Parts of Speech

1. Introduction. Every language has thousands of lexical items. If every one of the lexical items in a language behaved in its own unique grammatical way, the language would be impossible to describe and probably impossible to learn. But languages do not behave in such a way.

In every language, almost all of the lexical items fall naturally into a small number of classes, and the words in each class behave grammatically in much the same way. Linguists often call these classes **word classes** or **lexical categories**, but the traditional term is **parts of speech**.

The ancient Greek grammarians recognized eight parts of speech for their language. The Roman grammarians who followed them recognized a slightly different list of eight classes for their own language, Latin. Over the centuries, European grammarians proposed several different lists for English and other languages, though curiously the total number of classes recognized was eight in almost every proposal.

By the early twentieth century, grammarians of English had agreed on a set of eight parts of speech: *noun*, *pronoun*, *adjective*, *verb*, *adverb*, *preposition*, *conjunction* and *interjection*. This list of categories became the orthodox view of English and of other languages, and it was almost universally taught in schools in the English-speaking world, until the teaching of English grammar began to be abandoned in the 1960s.

This set of eight classes is still taught in those schools which teach any English grammar; it is found in many grammar books of English (and even in one or two textbooks of linguistics); and it is the list used by many dictionaries of English in assigning part-of-speech labels. But it is grossly inadequate.

English has at least a dozen parts of speech, and trying to squeeze all these classes into just eight is a serious error. The traditional classification lumps together classes of words which have little or nothing in common and which simply cannot be sensibly forced together. In particular, the traditional classification abuses the category *adverb*: practically every word which fails to fit sensibly into one of the recognized categories is shoved absurdly into the "adverb" box.

As a result, you should be very cautious about accepting the part-of-speech labels given by dictionaries and traditionally-oriented grammar books. In particular, you should be wary of the label "adverb".

2. Criteria for recognizing parts of speech. Over the centuries, a number of criteria have been proposed for distinguishing parts of speech. Not all of these criteria have proved to be valuable. One criterion which has proved to be completely unworkable is meaning. The grammarians of the past often tried to define parts of speech in terms of the meanings of the words in each class, but these "semantic" or "notional" definitions were abject failures.

For example, a traditional definition of nouns is this: "A noun is the name of a person, place or thing." Well, the word *red* is undeniably the name of a colour, and so by this definition it ought to be a noun, but in fact it is usually an adjective, as in *a red flag*. On the other hand, it is scarcely sensible to maintain that the word *absence* is the name of anything (where can we find the thing of which *absence* is the name?), and yet the word is undeniably a noun, because it behaves like a noun.

Parts of speech are not semantic classes (meaning-based classes) at all: they are syntactic (grammatical) classes, and they can only be usefully defined in terms of their grammatical behaviour. There are three grammatical criteria which have proved to be valuable in defining parts of speech: distribution, inflection and derivation.

2.1. Distribution. The most useful way of defining a word class is by identifying its **distribution**, the range of grammatical positions in which it can occur. A really adequate account of the distribution of a word class requires considerable appeal to the details of syntactic structure, including the recognition of phrases of several kinds. But there exists a much simpler and rather rough-and-ready approach which can be useful in some cases: frames.

A **frame** is a sequence of words containing a blank. The idea is that any word which can fill the blank and produce a good result must belong to some class of words picked out by that frame. For example, as we will see below, the frame *The ___ was nice* picks out nouns, while the frame *This is a very ___ book* picks out adjectives.

We will use frames below whenever they are helpful, but be aware that they are not really adequate as a way of examining distribution, even when they are carefully selected. And an arbitrary frame is unlikely to pick out anything useful at all. For example, the arbitrary frame *I want the cat ___ the bed* accepts an utterly diverse collection of words with nothing in common, such as *under*, *clawing*, *and* and (neglecting punctuation) *not*.

2.2. Inflection. Some parts of speech exhibit **inflection**: the words in a given class vary their forms for grammatical reasons. In English, for example, nouns inflect for number (singular versus plural), verbs inflect for tense (past versus present), and adjectives inflect for comparison (positive, comparative, superlative).

In very heavily inflected languages, such as Latin and Russian, inflection is usually a valuable criterion for distinguishing parts of speech. In comparison with these languages, English has very little inflection, but inflection is still useful in recognizing parts of speech in English. However, there exist languages with no inflection at all, such as Vietnamese and classical Chinese. In these languages, every single word is invariable in form, and inflection is useless as a criterion for identifying word-classes.

Even in the most heavily inflected languages, however, it appears that there always exist a few classes of grammatical words which exhibit no inflection at all.

2.3. Derivation. Some parts of speech exhibit possibilities for **derivation**: the words in a given class accept certain affixes (prefixes and suffixes) in order to derive (give rise to) other words, frequently (but not invariably) belonging to different parts of speech.

For example, the English noun *sugar* accepts the suffix *-y* to derive the adjective *sugary*, and many other English nouns accept the same adjective-forming suffix: *mud*/*muddy*, *haze*/*hazy*, *luck*/*lucky*, *brain*/*brainy*, *sleaze*/*sleazy*, *sleep*/*sleepy*, *cat*/*catty*, *sun*/*sunny*, and so on. Examination shows that this suffix can be attached only to nouns. Therefore, if we find that a word can accept the suffix *-y* to form an adjective, that observation is a piece of evidence that the word is a noun.

Likewise, many English verbs can take the prefix *re-* to derive new verbs: *write*/*rewrite*, *paint*/*repaint*, *examine*/*reexamine*, *try* (a case in court)/*retry*, *start*/*restart*, *build*/*rebuild*, *cover* (a sofa)/*re-cover*, *do*/*redo*, and so on. As a rule, only verbs take this prefix, and so a word which accepts *re-* is probably a verb.

