

UNIT A.2: WORD CLASSES

The stock of English words is immense. David Crystal (1995: 119) estimates that a conservative figure would approach one million and that, if all the terminology of science were included, it could be twice that much. Each word has a particular role that it can play in the structure of sentences. There are certain grammatical patterns, of sentence and phrase, into which a word may fit, and there may be specific other words with which it may regularly co-occur, its collocational patterning. To describe the grammatical and lexical operation of each of a million words would be a daunting task, and it would turn out that the descriptions would be identical, or very similar, for large sets of words. For this reason, grammarians have traditionally grouped words into classes. The traditional term has been 'parts of speech', but this is not a very transparent term, and linguists now prefer to talk about 'word classes'.

There is substantial, though not universal, agreement about which word classes to recognise for English. They comprise: noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, determiner, preposition, conjunction. The unfamiliar member of this list is likely to be 'determiner', which we will discuss in more detail below. A list of traditional parts of speech would have included an 'interjection' class (for items like *hey!* and *cor!*), but this is no longer thought necessary; such items would be described as phenomena of spoken discourse.

The word class with the most members is that of 'noun', followed by 'verb' and 'adjective'. The 'adverb' class is also large, but contains a number of subclasses with restricted membership. These four classes are known as the 'open' word classes, because new words in the language are added to one of these. The other classes - pronoun, determiner, preposition, conjunction - have a relatively small membership, which is rarely added to. They are, therefore, known as 'closed' classes.

In general, the members of the open (also known as 'lexical') word classes provide the main referential (lexical) meaning of a sentence, while the members of the closed (also known as 'grammatical') word classes tend to have a structuring function in sentences. This is a gross generalisation; there is more of a spectrum of function from the highly lexical of most nouns and verbs, to the highly grammatical of some determiners, but with the members of some word classes having both a lexical and a grammatical function (e.g. prepositions), but sometimes more one than the other.

The class of 'determiners' includes a restricted number of words that are used to accompany nouns in noun phrases (see Unit B.5, C.5.1). It includes, on the one hand, 'identifiers', such as the definite and indefinite articles (*a/an, the*), the possessive identifiers (*my, our, your, his, her, its, their*) and the demonstrative identifiers (*this/these, that/those*); and on the other, 'quantifiers', such as the numerals (*one/two/fifty, first/second/fiftieth*) and indefinite quantifiers (*some, few, several, plenty of, etc.*).

Activity 1

Remove the pronouns, determiners, prepositions and conjunctions from the following, to see how much is lost in terms of meaning. If you are not sure which word class an item belongs to, look it up in a dictionary. (The Collins dictionaries, the 10th edition of the Concise Oxford, and the New Oxford Dictionary include 'determiner' among their word class labels.)

An investigation has been launched at Blackpool Pleasure Beach after 14 people were injured in a rollercoaster accident at the resort. Two teenage boys needed surgery and have been kept in hospital after being cut free from the crushed rear carriage of The Big One ride. Twelve other people were injured and treated for whiplash after the two carriages collided on the world's tallest rollercoaster.

Commentary

If we remove all the pronouns, determiners, prepositions and conjunctions, the text will look like this:

investigation has been launched, Blackpool Pleasure beach, people were injured, rollercoaster accident, resort. teenage boys needed surgery, have been kept hospital, being cut free, crushed rear carriage, Big One ride. other people were injured, treated whiplash, carriages collided, world's tallest rollercoaster.

We should probably also omit the 'auxiliary verbs' (see Unit C.5.2, B.2), because they are also essentially 'grammatical' words; in which case, the text will read as follows:

investigation launched, Blackpool Pleasure beach, people injured, rollercoaster accident, resort. teenage boys needed surgery, kept hospital, cut free, crushed rear carriage, Big One ride. other people injured, treated whiplash, carriages collided, world's tallest rollercoaster.

You will notice that the words remaining are the main meaning-bearing ones, but some meaning is lost by the omission of some of the 'grammatical' words, especially the prepositions and conjunctions (*at, after, in, and, from, of, for, on*) and the numbers (*14, two, twelve*). The words that are missed least are probably the indefinite and definite articles (*a/an, the*).

