Propositions and Sentence Structure

There are an almost infinite amount of things that can be said in English. But there are standard patterns and forms in which to say them. Part of the meaning comes from the form in which it is said.

The most basic form of one **complete** thought is called a proposition. In English, a proposition is often the same as a sentence. But a sentence can contain more than one proposition joined together, so the two terms are not completely synonymous.

Types of Propositions:

What follows is a brief breakdown of the major categories of propositions in English, and the way in which they are formed.

Actions:

Active proposition

The most common proposition is stating that some action takes place (past, present, or future). The proposition tells what action happens (verb), who does the action (subject) and sometimes tells who receives the action (direct object). For instance, in the proposition "John hit the ball." "hit" is the verb because it tells the action. "John" is the subject because it tells who (or what) does the action. And "the ball" is the direct object because it shows what receives the action of John hitting.

John	hit	the ball
(Subject)	(Verb)	(Direct Object)

There may by many other modifying words that give details and elaboration of this main action. But the central idea of an action sentence will always be carried, at its most basic form in the SVD (Subject-Verb-Direct Object) of the sentence. The SVD is the central skeleton of the sentence.

Passive proposition

Sometimes the emphasis of the proposition may not be on something doing action, but on receiving some action. This is typically done either to put the emphasis on the receiver of the action, or if the doer of the action is unknown of purposely unstated. In this case, the subject receives the action and the verb is in the passive voice. If the doer of the action is mentioned at all, it is in a prepositional phrase (which is not part of the sentence skeleton). Compare the following sentence with the previous example. "John was hit by the ball."

John	was hit
S	V (passive)

Multi-Word Verbs

As in the case of the previous example, English often uses more than one word to make a single verbal idea. Greek will occasionally have a similar phenomenon. It is important to recognize that this is not more than one verb, but all the words are working together to make one verbal idea. For instance, "John has been hit by the ball" uses three words to communicate the one verbal action.

John   has been hit
 S   V

Implied Verbs

In the Biblical languages, as well as in English, when an idea is clearly implied in the surrounding context, it may be left out in a particular proposition. Often this happens when a verb is used in one proposition, and the same verb is used in the following proposition, the verb is not written, but should be implied from the following context. For instance "John was hit by the ball, but not by the bat." actually contains two propositions. The first proposition is self-explanatory. The second proposition is actually stating that "[John was] not [hit] by the bat." But the words in brackets were not stated because they were clearly implied from the previous proposition.

John   was hit   (by the ball)
 S   V

[John]   [was (not) hit] (by the bat)
 S   V

It is important to recognize implied words from the surrounding context, and recognize them as a part of the SVD of the sentence, even when they are only implied.

Statements of Existence (copulative):

There is a special category of verbs in the Biblical language (and English) called "to be" verbs (the technical term is "copulative"). The copulative functions almost like an equal sign stating that the word on the left side is in some way equated with the word(s) on the right side of the "to be" verb.

Existence

Occasionally a copulative simply states that the subject exists. In this case, the subject is equated with existence. For instance, "I am", "It is"

I   am
S   2BV ("to be" verb)

Existence in certain state

More often, a subject and copulative is modified by other words (primarily prepositional phrases) to show the place or state in which the subject exists. For instance: "I am in the house." "Jim is under consideration"

I	am	in the house
S	2BV	

Jim	is	under consideration
S	2BV	

Equating with a character

The most common use of a copulative proposition is to say that the subject exists as a certain character or the subject exists having certain characteristics. In the first case, the subject is equated with being something else or being in a certain category. In this construction, the subject is equated with another noun called the predicate nominative, which follows the "to be" verb. For example: "John is a student."

John	is	student
S	2BC	PN

In this case, the word "John" is equated with the word "student." It needs to be noted that the author is not saying that they are entirely equal in every respect. John may be many things besides a student, and there may be other students besides John. But the author is stating that at least in some ways, John is to be equated with what a student is.

Having a characteristic

In the second, related case, the subject is not equated with another noun, but is equated with a predicate adjective, stating that the subject has this certain characteristic. For instance, "John is nice."

