

Longman



Language ActivatorTM

朗文 英语联想活用词典

The World's First
Production Dictionary

世界上第一部联想生成表达词典



上海外语教育出版社



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Preface

The conventional dictionary has become better and better during the many generations since Longman published Samuel Johnson's great work in 1755. But better and better at basically the same job: explaining what someone else has said or written; that is, converting words into meanings for the *passive* partner in communication.

For the *active* partner, striving to convert meanings into words, such a dictionary is less helpful, and the Longman lexicographers have now produced a radically different type of dictionary with precisely this active partner's needs in mind.

Moreover, by attracting users to major 'Key Word' entries such as SUMMARIZE, The *Longman Language Activator* performs a double function. It presents linguistic – not just lexical – information in a rich, convenient and production-oriented way. This transcends word boundaries (**in short** is there) and grammatical categories (**a rundown** is there, but also **to sketch out**). Secondly, the *Activator* gently obliges users by this format to train themselves in preparatory thought and planning. They are encouraged to single out a word representing the beginnings of what they want to state and are then helped to home in on 'ideas boxes' in which semantically relevant and suggestive expressions are presented. An initial skeleton can thus be fleshed out and be given not merely a satisfying fullness but the desirable linguistic precision.

Professor Sir Randolph Quirk

Introduction

The *Longman Language Activator* is a dictionary of *ideas* and how to express them in English. This is a new type of dictionary, aimed at helping intermediate to advanced students *produce* language, in other words, to *encode* their ideas. As such, it is a major departure from, some would even say a reversal of, the traditional role of the dictionary, which is predominantly used by students of English to *decode* the meaning of unknown words.

The *Language Activator* has been produced in response to need, the need often expressed by students, to have a dictionary that would tell them which word is right in which context, which subjects and objects go with particular verbs, and what are the phrases or collocations that words are normally used in. Students wanted a dictionary that would enable them to *use* new words themselves, to expand their vocabulary, and to improve their ability to express themselves.

Meaning first

One of the most important innovations in this book is the grouping together of individual word-meanings or phrase-meanings that generally share the same idea, concept, or semantic area. They *mean* the same thing in a general way, but they entail certain key differences. These differences govern why one word sounds natural or correct in a particular sentence and why another word, apparently very close in meaning to the first word, does not sound right or jars with native or highly proficient speakers of English. *Sad* and *unhappy* seem to be almost synonymous, and indeed most dictionaries define them as if they are, but in the sentence *I was desperately unhappy at school* it would sound distinctly odd if *sad* were to be substituted for *unhappy*. This is because it actually has a different meaning from *unhappy*. In order to be able to use words appropriately, students need to understand the precise meanings that words have, and this is the *raison d'être* of the *Activator*.

How have the creators of this dictionary identified these apparently small, but actually highly significant meaning differences, many of them never before registered in a reference book? We have made extensive use of two powerful tools: 1) large representative corpora of written and spoken language, and 2) a computer-aided semantic analysis system with which we can formally distinguish between the meanings of similar words.

The whole analysis process began with the assignment of words and phrases to their appropriate concepts. This was very much a 'bottom-up', pragmatic approach, which took a great deal of intellectual effort by the lexicographic team, but it was an essential process and we now feel considerable satisfaction with the results. We believe that we *have* identified the core concepts of English in a new,

meaningful, and most of all, helpful way for the students and teachers of English for whom this dictionary was created.

Key Words or concepts

There are 1052 concepts in the *Longman Language Activator*. These concepts express the meanings at the heart of the English language. It should be pointed out straight away, however, that the *Activator* does not address itself to words for 'real world' items, some of which, of course, also belong to the core of English. We believe that concrete nouns, and content words in general, present fewer, less serious problems of correct use for students, so you will not find different types of transport, dogs, machinery or buildings here. That is left to the *Longman Lexicon*, which deals effectively with semantic fields, including real world items.

The concepts (or as we call them Key Words) have clear, direct names such as FAR, SAD/UNHAPPY, HOPE, INTEND, EASY, FAULT/STH WRONG, and BUT. The words are intended to be the ones that students know well and are happy with, and we have conducted tests in classrooms in the UK and checked all the Key Words against the Longman Learners' Corpus in order to validate them. Starting from the Key Word, the word that students already know, they can access the other appropriate ways of expressing their ideas in English.

