

Phonological and Grammatical Word as a Linguistic Phenomenon

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Abstract

Words are notoriously difficult entities to define, both in universal and in language specific terms. Many criteria have been proposed for identifying word but there has often been lack of a clear distinction between lexeme and word form, and between phonological and grammatical criteria. It is suggested that different sorts of criteria should be kept strictly apart – phonological criteria define phonological word, which is a unit in phonological hierarchy, while grammatical criteria define grammatical word, which is a unit in grammatical hierarchy.

The purpose of this paper is to define ‘word’ in terms of phonology and grammar, which explores the unit ‘word’ as a linguistic phenomenon, and to discuss the possible criteria to define word. In order to do so it is essential to look into the basic characteristic features of unit ‘word’, with the help of different sorts of definitions of ‘word’ given by scholars.

Introduction

The term ‘word’ is an older and familiar term. In non-technical everyday talk, we speak about words without ever thinking its complexity and that could be a problematic notion, because it is not as straightforward as one might expect. Word can be intuitively felt but the notion of word is difficult to define easily. In morphology we deal with words, how words are formed in terms of morphemes, clauses and sentences. ‘Word’ is one of the key concepts in morphology since we deal with word structure. Bloomfield (1933: 178) states that a word can be defined as “*a minimum free form*”, i.e. the smallest unit that can exist on its own. Studying words is not only the chief subject matter of lexicology but it depends on phonology for its phonological structure and on syntax for its delimitation of its status in more complex configuration.

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Words are the fundamental building blocks of language. The foremost task of any language learner, including young children acquiring their native language, is to find out the segments and analyze the wall of talking-noise around them into meaningful units – namely, words and their meaningful parts.

Dictionary Definition

Webster's Unabridged Dictionary (1989) reports, words are 'usually separated by spaces in writing and distinguished phonologically, as by accent' (p. 1643). But this definition is not sufficient to define 'word'. Although space is placed between words in the written form of many languages like English, but orthography cannot be a crucial component of word-hood. For example, languages like Chinese have no space between words in writing, but speakers of these languages still identify a word in their language. Similarly, illiterate people who cannot read and speakers of languages without writing system know what words are in their language.

Based on Phonology

On the other hand, phonology does play an important role across language in identifying the boundaries between words. For example, the string 'greenhouse'. Phonological stress disambiguates the meaning of the utterances in (a) and (b). Identifying that 'greenhouse' is a single (compound) word in (a) but two distinct words 'green' and 'house' in (b).

- a. They walked past a GREENhouse.
- b. They walked past a greenHOUSE.

A phonological word is a piece of speech, which acts as a unit of pronunciation. This is based on certain criteria, which vary from language to language. In English, each phonological word has exactly one main stress (as in 'green house').

Based on Meaning

The semantic definition of word states that a word expresses a 'unified semantic concept'. Although this may be true for most words (even for son-in-law) which is ill-behaved with regard to the integrity criteria), it is not sufficient in order to differentiate between words and non-words. The simple reason is that not every unified semantic concept

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corresponds to one word in a given language. Although a word may always express a unified concept, not every unified concept is expressed by one word. Hence, the criteria are not very helpful in distinguishing between words and larger units that are not words. Before taking the semantic definition of word seriously, it would be necessary to define exactly what ‘unified concept’ means.

Based on Syntactic Behaviour

This leaves us with the syntactically- oriented criteria of wordhood. Words are usually considered to be ‘syntactic atoms’, i.e. the smallest element in a sentence. Words belong to certain syntactic classes (nouns, verbs, adjectives etc.) which are called parts of speech, word classes or syntactic categories. The position in which a given word may occur in a sentence is determined by the syntactic rules of a language. These rules make reference to words and the class they belong. In a syntactic rule of ‘word’ no smaller units can be moved to different position in the sentence. A word is generally occurs in a fixed order. Thus, syntactic criteria can help to determine the wordhood of a given entity. To summarise the possible definition of word (phonological, orthographic, semantic and syntactic) we can say that, in spite of the intuitive approach of the notion ‘word’, it is sometimes not easy to decide whether a given string of sounds (or letters) should be regarded as a word or not. In the light of the above discussion, the properties of a word can be summarised below.

Properties of Words

- words are entities having a part of speech specification.
- words are syntactic atoms.
- words (usually) have one main stress.
- words (usually) are indivisible units (no intervening material possible).

Types of Word

Morphology and syntax are the two parts of grammar, which are closely linked together through the unit ‘word’. The basis of a word is lexical root or roots to which various morphological processes may be applied: compounding, reduplication, shift of stress or

change of tone, internal change, subtraction and most common of all affixation. A word is produced by applying these relevant morphological processes to a root.

