

A Graphical Grammar of Toki Pona



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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 Graphic Dictionary of Toki Pona*.¹

Basic sentences

The particle > separates the subject and the verb:

𐀮>𐀆 = The cat is eating.

𐀮>𐀀 = The person is sleeping.

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

𐀮>𐀆. = Fruits are food.

𐀮>𐀂. = Water is good.

𐀮>𐀆. = Water is a drink.

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

𐀀. = I eat.

𐀂. = You are good.

Modifying words

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

𐀮𐀂 = small human = child

𐀮𐀀 = my house

𐀮𐀂 = to feel good = to be happy

To modify with a group of words, separate them with the particle 𐀮. Although it can often be thought of as meaning “of”, the grammatical function of 𐀮 is actually different: it regroups the following words. Note the difference:

𐀮𐀮𐀆 = crazy water house = strange bathroom

𐀮𐀮𐀆 = house of the crazy water = pub

𐀮𐀆𐀆 = no strong people

𐀮𐀆𐀆 = people of not-strong = weak people

𐀮 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:

𐀮 = cat / dog / (any land mammal)

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

𐀮 = water / wet / to wash

𐀂 = good, simple / to fix, to repair

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

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

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

𐀮𐀂>𐀆. = *This* apple is bad.

𐀮𐀀>𐀆. = *My* apple is bad.

𐀮𐀮𐀆>𐀆. = The *light yellow* apple is good.

𐀮>𐀂𐀆. 𐀮𐀂>𐀆. = The apple is on the table. That apple is good.

Direct objects

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

𐀮>𐀆>>𐀆. = The cat drinks the water.

𐀮𐀮>>𐀆. = I’m washing the cat.

Negation

To negate a word, append 𐀆:

𐀮𐀆. = I’m not sleeping.

𐀮𐀆>𐀆. = Nobody is talking.

¹Typesetting 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)”:

o k x k o = Are you able to sleep?

ma > w x w s = Is the cat hungry?

Alternatively, append ∪? (“or what”) to the sentence:

o w ∅ >> o ∪? = Do you want to kiss me?

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

w ∅ = Yes, I want to kiss you.

w ∅ × = 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 ∅:

o s >> ∅ = What are you eating?

∅ > s >> o ∅? = Who/what ate my fruit?

Providing context

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

o o ∩ o o > ∩. = When I’m asleep, everything is okay.

o ∩ o ∩. = 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:

o s. = I am eating. / I was eating. / I will be eating.

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

o ∩ o ∩ o. = I am sleeping right now.

o ∩ o ∩ o. = I will be sleeping in the future.

o ∩ o ∩ o. = I slept in the past.

o ∩ o ∩ o ∩ o ∩ o. = Tomorrow I will go to the store.

Compound sentences

Separate multiple subjects in a sentence using +:

o + s > ∩. = Sleep and food are important.

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

ma > s > s. = The bug eats and destroys.

If there are several direct objects of the same

verb, you can use multiple >>-clauses:

o s >> o >> s. = 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:

o (k)(a)(p)(i)(l)(e) = Kapile = Gabriele

o (k)(a)(p)(i)(l)(e) > ∩ o. = Kapile = Canada is pretty.

o (i)(n)(l)(i) >> o (e)(n)(g)(l)(i)(s)(h). = Inli = I don’t speak English.

o (n)(u)(j)(o)(k)(a) > ∩. = Nujoka = New York is big.

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

Note: with Latin letters, names are capitalized.

Prepositions

∩, s, ∩, and ∩ can be used as prepositions at the end of a sentence to modify the verb:

o s ∩ o. = I eat in the house.

o s s o s. = I eat using a fork.

o ∩ o ∩ o. = You are good for me. = I like you.

o ∩ s ∩ ∅? = Why are you leaving?

In proper Toki Pona, prepositions do *not* modify nouns.

Commands

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

! o >> ∩! = Look at this!

To address someone, start a sentence with “(person) !, ”:

o (m)(a)(l)(i)(n)!, o ∩ o. = Malin, you are pretty.

Also use this together with a command, merging the two !’s:

o (s)(a)(m)! ∩ o. = Sam, go home.

Numbers

Combine number words to add them up:

1 = 1, || = 2, ∩ = 5

∩ ∩ || 1 = 13