**T h e P h r a s e**

**BASIC GRAMMAR**

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The Phrases

Recognize a phrase when you see one.

A phrase is two or more words that do not contain the subject-verb pair necessary to form a clause. Phrases can be very short or quite long. Here are two examples:

After lunch

After slithering down the stairs and across the road to scare

nearly to death Mrs. Philpot busy pruning her rose bushes

Certain phrases have specific names based on the type of word that begins or governs the word group:

noun phrase,

verb phrase,

prepositional phrase,

infinitive phrase,

participle phrase,

gerund phrase,

and absolute phrase.

**NOUN PHRASES**

A noun phrase includes a noun—a person, place, or thing—and the modifiers— either before or after—which distinguish it.

The pattern looks like this:

**O P T I O N A L M O D I F I E R ( S ) + N OUN + O P T I O N A L**

**M O D I F I E R ( S )**

Here are some examples:

The shoplifted pair of jeans

Pair = noun; the, shoplifted, of jeans = modifiers.

A cat that refused to meow

Cat = noun; a, that refused to meow = modifiers.

A great English teacher

Teacher = noun; a, great, English = modifiers.

**NOUN PHRASES**

function as subjects, objects, and complements:

The shoplifted pair of jeans caused Nathaniel so much

guilt that he couldn't wear them.

The shoplifted pair of jeans = subject.

Jerome adopted a cat that refused to meow.

A cat that refused to meow = direct object.

With her love of Shakespeare and knowledge of grammar,

Jasmine will someday be a great English teacher.

A great English teacher = subject complement.

**VERB PHRASES**

Sometimes a sentence can communicate its meaning with a one-word verb.

Other times, however, a sentence will use a verb phrase, a multi-word verb, to express more nuanced action or condition. A verb phrase can have up to four parts. The pattern looks like this:

**A U X I L I A R Y V E R B ( S ) + M A I N V E R B + V E R B E N D I N G**

**W H E N N E C E S S A R Y**

Here are some examples:

Had cleaned

Had = auxiliary verb; clean = main verb; ed = verb ending.

Should have been writing

Should, have, been = auxiliary verbs; write = main verb; ing = verb

ending.

Must wash

Must = auxiliary verb; wash = main verb.

Here are the verb phrases in action:

Mom had just cleaned the refrigerator shelves when Lawrence knocked over the pitcher of orange juice.

Sarah should have been writing her research essay, But She couldn't resist another short chapter in her Stephen King novel.

If guests are coming for dinner, we must wash our smelly dog!

**Prepositional Phrases**

At the minimum, a prepositional phrase will begin with a preposition and end with a noun, pronoun, gerund, or clause, the "object" of the preposition.

The object of the preposition will often have one or more modifiers to describe it.

These are the patterns for a prepositional phrase:

**P R E P O S I T I O N + NOUN , P R O N O U N , G E R U N D , O R**

**C L A U S E**

**P R E P O S I T I O N + M O D I F I E R ( S ) + N OUN , P R O N O U N ,**

**G E R U N D, O R C L A U S E**

Here are some examples:

On time

On = preposition;

time = noun.

Underneath the sagging yellow couch

Underneath = preposition;

the, sagging,

yellow = modifiers;

couch = noun.

From eating too much

From = preposition;

eating = gerund;

too, much = modifiers.

A prepositional phrase will function as an adjective or adverb. As an adjective, the prepositional phrase will answer the question Which one?

The spider above the kitchen sink has just caught a fat fly.

Which spider?

The one above the kitchen sink!

The librarian at the check-out desk smiles whenever she collects a late fee.

Which librarian?

The one at the check-out desk!

The vegetables on Noel's plate lay untouched the entire meal.

Which vegetables?

The ones on Noel's plate!

As an adverb, a prepositional phrase will answer questions such as How?

When? or Where?

While sitting in the cafeteria, Jack catapulted peas with a spoon.

How did Jack launch those peas?

With a spoon!

After breakfast, we piled the dirty dishes in the sink.

When did we ignore the dirty dishes?

After breakfast!

Amber finally found the umbrella wedged under the passenger's front seat.

Where did Amber locate the umbrella?

Under the passenger's front seat!

**Infinitive Phrases**

An infinitive phrase will begin with an infinitive [to + simple form of the verb].

It will often include objects and/or modifiers that complete the thought. The pattern looks like this:

**I N F I N I T I V E + O B J E C T ( S ) A N D / O R M O D I F I E R ( S )**

Here are some examples:

To slurp spaghetti

To send the document before the deadline

To gulp the glass of water with such thirst that streams of liquid ran down his chin and wet the front of his already

sweat-soaked shirt

Infinitive phrases can function as:

nouns,

adjectives, or

adverbs.

Look at these examples:

To avoid another lecture from Michelle on the benefits of vegetarianism was Aaron's hope for their date at a nice restaurant.

To avoid another lecture from Michelle on the benefits of vegetarianism

functions as a noun because it is the subject of the sentence.

Cheryl plans to take microbiology next semester when Professor Crum, a pushover, is teaching the course.

To take microbiology next semester functions as a noun because it is

the direct object for the verb plans.

The worst thing to happen during the severe thunderstorm was a lightning strike that fried Clara's computer.

To happen during the severe thunderstorm

functions as an adjective because it modifies thing.

Ryan decided to mow the long grass on the front lawn to keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners association.

To keep his neighbors from complaining to the homeowners association

functions as an adverb because it explains why Ryan mowed the lawn.

**Participle Phrases**

A participle phrase will begin with a present or past participle. If the participle is present, it will dependably end in ing. Likewise, a regular past participle will end in a consistent ed. Irregular past participles, unfortunately, conclude in all kinds of ways [Check a dictionary for help].

Since all phrases require two or more words, a participle phrase will often include objects and/or modifiers that complete the thought. The pattern looks like this:

**P A R T I C I P L E + O B J E C T ( S ) A N D / O R M O D I F I E R ( S )**

Here are some examples:

Flexing his muscles in front of the bathroom mirror

Ripped from a spiral-ring notebook

Driven crazy by Grandma's endless questions

Participle phrases always function as adjectives, adding description to the

sentence.

Read these examples:

The stock clerk lining up cartons of orange juice made sure the expiration date faced the back of the cooler.

Lining up cartons of orange juice modifies the noun clerk.

Elijah likes his eggs smothered in cheese sauce.

Smothered in cheese sauce modifies the noun eggs.

Shrunk in the dryer, the jeans hung above John's ankles.

Shrunk in the dryer modifies the noun jeans.

**Gerund Phrases**

A gerund phrase will begin with a gerund, an ing word, and will often include

other modifiers and/or objects. The pattern looks like this:

**G E R U N D + O B J E C T ( S ) A N D / O R M O D I F I E R ( S )**

Gerund phrases look exactly like present participle phrases. How do you tell the difference? You must determine the function of the phrase.

Gerund phrases always function as nouns, so they will be subjects, subject

complements, or objects in the sentence.

Read these examples:

Washing our dog Gizmo requires strong arms to keep the squirming, unhappy puppy in the tub.

Washing our dog Gizmo = subject of the verb requires.

A good strategy for avoiding dirty dishes is eating every

meal off of paper towels.

Eating every meal off of paper towels = subject complement of the

verb is.

Susie tried holding the slippery trout , but the fish

flipped out of her hands and splashed back into the stream.

Holding the slippery trout = direct object of the verb tried.

**Absolute Phrases**

An absolute phrase combines a noun and a participle with any accompanying modifiers or objects.

The pattern looks like this:

**N O U N + P A R T I C I P L E + O P T I O N A L O B J E C T ( S ) A N D / O R M O D I F I E R ( S )**

Here are some examples:

His brow knitted in frustration

Brow = noun;

knitted = participle;

his, in frustration = modifiers.

Her fingers flying over the piano keys

Fingers = noun;

flying = participle;

her, over the piano keys = modifiers.

Our eyes following the arc of the ball

Eyes = noun;

following = participle;

arc = direct object;

our, the, of the ball = modifiers.

Rather than modifying a specific word, an absolute phrase will describe the

whole clause:

His brow knitted in frustration, Thomas tried again to iron a perfect crease in his dress pants.

Francine played the difficult concerto, her fingers flying

over the piano keys.

We watched Leo launch a pass to his fullback, our eyes

following the arc of the ball.

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9 Phrases

key concepts

Definition of phrase

Modification and complementation

Adverb phrases

Prepositional phrases

Adjective phrases

Noun phrases

Verb phrases

introduction

No doubt you have noticed that our discussion of parts of speech required

us to consider the phrases they occurred in. Although traditional grammars

often treat word classes apart from their roles in larger structures, it is really

not possible to do so. For one thing, we cannot study a word’s functions

without viewing it in a larger setting. For another, a single word may constitute

a phrase. For instance, a noun phrase may contain just a noun—its

head. Likewise, a verb phrase may contain just a verb. Phrases, then, are

units of one or more words. They are the lowest syntactic unit.

It is important for us to know about phrases and to be able to distinguish

them from words and clauses. This knowledge is essential in at least the two

following situations.

Journeyman writers often produce fragments, that is, parts of sentences

punctuated as if they were sentences. These fragments are rarely just random

strings of words; rather, they are typically internally grammatical. They are

in fact phrases. Fragments are objected to because they are not the type of

expression that more experienced writers would use in the context. They are

often a reflection of linguistic patterns used in speech and indicate that the

writer has not yet mastered the stylistic differences between the spoken and

written modes.

Languages differ in the orders they impose on sequences of words. For

example, in English (and many other languages), adjectives typically precede

the nouns they modify, whereas in Spanish (and many other languages),

adjectives typically follow the nouns they modify. Language learners

must learn the orders expected in the target language. Their teachers must

know the ordering possibilities and be able to articulate them in ways their

students can learn from.

As we examine phrases, then, we study how words relate to each other

in the smallest of the larger linguistic structures. In our chapters on Basic

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Clause Patterns and Modifications of Basic Clause Patterns, we examine the

ways in which phrases form clauses. Our discussion here will treat the five

major phrase types in English:

1. Adverb Phrase (AdvP)

2. Prepositional Phrase (PP)

3. Adjective Phrase (AP)

4. Noun Phrase (NP)

5. Verb Phrase (VP)

We will discuss each of the five types in a similar way. First, we will examine

their basic functional patterns; then how those functions are realized by

structural possibilities; and, where appropriate, we will explore some of the

complexities associated with each type of phrase. Whenever such complexities

lead us to topics considered in another chapter, we will provide a brief

commentary and defer fuller treatment to a later time.

what is a phrase?

Traditionally “phrase” is defined as “a group of words that does not contain

a verb and its subject and is used as a single part of speech.”

This definition entails three characteristics: (1) it specifies that only a

group of words can constitute a phrase, implying that a single word cannot;

(2) it distinguishes phrases from clauses; and (3) it requires that the groups

of words believed to be a phrase constitute a single grammatical unit. We

accept (2) and (3), but must revise (1).

We reject the claim that single words cannot constitute phrases. First, a

word and a phrase may play identical grammatical roles in a clause, as (1)

and (2) demonstrate:

(1) Most of the members of the genus avis fly.

(2) Birds fly.

Most of the members of the genus avis is the subject of (1) and birds is the subject

of (2), showing that single words and phrases can function identically

in clauses. There are two inferences that we can draw from this fact: (a) a

subject can consist of either a single noun or a noun phrase, or (b) subjects

are phrases, and so whatever functions as a subject must be a phrase. If we

assume (a), then whenever we define subject (and any other grammatical

function, such as predicate, direct object, indirect object, etc.), we must

always specify that it can be expressed as a word or as a phrase. Linguists

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would say that this formulation is more complex than it needs to be because

it fails to articulate a more general pattern. The broader generalization is that

these grammatical relations are always expressed as phrases and phrases can

consist of either a single word or a unified group of words. Below, we will

show how and when words can be phrases.

Second, single words and phrases may be replaced by identical proforms.

We can replace the subjects of both (1) and (2) with They:

(1) a. They fly.

(2) a. They fly.

Again, there are two inferences we can draw: (a) pronouns can replace either

a noun or a noun phrase, or (b) pronouns replace phrases. Again, (b)

is more general, but it does require us to specify when words can function

as phrases.

A single word may be a phrase when it is the head of that phrase. The

head of a phrase is the phrase’s central element; any other words (or phrases)

in the phrase orient to it, either by modifying it or complementing it. The

head determines the phrase’s grammatical category: if the head is a noun,

the phrase is a noun phrase; if the head is a verb, the phrase is a verb phrase,

and so on. The head can also determine the internal grammar of the phrase:

if the head is a noun, then it may be modified by an article; if the head is

a transitive verb, it must be complemented by a direct object. Heads also

determine such things as the number of their phrases: if the head of an NP

is singular, then the NP is singular; if the head is plural, then the NP is

plural. Crucially, the head of a phrase may occur alone in the phrase, that is,

without modification or complementation.

Let’s look a little closer at what expressions may be replaced by pronouns.

Specifically, let’s test the claim made in many textbooks that pronouns can

replace nouns or noun phrases. Consider (3):

(3) Fooster hates the cabbage. NP

Det N

the cabbage

If we replace the NP the cabbage in (3) with the pronoun it we get the perfectly

grammatical (3a):

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(3) a. Fooster hates it. NP

Pron

it

However, given the typical textbook definition of pronoun as a word that

can replace either nouns or noun phrases, we should be able to replace just

the noun cabbage in (3) with it. However, when we do so, we create the

wildly ungrammatical (3b):

(3) b. \*Fooster hates the it.

So, why is (3a) fine but (3b) is not? To create (3a) we replaced the entire

phrase the cabbage, but for (3b) we replaced only a part of the phrase. It appears

that when we pronominalize we must replace an entire phrase with a

pronoun, not just a random piece of it. It follows that if we can successfully

replace an expression with a pronoun, then that expression must be a complete

phrase. To check this, consider what happens when we replace cabbage

in (3c) with a pronoun; we get the grammatical (3d):

(3) c. Fooster hates cabbage. NP

(3) d. Fooster hates it.

N

cabbage

So cabbage is just a noun in (3) and therefore cannot be replaced by a pronoun;

but in (3c) it is both a noun and a noun phrase (as the diagram

shows), and so can be pronominalized, proved by the fact that (3d) is grammatical.

Let’s add just one more test to the two tests for phrasehood we’ve already

used (capable of functioning as a grammatical relation and capable of being

replaced by a pronoun): if an expression can be moved from one part of a

sentence to another without any internal reorganization, then that expression

is a phrase. We can use our cabbage sentences for this test too.

We can successfully move the cabbage in (3) to the left of the subject, giving

us:

(3) e. The cabbage, Fooster hates.

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But when we try to move just the N cabbage, the result is ungrammatical,

just as when we tried to pronominalize cabbage in (3):

(3) f. \*Cabbage, Fooster hates the.

Analogously, when we move cabbage in (3c) in which cabbage occurs

alone, the result is also grammatical:

(3) g. Cabbage, Fooster hates.

So, we’ve applied three tests—ability to function as a grammatical relation,

pronominalization, and movement—and all three have yielded the

same results: a phrase may consist of a unified group of words, or of a single

word as long as that word is the phrase’s head.

There is an important methodological precept here: the more arguments

you can marshal in favor of your analysis and definitions, the more confidence

you can place in them.

Our new, improved definition of “phrase”: a phrase is a grammatical unit,

intermediate between a word and a clause, which may consist of just one word

(its head) or its head and expressions (including other phrases) that modify or

complement it (see below). This definition retains the traditional distinctions

between word and phrase and between phrase and clause. It adds the

requirement that phrases have heads and allows a phrase to consist of just its

head.

In considering word classes, we examined the most important ones first.

In this chapter, we will present the three less complex types first— adverb,

prepositional, and adjective. The reason for this seemingly backwards approach

is that the two major phrase types—noun phrases and verb phrases—often

include the minor types as subparts. But first we must make a

brief detour to discuss the important distinction between modification and

complementation.

modification and complementation

The head of a phrase may be modified or complemented by other words,

phrases, or sentences within the phrase. We begin with complementation as

it is perhaps the more easily understood.

When one element in an expression creates the grammatical expectation

that another expression will also occur, the expected element complements

the expecting element. For example, transitive verbs create the expectation

of an object, as in Sheila fractured [her ankle]; bitransitive verbs create the

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expectation of two objects, as in Sally gave [her] [a shot of morphine]; certain

other verbs create the expectation of two complements, though one or both

need not be an NP, as in She put [her first aid kit] [away/in the truck]. Generally,

although verbs (in English) require a subject, subjects are not usually

said to complement the verb.

Verbs are the primary complement-requiring elements in language, but

other parts of speech may require complements too. Prepositions typically

require an NP complement—on may be complemented by a phrase denoting

notions such as location or time, as in on [the pavement], on [your mark],

on [time]. Certain nouns may be complemented by clauses, as in the belief

[that diseases are caused by evil spirits].

Modification occurs in a construction in which an expression is accompanied

by an element not grammatically required by it. For example, because

nouns do not typically require adjectives, eager modifies fans in eager

fans. Verbs and adjectives do not typically require that they be accompanied

by adverbials, so violently modifies swore in swore violently, and disappointingly

modifies slow in disappointingly slow.

Modification may be restrictive or non-restrictive. When one word restrictively

modifies another, the modifier restricts the potential reference of

the modified. For example, in the phrase long books the adjective long restrictively

modifies the noun books. If the word books were to occur alone,

then it could potentially refer to any and all types of books. The modifier

restricts the reference of the phrase to just those books that are long. Nouns

may have many modifiers, as in tall, black, neutered, male, domestic, shorthaired

cat. Here we have six modifiers, each restricting the potential reference

of the word cat. The result of piling up these modifiers is that the actual

referent of the phrase must satisfy all of them—it must be a cat that is tall,

black, neutered, male, domestic, and short-haired. Each modifier acts like a

criterion that the ultimate referent(s) of the phrase must satisfy.

There are two main classes of modifying words in English—adjectives

and adverbs. Adjectives modify nouns and adverbs modify pretty much everything

else—verbs, adjectives, other adverbs, and sentences. They modify

these in much the same way as adjectives modify nouns—by adding criteria

that must be met. For example, in ran quickly, quickly modifies ran and

therefore requires that whoever ran didn’t run in any old way, but did it

quickly. Other examples include expressions like take regularly, needs help

immediately. Likewise, intensely in intensely bright requires that the brightness

be intense (cf. specially packaged, medically appropriate). Irritatingly in

irritatingly slowly requires that whatever is going on must not only be going

on slowly, but so slowly as to be irritating to someone (cf. extremely cleverly).