Activity 2

What is a noun? How do we decide which words in English belong to the word class of 'nouns'? A traditional definition is that a noun is "the name of a person, place or thing". This is a 'semantic' or 'notional' definition. Try applying it to the following words, all of which we would want to assign to the noun class.

kangaroo, emptiness, tooth, baptism, hostility, pleasure, disturbance, skiing

Commentary

Notional definitions are difficult to apply, and there is room for much disagreement. Of the words in the list above, the definition applies uncontroversially to *kangaroo* and *tooth*, which can both be said to be 'things'; but it is less easy to ascertain the 'thingness' of the remainder. They are all 'abstract' nouns of various kinds: *emptiness* refers to a 'state', *baptism* to an

'action', *enmity* and *pleasure* to 'feelings', *disturbance* to a 'happening', and *skiing* to an 'activity'. Neither 'person', 'place' or 'thing' applies very readily to any of these words. We must, therefore, reject - as linguists have done - a notional definition as a reliable criterion for determining the membership of a word class.

There are, however, other, more reliable, criteria that we can use to establish word classes. Let us remain for the moment with the noun class. If you look again at the list of words in Activity 2, there are two important characteristics that can help us. First, most of the words in this list can have a 'plural' form, for when more than one is being referred to: *kangaroos*, *emptinesses*, *teeth*, *baptisms*, *hostilities*, *pleasures*, *disturbances*. It is characteristic of nouns to have a singular and a plural form, though there is a set of nouns - the 'mass' or 'uncountable' nouns - that do not, and *skiing* is one of those. Second, some of the words have (derivational) endings that are characteristic of nouns: *-ness* (forms nouns from adjectives), *-ism* (forms nouns from verbs in *-ise/-ize*), *-ity* (forms nouns from adjectives), *-ure* (forms nouns from verbs), *-ance* (forms nouns from verbs), *-ing* (forms nouns from verbs). These 'morphological' criteria can be applied more easily: if a word has a plural form, or ends in a suffix such as *-ness*, *-ity*, *-ance*, etc., then it belongs to the noun class. Unfortunately, this is not enough to establish the noun class; there are still some 'nouns' that fall outside of these criteria.

Activity 3

There is a criterion that can be applied more widely and will establish a word class with a greater degree of certainty. Identify the nouns in the following.

Are there any features of their context or position that they have in common?

There was an emperor who was fond of new clothes and spent all his money on them. One day two swindlers arrived and announced that they knew how to manufacture the most beautiful cloth imaginable. The texture and pattern were uncommonly beautiful, and the clothes made from the cloth had a wonderful quality.

Commentary

The nouns are the following: *emperor*, *clothes*, *money*, *day*, *swindlers*, *cloth*, *texture*, *pattern*, *clothes*, *cloth*, *quality*. First, notice that many of these nouns are preceded by a definite or indefinite article (e.g. *an emperor*, *the texture*), or by an adjective (e.g. *new clothes*, *a wonderful quality*), or by other 'determiners' (e.g. *his money*, *two swindlers*). In other words, nouns are associated with particular types of other word in the structure of noun phrases (see Unit B.5). Second, nouns (and their associated words) typically occur as Subject and Object in the structure of sentences, e.g. *an emperor* (Subject), *all his money* (Object), *two swindlers* (Subject), *a wonderful quality* (Object). Alternatively, they are found after prepositions, e.g. *from the cloth*.

These criteria are syntactic; they relate to the positions in the structure of phrases and sentences where members of the word class may be found. Word classes are most reliably defined by the syntactic behaviour of their members, but morphological and notional criteria can also play a part.

Activity 4

What are the notional, morphological and syntactic criteria that could be used to define the class of 'adjectives'? Here are some examples to help you.

1. The big dog jumped over the lazy fox.
2. Foxes can be very lazy, even lazier than humans.
3. This fox is the laziest that I've met, more idle than your younger brother.
4. The fox is an agricultural menace.

Commentary.

First, let us establish which are the adjectives in these sentences: *big, lazy, idle, young, agricultural*. The traditional notional definition of an adjective is: 'a describing word'. This definition is vague enough to fit the vast majority of adjectives, but it is, like most notional definitions, perhaps too vague to apply with any confidence.

