1.   Subject and Topic

Summary

The majority of sentences in a narrative or dialogue describe a subject and an action or state that the subject is engaged in. The action or state is expressed by a verb, and by any object or other words attached to the verb (the predicate). However, this structure turns out not to be a good description of certain types of sentence, of which the most important are: some possession relations; a sentence which introduces a new item into the discussion (existential); and a sentence in which one element is marked as providing new information (the focus) while the rest is assumed to be known.

Consideration of how a sentence fits into a narrative or dialogue leads to an analysis of sentences which convey information into two parts: the topic, the known information which the sentence is referring to, and the comment, the new information which it is providing. A sentence must contain a comment if it is not to be tautologous. Subject-verb-object is one realisation of topic-comment, where the subject is the topic and the verb and object (called the predicate) is the comment. However, the dialogue may require that the object or some other element is the topic. The subject is identified by its relationship with the verb, and is the topic only when the dialogue so permits.

An existential sentence consists of the new information which is being introduced, and known information as a background or context (called the circumstance).

In a sentence which has focus, the focus is the comment and is a single sentence element. It may be the subject, object, or other sentence element, and is marked to distinguish it from the topic. All that part of the sentence which is not the focus is the topic.

In addition to sentences which convey information, language includes two other categories: sentences which ask a question and sentences which express a hypothesis. Each of these sentences includes a topic, concerning which the question is asked or the hypothesis is expressed. The element in a question which is not the topic is termed the enquiry. A suitable reply to a question consists of a comment on the same topic.

Terms Defined or Introduced

Subject, verb, object, noun, pronoun, predicate, recipient, possession, existential, circumstance, focus, topic, comment, enquiry, hypothesis.

Subject and Predicate

The usual understanding of a basic sentence is that it consists of a subject, verb, and object, for example "he read the book" or "she saw the postman". The *subject* is what the sentence is about, the *verb* describes the action that the subject is engaged in, and the *object* is what the action is directed towards. There is, of course, much additional information which can be added, thus: "The busy man quickly read the book which he had bought that morning" and "On Tuesday the women who was about to leave for work saw the postman deliver the letters". There is much to be said on this additional information, but for the moment we are only concerned with the basic structure of subject, verb, and object. It is usually called a *transitive sentence*, because the action of the verb is said to "transit" or pass over onto the object. The subject and object are called a *noun* or (if they stand for a noun) a *pronoun*.

There is a further sort of transitive sentence which has two objects, one without a preposition in front and one with a preposition, for example "He cooked the dinner for his family" or "She wrote a letter to her bank manager". The object without a preposition is a *direct object*, and that with a preposition is an *indirect object*. Some grammarians use the term "ditransitive sentence" for this type. This pattern of sentence is usually represented as a variation of the subject-verb-object structure, requiring only particular remarks.

Some sentences do not conform to this pattern, for example "He went shopping" or "She came to dinner". These evidently do not have an object onto which the action of the verb can be passed, and are therefore called an *intransitive sentence*, with the structure "subject-verb". There is also a category of sentence in which the subject is not doing anything but the sentence is describing him or her in some way, as: "Louis XIV was king of France" or "We became ill with food poisoning" or "You look well today". Since this type of sentence is clearly not transitive, it is usually put in the intransitive class. The difference is that in it the subject is not engaged in an action, but is in a *state* which the verb describes. The pattern "subject-verb" can be retained if we categorise the verb as *stative* and representing an *attribute* of the subject. Attached to intransitive and stative verbs is other information which is usually called the "complement".

A more general categorisation of all these sentences is *subject-predicate*, where the *subject* is what the sentence is about and the *predicate* is new information concerning it, whether an action or a state. The predicate comprises a verb and other information which the verb connects to the subject. In the case of a transitive sentence, the other information includes the object.

A large part of the grammars of most languages are devoted to explaining how subject-verb-object or subject-predicate works. Some languages have a different standard sequence (subject-object-verb or verb-subject-object). Some mark the subject, object, and indirect object in various ways. Many languages alter verbs in complicated ways, for tense (when the action took place), or aspect (whether its action is going on or completed), or the viewpoint from which the tense or aspect are regarded. Languages also use verbs to express something other than a fact, for example "he should read the book" (obligation) or "she can see the postman" (ability) or "he may go shopping" (supposition) or "she would come to dinner" (conditional). In English, this is done by placing an *auxiliary* in front of the verb. Other languages alter the verb for some of these purposes and not for others. Chinese and Malay, for example, do not alter the verb and only use auxiliaries.

As examples of a different basic word order, in Japanese it is subject-object-verb, and in Welsh it is verb-subject-object:

"Sasaki-san wa sake o nonde iru." "Mr Sasaki is drinking sake."
[Sasaki-Mr (topic) sake (object) drinking there-is.]

"Gwelwyd llawer o bobl yn y neuadd." "Many people were seen in the hall."
[Were-seen many of people in the hall.]

The variations are usually all fitted into subject-verb-object and are considered to reinforce it as a general sentence pattern.

A further purpose of language grammars is to explain how the subject-verb-object structure is altered when the speaker wishes to ask a question: "Did he go shopping?" or to give an instruction: "Go shopping!", or when the sentence is qualifying another noun: "the postman whom the woman saw" or "the book which he should have read". A sentence qualifying a noun is called a *relative clause*. Most languages allow a variation of the transitive sentence called the *passive*, in which the object becomes the subject, as: "the book was read by him" or "the postman was seen by her"; this term arises because the object "suffers" the action of the verb. These variations of meaning usually involve a change in the usual order for subject, verb, and object according to various rules, and are therefore sometimes called "transformations" of subject-verb-object. They operate differently in different languages. In Chinese, word order does not change for a question, and a relative clause appears in front of the noun:

"Qìchē jiāle yóu ma?" "Have you filled your car with petrol?"
[Car added-have petrol query?]

