

The structure of verb phrases

Finite verb phrases

- 3.52 We have seen that in one respect the structure of the verb phrase may be described in terms of auxiliaries and main verbs, the main verb normally being the sole verb in cases where the verb phrase consists of one verb only. In another way, the structure may be represented in terms of finite and nonfinite verb words. On this basis, a finite verb phrase is a verb phrase in which the first or only word is a finite verb, the rest of the verb phrase (if any) consisting of nonfinite verbs; on the other hand, a nonfinite verb phrase contains nonfinite verb forms only.

Using the description of finite and nonfinite verb forms in 3.2, we can now distinguish finite from nonfinite verb phrases as follows:

- (a) Finite verb phrases can occur as the verb phrase of independent clauses (*cf* 14.6*ff*).
- (b) Finite verb phrases have tense contrast, *ie* the distinction between present and past tenses (*cf* 4.3*ff*, 4.11*ff*):

He *is* a journalist now.
He *worked* as a travel agent last summer.

- (c) There is person concord and number concord (*cf* 10.34*ff*) between the subject of a clause and the finite verb phrase. Concord is particularly clear with the present tense of BE:

I <i>am</i>	}	here.	He/She/It <i>is</i>	}	here.
You <i>are</i>			We/They <i>are</i>		

But with most full verbs overt concord is restricted to a contrast between the 3rd person singular and other persons or plural number:

He/She/Jim <i>reads</i>	}	the paper every morning.
I/We/You/They <i>read</i>		

With modal auxiliaries there is no overt concord at all (*cf* 3.30):

I/You/She/We/They *can* play the cello.

- (d) Finite verb phrases contain, as their first or only word, a finite verb form (as described in 3.2) which may be either an operator (*cf* 3.21) or a simple present or past form. DO-support (*cf* 3.37) is used in forming (for example) negative and interrogative constructions.
- (e) Finite verb phrases have mood, which indicates the factual, nonfactual, or counterfactual status of the predication. In contrast to the 'unmarked' INDICATIVE mood, we distinguish the 'marked' moods IMPERATIVE (used to express commands and other directive speech acts; *cf* 11.24*ff*), and SUBJUNCTIVE (used to express a wish, recommendation, etc; *cf* 3.58*ff*). Both the imperative and the present subjunctive consist of the base form of the verb:

Please *come* here and *attend* to me.

The Council requires that every member *attend* at least one meeting per year.

The five criteria listed above lead to inconsistency, in that subjunctive and imperative verb phrases are according to criteria (a) and (e) finite, whereas according to criterion (c) they are nonfinite. This inconsistency is not, however, disturbing, but reflects the fact that the finite/nonfinite distinction may be better represented as a scale of 'FINITENESS' ranging from the indicative (or 'most finite') mood, on the one hand, to the infinitive (or 'least finite') verb phrase, on the other. The imperative and subjunctive have in some respects more in common with the infinitive (a nonfinite form which like them consists of the base form, and typically expresses nonfactual meaning). There is, indeed, a tradition of regarding the infinitive as a mood of the verb. On this basis, the gradience of 'finiteness' may be represented as follows (the symbols '+', '-', etc referring to the satisfaction or nonsatisfaction of each of the criteria listed above):

	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	
INDICATIVE	+	+	+	+	+	} (Finite)
SUBJUNCTIVE	+	?	-	-	+	
IMPERATIVE	+	-	-	?	+	
INFINITIVE	-	-	-	-	-	(Nonfinite)

Fig. 3.52 A scale of finiteness

On the query in column (b), see the discussion of the *were*-subjunctive in 3.62. The query in column (d) reflects uncertainty as to whether DO-support occurs in imperative constructions (cf 3.58 on the position of *not* in the subjunctive construction, and 11.30 Note [a] on *do* with the imperative).

For the sake of clarity, we will continue to make a clear-cut distinction between finite verbs (including those in the indicative, imperative, and subjunctive moods) and nonfinite verbs (including the infinitive).

A clause with a finite verb phrase as its V element is called a 'finite verb clause' or, more tersely, a 'finite clause'. Similarly, a clause with a nonfinite verb as its V element is called a 'nonfinite (verb) clause' (cf 14.5ff).

