

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter we give you an initial survey of English grammatical structure, taking words (as classified and illustrated in Chapter 2) as the basic units. This survey progresses in two steps. The first step, in Grammar Bite A, is to see how words pattern together to form phrases. The second step, in Grammar Bite B, is to see how phrases pattern together to form clauses.

GRAMMAR BITE

A Introduction to phrases

3.2 Phrases and their characteristics

As was seen at the beginning of the last chapter, words can be organized into higher units, known as **phrases**. In 3.2 and 3.3, phrase structure and phrase types (or classes) will be examined.

The following example consists of three major phrases, as shown by bracketing [] each phrase:

1 [The opposition][demands][a more representative government]. (NEWS†)

A phrase may consist of a single word or a group of words. Phrases can be identified by substitution—that is, by replacing one expression with another, to see how it fits into the structure. In particular, a multi-word phrase can often be replaced by a single-word phrase without changing the basic meaning:

[It]	[demands]	[something].
<The opposition>		<a more representative government.>

We can also identify phrases by movement tests. A phrase can be moved as a unit to a different position. Compare 1 above with 1a, which has a similar meaning:

1a [A more representative government] [is demanded] [by [the opposition]].

When we place one set of brackets inside another, as at the end of 1a, this means that one phrase is **embedded** (i.e. included) inside another. The possibility of embedding sometimes means that a given structure can be understood in two or more different ways. Consider the following example:

2 They passed the table with the two men. (FICT†)

Notice there are two possible meanings of this clause, corresponding to different ways of grouping the words (i.e. different phrase structures):

2a [They] [passed] [the table [with [the two men]]].

2b [They] [passed] [the table] [with [the two men]].

The meaning of 2a is roughly: 'They passed the table where the two men were sitting'. But in 2b the meaning is 'With (i.e. accompanied by) the two men, they passed the table'.

In summary:

- Words make up phrases, which behave like units.

- A phrase can consist of either one word or more than one word.
- Phrases can be identified by substitution and movement tests.
- Differences in phrase structure show up in differences of meaning.
- Phrases can be embedded (i.e. one phrase can be part of the structure of another phrase).

Phrase structure can be shown either by bracketing, as in 1–2 above, or by tree diagrams. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 correspond to the three bracketed clauses of 2a and 2b.

Figure 3.1
Phrase structure of 2a
 (prep = prepositional)

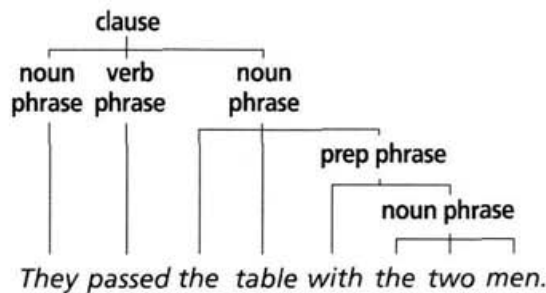
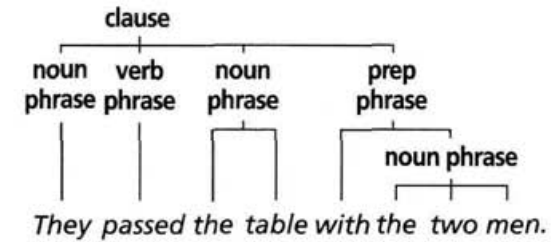


Figure 3.2
Phrase structure of 2b
 (prep = prepositional)



3.2.1 Syntactic roles of phrases

Phrase types differ both in their internal structure and in their syntactic roles—i.e. their relations to larger structures. Recognizing syntactic roles, like **subject** and **object**, can be crucial for the interpretation of phrases. For example, consider the difference between:

	subject	verb	object
1	[Mommy]	[loves]	[the kitty]. (CONV)
2	[The kitty]	[loves]	[Mommy].

Here the noun phrases at the beginning and end are interchanged, resulting in a clearly different meaning. Thus the first phrase in both 1 and in 2 is the subject, and the second phrase is the object. By interchanging the positions of *Mommy* and *the kitty*, we have also changed their syntactic roles.

