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## UNIT 9 STRUCTURE WORDS-1

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### Structure

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### 9.0 OBJECTIVES

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At the end of this unit, you should be able to

- distinguish structure words from content words (also called lexical words),
- describe the special characteristics of structure words, and
- distinguish the respective roles of structure words and lexical words in English.

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### 9.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this unit, we shall discuss the structure words of English. In this unit, we shall define structure words and distinguish them from content words. In the subsequent units, we shall discuss three important types of structure words of English: articles, auxiliaries and prepositions.

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### 9.2 PASSAGE FOR READING

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Read the following passage carefully. In this passage, James Thurber describes his 'University Days':

*University Days*  
James Thurber

- 1) I passed **all the** other courses that I took at my university, **but I could never** pass botany. **This was because** all botany students **had** to spend several hours a week in a laboratory looking **through** a microscope at plant cells, and I **could** never see **through** a microscope. I never once saw a cell **through** a microscope. **This used to** enrage my instructor. **He would** wander **around the** laboratory pleased with the progress all the students were making in drawing the involved and, so I am told, interesting structure of flower cells, until he came to me. I

would just be standing there. "I can't see anything," I would say. He would begin patiently enough, explaining how anybody **can** see **through** a microscope, but he would always end up in a fury, claiming that I could see through a microscope but just pretended that I couldn't. "It takes away from the beauty of flowers anyway," I used to tell him. "We are not concerned with beauty in this course," he would say. "We are concerned solely with what I may call the mechanics of flars". "Well," I'd say, "I can't see anything." "Try it just once again," he'd say, and I **would** put my eye to the microscope **and** see **nothing** at all, except now and again, a nebulous milky substance — a phenomenon of maladjustment. You were supposed to see vivid, restless clockwork of sharply defined plant cells. "I see what looks like a lot of milk," I would tell him. This, he claimed, was the result of my not having adjusted the microscope properly; so, **he would** readjust it for me, or rather, **for he, and I** would look again **and** see milk.

- 2) I finally took a deferred pass, as they called it, and waited a year and tried again. (You had to pass one of the biological sciences or you couldn't graduate.) The professor had come back from vacation brown as a berry, bright-eyed, and eager to explain cell-structure again to his classes. "Well," he said to me, cheerily, when we met in the first laboratory hour of the semester, "we're going to see cells this time, aren't we?" "Yes, sir," I said.

Students to right of me and to left of me and in front of me were seeing cells; what's more, they were quietly drawing pictures of them in their note-books. Of course, I didn't see anything.

- 3) "We'll try it," the professor said to me, grimly, "with every adjustment of the microscope known to man. As God is my witness, I'll arrange this glass so that you see cells through it or I'll give up teaching. In twenty-two years of botany, I..." He cut off abruptly for he was beginning to quiver all over, like Lionel Barry more, and he genuinely fished to hold onto his temper; his scenes with me had taken a great deal out of him.
- 4) So we tried it with every adjustment of the microscope known to man. With only one of them did I see anything but blackness or the familiar lacteal opacity, and that time I saw, to my pleasure and amazement, a variegated constellation of flecks, specks, and dots. These I hastily drew. The instructor, noting my activity, came back from an adjoining desk, a smile on his lips and his eyebrows high in hope. He looked at my cell drawing. "What's that?" he demanded, with a hint of squeal in his voice. "That's what I saw," I said. "You didn't, you didn't, you didn't," he screamed, losing control of his temper instantly, and he bent over and squinted into the microscope. His head snapped up. "That's your eye!" he shouted. "You've fixed the lens so that it reflects! You've drawn your eye!"

(Copyright c1933, 1961 James Thurber. From *My Life and Hard Times*, published by Harper & Row)

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### 9.3 RECOGNIZING STRUCTURE WORDS

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We have printed some words in the first paragraph of the passage in bold type. If you examine these words carefully you will find that these words are rather small as compared to the other words that occur in the passage. For example, in the first two sentences, the **words** in bold type are: **I, all, the, that, at, my, but, could, this, because, had, to, a, in, through, at, and**. All of them, except one, are one-syllable words. Some other words are also small but we have not printed them in bold type.

Flars/fla:z/flowers. The writer is trying to imitate the instructor's pronunciation.