In terms of morphology, you will have noticed that *lazy* appears in three forms: the 'base' form *lazy*, the 'comparative' form *lazier*, and the 'superlative' form *laziest* (see further C.2.2). Many adjectives have these forms, or the alternatives with *more* and *most* (e.g. *more idle* in No.2), the so-called 'gradable' adjectives; but not all adjectives do, e.g. *priceless, single* (which are 'non-gradable'). As with nouns, there are some typical 'derivational' suffixes for adjectives, e.g. the *-al* of *agricultural* (forming adjectives from nouns), *-ful* and *-less* (*hopeful, priceless*), *-ish* (*foolish*) - also from nouns - *-able/-ible* (from verbs - *readable, compressible*).

Syntactically, adjectives occur in two positions: the 'attributive' position, before nouns, e.g. *the lazy fox, an agricultural menace*; and the 'predicative' position after verbs like *be* and *seem*, e.g. *the fox seems lazy, the diamond is priceless*. With few exceptions, adjectives may occur in either position.

Activity 5

Try the same exercise with verbs: propose notional, morphological and syntactic criteria for establishing the word class of verbs. Then check your attempt with the discussion in Unit B.2.

UNIT B.2: NOUN AND VERB

As we noted in Unit A.2, the noun and verb word classes are the largest, and they are the classes to which most new words are added. In that Unit, we characterised nouns as the class of words whose members characteristically refer to 'things', take a plural inflection, and most importantly function as heads of noun phrases in Subject and Object slots in sentences. You were invited to provide a similar characterisation of the verb class. In this Unit, we will expand on our discussion of the noun and provide some answers to Activity 5 from Unit A.2.

All word classes contain a more or less heterogeneous set of items, but which have enough in common grammatically to justify them being lumped together in the same class. This is equally true of nouns.

Activity 1

To illustrate some of the diversity among nouns, consider the following examples. Test whether they can be used with an indefinite article (*a/an*), with a definite article (*the*), with the quantifier *some*, and whether *some* triggers the plural form.

apple, Aristotle, advice, argument, anarchy, annunciation

Commentary

The first item, *apple*, is a straightforward 'countable common noun', referring to a 'concrete' object. It can be used with both the indefinite and the definite articles, in both singular and plural form with the latter, and *some* triggers the plural (*some apples*). With the singular of *apple*, *some* is no longer a quantifier, but an emphatic (*some apple!*). A large number of nouns are like *apple*.

Aristotle is a 'proper noun'. It refers to a unique person, the Greek philosopher. Its status as a proper noun is indicated by the initial capital letter. When denoting the Greek philosopher, *Aristotle* cannot be used with any of the determiners. However, the articles can be used, but with rather specific meanings. To say "He's an Aristotle" implies that the person is something of a philosopher or acting as if they were. If you say "Do you mean the Aristotle?", you're checking that the reference is to the famous Greek philosopher rather than to anyone else called *Aristotle*. Names of people, places and institutions constitute the subclass of 'proper nouns'.

The remaining nouns in the list are 'abstract' (as against 'concrete') nouns of various kinds. *Advice* is uncountable; it has no plural form, it cannot occur with the indefinite article, and *some* retains the singular form (*some advice*). To make *advice* countable, it must be prefaced by the quantity expression *a piece of*, which can be made plural (*some pieces of advice*). Many uncountable nouns, both abstract and concrete, may be made countable in this way.

Like *advice*, *argument* is an abstract noun derived from a verb; but it is usually a countable noun, when it operates in the same way as the concrete *apples*: it can be accompanied by both articles, occur in the plural with *the*, and *some* triggers the plural form. But *argument* may also be used as an uncountable noun, in contexts such as *without argument* or *for the sake of argument*.

Anarchy is an uncountable abstract noun, like *advice*; but it is more restricted in the determiners that may accompany it. Neither the indefinite article nor the quantifier *some* may occur with it; only the definite article. Most usually, however, it occurs without any determiner.

