

Parts of Speech

Skills Team, University of Hull

Language comes **before** grammar, which is only an attempt to describe a language. Knowing the grammar of a language does not mean you can speak or write it fluently, but it helps. Knowing the names for the various elements which make up language (the terminology) and the functions they perform (the parts of speech) also helps us talk about it so we present these here. If you wish to skip the following preamble and go straight to the table of the main parts of speech, then scroll down to page 3; otherwise, read on.

All words in a language should have a function or a purpose. The exception to this is much of the spoken language we use where some words are often included which have neither meaning nor function other than to make the utterance longer. Some examples are:

To miss (out on)

To head (up) a team

To meet (up with)

(up) until

To listen (up)

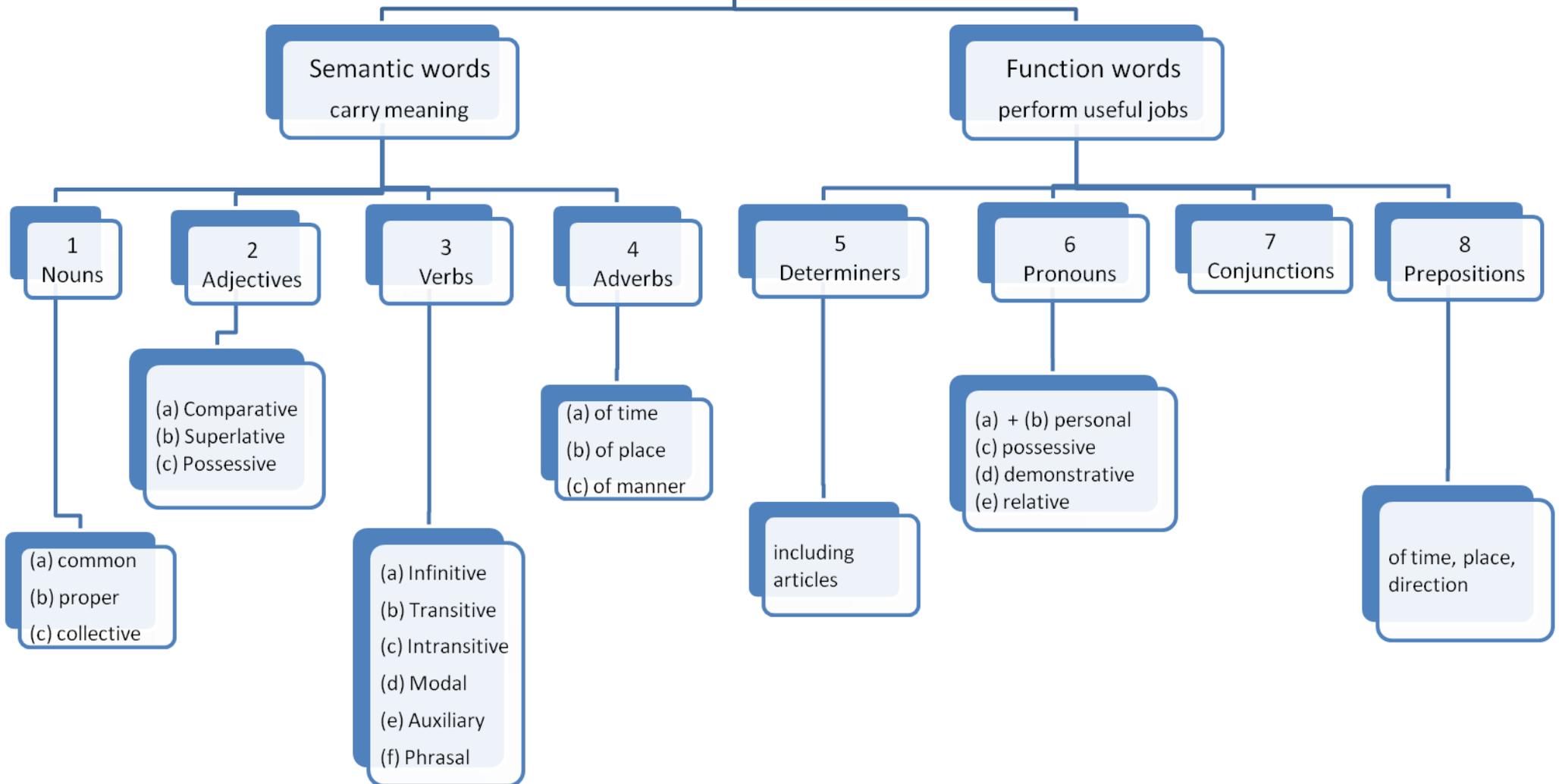
To start (off)

and many, many more.

