

Lesson 1.1: Introduction to Nouns – Nouns and Unconscious Knowledge

Take a nonsense sentence. Make up your own or use something like this:

The dorbling groobies frandled a bonkled slank.

Then ask students to identify the part of speech of various words. They'll 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.

Move some of those words around and see what happens:

While she was dorbling, she bonkled some slank groobies.
He groobies on the weekends.

Now what part of speech is *dorbling* or *bonkled*? Yep, they're both verbs. We know this because of the morphology (the endings, or the affixes, on the words) and the syntax (the position of the words in relation to the other words). What's *slank* here? It's an adjective, which we know because of its position preceding *groobies*, which is still a noun. But in the next sentence, *groobies* is a verb. How do we know? Again, the endings and the position.

So a key lesson here is that we all already know everything we need to know about parts of speech, about the various lexical categories. We just need to make that unconscious knowledge into conscious knowledge. We make use of morphology and syntax constantly. Another important thing to note is that meaning-based definitions (a noun is a person, place, or thing; a verb is an action or state) are very limited and limiting, and can sometimes lead us astray. They can be good starting places, but it's really the other information that our brain relies on to create the good sentences it creates all the time. So when we start paying attention to morphology and syntax, we'll see that a whole new linguistic world opens up.