

THE SENTENCE

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1. Introduction

“Sentence” is a commonly used word. Many people think they “know” what it is. However, few can define it correctly and there are many who have challenges regarding constructing correct sentences. In this lecture, I define and elaborate on the concept as well as related notions that have a bearing on sentence such as “word”, “phrase” and “clause”. I also provide different ways of categorising sentences using parameters such as their internal structure, their function, and the order of their internal constituents or units. I then systematically exemplify each sentence type and sub-type. Finally, I state why it is important for a writer to have a good command of the various types of sentences.

2. Words, Phrases and Clauses

A “word” may be defined as a stand-alone sequence of sounds (in speech) or letters (in written language) which has meaning in a particular language. Consequently, sequences of sounds (here represented by letters) such as “boy”, “woman”, “them” and “cut” are words in the English language. Likewise, “mchungwa”, “kucheka”, “nyinyi”, “nyekundu” and “punda-milia” are words in Kiswahili.

A “phrase” is a group of words that function as a unit in grammar. In the expression “the three brilliant girls are travelling to Mombasa”, there are two phrases. All the words in “the three brilliant girls” collectively name something and the words “are travelling to Mombasa” say something about what has been named. It correct to say, therefore, that the expression “the three brilliant girls are travelling to Mombasa” consists of two phrases, namely, “the three brilliant girls” and “are travelling to Mombasa”. The first of the two phrases is called a “noun phrase” (or subject) and the second phrase is known as a “verb phrase” (or predicate).

A “clause” is a group of words that expresses a complete thought. “The children are in class” is a group of words that expresses a complete thought; therefore, it is a clause. Likewise, “Shaaban Robert ni mwandishi maarufu” expresses a complete thought and, consequently, it is a clause.

As can be seen from the two examples of clauses, a clause must contain both a noun phrase (or subject) and a verb phrase (or predicate)

3. Definition of a Sentence

A sentence is a word (in Bantu languages) or a group of words that expresses a complete thought. The group may consist of only few words or it may be made up of many words. It must consist of at least two phrases, namely, the noun phrase (or subject) and the verb phrase (or predicate)

The noun phrase (that is, the subject) must contain a noun or a subject personal pronoun. The noun may be alone or it may be accompanied by another word or words that qualify or say more about other words. When the position of the subject is occupied by a pronoun, the pronoun stands alone since, unlike a noun, a pronoun cannot be qualified by another word. At the very minimum, a verb phrase (that is, predicate) has to contain a verb. However, besides the verb, it may contain other units.

4. Classification of Sentences According to Structure

Sentences are divided into three types according to their internal structure. The three types are:

- 1) Simple sentence;
- 2) Compound sentence; and
- 3) Complex sentence.

A simple sentence is the one that expresses a single thought. It has only one subject and one predicate. Now, it is beginning to appear as though there is some confusion between the definition of a simple sentence and that of a clause. We said that a clause is a group of words that expresses a complete thought. We are also saying that a simple sentence is a sentence that expresses a single thought. The question that one might ask is, “How can we tell apart a simple sentence and a clause?” Well, we cannot. A clause functioning alone (that is, without combining with other clauses,) is simultaneously a simple sentence. In other words, a simple sentence is a single clause (and a clause is a simple sentence).

Below are examples of simple sentences:

- 1) Mrs. Rono was very articulate in her speech.
- 2) Kamau, Mganga and Agesa have left for Mombasa by Kenya Airways.
- 3) She will be the president of this country five years from now.

When a sentence has more than one thought, it is said to have more than one clause. Each thought requires a clause, that is, a set of one noun phrase (subject) and one verb phrase (predicate). Such a sentence, that is, one which has more than one thought, that is to say, one with more than one clause, is said to be either a compound or a complex sentence. When a sentence has two or more clauses and those clauses are at par with each other, that is, they are of equal importance, the sentence is called a compound sentence. The following are illustrations of compound sentences:

- 1) I went to school but I did not find the other students.
- 2) He came back and gave us this letter.
- 3) I will sleep here and travel to Moyale tomorrow.

Sentence 1) has two clauses, that is, “I went to school” and “(I) did not find other students”. The information in each of the two clauses is of equal weight or importance. Likewise, the two pieces of information contained in Sentence 2), that is, “he came back”

and “(he) gave her this letter” are of equal importance. The same can be said of Sentence 3) where the pieces of information “I will sleep here” and “(I) will travel to Moyale tomorrow” are of equal weight.

