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ABSTRACT

This guide is meant to aid teachers and parents with explanations and activities that they can use to help students understand and clarify their use of English. The guide discusses, for example: how language develops and grows; how to use a dictionary to answer questions; how words have formed in the past and continue to form; changing the content and changing meaning; and idioms, such as "button your lip" and "let it all hang out." Following a preface with information for the teacher, the guide is divided into the following five sections: "What Is Language?"; "So What's a Dictionary For?"; "How Words Are Formed"; "How Words Change Meaning in Time and Context"; and "'I No Understand Your Idiots.'" (NKA)

Working With The English Language

Five Teaching Units for Middle and Upper Grades

By Edward B. Jenkinson

with Andrea Jenkinson

WORKING WITH THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

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Preface

In 1967 the Indiana University Press published *What Is Language? And Other Teaching Units for Grades Seven Through Twelve*; in 1969 a second printing appeared. That book contained a series of ten teaching units written after consulting with a state-appointed committee on teaching the English language. Four teachers on the committee submitted drafts of two units which they asked me, as chairperson, to revise and expand. Then teachers in more than fifty pilot schools in Indiana and in the Archdiocese of Cincinnati tested the units before I made final revisions before publication.

This volume contains recent revisions of four units taken from the book mentioned above: "What Is Language?", "So What's a Dictionary For?", "How Words Are Formed," and "How Words Change Meaning in Time and Context." A new unit, "I No Understand Your Idiots," has been written specifically for this book.

After the original volume was published, teachers of students in the middle and upper grades told me how they used the units in their classrooms.

Teaching the Units in the Middle Grades

Students in grades four through six enjoyed working through the unit entitled "What Is Language?" At least a dozen teachers told me that their students became so involved in constructing their own languages that they spent up to two weeks on the unit. Some of the experimental languages were quite complex, with a variety of sentence structures and with vocabularies of as many as four hundred words.

Using class sets of dictionaries or bringing their own dictionaries to class, fifth and sixth grade students worked through all or parts of "So What's a Dictionary For?" Several teachers reported that they asked their students a number of questions about dictionaries before deciding that their students needed instruction on how to use dictionaries. Then they used a section of the unit each day, or one or two sections a week until they were confident that their students could use dictionaries effectively. Three teachers told me that their students seemed to learn more about using dictionaries when they had a variety of dictionaries in the classroom and students could compare lexicographers' different approaches to

placing information in entry words. Several teachers who used classroom sets of a single dictionary reported making transparencies of entry words from three or four dictionaries so that students could compare them.

To test three of the four units in this book, I volunteered, one summer in the mid-sixties, to teach an ungraded class of fifth, sixth, and seventh graders in what was then Indiana University's laboratory school. I did not teach "What Is Language?" but focused instead on the dictionary, word formation, and change units. By asking questions at the outset, I could determine which parts of each of unit I needed to teach. I discovered that students needed to examine entry words in dictionaries very thoroughly since they did not know much about what they contained. After I taught parts of the dictionary and word formation units, I combined the teaching of part of "How Words Change Meaning in Time and Context" with the study of Conrad Richter's historical novel, *The Light in the Forest.*

Teaching the Units in the Upper Grades

Teachers in pilot schools were not surprised to learn that their ninth, tenth, and even eleventh grade students did not fully understand how to use dictionaries. By asking questions, they learned that most of their students approached any dictionary the same way. Students tended to think that the arrangements of the entry words in all dictionaries were identical, and they displayed ignorance of much of the information in entry words. Some students were surprised to discover that their own dictionaries—especially paperbacks—do not contain as many meanings of words like *run, set,* and *turn* as unabridged dictionaries do. Through questioning, teachers decided which parts of the unit they needed to teach.

In grades nine through twelve, more than two dozen teachers reported to me that they taught nearly all of the units on word formation and meaning changes in time and context. Several said that teaching the unit on meaning change before having students read a Shakespearean play was very effective.

At least six teachers in grades nine and ten said that they taught "What Is Language?" after they learned that their students displayed little or no knowledge of the nature of language. Like the students in elementary school, the secondary students who studied the unit became quite excited and deeply involved when they created their own languages.

Acknowledgments

My daughter, Andrea Jenkinson, did much of the revising of the first four units presented herein. She wrote the statement of objectives found at the beginning of each section, provided much-needed sub-headings, and brought the illustrative sentences up to date. But most importantly, she went meticulously through the units, removing the masculine pronouns which were perfectly acceptable in writing during the sixties. My heartfelt thanks for your hard work, Andrea.

I wish to thank the many teachers who have commented on the units. I also wish to thank Professor Carl Smith, Professor Emeritus of Language Education and Director of ERIC/REC and the EDINFO Press, for inviting me to revise the original book and for encouraging me throughout the revision process.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

Objectives

What role does language play in our lives? Why would it be impossible to have a civilization without language? In this unit, students discover what language is and why it is important.

Introduction

Language plays such a constant, vital role in our daily lives that we rarely—if ever—pause to think about it. Most of us simply take language for granted. Asked to define it, we would probably dismiss the question as being silly. "Of course I know what language is. It's ... well, it's ...."

We teachers of English may not be able to define language to the satisfaction of linguists, but we and our students do know a great deal about it. However, we may not have explored the nature and miracle of language with our students. That is the purpose of this unit.

Seventh graders, for example, have been listening to, communicating and playing with, and learning language from birth. They have been studying aspects of language in school for seven years. Yet it is highly unlikely that they have ever been asked, "What is language?"—a question they would probably consider stupid.

Why trouble seventh graders or students at any other level with a discussion of language? Why lead them to form their own definitions of language?

If language is basic to civilization, we and our students should understand what it is and how it works. If language is humankind's most important invention, we and our students should know more about it than the fact that we use it every day. If problems in communication arise because people fail to understand the nature of language, then we need to discuss language with students at the earliest age they can contribute to the discussion.

This unit is designed to help students discover for themselves what language is. As the teacher, you serve as guide and referee, keeping the discussion on the right track, giving every student an opportunity to contribute and helping students arrive at intelligent conclusions; thereby they can enjoy personal discovery. To put it another way, by giving students challenging questions and by creating a climate conducive to discussion, you can encourages students to find out for themselves how language operates instead of making the discovery for them and passing along information.

The Initial Discussion of Language

How did language begin? This section suggests ways for students to consider how early humans might have used different sounds to communicate with one another.

To launch the initial discussion of language with students at almost any level of instruction, you might ask questions like the ones listed here.

1. What kinds of noises can we make with our mouths? Do all of the noises mean something? Why or why not? Why are some noises more meaningful than others? Do you know exactly what's wrong when a baby cries? Why or why not? What kind of cry tells you something about how the baby feels or what it wants? If you hear a person whistle, what—if anything—does that tell you about the individual?

   Explain why some whistles mean something while others do not. How can you communicate with a neighbor just by whistling?

   What noises do you make when you hurt yourself? What noises do you make when someone tells a funny story? How can you tell when a person, without using language, makes noises that might indicate pain, happiness, or sadness?

2. Do you make noises when you talk? Or, to put the question another way, is talking just making noises? If so, what kinds of noise? What do you call those noises? When did you start learning how to make them? How did you learn to make them?

3. Why is talking a form of communication? What is communication? How many kinds of communication can you name? How many different methods can we use to communicate our thoughts and feelings? Must we rely solely on spoken words? Why or why not? (*Note:* As you ask the following questions, you might suggest that students give examples to illustrate possible meanings.)

   - ❒ What feelings can we communicate with facial expressions such as a scowl, an arched eyebrow, or a smile?

   - ❒ What feelings can we communicate with gestures?
   - ❒ What can we communicate with classmates by tapping a pencil on a desk?
   - ❒ What feelings can we communicate with the clothes we wear? with a hair style? with hair colors?

4. How do animals communicate? How do you think animals learn how to communicate, or do they simply make meaningful noises naturally? To clarify that question, we can ask: Why do you think a puppy learns from its mother to growl when a stranger is near? Or why do you think a puppy just growls naturally?

5. Do human beings communicate instinctively or do they learn how to communicate? Or do human beings communicate both instinctively and non-instinctively? To clarify that question, we can present this situation to students: A small baby cries for food long before it learns how to talk. Does it cry instinctively? Why or why not? Later, it learns to ask for milk, or a sandwich, or a steak. Does it do this instinctively? Why or why not?

6. More than four decades ago, Charlton Laird wrote a book entitled *The Miracle of Language*. Why do you think he gave that title to a book about the origins and nature of language? Why do you think Professor Laird and other scholars say that language is humankind's most important invention? Why do you think that, without language, we would not have civilization as we know it?

Designing a Situation for Language Exploration

How would you go about developing a new language that could express specific thoughts? In this section, students practice making up their own languages and, in doing so, discover the many problems that must be solved.

Thus far, our questions have concentrated primarily on communication in its various forms. We should have led students to see that they communicate with the noises they make with their mouths, but they can also communicate thoughts and feelings in other ways. We have more questions to ask if we want our students to discover for themselves what language is, how it is developed, and how it works. But if we want to ask those questions in a context that will free students' minds to explore language and discover some basic concepts for themselves, we need to set up a situation that can lead to the process of discovery. The thrill of discovery should not be minimized, because students are more likely to remember concepts if they are given the opportunity to explore a subject themselves and arrive at their own conclusions. Therefore, we can set up a situation for our students, and we ask you to guide them on this mental journey by saying something like this:

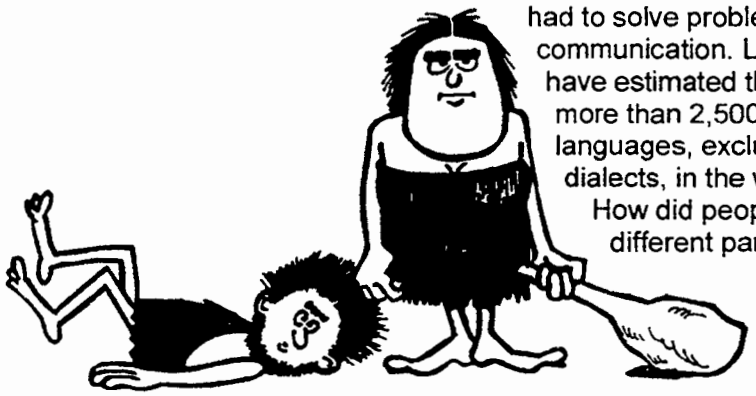
> Let's pretend that this class has been transported back in time more than ten thousand years. Each of you lives in the same area. All of you want to get along. You nod at one another, you may grunt, but you do not communicate by any means other than grunting, pounding your fists on logs, nodding your heads, grimacing, and, perhaps, hitting one another with clubs if two of you decide that you want the same thing. Now how would you go about developing a system of communication? In other words, how would you develop a language?

With student interest aroused, you may decide to describe the problem further before students attempt to answer more questions. You may wish to say something like this: Let's suppose you want to tell your neighbor that you are hungry. You could rub your stomach or smack your lips, or you could do both and also cry. But your neighbor might think you have a pain in your stomach instead of thinking that you are hungry, so

you try verbalizing. You say, "Adzik." Now what does that mean? Does it mean "I'm hungry," or just "hungry." Or perhaps you say, "Ee adzik" or "Adzik ee," either of which could mean "I'm hungry."

Suppose you and your neighbors agree that when you say "Adzik," this utterance means "I'm hungry." But when you say "Adzik?" with a rise in pitch on the last part of the word, it means "Are you hungry?" And if you say "Adzik!" in a very high tone with a stress on the last syllable, it means "I'm starved." If you say "Adzik" in a very low tone with a stress on the first part of the word, it might mean "I'm not hungry."

All of this may seem like nonsense, but it does focus students' attention on a problem that probably had to be solved hundreds of times by the ancestors of all the peoples of the world. (Thousands of early inhabitants of earth apparently had to solve problems of communication. Linguists have estimated that there are more than 2,500 different languages, excluding dialects, in the world today.)



How did people in different parts of the world with different cultures learn to communicate if they had no language and had to form their own? To rephrase an earlier question for our students: If you had no language, what would you and your neighbors need to do to devise a system of communication? What methods of communication are possible? What are the problems that you must solve?

That line of questioning could continue until students realize that, put into the situation described above, they would need to agree on what sounds stand for certain things; on how the sounds are to be put together in a pattern or system; on whether they would rely on word order, inflection, intonation, or all three.

The Structural Principles of the English Language

So far, students have considered some general questions about how language might have begun and how a new language might be constructed. Now they will look more closely at some of the important technical features that make our language intelligible. In the following sections, students briefly explore word order, inflection, intonation, "the silent language," and writing systems.

Word Order

Word order is one of the most important organizing principles in the English language. It is the single most important factor in determining whether or not a sentence "makes sense."

To lead students to an understanding of word order, you might note that a mythical group of human beings agreed, thousands of years ago, that "Ee glizzlak dong" means "I chased the dinosaur." (Several teachers who have taught this unit noted that one or more students might point out that dinosaurs did not co-exist with human beings. So have the students select another animal, real or imagined.) Would it mean the same thing if they said "Dong glizzlak eek?" Or would that mean "The dinosaur chased me?"

By developing questions of this type, you can help students understand the importance of word order in some languages. They might be led to see that English relies heavily on word order by examining several sentences like these:

John loves Mary.	The boy hit the ball.
Mary loves John.	The ball hit the boy.

The little girl gave her father a watch.
Her father gave the little girl a watch.

A brief discussion should illustrate that the position of a word as subject or object does make a great difference in the meaning of those sentences. Or, to put it another way, the order of the words makes a big difference in meaning. In the sentences above, the first nouns in the sentences perform the action, and the nouns that follow the verb receive the action.

Inflection

Although English relies heavily on word order as an organizing principle, a number of other languages employ different ways of showing relationships among words. Many of these languages rely more heavily on *inflections*: endings which show the function of words in the sentence. For example, one inflection would be used to show that a word is the subject in one sentence, another inflection would show that the same word has become the object in another sentence, still another inflection would show that the word functions as the indirect object, and so on. For example:

ee glizzlak dongun
dongun glizzlak ee } all mean: I chased the dinosaur.
glizzlak dongun ee

but

dong glizzlak eek
eek glizzlak dong } all mean: The dinosaur chased me.
glizzlak dong eek

In the first three sentences, the spelling *ee* shows that *I* is the subject and *dongun* (with the inflection *-un*) shows that *dinosaur* is the object, no matter where these words appear in the sentence. In the last three sentences, the spelling *eek* (with an added *k*) means that *I* has become the object and *dong* (without any inflection) shows that *dinosaur* is now the subject, no matter what the word order.

Students should readily see that in English we do not have endings like those. Nor can we change the meaning of a verb like *glizzle* simply by saying, as the Romans might have said in Latin:

glizzlo = I chase
glizzlas = You (singular) chase
glizzlat = He/she/it chases
glizzlamus = We chase
glizzlatus = You (plural) chase
glizzlant = They chase

Remind students of the principal inflections used in English with nouns, adjectives, and verbs:

Noun: *-s* and *-es* to show plural forms						
Singular	dog	cat	boy	girl	glass	bush
Plural	dogs	cats	boys	girls	glasses	bushes

Adjective: *-er* and *-est* to show comparative and superlative forms		
big	bigger	biggest
strong	stronger	strongest
pretty	prettier	prettiest

Verb: *-s* to show third person; *-ed* to show past tense; *-ed* and *-en* to show past participles; *-ing* to show present participles				
walk	walks	walked	walked	walking
speak	speaks	spoke	spoken	speaking
ride	rides	rode	ridden	riding

Those are only a few examples of inflection in the English language. See the third unit in this book, "How Words Are Formed." for more on the use of inflections in word formation.

You can conclude this section by showing students how inflection in the English language is combined with word order to produce sentences that convey intelligible meaning. For example, we do not say:

Ran the field across the cheerleaders enthusiastic.
A home run boy the strongest hit on the team.
The high hurdles easily very athletic girl the swift won.

Instead, we say:

The enthusiastic cheerleaders ran across the field.
The strongest boy on the team hit a home run.
The swift athletic girl won the high hurdles very easily.

Intonation

Even though we may not be aware of it, we rely on *intonation* to convey particular shades of meaning every time we speak. This means that we change the level or "pitch" of some words to let the hearer know that we want to convey something more than the usual literal meaning. For example, questions often end with a rising pitch: "What are you going to *do*?" We can emphasize certain words by saying them more loudly: "You're not going to do *that*, are you?" We express disappoint or dismay with a rising and falling sound on a single word: "Oh, *no*!"

To illustrate the role that intonation plays in language, you might note that when mother receives a present, she might respond by exclaiming, "That's nice," or "It's beautiful," or "That's great " How would a mother say each of those expressions if she were happy? Students might say each sentence aloud, noting what they do with their voices to show they are delighted. Then someone spills coke on the rug and mother says, "That's nice," or "That's beautiful, just beautiful," or "That's great." How would a mother say those phrases if she were unhappy? Again, students might say the phrases aloud, noting what they do with their voices to show that they are unhappy.

