Linguistic lingo for lawyers: word classes

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In Clarity 55, I suggested that the journal could include regular columns called 'Linguistic Lingo for Lawyers' and 'Legal Lingo for Linguists'. These would be practical and fairly short (500 words or so). In Clarity 55 and 56, I wrote the first two articles, on grammatical terms for verb and personal pronoun forms. When I was thinking what to write about this time, I realised this would be easier if I had an overall framework into which to fit the individual topics. I hope this will also help readers to see how different topics relate to each other. So here I write about word classes.

Open and closed word classes

There are two types of word class: closed classes, which are finite, and open classes, which are not. Closed word classes tend to comprise a small number of words that are:
• stable, existing in the same form for long periods
• grammatically important
• often short
• sometimes called 'grammatical', 'function' or 'structure' words.

Open word classes comprise vast numbers of words that are:
• much more prone to come and go with cultural change in society
• the main subject matter of dictionaries
• sometimes called 'lexical' words.

Because the boundaries between the word classes are not absolutely fixed, different grammarians may draw them in different places. This is sometimes called 'gradience'. The categories below are based on *A Student's Grammar of the English Language*, by Greenbaum and Quirk (Longman, 1990).

Closed word classes: functions and examples

Closed word classes		
Class	**Function**	**Examples**
Pronoun	Replaces a noun or noun phrase that has already been mentioned, or is about to be	she, it, them, mine, ours, theirs, yourselves, this, that, these, somebody, anyone
Determiner	Shows who or what the following noun or noun phrase refers to	a, an, the, this, those, my, your, all, few, each, two, sixth
Auxiliary verb	Expresses the tense and voice of a full verb	to be, to have, to do

Modal verb	Expresses the mood of a full verb: that a state or action is possible, intended or necessary rather than actual	can, may, shall, will, must, could, might, should, would
Preposition	Relates the following noun or pronoun to other words in the sentence	in, on, under, around, of, inside, from, during, through, by, beneath, above
Conjunction	Connects words, phrases, clauses or sentences	and, but, for, nor, yet, so, because, if, after, when, while, when

Open word classes: functions and examples

Open word classes		
Class	**Function**	**Examples**
Noun	Refers to a person, place or thing	cat, train, website, modem, love, Chris, Liverpool, garden, idea, hospital, fun, computer, fire
Adjective	Adds information about a noun or pronoun	tall, changeable, blue, wonderful, British, pleasant, savoury, triangular, leathery, bad, attractive, suspicious
Full verb	Indicates that an action takes place or a state exists	grow, request, arrive, seek, download, annul, retreat, forbid, act, right-click, rebel, celebrate
Adverb	Modifies a sentence, verb, adverb or adjective	fast, thankfully, really, simply, hopefully, almost, afterwards, sufficiently, gradually, well, clockwise, naturally

Some grammarians include an extra class: interjections, which express sudden emotion. Examples include *oh*, *ahem*, *shhh*, *psst*, *ugh*, *ouch*, *tut-tut*, *phew*, *gah*, *boo*, *wow* and *ah*. They would usually be followed by an exclamation mark.

Words may belong to more than one class. For example, *be* may be an auxiliary or full verb; and *forward* may be a noun, adjective, full verb or adverb.

Relevance of these terms to plain English

Since our job as plain-language practitioners includes getting rid of unnecessary technical terms, we would not use our own professional jargon without good reason. But technical jargon is valuable as a form of shorthand between professionals, so all these terms can be useful in discussions with one another. Some occur more often than others, being more central to common plain-English guidelines. Those of us involved in plain-language training may well need to explain these to laypeople.

Ideas for future columns

Would you like to write about one of the eight word classes not yet covered? Or about a different aspect of verbs or pronouns? There are many other areas of language and linguistics that are relevant to plain language: such as phonetics and phonology, morphology, semantics, sociolinguistics, psycholinguistics and pragmatics. Could you write for this column on one of these?

We also need people to start and write for this column's twin, Legal Lingo for Linguists.