

Modern English Syntax

C. T. Onions

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New edition of *An Advanced English Syntax*, prepared from the author's materials by

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Preface

Charles Talbut Onions, last surviving editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, editor of *A Shakespeare Glossary* (1911), the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (1933), and the *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1966), and long *facile princeps* of English lexicographers, died in January 1965, aged 91. For many years, almost up to the time of his death, he had been making notes for a revised edition of *An Advanced English Syntax*; among his literary remains were six copies of the book more or less heavily annotated, a number of sections apparently in final draft, and more than 500 scraps of paper, of every shape and size, each containing anything from one to several dozen memoranda of words, phrases, or constructions.

From this bulk of largely undigested material I have tried to make, within the limits prescribed, something approximating to the book that Dr Onions might himself have produced; to allow room for new material I have omitted the final sections, on parataxis and hypotaxis. In this undertaking I have been helped by Dr Onions's executors, who kindly gave me unrestricted use of the manuscript material, and by the publishers, who readily acceded to my suggestions; to both I offer my thanks.

Brasenose College
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Original preface to *An Advanced English Syntax*

The object of this short treatise is to present the main facts of current English syntax in a systematic form in accordance with the principles of the Parallel Grammar Series. The introduction is designed to provide a full scheme of sentence analysis. The rest of the book—the syntax proper—is arranged in two parts. Part I contains a treatment of syntactical phenomena based on the analysis of sentences. Part II classifies the uses of forms. Cross references indicate how the two parts of syntax supplement one another. . . .

While dealing mainly with the language of the present day, I have endeavoured to make the book of use to the student of early modern English by giving an account of some notable archaic and obsolete constructions. Historical matter has been introduced wherever it was considered necessary for the understanding of important points in syntax-development or seemed to add interest to the treatment of particular constructions.

Of the existing grammars which I have consulted, Dr Sweet's has proved the most enlightening and suggestive.

My connexion with the *Oxford English Dictionary* has given me facilities for research which I should otherwise not have had, and I wish to thank the editors of that work for the assistance which they have, directly or indirectly, afforded me in my task.

To Dr Henry Bradley I am especially indebted for valuable suggestions and emendations, in both the manuscript and the proof stages of the book.

To Dr Sonnenschein, my former professor, I am grateful for his constant help and stimulating criticism throughout my work.

Oxford,
10th September, 1903

C. T. Onions

It is customary to recognize

Three main periods of English

Old English (abbreviated OE.), from about AD 700 to about AD 1100. Period of full vowels in the endings, e.g. *faran*, *sunu*, *wulfas*.

Middle English (abbreviated ME.), from about AD 1100 to about AD 1500. The full vowels in the endings are weakened to one uniform unstressed *e*, e.g. *faren*, *sone*, *wolves*.

Modern English (abbreviated ModE.), from about AD 1500 to the present day. The unstressed *e* in the endings has become silent, and has often disappeared from the written word, e.g. *fare*, *son*, *wolves*.

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Introduction

Analysis of sentences

1 Speech is made up of sentences.

A **sentence** [Latin *sententia* 'meaning'] is a group of words, or sometimes a single word, which makes—

(i) a **statement**; e.g. I am an Englishman.

or (ii) a **command** or an **expression of wish**; e.g.

Open the window. Let us go.

or (iii) a **question**; e.g. How do you do?

or (iv) an **exclamation**; e.g. How it thunders! What a blow!

Compare §§48–57.

Many single words or self-contained groups of words, of any size, may perform the work of a sentence; e.g. Speaking; Thanks; Down!; Sh!; Out with it!; Farewell; Goodbye; What?; Murder!; Nonsense!; Splendid!

'Yes' and 'no' are long-established sentence-words; they are words *equivalent* to sentences; e.g. 'Will you come?'—'Yes' (= I will come). Other words which may be equivalent to sentences will be mentioned below (§4).

2 Analysis means *breaking up* [Greek *ana* 'up' and *lysis* 'breaking'], and is the name given to the process of breaking up a sentence into its parts. On pp. 1 to 22 it will be shown how to *analyse* sentences.

There are sentences in English and other languages which it is very difficult, or impossible, to analyse grammatically. But analysis may be applied to the majority of sentences and without it we should be unable to recognize the peculiarities of those sentences which cannot be analysed.

3 The first stage in the analysis of a sentence is into:

- 1 the **subject** 2 the **predicate**.

The **subject** denotes the **person or thing about which something is said** by means of the predicate.

The **predicate** is **what is said** about the person or thing denoted by the subject.

In the following examples of sentences the part printed in roman type is the subject; the part printed in italics is the predicate.

