



Teaching students to discern syntactic functions of phrases in English

Lok Raj Sharma

Associate Professor of English, Makawanpur Multiple Campus, Hetauda, Nepal

Abstract

This article attempts to assist the bachelor level education students to discern major syntactic functions of phrases in English. It primarily deals with noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase and prepositional phrase and their syntactic functions which are to be studied in the grammar subject. The article writer has pursued the inductive method by demonstrating some examples of syntactic functions of phrases in the beginning, explaining them and then drawing the particular function from the examples. This article primarily deals with the function subject, predicator, subject attribute, object attribute, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, predicator complement along with pre determiner and post determiner. This article is significant to those who are concerned with teaching learning grammar.

Keywords: english, function, phrase, syntactic

1. Introduction

In the course of teaching English grammar, I frequently notice the errors committed by students that they take every constituent as an object if it occurs after a verb or verb phrase. It hints at the two things. Either the students do not study grammar carefully or the English teachers do not teach them the structures and functions of sentences properly. I always realize the necessity of correcting their errors. I hope this article will contribute to their learning English sentences well. They will identify the different functions of phrases in sentences.

A sentence is a combination of constituents, and the combination gives us a complete meaning. Sentences can be described in terms of their functions and categories. Sentence constituents can have different functions such as subject, predicator, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator, Predicator complement, adjunct, pre modifier and post modifier.

The article writer has attempted to present several sentences based on the phrases to enable the students to identify the functions of the particular phrases. The article will turn to be useful to the English teachers and students.

1.1 Objectives of the Article

The specific objective of this article is to enable the students to identify the functions of phrases in English sentences.

2. Theoretical Review of Literature

Theoretical review of literature involves definitions and types of phrase, subject, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, subject attribute, object attribute, predicator, predicator complement, determiner, premodifier and post modifier.

2.1 Phrase

A phrase is a group of words which functions as a unit of grammar. Crystal (2008) defines phrase as “a term used in grammatical analysis to refer to a single element of structure

Typically containing more than one word, and lacking the subject-predicate structure” (p.367). There are mainly five types of phrase: Noun Phrase (NP), Verb Phrase (VP), Adjective Phrase (Adj P), Adverb Phrase (Adv P) and Prepositional Phrase (Prep P).

2.1.1 The noun phrase (NP)

A noun phrase is a group of words with a noun as its head word. A noun phrase consists of a noun as the head word alone or with determiners and pre-modifiers which come before the noun and the post-modifiers which come after the noun. The whole phrase works as a noun in a sentence. A Subjective personal pronoun in a sentence can also be taken as a noun phrase. For example: a car, a red doll, some beautiful toys etc.

2.1.2 The verb phrase (VP)

A verb phrase is a group of words with a verb as the head word. Verb phrases can be either finite or non-finite. A finite verb phrase contains a finite verbal form, whereas a non-finite verb phrase does not. Finite verbal forms are those which may be marked for tense, mood and concord. Quirk and Greenbaum (1996) ^[18] affirm that “the verb phrase consists of a ‘head verb’ preceded by one or more auxiliary verbs” (p.17). Verb phrases can be either simple or complex (compound). Simple verb phrases have only one verb, whereas the complex verb phrases have more than one verb in the verb phrase. For Example: can read, will be working, to have finished etc.

Sinclair (1992) ^[19] advocates a phrasal verb as “a combination of a verb and an adverb or a verb and a preposition, or a verb, an adverb and a preposition, which together has a single meaning” (p.504). For example: keep up, go down etc.

2.1.3 The adjective phrase (Adj P)

An adjective phrase is a phrase in which the head word is an adjective. For example: very good, extremely happy, too cold etc.

2.1.4 The adverb phrase (Adv P)

An adverb phrase is a group of words which functions like an adverb. An adverb is the head word in an adverb phrase. For example: very quickly, so badly, really sincerely etc.

2.1.5 The Prepositional Phrase (Prep P)

A prepositional phrase is a group of words that begins with a preposition and ends in a noun or a pronoun. For example: in the room, on the table, with her etc. Prepositions can be grouped into the four classes:

- Simple preposition: at, in, by, on etc.
- Compound Preposition: about, along, beside etc.
- Phrase preposition: by dint of, in spite of, because of, owing to etc.
- Participle Prepositions: Concerning, during, regarding, barring etc.

