PEARSON NEW INTERNATIONAL EDITION

How English Works
A Linguistic Introduction

Anne Curzan Michael P. Adams

Third Edition

ALWAYS LEARNING

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Language Change at Work

Is It *fish* or *fishes*, *oxen* or *oxes*?

Irregular plurals occur in Modern English for a variety of reasons. First, in Old English, there were several plural inflectional endings that depended on the class and gender of the noun. These endings included *-(a)s* and *-en*. Over time, *-s* became the regular plural ending, but we still have three "remnant" *-en* plurals: *children, oxen*, and *brethren* (versus *brothers*). These last two may be on their way to obsolescence, which would leave us with only one.

Old English also had unmarked plurals for one class of nouns, including the words *sheep* and *deer*. This class has expanded rather than shrunk over time. In other words, speakers extended this pattern of zero plurals to new words by analogy. For example, *fish* used to take an inflectional ending with final *-s* to form the plural, and now it does not; it is, therefore, an old word with a new plural ending (or zero ending, to be precise). A more recent acquisition to the English vocabulary, *moose*, was borrowed from Algonquian, and it was added to this irregular class of nouns, with the plural *moose*, not **mooses*. In the case of *fish*, the plural with a final *-s* has never completely died. For example, in the Michigan Corpus of Academic Spoken English (MICASE), although *fish* is the most common plural form, there are thirty-three examples of *fishes*. And speaking of variation in plural forms due to analogy, what is your plural form of *shrimp*?

Another set of irregular plurals comes from borrowed words that retain their foreign plural forms for a certain period of time. For example, many speakers still use Latin plural forms for *fungus/fungi, syllabus/syllabi, memorandum/memoranda*, and *datum/data*. In this last case, however, the plural *data* is now often interpreted and used by many speakers as a singular mass noun. One borrowed Latin word with four forms is causing English speakers a great deal of confusion: *alumnus* (masculine), *alumna* (feminine), *alumni* (plural generic or masculine), *alumnae* (plural feminine). *Alumni* is often used as a generic singular, sometimes with the plural *alumnis*. Some speakers dodge the issue entirely with the shortened forms *alum* and *alums*.

DET + NOUN	*a/the noun*	*the weather* (**a weather*)
DET + ADJ + NOUN	*a/the troublesome noun*	*the bad weather* (**a bad weather*)
ADJ + NOUN	*quirky nouns* (**quirky noun*)	*good weather*

Based on the ungrammatical constructions marked with an asterisk (*), we can see how *noun* and *weather* behave differently. *Noun* is a countable noun and *weather* is uncountable. **Countable nouns** (or count nouns) are quantifiable (i.e., they can be counted). And countable nouns can take plural *-s*. **Uncountable nouns** (or mass nouns) describe ideas (*peace*) or other referents that cannot be counted (*engineering*). If you want to count *engineering*, you have to count *kinds/types of engineering*. In other words, you have to add a countable quantifier.

The linguist Ray Jackendoff has argued that, given enough context, all nouns can be countable and uncountable. You can be in love (uncountable) but have had three great loves (countable) in your life. In theory, the quantifier *fewer* modifies only countable

nouns and *less* uncountable nouns. But many speakers use *less* for both types of nouns, and there are some well-known, even standard exceptions to the rule: the saying "one less thing to worry about," the common essay prompt "write an essay of 500 words or less," and the grocery store sign "10 items or less."

In the syntax of a phrase or clause, nouns can function as subjects, objects (direct and indirect objects of verbs and objects of prepositions), and complements. One fairly reliable test for a noun is whether the word can fill any of these syntactic positions:

The _____

(The) _____ is/are

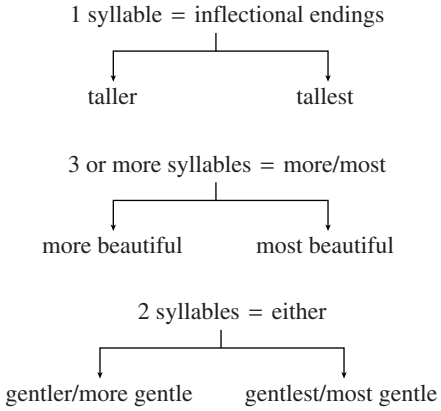
I like/want/have (the) _____

There are odd exceptions to the second test. For example, "pretty is as pretty does" has an adjective in this syntactic position, but we all recognize the construction, though acceptable, as slightly peculiar grammatically.

Adjectives

Merely establishing that adjectives "describe things" is clearly inadequate. At some level, depending on how we interpret *describe,* almost all words are describing words. In more precise linguistic terms, adjectives are words that modify the meaning of nouns.

