Glossary of Dictionary Terms

On this page, you can find an alphabetical list of words that you may come across when using dictionaries, or hear when people talk about dictionaries.

A

abbreviation: a short form of a word or phrase, for example: tbc = to be confirmed; CIA = the Central Intelligence Agency
aggregator: a dictionary website which includes several dictionaries from different publishers
annotation: a process of adding linguistic information to a corpus. Annotation can be of different kinds, depending on the type of linguistic features being focused on, and can be performed by humans or by computer programs, or by a combination of the two.
antonym: a word that means the opposite of another word

B

bilingual dictionary: a dictionary which lists words in one language (the source language) and gives translations of those words into another language (the target language). Bilingual dictionaries may be unidirectional, providing translations from one language to another (for example, an English-Spanish dictionary), or bidirectional, providing translations to and from both languages (for example, an English-Spanish/Spanish-English dictionary).
bilingualized dictionary: a type of bilingual dictionary which provides definitions in the source language in addition to translations into the target language

C

collocate: one of the two words in a collocation. For example, the adverb vividly is a frequent collocate of the verb remember.
collocation: a combination of two words (such as a verb and noun, or an adverb and adjective) which frequently occur together. For example, solve a problem and bitterly disappointed are collocations.
colligation: the way that some words have a tendency to be used in specific forms or constructions. For example, the verb put up with tends to be used in negative sentences, and the verb arrest tends to be used in passive constructions. These are examples of colligation.
compound: a combination of two or more words that function as a single word. For example, climate change is a noun compound, and according to is a prepositional compound.
concordance: a list showing every example of a particular word in a corpus. The word you are searching for is displayed in the centre of the computer screen, with some of the context in which it occurs shown on either side of it. Along with Word Sketches, concordances are one of the main ways of using a corpus to find out how words typically behave.

connotation: an additional idea or emotion that a word suggests to you, in addition to its literal or main meaning

consonant: a speech sound made by stopping all or some of the air going out of your mouth

corpus: a collection of written and/or spoken language stored on a computer or on the internet, and used for language research and writing dictionaries. The plural form is corpora or corpuses.

corpus-based approach: an approach to corpus use in lexicography in which the lexicographer relies on their intuition of word meaning and usage before finding examples of these in a corpus

corpus-driven approach: an approach to corpus use in lexicography that takes the corpus as the starting point. Starting from the collection of occurrences of the word in the corpus, the lexicographer analyses them and groups them into categories and then drafts a dictionary entry based on this analysis.

corpus linguistics: a branch of linguistics that uses corpora to study language

countable: a countable noun is a noun that has a plural and can be used after a or an when it is singular

crowdsourcing: the practice of using large numbers of people, often members of the public, to collect information for a particular purpose

D

defining vocabulary: a limited set of common words that are used to explain the meanings of words in some types of dictionary

definition: an explanation of what a word or expression means

derivative: a word that is formed from another word, for example an adverb that is formed from an adjective by adding -ly

descriptive: describing how people really use a language, rather than stating how they should use it

descriptive approach: a descriptive approach describes how people use a language rather than stating how they should use it

dictionary aggregator/portal: see aggregator

diphthong: a combination of two vowel sounds said one after the other, as in the words find and fail

discourse: written or spoken language, especially when it is studied in order to understand how people use language

distributional semantics: a branch of semantics which aims to discover the meanings of words on the basis of the contexts in which they frequently occur. According to distributional semantics, two or more words which typically appear in very similar contexts will usually have similar meanings.
E
e-dictionary: electronic dictionary – a dictionary whose data exists in electronic form and can be accessed through various different electronic media
text: one of the short sections into which a dictionary is divided, in which the meanings and uses of a word are explained
etymology: the study of the origins of words; the origins of a particular word
example: a phrase or sentence in a dictionary entry that shows how a word or expression is used. It usually follows the definition.

F
forensic linguistics: a branch of applied linguistics that looks at the relationship between language and the law, for example looking at linguistic aspects of how crimes are investigated or how trials are conducted
frequency: a measure of how common a word is. The number of times a word occurs in a corpus is a good guide to its frequency in the language.
frequency star: a ★ symbol used in Macmillan Dictionary to indicate how frequently a word or expression occurs in English

G
grammar code: a label such as 'intransitive/transitive' or 'usually plural' that shows you how a word normally behaves grammatically
grammar pattern: one of the ways a word is normally used in, in order to create a sentence. For example, the verb to decide can be used with an infinitive (We decided to leave) or with a that-clause (I decided that I would accept their offer) – these are its grammar patterns.
guide words: in a paper dictionary, the two words at the top of a dictionary page that show the first and last words on that page

