

Lecture 02: Phrases and Clauses

A **phrase** is a group of words that acts as a particular part of speech or part of a sentence but doesn't have a verb and its subject. These are the most common types of phrases:

Verb phrases are the most fundamental elements of the majority of languages in the world. In English, the verb phrase contains a main verb and other elements such as auxiliaries, modals, or adverbs. For example:

| | |
|-----------------|----------------------|
| sang | reads quickly |
| will be burning | might not have come. |

Noun phrases are also very important because they can be used in many constituents and also because the notion of noun is found in all languages, and acquired very early by children. In English head-nouns can be preceded by determiners and modifiers (of the head) and can be followed by postmodifiers that complement the head and can be complex phrases or even clauses. For example:

| | |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Peter my best friend | a very good story |
| the house of the man | a house in the countryside |
| the best trip that I ever had | |

Adjective phrases contain an adjective as a head, which can be preceded or followed by modifiers. For example:

| | | | |
|---------|-----------|-----------------|-----------------|
| quick | very fast | incredibly cold | pleasant enough |
| too hot | | to be enjoyable | |

Adverb phrases are similar to adjective phrases but the head is an adverb rather than an adjective. For example:

quite slowly as clearly as I could

Prepositional phrases have a preposition as a head and are followed by a prepositional complement, which is most of the time a noun phrase in English. For example:

| | | |
|------------------|-----------|--------------------------|
| on the sea | to London | by a strange coincidence |
| after our dinner | for me | with his son |

A final type of phrase is an **appositive phrase**. An appositive is a noun (usually) or pronoun (rarely) that gives details or identifies another noun or pronoun. Here is an example:
My favorite book, a dog-eared copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, has accompanied me on many vacations.

Copy is an appositive that refers to *book*. In this sentence, *copy* and the words that go with it—*a dog-eared*—make up the appositive phrase: *a dog-eared copy of To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Clauses

Like a phrase, a clause is used as a particular part of speech or part of a sentence; however, unlike a phrase, a clause has a verb and its subject.

An independent clause (sometimes called a main clause) is a group of words that has a verb and its subject. These words could stand alone as a sentence; that is, the words could make sense if they were by themselves. Here is an example:

The white index cards fell to the floor.

This is one independent clause. It has a subject (cards) and a verb (fell), and it stands alone as a sentence. Now, look at this sentence:

The cards scattered on the floor, and I had to pick them all up.

This is made up of two independent clauses. The first—the cards scattered on the floor—has a subject (cards) and a verb (scattered); it could stand alone as a sentence. The second—I had to pick them all up—has a subject (I) and a verb (had); it also could stand alone as a sentence.

Subordinate Clauses

A subordinate clause (sometimes called a dependent clause) has a verb and its subject, but it can't stand alone as a sentence. In order for a subordinate clause to make sense, it has to be attached to another part (to some independent clause) of the sentence. Look at this example:

I had just alphabetized the cards when they fell on the floor and scattered everywhere.

In this sentence, when they fell on the floor and scattered everywhere is a subordinate clause. It has a subject they and verbs fell and scattered. But read the words alone:

When they fell on the floor and scattered everywhere

So, what about them? What happened next? If the terminology seems complicated, think of the relationship this way: since a subordinate clause can't stand alone, it's secondary (subordinate) to the main clause of the sentence. Or, a subordinate clause relies (is dependent) on another clause (an independent clause) that's in the sentence.

There are three types of subordinate clauses, and each acts in a different way in the sentence.

1. An adjective clause is a subordinate clause that acts as an adjective; it modifies or describes a noun or pronoun. It is sometimes called a relative clause because it often begins with a relative pronoun (who, whose, whom, which, and that).

That man, whom I went to high school with, walked right by as if he'd never met me.

(Whom I went to high school with is an adjective clause describing the word man.)

2. A noun clause is a subordinate clause that acts as a noun; it can be the subject, predicate nominative, appositive, object of a verb, or object of a preposition.

Rocky couldn't believe what he heard at the water fountain.

(What he heard at the water fountain is a noun clause serving as the direct object of he heard.)

3. An adverb clause is a subordinate clause that acts as an adverb; it can modify or describe a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. An adverb clause is introduced by a subordinating conjunction, such as after, although, as (if), because, once, until, and while.

Mr. Sylvester came to visit because he needed some company for the evening.

(Because he needed some company for the evening is an adverb clause that modifies the verb came.)

Remember to use a comma after an introductory adverb clause, as in this example:

Whenever he came to visit, Mr. Sylvester always brought a box of candy for us.