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Basic sentence patterns 1

Grammar

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Basic sentence patterns

We do not speak English by merely stringing words together in some random fashion. Instead, we carefully arrange our words, for the most part unconsciously, into patterns. In English, we use nine basic sentence patterns and a multitude of sub-patterns. It will now be our purpose to examine these basic sentence patterns of English. Any sentence you speak will probably be based on one of them. Included in these nine basic sentence patterns are specific sentence positions. Each position in each pattern is the home-slot of a particular grammatical meaning.

In English grammar, sentence patterns refer to the common structures that show the relationship between subject, verb, and other sentence elements such as objects, complements, and modifiers. These patterns help in understanding syntax and sentence construction.

1. Pattern 1: N be Aj

Example: Food is good.

In the nine basic patterns, the subject always occurs in the first *N* position.

In Pattern 1 the grammatical meaning of the subject is "that which is described."

In each of the first three patterns, the verb *be* has a different meaning.

Here the meaning is "may be described as."

In Pattern 1, the third term must be an adjective or adjectival:

That food is poisonous.

You can test for Pattern 1 in a simple way. It is capable of this expansion:

That food is good > That good food is very good.

That food is poisonous > That poisonous food is very poisonous.

If a sentence can not undergo this expansion, it belongs to some pattern other than Pattern 1. For example, the sentence :My mother is outside

Note/ You can not say * my mother is very outside.

2. Pattern 2: N be Av

Example: The girl is here.

Pattern 2 differs from Pattern 1 in these respects:

1. The verb *be* in this pattern usually has the meaning of "be located" or "occur."
2. Pattern 2 is not capable of taking the Pattern 1 expansion.

The third position is occupied by a type of uninflected word that you will later learn is called an "adverbial." Words of this type include *here, there, up, down, in, out, inside, outside, upstairs, downstairs, on, off, now, then, tomorrow, yesterday, over, through, above, below, before, after*. *Up, in, and out* are partially and/or irregularly inflected with the forms *upper, uppermost, inner, innermost, outermost, utmost, outmost*. For most words in the third position, one can substitute *there* or *then*. The grammatical meaning of the subject (N position) in Pattern 2 is "that about which an assertion is made," and that of the Av is "modifier of the verb."

Examples:

The ping-pong table is downstairs.

The game was yesterday.

The balls are outdoors.

3. Pattern 3: N¹ be N¹

Example: My brother is a doctor.

The superscript after the second N (noun) means that this noun has the same referent as N¹ that is, both brother and doctor refer to the same person. The meaning of *be* in Pattern 3 is "be identified or classified as." The first N¹ (subject) has the grammatical meaning of "that which is identified." The second N¹ means grammatically "that which identifies the subject" and is called the subjective complement. The following sentences are examples of Pattern 3:

Those coeds must be roommates.

They are my friends.

He had never been an honor student.

Harry is my favorite uncle.⁵

Note/ Do not be deceived by a sentence like "These shoes are the wrong size."

The grammatical meanings of its parts are those of Pattern 1, to which it belongs. "The wrong size" is a phrase modifying shoes.

4. Pattern 4: N LV Aj

Example: The acrobat seems young.

In Pattern 4, the verb is called a linking verb (LV), as it links the adjective with the subject. Any verb except *be* that may be substituted for *seems* in this frame is a linking verb.

Examples:

The cyclist *appears* weary.

The physicist *grew* sleepy.

Some of the common linking verbs

are *seem, appear, become, grow, remain, taste, look, feel, smell, sound, get, and continue*. If verbs like these, however, are followed by an adverb or adverbial, then the pattern is not number 4 but number 6. Here, as in Pattern 1, the adjective is in grammatical meaning a modifier of the subject.

Examples:

The cyclist appeared *quickly* on the scene.

The physicist grew *rapidly* in knowledge.

5. Pattern 5: N¹ LV N¹

Example: My sister remained an outstanding student.

The two superscripts show that both nouns have the same referent. The verb, which links *student* and *sister*, is a linking verb. The number of linking verbs that may occupy the verbal position in this pattern is very small. Among them are *remain*, *become*, *appear*, *seem*, *continue*, *stay*, *make*.

Sentences that follow Pattern 5 should not be confused with those in which the noun after the verb does not have the same referent as the first noun. In Pattern 5, as in Pattern 3, the second noun means "that which identifies the subject," and is called the subjective complement.

References:

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