

2. Words, Sentences, & Dictionaries

The Structure of Words (Ling 350)

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What We'll Cover

1. Quiz #1
2. Words, sentences, and dictionaries
3. For next time

Quiz #1

1. What is an **idiom**? Give an example.
2. Give an example of a word with a predictable meaning. Why is its meaning predictable?

Starting Point

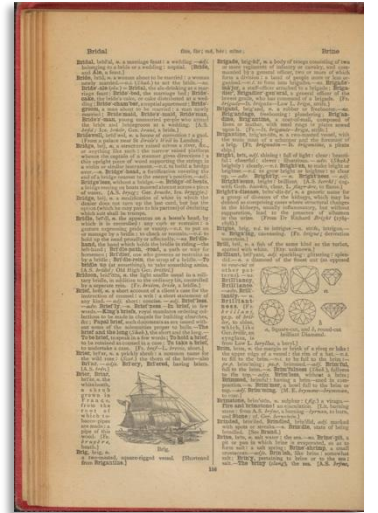
- Early in chapter 2, we find that words are “units of language which are basic in two senses [...]
 1. in that they have meanings that are unpredictable and so must be listed in dictionaries, and
 2. in that they are the building-blocks out of which phrases and sentences are formed.” (p.5)
- This is not bad, but is not wholly satisfactory, either, for reasons we’ll explore.

Types vs. Tokens

- How many words are there in this sentence?

Mary goes to Edinburgh next week, and she intends going to Washington next month.

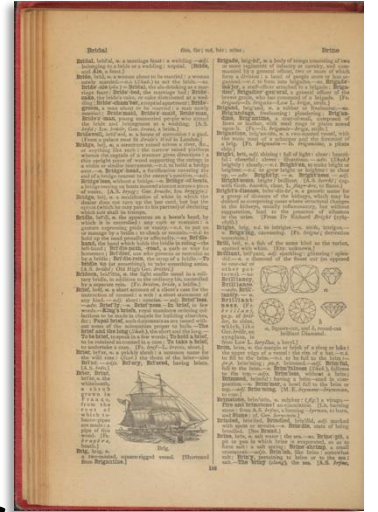
- There are fourteen **tokens** (the number of words spoken) but twelve **types** (the number of *different* words spoken).
- Dictionaries have separate entries for different types, but not for different tokens. When you “know a word,” you know the word type, having come across one or more tokens of it.
- In this sense, a “word type” does *not* mean the “kind” of word it is (e.g. noun or verb or whatever).



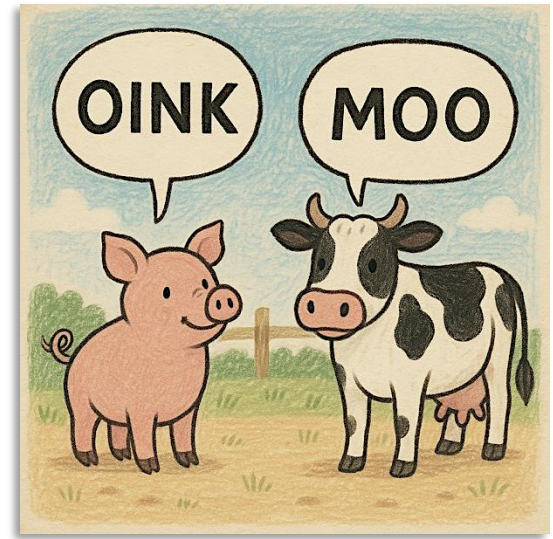
You can think of types as *abstract*, and tokens as *concrete*.

Types vs. Tokens

- So, we might say that sense 1 – words “have meanings that are unpredictable and so must be listed in dictionaries” – applies to **types**, and sense 2 – words “are the building-blocks out of which phrases and sentences are formed” – applies to **tokens**. And this would be right.
- But it's not the whole story.



Predictable Meanings



- We said earlier that words “have meanings that are unpredictable and so must be listed in dictionaries.”
- Do any words have predictable meanings?
- How about onomatopoeia?
- Anyone in here who speaks a language other than English, write down for me the sounds these animals make:

dog	cow	pig
cat	rooster	

- Even these words are **conventional**, meaning they are based on convention, and are *not* totally predictable just from nature. (If they were, they’d be universal.)

Predictable Meanings



- Okay, so onomatopoeia is out. Anything else?

“[A]ny words that are composed of independently identifiable parts, where the meaning of the parts is sufficient to determine the meaning of the whole word.” (p.7)

- What’s the example in the text?
- *dioecious* → *dioeciously*
- You know that *Xly* means ‘in an X fashion,’ so long as X is an adjective.
- So if you learn a new adjective, X, you know how to produce and understand *Xly*, as well as a whole other network of words.

Predictable Meanings

- The textbook's author created these sentences with words you've likely never seen before. Can you understand them?
 1. Hillary Clinton, if President, would have adopted quite *un-Trumpian* policies.
 2. It was interesting to see how quickly President Putin *de-Yeltsinized* the Russian government.
 3. The current emphasis on rehabilitative goals in judicial punishment may give rise to an *antirehabilitationist* reaction among people who place more weight on retribution and deterrence.

Lexical Items

- A “lexical item” is a useful term for a word that *does* fulfill the first part of the definition of “word” given earlier. Lexical items “have meanings that are unpredictable and so must be listed in dictionaries.”
- So, is *de-Yeltsinized* a lexical item?
- Is *dioeciously*?
- Is *dioecious*?
- Is *quick*?
- Is *quickly*?

Activity 1

- Break up into three groups. Then, working together, do question 1 on your sheets.
- Let's go over your responses.
- Now do question 2.