"mài bàozhǐ de shāngdiàn" "a shop that sells newspapers" [sell newspaper of shop]

The passive in Finnish uses a form of the verb without a subject. In Spanish, it may assume that the object is acting on itself:

"Ovi suljetaan avaimella." "The door is closed with a key." [Door one-closes with key.]

> "Se tienen que resolver varios problemas" "Several problem must be solved."
> [Itself must solve various problems.]

This method of sentence analysis is entirely proper and has stood the test of time and experience. The problem is that while it describes most sentences, it does not describe them all. It is true that nearly all sentences have a verb, and that nearly all sentences have a subject. Moreover, the subject-verb-object structure appears to occur in all languages, suggesting that it provides a powerful and complete solution. However, to apply it to all sentences, it is necessary to distort it by pretending that something is a subject when it is not, and that a verb is present when it is not. An example is the above Finnish passive construction, which has no subject. A more careful look at the possible types of sentence reveals four which do not lie adequately within the subject-verb-object pattern. They are exclamation, possession, existential, and focus.

Exclamation

In an exclamation, the speaker draws attention to some condition or behaviour of the subject but does not communicate it as new information. An exclamation therefore has a subject but may have no verb. Even if there is a verb, it does not fulfil the function of the verb in subject-verb-object of communicating new information on the subject. It is assumed that the subject's condition or behaviour is already known to the hearer:

> "What a beautiful day!" "How cold it is here!" "How well she speaks!"

Possession Sentence

A *possession sentence* is one which links an object with a *recipient*. As we shall see in Chapter 8., there is a good reason to include under this heading both material and mental possession, the common factor being that the recipient has received it. Material possessions include suitabilities and needs. Mental possessions include perceptions ("see" or "hear"), cognitions ("know" or "understand"), wishes, responsibilities, and opinions ("fear" or "like"). Instead of "recipient", we could equally use the word "possessor", but have chosen "recipient". Many possession sentences in many languages employ the subject-verb-object pattern:

English:	"I have a car." "I see the landscape." "I need some water."
French:	"J'ai pitié de lui." "I have pity for him."
Russian:	"Ya videla v sadu kakikh-to lyudei." "I saw some people in the garden." [I saw in garden some people.]
Persian:	"do bab xane darad" "He has two houses." [Two unit houses he-has.]
Chinese:	"Wŏ yŏu gè dìdi." "I have a younger brother." [I there-is unit younger-brother.]

However, many other possession sentences employ a different structure, which can be described as "indirect recipient". It takes the general form "at/for/to/with the recipient, there is" and is discussed further in Chapter 8. The word expressing possession is applied to the possession, not to the recipient:

English: "It is/becomes clear to me that you are right."

French: "Il leur faudra cent francs." "They will need 100 francs."
[It to-them will-be-necessary 100 francs.]

Italian: "Mi rincresce che tu parta." "I am sorry that you are leaving ."
[To-me it-regrets that you should-leave.]

Welsh "Y mae'n well gennyf i weithio yn yr ardd."
"I prefer to work in the garden." [It-is in better with me to work in the garden.]

Irish: "Tá eolas an bhaile go maith aige." "He knows the town well."
                                    [Is knowledge of-the town well at-him.]

Finnish: "Hänen ei sovi mennä nyt." "It does not suit her to go now."
                                    [Of-her not suit to-go now.]

Greek: "Δε μου αρέσει αυτό το κρασί" "I don't like this wine."
                                    [Not of-me is-liked this the wine.]

Russian: "U menya novyi kostyum." "I have a new suit." [At me new suit.]

Turkish: "Evin bahçesi var." "The house has a garden." [House-of garden-its there-is.]

Arabic: "lahu bnun fī l-jāmiʕati" "He has a son in the university."
                                    [For-him son at the-university.]

Persian: "be ma xoš gozašt" "We enjoyed ourselves." [To us happy passed.]

Hindi: "us kām ke lie use sau rupae mile" "He got 100 rupees for that work."
                                    [That work-for to-him 100 rupees accrued.]

Japanese:
        "Zō wa hana ga nagai." "Elephants have long trunks."
                    [Elephant $_{(topic)}$ trunk $_{(subject)}$ is-long.]

The number of these examples (which could be widely extended) illustrate how common this structure is. For many languages, it is the normal one for material possession, so that the equivalents of "have", "need", "lack", "suit", and "feel" in their basic senses are only expressed in this way. For Chinese, the word "yǒu" is used in both senses of "have" and "there is", and in Malay/Indonesian, "ada" has the same two meanings. For mental possessions the subject-verb-object structure is the more common, but as the examples show, indirect recipient is not infrequent.

An attempt to fit indirect recipient into the subject-verb-object pattern invites the questions: what is the subject? and what is the verb? Is the subject the recipient, and if so, why has it a preposition in front? If it is the possession, why does it come after the recipient? Following the analysis at the start of this chapter, we might answer: the subject is that which engages in the action of the verb. However, the above indirect recipient examples show that the action is not deliberate, but something which happens to the recipient; it therefore cannot be said that the subject is engaged in an action. There is no simple way in which the subject-verb-object pattern can be applied to these sentences. In the above English, French, and Welsh examples, the verb is given a dummy subject ("it") in order to conform formally to subject-verb-object while not doing so in its meaning.

Despite the difference in structure, there are common features between the indirect recipient and subject-verb-object patterns of possession sentences. Firstly, as we have noted, the subject is not engaged in the action of the verb, but linked to the possession in a manner that the verb expresses. Secondly, the action of the verb does not pass over onto the object; instead, the verb expresses a relationship with the object. The difference lies in that for some concepts some languages have verbs such as "have", "need", "lack", "gain", or "lose" which express possession, while others do not. Those possession concepts for which verbs do not exist are both material and mental. As will be shown, they are more common for general than for specific possession relationships.

