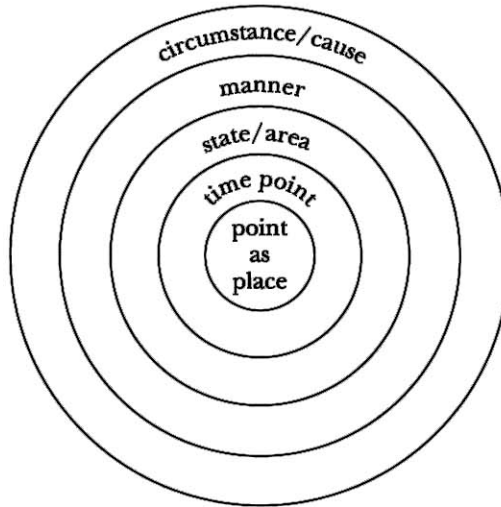


(Adapted from Lakoff 1987)

While this schema occupies a central position, one can imagine radiating from this central schema a system of links that are sometimes defined by shared properties with the central schema but that are often connected metaphorically to account for uses of *over*, such as

She has a strange power over me.

Given the notion of a central schema or a more prototypical meaning for prepositions, it would perhaps make sense to portray the meaning of prepositions as a series of concentric circles—with the spatial sense being most central. If we were to rearrange Dirven’s observations about *at*, they might look something like this:



In the interest of space, however, let us instead display in chart form the various meanings of common prepositions.<sup>10</sup>

<i>Prep.</i>	<i>Space</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Other (includes idiomatic usages)</i>
at	<i>point/intersect:</i> meet at the corner <i>target:</i> Look at John./ Throw the stone at the wall. <i>general area:</i> Meet me at the theater.	We met at 1:00.  It rains at night there.	Water freezes at 0°C.	He works at keeping in shape.  She’s good at dancing.
about	<i>all around:</i> He ran about the yard.	<i>approx:</i> about 1:00	<i>approx:</i> about \$1 about 70 degrees	<i>concerning:</i> a book about mathematics
above	<i>higher than:</i> above the picture (on the wall)		above \$5 above freezing above average	above suspicion above reproach
against	<i>contact:</i> to lean against the wall	<i>conflict:</i> to work against the clock	<i>conflict:</i> two against four	<i>internal:</i> against one’s will <i>external:</i> against all odds
around	<i>state:</i> The fence is around the house. <i>action:</i> The children run around the yard.	<i>approx:</i> around 1:00	<i>approx:</i> around \$2 around 4 miles	

<i>Prep.</i>	<i>Space</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Other (includes idiomatic usages)</i>
before	<i>in front of:</i> before the mast He stood before us.	<i>earlier than:</i> before 1960 before the accident		
below	<i>lower than:</i> below the surface		below zero below average	
between	<i>at an intermediate point in relation to two entities:</i> between the house and the street	between 1 and 2 o'clock	between 100 and 110 lbs.	between you and me
by	<i>nearness:</i> chair by the desk	<i>no later than:</i> by 5 P.M.	<i>reduplication - (gradual increase):</i> little by little; inch by inch <i>degree of failure:</i> miss the target by a mile; miss the train by 3 minutes	<i>without help:</i> do by oneself
for	<i>goal:</i> set out for Alaska <i>distance:</i> for 7 miles	<i>duration:</i> for 7 years	<i>exchange:</i> buy for \$4	<i>reason:</i> California is famous for its wines. <i>goal/purpose:</i> fish for trout
from	<i>a starting point:</i> We traveled from N.Y. to L.A. <i>origin:</i> man from New York	work from 9 to 5	from 60 to 80 degrees from 5 to 7 dollars	<i>source:</i> paper is made from wood <i>cause:</i> wet from the rain
in	<i>enclosure:</i> The man is in the room.	<i>in a period:</i> WW II ended in 1945. <i>future appl.:</i> Come in 10 minutes		<i>currency:</i> Pay me in dollars. <i>language:</i> Write/say it in English.
of	<i>names of geog. loc. or institutions:</i> the city of N.Y. the state of Texas the Univ. of Calif.	<i>before:</i> a quarter of ten	<i>fraction, portion:</i> one of the boys	<i>posses./assoc.:</i> a friend of mine <i>source:</i> a table made of wood
on	<i>contact:</i> on the wall <i>along:</i> on the Po; I live on this street.	<i>day, date:</i> on Sunday on Nov. 9th		<i>communication:</i> on the radio; on TV/the telly <i>concerning:</i> a book on magic; a lecture on modern art
over	<i>state of being above (with or without contact):</i> carry a sweater over his shoulder; the roof over our heads <i>action above:</i> jump over the fence	<i>spanning time:</i> over the weekend	<i>more than:</i> over an hour over \$2 over 0°C	<i>communication:</i> over the radio, TV
through	<i>penetrate:</i> through the window; through the forest	<i>duration:</i> through the years		<i>endurance:</i> through thick and thin

<i>Prep.</i>	<i>Space</i>	<i>Time</i>	<i>Degree</i>	<i>Other (includes idiomatic usages)</i>
to	<i>direction:</i> go to the movies	<i>until:</i> work from 9 to 5 <i>before:</i> a quarter to eleven	He is wise to that extent./He is wise to such an extent that	<i>accompany:</i> dance to the music
toward(s)	<i>in the direction of:</i> walk toward the wall	toward morning	the temperature moved steadily toward 0°C	toward a lasting peace
under	<i>below (state):</i> be under the house <i>below (action):</i> crawl under the house	<i>less than:</i> in under an hour	under \$1 under 10 men under 70 degrees	<i>condition:</i> under duress (stress)
with	<i>alongside, near:</i> even with the wall	<i>together:</i> He grew wiser with the years. He rises with the chickens.	<i>equal standing or ability:</i> rank with the best; run with the fastest	<i>in regard to:</i> pleased with the gift <i>manner:</i> spoke with ease

The chart above is only a partial systematization of prepositions. An unabridged dictionary will provide you with other definitions for each preposition listed.

### THE MEANINGS OF NONSPATIAL PREPOSITIONS

Two of the most common prepositions, *of* and *for*, don't have as obvious a spatial sense as do the other frequently used ones.<sup>11</sup> We know of no study that has focused on the meaning(s) of *for* in authentic texts; however, *of* has been investigated by Thompson (1992). In reviewing the history of *of*, Thompson found that *of* does, in fact, have a spatial connection. Thompson states that until a few centuries ago, *of* and *off* represented different pronunciations of the same word. Dirven (1993) also mentions the common origin of *off* and *of*, with *off* reduced to *of* in its area or causal meaning:

Place: *He has stepped off the platform.*

Area: *Talk of the devil (and he is sure to appear).*

Cause: *He died of cholera.*

We have also seen that *of* co-occurs with *out* in a spatial sense to mean departure from an enclosure, which can be extended metaphorically to an emotional state:

Place: *He walked out of the house.*

Cause: *He killed himself out of despair.*

However, in other instances of the use of *of*, it is more difficult to discern any spatial meaning. Thompson (1992) analyzed 200 tokens of *of*—100 from written texts and 100 from oral texts—in light of the three definitions she had distilled from her search of relevant literature:

1. concerning; about
  - a story of a princess
  - They told of her heroism.
2. derived or coming from (*X* of *Y*)
  - the President of the United States
  - the headlights of the car







## THE USE OF PREPOSITIONS

### VARIATION IN USE

As we noted at the outset of this chapter, there are issues of use as well concerning prepositions. For one thing, there appear to be instances where more than one preposition with the same meaning is acceptable in a given context:

1. spatial proximity: *a house near/by the lake*
2. time/degree approximation: *happened around/about 10 o'clock; cost around/about \$100.*
3. telling time: *a quarter to/of ten* (*of* for telling time is not used in British English)
4. telling time: *a quarter after/past ten*
5. location along something linear: *the towns on/along the Rhine*
6. in a time period: *It happened in/during 1998.*
7. temporal termination: *work from 9 until/till/to 5.*
8. location lower than something: *below/beneath/under/underneath the stairs*
9. location higher than something: *above/over the table*
10. location in/at the rear of something: *behind/in back of the door*
11. location adjacent: *next to/beside the stream*

Throughout this book, we have been invoking the linguistic principle that a language will not tolerate having more than one form with exactly the same meaning and use. Therefore, we may indeed find that members of a given set are not equally acceptable in all contexts. For example, while *above* and *over* can be interchangeable in three-dimensional space,

The plane flew above the storm clouds.

The plane flew over the storm clouds.

a semantic distinction can exist in two-dimensional space:

Hang the picture above the mirror. (location on a flat, vertical surface)

Hang the picture over the mirror. (could mean “Cover the picture with the mirror”)

Members of other sets may be distinguished by use issues—register, for instance. *Underneath* may occur in a more formal context than *under*, for example. Then, too, no doubt some dialect variation occurs; that is, not all proficient speakers of English will accept all the alternatives we proposed above. Finally, it is possible that the principle we have been operating with does not always apply synchronically. For while languages do not permit the uneconomic situation of having more than one form with the same meaning and use, languages do change, and at any one point in time, it is possible that one or more of the redundant forms is in the process of dying out with the other(s) remaining. More research needs to be done to determine which, if any, of these explanations serve to distinguish between seemingly equivalent prepositions.

