

**Language Study as Inquiry: Rediscovering Parts of Speech**  
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Many of the teachers I work with teach about language in a way that leads to further investigation and inquiry by their students. They find the effects of language study to be many and varied and to need little justification to their students or to the teachers themselves. But we all know that language study, particularly when one uses the word “grammar,” does come under scrutiny. And, of course, being able to clearly articulate why we are studying a particular topic and to what end is always important. I tackle here the study of parts of speech in particular, which have a long history in the Language Arts curriculum, and even when teachers “don’t teach grammar,” there is usually at least some expectation that basic lexical categories should be known to students and used in the context of other endeavors, primarily writing. To better articulate why we should undertake such language study, I examine the following questions:

- Why talk about parts of speech and what are some of the benefits of direct discussion of the distinctions among the various kinds of words?
- What are the best ways to teach about them and why?
- What are the applications of such study?

Current accountability requirements and assessment pressures, including the Common Core Standards Initiative, demand that students demonstrate high-level literacy skills and expert control of text and sentence structure, as well as vocabulary. Identification and understanding of lexical categories and their functions is a central aspect of those expectations. For example, the standards for English Language Arts for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade include the following:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.3.1a Explain the function of nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs in general and their functions in particular sentences.*

Those for 5<sup>th</sup> grade say students should be able to:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.5.1a Explain the function of conjunctions, prepositions, and interjections in general and their function in particular sentences.*

And by 7<sup>th</sup> grade, they should be able to:

*CCSS.ELA-Literacy.L.7.1a Explain the function of phrases and clauses in general and their function in specific sentences.*

So students are expected to be able to identify the categories of words and explain their functions.

Motivation for focus on understanding word categories extends beyond the Common Core, of course. My work with teachers over the last decade has demonstrated that exploration of language – focusing here on grammatical categories – pays off not only in terms of conscious knowledge of those word categories, but also in much broader ways: critical

thinking, scientific methodology, and extension of that knowledge to writing and to analysis of literature. These benefits occur, however, not when one follows traditional methods of parts of speech identification, but when a much more exploratory, investigative, tool-based approach is employed.

Let's first explore the traditional, meaning-based approach to parts of speech. Definitions such as the following are ubiquitous. Even if these are not taught directly in "grammar lessons," most upper elementary students have encountered them.

Noun – a person, place, thing, or idea

Adjective – a word that describes a noun

Verb – an action or state of being

While these kinds of descriptive, meaning-based definitions do capture the essence of the category distinctions, there is evidence that definitions of parts of speech such as these are typically not helpful for students (or teachers) and can lead to confusion and self-doubt.

Consider, for example, how traditional definitions can mislead with examples such as the following.

The horse's jumping was impressive.

Is *jumping* an action? Yes, sure. But is it a verb here? No, it's a noun. Or in the next example, is *Eiffel Tower* an adjective since it describes *keychain*?

The Eiffel Tower keychain broke.

No, it's a noun phrase. Or in the next sentence, is *seem* an action or even a state of being?

This test seems important.

No, not really, but it's a verb nonetheless.

Schuster has a number of examples of how such meaning-based definitions can mislead in his chapter, "Traditional School Grammar: Definitions that do not define." He offers a personal example with pronouns. As a tenth grade student, he was told this definition of a pronoun: "A word that takes the place of a noun" (2003, 22). Taking this to be true, in a sentence like *The author writes a new novel* Schuster notes that "It seemed obvious to me that one could replace *author* with *writer* and that *novel* could be replaced by *book*. In short, it was clear that words rather general in meaning – like *writer* and *book* had to be pronouns" (22).

David West Brown also notes in his study of linguistically diverse language curriculum that "the participating class seemed to struggle with parts of speech during the study. Much of the class's difficulty appeared to stem from a reliance on semantic definitions of parts of speech (i.e., a noun is a person, place or thing; a verb is an action; etc.). I posited that it might be more useful for teachers and students to think about both the function and the form of a word when trying to determine part of speech" (2008, 173).

In Schuster's *Breaking the Rules* book, he even asks students to put these traditional definitions to the test in order to demonstrate their inadequacy. He also includes an excellent appendix ("An Updated Treatment of the Parts of Speech") that offers clues for each category and encourages students to use their knowledge of those categories.

While the meaning-based definitions can be a starting place for discussion of the parts of speech categories, and while they may suffice for younger students, by upper elementary, middle, and high school, students can benefit from a closer look at the evidence for these

distinct categories and should also consider why it can be useful to investigate the categories more deeply.

NCTE's Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (<http://www.ateg.org/grammar/qna.php>) supports using students' knowledge of morphology and syntax to identify the categories.

