ALL IN A WORD.

100 DELIGHTFUL EXCURSIONS INTO THE USES AND ABUSES OF WORDS

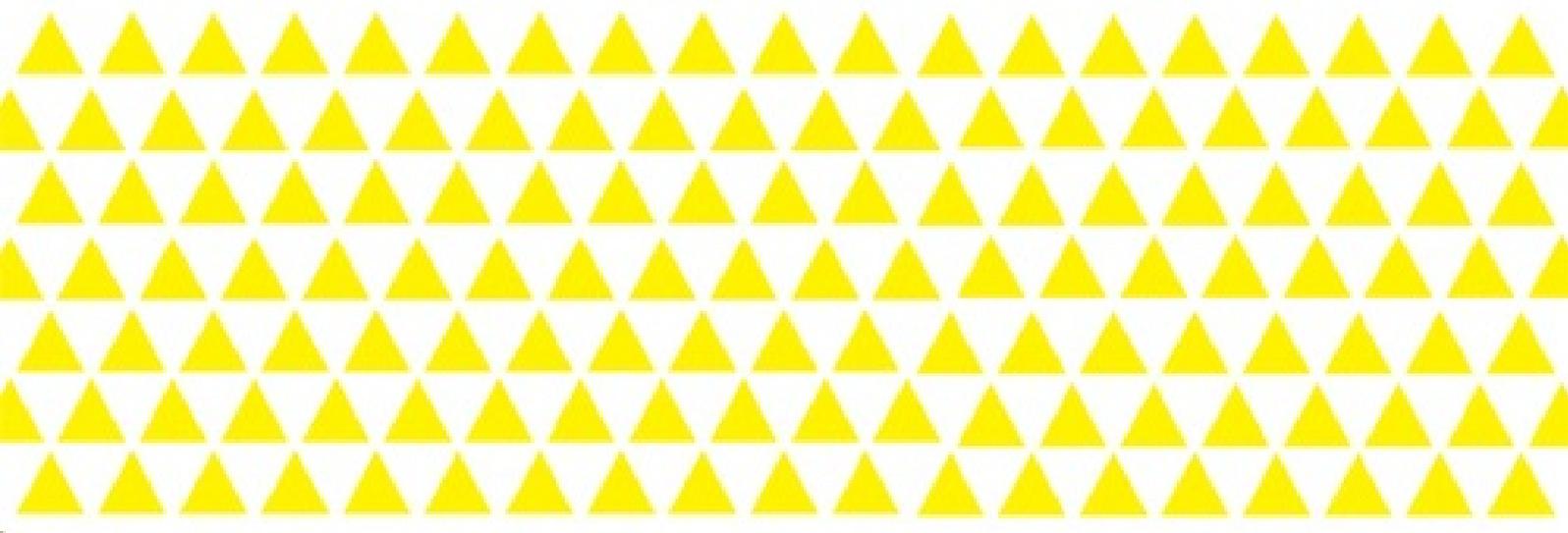# VIVIAN COOK

Also by Vivian Cook

Accomodating Brocolli in the Cemetary

All in a
Word

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Knowing words

What do we know when we know a word? Clearly we know that the word *dog* means 🐕 or "a four-footed domestic mammal that barks." But any speaker of English knows far more about *dog* than this. Among the things we know about any word are:

- *how to say it or write it* We know that *dog* has three sounds, "d," "o," and "g." If we can read and write, we know also that it has three letters, "d," "o," and "g." A word has its own spoken and written forms, in English connected by complicated spelling rules. Each of us has a mental dictionary telling us how to say or spell each individual word.

- *how to fit it into sentences* We know its part of speech. *Dog* is a noun, meaning that we can use it in the singular for one *dog* and in the plural for many *dogs;* combine it with articles and adjectives, as in *the big dog;* and use it as the subject of sentences, such as *the dog barked. Dog* is also a verb meaning ' "follow like a dog," as in *the detective dogged his footsteps*, so we can use it in the present tense, *he dogs*, or the past tense, *he dogged;* or add an *-ing* ending, as in *Watson was dogging his footsteps*. All of this information applies to many other English words, as well as dog.

  But we also know specifically that the noun *dog* is "countable" rather than "uncountable," meaning that we can say *a dog* and *two dogs*, though we can't say *an air* or *two airs* (except in a specialized sense), because *air* is an uncountable noun. So, our mental dictionary includes information about what kind of noun *dog* is. We also know that the verb *to dog* is likely to have a subject that is animate rather than inanimate: *The police officer dogged him*, not *The bus dogged him*. While the terms seem technical, they're only labels for the knowledge we all have in our mind, which forms the basis for every sentence we say or write.

- *how it combines with other words* We know the typical combinations of words in which *dog* occurs: *go to the dogs*, meaning either "visit a dogtrack" or "deteriorate"; *raining cats and dogs; lead a dog's life; let sleeping dogs lie*, and dozens more. And we know how *dog* forms compound words to get a distinct meaning: *dog biscuit, dog-leg, dog tag*, and so on. Knowing a word means knowing its relationships with other words, not just its meaning in isolation: no word is an island.

- *what it means* We know what the word *dog* means. At one level this is a matter of the general meanings that *dog* shares with many other words; a *dog* is concrete rather than abstract like *truth*, animate rather than inanimate like *stone*, animal rather than human like *girl*.

  At another level we know the unique meaning of dog, "a four-footed domestic mammal that barks" and have a mental image of a dog 🐕 – whatever distinguishes *dog* from *cat* or from any other animal. But there's more than one meaning to *dog*. It can refer to a person (*dirty dog*), things that fail, (*"That record was a real dog"*), a constellation in the sky (the *dog star*), an instrument with jaws (*iron dog*), and many more.

Our minds contain all this information about the word *dog*. Multiply it by the 60,000 or so words we know and you get some idea of the mammoth store of information about words that we carry around in our mental dictionaries. We don't have just a list of separate words in our minds, each attached to a single meaning.

Instead each word radiates into many areas through networks, links, associations, and rules. And this does not take account of the word's history, usually known only to specialists.

All of this information is available to us in a split second when we are speaking or listening. Is *florp* an English word? What about *tedium?* Your reactions were effectively instantaneous; you knew that *tedium* was a word and *florp* wasn't by searching in a fraction of a second through all the words in your mind. Finding the same information in a hardback dictionary would take minutes. Google took 0.03 seconds to find 5,070 examples of *florp*, mostly a username or a nickname, and 0.16 seconds to find a million examples of *tedium*. The same is true of spelling. We speak at up to 200 or so words a minute, 0.3 of a second each. Fran Capo has been timed speaking at 603 words per minute, 0.1 of a second each; needless to say, she is a stand-up comedian. Each word is a package of information that has to be retrieved, sorted out, organized into sentences, and pronounced in 0.3 seconds. The only time we are at all aware of this is when it goes wrong.

What this book is about

This book, then, is all about the different aspects of words, ranging from their forms to their meanings, from their roles in organizing our societies to their roles in helping us to think. It consists of a variety of pieces, some short, some long, some serious, some frivolous, some based on scientific research, some on opinion. As each piece is separate from the others, they can either be dipped into or read consecutively. Similar topics, say children's words or the history of words, are clustered together, though discussions of word forms are spread throughout the book. An Index of themes is given on to help the reader follow different paths through the book. The book covers familiar topics, such as the history and forms of words, but it also includes less familiar topics, such as how children learn and store words, differences between languages, how words vary from place to place and person to person, and how words shape our mental world. It provides a number of tests to show how many words you know, where you come from, how you learn new words, and so on.

Throughout, the book draws on the ideas of those who have been actively involved in studying and researching words – philosophers, linguists, developmental psychologists and the like, as seen in the list of sources. As with any scientific subject, the study of words tries to explain the facts; the behaviour of words is no more a matter of opinion than the behaviour of electrons. Needless to say, many aspects of words are still little studied, many are controversial, while some of the most important await better techniques for analyzing the brain.

Of course we are all experts about words in the sense that we use them all the time and have strong opinions about them; doubtless my own axes to grind will come across fairly often. The fact that we consist of atoms and have human bodies does not, however, make us physicists or doctors; speaking a human language doesn't qualify us as authorities on language, but it does qualify us to speak about our own experience of it.

1. Thinking in Metaphors?

At school we learn metaphors as part of poetry: "But at my back I always hear/Time's wingèd chariot hurrying near" – something is spoken about as if it were something else. However, according to the linguist George Lakoff, metaphors are not restricted just to poetry but are crucial to our everyday thinking.

Some things are UP	Others are DOWN
happy: "I'm cheering up"	*sad:* "*My* spirits sank"
conscious: "I woke up"	*unconscious:* "I fell asleep"
in control: "I'm on top of it"	*controlled:* "He's at the bottom of the ladder"
more: "My spirits rose"	*less:* "The Dow fell again"
status: "room at the top"	*lack of status:* "the bottom of the league"
moral: "high-minded"	*immoral:* "low-down trick"

Ideas are	*food:* "I can't digest this theory" *people:* "He's the father of modern linguistics" *plants:* "Physics has many branches" *products:* "Our meeting generated a lot of new ideas" *knives:* "She cut his argument to ribbons"
The mind is	*fragile:* "His mind snapped" *a machine:* "He had a breakdown"
Love is	*war:* "He made many conquests" *magic:* "She entranced me" *physical force:* "fatal attraction"
Time is	*money:* "You spend/waste/save/lose/time"
Understanding is	*seeing:* "I see"
Size is	*importance:* "She's big in the textile industry"

There is no intrinsic reason why *happy* should go with up, *love* with magic, and so on. It is just that our minds use metaphors to grapple with the world. Politicians make good use of this, with metaphors such as *the war against terror, the fight against drugs,* and *carbon footprint*. In one way such metaphors are justifiable shorthand for complex ideas. But, if they are taken too literally, they become a hindrance rather than a help.

2. Gassers and Slashers

DOCTORS' SLANG

Every group has its own jargon. Sometimes this includes the necessary technical terms that go with the job of being a pilot, a lawyer, and so on. But the jargon also shows that someone belongs to a particular group, whether it's car mechanics, a teenage gang or the conservative Tea Party movement. In addition, euphemisms and black humor are ways of coping with unpleasant or threatening aspects of a job – ways of pretending to have a thick skin. And such jargon can let out repressed feelings that cannot be expressed directly.

   Doctors' slang shows all of these effects. Doctors need technical terms, they form a distinct groups and they have to deal with patients in tragic circumstances. Doctors' slang used to be found on actual patients' notes; new openness regulations and people's willingness to sue mean that they are now less likely to be committed to paper. The following examples come from a study by researchers in four English hospitals.

Names of semi-medical conditions

GOK	God only knows
acopia	the inability to cope
cheerioma	a fatal tumor
DOA	dead on arrival
rule of five	A patient's condition is critical if he or she has more than five pieces of equipment attached
LOBNH	lights on but nobody home
TATT	tired all the time
UBI	unexplained beer injury
TEETH	tried everything else, try homeopathy

Medical life

metabolic clinic	the coffee or tea room
ash cash	money for signing cremation forms
the departure lounge	geriatric ward
expensive scare	intensive care
granny dumping	bringing old people into the hospital before bank holidays
feet up general	quiet general hospital
pathology outpatients	the mortuary

Colleagues

Freud Squad, trick cyclists, pest control	psychiatrists
pox docs	staff of the genito-urinary clinic
slashers	surgeons
gassers	anaesthetists
inbred	doctors whose parents were doctors

Patients

crumble, wrinkly, coffin dodger	elderly patient
GROLIES	*Guardian* reader of limited intelligence in ethnic skirt
YSM	yummy scrummy mummy
LOL	little old lady
CLL	chronic low-life
crispy critter	severe burns victim

3. Beatles versus Stones

Beatles songs give the impression that they are about the joys and sorrows of everyday life. Does this effect come from the words they use? Here are the ten most frequent words in twenty-two of their lyrics in order of frequency. The figures are slightly skewed by particular songs, like "Good Day Sunshine."

Most frequent verbs: *love, loves, think, got, make, feel, loving, hold, leaving, send*

Most frequent nouns: *day, home, man, sunshine, eyes, nowhere, ticket, days, girl, week*

Most frequent adjectives: *good, sweet, glad, hard, alone, true, bad, lucky, pretty, tight*

The impression left by Rolling Stones songs is of a tougher, streetwise world. Does that come across from twenty-two of their songs?

Most frequent verbs: *love, hide, taught, like, come, said, rocking, fly, know, make*

Most frequent nouns: *baby, man, cloud, midnight, sparks, gas, name, time, boy, face*

Most frequent adjectives: *wild, sweet, poor, strong, long, round, strange, sick, good, high*

So the Stones are *wild*, the Beatles are *good*. The Stones are *hiding, rocking,* and *flying;* the Beatles are *loving, feeling,* and *holding*. An overall comparison of these lyrics finds that the main statistical differences are in fact none of these: the Beatles use *she, yeah, day*, and *good* (*"She loves you, yeah yeah yeah"*) far more frequently than the Stones; the Stones use *I* and *get* (*"I can't get no satisfaction"*) far more than the Beatles.

4. Making Up Words

Some words have been deliberately created or adapted by particular individuals or organizations.

Kodak: invented by Eastman in 1888; the "k" was supposed to give an impression of strength, as was the pattern "k – – – k"

Xerox: from Greek *xero* (dry) but patterned after Kodak, 1952

gas: invented by Dutch chemist J. B. Van Helmont (1577–1644), apparently from Greek

television: from Greek *tele* (far off) and French *vision;* first found in 1907, even if the first actual transmission took place in 1925. T. S. Eliot considered it an ugly word.

Yahoo: from Swift's race of brutish humans in *Gulliver's Travels*, 1726

Google: from the mathematics term *googol*, meaning an immense number with a hundred zeros after it, invented by a nine-year-old boy

spam: from the canned meat *Spam* (spiced ham), a familiar food in 1940s Britain, revived by the Monty Python sketch "Spam, Spam, lovely Spam"

blurb: derived from Miss Blinda Blurb, a drawing on a book cover by Gelett Burgess in 1907

blatant: from Edmund Spenser's invention *blatant* (bleating?) *beast*, 1596

robot: invented by Karel Čapek in his play *R.U.R.*, 1920

5. How Many Words Do You Know?

A large vocabulary is often taken as a gauge of education and mastery of a language. The Basic Words Test measures the size of your vocabulary against different frequency bands in English. The test first sees whether you know words from the most frequent 1,000 words in English, then from the 1,000–2,000 band, and so on. It goes from the most frequent words down to the least frequent. Definitions have been checked against the *Oxford English Dictionary*. You can expect to know nearly all the words in the first section and fewer and fewer in later sections. Give up when it becomes just guessing.

   Complete the definitions below. All the spaces are the same size, so there are no clues to the number of letters. Then check your answers on this page. The Basic Words Test here tests you up to the 20,000 most frequent words of English. If you get through this with flying colors, try the Advanced Words Test on this page, which goes beyond the 150,000 level.

Band A: The most frequent 1,000 words

   1. a group of people meeting to decide something is a c…………………

   2. a person who can move heavy objects about is s…………………

   3. something that many people like is p…………………

   4. a person who has done well in life is a s…………………

   5. the group responsible for ruling a country is its g…………………

   6. a type of building often lived in by a family is a h…………………

   7. the part of the body that has eyes and is joined to the neck is the h…………………

   8. something that is consistent with the facts is t…………………

   9. a room in which paperwork takes place is an o…………………

10. to allow something to happen is also to l………………….it happen

Band B: Words up to 3,000 in frequency

11. a round object often used as a toy is a b…………………

12. something flexible you carry about and put things in is a b…………………

13. to think about past events is to r…………………

14. to divide things up among people is to s…………………

15. a royal man who rules a country is a k…………………

16. to work out the meaning of written words is to r…………………

17. a part of the body leading to the foot is a l…………………

18. to accept something given to you is to r…………………it

19. when you have evaluated something you have made an a…………………

20. to go on with something is to c…………………

Band C: Words up to 5,000 in frequency

21. to go from one place to another is to t…………………

22. natural, unadulterated food is o…………………

23. an elected member of local government is a c…………………

24. to look quickly at something is to g…………………

25. the opposite of male is f…………………

26. to find a new idea or a new place is to d…………………it

27. the person who is the best at a competition is the c…………………

28. a person who works for someone else is an e…………………

29. putting forward a new idea is making a s…………………

30. a temporary outdoor place for cooking and sleeping is a c…………………

Band D: Words up to 10,000 in frequency

31. the house or flat where someone lives is their r…………………

32. the place where the race ends is the f…………………

33. a long object for climbing walls, etc. is a l…………………

34. when countries or people refuse to deal with other people because they object to their behavior, they are b…………………them

