



Subject, Predicate and Object in Grammar

by

Jørgen Smit

A fifth grade girl wrote an essay in which the following paragraph appeared: “They came running towards us are you the ones who smashed Mr. Hanson’s window no we have not yes you have Anne says that she saw you no yes no.”

The teacher reads it for the class and explains: You must place a period after “us.” Then add the first quotation mark and a capital “A.” After “window” there is a question mark, add the final quotation mark and “they asked.” Then you need to place another quotation mark and a capital letter. Now listen to what you wrote: “yes no yes no yes.” That is terrible. You must write: “Yes,” they said. “No,” we answered. When people speak there need to be clear boundaries between one person and the next. Do you understand?

The girl stared at the teacher amazed and broke out: “But that is how they speak on the street. They speak straight ahead, back and forth.”

She had said something very important. Our language streams straight ahead, back and forth—until it gradually becomes more conscious and reflected. We learn our mother language without any grammar. Already by the age of three or four we can use clauses and verbs in many tenses without knowing anything about “the past” or “the future” or conjunctions that introduce clauses. If the adults around children speak correctly, the children will imitate and can learn to speak correctly without studying any grammar. The same is true of a foreign language. In principle, it is unnecessary to know grammar to learn to speak a foreign language. Many people learn languages by imitation. Another possibility is to use grammar

as a crutch before you learn to move freely and speak “straight ahead, back and forth.” Especially if your ability to imitate is poorly developed, grammar may be a necessary tool if you want to speak correctly. But is that the only function for grammar? Is that the reason for learning grammar in school?

If so, we would need to reduce grammar to the very minimum. But that is not the most important function of grammar. By learning and practicing grammar, something of great importance for the entire human development of children can take place. It can be an important part of awakening and sharpening consciousness. With grammatical reflections the words and sentences flow in a new way. They no longer flow “straight ahead, back and forth.” With this clarification and objectivity we take a distance to what we say. Self-consciousness increases. At the same time we develop the ability to present an issue more clearly.

Already making the simplest comparisons between words moves us in this direction. And grammar can gradually expand and be deepened from small transparent areas to more and more completely composed networks of every possible combination. The whole time grammar can have a consciousness-sharpening function. At the same time it always has the tendency to become absolutely meaningless, useless and damaging. What is the meaningless and the damaging that can appear in grammar lessons?

The consciousness-awakening effect of grammar can bring forth something dry and pale. The language’s poetic, colorful sounds, a poem’s emerging pictures must be experienced directly in their own qualities. And this is where schools often make huge mistakes. For example, who has not experienced at school a poem totally analyzed as a grammatical example, so that when you hear it as an adult, you almost become sick to your stomach? In poems there are often uncommon grammatical connections. And the teacher cannot help but explain and analyze every detail so it will be crystal clear for the pupils. That is, will occur eventually. But meanwhile the poem is murdered for the pupils. It has lost all of its poetical, immediate range of experiences. Indeed, the pupils can explain the grammar, but because of the “poem murder,” grammar is also fully distasteful.

This is not only true for poetry. It is also the case for all prose that has an artistic composition. Here we have to be very careful and do whatever we can to help the true experience emerge.

When adults have already learned and mastered grammar, there can be an advantage for them to analyze artistically composed prose and poetry. In that case the adult is sufficiently strong and independent in his inner life to carry out such work without losing the artistic, poetical value of the poem or prose. To the contrary, it often strengthens the poetic experience.

In grammar lessons the teacher should make separate examples for the various grammatical functions. It is not necessary to bring the idiotic and mundane examples that we often find in older grammar books. What are most important are the grammatical functions. And the children should know the content. For example, the teacher can use experiences from the lessons, the classroom or recess. Without using names she can address the needs of various children in the class.

Most importantly the teacher should develop the grammar lessons so the pupils can write their own examples. First then, have the children learn the grammar rules. If every child can make his own example, one after the other and not just repeat something that has already been presented, then the teacher is on the right path.

