

## UNIT 5 PREDICATES

**Entry requirements** REFERENCE and SENSE (Unit 3) and REFERRING EXPRESSIONS (Unit 4).  
If you feel you understand these notions, take the entry test below. If not, review Units 3 and 4.

- Entry test**
- (1) Which of the following is the phrase a *tall tree*? Circle your answer.
    - (a) a referring expression
    - (b) not a referring expression
    - (c) sometimes a referring expression and sometimes not, depending on context and circumstances of use
  - (2) Is the following statement correct (*Yes*) or incorrect (*No*)?  
Whether a sentence contains any referring expressions or not depends on the time and place at which the sentence occurs. *Yes / No*
  - (3) Which of the following sentences is equative? Circle your answer.
    - (a) *Mahmoud is an Egyptian*
    - (b) *I was telling you about Mahmoud the Egyptian*
    - (c) *Mahmoud is the Egyptian I was telling you about*
    - (d) *Mahmoud is a genius*
  - (4) Does *if* have sense in the same way that *dog* has sense? *Yes / No*
  - (5) Do the expressions *big* and *large* have essentially the same sense in the following sentences?  
*I live in a big house*  
*I live in a large house* *Yes / No*
  - (6) Circle those of the following words which can be referring expressions (in normal everyday English).  
*John, below, Venus, swims, round, beautiful, under, went.*

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**Feedback** (1)(c) (2) No: replace 'sentence' by 'utterance' to get a correct statement.  
(3) (c) (4) No (5) Yes (6) *John, Venus*  
If you have scored less than 5 correct out of 6, you should review the relevant unit. If you have scored at least 5 correct out of 6, continue to the introduction.

**Introduction** We start by examining the semantic structure of simple declarative sentences, such as *My dog bit the postman* or *Mrs Wraith is waiting for the downtown*

*bus*. Typically such sentences contain one or more referring expressions, plus some other words that do not form part of any of the referring expressions. It is on these other words that we shall now concentrate.

**Practice** In the following sentences, delete the referring expressions and write down the remainder to the right of the example. We have done the first one for you.

- |  |            |
|--|------------|
| (1) <del>My dog</del> bit <del>the postman</del> | <i>bit</i> |
| (2) Mrs Wraith is writing the Mayor's speech     | .....      |
| (3) Cairo is in Africa                           | .....      |
| (4) Edinburgh is between Aberdeen and York       | .....      |
| (5) This place stinks                            | .....      |
| (6) John's car is red                            | .....      |
| (7) Einstein was a genius                        | .....      |

Feedback	(2) <del>Mrs Wraith</del> is writing <del>the Mayor's speech</del>	<i>is writing</i>
	(3) <del>Cairo</del> is in <del>Africa</del>	<i>is in</i>
	(4) <del>Edinburgh</del> is between <del>Aberdeen</del> and <del>York</del>	<i>is between, and</i>
	(5) <del>This place</del> stinks	<i>stinks</i>
	(6) <del>John's car</del> is red	<i>is red</i>
	(7) <del>Einstein</del> was a genius	<i>was a genius</i>

**Comment** The 'remainders' written in the right-hand column are quite a varied set. But in each case it is possible to discern one word (or part of a word) which 'carries more meaning' than the others. For instance, *write* in example (2) carries more specific information than *is* and the suffix *-ing*. If one strips away such less meaningful elements, one is left with a sequence of words, which, though ungrammatical and inelegant, can still be understood as expressing a proposition. The result is a kind of 'Tarzan jungle talk', e.g. *Boy bad* for *The boy is bad*, or *Woman write speech* for *The woman is writing the speech*.

**Practice** Listed below are the remainders from the above examples. In each case, write down the single word (or part of a word) which carries the most specific information. We have done the first one for you.

