

SUBJECTS OF PHRASES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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List of Abbreviations

Adj.p	Adjective phrase
Adv.p	Adverb phrase
Comp.	Complementizer
Det	Determiner
Fig	Figure
InfP	Infinitival Phrase
InfC	Infinitival Clause
N	Noun
NP	Noun Phrase
NPGen	Genitive Noun Phrase
O	Object
P	Preposition
PP	Prepositional Phrase
S	Sentence
Š	S-bar
V	Verb
VP	Verb Phrase
VP grp.	Verb Group Gerundive verb phrase
VP pres.part	(present participle as gerund)

1. Introduction

An English sentence consists of two main parts – namely, the subject and the predicate¹. The subject is a noun phrase (NP) which can be realized by a noun, a pronoun, a word or a group of words. The predicate, on the other hand, is the verb phrase of the sentence. It consists of , beside the verb- the central element in sentence, all the auxiliaries, modifiers, etc. (Zandvoort, 1972: 196; Lapalombara, 1976: 32).

The subject is an 'abstraction' (Nash, 1986: 16). Like the object and the complement of a sentence, the subject does not denote specified words nor does it refer to a particular category. It is one of the grammatical functions or the

syntactic roles of NPs. Its function is to relate, syntactically, its NP, by means of the verb, to any other constituents of the sentence. In other words, there is a sort of agreement between the subject and the verb, the auxiliary, the reflexive pronoun, and these parts of the verb phrase that permit a distinction between singular and plural.(see Tallerman, 1998 : 39-43) as in:

1. **John considers himself a clever boy.**

Every part of a sentence has its role in forming the proposition of that sentence. Both the subject and the predicate make the complete proposition of the sentence, especially the subject. The subject provides an identification that cannot be made by the verb and its complement (Baker, 1989 : 184) as in:

2. **Mary met Alice.**

in which the verb *met* and its object *Alice* do not express a complete proposition. The role of the subject *Mary* is crucial in making a complete interpretation. This indicates that the verb phrase (VP) *met Alice* needs another element which is outside its scope to complete the meaning. The relation between the subject and the predicate can be presented by the following tree diagram:

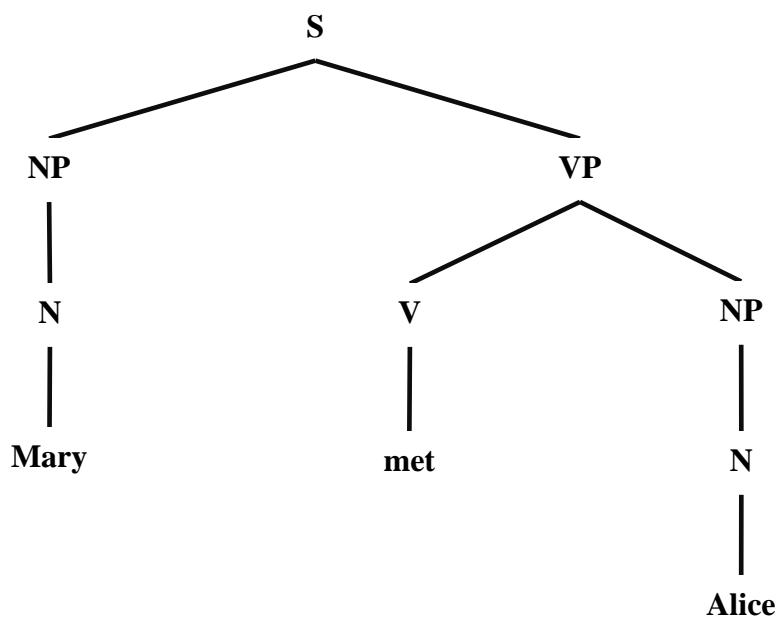


Fig (1) Structural Analysis of Sentence (2)

This tree represents an analysis of the syntactic structure of the simple sentence *Mary met Alice*.

Sentences are of various complexity. They could be simple as in the clause *Mary met Alice*, or complex as in *The boy who gave me that book left early*. To be complex, by virtue of the process of embedding (Quirk et.al., 1985 : 43), a sentence consists of more than one clause and phrase. Since these clauses and phrases need a subject, it is not always easy to identify their subjects. Some noun phrases function as subjects of more than one phrase at the same time, others may function differently in the same sentence at the same time.

It is hypothesized that even though NPs have more than one function in the sentence, and have the same function for more than one phrase, their identification does not follow a certain rule or formula, whereby difficulties of identification may appear.

The present paper is an attempt to shed some light on the concept of the subject: its forms and definitions, and show whether there are differences in the identification of the subjects of various kinds of phrases.

