

## Unit 5

### Diction

Words not only connote shades of meaning, but contain clues to the background, the personality, and also the attitudes and the intention of the reader or speaker. Diction means choice of words or manner of expression in words; so, we can tell what kind of person a writer or speaker is from the words he uses or the way he uses them. Look at the following sentences.

“When I told dad how I’d goofed that exam, he literally blew his top.” We can tell that this sentence probably is spoken, not written, by the fact that a contraction (*I’d*) and slang (*goofed, blew his top*) are used. Contractions and colloquial or slang are used more often in informal speech than in writing. However, this sentence might also occur in a letter. The fact that the speaker/writer uses contemporary slang and takes an exam reveals that he/she is young. There is no evidence to tell whether the speaker/writer is a young man or a girl; at any rate, he/she must be an American and speaking at the present time. The use of the word “literally” shows that the speaker is careless with his language because this word never belongs with an expression intended to be only a figure of speech. If Dad literally “blew his top” he would have been dead.

“There was a constable on point duty just where we stopped, and he came over and lifted the bonnet and made ineffectual motions with a spanner. And then--what do you think?--we found we were out of petrol!” This sentence must have been spoken by a British since a “constable on point duty” is the English equivalent of the American traffic cop. The words *bonnet*, *spanner*, and *petrol* correspond respectively to the American words *hood*, *wrench*, and *gasoline*.

“We don’t keep nothing like that here, but maybe we could order it for you special. Not in a hurry for it, was you?” This sentence shows that

the speaker is poorly educated as can be seen from the use of the double negative (we **don't** keep **nothing** ); the use of adjective in the place of adverb (special ); and the fact that the verb does not agree with the subject (was you).

“I had him on the ropes in the fourth, and if one of those short rights of **mine** had connected, he'd gone down for the count. I was aiming for his glass chin, but I couldn't seem to reach it.” The terms used in this sentence are words associated with boxing. Thus, the speaker must be or must have been a boxer.

“We were loading hay in the west forty when we saw the twister in the distance.” This sentence reveals that the speaker must be from the Middle West of the US since **forty** refers to a forty-acre tract which is a customary division of land in that region. **Twisters** or tornadoes occur most commonly in the Midwest.

“Both the Oriental romance and the picaresque narrative have been favorite vehicles for the satirist, the romance because it permits a handy and **vivid** way of contrasting western manners with those of a very different culture, the picaresque tale because the hero's adventuresome career, spiced as it is with all sorts of roguery, gives an excellent excuse for pungent comment on the errant ways of mankind.”

This excerpt sounds more like **written** than spoken words. It shows the writer's ability to write clearly since even though his sentence is rather long and complicated, it is quite well-constructed. He must be also well-educated, with more than average knowledge or interest in various types of literature (the Oriental romance, the picaresque narrative). Therefore, we may safely assume that he must be a professional critic or a literary historian.

“The female operatives in this mill seemed well content **with** their lot, laughing and singing as they emerged at the end of the day.” This

sentence must have been written perhaps a hundred years ago since **old-**fashioned words like “female operatives” are used, whereas we might refer to them as “girls and women who tend the machines.”

“Have you noticed how perfectly lovely the sunset is?” We would probably guess that the speaker is a woman since **perfectly lovely** is a characteristically female expression.

“The ominous final movement begins with a toccata in the horns, punctuated by glissando in the tympani, and then develops, in the middle section, into a lyric coda.” The sentence shows that the writer does not really know his musical terms since he has them all mixed up. A toccata is a piece of music designed to exhibit the dexterity of an organist or a pianist, not of a horn player. **Tympani** cannot produce glissando effects since they belong to the percussion section. A coda would not occur in the middle section since it is the concluding part of a musical composition.

A conclusion that can be drawn from these examples is that words not only connote shades of meaning, but also contain valuable clues to the background, the personality, the attitude and the intention of the writer or the speaker. Not only **what information** we receive, but also how this information is given, enables us to understand what the writer or speaker really wants to communicate.

## Elementary Clues of Diction

1. Geographical clues. There is a great difference between the British and American vocabularies. The English **word maize** becomes corn in American English. What the British call corn is what the Americans call wheat. An Englishman needs **petrol** for his car, whereas an American would need **gasoline** or simply gas. The bonnet of a British car is the hood of an American car. What is known in Britain as a caravan becomes a

*house trailer* in the US. The British word *lift* is *elevator* in American English. British and American **idioms** also differ; an American would be *in* the **hospital** , but a British would be *in* hospital . Americans take (subscribe to) newspapers while the British *take* them in .

There are also vocabulary differences between the various sections of the United States. A New England *stone* wall is a *stone row* in Northern New Jersey, a stone *fence* in Pennsylvania, and a *rock fence* from West Virginia southward. The general word *baby carriage* is called by other names in certain localities--baby coach, *baby buggy*, *baby cab*.

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2. Occupational clues. Every profession and occupation has its own slang and technical vocabulary. If a woman tells you that she is working in ER, she is probably a nurse working in the emergency room of a hospital. If another woman is a PR, then she is working in the public relations section of some institution.

Sometimes, what began as a term peculiar to one occupation ends up in the general vocabulary. *Top brass* , originally an Army term, is widely used to mean bosses or executives in general.

3. Educational clues. Bad grammar, such as the use of the double negative or the mismatching of verb and subject, shows that the person who speaks or writes like this has not been properly instructed or never had a chance for education. It does not necessarily mean that people who use such poor grammar must belong to the poorer classes. However, in practice this is often true. Maybe it is because there is a certain amount of pressure which requires people to speak correctly the higher up they are in society. However, modern standards are not usually very strict about correct English usage. Only when a person makes such errors in speaking

or writing that cannot be accepted by any standard that we are justified in calling him/her uneducated.