### PREPOSITIONS IN DISCOURSE

The other issue of use that we should deal with is the discourse in which prepositions occur. According to Kennedy (1991), it is important to study the “linguistic ecology” of prepositions. One way to do so is to use computer corpora. Kennedy examined the Lancaster-Oslo/Bergen (LOB) corpus for incidence of the prepositions *between* and *through*. Although their meanings sometimes overlap, analysis revealed that there was a striking difference between the words that these two prepositions co-occur with. Kennedy found that nouns typically precede *between* (*difference between*), whereas verbs are the most common word class preceding *through* (*flash through*).<sup>15</sup>

Both *between* and *through* are most commonly used in their locative senses; however, other nonphysical relations are also very frequent—involving, for example, interaction (*communication between management and employees*), comparison (*there is little to choose between the two*), similarity (*the important parallel between Handel and Beethoven*), difference (*the discrepancy between expected and observed scores*), means (*through the medium of the English language*), or causation (*dilapidation through lack of maintenance*). Kennedy goes on to point out that while grammars and dictionaries already provide descriptively adequate accounts of the grammatical functions and possible meanings in context of *between* and *through*, corpus study goes beyond systemic possibility by adding to linguistic description a statistical dimension based on use in context.

A more far-reaching implication, which is a reprise of a theme we first introduced in Chapter 3 and mentioned in this chapter in conjunction with the grammaticization of *of*, is the question of whether it really makes sense in all cases to teach prepositions as meaningful words unto themselves. What could be the meaning of *by*, for example, in the expression *by and large*? Some applied linguists would submit that some of the most frequently occurring prepositions are delexicalized (Lindstromberg 1996) and that it therefore makes sense to think not only about teaching their meanings but also about teaching their recurring combinations. Kennedy (1990), for instance, in studying the preposition *at*, found that 142 collocations beginning with the word *at* accounted for 43 percent of its 2576 tokens. The most frequent collocation, *at least*, which we have already encountered in our discussion of Parker's study, is very telling in that like other frequently occurring collocations, its basic locative meaning does not stand out. Kennedy suggests that to treat prepositions as roughly substitutable parts of speech can be very misleading. As we noted in Chapter 3, we may not have as open a choice in grammatical frames in the words we use as we think. It may be then that we shouldn't teach certain prepositions in isolation but rather teach them as in relation to their occurrence with other words.

### PREPOSITIONS: A MULTILEVEL STRATEGY

Another finding from Kennedy (1991) will allow us to segue to our final point in this chapter. Kennedy observes that the traditional rule that tells English speakers to use *between* with two entities and *among* with more than two is not observed in the LOB corpus. *Between* is frequently used where *among* might be expected; for example:

[he] would help to establish an enduring peace between nations

In keeping with the previous discussion on the value of using corpora to conduct linguistic research, Todaka (1996) analyzed instances of *between* and *among* in the Brown corpus. Todaka agrees that the traditional prescriptive rule has some influence but says it does not fully reflect the distribution of these two prepositions in the data. Therefore, Todaka recommends a multilevel strategy. At the word level, the central sense that differentiates the two prepositions is that objects with the semantic features of [+ explicit, + separable] always take *between*; when the objects are conceived as [+ collective], *among* is used.

*A quarrel between the six attorneys . . .* (the attorneys are explicit and are seen as individuals)

*Among the recipients of the Nobel prize for literature, more than half are practically unknown to readers of English.* (the recipients of the Nobel prize are seen collectively)

At the phrase/sentence level it is possible to account for some of the instances that cannot be explained through the semantic feature analysis by examining their occurrence in collocations. For one thing, *between* takes leftward collocations and *among* takes rightward collocations:

<i>a relation between</i>	<i>among others</i>
<i>a distinction between</i>	<i>among + plural noun + on the whole (e.g., among English-speaking people on the whole)</i>
<i>a distance between</i>	<i>among + ranking adjective (e.g., among the best)</i>

Then, according to Todaka, at the level of discourse, what determines the choice of prepositions, when it can't be explained by semantic features or collocations, is whether or not the object's individual members are identifiable from the discourse context. When they aren't, *among* is more likely to be used.

*among all western hemisphere languages (the individual languages are not identifiable from the context)*

When the object's members are identifiable, *between* is used.

*... And lastly, with hypnotherapist and client, there rarely is an affective bond established, whereas in faith healing there almost always is a terrific bond that forms immediately between people.*

The object, *people*, is [- explicit]. However, *between* is used because it is clear from the context that the people to whom the speaker is referring are the faith healer and the people consulting the healer. As such, the individuals referred to in the object are identifiable, while not explicit.

## CONCLUSION

It may be more obvious now that you've read the chapter why prepositions cause such difficulty for ESL/EFL students. Even relatively advanced-level students continue to make errors of omission, as in

\*I served the Army until June 1964.  
(in)

or use the wrong preposition, as in

\*It is predicted that the degree to social adaptation will determine . . .  
(of)

or use a superfluous preposition, as in

\*I studied in biology for three years.  
(ø or majored in?)

Nonetheless, the situation is not hopeless. As we have tried to show in this chapter, there is some systematicity in how the core meaning of certain prepositions is extended beyond representing spatial relationships. Calling attention to it where it exists will doubtless lighten the learning burden.

While learning the various meanings and meaning extensions of prepositions is perhaps the greatest challenge, a pedagogical strategy that enables students to pay attention to their co-occurrence, collocational, and discourse behavior in addition will no doubt facilitate learners' acquisition of these difficult lexico-grammatical forms.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

**1. Form.** At the beginning and intermediate levels, it probably suffices to make sure that when new verbs or adjectives are introduced, any prepositions that occur with them are also taught. At the advanced level, it would be helpful to systematically review the particular patterns of verb + preposition and adjective + preposition clusters that are common. For example, Frodesen and Eyring (1997) recommend an exercise that gets students to practice verb + *for* combinations by having them discuss different immigrant groups to the United States. The students are given certain information and are asked to use it to say why they think that different groups immigrated. For example:

The Pilgrims longed for freedom from religious persecution.  
 In the 1840s and 1850s, the Irish hoped for freedom from hunger.  
 In the late 1800s, the Scandinavians yearned for farmland.

**2. Meaning.** Using a matrix, such as the one we have adapted from Quirk et al. (1985:674) below, will help students in learning the spatial meaning of prepositions as contrasting sets rather than independent lexical items.

	<i>Positive Direction</i>	<i>Position</i>	<i>Negative Direction</i>	<i>Position</i>
point	to → X	at • X	(away) from X →	away from X •
line or surface	on (to) ↓	on •	off (of) ↑	off •
area or volume	in (to) ↳	in •	out of ↳	out of □ •

Perhaps a chart like this could be placed in the classroom for students' reference and to foster any peripheral learning.

**3. Meaning.** There is a children's game that affords practice with prepositions. It is called "A Bear Hunt." The narrator tells a story about going to hunt bears, and as the story is told, the narrator mimes the corresponding actions in an exaggerated fashion. The listeners repeat the words and actions after each sentence. For example:

Let's go on a bear hunt. First we go out the door (mimes action). Then we go under the fence (mime action). We have to walk through some deep grass (narrator makes swishing noise by rubbing hands together). Next, we have to wade across a stream (narrator picks feet up in an exaggerated fashion as if walking through water). Then, we have to walk on a path to the forest (narrator slaps hands on thighs, alternating left and right, in order to make a "clopping" sound). In the forest, we have to go through a swamp. . .

When a bear is sighted, the narrator leads the group through all the steps again, this time in reverse order, so as to get everyone safely home. Such stories may not be appropriate for older learners, but some enjoy them, and they can be entertaining ways of associating forms with meaning.

**4. Meaning.** Lindstromberg (1996) outlines a systematic approach to teaching the prototypical meanings of the prepositions,<sup>16</sup> and how to treat their more abstract meanings derived by metaphorical extensions. He illustrates his approach with the preposition *on*. We don't have the space to report every step of the approach, but here is a synopsis.

Lindstromberg first uses classic approaches, such as the use of Total Physical Response and schemata, to make the prototypical place and goal meaning of a preposition clear; for example:



*Put it on the table.*

Later, also using pictures, he introduces more metaphorical extensions:

- *on* = about or *concerning*: *An article on holidays in France*



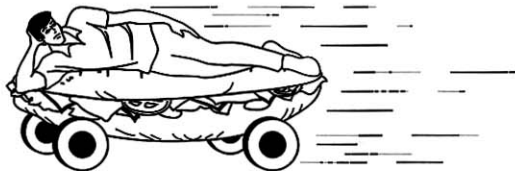
- the burden metaphor: *The engine died on us.*



- the basis metaphor: *The argument is based on copious data.*



- the vehicle metaphor: *It's hard to get through the day on one sandwich.*



Finally, along the way, Lindstromberg contrasts prepositions with overlapping meanings, such as *on top of* versus *on*.

As Lindstromberg himself notes, the use of schemata to represent prepositional meaning long predates prototype theory. However, what may be innovative is to use a schemata series to show how the prototype meaning holds throughout its metaphorical extensions.

**5. Meaning.** Several groups of prepositions are frequently confused by learners. These include the spatial and temporal meanings of *in*, *on*, and *at*. As we have pointed out in this chapter, *at* is used to show one-dimensional relationships; *on*, two-dimensional; and *in*, three-dimensional. Another way to think about these relationships is that they differ with regard to their specificity. For example, with addresses and dates, *at* is most specific, *on* is less so, and *in* is most general.



- a. Addresses:** From most specific to most general
- I live at 252 Linden Street.
  - I live on Linden Street.
  - I live in Bellmore.
  - I live in Nassau County.
  - I live in New York State.
  - I live in the United States.
- b. Dates:** From most specific to most general
- Our daughter was born at 6:30 A.M.
  - Our daughter was born on (a) Friday.
  - Our daughter was born on October 27, 1972.
  - Our daughter was born in the morning.
  - Our daughter was born in October.
  - Our daughter was born in 1972.
  - Our daughter was born in the 70s.

