

TITLE:

What's in a word? Cognitive-linguistic, Psycholinguistic, Neuroscientific, Corpus-linguistic, AI, and Usage-based perspectives.

ABSTRACT:

What's in a word? Saussure (1916) emphasized signification, Firth (1957) "you shall know a word by the company it keeps", and Wittgenstein (1953) "in most cases meaning is use". Where are these ideas now and what are their educational implications?

Signification Saussure encouraged the scientific study of signs as part of social life. Signs are associations (signifier-signified) between words and concepts. Imageable concepts are grounded in perceptual memory systems. Neuroimaging illuminates these lexical semantic associations in the brain, their nomothetic tendencies and their personal idiographies (Huth et al., 2016; Schrimpf et al., 2021).

Company Cognitive linguistics explores morphological, lexical, collocational, phrasal and syntactic constructions and how they combine to make meaning (Dabrowska & Divjak, 2015; Robinson & Ellis, 2008). Corpus linguistics shows (1) some constructions are more frequent than others; (2) the phrase is the usual unit of meaning. Psycholinguistics demonstrates how the conspiracy of accumulated usage underpins our language system (Ellis et al., 2016). Firth's view is supported by (1) AI Large-Language-Models like GPT-3, which know nothing of worldly referents, producing essays that are Turing-test-indistinguishable from human authors', (2) Psycholinguistic demonstrations that inflectional morphology is better provided on words reliably so inflected (Ellis, 2022).

Usage Wittgenstein (1953) analyzed the social negotiations involved in language. Hence our need for transdisciplinary/emergentist/usage-based perspectives on language acquisition in multilingual societies (Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Ellis, 2019). There are strong parallels between Wittgenstein's Language Game and well-considered vocabulary-focused L2 courses (e.g., Webb & Nation, 2017).

We live in a world of words.

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