Note Verb phrases introduced by modal auxiliaries are normally classified as indicative, but it is worth pointing out that not only semantically, but syntactically, they resemble imperatives and subjunctives. They lack person and number contrast and also (to some extent) tense contrast. It follows from the lack of person and number contrast that they have no overt concord with the subject.

Nonfinite verb phrases

3.53 The infinitive ((*to*) *call*), the *-ing* participle (*calling*), and the *-ed* participle (*called*) are the nonfinite forms of the verb. Hence any phrase in which one of these verb forms is the first or only word (disregarding the infinitive marker *to*) is a nonfinite verb phrase. Such phrases do not normally occur as the verb phrase of an independent clause. Compare:

FINITE VERB PHRASES

He *smokes*.
 Mary *is having* a smoke.
 He *must smoke* 40 a day.
 You *have been smoking* all day.

NONFINITE VERB PHRASES

To smoke like that must be dangerous.
 I regret having started *to smoke*.
 The cigars *smoked* here tend to be expensive.
 That was the last cigarette *to have been smoked* by me.

Simple and complex verb phrases

3.54 The finite verb phrase is **SIMPLE** when it consists of only one word, which may be present, past (cf 3.2), imperative (cf 11.24), or subjunctive (cf 3.58):

He *works* hard. He *worked* hard. *Work* harder!
 It is important that he *work* hard.

Except in the 3rd person singular, the present tense of all verbs apart from **BE** is realized by the base form of the verb: *I/you/they work hard*.

The verb phrase is **COMPLEX** when it consists of two or more words, as in:

John *has worked* hard. John *should be working* hard.
 Don't let's *upset* her. They *may have been sold*.

There are four basic types of construction in a complex verb phrase:

Type A (**MODAL**) consists of a modal auxiliary + the base of a verb: *eg: must examine*.

Type B (**PERFECTIVE**) consists of the auxiliary **HAVE** + the *-ed* participle of a verb: *eg: has examined*. (Traditionally the term **PERFECT** has been frequently used instead of **PERFECTIVE**.)

Type C (**PROGRESSIVE**) consists of the auxiliary **BE** + the *-ing* participle of a verb: *eg: is examining*.

Type D (**PASSIVE**) consists of the auxiliary **BE** + the *-ed* participle of a verb: *eg: is examined*.

These four basic constructions also enter into combination with each other:

- AB: *may have examined*
- AC: *may be examining*
- AD: *may be examined*
- BC: *has been examining*
- BD: *has been examined*
- CD: *is being examined*
- ABC: *may have been examining*
- ABD: *may have been examined*
- ACD: *may be being examined*
- BCD: *has been being examined*
- ABCD: *may have been being examined*

In these strings the different constructions are 'telescoped' into one another. This means that combinations of the basic types A, B, etc form structures in which the nonfinite verb of the first construction also functions as the

auxiliary of the second, and so forth. For example, ABD (*may have been examined*) has the following structure, where *have* is shared by A and B, and *been* is shared by B and D:

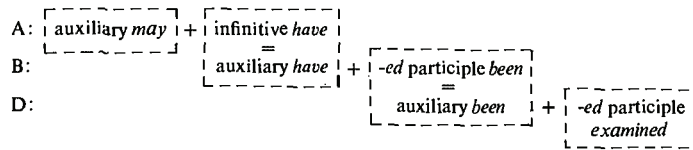


Fig. 3.54

Note *Beware* is used only in the imperative and in complex verb phrases with modal auxiliaries which have a quasi-imperative force:
Beware (of) the dog.
 You must *beware (of)* what you say to her.

Simple and complex finite verb phrases

3.55 The order in which the four constructions can form combinations is indicated by the alphabetical symbols A, B, C, D, which label them. A cannot follow B, B cannot follow C or D, etc, but gaps are allowed: AC, AD, ACD, BD, etc. Figure 3.55 gives a graphic representation of how the finite indicative verb phrase (simple or complex) is built up in a left-to-right progression.