In languages with rich derivational possibilities, such as English, derivation can be a valuable criterion in identifying parts of speech. But there exist languages with few or no derivational possibilities, and in these languages derivation is of little or no use in recognizing word-classes. Even in English, most of the grammatical parts of speech, such as prepositions, determiners and conjunctions, accept no derivational affixes at all.

3. The use/mention distinction. This is a minor point, but one that sometimes causes confusion. In linguistic work, it is essential to distinguish between two very different ways in which a word can occur. Borrowing a term from philosophy, we speak of the **use/mention distinction**.

First, and most obviously, a word can be used in the ordinary way, as a structural part of a sentence. When so used, a word carries whatever meaning or function it normally has.

Second, a word can merely be *mentioned*, or *named*, or *cited*. In this case, all we are doing is naming the word so that we can talk about it *as a word*, and the word has no meaning or function at all. When we are merely mentioning a word in linguistic work, we must set it off in some way so that readers can see that we are only mentioning it, and not using it. The usual convention is to enclose it in single quotes, though italicizing it is also acceptable.

Compare the following examples:

Men are physically stronger than women.
'Men' is an irregular plural.

In the first example, we are using the word 'men' in the ordinary way, to denote adult male humans. In the second example, however, we are not talking about any humans at all: instead, we are talking about the *word* 'men'. The single quotes make this clear.

In your own writing, you should be careful to adopt this convention, since failure to make it leads quickly to unnecessary confusion. For example, here is a statement about English: the word 'of' cannot occur twice in a row. This statement is true. Sentences like the following are not counterexamples:

The history of 'of' is very interesting.
The French translation of 'of' is de.

In these sentences, only the first occurrence of 'of' represents a use of the word, while the second represents merely a mention of the word.

4. Subcategorization. The words assigned to a single part of speech are so assigned because they have important grammatical properties in common. But it is practically never the case that all the words in a given part of speech exhibit *identical* properties in every respect. Usually, the words in a given class show some differences in their behaviour. We therefore need to recognize some subclasses, or **subcategories**, within each part of speech, and the existence of such subclasses is called **subcategorization**.

For example, among the adjectives, some compare by inflection (*small*/*smaller*/*smallest*), some compare with extra words (*interesting*/*more interesting*/*most interesting*), and some don't compare at all (*first*). The class of adjectives is therefore subcategorized in this respect.

In a word-class with a large number of members, we often find that there exist very many subcategories, and that these subcategories intersect and overlap in complicated ways. In English, the class of verbs is a good example of this, as explained below.

The existence of subcategories presents us with an important general problem: at what point do the differences between two subcategories of a word-class become so great that we would be better off separating them into two parts of speech? We will see some examples of this problem below, most notably in connection with the English auxiliaries.

5. The parts of speech of English.

Noun There is a simple but effective frame for picking out nouns in English:

The ___ was/were nice.

We need two versions, because English nouns typically occur in two forms, singular and plural. Any word which can fit into this frame to yield a grammatical sentence, if not always a sensible one, is a noun, because the grammar of English permits nouns, and only nouns, to fit into this slot. For example, all of the words *skirt*, *spaghetti*, *frogs*, *police*, *singing* and *torture* can fill the slot, and so all of these words can be nouns. On the other hand, none of the words *arrive*, *with*, *unlucky*, *this*, *because*, *delivered* or *very* can fill the slot, and so these words cannot be nouns. (But see below for a class of nouns that cannot appear in this slot.)

English nouns exhibit only one inflectional distinction: that between singular and plural. The regular pattern for forming the plural is illustrated by such pairs as *dog*/*dogs*, *illustration*/*illustrations*, *book*/*books* and *box*/*boxes*. But there are some nouns which form their plurals irregularly, such as *man*/*men*, *tooth*/*teeth*, *sheep*/*sheep*, *child*/*children*, *mouse*/*mice*, and *ox*/*oxen*. Traditionally, one more of these is *die*/*dice*, but for most British speakers and many American speakers this one has been re-shaped according to the *sheep* model, and it now works *dice*/*dice*.

Educated standard English presents a large number of further irregular plurals taken wholesale from other languages. Examples are *radius*/*radii*, *index*/*indices*, *formula*/*formulae*, *alga*/*algae*, *bacterium*/*bacteria*, *crisis*/*crises*, *criterion*/*criteria*, *phenomenon*/*phenomena*, *kibbutz*/*kibbutzim*, *basso*/*bassi*, *paparazzo*/*paparazzi*, and the purely written forms *beau*/*beaux* and *bureau*/*bureaux*. But even tolerably well-educated speakers often struggle with these things, and produce non-standard forms like **this bacteria*, **a paparazzi* and **these criterias*. It appears that the position of these foreign plurals in the language is somewhat marginal.

Not all English nouns exhibit the singular/plural contrast. Quite a few nouns have only a singular form. Examples are *furniture*, *evolution*, *happiness*, *humanity*, *health*, *nonsense* and *singing*. And many others occur in the plural only exceedingly rarely or only in special senses, such as *slime*, *water*, *spaghetti*, *ancestry* and *pornography*. A few nouns have only a plural, and no singular, such as *oats*, *genitals*, *specifics*, *timpani* and *police*. These cases represent instances of subcategorization in the class of nouns.

(An aside. Do not confuse these cases with the cases like *sheep* and *deer*. The animal names have both singular and plural forms, but these two forms happen to be identical: *This sheep is hungry*, but *These sheep are hungry*. But *furniture* has no plural at all: **These furniture(s) are nice*. And *police* has no singular: **This police is nice*.)

