### 3. Lexicology

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Lexicology is the study of the structure of a lexicon. It involves the examination of vocabulary in all its aspects: words and their meanings, how words relate to one another, how they may combine with one another, and the relationship between vocabulary and other levels of language such as phonology, morphology and syntax. Lexicology is linked closely on the one hand with word-formation (see discussions in previous section) and on the other with lexicography which is the compilation of dictionaries and the discussion of linguistic matters attendant on this. When discussing lexicological matters it is essential to distinguish between the mental lexicon which speakers have as part of their competence in their native language and the lexicon in the sense of a dictionary in which one looks for information about one's own or a foreign language. In the following discussion by lexicon is meant the mental lexicon of native speakers. In this connection one should also mention etymology which studies the origins of word meanings.

The lexicon of any language shows an internal structure. This is evident from the fact that the words of the mental lexicon are organised into word fields which in general have a basis in the outside world. However, one must be careful not to expect all differences in reality to be reflected in language, for instance in English there are separate words for animals and the meat gained from them, e.g. **cow** : **beef**, **calf** : **veal**, **pig** : **pork**, **sheep** : **mutton**, **deer** : **venison** but there is no special word for the meat of wild boar. This example is not as trivial as might at first seem. One can postulate that the reason for the lack of a word is that people are less aware of the matter in question. This means that the lexicon is likely to contain distinctions which speakers in a community consider important.

### 3.1 Awareness of the lexicon

Speakers’ awareness of the lexicon varies from individual to individual and from language to language. Because one learns words on a stylistically higher level later in life (after childhood) those items which are located here are those which people think of consciously and using them usually involves a deliberate choice. Thus it is true that English speakers have two tiers of vocabulary which are distinguished by considerations of style, i.e. a more formal level and a more colloquial tier.
The more formal words mostly go back to French loans in the Middle English period or Latin borrowings since then. Rather than either replacing the original Germanic words or dying off as synonyms, they were hived off in the course of time from everyday language and became characteristic of more formal registers such as the written language. Examples abound of this phenomenon, the word pairs work : labour, freedom : liberty, see : perceive, begin : commence are enough to illustrate the principle.

English has borrowed from French continuously since the Middle Ages. The earlier loan have come to be pronounced like English words and are thus not usually recognised as French. In one or two cases, like garage, an older pronunciation with initial stress and a later one with final stress is available. What one also finds is that a word has been borrowed twice, the two forms from the original root showing a somewhat different pronunciation today. Examples of this phenomenon are hostel and hotel; cattle and chattels; catch and chase; risky and risqué. In the last instance one can see the accent on the French <é> which is found in other more recent borrowings such as élán, blasé, sauté. Other examples of such recent loans are: buffet, chauffeur, chuté, connoisseur, couture, critique, cuisine, détente, élite, entrepreneur, etiquette, lingerie, machine, rouge. What all of these words have in common is a foreign pronunciation in that the vowel values and stress patterns are not what one would normally expect in English, e.g. buffet is pronounced [bʌ'feɪt] (in imitation of French [byfe]) and not [bʌ'fæt].

French is by no means the only source of loans English during the past few centuries. Other Romance languages have provided words like cappuccino, pasta, chiaroscuro ‘dark-light in art’ (Italian), veranda (Portuguese via Hindi), incommunicado, aficionado (Spanish), cafeteria (Latin American Spanish). Gaelic, German and Russian have also been sources for borrowings, e.g. galore, hooligan, gob, bother (Irish/Scots Gaelic); umlaut, wanderlust, gestalt, ersatz, schadenfreude (German); sputnik (Russian, used productively as in beatnik) while languages further afield have also provided lexical input to English, e.g. pyjamas, shampoo (Hindi), yogurt (Turkish), admiral, albatross (Arabic).

It is not true to say that all borrowings are located on a stylistically higher level. To determine this one should consider whether the word either belongs to a specific sphere of activity, say science or medicine as with gestalt for instance, or whether it is an alternative to a word which already exists colloquially as with ask and request or get and obtain. If neither of these situations apply, then the loan word is used informally, e.g. shampoo or pasta.

Furthermore, a common development is for words to percolate upwards from a lower to a higher stylistic level. In English this can be seen clearly in many words which have their source in ingroup slang or regional dialect and have become accepted in the standard with time. For instance, gadget derives from 19th century sailor’s slang; bloke is from Shelta (a secret language of travelling people); pal is from Romani; wangle is from the jargon of printers; spiv has its source in the slang used on racecourses. In other instances an
additional meaning is given to an existing word, e.g. *square* in the sense of ‘conservative, conventional’ has been taken from jazz usage. Still other words are of regional origin such as *scrounge* (originally ‘to steal’).

### 3.2 Terms and distinctions

As a separate level of language lexicology has terminology of its own. The *lexeme* is parallel to the phoneme and the morpheme and is used to denote the minimal distinctive unit in the semantic system of a language. It is an abstract unit which underlies the different grammatical variants of a form such as *sing*, *sings*, *singing*, *sang*, *sung* and usually corresponds to those forms which are quoted in a dictionary. However, the lexeme SING is not the same as the dictionary entry *sing* in that the latter is an actual form of the former, this representing the common core of meaning which is present in all the variants which a word may have.

The term *lexis* refers to the vocabulary of a language. The set of lexemes of a language is termed the *lexicon* and the structure of a language’s vocabulary is its *lexical system*.

A *lexical set* is a group of items which share certain semantic features, e.g. *long, length, lengthen, lengthy, longitude, longevity* form a lexical set in that they are all derived from a basic element of meaning ‘long’.

A *lexical gap* refers to an absent term which one would expect given other terms present in a lexical field (see below). For example, in English there is a gap in terms which refer to the maturation of food: it does not have a single word like German *durchziehen* ‘develop in taste by not being eaten immediately’ although it has verbs for the preparation/preparation/state of food such as *flavour, season; go sour, be bland,* etc.

*Lexical selection* refers to the semantic necessity to use certain words only in combination with other words in order to make sense, e.g. only animate nouns can normally be used with animate verbs, i.e. the sentence *My suitcase is learning to play the piano* is peculiar in that it violates just this lexical selection rule, although it is syntactically correct.

The term *lexicalise* is used to refer to a process whereby something in the outside world which is normally described by paraphrase in a language is given a single word to denote it. For example, the single English word *hail* has an equivalent in Irish, *cloichshneachta*, lit. ‘stone snow’, which is a description of the phenomenon using two independent nouns in the form of a compound.

### 3.3 Word fields

The term *word field* (or *lexical field*) is used to denote a collection of lexical items which are related by corresponding to a more or less natural grouping in the nonlinguistic world. Examples of such fields are the terms for colour, musical instruments, animals, furniture, clothes, vehicles, etc. The following
shows the word field ‘mental ability’ and gives some of the more common terms found in Irish and English.

Irish  

English  
clever, wise, cute, smart, sharp, intelligent, bright, cunning, quick, crafty, ingenious, wily, brilliant

When speaking we choose words from word fields and deliberately manipulate the shades of meaning which elements of such fields have. Just consider how one would describe the mental abilities of one individual to another. Depending on one’s perception of the person to be described one would select an item from the relevant word field which one felt conveyed the shades of meaning which best matched one’s perception of the individual in question.

The ability to express oneself in a nuanced and differentiated fashion in one’s native language (and perhaps in a second language one knows well) is largely dependent on one’s intuitions concerning the connotations of elements of word fields. These intuitions result from language acquisition in early childhood when one’s stores much information concerning the use of words in specific contexts, over and beyond their basic meanings.

From the current discussion it will be obvious that one of the main difficulties in translation lies in determining precisely the position of a single term in a word-field and then finding an equivalent in range and connotation in the corresponding word-field of the language into which one is translating.

§3.4 Lexicological processes in English

Even a brief glance at present-day English shows that there are many productive processes which concern the lexicon, that is which affect words with lexical meaning rather than grammatical elements or the pronunciation of words. The following paragraphs offer examples of such processes which should be considered in conjunction with the examples of word-formation discussed above.

COMPOUNDING Two nouns which are used together as a single word form a compound. Because of the lack of inflections in English, compounds are not usually formally marked, although in other languages they often are, e.g. German Wohnungstür ‘flat door’ < Wohnung ‘flat’ + s + Tür ‘door’. The link element -s- between the first and the second part of a compound is not normal in English though it is found occasionally, cf. statesman.

