

**Verb Forms**  
*Handout*

**Part 1**

English sentences often contain more than one verb. The verbs are italicized below:

- (1) They *have seen* the full horror of the assignment.
- (2) They *might see* the full horror of the assignment.
- (3) They *might have seen* the full horror of the assignment.
- (4) They *are seeing* the full horror of the assignment.
- (5) They *could see* the full horror of the assignment.
- (6) They *could be seeing* the full horror of the assignment.
- (7) They *could have been seeing* the full horror of the assignment.

The last verb in this sequence is the one which names the activity described by the sentence. For this reason it is often called the MAIN VERB. All the verbs preceding it are called AUXILIARY VERBS (note the spelling of *auxiliary*).

BEFORE GOING FURTHER, be sure you can identify the main verb in (8-9):

- (8) They might be shouting.
- (9) They might be in the park.

The largest number of auxiliaries is three (excluding passives):

- (10) They *might have been* eating.

There are three auxiliary slots, and each slot is optional. The first slot is filled auxiliaries like *may, might, can, should*, etc. These are called MODALS:

- (11) MODALS: *may, might, must, can, could, will, would, shall, should*

Notice that only one modal is allowed in a sentence:

- (12) a. They *might* leave.
- b. \* They *might will* leave.

The second slot is filled with the auxiliary *have*; notice that the modal slot is optional, so *have* could be the first (and possibly only) auxiliary. However, *have* cannot come before a modal:

- (13) a. They might *have* left. *have* in second slot
- b. They might *have been* leaving. *have* in second slot
- c. They *have* left. no modal – *have* is first auxiliary
- d. \* They *have might* leave. *have* cannot come before a modal

The third slot is filled with the auxiliary *be*. Since the modal and the *have* slots are optional, *be* can be the first (and only) auxiliary. Neither the modal nor auxiliary *have* can follow *be*:

- (14)
- |    |                                      |   |
|----|--------------------------------------|---|
| a. | They might have <i>been</i> leaving. | <i>be</i> in third slot                                     |
| b. | They have <i>been</i> leaving.       | <i>have</i> , but no modal; <i>be</i> is in second position |
| c. | They might <i>be</i> leaving.        | modal, but no <i>have</i> ; <i>be</i> is in second position |
| d. | They <i>are</i> leaving.             | no modal, no <i>have</i> – <i>be</i> is first auxiliary     |
| e. | * They are might leave.              | modal cannot follow <i>be</i>                               |
| f. | * They <i>are</i> having left.       | <i>have</i> cannot follow <i>be</i>                         |

To summarize, the order of auxiliaries is:

- (15) (modal) (have) (be)

In order to modify our grammar, we define three new syntactic categories:  $V_m$ ,  $V_h$ , and  $V_b$ :

- (16)
- |    |                      |  |
|----|----------------------|--|
| a. | <i>may</i> , $V_m$   |  |
|    | <i>might</i> , $V_m$ |  |
|    | ...                  |  |
| b. | <i>have</i> , $V_h$  |  |
| c. | <i>be</i> , $V_b$    | (note: on the third part of the midterm, this is renamed $V_{b-A}$ ) |

Note that there are homophonous main verbs *have* and *be*:

- (17)
- |    |                           |
|----|---------------------------|
| a. | They have a new computer. |
| b. | They are happy.           |

We now modify our phrase structure VP rule to incorporate auxiliaries:

- (18)  $VP \rightarrow \{(V_m) (V_h) (V_b) V (NP) (AP) (PP), VP \{PP, Adv\}\}$

## Part 2

Most English verbs have six forms: three finite forms (present singular, present plural, past) and three nonfinite forms (the bare form, the -ING form, and the -EN form). Some examples are given below.

