

2 – THE PARTS OF SPEECH

Grammarians regularly classify each word in a language according to the way in which it is commonly used. For example, a word which is commonly used to name something is classified as a *noun*. We call the system of classifying words by their common use *parts of speech*. We can think of these *parts of speech* as the parts or roles which words usually play in ordinary speech. (The idea of playing parts or roles is probably not what was originally meant by “parts” of speech, but it works here and I like it.) Other grammarians may use such terms as *lexical categories* or *word classifications* for what we are calling *parts of speech*. Whatever we call it, it is simply a system for classifying words according to their common use within a language.

Most of the time, we use a word to play one certain part in a sentence. But words can be versatile actors, and sometimes we may use a word to play a part which is not its usual part. A word may be used to play a different than usual part in order to add emphasis, illustration, color, and variety to our speech. For example, a word usually used as a noun may, from time to time, actually be used as an adjective. *Bear* and *bull* are classified as nouns which are usually used to name two large animals, but we may talk about a *bear* market and a *bull* market, using these two nouns as adjectives which describe the general trend of a financial market – aggressive like a *bull*, or slow and clumsy like a *bear*. (Of course, bears can be aggressive, and bulls can be clumsy, but somehow it has become customary to use *bear* and *bull* this way when talking about financial markets.) Hence we classify a word as a particular *part of speech* according to the way in which we *usually* – though not *exclusively* – use the word in our ordinary speech. We must be careful to distinguish between a word’s *customary* part of speech, and the *actual role or function* which that word is playing in a particular sentence.

English grammars traditionally teach *eight parts of speech* (noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, interjection). In this grammar we will refine this classification system into *twelve parts of speech*. (We add three categories by separating the auxiliary from the verb, the determiner from the adjective, and the qualifier from the adverb. We split one category (and pull in a few more words) by reclassifying the interjection as the isolate and the expletive.) This fine tuning of the *parts* (or categories) of *speech* is an advance in systematic grammar based upon a general agreement of studies on the structure of language. This refinement of categories will prove useful in describing more accurately how we use words.

τοῦ δὲ λόγου μέρη ἔστιν ὀκτώ: ὄνομα, ῥῆμα, μετοχή, ἄρθρον, ἀντωνυμία, πρόθεσις, ἐπίρρημα, σύνδεσμος.

There are eight *parts of speech*: *noun, verb, participle, article, pronoun, preposition, adverb, and conjunction*.

—Dionysius Thrax, *The Art of Grammar*

[We distribute *participles* under *adjectives, nouns, and verbs*. Dionysius gathers what we call *adjectives* under the classification of *nouns*; *auxiliaries* under *verbs*; *qualifiers* and *isolates* under *adverbs*; *expletives* under *conjunctions*.]

The twelve parts of speech are divided nicely into three sets of four parts: (1) the four major parts, (2) the four minor parts, and (3) the four particles.

• EXERCISES •

What do we call the system of classifying words according to the way in which they are commonly used within a language?

parts of speech

What other names are parts of speech known as?

Other grammarians may call them "lexical categories" or "word classifications."

Though it is probably not what was originally meant, in what "dramatic" way might we think of these parts of speech?

We might think of these parts of speech as the parts or roles which words usually play in ordinary speech.

Why do we classify a word according to the way it is always used in ordinary speech?

We do not classify a word according to the way it is always used in ordinary speech, but according to the way it is usually or customarily - not always or exclusively - used in ordinary speech. Words can be used to play unusual parts in order to add emphasis, illustration, color, and variety to our speech. We must be careful to distinguish between a word's customary part of speech, and the actual role or function which that word is playing in a particular sentence.

How many parts of speech do English grammars traditionally teach?

English grammars traditionally teach eight parts of speech: noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, adverb, preposition, conjunction, interjection.

How many parts of speech will we learn in this grammar? Why?

We will refine the classification system into twelve parts of speech. This fine tuning of the parts or categories is an advance in systematic grammar, and it will prove useful in describing more accurately how we use words.

