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# *The Essentials of* **USE OF ENGLISH & COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

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# Chapter 2

## 2.0 VOCABULARY DEVELOPMENT R.C. Ihejirika & G.N. Ogbonna

### INTRODUCTION:

The success in second language learning partly depends on the amount of words of the language in question which an individual possesses to express his thoughts and feelings better.

The totality of the words available for use in a language is what is usually referred to as the vocabulary of that language. It is also correct to say that vocabulary is the amount of words of a language which an individual possesses and can manipulate.

It is therefore absolutely necessary that in learning English as a second language one should develop one's vocabulary or possess as many words as possible. As to how the vocabulary of English could be developed, some processes are indispensable. The discussion of some of the processes is the main focus of this section.

## **2.1 DENOTATION AND CONNOTATION**

In vocabulary development, denotation and connotation are two concepts that are worthy of mention. Just as words are used to have contextual meaning, they can equally be used denotatively or connotatively. According to Holman (1973) denotation is the specific, exact meaning of a word, independent of its emotional coloration. In other words, denotative meaning of a word is the literal or dictionary meaning of a word and not necessarily what it suggests. For instance the denotations of sheep, lion, dog, rat, monkey, etc. are the animals to which the words literally refer and nothing more. Therefore, if one says, "The lion is roaring in the forest". It simply means that there is an animal called lion which is at that point in time crying in the forest, it should also be pointed out that the denotation of a word does not vary from culture to culture what this simply means is that when a word is used denotatively it must be understood by all that use the same language irrespective of their cultural background.

Connotation on the other hand has been defined by Holman (1975) as the cluster of implications that words or phrases may carry with them as distinguished from their denotative meanings. In other words connotation is associative meaning. That is, when words are used to convey meanings outside their dictionary meanings. Connotative use of words is one of the devices found in literary creativity and its function is to create mental picture of an idea being put across.

Connotative use of words can be private or personal. This is when an individual uses words connotatively in line with his or her personal experience. When this is the case, the connotation may not be universally understood. On the other hand connotation can be group (National, linguistic, racial).

Students should always pay critical attention to words in order to determine their connotative meanings. It is by interpreting the connotative meanings of words that one can infer the writer's point of view and attitude towards his subject matter.

## **2.2 FIGURES OF SPEECH:**

The essence of vocabulary development is to enable the learner of English express himself better. However, expressing one's thoughts and feelings, many a time goes beyond the use of individual words. At times a group of related words is taken as a whole to express one's thought. Such group of related words is taken as a whole to express one's thought. Such group of related words could be examined from the point of view of what is linguistically referred to as figures of speech.

According to Holman (1972:224), "figures of speech are the various uses of language which depart from customary construction, order or significance in order to achieve special effects or meanings". Figure of speech is a device which can enable one create a mental picture of an idea he wants to put across. Also, it is a process of concretizing an abstract idea. Take for instance, if one says: "Ike is very tall." It is an

ordinary statement that has no special effect. But the statement could be more effective and at the same time creates a mental picture if it is transformed figuratively as: "Ike is as tall as a palm tree".

There are several types of figures of speech. Some of them would be explained as follows:

- i. **Simile:** Simile is a figure of speech in which two unrelated things are compared using "as" or "like" Examples:
  - a. John is as tall as a palm tree.
  - b. His head is like a coconut.
- ii. **Metaphor:** A figure of speech in which two unrelated things are compared without using "as" or "like". In fact, it is a situation in which the qualities of one thing is ascribed to another. Example:
  - a. He was a lion in the battle.
  - b. The lady is a pig.
- iii. **Personification:** Simply means giving animate quality to inanimate objects. Examples:
  - a. War has eaten up a good number of people in Rwanda.
  - b. The times are biting hard.
- iv. **Euphemism:** This is a figure of speech in which something that is very serious is put in a less serious way example:
  - a. His grandfather has passed on.
  - b. The woman who lost her husband shaded

ocean of tears.

