

What is lexis?

Lexis (or **vocabulary**) refers to single words, or sets of words, that have a specific meaning, for example: *car*, *pick up*, *in the end*.

Unit 1 Types of meaning

LEARNING OUTCOME

KNOWLEDGE: the different types of meaning that items of lexis can have and the terms used to describe these

■ What affects the meaning of items of lexis?

Items of **lexis** have different types of meaning depending on the situation or **context** they are used in, what **function** (purpose for communication, e.g. giving advice) they perform and who is using them.

■ Denotation and connotation

Exercise 1

What is the meaning of the underlined words in the sentences below? When you have thought about the meaning, read the next section.

- 1 Shall we sit at the table?
- 2 I'm trying to give up chocolate.
- 3 I'm going to take my books to school.
- 4 He's really skinny. I think he may be ill.
- 5 This film is so boring!

The meaning of *table* in number 1 above is 'a flat surface, usually supported by four legs, used for putting things on' (from the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition)*). The meaning given in a dictionary is called the **denotation** (or sometimes the **literal meaning**). Literal meaning also refers to the original or basic meaning of a word or group of words (see also the section on figurative meaning on pages 6–7). Sometimes the denotation of individual words is obvious as in *table* in number 1 above, or *take* in number 3. At other times the denotation of a combination of words may be more difficult to understand as in *give up* in number 2 above. In this example of a **multiword verb** (a verb plus an **adverb/preposition particle**), the separate denotations of *give* and *up* do not give the meaning of *give up*. It is sometimes important to look at words in combination when understanding their meaning.

Look again at number 4 in Exercise 1. The denotation of the word *skinny* is 'very thin' but it has an additional negative meaning: an idea that is suggested by the word. This is called the **connotation**. So, the full meaning of *skinny* is 'very thin (denotation) in a bad way (connotation)'. Words or sets of words can have a negative, a positive or a neutral connotation. Some dictionaries provide information about connotations. For example, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition)* says that *skinny* is 'MAINLY DISAPPROVING'. Sometimes, it is the denotation itself that has a negative meaning, for example *boring* in number 5 in Exercise 1.

Because some words have negative connotations or denotations, people often avoid them by using other words or phrases. For example, they might use *very slim* because it is more positive than *skinny*. Sometimes people 'soften' words by adding others. For example, *It was a bit boring* is more positive than *It was boring*.

Exercise 2

Is the denotation or connotation of the underlined words below different from their denotation or connotation in Exercise 1?

- 1 In business reports, it's common to use tables and graphs.
- 2 I gave up ice-cream last year and feel so much healthier.
- 3 I usually take the bus to work.
- 4 He's as skinny as he was when he was 16. He looks great!

Check your answers on page 116.

In English, many words can be used with different meanings. Some words (e.g. *table*) can change their meaning because they are used for different things. Some can 'lose' their meaning. For example, *take* has a denotation of 'move from one place to another' but in number 3 in Exercise 2, it has 'lost' this meaning without gaining another. This is because it is part of the **collocation** *take a bus*, i.e. the words *take* and *bus* regularly go together and the meaning of *take* cannot be separated from *bus*. Verbs that 'lose' their meaning in this way are called **delexicalised** verbs. Another example is *have* in *I have a shower every morning* (which does not mean 'possess or own a shower'). (For more information on collocations, see pages 20–1, Unit 4.)

The connotation of a word can also change according to the situation or the context it is used in or the person using it. For example, in number 4 above, although *skinny* often has a negative connotation, the speaker is using it in a positive way. When using lexis it is important to make sure you understand the denotation, the generally accepted connotation and also the specific connotation in the context in which it is being used.

■ Figurative meaning

The term **figurative** is used to describe words or sets of words whose meaning is non-literal and imaginative. For example: *I could eat a horse* means 'I'm extremely hungry', *they received a flood of letters* means 'they received a lot of letters all at once' and *he can swim like a fish* means 'he can swim very well'. In order to find the meaning of a figurative phrase in a dictionary, decide which word is key and look for this in the dictionary. For example, *eat* is key in the first example above.

Exercise 3

Look at the underlined words in the sentences below and complete the table. The first one has been done for you.

Why do the speakers here use this kind of figurative language?

Words / Sets of words	Literal meaning	Figurative meaning
1 I ate so much I thought I was going to <u>burst</u> .	Explode like a balloon.	I felt <i>extremely</i> full.
2 She has <u>the voice of an angel</u> .		
3 He has such <u>a sunny smile</u> .		
4 We were <u>baking</u> . The weather was so hot.		