How are these twelve parts of speech divided?

The twelve parts of speech are divided into three sets of four parts: (1) the four major parts, (2) the four minor parts, and (3) the four particles.

2.1 – FOUR MAJOR PARTS OF SPEECH

Words classified among the *major parts of speech* – noun, verb, adjective, adverb – carry the greatest burden of meaning in the language. Words in this classification are more likely to play parts different from their usual parts – they are the most functionally flexible words. The four major parts of speech encompass the largest number of individual vocabulary words. About ninety-nine percent of the words

in a comprehensive dictionary are classified among these four major parts of speech. Because the major parts of speech make up the overwhelming proportion of the vocabulary of a language, most of the individual words in this classification are actually used very infrequently. Only a small percentage are frequently used – the words which make up our common day-to-day communication. New words are more easily added to a language under the classification of *major parts of speech*.

• EXERCISES •

Name the four major parts of speech.

noun, verb, adjective, adverb

Of the three divisions of parts of speech (major parts, minor parts, particles), name some characteristics where the major parts excel.

The major parts of speech:

- (1) carry the greatest burden of meaning in the language,
- (2) are the most flexible words - are more likely to play unusual parts,
- (3) encompass the largest number of individual vocabulary words - about ninety-nine percent of the words in a comprehensive dictionary,
- (4) are more easily added to a language as new words.

Are words which are classified among the major parts of speech frequently used?

Only a small percentage of words which are classified among the major parts of speech are frequently used. Most of the individual words in this classification are actually used very infrequently - there are too many of them for a large number of them to be used frequently.

2.1.1.1 – Noun

2.1.1.1. 1 – Simple Descriptive Definition of a Noun

A *noun* is the name of anything which has been given a name.

2.1.1.1. 2 – More Specific Definition of a Noun

A *noun* is the name of a

person (*gentleman, Peter, king, sailor*),

place (*country, Egypt, city, Jerusalem*), or

thing (*building, electricity, poem, horse*), which includes such things as a

quality (*flexibility, quietness*) or quantity (*yard, ounce*),

idea (*capitalism, truth*) or concept (*integer, righteousness*),

activity (*thought, birth*) or emotion (*fear, affection*).

Example: John slowly drove his new car over the very rough road.

2.1.1.1. 3 – Definition of a Substantive

A *substantive* is any word or group of words which is used as a noun is used – that is, to name something. A noun is a *substantive* whenever it is performing its normal role of naming something. If a noun is temporarily performing the role of some other part of speech, then it is no longer playing its own role, so for the time being it is no longer a *substantive*. Other parts of speech and even parts of a sentence may play the role of a noun, and while they are playing that role, they are *substantives*. Pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, determiners, gerunds, infinitives, phrases, clauses, and quotations are commonly used as *substantives*.

2.1.1. 4 – Special Classifications for Nouns

There are several special classifications for nouns:

ὄνομα ἔστι μέρος λόγου πτωτικόν, σῶμα ἢ πράγμα σημαῖνον, σῶμα μὲν οἷον λίθος, πράγμα δὲ οἷον παιδεία, κοινῶς τε καὶ ἰδίως λεγόμενον, κοινῶς μὲν οἷον ἄνθρωπος ἵππος, ἰδίως δὲ οἷον Σωκράτης, Πλάτων.

A **noun** is a declinable part of speech, signifying something *concrete* or *abstract* – either **concrete**, as *stone*; or **abstract**, as *education*; naming the *common* or the *proper* – either **common**, as *man, horse*; or **proper**, as *Socrates* [, *Plato*].

—Dionysius Thrax, *The Art of Grammar*

2.1.1. 4.1 – Common and Proper Nouns

A *proper* noun designates by name one particular individual or one particular class of individuals to whom the name belongs properly. In English, we capitalize the first letter of a proper noun. (Two or more words forming one name are considered as one noun: *Central Park*.) (In Greek, placing the article in front of a proper noun is often the equivalent of capitalizing a proper noun in English.) All other nouns are *common* nouns which designate – by name – any, some, or all members of a *general class* of individuals – persons, places, or things – to whom the name belongs in common.

Examples:

[*common nouns*] man, city, country, tribe

[*proper nouns*] James, Jerusalem, Samaria, Levites

2.1.1. 4.2 – Concrete and Abstract Nouns

A *concrete* noun names a physical or material object which can be perceived by the senses (primarily seen or touched). An *abstract* noun names an attribute, quality, condition, ideal, activity, or type – things not immediately perceived by the senses.

Examples:

[*concrete nouns*] man, city, country

[*abstract nouns*] goodness, generosity, heroism

2.1.1. 4.3 – Mass and Count Nouns

A *mass* (or non-count) noun names what can be divided but which cannot be numbered or counted individually (*food, health, water*). In English, a *mass* noun ordinarily has no plural form, and may be used with or without the definite article (*the*), but may not be used with the indefinite article (*a, an*). A *count* (or *countable*) noun names what can be counted individually as separate units of an aggregate. In English, a *count* noun has singular and plural forms, and must be used with either the definite or the indefinite article in the singular. Some nouns, especially *abstract* nouns, can be either *mass* or *count* nouns, depending upon the context.

Examples:

[*mass nouns*] mankind, oxygen, money

[count nouns] man, atom, dollar

Example: Wood [mass noun] is used for construction, and pine is the wood [count noun] most commonly used.

2.1.1. 4.4 – Collective and Distributive Nouns

A *collective* noun is a singular noun in form which names a group or collection of individuals which is regarded as a single whole unit. In English, most collective nouns focus on the collective whole, so they are considered singular and take a singular verb and a singular pronoun (*The army is defeating itself. The committee is dividing itself.*). However, some collective nouns focus on the individuals – they are *distributive*, assigning to each individual member of the group his respective portion – so such nouns are considered plural and take a plural verb and a plural pronoun (*The police are arming themselves.*). Some collective nouns may be either singular or plural depending upon how the author considers the group (*The majority is not satisfied with its decision. The majority are still arguing between themselves.*). Some collective nouns have plural forms (*army; armies*), which signify different groups of the same class of things (*Our army defeats many armies when they come against it.*).

Examples: [collective nouns] army, committee, family, herd, majority, remainder, school, team, trio

2.1.1. 4.5 – Compound Nouns

A *compound* noun is made up of two or more words. Some compound nouns are written as separate words in a phrase (*editor in chief, ice cream*), some are hyphenated (*brother-in-law, secretary-general*), and some are written as one word (*newspaper, motorboat*).

2.1.1. 4.6 – Verbal Nouns

A *verbal* noun is a verb form without the dimension of person which is regularly used as a noun. In English, this includes the *infinitive* and the *gerund*.

2.1.1. 4.6.1 – Infinitive

An *infinitive* is a *verbal noun*. The English infinitive ordinarily consists of a verb form preceded by the word *to*, forming an *infinitive phrase* which is used as a noun. (This might appear to be a prepositional phrase, but it is not.) An infinitive is not a pure noun because, being formed from a verb, it retains some of the nature and characteristics of a verb – that is, it makes a direct assertion about a noun (or other substantive); it may be modified by adverbs or adverbial phrases; it may have completers such as direct and indirect objects, subjects and subject complements.

Examples:

[simple infinitive] My goal is to compete in this contest.

[passive infinitive] My present goal is to be chosen for the contest.

[passive progressive infinitive] I am happy to be entering this contest.

[perfect infinitive] I am happy to have won the contest.

[perfect passive infinitive] I am happy to have been selected for this contest.

[perfect passive progressive infinitive] My goal was to have been winning the race by the last lap.

Sometimes English will drop the “to” from the infinitive phrase. This is called an *elliptical infinitive*. An *ellipsis* [Greek: ἔλλειψις = a falling short by leaving something out, a defect] is the omission of a word or phrase which is necessary for a grammatically complete sentence, but which is not necessary for understanding. In most cases, more formal English would add the word *to*, but occasionally, by custom, the omission of the word *to* would be the better form, and the omission of *to* is almost mandatory after some verbs in the imperative such as *bid, dare, help, let, make, need, see*.