The few *are happy*. *Long live* the Queen!

Who *knows*? Who *goes there*?

Be it so.

How beautiful she *looks*!

Fools *rush in where angels fear to tread*.—POPE

Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.—SHAKESPEARE

He *laughs best* who laughs last.

A terrible accident *has happened*.

Whatever is, *is right*.—POPE

Listen. } (The subject 'thou', 'ye', or 'you' is not

Do not go. } expressed.)

4 Some sentences lack some part or parts that are ideally necessary to the full form of a sentence as defined above. These are called *elliptical* sentences, and an **ellipsis** is said to occur. Ellipsis plays a great part in English as in many languages. It is common to all styles of speaking and writing. In poetical and rhetorical language it often lends dignity and impressiveness, with something of an archaic flavour; to colloquial speech it gives precision and brevity, and saves time and trouble. It is especially appropriate to exclamations and abrupt commands. Examples:

To err is human, to forgive divine.—POPE (Supply 'is')

One murder makes a villain, a million a hero. (Supply 'make')

This house to be let or sold. (Supply 'is')

Students must be able to help, and we hope will. (Supply 'help')

Go and see what the boy's doing, and tell him not to. (Supply 'do it')

Rest assured that everything will be done that can be. (Supply 'done')

You are more likely to quarrel with me than I with you. (i.e. than I am likely to quarrel with you)

Well roared, Lion: well run, Thisbe.—SHAKESPEARE

Thy name well fits thy faith; thy faith thy name.—

SHAKESPEARE (Supply 'well fits')

Thank you. (=I thank you: cf. German *danke*)

Your name and address, please. (i.e. Give me your name)

What if he dies? (=What will happen, *or* What will you do
or say if he dies?)

I could, but I won't. (e.g. do it)

Is the venture a success, and if not, why not?

(At the railway booking office) Oxford, second, single.

One master or many.

Easier said than done.

Once an actor, always an actor.

Here goes! Never again.

Fire, fire! Silence!

Hats off! What a pity!

Well, I never!

Ellipsis is very common in answers where the complete form of the answer reflects that of the question and is therefore sufficiently obvious not to require full expression. Examples:

Who did it?—I. (i.e. did it)

How many were saved?—Twenty. (i.e. were saved)

Have you ever been abroad?—Never. (i.e. have I been
abroad)

We will send somebody.—Whom? When? Where to?
(i.e. will you send?)

Similarly with all interrogative words.

Ellipsis is common also in wishes, as 'good morning'; 'bless you'; 'all good wishes'.

Ellipsis enters into the development of various conversational or unstudied formulas; e.g. all right; not at all; no doubt; half a minute; one moment, please; all the same . . . ; let alone . . . ; no matter who (what, when) . . . ; no wonder; . . . and no mistake; far from it; and a good thing too.

Numerals are used in many kinds of elliptical constructions: e.g. a child of *five* [years of age]; between *a quarter* [of an hour] and *ten* [minutes] to *five* [o'clock]; from *four* [o'clock] to *half* [an hour] *past* [four]; the *first* [day] of April; a *tenth* [part] of a pound; a coach and *four* [horses].

Single words like 'Good!' 'Right!' 'Now!' 'Really?' 'Certainly'; 'Granted'; 'True'; 'Quick!' 'Enough!' are often equivalent to sentences.

Instances like the following, where a verb of motion in the infinitive is omitted, belong to older stages of the language:

I must to Coventry.—SHAKESPEARE, *Richard II*

He to England shall along with you.—*Hamlet*

I shall no more to sea.—*Tempest*

I wylle to morowe to the cowrte of Kyng Arthur.—MALORY

This usage is regular in OE. with the so-called 'auxiliaries': *Ic tō sē wille* = 'I to sea will [go]'.

5 The five forms of the predicate

Most predicates contain a verb, which is the medium by which the predication is normally conveyed.

The predicate may consist of—

1 a verb only

2 a verb together with some other word or words

Sentences are classified according to the form of the predicate, which may assume any of *five* principal forms.

First form of the predicate

Subject	Predicate
Day	dawns
He	died
My hour	is come
The shades of night	were falling

In such sentences the predicate consists of the **verb alone**.

6 *Second form of the predicate*

Subject	Predicate	
	verb	predicative adjective or predicative noun or predicative pronoun
Croesus	was	rich or a king
Many	lay	dead
I	am	he
Thought	is	free
Seeing	is	believing
To err	is	human
The meeting	stands	adjourned
We	are getting	ready

In such sentences the predicate consists of (1) a **verb**, and (2) a **predicative adjective**, **predicative noun**, or **predicative pronoun**, i.e. an adjective, noun, or pronoun *predicated of the subject*. This form of the predicate embraces the participles used in constructing compound tenses, e.g. 'was coming', 'were ruined'. Observe that here and in the fifth form of the predicate the verb and the predicative word or words form a unity ('lie dead', 'stand adjourned', 'get ready') in which the verb often acquires an extended meaning not shown when the verb is not thus linked. Cf. *run short*, *come clean*, *come undone*.