Existence and Non-Existence

Every language possesses a means to say that something or someone exists. The purpose is to introduce that thing or person into a dialogue or narrative where previously he, she, or it was not present. Once introduced, statements can be made or questions asked about the new object[1]. If correctly phrased, the introductory sentence says enough about the new object to enable the hearer to

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[1] For reasons hinted at in the introduction and developed in Chapters 13. and 16., an existential sentence does not have a subject; we say that introduces an object.

understand what or who the speaker is talking about. Without it, subsequent sentences on the object may not be meaningful. The introductory sentence therefore generally relates the new object to some context known to the hearer:

"There is a cat in my garden." "It is chasing the birds." "The birds have escaped."

If the introductory sentence is omitted, and we start with the sentence "The cat is chasing the birds in my garden", it invites the question: "What cat?". The introductory sentence is needed to place the cat in context, but it assumes that the hearer knows that the speaker possesses a garden. If the hearer did not know that, he/she could reasonably ask: "What garden?", and the speaker should have commenced:

"There is a garden attached to my house." "There is a cat in it." and so on.

We call this introductory sentence an *existential sentence*. The commonest way in which languages construct it is to employ a dedicated *existential verb* (in brackets):

French: "Il y a beaucoup d'eau." "There is plenty of water." (y a)

German: "Es gibt fünf Bücher auf dem Tisch." "There are five books on the table." (gibt)

Spanish: "Hay un gato en el tejado." "There is a cat on the roof." (hay)

Italian: "C'è qualcuno alla porta." "There's someone at the door." (c'è)

Russian: "Pri gostinitse est' pochta?" "Is there a post-office in the hotel?" (est')
                                    [In hotel is-there post-office?]

Turkish: "Köşede bir kahve var." "There is a café on the corner." (var)
                                    [Corner-at a café there-is.]

Arabic: "θammata waqtun fāṣilun bayna l-wuṣūli wa-l-ʔiqlāʕi" (θammata)
         "There is a time separating arrival and departure."
         [There time separating between the-arrival and the-departure.]

Malay: "Di seberang sungai ada rumah." "Across the river there is a house." (ada)
                                  [Across river there-is house.]

Chinese: "Jìngzi pángbiān yǒu yī pén huār." "There is a pot of flowers besides the mirror."
(yǒu)   [Mirror besides there-is one pot flower.]

Japanese (imasu):
         "Kono machi ni wa nihonjin ga takusan imasu."
         "In this town there are many Japanese."
         [This town-in (topic) Japanese-people (subject) many there-are.]

Languages also construct an existential sentence by altering the standard word order. They rely on the fact that in a non-existential sentence, the subject represents something or someone which is known to the hearer. By placing in subject position words which relate to known information but are not usually the subject, the sentence indicates that the rest of the sentence is introducing a new object:

Arabic: "bihi ṣabiyyun ṣaɣīrun" "There is a small boy in it." [In-it boy small.]

Hindi: "Mez par pustak hai." "There is a book on the table." [Table-on book is.]

Russian: "Na stole vaza." "There is a vase on the table." [On table vase.]

Chinese: "Bīngxiāng lǐbian dōu shì shuǐguǒ." "Inside the fridge there was nothing but fruit."
                                [Ice-box inside all be fruit.]

Inuit: "Qiqirtap qulaani nuiaqarpuq." "There are clouds above the island."

[Island-of above-its-at cloud-thereis-it.]

Alternatively, the new object is placed in subject position and relates grammatically to the verb as if it were the subject, but is marked as indefinite by an article or in some other way. In this way, the sentence indicates that the "subject" is in fact a newly introduced object:

English: "A garden is attached to my house." "A cat is in it." "It is chasing the birds."

Welsh: "Y mae llyfr ar y bwrdd." "There is a book on the table. [Is book on the table.]

Irish: "Tá scoil nua ar bharra an choic." "There is a new school on top of the hill."
[Is school new on top of-the hill.]

Finnish: "Ruokaa on pöydällä." "There is some food on the table." [Food (partitive) is table-on.]

Arabic: "ʔasbābun ʕadīdatun ʔaddat ʔilā l-ʔirjaʔi"
"There are numerous reasons which led to the postponement."
[Reasons numerous (indefinite) led to-the-postponement.]

Finally, a sentence can be marked as existential by placing the verb in subject position:

Italian: "Arrivarono due uomini." "[There] arrived two men."
"È sorto un problema." "[There] has arisen a problem."

Russian: "Ukroshcheny nekotorye opasnye bolezni."
"[There have been] curbed certain dangerous diseases."

These examples show that in an existential sentence, the subject and verb fulfil a different purpose to those of a subject-verb-object sentence. In subject-verb-object, the subject is known to the hearer and the verb and object supply new information about it. In an existential sentence, there is no true subject, and the sentence cannot therefore supply new information on it; the verb states that an object (which may or may not be in subject position) exists and relates it to a context (which in Chapter 13 we will call the *circumstance*). In the English, French, German, and some Italian examples, the verb is given a dummy subject ("there" or "it") in order to conform formally to subject-verb-object while not doing so in its meaning.

On this argument, existential sentences include those which introduce atmospheric conditions, which traditionally have been categorised as "impersonal":

English: "It was gloomy in the hall."
Italian: "Piove." "It is raining." [Rains.]
Chinese: "Xià yǔ le." "It is raining." [Fall rain now.]

These could equally well be expressed by the existential sentences "There was gloom in the hall" and "There is rain falling".

The existential construction performs a second useful purpose, that of negation. All existential sentences can take a negative form, meaning that its object does not exist, either generally or in the context which the sentence states. Many languages employ a different verb (given in brackets) for a negative existential sentence than that for the positive existential sentence discussed above:

English: "There is no cat in my garden."

