

LBRIS

We know
books

how to

*Teach
Vocabulary*

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What's in a word?

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Introduction

'A word is a microcosm of human consciousness.' (Vygotsky)

All languages have words. Language emerges first as words, both historically, and in terms of the way each of us learned our first and any subsequent languages. The coining of new words never stops. Nor does the acquisition of words. Even in our first language we are continually learning new words, and learning new meanings for old words. Take, for example, this description of a wine, where familiar words are being used and adapted to express very specialised meanings:

A deep rich red in colour. Lush and soft aroma with plums and blackberries, the oak is plentiful and adds vanilla to the mix, attractive black pepper undercurrents. The mouthfeel is plush and comfortable like an old pair of slippers, boysenberry and spicy plum fruit flavours with liquorice and well seasoned oak. The generous finish ends with fine grained tannins and a grippy earthy aftertaste.

(from web page at www.ewinexchange.com.au)

If you are not familiar with wine-tasting terminology, you may have found this text heavy going, due to both the density and specialised nature of its vocabulary. For example, you may be familiar with *lush* and *plush* but uncertain as to what they mean, or how they differ in meaning, in this context. Some words may be entirely new to you – such as *grippy* and

mouthfeel. Learners of a second language experience a similar bewilderment even with much simpler texts. They may be confronted by words that are totally unfamiliar, or are being used in ways that for them are novel and possibly obscure. They may even be meeting concepts that are simply not represented by words in their first language.

Their problems are compounded when they need to produce language. Finding the right word to fit the intended meaning is frustrating when your store of words is limited. And when words get confused with each other, even within this limited store, the results can be disastrous, as in this example from a student's composition:

I am writing to complain you about an unnecessary operation that I had at St Charles Hospital, last May 24. Two months ago, I went to visit Doctor Sánchez, who works at this Hospital, because I had adenoids that prevented me to breathe. He persuaded me to have a noise operation to get out the adenoids. I was worried with this idea, but finally I accepted his decision. Two weeks later I had been operated.

The problem was when he removed the bandages of my noise. I gave a shout!!!! My noise had been changed by a small noise similar to the pig's noises ...

To sum up, learning the vocabulary of a second language presents the learner with the following challenges:

- making the correct connections, when understanding the second language, between the form and the meaning of words (e.g. *mouthfeel*, *grippy*), including discriminating the meanings of closely related words (e.g. *lush* and *plush*)
- when producing language, using the correct form of a word for the meaning intended (i.e. *nose* not *noise*)

To meet these challenges the learner needs to:

- acquire a critical mass of words for use in both understanding and producing language
- remember words over time, and be able to recall them readily
- develop strategies for coping with gaps in word knowledge, including coping with unknown words, or unfamiliar uses of known words

Identifying words

In order to address the above issues, it may pay to start at the beginning, and to attempt to define what exactly a word is. Here is a sentence that, at first glance, consists of twenty of them:

I like looking for bits and pieces like old second-hand record players and doing them up to look like new.

Of course, there are not twenty *different* words in that sentence. At least two of those twenty words are repeated: *and* is repeated once, *like* three times: *I like looking for bits and pieces like ... look like new*. On the other hand, the first *like* is a verb, and the other two are prepositions – so is this really a case of the same word being repeated? And then there's *looking* and *look*: are these

two different words? Or two different **forms** of the same word? Then there's *second-hand*: two words joined to make one? Probably – the hyphen suggests we treat *second-hand* differently from, say, *I've got a second hand*. But what about *record player*? Two words but one concept, surely?

It gets worse. What about *bits and pieces*? Isn't this a self-contained unit? After all, we don't say *pieces and bits*. Or *things and pieces*. A case, perhaps, of three words forming one. (Like *bits and bobs*.) And *looking for*: my dictionary has an entry for *look*, another for *look for*, and yet another for *look after*. Three different meanings – three different words? And, finally, **doing them up**: although *doing* and *up* are separated by another word, they seem to be so closely linked as to form a word-like unit (*do up*) with a single meaning: *renovate*. One word or two?