The word *annunciation* is a special case. It occurs almost always in the form *the Annunciation*, to refer to the biblical episode (Luke 1:26-38) when the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that she would be the mother of the Christ child, or to paintings of this event. So, it is a kind of proper noun. It derives from the same Latin root as underlies *announce*, and it is sometimes used

(inappropriately?) instead of *announcement*, e.g. "the drafting and annunciation through the UN of a comprehensive set of rules applying to the relationships between states" (from the *British National Corpus*, CHC899).

Summarising, nouns may be subcategorised according to whether they are 'proper' or 'common', 'abstract' or 'concrete', 'countable' or 'uncountable'.

We turn now to verbs. We make a distinction between 'main' verbs and 'auxiliary' verbs (B.5). Both subclasses of verb function within a verb phrase, main verbs as head, and auxiliary verbs as pre-modifiers - which provides a syntactic definition of the verb class. 'Main' verbs give the main meaning of the verb phrase; 'auxiliary' verbs add meanings associated with tense, aspect, modality (C.5.2) and passive (B.1). Verbs used as auxiliaries include: *be, have, do; can, may, shall, will, must*. Let us look now at the morphology of verbs.

Activity 2

Give the present tense, past tense, and participle forms of the following verbs. E.g. *speak*: present *speak, speaks* (form with '3rd person singular' (*he, she, it*) Subjects); past *spoke*; participles *speaking* (present participle), *spoken* (past participle).

see, search, sing, tell, go, have, be, may

Commentary

The forms of these verbs are as follows:

| Present Tense Past Part. | Past Tense | Present Participle | |
|-----------------------------|------------|--------------------|----------|
| see, sees | saw | seeing | seen |
| search, searches | searched | searching | searched |
| sing, sings | sang | singing | |
| sung | | | |
| tell, tells | told | telling | told |
| go, goes | went | going | gone |
| have, has | had | having | had |
| am, is, are | was, were | being | been |
| may | might | | |

The one anomaly in this list is *may*, which has no participle forms, and no 3rd person singular present tense form. It shares these features with other 'modal' auxiliary verbs, which, along with the meanings that these verbs have, sets them apart as a special subclass of auxiliary verbs.

Otherwise, all the examples have the following five forms: present, 3rd singular present, past, present participle, past participle. The verb *be* additionally has a 1st person singular present tense form (*am*) and differentiates a singular (*was*) and a plural (*were*) past tense form. Some verbs have identical forms for past tense and past participle, including the 'regular' verb *search*.

From this evidence, we can see that the inflectional morphology of the verb provides a particularly sound and comprehensive definition of the class, with only a small number of exceptions to be accounted for.

Activity 3

Traditionally, verbs have been defined notionally as 'doing words', but this is probably an oversimplification. Which main verbs in the following sentences would you call 'doing words'? And if a verb is not about 'doing', what is it about?

1. Barry kicked the ball into touch.
2. Eva shouted encouragement from the sidelines.
3. Then the rain fell.
4. Both players and spectators got wet.
5. The pitch was already muddy.
6. The groundsman wondered about the state of his turf.

Commentary

The most obvious 'doing' verb among these is *kick* in No.1, denoting a physical action. *Shout* in No.2 probably also counts as a 'doing' verb, in this case a verbal action. The verbs in the remaining sentences can hardly be called 'doing words', however. In No.3, *fall* is something that 'happens' rather than 'doing', and similarly with *get* in No.4. In No.5, the main verb is *be*, expressing the state something is in; and in No.5, *wonder* could possibly be construed as 'doing', but also as a 'state of mind', or a mental process.

Arguably, verbs may refer to: actions (what someone (usually) does), events (what happens to someone or something), states (how someone or something is).

UNIT C.2.1 NOUNS AND PRONOUNS

We introduced the word class of nouns in Unit A.2, using it as an exemplar for testing the criteria relevant to establishing a class of words. We explored the class of nouns further in Unit B.2, looking in particular at the variety of words included within the class. In this unit, we are considering nouns in relation to the pronouns that may substitute for them.

Activity 1

We begin with a text (taken from the start of the traditional fairy tale, *Snow White*). The sentences have been numbered for easy reference. Identify the pronouns in the text, and say which noun each of them substitutes for. (Note: in A.2, we counted *my*, *our*, *your*, etc. as determiners, specifically 'possessive identifiers', and not as pronouns.)

[1] Once upon a time, in the middle of winter, when the snowflakes were falling like feathers on the earth, a Queen sat at a window framed in black ebony and sewed. [2] And as she sewed and gazed out on the white landscape, she pricked her finger, and three drops of blood fell on the snow outside.

[3] Because the red showed up so well against the white, the Queen said to herself, “Oh, what I would give to have a child as white as snow, as red as blood and as black as ebony!”

[4] And her wish was granted, for not long afterwards a little daughter was born to her, with a skin as white as snow, lips and cheeks as red as blood and hair as black as ebony. [5] They called her Snow White, and after her birth the Queen died.

[6] After a year, the King married again. [7] His new wife was a beautiful woman, but so proud that she could not stand any rival to her beauty. [8] The new Queen possessed a magic mirror, and when she stood before it, she asked:

*Mirror, mirror, on the wall,
Who is the fairest of us all?*

and it always replied: *Thou, Queen, art the fairest of all.*

...

[9] At last she could endure Snow White’s presence no longer. [10] She called a huntsman to her and said: “Take the child out into the wood and never let me see her face again. [11] You must kill her and bring me back her lungs and heart, so that I may know for certain she is dead.” [12] The huntsman did as he was told and led Snow White out into the wood, but as he was in the act of drawing out his knife to slay her, she said: “Oh, dear huntsman, spare my life. [13] I promise you that I will disappear into the forest and never return home again.

Commentary

The pronouns in this text are as follows, given by sentence, together with the nouns for which they substitute, if any:

[2] *she* (twice) – Queen

[3] *herself* – Queen, *what, I* – Queen

[4] *her* (second one, after *to*) – Queen

[5] *they* - ?, *her* – daughter

[7] *she* – wife

[8] *she* – Queen, *it* – mirror, *she* – Queen, *who, us* – Queen + others, *it* – mirror, *thou* – Queen

[9] *she* – Queen

[10] *she* – Queen, *her* – Queen, *me* – Queen

[11] *you* – huntsman, *her* – child, *me* – Queen, *I* – Queen, *she* – child

[12] *he* – huntsman, *he* – huntsman, *her* – Snow White, *she* – Snow White, *I* – Snow White, *you* – huntsman, *I* – Snow White.

(Note: where *her* is followed by a noun, as in *her finger* [2] or *her face* [10], it is a possessive identifier and not a pronoun.)

Most of the pronouns in this text belong to subclass of ‘personal’ pronouns.

This group of pronouns manifests a number of category distinctions, reflected in their forms, which are not all shared by the nouns for which they substitute.

Pronouns vary:

1. according to who is speaking and about whom or what: compare *I, you, she*.
2. between singular and plural: compare *she, they; I, us*.

3. according to whether the referent is female, male, or neither: compare *she, he, it*.
4. according to the syntactic function of the pronoun: compare *I, me; she, her, herself*.

The relevant categories are: 1. person, 2. number, 3. gender, 4. case. The forms of nouns vary for number (*snowflakes, drops, cheeks*), but not for any of the other categories. These distinctions are found only in the personal pronouns (and their related possessive identifiers). The forms in full are as follows:

| person/gender | singular | | | | plural | | | |
|----------------------|----------|--------|------------|-----------|---------|--------|------------|--------|
| | subject | object | possessive | reflexive | subject | object | possessive | |
| <u>reflexive</u> | | | | | | | | |
| First ourselves | I | me | mine | myself | we | us | ours | |
| Second yourselves | you | you | yours | yourself | you | you | yours | |
| Third/masc | he | him | his | himself | | | | |
| Third/fem | she | her | hers | | herself | they | them | theirs |
| Third/neuter | it | it | its | itself | | | | |

First person pronouns are used by the speaker(s) to self-refer; second person pronouns refer to the addressee(s); third person pronouns to any 'third party/ies' being talked about. First and third person pronouns show clear distinctions of form for number, but the second person pronoun shows a singular/plural distinction only for the reflexive.