English nouns can accept a large number of derivational suffixes, and one or two prefixes, though of course there is no affix which can be attached to every noun in the language. Here are just a few of the affixes which can go onto nouns.

Many nouns can accept the adjective-forming suffix *-y*: *dust*/*dusty*, *fog*/*foggy*, *dirt*/*dirty*, *slime*/*slimy*, *grass*/*grassy*, *sun*/*sunny* and *cat*/*catty*. And quite a few can take the adjective-forming suffix *-like*: *dog*/*doglike*, *tree*/*treelike*, *spoon*/*spoonlike* and *spaghetti*/*spaghetti-like*. Some can take the adjective-forming suffixes *-ous* and *-ful*: *mountain*/*mountainous*; *glory*/*glorious*; *power*/*powerful*; *dread*/*dreadful*.

A very few nouns can accept the ancient and feebly productive noun-forming suffixes *-hood* and *-dom*: *child*/*childhood*, *man*/*manhood*, *star*/*stardom* and *king*/*kingdom*.

Some nouns can accept the noun-forming negative prefix *non-*: *student*/*non-student*, *smoker*/*non-smoker*, *participant*/*non-participant* and *event*/*non-event*. In contrast, the negative prefix *un-* cannot be attached to nouns: **undog*, **unjoy*, **unhealth*, **uncity*. Do not be misled by cases like *unhappiness*: this word is *unhappy* plus *-ness*, and not *un-* plus *happiness*. George Orwell's famous creation *unperson* is striking precisely because it breaks the rules.

There is a further subcategorization of nouns. All the nouns we have considered so far, the ones that fit freely into the frame above, are **common nouns**. But there exists a second subcategory, that of **proper nouns** (or **proper names**). These are labels for unique entities, and most of them will not fit into the frame provided, because they cannot co-occur with the determiner *the*: *Susie*, *Gwyneth Paltrow*, *Zeus*, *Beelzebub*, *Paris*, *Sweden*, *Manchester United*, *Blur*. But some proper names have the word *the* built in and cannot occur without it: *the Gobi Desert*, *the Louvre*, *the United Kingdom*, *the Golden Gate Bridge*, *the Chicago Cubs*, *the Rolling Stones*, *the Industrial Revolution*.

English nouns exhibit one property which is rather unusual among languages and which often causes confusion: in English, nouns can modify other nouns with complete freedom. Countless examples of this construction are already lexicalized (institutionalized), such as *wine rack*, *girlfriend*, *snowball*, *jet lag*, *cheese dip*, *skunk cabbage* (an American plant) and *ultraviolet catastrophe* (not a sixties rock band, but a term from physics). Among the recent coinages of this kind are *lipstick lesbian*, *weekend warrior*, *trophy wife*, *snail mail*, *fag hag*, *bikini wax*, *neutron bomb*, *ski bunny*, *tongue sandwich* and *spin doctor*.

But it is literally true that any English can modify any other noun. The only limit is our imagination. If you have enough imagination, you can find a use for such arbitrary formations as *whisky turtle*, *pumpkin bra*, *nasturtium gun*, *happiness fish*, *kangaroo sky*, *marshmallow embargo* and *chocolate pandemonium*.

Non-linguists often conclude that the first word in each of these examples must be an "adjective", because it is modifying a noun. But this notion is wrong: the word is a noun. Traditional grammars sometimes use the label "noun used as an adjective", but this label is unhelpful and misleading. The first word in each of these examples is a noun, and it simply doing one of the things that an English noun can do: it is modifying another noun.

Verb The class of verbs is impossible to define without appealing to some advanced concepts in syntax. A good definition is this: a **verb** is a word which requires one or more noun phrases to serve as its arguments and which forms the head of a verb phrase. But this definition will probably mean nothing to you until you have learned some more grammar.

It is not possible to present any useful frames for English verbs, for two reasons. First, verbs exist in a large number of subcategories showing different behaviour. Second, verbs exhibit a number of inflected forms which also differ in their behaviour.

Among the English verbs are *sing*, *run*, *arrive*, *exist*, *kill*, *believe*, *suggest*, *precede*, *understand*, *elapse*, *exhibit*, *must*, *have*, *should* and the unusual *be*.

English verbs exhibit an extraordinary degree of subcategorization, and the subcategories which must be recognized overlap extensively.

One obvious subcategorization is that into **transitive** verbs, which take an object, and **intransitive** verbs, which do not. For example, in *I saw a film last night*, the verb *see*, appearing here in its inflected form *saw*, takes the object *a film*, and it is transitive. But, in *She smiled quietly to herself*, the verb *smile*, appearing here as *smiled*, takes no object, and it is intransitive.

Some English verbs are rigorously intransitive, among them *arrive*, *elapse*, *deteriorate*, *triumph*, *fornicate*, *dwell*, *giggle*, *dive*, *exist* and *pontificate*. Others are rigorously transitive, including *slap*, *annihilate*, *underestimate*, *accompany*, *trick*, *seduce*, *envy*, *ruin*, *disdain* and *evaluate*.

Very many English verbs can be used either transitively or intransitively, but these verbs appear in a large number of subcategories in which the relation between the transitive and intransitive uses varies conspicuously. Here are just a few examples: *Susie smokes*/*Susie smokes Marlboros*; *Susie is washing*/*Susie is washing the children*; *The ice melted*/*The sun melted the ice*; *She's washing her bikini*/*Her bikini washes easily*; *The horse jumped over the fence*/*She jumped the horse over the fence*; *Susie is swimming*/*Susie is swimming the Channel*. Many English verbs are **complement-taking verbs**, but English exhibits a large number of complement constructions, and it is impossible to predict which verbs can appear in which constructions. Here are some examples of complement constructions:

I ___ that she is honest.
I ___ her to be honest.
I ___ her of being dishonest.
I ___ to be honest.

