

Discuss the problems involved in defining the term 'word'. What difficulties are there in assuming that words are the units of English vocabulary? Explain and discuss alternative terms.

- A There are four other ways that a word can be defined; phonologically, semantically, syntactically and in terms of its internal integrity (Plag, 2003). So let us now examine these four methods of definition, with the information under the following four sub-headings all having been taken from Plag (2003) unless otherwise stated, with the examples coming from personal data.
- B Plag (2003) suggests that in accordance with an individual's intuitive feeling of what a word is, the first thought might be to define it orthographically (its written form) as 'an uninterrupted string of letters which is preceded by a blank space and followed either by a blank space or a punctuation mark' (Plag, 2003: 5). Yet difficulties arise within this definition if we look at the possessive apostrophe (is *Charlotte's cough* really three words?) or the use of hyphens (is *high-rise* one or two words?). Carter (1998) points out that an orthographic definition is bound to the form of a word in a particular medium, it is not sensitive to distinctions of meaning or grammatical function. So the orthographic definition points us to say that *fag* (n. coll. cigarette) and *fag* (n. coll. homosexual) are the same word, though there appears to be two distinct meanings at work here and *give* (present tense, 1st person) and *gives* (present tense, 3rd person) are two entirely different words, though their meanings are obviously closely connected as they are forms of the same verb.
- C Yet there are also irregularities as to how words are spelt, and the question of compounds and hyphenated words makes this situation more complex (lecture notes, 27.09.04). Katamba (2005) explains that the use of hyphens is to indicate that something is a complex word, made up of more than one word-like unit, and that their usage is variable. We can see that *cupboard* is a compound, yet would only ever think of it as one word as it is established (Katamba, 2005), yet with unestablished words there is more disagreement and often a dictionary will give two possible options; two words and hyphenated or hyphenated and one word. As a generalisation the longer a compound has been in the language, the more likely it is to be written as one word.
- D The average speaker of a given language knows between 45,000 and 60,000 words (Plag, 2003). Yet defining exactly what the term 'word' means is not the simple task that it might at first appear. The term 'word' is used frequently, without problem in non-technical everyday speech and is seen as a totally unproblematic notion (Plag, 2003) and L2 learners learn words or vocabulary as part of their studies. Plag (2003) also refers to our intuitive feeling of what a word is; however, within linguistics the definition of the term 'word' is not the simplistic task that its everyday usage suggests. There are difficulties as to how a word can be identified or defined, and there are suggestions by linguists for other ways of classification that encompass and allow for some of the complications. I shall answer the questions in the order they have been asked; firstly by examining how a 'word' can be identified, and then moving on to question whether words are the units of English vocabulary and to discuss alternative terms.