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Unfortunately in Unfortunately, he didn’t make it back requires not only that

he didn’t make it back, but also that (the speaker feels that) it is unfortunate

that he didn’t (cf. Sadly, she’s no longer with us, Hopefully, it won’t happen

again).

Nouns may be restrictively modified by clauses, called relative, adjective,

or defining clauses, bolded in the man who knew too much. Notice that

there is no comma between the noun man and the beginning of the restrictive

relative clause. Sentences may be restrictively modified by adverbial

clauses, bolded in Though he liked her a lot, he was afraid to ask her for a

date. Here a comma is preferred, especially if the adverbial clause is relatively

long.

Notice that none of the modifiers are required or implied by the words,

phrases, or sentences they modify. These words, phrases, and sentences

would be grammatically complete without the modifiers—though of course

adding or removing modifiers affects the meaning and potential referents of

the modified elements.

Non-restrictive modifiers, or appositives, add information that is not

essential for the identification of the referent of the phrase so modified.

In written English, appositives are set off by commas—The President of the

US, who is in his 7th year in office, has only one more year to serve. In cases

like this, the writer assumes that the reader will know who the President of

the US is and so does not need the appositive information to identify him.

Nonetheless, the writer adds the information that the President is in his

7th year in office as a sort of secondary predicate in addition to the primary

one, namely, that he has only one more year to serve. In spoken English,

appositives are set off from the remainder of the sentence by brief pauses

(hence the commas) and a drop in pitch. From a writer’s or speaker’s point

of view, it is essential to decide whether the audience does or does not need

the modifier to identify the referent of the phrase.

the adverb phrase (advp)

The following are examples of adverb phrases:

(4) a. adamantly (adverb alone)

b. quite reluctantly (adverb modified by intensifier)

c. extremely clumsily (adverb modified by degree adverb)

From a functional point of view, each AdvP must contain a head, which

must be an adverb; this adverb may be modified by an intensifier, as in

(4b), or by a degree adverb, as in (4c). Examples of these are listed in Table 1.

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very extraordinarily

quite reasonably

rather particularly

too extremely

more/most terrifically

only

somewhat

table 1: typical intensifiers and degree adverbs

The following formula encapsulates the functional properties of AdvPs:

(5) (Modifier) + Head [In formulae like this, parentheses indicate

optional elements.]

The structures associated with (4a), (4b), and (4c) may be represented by

the following trees:

(6)a. AdvP (6)b. AdvP

Adv Int Adv

adamantly quite reluctantly

(6)c. AdvP

Adv Adv

extremely clumsily

As we noted for single adverbs (i.e., adverb phrases composed of just a head

adverb), adverb phrases are relatively movable within a sentence, although the

changes in position may be accompanied by changes in meaning, for example:

(7) a. Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.

b. My dear, I frankly don’t give a damn.

c. My dear, I don’t give a damn, frankly.

(8) a. Luckily, his fall was broken by deep snow.

b. His fall was broken by deep snow, luckily.

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Exercise

1. For each of the following AdvPs identify its head adverb. If it has a

modifier, identify that and determine its part of speech.

a. quickly

b. very quickly

c. particularly extravagantly

2. Draw brackets around each adverb phrase in the sentences below.

Then underline the head adverb.

a. They surrendered peacefully.

b. I go to the movies quite frequently.

c. Esmeralda acted awfully strangely.

d. Very slowly, we edged down the mountain.

e. Somewhat reluctantly, she returned home a week early.

3. Draw a tree diagram like those in (6) above for each of the AdvPs you

identified in the sentences in Exercise (1) above.

Before we move on, we want to broach the topic of how phrase structure

trees are created. They are said to be “generated” by phrase structure rules

(PSRs) such as:

(9) AdvP –—> (Int) Adv

This is to be read as: An adverb phrase (AdvP) consists of (——>) an optional

intensifier followed by an adverb.

As we know, however, adverbs may be modified by either an intensifier

or another adverb, for example, extremely quickly. We represent this choice

by placing the items to be selected from in curly brackets: {Int/Adv}. If all

these elements are optional, then the curly brackets are put in parentheses:

({ }). So, a more complete PSR for AdvPs would be:

(10) AdvP –—> ({Int/Adv}) Adv

We read this as: an AdvP consists of an optional intensifier or adverb and

an adverb.

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A note on “Adverbial”

The term “adverbial” refers to adverb phrases and all other expression types

that function in the ways that adverb phrases do, namely, as modifiers of

almost all parts of speech except nouns. Besides adverb phrases, prepositional

phrases (bolded), e.g., She drove with great caution (cf. She drove

cautiously), noun phrases (bolded), e.g., They do that a lot, (cf. They do that

frequently), and deictic words (bolded), e.g., There’s nobody here may function

as adverbials.

the prepositional phrase (pp)

The following are typical prepositional phrases:

(11) a. on the waterfront

b. of human bondage

c. beyond the blue horizon

d. from the halls of Montezuma

e. with malice toward none

From a functional point of view, PPs are very simple: they consist of a head

preposition and an object or complement, which is typically an NP. We can

represent this as:

(12) Head + Object

From a structural point of view, each of the PPs in (11) consists of a preposition

followed by a noun phrase, and we can represent their basic structure as:

(13) PP

P NP

This phrase structure tree is generated by the following PSR:

(14) PP ——> P NP

We read this PSR as: a PP consists of a P followed by an NP. Noun phrases

are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. All you need to know now

is the list of single- and multi-word prepositions presented in the chapter on

Minor Parts of Speech.

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Prepositional phrases are relatively uniform constructions: spot a preposition

and the NP that immediately follows it, and you can be fairly certain

that you have identified a PP. However, you should recall that some apparent

prepositions are actually particles and that others may be subordinating adverbial

conjunctions.

Exercise

Draw a tree diagram for each of the phrases (11a-c).

In (11d,e) we find two PPs, one inside the other. You can visually represent

(11e) as:

(15) PP

P NP

with N PP

malice P NP

toward Pron

none

It may seem odd to treat a preposition as the head of a phrase, because

traditional grammar may have persuaded us to regard the preposition as insignificant.

In fact, prepositions express meanings that encompass the entire

range of key semantic relations in a sentence. Another sign of the importance

of prepositional phrases is their ability to appear in so many structures—within

noun phrases, verb phrases, and adjective phrases.

The second part of the PP is a noun phrase that functions as its complement

or object. This terminology also suggests the central role of the preposition

within its phrase. Just as verbs may govern direct and indirect object NPs,

prepositions govern object NPs.

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Exercise

1. Here are several prepositional phrases. For each, identify its head P

and NP complement/object:

a. on the ropes

b. under the boardwalk

c. on a slippery slope

d. around midnight

e. beyond the horizon

2. In the sentences below, draw brackets around the prepositional

phrases. Circle each preposition and underline its NP object. Be sure to

note where PPs contain other (embedded) PPs. Can prepositions take

objects that are not NPs?

a. I put the dynamite in a safe place.

b. In Warden’s house, smoking is not allowed.

c. I thank you from the bottom of my heart.

d. Hilda peeked from behind a tree.

e. After all of his warnings about the dangers of cigarettes, Benjy

consumed a cut of meat with a huge amount of cholesterol.

f. Oscar resigned in the face of increasing evidence of his association

with disreputable companies.

3. Using the movement test, show that the italicized sequences are

phrases:

a. In times of danger, everyone must rally behind the leader.

b. At the end of the day, he is always very tired.

c. It is easy to identify phrases with examples like these.

4. From the discussion above, identify the ideas that show how a preposition

is the head of its phrase. Consider also how the following sentences

add further support for this claim:

a. Sheila hit the ball almost into the parking lot.

b. Werner spilled oil all over his new jacket.

Try to think of other sentences similar to these. How do they call for a

revision of our formal and functional formulas for PPs?

Prepositions are often simply characterized as linking words, and this

is an accurate characterization as far as it goes. However, we’d like to have

a more complete concept of how they work. Typically prepositions have

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meanings and these meanings connect their objects to other parts of the

sentences in which they occur. For example, in (16), to indicates that its

object NP represents the recipient of the money:

(16) Tony donated $10,000 to the hospital.

In (17), for indicates that the cardiac laboratory is to be the beneficiary of

the money:

(17) The money was for the cardiac laboratory.

Notions such as recipient and beneficiary are called semantic roles,

about which we will have much more to say in our chapter on Basic Clause

Patterns.

the adjective phrase (ap)

Each of the following is an AP:

(18) a. Impertinent (adjective alone)

b. Very impertinent (intensifier + adjective)

c. Unaware of any wrongdoing (adjective + PP)

d. Disappointed that someone had lied (adjective + clause)

e. Afraid to make a move (adjective + infinitival)

f. Fully aware of his surroundings (adverb + adjective + PP)

From a functional perspective, adjective phrases may be analyzed as:

(19) (Modifier) + Head + (Complement)

The modifiers may be either intensifiers or degree adverbs, just as in AdvPs;

the complements may be PPs, finite clauses, or infinitivals. Only some types

of adjectives take complements—mainly those that denote mental or emotional

states, e.g., aware, afraid, sorry, disappointed, astonished, hopeful, sad.

