

02 — The lexicon

Lexicology and Lexicography — **Course Website**

Dr. Quirin Würschinger, LMU Munich

October 28, 2025

Outline

1. What is a word? Criteria and problems
2. Names and multi-word expressions
3. Paradigms: inflection and derivation
4. Practice: Using the OED

Criteria for wordness

Utterance criterion

“A word is the smallest unit which can stand on its own as an utterance.” (**Bauer 2022**: 1)

Utterance criterion

“A word is the smallest unit which can stand on its own as an utterance.” (**Bauer 2022**: 1)

- but: mentioning vs use

A: Is it *inadvisable* or *unadvisable*?

B: Un.

- grammatical words as utterances (e.g. *the*) only in special contexts

Phonological criterion

“A word [in isolation] has a single intonational focus point, or movement of pitch.” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

Phonological criterion

“A word [in isolation] has a single intonational focus point, or movement of pitch.” (Bauer 2022: 2)

- but: sequencing and alternatives affect prosody
 - *in the beginning* vs *first* vs *forever* vs *for ever*
- minimal pair in intonation: *record* (N) vs *record* (V) in isolation vs context

Examples:

- *He will re'cord the song. / He bought the 'record.*

Semantic criterion

“A word has a single, unitary meaning.” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

Semantic criterion

“A word has a single, unitary meaning.” (Bauer 2022: 2)

but: near-synonymous expressions can differ in meaning

finally vs *in the end* (closure vs narrative sequencing)

Examples:

- *We finally arrived after midnight. / In the end, we stayed home.*

Orthographic criterion

“words are unitary orthographic units” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

Orthographic criterion

“words are unitary orthographic units” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

- but: spacing and hyphenation vary
 - *coffee pot* vs *coffee-pot*
 - *in so far as* vs *in-so-far-as*
- diachronic change: *all right* vs *alright* (usage note in OED)

Examples:

- *It's all right.* / *It's alright.* (nonstandard in some styles).

Dictionary criterion

“A word is listed in the dictionary.” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

Dictionary criterion

“A word is listed in the dictionary.” (**Bauer 2022**: 2)

but: circularity; sub-lexical units are also listed (e.g. prefix *un-*)

Practical definition

“We will accept the spelling conventions of English as defining words [...] which has the advantage of being practical.” (Bauer 2022: 3)

Further reading: Haspelmath, Martin. 2023. “Defining the Word.” *WORD* 69 (3): 283–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.2023.2237272>.

Criteria cheat sheet

Criterion	Diagnostic	Quick example
Utterance	standalone?	<i>Un.</i> (context-dependent)
Phonology	stress pattern?	<i>first</i> vs <i>for ever</i>
Semantic	unitary meaning?	<i>finally</i> vs <i>in the end</i>
Orthography	spacing/hyphens?	<i>alright</i> vs <i>all right</i>
Dictionary	listed?	<i>un-</i> (sub-lexical but listed)

Check: is this a word?

alright

Check: is this a word?

alright

→ orthographic controversy; cf. practical definition (accept spelling conventions)

honeybee vs *honey bee*

Check: is this a word?

alright

→ orthographic controversy; cf. practical definition (accept spelling conventions)

honeybee vs *honey bee*

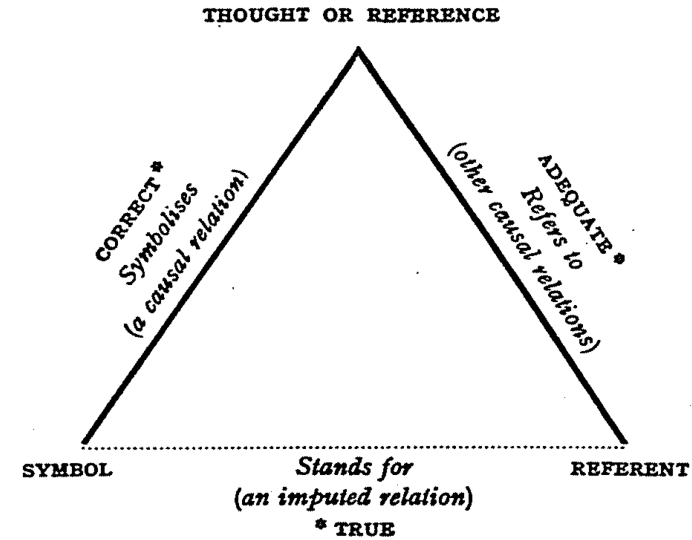
→ orthographic criterion; both attested; check dictionary practice

