While teaching English we, teachers, do not pay much attention to learning homonyms at the lesson. However, it is not only an interesting topic for discussion but also a very confusing one for students. That’s why we offer some theoretical and practical material which can be used at the lessons by the English teachers.

**Determination of Homonymy**

“Homonyms are words different in meaning but identical in sound or spelling, or both in sound and spelling” [1]. So, two or more words identical in sound and spelling but different in meaning, distribution and in many cases origin are called homonyms. The term is derived from Greek “homonymous” (homos – “the same” and onoma – “name”) and thus expresses very well the sameness of name combined with the difference in meaning. There is an obvious difference between the meanings of the symbol fast in such combinations as run fast “quickly” and stand fast “firmly”. The difference is even more pronounced if we observe cases where fast is a noun or a verb as in the following proverbs:

- *A clean fast is better than a dirty breakfast;*
- *Who feasts till he is sick, must fast till he is well.*

Fast as an isolated word, therefore, may be regarded as a variable that can assume several different values depending on the conditions of usage, or, in other words distribution. All the possible values of each linguistic sign are listed in the dictionaries.

In some dictionaries we find out such determination of homonyms as “two or more words that have the same sound or spelling but differ in meaning”.

> “Mine is a long and sad *tale!*” said the Mouse.
> “It is a long *tail*, certainly,” said Alice, looking down with wonder at the Mouse’s tail;
> “but why do you call it sad?”

(L. Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland)
Generally, the term homonym refers both to homophones (words that are pronounced the same but have different meanings, such as pair and pear) and to homographs (words that are spelled the same but have different meanings, such as bow your head and tied in a bow) [2].

Homonymy exists in many languages, but in English it is particularly frequent, especially among monosyllabic words. In the list of 2540 homonyms given in the “Oxford English Dictionary” 89% are monosyllabic words and only 9.1% are words of two syllables.

**Recognising homonyms proper, homophones and homographs**

**Homonyms proper** are words with identical spellings and pronunciations but different meanings. Some examples are:

*back n (part of the body) – back adv (away from the front) – back v (go back)*;

*ball n (a gathering of people for dancing) – ball n (round object used in games)*;

*bark n (the noise made by dog) – bark v (to utter sharp explosive cries) – bark n (the skin of a tree) – bark n (a sailing ship)*;

*bay n (part of the sea or lake filling wide-mouth opening of land) – bay n (recess in a house or room) – bay v (bark) – bay n (the European laurel)*.

For example:

*left – adverb – opposite of right*
*left – verb – simple past form of to leave*

*The thief left through the left door.*

*stalk – noun – the stem of a plant*
*stalk – verb – to follow, to track, to pursue*

*That creepy stranger stalks the woman who leaves up the flower stalks in the park.*

The important point is that homonyms are distinct words: not different meanings within one word.
**Homophones** are words with identical pronunciations but different spellings and meanings. For example: *arms – alms; buy – by; him – hymn; knight – night; not – knot; or – oar; rain – reign; scent – cent; steel – steal; storey – story; write – right* and many others.

*flour – noun – ground up grain
flower – noun – the bloom of a plant*

*While baking a cake with flour, I received a flower from my husband.*

to – preposition
too – adverb – also
two – determiner – numeral 2

*The mailman delivered two packages to me, too.*

In the sentence *The play-wright on my right thinks it right that some conventional rite should symbolize the right of every man to write as he pleases* the sound complex [rait] is a noun, an adjective, an adverb and a verb, has four different spellings and six different meanings.

On the other hand, whole sentences may be homophonic: *The sons raise meat – The sun’s rays meet.* To understand these one needs a wider context. If you hear the second in the course of a lecture in optics, you will understand it without thinking of the possibility of the first.

**Homographs** are words with identical spellings but different meanings. Homographs may have identical or different pronunciations. For example:


*wind – noun – movement of the air\ wind – verb – to tighten, to coil

Wind your scarf tight to keep it from blowing away in the wind.*

**Sources of Homonyms**

There are a lot of different sources of homonyms in the English language, so let’s talk about some of them, which are the most important ones.

One source of homonyms is **phonetic changes**, which words undergo in the course of their historical development. As a result of such changes, two or more
words, which were formally pronounced differently, may develop identical sound forms and thus become homonyms.

*Night and knight*, for instance, were not homonyms in Old English as the initial *k* in the second word was pronounced, and not dropped as it is in its modern sound form: O.E. *kniht* (O.E. *niht*). A more complicated change of form brought together another pair of homonyms: *to knead* (O.E. *cneadan*) and *to need* (O.E. *neodian*).

**Borrowing** is another source of homonyms. A borrowed word may, in the final stage of its phonetic adaptation, duplicate in form either a native word or another borrowing. So, in the pair bank, *n a shore* is a native word, and bank, *n a financial institution* is an Italian borrowing. Match, *n a game; a contest of skill, strength* is native, and match, *n a slender short piece of wood used for producing fire* is a French borrowing.

**Shortening** is a further type of word building, which increases the number of homonyms. Fan, *n in the sense of enthusiastic admirer of some kind of sport or of an actor, singer, etc.* is a shortening produced from fanatic. Its homonym is a Latin borrowing fan, *n which denotes an implement for waving lightly to produce a cool current of air.*

Words made by sound-imitation can also form pairs of homonyms with other words: mew, *n the sound the cat makes – mew, n a sea gull – mew, n a pen in which poultry is fattened – mews small terraced houses in Central London.*

Now we come to a further source of homonyms, which differs essentially from all the above cases. Two or more homonyms can originate from different meanings of the same word when, for some reason, the semantic structure of the word breaks into several parts. This type of formation of homonyms is called disintegration or **split of polysemy**.

*board, n – a long and thin piece of timber*

*board, n – daily meals, esp. as provided for pay, e.g. room and board*

*board, n – an official group of persons who direct or supervise some activity, e.g. a board of directors.*
To master homonyms we suggest practicing some exercises dealing with the use of them.

**I Complete the definitions with the words below.**

*matter mind object show state treat trip turn*

1. a short journey, there and back (n)
   to catch your foot and fall or nearly fall over (v)
2. a physical thing (n)
   to argue against something (v)
3. a performance (of a play, musical, etc.) (n)
   to bring somebody’s attention to something (v)
4. something nice that makes a person feel good (n)
   to give medical attention to somebody (v)
5. your thoughts and memories (n)
   to feel unhappy about something (v)
6. the physical substance that things are made of (n)
   to be important (v)
7. a condition (usually temporary) (n)
   to say (a fact) (v)
8. the right time for you to do something (n)
   to move (something) round or over (v)

**II Complete each pair of sentences with the same word. Use the words in the box.** *matter mind object show state treat trip turn*

1 a We’re studying the properties of __________
   b It doesn’t __________ to me what you do.
2 a I bought myself a new dress as a __________.
   b My doctor doesn’t know how to __________ this disease.
3 a We went out for dinner after the __________.
   b Can you __________ me your holiday photos?
4 a Whose __________ is it?
   b The wheels of the car began to __________.
5 a The murder weapon was a strange __________.
   b A lot of local people __________ to the plans for the new airport.
6 a He was in a __________ of shock after the accident.
   b Please __________ clearly how many tickets you require.
7 a Did you have a good __________?
   b Be careful you don’t __________ over that cable on the floor.
8 a Einstein had a brilliant __________.
   b I don’t __________ where we have lunch.

**III Complete each sentence using the same word twice.**

**Choose from the homonyms below.**

*face  fly  land  left  park  plant  play  study*

1 We decided to __________ our car near the ______.
2 Please _____ the audience and take your hands away from your ______.
3 Which part did you __________ in the school ____________ ?
4 The pilot had to __________ the plane on a thin piece of ______ near the lake.
5 He shut the door of his __________ and tried to ______.
6 I want to __________ a tomato ______ in my garden.
7 I watched a _____ _____ in through the window.
8 She opened the door on the ______ and ______ the building.

It would be also a good idea to play a game practicing the use of homophones which will improve students’ skills to differ their meaning and spelling.
 SOURCES

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