University of Basrah

College of Arts

Department of Translation

Third Year

Linguistics

Grammar

English Grammar

Grammar, is the rules of a language governing the sounds, words, sentences, and other elements, as well as their combination and interpretation. In a restricted sense, the term refers only to the study of sentence and word structure (syntax and morphology), excluding vocabulary and pronunciation. Consider the following phrase:

The lucky boys, it is a well-formed phrase in contemporary English, but that the following two "Phrases" are not at all well-formed, **boys the lucky* **lucky boys the* (We use an **asterisk *** to indicate that a form is *unacceptable* or *ungrammatical*.)

From these examples, we can see that English has strict rules for combining words into phrases. The article (**the**) must go before the adjective (**lucky**), which must go before the noun (**boys**). So, in order to be grammatical, this type of phrase, for example, must have the sequence (article + adjective + noun) and not *(noun + article + adjective).

The process of describing the structure of phrases and sentences in such a way that we account for all the grammatical sequences in a language and rule out all the ungrammatical sequences is one way of defining the grammar of a language.

Traditional Grammar

The terms "article," "adjective" and "noun" that we use to label the *grammatical categories* of the words in the phrase *the lucky boys* come from *traditional grammar*. We have inherited a number of terms from the model that are used in describing those basic grammatical components, known as the "*parts of speech*," and how they connect to each other in terms of "*agreement*."

The Parts of Speech

Nouns are words used to refer to people (*boy*), *objects* (*backpack*), *creatures* (*dog*), *places* (*school*), *qualities* (*roughness*), *phenomena* (*earthquake*) and *abstract ideas* (*love*), etc. We begin proper nouns with a capital letter (Cathy, Latin, Rome). *Articles* are words (*a, an, the*) used with nouns to form *noun phrases*: *eg.* *You can have a banana or an apple* or *I'll take the apple*.

Adjectives are words used, typically with nouns, to provide more information about the things referred to large objects, a strange experience, etc.

Verbs are words used to refer to various kinds of ***actions*** (eg. go, talk) and ***states*** (eg. be, have) involving people and things in ***events***, eg. ***Jessica is ill and has a sore throat so she can't talk or go anywhere***).

Adverbs are words used, typically with verbs, to provide ***more information*** about **actions**, **states** and **events**, eg. **slowly**, **yesterday**. Some adverbs , eg. **really**, **very** are also used with adjectives ***to modify information*** about **things**, eg. ***Really large objects move slowly***. Eg. ***I had a very strange experience yesterday.***

Prepositions are words (eg. **at, in, on, near, with, without)** used with nouns in phrases providing **information about time** (eg. **at five o'clock**, **in the morning**), **place** (eg. **on the table**, **near the window**) and **other connections** (eg. **with a knife, without a thought**) involving actions and things.

Pronouns are words (eg. **she, herself, they, it, you**) used in place of noun phrases, typically referring to **people** and **things** already known (eg. ***She talks to herself. Eg. They said it belonged to you***).

Conjunctions are words (eg. **and, but, because, when**) used to make connections and indicate relationships between events, eg. ***Chantel's husband was so sweet and he helped her a lot because she couldn't do much when she was pregnant***.

Agreement: 1

In addition to the terms used for the parts of speech, traditional grammatical analysis has also given us a number of other categories, including "*number*," "*person*," "*tense*," "*voice*" **and** "*gender*." These categories can be discussed in isolation, but their role in describing language structure becomes clearer when we consider them in terms of agreement. For example, we say that the verb *loves* "agrees with" the noun *Cathy* in the sentence *Cathy loves her dog*.

This agreement is partially based on the category of *number*, that is, whether the noun is **singular** or **plural**. It is also based on the category of *person*, which covers the distinctions of **first person** (involving the speaker), **second person** (involving the hearer) and **third person** (involving any others). The different forms of English pronouns can be described in terms of **person** and **number**. We use I for **first person singular**, you for **second person singular**, and he, she, it (or Cathy) for **third person singular**. So, in the sentence *Cathy loves her dog*, we have a noun *Cathy*, which is **third person singular**, and we use the verb **loves** (not love) to "**agree with**" the noun.

Agreement: 2

In addition, the form of the verb must be described in terms of another category called *tense*. In this case, the verb **loves** is in the present tense, which is different from the past tense (*loved*). The sentence is also in the *active voice*, describing what *Cathy does* (i.e. **she performs the action of the verb**). An alternative would be the *passive voice*, which can be used to describe what **happens to Cathy** (i.e. **she doesn't perform the action**), as in **Cathy is loved by her dog** or just **Cathy is loved**.

Our final category is *gender*, which helps us describe the *agreement between Cathy* and *her* in our example sentence. In English, we have to describe this relationship in terms of *natural gender*, mainly derived from a *biological distinction* between *male* and *female*.

The agreement between *the noun Cathy* and *the pronoun her* is based on a distinction made in English between reference to **female** entities (*she, her*), **male** entities (*he, his*) and **things** or **creatures**, when the sex is unknown or irrelevant we use (*it, its*).

Grammatical Gender

The type of biological distinction based on "**natural gender**" in English is quite different from the more common distinction found in languages that use grammatical gender. Whereas natural gender is based on sex (male and female), *grammatical gender is based on the type of noun* (masculine and feminine) and is *not tied to sex*. In this system, **nouns** are classified according to their **gender class** and **articles** and **adjectives** have different forms to "**agree with**" the nouns' gender.