Russian: "Tam net lyudei." "There are no people there." (net)
[There there-are-not people (genitive).]

Arabic: "laysa man yuwaqqiʕu lī šahādatī"
"There is no-one who will sign for me my certificate."
[Is-not he-who signs for-me certificate-my.]

Chinese: "Méi yǒu huǒchē." "There are no trains." [Not there-are train.] (méi yǒu)

A negative existential evidently performs a different purpose in a dialogue or narrative from a positive existential. A positive existential introduces and identifies an object for subsequent discussion. A negative existential denies that it is available for subsequent discussion. It also does not fit into the subject-verb-object pattern. If the existence of a subject is denied, it is not possible to provide further information on it. This is further discussed in Chapter 3 (Negatives).

Focus

Exclamations, recipient-possession, and existential are three sentence constructions which do not fit readily into the subject-verb-object pattern. Focussing is a form of sentence which conforms to subject-verb-object, but which subject-verb-object does not adequately express in some languages.

A sentence has a *focus* when the speaker emphasises a particular element in the sentence (the subject, object, or any other element) as the new information that he/she is communicating. It is assumed that all the other information is known to the speaker. In speech, this can be done by stressing the relevant words, which in text can be italicised. "The meeting will start *at 7.30*" assumes that the hearer knows that a meeting will takes place on a certain day, but not that it will start at 7.30. That sentence conforms to the subject-verb-object pattern. However, an alternative construction is termed clefting: "It is at 7.30 that the meeting starts". In that case, subject-verb-object is less obvious: what is the subject? Is it "it", which has no real meaning? Or, is it "that the meeting starts", which is not the subject of the verb "is"? The sentence conforms to subject-verb-object only by an artifice.

Similarly, the subject can be the focus: "*Henry* is our favoured candidate" or "It is Henry who is our favoured candidate." This assumes that it is known that there is a favoured candidate, but not the particular person.

Another way of indicating focus is illustrated by: "He gained her cooperation by treating her politely." By placing "by treating her politely" at the end of the sentence, the speaker assumes that the hearer knows that co-operation was obtained, and focuses on how that was done. If the speaker had said "By treating her politely, he gained her co-operation", her polite treatment is assumed to be known and the gaining of her co-operation is the new information communicated.

These means of indicating focus are employed in other languages. Examples of clefting:

French: "C'est ton frère qui le dit." "It's your brother who says so."
                                                [It's your brother who it says.]

Irish: "Is inné a tháinig sé." "It was yesterday that he came." [Is yesterday that came he.]
            "Is sinn-ne a raghaidh isteach ar dtúis." "[It] is we who shall go in first."

Turkish: "Iki senedir bu evde oturuyor." "It is two years that he has lived in this house."
                                                [Two year-is this house-in he-lives.]

Inuit: "Aqaguuna Hansip pulaarniaraatigut." "Is is tomorrow that Hansi will visit us?"
                                                [Tomorrow-that Hansi (agent) visit-will-participle-he-us?]

The following examples place the focus at the end of the sentence, where it would not otherwise be:

German: "Zu diesen Zeiten unterrichten die Kinder die Studenten."
            "It is the students who teach the children at these times."
            [At these times teach the children the students.]

Spanish: "Esta carta la escribió mi secretaria." "It was my secretary who wrote this letter."
                                                [This letter wrote it my secretary.]
            "Las cartas mi secretaria no las escribe, sino que las corrige."
            "My secretary does not write letters, but corrects them."
            [Letters my secretary does not them write, but them corrects.]

Greek: "Τώρα μαθαίνει πιάνο η Ελένη." "Now it is Helen who is learning the piano."
[Now learns piano the Helen.]

Russian: "V Zheneve sostoyalsya festival'." "A festival took place in Geneva."
[In Geneva took-place festival.]
"Ya vklyuchil radio i uslyshal znakomuyu balladu. Pela Alla Pugachëva."
"I switched on the radio and heard a well-known ballad. It was being sung by Alla Pugacheva."
[I switched-on radio and heard well-known ballad. Sung Alla Pugacheva.]

Inuit: "Piniartup puisi pisaraa." "The hunter caught the seal."   (unstressed)
[Hunter (agent) seal catch-he-it.]
"Piniartup pisaraa puisi." "It was a seal which the hunter caught."
[Hunter (agent) catch-he-it seal.]
"Puisi pisaraa piniartup." "It was the hunter who caught the seal."
[Seal catch-he-it hunter (agent).]

The following place the focus at the start of the sentence, where it would not otherwise be:

English: "7.30 is when the meeting will start."
"Henry is the candidate whom we favour".

Welsh: "Ei fag a gollodd y dyn ar y trên ddoe."
"It was his bag that the man lost on the train yesterday."
[His bag lost the man on the train yesterday.]

Greek: "Στον πατέρα του θέλει να γράψει ο Μιχάλης."
"It is to his father that Michael wants to write."
[To father-his he-wants that he-writes (subjunctive) the Michael.]

Arabic: "ʔiḍā hiya raɣibat fī ðālika" "if [it is] she (f) [who] desires that"

"kanāt sanʕāʔu hiya hājisahu l-jadīda" "It was Sanʻa that was his new concern."
[Was Sanʻa (f) it concern-his the-new.]

Swahili: "Hicho ndicho kitu nilichokitafuta." "This is indeed the thing I was looking for."
[This is-that thing I-was-that-it-looked-for.]

An equally common method is to retain the normal word order and stress, but to indicate with a particle (in brackets) the element in focus:

Finnish: "Viime sunnuntainahan Kalle syntyi." "It was last Sunday that Kalle was born."
(-han)   [Last Sunday-on (focus) Kalle was-born.]

