The parts of speech: the basic labels

The Western traditional parts of speech began with the works of the Greeks and then the Romans. The Greek tradition culminated in the first century B.C. work of Dionysius Thrax, The Art of Grammar, a work of only about 400 lines, which divided Greek into eight parts of speech: nouns, pronouns, prepositions, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, participles, and articles. The Romans imitated the Greeks, adapting the Greek parts of speech to the study of Latin. Except that Latin lacks articles, it could be analyzed in terms of the seven other parts of speech used by the Greeks; the Latin grammarians then added the category of interjections, giving Latin, like Greek, eight parts of speech.

The tradition of saying that there are eight parts of speech remains with us today, although it will quickly become apparent that there are actually more than eight. Although the English tradition retains all the categories of the Greek tradition, neither participles nor articles are now listed among the eight traditional parts of speech: adjectives have replaced participles, and the Latin category of interjections has been added. For English, the eight traditional parts of speech are nouns, pronouns, prepositions, verbs, adverbs, conjunctions, adjectives, and interjections.

Defining the parts of speech.

Because the intent of this book is to introduce the structure of English to those who are not already trained in English grammar, strict definitions of the parts of speech will be not be given. Definitions are essentially an attempt to describe a class of examples. As a result, it is often easier for students to learn parts of speech through examples and illustrations than through definitions. In addition, iron-clad definitions always "leak" and, even if such definitions can be formulated, they are often of limited use to the learner. In place of definitions, techniques for identifying the various parts of speech are offered.

In developing a working notion of what a particular part of speech is, it is crucial to realize that a particular word is not a noun, verb, or adjective — in a very real sense, a word only has a part of speech when it is used in a sentence (or phrase). If one were to ask what part of speech the word fast is, it is impossible to answer without knowing how it is used. For
example, in the fast runner it is an adjective, in he runs fast it is an adverb, in I fast during Ramadan it is a verb, and so on. That is, it depends upon how it is used.

Although it is common for linguists and grammarians to criticize the traditional "definitions" of the parts of speech for various technical shortcomings, these definitions do form a useful starting point for those trying to develop a working notion of the various parts of speech. As a starting point, the following notions are offered, divided into nouns and parts of speech related to nouns, verbs and parts related to verbs, and other parts. These notional "definitions" are meant to be read quickly, with the real task of learning how to identify parts of speech being learned by doing the exercises which follow the definitions:

**Nouns and noun-related parts of speech:**

**Nouns**

A noun is the name of a person, place, or thing (or something treated grammatically as if it were a person, place, or thing). This description is okay as far as it goes. The obvious problem lies in determining what constitutes a thing, and in determining what constitutes treating something grammatically as if it were a thing. In practice, fortunately, the problem of identifying nouns is not so difficult. In the example, the nouns are italicized.

The young man with the red coat robbed a bank yesterday.

There are several ways in which a word can be treated grammatically as a noun. If, a word is modified with an article, that is, by a, an, or the, it is being treated grammatically as a noun. Similarly, it is a noun if it is singular or plural. That is, if it is modified by a number. Similarly, if it ends in plural -s, it is a noun. Also it is possible to test if it is in a noun 'slot' by checking to see if it can be made plural in the slot it occurs in. In the example above, for instance, we could change man into men in the phrase the young man, we could change coat into coats in the phrase the red coat, and we could change a bank into banks.

**Pronouns**

Pronouns traditionally substitute or take the place of nouns. While there are cases where this characterization is not fully adequate, it will serve us well enough for our purposes. In the first sentence, there are two nouns; in the second sentence, pronouns have been used instead of the nouns.
The man cut his finger. Then, he put a bandage on it.

Adjectives
Adjectives modify, classify, characterize, or in some way tell more about a noun.

The old man
his dying words
adj noun adj noun

Prepositions
Prepositions are a group of words that show how a noun or a noun phrase (that is, a phrase that functions like a noun) relates to the rest of the overall sentence. However vague this seems now, in practice one quickly learns to recognize the prepositions. Not only are there only a small number of prepositions, but they usually come attached to a following noun.

at the house behind the clock under the rug
prep. noun prep. noun prep. noun

Not only is at a preposition but the whole unit At the house is a prepositional phrase; that is, it is a unit composed of a preposition and a noun phrase.

Verbs and verb-related parts of speech

Verbs
Usually verbs are characterized as words denoting actions, events, and states of being. Although this is true, it is usually not too helpful for the beginner. Fortunately, like nouns, verbs are not as difficult to find in practice as their characterization would lead you to think.
One characteristic of verbs that many students find helpful in identification is that not only do verbs denote actions, events, and states, but the verb itself also contains an indication of time (that is, it has a tense). Usually, the form of the verb changes when you change the time reference, for instance, when the time reference is changed from last night to every night. Examine the examples:

Those detectives *ate* there last night. [*ate* includes past]
Those detectives *eat* there every night. [*eat* includes present]

That duck *goes* south every winter. [*goes* includes present]
That duck *went* south last winter. [*went* includes past]

**Adverbs**

Adverbs modify, classify, characterize, tell more about a verb.

