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Adjectives and Adverbs

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Adjectives and adverbs are two parts of speech whose prototypical function is to qualify or modify the meaning of basic grammatical categories such as nouns and verbs. Adjectives and adverbs share important characteristics. Some words can be used as both adjectives and adverbs, and some grammatical structures using adjectives or adverbs are very similar. Because there are many ways to qualify something, many grammatical constructions use adjectives and adverbs. In some cases, the nouns or verbs qualified are omitted or implied, meaning that adjectives and adverbs are sometimes used independently from nouns or verbs and have a predicate or deictic value. This entry reviews the functions of adjectives and adverbs and then discusses the two categories in relations to language acquisition and language disorders.

Adjectives

Adjectives are characterizers of nouns or pronouns. They can characterize nouns directly in the noun phrase: “The heavy book.” “The book is heavy.” “It’s heavy.” In all of these examples, heavy is an adjective. In English, adjectives are clearly differentiated from the other categories, especially nouns but also adverbs. Some adjectives can be used as adverbs (e.g., as an adjective in “a fast car” and as an adverb in “to run fast”), but morphology and syntax make a clear difference between adjectives, adverbs, and nouns. For example, happy is an adjective, happiness is a noun, and happily is an adverb. The class of adjectives is open in English, and it is easy to create new adjectives, especially using morphology; for example, the adjective acceptable can be derived from the verb accept using the suffix -able.

In English, adjectives can be combined, following a very specific order, as in “a small round black wooden box.” Adjectives are not so easily characterized in other languages. In French, they are closer to nouns than in English. They use a system of agreement (number and gender) similar to that of nouns and must be in agreement with the noun or pronoun they modify. Moreover, unlike in English, they can be used as nouns without a pronoun support. For example, one does not have to say “It’s a big one”; the adjective can be used directly: *C’est un grand* (“It’s a big).”

Finally, in French, adjectives can precede or follow the noun. The set of preposed adjectives and of postposed adjectives are mostly different. For the adjectives that can be in either position, the meaning induced by the adjective is different in each position. Preposed adjectives correspond to a limited and nonproductive set, whereas postposed adjectives are an open set. As in English, adjectives are used after a copula, or linking verb, when they modify a pronoun. There are languages in which adjectives are quite different from English or French. For example, in Hausa, a Chadic language spoken in Niger and Nigeria, adjectives correspond to a limited set of 12 elements.

	babb	big		qara	small
a				mi	
	dog	long, tall		qanqa	small
o				ne	
	dany	fresh, raw,		gajere	short
e		unripe			
	sabo	new		tsofo	old
	baqi	black		fari	white
	mug	bad		ja	red
u					

Other languages have similar characteristics. All Bantu languages have a rather small adjective class. This is not limited to languages from the Bantu family; it is also the case for certain languages outside the African continent. Interestingly, the set of preposed adjectives in French is quite similar to the reduced set of adjectives in Hausa, as if in French there are two categories of adjectives, one similar to that in Hausa and one similar to that in English. Professor of linguistics Robert Dixon notes that adjectival concepts are expressed through other categories when no adjective category exists for a specific meaning. Chinese, for example, uses intransitive verbs, Hausa uses nouns and verbs, and Chinook uses a particle as well as noun and verb.

Linguist Bernard Comrie explains what is meant by saying that in Chinese, adjectives are verbs. First, words denoting qualities and properties do not occur with a copula, so they can be considered as full verbs. For example, *Mǎli hěn cōngmíng* (“Molly very intelligent”) would be translated as “Molly is very intelligent.” Second, qualities and properties are negated by the same particle as verbs, *bù*. Third, “adjectives” that modify a noun occur with the same particle *de* as verb phrases do. For example, *kāixīn -de rén* (“happy nominalizer person”) corresponds to “people who are happy (happy people).” This means that adjectives in Chinese are a subclass of verbs rather than a separate category.

Adverb

Adverbs are one of the most heterogeneous categories in syntax. With adjectives, although their syntax may not be different from the syntax of nouns or verbs in some languages, the semantic value of the category is unambiguous and provides a clear understanding of what an adjective is. This not the case for adverbs. As suggested by Randolph Quirk and colleagues, adverbs can be considered the set of words that do not fit the

definitions for other word classes.

Marc Wilmet makes similar comments about the status of adverbs in French. His comprehensive review of the literature showed that this point of view is widely shared. Wilmet concludes that the only solution is to define adverbs by extension, giving the list and characteristics of all words considered to be adverbs. Quirk et al. in fact do the same for English in their grammar, but do not say so explicitly.