If a sentence has two clauses and one of the clauses consists of information of less weight than the information in another clause or other clauses in the same sentence, the sentence is said to be complex. Examples of complex sentences are:

- 1) Cheronon, who was born in Kaptagat, has been appointed an ambassador.
- 2) I have read *The Trouble with Nigeria* which was written by Chinua Achebe
- 3) Mwangangi wrote several books when he was young.

In Sentence 1, the clause “Cheronon wa born in Kaptagat” is mere detail. The main message of the sentence is “Cheronon has been appointed an ambassador”. The clause carrying the information “Cheronon has been appointed an ambassador” is referred to as the main clause because it bears the main information whereas the clause carrying the message “Cheronon was born in Kaptagat” is called a sub-ordinate clause because it comprises sub-ordinate, that is, “junior” information.

5. Classification of Sentences According to Function

Sentences can also be further classified according to their function. The classification yields four sentence types, namely:

- 1) Declarative sentences
- 2) Interrogative sentences
- 3) Imperative sentences
- 4) Conditional sentences

Below, I give three examples of each type. For each set of three sentences, clearly note the function indicated by the name of the sentence type.

Declarative sentences:

- 1) The students are travelling tonight.
- 2) I sent the letter to the Managing Director.
- 3) I sold the fruits and used the money to buy shoes.

Interrogative sentences:

- 1) Did yesterday's meeting have a quorum?
- 2) Why didn't you read the novel that I recommended?
- 3) Are you or are you not going to the clinic?

Imperative Sentences:

- 1) Stand up and walk towards the door!
- 2) Stop it, now!
- 3) Run to the shop and bring me a tray of eggs!

Conditional Sentences:

- 1) If you don't read adequately, you will not attain good grades.
- 2) If I knew, I would have left early.
- 3) They will find it if they look hard enough.

6. Sub-Classification of Sentences According to Structure and Function

When we combine the two types of sentence classifications, that is, classification according to the sentence structure (simple, compound and complex sentences) with the classification according to sentence function (declarative, interrogative, imperative and conditional sentences), we get nine sentence sub-types. These are:

- 1) Simple declarative sentences
- 2) Simple interrogative sentences
- 3) Simple imperative sentences
- 4) Compound declarative sentences
- 5) Compound interrogative sentences
- 6) Compound imperative sentences
- 7) Complex declarative sentences
- 8) Complex interrogative sentences
- 9) Complex imperative sentences

It is important to note that we cannot have a “simple conditional sentence” because a conditional sentence must consist of a *condition* (also referred to as *protasis*) and a *consequence* (also called *apodosis*) which requires a conditional sentence to have two clauses. We can also not have a “compound conditional sentence” because, in a conditional sentence, the *consequence* (which is the main information) is carried by a main clause and the *condition* (extra information) is found in a sub-ordinate clause. All conditional sentences are complex sentences. However, since of necessity conditional sentences are complex, is superfluous or unnecessary to use the adjective “complex” before the term “conditional sentence. So, we do not encounter the expression “complex conditional sentences” any more than we encounter the expression “male boy”!

Let me give three illustrations for each of the nine sub-types of sentences beginning with simple declarative sentences:

- 1) I swam yesterday.
- 2) Leshore has a beautiful car.
- 3) All the children are already in class.

Simple interrogative sentences:

- 1) Has the baby eaten?

- 2) Have you seen Asha?
- 3) Are you coming with us?

Simple imperative sentences:

- 1) Stand up!
- 2) Bring all the books!
- 3) Eat your food, now!

Compound declarative sentences:

- 1) I went to his house but I did not find him
- 2) Charo came but he did not bring the money
- 3) I bought some meat, cooked it and ate before 1.00 pm.

Compound Interrogative sentences:

- 1) Did you clean the house and wash the car?
- 2) Are spending the night in Arusha or going all the way to Dodoma?
- 3) As she come in Washington, D.C. or still touring Ontario?

Compound imperative sentences

- 1) Pick your books, go to the library and do the assignment.
- 2) Leave the office and come to the meeting.
- 3) Go to the airport, pick the visitors and take them to the hotel.

