

02 – The lexicon

Lexicology and Lexicography – Course Website

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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

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- 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

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- 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)

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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)

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- 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)

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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

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

honeybee vs *honey bee*

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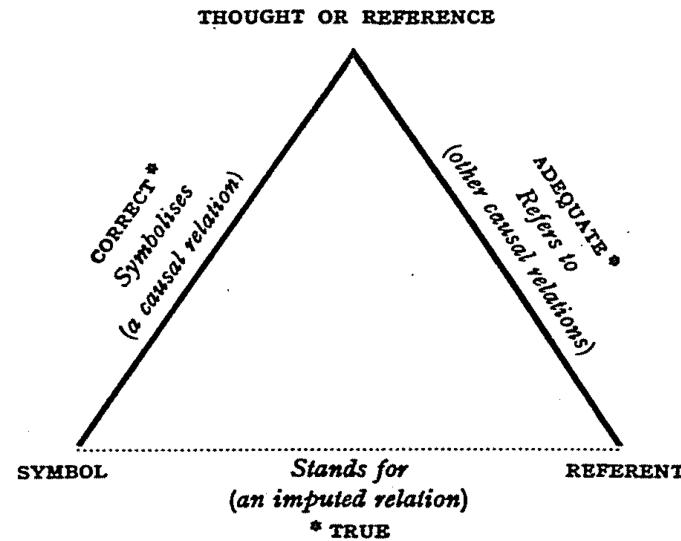
→ orthographic criterion; both attested; check dictionary practice

Problems in delineating the
term *word*

Names

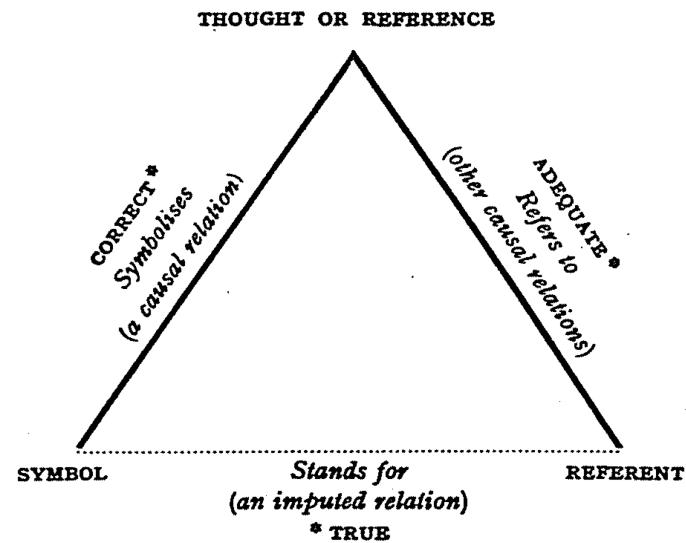
Names

- 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*



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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

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

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- 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

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→ collocation (light verb construction)

kick the bucket

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→ 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)

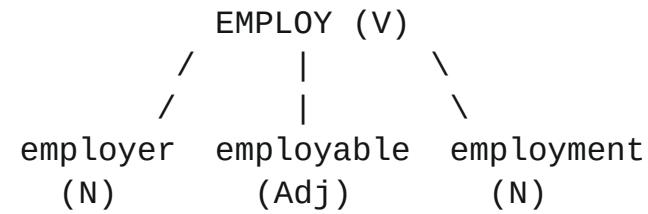
	deceive	employ	proceed	theorise
Verb	deceive	employ	proceed	theorise
Noun	deception	employer	process	theory
Adjective	deceptive	employable	processual	theoretical

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 → walks, walked, walking
Derivation	no (new lexeme)	often	EMPLOY → employer (N), employable (Adj)

Visual family tree: derivation



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

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- 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.