1 Context

This book is a concise typological overview of the languages of mainland Southeast Asia (MSEA).[1] It is intended to be accessible yet technical. Readers with a basic grounding in linguistics should find the terms and concepts familiar. For others, where relevant, I define terms and concepts, and give references for further reading. A preliminary summary of key linguistic concepts is given at the end of this chapter.

Given that greater MSEA has three times as many languages in it as this book has pages, by necessity I have left much information out. Many languages go unmentioned. Many types of structure are overlooked. Many of the finer, intriguing details are passed over. And many functional domains of language are left out. My goal here is to give information on the central domains of grammatical structure that are traditionally discussed in linguistic typology. There is, of course, much more to language than synchronic depictions of phoneme inventories and clause-level morphosyntactic structures. I provide references to some of that work in Section 1.3 (see also Goddard 2005, Simpson 2007).

The present chapter introduces the mainland Southeast Asia area. Some general information about historical context follows, with some information about current trends in scholarship on the languages.

Being a reference work, this book does not defend a thesis as such. So, there is little call here for a summary of the book's main idea. But I would like to make one point before we start. If the book has a take-home message it is this. When you think of MSEA languages, you should think first of minority, non-official languages like Semelai, Lahu, Saek, Cham, Kri, or Mien, and not the go-to languages, the big ones that are usually thought of first (or cited most often): Thai, Lao, Khmer, Vietnamese, Burmese. The minority languages are more representative of the area.

[1] For an overview of selected national languages in MSEA, see Comrie (1990). Goddard (2005) presents a more topic-oriented approach. See also Vittrant and Watkins (forthcoming).

1.1 The Mainland Southeast Asia Region

Mainland Southeast Asia can be broadly defined as the area occupied by present-day Cambodia, Laos, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam, along with areas of China south of the Yangtze River, with a periphery that includes the seven states of Northeast India, and – although here the term 'mainland' no longer applies – the islands from Indonesia and Malaysia running southeast to Australia and West Papua (see Map 1.1).

There are no definitive borders around the MSEA area. Different scholars draw lines in different places. But there is nevertheless a core (Comrie 2007: 45). MSEA is always taken to include Indochina – Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia – together with Thailand, and, usually, Peninsular Malaysia and part or all of Myanmar (see Map 1.2). But there is often a broader scope of greater MSEA, moving beyond the core area of Indochina and Thailand, in all directions.[2]

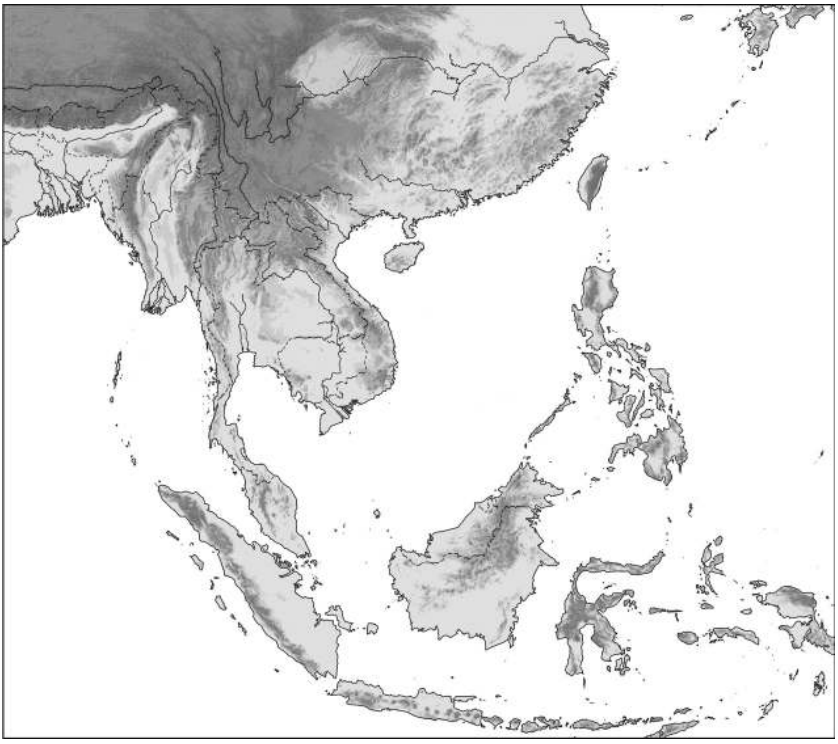
MSEA is a tropical and sub-tropical area with rugged and well-forested hills and river systems running from higher altitudes in the northwest to the plains and deltas of the south.