Try a few verbs in these frames: *want*, *believe*, *consider*, *suspect*, *prefer*, *accuse*, *know*, *intend*, *suppose*, *recognize*, *decide*, and others. You will find that there is little rhyme or reason in the behaviour of these verbs. When we subcategorize the class of verbs according to the complement constructions in which they can appear, the subcategories overlap in complicated and unpredictable ways.

There is one English verb which is unique in its grammatical behaviour. This is the verb *be*, which is called a **copula** or a **copular verb**. Examples: *Susie is Irish*; *Kansas City is in Missouri*; *Rome is the capital of Italy*; *Wide ties are fashionable*. A few other verbs share some properties with the copula; these are sometimes called **quasi-copular verbs**, and among them are *seem*, *appear*, *look* ('appear'), *become* and *turn* ('become'). Examples: *This looks interesting*; *She seems nice*; *She became a teacher.*

But there is no doubt as to what is the most important subcategorization of English verbs. This is the distinction between the **main verbs** (or **lexical verbs**) and the **auxiliary verbs**. Most verbs are main verbs. The auxiliary verbs are a small class distinguished by a number of grammatical peculiarities.

The auxiliaries are divided into several subclasses. The **primary auxiliaries** are *be* and *have*, as in *The baby is sleeping* and *We have finished dinner*. The **dummy auxiliary** is *do*, as in *You don't smoke, do you?* The **modal auxiliaries** are *can*/*could*, *may*/*might*, *shall*/*should*, *will*/*would*, *must* and the slightly peculiar *ought*, as in *I can do it* and *We should go*. The **semi-modals** are *dare* and *need*, as in *I dare not go* and *You need not stay*.

The peculiar properties of the auxiliaries, which are sometimes known by the mnemonic **NICE properties,** are summarized in many textbooks and reference books, and we won't review them here. But there is another issue which we must mention.

The standard position among grammarians of English is the one given here: the auxiliaries are a subclass of verbs. This position is vigorously defended in a classic article: G. K. Pullum and D. Wilson (1977), 'Autonomous syntax and the analysis of auxiliaries', *Language* 53: 741–788. But there exists a second position, which is that the auxiliaries are not verbs at all, but a distinct part of speech. This minority position is particularly associated with the American linguist Noam Chomsky and his followers, but it is not confined to the Chomskyans. It is also espoused, for example, by the British grammarian Randolph Quirk and his colleagues in their several well-known grammars of English.

In English, verbs inflect more richly than any other part of speech. To start with, verbs inflect for **tense**. English has only two tenses, the past tense and the other one, which is traditionally called the "present" tense, but which might more accurately be called the "nonpast" tense or the "present–future" tense. Examples of the "present" tense: *I like Turkish food*; *Susie speaks French*; *We fly to Rome on Friday*. Examples of the past tense: *The Mongols sacked Kiev*; *I had a headache*; *We saw a play last night*.

The verb-forms which are marked for tense are called **finite** forms. Most English verbs have a further set of forms, the **non-finite** forms, which are not marked for tense. Among these are the **present participle** in *-ing*, as in *She ran smiling to the door*, the **gerund**, also in *-ing*, as in *Walking is good exercise*, the **past participle**, which has various forms, as in the final forms in *I have finished* and *I have eaten*, and the **infinitive**, which has no ending, as in the final forms in *We must go* and *I want to eat*. The modal auxiliaries have no non-finite forms, and they are therefore **defective**, meaning that they lack some of the forms normally exhibited by words of their class.

English verbs have various derivational possibilities. Almost every verb yields a related abstract noun, its **verbal noun**, but the manner of formation of verbal nouns is so varied as to be virtually chaotic. Here a just a few examples: *arrive*/*arrival*, *destroy*/*destruction*, *bless*/*blessing*, *advise*/*advice*, *relate*/*relation*, *defend*/*defence*, *rob*/*robbery*, *permit*/*permission*, *deliver*/*delivery*.

Quite a few verbs accept the adjective-forming suffix *-able* ~ *-ible*, as in *wash*/*washable* and *pay*/*payable*.

Many verbs accept the verb-forming prefix *re-*, as in *write*/*rewrite* and *examine*/*reexamine*. Some verbs accept the verb-forming prefix *un-*, as in *lock*/*unlock* and *zip*/*unzip*.

Pronoun A **pronoun** is a grammatical word which can form a noun phrase all by itself. Any word which is not a noun but which can fit into the following frame is a pronoun (though not all pronouns can fill this slot):

___ *was/were nice.*

Pronouns are divided into a number of subclasses which differ grammatically in various respects.

First we have the **personal pronouns**: *I*/*me*, *you*, *he*/*him*, *she*/*her*, *it*, *we*/*us* and *they*/*them*, and also the indefinite *one*, as in *One hardly knows what to do*. (We used to have one more, *thou*, but this is now obsolete.) The personal pronouns distinguish the grammatical category of **person**, meaning the participants in the speech situation: speaker, addressee, and others. Apart from *you*, they also distinguish the category of **number**: singular versus plural. In the third-person singular, the English pronouns further distinguish the category of **sex**: *he* (male), *she* (female) and *it* (no sex). (Note that this is sex, not gender: English has no distinctions of gender. Sex is a matter of biology; gender is not.)

Most of the English personal pronouns are inflected for **case**. This is the grammatical distinction illustrated by *I* and *me*, *she* and *her*, and so on. Pronouns are the only English words which exhibit any distinctions of case.