- v. **Paradox:** A statement that sounds contradictory at the surface level but which is meaningful after careful interpretation. Example:
- The child is the father of the man.
  - If you want peace you must be prepared for war.
- vi. **Irony:** Deliberately saying the opposite of what one wants to say. Example:
- I am hungry because I have eaten to my satisfaction.
  - You are brilliant to have failed the exam.
- vii. **Metonymy:** Using an object associated with something to represent that thing. Example:
- The pen is mightier than the sword.
  - Uncasy lies the head that wears the crown.
- viii. **Synecdoche:** A figure of speech in which a part is used to represent a whole. Example:
- All hands on deck.
  - I have ten mouths to feed.
- ix. **Litotes:** A statement in which two negative expressions are used to give positive meaning. Example:
- I am not ungrateful.
  - His success is not unconnected with his hard work.

## 2.3 IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS:

Another language device in which a group of related words are taken as a whole to express human thought is idiom. Idioms are phrases or sentences which meanings are not arrived at by interpreting the individual words that make them up. The meanings of idioms are fixed like that of individual words. Take for instance, the expression **kick the bucket** is an idiomatic expression which meaning is "die". Therefore if one says, "The old man has kicked the bucket", it simply means that "The old man has died".

Every language has its idioms. As we have English idioms so also there are French idioms or Igbo idioms. Idioms are not created by individuals rather they exist in the language like the individual words. In learning the English idioms, a good English dictionary is the answer because the English idioms and their meanings are usually found in the dictionary. Some examples of the English idioms and their meanings are listed below:

### Idiom

### Meaning

- |                               |  |
|-------------------------------|--|
| 1. Let the cat out of the bag | - reveal secret.                             |
| 2. Live cat and dog life      | - be quarrelsome.                            |
| 3. Take the bull by the horns | - be courageous.                             |
| 4. Cock and bull story        | - Meaningless story.                         |
| 5. Beat about the bush        | - go round and round without making a point. |
| 6. To be at home              | - to be familiar or at                       |

- |                          |  |
|--------------------------|--|
|                          | ease with.   |
| 7. To toe the line       | - to accept authority and abide by the rules.        |
| 8. Keep your hat on      | don't lose your temper.                              |
| 9. To fly off the handle | to lose your temper suddenly for no apparent reason. |
| 10. Fall on one's feet   | to be lucky usually unexpected.                      |

It is not possible for one to know the meaning of every idiom one comes across. It is in this situation that the use of dictionary becomes necessary. For instance, the idiom "take the bull by the horns" could be located in the dictionary by looking up the word "bull". Against the word, you would find "take the bull by the horns" written in black ink and the meaning stated. Thus, for every idiom there is always key word it contains, look up the key word in a dictionary, you would always find the idiom and the meaning.

Making use of your dictionary, look up the following idioms:

1. To have an axe to grind.
2. To be in deep water.
3. A dark horse.
4. A drug on the market.
5. Keep your chin up.
6. Keep your shirt on.



7. Let the sleeping dog lie.
8. The man in the street.
9. Nip in the bud.
10. Play one's card well.
11. See stars.
12. Step on some one's toes.
13. Strike while the iron is hot.
14. Make hay while sun shines.
15. Hit the nail on the head.
16. Call a spade, a spade.
17. To bell the cat.
18. Have an itching palm.
19. Turn up a new leaf.
20. A dog in a manager.

## 2.4 PROVERBS

Some students have always confused idioms with proverbs. For such students, idioms and proverbs are the same. This notion is quite erroneous. The reason is that both are different concepts in language study. Proverb, according to Holman (1975) is a sentence or phrase which briefly and strikingly expresses recognized truth or shrewd observation about practical life and which has been preserved by oral tradition though it may be preserved and transmitted in written literature as well.

Every language has its own proverb, hence we can talk of Igbo Proverb, English Proverb, etc. However, it is possible for proverbs to pass freely from one languages to another.

Like idioms, proverb, is a language device that

helps are to convey ideas more vividly and effectively. It also creates room for economy of language what could be said in one paragraph or more could be dismissed in a single proverb. It also adds colour to language and makes it more interesting to be used. It is on this note that Chinua Achebe was quoted as saying: "Proverb is the palm oil with which words are eaten."

