

## Unit 1

# THE SUBJECT

## I. GRAMMATICAL PROPERTIES

Let's consider these two sentences:

1. Singapore is the smallest republic in the world.
2. The smallest republic in the world is Singapore.

### QUESTION 1:

The two sentences (1-2) are made up of exactly the same words, and they seem to be saying the same thing. But what is the **subject** of each of these sentences?

Sentence 1:

Sentence 2:

---

---

To put it simply, the subject is what the rest of the sentence is about. So, sentence (1) is about 'Singapore', and sentence (2) is about 'the smallest republic in the world'. The subject is one of the most important parts of a sentence in English – more so than in Chinese. To see how important it is, let's find out what sort of *grammatical properties* it has – that is, how does it behave in relation to the other parts of the sentence?

### QUESTION 2:

In the following sentences, the subjects are underlined for you. What regular pattern can you see in the *position* of the subject in the sentence?

3. China has the largest population in the world.
4. The concert by the youth orchestra is completely sold out.
5. The handsome frog turned into an ugly prince.

ANSWER:

So you have worked out a simple ‘hypothesis’ about the position of the subject. But now consider the following sentences, where the subjects are again underlined.

6. As everyone knows, China has the largest population in the world.
7. To my disappointment, the concert by the youth orchestra is completely sold out.
8. Suddenly the handsome frog turned into an ugly prince.

### QUESTION 3:

Do sentences (6-8) cause you to change the answer you gave to Question 2 above? If so, how?

ANSWER:

---

---

So you’ve noticed that the subject has a ‘typical’ position, namely at the beginning of the sentence and immediately before the verb. It is true that this is not the only possible position, as sentences (6-8) show. But you will note that if something else comes before the subject, it is normally not an *essential* part of the sentence: e.g., if you delete everything before the subject in (6-8), you are still left with a complete and grammatical sentence – i.e. sentences (3-5).

Let’s look at some other properties of the subject besides its position. Consider sentences (9-12) below, and answer Questions 4 and 5:

9. The little girl *has* a big appetite.
10. The little girls *have* a big appetite.
11. A tall building *attracts* lightning.
12. Tall buildings *attract* lightning.

### QUESTION 4:

Sentences (9-12) show an important grammatical property of the subject in English. What is that property? (Pay particular attention to the form of the verb that follows the subject)

ANSWER:

### QUESTION 5:

What other grammatical property do you notice about the subject in the sentences below?  
[NB. Words like *be*, *have* and *can* are ‘auxiliary verbs’. We’ll explore them later.]

13. English *has* become a world language.
14. *Has* English become a world language?
15. Property prices *are* rising.
16. *Are* property prices rising?
17. Peter *can* eat 10 hamburgers in 1 minute.
18. *Can* Peter eat 10 hamburgers in 1 minute?

ANSWER:

---

---

To summarise the grammatical properties that you have discovered thus far about the subject in English:

- 1) The subject usually occurs at the beginning of a sentence and before the verb;
- 2) The subject controls the form of the verb in the present tense (singular/plural);
- 3) The subject changes positions with the auxiliary verb in a question.

Except for (1), these properties of the subject are very different from Chinese.

## II. WHAT DOES THE SUBJECT ACTUALLY ‘DO’?

The above exercises have shown that the subject has certain **grammatical** properties – e.g. its position and relation to the verb, and so on. You will have noticed that it behaves differently from the subject in Chinese. E.g., in Chinese, the subject does not ‘control’ the form of the verb as it does in English (as in sentences 9-12), nor does it change positions with the auxiliary verb when asking a question (as in 13-18). In learning English, it is important to know these differences.

A different question about the subject is this: what does it actually ‘do’ in a sentence? Why do we need a subject at all?

Look again at sentences 1-18. You could say that the rest of the sentence is ‘about’ the underlined words – that is, about the subject. Without it, we would not know what the speaker is talking about, e.g.:

11. ? attracts lightning.
13. ? has become a world language.

### QUESTION 6:

Identify and underline all the subjects in the following text. Do you agree that, in most cases, the rest of the sentence is 'about' the subject?

Dictionaries are full of words, and words are common property. This sentence itself is made up of words which can all be found in any English dictionary -- and yet the sentence is not common property. This is because words are not used in isolation, but are put together by the writer, and the resulting phrases and sentences are products of his mind. An idea may be quite commonplace: for example, the first sentence in this paragraph contains a perfectly common idea, which most of you will have thought of at one time or another. Yet the way the idea is expressed is entirely my own, and it is possible that no-one else has written exactly the same sentence before.

---

---

### QUESTION 7:

In the following passage, the subjects have been left out from most of the sentences. Fill in the blanks with appropriate subjects:

What is science? \_\_\_\_\_ is usually used to mean one of three things, or a mixture of them. \_\_\_\_\_ do not think \_\_\_\_\_ need to be precise – \_\_\_\_\_ is not always a good idea to be too precise. \_\_\_\_\_ means, sometimes, a special method of finding things out. Sometimes \_\_\_\_\_ means the body of knowledge arising from the things found out. \_\_\_\_\_ may also mean the new things \_\_\_\_\_ can do when \_\_\_\_\_ have found something out, or the actual doing of new things.

