

Lesson 4.1: Adjective Morphology and Syntax

Just as the meaning-based definitions for nouns and verbs can be problematic, so too can a definition of adjective that labels it simply as a “describing word”; nouns can also describe (**linguistics** book), as can verbs (She is **diving**.), so, again, it is the morphological and syntactic information that is more reliable and less subjective when identifying adjectives.

Most adjectives take comparative and superlative morphology: *-er/-est* or the words *more* and *most*.

So now we already have a handy test for adjectives.

Test 1 for Adjectives: Does the word have a comparative and superlative form?

small, smaller, smallest
curious, more curious, most curious
ugly, uglier, ugliest
difficult, more difficult, most difficult

There's a lesson on TeachLing on the comparative and superlative forms of adjectives. (I should note that many adverbs also have comparative and superlative forms: *I run faster than you*. See lesson 4.3.)

Now, some adjectives cannot be compared since they are not **gradable**, so it might be weird to say

This chair is more wooden than that one.
He is more married than she is.

since you're either wooden or you're not, married or not, and so on. Sometimes, however, we use these forms in certain situations and they do make sense. If someone said that one chair is more wooden than another, what might that mean?

Gradability is also relevant for a second test for adjectives, their ability to be used with a degree word, like *very*.

Test 2 for Adjectives: Can the word be preceded by a degree word?

Degree words (also sometimes called intensifiers) are a part of speech (sometimes misclassified as adverbs, though they have different syntactic and morphological behavior – I'll come back to that at some point) that, well, express degree, so words like *very, so, too, more, less, quite, almost, kind of, rather, pretty, sort of, or extremely*.

Again, as with the comparative and superlative forms for adjectives, there are some adjectives that resist a word like *very* since they are already opposite ends on a scale – *complete/incomplete, married/not married, wooden/non wooden, pregnant/not pregnant*. Does *very* work with these adjectives? We do use it that way, so you might want to have your students explain what something like "very complete" might mean and when it might be used (rather than just saying "don't say that" or "we can't say that").

Test 3 for Adjectives: Can the word follow a linking verb?

Adjectives occur in two basic positions: before a noun (the **furry** cat) and following a linking verb (the cat is **furry**). Linking verbs do just that – “link” to the subject noun phrase by renaming it. Linking verbs include sense verbs like *taste, smell, feel*, as well as verbs of “existence” like *be, remain, seem, appear, grow, or become*.

Jojo is tall.

The cat remains skittish.

The toast tastes burned.

So there you go. Three easy tests to use to verify whether a word is an adjective.

Anywhere where there is uncertainty or disagreement among your students provides the perfect opportunity to do analysis, some figuring out. If you're uncertain, that simply means something interesting is going on. One place where there may be some debate is figuring out whether participles are adjectives or verbs.