

THE SENTENCE

By Kithaka wa Mberia

Introduction

“Sentence” is a commonly used word in both ordinary conversations and in technical discourses. Many people think they “know” the meaning of the word. However, few can define it correctly. In this article, I define and elaborate on the concept as well as other related concepts such as the phrase and the clause. I also provide different ways of categorising sentences using parameters such as their internal structure, their function, and the order of internal constituents or units. I systematically exemplify each sentence type. Finally, I state why it is important for a writer to have a good command of the various types.

Definition of a Sentence

A sentence is a word (as it is the case in some instances in Bantu languages) or a group of words that expresses a complete thought. The group may consist of a few words or it may be made up of many words. Every sentence must have at least two main constituents or parts. The two parts are named after the functions they perform in the sentence. Accordingly, they are referred to as the subject and the predicate.

It is important to note that in Kiswahili and other Bantu languages, it is possible to have a sentence made up of only one word. The single-word sentence will still contain the essential parts of a sentence, that is, the subject and the predicate. That is possible because, a conjugated verb form in a Bantu language, contains not only a verb root but also a subject pronoun and tense. Thus:

Amefrika - she/ he/ it (animate)

Zimebomoka – They (for instance, houses) have collapsed

are complete sentences in Kiswahili the fact that each consists of a single word notwithstanding. In this article I focus on the English sentence.

I have pointed out that a sentence has to have a subject and a predicate. The subject must contain a noun or a pronoun. The noun may be alone or it may be accompanied by a word or words that qualify it.

As we learned in a previous lecture when we discussed parts of speech, a noun names a person, a thing, a place or an idea about which something is being said. The predicate expresses something about the subject.

Types of Sentences

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

- 1) Simple sentence
- 2) Compound sentence
- 3) Complex sentence

A simple sentence is the one that has only one subject and one predicate. When a sentence has more than one set of subject and predicate, it is said to be either a compound or complex sentence. When a sentence has two or more sets of subject and predicate, in other words, when it has two or more clauses and those clauses are at par with each other or they are of equal importance, the sentence is called a compound sentence. However, if one of the subject and predicate sets is more important than one or more such sets, the sentence is said to be complex.

Examples of simple sentences:

- (i) Mrs. Rono was very articulate in her speech.
- (ii) Kamau, Mganga and Agesa have left for Mombasa by Kenya Airways.
- (iii) She will be the president of this country five years from today.

Examples of compound sentences:

- i) I went to school but I did not find the other pupils
- ii) He came back and gave us this letter
- iii) I will sleep here and travel to Moyale tomorrow.

Examples of complex sentences:

- i) Cherono, who was born in Kaptagat, has been appointed an ambassador.
- ii) I have read the book which Soyinka wrote last year.
- iii) Mwangangi wrote several books when he was young.

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

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

Declarative sentences:

- i) The students are travelling tonight
- ii) I sent the letter to the Managing Director
- iii) I sold the fruits and used the money to buy medication

Interrogative sentences:

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

Imperative Sentences:

- i) Stand up and walk to the door!
- i) Stop it, now!
- ii) Run to the shop and bring me a tray of eggs!

Conditional Sentences:

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

When we combine the two types of sentence classifications, that is classification according to the sentence structure and classification according to sentence function, we get ten sentence 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
- 10) Conditional sentences (which are, by their nature, complex).

Simple declarative sentences:

- i) I swam yesterday
- ii) Leshore has a beautiful car
- iii) All the children are already in class

Simple interrogative sentences:

- i) Has the baby eaten?
- ii) Where in the city is the General Post office located?
- iii) Are you coming with us to teach?

Simple imperative sentences:

- i) Stand up!
- ii) Bring all the books!
- iii) Eat your food, now!

Compound declarative sentences:

- i) I went to his house but I did not find him
- ii) Charo came but he did not bring the money
- iii) I bought some meat, cooked and ate before 1:00 o'clock

Complex declarative sentences:

- i) Kilonzo who was borne in Makueni, has been appointed the Managing Director of the Tana River Management Authority
- ii) I have just read the book that Lekolol wrote that year
- iii) This is the boy who wrote the winning essay

Complex Interrogative Sentences:

- i) Is this the woman who won the medal?
- ii) Have we been paid the money which they borrowed last year
- iii) 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 the members who have arrived to the meeting venue!
- iii) Show me the man who stole the child's bicycle!

Of the four sentence types according to function – that is: declarative, interrogative, imperative and conditional sentences, only the first three can be qualified as simple, compound or complex. Such qualification is not possible for conditional sentences. By their very nature, conditional sentences are complex. Consequently, we cannot qualify them as either simple or compound. To do so would be redundant.

In a conditional sentence, the condition (protasis) is the subordinate clause whereas the consequence (apodosis) is the main clause.

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

- 1) Active sentences
- 2) Passive sentences

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

- i) The children have done their school work well.
- ii) The traders have sold all the goods.
- iii) We gave the book to Fatuma yesterday

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

- i) The letter was read by the secretary
- ii) The car was driven by the new driver
- iii) The keys were given to the guard by the Chief Security Officer of the Company.

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 of the company".

Please note that active sentences are also referred to as active voice and the passive sentences as passive voice.

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

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

- i) In her left hand, she held a small green handbag.
- iii) 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 validity of the statement, to emphatically confirm the truth of

the validity of the statement, the speaker may say: "A university professor, he is". More emphasis may be added by adding the connector of emphasis "indeed" thus:

- i) Indeed, a university professor, he is.
- ii) A university professor, he is, indeed.

Other examples of similar sentences include:

- i) Drunk and disorderly, he was.
- ii) Drunk and disorderly, he was, indeed.
- iii) Indeed, drunk and disorderly, he was.
- iv) Dirty, they were!
- v) Dirty, they were, indeed!
- vi) 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. 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?

Conclusion

One characteristic of 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 is static.

A writer will not be able to diversify a text in terms of 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 to an extent that makes creating a dynamic text second nature for the writer.

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