We can represent the structures of (18a-f) as the following trees, respectively:

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(18)a’. AP (18)b’. AP (18)c’. AP

A Int A A PP

impertinent very impertinent unaware of any

wrongdoing

(18)d’. AP (18)e’. AP

A S A Inf

disappointed that someone had lied afraid to make a

move

(18)f’. AP

AdvP A PP

fully aware of his surroundings

These trees can be generated by the following PSR:

(20) AP ——> ({Int/AdvP}) A ({PP/S/Inf})

We read this as: an adjective phrase consists of an optional intensifier or adverb

phrase, an adjective, and an optional PP, S, or infinitival.

Exercise

1. Each of the following is an adjective phrase. Identify its head adjective,

any modifiers, and any complements. For each modifier and

complement you find, indicate its part of speech.

a. sad

b. quite attractive

c. extremely volatile

d. disappointed that he has to leave

e. eager to get on with his life

2. In the following clauses, draw brackets around each AP, underline

the head adjective, and identify any modifiers and/or complements

and provide their parts of speech. Don’t forget to use formal criteria to

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check that the word you underline actually is an adjective.

a. The undernourished animals recovered.

b. My boss is happy with my work.

c. Mindy was completely unaware of his ability to dance.

d. The reasons for his sudden resignation eluded even the most astute

observers in the company.

e. Afraid of real combat, George bought a large squirtgun.

f. George is extremely generous to his wealthy friends.

3. For each of the following adjectives, create at least three APs:

aware, afraid, sorry, disappointed, astonished, hopeful, sad. In the

APs you create, include at least one PP complement, one finite clause

complement, and one infinitival complement.

4. Draw a tree diagram with full detail (i.e., include part of speech

labels for each word and internal phrase) for the expression very sure

of himself.

APs have three main functions. First, they may directly modify nouns. In

this function they are often called attributive adjectives, as in friendly dogs.

Second, APs may complement subject NPs. In this function they are referred

to as predicative or subject complements. Predicate adjectives occur

after verbs of the be-become-seem type.

(21) a. Faust is anxious.

b. Mephistopheles became despondent.

c. Wagner seems puzzled.

Third, an AP may function as an object complement, that is, as the

complement of the object of a clause:

(22) a. We consider him foolish.

b. Your attitude makes me angry.

Adjectival object complements are particularly common in certain set

phrases, such as make X clear. Table 2 contains a sample of such set phrases.

cut X short pack X tight

drain X dry push X open

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keep X loose put X straight

leave X clean set X right

make X plain shake X free

wash X clean work X loose

table 2: adjectives as object complements (x = direct object)

the noun phrase (np)

We begin our discussion of noun phrases (NP) with NPs that consist of just

a single word and discuss their functional and then their formal properties.

Then we will move on to various types of multi-word NPs.

Simple NPs: single word phrases

The left-hand column in Table 3 lists categories of single words that may

constitute an NP, and which must consequently be its head; the italicized

expressions in the right-hand column in Table 3 are examples of single-word

NPs belonging to the corresponding category.

category of head word example

Noun, count Wombats are playful.

Noun, non-count Cabbage is nutritious.

Subject and object personal pronouns They saw her.

Genitive personal pronoun Mine are chartreuse.

Indefinite pronoun/quantifier None were found.

Wh-word/pronoun Who placed the call?

table 3: single-word nps

All of the word categories in the right-hand column are noun-like, so in

order to abbreviate and to simplify matters, let’s refer to them all as nominals.

Every NP, like every other phrase, must have a head, and any nominal

can be the head of an NP.

From a structural point of view, we can represent the possibilities in Table

2 in the following simplified tree structure:

(23) a. NP

Nominal

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This tree is generated by the PSR:

(23) b. NP ——> Nominal

We can read this as saying that an NP consists of any kind of nominal.

More complex NPs

We begin this section by presenting two very general functional formulas

for NPs. We give these two because it would be confusing to combine them

into a single formula.

(24) a. (Premodifier\*) + HEAD + (Postmodifier\*)

(Asterisks denote elements that may appear more than once.)

b. (Complement) + HEAD + (Complement)

Formula (24a) states that a noun phrase must contain a head word

(which, of course, must be a nominal) but need not contain anything else.

If the NP has more elements than the head, it may contain one or more premodifiers

(modifiers that precede the head) and/or one or more postmodifiers

(modifiers that follow the head). This formula thus abbreviates several

possibilities:

(25) a. Head

b. Premodifier(s) + head

c. Head + postmodifier(s)

d. Premodifiers(s) + head + postmodifiers(s)

Formula (24b) states that a noun phrase must contain a head, which may

be preceded or followed by a complement. It also abbreviates several possibilities:

(26) a. Head

b. Complement + Head

c. Head + Complement

d. Complement + Head + Complement

We will deal with these possibilities in sequence.

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More complex NPs: single-word premodifier + head

Table 4 illustrates NPs whose heads (bolded) are modified by single-word

premodifiers (italicized). The part of speech of the premodifiers is given in the

left-hand column.

form of premodifier example

Article The wombats escaped.

Adjective Phrase Strong winds.

Demonstrative pronoun That vase is valuable.

Genitive NP Sheila’s serve is powerful.

Genitive pronoun Her serve is powerful.

Noun Metalplates shielded the instruments.

Indefinite pronoun/quantifier Some survivors remained.

Wh-word Which lobster do you want?

Numeral Seven boxes fell.

Ordinal Second thoughts assailed us.

Quantifier Several vats of beer.

Negative No accidents were reported.

table 4: single-word premodifiers

Exercise

In each sentence below, identify all the NPs; then identify the part of

speech of the head and of any premodifier(s) in each NP:

a. The evidence was unconvincing.

b. Party invitations are always welcome.

c. Many people have visited that exhibition.

d. Their intuitions make them remarkable therapists.

e. Dust mites cause serious allergies in some people.

The range of premodifiers of noun heads is large, including nearly all the

parts of speech. The items in Table 4 present the basic possibilities. The most

frequently used modifiers are the articles, which we briefly discussed in our

chapter on Minor Parts of Speech. Here we will elaborate on that discussion.

We noted that one major use of an article is to indicate whether the NP

in which it occurs is definite or not: if the NP is definite, then the speaker/

writer assumes that the hearer/reader can identify the referent of the NP; and

if the NP is indefinite, then the speaker/writer assumes that the hearer/reader

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cannot identify its referent.

Yet another meaning associated with NPs is that of referentiality. A referring

NP may be either definite or indefinite but it denotes a particular entity or set of

entities: the bold NP in The/A man sat down refers to some particular man.

The opposite of a referring NP is an attributive or non-referring one.

An attributive NP provides a description but does not refer to any particular

individual(s). Anyone or anything that fits the description will do. Attributive

NPs can often be paraphrased by whoever . . ., whatever . . ., or any . . ., as in

The man who /Whoever steals my purse steals nothing.

(27) a. I saw the elephants at the zoo. (referential and definite)

b. The next caller will win a vacation to Miami. (attributive and

definite = whoever is the next caller)

c. I want an elephant. Its name is Big Bob. (referential and indefinite)

d. I want an elephant. Any pink one will be fine. (attributive

and indefinite.)

Finally, NPs can have a generic or non-generic reference. Generic reference

designates an entire class (i.e., category, set) of entities. A non-generic

reference designates a particular member or members of a class.

(28) a. Cats are skilled predators. (generic, indefinite)

b. A cat is a skilled predator. (generic, indefinite)

c. A cat is asleep on the table. (non-generic and indefinite)

d. The cat is asleep. (non-generic and definite)

e. The cat is a skilled predator. (ambiguous: generic or nongeneric

and definite)

Exercise

Identify each italicized expression as (a) definite or indefinite, (b) referential

or attributive, and (c) generic or non-generic. You will have

to imagine a situation in which each sentence is used. Note where

ambiguities arise.

a. I need a sandwich.

b. I need a part for my car.

c. Alice wants to protect the elephant.

d. The president’s detractors must be insane.

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The only somewhat difficult case in Table 4 is the noun modifier, that is,

the case where a noun modifies a head noun, as in metal plates. Remember

that metal is not an adjective for formal reasons—e.g., it cannot be

compared or intensified: \*metaler, \*more metal, \*very metal. Noun modifiers

appear frequently when one speaks of a material out of which something is

made, but the semantic range of such constructions is extensive:

(29) a. government spying

b. state law

c. pie chart

d. desert safari

e. Sunday newspaper

f. stone wall

g. plastic cups

h. cardboard boxes

Exercise

1. Try to describe the semantic/meaning relations between the head

noun and its noun modifier in each of the constructions in (29).

2. What do writing handbooks say about the use of noun modifiers?

Examine a piece of real-life prose, identifying various types of premodifiers.

Can you determine different writing styles according to their

variety?

More complex NPs: head + prepositional phrase

Most of the simple premodifiers above contain one word. The least complex

postmodifier—and by far the most common—is the prepositional phrase

(PP). Remember that PPs consist of a preposition and a noun phrase. So this

simple postmodification will have the structure: N + PP. (31a-f) are examples,

each with the structure:

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(30) NP

N PP

concerns P NP

about Art N

the future

(31) a. songs about rebellion

b. clocks on the wall

c. walks with my mother

d. arguments about abortion

e. reasons for my hesitation

f. sources of concern

Exercise

Provide a fully labeled tree diagram for each of the NPs in (31a-f).

A problem that arises with expressions in which a N is followed by a PP

is whether the N and PP actually combine to form a noun phrase, as in the

examples in (31), or whether they are simply a non-unified sequence of N

followed by PP, as in Put the book on the shelf. In this expression, the N book is

not combined with the PP on the shelf into an NP. It is important to have ways

of identifying which kind of expression we are dealing with.