Let us divide the words in bold type in the first paragraph into different parts of speech. We see that they can be divided into these categories:

Articles: the, a

Pronouns: I, that, my, this, he, me, anything, anybody, it, him, we, what, nothing, you, himself

Prepositions: at, in, through, around, with, of, to, from, except, like, for

Conjunctions: but, because, and, until, how, that, so, or

Auxiliaries: could, had to, used to, would, were, am, be, can, are, may

Some other words: all, this (when not a pronoun)

Words belonging to these parts of speech are called structure words.

### 9.3.1 Structure Words and Content Words

You will notice that our list does not contain the names of the more important parts of speech like noun, verb, adjective, and adverb. These four are the major parts of speech. Words belonging to these categories are not structure words: they are called **content words** or **lexical words**.

The difference between content words and **structure** words lies partly in the nature of their meaning and partly in the characteristics of their use. We shall discuss the differences in the nature of their meanings first.

### 9.3.2 Lexical Meaning and Structural Meaning

Let us look at some content words occurring in our passage:

**Nouns:** university, microscope, structure, fury, phenomenon, etc.

**Verbs:** pass, enrage, pretend, claim, adjust, etc.

**Adjectives:** nebulous, milky, vivid, restless, brown, etc.

**Adverbs:** patiently, always, sharply, cheerily, quietly, etc.

How do the meanings of these content words differ from the meanings of the structure words which were listed earlier? Look up both kinds of words in a dictionary. What do you find?

Dictionaries are of various types but you will find that content words are entered in all dictionaries. The dictionary gives you a description of the meaning in simple words. For example, one meaning of the noun *structure* is given as 'the way in which parts are formed into a whole'. The meanings of some other nouns (e.g., *microscope*) may include a picture. Meanings of verbs, adjectives and adverbs are generally given in the form of simple word-equivalents and definitions. Thus, *nebulous* is defined as 'not clear', 'cloudy', etc., *enrage* as 'to make very angry', and so on. This shows that content words have meanings which can be described, represented by a picture, carried by synonyms, etc. Such meanings are called **lexical meanings**. Nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs have lexical meanings. Respectively, their meanings refer to objects or things, actions, qualities of objects, and modes and manners of action. Whenever we want to say something, we use names of objects (nouns), words for actions (verbs), qualities (adjectives), modes and manners (adverbs), etc. These words carry the main items of meaning in a sentence. Without them we would not be

## Structure Words

able to say anything about any person, thing, action, quality, etc. In other words, we would not be able to use language at all.

As for structure words, dictionaries do not really give you their meanings; what they do is to tell you how these words are used, for example, here is what the *Oxford Advance Learner's Dictionary of Current English* has to say about some of the structure words from our list:

- I** used by a speaker or writer to refer to himself. Cf. *me*, object form, and *we*, *us*, plural forms.
- the** 1. used as a less specific form of *this*, *these*, *that*, *those* applied to person(s), thing(s), event(s), etc. already referred to or being discussed .....2. used when who or what is referred to is quite obvious. 3. used with a noun when it stands for something unique... 4..., etc. (Lists 14 uses)
- at** 1. (place and direction) (a) indicating the place in or near which something or somebody was, is or will be ... (b) towards; in the direction of. .... (c) indicating an attempt to get or reach something, (d) indicating distance ..... (e) 2. (time and order) (a) indicating a point of time..... (b)..... ,and so on.
- and** ...1. connecting words, clauses, sentences....
- can** ...1. indicating ability or capacity to do something. 2. is used with verbs of perception in place of the simple tenses, which are less usual? Nothing is added to the meaning... 3. is used, colloquial style, to indicate permission... (4) etc. (lists 9 uses).

Why do dictionaries give 'meanings' for lexical words and 'uses' for structure words? The reason obviously is that lexical words have 'content', some substance of meaning which can also be represented in other ways, by other words or by pictures. Structure words do not have much content; as a result, they cannot generally be represented by other words. We can use the words 'cloudy' or 'not clear' for nebulous but we cannot use *a* for *the* or *at* for *in*, or *it* for *him*. This is because each of these small words, or structure words, has a definite use, or uses, which cannot be performed by another word. The function of *a* cannot be performed by *the*, the function of *of* cannot be performed by *may*, and so on.

