

## IS SYNONYMY A LINGUISTIC REALITY IN ECONOMICS ENGLISH?\*

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While metaphors and other stylistic aspects have attracted the attention of more language specialists, not much has been written on synonymy in ESP (English for Specific Purposes). Hence our interest in this almost neglected area of research.

Synonymy is one of those multifaceted linguistic phenomena that look differently every time you change the perspective. One cannot, of course, exhaust the range of perspectives, but one can at least try to take several aspects into account when striving to find answers to questions such as:

- What is synonymy?
- Is synonymy in ESP different from synonymy in general?
- Are we entitled to speak about synonymy in ESP? What about synonymy and economics English?

The first section of this article comprises a selection of definitions given or compiled by linguists and other language specialists.

In the second section there is a shift of focus from synonymy in common-core English to synonymy in ESP, whereby 2.1 is meant for focus clarification, 2.2 deals with issues related to synonymy's right to existence in ESP, and 2.3 includes points of view on ESP. This subsection has been written starting from the assumption that one cannot appropriately define and analyse synonymy in ESP unless the conceptual and terminological framework of ESP has been updated.

The third section comprises suggestions for a new approach to synonymy in ESP for economics. Several aspects have been taken into account, such as the relationship between synonymy and the degree of "scientificity" of a specialised language [1], on the one hand, and the terminological levels within an ESP discourse, on the other. A new classification of synonyms in ESP is proposed, according to the role of

the participants in the process of communication and the perspective taken when investigating synonymy. The last subsection of this section deals with the functions of synonymy.

Section 4 consists of examples of synonyms analysed in their context of occurrence, i.e. in economics texts.

### 1. Brief literature review: What is synonymy?

A first possible answer to this apparently simple question could be given by tracing back the etymology of the words *synonym* and *synonymy* to their Greek source *synonymon* (meaning "the same name").

In the attempt to describe *synonymy* as accurately as possible, delimiting it from other linguistic realities, the specialists produced a whole range of definitions. This diversity is due to several factors, such as:

- the relevance of synonymy to different disciplines and areas of research, e.g. linguistics, semantics, pragmatics, stylistics, EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teaching, ESP a.s.o.;
- the interpretation given by various specialists to key concepts, such as *meaning*;
- the variety of aspects taken into consideration;
- the type and scope of the text/publication where the notion *synonymy* is defined and discussed, e.g. an entry in a general monolingual dictionary, a specialised stylistics dictionary, a linguistics textbook, a journal article on synonymy, etc.

Before going into any further details we shall consider two short definitions of *synonym*, as they appear in two well-known monolingual dictionaries:

- (i) "A *synonym* is a word or expression which means the same as another word or expression" [2, p.1484].
- (ii) "*Synonym* - any of 2 or more words or expressions in a language that are used with (nearly) the same meaning" [3, p.1412].

Comparing the two dictionary entries, one can realise how the introduction - be it in brackets - of a "downtoner", i.e. the "approximator" [4, p.456 f.] *nearly*, opens up a new perspective. Metaphorically speaking, it contains - in a nutshell - the essence of the

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'controversy' among language specialists. Questions such as the following might arise:

- Can one speak of synonyms only when their meaning is "the same", i.e. overlapping?
- If it is only "nearly" the same, then to what extent is the approximation permitted / accepted?
- Which are the factors that come into play?

A more complex definition, such as David Crystal's in *The Encyclopaedia of Language*, already hints at the variety of aspects to be taken into account. He describes *synonymy* as a type of "paradigmatic semantic relationship", considering it together with other related categories, such as *hyponymy* and *antonymy*. He defines *synonymy* as "the relationship of sameness of meaning", specifying that

"lexemes rarely (if ever) have exactly the same meaning. There are usually stylistic, regional, emotional, or other differences to consider. And context must be taken into account. Two lexemes might be synonymous in one sentence but different in another." [5, p.105].

In order to elucidate these issues, specialists have considered the key concept *meaning*, trying to find out what the meaning of *meaning* is [6], and specifying the types of meaning that have to be taken into account.