Each Key Word is divided into smaller sections, and these are shown in a numbered menu of meanings. The user simply selects the number that most closely corresponds to the idea they want to express and goes to that section to discover the various words and phrases presented to him/her.

Corpus revelations

All our work is corpus-based. The corpora used for this project are described collectively as the Longman Corpus Network. The main corpus, the Longman Lancaster Corpus, is about 30 million words made up of chunks of text up to 40,000 words long from over 2000 books, periodicals, and unpublished material from British, American, and other varieties of English. The 10 million-word Spoken Corpus, developed by Longman as part of the British National Corpus, is the first large-scale corpus of truly natural spontaneous speech. The Longman Learners' Corpus of students' writing has given us insights into the problems shared by students from over 70 different countries as well as the words and structures which students at different levels can already use successfully.

We believe that the meanings explained in detail in the *Longman Activator* will strike a chord with proficient users of English, particularly teachers, but there may be other times when users are surprised by the definitions of meanings. For example,

mean in the sense of 'not generous' is defined as a British use in the *Activator*. This is because our analysis of the written corpus, which is 40% American, demonstrates convincingly that *mean* is very rarely used in this sense in American English, where *mean* is predominantly used to express the idea 'deliberately unpleasant or nasty'.

Spoken language

Our work with the first large-scale corpus of spoken English, as part of the British National Corpus breaks new ground. Working with the first-ever large-scale corpus of spontaneous speech has given us unprecedented access to the language of spoken English. The *Activator* is consequently full of new insights into the natural ways of expressing ideas in the spoken medium as well as in written language.

Many of these lexical items are phrases rather than single words, and this has forcibly reminded us that native speakers often use a phrase rather than a single word to express their ideas.

The *Language Activator* includes items such as **be going** (as in *Is there any more wine going?* under the Key Word AVAILABLE), **something to eat** (under FOOD), and **not the easiest** and **it's easier said than done** (under DIFFICULT).

It was the Spoken Corpus that initially alerted us to the surprisingly frequent use of such phrases. But we have often found that words and phrases which seem distinctly 'spoken' also crop up in the written corpus, so the dividing line between spoken and written vocabulary is not as clear cut as might be supposed.

When a word or phrase has been identified as being predominantly spoken rather than written, this is indicated in the dictionary by introducing the definition with 'you say'. For example, in **between you and me** under the Key Word SECRET:

you say **between you and me** when you tell someone something which you expect them to keep secret from other people

The use of 'you say' here shows that this is a phrase which is typically used in speech.

Informal, formal, and other restricted contexts

One of the most important factors that affects word choice is register. For example, **hush-hush** is an informal word offered as a way of expressing the idea SECRET, as opposed to **covert**, **undercover**, or **secret** itself, which are all fairly neutral in register. This information is often essential to choosing the right word, so in the *Activator* informal or formal restrictions are 'fronted', which means that the register is stated at the beginning of the definition, as in:

hush-hush / ... / an informal word meaning officially secret

Where there is a more specific restriction on the typical use of a word or phrase, this is also specified in the definition, for example:

with a heavy heart / ... / an expression used especially in stories ...

This is to warn students against using this expression except when they are trying to create a story-like effect in what they are writing.

Interestingly, informal expressions are much more common in the *Activator* than formal ones, and this again reflects the fact that the dictionary is concerned with the core of the language, the more frequent words and phrases, rather than less frequent formal usage. Some students have a tendency to use a word that is too formal for general use, and so an important benefit of the *Activator* is to guide students away from such words. For example, under the Key Word CAN'T, the entry for **impotent** says clearly:

impotent / ... / a formal word meaning unable to deal with a situation because you do not have enough power

This is intended to deter students from using the word **impotent** in contexts where other less formal expressions may be more appropriate, such as **not be able to do something** or **not be in a position to do something**.

Frequency

Frequency has been of fundamental importance to this dictionary in various ways. All the lexical choices, i.e. the words and phrases offered to the student in the *Activator*, are relatively frequent. We do not include items that are highly infrequent or that are typical of only one or two text types, such as technical or very literary writing. The whole book may in fact be seen as a series of recommendations or selections by our lexicographic team, based on the empirical evidence of the written and spoken corpora.

