One way schizophrenia researchers attempted to pin down their conception of twentieth-century madness was through definition. So we now turn to examine definitions of schizophrenia. But before proceeding, it is worth remembering that the contemporary reader, and those involved in schizophrenia research, bring to any such history an entirely different mindset regarding definitions per se in comparison with early twentieth-century psychiatrists. For that generation the linguistic turn of philosophy was never really apparent. And controversy over the nature of definition itself would not emerge as a major theme in psychiatric research until approximately the second half of that century.

Instead, early schizophrenia researchers by and large saw the process of definition as a valid method of discussing a concept. And rather than analysing this form of representation itself, they limited themselves principally to debates and to concerns over the content of definition. That psychiatrists did not recognise the limitations of definition is unsurprising. It was only in 1950 that a major analysis of this form of representation was carried out by Richard Robinson in *Definition* (1950). In that work, which used as examples 18 definitions of ‘definition’, the author identifies several species of definition. In doing so, he revealed that it has been variously argued that a definition need not necessarily be brief. An intellectual or scientific endeavour might equally work towards a definition, as opposed to commencing with one. And many definitions of the same term might be better than one alone.

Furthermore, Robinson observed that it has been maintained that some things are indefinable. That it has been suggested that the whole procedure is worthless or vice versa. And that a definition cannot be either true or false because it is not a statement but rather a command;
not a proposition but a proposal. Finally, in this list of charted controversy, he reminded readers of the sticky question, as to whether definitions apply to things, words, or concepts (ibid).

No definition then will capture the variety of meaning possessed by schizophrenia at a given time. Nevertheless, we can examine what is included in a given definition and collate these with other definitions in a chronological manner. In doing so, we improve our theoretical understanding of changes in schizophrenia conceptualisation. We also improve our understanding of its complex ontological nature and of the ontogenesis of what would become known as operational definitions. In doing so we chart what Foucault would perhaps call the ‘ceremonial space’ of definition. Such an investigation helps lay foundations for a broader comprehension of the representation of psychiatric concepts. It also helps us understand how they are maintained and the transhistorical manner in which they are subject to change.

Bleuler

First, let us retrace our steps a little. As we have seen, Swiss psychiatrist Eugen Bleuler, of the Burghölzli clinic in Zürich, first introduced the term schizophrenia in 1908. And in that brief paper, he presented the following working definition or proposal. It comes as close as he ever came to explaining the derivation of schiz (to split) and phrene (mind):

I believe that the tearing up or the splitting of the psychic functions is the outstanding symptom of this whole group [Ich glaube namliche das die Zerreißung oder Spaltung der psychischen Funktionen ein hervorragendes Symptom der ganzen Gruppe sei] (1908, p. 436, my translation).

In the same paper, Bleuler went on to present information on the recovery rates of his patients. He believed these to be much superior to those previously estimated for dementia praecox. Instead of deteriorating, more patients than hitherto thought now showed indications of recovery. Bleuler's proposal was, in the author's own mind, not so much at this stage a definition of schizophrenia. It was more a redefinition or reformulation of dementia praecox, which Kraepelin had characterised before 1908 as,

The complete loss of mental activity, and of interest in particular, and the failure of every impulse to energy, are such characteristic