The basic function of adverbs is to modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs, but they also modify other words and even whole sentences. The Greek and Latin origin of the adverb category (*adverbum*: word applied to the verb) explains why it is difficult to generalize the concept of adverb to all languages, especially non-Indo-European languages, which are very different from Greek.

In English, there are three main types of adverbs: simple adverbs (*just, only, well*), compound adverbs (*somehow, therefore*), and derivational adverbs (*oddly, interestingly, clockwise*). The first two types are closed classes, whereas the third category is an open class. It is easy, for example, to create adverbs from adjectives using the suffix *-ly*. In French, a similar typology exists: There is a set of basic adverbs that form a closed class, and it is possible to create adverbs easily from an adjective using the suffix *-ment*—for example, *fort* (“strong”) gives *forte-ment* (“strongly”).

In English, an adverb can be used to qualify a verb (“He *quite* forgot about it”), as a premodifier of an adjective or an adverb (“They are *quite* happily married”), or with a more peripheral relation to the sentence as a disjunct or a conjunct (“She has bought a big house, *so* she must have a lot of money”). This means that adverbs have clearly defined syntactic positions. Similar positions exist in French, and this explains how it is possible to change the category of a word and use it as an adverb.

A preposition, a pronoun, or a conjunction are changed to an adverb when used syntactically as an adverb. For example, in *Jules a voté contre* (“Jules voted *against*”), *contre* (“against”) is an adverb, whereas it is basically a preposition as in *Jules est contre le mur* (“Jules is *against* the wall”). English has the same characteristics. This shows that, except for the open-class subcategory of adverbs, adverbs are defined more by their syntactic and functional characteristics than by anything else. Any word that behaves syntactically as an adverb is an adverb, even if its use is metaphoric rather than basic. This explains why adverbs can be a garbage category, but it also means that adverbs have a fundamental role in language.

Language Acquisition

The development of adjectives and adverbs in young children’s language starts very early because some of the most common and useful words for communication belong to this category. This is the case of the word *no*, which is understood by 90% and produced by 23% of English-speaking 12-month-olds. Similar values (understood: 96% and produced: 29%) are found for French-speaking 12-month-olds. In this context, *no*, an adverb, could also be considered an interjection because it has not yet any syntactic combinatory properties.

Other adverbs appear very early in child development—for example, *more*, understood by 37% and produced by 9% of English-speaking 12-month-olds, and *encore* (“again”), understood by 56% and produced by 11% of French-speaking 12-month-olds. *More* is an adjective (or a determiner) or an adverb in English (depending on the context) and *encore* is an adverb in French, but both words have a very similar function and use in children’s speech, which emphasizes the connection between adjective and adverb in that both are modifiers. Often, what is modified is implied; children can use the word in isolation to express their desire for a repetition of the situation of interest at the moment the word is produced.

Other similar words are location adverbs such as *in* in English and *dedans* (“in”) in French. In English, these words can also be a preposition or a particle. In French, prepositions and adverbs have often different but

related forms—for example, the adverb *dedans* and the preposition *dans* (“in”). This makes it easier to understand that children are not confusing categories but using word forms that they hear in adverb positions.

Language Disorders

There is not a lot of information about the use of adjectives and adverbs in language disorders. These words are not frequently included in language tests because they are not easy to represent (and thus to test) and are often not considered as basic in language development. Some studies have targeted the production of adjectives in Spanish because there are specific features of the Spanish language that create problems for children with specific language impairment (SLI).

The reason is that in Spanish, adjectives are marked for gender (*o* for masculine and *a* for feminine), which must agree with the noun they modify. Because gender is sometimes opaque in Spanish, this generates errors in children’s production: One ending is replaced by the other. This error pattern makes this an efficient marker of language difficulties for Spanish-speaking children.

Children with SLI can have problems with adverbs when they are used in grammatical structures and not only in isolation or simple two-word structures as in the early years of language acquisition. For example, negation uses not only words such as *no* or *not* but also uses negative auxiliary verbs with a contraction such as *doesn’t* (e.g., “It doesn’t fit”). This type of construction is difficult for children with SLI. In whose study, 5-year-old children with SLI produced nonadult negative sentences (e.g., “It not fit”), which are not produced by normally developing 5-year-olds but which can be found in 2- to 3-year-old typically developing children.

See also [Grammatical Development](#); [Language Disorders in Children](#); [Morphology](#); [Nouns and Pronouns](#); [Syntactic Disorders](#); [Syntax and Grammar](#)

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Further Readings

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