Understanding the Eight Parts of Speech

Lecture notes · English Grammar Foundations · Module 1: Words and sentences

Learning objectives

O1	Name the eight parts of speech and say what job each one does.
O2	Find the parts of speech in real sentences, using simple questions.
O3	Explain how one word can change its job, and sometimes its pronunciation.
O4	Avoid the most common mistakes with parts of speech.

Prerequisites: Able to read simple English sentences.

Contents: 1. What a part of speech is · 2. Nouns and pronouns · 3. Verbs · 4. Adjectives and adverbs · 5. Prepositions, conjunctions and interjections · 6. One word, several jobs · Worked examples · Summary · References

1. What a part of speech is

A part of speech (also called a word class) is the job a word does in a particular sentence. The same word can do different jobs in different sentences, so always look at the sentence, not the word alone.

Traditional English grammar names eight jobs: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction and interjection. Knowing them helps you understand sentence structure, use a dictionary well, and correct your own writing.

2. Nouns and pronouns

A noun names a person, place, thing or idea: teacher, Lagos, bicycle, honesty. Test: can you put the, a or my in front of it? (the bicycle, my honesty).

Proper nouns name particular people, places and organisations and begin with a capital letter: Maria, India, the United Nations. Common nouns are general: city, river, company.

Countable nouns have plurals (one apple, two apples); uncountable nouns usually do not (water, advice, information). This affects which words go with them: many apples, much water.

A pronoun replaces a noun so we do not repeat it: I, you, he, she, it, we, they, me, him, her, us, them; possessives such as mine and yours; and words such as someone, nobody, everything, who, which, this.

A pronoun must point clearly to its noun. 'Ana told Beth that she had won' is unclear: who won? Rewrite: 'Ana told Beth, "You have won."'

3. Verbs

A verb shows an action (run, write, decide) or a state (be, seem, know, belong). Test: can you change its time? walk / walked / will walk.

Auxiliary (helping) verbs such as be, have, do, and modal verbs such as can, must, should, will, work with a main verb: She has finished. You should rest.

Every complete sentence needs at least one verb. 'The red bus.' is not a sentence; 'The red bus stopped.' is.

4. Adjectives and adverbs

An adjective describes a noun or pronoun: a quiet street; the soup is hot. Test questions: what kind? which one? how many?

An adverb describes a verb, an adjective or another adverb: She spoke quietly. It was very hot. He finished surprisingly quickly. Test questions: how? when? where? how often? to what degree?

Many adverbs end in -ly, but not all (fast, often, very, here, soon), and some -ly words are adjectives (friendly, lovely, lonely). Always check the job: 'a friendly dog' (adjective describing dog).

5. Prepositions, conjunctions and interjections

A preposition links a noun or pronoun to the rest of the sentence, often showing place, time or direction: in, on, under, after, during, to, with, for. It is followed by its object: under the table, after lunch.

A conjunction joins words, phrases or clauses. Coordinating conjunctions join equal parts: and, but, or, so, yet, for, nor. Subordinating conjunctions introduce a dependent clause: because, although, when, if, while, unless.

An interjection expresses a sudden feeling or reaction and stands apart from the grammar of the sentence: Wow! Oh no! Ouch! Hey, wait. It is common in speech and informal writing, rare in formal writing.

6. One word, several jobs

Many English words change class without changing form. Light: 'Turn on the light' (noun), 'Light the candle' (verb), 'a light bag' (adjective). Like: 'I like tea' (verb), 'She sings like a bird' (preposition).

Some two-syllable words change stress when they change job: a REcord (noun) / to reCORD (verb); a PREsent / to preSENT; an OBject / to obJECT; a PROgress / to proGRESS. Nouns usually stress the first syllable, verbs the second.

The method is always the same: find the word's job in this sentence by asking the test questions.

Determiners and articles

Words such as the, a, an, this, these, my, some, every and three come before a noun and tell us which one or how many. Traditional grammar treats many of them as adjectives (or pronouns); modern grammar puts them in their own class, determiners.

Use a before a consonant sound and an before a vowel sound: a university (you-), an hour (silent h).

Phrasal verbs

A verb plus a small word can form one meaning: give up (stop), look after (care for), run out (have none left). The small word belongs to the verb here and is often called a particle.

Compare: 'He looked up the word' (phrasal verb: searched for) and 'He looked up the chimney' (preposition: direction).

A step-by-step method for analysing any sentence

1. Find the verb(s): what happens or what is? 2. Find who or what does it: usually a noun or pronoun. 3. Find words that describe nouns (adjectives) and words that describe verbs, adjectives or adverbs (adverbs). 4. Find linking words: prepositions (with their objects) and conjunctions (joining clauses). 5. Anything that stands alone as an exclamation is an interjection.

Example: 'Oh, the tired players walked slowly to the bus because it was late.' Oh (interjection), the (determiner/article), tired (adjective), players (noun), walked (verb), slowly (adverb), to (preposition), the (article), bus (noun), because (conjunction), it (pronoun), was (verb), late (adjective).

Worked examples

Worked example 1: labelling every word

Label each word in: 'Wow, Sam quickly ran to school, and he bought fresh bread.'

Step 1. Wow: interjection (a sudden reaction, separate from the grammar).

Step 2. Sam: proper noun (names a person). quickly: adverb (how did he run?).

Step 3. ran: verb (action; past of run). to: preposition (links 'school' to the action). school: noun.

Step 4. and: coordinating conjunction (joins two clauses). he: pronoun (stands for Sam). bought: verb (past of buy).

Step 5. fresh: adjective (what kind of bread?). bread: noun.

Worked example 2: one word, three jobs

Identify the job of 'light' in each sentence: (a) The light is broken. (b) Please light the fire. (c) This box is light.

Step 1. (a) 'The light': the article 'the' fits in front and it names a thing, so it is a noun.

Step 2. (b) 'Please light the fire': it is the action; you can change its time (lit), so it is a verb.

Step 3. (c) 'is light': it describes the box (what kind?), so it is an adjective.

Worked example 3: correcting adjective/adverb mistakes

Correct the sentence: 'She sings beautiful and she did good in the exam.'

Step 1. 'sings' is a verb; a word describing how she sings must be an adverb: beautifully.

Step 2. 'did' is a verb; 'good' is an adjective, so use the adverb 'well'.

Step 3. Corrected: 'She sings beautifully, and she did well in the exam.'

Step 4. Note: 'She is good' is correct, because 'good' describes 'she' (a pronoun) after the linking verb 'is'.

Summary

- A part of speech is a word's job in a particular sentence; the same word can do different jobs.
- Nouns name; pronouns replace nouns; verbs show actions or states.
- Adjectives describe nouns; adverbs describe verbs, adjectives and other adverbs.

• Prepositions link nouns to the sentence; conjunctions join words and clauses; interjections express feeling.

• Use the test questions (the/a/my? can the time change? what kind? how?) instead of guessing from the word's shape.

References

References: KN-GEN-ENG-C01-M01-T01-L01
Britannica, "Part of speech" (traditional eight classes; modern grammars use 'word classes' and may add determiners); Government of Canada Language Portal, HyperGrammar 2, "The parts of speech" (a part of speech describes how a word is used; the same word can be a noun in one sentence and a verb in another). Pronunciation of stress-shift pairs follows standard
All references were consulted for accuracy; no text or figures from them are reproduced in the video. Verify links before publication.
All example sentences are original. Traditional grammar names eight parts of speech; modern grammars use the term word classes and often add determiners.