



STUDYING LEXICAL UNITS: MORPHOLOGY, ETYMOLOGY, AND THE HISTORY OF WORDS

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Abstract: *Lexical units — the words and word-like combinations that carry meaning in a language — are simultaneously products of grammatical structure, historical accident, and cross-cultural contact. This article surveys three interlocking dimensions along which lexical units can be studied: their internal morphological composition, their etymological origins, and the historical processes that reshape their form and meaning over time. Drawing on comparative-historical and etymological research into English lexis, including specialized domains such as folk-medicine terminology (Khujakulov, 2025a, 2025b, n.d.), the discussion also considers how an understanding of word history informs second-language pedagogy, learner engagement, and pronunciation instruction (Hasanova et al., 2021a, 2021b; Khujakulov, 2025c, 2025d; Tursunov et al., 2021). The article argues that morphological and etymological literacy is not a peripheral, antiquarian pursuit but a practical resource for vocabulary teaching, translation, and cross-linguistic comparison.*

1. Introduction

Every word a speaker uses carries a hidden biography. Its sounds and spelling reflect borrowings, phonetic shifts, and semantic drift that stretch back centuries or millennia; its internal structure reveals how smaller meaningful units — roots, prefixes, and suffixes — have been assembled and reassembled by generations of speakers. Lexicology, the branch of linguistics devoted to the study of the lexicon, therefore sits at the intersection of three closely related but analytically distinct inquiries: morphology (how words are built), etymology (where words come from), and lexical history (how words and their meanings change over time). Understanding



these three dimensions together gives language learners, teachers, and researchers a coherent picture of why the vocabulary of English — or any language — looks the way it does today.

This article examines lexical units from a comparative-historical perspective, synthesizing morphological analysis with etymological tracing and diachronic semantics. It draws in particular on research into specialized and culturally embedded vocabulary, such as folk-medicine terminology, to illustrate how etymological methods uncover layers of borrowing and adaptation that are invisible in a purely synchronic description of a language (Khujakulov, 2025a, 2025b). It then turns to the pedagogical dimension of this knowledge, considering how awareness of word-formation and word-history can be leveraged in the EFL classroom to support vocabulary retention, pronunciation accuracy, and learner engagement (Hasanova et al., 2021a, 2021b; Khujakulov, 2025c, 2025d; Tursunov et al., 2021).

2. Lexical Units: Definition and Scope

A lexical unit is commonly defined as any linguistic item — a single word, a fixed phrase, or an idiom — that functions as a single unit of meaning within the lexicon of a language. Lexical units differ from purely grammatical units in that they carry independent semantic content rather than simply signaling grammatical relationships. This makes them a natural point of convergence for morphological, etymological, and historical analysis: the same unit can be dissected structurally (what parts is it made of?), etymologically (where did those parts come from?), and historically (how has its form or meaning shifted since it entered the language?).

Because lexical units accumulate meaning through use across generations, they are also cultural artifacts. Specialized vocabularies — legal, medical, religious, or, as discussed below, folk-medical — tend to preserve older layers of borrowing more faithfully than everyday vocabulary, because their use is often restricted to particular communities of practice that are less exposed to the leveling effects of everyday language change (Khujakulov, 2025a).



3. Morphological Structure of Lexical Units

Morphology examines the internal architecture of words: the roots, stems, and affixes that combine according to more or less productive rules to generate new lexical items. In English, this includes native Germanic patterns of compounding and affixation alongside layers of Latinate and Greek-derived derivational morphology introduced through centuries of borrowing. A morphological analysis of a lexical unit typically proceeds by identifying its root morpheme, any bound derivational morphemes attached to it, and the word-formation process — derivation, compounding, conversion, blending, or clipping — responsible for its current form.

Morphological transparency varies considerably across the lexicon. Some lexical units remain synchronically analyzable, their component morphemes still recognizable and productive elsewhere in the language. Others have become opaque through phonetic erosion or semantic drift, such that native speakers no longer perceive an internal structure at all. This opacity is frequently a symptom of etymological depth: the more historical change a word has undergone, the more likely its original morphological seams have been smoothed over. Recognizing this relationship between morphological transparency and etymological age is one of the most useful diagnostic tools available to the historical lexicologist.

4. Etymology: Tracing the Origins of Words

Etymology investigates the origin and historical development of individual lexical units, tracing their form and meaning back through earlier stages of a language and, where relevant, into donor languages from which they were borrowed. English vocabulary is famously heterogeneous in its origins, combining a Germanic core with substantial strata of Old Norse, Norman French, Latin, Greek, and — in more specialized domains — Arabic, Persian, and other contact languages.

