

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### 1.1

#### WHY STUDY WORDS?

Imagine a life without words! Trappist monks opt for it. But most of us would not give up words for anything. Every day we utter thousands and thousands of words. Communicating our joys, fears, opinions, fantasies, wishes, requests, demands, feelings and the occasional threat or insult is a very important aspect of being human. The air is always thick with our verbal emissions. There are so many things we want to tell the world. Some of them are important, some of them are not. But we talk anyway-even when we know that what we are saying is totally unimportant. We love chitchat and find silent encounters awkward, or even oppressive. A life without words would be a horrendous privation.

It is a cliché to say that words and language are probably humankind's most valuable single possession. It is language that sets us apart from our biologically close relatives, the great primates. (I would imagine that many a chimp or gorilla would give an arm and a leg for a few words-but we will probably never know because they cannot tell us.) Yet, surprisingly, most of us take words (and more generally language) for granted. We cannot discuss words with anything like the competence with which we can discuss fashion, films or football.

We should not take words for granted. They are too important. This book is intended to make explicit some of the things that we know subconsciously about words. It is a linguistic introduction to the nature and structure of English words. It addresses the question 'what sorts of things do people need to know about English words in order to use them in speech? It is intended to increase the degree of sophistication with which you think about words. It is designed to give you a theoretical grasp of English word-formation, the sources of English vocabulary and the way in which we store and retrieve words from the mind.

I hope a desirable side effect of working through *English Words* will be the enrichment of your vocabulary. This book will help to increase, in a very practical way, your awareness of the relationship between words. You will be equipped with the tools you need to work out the meanings of unfamiliar words and to see in a new light the underlying structural patterns in many familiar words which you have not previously stopped to think about analytically.

For the student of language, words are a very rewarding object of study. An understanding of the nature of words provides us with a key that opens the door to an understanding of important aspects of the nature of language in general. Words give us a panoramic view of the entire field of linguistics because they impinge on every aspect of language structure. This book stresses the ramifications of the fact that words are complex and multi-faceted entities whose structure and use interacts with the other modules of the grammar such as **PHONOLOGY**, the study of how sounds are used to represent words in speech, **SYNTAX**, the study of sentence structure, and **SEMANTICS**, the study of meaning in language. In order to use even a very simple word, such as frog, we need to access various types of information

from the word-store which we all carry around with us in the **MENTAL LEXICON** or **DICTIONARY** that is tucked away in the mind. We need to know:

[1.1]

- (i) its shape, i.e. its **PHONOLOGICAL REPRESENTATION**/frg/ which enables us to pronounce it, and its **ORTHOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION** frog, if we are literate and know how to spell it (see the Key to symbols used on page xix);
  - (ii) its grammatical properties, e.g. it is a noun and it is countable-so you can have one frog and two frogs:
  - (iii) its meaning.
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But words tend not to wear their meaning on their sleeve. Normally, there is nothing about the form of words that would enable anyone to work out their meaning. Thus, the fact that *frog* refers to one of these simply has to be listed in the lexicon and committed to memory by brute force. For the relationship between a **LINGUISTIC SIGN** like this word and its meaning is **ARBITRARY**. Other languages use different words to refer to this small tailless amphibian. In French it is called (*la*) *grenouille*. In Malay they call it *katak* and in Swahili *chura*. None of these words is more suited than the others to the job of referring to this small reptile.

And of course, within a particular language, any particular pronunciation can be associated with any meaning. So long as speakers accept that sound-meaning association, they have a kosher word. For instance, *convenience* originally meant 'suitability' or 'commodiousness' but in the middle of the nineteenth century a new meaning of 'toilet was assigned to it and people began to talk of a public convenience'. In the early 1960s the word acquired the additional new meaning of 'easy to use, designed for hassle-free use" as in *convenience food*.

We are the masters. Words are our servants. We can make them mean whatever we want them to mean. Humpty Dumpty had all this worked out. The only thing missing from his analysis is the social dimension. Any arbitrary meaning assigned to a word needs to be accepted by the speech community which uses the language. Obviously, language would not be much use as a means of communication if each individual language user assigned a private meaning to each word which other users of the language did not recognise. Apart from that, it is instructive to listen in on the lesson on the nature of language that Humpty Dumpty gave to Alice (see overleaf).