Check your answers on page 116.

In number 1 you can guess the figurative meaning of *burst* here by relating the denotation to the context. For example, *burst* means ‘explode because something is very full, like a balloon’. Here it is describing the feeling of being about to explode because you have eaten a lot.

Some figurative phrases are called **idioms**. (For more information on idioms, see page 21, Unit 4.)

■ Register

Exercise 4

Look at the dictionary entry below for the word *drill*.

drill /driːl/ **noun** [C]

1 a tool or machine which makes holes



(Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition),
Cambridge University Press 2008)

Now look at *drill* in the sentence below. Is the meaning the same as above?

When I teach I like to drill my students by getting them to repeat words two or three times, so they can practise and remember the pronunciation.

The word *drill* has changed its meaning in the sentence because it is being used by a particular person (a teacher) to mean ‘ordered and controlled repetition of language’. The set of words used by particular groups of people (e.g. people who have the same jobs, are of the same age, belong to the same social group) is called **register**. As with *drill*, this can mean that a word can change its meaning, or that a different word is

used instead of a more common one. For example, *leave* means the same as *depart* but *depart* is perhaps more commonly used in the register of public transport services.

Register and **style** (a typical way of conveying information, e.g. business-like or casual) also refer to the kind of words used in a particular kind of text, for example a letter of complaint or a relaxed chat at a party. This may involve using **formal** or **informal** (also called **colloquial**) words. For example, we expect a formal speech to begin with *Good morning/evening/afternoon* rather than *Hi*. The function (i.e. greeting) remains the same but because *Hi* is not the right register for a formal speech, it is used wrongly in this context.

You can often find out what register a word or set of words is by looking in a good English dictionary, such as the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (Third Edition)*. Entries in this dictionary will tell you if a word is formal or informal. For example: 'hi *exclamation* **INFORMAL**'. The definitions given in a dictionary will often tell you if a word is used by a particular group of people. For example, *drill* is associated with the military, which leads to the meaning teachers give it.

FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES (See page 116 for answers)

- Look at the underlined items of lexis in the table below and make notes about the meaning and register of each one.

Item of lexis	Figurative? Meaning?	Register
1 Last Sunday was <u>boiling</u> hot!		
2 I would <u>appreciate</u> it if you could ...		
3 Overwork can lead to serious <u>fatigue</u> .		
4 So, <u>how's it going?</u>		
5 See you soon. <u>Tons of love</u> , Anne		

- Look at the underlined items of lexis in the sentences below. How does their meaning change from sentence a) to sentence b)?

- Could you pick up that pen for me?
 - If you've got the car, could you pick me up?
- I had chips for my dinner.
 - How many chips are in a computer?
- I went to the cinema last Saturday.
 - I nearly went mad trying to do my homework.

DISCOVERY ACTIVITIES

- Find a text (e.g. a newspaper article, a reading text from a student's English coursebook). Underline any words and phrases which have a figurative meaning. Use a dictionary if necessary.
- Choose five words you taught your students recently. Use a dictionary to find out if they have other meanings, what their register is, whether they can be used figuratively and if they have any particular connotations.

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TKT: KAL practice task 1 (*See page 133 for answers*)

A teacher is writing comments about her students' use of lexis.

For questions 1-6, match the students' sentences with the teacher's comments listed **A-G**.

There is one extra option you do not need to use.

Teacher's comments

- A** You've got the right idea but the wrong register.
We use *departure gate* in this context.
- B** This phrase is too formal for this situation. You need a more informal phrase.
- C** Good. You chose the right verb–noun collocation.
Notice how the verb changes its meaning.
- D** This word is too informal in this context. Do you know a more formal equivalent?
- E** This word is very strange in this sentence. Is it a spelling mistake?
- F** Good to see you using figurative language but in English this doesn't collocate.
- G** This word generally has a negative connotation.
Find one with a positive connotation.

Students' sentences

- 1** How do you do, Katy? Happy anniversary! Give me a kiss!
 - 2** I usually take a break at about 11 o'clock.
 - 3** Where's the door for getting to the plane?
 - 4** You're looking burnt from the sun! You look wonderful!
 - 5** I am writing to complain about the behaviour of some kids at my local school.
 - 6** That's really kind of you. Thanks a thousand.
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