But there is always a real danger with grammar lessons. It always tends to become a pale, superficial scheme that is used routinely: subject, predicate, object, clauses, infinitives, and so forth. Eventually it becomes a well-oiled machine with a routine and complete analysis by which sentence after sentence is evaluated according to its type, the sentence parts and the types of words in as great detail as possible.

What is the point with such “complete” machinery? Does it have any meaning at all for life, to be able to identify the plural, indefinite object or the conditional clauses? Doubtful. But that was never the intention. The intention is to use grammar as a way to awaken consciousness on a path to knowledge that sharpens conscious clarity, streaming step by step from the grey clouds into the clear sky. But when grammar becomes an automatic function, a routine machine-like process where the analysis takes place without having to think about it, it has again become meaningless. What is significant is that the child continually discovers something new in the grammar lessons; she finds a new relationship and creates new examples.

There is nothing wrong with using the conventional definitions. For the most part they are useful. It would be risky to continually change the names of the definitions, even though it would be a good exercise to make totally new definitions. The decisive aspect of grammar is for the children

to continually ask questions anew. When they re-ask or rediscover a moment in grammar, the teacher is going a good job. How does this really work? What is the relationship here? Could it not be different? The more such questions come alive, the better they become at masterfully making their own examples.

Often an apparently naïve question can become a very intricate question that can stop a routine and meaningless process. For example: “He saw me.” *He* is the subject, *saw* is the predicate, *me* is the object. In German it is written: “Er sah mich.” Or, for example: “He helped me.” *He* is the subject, *helped* is the predicate, *me* is the object. And in German it is: “Er half mir.” *Mich* and *mir* are different. *Mich* is accusative and *mir* is dative.

So the pupil asks, “Why should it be dative with the verb *half* and accusative with the verb *sah*?” Does the teacher answer by saying, “We learned the rule in our verse: *begegnen, behagen, danken, dienen...and helfen*. All you have to do is remember the verse!” No, that would be routine. You cannot say that the verb uses dative because it is in the verse. The verb is in the verse because it is dative. The verse does not help to answer the difficult question. Nor can the teacher explain why we have a different word formation for the dative in German and not in English.

The teacher cannot always answer all the questions. There are many strange things in language’s labyrinthine passages. But the teacher should rather help the children to ask more questions with real interest. It is essential that he has a sense for the value in such questions and does not dismiss them. Then we also arrive at interesting answers.

When we use grammar in the grade school it is important to take into consideration the possibilities for each age group. In the first, second and third grades, the teacher can use lists of words and verses in which grammar lies just below the surface. But leave it there and wait until the time is right. Grammar appears much stronger and healthier at the time the child’s inner development corresponds to the relevant learning process. Real grammar should be delayed until the fourth grade.

The fourth grade brings an important level of development wherein the feeling for the Self or “I” awakens to a new independence. “They are there and I am here.” The border between the world and the child is more distinct than before. This is when grammar, in its initial form, can be one of many ways of learning. Our goal is to make this a positive and healthy

experience. If the teacher has already caused a false start with grammar in the second or third grade, there could be damage. Bringing a foreign body into the younger classes will most often reduce the effectiveness of grammar when it truly should be presented.

In the fourth grade the first level of grammar is relevant: the qualities of the parts of speech. (See “A Little Introduction to Grammar” in this journal.) At the age of twelve in the sixth grade, children reach a new level of development. The child awakens to the outside world more objectively. Physics and chemistry are relevant. And the feeling of Self becomes a consciousness of Self. Now the students need to practice separating the subject from the object. Sentence analysis can be used powerfully. Of course you can prepare for sentence analysis in the fifth grade, but if you do so superficially, it can be unhealthy and support a premature development of the child’s intellect. It will also reduce the effectiveness of grammar lessons at the ages of twelve to thirteen.

