Lexical Categories (Parts of Speech)

There are several ways to classify words. Traditionally, English teachers divide words into eight parts of speech or lexical categories. However, the eight parts of speech are arbitrary categories that are not relevant to many languages or do not adequately represent the lexical differences of morphological units found in many languages. Although there are problems with this system (see Ben Yagoda’s book on the subject, which is listed under “Suggested Reading”), it is a good jumping-off point to introduce students to the primary functions of words within sentences. The sections below are meant to summarize the traditional parts of speech and to add a few additional concepts. A more detailed discussion of parts of speech can be found at: http://www.uottawa.ca/academic/arts/writecent/grammar/parts.html.

Noun

A noun is a word that refers to names, persons, places, attitudes, ideas, things, qualities, or conditions. A noun can be the subject of a sentence, the object of a verb, or the object of a preposition.

Some nouns can occur after articles a, an, or the. Many nouns can be inflected to show number (-s) or can be inflected to show possession (-’s). There are many subtypes of nouns and a noun can belong to more than one of the following subtypes (some examples are in parentheses). Proper nouns refer to a particular person, place, activity, idea, or thing (John, California, Super Bowl, Chevrolet). Common nouns are not specific (man). Concrete nouns refer to tangible things (cow, tree, noise), whereas abstract nouns refer to intangible things (love, liberty, admiration). Count nouns can be pluralized (dog), whereas mass nouns generally cannot (butter, flour, gravel). Collective nouns refer to a group of things (mob, flock, herd).

Pronoun

A pronoun replaces a noun or another pronoun. An indefinite pronoun does not have a specific reference (any, each, all, everyone, some). A reflexive object pronoun
refers back to the subject (myself, yourself, himself, herself) and an intensive pronoun is used for emphasis and has the same forms as reflexive pronouns. Personal pronouns refer to a specific person or thing (I, you, she, he, it, we). Demonstrative pronouns indicate what is being referred to (this, that, these, those). Linguists put demonstratives into the determiner category, which is discussed below. Interrogative pronouns are used to ask a question (who, whom, which, what), and relative pronouns link one phrase or clause to another phrase or clause and take the same form as interrogative pronouns.

Adjective

Adjectives modify a noun or pronoun. They identify a characteristic or a quality of a noun or pronoun. In English, adjectives occur before a noun (a beautiful woman) or after a verb such as is (She is beautiful). Some can be inflected for degree: hotter = comparative degree, hottest = superlative degree. English teachers often distinguish between descriptive adjectives such as good, happy, wonderful, and ugly and limiting adjectives that are also called articles. The articles in English are a, an, and the. They make the noun refer to a specific person or place, or a type of person, place, or thing (the house). Linguists place articles in to a lexical category called determiners.

Determiner

The lexical category, determiner, is not one of the traditional parts of speech. However, linguists use the category for words (or affixes) that specify something about a noun. Linguists classify articles as determiners. Other determiners are demonstrative pronouns (examples: this, that, these, those) and qualifiers (examples: all, three, many, and some).

Verb

A verb expresses an action, an occurrence, a condition, or a state of being. It can be a single word or a group of words. In English, verbs are inflected for tense, person, number, voice, and aspect. There are three main subtypes of verbs. Intransitive verbs do not require a direct object (Phil retired). Transitive verbs do take an object (Bruce built a house). Linking or copulative verbs cannot form a complete assertion (predication) by themselves and do not take a direct object. They link the subject to a noun (predicate noun) or an adjective. Examples of linking verbs in sentences include: My mother is an artist. He remains a good person. That pie smells good. Other linking verbs are be, become, look, appear, and verbs of the senses such as taste, feel, and sound.

Auxiliary

Linguists use the term auxiliary as a natural category that refers to words and bound morphemes (such as -ed, which expresses the past tense) that “help” a verb to express additional information. What are traditionally called auxiliary verbs are simply called auxiliaries (aux) by linguists. They include what are traditionally called “helping verbs” that are used to form various tenses (be, have) and modal verbs that express particular moods or attitudes (may, can, should, must).
Adverb

Adverbs modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs (careful, today, now, often, away, absolutely). Like adjectives, adverbs have (a) positive, (b) comparative, and (c) superlative degrees: He walked fast. He walked faster. He walked fastest.

Preposition

Prepositions usually introduce a phrase (The cat was on the fence). The phrase usually ends in a noun or pronoun, which is called the object of the preposition. The preposition shows a relationship between its object and another word or words in the sentence.

Conjunction

Conjunctions connect words or groups of words. There are three subtypes of conjunctions: Coordinating conjunctions connect equal elements as in the sentence: It is Rob and Becky’s savings account. Correlative conjunctions connect equal elements but occur in pairs, such as in the sentence: Either you or I will go to the store today. Subordinating conjunctions connect unequal elements; for example, a dependent and independent clause (see Chapter 5) such as in the sentence: Because you studied very effectively, you got an A on the test.

Interjection

Interjections are not a vital part of a sentence grammatically. They can be removed and not destroy the grammatical structure of a sentence. Interjections are usually used to express feelings. Interjections include many swear words as well as words such as oh, well, goodness sakes, good heavens, alas, ouch, and indeed.

Note: A word’s lexical category depends on its function in a sentence. So, a word such as round can function as any one of six lexical categories. See http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/round.

EXERCISE 7 Lexical Categories

1. Determine the lexical category of the underlined words as well as the subtype of the lexical category.

   Example: Honesty is the best policy.

   a. [ ]
   b. [ ]

   a. abstract noun  b. descriptive adjective

A. Some of the boats sank.

   a. [ ]
   b. [ ]

A. [ ]

B. Some people never learn.

   a. [ ]
   b. [ ]

B. [ ]
C. According to Steve, the road ends one mile down the highway.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________  
c. ____________________________

D. The boxer won that round.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________

E. The round house looked strange.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________

F. He rounded the piece of wood.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________

G. The piece of wood will become round.
a. ____________________________

H. He turned round.
a. ____________________________

I. He went round the river.
a. ____________________________

J. The crowd became noisy, and the police surrounded them.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________  
c. ____________________________

d. ____________________________

K. Who said that you could appoint yourself?
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________  
c. ____________________________  d. ____________________________

L. That speech would touch anyone who heard it.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________

M. Jack will either go to the party or stay home.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________  
c. ____________________________

N. Oh no, the guests are already arriving.
a. ____________________________  b. ____________________________
O. The sand at the beach is contaminated.
   a. ___________________  b. ___________________
   c. ___________________

2. Examine the uses of the word *round* in D through I. What can be concluded from these examples?

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**Summary**

Morphology is the study of the rules governing the internal structure of words and the interrelationships that exist among words. The basic unit of morphology is the morpheme, of which there are two main types, bound and free. Bound morphemes can be derivational or inflectional. Derivational morphemes, when added to a word, change the meaning or part of speech of the word. Inflectional morphemes serve grammatical functions, such as changing a singular noun to a plural.

Languages can be classified on the basis of how they use morphemes. In analytic languages, words are single morphemes. In synthetic languages, bound morphemes are attached to root morphemes to change meaning or mark grammatical function.

Three kinds of synthetic language types were discussed: inflectional, agglutinating, and polysynthetic. In reality, most languages mix the typological principles to various degrees.

Morphemes may have different phonemic shapes. The phonemic shape that is used depends on the sound characteristics of the morphemes being combined. Because both morphology and phonology are involved in these subconscious decisions, the study of them is called morphophonemics.

New words are constantly entering languages. The processes of compounding, blending, acronym formation, foreign word borrowing, clipping, derivation, back-formation, using proper names, and using trade names are some of the more common ways that new words are formed.

Words can be divided into types and subtypes depending on their meaning, how they function in a sentence, how they are inflected, and other criteria. One system of doing this, dividing words into the lexical categories, is described in this text.

**Suggested Reading**

