



# A Course in English Lexicology

## 英语词汇学教程

主 编 / 王 扬 乔春华 刘 娜



重庆大学出版社

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# 前 言

《英语词汇学》课程是高等学校英语专业本科教学大纲规定的一门英语专业知识课程。对英语专业学生来讲,该课程是打好外语基本功的一门重要专业基础理论与实践课程。《英语词汇学》课程以现代语言学理论为指导,主要介绍和揭示英语词汇的普遍规律和特点,分析和阐述英语词汇的各类现象以及英语词汇的演变和发展。认真学习词汇学课程、研究英语词汇,了解和把握词汇学的基础理论知识有助于正确认识英语词汇的基本规律和特征,扩大英语词汇量,提高应用英语词汇的专业能力、专业素质及语言素养。

《英语词汇学教程》共有八章:第一章概述,介绍了词汇学的概念、词汇学与其他学科的关系,词的定义讨论以及词所附带的各类信息。第二章描述了词的各种类型及分类。第三章简述了词的内部结构。第四章讨论了词的各种意义,词与词的意义关系以及词义的分析方法。第五章讨论了词在语言不同层面的演变与变化。第六章阐述了词在交际中的使用。第七章介绍了词与语境以及语境的功能。第八章讨论了习语的定义、特点、分类、使用以及习语的翻译问题。每章后附有参考文献和配套练习。书后有三个附录:1.《英语词汇学》课程阅读参考书目;2.《英语词汇学》考试参考题型;3.《英语词汇学》常用术语表。

《英语词汇学教程》教材由王扬教授、乔春华副教授、刘娜副教授主编。第一章由刘清玉撰写,第二章由乔淑霞撰写,第三章由蒋慧成撰写,第四章由肖祎撰写,第五章由刘娜撰写,第六章由王佳撰写,第七章由李顺臣撰写,第八章由乔春华撰写。本教材具有以下三个特点:针对性、新颖性、实用性。第一,针对性。教材设计学习对象主要针对高等学校一般本科院校英语专业本科学生,尤其是地方本科院校英语专业学生,教材内容重点突出、强调基础知识、教材信息量适当、文字简洁清晰。第二,新颖性。内容选择上,突出课程核心和基础知识;选材上,力求不重复其他材料、重点选择原材料,注意材料的趣味性、生动性、时代性。编写设计上,突出可读性、可操作性、实践性。第三,实用性。教材编写在学生掌握词汇学基础知识的前提下,注重培养学生的应用和实践能力、促进学生外语思辨能力的提升。以每章后练习设计为例,设计有基础知识练习部分,实践应用能力练习部分,经典选读部分。

参与教材编写工作和收集整理资料的还有重庆科技学院外语学院许吟雪、重庆工商大学外语学院刘帆、重庆三峡学院外国语学院向恩白、林永恒、戴倩倩、陈雯、孔云军、重庆万州三中的李莉以及北京化工大学文法学院英语系范厉杨。

由于编写时间紧、编委水平有限,本书中难免有不足之处,敬请外语同行专家、外语教师、英语读者不吝赐教、批评指正。

主 编  
2015年2月

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## Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction

Word is the basic unit in one language and is generally viewed as the building block of the language. It is also a complex phenomenon in our daily life. Knowing a word requires more than just familiarity with its meaning and form. A full knowledge of the words depends a lot on the precise understanding of “word” itself, as well as those elements related to it, linguistic and non-linguistic. This chapter will introduce some essential concepts and theories concerning words, with an aim to help the learners have a more systematic and scientific investigation into words in the following chapters.

### 1.2 Definition of Lexicology

The term “lexicology” is composed of two Greek morphemes; *lexico-* with the meaning of “word, phrase” and *-logo* denoting “a department of knowledge”. Thus, the literal meaning of **lexicology** is “science of word”. It is a branch of linguistics dealing with the properties of “word” which is viewed as the main unit of language. It studies the origins, formations, meanings, usages of the word as well as its historical development. And **English lexicology** covers rich knowledge about English vocabulary and it studies the development, structure, formation, meaning, usage of English words and word equivalents and other aspects, etc. Thus, English lexicology embraces six branches—phonology, morphology, semantics, pragmatics, etymology and lexicography.

### 1.3 Lexicology and Other Linguistic Branches

As one of the chief branches of linguistics, lexicology is closely related to other academic disciplines, each of which has been established as a branch in its own right.