Compounds are a common source of new words in any language, just think of coinages like road rage, binge drinking, designer drug, trophy wife,
life-style magazine. In present-day English it is also common to find compounds where the first element can be interpreted as deriving from a relative clause which qualifies the second element, e.g. zero tolerance New York mayor which can be paraphrased in a longer form as the mayor of New York who shows zero tolerance of crime.

CONVERSION This is the use of a word from one word class in another without any alteration in form. English has many instances of conversion:

package : (to) package  detail : (to) detail
shelf : (to) shelf   fast track : (to) fast track
showcase : (to) showcase  security check : (to) security check

Conversion has a considerable history in English, there are many examples in Shakespeare’s dramas, for instance. In contemporary English conversion is rife, there are an ever increasing number of nouns which can be used as verbs simply by treating them as such.

BACK-FORMATION This is where a verb is derived from a noun. Normally nouns are created from verbs which already exist.

vivisector : (to) vivisect  burgler : (to) burgle
brainwashing : (to) brainwash  baby-sitter : (to) baby-sit

USING PREFIXES AND SUFFIXES The use of productive affixes (elements at the beginnings and ends of words) is common in present-day English to form new words. For instance, he use of Latinate elements is frequent with prefixed verbs: anti-, de-, dis-, inter-, mis-, non-, pre-, pro-, re-, un- and the Germanic prefix self-: self-protect. To make verbs the Romance ending -ise is very common private: privatise (there is a tendency for this to be written -ise in British and -ize in American English). Adjectives are formed using various endings which may imply a certain attribute, e.g. -able ‘possible’, e.g. computable from compute, doable from do, etc. Other endings are more neutral, such as -y, e.g. spooky from spook, or -ly, e.g. princely from prince. New adverbs commonly occur with -wise, e.g. Spacewise the school is well-equipped, and nouns with the Germanic -er (stabilise : stabiliser) or the Romance -ee (detain : detainee).

Native speakers are aware of the productive elements in their language and frequently use these to create words on the spot, so-called ‘nonce formations’. During a public discussion about temporary employment the author once heard a speaker referring to those hired as hires. This word is not established usage but it is obvious what was meant as it is analogous to equivalent term employee.

Productive suffixes may arise by generalising a fixed element of an
original word where this element is associated with a specific meaning. An example of this is the element -burger (indicating a filling in a bread roll normally sold in a fast-food chain) as in hamburger which has been extended to give beefburger, cheeseburger, fishburger, veggieburger, etc. Another instance is -ery (originally indicating a shop selling specific commodities) as in upholstery, buttery, knishery ‘shop selling baked or fried pastries’ (Yiddish). The ending -eria in pizzeria or cafeteria has come to be used in a similar fashion, e.g. spaghetteria, pasteria. Yet a further instance of this would be -aholic (indicating compulsive behaviour) as in alcoholic (the origin of the use) which has been extended by using different word stems, e.g. workaholic, sportaholic (see blending above). What is interesting in this instance is that -aholic contains the ending -ic and half of the stem of alcoholic. The reason for this is probably rhythmic: the ending -aholic is phonetically [-ə/-hɑlɪk] which means that when preceded by a stem consisting of a single syllable the stress pattern [’-eɪ,-iə] results. This consists of two iambic feet and is thus a rhythmic structure which is very much in keeping with the prosody of English.

Apart from productive suffixes, as just discussed, some may be fossilised, i.e. only contain a limited set of attestations, e.g. hamlet ‘small village’ (which contains a form of the word home), starlet ‘minor (film) star’. Care should be taken not to confuse suffixes with parts of a compound which may be written the same, e.g. outlet derives ultimately from ‘to let out’ and not from ‘small exit’.

ABBREVIATED FORMS These consist of polysyllabic words which are commonly reduced to one syllable (often called truncation) ad ← advertisement, bus ← omnibus, cab ← cabriolet, nylons ← nylon stockings, perm ← permanent wave, prefab ← prefabricated house, plane ← aeroplane, pub ← public house, van ← caravan, telly ← television, decaff ← decaffeinated coffee, disco ← discothèque, mag ← magazine, deli ← delicatessen.

Some of these abbreviations derive from two separate words. There are instances which consist of just one of the two words, such as soap from soap opera. With others the results is not immediately recognisable from the source, e.g. soccer from association football or bobby from Robert Peel, the founder of the modern police force in England in the 19th century. Yet other abbreviations have become so common that the original full form is now hardly known, e.g. pants ← pantaloons or mob ← mobile vulgus.

Abbreviations in their turn can be used productively in new formations based on the shortened form. Two good examples of this are (1) eco from ecology/ecological(ly) which has spawned a whole series of formations such as eco-friendly, eco-disaster, eco-tourism, etc. and (2) bio from biology/biological(ly) which has resulted in bio-sphere, bio-warfare, bio-diversity, etc.

LEXICALISED BRANDNAMES IN ENGLISH These occur quite frequently, e.g.
She hoovered the floor (from Hoover a brand of vacuum cleaner), She xeroxed the article (from the firm Rank Xerox which produced the first photocopier), She liked his Cologne (from Eau de Cologne, a well-known perfume), She asked for a Kleenex (a paper tissue). Such instances usually stem from the name of the firm which first produced an article or from the name of the article itself.

COINAGES These are completely new words, usually names for commercial products. A famous example is Kodak which was invented by the camera company with the express intention of being pronouncable in the main European languages in more or less the same way.

BLENDING This consists of combining two words, usually with some alteration in the process, usually a reduction in the number of syllables. Blendings are very productive in present-day English. Brunch ← breakfast + lunch; ginormous ← gigantic + enormous; motel ← motor hotel; smog ← smoke + fog; workaholic ← work + alcoholic (cf. chocoholic, sportaholic, shopaholic, etc.); guestimate ← guess + estimate; chunnel ← channel + tunnel; motel ← motor + hotel.

EXPRESSIVE WORDS These form a curious group in English because they do not always have a clear origin: pizazz ‘energy, verve’, gunge ‘sticky, mud-like substance’, zany ‘idiotic, ridiculous’ (possibly from Venetian Italian Gianni, a figure in comedy). The expressive character of such words depends heavily on the presence of certain sounds such as /z/ or /ndʒ/.

A further subtype of expressive words are so-called ablaut-motivated compounds. These involve two words which are phonetically identical but for a change in the stem vowel, a common alternation between /i/ and a low or low back vowel /a/ or /o/ shilly-shally, wishy-washy, zig-zag, dribs and drabs; flip-flop; bric-a-brac (borrowed from French).

AUGMENTATIVES One of the effects which modern commercialism has had on languages is that words expressing a greater degree of something, so-called augmentatives, have become very common, e.g. giga, hype (from hyperbole), mega, macro, mammoth, super.

SEMI-PHONETIC SPELLINGS Deliberate semi-phonetic spellings in names of shops, companies and products are increasingly common in the English-speaking world: nitebite (takeaway open late at night), kwik kleen (prompt dry cleaners), xpress (rapid parcel service). These have become increasingly common in situations where little space is available for long words, e.g. on computer displays, signs or on credit cards. Examples are thru (for through), xing (for crossing), hi (for high).

HEADLINESE Headlines in newspapers result in much reduced sentences due to
the contingencies of space. An actual example of this is *Judas kiss killer gang head given life*, i.e. ‘the head of the killer gang which gave a Judas kiss to its victim was sentenced to life imprisonment’. The type of reduction found in headlines must of course be in keeping with the syntax of the language in question, for instance in the example just quoted one sees the suppression of the agent in the passive construction, probably the judge in a court. Equally one finds nouns placed in front of others in an adjectival function, i.e. *Judas kiss + killer + gang + head*. Both these structural features are permissible in English in general.

**BUZZ-WORDS** These are fashionable words, frequently from certain areas of occupation or interest. Computer terms provide many instances, *RAM*, *floppy*, *hard disk*, *USB stick*, *cache*, *firewall*, *internet*. Further examples are adjectives which enjoy a popularity at a given time, e.g. *cool*, *hip*, *gross*, etc.

**ACRONYMS** Here the letters of the abbreviation are pronounced phonetically, i.e. as if they were a real word, e.g. *NATO* (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), *WHO* (World Health Organization), *WASP* (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant), *AIDS* (acquired immune deficiency syndrome), *BSE* (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy), *MCP* (Male Chauvinist Pig).

**INITIALISMS** In the case of ‘letter pronunciations’ the name consists of each letter pronounced individually as in *BBC* [biˈbiːsiː] (British Broadcasting Company), *BA* [biˈeɪti] (British Airways). There are differences between German and English here: the former has *VIP* as [vip] (an acronym) and the latter has *VIP* as [ˈviːaɪpiː] (an initialism); the same applies to *UNO* (United Nations) which is [ʔuˈnoː] in German (an acronym) and [ˈjuːən] in English (an initialism). Bear in mind that initialisms always have level stress.

§3.5 **Questions of style**

Differences in style which are found among individuals or groups in either spoken or written language. Style rests on a set of choices which people make when using language. The tendency of an individual to make similar choices – grammatical, syntactic, lexical, pragmatic – constitutes the style of that person. Beyond the style of an individual one can recognise patterns of usage in groups which justify divisions of style according to levels as shown in the following sections.

1) **colloquial**

*blockbuster* ‘very effective device’, *boffin* ‘scientist’, *buddy*, *chap*, *chatterbox*, *elevenses* ‘break for tea / coffee at 11.00 AM’, *gal*, *half-baked*, *lad*, *mum and dad*, *rumpus* ‘noisy behaviour’.
2) formal

3) literary
brine ‘salt water’, presage ‘foretell’, prescient ‘able to guess what will happen’. There are also literary usages of everyday words: cheat ‘escape’ as in The climbers cheated death; breathe ‘live’ as in As long as I breathe.

4) archaic
apothecary ‘chemist’, din ‘noise’, to wend ‘to go’.

5) jocular
to underwhelm ‘not to impress’ (analogous to overwhelm)

6) derogatory
anecdotal ‘not properly researched’, blowsy ‘coarse, untidy, red-faced’, egghead ‘intellectual, theorist’, politicking ‘acting for one’s personal benefit in politics’, stinger ‘miserly person’, unspectacular ‘not of particular value’. Some endings have a derogatory connotation, e.g. -eer as in racketeer, profiteer; -ery as in themeparkery, dotcomery probably on an older model like skullduggery, trickery.

7) euphemistic
bathroom, cloakroom, developing world ‘third world’, economic co-operation ‘developmental aid’, plain ‘ugly’, powder-room ‘toilet’, senion citizen ‘old-age pensioner’, wash your hands ‘go to the toilet’. Many euphemisms in English are the result of applying ‘political correctness’ to an area or activity. For instance, air hostesses are now called flight attendants. Dustmen have been termed sanitation workers.

8) slang
baloney, dud, lousy, lout, nitwit, nutter. Sometimes slang involves the use of neutral words in a special sense, e.g. to lick in the sense of ‘defeat’ as in They licked the team from the other town; to rat in the sense of ‘betray’ as in They ratted on us in the end.

9) vulgar
arse, backside, bastard, bloody, bugger, bullshit, bum, butt, fecking, fucking, gobshite, piss

The reaction of hearers to words from different levels varies greatly, particularly to those regarded as vulgar. In general one can say that the more
words are used the less the effect they have on hearers. For many English speakers nowadays the third item from the end in (9) above is perfectly innocuous, for others it is still a cause of offence when used.

Summary

- **Lexicology** investigates the internal structure of the lexicon. **Lexicography** concerns the compilation of dictionaries. **Etymology** is about the historical development of word meanings.
- A *lexeme* is the minimal distinctive unit in the semantic system of a language. A *lexical set* is a group of forms which share a basic meaning. A *lexical gap* is a missing item in a language’s lexicon and *lexical selection* concerns what words can combine with what others, e.g. what nouns are permissible with what verbs.
- A *word field* is a collection of words which are related by a common core of meaning, such as furniture, plants, colours, the instruments of an orchestra or whatever.
- **Lexicological processes** are variously active in a language and, along with borrowing from other languages, form the main source of new words. Such processes include compounding, conversion, back-formation, abbreviations, coinages, and blendings.

Further reading