For the kinds of verbs that may be used in a predicate of the second form, see §35.

7 In a sentence like 'It is hard to do right', the pronoun *it* is called the **formal subject** (or 'anticipatory subject') because, although it is a subject in *form*, it merely anticipates or provisionally represents the real subject, which follows. Thus we have a predicate of the second form:

To do right		is		hard.
(It)				

For the relation between this *it* and the *it* which forms the subject of impersonal verbs, see §171.4.

In sentences like 'There was peace', 'there was' is equivalent to 'existed', 'came into existence', and we have in origin a predicate of the first form containing an adjunct (§15):

Peace | was (*verb*) there (*adjunct*, §15).

There, however, has become formal.

8 Third form of the predicate

Subject	Predicate	
	<i>verb</i>	<i>object</i>
Rats	desert	a sinking ship
Many hands	make	light work
Nobody	wishes	to know
He	can (§40)	tell
You	would have	what me do
They	do think	what we are

In such sentences the predicate consists of (1) a **verb**, and (2) an **object**, which denotes the person or thing to which the action of the verb 'passes over'.

Verbs taking an object are called **transitive** [= 'passing over', Latin *transire* 'to pass over']. Verbs not taking an object are called **intransitive** [= 'not passing over'].

For the *cognate object* see §37.

Note that tabular analysis does not distinguish different kinds of sentence, e.g. statement and question. The fourth sentence above might be read either: 'He can tell' (statement) or: 'Can he tell?' (question); the last two sentences are both questions: 'What would you have me do?'; 'What do they think we are?'

9 When a sentence with a predicate of the third form is turned into the passive, we have a sentence with a predicate of the first form containing an adjunct (§15); e.g. 'Cain killed Abel' becomes:

Subject	Predicate
Abel	was killed (<i>verb</i>) by Cain (<i>adjunct</i>)

10 Fourth form of the predicate

Subject	Predicate		
	<i>verb</i>	<i>two objects</i>	
We	taught	the dog	tricks
I	ask	you	this question
They	showed	me	the way
We	asked	him	to speak

In such sentences the predicate consists of (1) a **verb**, and (2) **two objects**.

For the kinds of verbs which may be used in a predicate of the fourth form, see §41.1.

A sentence like 'I gave **him** the money' may be regarded in two ways:

- (a) In form, it is like 'We ask you this' or 'I asked him a question'; hence *him*, which is in form a dative, is often called an object (**indirect object**).
- (b) In meaning, the sentence is equivalent to 'I gave the money **to him**', which is most simply parsed as containing an adjunct (§15) in a predicate of the third form.

Sentences like 'We asked *him to speak*' may also be analysed as containing a predicate of the third form (subject *we*, verb *asked*, object *him to speak* = *that he should speak*).

11 When a sentence with a predicate of the fourth form is turned into the passive, we get a sentence with a predicate of the third form containing an adjunct (§15); e.g. 'You ask me my opinion', 'I told him to speak', become:

Subject	Predicate		
	<i>verb</i>	<i>object retained</i>	<i>adjunct</i>
I	am asked	my opinion	by you
He	was told	to speak	by me

12 *Fifth form of the predicate*

Subject	Predicate		
	<i>verb</i>	<i>object</i>	<i>predicative adjective or predicative noun</i>
Nothing	makes	a Stoic	angry
People	called	Duns Scotus	the Subtle Doctor
They	elected	him	Consul
He	thought	himself	a happy man
The thought	drove	him	mad
	Leave	me	alone

In such sentences the predicate consists of (1) a **verb**, (2) an **object**, and (3) a **predicative adjective** or **predicative noun**, i.e. an adjective or noun *predicated of the object*.

Note that in commands and prohibitions (e.g. 'Leave me alone') no subject is expressed.

For the kinds of verbs used in a predicate of the fifth form, see §§44-5.

13 When a sentence with a predicate of the fifth form is turned into the passive, we get a sentence with a predicate of the second form containing an adjunct (§15); e.g. 'The Court declared him a traitor' becomes:

Subject	Predicate		
	<i>verb</i>	<i>predicative adjective</i> or <i>noun</i>	<i>adjunct</i>
He	was declared	a traitor	by the Court

14 Attributes

A noun may be **qualified** by an adjective (or adjective-equivalent, §18); e.g. *dear* friends; *a good* man; *my* father; *ten* men.