The words and phrases given as options to express the idea chosen by the user are also shown in order of frequency, the first word or phrase being the most general and usual. Often the definition of the section is exactly the same as that of the first option listed and in such cases the definition is not repeated at the first option (such as **declare** under section 6 of the Key Word SAY/STATE).

If a phrase or spoken item has been judged more frequent this will be placed before a single-word item. This is because it is often a more natural item to express the meaning (for example, **get off the subject** is the first option given at section 5 of the Key Word SUBJECT, before the single word **digress**).

Examples

Examples are of the greatest importance to students in helping them to see the typical contexts, signifi-

cant nuances of meaning, and grammatical behaviour of words and phrases. Because this is a production dictionary, examples as models of use are even more important, and we have therefore included many more examples than in a traditional reference dictionary.

The examples in this dictionary are all strongly influenced by corpus evidence, but not all of them are taken directly from the corpora. The group of examples often begins with at least one 'pedagogic' example, i.e. one that demonstrates the meaning particularly clearly, such as a teacher might use in class when asked for an example by a student. Research has shown that teachers and students value this type of example at least as much as purely corpus-based examples. However, most of the examples are either closely modelled on sentences from one of the corpora or taken directly from them.

When sentences are taken directly from the American or the British side of the main corpus the original vocabulary and spelling are preserved.

Clarity of access and definition

We believe that we have devised an easy-to-use access system to the core meanings of English, which have been resolved to a flat hierarchy of the 1000 or so Key Words. But the success with which students can make use of the *Activator* depends very much on whether we have achieved sufficient clarity in defining:

- a) the menu of meaning under each of the Key Words (the comprehensibility and accuracy of the numbered menus under the Key Word) and
- b) the clarity of the definitions of the individual words and phrases.

The user will only know that a new word or phrase is appropriate for her/his context, if the individual definitions of the range of possible expressions are so clear that she/he can clearly see the difference.

We believe that this has resulted in the definitions being very clear: they have been written, as always, within the 2000-word **Longman Defining Vocabulary** to ensure that no difficult words impede the user's comprehension.

The key differences in meaning have been identified by the lexicographers using a diagnostic semantic analysis system. This has enabled them to compare the differences and similarities among all the words and phrases in a given semantic grouping.

Using new vocabulary – grammar and collocations

The *Activator* helps the user to *choose* an appropriate word or phrase for their context: it also gives clear guidance on how the words and phrases are normally *used*. The examples are, of course, essential to appropriate production and use of vocabulary,

but the treatment of grammar and collocation in the *Activator* is also designed to be particularly direct and straightforward.

Grammar – grammatical constructions that are available for use are described using only 4 codes and the restrictions shown on the inside back cover. The major innovation in grammatical presentation is the use of bold phrases (which we call propositional forms) to show the grammatical patterns in 'written-out' form. The treatment of grammatical behaviour is explained more fully in the 'How to Use the Longman Language Activator' section (pages F28–F33).

Collocations – the *Activator* lays great emphasis on providing students with the appropriate collocations of words and these are shown in bold type too, because we believe this is the clearest way of presenting the information. See for example deny at SAY/STATE 8, ... **vigorously/strenuously/categorically deny** (=strongly deny) *North categorically denied all the allegations made against him.*

In the same Key Word, SAY/STATE 10, the collocations for **allegation** are shown thus:

... **allegation that** *The commissioner will investigate allegations that the election was rigged.*
allegation of *The company finances will be examined closely after allegations of corruption.*
make an allegation *Several newspapers have made false allegations about a government minister's private life.* **refute/deny an allegation**
 (= say that it is not true) *My client refutes the allegation that he leaked these documents to the newspapers.*

Alphabetical order

Although the dictionary uses grouping by concept as a very important aid to production, the dictionary is in alphabetical order. The Key Words themselves are in alphabetical order, and all the individual word- and phrase-meanings are also in alphabetical order. If you already know the word **allegation** and want to find out how to use it correctly, you look in A, and are directed to the appropriate Key Word SAY/STATE in S.

We hope and believe that we have made a new type of dictionary for students of English in this book. The *Longman Language Activator* has many new features and innovations, and has been expressly designed to overcome the problems that students have had up to now in using their existing dictionaries for production purposes.