We should emphasize that this **gender distinction** is not based on a distinction in sex. *A young girl is biologically female*, the word "**book**" is grammatically **masculine**, but we do not consider a "**book**" to be biologically **male**. *Grammatical gender is a very important category for the description of a number of languages.*

The Prescriptive Approach

It is one thing to adopt the grammatical labels (e.g. "noun," "verb," etc.) to categorize words in English sentences. It was an approach taken in eighteenth-century England by grammarians who set out rules for the "*proper*" use of English. This view of grammar as a set of rules for the proper use of a language is still found today and is best characterized as the prescriptive approach. Some old-style prescriptive rules for English are: You must not split an infinitive. You must not end a sentence with a preposition, etc. Following these types of rules, traditional teachers would correct sentences like (**Who did you go with**? to *With whom did you go*? (so that the preposition *with* was not at the end of the sentence)). And *Mary runs faster than me* would be corrected to *Mary runs faster than I*. And one should never begin a sentence with *and*!

It may, in fact, be a valuable part of one's education to be made aware of this "*linguistic etiquette*" for the use of language in certain contexts. Yet, it is worth considering the origins of some of these rules and asking whether they have to be followed in English. Let's look at one example: "*You must not split an infinitive.*"

The Descriptive Approach

Since, the categories of traditional grammar did not seem to fit some languages, a different method, called the ***descriptive approach***, was adopted. Analysts collected samples of the language they were interested in and attempted to describe regular structures of that language as it was used, not according to some view of how it should be used.

Structural Analysis

One type of descriptive approach is called structural analysis and its main concern is to investigate the distribution of forms in a language. The method involves the use of "**test frames**," which can be sentences with empty slots in them.

The _____ makes a lot of noise.

I heard a _____ yesterday.

There are a lot of forms that can fit into these slots to produce good grammatical sentences of English (***e.g. car, child, donkey, dog, radio***). As a result, we can propose that, because all these forms fit in the same test-frame, they are likely to be examples of the same grammatical category, a "***noun***" (or N).

However, there are many forms that do not fit those *test-frames*. Examples would be *Cathy*, *someone*, *the dog*, *a car* and *many others*. (**That is, we wouldn't say *The Cathy or *The the dog**.) For these forms, we require different *test-frames:*

_____ *makes a lot of noise.*

I heard _____ yesterday.

Among other forms that comfortably fit these **test-frames** are *it, the big dog, an old car*, *the professor with the Scottish accent* and many other examples of the same grammatical category, a "*noun phrase*" (or NP). Observing that it fits only in this second set of **test-frames** (**The it makes a lot of noise*). *Pronouns* were described as "*words used in place of nouns*." We now see that it is better to say that **pronouns are used in place of noun phrases** (not just **nouns**).

Constituent Analysis

An approach with the same descriptive aims is called ***constituent analysis***. The technique employed in this approach is designed to show how small **constituents** (or **components**) go together to form ***larger constituents***. One basic step is determining how words go together to form phrases. In the following sentence, we can identify nine constituents at the word level: ***The old woman brought a large snake from Brazil.***

How do those **nine constituents** go together to form constituents at the phrase level? Does it seem appropriate to put the words together as follows? ***The old woman brought a large snake from Brazil.***We do not normally think of these combinations as phrases in English. We are more likely to say that the phrase-like constituents here are combinations of the following types:

The old woman, (NP) brought (V.) a large snake (NP) from Brazil (Prep.P) (VP).

This analysis of the constituent structure of the sentence can be represented in a diagram showing the distribution of the constituents at different levels.

The	old	woman	brought	a	large	snake	from	Brazil

Using this kind of diagram we can determine the types of forms that can be substituted for each other at different levels of constituent structure. One advantage of this type of analysis is that it shows rather clearly that *pronouns* (*she, it*) and proper nouns or names (*Brazil*), though they are single words, can be used as noun phrases and fill the same constituent space as longer phrases (e.g. *the old woman* or *a large snake*). The figure below presents an analysis of the common constituent structure of many English sentences.

Noun phrase	Verb	Noun Phrase	Prepositional phrase
The old woman	brought	a large snake	from Brazil
She	kept	it	in a cage

Subjects and Objects

In the previous figure , we can see not only how small constituents combine to form larger constituents as *phrases*, we can also work out the different grammatical *functions* of those phrases. We use the term "*noun phrase*" when we describe the form of the expression (i.e. **it has a noun or a pronoun in it**). We use the terms "**subject**" and "**object**" **to describe the different functions of noun phrases in a sentence**. Since English uses **position** in the sentence to indicate **grammatical function**, we can normally identify the **subject** as the **first noun phrase before the verb** and the **object** as **the noun phrase after the verb**. The **other phrase at the end** of our example sentences is an **adjunct**, often a **prepositional phrase**, which typically provides **additional information** such as **where**, **when** or **how** the subject verb-ed the object.

Subject	Verb	Object	Adjunct
The old woman She	brought kept	a large snake it	from Brazil in a cage

There are a number of ways in which we can distinguish between **noun phrases** used as **subjects** versus **objects**. In addition to **position** differences, the **subject** is frequently **the person or thing that the sentence is about and often the one that performs the action of the verb**, whereas the **object** more typically **represents the person or thing that undergoes the action**. The **subject noun phrase** determines the form of the verb as singular or plural while the **object noun phrase has no such effect**. English also makes a clear distinction between pronouns used as subjects (eg. *I, he*) and those used as objects (eg. **me, him**).

Word Order

The basic linear order of constituents in English is *Noun Phrase*–*Verb*–*Noun Phrase* (or **NP V NP**) and their typical *grammatical functions* are *Subject*–*Verb*–*Object* (or *SVO*). Although we are actually talking about constituent order, this type of analysis is traditionally discussed in terms of *word order*. The *English word order sequence* is not the only possible, or even the most common word order among languages.