

Extension exercises

Chapter 20: Sentence constituents: basic principles | Comments

Exploring English

The aim of this exercise is not to lead to particular conclusions about the grammar we use in particular kinds of text, but to raise general awareness of some of the ways we construct sentences. Your precise answers to this question will depend on the texts or extracts from texts you choose.

It is likely that this exercise will reveal how rarely, on the whole, we use simple clauses – most sentences or spoken utterances are complex sentences, which involve some form of subordination (for example, *I think that you should stop now.*) or embedding (for example, *Give the prize to the first person to finish.*), or some changes to the ‘basic’ order of clause constituents. It is also likely to reveal how often we place adverbials in positions other than at the end of the clause.

Comparing grammars

The aim of this exercise is for you to become (more) aware that there many different ways of describing sentence constituents and word order. Your precise answers to this question will depend on the reference grammars you choose.

Although they may still differ in important points of detail (some grammars, for example, include a variety of kinds of subordinate clauses as objects), and although they may use terminology in different ways (for example, some grammars refer to and classify adverbials as adjuncts, conjuncts and disjuncts, and some refer to everything that can follow different kinds of transitive and linking verbs as complements), there is generally rough agreement about what constitutes the basic constituents of sentences in grammars written for learners and teachers of English. In general, the more academic the grammar, the more likely it is to use terms that are not used here, and the more likely it is to make distinctions that aren’t made here.

Learners’ and teachers’ grammars published in Europe generally pay relatively little attention to sentence structure and word order. Perhaps they assume that the target users will be speakers of European languages in which sentence structure is relatively similar to that of English. Books produced outside Western Europe may pay more detailed and systematic attention to this aspect of grammar. They may make detailed comparisons between the structure of English and another language (for example, English and Chinese).

Course materials

A quick glance at the Contents page of coursebooks produced in Western Europe usually reveals a preoccupation with aspects of the verb phrase (especially tenses). Although some attention is usually paid to the order of words within this and also within the noun phrase or in question forms, there is often no systematic treatment of sentence constituents and word order.

Coursebooks produced for specific regional markets (for example, China or Japan) may pay more attention to this aspect of grammar, particularly if they use the learners' first language and are written by or in collaboration with teachers from the learners' language community. These materials sometimes include very perceptive analyses of differences between the constituent structures of the two languages.