23

Syntax: Constituents, Phrases, and Functions

To master the hardest points of English, it helps to see sentences the way linguists do: as hierarchies of **constituents**, each with a *category* (what it is) and a *function* (what it does).

23.1 Categories vs. functions

Categories (form)	Functions (role)
noun phrase (NP): *the old bridge*	subject, object, complement
verb phrase (VP): *has been repaired*	predicate
adjective phrase (AdjP): *very proud of her*	modifier, complement
adverb phrase (AdvP): *quite carefully*	adjunct
prepositional phrase (PP): *under the bridge*	modifier, adjunct, complement
clause (finite or non-finite)	subject, object, modifier, adjunct

The same category can serve many functions: in ***Under the bridge*** *is a good spot*, the PP is the subject; in *We met* ***under the bridge***, it is an adjunct.

23.2 Tests for constituency

How do you know *the old bridge* is a unit? It passes the classic tests:

1. **Substitution:** replace with a pro-form — ***It*** *has been repaired.*
2. **Movement:** shift it as a block — ***The old bridge****, they finally repaired.*
3. **Clefting:** *It was* ***the old bridge*** *that they repaired.*
4. **Question-answer:** *What did they repair?* — ***The old bridge.***
5. **Coordination:** conjoin with a like unit — *the old bridge* ***and the new tunnel****.*

These tests settle real editorial questions, e.g. where a modifier attaches (see ambiguity, Chapter 28).

23.3 The structure of the noun phrase

English NPs follow a strict template:

all the first three remarkable Victorian railway *bridges* ***in Wales that survive***

pre-determiner < determiner < ordinal < cardinal < adjectives (in the order of Chapter 5) < noun modifiers < **head** < PP complements/modifiers < relative clause.

Noun + noun sequences (*railway bridge*, *government policy review*) stack recursively; long stacks tax readers — prefer *review of government policy* to *government policy review process delay* chains.

23.4 The verb phrase and its auxiliaries

Auxiliaries occur in a fixed order:

modal < **perfect** ***have*** < **progressive** ***be*** < **passive** ***be*** < **main verb**

The files ***might have been being copied*** *while we spoke.* (rare but grammatical — all four slots filled)

The first auxiliary is the **operator**: it carries tense, hosts negation (*might* ***not*** *have. . . *), and inverts in questions (***Might*** *the files have been copied?*). When no auxiliary is present, *do* steps in as operator — the **do-support** that runs through Chapters 3 and 6.

23.5 Complements vs. adjuncts

A **complement** is selected and often required by the head; an **adjunct** is optional extra information:

- *She put the keys* ***on the table****.* (PP complement — *put* demands a place: ✗ *She put the keys.*)
- *She found the keys* ***on the table****.* (adjunct — *She found the keys* stands alone.)
- Verbs dictate their complements (**valency**): *rely* ***on****, accuse* ***of****, provide* ***with****, prevent* ***from****.* Valency errors are among the most persistent advanced mistakes: ✗ *discuss about*, *emphasize on*, *comprise of* → ✓ *discuss*, *emphasize*, *comprise* (or *consist of*).

23.6 Subordinate clauses by function

Function	Examples
Subject clause	***That she resigned*** *shocked us.* ***What he said*** *makes sense.* ***To err*** *is human.*
Object clause	*I know* ***(that) you're right****. She asked* ***whether we agreed****. He enjoys* ***cooking for friends****.*
Complement of adjective/noun	*glad* ***that you came****; the fact* ***that costs rose****; a plan* ***to expand***
Adverbial clause	***when the bell rang****;* ***because it was late****;* ***if you insist****;* ***so that no one would see***
Relative clause	modifies a noun (Chapter 12)

Heavy subject clauses are usually **extraposed** with dummy *it*: ***It*** *shocked us* ***that she resigned*** — see Chapter 24.

Usage Note

The *that* of an object clause can be omitted after common verbs (*I think Ø you're right*), but keep it (a) after less frequent verbs (*the minister conceded* ***that****. . . *), (b) when a phrase intervenes (*She said yesterday* ***that****. . . *), and (c) whenever omission invites misreading: ✗ *He believes the witness lied* momentarily misparses *the witness* as object — ✓ *He believes* ***that*** *the witness lied.*

Exercises

Exercise 23.1 Constituency tests

Use at least two tests to decide whether the bracketed string is a constituent.

1. She [gave the letter] to her lawyer.
2. The jury found [the defendant guilty].
3. He spoke [to the students in the hall]. (two readings!)

t the results were faked soon became obvious.

Exercise 23.2 Complement or adjunct?

Say whether the bracketed phrase is a complement or an adjunct.

1. They treated the guests [with great courtesy].
2. They dealt [with the complaint].
3. She became [a judge] [in 2019].
4. He placed the vase [on the shelf] [this morning].

Exercise 23.3 Valency repair

Correct the complementation errors.

1. The panel discussed about the merger for two hours.
2. The kit comprises of ten components.
3. She emphasized on the need for caution.
4. We must prevent the disease to spread.
5. The report provides readers useful comparisons.