She quickly *began* the tape recorder.

They immediately *ate* the food.

He *ran* fast.

Adverbs can also modify adjectives as well as other adverbs. In the first example, *green* is an adjective because it modifies the noun *house*; *dark* is an adverb because it modifies the adjective *green*. 
In the last example, *unexpectedly* is an adverb because it modifies the verb *died*; *quite* is an adverb because it modifies the adverb *unexpectedly*.

**Other parts of speech**

**Conjunctions**

Conjunctions (con- ‘with’) join words, phrases, or sentences.

the boy *and* dog       slow *but* sure       right *or* wrong

**Interjections**

Finally, there are interjections. These words do not have any particularly well-defined relationship with the rest of the sentence. In fact, when diagramming sentences the interjections are best simply ignored. However, they are not difficult to spot. In writing interjections are often separated from the rest of the sentence by the punctuation:

*Ouch!* That hurt!     *Oh s___!* I just locked my keys in the car.

As the second example suggests, interjections include expletives such as *fiddlesticks, alas, damn it, gosh*, and so on.
Chapter 1: Interjections

**Exercise 1.1: Parts of Speech.**

Label the parts of speech and draw arrows to indicate the relationships in the following sentences. Note: The words *the* and *a* are articles (art.). Answers to these exercises are found at the end of the chapter.

1. Beverly solved the difficult problem on the last test.
2. Oh, that was a confusing assignment for me.
3. The little old man barely escaped from the lion.
4. The rain in Spain falls mainly on the plain.

Answer the following question:

5. What part of speech is the word *fast*? Explain your answer.

**Exercise 1.2: Parts of Speech.**

Label the parts of speech and draw arrows to indicate the relationships in the following sentences.

1. He usually sleeps in the first row.
2. That was the very worst joke.
3. The police arrested the man in the long coat yesterday.
4. The slow moving turtle beat the fast talking rabbit.

Answer the following question:

5. What part of speech is the word *quick*? Explain your answer.
Phrasal "parts of speech"

Phrases

Phrases are units usually named after the main or head word in the phrase. Noun phrases (NP) act like large nouns, verb phrases (VP) like large verbs,\(^1\) adverbial phrases (AdvP) act like large adverbs, and adjective phrases (AP) act like large adjectives.

However, prepositional phrases—constructions composed of a preposition and a noun phrase—act neither like nouns nor like prepositions. Instead, prepositional phrases act either adjectivally or adverbially, that is, either like adjectives or adverbs.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The man} & \quad \text{with the red beard} & \quad \text{sang} & \quad \text{with gusto}.
\end{align*}
\]

NP \quad \text{adjectival PP} \quad V \quad \text{adverbial PP}

As the arrows indicate, the prepositional phrase with the red beard acts like a giant adjective describing the noun phrase the man—that is, it is an adjectival prepositional phrase but the prepositional phrase with gusto acts like a large adverb modifying the verb—that is, it is an adverbial prepositional phrase. In short, one prepositional phrase acts like an adjective, while the other acts like an adverb.

The functions of other phrases can be illustrated with a sentence taken from one of the exercises:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The waitress} & \quad \text{was pouring} & \quad \text{him} & \quad \text{a cup} & \quad \text{of coffee}.
\end{align*}
\]

NP \quad VP \quad NP \quad [NP [PP]]
(S) \quad (V) \quad (IO) \quad (DO)

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1. Note: In this text, verb phrases are not identical to what is called the predicate in traditional grammar or to what is often termed the VP in transformational grammar. If the meaning of this note is not obvious to you, you can safely ignore it.
In this sentence, the subject is a noun phrase, the verb is was pouring, the indirect object him is of course a pronoun but it is also a noun phrase (Yes, even though it is only one word long!), and the direct object is a noun phrase, but a noun phrase which has a prepositional phrase inside it.

Let's examine the phrase a cup of coffee in more detail. To begin with the whole phrase a cup of coffee is a noun phrase because the head of the phrase is the noun cup.

a cup of coffee
noun phrase

The noun phrase a cup of coffee can, of course, be broken down further into two constituents (or, parts): a cup and of coffee. If we do this, a cup is a noun phrase and of coffee is a prepositional phrase.

a cup of coffee
noun phrase prepositional phrase

When the two are joined, the noun phrase a cup is the head (or, main part) of the construction with of coffee acting as an adjective, that is, as an adjectival prepositional phrase.

**EXERCISE 1.3: TYPES OF PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES**

Underline the prepositional phrases in these sentences, and then label them as either adjectival (Adj.) or adverbial (Adv.).