I personally have to thank all the people who have been involved in the project for embarking with me on such a daring and massive undertaking. I must thank most of all our Managing Editor, Michael Rundell, without whose linguistic and lexicographic skill and insight none of this would have been possible. Next, our Associate Lexicographer, Nick Ham,

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Jennings, who were involved in the last, extremely exhausting, stages of the book.

I know they would all join with me in wishing every success to the forthcoming generations of students and teachers of English who will work with, and we hope greatly benefit from, the ***Longman Language Activator – the World's First Production Dictionary***.

Della Summers
Editorial Director

The scope of the *Longman Language Activator*

Every so often a new conception of what language reference books can do reaches the vast public of English dictionary users. For example, in the nineteenth century, a century after Samuel Johnson's epic achievement of his *Dictionary of the English Language*, came another great one-man success, *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. Peter Mark Roget supplied a 'treasure store' of words organized in terms of the meanings, rather than the spellings of words.

Activating vocabulary for productive use

The *Longman Language Activator* can be measured alongside such past achievements as a new concept in dictionary-making. Its subtitle, *The World's First Production Dictionary*, reminds us that previous dictionaries have almost inevitably suffered from a bias towards the needs of the passive user of a language – the reader, or listener – rather than the active user, who wishes to speak or write in that language. The reason is self-evident. The way we recognize words, and gain access to their meanings, is through their spelling and pronunciation. Our commonest dictionary need, in reading in a language, is to find the meaning of an unfamiliar word or word use – and this need is met by looking up the word in its alphabetical position in the dictionary, arbitrary as that may seem. But from the productive end, when we want to find the words to express our ideas, there is no simple solution to the corresponding problem: if we know the meaning (roughly) that we want to express, how can we find a word to fit it? The *Longman Language Activator* provides us with ways of dealing with this problem, and so merits its subtitle as '*the World's First Production Dictionary*'.

Roget met this need for native-speakers – by arranging the words and phrases of English in groups, under headings, according to their similarity of meaning. So, speakers and writers suffering from a 'tip of the tongue' problem – knowing there is a word with a particular meaning, but not being able to remember its precise pronunciation or spelling – could jog their memories by looking through a list of near-synonyms and recognizing the word they were looking for. But this was only part of the task, because it was assumed that users already knew how to use the word when found. For example, looking up *anger* in *Roget's Thesaurus* (via the alphabetical key at the back of the book), I discover that the near-synonyms of *angry* include *irritated*, *livid*, and *furious* – but how can I choose the most appropriate of these words for a particular purpose, unless I already know enough about their meaning and use? We cannot take that knowledge for granted, when we are thinking about the needs of non-native users of English.

To put it another way, thesauruses such as *Roget* assume that we already have the necessary dictionary information handy – in our head or on the printed page of a dictionary.

But our favourite desk dictionary would not give enough detail. A true production dictionary of a language needs to give far more information about meaning and use than the traditional desk dictionary. In a dictionary for the passive user (reader or listener), all that is needed is enough information for the user to make the mental connection between form (especially spelling) and meaning and use. (The fact that we have met the word in a book will normally be a guarantee that it is being used appropriately according to the lights of the native speaker.) Then, all that is needed is to find, from the dictionary-defined meanings, the one which fits that context most closely. But for the active user, writing, let us say, an essay or a letter, the need is to satisfy the conditions of appropriate use oneself: to find not merely a word, but with the word, all the conditions which enable us to fit it into a suitable context.

So a production dictionary is a dictionary which finds the *mot juste* – the right word – with a full account of why it is right for its context. To use the jargon of our modern age, it aims to meet the criterion of specifying *communicative appropriateness* – giving explicit information to enable the speaker or writer to pick out one word as being more appropriate than others. This means giving information not only about the various meanings a word may express, but also about the style or the types of text to which it is appropriate, the kind of communicative function to which it is linked, and (not least) the range of grammatical patterns or 'frames' in which it may be used. Including only frequent, generally-used words will also be important.

Gaining access to meaning through ideas or 'Key Words'

However, a production dictionary does not only have to deliver communicative appropriateness. Another special function it has is that of providing *channels of access* to this information. Admittedly, all dictionaries suffer from the arbitrary 'tyranny of the alphabet' – which means you cannot look up a word unless you know its spelling. But in a true production dictionary, we need to find access even to words we have never heard of before. Can we escape from the alphabetic tyranny? Even *Roget* succumbs to its arbitrariness – providing an alphabetical index almost as long as the thesaurus itself! So how can we gain access to meanings without knowing the words that express them? The *Longman Language Activator* provides an ingenious answer to this question, in the form of a two-level strategy.