(19)	Pres. Sg.	Pres. Pl.	Past	Bare	-ING	-EN
	is/am	are	was/were	be	being	been
	gives	give	gave	give	giving	given
	sings	sing	sang	sing	singing	sung
	runs	run	ran	run	running	run
	walks	walk	walked	walk	walking	walked
	buys	buy	bought	buy	buying	bought
	has	have	had	have	having	had

Every auxiliary verb requires the verb that immediately follows it, whether it is another auxiliary or the main verb, to occur in a particular form:

A. The verb (main verb or auxiliary) following a modal must be in the BARE form:

- (20) a. She might *eat* the sweetbreads.  
 b. She might *have* eaten the sweetbreads.  
 c. She might *be* leaving.

B. The verb (main verb or auxiliary) following the auxiliary *have* must be in the EN form:

- (21) a. He has *eaten* the sweetbreads.  
 b. He has *been* eating the sweetbreads.

C. The verb following the auxiliary *be* must be in the ING form:

- (22) Kim is *eating* the sweetbreads.

The first verb (auxiliary or main verb) following the first NP of the sentence is in a finite form – that is, PRESENT SINGULAR (if the NP is singular -23), PRESENT PLURAL (if the NP is plural -24) or PAST (25):

- (23) a. She has eaten sweetbreads.  
 b. He eats sweetbreads.  
 (24) a. They are eating the sweetbreads.  
 b. They eat sweetbreads.  
 (25) a. Kim had eaten sweetbreads.  
 b. The students ate the sweetbreads.

In order to implement these verb form restrictions in our grammar, we define a new type of rule – FORM RULES (also called MORPHO-SYNTACTIC RULES). These rules are unlike the familiar PHRASE STRUCTURE RULES. Form rules do not create or alter phrase structure (trees). Instead they add morphological features to existing structure. These features can be interpreted as instructions to the morphological component telling it which morphological verb form is required – hence, they are part of the syntax-morphology interface. We need five form rules.

The first two deal with the finite verb forms – they tell us that the verb immediately following the NP can be present or past; they also say that the verb will be singular or plural, depending on whether the NP is singular or plural (note, this will usually only be important if the verb is present tense):<sup>1</sup>

- (26) a.  $V \rightarrow V_{[\text{past or present}]} / \text{NP } \underline{\quad}$

<sup>1</sup> Note that in these form rules, ‘V’ stands for the syntactic categories, V, V<sub>m</sub>, V<sub>h</sub>, and V<sub>b</sub>

b.  $V \rightarrow V_{[\alpha \text{ number}, \beta \text{ person}]} / NP_{[\alpha \text{ number}, \beta \text{ person}]} \_$

The next rule stipulates that the verb following a modal must be in the BARE form:

(27)  $V \rightarrow V_{[\text{BARE}]} / V_m \_$

The form rule in (28) gives us an EN form after the auxiliary *have*:

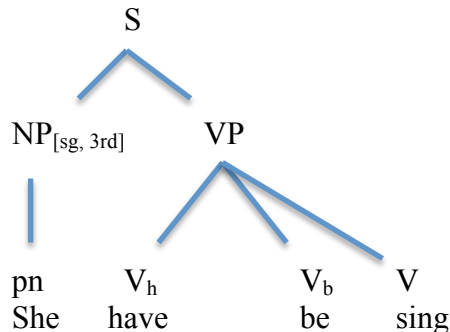
(28)  $V \rightarrow V_{[\text{EN}]} / V_h \_$

Finally, (29) requires that the verb form after the auxiliary *be* is ING:

(29)  $V \rightarrow V_{[\text{ING}]} / V_b \_$

Given these form rules, we need to worry a bit about the organization of the grammar. We still have our phrase structure rules and our lexicon. These define syntactic trees (phrase structures). Once the tree is built and all the lexical items are inserted, the form rules apply, adding morphological features to the various verbs. These features are then instructions to the morphology and phonology, which then provide the appropriate verb forms:

(30)  phrase structure before FORM RULES



(31)  phrase structure after FORM RULES

