

Antonym

Definition of Antonym

An antonym is a semantic term for words that have opposite meanings or definitions. To simply put it, an antonym is an opposite of another word. The term “antonym” has been derived from a Greek word *antonumia*, which means counter name.

It is, in fact, a sense relation or binary relationship between words that have opposite or contradictory meanings. For instance, in the [sentence](#), “You forget what you want to remember and you remember what you want to forget” (*The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy), the underlined words “forget” and “remember” are opposites to one another. In other words, they are antonyms of one another.

Difference Between Antonym and Synonym

Antonyms are pairs of words that have opposite meanings, such as: night-day, bright-dull, and wet-dry. Synonyms, on the other hand, are a group of words having similar meanings. Most words have synonyms. Verbs, nouns, prepositions, adjectives, and adverbs have synonyms, provided they belong to the same parts of speech.

Types of Antonym

There are three types of antonym, which are:

Graded Antonyms – Graded antonyms use words having variations between two opposites. For instance, the words “big” and “little” are opposite; however, they can use a variety of other words with opposite meanings such as:

Big, bulky, full-size, huge / petite, slight, and little

Smart, clever, canny, bright / stupid, dim, obtuse, foolish, unwise

Happy, pleased, joyful, ecstatic / sad, gloomy, dejected, miserable

Healthy, vigorous, fit, strong / sick, unwell, ill, ailing

Relational or Converse Antonyms – Relational antonyms use word pairs having a close relationship in which each word cannot exist without the other, or one word has only a single relational opposite. For example:

Front-back
Open-close
Husband-wife
Hello-goodbye

Complimentary Antonyms – Complimentary antonyms use word pairs that are absolute opposites. They can independently exist without each other, such as a daughter is not the complimentary opposite of a son in the family. Similarly girls can exist without their complimentary opposites, boys. Some of these are given below:

True-false
Dead-alive
Male-female
On-off
Daughter-son
Yes-no

Examples of Antonyms in Literature

Example #1: *The Plain Man and His Wife* (by Arnold Bennett)

“If you [ask](#) me whom I mean by the plain man, my reply is that I mean almost every man. I mean you. I certainly mean me. I mean... the successful and the unsuccessful, the idle and the diligent, the luxurious and the austere.”

This is a good example of graded antonyms, as “successful” is opposite to “unsuccessful,” while “idle” is opposite to “diligent,” and “luxurious” is exactly opposite to “austere.”

Example #2: *The World As I See It* (by Albert Einstein)

“Every day I remind myself that my inner and outer life are based on the labors of other men, living and dead, and that I must exert myself in order to give in the same measure as I have received

The above example has used the graded antonyms “inner” and “outer,” “give” and “received,” and complimentary antonyms “living” and “dead.”

Example #3: *Hamlet* (by William Shakespeare)

“This above all: to thine own self be true,
And it must follow, as the night the day,
Thou canst not then be false to any man.”

In this excerpt, Shakespeare has used graded antonyms “night” and “day,” and absolute or complimentary antonyms “living” and “dead.”

Example #4: *A Tale of Two Cities* (by Charles Dickens)

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair...”

Dickens has beautifully used antonyms in this passage. “Best” is opposite to “worst,” “wisdom” is opposite to “foolishness,” and likewise “belief” and “incredulity,” “light” and “darkness,” “hope” and “despair” are all graded antonyms.

Function of Antonym

The function of antonyms, in both speech and writing, is important because they highlight or emphasize the main idea of a text or speech. In literature, antonyms are used in different [literary devices](#) such as in synecdoche and paradox. These devices make some features of a character, or some quality in a person prominent. Antonyms also are helpful tools in narration, argumentation, description, and explanation. Antonyms also play an important role in language acquisition.