MSEA has seen a long and complex history of human movement, contact, and diversification. Evidence from genetics and archaeology suggests that there has been human activity in the area since some 40,000 years ago, when conditions were very different from today. For example, sea levels were much lower than now (Chappell and Shackleton 1986, Tooley and Shennan 1987), implying different possibilities for human movement and livelihoods.

A widely accepted view is that the people of MSEA once spoke Austroasiatic languages in a 'continuous distribution', and that this distribution was 'broken up by the historical expansions of the Chinese, Tai, Vietnamese, Burman and Austronesian (Malay and Cham) peoples' (Bellwood 1992: 109).[3] There are differences of opinion as to whether the historical process of peopling and ethnolinguistic diversification in MSEA was driven primarily by the spread of people or by the spread of cultural ideas and practices, but the modern distribution of ethnolinguistic groups is clear. In lowland areas, populations are denser, more culturally and linguistically homogeneous, and more closely affiliated

[2] For recent work, see Vittrant (2015) and Jenny (2015) on Myanmar (cf. Bradley 1995, Watkins 2005), Post (2015) on Northeast India (cf. Morey and Post 2008, 2010, Hyslop, Morey, and Post 2011, 2012, 2013), Gil (2015) on Insular Southeast Asia (cf. Adelaar and Himmelmann 2005, Blust 2013a, b), and de Sousa (2015) on Southern China (cf. Bauer 1996, Ansaldo and Matthews 2001, Chappell 2001).

[3] For discussion of the possible scenarios, see Sidwell and Blench 2011: 338 and passim, Post 2011, also Bellwood 1992, Blust 1994, Edmondson and Gregerson 2007, Fix 2011, Higham 2002, Jonsson 2011, 2014, O'Connor 1995, White 2011.

