

**B1 WORD CLASSES****B1.1 Classifying words**

When we begin to study something unknown, one of the ways that we try to make sense of it is by grouping or classifying the different phenomena that we encounter. The same was true when people first started thinking about and describing languages: they looked at the basic units – the words – and tried to find ways of putting them into groups or classes. Indeed, in the past this approach was almost the only one used in describing grammar, and it is still important, though we need to supplement it with other approaches.

The eight original classes were derived from the study of Latin and Greek and were traditionally called 'parts of speech'. They were:

- noun, adjective, verb, adverb, pronoun, conjunction, preposition, interjection

This list has been adjusted slightly for English (see below) and nowadays a more accurate cover term, 'word classes', is used.

**B1.2 Open and closed word classes**

This refers to an important distinction between types of word class. Open word classes are those that are open to new members; closed classes are not. For example, it is relatively easy to make a new noun to describe some invention or new behaviour, for example *chocoholic*, but the same is not true of pronouns. Here is a list of the two types, as identified for modern English:

- open: noun, adjective, adverb, (main) verb
- closed: pronoun, determiner, preposition, auxiliary, conjunction

The division into main verb and auxiliary (verb) is made precisely because of this open/closed distinction.

There are other differences between open and closed classes. Words in open classes tend to be longer and less frequent than those in closed word classes; they also supply more of the meaning or **content** in language. Closed words classes carry less meaning and often supply the **function** words that are mentioned by Swan in the reading in B1. For example, when we say *the capture of the murderer*, the word *of* does not have any content meaning; it merely shows that the following noun, *murderer*, can be considered the object of *capture*.

It is not entirely true to say that the closed classes do not admit new members; for example *you guys* could be added to the class of pronouns (as an informal plural version of *you* – see B2). But the process is much slower.

### B1.3 Formal and notional approaches to defining word classes

In the A sections there are two ways used to define word classes and to establish what class a word belongs to. The first relies on the meaning of the word and is sometimes called 'notional'. For example, if we say that a noun is the name of a person, place or thing, this is a notional definition; it tries to cover the meanings of nouns. The problem is that it does not do the job fully. What about nouns such as *laughter*, *statement* or *hatred*? We would have to extend the definition by adding notions such as ideas, feelings, actions etc. until it becomes useless. (And wait: aren't actions to do with verbs?)

The point is, when we identify the word class of a word we do it on the basis of its grammar, not its meaning. In other words, we use a formal definition. For example, if I say to you *I can see you've been durling lately*, you know that *durling* is a verb because of its formal characteristics – the facts that it has the ending *-ing* and comes after *-ve been*.

The table below shows the main word classes of English and their notional and formal characteristics in the order they appear in this book. The formal features are divided into morphological (i.e. inflections) and structural (the words they go with). It will be noted that closed word classes (apart from primary auxiliaries) do not have inflections.

Table B1.3.1 The word classes of English

Word Class (section where it is discussed)	open/ closed	traditional or notional 'definition'	examples	morphological features	structural features
Nouns (A2)	open	words used for the name of a person, place or thing	<i>man, house, height, Paris</i>	– plural with <i>-s</i> – genitive (apostrophe <i>-s</i> )	– the head of a noun phrase – subject, object or predicative of verbs
Pronouns (B2)	closed	words used instead of a noun	<i>this, who, mine</i>		– function as a noun phrase – typically no modification
Determiners (A3)	closed	(not a traditional word class) words that 'determine' the following noun	<i>the, no, every</i>		– the first part of the noun phrase, before adjectives – obligatory with singular count nouns used as heads – some agree with nouns
Adjectives (A4)	open	words used to qualify the meaning of a noun	<i>fine, brave, utter, afraid</i>	– comparative and superlative forms – add <i>'-ly'</i> to form adverbs	– modified by adverbs such as <i>very, so</i> (gradability) – predicative or attributive – some can be the head of a noun phrase ( <i>the poor</i> )

Table B1.3.1 (continued)

Word Class (section where it is discussed)	open/ closed	traditional or notional 'definition'	examples	morphological features	structural features
Adverbs (A4, B4)	open	words used to add meaning to verbs	<i>often, slowly, very</i>	- some end in '-ly', '-ways' '- wise'	- modify verbs, adjectives and other adverbs
Prepositions (A4)	closed	words that precede a noun	<i>in, to, of, in spite of</i>		- precede noun phras- es, relate them to other elements
Verbs (A5)	open	words used to denote an action, event (or state?)	<i>make, know, buy, sleep</i>	- inflections for 3rd person -s, past tense, -ed and -ing participles	- agree with their sub- ject (unless imper- ative) - determine which clause elements are possible - preceded by auxiliaries - precede objects
Auxiliaries (A6)	closed	(not a tradi- tional word class) they 'help' the verb	<i>have, be, do, can</i>		- only one form (modals) - used to form aspect and passive of verbs - combine together - precede (main) verbs
Conjunctions (A9)	closed	words used to join two ideas	<i>and, if, although</i>		- used to join two clauses together

Fuller formal definitions (and problems associated with them) are given in the individual sections dealing with word classes.

## Activity B1.1 ★

Look at the following sentences and try to allocate each word to its word class.

1. *When I think about it, we should have done better.*
2. *Melt the butter in a separate pan.*
3. *Double standards abound in the discussion on climate change.*

How many words are from open and closed classes?

## B1.4 Problems with word classes

There are a number of general problems with a word-class approach to grammar:

- there are classes that we are not sure about (e.g. numerals, interjections);
- the distinction between some classes is not always clear, e.g. between pronouns and determiners (see A.3), or between adverbs and prepositions (see A.4);

- many words do not meet all the criteria for membership listed above (e.g. a non-count noun such as *money* does not have a plural or a genitive), so we have a situation in which some words are more typical members of a word class than others. It is nowadays normal to talk of 'core' or 'prototypical' members of a word class, in contrast to 'peripheral' or 'marginal' members. See A4 for an illustration of this with adjectives.
- some words are difficult to assign to any class, e.g. *yes* and *no* are generally said to be adverbs, but they have little in common with other members of that word class.
- adverbs especially are a problem to define formally. See B4 for more details.

In addition there are many words that can belong to more than one class (e.g. *change*, *round*, *back*). This is not necessarily a problem, though; we can use the different word class labels to explain the way such words behave and how they are different from other words. And we will see that such uses often involve a difference in meaning, which corresponds to that in grammar.

A further issue follows on from this: is word class membership an inherent feature of words or a feature that is endowed by particular instances of use; i.e. should we say that *information* is a noun or that it is used as a noun in particular cases? Some linguists would argue that only the second approach is valid. In this book, however, I have generally followed the former, traditional approach; dictionary writers seem to have no problem assigning a word class (or more than one) to words in isolation.

### B1.5 Conclusion

For centuries a word class approach was the principal tool for analysing the grammar of European languages, including English (there are, of course, other traditions). In conjunction with the identification of sentence roles (subject, object, etc. – see A8) it was grammar. And it still forms the backbone of modern grammatical analysis. However, we have seen it is not a foolproof method for classifying words, and in order to understand how words function in sentences we need to supplement it with further approaches.

#### Comment

Activity B1.1: Here is a list of the word classes:

pronouns: <i>I, it, we</i>	conjunction: <i>when</i>
auxiliaries: <i>should, have</i>	verbs: <i>think, done, melt, abound</i>
determiners: <i>the, a</i>	adjectives: <i>separate, double</i>
adverb: <i>better</i>	prepositions: <i>about, in, on</i>
nouns: <i>butter, pan, standards, discussion, climate, change</i>	

You may have wanted to call *climate* an adjective (see A3), but apart from that most of the words are fairly easy to assign. This is not always the case (for example, *to* in the previous sentence), as we will see later. As regards open and closed classes, there are 13 instances of each (including some in closed classes – *in* and *the* – which are repeated).