Predictable Meanings

- Sometimes a word's meaning is completely unpredictable, e.g. *jazz* or *poodle* or *rapid* or *tall*. You do not know the word's meaning at all just by looking at it in isolation.
- Sometimes, you know just what a word means as long as you understand its component parts, e.g. *jazzy* or *poodles* or *rapidly* or *taller*.
- And often, you have a hint at what a word means by understanding its component parts, but you need more information or context to get the meaning exactly right, e.g. *jazz age* or *poodle skirt* or *rapid access memory* or *tallboy*.



Idioms

- We said that words are both small building-blocks that make up larger phrases and sentences, *and* that they have unpredictable meanings.
- But what about segments that are clearly larger than words, but which also have unpredictable meanings?

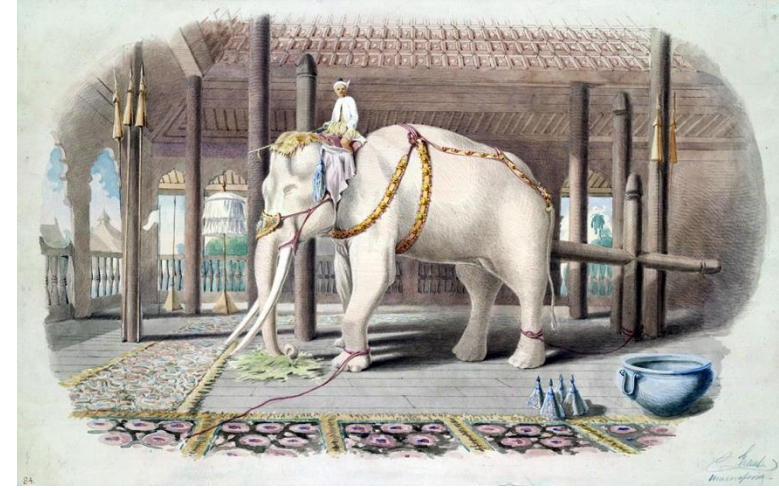
Once in a blue moon.

Bite the bullet.

Break a leg!

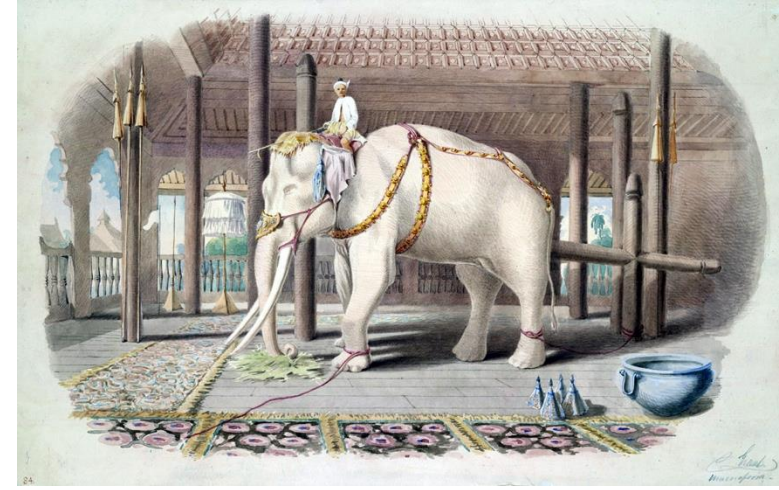
Under the weather.

- These kinds of phrases are called **idioms**: “multi-word items whose meaning is not fully predictable from their component words.” Idioms are lexical items, too.



Idioms

- *keep tabs on*
- *take a shine to*
- *raise hell*
- *have a chip on one's shoulder*
- *kick the bucket*
- *red herring*
- *dark horse*
- *white elephant*



- Many of these expressions can also be used **non-idiomatically**.
- One can *literally* kick a bucket or break a leg or bite a bullet, and there are actual white elephants and dark horses, etc.

N.B. People sometimes complain about English's idioms as being one of the reasons English is supposedly a very difficult language to learn. This is incorrect. Every language has idioms.

Idioms

- Some words, like *cahoots* and *umbrage*, only occur in idioms.
- Among the idioms, we can also include (and this is not in the text, so pay attention!) English's many phrasal verbs:

call off

Sue will call off the meeting.

Sue will call the meeting off.

shut down

Please shut down the computer.

Please shut the computer down.

throw up

He threw up his beer on himself.

He threw his beer up on himself.

open up

She opened up.

give up

I give up.

Activity

- Split your groups in half. Now, in six groups of ~three, do question 3 on your sheets.

Collocational Restriction

- A similar phenomenon involves **collocationally restricted** meanings, i.e. a special meaning that a word has when it is paired with another word or phrase.



white



white man

actually beige



white wine

actually yellow

- “If a typical idiom is a phrase, then a word with a collocationally restricted meaning” – like *white* in the examples we’ve just seen – “is smaller than a typical idiom.” (p.11)

Activity

- In six groups of three, do question 4 on your sheets.

Proverbs

- If idioms are phrase-length lexical items, then proverbs are sentence-length lexical items. What's the meaning of:
- Too many cooks spoil the broth.
- A stitch in time saves nine.
- It's no use crying over spilt milk.

In sum

- **Lexical items** are linguistic units whose meanings must be learned/ cannot be predicted. They are (figuratively) listed in your lexicon, or mental dictionary.
- Many words are lexical items, but not all: *dog* is a lexical item, but *dogs* is not; *serene* is a lexical item, but *serenely* is not. Why?
- Some lexical items are not words, but whole phrases, known as idioms. These include phrasal verbs, like *shut down* and *turn off*, as well as more colorful phrases, like *bite the bullet* and *have a chip on one's shoulder*.

For next time

- Read chapter 3 in the textbook. There will be a quiz on this reading and on what we did today at the start of class.