### 9.3.3 Why Do We Need Structure Words?

Why does a language need structure words? Can it not do with content words only?

We can find the answer to this question if we take a normal sentence and remove all the structure words from it. Let us take these two sentences:

I could never see through a microscope.

I will never see a microscope.

If we remove the structure words from these sentences, we get

never see microscope

from both sentences. In fact, we can think of a number of sentences such that, by removing the structure words, we will get 'never see microscope'. For example:

You may never see the microscope.

She will never see through my microscope. etc.

It is obvious that these sentences all carry different meanings though the content words are the same in all of them. We can, therefore, say that the meaning of a sentence does not come from lexical words only: some meaning is also contributed by structure words. It is true that the meaning of lexical words is important in all the above sentences: they all talk about microscopes, for example. But the presence of structure words is also important. For example, it is the presence of the preposition *through* which tells us that in one sentence we are talking about seeing *through a* microscope, while in another sentence we are talking about seeing a *microscope*. Similarly, the presence of *could* in one sentence and of *will* in another shows that in one sentence we are talking about the past, in another about the future. The presence of *the* in one sentence and of *a* in another also makes a difference in meaning (*themicroscope vs. a microscope*) as we shall see in the next unit.

The kinds of meanings that structure words convey are clearly different from the meanings of lexical words. Lexical words denote objects, actions, qualities, etc.; structure words produce meanings like the time of action, relationships between objects, definite or indefinite object, etc. However, more important than the kinds of meaning is the way in which these meanings are conveyed. Lexical words convey their meanings by themselves, i.e., each lexical word contains its own meaning. (the meaning of chair, the object, comes from the word *chair*, the meaning of running, the action, comes from the word *run*, and so on.) The meaning of a structure word, on the other hand, comes from the association of the word with another word, or set of words. The meanings of the articles *a* and *the*, for example, are conveyed to us only when the article is attached to a noun; the meaning of a pronoun comes to us only when we know the noun it stands for; the meaning of a preposition comes to us only when we know the two entities which it relates, and so on. We would not be very wrong if we said that structure words have no meaning of their own: their meaning emerges only when they occur in combination with other words, i.e. in a sentence. This is the reason why some dictionaries do not list structure words, and also the reason why those dictionaries that do list them describe their uses rather than give their meanings.

We have thus identified two kinds of meaning: the meaning of lexical words and the meaning of structure words. We call the former 'lexical meaning' and the latter 'structural meaning'. The meaning of a sentence is a combination of these two kinds of meaning.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) We have identified all the structure words in the first paragraph of James Thurber's passage. You do the same for the remaining paragraphs. List the structure words under these heads: Articles, Pronouns, Auxiliaries, Conjunctions, Prepositions, others. List each structure word only once.

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- 2) Make five good sentences using all the content words given below in each sentence. To do so, you will have to use a number of structure words. Use different structure words for different sentences. You can change the form of the content words but use each content word only once:

go	stand	' street	window
watch	man	people	

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## 9.4 CHARACTERISTICS OF STRUCTURE WORDS IN USE

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We have shown how structure words can be distinguished from lexical words on the basis of meaning. We shall now describe some characteristics of the use of structure words which also help us to distinguish them from lexical words.

### 9.4.1 Frequency of Occurrence

If you count the structure words that we have underlined in the first paragraph of James Thurber's passage, you will find that they constitute nearly half of the total number of words in the passage. Some of the structure words occur again and again. For example, the article *a* occurs 13 times and *the* 10 times. Similarly, other structure words like *all, this, he, it, etc.* also occur repeatedly. If you continue counting these words in the rest of the passage, you will find that the total occurrences of each structure words add up to quite a few. No lexical word occurs in the passage as many times, though some words like *microscope, look, etc.* do occur again and again. The higher frequency of structure words becomes more apparent as you increase the size of the passage. It has been calculated that, on an average, one-third or more of the words occurring in a text are structure words.

