NOTES FOR TEACHERS

What Makes a Sentence?

Rajesh Kumar

Introduction

The use of language is a unique and distinctive human capacity. One of the most imperative curiosities of the human mind is to understand how human communication takes place. Therefore, it becomes natural to know how we speak and how the medium of communication, i.e. language, works. Communication works through discourse; however, the minimal unit of our communication is a sentence. There are three major components of language. They are sounds, words, and sentences. In this paper, we will describe the making of a sentence. The purpose of this article[1] is to understand the various components of a sentence. This article describes how words combine to form a sentence. It assumes that native speakers already know the intrinsic rules governing and putting the words in the order in a sentence. These rules help us distinguish between a well-formed sentence and an ill-formed sentence. Native speakers produce sentences while communicating their thoughts or talking to others without thinking about the underlying aspects of sentences or language. For example:

1. raajuu-m aur shyaam-m ghar jaa -rahe the
   Raju and Shyam home go-cont-masc-pl pst-m-pl
   'Raju and Shyam were going home.'

2. *raajuu-m aur shyaam-m ghar jaa rahii thiiN
   Raju and Shyam home go cont-f pst-f-pl
   'Raju and Shyam were going home.'

The sentence in (1) is grammatical and acceptable, whereas the sentence in (2) is neither grammatical nor acceptable. Speakers of Hindi recognize this distinction without any difficulty. In other words, speakers of Hindi

produce and understand a sentence like (1) and not the one in (2). Now, to understand how languages work, it is essential to find out why (1) is grammatical or acceptable and (2) is not. In the following sections of this paper, we outline various components of a sentence and the system underlying it. The first section describes a sentence; the second part brings out different parts of a sentence. The third part describes some of the types of a simple sentences, and the fourth part describes how sentences mean what they mean.

Parts of a Sentence

There are two parts to a sentence. They are subject and predicate. Except for the subject, all other elements in a sentence are part of the predicate, including the verb. The verb becomes central to predicate as everything else stays related to the verb in the predicate. The relationship between the subject of a sentence and an object is hierarchical; because the existence of the subject is required for making a sentence. However, the existence of an object in a sentence depends on the nature of the verb. If a verb is transitive, it requires an object for itself, and if the verb is an intransitive one, then it does not. Most of the elements of a sentence are visible. All those visible elements are called lexical units.

On the other hand, the elements that connect the subject and the predicate are part of 'agreement'. Many elements of the agreement, such as number, person, gender, and more such as case, tense, aspect, and modality, etc., are not visible all the time. These elements are called functional or inflectional elements. A possible computation of these elements gives us a grammatically acceptable sentence.

Lexical Categories

Words in a language are part of the lexical category. In traditional grammars, lexical categories are referred to as parts of speech. Elements of this category are nouns, adjectives, prepositions/postpositions, adverbs, and verbs.

Nouns

Nouns are naming words. It is a lexical item that belongs to the open class of words in grammar. It is also part of grammatical relations such as subject, objects (objects of a verb), and ad positions.[2]

3. raajuu shaam ko muuvii dekh rahaa thaa
    Raju-sg-m evening in movie watch cont-sg-m pst-sg-m
    'Raju was watching a movie in the evening.'

In 3, *raajuu* 'Raju' is a subject; *shaam* 'evening' is the object of postposition *ko* 'in'; and *muuvii* 'movie' is the object of the verb *dekh* 'to watch'. These lexical items are nouns. Nouns belong to an open class.[3]

Adjectives

Adjectives describe nouns. They give more information[4] about the nouns in a phrase or in a sentence. Adjectives may occur either to the right[5] or to the left of a noun. In a given language, adjectives belong to an open class too.

4. raajuu acchaa DaakTar hai
    Raju-sg good doctor pres-sg
    'Raju is a good doctor.'

5. yeh DaakTar mashhuur hai
    this doctor famous pres-sg
    'This doctor is famous.'

In 3 and 4 *achaa* 'good' and *mashhuur* 'famous' are adjectives. In both the sentences, they modify the nouns *DaakTar* 'doctor'. In 3, the adjective occurs right before the verb, i.e. to the left of the noun, whereas in 4, it occurs to the right of the noun.

Prepositions/Postpositions

Postpositions always follow or precede a noun. They are also case markers. A unique feature of postpositions in Hindi is that they block the agreement between the noun in their scope and the verb. Postpositions in Hindi are a closed class. In 6 *meN* 'in' is the postposition. It follows the noun *gaaNoN* 'village'.