2.2 Determiners

Determiners are words placed in front of a noun to make it clear what the noun refers to. Articles, demonstratives, possessive pronouns, quantifiers, cardinal numbers, ordinal numbers, distributives etc. are determiners. Huddleston (1996) [10] says that determiners “play a major role in the NP contrasts singular vs. plural, count vs. mass and definite vs. indefinite” (p.87). Determiners determine or specify the reference of the noun.

2.3 Premodification and postmodification

Wales (2001) [22] affirms that in modern grammar “pre-modification is used to describe all those elements in a noun phrase or nominal group which are subordinate to the noun and occur directly before it” (p. 316). Noun, adjective and adjective phrase can be the pre-modifiers in a non-phrase. He also mentions that in modern grammar “post-modification describes all those elements in a noun phrase or nominal group which are subordinate to the noun as head word and occur after it” (p. 311). Adjective, adverb, prepositional phrase, finite clause and non-finite clause can be the post-modifiers in a noun phrase. The following table clarifies the concept of determiners premodifiers and Postmodifiers.

2.4 Subject (Sub)

The subject of a sentence is the person, place, idea or thing that does the action or that is being described. It is what performs the action. Every sentence must have a verb. There are three types of subject. Aarts (1997) [1] defines a subject “as the entity that carries out the action expressed by the verb in a sentence” (p.283).

2.4.1 Simple Subject

A simple subject is just one word without any modifiers. For example: **Cats** eat meat.

2.4.2 Complete Subject

A complete subject involves a noun with the modifier(s). For example: **This dog** is hungry.

2.4.3 Compound Subject

A compound subject includes more than one noun or pronoun as a subject. For example: Rita and Gita work hard.

2.5 Object (Obj)

An object is the part of a sentence that gives meaning to the

subject’s action of the verb. It refers to someone or something that receives the action of the verb. An object answers the question “What?” or “Whom?”. For example:

He played ball. They drive cars. She will help Ram. Peter man has killed a thief.

2.6 Predicate

A predicate is a grammatical term that is part of a clause that includes the verb and the words that tell what the subject does. It is also called a complete predicate. A complete predicate is the verb that shows the action and also the modifying phrase that completes the thought, basically everything in the sentence that isn't the subject. A compound predicate contains more than one verb. A compound predicate can include any variation of the predicates described above (except simple predicate) so long as it contains more than one verb. The predicate involves a predicator alone or a predicator with a complement. Aarts (1997) [1] asserts that the predicate of a sentence is syntactically defined as “comprising all the linguistic material to the right of the subject” (p.281).

2.7 Predicator

In clauses and sentences, the predicator is the head of a verb phrase. The predicator is sometimes called the main verb. Some linguists use the term predicator to refer to the whole verb group in a clause. The predicator is the central syntactic element in a sentence. This is the case because it is the predicator which determines the number of complements that will occur and, indeed, whether a particular element is a complement or an adjunct. Aarts (1997) [1] defines predicator as “a functional label applied to the verb in a sentence” (p.281).

2.6 Complement

A complement is a word, phrase or clause that is necessary to complete the meaning of an expression. A complement adds more information about the subject or object of the sentence. Aarts (1997) [1] considers complement as “a functional label which denotes a constituent whose presence is required by a verb, noun, adjective or preposition”(p.275). There are six types of complement:

1. Direct Object
2. Indirect Object
3. Benefactive Object
4. Subject Attribute / Complement
5. Object Attribute / Complement
6. Predicator Complement

2.5.1 Direct Object (Do)

A direct object is the receiver of action within a sentence. Aarts (1997) [1] assumes direct object as “a function label which denotes an entity that undergoes whatever it is that the preceding verb expresses” (p.275). A direct object answers the question "what?" or "whom?" For example: Ram wrote a letter. (Active) A letter was written by Ram. (Passive) She sells flowers. (Active) Flowers are sold by her. (Passive)

2.5.2 Indirect Object (IO)

An indirect object is the recipient of the direct object, or an affected participant in the event. There must be a direct object for an indirect object to be placed in a sentence. In other words, an indirect object cannot exist without a direct

object. Aarts (1997) [1] holds indirect object as “ a function label which denotes an entity that expresses the goal of whatever it is that the preceding verb expresses” (p.278). An indirect object answers the question of “to whom”, “for whom” or “for what” For example:

Peter taught us English. (Active) or Peter taught English to us. (Active)

We were taught English by Peter. (Passive) English was taught to us by Peter. (Passive)

Someone gave the boy a book. (Active) Someone gave a book to the boy. (Active)

The boy was given a book. (Passive) A book was given to the boy. (Passive)

2.5.3 Benefactive object (BO)

A benefactive object of a verb is the person, animal, or thing that benefits from the action of the verb. A benefactive object may occur with an intransitive verb. For example:

Can you call me a taxi? Can you call a taxi for me?

I bought my daughter a car. I bought a car for my daughter.

He brought his wife a sari. He brought a sari for his wife.

2.5.4 Subject attribut complement (SA)

The subject attribute completes the verb relating to the subject of the sentences. It adds more details about the subject of the sentence. For example:

He is a new teacher. Paul is my nephew. They are happy.

2.5.5 Object attribute / complete (OA)

Object attribute adds more details about the object of the sentence. For example:

She called Ram a monkey. Everybody considers you a fool. We appointed him the manager They made her a teacher.

2.5.6 Predicator complement (PC)

Predicator complement constituent resembles to the direct object, but it cannot be used as the subject in the passive sentences. For example:

This girl resembles her mother. That tin contains tobacco.

2.6 Adverbial / adjunct (A)

Subject, predicate and adverbial are immediate constituents of a sentence. This is not an obligatory element o a sentence. This constituent generally answers the questions introduced by ‘when’, ‘where’, ‘how much’, and ‘how often’, ‘why’ etc. It is a part of a sentence that contains extra information; it is not necessary to complete the meaning of a sentence. For example:

I am flying to London next month. She went out quickly.

We can summarize the functions of Phrase in sentences in the following diagram.

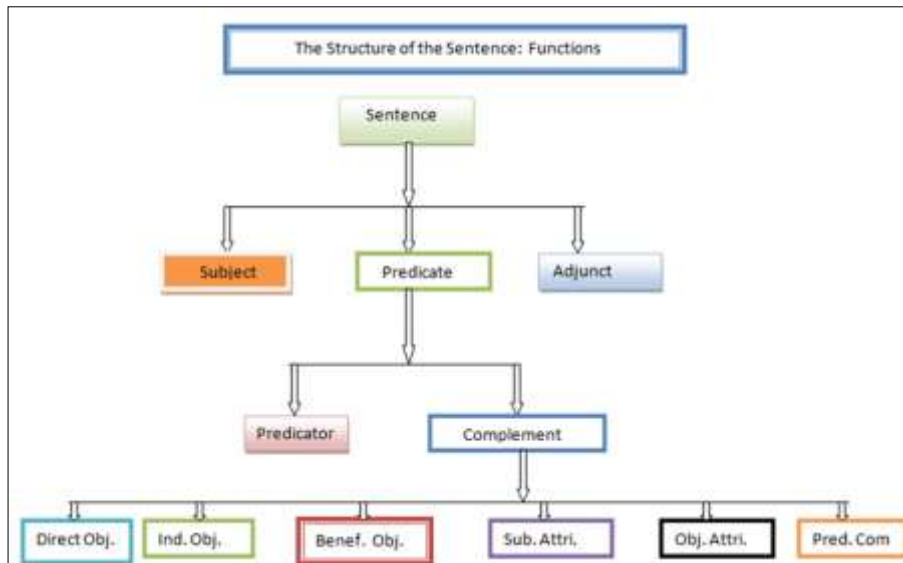


Fig 1

3. Teaching Learning Activities

The subject teacher is advised to consider the following steps to teach different functions of phrases:

- Motivate the students to learn.
- Revise the main points of the previous teaching item.
- Ask the students if they are able to tell something about the functions of phrases.
- Present ample examples of sentences.
- Explain and clarify these examples by focusing on the phrases.
- Focus on the position of a particular phrase in a sentence.
- Tell the students why the phrase does have a particular function.
- Ask the students to make similar types of sentences to focus on the functions of the phrases.

- Revise if they can't discern the function of phrases.
- Encourage them to draw the common structures of the verb phrase from the examples.
- Give them sufficient assignment for the next day.

Demonstration No. 1

His father was honest. The boss is very helpful. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Subject].

Demonstration No. 2

She will sell a car. He bought a big house. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Direct Object].