Examples:

All he did was ___ succeed at everything he tried. (More formal English might require: All he did was to succeed at everything he tried. But this could be mistaken to mean: All he did was in order to succeed at everything he tried.)

He could do nothing but succeed at whatever he tried.

Let me go alone. (Compare: Allow me to go alone.)

Make him do it. (Compare: Force him to do it.)

2.1.1. 4.6.2 – Gerund

A *participle* is a *verbal adjective*. (See below, § 2.1.3. 4.3 – *Participial Adjective*.) In English, the present participle consists of a verb form with an *-ing* ending added to it, and the perfect participle consists of a verb form preceded by *having*. An adjective – and therefore a participle, which is a verbal adjective – may be used as a noun.

In English, a present participle or a perfect participle which is used as a noun is called a *gerund*. The *gerund* names the activity or condition which is expressed or described by the verbal form. (Verbal form: *swim* – I swim. Gerund: *swimming* – Swimming is what I do.) A gerund is not a pure noun because, being formed from a verb, it is only one of several possible uses of a participle, and it retains some of the nature and characteristics of a verb – that is, it makes a direct assertion about a noun (or other substantive); it may be modified by adverbs or adverbial phrases; it may have completers such as direct and indirect objects, subjects and subject complements. English gerunds are usually convertible to the equivalent form in the infinitive.

Examples:

[*present gerund*] Swimming is my favorite exercise activity.

(Simple infinitive form: To swim is my favorite exercise activity.)

[*present passive gerund*] Being selected is his only goal.

(Passive infinitive form: To be selected is his only goal.)

[*perfect gerund*] Having orbited the earth safely was his boast.

(Perfect infinitive form: To have orbited the earth safely was his boast)

[*perfect passive gerund*] Having been selected for the mission was his greatest triumph.

(Perfect passive infinitive form: To have been selected for the mission was his greatest triumph.)

• EXERCISES •

What is a noun?

A noun is the name of anything which has been given a name - the name of a person, place, or thing, which includes such things as a quality or quantity, an idea or concept, an activity or emotion.

What is a substantive?

A substantive is any word or group of words which is used as a noun is used - to name something.

When is a noun not a substantive?

A noun is not a substantive when it does not serve the function of a noun - to name something - but it serves the function of some other part of speech.

Name some other parts of speech or parts of a sentence which may function as substantives.

Pronouns, adjectives, adverbs, determiners, gerunds, infinitives, phrases, clauses, and quotations are commonly used as substantives.

Describe the difference between a proper noun and a common noun.

A proper noun designates by name one particular individual or one particular class of individuals to whom the name belongs properly.

All other nouns are common nouns which designate - by name - any, some, or all members of a general class of individuals - persons, places, or things - to whom the name belongs in common.

In Greek, what is often the equivalent of capitalizing a proper noun in English?

In Greek, placing the article in front of a proper noun is often the equivalent of capitalizing a proper noun in English.

Describe the difference between a concrete noun and an abstract noun.

A concrete noun names a physical or material object which can be perceived by the senses.

An abstract noun names an attribute, quality, condition, ideal, activity, or type - things not immediately perceived by the senses.

Describe the difference between a mass noun and a count noun.

A mass noun names what can be divided but which cannot be numbered or counted individually.

A count noun names what can be counted individually as separate units of an aggregate.

Describe some indicators of a mass noun in English. Give some examples.

In English, a mass noun ordinarily has no plural form, and may be used with or without the definite article (the), but may not be used with the indefinite article (a, an).

[Examples will vary.] mankind, oxygen, money

Describe some indicators of a count noun in English. Give some examples.

In English, a count noun has singular and plural forms, and must be used with either the definite or the indefinite article in the singular.

[Examples will vary.] man, atom, dollar

What is a collective noun? Give some examples.