Malay: "Dialah memberitahu saya." "It was he who informed me." [He (focus) informed me.]
(-lah)

Hindi: "Banāras ke log hindī hī bolte haĩ." "It is Hindi that the people of Banaras speak."
(hī)   [Banaras-of people Hindi (focus) speak.]

Chinese: "Shì wǒ dǎ pò zhèi gè bēizi de." "I was the one who broke this cup."
(shì ….. de)   [(focus) I hit break this unit cup (focus).]

Japanese expressly separates the rest of the sentence from the focus by the topic particle "wa":

"Morita-san ga kita no wa Tōkyō kara da." "It was from Tokyo that Mr Morita came."
[Morita-Mr (subject) coming (topic) Tokyo-from is.]
"Nihon de oishii no wa kudamono da." "What is delicious in Japan is fruit."
[Japan-in delicious being (topic) fruit is.]

These examples show that in focussing, the subject-verb-object structure is followed, but there is a significant change in how it is applied. We recall that the purpose of subject-verb-object is to express some new information (an action or state) about a subject which is assumed to be known. In focussing, the purpose of the focus is to express some new information about all the rest of the sentence, which is assumed to be known. Since the focus can be any part of the sentence, the rest of the sentence can be any other part of it. As we have seen, the focus can be the subject, verb, object, or an adverbial element. In expressing this, the purposes of subject, verb, and object are substantially altered. One way of doing so is to construct a sentence with a dummy subject ("it") in order to isolate the focus.

Three points can be made in passing:

- Focussing can equally be applied to possession sentences: "It is a Ford car that he owns now"; "A Ford is the car that he owns now."

- Focussing does not apply to existential sentences, since the item introduced (the object) is by its nature new information, and the remainder (the circumstance) is by its nature existing information.

- Focussing is often used to express selective, additional, or exclusive information:

  "It is Henry, not Edward, who is our favoured candidate."   (selective)
  "It is your brother as well as your sister who says so."   (additional)
  "It was only his bag that the man lost on the train."   (exclusive)

These examples do not affect the general observations on focussing. The same sentence structures are employed. The focus is the new information in a sentence, of which the rest is assumed by the speaker to be known to the hearer.

Topic and Comment

It seems from the above that there are at least five different sentence constructions which we have to consider. They all conform to the subject-verb-object pattern, but in ways which interpret the elements subject, verb, and object differently and inconsistently. They also have different rules of word order. In some, there is not a real subject but a meaningless dummy, "it" or "there" or its equivalent, which grammarians call an "impersonal" subject or sentence. It is reasonable to ask what the expression "impersonal" means. It does not mean that the subject is not a person. The "it" or "there" is present simply to conform to the subject-verb-object or subject-predicate model.

These variations and inconsistencies can be resolved if we reflect further on how a sentence fits into a dialogue or narrative in real conversation. We recall that in the basic subject-predicate format, the predicate supplies new information on a known subject. The identity of that subject has been provided by a previous sentence, either immediately or in the medium or distant past, where it was new information. That previous sentence included known information, which itself had been new information in a sentence previous to it, and so on.

As an example, we can consider a sequence of sentences in a piece of text, whose only merit it that it has some sort of logical connection:

"I $_{(known)}$ read $_{(new)}$ in the newspaper $_{(known)}$ that a new school $_{(new)}$ was about to be opened $_{(new)}$ in our neighbourhood $_{(known)}$, and that there would be an opening $_{(known)}$ ceremony $_{(new)}$. After making enquiries $_{(new)}$, I received an invitation $_{(new)}$ to this ceremony $_{(known)}$. I $_{(known)}$ attended $_{(new)}$ it with my wife $_{(known)}$. The new school's $_{(known)}$ head teacher $_{(known)}$ made a speech $_{(new)}$. The speech $_{(known)}$ lasted 15 minutes $_{(new)}$, after $_{(new)}$ which we had refreshments $_{(new)}$. The refreshments $_{(known)}$ included some which we had prepared $_{(new)}$. It was 4 o'clock $_{(new)}$ before we left $_{(known)}$. It was a fine $_{(new)}$ day."

The items marked "new" are those which were not known to the hearer (or reader) at the time that they were uttered. It will be seen that they include both nouns and verbs. The sentences are so constructed that when these words have been uttered, their identity is clear and subsequent sentences can treat them as known information.

The items marked "known" are of four sorts:

- Those identified in a previous sentence: "school", "ceremony", "speech", and "refreshments".
- Those identified by a sentence previous to the text, however remote, which can be described as prior knowledge common to the speaker and the hearer: "newspaper", "neighbourhood", "wife" (assuming that the hearer knows that the speaker is married).
- Those whose identity can be readily inferred without any need to identify them: "head teacher", "left", "day".
- The pronouns "I", "it", and "we" referring to a person or thing known to the speaker and the hearer.

The text also includes words which do not represent either known or new information, but explain how the meaningful words fit into their sentence: "was", "about", "making", "received", "made", "lasted", "had", "included". We call these words *auxiliary*, and will have more to say about them in Chapter 4 (Auxiliary Words).

Finally, there are words which connect the other words and sentences in various ways. They are also discussed in Chapters 2 and 4.

This short text contains most of the sentence types which we have been discussing. Apart from subject-verb-object, "there would be" is existential, "I received" and "we had" are receptive (a form of possession), and "it was four o'clock" is a focus. Moreover, later chapters will show that subject-verb-object itself encompasses a range of sentence types, whose details are not relevant here.

Although this example may seem trivial, it would be quite easy to alter it so that its meaning was not clear, by omitting one or other word or sentence, or by changing the sequence of sentences. For example, omission of the sentence starting "the new school's head teacher…" would mean that in the following sentence, it was not clear what speech was referred to. Moreover, not all references to a "new" word result in that word being subsequently "known". If the words in the first sentence had been "a newspaper", they would have been insufficient to identify it, and a subsequent sentence could not have referred to it.

