SOME TERMINOLOGY

A look at some of the terminology in grammar

CONTENTS

TERMINOLOGY

Constituent

> a unit; a part of something

A sentence can be divided into parts, its constituents. For example the following can be divided into three phrases:

> 1. [The man] [was using] [an electric drill]

The phrase is a constituent of sentences. The sentence can also be divided into seven words: words are constituents of sentences. The word 'using' can be divided into two morphemes: 'use' and '-ing'. A morpheme is a constituent of a word (it is part of a word).

Constituency is the process of breaking down a whole into its parts. (See Burton-Robert (2016) p6.)

(Grammatical) Category

Each constituent of a whole has a 'category'. A category is the essential nature of the constituent. In the sentence 1. above we have a noun phrase, verb phrase and noun phrase:

> NP + VP + NP

The phase 'the man' is a noun phrase (NP). It is always a noun phrase. That is its essential nature. So we often talk about categories (or grammatical categories).

Function

Each constituent of a sentence can also have a 'function'. A function is the way the constituent is behaving in a particular circumstance. For example, in sentence 1. 'The man' is an NP, but it is functioning as a subject in this particular sentence. In other sentences, it can function as something else. For example, in sentence 2. it is functioning as the object:

> 2. The policeman killed the man

Note that the category of a constituent never changes but its function can.

Constituent (phrase)	Category	Function
The man	noun phrase (NP)	Subject
was using	verb phrase (VP)	Predicator
an electric drill	noun phrase (NP)	Object

A constituent has functional potential. It can act in a certain way. It receives its function not because of what it is (category) but because of its relationship with other elements in the sentence. Thus a 'subject' is only a 'subject' because it is in a functional relationship with the 'predicate'.

Modification

Modification is a one-way dependency function. The modifier depends on the head, but the head does not depend on the modifier. The modifier is *optional*.

> The big house

In the noun phrase above, 'big' is an adjective which modifies the head 'house'. 'Big' is optional – the head noun does not demand it. If we remove it, the constituent is still a noun phrase.

Complementation

Complementation is a slightly different relation from modification. Complementation is a two-way dependency function. The head demands a complement and the complement needs the head. For example, in the sentence below, the verb phrase 'was using' demands a complement. Without it, the predicate is not complete (3a). The relationship between the VP and the object is one of complementation.

> 3. The man was using an electric drill
> 3a. *The man was using

(See Burton-Robert (2016) p32-37.)

SOURCES

Burton-Robert, N. (2016) Analysing sentences: An introduction to English syntax. Routledge