

Chapter 1

Introduction

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WHY STUDY WORDS?

Imagine a life without words! Trappist monks opt for it. But most of us would not give up words for anything. Every day we utter thousands and thousands of words. Communicating our joys, fears, opinions, fantasies, wishes, requests, demands, feelings—and the occasional threat or insult—is a very important aspect of being human. The air is always thick with our verbal emissions. There are so many things we want to tell the world. Some of them are important, some of them are not. But we talk anyway—even when we know that what we are saying is totally unimportant. We love chitchat and find silent encounters awkward, or even oppressive. A life without words would be a horrendous privation.

It is a cliché to say that words and language are probably humankind's most valuable single possession. It is language that sets us apart from our biologically close relatives, the great primates. (I would imagine that many a chimp or gorilla would give an arm and a leg for a few words—but we will probably never know because they cannot tell us.) Yet, surprisingly, most of us take words (and more generally language) for granted. We cannot discuss words with anything like the competence with which we can discuss fashion, films or football.

We should not take words for granted. They are too important. This book is intended to make explicit some of the things that we know subconsciously about words. It is a linguistic introduction to the nature and structure of English words. It addresses the question 'what sorts of things do people need to know about English words in order to use them in speech?' It is intended to increase the degree of sophistication with which you think about words. It is designed to give you a theoretical grasp of English word-formation, the sources of English vocabulary and the way in which we store and retrieve words from the mind.

I hope a desirable side effect of working through *English Words* will be the enrichment of your vocabulary. This book will help to increase, in a very practical way, your awareness of the relationship between words. You will be equipped with the tools you need to work out the meanings of unfamiliar words and to see in a new light the underlying structural patterns in many familiar words which you have not previously stopped to think about analytically.

For the student of language, words are a very rewarding object of study. An understanding of the nature of words provides us with a key that opens the door to an understanding of important aspects of the nature of language in general. Words give us a panoramic view of the entire field of linguistics because they impinge on every aspect of language structure. This book stresses the ramifications of the fact that words are complex and multi-faceted entities whose structure and use interacts with the other modules of the grammar