

## 1.2.1 - FUNCTION & CONTENT WORDS

Nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions are the major word classes of English, and they are the sorts of words we find in dictionaries with meanings attached to them. However, not all words are straightforwardly meaningful, and this observation paves to distinguish between those words that carry meaning and those that have little meaning in and of themselves.

If we consider this sentence: *The* first day *of the* semester, *the* professor told us we *will* be learning many new words over *the* course *of the* semester.

It is difficult to ascribe the kind of meaning to the blue, italicized words as we could to the non-italicized ones. For instance, imagine being asked by someone who has a low proficiency in English to explain the word “*the*” to them. What would you tell them is the meaning of “the?” It surely is likely you won’t have an answer for them. A better way of thinking of these words is to explain them as fulfilling a particular function in the sentence. For example, the definite article “the” signals to the interlocutor common ground with respect to the referred nouns in the sentence. It is being attached to specific nouns to show that the speaker and their interlocutor know specifically the professor they are talking about out of the categories of professors.

So, those words that do not carry much lexical meaning are known as **function words** and they belong to classes known as functional categories. They are distinguished from nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, which carry lexical meaning, and are also known as **content words**. The category of function words includes conjunction, prepositions, pronouns, and articles.

This distinction has proved useful not only in the description of individual languages but also in the study of language acquisition as well as the study of language disorders. Content words are often referred to as the **open class** because we can and regularly do add new words to these classes. For example, with advances in technology, English and other languages have added new words such as *Facebook*, *Google*, *Moodle*, *Blog*, and *Fakersation* to the class of content words. While *Facebook* is generally used as a noun, *Blog* is frequently used as a noun, a verb, and an adverb.

Function words are sometimes called the **closed class** because it is difficult to think of any conjunctions, articles, or prepositions that have recently entered the English language. The small set of personal pronouns such as *I, me, you, yours, mine, his, hers, she*, etc. are part of this class. Even with the growth of feminist and LGBTQ movements and the proposal to add genderless singular pronouns, these attempts have failed because it is an attempt to expand the closed class. Various proposals such as “e” have been put forward. However, none are likely to gain traction because the closed classes are unreceptive to new membership. A convenient alternative used by many is *s/he, he or she, or they*.

Content and function words also play a determining role in distinguishing between patients with different types of aphasia. Aphasia is an impairment of language, affecting the production or comprehension of speech and the ability to read or write. Aphasia is always due to injury to the brain, generally from a stroke, particularly in older individuals. Aphasia can be so severe as to make communication with the patient almost impossible or it can also be mild. It may affect mainly a single aspect of language use, such as the ability to retrieve the names of objects, so content words, or the ability to put words together into a sentence, therefore affecting function words. Aphasias are categorized differently depending on their severity or the area of the brain that is affected. While global aphasia is the most severe form of aphasia, Broca’s and Wernicke’s Aphasia are variations depending on the area of the brain that is affected.

Individuals with Broca’s Aphasia have trouble speaking fluently but their comprehension can be relatively preserved. They have difficulty producing grammatical sentences, and their speech is limited to short utterances of less than four words. While they may understand simple sentences, complex ones become more difficult to understand. For example, they may not have trouble understanding the sentence "Mary gave John balloons" so, a sentence with no function words, but may not be able to understand the sentence "The balloons were given to John by Mary," so, a sentence with function words.

Individuals affected by Wernicke’s aphasia have problems grasping the meaning of spoken words and sentences while their ease of producing connected speech is not very affected. They can produce many words using grammatically correct sentences at a normal rate and prosody. However, what they say does not make a lot of sense. And as you may guess, their content words are affected.

Besides indicating that content and function words are organized differently in the brain, these categories of aphasia show that the brain treats content and function words differently.

Let's finish up with this game that has circulated over the internet. Please count the number of F's in the following text.

FINISHED FILES ARE THE  
RESULT OF YEARS OF SCIENTIFIC  
STUDY COMBINED WITH THE  
EXPERIENCE OF YEARS

Most people come up with three, which is wrong. If you came up with fewer than six, count again, and this time, pay attention to function words. This little test does show that the brain treats content and function words differently and much more neurological evidence supports this claim.