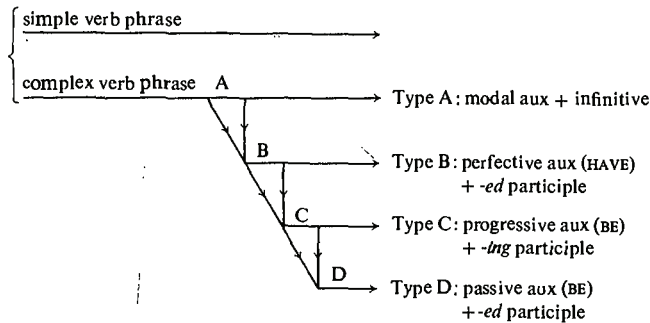


Fig. 3.55 The structure of the finite verb phrase

First comes the selection of the present or past tense of the finite verb, then the selection of none, one, two, three, or four of the complex phrase constructions as indicated by the direction of the arrows. On the whole, the more complex the verb phrase pattern is, the less commonly it occurs. Those complex phrases containing the combination CD (progressive + passive) are particularly uncommon (*cf* 3.73), but are undoubtedly acceptable as compared with sequences such as BCC (**have been being examining*) or CBD (**is having been examined*) which are not grammatical at all.

Note The rare ABCD pattern is illustrated in 2.28 Note.

- 3.56 Simple and complex nonfinite verb phrases**
 Unlike finite verb phrases, nonfinite verb phrases have no tense or mood distinctions (subject to the remarks on the gradience of finiteness in 3.52), and cannot occur in construction with a subject of a main clause. Contrast:

FINITE: He *was doing* it easily.
 NONFINITE: *He *doing* it easily.

Since modal auxiliaries have no nonfinite forms (*cf* 3.30), they cannot occur in nonfinite verb phrases, and therefore the modal construction Type A is not available within such phrases. But the aspect and voice auxiliaries HAVE (Type B) and BE (Types C and D) suffer from no such restriction. If we relate the structure of the nonfinite verb phrase to that of the finite verb phrase, we can tabulate the eight possible combinations as in *Table 3.56a*:

Table 3.56a Nonfinite verb phrases

	INFINITIVES	PARTICIPLES
simple	<i>to examine</i>	<i>examining</i>
complex	B <i>to have examined</i>	<i>having examined</i>
	C <i>to be examining</i>	[<i>being</i>] <i>examining</i>
	D <i>to be examined</i>	[<i>being</i>] <i>examined</i>
	BC <i>to have been examining</i>	<i>having been examining</i>
	BD <i>to have been examined</i>	<i>having been examined</i>
	CD <i>to be being examined</i>	[<i>being</i>] <i>being examined</i>
	BCD <i>to have been being examined</i>	<i>having been being examined</i>
	<rare>	<rare>

Looking at the right-hand side of the *Table*, we may interpret the square brackets as follows. Whenever a phrase should theoretically begin with the auxiliary *being*, this participle is omitted. In this way, the *-ed* participle phrase *examined* is regarded as a special variant of the *-ing* participle phrase, *viz* the representative of the passive construction D. There does indeed occur a further construction *being examined*, but this is the one which combines progressive with passive meaning (CD), as in the contrast between:

the suspects *examined* by the police [not progressive]
 the suspects *being examined* by the police [progressive]

(On progressive meaning in nonfinite phrases, *cf* 4.67.) Another result of the rule which omits the initial auxiliary *being* is that there are two types of nonfinite *-ing* participle phrase containing a main verb only (*examining*): one of these is progressive, and expresses the meaning characteristic of the progressive (*cf* 4.25), whereas the other is not. Contrast:

Smoking cigarettes is dangerous. [not progressive]
 They caught him *smoking* cigarettes. [progressive: 'while he was smoking']

As with finite verb phrases, the combination CD is rare, and BCD is of marginal acceptability.

