

# A GENERAL SERVICE LIST OF ENGLISH WORDS

WITH  
SEMANTIC FREQUENCIES  
AND  
A SUPPLEMENTARY WORD-LIST  
FOR THE WRITING OF POPULAR SCIENCE  
AND TECHNOLOGY

*Compiled and Edited by*  
**MICHAEL WEST**  
M.A., D.Phil.



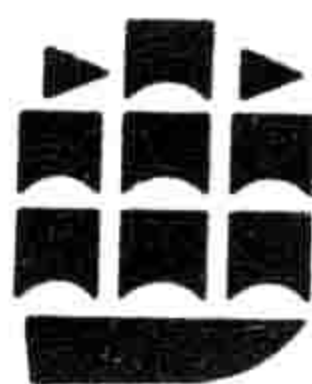
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## FOREWORD

*by*

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*Director of the University of London Institute of Education*

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During the first half of the present century great progress has been made in the development of language teaching techniques, and a great deal of this has been applied to English, which has now become the most widely-used language. A language is so complex that selection from it is always one of the first and most difficult problems of anyone who wishes to teach it systematically. It has come to be more and more generally realized that random selection is a wasteful approach, and that only a complete system capable of continuous enlargement can form a satisfactory objective for the first stage in any attempt to grasp as much of the entire language as may ultimately be necessary. Roughly a language system may be considered as consisting of words entering into grammatical constructions spoken with conventional stress and intonation. To find the minimum number of words that could operate together in constructions capable of entering into the greatest variety of contexts has therefore been the chief aim of those trying to simplify English for the learner. Various criteria have been employed in choosing the words, but the dominant activity throughout the period among all those concerned with systematic teaching of English has been vocabulary selection.

All the vocabularies produced were useful, but their multiplicity confused the teachers they were designed to help. Co-ordination of effort was desirable, and in October 1934 a conference, sponsored by the Carnegie Corporation, was held in New York on the selection of vocabulary as a stage in the teaching of English. It was attended by most of the leading workers on the problem, and it entrusted the preparation of its report to a committee consisting of Dr L. W. Faucett, Dr Michael West and Dr H. E. Palmer, with Professor E. L. Thorndike as consultant. Meeting in London, together with Professor Fife, Dr Keppel and Professor Thorndike, the committee arranged for the preparation of a tentative word-list. The Carnegie Corporation made a grant to cover the cost of publishing the list and asked the University of London Institute of Education to administer the grant, which was to provide also for the expenses of further conferences on the use of English as a world language.



## FOREWORD

The list was published in 1936 as the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection* (P. S. King & Son, Ltd, London). Under that title it has become well known to all teachers of English. It has long been out of print, however, and it was never considered to be more than an interim report. By 1939 arrangements had been made for its revision, and, with the agreement of the Carnegie Corporation, Dr Michael West was invited to carry out the work. The war intervened, and it was not until the end of the war that any progress could be made. Dr West then laboured hard at the formidable task, and the result is the present volume.

Dr West is entirely responsible for the revised list. He has had the advantage of using a semantic frequency count by Professor I. Lorge of Columbia University, who generously made the work available before it was published. The Institute of Education has sponsored this publication as trustees for the fund originally established by the Carnegie Corporation, but it is not in any way committed to the list, for which full credit should be given to Dr West. As a member of the distinguished band of workers in the field of vocabulary selection who attended the New York Conference in 1934, and one who has continued to interest himself in the subject, it is fitting that he should bring this phase of research into the teaching of English to what looks like being a culmination, since attention is now shifting to structural problems. All who are concerned with the spread of English throughout the world must be grateful to him for the energy and experience he has brought to his task. The generosity of Professor Lorge has added to the value of the present list and lightened Dr West's labours. Dr West has no doubt been conscious of the whole movement which has contributed to the clarification of the issues involved in vocabulary selection, and his work in the present volume may be regarded as a tribute to a period of research into language teaching, as well as his own latest judgment on the selection of English most suitable to set as a first objective for foreign learners.

