

Clauses and phrases

Clauses and phrases are building blocks of language that are larger than phonemes, morphemes and words, and smaller than sentences and utterances. The clause is a group of words that usually contains a (finite) verb, and often arguments of the verb. Clauses are the basic elements of what is called an utterance in oral language and a sentence in written language. Utterances and sentences are considered complex if they contain two or more clauses, whereas simple utterances and sentences are made of one clause only. A phrase is a group of words that forms a meaningful unit within a clause. It is characterized as a grammatical unit at a level between the word and the clause, and is usually built around verbs, nouns, adjectives, or adverbs. In some cases, the phrase can be a clause in itself, or contain clauses and other phrases within it.

The organization of phrases, clauses, utterances and sentences varies from one language to another. It must be emphasized that the organization of grammar and the definition of a grammatical unit (including words) is difficult and it is often impossible to provide neat boundaries between grammatical units. Thus the descriptions below are most appropriate for languages such as English and might in some cases be contradicted by very specific cases and constructions (see the construction grammar approach).

Clause

Clauses come in two types: main clauses and subordinate clauses. Both types of clause are organized around a verb. They are made of a verb phrase (see below), some noun phrases (see below) that are arguments or complements of the verb and, if required, some adjuncts (which can also be phrases). Some specific types of clause can be constructed without a verb. They are usually adverbial phrases or nominal phrases and are found more often in oral language. In some languages, they are more frequent than in English.

Main clauses can stand on their own and can form a complete sentence by themselves. For this reason, this type of clause is considered as an independent clause. In English, the following examples are independent clauses:

Put it on the table!
The streets are empty
Cats are asleep

The distribution of verb arguments in a clause varies from one language to another and depends on whether the language is ergative or accusative, and whether the language is null-subject or not. In null-subject languages (such as Arabic, Chinese, Hebrew, Italian, Polish, Spanish, etc.), the subject can be omitted because it is implicit or retrievable from the context, or because it is indicated by the morphology of the verb. In languages such as English, which is an accusative and non-null-subject language, all clauses contain a subject (marked by the nominative case), except for imperative verbs which do not contain a subject. Other verb arguments (objective cases) and complements are optional. In languages which are null-subject languages, the verb can be a clause by itself, and all arguments are optional.

Subordinate clauses (i.e. embedded clauses) depend on main clauses and are therefore referred to as dependent clauses. These clauses have a verb and can have arguments or complements, but they do not express a complete thought. They are often linked to main clauses by a subordinating conjunction or a relative pronoun (e.g. that, since, who, ... – in the examples below, the subordinating conjunction or relative pronoun is in bold). There are three types of dependent clauses, depending on their functions: adjectival (relative), noun and adverbial.

A *relative clause* is an adjectival clause that describes or defines the noun. It begins with a relative pronoun (who, whom, whose, that, and which) or a relative adverb (when, where or why). It functions as an adjective. The following sentences contain a relative clause:

I thank the girl **who** gives me a gift
My neighbor is a person **whom** I like very much
Can I have the book **(that)** I gave you this morning?

A *noun clause* is a dependent clause that serves the same function as a noun (e. g. subject, direct object, indirect object, object of the preposition, and predicate nominative). Noun clauses may seem similar to relative clauses but differ by the fact that a noun clause takes the place of the noun in the sentence, whereas a relative clause will be dependent on the noun in the sentence.

Whoever crosses the finish line first wins the race.
He did not know **that** the time was up

Finally, an adverbial clause is a clause that functions as an adverb. In other words, it modifies a verb, an adjective, another adverb or even a sentence. In some languages, such as English or French, the adverbial clause may precede or follow the associated main clause:

After we've finished dinner, we'll have a coffee.
He passed the test **because** he worked hard.

Phrase

Phrases, which are basic constituents of clauses (along with subordinate clauses), are groups of words organized around what is called a head-word, which is obligatory (it is not grammatical to omit this word) and which determines the grammatical nature of the phrase. For example, if the head of the phrase is a noun, the phrase is called a noun phrase (NP). Similarly, if the head is a verb, the phrase is a verb phrase (VP). In English, head-words can be verbs, nouns, adjectives, adverbs, or prepositions. A phrase can be made of one word only, which in this case is the head-word itself.

