



An Animated and Narrated Glossary of
Terms used in Linguistics
presents

Lexical Category



Basic Idea

- A lexical category is a **class** of **lexical items**.
 - Lexical items are items in the lexicon of a language (= the language's vocabulary).
eat, pinch, elephant, cookie, pretty, ...
 - Common lexical categories:
noun, verb, adjective, ...
- **Lexical category** is also known as **part of speech**



Motivation for Categorization

Central to the idea of “lexical category” is the notion that words (i.e. lexical items) form classes.

How does one decide if a given list of words form a class?



Natural Class

Consider this list of English words:

apple, Kenya, man, happiness, destruction

Most of us would recognize this set as

Nouns



Traditional ideas

Nouns are “person, place or thing”.

happiness ~ *happy* ?

Verbs are “actions”.

destroy ~ *destruction* ?

Adjectives are words that describe nouns.

Mary's pencil ~ *sharp pencil* ~ *pencil that is sharp*

Adverbs are words that describe verbs or adjectives.

John screamed wildly ~ *John's wild scream* ~ *John screamed in a wild manner.*

Inadequate!

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Patterning as a class

Other than appealing to the semantics (i.e. meaning), lexical categories can be identified by looking for cases where the items in question pattern together.

- **Syntactic** distributions
- **morphological** properties

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Syntactic distribution

The _____ delighted Tom.
Ivy would like a/an/some _____.

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

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Syntactic distribution

Susie persuaded Ali to _____ X.
I _____ therefore I am.

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

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Syntactic distribution

The very _____ cat grinned.

Ravi is somewhat _____ .

apple

grow

quick

destruction

tickle

slow

happiness

destroy

shrewd

philosophy

think

handsome

strawberry

sing

beautiful

movie

attend

intelligent

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Morphological properties

- Number marking: Plural

apple

grow

quick

destruction

tickle

slow

happiness

destroy

shrewd

philosophy

think

handsome

strawberry

sing

beautiful

movie

attend

intelligent

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Morphological properties

- Tense marking: -s/-ed
- Aspect marking: -ing

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

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Morphological properties

- Comparative and Superlative forms:
more/-er/most/-est

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

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Convergence

Words indicated with the same color pattern together in a number of independent tests.

⇒ Same class/category

apple	grow	quick
destruction	tickle	slow
happiness	destroy	shrewd
philosophy	think	handsome
strawberry	sing	beautiful
movie	attend	intelligent

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Note

- Some words defy easy classification, and may cross-classify.
 - *I like blue* and *I like the blue pen.*
- Some words look the same, and are really different words.
 - *Seal* = 1. sea mammal; 2. a symbol; 3. the act of making something inaccessible
- The notion word is a difficult concept.
 - *computer keyboard* (one word or two?)
 - Not all languages are like English, and “word” can be very hard to define.

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Further reading

Baker, Mark C. (2003) *Lexical Categories : Verbs, Nouns, and Adjectives*. Cambridge University Press.

Fromkin, Victoria and Robert Rodman (1998) *An Introduction to Language*, 6th edition, pp.116-124. Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers.

Tserdanelis, Georgios and Wai Yi Peggy Wong (eds.) (2004) *Language Files: Materials for an Introduction of Language and Linguistics*, 9th edition, File 6.4. The Ohio State University Press.



The End

Wee, Lian-Hee and Winnie H.Y. Cheung (2009)
An animated and narrated glossary of terms used in Linguistics.
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