6. is gaaNoN meN do hajaar log rahte haiN
    this village in two thousand people live-imperf-pl-m pres-pl
    'In this village, two thousand people live.'

Adverbs

Adverbs modify a verb. They belong to a class of words that must be very large in any language (open class). In an unmarked order of words in a sentence, they can occur before the verbs. However, they can potentially occur anywhere in a sentence. They are of various types,

manner adverbs, time adverbs, place adverbs etc.

7. ham ne kaam jaldii-jaldii khatam kiyaa
   we erg work fast finish do-perf-m
   'We finished the work fast.'

In 7, *jaldii jaldii* 'fast' is a manner adverb. In this sentence, it is right before the verb; however, we can put it anywhere in this sentence without substantial change in the content value of the sentence.

Verbs

A verb is the most crucial item in a sentence. It controls the whole sentence. Verbs encode information such as time and nature of what they refer to. Verbs belong to the open class of lexical category.

8. hamlog har din skuul jaate haiN
   we every day school go-imperf-pl-m pres-pl
   'We go to school every day.'

In 8, *jaanaa* 'to go' is the verb. It tells us the central idea of the sentence that we are talking about is *going*. It encodes information about time, i.e., present, nature, i.e., regularly instead of onetime activity, and agreement features, i.e. number (plural) and gender (masculine). It is intransitive.

This completes a concise description of some lexical items of a language In the next section we will discuss the phrasal category.

Phrasal Categories

So far, we have looked at individual words as lexical items, and in grammar, they are termed lexical categories. Now we will look at phrases. Phrases are larger than words (lexicons) but smaller than a clause.

Noun Phrase

Noun phrases (NP) may consist of one or more than one word. If it is a one-word phrase, it only has a noun, whereas when it has more than one word, one of them must be a noun as the head of the noun phrase.

9. do lambe laRke khel rahe the
   two tall boy-pl play cont-pl-m pst-pl-m
   'Two tall boys were playing.'

In 9, *do lambe laRke* 'two tall boys' is a noun phrase consisting of the head noun, *larke* 'boys', and two adjectives *lambe* 'tall' and *do* 'two' which

modify the head noun. In a phrase, all other elements are related to the head noun and constitute a unit.

Verb Phrase

Verb phrase is the most important part of a sentence. A lot about a given sentence depends on the verb phrase. As the name suggests, a lexical verb is the head of the verb phrase.

> 10. raajuu aam *nahiiN* khaa rahaa hai
>   Raju-m mango not- neg eat cont-sg-m pres-sg
>   'Raju is not eating mango.'

In 10, *aam nahiiN khaa rahaa hai* 'is not eating a mango' is the verb phrase of the sentence, in which *aam* 'mango' is the direct object, *nahiiN* 'neg' and *khaa rahaa hai* is the verbal complex containing information about the time and nature of the action taking place.

Postpositional Phrases

The postpositional phrase has a post position as a head. A postposition which is the head, follows its complement in this phrase. The complements of the head (postposition) is always a noun phrase. Postpositional phrases are mostly adjuncts in a sentence.

> 11. raajuu is shahar meN nahiiN rahtaa
>   Raju-m this city in neg live-imperf-sg-m
>   'Raju does not live in this city.'

In 11, *is shahar meN* 'in this city' is postpositional phrase where the postposition *meN* 'in' is the head of the phrase and the NP *is shahar* 'this city' is the complement of the phrase.

Grammatical Relations: Subject and Object

Grammatical relation refers to the role of an NP in a sentence. The syntactic behaviour and the position of a phrase determine the role of an NP. Grammatical relations are different from thematic relations (roles). Based on the position of an NP in a sentence, sometimes there seems to be a correlation between grammatical and thematic relations.

Subjects

The notion of a subject is complex. In short, the NP that agrees with the verb is the grammatical subject of the sentence. There is a difference

between a grammatical subject and the logical subject (agent). Usually, a grammatical subject is a logical subject as well. However, a grammatical subject and a logical subject maybe two different NPs within a sentence.

12. raajuu aam khaa rahaa hai
    Raju-3-sg-m mango eat cont-sg-m pres-sg
    'Raju is eating a mango.'

13. is shahar ke log aam nahiiN khaate
    this city of people mango-pl-m neg eat-imperf-pl-m
    'People of this city do not eat mangoes.'