2. Subjects

2.1. Form

Being an NP, the subject is realized by different forms (see Folwer, 1971: 12; Quirk et.al. , 1985: 245, 736, 748; Nash, 1986: 16; and Burton-Roberts, 1997: 35-38). Some of these forms are:

a. a bare NP: This is limited to mass nouns and plural nouns as in:

3. **Workers are waiting for their manager.**

b. a gerund: Gerund, sometimes, can be used as subjects of sentences like:

4. **Walking is a sport.**

c. a noun premodified by some premodifiers. Premodifiers can be an article, adjective, adverb, etc. and all these premodifiers modify the noun which is their head as in:

5. **The very clever boy comes early.**

d. expletive *it* and *there*: When they do not refer to anything or any place, *it* and *there* can be used as subjects as in:

6. **It rained heavily yesterday.**

e. a non-finite clause: Non-finite clauses are of three types – to-infinitive clause (contracted as InfC), ing participle, and –ed participle as in:

7. **To leave early is very important.**

8. **Walking for a long time makes me feel tired.**

f. a clause that begins with a complementizer (an overt one) like:

9. **That he committed a mistake is obvious.**

10. **What made me angry is his childish behaviour.**

2.2. Definitions of Subject

Chomsky (1965: 66-67) defines subjects as one of the immediate constituents that are dominated by the sentence. It is one of the grammatical relations that are combined to form the structure of the sentence. Chomsky (ibid.) calls the terms 'subject', 'object', etc. as 'functional labels' while terms such as 'NP', 'VP', etc. as 'categorical labels'. Thus, he defines the subject as "the relation holding between the NP of the form NP~Aux~VP and the whole sentence." That is, the subject of a sentence is the NP that is immediately dominated by the sentence. It is represented as: Subject-of: [NP-S]. The NP which functions as a subject, together, with the VP (the predicate) form the immediate constituents of the sentence as in:

11. **The boy broke the window.**

The structure of this sentence can be presented by the following tree diagram:

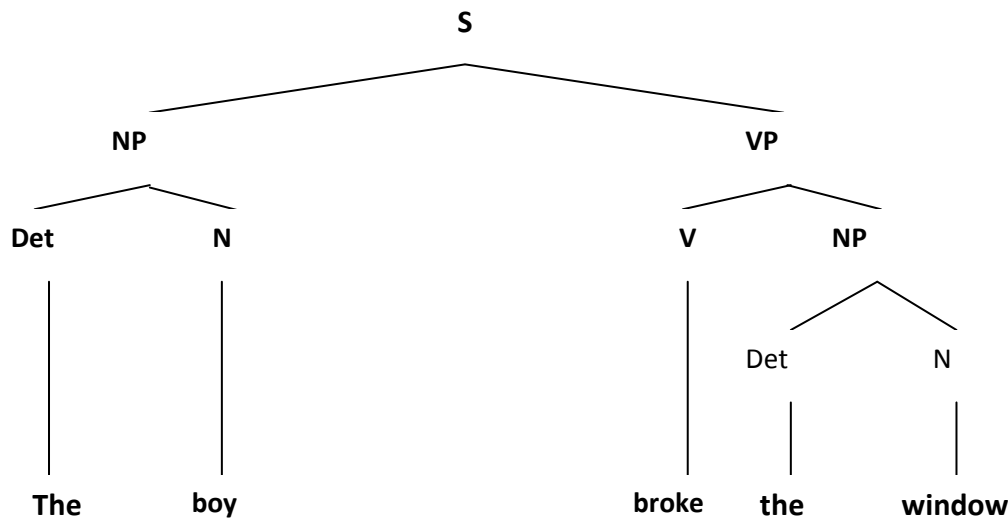


Fig. (2) Structural Analysis of Sentence (11)

Here we can see how the NP *the boy*, together, with the VP *broke the window*, form the immediate constituents of the whole sentence *S*. The NP *the boy* functions, in terms of traditional grammar, as the subject of the sentence, and the VP *broke the window* functions as the predicate which consists of the verb *broke* and its object *the window*. The NP and the VP are daughters (in terms of transformational generative grammar) of the sentence *S*.

The term ‘subject’ may be mixed with the terms ‘agent’ and ‘actor’. The latter two terms represent the semantic roles of NPs that function as a subject (Fillmore, 1977:52). Fillmore (ibid.) states that: in a sentence which contains an agent NP, this NP should be the subject. Assigning the semantic roles to subjects or to NPs depends on the verb of the sentence itself (Fillmore, ibid; and Tallerman, 1998:39, 163). Being the central part of any sentence (Palmer, 1965:1, Chafe, 1970: 96 ; and Quirk et.al., 1985: 50)), it is the verb which assigns the semantic roles of arguments. Chomsky (1986:59), on the other hand, argues that, sometimes, it is the verb and its arguments (complements) which assign the semantic roles of the subject NPs. This is obvious in Chomsky’s example:

12. **John threw a ball.**

13. **John threw a fit.**

in which *John* is the agent subject in (12). It is the doer of the action. But it is not agent subject in (13).

Although the normal position (i.e. unmarked) is the front position, it may come at an end position in a sentence. Tallerman (1998:163) states that 90 per cent of the languages have the subject in an initial position, but this, as he says,

cannot be considered to be a restrictive property of subjects. This means that there are languages whose subjects do not take front position.

