

Levels of language

To start, let's look at an example of a short text:

It was about midnight. When I heard the disturbance, I dropped the files that I had been examining, then ran out into the corridor. Who could it be? I shouted at the unseen intruder, 'Stop there!' Quite carelessly, I let the door slip from my fingers and it closed behind me. I couldn't believe it. Because of this one stupid mistake, I had lost the chance to clear my name.

No doubt you would be able to tell me that there are 70 words in this extract. You might even be able to provide a working definition of 'word' based on this text – "a word is a run of letters separated off by a white space on either side". You can also probably tell me that the text consists of three sentences and would supply the definition: "a sentence is a run of words, the first of which begins with a capital letter and the last of which is followed by a full stop". Although these definitions would not work for the spoken language, we will consider them acceptable for the time being.

When we talk about 'words' and 'sentences', we are referring to the **linguistic levels** of language. It is, however, usual to divide the language up into more than just the two levels that were introduced above. The following list shows the main elements of English, starting with the largest:

- **Text**
- **Sentence**
- **Clause**
- **Phrase**
- **Word**
- **Morpheme**

As you can see, 'word' and 'sentence' make up just two levels of a more complex hierarchy. It is quite important, then, to note that a 'sentence' is more than just a string of words with a capital letter at the beginning and a full stop at the end. It can be analysed into smaller units, some of which are groups of words, some single words and others

smaller even than a word. It is also used to create larger stretches of language referred to as **text** or **discourse**. To begin our investigation of English grammar, we will use the extract above to look at each of these levels in turn to see how the language is structured.

Text

The largest linguistic unit is **text**. In everyday speech this refers only to the written language, but for our purposes it will also be used to talk about the spoken language. The whole extract at the beginning of this section is an example of text – in fact, it is possible to consider only two sentences from the extract as a text. If there is some kind of connection between one sentence and another, this is enough to constitute a text – written or spoken. We will be examining these connections and texts in general later in this module.

Sentence

Sentence types

As you've probably already guessed, the sentences from the text above are:

1. It was about midnight.
2. When I heard the disturbance, I dropped the files that I had been examining, then ran out into the corridor.
3. Who could it be?
4. I shouted at the unseen intruder.
5. 'Stop there!'
6. Quite carelessly, I let the door slip from my fingers and it closed behind me.
7. I couldn't believe it.
8. Because of this one stupid mistake, I had lost the chance to clear my name.

Each of them stands on its own as a sense unit and, although one sentence may need others to make a coherent text, a native speaker would feel that, even individually, they constitute complete ideas. The sentences taken from the text are all examples of **major sentences**, that is, they follow the normal rules for ordering strings of words in English.

There is, however, a second type known as **minor sentences**, which cannot be analysed according to the rules of English. This type includes **interjections** (usually nonsense sounds) like *brrr*, *yeuch!*, *oof* and so on, social formulae, *hi*, *so long*, *how's things?*, *what bad luck!*, *never mind*, proverbs and sayings and shortened regular sentences like, *been shopping?*, *no smoking*, *no way!* Most of the sentences that we use in everyday English are, of course, of the major type and do conform to the normal rules of the language.

All the possible major sentences in English are structured according to this specific and limited set of rules, which every native adult speaker intuitively 'knows'. Most native speakers would not be able to explain these rules, not at least without formal training, but all native speakers have managed to internalise the system and can use it largely unconsciously. Any sentence which conforms to these rules is referred to as **grammatical**; conversely, any sentence which does not conform is considered **ungrammatical** (throughout this guide those sentences which do not conform to **Standard English** will be marked with an asterisk *). Look at the following example:

**The girl has puppy new.*

Native speakers would have no problem in recognising this sentence as ungrammatical and would be able to correct it. It is probable that they would not be able to state the general rules governing each of these corrections in an explicit way, but they would notice that the word *a* is missing and that *new* should come before *puppy*. When we are considering word order and the structure of sentences in a particular language, we are dealing with the **syntax** of that language. Syntax is one aspect of what we commonly refer to as **grammar** and is the most important area in understanding the grammatical meaning of English sentences. The second and less important area is to do with the analysis of words and is called **morphology**. We will be looking at this aspect of grammar at different points in the guide, but the bulk of it will be concerned with syntax.

Sentence functions

The question of what constitutes grammatical acceptability will be taken up at various points throughout the course. For the time being, we need to look at the **functions** of sentences, that is – what kinds of things we can do with sentences. Sentence functions can be divided into three basic types: **statements**, **questions** and **directives**. Let's look at each of these in turn.