Students can interview each other about when they were born and where they live. The first answer each interviewee should give should be very general. With repeated questioning, the interviewee should get more specific.

A: Where do you live?

B: In Brazil.

A: Where do you live in Brazil?

B: In São Paulo.

A: Where do you live in São Paulo?

B: On Alameda Lorena.

**6. Meaning.** A fairly common way of getting students to associate spatial meaning with prepositions is to make use of maps. Create a simplified map of the town you are living in or of your school. Give each student a copy of the map and ask students to trace the path you are following with their pencils as you describe it. For example:

I am *at* the bank *on* Main Street, and I want to go *to* the market. I go *out of* the bank, and I make a right turn. *At* the corner, I go *across* Main Street. I turn right again. The market is two blocks *down* the street, *on* Elliott Street. It is *next to* the laundromat. I go *in* the front door.

Later, you can give them your starting point and some directions. See if they can figure out where you are after following the directions. When they are ready, they can take turns asking for and giving directions to each other.

**7. Meaning.** Another widely used technique for giving students practice in using prepositions to express spatial relationships is to ask students to draw pictures or manipulate bits of paper to create designs. Give each student five pieces of paper in the shapes of a triangle, square, circle, star, and rectangle. Then ask students to pair up. Ask Student A to arrange the shapes in any pattern he or she likes. Student B does not watch. Then Student B has to try to construct the same pattern that Student A has created following A's description. The students are seated back to back. When the five pieces of paper have been placed, the students should compare A's original to B's copy. Then it is B's turn to describe a new pattern to A.

**8. Use.** Kennedy (1991) encourages us to help students learn about prepositions by learning about “the company they keep.” To this end, advanced learners could be assigned to explore the collocations of particular prepositions in a variety of texts. Different students could choose to examine different prepositions in the same text and report on their findings to the rest of the class. Another possibility is to have different students investigate the same preposition in a variety of texts. In addition to noting collocational patterns, students could be encouraged to describe the use of prepositions from the several different perspectives we have presented here—their meanings, their collocations, and anything in the discourse that favors the use of one preposition over another.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

1. Provide an original sentence illustrating each of the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) or word parts in your example.
  - a. verb + preposition co-occurrence
  - b. deletable preposition
    - (i) optional
    - (ii) obligatory
  - c. co-occurring nonadjacent prepositions
  - d. complex preposition
  - e. source preposition
  - f. metaphorical extension of *in*
  - g. genitive use of *of*
  - h. collocation with preposition
2. Explain the ungrammaticality of the following sentences:
  - a. \*You can rely me.
  - b. \*In case someone phones, I'll be back during 15 minutes.
  - c. \*He is interested by good books.
  - d. \*It is underneath one's dignity.

### Test your ability to apply what you know.

3. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct the errors?
  - a. \*We discussed about our plans.
  - b. \*Stuart lives on 160 Western Avenue.
  - c. \*Because of the teacher gave us a lot of homework, I can't go.
  - d. \*After my evening class, I went to home.
  - e. I live in Washington, D.C. \*I like living in here.
4. A student asks you what the meaning of *of* is in the following sentence. What would your answer be?

Don't forget to buy me a pad of paper.

5. There are several pairs of prepositions that ESL/EFL students often confuse:

Source meanings of *from* and *out of*:

Paper is made from wood. (source not visibly obvious)

This table is made (out) of wood. (source visibly obvious)

Temporal meaning of *in* and *within*:

Come back in 30 minutes. (30 minutes from now)

Come back within 30 minutes. (between now and 30 minutes from now)

*Since/For* to express spans of time:

I have lived here since 1960. (refers to beginning of span)

I have lived here for decades. (refers to duration of span)

Choose one of these and create an exercise that would help students to detect the difference and be able to use them correctly.

- Describe two prepositions other than the 20 listed in the large chart in this chapter that do not express case functions and that have meanings that can be extended from one dimension into others.

- How is the following sentence ambiguous?

I'll tell you the story in five minutes or less.

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

*For linguistic analyses of English prepositions in addition to those cited above, see:*

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*For helpful resources on collocations, see:*

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*For useful diagrams representing the spatial meanings of prepositions, see:*

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## ENDNOTES

1. O'Dowd (1994), noting that we can't use *out* alone as a source preposition—that is, to mean “from” (*\*I took it out the box*)—argues that the sequence *out of* is actually a particle followed by a preposition. We will be discussing particles in the next chapter when we deal with phrasal verbs.

2. In the next chapter we deal with constructions consisting of verb + particle, such as *write off*, which appear to be the same as verb + preposition co-occurrences, but which function differently.

3. Some verbs can take an object NP before the preposition, e.g., *accuse someone of*, *charge someone with*, *prefer something to*, *protect someone from*.

4. These determiners can be preceded by a preposition in nondeictic use; for example, in *on the last Sunday of the month*, *last* means “final,” not the Sunday before the moment of speech. For the same reason, *that* isn't included in our list since it is usually used anaphorically (e.g., *I was ill on that Sunday*), not deictically.

5. Note that the concept of motion or direction is important since *home* may take the preposition *at* with a stative verb:

Is Jackie (at) home?

Also, *here* and *there* can take prepositions in other environments:

Yes. She is (in) there.

6. We are using Dirven's analysis for illustrative purposes. There are more prepositions that express spatial relationships than are presented here. Also, for a different type of semantic analysis of spatial prepositions, see Hawkins (1993).

7. Hawkins (1984) notes that in addition to the denotation of prepositions, there is also an implicit frame of reference that must be accessed in order to understand the full meaning of a preposition. For instance, implicit in *by* is the notion of a scale of distance. The prepositions *up* and *down* access a domain of oriented physical space, in which they denote positive and negative polarity, respectively.

8. Or what Johnson (1987) calls “image schemas.” See the discussion of Lakoff (1987) that follows.

9. In fact, Taylor states that “In general, prepositions that denote the place of a tr [trajector] can also denote a goal, i.e., a place where the tr comes to occupy with respect to the lm [landmark]” (Taylor 1993:161). This place-goal polysemy can cause ambiguity:

He jumped on the wall. (place or goal)

10. According to Francis and Kučera (1982), the most common prepositions in decreasing order of frequency are: *of*, *in*, *to*, *for*, *with*, *on*, *at*, *by*, *from*.

11. In fact, by some estimates, *of* is the second most frequently used word in the English language, second only to the definite article.

12. For example, *of* in its genitive use is equivalent to the apostrophe syntactic marker.

13. Rauh (1993) notes that indeed it is the prepositions that assign roles themselves and not just that prepositions express roles assigned by verbs, as is often assumed.



**14.** Note that *on foot* and *on horseback* are exceptions to *by bus*, *by car*, *by taxi*, *by train*, *by plane*, etc. Also, there are other prepositions such as *through* which also express means, e.g.:

She has accomplished a great deal through hard work. (i.e., by working hard)

**15.** Although, as Kennedy notes, looking only at adjacent words can be misleading since discontinuous collocations, sometimes several words apart, are quite common. For instance, in the following example from Kennedy's data, there is more of a collocational association between the verb *move* and the preposition *through* than there is between the pronoun *it* and *through*.

I found that I had moved, without realizing it, through the gateway.

**16.** Although he also includes what we call particles, which we discuss in the next chapter.



# PHRASAL VERBS

## INTRODUCTION

Consider the following sentences and their analyses adapted from O'Dowd (1994). How would you describe the role of *up* in each?

- a. She walked up the street to get a bite to eat.
- b. I live up in Springfield.
- c. When are you going to clean up your room?
- d. I am sorry that I messed you up.

The most generally agreed upon interpretation would be that *up* is a preposition in the first two sentences. In (a) it is the preposition in the adverbial PrepP of direction *up the street*. In (b) it is once again a preposition. This time its object, presumably “north,” has been deleted. In (b) the PrepP *up north* is an adverbial of position.

The *up*'s in (c) and (d) are different, structures with which we have not yet dealt in this text. These *up*'s we will call particles, which when combined with the verbs *clean* and *mess*, form phrasal verbs. Despite sharing the same form, the meaning of *up* in (c) is quite different from that of (d). In (c), the *up* is syntactically optional, and its contribution to the meaning of the sentence is quite modest. The verb could stand on its own with almost the same meaning; that's not true with the particle in (d). In this sentence, *up* seems to form an integral part of the verb (*mess up*) despite its separation from the verb by the intervening pronominal direct object *you*.

It may already be obvious that we are once again dealing in this chapter with a structure that is very difficult for ESL/EFL students. For one thing, the meaning of phrasal verbs is often noncompositional; that is someone can know the meaning of the verb and the apparent meaning of the particle, but when they are put together, a unique meaning is derived.

Jennifer gave up. (to give up = to surrender)

For another thing, there are very few non-Germanic languages<sup>1</sup> that have phrasal verbs. Thus, most ESL/EFL students will find such verbs strange and difficult. Yet they are ubiquitous in English; no one can speak or understand English, at least the informal register, without a knowledge of phrasal verbs. Because they don't realize this, some nonnative speakers of English have a tendency to overuse single lexical items where a phrasal verb would be much more appropriate; for example:

- a. I arose early this morning.
- b. I got up early this morning.

While sentence (a) is accurate and meaningful, it is not appropriate usage in conversation.

A final learning challenge involves the conditions governing optional or obligatory separation of the verb and the particle for phrasal verbs used transitively.