#### 1.3.1 Phonology

In most languages, a word is a unit with both phonetic and semantic properties. And the expression of the meaning of words is made possible by means of sound, that is, the word meaning depends on the phonemic make-up of words, the order of the sounds and other qualities of sound patterns such as the tone, stress, pitch and so on. Phonology is the study of

sound pattern and how meanings of words are conveyed by the sound pattern. Therefore, it is closely related to lexicology.

### 1.3.2 Morphology

Morphology is the study of the internal structure or forms of words, primarily through the analysis of morpheme in a word. This is one of the chief concerns of lexicology as the full knowledge of a word includes the inflections of words and word-formation, besides its sound system.

### 1.3.3 Semantics

Semantics is the study of meanings in different linguistic levels; lexicon, syntax, discourse. But lexicology will focus on meaning study in the lexical level. For example, the form “flowers” suggests both the lexical meaning and grammatical meaning. Furthermore, a word may have the extended associative meaning besides its conceptual meaning as in the word “sun”. Sense relations of words such as synonymy, antonymy, polysemy, homonymy, hyponymy and semantic field all belong to the scope of semantics and constitute an important part of lexicology.

### 1.3.4 Pragmatics

Pragmatics is the branch of linguistics that deals with the meanings and effects which come from the use of language in particular situations. The findings in the study of pragmatics throw much light on the research in lexicology. Words are studied based on the context in which both the users and situation should be taken into account, and therefore a word may mean more than what the dictionary describes. For instance, the word “cold” when used in an utterance does not just suggest “the sensation produced by low temperature”, but may have the meaning of “hopeless” or “indifferent” depending on the context. It may function as a speech act with an effect of asking a person to close the door, to bring the scarf or to turn off/on the air-conditioner.

### 1.3.5 Etymology

A chief concern in the study of lexicology is about the change in the form and meaning of words and the semantic relations among groups of words. This study is closely related to the branch of etymology which explores the origin and history of a word. Etymologists use a technique known as the comparative method to analyze word roots that have been found to trace all the way back to the origin of, for instance, the Indo-European language family. Etymology is helpful in clarifying some questionable meanings and spellings of words and is also used in lexicography to provide words with their historical origins and changes. Besides, it explains how a small vocabulary in the languages of early Germanic tribes can grow into a huge modern English vocabulary (Liu Xiaohong, 2003).

### 1.3.6 Lexicography

Lexicography is a sub-branch of lexicology and it is the science of dictionary compiling. Lexicography enables learners to have some ideas of the general organization of word information in dictionaries, including the word's spelling, pronunciation, origin, definition, related usages and examples as well as some typical grammatical information of the word. The words in a dictionary are generally arranged alphabetically except thesaurus which categorizes words only based on their semantic similarities, regardless of the shared forms or origins of words. There are different types of dictionaries used for different purposes such as unabridged dictionary, desk dictionary, concise dictionary and electronic dictionary (Yang Xinzhang, 2009).

Lexicology and lexicography have some aspects in common, that is, they both cover the form, meaning, usage and origin of the words. They both contribute to each other in their study in that lexicologists do their research based on the raw material collected in dictionaries while lexicographers make use of the findings of lexicologists to compile the dictionary.

## 1.4 Word

### 1.4.1 Definition of Word

Language is a system of vocal symbols used as a means for communication in society. Words are usually easily identified in one language. In the sentence "He has studied English for four years", it is clear that there are altogether seven words in it, even to people who have never learned English. However, word is a very elusive element in language. One's intuition may not be less certain about such forms as *bookstore*, *laptop* and *headset*. And *I* is a word for sure, how about *Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanoconiosis*? If both of them are viewed as "word", are there any qualities they share in common?

Up to now, there has been no agreed definition to this term and many scholars have different understandings of it. Orthographically, a word can be defined as a string of letters printed or written horizontally across a piece of paper, bounded by spaces on each side. In terms of spoken language, a word is viewed as a sound or combinations of sounds, made voluntarily with human vocal equipment, which are surrounded by pauses. Phonologically, a word is a sequence of sounds that will not have more than one stressed syllable. According to semanticists, a word is a unit with a specific meaning, and to grammarians, a word is a form that has certain functions in a sentence.

It is clear that there are some problems in trying to define a word like these. Here are some puzzles that we may encounter:

—Orthographic definitions of a word make sense. But there are many words which do not fit these categories such as *bath tub* and *bath tub* both of which are acceptable in English.

—Words can be surrounded by pauses, but speakers do not always make pauses before or

after each word, for example, *He's John's brother.*

—Words are units of meaning, but the understanding of a word-form corresponding with a unified meaning may create numerous exceptions as some words in the same form may suggest the different meanings such as *bank* (a financial institution that accepts deposits and channels the money into lending activities) and *bank* (sloping land, especially the slope beside a body of water) which should be viewed as different words. Besides, not every unified semantic concept corresponds with just one word in a given language like *all of a sudden.*

—The existence of idioms also seems to upset our attempts to define word in a neat formal way.

From the above, we can see that it is unscientific to take into account a mere single property or dimension to define “word”. Now it has been generally accepted that a word will embrace the following basic prototypical properties (Zhang Weiyu, 1999):

- ① *a minimal free form*
- ② *a sound unity*
- ③ *a unit of meaning*
- ④ *a form that functions alone in a sentence*

To sum up, a **word** is a fundamental linguistic unit that is considered as the minimum free form, a unity of sound and meaning which is capable of performing a given syntactical function. English consists of words of all kinds and no matter what they are, all must comply with these criteria above.

One theoretical notion which helps us understand the term “word” is “lexeme”. A **lexeme** is the abstract unit which underlies some of the variants in connection with a “word”. For example, BRING is the lexeme which underlies different grammatical variants: *bring*, *brought*, *brings*, *bringing* which we can refer to as word-form (A lexeme is conventionally represented by uppercase letters). It is noted that members of this set have the same lexical meaning, but different grammatical meanings. Lexeme is the basic, contrasting unit in a language. When we look up words in a dictionary, we are actually looking up lexemes rather than words. That is, *brought* and *bringing* will be found under an entry for BRING.

#### 1.4.2 Vocabulary

When we talk about “word”, we find it is so important to distinguish it from “vocabulary”.

All the words in a language make up what is generally known as its **vocabulary**. The term “vocabulary” is used in different senses. Vocabulary is most commonly used to refer to the sum total of all the words of a language. It can also refer to all the words of a given dialect, a book, a subject, and all the words possessed by an individual person as well as all the words current in a particular period of time in history. English is one of the world's highly developed languages. Naturally, the vocabulary is one of the largest and richest. The general estimate of

the vocabulary is over one million words. It is generally approved that the vocabulary of a given language is not simply a listing of independent items, but organized internally in one way or another.

The **lexicon** of a language is a similar term to “vocabulary”. According to *Wikipedia*, linguistic theories generally regard human languages as consisting of two parts: a lexicon, essentially a catalogue of a language’s words (its word stock); and a grammar, a system of rules which allow for the combination of those words into meaningful sentences. The lexicon is also thought to include bound morphemes, which cannot stand alone as words (such as most affixes). In some analyses, compound words and certain classes of idiomatic expressions and other collocations are also considered to be part of the lexicon. Dictionaries attempt at listing the lexicon of a given language in alphabetical order, however, bound morphemes are not included.

A **lexical item** is a single word or chain of words that forms the basic elements of a language’s lexicon (vocabulary) such as *cat*, *traffic light*, *take care of*, *by-the-way*, and *raining cats and dogs*.

## 1.5 Word Information

Using a word requires providing full information about the three dimensions of a word—sound, meaning and form which are interrelated with each other and they work together to achieve a very complicated effect in one’s communication. For every word used, one relies on five types of information. They are the following:

### 1.5.1 Phonological Information

Theoretically, man’s speech organs enable him to produce more than 200 phonetic sounds. However, when one is talking, he/she does not produce the sounds individually. Instead, these sounds are uttered in a continuous manner. While being put in a word unit, these sounds are arranged in a certain pattern that follows its own condition or constraints. Therefore, a word may present some phonological rules and information about the sequence of sound. For example, it is “cringe”, not “ircnge” that is acceptable as a phonological form. Phonological information can also be seen in the position of stress in a word. The stress is very important in the interpretation of the lexical meanings of words as in *increase* (*n.*) and *increase* (*v.*) and word phrases such as a *light house keeper* and a *light house keeper*.

### 1.5.2 Morphological Information

A word is made up of morphemes, the smallest meaningful unit in language. Morphological information discloses how a word is structured and it is related to both lexical information and grammatical information of a word. We can see the grammatical information in *books* and *booked*, as the first one suggests the plural property of a noun and the second implies

the past tense of a verb. Another example, any native speaker of English can interpret the meaning of the words *unable* and *breakable* because he has an unconscious command of the internal structure of words. The above two words are tangible and analyzable and they can be divided into two parts, the first word is composed of “un + able”; the second word is “break + able”. If you create a new word “ableun” and “ablebreak” at random and ask any native speaker, he will say “There is no such word.” Because based on his knowledge of morphological structure of words, he can not attach a proper role to “able” in these two ill structures, which do not have any meanings at all.

### 1.5.3 Semantic Information

Words are very crucial in conveying a message in communication as they always carry the chief information of the whole sentence. The semantic information is mainly about the meaning of words which is rather complicated as it correlated with the object it refers to and the concept in our mind. The full semantic information about a word is multi-facet. Besides the conceptual information, a word may have other types of information conditioned by different emotions of the users, social circumstances, collocates in the sentences and so on.

A modern assumption in semantics is that the meaning of a word presents a structure which is called the semantic structure. The older a word is, the better developed its semantic structure is. The normal pattern of the development in word's semantic structure is from monosemy to polysemy (Wang Rongpei, 2010). Therefore, due to many factors, the semantic information of a word is subject to diachronic change, that is, it changes with the passing of time.

### 1.5.4 Syntactic Information

When a word is used in a sentence, it is connected with other words by certain syntactic rules. Due to these rules, a word takes on some syntactic information. Syntactic information of a word is usually grammatical and it enables one to identify the role of a word in the sentence, for instance, its function in the sentence (subject or predicate); the part of speech to which each word in the sentence belongs (noun or adjective); the inflectional form indicating tense (past or present), aspect (perfect or continuous), voice (active or passive) and mood (imperative or subjunctive) of the action.

Sometimes a word in a sentence may have different syntactic information which often gives rise to much complexity of the sentence. For example, in the sentence “Flying airplanes can be dangerous”, the word “flying” has two different syntactic information. One is interpreted as “planes that are flying” while the other is “to fly planes”.

### 1.5.5 Pragmatic Information

Besides the above information, a word may carry some information which can not be simply accounted for by a dictionary or by a grammar book. Instead, its interpretation depends

a lot on a given context, linguistic or non-linguistic, which provides some knowledge about the user of the word and about the situation in which it is used. With this knowledge, a word can be understood appropriately and effectively.

Pragmatic information of a word is dynamic and changeable. In the sentence “He is a machine”, here the word “machine” does not just refer to “any mechanical or electrical device that transmits or modifies energy to perform or assist in the performance of human tasks”, but is used to mean many different qualities in “he”, such as “being boring, efficient, hard-working, indifferent, cold and so on” which rely on who “he” is.

In recent studies, it has been assumed that these types of information must be stored in the brain’s dictionary which is called **mental lexicon**. There are some parallels between the kinds of information stored in the mental lexicon and the kinds that can be found in the desk dictionary. A desk dictionary contains information about pronunciation, meaning, related words and sentence use. But it also includes the information that is needed for speaking—about word’s spelling and historical development. A good dictionary also provides illustrations of how a word has been used. Obviously, man’s mental lexicon will not contain spelling, etymological and illustrative information about a word (Aronoff & Miller, 2001).

## 1.6 Aims and Significance of the Course of Lexicology

Modern English lexicology aims at giving a systematic description of the word-stock. It investigates the word-structure and word-formation in modern English, the semantic structure of English words and their change in meaning, the main principles of the classification of the English vocabulary units into various groupings and the laws governing the replenishment of the English vocabulary. It also studies the relations existing between various layers of vocabulary and the laws and regulations that govern its functioning at the present time and the changes it has undergone in its history are also dwelt upon.

The course of English lexicology is of great importance as it helps learners develop their personal vocabulary and consciously increases their word knowledge and gives them a deeper understanding of word meaning, enables them to organize, classify and store words more efficiently, and to use words more accurately and appropriately, thus, improves learners’ skills of using reference books and raise their problem-solving ability and efficiency of individual study. And ultimately this course improves learners’ receptive and productive skills in language processing as well as language production.

There are two main approaches which are used to study English lexicology. One is a diachronic approach and the other is a synchronic approach. From a diachronic perspective, words can be considered historically, with emphasis on the origin and changes in form and meaning. From a synchronic point of view, words can be studied at a point in time, disregarding whatever changes might be taking place.



## 1.7 Conclusion

Lexicology is a sub-branch of linguistics dealing with words and their properties. In this chapter, we define the nature and domain of English lexicology and discuss some basic terms in this branch. We see the distinction between word and vocabulary as well as that between lexeme and lexicon. The information of words presented by word may also help us understand comprehensively what a word is. Lexicology is of much importance to language learners because it not only increases their word knowledge but also develops their word power, especially in language use.

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