The Elegant English Verb Phrase

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Have you studied a Romance language? If so, then you've met the beauty of a highly inflected verb system, where a single word can put together **form,** or grammar meaning, and **content,** or dictionary meaning. Take the verb PAINT: *pintar*. First of all, it says, "I'm a verb!" just by its *-ar* ending. Then it changes into 30 or 40 other forms to tell you 'I paint, you paint, he paints'—*Pinto, pintas, pinta*—to add plurals—*pintamos, pintáis, pintan*—to show past and future, imaginal and subjunctive—*pinté, pintaré, pintaría, pintara.*

Now think about the English verb *PAINT.* It has only three forms: the base form *paint,* the *-ing* form *painting, and* the participle (or *d-t-n* form) *painted.* We'll get to three related forms in a moment, but think of these three as the "primary colors" of the English verb system. I'm going to say something about these forms that is radically different from how our students see them: the three English verb forms have **no time or tense** of their own. They have **no number**—singular and plural. They have **no person**—*I, you, he, she,* etc. They have dictionary meaning: *paint, walk, love, prevaricate, intensify.* In fact, English, with a vocabulary of over 500,000 words, has the richest collection of verbs in the world.

The three verb forms have another great value. Because we get meaning not just from an English word itself but from its position in a sentence, the three forms serve not only as verbs—*Paint your wagon!*—but also as nouns—*Where's the paint? Finger painting is fun*—and as adjectives—*the painted desert.*

But where's all the grammar? Where are past and present, one and many, negative and affirmative, question and answer, active and passive? They're in the **x-words.** X-words are the first auxiliaries of the English verb phrase, and if you want to find them on your own, stop for a minute and make yes-no questions like *Are you married?* Start each one with a different word: *Do you have any children?* Only the x-words will make the yes-no questions of English, and if you keep going, you will get to the 20 most common ones.

The x-words fall into four families:

• the *DO* family (*do, does, did*), which gives us our only two real **tenses,** when combined with a main verb, and which we use to present things we take to be facts;

• the *BE* family (*am, is, are, was, were*) and the *HAVE* family (*have, has, had*), which give us **aspect,** or how we distribute events in time and relate different times; and

• the modals (*can, could, shall, should, will, would, may, might, must*)[1], which give us **modality,** or how we assess the possibility, probability, desirability, etc. of an event occurring in relation to how we see ourselves and the outside world at the moment.

The x-words are little but mighty. They put together all the basic grammar opposites. We already have **questions,** and Level 1 students are always excited to see how the x-words turn up in **answers** as well: *Do you like merengue? Yes, I do. Can you teach me? Yes, I can. It's fun dancing, isn't it? It sure is!*

By themselves, x-words are **affirmative.** Add *not* or *-n't* and you have **negative:** *don't, doesn't, didn't; can't, couldn't, shan't[1] shouldn't, won't, wouldn't, may not, mightn't, am not, isn't, aren't, wasn't, weren't, haven't, hasn't, hadn't.*

Concerning time reference, the x-words are **immediate**—*do, does, have, has, am, is, are, can, shall, will, may* and *must*—which means we typically use them for present or future time reference—and **remote**—*did, had, was, were, could, should, would,* and *might*—which we use for past or imaginal reference, as in *We were in Paris* and *I wish we were in Paris,* and also for social distance, as in *Did you want to ask a question? I would suggest we discuss this.*

For **singular** and **plural,** most of the x-words are blessedly neutral: *I will/they will, he can/they can,* etc. But there are five that are

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[1] *Shall* is disappearing from American English speech, and *shan't* is unfamiliar to most people. The two can be mentioned briefly and put aside.

strictly singular. One—*I am*—seems to offer no problems, perhaps because it's about #1. The other four are the real core of what ESOL and English teachers mean when they mark "subject-verb agreement" errors. The problem is really the matching of subjects with *does, is, was, has* and their "plural" counterparts *do, are, were, have*. Do you see something interesting about the first four? When I introduce them, I call them "sssssssstrictly sssssssingular" because all four end in -s, and no other x-words do.

And what about **person**? As I said when we started, many languages can show person with verb endings, but English can't, and only the five strictly singular x-words attach to particular persons. But all the x-words are very attached to their subjects. The subject/x-word combination, is, in fact, the only completely **obligatory** part of a written English sentence. So if you see an x-word, you know there has to be a subject close by, and if one goes, the other one goes, too. That's why we can say *I hear <u>he is</u> practicing daily* and *I hear <u>him practicing</u> daily*. And we can substitute **SX** (subject and x-word) for a whole sentence as in *Who's ready to go? I am! Who has a car? Sammy does!*

And here's something wonderful about **XV** (x-word and main verb). The combination of the *DO* family and the modals with the base form and the *HAVE* family with the participle are a 100% match-up: *do paint, does paint, did paint; have painted, has painted, had painted; can paint, could paint,* etc. There are no exceptions whatsoever. These combinations give you active, finite (which we used to call "conjugated") English verb phrases. The *BE* family does the same thing: *am painting, is painting,* etc. are active, finite verb phrases. But *BE* has a second possibility, its "crossover" possibility. The whole *BE* family can cross over to the participle to give us the passive forms *were painted, was painted, are painted, is painted* and *am painted*. So, visually speaking, all the "horizontal" match-ups of XV are **active**, and the diagonal match-up of *BE* + participle is **passive**.

What we have in the 20 x-words and three main verb forms is <u>almost the entire English verb phrase</u>: 25 totally reliable two-word combinations. Now we'll add just three more things to see all the possibilities of the English verb phrase.

(1) The **middle auxiliaries**. Here they are, just four of them: *BE, HAVE, been* and *being*. Since they are, themselves, base forms, a participle and an *-ing* form of their respective verbs, they follow the x-words according to precisely the same sequencing rules as applied to two-word combinations, for example, *has been painted, should be painting, could have been painted*.

(2) The **hidden x-words**. Only *do, does* and *did* can be hidden or shown. Look at the three sentences below that seem to have no x-word:

My three brothers paint.
My niece paints. •
My grandmother painted.

Make each sentence into a yes-no question—

Do my three brothers paint?
Does my niece paint?
Did my grandmother paint?

or a negative statement—

My three brothers don't paint.
My niece doesn't paint.
My grandmother didn't paint.

and the hidden x-words show themselves. Is the concept of hidden x-words a construct? Yes. Does it have any basis in fact? Elizabethan English said of Eve that she "took of the fruit thereof and did eat," and some linguists have described the *did* as having "collapsed into the main verb." Students like the way the *DO family* x-words can all hide and show themselves—like we do—and once, again, what they meet in this construct is entirely consistent; it has no exceptions.

(3) The **semi-modals**. Especially in speech, *going to, have to, need to have got to, be able to, 'd better, be supposed to, be willing to, 'd* add their individual flavors to how we show perception of events.

Our verb phrase is complete, so we return to form and content. How does the mind of a listener or reader process the enormous amount of information coming to it from a single verb phrase? It makes form and content one. At the moment we hear or read the sentence *Picasso painted Guernica*, we know what the creative process was, who did it, that he finished it and that the speaker or writer believes this to be a true statement. That we can do so effortlessly is a tribute to the human mind and to the ordinary people who developed and streamlined English.