Lyons, for instance, points out "the diversity of meaning" and draws a distinction between "lexical meaning" (i.e. the meaning of words) and "sentence-meaning" (including and depending on lexical meaning and grammatical meaning), all these falling "within the scope of linguistic semantics" [6, pp.139f].

He further discusses "the variety of semiotic, or communicative, functions that languages are used for", "the multiplicity of purposes that languages fulfil" [6, p.140], and considers that these are responsible for the existence of many kinds of meaning, such as "the trichotomy of descriptive, expressive and social meaning" [6, p.143].

After these preliminary clarifications, Lyons proceeds to define *synonymy* and *synonyms*. He contrasts *absolute* and *complete synonymy* ("defined as identity of meaning"), on the one hand, with *incomplete synonymy*, on the other. He even draws a distinction between *absolute synonymy* (characteristic of lexemes that "have the same distribution and are completely synonymous in all their meanings and in all their contexts of occurrence") and *complete synonymy* (i.e. identity of meaning "in a certain range of contexts"), also called "context-restricted synonymy". Lyons points out that whereas complete synonymy is relatively rare in nature, "absolute synonymy, as it is here defined, is almost non-existent", and is "probably restricted to

highly specialised vocabulary that is purely descriptive" [6, p.148].

Incomplete synonymy, i.e. "identity of one kind of meaning, but not of others", is considered by no means rare.

"Lexemes may be descriptively synonymous without having the same expressive or social meaning". [ibid.]

According to Lyons, descriptive synonymy (also known as cognitive or referential synonymy) is the most frequent type of synonymy and is "what many semanticists would regard as synonymy properly so called" [6, p.150].

Along the same lines, there are also other definitions of synonymy and classifications of synonyms. Levitchi, for instance, suggests the following 'working definition':

"Synonyms are two or more lexical or grammatical units comparable through their content, but reflecting in various degrees and in various senses (semantic, grammatical, stylistic) the essential notes of the notion they denote" [7a, p.85].

He classifies synonyms into: *absolute* and *relative* (proper) *synonyms*. The latter are subdivided into *lexical* (with the sub-categories ideographic and stylistic) and *grammatical synonyms* (further subdivided into ideographic and stylistic) [7a, p.86].

After studying the literature on this topic one can realise that

- (a) some specialists - e.g. Levitchi [7a], [7b], Lyons [6], Cruse [8], Halliday and Hasan [9], Crystal [5] - accept the approximator *nearly* in the definition of *synonymy* and try to build on the aspects taken into account in order to produce a working definition, also specifying which types of synonymy and of synonyms are likely to be found;
- (b) for other authors, such as Palmer [10], the starting point is the definition: "*Synonymy* is used to mean *sameness of meaning*" (no approximation accepted). Consequently, they choose to focus on what distinguishes words that are considered *synonymous* by dictionary-makers, and *cognitive synonyms* by other linguists.

In addition, Palmer draws attention to "two phenomena that are sometimes handled under synonymy": "The first is context-dependent synonymy where two items appear to be synonymous in a particular context", although one cannot say that they are synonyms; the second kind of synonymy refers to items that seem to have the same meaning, and yet, are ruled out as synonymous by "the test of interchangeability" [10, p.93].



Looking once again at the questions formulated at the beginning of this section, we find it even more difficult to give one 'correct' answer. The notion of *synonymy* has to be considered in 'a broader conception', such as the one developed by Cruse [8], for instance.

The perspective suggested by Cruse is that of a "scale of synonymy", according to which there are various degrees of synonymy. In order to establish which these are, he analyses synonyms from two points of view:

- a) "the degree of semantic overlap", in terms of "necessary resemblances", and "the degree of implicit contrastiveness", i.e. in terms of "permissible differences",
- b) "contextually, by means of diagnostic frames" [8, p.266].

In analysing the necessary semantic overlap that synonyms have to manifest, in order to be considered as such, Cruse distinguishes between *central* and *minor* or *peripheral* semantic traits. Synonyms are thus defined as

"lexical items whose senses are identical in respect of central semantic traits, but differ, if at all, only in respect of what we may provisionally describe as minor or peripheral traits" [8, p.267].

