From the psycholinguistic perspective, words are interconnected memory representations in individual minds, linking together at least a subset of the following kinds of information:

- fragments of phonological and, for the literate, textual memory (sequences of phonemes, signs for the deaf, and graphical units such as letters—i.e. word forms);
- pointers to productive morphological rules (which assemble affixed and compound forms, e.g. most adjectives can be made negative in English by adding un-);
- fragments of syntax (parts of speech, kinds of complement, etc. – the word’s ‘syntactic frame’, e.g. that hold is a ‘transitive verb’);
- other idiosyncratic properties which affect how word forms are used in sentences (e.g. the non-count noun mud, compared with the count noun with the same meaning clart/s from Geordie English);
- pointers to lexical phrases and collocations in which the word form habitually participates, like take in the entry for umbrage;
- activation threshold levels (how fast the form can be accessed when you need it for speaking, listening, reading or writing)—this is determined by frequency and recency of usage (e.g. high frequency rain vs. low frequency precipitation);
• fragments of conceptual structure (core word meanings) and of episodic memory (memories associated with actual experiences of the word form), e.g. *crunch* with the core meaning related to 'crush' and the currently more focused meaning of 'credit squeeze';

• connections with related concepts (e.g. synonyms, antonyms and other words in the same semantic field); e.g. *sword*, *knife*, *dagger*;

• indices of pragmatic force, situational appropriateness, sociocultural value, and other connotations of usage, e.g. *problem* vs *issue* vs *dilemma*.

From this perspective, words are not neat pairings of forms and meanings, like the coin metaphor of Ferdinand de Saussure; rather they are fuzzy sets of disparate kinds of knowledge connected up in multifarious ways. Here are some of the most prevalent causes of blurred lexical boundaries:

• There are, at least in English, multiple homonyms, either homophones like *red* the colour and the past tense of *read*, represented as a single phonological word form connected to two different spellings and meanings, or homographs like *lead* the verb and *lead* the metal, a single orthographic word form with two different pronunciations and meanings.

• Some word forms have different syntactic categories (like *red*, used as both an adjective and a noun ('reds under the bed')), so they have more than one syntactic frame attached to them.

• Many words are (near) synonyms (like *napkin* and *serviette*) and have two different word forms but shared frames and meanings (especially common for bidialectal speakers).
• Many word forms are polysemes, i.e. have single forms and frames, but overlapping meanings (like the *get* in ‘get a new car’ and the *get* in ‘get drunk’).

• Some grammatical words (like the *of* in ‘think of’) have form and frame but no meaning.

• Some (potential) word meanings have no single word form to express them: Lexical gaps, such as the lack (for most English speakers) of a single word for ‘five years’, where Spanish speakers have *lustro*.

See Hall (2005, chapter 3) for more detail and discussion.

References


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