The Verb Phrase: Helper Verbs

So far we have seen how the verb phrase seems to include a variety of items--noun phrases, adjective phrases and adverb phrases--that we have already dealt with in the sentence subject. We have also seen one new phrasal structure that looks a bit like an adjective phrase, but does not seem to occupy other adjective phrase slots, and also seems to do another job (it modifies verbs, and has to do more with verbs). We recognized that this item is called an and that it takes an intensifier like a adjective. As such it resides in "adverb phrase." As we have identified all of the items mentioned above we have also noticed, and waited patiently for an explanation of that item which, until now, has been referred to only as "the verb." Finally we can look at the verb a little more closely. (if you are saying "Great!!" at this point, you really want to think about getting out a bit more…we're talking grammar here.)

Verbs have a lot of work to do, as they are the "do" words, the words that show whatever action is being performed in the sentence. If sentences were like bees and had "drones" that sat around and didn't do much on their own then the noun phrase would be the equivalent of a sentence's "drones" as they mostly just sit there taking up space, naming something. The verbs on the other hand would have to be the sentence's workers: they show how noun phrases are related to one another (in the case of *copular* verbs like *be, and some uses of appear* and *seem*), they show actions when needed, and they are also given the extra job (as if they don't already have enough to do!!) in English, with showing things like tense (past, present, future), and whether action is proceeding or completed. Verbs have a lot of work to do.

Verbs do all of their work with a relatively simple structure that looks like this:

VP➔ (Aux) V

where

$$Aux \rightarrow \left\{ \begin{array}{l} (M)(Have_{en})(Be_{ing}) \\ Do^{*} \end{array} \right\}$$

What does all of this mean? Well first of all there's the verb itself, which can stand by itself as in sentences like:

1. The dog ate the food
2. The light was broken.
3. My computer runs on electricity.

Each of these sentences includes a simple verb on its own: *ate, was, runs*. Verbs by themselves like this are great for showing simple actions and relationships. But adding the helper verbs *have* allows us to show that an action is complete i.e.:

1. The dog has eaten the food.

2. The branch has broken.
3. The students had written the test.

Meanwhile using one version of the helper verb be allows us to show that an action is ongoing:

4. The dog is eating the food.
5. The light was being broken.
6. My computer was running on electricity.

And combining the two

7. The dog has been eating his food.
8. My computer had been running on electricity.

Allows us to state confirm or emphasize that an action had been taking place…tricky stuff.

Adding the helper verbs *have* and *be*, allows us to show some fairly sophisticated information about the state of an action: whether it is or was complete, and whether it was observed as being in progress. From a grammatical point of view it is worth noting how the main verb changes as we add these auxiliaries, i.e. the main verb takes the form determined by the helper verb immediately in front of the helper. If the auxiliary includes "has" then the main verb takes what linguists call the "en" form: eaten "been," "run" (run is "irregular" because it does not simply change according to the "en" rule. Instead there is an irregular ending). Likewise when we add the helper verb "be" the main verb changes to its "ing" form: "eating," "being," "running." And finally, if you add both helpers the main verb seems to take the form of the helper that is closest to it, i.e., again, the "ing" form. And what's really cool here, is that if you add both, even the second helper verb changes form, and takes the ending determined by the previous helper verb. Thus for instance if we go from:

I was typing

to

I had been typing.

Adding the helper verb *have* changes the helper verb *be* to the *en* form.

Once again we can show how all this happens using one of our descriptions, i.e.:

$$Aux \rightarrow \begin{Bmatrix} (M)(Have_{en})(Be_{ing}) \\ Do^{*} \end{Bmatrix}$$

The expression shown above reflects the way that the helper verbs *have* and *be* affect the next verbal element (the next part of the verb) by adding the subscript "en" and "ing" to them.

So is that it? Are there any more parts to the Auxiliary. As the diagram above indicates, there is actually one more part the **M**odal. Modals are words like "shall," "should," "might," "must," "could" etc. Modal verbs, "provide information about the function of the main verb. The type of information that they provide varies quite a bit, as they can show things like: intent—*I shall go to the theatre*; probability—*I might go to the theatre*; and possibility—*I could go to the theatre*.

The combination of modals, what is sometimes called the *perfective participial (*the thing we called *have* $_{en}$ above*)* and the *progressive participial (*the thing we called *be* $_{ing}$ above*)* allows us to really colour a main verb so that it is possible to say things like:

1. The dog should have eaten the food
2. The light may be broken.
3. My computer could have run on kerosene.

Is that is sir? …can we diagram a few now? Well actually no….because there **does** seem to be one other word that can be used in the aux. The modal, and two auxiliaries can be replaced with the helper verb "do" …but as the auxiliary description shown above suggests, this helper must be used on its own. Thus it is possible to say:

1. The dog did eat his food.
2. My computer did run on really good gasoline.

So verbs do have a lot to *do* (bad pun alert). The down side of this situation is that as students trying to show that we understand that these components of the verb exists, we need to account for all of these little bits. The upside is that this process really isn't that difficult mostly because these items always appear in the same simple order., ie. there's none of the funny weird recursion stuff that we saw in the subject noun phrase. Lets try to draw sentence trees for a few:

The boy on the bicycle should have been doing his homework.

My grammar homework may be incomplete.

My geography homework will be finished by the beginning of class.

Homework—draw sentence trees for these babies (note that these sentences have an “extra” item at the end—we will be talking about these next class. For the meantime though see if you can diagram these elements anyway.

1. Verb phrases might be easy for some.
2. Noun phrases should be written with a pen.
3. Adjective phrases have been driving my very grammar-phobic friend crazy.
4. The girl in the third desk in the second row of my classroom had been seeing really awful, complicated, nasty sentence trees in her sleep.
5. I have been given too many long, difficult, very complicated sentences.