Morphological Description of Adjectives Morphologically, some derivational suffixes indicate adjectiveness: for example, *-al, -able, -like, -ful, -y, -an*. Most adjectives have **comparative** and **superlative** forms, which are formed either by the addition of the inflectional endings *-er/-est* or of the modifiers *more/most*. English follows the general rule that adjectives of one syllable take the inflectional endings (*tall, taller, tallest*), adjectives of three or more syllables take *more/most* (*beautiful, more beautiful, most beautiful*), and adjectives of two syllables often can do either (*gentle, gentler* or *more gentle, gentlest* or *most gentle*).



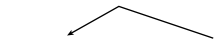
Within this general rule, there are patterns and exceptions. For example, you probably wouldn't say *pompouser* or *purpler,* and many people think that *funner* sounds terrible. The word *fun* takes *more/most* for historical reasons, as it only recently shifted

from a noun to an adjective. There is a good chance that, over time, its morphological behavior will come into line with other one-syllable adjectives and it will become regular: *funner* and *funnest* may become standard.

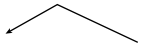
Not all adjectives form comparatives and superlatives, for semantic reasons: adjectives must be gradable in order to have degrees of comparison. For example, the meaning of *unique*, at least in theory, resists comparison—if something is one of a kind, it cannot be compared. However, you will certainly hear "more unique" if you listen for it. Other nongradable adjectives include *pregnant, alive*, and *asleep*. And in any given context, nongradable adjectives may take a comparative or superlative form. For example, if your alarm clock goes off and you continue to sleep but your roommate wakes up, you might say, "Well, I guess I was more asleep than you were."

Some adjectives form the comparative and superlative in irregular ways, for example, *good/better/best* and *bad/worse/worst.*

Syntactic Position of Adjectives Syntactically, adjectives can appear in **attributive** or **predicative** position. Attributive position refers to the position before the noun (and after the determiner if it is present): *fascinating adjectives*, or *the attributive adjective*. Predicative position refers to the position after the verb. (The predicate is the verb and other elements it governs in a clause. In the clause *grammar makes me happy, grammar* is the subject and *makes me happy* is the **predicate**.) In predicative position, the adjective can modify the subject or in some cases the object. After a linking verb such as *be* or *seem*, predicative adjectives describe the subject:

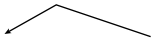


Adjectives are fascinating.



Grammar seems cooler than I remember.

After a small set of verbs, a predicative adjective can modify the object:



We called the construction grammatical.

Grammar makes me happy.

In English, some adjectives typically appear exclusively or almost exclusively in attributive or in predicative position. For example:

Predicative	**Attributive**
The grammarian is finally well.	**The well grammarian sang the noun's praises.*
The student was awake for class.	**The awake student wanted to learn more grammar.*
**The grammar teacher was former.*	*The former grammar teacher missed studying adjectives.*
**Her interest in grammar was sheer.*	*The sheer interest of grammar overwhelmed her.*

A Question to Discuss

Am I Good or Well?

Whether or not you are good or well depends on what you mean. If your health is good, then you are well. *Well* can function as an adjective meaning 'healthy', which is its meaning here. If you do something well, you are good at it. In this case, *well* is an adverb, and *good* is an adjective. So things are good and one does things well.

Confusion arises because *well*, which is usually an adverb, can also be an adjective, but only in the context of discussing one's health. So, if someone asks you how you are, what is the difference between saying "I'm good" and "I'm well"? (Hint: There is arguably a difference.) A very similar issue arises if you want to express your condolences and say that you feel bad/badly about something. Do you think it should be *bad* or *badly* here?

That said, you can imagine specific circumstances in which you could use the phrase *the awake student:* for example, *Of the two students camped out in the library, the awake student was getting more work done*.

Some adjectives have different meanings in attributive and predicative position—see Exercise 2. As one example, the adjective *sheer* can appear in both predicative and attributive position when it means 'transparent or thin' in reference to fabric: *his curtains are sheer,* and *the sheer curtains*. This use is historically related to the word's meaning 'absolute, pure' in *sheer interest*—a meaning that the adjective has only in attributive position.

Verbs

Modern English verbs typically have five basic morphological forms: the bare form (e.g., *nap*), the third-person singular present-tense form (*naps*), the past-tense form (*napped*), the present participle (*napping*), and the past participle (*napped*). Each form corresponds to different grammatical functions, as summarized in Table 2.

Before we turn to the detailed morphological description of verbs, we can state more generally that all English verbs **conjugate** (or change form) to indicate six grammatical categories: person (first, second, third), number (singular and plural), tense, aspect, voice, and mood. Whereas person and number are relatively straightforward, the other four categories may require a brief explanation.

Tense English verbs formally have two tenses: past and present (sometimes called past and nonpast). By "formally," we are referring to tense as marked by inflectional endings. The term *present* in *present tense* is deceptive because the present-tense form can also describe the future, particularly if the future event is scheduled to occur: *The class is at 2:00 tomorrow*. The present tense can also describe the past, usually in a narrative: *So yesterday I go to class and the teacher says English formally has no future tense*.

