Language as a system

Unit 3: Phrases and sentences

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Competence: Identify and broadly analyse some elements in sentences, in both spoken and written texts.

Presentation

In this unit, we will explore the concepts of phrase, clause and sentence as an approach to what the grammar of a language involves. Therefore, syntax will also be an important issue to look at, since it is a fundamental component in the set of language rules that grammar comprises.

To be assessed in this unit, you will have to send on due time the portfolio activities, participate in forum discussions, and include your insights on the unit topic in a short essay.

Introduction

In the previous unit we reviewed some of the most significant aspects regarding words, which are an essential element in a language.

However, in order to communicate, words must be 'organized' in a certain way. The order that we choose to give to words is precisely part of the grammar of a language.

Following this grammar, words can be organized to form phrases, clauses, sentences and whole texts, whether spoken or written. Although we can choose the order we give to words, there is a certain set of 'considerations' to take into account to produce understandable chains of words. In this unit, we will explore some of the possibilities to produce these chains of words, which are phrases, clauses and sentences, and the overall principle to form them, which is syntax.

Getting started

Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

3.1 What is a phrase?

A phrase is a structure usually composed of more than one word, but it does not present a subject-predicate construction. There are different classifications for the types of phrases, but they all consider the most important word that the phrase contains, which is called the head, to name their categories.

For example, in the phrase "the red carpet", the head would be the word 'carpet', which is a noun; therefore, it is a noun phrase. Sometimes, there are different names for the same type of phrase, for example, noun or nominal phrases and pronoun or pronominal phrases. In other cases, some categories include two different types of phrases, for example, adpositional phrases include prepositional (for example, "in the meantime" is a prepositional phrase, as it is introduced by a preposition) and postpositional ones, which do not occur in English.

By and large, it is the word classes (see 2.2) that are considered to identify the most important word in a phrase, but in some cases, gerunds, participles, infinitives and appositives are considered as types of phrases.

Stop and think

Taking into consideration that phrases are usually classified according to the class of the most important word that they include, what types of phrases can you mention?

Noun, pronoun, adjective, adverb, verb, and prepositional.

Activity 1. LAS 301 Phrases. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

3.2 What is a clause?

The clause is also a group of words, but, unlike the phrase, the clause does have **one subject**, whether explicit or implicit, and **one predicate** or **main verb**. There are two general kinds of clauses: independent and dependent or subordinate. An independent clause makes sense by itself, and can be the main clause or a coordinate clause (because the type of connector they use is a coordinate one) in a multiple-clause or complex sentence. The dependent or subordinate clause does not make sense by itself and depends on an independent clause to complete its meaning; therefore, it is always part of a multiple-clause or complex sentence; for example, I can give you a lift [main independent clause] if you like [dependent clause].

Read the directions and do **Activity 2. LAS 302 Counting clauses (PORTFOLIO)** in the corresponding section on Eminus.

Broadly speaking, coordinate clauses are most commonly introduced by the coordinate conjunctions and, but, or, so and yet, while subordinate clauses can be classified into adverb, noun, and adjective clauses, depending on the type of connection that they have with the main clause. There are also different types of adverb clauses: time, cause, place, manner, condition and contrast. Noun clauses play the role of a noun in a sentence, that is, they can be either a subject or an object of verb or preposition. Adjective clauses describe a noun, and they are usually placed after the noun they describe.

Activity 3. LAS 303 Type of Clauses. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Stop and think

What did you take into account to classify the previous clauses? 'Who I work with' can be both a noun and an adjective clause. Why do you think this is possible?

One way to classify clauses is taking into account the type of connector (so, and, while, who, etc.) that they have, but in some cases it is also important to consider the role they play in the sentence.

The type of clause for 'who I work with' depends on its position in the sentence it belongs to:

If it is after a noun (eg. "The girl who I work with is nice"), it is an adjective clause.

If it is at the beginning of the sentence as the subject (eg. Who I work with is none of your business), after a verb (eg. I'm not telling you who I work with), or after a preposition (eg. He's worried about who I work with), then it is a noun clause.

Forum Clauses

Go to the forum "**Activity 4. LAS 304 FORUM Clauses**" when indicated to discuss the answers to the previous questions.

Another important aspect about adverb and adjective clauses is that they can take a reduced form, which means that they apparently 'lose' the elements that make them clauses, in other words, they do not present a subject and predicate, at least at first sight. However, we will see this special characteristic more in detail in the following section.

3.3 What is a sentence?

Stop and think

Taking into account the previous sections regarding phrases and clauses, try to define the concept of 'sentence'.

Based on the information presented previously, we could define a correct, complete sentence as the unit of language with at least one main clause, that is, one subject and its corresponding predicate or main verb, in which case it is called one-clause or simple sentence. When a sentence has more than one clause, it iscalled multiple-clause or complex sentence, and it can include coordinate clauses joined by coordinate conjunctions, or it can contain a main clause and one or more subordinate clauses, which are all introduced by their corresponding connector.

Activity 5. LAS 305 Simple or complex sentences. Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

However, a sentence has also been defined as the expression of a complete thought, which does not necessarily presents the aforementioned structure, especially in spoken language. Very frequently, spoken utterances express complete thoughts using one single word. This happens because sometimes it is possible to omit some information due to the context. In this case, utterances like "Yes, sure", or "Finished?" are sentences. Some other times, utterances are interrupted, but still considered sentences in an incomplete form.

Even in the written form, there are sentences which do not have a "subject + predicate" structure. So, sentences can also be defined as those units of language that begin with a capital letter and end with a full stop or some other mark of 'final' punctuation. In this case, a sentence may not present an explicit subject and its main verb, but still expresses a complete idea.

