

**LANGUAGE IN INDIA**  
**Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow**  
**Volume 11 : 8 August 2011**  
**ISSN 1930-2940**

Managing Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.

Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.

B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.

A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.

Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

S. M. Ravichandran, Ph.D.

G. Baskaran, Ph.D.

L. Ramamoorthy, Ph.D.

**Defining a Word: Beyond a Dictionary Definition**

**Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. ELT. Scholar**

---

---

**Abstract**

‘A word is a single unit of language which means something and can be spoken or written’ (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 2010, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition). It seems the above definition is inadequate in global linguistics because it does not give a comprehensive picture of what a word is. It reads like a layman’s description of what a ‘word’ is. Nevertheless, in lexicology, the definition needs to be comprehensive as it should make us look at related fields and at times ambiguous and even controversial issues. Thus, when we look at the dictionary definition more closely, defining ‘word’ turns out to be far from simple which we generally think it to be. This paper discusses the pertinent problems in defining a word in general. It also highlights some fundamental factors in determining the meaning of word which will help us to understand the complex role of words in a language. In conclusion, it is argued that words are governed by social convention and only by going beyond the dictionary definition can lexicologists explore its real meaning.

**Lexicology**

Lexicology is defined as the study of lexis or the stock of words in a given language, i.e. its vocabulary or lexicon. From the above definition, it becomes clear that the notion of ‘word’ is central to the study of lexicology. Lexicology not only deals with simple words

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 8 August 2011

Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. (ELT), Scholar

Defining a Word: Beyond a Dictionary Definition

in all their aspects, but also with complex and compound words, as the meaningful units of language. Since these units must be analyzed in respect of both their form and their meaning, lexicology relies on information derived from the four related fields of morphology, the study of the forms of words and their components; semantics, the study of their meanings; etymology, the study of the origins of words; and lexicography, the writing or the compilation of dictionaries. Thus, lexicology is a comprehensive field of study and under this ‘word’ itself needs to be defined and discussed as a technical term.

### **Problems in Defining ‘Word’ in General**

There is no one straight-forward way of arriving at a comprehensive definition for the term *word*, as different dictionaries take different decisions about defining it. This is understandable because it is not clear where a word begins and where it ends. In other words, we may not be sure of word boundaries. Defining *word* is problematic as it poses a number of questions to anyone who attempts to know what a word is and how to describe it. For example, some of the questions are:

- Is *armchair* one word or two?
- Does a word have two different forms or not?
- Does a word have only one meaning or many?
- Are variants like *speak*, *speaks*, *speaking*, *spoke*, *spoken* five different words, or is it just one word *speak* with many forms?
- Are *boy* and *boys*, *beautiful* and *beautifully* one word or two words?

It seems there is no single answer to these questions and the reason for this is because words are not clearly bounded. Another reason could be because many languages do not clearly distinguish what a word is. For instance, writing systems such as Japanese, Thai, Arabic and Hindi do not give a constituent indication of word boundaries (Halliday, et. al, 2004). It seems there is no universal entity, found in every language that we can equate with what in English is called a ‘word’. It is because languages are different and have different kinds of writing. Also, all languages may not necessarily be found similar in their approach to identifying words as English does. Moreover, in languages which do not have script it is quite hard to lay down the definition of a ‘word’.

### **Difficulties Involved in Defining Word**

Before we try defining of what a word is, it would be sensible to look at the difficulties involved in this definition: ‘*A word is a single unit of language which means something and can be spoken or written*’ (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2010, 8<sup>th</sup> Edition). The above definition can be otherwise explained as the word is defined focusing on: its representation, the thought which it expresses, or on purely formal criteria. However, it seems to pose three difficulties for learning the same.

The first part of the definition relies mainly on writing traditions that separate by space sequences of letters or characters. However, these separations may not always correspond to functional realities. For example, in '*a new waste-paper basket*', the first two spaces do not have the same value as the last two because the group '*waste-paper basket*', although represented by three words, constitutes a semantic unit, while such a unit does not exist for the group '*a new waste*'. Consequently, a definition based on writing traditions alone cannot be entirely satisfactory (Jackson and Ze Amvela, 2000).

### Alternatives

The second part of the definition considers the indivisible unit of thought as the most essential criterion.

The above type of definition leads to the problem of 'delimitation', which offers three following possible alternatives (Jackson and Ze Amvela, 2000):

- a) the word as represented in writing represents a thought unit or a psychological unit: this is the most common case, the easiest to observe and which, unfortunately, may make us forget the others e.g. *eat*, *sleep*, *house*, *table*, etc.
- b) the word forms one block but includes two units of thought: e.g. *teacher*er, *spoon*ful.
- c) the psychological unit exceeds the limit of the graphological unit and spreads over several words; the word is only element of the real unity, which is then a more complex unit: e.g. *all of a sudden*, *as usual*, etc.

### Reliance on Formal Criteria

The third part of the definition relies on purely formal criteria. Bloomfield was the first to suggest a formal definition of the word. He contrasted the word with other significant units: the morpheme or minimal meaningful unit and the syntagme or structure, consisting potentially of more than one word. A form, which may occur alone, is free and that which cannot occur alone is bound. For example, *cat* and *bottle* are free; *-er*, *d* and *-ing* as in *singer* and *writing* are bound forms. Here a word is viewed as a minimal free form which can occur in isolation and have meaning but which cannot be analyzed into elements. It becomes clear that lexis, which consists of an infinite number of elements, excludes relational words or grammatical morphemes.

Another difficulty in the use of formal criteria is that the word may be defined from the phonological, lexical, and grammatical points of view. For example, the phonological word /ri:dz/ and the orthographic word *reads* correspond to the grammatical word 'third person singular of *read*'. The word *read* as the base form without any modification is the lexical or content word. The lexical or content word is also referred to as a 'lexeme', e.g. *pen*, *man*, *student*. It should be noted that lexical or content words are different from

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 8 August 2011

Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. (ELT), Scholar

Defining a Word: Beyond a Dictionary Definition

grammatical or structural words and the difference between them partly lies in the nature of their meaning and partly in the characteristics of their use. Generally, lexical words are nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs and their meanings can be described or represented by a picture. These words have independent meaning and are meaningful in isolation and in sentences. Since they are more in number and form the part of open class i.e. new words are added to this class. On the other hand, grammatical or structural words such as prepositions, articles, conjunctions, forms indicating number or tense do not have meaning on their own. These are few in number and therefore constitute closed set of words.

### **The Concept of Lexical Item**

In order to avoid this confusion, a general concept underlying this diversity referred as the 'lexical item' has been introduced. It is a known fact that every language is built upon words, which is called vocabulary or 'lexicon'. It needs to be understood here that this lexicon is not independent in itself, but it is part of grammar. In other words, a lexical item is one part of its lexicogrammar. (Halliday et. al, 2004: 3). Therefore, the reason 'word' turns out to be such a complicated notion in English. It is said the reason why lexicogrammar is divided into 'grammar' and 'lexicology' is because they require different models – different theories and techniques – for investigating these two kinds of phenomena, lexical items on the one hand and grammatical categories on the other. This is why lexicology forms different sub-discipline within linguistics and why there is a need for an improved definition of a word.

### **'Word' Defined**

To do away with all the confusion it is necessary that we find a definition which will apply to all types of words in English. Jackson and Ze Amvela (2000) propose a definition that can serve as a working tool in lexicology. According to them, 'a word is an uninterruptible unit of structure consisting of one or more morphemes and which typically occur in the structure consisting of one or more morphemes and which typically occurs in the structure of phrases' (p. 50).

### **Characteristics of a Word**

According to Jackson and Ze Amvela (2000), the above definition explicates four characteristics of a word which are essential. These are explained below.

1. First, the word is an uninterruptible unit which means when elements are added to a word to modify its meaning, they are added at the beginning as prefixes of the word (*unaware*) or at the end as suffixes (*drinkable*) or simultaneously with the word as a suprafix [*'export* (noun) and *ex'port* (verb)].

2. Secondly, the word may consist of one or more morphemes. When a word consists of one morpheme, it cannot be broken down into smaller meaningful units. They are 'minimum free forms' which stand by themselves and yet act as minimally complete utterances (e.g. *dog*, *work*, *out*, *hand*, etc). When words consist of more than one morpheme, they may be either complex (*happi-ly*, *work-ing*) or compound (*birth-day*, *candle-stick*).

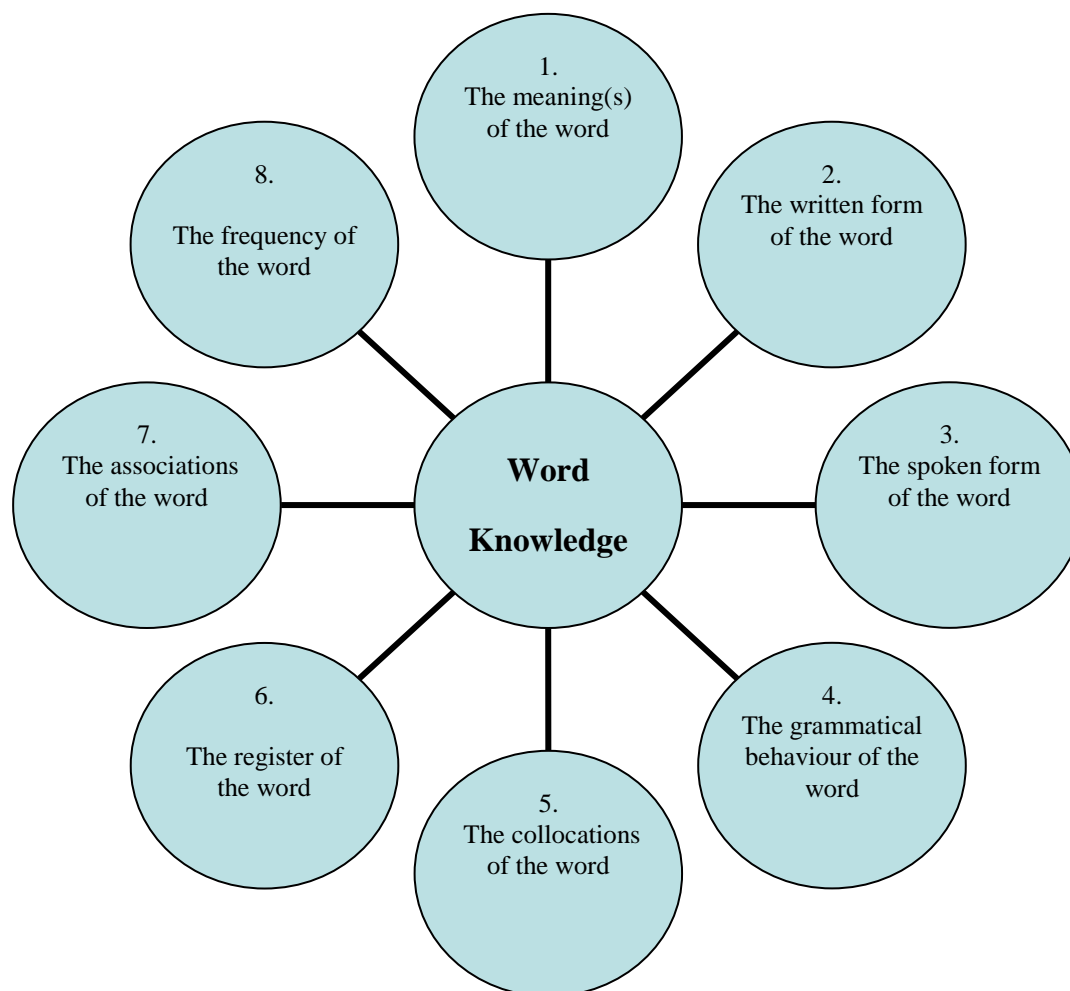
3. Thirdly, the word occurs typically in the structure of phrases. Which means according to the hierarchy, morphemes are used to build words, words to build phrases, phrases to build clauses, and clauses to build sentences.

4. Finally, each word belongs to a specific word class or part of speech. However, if the same form of the word appears in more than one class, e.g. *smoke* (noun), *smoke* (verb), these various occurrences are regarded as separate words.

### **Aspects of Word Knowledge**

Another perspective of looking at the word is from the point of view of Nation (1990) and Wallace (1982), who propose different aspects of word knowledge that a person needs to acquire/know in order to know a word.

### **Figure 1: Aspects of Word Knowledge**



The above aspects of word knowledge entail the overall definition of a word. Although it seems satisfactory, each aspect can be further studied in detail. These aspects fall under the related fields of lexicology such as morphology, phonology, syntax, lexicography and semantics respectively. This implies that it is not enough to view the definition of words given in dictionaries as authentic or final. Therefore, it is obvious that the role of the lexicologists is to go beyond the established definition in dictionaries, as it is debatable whether it constitutes a realistic account of meaning. Dictionaries only provide a paraphrase or explanation of meaning. Therefore, the meaning is not necessarily fully contained or exhaustively captured within such definitions.

### **Help with Understanding the Role of Words**

The following information also adds to the knowledge of lexicologists in understanding the role of words in a language.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 8 August 2011

Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. (ELT), Scholar

Defining a Word: Beyond a Dictionary Definition

1. It is said that there is no absolute definition of any verbal unit, because a word is only one element within a comprehensive system and because each element must depend on all other elements in the system. To put it in other words, one cannot know the meaning of any item until one knows the meanings of all other items. According to Nida (2008), 'although the process of defining terms is seemingly circular, it is hopefully spiral and in this way capable of providing increasing breadth of insight' (p. 397).
2. The meanings of words are largely known from syntagmatic contexts, that is, from accompanying terms that help to define meanings by indicating the types of contexts in which such words may occur. In other words, one should not only understand the meanings of words but one should also know precisely the contexts in which they fit. Although paradigmatic sets are useful in explaining the meaning of a lexical item, they are always secondary to syntagmatic contexts, because they depend upon these syntagmatic contexts to provide a basis for determining similarity and contrast (Sinclair, 2008; Nida, 2008).
3. The referents of lexemes of any language represent primarily the different elements of a culture, which may be defined as the totality of beliefs and practices of a society. In this case defining a word is not quite possible. It can only be inferred from the apparent events.
4. The notion that languages 'exist' only in dictionaries and grammar is partly correct because it is believed that such books are mostly limited attempts to describe some of the more obvious features of a language. It should be noted that languages exist only in people's minds, not as mental images as it was believed in the past.
5. Words that are bound to simple conjunctive definitions will have little value for application in a real world, which presents us with an unlimited range of new and variable objects for description (Labove, 2008). This should give a push to all the lexicologists to say to the world that rather than complain about the variable character of the meanings of words, people should recognize the existence of an extraordinary ability of human beings to apply words to the world in a creative way. It implies that one can use words out of their established meanings or the way they have been defined in dictionaries, assigning creative tone and special value to them.
6. It is quite important to note that a 'lexical item' may be a phraseological combination. Here attention should be drawn to the 'the openness principle', in which words are used freely in a wide variety of contexts, and the 'idiom principle,' in which use of words is normally governed by collocations and other aspects of linguistic context. Studying how words are used in combination with one another is important in lexicology, because there is the possibility, of the meaning being either literal or figurative based on the intention of the speaker or the writer.



7. 'Emotive meaning' or 'attitudinal meaning' of a word, which is used to elicit sympathy, love, happiness, sadness, etc, which commonly serves to signal the speaker's attitude, or serve to make the message sound less authoritative or dogmatic, or as a polite way of telling someone something, is an integral part of discourse. Dictionaries cannot describe this emotive or attitudinal meaning of words. Therefore, we cannot assume that the wording of a dictionary definition is an ideal representation of what a word means in the actual or real discourse.

## Conclusion

This paper is an attempt to bring out certain difficulties in defining a word. This is because it is said that no one person ever controls a language completely. It means that language is distinctly shared and is an interactive phenomenon unlike the fixed meanings of words we find in dictionaries. The fact that every language is constantly in the process of change makes the standard meaning essentially tentative.

Secondly, although we have attempted a comprehensive definition of 'word', it cannot be said to be the final one because it is impossible to capture the meaning of 'word' in its true sense. The context actually contributes more to the meaning of a particular lexical unit than the units themselves, because, the meaning of a word is only a minimal contribution to the meaning as a whole. It is much more relevant to think of meaning as always being a combined meaning of the focal element and the context. An elaborate explanation can be found in Sinclair's (2008) 'semantic reversal'.

The enormous variability of human language cannot be categorized or defined in a limited manner. Within the conventions of a particular language, meanings contrast with each other in established and precise ways. Also, speakers of the same language can convey meanings to each other with considerable precision. It simply means that words do not mean whatever people want them to mean, but are governed by social convention. Finally, although the traditional practice of assigning a number of meanings to a word and then leaving the distinguishing features to the contexts seems so easy and natural in view of traditional dictionary practice, it is much more relevant to move up from a focus on the atomic level of individual words to the level of words in combinations. Only by going beyond the notion, that a dictionary definition is an ideal representation of what a word means, can lexicologists explore its real meaning.

---

---

## References

1. Halliday, M. A. K., & Yallop, Colin. (2007). *Lexicology: A Short Introduction*.
2. Halliday, M. A. K., Teubert, Wolfgang., Yallop, Colin., & Cermakova Anna. (2005). *Lexicology and Corpus Linguistics*. London: Continuum.

Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com)

11 : 8 August 2011

Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. (ELT), Scholar

Defining a Word: Beyond a Dictionary Definition



3. Hanks, P. (2008). General Introduction. In Patrick Hanks, (Ed.), *Lexicology: Critical Concepts in English, 1*, 1-35. New York: Routledge.
4. Jackson, H., & Ze Amvela, E. (2000). *Words, Meaning and Vocabulary*. London: Cassell.
5. Labov, William. (2008). The Boundaries of Words and their Meanings. In Patrick Hanks, (Ed.), *Lexicology: Critical Concepts in English, 1*, 377-407. New York: Routledge.
6. Nation I. S. P. (1990). *Teaching and Learning Vocabulary*. New York: Newbury House.
7. Nida, A. Eugene. (2008). The Molecular Level of Lexical Semantics. In Patrick Hanks, (Ed.), *Lexicology: Critical Concepts in English, 4*, 396-406. New York: Routledge.
8. Sinclair, John. (2008). The Lexical Item. In Patrick Hanks, (ed.), *Lexicology: Critical Concepts in English, 4*, 51-72. New York: Routledge.
9. Wallace, Michael. (1982). *Teaching Vocabulary*. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

---

Rajakumar Guduru, Ph. D. (ELT) Scholar  
 EFL University  
 Hyderabad 500 605  
 Andhra Pradesh  
 India  
[raja.ciefl@gmail.com](mailto:raja.ciefl@gmail.com)