- 1 The first-level strategy is to look up one of the 1000 or so Key Words such as SAD or ANGRY in its normal alphabetical position in the dictionary – yes, the dictionary is alphabetical, to enable easy access to the Key Words. These are the main organizing divisions of the dictionary, and the regular user will soon grow familiar with a large number of these major headings.

At SAD/UNHAPPY many items in the same area of meaning are presented and compared: **depressed, dejected, despondent, down in the dumps** and so on – and the fact that all these items begin with *d* is, for our purpose, purely accidental!

- 2 The second access strategy is to look up a word or idiom, again in its normal alphabetical position in the same wordlist as the Key Words. Frequently, speakers and writers have partial knowledge of a word or phrase, but are not sure of the full details of how to use it. For example, if you know the word **downcast**, but do not think it is quite right for the purpose in hand, you can look it up alphabetically, and find a cross reference to the Key Word SAD/UNHAPPY.

So – the tyrannous alphabet is not defeated, but tamed, as it were, and put to use in the recognition of Key Words themselves.

The 1000 Key Words have been arrived at as a result of years of practical work – sifting of words and their meanings – by a skilled team of lexicographers, so the concepts presented in the dictionary have gone through a stringent selection process. By means of Menus, too, they are subdivided into sections which specify a 'subconcept' important enough in the language to boast a range of near-synonyms to express it. For example, under the general category of SAVE MONEY we find the sub-headings

- 1 to save money, e.g. **save up**
- 2 to have some money that you have saved, e.g. **have something put by**
- 3 the money that you have saved, e.g. **nest egg**

Under each of these subheadings, in turn, the near-synonyms are distinguished, so that (for example), in comparison with the more general expression **savings**, **nest egg** is defined as '*an amount of money that you have saved for the time when you stop working, get married, etc.*' In this way, the dictionary provides an illuminating conceptual map of the language.

- 3 A third important mode of access should not be ignored: browsing. All dictionaries invite browsing by the reader who scans through the pages at will (perhaps following up cross-references for interest's sake). This dictionary, however, provides a particularly rich and recreative language-learning experience for the browser: each column, each concept entry, each subentry, provides a fresh revelation of the resources of

the language in expressing varying foci of meaning, or meanings in varying contexts. The browsing process can on the one hand suggest the 'off-duty' reader's casual skimming through the book. But on the other hand, it can also extend to the more purposefully-structured learning tasks of the classroom. In either case, browsing is not to be neglected as a means to achieving productive control of the language's vocabulary resources. The more the reader browses, the more he or she becomes familiar with the range of Key Words, so that these become fixed reference points in the memory. The arrangement of the dictionary, whereby the alphabetical list is interspersed with the entries for Key Ideas, aids this process.

The means of production: rendering meaning

Clearly a production dictionary cannot ignore the means of expression: the forms of language by which we *render* meaning. Indeed, for productive use, more exact information is needed on the forms that can be used, and their variability.

- (1) **Words and other expressions** – Firstly, what units of language are we looking for, for expressing meaning? We need to recognize that the *word* is not the only unit to consider. Recent research has emphasized the extent to which writers and speakers create messages by making use of pre-formed sequences of words. These sequences, whether we call them idioms, fixed expressions, or habitual collocations, mediate between the dictionary and the grammar of a language, and in fact show that the distinction between these two repositories of linguistic knowledge is not at all clear cut. We often need to be formulaic in our use of grammar, and creative in our use of the dictionary. *The Longman Language Activator* satisfies this need to get away from the word as the only unit for encoding meaning. Hence it is revealing to look at a section of the alphabetical list such as the following, in which the various idioms involving chance are related to their Key Ideas:

chance	CHANCE/BY CHANCE 2, 3 CHANCE/OPPORTUNITY 1, POSSIBLE 2
chance:	by chance CHANCE/BY CHANCE 1
chance:	get sth by chance/accident/luck GET 6
chance:	grab the chance CHANCE/OPPORTUNITY 4
chance:	have/stand a good chance PROBABLY 6
chance:	have/stand little chance PROBABLY 10
chance:	jump at the chance/opportunity CHANCE/OPPORTUNITY 4
chance:	little chance/hope/prospect PROBABLY 10
chance:	not stand a chance IMPOSSIBLE 2
chance:	outside chance PROBABLY 10
chance:	take a chance RISK 3
chance:	there's a chance MAYBE 1
chance:	there's a fifty-fifty chance UNCERTAIN 3

From this list, we note that the word *chance* crops up in 15 locations – involving 8 distinct Key Words – in the dictionary. But 12 of these locations apply to

the use of *chance* in multi-word sequences. This case is typical, in the light it throws on the essential role of word sequences in the productive resources of the language.