Agentive NPs, in English, however, are not fixed to front position of sentences. They may come at an end position in passive sentences. The subject is demoted to an end position while the object is promoted to an initial position. Thus, the passive form of the sentence 14-a is:

14-b. Peter was given the book by Mary.

in which the NP *Peter*, although it begins the sentence, it is not its agentive subject. It is the demoted NP *Mary* which is the agentive subject.

It should be noted, here, that the functional relation between the subject NP and the verb does not change though the subject position² is changed to an end position (Chomsky, 1965: 68-70). This is clearly illustrated in 14-a and 14-b. Chomsky, however, discusses this case distinguishing between what is called 'grammatical subject' and 'logical subject'. For him, the logical subject is the NP that is presented in the deep structure of a sentence. It is "this element to which the predicate refers semantically", i.e., the verb and its arguments, both, describe the NP which functions as a subject. The grammatical subject, on the other hand, is the NP that is present in the surface structure of the sentence; "it is in grammatical concord with the verb", i.e., the grammatical subject has an agreement with the verb of the sentence (ibid). For example, a sentence such as:

15-a. The boy broke the window.

-b. The window was broken by the boy.

have an agent subject (logical subject) (*The boy*), and a grammatical subject in 15-b (*The window*). The logical subject remains or keeps its function though its position is changed, and even if the logical subject, which is preceded by the prep. (*by*) in passive sentences³, is deleted from the sentence, sometimes, in the transformational reconstruction of the passive sentences, it is always present in deep structure.

2.3. Phrase

A phrase is a word or group of words that are syntactically related (Quirk et.al., 1985: 42-43). It could be simple phrase or complex phrase. By virtue of the process of embedding, a phrase may be a complex one, i.e., it may consist of more than one kind of a phrase. For example, the prep. Phrase (pp) *in the corner* consists of a preposition and an NP and the preposition and the NP, both, make the immediate constituents of the prepositional phrase.

There are different kinds of phrases. There may consist of an NP, VP, Prep.P, Adj.P, Adv.P. And by the process of embedding, a phrase can be expended to contain different types of phrase.

It is not only verb phrases, within a sentence, which requires a subject, infinitive phrases, adjective phrases, gerundive, etc. all require a subject (Baker, 1989: 183-208).

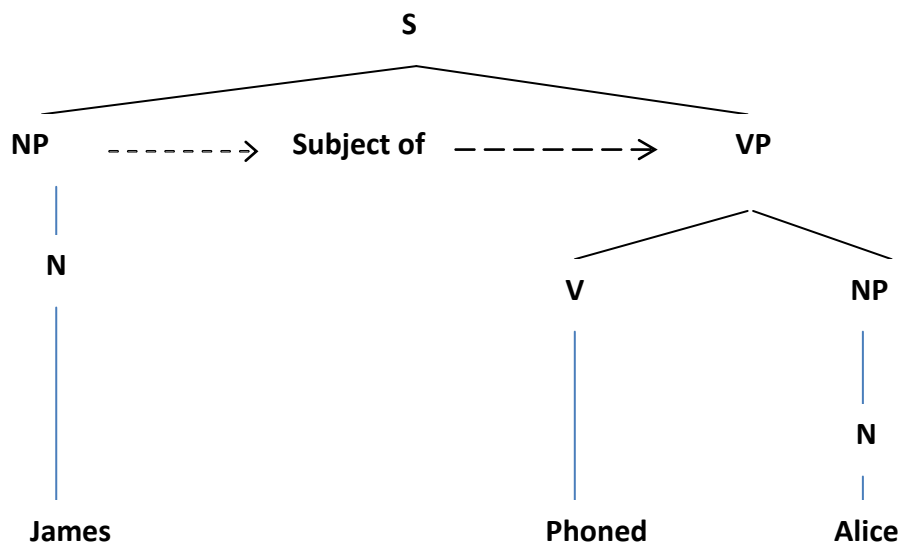
2.4. Subjects of Phrases

2.4.1. Subjects of VPs and InfP

It is often stated that the verb is the most central element in any sentence and it is this part (i.e. the verb phrase), which comprises the verb and its complements, which is the most difficult one (Palmer, 1965; and Quirk et.al., 1985:50). Every VP of declarative sentences requires a subject that complements the meaning of the sentence as in:

16. James phoned Alice.

The following tree diagram illustrates the structure of this simple sentence:



Fig, (3) Structural Analysis of Sentence (16).

In this analysis, we can see how the NP *James* functions as an agent subject to the VP *phoned Alice*. Identification of the subject in such sentences, however, is not a difficult process. Baker (1989: 185) proposes a rule for such subjects saying that: the construction which precedes a VP in a sentence functions as its subject.