Second, we have the **possessive pronouns**: *mine*, *yours*, *his*, *hers*, *ours* and *theirs*. Examples: *This book is mine*; *Yours is on the table*. Observe that there exists no possessive pronoun corresponding to *it*: we cannot say **This bone is its*.

An aside. Traditional grammarians commonly applied the label "possessive pronouns" to the items like *my*, *your* and *our*. But these items are not pronouns at all: they are determiners. Observe that **My is nice* is not possible, unlike *Mine is nice*. See **determiner** below for discussion.

Third, we have the **reflexive pronouns**: *myself*, *yourself*, *himself*, *herself*, *itself*, *ourselves*, *yourselves* and *themselves*. Note that we distinguish singular *yourself* from plural *yourselves*, even though the personal pronoun *you* makes no distinction of number. (A few speakers have one more, the non-standard form *themself*.)

Fourth, we have the **reciprocal pronouns**: *each other* and *one another*.

Fifth, we have the **demonstrative pronouns**: *this*/*these* and *that*/*those*. These are inflected for **number**.

Sixth, we have the **indefinite pronouns**. There are several sets of these: *somebody*, *someone* and *something*; *anybody*, *anyone* and *anything*; *everybody*, *everyone* and *everything*, *nobody*, *no one* and *nothing*. Another set is *whoever* and *whatever*, as in *Whoever did this is in trouble*.

In addition, some linguists prefer to split the *any-* set into two groups: the ones occurring in negatives and questions, which are **negative polarity items**, as in *I didn't see anybody* and *Have you found anything?*, and the ones occurring elsewhere, as in *You can have anything you like*.

Seventh, we have the **quantifier pronouns**, such as *many*, *all*, *none*, *some* and *both*: *All are here*; *I want both*.

Eighth, we have the **interrogative pronouns**: *who*, *what* and *which*. These occur in questions: *Who did this?*; *What do you want?*; *Which do you prefer?*

Ninth, we have the **relative pronouns**, *who* and *which*, which introduce relative clauses: *the woman who you were talking to*, *the skirt which you prefer*.

The interrogative and relative pronoun *who* has a case-inflected form *whom*, but this form appears to be slowly disappearing from the language.

Finally, the **numerals** can behave as pronouns: *One is ready*; *I bought three*.

A few of the pronouns can be regarded as derived from other pronouns. For example, *himself* is derived from *him*, and *whoever* is derived from *who*. Moreover, the possessive determiners, like *your* and *their*, are derived from the personal pronouns, like *you* and *they*. Otherwise, English pronouns have no derivational properties.

Adjective An **adjective** modifies a noun or a noun phrase. A possible frame for adjectives is this:

This is a(n) ___ book.

But this frame also accepts nouns like *physics* and *linguistics*. A somewhat better frame is this one:

This is a very ___ book.

Typical adjectives are *big*, *new*, *red*, *interesting*, *expensive*, *devoted*, *ridiculous*, *frantic*, *pregnant*, *smoky*, *itchy*, *French*, *red-headed*, *last*, *topmost* and *magnanimous*.

Adjectives occurring in the position illustrated by the frame above are said to be in **attributive** position. But adjectives can also occur in **predicate** position, as in the following frame:

The baby is ___.

Some adjectives are subcategorized to occur only in predicate position, such as *afraid*, *asleep* and *ready* ('prepared'). And others, such as *topmost*, *late* ('deceased') and *ultimate*, are subcategorized to occur only in attributive position.

Some adjectives, when occurring in predicate position, can take a following prepositional phrase: *afraid of snakes*, *proud of her achievements*, *bored with*/*of pizza*, *ready for bed*. These are occasionally called **transitive adjectives**.

Some adjectives inflect for comparison, as in *big*/*bigger*/*biggest*. (These three forms are called the **positive**, the **comparative** and the **superlative**.) Others can be compared only with the words *more* and *most*, as in *beautiful*/*more beautiful*/*most beautiful*. A few adjectives fluctuate: *commoner* or *more common*; *drunker* or *more drunk*. And many adjectives cannot be compared at all, for semantic reasons: *ultimate*, *first*, *Spanish*, *other*, *same*, *topmost* and *three-cornered*, for example.

Adjectives can be modified by **degree modifiers**: *very big*, *rather difficult*, *surprisingly fresh*. See below.

English adjectives exhibit quite a few derivational possibilities. Many adjectives will accept one of the abstract-noun-forming suffixes *-ness* and *-ity*: *sly*/*slyness*; *red*/*redness*; *human*/*humanity*; *suitable*/*suitability*. Many accept the adverb-forming suffix *-ly*: *eager*/*eagerly*; *reluctant*/*reluctantly*.

Many adjectives accept the adjective-forming negative prefix *un-*: *happy*/*unhappy*; *interesting*/*uninteresting*.

Adverb An **adverb** modifies a verb, a verb phrase or a sentence. Adverbs are subcategorized into two main types: simple adverbs and sentence adverbs. A **simple adverb** modifies a verb or a verb phrase. Many simple adverbs will fit into at least one of the slots in the following frame:

___ *Susie* ___ *poured the wine* ___.

Some simple adverbs pertain to time, such as *yesterday*, *soon*, *often*, *never*, *then* and *always*. Some pertain to place, such as *here* and *somewhere*. Some pertain to circumstance, such as *unwittingly*, *unnecessarily* and *publicly*. Some pertain to direction, such as *out*, *away*, *off*, *down* and *uphill*. Many pertain to manner, such as *carefully*, *reluctantly*, *hastily*, *angrily* and *provocatively*.