- a. Turn out the lights.      Separation optional (direct object is not a pronoun)
- b. Turn the lights out.
- c. Turn them out.            Separation necessary (direct object is a pronoun)
- d. \*Turn out them.

While most analyses of phrasal verbs highlight the pronominal status of the direct object to account for the ungrammaticality of (d), we go beyond this explanation to invoke a pragmatic principle in the use section of this chapter to explain why (d) is unacceptable. We do this heeding the advice we offered in Chapter 1—to give students “reasons, not rules.”

## FORM OF ENGLISH PHRASAL VERBS

### SYNTACTIC ANALYSIS OF PHRASAL VERBS

As you have just seen, a phrasal verb (PV) is made up of two (or more) parts that function as a single verb. Phrasal verbs are sometimes called two-word verbs because they usually consist of a verb plus a second word, the latter often referred to as an adverb. We will refer to the second part of the phrasal verb as a particle, to show its close association with the verb, and to distinguish it from prepositions and other adverbs, although we acknowledge that, as you have just seen with *up*, the same word can fit into more than one category.<sup>2</sup>

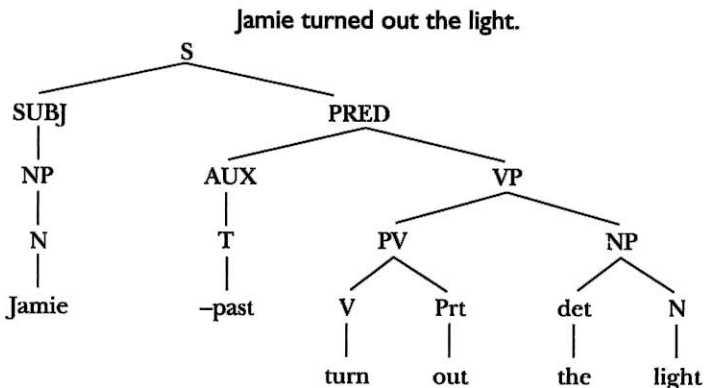
To be able to analyze sentences with phrasal verbs, we need to refine our phrase structure rule for the VP by generating a PV as an alternative to V.

$$VP \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{cop } \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{NP} \\ \text{AP} \\ \text{PrepP} \end{array} \right\} \\ \left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{V} \\ \text{PV} \end{array} \right\} (\text{NP})^2 (\text{PrepP}) \end{array} \right\}$$

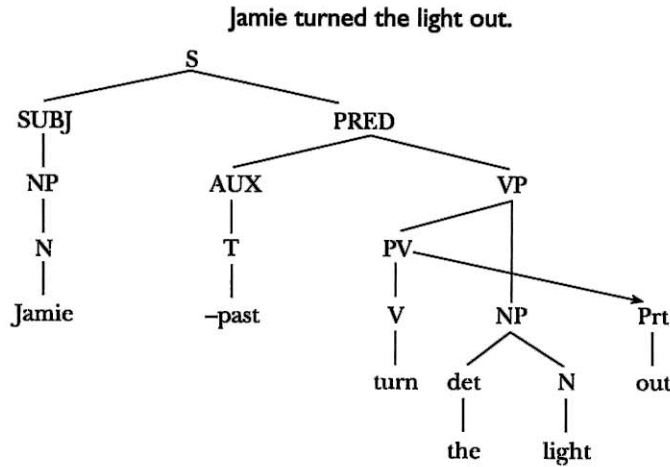
The PV category is then expanded in a new phrase structure rule as a verb and particle (Prt):

$$PV \rightarrow V \ll \text{Prt} \gg$$

The symbols on either side of the particle indicate that although the particle is part of the phrasal verb, it need not be contiguous with it. Here is the basic structure of a sentence in which the particle follows the verb directly.



Now here is a tree where the particle is not contiguous with the verb but rather is separated from it by an intervening direct object.



## SYNTACTIC FEATURES OF PHRASAL VERBS

### Transitive and Intransitive Phrasal Verbs

Like single-word verbs, phrasal verbs can be transitive:

Harold turned on the radio.  
 Barbara passed out the new assignment.<sup>3</sup>  
 I called off the meeting.

(Others: *do over* (repeat), *look over* (examine), *fill out* (complete), *find out* (discover), etc.)

Phrasal verbs can also be intransitive.

My car broke down.  
 He really took off.  
 The boys were playing around in the yard.

(Others: *come back* (return), *come over* (visit), *make up* (reconcile), *pass out* (faint), etc.)

Of course, just as some regular ergative or change-of-state verbs (e.g., *open*, *increase*) may be either transitive or intransitive depending on the role of the agent, some phrasal verbs can have this dual function, too; for example:

An arsonist burned down the hotel. (transitive)  
 The hotel burned down. (intransitive)

### Phrasal Verbs that Require Prepositions

Also like single-word verbs, adjectives, and nouns, many phrasal verbs take a specific preposition. Examples of this type of construction are:

<i>put up with</i>	<i>get along with</i>	<i>cut down on</i>	<i>close in on</i>
<i>look in on</i>	<i>check up on</i>	<i>catch up with</i>	<i>make away with</i>
<i>look down on</i>	<i>check out of</i>	<i>stand up for</i>	<i>make up for</i>
<i>get away with</i>	<i>go in for</i>	<i>keep up with</i>	<i>drop in on</i>
<i>get down to</i>	<i>come up with</i>	<i>end up with</i>	<i>run up against</i>
<i>get back to</i>	<i>give in to</i>	<i>pick up on</i>	<i>break up with</i>

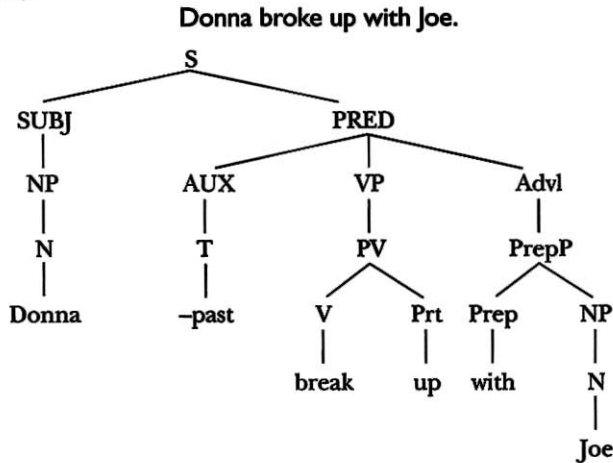
In these expressions the phrasal verb and preposition must be learned as a unit.<sup>4</sup>

The only thing that can be added to such a string is an adverb or adverbial phrase between the particle and the preposition:

I haven't kept up fully with the work.

Mort has cut down almost completely on his smoking.

Here's how a tree would look with a "three-word phrasal verb" (i.e., a phrasal verb that takes a preposition).



### The Separability of Phrasal Verbs

Thus far we have been discussing characteristics that phrasal verbs share with regular verbs; however, there is one syntactic characteristic peculiar to transitive phrasal verbs: sometimes the particle can be separated from the verb by the direct object and sometimes it cannot. Separation is obligatory when the direct object is a pronoun.

#### *Separable Phrasal Verbs*

Mark threw away the ball.    \*Mark threw away it.

Mark threw the ball away.    Mark threw it away.

Rachel looked up the information.    \*Rachel looked up it.

Rachel looked the information up.    Rachel looked it up.

(Others: *take up* (discuss), *leave out* (omit), *pass out* (distribute), *bring back* (return), *turn down* (refuse), etc.)

The largest, most productive category of phrasal verbs are these transitive separable ones. However, we also posit a smaller category of inseparable phrasal verbs, where the particle cannot be separated from its verb. Some linguists would argue that the inseparability is due to the fact that what we are calling a particle is really a preposition, and thus would naturally precede its object. Because the two words appear to have a syntactic affinity (see the section on syntactic tests later) and together have a meaning beyond what each word contributes individually, we feel that it makes good pedagogic sense to have a category of inseparable phrasal verbs.

#### *Inseparable Phrasal Verbs*

I came across an interesting article last night.    I came across it last night.

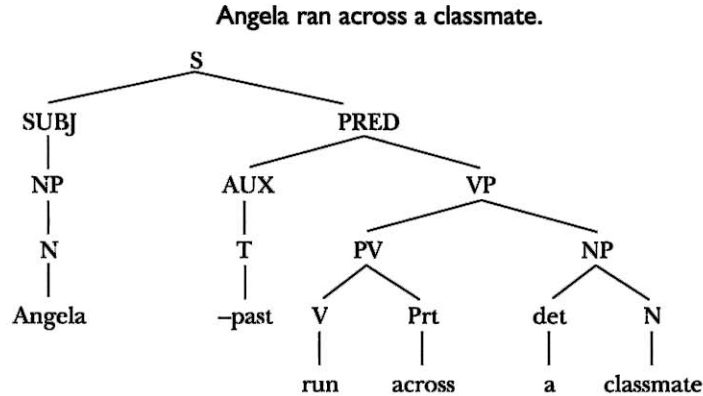
\*I came an interesting article across last night.    \*I came it across last night.

Josh ran into an old friend.    Josh ran into him.

\*Josh ran an old friend into.    \*Josh ran him into.

(Others: *get over* (recover), *go over* (review), *look into* (investigate), *go for* (attack), etc.)

We have already illustrated the two trees for the separable phrasal verb *turn out*. Here's a tree for a sentence with an inseparable phrasal verb. Since the particle must follow the verb directly in an inseparable phrasal verb, only one tree is possible.