Remember that we said that one test for phrasehood is the possibility of

being replaced by a single word. In the case of NPs these words would be

pronouns. So, if a sequence of words can be replaced by a pronoun, then it is

very likely an NP. For instance, you could replace all of the expressions in (31)

by some form of the word they. Let’s call this test the Pronoun-Substitution

(Pro-Sub) Test. To see how it works, let’s consider (32):

(32) a. Woody admired the picture on the wall.

b. Woody put the picture on the wall.

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Applying the Pro-Sub Test to the picture on the wall in (32a) we get (33a):

(33) a. Woody admired it.

This is grammatical, so in (32a) the picture on the wall is a unified NP.

When we apply the Pro-Sub Test to the same sequence of words in (32b)

we get (33b):

(33) b. \*Woody put it.

This is ungrammatical, showing us that the picture on the wall in (32b) is not

a unified NP.

If we now apply the Pro-Sub Test to the picture in (32b) we get:

(34) Woody put it on the wall.

This is grammatical, showing us that the picture in (32b) is separate from on

the wall.

These patterns of grammaticality lead to the conclusion that (32a) contains

an NP made up of a head with a PP postmodifier and that (32b) contains the

simpler NP the picture followed by a separate PP on the wall.

We can represent these by the following tree structure diagrams:

(32)a’. NP (32)b’. VP

Art N PP V NP PP

the picture on the wall put the picture on the wall

Exercise

1. English contains several different types of pronouns—demonstratives,

wh-pronouns, and the like—and pronoun substitution tests can be created

using any of them. Using wh-pronouns we can create the wh-question

Test. In this version of the Pro-Sub Test, you replace the sequence under

analysis with an appropriate question word and turn the sentence into a

question. Let’s apply this test to (32a,b) just as we applied the original

Pro-Sub Test. First replace the picture on the wall in (32a) with an appropriate

wh-word and turn the result into a question. If the result is grammatical

then the sequence is a unified NP. If the result is not grammatical

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then you have evidence that the sequence is not a unified NP. Now apply

the same test to the sequence in (32b). Follow the same procedure and

logic. You should find again that in (32a) the picture on the wall is an NP,

but that in (32b) the picture on the wall is not.

2. You will recall also that movement is a good test for phrasehood. The

active-passive relationship you read about in our chapter on Minor Parts

of Speech provides the basis for a movement test that can identify NPs.

Recall from that discussion that the passive subject NP corresponds to

the active object NP and the active subject NP corresponds to the NP

that is the object of passive by. These correspondences are indicated by

subscripts in:

Active: [1

Masked raiders] breached [2

the security system].

Passive: [2

The security system] was breached by [1

masked raiders].

Given that subjects are generally NPs, if an expression can be turned

into a passive subject then it is an NP. We can apply this test to (32a,b):

(32) a. Woody admired the picture on the wall.

c. The picture on the wall was admired by Woody.

Because (32c) is grammatical the sequence the picture on the wall

must be an NP in (32a).

(32) b. Woody put the picture on the wall.

d. \*The picture on the wall was put by Woody.

Because (32d) is ungrammatical, the sequence the picture on the wall

cannot be an NP in (32b).

Use the passive test to show that the italicized phrases in the following

sentences are NPs:

a. Grammatical tests prove grammatical categorizations.

b. Teenagers mow lawns.

c. Obsessive-compulsives write grammar books.

d. The military developed the internet.

e. The teachers forced the unfortunate students to read grammar

books.

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There is also a paraphrase test for a noun head + PP. If you can insert the

words which is/was or that is/was between the noun head and the PP, the

construction is probably of the head + postmodifier type. We call this the

Whiz-test. (Wh comes from which; iz comes from the pronunciation of

is). Applying this test to (32a) and (32b) we end up with the paraphrases

(32e,f), respectively.

(32) e. Woody admired the picture which was on the wall.

f. \*Woody put the picture which was on the wall.

That (32e) is grammatical indicates that on the wall is a postmodifier of picture

in (32a) and thus that the picture on the wall is a phrase in that sentence;

the ungrammaticality of (32f) indicates that on the wall is not a postmodifier

of picture in (32b) and thus that the picture on the wall is not a phrase

in that sentence.

Thus we can conclude that the picture on the wall in (32a) is a unified NP

containing a head noun and a following PP. In contrast, in (32b), the picture

on the wall is not a unified NP.

Our tests demonstrate aspects of the process of grammatical reasoning—the

use of tests, the need for several tests, consideration of multiple

hypotheses, and the role of grammaticality judgments. A further dividend is

that the tests we have just described will apply to just about any type of NP,

not just those involving PP postmodifiers.

More complex NPs: multiple premodifiers

Our examples so far have dealt only with single word premodifiers, but premodifiers

can be multiplied, as (35) shows.

(35) a. the two culprits (article + numeral)

b. those metal plates (demonstrative + noun)

c. several other candidates (quantifier + indefinite)

d. one such oddity (numeral + indefinite)

e. a second chance (article + ordinal)

Exercise

Identify the premodifiers and their types in:

a. several handsome geldings

b. long boring sessions

c. three French hens

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d. a rock quarry

e. many such steamy scenes

More complex NPs: phrasal premodifiers

Multiple one-word premodifiers cause little trouble for students. But phrasal

prenominal modifiers are more complicated. Table 5 presents some major

types. (We deal with verbal phrases in our chapter on Multi-Clause Sentences.)

form of premodifier example

Genitive NP (GenNP) This friend’s hobby is knitting.

Adjective phrase (AP) Very old memories return easily.

Verbal phrase (VblP) Carelessly organized meetings annoy everyone.

table 5: phrasal premodifiers

Phrasal premodifiers can be expanded, adding greater complexity to the

structure. Moreover, genitive NPs and APs readily combine with other structures

to create heavily premodified NPs:

(36) a. My friend’s hobby is interesting.

(GenNP my friend’s modifies hobby; genitive pronoun

(GenNP) my modifies friend.)

b. All my friend’s hobbies are interesting.

(GenNP my friend’s modifies hobbies; my modifies friend; all

modifies my friend’s hobbies)

c. All my friends’ very old plates (three premodifiers: quantifier all;

Gen NP with genitive premodifier my friends’; AP with intensifier

very old)

d. Those very old counterfeiting plates belonged to Capone.

(three premodifiers: demonstrative those; AP with intensifier

very old; verbal phrase counterfeiting)

Exercise

Describe the meaning difference between (36b) and All my friends’

hobbies are interesting. Note the positions of the apostrophes.

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Genitive NPs raise two further issues of complexity. First, they are closely

related to postmodifiers that use a prepositional phrase headed by of. Compare

the following.

(37) a. my friend’s hobbies

b. the hobbies of my friend

c. my friend’s house

d. the house of my friend

e. the house of the friend that I met in Palo Alto

f. the birth of a daughter

g. a daughter’s birth

h. my daughter’s birth

i. the home of the brave

j. ?the braves’ home [Note: (37i) and (37j) have different meanings.]

k. a cup of soup/coffee/tea

l. \*a soup’s/coffee’s/tea’s cup

m. a wedge of cheese

n. \*a cheese’s wedge

o. a pat of butter

p. \*a butter’s pat

q. a ream of paper

r. \*a paper’s ream

s. a fistful of dollars

t. \*a dollar’s fistful

These examples indicate that the choice of premodifier genitive vs. of-genitive

depends on various factors:

a. The length of the GenNP: the longer the GenNP, the more likely

we are to use an of-genitive, e.g., (37e).

b.Whether the entity represented by the genitive is animate or not;

if it is, we are more likely to use the premodifier genitive; cf. the

cat’s fur vs. ?the wheel’s rim).

c.If the GenNP is a pronoun, we strongly prefer the premodifier

genitive; cf. her car vs. \*the car of her, Sophie’s Choice vs. ?A Choice

of Sophie(’s).

d.Note the meaning difference between her photographs and photographs

of her. The first can have many meanings, e.g., photographs

she owns/took/ordered/designed/etc. The second means photographs

in which she is pictured.

e. An NP containing a premodifier genitive is definite, but a post-

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modifier genitive allows indefinite determiners to modify the

head noun; compare the definite NP Oscar’s friend with the indefinite

NP a friend of Oscar’s.

While native speakers are not likely to have trouble with such complexities,

non-native students may encounter serious difficulties with this construction.

The second complexity is that genitive NPs themselves contain a NP.

When one structure contains another structure, we say that the second

structure is embedded in the first. The NP Harry’s wife’s paintings contains

a genitive NP within a genitive NP. In other words, Harry’s is embedded

within Harry’s wife’s, which in turn is embedded in Harry’s wife’s paintings.

This structure is represented in (38):

(38) NP-1

Premodifier-A Head-A

(GenNP)

NP-2 ’s

Premodifier-B Head-B

(GenNP)

NP-3 ’s

Head

N

Harry ’s wife ’s paintings

Embedding allows one function (or form) to contain other functions (or

forms). An understanding of embedding is critical to analysis of grammatical

structures with any significant degree of complexity. Let’s illustrate this fact

with diagram (38). NP-l (Harry’s wife’s paintings) consists of a premodifier of

the form GenNP (Harry’s wife’s) and a head noun (paintings). The GenNP

in turn consists of a full NP (NP-2), along with the genitive inflection ’s. In

other words, the form NP-2 is contained in the form NP-l. NP-2 contains a

premodifier (Harry’s) and a head noun (wife). Finally, premodifier-B contains

a single noun head (Harry), the ‘s, and no premodifiers.