Types of word can be broadly divided into two categories as below:

- a. **Phonological words:** those, which are determined on entirely phonological principles.
- b. **Grammatical words:** those, which are determined on entirely grammatical (that is, morphological and syntactic) principle.

Simple and Appealing Definitions

Some of the definitions of 'word', which have been suggested by various scholars, are simple and appealing. Sapir (1921: 34) defines a word as "one of the smallest, completely satisfying bits of isolated "meaning" into which sentence resolves itself" and Žirmunskij (1966: 66) "the word is most concise unit of language which is independent in meaning and form". However, each of these two definitions is essentially vague because they are unable to provide definite criteria for deciding 'what is a word' in a given language.

According to Bloomfield (1933: 178), a word is a "minimum free form". This is probably the most oft-quoted definite of word but is, in fact scarcely workable. Many linguists have suggested more detailed definitions of 'word' in general or in a particular language. Newman (1967: 183-3) begins his perspective study of word classes in Yokuts (California) with list of phonological and grammatical criteria, he states morphological criteria serve to supplement the phonological features for delimiting the unit 'word'.

On the other hand, Wells (1947: 99) states: "because of the insufficiency, the phonemic criteria of a word must be supplemented, for every language, by criteria of the second kind... the grammatical". Wells also states that working in terms of a single unit 'word' – in fact, the word is most solid as unit in those languages where, phonemic and grammatical criteria reinforce each other.

Coinciding Feature

In types of words, it may be that after phonological word has been recognised on phonological criteria and grammatical on grammatical criteria, the two units will be found to coincide. Nevertheless, in many languages they do not quite coincide. A linguist who has just

tried to recognize a single unit 'word', mingling phonological and grammatical criteria, will find himself in trouble (Dixon 2010: 3).

Phonological Word

It is difficult to find single and fixed criteria, which can be used to define a unit 'phonological word' in every language. There is a range of types of criteria such that every language, which has a unit 'phonological word', uses a selection of these criteria.

Dixon (2010: 7) states that a phonological word is a phonological unit larger than the syllable (in some languages it may minimally be just one syllable) which has at least one (and generally more than one) phonological defining property chosen from the following areas:

- *Segmental features*

Internal syllabic and segmental structure, phonetic realization in terms of this; word boundary phenomena; pause phenomena. These segmental features are helpful to define a phonological word. A phonological word can be realised depending on the different segmental features of a word. For example; sequence of phoneme types, vowel clusters between consecutive syllable, possible positioning of phonemes within a word, role of aspiration and nasalization and pausal phenomena etc. (see, for examples, Dixon 2010: 8-10)

- *Prosodic features*

Stress (or accent) and/ or tone assignment; prosodic features such as nasalization, retroflexion, vowel harmony. Stress or accent, in many languages proves one helpful criterion for defining a phonological word. It becomes easier to find the position of word boundaries from the location of stress in a word, but in some languages, stress placement may depend on a combination of morphological and phonological factors. In such cases, stress may not be a useful criterion for phonological word. A phonological word can be realised in terms of vowel harmony, which operates over a certain syntagmatic extent.

- *Phonological rules*

Some rules apply only within a phonological word; others (external Sandhi rules) apply specifically across a phonological word boundary. Phonological rules that are applied in a phonological word have particular rules of pronunciation, which help to figure out the

boundary of a word. For example, languages that stress the last syllable of a word, a word boundary is likely to fall after each stressed syllable. Another example of a phonological rule is vowel harmony, where the vowels within a given word share the same quality, so a word boundary is likely to occur, whenever the vowel quality changes. For example in Turkish, vowels in certain types of word must either be all front or all back (Bloomfield 1933: 181, Waterson 1965). Vowel harmony may constitute a necessary and sufficient condition for recognising phonological word but not all languages have such convenient phonetic rules, and even those that do present the occasional exceptions.

Grammatical Word

In the previous, section of ‘phonological word’ only a number of types of criteria could be offered where none of them can be applied to every language to determine a phonological word. On the other hand, for grammatical word it is possible to put forward general criteria, however tempered by a number of caveats. For grammatical word, we can discuss eight criteria, which are helpful to identify a grammatical word. Out of these (a-d) are main for the identification of a grammatical word.

- a) A grammatical word has its base one or more lexical roots to which morphological processes (compounding, reduplication, shift of stress, change of tone, internal change, subtraction, and affixation) have applied. When these morphological processes are applied to an underlying root, a grammatical word is produced.
- b) A grammatical word has a conventionalized coherence and meaning. This shows that the speakers of a language think a word as having a certain unity and character. A speaker of any language when talks about word he is unlikely to talk about morpheme. For example, the word like ‘untruthfulness’, one may talk about ‘true’ or ‘truth’ or ‘untruth’ or ‘truthfulness’ or ‘ untruthfulness’ etc., but not surely of *-th* or *-ness* (although he may possibly talks about the suffix *-full*, since it is homonymous with the word *full* which has some semantic similarities, or about *un-* since this is a clear meaning of negation). The next two criteria involve compounding and affixation, can be discussed together in terms of grammatical elements.
- c) The elements of a grammatical word always occur together, rather than scattered through the clause (the criterion of cohesiveness).

d) The elements of a grammatical word generally occur in a fixed order.

Consider the examples from Dyirbal language as given below.

i) Ban yibi bulayi bani-nu
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
 Determiner (fem) woman two come-past
 The two women came.

ii) ban yibi jarran bani-nu
 ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓
 Determiner (fem) woman two come-past
 The two women (a pair of women) came.

In the above example (i) the four forms *ban*, *yibi*, *bulai* and *baninu* can be permuted and use in any order (e.g. *yibi ban baninu bulai*). However, in (ii) *jarran* must follow *yibi*; here we can only permute *ban*, *yibi-plus-jarran*, and *baninu*. This example shows that *bulai* is a separate grammatical word that adjective ‘two’, while *-jarran* is a nominal suffix with dual meaning.

e) In grammatical word, there will be just one inflection per word. Matthews (1991: 213) provides examples from English of the varied word order of application of derivational processes. In the following examples suffixal processes *-al* and *-ize* apply before *-ation* in (1) and in (2) they apply after it.

For example,

1.	Noun root	nation
	add <i>-al</i> ,	deriving an adjective stem
	add <i>-ize</i> ,	deriving a verb stem
	add <i>-ation</i> ,	deriving a noun stem
		nation-al
		nation-al-ize
		national-iz-ation
2.	verb root	sense
	add <i>-ation</i> ,	deriving a noun stem
		sense-ation

add <i>-al</i> ,	deriving an adjective stem	sense-ation-al
add <i>-ize</i> ,	deriving a verb stem	sense-ation-al-ize

After completing the derivational process, the resulting stem takes the inflection appropriate to the word class. For example, *nationalization* is derived noun and now the plural suffix –s can be added to it. Same as in *sensationalize* is a derived verb and takes one of the inflectional suffix available for verb in English, -ed, -ing, -s or zero.

- f) Morphological processes involved in the word-formation tend to be non-recursive. That is, as a rule, one element will not appear twice in a word. However, as Matthews points out, this is not fixed principle; it does apply without exception for some languages (e.g. Latin).
- g) In a grammatical word, a speaker may pause between words but not within word. In a synthetic language one certainly tends to pause, more often between words than within words but it is no means unheard of to pause between morphemes within word. For instance, *un <pause> suitable*. In English, for example, there are just a few examples of two grammatical making up one phonological word, e.g. *don't*, *won't*, *he'll*. One would not pause between the grammatical words *do-* and *-nt* in the middle of the phonological word *don't* (one could of course pause between the *do* and *not* of *do not*, since these are distinct phonological words).
- h) A word may constitute a complete utterance, all by itself. This criterion is neither only applicable to ‘phonological word’ nor only to ‘grammatical word’ but a combination of these two, i.e. a unit which is grammatical word consisting of a whole number of phonological word; or to something which is a phonological word consisting of a whole number of grammatical word. For example, clitics (which are one grammatical word, but not a separate phonological word, e.g. *n't* from English *don't*).

Conclusion

To summarise the notion ‘word’ in the light of the above discussion we can say that few definitions have clearly distinguished between phonological and grammatical words. Often, the unit ‘word’ is taken for granted, with no justification of criteria offered. Sometimes criteria are offered but they mix grammatical and phonological characteristics without clear

discussion of whether these always define the same unit. Different types of criteria are relevant for defining phonological word in different languages. In addition, the relative importance and weighting of criteria differ from language to language.

The criteria (a-h) offered for the identification of grammatical word, (a-d) are the main criteria for defining a grammatical word. In criterion (e), distribution of inflections and (f), non-recursiveness, do apply well in certain languages. The principle of pausing/interruptability, (g), is only a tendency - which may apply more to phonological than grammatical words – but can be a useful support for the other criteria. Moreover (h), isolatability, is again a tendency which can be of use when it is realized that it only applies to a unit which consists of a whole number (one or more) of grammatical words and also a whole number (one or more) of phonological words.

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