

The function / category confusion

For two hundred years or more the following two notions have been persistently confused in discussions of English grammar:

- What **kind** of constituent is this? — category
- What **role** does this constituent perform? — function

The function / category confusion

For two hundred years or more the following two notions have been persistently confused in discussions of English grammar:

- What **kind** of constituent is this? — **category**
- What **role** does this constituent perform? — **function**

The **category** of a word can be listed in a dictionary: it is independent of the syntax of any particular sentence.

The **function** cannot be listed in the dictionary: It is entirely relative to the syntax of the particular expression containing the word.

The function / category confusion

Just to make sure the disastrous confusion continues for another hundred years or so, the Merriam-Webster dictionaries actually **use the term 'function' for '(lexical) category'**!

Main Entry:	¹ pig
Pronunciation:	¹ pig
Function:	<i>noun</i>
Inflected Form:	-s
Usage:	<i>often attributive</i>
Etymology:	Middle English <i>pigge</i>

1 : a young swine of either sex that has not reached sexual maturity; *broadly* : a wild or domestic swine — see HOG 1a ...

The function / category confusion

Just to make sure the disastrous confusion continues for another hundred years or so, the Merriam-Webster dictionaries actually **use the term 'function' for '(lexical) category'**!

Main Entry:	¹ pig
Pronunciation:	¹ pig
Function: Category!!	<i>noun</i>
Inflected Form:	-s
Usage:	<i>often attributive</i>
Etymology:	Middle English <i>pigge</i>

1 : a young swine of either sex that has not reached sexual maturity; *broadly* : a wild or domestic swine — see HOG 1a . . .

The functions of adjectives and AdjPs

Adjectives serve (of course) as Head of AdjP. (When nothing hangs on it I often say 'adjective' when strictly I mean AdjP.)

The two most important functions in which AdjPs serve are:

1. Attributive Modifier in the structure of NP (n.b.: stackable):

[_{NP} *those* [_{Nom} *totally stupid* [_{Nom} *red* [_{Nom} *pants*]]]]

2. Predicative Complement in the structure of VP:

Those pants [_{VP} *look* *really stupid*]

The functions of adjective phrases and AdjPs

There are a few less significant functions of AdjP:

Postpositive Modifier in the structure of NP:

I'd never seen [_{NP} *anything* *so stupid*]

External Modifier in the structure of indefinite NP:

I'd never seen [_{NP} *so stupid* *a* [_{Nom} *pair of pants*]]

(Marginally, perhaps also Subject function, though this isn't clear: think of *Totally stupid* *is not a good way to be* or *Totally stupid* *is not quite as bad as totally evil*.)

The functions of adjective phrases

Traditional grammar crucially fails to recognize that

occurrence as Attributive \neq membership in Adj

In the same spirit as the 'thing word' definition of Noun, traditional grammarians define adjective as a word that 'modifies' or 'qualifies' or 'adds to the meaning' of a noun'.

This is vague, semantically-tinged function talk. As a definition, it is hopeless.

Consider: *The good die young.*

Two adjectives, no nouns. Modifying a noun is not necessary.

But as we shall see, it is also not sufficient.

The functions of adjective phrases

Dictionaries often list various nouns with Adj as a second category. Merriam-Webster is typical:

Main Entry:	² head
Pronunciation:	^h hed
Function: Category!!	<i>adjective</i>
Etymology:	Middle English <i>heved, hed</i> , from <i>heved, hed</i> , n.

1 : of, relating to, or for a head or the head

2 : PRINCIPAL, CHIEF, LEADING, FIRST ⟨*head chorister*⟩
⟨*head cook*⟩

3 : situated at the head ⟨*head wall** ⟨*head sails*⟩

4 : coming from in front : meeting the head as it is moved forward ⟨*head sea*⟩ ⟨*head tide*⟩

The functions of adjective phrases

Consider the modifiers in NPs like Alaska residents, Beatles recordings, California girls, Dell laptops, Edinburgh weather...

If serving in Attributive Modifier function is sufficient to determine adjectivehood, then the Adjective category will have to include

- all place names in the world (Sheffield steel)
- every company name (Toyota truck)
- every number name (prestigious 10025 zipcode)
- every name of a chemical element or other substance (aluminium foil, gold ring, oil painting, plutonium bomb...)
- every plant name (mahogany table, pine boards, grass verge) ...

The functions of adjective phrases

Under the traditional view **the list of adjectives will never end.**

Adjective will be an open category, even larger than Noun.

And there will be no distinction in grammatical properties between the two.

The functions of adjective phrases

M-W is cautious in defining 'adjective', claiming only typicality, not criteriality:

... typically used as a modifier of a noun to denote a quality of the thing named ...

The functions of adjective phrases

M-W is cautious in defining ‘adjective’, claiming only typicality, not criteriality:

... typically used as a modifier of a noun to denote a quality of the thing named ...

But amusingly, M-W also has an entry for ‘adjective’ as an **adjective**! The primary sense given is:

being an adjective (an *adjective* word) : functioning as an adjective (an *adjective* clause) : fitting or suitable to an adjective (adjective uses of nouns) (adjective inflections)

A classic confusion over what ‘adjective’ means, in a dictionary entry where *adjective* is wrongly analysed as an adjective!

Criteria for adjectivehood

So how do we define 'adjective', if not by reference to the function *Attributive Modifier*?

In any language, the adjectives (if there are any) are a grammatically distinct class of words including the simplest and most direct ways of denoting **one-dimensional** and **stative** properties such as being good, bad, large, small, new, old, black, white, etc.

But that is applicable only in universal grammar.

In English we can, and must, be more specific.