### Phrasal Verbs That Are Always Separated

A few phrasal verbs seem to occur only with the verb and particle separated:

How can I get  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{the message} \\ \text{it} \end{array} \right\}$  through to him? (*get ... through* = convey; transmit)

\*How can I get through the message to him?

We'll see  $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} \text{this ordeal} \\ \text{it} \end{array} \right\}$  through together. (*see ... through* = survive)

?We'll see through this ordeal together.

The reason for the obligatory separation is presumably to avoid the ambiguity with the inseparable phrasal verbs that have the same form but a different meaning:

get through the lesson (*get through* = finish)

see through his excuse (*see through* = not be deceived by)

Such phrasal verbs that are always separated compose a small subcategory of phrasal verbs. Their lexical entries would have to indicate the fact that the verb and particle are always separated.

## DISTINGUISHING PHRASAL VERBS FROM VERB + PREPOSITION SEQUENCES

### Syntactic Tests

At the beginning of this chapter you saw that a particular word can behave as a preposition in some contexts and a particle in others. Despite the overlap, there is reason to try to arrive at a common understanding of what distinguishes its prepositional use from that of its particle use in a phrasal verb. The following are some of the tests that have been applied (adapted from O'Dowd 1994:19).

Only prepositions (not particles) allow:

Adverb insertion    We turned quickly off the road.

\*We turned quickly off the light.

Phrase fronting	Up the hill John ran. *Up the bill John ran.
<i>Wh</i> -fronting	About what does he write? *Up what does he write?

Only particles in separable phrasal verbs (not prepositions) allow:

Passivization <sup>5</sup>	The light was turned off. *The road was turned off.
Verb substitution	The light was extinguished. (= the light was turned off.)
NP insertion	We turned the light off. *We turned the road off.

The rationale for many of these tests is the fact that a preposition makes a natural unit with the NP object that follows it, whereas a particle makes a natural unit with the verb that precedes it. For instance, when we apply *wh*-fronting:

About what does he write?

we produce a somewhat stilted but nevertheless grammatical question because we have fronted a natural unit consisting of a preposition and its object. When we apply this same test to a sentence containing a phrasal verb, the question is ungrammatical:

\*Up what does he write?

because it is not possible to separate the particle *up* from the verb *write*, with which it forms a natural unit.

Since we are positing a three-way distinction among separable PVs, inseparable PVs, and verb-plus-preposition sequences, we recommend adopting the following hierarchy of tests. Consider the following examples:

Peter looked up the new word.  
Peter looked at the newspaper.  
Peter looked into the matter.

1. Can you put the object noun between the verb and the “P”?

Peter looked the new word up. → Yes = Separable PV (*look up*)  
 { \*Peter looked the newspaper at.  
 \*Peter looked the matter into. } → No = Inseparable PV or V + Prep

2. Can you front the “P” in a *wh*-question?

At what did Peter look? → Yes = V + Prep (*look at*)  
 \*Into what did Peter look. (*look into* = investigate) → No = Inseparable PV (*look into*)

Another reason for the difficulty in distinguishing particles from prepositions is that their syntactic roles are evolving (O’Dowd 1994); that is, some of the items O’Dowd calls “Ps” are becoming more particle-like and some more preposition-like. For now, let us say that it is perhaps more helpful to view phrasal verbs and verbs taking prepositions as opposite ends of a continuum rather than as a categorical dichotomy. Indeed, O’Dowd (1994) rejects the hard-and-fast distinction between prepositions and particles; she also, however, acknowledges the tendency for particular “P’s” to specialize in one syntactic role or another.





lists of such verbs along with their meanings. Fortunately, this is not the only answer. There is some systematicity in how meaning is represented in phrasal verbs, and to exploring this, we now turn.

## SEMANTIC CATEGORIES OF PHRASAL VERBS

First of all, the systematicity that does exist becomes easier to perceive when phrasal verbs are not treated monolithically. At least three categories of phrasal verbs can be discerned: literal, aspectual, and idiomatic.

### Literal Phrasal Verbs

The first category is comprised of verbs that appear to be a combination of a verb and a directional PrepP. Nevertheless, for pedagogical purposes, we will classify them as phrasal verbs because they function syntactically like verb-particle constructions. Since the particle retains its prepositional meaning, the result is a phrasal verb whose meaning is fully compositional (Jackendoff 1997). Some examples of literal phrasal verbs are: *sit down*, *stand up*, *hand out*, *take down*, *carry out*, *throw away*, *climb up*, *fall down*, *pass through*. These should not be especially difficult for ESL/EFL students to comprehend and to produce.

### Aspectual Phrasal Verbs

The second category is one where the meaning is not as transparent, but it is not idiomatic either. This category consists of verbs to which certain particles contribute consistent aspectual meaning. (Recall our discussion of the aspectual meaning of verbs, such as of accomplishment and activity verbs in Chapter 3, and of aspect, e.g., punctual versus continuous in Chapter 7.) This category in turn can be subdivided into a number of semantic classes, depending on the semantic contribution of the particle.<sup>6</sup>

- Inceptive (to signal a beginning state)

John took off.

(Others: *set out*, *start up*)

- Continuative (to show that the action continues)

—use of *on* and *along* with activity verbs

Her speech ran on and on.

Hurry along now.

(Others: *carry on*, *keep on*, *hang on*, *come along*, *play along*)

—use of *away* with activity verbs with the nuance that the activity is “heedless”

They danced the night away.

(Others: *work away*, *sleep away*, *fritter away*)

—use of *around* with activity verbs to express absence of purpose

They goofed around all afternoon.

(Others: *mess around*, *play around*, *travel around*)

—use of *through* with activity verbs to mean from beginning to end

She read through her lines in the play for the audition.

(Others: *think through*, *skim through*, *sing through*)

- Iterative (use of *over* with activity verbs to show repetition)
  - He did it over and over again until he got it right.
  - (Others: *write over, think over, type over*)
- Completive (uses particles *up, out, off,* and *down* to show that the action is complete)
  - turns an activity verb into an accomplishment
    - He drank the milk up.
    - (Others: *burn down, mix up, wear out, turn off, blow out*)
  - reinforces the sense of goal orientation in an accomplishment verb
    - He closed the suitcase up.
    - (Others: *wind up, fade out, cut off, clean up*)
  - adds durativity to a punctual achievement verb
    - He found out why they were missing.
    - (Others: *check over, win over, catch up*)

In short, there is some consistency of meaning for certain particles. Nonetheless, we should also acknowledge that even here ESL/EFL students can have problems. For example, *burn up* and *burn down* are not antonyms. *Up* has a positive “goal completion” meaning versus *down* or *out*, which have a more negative “complete extinction” meaning (O’Dowd, personal communication). And even if the aspectual particles signal certain meanings consistently, they cannot be assigned freely to any verb. Certain aspectual particles co-occur with certain verbs. *Fade out* is acceptable, but *\*fade up* is not (Brinton 1988:182). This brings us to the last category—noncompositional, or idiomatic, phrasal verbs.

### Idiomatic Phrasal Verbs

As we have been saying, many phrasal verbs are idiomatic, such as *chew out, tune out, catch up, put off*. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to figure out the meaning of the verb by combining the separate meanings of its parts. This is not to say that the situation is hopeless, however. Stauffer (1996) makes the point that native speakers coin novel phrasal verbs and can understand phrasal verbs that they have never before encountered because they understand the underlying logic of the language. For example, earlier we contrasted a phrase with a verb + preposition sequence *run up the hill* with one with a phrasal verb, *run up the bill*. Stauffer demonstrates how in each sentence *run* contributes a sense of motion entailing change and *up* contributes the meaning of higher vertical direction on some path. When *run* and *up* occur together with what appears to be an incompatible object since it is [– place] (i.e., *the bill*), the listener can use logic to infer that if one is running up a bill and something is going to change, then what is going to change is the amount of money. Since the direction is up, it means that the amount of money will increase.

Pelli’s (1976) statistical analysis of 14,021 verb-particle constructions has shown that the vast majority rely at least in part on the literal spatial or aspectual meaning of the particle. Thus, it would behoove teachers to guide their ESL/EFL students through some “idiomatic” phrasal verbs by analyzing their component parts and then looking for a logical relationship within a specific context.<sup>7</sup>

## POLYSEMIOUS PHRASAL VERBS

A final point concerning the meaning of phrasal verbs is that as with other verbs, phrasal verbs can be polysemous. A verb such as *check out*, for instance, can have many meanings. A partial inventory might include:

1. I need to check out by 1 P.M.
2. I went to the library to get a book, but someone had already checked it out.
3. Be sure to check it out before you buy it.
4. Check it out!
5. If you have fewer than 10 items, you can check out in the express lane.

While the meanings of some of these verbs are related, they illustrate the point of the polysemy. Furthermore, they show how the two-word sequence can be literal, aspectual, or idiomatic. Just as one form can have many meanings, we know that it is also possible to have more than one form with the same or similar meanings. This brings us to the question of use.

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## THE USE OF PHRASAL VERBS

### REGISTER

#### Level of Formality

When we discussed matters of form, you learned that the verb substitution test could be used to identify phrasal verbs. Indeed, although like the other tests it is not failproof, many phrasal verbs do have single-verb counterparts, words derived from Latin.<sup>8</sup> One factor that makes English speakers prefer phrasal verbs such as *put off*, *call off*, and *show up* to their Latinate counterparts<sup>9</sup> *postpone*, *cancel*, and *arrive*—is presumably a question of register. As we indicated in the introduction to this chapter, phrasal verbs are common in informal registers, although not completely absent from formal discourse (Cornell 1985).