He further expands on these issues in the subchapter on cognitive synonyms.

Other aspects raised by Cruse relate to the context of occurrence of synonyms, the lexical elements signalling synonymic relations, the "selectional restrictions" to be taken into account, the "collocational restrictions", a.s.o. In Section 3, we shall take up some of these issues again, in order to see to what extent they are of relevance to a discussion of synonymy in the ESP for economics.

Before concluding this first section, whose focus has been on the different points of view underlying definitions of *synonymy* in general, mention should be made of one aspect upon which specialists seem to agree, irrespective of the perspective taken when defining synonymy:

"There is no obvious motivation for the existence of absolute synonyms in a language, and one would expect either that one of the items would fall into obsolescence, or that a difference in semantic function would develop. (...) natural languages abhor absolute synonyms just as nature abhors a vacuum" [8, p.270].

Using these theoretical considerations as a springboard, in the next section we shall discuss synonymy's right to existence in ESP.

## 2. Synonymy and ESP

### 2.0 Focus clarification

As compared to the previous section, in this one there is a shift of focus from SYNONYMY in general to SYNONYMY in ESP.

The question arises: *Is SYNONYMY a linguistic reality in ESP and, if yes, to what extent?*

The possible answers depend a lot on the perspective taken, and, as we have already seen in the previous section, one cannot hope to find only one correct answer.

For a start, we shall consider points of view expressed by ESP-specialists, who question the *synonym*'s right to existence in ESP.

### 2.1 Is synonymy excluded from the realm of ESP?

Gläser, for instance, points out that - although the occurrence of synonymy is not entirely excluded - we may speak of *synonymy* in ESP only in the case of sameness of meaning at the level of scientific abstraction, but not in the case of coexistence of terms with their equivalents in common-core English or in what she calls "Berufsjargonismus" [11, p.32-33].

This means - as we interpret it - that these words, although equivalents, are not to be regarded as synonyms, because of the difference of register.

Gläser takes her examples of accepted synonyms (i.e. terms manifesting identity of meaning) only from the highly specialised vocabulary of chemistry, physics and medicine, along the same lines as Lyons [6] when giving examples of absolute synonymy.

To be even more convincing, Gläser specifies that: should the terms be replaced - following the principles of variety of expression - by synonyms taken from General English, specialists would question the degree of specialism characteristic of the entire text, which would then be considered as belonging to another level of abstraction, as Gläser [11].

If we are to accept it, then we ought to consider the whole issue of *synonymy* and *synonyms* in relation to *ESP*. The implications of the above theoretical considerations are that:

- (a) ESP would be restricted to terminology in a certain subject field, and
- (b) it would be restricted to texts written/produced by specialists for peers at the same (read: highest) level of specialisation.

If we think of textbooks written by senior specialists for 'novices' in the field, for instance, and consider that they do not belong to ESP (as is implied in Gläser's discussion of synonymy in ESP), then where are they to be integrated?



Gläser's point of view could be seen as characteristic of a certain stage in descriptive linguistics writing, on the one hand, and of a certain conception of ESP in the 1970s, on the other.

In the next section we shall try to clarify these issues in accordance with the latest developments in ESP research.

## 2.2 Conceptual and terminological updating

As we all know, according to ESP research in the 1980s and especially the 1990s, the concept of ESP is no longer restricted to terminology, i.e. it is more than glossaries of terms used in a certain field of activity. ESP is considered a "means of communication" in a certain subject field [12], with a macro- and micro-structure dependent on a multitude of factors, such as situation, communication partners, medium of communication, the objectives pursued in communication etc.

Thus, the writer's / speaker's degree of specialisation is not necessarily the same as that of his/her readership / audience, and the means of communication used by experienced specialists when conversing with their juniors in a professional situation can still be considered ESP.

According to this new approach, context is no longer static as in descriptive linguistics, it is dynamic and plays an essential role in the process of communication. ESP-specialists no longer take the prescriptive approach to language, imposing restrictions as to what should and what should not be considered ESP. They prefer to analyse the latter in its entire complexity as a means of communication in real-life situations.

