# THE FUNCTIONAL PATS OF SPEECH

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## ANNOTATION

This article gives information about parts of speech and their functional devices. In this article I distinguish nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs (the major parts of speech), and pronouns, wh-words, articles, auxiliary verbs, prepositions, intensifiers, conjunctions, and particles (the minor parts of speech.

**Key words:** content words, common, proper noun

**The major parts of speech: nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs**

The major parts of speech contribute the major "content" to a message, and hence are sometimes called content words, as opposed to other parts of speech known as function or structure words. The content words are the ones that we see in newspaper headlines where space is at a premium and they are the words we tend to keep in text messaging where costs per word can be high. However, in most types of discourse, function words significantly outnumber content words. We begin our discussion of each part of speech by examining its traditional definition, which is generally either semantic or functional. We evaluate the traditional treatment and suggest more effective means of classifying the word type by referring to its formal characteristics. These include a word's potential inflectional morphology, its actual derivational morphology, and the positions in phrases and clauses in which it may occur. For example, the word kingdom is a noun because it can be inflected for plural (kingdoms); it ends in the noun creating suffix -dom; and it can occur after the (the kingdom). We also examine some of the major functions of each part of speech. Each section concludes with a discussion of subclasses of the larger class.

**Nouns**

Traditionally, a noun is defined as a word that names "a person, place, thing, or idea" (Weaver 1996: 252). This defines the noun category according to what its

members are assumed to typically denote, so it is a meaning-based or semantic definition. (Occasionally this definition gets abbreviated to "a noun is a person, place, or thing," which makes no sense at all!) By Weaver's definition, Madonna, Pittsburgh, and Godzilla are all nouns, which is correct, so the definition provides a useful start. However, if we apply it precisely (and to be worth keeping, definitions should be precisely applicable), then the word desk is not a noun because it denotes, not a thing, but a whole class of things. Most nouns are like desk in this regard—peacock denotes not a peacock but all the peacocks living now, as well as all those that existed before, all those that will ever exist, and all the peacocks that we merely imagine. If we want to refer to one peacock, we have to add a modifier such as a—a peacock, cf. a desk, a book, a hard drive. We might revise our definition to take such nouns into account— "nouns name classes of persons, places, things, and ideas." But now we require Pittsburgh to refer not to one 149 The Major Parts of Speech Pittsburgh, but to a whole set of them, which doesn't seem quite right. So, there is something right about saying that nouns name classes of things, but there also seem to be nouns that name individual things. The nouns that name classes of things are common nouns; the nouns (and other types of expression) that name individual things are proper nouns: printer is a common noun; Denver is a proper noun. In English, we conventionally capitalize the initial letter of proper nouns. A common noun can be turned into a proper noun, in which case it should be capitalized; for instance, we have a friend whose dog's name is Dog. Similarly, we can distinguish god (of which there may be many) from God (which is presumed to be unique—at least in some contexts).

**Verbs**

Verbs can be subdivided into main and auxiliary verbs. We will treat the various types of auxiliaries, such as may, might, and should, in our chapter on Minor Parts of Speech and will concentrate here on main verbs, i.e., those which may occur alone in a clause. Traditional grammars define verbs semantically, e.g., as words that represent activities (grow, kiss, freeze, run) and states of being (be, have, resemble). States are unchanging situations while activities are situations in which change occurs. (Activity verbs are also called dynamic verbs, though the terminology is far from consistent.) State verbs typically have to do with existence and static relationships. Just as nouns denote classes of entities and stuff, verbs denote classes of states and activities. As

with most meaning-based definitions, this one is a tad simplistic. For instance, nouns derived from verbs through zero derivation (e.g., strike, kick, throw) maintain their sense of action, as nouns derived from verbs by derivational affixing do (e.g., action). Likewise, verbs derived from nouns—e.g., pot, as in to pot plants—may appear to retain some of the entity-naming sense they had as nouns. In addition, students occasionally classify certain adjectives as verbs, especially those adjectives that suggest activity (e.g., vigorous, playful, cruel), and we've had a student who classified the preposition as as a verb because it denoted a relationship, as verbs often do. Additionally, adjectives and other types of expressions may name states, cf. to sleep and asleep. Nonetheless the semantic division of verbs is a good place to start our discussion, though we'll refine the activity/state division in the exercises in this section.

### Adverbs

The traditional definition of adverb is "a word used to modify a verb, an adjective, or another adverb." This definition is clearly functional and actually represents the typical functions of adverbs (or at least, adverb phrases) fairly well, e.g., Run quickly, extremely adroit, remarkably cleverly.

### Adjectives

While traditional grammars usually define nouns and verbs semantically, they Delahunty and Garvey 172 often shift to functional criteria to characterize adjectives. A typical definition of adjective is "a word that modifies a noun or pronoun." (Occasionally you will see adjectives defined as "words that describe nouns," which makes no more sense than saying that "nouns are persons, places, and things." If adjectives describe anything, it is whatever the nouns they modify denote.) While we might criticize the traditional definition for changing from meaning to function, it is more appropriate to determine whether it leads to reasonably successful identification of adjectives. The definition holds good in simple cases, such as old shoes, offensive remark, and matters inconsequential, though in the last case, students may have trouble recognizing the second word, rather than the first, as an adjective. But in each case, the adjective does modify a noun, which serves as the head of the phrase. However, words that are clearly not adjectives may modify nouns; for instance, stone in stone wall is, by formal criteria, a noun and not an adjective (cf. stones and stone's). Likewise, the in

the wall shows none of the formal characteristics of adjectives, though it clearly modifies the noun, wall. In a nutshell, the fact that a word modifies a noun is not a sufficient reason to call it an adjective.

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