Criteria for adjectivehood

- Adjectives usually denote **static** and **gradable** properties, and many basic ones **inflect** for grade (*old*, *older*, *oldest*).
- Uninflectable adjectives, if gradable, express grade with pre-Head *more* and *most*.
- No adjectives show agreement for person or number.
- Adverbs function as pre-head Modifiers of Adjectives (unusually intelligent, insanely great).
- Typical AdjPs can serve as both Attributive Modifier (*big boy*) and Predicative Complement (*looks big*).
- The Complements that Adjectives select are typically PP or Clause — almost never NP.

Criteria for adjectivehood

AdjP can serve as **Adjuncts** (i.e., Modifiers or Supplements).

When such an Adjunct is fronted, it requires a **target of predication**.

If no such target is available, we get the **dangling modifier** effect — useful for diagnosing adjectives:

Away is a Preposition but *afraid* is an Adjective:

Away from home, John behaved properly. [no target needed]

Afraid of us, John behaved properly. [target is *John*]

Away from home, there was just work. [target unneeded]

**Afraid of us, there was just work.* [BAD — NO TARGET]

Criteria for adjectivehood

The predicativity test is also useful in distinguishing adjectives from adverbs. The general principle is: **Prepositions and Adverbs always have some uses as non-predicative modifiers; adjectives never do.**

Again is an Adverb. *Awake* is an Adjective.

Again, we scarcely knew what to do.

[no target needed]

Awake, we scarcely knew what to do.

[target is *we*]

Again, it snowed heavily.

[target unneeded]

**Awake, it snowed heavily.*

[BAD — NO TARGET]

Criteria for adjectivehood

The strange adjective *worth*

- Does not inflect for **grade** (despite being short).
- Can **never** be used attributively.
- Selects an **NP** complement, not PP.
- The complement it takes is **obligatory**.

Criteria for adjectivehood

The strange adjective *worth*

Compare with the typical adjective *worthy*:

The lexeme *worth*

worth, **worther*, **worthest*

* *It's a worth project.*

It was worth my time.

* *It was worth of my time.*

* *It is certainly worth.*

The lexeme *worthy*

worthy, *worthier*, *worthiest*

It's a worthy project.

* *It was worthy my time.*

It was worthy of my time.

It is certainly worthy.

Criteria for adjectivehood

The words *due*, *like*, *near*, *opposite*, and *unlike* are also puzzling, with a complex mix of Adjective and Preposition properties. But arguments can be given that

- *due* and *opposite* were adjectives but have evolved into prepositions;
- *like* and *unlike* are sometimes prepositions and sometimes adjectives with NP or Clause complements;
- *near* may be dually categorized, but is probably prepositional (though it inflects for grade!).

And now...

Prescriptive Poppycock time

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs.

E. B. White, in chapter 5 ('An Approach to Style')
of Strunk & White's *The Elements of Style*

White's very next sentence is:

The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or
inaccurate noun out of a tight place.

The underlined words are, of course, adjectives.

Don't the rules apply to White himself?

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Apparently they don't:

"It's very small and weak"

— *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Apparently they don't:

"It's very small and weak"

— *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's dialog. What about the expository narrative?

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Apparently they don't:

"It's very small and weak"

— *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's dialog. What about the expository narrative?

The grass was wet

— *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Apparently they don't:

"It's very small and weak" — *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's dialog. What about the expository narrative?

The grass was wet — *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's predicative. What about attributive adjectives?

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Apparently they don't:

"It's very small and weak" — *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's dialog. What about the expository narrative?

The grass was wet — *Charlotte's Web*, page 1.

But that's predicative. What about attributive adjectives?

A queer look came over John Arable's face
— *Charlotte's Web*, page 3.

*the room smelled of coffee, bacon,
damp plaster, and wood smoke* — *Charlotte's Web*, page 3.

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

There . . . was the newborn pig. It was a white one. The morning light shone through its ears, turning them pink. “He’s yours,” said Mr. Arable. “Saved from an untimely death. And may the good Lord forgive me for this foolishness.” Fern couldn’t take her eyes off the tiny pig. “Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, LOOK at him. He’s absolutely perfect.”

— *Charlotte’s Web*, page 4.

White’s novel is admired by everyone who knows it. His assertion that as a writer you should avoid using adjectives is simply absurd — visibly false in the light of his own excellent writing.

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

William Zinsser likewise asserts that most adjectives are 'unnecessary'.

How could he say this with a straight face when when he couldn't finish his sentence without the adjective *unnecessary*?

And Alistair Cooke, the brilliant author of 2,869 'Letter from America' broadcasts on BBC radio, thought that after drafting a script he would then 'beat the hell out of it, getting rid of all the adverbs, all the adjectives, all the hackneyed words.' (He didn't.)

Do these people even know what adjectives are?

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

Notice that under the traditional definition of ‘adjective’, where all determinatives and genitive pronouns are included, the adjective count in any prose is vastly higher:

There . . . was the newborn pig. It was a white one. The morning light shone through its ears, turning them pink. “He’s yours,” said Mr. Arable. “Saved from an untimely death. And may the good Lord forgive me for this foolishness.” Fern couldn’t take her eyes off the tiny pig. “Oh,” she whispered. “Oh, LOOK at him. He’s absolutely perfect.”

Clearly the people who claim they avoid adjectives cannot possibly also claim that they defend the traditional definition.

Prescriptive Poppycock time: Adjectivophobia

There is more than a little hypocrisy here. **The very people who tell you not to are doing it more than you are.**

Bertold Brecht commented on this nasty tendency in human beings:

*Those who take the meat from the table
Teach contentment.*

*Those for whom the taxes are destined
Demand sacrifice.*

*Those who eat their fill speak to the hungry
Of wonderful times to come.*

*Those who lead the country into the abyss
Call ruling too difficult
For ordinary men.*