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Under NP-3, we could have chosen a premodifier with a possessive pronoun

and a noun modifier to give us my uncle Harry’s wife’s paintings. We could

even have selected another GenNP under NP-3, in which case we might have

gotten Harry’s cousin’s wife’s paintings. In fact, we could (in principle) go on

to infinity, producing ever longer and more genealogically bizarre structures:

Harry’s aunt’s cousin’s son’s granddaughter’s niece’s sister’s step-child’s friend’s paintings.

Embedding enables language to be infinite in the number and length

of the sentences it can create. Fortunately, speakers tend to use these possibilities

sparingly, though occasionally writers such as Dylan Thomas, Henry

James, and William Faulkner toy with them. As you progress through this

book, you will see the pervasiveness of embedding.

Before we leave premodifiers of Ns we must address one final matter,

namely the order of premodifiers. There are many proposals in the grammatical

and linguistic literature, many of remarkable complexity. The following,

adapted from Frawley (1992: 482-3) is a partial list:

Det > quantity > value > physical property > age > color > Head

The five good long old brown tables

Other languages allow different orders, so your non-native English speaking

students may come up with utterances that violate the order rules, such as the

following from a Korean student:

the weakness of the each student

Exercise

Identify and draw brackets around each NP and underline its headword.

Using Tables 3 and 4, identify the type of each premodifier in the NP.

a. We noticed several suspicious details.

b. My best friend’s parents gave his younger sister a European tour

as a graduation present.

c. Three false alarms were mysteriously called in during exam week.

Complex NPs: The range of postmodifiers

As complicated as possessives are, we easily recognize the infrequency of

expressions such as Harry’s uncle’s cousin’s sister’s paintings. Much more common—and

much more complex—are the various sorts of phrases and

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clauses that follow head nouns. We have already examined the prepositional

phrase, probably the simplest postmodifier. Yet even this innocent construction

raises the specter of mind-boggling expansions. Like possessive NPs,

prepositional phrases contain noun phrases, which can contain prepositional

phrases, which can contain other NPs which can contain a PP . . . all the

way to the linguistic loony bin. In case you have doubts, consider the NP

in (39):

(39) The book in the drawer of the desk in the office of the leader of

the rebellion against the oppression of readers of tales of adventures

on far planets of the galaxy . . .

Complexity is due also to the potential for various sorts of postmodifiers,

each more structurally intricate than the premodifiers. We treat these structures

more fully in other chapters. For the present, we will introduce the

major types of postmodifiers and comment briefly on them.

postmodifier type example

Adjective phrase (AP) [Anyone fond of kumquats] should buy

this cookbook.

Appositive NP (AppNP) [His nominee, an infamous scoundrel,]

is unlikely to be elected.

Relative clause (RC) [The contestant who guesses the title]

will win a trip to Tahiti.

Appositive relative (AppRC) [G.W. Bush, who is the 43rd President of

the US,] is only 60.

Verbal phrase (VblP) [The contestant guessing the title] will

win a vacation in Tahiti.

[The person seated at the president’s

right] is her bodyguard.

[The player to watch] is Tzrdsky.

table 6: complex postmodifiers

We have seen adjective phrases (APs) that function as premodifiers. Such

constructions tend to be brief—one or two words if the adjective is not coordinated.

However, some adjectives can, like nouns, appear with their own

postmodifiers. (In the example in Table 6, of kumquats is a PP that complements

fond; since that PP contains an NP, expansions like that in (39) are

possible.) APs with complements or postmodifiers almost always occur in the

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postmodifier position of noun phrases. Postmodifying APs also tend to allow

the Whiz-test: Anyone who is fond of kumquats.

If the head of the NP is an indefinite pronoun such as someone, something,

anything, nothing, then any attributive AP will occur after it:

(40) a. I heard something strange.

b. I haven’t heard anything new.

c. I see nothing unusual.

Appositive noun phrases (AppNPs) and Appositive Relative Clauses

(AppRCs) occur as “parenthetical asides” after their head noun. They are

usually blocked off in writing by surrounding commas (dashes are also possible).

In speech, they are surrounded by perceptible pause and often a fall

in voice pitch, akin to the aside spoken by a stage actor. The appositive NP

has the same referent as the rest of the NP. Thus in Table 6 his nominee and

an infamous scoundrel designate the same individual. Since appositives can

be expanded just like any other NP, they allow for infinite embedding. Sentence

(41) suggests the possibilities.

(41) His nominee, an infamous scoundrel with principles learned from

years of service in one of the most corrupt political machines ever devised

by the devious minds that have blemished history, is unlikely

to be elected.

Appositives provide extra information that is generally viewed as not being

required for the identification of the referent of the NP. Some handbooks

say that they can be omitted without changing the meaning of the sentence

they occur in. This is quite misleading. The meaning of the sentence certainly

changes, though what the affected NP refers to may not.

Verbal phrases (VblPs), which will be dealt with further in our chapter on

Multi-clause Sentences, are like adjective phrases: short VblPs precede noun

heads; longer VblPs, which may possess their own range of objects, complements,

and modifiers, follow the head noun within a noun phrase. In general,

short modifiers tend to precede head nouns and longer ones tend to follow

them.

Relative clauses were introduced in our chapter on Minor Parts of Speech

and will be more fully discussed in our chapter on Modifications of Basic

Clause Patterns. These clauses usually begin with a wh-word, that, or no introducer

at all: The soldier who died . . . , The thing that gets me . . . , The book

[ ] you wrote . . .

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Exercise

Draw brackets around each NP and underline its headword. Using Tables

4, 5, and 6, indicate the type of each premodifier and/or postmodifier

that you find.

a. Don’t go out in the midday sun.

b. The cat near the window is Salome.

c. Alvin set the goldfish bowl near the window.

d. I saw the cat near the window. (ambiguous: analyze two different

ways)

e. The squirrel that Bonzo, my pet chimp, chased became quite

flustered.

f. Some friends of Boris gave him a box filled with his favorite candy

as a going-away present.

g. The witnesses at the scene noticed a stranger who drove away in

a red station wagon full of flowers.

Complements in NPs

Complements in NPs typically follow the head N, though some may occur

before it, giving us the formula:

(42) (Complement) + H + (Complement)

The complements before the head may be either nouns or, more rarely, adjectives:

(43) a. a fiction writer cf. someone who writes fiction.

b. an economics professor cf. someone who professes economics.

c. a technical writer cf. someone who writes technical manuals/

materials.

d. a financial adviser cf. someone who advises on financial matters.

e. an ecological expert. (Huddleston and Pullum 2002: 439)

When the complement follows the head N it must be either a PP or a clause:

(44) a. the trip to Disneyland (PP)

b. the claim that the war is justified (that-clause)

c. the question whether we’ve won (embedded/indirect

question)

d. the question ‘Are we there yet?’ (quoted question)

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e. the request to withdraw (to-infinitival clause)

Noun complement clauses are also discussed in our chapter on Multiclause

Sentences.

Nominalization

In our chapter on Morphology and Word Formation, we describe how a word

belonging to one part of speech may be derived from a word belonging to a

different part of speech. Nominalizations are nouns derived from words belonging

to other parts of speech. Here we focus only on nouns derived from

verbs. These derived nouns can head noun phrases, just like any other noun.

However, their relationship to verbs allows them to have subjects and objects.

For example, amusement is derived from amuse, which is a transitive verb and so

grammatical in a sentence with both a subject and a direct object, such as (45):

(45) a. The clown amused the children.

We can nominalize (45a) as the NP (45b):

(45) b. The clown’s amusement of the children.

Notice that in the nominalization, the subject of the clause in (45a) shows

up as a genitive premodifier, The clown’s, and that the direct object of the

verb in (45a), the children, shows up as the object of the preposition of.

Exercise

1. Nominalize the following sentences.

a. Werner inspected the package.

b. Pamela enjoys bobsledding.

c. The truth gradually emerged.

2. Change the following noun phrases to sentences by reversing the nominalization.

a. Manuel’s toleration of teasing

b. Oscar’s avoidance of hard work

c. Helen’s expectation that she would be rescued

3. Nominalization occurs more frequently in written texts, and especially

technical and academic texts, than in speech. Pick a paragraph

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in a scientific text and a similar sized section of dialog in a novel and

compare the number of nominalizations in the two.

Complex NPs: Coordination

Perhaps on the principle that too much of a good thing is impossible, languages

allow us to repeat NPs indefinitely. Coordinated NPs are joined by a

coordinating conjunction, such as and or or, as in (46):

(46) My sister and/or her best friend will deliver the letter.

Such structures are relatively simple to deal with—except for one problem.

Consider the ambiguous sentence (47):

(47) Old men and women will be served first.

Who will be served first? Old men and all women? Old men and old women?

The answer seems to depend on whether the premodifying adjective

old applies to men only or to the conjunction of men and women. To differentiate

these possibilities, we must allow not only full NPs to coordinate but

also heads of NPs. We represent the ambiguity diagrammatically in (48).

(48)a. NP

AP NP

N Conj N

A

Old men and women

(48)b. NP

NP Conj NP

AP N N

A

Old men and women

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Diagram (48a) represents the situation in which old modifies the NP

men and women; (48b) represents the situation in which old modifies only

men.

the verb phrase (vp)

We begin with the functional formula for VPs and then examine the forms

that can satisfy those functions.