Any properly constructed prose text can be subjected to analysis along the above lines. Every sentence (other then an existential sentence) contains information which is known and which the sentence is about, called the *topic*, and presents new information about it, called the *comment*. The comment supplies information which forms the topic of subsequent sentences. If the prose text is well constructed, the comment will be sufficient for the identity of the subsequent topic to be clear. In this way, each narrative consists of a dynamic sequencing of sentences, each containing known and new information, and designed to convey information of greater or less complexity. This is true for the sentence types discussed above:

- In subject-verb-object, the subject is the topic, the verb is the comment, and the predicate includes the verb, the object, and other elements. The subject includes any words qualifying it, as we shall see. As well as new information, the predicate may include information which is already known, which the comment links to the subject.
- An exclamation consists entirely of a topic, but brings that topic to the attention of the hearer.
- In a possession sentence, the recipient is the topic and the possession statement is the comment. Attached to the possession may be further information which is either new or known.
- In a sentence with a focus, the focus is the comment and the rest of the sentence is the topic. In fact, a better description of the focus construction is *focus-topic*.
- When focussing is applied to the subject of a sentence, the subject is the comment and the predicate is the topic, the reverse of the usual arrangement: "It is Henry who is our favoured candidate"; "Henry is the candidate whom we favour".

An existential sentence such as "There would be an opening ceremony" also contains both known and new information, but its purpose is not to talk about known information ("opening"), but rather to introduce new information ("ceremony") into the narrative. The known information is a background or circumstance which gives an identity to the new information. All other sentences are topic-comment.

It is possible for a sentence to contain a comment and very little topic, if its context is evident to both speaker and hearer:

Japanese:
"Iku yo." "I'm coming." [Coming!]

It is not possible for a meaningful topic-comment sentence to contain no comment. Such a sentence is a tautology.

In subject-verb-object, the formation of a passive sentence from an active one is not simply a grammatical transformation of words to make the object into the subject. It arises because the object of the sentence is known and the speaker wishes to make it the topic, while the subject and verb are new information and therefore constitute the comment. As already mentioned, there are many ways to construct the passive. The common factor of these and the previous examples is that the object is marked as topic by being put at the start of the sentence:

German: "Der Laden wird um 8 Uhr geöffnet" "The shop opens at 8 o'clock."
[The shop becomes at 8 o'clock open.]

Spanish: "La reacción la provocó una alergia o una enfermidad."
"The reaction was produced by an allergy or illness."
[The reaction produced-it an allergy or an illness.]

Russian: "Vash bagazh otpravyat v gostinitsu." "Your luggage will be taken to the hotel."
[Your luggage they-take to hotel.]

Malay: "Surat itu ditulisnya dalam bahasa Inggris."
"That letter was written by him in English."
[Letter that written-by-him in language English.]

Swahili: "Kikombe kimevunjwa na mtoto." "The cup has been broken by the child."
[Cup has-been-broken by child.]

Japanese:
"Sensei wa Jon ni shitsumon o sareta." "The teacher was asked a question by John."
[Teacher (topic) John-by question (object)was-put.]

We may summarise the four principal topic-comment constructions available in English with a single example:

	topic	comment
"My secretary wrote the letter." (active)	my secretary	wrote the letter
"The letter was written by my secretary." (passive)	the letter	was written by my secretary
"It was my secretary who wrote the letter." (focus-topic)	who wrote the letter	my secretary
"My secretary was the one who wrote the letter." (focus-topic)	who wrote the letter	my secretary

The most common means of marking the topic, and so distinguishing it from the comment, is to locate it at the start of the sentence. We saw in the previous section that many languages which do this also place an element in focus by locating it at the end of the sentence. Here are some further examples of a topic at the start of a sentence which is not the subject of the verb:

Italian: "Di Camilla Cederna leggevo tutto." "I read everything by Camilla Cederna."
[Of Camilla Cederna I-read everything.]

Malay: "Sopir itu namanya Pak Ali." "The name of that driver is Mr Ali."
[Driver-that (topic), name-his Mr Ali.]

Chinese: "Nèi běn zhēntàn xiǎoshuō wǒmen mài wán le."
"We have sold out of that detective novel."
[That unit detective novel (topic) we sell finish now.]

In Arabic, the topic is placed first, after the verb in an unstressed sentence and before the verb in a focus-topic sentence:

"ʿlam yatawāfar lī hāðāni l-šarṭānī"
"What were not available to me were these two conditions."
[Not available to-me these the-two-conditions.]
"hāðāni l-šarṭāni lam yatawāfarā lī"
"As for these two conditions, they were not available to me."
[These the-two-conditions, not available to-me.]
"al-ḥujratu llatī yaʕmalu fīhā jawwuhā xāniqun"
"The air of the room in which he works is suffocating."
[The-room the-one-which he-works in-it, air-its suffocating.]
"ʔawlāduka, hal fakkarta fī muataqbalihim"
"Have you thought about the future of your children?"
[Children-your, query you-have-thought about future-their?]

It will be seen that topic-comment constructions can allow a degree of looseness in the connection between the topic and the comment, so that it may be inferred rather than explicit. In contrast, a conventional subject-verb-object sentence is more precise. The purpose of the verb is to state the action or state that the subject is engaged in. If the verb is correctly chosen, there is usually little room for doubt on the meaning.

The above examples are of sentences whose basic structure is subject-verb-object. The subject-verb-object and subject-predicate constructions are only one realisation of the structures of topic and comment. There are languages which explicitly mark the topic whether or not it is the subject. In Japanese, the topic is marked by the particle "wa", and can be of varying length:

"Watashi wa eigo ga wakaru." "I understand English." [I (topic) English is understandable.]
"Amerika kara wa Sumisu-san ga kita." "Mr Smith came from America."
[America-from (topic) Sumisu-Mr (subject) came.]
"Morita-san ga kita no wa Tōkyō kara da." "It was from Tokyo that Mr Morita came."
[Morita-Mr (subject) coming (topic) Tokyo-from is.]