When we begin with sentence analysis in the sixth grade, it should be done in a main lesson that covers three to four weeks. This leaves room for a lot of opportunities. The following is especially fruitful: The teacher starts with a thunderstorm: *It lightnings. It thunders. It blows. It rains.* Then it is easy for the students to create their own series of impersonal, indefinite expressions. Soon the children find many examples. Multiple, changing conditions in the atmosphere and in the four seasons appear: *It shines. It darkens. It snows. It hales. It drizzles. It dries. It grows. It sprouts. It flowers. It withers.*

Do not be content with just a few examples. All of the pupils should find their own expressions and listen to each other. Then they can write them up in a long series. Drawing and painting pictures of their examples are good activities as well.

In all of these impersonal, indefinite expressions, a definite subject is missing. In ancient times they often had certain gods as the subject, for example: Zeus thunders. Zeus lightnings. Zeus rains. But these figures disappeared and all we have left is the indefinite: something all-encompassing and overpowering that we are part of and that we cannot understand. Yet it may be something that was hidden temporarily, something that can appear any minute: It knocks. Who knocks? The door is opened and Peter walks in. Peter knocked.

To experience this more clearly, let two pupils go out in the hall. One shall stand aside while the other knocks. We who are inside do not know who knocks. It knocks. Who knocks? Before the door opens we all write up who we think it is who knocks. The door opens and the subject enters the classroom. Can it ever happen that the whole class guesses correctly?

Now the teacher need not ask if anyone else wants to go out and knock. Rather he needs to dampen the enthusiasm. Everyone wants to go out and try. We repeat the exercise many times. After a couple of times the whole class guesses incorrectly. For now a tricky kid has purposely knocked differently than we would expect from him. It was a different subject than we assumed.

We can change the exercise to a hand that waves through the door opening. It waves. Who waves? Many pupils are very sure they know who waves. But many do not recognize the hands they have seen a thousand times before.

So the teacher passes out pieces of paper. On one piece is written: *knock*. All the others are blank. The pupils sit with their hands underneath the desks. They try to identify the sound and direction when one of them knocks. You can do this for a while and then draw pictures of some examples where the definite subject appears.

Then each pupil finds his example of sentences with a subject and a predicate. We introduce grammatical terminology and carry out the analysis: Peter speaks. Speaks = predicate. Who speaks? Peter = the subject.

Of course pupils can learn the first phase of sentence analysis much quicker and much more routinely. But then it would be a superficial, mechanical and meaningless operation. Even finding the subject must be something that works into the child as strongly as possible. It must be an experience with the most quality of discovery: WHO knocks? The goal is to have an inner tension in the process of discovery.

Here many teachers can easily make mistakes. They think the first phase (subject-predicate) is so easy you can do it quickly and use the lesson time on more difficult relationships such as relative pronouns, infinitives and prepositions. But that is a big mistake! The relationship between subject and predicate is the core of sentence analysis. If you teach so well that this relationship appears as a realistic relationship and not a formal, routine question, then something has happened for the pupils.

That is most important. In addition, something has taken place in their understanding of grammar. The more powerful the subject appears, the easier the other parts of the sentence are to see. You need to take your time with this and practice multiple methods: run the sentences through all the verb tenses and then turn all of the sentences into questions. The latter is especially important. The subject must be found—no matter where it appears in the sentence.

We adults can easily forget to place ourselves within the possibilities children have in each phase of their development. For us it is no problem to find a subject in the sentence; we have passed that stage. But children are on their way out of a streaming life-filled experience in which the relationship to a subject is not yet clear. Eventually the subject appears out of the fog. In truth, that is a huge event. It takes time and it must be emphasized correctly.

With the following words the Austrian author, Adalbert Stifter, described the streaming life-filled experiences at the beginning of his childhood:

Long ago in the empty space there is something that resembles joy that streams into my being, grasping me powerfully, as if to destroy me, something very different from anything later in my life. When I describe it I must say shining things below. It must have been very clear, for it is as if the universal darkness was up above and surrounding it. There was something else that soothed through me. It was a sound. I swam in something that waded, I swam back and forth and it became softer and softer, I became dizzy and then there was nothing. It lies like a fairy tale in a sea of clouds in my past, like the primal memory of a folk.