Not every English sentence and phrase, that needs a subject, follow this rule of identification. Identification of the subjects of InfPs is a different one. The prepositional phrase (contracted as PP) in (17) illustrates an entirely different rule of identification.

17. For John to phone Mary...

In this PP, the NP *John* has two distinct functions. It functions as an object to the P. *for*, and, at the same time, as a subject to the verb *phone* of the InfP to *phone Mary*.

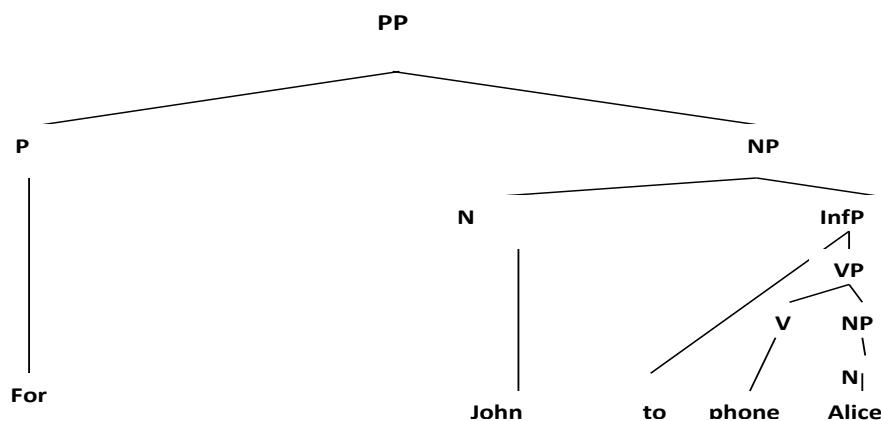


Fig. (4) Structural Analysis of PP.

Burton-Roberts (1997:265) asserts that it is only to-infinitive and –ing participle clauses that permit a ‘covert’ subject, i.e. a hidden or implied subject, and that it is the subject of the VP of the main sentence which controls the hidden or implied subject. In other words, it is the first immediate constituent of the sentence (the subject) which controls the subject of the embedded phrase as in:

- 18. **John did not remember to phone Alice.**
- 19. **John did not remember phoning Alice.**

In these sentences, the NP *John* functions as the subject of the main VP *did not remember to phone Alice*, and *did not remember phoning Alice*, respectively. At the same time, it is the subject of the two phrases *to phone Alice* and *phoning Alice*.

Identification of the subject of the InfP in such phrases is similar to those InfP that are embedded within a transitive verb phrase. This is illustrated in (20) and (21):

- 20. **James convinced John to phone Mary.**
- 21. **We considered Mark to be a fool.**

The verb *convinced* is a transitive verb which takes an object. The InfP *to phone Mary*, which is embedded within the larger VP *convinced John to phone Mary*, is a complement to the verb phrase. Within the larger VP, the NP *John* functions as the object to the verb *convinced*. At the same time, it functions as the subject to the infinitive verb *phone*. The NP *John* then has two distinct functions, i.e., it functions as an object and as a subject at the same time (Baker, *ibid*; Chomsky, 1965: 22-23).

Baker (*ibid*: 186) states a rule for the identification of the subjects of InfPs saying that: if an InfP is embedded within a verb phrase which consists of a transitive verb, then the object of the transitive verb also serves to be the subject of the embedded InfP. The following structural analysis of sentence (20) illustrates this rule:

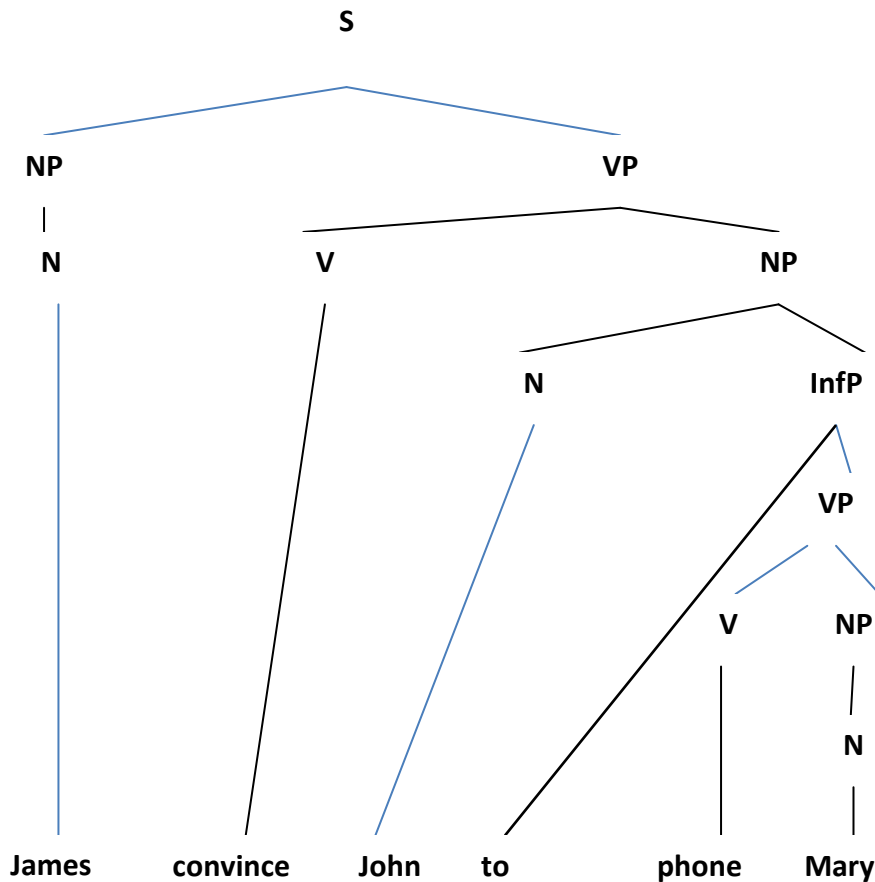


Fig.(5) Structural Analysis of a Sentence with Embedded InfP

Unlike Baker, Burton-Roberts (1997) does not find it easy to propose an identifying rule that can be applied for all sentences. Burton-Roberts talks of the non-finite clauses and how they permit NPs to be their overt or covert subjects. He says that: to say some verbs permit an NP to be their complement (transitive verbs) is not decisive one and that there should be ‘an explicit subcategorization system’ which subcategorizes verbs and assigns their features and their environmental specifications. According to such system, it would be possible to know whether verbs permit NPs to precede or follow them, and, if so, what function do these NPs perform (ibid: 263-69). Thus, we find that Burton-Roberts proposes two distinct analyses of the structure of VPs which consist of embedded InfP. This is clearly illustrated in his two examples:

- 22. “I’d prefer the butler to taste it first.”
- 23. “I’d prefer for the butler to taste it first.”

In his analysis of these two sentences, Burton-Roberts states that the NP *the butler* functions as a subject to the verb *taste* of the InfP, considering it (i.e., the NP) to be part of the InfP. He based his analysis on the fact that: since there is no complementizer in sentence (22) which marks the beginning of the subordinate clause, the NP *the butler* must be included within the InfP. Thus, he proposes the following analysis for the VP:

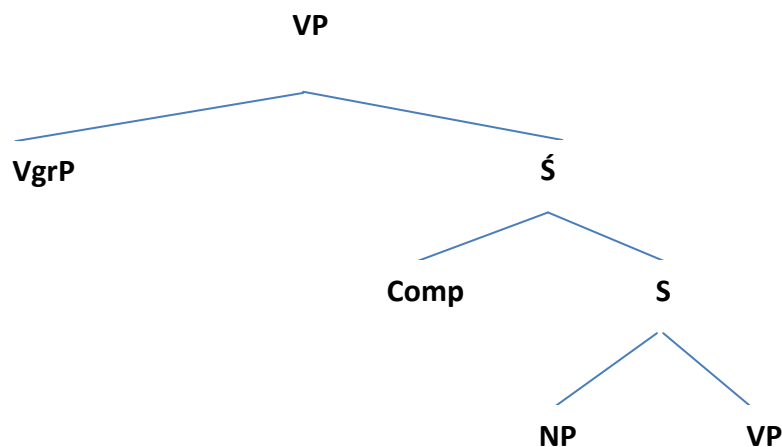


Fig.(6) NP as a Subject of InfP

The absence of a complementizer, due to the fact that some verbs do not permit overt complementizers (obligatory in surface) to be used, makes it possible to consider the NP *the butler* as a subject to the InfP. The verb *prefer*, however, permits an overt and covert (implied) complementizer. It is, thus, possible to consider the NP *the butler* to be an object to the verb *prefer* and to be included, in the analysis of the VP as a sister to the verb *prefer* and to the InfP *to taste it*. Moreover, this is strongly supported by the possibility of using a pronoun in accusative case (him, me, etc.) which functions as an object (for example: *I saw him*). But, since the subjects of non-finite clauses or phrases could take the accusative form, again, makes it possible for the NP to function as a subject in the accusative form.

It is for the previous causes that grammarians cannot make one fixed structural analysis.

The second analysis, proposed by Burton-Roberts, introduces the NP that precedes the InfP to function as an object to the verb *prefer* of the main verb phrase and thus, it is immediately dominated from the main verb phrase to be a sister to the verb *prefer* and the InfP *to taste if first*. This analysis is represented by Burton—Roberts (ibid:267) as follows:

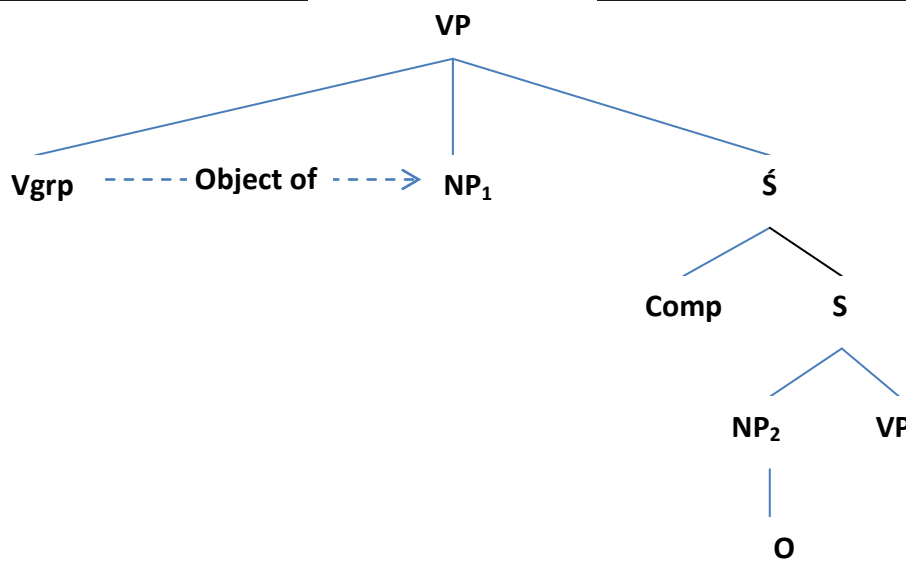


Fig.(7) NP as an Object to Main Verb

Here we can see how the (V, NP, \bar{S}) are sisters since they are immediately dominated from the VP and all of them are daughters of the VP. NP₂ represents the supposed subject of the InfP.

Burton-Roberts admits that such analysis arises uncertainty, referring to the absence and presence of complementizers, and the ability of NPs to have double function, in the same sentence, at the same time. And all this is due to the verb itself and to the NP which functions as an object at one time, and as a subject at another. It is this object which controls the subject of the embedded InfPs that follows it.

It seems that the identification of the subjects of phrases is done, sometimes, without any difficulties. But what may cause difficulty is the transitive verbs and their complements, i.e. those NPs that function as objects. It is not always possible to identify these Nps as having a double function, i.e. to function as an object to the verb of the main VP of the sentence and as a subject to the adjacent phrase that follows it. Baker (1989:193-204) discusses this difficulty saying that some exceptional verbs like (promise) do not let their complements (objects) to function as subject to the embedded phrases within the main VP. Thus, in a sentence like:

24. **Alice promised Mark to leave.**

The verb *promised* is a transitive verb which takes the NP *Mark* as its object. But it does not permit it (*Mark*) to function as a subject to the InfP *to leave*. It is the subject of the main VP, i.e. *Alice* which has a double function. It is the subject of the whole sentence and the subject of the embedded phrase at the same time.

This difficulty, however, will not arise if the verb *promise* (and other exceptional verbs) is not followed by an NP which causes the confusion. When the verb is followed immediately by an InfP or that-clause, identification of the subject will be an easy process as

25. **Alice promised to leave.**

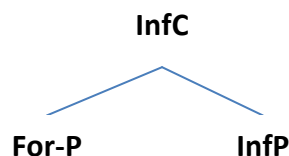
26. **Alice promised that she would leave.**

Here we can see that it is the subject *Alice* in (25) which functions as the subject of the InfP *to leave* and it is the subject *Alice* in (26) which is replaced by the pronoun *she* which is the subject of the finite clause that is embedded within the that-clause.

2.4.2. Subjects of Infinitival Clauses and Gerundive Constructions

Infinitival clauses (contracted as InfC) are those constructions that begin with the prep. *for*, followed by a NP and an InfP like *For John to help Mary* (Baker, 1989:76). Whenever an InfC is used, there is an embedded InfP within it. Thus, sometimes, the prep. *for* can be omitted leaving the INfP alone and, still, it is called InfC. So, to use InfC or InfP in the nalysis of InfP is the same (ibid:76-77). Baker proposes the following rules, which justify or support his statement of how InfC is formed: “a- An infinitival clause can consist of a for phrase plus an infinitival phrase” and “b- An infinitival clause can consist of an infinitival phrase alone” (ibid). These two rules can be represented by the following tree diagram:

a-



b-



The InfC serves to be used as subjects and complements. As complements, of course, they require a subject; the subject, again, could be overt or covert one. When it is present in the sentence, the subject of the InfC is introduced by the prep. *for*, but when it is not present in the sentence the subject of the main verb phrase may function as its subject as it is clearly illustrated in sentence (22) and (23) by Burton-Roberts. It is the absence of the prep. *for* and its NP (its object) which makes the process of assigning the subjects of these phrases indirect. The more embedded InfP, the more indirect the process of identifying the subject it will be. And all this is due to the process of embedding which makes sentences more complex (Fowler, 19 : 123-24; and Quirk et.al., 1985: 43). This indirect identification is clearly illustrated in (25):

25. **John intends³ to try to repair the computer.**

Identification of the subject of the first InfP *to try* is a direct one. Since there is no preceding NP, the agent subject of the main VP also functions as the subject of the InfP *to try*. Again, by virtue of being the subject of the InfP *to try*, the NP *John* functions as a subject to the other InfP *to repair*.