In Tagalog, the topic is marked with "ang" ("the"). It can be the subject, object, beneficiary, or other sentence element, and can be placed in any position. Only the topic can be definite; the other elements are not marked as definite even if they are:

"Magaalis ang tindero ng bigas sa sako para sa babae."
"The storekeeper will take some rice out of a sack for the woman."
[Will-take the storekeeper some rice from sack for-to woman."
"Aalisin ng tindero ang bigas sa sako para sa babae."
"The rice will be taken out of a sack for the woman by the storekeeper."
[Will-be-taken a storekeeper the rice from sack for-to woman.]
"Ipagaalis ng tindero ng bigas sa sako ang babae."
"For the woman, some rice will be taken by the storekeeper out of a sack."
[Will-be-taken-for-her a storekeeper some rice from sack the woman.][2]

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[2] Schachter, 941.

The object of verbs of communication and perception can also be constructed as a topic (Chapter 8, the Communication and Perception Functions).

A few remarks may be appropriate here on the linguistics of topic-comment analysis. While the topic-comment split of a statement in a particular discourse is intuitively clear, analysis is complicated by the fact that the comment can be placed at either the start or the end of a sentence:

> "I'm going off to work now."
> "Work is where I'm going off to now."
> "It's work that I'm going off to now."

Such sentences are sometimes interpreted by commentators as having "work" as the topic. This is not so; they mean "I'm going off somewhere now, and it's to work": work is the comment. If "work" is the topic, the sentence should be "[As for] work, I'm going off to it now". For example, the German

> "Dich wollten wir sehen"

has been interpreted[3] as "It's you we want to see", when it fact it means "You are wanted to be seen by us." Similarly, the Latin:

> "Fuimus Trōes, fuit Īlium."
> "Trojans is what we were; Troy is what was (but no longer is)."
> [We-were Trojans; it-was Troy.]

(a quotation from the Aeneid) has been analysed[4] as "topicalisation" of "fuimus" and "fuit", when in fact those elements are in focus.

Topic and Enquiry

We have so far been considering a sequence of sentences within a narrative spoken or written by one person. Another form of sentence sequence is a dialogue between two or more persons. Where this consists only of an exchange of statements, the same principles of sentence construction and interpretation apply as in a narrative. If person A makes a statement which is comprehensible to person B, its topic must be known to person B. The comment of the statement refers to new elements and should provide sufficient information to identify them. These new elements can then be the topic of A's reply, and so on throughout the dialogue.

However, dialogue contains a further type of sentence not previously mentioned, the question. In a question, person A asks for information concerning a topic. Since there is no point in asking a question about a subject which is not known to the other party, person B, the topic contains only known information, as it does in a narrative. The part of the question which is not known is that part which Person A is enquiring about. We call that part the *enquiry*. Questions therefore consist of two parts, the topic and the enquiry. The reply that Person B makes, if he/she answers the question, includes as its topic the topic of the question and as its comment the response to the enquiry. As with other statements, the answer can be standard subject-verb-object or the comment can be in focus.

We can again choose a relatively trivial example:

> "What $_{(enquiry)}$ are you doing this summer $_{(topic)}$?" "We $_{(topic)}$ are going on holiday $_{(comment)}$."
> "Where $_{(enquiry)}$ are you going $_{(topic)}$?" "To Bodrum $_{(comment)}$."
> "Where $_{(enquiry)}$ is that $_{(topic)}$?" "It's $_{(topic)}$ a resort $_{(comment)}$ on the West coast of Turkey $_{(comment)}$."

In the first sentence, "your activities this summer" establishes a topic, on which a request for information starts the conversation. In the subsequent questions and answers, pronouns ("you", "we", "that", and "it") refer to items which have been identified in the comment of the previous sentence, and are the topics of their own sentences.

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[3] Lockwood, 345.
[4] Fortson, 144.

The construction of a question from a statement is not simply a grammatical transformation of the sequence of subject, verb, and object. In a statement, there is a topic (often, the subject) and a comment (often, the verb, object, etc) which provides information on the topic. In a question, all the words except for the enquiry are the topic, including the subject, verb, object, and any other element apart from that which is being enquired into. This may be illustrated further by the following pairs of sentences:

"What (enquiry) are you doing (topic)?" "I'm (topic) answering the telephone (comment)."
"What (enquiry) are you eating (topic)?" "I'm eating (topic) an apple (comment)."

In the first pair, the enquirer assumes that the respondent is doing something and asks what it is. In the second, the enquirer observes that the respondent is eating and enquires what is being consumed. The replies could be recast in focus form: "What I'm doing is answering the telephone"; "What I'm eating is an apple."

The task of a question is therefore to specify a topic and some information which is required concerning it. In doing so, an assumption is made that the topic exists and is understood by the hearer; if that is not so, the question cannot be answered, as in:

"What (enquiry) are you eating (topic)?" "I'm not eating."
"What (enquiry) is hydrogen peroxide (topic)?" "I don't know."

To express a question and distinguish it from a statement, the enquiry must be marked. That is simple where it is a particular enquiry word such as "what?", "where?", "when", or "why". Some languages place this word at the start of the sentence, as in English:

Arabic: "maʕa man ʔunāqišu l-mawḍūʿa l-ʔāna"
"Who do I discuss the subject with now?" [With whom I-discuss the-subject now?]
"ʿalāma tubaʕθiru ʔamwālaka" "What are you squandering your money on?"
[On-what you-are-squandering money-your?]

