

Language and this book

In this chapter ...

In this chapter we will introduce you to a system of thinking about, and then describing, English words and sentences. We will see that most words can have different forms. Combined according to rules of grammar (morpho-syntax), words can form larger units such as phrases, clauses and sentences. Many words can also be segmented into smaller meaningful units, which are called morphemes. We will discover that the most important shared characteristic of these units is that they all have internal structure. As we will see, in order to work systematically with English words and sentences, we need to analyse both: the structure that lies behind words (morphology), and the organising principles according to which native speakers assemble words into sentences (syntax). And we will see that, without this internal structure, we would not be able to communicate with language, and this is, after all, its purpose. We will not give you stylistic or prescriptive rules, but together we will discover the conventions underlying the use of standard English for communication.

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Hi! How are you?

We do hope you are well.

Hi, how, are, you, we, do, hope and *well* are **words**. They are English words and they are written words. When you read them out loud, or simply say them to the next person you meet, they become spoken words. *How, are, and*

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you together, in this particular form and in this particular order, also make up a **sentence** (a specific type of sentence, a question). So do *we, do, hope, you, are* and *well*.

This book is called *English Words and Sentences*. On its very first page we are using English words and sentences. This is characteristic of the whole book: we will explore something which, if you are a native speaker of English, you already intuitively know. So why write a book about it? There are many reasons why it is better for you to also consciously know how English words and sentences work. We will look into this after two games with English words and sentences.

Activity 1.1

Use **all** six words from our reply, i.e. *we, do, hope, you, are* and *well* (without changing their form) to create at least three different sentences. If you manage to build more than five grammatical ones without changing any of the word forms, you beat us.

We presume you cursed at us for asking you not to change their form. The more or less sanctioned orders for the word-forms *we, do, hope, you, are* and *well* are

1. *You are well, we do hope.*
2. *Hope you are well, we do.*
3. *Well, you are, we do hope.*
4. *Well, we do hope you are.*

Without this restriction, the activity would have been easier and you would have been able to build more sentences. Try it now.

5. *We hope you are doing well.*
6. *You are hoping we do well.*
7. *We are hoping you do well.*
8. *?We did hope you are well.*
9. *We were hoping you did well, etc.*

What is the difference between our Activity 1.1 and the second version of this language game? In the original version, you were only allowed to change the order the words come in; now you could use different forms of the same word, which gave you more options.

So far we have looked at words and established that many of them come in slightly different forms. We have also established that combined according to rules of **grammar** and arranged in an order that is sanctioned by English grammar, words form sentences.

Now for the second creative activity with English words and sentences. This time we ask you to take the role of the teacher.

Activity 1.2

Imagine a non-native speaker of English is staying with you. She is a nice person and wants to help in the house. Before heading back to your home from town, she sends you a text message / SMS which reads ‘I’m at the shop, should I bought anything for home?’ How can you help your visitor improve her English?

If you are able to explain how English words and sentences work, you can not only help your friend with her English, you can also better comprehend your tutor’s notes about your own language use in essays and assignments. Understanding the meaning of *tense*, *agreement*, *word order* will enable you to improve your own language use and get better grades. To help yourself and your non-native speaker friend with grammar in general, and not just with one specific utterance, you should be able to explain in a more general way why a sentence does not work and is ungrammatical (marked by an asterisk in linguistics). Sentences you could have made out of the six words from Activity 1.1 but which are ungrammatical because word forms are not right (examples 10 to 12) or they are not in the right order (examples 13 to 15) are listed below.

10. **We hopes you are doing well.*
11. **You is hoping we do well.*
12. **We are hoping you do weller.*
13. **Are did hope you are well we.*
14. **We well were hoping you did.*
15. **You we are hoping do well, etc.*

The same argument applies if you want to work as a classroom assistant, or go into teaching, or teach English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). If you intend to become a speech and language therapist, you will also need to be able to explain how words and sentences work. And knowledge about language not only facilitates all the creative uses of language in the media, journalism, drama, poetry, but also in more everyday tasks such as writing reports, reviews and presentations. It is highly **unlikely** that you’ll get through life without having to, or wanting to, perform any of these tasks. Knowing how language works is a transferable skill which will stand you in good stead in many life situations. After reflecting on a few reasons why it is good to know how English words and sentences work, we now return to the three notions we have already introduced: **words**, **sentences** and **grammar**.

1.1 Words

Recognising **words** is a task we tend to take for granted, because we have been using word-spaces to separate words since we first learned to read and write. OK, we can sometimes argue over whether *all right* is two words or one (*alright*), but generally the convention of using spaces to separate written words fits the realities of the language well, and by and large people agree as to what is or is not a word. Recognising word boundaries in spoken language is a much trickier task than in writing. Let's start with the most basic distinction, the one between **words** and **non-words**.