Another characteristic of structure word is that they occur with equal frequency in all kinds of styles and varieties of English. This characteristic is not found in the use of content words. The kind of content words that will occur in a particular passage is determined by various factors, e.g., the subject matter, the choice of style, the level of education of the person addressed, and so on. Content words that occur in a discussion on politics are unlikely to occur in a discussion on physics; the content words that one uses when talking informally to one's friends are different from the content words that one uses when delivering a formal lecture (even if their meanings are similar). Structure words, on the other hand, always remain the same. There are no substitutes for articles. Pronouns, prepositions, auxiliaries, etc. in English. Hence their frequency is the same in every style and every use except perhaps in such specialised cases as the language of telegrams where structure words are often dropped to save on cost.

### 9.4.2 Closed Class Membership

As we stated earlier, structure words belong to different parts of speech: some are articles, some pronouns, some prepositions, some auxiliaries, some conjunctions, and so on. It is to be noted that each of these categories contains only a few words. There are two articles, 25-30 pronouns, 60-70 prepositions, 35-40 conjunctions 15-16

auxiliaries and a few other words. The total number of structure words in English is not more than 200-250. This number is very small when compared to thousands and thousands of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Why is this so? Why are there only a few structure words but thousands upon thousands of lexical words? The answer is very simple. Lexical words denote objects, actions, qualities, etc. and there are thousands upon thousands of these in the world; structure words denote relations between these and there are only a few of these relations. The situation is somewhat similar to arithmetic: there are thousands and thousands of numbers but only a few relations (or operations, like addition, subtraction, multiplication and division) that exist between them.

It is this which leads to the open class membership of lexical words and closed class membership of structure words. New words are added to the class of nouns, verbs, etc. all the time because new objects are discovered, new kinds of actions, or combinations of actions, are seen or imagined; new qualities, or combinations of qualities, are experienced, and so on. However, no new words are added to the class of pronouns, articles, prepositions, auxiliaries, etc. because the functions these classes of words perform (e.g., the relations that prepositions show between objects denoted by nouns) always remain the same or vary only over long periods of time.

We thus notice that the class of structure words consists of a small number of words which occur very frequently. The class of lexical words, on the other hand, consists of a very large number of words which occur very infrequently.

### 9.4.3 Structure Words as Structural Markers

A characteristic of the use of structure words is that they always occur with content words belonging to the major parts of speech (nouns, verbs, etc.). Just as content words by themselves cannot form a sentence (remember 'Never see microscope!'), function words also cannot form a sentence by themselves (can you imagine a sentence like 'I all the that I my I could?') Structure words have to be combined with lexical words to make good sentences. There are certain definite ways ('rules') in which structure words combine with lexical words. For example, articles combine only with nouns, auxiliaries combine only with verbs, prepositions always precede nouns or noun phrases, conjunctions always join elements of the same type, etc. Because of these definite rules of combination, we can always use a structure word to tell the part of speech of its accompanying word. For example, wherever an article occurs we can be sure that the accompanying word will be a noun, since articles always occur with nouns, never with verbs, adverbs, etc. Similarly wherever an auxiliary occurs we can be sure that the accompanying word will be a verb, since auxiliaries occur only with verbs. In other words, articles are markers of, nouns and auxiliaries are markers of verbs. All structure words function as markers of some grammatical category or the other. In this capacity, they are called 'structural markers'.

What is the use of structural markers? How are structure words useful as structural markers?

A simple example will answer these questions. Look at the following message received by wire:

Ship            sails            today

This message contains only lexical words. In telegrams we save money by omitting the structure words, but this sometimes leads to problems, as in this case. What does the message mean? It may either mean 'The ship is sailing today' or it may be a command asking the addressee to ship the sails (send sails by ship) immediately. If the telegram is received by the addressee, who has the necessary background information, he will have no problem, but if it is received by a friend or a member of the family who doesn't know the background, he will not know how to interpret the telegram.

Now suppose we supply the structure words. The telegram will then be read either as

*The* ship sails today

or as

Ship *the* sails today

The meaning becomes quite clear in either case. What makes this possible? The structure word *the*. Whichever word it precedes is marked as the noun (*ship* or *sails*), the rest follows easily.

#### 9.4.4 Structure Words Provide the Grammatical Framework of a Sentence

Structure words and inflections (endings on words like the present tense ending *-s*, the plural *-s* or *-es*, the past tense ending *-ed*, etc.) function as structural markers—they tell us the grammatical category of the word with which they occur. When we know the grammatical categories of all the words in a sentence we know its grammatical structure to a great extent. The grammatical structure of a sentence contains a number of positions in which content words occur, e.g., the subject position, the object position, the verb, etc. When the content words are filled in, we get the full meaning of the sentence. For example, look at the structure.