(2) **Grammar** – Secondly, what about grammatical information? We need to be precise as to the kind of 'grammatical frame' a word or other expression can occur in, with a given meaning. For the visual sense of the verb *to see*, for example, the user needs to know

- that *see* can be a straightforward transitive verb with a direct object – *We'd better get out of here before your father sees us*;
- that *see* can also be used in the more advanced constructions *see sb/sth do sth* (*He saw the car cross the road...*) and *see sb/sth doing sth* (*I could see her standing outside our house...*); also in *see who/what/where* (*... it was too dark to see who it was*);
- and that in none of these is the progressive form normally used (we could not say *... before your father is seeing us*).
- We also need to know, for example, that the construction *see that* (as in *I'll see that you come to no harm*) cannot be used in the visual sense of seeing.

All these facts have to be at our fingertips, if we are to communicate an appropriate message, but many such details have traditionally been avoided by dictionary makers as too difficult to explain to the

average non-grammarians. The *Activator* gets such information across to the user in a simple, largely self-explanatory way, reducing to a minimum the grammatical symbols and terminology which can be a burden for the average user.

Turning passive knowledge into active knowledge

In conclusion, let us emphasize the continuity between passive and active knowledge of a language. When learning how to improve our active ability in using the language, we continually need to draw upon our passive knowledge.

The *Activator* takes students' *active* knowledge, the 1000 basic building blocks of the language, the Key Words, and helps to activate their *passive* knowledge of words and phrases and so make a greater range of vocabulary available for their productive use. The carefully-chosen textual examples used to illustrate each sense in the dictionary, many of them taken from the Longman Lancaster Corpus, show this continuum, with the first examples being simpler, clearer sentences, and the later ones going up to more 'authentic' and advanced production. In sharpening the precision of the insight into the meaning of words, and in making this accessible in an easily usable form for students of English, the *Longman Language Activator* deserves to be seen as an important step forward in modern English lexicography.

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Vocabulary acquisition and the Activator

Not so very long ago, it was very unfashionable for teachers to worry about vocabulary. It was generally believed that learners could get by with a basic vocabulary of about 2000 words. People also thought that the best way to pick up this basic vocabulary was to work through a carefully graded textbook, which introduced 2000 words slowly and cautiously, perhaps only a couple of hundred words a year. This method had the advantage of leaving the learners free to concentrate on what people thought was the *real* business of learning a language: grammar and sentence structure. Nowadays, not many people hold these views. Vocabulary is beginning to occupy a central place in the way people learn a language. Learning words and their meanings and how they are used is increasingly seen as the key to learning a language, not just an annoying or irrelevant side activity.

These new attitudes have yet to make a serious impact on textbooks and courses, however. English language textbooks are often built around a basic vocabulary of only 2000 words. This core vocabulary consists of highly frequent words, which you are likely to find in almost any text you pick up. It includes words like SEE and THINK, but excludes words like 'rheumatism' or 'paralysis', which normally only occur in specialist texts. This core vocabulary is surprisingly powerful: if you count the number of different words in an ordinary newspaper article, for example, you generally find that 80 or 90 percent of the words belong to the core vocabulary of English. This is a very high figure.

Because the core vocabulary plays such an important role in English, some people have suggested that a basic vocabulary of 2000 words will allow you to understand 80 or 90 per cent of everything that you hear or read in English. In fact, things are more complicated than that. What actually happens is that with a vocabulary of 2000 words, you can understand *everything* you see or hear a lot of the time, but other times you won't understand anything at all. It depends on what kind of situation you are dealing with. 2000 words will let you deal with a large number of ordinary everyday situations – buying drinks or bus tickets, for example – but once you leave these predictable situations, you will find it hard to get by with only a limited vocabulary.

