

2. Grammatical terms (2) - parts of speech

1 Why know about parts of speech?

Parts of speech are categories of words like "noun" or "adjective" which tell us how a word behaves in general, rather than its role in a specific sentence (like "subject" or "object"). They are important because without them it would be impossible to learn how a language works. Take, for example, the following rule about how to write words expressing nationality:

- Nouns relating to nationalities begin with a capital letter:
Les Français sont très fiers de leur cuisine
The French are very proud of their cuisine
- Adjectives relating to nationalities, however, begin with a small letter is used:
La grammaire française est difficile
French grammar is difficult

It is difficult to understand this rule without understanding the words *noun* and *adjective*!

2 The major parts of speech

2.1 A **noun** is a word like *Peter*, *teacher* or *mountain* which names an entity such as a person, thing, place, substance or state.

2.2 A **verb** is a word such as *to give* or *to be* which can serve either to express an action or state, or else to modify another verb by giving information for example about time (*I will go*). Verbs are situated in time primarily by means of **tense**, for example the present, the perfect etc. Other verb forms include **moods** such as the **indicative** (used when considering something as a fact or probability), and the **subjunctive** (used when the action of the verb is coloured with an attitude such as doubt, need, wishing, feeling or opinion).

2.3 An **adjective** is a word that gives information about a noun. Most often adjectives serve to indicate a quality possessed by a noun, and these are called **qualificative adjectives**. For example, in the phrase *the red book*, the qualificative adjective *red* modifies the noun *book*. Other types of adjective include **possessive** adjectives: *my book*; **demonstrative** adjectives: *this house*; **indefinite** adjectives: *several people*; **interrogative** adjectives: *what number?*; and **numerical** adjectives: *fifty pounds*.

2.4 An **adverb** is a word that can modify most parts of speech apart from a noun. For example, in the sentence *She sang beautifully*, the adverb *beautifully* modifies the verb *sang*; in *She has an extremely beautiful voice*, the adverb *extremely* qualifies the adjective *beautiful*; and in *She sang extremely beautifully*, the adverb *extremely* modifies the adverb *beautifully*.

2.5 An **article** is a word such as *the* or *a* appearing before a noun that describes the scope of reference of that noun (that is whether the noun referred to is specific or non-specific, a part or whole of a category, and so on). It may be **definite** (*the*) or **indefinite** (*a*). French also has the **partitive** article (*du*, *de la*) which expresses part of a category.

- 2.6** A **pronoun** is a word which stands in the place of a noun or something that functions as a noun. It can be a **personal pronoun** (*I, me*); a **possessive pronoun** (*yours*); a **demonstrative pronoun** (*this one, those*); an **interrogative pronoun** (*which?*); a **relative pronoun** (*who, that*); or an **indefinite pronoun** (*anything*).
- 2.7** A **preposition** is a word that expresses the relationship between a **noun, pronoun** or **infinitive** and the rest of the sentence. Prepositions have two basic functions. First (usually involving *to* or *of*) to provide a transparent link between two words, as in *to manage **to** do* or *the rate **of** inflation*. And second to express a distinct relationship between a noun or pronoun and the rest of its sentence (as in *He put the book **on** the table*).
- 2.8** A **conjunction** is a word like *but, and* or *because* that connects words, phrases or clauses.