*December, 1952*

Thanks are due to Dr W. E. Flood, Lecturer on Science-teaching in the Department of Education, Birmingham University, for permission to include the vocabulary used in *An Explaining and Pronouncing Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Words* (Flood & West, Longmans, 1952). We wish also to express our appreciation of the care and labour of Mrs R. Gunther in reading and criticizing the work; and of Miss Gertrude Thresher in typing and checking.



## EXPLANATION

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*The Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection* (1936, P. S. King & Co.) presented a list of 2000 "General Service" words considered suitable as the basis of vocabulary for learning English as a foreign language. The compilation of this list was rendered possible by a grant from the Carnegie Corporation of New York.

THE SEMANTIC COUNT was a count of the frequency of the occurrence of the various meanings and uses of words as found in a study of five million (or for some words, 2½ million) running words. A note by Dr Irving Lorge on the procedure in making this count will be found on page xi below.

In this reissue of the *Carnegie Report on Vocabulary Selection* the various meanings and uses of the selected words have been rearranged in the light of the Semantic Count, and the figures of the Semantic Count have been added to indicate their relative importance.

In the original Semantic Count very fine distinctions of meaning were made and the frequencies were expressed *per mille* (e.g. of 1000 occurrences of the word GAME, 5 were in the meaning Fun, e.g., Make game of).

In the present report these meanings have been grouped more coarsely and the frequencies expressed as percentages, so that the teacher and textbook writer may find it easier to understand and use the list.

AN EXAMPLE will make the meaning clear:

GAME	638	(1) ( <i>amusement, children's play</i> ) Fun and games It's not serious; it's just a game	9%
		(2) ( <i>with the idea of competition, e.g. cards, football, etc.</i> ) A game of football Indoor games; outdoor games	38%
		(3) ( <i>a particular contest</i> ) We won, six games to three I played a poor game Play a losing game (10.5%)	23%
		(4) ( <i>games = athletic contest</i> ) Olympic Games	8%
		? [= <i>animals</i> , 11%; <i>game-</i> /, <i>game-birds</i> , <i>etc.</i> , 5%] [= <i>fun</i> , <i>Make game of</i> , 0.5%]	



## EXPLANATION

This means: In a count of 5 million words the word *Game* occurred 638 times. In 9% of these occurrences it meant children's play, amusement: in 38% of the occurrences it had the idea of competition as in football, card games, etc.

The sign ? [ ] shows a suggestion on the part of the compiler that the meaning *Game* = *animals*, e.g. *Big game*, which accounted for 11% of the occurrences, may be omitted by the teacher; so also *game-/* as in *game-birds*, *game-preservation*, etc.

The sign [ ] is a definite recommendation by the compiler that *Game* = *fun*, as in such phrases as "Make game of", should not be taught.

On the subject of these suggestions and recommendations see the note on "Factors other than Frequency" below.

(Certain minor meanings have been omitted, so the percentages do not add up to 100.)

IN STUDYING THESE PERCENTAGES the total frequency of the word should be considered: thus 1% of a word such as *Pull* may be important, but 1% of *Drag* is definitely not so. This does not mean that all the Total Frequencies can be multiplied by the percentages to yield exact values for every item in this list, since the actual numbers are sometimes too small to be reliable; the smaller products would merely show that the items are unimportant.

THE CHIEF VALUES OF THE LIST ARE that it shows:

- (1) how very heavy is the learning-burden of the major words compared with all the others, and how very much the learner's task may be lightened by cutting out everything which is not really essential, especially in those heavy words.
- (2) how much less frequent and less important are the minor items of words than one would have expected. Indeed it may be taken as a general rule that anything which seems in the least degree unusual or doubtful should certainly be excluded from the teaching course.

IN INTERPRETING THE LIST it is to be remembered that it is based on printed and written material, and it therefore rather tends to undervalue those items used more in speech than in writing, e.g. the direct interrogative *Who?*, names of foods, greetings, and colloquialisms: and it sometimes has a tendency to overweight the purely literary item (e.g. *Preserve* = *save*): these latter cases have been annotated.