(49) VP Functional Formula

(AUXILIARY\*) + HEAD + (OBJECT\*) + (COMPLEMENT\*) + (MODIFIER\*)

This formula states that a VP must contain a head word, optionally preceded

by one or more auxiliaries, and optionally followed by object(s), complements,

and/or modifier(s).

Simple VPs: head alone

Single-word VPs always consist of a head word that is an intransitive verb,

bolded in the examples in (50). The syntactic structure of such intransitive

verb phrases is given in (50’):

(50) a. Hector walks. (50’) VP

b. All the employees agree.

c. The lemmings followed. V

d. Cynthia lied/laughed/coughed/died/ . . .

In school grammars, the terms main verb and simple predicate sometimes

are used for the head word of the VP.

VPs: auxiliaries and head

In our chapter on Major Parts of Speech, we distinguished between main

verbs and auxiliary verbs. The discussion primarily concerned head verbs.

However, heads often occur in the company of other verbs, called helping

verbs, auxiliaries, or simply Aux, some of whose functions we described in

our chapter on the Minor Parts of Speech.

The major auxiliary verbs in English are have, be, and do. (In our chapter

on Minor Parts of Speech we briefly discussed the modal auxiliaries will,

would, can, could, shall, should, may, might, and must.) The uses of have, be,

and do are illustrated in (51):

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(51) a. The zombies departed from Hector’s house. (head alone)

b. Hector is acting strangely. (be + head verb in Ving form)

c. Hector has never looked at me like that. (have + head verb in

past participle form)

d. Hector does not eat vegetables. (do + head verb in infinitive

form)

e. Hector has been consorting with the zombies. (have + be in

past participle form + head verb in Ving form)

As these examples show, a verb phrase will generally contain one head verb;

in English, auxiliaries always precede the main verb. The auxiliaries may be

separated from the verb, either through interruption by items like never as in

(51c) or by inversion as in Has Hector seen Oswald? Let’s examine these auxiliaries

in more detail.

Have is the auxiliary associated with the perfect aspect. It can accept all

of the four potential inflections of a main verb, although its third person

singular present tense and past tense forms are slightly irregular:

(52) a. have sung

b. has sung

c. had sung

d. having sung

These examples also demonstrate that auxiliary have is followed by a verb

(whether another auxiliary or a main verb) in the past participle form, which

we have abbreviated Ven. So our formula for auxiliary have is HAVE + Ven.

The syntactic structure that corresponds to this formula is:

(53)

HAVE Ven

A word of caution: have may also serve as a head verb. If a single instance of

have is the only verb in a clause, then it is a main verb and therefore head of its

VP: I have a cold. If two instances of have occur, the first is an auxiliary, as in I

have had a cold for two weeks, and the second is the head verb.

Exercise

Using (a) as a model, identify the two elements of the perfect in each

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of the following examples:

a. We have eaten all the pizza.

b. They have been in there for hours.

c. Bill has seen the light.

d. The fugitive has taken the bus.

e. The police have blocked the roads.

f. They haven’t found her yet.

Be is the auxiliary associated with the progressive aspect, which is compatible

with almost all the possible forms of be:

(54) a. be singing

b. am singing

c. is singing

d. are singing

e. was singing

f. were singing

g. been singing

h.\*being singing

Be, have, and do are the most irregular verbs in English. Their standard

English forms are listed below in Tables 7.

a. be Present Past

Singular Plural Singular Plural

Person 1 am are was were

2 are are were were

3 is are was were

Past participle (Ven form) been

Present participle (Ving form) being

Gerund (Ving form) being

b. have Present

Third person singular has

All other persons and numbers have

Past

All persons and numbers had

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Past participle (Ven form) had

Present participle (Ving form) having

Gerund (Ving form) having

c. do Present

Third person singular does

All other persons and numbers do

Past

All persons and numbers did

Past participle (Ven form) done

Present participle (Ving form) doing

Gerund (Ving form) doing

table 7: forms of be, have, and do

Auxiliary be will always follow auxiliary have when they occur together in

the same clause. Whichever verb follows progressive be assumes its present

participle form, Ving. Our formula is BE + Ving, and the syntactic structure

corresponding to this is:

(55)

BE Ving

Exercise

Using (a) as a model, identify the two elements of the progressive in

each of the following sentences:

a. The students were acting out.

b. Everyone was talking during class.

c. Ted and Sheila are getting divorced.

d. Sheila and Roger are planning to elope.

e. Ted is feeling blue.

f. Their friends are acting surprised.

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When perfective have and progressive be occur together in a clause, (1)

have precedes be; (2) be, as the verb immediately to the right of have, occurs

as a been; and (3) the verb immediately to the right of progressive be occurs

as Ving. The associated syntactic structure is:

(56)

HAVE

BEen Ving

Exercise

Using (a) as a model, identify and distinguish the elements of the perfect

and the progressive in each of the following sentences:

a. I have been searching for that for ages. (Bold = perfect; underlined

= progressive)

b. We had all been hoping for better weather.

c. Eleanor has been dating JD for several months now.

d. JD has been seeing a physical therapist for his damaged knee.

e. The plants have been doing better since you started talking to

them.

f. My computer has been crashing a lot lately.

Like have, be may serve as a main verb. When it does, as in Wiggles is a

friendly boa, it is a linking verb. When two instances of be occur, the same

generalization holds as for have—the first is an auxiliary (as in Wiggles is being

affectionate) and the second is the head verb.

The auxiliary be is a bit more complex than auxiliary have because it also

occurs in the passive. The functional formula for the passive is Be + Ven, and

the corresponding syntactic structure is:

(57)

BE Ven

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Exercise

Using (a) as a model, identify the two elements of the passive in each

of the following sentences:

a. This book was written by a nice derangement of linguists.

b. The current global warming was predicted by scientists almost

fifty years ago.

c. The Mona Lisa was painted by Leonardo da Vinci.

d. Global warming is caused by excessive hydrocarbon use.

e. Passive sentences are marked by a form of be and a verb in its

past participle form.

f. Movies are intended to communicate ideologies.

Can the passive be occur with the progressive be? Sentence (58) shows that it can:

(58) That song is being sung poorly.

(58) also shows that the passive be follows the progressive be. We can represent

the structure of the verb phrase in (58) as:

(59)

BE

Ving Ven

Finally, we can combine all of the auxiliaries above into a single verb phrase.

Can you think of what such a verb phrase might be? Let’s look at it structurally:

(60)

HAVE

BEen

BEing Ven

sung

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To imagine such an ungainly (but grammatical) verb phrase in a sentence,

consider (61), which denotes either the singing of one extremely long song or

repetitious performances of the same song.

(61) That song has been being sung for hours, and I’m sick of it.

Exercise

Using (a) as a model, identify and distinguish the elements of the perfect,

the progressive, and the passive in each of the following sentences:

a. Actors have been being nominated for Oscars for over fifty years

now. (Bold = perfect; italics = progressive; underlined = passive)

b. Time and energy have been being wasted on that project for a

long time.

c. The children must not have been being well cared for.

d. The parents should have been being monitored all along.

e. Administration policy hasn’t been being properly scrutinized by Congress.

f. Air travelers from the Middle East have been being harassed by

security officers since 9/11.

A note on Do

Do, the last auxiliary, is something of an exception, as the sentences below

suggest:

(62) a. Jason does not/doesn’t sing.

b. Does Jason sing?

c. Jason DOES sing.

d.\*Jason may do sing.

e. \*Jason do may sing.

f. \*Jason is doing sing.

g. \*Jason does be singing. (grammatical in some dialects of English)

h. \*Jason has done sing.

i. \*Jason does have sing.

j. \*Jason is done sing.

k. \*Jason does be sung.

What can we learn from this odd pattern of sentences? First, when do occurs

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with a main verb, that verb is in its base (V) form, represented by the formula

DO + V. Second, do cannot occur with any of the other auxiliaries, either

before or after them. Third, do may occur when the main verb is negated by

not or n’t (62a), in a question (62b), or in an emphatic sentence (62c).

Fourth, the auxiliary do differs from the Pro-Verb Phrase do. Consider

sentence (63).

(63) Did1

she do2

so too?

In this example, Did1

is an auxiliary, while do2 so acts as a Pro-Verb Phrase,

an expression that substitutes for a verb phrase.

Auxiliary do and main verb do also differ, as the fact that they can cooccur

shows: [

AuxDid] you [

MV do] the dishes?

One handy test for identifying VPs is the Do-So Test. One simple application

of this test is to substitute do so for the VP (ensuring that the tense

of do matches that of the original VP):

(64) a. The zombies did so. (= 51a)

b. Hector is doing so. (= 51b)

c. Hector has never done so. (= 51c)

d. Hector does not do so. (= 51d)

e. Hector has been doing so. (= 51e)

In another version of this test, the sentence in question is coordinated with

one similar to it; in this case the elements reverse to form so do:

(65) a. Hector juggles and so does Zenobia.

b. All the employees agree and so does their supervisor.

c. The lemmings jumped and so did the zoologists.

In short, the expressions do so and so do replace a VP, including its objects,

complements, and modifiers, but excluding negation and auxiliaries.

Exercise

In the sentences below, draw brackets around the main verb. Draw formulas

or trees similar to those used in the preceding section to describe

the structure of the auxiliaries + main verb.

a. I have bought all my textbooks for next semester.

b. I have a few dollars for fun.