Grammar is the most obvious clue to tell us about a person's background. Another clue is vocabulary which is equally important. A speaker or writer who can use words accurately and appropriately is **well-**educated whether formally or informally. On the other **hand**, a person who misuses words is not soundly educated because education aims to teach people to use their native language accurately. The only way we can fairly judge whether a person uses language correctly or not is that we ourselves must be correct users of language first.

4. Time clues. Through the years, many words have shifted their meanings, some have even gone out of common usage and remained in historical references only. The reason for this is that the object they designated has disappeared or because other words have taken their place. Thus, if we see a word used in an obsolete sense, or a word that has become obsolete, in a passage, it is a clue to the date of the passage we are reading.

The occurrence of slang or colloquialism is an important clue to the time background of a passage. When a young lady used the word *elegant* to describe a picnic basket, she would probably belong to the nineteenth century. The current word for *elegant* would be *swell* or *super*.

### Clues to Personality and Intention

The "intensive" or the simple exaggeration are words intended to make a common place or mild statement seem more dramatic or important than it usually is. These words are born every few years and then become overused and so lose the persuasive power they originally had. The person who persists in using them is someone whose vocabulary is inadequate.

Indiscriminate use of such words of praise or wonder (*fabulous* , *tremendous* , *terrific* ) or of condemnation or shock (*horrible* , *awful* , *dreadful* ) shows that the speaker/writer cannot think of other words that are more appropriate to the situation than these threadbare words. In this respect, it shows that his education is somewhat deficient.

Language also contains clues to the writer's character, personality, and intentions. A person's habitual manner of speaking or writing reflects more of him than he is aware. Look at the following sentences which express the same message, a desire to borrow money, but spoken in different ways by two men.

1) "Listen, slip me a fin, will you? I'm in a jam. I'll pay you back Saturday."

2) "I'm awfully sorry to bother you, old man, but I wonder if you could possibly lend me five dollars. I'm in a sort of predicament. I will repay you on Saturday."

The first sentence suggests that the speaker must be the kind of person who is accustomed to using slang to express himself. He is forthright about his request, maybe a little too demanding. The second speaker has the same intention, but his way of asking is more smooth and concealed. It sounds as if the first speaker is used to borrowing money from his friends, whereas the second person seems rather embarrassed to do so.

1) "She don't think much of him, but believe me, if I ever got my hooks into him, nobody else wouldn't have a chance at him."

2) "Pim treats him rather lightly, I'm afraid. I confess I have a different feeling about men like him. I find them quite fascinating."

The message in these two speeches is the same: 'even though a man may not mean much to another girl, if he is my man, nobody else can touch

him.’ The difference lies in the ways the message is conveyed. The first girl, even though her grammar is not up to standard, is blunt and outspoken. She means what she says. The second girl tries to disguise her eagerness to get the man by speaking lightly about him as if he means nothing to her. She is only “fascinated by his type.” She does not want to admit her feelings as frankly as does the first girl. The fact that she uses the words *rather* and *quite* reveals that she belongs to a different social class from the first girl since these words are characteristic of a certain upper stratum of society. This girl might be a member of the upper **middle**-class, or pretend to be one.

Connotations also reveal the writer’s or the speaker’s judgment, sometimes without his knowledge. A person’s language can reveal his true feelings about a matter through his choice of words or his diction. Thus, examination of diction can help us see the truth even though the writer may attempt to conceal it. From a person’s choice of words, we can infer his/her personality.

### Exercise 1 Diction

Use clues of diction to infer about the person who spoke or wrote the following statements.

1. “When I struck the town I see there warn’t nobody out in the storm, so I never hunted for no back streets but humped it straight through the main one, and when I begun to get towards our house I aimed my eyes **and** set it. No light there; the house all dark--which made me feel sorry and disappointed, I didn’t know why.”

2. “Just our luck. Don dug the orbit out of the morgue a week ago and we had it in type, **all** ready for the word from Mac, who was standing the

death watch at the hospital. So what happens? He calls ten minutes after the last edition had gone to bed.”

## Exercise 2

Examine each word for clues to the kind of person who would use such a term (sex, occupation, age, etc.)

colleague

**ally**

associate

sidekick

partner

mate

companion

comrade

buddy

accomplice

## Exercise 3 British/American Usage .

In the blank after each word or expression, write B if you think it is British, and A for American usage. Then match the words or expressions in the left-hand column with their counterparts in the right-hand column.

apartment--

rubber--

lorry\_\_\_\_

area code\_\_\_\_\_.

assignment----

a. homework

b. bell boy/bellhop

c. dialling code

d. wallet

e. blooper

dressing gown----

porter--

mistake\_\_\_\_\_

billfold\_\_\_\_\_

catwalk--

bus boy\_\_\_\_\_

braids---

M-----

carousel----

lip-salve----

checkers----

left luggage office----

estate tax\_\_\_\_\_

petrol station---

tap\_\_\_\_\_

pants\_\_\_\_\_

tuxedo\_\_\_\_\_

railroad\_\_\_\_\_

headmaster----

hoover---

quotation marks-.-.-

f. runway

g. eraser

h. bathrobe

i. plaits

j. flit

k. truck

l. chap-stick

m. draughts

n. filling station

o. faucet

p. death duties

q. merry-go-round

r. pitcher

s. checker room

t. railway

u. principal

v. dinner jacket

w. vacuum cleaner

x. inverted commas

y. trousers

z. waiter