Finding a Word’s Range of Meanings

Human beings use words as signs to communicate with one another. However, as arbitrary symbols, words hardly ever have just one fixed meaning. One word can possess a multiplicity of meanings. But the variations in meaning are not infinite; otherwise, communication would be impossible. Since language is constantly changing, the possible meanings of individual words are equally evolving — acquiring and losing possible variations.

The use of a dictionary can help you to familiarize yourself with the variety of a word’s meanings. In addition, a good dictionary will also give you example sentences illustrating the context in which a word assumes a certain meaning. This information will enable you to recognize and use a greater range of a word’s meanings. The following example using the word “mean” demonstrates how dictionaries attempt to chart a word’s possible meanings:

**mean** (mēn), v., mean, mean-ing. — v.t. 1. to have in mind as one’s purpose or intention; intend. 2. To intend for a particular destiny: They were mean for each other. 3. to intend to express or indicate: What do you mean by “perfect”? 4. to have as its sense or signification; signify. 5. to bring, cause, or produce as a result: Prosperity means peace. 6. to have the value of: Money means everything to them. — v.i. 7. to have specified intentions: We mean well. [bef. 900; ME menen, OE mænan, c. OFrIs mâna, OS mēnian, OHG meinan]

**mean** (mēn), adj., -er, -est. 1. uncharitable; malicious: a mean remark. 2. small-minded; ignoble: mean motives. 3. stingy; miserly. 4. inferior in quality or character. 5. low in status: mean servitor. 6. bad-tempered: a mean old horse. 7. excellent; topnotch: plays a mean game of tennis. [bef. 900; ME mene, api. Var. (See Y.) of menne, OE gemæne common, hence, ordinary, inferior, c. OFris mône, OS gimeini, OHG gimeini, Go gamains; cf. COMMON] — mean’ness, n. — Syn. MEAN, LOW, BASE refer to characteristics worthy of dislike, contempt, or disgust. MEAN suggests a petty selfishness or lack of generosity, and may describe spiteful, unkind, or even vicious behavior: mean rumors; a mean bully. LOW means dishonorable in purpose or character; it describes that which is mortally reprehensible or vulgar: low deeds; low company. BASE suggests moral depravity, greed, and cowardice; it describes dishonorable or exploitative behavior: base motives.

**mean** (mēn), n. 1. usu., means. (used with a sin. Or pl. v.) an agency, instrument, or method used to attain an end. 2. means. a. available resources, esp. money. b. considerable financial resources: a person of means. 3. Something midway between two extremes. 4. a. a quantity having a value intermediate between the values of other quantities; an average, esp. the arithmetic mean. b. either the second or third term in a syllogism. — adj. 6. occupying a middle position or intermediate place. — Idiom. 7. by all means, certainly: Try it by all means. 8. by any means, in any way; at all. 9. by means of; by the agency of; through. 10. by no means, not at all. [1300-50 ME mene < AF, OF meen, var. of meien < L mediano; SEE MEDIAN] (Webster 839)

In order to find the right meaning for a word in a certain context, you must understand the organization of a dictionary entry. As you can see in the example, the word mean can fulfill the function of a verb (v.), an adjective (adj.), and a noun (n.). The different functions are marked by the small numbers one, two and three. Before you begin your search for meaning in the dictionary, identify the function of the word in the sentence context.

Consider this sentence: They mean to leave right after school gets out. Here, mean functions as a verb, the possible meanings of which are listed under small number one. In this case you can find the appropriate meaning under 1.1.: to have in mind as one’s intention. The
following sentence, however, requires a different meaning, although mean still functions as a verb: Leaving now means we will get there earlier. The meaning under 1.1. does not fit properly into the structure of this sentence, while the meaning under 1.5. proves to be compatible: Leaving now produces as a result [that] we will get there early. The appropriate meaning will always produce a sensible sentence. Oftentimes, you will have to check a few different possibilities until you will arrive at the appropriate meaning. Dictionary entries, however, offer more information than just definitions based on part of speech. You will find, for example, synonym studies, grammatical information, idioms and phrases, and the etymology of a word.

**Synonyms:**

If you decide that mean in the sentence He had a tendency to gamble whenever he found himself in mean company does not fully express your feelings, the entry under mean lists a few synonyms of this definition, as well as a study about synonyms. Look over this section; perhaps you will find that the word low depicts your feelings more accurately.

**Grammatical Information:**

The dictionary entry notifies you of possible grammatical irregularities that might be associated with a word in certain contexts. In the sentence It's just a means to an end, for instance, the plural form means seems odd, even wrong, in connection with the singular verb is. But the information under 3.1 points out that you can use means with singular or plural verbs.

**Idioms and Phrases:**

The standard meaning of a word sometimes does not fit into the context of an idiom or a set phrase. In the sentence He was by no means a gentleman, the standard definitions of means do not apply, but the idiom illustration under 3.10 will help you to identify the idiom-specific meaning, in this case as not at all.

**Etymology:**

In some dictionaries, you will find a short note on the etymology (history) of the word and its derivations. Under mean, the etymological notice suggests that mean is closely connected with the word median, both deriving from a root signifying the middle. This information will expand your grasp of the range of meanings a certain word might have.

Thus, dictionaries give you more than the mere denotation of a word, i.e. the ordinary or common meanings of a word. Dictionaries include a variety of information that will help you to get a feel for the connotations or the nuances and metaphysical extensions possible for a word.

Let's apply all of this information to a passage from Shakespeare's Merchant of Venice, act I scene ii lines 3-9. Here, Portia complains to Nerissa, her waiting woman, that she is sick of living. Her depression results from her father's deathbed decree, that Portia must marry the man who chooses the lucky casket out of the three choices. The lucky guesser gets Portia as well as her fortune, without any consent on Portia's part.

Portia: By my troth, Nerissa, my little body is a weary of this great world.
Nerissa: You would be, sweet madam, if your miseries were in the same abundance as your good fortunes are; and yet for aught I see, they are as sick that
surfet with too much as they that starve with nothing. It is no mean happiness therefore to be seated in the mean: superfluity comes sooner by white hairs, but competency lives longer.

Based on the dictionary definitions given of mean, how can Nerissa’s response be interpreted?

Nerissa can be saying that to live in ordinary or common (mean) living conditions is no ordinary or common degree of happiness; therefore, ordinary living conditions can give great happiness (2. Etymology).

In addition, Nerissa can be explaining that a meager (mean) amount of happiness does not come from living a meager lifestyle (2.4).

Another interpretation is that Portia’s base and lowly (mean) state (since she cannot pick her husband and must take a subordinate place to him) will not determine a lowly or base form of happiness (2. Syn.).

At last, Nerissa might be saying that to live in between the extremes of poverty and superfluity (in the mean) is extreme (no mean) happiness (3.3 and SEE MEDIAN)

Here, we have used several different possible definitions of mean that work in the sentence by itself. However, not all these definitions of mean are applicable in this context. Nerissa’s comment on the ills of extremes (they are sick that surfet with too much as they that starve with nothing) defines the applicable meaning: neither too much nor too little, the mean between two extremes. Therefore, the first and last examples are possible definitions for mean, while the second and third examples are not applicable in this context. You must look at the context of the sentence to determine which definition of a word the author intended.

Here are a few sentences using the word drive in different contexts, requiring several different meanings. Look the word up in your dictionary and identify the meanings of the word drive.

They outplayed the defense of the opposing team by driving the ball.

I don’t have any drive to go to the meeting tonight.

She drove me to commit a horrible crime.

Last Saturday we went on a beautiful drive through the canyons.

There was a food drive downtown

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Works Cited: