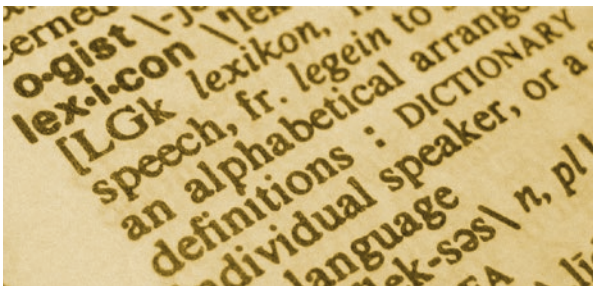
# A to Z



It's issue 3 and we're on to C. If you missed the previous two issues, subscribe to Babel to catch up!!

# The linguistic lexicon

## Cataphora

Cataphora – or cataphoric reference – is the opposite of anaphora (see issue 1). The normal way that language refers to things and people is to introduce them first in detail and then refer backwards to this first mention by using pronouns and other pro-forms (*John was a fireman. **He** was tall and imposing*). Cataphora involves referring forwards in the text instead, so that the reader/listener comes across a mysterious person or thing first and then is enlightened later about who or what is being referred to.

## Catenative verbs

Most lexical verbs can combine only with auxiliary verbs which add information about extent (*was running*) or completion (*had run*) or modality (*might run*). However, there is a small group of verbs, called catenative verbs, which can 'concatenate' (combine in a sequence) with other lexical verbs. They include verbs like try (*try running*), avoid (*avoid running*), want (*want to run*) and can be linked together into fairly long 'chains' of verbs, e.g.: *"The government **agreed to try to decide to stop** running the train company."* Some linguists define catenatives as verbs that 'take' other verbs (in either infinitive or –ing participle form) as objects, but this implies that each verb in a catenative string is in a subordinate clause. The idea that the sentence given above has four levels of subordination, however, seems counter-intuitive. Catenative verbs, then, present a 'puzzle' for grammatical description.

## Clause

A clause is a unit of syntactic structure that expresses a complete proposition. Simple sentences are composed of just one clause, e.g. 'It was love at first sight'. Complex sentences have multiple clauses. Sometimes, those clauses are equally weighted (that is, they make sense on their own as a complete sentence) and are connected by a co-ordinating conjunction such as and, but and or, e.g. 'It was a bright cold day in April, and the clocks were striking thirteen.' Sometimes the clauses are joined by a subordinating conjunction such as when, if and although, making one clause subordinate to the other (that is, the subordinate clause would not make sense on its own), e.g. 'When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.' Now have fun counting the clauses in this definition. And in case you were wondering, the example sentences are all famous first lines of novels.

## Code-switching

When speakers have more than one language – or dialect – in their repertoire, they often switch rapidly and repeatedly between them in situations where both languages or dialects are being spoken. This is called 'code-switching' and it happens particularly with multilingual speakers, though it can also occur with second language

speakers. The code-switching can take place to acknowledge the other participants' linguistic identity and ability but it also helps speakers express concepts in cases where vocabulary might not be entirely overlapping in the two codes.

## Collocate

Collocates are words that have a tendency to co-occur with a particular set of other words. For example, in the British National Corpus that comprises 100,000,000 words of British English, the word *unemployed* collocates with *long-term, homeless, unskilled, disabled, redundant* and *unsuccessful*. That is, whenever the word *unemployed* is used, it's statistically likely that these other words will be found somewhere in the surrounding context. The corpus linguist John Sinclair (see this issue's Lives in Language) maintained that meaning is best seen as a property of words in combination. This is nicely illustrated in the *unemployed* example, where the collocates of the word generate the negative connotations associated with it.

## Connotation

The connotation of a word is the association that it has with particular groups of people, particular settings or particular styles. Thus, the word gee-gee might be associated with babies, children or horse-racing, the phrase fifteen-love is associated with tennis and the word behove has either dated or formal connotations – or possibly both. Connotations derive in part from collocational patterns.

## Consonant

Whilst most people will think of consonants in terms of the written language, the reason for distinguishing between consonants and vowels is that they differ phonetically. The air that we breathe out is used to form speech sounds as it passes by, through and over the 'articulators' – i.e. the parts of the oral and nasal cavities that shape the sounds we use to speak. Consonants are those sounds which obstruct or significantly impede the passage of exhaled air from the lungs to the outside of the body via the mouth or the nose. There are different levels of obstruction which form groups of sounds sharing the same 'manner' of articulation. These include, for example, the 'plosive' consonants, such as /p/ and /t/ which create a complete closure somewhere in the mouth. When the air builds up significantly behind this closure, it explodes the articulators apart, causing a sound.

## Corpus

In Latin, *corpus* means 'body'. In Linguistics, a corpus is a 'body' of texts; that is, a database of language that has been selected to be representative of a particular variety. For example, the British National Corpus is a 100,000,000 word sample of British English from the 1990s. Corpora (the plural of corpus) allow linguists to study patterns of language use and to determine aspects of usage that it is impossible to discover if you are only studying a small sample of language (see collocate for an example of this kind of finding). As John Sinclair famously said in his book Corpus, Concordance, Collocation, "The language looks rather different when you look at a lot of it at once".

## Creaky voice

In Stanley Kubrick's horror film The Shining, Danny, the son of the central character, Jack Torrance, has an imaginary friend called Tony. To give the effect of Tony speaking, Danny raises his index finger and moves it up and down while speaking in what phoneticians would describe as a creaky voice. Creaky voice is a particular kind of sound produced by regulating the passage of air through the vocal folds (commonly known as the vocal cords). Air passes between the folds when we speak. The vocal folds are attached to the arytenoid cartilages which form part of the larynx and enable the vocal folds to move. If the arytenoid cartilages are pulled together, the vocal folds become compressed. In such an instance, the airflow between the folds is limited and air passes through at a slower rate than usual. The vocal folds consequently vibrate below the frequency used during normal speech. This creates the unusual 'creaky' effect. Some languages make use of creaky voice as a characteristic feature (e.g. Jalapa Mazatec and San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec, both spoken in Mexico). But it's never been used to creepier effect than in The Shining.