#### Field

Another use of the term register is relevant here. As we saw in Chapter 2, register can also refer to the social activity in which the language is being used and what is being talked about. Certain phrasal verbs are associated with a particular field for which there are no concise alternatives. For instance, *check out* in example 1 above will likely be understood to mean check out of a hotel room. It would be difficult to describe the same action using any other verb. A paraphrase of *check out* in this context might be that “upon leaving a hotel, I have to go to the front desk, give the clerk my key, and pay my bill.” No other verb exists that has this precise meaning.

Conversely, airline personnel often favor Latinate verbs over phrasal verbs, perhaps to assist nonnative speakers of English comprehend announcements. For instance, in the days when cigarette smoking was permitted on all airplanes, passengers were requested to “extinguish all smoking material,” prior to landing, rather than the more common “put out your cigarette.” Thus, the field-specific use of the term register is pertinent in explaining the use or non-use of phrasal verbs in certain contexts.

## THE ISSUE OF PHRASAL VERB SEPARABILITY

### Principle of Dominance Revisited

Erteschik-Shir’s (1979) principle of dominance, which we discussed with regard to indirect objects in Chapter 19, applies to account for when separable phrasal verbs

require that an NP direct object intervene between the verb and particle. If the direct object is a pronoun, its referent has already been made clear in the discourse context, and it would therefore be nondominant. By virtue of its nondominance, it does not occupy the final position in the sentence if this can be avoided, and thus a pronoun direct object is put between the verb and its particle.

He poured out his heart. (direct object is a noun—either order is syntactically possible)  
He poured his heart out.

He poured it out. (direct object is a pronoun—it must be placed between the verb and particle)  
\*He poured out it.

On the other hand, if the direct object contains a significant amount of new, complex, or unpredictable information, its insertion between the verb and the particle would interrupt the cognitive unity of the verb and particle and make processing very difficult.

?He poured a brand new can of green paint that was on sale out.

Thus, if the direct object is not a pronoun, and especially if it is a long and elaborate NP, it would occupy the more dominant position after the particle. You will recall that this is the conventional position for new, discourse-salient information.

He poured out a brand new can of green paint that was on sale.

Of course if the direct object is not dominant, then the particle can occupy the dominant position.

He cried his eyes out.

The ability of the particle to occupy this position is in keeping with the fact that it can bear primary stress. Phrasal verbs thus afford English speakers the opportunity to put part of the verb into end-focus position. Such syntactic flexibility does not exist for Latinate verbs where all the semantic features are conflated into a single word (O'Dowd, personal communication).

### **Sentences with Separable Phrasal Verbs, Direct and Indirect Objects**

We also noted in Chapter 19 that indirect objects that are nondominant are likely to precede direct objects. In the following, the indirect object—*the country singer*—marked by the definite article as having already been introduced into the discourse, is nondominant.

The Mayor of Nashville gave the country singer a tour of the city.

What happens when the direct object and indirect object occur in a sentence with a separable phrasal verb? As you might expect, the order of particle, direct object, and indirect object depends on the dominance of the objects.

If the indirect object is dominant, then the sentence could occur with the particle directly following the verb and the indirect object in sentence-final position:

John paid back his loan to the bank.

To reinforce the dominance of the indirect object, the direct object could be followed by the particle, separating the direct and indirect objects:

John paid his loan back to the bank.

If, on the other hand, the direct object is the dominant NP, then the order would be:

John paid the bank back his loan.

It is not likely that the verb and its particle would occur contiguously in such a sentence because it would be in conflict with the fact that the indirect object is nondominant:

?John paid back the bank his loan.

Finally, it is possible to have a sentence order in which the particle follows both the direct and the indirect objects:

John paid the bank his loan back.

Here the direct object, *his loan*, is more dominant than the indirect object, *the bank*, but *his loan* is still less dominant than when it was in sentence-final position. It's the particle *back*; which is in sentence-final position, and therefore dominant.

In short, while there is nothing wrong with the rule that says that if the direct object is a pronoun it goes between verb and the particle, it is simply incomplete and offers no explanation for why the object should be placed in this position. Furthermore, it offers no explanation for why one word order is preferred over another when there is a syntactic choice—that is, when the direct object is a noun. We now know that there is a reason for the rule and a greater generalization to be made. The rule is not arbitrary, but rather it reflects the higher-order principle regarding the ordering of constituents with different information status: when an object is nondominant, it will be placed between the verb and particle of a separable phrasal verb.

## CONCLUSION

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Phrasal verbs are not unique to English, but they are different enough from verbs in many languages of the world, and common enough in English, to pose a significant learning challenge. Perhaps the most challenging dimension is in the meaning, for while there is some semantic systematicity, there is still enough idiomaticity to cause difficulty for ESL/EFL students. Furthermore, the meaning of idiomatic phrasal verbs is not only obscure, it is often deceptive because while one expects to be able to figure out the meaning because the words look so familiar, knowing the meaning of the parts does not necessarily aid comprehension. In other words, part of the challenge of phrasal verbs is recognizing when you are dealing with compositional as opposed to noncompositional meaning.

ESL/EFL students will also have to make appropriate choices when it comes to the dimension of use—when to use a phrasal verb versus a single-word verb and when to split the particle from its verb.

## TEACHING SUGGESTIONS

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**1. Form/Meaning.** Many teachers like to begin to introduce the concept of phrasal verbs using Total Physical Response. Giving commands such as *stand up*, *turn around*, *turn on the light*, *turn off the light*, *go back to your chair*, *sit down*, and so forth will get students used to the fact that certain verbs in English are composed of two forms, and the exercise will have students begin to associate meaning with certain common forms.

**2. Form/Meaning.** Certain routines can be pantomimed in which a number of different phrasal verbs can be incorporated. The teacher reads the routine the first time and mimes the actions with the students. Later, the students can give the routine and mime it. Here are two examples:



**Morning Routine:**

My alarm goes off at 6 A.M. I wake up. I turn off my alarm. I stretch in bed and then I get up. I go to my closet and take out my slippers. I put them on . . .

**Telephone Routine:**

I want to call up my classmate. I look up her number in the telephone book and I write it down. I pick up the receiver and I dial the number. The line is busy so I hang up. I will call back later.

**3. Form/Meaning.** Prepare 20 verb cards and 20 particle cards (some can be repeats) for each small group of students. Have the students shuffle the verb cards and place them face down on a desk or table. Then they should do the same for the particle cards. The first student in each group turns over one verb card and one particle card. If there is a phrasal verb match, the student should give a sentence using the phrasal verb to show that the student knows its meaning. If there is no match, the student should say that. Students take turns turning over two cards at a time and helping each other decide if a match has been made and what the meaning and syntactic properties of the match are.

**4. Meaning.** Margaret Olin suggests creating a “phrasal verb wall.” Whenever the class or an individual student discovers a new phrasal verb, someone should write the phrasal verb on a chart and indicate whether it is transitive/intransitive, separable/inseparable. Next, a picture should be drawn illustrating its meaning. Finally, a sentence in which it is used should be added. The chart should be mounted on the wall (or on a long roll of paper if the teacher is more mobile) and added to throughout the term.

**5. Meaning.** Drehmel (1997) reports that one of her Swiss friends once remarked that “English is such an easy language. All you have to know is the word *get*.” Intrigued by this observation, Drehmel wrote a passage entitled “*Gotcha*.” It begins thus:

*This morning I got up at 7 A.M. After getting showered and shaved, I got dressed. Then I got my own breakfast since none of my roommates had gotten back from vacation yet . . .*

Not all the uses of *get* involve phrasal verbs, of course. However, Drehmel’s suggestion that students try to rewrite the passage without *get* gives students an opportunity to learn which do and which don’t.

**6. Meaning.** Ivins (1986) has a good way to practice the literal and aspectual meaning of certain particles. The teacher makes a grid with five verbs along the side and five particles along the top.

	on	out	up	away	off
take					
put					
get					
turn					
give					

Students have to make up sentences for every phrasal verb combination possible.

Then, they should see if they can figure out the underlying literal or aspectual meaning of the particles.



**7. Use.** Linnea Henry and Lauren Parker have created a dialogue that uses forms that are accurate and meaningful but are not what a native speaker of English would probably say. The students are asked to first listen to the dialogue and then to read it, rewriting the verbs so that they are more appropriate for conversational English. Here is our adaptation of their dialogue.

*Linnea:* Hey, Lauren, I heard that guy finally asked you for a date.

*Lauren:* Yeah, well, actually, Pam arranged the meeting.

*Linnea:* How did it go?

*Lauren:* Well, first he telephoned me at 8 in the morning, and it was necessary for me to leave my bed. I was quite annoyed. It was Saturday morning. Then he said he wanted to have a date with me that night.

*Linnea:* So, what happened?

*Lauren:* Well, he was supposed to arrive at 7, but he didn't. He stumbled when he entered. I think he may have been drinking. He came an hour late because he said that his car had stopped working. Then he said there was no more gas in it.

*Linnea:* I would have abandoned him.

*Lauren:* Yeah. I told him to leave. I said that I couldn't take any more.

**8. Use.** In order to give students practice with the constraints governing verb-particle separability, Riegenbach and Samuda (1997) suggest asking students to read items in which the particle is sometimes correctly placed vis-a-vis the verb and sometimes isn't. When the particle is in the wrong position, students are to circle the particle and to draw an arrow to show its correct position. For example:

Last June, after school was over, I decided to clean up my office. I had been putting off it for as long as I could. I started with my filing cabinets. I threw all the papers I had been keeping since graduate school out.