- |                            |              |
|----------------------------|--------------|
| (1) <i>is writing</i>      | <i>write</i> |
| (2) <i>is in</i>           | .....        |
| (3) <i>is between, and</i> | .....        |
| (4) <i>stinks</i>          | .....        |
| (5) <i>is red</i>          | .....        |
| (6) <i>was a genius</i>    | .....        |

Feedback	(2) <i>in</i> (3) <i>between</i> (4) <i>stink</i> (5) <i>red</i> (6) <i>genius</i>
Comment	The words we have just isolated from their original sentences we call the predicators of those sentences.
Definition (partial)	The PREDICATOR of a simple declarative sentence is the word (sometimes a group of words) which does not belong to any of the referring expressions and which, of the remainder, makes the most specific contribution to the meaning of the sentence. Intuitively speaking, the predicator describes the state or process in which the referring expressions are involved.
Example	<i>asleep</i> is the predicator in <i>Mummy is asleep</i> and describes the state <i>Mummy</i> is in. <i>love</i> is the predicator in <i>The white man loved the Indian maiden</i> and describes the process in which the two referring expressions <i>the white man</i> and <i>the Indian maiden</i> are involved. <i>wait for</i> is the predicator in <i>Jimmy was waiting for the downtown bus</i> and describes the process involving <i>Jimmy</i> and <i>the downtown bus</i> .
Comment	Note that some of the elements that we have stripped away in isolating the predicator of a sentence do carry a certain amount of meaning. Thus the indicators of past and present tense are clearly meaningful. The semantics of tense is interesting, but its contribution to the meaning of a sentence is of a different type from the contribution made by the predicator, and will not be pursued here. Notice also that the verb <i>be</i> in its various forms ( <i>is, was, are, were, am</i> ) is not the predicator in any example sentence that we have seen so far.
Practice	Strip away referring expressions and the verb <i>be</i> (and possibly other elements) to identify the predicators in the following sentences: (1) <i>I am hungry</i> ..... (2) <i>Joe is in San Francisco</i> ..... (3) <i>The Mayor is a crook</i> ..... (4) <i>The man who lives at number 10 Lee Crescent is whimsical</i> ..... (5) <i>The Royal Scottish Museum is behind Old College</i> .....

Feedback	(1) <i>hungry</i> (2) <i>in</i> (3) <i>crook</i> (4) <i>whimsical</i> (5) <i>behind</i>
Comment	The predicators in sentences can be of various parts of speech: adjectives ( <i>red, asleep, hungry, whimsical</i> ), verbs ( <i>write, stink, place</i> ), prepositions ( <i>in, between, behind</i> ), and nouns ( <i>crook, genius</i> ). Despite the obvious syntactic differences between these different types of words, semantically they all share the property of being able to function as the predicators of sentences. Words of other parts of speech, such as conjunctions ( <i>and, but, or</i> ) and articles ( <i>the, a</i> ), cannot serve as predicators in sentences.



(3) <i>woman</i>	Yes / No
(4) <i>you</i>	Yes / No
(5) <i>Fred</i>	Yes / No
(6) <i>about</i>	Yes / No

Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) No (5) No (6) Yes

**Comment** The definition of ‘predicate’ above contained two parenthesized conditions. The first, ‘(or sequence of words)’, is intended to take care of examples like *wait for*, *in front of*, which are longer than one word, but which it seems sensible to analyse as single predicates.

The second parenthesized condition, ‘(in a given single sense)’, is more important, and illustrates a degree of abstractness in the notion of a predicate. A ‘word’, as we use the term, can be ambiguous, i.e. can have more than one sense, but we use ‘predicate’ in a way which does not allow a predicate to be ambiguous. A predicate can have only one sense. Normally, the context in which we use a word will make clear what sense (what predicate) we have in mind, but occasionally, we shall resort to the use of subscripts on words to distinguish between different predicates. (We do this especially in Unit 16 ‘About dictionaries.’)

**Example** The word *bank* has (at least) two senses. Accordingly, we might speak of the predicates *bank*<sub>1</sub> and *bank*<sub>2</sub>.

Similarly, we might distinguish between the predicates *man*<sub>1</sub> (noun) = human being, *man*<sub>2</sub> (noun) = male adult human being, and *man*<sub>3</sub> (transitive verb) as in *The crew manned the lifeboats*.