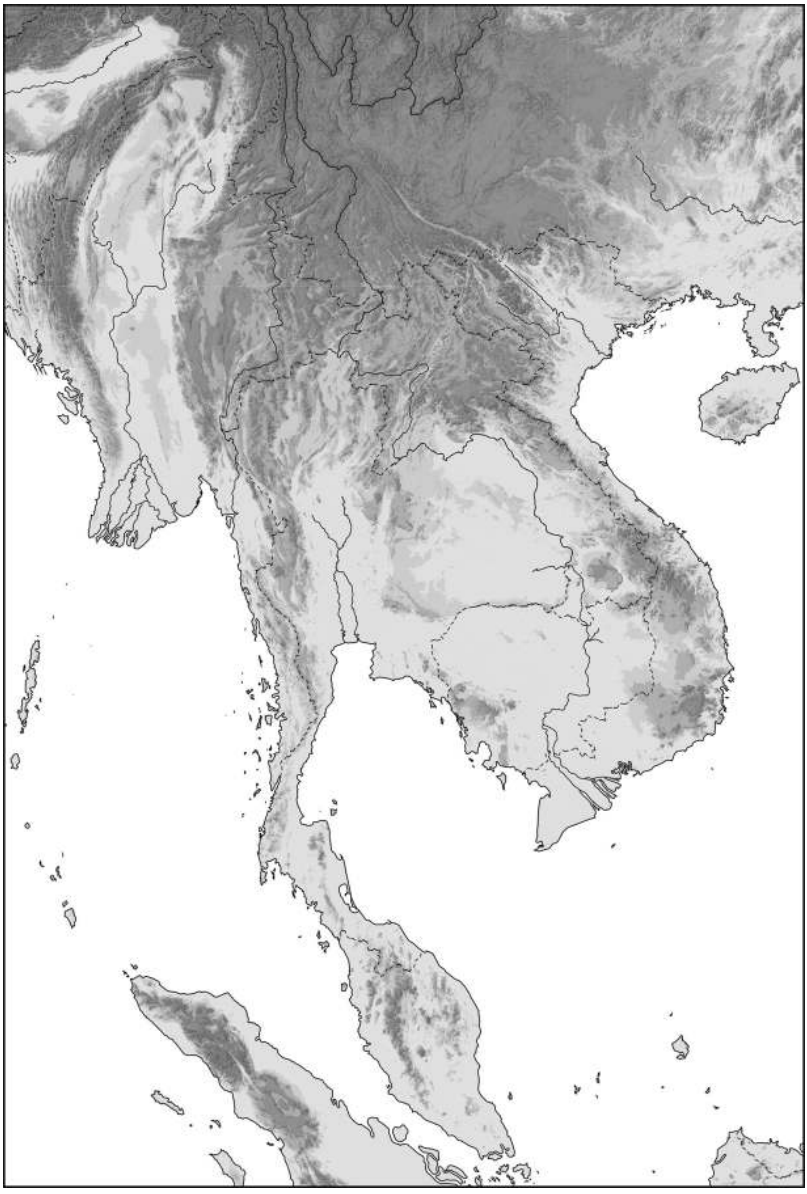


Map 1.1 Greater mainland Southeast Asia: present-day Cambodia, Laos, Peninsular Malaysia, Thailand, Myanmar, and Vietnam, along with China south of the Yangtze River, Northeast India, and Insular Southeast Asia

with state political power. In upland areas, populations are sparser, more culturally and linguistically diverse, and have limited if any access to infrastructure, education, or political power.

The upland areas in which many MSEA minorities live are conjoined in a single, elongated area, crossing political borders and encompassing 'virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India' (Scott 2009: ix). This area is sometimes referred to collectively as *Zomia* (Van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009, Michaud 2010).[4]

[4] For further information on the detailed history of human activity – peopling and migration, social contact and cultural shift, state formation and avoidance, war and peace – in MSEA, see Tarling (1993), Scott (2009), and Enfield (2011a).



Map 1.2 Core mainland Southeast Asia: present-day Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and neighbouring parts of China, Malaysia, and Myanmar

1.2 Mainland Southeast Asian Languages

The degree of linguistic diversity in MSEA (i.e., the number of languages per square km) is high (Enfield 2011b), and it is highest in upland areas. Formerly diverse lowland communities in MSEA have become homogenized by a combination of two processes. One process was ethnolinguistic shift. Some groups stayed where they were but stopped passing on their languages and identities to their children, instead adopting the languages and identities of new dominant groups. This process can be observed all over MSEA today. Another process was out-migration, typically to more isolated hill areas (Scott 2009). Geographical isolation is a force that still promotes language diversity in the region, where former diversity of lowland areas is on its last legs. Many of the lowland languages are heavily endangered or extinct (Enfield 2006a, Bradley 2007, Suwilai 2007). This is quickened by the effects of the concentration of political power of modern nation states in the lowlands. In recent decades, processes of language standardization in MSEA nations (Simpson 2007) have helped to heavily reduce language diversity.

The languages of MSEA are from five major language families: Sino-Tibetan, Tai-Kadai, Hmong-Mien, Austroasiatic, and Austronesian.[5] There are nearly 600 distinct languages spoken in greater MSEA.[6] If we exclude the China and India data, thus representing only the core MSEA area, the number of languages is about half this amount; see Table 1.1.

The very high linguistic diversity (i.e., the number of languages) in Northeast India and Southern/Southwestern China adds dramatically to the number of languages included in the area. It also reverses the relative proportion of Sino-Tibetan and Austroasiatic languages.

The MSEA area is unusual in global terms in that there is good agreement among scholars as to the basic language family affiliation of known languages.[7]

[5] The Andamanese languages are located just outside MSEA as defined here; though we note with interest new work on these lesser-known languages: see Abbi's recent reference grammar (2013) and dictionary (2012) of Great Andamanese.

[6] Data are from glottolog.org, accessed in May 2014. Many thanks to Harald Hammarström for his input and assistance. Core MSEA was defined for this count as Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, and Vietnam; Greater MSEA included this, along with Peninsular Malaysia, areas of India east of 90 degrees (i.e., the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram, Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura) and China south of the Yangtze river (specifically, the provinces of Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Hunan, Guizhou, Yunnan, Guangxi, Guangdong, Fujian, and Hainan).

[7] Not considered in this book are sign languages. The sign language used in Ban Khor, Thailand (Nonaka 2004), appears to be an isolate, and there are surely more of its kind. Among spoken languages in MSEA there is Kenaboi, now extinct, and known only from two early twentieth-century word lists. Hajek (1998) refers to Kenaboi as 'unclassified' but does not call it an isolate. Benjamin (2006) summarizes and analyses the available data as far as is possible. His view is that Kenaboi is 'a specially-invented form of speech', a 'taboo-jargon' associated with forest collecting trade. Kenaboi had large proportions of both Austroasiatic and Austronesian

Table 1.1 *Numbers of languages in MSEA, separated into language families*

	Core MSEA	Greater MSEA
Austroasiatic	**122** (44%)	**138** (24%)
Sino-Tibetan	**74** (26%)	**288** (49%)
Tai-Kadai	**51** (18%)	**93** (16%)
Austronesian	**25** (9%)	**26** (4%)
Hmong-Mien	**8** (3%)	**38** (7%)
Total	**280**	**583**

There are unresolved issues about lower-level subgroupings and there are unresolved hypotheses about possible macro-groupings. But for every known language, scholars agree as to which of the five main language families it fits into. This is unusual firstly because it means that each language's basic affiliation is apparently uncontroversial, and secondly because it suggests that there are no language isolates (Blench 2011: 125–126).[8]

1.3 Historical-Comparative Linguistics

Research in historical-comparative linguistics continues apace in MSEA. At the level of sub-grouping, advances are being made in all the major language families. Old hypotheses are being tested with new data and techniques, and new hypotheses are being put forward. The appearance of new data, in particular, has made an important difference, enabling, for example, Pittayaporn (2009a, 2009b) to propose new reconstructions of the phonologies of Proto-Tai and Proto-Southwestern-Tai, Sidwell (2009) to offer an improved account of vowels in Proto-Mon-Khmer, and Matisoff (2015, cf. Matisoff 2003a) to re-examine the place of the Jingpho language within Tibeto-Burman. In research on historical Hmong-Mien, Ratliff (2010) has recently provided an assessment of previous work and offers substantial new reconstructions, with consideration of their implications. Historical Austroasiatic has seen substantial developments, including a suspension of the assumption

vocabulary, along with some unexplained forms. The data are too tenuous to establish whether it was an isolate or not.

[8] For a survey of the historical linguistic background, see Sidwell (2013). For recent information on the history and affiliations of MSEA languages and language families, see Jenny and Sidwell 2015 on Austroasiatic, Diller et al. 2008 on Tai-Kadai, Thurgood and La Polla 2017 on Sino-Tibetan, Grant and Sidwell 2005 on the Austronesian languages of MSEA (focusing on Chamic), and Ratliff 2010 on Hmong-Mien.

of a highest-level split between Munda and Mon-Khmer. It is no longer widely assumed that 'Mon-Khmer languages' represent descendants of a single ancestor language below Proto-Austroasiatic (although the term is still useful with the meaning 'non-Munda Austroasiatic languages'; for a range of perspectives on this, see discussion in Sidwell and Blench 2011, Diffloth 2011, Sagart 2011, and Van Driem 2011). Similarly, in Sino-Tibetan linguistics, assumptions are being questioned. For example, recent reconsiderations of the position of Chinese in the family have assigned it to a lower-level subgroup rather than the standard placement as a high major branch; more subgroups of Sino-Tibetan are identified, and the time-depth of reconstructed proto-Sinitic is pushed back to well before Old Chinese (Blench and Post 2013, Van Driem 2013).