Where American and British usage differs, this has been pointed out (e.g. *Can*).

Months, days of the week and numbers are not shown.

NO ATTEMPT HAS BEEN MADE TO BE RIGIDLY CONSISTENT in the method used for displaying the words: each word has been treated as a separate problem, and the sole aim has been clearness.



## EXPLANATION

The presence of a word in an example (e.g. *tyre* under BURST) or in a compound (e.g. *marshal* in *field-marshal* under FIELD) should not be taken to justify free use of the word if it is not included in the General Service List in its own right.

## SIGNS

— — — — — A broken line across the page shows a separate entry in the dictionary and therefore the start of a new percentage, e.g.,

### EXPRESS

— — — — —

expression

A—B—C e.g. A. Expression (= *phrase, etc.*)

B. Expression (*of the face*)

The lettering shows that the difference in meaning is so great that, for purposes of teaching and of word-counting, these are equivalent to two separate words.

[ ] In the opinion of the editor this item should not be taught.

?[ ] In the opinion of the editor it is doubtful whether this item is worth teaching. On this point see the note on "Factors other than Frequency".

e after a number, e.g. IMAGINE, 288e; this means that the word occurred 144 times in a count of 2½ million words; the estimated frequency in 5 million words is therefore 288.

\* after a number, e.g. GARDEN, 574\*, means that this figure is based upon an unknown number of counted words.

## FACTORS OTHER THAN FREQUENCY

### WHICH ARE TO BE CONSIDERED IN VOCABULARY SELECTION

FREQUENCY IS NOT, OF COURSE, THE ONLY POINT to be considered in selecting items for teaching English. Other considerations are:

(1) *Ease or difficulty of learning (= Cost)*. Thus the item Claim (mining) is very closely related to Claim the title, and so would cost but little in learning effort, though its value is low.

(2) *Necessity*. An item of relatively low frequency may be selected because it alone covers a certain range of necessary ideas. Thus Preserve (food), 7% of 350, is the only satisfactory cover for canning, bottling, salting, freezing, jam making: the rest of the word is merely a literary synonym of Keep safe, and is of doubtful value. So also Vessel (blood-vessel).

(3) *Cover*. This is the converse of Point 2 above (*Necessity*). An item



may be frequent but unnecessary. Thus "for the time being" is not uncommon, but is adequately covered by "for the present". "For the time being" is costly, since the word "being" here is remote in meaning from To be, whereas "present" is used in its normal, root sense. It is a useful general rule to prefer the item nearest to the root sense; tricky idioms are often of less value than an extra word as cover for an idea.

(4) *Stylistic level.* Such duplicates as the above often arise from different stylistic levels; thus Personage is the written and rather literary (high stylistic) equivalent of person; Fellow or Chap is the colloquial (low stylistic) equivalent. The foreign learner does not at this (2000-word) stage need either high or low equivalents in his conversation but should keep a middle path. (But some high equivalents are needed in the reading vocabulary, e.g. in popular science.)

(5) *Intensive and emotional words.* The foreigner is learning English to express ideas rather than emotion; for his emotional expression he has the mother-tongue. English is a rather unemotional language, but it has its intensive words and items whose only function is to be the equivalent of underlining, or an exclamation mark, e.g. "simply useless" = quite useless plus annoyance. It is a useful general rule that intensive words and items are of secondary importance to the foreign learner, however common they may be.

Some guidance in respect of the above considerations is given by enclosing in square brackets, [ ] or ?[ ], items which we suggest as undesirable; in this we have erred on the side of caution (of rejecting too little rather than too much).

MICHAEL WEST



# THE SEMANTIC COUNT

by

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THE selection of words for the teaching of English to foreigners, to a large degree, has been based on the frequency of the occurrence of words in printed English. Such facts about word frequency have been useful in the choice of basic vocabularies of specified sizes. The teaching of these words, however, left much to the judgment of the teacher, for he had to choose which meaning or meanings of these words to impart. In general, the more frequent the occurrence of a word, the greater is the variety of meanings in which it is used.