H
headword: the word that appears at the beginning of a dictionary entry, which is followed by information about its meanings and uses
historical dictionary: a dictionary that not only gives the current meanings of words but also traces all the changes in their meanings over time. The Oxford English Dictionary (OED) is the best-known historical dictionary of English.
homograph: a word that is spelled the same as another word but has a different meaning and sometimes a different pronunciation

I

idiom: an expression whose meaning is different from the meaning of the individual words
index card: one of a set of small cards on which you write information, such as an example of language use
inflect: if a word inflects, you change its form to go with the grammar of the other words you are using with it. If a language inflects, it has words that do this.
inflection: the way in which the basic form of a word changes to show something such as tense or number. An inflection is a form of a word that is different from the basic form, for example houses, walked or goes.
International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA): a system of symbols used to represent speech sounds
intransitive: an intransitive verb has no direct object
introspection: the process of examining your own personal knowledge of a language (your mental lexicon) in order to reach conclusions about what words mean and how they are used. Introspection is often contrasted with observation, when you consult a corpus in order to observe how people use words when they communicate.

L

L1: first language – the first language that someone learns to speak
L1 speaker: someone who is using a language that is the first one they learned to speak
L2: second language – a language that someone can speak or is learning to speak that is not their first language
L2 speaker: someone who is using a language that is not the first one they learned to speak
label: a note in a dictionary entry that tells you something about the way a word or meaning is used. The labels in Macmillan Dictionary tell you about a writer’s or speaker’s style and attitude (style and attitude labels), the part of the world where an word or meaning is mainly used (regional labels), or the subject area that it is used in (subject labels).
learner's dictionary: a dictionary that is designed to be used by people who are learning a language that is not their first language. Macmillan Dictionary is a learner's dictionary.
lemma: the "base" form of a word used as a headword in a dictionary, which may have other forms. For example, the forms went and going are part of the lemma go.
lemmatization: the process of reducing different forms of a word back to their "base" form, the lemma, for example breaking, breaks, or broke back to break
lexical gap: a meaning or idea for which a language has no word, even though a word for this may exist in other languages. For example, there is no exact equivalent in Spanish for the English verb to eavesdrop (to
secretly listen to a conversation), so this is a lexical gap in Spanish, and there is no general word in English for a parent's siblings, although such words exist in some other languages.

**lexicography**: the job or skill of writing dictionaries

**lexicographer**: someone whose job is to look at what words mean and how they are used, and to use this information to write entries for a dictionary

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**M**

**meaning**: the thing, action, feeling, idea etc that a word or words represent

**mental lexicon**: the information about words and meanings which an individual speaker of a language holds in their brain. It can be thought of as your own ‘personal dictionary’.

**menu**: a part at the beginning of a long dictionary entry, which gives a summary of the word's different meanings, using very short definitions. For example, the entry for the verb *to train* in Macmillan Dictionary begins with a menu giving a summary of its six meanings.

**metaphor**: a word or phrase that means one thing and is used for referring to another thing in order to emphasize their similar qualities

**monolingual dictionary**: a dictionary that is written in and gives information about one language

**multilingual**: someone who is multilingual speaks several languages. A multilingual environment is one in which several languages are used.

**multilingual dictionary**: a dictionary which lists words in one language and gives translations of those words into two or more other languages

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**N**

**Natural Language Processing (NLP)**: the activity of using computers to produce or understand natural language

**neologism**: a new word or expression, or an existing word used with a new meaning

**noun group**: a group containing at least one noun or pronoun and often other items such as determiners, adjectives, and prepositional phrases

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**O**

**object**: in active clauses, the part of a clause referring to the person or thing that is affected by the action of a verb. In English, the object is usually a noun group or pronoun, and comes after the verb.

**orthography**: the spelling system of a language, including the rules for using punctuation, capital letters, and emphasis
**P**

**paper slip**: a small piece of paper, especially one used to make a note of an example of language use

**part of speech**: see **word class**

**part of speech tagging**: an annotation process that assigns a part of speech to a word form

**past participle**: the form of a verb used to make perfect tenses and passive forms of verbs

**past simple**: the form of a verb used to express what existed or happened in the past

**pedagogical dictionary**: another name for a **learner’s dictionary**

**phrasal verb**: a verb consisting of two or sometimes three parts, the verb itself and one or more particles (adverb or preposition). The meaning of a phrasal verb is often impossible to guess from the meanings of its parts. *Sit down, carry out and put up with* are examples of English phrasal verbs.

**phrase**: a group of words that are used together in a fixed expression

**polysemous**: a polysemous word has more than one meaning

**polysemy**: the fact that some words can have more than one meaning

**portal**: see **aggregator**

**pragmatics**: the study of how language is used in particular situations to express a meaning or attitude that may not be obvious from the actual words

**prefix**: a group of letters that is added to the beginning of a word to change its meaning

**prescriptive**: stating how people should use a language rather than describing how they really use it

**prescriptive approach**: a prescriptive approach says how people should use a language rather than describing how they do use it

**productive**: productive language skills involve being able to speak and write in a language, in contrast to **receptive skills**

**production**: the ability to speak or write in a language, in contrast to **reception**

**Q**

**qualifier**: the part of a noun group, adjective group, or verb group that comes after the most important word (the head), and adds information about it

**quantifier**: a word or phrase such as *much* or *a few* that is used with another word to show quantity

**R**

**receptive**: receptive language skills involve being able to understand and read a language, in contrast to **productive** skills

**reception**: the ability to understand a language when you read it or hear it, in contrast to **production**

**red word**: in **Macmillan Dictionary**, a word where the headword is shown in red, in order to indicate that this word is one of the 7,500 most frequent words in English
**reference tool**: a reference tool or reference resource is something such as a book, app, or website which provides information about words, meanings, people, places etc. Reference tools include dictionaries, thesauruses, encyclopedias, and translation sites.

**regional label**: a label such as 'American' or 'South African' that shows you which part of the English-speaking world a word is used in.

**register**: the type of language that you use in a particular situation or when communicating with a particular group of people. In Macmillan Dictionary register is marked by labels like 'informal' and 'humorous'.

**reference tool**: something you can use to find out information, for example a dictionary, an online encyclopedia, or a translation app.

**S**

**search engine**: a computer program used for searching for information on the internet.

**semantic prosody**: the way in which words that seem neutral can acquire positive or negative associations through frequent occurrences with particular collocations. For example, the phrasal verb set in co-occurs frequently with nouns that have a negative meaning, giving it a negative semantic prosody.

**semantics**: the study of words and their meanings.

**sense**: one of the individual meanings of a word or phrase which has several different meanings. Dictionary entries for words with more than one meaning are divided into senses.

**Sketch Engine**: a software package developed by Lexical Computing Limited, used for analysing the language in a corpus. The Sketch Engine includes tools for creating concordances and Word Sketches.

**source language**: see bilingual dictionary.

**stress mark**: a mark that shows which part of a word is pronounced with more emphasis.

**style and attitude label**: a label such as 'formal', 'spoken', or 'showing disapproval', which is used to indicate that a word is normally used when someone is writing or speaking in a particular style, or showing a particular attitude.

**subject label**: a label such as 'legal' or 'medical' which is used to indicate that a word belongs to the specialized language of a particular subject, and is not normally used in everyday English.

**subsense**: a meaning that is very closely related to another meaning, and is therefore shown in the same sense as it.

**suffix**: a group of letters added to the end of a word to make a different word.

**syllable**: a word or part of a word that has only one vowel sound.

**synonym**: a word that has a very similar meaning to another word. For example, the words *let* and *allow* are synonyms.
**T**

target language: see bilingual dictionary

thesaurus: a reference tool which shows groups of words that have similar meanings

transitive: a transitive verb is one that has a direct object

**U**

uncountable: an uncountable noun has no plural form and cannot be counted in individual units

usage note: a note at the beginning or end of an entry that gives information on the way words are used by people when they speak or write their language

user-generated content or UGC: information in a dictionary which has been provided by members of the public, rather than by professional lexicographers. Macmillan Dictionary's Open Dictionary consists of user-generated content.

**V**

vowel: a sound that you make when you speak without closing your mouth or throat

**W**

Web 2.0: a second stage in the development of the World Wide Web, involving ways of sharing information such as blogs and wikis

wiki: a website where the information has been created by the website's users, who can freely add and edit content, and create links between different pieces of content

word class: one of the main grammatical groups that a particular word belongs to according to the way it is used in a sentence, for example noun, verb, adjective, or adverb

Word Sketch: a one-page on-screen summary of a word's collocations and grammatical patterns based on the information in a language corpus. Word Sketches are one of the features of the Sketch Engine software package, and are used by lexicographers when creating dictionary entries.

word-sense disambiguation or WSD: the process of identifying the different meanings of a polysemous word. For example, the word party has more than one meaning (to join a political party, be invited to a birthday party, etc), and WSD is the task of deciding which meaning of the word the speaker or writer is referring to when they use it.
zero article: in English, the absence of an article before nouns that refer to something that is indefinite. For example, in the sentence "She loves cheese but hates eggs" both cheese and eggs have zero article.