To experiment with intonation, students might think of a nonsense word such as *driznik*. What does it mean when it is said with no vocal inflection on either syllable? When the first syllable is accented and the voice rises markedly? When the second syllable is accented and the voice is lowered noticeably?

By playing with a series of nonsense words, carefully noting intonation patterns and the changes in meanings they give the words, students can begin to understand tonal languages that rely primarily on intonation to change meaning.

Suggested Activities

1. Encourage students who speak or are studying another language to give a brief demonstration, illustrating how that language uses inflection and/or intonation to convey meaning. Ask the students to write several sentences on the chalkboard, illustrating how an inflected language differs from English. Ask the students who know something about a tonal language to select several words whose meanings change with different intonations. (Inviting speakers of languages that rely on inflection or intonation to talk about their languages is an effective method of illustrating how inflection and intonation work.)

2. Working in groups, students explain why they think that language is necessary for civilization. They can consider these questions: What would the world be like today if people had not learned to communicate? Why? How would people organize their communities without language? How would they communicate their thoughts, feelings, emotions? Would there be cities, towns, states, and nations if there were no languages? Why or why not?

"The Silent Language"

As we say words, we can emphasize them, change their meanings, or soften their harshness. We use facial expressions, gestures, body movements, and eye and mouth movements among other ways of conveying meaning. (In 1959, Edward T. Hall called those methods of communication "the silent language" in a best-selling book by that title.) To help students understand the pervasiveness of "the silent language," much of which they already know, we might ask questions like these:

1. How can we tell someone *no* without saying the word? How many ways can we express *no* without making any sound? (The same questions can be asked for *yes*.) Students should discover that in some cultures *no* and *yes* are signaled in exactly the opposite way that they are in our culture. The gestures that we make with our hands and extended arm to mean *come here* or *go away* mean exactly the opposite in some cultures. As another example, in the tiny country of Lebanon, *no* can be expressed by arching the eyebrows, by tilting the chin up, or by sticking the tongue against the upper teeth and making a slight sound. An absolutely emphatic *no* is conveyed by making all three movements simultaneously.
2. How can we tell someone *to stop* whatever they are doing without making any sounds? How can we tell someone *to come here, to go away, to sit still, to remain calm* without making any sounds?
3. How can we express the following without making any sounds: boredom, anger, happiness, love, hatred, sadness?
4. How can we show someone that we do not believe what they are saying? that we are not interested in what they are saying? that we like what they are saying?
5. What do our choices of clothing tell other people about us? the colors? the styles? the care that we give them?
6. What do our hairstyles tell people about us? What do we want them to think?
7. When we talk to other people, how do we stand? What does that tell the people with whom we are talking? What do we do with our arms? Why? How much space do we keep between us and the people with whom we are talking? Why?

Writing Systems

Legend tells us that Ts'ang Chien invented the Chinese alphabet by examining the patterns in the stars, the marks on the backs of turtles, and the footprints of birds in his garden. Legend also tells us that when the Hindu god Brahma decided to write down his teachings, he invented letters that came from examining seams in the human skull. Finally, a Greek legend says that Cadmus, a national hero, brought sixteen of the Greek letters from Phoenicia to help him form the Greek alphabet.

No one knows for certain just exactly when early human beings began recording, in some form of writing, the world around them. However, archaeologists have discovered carvings on bones and pictures on caves that date back more than twenty thousand years. Attempts to record life advanced from drawings and carvings to pictographs and hieroglyphics and ultimately to alphabets. About fifty different alphabets exist today, with our own alphabet being the most widely used throughout the world.

(We must point out here that linguists do not consider writing to be part of language. They call it a different system altogether through which people use symbols to represent the sounds they make when they talk.)

Suggested Activities

1. Working in groups of three or four, students create a brief skit (two or three minutes) in which they tell a story without any oral or written language. Restricted only to "the silent language," each group presents its story with gestures, facial expressions, stance, clothing, colors, and so forth. After each group presentation, the other groups attempt to explain the skit.

2. For oral or written reports, individuals or groups of students may explore the beginnings of writing from drawings to pictographs to alphabets. *National Geographic* is a good source for information and pictures on early cave drawings. Several dictionaries show different alphabetic representations of our letters at the beginning of each alphabetical section. School librarians should also prove to be most helpful in finding information. One of the most fascinating books in my collection is *The 26 Letters* by Oscar Ogg (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1948). Copies may still be available in school and public libraries.

Designing a Language

Now students can try to develop real languages, with inflections and rules of word order and everything else that is needed. Have them work in groups, with each group sharing the elements of its language with the class.

After students have arrived at some understanding of word order, inflection, and intonation, you might have them review the problem of designing a language. They need to determine just what they must know, and on what they would need to agree, before they could begin communicating satisfactorily with one another in a new language. You might divide the class into groups of three to six, assigning each group the task of attempting an initial design of a new language. To get started, each group might answer questions like the ones given below.

1. How will we express such basic feelings as "I am hungry," "I am thirsty," "I am sleepy," "I am sick," "I am afraid?" As students begin supplying words for those sentences, they should note the emergence of a pattern. For each of those statements, for example, students need to agree on one group, or several groups, of sounds to express "I am." They also need to decide on the arrangement of the words. Do *hungry, thirsty, sleepy, sick,* and *afraid* come before or after *I am*?

2. What sounds will we put together to designate boy girl, young man, young woman, man, woman, old man, old woman? Is there any pattern to the sounds students designate for those words? Did one group use the same word for girl, young woman, woman, and old woman, for example, but say each in a different tone to signal the difference in meaning? If a group is so inventive, the teacher might want to spend several minutes talking about tonal languages.

   What sounds will we use to designate various animals? Again, do the sounds have anything in common? A pattern may not become apparent until students attempt to distinguish age and sex of the same family of animals, e.g., cow, calf, bull, steer, heifer. Of course, it is readily apparent after saying those English words that a pattern of sounds may not emerge.

3. What sounds will we use to name the objects immediately around us?

4. After we have named objects around us and have decided on sounds to express basic feelings, what sentences can we make with the new words we have invented? What patterns begin to emerge? Do students rely on inflection, word order, intonation? Can they find a pattern in their new language?

You will think of other questions to help the groups develop their languages. In fact, teachers experimenting with this unit told us that students posed a number of questions that helped not only their own group but also the other groups to create their languages. Several teachers also told us that some classes became so absorbed with the project that they spent as many as five days on their creations and learned a great deal about languages. Student groups also enjoyed collaborating on a name for their language. It frequently combined syllables from the names of the members of the group.

What Is Language?

Now that they have designed their own languages, students can work on a definition of language in their own words.

After students have developed their own languages, you might want to conduct a discussion about the nature of language. What is language? I have taken the following elements from a variety of sources. They are far from being all of the elements that some linguists include in their definitions.

- ❒ Language is a system of human communication.
- ❒ It is human and non-instinctive, raising it above the noises made by birds, animals and insects.
- ❒ It consists of a pattern of speech sounds through which human beings communicate.
- ❒ Language is a form of human symbolic activity.

- ❒ The symbols are sounds arranged in definite patterns.
- ❒ The connection between the sound symbol and the thing it represents is arbitrary and socially controlled.
- ❒ The arbitrary system of sounds is infinite in number, as the large number of languages indicates. No one knows exactly how many languages there are currently and how many languages have vanished. (Linguists estimate that there are more than 2,500 languages in the world today.)
- ❒ Language is not only a creature of society but also a creator of society.

Suggested Activity

As a culminating activity, you might have students write in their journals or in a theme their impressions of this unit.

- ❒ What did they learn about language?
- ❒ What surprised them?
- ❒ Why do they believe, or not believe, that language is humankind's most important creation?
- ❒ How would they define language?

SO WHAT'S A DICTIONARY FOR?

Objectives

In this unit, students will broaden their understanding of language by discovering how much information they can find in their dictionaries. Here are some of the things they will do:

- ❒ Decide what a word is and what it means.
- ❒ Discover that words can have both denotative and connotative meanings.
- ❒ Examine sentences and discover that one word can be used to refer to a great number of objects or actions.
- ❒ Discover that they can sometimes unlock the meaning of an unfamiliar word by examining the entire sentence in which it appears.
- ❒ Realize that dictionaries give a common core of meanings to words.
- ❒ Discover the multiple uses of a dictionary.
- ❒ Examine spelling, pronunciation, and syllabication and discover their usefulness in revealing meaning in a dictionary.

Students will also find that they need to read the introduction to a dictionary to determine how preferable—as well as acceptable—multiple spellings and pronunciations are indicated. Finally, they will learn how to use all parts of a dictionary entry.

Humpty Dumpty and Words

We live in a world of words. With words we imagine, we dream, we think, we believe, we feel, we scream, we sing, and we communicate. The more we control words, the more orderly our own private world becomes, the more we appreciate it, the more we expand it, and the more we contribute to the public world. And the more we know about words, the better we can control them and our worlds—both private and public.

But what is a word? How is it formed? What are its limits? What does a word mean? Or a better question: How does a word mean?

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking-Glass*, Humpty Dumpty explains his concept of meaning to a puzzled Alice:

> "When *I* use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less."
>
> "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things."
>
> "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master—that's all."

The question really is, "Who are to be the masters?" Perhaps Humpty Dumpty could make words mean just what he wanted them to—for himself. (In "The Jabberwocky" we see Carroll's ability to coin words.) But he had no control over Alice and her experiences with the same words. So the question of mastery must take into account both the speaker or the writer and his listener or reader.

Had Humpty Dumpty commanded Alice to bring him a table, for instance, he could have meant a piece of furniture, or a systematic list of details about a certain thing, or a thin, flat tablet of metal or stone to write on. Had he meant furniture, he might have intended table to mean a particular kind, such as kitchen, dining room, dressing, coffee, or writing. And he could further have wanted a specific style of one of those tables. But he could not have counted on Alice's bringing him the right table had he not been specific. For to Alice, table could have meant any piece of furniture that had a flat top made of any substance set horizontally on from one to four or more legs.

As children, we learned that the word *table* can refer to several things. We learned the word by imitating the sounds made by our parents and others around us, and we became aware of groups of sounds that refer to certain things, or of sounds like *at* and *to* that we constantly use in sentences. As we grew older, we learned that these groups of sounds are called words. As we continued learning language, we attached certain meanings to these groups of sounds. Some of us grew up thinking that groups of sounds have fixed meanings and that words can be used only in certain ways. Some of us still believe, or have been taught, that we can always check the "meaning" of a word by referring to a dictionary. We sometimes further believe, or we are told, that if we cannot find in the dictionary the meaning we intended a word to mean, we have used the word incorrectly. And therein lies the problem.

Several Meanings, Not Just One Meaning

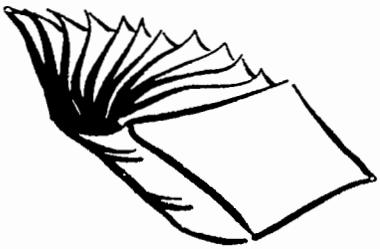
No matter how hard we try, we teachers of English can never fix meanings of words so that language study will be easy for students, nor do we want to freeze meanings of words if we prize our living, changing language. We can, however, help students understand what words are, how they are formed, what and how they mean, and how they work in sentences.

Frequently we hear this question: "What is the meaning of this word?" (or "What does this word mean?") The question is misleading, for most words have not just one meaning but several meanings. And that's one of the main points we want to make in this second unit of the language study sequence.

This unit presents several steps in a sequence designed to acquaint students with words, what they are, and how they work. The unit includes basic material that all students regardless of academic ability need. As the teacher, you can adapt the material to any class.

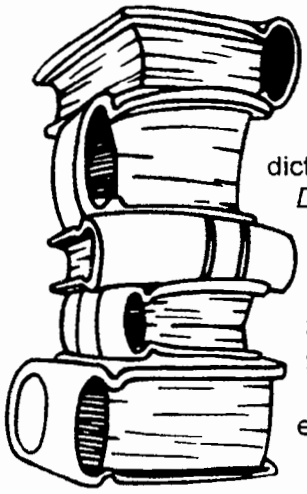
The first part of this unit deals with denotations and connotations, leading logically to answers to the question, "So what's a dictionary for?" This unit and the preceding one on "What Is Language?" lay the foundation for the units that follow in this book and in its companion volumes.

Using Dictionaries, Not Just One Dictionary



Familiarity with only one dictionary does not give students an adequate introduction to the study of words. Therefore, this unit considers dictionaries, not a dictionary. In preparing this unit, we have referred to these dictionaries:

The American College Dictionary
The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language
Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary
Macmillan's School Dictionary 2
Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary—Tenth Edition
The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, Third Edition
The Oxford Universal Dictionary on Historical Principles
The Random House Dictionary of the English Language—College Edition
The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary
Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language
Webster's Third New International Dictionary



We recommend that you have a class set of one of those dictionaries and at least two copies of two or more of the other dictionaries, excluding *The Oxford English Dictionary*, which may be available in the school library in at least its shorter, two-volume edition. (*Note:* We have more than forty dictionaries in our collection. Some are no longer in print. Even so, we referred to two of them throughout this unit because of the variety they offered in their entries.)

What Is a Word?

To launch this unit, you may wish to write a list of words like this on the chalkboard:

spring	friend	average	no
astronaut	hate	cat	old
love	insubordinate	enemy	green
fall	contact	television	run
to	strike	jazz	bank

What do we call each of these groups of letters? Students may think such a question ridiculous since it is obvious that the answer is a *word.* But the question and its answer are basic to the understanding of the material that follows. If students agree that every group of letters on the list is a word, how do they know this? What do these letter-groups have in common? What is a word?

Any definition of *word* will be controversial from a linguist's point of view. For years, linguists accepted Aristotle's definition that a word is the smallest significant unit of speech. Today, however, linguists refer to the *morpheme* as a significant unit of meaning smaller than a word. For example, *unlocked* contains three morphemes: the prefix *un-* (meaning "not"), the base word *lock*, and the inflection *-ed* (which shows past tense or past participle). Each of the three morphemes contributes something to the meaning of the word.

For the time being, however, it would be useful to have students examine the letter-groups on the chalkboard and attempt a definition of *word.* Typical responses might include: "A word is a group of letters that has meaning," or, "A word is a series of sounds that we produce and that make sense." Such definitions are acceptable.

Words and Nonsense Words

Let's leave the first list for a moment if students agree that it contains words, and let's ask them if the following is a list of words:

wamtupper	erg	zax	clarkle
iggle	ogn	img	swicky
adz	doncuted	ziggurat	syzygy

Students will laugh when they see this second list and will probably agree that each of the letter-groups is a nonsense word.

It's not likely that many students will recognize that *adz*, *erg*, *syzygy*, *zax*, and *ziggurat* really are words. However, Scrabble players and crossword puzzle solvers may have immediately spotted these five words and may even know their definitions:

adz	A heavy, curved tool for dressing timbers or planks, with a broad, chisel-like steel end mounted on a wooden handle.
erg	In physics, a unit of work or energy equal to the work force one dyne when its point of application moves through a distance of one centimeter in the direction of the force.
sygzy	In astronomy, the conjunction or opposition of two heavenly bodies; a point in the orbit of a body, as the moon, at which it is conjunction with or in opposition to the sun.
zax	A tool used for trimming roofing slates. Obsolete: knife, dagger.
ziggurat	A temple tower of the ancient Assyrians and Babylonians in the form of a terraced pyramid with each story smaller than the one below it.

How Do Words Get Their Meanings?

Confronted with a list of nothing but nonsense words, students may conclude that no letter-group on such a list is a word. But let's take four words from that second list and write them on the chalkboard.

iggle ogn img swicky

Now ask students to give one or more meanings to each of those words. After they have given meanings to those four words, ask them if the words would still be nonsense words if people in the community began using them and attached meanings to them. Through discussion, we can

help students understand that a group of letters has no meaning or meanings until people decide what the group of sounds means. *Words do not automatically have meanings in and of themselves. People give meanings to words.*

Words That Indicate Relationships

Now let's return to the first list. Do all words on it have meanings? Students will probably answer yes. But what about *to?* Can students define *to* as it stands alone? Or can they only tell what it "means" when they see it in sentences? Even in a sentence, does *to* actually "mean" something, or does it indicate relationships between words, or does it show the position of one thing to another, or does it indicate the result of an action? Does *to* have "meanings" in these sentences?

1. He wanted to help the woman across the street. (Here, *to* has no meaning *per se*; it is the sign of the infinitive.)
2. Cal Ripken, Jr., ran to first base. (*To* is used as a function word indicating where.)
3. The early Greeks built temples to their gods. (*To* is used as a function word to indicate purpose.)
4. The prisoner was sentenced to death. (*To* is used as a function word to indicate determined end.)
5. She rose to fame rapidly. (*To* is used as a function word to indicate condition.)

We could give many more examples of the multiple functions of *to*, but each example would only show that *to* does not, by itself, denote or connote anything; it serves to indicate some relationship of the word it connects to the rest of the sentence. Students can find denotations of *to* in dictionaries; however, they will note that in almost every instance an example of the word as it is used in a phrase is given to indicate its meaning in a particular context.

Suggested Activities

1. Students divide into groups and write at least three sentences for each of the following words. After re-examining the sample sentences for *to*, students make certain that the connecting word is used to show a different relationship with the other words in each of the three sentences.

   at from in of on with

2. Each group of students, in turn, presents its sentences for a particular word to the class. Students in the other groups try to determine the "meaning" of the word in its context.

After students have performed the two activities, an appropriate question for the class to consider is: "Are sounds like *to* and *at* words?" In discussion, student should decide that of course they are words, but they do not "mean" in the same way that most other words do. A connecting word "means" in a different way from a word which by itself has a core of meanings. The "meaning" of *to* and *at* derive from their use in sentences, not from a core of definitions that we give those words.

More about Meanings

Now let's look again at that first column of words on the first list:

spring astronaut love fall to

If we ask students what *spring* means instead of asking for the meanings of *spring,* at least one student might ask what kind of *spring* we mean. The student should be congratulated for seeing that the word *spring* can refer to a number of things: a season of the year; a leap or jump; an elastic or bounding movement; a stream of water flowing from the earth; or a device, usually made of wire or steel coiled spirally, which recovers its shape after being compressed or bent. These, of course, are only a few meanings of *spring. The American College Dictionary* includes fifteen entries for *spring* used as an intransitive verb, ten as a transitive verb, thirteen as a noun, and two as an adjective. Consequently, we can see that *spring* does not have one meaning, but several meanings.

For the second word, *astronaut*, we can find two definitions in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*: 1. "a traveler in interplanetary space," and 2. "a pupil, devotee, or advocate of astronautics." Although we do not plan to go into connotations until later in this unit, you may wish to ask students what they think of when they hear the word *astronaut*. Students will probably respond with words like hero, brave, courageous, superman, and so on. Some students may become quite excited and want to talk about the latest exploits of male and female astronauts. You may simply note at this stage that the mere mention of *astronaut* excites some students. Why? When students hear the word, do they think only of its dictionary meaning? Or do other thoughts enter their minds?

Suggested Activities

1. Let's take *run* as an example of a word that has come to refer to a number of different things. You may want to make copies of the following sentences or of sentences like them and give them to students, or you may prefer to read the sentences and ask students what the word *run* refers to in each sentence:

    1. The shortstop's single scored the winning run.
    2. "That was a good run," the track coach said.
    3. She told her husband that he should not run up big bills.
    4. That man never stops; he is always on the run.
    5. That ill-mannered child has the complete run of the house.
    6. The run on the banks in 1929 caused serious trouble for the United States.
    7. In the long run you are better off if you do not buy too many things for which you cannot pay cash.
    8. That musical composition is difficult because of its intricate run.
    9. The mine had a huge run of silver.
    10. The candidate announced that he will run for state senator.
    11. When the smelt run, the fishermen in northern Michigan get excited.
    12. The rapid reader is one who has learned to run his eyes down a page quickly.
    13. He wants to run up to Chicago for the weekend.
    14. The trainer says that he will not run the horse in the next race.
    15. She had a run in her stocking.

Students will have little difficulty making additional sentences in which the word *run* stands for a different action or thing. By examining such sentences, they should see that humans have extended the meaning of *run* to refer to a great number of objects or actions.

Students can find more than fifty meanings of *run* in some dictionaries. *The American College Dictionary* lists 104; *Macmillan's School Dictionary 2* gives 54 plus 16 idioms; *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition* has 135 definitions: *The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary* lists 37; and *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language* gives 87 definitions.

When students hear or read the word *run* in a sentence, how can they tell which *run* is meant by the speaker or writer? By reexamining the sentences above, they should conclude that they can learn the meaning only from the entire sentence. Thus they have concluded that words sometimes can be dealt with only in context. In other words, the listener or reader can only infer what is meant after examining all the words surrounding the word in question.

Note: The fourth unit in this book deals with how words change meaning in time and context, so we will not go into contextual meanings of words in great detail now. However, we feel that it is necessary for students at this stage to recognize that the "meaning" of a word can frequently be determined only after a careful examination of its use in a sentence. Other clues to meaning must also be considered. For example, words change meaning in time and they also change meaning by intonation. Students will become well aware of these changes after they have studied the fourth unit in this book. For the time being, it is necessary only for them to be aware of other clues to meaning besides context.

2. Students divide into groups and give as many meanings as they can to these words:

   iron set turn draw bank follow

Then each group selects two of those words and creates as many sentences as they can for each word. For each sentence, they use the word so that a different meaning is obvious. Then each group shares its sentences with another group, asking the second group if it can determine the meaning intended from the context.

Why Some Words Have Many Meanings

Why do some words have so many meanings? How do the makers of dictionaries decide what these words mean? How can we be certain that we are using a word correctly if it means so many different things?

These are some of the questions that should occur to students as they become aware of the many dictionary definitions of a word. We will not attempt to answer these questions fully at this point; however, we will try to give students enough information to stimulate their interest and to make them curious about words. The answers to the three questions we have raised in this paragraph, as well as answers to additional questions, will grow clearer as students work through the language sequence in this book.

Let's take those first three questions one at a time and give students some information.

Why do some words have so many meanings? Language is a miracle—a miracle of humankind. As early humans examined their environment, they learned that they must give names to the objects around them, to their thoughts, and to their actions in order to communicate with one another. For years linguists have advanced various theories about how humans attempted to affix a series of sounds to objects as oral symbols for the object. Many of those theories have been discredited. However, it is safe to theorize that, as humans gave names to objects, people accepted the series of sounds that were put together to make the names and that they agreed that these sounds referred to specific objects, actions, ideas, and so forth. As humankind developed a more complex society, they discovered that they needed many more words, or series of sounds, to name the objects around them. People formed new words, borrowed words from other languages, and extended the meanings of existing words in their vocabulary to refer to different objects. Thus, in many instances, a single word could be made to refer to a number of different objects. Therefore, a speaker using a word that could refer to a number of different objects found it necessary to make it clear by the rest of the words in the sentence which object was being referred to.

The Multiple Meanings of the Word *Nice*

Let's take *nice* as an example of a word to which human beings have given a number of different meanings in its four hundred year history in the English language.

In 1513, for example, a writer might have used the word *nice* to mean that a certain piece of work required or involved great precision, accuracy, or minuteness. Therefore, if a writer wrote that something was "a *nice* piece of work," the writer meant that it required great skill to make. The word *nice* still retains this meaning in some contexts today. Only thirty-eight years later, in 1551, a writer may have used *nice*, in referring to a person, to mean that the person was extremely careful and precise or that the person was punctilious or difficult to please or satisfy. Nine years later, in 1560, people also used the word *nice* to mean that a person was foolish or stupid. By 1604 the word had acquired the additional meanings of unimportant and trivial. Not until 1830 did people use the word *nice* in the way that we most frequently use it today, that is, to mean kind, considerate, or pleasant.

Since words change meaning in time, it is necessary for the sensitive reader of literature to be aware of these changes to fully understand what the writer means by a certain word.

Another important clue to meaning comes in oral discourse. We can frequently tell what a person means by the ways a word is said. Again, let's take the word *nice* as an example. Upon receiving a present for her birthday, a mother may exclaim, "That's nice." In such a context, the student's mother is probably very pleased with the present and she means that not only the giving of the present was a pleasant surprise but that the present itself was appreciated. On the other hand, if a student comes home from school late and gives a lame excuse for being tardy, the student's mother may exclaim, "That's nice." By the way that she says the word and by the expression on her face, the student can immediately infer that mother does not accept the action as being something pleasant but that she is using the word *nice* sarcastically.

Words, then, take on different meanings in context, in time, and through intonation patterns.

How Are Dictionaries Made?

So far we still haven't found out how dictionary makers decide the meanings of words. Dictionary makers, or *lexicographers* as they are called, collect many examples of different uses of a word in books, magazines, journals, newspapers, and printed speeches. They study these uses very carefully in context. After studying numerous uses of a word, they arrive at definitions of the word which are recorded in the dictionary. (To compile a dictionary like *Webster's Third, Webster's New World Dictionary,* or *The Random House Dictionary,* large staffs of specialists spend years examining many uses of words in context before they arrive at definitions.) These can be called dictionary, or *lexical*, definitions. They are also called the words *denotations*; more about this later.

In a dictionary, each entry provides the objective meaning or group of meanings for a particular word. For example, the word *sleep* has a definite meaning: the act of bodily rest that we perform in the evening in a reclining position. If we check the entry for the word *asleep* in *The American College Dictionary,* we find these definitions: "1. in or into a state of sleep.-adj. 2. sleeping. 3. dormant; inactive. 4. (of the foot, hand, leg, etc.) numb. 5. dead."

Core Meanings

These entries give us the common core of meanings assigned to the word *asleep*. From this core we can infer what writers or speakers mean when they declare: "Harry was asleep at the switch and did not do what we wanted him to." Or, "His mind was asleep during the test."

Let's look at a very common word that has a definite core of meanings. *The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary* lists these definitions for *cat*: "1. a small, four-footed, flesh-eating mammal often kept as a pet or for catching mice. 2. any animal of the group including cats, lions, tigers, leopards, etc. 3. animal something like a cat. 4. a mean, spiteful woman. 5. catfish. 6. cat-o'-nine-tails. 7. tackle for hoisting an anchor. 8. *let the cat out of the bag,* tell a secret.-v. hoist (an anchor) and fasten it to a beam on the ship's side."

According to *The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary*, the word *cat* has the above core of meanings. The dictionary also defined the word cat as it is used in the idiomatic expression "let the cat out of the bag." But are these the only meanings of *cat*? What associations do we make when we hear the word *cat*? If students understand that the dictionary definitions give us the common core of objective, specific meanings for each word, then they are ready to move on to another group of meanings that are equally important.

Denotations and Connotations

Most words have clear, specific meanings—"dictionary definitions," so to speak. For example, when we look up the word *house* in a dictionary, we expect to see that it is "a building that serves as living quarters," and most of us agree that this is its most commonly used meaning. As we've said, these literal, objective meanings are called *denotations*.

In addition, many words can acquire *connotations* that go beyond their literal meanings. Connotations are the subjective, purely personal meanings we associate with certain words that bring back strong memories or remind of us significant feelings or events. For example, the dictionary may say that a *vacation* is "a period of rest away from work," but the word will have one connotation for someone who remembers a pleasant, relaxing week in the mountains and a very different connotation for someone who remembers only bad weather, travel delays, lost luggage, and all the other hassles that can descend on unsuspecting travelers.

To introduce students to the idea of connotative, or associative, meanings of words, you might read and discuss the sentences below. After you read each one, ask students what comes to mind when they see or hear each italicized word.

1. Dad gets upset every time I call my older sister a *cat*.
2. I often wonder why Jasper is my *boss* even though he is *competent*.
3. I followed the *nurse* into the office where the *doctor* was waiting.
4. We spent three weeks at the *lake* where I met several other *teenagers*.
5. *Mother* knocked on my *bedroom* door and told me it was time to go to *school*.

6. The *dentist* smiled as he asked me to open my mouth.
7. Sherry, a *star athlete*, sometimes plays like a *pro.*

How many different associations came from the class for each word? Why didn't all students have the same experiences with each word? You might note here that the experiences, feelings, and thoughts that we associate with a word are call its connotative or associative meanings.

Suggested Activities

1. Students write sentences for each of the following words.

carnival	airplane	dog	lake
hero	pretty	handsome	politician
teacher	algebra	bully	baby

After you ask for sample sentences for each of the words, you might ask students to answer these questions for each word:

- ❒ What are the dictionary definitions of the word _____?
- ❒ What other meaning might you associate with the word _____? Why?
- ❒ When you read or hear the word _____, what experiences do you associate with it? (Remind students that if the experiences are personal in nature, they do not need to reveal them.)
- ❒ When you read or hear the word _____, does it trigger an emotional response?
- ❒ Why? (Again you might note that students need not reveal responses that are personal in nature.)
- ❒ How many of us associate the same meanings with the word _____?

Note: The context for each italicized word should have helped students decide its denotative meanings as well as its connotative meanings. But context is not always necessary.

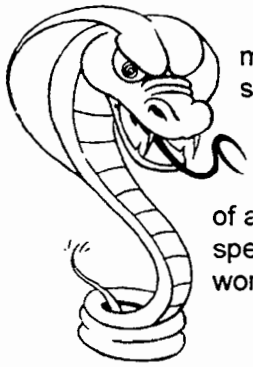
2. Ask students to write at least one definition for each of the words on the list given in Question 1 and to record their associative meanings for each word.

Sample Associations: Several students may be reminded of the fun they had at a *carnival* and associate the word with pleasant memories. They may write such responses as Ferris wheel, merry-go-round, cotton candy, taffy apples, fun house, or just fun. But one student may recall that she got cotton candy on her blouse and jeans and that her mother was cross with her when she got home. Another student may recall that he overate; therefore, a carnival is associated with a stomach ache.

You may want to repeat several of the student-written sentences that will help the class see that some words, even in isolation, call to mind a variety of experiences and feelings. But if they are asked to define the words written on the list, all students may arrive at the same general definitions. In other words, carnival designates the same *thing* to all students, but not all students feel the same way about carnivals because they have had different experiences at them.

As you call for responses to the words, point out two kinds of associated meaning: *public* and *private*. For example, most students associate fun with a carnival; this is a public meaning that is generally associated with the word by most people. On the other hand, the girl who associates carnival with cotton candy and stained clothes has a private meaning, an association that may not come to the mind of more than one person since it arose from an individual experience.

It's the Way You Said It



Many people learn to associate definite meanings with words because of the way the words sound when they are spoken. For example, consider the words *sneak* and *snake*. Both begin with *sn*, and both are frequently hissed when they are spoken. As a person grows up, they become aware of the feeling of a speaker toward a certain word by the tone the speaker employs when the word is pronounced. In other words, "It's not what you said but the way you said it."

Have students think of words that have unpleasant connotations because of the way they are used in sentences and because of the way they are pronounced. For example, in the sentence, "He's a weasel," the very tone employed by the speaker may give the listener an unpleasant connotation.

Suggested Activity

Have students make up sentences in which, by their tone, they give an unpleasant connotation to a word that may normally carry a pleasant connotation. (See suggested list below.) For example, the word *carnival* in the following sentence can carry either a pleasant or unpleasant connotation, depending on the tone the speaker employs and depending on how the word is emphasized. "The dance had a *carnival* atmosphere." If the speaker hits the word lightly, the speaker conveys that a carnival atmosphere is desirable since it is pleasant, gay, full of fun. If the word is hit hard and is spat out, the speaker may convey that such an atmosphere is sinful or otherwise unpleasant.

Here is a suggested list of words and students can add more:

friend	brother	sister	school
algebra	police officer	principal	teacher
television	English class	politician	fair
Halloween	bus	holiday	Valentine's Day

Two Kinds of Meaning

By this time, students should understand that many words have two kinds of meaning. As we said earlier, *denotative* meanings of words are the ones found in dictionaries, while *connotative* meanings derive from the thoughts that run through a person's mind when they hear a certain word because of their experiences with it or because of the various meanings attached to the word by society.

Students should be asked to determine how words take on particular associations that they may not be able to find in the dictionary. Some of the reasons have been listed above, and there are others.

Some words take on an aura of respectability because they are normally associated with religion, with the happy home, with formal education, or with undisputed greatness. Other words take on the aura of respectability because they are associated with a branch of knowledge that many persons are not familiar with. For example, in advertising products, advertisers will frequently say that a certain product contains *hexasodium* or some such a compounded scientific term. What do students think when they hear the word *hexasodium*? Does the mere fact

that *hexasodium* is an ingredient with a scientific sound mean that the product is good? Why is the product good? What do students associate with *hexasodium*?

Suggested Activity

Students listen to commercials for words and phrases that reflect scientific respectability and for words and phrases that suggest a superior product or professional endorsement, such as *new and improved* and *doctor-tested*. They make a list of such words and bring them to the class.

Ask students if they would use the products only because they contain "hexa-X" or whatever the scientific term is. Do they know what "hexa-X" is? If they do not know what it is, and if they have answered that they would use the product because it contains "hexa-X," then why would they use this product? Are they unconsciously aware of the scientific respectability that comes with certain words? Are they afraid to challenge certain words because they do not know what they mean? Or do they think that because a product is advertised that it must be good regardless of what it contains? What makes them associate goodness with a certain product? Is it the words used? Is it the context in which the product is presented? Is it the tone of voice that the announcer uses in pronouncing certain words?

The Power of Words

The power of words, then, lies not only in their designated meanings but also in their associated meanings. The emotions that they evoke, the images that they create in the mind, and the sensory reactions that they create all add to the power of words through their associated meanings. You have probably called students' attention to connotative meanings of words in poems that they are studying. You have probably also called their attention to the connotative meanings of words as students read both fiction and non-fiction. Students should learn that if they begin responding to language by thinking of the various meanings associated with words, they will begin enjoying literature more and will become much more aware of what people might mean when they talk.

So What's a Dictionary For?

After students have become acquainted with connotative meanings of words, they may wonder just how valuable their dictionary is. In other words, they may ask: "So what's a dictionary for?"

Seventh grade students, for example, have long been using dictionaries of one kind or another. And, perhaps, some have even acquired skill in using a good standard dictionary to check spelling, definitions, synonyms, antonyms, syllabication, pronunciation, and capitalization. Therefore, some students may wonder why they should examine the dictionary again.

Exploratory Questions

If you ask questions like the ones given below, students may become aware of their need to explore the dictionary once more.

1. If you look up a word in a dictionary and you find that it has two possible spellings, how do you know which spelling is preferred?
2. If a dictionary entry gives more than one definition of a word, how can you tell which is the most common meaning?
3. How do you pronounce *presentation*? Is there a preferred pronunciation? How do you know which pronunciation of a word is considered standard?
4. How can you tell if a word is usually used only in slang expressions? How can you tell if a word is used primarily in everyday speech but not in writing, or if it is used primarily by uneducated persons?
5. If you are writing a composition and you need to divide a word at the end of a line, how can your dictionary help you? What marks are used to show syllabication?
6. What are synonyms? antonyms? homonyms? homographs? Does your dictionary contain examples of each?
7. Does your dictionary tell you the origin of a word? If so, where is this information given in the entry?
8. Does your dictionary ever help you to see what a word refers to? In other words, are there maps, pictures, or diagrams?
9. Does your dictionary tell you how a word is used in a sentence? Does it tell you whether a word can function as a noun, a verb, an adjective, or an adverb?

10. Does your dictionary show you how to form the past tense of a verb? the plural of a noun? the comparative degree of an adjective?
11. Does your dictionary identify prominent persons? literary characters? Biblical characters? prominent places?

    Note: If students can answer those questions without difficulty and if they can demonstrate that they know how to find various kinds of information about words, then they may not need this section of this unit. If, however, they are not certain just what information they can find in a dictionary, they may need to cover all or part of the exercises in this section.

Examining Entry Words

In the exercises that follow, we will ask questions to help students understand the great amount of information that is packed into an entry word. We suggest that you modify the questions, if necessary, for your students. *If you discover that students already know how to use dictionaries, you may skip the rest of this unit or ask questions only for those parts of entry words that students do not understand fully.*

Note: We assume that you will call students' attention to the important introductory material in each dictionary. Students cannot answer the questions without knowing how a specific dictionary arranges its entry words, indicates pronunciation, and so forth.

The questions address the following information in entry words:

1. arrangement of entries
2. pronunciation
3. spelling
4. syllabication
5. pictures, diagrams, maps
6. inflected forms (plurals and principal parts of verbs)
7. parts of speech
8. levels of usage
9. synonyms, antonyms, homonyms, homographs, and idioms
10. etymology and derivatives
11. literary allusions

To acquaint students with dictionaries, not just *a* dictionary, you should have, in addition to the class set, single copies of four or five other dictionaries. The activities in this unit are based on these dictionaries: *The American College Dictionary, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Funk & Wagnall's Standard College Dictionary, The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary, Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, Webster's Third New International Dictionary, and Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary.*

Arrangement of Entries

Students frequently refer to a dictionary without knowing anything about its system of entries. The following questions may prove useful:

1. How are words arranged in the dictionary you are using? in another dictionary?
2. Which is the most common definition in the dictionary you are using? in another dictionary?
3. Where can you find information about the listing of definitions?
4. What information is given with each entry in the dictionary you are using? in another dictionary?

Pronunciation

How do you know how to pronounce the words in the dictionary you are using? in another dictionary? Is the same pronunciation key used in all dictionaries? What do you need to read before you try to pronounce the first word you look up in a dictionary other than the one you are using? (You may decide that it is necessary to review the pronunciation keys.)

Spelling

Some words can be spelled in more than one way. The question is, which is correct or more acceptable? To become familiar with how dictionaries treat variant spellings, students may be asked these questions:

1. If more than one spelling is listed in a dictionary, how can you tell which one is preferred? Where do you find the answer to that question in your dictionary? in another dictionary?
2. Look up the word *enclose* and its alternative spelling, *inclose*. Which is the preferred spelling? How do you know?
3. Look up the word *color* in your dictionary. What does "also esp. Brit." mean? Where does it appear in the dictionary you are using? in another dictionary?
4. Look up the word *adviser.* Are two spellings of the word given in your dictionary? If so, is there any explanation of the two spellings?
5. How do you know when a word can be abbreviated? Look up the abbreviation *mag.* in *The Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary*. Compare it with entries in other dictionaries.

Syllabication

The following questions may help students understand how words are divided into syllables.

1. Look up the word *machinery*. How is the word divided into syllables? What mark is used in your dictionary to show syllables? in another dictionary?
2. Look up *made-up.* How is it divided? What mark is used in the entry? Is the entry *make up* also hyphenated? How do you know that it is two words? Is *make up* listed as two words in all dictionaries, or is it hyphenated in some? In which dictionaries is it hyphenated?
3. Look up the word *making* in several dictionaries. Which dictionaries give you compound words that are formed with making? Which of the compounds are two words? Which are one word?

Pictures, Diagrams, and Maps

Pictures, diagrams, and maps are valuable additions to any dictionary. Although students may be aware of their inclusion in the dictionary they are using, they seldom realize the importance of these items. The following activities may make students more aware of the usefulness of pictures, diagrams, and maps.

1. Draw an English *horn*.
2. What is unusual about *Pegasus*?
3. Describe a *flamingo*.
4. What bodies of water border *India*?
5. Draw a diagram showing the *apogee* of the orbit of the moon around the earth.
6. Thumb through the pages of your dictionary noting the maps, diagrams, and drawings. What generalization can you make about their inclusion in dictionaries? Or, to put it another way, why do you think editors decide to include visual aids with certain words? What kinds of words do they select?

Inflected Forms of Nouns and Verbs

You may want to remind students of the importance of inflections in the English language, especially in showing plural nouns (book, book**s**; glass, glass**es**) and the various forms of verbs (look, look**s**, look**ed**, look**ing**).

The following questions may make students more aware of the information they can find about inflections.

1. Are the plural forms of all nouns given in your dictionary? in another dictionary? What system did the editors of the dictionary you are using follow for giving inflected forms? Where do you find an explanation of their system? Are the systems the same for all dictionaries? If not, how do they differ?
2. What is the plural form of *brother-in-law*? of *index*?
3. What is the past tense of *ricochet*? If more than one form is given, which is preferred? How do you know?

4. What are the principal parts of the verb *climb*? Are all given in your dictionary? in another dictionary? What are the principal parts of the verb *open*? Are all given in your dictionary? in another dictionary? Why or why not?
5. Is there a principal part of the verb *picnic* that is spelled *picnicking*?
6. What is the singular form of *data*? Is *alumnus* the singular or plural form? Does *alumnus* refer to a man or a woman?

Parts of Speech

Remind students of the standard parts of speech usually cited in grammar study:

Nouns	Adverbs
Pronouns	Prepositions
Verbs	Conjunctions
Adjectives	Interjections

When they study dictionary entries, students should soon realize that many words can function as more than one part of speech; it all depends on how the word is used in each sentence. In particular, many nouns can be used as verbs: We can put something on the *table*, or the chairman of a committee can *table* a motion; we can throw a *rock* into the ocean, or we can *rock* the baby to sleep.

The following questions will help students understand how parts of speech are designated in dictionaries.

1. Does your dictionary list the parts of speech of a word? Can one word, according to the dictionary you are using, be used as more than one part of speech?
2. Look up the word *accord*. As what part(s) of speech can it be used?
3. Does the dictionary you are using indicate that a verb may be of a particular kind? What distinction among verbs does your dictionary make? Can some verbs be used in more than one way (i.e., transitive or intransitive)?

Levels of Usage

Lexicographers record language as it is used; usually they do not prescribe how words must be used or which words should not be used in formal conversation or writing. Lexicographers know that time, place, and occasion govern a person's choice of words. To indicate how words are used, some lexicographers label words as slang, informal, standard, colloquial, obsolete, archaic, poetic, and British. Levels of usage should be explained fully to students, and the following activities may help.

1. What is a colloquialism? Look up the word in more than one dictionary.
2. What is slang? Are slang words included in the dictionary you are using? If so, why?
3. What is a dialect? What words can you find in your dictionary that are labeled *dial.*?
4. What labels indicating levels of usage do the editors of your dictionary use? How do they define the various levels? Do their labels differ from those used by editors of other dictionaries? If so, how? (You may wish to introduce the concept of usage levels employed by the editors of *Webster's Third* and *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language.* You will want to read the introductory material in both dictionaries carefully before discussing lexicographers' approach to levels of usage with the class.)
5. Look up the words *ain't, corn, drop, adorable, make-up* in your dictionary. What usage labels are given for each word? Compare the entries of these words in your dictionary with those of several other dictionaries.
6. When can you use *dove* as the past tense of dive?
7. What is the level of usage given in the entry for *ball up*? What usage label do you find behind the word *belike*?
8. In which part of the country is the word *arroyo* used?
9. Check several dictionaries for the entry of *poke*, meaning a bag or sack. What label(s) are given?
10. Entries for some words are labeled *Naut., Bot., Biol.*, and so forth. Are these usage levels? If not, what are they?

Synonyms, Antonyms, Homophones, Homographs, and Idioms

Make sure students understand the meaning of each term:

synonyms Words that have the same or almost the same meaning (*big*, *large*, *huge*).

antonyms Words that have opposite meanings (*up* and *down*; *big* and *small*).

homophones Words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings (*hear* and *here*; *to*, *too*, and *two*).

homographs Words with the same spelling but different meanings and sometimes different pronunciations (*bark* of a tree, *bark* of a dog; *bow* of a ship, *bow* and arrow).

idioms Phrases that have peculiar, individual meanings which cannot be determined by the literal definitions of individual words (*up the creek; down in the dumps; live it up; look down your nose*).

Students sometimes use a dictionary to find a synonym for a word that they have used too many times in a composition. Occasionally, they do not discriminate in their choice of synonyms, but merely take the first one they find. The following activities can help them make proper use of the dictionary as a writing tool.

1. Look up the words *imagination* and *make up* and check the entries after the abbreviation *syn*. What information are you given? Write sentences in which you use the synonyms for *make up* and *imagination.*
2. What is a synonym? How did the editors of the dictionary you are using select words for which they recorded synonyms? What do the editors say about their presentation of synonyms?
3. Look up the word *absolve*. What appears in the entry after *ant.*? What is an antonym? Does your dictionary give antonyms? If so, for which words? What do the editors say about the inclusion of antonyms?

4. What are homonyms and homographs? Give examples of each. In the dictionary you are using, have the editors explained homonyms or homographs? If so, what do they say?
5. Look up the words *account* and *advantage* in *Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language.* What are the final entries under these words? What are these phrases called? What do the editors say about idiomatic phrases? Are idiomatic phrases included in other dictionaries? How are they entered? How does the listing of idiomatic phrases help you?

Etymology and Derivatives

As students become increasingly familiar with the wealth of material contained in dictionaries, they will begin to realize that many words, or their ancestors, have been with us for centuries. They will also realize that English has borrowed thousands of words from other languages.

The study of word histories and origins is called *etymology*. Many dictionaries show the etymology of various words: what language they originated in, when they entered English, how their spellings and meanings may have altered, and so on. To get students interested in word origins, the following exercises may help.

1. Look up these words in the dictionary: alumnus, induce, portico, beau, drive-in, bambino. Are they English words? If not, from what languages do they come? Can you tell how long they have been a part of the English language?
2. Have you noticed the abbreviations OE or ME in the dictionary entries? What do these abbreviations mean? In which section of the dictionary would you look if you did not know the meanings of these abbreviations? What does the symbol < mean? What do the following abbreviations stand for?

   AF, Am.E., Am.Ind., Am.Sp., E, F, G, Gk., Cme., HG, Hindu., Ital., L, LG, LGk., LL, M, ME, Med., Med.Gk., Med.L, MF, MHG, MLG, NL, O, OE, OF, OHG, Pg., Scand., Skt., Sp., VL.

   Can you find additional abbreviations in the language keys in other dictionaries?

3. What is a derivative? What are prefixes? What are suffixes? How does a knowledge of them help you increase your vocabulary?
4. Look up the prefix *mal-* in the *Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary*. Why are 33 words listed in this entry?
5. What does the suffix *-able* mean? What are the variant forms of this suffix?

Literary Allusions

As students read the literature suggested for their grade level, they will encounter Biblical, mythical, and literary allusions. Students may know some of the persons mentioned in the stories, but they may be stumped by others. A few minutes with the dictionary will give them some help, and questions like these may pave the way:

1. Who are the following?

Mercury	Atlas	Pegasus	Narcissus
Nathan	Esther	Mars	Helenus
Scrooge	Haran al-Rashid		

2. Can you find the following in your dictionary?

Hudson Bay	Helena	Heliopolis
Cornhusker State	Hoosier State	

3. Who were the following persons? Is your dictionary of help in identifying them?

Susan B. Anthony	James Bowie	Tycho Brahe
Marie Curie	Alfred Dreyfus	Stephen Foster
Jacques Cartier	Thurgood Marshall	

4. Do you find proper names in *Webster's Third?* If not, why?

Review

Students may now be asked the same questions that were given before they started these exercises. They should be able to answer them readily and clearly. They should also be able to generalize about dictionaries and what they are for. You may decide to conclude this unit by assigning a theme topic like one of these:

1. In a letter to a friend who doesn't like to look up words, persuade your friend that a dictionary is a warehouse of information that can be useful.
2. In a short theme, explain why usage labels appear in most dictionaries and tell why they can be useful.
3. In a short theme, indicate why a knowledge of word origins is or is not valuable.

HOW WORDS ARE FORMED

Objectives

In this unit, students will consider how speakers of English added words to the language, how surnames developed, and how they can discover possible meanings of their own and their classmates' surnames. They will also examine literature and the mass media and discuss character names.

Language

Language is humankind's most important invention. Without it, we would have been unable to build bridges and empires, to harness the elements of nature for our own use, or to acquire knowledge of the world around us and to impart that knowledge to others. Without language, humankind would have lived as the other animals live.

With language, humans examined the world around them and communicated their knowledge to one another. As awareness of their world increased, people found that they needed to add words to describe their surroundings, to name neighbors, to express thoughts, to convey attitudes, and to explain inventions. Taking advantage of their own language, people formed new words by combining two words or by adding prefixes and suffixes to existing words. Taking advantage of other languages, they borrowed words, combined two borrowed words, or added prefixes and suffixes to borrowed words. As they borrowed words, people changed them slightly in spelling or pronunciation—if at all. If people could not get the word they needed by borrowing, by adding a prefix or suffix to an existing word, or by combining two words, then they coined new words.

This unit is concerned with the addition of words to the English language through affixation, compounding, coinage, and borrowing. Prefixes and suffixes are treated in companion volumes. Therefore, this unit will not emphasize those methods of language development.

What's in a Name?

Most students take pride in their own names. Taking their surnames for granted, students rarely, if ever, pause to consider how their names were formed. Students know that they have a given name and a surname and that the two are useful for identification. Students have probably never considered the confusion that would arise if they and everyone else in the school had only given names.

In a class that has several students named Bill, Bob, Mike, Jennifer, Lisa, or Mary, you may be able to illustrate the value of surnames and launch this unit by saying "Language is humankind's most important invention" and asking "Do you agree with that statement, Bill?" Without looking at the class and without giving any indication of which Bill you are calling on, the Bills will probably wonder who should answer. Giving little time for response, you ask the same question of the Jennifers, Lisas, Marys, Mikes, or Bobs without indicating which one you mean.

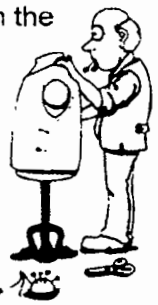
After the students ask which is being called on, you can have them consider the confusion that would arise if students had only given names. Through discussion, students should conclude it would be necessary to devise some system of distinguishing the Jennifers, Lisas, Marys, Bobs, Mikes, and Bills. Students may suggest that they be called Lisa One, Lisa Two, Lisa Three, and so forth. If students make that suggestion, these questions should arise: "Who will be Lisa One? Who will decide?"

Centuries ago, English-speaking people had to solve the problem of confusion with names. Most people had only given names. In small towns where only one William lived, there was no problem. But if a second William moved to the town, problems of identification arose. Therefore, people began devising methods of distinguishing themselves and their sons and daughters from others who had similar given names. And people let their imagination and inventiveness have free rein.

Surnames

Have students consider the ways early humans could distinguish between the two Williams living in the same town. If one came from Westchester, he might be called William of Westchester. William or his neighbors would shorten the name to William Westchester because people have a tendency to shorten words. But only one of the two

Williams has been taken care of. What do we do with the other? Is he bold? If so, why not call him William Bold or William Hardy? Or is he strong? If so, why not call him William Strong or William Stout? If he's dark in coloring, he could be called William Black, or Brown, or Dunn, or Schwartz—if he's from Germany. If he's red-haired or red-faced, he could be William Reed, or William Reid, or William Roth, or William Russell.



Other means of identification occurred to persons in the early period of English history. If one William was a tailor and the other a miller, they may have been known as William Taylor and William Miller. If one was the son of Thomas and the other the son of John, they could have been called William Thomson and William Johnson. Or, if one lived on or near a hill, he may have been known as William Hill, and the other, who lived near a church, may have been known as William Church or William Kirk. If one William came from Scotland and the other from Ireland, they may have called themselves William Scott and William Irish. Or possibly, as was the case with the oppressed Jews living in Central Europe who were not permitted to have family names, the two Williams may have named themselves after objects they admired: William Jewel, or Gold, or Rose, or Prince, or Stein (German word for *stone*, usually meaning *gem*).

Thus in early England people found that they could distinguish themselves from others by adding a name to their given name, and they passed this family name, or surname, on to sons and daughters. One of the foremost ways of identification was to name a child after his father. This was done by adding a prefix or suffix to a father's name or nickname. The most common prefixes that mean *son of* are *O-*, *Mac-*, *Mc-*, *Fitz-*, and *B-*. Thus today we have the surnames O'Brien, MacDonald, McCain, Fitzpatrick, and Bowen. Some of the suffixes meaning *son of* are *-son*, *-sen*, and *-s*. Thus we have Johnson, Petersen, Davis (son of David), and Jones (son of John).

Speakers of other languages have also named themselves after their parents. In German, the suffix *-sohn* appears in such names as Mendelssohn and Heinsohn. In Spain, a native may carry both the mother's and father's last names in their own; consequently, we read such names as Pedro Gonzalez y Sanchez. Russian has a number of suffixes indicating *son of or daughter of*. These include *-ov* and *-ova*, *-ev* and *-eva*, *-in* and *-ina*, *-oy* and *-oya*, *-ovich* and *-ovna*, and *-evich* and *-evna*.

The Ukrainian suffix *-enko* provides an excellent opportunity to show students how many different objects persons name themselves after and how their children retain these family names by adding *-enko* to them. This suffix literally means *son of*, and it has been attached to many different names, as the list below indicates:

Ivanenko	son of Ivan (John)	Bobrenko	son of the bibr (beaver)
Andrijenko	son of Andrig (Andrew)	Losenko	son of the los (elk)
Babenko	son of Baba (grandmother)	Caplenko	son of a heron
		Koropenko	son of a carp
Bratunenko	son of Bratun (brother)	Komarenko	son of a gnat
Usenko	son of a man with a long mustache	Dubenko	son of an oak
		Bilenko	son of white
Tu-enko	son of a Turk	Cornenko	son of black
Dnip enko	son of Dnipro (Dniper River)	Bidenko	son of misfortune
		Teslenko	son of Teslja (carpenter)

As was already pointed out and so graphically illustrated with the suffix *-enko*, people used several methods for giving themselves surnames in addition to adding son of or daughter of to a parent's name. They named themselves after their occupations, personal characteristics, nationalities, and places and things near their dwellings. They also named themselves after animals, colors, or things. We have the following names:

Occupation	**Personal Characteristics**
Archer	Armstrong (strong arms)
Bailey (bailiff)	Cruikshank (crooked leg)
Cantor (singer)	Fairfax (fair-haired)
Turner (woodworker)	Strong
Zimmerman (carpenter)	Weiss (fair in coloring)
Nationality	**Places/Things Near Dwelling**
Dane	Bach (brook)
English	Baum (tree)
Hollander	Field
Scott	Hurst
Welsh	London
Animals/Things	**Colors**
Bear	Brown
Fox	Black
Jewel	Green
Stone (also Stein)	White
Wolf (also Wolfe)	Russell (red; also Reed, Rhed, Roth)

Students may be interested in learning the ten most common surnames in the United States. As you write these names on the chalkboard, the students should have little difficulty figuring out how they came into the language: Smith, Johnson, Brown. Miller, Jones, Williams, Davis, Anderson, Wilson, and Taylor.

Suggested Exercises

1. You may wish to write the names of all students in the class on the chalkboard and have students try to decide what these surnames mean and how they were formed. Students should attempt to tell what their own names mean and what their origins are.

2. Students should look in novels for names that they think the novelists chose purposely to describe the traits of characters. Dickens provides a goldmine of descriptive names. Students may also want to discuss the names of television and cartoon characters. Are the names of certain characters significant? If so, what do the names reveal about the characters? Do they appeal to you, or are they so obvious that they insult your intelligence? Why or why not?

3. Pretending that they have been assigned to write a play with these ten characters, students choose the names for each:

   a 16-year-old heroine
   a 16-year-old best friend
   a 16-year-old jealous classmate
   a science teacher
   a minister
   a 16-year-old hero
   a 16-year-old buddy
   an 18-year-old buddy
   a vice principal
   a police officer

Compounds

In the following section, students discover that compounding is a very useful method for adding words to the English language. They also learn that compounds are frequently formed by joining two different parts of speech such as noun-verb, verb-noun, noun-adjective, adjective-noun, adjective-verb, adverb-verb, and so forth.

One of the oldest and most frequently used ways of forming new words is by taking two separate words and joining them together to describe something new. This process has been going on from Old English, which gave us *seacliff*, to present-day American English, which gave us *baby-sitter*. The process of compounding does not confine itself to only two words joined together. Consequently, we have expressions such as *fare-the-well*, *off-the-cuff*, and *nonetheless.*

- By combining noun with noun, we get words such as these:

airplane	apron-string	arrowhead	bearskin
bedclothes	bedside	bedtime	birthday
boyfriend	clothesbasket	disc jockey	girlfriend
handbook	headache	heartache	lipstick
necklace	railroad	rainbow	roller-coaster
swordfish	thumbnail	waistline	yearbook

- Combining a possessive or genitive noun with a noun, we get compounds such as:

bridesmaid salesperson salesroom spokesperson

- Adjectives can be combined with nouns to get the following compounds:

blackbird	highway	shortcake	sweet potato
briefcase	livestock	sweetheart	tenderfoot
greenhouse	madman		

- There are also many words that are formed with the adjective *new* and a place name, such as:

New Hampshire	New Mexico	New England
New Jersey	New York	

- By combining noun with adjective, we get such words as:

airtight	jet-black	threadbare	timeworn

- Placing an adverb before a noun, we get these words, among others:

afterthought	alongside	downtown
offbeat	offspring	outlaw
underdog	underwater	undergraduate

- By putting a verb with an adverb, we have such compounds as;

dugout	holdup	kickoff
takeoff	throwback	tip-off
toss-up	write-up	workout

- Putting noun with verb, we have:

babysit	manhunt	sideswipe	toothache
handpicked	nosebleed	tape-record	viewpoint

- By putting verb with noun, we get such words as:

crybaby	tugboat	snapdragon	workhouse
paydirt	turntable	wanderlust	workingman

- The combination of adjective and verb gives us such words as:

highjack	rapid-fire	short-circuit	shortcut	whitewash

- The combination of adverb with verb gives us such words as:

bypass	onrush	output	overprice	underplay
downcast	outfit	outreach	overthrow	underwrite

- By putting a noun with an adverb, we get such expressions as feet first, hands-down, and head-on.

- The combination of adverb with adjective gives us such words as evergreen, overripe, past due, and wellworn.

Suggested Exercises

1. Working in groups, students might list as many words as they can that have been formed by compounding two words: noun with noun, noun with verb, verb with noun, and so forth.

2. Students might list as many words as they can that have been formed by compounding more than two words.

3. To illustrate the pervasiveness of compound words in the English language, you might ask students to write a paragraph in which they describe their neighborhood without using any compound words, including neighborhood.

4. Compounding as a method of forming new words continues today. We only need enter a restaurant or a supermarket to find relatively new compounds such as these:

double cheeseburger	mushroom and swiss burger
triple cheeseburger	seven bean soup
cheese dog	blue ribbon country gravy
chili dog	low sodium medium salsa
kraut dog	

Working in pairs or small groups, students might list the relatively new compound words they find in restaurants, supermarkets, clothing stores, and on radio and television.

Note: A very useful companion book filled with interesting information on compound words and their histories is *Word History: A Resource Book for the Teacher* by Carl B. Smith and Eugene W. Reade (Bloomington, IN: ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication, 1994).

Prefixes and Suffixes

In this section, students discover that once they know the meanings of commonly used prefixes and suffixes they can frequently infer the meanings of unfamiliar words.

Make sure that students understand what prefixes and suffixes are and how they affect the words to which they are added.

- Prefixes are syllables added at the beginning of words to change their meaning: lock, **un**lock; like, **dis**like; play, **re**play; fiction, **non**fiction; and so on.
- Suffixes are syllables added to the end of words to change the way they are used in sentences. Many suffixes change verbs to nouns: govern, govern**ment**; act, act**ion**; play, play**er**; and so on. Other suffixes are used to create verbs (hard**en**, infl**ate**, critic**ize**) and still others are used to create adjectives (fam**ous**, self**ish**, us**able**, vis**ible**).

With the help of prefixes and suffixes, both native and borrowed, speakers of English have formed new words. This method of word making is one of the most common.

Since companion volumes will treat both prefixes and suffixes, this unit will not go into Latin and Greek prefixes and suffixes in great detail. However, it may be useful to point out to students that they can sometimes infer meanings of certain words if they understand the meanings of prefixes and suffixes like *in-*, *ir-*, *im-*, *un-*, *-ly*, *-ful*, and *-ize*.

Students may already know that certain prefixes and suffixes have been borrowed from other languages. For example, *ir-*, *im-*, *in-*, and *il-*, meaning *not*, come from Latin. Since these are Latin prefixes that are normally used with Latin roots, English has developed the prefix *un-*, meaning *not*, which is normally used with English words.

But we do not always use foreign prefixes only with foreign roots. For instance, we use the proper Latin prefixes before the words *imperfect*, *impossible*, *impatient*, *incorrect*, and *inexperienced*. On the other hand, we have the native prefix *un-* in front of borrowed words such as *unpleasant*, *undesirable*, and *unequal*, Occasionally, we have a national preference. For example, the British say *insanitary* and the Americans say *unsanitary*.

Indiscriminate Uses of Prefixes and Suffixes?

Some people dislike the indiscriminate use of prefixes and suffixes to form new words. In a few instances, these individuals are probably justified in criticizing the extensive use of certain suffixes in particular.

For example, the suffix *-ize* has been most useful in our language in such words as *antagonize*, *organize*, and *baptize*. Today, it seems to be one of the favorite suffixes employed by advertising copywriters. We find the suffix appearing frequently in such words as:

tenderize	winterize	finalize	regularize	prioritize
customize	motorize	maximize	actualize	finalize

Another favorite suffix is *-ee*. The use of it has given rise to words such as *draftee*, *trainee*, *employee*, *addressee*, and *selectee*.

Another frequently used, or overused, suffix is *-wise*. This can obviously be applied to almost any word in the language. Consequently, we hear speakers saying:

"Economywise, this is unsound."
"Religiouswise, he should not do this."
"Schoolwise, this is a good idea."
"Stock-marketwise, he should not invest now."
"Basketballwise, he is very smart."

In the same category as *-wise* we have the many combinations with *-crazy*, *-happy*, *-conscious*, *-struck*, *-minded*. Using these suffixes, native speakers form such words as *girl-crazy*, *slap-happy*, *trigger-happy*, *class-conscious*, *race-conscious*, *stagestruck*, *thunderstruck*, *social-minded*, and *security-minded*.

With prefixes, we have the typically American usage of *para-* in such words as *paratroops* and *parachute*. And, of course, the use of *super-* in such words as *supercolossal*, *superhighway*, and *supermarket*.

Suggested Exercises

1. Working in groups, students list as many American English words as they can that have been formed by adding these suffixes: *-ize*, *-ette*, *-ee*, *-buster*, *-eer*, *-ine*, *-orium*, *-ery*, *-cade*, *-mobile*, and *-wise*.

2. Students list as many words as they can that are typically American formations made by the addition of these prefixes: *de-*, *super-*, *semi-*, and *near-*.

3. Students should be reminded that we frequently judge people by their use of language. Then they should react to these sentences by writing a paragraph in which they comment on the persons who may have uttered them.

   "Saleswise, we must finalize our arguments and be marketwise before we maximize our supercolossal advertising campaign."

   "Emergencywise, you will be better off long-runwise if you customize your car and have it winterized by our service station now."

"Stagewise, we must maximize our plans so that we can wow the yokels, audiencewise."

"Guardwise and tacklewise," the coach said, "we are too small to win many games, offensewise."

In the following sections, students discover how words can be added to the language by blending, manufacturing words, and forming acronyms.

Blends and Manufactured Words

Blends are formed by taking parts of two words and putting them together to form a new word. This process seems to be very popular today, especially in the business world. As a result of this blending, or forming a portmanteau word, we have *motel*, which is a combination of motor and hotel. And the blight of the West Coast, the combination of smoke and fog, gave us *smog*. When a minister was forced to use a public auditorium for his services, he called it an *evangelorium*.

Other popular blends include *brunch* (breakfast and lunch), *flush* (flash and blush), *sitcom* (situation and comedy), *squash* (squeeze and crush), and *splatter* (splash and spatter). Lewis Carroll gave us *chortle* by combining chuckle with snort.

One of the most interesting blends is gerrymander, which is a combination of Gerry and salamander. This word combines the last name of a former governor of Massachusetts and vice-president of the United States, Elbridge Gerry, and salamander. While Gerry was Governor of Massachusetts, his party attempted to stay in power by dividing the state into electoral districts with more regard for politics than for geography. One district somewhat resembled a salamander. When artist Gilbert Stuart added head, wings, and claws to a map of the district, the result was called a gerrymander. This word caught on immediately and has become a derisive term in politics ever since.

Students should have little difficulty in supplying other manufactured words that have been made by blending either the names of the manufacturers or the products they produce. They may also suggest some of the blends that have been formed from cafeteria and another word. Today we have gaseteria, lubriteria (also lubritorium), auditeria (a schoolroom that is used as a cafeteria and auditorium), buffeteria, and so forth.

Acronyms

In the United States the acronym, or tip name, has become very popular. Acronyms are words made from the initial letters of other words. Some of the most common are CARE, which stands for Committee for American Relief in Europe, SHAPE (Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Powers in Europe), UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization), and UNICEF (United Nation's Children's Fund—note the insertion of the I and E so that it can be pronounced). Businesses have created acronyms by taking several letters from each of the words in their titles. Thus, we have Sekani (Standard Oil Company of New York), Nabisco (National Biscuit Company), Alcoa (Aluminum Company of America), and Scenic (Sun Oil Company).

During World War II, a number of acronyms became well known: WAC (Women's Army Corps), WRENS (Women's Royal Naval Service-note the insertion of the E so that it can be pronounced), and AWOL (absent without leave). The GI, with his droll sense of humor, coined the acronym to end all acronyms—SNAFU (situation normal, all fouled up).

Probably the most widely used of all acronyms is *O.K.* Of the many stories that have been written about the origin of *O.K.*, the most colorful is the one that attributes the coining of the acronym to a sign painter who had trouble spelling. For a Whig demonstration on September 15, 1840, in Urbana, Ohio, the sign painter allegedly wrote in large letters, "The people is oil korrect." This sign was in support of the candidacy of General William Henry Harrison for President. According to this story, the people who saw the sign were so attracted by the misspelling and by the politician identified with it, that they began saying, "Everything is oil korrect," or simply "O.K."

The origin of O.K. that seems to be most accurate also dates to the same Presidential campaign, but it is attributed to Martin Van Buren, the opponent of General William Henry Harrison. President Van Buren was born in the little town of Old Kinderhook, and his birthplace became a sort of rallying cry for the Democrats in the days of Van Buren's power. He became known as Old Kinderhook, which was shortened to O.K.

Regardless of its origin, the acronym O.K. is used around the world. It also illustrates how a word can be used as a noun, verb, or adjective through the process known as functional shift, which will be described later. Although O.K. originally came into the language as an adjective, it can be used as a noun (We need your O.K. on the paper) or as a verb (Will you O.K. this?). It is also frequently written without periods as OK, or it is spelled out as *okay*.

Suggested Exercises

1. Analyze the blends in the list below and tell what words were used to form them. Check your answers by consulting several desk dictionaries. Where in the entry words do you find the information you need to check your answers? Does each of the dictionaries you consulted give you the information you need?

aquacade	motorcade
boatel	motel
electrocute	cafetorium
smog	smaze
twinight	splatter
squawk	slanguage

2. Blending is still being used to form new words. We need only watch television, read food labels, and look at restaurant menus to find new blends. Here are three:

infotainment	A TV program that combines information and entertainment.
informercial	A TV program that combines information with a commercial, usually in a 30-minute program.
workaurant	Word in a television commercial used to describe a restaurant in which the waiters do all the work, thus distinguishing it from a cafeteria or fast food restaurant.

After students search for new blends in restaurants, supermarkets, and on radio and television, they make a list of such words.

Activity: An interesting activity could be the creation of a student-compiled dictionary of new compounds, blends, acronymns, slang, and so forth. See the activity at the end of the unit, "I No Understand Your Idiots."

3. In *Word Watch* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995), Anne Soukhanov noted that a circus animal handler had mated a male lion with a female tiger to produce a *liger*. The offspring of a male tiger and a female lion has been called a both a *tiglon* and a *tigon*. Professional zookeepers object to such genetic manipulation that produces "designer cats." Such crossbreeding has, however, produced the *beefalo*, the hybrid offspring of a buffalo and beef cattle. In canine circles, the crossbreeding of a cocker spaniel with a poodle has produced the *cockapoo*, and the hybrid of a Pekingese and poodle has been called a *peekapoo*.

   To get a better understanding of blends, students might have fun with the naming of these fictional hybrids:

rhinoceros/hippopotamus	elephant/mastodon
mouse/shrew	chipmunk/squirrel
dachshund/schnauzer	collie/greyhound
alley cat/Siamese	sparrow/canary
wren/marten	polar bear/grizzly

   Surely students can create better combinations than those suggested above.

4. What are the acronyms for the following organizations, businesses, and inventions?

   a. radio detecting and ranging
   b. sound navigation and ranging
   c. compact disk—read only memory
   d. American Oil Company
   e. National Biscuit Company
   f. Sun Oil Company
   g. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
   h. United Nations Childrens Fund
   i. Congress of Racial Equality
   j. National Aeronautics and Space Administration

Onomatopoeic and Iterative Words

In this section, students discover how people imitated sounds to produce onomatopoeic words. They also examine iterative or reduplicative words in which the second part of the word is duplicated, changed slightly, or rhymes with the first.

Some early students of language thought that human beings learned how to speak by imitating sounds they heard. This notion, which has been derisively labeled as the "bow-wow theory," has long been discredited. Obviously, the early linguists based their theory on the number of words that attempt to recreate the sounds described. Any student can easily think of a number of onomatopoeic or echoic words such as *meow*, *bow-wow*, *clink*, *splat*, or *boom*. A reading of Edgar Allen Poe's *tour de force* in onomatopoeia, "The Bells," will graphically illustrate how poets have made full use of onomatopoeic words.

Instead of spending much time on this method of word formation, you may simply want students to list all the words they can that imitate sounds.

Closely related to the echoic or onomatopoeic words are the iterative or reduplicative compounds. In one type of these compounds, the base is exactly duplicated in the second form. Thus we have such words as *tweet-tweet*, *cuckoo*, *mama*, *click-click*, and *thump-thump*.

In a second type of iterative word, the second element is changed slightly: *bow-wow*, *tick-tock*, *zigzag*, *chitchat*, and *fiddle-faddle*.

A third type of iterative form rhymes the second element with the first. Thus we have *walkie-talkie*, *peepie-creepie* (a portable television camera), *hotsy-totsy*, *okey-dokey*, and *jeepers-creepers*.

New iterative forms are frequently found in slang expressions. Students should have no difficulty adding many words to the examples given.

Suggested Exercises

1. List as many words as you can that imitate the sounds that animals make.

2. What method was used to form each of the following iterative or reduplicative words? Which are labeled slang in the dictionary you are using?

nitty gritty	namby pamby
mumbo jumbo	papa
chitchat	willy-nilly
mama	humdrum
clitter-clatter	ticktock

3. The Batman television series used onomatopoeic words in its fight scenes. Viewers were entertained by such words as *pow*, *zonk*, and *zap* that filled the screen. What other onomatopoeic words might you use to highlight a fight scene? What onomatopoeic words would use to echo the sounds of *war*? of a hockey game? of a football game? of a basketball game?

Functional Shifts

Many words that first came into the language as nouns now also function as verbs. For example, to contact, to date, to elbow, to package, to park, to program, and to vacation. New verbs are also made by shortening nouns. For example, to emote, to perk, to phone, and to type.

Frequently the stress we place on a syllable shifts to another syllable when we change the function of a word from noun to verb. Linguists call this shift a superfix, a term which may intrigue some students. They may arrive at an understanding of this change in stress if they are asked to use the following in sentences, first as nouns and then as verbs, noting how they change the pronunciation of the words:

combat	content	contract	object
permit	predicate	subject	suspect

Is there a noticeable change in stress in each of the above words when it is used first as a noun and then as verb? What other words can students add that function as both nouns and verbs? Are these words pronounced differently as they change function?

The shift from noun to verb is not the only kind of functional change that occurs in American English. There are occasional verb to noun shifts, e.g., dump and scoop (getting a news story first) and adjective to noun, e.g., personal (item in a newspaper column) and basic (a fundamental point or issue). Some words can be used to serve more than two functions, e.g., down, run, and bank.

Clipping

Clipping is the process of shortening a word to give an abbreviated version that is used more commonly in speech. As a result of the clipping or shortening process, we have hypo for hypodermic, photo for photograph, gas for gasoline, and prof for professor. Other examples of clipping are plane for airplane, lab for laboratory, gym for gymnasium, math for mathematics, mike for microphone, memo for memorandum, and grad for graduate.

In spoken language, first names are frequently clipped. Examples are Al for Albert or Alfred, Fred for Frederick, Sue for Susan, Sam for Samuel, Pat for Patricia, and so forth.

Immortalization

Some people find themselves immortalized in words that bear their names. For example, *watt*, *ohm*, *gerrymander*, *pasteurize*, and *diesel*. Other words can be traced back to characters and terms in mythology: Mercury, Apollo, Olympic, etc.

Coining

Some people have made serious attempts to coin new words. A few of these survive in the language. Hollywood has given us the Oscar and television has given us the Emmy. *Time* magazine has coined such words as *cinemactress*, *steelionaire*, *millionheiress*, and *socialite*. Included among the words that have been coined by individuals are *bromide*, *blurb*, *yes man*, *highbrow*, and *momism*.

This unit does not treat every method of word formation, nor does it cover in depth those methods listed. You may have students do research on word formation and also have them listen carefully to language for other processes of word formation that have not been covered here.

Suggested Activities

1. Students who have access to *The Oxford English Dictionary* may write a paragraph in which they trace the history of a word that has been formed by one of the methods described in this unit. Some words that have interesting histories include the following:

bluff	cybernetics	mockingbird
carpetbagger	G-man	mugwump
caucus	gouging	O.K.
charley horse	lightning rod	popcorn
chortle	Linotype	razorback
copperhead	lynch	smog

2. To describe the landscape in the New World, the first British colonists used such words as barrens, bluff, bottom land, bottoms, branch, clearing, cliff, creek, divide, foothill, hollow, neck, pond, rapids, run, swamp, underbrush, watergap, and watershed. Students might talk to "oldtimers" in the area to learn colorful names for features of the American landscape. After they interview several older citizens, they should record their findings in a paragraph or two and share their information with their classmates. Are the words commonly used today? If not, can students decide why they are not? (*Note:* This activity works best with students who live in rural areas or in newly developed suburbs.)

3. What meanings have people given to the following words? What people or places are immortalized by the words?

bowie knife	malapropism	ohm
Dead Sea Scrolls	Jezebel	bowdlerize
Greenwich time	Pandora's box	Herculean
Gresham's law		

4. Sub is the shortened form of *submarine; phone* has been clipped from *telephone*. Given names, names of academic courses, and names of buildings are frequently shortened.

Make a list of as many words as you can that are shortened forms of other words. Share your list with your classmates.

Borrowed Words

Our language is richer because our ancestors have borrowed words from other languages to name items, actions, ideas, places, animals, plants, and other products for which there was no word in English. To show how freely English has borrowed from other languages, you might ask students to open their dictionaries to any page and count the total number of entries. Then they should count the words that have been borrowed from another language and subtract that number from the total number of entries to determine how many native words are recorded on that page of the dictionary.

English has borrowed thousands of words from Latin and Greek in particular. A few examples of words borrowed from these languages are given below. (*Note:* Only a very small portion of the listing is given for each language. The year of a word's first recorded use in English, according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, is given in parentheses. For some languages, no recorded date is given.)

Latin

cadaver (1500); integer (1509); genius (513); pollen (1523); junior (1526); alias (1535); circus (1546); medium (1551); omen (1582); militia (1590); radius (1597); virus (1599); premium (1601); census (1613); focus (1644); album (1651); lens (1693); antenna (1698); alibi (1727); bonus (1773); duplex (1817); and bacillus (1883)

Greek

irony (through the Latin in 1502); alphabet (through Latin in 1513); trophy (through French in 1513); drama (through Latin in 1515); phrase (1530); cube (through French in 1551); topic (1568); epic (through Latin in 1589); orchestra (through Latin in 1606); hyphen (through Latin in 1620); tonic (1649); camera (through Latin in 1708); phase (1812); acrobat (through French in 1825); and agnostic (1870).

Suggested Exercises

1. Ask students to open their dictionaries at random, count the words on a page, and then count the number of words that have been borrowed from Latin and Greek. Students compare their results with the rest of the class before discussing the impact of Latin and Greek on the English language.

2. Turning at random to another page in their dictionaries, students count the number of words and then subtract the number borrowed from Latin, Greek, and other languages. How many words were not borrowed from any other language? Students give reasons why they think the English borrowed so heavily from other languages. *Note:* Information on word history as well as exercises on words borrowed from Latin and Greek can be found in two books by Carl B. Smith and Eugene W. Reade: *Word History: A Guide to Understanding the English Language* (1991) and *Word History: A Resource Book for the Teacher* (1994). Both books are published by ERIC Clearinghouse on Reading, English, and Communication (Indiana University, Bloomington, IN).

Here are some words borrowed from languages other than Latin and Greek.

Scandinavian (Since Middle English)
link, silt, smelt, rug, kink, skit, snag, scuffle, snug, scrub, simper, oaf, squall, keg, gauntlet, smut, cozy, muggy, tungsten, trap, nag

French (Since Middle English)
pioneer (1523); colonel (1548); machine (1549); gauze (1561); grotesque (1561); vase (1563); cartridge (1579); unique (1602); fanfare (1605); crayon (1644); detour (1738); glacier (1744); rouge (1753); restaurant (1827); coupon (1864); and garage (1902) (*Note:* Like the borrowings from Latin and Greek, the borrowings from French could fill many pages.)

Low German

(Under the term Low German, linguists include the dialects of Dutch, Flemish, and continental Saxon. Only a small part is included here.)
spool (1440); rack (1440); sled (1440); buoy (1466); deck (1466); snap (1495); hose (1495); uproar (1526); reef (1584); wiseacre (1595); drill (1611); brandy (1622); furlough (1625); tattoo (1644); easel (1654); slim (1657); hustle (1684); smuggle (1687); spook (1801); waffle (1808); boss (1822); and dope (1880)

High German

sauerkraut (1617); zigzag (1712); cobalt (1728); poodle (1825); yodel (1830); kindergarten (1852); and seminar (1889)

Italian (since 1600)

attack (1600); gazette (1605); umbrella (1609); intrigue (1612); parasol (1616); balcony (1618); ditto (1625); balloon (1634); monsignor (1635); opera (1644); serenade (1649); cartoon (1671); piano (1683); sonata (1694); solo (1695); portfolio (1722); trombone (1724); soprano (1730); studio (1819); figurine (1854); and vendetta (1855)

Spanish (since 1550)

cask (1557); alligator (1568); renegade (1583); comrade (1591); spade (on cards-1598); booby (1599); bravado (1599); desperado (1610); cockroach (1624); guitar (1629); parade (1656); cargo (1657); turtle (1657); vanilla (1662); plaza (1683); mustang (1808); picaresque (1810); rodeo (1834); cigarette (1842); bonanza (1878); bronco (1883); and cafeteria (1839)

Celtic

inch (1425); gull (1430); bog (1505); slogan (1513); galore (1675); and banshee (1771)

Portuguese

caste (1613); tank (1616); pagoda (1634); and veranda (1711)

Slavonic

mammoth (1706); vodka (1802); polka (1844); pogrom (1905); Soviet (1917); and robot (1923)

Arabic

mattress (1290); camphor (1313); cotton (1381); zenith (1387); almanac (1391); ream (1392); syrup (1398); artichoke (1531); assassin (1531); algebra (1541); alcohol (1543); magazine (1583); giraffe (1594); zero (1604); sofa (1625); ghoul (1786); alfalfa (1845); and safari (1892)

Indian Dialects

pundit (from Hindu, 1672); bungalow (from Hindu, 1676); bandanna (1752); cheetah (1781); shampoo (1762); sari (1785); bangle (1787); thug 1810); beri-beri (1879); and pyjamas [British spelling] (1886)

Persian

scarlet (1250); azure (1325); salamander (1340); taffeta (1373); tiger, check, checkmate, and chess (14th century); arsenic (14th century); mummy (1400); spinach (1530); jasmine (1548); naphtha (1572); divan (1586); caravan (1599); julep (1624); jackal (1603); lilac (1625); shawl (1662); seersucker (1757); and khaki (1848)

Turkish Dialects

tulip (1554); horde (1555); turban (1561); coffee (1598); fez (1802); and bosh (1834)

Dravidian (non-Indo-European dialects of Southern India)

calico (1540); coolie (1598); curry (1598); atoll (1625); and teak (1698)

Semitic Dialects

(excluding Arabic, Phoenician, Hebrew, and Aramaic)
amen, hemp, rabbi, Sabbath, Satan, tunic, seraphim, cherubim, endive, emerald, coral, cinnamon, sapphire, lotus, Torah, hallelujah, and kosher

Tibeto-Chinese

silk, tea, pongee, ketchup, and pekoe

Japanese

kimono (1637); soy (1696); hara-kiri (1856); jinricksha (1874); and jujitsu (1904)

Malay-Polynesian

bamboo (1598); gong (1600); junk (meaning a ship, 1613); gingham (1615); launch (1697); orangutan (1699); bantam (1749); kapok (1750); aye-aye (1781); caddy (1792); sarong (1834); poi (1840); and ukulele (1920)

African Languages

ebony, banana, drill (a kind of baboon), okra, chimpanzee, cola, voodoo, zebra, and gnu

South American Languages

canoe, hurricane, iguana, savannah, potato, maize, petunia, llama, cocaine, cashew, tapioca, jerk (verb), and cougar

Native American

hominy, hooch, pemmican, pone, succotash, supawn, cayuse, chipmunk, moose, muskrat, possum, raccoon, skunk, terrapin, woodchuck, menhaden, muskellunge, porgy, quahog, catalpa, catawaba, hickory, pecan, persimmon, poke, scuppernong, sequoia, squash, tamarack, pow wow, totem, papoose, squaw, mackinaw, moccasin, tomahawk, wampum, hogan, igloo, kayak, tepee, wigwam, mugwump, Tammany, chautauqua, and podunk

Suggested Exercises

1. You might ask students to examine a list of borrowed words, attempting to determine why our ancestors borrowed the words from other languages. Ask students to classify the words into groups, such as, articles of clothing, kinds of food, different animals, and so forth.

2. To illustrate how heavily English has borrowed from other languages, you might have students write a paragraph in which they use only English words. They should check each word they use in a dictionary, making certain that it has not been borrowed from another language. Why is it difficult for student to describe any of their activities or any item in their environment by using English words only?

HOW WORDS CHANGE MEANING IN TIME AND CONTEXT

Objectives

In this unit, students will do the following things:

- ❒ Consider how words change meaning over time and how many meanings one word can have.
- ❒ Discover that words can follow definite patterns as they change: they can become more specialized, generalized, elevated, or degraded.
- ❒ Define and examine euphemisms that they hear in daily life.
- ❒ Examine several words to discover how they can change meaning in different contexts.
- ❒ Discover that a word can take on a number of meanings depending on its verbal setting or context.
- ❒ Discover how their experiences affect how they make inferences about certain words.
- ❒ Recognize that a writer's or speaker's purpose and audience affect the way words are used.

People Can Give Many Meanings to a Word

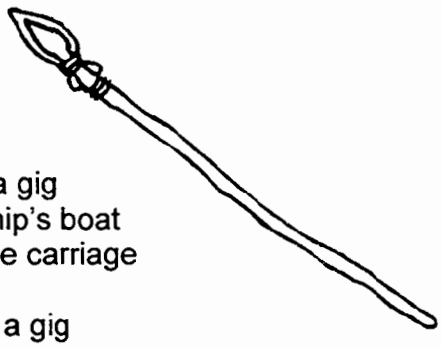
Students are sometimes surprised to learn that a word to which they give special meaning in teenage conversations means little or nothing when used in the same manner before adults. To teenagers, the words *tough, cool*, and *neat* have additional meanings that are not always included in the entries in standard dictionaries, even as slang, because the meanings are too ephemeral to record. Like adults, teenagers sometimes invent words when they think they are needed; also, like adults, they frequently give well-established words new meanings to convey their thoughts and feelings to their friends.

Because English is a living language, some of its words are given additional meanings or the meanings of the words are changed slightly from generation to generation because people change with time and progress. Some words retain essentially the same meanings for centuries; others undergo quite radical changes in meaning. For example, the word *nice* has undergone an elevation in meaning from foolish and stupid, first recorded in 1560, to the following present-day meanings recorded in *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* in 1967:

1. pleasing, agreeable; delightful: a nice visit.
2. amiably pleasant; kind: They are always nice to strangers.
3. characterized by or requiring great accuracy, precision, skill, or delicacy: nice workmanship; a nice shot.
4. requiring or showing tact or care: delicate: a nice handling of the situation.
5. showing minute differences; minutely accurate, as instruments: a job that requires nice measurements.
6. minute, fine, or subtle: a nice distinction.
7. having or showing delicate, accurate perception: a nice sense of color.
8. refined as to manners, language, etc.: Nice people wouldn't do such things.
9. virtuous: chaste; respectable; decorous: a nice girl.
10. suitable or proper: That was not a nice remark.
11. carefully neat as to dress, habits, etc.
12. (esp. of food) dainty or delicious: That was a nice dinner.
13. having dainty or fussy tastes: They're much too nice in their dining habits to enjoy an outdoor barbecue.

As *nice* illustrates, in time people can give a single word a number of different meanings. People retain some meanings for words for generations; they discard other meanings (labeled *obsolete* in many dictionaries); and they add some meanings. To illustrate how people can give one word a number of meanings, even to the extent that they have it refer to a number of different things, we give these meanings of *gig*:

Middle English—something that whirls
1651—to throw out (a smaller gig), which apparently referred to the whipping-top of a particular construction that does this
1693—to move to and fro
1722—a kind of fish-spear
1777—an oddity; in dialect, a fool
1777—fun, glee
1780—a flighty, giddy girl
1789—to raise the nap of cloth with a gig
1790—a light, narrow, clinker-built ship's boat
1791—a light two-wheeled, one-horse carriage
1807—to travel in a gig
1816—to fish; also to spear fish with a gig
1821—a joke
1865—a form of a ship's boat used for racing purposes
1875—to move backward and forward
1881—a wooden box, with two compartments, one above the other, used by miners in ascending and descending a pitshaft
Present—an official report of a minor infraction of regulations, as in school or the army; a demerit; also a punishment for a minor infraction of rules; an entertainer's engagement



This list shows the various meanings given to the word *gig* and the various objects to which it has referred. Some meanings are still recognized today, while others have become obsolete over the centuries. In order to understand *gig* as it is used by writers during the last four centuries, we must find a source that lists the word's various meanings. The most complete record is given in *The Oxford English Dictionary; The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* is also helpful. Other sources indicate the ranges of a word's

meanings but do not, of course, record the dates when a word was first found in print because that is not their purpose. Such sources include the following:

The American College Dictionary
The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language
Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary—Tenth Edition
The Random House Dictionary of the English Language
The Standard College Dictionary
Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language
Webster's Third New International Dictionary.

Suggested Activity

Groups of students who have access to *The Oxford English Dictionary* or to *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* should report on the various meanings from the earliest recorded use to the most recent for the following words:

propaganda	fine
virtue	mystery
chisel	spleen
bolster	picture
derby	lewd
Scotch	marshal
take	minister

As students note the changes in meanings of those words, they may realize that some words that once stood for a special thing now have a more general meaning (*picture*, for example); other words that once had a general meaning now have a more specialized meaning (*virtue*, for example). Students may also notice that words that once referred to something bad or neutral have come to refer to something good (*marshal* and *minister*). On the other hand, words that may have referred to something neutral or good have come to refer to something bad (*lewd*, for example). If students do note these changes, they are recognizing the processes of generalization, specialization, elevation, and degradation without using the terms.

The Four Processes

As students note that words seldom remain static, with no change in meaning, you should stress that words usually do one of four things: (1) they become more specialized; (2) they become more generalized in application; (3) the meaning becomes more elevated; or (4) the meaning is degraded over time. Occasionally a word will move from a specialized meaning to a general meaning and back to a specialized denotation.

Specialized Meanings

The four processes just mentioned have contributed greatly to changes in meanings of words from one generation or one century to another. As an example of specialization, people once used the word *girl* to refer to a young person of either sex; now, of course, English-speaking people use it only to refer to a young female. Another example: an *undertaker* was once used to refer to a person who could undertake to do anything, but today one would hardly refer to a mayor who has undertaken to improve city planning as an undertaker.

Another word that has become specialized in meaning is *meat.* Students normally think of meat as edible food from an animal. Actually, the word *meat* was originally used to refer to any kind of food for humans or animals. Not until the nineteenth century did people use it to refer specifically to the flesh of animals prepared for human consumption. Therefore, the word *meat* moved from a general category of words referring to any kind of food to a specialized category referring to only one type of food.

General Meanings

As some words have taken on specialized or narrower meanings, other words have taken on more general meanings. The word *butcher* has changed meaning toward a broader, more general denotation. In its earliest use, the butcher was one who killed goats. The word was used in this narrow meaning as early as

1100 in Anglo-French dialects. By 1440, a butcher had become any slayer of animals who provided food for human use. In the sixteenth century we find the word applied to any men of cruel and inhuman behavior who wantonly slew humans in war or peace. In 1529, Rastell wrote in the *Pastyme History of Britain* about the infamous lord, "Erle of Worcester whiche for his crueltye was called bocher of Englande." The word *butcher* today retains two general meanings: a killer of animals for meat, and an inhuman slayer of people. Therefore, in time people have broadened or generalized the meaning of the word *butcher.*

Some words that we use daily have acquired so many meanings that they can refer to any of a number of objects. *Thing, business, concern, condition, matter, article,* and *circumstance* are examples of words that have taken on general meanings to the extent that readers or listeners cannot always determine the referent.

Degradation of Meaning

Some words that once referred to something good or neutral now refer to something bad. Such words have undergone the process of degradation. Many terms that now describe moral depravity did not always carry that meaning. *Lust,* for example, meant simply "pleasure"; *wanton* was "untaught"; *lewd* was merely "ignorant," ("lerned and lewed" being a phrase commonly standing for "clergy and laity"); *immoral* was "not customary"; *vice,* "flaw"; *hussy,* "housewife"; *wench,* "young girl"; and *harlot,* "fellow" (of either sex).

The word *knave* developed in just such a downward direction. In Old English a knave referred to a youth. It later applied to a male servant who was young in years. By 1400 it came to mean a rascal or prankish one. This was a natural development, for boys tend to be playful and tricky. Therefore, all boys tending to be incorrigible became knaves. Finally, the knave dropped to its lowest pitch to mean one involved in petty crimes.

Elevation of Meaning

On the other hand, words that people once used to refer to something bad or neutral have traveled the opposite path, from the humble to the exalted, or from the base to the refined. These words are examples of elevation of meaning: knight, bard, enthusiasm, marshal, chamberlain, minister, constable, governor, steward, angel, martyr, paradise, pretty, nice.

We can illustrate this elevation process with the word *knight*. As early as 893, this word meant just a boy, a youth, as did the word *knave* in its earliest meaning. By 1000 it had come to mean a servant, but still a young boy servant. Five hundred years later, the word added the meaning of military servant to the king. Interestingly enough, while the king was away at war, his lady needed a protector at home. The word *knight* by 1500 took on the special meaning of a young man devoted to the service of a lady. Since these two duties were special privileges bestowed upon worthy young men, trusty and brave, between the years of 1400 and 1800 the word *knight* denoted an order or rank of respect and attainment. *Knight* thus moved from the Old English meaning of any lad or youth, an ordinary category, to the area of a privileged rank in medieval history. This word is an example of elevation in meaning.

Euphemisms

Many words have come into our language as "genteel" substitutes for commonly used words. In an attempt to avoid bluntness or vulgarity, English-speaking people have coined many euphemisms. Some examples of these are *pass away* and *breathe one's last* for die; *custodian* or *sanitary engineer* for janitor; *realtor* for real estate agent; and *junior executive* for clerk.

Suggested Activities

1. Ask students to list euphemisms that they hear daily, and then have them write a theme in which they explain why euphemisms come into our language and how they reflect a particular attitude of people. (Students might note why these euphemisms apparently entered the language and why certain kinds of people use them.)

2. Identify the euphemism in each of the following pairs of words and explain why you think the euphemism was coined.

bricklayer—mason	cheap—economical
housewife—homemaker	teacher—educator
interior decorator—house painter	waitress—hostess
cabinet maker—carpenter	domestic help—servant
patron—customer	clerk—sales associate

How Words Change Meaning in Context

To show students how words change meaning in context, you may ask students to arrange the sentences below into groups, illustrating the different meanings of *flight.*

1. Under the cover of darkness, the refugees began their *flight* for freedom.
2. Into the marsh, a well-protected nesting place for wild geese and ducks, the *flight* settled gently.
3. Imagining we might encounter the Hunchback, we climbed the spiraling *flight* of stairs to the cathedral bell tower.
4. To stop the *flight* of skilled workmen to West Berlin, the East German government erected a wall of concrete and barbed wire.
5. Each spring, the villagers eagerly watch the sky for the *flight* of swallows.
6. Step by step, we climbed the *flight* to the ghost-infested attic.

After students have grouped the sentences according to the several illustrated meanings of the word *flight,* you might ask them to write a definition for the word as it is used in each group of sentences.

1 and 4: act of fleeing or escaping
2 and 5: a flock of birds
3 and 6: a set of stairs

Thus students should discover that the word *flight* has at least three meanings and that each meaning is determined by the use of the word in its sentence—its verbal setting or context. Which of the above three definitions is the "correct" definition? Is there a "correct" definition? After consulting a dictionary, students should indicate how many more meanings of the word *flight* they found.

Suggested Activities

1. To illustrate further how the meanings of a word can be affected by various contexts, students should use a different word for *turn* in each of the following sentences.

   In the fall in Indiana, the leaves *turn* many colors.
   If snow *turns* to freezing rain, the pilot knows he must increase his altitude to avoid dangerous icing.
   The *turn* of events caused the sophomore class to cancel the picnic.
   Turn the key quietly, or you will awaken father.
   Adlai Stevenson, a candidate for President forty years ago, could *turn* a fine phrase.
   She *turned* him against his family.
   At the *turn* of the century this country will be colonizing distant planets.
   My *turn* to stand guard came at the darkest hour of the night.

2. As a short research project, you might ask groups of students to select one of the following words, or any others you may suggest. Have them find that word in newspapers,

magazines, and books with ten or twelve sentences. Using the method employed by dictionary editors, students should record the sentences, as well as author and source, on separate cards; then they should separate the cards into groups according to different meanings and write definitions for the words as illustrated in the sentence context.

air bat frame mean paint pair record swing

3. Students should decide whether the meaning of the word *green* changes in the following sentences:

   Mary is wearing a *green* bathing suit.
   The fruit is still *green.*
   The second team is pretty *green.*

   What new meaning does *green* take on in the second sentence? in the third sentence? How is each of these new meanings suggested by other words in the sentences?

4. Students should consider how the meaning of *run* changes in the following sentences:

   John can *run* a fast half mile.
   Bill *runs* an illegal business.
   He plans to *run* for office.
   Tom batted in the winning *run.*
   Mary has a *run* in her stocking.
   The scandalous Florida land deals of the late twenties started a *run* on the stock market.

   Students should be able to explain how the meaning of *run* is controlled by other words in the preceding sentences.

5. Students should write sentences in which they use the same word in more than one way. Have them write three sentences showing different meanings for each word listed.

   foot point wing pipe cat rat

The Multiple Meanings of *Slide*

By this time students should begin to realize that a word can take on any of a number of meanings depending on its verbal setting, or context. To illustrate how important context is, you may put the word *slide* on the chalkboard and ask students what the word means.

The word *slide*, like the word *run*, should elicit a number of different responses. Some students may indicate that the word, out of context, can mean any of a number of things; but if they were to see it in a sentence, they could come closer to giving a precise definition of it.

You may then put sentences like these on the chalkboard and ask students how the meaning of *slide* changes.

1. The little boy went down the *slide*.
2. Maury Wills made a great *slide* into second base.
3. He was never able to *slide* on ice without falling.
4. He let the matter *slide* by without doing anything about it.
5. The trombonist *slides* from note to note without difficulty.
6. He will never *backslide* as long as he listens to the Reverend Goodman.
7. That giant rock *slide* started an avalanche.
8. What I need is a *slide* rule.
9. He had trouble putting the *slide* into the projector.
10. He polished the *slide* on his trombone.

In the preceding exercises, students have probably tried to determine word meanings without recourse to a dictionary. Knowing how to use surrounding words to unlock the meaning of a familiar or unfamiliar word is a highly useful and practical skill. Since words do change meaning in context, as demonstrated above, students will increase their ability to read intelligently and sensitively by consciously developing skill in using context clues.

Suggested Activity

The following exercise gives one approach that illustrates some of the most useful context clues for tracking down word meanings. First, you might write sentence A of a group on the chalkboard and ask the class to discuss the meaning of the underlined word. Then you could present sentence B to demonstrate how the context clue helps to establish and define more exactly the meaning of the word. After each word has been defined by the use of context, you may wish to have students check the dictionary for denotative meanings.

1A. Carefully propelling himself in space with his gun, Astronaut White photographed the Earth 120 miles below.

The sentence as it stands obviously contains a specialized meaning of the word *gun*. As sophisticated about space as they are, some students may even be able to describe in detail the construction and operation of the jet-propulsion gun. Nevertheless, many students will probably have only a vague, generalized notion about the *gun*.

1B. Carefully propelling himself in space with his *gun*, a jetnozzled device that spurts compressed oxygen enabling him to move in any direction, Astronaut White photographed the Earth 120 miles below.

What additional information is now supplied about the *gun*? In the original sentence, the reader did not know that the gun was equipped with a jet nozzle, that it used compressed oxygen, nor that it could give motion in all directions. The use of a synonym, in this instance in the form of an appositive phrase, may provide the meaning of an unfamiliar word or a more specific meaning for a familiar word.

2A. He suffers from *claustrophobia*.

As it stands, the sentence does little to help the reader understand the meaning of the word.

2B. When a person dreads being in a closed room or narrow space, we say that he suffers from *claustrophobia*. (In this instance, the context clue is an actual definition included in the sentence.

3A. His analysis of the problem was *superficial*.

In this instance, unless the students are actually familiar with the word or its Latin origin, they will be unable to make an intelligent guess at its meaning.

3B. His analysis of the problem, far from being careful and thoroughgoing, was *superficial*.

Students who can now supply a satisfactory meaning for the word should be asked to explain specifically how they solved the riddle. The words *far from* introduce an idea of contrast. Whatever *superficial* means, it is, according to the sentence, far from or opposite to the meanings of *careful* and *thoroughgoing*. In other words, *superficial* must mean careless and hasty. Thus, in this instance, the context clue tells the reader the meaning of a word by telling what it is not like.

4A. I soon learned that John was an exceedingly *obdurate* person.

Again, unless the students are familiar with the word or its Latin origin, they will find little help within the context of the sentence.

4B. I soon learned that John was an exceedingly *obdurate* person, as stubborn and unyielding as a mule.

You might ask students who can now supply a satisfactory meaning for the word, how the context clue in this sentence differs from the clue in sentence 3B. The word *as* introduces an idea of likeness or similarity. According to the sentence, being obdurate is like being as "stubborn and unyielding as a mule." Thus *obdurate* must mean *stubborn* or *unyielding* in this sentence. The context clue in this example tells the reader the meaning of the word by teiling what it is like.

5A. The President made plans to counteract the *escalation* of the war.

You might ask students to substitute "tried desperately to prevent" for the words "made plans to counteract" in the foregoing sentence. How do the words "tried desperately to prevent" change the tone of the sentence? Do they provide a stronger clue to the meaning of *escalation* than the original words?

5B. The President made plans to counteract the *escalation* of the war, the expansion of military power. But the efforts resulted in an increased commitment of men and materiel by the enemy. Thus the conflict enlarged and spread as each side tried to win freedom and justice.

A larger context provided by several sentences often gives the circumstances or situations which make the meaning of an unfamiliar word clearer. The additional sentences suggest that *escalation* has to do with "expansion of military power," "increased commitment of men," and the enlarging and spreading of the conflict.

Ways to Unlock Meaning

To summarize, some of the most useful ways to unlock word meanings in context without immediate recourse to the dictionary are through the use of synonyms, comparisons, contrasts, definitions, explanations, and the larger context of several sentences which explain the general situation or circumstance in which the word is used. While the foregoing exercise is intended to show how useful context clues can be in determining word meanings, it also shows sentences in which virtually no significant clues are available, although the larger context of many sentences may sometimes provide a clue to meaning not given in the immediate sentence environment. A knowledge of Latin and Greek roots may help a person infer meanings of words. The dictionary remains an invaluable tool in supplying many generally accepted meanings as a check against contextually derived meanings and in providing meanings when context clues are unavailable.

Word Meaning and Individual Background and Experience

In this unit, the emphasis has been on the strong influence that word setting or verbal context has on the meaning of a word. But there are other variable factors of prime importance which comprise the total context determining word meanings. Among the many elements affecting word meaning, some significant ones are the background or experience of the individual, the purpose of the speaker or writer, and the nature of the audience.

The background and experiences of a person color the use of and reaction to many words. When George Lincoln Rockwell of the American Nazi Party spoke of "America for Christians," he undoubtedly had a different meaning in mind for the word *Christians* than had the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., when he used the term. When Rockwell used the word *Christians*, he probably was thinking of members of his organization. There were

certainly no African Americans in his "congregation." On the other hand, Dr. King was probably not thinking of an all black "congregation." Dr. King's *Christian* was not equal to Rockwell's *Christian*. That the thoughts and feelings a word evokes for one person may be strikingly different from the associations the word may suggest for another person is a fundamental idea students need to understand.