Because lots of English language courses rely on core vocabularies of about 2000 words, many learners get stuck at that level. In fact, learners who have studied English systematically from a good textbook usually have a very good grasp of basic grammar and sentence patterns. Their biggest problem is learning new words, learning what these words mean, and how to use them. This type of learning is very different from what they will have encountered in a basic course. Because of this, some

learners find it difficult to make any progress beyond the basic levels, and even good learners often feel that they have reached a sort of plateau, where progress is very slow.

Some teachers underestimate just how many words students need to know in order to increase their fluency, and these expectations strongly influence the way we think about teaching vocabularies. An unofficial, but often quoted, figure for the Cambridge First Certificate examination, for instance, suggests that students with a vocabulary of less than 3500 words are unlikely to be successful in the exam. Figures like this provide a useful rule of thumb, but they can often be very misleading because they underestimate just how big native speakers' vocabularies are, and therefore badly underestimate how many words learners really need. The best current research suggests that native English speakers who have been educated up to 18 years old or beyond know at least 16,000 English 'word families'. (A word family is a set of words that all share a common root, like 'happy', 'happily', 'unhappy', 'happiness', and so on. If you count all these words separately, then the number of words that people know is very much greater than 16,000.)

If you already speak a language like Spanish, Greek, German or Swedish, you will find that many of these words are words that you know already, because they are similar to words in your native language. This is obviously a great help. For most learners, however, there are no short-cuts: you just have to work very hard at understanding but you can meet a surprisingly large number of unusual words in even a 'simple' text. When we analysed some comic strips in the Tintin series, for instance, we found that they each typically contained about 500 words that weren't part of the core vocabulary.

Learning to understand a large number of words is a key part of becoming a fluent speaker of a language, but learning to use these words accurately is also very important – and very much harder. One of the best ways to pick up new words is to read a lot, preferably stories that you find interesting or exciting. It often pays to read the same book over and over again: each time you read it, you will learn different new words, and the familiar context helps to fix them in your mind. But often when you pick up a word from reading, you have a general idea of what it means, without being clear about the detailed meaning of the new word, and, more importantly, how it can be used.

Suppose for example, that you learn the word **burgle** from watching a movie on TV. You know that it has something to do with stealing things from somewhere. That might be all you need to know if you are watching a film, but it's easy to make the wrong inferences about words like this. For instance, can you **burgle** a person, or somebody's wallet? Can you **burgle** an idea? If you

take something from a shop without paying for it, have you **burgled**? What exactly is the difference between **burgle**, and other words you might know with a similar meaning like **shoplift**, **loot**, **pinch**, **mug**, **embezzle**, **hold up** and so on. All these words share parts of their meaning with **STEAL** but they are actually very different in meaning and it is often difficult for a non-native speaker to choose correctly between them.

If you were a horribly efficient and serious language learner, you might try making a list of all the words you could think of that had something to do with stealing. You could then systematically compare them all, until you really understood the difference between **burgle** and all these other words. With an ordinary dictionary, this would be a mammoth task. You would only be able to identify words that you already knew anyway, so you could never be sure that you had uncovered all the relevant words. And then, you would have to jump about from one part of the dictionary to another comparing half a dozen definitions, which might only differ in one or two words. Although this is a good idea in theory, in practice it would only appeal to masochists.

The *Longman Language Activator*, however, makes it very easy for you to get to know well words that you have only just met. It brings together all the

most frequent words that share a meaning with the words you are interested in – not just the ones you know well already, but others that are completely new – and the definitions show you exactly how these words are related to each other. It will also remind you of other words that you perhaps once knew but have now forgotten. You won't be able to learn all these words at one go. Your brain will make subconscious associations between the words, however, and these associations will make it easier for you to recognize them when you meet them again, and it will be more likely that you remember them in the long term. The *Activator* does make use of the 2000-word core vocabulary – all its definitions are written within the 2000-word Longman Defining Vocabulary to make sure the definitions are all totally clear. Its 1052 Key Words are all expressed in words well within the FCE or intermediate students active vocabulary. Its 23,000 word- and phrase-meanings, if we exclude concrete or real-world items, are those usually used by native-speakers, or fluent non-native speakers, to express themselves in English. Using the *Activator* systematically should help you to remember these new words, because they will be linked by meaning with words you already know.

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