

Unit 7

SIMPLE SENTENCES

I. INTRODUCTION

As you know, the chief aim of learning grammar is to be able to put words together to form '**grammatical**' sentences. (It is of course no less important to be able to write not only isolated sentences but whole **texts** – but for the purposes of this course, we'll start at the more basic level of sentences.)

So far, we've been looking at *parts* of sentences, such as the noun or noun phrase and the verb or verb group, because they have their own internal structures and it's important to understand them properly.

The noun (or noun phrase) and the verb (or verb group) can be said to be the basic 'building blocks' of the English sentence. Even the simplest sentence will have at least a **noun**—functioning as the **subject**—and a **verb**, e.g.:

1. People left.
2. The concert ended.

You can't have a complete sentence which is without either a subject or a verb – e.g. *'Left' or *'The concert'. [NB. For the time being, we'll exclude 'imperative' sentences like 'Go!', and sentences which are 'truncated' or cut short.]

A sentence is a very complicated thing to analyse, because it can be very, very long, consisting of an enormous number of clauses, e.g.:

'This is the dog that chased the cat that caught the rat that ate the cheese that Jim bought from the store that... etc. etc.'

Or it can be very short, consisting of only one little clause (e.g. 'People left'). Though the number of possible sentences in English is infinite (we can sit here and continue making up sentences and more sentences until we die of old age!), it can be seen that they fall into a relatively small number of **patterns**. Understanding these patterns can help us to make grammatical sentences more easily, and this is what we are going to do in the next four units.

Since a sentence is made up of one or more **clauses**, let's first analyse the structure of the clause in English, and then the structure of the sentence will become clearer. A sentence

which consists of only one clause is called a 'simple sentence'. In this unit, we'll explore the structure of the clause (or simple sentence), i.e. the parts that it is made up of.

II. PATTERN ONE: SV

(Note: **S** = Subject and **V** = Verb)

The simplest type of clause consists of a Subject followed by a Verb. Here are a few examples of this type of clause:

[Time]**S** [flies]**V**
[The war]**S** [has ended]**V**
[The new millennium]**S** [is beginning]**V**
[What he said]**S** [will be remembered]**V**

As we have said earlier, the subject is most commonly a noun (or noun phrase). But it is not the only possibility (as you may have noticed in the last sentence).

QUESTION 1:

In each of the following sentences, can the underlined group of words function as the Subject? From this evidence, can you explain what types of words or phrases – other than nouns – can serve as Subjects? [NB. In case you don't know what to call the underlined groups in (7-9), they are 'subordinate clauses'.]

1. Poor are always with us.
2. The poor are always with us.
3. Loudly are here.
4. The loudly are here.
5. Some are here.
6. On the table is tiring.
7. Standing on the table is tiring.
8. That oil floats on water is well-known.
9. What he does is well-known.

The following types of words or phrases can be Subjects:

Notice that, while a number of different forms can function as the Subject (though nouns and noun phrases are by far the most common), only a **verb** can function as the Verb. This may be obvious, but some students still wrongly produce sentences without a Verb, e.g. * 'Her father very rich', * 'My friend very angry with me', etc.

III. PATTERN TWO: SVO

In Unit 5, you saw that certain verbs, called **transitive** verbs, require an **object**, without which the sentence would be incomplete. For example, *'He likes' and *'He hates' are incomplete, as opposed to 'He likes classical music' and 'He hates heavy metal'. 'Classical music' and 'heavy metal' are objects of the verbs 'like' and 'hate' respectively.

Here then is our second clause pattern: **SVO** (where **O** = Object).

QUESTION 2:

Complete the following sentences with an Object only where necessary (otherwise leave it blank).

1. My friend repaired _____.
2. My friend snored _____.
3. He caught _____.
4. He died _____.
5. The economy has deteriorated _____.
6. Workers' salaries will fall _____.
7. The building of Disneyland will stimulate _____.
8. The earthquake destroyed _____.

To test whether the 'object' you've added is really an object, try turning the sentence into the passive voice. Only true objects can be passivised.