Comparative-historical etymological analysis of English lexical units connected to folk medicine illustrates this layering particularly well. Research into this domain has traced how a number of English medical and folk-medical terms preserve Arabic-origin roots that entered the language indirectly, through Latin



medical writing and translation traditions, most notably the medieval transmission of Ibn Sina's (Avicenna's) Canon of Medicine into European scholarly vocabulary (Khujakulov, n.d.). A comparative study of Arabic-origin medical lexemes in the Canon of Medicine alongside their Uzbek folk-medicine equivalents and English counterparts shows that semantic transformation — narrowing, broadening, amelioration, or pejoration of meaning — regularly accompanies this kind of cross-linguistic transmission, so that a term's meaning in the receiving language may diverge substantially from its meaning in the source language (Khujakulov, n.d.).

A related comparative-historical analysis of folk-medicine lexis more broadly confirms that such vocabulary tends to retain older semantic and phonological features precisely because it circulates within relatively closed speech communities, insulated from some of the standardizing pressures that reshape general vocabulary (Khujakulov, 2025a). Complementary etymological work focused specifically on English folk-medicine terms traces the pathways by which these items entered the language — through borrowing, loan translation, and semantic extension of native terms — and demonstrates that etymological analysis of a specialized lexicon can reveal patterns of cultural contact that are not otherwise recorded in written history (Khujakulov, 2025b).

5. The Historical Evolution of Word Meaning

Beyond origin, the history of a lexical unit encompasses everything that has happened to its form and meaning since it entered the language: phonetic change, orthographic standardization, and — most consequential for the language learner — semantic change. Semantic change is commonly classified into processes such as broadening (a word's meaning expands), narrowing (its meaning contracts to a more specific sense), amelioration (its connotation improves), pejoration (its connotation worsens), and metaphorical or metonymic extension (its meaning shifts through figurative association).

These processes are rarely random. They tend to follow recurrent cross-linguistic pathways, and comparative-historical analysis — examining cognate



lexical units across related or contact languages — allows researchers to reconstruct the likely sequence of semantic changes a word has undergone even where documentary evidence is sparse. This comparative method is especially productive in domains such as folk medicine, where terminology often survives in oral tradition for long stretches before being committed to writing, leaving etymologists to reconstruct intervening stages through comparison with better-documented cognate languages (Khujakulov, 2025a, n.d.).

6. Pedagogical Implications: Teaching Word Structure and History in the EFL Classroom

Knowledge of morphology, etymology, and lexical history is not purely an academic exercise; it has direct application in second-language teaching. Vocabulary instruction that draws explicit attention to root morphemes, affixation patterns, and word origins gives learners a generative strategy for decoding unfamiliar words, rather than requiring rote memorization of each item in isolation. This is consistent with broader discussions of teaching approaches, methods, and techniques, which emphasize that instructional choices should be matched to the cognitive demands of the material being taught and to learners' existing strategies for processing new information (Hasanova et al., 2021a, 2021b).

Etymological and morphological awareness is also relevant to two persistent challenges in EFL instruction: learner passivity and pronunciation. Learners who are characterized as passive often disengage from vocabulary tasks that feel arbitrary or disconnected from any underlying logic; embedding word-history and word-formation content into vocabulary instruction offers one route toward more active, analytical engagement with new lexis, since it invites learners to reason about words rather than simply memorize them (Khujakulov, 2025c). Pronunciation instruction likewise benefits from etymological context: many of the spelling-to-sound irregularities that create accent-related difficulties for learners of English trace directly back to the mixed etymological history of the words in question, so that



explaining why a word is pronounced as it is can support more accurate and confident production (Khujakulov, 2025d).

Finally, this lexical and pedagogical perspective sits within a broader global conversation about the role and status of English as a world language and as a medium of instruction across diverse educational contexts. As English continues to function as a lingua franca in academic, professional, and digital domains, understanding its layered lexical history becomes an increasingly practical form of linguistic and cultural competence for both teachers and learners (Tursunov et al., 2021).

7. Conclusion

The study of lexical units profits from treating morphology, etymology, and lexical history not as separate subfields but as complementary lenses on the same object. Morphological analysis reveals how a word is built; etymology reveals where its parts came from; and historical semantics reveals how its meaning has moved since. Comparative-historical work on specialized vocabularies such as folk-medicine terminology demonstrates the analytical power of combining these lenses, uncovering layers of Arabic, Latin, and vernacular influence that a purely synchronic description would miss (Khujakulov, 2025a, 2025b, n.d.). At the same time, this body of knowledge has direct pedagogical value: it equips language teachers with tools for fostering active vocabulary engagement, improving pronunciation instruction, and situating English lexis within the wider, ongoing history of the language as a global means of communication (Hasanova et al., 2021a, 2021b; Khujakulov, 2025c, 2025d; Tursunov et al., 2021).

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