

Parts of Speech

Certain types of words fall into categories called **parts of speech** which share common behaviours such as affixes or word orders. For instance, only nouns can take the derivational suffix *-ment* and only verbs can take inflection {present tense}. Prepositions can't take inflectional suffixes and they can only go before nouns, not after them. In general, certain parts of speech are either form-class words or structure-class words. When we identify the part of speech of a word by its morphological make up (base and/or affixes), we are identifying it by its **form**. When we identify the part of speech by its relation to other words, we are identifying it by its **function**. Hence, to use the examples just mentioned, we can prove that the word *government* is a noun both because it contains the suffix *-ment*, which is normally associated with nouns and because it occurs in the sequence *the government*, rather than the other way around.

For every part of speech there are both “formal” test (that is tests of form) and “functional tests” that can be used to identify whether or not a word belongs to that particular part of speech. Unfortunately, not all tests work for all words. For instance, *dog* is a noun, but you cannot identify it as such by looking at its derivational affixes since it doesn't have any. Other times, the same test will reveal different parts of speech. For instance, the inflection {-er comparative} primarily occurs with adjectives, but it also occurs with adverbs. The suffix {-ly} can also occur on adjectives and adverbs. So is a word like *friendlier* an adjective or an adverb?

One way to solve this sort of problem is to accept the possibility of **prototypical and peripheral cases**. A word which passes *all* the tests for a noun is a prototypical noun and a word which passes only most of the tests is a peripheral noun. A word which passes a minority of the tests probably should not be classified as a noun. Many dictionaries list the parts of speech of words, and their editors have applied these tests. Sometimes dictionaries will list two parts of speech for a single word (*talk*, for instance, will be listed as both a noun and verb). In such cases, the word very often can undergo something called **functional shift**. This is when a word changes the part of speech it functions as, depending upon its place in the sentence. For instance, *I gave a talk yesterday* has a noun, but *I talk in a loud voice* has a verb. It is useful to know how to identify the part of speech of a word in isolation, since this helps with identifying their functions. But to analyse the grammar of a sentence it is essential to be able to identify the part of speech a word is functioning as in that sentence.

Tests for Nouns

Formal tests for nouns are of two types: (a) whether the word has a derivational morpheme associated with nouns and (b) whether the word can take inflectional morphemes associated with nouns. Words like *government* have the derivational suffix *-ment*, which is also found on other nouns like *abatement*, *statement*, etc. To identify a derivational morpheme as associated with nouns you need to be able to think of a number of other nouns which have with same morpheme. Some students have trouble doing this, as it requires them to know in advance that the words they think of are nouns. You can go to the dictionary to double check this, but, in the end, you need to categorise these morphemes in your memory in order for this test to be consistently effective.

Most nouns can take the two types of inflections associated with nouns: {-s pl} and {-s poss}. For instance, the word *government* can become *governments* or *government's*. If you are faced

with a word like *seasoning*, try adding these inflections. If you can, the word passes the noun test. However, not all nouns will pass this test. For instance, the word *electricity* cannot generally be made plural. It belongs to a subclass of nouns that we think of as not being countable. Nouns belonging to this subclass are called **noncount nouns** or **mass nouns**. Some nouns can be both **count nouns** and noncount nouns depending upon the context. For instance, the word *bread* appears to be a count noun since it can be pluralised (*A lot of breads taste like sponges*). But it can also function as a noncount noun in *They brought a lot of bread to the picnic*.

Functional tests for nouns involve testing where the word can occur in a sentence. Nouns can generally occur as grammatical unit with the articles *a/an* or *the*. So if you can say *a government* or *the government*, you may well have a noun. The major exception is the subclass of nouns called **proper nouns**. Proper nouns are the names of specific places, persons, or events (like *Norway*, *John*, or *Christmas*). Most proper nouns cannot be preceded by an article (or be pluralised), although some can: *the Alps*, *the Hundred Years War*, *the Norway of a hundred years ago*, etc. Nouns that are not proper nouns are called **common nouns**. Proper nouns are capitalised in English, but this is merely convention. In German, all nouns, including common nouns, are capitalised.

Nouns can also be described by adjectives, so another technique is to insert the word being tested into a sentence where an adjective describes a noun. Your test sentence is called a **frame sentence**. Here is an example of a frame sentence for nouns:

(The)_____ seem(s) all right.

For proper nouns and some abstract nouns like *diligence*, you will need to omit the “The”, which is why it is in parentheses. Likewise, plural nouns will need the verb *seem*, rather than *seems*. You may also find that the adjective *all right* does not make sense because the meaning of the word you are testing cannot be described as “all right”. If you can substitute another adjective that makes more sense, the word still passes the noun test.