Some examples of English proverb include:

1. Still waters run deep.
2. Man proposes God disposes.
3. Forewarned, forearmed.
4. A friend in need is a friend indeed.
5. All that glitters is not gold.
6. One day begins a story.

This is connotation that is group, national, linguistic or racial bound. It does not enjoy universal usage. Take for instance, in Igbo Culture dog is known to be promiscuous. Therefore, when a person is said to be a dog, it connotes promiscuity. But outside Igbo culture, it may connote something different. Also in Igbo culture to say that a person is a goat connotes that the person is stupid. But in the English Culture it means that the person is a lecher.

Another type of connotation is the one that could be described as general or universal. This is the type of connotation that is understood by all irrespective of one's cultural background, in this case, if one is described as a lion it would be generally known that the person is brave also when one is called a pig, it

would be universally known that the person is dirty.

In general, words have positive or negative connotation. However, while some words may have both positive and negative connotation depending on usage, others have permanent in-built positive or negative connotation. For instance, the word "radical" may connote positivity or negativity depending on the writers' point of view. Look at these two sentences:

1. He succeeded because of his radical approach to issues. (positive)
2. He always have conflict with the authorities because of his radical approach. (negative).

The following words are either permanently positive or negative in connotation:

**Positive**

Thrifty  
Diligent  
Wise  
Rich  
Success

**Negative**

stingy  
lazy  
stupid  
poor  
failure.

3. Practice makes perfect.
4. The pen is mightier than the sword.
5. All is well that ends well.
6. Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown.

Students are advised to study proverbs and use them as a way of improving their expression.

## 2.5 REGISTERS

There are varieties of language. One may use the language according to one's individual speech habit (idiolect), one's geographical location (dialect) or subject matter or situation or context (register). We shall concentrate on the last variety.

When the word register is mentioned, the commonest impression is the book used in schools, in recording names and attendance of pupils and students. In our context, register is used to mean language according to Profession or field of discourse. This simply means that the subject matter or the situation in question goes a long way in influencing the type of language one uses. Register has to do with distinct linguistic components of any profession. For example: we have register of Science, Law, Technology, Economics/Commerce, Medicine, Mass media. In other words, when we talk of register of Science, we mean the vocabulary, the grammar employed in Science and by Scientist in the course of their profession; these may include, hypothesis, theory, experiment, reaction, laboratory, etc as distinct from the vocabulary used in legal discussions by lawyers which may include; contract, criminal code, equity, plaintiff, convicted, defendant, evidence, exhibit, etc.

The language of law has propensity for long sentences. At times, one sentence can be expressed in a whole paragraph. The use of long sentences is necessitated by the absence of punctuation marks.

On the other hand, Science has contributed to the English vocabulary to the extent that some writers

of Science have introduced technical terms like, genes, hormone, cyclotron, etc. some of these words even dominate our everyday discussion.

Words and expressions such as gross profits, net profits, inflation, devaluation of currency, economic recession and slump, debt rescheduling, import and export, exchange rate, market trends, etc. pervade any discussion and therefore form the register of economics and commerce.

## **2.6 COLLOQUIALISM:**

Colloquial expressions are phrases or styles that are used for ordinary conversation. They are not suitable for formal or literary setting. We may say of them as expressions commonly used in informal speech but not usually acceptable in formal speech or writing.

It is necessary to note that colloquial expressions are not wrong usage. This is so because, they can be appropriate in certain situation, especially informal situations. However, colloquialism becomes a wrong usage when it occurs in a formal presentation.

Colloquialism can be stylistic use of language. For instance, the word "engaged" is colloquially used in Nigeria English. For example:

Mr. Njoku engaged Uduma in a discussion.

In Standard English the word "engaged" occurs in the register of matrimony: for example:

Okay has engaged Edna.

Contracted forms are colloquialisms, and so are not used in formal presentations. Below are some examples:

She shan't.

He won't.

Aren't you?

I weren't etc.



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