Locutions involving “stringing words together” are often presented in the negative form, being used to criticize people’s linguistic and hence communicative competence: “Tom is a terrible writer, he can’t string two words together.” That is an example I invented while sitting here at the keyboard, but if I take the string “can’t string two words together” and put it into the Google search engine (remember that putting the string into inverted commas means that Google will search for exactly that combination of words, exactly that locution without applying any of its mysterious and wonderful algorithms) I get, among many other things:

As the Facebook world hummed with the news ex-President, George W. Bush now had his own Facebook page, it became proof positive very quickly that George W. Bush still can’t string two words together in a grammatically correct fashion.

http://voices.yahoo.com/george-w-bush-gets-facebook-account-proves-he-6148152.html (November 2013)

George Bush has received so much criticism in recent years for his lack of command of the English language, that it seems almost unkind to use him as an example, but my point is not to criticize the bad English of anyone in particular, but is simply to highlight the use of “to string words together” as a useful illustration of how important the grammatical structures of the language are.

The verb to string, which is used in English to describe (metaphorically) the assembly of units of language in order to create understandable and effective discourse, does make sense in the linguistic context. The verb of course derives from the noun for a material that is often used to keep other materials together (the beads on a necklace, for example) or is used to maintain linearity in building work (the way bricklayers will stretch pieces of string to indicate straight lines that they can follow in their work). In order to be capable of stringing words together we have to respect (or deliberately and knowingly violate) the rules and the conventions of grammar.

Chapters 7 and 8 of English Language are the parts of your course book most closely linked to this topic: “Grammar: Phrases (and Clauses)” and “Grammar: Clauses (and Sentences)” respectively, both by Geoffrey Leech. It is Chapter 9,
however, “Text Linguistics” by Paul Chilton, that truly takes us to an investigation of the matter of stringing words together. Indeed, in his introduction (“9.1 What is text?”) Chilton makes use of a metaphor that is closely related to our piece of string:

The etymology of the term gives us some help. The word text is from the Latin word texere, meaning weave. We can think of texts as woven together from different strands or threads. Texts, like textiles, come in different shapes and sizes and have different functions in human life. In general, the parts of texts have an analogous kind of coherence or cohesion – technical terms, about which more later. (170)

All grammar should contribute to making a text (and remember that in linguistic terms even our oral communications are “texts”) coherent. Inflections, for example, are essential in this process; these are grammatical matters at the level of individual words and indeed they are simply the way in which the endings of particular words (or entire words in some cases) change in particular circumstances. “Book”, for example, in its (regular) plural form becomes “books”. “Child”, for example, in its (irregular) plural form becomes “children”. “Stadium”, for example, in its (classical and therefore recherché) plural form becomes “stadia”, but it can become “stadiums”, or even “stadias”, which is something of an exaggeration, a sort of double plural. “I” (subject) am writing this text, but I am writing it for both you (non inflected as both subject and object) and for “me” (object).

The answer to the question, “What is a phrase?” is essentially that it – they can also be known as “groups” rather than “phrases” – is one of the units, a combination of words, that work together to form a clause or a sentence. Let’s take as an example the following simple sentence:

The students were listening attentively to the teacher’s discourse.

How would you divide it into phrases (or groups)?

The students + were listening + attentively + to the teacher’s discourse.

[NP] [VP] [AdvP] [PP (but with a further NP)]
The answer to, “What is a clause?” is that it is one of the units within a sentence in which a verb is used to describe an action, but when we use a verb syntax requires that it be accompanied by various other elements: a subject, the verb itself, and an object.

The students were listening attentively to the teacher’s discourse.

[NP] [VP] [AdvP] [PP (but with a further NP)]

[S] [V] [A] [O]

In English the subject clause generally comes before the verb; it is rare and unusual for the subject clause to come elsewhere in a sentence.

A sentence is the largest unit of syntactic structure and it may consist of just one, or of several clauses. Although there are conventions, there are no hard and fast rules about what actually constitutes a sentence. Indeed, it is up to the writer (or the speaker) to decide how they wish to create their sentences – remember the use of semi-colons in the class dedicated to punctuation? Extremely interesting in that last sentence is the use of a singular subject with a plural verb: very common in English. Liverpool, for example, are my favourite team.

And to tell you that Liverpool is (I can say that as well) my favourite team is a rather essential (in both meanings of the word: important and basic) discourse.

Discourse, of course, is territory that goes way beyond the sentence and that’s where we’ll be going in our next class on Friday (15 November).

NOTES

a quick OFA update: in the first instance, consideration will be give to the results of the language instruction groups entrance test

you’ll just have to bear with us over the next few weeks as we sort out this OFA problem
to hum means to emit noises, usually quite quietly, that follow a known melody / sometimes used figuratively to indicate the noise coming from machinery at work or to indicate some great and constant activity / also used figuratively (but I’m not sure why) to indicate a constant bad smell produced by something / someone

your shortcut answer to the meaning of hum? the easiest way for you to deal with the meaning of “to hum”, but not necessarily the best way of learning English

what are the beads on a necklace?

Years ago I was told that at the Daily Express newspaper the exam for aspiring sub-editors was “simply” to describe (in English) how they tied their shoelaces. “That’s easy! I would just shout, ‘Mummy!’” but obviously I wouldn’t have become a Daily Express sub-editor

“How long is a piece of string?” a common response, which is often a riposte to a question that you cannot answer (or which cannot be answered)
riposte – a sharp, witty response

a bit like writing on glass with soap

wit (keep you wits about you)

“I am at my wits’ end” – a situation where we no longer have any resources in terms of intelligence, in terms of sense of humour

although in linguistics we try to be “scientific” and linear, the fact is that the very material we are studying (language) is full of figurative meaning (and figurative meaning cannot in any way be considered “scientific”)

at the very outset of his chapter, Chilton finds himself discussing a figurative, a metaphorical meaning for a single word: text

you can see that Chilton is extending the metaphor, he’s enjoying using it, finds it useful and wants to continue with it

texts come in all shapes and sizes, just like … clothes

recherché is automatically ironic and critical; it’s almost synonymous with “affected”
I get a bit irritated by seeing people who have the giggles ...

both “I” and “me” refer to yours truly, but they are different because of their inflections, which derive from their grammatical purposes

In English you can in theory forget about adjectives having to inflect, but in practice the mother tongue often exerts considerable interference in the production of the interlanguage

The writer does this so that [he or she grants] they grant cohesion to their [his or her] text.

The writer does this so that he grants cohesion to his text.

clumsy someone or something that is inappropriate and possibly physically uncoordinated

clumsiness in texts (oral and written) affects the cohesion and the coherence
“beyond the sentence”, which is where you should be aiming anyway

you should be more ambitious than just wanting to string enough words together to make a few sentences in your use of English, Italian, Spanish, French, German ...