Other languages leave it in the same position in the sentence that they expect the comment to be in the answer:

Hindi: "vah kiskā makān hai?" "Whose house is that?" [That whose house is?]

Malay: "Anda membaca apa?" "What are you reading?" [You read what?]

Chinese: "Nĭ jīntiān shàng shénme kè?" "What classes do you have today?"
[You today attend what class?]

Japanese:
"Kinō no pātī ni wa dare ga kimashita ka." "Who came to yesterday's party?"
[Yesterday-of party-to (topic) who (subject) came query?]

For questions of the "yes/no" type, without a particular enquiry word, languages mark the verb as the enquiry. This may be done by altering its position to the start of the sentence, as in English, or by a means of a query particle ("query"):

Arabic: "hal tarā ?anna ðālika ?amrun jayyidun" "Do you think that is a good thing?"
[Query you-think that that matter good?]

Turkish: "Geliyor mu?" "Is he coming?" [He-is-coming query?]

Persian: "aya in ketab ast?" "Is it this book?" [Query this book is?]

Hindi: "kyā laṛkiyā̃ yahā̃ hai̋?" "Are the girls there?" [Query girls there are?]

Chinese: "Qìchē jiāle yóu ma?" "Have you filled your car with petrol?"

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[Car added-have petrol query?]

Japanese:
"Yoshiko wa daigaku e iku ka." "Is Yoshiko going to college?"
[Yoshiko (topic) college-to go query?]

A particular category of "yes"/"no" question is an existential question, of the type:

Russian: "Pri gostinitse est' pochta?" "Is there a post-office in the hotel?"
[In hotel is-there post-office?]

Where a query particle is not used, a yes/no question can be marked by intonation, and in writing by
"?", as in Italian:

"La conosce?" "Do you know her?" [Her you-know?]
"C'è una mela nella macchina?" "Is there an apple in the car?" [There's an apple in the car?]

It will be seen that, in general, the structure of a question is determined by the expected structure of the
answer. A fuller understanding of the functional grammar of questions involves distinguishing
between definite and indefinite questions. This will be discussed in a Chapter 3. (Questions).

Topic and Hypothesis

To complete our summary of sentence types, a further category must be mentioned which does not
provide either new information or an enquiry. They are sentences which suppose or hypothesise a
statement whose reality is not known. Because a hypothesis refers to a topic which expresses known
information, we can call the sentences *topic-hypothesis*. Hypotheses are discussed in Chapter 3.
(Hypotheses; Conditionals). Hypotheses include wishes, which are discussed more fully in Chapter 8.
(The Volition and Imperative Functions).

A hypothesis is not a statement of fact but expresses an event which might happen but has not.
Languages may therefore use a different form of the verb, called the *subjunctive*, in contrast to factual
statements whose form of verb is the *indicative*.

A wish is expressed in languages in three ways:

- As a direct imperative by the speaker to a person present: "Eat your lunch!" "Speak your
  lines more clearly!"
- As a desire expressed by the speaker or another: "I/she wants you to eat your lunch/speak
  your lines more clearly."

In each case, the topic is the known information: "your lunch/your lines".

Hypotheses arise in eight different types of sentence. The verb expressing the hypothesis is here
marked (h). Some languages use a subjunctive for all these instances, others for only some of them.
There are also languages which do not possess a subjunctive form, and leave the hearer to infer a
hypothesis from the structure of the sentence. The topic of each sentence depends on its context in the
narrative of which it is a part; the probable topic is marked (t):

- As a wish or preference for something which is not known to exist: "I (t) would prefer a house
  which has (h) some land attached."
- As a purpose which has not been realised: "She is studying so that she (t) can win (h) a prize."
- As a person or object whose existence is denied: "I know no-one who can help (h) you (t)."
- As a person or object which cannot be identified: "Whoever you (t) are (h), you can't go in!"
- As a communication of something uncertain: "I think that he (t) has (h) gone."
- As an event which has not occurred: "I'll sell it provided I (t) can get (h) a good price."
- As a condition whose occurrence is unknown: "If I (t) knew (h), I would tell you."
- As an unreal condition: "If I (t) had known (h), I would have told you."

A hypothesis can also be reported, in which case the reported speech may use the subjunctive:

"She told him that he (t) should eat (h) his lunch/speak (h) his lines more clearly."

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have attempted to define the linguistic concepts of existential sentence, topic, comment, enquiry, and hypothesis, and to relate these to the different sorts of sentence: statement, question, and hypothesis. In Chapter 3., we shall add a negative statement and explore questions and hypotheses in greater detail.

We have tried to show that a topic and comment are different from a subject, verb, or object, but related to them. The terms topic, comment, etc have been precisely defined within the structure of a dialogue or narrative, while subject, verb, and object have not. Subject and object are instances of the linguistic concept of noun, which we have also not defined precisely. The reason for this lack of clarity is that the purpose of subject, verb, and object differ according to the functional nature of the sentence in which they are used. Before giving them a clear meaning, we must therefore explore the varieties of sentence function, which is the purpose of Chapters 6. to 12.

The varieties of sentence function are summarised in Chapter 15., and this will enable us to attempt a definition of subject, verb, object, adjective, and noun, in Chapters 16 and 17.

For the present, we shall use the following empirical definitions:

- A verb is the word which describes the action or state of a sentence, and is the word connecting a subject to the rest of a sentence.
- A noun is a concept word which is not a verb.
- A subject is a noun whose action or state is described by a verb.
- An object is a noun towards which a verb directs its action.
- An adjective is a word which describes the state or condition of a noun.

As we shall see in Chapter 4., some expressions which describe a state or condition are not adjectives as the term is commonly understood, such as "beautiful" or "large". We shall therefore cover both these expressions and adjectives with the term "attribute", although this usage differs from the conventional one.