

## GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES

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**Abstract:** *In traditional structural grammar, grammatical categories are semantic distinctions; this is reflected in a morphological or syntactic paradigm. But in generative grammar, which sees meaning as separate from grammar, they are categories that define the distribution of syntactic elements. Categories may be described and named with regard to the type of meanings that they are used to express. For example, the category of tense usually expresses the time of occurrence (e.g. past, present or future). However, purely grammatical features do not always correspond simply or consistently to elements of meaning, and different authors may take significantly different approaches in their terminology and analysis.*

**Key words:** *grammatical category, number, case mood, gender, person, tense, aspect, degree, voice.*

In linguistics, a grammatical category or grammatical feature is a property of items within the grammar of a language. Within each category there are two or more possible values (sometimes called grammemes), which are normally mutually exclusive. Another way to define a grammatical category is as a category that expresses meanings from a single conceptual domain, contrasts with other such categories, and is expressed through formally similar expressions. Another definition distinguishes grammatical categories from lexical categories, such that the elements in a grammatical category have a common grammatical meaning – that is, they are part of the language's grammatical structure.

The term "grammatical category" refers to specific properties of a word that can cause that word and/or a related word to change in form for grammatical reasons (ensuring agreement between words).

For example, the word "boy" is a **noun**. Nouns have a grammatical category called "**number**". The values of number are **singular** (one) and **plural** (two or more).

1. The girl **is** singing.
2. The girls **are** singing.





In sentence 1, "girl" is in its basic form, giving its "number" the value of singular. There is one boy and the related auxiliary verb "to be" is in the singular form (is).

In sentence 2, the form of "girl" has changed to "girls", giving its "number" the value of plural. There is more than one girl and the related "to be" is in the plural form (are).

In the above example, the "number" of "girl" influences the form of boy, and also influences the form of a related word (be). "Number" is a "grammatical category".

English has over twenty grammatical categories. Below we list the most common ones for English learners and summarise their main features.

### Number

Number is a property of **nouns** and **pronouns**, and indicates quantity. Number has two values:

- **singular**: indicates one only
- **plural**: indicates two or more

### Case

Case is a property of **pronouns** and **nouns**, and expresses their relationship to the rest of the sentence. Case has three values (two of which do not apply to nouns):

- **subjective** (pronouns only): when the word is the subject
- **objective** (pronouns only): when the word is the object
- **possessive** (pronouns and nouns): when the word indicates possession (ownership)

word type	Number	
	singular	plural
<b>Noun</b>	Boy	Boys
<b>Pronoun</b>	I	We

word type	Case		
	subjectiv e	objectiv e	possessiv e
<b>Pronoun</b>	I	Me	mine
<b>Noun</b>			boy's

### Gender





*Natural gender* is a property of **pronouns**, and differentiates the sexes.

Natural gender has three values:

- **masculine**: indicates male
- **feminine**: indicates female
- **neuter**: indicates everything else

word type	Gender		
	masculine	Feminine	neuter
<b>Pronoun</b>	he/him/his	she/her/hers	it/its

Note that Old English had "grammatical gender" where words themselves had gender. Remnants of this are found in "natural gender", which is based on the sex of people rather than the gender of words.

### Person

Person is a property of **pronouns**, and differentiates participants in a conversation.

Person has three values:

- **first person**: refers to the speaker
- **second person**: refers to the hearer
- **third person**: refers to all other people or things

word type	Person		
	1st	2nd	3rd
<b>Pronoun</b>	I/me we/u s	you	he/him, she/her, it they

### Tense

word type	Tense	
	past	Present
<b>Verb</b>	was did had worke	am do have work





Tense is a property of **verbs**, and most closely corresponds with location in time. Tense has two values:

	d ran	run
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**past:** indicates before now

**present:** indicates now (and sometimes before and after now)

Note that "future tense" is not shown here because strictly-speaking it is not a tense but a structure to talk about the future (after now).

### Aspect

Aspect is a property of **verbs**, and expresses our view of the time structure of an activity or state. Aspect has three values:

- **simple:** the time has no structure
- **continuous:** expresses ongoing action
- **perfect:** expresses completed action

word type	Aspect		
	simple	Continuous	Perfect
Verb	they work	they are working	they have worked

### Mood

Mood is a property of **verbs**, and relates to the speaker's feelings about the reality of what he is saying. Mood has three values:

- **indicative:** expresses simple statement of fact
- **imperative:** expresses command
- **subjunctive:** expresses something desired or imagined

word type	Mood		
	indicative	imperative	subjunctive
Verb	James stood up.	Stand up!	We insist that he stand.





word type	Mood		
	indicative	imperative	subjunctive
	Is it quiet enough?	Be quiet!	It is essential that you be quiet.

### Voice

Voice is a property of **transitive verbs**\*, and expresses the relationship of the subject to the action. Voice has two values:

- **active**: the subject does the action
- **passive**: the subject receives the action

<b>transitive verb</b>	The cat ate the mouse.	The mouse was eaten by the cat.
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\*A transitive verb can take a direct object. (An intransitive verb does not take a direct object.)

### Degree


Degree is a property of gradable **adjectives** and **adverbs**, and indicates amount. Degree has three values:

- **positive**: indicates a basic quality
- **comparative**: indicates a greater quality
- **superlative**: indicates the maximum quality

word type	Degree		
	positive	comparative	superlative
<b>gradable adjective</b>	happy	happier	the happiest
<b>gradable adverb</b>	carefully	more carefully	the most carefully







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Categories can also pertain to sentence constituents that are larger than a single word (phrases, or sometimes clauses). A phrase often inherits category values from its head word; for example, in the above sentences, the noun phrase *the birds* inherits plural number from the noun *birds*. In other cases such values are associated with the way in which the phrase is constructed; for example, in the coordinated noun phrase *Tom and Mary*, the phrase has plural number (it would take a plural verb), even though both the nouns from which it is built up are singular.

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