

# English Lexicology

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## Preface

In this book, English lexicology is studied based on the theory of lexicology and the author's experience. Lexicology is a branch of linguistics, inquiring into the origins and meanings of words. English lexicology aims at investigating and studying the morphological structures of English words and word equivalents, their semantic structures, sense relations, word-formations and applications.

The emphasis of this book has been placed on the five sub-branches of English lexicology: semantics, etymology, historical lexicology, phraseology and lexicography. These are closely related to one another in that they all aim at the study of the vocabulary and basic word-stock of English, but differ from one another in that each approaches its subjects from its own points of view. In other words, English vocabulary can be studied semantically, etymologically, historically, idiomatically and lexicographically. From these different aspects, the students can acquire a comprehensive view of the lexical phenomena, principles, laws and regulations governing the English vocabulary such as the problems of word structure and word-formation, the semantic structure of English words, and

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relation existing between lexical layers, the replenishment of the vocabulary and idioms, etc.

This book can be used as a textbook in English Lexicology forming part of the curricula of the Foreign Language Departments of colleges and universities in China. It is also intended for students, teachers of English, postgraduates and all those who are interested in the English language and its vocabulary.

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## Introduction

### 1.1 Definition of Lexicology

Lexicology is a branch of linguistics dealing with the vocabulary of a language and the properties of words as the main units of language. The term “vocabulary” is used to denote the system formed by the sum total of all the words and word equivalents that the language possesses. The term “word” denotes the basic unit of a given language. The term “word equivalent” denotes English idioms or word-group representing a semantic unit and it is equivalent to a single word in the sentence. The term “lexicology” is composed of two Greek morphemes: *lexi-* means “word, phrase”, hence *lexico* means “having to do with words”; and *logos* denotes “a department of knowledge”. Thus, the literal meaning of lexicology is “the science of the word”. In a broad sense, lexicology is concerned with the study of words. It studies not only the meaning and making of words, but also their ways and manners, the ups and downs in their individual fortunes, where they come from, what they have been through, and the whys and hows of their appearance and disappearance. In a word, lexicology deals by definition with words and word-forming morphemes, that is to say, with significant units. It follows that these elements must be investigated in their form and in their meaning. Therefore, from the lexicological point of view, a word is a combination of form

(phonological) and meaning (lexical and grammatical).

Itself being a branch of linguistics, lexicology consists of mainly five sub-branches: (1) *semantics*, the basis of lexicology, which studies the nature, structure, and the development and change of word-meaning; (2) *etymology*, which studies the meaning, origin and history of individual words and their development, thus it is closely related to the history of a language and to the history of the people who speak it; (3) *historical lexicology*, which studies the development of the vocabulary as a whole on the basis of the etymology. It studies the history of the constant enrichment and replenishment of the vocabulary, why certain words have been coined, how certain old meanings are now lost to us while new meanings have been added, and in what way foreign loan words have been introduced, assimilated, and taken on native forms until they are not felt to be alien at all; (4) *phraseology*, which studies the word formation and usage, their classification and characteristics, such as set expressions, stock phrases, cast-iron idioms which in their common acceptance have required very definite and specific meanings that cannot be made out from the individual words they are composed of; and (5) *lexicography*, the science of dictionary-compiling. These five sub-branches are closely related to one another in that they all aim at the study of the vocabulary and the basic word - stock of a language, but differ from one another in that each approaches its subject from its own point of view.

## 1.2 The Relationship of Lexicology with Other Branches of Linguistics

English lexicology itself is a branch of linguistics. However, it is closely related to other branches of linguistics, such as phonetics, grammar, semantics, stylistics, etc., each of which has been

established as a subject on its own.

**a. Its Relation to Grammar**

Lexicology, as a branch of linguistics, is inseparably bound with grammar. They are organically related to each other. The vocabulary of a language assumes tremendous importance when it comes under the control of grammar, which defines the rules governing the modification of words, and the combination of words into sentences, and the formation of new words. Words, then, become significant speech-forms only when they are governed by grammar. Even isolated words bear a definite relation to the grammatical system because they belong to some parts of speech. When used in actual speech, words seldom occur in isolation. They are arranged in certain patterns conveying the relations between the things for which they stand; therefore, alongside with their lexical meaning, they possess some grammatical meaning. The two kinds of meaning are often interdependent.

**b. Its Relation to Phonetics**

Phonetics investigates the phonetic structure of language (its system of phonemes and intonation pattern) and studies the outer sound-form of the word. The expression of the meaning of words is made possible by means of sounds; it depends on the phonemic make-up of words, on the order of the sounds and on the sound-stress. The study of the sound system and sound changes of language is closely related to grammar and lexicology.

**c. Its Relation to Stylistics**

Although lexicology is not directly concerned with the use of

words, still less with the use of proper words at proper places, the relation of lexicology to stylistics is a very close one. Since lexicology is to touch on archaism, colloquialism, neologism, dialect, slang, jargon, taboo and euphemism, etc., different styles have to be discussed. Stylistics, from a different angle, studies many problems treated in lexicology, such as the problems of meaning, synonymy, differentiation of vocabulary according to the sphere of communication.

### 1.3 Sub-branches of Lexicology

Five sub-branches of lexicology are as follows:

#### a. Semantics

Semantics is a branch of linguistics by itself that studies the meanings of language in different linguistic levels: lexicon, syntax, utterance, etc. It is also a sub-branch of lexicology. It is the basis of lexicology. Its importance is evident in social intercourse. To get one's meaning clear and to be able to put across one's idea are the first thing required of a speaker in social intercourse. Without that, social intercourse won't be effective. Semantics also investigates the nature, structure, and the development and change of word-meaning. Polysemy and homonymy, synonym and antonym, metaphor and metonymy, etc. are all important subjects to be dealt with in semantics. What is more, semantics is now coming to the fore as the central problem of linguistic investigation of all levels language structure.

#### b. Etymology

Etymology is closely connected with semantics and is also concerned with the meaning of words. But whereas semantics studies

the meaning of words from the point of view of current usage, etymology does this from a historical point of view. Etymology studies the meaning, origin and history of individual words and their developments. It is therefore closely related to the history of a language and to the history of the people who speak it.

**c. Historical Lexicology**

It must not be confused with etymology. Etymology studies the history of individual words, their original forms and meanings, while historical lexicology studies the development of the vocabulary as a whole on the basis of etymology and other sciences such as the history of English language and English social history. It studies the history of the constant enrichment and replenishment of the vocabulary, why certain words have been coined, how certain old meanings are now lost to us while new meanings have been added, and in what way foreign loan words have been introduced, assimilated, and taken on native forms, until they are not felt to be alien at all.

**d. Phraseology**

Lexicology not only studies individual words but also studies set expressions, stock phrases, cast-iron idioms which in their meanings that cannot be made out from the individual words they are composed of. They may therefore be considered word equivalents. Phraseology is to study their formation and usage, their classification and characteristics.

**e. Lexicography**

Lexicography is the last sub-branch of lexicology, but not the

least. It has a common object of study with lexicology since both deal with the same problem — the form, meaning, usage, and origin of vocabulary units. The lexicographer has to have a good knowledge of lexicology because he must consider the degree of usefulness of each word; he has to consider what to enter and what not to enter; he has to leave the less useful ones, since an ordinary dictionary must need to be limited in scope and size. Furthermore, he has to supply adequate information on the usage of each word, whether it is literary, or colloquial, or slang, or obsolete; or whether it is official, or dialectal or familiar. Lastly, he has to define the meanings of words, and in the case of polysemantic words, he has to make clear which are direct meanings and which are transferred or figurative meanings.

It must be pointed out that each of these sub-branches enjoys an independent status and requires a special study of its own. All of them are closely related to one another. Each can be an independent course and a branch of linguistics by itself.

#### 1.4 Aims and Significance of the Course of English Lexicology

English lexicology aims at giving a systematic description of the word-stock of Modern English. It investigates the problem of word-structure and word-formation in English, the semantic structure of English words and their changes in meaning, the main principles of the classification of the English vocabulary units into various groupings and the laws of 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.

Theoretical value of lexicology is of great importance because it forms the study of the three main aspects of language, i.e. its vocabulary, grammar and sound system. And there is no doubt that a language learner will find the course of English Lexicology especially useful. A good command of word-structure and word-formation will help English learners to develop their personal ability to enlarge their vocabulary and improve their power to use words. The historical development and the principles of classification of words will help the learners to have a deeper understanding of word-meaning and enable them to organize, classify and store words more effectively and sufficiently. The understanding of the semantic structures of words, the types of word meaning and their sense relations will gradually raise their awareness of meaning and usage, and enable them to use words more accurately and appropriately. Good knowledge of dictionaries will improve learners' skills of using reference books and improve their problem-solving ability for efficiency of individual study.

Lexicology will clarify the relationship between words thereby facilitating students' understanding and memorization. Besides, the course is aimed both at summarizing the practical material already familiar to the students and at helping students to develop skills and habits of generalizing the linguistic phenomena observes. In a word, the study of lexicology will ultimately improve learners' receptive and productive skills in English language learning as well as language production.

The English language teachers having a sound knowledge of lexicology will be able to choose, classify and systematize the linguistic material to be mastered by their students. To teachers, a

good knowledge of word-formation will prove especially useful, as it furnishes a tool helping the students to guess and retain in their memory the meaning of new words by comparing and contrasting them with the previously learned elements and patterns. The study of English lexicology will help teachers solve a difficult teaching problem in English idioms, for a good classification of English idioms according to their origin, meaning, their lexical or phonetic make-up, etc. will prove helpful for the students to grasp their extended meanings by means of association. To teachers, a good knowledge of the distributional characteristics of words will help the students to prevent many mistakes. The mastery of the correct use of words through the study of lexicology, together with a good understanding of functional styles and stylistic synonyms is absolutely necessary for teachers when literary texts are used as a basis for acquiring oral skills, analytical reading, discussing fiction and translation.

Lexicology came into being to meet the needs of many different branches of applied linguistics, literary criticism, standardization of terminology, machine translation, and last but not least foreign language learning and teaching.

## **Sources of the English Vocabulary**

### 2.1 Elements Making up the English Vocabulary

According to its origin, the vocabulary of English is composed of two main elements, the native element and the foreign element. The native element is conventionally used to denote words of Anglo-Saxon origin. It belongs to the original English stock, as known from the earliest available manuscripts of the Old English period, or those derived from the Old English. The foreign element, on the other hand, is the word taken over from any other language. To comprehend the nature of the English vocabulary and their historical development, it is necessary to examine the etymology of their different layers, the historical causes of their appearance, their volume and role and the comparative importance of native and foreign elements in replenishing the English vocabulary.

#### **a. The Native Element in Modern English**

Our study of the English vocabulary must obviously begin with the native element which was brought to Britain in the 5th century by the German tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes who eventually overran the Britons. Before about 450 A.D. there was no English language in Britain. Words of native origin consist of the most part of very ancient elements — Indo-European, Germanic and West Germanic cognates. The bulk of the Old English