

The set of words which make up a language is known as its **vocabulary**.

What is a word?

The notion of a **word** is actually quite hard to define. It is probably easiest simply to describe the word as the smallest unit of language that can be used on its own, demonstrated in English writing by the practice of separating words by leaving spaces around them.

Another way of looking at words is to see them as corresponding to a concept; so the word *table* corresponds to a typical or an actual table, and so on. Again, this is not a perfect definition, but it is certainly a useful one. After all, without this characteristic of words children's language-learning would be impossible. This is because children build up their vocabularies by attaching individual words to individual concepts.

The vocabulary of a language consists of words inherited from previous generations of speakers and others which have spread from neighbouring languages.

➤ *See also* **Language Study** panels on **English and Old Norse**, **English and Latin**, **English and French** and **English and non-European languages**.

New words

New words can also be created for new concepts, such as *netiquette* for 'polite behaviour when using the Internet'. New words can also arise from blends of new and old words, such as *knowable* from Old English *cnawan* 'to know' plus French *-able*.

Words can also change their meaning, sometimes quite radically. For example, the ancestor of Present-Day English *silly* is Old English *sælig*, which meant 'holy'. Another example of this is the word *bad*, which developed an opposite meaning, 'good', in slang.