Identification of the subjects of the InfP is done according to Baker's rule "If a certain verb phrase occurs as the complement of an intransitive verb, then the subject of the higher verb phrase also serves as the subject of the lower one". The following tree diagram represents the structural analysis of a sentence with more than one embedded InfP

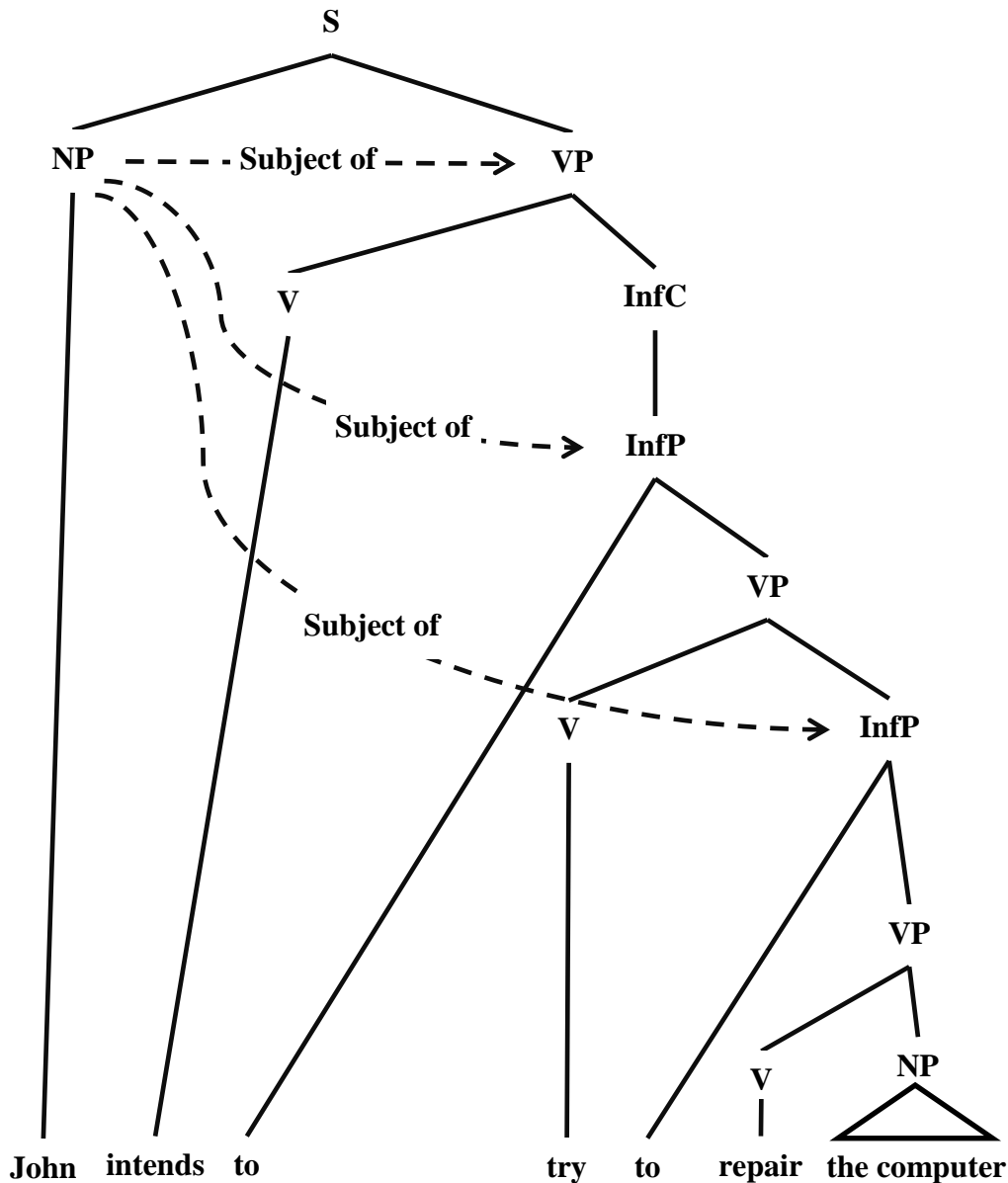
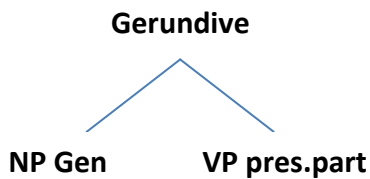


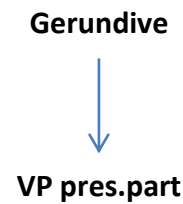
Fig.(8) Structural Analysis of a sentence with more than one InfP