**Comment** Notice that ‘predicate’ and ‘predicator’ are terms of quite different sorts. The term ‘predicate’ identifies elements in the language system, independently of particular example sentences. Thus, it would make sense to envisage a list of the predicates of English, as included, say, in a dictionary. The term ‘predicator’ identifies the semantic role played by a particular word (or group of words) in a particular sentence. In this way, it is similar to the grammatical term ‘subject’: one can talk of the subject of a particular sentence, but it makes no sense to talk of a list of ‘the subjects of English’: similarly, one can talk of the ‘predicator’ in a particular sentence, but not list ‘the predicators of English’. A simple sentence only has one predicator, although it may well contain more than one instance of a predicate.

**Example** *A tall, handsome stranger entered the saloon*

This sentence has just one predicator, *enter*, but the sentence also contains the words *tall*, *handsome*, *stranger*, and *saloon*, all of which are

predicates, and can function as predicators in other sentences, e.g. *John is tall*, *He is handsome*, *He is a stranger*, and *That ramshackle building is a saloon*.

- Practice** (1) In which of the following sentences does the predicate *male* function as a predicator? Circle your choice.
- (a) *The male gorilla at the zoo had a nasty accident yesterday*
  - (b) *The gorilla at the zoo is a male*
  - (c) *The gorilla at the zoo is male*
- (2) In which of the following sentences does the predicate *human* function as predicator?
- (a) *All humans are mortal*
  - (b) *Socrates was human*
  - (c) *These bones are human*

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**Feedback** (1) (b), (c) (2) (b), (c)

**Comment** We turn now to the matter of the degree of predicates.

**Definition** The DEGREE of a predicate is a number indicating the number of arguments it is normally understood to have in simple sentences.

**Example** *Asleep* is a predicate of degree one (often called a one-place predicate)  
*Love* (verb) is a predicate of degree two (a two-place predicate)

- Practice** (1) Are the following sentences acceptable?
- (a) *Thornbury sneezed* Yes / No
  - (b) *Thornbury sneezed a handful of pepper* Yes / No
  - (c) *Thornbury sneezed his wife a handful of pepper* Yes / No
- (2) So is *sneeze* a one-place predicate? Yes / No
- (3) Are the following sentences acceptable in normal usage?
- (a) *Martha hit* Yes / No
  - (b) *Martha hit the sideboard* Yes / No
  - (c) *Martha hit George the sideboard* Yes / No
- (4) So is *hit* a one-place predicate? Yes / No
- (5) Is *die* a one-place predicate? Yes / No
- (6) Is *come* a one-place predicate? Yes / No
- (7) Is *murder* (verb) a one-place predicate? Yes / No

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**Feedback** (1)(a) Yes (b) No (c) No (2) Yes (3) (a) No (b) Yes (c) No (4) No (5) Yes (6) Yes (7) No

**Comment** A verb that is understood most naturally with just two arguments, one as its subject, and one as its object, is a two-place predicate.

**Example** In *Martha hit the parrot*, *hit* is a two-place predicate: it has an argument, *Martha*, as subject and an argument, *the parrot*, as direct object.

- Practice**
- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) Are the following sentences acceptable?                 |          |
| (a) <i>Keith made</i>                                       | Yes / No |
| (b) <i>Keith made this toy guillotine</i>                   | Yes / No |
| (c) <i>Keith made this toy guillotine his mother-in-law</i> | Yes / No |
| (2) So is <i>make</i> a two-place predicate?                | Yes / No |
| (3) Is <i>murder</i> a two-place predicate?                 | Yes / No |
| (4) Is <i>see</i> a two-place predicate?                    | Yes / No |

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**Feedback** (1) (a) No (b) Yes (c) No (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

**Comment** There are a few three-place predicates; the verb *give* is the best example.

- Practice** For each of the following sentences, say whether it seems somewhat elliptical (i.e. seems to omit something that one would normally expect to be mentioned). Some of these sentences are more acceptable than others.
- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| (1) <i>Herod gave</i>  | Yes / No |
| (2) <i>Herod gave Salome</i>                                 | Yes / No |
| (3) <i>Herod gave a nice present</i>                         | Yes / No |
| (4) <i>Herod gave Salome a nice present</i>                  | Yes / No |
| (5) How many referring expressions are there in Sentence (4) | .....    |

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**Feedback** (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes: one would normally mention the receiver of a present. (4) No (5) three

**Comment** We have concentrated so far on predicates that happen to be verbs. Recall examples such as *Cairo is in Africa*, *Cairo is dusty*, *Cairo is a large city*. In these examples *in* (a preposition), *dusty* (an adjective), and *city* (a noun) are predicates.