A **sentence adverb** modifies a whole sentence. Semantically, a sentence adverb expresses the attitude of the speaker toward what is being said. Typical sentence adverbs are *probably*, *frankly*, *hopefully*, *certainly*, *surely*, *surprisingly*, *undoubtedly* and *maybe*.

Note the contrast in the following pair of examples:

She should speak frankly to her boss.

Here *frankly* is a simple adverb: it modifies the verb *speak*, and it describes the manner of her speaking.

Frankly, she should speak to her boss.

Here *frankly* is a sentence adverb: it modifies the entire sentence, and it expresses the speaker's attitude toward that sentence.

A very few English adverbs can be inflected for comparison: *fast*, *faster*, *fastest*; *slow*, *slower*, *slowest*; *soon*, *sooner*. Many other adverbs can be compared with *more* and *most*: *more carefully*, *most often*, *more surprisingly*. Otherwise, English adverbs have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Adverbs can be modified: *very carefully*, *rather reluctantly*. See **degree modifier** below.

Determiner A **determiner** is a grammatical item which combines with a noun (and possibly other material) to make a noun phrase. (If you haven't learned about noun phrases yet, you'll be learning about them soon.) Here is a useful pair of frames for determiners:

___ *book is good.* ___ *books are good.*

We need two frames because some determiners are specifically singular and others specifically plural. Among the determiners are *the*, *a(n)*, *this*, *those*, *some*, *many*, *all*, *no*, *my*, *their*, *most*, *few*, *every* and *which*. (Note that the second frame accepts certain words which are not determiners, such as *other*, *expensive* and *physics*. This frame also accepts the item *such*, whose classification is debatable.)

There are conventional labels for some subclasses of the determiners. The two items *the* and *a(n)* are called the **articles**. The items *this*/*these* and *that*/*those* are the **demonstrative determiners**. The items *which* and *what*, when they behave as determiners, are the **interrogative determiners**. And all the determiners whose meanings involve quantity, such as *all*, *many*, *no* and *some*, are called **quantifiers**.

A few linguists have proposed that the quantifiers should be separated from the other determiners and recognized as a distinct part of speech, but there is no good grammatical justification for such a move.

The **numerals** can behave as determiners: *three people*, *two new books*.

The **possessive determiners** are the items *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our* and *their*, and also the indefinite *one's*, as in *One must watch one's step*. Traditional grammarians called these things the "possessive pronouns", but this label is wrong, because the words are not pronouns at all: we cannot say **My is nice* or **That one is your*. We can say that the determiners *my* and *your* are derivationally related to the pronouns *I* and *you*, much as the noun *arrival* is derivationally related to the verb *arrive*.

A few determiners can precede other determiners: *both these books*, *all my children*. The first determiner in such a case is sometimes labelled a **predeterminer**.

The determiners *this*/*these* and *that*/*those* uniquely inflect for number. No other English determiners inflect, and determiners have no derivational properties.

Preposition A **preposition** combines with a following noun phrase to make a larger phrase, a prepositional phrase. Examples are *of*, *to*, *on*, *with*, *under*, *beside*, *without*, *beyond*, *next to*, *in front of*, *on top of* and *in spite of*.

Typical prepositional phrases are *of the book*, *to London*, *under the bridge*, *next to the bed* and *in front of the house*.

A very few prepositions can be followed by a complete prepositional phrase. An example is *from*, as in *The cat ran out from under the bed*.

English prepositions have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Conjunction Traditional grammarians applied the label "conjunctions" to a wide variety of connecting words, but today it is usual to restrict this label to the small group of items formerly called "coordinating conjunctions" . In this definition, a **conjunction** is a grammatical word which can link two words or phrases of the same category. The familiar conjunctions are *and* and *or*. Examples:

Susie and her friends
under the bed or behind the sofa
finished her drink and stood up
a new jacket or a new pair of shoes

A conjunction can join two complete sentences, as in this frame:

Susie is coming ___ Mike is staying home.

In this case, the two further words *but* and *yet* can also occur, and these two are sometimes included in the class of conjunctions.

The correlative pairs *both...and*, *either...or* and *neither...nor* are often also classed as pairs of conjunctions.

English conjunctions have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Subordinator A **subordinator** introduces an adverbial subordinate clause. Examples are *when*, *if*, *because*, *since*, *although*, *after*, *whenever*, *even though*, *while* and *as soon as*. Examples:

When she arrives, we'll eat.
I'll wash if you'll dry.
After the match ended, there was a scuffle in the tunnel.
Susie got the job because she gave a brilliant interview.

Observe that the sequence after the subordinator, up to any following comma, constitutes a complete sentence by itself.

Traditional grammarians called these things "subordinating conjunctions", a label which is still widely used today. Traditional grammarians also assigned these words to the class of "conjunctions", but they are not very similar to *and* and *or*, and most linguists today prefer to assign them to a distinct class.

English subordinators have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Complementizer A **complementizer** is a word that introduces a complement clause, a subordinate clause that follows one of a class of verbs including *believe*, *know*, *suspect*, *wonder* and *suggest*. The only common complementizers in English are *that* and *whether*, plus *if* when it means 'whether' (but not otherwise). Examples:

She said that she would come.
I don't know whether she's coming.
I don't know if she's coming.

Traditional grammarians assigned these words to the class of "conjunctions", but these items behave very differently from the words *and* and *or*, and most linguists today prefer to put the complementizers into a separate category. Even though this new category is very small, it plays an important role in some contemporary theories of grammar.

English complementizers have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Sentence connector The rather inadequate label **sentence connector** is sometimes applied to a small group of connecting words, including *however*, *therefore* and *nevertheless*, among others. These words really have a discourse function: they relate one piece of discourse to another piece.