To establish the relative frequency of the occurrence of the different meanings of all multi-meaning words, the Institute of Psychological Research under a generous grant from the Rockefeller Foundation for "Studies of English Usage" and with the personnel made available by the Works Division, Emergency Relief Bureau of New York City and its successor agencies, was enabled to collect the facts of the relative occurrence of the different meanings of English Words. These facts were reported in 1938 by Irving Lorge and Edward L. Thorndike in *A Semantic Count of English Words*. This count was supplemented this year with the publication of *The Semantic Count of the 570 Commonest Words* by Irving Lorge. This latter study was, in part, supported by a grant-in-aid for the study of "English as a Foreign Language" by the American Council on Education through the Carnegie Corporation of New York and by support from the General Fund of the Institute of Psychological Research at Teachers' College, Columbia University.

The grant-in-aid from the American Council on Education, however, was used primarily to arrange the facts about the frequency of the meanings of words for the use in the new *Carnegie Report on Vocabulary Selection*. A brief description of the basic procedure involved in semantic counts will illustrate the entire process.

First, it was necessary to select a sample of material to be read. For this purpose many sources, such as encyclopedias, magazines, textbooks, novels, essays, biographies, books about science, poetry and the like, were sampled. Altogether the original sample included about two and a half million words. This sample was later supplemented by another sample of the same size.

The semantic count is based on the differentiation of the meanings in *The Oxford English Dictionary*. The thirteen-volume dictionary was split into folios of 32 pages. Each person selected to do the semanticizing was



# THE SEMANTIC COUNT

of high intelligence and especially trained for the task. He proceeded to read the materials. Whenever he found a word in his section of the dictionary he made a record of it, giving its location by unit, page and column in the sample. He then studied its apparent meaning in context to assign its proper meaning, number and letter as given in the Oxford Dictionary. The semanticist usually read all of the five million words for this purpose.

When all the material was assembled, the record looked like this:

	<i>O. E. D.</i> <i>Code</i> <sup>*</sup> (Th lb)	<i>Per</i> <i>Mille</i> (638)	<i>No. of</i> <i>Units</i> (29)
game	sb. 1	005	3
	3	092	18
	4	271	27
	4b	036	10
	Modern Olympics	044	8
	4c	009	4
	4f	002	1
	5	105	20
	5b	003	2
	6	121	14
	6b	008	4
	6c	005	1
	6e	002	1
	6f	016	4
	10	017	7
	10b	006	3
	11	083	13
	11b	003	2
	16	044	8
	17	005	2
	adj. 1	006	4
	v. 1	003	2
	vbl. sb. 1	009	6

The data for *game* are interpreted as follows:

- The rubrics (Th lb\*) indicate that in the word count made by Dr Thorndike *game* was in the second five hundred in frequency.
- The (638) indicates that *game* occurred in five million words with a total frequency of 638.
- The (29) indicates that the word was semanticized for twenty-nine units, i.e. all the units in the five million sample.
- The references in the column headed "O. E. D. Code" are the rubrics for each separate meaning in *The Oxford English Dictionary*.

\* The "l" refers to most frequent thousand words, the letter "b" to the second half of them.



