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Vocabulary**

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In general terms, *vocabulary* is defined as the set of words of a language known by an individual. To know a word involves not only mastering low level features of recognition of the auditory (i.e., phonetic/phonological/morphological) and written (i.e., orthographic) forms of the word but also high-level processes related to syntactic structures (i.e., words organized into sentences) and semantic associations (i.e., associations based on word meanings or word relations). The vocabulary of a language is organized into semantic relations that group words into larger structures which are known as *lexical fields* or *word fields*. Vocabulary knowledge is crucial both in language acquisition and language development. In fact, language production and language comprehension are not possible apart from vocabulary knowledge. This entry examines productive and receptive vocabulary, the different ways vocabulary can be measured, the process of language development in young children, and the relationship between vocabulary and speaking and reading skills.

Types

There is a very common distinction concerning vocabulary that is related to two different dimensions of speech: language production and language reception. The productive vocabulary, also referred as *active vocabulary*, includes all the lexical items that an individual usually produces in his or her daily speaking or writing, taking into account the context and the intended meaning. The receptive vocabulary, also known as *passive vocabulary*, refers to the lexical items an individual comprehends while listening or reading. The receptive vocabulary is larger than the productive vocabulary. In fact, individuals understand a larger number of words than the ones they use. In language teaching (e.g., in first language acquisition), it is quite typical to make people understand lexical items when listening or reading that they are not able to produce when speaking or writing. There is some discussion regarding the way a lexical item can move from receptive to productive stage; it probably relates not only with the use of the lexical item but also to the increased knowledge of that lexical item.

Different Forms of Measurement

Word knowledge comprises the mastery of its multidimensional components, including its phonological (e.g., phonemes, word stress), morphological (e.g., morphemes, inflection), syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic (i.e., word adequate use within a linguistic context) properties, both in productive and receptive mode. It is very hard to know exactly the number of words a person has mastered because vocabulary size/breadth and vocabulary depth are quite different measures. For example, an individual can know a large number of words without mastering all their dimensions or components; he or she can know a smaller number of words that he or she has mastered completely, which means that this individual is able to identify or use all the individual lexical aspects of that words (i.e., multiple meanings, associative meaning networks, grammatical properties, and usage).

Vocabulary size/breadth measure, which is widely used, refers to the number of words an individual recognizes and produces. However, this measure does not consider the individual's degree of lexical knowledge of the words, which can be variable. Vocabulary depth knowledge measures the variable lexical knowledge of the words (i.e., comprehension of its multiple meanings and its intentional and adequate grammatical and communicative usage).

Early Childhood Development

In their first language acquisition, children produce the first words around the first year of life (i.e., 10–12 months of age). These words are not those spoken by adults: They do not sound like the target adult language and they are not used adequately every time. At this age, the rate of word learning is quite slow. At 18 months of age, children produce approximately 50 words and are able to start combining them, which means that they

start to be aware of the word's lexical properties. Vocabulary acquisition in children dramatically improves between 18 and 24 months of age in a process known as *vocabulary spurt* (i.e., a child produces an average of 10 new words each 2 weeks [average numbers and ages vary across languages and studies]). The first words are primarily nouns referring people, food, animals, and daily life experiences. Verbs and closed-class words (i.e., pronouns, prepositions) are rare within the first period of language acquisition. The receptive vocabulary during the same period is much larger because comprehension precedes production.

Another fact to consider in the word-learning process is the great individual variation that is a consequence of a variety of aspects that influence language acquisition and learning, including age, gender, education, learning environment, social context, personal motivation, and quality and frequency of linguistic interactions. Several factors are involved in vocabulary development, including the nature of linguistic input, memory, cognitive skills, and linguistic (phonological, syntactic, and semantic) knowledge. Vocabulary knowledge plays an important role both in first language and second language acquisition: The larger the vocabulary, the better the understanding of the world. Vocabulary acquisition proceeds to build language competence. In fact, lexical competence seems to boost the acquisition of syntactic and semantic structures of the language, providing individuals with adequate linguistic and communicative competences.

How Vocabulary Relates to Speaking and Reading Skills

It is estimated that the minimum vocabulary size that enables basic oral communication in a language ranges between 2,000 and 3,000 words. While a vocabulary size of 5,000–7,000 words allows for developing a conversation on a variety of topics, the minimum vocabulary size for reading and writing is larger. An individual will need to master 3,000–5,000 lexical items in order to be able to begin to read texts and 8,000–9,000 to read texts on different subjects.

Education, in particular higher education, provides the individual with a larger set of words, due to an intensive exposure to a larger diversity of lexical items. Studies estimated that a monolingual high-school graduate English speaker has a vocabulary of about 80,000 words.

Vocabulary has a huge influence on the development of the ability to read, while reading also contributes strongly to an increase in vocabulary size/breadth and depth caused by the exposure to a larger number of different lexical forms, used in various contexts. To become a competent (i.e., fluent) reader requires both written word identification and comprehension that lead to master lexical proficiency. Children with smaller and inadequate vocabularies usually perform poorly in school.

See also [Lexicon](#); [Linguistics](#); [Morphology](#); [Reading and Reading Disorders](#)

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Further Readings

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