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A Course in Morphology and Syntax

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The basic Verb Phrase

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A first look at verbs

The one constituent that a Verb Phrase (VP) must contain is a verb (V). VPs are centered on V.

There are two kinds of verb in English: **lexical** and **auxiliary**.

-Lexical verbs: are the ones that belong to the indefinitely large general vocabulary of the language (e.g. *run, eat, seem, explain, recycle, shatter, prepare, depend*). Lexical verbs are easily identified by their morphological (i.e. their word form) possibilities. They are words that take some if not all of the verbal inflections *-s, ing, -ed, -en*. For example: *plays, playing, played* and *writes, writing, written*. -

Auxiliary verbs: by contrast, are a special and very restricted set of verbs. The clear ones are: *be, have*, and *do* (which can also be lexical) and *can/could, will/would, shall/should, may/might, must*, and *need*.

A full VP *must* contain a lexical verb and it *may* contain auxiliary verbs.

In the following, the lexical verbs are in bold and the auxiliary verbs are in italics.

[1a] Diana **plays** the piano. [1b] Diana **played** the piano.

[2] Anders *is* **explaining** his generalization.

A general point to note in identifying categories – one that applies particularly to verbs – is that words can belong to more than one category. For example, *interest* is certainly a verb: cf. *interests, interesting, interested*.

It is a verb in [5].

[5] Millie's hair interested him.

But both *interest* and *interests* can also be nouns (singular and plural respectively) as in [6a–b]

[6a] Its great architectural interest did not strike him immediately.

[6b] John's interests are rather
eccentric. and *interesting* and

interested can be adjectives as in [7a–
b]

[7a] A very interesting plan was proposed.

[7b] He wasn't very interested in the bean production.

Notice in passing that the adjectives *interesting* and *interested* are gradable and so can be modified by *very*. By contrast, no verb can be modified by *very*:

[8a] Millie's hair very interested him.

[8b] Her hair was very interesting him1.

1. Complements of the Verb Phrase

Let's begin by considering an example: • *Phil dreads affectionate cats*. Here, dreads is the verb, and affectionate cats is its complement. The relationship between these two elements is known as a head–complement relation. This means the verb dreads requires an NP (noun phrase) to complete its meaning. If we remove the NP, the sentence becomes ungrammatical (Phil dreads.). Similarly, the NP alone without the verb is also incorrect (Phil affectionate cats.).

However, not all verbs behave in this way. Consider another example:

• *Phil sunbathed*.

Unlike dread, the verb sunbathe does not require a following NP. In fact, adding an NP makes the sentence ungrammatical (Phil sunbathed affectionate cats.).

This contrast highlights an important distinction: some lexical verbs must take an NP, while others cannot take an NP.

2. Sub-categorization of Lexical Verbs

Based on their complement requirements, lexical verbs are classified into *subcategories*:

1. Transitive Verbs – These verbs require an NP complement.

Examples include dread, make, inspect, spot, and throw.

• Max made a noise. (Correct) • Max made. (Incorrect)

2. Intransitive Verbs – These verbs do not take an NP complement.

Examples include sunbathe, die, disappear, and laugh.

• Max died. (Correct) • Max died Bill. (Incorrect)

3. Dual-category Verbs – Some verbs can function both transitively and intransitively, depending on the meaning.

For example, play:

• The children played. (Intransitive) • Max played the tuba. (Transitive)

Other verbs that fit into both categories include paddle, reflect, break, and relax.

3. Complements vs. Modifiers

An important distinction to note is that complements are necessary to complete the meaning of the verb, while modifiers provide optional information. For instance:

- Phil sunbathed beside a stream.
- The phrase beside a stream is not a complement because it is optional.
- Sunbathed alone already forms a complete VP.

Similarly, we can add a prepositional phrase (PP) to a transitive verb:

- Phil dreads affectionate cats in the hay-fever season.

Here, in the hay-fever season is an optional modifier, not a complement.

There are **six sub-categories** of lexical verbs:

(1) transitive, (2) intransitive, (3) ditransitive, (4) intensive, (5) complex transitive, (6) prepositional.

1. Transitive Verb

A transitive verb is a verb that requires a single noun phrase (NP) complement to complete its meaning. Without this NP, the sentence becomes ungrammatical.

For example, consider these verbs:

- Phil dreads affectionate cats.
- She made a cake.
- They spotted a rare bird.
- He threw the ball.
- The officer inspected the documents.

All of these verbs (dread, make, spot, throw, and inspect) are transitive because they require an NP complement. The NP that follows a transitive verb is called the direct object.

-The Objective Case and Pronoun Forms

When the direct object is a pronoun, it takes a special form known as the objective case (or accusative case in traditional grammar).

Let's compare:

✓ Correct (Objective Case)

- Phil dreads me.
- Phil dreads her.
- Phil dreads him.
- Phil dreads us.
- Phil dreads them.

✗ Incorrect (Subjective Case)

- Phil dreads I.
- Phil dreads she.
- Phil dreads he.
- Phil dreads we.
- Phil dreads they.

The objective form is required because the verb governs the NP, meaning it determines the case of the pronoun. Interestingly, this rule applies to prepositions as well. Prepositions also govern the case of their NP complements:

- ✓ For him vs. ✗ For he • ✓ Against them vs. ✗ Against they

However, you and it are exceptions, as they do not change form in the objective case.

-Structural Representation of Transitive Verbs

Since transitive verbs and their objects form a close functional relationship, the NP must be represented as a sister of the verb in sentence structure. In phrase structure trees, the VP consists of a V (verb) and an NP (direct object). To indicate that a verb is transitive, we can label it with a [trans] feature. This feature helps specify that the following NP functions as a direct object. This notation becomes particularly useful when we start analyzing other verb sub-categories, such as intransitive and ditransitive verbs.

2. Intransitive Verb

An Intransitive verb is a verb that does not require a complement to form a complete

VP. The term “intransitive” literally means “has (and needs) no complement.” For example, consider the following verbs:

• disappear • die • laugh • vegetate • play (in one interpretation)

These verbs do not need an NP (noun phrase) or any other complement to complete their meaning.

Let's look at a simple sentence: • Omar sighed.

Here, sighed is an intransitive verb. The sentence is already grammatically complete without any additional elements.