

THE SUBJECT IN MODERN ENGLISH

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ABSTRACT

This article contains facts about the subject a modern English language. There is also information about the the subject's history. the subject's expression in modern English is also explained with examples.

Key words: *The subject, a noun, a noun phrase, a pronoun, a declarative sentence, person and number*

English is a universal language. English is used in films, literature, songs, sports, trade, products, science and technology, and through these areas many English words. To succeed in a world where English is used for international communication, it is necessary to be able to use the English language and to have knowledge of how it is used in different contexts. Language learning occurs while encountering a diversity of texts, where the concept of text is used in the broadest sense of the word. It involves oral and written representations in different combinations and a range of oral and written texts from digital media. So, people who want to learn English language, they have to learn English grammatical rules very well.

Every word in a sentence serves a specific purpose within the structure of that particular sentence. According to rules of grammar, sentence structure can sometimes be quite complicated.

In English grammar, the *subject* is the part of a sentence or clause that commonly indicates (a) what it is about, or (b) who or what performs the action (that is, the agent). **The subject of a sentence is the person, place, or thing that is performing the action of the sentence. The subject represents what or whom the sentence is about. The simple subject usually contains a noun or pronoun and can include modifying words, phrases, or clauses.**

The man . . .

The subject in a simple English sentence such as John runs, John is a teacher, or John was run over by a car, is the person or thing about whom the statement is made, in this case John. Traditionally the subject is the word or phrase which controls the verb in the clause, that is to say with which the verb agrees (John is but John and Mary are). If there is no verb, as in John - what an idiot!, or if the verb has a different subject, as in John - I can't stand him!, then 'John' is not considered to be the grammatical subject, but can be described as the topic of the sentence.

A sentence such as It was John who broke the window is more complex still. Sentences beginning with a locative phrase, such as There is a problem, isn't there?, in which the tag question isn't there? seems to imply that the subject is the adverb there, also create difficulties for the definition of subject.¹

The subject is typically a noun ("The dog . . ."), a noun phrase ("My sister's Yorkshire terrier . . ."), or a pronoun ("It . . ."). The subject pronouns are *I, you, he, she, it, we, they, who*, and *whoever*.

In a declarative sentence, the subject usually appears before the verb ("*The dog barks*"). In an interrogative sentence, the subject usually follows the first part of a verb ("Does *the dog* ever bark?"). In an imperative sentence, the subject is commonly said to be "*you* understood" ("Bark!"). Its etymology is from the Latin, "to throw".

¹ Comrie (1989), pp.105-6.

The subject (glossing abbreviations: SUB or SU) is, according to a tradition that can be traced back to Aristotle (and that is associated with phrase structure grammars), one of the two main constituents of a clause, the other constituent being the predicate, whereby the predicate says something about the subject. ²"The traditional definition of **subject** as referring to the 'doer of an action' (or agent), though it is adequate for central or typical cases, will not work for all cases. For example, in passive sentences, such as *John was attacked*, the subject is *John*, but John is certainly not the 'doer' of the attacking. Again, not all sentences, even those with transitive verbs, express any action. Examples are *This book cost fifty francs* and *I loathe relativism*. But such sentences have always traditionally been held to have subjects (in these cases, *this book* and *I*)."³

In modern English, the subject is expressed person and number (and sometimes in gender as well). The second and third criterion are merely strong tendencies that can be flouted in certain constructions. For example:

1. **Tom** is studying chemistry. - The three criteria agree identifying *Tom* as the subject.
2. Is **Tom** studying chemistry? - The 1st and the 3rd criteria identify *Tom* as the subject.
3. **Chemistry** is being studied (by Tom). - The 1st and the 2nd criteria identify *Chemistry* as the subject.

In the first sentence, all three criteria combine to identify *Tom* as the subject. In the second sentence, which involves the subject-auxiliary inversion of a yes/no-question, the subject immediately follows the finite verb (instead of immediately preceding it), which means the second criterion is flouted. And in the third sentence expressed in the passive voice, the 1st and the 2nd criterion combine to identify *chemistry* as the subject, whereas the third criterion suggests that *by Tom* should be the subject because *Tom* is an agent. Moreover, in imperative clauses, the subject typically requires a subject to be present. For example: Give it to me.

In modern English, existential *there*-constructions allow for varying interpretations about what should count as the subject. For example:

1. **There's** problems.
2. There are **problems**.

In sentence 1, the first criterion (agreement) and the second criterion (position occupied) suggest that *there* is the subject, whereas the third criterion (semantic role) suggests rather that *problems* is the subject. In sentence 2, in contrast, agreement and semantic role suggest that *problems* is the subject, whereas position occupied suggests that *there* is the subject. In such cases then, one can take the first criterion as the most telling; the subject should agree with the finite verb.⁴

- My uncle is leaving for New York tomorrow.

To identify the subject in the above sentence, first identify the verb. The sentence has only one verb – 'leaving', which is the Present Participle form of leave. Now look for the answer on who is performing the verb? That is, who is leaving for New York tomorrow?

The answer to the question is- My uncle! 'My uncle' is therefore the subject in the given sentence.

A subject may be a single word or a combination of several words. Different types of subjects with suitable examples are given below.

² See Conner (1968:43ff.) for a discussion of the traditional subject concept.

³ James R. Hurford, "Grammar: A Student's Guide". 1994

⁴ For a discussion of the subject status of existential *there*, see Biber et al. (1999:944).

A simple subject contains only one word as a subject. That is it may have a Proper Noun (Tommy, Italy, Lilly etc), Improper Noun (dog, river, city etc) or a Personal Pronoun (I, they, you etc) as a subject. The types of simple subjects with suitable examples are given below.

1) Proper Noun as Subject

In a sentence a subject may be a Proper Noun i.e. a single word name of a person, place, or thing. Proper Nouns are the name of an individual place or person. Consider the below sentences using a Proper Noun as a subject.

- Tom Cruise is a good actor.

In all of the above sentences the Subject is a proper noun and very easy to identify- Tom Cruise.

2) Improper Noun as Subject

Improper Nouns may also be used as a subject in a sentence. An Improper or Common Noun is the name given to a thing, place or a class, like- city, cat, dog, etc. Below given are some examples of sentences using Improper Nouns as subjects.

- The dog is barking loudly.

All the above sentences have used improper nouns/common nouns as subjects- dog.

3) Personal Pronouns as Subjects

A personal pronoun is a word which can be used instead of Noun. Words like I, he, she, they, me, you, we etc are all personal pronouns. Some examples of sentences using personal pronouns as subjects are given below-

- He is singing.

In the above sentences pronouns like- he.

4) Interrogative Pronouns as Subjects

Interrogative Pronouns like who, what, which – can be used as simple subjects as shown below-

- Who switched off the lights?
- What is troubling you?
- Which bus is going to Michigan?
- Who is feeding the cat?

Unlike the simple subjects which are only single words; complex subjects are a combination of a proper/improper noun and a modifier.

Go through the below given sentences.

- The dog who was sitting beside the road started chasing us.

Sometimes a sentence has more than one person or thing performing the same task; such sentences have compound subjects as given below-

1. Rahul and Punit are going to college.

The above sentence have one or two nouns performing the same verb and therefore have ‘Compound Subjects’. – ‘Rahul and Punit’.

The grammatical forms that can function as the subject in English grammar are noun phrases including pronouns, prepositional phrases, verb phrases, and noun clauses.

Grammatical subjects should not be confused with semantic subjects, or the topic of the sentence.

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