

## Topic: Sentence types and discourse functions

Simple sentences may be divided into **four major syntactic types**, whose use correlates mostly with different **discourse functions**:

### Sentence types:

**(I) declaratives** - it is normal for the subject to be present and to precede the verb;

**(II) interrogatives** - formally marked in one of two ways: either an operator is placed in front of the subject, or an interrogative *wh*-element is positioned initially and there is generally subject-operator inversion;

**(III) imperatives** - normally having no overt grammatical subject and the verb is used in the base form:

**(IV) exclamatives** - having an initial phrase introduced by *what* or *how*, usually with subject-operator order;

### Discourse functions:

**(A) statements** - used primarily to convey information;

**(B) questions** - used to seek information on a specific point;

**(C) directives** - used to instruct somebody to do something;

**(D) exclamations** - used primarily to express the extent to which the speaker is impressed by something;

Direct associations between syntactic types and discourse functions are the rule, but the two do not always match. We **distinguish direct and indirect speech acts**.

Examples:     *Could you mend my watch?*   question about ability         DSA  
                  *Could you mend my watch?*   request                                     ISA

## Questions - Three major classes

### 1. Yes-no questions:

Examples:     *Are you prepared?* - *Yes, I am.*         or         *No, I'm not.*

They expect affirmation or negation. If there is no item in the verb phrase that can function as operator, *do* is introduced, as with negation.

### Positive yes-no questions

Like negative statements, they may contain nonassertive items. Such questions are neutral, with no bias in expectation towards a positive or negative response:

Examples:     *Did anyone call last night? Has the boat left yet?*

However, questions may be conducive, e.g. a positive question may be presented in a form which is biased towards a positive answer, having positive orientation and using assertive forms rather than usual nonassertive forms:

Examples:     *Did someone call last night? Has the boat left already?*

### Negative yes-no questions

Negative questions are always conducive. The implication is that the speaker had originally hoped for a positive response, but new evidence now suggests that the response will be negative (combination of the old expectation [positive] and new expectation [negative]):

Example:     *Hasn't he told you what to do?*

### Tag questions

while being appended to a statement, they express maximum conduciveness:

Examples:     *He likes swimming, doesn't he? He doesn't like swimming, does he?*

In the most common types, the tag question is negative if the statement is positive and vice versa. The tag question has the form of a *yes-no* question consisting of merely an operator and a subject pronoun, the choice of operator and pronoun depending on the statement. The tag with a rising tone invites verification, expecting the hearer to decide the truth of the proposition in the statement. The tag with a falling tone, on the

other hand, invites confirmation of the statement, and has the force of an exclamation rather than a genuine question.

### **Declarative questions**

have the form of declaratives, except for the final rising intonation. They are conducive and resemble tag questions with a rising tone in that they invite the hearer's verification:

Examples: *He wants something to eat? Nobody ever stays at your place?*

### **2. Wh-questions:**

Unlike *yes-no* questions, *wh*-questions generally have falling intonation:

Examples: *What's your name? - My name's Peter.*

They typically expect a reply from an open range of replies.

*On what did you base your results? (formal) What did you base your results on?*

The normal statement order of elements is altered in *wh*-questions not only by initial placing of the *wh*-element, but by the inversion of subject and operator in all cases except when the *wh*-element is subject:

Examples: *What happened? Who is late?*

### **3. Alternative questions:**

There are two types, the first resembling a *yes-no* question, the second a *wh*-question:

Examples: *Would you like chocolate, vanilla, or strawberry (ice-cream)?*

*Which ice-cream would you like? Chocolate, vanilla or strawberry?*

### **Minor types of questions**

#### **1. Exclamatory questions:**

are interrogative in structure, but have the force of exclamatory assertions. Typically they are negative *yes-no* questions with a final falling instead of rising tone:

Example: *Hasn't she grown!*

#### **2. Rhetorical questions:**

are interrogative in structure, but have the force of strong assertions. Speakers do not expect an answer:

Examples: *Is that the reason for despair? ('Surely that is not a reason ...')*

*Isn't the answer obvious? ('Surely the answer is obvious ...')*

#### **3. Echo questions:**

repeat part or all of what has been said:

Example: A: *The Browns are emigrating.* B: *Emigrating?*

### **Directives**

typically take the form of an imperative sentence, which differs from a declarative sentence in that 1/ it generally has no subject and 2/ it has a verb in the base form. The imperative verb lacks tense distinction and does not allow modal auxiliaries:

Examples: *Be careful. Don't be deceived by his looks.*

However, the implied subject *you* can be added for emphasis:

Example: *Don't tell me to be quiet. You be quiet! Somebody open this door.*

### **Exclamatives**

are restricted to the type of exclamatory utterance introduced by *what* or *how*. The former is used as predeterminer in a NP, the latter as intensifier of an adjective or adverb, or as a degree adverbial. The *wh*-element is fronted, but in contrast to *wh*-questions there is no subject-operator inversion:

Examples: *What beautiful weather! How quickly he runs! How pleasant her voice is!*

**Block language** appears in such functions as labels, titles, newspaper headlines, headings, notices, and advertisements. It usually consists of noun phrases in isolation:

Examples: *No dogs without leash Entrance Wish you were here. (postcard)*