## THE SEMANTIC COUNT

- (e) The numbers in the column headed "Per Mille" refer to the relative frequency of each meaning. For instance, meaning 4 had a frequency of 271.
- (f) The numbers under the column headed "No. of Units" refer to the number of different units in which the meaning was found. In general the data give some indication of the different kinds of material in which the meaning is used.\*

The data for *game* give twenty-four different meanings. Some of the distinctions, however, are too fine for general use. To make the *Semantic Count* more useful, members of the staff of the Institute of Psychological Research tried to relate the Oxford meaning classifications to those that were made in the *Interim Report*. They found, sometimes, that the *Interim Report* included meanings which rarely or never were found and left out some meanings that were fairly frequent. For instance, in the *Interim Report on Vocabulary Selection* the facts about *game* are:

- A game of football
- Playing a losing game
- Having the game in one's hand
- (X) [game = animals used for sport; game  
= tricks; have a game with = make  
fun of]

A semanticist estimated how frequently each of the semantic count meanings accorded with the meanings selected for the *Interim Report*. Thus, it was found that the sense of "A game of football" occurred as meaning 4 with a per mille of 271; or "Play a losing game" occurred as meaning 5 with a per mille of 105.

Meanings like "Have the game in one's hands" occurred infrequently, i.e. two times in a thousand, while meanings like "animals used in sports" or "Olympic Games" occurred with much greater frequencies. These facts became, in part, the basis for revising the selection of meanings to be exemplified in this report.

IRVING LORGE

New York, N. Y.,  
May 31, 1949

\* Whenever the relative occurrence of the meanings of a word was based on less than the total sample, estimates of its frequency in a five million sample are also provided.



A, AN, indef. art.	(89,572*)	(1) (a certain one) A book (indicating a class) An insect has six legs	90%
		Special use Many a —, such a —, so large a	5%
		(2) (with numbers) A hundred, a dozen A good many	2%
		(3) (distributive) Once a day; five pence an hour [Bells a-ringing, 0.7; = of, 0.7]	1%
<hr/>			
ABLE, adj.	940	(1) Able to take care of (2) An able man [Able-bodied, 0.1 %]	89% 11%
<hr/>			
ability, n.	340	(1) (cleverness) A man of great ability Musical ability (2) (power to) Ability to learn [legal sense, 2%]	58% 40%
<hr/>			
ABOUT about, adv.	(7819*)	(1a) (on every or any side; sometimes with the idea of carelessness) Stand, sit, lie about Is the manager anywhere about? (1b) (hither and thither; sometimes implying mishandling) Move things about; knock about ? [Special use Bring about; come about (= happen) (2) (approximately) About right; about the biggest; about finished (3) (future tense) I am about to tell you	2% 3% 6% 25% 3%
about, prep.		(1) (showing proximity) Flowers dotted about the grass Standing about the door (2) (approximately) About 3 o'clock; about 12 ounces	6% 12%



about, prep. ( <i>continued</i> )	(3a) ( <i>in connexion with</i> )	
	Something dishonest about it	8%
	(3b) ( <i>concerning</i> )	
	Quarrels about money	31%

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ABOVE	(978*)		
above, adv.		( <i>in a higher position</i> )	
		In heaven above	18%
		<i>Special use</i>	
		See page —, above ( <i>in a book, etc.</i> )	
		The above facts ( <i>adj.</i> )	17%
above, prep.		(1a) Above the trees	
		Kingston is above London on the river	25%
		(1b) ( <i>figurative</i> )	
		His voice could be heard above the noise	17%
		(2) ( <i>idea of superiority</i> )	
		Above my station	
		Above dishonesty	4%
		(3) ( <i>more than</i> )	
		Above 500	
		Above all	18%
		[Over and above, 0.5%]	

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ABROAD, adv.	268	(1) ( <i>idea of foreign country</i> )	
		Travel abroad	
		News from abroad	80%
		(2) ( <i>idea of scattering as in Broadcast</i> )	
		Preach abroad	11%
		? [(3) ( <i>out of the home</i> )	
		I never venture abroad without an umbrella	9%]

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ABSENCE, n.	213	(1) ( <i>lack of</i> )	
		Absence of self-respect	
		Total absence of hair	50%
		(2) ( <i>state of not being present</i> )	
		No one noticed his absence	
		In the absence of the manager	49%
		[Absence of mind, 0.5%]	

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absent, adj.	91	(1) <i>(not present)</i>	
		Absent from the meeting	44%
		(2) <i>(lacking, not existing)</i>	
		In these animals the tail is entirely absent	44%
		[Absent-minded, 2%; to absent one- self, v., 2%]	