Activity 1.3

The following sentence has been modified from a scientific article on canine compulsive disorder:

A canine chromosome 7 locus that wodoples a high risk of compulsive disorder susceptibility has been identified.

How many non-words are there in the above sentence? Which ones are they? If you are not sure, where can you check?

You could look up all the unfamiliar words in a dictionary. Under which entry would you look for *wodoples*? We assume you would try the form *wodople*, safely assuming that *wodople-s* won't be listed. You won't find *wodople*, because it is a non-word in the English language. Non-words are neither listed in printed or online dictionaries, nor in the dictionary in our brain (also called our *mental lexicon*). If we successfully managed to introduce *wodople* into the English language, the words *wodopled* and *wodopling* would also be possible. All these words are different manifestations of the 'same' slightly more abstract vocabulary item and share a core meaning. The vocabulary items that are listed in the dictionary are generally referred to as **lexemes** (the 'lex-' component of 'lexeme' is taken from 'lexicon', which has more or less the same meaning as 'dictionary'). Lexemes are conventionally written in capital letters. The lexeme IDENTIFY, for example, has the different word forms *identifies*, *identified*, *identifying*.

The term 'word', however, is commonly used in a variety of different senses that are frequently not clearly distinguished. We'll distinguish them now to avoid confusion later on. In everyday language use, one meaning of 'word' is *lexeme*. But in everyday language use we also refer to spoken and written realisations of lexemes as **words**. For example, we call the last lexical unit in the example in Activity 1.3 'word', although strictly speaking *identified* is a word-form of the lexeme IDENTIFY.

Another sense of word we want to distinguish in some situations is best illustrated with an example. When we focus on the lexeme BID and the word-forms *bid* in the following two sentences, you will realise why we have to make this other distinction.

16. *I never bid more than £50 on eBay.*
 17. *I bid £50 for an arm chair on eBay yesterday and it will get delivered in five days.*

The same word-form *bid*, belonging to the same lexeme BID, represents two different **grammatical words** in examples 16 and 17. In sentence 16, it is present tense; in sentence 17, on the other hand, it is past tense and refers to a time already past. This is why we should regard *bid* as representing two distinct grammatical words. Grammatical words are important in the discussion of the relationship between words and sentences.

For English we can assume that ‘word’ is the basic unit of language. Words stand out in contrast with other units of language, either smaller ones such as morphemes and phonemes, or larger ones such as phrases and sentences, because they typically combine a number of different characteristics. We’ll use these characteristics to summarise our discussion of the first key term which also features in the title of this book.

The word is the largest unit relevant to spelling, and the unit marked by word spaces in conventional English spelling. *All right* and *mouse trap* are exceptions in that they behave more like a single word, but are sometimes written as two words. Words which combine two or more words (or roots) into a single word, i.e. compounds like *armchair*, *matchbox* but *chocolate-box* or *chocolate box*, are notoriously inconsistent in this respect and the hyphen is just a tentative word-space.

Words (in the sense of abstract vocabulary item or lexeme) tend to have one or more word-forms. The lexeme JUMP, for example, has the written word-forms

jump jumped
jumps jumping

The same word-form, on the other hand, can be two grammatical words. We looked at the example of *bid* earlier, another one would be *cut*. *Cut* can refer to an action in the present or past.

18. *I normally cut white bread too thickly to fit into the toaster.*
 19. *Yesterday, however, I cut it so thinly that it burned in the toaster.*

However, when *cut* refers to the result of a cutting action, as in *The cut in Tom’s middle finger does not heal*, it is a separate lexeme. It behaves differently in sentences and therefore belongs to a different word-class (as we will see in Chapter 2).

The word is also the basic unit of syntax. **Syntax** is concerned with the structural relationships among co-occurring words (we will discuss the term

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syntax in more detail in Section 1.5). Syntactic rules link words and phrases. And it is words, rather than phrases or morphemes, which are classified in terms of word-classes (see Chapter 2).

Some words are also the smallest unit of meaning, such as, for example, *apricot*. Phrases and sentences have meanings which are based in regular ways on the meanings of the words that make them up, but a word such as *apricot* has no smaller parts which contribute to its meaning. Exceptions to this characteristic of words are words that have no meaning as such (e.g. the first word in this chapter *hi!*, or *um*, or the *it* of *It rained*), and idioms which have meanings which can't be worked out from the meanings of their parts (e.g. *cats and dogs* in *It rained cats and dogs*). The most frequent, regular and important exception to words being the smallest unit of meaning are the different (inflectional) forms of lexemes. The meaning of many inflected words (e.g. *dog-s*) can be worked out on the basis of the meanings of their constituent parts, but arguably it is the words themselves, rather than the morphemes, that have meaning.

1.2 Word structure: morphology

Based on the similarity between the different forms of the non-word WODOPLE, *wodople-s*, *wodopl-ing*, *wodopl-ed*, and the real-word lexeme JUMP, *jump-s*, *jump-ing*, *jump-ed*, we will now claim that words have structure. This may come as a surprise to you because normally speakers think of words as indivisible units of meaning. This is probably due to the fact that many English words are morphologically simple, as we saw in the *apricot* example. Other words that cannot be divided up into smaller parts that are themselves meaningful are, for example, *up*, *the*, *gentle*, *dog*, *coriander* and *shook*. When you compare these words with *jump-s*, *jump-ing*, *jump-ed*, you will notice that *up*, *the*, *gentle*, *dog*, *coriander* and *shook* cannot be segmented into smaller units that are themselves meaningful and are used in other words, too. Does this statement also hold true for *meander*? After all, there are many words that end in *-er*.

Activity 1.4

Collect at least ten words that end in *-er*. Then divide your ten words into two groups:

- group A in which the *-er* is a separable, recyclable (productive) unit of language, and
- group B in which *-er* just happen to be the last two letters of those words.

Which group does *meander* belong to?

In activity 1.4 on page 6, the group containing *meander* (group B) contains words like *number*, *remember*, *Mister* etc., the other group, on the other hand, contains words like *small-er*, *bright-er*, *call-er*, *runn-er*. Group A words can be broken down into smaller units that are meaningful; they are said to be morphologically complex. Other examples of morphologically complex English words are *jump-s*, *jump-ing*, *jump-ed*, or *comput-er-s*, *key-board-s*, *screen-s* or *tool-bar-s*. In the last four examples, *comput-er-s*, *key-board-s*, *screen-s* and *tool-bar-s*, the morphologically complex words denote more than one of the referred-to objects; if we take the *-s* off, they refer to one of them. The word-final *-s* therefore always has the same meaning ‘more than one’ and serves the same grammatical function, it indicates plurality.

The smallest indivisible meaningful units of language or grammatical function from which words are formed are called **morphemes**. Morphology is the linguistic discipline which devotes itself to the study of components of words which cannot be decomposed into smaller units that are either meaningful by themselves or mark a grammatical function (like plurality). Morphologists are linguists who study word structure. Morphemes can be compared to pieces of a building set or construction kit that can be used again and again to form different words. Recurrent parts of words that have the same meaning can be isolated and recognised as manifestations of the same morpheme. For example, *jump* in *jump-s*, *jump-ing*, *jump-ed* can be isolated and has the same meaning. In *sing-er*, *play-er*, *call-er*, the form *-er* is attached to verbs to derive nouns with the general meaning ‘someone who does X’ (where X indicates whatever action the verb involves, e.g. singing, playing, calling). We can therefore recognise the element *-er* as belonging to a given morpheme which contributes an identifiable meaning to the word which they are part of. In a similar way the *-s*, the *-ing* and the *-ed* can be isolated from *jump-s*, *jump-ing*, *jump-ed*. These morphemes have little semantic content, but each one of them has the same grammatical function when added to other words of the same word class (see Chapter 2 for a discussion of verbs).

Although there are no effective mechanical procedures for discovering the structure of words, or of a language in general, there exist reasonably reliable and widely accepted techniques that will help you. We have introduced the main procedure for discovering the structure of words, the *principle of contrast*. We have contrasted forms that differ in terms of their sound / letter sequences, and forms that differ in lexical meaning and / or grammatical function. Exercise 1.1 at the end of this chapter gives you practice in recognising when a single sound / letter or combination of sounds / letters

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represent a morpheme. We will also return to morphology in Chapters 3 and 4. For now it suffices if you can recognise when a word consists of one morpheme only, or when it is built up from two or more morphemes.

The morphological units words are composed of are not random; you can recognise them because they have the same shape and the same meaning or grammatical function in many other words. The way morphemes combine is also not random, but guided by rules (mainly morphological ones, but phonological ones are involved, too). You use these rules on a daily basis when you use the English language for communication, but we will make some of them more explicit in Chapters 3 and 4.

In this book on English words and sentences we have so far dealt with words and a little bit with their building blocks, morphemes. All morphemes have meaning and / or grammatical function, but some of them (called *bound morphemes*, see Chapter 3) need to combine with another morpheme to form a useful word. Words, on the other hand, can always stand alone as basic meaningful units of language. In a minimal way, words therefore already fulfil the main purpose or function of language: to communicate meaning – a message, an idea, a thought, a feeling. But we can only think of three groups of humans who tend to communicate in one-word utterances: grumpy people, adults with severe speech and language impairment and children who are under two years old. Remember this next time you are interacting with a toddler, and listen out for how much more children can communicate when they start combining first two, then three and eventually many words to form sentences.

