

SETS OF MUTUALLY ANTONYMIC WORDS

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Two words - life and death, yes and no, black and white - precisely or approximately opposite each other in meaning are called antonyms. By and large, antonyms have received little attention in the logological realm. Exceptions have been two opposite concepts expressed by the same word (TEMPER means both to harden and to soften) and two words antonymic in their most obvious senses which are synonyms in some other sense (to best and to worst both mean "to get the better of"). Some words have numerous antonyms, but the latter are generally mutual synonyms, rendering the phenomenon one of synonymy rather than of antonymy.

Despite the fact just mentioned, the antonymic relationship is thought of as a one-to-one relationship, not as one in which three or more words can participate, with all of the words possessing a coordinate status. The purpose of this article is to broaden the concept of antonyms to include sets of three or more words, with each member of a given set the antonym of each other member.

To introduce the broadened concept, I have selected a group of seven common words, each of which stands in semantic opposition to each of the six others: ALWAYS, NEVER, NOW, OCCASIONALLY, OFTEN, THEN, and WHEN. There are 21 ways of selecting two words from a group of seven, so that the specified group must exhibit a total of 21 different oppositions to qualify as a mutually antonymic word set. A novel characteristic of such sets is the fact that, in order to bring out the antithetical meanings involved most effectively, the definitions of the individual words must sometimes be changed from one pair to another. The following list of the 21 pairs included in the seven-word set specified above, complete with the most appropriate definitions of the individual words, illustrates this principle in operation:

1. WHEN at what time?
NOW at this time
2. WHEN at what time?
THEN at that time
3. WHEN at what time?
NEVER at no time
4. WHEN at what times?
ALWAYS at all times
5. WHEN at what times?
OFTEN at many times?

6. WHEN at what times?
OCCASIONALLY at some times
7. NOW at this time
THEN at that time
8. NOW at this one time
NEVER at no time at all
9. NOW at this one time
ALWAYS at all times
10. NOW at this one particular time
OCCASIONALLY at a number of unspecified times
11. NOW at this one particular time
OFTEN at many different unspecified times
12. THEN at that one time
NEVER at no time at all
13. THEN at that one time
ALWAYS at all times
14. THEN at that one particular time
OCCASIONALLY at a number of unspecified times
15. THEN at that one particular time
OFTEN at many different unspecified times
16. NEVER at no times
ALWAYS at all times
17. NEVER at no times
OCCASIONALLY at some times
18. NEVER at no times
OFTEN at many times
19. ALWAYS at all times
OCCASIONALLY only at some times
20. ALWAYS at all times
OFTEN at many but not all times
21. OCCASIONALLY at a few, possibly selected, times
OFTEN at many times, perhaps indiscriminately selected ones

Not all words belonging to a particular group can be included in a mutually antonymic word set. Synonyms of selected words must, for example, be excluded. In the illustrative group, words such as FREQUENTLY (= often), SOMETIMES (= occasionally), EVERY-WHEN (= always), and NOWHEN (= never) may not be introduced into the set. In addition, many word groups include some words which are antonyms of only some of the members of a mutually antonymic word set, not of all of them, or which are unsuitable for other reasons. In the case of the illustrative group, words such as BEFORE, CONCURRENTLY, and AFTER must be excluded from the multiple comparisons.

Can readers find larger mutually antonymic word sets (MAWS)?