Statements

The basic function of a statement is to convey information to the listener or reader. The vast majority of sentences, both written and spoken are statements. From our text above, sentences 1, 2, 4, 6, 7 and 8 are statements. Their function is to describe the situation to the reader and to move the narrative along. Most of the sentences in the text are **positive**, that is, they state the truth or actuality of a particular idea or situation. For example, the following sentences are all positive statements:

The Eiffel Tower is in France.
She has already read this book.
The policeman asked me for some identification.
I think he's the man who gave me the information about the timetable.

However, you will also want to express the absence of actuality and for this we use the **negative** statement. Sentence 7, *I couldn't believe it*, is one instance of a negative sentence. Here are some more:

The postman didn't arrive this morning.
I'm not in love with him.
He's never been to London.
No one knew the way to the museum.
She doesn't often go to the theatre.

Many negative sentences are made by using the word *not* (or *n't*), but there are also several other words, including: *never*, *no one*, *nowhere*, *hardly*, *rarely* and so on, which do not require the use of *not*, because they are already negative in meaning. Having

said that, there are a large number of dialects of English which accept **I haven't never met him* and **my mother hadn't hardly slept* as regular sentences (note the asterisks show that these are not acceptable in *Standard English*).

Questions

The function of a question (also known as an **interrogative**) is to ask for information. There are two basic types of question depending on what sort of information is being sought:

- 1) **Yes/no questions.** Here the speaker is seeking either a positive or negative answer to his question. Examples include:

Do you smoke?

Have you put the cat out?

Will Bill be staying the night?

Did they finish painting the house last week?

Would you like another piece of cake?

In each case the speaker requires only a blunt *yes* or *no* in reply to the question. There are, however, some types which are apparently *yes/no* questions, but do in fact need a much more detailed reply or no reply at all; for example:

Can you tell me the way to the High St. please?

Could I get some information about train times please?

Are you ever going to shut up whining?

Do you have to slurp your tea?

A simple *yes/no* reply to the first two questions would probably be met with incredulity by the speaker, although we use them occasionally for comic effect, while the second pair function as complaints and are not really expecting either a positive or negative verbal response, but an end to the *whining* and the *slurping*.

- 2) **Wh-questions.** The *wh-* here is shorthand for any of the list of question words in English that require information in response. These words include: **who**, **what**, **why**,

where, when, how, which, whose when they are used at the beginning of a sentence. Examples are:

Why did he do it?
What's the time?
Where did you last see your father?
How much does this cost?
Whose jacket is this?

The reply to this type of question can be drawn from a wide range of possibilities. We can also add the ending *-ever* to most of the question words in the list both to ask for information and to register our surprise or shock:

Whoever did you expect?
Whatever made him do such a thing?
However has the cat managed to get out?

Directives

These are characterised by the use of the plain verb (i.e. the one you would find in a dictionary) and are often referred to as **commands** or **imperatives**. But many directives do not fall into either of these categories:

Beat the eggs and flour together. (instruction)
Take a seat. (invitation)
Look out! (warning)
Go away! (true imperative)
Let's have a look. (request) and so on

Clause

You may have noticed in most of the examples above that the sentences are very short, whereas sentences 1 and 2 from the sample text are longer and much more complicated in structure. For ease of reference I have reproduced those sentences below:

1. When I heard the disturbance, I dropped the files that I had been examining, then ran out into the corridor.
2. Carelessly, I let the door slip from my fingers and it closed behind me.

In sentence number 1 it appears that there are as many as four separate segments which look like partial sentences connected to each other in different ways:

- a. When I heard the disturbance,
- b. I dropped the files
- c. that I had been examining,
- d. then ran out into the corridor.

In sentence 2 there are just two segments:

- e. Quite carelessly, I let the door slip from my fingers
- f. and it closed behind me.

We usually refer to these segments as **clauses**. As we have already noted, most of the example sentences so far are short – they contain only one segment or clause. These single-clause units are called **simple sentences**. Examples of simple sentences from the lists above might include:

She has already read this book.

The policeman asked me for some identification.

The postman didn't arrive.

No one knew the way.

Why did he do it?

Where did you last see your father?

How much does this cost?

Have you put the cat out?

Will Bill be staying?

Did they finish painting the house?

As you can see, it is not possible to divide any of these up into smaller segments that look like sentences. However, many sentences, both in the spoken and the written language, are often longer and more complicated than this simple type; such sentences are called **multiple sentences**. Sentence 2 (reproduced below for reference) from our sample text is an instance of a multiple sentence, which can be broken down into smaller segments or clauses.

2. When I heard the disturbance, I dropped the files that I had been examining, then ran out into the corridor.