

The Word

Definitions and Interpretations

Difficulties in the definition of the word

There are a lot of definitions of the word. It is hard to find a satisfactory one. On the other hand, people have no difficulties in recognizing words of their native language. Below are three definitions which emphasize different aspects of word:

1. A sequence of letters separated by spaces on both sides.

2. An indivisible unit of thought.
3. The minimal free form. (Bloomfield)

Distinction should be made between **orthographic words, phonological words, word forms and lexemes.**

Lexeme is the smallest distinctive unit in the lexicon of a language. The term was introduced to avoid the ambiguity of the term “word”. Lexeme subsumes a range of variant grammatical forms (go – going - goes).

Count the words in the following sentence:

You can't tie a bow with the rope in the bow of a boat. (Jackson 1988:1)

The most straightforward answer - 14 words.

can't ?

Some words occur more than once (a, the)

Bow (two or one)?

bow 1 [beu]– kilpa

bow 2 [bau] – laivo priekis

The answer:

There are 11 different orthographic words,
with two instances each of *a*, *the* and *bow*.

There are 12 different phonological words,
with two instances each of the indefinite
and the definite articles.

There are 13 different word forms
(grammatically *can* and *not* are distinct
word forms)

There are 13 different lexemes. (the two instances of **bow** are two distinct lexemes since they carry different meanings and get separate entries in a dictionary)

Lexemes appear as **headwords** of dictionary entries.

Four characteristics of words

1. The word is an uninterruptible unit. Elements are added to the beginning or end and are never included within the word.
2. The word may consist of one or more morphemes. When a word consists of more than one morpheme, it may be complex or compound. Complex – can be broken into one free and one or more bound morphemes. Compound words consist of more than one free form.

It is not always easy to recognize morphemes – *woman, cupboard, breakfast* historically compound words, but now are unanalysable in to morphemes.

3. The word occurs typically in the structure of phrases. Morphemes are used to build words and words are used to build phrases, phrases – to build clauses.
4. Each word should belong to a specific word class or part of speech.

Ambiguity in the notion of word

The most important sources of ambiguity of word are four:

1. The generic character of the word. Words denote not single items but classes of things or entities. There is always a certain amount of generalization, which inevitably involves an element of vagueness. E. g. *chair* (what makes a chair a chair? Number of legs? Function?)

2. The multiple aspects of every word.

We have to discriminate between distinctive and non-distinctive features of words.

E.g. *table* (the color, shape, material are not essential).

3. The lack of clear-cut boundaries in the world.

The nature of the non-linguistic world itself may be a source of ambiguity. One phenomenon may merge into another. E.g. *color spectrum* is a continuum. But each language divides it into a certain amount of arbitrary distinctions

4. Lack of familiarity with the referent of a word. General knowledge and specific interests of individuals. E.g. agricultural terms, computer terms, linguistic terms, etc.

Emotive overtones – word expresses emotions or arouses them in others. This may be opposed to the communicative/informative use of language, but may be even dominant in an utterance (*He is bad.*)

Word meaning

The word as a linguistic sign consists of **meaning** and **form**

referent, concept, form

Denotation – the relation between a lexeme and a whole class of extra-linguistic objects.

Reference – the relation between word and what it stands for in a particular context.

Sense – meaning relations within language

There may be words that have sense but no denotation (*unicorn, dragon*)

Denotation and connotation

There is no universal treatment of the distinction between these two types of meaning. Connotations make additional properties of lexemes – poetic, slang, emotive, humorous, etc.

Connotation – the associations that a word has over and above its denotation. Linguistically significant are the associations that a word carries for a whole language community, e.g. *caviar* denotes luxury, high class, money, *candle* – religious or romantic connotations.

The noun **woman** is defined conceptually by three features: HUMAN, FEMALE ,ADULT but there is a multitude of additional features that we have learned to expect of the referent - psychological and social properties (experienced in cookery, gregarious, likes to dress nicely, is prone to tears).

Hollywood denotes an area of LA known as the center of American movie industry, but connotes glamour, glitz and stardom.

Thus connotation is a non-central word meaning acquired through frequent associations. Connotation is closely related with synonymy since synonyms may have the same denotation but different connotations. Both aspects are important in determining word meaning in a given context.

The referential meaning of a lexeme is its denotation and connotation. It depends on the context in which the lexeme is used. The context is of two kinds: linguistic (the sentence, the text) and situational (extralinguistic).

The definitions of lexemes given in dictionaries cannot provide all the aspects of its meaning. Thus the meaning of a lexeme (its sense) in a dictionary entry must be regarded as “potential”, a distillation of the essentials (Jackson 1988: 60) . It is actualized in a particular context.

Salt – a natural white mineral added to food to make it taste better (Longman 2007)

Salt – a very common colorless or white solid substance [sodium chloride] found in the Earth and in sea water and with many uses including preserving food and improving the taste (Longman 1978)

Salt –sodium chloride, NaCl, a white crystal like substance found in natural beds, in sea water, etc., used for seasoning and preserving food, etc. (Webster 1980)

Multiword Lexemes

Definition of **lexeme** (Jackson and Ze Amvela 2001: 63): it is a unit of lexical meaning which exists regardless of inflectional endings or the number of words it may contain.

The definition implies that a lexeme may consist **of more than one word**.

Three types of multiword lexemes:

1. Phrasal and prepositional words.
2. Idioms.
3. Some compounds.

Multiword verbs

These are phrasal verbs, prepositional verbs and phrasal-prepositional verbs.

The clues that help to distinguish the three groups are transitivity, the position of the direct object and the number of particles used with the verb.

look up

look after

look forward to

1. Prepositional verbs are always transitive, i.e. they always take the direct object. The preposition must go before the direct object.

Mary looks after the little boy.

Mary looks after him.

2. Phrasal verbs can be transitive or intransitive.
Transitive:

Jane has put off the party.

Jane has put the party off.

Jane has put it off.

The object may occur after the main verb or after the particle. Personal pronouns cannot precede the particle.

Intransitive:

Get up at once.

Won't you sit down?

He will never give in.

The firm provides its workers with uniforms.

Phrasal verbs vary in the extent to which they preserve the meanings of the verb and the particle. The following examples are idiomatic:

give in – "surrender"

turn up – "appear"

drop in – "come for a short visit"

3. Prepositional phrasal verbs

put up with – “tolerate”

look down on – “despise”

rub up against – “keep touching smith”

stand up for – “to support someone”

These are also more or less idiomatic in their meaning.

Idioms

Idioms consist of more than one word. The meaning of an idiom cannot be predicted from the sum of the meaning of words that make it up. Thus idioms are primarily units of meaning and are treated as multi word lexemes.

to smell the rat

to take the bull by the horns

to hit the nail right in the head

to fly off the handle

out of the blue

a fine kettle of fish

in a hole

to call a spade a spade

Idioms are often called “frozen metaphors”.

They are fixed expressions. The native speakers may use idioms without considering their metaphorical origin.

Some idioms are only partially idiomatic in the sense that some words in them preserve their original non-metaphoric meaning.

to make bed

to fall in love

white coffee

white people

red hair

blue grass

Thus what is and what is not an idiom is a matter of degree. We can speak about completely non-motivated idioms (***Go, fly a kite; to kick the bucket***) and partially non-motivated idioms.

Ambiguity of idioms: as expressions many of them may have both literal and non-literal meaning.

to let the cat out of the bag

to wash one's dirty linen in public

The context helps to disambiguate the use of an idiom.

In an idiom in the greatest majority of cases no word can be replaced by a synonym or any related word. Thus to ***let the dog/rabbit/ degu/hamster*** out of the bag will not be treated as an idiom.

Syntactically idioms are mostly strictly fixed – an active form of the expression cannot be changed into a passive, for example (***to kick the bucket***); words cannot be omitted (***to turn over a new leaf***).

Compound nouns

Not all compound nouns are multiword lexemes.

tablecloth - not

table manners - multiword lexeme

same-sex (adj) - not

water resistant (adj) - multiword lexeme

travel agency - multiword lexeme

continental breakfast - multiword lexeme