Grammar Voyage

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Art by Milton N. Kemnitz
A GRAMMAR VOYAGE

We set sail now on rolling seas
that fall on beaches far and near.
Like passengers on rusty ships,
we scan the water, trying to hear
the sound, the voice, the mystery,
the whispery report, the words,
the clear austere details.
Around the seas we search,
inspecting every port of call,
the harbors, inlets, most of all
the coastal cities on the far
horizons, distant and inviting our
arrival. In the misty night we sail,
in the sea we make our trail
until the vivid dawn reveals
our destination. Now we feel
it drawing near, we hear the sounds,
the voices, words, clamor of birds
and people walking toward the pier.
We steer, we cast our ropes,
and we are here.
On any grammar voyage, wild words pervade the world, like freighter, storm, and cable, later, form, affable, and able. There are words like strike, and flake, and croak, opaque, and words like sudden, sodden, and redden. Happily is a word, and snappily, and mug, and log, and dog. There are names for seagulls, and seaweeds, and seashores, and more. The wind might roar, a bird might soar, the knocking oar might dip into the water of the port, and row us to the dock. We climb up from the rocking boat and step into a new world full of language. There are voices, and tacit choices, and faces behind the words that rise and fall and tell us all the secrets of the heart. So let us start.
LEVEL ONE
PARTS OF SPEECH

There are only eight kinds of words.
1. NOUNS

Nouns name persons, places, and things—a world of things....

The ship chugged up the torpid Congo, gray smoke long ago passing the stern, the sharp bow cutting unconcerned the flowing blue, indolent crew knowing they will see the lurid lights of Kisangani bright beneath the vast and vivid sunset.

The word noun comes from the Latin nomen, meaning name.
**PROPER** nouns, such as *Madagascar* and *Titanic* and *Bombay*,
are capitalized.

**COMMON** nouns, such as
*fuel*, *dishes*, *foam*, and *horizon*,
are not capitalized.

A noun naming one thing, such as
*rail*, or *tide*, or *smokestack*, or *buoy*, or *quay*,
is **SINGULAR**.

A noun naming more than one thing,
such as *sails*, or *shores*, or *cultures*,
or *ports*, or *songs*, or *seamen*,
is **PLURAL**.

*Micronesia* is a singular proper noun.
*Ships* is a plural common noun.

There are also **POSSESSIVE** nouns:
*We watched John’s ship.*

But many nouns,
such as *Micronesia* and *bioluminesence*,
are long words
and take energy and time to say, so...
we use a short word that means the noun,
and it is called the **pronoun**.
2. PRONOUNS

Pronouns are quick words, code beeps, speedy shortcuts we use when we do not want to repeat a long noun. Instead of saying Joseph Theodore Conrad,

the author of Heart of Darkness, whose real name was Jozef Teodor Konrad Nalecz Korzeniowski, we can just say he.

The noun the pronoun replaces is called the ANTECEDENT. Pronouns must agree with their antecedents in number:

WRONG: Some person dropped their book.
RIGHT: Some person dropped his or her book.
There are several groups, or **CASES**, of pronouns.

One important group of pronouns is the **SUBJECT pronouns**:

\[
I \quad you \quad he \quad she \quad it \\
we \quad you \quad they
\]

*He* sailed west across the Pacific toward the Solomon Islands.

Another important group of pronouns is the **OBJECT pronouns**:

\[
me \quad you \quad him \quad her \quad it \\
us \quad you \quad them
\]

She gave *him* the map of Polynesia and taught *him* how to navigate by the stars at night.
MEMORIZE

SUBJECT PRONOUNS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>singular</th>
<th>plural</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>first person</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>we</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second person</td>
<td>you</td>
<td>you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>third person</td>
<td>he she it</td>
<td>they</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

OBJECT PRONOUNS

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</tbody>
</table>

You must memorize these two groups of pronouns. Keep repeating them until you feel certain that you will know them for the rest of your life. We will think more about this later, but do you notice anything now about how we use these pronouns?

I saw him, and she saw me, but we gave him and her the squid.
Notice that subject pronouns have *ieee* sounds, and object pronouns have *mrmrmr* sounds, and that helps us keep them apart. There are other kinds of pronouns, too.

We use **demonstrative** pronouns to demonstrate:

- *this, that, these, those.*
- *This* is a good harbor.

We use **possessive** pronouns to show possession:

- *mine, yours, his, hers, its, ours, yours, theirs.*
- *Mine* is the new ship at the dock.
- The word *its* is a possessive pronoun;
  - *it’s* is a contraction of *it is.*

We use **interrogative** pronouns to interrogate (to question):

- *who, whose, whom, which, what.*
- *Who* stowed the grub today?

We use **indefinite** pronouns for unspecified references:

- *anybody, anyone, everybody, everyone, somebody, someone, many, few, etc.*
- *Someone* ate the potato.
His It

One purple morning in San Juan harbor, there was a tugboat, the G.W. Seagle, splashing through the water toward the sea, which glowed and shone in the salty wind, and the pelicans dove for breakfast, and the first fingers of the sun spread red on the ocean clouds.

The captain of the G.W. Seagle, José Borges, halted before the harbor mouth, where the foaming waves rolled in, and waited for The Nostromo, an old and melancholy freighter, coming from the west coast of Africa. The Nostromo was a blue speck on the horizon, a feather of smoke far out and just visible in the new light, and the captain of The Nostromo, Eduardo, would not spot the waiting tugboat for thirty more minutes.

But soon they would see each other, and he would signal him that he should bring his boat alongside his, where he would help him steer it toward it, and he would guide it toward his pier, where he would work with him to do his job right, which he did.
ANTECEDENT

ante - before  cede - go

The antecedent is the noun that goes (cede) before (ante) the pronoun; it is the noun the pronoun replaces.

