

Verb Finiteness in the English Sentence

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Abstract:

Any independent clause must contain one and only one finite verb. A finite verb is the one which can occur on its own in an independent clause and permit formal contrasts of tense, number, and mood. On the contrary, a non-finite verb or construction, can occur on its own only in a dependent clause and lacks the said contrasts. This dichotomy plays a significant role in the recognition of the sentence from non-sentence. It is particularly of help in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, in a number of aspects. The objective of this article is to formulate the rules governing the two categories of verbs and to illustrate how the concept of finiteness can be utilized to help prevent the formation of ungrammatical sentences in English. Some simple rules facilitating the interrogation and/or negation of English sentences are also introduced.

Key Words: *Finite, Non-finite, Finiteness, Elsewhere Rule.*

1. Introduction

The Finiteness of the sentence is a universal linguistic concept. No sentence can be grammatical without one and only one finite verb. A finite verb is the one which permits formal contrasts of tense, number, and mood. In contrast, a non-finite verb or construction lacks the said contrasts and therefore, can occur on its own only in a dependent clause. Differentiating between these two verb forms has a significant part in the recognition of the sentence from non-sentence. This dichotomy is of help to both EFL and ESL learners and teachers, in a number of aspects. This article aims at a brief formulation of the rules governing the two categories of verbs and manifesting how the concept of finiteness can be utilized to help prevent the formation of ungrammatical sentences in English. It also introduces some simple rules facilitating the interrogation and/or negation of English sentences.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Finite and non-finite verb forms

A finite verb is "a verb form or verb phrase that serves as a predicate; it has number and person. Opposed to the finite verb is the nonfinite verb form, which cannot serve as a predicate. Nonfinite forms are participles, gerunds, and infinitives:

He *walked* to school.

I *have* finished the job" (Shaw, 1986:56).

"Sentences with tense and AGR are called finite clauses. Thus: *Mervyn plays the piano very well.* is a finite clause because it contains the ending –s to show both present tense and singular AGR" (Cook and Newson,1997:52).

A finite verb " is always marked for tense, and it also carries agreement, insofar as English has any agreement.", while "A non-finite form is not marked for tense, it shows no agreement and it cannot be the only verb in a sentence"(Trask 2008:90). This means that" participle forms- the present participle, or 'ing' form, and past participle, or 'en' form- are always non-finite" (Finch, 2000: 92).

For Leech, Deuchar and Hoogenraad (1983), finite verb forms are those " showing TENSE (past or present) and SUBJECT CONCORD (for person and number, and is either the **operator** (the first auxiliary verb in the VP) or the **main verb** if there is no operator"(p:78).

Finite verbs are verbal forms "marked to show that it is related to a subject in PERSON/and/or NUMBER, and show TENSE. A non-finite form is not marked according to differences in the person or number of the subject, and has no tense" (Richards and Schmidt, 2002: 202). On this basis, "the –s form and the past form are called FINITE, whereas the –ing participle and the –ed participle are called NONFINITE" (Quirk et al, 1995: 96).

According to (Crystal, 2001:146) "all forms except the INFINITIVES and PARTICIPLES (-ing and –en forms) are finite ". Thus " *I walk* is a finite use of verb because it expresses only one tense, number and mood (1st person present indicative), as can be shown by such contrasts as I walked and He walks. The verb in Walking in the street..., is however nonfinite, as it is not limited in this way" (Crystal, 1992:76).

"A finite (auxiliary or non-auxiliary) verb form is one which carries (present/past) **tense**- e.g. can, could, hates, went etc. "(Radford, 2006:480).

2.2. Auxiliary vs. Lexical Verbs.

Related to finite vs. non-finite dichotomy is the dichotomy of Auxiliary vs. Lexical (also, referred to as full or main) verb. An auxiliary "serves to express any of several grammatical categories. The English auxiliaries are specialized verbs; they chiefly serve to express **aspect**,

voice and **modality**, and they commonly also carry markers of tense and agreement.”(Trask, 2008:29)

"In English, *be*, *do* and *have* and the modal verbs like *may*, *can* and *will* are all auxiliaries. For example:

She is working.
He didn't come.
They have finished.

They may go.
Can you manage?
They will arrive tomorrow.

Lexical verbs can be used as the only verb in a sentence, e.g. She works at the factory. *Be*, *do*, and *have* can also be used as lexical verbs, e.g. *He is happy*, *She does computer studies at the university*, and *They have three children*." ((Richards and Schmidt, 2002:44).

3. Data of the Study

Simple sentences collected from elementary language text-books comprise the data of the study. They are deliberately chosen for among simple sentences for the ease of discussions and argumentations.

4-Discussions

From the literature review above, rules (a-h) can be inferred:

Table (1)

a	Any simple sentence has necessarily a finite verb form.
b	No simple sentence can have more than one finite verb form.
c	Finite verbs (may) undergo changes, non-finite verbs may not.
d	Sometimes a finite and a non-finite verb seem to have the same form. This resemblance is superficial and accidental. ¹
e	In English, non-finite verbs are either participles (present or past), or infinitives (with or without to).

1-It is worth insisting that English, with its small number of grammatical markings, is not the ideal language to illustrate the difference, because some of the non-finite forms look just like some of the finite forms. For example, the verb form **opened** is finite in He **opened** the door and non-finite in He has **opened** the door. The reason behind this superficial resemblance is that English uses the same marker (-ed) for both the past form (a finite) and the Past Participle (a non-finite) verb form, in regular verbs. The same resemblance can be seen in the form **drive** which is a finite verb in I **drive** home every day, and non-finite in I can **drive**.

f	If a simple sentence has more than one verb, the finite verb form is the leftmost verb of the VP.
g	The finite verb of sentences with more than one verb is necessarily an auxiliary (operator), and it is a form of BE , HAVE , or a MODAL .
h	The only verb of a sentence is a lexical (i.e. non-auxiliary) verb form.

Sentences (1-21), in Table 2, are examples of the use of finite and non-finite verb forms in English:

Table (2)

	Finite Verb	Subject	Finite Verb	Non-finite Verb 1	Non-finite Verb 2	Non-finite Verb 3
1	--	I	study	--	--	--
2	--	He	studies	--	--	--
3	<u>Does</u> ²	he	--	study ?	--	--
4	--	They	studied	--	--	--
5	--	they	--	study ?	--	--
6	--	I	<u>am</u>	studying	--	--
7	--	He	<u>is</u>	studying	--	--
8	<u>Is</u>	he	--	studying?	--	--
9	--	I	<u>was</u>	studying	--	--
10	--	I	<u>have</u>	studied	--	--
11	--	He	<u>has</u>	studied	--	--
12	--	He	<u>had</u>	studied	--	--
13	--	I	<u>can</u>	drive	--	--
14	--	He	wants	to leave	--	--
15	--	He	<u>was</u>	killed	--	--
16	--	He	<u>is</u>	<u>going</u>	to study	--
17	--	He	<u>has</u>	<u>been</u>	studying	--
18	--	He	<u>has</u>	<u>been</u>	taught	--
19	--	He	<u>is</u>	supposed	to be	studying
20	--	He	<u>will</u>	<u>be</u>	obliged	to study
21	--	He	<u>will</u>	<u>have</u>	<u>been</u>	studying

² -Auxiliary verbs are underlined

5. Applications

5.1 Judgment about the sentence ungrammaticality

Some ungrammatical sentences made by EFL learners can be traced back to the violation of one of the above-mentioned rules. Some typical ungrammatical sentence frequently made by EFL learners are as follows³:

- 22- * I able to speak English.
- 23- *The keys found.
- 24- * He be working.
- 25- * He is work.
- 26- * The letter was wrote.
- 27- * I like speak English.
- 28- * Did he understood the lesson?
- 29- * He has went to school.

Sentences (22-24) violate Rule (a), (25) violates (b) and (e), and (26-29) violate (c), etc.

5.2 Application of the Dichotomy in Negation and Interrogation

Finite and non-finite verb dichotomy, can have an important part in the negation and/or interrogation of English sentences. By explicit teaching of an **Elsewhere Rule**⁴ and its (rule-governed) exception, negation and interrogation of English sentences of all tenses can be instructed much more easily.