1.3 Sentence structure: phrases, clauses and sentences

In contrast with words, which we have already identified as the smallest unit in grammar/syntax, **sentences** are the largest unit in grammar. Sentences are strings of words which are held together by syntactic relations. In writing, sentences tend to start with a capital letter and end with a full stop. Between the initial capital letter of a written sentence and the final full stop, or between the first and the last sounds of the first and the last words of an utterance, we encounter several different-sized units of language: **words**, **phrases** and **clauses**. We have already established a working notion of words. In everyday language use, a **phrase** is a group of words standing together as a conceptual unit. The linguistic definition of phrase includes these characteristics: a **phrase** is a group of semantically and grammatically related words which have an internal structure. Because phrases form

conceptual and syntactic units, they can frequently be replaced by one word, or consist of a single word. A phrase therefore tends to be a grammatical unit intermediate between word and clause. We will look at phrases in more detail in Chapters 5 and 7.

Clause is the first term in this book which is not used much in everyday language; but it does have a very specific meaning in linguistics. A clause is a sentence that contains one lexical verb and whatever other sentence elements this verb requires. That is, it can consist of at least two phrases (phrases can consist of one word only). Here are three examples of simple or one-clause sentences.

20. *Alison laughed.*
21. *My cousins like chips.*
22. *It has been snowing in London recently.*

For linguistic units that contain only one lexical verb (represented by the lexemes LAUGH, LIKE and SNOW in the three example sentences above), the terms *clause* and *sentence* can be used interchangeably, because there is a one-to-one relationship between clauses and sentences. Not so in the following examples 23 to 25:

23. *Alison laughed about the fact that I had already forgotten our meeting.*
24. *My cousins, who live in Canada, like chips.*
25. *It has been snowing in London recently, because we had sub-zero temperatures and it was raining.*

Activity 1.5

How many clauses are there in examples 23 to 25?

Note that these sentences still contain representations of the lexemes LAUGH, LIKE and SNOW, but each of the complex sentences contains at least one other lexical verb.

We'll introduce criteria which will help you identify lexical verbs in the next chapter; for this activity it is sufficient to note that verbs tend to express a state, act, event or emotion. Once you have established the number of lexical verbs in examples 23 to 25, you will also know how many clauses these sentences contain.

In addition to LAUGH, example 23 contains the verb FORGET in the second clause, which starts with *that*. Example 24 contains LIKE and LIVE; LIKE being the verb of the main clause, LIVE being the verb of the embedded subordinate clause. Example 25 includes three lexical verbs: SNOW, RAIN and HAVE (in *we had sub-zero temperatures*). Example sentence 25 therefore contains three clauses. When talking about sentences

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like 23 to 25, we cannot use the linguistic terms *clause* and *sentence* interchangeably any longer, because in these examples there is no one-to-one relationship between number of clauses and number of sentences. Those sentences are more complex, and are composed of more than one clause: examples 23 and 24 are one sentence and two clauses respectively, and example 25 is one sentence containing three clauses. To be able to make this distinction, linguists added the term **clause** to their jargon. We use this term to refer to the linguistic unit that is intermediate between phrases and sentences.

We have now made a first parse through an English sentence, and established initial working definitions of its constituent parts. The smallest unit of an English sentence is a word, which in itself may be composed of one or more morphemes. If a word consists of one morpheme only, we call it *simple*; if it consists of two or more morphemes, we call it *complex*. Although a phrase can also consist of only one word, most of the time phrases consist of a group of related words with an internal structure. Phrases thus form a linguistic unit intermediate in size between words, and clauses and sentences. Sentences can also consist of one clause only. These sentences are called *simple sentences*. Sentences which are composed of two or more clauses are called *complex*. We can see that there are a lot of similarities between the linguistic units ranging from words, to phrases, to clauses, to sentences. The most important shared characteristic of all these units is that they all have internal structure.

Without this internal structure, we would not be able to communicate with language. We'll explore in the next section why parts of speech need to have internal structure, and why their combination needs to follow conventions / rules all its native speakers adhere to in order to be able to use language to communicate.

1.4 Structure and convention in language use

Activity 1.6

In this activity we let you play with the building blocks of language. We'll give you several language 'Lego' sets and ask you to build something with the blocks or units.

- a. Make the word referring to the rebirth of a soul into a new body out of the morphemes
carn, re, at, in and *ion*.
- b. Make a phrase referring to a trendy or cool motor vehicle out of the following words
bike, this, hot.