Word Classes

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# Words

## Definition

Working definition is ‘minimal standalone symbolic unit’

1. Symbolic = arbitrary relationship between form and function (as described by the linguistic Charles Sanders Pierce 1839 - 194)
2. Standalone = make sense in isolation, e.g.
3. A: What was he doing? B: Working
4. B: How would you describe the experience? B: Unbelievable
5. Shark!!!!!!!!
6. Swim!!!!!!!!!
7. Minimal = cannot be divided into smaller standalone units
8. Inactive -> \*One sip of coffee and Charles changes from **in-** to **hyper-active**.
9. Underconfident -> ?After eight pints, Angela changes from **under-** to **over-confident**.
10. Walk out -> She **walked through** the door and **out** of my life.
11. Blackbird (species) -> \*She saw a **black** and a **white bird** in the tree

This definition is not perfect, e.g. some items classified as words cannot stand alone, e.g. *the* dog, and some words are not purely symbolic, e.g. *buzz*, *whisper*.

# Word classes

Words belong to word classes / syntactic categories

The word class determines how we put words together to make sentences

## Semantic definitions - why the don’t work very well

Typical examples:

A verb is a DOING word An adjective is a DESCRIBING word

But are the following adjectives or verbs?

1. The *raging* river tore through the valley
2. That film really *sucks*

These examples demonstrate that semantic/functional definitions of words fall short

## 3 ways to define word classes

1. Meaning test (test), e.g. a verb is a ‘doing’ word.
2. “Form” test, e.g. we can make a verb progressive by adding *-ing*
3. Position test, e.g. verbs come after subjects and before objects, e.g. *she* **ate** *the fish*, *she* **likes** *cheese*.

### So which test?

The positional test is the most reliable, e.g.

1. The *raging* river tore through the valley: *raging* comes before a noun. It is an adjective
2. That film really *sucks*: comes after the subject *film*. It is a verb.

## Let’s meet the word classes!

### Categorization of word classes

1. Open versus closed class. Open class words permit new members, while closed class words don’t. NB all content words are open, and all function words are closed.
   1. Open = Nouns, Verbs, Adjectives, Adverbs
   2. Closed = Determiners, Prepositions. NB we also use the terms “Content” words to refer to open class words, and “Function” words to refer to closed class words.
2. What the words do in the sentence?
   1. Referring words = Nouns, Pronouns
   2. Modifying words = Adjectives and Adverbs
3. Where do they appear in the sentence?
   1. The verb complex tends to contain auxiliary verbs and adverbs in addition to the verb itself
   2. The Noun Phrase tends to contain determiners and adjectives in addition to the noun itself
   3. Prepositions are used before the Noun Phrase.
4. Super- and sub-types
   1. Types of modifying words: adjectives and adverbs
   2. Types of referring words (nominals): Nouns and Pronouns

## Word classes and language impairment

Children with language impairments

* Tend to miss out function words
* Have difficulties understanding prepositions (when used to express location), e.g. *on*, *in*
* Have reduced verb diversity
* Sometimes omit arguments of the verb, e.g. ‘She put the books’

# 5 minutes exercise

What’s unusual about the following sentence: “That film was absobloodylutely brilliant!”?

A student says ‘I am going to a lection’. What does ‘lection’ mean, and how has this error arisen?