- Note [a] The combination *being examining*, for phrase type C, is not quite impossible, as occasional examples such as the following have been attested in spontaneous conversation:
 You can probably get an extension on the grounds of *being teaching*.
Being teaching here manages to draw particular attention to the progressive meaning 'on the grounds of being in the course of teaching', which the aspectually ambiguous *on the grounds of teaching* would fail to do.
- [b] It may be helpful to illustrate various kinds of complex nonfinite verb phrase by means of the following sentences:

Table 3.56b

INFINITIVES	PARTICIPLES
We're glad <i>to have invited</i> you.	<i>Having invited</i> you, I expected you to come.
I'd like <i>to be working</i> .	<i>Being working</i> (cf Note [a])
I'd hate <i>to be questioned</i> about it.	When <i>questioned</i> , he denied everything.
I'm glad <i>to have been working</i> .	<i>Having been working</i> all day, I'm very tired.
He's said <i>to have been invited</i> .	<i>Having been invited</i> , he should have come.
I expected <i>to be being interviewed</i> then.	I saw her <i>being interviewed</i> .

Gradience between one and two verb phrases

- 3.57 In a single complex finite verb phrase, as already discussed, the order of constructions is limited to ABCD, and a similar restriction of nonfinite verb phrases to the order BCD has also been noted. If, however, a nonfinite verb phrase follows a finite one, as in certain types of verb complementation (cf 16.36ff), it is possible for the same construction to be repeated in each phrase:

We had hoped! *to have finished* by then. [perfective + perfective]
I am hoping! *to be seeing* her tomorrow. [progressive + progressive]

Moreover, it is possible for two constructions to occur outside their normal 'alphabetical' order so long as one construction occurs in a different verb phrase from the other:

I was hoping! *to have finished* by then. (C + B)
Jackson was believed! *to have been killed*. (D + BD)

In practice, however, most of the more complex possibilities, such as ABC + BCD, rarely if ever occur:

?*They must have been expecting*! *to have been being paid* well.

The question arises as to what structures are possible when a semi-auxiliary or a catenative verb occurs in the string of verbs. For instance, should *will have to help* in *The children will have to help us* be analysed as one verb phrase, or as two? There is no clear answer to this question, since the gradient relating auxiliary to main verb functions implies a comparable gradient between a single verb phrase analysis and a multiple verb phrase analysis.

With semi-auxiliaries it is possible to repeat the same construction in such examples as:

Sarah and I *are going to be leaving* tonight. [1]
The walls *were supposed to be repainted*. [2]

But (as noted in 3.47) *are going to* in [1] is not truly progressive, and *were supposed to* in [2] is not truly passive, because these constructions do not contrast (in the relevant sense) with a nonprogressive and an active construction respectively. In other cases where the same construction is repeated, the meaning of the construction does not require this repetition:

If you'd done that, we *would have had to have arrested* you. [3]

Such verb sequences as *would have had to have arrested*, with its vacuous repetition of the past time meaning of the perfective construction, are not uncommon, but are felt to be 'illogical' or pleonastic, because their meaning is no different from that of the same sequence without the repetition: . . . we *would have had to arrest you*. The occurrence of such constructions, however, may be a mark of the intermediate status of semi-auxiliaries, which allow some syntactic duplication of constructions, but do not appear to allow for semantic duplications. It is reasonable to suggest that in [3] *would have had to have arrested* consists syntactically of two verb phrases *would have had and to have arrested*, but semantically of only one.

The subjunctive mood

- 3.58 The subjunctive in modern English is generally an optional and stylistically somewhat marked variant of other constructions, but it is not so unimportant as is sometimes suggested. There are two forms of the subjunctive, traditionally called the present and past subjunctive, although the use of these forms relates more to mood than to tense.

Terms for the two major categories of the present subjunctive are the MANDATIVE and the FORMULAIC subjunctive (*cf* 3.59*f*). These are realized, like the imperative, by the base form of the verb. Consequently, where the clause has a plural subject, there is normally no difference between the indicative and subjunctive forms. Except with BE, where the subjunctive form *be* is distinct from the indicative forms *am*, *is*, and *are*, the subjunctive is distinctive only in the third person singular:

I insist that we *reconsider* the Council's decisions. [indicative or subjunctive] [1]
I insist that the Council *reconsider* its decisions. [subjunctive] [2]
I insist that the Council's decision(s) *be* reconsidered. [subjunctive] [3]

The past subjunctive is conveniently called the WERE-SUBJUNCTIVE, since it survives as a distinguishable form only in the past tense of the verb BE.