IV. PATTERN THREE: SVOO

In a SVO clause, there is only one Object. But there are certain verbs that take not one but two objects. The most common example is the verb 'give'. In terms of meaning, the action of giving involves not only a 'giver', but also something which is given (the '**Direct**' Object), and someone who receives it (the '**Indirect**' Object). For example:

1. She gave him [IO] an expensive present [DO]
2. The university gave the Chief Executive [IO] an honorary degree [DO]

(where IO = Indirect Object, DO = Direct Object)

Notice that the Indirect Object precedes (comes before) the Direct Object – it would be wrong to reverse the order, as in *'She gave an expensive present him'. In this sense, English is just like Mandarin. However, there is another way of putting it, where the Direct Object comes first, and the Indirect Object comes next, preceded by a **preposition** (usually 'to'):

3. She gave an expensive present to him.
4. The university gave an honorary degree to the Chief Executive.

Again, this is like Mandarin -- '她給一件貴重的禮物 (DO) 給他 (IO)', as opposed to the more common '她給他 (IO) 一件貴重的禮物 (DO)'.

Is it true that any sentence like (3-4) above can be re-written as (1-2), with the Indirect Object preceding the Direct Object? This is a small but interesting question.

QUESTION 3:

Some of the following sentences can be re-written in the form Subject-Verb-Indirect Object-Direct Object, and some cannot. Identify and re-write those that can. Do you see anything in common among them? [Clue: Look for any special characteristics of the Indirect Object in a S-V-IO-DO sentence.]

1. I sent a letter to my best friend.
2. I sent a letter to Japan.
3. She baked a cake for her boyfriend.
4. She baked a cake for the party.
5. He bought a car for his parents.
6. He bought a car for transportation.
7. He gave a thousand dollars to everyone.
8. He gave a thousand dollars to charity.

The sentences that can be re-written as S-V-IO-DO are:

V. PATTERN FOUR: SVC

(where C = Subject Complement)

We have seen that a sentence must have a Subject and Verb, and that some Verbs need to be completed by an Object. But are Objects the only things that are needed to complete a sentence?

QUESTION 4:

Complete the following sentences with whatever words you find appropriate (nouns, adjectives, and so on, but don't use another verb here). If you use a noun to complete it, do you think it is the Object of the Verb? If not, why?

1. My neighbour is _____.
2. In the 1950's, Hong Kong was _____.
3. China will be _____.
4. He became _____.
5. These apples are _____.
6. The students seem _____.

Types of words used to complete the above sentences:

You will notice that the sentences above are different from the SVO sentences that we looked at earlier. In the SVO pattern, the verb is 'completed' by an Object, and an object has all the properties that we described in Unit 5 – i.e. it is usually a noun (or noun phrase), it can be passivised (i.e. moved to the subject position of a passive sentence), and in terms of meaning, it is the 'target' at which the action is directed.

In the pattern in Question 4 above, on the other hand, the Verb is completed by something which is clearly not an Object. It's usually called a '**Subject Complement**', and we'll see why in a moment.

A Subject Complement is different from an Object firstly because it is not necessarily a noun (or noun phrase) -- it may also be an adjective or prepositional phrase or subordinate clause, e.g.:

1. The economy became very bad. [adjective phrase]

2. The book is on the table. [prepositional phrase]
3. This is what I've always wanted. [subordinate clause]

Secondly, even if the Subject Complement is a noun, it can never be passivised like an object, e.g.:

4. He became a stockbroker.
- 4a. * A stockbroker was become by him.

Thirdly, unlike an Object, a Subject Complement is not the 'target' of any action aimed at it by the Subject. In fact, *it refers back to the Subject itself*.

1. The economy became very bad. (the economy ~~4~~ very bad)
2. The book is on the table. (the book ~~4~~ on the table)
3. This is what I've always wanted. (this ~~4~~ what I've always wanted)
4. He became a stockbroker. (he ~~4~~ a stockbroker)

That's why verbs like *be*, *seem*, *become*, etc. are sometimes called '**linking verbs**' or '**copula verbs**', because they 'link' the Subject to the Subject Complement. The term 'Subject Complement' suggests that it 'completes' the Subject in some way.