Tests for Verbs

Formal tests for verbs are similar to those for nouns. Some derivational morphemes occur only on verbs, such as *-ize*. Also, if the word being tested can take one of the inflections associated with verbs (*{-s present tense}*, *{-ed past tense}*, *{-ing present participle}*, *{-d past participle}*), chances are that you have a verb.

There are three functional tests that you can use to identify verbs. First, you can try making the word into a command. For instance, the word *work* can be made into the command *Work hard!* Verbs can also be made negative using the word *not* (often in combination with *do*): *They do not work hard*. Finally, you can use a frame sentence that places the word in a position where verbs commonly occur. Because there are multiple subclasses of verbs, two frame sentences—both of which must be tried—are needed to test a potential verb:

They must _____ (it).
They must _____ good.

The different verb subclasses will be addressed later in the course.

Tests for Adjectives

Adjectives perform a function called modification; that is, they are **modifiers** of other parts of speech. For instance, the noun *dog* encompasses dogs of many different types, and we can be more specific about the type of dog by modifying it with an adjective: *big dog*, *brown dog*, *yappy dog*, etc.

Formal tests for adjectives consist of identifying derivational morphemes associated with adjectives (e.g. *-able*, *-ish*, *-y*, etc.) and whether the word can take the inflections associated with adjectives ({-er comparative} and {-est superlative}).

Some adjectives (e.g. *profitable*) cannot take inflections but can still be treated as comparative or superlative by preceding them with *more* or *most*. If a word fails the formal test of taking an adjectival inflection, it may pass this functional test of word order. Another functional test is that adjectives can be preceded by structure class words called **qualifiers** or **intensifiers**: words like *very*, *rather*, *quite*, etc. Finally, a frame sentence may be used. For adjectives, the word being tested must be insertable into both blanks.

The _____ man is very _____.

Tests for Adverbs

Whereas adjectives are modifiers of nouns, adverbs are modifiers of verbs. Formal tests for adverbs include the presence of derivational morphemes associated with adverbs (e.g. {-ly}, *-wise*, *-ward*) and whether or not the word being tested can take the comparative or superlative inflections. Note that these inflections are normally associated with adjectives, and the fact that adverbs can also take them shows how they, like adjectives, are modifiers.

As with adjectives, some adverbs (like *suddenly*) can be made comparative or superlative using *more* or *most*. If the word fails the formal test using inflections, try the functional test using *more* or *most*. Another functional test is that adverbs can take qualifiers or intensifiers. One way in which adverbs differ from adjectives, is that they can often be moved within a sentence:

The door opened suddenly.
The door suddenly opened.
Suddenly, the door opened.

You can also use a frame sentence like:

The man told his story _____.
or
The woman walked her dog _____.

Form and Function

It is valuable to be able to identify the part of speech of a word in isolation, but more important to be able to identify its function in a sentence. For instance, if you examine the word *run*, you

will find that it passes the tests for both nouns and verbs. Most of the time, you will not be faced with having to decide whether the word in isolation is a noun or a verb. More often, you will have a sentence, and you will have to decide how the word function in that particular sentence. Compare the following sentences:

He had two *runs* yesterday.
This car *runs* well.

The word *runs* functions as a noun in the first sentence and as a verb in the second. Words functioning as nouns are said to have **nominal** function, words functioning as verbs are said to have **verbal** function, words functioning as adjectives are said to have **adjectival** function, and words functioning as adverbs are said to have **adverbial** function.

Many words that pass the formal tests for one part of speech can function as another. For instance, the word *home* passes the formal tests for a noun (*homes, the home's upkeep*), but it can function adverbially (*I'm going home*). It can also function adjectivally (*home furnishings*). In such cases, the word is said to undergo **functional shift**. The best way to identify the function of a word is to substitute it with a prototypical word, that is, a word which you know already is a noun, verb, adjective, etc. For instance, if you know that the word *happily* is an adverb, you can substitute it in the sentence *I'm going home* to get *I'm going happily*. The sentence works, so *home* is functioning adverbially in the sentence here. If you know that *old* is an adjective, you can substitute it for *home* in *home furnishings*. The result, *old furnishings*, suggests that *home* is functioning adjectivally.

There are many different kinds of functional shift, but one common one is the use of the past participle form of a verb with a nominal function. Compare the following sentences:

I am going home now.
Going home early is a luxury.

In the first sentence, the word *going* is functioning verbally; in the second it is functioning nominally. Past participle forms of verbs which function nominally are called **gerunds**.