

## Overview of topics

1. Subject & Object
2. Transitive and intransitive verbs
3. Form
4. How do you know what is what?

What to remember and understand:

Subject, object, case, agreement.

## 1 Subject & Object

- (1) a. *John snores loudly.*  
b. *John wrote a long paper.*  
c. *A **long paper** was written by John.*

Roughly: **Subject** is the active participant in the active sentence.

- (2) a. *John writes a letter.*  
b. However: *John underwent torture (at the hands of the terrorists).*

Note: We are defining a syntactic notion using semantics. It works in most of the cases, however not always (e.g. 2b)

Objects are the other participants.

Most of the active sentences can be transformed into passive sentences – an object becomes the subject, the subject becomes the by-PP or can be omitted.

- (3) a. *John loves Mary.* (active)  
b. *Mary is loved by John.* (passive)  
c. *Mary is loved.* (passive)

All English sentences (except imperatives) have a **subject**. Many (but not all) have an object.

In some languages (e.g. Spanish), the subject can be omitted if it is understandable from the context.

The pronoun in tag questions refers to the subject:

- (4) a. *The boy wrote a book, didn't he?*  
b. *The girl wrote a book, didn't she?*  
c. *John underwent torture at the hands of the terrorists, didn't he?*  
d. *\*John underwent torture at the hands of the terrorists, didn't they?*

## 2 Transitive and intransitive verbs

- **Intransitive** verb – a verb with a subject and no objects: *sleep, snore*
  - (5) a. **John** *snore*s.
  - b. \***John** *snore*s a book.
- **Transitive** verb – a verb with a subject and an object: *buy, brush, write, catch*
  - (6) a. **John** *buys* a candy.
  - b. \***John** *buys*.

Some verbs are both intransitive and transitive: *dance* – *John dances* × *John dances samba*.

- **Ditransitive** verbs – a subclass of transitive verbs, take two objects (direct & indirect).
  - (7) a. **John** *gave* a book *to his friend*.
  - b. **John** *gave* his friend a nice book.
  - c. **A nice book** *is given to Mary* *by John*.
  - d. **Mary** *is given* a nice book *by John*.

## 3 Form

Typical realization of subjects and objects:

- Noun phrase (NP)
  - (8) a. **The cat** *caught* the mouse.
  - b. **He** *goes to* *Chicago*.
- A sentence (S)
  - (9) a. **That I lost the tickets** *annoys* *me*.
  - b. *I know* that this is true.

## 4 How do you know what is what?

### 4.1 Word order

English:

- declarative sentences – subject goes before the verb, object after it:  
*A small dog* *chases* a big cat.                      Subj V Obj
- interrogative sentences – subject after the auxiliary verb, object after the verb:  
*Does a small dog* *chase* a big cat?                      Aux Subj V Obj

## 4.2 Case

**Case** – morphological marking of a word suggesting its syntactic function. Usually, words have a special suffix at the end indicating the case.

English: very sporadic, only some pronouns distinguish it:

- (10) a. *He sees Mary.*  
b. *Mary sees him.*

If a language has cases, then this is the typical situation:

- **nominative** case is used for subjects (e.g. Latin *deus* God-subject)
- **accusative** case is used for (direct) objects (e.g. Latin *deum* God-object)

Some languages have more cases (Old English – 4, German – 4, Latin – 6, Finnish – 15) serving generally the same function as English prepositions.

Czech (the same word order, different cases, different meaning):

- (11) a. *Mal-á kočk-a vidí Honz-u.*      Subj V Obj  
Small-nom cat-nom sees John-acc      nom acc  
The small cat sees John.
- b. *Mal-ou kočk-u vidí Honz-a.*      Obj V Subj  
Small-acc cat-acc sees John-nom      acc nom  
John sees the small cat.

The suffix *a* in *kočka* says it is nominative, therefore it is the subject. The suffix *u* in *Honzu* says it is accusative, therefore it is the object.

## 4.3 Agreement

In many languages, subject and verb agree – they share certain morphological properties (number, person, gender, etc.)

English: Limited only to the 3<sup>rd</sup> person singular and everything else distinction:

- (12) a. *I write a letter.*  
b. *\*I writes a letter.*

Spanish:

	Singular		Plural	
1	<i>yo habl-o</i>	I speak	<i>nosotros habl-amos</i>	we speak
2	<i>tú habl-as</i>	you speak	<i>vosotros habl-áis</i>	you (guys) speak
3	<i>él habl-a</i>	he speak	<i>ellos habl-an</i>	they speak

Russian:

	Singular		Plural	
1	<i>ya vizh-u</i>	I see	<i>my vid-im</i>	we see
2	<i>ty vid-ish'</i>	you see	<i>vy vid-ite</i>	you (guys) see
3	<i>on vid-it</i>	he sees	<i>oni vid-yat</i>	they see
	<i>on vid-el</i>	he saw	<i>ona vid-ela</i>	she saw

Some languages (Bantu in Africa, etc.) have object-verb agreement.

#### 4.4 So, how do you know?

- (13) a. *I see him.*  
b. *He sees me.*

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- (14) a. *Peter sees Mary.*  
b. *Mary sees Peter.*

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- (15) Russian:  
a. *Mash-a vid-ela Pet-iu.*  
Masha-f-nom saw-f Peter-m-acc  
Masha saw Peter.  
b. *Mash-u vid-el Pet-ia.*  
Masha-f-acc saw-m Peter-m-nom  
Peter saw Masha.

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## 5 Syntax vs. Semantics

Compare:

- (16) a. *I ate a cake.*  
b. *I entered a room.*

The sentences have the same syntactic structure – both *a cake* and *a room* are (direct) objects, but the cake disappeared after I ate it, while the room did not after I entered it.

Compare:

- (17) a. *I took my friend to Target.*  
b. *I took 315 to Target.*

Both *my friend* and *315* are (direct) objects, but ...