One common mistake made by students is to omit a linking verb, especially the verb *be*, as in *'My friend ^ very angry'. This is partly due to the influence of Chinese, where the linking verb (*shi* 是) is usually omitted unless you want to emphasise the subject complement.

QUESTION 5:

Fill in the blanks in the following sentences with an appropriate verb. Some of them can only be filled by a **linking verb**, and some only by a transitive verb, so be careful. If a blank can be filled by either a linking or a transitive verb, then provide both, but note the differences in meaning.

1. He _____ a doctor.
2. The driver _____ a man.
3. My classmates _____ very hard-working.
4. During the trip, he _____ ill.
5. During the trip, he _____ a fever.
6. My teacher _____ a book.
7. My teacher _____ a singer.
8. The truth _____ that he had an affair with the intern.

VI. PATTERN FIVE: SVOC

In Section V, we saw that, in the SVC pattern, the ‘Subject Complement’ is needed to refer to and ‘complete’ the Subject. As you can see, this is a very common pattern -- there are lots of sentences like ‘He is rich/young/handsome/ an actor/a teacher/at home/in the shower’ etc.

There is a less common pattern where a complement is needed to refer to the Object, for otherwise the sentence would be incomplete. That’s why we call this type of complement an ‘**Object Complement**’, to distinguish it from a ‘Subject Complement’.

QUESTION 6:

There’s something incomplete about some of the following sentences. Complete these sentences with an appropriate word or phrase. (For sentences which do not really need to be completed, do not fill in the blanks.) The Objects are underlined for you.

1. The committee appointed him _____.
2. The committee welcomed him _____.
3. The students voted Professor Lee _____.
4. The students liked Professor Lee _____.
5. His war experience made him _____.
6. His war experience scared him _____.

The last pattern, SVOC, is the least common of all the five that we’ve seen so far, and involves a relatively small number of verbs (like *appoint*, *make*, *elect*, etc.) Still, it’s important to know that such sentences would be incomplete and ungrammatical without an Object Complement where it’s needed.

VII. ADVERBIALS

So far we have not said anything about a very common part of a clause or sentence. Consider the underlined parts in the following sentences:

1. He suddenly left Hong Kong yesterday.
2. He left Hong Kong for a conference in Tokyo.
3. He slept soundly on the plane all the way from Hong Kong to Toronto.
4. He cried because his sister took his teddy bear.

We'll call the underlined phrases **Adverbials** – because they provide additional information such as the time, place, manner, reason, etc. (Note that the term 'adverbials' includes not only adverbs, but all other words or phrases (like the above) which have the same function as adverbs.)

The important point about Adverbials is that they are generally optional rather than compulsory, and can be left out without making the sentence ungrammatical. All the other parts which we discussed earlier – Subject, Verb, Object, Complement – are compulsory (depending on the type of verb), and if any of them are left out, the sentence would be ungrammatical.

Another grammatical feature of Adverbials is that, unlike Subjects, Objects and Complements, they can be moved around much more easily. E.g., sentence (1) can be re-written as 'Yesterday he left Hong Kong suddenly' or 'He left Hong Kong suddenly yesterday', etc.

QUESTION 7:

Which of the bracketed parts in the following sentences are **Adverbials**? Can you explain how you know?

1. He lent [her] [the book].
2. He bought [the book] [from the university bookshop].
3. The boss made [him] [the general manager].
4. The boss scolded [him] [all the time].
5. The light went out [all of a sudden].
6. The light blinded [the intruder].

The following are Adverbials:

They are Adverbials because:

As we've said, there is a huge variety of Adverbials, and they are optional – i.e. not strictly required by the grammar. Therefore, we'll not say too much about them in this book.

