Chapter 5

Lexicology

LEXICOLOGY IS THE STUDY OF WORDS and, whereas many readers will be new to the study of sounds or word segments, most of us feel that we are very familiar with words. Indeed, when we think of language we tend to think about words. We often ask: 'What's the word for a stamp-collector?' or say: 'I just can't think of the right word.' As we have already seen, words are only one of the strands in language, a strand that has, in the past, been given too much attention and a strand that, because of our familiarity with it, we have often failed to study as rigorously and as objectively as other aspects of language. In this chapter, we shall try, first of all, to say what a word is. We shall then consider word-formation and word classes. Other questions relating to words – their meaning and organisation – will be dealt with in Chapter 7 when we discuss semantics.

What do we mean by 'word'?

In spite of our familiarity with 'words', it is not always easy to say what a word is. Certain scholars have suggested that a word can occur in isolation. This claim has some validity, but would 'a' or 'my' or 'if' normally occur in isolation? They would not and yet we would like to think of such items as words. Others have suggested that a word contains one unit of meaning. This is perhaps true if we think of words like 'car' or 'snow', but when we think of sets of words like 'cow', 'bull' and 'calf' or 'ewe', 'ram' and 'lamb', we become aware that the first set might be regarded as follows:

cow ⇒	+ noun	bull ⇒	+ noun	calf ⇒	+ noun
	+ bovine		+ bovine		+ bovine
	+ female		+ male		+ unmarked sex

and we could establish similar patterns for the second set. It would be hard to say, looking at our patterns, that the word 'cow' contains only one unit of meaning.

A better approach to defining words is to acknowledge that there is no one totally satisfactory definition, but that we can isolate four of the most frequently implied meanings of 'word': the *orthographic* word, the *morphological* word, the *lexical* word and the *semantic* word.

(1) An *orthographic* word is one which has a space on either side of it. Thus, in the previous sentence, we have fourteen orthographic words. This definition applies only to the written medium, however, because in normal speech we rarely pause between words. Nevertheless, even in speech it is possible to isolate words by pausing between them.

(2) A *morphological* word is a unique form. It considers form only and not meaning. 'Ball', for example, is one morphological word, even though it can refer to both a bouncing object and a dance. 'Ball' and 'balls' would be two morphological words because they are not identical in form.

(3) A *lexical* word comprehends the various forms of items which are closely related by meaning. Thus, 'chair' and 'chairs' are two morphological words, but one lexical word. Similarly, 'take', 'takes', 'taking', 'taken' and 'took' are five morphological words but only one lexical word. Often in linguistics, when capital letters are used for a word, for example TAKE, it implies that we are dealing with a lexical word and so TAKE comprehends all the various forms, that is, 'take', 'takes', 'taking', 'taken' and 'took'.

(4) A *semantic* word involves distinguishing between items which may be morphologically identical but differ in meaning. We have seen above that 'ball' can have two distinct meanings. This phenomenon of 'polysemy' is common in English. Thus, 'table' can refer to a piece of furniture or to a diagram. The diagram and the piece of furniture are the same morphological word but they are two semantic words because they are not closely related in meaning.

Word-formation

We have already looked at some of the methods of word-formation in English. These can be summarised as follows:

Suffixation:	man + ly	>	manly
Prefixation:	un + true	>	untrue
Affixation:	dis + taste + ful	>	distasteful

As well as the above techniques of derivation, the commonest type of word-formation in English is called 'compounding', that is, joining two words together to form a third. Compounding frequently involves two nouns:

book + case	>	bookcase
sea + man	>	seaman
wall + paper	>	wallpaper

Occasionally, the possessive form of the first noun is used although apostrophes are not found in the compound:

bull's + eye	>	bullseye
lamb's + wool	>	lambswool

Other parts of speech can, of course, combine to form new words and we provide selective examples of these below:

noun + verb		
hair + do	>	hairdo
blood + shed	>	bloodshed
adjective + noun		
blue + bell	>	bluebell
hot + house	>	hothouse
adjective + verb		
easy + going	>	easygoing
wide + spread	>	widespread
verb + noun		
lock + jaw	>	lockjaw
scare + crow	>	scarecrow
verb + adverb		
come + back	>	comeback
take + away	>	takeaway
adverb + verb		
down + fall	>	downfall
out + cry	>	outcry

Often, when the compound is new, whether it involves a prefix and a word or two words, a hyphen is used between the parts:

come-back
dis-inter

but, as the compound becomes more familiar, the hyphen is dropped. The main exception to this rule is that the hyphen is often retained when two vowels come together:

co-operation
multi-ethnic
take-off

New words are formed in English by four other processes: coinages, backformations, blends and acronyms. Words can be coined from existing material to represent a new invention or development:

wireless

television

hypermarket

Often, when the coinages refer to trade-names, untraditional spellings are used:

kleenex (tissues)

sqezy (washing-up liquid)

Backformations involve the use of analogy to create forms that are similar to ones already in existence in the language. Thus, recently we have derived:

gatecrash	*from* gatecrasher
globetrot	*from* globetrotter
pop	*from* popular

Blends involve joining two words together by taking parts of both words and welding the parts into a new whole:

breakfast	+	lunch	>	brunch
chuckle	+	snort	>	chortle
motor	+	hotel	>	motel

The fourth technique involves creating words out of the initial letters of well-known organisations:

UNESCO	*from* United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation
Laser	*from* Light Amplification by Stimulated Emission of Radiation

Word classes

We have looked at the *form* of some English words and we shall now sort these words into classes according to the way they *function*. One crucial generalisation has to be made first, however. Words in English can function in many different ways. Thus 'round' can be a noun in:

He won the first round.

an adjective in:

She bought a round table for the dining room.

a verb in:

They rounded the corner at eighty miles an hour.

an adverb in:

The doctor will come round this evening.

and a preposition in:

He went round the track in four minutes.

In English, it is always essential to see how a word functions in a particular example before assigning it to a word class.

In spite of the flexibility of English words, we can use test frames to distinguish a number of word classes which we shall list and then describe:

nouns
determiners
pronouns
adjectives
verbs
adverbs
prepositions
conjunctions
exclamations/interjections

A **noun** has often been defined as the name of a person, animal, place, concept or thing. Thus *Michael, tiger, Leeds, grace* and *grass* are nouns. If you wish to test an item to see if it is a noun, you can use such test frames as:

(The) . . . . . seemed nice.
(This/these) . . . . . is/are good.
little . . . . .
lovely . . . . .
ancient . . . . .

A **determiner** is an adjective-like word which precedes both adjectives and nouns and can fit into such frames as the following:

Have you . . . . . wool?
I don't want . . . . . cheese.
. . . . . cat sat on . . . . . woollen gloves.

There are five main kinds of determiners: articles such as *a/an* and *the*; demonstratives *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*; possessives *my*, *your*, *his*, *her*, *its*, *our*, *their*; numbers when they precede nouns as in '*one* girl', '*first* degree', '*seven* hills'; indefinite determiners such as *some*, *any*, *all*, *enough*, *no*, *both*, *each*, *every*, *few*, *much*, *more*, *most*, *fewer*, *less*, *either*, *neither*.

Determiners always indicate that a noun follows. Many indefinite determiners can function as other parts of speech. The words in italics below are used as determiners in column A and as pronouns in column B:

A	*B*
I ate *some* bread.	Give me *some*.
I haven't *any* money.	I don't want *any*.
Both parents were late.	I saw *both*.

A **pronoun** is, as its name suggests, similar to a noun in that it can take the place of a noun or a noun phrase:

John met his future wife on a train.

He met *her* on *it/one*.

Pronouns can fit into such test frames as:

. . . . . don't know your name.

Give . . . . . to . . . . . .

but the simplest test for a pronoun is to check if it can replace a noun or a noun phrase.

Pronouns in English can reflect number, case and person:

Person	*Singular*		*Plural*	
	Nominative	*Accusative*	*Nominative*	*Accusative*
First	I	me	we	us
Second	you	you	you	you
Third	he	him	they	them
	she	her		
	it	it		

As well as reflecting nominative and accusative cases with all personal pronouns except *you* and *it*, English also has a set of seven possessive pronouns:

Person	*Singular*	*Plural*
First	mine	ours
Second	yours	yours

Third	his hers its	theirs

As is clear from the two tables, natural gender is marked in the third person singular:

He lost his wallet. (that is, the man)

She lost her purse. (that is, the woman)

It lost its railway link. (that is, the city)

English has six other types of pronoun: reflexives such as *myself*, *themselves*; demonstratives *this*, *that*, *these*, *those*; interrogatives *what?*, *which?*, *who?*, *whom?*, *whose?*; relatives *that*, *which*, *who*, *whom*, *whose*; distributive pronouns which are often followed by 'of you': *all* (of you), *both* (of you), *each* (of you), *either* (of you), *neither* (of you); and a set of indefinite pronouns such as *some*, *any* and occasionally *so* and *such* in sentences like:

Who said *so*?

Such is the way of the world.

An **adjective** is a descriptive word that qualifies and describes nouns as in:

a *cold* day

a *heavy* shower

Adjectives occur in two main positions in a sentence, before nouns as in the above examples and after verbs like BE, BECOME, GROW, SEEM:

He is *tall*.

He became *angry*.

He grew *fiercer*.

He seems *content*.

Adjectives can thus fill such frames as:

(The) . . . . . men seemed very . . . . . .

(The) . . . . . bread is not very . . . . . .

A **verb** is often defined as a 'doing' word, a word that expresses an action:

John climbed a tree.

a process:

John turned green.

or a state:

John resembles his mother.

Verbs fit into such frames as:

They . . . . . .

Did he . . . . . that?

We might . . . . . .

She is . . . . . ing.

There are two main types of verbs in English, headverbs and auxiliaries. A few examples will illustrate this. In sentences such as:

He hasn't seen me.

He was seen.

He didn't see me.

He might see me tomorrow.

the various forms of SEE are known as the headverb whereas *has*, *was*, *did* and *might* are called auxiliary verbs because they help to make more precise the information carried by the headverb. In English it is possible to have a maximum of four auxiliaries in the one verb phrase:

He may have been being followed.

Verbs that can replace 'may' are called 'modals'; HAVE, in this context, is the 'perfective auxiliary'; the first BE is the 'continuative' or 'progressive auxiliary'; and the second BE is used to form 'passives'. There is one other auxiliary in English, often called the 'dummy auxiliary' because it has little meaning but a great deal of structural significance. In the absence of other auxiliaries, DO is used to turn positive statements into negatives or to create questions:

I like him.

I do not (don't) like him.

Do you like him?

Do you not (Don't you) like him?

An **adverb** is used to modify a verb, an adjective, a sentence or another adverb:

John talked *strangely*.

He is *dangerously* ill.

He was, *however*, the best person for the job.

He talked *very* strangely.

Adverbs fit into such test frames as:

He ran very . . . . . .

He is . . . . . intelligent.

A **preposition** is a function word, such as *at*, *by*, *for*, *from*, *to* and *with*. Prepositions are always followed by a noun, a noun phrase or a pronoun.

He talked *to* John.

He arrived *with* another man.

He did it *for* me.

Prepositions fit into such test frames as:

Who went . . . . . John.

Do it . . . . . me.

A **conjunction** is, as its name suggests, a 'joining' word. There are two types of conjunctions: co-ordinating conjunctions such as *and*, *but*, *so*, which join units of equal significance in a sentence:

John *and* Mary ran upstairs.

Give the parcel to John *but* give the money to Mary.

and subordinating conjunctions which join subordinate clauses to a main clause:

He wouldn't tell me *why* he did it.

He said *that* he was tired.

An **exclamation** may be described as an involuntary utterance expressing fear, pain, surprise:

Good lord!

Heavens above!

Oh dear!

The term 'interjection' is often reserved for monosyllabic utterances such as: Oh! Wow! Ouch!

In the written medium, both exclamations and interjections are marked by exclamation marks.

Summary

The foregoing survey is a superficial account of how words function in English. It will guide the student in making decisions about word classes as long as it is remembered that each word must be judged in a

specific context. Only context tells us that *any* is a determiner in the first sentence and a pronoun in the second:

Have you any wool?

Have you any?

that *up* is a preposition in the first sentence below, an adverb in the second and a verb in the third:

It ran up the clock.

I can't get up.

He has decided to up his prices.

Exercises

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1. How many (*a*) orthographic, (*b*) morphological, (*c*) lexical and (*d*) semantic words have we in each of the following lists?
   (1) make, makes, making, made, maiden
   (2) fire, fires, fir, firs, fur
   (3) take, taken, took, taking, takings
   (4) bass (fish), bass (singing voice), bass (tree bark)
   (5) royal, regal, kingly (in the context 'royal/regal/kingly bearing')
2. Expand the following compounds by showing how the two parts are connected. (For example an 'applepie' can be expanded into 'a pie made from apples' and a 'bookcase' can be expanded into 'a case/container for books'.)
   (1) farmyard
   (2) fieldmouse
   (3) girlfriend
   (4) hothouse
   (5) playhouse
   (6) postman
   (7) raincoat
   (8) silkworm
   (9) steamboat
   (10) treehouse
3. Expand the following compounds in the same way as in Exercise 2 and, where possible, say which parts of speech are involved in the compound.
   (1) football
   (2) greenhouse
   (3) handsaw
   (4) highlife

(5) lambswool
(6) income
(7) milkman
(8) outlook
(9) scarecrow
(10) takeaway

4. Decide what part of speech each of the underlined words is.

(1) Come round to see us.
(2) All fighting stopped immediately.
(3) Did you hear what your father said?
(4) To whom did you give that?
(5) John and Mary came with their parents.
(6) Hey! Who told you to do that?
(7) Seeing is believing.
(8) He is too happy to go out.
(9) I'm terribly sorry I took yours.
(10) What can you see with that?