

# Defining Antonymy

by studying co-occurrences in Context

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## 1. Antonymy : a very familiar meaning relation

The term *antonymy* is usually used to designate the relation between the meanings of two words. Such two words are called *antonyms*. *Antonyms* is the scientific term for *opposites*.

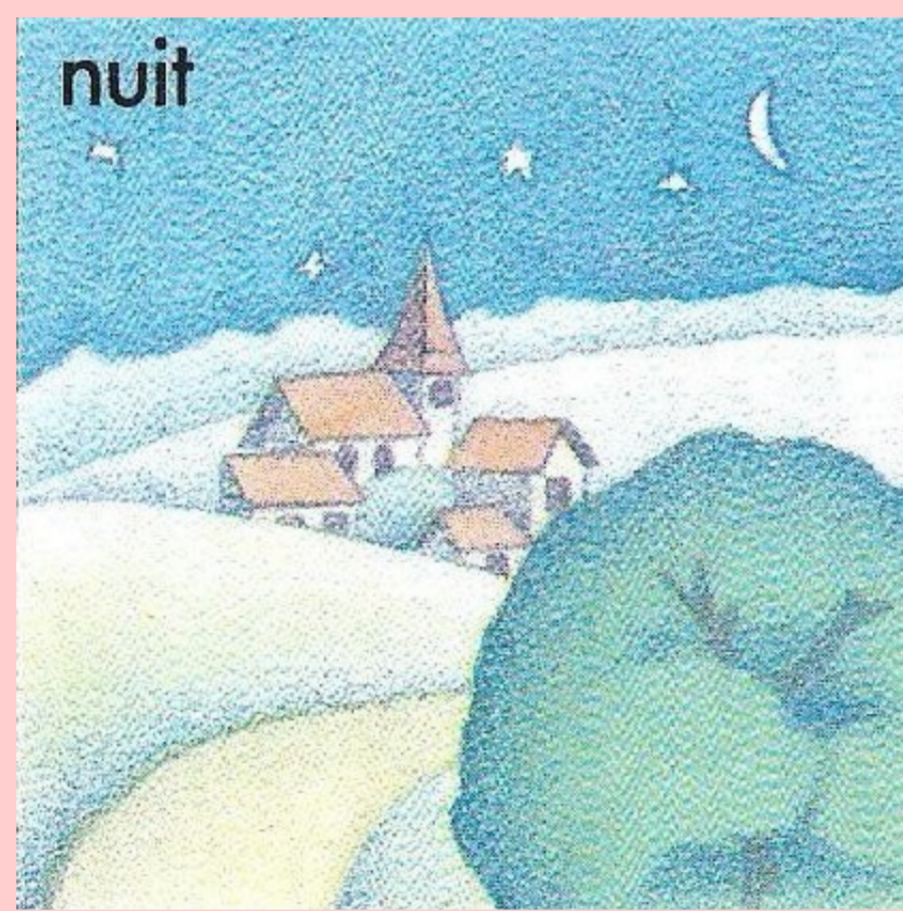
Everybody knows the opposite of *young*, *happy*, *day* or *love* (or their translations in different languages). The English speakers learned in childhood *young* as opposed to *old*, *happy* to *sad*, *night* to *day* and *love* to *hate*. This learning is aided by many educational games, picture books and other textbooks, devoted entirely or partly to antonymy. The antonyms or opposites of a language, at least the most common of them, are familiar to all speakers of that language, including the youngest.



jour

These images are taken from a Nathan's domino game.

They show that the representation of a village in a sunny or a moonlit sky is enough to evoke the contrast between *day* and *night*.



nuit

## 2. Antonymy in discourse : a less studied phenomenon

The use of two antonyms in the same sentence is less well known by non-linguist speakers but also less studied by linguists. Yet is this phenomenon very common. Many sentences in which two **opposed** antonyms were found by Jones in the newspaper called *The Independent*. These phrases include the following:

"The survey also shows that the environmental movement as also won the debate over **public** versus **private** transport" (Jones 2002: 36).

Jones also found many other sentences in which two antonyms are used together **without opposition**:

"And this good practice can be employed in respect of both **listed** and **unlisted** properties" (ibid.: 73).

These two types of sentences can be studied to determine the functions of antonyms in a text, as Jones did, or to define precisely what the relation between opposites is and to describe the formal structures (*X versus Y*, *X and Y*, etc.) that connect them in use. It is the purpose of our research.

He also listed opposites that are not used anymore as *simple* (*simple*) and *implexe* (*complicated*, by speaking about a story). But there are also words that would never be recognized today as antonyms by French speakers, such as *biens* (*goods*) and *ombre vaine* (*vain shadow*, *fata morgana*).

Ackermann did not have clear criteria to say

193. C. *Biens* — *ombre vaine*.  
„Les biens du siècle d'or  
Ne sont plus *biens*, ce n'est qu'une *ombre vaine*."  
In. *Le Remède*.

if *biens* and *ombre vaine* (or *goods* and *vain shadow*) are antonyms or not. Such criteria still don't exist. To answer the question: Are *goods* and *vain shadow* antonyms?, one might consider that a special relation must exist between the words and not just between their meaning. In this case, the sense opposition between *goods* meaning "something" and *vain shadow* meaning "nothing, absence of any real thing" won't be enough to say that *goods* and *vain shadow* are antonyms because there is no particular relation between the words *goods* and *vain shadow*. Similarly *nothing* and *car* or *television* are not antonyms. It remains to define precisely the relation that should exist between words so that they are antonyms.

## 3. A corpus-based dictionary : searching defining criteria

What is the need to define a semantic relation so well intuitively understood by all speakers of a language? If the most common opposites are recognized by everyone, things are not so simple for other opposites.

In 1842, Paul Ackermann wrote the first dictionary of antonyms in French and the only entirely based on a corpus of literary texts. In his dictionary, Ackermann has listed opposites still regarded as such today like *haut* (*high*) and *bas* (*low*).

672. C. *Haut* — *bas*.  
„Enfermez l'un des deux dans le plus haut étage;  
Qu'à l'autre le plus bas devienne le partage."  
LA FONTAINE. *Le Florentin*. sc. 3.

## 4. Perspectives

Finding precise criteria to define antonymy is useful in at least three areas:

- the writing of dictionaries, to reflect as much as possible the relations between the words of a language,
- the learning a foreign languages that requires a structured vocabulary of this language,
- the natural language processing to improve translation software, for example.