Descriptive Grammar of English part 2: Syntax

Topic 2: Parts of Speech


Tutor: mgr Jadwiga Bogucka

1. Lexical Categories

Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Prepositions, Adverbs (etc.) - the building blocks of sentences

(1) The \(N\) sun shines too brightly in Tucson
(2) \(V\) Will glow shines too brightly in Tucson

Also called: Lexical Categories, Syntactic Categories.

2. Classic definitions of parts of speech:

**Noun:** Person, place, or thing

**Verb:** Action, occurrence or state of being

**Adjective:** modifier that expresses quality, quantity or extent.

**Adverb:** modifier that expresses manner, quality, place, time, degree, number, cause, opposition, affirmation or denial

**Preposition:** modifier that indicates location or origin.

3. Problems with the semantic definitions:

a. Not so clear cut:
(3) The assassination of the president...
(4) Sincerity is an important quality
(5) Tucson is where New Yorkers flee for the winter

b. Multiple parts of speech?
(6) They cannot **still** her brave clear voice. \([V]\)
(7) It was a **still** cold night. \([A]\)
(8) They will **dance** until dawn. \([V]\)
(9) One **dance** was all she would grant him. \([N]\)

d. Even if we don’t know the meaning of the words, we can still determine what parts of speech they should belong to:

*The yinkish dripner blorked quastofically into the nindin with the pidibs.*

yinkish - adj
dripner - noun
blorked - verb
quastofically - adverb
nindin - noun
pidibs - noun

4. Structural classification:

Words in isolation - forms – what structural characteristics do words have and what changes occur when they are used in phrases and clauses

Distribution of words – see what slots they regularly fill in basic recurring patterns – subject, object, complements

5. Morphological vs syntactic distribution

**Morphological distribution** - determined by the kind of affixes that a given word takes and other morphology.

- Looking at characteristic inflectional and derivational endings of words
e.g.: if elements can take endings such as -s, -’s, s’ or -ment -dom, -er, we can say they are nouns

**Syntactic distribution:** determined by a syntactic position of a given word, eg. What kind of words appear before or after it.

- See which words can be inserted into different slots in a sentence:
e.g.: He bought the X X: dog, butter, paper (nouns)
He wants to X X: swim, play, sing, cook (verbs)
The boy is very X X: handsome, tired, young (adjective)
He went X X: out, away, quietly, there (adverbs)

- However, there are many other possible distributions:
  a. *The old man is here vs. He is alive*
  
  *The alive man is here*
  
  b. *Intensifiers: rather quickly (but: *rather outside)*
adverbs of manner, place: *patiently outside* (but: *quickly patiently*)
  c. *Some words are unique in their distribution:*
  He did not want the coffee
  Even Fred knows that
  She waited for she had no choice
  They want to eat

Sometimes morphological and syntactic distributions conflict:
The dancing ceased

6. Parts of speech in English:

**Nouns**

- Plural and genitive inflectional endings: -s, -’s and –s’
- Irregular plurals
• Words which appear plural but are singular: news, phonetics, linguistics
• Words with no singular variant: trousers, pincers, tweezers
• Words with different meaning in the plural: spirits, looks, scales
• **Count** (countable) vs. **Mass** (uncountable) nouns
  
  Mass nouns – usually found in the singular only, however sometimes can appear in the plural: *Their hopes were quickly dashed*
• **Proper** nouns: names of specific entities
• Common nouns (all other nouns)
• Sometimes proper nouns can behave like a common noun: *He is a regular Don Juan*

**Genitive:**
  
  - marked vs. periphrastic
  - can indicate possession, origin, measure, subjective, partitive, appositive etc.
  - further variants: **group**: the captain of the ship’s lawyer; **double**: a play of Shakespeare’s; **location**: at the doctor’s; **elliptical**: This book sells better than John’s

• Derivational suffixes: -ter, -er, -ism, -hood, -ment etc
• Can show gender: waiter – waitress; hero – heroine; bull - cow

**Typical noun positions:**
  
  The ____ is here
  Give me some ____
  Show me a ____
  ____ is good

**Pronouns:**

a. Personal pronouns

• **Inflected** for: singular, plural, subject and object (nominative and accusative case)
• Two genitive forms: **attributive** and **absolute**
• **Inclusive** plural, eg. *We (“you and I”) should see him about it*; **Exclusive**: *We (I and some others but not you) intend to stop you*
• Object forms: used after verbs and prepositions: *I followed him, I spoke to her*
• First possessive (attributive): used (not always immediately) before nouns: *her house, her old friend*
• Second possessive (absolute): used by itself: *Mine is ready, It’s hers*
• Reflexive or intensifying and empathic forms of pronouns: *himself, herself*

b. Demonstrative pronouns:

• **This, that, pl. these, those**
• Can be used alone *This is the book* or as determiners: *This new cake is delicious*

c. Relative pronouns

• Personal *who* or impersonal *which*
• Object: whom, genitive: whose
  
• That, sometimes used instead of which is a complementizer (not a pronoun)
  