Complex declarative sentences:

- 1) Kilonzo who was born in Makueni, has been appointed the Managing Director of the Tana River Management Authority.
- 2) I have just read the book that Lekolol wrote that year.

3) This is the boy who wrote the winning essay.

Complex Interrogative Sentences:

- 1) Is this the woman who won the medal?
- 2) Have they paid the money which they borrowed last year?
- 3) Have all the students who excelled in the examination last year been admitted to universities?

Complex imperative sentences:

- i) Read the book which the teacher gave you!
- ii) Take to the meeting venue the members who have arrived!
- iii) Show me the man who stole the child's bicycle!

7. Other Classifications of Sentences

Sentences can also be classified in terms of the arrangement of subject (doer of action) and the direct object. In accordance with this classification, English has two types of sentences, namely:

- 1) Active sentences; and
- 2) Passive sentences.

In active sentences, the logical subject precedes the direct object. The three examples below illustrate active sentences:

- 1) The children have done their school work well.
- 2) The traders have sold all the goods.
- 3) We gave the book to Fatuma yesterday

In Passive sentences, the direct object precedes the subject as shown below:

- 1) The letter was read by the secretary.
- 2) The car was driven by the new driver.
- 3) The keys were given to the guard by the Chief Security Officer.

In the first two passive sentences, the direct object in each sentence, that is “the letter” and “the car” come before the “the secretary” and “the new driver” respectively. In the third sentence, where there is both a direct and an indirect object, that is “the keys” and “the guard” respectively, the two objects precede the subject “the Chief Security Officer”.

Please note that active sentences are said to have “active voice” and the passive sentences “passive voice”.

There are other sentence types besides the ones described above. Sometimes, the writer may want to communicate not merely a message but also to convey it a particular, tone, focus or emphasis. Achieving such an intention may call for a specific sentence structure different from the types we have seen above.

Whereas prepositions are ordinarily found within the predicate in active voice sentences, it is possible, to begin a sentence with a prepositional phrase. Below are two examples in which prepositional phrases begin sentences:

- 1) In her left hand, she held a small green handbag.
- 2) Beside the road, they stopped to decide on the next course of action.

To make a general statement one may say, “He is a university professor”. However, if there a doubting Thomas contesting the correctness of the statement, to emphatically confirm the validity of the statement, the speaker may say: “A university professor, he is”. More emphasis may be brought in by adding a connector of emphasis “indeed”, and hence say:

- 1) Indeed, a university professor, he is.
- 2) A university professor, he is, indeed.

Examples of similar sentences include:

- 1) Drunk and disorderly, he was.
- 2) Drunk and disorderly, he was, indeed.
- 3) Indeed, drunk and disorderly, he was.
- 4) Dirty, they were!
- 5) Dirty, they were, indeed!
- 6) Indeed, dirty, they were!

Whereas it may sound a contradiction in terms, it is possible to have declarative questions. Declarative sentences make statements whereas questions in another term for interrogative sentences. In spite of this clear dichotomy between the two, they may be combined to create a question which, in terms of the structure at the levels of words, they are like statements but they end up being questions due to a rising intonation at the end at the end of the expression. Thus:

- i) You are going to the market later today?
- ii) You were a student at Alliance High School in the 70's?
- iii) You said you woke up before six in the morning?

One may create elliptic sentences by clipping part of the declarative questions. The clipped part, usually the 2nd person pronoun, can be inferred from the context and, therefore, clipping does not interfere with the clarity of the sentence. The following three questions illustrate elliptic sentences:

- i) Reading very hard for you forth-coming exams?
- ii) Coming with us to the church tomorrow?

iii) Enjoyed your trip to the People's Republic of China?

8. Conclusion

One characteristic of a poor style is monotony. Monotony causes boredom among readers and, sometimes, leads to a reader giving up reading a text. To avoid monotony in their writing, good writers strive to create variety in their text. To achieve this end, writers employ several strategies. One such strategy is to diversify sentence types. They alternate from one sentence type to another in a manner that creates dynamism in the text. Such a text is more attractive to a reader than a text that feels static.

A writer will not be able to diversify sentence types unless they can move with ease from one sentence type to the next. It is, therefore, important to understand and to practice using different sentence types so as to make creating a dynamic text second nature to the writer.

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