As a student in higher education, therefore, your written work will **not** contain such superfluous vocabulary; it will be more 'academic'. For more detail on what this means, see the Skills Guide on 'Academic Writing Style' on the web at <http://libguides.hull.ac.uk/skills>

So what are the various functions of words in formal written and spoken sentences? These can be summarised very well by identifying them as 'parts of speech'. The diagram below sets them out, followed by a table giving in each case a definition and the function of each one, along with examples, and a second table for other grammatical concepts.

Parts of Speech



Occasionally, words can 'become' other parts of speech, according to the function they perform in a particular sentence. There are no 'rules' about this.

Part of speech	Function or purpose	Example
1 Nouns	To name or label things	
(a) Common	To name or label things, places, people, animals, ideas, concepts, groups of things etc.	Dog, elephant, hospital, cupboard, girl, sunlight, idealism The dog buries the bone .
(b) Proper	To name or label a specific item (usually one of a kind). Starts with a capital letter no matter where it occurs in a sentence.	Mary, John, Wednesday, Birmingham, University of Hull. Shall we go and visit Carolyn in Scarborough on Tuesday ?
(c) Collective	To name or label a group of people or a collection of things (more than one).	Committee, team, class, group, collection, set. (One can often treat the collective noun as singular or plural). Wigan has (or have) been promoted. The government was (or were) at fault.
2 Adjectives	To say more about (qualify) a noun or nouns.	Small, square, blue, old, beautiful, broken, dangerous, terrible. It is a beautiful day. The brown dog wagged its short tail. The tall man won the race.
(a) Comparative	To compare two things or people.	Quicker, more expensive, easier. I am taller than Jim. The vase is more expensive than the teapot. Porto is the better team.

(b) Superlative	To compare more than two things or people.	Tallest, fastest, most interesting, best. Peter is the tallest in the group. I am the eldest of five sisters.
(c) Possessive	An adjective which shows possession – who ‘owns’ what – and which is always followed by a noun or nouns	My; your; his; her; its; our; their. This is my desk. That’s our house.
(d) Demonstrative	An adjective which indicates the relative position of something or someone.	This, that, these, those. This car has better brakes than that one.
3 Verbs	To describe an action, an event or a state of affairs. See Tense below.	
(a) Infinitive	The most basic form of the verb	To be or not to be , that is the question... To sleep , perchance to dream .
(b) Transitive	Transitive verbs have direct objects.	I like the film (present tense). The dog catches the ball (present tense). She sang in the choir (past tense). Philip will post the letter tomorrow (future tense). He will see his friends next week (future tense).
(c) Intransitive	Ditto but intransitive verbs only take indirect objects. Some verbs can be both transitive and intransitive.	Mike thought about Sue (past tense). She is going for a walk (present tense). (You can’t think a Sue or go a walk! The objects - Sue and walk - need prepositions to connect them to their respective verbs. They are therefore indirect objects of their transitive verbs.)

(d) Modal	A verb or part of a verb which indicates the attitude of the speaker or writer.	If I were you, I would not do that. May I come in?
(e) Auxiliary	A type of verb which helps to form the complete verbal expression. Often used to form tenses.	He might arrive tomorrow. They will be very happy about that. We have been duped.
(f) Phrasal	A verbal construction having a verb and a particle (often a preposition).	To climb up. He found out. You went away.
4 Adverbs	To describe the way an action is carried out or how someone does something.	Slowly, carefully, often, never, high, shyly, loudly.
(a) Time	When	I often go to the cinema. Later , the snow stopped.
(b) Place	Where.	The arrow flew upwards and straight .
(c) Manner	To say more about (qualify) a verb.	Later on would be an adverbial phrase. The postman runs quickly when he sees the dog. The driver sounded the horn angrily .
5 Determiners	An item that occurs before a noun (or noun phrase) to express e.g. number or quantity.	The, some, each, every, numerals. Three players were booked. Some fans were unhappy. Each was fined a week's wages.

(a) Definite (the)	Used with a noun to define a particular thing or person.	The describes a particular thing. This is the car I would like (a specific car).
(b) Indefinite (a, an, some)	Used with a noun to define any, unspecified thing or person .	A or an describe any thing. I would like a car (any car).
6 Pronouns	To replace a noun (see above) thus avoiding repetition.	
(a) Personal Subject (see next table)	These stand for nouns (or noun phrases) which are the subject (initiate or perform) an action.	I, you, he, she, it, we, they. When George got up he had his breakfast. She phoned to cancel the appointment.
(b) Personal Object (see next table)	To replace a noun (see above) that is an object of a verb.	Me, you, him, her, it, us, them. We met them when we were on holiday.
(c) Possessive	To replace a noun (see above) to show ownership.	Mine, yours, his, hers, ours, theirs. This handbag is mine . Yours is the correct answer.
(d) Demonstrative	To demonstrate (indicate) something or someone, as if pointing.	This, that, these, those. This is more expensive than that .

