

Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

Monday 22nd of January is Opposites Day in the US. It's been around for some time and the main purpose is being rather silly, for example, saying the opposite of what you mean and trying to have a conversation along those lines. Some teachers apparently try to take advantage of the day to create drama activities and improv scenes. It gives me an excuse to look at one or two of the more curious aspects of opposites in language.

Opposite work on a kind of shifting scale of precision. Hot and cold, quiet and noisy, short and tall. Very little confusion there. But, after establishing that adding a prefix is not permissible, if you ask people what the opposite of these words are - ambition, blood, a computer, you will probably get a range of answers. A pre-school teacher in a short story I read recently was fascinated by his class of three-year-olds having animated scatological discussion about whether poop is the opposite of pee. The consensus was, well, basically, no, but maybe.

You may have heard siblings or couples referred to as being 'like chalk and cheese,' meaning they are completely different in character or personality. These expressions – technically called binomials – two words linked with a conjunction – usually 'and' - can combine opposite ideas to – so we have ups and downs or highs and lows (good times and bad times), you might want to know the ins and outs of something, so you are aware of the pros and cons. A friend who stands by you supports you through thick and thin, and that's the long and the short of it – there's nothing more to say. We hear a lot nowadays about the growing economic gaps between sectors of the population – the haves and the have nots.

But an aspect of language that really fascinates me is one where words have two different and opposite meanings, these are sometimes referred to as antagonisms although some people call them contronyms. Let me give you some examples. Take the word left. Now consider this sentence. When he left the room there was a lot of food left. The word left means depart, but it also means remain. Another example is the word clip. Think for a moment about when we use that word, well, you can clip your nails or your hair, in effect, you are cutting or separating something, you are removing it. But what happens when you use a paperclip or a stapler? Well, in that case you're putting things together, combining them or unifying them. So once more the word has opposite meanings. Anyone who lives in a reasonably polluted city like Madrid where I live will know that dust is an endless enemy. The soldier in this war use dusters. They dust. Meaning they take it away, they remove dust from the places it inhabits. However, in policework it's necessary to apply dust when looking for fingerprints. So, in one case the verb means to take it away and in the other, to apply it. Curious. Look at the word fast. Well, you know it means to move quickly and the sense of speed is evident but what about an expression like 'a ship's anchor makes sure the vessel is held fast.' In the case of the latter sentence the word means not moving, fixed, not having the possibility of movement. You probably can see the link here to the verb fasten, as in fasten your seatbelt, or fasten your jacket. And on the subject of movement, how about the word bolt, which has appeared recently as another taxi company, I guess to emphasise quick movement. Nominative determinism, the idea that people's lives and career choices can be

determined by their name, could use as evidence the fact that one of the greatest Olympics sprinters was called Bolt. But as with fasten, bolt can also mean a restriction of movement because you use a bolt to secure something. On ships, for example, tables are often bolted to the floor to stop them moving around in storms or bad weather.

Well, I hope you have enjoyed this talk about opposites. If you can think of any other examples of these kinds of opposites in English or other language, please leave a comment.

In the spirit of opposites day, I would like to thank you for not listening, and say hello.