Verb phrases are the most fundamental elements of the majority of languages in the world. In English, the verb phrase contains a main verb and other elements such as auxiliaries, modals, or adverbs. For example:

sang

reads quickly
will be burning
might not have come

Noun phrases are also very important because they can be used in many constituents and also because the notion of noun is found in all languages, and acquired very early by children. In English head-nouns can be preceded by determiners and modifiers (of the head) and can be followed by postmodifiers that complement the head and can be complex phrases or even clauses. For example:

Peter
my best friend
a very good story
the house of the man
a house in the countryside
the best trip that I ever had

Adjective phrases contain an adjective as a head, which can be preceded or followed by modifiers. For example:

quick
very fast
incredibly cold
pleasant enough
too hot to be enjoyable

Adverb phrases are similar to adjective phrases but the head is an adverb rather than an adjective. For example:

quickly
quite slowly
as clearly as I could

Prepositional phrases have a preposition as a head and are followed by a prepositional complement, which is most of the time a noun phrase in English. For example:

on the sea
to London
by a strange coincidence

The notion of phrase is not represented equally in all languages. In synthetic languages such as Navajo or Latin, and in agglutinative languages such as Hungarian or Turkish, words are composed of many morphemes. Complex verb phrases such as English verb phrases, that include auxiliaries and modals, do not exist. Instead verb forms contain many morphemes that express the same or similar values as complex verb phrases. Similar properties apply to noun phrases that do not include elements such as determiners, as they are morphemes of the language. In agglutinative languages, the most frequent prepositions feature as markers on the noun, so the notion of prepositional phrase is also limited.

Language acquisition

There is an extensive literature on the acquisition of relative clauses in typically developing children, in various languages. Based on a sentence repetition task with 4-year-old typically developing children, the following sequence of acquisition of relative clauses was demonstrated: English-speaking children first mastered subject relative clauses (the man who saw the farmer), followed by object relatives (the cat that the dog chased), then indirect object relatives (the girl who the boy gave his ball to) and oblique relatives (the boy who the girl played with) with similar performances, and finally, genitive relatives (the man whose cat caught a mouse). Interestingly, replicating this task with German-speaking children showed that the children had significantly more difficulties with oblique relatives than the English-speaking children while the differences in children's performance between the other categories were not significant. A multifactorial analysis of the acquisition process of relative clauses suggested that the most general factor appeared to be based on the similarities between constructions and their relationships to simple sentences. Among the other factors, some are language-specific.

Language disorders

In contrast to the amount of research on word-level performance (e.g. syntactic morphology), there has been less research on the production and comprehension of complex syntax at the clause level in children with developmental language disorders (DLD). However, as children with DLD tend to have problems with complex syntax, problems in complex phrase and clause constructions should be expected. For example, studies pointed out difficulties in these children with structures such as relative clauses, passives and questions. This was confirmed on relative clauses: children with DLD were found to be significantly delayed in their ability to repeat all types of relative clause constructions but they demonstrated a similar acquisition pattern. Children with DLD performed best on subject relatives, followed by object relatives, oblique relatives, indirect object relatives, and, finally, genitive relatives. Their difficulties mainly concerned production: children with DLD produced structures involving relative clauses less efficiently than unimpaired children while the groups did not differ significantly in comprehension. A strong effect of syntactic complexity that led the children to simplify syntactic structure during repetition (e.g. a tendency to transform object into subject relatives) was observed in children with DLD. At least part of these difficulties could be linked to the weak verbal memory capacity of children with DLD, as significant correlations were found between digit recall and different relative clause constructions in children with DLD but only the more complex constructions were significantly associated with the listening span, a measure of working memory.

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Further readings

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Cross references

Grammar

Grammatical Development

language disorders in children,

Adjectives and Adverbs

Nouns and Pronouns

Syntactic Disorders