3.2.2 Phrases in use

The use of phrases in discourse can be illustrated by comparing the two text passages presented earlier in 2.2.6. The words in these passages have been grouped into phrases (shown by brackets). Single-word phrases (which are very common) and phrases embedded within phrases are not marked. The round brackets, as in [Do] you (want), signal a split (discontinuous) phrase. (That is, you is not part of the phrase do want.)

- A: Is that [the time]?
 B: Yeah, it's [twenty minutes to four].
 A: Oh [my clock] is slow, yeah.

B: [Do] you [want] us [to] just [go] out there and come back and pick [you guys] up?

A: Uh huh.

C: Yeah.

A: You [can go] if you want to, I'll, I think I'll <...>

D: He really [doesn't trust] me, does he?

C: That's right, how 'bout I pin you?

D: Okay. Oh, let me tell you something.

B: Do you, [do] you (want] to go [by yourself]?

D: No, no, no. You[ll feel] better and we[ll be following] you.

A: [Will] you [feel] better?

D: It [doesn't].

C: I need [three safety pins], you had one [in your pocket].

B: Uh huh. (CONV)

[Radioactive leak] confirmed [at Sellafield]

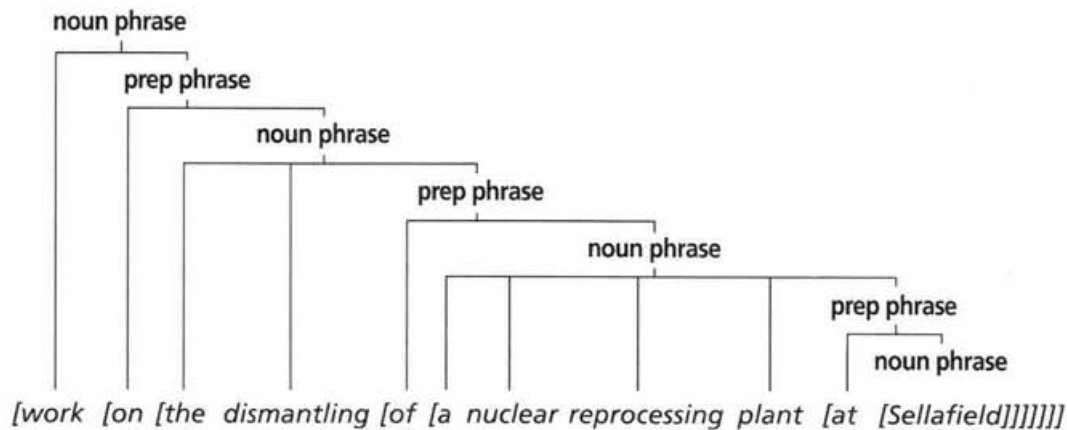
[Work on the dismantling of a nuclear reprocessing plant at Sellafield] caused [a leak of radioactivity] yesterday. [British Nuclear Fuels Ltd] said [the radioactivity] reached [the air] [through a chimney stack which was still in use]. But [spokesman Bob Phillips] said it was not [an incident which required reporting to the Government]. He dismissed [protests from Friends of the Earth] as 'scaremongering'. However, [Dr Patrick Green, Friends of the Earth radiation campaigner], said: 'BNF has [a scandalous track record of playing down incidents at first, and only admitting their seriousness later].' [Three months ago] BNF confirmed that [a leak of radioactive plutonium solution] [had been reclassified] [as 'a serious incident']'. (NEWS)

The length of the phrases in the two passages is very different. Generally the news story has longer phrases as well as a larger number of multi-word phrases. In fact, in the conversation sample, almost three-quarters of the phrases are only one word long, while there is only one phrase that contains four or more words. In the news sample, however, nine phrases are four or more words long, and some of these are longer than ten words.

The comparison is incomplete because it does not include phrases within phrases. These occur particularly in the news story. Using a tree diagram or brackets, the example from the beginning of the sample can be broken down as in Figure 3.3.

Noun phrases and prepositional phrases can have particularly complex structure in written texts, with several layers of phrase embedding. In fact, the complexity of phrases is a very striking measure for comparing the complexity of syntax in different registers of English. The simplest structures occur in conversation and the complexity increases through fiction and newspaper writing, with academic writing showing the greatest complexity of phrase structure.

Figure 3.3 A phrase with embedding



3.3 Types of phrases

For each class of lexical word, there is a major phrase type with an example of that class as the **head**: **noun phrase** (3.3.1), **verb phrase** (3.3.2), **adjective phrase** (3.3.3), **adverb phrase** (3.3.4), and **prepositional phrase** (3.3.5). The head is the principal, obligatory word. In fact, each phrase type can often consist of just one word: the head.

To begin our outline of these phrase types, let's recall the procedure of word classification in 2.3, where we took account of form/structure, syntactic role, and meaning. The same three factors need to be recognized in describing phrase types:

- **Form/structure:** Our main test for the classification of phrases is structure, especially the word class of the head of the phrase and the other elements contained in the phrase. (This is analogous to the morphological structure of words.)
- **Syntactic role:** Phrases can be described according to their function or syntactic role in clauses (e.g. subject, object). (In 3.4 we outline the structure of clauses in some detail, but here we take for granted only a limited knowledge of such roles as subject and object.)
- **Meaning:** In general, the semantic nature of phrases is to specify and/or elaborate the meaning of the head word and its relation to other elements in the clause.

3.3.1 Noun phrases

A phrase with a noun as its head is a noun phrase. The head can be preceded by **determiners**, such as *the*, *a*, *her*, and can be accompanied by **modifiers**—elements which describe or classify whatever the head refers to. Here are some examples of noun phrases (head in bold; determiner, where present, underlined):

a **house** these **houses** their **house** many **houses**
his bristly short **hair** her below-the-knee **skirt**
the little **girl** next door heavy **rain** driven by gales
any printed **material** discovered which might be construed as dissent

An abstract head noun can also be followed by **complements**, which complete the meaning of the noun, especially **that-clauses** or **infinitive to-clauses**. Noun phrases containing a complement are shown below in []; heads are in bold, and complements underlined:

- 1 [*The popular **assumption** that language simply serves to communicate 'thoughts' or 'ideas' is too simplistic.* (ACAD)]
- 2 *He feels awkward about [*her **refusal** to show any sign of emotion*].* (NEWS†)

Besides common nouns, noun phrases can be headed by proper nouns (3), pronouns (4–5) and (occasionally) adjectives (6). (Brackets [] enclose noun phrases consisting of more than one word; noun phrase heads are in bold.)

- 3 ***Dawn** lives in **Wembley**.* (FICT)
- 4 ***They** said **they'd** got **it**.* (CONV)
- 5 *'Have **you** got [***everything** you need*]?' (FICT)*
- 6 *'Show me how [*the **impossible***] can be possible!'* (FICT)

Even though these phrases do not have a common noun as head, they are noun phrases because they have the structure characteristics of a noun phrase (e.g. 5 has a modifier, *you need*, and 6 has a determiner, *the*) and they serve the same syntactic roles (e.g. acting as subject or object of a clause).

Noun phrases can take the role of subject or object in a clause. For example:

subject	verb phrase	object
<i>I</i>	<i>saw</i>	<i>a lot of Italy.</i> (CONV†)

Noun phrases can also take the syntactic role of predicative, adverbial, or complement (in a prepositional phrase). These roles will become clear when we introduce them in relation to other phrase types (see 3.3.5, 3.4).

3.3.2 Verb phrases

Verb phrases have a **lexical verb** or **primary verb** as their head (i.e. their **main verb**; see 2.2). The main verb can stand alone or be preceded by one or more **auxiliary verbs**. The auxiliaries further define the action, state, or process denoted by the main verb.

Finite verb phrases show distinctions of tense (present/past) and can include modal auxiliaries. **Non-finite** verb phrases do not show tense and cannot occur with modal auxiliaries, and so have fewer forms. Here we focus on finite verbs. Table 3.1 presents the range of finite verb phrases for the main verb *show* preceded by one or more auxiliary verbs.

Verb phrases are the essential part of a clause, referring to a type of state or action. The main verb determines the other clause elements that can occur in the clause (e.g. the kinds of objects, see Grammar Bite B).

Verb phrases are often split into two parts (i.e. they are discontinuous). This happens in questions, where the subject is placed after the (first) auxiliary verb:

*What's he **doing**?* (CONV) <verb phrase = *is doing*>

In addition, the parts of a verb phrase can be interrupted by adverbs or other adverbials:

Table 3.1 Main forms of the verb phrase

	present tense	past tense	modal
simple	<i>shows, show</i>	<i>showed</i>	<i>could show</i>
perfect	<i>has/have shown</i>	<i>had shown</i>	<i>could have shown</i>
progressive	<i>am/is/are showing</i>	<i>was/were showing</i>	<i>could be showing</i>
passive	<i>am/is/are shown</i>	<i>was/were shown</i>	<i>could be shown</i>
perfect+progressive	<i>has/have been showing</i>	<i>had been showing</i>	<i>could have been showing</i>
perfect+passive	<i>has/have been shown</i>	<i>had been shown</i>	<i>could have been shown</i>
progressive+passive	<i>am/is/are being shown</i>	<i>was/were being shown</i>	<i>could be being shown</i>

Notes

a *Show*, the main verb illustrated here, has a distinct past participle form *shown*. However, occasionally *show* can also be a regular verb, so *showed* could replace *shown* in the table.

b *Could* is the only modal auxiliary illustrated here. Any modal could be substituted for it.

c In general, the verb phrases with four or more verbs (e.g. *could have been shown*) are extremely rare.

*You know the English **will** always **have** gardens wherever they find themselves.* (FICTION) <verb phrase = *will have*>

*The current year **has** definitely **started** well.* (NEWS) <verb phrase = *has started*>

3.3.3 Adjective phrases

Adjective phrases have an adjective as head, and optional modifiers that can precede or follow the adjective. In these examples the head is in bold and the modifiers are in ordinary italics:

old *incredible* *so lucky* *good enough* *desperately poor*

Modifiers typically answer a question about the degree of a quality (e.g. 'How lucky/poor?'). Adjective heads can also take complements. The complements are underlined below:

guilty *of a serious crime*

subject *to approval by...*

slow *to respond*

more blatant *than anything they had done in the past*

so obnoxious *that she had to be expelled*

Complements often answer the question 'In what respect is the adjectival quality to be interpreted?' (e.g. 'guilty/slow in what respect?').

The structure and uses of adjective phrases are described in detail in 7.2–9. Adjectives with clauses as complements are discussed in 10.7, 10.9.2, and 10.15.

The most important roles of adjective phrases are as modifier and subject predicative:

- as a modifier before a noun, where the adjective is called an **attributive adjective** (noun phrases are marked in []):

*He's [a **deeply sick** man].* (FICT)

*We saw [a **very good** movie] the other night.* (CONV†)

*The European study asked [a **slightly different** question].* (ACAD)

- as a **subject predicative**, often following the verb *be*:

*That's **right**.* (CONV)

*He's **totally crazy**.* (CONV)

*Gabby was **afraid to say anything more**.* (FICT)

Adjective phrases modifying nouns can be split into two parts by the noun head:

*You couldn't have a **better** name **than that**.* (FICT) <adjective phrase = better than that>

*When he plays his best, he's a **really tough** player **to beat**.* (NEWS†)
<adjective phrase = really tough to beat >

3.3.4 Adverb phrases

Adverb phrases are like adjective phrases in structure, except that the head is an adverb (in bold below). Optional modifiers (in ordinary italics) may precede or follow the adverb head. They typically express degree. Complements (underlined) can also follow:

there

*pretty **soon***

*so **quickly** you don't even enjoy it*

quietly

***fortunately** enough*

*much more **quickly** than envisaged*

Adverb phrases should be distinguished from adverbials: adverb phrases are structures, while adverbials are clause elements. Adverb phrases, prepositional phrases, and adverbial clauses can all function as adverbials (see 3.5.5; 11.1–3).

The following syntactic roles are most usual for adverb phrases:

- as a modifier in adjective or adverb phrases (the adjective or adverb phrase modified is marked []):

*Those two were [**pretty much horribly** spoiled].* (†CONV)

*He was an attractive little creature with a [**sweetly expressive**] face.* (FICT†)

- as an adverbial on the clause level:

*She smiled **sweetly**.* (FICT†)

*They sang **boomingly well**.* (FICT)

For further detail, see the treatment of adverb phrases in 7.10.5 and the extensive treatment of adverbials in Chapter 11.

3.3.5 Prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases mostly consist of a preposition (in bold below) followed by a noun phrase, known as the **prepositional complement** (in ordinary italics). The preposition can be thought of as a link relating the noun phrase to preceding structures.

