Some things you’ll know at the end of this course:

- Why French speakers call the symbol “A” ah and we call it eh
- Which set of English suffixes change the pronunciation of their stem
- How the meaning of a verb predicts the syntactic environments it can appear in
- How toddlers pick a word out of the speech stream and associate it with a meaning
- How the writing tool used in the Middle Ages determined the present spelling of the word “love”
- Why you might be unsure about whether “timp” is an English word, but you know for a fact that “mpit” isn’t

What’s in a word?

Defining and recognizing words

First things first

- In order to study them, we need to know what we mean by a ‘word’
- First attempt at a definition:
  Word: n. A word is a sequence of letters that we write consecutively, with no spaces.
What’s a word?

Word: *n.* A word is a sequence of sounds that we pronounce consecutively, with no spaces.

Listen to the following clip of Arabic. Which subparts do you think are the words?

What’s a word?

Here’s a transcription of that Arabic clip, broken up into words:

hal tatakallumu l-faransiyya?
Do you speak French?

What’s a word?

Obviously, in normal speech the breaks don’t occur after each word. (Where do breaks occur? Listen to your friends’ and your own speech to see where the pauses are)
What’s a word?

- Word: n. A word is a sequence of sounds which can be pronounced on its own, with space on either side.
- Still no good, of course.
- According to that definition, *spimble* and *intafulation* and *pag* would be words.
- So would *Raise your arm* and *How are you?*

What’s a word?

- Obviously we’ll have to include something else.
- Let’s see what the OED says:
  - *word*: A combination of vocal sounds, or one such sound, used in a language to express an idea (e.g. to denote a thing, attribute, or relation), and constituting an ultimate minimal element of speech having a meaning as such; a vocable.

What’s a word?

- Including the bit about ‘minimal unit having a meaning ‘as such’ has helped a lot.
- No longer will *spimble, intafulation* or *pag* count (no meaning).
- Nor will *Raise your arm or How are you?* (has meaning, but not minimal).
What’s a word?

Still doesn’t quite work, though.

Why not? Take a moment and see if you can think of exceptions to that definition.

You’re looking for things that call into question the equivalence of ‘word’ and ‘ultimate minimal elements of speech having a meaning as such’.

What’s a word?

Write down your ideas about ‘word’ for us to come back to later, and let’s pause for a quick look at language in communication.

Language is a code for thought
Language is a two-part system

- Part 1: Symbols
- A sound sequence = some concept
- The arbitrariness of the sign: (Ferdinand de Saussure)
  - English: dog
  - French: chien
  - Spanish: perro
  - German: hund
  - Old Irish: cú
  - Ulwa: sūlu

Symbols are very useful!

- You can get pretty far with just symbols
- Koko the gorilla can communicate pretty well with a vocabulary of about 400 symbols
- But with just symbols, we couldn’t, for instance, write a text that explains how to do something.

Part II: Syntax

- Syntax is the rules we use to put our symbols together.
- Compare the following two pairs of symbol strings:
  - The dog that is barking
  - The dog is barking
- vs
  - "Is dog the barking that
  - "Is dog the barking.
Syntax makes the difference

- *Is dog the barking and Is dog the barking that* don’t mean much
- They differ only in one word
- *The dog is barking and The dog that is barking* both are very meaningful
- They differ in only one word too — the same word.
- The arrangement makes all the difference

Symbols & Syntax

- We’ll learn a little more about the syntax as we go along
- Turning back to the problem of defining ‘word’:
- ‘Minimal unit of language with a meaning’ = the *symbols* we’ve been talking about.
- BUT: symbols are not always ‘word’-sized!

These are minimal units of meaning — would you call them words?

- ‘I’m’  
- ‘You’re’  
- ‘Don’t’  
- ‘Wouldn’t’  
- ‘John’s’
Same with these

- dog vs. dogs -s
- wriggle vs. wriggled -ed
- happy vs. unhappy un-
- man vs mailman -man
- possible vs. impossible im-
- inhibit vs. inhibition -ion
- crystal vs. crystallize -ize

How about these items? Would you call them ‘words’? Are they minimal units of meaning?

- She up and left, kit and caboodle
- Jack walked to and fro
- If I had my druthers, the party would be on Saturday.

Words that aren’t minimal units of meaning in an expression: idioms

- Bill kicked the bucket last night.
- The promotion is a real feather in her cap.
- Fred was suffering from an attack of the green-eyed monster.
- He wouldn’t stop complaining, but he was flogging a dead horse.
- These words have a meaning, but not in these expressions — when they’re in these sequences, the individual words are without meaning.
Remember: symbols = arbitrary connections between sound & meaning

- Idioms are strings of words whose meanings have to be learned by rote — just like you have to learn the meanings of individual words like *scalp* or *pusillanimous* by rote.
- The arbitrary nature of the sound-meaning connection here means that idioms are 'symbols' too, even though they're made up of more than one 'word'.

So: Two kinds of 'words'

- There are minimal units of meaning that aren't 'words'.
- There are words that aren't minimal units of meaning.
- Solution: distinguish between *phonological* words and *semantic* words, a.k.a. *listemes*.
- ('Symbol' is too broad a term — designates red lights and restroom signs as well as linguistic symbols)
- We'll study both types of item in this course!

Why 'listeme'?

- These constitute the minimal list of arbitrary sound-meaning connections that a speaker of a given language must memorize.
- This is the list that makes learning a second language so hard; you have to spend hours memorizing it.
- Any sound-meaning connections bigger than a listeme can be calculated using the rules of syntax.
The anatomy of a listeme

Pronunciation: /najs/

Meaning: 'nice'

Morphology: nicer, nicest

Spelling: N-I-C-E

Syntax: Adj.

History: Latin ni-scire

→ Old English: 'stupid' > 'wanton' > 'lazy' > 'weak' > 'delicate' > 'fastidious' > 'refined' > 'appetizing' > 'nice'

Style: Not literary

You should understand:

■ What the difference is between a 'phonological word' and a 'listeme'
■ Why we have to distinguish them
■ Two or three examples of phonological words that aren’t listemes
■ Two or three examples of listemes that aren’t phonological words
■ How human language consists both of listemes and rules for combining them