John	is	nice
S	V	PA

In this case, the word "John" is not directly equated with the word "nice," as if John were the concept of niceness itself. But in this case, the word "John" is claimed to have the characteristic of niceness in some way.[1]

---

[1] See Exegetical Fallacies pp. 57-61 for one example of how these categories can be useful (and abused) in exegesis.

Questions:

Questions are formed in a few ways in English. For instance, sometimes a question is formed by changing the order of the 2Bverb and subject, "Are you a student?"

Are	you	student
2BV	S	PN

Sometimes a question word (Who? What? Why? etc.) is substituted for the subject, "What is the problem?"

What	is	problem
S	2BV	PN

Sometimes the word order of a helping verb is the signal for a question in English. "Did John hit the ball?"

John	did hit	the ball
S	V	D

Commands/Requests:

A command or request is formed in English by leaving out the subject and speaking the verbal idea directly to the listener. The subject is always an implied "you." For example, "Hit the ball!"

(you)	hit	ball
(S)	V	D

Interjections:

Occasionally in English, a single word or short phrase contains a complete thought, even though it does not contain an entire sentence. This is usually an expression of emotion. For instance, "Wow!"

Compound propositions:

In addition, propositions may have a compound subject (more than one subject). For example, "Jim and John played baseball." is one proposition which has two subjects.

Jim and John	played	baseball
S	V	D

Sometimes there is a compound verb. But in this case, it is better to consider it to be two separate propositions with an implied subject in the second proposition. For example, "Jim hit the ball and ran to base."

Jim	hit	ball
S	V	D

(Jim)	ran
(s)	V

Summary:

These are the basic types of propositions in English (though not an exhaustive list). Be aware that these are just the basic skeletons of the propositions, which can then be elaborated with as many modifiers as the author chooses to use.

Sentence structure in Greek:

Because they are inflected languages, both Hebrew and Greek do not rely on word order in a sentence as much as English. Word order can dramatically change without changing the basic meaning of the proposition. For instance, in English, "Jim hit John." is a completely different meaning than "John hit Jim." But in the Biblical languages, one of these words would be marked as the subject, and one as the Direct object. Therefore, "John(S) hit Jim(D)" and "Jim(D) hit John(S)" would actually mean the same thing, and Jim would be saying "ow!" in both these sentences. However, because the word order has changed, both of these sentences would not mean *exactly* the same thing with all the same nuances.

Both Greek and Hebrew have a standard word order of propositions. The author can change the order, but when he does, there is a reason. The most common reason for changing word order is emphasis. Whenever a word is put earlier in a proposition than expected in normal word order, it typically is meant to draw increased attention and emphasis.

The typical word order of Greek propositions is VSD, followed by prepositional phrases and dependent clauses. This is somewhat debated, because Greek propositions don't always have a subject (the subject is implied in the inflection of the verb) and when a subject does occur, it is often before the verb. The more likely position is that VSD is the typical construction.

Therefore, whenever a subject comes before the verb, especially if it is an emphatic pronoun, the author has made some sort of emphasis. Likewise, when a prepositional phrase or some dependent clause or other modifier comes first in the proposition, it is intentional. For instance, in Ephesians 2:8 the first words are τῃ χάριτί ("by grace") in order to emphasize this idea as the central focus of the proposition (this is also shown by the contrast drawn in the following proposition, "not by works").

Sentence structure in Hebrew:

The standard word order of Hebrew propositions is VSD, with all modifiers coming after. In the same way, whenever an author places a word or phrase earlier in the proposition than expected, it is for emphasis. For instance, in Genesis 1:1, a translation which kept the Hebrew order would read:

in the beginning	He Created	God	the Heavens and the Earth
prep.phrase	V	S	D

Notice the prepositional phrase is at the beginning in order to emphasize the time when this happened. The rest of the sentence demonstrates typical Hebrew word order.

Implications for Exegesis:

It is important when studying the Biblical languages not to rely on word order to tell you the function of the words in the proposition. Rather, the inflection (morphology) of the words should be used to tell the function. Therefore, it is helpful at first to completely disregard the word order and learn to speak backward ("yoda-speak"). Then after you have gained a certain level of comfort with the Biblical languages, then it is important to again start to pay attention to the word order and ask if the author has deviated from the standard word order, and if so, what the significance of this change is. Sometimes, the author will demonstrate their meaning through subtle emphases using word order and other marking devices.