[from Richard Feynman, *The Meaning of It All*]

---

---

As we have seen earlier, the subject normally tells us what the rest of the sentence is about – i.e. it is the 'topic' of the sentence.

But what if we already *know* what the topic is? For instance, in the following examples, do we really need to fill in the blanks with subjects in order to know what each sentence is about?

19. \_\_\_ is very hot in here.
20. \_\_\_ are lots of reporters outside.
21. A: What did Tom do last night? B: \_\_\_ went to a movie with his friends.

You will agree that, even without a subject, we can easily guess what each of the above sentences is about. In fact, in Chinese, we would not normally have a subject at all in sentences like 19, 20 and 21B. But in English, sentences 19-21B would be grammatically incomplete without a subject.

Here then is one important difference between English and Chinese:

- In English, a sentence *must* have a subject, even when the topic of discussion is clearly understood by the speaker and hearer;
- In Chinese, a sentence need not have a subject if the topic is understood.

In fact, think about the subjects in sentences 19-20:

19. It is very hot in here.
20. There are lots of reporters outside.

What do ‘it’ and ‘there’ tell us? Nothing really. They are ‘empty’ subjects – they are there only because the grammar of English *requires* a subject to be there!

So, in English, every sentence must have a subject. Usually, the **subject** is also the **topic** of the sentence, as in the following sentence, which is about Singapore:

1. Singapore is the smallest republic in the world.

Occasionally, the topic is different from the subject, and we see both of them side by side. In the following example, the topic is ‘the crocodile’, but the subject is ‘nobody’ (which controls the verb ‘knows’):

22. As for **the crocodile**, nobody knows exactly where it is hiding.

It would be rather unusual to have a separate topic and subject both referring to the *same* thing (though it may not be ungrammatical):

23. As for **the property market**, it continues to fall.

This is not a normal kind of sentence, so don’t over-use it. It sounds odd to say something like this (as many students do):

24. **Hong Kong people**, they are very independent.

'Hong Kong people are very independent' would have been more natural.

### **QUESTION 8:**

What is odd about the following sentences? Re-write them properly.

1. In Graph 1, it shows that the standard of living in Hong Kong is rising.

ANSWER:

2. According to the findings, they reveal that red wine is good for your health.

ANSWER:

3. For this school, it was built 50 years ago, but still looks new.

ANSWER:

4. Some people in the audience, they booed and shouted at the speaker.

ANSWER:

## **III. SUBJECT OMISSION**

Earlier on, we said that a sentence must have a subject. There are times, however, when the subject may be left out in the second of two sentences (or main clauses) which are joined together. Consider the second half of the following sentences. They all have missing subjects, but some are grammatical while others are not.

### QUESTION 9:

Marked each of the following sentences as either grammatical or ungrammatical (\*).  
From these examples, can you explain when a subject can be left out and when it cannot?

1. He tried lifting the weight but was too heavy.
2. He tried lifting the weight but was too exhausted.
3. He couldn't lift the weight as was too heavy.
4. He couldn't lift the weight as was too exhausted.
5. She greeted us and sat down.
6. She greeted us before sat down.
7. He checked his pocket and was full of coins.
8. He checked his pocket and took out the coins.

The subject can be left out in the second clause if: <hr/> <hr/>
The subject cannot be left out in the second clause if: <hr/> <hr/>

---

---

## IV. SUBJECT-VERB AGREEMENT

There is a systematic feature of English grammar which is very simple to learn, but troublesome to remember, because it seems so 'unnecessary' that we don't miss it at all if it's not there – in fact, many languages, including Chinese, have nothing like it. This feature is 'subject-verb agreement', which we first saw in Question 4 above. Let's look at it more closely.

### QUESTION 10:

From the following examples, can you give a simple explanation of how subject-verb agreement works?

1. The boy plays football every weekend.
2. The boys play football every weekend.
3. My father works in a library.
4. My parents work in a library.
5. Tom likes classical music.
6. Tom and Jerry like classical music.
7. Each student has a locker.

8. All students have lockers.

ANSWER:

---

---

Now, what if the verb is in the past tense rather than present tense?

**QUESTION 11:**

Compare the following data with those in Question 10. How would you revise your earlier answer to give a more accurate account of subject-verb agreement?

- 9. The boy played football yesterday.
- 10. The boys played football yesterday.
- 11. My father worked in a library.
- 12. My parents worked in a library.
- 13. Tom liked classical music.
- 14. Tom and Jerry liked classical music.
- 15. Each student had a locker.
- 16. All students had lockers.

ANSWER:

---

---

If you think you have the right answers to Questions 10 and 11, then you have grasped the essence of the subject-verb agreement problem. But it's not enough just to know about it. You have to fully acquire the patterns for subject-verb agreement by giving yourself more practice, with exercises like the following:

**QUESTION 12:**

Fill in the blanks with the appropriate forms of the verbs in brackets, paying special attention to subject-verb agreement. Keep the verbs in the present tense.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. My friends _____(visit) me very often.</li><li>2. My best friend _____(live) in the next block.</li></ul>
--



3. One of my friends \_\_\_\_\_(be) a disc jockey.
4. Most of our teachers \_\_\_\_\_(prefer) to teach in Chinese.
5. He \_\_\_\_\_(spend) most of his money on CDs.
6. He and his wife \_\_\_\_\_(spend) most of their money on CDs.
7. Many of the soldiers \_\_\_\_\_(have) deserted.
8. One of the soldiers \_\_\_\_\_(be) staying behind.
9. Each of these books \_\_\_\_\_(cost) more than \$200.
10. Few of these books \_\_\_\_\_(cost) less than \$250.
11. Most of the money \_\_\_\_\_(have) been lost.
12. Most of the furniture \_\_\_\_\_(have) been stolen.
13. Most of the students \_\_\_\_\_(have) signed up.

---

---

Most of the time, subject-verb agreement seems very simple and straightforward. However, there are complications (as with many other aspects of grammar). The most troublesome cases of subject-verb agreement involve subjects which are more complex – e.g. a complex **noun phrase** such as ‘The fierce leader of the resistance fighters’ *was* (or *were*?) arrested’. We’ll take up noun phrases in the next unit. In the Notes for Students to this unit, we’ll deal with some special cases of subject-verb agreement, if you’re interested in reading more about it.

---

---

## ADDITIONAL EXERCISES

### **EXERCISE 1**

In the following texts, most of the subjects have been left out. Fill in each blank with an appropriate subject, so that the sentence as a whole makes sense:

#### Text 1.

Four men were attacked by a group of masked men wielding knives at Shamshuipo early on Thursday.

Around 12.39am, \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were talking on the corner of Shek Kip Mei Street and Fuk Wa Street.

"Suddenly, \_\_\_\_\_ jumped out of a private car and started attacking the victims," a police spokeswoman said.

\_\_\_\_\_ added: "After chopping them repeatedly, \_\_\_\_\_ fled in the private car on Boundary Road towards Kowloon City."

\_\_\_\_\_ were taken to Caritas Hospital for treatment.

Police said \_\_\_\_\_ did not know the men and had no idea why \_\_\_\_\_ were attacked.

### Text 2.

\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ were found burned alive in bed together yesterday after her former lover allegedly set light to her Tuen Mun home.

\_\_\_\_\_ had allegedly got into the woman's 21st-floor flat in Castle Peak Road after climbing in through the kitchen window at about 9am.

"\_\_\_\_\_ allegedly poured gasoline into one of the bedrooms through the door gap when \_\_\_\_\_ were asleep inside," \_\_\_\_\_ said.

"\_\_\_\_\_ set the inflammable liquid alight and then ran out of the unit through the main door."

## **EXERCISE 2**

Fill in the blanks with suitable verbs that fit the context, in the present tense if possible. Pay special attention to subject-verb agreement:

### Text 1.

There \_\_\_\_\_ many articles and letters in the South China Morning Post about the proposed ban on smoking in restaurants.

As a teenager, not only must I \_\_\_\_\_ second-hand smoke when I \_\_\_\_\_ out eating, but I also have to put up with it when I play sports in public playgrounds, play video games in a games centre, and when I surf the Net at Internet cafes.

I understand that a smoking ban \_\_\_\_\_ already in place in certain public areas; however, I see little being done to punish those who \_\_\_\_\_ the regulations.

Unless the government \_\_\_\_\_ to take action, for example, increasing fines for people who \_\_\_\_\_ the law, there \_\_\_\_\_ little point in extending the ban if smokers \_\_\_\_\_ to ignore it.

### Text 2.

Two men \_\_\_\_\_ been caught using a video camera to record a preview of a film - the first arrest of its kind since an amended copyright law came into effect in April last year. The two, aged 26 and 27, \_\_\_\_\_ arrested at the Broadway Theatre in Sai Yeung Choi Street, Mongkok, during a preview of the Hong Kong-made action movie So Close on Saturday. They \_\_\_\_\_ caught with a digital video camera and two cassettes.

The new film \_\_\_\_\_ Taiwanese actress Shu Qi and Shaolin Soccer's Karen Mok Man-wai and Vicky Zhao Wei. It \_\_\_\_\_ on an international conspiracy involving murders and computer viruses.

### Text 3.

Cinemas \_\_\_\_\_ attendance levels to double from today when ticket prices \_\_\_\_\_ cut to \$25 for films screened on Tuesdays and Wednesdays.

Box-office takings \_\_\_\_\_ slumped to record lows this summer, diving more than 45 per cent from \$386 million last year.

In July last year, the local smash hits Shaolin Soccer and Love on a Diet together grossed \$90 million, but this year the biggest releases, Men In Black II and Minority Report, \_\_\_\_\_ taken only half that amount.