ABSOLUTELY, 234 adv.	(1) <i>(to the fullest extent, entirely)</i>	
	Absolutely necessary, right	85%
	(2) <i>(with a negative)</i>	
	Absolutely nothing	7%
	[expressing surprise—Absolutely kissed him! 1.7%]	

ACCEPT, v.	732	(1)	<i>(take a thing, person, offer, office)</i>	
			Accept a gift	
			Accept £10 for it	
			Accept the post of headmaster	50%
		(2)	<i>(agree to an idea or belief)</i>	
			Accept the suggestion	
			The accepted opinion	47%
			[Accept a bill, 1%]	

ACCIDENT, n.	275	(1) ( <i>disaster</i> )	
		Meet with an accident	
		Accident on the railway	72%
		(2) ( <i>unintended event</i> )	
		It was a mere accident that we met	20%
		(3) By accident	7%
		[ <i>inessential property. Accidents of birth and fortune, 1%</i> ]	

accidental, adj.	39	<i>(happening by chance)</i>	90%
		[inessential, 8%]	

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accidentally, adv.	22	<i>(by chance)</i>	
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ACCORD, v.	1446	[Honours accorded to a hero [His deeds do not accord with his principles	3%] 1%]
·according to		According to my ideas According to Smith According to plan	88%
		? [according as, 1 %]	

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? [accordingly, adv.	167	(in agreement with the facts or circumstances) He is a thief and ought to be treated accordingly He gave us his reasons and we acted accordingly]	
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ACCOUNT, v.	968	(give reason for, explain) How do you account for it? [Accounted as = <i>thought to be</i> , 2%]	15%
account, n.	A.	(money, and connected phrases) Open, close, pay, settle, send in an account Cash account, Profit & Loss Account, keep accounts	10%
		Phrases:	
		(a) Put it on my account (= <i>charge to me</i> ) I did it on my own account (= <i>at own cost, on own responsibility</i> )	3%
		(b) On account of (= <i>because of</i> ) [On no account (= <i>in no circumstances</i> )]	22%
		(c) Give an account of ( <i>money, your stewardship</i> )	2%
		(d) Take into account, take account of	6%
		[Turn to good account, . . .]	
	B.	( <i>story</i> ) Give an account of the journey	35%

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ACCUSE, v.	142	(1) Accuse a person of a crime	73%
		(2) The accused	18%
		(3) ( <i>blame</i> ) My pen is broken; I accuse you	6%

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ACCUSTOM, v. 162		Accustom our eyes to, ourselves to	7%
		Accustomed to see; accustomed to the cold	85%
		[In its accustomed place, 8%]	

ACHE, v. 58	ache, n.	My arms ache	
		An aching tooth	75%
		Aches and pains	
		Toothache, headache	14%

ACROSS, adv. & prep. (1140*)		Go across the road	
		His house is just across the road	
		We shall soon be across	91%
		[Come across = <i>find</i> , 9%]	

ACT, n. 2184	act, v.	(1) ( <i>thing done</i> )	
		A noble act	
		The act of a madman	14%
		(2) ( <i>legal act</i> )	
		The bill became an act	22%
		(3) ( <i>part of a play</i> )	
		The third act of <i>Hamlet</i>	31%
		(1) ( <i>behave</i> )	
		Men are judged not by what they say but by how they act	11%*
		Act for the headmaster; acting headmaster	7%
		My advice is not always acted upon	2%
		* (This includes "Acting strangely", <i>etc.</i> = <i>behaving</i> -)	
		(2) ( <i>have an effect</i> )	
		The brake doesn't act	
		This acid acts on zinc	6%
		(3) ( <i>theatre</i> )	
		A well acted play	
		Act the part of	4%

actor, n., 163; actress, n., 65

action, n. 1079		(1) ( <i>opposite of thought, planning, etc.</i> )	
		What we need is not talk, but action	