

TEACHING SUBJECT AND PREDICATE:

Things aren't always as simple as they seem!

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Have you ever thought about the fact that you tell your learners that every sentence (here one means a simple sentence) must have a subject and a predicate? That's fine when you are thinking of a sentence such as the following:

(1) *The hungry leopard chased its prey across the veld last night.*

The steps to follow in analysing into subject and predicate are as follows:

A: Find the *verb* ('chased').

B: Ask *who what* performed the action expressed by the verb = the subject ('The hungry leopard').

C: Whatever is left over is the predicate ('chased its prey across the veld last night').

So the answer is:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The hungry leopard	chased its prey across the veld last night

Things get a bit more complicated when the verb is split and straddles the subject as in:

(2) *Last night the hungry leopard chased its prey across the veld.*

Follow exactly the same procedure and you end up with the same answer by putting the predicate parts together in its natural order:

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The hungry leopard	chased its prey across the veld last night

The same applies when the sentence is a question, as in:

(3) *When did the hungry leopard chase its prey across the veld?*

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The hungry leopard	did chase its prey across the veld (when)

(4) *Where did the hungry leopard chase its prey last night?*

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The hungry leopard	did chase its prey (where) last night

(5) *Did the hungry leopard chase its prey across the veld last night?*

SUBJECT	PREDICATE
The hungry leopard	did chase its prey across the veld last night

It is a good strategy to start with sentences like (1); then to go onto sentences like (2), and then progressively onto sentences like (3), (4) and (5).

So far so good: Each of the above sentences contains a subject and a predicate. But what about the following?

(6) *A: What chased the prey across the veld at night?*

B: The hungry leopard.

B's answer has a subject – but where is the predicate?

Now consider the following:

(7) *A: Where did the hungry leopard chase its prey last night?*

B: Across the veld.

(8) *A: When did the hungry people chase its prey across the veld?*

B: Last night.

In each case B's answer contains part of the predicate – but where is the rest of the predicate, and where is the subject?

How do we reconcile these sentences with the rule that a sentence must consist of a subject and a (whole) predicate? Or do we say that they are not sentences? If so, how can we say that we use sentences to communicate in language?

In Linguistics, we would say that the rule that a sentence consists of a subject and a predicate is true of the 'deep' (underlying) structure of every sentence (or clause). In the 'surface' (actual) structure of a sentence this may not be true. The idea is that, when we compose a sentence, we draft a deep structure in our minds which contains all the necessary elements, in the 'normal' order. We then transform the sentence (in our minds) into a surface structure, which may or may not contain all the elements. We then deliver the surface structure in speech or writing. When our reader or listener reads or hears the sentence we have produced, their mind re-creates the deep structure from the context; otherwise a fragment such as 'last night' on its own would not make sense. It makes sense because in our minds it is part of a bigger structure – a full sentence. Explaining all of this not only helps to understand the whole issue of subject and predicate; it also provides some insight into how we produce and understand sentences, which makes it not so much a sterile, technical exercise.

One can picture the situation as follows:

SPEAKER/WRITER: Creates deep structure – transforms into surface structure (which may be the same as the deep structure; or it might omit parts or move parts around).

LISTENER/HEARER: Hears/reads surface structure produced by speaker/writer – transforms this back to deep structure.

When we analyse a given (surface structure) sentence, we do the same – we re-create the deep structure, and indicate any missing bits in brackets. Thus the analysis for sentence (5), (6) and (7) would be the same as for (1):

	SUBJECT	PREDICATE
(5)	[The hungry leopard]	chased its prey across the veld last night
(6)	[The hungry leopard]	[chased its prey] across the veld [last night]
(7)	[The hungry leopard]	[chased its prey across the veld] last night

This is typical of conversation, where we omit the obvious bits of a sentence to avoid repetition and to sound more chatty. But it still fits the basic rule that a sentence consists of a subject and a predicate.

Next one would need to move onto non-simple sentences (i.e. sentences consisting of a number of simple sentences combined together – each of the simple sentences is now called a ‘clause’). Here is an example:

(9) *When the hungry leopard chased its prey across the veld at night, it tripped.*

The clauses of a non-simple sentence each consist of a subject and a predicate, with some of them introduced by a conjunction. Each clause is analysed in the same way as a simple sentence:

	CONJUNCTION	SUBJECT	PREDICATE
Clause 1	when	the hungry leopard	chased its prey across the veld last night
Clause 2		it	tripped

Things are more complicated if one uses the conjunction ‘and’ and the subject is omitted, as in:

(10) *When the hungry leopard chased its prey across the veld at night, it tripped and fell into a ditch.*

This once again seems to flout the opening statement of this article that every sentence (here clause) consists of a subject and a predicate. As we said above, we would say that that is true of the ‘deep’ (underlying) structure of every sentence (or clause). In the ‘surface’ (actual) structure of a sentence, the subject could be omitted in a clause introduced by ‘and’ if it is the same as the subject of the clause that precedes it (here ‘it’). So the analysis of the sentence is the same, except that one inserts the understood subject into the relevant clause:

	CONJUNCTION	SUBJECT	PREDICATE
Clause 1	when	the hungry leopard	chased its prey across the veld last night
Clause 2		it	tripped
Clause 3	and	[it]	fell into a ditch.

So one has to teach that all (simple) sentences (and clauses) consist of a subject and a predicate, but this is not always the case in the way we say or write a sentence: sometimes we omit the subject, the predicate or parts of the predicate. This allows for what we teach our learners to relate to the reality of speech and writing, and not just to sentences composed for teaching purposes.

Underlying all of this is the basic teaching principle for teaching grammar: Start with easy, obvious structures, and then gradually progress to more complicated or tricky ones.