This rule can be applied on the gerundive constructions when we try to identify their subjects. Gerundive constructions are those constructions that have a sentence like structure but whose external form identifies it as an NP (ibid: 147). A gerundive phrase may appear in two forms: it either appears to consist of a genitive NP followed by a present participle verb, or consist of present participle verb alone without the genitive NP (ibid). The following tree diagrams represent the two structures of the gerundive constructions:

a-



b-



Gerundive constructions that are not preceded by the genitive NP, when they function as complements of verbs, need subjects. The subject of the gerundive constructions can be identified in an indirect way following the rule that is proposed by Baker for the identification of subjects of the InfP as in:

25. John regrets leaving the party.

which can be represented by the following tree diagram:

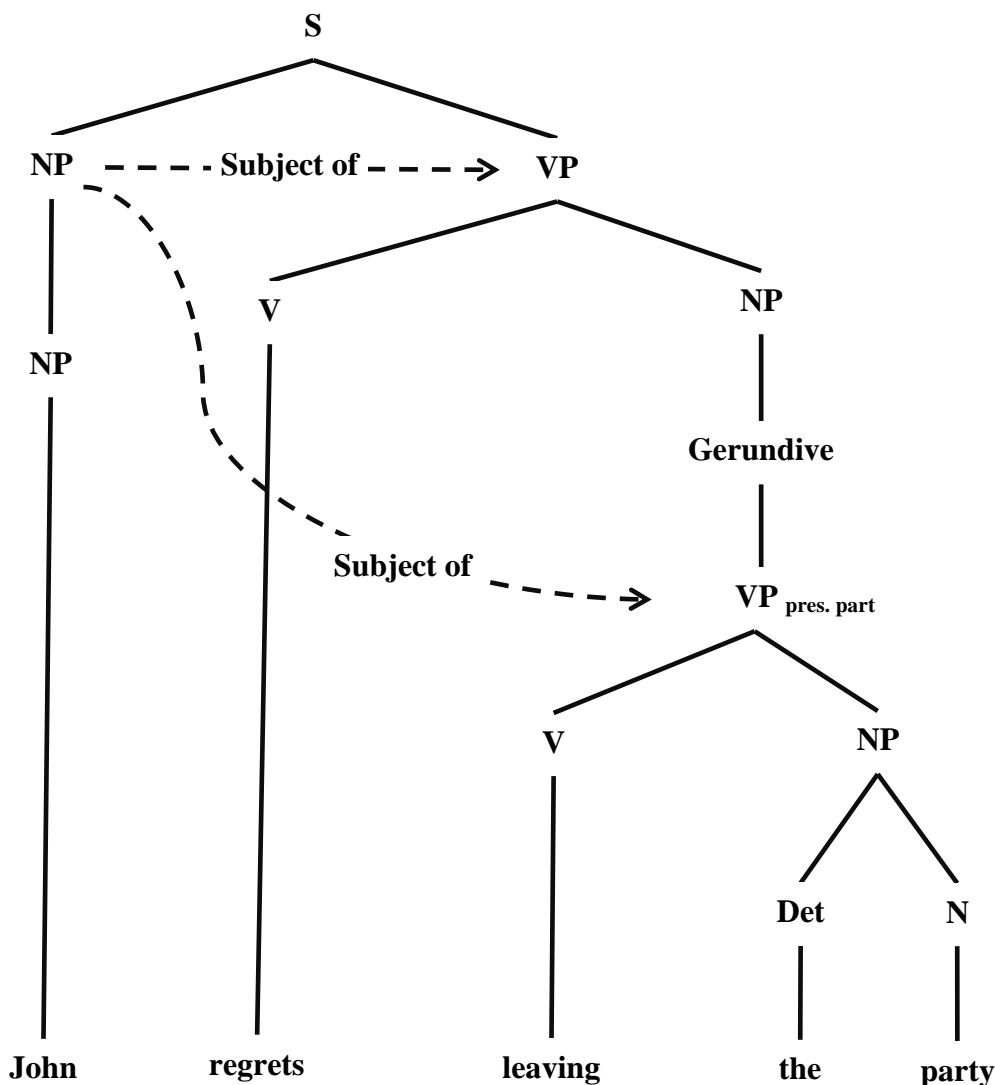


fig.(9) Subject of Gerundive NPs

In the above sentence, the subject of the VP *regrets leaving the party* is the NP *John*. It is identified directly. But this NP also functions as a subject to the gerundive construction *leaving the party* which is embedded within the main VP.

Notes

¹ Constructions like imperatives and exclamations which do not consist of subjects and predicates are outside the scope of this article.

² With regard to the relative position of subjects, there are, roughly, two possibilities, in active sentences. Front position, i.e., subject then verb, and after the verb in interrogative sentences (which is outside the scope of this article). But for logical subject, beside front position, it may take final position in passive sentences.

³ The verb *intend* permits an InfC consisting of the prep. *for* plus an NP an InfP. It can also be followed by an InfP alone (Baker, 1989: 97).

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