The decision as to what counts as a word might seem rather academic, but there are important implications in terms of teaching. Is it enough, for example, to teach *to look* and assume that learning *to look for* and *to look after* will follow automatically? Do you teach *look*, *looks*, *looking* together? Should you teach *record* and *player* as separate items before introducing *record player*? And how do you go about teaching *to do something up* when not only is the meaning of the whole more than the sum of its parts, but the parts themselves are moveable? You can *do a flat up* or *do up a flat*. Finally, how do you assess how many words a learner knows? If they know *bits* and they know *pieces*, can we assume they know *bits and pieces*? Does the learner who knows *bits and pieces* know 'more' than the learner who knows only *bits* and *pieces*?

Let's take a closer look at these different aspects of what constitutes a word. In so doing, we will attempt to cover the main ways in which words are described and categorised. Knowing how words are described and categorised can help us understand the decisions that syllabus planners, materials writers and teachers make when it comes to the teaching of vocabulary.

Word classes

We can see from our example sentence that words play different roles in a text. They fall into one of eight different **word classes**:

nouns	bits, pieces, record, player
pronouns	I, them
verbs	like, looking, doing, to look
adjectives	old, second-hand, new
adverb	up
prepositions	for, like
conjunction	and
determiner	–

Like, like many words in English, can belong to two or more word classes. The unrepresented class are the determiners – words like *a*, *the*, *some*, *this*, *last*.

In terms of the meanings associated with these word classes, we can make a crude division into two groups. On the one hand, there are words like *for*, *and*, *them*, *to* that mainly contribute to the grammatical structure of the

sentence. These are called **grammatical words** (or **function words**) and are generally prepositions, conjunctions, determiners and pronouns. On the other hand, there are the **content words**, those that carry a high information load. Content words are usually nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. The sense of a text is more or less recoverable using these words alone:

like looking bits pieces old second-hand record players doing up look new

Compare this with:

I for and like and them to like

Typically, where space is at a premium, such as in text messages, newspaper headlines, and road signs, it is the content words alone that do the job: *RAIL STRIKE TALKS END*. Content words are an open set: that is, there is no limit to the number of content words that can be added to the language. Here are a few that have been added recently – *airbag*, *emoticon*, *carjacking*, *cybersex*, *quark*. Grammatical words, on the other hand, are a closed set. The last time a pronoun was added to the language was in the early sixteenth century. (It was *them*.)

Traditionally, grammatical words belonged to the domain of grammar teaching, while the teaching of vocabulary was more concerned with content words. However, the rigid division between grammar and vocabulary has become blurred recently. The interdependence of these two systems is a key tenet of what has been called the **lexical approach** (see page 112).

Word families

We've seen how words may share the same base or **root** (e.g. *look*) but take different endings: *looks*, *looking*, *looked*. This is a feature of the grammar of most languages: the use of add-ons (called **affixes**) to make a verb past (*looked*), for example, or a noun plural (*bits*). These different grammatical forms of a word are called **inflexions**. Adding affixes serves a grammatical purpose. It is also a fundamental principle of word formation generally – the adding of affixes to the roots of words (e.g. *play*) to fashion new words. A word that results from the addition of an affix to a root, and which has a different meaning from the root, is called a **derivative**:

play
play + er
re + play
play + ful

So, while *plays*, *played* and *playing* are inflexions of *play*, the words *player*, *replay* and *playful* are each derivatives of *play*. Inflexions and derivatives are both formed by the process of **affixation**. Note that *-er* and *-ful* are end-of-word affixes, or **suffixes**, while beginning-of-word affixes, like *re-*, *un-*, *pre-*, *de-*, etc. are called **prefixes**.

We can now talk about words as belonging to families. A **word family** comprises the base word plus its inflexions and its most common derivatives. To take another example, the base form *understand* includes the following members in its family:

understands
understanding
understood
understandable
misunderstand
misunderstood

Research suggests that the mind groups these different forms of the same word together. Therefore, rather than talk about the number of individual words a person knows, it makes more sense to talk about the number of word families.

Word formation

Affixation is one of the ways new words are formed from old. Another one is **compounding** – that is, the combining of two or more independent words, as in the case of *second-hand*, *word processor*, *paperback*, and so on. The fact that many compounds started life as two separate words is evident from their variant spellings. Thus: *dish washer*, *dish-washer*, *dishwasher*; and *wild flower*, *wild-flower*, *wildflower*. This is one reason why it is tempting to consider *record player* as one compounded word rather than two single words.