1.4 Language in Social Life

Numerous lines of work in linguistics deal with the role of language in social life. An important theme in recent work in MSEA is the sociolinguistics of language endangerment, and associated issues including language protection and revitalization; for an example, see Phattharathanit (2012) on identity maintenance in Lanna (cf. Matisoff 1991c, Bradley 2007, Suwilai 2007, 2011). Research on linguistic politeness continues, mostly in relation to national languages, and with reference to the languages' elaborated systems of social deixis, for example in their systems of personal pronouns, and the pragmatic alternatives that effectively create open-class systems for person reference (Cooke 1968, Haas 1969, Luong 1990, Enfield 2015: ch. 5). The more complex documented systems of person reference are those belonging to the major literate languages of the area, including Thai, Cambodian,[9] Vietnamese, and Burmese (Cooke 1968). There has been recent work in this domain on languages including Lao (Enfield 2007: ch. 5, 2015: ch. 5). On Vietnamese, see Sophana (2008) on politeness strategies, and Sidnell and Shohet (2013) on avoidance strategies (see also Luong 1988). Linking social life to central concerns of historical linguistics and typology, there has been recent work on sociolinguistic conditions for borrowing (Alves 2009); for similar work see Thurgood (2010) comparing two varieties of Cham with the Tibeto-Burman language Anong. A new line of work in MSEA is conversation analysis; Enfield (2013) presents several case studies of Lao language in conversation; Hạ (2010, 2013) presents studies of Vietnamese conversation with a focus on the role of prosody, for example in repair and backchannelling (see also Umaporn 2007 on backchannelling in Mon).

[9] Cambodian is also known as Khmer, where 'modern Khmer' is assumed but is sometimes used to distinguish it from 'Old Khmer'.

1.5 Resources for MSEA Linguistics

The community of scholars working on MSEA linguistics is steadily growing. The South East Asia Linguistic Society (SEALS) was founded by Martha Ratliff and Eric Schiller at Wayne State University, Detroit, in 1990. Prior to 2009, proceedings of SEALS meetings were published in edited volumes. Since then they have appeared in the open-access *Journal of the Southeast Asian Linguistics Society* (for which, see www.jseals.org/). The SEAlang Projects website (www.sealang.net) is an invaluable resource for primary and secondary sources on MSEA languages. Other regular publishing venues for research on MSEA languages include the journals *Mon-Khmer Studies* (an open-access journal, see www.mksjournal.org/) and *Linguistics of the Tibeto-Burman Area* (see http://sealang.net/sala/ltba/htm/index.htm). Some recent interdisciplinary explorations of ethnolinguistic diversification have focused on languages of MSEA and neighbouring places (e.g., Sagart, Blench and Sanchez-Maras 2005, Enfield 2011a). The last ten years have seen the publication of multiple landmark overviews of MSEA language families, including Tai-Kadai (Diller, Edmondson and Luo 2008), Sino-Tibetan (Thurgood and LaPolla 2003, cf. Matisoff 2003a), Austroasiatic (Jenny and Sidwell 2015, cf. Shorto 2006), and the Austronesian languages of MSEA (Thurgood 1999, Grant and Sidwell 2005, Larish 2005, Blust 2013b: 70–75).

A key measure of progress in an area is the production of reference materials based on new empirical research (see Enfield 2017: 685–686 for a list).[10]

1.6 Preview of the Book

The chapters of this book present a concise typological survey of MSEA in five parts. Chapter 2 is an overview of some basic structural features of MSEA languages in the context of traditional linguistic typology, including relative order of phrasal elements. Chapter 3 surveys sounds and sound systems in MSEA, examining the diversity of consonant and vowel inventories, and with special attention to the intertwined phenomena of register and tone. Chapter 4 examines principles of word formation, showing the many ways in which MSEA languages depart from the stereotype of an extreme isolating/analytic

[10] We mention here only a selection of those recent materials that have been published in English, though we note that a substantial descriptive literature on MSEA languages is being published in other languages, including Chinese, French, Indonesian, Thai, and Vietnamese (for some examples, see: Bo 2002, Bon 2014, Buakaw 2012, Chen 2005, Gai 2002, Giaphong 2004, Kosaka 2000, D. Li 2003, 2004, Y. Li 2003, Lidz 2010, Mao and Li 2002, 2007, Mayuree 2006, Ploykaew 2001, Samarina 2011, Seng Ma 2012, Shee 2008, Shintani 2008, Srisakorn 2008, Wayesha 2010). Further chapters of this book draw on works written in Chinese (made possible by the expert assistance of Weijian Meng).

profile. Chapter 5 surveys the main forms and structures that speakers of MSEA languages use for formulating reference to persons, places, and things. And Chapter 6 looks at verbs, their marking, and their role and status in the structure of clauses, with special attention to the MSEA-wide phenomenon of serial verb constructions. A brief postface concludes the book.