A collective noun is a singular noun in form which names a group or collection of individuals which is regarded as a single whole unit.

[Examples will vary.] army, committee, family, herd, majority, remainder, school, team, trio

The collective noun is singular in form, but it names a collection of individuals, which is plural. In English, how does this affect the form of the verb and the pronoun? Give some examples.

Most collective nouns focus on the collective whole, so they are considered singular and take a singular verb and a singular pronoun.

[Examples will vary.] The army is defeating itself. The committee is dividing itself.

Some collective nouns are distributive, focusing on the individuals, so these nouns are considered plural and take a plural verb and a plural pronoun.

[Examples will vary.] The police are arming themselves.

Some collective nouns may be either singular or plural depending upon how the author considers the group.

[Examples will vary.] The majority is not satisfied with its decision. The majority are still arguing between themselves.

Some collective nouns have plural forms which signify different groups of the same class of things.

[Examples will vary.] Our army defeats many armies when they come against it.

What is a compound noun? Give some examples.

A compound noun is made up of two or more words.

[Examples will vary.]

Some nouns are written as separate words in a phrase: editor in chief, ice cream.

Some nouns are hyphenated: brother-in-law, secretary-general.

Some nouns are written as one word: newspaper, motorboat.

What is a verbal noun?

A verbal noun is a verb form which does not have the dimension of person and which is regularly used as a noun.

What two verbal nouns are common in English?

The infinitive and the gerund are verbal nouns in English.

Why might the English infinitive appear to be a prepositional phrase?

The English infinitive ordinarily consists of a verb form preceded by the word to, which might appear to be a prepositional phrase.

Give some examples of English infinitives.

[Examples will vary.]

Simple infinitive: My goal is to compete in this contest.

Passive infinitive: My present goal is to be chosen for the contest.

Passive progressive infinitive I am happy to be entering this contest.

Perfect infinitive: I am happy to have won the contest.

Perfect passive infinitive: I am happy to have been selected for this contest.

Perfect passive progressive infinitive: My goal was to have been winning the race by the last lap.

What is an ellipsis?

An ellipsis is the omission of a word or phrase which is necessary for a grammatically complete sentence, but which is not necessary for understanding. The word "ellipsis" comes from the Greek word "ἔλλειψις," which means "a falling short by leaving something out, a defect."

What is an elliptical infinitive? Give some examples.

An elliptical infinitive drops the "to" from the infinitive phrase.

[Examples will vary.]

All he did was __ succeed at everything he tried.

He could do nothing but __ succeed at whatever he tried.

Let me __ go alone.

Make him __ do it.

What is a participle? How is this related to a gerund?

A participle is a verbal adjective.

An adjective may be used as a noun.

A present participle or a perfect participle which is used as a noun is called a gerund.

The gerund names the activity or condition which is expressed or described by the verbal form.

How is the English gerund formed? How is this related to the infinitive?

In English, the gerund has the form of the present and the perfect participle.
The present participle consists of a verb form with an "-ing" ending added to it.
The perfect participle consists of a verb form preceded by "having."
English gerunds are usually convertible to the equivalent form in the infinitive.

Give some examples of English gerunds and their equivalent infinitives.

[Examples will vary.]

Present gerund: Swimming is my favorite exercise activity.

Simple infinitive: To swim is my favorite exercise activity.

Present passive gerund: Being selected is his only goal.

Passive infinitive: To be selected is his only goal.

Perfect gerund: Having orbited the earth safely was his boast.

Perfect infinitive: To have orbited the earth safely was his boast.

Perfect passive gerund: Having been selected for the mission was his greatest triumph.

Perfect passive infinitive: To have been selected for the mission was his greatest triumph.

Why are not the infinitive and the gerund pure nouns?

The infinitive and the gerund are not pure nouns because, being formed from verbs, they retain some of the nature and characteristics of verbs - they make a direct assertion about a noun (or other substantive); they may be modified by adverbs or adverbial phrases; they may have completers such as direct and indirect objects, subjects and subject complements.