

What's the Subject?

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How does one determine the subject of a sentence when a linking verb occurs with two nominatives? Here's what you need to know to figure that out.

Linking verbs (aka, equative verb, copulative verb) in Greek are εἰμί, γίνομαι, and ὑπάρχω.¹

Predicate nominative is a second substantive used with a linking verb that restates, defines, or in some way further explains or categorizes the subject of the sentence. This relationship is approximate, i.e., it is not the same as a mathematical formula $A = B$. Often the predicate nominative describes a category of which the subject is a part. E.g., "George is a boy" (there are other persons who belong to the category "boy" beside George); "God is love" (love is not identical with God).

Substantive is a noun or any other word or group of words that functions as a noun (e.g., pronouns, adjectives, infinitives, participles, prepositional phrases, and entire clauses can all function as nouns).

The Hierarchy of Rules

When a linking verb is accompanied by two nominative substantives:

1. If one of them is a pronoun, it is *always* the subject. (Sometimes this pronoun is the "default/built-in" subject of the verb; i.e., a linking verb has only one explicit nominative substantive.)
- 2.a. If one is a proper noun (i.e., a name) and the other a common noun, it is the subject.
- 2.b. If one has an article and the other does not, the one with the article is the subject.
3. If both have one of the "tags" from #2 (i.e., proper noun or an article) or if neither has such a tag, then the first in word order is the subject. This statement is also known as a "convertible proposition" (see below), but it may still be important in terms of the context to specify the correct subject.

¹ If you are using this handout early in your studies of Greek (i.e., you've learned about nouns but not yet about verbs), some of this note will not make much sense. It is included here for your future reference. In addition to the three primary linking verbs listed above, there are a few others that sometimes take a predicate nominative. These include the passive forms of καλέω and εὐρίσκω, also λέγω, and sometimes even μένω. See Wallace.

Note: these rules are hierarchical; the higher rule always prevails (#1 being the highest), except for 2.a. and 2.b. which hold equal rank (hence the numbering).

Convertible proposition means that the subject and predicate nominative can be reversed with no change in meaning.

Examples (selected from Wallace)

1. ἐγὼ εἰμι πρεσβύτης, Lk. 1:18 (I am an old man)
- 2.a. Ἠλίας ἄθρωπος ἦν, Jas. 5:17 (Elijah was a man)
- 2.b. πνεῦμα ὁ θεός, Jn. 4:24 (God is spirit) [the verb εἰμί is understood]
3. ὁ πατήρ ἡμῶν Ἀβραάμ ἐστιν, Jn. 8:39 (Our father is Abraham)
3. ὁ πατήρ μου ὁ γεωργός ἐστιν, Jn. 15:1 (My Father is the vinedresser)

Additional Notes/Situations

If one of the substantives does not have case (e.g., an adverb, an anarthrous prepositional phrase, etc.), the nominative substantive is always the subject: e.g., ὁ καιρὸς μου ἐγγύς ἐστιν, Mt. 26:18 (the time is near); ἐν τούτῳ ἡ ἀλήθεια οὐκ ἐστιν, 1 Jn. 2:4 (the truth is not in this one). (Often one of the formal rules will make this clear also.)

The subject must always agree with the verb in person and number.² This may at times help distinguish the subject. Most examples are 1st or 2d person pronouns (and thus the first rule applies), but some 3d person situations also occur (εἰσὶν σπέρμα Ἀβραάμ, Rom. 9:7 [they are the seed of Abraham]).

For additional study:

Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the NT*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996. Pp. 40-48.

McGaughy, Lane C. *A Descriptive Analysis of ἜΙΝΑΙ As a Linking Verb in NT Greek*. SBL Dissertation series, 6. Missoula, MT: Society of Biblical Literature, 1972. (Originally a Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt Univ., 1970). See esp. pp. 23-65.

² Except, of course, for the situation “neuter plural subject may take a singular verb.”