In 12, the NP *raajuu* 'Raju' is the subject of the sentence. It agrees with the verb *khaanaa* 'to eat' in number and gender. The NP *raajuu* 'Raju' is singular and masculine. We find the same number and gender on the verb. A subject can also be a larger phrase as in 13. In 13, the phrase *is shahar ke log* 'people of this city' is the sentence's subject.

14. raajuu ne roTiyaaN nahiiN khaaiiN
    Raju-m erg roti-pl-f neg eat-pl-f
    'Raju did not eat roti.'

In 14, the NP that agrees with the verb is *roTiyaaN* 'roties'. This is plural feminine, and the verb reflects feminine gender as well. This is an example of a grammatical subject. The NP *raajuu ne* 'Raju' is the logical subject (agent) of the sentence.

Objects

Objects are parts of verb phrases. They are the required elements of the verb. A di-transitive verb requires two objects: a direct object and an indirect object, a transitive verb requires one (mostly a direct object), and an intransitive one requires none.

Direct Object

The direct objects are the required elements of a transitive or a di-transitive verb. They usually have an accusative case with no overt marker.

15. raajuu aam khaa rahaa hai
    Raju-m mango eat cont-sg-m pres-sg
    'Raju is eating a mango.'

In 15, the NP *aam* 'mango' is the direct object. It is a required argument

of the verb *khaanaa* 'to eat', which is a transitive verb. In an unmarked sentence, it occurs right before the verb.

Indirect Object

A verb requires an indirect object only when it requires a direct object too. They are the second required object of a verb.

> 16. raajuu baccoN ko aNgrejii paRdh-aa-taa hai
>   Raju-m kids-obl to English teach-imperf-sg-m pres-sg
>   'Raju teaches kids English.'

In 16, *baccoN ko* 'to the kids' is the indirect object. It is also one of the required objects of the verb *paRhaanaa* 'to teach'. In an unmarked order, it precedes the direct object *aNgrejii* 'English'.

Locative Object

Locative objects are usually adverbs. They are not a required part of a verb phrase. They refer to the location the noun.

> 17. raajuu-ne caabhii teble par rakh-ii hai
>   Raju-m-erg keys-f table on keep-perf-sg-f pres-sg
>   'Raju kept the key on the table.'

In 17, *tebal par* 'on the table' is the locative object. It gives information about the location of the noun *caabhii* 'key'. The presence of a locative object in a sentence provides additional information, but its absence does not make a sentence sound incomplete.

Instrumental Object

Instrumental objects are adverbs too. They are not one of the required objects. They refer to the way an activity was conducted.

> 18. raajuu-ne ramesh ko kitaab se maar-aa
>   Raju-m-erg Ramesh-m to book-f with hit-perf-sg-def-agr
>   'Raju hit Ramesh with a book.'

In 18, *kitaab se* 'with the book' is an instrumental object. Case marker *se* 'with' turns the noun *kitaab* 'book' into an instrument. This sentence demonstrates default agreement system in Hindi.

When all NPs are overtly case marked and have a postposition following them, the verb shows a default agreement pattern, which is homophonous with masculine agreement marking.

Objects of Genitive

Unlike locative and instrumental objects, the object of a genitive case marker always follows the genitive case marker, and the case marker always agrees with the NP.

19. raajuu kii kitaab tebal par hai
     Raju gen book-sg table on pres-sg
     'Raju's book is on the table.'

In 19, the NP *kitaab* 'book' is the object of the genitive case marker *kii* 'of'. *kitaab* 'book' is a feminine noun; hence the genitive case marker *kii* 'of' also has a feminine form.

Inflectional Categories

Inflectional categories are tense, agreement, aspect, modality, and case.

Tense, aspect, and agreement

Tense in a sentence refers to the time (present, past, and future) of the event, whereas Aspect (imperfect, continuous, and perfect) refers to the nature of the event. Agreement contains markers for person, number, and gender and relates to mapping the features of the subject NP and the verb.

20. raajuu aam khaa rahaa hai
     Raju mango eat cont-sg-m pres-sg
     'Raju is eating a mango.'

In 20, the time of the event is present. The auxiliary verb *hai* 'is', is the tense marker in Hindi to mean the event is continuing. The marker *rahaa* represents the continuous aspect. The maker *aa* on the aspect represents singular and masculine gender. The verbal complex contains all information about the inflections.

Modality

Modal sentences are usually tenseless. The verbal complex in the modal sentences lacks information about time and gender. We discuss two sets of examples from imperatives and subjunctive sentences.