The category of gender applies only to the third person singular pronouns; it is based on 'natural' gender. 'Masculine' pronouns substitute for nouns referring to male animates, 'feminine' to females, and 'neuter' to others. There are some exceptions: names of countries, ships, mountains and some machines are often substituted by a feminine pronoun; and where the gender, of say a child or animal, is not known, the neuter pronoun may often be used. Much debate has taken place in recent years about the third person singular pronoun that should be used to substitute for a noun (e.g. *student*) that could refer to either a male or female. Which is your 'gender-neutral' pronoun – *s/he, he/she, they*?

Under 'case', pronouns share a 'possessive' form with nouns (*child's, children's, girl's, girls*), though possessive case nouns are more often substituted by possessive identifiers, e.g. 'the *child's* lungs' – '*her* lungs'. Possessive pronouns are used in contexts such as: "The fault is *mine*", where *mine* substitutes for 'my fault'. The basic case distinction between 'subject' and 'object' reflects the syntactic functions of Subject and Object (A.4, B.4): 'subject' pronouns are used in Subject slots, 'object' pronouns are used in Object slots and after prepositions (*to us, to her, to them*). Second person pronouns do not show this case distinction, although in older English,

reflected in the mirror's answer to the queen in the text, a distinction was made as follows:

| singular | | plural | |
|----------|--------|---------|--------|
| subject | object | subject | object |
| thou | thee | ye | you |

However, this was more than a simple number distinction; as in many modern European languages, the distinction was also used to express relative 'status' and 'familiarity', with, for example, higher status individuals using *thou/thee* to lower status persons but expecting *ye/you* in return. Such distinctions are reflected, for example, in how characters of differing social positions address each other in the plays of Shakespeare.

The 'reflexive' pronouns have also been included under 'case', though reflexiveness is not strictly speaking a 'case'. Reflexive pronouns are used in Object position, where the reference is the same as that of the Subject, e.g. "Lydia has hurt herself", and they are also used together with another noun or pronoun for emphasis, "She made it herself", "You'll have to answer to the president himself".

Activity 2

We have not yet mentioned the pronouns *who* and *what* from the text in Activity 1. We'll incorporate them in the following activity, which asks you to identify and classify, as far as you can, the pronouns (except the personal pronouns) in the following sentences.

1. Who likes ice-cream?
2. Nobody here does, it seems.
3. Look at this!
4. What is it?
5. Did you find a nice one?
6. That is their final offer.
7. Can you smell anything?
8. It's raining again.

Commentary

Who and *what* appear in Nos.1 and 4 as 'interrogative' pronouns; they ask for a specific piece of information in the form of a noun (phrase) and so substitute for a noun that has yet to be revealed. *Nobody* in No.2 and *anything* in No.7 belong to a group of 'indefinite' pronouns, which includes *someone*, *nothing*, *anybody*, etc., and which substitute for an unknown (indefinite) noun. *This* in No.3 and *that* in No.6 are 'demonstrative' pronouns, with corresponding plural forms *these* and *those*; they show a distinction between 'proximate' (*this/these*) and 'distant' (*that/those*). The pronoun in No.5 is *one*, used to substitute for a noun in a previous sentence (e.g. "I've been looking for a new jacket"): it is the ultimate 'pro-noun'.

Finally, the *it* in No.2 and in No.8 look as if they are third person singular neuter pronouns, but though they share the same form, they are not personal pronouns here. In neither case does *it* substitute for a noun. The use in No.8 is sometimes called 'meteorological *it*', because of its use in reference to the

weather. In No.2, however, *it* merely fills Subject position because there is no other item to do so, and in all sentences, apart from imperatives, English requires the Subject slot to be filled. We could refer to this use as 'dummy *it*'; there is a similar use in the 'extraposition' construction (C.6.1).

Summarising

Pronouns are an interesting class of words, showing category distinctions that have been largely lost to nouns. The major subclass is that of the personal pronouns, with a number of other subclasses, including indefinite, interrogative and demonstrative, as well as relative pronouns, which are discussed in detail in C.5.1 and C.6.2.