

# THE STRUCTURE OF CLAUSES

## *A look at clauses structure in English*

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### STRUCTURE OF THE CLAUSE

#### What is a clause?

All languages are able to talk about ‘things’. That is, we can talk about things such as *dogs, chairs, democracy*, etc. And all languages are able to say what happened to these things or what state they are in. That is, we can say something *is barking, are broken, is vital*. Thus at the heart of language we have a system which consists of things that we talk about (the subject) and states or actions that we ascribe to the thing (the predicate).

The basic structure of a clause is thus subject + predicate:

subject | predicate

Let’s look at a few simple clauses:

Jim jumped

Mary ate chocolate

John gave the book to Peter

The dog is angry

In each of these clauses we can identify a subject and predicate:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
Jim	jumped
Mary	ate chocolate
John	gave the book to Peter
The dog	is angry

A clause then is a subject plus predicate. Note a clause is *not* just a phrase such as an NP or VP; a clause needs to have a subject and predicate. Note also that the above clauses are all (simple) sentences as well. A clause is a single subject + predicate combination. But a

sentence can have more than one clause in which case we would call it a complex sentence. The following are all complex sentences which consist of more than one clause.

Jim jumped before he was pushed

Mary ate chocolate after giving birth to her fifth child

## FUNCTIONAL CLASSES

We have seen the use of grammatical classes such as NP, VP, PP, etc. We can also label constituents according to function that they have within the clause.

Subject

Predicate

Predicator

Complement

Direct object

Indirect object

Intensive complement

Adverbial

Consider the following. What kind of phrase is each one? What function does each phrase perform within the sentence?

Robert saw Lucy.

Children play games.

Tim likes music.

### 1. Robert saw Lucy

Constituent	Class	Function
Robert	NP	Subject
saw Lucy	VP	Predicate
saw	VP	Predicator
Lucy	NP	Object

### 2. Children play games.

children	NP	Subject
play games	VP	Predicate
play	VP	Predicator
games	NP	Object

### 3. Tim likes music.

Tim	NP	Subject
likes music	VP	Predicate
likes	VP	Predicator
music	NP	Object

## COMPLEMENT

Some verbs require constituents to 'complete' them. Without these constituents, the sentences does not make sense, or does not seem complete.

- \* John is
- \* Batman gave to Robin
- \* I like

All of the above are incomplete in some sense and would be considered ungrammatical. They all need complements

John is handsome  
 Batman gave the keys to the batmobile to Robin  
 I like mint choc-chip

Complements consist of direct objects, indirect objects and intensive complements

John broke the cup (direct object)  
 I gave the Jim the ball (indirect direct object)  
 He is a lawyer (intensive complement)

## ADVERBIALS

Many clauses include additional information. Not just who is doing what to whom, but also when, where, how, etc.

They were swimming **in the sea**.

The elderly gentleman cleared his throat **noisily**.

**After dinner** the friends left the flat.

This information is given by an **adverbial**.

Adverbials are usually adverb phrases or preposition phrases.

Adverbials can also be noun phrases:

The whole family went to Macdonald's **last night**.

Adverbials may be classified as time, place, manner or reason adverbials:

Julie lost her handbag **yesterday**. (time)

She left it **in the night club**. (place)

She **quickly** informed the police. (manner)

Her mother had given it to her **for her birthday** (reason)

### Exercise

Identify the subject, predicate, direct and indirect object, intensive complement and adverbials in the following sentences.

The boy with untidy hair immediately handed his teacher a piece of paper.

The children caught the red and white fish with a large net.

Thomas might never see the big fish with red and white patches.

By his early thirties their brother had travelled extensively in Eastern Europe.

Julia's oldest son will probably become a television producer

## PHRASES

Below the clause we have the phrase. A phrase is a collection of words that are closely bound to each other. There are three tests to see whether a group of words forms a phrase:

1. Movement
2. Meaning
3. Substitution

### Movement

In order for a group of words to be considered a phrase, they must pass the first test of movement. Consider the following:

1. The old man ate the chocolate cake
2. What the old man ate was the chocolate cake
3. It was the chocolate cake that the old man ate (Kuiper et al)

### Meaning

The phrases *the old man* and *the chocolate cake* all have meaning, which is the second test for a phrase. We wouldn't say however that *the old* had meaning.

### Substitution

In the following we can substitute another phrase for the phrases underlined.

Davina sold chocolates yesterday at the corner store  
My old friend sold carpets yesterday at the market in Zurich

This ability to substitute indicates that *Davina*, *chocolates* and *at the corner store* are all phrases.

## SOURCES