Lexicon

An important distinction:

- Lexicon: list of words (that a person knows, that is available in a specific field, in a dictionary, etc.)
- Lexicon (in linguistics): all of the meaning units in a language, whether they have been recognized by individuals or listed in a dictionary or not; the linguistic lexicon can also refer to any given language speaker's knowledge of the language, as conceptualized in meaning units and ways to combine units of meaning meaningfully.
- Lexicon (me): I tend to use the term to designate all of the information that is contained in a language: meaning units, how those meaning units are categorized in the language, the concepts that are designated by the meaning units, the patterns that are available to combine units of meaning meaningfully, and any other information-related task that comes up.

So, when people tell me that words can't describe 'x', I assume that they're thinking only of their personal lexicon. Exceptionally skilled and exceptionally knowledgeable users of languages usually figure out a way to describe 'x', and usually already have (this is part of the fun of poetry and great prose—but people who don't have a large personal lexicon are probably also not fluent readers or fluent enjoyers of literature, so we have multiple layers of inadequacy).[1]

Elements of the lexicon include morphemes, single units of meaning that might or might not be words:

- Free morphemes: can be used as words—silver, cat, three, green, of, fly, see, when…
- Bound morphemes: have to be combined with something else to make a word—'-s' plural (even though it shows up in different forms in writing and speech), pre- (as in prefix), -ment (as in government)

The lexicon also contains information about what jobs the morphemes can and cannot do—plural markers are not allowed to go wandering about without supervision (in English); 'hammer' can appear as a noun or a verb; 'when' can be an interrogative pronoun or a subordinating conjunction; etc.

The lexicon also contains information about multiple meanings: a 'chick' can be recently hatched poultry or a woman to whom one feels somewhat attracted or about whom one feels somewhat dismissive.

The lexicon also contains information about how the language puts all of this information together: subjects with various kinds of verbs, the leftovers of case in the pronominal system, subordination vs. coordination, etc.

The lexicon also… (this space intentionally left blank; feel free to contribute)

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[1] So—no whining about the limitations of words or language without being specific about the fact that it's *your* knowledge of words or language that can't do the job.