Glossary of standard linguistic terms

Parts of speech

Open class words

**noun**  word denoting person or thing e.g. dog, house, idea, mind, English nouns typically add ‘s’ to mark the plural.

**verb**  word denoting state, action or event, e.g. sleep, live, kiss, think. English verbs carry markers that indicate whether the event is ongoing or complete, and that say something about when it happened

(1)  
   a. I want to **live** there (infinitive/base form, says nothing about time: occurs following verbs like ‘want’, ‘expect’, . . .)
   b. I **live** there (present tense, everything except 3rd person singular)
   c. He **lives** there (present tense, 3rd singular)
   d. I am **living** there (incomplete, now (marked by present tense form of ‘is’))
   e. I was **living** there (incomplete, past (marked by past tense form of ‘is’))
   f. I **lived** there for twenty years (in the past, probably complete)
   g. I have **lived** there for twenty years (in the past, probably incomplete)
   h. I had **lived** there for twenty years (further in the past, probably incomplete)
   i. It has not been **lived** in for twenty years (passive, i.e. the subject isn’t the thing performing the action)

Note that the same marker can carry out different tasks, e.g. ‘-ed’ can be the past tense (with no auxiliary), the past participle (with ‘have’) or the passive participle (with ‘be’).

Although (1) shows the most regular pattern of affixes for English verbs, there are plenty of irregular cases–‘sleep’, ‘know’, ‘think’, ‘catch’, . . .
adjective  word describing a property. Usually used for adding information to a noun—‘old man’, ‘green grass’, . . . Can occur with ‘-er’ and ‘-est’ to position it within a scale.

adverb  word describing a property, but used with verbs rather than nouns. Often obtained from an adjective by adding ‘-ly’ to it—‘he ran quickly’, ‘she suddenly stopped’, . . .

Closed class words

pronoun  word that is used to denote some thing or person that we’ve been talking about very recently or which is immediately identifiable from the context—‘I, me, you, we, us, he, she, him, her, it, they, them’.

preposition  word that provides more information about a noun or a verb by linking it to some other entity—‘the shop on the corner sells milk’, ‘the man with a big nose bought some’; ‘of, in, on, under, at, up, beyond, with, to, inside, outside, for, by, beneath, beside, . . .’.

auxiliary  word that helps provide information about when an event happened—‘I am sleeping’, ‘I have slept’, ‘I will sleep’, ‘I might sleep’. They can occur in combinations—‘I might have been sleeping’; and some of them can occur as proper verbs as well—‘I have four children, three chickens and two cats’, ‘I am a complete fool’.

determiner  nouns and adjectives provide you with a description: ‘big fat old man’. Determiners tell you how to use that description—‘a big fat old man’=introduce a big fat old man into your listener’s picture of the conversation, ‘the big fat old man’=remember the big fat old man we were talking about just now, ‘most big fat old men’=I’m going to say something that is true of most things that fit this description. ‘the, a, some, all, many, most, few, . . .’

There are some other closed class words that do specific jobs, but they are all different. I’ll describe them as I come to them.
Features

Nouns and verbs tend to carry markers that say something about who is involved, how many things are involved, when something happened. These are often called features. The main English ones are:

**person**: 1st (any group including the speaker, so denoted by ‘I’, ‘me’, ‘we’, ‘us’), 2nd (any group including the hearer, so denoted by ‘you’ and in archaic forms by ‘thee’ and ‘thou’), 3rd (anything else, so ‘he’, ‘him’, ‘she’, ‘her’, ‘they’, ‘them’, ‘it’, plus almost any ordinary noun phrase).

**number**: singular (‘cat’) and plural (‘cats’). Some languages also have a form for dual, i.e. for when there are exactly two items.

**tense**: see the list of examples for ‘live’ in (1). The tense tells you when something happens – ‘He sleeps’ vs ‘He slept’. English uses a combination of affixes (‘-s’, ‘-ed’) and ‘auxiliaries’ (words like ‘is’, ‘has’, ‘will’) to say when things happen: ‘I will have been teaching this course for twenty years by the time I retire’. Other languages make more use of affixes and less use of auxiliaries. Roughly speaking, you can say more complicated things about time in English than in other languages but you have to work harder if you just want say simple things.

**aspect**: tense tells you when something happened. ‘aspect’ tells you how the event was related to the time point named by the tense. So ‘He crossed the road’ says that at some time in the past he made it all the way across the road, whereas ‘He was crossing the road’ says that at some time in the past he had started to cross the road, but at the moment you are thinking about he hadn’t got to the other side. It doesn’t say that he didn’t get there (‘He was crossing the road when I saw him’) but he might not have (‘He was crossing the road when the bus hit him’). The English present participle (‘sleeping’, ‘living’, . . .) expresses the progressive aspect, the past participle (‘He had walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela’, ‘He has eaten forty three ice creams since teatime’) expresses the perfect aspect (the event was complete at the time denoted by the tense of the auxiliary, which is always ‘have’), the simple aspect (‘He walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela’, ‘He ate forty three ice creams after tea’) says that there was
an event like this but it doesn’t really tell you whether it was complete or not. The past tense and the past participle often look the same: you can tell which it is by the presence/absence of ‘have’ – ‘He walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela’ is a simple past, ‘He has walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela’, He had walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela, ‘He would have walked from Santander to Santiago de Compostela’ are all past participles, with different auxiliary sequence giving you the tense. Participle forms tend to involve thinking about a point in time (‘He has eaten forty three ice creams since teatime’), simple forms tend to involve thinking about an interval of time (‘He ate forty three ice creams after tea’). ‘He has eaten forty three ice creams after teatime’ and ‘He ate forty three ice creams since teatime’ just don’t sound right, because ‘since teatime’ points to an instant and ‘after tea’ denotes a period of time. Or something like that.

**voice**: did you do it (‘I passed the salt to the man on my right’–active) or was it done to you (‘I was passed the salt by the man on my left’–passive)

These things can combine, so you could have a 1st plural present tense active form. So in some languages you get very large versions of the same item–an Arabic verb can have 42 forms (number*gender*person*tense*voice = {singular, dual, plural}*{masculine, feminine}*{1st, 2nd, 3rd}*{present, past}*{active, passive} = 72, but some cases are guaranteed to be the same, so you don’t get all 72).