What is lexicology?

What is lexicology? Its relation with morphology, semantics and etymology

Lexicology is a branch of linguistics concerned with the study of the meaning and use of words (the stock of words in a given language).

Vocabulary

Lexis (synonymous terms)

Lexicon

All the terms refer to the total word stock of a language.

Dictionary (only a selective recording of the word stock of a language at a given point of time).

Lexicology and morphology

Words of a language may be analysed in respect of both their **form** and their **meaning**. Therefore, lexicology is related to both **morphology** and **semantics**.

Morphology is the study of **morphemes** and their arrangements in forming words.

Morpheme is the **smallest meaningful** unit of a language which may be a word or a part of a word.

e.g. *cat, book, handbag, smile*

cats, books, smiling, farmer

Morphemes are minimal meaningful units because they cannot be broken down into further meaningful units.

We can establish a stable relationship between each morphemic item and the non-linguistic world of experience. E.g. *cat* (a domestic feline animal);

non- negative meaning; *-s* plurality.

Free morphemes – can occur alone as individual words: *book, go, out.*

Bound morphemes – can occur only with another morpheme: *-ing* (*read<u>ing</u>), un-(<u>un</u>lock), -s (girl<u>s</u>)*.

Morph – a concrete realization of a morpheme in a given utterance.

Most morphemes are realized by single morphs. However, some morphemes are realized by more than one morph according to their position in a word or sentence; such alternative morphs are called allomorphs.

Allomorphs are different representations of the same morphemes that are mutually exclusive and **in complementary distribution,** i.e., they do not appear in the same environment.

(distribution – a total set of contexts in which a linguistic element may occur).

The forms of the indefinite article (*a* and *an*) are allomorphs.

The prefixes *im-* and *il-* are allomorphs having the same negative meaning (*im**m**oral* and *il**l**egal*)

(*m* is used before root beginning wit*h m with* and *l* before root beginning with *l*)

Simple and **complex** words. Simple words are morphologically unanalysable, complex words are formed from simple words using affixes or compounding.

cat, write, be, run, the, on – simple words;

handbag, bookstore, rewrite, friendly, heartless – complex words

Lexicology and semantics

Semantics is the branch of linguistics concerned with the study of meaning. Its aim is to explain and describe meaning in natural languages.

Meaning pervades the whole language.

Lexical semantics studies meanings of words and their meaning relations.

Sentence semantics studies meanings of sentences and their relations.

Pragmatic semantics studies the meaning of utterances in context, the speaker's intentions, etc. E. g. *It's getting late*. (said by a guest at a party)

Lexicology and etymology

Etymology is one more field of study related to lexicology.

Etymology studies the origins of words. The **Ancient Greeks** undertook to find out the original forms of words – ***etyma*** (=**roots**) – in order to establish the regular correspondence between language and reality.

"True" origins, however, cannot be established because human language stretches too far back in history.

Examining the history of words may be quite interesting:

e.g. **symposium –** a meeting or conference for the discussion of some subject. From Greek *symposion* *“drinking party” : syn-* together*, po-* drink*;*

In Ancient Greek and Rome a meeting following a dinner for drinking and intellectual conversation.

The word entered English in the 16th century.

Etymological information helps to determine **cognates** – words related in form (and meaning) in other languages.

e.g. *father* (English) and *der Vater* (German);

the Sun (English) and *di Sonne* (German).

It also helps to determine **borrowings** , i.e. words that were taken from other languages. Finally, it gives any other information on the previous history of the word (its etymology).

e.g. *autumn* (<Old French <Latin);

volcano (< Italian < Latin);

jungle (<Hindu <Sanskrit).

“Folk etymology” is a historical process. Speakers who do not understand an obscure form replace it with different form which is morphologically transparent.

e.g. **bridegroom** = bride + gome (“man”). But ***gome*** was no longer understood and was replaced by ***groom*** (“manservant” or “royal knight”).

Depart – used in wedding ceremonies meaning "to separate" in the expression *till death us depart*.

Later the word was analysed and understood as *do part.*

Hamburger is from Hamburg (a city) but was analysed by the English speakers into *ham* and *burger* (there is no such word).

Thus new words like *cheeseburger* later appeared.

Lexicology and lexicography

Lexicography is the process and the technique of writing and compilation of dictionaries. It is based to a large extent on lexicological theory, especially recently.

For example, the principle of **descriptiveness** (how language/words are actually used) not **prescriptiveness** (how they should be used according to specialists of language) has become a norm. This is a direct application of modern linguistic principles.

Lexicology and Phonology

At first sight it may seem that phonology does not interact with lexicology. But at least in two cases this is not so.

Firstly, the difference between two otherwise identical lexical items can be reduced to a difference at the level of phonology.

e.g. *pill; bill, meat: meal, cat: bat*.

As suggested by the examples, the sounds responsible for the difference may occur anywhere in the structure of the word – at the initial, medial or final position.

Secondly, stress alone may indicate the difference between words (in case of conversion) or between compound words and phrases.

e.g. *export* (N and V)

blackboard vs. black board

White House vs. *white house* – in case of compounds the primary stress falls on the first constituent.

Lexicology and syntax

Syntax studies the rules of sentence making. Thus syntax is concerned with the relationships between words in constructions and the way these words are put together to form sentences.

One may know the words of a foreign language but without the knowledge of syntactic rules he/she will not be able to put them into grammatically correct sentences.

On the other hand, a sentence may be syntactic but unacceptable from the lexical point of view. *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously.* (N. Chomsky)

We may say that syntax deals with more general aspects of language. It deals with rules of combining words in sentences.

e.g. NP ->(Det) (Adj)N

Lexicology studies **individual** words, how individual words affect other words in the same context.