The traditional definitions of the parts of speech can be difficult to apply. Students recognize the basic parts of speech more reliably and quickly by looking at the form of a word and by using sentence "frames." If a word can be made plural or possessive, or if it fits in the sentence "The \_\_\_\_ went there," it is a noun. If a word can take both -ing and -s endings, it is a verb.

Such ideas about parts of speech are anything but new, but have had a hard time getting a firm foothold. Strickland in *The contribution of structural linguistics to the teaching of reading, writing, and grammar in the elementary school* in 1964 writes that "[Meaning-based] definitions are more confusing than helpful and do more harm than good. Typical were definitions which stated that 'a sentence expresses a complete thought,' 'a noun is the name of a person, place, or thing,' 'a verb is an action word.' None of these are helpful because they do not tell the whole story, and children come upon both oral and written sentences, nouns, and verbs which seem to them not to fit the definitions" (18).

Even earlier, Sumner Ives in a textbook for use in schools writes that "Some terms, e.g., adverb and pronoun, are in use without a genuine referent (the supposed referents of these terms lack identity as single classes or categories of items); finally, some terms, e.g., noun and verb, are identified, not by definitions, but by statements which may well be true, but which do not name the particularizing characteristics of the classes which the terms refer to" (170).

Despite the criticisms, such "traditional grammar" definitions persist in many classrooms, especially elementary classrooms.<sup>1</sup> We must strive to teach a more informed approach to parts of speech by using morphology and syntax to help students recognize and take advantage of their unconscious knowledge of the category distinctions.

The best way we have found to introduce students to this more analytical approach to parts of speech is to examine a sentence containing made-up words. Take a nonsense sentence. Make up your own or use something like

The dorbling groobies frandled a bonkled slank.

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<sup>1</sup> Fries (1952), noting the slow response of schools to bringing in the research by linguists into the curricula, makes an analogy between the discoveries of the linguistic scientists and Harvey's discovery of the circulation of the blood in 1761. He points out that 200 years after Harvey's discovery, George Washington was bled to death by physicians. Such is the power of strongly-entrenched traditions. That there is a time lag, too, between discoveries in linguistics and their adoption in the K-12 classroom is obvious. Strom (1960) writes about this same issue, "The persistence and extent of that lag are problems that saddle all who want to improve the teaching of English today" (13).

Ask students to identify the part of speech of various words. They will quickly tell you that *groobies* and *slank* are nouns. They will likely add that *frandled* is a verb. They may stumble a bit on *dorbling* and *bonkled*, but will soon label these as adjectives. (If they do stumble, it's because these forms, in other positions, could be verbs; they're aware that those *-ing* and *-ed* endings are typical verbal endings.) So how do they know all this? How do they know that *groobies* and *slank* are nouns? It's certainly not because they are "persons, places, things, or even ideas" since these "things" don't even exist. They know because of the morphology and syntax, because of the suffixes, in this case, on the words (their morphology) and because of the position of the words in relation to the other words (some of which are "real" words) in the rest of the sentence (the syntax). It is that kind of knowledge that we make use of all of the time to identify parts of speech and to learn real new words and how they function.<sup>2</sup>

I offer here examples of the "content" (also known as *form-class*) words, followed by a collection of some clues, tests, and frames that you might use for word category identification. Teachers who have used these have allowed the students to come up with the tests and clues on their own through collaborative discussion and analysis, rather than presenting the charts to them. This bottom-up method is critical, in fact, to allowing students to discover the knowledge they already possess and to then be empowered by that. For completeness, Table 2 contains the function words (also called "grammatical-" or "structural-class" words) categories; these are the closed class ("closed" since we do not typically add new members to these categories) that express more grammatical rather than meaningful, or "contentful" information. Depending on your goals, you may not need to focus on these at the same time as exploration of the open class/lexical category words. If you are discussing types of clauses, for example, discovering the differences between the kinds of words that link independent clauses (conjunctions and conjunctive adverbs), and distinguishing those from the types of words that introduce subordinate clauses (complementizers, subordinating prepositions, relative pronouns), for example, would be useful.

**Table 1: Lexical Categories or "Content" Words – Open Class**

Noun	Verb	Adjective	Adverb
book, friendship, Seattle, cork, mud, email, Snapchat, text	sing, text, wonder, catapult, forgive, stand up	glad, curious, funny, silky, weird, tight, interesting	carefully, often, sometimes, fast

**Noun Tests and Clues** (morphological and syntactic facts about nouns):

- Nouns can be pluralized: *rats, spiders, bunnies*
- Nouns can be made possessive: *the cat's tail, the truth's inevitability*

<sup>2</sup> See a related lesson at <http://middleschoollng.blogspot.com/2013/09/lesson-1-on-nouns.html>, and many other examples of using nonsense sentences as a starting point for analysis, from Fries (1952), who suggests students analyze the sentence *The vapy koobs dasaked the citar molently* (111), to Benjamin (2007) who suggests analysis of *I found a flindering fleek on the flook* (63).