## EXERCISES

### Test your understanding of what has been presented.

- Provide original example sentences to illustrate the following terms. Underline the pertinent word(s) in your examples:
 

a. verb + preposition	f. phrasal verb plus preposition
b. transitive phrasal verb	g. literal phrasal verb
c. intransitive phrasal verb	h. aspectual phrasal verb
d. separable phrasal verb	i. idiomatic phrasal verb
e. inseparable phrasal verb	j. phrasal verb that is always separated
- Give tree diagrams for the following sentences:
  - Graeme warmed the soup up.
  - Anne puts up with murder.
  - Deidre brought the cart back to the market.
  - Rachel looked up the tree.
- Explain why the following sentences are ungrammatical or, at least, awkward.
  - \*We called our neighbors on.
  - \*I looked the report that Phyllis wrote in Dallas last week over.

- c. \*I gave back Larry the money.
- d. ?He showed just as all the work was done.
- e. ?Amber placed back the things that had fallen down from the shelf.

**Test your ability to apply what you know.**

4. If your students produce the following sentences, what errors have they made? How will you make them aware of the errors, and what exercises will you prepare to correct the errors?
  - a. \*Donna can't put up the noise anymore.
  - b. ?We discontinued our engagement.
  - c. \*After two hours the candle had burned off.
  - d. \*Kim worked out her muscles at the gym.
  - e. \*The child ate up it.
5. Why is the term "two-word" verb somewhat inaccurate?
6. Apply the syntactic tests in this chapter to the following sentences to determine if the verb + "P" is a phrasal verb or a verb + preposition.

When we *got to* the station, the train had already left.

My brother and I always *fought over* the prize in the box of cereal.

7. In the last chapter, we contrasted the prepositions of English with the postpositions of other languages like Japanese and Korean. Consider the following examples. Is it really accurate to say that English has no postpositions? Explain your answer.

Bonnie ran over the field.

Bonnie ran the field over.

8. Make up a routine like the two examples we gave in Teaching Suggestion 2, which takes place at the library.
9. We gave *check out* as an example of a verb that really has no single verb paraphrase in its use in a hotel context. Can you think of any other phrasal verbs that have no single verb counterparts?

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### Suggestions for Further Reading

*For a diachronic view of phrasal verbs, see:*

- Martin, P. (1990). *The Phrasal Verb: Diachronic Development in British and American English*. Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University.

*For reference works dealing with phrasal verbs as well as prepositions, consult:*

- Cambridge International Dictionary of Phrasal Verbs*. 1997. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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*For another work that discusses information status and separability, see:*

- Chen, P. (1986). "Discourse and Particle Movement in English." *Studies in Language* 10:1, 79–95.

*For teaching suggestions, see:*

- Danielson, D., and P. Porter (1990). *Using English: Your Second Language* (2d ed.) Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
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**ENDNOTES**


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1. The Germanic languages include English, German, Dutch, Flemish, and the Scandinavian languages. Some Bantu languages apparently also have phrasal verbs (Paul Schachter, personal communication).
2. Others have tried to accommodate the overlap among adverbs, prepositions, and particles by referring to a certain word that follows the verb as an “adprep” (Bolinger 1971), a “prepticle” (Clark 1995), and even just a “P” (O’Dowd 1994).
3. Sometimes a phrasal verb can be used both transitively and intransitively with different meanings, e.g.:

Barbara passed out the papers. (distributed)  
 Maxine passed out. (fainted)

It is best to consider such homophonous items as two different phrasal verbs with two separate lexical entries.

4. Although the overwhelming majority of phrasal verbs taking prepositions are intransitive, there are also a few idiomatic transitive phrasal verbs that take prepositions where the direct object pronoun *it* intervenes between the verb and the particle, e.g.:

She *put it over on* him. (= She deceived/fooled him.)  
 I’ll *make it up to* you. (= I’ll return the favor/good deed.)

5. This test refers to the passivization of direct objects. We know from Chapter 19 that it is possible for objects of prepositions that are indirect objects to be subjects of passive sentences:

Dan’s organization was awarded the contract.

6. We have drawn from the following sources to compile this list: Fraser (1976), Brinton (1988), O’Dowd (1994), and Jackendoff (1997).
7. Only 6 percent of Pelli’s verb-particle sequences were classed in the idiomatic group. All the others were semantically recoverable as compositional sequences.
8. Of course, Latinate verbs are not true synonyms. Neither, for that matter, are other verb + adverb sequences. As we saw in the discussion of the meaning of phrasal verbs, the particle often connotes some aspectual sense. For instance, in *check out* in sentence 3 above, the particle conveys a sense of goal orientation (the goal being the speaker’s satisfaction), which is lost in a paraphrase like *examine* or even the verb + adverb sequence *check thoroughly*.
9. Of course, as O’Dowd (1994) shows, the Latinate verbs themselves are frequently made up of the same sort of morphological composition as verb-particle combinations. For instance, one of the paraphrases of the phrasal verb *check out* might be “examine,” which in and of itself carries the Latin directional preposition *ex-* (“out of,” “from”) as its prefix.

# NONREFERENTIAL *IT* AND *THERE* AS SUBJECTS

## INTRODUCTION

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You have already seen that the forms that we treat in this chapter fill other functions. In Chapter 16, *it* was called a personal pronoun, the same form being used for both subject and objects:

A: Has anyone seen the newspaper?

B: The last time I saw *it*, *it* was in the living room.

In Chapter 21, we referred to *there* as a pro-adverb, since it can be a paraphrase of another type of adverbial, namely a prepositional phrase.

A: Where exactly did you see it?

B: (Pointing) I saw it *there* (on the coffee table).

While the forms themselves, then, may not be new, their meanings and uses as nonreferential subjects are different and, therefore, warrant a special treatment of their own.

These subjects have gone by many names: nonreferential, dummy, empty, and so forth. What these terms have tried to capture is that, unlike the referential *it* and *there* we have just exemplified, these subjects appear to have no clearly definable antecedent.

It's raining. (What is the *it* that is raining? What does *it* refer to?)

There's a lot of noise here. (Where is *there*? What does *there* refer to?)

Without a clearly identifiable referent, *it* and *there* are free to serve very useful purposes in English. Consequently, they occur frequently.

## CHALLENGES FOR ESL/EFL STUDENTS

Despite their common occurrence, nonreferential *it* and *there* can cause difficulties for ESL/EFL students. Speakers of Spanish and Italian, for instance, who speak languages that do not require a surface subject the way English does (for every nonimperative and nonelliptical sentence), may produce sentences that are ungrammatical in English, such as the following:

\*Is raining.



Speakers of Cantonese might translate literally from their language into English and say:

\*Rain is plentiful.

Speakers of topic-comment languages—Japanese, for example—may preserve the topic-comment structure of their native language and instead of producing sentences with nonreferential *there*, such as

There are 27 students in Taro's school.

produce sentences such as:

\*Taro's school is 27 students.

\*Taro's school students are 27.

\*In Taro's school students are 27.

(Examples from Sasaki 1990)

Another strategy speakers of Japanese employ is to use the English verb *have*, which allows for the topic-comment word order of Japanese while generating well-formed sentences in English. But even this type of sentence is not as acceptable as a sentence with a nonreferential *there* in subject position.

?Taro's school has 27 students.

There are 27 students in Taro's school.

Another problem for speakers of topic-comment languages is the formation of “pseudo-relatives” (Yip 1995). It has long been known that Chinese students use the nonreferential *there* frequently (Schachter and Rutherford 1979:3). Many of these sentences with nonreferential *there* subjects appear to be missing a relative pronoun.

\*There were lot of events happen in my country.

It is understandable why an ESL/EFL teacher might be inclined to correct sentences like this by supplying the relative pronoun *that*, in addition to making other modifications.

There were a lot of events that happened in my country.

However, as Rutherford (1983) shows, such ungrammatical learner utterances do not stem from omission of the relative pronoun, but rather conform to Chinese grammar. The *there* is presumably seen by learners to correspond to a topic introducer in Mandarin Chinese, which goes before a subject.

Then, too, the fact that English has two nonreferential subjects, *it* and *there*, is a potential source of confusion to those ESL/EFL students who have no such structure—or to those whose languages have only one such form, the meaning of which may overlap with the meanings of English *it* and *there*. This state of affairs sometimes results in students producing errors such as

\*There is very nice in Korea.

Any similarities that the two nonreferential subjects share are far outweighed by many obvious differences: *it* and *there* occur in different contexts and have different meanings.

Finally, nonnative speakers of English struggle with matters of use, such as when it is appropriate to say

There's a book on the table.

rather than

A book is on the table.



Moreover, it is impossible to find referents for some cases of *it* above:

It is raining.

What is raining? (?The clouds are raining. \*The rain is raining.<sup>1</sup> ?The weather is raining.)

It gets a little noisy, especially when everyone is warming up.

What gets noisy? (The room gets a little noisy. ?The space gets a little noisy. ?The ambience gets a little noisy.)

Therefore, for both these reasons—first, the fact that unlike the personal pronoun *it*, nonreferential *it* requires no antecedent or anaphoric referent, and second, there is often no conceivable referent for the *it*—linguists conclude that the nonreferential *it* takes its meaning from the ambience/environment in which it occurs. “We can therefore acknowledge the rationale for calling *it* a dummy—its meaning is too unspecific to articulate, and speakers have no clear conception of its referent. But that precisely is its crucial semantic property . . .” (Langacker 1991:377). By virtue of *it* being a linguistic chameleon, it is extremely versatile in that this form can be identified with many different aspects of the linguistic or situational context.<sup>2</sup>

## USE

As we have seen, nonreferential *it* occurs in a number of simple statements and questions in English dealing with time, distance, weather, and other environmental features. Use of nonreferential *it* allows such a question or statement to be shorter and less redundant than it would be if content nouns such as “time” and “weather” were used instead. Note that certain nouns do exist to deal with these notions, which, when used, make a statement more formal or more precise.

