

Introduction to English Syntax

Syntax studies the structure and classification of phrases, clauses, and sentences. Moreover, it indicates the ways in which words are arranged to form larger structures than words.

Morphology and Syntax are closely interrelated and that is why sometimes it is difficult to deal with the former without taking into account the latter.

Language consists of smaller and larger linguistic units such as:

Sentence - **is the unit of the highest rank**

↓

Clause

↓

Phrase

↓

Word

↓

Morpheme – **is the unit of the lowest rank**

A linguistic unit of higher rank usually contains one or more units of the next lower rank.

Thus, for example: a sentence contains one or more clauses, a clause contains one or more phrases, a phrase contains one or more words, a word contains one or more morpheme.

Or we may put it the other way round:

Morphemes make up or constitute words: **on+look+er+s, play+er+s, en+courag+ing**. Then words make up phrases, e.g. **the onlookers, on the stand, their players, were encouraging**. And finally, phrases arranged in a certain order constitute clauses (simple sentences).

e.g. **The onlookers on the stand were encouraging their players.**

A sentence is the largest grammatical and the smallest communication unit which expresses a more or less complete thought and has a definite grammatical form and intonation.

Clauses are the principle units of which sentences are composed. A clause is defined as a group of words with its own subject and predicate. A sentence contains at least one main clause. It may also contain subordinate clauses.

A phrase may be defined as a single word or a group of words that together function as a unit and which does not have its own subject and predicate.

The word is the smallest naming unit. Words such as hopeful, colourless, sympathize, though consisting of more than one morpheme each, are the smallest units that name a certain property or certain action.

The morpheme is the smallest meaningful unit in the language. It means, it is a part of a word and it cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts.

Phrase and its types

The phrase is a grammatical unit that lies between the clause and the word.

A phrase may consist of only one word called the **Headword (H)** or it may consist of the headword with one or more words clustered around it and dependent on it, these are called **Modifiers (M)**. In the former case the phrase is **simple**, in the latter it is **complex**.

A simple phrase may become complex by expansion, i.e. by adding other words.

e.g. **students**

those **students**

those hardworking **students**

those extremely hardworking **students**

those extremely hardworking **students** in our class.

The words dependent on the headword, i.e. modifiers may either precede the headword or follow it. Those preceding the headword are **premodifiers (PreM)**, those following it are **postmodifiers (PostM)**.

We can also say that premodifiers occur to the left of the headword and postmodifiers to the right of it.

The headword is always **obligatory**, there cannot be a phrase without a headword. Premodifiers and postmodifiers are **optional**, i.e. the headword may be accompanied by them or not. A headword may have an indefinite number of premodifiers and postmodifiers.

The structure of the phrase may be expressed by the following formula:

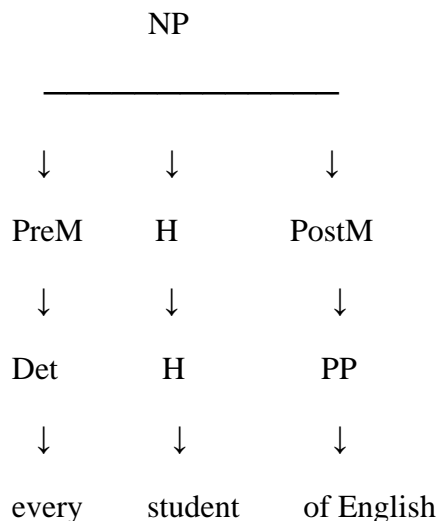
(PreM) H (PostM)

The brackets denote that premodifiers and postmodifiers are optional.

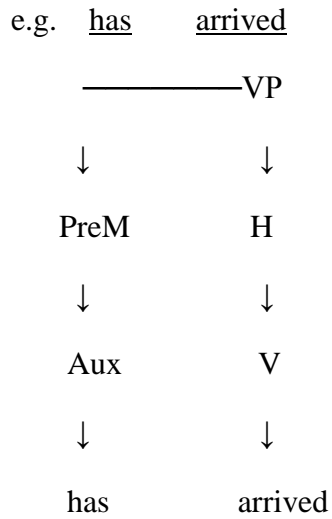
There are five types of phrases such as:

1. **Noun Phrases (NP)** – the headword is primarily a noun or a pronoun.

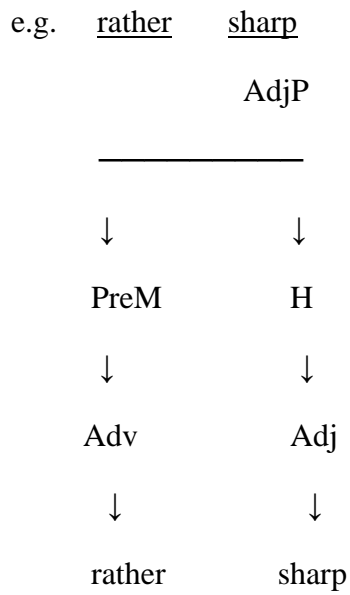
e.g. every student of English



2. **Verb Phrases (VP)** – the headword is a lexical verb.



3. **Adjective Phrases (AdjP)** – the headword is an adjective.



4. **Adverbial Phrases (AdvP)** – the headword is an adverb.

e.g. very quickly

AdvP

—————

↓

↓

PreM

H

↓

↓

Adv

Adv

↓

↓

very

quickly

5. Prepositional phrases (PP)

e.g. in the middle

PP