35. a pipe or artificial channel through which things flow is a c…………………

36. to give way to someone is to y…………………

37. a space without any air is a v…………………

38. something that can be carried from place to place is p…………………

39. getting minerals from the earth is called m…………………

40. a man who serves food in a restaurant is a w…………………

Band E: Words up to 20,000 in frequency

41. the movement to liberate women is known as f…………………

42. a disabled person is sometimes described as h…………………

43. a kind of tree with grey bark and winged seeds is an a…………………

44. one type of British lawyer is called a b…………………

45. a person who works without being paid is a v…………………

46. a preparation for preventing infectious disease is a v…………………

47. something that is not difficult can be called e…………………

48. material that you can see through is t…………………

49. a kitchen device that cooks by direct heat is a g…………………

50. a place known for its health-giving waters is a s…………………

6. Car Names

Modern businesses try hard to make the names of their products attractive to potential buyers, none more so than car manufacturers. A study of the American car industry by the linguist Michael Aronoff once found that there were at least five different positions for words in the typical car name, though of course not all of them were used at once.

First comes the year: *a 2006 [model]*

Next comes the make: *a 2006 Ford*

Next the line: *a Ford Galaxy*

Next the model: *a Galaxy economy*

Finally the body type: *a Ford sedan*

Year >	make >	line >	model >	body type
2003	Ford	Focus	compact	Multi-Activity Vehicle
2007	Buick	Enclave	standard	four-door sedan
2008	Honda	CRV	compact	4x4

Devising or advertising a car name means choosing items to fill the different positions: *a 2003 economy sedan; a Ford standard coupé* – assuming, of course, that a particular manufacturer makes the whole range. The website for General Motors indeed forces you to choose something for each slot: a make (*Buick, Cadillac, Chevrolet …*), a model (for Buick, *LaCrosse, Enclave*, or *Lucerne*) and a body style (SUV, *pickup, crossover …*)

Choosing one word after another to fill "slots" in the sentence reflects a particular way of constructing sentences from frames with empty slots for words:

| Noun | Verb | Noun |

and then working out which words to fill them with:

| John | likes | beer |
| Jane | likes | John |

For a hundred years this slot-and-filler approach has been a way of teaching languages, called "substitution tables." Students have to make up sentences by choosing words one after the other from left to right

I have some	new black gray white stylish warm	shoes clothes socks stockings gloves hats	in my	house cupboard drawer room

so that they can say *I have some stylish clothes in my drawer* or *I have some black shoes in my house* – not very meaningful but helpful as sheer language practice.

One of Noam Chomsky's first contributions to linguistics was an elegant proof that filling slots in a frame doesn't work as a model of how speakers construct sentences. Some choices of words in English are not in sequence from left to right. If you say *Does he like it?*, choosing *does* rather than *do* depends on choosing the singular word *he* (rather than, say, the plural word they), which comes after *does* rather than before it. We have to put the sentence together in our minds before we say it, not just choosing one word after another, but paying attention to relationships extending before or after each word.

Nevertheless this process of filling slots with words can be used to produce different phrases: for example, local newspaper headlines:

Column 1	**Column 2**
Train death	fee
Factory shooting	horror
Horse society funding	failure
School bus	victory

Choose any word from Column 1 and then any from Column 2 to get *factory shooting victory, school bus fee*, and so on. Michael Frayn gave precisely this way of producing headlines in one of his novels. Here are some actual local paper headlines that show that the technique is still in use:

Police	hunt stepping up hunt for hunting hunt for target	masked man missing man window vandal park raiders rowdy drunken teens bicycle thieves