Suggested Activity

To illustrate to the class that words do suggest different ideas and emotions to each person, you might try this game of association. You read or write on the chalkboard words relating to controversial ideas or persons, such as the following:

terrorism	a popular music group
skinhead	Oklahoma City bombing
Bosnia	Religious Right
liberal	O. J. Simpson
Pentagon	dropout
school	rollerblading
parents	Madonna
geek	a current TV show that appeals to teens

After each word is read or written on the board, give students a brief time, perhaps 20 to 30 seconds, to make a spontaneous written reaction to each term in the form of a word or phrase. Then collect the responses and read and discuss them with the class. Why are there so many different responses to a given word? Are there tendencies toward a common agreement for a given word? For the word *school*, for example, some typical responses might be "building," "prison," "education," "brick and mortar," "friends," "a drag," "misery every hour," "pep sessions," and "homework."

This activity and similar ones should help students realize that the meaning of a word can be colored by highly personal

experiences which evoke an emotional response to the idea or object to which the word refers. Thus the potential dropout who is having difficulty reading may find attending school a desperately discouraging experience and may respond to the term *school* with the word *prison*. On the other hand, the potentially brilliant student who is not being challenged by the school's curriculum may describe school as a *drag*.

If the responses given for the words listed on the chalkboard were sufficiently different, students may begin wondering just how they manage to communicate with their classmates, teachers, and parents. Communication, though imperfect, is possible because people have reached general agreement on what many words mean. This general agreement stems from the fact that many words relate to things or situations in the physical world, things which people have observed or have experienced through one or more of the senses.

For example, the word *tree* by common agreement among English-speaking people describes an object having particular physical characteristics. It is important for students to see that the word *tree* is a symbol created by the mind to stand for an object in the physical world and that the word is not the same thing as that object. Confusion between the symbol (the word) and the referent (the object) often causes a breakdown in communication. As semanticists frequently say, "The word is not the thing."

Purpose and Meaning

The purpose of the writer or speaker is another significant factor that contributes to the context of word meaning. Skillful writers or speakers may deliberately use words which carry emotional connotations favorable to their purposes. Also, writers and speakers sometimes extract words from context and quote them to serve their own purposes. The result is that the reader or listener receives a distorted message which is often diametrically opposed to the meaning intended in the original quotation.

To illustrate the effect upon meaning when quotations are lifted from context, you may use the following sentence pairs. First, you present the "lifted" quotation to get the students' impression of the musical or book being described; then you give the students the original quotation. You should discuss the differences in meanings and the apparent purpose of the writer who extracted the phrase from the original description.

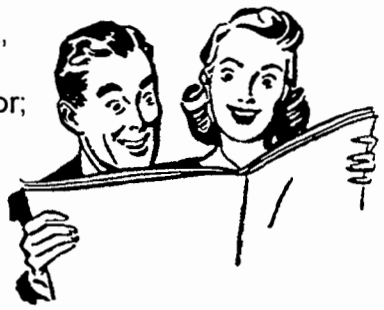
1A. "A brilliant work."
1B. "It falls far short of being a brilliant work."
2A. "*Bye Bye Birdie* has emotional delicacy."
2B. "*Bye Bye Birdie* has the emotional delicacy of a teen-age rumble."

It may be useful for students to look at bits of reviews as they appear on covers of paperback books. How appealing is the book when students see the word *sensational* on the cover as part of a comment about it by a prominent critic? What do they find if they can look up the original criticism? Students may be asked to read current reviews in popular magazines to lift out of context particular words of praise or condemnation and to read them to their classmates. Then students should read the entire sentence or paragraph from which the complimentary or uncomplimentary words were taken.

Kinds of Context

Thus far we have been primarily concerned with written verbal contexts—with a word's immediate verbal setting. As we already pointed out, the reader must take into consideration the word's immediate verbal environment to understand what the writer means. But equally important, the reader must also consider the writer, the writer's background, and the writer's intentions. As we noted before, George Lincoln Rockwell and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., did not mean the same thing when they used the word *Christian* or when they referred to their *congregation*.

Consequently, intelligent readers must consider as they read (1) the word's immediate written setting; (2) the kind of book, magazine, or article in which the word appears; (3) the time at which the book, magazine, or article was written; (4) some basic information about the author; and (5) the author's intentions (if these can be determined by what and how he writes). Perfect communication is impossible since no two people have exactly the same set of experiences with the same words. Therefore, the reader must attempt to take into consideration what experiences might affect the writer's use of particular words, especially motive words.



In conversation, if a listener intends to infer correctly what the speaker is saying, the listener must consider (1) the word's immediate setting; (2) the situation; (3) the mood of the speaker; (4) experiential background; (5) the tone used with certain words; and (6) facial expressions and gestures.

Basically, there are three kinds of contexts: verbal, physical, and psychological. The verbal context is, of course, the immediate oral or written setting in which a word is used. The physical context includes the time, the place, and the activities going on when the word is spoken or written. The psychological context includes the mood of the speaker or writer at the time they use a particular word and the speaker or writer's experience with it.

Suggested Activity

Students write a theme, with the audience being their parents or guardians, in which they explain how words can change meaning in time and context. They should illustrate each concept with sample sentences.

"I NO UNDERSTAND YOUR IDIOTS"

Objectives

In this unit, students discover that many idioms in our language make it difficult for non-native speakers to understand English. Students explore the meaning of *idiom* and examine idiomatic expressions.

The Trouble with Idioms

Long ago, the senior author of this book taught at the American University of Beirut in the tiny country of Lebanon. While my wife and I were in Beirut, we established friendships with Lebanese, Egyptians, Jordanians, Palestinians, Pakistanis, Cypriots, and Sudanese, as well as with people from other Asian, Middle Eastern, and European countries. Fouad, one of our closest friends, was a Beiruti businessman who struggled with the English language but not one tenth as much as we struggled with Arabic. He once told us that he found it easier to talk with our mutual friends from England than with us. Startled, we asked why. "I no understand your idiots," he replied. "When you talk, you Americans use too much idiots." Fortunately, another Arab friend was present and explained, "Fouad does not understand American idioms."

Fouad is not the only person in the world who has trouble with American idioms, which are a vital, rich part of our language. Many Americans also have difficulty deciding on the meanings of some idiomatic expressions when they first hear them, or even when they hear or read them several times.

To introduce this unit, you might give students this passage:

> Shirley *let the cat out of the bag* when she told her *bosom friends* about Archie. She said he was *a horse of a different color* who *bent over backwards* to *drive his friends up the wall.* "Archie is a master of *the snow job*." Shirley said. "He *strings his friends along,* making them think he would and *go to bat* to help and even *pull strings* when friends are *at the end of their rope.* But he's just *feeding them a line* and *pulling their legs."* Shirley's friends knew that she was not just *talking through her hat* when she *dished out the dirt* on Archie. They were *getting the inside track* on him *right from the horse's mouth* when Shirley *lowered the boom* on her brother Archie.

That is far from being a literary passage, but it does illustrate the problem that Fouad experienced. American idioms, like idiomatic expressions in other languages, are difficult for a non-native speaker to understand. But, as noted above, Americans also do not always understand the hundreds of idioms in our language.

What Is an Idiom?

An idiom is an expression that is peculiar to a specific language. Speakers of a language assign a meaning or meanings to a group of words—each of which already has its own meaning(s). An idiom is an expression that is more than the sum of its parts. In other words, we cannot infer the meaning of an idiomatic phrase simply by knowing the meaning(s) of each word in it. However, speakers of a language usually know the meaning(s) of commonly used idioms.

There are hundreds of idioms in American English. The following short list contains only fifty idiomatic expressions.

about face—a sudden change of course or decision
add fuel to the fire (or flame)—to make a bad situation even worse; to spread trouble
a little bird told me—to learn something from a secret source
around the clock—continuously
as the crow flies—the shortest distance between two places
at loggerheads—opposing each other; in a fight
at the drop of a hat—[informal] immediately; promptly
back to the salt mines—[informal] back to work
bark worse than one's bite—[informal] speech that is more frightening than the accompanying actions
behind the eight-ball—[slang] in trouble
beside oneself—excited; somewhat crazy
big wheel—[informal] important or influential person
blow one's top—become very excited, angry, or furious
break the ice—[informal] to do something to get a party or a discussion started, especially when people do not know one another
butter up—[informal] to curry favor through flattery
by the sweat of one's brow—by hard work
call the shots—[informal] be in charge; give orders
case in point—an example to prove something
cast the first stone—be the first to accuse someone of wrongdoing
catch some Z's—[slang] to go to sleep; to take a nap
check out —to pay a hotel bill before leaving; [informal] to leave; go away; [slang] to die
close call (or close shave)—narrow escape
come in handy—[informal] to be useful
face the music—[informal] to experience danger or trouble that is self-provoked; accept punishment

hard-nosed—[slang] tough; rugged; strict; stubborn; not weak or soft
hit the ceiling—[slang] to become violently angry; to go into a rage
hit the hay (or hit the sack)—[slang] to go to bed
horse around—[slang] to play around; to join or initiate teasing
jump at (the chance)—to take or accept quickly
knock off—[slang] to burglarize a house or business; to murder someone
lay out—[slang] to knock someone flat or unconscious
last but not least—last in line or sequence but not the least important
make a mountain out of a molehill —to turn a small problem into a big one; to make something unimportant seem important
mess up—[slang] to hurt someone physically; to cause emotional trauma; to spoil something
needle in a haystack—[informal] something very hard to find (usually preceded by look for, hunt for, or search for)
off the top of the head—[informal] without thinking about what is said; quick response or comment
off the wall—strange; stupid; out of the ordinary
on the spur of the moment—suddenly; without thought or preparation
out to lunch—[slang] stupid; inattentive; inefficient
pay through the nose—[informal] to pay too much
play ball— [informal] to join in; to cooperate
rub the wrong way—[informal] annoy; bother
shoot the breeze—[slang] to talk
take the bull by the horns—[informal] to take decisive action without fear of the risks or consequences
tongue lashing—criticism; sharp scolding

water under the bridge (or water over the dam)—a past action or incident that cannot be changed
whipping boy—the person who gets punished for someone else's mistake or action
wolf in sheep's clothing—someone who pretends to be good but is not
you bet your life (or you bet your boots or you bet)—[informal] yes; without doubt; definitely
zonk out—[slang] to fall asleep quickly; to pass out from fatigue or drink

Sources

Collis, Harry. 101 American English Idioms. (Lincolnwood, Ill.: Passport Books, 1995, 104 pp.)

Makkai, Adam, Maxine T. Boatner, and John F. Gates. *Handbook of Commonly Used American Idioms, Third Edition.* (Hauppauge, N.Y.: Barron's, 1995, 333 pp.)

Spears, Richard A. *NTC's Super-Mini American Idioms Dictionary.* Lincolnwood, Ill.: NTC Publishing Group, 1996.)

Suggested Activities

1. Ask students to define the idioms on the list above. Ask them which idioms they think are acceptable in writing and speaking? Which might be labeled informal because they are acceptable only in conversation or informal writing? Which might be labeled slang? (See the section on slang at the end of this unit.)

2. Working in groups, students compile lists of idioms they use frequently. They define the idioms and label them if they think they are informal or slang. As they compile their lists, they check meanings and labels in standard dictionaries or in handbooks of American idioms. (See sources above.)

3. Interested students may want to create paragraphs like the one at the beginning of this unit. Sharing their creations with classmates, the writers ask their classmates for "translations" of the paragraphs to determine which of their idioms their peers know and use.

   Working in groups, students attempt to define slang and then share their definitions with the class. Students discover that many slang expressions do not last long and that their meanings can vary from community to community and from generation to generation.

Slang

"I know it when I read it or hear it, but I'm not certain just what it is."

Although definitions of slang vary, a close reading of both dictionary and linguistic definitions reveals these common elements:

- ❒ nonstandard, colorful, and frequently witty language of a given culture or subculture;
- ❒ composed mainly of ephemeral coinages, arbitrarily changed words, and extravagant, forced, or facetious figures of speech;
- ❒ characterized by spontaneity and raciness.

Slang is a label applied to off-beat expressions that were once popular but were soon forgotten. For example, at various times we have used these slang words or phrases for "go away": *vamoose, scram, take a powder, beat it, bug off, get lost, lose it, outta here, take a hike, take a walk.* Slang is linguistic playfulness; it can also be the secret speech of a given group, designed to keep outsiders in the dark.

No matter how slang is defined, most everyone would agree that it is an important component of everyday speech; it also appears frequently in informal writing. In fact, a very fine, often indistinct line separates slang from the labels informal or colloquial in dictionaries. Nonetheless, careful writers avoid slang words and phrases in any formal communication. And writers and speakers who pepper their oral and written language with slang may discover that their readers and listeners fail to understand every word and phrase since the meanings of slang expressions are frequently confined to a definite community or period of time.

We teachers of English may admonish students not to use slang in their writing, but that admonition frequently falls on deaf ears. As one student once said: "Why can't I use it? It says exactly what I want it to say." It was only when he discovered that some of his slang expressions did not communicate with his audience—even with his peers—that he began removing it from that writing which he wanted to be read and understood.

The purpose of the activities that follow is not to condemn slang but to celebrate it as a vital part of the language. Another purpose is to help students discover for themselves how slang expressions may have disparate multiple meanings that change from community to community and from one generation to another.

Suggested Activities

1. Working in groups, students compile a list of current slang terms. (You need to decide what restrictions to impose on the lists.) The groups define each term on their list and write an illustrative sentence for each word or phrase. The groups share their lists with the class, noting how the lists vary and paying particular attention to definitions that differ from group to group.

2. After the groups complete activity 1, students take their lists to people in the community who are at least ten years older than the group members. They ask the persons interviewed if they know the meanings of some of the terms on the list. They also ask the interviewees to tell them the words or phrases they used ten or more years ago to convey the meanings of the items on the list. Members of the group share their findings with the group and with the class.

3. The meanings of slang expressions can change from generation to generation and from one region to another. Students might select ten words from the following list to send to friends in different parts of the nation. They ask their friends to define the ten words so that they can compare definitions with the class. *Note:* All of the slang words or phrases in the following list have multiple meanings. They were chosen not only because of their multiple meanings but also because they have very few meanings that refer to alcohol, drugs, and sex.)

ace	awesome	bad	boss
buzz	cat	chill	come on
cop	crack	cruise	dog
down	egg-beater	front	grub
hack	hit	in	lift
Mickey Mouse	nuke	okay	roll
shuck	take	wash	zap

4. You might give students several British slang words and expressions to see if they can detect their meanings. The following list contains thirty words and phrases with their definitions:

all the go—Thoroughly, satisfactory, fashionable.
argy-bargy—To bandy words.
bad hat—A rascal.
bakey—A baked potato.
bang-up—First-rate; smart.

barmy—Very eccentric; mad.
belly-ache—To grumble, complain, especially querulously or unreasonably.
button B—Penniless; very short of money.
take the cake—To carry off the honors; be the best.
clink—A prison; a lock-up; a detention cell.
college—A prison.
corner-boy—A loafer.
cove—A man, a companion, a chap, a fellow.
croak—Means both to die and to kill; it was, until around 1920, an underworld term.
one's daily dozen or the daily dozen—Physical exercises on rising in the morning.
as near as dammit—Very nearly indeed.
dickey, dicky—adj. In bad health, feeling very ill; inferior; insecure; queer.
filthily—Very; as in "filthily rich."
flat—adj. Penniless; short of money.
funk—(a state of) fear, great nervousness, cowardice; a coward.
governor—One's father; a term of address to a strange man; a superior; an employer.
jam-jar—A tramcar; a motorcar.
keep one's lip buttoned—To maintain silence; to tell nothing.
muck about—To wander aimlessly; potter about.

posh—adj. Stylish, smart (of clothes); best; splendid.
quizzy—Inquisitive.
quod—A prison.
rumble—To detect, fathom, understand.
dead to the world—Utterly drunk; fast asleep.
zizz—n. and v. A rest period; to rest, especially to sleep.

Sources

Ayto, John and John Simpson. *Modern Slang.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, 299 pp.)

Jenkinson, Edward. *People, Words, and Dictionaries.* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972, pp. 153-154)

Spears, Richard A. *Slang American Style.* (Lincolnwood, Ill.: NTC Publishing Group, 1997, 555 pp.)

5. The age of the computer and of space exploration has given us *cyberspace*, *internet*, *satnav*, (satellite navigation), and *meteostat* (meteorological data transmitted by satellite). Have students think of other newly coined words that are associated with the most recent technology. (Obviously, books and articles on the latest developments in computers will have many such words.)

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Edward B. Jenkinson has been a leader in English Education for decades as a professor at Indiana University and as the Director of the English Curriculum Studies Center. He has written extensively on the use of English and on controversial books and censorship. ***Andrea Jenkinson***, a secondary English teacher, resides in San Antonio, Texas.

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