(e) Relative	A pronoun which relates what precedes to what follows.	Which, that, who, whom, when, where He met him in the office where they last met. God helps those who help themselves. Therefore, enquire not for whom the bell tolls.
7 Conjunctions	To join two sentences, two phrases or two words.	And, because, or, but, although, whereas, if, as, for, yet, that, when, since, while, until, though, unless, whether. Men and women. I was late because I missed the bus. The wind was cold although it was May.
8 Prepositions	To link a noun (see above) to other words to give a sense of time, place, direction etc.	In, at, on, from, to, until, since, for, before, after, during, by, with, without, about, above, of. I will see you on Tuesday. The purse is under the table. Look at those children. I have been waiting since yesterday.

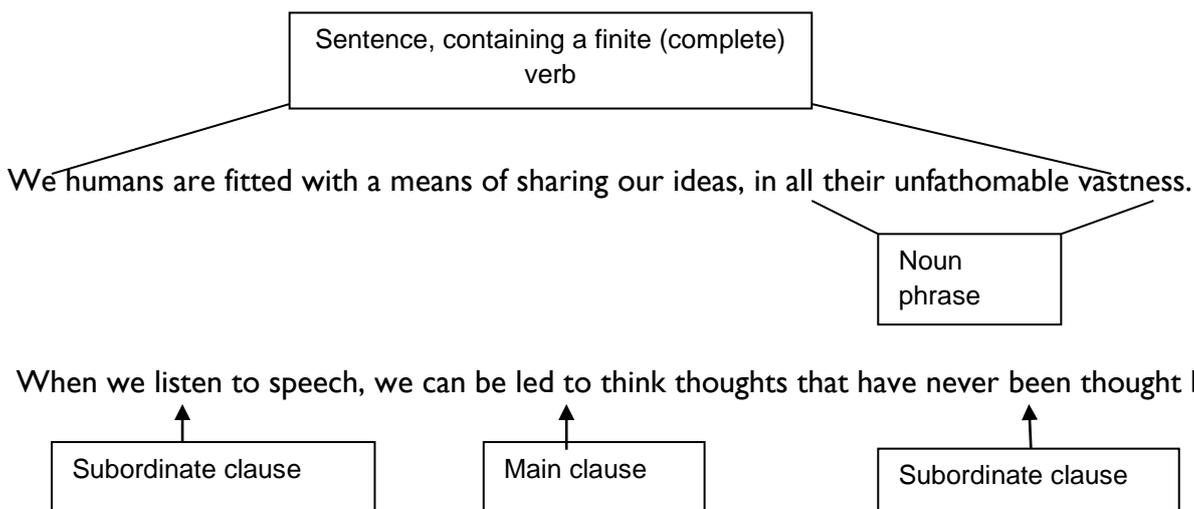
Short descriptions of some other key concepts in language:

Concept	Description	Example
Sentence	‘The largest unit [of language] to which syntactic rules apply’. ¹ A meaningful sequence of words, usually containing at least one complete verb and ending with a full stop or semi-colon.	The best way out of this dilemma is to seek advice.
Clause: main & subordinate	A meaningful sequence of words containing a complete verb and forming part of a sentence. A main clause is the essential part of a sentence (normal type above right); a subordinate clause offers information additional to the main clause (in italics above right).	He contributed to charity although he had very little income Verbs are shown in bold .
Phrase	A meaningful sequence of words not containing a complete (finite) verb but making a grammatical unit.	Too many. Formerly known as the DfES.
Tense	Time. The way in which time is expressed by the verb. There are many past tenses in English, two present tenses and one future tense.	Past: e.g. I went; I was going; I used to go Present: I am going; I go. Future: I shall go.
Subject	The person or thing which performs or initiates an action.	Dave gave <u>a present</u> to <i>John</i> .
Direct object	The person or thing to or upon whom an action is performed.	
Indirect object	The person or thing who/which is a secondary object (in some way one stage removed from the object of the action).	

¹ Crystal D. (1997) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* Cambridge : C.U.P. p. 94

You are also referred to the Skills Guide *Sentences and Paragraphs* at <http://libguides.hull.ac.uk/skills>

The boxes below show how each sentence is constructed.



Recommended reading:

Arcott, D. (n.d.) *Good English: the witty, in-a-nutshell, language guide*. Lewes, Sussex : Pomegranate Press. (Highly recommended. The first section, *Nuts and bolts*, page 3, is a brief summary of the main parts of speech.)

For a complete summary of all grammatical categories of language, the reader is referred to Crystal, D. (1987) *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language* Cambridge : CUP p. 95

By Phil Farrar and Peter Wilson.

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request – email skills@hull.ac.uk