

## WORD

FRENCH	<i>mot</i>
GERMAN	<i>Wort</i>
GREEK	<i>onoma</i> [ὄνομα], <i>rhēma</i> [ῥῆμα], <i>lexis</i> [λέξις]
ITALIAN	<i>parola</i>
LATIN	<i>vox, verbum, dictio, locutio, muttum, pars orationis, vocabulum</i>
PORTUGUESE	<i>palavra</i>
ROMANIAN	<i>cuvânt</i>
RUSSIAN	<i>slovo</i> [слово]
SPANISH	<i>palabra</i>

- HOMONYM, LANGUAGE, LOGOS, PRÉDICABLE, PREDICATION, PROPOSITION, SENSE, SIGN, SIGNIFIER/SIGNIFIED, SUBJECT, TERM, THING

All European languages have a term that refers to an element of the language felt spontaneously to be distinct, grammatically and/or semantically, and that corresponds to the English term “word”: Italian *parola*, Spanish *palabra*, Portuguese *palavra*, French *mot*, German *Wort*, Russian *slovo* [слово], etc.

This pleasing unanimity glosses over several questions, however. The first is knowing whether the word is a universal category. It is not in fact certain that in all languages there is a signifying unit perceived as autonomous by its speakers. Furthermore, even if we confine ourselves to the Greco-Roman tradition, this unit was constituted for its speakers in a way that was not independent of the process of the formation of its grammar. Finally, the designation of such a unit has been the object of so many political and religious debates over the centuries that its modern form was not established until the end of the seventeenth century.

In addition to this, whether we distinguish the minimal unit that is a word on the basis of criteria that are grammatical (morphology, function) or semantic, different words to say “word” are related to, or in competition with, each other, not only from one language to another but also within the same language, to the extent that there is sometimes no generic term, or no longer any generic term, to designate a “word.” Thus, in Aristotle’s *De interpretatione*, the word is made up of the pair *onoma-rhēma* [ὄνομα-ῥῆμα], “noun-verb,” which constitutes *logos* [λόγος], so that when medieval commentators introduce *dictio* (the “word”) as a generic term covering both *nomen* and *verbum*, it appears as a distortion.

Moreover, the terms that are continually reinvested from within other perspectives are particularly difficult to translate, terms such as *onoma* (word/name), *verbum* (word/verb), and at the confluence of several different traditions, *lexis* [λέξις] (speech, style, expression, articulate vocal sound, word) or *vox* (voice, word).

### I. A Linguistic Entity? The Word as a Result of Grammar Formation

In Greek and in Latin, everyday language did not contain a term devoted specifically and monosemically to a linguistic entity that corresponded to the word and that was endowed with its general properties (Fruyt and Reichler-Béguelin, “La notion”; Lallot, “Le mot”). It was the predominance of parts of speech in the process of forming a grammar that placed the segmentation into words at the center of how language was discussed (see Auroux, *Histoire des idées linguistiques*, vol. 2). In the Hellenic graphic tradition, the norm was the *scriptio continua*, and the regular separation of words by a space did

not appear until later in the Byzantine era. As for the designation “word,” which since Plato had been confused with that of “name,” *onoma* [ὄνομα], from the Hellenistic period onward it was expressed by the term *lexis* [λέξις]: “word” was understood at that time to mean “part of speech.” It was only with the grammarians in the Alexandrine tradition that the word came to be characterized as an autonomous segment with a single stress and meaning (see Lallot, “Le mot”). For Latin, it would seem that it was Varro (1 BCE) who named the word *verbum* (whose etymology was *verum boare*, “to proclaim what is true”) in his *De lingua latina*.

Nevertheless, the polysemy of the word *verbum* was omnipresent for this author, who assigned it several meanings (Di Pasquale, “La notion”). This polysemy (see below) was evident in the first French-Latin dictionary, Jean Nicot’s *Thresor de la langue françoise tant ancienne que moderne* (1606), where the entry “Mot: *dictio, verbum*” contains a list of expressions in which the occurrence of the word *mot* is translated alternately as *verbum, dictio, oratio, vox, vocabulum, tessera*: “haec vox dominus,” “dictum breviter,” “prisca vocabula,” “oratio capitalis,” “vigiliarum tesserae,” “pervetusta verba.” This polysemy, which is still very much present in modern dictionaries through collocations, is as much indicative of the questions linked to the designation of the word as it is of the difficulties of translating the different terms that name it.

- See Box 1.

## II. The Word in Greek, Grammatical and Semantic Issues

### A. *Onoma/rhēma*: “Word,” “noun,” “verb”

In Greek grammatical terminology, *onoma* and *rhēma* [ῥῆμα] refer to the basic constituent elements of *logos* (“statement, phrase”; see LOGOS), the noun and the verb. These are the preferred terms of *merismos* [μερισμός], the separation of the sentence into functionally different constituent parts. But this pair has a history, and the terms *onoma* and *rhēma* preexist their conjunction.

### 1. *Onoma* and *rhēma*: Two possible designations for “word”

The term *onoma* is intimately associated with the oldest and most elementary awareness of the referential function of language: language gives names to things, it is a nomenclature that has the world as its referent. Even though at this stage it is still not a question of “parts of speech,” the elements of nomenclature are prototypically *substantives*, that is, nominal types of words that are applied to concrete—“substantial”—objects around us: it is quite likely that in the first instance these are proper names of people (Socrates, Zeus—it is important to note the Greek use of the definite article, so they would say *ho Sôkratês* [ὁ Σωκράτης], literally “the Socrates” or “the Zeus”; see SUBJECT). During this roughly pre-Platonic stage, *onomata* [ὀνόματα] in the plural refers to the “vocabulary” of a language, and the singular, *onoma*, to a “word” (proper noun, common noun, adjective, or verb). As for the other kinds of “words” (articles, pronouns, conjunctions, prepositions, particles, etc.), we can see that for Aristotle, in any case (*Poetics*, 20), all of this “small matter” of the language is classified, like syllables, as *phônai asêmoi* [φωναί

