A Graphical Grammar of Toki Pona

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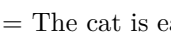
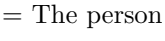
February 15, 2022

This article explains the rules of Toki Pona grammar using only the *sitelen pona* hieroglyphic writing system in examples. For help with the pronunciation, definition, and spelling using the Latin alphabet, see *A Graphical Dictionary of Toki Pona*. [1]

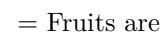
Basic sentences

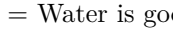
The particle > separates the subject and the verb:

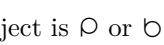
 = The cat is eating.

 = The person is sleeping.

There is no verb "to be"; the part after > can also be a noun or an adjective.

 = Fruits are food.

 = Water is good.

 = Water is a drink.

If the subject is  or  , the > is always omitted:

 = I eat.

 = You are good.

Modifying words

Words can be modified by appending other words. With a single modifer, just put it right after the main word:

 = small human = child

 = my house

 = to feel good = to be happy

To modify with several words, introduce them with the particle ∟. Although often translated as "of", the grammatical function of ∟ is actually different: it regroups the folowing words. Note the difference:

 = crazy water house = strange bathroom

 = house of the crazy water = pub

 = no strong people

 = people of not-strong = weak people

∟ can only be used when followed by multiple words.

Ambiguity

You'll often need to know the context to decide what things mean. Many words have multiple or general meanings:

 = cat / dog / (any land mammal)

Many words can play the role of a noun, adjective, or verb:

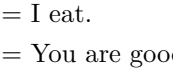
 = water / wet / to wash

 = good, simple / to fix, to repair

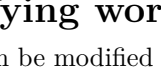
Nouns have no singular or plural, and no definite or indefinite article:

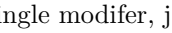
 = a fruit / the fruit / some fruits / the fruits

There are ways to narrow down *which* object you are talking about:

 = *This* apple is bad.

 = *My* apple is bad.

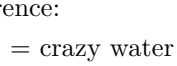
 = The *light yellow* apple is good.

 = The apple is on the table. That apple is good.

Direct objects

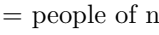
The particle ≫ separates a direct object from the rest of the sentence:

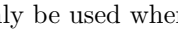
 = The cat drinks the water.

 = I'm washing the cat.

Negation

To negate a word, append ×:

 = I'm not sleeping.

 = Nobody is talking.

[1] Typesetting with LaTeX. The font is linja pona. Initial explanations are from the Toki Pona Cheat Sheet

Questions

To ask yes-or-no questions, replace the verb with "(verb) × (verb)":

ᑲꓘ×ꓘ-ʘ = Are you able to sleep?

⁊>ω×ωԑ = Is the cat hungry?

Alternatively, append ⋎? ("or what") to the sentence:

ᑲω▽≫ρ⋎? = Do you want to kiss me?

To answer these questions, reply with either "(verb)" or "(verb) ×".

ω▽ = Yes, I want to kiss you.

ω▽× = No, I do not want to kiss you.

To ask questions that can't be answered with yes or no, write a normal sentence and replace the word in question with ?:

ᑲԑ≫? = What are you eating?

?>ԑ≫ꝺρ? = Who/what ate my fruit?

Providing context

To provide context for a sentence, prepend another sentence or expression, followed by ɔ. This often results in a structures like "If (part 1), then (part 2)" or "In the context of (part 1), (part2)."

ρ-ʘɔ∞>∪. = When I'm asleep, everything is okay.

ρɔꝺ>∪. = To me, fruit is good.

The *context* of a sentence is not the same thing as it's *subject*.

Time and Tense

Verbs have no tense:

ρԑ. = I am eating. / I was eating. / I will be eating.

Instead, use a ɔ-clause to add a temporal context to a sentence:

◷↓ɔρ-ʘ. = I am sleeping right now.

◷∧ɔρ-ʘ. = I will be sleeping in the future.

◷⌶ɔρ-ʘ. = I slept in the past.

◷◊∧ɔρ∧∸⌂. = Tomorrow I will go to the store.

Compound sentences

Separate multiple subjects in a sentence using +:

-ʘ+ԑ>⋎. = Sleep and food are important.

To say that the subject does more than one thing, you can use multiple >-clauses:

⋕>ԑ>⊠. = The bug eats and destroys.

If there are several direct objects of the same verb, you can use multiple ≫-clauses:

ρԑ≫ꝺ≫≈. = I consume fruit and water.

Names

Names of countries, languages, or people are treated like adjectives. They are attached to a noun indicating what class of thing is being named, and often simplified to Toki Pona's limited alphabet. In sitelen pona, the individual letters are then replaced by a series of signs within a cartouche, where only the initial sound of each sign is used. Exactly which words to use is an artistic choice:

[ꝺ∞♡○∪+] = Kapile = Gabriele

⊕[✿∧∩⋎⊣∧]>∪⊙. = Kanata = Canada is pretty.

ρö×≫ö[中↓⋇中]. = Inli = I don't speak English.

⊕⌂[ᒷ▽ꝺ☋ꟾ⋕]>⋎. = Nujoka = New York is big.

This use of cartouches is why the *sitelen pona* sign for *name* or *word* is ▭.

Note: with Latin letters, names are capitalized.

Prepositions

∸, ⚲, =, ∧, and ↶ can be used as prepositions at the end of a sentence to modify the verb:

ρԑ∸⌂. = I eat in the house.

ρԑ⚲中ԑ. = I eat using a fork.

ᑲ∪∧ρ. = You are good for me. = I like you.

ᑲ∧⁝↶? = Why are you leaving?

In proper Toki Pona, prepositions do *not* modify nouns but adjectives do. Some words can be used in either role!.

Commands

Use ¡ and then what you want the person to do:

¡⊙≫↓! = Look at this!

To address someone, start a sentence with "(person) ¡,":

Ω[◎⌘∩中ᒷ]¡, ᑲ∪⊙. = Malin, you are pretty.

Also use this together with a command, merging the two ¡'s:

Ω[=⨆ԑ]¡∧⌂ᑲ. = Sam, go home.

Numbers

Combine number words to add them up:

ᒣ = 1, ᑊᑊ = 2, ∩ = 5

∩∩ᑊᑊᒣ = 13