Traditional grammarians included these words among the catch-all class of "conjunctions". Modern linguists have not really decided what to do with them, and the label used here is taken from the grammars of English written by Randolph Quirk and his colleagues.

English sentence connectors have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Degree modifier A **degree modifier** modifies an adjective or an adverb. Semantically, a degree modifier expresses the degree to which some quality is present. Here are some frames for degree modifiers:

This is a(n) ___ good book.
She poured the wine ___ carefully.

Examples are *very*, *so*, *really*, *rather*, *extremely*, and the informal items *kind of* and *sort of*. (But note the peculiar behaviour of these last two in the first frame: *This is kind of a good book.*) Degree modifiers ending in *-ly* can be constructed with some freedom: *amazingly*, *frightfully*, *awfully*, *terrifically*, and so on.

Traditional grammarians assigned these things to the class of"adverbs", but degree modifiers are quite distinct from adverbs in their grammatical behaviour, and most linguists today prefer to recognize them as a distinct class. A few linguists call them "intensifiers", but this label is inappropriate, since not all these words "intensify" the meaning of the adjective or adverb which is modified.

English degree modifiers have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Particle English exhibits a class of items called "phrasal verbs". A **phrasal verb** consists of a simple verb plus a second element. Examples are *turn on*, *put away*, *take off*, *make up* and *put down*. The second element in a phrasal verb is conventionally assigned to the class **particle**. This is an *ad hoc* label with no particular significance.

Many of the items which function as particles in English can also function as prepositions, but it is necessary to distinguish the two classes. Consider the item *off*, which can function either as a preposition or as a particle:

She took her coat off the hook.

Here *off* is a preposition; it occurs inside the prepositional phrase *off the hook*, and the noun phrase *the hook* serves as its object.

She took her coat off.

Here *off* is a particle; it has no object, and it forms part of the phrasal verb *take off*, which here means 'remove'.

This use of the term 'particle' is specific to English. In fact, though, the term 'particle' is used very widely in the grammatical description of other languages. Sometimes it labels a specific class of items, as in English. Often, however, it serves merely as an *ad hoc* general label for any grammatical item which is invariant in form. When you come across this term in a description of another language, you should check to see how it is being used.

English particles have no inflectional or derivational properties.

Interjection An **interjection** is a word which typically makes up a complete utterance by itself, without entering into any syntactic structures. Semantically, an interjection is merely an expression of emotion. Examples are *wow*, *hooray*, *drat*, *phooey*, *damn*, *shit*, *ha*, *blimey* and Snoopy's famous *rats*. A few interjections are institutionalized representations of what were originally non-linguistic noises, such as *psst*, *whew*, *phwoar* and *aarrgh*.

Given their lack of syntax, interjections are in most respects of little linguistic interest. However, some of the coarser interjections display a limited ability to enter into a syntactic structure with a following noun phrase, as in *Damn the torpedoes!*, *Bugger Bognor!* and *Fuck this essay!* These utterances exhibit unique and peculiar grammatical properties, as explained by the Scottish-born American linguist James McCawley, writing under the pseudonym Quang Phuc Dong, in his famous paper 'English sentences without overt grammatical subject' (not recommended for those of a delicate disposition or of devout religious belief).

Interjections have no inflectional or derivational properties.

6. Multiple membership. In English, it is commonplace for what appears to be the same word to belong to two or more parts of speech. For example, *red* is an adjective in *a red skirt* but a noun in *She went through the light on red*. And *kiss* is a verb in *She kissed him* but a noun in *She gave him a kiss*. The word *straight* is an adjective in *a straight line*, an adverb in *Can't you drive straight?* and a noun in *Schumacher accelerated down the straight*. The word *surprisingly* is a (sentence) adverb in *Surprisingly, he got the job*, but a degree modifier in *She's a surprisingly good cook*.

Similarly, the word *this* is a pronoun in *This is good*, but a determiner in *This book is good*. And *off* is an adverb in *She jumped off*, a preposition in *She jumped off the bed*, and a particle in *She took her coat off*.

This is just a fact about English, and you should be prepared to encounter such multiple class membership constantly.

7. Some difficult cases. Not all English words fit into the twelve or so classes which are commonly recognized. Some dozens of our words exhibit behaviour which is different from what we see with any of the established classes, and these words have no established classes. Here are a few examples.

There exists a set of words which modify prepositional phrases. Among them are *straight*, *just*, *way* and *right*, as in *straight into the hole*, *just behind the house*, *way over the limit* and *right beside the bed*. These words have received little attention from grammarians. Perhaps they deserve to constitute an additional part of speech.

The words *just*, *only* and *even* make up another interesting set, illustrated by the examples *Just*/*Only*/*Even Susie bought a book* and *Susie just*/*only*/*even bought a book.* Perhaps we are looking at another small class of words.

English has a small class of items whose function is to introduce an utterance. The most familiar of these is *well*, as in *Well, what have you been up to?* Other items exhibiting similar behaviour include *oh*, *now* and *say*.

The two words *yes* and *no* exhibit unique behaviour: each one constitutes a complete sentence by itself. Example: *Are you coming along? Yes.* These two items have occasionally been called **pro-sentences**, but this label is not common.

In some cases, we find that a single word exhibits unique behaviour, behaviour shared by no other word in the language. Such a word is occasionally called a **syncategorematic** item, a very fancy word meaning 'belonging to a category of which it is the only member'. The best-known such item in English is the negative *not*, which behaves differently from every other word in the language. Traditional grammarians, as usual with difficult words, called the word an "adverb", but in fact there is not a single property which *not* shares with the adverbs – unlike, for example, *never*, which really *is* an adverb.