TABLE 2 **Morphological Forms of Verbs**

Verb Form	*Function*	*Examples*
Bare/infinitive form (regular = zero ending)	All present tense forms except the third-person singular	I/we/you/they *nap*
	Base for infinitive form with *to* (the marked infinitive)	to *nap*
	Form after modal auxiliaries and auxiliary *do*	we must *nap* we don't *nap* / do we *nap*? / we do *nap*
	Imperative form	*nap*!
	Present subjunctive form	I recommend that she *nap*
	Complement of perception and causative verbs	we watched her *nap*
Third-person singular present tense form (regular = *-s* ending)	Third-person singular present tense forms	he/she/it/one *naps*
Past tense form (regular = *-ed* ending irregular = internal vowel change)	All past tense forms	I/we/you/she/they *napped* I/we/you/she/they *sang*
Present participle (regular = *-ing* ending)	Form for progressive constructions	we are/were/have been *napping*
Past participle (regular = *-ed* ending irregular = *-en* ending or internal vowel change)	Form for perfect constructions (with form of *have* as auxiliary)	we have/had *napped* we have/had *forgotten* we have/had *sung*
	Form for passive constructions (with form of *be* as auxiliary)	the sentence is/was *mangled* all verbs are/were *forgotten* the song is/was *sung*

Note: The third-person singular present-tense form (e.g., *naps*) and the past-tense form (*napped*) are both **finite** forms: these forms mark tense. The other three forms—the bare form (*nap*), the present participle (*napping*), and the past participle (*napped*)—are called **nonfinite** (or infinite) forms because they remain fixed: they do not mark tense.

Wait a minute. English has no future tense? Technically, or formally, no. Verbs in English do not inflect (i.e., take an inflectional ending) to indicate future time. Instead, English employs modal auxiliary verbs (usually *will*) to indicate future action.

Aspect **Aspect** marks whether the action of the verb is completed (the perfect) or continuous (the progressive). The perfect and progressive can co-occur: *I have been loving this chapter*. Standard varieties of English mark only the present and past perfect and the progressive. Some nonstandard varieties, such as African American English, also mark habitual action and remote past perfect (see the "Auxiliary Verbs" section for details).

Voice Voice describes the relationship of the subject to the action of the verb (e.g., agent, recipient). In English, the active voice is distinguished from the passive voice (in which the subject is acted upon by the verb) through syntactic devices including the inflection on the past participle (e.g., *I broke the record* ⟶ *The record was broken*).

Mood The grammatical category of mood is not related to mood as we typically understand it (e.g., happy, depressed), but it does allow speakers or writers to indicate their attitude toward what they are expressing. For example, they can express a certainty, a command, or a wish. In English there are three basic moods: indicative (the mood of statements and questions, which inflects for person, number, and tense); imperative (the mood of commands, which uses the bare infinitive); and subjunctive (the mood of conditions, which employs the bare infinitive for present tense and is identical to the regular past tense in the past tense except for invariant *were* for 'to be'). The **subjunctive mood** (whose death has been predicted for decades but which, if anything, may be getting stronger) expresses something wished for (*I wish ice cream were healthier*), commanded (*let it be*), intended (*we propose that she bring ice cream*), or hypothesized (*if green beans were chocolate*). English speakers more often create conditionals, though, through the addition of modal auxiliary verbs (e.g., *might, could, would*), discussed later in this chapter. Modality allows speakers to express, grammatically, that they know something to be true, that they think something is possible or permissible, or that they think something must or should happen.

Morphological Description of Verbs In terms of morphology, for all verbs except *be, have, do,* and *go,* the **bare infinitive** form serves as the base for the other four forms, marked by inflectional endings or internal vowel changes. In standard varieties of English, the bare infinitive functions as the present-tense form for first- and second-person singular and plural, and for third-person plural. Third-person singular requires the addition of inflectional *-s*. Many nonstandard varieties use the bare infinitive form throughout the present-tense paradigm. See Table 3 for examples.

Regular English verbs—the majority of verbs—form the **past tense** through the addition of the inflectional ending *-ed*. Another significant class of verbs, now seen as irregular but historically regular,

TABLE 3 **Present Tense of a Regular Verb**

	Standard Varieties of English	*Some Nonstandard Varieties of English*	
Singular			
1st	I think	I think	I think
2nd	you think	you think	you think
3rd	he/she/it thinks	he/she/it think	he/she/it thinks
Plural			
1st	we think	we think	we think
2nd	you think	you think	you think
3rd	they think	they think	they thinks[a]

[a]Some varieties allow constructions such as *they thinks*; others extend inflectional *-s* to the third-person plural but not if the pronoun *they* occurs right next to the verb.