Imperative

Imperative refers to direct instructions such as commands, requests, suggestions, advice, etc. The marker on the verb does not reflect

information about the number and gender of the subject. Hindi has three different forms of second-person pronouns. They all get different representations in Hindi imperative.

21. apnii kitaab paRdh (o)/(iye)
    self book read-imp
    'Read your book.'

The subject in an imperative sentence is always in the second person. However, they are not overtly present as in (21).

Subjunctive

Subjunctive moods refer to indirect instructions. Like imperatives, the verbs lack information about the time of the event and the gender of the verb. However, unlike imperatives, subjunctives use any noun or pronoun as their subject.

22. apne saamaan kii surakshaa swayM kareN
    self luggage of safety self do-subj-pl
    'Take care of your luggage.'

In 22, the verb *kareN* 'do' talks about doing the safety of the luggage. However, it does not sound like direct instruction. It does not say when to do the safety of the luggage as they lack the information about time.

Case (Nominative, Accusative/Objective, Ergative, Dative)

The case indicates the grammatical functions of different nouns in a sentence. The mapping between the grammatical functions and the case may not be one to one. Some such cases are nominative, accusative/objective, ergative, and dative. Nominative and accusative/objective cases in many languages including Hindi do not have an overt marker whereas ergative and dative cases have overt markers on the nouns.

23. raajuu aam khaa rahaa hai
    Raju-m mango eat cont-sg-m pres-sg
    'Raju is a eating mango.'

In 23, the NP *raajuu* 'Raju' has a nominative case on it. The grammatical function of this NP is that of a subject in the sentence. The NP *aam* 'mango' has an accusative/objective case on it. The grammatical function of this NP in 23 is of a direct object. Nominative and accusative are not overtly marked on these NPs.

24. raajuu-ne caabhii teble par rakhii hai

    Raju-erg keys-f table on keep-perf-sg-f pres-sg

    'Raju kept the key on the table.'

In 24, the NP *raaju* 'Raju' has an ergative case on it. The ergative case comes with an overt case marker *ne* in Hindi. An NP with an overt case marker does not agree with the verb. The grammatical subject of 24 is the NP *caabhii'* key' as this agrees with the verb. The NP *caabhii'* key' does not have a nominative case on it, though. This shows that there is no one to one correspondence between case and grammatical function.

25. raajuu-ko gussaa aa-taa hai

    I-dat anger-sg-m come-imperf-sg-m pres-sg

    'Raju gets angry.'

In 25, the NP *raajuu* 'Raju' has a dative case marker *ko* on it. As a result of which the NP *raajuu* 'Raju' does not agree with the verb. The NP *gussaa* 'anger' agrees with the verb instead.

A sentence can be of two types as a declarative and an interrogative. A declarative sentence can be either an affirmative sentence or a negative one. Structurally speaking, a sentence can be simple or complex. A complex sentence has a subordinate clause in it. The subordinate clause can also be embedded as a compliment of a verb.

Conclusion

This article discusses constituents of a sentence as words and phrases. It talks about the role of lexical and functional categories in making a sentence for a more straightforward understanding of the components. It is aimed at basic information on what makes a sentence.

Notes

1. This article does not prescribe rules for making sentences. Instead, this helps to understand the underlying system of a sentence.
2. Ad positions are prepositions and postpositions put together
3. In grammar, the total number of elements in open class is not known.
4. Sometimes, more information about a noun in a sentence comes through a sentence too. They are modifying clauses.
5. Adjectives occurring to the right of a noun are predicative adjectives.

Suggested Readings

Agnihotri, R.K. (2007). *Hindi: An essential grammar.* Routledge.

Comrie, B. (1989) *Language universal and linguistic typology,* Blackwell.

Cook, V. (1997). *Inside language.* Arnold.

Lyons, J. (1995). *Linguistic semantics: An introduction.* Cambridge University Press.

Pinker, S. (1994). *The language instinct: The new science of language and mind.* Allen Lane.

Singh, R., and Agnihotri, R.K. (1997). *Hindi morphology: A word-based description.* Motilal B.

Trask, L. (1999). *Key concepts in language linguistics.* Routledge.

Trudgill, P. (2000). *Sociolinguistics.* Penguin.

Rajesh Kumar *teaches linguistics in the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences at the Indian Institute of Technology Madras in Chennai (TN).*

thisisrajkumar@gmail.com