5.2.1. Elsewhere rule

Default:

Unless the affirmative sentence has merely a finite verb form other than a finite form of the copular verb **BE**, i.e. *am, is are, was* and *were*, apply **Maxims A, B and C**, respectively, to convert the sentence to yes-no question, wh-question & negative:

Maxim A	Just tropicalize the finite (auxiliary) verb. The sentence will be converted to a yes-no question.
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³ - These sentences are collected from among ungrammatical sentences by students taking General English at Yasouj University, Iran.

⁴ - An **elsewhere rule** is "a rule in a generative grammar that applies whenever the conditions for more specific rules are not met: hence a **default rule**" (Matthews, 2007:119)

30- He is working.

Is he working?

31- You have worked.

Have you worked ?

32- He is going to work.

Is he going to work ?

33- He has been working.

Has he been working ?

34- He is a student.

Is he a student?

Maxim
B

Put the wh-word before the finite (auxiliary) verb. The sentence will be converted to a wh-question.

35- **Where** is he working?

36- **Where** have you worked?

37- **How** is he going to work?

38- **When** has he been working?

Maxim
C

Just insert NOT after the finite (auxiliary) verb. The sentence will be converted to a negative question.

39- You are playing soccer.

You are **not** playing soccer.

40- He has played soccer.

He has **not** played soccer.

41- You can play soccer.

You **cannot** play soccer.

42- He is going to play soccer.

He is **not** going to play soccer.

43- He has been working.
He has **not** been ing.

5.2.2. Exception

If the sentence has no auxiliary verb form, to make the sentence negative or interrogative, apply Maxim D:

Maxim D	Insert the auxiliary verbs <i>do</i> and <i>does</i> (for the present) and <i>did</i> (for the past) between the subject and the already existing finite verb forms.
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44- He plays.
45- * He **does** plays.

46- You work.
47- *You **do** work⁵.

48- He went.
49- * He **did** went.

These auxiliary verbs are substitutes for the finite verbs of the new sentences. They move the already existed finite verbs to the right. As two finite verbs can not occur in one simple sentence, they should be converted to non-finite verbs, i.e. verb words:

50- He does play.
51- You do work.
52- He did go.

Sentences (45-47) are grammatical and ready for negation and/or interrogation. Now, they are ready for the application of the **Elsewhere Rule**:

53- He does play.
Does he play?

54- You do **not** work.
Do you work?

⁵ - The verb form work in (46) is the only verb of the sentence and therefore a finite verb form. In (47) do is inserted before the finite verb of the sentence (46). Although (47) is not ungrammatical at face value, in the explanation of the rule, the concept of "finiteness" should not be confused.

55-You did **not** go
Did you go?

To make negative-interrogative sentences, apply the above-mentioned negation and interrogation **Maxims A, B and C**, simultaneously:

56- **Are** you **not** playing?

57- **Do** you **not** work?

58- **Is** he **not** a student?

Note 1: The contracted form **n't**, always attaches to the finite verb forms inseparably:

59- You **don't** work.

60- You **aren't** playing.

61-**Don't** you work?

62- **Isn't** he a student?

Note 2-Sentences with a "**to infinitive**" can have two negative forms, of course with slightly different meanings:

(a) –By applying **Maxims A-D**:

63- I am **not** going to work.

64- I do **not** have to work.

(b) : By putting **not** immediately before the infinitive marker **to**:

65- I am going **not** to work.

66- I have **not** to work.

6. Conclusions

Differentiating between finite and non-finite verb forms is far from trivial. Focusing on the dichotomy, and instructing it explicitly, would play an important part in teaching and learning English as a foreign language, giving EFL learners a good insight about the nature of the sentence and a sound judgment about the grammaticality of sentences. Lack of an explicit instruction of the dichotomy could be the source of a number of ill-formed sentences made by EFL learners. Moreover this dichotomy could be of a great help in facilitating the teaching and learning of negation and/or interrogation of English sentences.

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