- 1 **to** town 3 **in** the morning 5 **on** the night [**of** the first day]
 2 **to** Sue 4 **to** him 6 **in** a street [**with** no name]

Note that prepositional phrases are often embedded in larger phrases, as in 5 and 6, where [] enclose an embedded prepositional phrase.

Prepositions also take **complement clauses**—clauses which have the same role as noun phrases—as complements, but normally these are only *wh*-clauses (in 7 below) and *ing*-clauses (in 8 below):

- 7 *Component drawings carry instructions [on **where they are used**].* (ACAD†)
 8 *It was hard to live in Missouri [after **spending so much time in California**].* (CONV)

Prepositional phrases can be ‘extended’ by an initial **adverbial particle**, which adds a meaning such as place, direction, or degree: **back** to the fifties; **down** in the south. Another kind of extension is an adverb of degree: **exactly** at noon; **nearly** till eleven; **considerably** to the right.

Prepositional phrases vary in how closely they are connected with the surrounding structure. Their two major syntactic roles are:

- as an adverbial on the clause level (see Chapter 11):
He worked [in a shop] – [probably at that time]. (CONV†)
He retired [after three minor heart attacks] [at the age of 36]. (NEWS†)
- as a modifier or complement following a noun (the noun phrase is bracketed {} and the prepositional phrase is bracketed []):
He was a poet, {a teacher [of philosophy]}, and {a man [with a terrible recent history]}. (NEWS)
Or at least that is {the ambition [of {the industrial development commission [of a small Pennsylvania steel town]}}}. (NEWS)

Prepositions also occur in prepositional verbs such as *look at* (see 5.10).

A preposition is said to be **stranded** if it is not followed by its prepositional complement. The prepositional complement, in such cases, is generally identified as a previous noun phrase, marked [] below:

- 9 [*What more*] could a child ask **for**? (NEWS)
 10 *As soon as Unoka understood [what] his friend was driving **at**, he burst out laughing.* (FICT)
 11 *Without the money to pay for your promises, your manifesto is not worth [the paper] it is written **on**.* (NEWS†)

Stranded prepositions are usually found in clauses that do not follow normal word order, such as direct questions (9), interrogative clauses (10) and relative clauses (11).

According to the old-fashioned ‘rules’ of grammar, stranded prepositions have long been considered bad style. However, in practice they frequently occur, especially in conversation. Although there is usually an alternative to stranded prepositions, in which the preposition is moved forward to precede its complement, speakers often prefer the stranded preposition. Taking 9 above as an example, the alternative of placing the preposition at the beginning of the clause (9a) is unlikely to occur, even in formal writing.

- 9 *What more could a child ask **for**?* (NEWS)
 9a ***For** what more could a child ask?*

Review

Major points of **GRAMMAR BITE A**: Introduction to phrases

- Words are organized into larger units known as phrases.
- The main classes of phrases are: noun phrase, verb phrase, adjective phrase, adverb phrase, and prepositional phrase.
- The classes can be identified by their meaning, structure, and syntactic role.
- Each of these phrases has a head from the corresponding word class: e.g. noun phrases usually have a noun as their head.
- The frequency of longer and more complex phrases varies from one register to another, increasing from conversation, to fiction, to news writing, to academic prose.

GRAMMAR BITE

B Clause elements and clause patterns

3.4 A preview of clause patterns

The clause is the key unit of syntax, capable of occurring independently (i.e. without being part of any other unit). It is useful to think of the clause as a unit that can stand alone as an expression of a ‘complete thought’—that is, a complete description of an event or state of affairs. Hence, many spoken utterances consist of a single clause:

Have you got an exam on Monday? (CONV)

and the same is true of many written sentences:

She smiled sweetly. (FICT)

However, not all utterances or sentences contain a complete clause. For example:

More sauce? (CONV)

Thirty pence please. (CONV)

Five years later? (FICT)

Image crisis for Clinton over haircut. (NEWS) <a headline>

Although these examples make sense as individual utterances or sentences, they do not have a verb phrase, which is the key element of a clause. However, their message could be expressed more fully as a clause:

Would you like more sauce?

Such non-clausal material will be considered further in 13.4. For the sake of clarity, we limit the discussion here to examples with a single, complete clause.

The following list presents examples of the basic clause patterns that are introduced in this section. All the examples are from conversation: