2

Lexical words and meaning

2.1 Word-classes

Words can be grouped into two sets – (i) those that have meanings which refer to the world and our experience of it, and (ii) those whose job it is to link or hold together the structure that makes sentences from words, phrases and clauses. The first set are called lexical words (the subject of this chapter); the second set are called function words (the subject of Chapter 3). The two categories are not altogether separate, but this general distinction is a useful one.

The set of lexical words is continuously being changed, as words drop out of use and new ones are coined. It is therefore an open class of words. Function words, on the other hand, are much fewer in number, and change much more slowly and so make up a closed class.

Here is the opening paragraph of a story, printed firstly with only the open class, lexical words, and secondly with only the closed class, function words.

Exercise 1

(a) Read both versions of the story. Does either version make any sense? Does one version make more sense than the other?
(b) Do any of the function words have some lexical meaning, that is, have they some reference to our experience of the world?
(c) Combine the two versions to reconstruct the original.

1 Lexical words only
Michael marched off chapel sister, rapping Sunday shoes down
pavements fetch brisk, stinging echo housewalls, wearing detestable blue blazer meaningless badge uniform loaded honours privilege. Chapel sat erect, arms folded, curling down spine prawn sinking chin collar-bones steady pressure great hand, was usual attitude worship. Sang hymns prayers thought exultantly Top Wharf Pub, trying remember time places opened.

2 Function words only
to beside his, his on to the to the off, the with its as a with and. In he, instead of on to his like a and his between his as under the of a, which his of. He the and during the of, to what those.

(Adapted from ‘Sunday’, in Wodwo, Ted Hughes, 1967)

Both sets of words contain a number of different word-classes, according to the different jobs that words do in referring to experience, or in relating words, phrases and clauses. The same word can belong to more than one word-class. For example the word off appears in both sets of words above, and its uses can be illustrated in:

1 Michael got on his bike and rode off.
2 He got off his bike and padlocked it.

In (1) off is an adverb (see section 2.5). In (2) it is a preposition (see Chapter 3, section 3.1).

The traditional term for word-classes is parts of speech, and the names for them are also traditional. Attempts have been made to change the names, but most linguists stick to the old terms, which is why you need to learn and use them. You can then read or refer to other books on language, and understand the same terms.

2.2 Nouns

In the following extract, the opening of James Joyce’s short story Eveline, nouns are printed in bold type:

_Eveline 1_
She sat at the window watching the evening invade the avenue. Her head was leaned against the window curtains, and in her nostrils was the odour of dusty cretonne.