Other such unique words are the polite *please* (as in *Please pass the salt*), the infinitival *to* (as in *I want to go home*), the existential *there* (as in *There's a wasp on your back*), and the modifier *almost*. One more is the unstressed *one(s)*, as in *this one*, *a new one* and *the other ones*. The informal English of younger speakers presents a striking example, the discourse particle *like*, as in *I was like, get away from me.*

8. Open and closed classes. It is obvious that some word-classes are much bigger than others. In English, the class of nouns is by far the biggest class, and the same is perhaps true for every language on the planet. But some other classes are very small, and the English class of complementizers is very small indeed.

It is conventional to classify the parts of speech into open classes and closed classes. An **open class** is large and accepts new members readily. A **closed class** is small and accepts new members only rarely. The open classes in English are *noun*, *verb*, *adjective* and *adverb*; all the other classes are closed.

Some publishers bring out annual volumes of new words which have recently been added to English. In any one of these volumes, the bulk of the new words will be nouns. New adjectives and verbs will be fewer, while new adverbs consist mostly of words derived from new adjectives with *-ly*.

Additions to the closed classes are rare events. The pronoun *they*, taken from Old Norse, was added to English during the Old English period. The subordinator *because* is first recorded in 1305, and the preposition *despite* is first recorded in 1593 (in Shakespeare). The chiefly American preposition *in back of* is not recorded before the early 20th century (in Mark Twain). The chiefly British degree modifier *well*, as in *She's well clever*, is a recent introduction.

Not all languages possess the same open and closed classes. See section 10.

9. Reducing the number of classes. We have encountered a few proposals for increasing the number of parts of speech – for example, by separating the auxiliaries from the other verbs, or by separating the quantifiers from the other determiners. But there exist also a few proposals for *reducing* the number of classes by combining some of the recognized categories.

One such proposal involves the two classes of particles and prepositions. Observing the large overlap in membership between these two classes, a few linguists propose to combine the two classes into a single class of prepositions. This new class of prepositions is then subcategorized into two subgroups: the **transitive prepositions**, which take objects (the conventional prepositions), and the **intransitive prepositions**, which take no objects (the particles). So, in *She took her coat off the hook*, *off* is a transitive preposition, while in *She took her coat off*, it is an intransitive preposition.

This analysis reduces the number of word-classes by one, and it makes the new class of prepositions look more like the class of verbs, which is likewise subcategorized into transitive and intransitive subclasses. But very few linguists like it, and it can be found only in the writings of a handful of linguists. In Britain, the most prominent advocate of this analysis is Richard Hudson of University College London.

The British linguist Andrew Radford has made another proposal. He observes that certain words, such as *before*, can function as adverbs (*I'd never met her before*), as prepositions (*I'd never met her before the party*), and as subordinators (*I'd never met her before you held your party*). He therefore proposes to combine these three classes into one.

But, while a few words, like *before*, *after*, *since* and *until*, can exhibit two or all three of these types of behaviour, most words which can be prepositions (like *to*, *under* and *during*) cannot behave as subordinators, while most subordinators (like *if*, *although* and *while*) cannot behave as prepositions, and the majority of both these groups cannot behave as adverbs. Consequently, combining the three groups into a single class would give us a word class in which the overwhelming majority of members would have to be marked as exceptional.

For most linguists, this price is too high to pay, and we are better off recognizing three classes of unexceptional items with a few common members. This result illustrates the usual basis for deciding on the parts of speech to be recognized: we want the most economical overall grammar, and reducing the number of classes is not economical if doing so greatly increases the number of statements which must be made.

10. Are parts of speech universal? No. Investigation has revealed that languages differ greatly in their parts of speech.

We begin with a trivial difference. In many languages, such as Japanese, Turkish and Basque, the items corresponding to prepositions come *after* their objects, rather than

before, as with Japanese *Tookyoo de* ‘in Tokyo’ and *Tookyoo e* ‘to Tokyo’. These have been dubbed **postpositions**, and the cover term **adpositions** has been coined to cover prepositions and postpositions. (Even English has at least one postposition: *ago*. Compare *a week ago* with its German translation *vor einer Woche*.)

But there exist much greater differences. In European languages, the class of adjectives is open. In many other languages, it is closed, and there exist only 6–12 adjectives. In still other languages, there is no class of adjectives at all. In such languages, adjectival meanings are variously expressed by nouns or by verbs. So, instead of an adjective *big*, a language may have a noun ‘big-thing’ or a verb ‘be big’.

On the other hand, the Australian linguist Bob Dixon reports that in Yidiny and in many other Australian languages the functions of the English adverbs are divided among three parts of speech: *locational qualifiers*, *time qualifiers* and *true adverbs,* all distinguished by morphology and syntax.

In fact, the only parts of speech for which any linguists want to claim universal status are nouns and verbs, since it is now clear that no other parts of speech are universally present. But the universal status of even the noun/verb distinction is disputed by some linguists. Particularly salient here are the Salishan and Wakashan languages of the Pacific northwest of North America.

For example, the American linguist Charles Hockett argued that the Wakashan language Nootka lacks a noun/verb distinction. In this language, the four stems *wala:k-* ‘go’, *qo:ʔas-* ‘man, person’, *ʔi:h-* ‘large’ and *ʔathija-* ‘at night’ can occur unaffixed, in which case they have nounlike meanings: ‘a going, a trip’, ‘a man, a person’, ‘a large thing’ and ‘the night time’. But with the suffix *-ma* all become verblike, and they mean ‘he goes’, ‘he is a man’, ‘he is large’ and ‘he does it at night’.

This debate continues today, with some linguists maintaining the universal nature of the noun/verb contrast and other linguists denying it.