Problems in delineating the
term *word*

Names

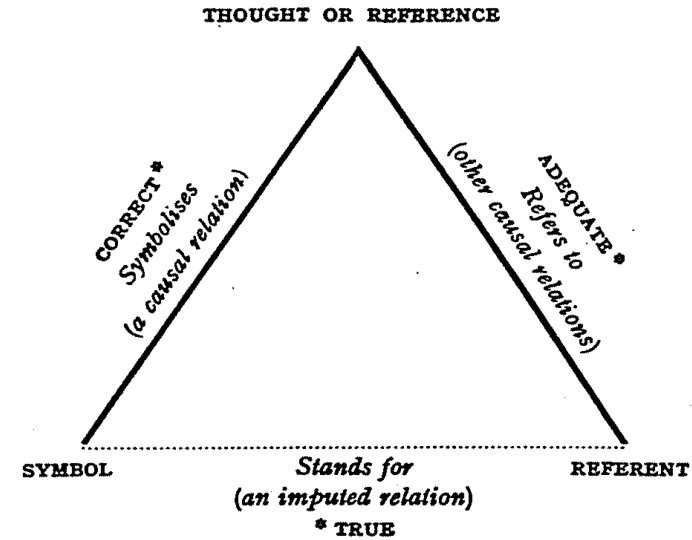
Names

- names have unique reference; they pattern differently from common nouns
- examples:
 - *the Samantha*
 - *This isn't the Paris I remember.*
(common-noun use; compare corpus: "This isn't the Paris of my youth")
- roles as noun phrases (no modifiers): *the former Argentine*



Names

- names have unique reference; they pattern differently from common nouns
- examples:
 - *the Samantha*
 - *This isn't the Paris I remember.*
(common-noun use; compare corpus: "This isn't the Paris of my youth")
- roles as noun phrases (no modifiers): *the former Argentine*



When do names pattern like common nouns?

Multi-word expressions (MWE)

- compounds: *blackbird, coffee pot*
- phrasal verbs: *look up, take off*
- collocations: *strong tea, make a decision*
- idioms & proverbs: *kick the bucket, Too many cooks spoil the broth*

Compounds

- *passion flower; sunflower; wall-flower*
- onomasiological competition: *honey bee* vs *honeybee*

Worked example: *honey bee* vs *honeybee*

- both forms occur; dictionaries may list one as headword with variant
- evidence to check:
 - headword spelling
 - variant forms list
 - example citations
- OED finding: *honeybee* (primary); *honey bee* (variant)

Evidence	Result
Historical precedence	separate words older
Current usage	both forms common

Phrasal verbs

- *He passed out.*
- *He fainted.*

Examples:

- *She looked up the word. / She looked the word up.*

Collocations

Continuum:

- **strong:** *kith and kin*
- **intermediate:** *all things considered; as a matter of fact; excuse me; good afternoon; I'm sorry to say; in other words; in the long run*
- **weak:** function-word sequences like *in the*

Examples:

- *take a quick photo* (typical) vs *make a quick photo* (less typical)

Worked example: collocation strength

- cues for strength:
 - fixedness
 - semantic transparency
 - paradigmatic alternatives

Phrase	Typical?	Notes
take a photo	yes	conventional light verb
make a photo	variable	regional/genre variation
do a photo	rare	atypical in standard usage

Idioms & proverbs

- **Idioms:** *He kicked the bucket.* (= He died)
- **Proverbs:** *Too many cooks spoil the broth.* (fixed formulaic)

Examples:

- *She spilled the beans.* (= revealed the secret)
- *A stitch in time saves nine.* (cannot reorder)

Worked example: ambiguous case

break down

Form test:

Stress test:

Meaning test:

Conclusion:

Worked example: ambiguous case

break down

Form test:

- written as two words → phrasal verb

Stress test:

Meaning test:

Conclusion:

Worked example: ambiguous case

break down

Form test:

- written as two words → phrasal verb

Stress test:

- stress on particle *down* → phrasal verb

Meaning test:

Conclusion:

Worked example: ambiguous case

break down

Form test:

- written as two words → phrasal verb

Stress test:

- stress on particle *down* → phrasal verb

Meaning test:

- can be literal (*car broke down*) or figurative (*negotiations broke down*) → both possible

Conclusion:

Worked example: ambiguous case

break down

Form test:

- written as two words → phrasal verb

Stress test:

- stress on particle *down* → phrasal verb

Meaning test:

- can be literal (*car broke down*) or figurative (*negotiations broke down*) → both possible

Conclusion:

- primarily phrasal verb; can form compound noun *breakdown*

Check: Classifying multi-word expressions

take a photo

Check: Classifying multi-word expressions

take a photo

→ collocation (light verb construction)

kick the bucket

Check: Classifying multi-word expressions

take a photo

→ collocation (light verb construction)

kick the bucket

→ idiom (non-compositional)

Paradigms

Inflectional paradigms

“The term ‘paradigm’ is in general usage, but its usage is often limited. Although *paradigm* can justifiably be used of any substitution class, it is most often used of substitution classes within the word. Thus the normal use for the term *paradigm* is the kind of substitution class illustrated in the following example.” (Bauer 2022)

(12): *walk, walks, walked, walking*

This paradigm illustrates two different kinds of word: there is a sense in which all the items are different **word-forms**, and a contrasting sense in which the paradigm illustrates different uses of the same word, the **lexeme**.”

Derivational paradigms

(13)

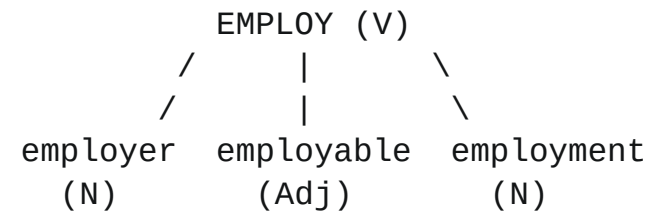
	<i>deceive</i>	<i>employ</i>	<i>proceed</i>	<i>theorise</i>
Verb	<i>deceive</i>	<i>employ</i>	<i>proceed</i>	<i>theorise</i>
Noun	<i>deception</i>	<i>employer</i>	<i>process</i>	<i>theory</i>
Adjective	<i>deceptive</i>	<i>employable</i>	<i>processual</i>	<i>theoretical</i>

Although these examples show individual word families, these series are often generalised over several word families (e.g. *theory* – *theorist* – *theorise* parallels *fantasy* – *fantasist* – *fantasise*).

Inflection vs Derivation: key contrast

Type	Same lexeme?	Word class change?	Example
Inflection	yes	no	WALK → <i>walks</i> , <i>walked</i> , <i>walking</i>
Derivation	no (new lexeme)	often	EMPLOY → <i>employer</i> (N), <i>employable</i> (Adj)

Visual family tree: derivation



Check: Paradigms

1. Identify all inflected forms for the lexeme *walk*^v
2. Find as many derived forms as possible for the base ANALYSE.

Check: Paradigms

1. Identify all inflected forms for the lexeme *walk*^v
 - *walks*: 3rd person present
 - *walking*: present participle
 - *walked*: past tense
 - *walked*: past participle
2. Find as many derived forms as possible for the base ANALYSE.

Check: Paradigms

1. Identify all inflected forms for the lexeme *walk*^v

- *walks*: 3rd person present
- *walking*: present participle
- *walked*: past tense
- *walked*: past participle

2. Find as many derived forms as possible for the base ANALYSE.

- N: *analysis*, *analyst*
- Adj: *analytic*, *analytical*
- Adv: *analytically*
- V: *analyse*
 - also AmE: *analyze*, *analyzer*, *analyzable*

Practice: Using the OED — Topic & Objective

- Topic: Using dictionary data to examine lexical structure and usage.
- Objective: Identify and describe “problematic” lexical cases via OED evidence.

Navigation targets (OED)

- Forms/Spelling (variants)
- Phrasal verbs / Idioms sections
- Examples/Citations pane

Tasks

Starter headwords (choose one or explore all):

- *alright* (spelling variant)
- *kick the bucket* (idiom)
- *honeybee* (compound with variants)

What to look for:

- **Task A** (find two problematic cases): variant spellings? usage labels? date range in citations?
- **Task B** (compare entries): entry structure? cross-references? examples?
- **Task C** (extract citations & discuss): fixedness cues? semantic transparency? paradigmatic alternatives?

References

Bauer, Laurie. 2022. *An Introduction to English Lexicology*. Edinburgh University Press.