Such a qualifying part of a sentence is called an **attribute**.

15 Adjuncts

A verb, an adjective, or an adverb may be **qualified** by an adverb (or adverb-equivalent, §19); e.g. Fight *bravely*; He is *quite* happy; *Well* begun is *half* done.

Such a qualifying part of a sentence is called an **adjunct**. For instances in the various forms of the predicate, see §24.1.

16 Equivalents

The noun, the adjective, and the adverb may be replaced by other parts of speech doing the same work in the sentence, or by a group of words doing the work of a single part of speech.

A word or group of words which functions as a noun, an adjective, or an adverb is called an **equivalent** (noun-equivalent, adjective-equivalent, or adverb-equivalent).

A group of words forming an equivalent and not having a subject and predicate of its own is called a **phrase**. Cf. §§18.5, 19.1.

A group of words forming an equivalent and having a subject and predicate of its own is called a **subordinate clause**. Cf. §21.

17 Noun-equivalents

A noun-equivalent may be provided by:

- (1) a pronoun:

The boy is here; *he* has not been long.

You are fortunate, *I* am wretched.

It is *I*.

- (2) a verb-noun:

To see is *to believe*. *Seeing* is *believing*.

I desire *to learn*. His frequent *comings* and *goings*.

Note—A verb-noun participates in all the constructions of the verb to which it belongs. Thus it may take a predicative adjective, predicative noun, or predicative pronoun; or an object; or two objects; or an object and a predicative adjective or noun; and it may be qualified by an adverb—just like a verb.

- (3) an adjective or adjectival phrase (with or without *the*; see §184):

at *dead* of night

through *thick* and *thin*

the *careful*, the *careless*, the *indifferent*, the *brave*, the *callous*

all and *sundry*

Fair's fair.

the survival of the *fittest*

Things went from *bad* to *worse*.

the *next-of-kin*

- (4) a verb-adjective (sometimes with *the*):

(the) *living* and (the) *dead* *killed* and *wounded*

the *fallen* both teachers and *taught*

- (5) an adverb or adverbial phrase:

Up to *now*; from *now* on; till *then*; every *so often*; for *once*; for *ever*; from *here* to *there*; from *abroad*; from *beyond the sea*; I like *abroad*; out of the *everywhere* into *here*.

- (6) a clause (in a complex sentence, §20):

That you have wronged me doth appear in this.—SHAKESPEARE

Who knows *how it happened*? Tell me *what you mean*.

- (7) a word or group of words quoted, or used as subject, object, or predicate:

'*And*' is a conjunction. '*I think not*' was all he said.

But me no *buts*. There is much virtue in '*if*'.

the *when* and *how* of pruning

a matter of *give-and-take*

(8) a sentence:

Why haven't you been to see me since *I don't know when*?
(Cf. the sentences 'Forget me not', 'Love lies bleeding', which have become, as names of flowers, a single word.)

In sentences like '*Through the wood* is the nearest way', '*From Tamworth thither* is but one day's march' (Shakespeare), a phrase formed with a preposition would seem to stand as a noun-equivalent. But this is not really so; the sentences are inverted forms of 'The nearest way is through the wood', 'It is but one day's march from Tamworth thither'.

18 *Adjective-equivalents*

An adjective-equivalent may be provided by:

(1) a verb-adjective:

a *running* sore a *printed* book
The city lies *sleeping*.

Note—A verb-adjective participates in all the constructions of the verb to which it belongs. Thus it may take a predicative adjective, predicative noun, or predicative pronoun; or an object; or two objects; or an object and a predicative adjective or predicative noun; and it may be qualified by an adverb—just like a verb.

(2) a noun in apposition, i.e. a noun, with or without epithet, describing or identifying:

We *English* Prince Consort
King Alfred Simon Lee, the old *hunter*
London town (cf. 5)

(3) a noun in the genitive case:

Milton's works *Duncan's* murderer
today's news (= German 'die *heutigen* Nachrichten')
a *summer's* day
the *Queen's* palace (= the *royal* palace)
Cicero's treatise on friendship (cf. the *Ciceronian* treatise)
Plato's doctrine of ideas (= the *Platonic* doctrine)

(4) a noun in the accusative case, qualified, forming a descriptive expression ('accusative of description'):

a book *the same size as this*
water *the colour of pea-soup*

These equivalents are most often used like predicative adjectives:

The earth is *the shape of an orange* (= orange-shaped).
What age is he? (= how old?)

For more examples, see §106.