**d. Interrogative pronouns:**

• Same as relative + what
  
**e. Reciprocals:** each other, one another
  
**f. Indefinite pronouns:** some, any, none
  
**g. It, there or one:**
  
It’s raining (expletive)
  
There happens to be a man in the garden (expletive)
  
He wants a book and I want one too
  
Pronouns distribute much like nouns (or rather noun phrases) in sentences:
  
**John** left – **He** left, **Someone** left, **Who** left?
  
**The boy** asked **the girl** – **He** asked **her**
  
**Verbs**

• Marked inflectionally for:
  - Third person singular present tens: -s
  - Present participle: -ing
  - Past tense: -ed
  - Past participle: (-ed or –en):
  - Past tense and participle: regular or irregular
  - Marked infinitive: I want to know; bare infinitive: I don’t know
  
• **Lexical vs. auxiliary verbs**
  
John is happy – lexical
  
John is going – auxiliary
  
John does his work well – lexical
  
John does not work well – auxiliary
  
• **Modal** verbs – defective (lack inflections for third person singular and the participles and cannot appear in marked infinitives)
  
• **Subjunctive** form – absence of the form that might be expected:
  
I insists she go (goes)
  
It is necessary that he see (sees) her immediately
  
• Derivational suffixes: -ify, -en, -ate, -ize
  
• Distribution:
  
Birds _______
  
He will _______
  
Fred _____ happy
  
People _________ such things
  
**Adjectives:**

• Inflected for comparative and superlative
  
• **Suppletive forms** – good better best
  
• For an adjective to be inflected it must be gradable
Classifying adjectives (non-gradable) cannot occur after more or most

Pairs of opposites (young-old, high-low) – one of the pair is “unmarked” as in “How old is he” (not “how young is he?”)

Derivational affixes: -en, -less, -ish, -able, -ous – ary

Gradable adjectives can occur after intensifiers - very, rather, quite

Position before a noun – attributive, after a verb – predicative

Some adjectives can occur only in predicative positions: awake, alive, ill, well, alike

In certain fixed expressions, adjectives always occur after the noun – attorney general, court martial

Adverbs:
- take -ly suffix
- some adverbs take comparative and superlative forms: badly-worse-worst, well-better-best
- can take more and most – more commonly, most successfully
- derivational suffixes: -ward, -wards, -wise
- some adverbs don’t have derivational markings and can be distinguished only by their position:
  He did it ______ (quietly, then, outside)
  She sings ______ (beautifully, upstairs, loudly)
  _____, she eats there (usually, sometimes, however)
  Very,/rather/quite ________ (slowly, fast, well)
- adverbs with no –ly suffix – flat adverbs
- some exist in two forms: cheap, cheaply, slow, slowly

Class boundaries:
- -ing, -ed – may or may not be verbs, can be nouns and adjectives
- -ing as noun ending in building, railing, ceiling – inflectable for plural,
- Gerund or verbal nouns: singing, dancing (the singing went well, his drinking is excessive) – cannot take plural
- -ing in adjectives: interesting, amusing, fascinating – we can insert very, rather,
  However:
  His dying wish, a falling star –non-gradable, much closer to verbs
- Such adjectives also take –en form: interesting – interested, boring-bored
- -ing as present participle of verbs:
  Weeping, the girl left the room, he died laughing, seeing him enter...
  Clear relationship between the subject and the participle – girl was weeping, he was laughing etc
  Dangling participles - violated relationship : “playing in the garden, the window got broken”
- -ing as verb inflection:
  He was going home, They have been growing roses
- -ed: choice between an adjective and a verb
- Sometimes they attach to nouns : a gifted student, a skilled worker
• Can go with intensifiers: very isolated place, very tired, rather worried
• Opinions may differ however:
  It’s an unwarranted intrusion
  She assisted an injured spectator
  The broken window
  (adjectives or verbs?)
• -ed as verbal inflection:
  He has picked the apples, His leg was broken
• -ed past participle:
  Badly wounded, he surrendered
  The meal, burned to a cinder, had to be thrown away

Other parts of speech:
• Identified solely on distributional criteria
• Conjunctions: coordinating, subordinating and correlating
  coordinating: and, but,
  subordinating: because, if, when
  correlating: either.. or, not only.. but also, whether...or
• Conjunctive adverbs: however, moreover, nevertheless
• Prepositions: single words used in phrases in whey the govern a noun or a pronoun:
  To, at, between
  Complex prepositions: because of, on account of, in spite of..
• numerals

9. Lexical vs Functional categories:

Lexical categories – nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs – they carry meaning.
Functional categories – determiners, articles etc – they do not carry meaning- the perform certain functions.

Lexical categories are mostly open (you can add new elements, eg. neologisms), while functional categories are mostly closed (you cannot add anything new)