



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?

Slide 3 



Natural Class

Consider this list of English words:

apple, Kenya, man, happiness, destruction

Most of us would recognize this set as

Nouns

Slide 4 

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!

Slide 54 

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

Slide 55 



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

Slide 54 



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

Slide 55 



Syntactic distribution

The very _____ cat grinned.

Ravi is somewhat _____ .

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

Slide 9



Morphological properties

- Number marking: Plural

apple

destruction

happiness

philosophy

strawberry

movie

grow

tickle

destroy

think

sing

attend

quick

slow

shrewd

handsome

beautiful

intelligent

Slide 10



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

Slide 14 



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

Slide 15 

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

Slide 13 

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.

Slide 14 



The End

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