A sentence can also be regarded as the most independent linguistic construction, or as 'the largest unit to which syntactic rules apply'. In both cases, it is necessary to consider the regular patterns in which sentences occur. If a sentence does not follow these patterns to which syntactic rules can be applied, it does not make sense, and therefore it cannot be considered an independent linguistic construction because it would not express a complete thought or idea.

Therefore, the examples included in the Getting started activity, and in Activity 4, are considered sentences because they express a complete idea. The simple sentences have only one subject and one verb, and the complex sentences have more than one clause: one main clause and an independent coordinate clause or one main clause and one subordinate clause.

✏️ **Activity 6. LAS 306 Simple sentence analysis.** Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

✏️ **Activity 7. LAS 307 Complex sentence analysis.** Read the instruction corresponding to this section and do the activity.

Forum Sentences

Go to the forum "**Activity 8. LAS 308 FORUM Sentences**" when indicated to discuss the answers to LAS 306 and LAS 307.

3.4 Syntax

We have already discussed issues such as the classes of words, the different types of phrases and clauses, and what a sentence is. We have also divided sentences and even clauses into subject and predicate. Well, we could not have done any of this without having a notion of what syntax is.

Stop and think

What do you expect from students if you give them an item like this, for example, in an exam?

ask / permission / for / your / you / should / parents /.

You would expect them to put the words into the correct order, wouldn't you? Well, syntax, according to Thornbury (1999), is "the system of rules that cover the order of words in a sentence." In other words, syntax entails the possible ways in which words can be put together in phrases, clauses, and especially sentences, in order to communicate. Therefore, a syntactic analysis involves identifying the different components in a sentence, such as subject and predicate, as well as the types of phrases used to form the sentence, such as noun, verb, or prepositional phrases, for which it is necessary to be familiar with word classes.
In English, for example, adjectives have to be placed before the noun or after a 'linking verb' such as the verb to be, an article almost always introduces a noun, the most common order in sentences is first subject and then predicate, and a verb is often followed by an object. All of these rules are of a syntactic nature. If they are not followed, then you obtain a sentence which may hinder communication, especially through a written means.

In the previous example referring to an item in an exam, the order in which words is presented does not make any sense, so the expected answer is You should ask your parents for permission. But... is it the only possibility? And in any case, how can students put the string of words that they were given into the 'correct' order?
First, they are expected to find the subject, which goes first in a sentence. For this, they

have to know the word classes that can be subjects: nouns and pronouns. Once they have identified the possible subjects, "you", "parents", and "permission", they have to find the verb, which should be placed after the subject. They need to identify that "ask" is a verb, but they also need to identify the auxiliary "should" and to know that auxiliaries go first to come up with the verb phrase "should ask".

Then they are expected to find an object for the verb, which again has to be a noun or a pronoun... and so on. In the end, after following all these procedures, we find that, as there is no context, the sentence Your parents should ask you for permission is also an absolutely, syntactically correct sentence. What aboutPermission should ask your parents for you, or You should ask permission for your parents, or Permission should ask you for your parents? Although these sentences do not make any sense at all, they do follow syntactic rules for their formation. If they do not make sense, it is because of the context or the meaning, but that's another story...

Read the directions and do **Activity 9. LAS 309 Levels of sentence analysis (PORTFOLIO)** in the corresponding section on Eminus.

A Little of fun

Sometimes sentences can be interpreted in different ways because of syntactical ambiguity, that is to say, because of the order and relationships of the words that form them. The following are examples of such ambiguities, some of which are what is known as garden path jokes. Can you identify what exactly the problem is? Try to make the sentences less ambiguous. In some cases, it will not be that easy...

1. The word of the Lord came to Zechariah, son of Berekiah, son of Iddo, the prophet.
2. Specialist in women and other diseases.
3. Quitting smoking now greatly reduces your risk of cancer.
4. Flying planes can be dangerous.
5. The cow was found by a stream by a farmer.
6. Persons are prohibited from picking flowers from any but their own graves.
7. Special cocktails for the ladies with nuts.
8. You are welcomed to visit the cemetery where famous Russian and soviet composers, artists, and writers are buried davily except Thursday.
9. Squad help dog bite victim.
10. Wanted: Man to scrub floor and two waitresses.
11. 'Would you hit a woman with a baby?' 'No I'd hit her with a brick.'
12. 'What has four wheels and flies?' 'A garbage truck.'
13. The complex houses married and single students and their families.

14. One morning I shot an elephant in my pyjamas. How he got in my pyjamas I don't know.
15. I convinced her children are noisy.
16. The player kicked the ball kicked the ball.
17. If you wish to shoot the attendant will be happy to load your gun.
18. Visiting relatives can be a bore.
19. Please take time to look over the brochure that is enclosed with your family.
20. As a baboon that grew up wild in the jungle, I realized that Wiki had special nutritional needs.
21. Yoko Ono will talk about her husband, John Lennon, who was killed in an interview with Barbara Walters.
22. Do not sit in a chair without being fully assembled.
23. Walking along the beach, the sea looked warm and inviting.
24. Believed to be at least two hundred years old, I bought the painting and hung it in my living room.
25. Rising majestically from the tropical vegetation, she gazed at the mountain with awe.

Forum Garden path jokes

Go to the forum "**Activity 10. LAS 310 Garden path jokes**" when indicated to discuss the syntactic ambiguity in these sentences.

Read the directions and do **Activity 11. Self-evaluation** in the corresponding section on Eminus.

Forum Phrases and sentences

Go to the forum "**Activity 12. LAS 312 FORUM Phrases and sentences**" when indicated to share you insights on the issues of this unit. Feel free to focus on what you found the most interesting, or any aspects that caught your attention the most.

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