

1 Preliminaries

The last three chapters have dealt with the two most fundamental lexical categories (parts of speech) in English, verbs and nouns. Nouns are the commonest words in text, the most abundant in the dictionary, and the most productively added to the language by word-formation processes and borrowing. Verbs are fundamental in the sense that they function as head in clause structure, and they are second only to nouns in text and dictionary frequency. All canonical clauses contain at least a noun and a verb, and the simplest ones contain just one of each: *Rain fell*; *People change*; *Kim disappeared*.

But there are not enough nouns and verbs to express every shade of meaning needed. There is a noun to denote water, but not different nouns for water at various temperatures. There is a verb to denote falling (indeed, several: *fall*, *drop*, *sink*, *plummet*, . . .), but not enough different verbs to denote falling at all the different speeds we might want to distinguish, or in all the different ways things might fall.

In English the necessary finer gradations of meaning are expressed by means of words (and phrases) that alter, clarify, or adjust the meaning contributions of nouns and verbs. The words used to modify nouns are typically **adjectives**, and the words that similarly modify verbs are **adverbs**:

- [1] i a. [*Heavy rain*] *fell*. b. [*Young people*] *change*. [adjective]
 ii a. *Rain* [*fell heavily*]. b. *People* [*change slowly*]. [adverb]

Many of the adverbs that modify verbs can also modify adjectives and other adverbs. The primary syntactic distinction, therefore, is between adjectives, which modify only nouns, and adverbs, which modify all the other categories – verbs, adjectives, prepositions, determinatives, and other adverbs. Compare, for example:

- [2] i *They made a lot of* [*unnecessary changes*]. [noun]
 ii *They had* [*worried unnecessarily*]. [verb]
 iii *Their response was* [*unnecessarily long*]. [adjective]
 iv *They had treated him* [*unnecessarily harshly*]. [adverb]

Here the noun *changes* is modified by the adjective *unnecessary*, while the verb *worried*, the adjective *long*, and the adverb *harshly* are all modified by the adverb *unnecessarily*.

In addition to modifying nouns, adjectives may have a predicative function: *The rain was heavy*; *They are young*. In these examples the adjectives are syntactically complements of the verb *be*, but semantically they constitute the main part of the predicate. As a lexeme,