First José laughed; then he smiled.

Look at the second paragraph on the previous page. What is the problem with the pronoun usage?
So nouns and pronouns let us name everything.
But the world is big, and the waters are wide, and the ports hum with tugboats, and we would need millions of nouns for the millions of things we would find...

...or would we? Well, no....
LEVEL TWO
PARTS OF SENTENCE
THE VERB DETERMINES
THE SENTENCE STRUCTURE

Do you remember that some verbs show action, and other verbs are linking, like equations?

1. **ACTION** verbs show action:
The tugboat **pushed** the barge.

2. **LINKING** verbs show that something IS something:
The harbor **is** deep. The ship **was** an old Italian cruise liner.

The sentence is made of a **complete subject** and a **complete predicate** about it.
The **simple subject** is the noun or subject pronoun that the sentence is about.
The **simple predicate** is the verb.

If the verb is **ACTION**, it might act on a **direct object**.
A direct object is a noun or object pronoun that receives the action of the action verb.
The captain saw the **island** in the distance.

If you have a direct object, you might have an **indirect object**.
An indirect object is a noun or object pronoun that is located between the action verb and the direct object, and it is indirectly affected by the action.
The captain gave the **seaman** a direct order.
If the verb is **LINKING**, you might have a **subject complement**. A subject complement is a noun, subject pronoun, or adjective that is linked to the subject by a linking verb and that completes our knowledge of the subject.

Roberto is the **captain** of the red tugboat.
Roberto is **he**.  
Roberto is **old**.

Notice the sequence if you have an action verb: subject - predicate - indirect object - direct object.

Roberto gave Vásquez the coffee.
LEVEL THREE
PHRASES
THREE KINDS OF PHRASES
prepositional • appositive • verbal

A phrase is a group of words, but it acts like one word, like a single part of speech. It does a one-word job.

A phrase cannot have a subject and verb.

Some phrases act like nouns, others like adjectives or even adverbs.

A whole phrase, for example, can be a noun/direct object.

I love eating swordfish steaks.

This is like “I love dogs” except that the direct object is a three-word phrase.

1. PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES

Prepositional phrases always begin with prepositions, and they act like modifiers (like adjectives or adverbs):

like an adjective: The ship at the dock sank.
like an adverb: It sailed after sunset.
like an adjective: It’s a letter for him and her.
like an adverb: From the forecastle he shouted commands.

A prepositional phrase begins with a preposition that shows the relationship between its object, which is usually a noun or an object pronoun, and some other word in the sentence. Prepositional phrases are always modifiers. If a prepositional phrase acts as an adjective, it comes immediately after the noun or pronoun it modifies:

The main hold of the ship needed repairs.
See how of the ship modifies the noun hold, just as an ordinary adjective would? The phrase begins with the preposition of and relates its object ship to another word in the sentence, hold. If a prepositional phrase acts as an adverb, it can come in a number of different places, including at the beginning of the sentence:

**From the start** the trawler led the fleet.

In this case, From the start modifies the verb led. Notice that prepositional phrases do not have subjects and predicates. No phrases do. Many prepositional phrases start with a preposition, then have an adjective that modifies a noun: on the deck, prep.-adj.-n. Notice also that we do not put a comma after a single, short introductory prepositional phrase.

One of the problems that prepositions can cause occurs when a prepositional phrase modifies the subject of the sentence and therefore comes between the subject and its verb: The leader of the people is benevolent. The problem comes when we mistakenly match the verb to the object of the preposition instead of to the subject. We will examine this again in a few pages, but here is an example:

**RIGHT:** The captain of the pirates is cruel.
**WRONG:** The captain of the pirates are cruel.
2. APPOSOITIVE PHRASES

Appositive phrases are interrupting definitions. Enclosed in commas, they are put \((pos)\) beside \((apo)\) what they define. They act like nouns or sometimes like adjectives.

Roberto, \textit{the captain’s poodle}, came on board early. The canal, \textit{an old lake system}, was still used by ships.

Appositive phrases are called \textit{appositives} because they are apposed—put beside what they define. An appositive phrase is a graceful way of inserting a quick explanation or definition so that your reader is not confused for the rest of the sentence.

The \textit{Franca C}, \textit{a vintage passenger liner}, was in port.

Because appositive phrases are interruptions, there is a comma rule for them; there should be commas before and after the appositive or appositive phrase:

Calle del Cristo, \textit{the street by the plaza}, is beautiful.

Notice that appositive phrases do not have subjects and predicates. Also, there can be a one-word appositive, such as a state appositive or date appositive. It is not always a phrase (group of words), but it still needs two commas:

My old friend, \textit{Hernandez}, arrived on the afternoon ferry. On March 10, \textit{1837}, the harbor was sunny and calm. Veracruz, \textit{Mexico}, is a a seaside town. New Orleans, \textit{Louisiana}, is on the Gulf of Mexico.
LEVEL FOUR
CLAUSES
THREE KINDS OF DEPENDENT CLAUSES
adverb clause • adjective clause • noun clause

The dependent clauses we have seen in these complex sentences are adverbial in effect. They act like adverbs to modify the verbs in the independent clauses.

There are also dependent clauses that act like adjectives and follow the nouns that they modify:

The captain who sold the boat left the harbor.

There are also dependent clauses that act like nouns:

I know who broke the anchor.

In this sentence the dependent clause who broke the anchor acts as a noun/direct object.
Here is another noun clause:

Whoever defied the captain is a mutineer.

In this complex sentence, the noun clause acts as the subject of the sentence.