1.7 Some Key Linguistic Terms and Concepts

Here I introduce some basic concepts and terms that will be used in the book, for the benefit of readers who are not trained in linguistics.

1.7.1 Phonology

Every spoken language provides its speakers with an inventory and set of rules for forming syllables and words from combinations of consonants and vowels, and other elements of sound such as pitch and duration. The term *phonetics* refers to the physical patterns of sound in language, such as can be measured by instruments that can tell us the frequency, pitch, volume, or length of a sound. Phonetic measures are direct physical measures and they can be made without any knowledge of the language being described. By contrast, the term *phonology* refers to a description of the role that different sounds play in defining categories that make up a system of contrasts specific to a given language. An instrumental measure of two sounds might reveal that they are [p] and [pʰ] (with square brackets signalling a phonetic value), a voiceless unaspirated bilabial plosive and a voiceless aspirated bilabial plosive, respectively, but this phonetic description cannot tell us what role the two sounds play in a given language. To see what this means, we need the term *phoneme*. A phoneme is an idealized sound element that plays a contrastive role in the sound system of a language. In English, [p] and [pʰ] are realizations of a single phoneme /p/ (with slashes signalling a phonological value). This means that even though they are distinct sounds (to hear the difference, contrast *spin* [spɪn] and *pin* [pʰɪn]), these sounds do not contrast directly in English, and so they are realizations of the same idealized, underlying category, called a phoneme. By contrast, in Lao, these sounds can occur in the same place in a word, signalling the difference between two words: for example, [paa] means ‘forest’, while [pʰaa] means ‘to split’.

A word is made up of at least one syllable. As we shall see, in MSEA languages a majority of words consist of a single syllable. As in any language, a syllable typically includes a *vowel* in combination with one or more *consonants* – sounds in which the airflow is at least partially obstructed by our vocal articulators, usually the tongue or lips. Alongside vowels and consonants, sometimes referred to together as *segments*, there are *suprasegmental* features.

These are features that can vary independently from the vowels and consonants they occur with, such as pitch, loudness, duration, and phonation type.

Pitch plays an important role in *tone* systems, which are widespread in MSEA, and in many other parts of the world. In a tone system, a word must be pronounced with the same pitch each time. Changing the pitch can signal a different word (for example in Lao, if *kaj* is pronounced with a low-rising pitch, it means 'far', but with a high-falling pitch it means 'near'). In tone languages of MSEA, there are usually between four and six defined pitch patterns used for distinguishing between words (see Chapter 3). *Register* is a similar phenomenon, where the most important distinguishing feature is not pitch but voice quality – for example breathy phonation versus clear phonation. In Kri (spoken in upland central Laos), if *cii?* is pronounced with breathy phonation it means 'elder sister', but with clear phonation it means 'head louse'.

Consonants, vowels, and suprasegmental features form an inventory of phonemic elements that are the building blocks of syllables and words. Each language has distinct rules and constraints – known as *phonotactics* – for combining these elements. Phonotactics specify how many distinct sounds can occur together in a syllable or word, which sounds can be combined, in what orders, and so on. In some languages of the world, phonotactic rules are very simple, only allowing CV sequences (C=consonant, V=vowel), while other languages allow greater complexity (for example, English *splints* /splɪnts/ has the phonotactic structure CCCVCCC).

1.7.2 Word Formation

There is a basic distinction between *words* and *morphemes*. A morpheme, defined as a minimal meaningful unit in language, can be smaller than a word. In English, *trees* is a single word, which contains two morphemes: the noun *tree* and the plural suffix *-s*.

All languages have ways of forming words by combining multiple elements. These elements can be words, or they can be smaller than words, such as suffixes. For example, the English word *cats* consists of the noun *cat* and the plural suffix *-s*. *Mindful* consists of the noun *mind* and the adjective-creating suffix *ful*. And *fingernail* is a compound made from two nouns, *finger* and *nail*. Each of these English examples illustrates ways in which words can be formed by processes such as affixation and compounding. There are many more such processes in the languages of the world; languages differ widely in how these processes of word formation are structured and used (see Haspelmath and Sims 2010).

An important distinction in word formation is between *inflection* and *derivation*. Inflectional marking adds simple information to a word, usually without changing the core meaning of the word, and where the overall meaning can