

Fourth Edition

Words in the Mind

An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon

JEAN AITCHISON



 WILEY-BLACKWELL

Words in the Mind

From reviews of previous editions:

“This very fine book represents state-of-the-art research in a relatively unconventional easy-to-read frame.”

Language

“‘Leider nicht von mir’ (‘Wish it were mine’), Johannes Brahms regretfully remarked when he first heard Johann Strauss’s waltz, ‘An der schönen blauen Donau’. I felt quite the same way when I read this book for the first time, and I admire it still . . . *Words in the Mind* is a very valuable book . . . Moreover, whereas the book does not require much background reading beforehand, it is nevertheless also useful for the specialist: I could not discover any important finding relevant to the structure of the mental lexicon which is lacking in Aitchison’s presentation.”

Yearbook of Morphology

“The book succeeds as a popular introduction to the problem of how humans remember words and how children learn them. It is aimed at both the general reader and undergraduates in linguistics and psychology. The author presents a lively, comprehensive summary of the data obtained from observing slips of the tongue, from aphasics, and from psycholinguistics experiments, together with perspectives from theoretical linguistics . . . The book is a very good introduction to many of the problems of language . . . from the novel perspective of the mental lexicon. It provides a refreshing change from the usual ‘speech chain’ introduction to language and helps to redress the relative neglect of the mental lexicon.”

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“The well-known author Jean Aitchison . . . has given us such classics as *Language Change*, *The Articulate Mammal*, and the *Linguistics* volume in the *British Teach Yourself Books* series. This volume, like the others, is well written and well researched and thus can be recommended for linguist and layman alike.”

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“Here is a book to inform and delight all those with an interest in words. It gives a challenging picture of what has been rightly called ‘the vastness of natural language’ and the complexity of the representation of language in the brain.”

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“This account is a splendid exposition of the field, which takes the reader through a wide range of psychological and linguistic notions . . . It is a splendid synthesis of theoretical positions and methods, with clever analogies, realistic examples, and clear chapter summaries . . . If you want to find out about the current state of knowledge concerning language in the brain, with the least possible pain, then read this friendly book.”

English Today

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An Introduction to the Mental Lexicon

FOURTH EDITION

Jean Aitchison



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*The first edition of this book was dedicated to my parents,
who taught me my first words.
This edition is in memory of them.*

We thought a day and night of steady rain
was plenty, but it's falling again, downright tireless . . .
. . . Much like words
But words don't fall exactly; they hang in there
In the heaven of language, immune to gravity
If not to time, entering your mind
From no direction, travelling no distance at all,
And with rainy persistence tease from the spread earth
So many wonderful scents . . .

Robert Mezey, "Words"

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Preface

This book deals with words. It sets out to answer the questions: how do humans manage to store so many words, and how do they find the ones they want? In brief, it discusses the nature of the human word-store, or “mental lexicon.”

This is a topic which has recently attracted the attention of a large number of researchers. At one time, much of the work was tucked away in scholarly journals and conference proceedings. Yet since the first edition of this book was published (1987), the mental lexicon has become a trendy topic, and the number of books published on it has escalated. This (fourth) edition has the same aim as the earlier ones, to make recent findings on the mental lexicon available to a wide range of people, and to provide a coherent overall picture of the way it might work. Hopefully, it will prove of interest to anyone concerned with words: students of linguistics and psychology, speech therapists, language teachers, educationists, lexicographers, and the general reader who would just like to know how humans remember words and how children learn them.

The book does not presuppose any previous knowledge of linguistics or psychology. It contains a minimum of jargon, and all technical terms are fully explained. For those interested in pursuing any topic further, there are references and suggestions for further reading in the notes at the end of the book.

Work on the lexicon has exploded since the earlier editions of this book were published (first edition 1987, second edition 1994, third edition 2003). From being a minor interest of a few, the lexicon has become a major interest of many. This is reflected in this new edition, which contains important additional material. A new chapter has been added (chapter 4 on the brain). Another chapter on phrases (chapter 10) is a combination of new material, together with sections from an overlong chapter in the previous edition. Another chapter from the previous edition has been expanded and renamed. In addition, new paragraphs and new references have been added throughout.

In some of the earlier editions, I thanked by name those people who particularly helped in the preparation of the edition, by sending me offprints, making helpful suggestions and so on. Such a list has now got so long that I would undoubtedly (and accidentally) leave off valuable names. So I will thank everybody together, and say please continue to send me e-mails and letters about my book, especially if any errors have inadvertently crept in. Please also continue sending offprints. I really do read them, even if there was (this time) insufficient space to include everything.

However, as before, I want to thank my husband, the lexicographer John Ayto, whose books, constant support, non-stop loving kindness, and brilliant cooking made my task an easier one.

Of course, the views expressed in this book are my own, and I alone am responsible for any errors which remain.

Jean Aitchison
London, 2011

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Abbreviations and Symbols

The following abbreviations are used for standard works of reference after their first mention in the text, where they are referred to by their full title:

BNC *British National Corpus*.
OED *Oxford English Dictionary*

In order to make the text easier to read, spoken words have been mostly represented by their conventional written form. Where the use of phonetic symbols is unavoidable, these are put in square brackets [], regardless of their linguistic status (phones or phonemes, on which see Aitchison, 2010a). Most of the phonetic symbols are obvious, as [d] in *did*. The following non-obvious IPA (International Phonetic Alphabet) symbols occur in the text:

[θ] as at the beginning of *thin*
[ʃ] as at the beginning of *shin*
[ŋ] as at the end of *sing*

An asterisk * indicates an impossible word, phrase, or sentence, such as **kbad*, which is not a possible English word.

An exclamation mark (!) indicates an unacceptable or odd sentence.