



### TITLE

What are functional elements of languages?

### UMBRELLA KEY IDEA

Words/signs can be divided into groups.

### TEXT KEY IDEA

One group of words/signs has the function of holding other words/signs together

### CONSPECTUS

1. Umbrella key idea: Words/signs can be divided into groups.
2. Introduction: Language needs different kinds of words and signs to communicate
3. Text key idea: Why are functional words important?
4. Examples: Examples of functional elements in written and signed language
5. Conclusion: Functional elements help keeping other signs and words together

### REFERENCES

- Branchini, C., and Geraci, C. (2011) L'ordine dei costituenti in LIS: risultati preliminari. In: Cardinaletti, A. et al. *Grammatica, lessico e dimensioni di variazione nella LIS*. FrancoAngeli, pp.113-126.
- Chung, C., and Pennebaker, J. W. (2007) The psychological functions of function words. *Social communication*, 1, pp. 343-359.
- Renzi, L., et al. (2001) 1, Grande Grammatica Italiana di Consultazione. Il Mulino, Bologna 3 (2001) pp. 371-438, 521-647
- Zucchi, S. et al. (2010) Functional markers in sign languages: the case of FATTO and FINISH. In: Brentari, D. *Sign Languages*. New York, Cambridge University Press, pp. 197-224.
- Nordquist, R. (2018) Definition and Examples of Function Words in English. [WWW] ThoughtCo. Available from: [thoughtco.com/function-word-grammar-1690876](http://thoughtco.com/function-word-grammar-1690876) [Accessed 14/12/2018].

### OBJECTIVES

You can **recognize** some functional elements in signed and spoken languages.



You can **match** functional elements with their function by choosing amongst different functions.

You can **categorize** signs and words into functional category and other categories (things, activities, features).

You can **list** some functional elements in signed and spoken languages.

## FULL TEXT

### 1. Umbrella key idea

All words/signs from one language we call a dictionary of this language. Words/signs in a language dictionary we can divide into groups. Words of group 1 refer to objects (both real, like monkey and made up like dragon and describing different types of feeling and ideas like love or liberty). Words of group 2 refers to activities (sth is happening with an object or object by itself is doing sth). Words of group 3 refers to features (both of objects and activities). In some languages (sign languages, English) some signs/words from the 1 and 2 groups look the same. There is an extra 4 group with words which do not belong to any of the above groups. Words in this 4 group play different roles: replace, connect or indicate types of relation between words from 3 above groups.

### 2. Introduction

In communication we put together lots of different signs or words. Some of these have a meaning of their own. For example if a person signs APPLE you understand that the person is talking about the fruit apple and you picture that in your head. It can also be that the person is talking about computers. Still, the sign means something to you. If your coach tells you "Run!", you understand the message and you will probably start running. If your fiancée looks at you and signs BEAUTIFUL, you smile because you understand that that is a compliment to your beauty.

For some words it is difficult to tell what is their complete meaning if they are on their own. If a person stops you and tells you 'if', you can expect what follows but you don't know exactly what the person wants to tell you.

Signs and words like 'if' have an important function and are called *functional elements*.

### 3. Text key idea

A clear communication is very important. To be able to do so, languages have different kinds of words and signs. For example they have different signs and words for things (apple, table, freedom), activities (run, buy), and features (beautiful, fast). Languages also need other words and signs, which are different from the previous ones because their main function is not to refer to a thing, a person, an activity or a feature, but their main function is to link words together (for example: if, at, ...).



### Why are functional words important?

Building a sentence is like building a house. You need bricks but you also need mortar to glue them together. Words and signs used for linking other words and signs together are like mortar. They are the “glue” that keeps the sentence together. Since their function is that of gluing other signs and words together, they are called functional elements. If we use functional elements well, we have more chances that the other person will understand what we mean (see examples 1 to 8).

In written language, you can find functional elements by testing the words. You can try to take words out of the sentence and see if they work out well in a new sentence where they stand alone. Does the meaning seem complete to you? (see examples 9 to 12).

In sign language functional elements can be more challenging to find because in sign language hands, face and body move together at the same time. When we sign we can place things and people in the space in front of us and move them within it. Finding the glue that makes this three-dimensional message correct and understandable can be difficult.

There are lots of signs and words used to express things, activities and features. Also, their number increases in time. We continuously invent new ones. Functional elements are less in number. Their number is fixed and does not increase (but it may decrease in time). We use only those we have and we do not need to invent new ones (see examples 1, 2).

#### 4. Examples

In example 1 you can see some functional elements in written languages. In example 2 you will find some functional elements in sign languages. They are grouped according to the function they have.

The functional element *where* is used to make questions asking about the position of something, such as “*Where* is my pen?”. The function of *where* is that of making the sentence a question.

Other functional elements help in adding two concepts. For example *and*: “you can have eggs *and* bacon”. *And* is a functional element that, in this sentence, allows you to have both eggs and bacon.

Functional elements such as *the*, *an*, *a* help specifying better the number of objects mentioned in the sentence. For instance in the sentence “Laura has *a* book”, *a* means that Laura only has one book. In addition to the number of books owned by Laura, the functional element *a* also reveals that the person writing this sentence does not know what book is that. It can be whatever book, and for sure not one book in particular.

In a sentence like “I do *not* go to school today”, the functional word *not* is very important. It changes the meaning of the whole sentence into negative! So, instead of going to school, I don’t go and I stay at home.

Finally there are functional elements which allow to specify the position of an



object. For example in the sentence “There is a computer *in* the oven”, the word *in* makes it clear that the computer is inside the oven and not behind or under it.

In other languages you will find similar functional elements but written or signed differently. Functional elements in other languages will not be exactly the same in number either.

1. Some functional elements in spoken languages:

function ask: *who, what, where, when, why, how*

function connect and separate: *and, but, or*

function negate: *not*

**function determine things: *the, a, an***

**function place things: *on, to, in, for, from***

2. Some functional elements in sign language:

function ask: WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WEHN, WHY, HOW, WHICH

function connect and separate: AND, BUT, OR

function negate: NOT

**function add information to an activity: FATTO/FINISH**

5. Conclusions

When people communicate they put together lots of different signs and words. Some signs and words are called functional elements. They are used as the glue that keeps other parts of the language together. They take their name because of the important function they have in the communication.