

THE STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF THE SENTENCE IN ENGLISH

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Abstract: This article explores the structural organization and communicative function of the English sentence as a fundamental syntactic unit. The study analyzes the sentence from both grammatical and functional perspectives, highlighting its role in expressing complete thoughts, establishing logical relations, and performing communicative acts in discourse.

Keywords: sentence structure, syntax, sentence function, communicative types, type of the sentences, clause, sentence pattern, transformational grammar, functional grammar, systemic functional linguistics, English syntax, information structure, grammatical relations.

The sentence is the central unit of syntax and the primary means of communication in English. It organizes linguistic material into a coherent structure capable of expressing propositions, emotions, or intentions. The study of sentence structure and function is therefore essential for understanding how meaning is constructed in English grammar and discourse. In modern linguistics, the sentence is defined as a grammatical construction that contains at least one subject-predicate relationship and expresses a complete idea. Structural linguists (Chomsky, 1957; Quirk et al., 1985) emphasize its syntactic form, while functional linguists (Halliday, 1994; Thompson, 2004) focus on its communicative purpose.

Structurally, English sentences can be classified according to their composition and clause organization.

Table 1. Comparative analysis of structural and functional approaches to the sentence in English

Criterion	Structural approach	Functional approach
Main focus	The grammatical composition and hierarchical arrangement of sentence elements (subject, predicate, object, etc.).	The communicative purpose and pragmatic role of the sentence in discourse.
Representative scholars	Noam Chomsky, Quirk, Huddleston, Biber.	Halliday, Thompson, Leech.

Core concept	Syntax as a system of rules governing sentence construction.	Language as a tool for communication and meaning-making.
Unit of analysis	Clauses and constituents (noun phrase, verb phrase, etc.).	Speech functions (statement, question, command, exclamation).
Classification principle	Based on clause type and structural complexity: simple, compound, complex, compound-complex.	Based on communicative intention: declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamatory.
Analytical aim	To describe sentence forms and grammatical relations.	To analyze how sentences perform social and communicative functions.
Sentence example	<i>The students completed the task successfully.</i> → Focus on subject–predicate relation.	<i>Please complete the task carefully.</i> → Focus on directive function.
Relation to grammar	Descriptive and rule-based; highlights syntactic accuracy.	Contextual and pragmatic; highlights communicative effectiveness.
Advantages	Ensures grammatical correctness and structural clarity.	Enhances understanding of meaning, intention, and interaction.
Limitations	May overlook context and meaning.	May underestimate formal grammatical precision.
Application in teaching	Useful for grammar instruction and syntax analysis.	Effective for developing communicative competence.

A simple sentence consists of a single independent clause containing a subject and a predicate.

Example: *The students are studying linguistics.*

This type of sentence expresses one complete thought and forms the basis for more complex structures.

A compound sentence joins two or more independent clauses by coordinating conjunctions (for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so) or semicolons.

Example: *The students attended the lecture, and they took detailed notes.*

Each clause is grammatically independent but semantically connected.

A complex sentence combines an independent clause with one or more dependent clauses introduced by subordinating conjunctions (because, although, when, if, etc.).

Example: *The students succeeded because they worked diligently.*

This structure reflects hierarchical relationships and logical subordination.

A compound-complex sentence contains at least two independent clauses and one dependent clause.

Example: *The students who studied hard passed the exam, and they felt proud of their achievement.*

Functionally, English sentences are classified according to the type of speech act they perform.

Declaratives express statements or opinions.

Example: *Language is a social phenomenon.*

They are the most frequent type in academic and informational discourse.

Interrogatives ask questions and seek information.

Example: *What is the function of syntax in communication?*

They are essential for interaction and knowledge exchange.

Imperatives issue commands, requests, or suggestions.

Example: *Read the following passage carefully.*

They express directive force and are common in instructional contexts.

Exclamatories express strong emotions or attitudes.

Example: *How beautiful this sentence sounds!*

They add expressive intensity to discourse.

The English sentence performs multiple communicative and structural roles:

Informative function – conveying factual information.

Interrogative function – eliciting responses or clarification.

Directive function – influencing the behavior of the listener.

Emotive function – expressing feelings or evaluation.

Stylistic function – contributing to the overall tone and rhythm of discourse.

According to Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar, each sentence operates within three metafunctions: ideational (representing reality), interpersonal (establishing relationships), and textual (organizing information).

Modern English demonstrates a variety of sentence patterns, typically categorized by verb valency and complement structure:

S + V (Birds fly.)

S + V + O (Students read books.)

S + V + C (The weather became cold.)

S + V + IO + DO (He gave me a pen.)

S + V + O + C (They elected him president.)

These patterns reveal the syntactic regularity of English and serve as the foundation for sentence transformation processes such as passivization, nominalization, and subordination.

Transformational-generative grammar views sentences as surface realizations of underlying deep structures. Transformations (e.g., from active to passive, or from statement to question) demonstrate the flexibility of English syntax.

Example:

Active: The teacher explained the rule.

Passive: The rule was explained by the teacher.

The structure and function of the English sentence represent an integrated system balancing grammatical form and communicative purpose. Understanding this dual nature enables linguists, teachers, and students to analyze language use more effectively and develop syntactic awareness in both comprehension and production.

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