We may also say that sentences can be **deviant** (strange, not acceptable) because of lexical reasons.

The dog scattered. (???) Is such a situation possible?

Lexical restrictions are generally not a matter of well-established rules but of tendencies in meaning interpretation.

Consider the following **deviant** sentences. Lexis or syntax?

1. Visitors are aggressively requested to remove their shoes before leaving the temple.

2. You put can table the on bread you bought have.

3. Off you go, up the apples and pears and into uncle ned.

(H. Jackson and E. Ze Amvela , 2001)

The word and its associative field

Every word in a language is involved in a network of associations. Some of these associations are based on similarity of meaning (*university* – *lecture*); others are formal (*lecturer*, *lecture*, *lecturing* - the same root).

We can speak about **paradigmatic** relations of words if they can substitute each other in a given context. (*a cup/mug of tea; a hot/tasty soup*)

Syntagmatic relations are between co-occurring words. E.g. a *difficult question* – the three words are related syntagmatically. (a typical noun phrase).

The terms were introduced by F. de Saussure.

Lexical fields

Lexical field (semantic field, semantic domain) is an area of meaning in which lexemes interrelate and define each other in specific ways from the point of view of their meaning.

E.g. **kinship terms, colour terms, military ranks**.

Field theory was introduced in 1920s and 1930s by **Swiss** and **German** linguists. But some ideas come from philosophers Humboldt and Herder (the 19th century).

Lexemes are **related on the basis of their meanings**.

The main statement of the theory: the vocabulary of a language is a **system**.

Lexemes are **related on the basis of their meanings**. Some of the most common types of meaning relations are those of general – specific and part – whole (*animal – dog – terrier ; building – room – ceiling*).

The system is constantly changing because some words disappear , new ones come into being, meanings change, etc.

computer, laptop, palm PC, tablet …..

Example

VOCABULARY
|
LEXICAL FIELD heavenly bodies
|
WORD star, satellite, planet, sun, nova, galaxy,
comet, meteorite, etc.

There are some difficulties with this theory. Sometimes it is **difficult to assign a word to a field**. (*noise, difficult*)

The categories of language are not well defined. There are always **fuzzy cases** (e.g. what is a chair? mountain/hill?)

However, a large numbers of lexemes can be grouped together into fields and sub-fields. Therefore, it is a useful theory.

Each word delimits the meanings of other words in the field, it marks off an area or range within the semantic domain. However, there may be overlapping in meaning between words in a domain.

Within a domain, some words are marked, while some are unmarked; the unmarked members are more frequent, more basic, broader in meaning, easier to learn and remember, not metaphorical, and typically one morpheme or a single word.

The field of "parts of the face“

- forehead
- eyebrows
- brow
- temples
- nose
- nostrils
- bridge/tip of the nose
- mouth

eyes
eyelids
eyelashes
chin
cheeks
jaw
lips

The terms within the field are arranged spatially and quite clearly delimited, though there is some overlap between terms such as *forehead* and *temple*. Terms such as *bridge of the nose* or *eyelids* would constitute marked members of the field.

The field of "stages of life“

new-born
infant
nursling, suckling
baby
child, kid
toddler
preschooler
youngster
adolescent
preteen
teenager
juvenile, minor
young adult
adult
grown up person
middle-aged person
senior citizen
sexagenarian
septuagenarian

octogenarian

nonagenarian

centenarian

The field is arranged sequentially, though there is considerable overlap between terms (e.g. *child, toddler*) as well as some apparent gaps (e.g. there are no simple terms for the different stages of adulthood).

differences in the level of formality

Word families

Bauer and Nation (1993)

Words are grouped into “families” on the basis of their morphological structure, including inflections and derivational affixes.

A family consists of a base form, its inflectional forms and word derived from it by affixation.

Families are divided into levels. The levels are distinguished on the basis of the frequency, productivity, regularity and predictability of affixes.

e.g. –**er** is more frequent than –**ist** (communist, violinist).

Frequency is determined using **computer corpus**.

This theory is useful in language teaching and lexicography.

Word classes

The notion of word class may also be used to account for the structure of the lexicon. Latin and Greek tradition – traditional grammars –distinguish **8** parts of speech:

- Noun
- Pronoun
- Adjective
- Verb
- Adverb
- Preposition
- Conjunction
- Interjection

In English we also have Determiners (the articles, this, that, these, those)

Quirk et al. distinguish only 4 classes:

- closed classes: preposition, pronoun determiner, conjunction, auxiliary verb – there's a limited number of them and it does not change (or change very slowly – *thou* and *thee* have been lost for about 3 hundred years).
- open classes: noun, adjective, verb, adverb – their membership is not stable since some words fall out of use and some new words appear;
- lesser categories: numeral, interjection;
- a small number of words of unique function: the particle *not* and the infinitive marker *to.*

At present the majority of linguists agree that all words fall into two broad types – **lexical** and **grammatical** words.

The lexical words belong to large and open classes of words (nouns, verbs, adjectives). These are **content** words which carry the main meaning in a sentence. They are likely to be retained in a telegram or a headline of a newspaper.

- *Famous French actress murdered (headline).*
- *Coming tomorrow six o'clock train (telegram).*

Grammatical words make the sentence grammatically complete and provide relations to other sentences. It's easier to understand them describing their grammatical function than trying to give their meaning definitions.

(What is the meaning of *the, or* ?)

Traditionally lexicology is more concerned with open classes, though all classes of words are analysed.