Another reason to consider *record player* a single word is that this kind of compound pattern – noun + verb + *-er* – is a very common, and highly productive, one in English: a *record player* is a machine that plays records. Likewise *dishwasher*, *hairdryer*, *bus driver*, *goalkeeper*, *typewriter*; they are all formed according to the same principle. New words that follow this pattern are constantly joining the language: *screensaver*, *trainspotter*, *particle accelerator*, *mail server*. Another common pattern is the noun + noun pattern, as in *matchbox*, *classroom*, *teapot*, *mousemat*, etc. Of course, the two patterns – noun + noun and noun + verb + *-er* – can re-combine to form even more complex compounds: *dumptruck-driver*, *candlestick-maker*, *windscreen-wiper*, and so on.

Two words can be **blended** to form one new one (called a **blend**): *breakfast* + *lunch* = *brunch*; *information* + *entertainment* = *infotainment*. Or a word can be co-opted from one part of speech and used as another, a process called **conversion**. Typically nouns are converted into verbs (or ‘verbed’) as in *The shell impacted against a brick wall*; *Let’s brunch tomorrow*. But other parts of speech can be converted as well: *she upped and left* (preposition → verb); *a balloon flight is an absolute must* (verb → noun). Finally, new words can be coined by shortening or **clipping** longer words: *flu* (from *influenza*), *email* (from *electronic mail*) and *dorm* (from *dormitory*).

In the following text, ¹ indicates words formed by affixation, ² compounds, ³ conversion and ⁴ clipping:

Weighed down by details? The 40MB Klik! PC Card Drive from Iomega, a lightweight², removeable¹ storage¹ drive for PC users, will soon sort that out. Designed with people on the go³ in mind, the Klik! PC Card Drive removes the need for additional cables and cumbersome¹ storage back-up^{2,3}. Each Klik! disc has the capacity to store 40 megas⁴ of information quickly and conveniently. With packaging^{1,3} akin to your

favourite pair of Cutler and Gross specs⁴, this stream-lined² system is an essential lubricant¹ to life in the fast lane.

(from *Wallpaper* magazine, Time Life)

Multi-word units

Even when words are not joined to form compounds, we have seen that groups of more than one word, such as *bits and pieces*, *do up*, *look for*, can function as a meaningful unit with a fixed or semi-fixed form. Technically these are known as **multi-word units**, but they are often called simply **lexical chunks**. For example, in the following extract (in which two workers are discussing the Australian car industry – a Holden is an Australian car) the lexical chunks are in italics:

KEITH: *It's amazing how* the bleeding car industry's *swung round*. It's Holdens *for years* and now Fords have got it. *Well and truly*. [...] *Year after year* they're *laying more off* towards *the end of the year* so they knew this was coming – it wasn't *out of the blue*.

JO: I think that they shipped *a lot of* the accessory overseas too. Before they did *a lot of the bits and pieces* themselves.

(from Slade D, *The Texture of Casual Conversation*)

The chunks vary in terms of how fixed, and how idiomatic, they are. For example, *out of the blue* is both idiomatic (that is to say, its meaning is not easily recoverable from its individual components) and fixed – you can't say *from the blue* or *out of the green*, for example. *Well and truly* and *bits and pieces* (as we have seen) are also fixed, but less idiomatic. *Year after year*, on the other hand, is only semi-fixed. It allows a limited amount of manipulation: we can say *month after month* and *day after day*. Note that both *a lot of* and *for years* are typical of the enormous number of chunks that are used to express vague quantities and qualities: *loads of*, *that sort of thing*, *more or less*, *now and again*.

It's amazing how ... belongs to a set of semi-fixed multi-word units that function as **sentence frames**: they provide a structure on which to 'hang' a sentence, and are especially useful in reducing planning time in rapid speech.

Especially common in informal language are compounds of verb + adverb (like *swung round*), or verb + preposition (*look after*). These are known as either **phrasal verbs** or **multi-part verbs**. Because they are often idiomatic (like *lay off*) and can sometimes be separated (*laying more workers off* and *laying off more workers*), they present a formidable challenge to learners. (In Chapter 7 you will find more on chunks and phrasal verbs.)

To handle the fact that there are multi-word items that behave like single words, the term **lexeme** was coined. A lexeme is a word or group of words that function as a single meaning unit. So, to return to the sentence that started this chapter:

I like looking for bits and pieces like old second-hand record players and doing them up to look like new.

we could count *looking for*, *bits and pieces*, *record players*, *doing ... up* and *to look* as single lexemes, along with *I*, *like*, *old*, *them*, etc.