In the case of prepositions, nouns, and adjectives, we can also talk of one-, two-, or three-place predicates.

- Practice**
- |  |          |
|--|----------|
| (1) How many referring expressions are there in<br><i>Your marble is under my chair?</i> | .....    |
| (2) Is <i>Your marble is under</i> acceptable in normal usage?                           | Yes / No |
| (3) Is <i>Your marble is under my chair the carpet</i> acceptable<br>in normal usage?    | Yes / No |

- (4) So, of what degree is the predicate *under* (i.e. a how-many-place-predicate is *under*)? .....
- (5) Of what degree is the predicate *near*? .....
- (6) Is *Dundee is between Aberdeen* acceptable? Yes / No
- (7) Is *Dundee is between Aberdeen and Edinburgh* acceptable? Yes / No
- (8) Of what degree is the predicate *between*? .....

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Feedback (1) two (2) No (3) No (4) two (5) two (6) No (7) Yes (8) three

Comment We will now turn our attention to adjectives.

- Practice (1) How many referring expressions are there in *Philip is handsome*? .....
- (2) Is *Philip is handsome John* (not used when addressing John) acceptable? Yes / No
- (3) Of what degree is the predicate *handsome*? .....
- (4) Of what degree is the predicate *rotten*? .....
- (5) Of what degree is the predicate *smelly*? .....

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Feedback (1) one (2) No (3) one (4) one (5) one

Comment In fact, the majority of adjectives are one-place predicates.

- Practice (1) Is *John is afraid of Fido* acceptable? Yes / No
- (2) Does *John is afraid* seem elliptical (i.e. does it seem to leave something unmentioned)? Yes / No
- (3) Could *afraid* be called a two-place predicate? Yes / No
- (4) Is *Your house is different from mine* acceptable? Yes / No
- (5) Does *Your house is different* seem elliptical? Yes / No
- (6) Of what degree is the predicate *different*? .....
- (7) Of what degree is the predicate *identical*? .....
- (8) Of what degree is the predicate *similar*? .....

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Feedback (1) Yes (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes (5) Yes (6) two (7) two (8) two

Comment You may have wondered about the role of the prepositions such as *of* and *from* in *afraid of* and *different from*. These prepositions are not themselves predicates. Some adjectives in English just require (grammatically) to be joined to a following argument by a preposition. Such prepositions are relatively meaningless linking particles. You might want to think of the combination of adjective plus linking particle in these cases as a kind of



complex or multi-word predicate with basically one unified meaning. Notice that one can often use different linking prepositions with no change of meaning, e.g. (in some dialects) *different to*, or even *different than*.

We now turn to predicates which are nouns.

- Practice**
- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) How many referring expressions are there in<br><i>John is a corporal?</i>         | .....    |
| (2) Is <i>John is a corporal the army</i> acceptable?                                 | Yes / No |
| (3) Of what degree is <i>corporal</i> ?   | .....    |
| (4) Of what degree is <i>hero</i> ?   | .....    |
| (5) Of what degree is <i>crook</i> ?  | .....    |
| (6) How many referring expressions are there in<br><i>This object is a pitchfork?</i> | .....    |
| (7) Of what degree is <i>pitchfork</i> ?  | .....    |

**Feedback** (1) one (2) No (3) one (4) one (5) one (6) one (7) one

**Comment** Most nouns are one-place predicates. But a few nouns could be said to be 'inherently relational'. These are nouns such as *father*, *son*, *brother*, *mother*, *daughter*, *neighbour*.

- Practice**
- |   |          |
|---|----------|
| (1) Does <i>John is a brother</i> seem somewhat odd?              | Yes / No |
| (2) Is <i>John is a brother of the Mayor of Miami</i> acceptable? | Yes / No |
| (3) Could <i>brother</i> be called a two-place predicate?         | Yes / No |
| (4) Could <i>sister</i> be called a two-place predicate?          | Yes / No |

**Feedback** (1) Yes, it would be completely acceptable only in a somewhat unusual context. (2) Yes (3) Yes (4) Yes

**Comment** Sometimes two predicates can have nearly, if not exactly, the same sense, but be of different grammatical parts of speech. Typically in these cases the corresponding predicates have the same degree, as in the following examples. See if you can determine the degree of the predicates in these sentences.

