**No Synonyms, Please**

September 16, 2013, 12:01 am

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Today’s quiz: What’s the difference between a bag and a sack?

(Spoiler alert: Before you read further, what’s your answer to that question?)

All right, you have your answer? It’s not hard, after all.

I put the question to three dozen first-year students at a small Midwestern college. Here’s what some of them said:

—Bags have straps, sacks have handles.

—A bag has handles and is usually bigger.

—A sack can be plastic or paper, while a bag is cloth.

—A bag is brown paper and a sack is plastic.

—Sacks are made of brown paper.

—Sacks are more disposable.

—Bags are better looking than sacks.

—A sack is used to carry groceries; a bag you can carry around your shoulders.

—A bag you carry on your shoulder, a sack you throw over your shoulder.

—Bag is something young people say. Sack is what older people say.

—You carry stuff in a bag, but you can sleep in a sack.

—A bag is a purse or a backpack, a sack is for things like groceries.

—Bags are bigger and can hold more heavyweight items than sacks.

—A sack is just open whereas a bag you can close with a zipper, button, or snap.

—Nicer things go in a bag.

—A bag is plastic and can be crumpled in any form. A sack can be plastic but it’s still not as easy to crumple.

Get the picture? It’s a little blurry. I favor the following explanation, offered by five students:

—There is no difference.

But if there is none, how come most people think there’s a difference? I think it comes from this principle:

Just as nature hates a vacuum, so language hates synonyms.

To be precise, it’s the users of language who hate exact synonyms. After all, common sense and our experience of language tell us that if there are two different words, they must refer to two different things. So when two words seem to refer to the same thing, we are inclined to invent a difference.

Linguists don’t like what’s known as “free variation” either. When there is seemingly random variation between words people use, or between pronunciations of a particular word, linguists like to look for conditioning factors that can predict which variant a person will use, factors like age and region and ethnicity. The hypothesis is that different words will always have at least slightly different meanings. It just seems natural.

Try this exercise yourself: What’s the difference between a pail and a bucket? How about a lightning bug and a firefly? They aren’t exactly the same, are they?

And for the advanced semanticist, how about this: What’s the difference between freedom and liberty? Surely they can’t be the same. …

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