If we fill in the blanks with content words, we get the sentences

The *man* is *watching* a *word*.  
The *country* is *fighting* a *war* etc.

Structure words therefore provide the basic structure, or the grammatical framework of a sentence. This framework, as we saw earlier, contributes its own meaning, which is called structural meaning. If we remove the structure words, the structural meaning is lost. We are only left with some items of lexical meaning with no structure and no relationship between them. On the other hand, if we remove the content words, we have only an empty framework, a structure without any substance.

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### 9.5 A NOTE ON 'SOME OTHER WORDS'. DETERMINERS

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In our list of the parts of speech of structure words, we have listed some words under the title 'some other words'. What words are these?

In James Thurber's passage some words (like *all, this, that*) occur again and again. These words do not belong to a single part of speech. Depending on how we use them they are either pronouns or adjectives. They are pronouns when they stand for nouns (e.g., *this* in '*This* used to enrage my instructor. '), and adjectives when they stand before a noun (e.g., *this* in '*We* are not concerned with beauty in *this* course').

Modern grammar tells us that when words like *all, this, that, these, those, one*, etc. stand before nouns (i.e. when they function as adjectives), they are markers of nouns. Hence they are like the articles *a, an, the*, which are also markers of nouns. Some pronouns (the possessive pronouns like *my, your, his*, etc.) also stand before nouns



and should also be called noun-markers. Modern grammar puts all noun-markers in a single category. The name given to this category is **Determiner**. Determiners are the class of structure words which include articles, possessive pronouns, demonstrative adjectives, numerals, etc., all of which function as noun-markers. In our next unit we shall discuss one type of determiner words: the articles.

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## 9.6 LET US SUM UP

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Let us now sum up our discussion. We have seen that

- i) Structure words are words belonging to the categories of articles, auxiliaries, conjunctions, prepositions and pronouns. Words belonging to the categories of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs are content words.
- ii) Content words have lexical meaning, or meaning which can be represented by other words, pictures, etc.; structure words have uses or functions which may be described but cannot be performed by other words.
- iii) Structure words have a high frequency of occurrence in all styles and varieties of English; the frequency of content words is much less and varies according to style, subject matter, etc.
- iv) Structure words form classes whose membership is closed. No new structure words are added to the language.
- v) Structure words function as structural markers. Structural markers help us to recognize the part of speech to which a word in a sentence belongs. This, in turn, helps us to understand the sentence correctly.
- vi) Structure words provide the grammatical structure of a sentence and contribute structural meaning; content words fill the structural positions and contribute lexical meaning.

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## 9.7 KEY WORDS

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**Structure words:** Words belonging to closed classes with a high frequency of occurrence.

**Content words:** Words belonging to open classes with a comparatively lower frequency of occurrence.

**Closed class:** A class of words that does not admit new members (e.g. articles, pronouns, prepositions, etc.).

**Open class:** A class of words that admits new members (e.g., nouns, adjectives, verbs, etc.).

**Structural meaning:** The meaning contributed by structure words,

**Lexical meaning:** The meaning contributed by content (or lexical) words.

**Structural marker:** A word is said to function as a structural marker when it helps us identify the grammatical category of another word with which it occurs. Inflections also function as structural markers.

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## ANSWERS

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### Check Your Progress

1) Articles: a, the, an

Pronouns: I, it, you, one, his, he, me, we, why they, them, their, anything, him, my, these, that

Auxiliaries: had to, could, had, are, going to, were, did, 'll (shall/will),

Conjunctions: as, and, or, when, so that, for, so

Prepositions: of, from, as, to, in, through, like, onto, with, out of, but (=except), at

Others: first, this, every, that

2) The five sentences given below are examples. You can construct other good sentences;

- i) The man went to the window and watched the people standing in the street.
- ii) The man stood at the window and watched the people going in the street.
- iii) The people stood *and* watched the man going out of the window into the street.
- iv) The man went into the street and the people stood and watched him through the window.
- v) The man stood and watched the people going out of the window into the street.