

Introducing Basic Linguistic Concepts in E4PS

English vocabulary has a remarkable **range**, **flexibility** and **adaptability**. Thanks to the periods of contact with foreign languages and its readiness to coin new words out of old elements, English seems to have far more words in its core vocabulary than other languages.

For example, alongside **kingly / queenly** (from Anglo-Saxon) we find **royal** (from French) and **regal** and **majestic** (both from Latin). There are many such sets of words which add greatly to our opportunities to express subtle shades of meaning at various levels of style.

Look at the following examples:

- ✧ a symbol of **kingly** authority
- ✧ They paid a **kingly** price for their new house.
- ✧ She smiled at him, trying not to lose her **queenly** dignity.

- ✧ the **royal** family
- ✧ by **royal** appointment (= a sign used by companies that supply goods to the royal family).

- ✧ **regal** power
- ✧ Her height gave her an almost **regal** appearance.

- ✧ The Dolomites are **majestic** in size.
- ✧ This **majestic** creature has been rescued from the brink of extinction.

Sets of lexical units that have identical, or near identical, meanings are referred to as **synonyms**. Theoretically they can take each other's place in any context but in practice there are always differences.

e.g. *holiday, vacation, leave, break, time off, recess* (all refer to a period of time when you do not do your usual work). Note how they differ in the words they occur with (their collocations or word-clusters). *Leave* is often found in compounds such as *sick leave, maternity leave / paternity leave* and *unpaid leave*. *Break* can be both a short period of time when something stops before starting again (*lunch break, winter break*) and a short holiday (*a two-night break*). *Vacation* is used in AmE like the GenE *holiday(s)* and can refer in both BrE and AmE to the time when no teaching is done at colleges and universities. Both *holiday* and *vacation* mean a period of time spent travelling or resting away from home, as well¹. *Time off* is time when you are not working or studying, i.e., free time. *Recess* is a period of time during the year when the members of a Parliament, Committee, etc. do not meet (*summer recess*).

It is usual to say that synonyms share their denotation, or central meaning, while they differ in their connotations, or the associations of the denotation, their associated or secondary meaning.

N.B. – the denotation of an expression is its context-independent, **objective** basic and explicit meaning, also called descriptive meaning, and contrasts with connotation, which is the variable, **subjective**, implicit, often emotive part of its meaning.

¹ Remember another set of synonyms, that is *home, house, apartment, flat, cottage, hut, mansion, villa*.