

2F. The English adjective and its subcategories

An adjective is a word that modifies a noun or noun phrase; it describes a feature of the noun or noun phrase, giving more detailed information about it. In English, there are three subcategories of adjectives: “true” adjectives, determiners, and post-noun modifiers.

(1) True adjectives immediately precede the noun. They are gradable into comparative and superlative forms. True adjectives can also be used as predicate adjectives: adjectives that are the complements of linking verbs. Finally, true adjectives are an open class; countless new true adjectives are created every day. (True adjectives can be either short or long. Short true adjectives form their comparative by adding the -er ending and the superlative by adding the -est ending. Long true adjectives add the word “more” to create the comparative and “most” to create the superlative form.)

(2) Determiners are noun modifiers that precede adjectives. In English, there are four types of determiners: articles, possessives, demonstratives, and quantifiers. With the exception of a few quantifiers, determiners are mutually exclusive. Articles can be definite (the), indefinite (a/an, some), or implied (the zero or \emptyset article; used with plural nouns or uncount nouns when making generalizations). Possessives can be nouns or pronouns that show ownership or possession, such as “my book” or “Rajiv’s car.” Demonstratives describe relative closeness in space or time. “This” (singular) and “these” (plural) are proximal demonstratives because they refer to things nearby, and “that” (singular) and “those” (plural) are distal demonstratives because they refer to things farther away. Finally, quantifiers are noun modifiers that express amount or degree. They tend to explain how much or how many of the noun the speaker is referring to, e.g., “a lot” or “a little.”

(3) Post-noun modifiers are different types of phrases that describe the noun/noun phrase. There are five subcategories of post-noun modifiers: adjectival prepositional phrases, relative clauses, appositive phrases, participial phrases, and infinitive phrases. The important thing to notice about these phrases is how they function grammatically. If the phrase does not give more information about a preceding noun or noun phrase, then it is not a post-noun modifier, even if it follows the noun/noun phrase in the sentence.

2G. The English determiner system: Subcategories

Determiners are noun modifiers that precede adjectives. In English, there are four types of determiners: articles, possessives, demonstratives, and quantifiers. With the exception of a few quantifiers, determiners are mutually exclusive. This means that you can say either “a dog” or “the dog” but not “a the dog,” “the a dog,” or even “a some the that dog.”

Articles can be definite (the), indefinite (a/an, some), or implied (the zero or \emptyset article; used with plural nouns or uncount nouns when making generalizations). “The” can be used with singular or plural nouns, but only “a/an” can be used with singular nouns, and only “some” can be used with plural nouns.

Possessives can be nouns or pronouns that show ownership or possession, such as “my book” or “Rajiv’s car.”

Demonstratives describe relative closeness in space or time. “This” (singular) and “these” (plural) are proximal demonstratives because they refer to things nearby, and “that” (singular) and “those” (plural) are distal demonstratives because they refer to things farther away.

Finally, quantifiers are noun modifiers that express amount or degree. They tend to explain how much or how many of the noun the speaker is referring to, e.g., “a lot” or “a little.”

