

## CAPE Alumni Internet Connection: English Teacher Talk

*CAPE Internet Talk was started as part of CAPE follow-up activities to continue ties with CAPE alumni and those who are interested in professional development in English teaching. It is hoped that this would increase our bond and aloha among former participants, and that the information in the TALK would help our alumni and friends/members review what you know and deepen their understanding of issues of interest in the ESL field.*

---

### What it Means to Know a Word

#### *Part II*

**Sandra Lee McKay**  
**Professor Emeritus, San Francisco State University**

In Part I of “What it Means to Know a Word” we focused on the meaning of individual words, using the word *heart* as an example. In this part, we will focus on the relationship between words and also the manner in which words differ by geographical region, profession, and level of formality.

When a particular word is used in context, it often tends to appear with some of the same words over and over again. This is called collocation. For example, when the word *declare* is used, it is often followed by words such as *war*, *bankruptcy*, *goods* and *candidacy*. On the other hand, the word *announce*, a synonym for *declare*, tends to be followed with words such as *birth*, *death*, *promotion*, and *wedding*. On a simpler level, the following verbs are often used with parts of the body: *bend*, *raise*, *nod*, *wink*, *twist*, *wiggle*, and *wave*. Yet most of them can be used with only a limited number of parts of the body. *Wave*, for example, is typically used with *your arm*, *your hand* and little else. *Nod* can in fact only be used with *your head*.

Words can also be related to a particular geographical region. These are often called dialects. For example, there are many words that are used more commonly in British English while others are more typically found in American English. You might, for example, try to list the American terms for the following British terms: *a zebra crossing*, *the boot of a car*, *the bonnet of a car*, *a flat*, and *a nappy*. Now what are the British terms for the following American terms: *round trip ticket*, *subway*, *cookie*, *eraser*, and *flashlight*? Don't worry if you don't know many of the terms. Chances are that you have learned the vocabulary of either British or American English and hence, are not very familiar with words from the other dialect. However, if you go to visit or live in a new geographical region where English is spoken, you may need to learn some new vocabulary.

Words are also often related to a particular profession. This is frequently referred to as jargon. Lawyers, for example, often use words such as *briefs*, *decisions*, *contracts*, *courtroom*, *proceedings*, and *testimony*. Doctors regularly refer to a *diagnosis*, *a prescription*, *vital signs*, *blood pressure* and so on. And we, as teachers, often talk about *presentation*, *practice*, *reinforcement*, *group work*, *input*, and *proficiency*. In some cases, jargon is very specialized

language that occurs mainly in the writing and discussion of that particular profession. In other cases, however, common words can take a special meaning when used in the context of a profession. For example, in teaching, the word, *presentation*, is often used in a special way to refer to the introduction of a new grammar point. Unlike the previous examples we have talked about, jargon is often acquired as one learns to be a member of a particular profession. Part of becoming a lawyer, doctor or teacher is learning the jargon of the profession.

Finally words can differ by their level of formality. This is sometimes referred to as slang. For example, *a stupid person* can be referred to as *an airhead*, *a strange person* as *a dork*, *dirty* as *grungy* and *courage* as *guts*. Again don't be concerned if you don't know these words. These words are used primarily in informal spoken language and are often used by younger people rather than older people. Also slang can change rather rapidly so that new slang terms are often added and older ones are no longer used.

Knowing a word fully involves a good deal of knowledge. It is not enough to know its dictionary definition. Individuals also need knowledge of the connotations of words, their synonyms, antonyms, collocation patterns, and idioms. In addition, it is useful to be aware of geographical dialects, jargon and slang. These are all important aspects of vocabulary learning that should be dealt with in language classrooms.

*Contributor: Dr. Sandra McKay, Professor Emeritus, San Francisco State University  
Jai-Ho Yoo, CAPE President*