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c. Sylvia has been doing a lot of work lately.

d. Of course we are being ironic.

e. Zelda was congratulated for her good work.

f. The job has been completed.

VP: head + object(s)/complement

A phrase that obligatorily follows a verb head is called an object or complement.

These terms are sometimes interchangeable, although tradition has

tended to attach “object” to some constructions and “complement” to others.

The reasons for the variation are obscure. The label “object” dimly suggests

the goal or purpose of the verb head, though neither of these semantic

labels applies to every structure so labeled. The term “complement” suggests

the notion of completing (hence the spelling) the verb in some way. Table 8

lists the four main types of objects and complements.

type example

Direct Object The Vikings demanded [tribute (NP)].

Indirect Object Waldo gave [his sister (NP)] a dictionary.

PP Complement Waldo gave a dictionary [to his sister (PP)]

Subject Complement Freud was [a prude (NP)]/[prudish (AP)].

Object Complement I consider Jung [a quack (NP)]/[unreliable (AP)].

Sentence Complement I realize [that tests should be easier (S)].

table 8: objects and complements of verbs

Table 8 reveals that NPs can serve any object or complement function,

that adjective phrases can also act in complement functions, and that an

entire clause or sentence can act as the complement of certain verbs.

An important grammatical notion associated with the direct object is

that of transitivity. A transitive verb takes a direct object; an intransitive

verb does not. Thus the sentences (66a-d) contain transitive verbs and those

in (67a-d) contain intransitive verbs. The direct objects in (66) are italicized.

(66) a. Moriarty eluded Sherlock.

b. Everyone avoided me.

c. Sarah gave him some good advice.

d. I consider Jung a quack/unreliable.

(67) a. We walked.

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b. Smoke rises.

c. Harrison confessed.

d. Everyone in the room laughed.

In English, a large number of verbs can be either transitive or intransitive,

sometimes with a considerable difference of meaning:

(68) a. The fire smoked.

b. Shelley smoked. (Ambiguous)

c. Shelley smoked the salmon.

Thus whether such verbs are transitive or intransitive can only be determined

by their use in an actual clause. One simple test is that an intransitive

verb can potentially end a complete clause, as in (67).

Two structures require not one but two phrases to follow the verb. The

indirect object construction, e.g., (66c), typically calls for a direct object

also. Verbs that enter into such constructions are said to be bitransitive or

ditransitive. The object complement construction (e.g., (66d)) requires a

direct object preceding the complement. We deal in more detail with these

constructions in our chapter on Basic Clause Patterns.

Verbs with objects may imply end products and/or bounded activities:

(69) a. He built a workbench.

b. He builds workbenches.

(69a) implies that a workbench came into being as a result of the building;

it also views the workbench building event as having an end point,

namely the completion of the workbench. (69b) is in the simple present

tense and represents multiple, discrete, workbench building events, as the

plural, workbenches, makes clear. In this respect, it is like a punctual verb,

such as cough, punch, or kick.

Verbs without objects often imply no natural end-point. Compare (70a)

with (70b):

(70) a. She ran.

b. She ran a marathon.

(70a) implies no particular end to the running; in fact, it is compatible with

and she’s still running. (70b), on the other hand, looks at the marathon-running

as a single event with a natural completion, namely, the end of the marathon.

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The simple present version of (70b), She runs marathons, implies multiple

individual marathon-running events. Note the plural, marathons.

Verbs allow or select complements of various syntactic forms. For instance,

when wait is transitive, its complement may be either an NP (e.g., Wait your

turn!) or a PP (e.g., We’ll wait for the next bus). Anyone learning the language

must learn the restrictions and possibilities associated with verbs.

Exercise

Using (a) as a guide, identify and distinguish the various objects and

complements in the following sentences. Be sure to identify the entire

object/complement expression in each instance.

a. The people elected Oscar (Direct Object) poet laureate (Object

Complement).

b. She must be really intelligent.

c. Her daughter became a famous scientist.

d. Fred smokes cigarillos.

e. The students gave the new teacher a welcome gift.

f. The class named Rodriguez “classmate most likely to succeed.”

g. Many people believe that James Joyce was the greatest novelist

of the 20th century.

VP: head + modifier(s)

To distinguish them from modifiers of nouns, modifiers of verbs often have

special names such as adverbial. The most frequent modifiers come in only

four formal types, as indicated in Table 9.

type of modifier example

Adverb phrase We left early.

Prepositional phrase We stayed in Helsinki.

Adverbial clause We left after it started to snow.

Noun phrase We enjoyed it a great deal.

table 9: modifiers of verbs

Adverbial clauses begin with the subordinating adverbial conjunctions

mentioned in the chapter on Minor Parts of Speech.

Like single adverbs, the phrasal and clausal modifiers are somewhat movable

in the sentence:

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(71) a. We eagerly waited for our turn.

b. After it began to snow, we left.

Sometimes a short (1-2 word) adverbial will appear within the verb phrase:

(72) a. We do occasionally eat out.

b. She must have often donated her legal services.

Noun phrase adverbials, such as a lot in (73a), may be confused with direct

objects. However, they will never become the subject of a corresponding

passive sentence, as the ungrammaticality of (73b) shows:

(73) a. Harry entertains a lot.

b. \*A lot is entertained by Harry.

The adverbials that modify verbs can be grouped semantically according

to the semantic roles that they express. The most common appear in Table

10. These roles should remind you of the meanings associated with adverbs

and prepositions listed in our chapters on Major and Minor Parts of Speech.

semantic role examples

Time He left early.

We left on Monday.

I’ll leave when the moon turns green.

Place She stopped there.

She relaxed on the sofa.

She stopped where the victim was found.

Manner The troupe exited gracefully.

The troupe exited with grace.

Reason He left out of spite.

He left because he was miffed.

Purpose He left to milk the cow.

table 10: some semantic roles of adverbials

Exercise

Draw brackets around each VP in the sentences below. Underline the

headword and indicate the type of object, complement, or modifier

that accompanies the headword.

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a. Angela offered the job to her former rival.

b. Angela offered Archie the job.

c. We left for Austin in the morning.

d. In the morning, we left San Antonio for Austin.

e. Your proposal seems quite reasonable.

f. Eat this, if you dare.

Complex VPs: combinations of functions

Though we have illustrated separately each of the functions accompanying

the verb head, the options in the formula stated at the beginning of this section

allow for more than one function to appear with the verb. Consider, for

example, the sentences in (74).

(74) a. She has been speaking for three hours.

(auxiliaries + head + PP-modifier)

b. Scott offered Zelda a ride since her car was out of gas.

(head + indirect object + direct object + adverbial clause

modifier)

c. Hortense never becomes angry.

(adverb phrase + head + AP-subject complement)

d. The remains will be shipped to Cleveland on Wednesday.

(auxiliaries + head + PP-modifier + PP-modifier)

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glossar y

adjective phrase:phrase headed by adjective.

adverb phrase: phrase headed by adverb.

adverbial: an expression that functions like an adverb phrase, namely as a

modifier of a verb, verb phrase, adjective, adverb, clause, or sentence.

appositive noun phrase: NP that occurs as a “parenthetical aside” after its

head noun.

auxiliary verb (also called aux or helping verb): verb that accompanies a

main verb in a clause.

bitransitive (also called ditransitive): verb phrase having a direct and an

indirect object.

complement: one expression that grammatically completes another.

degree adverb: adverb indicating the extent to which an adjective or adverb

applies.

ditransitive: See bitransitive.

do-so test: a substitution test used to identify a verb phrase.

embed: to include one structure inside another structure.

finite: a clause whose verb is marked as present or past tense or which contains

a modal. See non-finite.

function: role played by one expression in another.

gerund: a non-finite verbal phrase whose first verb is in its Ving form and

which functions in the range of NPs.

helping verb: See auxiliary verb.

infinitive: a non-finite verbal phrase that functions in the range of NPs,

modifiers, or complements.

intensifier: member of a small word class which intensifies the meaning of

its head word.

intransitive: verb that cannot take a direct object.

logical subject: in traditional grammar, a word or phrase referring to either

the agent of an action or the understood subject of a sentence.

modal auxiliary: one of the auxiliaries will, would, can, could, shall, should,

may, might and must.

non-finite: a clause which is not marked for tense nor includes a modal.

See finite.

noun modifier: a noun that modifies a head noun.

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noun phrase: phrase headed by a noun.

object: NP in VP required by transitive or bitransitive verb.

object of a preposition: a noun phrase required by a preposition in a prepositional

phrase.

participle: a verbal phrase whose first verb is Ven or Ving and which functions

as a pre- or post-modifier in an NP.

passive test: a test used to determine the object of an active clause by making

it passive.

phrase: a grammatical unit containing a head word and any complements

or modifies.

prepositional phrase: phrase headed by a preposition.

pro-sub test: a test used to identify a noun phrase by substituting a pronoun

for it.

pro-verb phrase: a form such as do so that replaces a verb phrase.

topicalization test: a test used to determine whether a structure is a phrase

by moving it to the beginning of its sentence.

transitive: verb that requires a direct object.

verb phrase: a phrase headed by a verb.

verbal phrase: a non-finite verb phrase that functions in ways other than as

the predicate of a finite clause. See gerund, infinitive, participle.

wh-question test: a test to identify a noun phrase by replacing it with a

wh-question word and then recasting the sentence that contains it as a question.

whiz-test: a test to identify a noun phrase with a head + postmodifier structure

by inserting who or which plus a form of the verb be after the presumed

head word.