- Nouns can have certain other “nominal” suffixes: *-ance/ence* (performance), *-ion* (formation), *-al* (refusal), *-age* (leakage).
- Nouns occur after Determiners like *a, the, and an* (also called articles); *this, that, these, those* (also called demonstrative determiners); and possessive determiners (*my, your, her, etc.*).
- Nouns occur after Numerals, both the Cardinal ones (six, eleven, four thousand) and the Ordinal ones (second, fifteenth).
- Nouns occur after Quantifiers, words that express quantity like *all, each, both, every, some, several, many, more, less, much, few*.
- Nouns can be modified by (or described by) Adjectives: *the furry kitten, a rainy day*. The term modification is one we’ll be exploring in more depth later.
- Frame: The \_\_\_\_\_ is here.

#### Verb Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about verbs):

- Verbs express tense – present and past
  - She **walked** to school.
  - He **eats** pizza.
  - Sue **caught** the ball.
- Verbs can have certain other “verbal” affixes: *dis-* (disappear), *re-* (rediscover), *-ate* (activate), *-ize* (regularize), *-en* (tighten), and others
- Verbs can occur with auxiliary verbs (forms of *have, be, and do*) and modal verbs (*can, could, shall, should, may, might, must, will, would*) modal verbs: *She will eat. They must swim. We are running.*
- Frame: She will \_\_\_\_\_. He is \_\_\_\_\_ing the X.

#### Adjective Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about adjectives):

- Adjectives have comparative (*-er/more*) and superlative (*-est/most*) forms: bigger, biggest; more interesting, most interesting
- Adjectives can follow a **linking verb** (such as *seems, is, appears*), which “link” a subject to what follows: *The cat seems sick. The paint is thick.*
- Adjectives can be preceded by a degree word like *very, so, or too*: *Her foot is very bruised. She is so ecstatic.*
- Frames: The block seems \_\_\_\_\_. They are very \_\_\_\_\_.

#### Adverb Tests and Clues (morphological and syntactic facts about adverbs):

- Adverbs sometimes end in *-ly*, but not always: *quickly, slowly, awkwardly* (Some adjectives end in *-ly*: *friendly, cowardly*, and lots of adverbs don’t end in *-ly*: *fast, often, sometimes*)
- They can have no suffix, or they can have other suffixes: *-wise, -like, -ward, -ways*, among others. We are eating fast. He wrote on the page sideways.
- Adverbs, like adjectives, can have comparative (*-er/more*) and superlative (*-est/most*) forms: She ran faster than you. He is the fastest of all.
- Adverbs can modify not just verbs, but whole sentences: Carefully, he unwrapped the sandwich. Fortunately, we don’t have to walk home in the rain.
- Frame: We walked \_\_\_\_\_.

**Conjunctive Adverbs** – This subtype of adverb can conjoin independent clauses: *accordingly, again, also, besides, consequently, finally, further, furthermore, hence, however, indeed, instead, likewise, moreover, nevertheless, otherwise, still, then, therefore, thus.*

**Table 2: Function Word Categories or “Grammatical” Words – Closed Class**

The words in these categories convey more grammatical meaning, and we do not typically add new words to these categories.

<b>Determiner</b>	the, a, this, that, these, those, his, my	<b>Preposition*</b>	across, beneath, under, in, on, during
<b>Numeral</b>	two, seven, twelfth, first	<b>Conjunction</b>	and, or, yet, for, but, so, nor
<b>Quantifier</b>	all, each, every, both, some, most, much, less	<b>Degree Word</b>	very, so, quite, somewhat, too
<b>Pronoun</b>	I/me, you, he/she, him/her, we/us, they/them, mine, who**	<b>Auxiliary Verb</b>	have (has, have, had) be (am, is, are, was, were), do (does, did)
<b>Interjection</b>	ouch, lordy, oh my!	<b>Modal</b>	may, might, can, could, will, would, should, must

**\*Subordinating Prepositions** – This subtype of prepositions can introduce clauses: *although, because, before, even though, since, until, when.*

**\*\*Relative Pronouns** – This subtype of pronoun stands in for a noun and introduces a relative clause, a clause that modifies a noun: *the woman [who I know]*. Others include *that, which, when, and where.*

Regardless of your goals for using these word category labels (talking about writing, analyzing literature, laying the groundwork for other grammatical investigation), the process will be beneficial: it encourages critical thinking, it encourages scientific thinking, and it empowers, making us all experts. Inevitably, there will be uncertainty about which categories some words fit in to. Debates and discussions about language are welcomed and lead to useful conversations that students are engaged in. It can be intimidating to begin a linguistically-informed approach to language in your classroom, especially when you may not necessarily be that confident about your own knowledge of language and grammar. This, fortunately, is one of the main goals of such an approach to language; that is, to understand that language is something to be studied and analyzed, and that there may not be a single correct answer for many aspects of language study. If you aren't certain whether a particular word is, say, an adjective or an adverb, well, then, that becomes an interesting question. It becomes something to investigate and discover.

