

# 1. Grammatical terms (1) - clauses

## 1 Clauses

### 1.1 The clause

A **clause** is a group of words containing at least a subject and a verb. The **subject** is the element of a clause about which an action or state is presented, and the **verb** is the element expressing this action or state. Sometimes a clause forms a sentence on its own, and this is called an **independent clause**. For example:

Sara will visit her mother tomorrow

subject = *Sara*

verb = *will visit*

And sometimes a clause contains one or more clauses within it. In this case the "containing" clause is called a **main clause**, and the clause being contained within the main clause is called a **subordinate clause**. For example:

Sara will visit her mother before she goes home

main clause = *she will visit you* + subordinate clause

subordinate clause = *before she goes home*

A main clause contains a subject, a conjugated verb (one like *will visit* that changes its form according to its role in the sentence) and a subordinate clause. A subordinate clause contains a subject and any form of verb, conjugated or unconjugated (like *to visit* or *visiting* that never changes its form).

The most common types of clauses in French are:

- *Que* clauses:  
Il a dit ***qu'il serait en retard*** - *He said that he would be late*
- Clauses introduced by another conjunction:  
Il viendra te voir ***avant que tu ne partes*** - *He'll come and see you before you leave*
- Clauses reporting a question:  
Il m'a demandé ***si j'avais été en retard*** - *He asked me if I had been late*
- Relative clauses:  
Il y a une femme ***qui veut te voir*** - *There's a woman who wants to see you*

### 1.2 Why know about clauses?

Clauses are important because they express the individual ideas that form the building blocks of what we say or write. For greater efficiency and clarity we insert subordinate clauses into other main clauses. In this way our language is not a series of simple ideas strung along by connecting words like **and** and **then** (this is very much how young children use language) but a progressive development of interconnected ideas more accurately reflecting the complexity and subtlety of our thought processes.

Furthermore clauses enable us to express ideas with much more precision. In the above independent clause we read that Sara will visit her mother **tomorrow**. In the above main clause we obtain far more precise information about when Sara will visit her mother: **when she goes home**. This is because a subordinate clause can express much more information than a word or a phrase, because it has a subject, a verb, and usually other elements like an object and even another clause.

Knowledge of clauses is particularly important in French because elements of a clause change according to what type of clause they are in. Take, for example, the following sentence containing a *que* clause:

Je veux que tu sois de retour avant minuit  
*I want you to be back by midnight*  
main clause = *Je veux* + subordinate clause  
subordinate clause = *que tu sois de retour avant minuit*

Here, the fact that a verb expressing the idea of "wishing" is followed by a "*que* clause" means that the verb in the subordinate clause must be in the subjunctive.

## 2 Subjects and objects

### 2.1 Definition

We have seen in section 1.1 above that the subject is the element of a clause about which an action or state is presented. Another important element of the clause is the **object**, which can be **direct** or **indirect**.

A **direct object** is one which experiences the direct action of a verb:

I gave the money to my mother      *the money* = direct object of *gave*

An **indirect object** is one acting as the beneficiary of the action of a verb and its direct object.

I gave the money to my mother      *my mother* = indirect object of *gave*

### 2.2 Why know about subjects and objects?

Subjects and object are essential to understanding what is happening in a sentence. For example, in the sentence *The dog bit the postman*, the fact that we know that the dog is the subject and the postman the object tells us that it is the dog that bit the postman, and not the other way round!

These terms are particularly important when it comes to learning French because French has so many words which take different forms according to whether they are subject, direct object or indirect object. Take, for example, the following sentences:

Le chien **qui** a mordu le facteur était furieux  
*The dog that bit the postman was angry*  
Le facteur **qu'**a mordu le chien était furieux  
*The postman who(m) the dog bit was angry*

Here, it is only through knowing that *qui* replaces a subject and *que* or *qu'* replaces an object that we can tell that in both cases it is the dog doing the biting!