VIII. COORDINATION

From the next unit onwards, we'll go beyond the single-clause, simple sentence and look at more complex sentences. One of the most common errors made by students is to combine two or more main clauses (or simple sentences) into one sentence without any attempt to connect them. For example:

1. The economy deteriorated, many people lost their jobs.
2. I called yesterday, he was not home.

This may be due to the influence of Chinese writing. Just remember that in English, you cannot keep putting main clauses (or simple sentences) one after another in a series, separated only by commas. You will need to join them with **coordinating conjunctions**, like *and*, *or*, *but*.

1. The economy deteriorated, **and** many people lost their jobs.
2. I called yesterday **but** he was not home.

If you don't do that, you should at least separate the two main clauses into separate sentences, with a full stop:

1. The economy deteriorated. Many people lost their jobs.

QUESTION 8:

The following sentences are taken from students' writings. Correct any mistakes that you may find:

1. Vitamin A is also called retinol, occurs naturally in carrots.
2. The lower part was vegetation, this vegetation was very thick.
3. Coal is the most important fuel in our daily life, it has been used for a long time.
4. The baby was very clean, did not need a bath.
5. The giant plants died many years later, thus the plants decomposed gradually.

ANSWER:

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ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

Fill in the blanks in the following texts with appropriate words:

Text 1:

I have read with amusement about _____ attempts of the Hong Kong government _____ control the littering public by _____ \$600 on-the-spot fines.

As we have all seen by _____ reports about beach littering, this system _____ completely useless as it is.

I _____ like to propose a new three-phase scheme _____ would surely deter littering. Phase one _____ the same, an on-the-spot fine, but _____ to \$1,000. Phase two would be _____ use the money to purchase a _____ refuse container to be placed on _____ near the spot of the crime. _____ this container would be a small _____ bearing the name of the offender _____ wording such as "This bin was _____ for by (offender's name) as a _____ of littering." Phase three of this _____ would be to make the offender _____ for one day cleaning the streets _____ the area where the offence took _____.

Surely this would deter littering in _____ of the punishment and I am _____ that it would also severely reduce _____ likelihood of a repeat offence.

Such _____ plan would demonstrate just how serious _____ government is about trying to make Hong Kong _____ a clean city, if indeed it _____ serious about a cleaner Hong Kong.

Text 2:

The Chinese government will not let just anybody gather _____ 30,000 people, mostly students, in one place for an _____ or two for often emotional motivational speeches. Li Yang _____ clearly an exceptional case.

Mr Li is the inventor _____ Crazy English, a language learning method that requires students _____ shout in order to overcome their inhibitions, and he _____ more of a proselytiser than a teacher.

He once _____ to 100,000 people in a single day, at three _____ seminars in Chengdu, and to date as many as _____ million people are believed to have heard him speak _____ person or on tape. In perhaps the ultimate official _____, he was granted the privilege of holding a seminar _____ the hallowed grounds of the Forbidden City.

But it _____ not be surprising that government officials would support Mr Li, China's _____ English-learning guru. He is singing their song, and it _____ something like this: learn English because it is necessary _____ your life and your country, and in return you _____ be rewarded with a higher salary, a stronger China _____ eventually a future in which people around the world _____ be required to learn Putonghua just as they need _____ learn English today.

Text 3:

I hope that I am not the _____ Hong Kong citizen to feel profound shame _____ the reaction, or rather lack of it, _____ our community to the bomb disaster _____ Bali.

The island is a popular tourist _____ for Hong Kong people, so it was _____ from the outset that some of the _____ would be SAR residents. Yet the only _____ from our city when the news was _____ was a rather bland announcement on the _____ of Cathay Pacific that it would send _____ larger plane than usual to accommodate residents _____ wanted to return early. While the Australians _____ sending in medical teams and supplies, we _____ not even bother to donate as much _____ a box of bandages.

Are we so _____ up in the never-ending debates on _____ economy and negative equity that we have _____ all sense of our moral and social _____? Even when it became apparent that a _____ of fellow residents were missing, no member _____ our accountable government was dispatched to the _____ to represent our community and to ensure _____ everything possible was being done to find _____.

The Hong Kong community seems to have sunk _____ a spiritual vacuum. We must examine the _____ for this and try to recover our _____ of humanity and compassion for others.