Sandra Wilde, in *Funner Grammar*, suggests that many teachers' hesitation at delving in to teaching about word categories is, well, a hang up, not a real barrier founded on actual

difficulties, at least not once we realize that such exploration is just that - exploration. “Introducing eight new words in a science unit on the solar system wouldn’t faze us at all, and these [introducing parts of speech] shouldn’t either” (29).

David West Brown acknowledges that in his lessons, “students are advised that such tests have exceptions (e.g., standard English modal auxiliaries do not take the *-s* inflexion for third person singular)” (2008, 174). And he adds that “the exploration of grammatical function and form may not eliminate teachers’ and students’ struggles with parts of speech, but it can move them away from the kind of person-place-or-thing tests that seem to be more confusing than helpful, and it supports the overall goal of a more linguistically informed curriculum” (174).

Schuster also notes that getting the labels exactly right is not necessarily the main goal. He writes, for example, with respect to labeling words that precede nouns as adjectives: “Nothing dreadful will happen if you continue to call all modifiers of nouns adjectives, but if you prefer to distinguish true adjectives from other types of modifiers of nouns, here are some clues for the former...” (201), and he goes on to offer the clues and frames that can help one determine the word’s category.

Beth Keyser, a junior high school teacher from Montana who employs this investigative method in her classroom writes, “One of the major strands in Common Core is problem solving. Completing these [language] lessons turns students into scientists of language. They have to discover the rules for themselves based on evidence that *they* look for. Also, students use their own intuitions to understand the rules. This approach is more engaging because every student works on this together in small groups and they collaborate to discover, using evidence, the most appropriate analysis. From my experience, most students do well with this regardless of their reading and writing abilities” (personal communication).

There are a number of engaging, inquiry-based approaches to discovering parts of speech categories and other grammatical functions that many upper elementary, middle, and high school teachers use, some of which are accessible on TeachLing (<http://www.teachling.wvu.edu/node/4>), others on the blog Middle School Linguistics (<http://middleschoolling.blogspot.com/>), [and on the Exploring Language website: <http://www.explorelanguage.org/>]<sup>3</sup>, as well as in Benjamin’s, Schuster’s, Brown’s (2008 and 2009), and Wilde’s books, among others. These all focus on students’ intuitive knowledge and offer tools to access that knowledge.

Although the focus here is not necessarily on the effects of study of word categories on writing, Noguchi does emphasize, when discussing how to teach about run-ons and fragments, how using similar intuitions and the tests that fall out from them develop self-reliance and self-confidence “because it emphasizes what students already know rather than what they do not...The method brings to the surface the immense, often untapped (and often unappreciated), store of linguistic knowledge that students bring to the classroom everyday” (35). The teachers I collaborate with see their students using their meta-knowledge about word categories in relation to writing as well: using the terminology in discussions of

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<sup>3</sup> Added after published version of article.

writing revision, in checking for subject-verb agreement in their own writing, in simply analyzing what makes “good writing,” and in discussions of genre.

I summarize briefly the responses to the questions posed at the beginning:

Q: Why talk about parts of speech and what are some of the benefits of direct discussion of the distinctions among the various kinds of words?

A: We talk about parts of speech for what it can reveal about our unconscious knowledge of these distinctions that all speakers of any language have. The distinctions are as real as those between mammals and birds or between two chemical elements. And those distinctions are even more relevant, one might argue, because they are part of our human endowment. And important benefit of such inquiry is that it empowers; students learn that they do have this knowledge and they are experts. The effects of this are enormous and are quite distinct from the insecurity about language and grammar that traditional methods often induce.

Q: What are the best ways to teach about parts of speech and why?

A: There is evidence that an investigative, inquiry-based approach to parts of speech is extremely effective. It allows the students to be the experts. It reveals knowledge they didn't realize they had. It reveals that these distinctions are actual ones, not arbitrary labels. It employs scientific methodology (making hypotheses, testing them, collecting data, revising hypotheses) in order to discover the most appropriate category.

Q: What are the applications of such study?

A: The applications are numerous. In addition to the ways of thinking mentioned above, teachers find direct applications to the study of literature, to writing, and to students' discussions about language generally.

Simply put, allowing students to discover their intuitive knowledge about parts of speech categories is an excellent place to begin language analysis and doing so will pay off in spades. And it doesn't hurt that it will help students meet some of those Common Core standards!

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