**Example** *Ronald is foolish, Ronald is a fool*  
*Timothy is afraid of cats, Timothy fears cats*  
*My parrot is a talker, My parrot talks*

**Comment** We conclude this unit by discussing one special relation, the identity relation. This is the relation found in equative sentences (Unit 4, p. 42). In English, the identity of the referents of two different referring expressions is expressed by a form of the verb *be*.

**Example** *George W. Bush is the 43rd President of the United States*  
*The 43rd President of the United States is George W. Bush*

**Practice** All of the following sentences contain a variant of the verb *be*. In which sentences does a form of *be* express the identity relation? Circle your choices.

- (1) *This is a spider*
- (2) *This is my father*
- (3) *This is the person I was telling you about at dinner last night*
- (4) *The person I was telling you about at dinner last night is in the next room*
- (5) *The person I was telling you about at dinner last night is the man talking to Harry*
- (6) *The whale is a mammal*

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**Feedback** The identity relation is expressed by a form of *be* in sentences (2), (3), and (5).

**Comment** The identity relation is special because of its very basic role in the communication of information. In English, one must analyse some instances of the verb *be* (e.g. those in sentences (2), (3), (5) above) as instances of the identity predicate. Other instances of the verb *be*, as we have seen, are simply a grammatical device for linking a predicate that is not a verb (i.e. an adjective, preposition, or noun) to its first argument, as in *John is a fool* or *John is foolish*. The verb *be* is also a device for ‘carrying’ the tense (present or past) of a sentence.

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**Summary** The predicates of a language have a completely different function from the referring expressions. The roles of these two kinds of meaning-bearing element cannot be exchanged. Thus *John is a bachelor* makes good sense, but *Bachelor is a John* makes no sense at all. Predicates include words from various parts of speech, e.g. common nouns, adjectives, prepositions, and verbs. We have distinguished between predicates of different degrees (one-place, two-place, etc.). The relationship between referring expressions and predicates will be explored further in the next unit.

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## **Unit 5** Study Guide and Exercises

**Directions** After you have read Unit 5 you should be able to tackle the following questions to test your understanding of the main ideas raised in the unit.

- 1 You should understand these terms and concepts from this unit:

predicator	degree of a predicate
predicate	ellipsis (elliptical)
argument	identity relation

- 2 Indicate the arguments and predicator(s) in each sentence.
  - a John is a linguist
  - b John loves Mary
  - c Mary loves John (Are arguments ordered?)
  - d John gave Mary a ring
  - e Chicago is between Los Angeles and New York
  - f Jane is Mary's mother
  - g Jones is the Dean of the College
  - h John stood near the bank  
(How should the ambiguity be handled?)
  - i Ed is a fool
  - j Ed is foolish
- 3 Indicate the degree of the predicates used as predicators in each sentence in item 2 above.
- 4 How does the concept of **predicate** in the semantic sense differ from the concept of **grammatical predicate**? Does one seem to be more revealing than the other?
- 5 In this unit we said that the prepositions *from* and *of* in the two-part adjectives *different from* and *afraid of* 'are not themselves predicates . . . (and that they) are relatively meaningless linking particles'. Do you agree with this statement? Consider a sentence such as *The letter is from my uncle* before reaching a conclusion.
- 6 What are the functions of the verb *be* in these sentences (i.e. does it function as an identity predicate or as a grammatical device for linking a non-verbal predicate to its first argument)? Do all instances of *be* carry tense?
  - a Mary is happy
  - b A tulip is a flower
  - c George W. Bush is the US President
  - d God is
- 7 Does it make sense to say that the verb *be* has a meaning of its own, independent of whether it is used as a linking device or as the identity predicate? Speculate about what it could mean, and don't be concerned if your answer is quite abstract. Many lexical items in the world's languages have very abstract meanings.