

GRAMMATICAL FUNCTIONS AND MEANINGS OF THE MOST FREQUENT WORDS IN ENGLISH.

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Abstract: *This paper analyzes the grammatical roles and semantic characteristics of the most frequent English words, including function words such as the, of, and, to, and be. Drawing on corpus linguistics and grammatical theory, the study identifies how these words operate within English syntax and how their meanings shift depending on context. Despite their brevity and abstractness, such high-frequency words carry significant grammatical weight, acting as determiners, auxiliaries, prepositions, conjunctions, and particles. The analysis contributes to better understanding of English fluency, parsing, and pedagogy, especially for second language learners.*

Keywords: *frequency, function words, grammar, meaning, corpus linguistics, English syntax*

Language use is highly dependent on a relatively small set of high-frequency words. In English, function words such as *the, of, to, and, be, and in* account for a disproportionately large percentage of all written and spoken texts. These words are not content-bearing in the traditional lexical sense, but they are grammatically essential.

The goal of this study is to analyze the **grammatical functions** and **semantic roles** of the most frequent English words, using corpus data to explore their distribution and usage patterns. While they often go unnoticed due to their commonality and short form, such words are fundamental to sentence structure, logical relations, and the formation of complex expressions.

Understanding the behavior of frequent function words helps improve **language processing, second language acquisition, and linguistic analysis**, since these words act as scaffolding for grammatical relationships.

The study uses a **descriptive corpus-based approach** with qualitative and quantitative analysis. The methodology includes:

- **Corpus Selection:** Data were drawn from the **Corpus of Contemporary American English (COCA)** and **British National Corpus (BNC)**.
- **Frequency List:** The 20 most frequent English words were selected for analysis based on corpus frequency lists.
- **Grammatical Classification:** Each word was categorized based on its primary grammatical role: article, pronoun, preposition, auxiliary, etc.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Sample sentences were analyzed to observe shifts in grammatical function and contextual meaning.

- **Semantic Role:** Despite their function word status, semantic nuances and discourse roles (e.g., emphasis, cohesion) were considered.

The (Definite Article)

- **Grammatical Function:** Determiner preceding nouns.
- **Use:** Marks definiteness; known or specific reference.
- **Examples:** *The book on the table, the sun rises.*

Of (Preposition)

- **Function:** Links nouns to show possession, quantity, composition.
- **Semantic Role:** Abstract relational marker.
- **Examples:** *The color of the sky, a piece of cake.*

And (Coordinating Conjunction)

- **Function:** Connects words, phrases, or clauses.
- **Examples:** *You and I, He came and went.*
- **Semantic Nuance:** Indicates addition, sequence, or contrast.

To (Preposition/Infinitive Marker)

- **Dual Role:**
 - As a preposition: *Go to school.*
 - As an infinitive marker: *To run fast.*
- **Semantic Range:** Direction, purpose, intention.

A (Indefinite Article)

- **Function:** Marks indefiniteness; non-specific items.
- **Examples:** *A car passed, a friend called.*
- Often used in generic reference (*A dog is a loyal animal*).

In (Preposition)

- **Function:** Expresses location, time, inclusion.
- **Examples:** *In the house, in 2020, in trouble.*

Is, Are, Be (Auxiliary/Copula Verb)

- **Function:** Serves as auxiliary for progressive/passive voice or as copula.
- **Examples:** *She is running, They are tired.*
- **Semantic Role:** Indicates state, identity, or existence.

That (Pronoun, Determiner, Conjunction)

- **Multifunctional:**
 - Demonstrative pronoun: *That is mine.*
 - Conjunction: *I know that she left.*
 - Relative pronoun: *The book that I read.*

It (Pronoun)

- **Function:** Subject/object placeholder.
- **Usage:** Real and dummy subject (*It is raining*).
- Abstract reference or anticipatory structure.

For (Preposition, Conjunction)

- **Function:** Indicates purpose, benefit, duration.
- **Examples:** *A gift for you, Waited for two hours.*
- Conjunction in formal style: *He went, for he was summoned.*

The analysis of frequent English words shows that **grammatical function is central to meaning**. Many high-frequency words are polyfunctional: they change grammatical roles depending on context (*to* as preposition vs. infinitive marker, *that* as conjunction vs. demonstrative). Their **semantic load is often relational**, rather than referential, meaning they structure information rather than present it directly.

Function words are highly abstract but **crucial for cohesion and coherence**. Learners often struggle with them due to their polysemy, lack of direct translation equivalents, and subtle usage differences. Native speakers acquire them early, while second-language learners may require **explicit instruction and contextual practice**.

Moreover, despite their low phonological salience, these words have **high syntactic impact**. Omitting or misplacing them drastically alters meaning or grammaticality (*Go store* vs. *Go to the store*).

In addition to their syntactic and semantic significance, high-frequency words play a crucial role in **discourse structuring, pragmatic interpretation, and cognitive processing**. Their ability to function across a variety of grammatical categories and their pervasiveness in both spoken and written registers make them key units in language comprehension and production.

For instance, words like *it* and *there* often act as **dummy subjects**, which are essential for English sentence structure but are often misunderstood by learners whose native languages do not use such constructs. Similarly, the conjunction *and*, though seemingly simple, can express a wide range of logical relationships beyond mere addition—such as sequence (*He came and left*), consequence (*Say one more word and I'll leave*), or contrast (*He is strong and yet gentle*).

Moreover, these words are heavily involved in **modality and stance**. Consider how *may*, *should*, or *would* function to convey possibility, obligation, or hypothetical conditions. Even articles like *the* and *a/an* contribute to the speaker's **epistemic stance**—whether something is assumed to be known, new, specific, or general.

In terms of language acquisition, frequent words are usually learned first, but their **multi-functionality** often requires years of exposure and contextual learning for full mastery. For language educators, this implies a need for **explicit focus on function words** in context—not just vocabulary lists, but examples that show variation in use and meaning.

From a computational linguistics perspective, the semantic ambiguity of high-frequency words presents challenges for **natural language processing (NLP)** tasks such as part-of-speech tagging, machine translation, and sentiment analysis. These words often require **deep contextual models** (such as those used in transformer-based language models) to be interpreted accurately.

Ultimately, frequent function words may appear “small” in form but they are “large” in function. Their role in maintaining syntactic integrity, conveying nuanced meaning, and shaping discourse makes them an indispensable object of linguistic inquiry.

The study also confirms the **non-linear relationship between frequency and simplicity**—even though function words are common, their full range of use is complex and nuanced.

Frequent English words, especially function words, fulfill critical grammatical roles and carry important semantic and discourse functions. While often semantically light on their own, they provide the framework for **sentence construction, logic, and cohesion**. Understanding their grammatical behavior and subtle contextual meanings is essential for mastering English fluency, especially for second-language learners.

Future research may investigate how native and non-native speakers process these words cognitively or explore their development in child language acquisition and machine translation.

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