As a result of this global and, at the same time, dynamic view of ESP, also the approach to *synonymy in ESP* has to become more eclectic, especially when the focus is on the ESP for social sciences, economics in our case.

## 3. Suggestions for a new approach to synonymy in ESP for economics

### 3.0 Setting the scene

The insights derived from the theoretical considerations presented above constitute the starting point of the present section, and could be summarised as follows:

- a) The degree of "scientificity" [1] influences the occurrence of synonymy in a particular ESP discourse;
- b) Since ESP is not restricted to terminology, there is no need to restrict a discussion of synonymy in ESP to the terminological level; once we accept the occurrence of synonymy at various levels, we have to see which these are;

- c) If we consider the importance of communication partners in the communication process, we ought to deal with synonymy not only from the writer's / speaker's, but also from the reader's / audience's point of view.
- d) As for the objectives that have to be achieved in the process of communication, we have to investigate the possible functions of synonymy in ESP.

### 3.1 Synonymy and 'scientificity'

It is considered that various ESP's have different degrees of 'scientificity'. Texts of physical sciences are known to have a high degree of 'scientificity', which implicitly means a higher preciseness of expression and less synonyms. There are even international bodies working on the unification of terminology, eliminating equivalents, to facilitate communication among specialists world-wide.

By contrast, economics, "a moral, non-demonstrative science" [as Keynes, 1936, in 13], is characterised by uncertainty, which "is to be accepted as a fact of scientific inquiry. And discourse plays a particularly relevant role" [13]. In Section 4, by means of exemplifications we shall analyse the functions of synonyms in the economics discourse.

### 3.2 Terminological levels within an ESP discourse

As already mentioned, there is not much literature on synonymy in ESP, but one can derive suggestions from results of research done in other areas.

Thus, one can apply the method Irgl [in 14] used when studying metaphors in economics texts. The occurrence of synonyms can also be analysed at three levels: one of pure terminology, a semi-terminological one, and a non-terminological one.

We may consider a sample paragraph taken from Keynes [1936], for instance, in order to find out more about the distribution of synonyms at the three levels mentioned above:

"Let us assume, for the moment, that labour is not prepared to work for a lower money-wage and that a *reduction* in the existing level of many wages would lead, through strikes and otherwise, to a withdrawal from the labour market of labour which is now employed. Does it follow from this that the existing level of real wages accurately measures the marginal disutility of labour? Not necessarily. For, although a *reduction* in the existing money-wage would lead to a withdrawal of labour, it does not follow that a *fall* in the value of the existing money-wage in terms of wage - goods would do so, if it were due to a rise in



the price of the latter. (...) The classical theory has tacitly assumed that this would involve no significant change in the theory. But this is not so. For, if the supply of labour is not a function of real wages as its sole variable, their argument breaks down entirely... [Keynes, 1936, p.8]

We find that:

- (a) at the level of pure terminology, synonymy is almost absent; instead, repetitions are effectively used;
- (b) most synonyms occur at a semi- or non-terminological level, e.g.:

- at the verbal level: *to fall, to drop* (about prices)
- at the nominal level: *rise, increase* (in price); *reduction, fall* (in value, in the level of wages etc.)

As compared to the frequency of occurrence of other meaning relations - such as antonymy, hyponymy etc. - synonymy is not only less frequent but also seems to be less important.

### 3.3 Intra- and intertextual synonymy in ESP

#### 3.3.1 Defining the concepts

Whereas in General English, esp. in literature, synonymy is praised and desirable, in ESP it is accepted and, therefore present, only at non- or semi-terminological level; at purely terminological level it is undesirable, sometimes even condemned when it generates confusion in one and the same text.

Considering that communication is a two-way process, involving at least two participants, why should synonymy be viewed only from the writer's / speaker's perspective? If we take a closer look at all the statements related to synonymy, we can realise that they are restricted to what we shall call *intratextual synonymy*, to be seen as the meaning relationship existing in a text between/among words, phrases, structures that have the same meaning in the context of occurrence.