Demonstration No. 3

I gave my son a car. He sent the boss a letter. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Indirect Object].

Demonstration No. 4

He bought his wife a car. She brought a poor child a grammar book. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Benefactive Object].

Demonstration No. 5

He is a new teacher. Paul is my nephew. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Subject Attribute].

Demonstration No. 6

She called him a fool. They appointed me Headmaster of the school. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Object Attribute].

Demonstration No. 7

Mohan, a new student, is very intelligent. Mr. Thapa, our English teacher, is friendly. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Apposition].

Demonstration No. 8

Mohan resembles his father. The new boy resembles my brother. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Predicator Complement].

Demonstration No. 9

I bought an arm chair. He is a school boy. The words in boldface are nouns. They work as [Premodifier].

Demonstration No. 10

We are sitting in the classroom. There is a book on the table. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Prepositional Complement].

Demonstration No. 11

He left his wife last week. She is going to London next year. The words in boldface are noun phrases. They work as [Adjunct].

Demonstration No. 12

She is a very good student this is a far more interesting story. The words in boldface are adjective phrases. They work as [Premodifier].

Demonstration No. 13

She is very kind. The book is really interesting. The words in boldface are adjective phrases. They work as [Subject Attribute].

Demonstration No. 14

I find politics really disgusting. John makes his wife very happy. The words in boldface are adjective phrases. They work as [Object Attribute].

Demonstration No. 15

The then chairman has come. The then teacher was very good. The word in boldface is an adverb phrase. It works as [Premodifier in a Noun Phrase].

Demonstration No. 16

Children out there are playing well. The girls there are happy. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They

work as [Postmodifier in a Noun Phrase].

Demonstration No. 17

He is quite brave. She was very sad. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Premodifier in an Adjective Phrase].

Demonstration No. 18

He is not rich enough to buy a car. She was not tall enough to touch the ceiling. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in an Adjective Phrase].

Demonstration No. 19

She danced very beautifully. He walks really slowly. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Premodifier in an Adverb Phrase].

Demonstration No. 20

She sang well enough. He did not play carefully enough. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in an Adverb Phrase].

Demonstration No. 21

The students worked harder than we had expected. She came later than she needed. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in a Finite Clause].

Demonstration No. 22

She came quickly He has not finished his work yet. The words in boldface are adverb phrases. They work as [Adjunct].

Demonstration No. 23

The way through the forest is short. I am reading a book on politics. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in a Noun Phrase].

Demonstration No. 24

I am satisfied with her work. He is good at music. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in an Adjective Phrase].

Demonstration No. 25

He went away from the college. She walked slowly on the way. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Postmodifier in an Adverb Phrase].

Demonstration No. 26

We met Ram beside the river. He saw his doctor on Sunday. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Adverbial].

Demonstration No. 27

Before next week is the good time for you. On Sunday will be a programme. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Subject].

Demonstration No. 28

Your lunch is on the table. Rita is in a red sari. The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Subject

Attribute].

Demonstration No. 29

He has put his book on the table. I put the matter before the teacher.

The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Object Attribute].

Demonstration No. 30

He resembles his father in his appearance. He looks like his father in this dress.

The words in boldface are prepositional phrases. They work as [Predicator Complement].

Demonstration No. 31

The moon rose. She must have been working hard.

The words in boldface are verb phrases. They work as [Predicator].

4. Expected result

The article writer expects that this article will be able to supply the students and the teachers with ample information about the functions of phrases in English. They will be capable of identifying the fact that a phrase can play different functional roles depending on the structures of the sentences. Their understanding of functions of phrases will make them create the phrases with diverse functions. It will be a help in the field of functional grammar.

5. Conclusion

A phrase can have multiple functions depending on its position in sentences. A noun phrase can be a subject, subject attribute, direct object, indirect object, benefactive object, object attribute and adjunct. Similarly, the function subject can be realized by noun phrase, prepositional phrase, finite clause, non-finite clause, anticipatory it and unstressed there. It can be noted that different parts of speech play a prominent role in the formation of a phrase; therefore Students and teachers should have sound knowledge of the parts of speech. Determiners, pre-modifiers and post-modifiers can be realized by different elements or parts of speech. Identifying the functions of phrases can be difficult for average students, but persistent study and practice will enable them to discern diverse syntactic functions of phrases in English.

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