The time is (now) 10 o'clock.

The weather today will be fair and cool.

Such formal statements are sometimes used in television or radio broadcasts. The issue of when speakers of English use a content noun like *time* or *weather* versus when they use nonreferential *it* would be a good topic for a future research study.

There is another nonreferential *it* that is used in subject position as well, one that has an important discourse management function:

It is human to err; it is divine to forgive.

However, we prefer to call this *it* by another name, the anticipatory *it*, because its referent is established cataphorically—that is, by something that follows: in this case, the clause that comes at the end of the sentence. This *it*, therefore, has a different function, one that we address in Chapter 31 on complementation.

## NONREFERENTIAL *THERE*

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### FORM

As we mentioned earlier, you have encountered *there* before as a pro-adverb. As a pro-adverb it can be used anaphorically (*Let's go to London. There we can see the crown jewels.*) and deictically—its meaning is understood within the context in which it occurs. One of the manifestations of this deictic meaning is that it is usually accompanied by some gesture, such as finger pointing. It is also stressed.

THERE is the little boy who looks after the sheep.

Deictic *there* calls attention to a location relative to the speaker. Contrast deictic *there* with the unstressed *there* in the next sentence.

There is a little boy who looks after the sheep; his name is Little Boy Blue.

The *there* in this second sentence does not refer to any specific location. It is not accompanied by any typical gesture, and it does not bear stress; in fact, its vowel may well be reduced [əɹ]. The *there* in the second sentence is called the nonreferential *there*.

In addition to its phonological and nonverbal differences, the nonreferential *there* has certain syntactic properties that the deictic *there* does not share. One is that the nonreferential *there* is the subject of the clause; the deictic *there* is not. To prove this, we can see that the deictic *there*, since it is an adverb, can be moved to another position in the sentence. This is not true of the nonreferential *there* because as the subject, it is always clause initial:

Deictic *there*: The little boy who looks after the sheep is THERE.

Nonreferential *there*: \*A little boy who looks after the sheep is there. (Sequencing the words in this fashion forces a deictic interpretation to the *there*; that is, such an order is not possible with nonreferential *there*.)

Lakoff (1987) offers additional syntactic tests to distinguish the two forms of *there*:

- Question tag test

Deictic *there*: \*There's the little boy who looks after the sheep, isn't there?

Nonreferential *there*: There is a little boy who looks after the sheep, isn't there?

Recall that question tags are made with the subject of a sentence. Only the nonreferential *there* can be used in the question tag, demonstrating that it is indeed a subject.

- Negation test

Deictic *there*: \*There isn't the little boy who looks after the sheep.

Nonreferential *there*: There isn't a little boy who looks after the sheep.

Only sentences with nonreferential *there* can be negated.

- Deictic *here* test (substitute *here* for *there*)

Deictic *there*: Here's the little boy who looks after the sheep.

Nonreferential *there*: \*Here's a little boy who looks after the sheep. (forces a deictic interpretation)

Deictic *here* can alternate syntactically with deictic *there*, but not with nonreferential *there*.

There are other tests that could be applied as well. The results of these should suffice to demonstrate that nonreferential *there* is a subject, therefore a noun phrase, not an adverb.

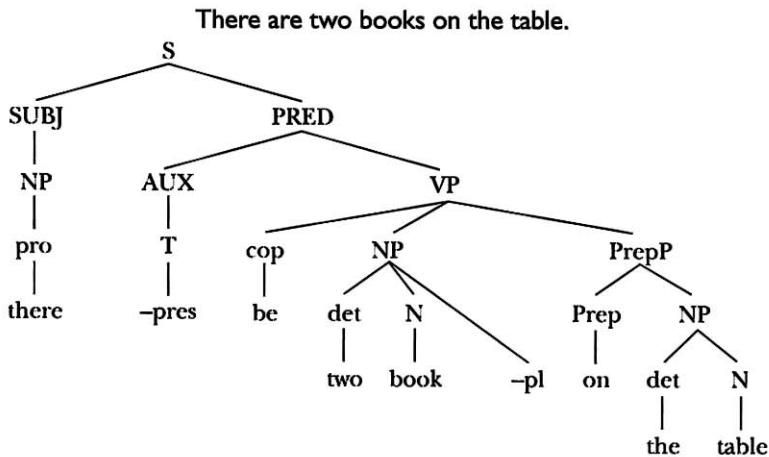
### **There and Subject-Verb Agreement**

As a subject, *there* is followed by a verb, most often the copula verb *be*. In terms of subject-verb agreement, nonreferential *there* is much more problematic than nonreferential *it*, which is always followed by a singular verb. In contrast, in sentences with nonreferential *there* subjects, the verb may be singular or plural depending on the form of the noun phrase following the *be*.

There is a book on the table.

There are two books on the table.

Here is the tree and the derivation for the second sentence.



output: there -pres be two book -pl on the table

copy s/t: [with nonreferential *there* in subject position, the person and number of the NP following the verb is copied onto the tense marker]

there -pres [+3 +pl] be two book -pl on the table

morphology: There are two books on the table.

It is rather strange that the NP following the verb determines the form of the verb in that a basic property of subjects in English is their power to govern the agreement of the verb. The explanation for this phenomenon is that the noun phrase following the verb would have been the subject of the sentence rather than *there* had other considerations not intervened. We discuss these other considerations in the Use section in this chapter. For now, the point is that the NP following the verb is not an object but rather is notionally, although not morphosyntactically, the subject.<sup>3</sup> Sometimes such an NP is referred to as the logical subject, as opposed to the grammatical subject.

To make matters more complex, there is also considerable variation from speaker to speaker with regard to the form of the verb, with many speakers opting for a singular verb when the verb is contracted with *there*, no matter what the number of the following noun is.

There's problems here.

This preference might arise because speakers are treating nonreferential *there* as analogous to nonreferential *it*, which is always followed by a singular verb. In other words, they are copying the number of *there* onto the tense instead of the number of the logical subject. Another explanation is that speakers choose the singular form of the verb due to the awkwardness of articulating two consecutive weak syllables with final "r" sounds, which the choice of contracting the plural form of the verb necessitates.<sup>4</sup>

There're problems here. (*there're* = /ðə'rer/)

It may also be the case that *there* and *is* have become fused into a single formula (Breivik 1981). Whatever the reason, in a study of spoken discourse, Celce-Murcia and Hudson (1981) confirmed that *there's* predominates in informal speech, even when a plural noun phrase follows the verb.

Therefore, it is probably unrealistic of ESL/EFL teachers to expect their students to maintain the traditional subject-verb agreement rule in their speech when many native speakers of English ignore it. ESL/EFL students should probably be taught the contrast *there is* versus *there are* since the number-agreement distinction is still expected in formal—

especially written—usage; however, they should also realize that, when speaking, native speakers of English often use *there's* with following plural nouns.<sup>5</sup> Another strategy might be to teach ESL/EFL students to say *there's* instead of *there is* because the contraction definitely makes the lack of agreement more acceptable:

There's too many term papers for this course.

?There is too many term papers for this course.

A related issue, which was discussed in Chapter 4, is that the proximity principle tends to apply when conjoined noun phrases follow *there*, with the result that the verb *be* agrees with the number of the nearest noun phrase rather than the number of both noun phrases combined, which was the older prescriptive agreement rule. This tendency occurs even in writing:

There are two boys and a girl in the room. First conjunct is plural.

There is a girl and two boys in the room. First conjunct is singular.

?There are a girl and two boys in the room. Traditional prescriptive agreement now sounds strange to many native speakers of English.

### Verbs Other Than *Be* with Nonreferential *There*

Even though *be* is by far the most frequent verb following nonreferential *there*, it is by no means the only one. Other groups of intransitive verbs can occur with nonreferential *there*:

- Verbs of existence or position: *exist, live, dwell, stand, lie, remain*, etc.

There exist several alternatives.

At the edge of the forest there dwelt a troll.

- Event verbs that describe something happening, developing, or materializing: *develop, arise, appear, emerge, ensue, happen, occur*, etc.

There arose a conflict.

There ensued a dispute.

- Verbs of motion or direction: *come, go, walk, run, fly, approach*, etc.

There came three suspicious-looking men down the street.

Along the river there walked an old woman.

### The Use of the Indefinite Determiner with the Logical Subject

You may have noticed, in the example sentences beginning this discussion of *there*, that the only morphological feature that distinguished the sentence with deictic *there* from the sentence with nonreferential *there* was the choice of determiner before *little*.

There's the little boy who looks after the sheep. (deictic *there*)

There's a little boy who looks after the sheep. (nonreferential *there*)

The indefinite article in the sentence with the nonreferential *there* indicates that the noun following the verb—that is, the logical subject, *boy*—is not specific. Some reference grammars state that only logical subjects with indefinite determiners occur with nonreferential *there*. As a matter of fact, all the example sentences we have presented thus far in our chapter agree with this condition. As you will see a little later, however, it is possible to use the definite article with the logical subject. Nevertheless, this “rule” requiring use of the indefinite determiner with the logical subject provides a clue as to the meaning of the nonreferential *there*.