Let us now consider one further example. All competent speakers of English know that you can add -s to a noun to indicate that it refers to more than one entity. So, you say cat when referring to one and cats if there is more than one. If you encountered in the blank in [1.2a] an unfamiliar word like *splet* (which I have just made up), you would automatically know from the context that it must have the plural form *splets* in this position since it is specified as plural by *all*. Further, you would know that the plural of *splet* must be *splets* (rather than *spletren* by analogy to *children* or *spleti* by analogy to *stimuli*). You know that the majority of nouns form their plural by adding the regular plural suffix or ending -s. You always add -s unless express instructions are given to do otherwise. There is no need to memorise separately the plural form of most nouns. All we need is to know the rule that says 'add -s for plural. So, without any hesitation, you suffix -s to obtain the plural form *splets* in [1.2b]:

- a. We put all the big\_\_\_\_\_ on the table.
  - b. We put all the big *splets* on the table.
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The study of word-formation and word-structure is called **MORPHOLOGY**. Morphological theory provides a general theory of word-structure in all the languages of the world. Its task is to characterise the kinds of things that speakers need to know about the structure of the words of their language in order to be able to use them to produce and to understand speech.

We will see that in order to use language, speakers need to have two types of morphological knowledge. First, they need to be able to analyse existing words (e.g. they must be able to tell that *frogs* contains *frog* plus *-s* for plural). Usually, if we know the meanings of the elements that a word contains, it is possible to determine the meaning of the entire word once we have worked out how the various elements relate to each other. For instance, if we examine a word like *nutcracker* we find that it is made up of two words, namely the noun *nut* and the noun *cracker*. Furthermore, we see that the latter word, *cracker* is divisible into the verb *crack* and another meaningful element *-er* (roughly meaning 'an instrument used to do X'), which, however, is not a word in its own right. Numerous other words are formed using this pattern of combining words (and smaller meaningful elements) as seen in [1.3]:

[1.3]

[tea]Noun\_\_ [strain-er]]Noun  
[lawn]Noun \_\_[mow-er]]Noun  
[can]Noun\_\_ [open-er]]Noun

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Given the frame [[ Noun er]] Noun, we can fill in different words with the appropriate properties and get another compound word (i.e. a word containing at least two words). Try this frame out yourself. Find two more similar examples of compound words formed using this pattern.

Second, speakers need to be able to work out the meanings of novel words constructed using the word- building elements and standard word-construction rules of the language. Probably we all know and use more words than are listed in dictionaries. We can construct and analyse the structure and meaning of old words as well as new ones. So, although many words must be listed in the dictionary and memorised, listing every word in the dictionary is not necessary. If a word is formed following general principles, it may be more efficient to reconstitute it from its constituent elements as the need arises rather than permanently commit it to memory. When people make up new words using existing words and wordforming elements, we understand them with ease-providing we know what the elements they use to form those words mean and providing the word-forming rules that they employ are familiar. This ability is one of the things explored in morphological investigations.

In an average week, we are likely to encounter a couple of unfamiliar words. We might reach for a dictionary and look them up. Some of them may be listed but others might be too new or too ephemeral to have found their way into any dictionary. In such an event, we rely

on our morphological knowledge to tease out their meanings. If you heard someone describe their partner as 'a great list maker and a ticker-off, you would instantly know what sort of person the partner was\_although you almost certainly have never encountered the word *ticker-off* before. And it is certainly not listed in any dictionary. The *er* ending here has the meaning of 'someone who does whatever the verb means. Given the verb tickoff, a *ticker-off* must be a person who *ticks off*. Similarly, if you know what established words like *handful*, *cupful* and *spoonful* mean, you are also able to figure out the meanings of novel words like *fountain-penful* (as in a *fountain-penful of ink*) or *hovercraftful* (as in *hovercraftful after hovercraftful of English shoppers returned from Calais loaded down with cigarettes, cheese and plonk*). Virtually any noun denoting a container can have *ful* added to it in order to indicate that it is full of something".

To take another example, a number of words ending in *-ist*, many of which have come into use in recent years, refer to people who discriminate against, or hold negative views about, certain less powerful subgroups in society, e.g. *racist*, *sexist*. Anyone who knows what *racist* and *sexist* mean, given the right context should have no difficulty in understanding the nature of discrimination perpetrated by people who are described using the novel words *ageist*, *sizist* and *speechist*. *Ageism* is discrimination on grounds of (old) age -for instance, denying employment to people over the age of 60; *sizism* is discrimination (usually against fat people) on grounds of *size* and *speechism* is discrimination against people with speech impediments like stuttering.