C.G. Jung gave a description from his own childhood. It must have been in the sixth grade:

On the way to school, there was one moment where I suddenly had an overpowering feeling that I had come out of a thick cloud with the consciousness that now “I” am. Behind me was a cloud. Behind that I was not in existence. But in that moment I became myself. [He used the German expression: *Geschah ich mir.*] Before then I existed but

everything was just something that happened. Now I knew: NOW I AM. NOW I HAVE BECOME.

Before we continue in our grammar lessons with the parts of speech, we can do a supplemental language exercise. We transform an indefinite, impersonal expression into an expression with subject. Then we turn the expression into a noun by allowing the verb to have an adjective form as present participle:

It grows. The grass grows. Growing grass.

It withers. The leaves wither. Withering leaves.

It darkens. The heavens darken. Darkening heavens. Dark heavens.

During the first step of these examples, you stand within nature. Then a definite subject appears in a definite process. And finally we have a subject as the concept. At first the verb (as predicate) controls alone. There is simply something that happens. In the next step the process is limited. And finally the living process resolves into a quality of the definite subject. You may protest that a sixth grader cannot fathom this conceptually, but this shifting transformation is important to bring forth: The verb transforms into an adjective in the present participle. Remember that *participle* means something we “participate in.” What does the participle participate in? It participates in the verb and adjective parts of speech? It is a verb with the function and form of an adjective.

Such transformations do not need to confuse. You will meet the transformations no matter what. If we do not teach them, they will be confusing for the students. Once the children have practiced subject and predicate and you have treated the predicate words (which we omit in this article), the objectives appear.

Here the teacher needs to clean up his own bad grammar habits whereby all cats are grey and all objects are the object:

I sing a song. *Song* = object

I help Mother. *Mother* = object

Isn't that strange? In one case the object is the result of the action, in the other it is an independent person who does not even need to be present,

who could be resting in bed for all we know. For her the relationship is what I am doing when I help her. Is not *mother* in this sentence the indirect object? Is *mother* truly an object? Yes, in all thick and thin grammar books it is considered an object, so it must be correct.

If the teacher routinely trains the pupils to find the objects, they can learn to do it without error. Nor would it matter that you swept important nuances under the rug. But you can reach much farther if you find the core of each object, its origin. And this may be found in such sentences as: *He sings a song. I think a thought.* These are so-called “inner objects,” since the object is the content of the action.

At the next level the object appears from the action as a finished product: *He baked bread. Mother knitted a sweater* (a product object). At the next level you can do an action with an object that was there before: *He moves the stool.* *Stool* is not the action nor is it a product of the action (a transformation object).

There can be a superficial transformation and there can also be a transformation of the entire appearance: *He paints the stool.* Or the object can be completely transformed: *He melts the snow* (a transformation object).

And there can be an object we do not want to do anything to other than look at it: *He saw a horse.* Here the sensory verbs appear: *see, hear, smell, feel, discover, find* (sensory objects).

We can also divide something: *He sliced the cake.* Or an object can be destroyed completely: *He smashed the lamp* (a damaged object).

Once in a while we can make things better again: *He repaired the watch* (a beneficial object). And finally, we reach a damaged object or a beneficial object that is not merely singular but independent: *I help Mother* (personal, beneficial object).

There is a long list of types of objects (we have introduced only the most important) from the inner objects and the product objects to the personal beneficial objects that are farthest away from the inner object. With one little jump, it can become the indirect object.

Mary lost her book. (a transformation object)

I help her. (personal, beneficial object)

I give her (indirect object) the book. (a transformation object)

From the very first moment a child speaks her first word, language streams from the human being's inner being and expresses what is hidden in feelings and intensions. From the very first moment, language has the possibility to enable the unique quality of all things, actions and beings to come forth objectively, if it is not burdened or polluted by subjective egotism.

In language, in the word, lives the great human possibility to express our inner and true relation to reality. In the most profound meaning, language can unite the *subject* with the *object*. The purely human quality of this unity is that it is never given in advance as a finished thing that can be acquired. Language lives and it must evolve continually, be discovered anew, conquered anew, and created anew. Every single human being faces the task of finding his or her own unique way to participate in these processes.