1. The student in the red sweater has been sleeping for an hour.
2. With a quick leap, the cat with the brown fur caught the mouse.
3. The man in the long coat was jailed in a room with no windows.
4. The turtle, with its steady pace, beat the fast-moving rabbit.
5. The man in the front car didn't see the man in the second car.
Clauses

Clauses are quite similar to what you would probably call a sentence. For our purposes, a clause contains the basic parts found in a sentence: a subject (a noun phrase), and a predicate (a verb phrase plus what other things the particular verb type requires). Both examples are clauses.

The ink faded. Bill hit the floor.

**Independent and dependent clauses**

In the example below, the independent clause (the "main" clause) is the main clause in several obvious senses. First, the main clause is central in a meaning sense; what the dependent clause *While Herman was sleeping* does is supply information about the time of the main clause *the children were playing*. Second, the dependent clause can not stand alone. *While Herman was sleeping* is not a sentence by itself; it is 'dependent' upon a main clause. Third, the whole clause *While Herman was sleeping* acts like an adverb—a large adverb but nonetheless like an adverb. In contrast, the main clause *the children were playing* is a sentence without anything else; it is independent.

*While Herman was sleeping,* the children were playing.

= the dependent clause = the independent clause
= the subordinate clause = the main clause

The word order has nothing to do with which is the dependent clause and which is the independent clause.

*The children were playing,* while Herman was sleeping.

= the independent clause = the dependent clause

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1. If it is not clear how *While Herman was sleeping* acts like an adverb, substitute *yesterday* for *While Herman was sleeping*. Just as *yesterday* is an adverb because of its relationship to the verb of the main clause, *While Herman was sleeping* is an adverbia, because it has exactly the same relationship to the verb of the main clause. Such adverbial clauses are discussed in Chapter 10: Adverbs.
Chapter 1: Independent and dependent clauses

= the main clause = the subordinate clause

EXERCISE 1.4: DEPENDENT VERSUS INDEPENDENT CLAUSES.

Mark the dependent clauses with (D), and the independent clauses with (I).

Example: John gave me the money (I), after I twisted his arm (D).

1. When he put the cards on the table ( ), one fell out of his sleeve ( ).
2. The pilot brought the plane down safely ( ), before the passengers even knew there was a problem ( ).
3. While Sarah was sleeping ( ), her husband took money from her purse ( ).
4. By the time the police arrived ( ), it was too late ( ).
5. Whenever I drink too much ( ), my head hurts ( ).
6. Ever since Melody got out of prison ( ), she has been causing trouble ( ).
7. Albert gave up smoking ( ), because it cost too much ( ).
8. Steve makes a fuss ( ), whenever he is asked to do any work ( ).

EXERCISE 1.5: DEPENDENT VERSUS INDEPENDENT CLAUSES.

Mark the dependent clauses with (D), and the independent clauses with (I).

1. After the card fell out of his sleeve ( ), one of the other players shot him ( ).
2. Even after the pilot brought the plane down safely ( ), the passengers never knew there was a problem ( ).
3. Sarah was sleeping ( ), when her husband took money from her purse ( ).
4. Before the police arrived ( ), they hid the evidence ( ).

5. David drinks to forget ( ), although he never forgets to drink ( ).

6. If Melody got out of prison ( ), she would cause trouble ( ).

7. Alfonse will be asleep ( ) by the time we get there ( ).

8. Cheryl takes her time ( ), because she is careful ( ).

**Terms**

To check yourself, see if you can briefly describe each of the following terms and illustrate it in a phrase or sentence (underlining the relevant part).

parts of speech:

- noun
- verb
- article
- adverb
- pronoun
- adjective
- conjunction
- preposition
- interjection

phrases:

- noun phrase (NP)
- verb phrase (VP)
- adverb phrase (AdvP)
- adjective phrase (AP)
- prepositional phrase:
  - adjectival prepositional phrase
  - adverbial prepositional phrase

clauses:

- independent clause
- dependent clause
- main clause
- subordinate clause

Answers to Exercise 1.1:

1. noun verb art. adj. noun prep. art. adj. noun
2. inter. pron. verb art. adj. noun prep. pron.
Chapter 1: Terms

3. art. adj. adj. noun adv. verb prep. art. noun
4. art. noun prep. noun verb adverb prep. art. noun
5. It depends upon how it is used.

Answers to Exercise 1.2:

1. prn. adverb verb prep. art. adj. noun
2. prn. verb art. adverb adj. noun
3. art. noun verb art. noun prep. art. adj. noun adverb
4. art. adverb adj. noun verb art. adverb adj. noun
5. It depends upon how it is used.

Answers to Exercise 1.3:

1. The student in the red sweater has been sleeping for an hour.
   adjectival adverbial
2. With a quick leap, the cat with the brown fur caught the mouse.
   adverbial adjectival
3. The man in the long coat was jailed in a room with no windows.
   adjectival adverbial adjectival
4. The turtle, with its steady pace, beat the fast-moving rabbit.
   adverbial
5. The man in the front car didn't see the man in the second car.
   adjectival adjectival

Answers to Exercise 1.4:


Answers to Exercise 1.5: