

# A Graphical Grammar of Toki Pona



jan Suno

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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 Graphical Dictionary of Toki Pona*.<sup>1</sup>

## 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 modifier, 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 following 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.

☉>∓π. ☉↓>☉. = 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.

<sup>1</sup>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)”:

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 > ∩. = 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 ∅. = I am sleeping right now.

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

o ∩ o ∅. = I slept in the past.

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 > ∩. = The bug eats and destroys.

If there are several direct objects of the same

verb, you can use multiple >>-clauses:

o s >> o >> ∩. = 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 ∩ o o o ∩ o ∩ = Kapile = Gabriele

o ∩ o ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ > ∩ o. = Kanata = Canada is pretty.

o ∅ × >> o ∅ (∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩). = Inli = I don’t speak English.

o ∩ (∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩) > ∩. = 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:

o s ∩ ∩. = I eat in the house.

o s ∩ ∩ ∩. = I eat using a fork.

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

o ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩? = Why are you leaving?

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

## Commands

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

∩ o >> ∩! = Look at this!

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

o ∩ (∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩) ∩!, o ∩ o. = Malin, you are pretty.

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

o ∩ (∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩ ∩) ∩! ∩ ∩ o. = Sam, go home.

## Numbers

Combine number words to add them up:

1 = 1, ∩∩ = 2, ∩∩∩ = 5

∩∩∩∩∩ = 13