

Ask a linguist

Experts answer your questions



“Are there constructions that are grammatically describable in different ways? How absolute are the categories of grammar?” Dan @jamgyal on Twitter.

Languages are wonderfully complex, and so it is not always possible for linguists to describe them all in only one way. Different theories, approaches and traditions sometimes use different words to describe the same idea, and sometimes a construction can be interpreted in different ways.

Let's look at some examples. If we consider phrases such as 'the elected president' or 'the crying baby', how would we describe the role of 'elected' and 'crying'? Are these words adjectives or verbs, or could they be both? The words in themselves are verb forms: 'elected' is a form (the past participle) of the verb 'elect', and 'crying' is a form (the present participle) of the verb 'cry'. However, in 'the elected president' and 'the crying baby', they are used like adjectives. One indicator for this is the fact that you can replace them with other adjectives: 'the *new* president', 'the *little* baby'. You can also modify them using an adverb, for example in 'the *newly* elected president' or 'the *loudly* crying baby'. This suggests that the words are adjectives in this context. Therefore, you could say that in terms of their *form*, these

“If we consider phrases such as ‘the elected president’ or ‘the crying baby’, how would we describe the role of ‘elected’ and ‘crying’? Are these words adjectives or verbs, or could they be both?”

words could be seen as verbs, but in terms of their *function*, they are adjectives.

Another interesting case is that of the words 'my', 'your', 'his', 'her', 'its', 'our' and 'their', which are used with nouns to express possession. Some people call them 'possessive determiners', but others call them 'possessive adjectives'. Who is right? As you may have guessed already, neither group is wrong, depending on how you look at it: words like 'my', 'your', etc. have features of determiners and are similar to the definite article ('the'). In English, you cannot combine them with another determiner (*'the my book'), which suggests that they are determiners themselves. However, there are

other languages in which they are combined with determiners and behave more like adjectives. In Italian, for example, 'my book' is *il mio libro* (literally 'the my book'). Therefore, this is another example of a feature of grammar that can be described in different ways.

As you can see from the examples above, grammatical categories are often not absolute. In fact, there can be different ways of describing them, depending, for example, on whether you want to focus on their form or their function, or depending on the language that you are analysing, or the theory or tradition that you are working with. ¶

Sascha Stollhans is a PhD researcher and teaching assistant in Linguistics at the University of Manchester, working on Germanic and Romance Linguistics as well as Second Language Acquisition. He tweets as @SaschaStollhans.

Do you have a burning linguistic question, something you've always wanted to know about language? Contact us on twitter, facebook or email and we will pose your question to an expert linguist and attempt to answer it in the next issue of Babel.