Did you notice how I exploited your tacit knowledge of the fact that words ending in *-ist* and *-ism* complement each other? You were glad to accept *ageism*, *sizism* and *speechism* because you know that corresponding to an adjective ending in *-ist* there will normally be a noun ending in *-ism*. This is important. It shows that you know that certain word-forming bits go together and others do not. I suspect that you would reject putative words like *\*agement*, *\*sizement* and *speechment*. (An asterisk is used conventionally to indicate that a form is disallowed.) In word-formation it is not a case of anything goes.

A challenging question which morphology addresses is, how do speakers know which non-occurring or non-established words are permissible and which ones are not? Why are the words *fountainpenful*, *hovercraftful* and *speechist* allowed while *\*agement*, *\*speechment* and *sizement* are not?

Morphological theory provides a general theory of wordformation applicable to any language but, as mentioned earlier, this book focuses on word-formation in English. Its objective is to provide a description of English words designed to make explicit the various things speakers know, albeit in an unconscious manner, about English words. The emphasis will be on the description of English words rather than the elaboration of morphological theory. So, data and facts about English words are brought to the fore and the theoretical and methodological issues are kept in the background for the most part. The use of formal notation has also been kept to a minimum in order to keep the account simple.

## 1.2

### OVERVIEW OF COMING CHAPTERS

At the very outset we need to establish the nature of the subject we are going to be examining. So, **Chapter 2** discusses the nature of words. Then the next three chapters delve deep inside words and investigate their internal structure. In the process, traditional morphological concepts of structural linguistics are introduced and extensively exemplified.

Morphology is not a stand-alone module. After the introductory chapters, in **Chapter 6** you are introduced to a theory where morphology is an integral part of the **LEXICON** or **DICTIONARY**. This chapter focuses on the interaction of phonology and morphology in word-formation.

**Chapter 7** explores the relationship between words in speech and in writing. What is the relationship between saying words and writing them down? Is writing simply a mirror of speech-and an apparently distorting one in the case of English?

The following chapter continues the discussion of the role of the lexicon. It attempts to answer questions like 'what is the lexicon for?' 'What items need to be listed in the dictionary?' 'What is the difference between idioms (like *to nail one's colours to the mast*) and syntactic phrases (like *to nail a notice to the door*)?' The next two chapters highlight the fact that the English word-store is vast and infinitely expandable. First, in **Chapter 9** we consider the ways in which, using the internal resources of the language, speakers are able to produce an indefinitely large number of words. In **Chapter 10** attention shifts to the expansion of English vocabulary through the importation of countless words from other languages. The story of imported words is in many ways also the story of the contacts that speakers of English have had with speakers of other languages over the centuries.

Most of the space in this book is devoted to an examination of the structure of English words. But the analysis of word-structure is seen not as an end in itself, but rather as a means to an end. And that end is to understand what it means to know a word. What sorts of information about words do you need to have in order to use them in communication? So the final chapter is devoted to the **MENTAL LEXICON**. It addresses the question, how is it that people are able to store a vast number of words in the mind and to retrieve the right one so fast in communication? We will see that words are not piled in a muddle in the mind. Rather, the mental lexicon is very highly organised. This concluding chapter will also pull together the various strands developed in the earlier chapters.

I have already stressed the point that morphology is not a self-contained module of language. Any discussion of word-formation touches on other areas of linguistics, notably phonology and syntax, so I have provided a key to the list of pronunciation symbols at the beginning of the book. I have also included at the end a glossary of linguistic terms (many of them from other branches of linguistics) which might be unfamiliar. But still I may have missed out some terms. If you encounter any unfamiliar technical terms that are not explained in this book, I suggest that you consult a good dictionary of linguistics like Crystal (1991). Sometimes it is useful to present data using phonetic notation. A key to the phonetic symbols used is to be found on pp. xix-xx.

After this introductory chapter, all chapters contain exercises. Several of the analytical exercises require you to look up words and parts of words in a good dictionary like the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Access to such a dictionary is essential when you study this book. This is a practical way of learning about the structure of English words (and may also be a useful way of enriching your vocabulary)