Since the audience has been too long neglected in the more or less controversial discussions of synonymy, we suggest the term and concept of *intertextual synonymy*, i.e. the relationship of equivalence of meaning established by the reader / audience between/among words, phrases, structures in and through their interaction with oral or written discourses. This is a relationship of equivalence that has to be present in the reader's / audience's 'personal, mental thesaurus', if s/he is to understand the discourse he is reading/listening to, relating it to previous reading/listening experiences on the same topic.

Whether we accept it or not, *intertextual* relations of sameness of meaning exist among lexical units belonging to different texts, esp. of economics. It is this type of synonymy that can exist even at the purely terminological level. Its sources can be historical or geographic,

e.g. in AmE:	in BrE:
<i>business cycle</i>	<i>trade cycle</i>
<i>stock</i>	<i>share</i>

Especially for the non-native speakers, e.g. students of economics, it is essential to be aware of this parallelism of expression. It is, therefore, also essential to look up words in the right dictionary, i.e. a British dictionary of economics when reading a text written by a British author, or an American dictionary, when confronted with an American text.

E.g. Dictionary entries for (...) cycle

*economic cycle*  
 - not as a separate entry;  
 - within the entry ECONOMIC  
 "period during which trade expands, then slows down, then expands again" (Collin, *English Business Dictionary*)

*trade cycle*  
 "a period of time during which business moves from a time of good profits and high employment (boom) to a time of low profits and high unemployment (slump), and then back to boom conditions again."  
 (Collins *Business English Dictionary*)

*business cycle*  
 "a type of fluctuation found in the aggregate economic activity of nations that organise their work mainly in business enterprises: a cycle consists of expansions occurring at about the same time in many economic activities, followed by similarly general recessions, contractions and revivals which merge into the expansion phase of the next cycle; this sequence of changes is recurrent but not periodic; in duration business cycles vary from more than one year to ten or twelve years" (Mitchell apud Rutherford, D., *Dictionary of Economics*).

Other sources of *intertextual synonymy* are related to the genre to which the text belongs or the medium of communication. In such cases, it is important for the NNS (Non-Native Speaker) to be aware not only of the



similarities but also of the differences existing between synonyms (e.g. those characteristics of written communication in business English as compared to their cognitive equivalents characteristic of oral communication). To give only one example, we can think of the classical pair *to commence* and *to begin*.

What is important for the reader - when interacting with a given text - is to be able to bring into it previously acquired knowledge from other texts, which might have provided him with equivalents denoting the same reality. Neglecting this aspect can be a major impediment in comprehension, even communication in the widest sense.

### 3.3.2 The functions of synonymy in ESP for economics

Whereas in General English the function of *intratextual synonymy* is mainly aesthetic, in the ESP for economics synonymy serves both the purpose of familiarisation and that of lexical cohesion. Its frequency of occurrence largely depends on the genre. In the business letter, for instance, synonymy is an important category of lexical cohesion [15].

In the economics textbook (esp. for undergraduates, and within the textbook, in the first subchapter of each chapter), it usually serves the purpose of familiarisation [18]. It can be traced at all three terminological levels. The move is either from the non-terminological vocabulary towards the more specialised one, or the other way round, synonyms having then an explanatory function. In such cases, synonymy is meant to be a facilitator of comprehension, of communication in general.

There are also other situations, when economists resort to synonymy, and do so not only for the purpose of variety of expression or cohesion. They select out of a scale of available synonyms those that serve their purpose best, e.g. when they want to convince, to persuade, to negotiate. Synonymy is then a rhetorical tool, meant to help the economist to achieve his goal in communication [16].

### 4. Synonyms in their context of occurrence in economics texts

For exemplification purposes, in support of the theoretical aspects presented so far, we have analysed texts belonging to different genres (e.g. textbook and dictionary entry) but related in terms of topic and - to a certain extent - vocabulary.

If we look closer at the textbook-text on *Business*

*Trends* [17, cf. Appendix], we can immediately notice the abundance of antonyms and reiterations. We may even speak of a parallelism of expression, i.e. a symmetry based on opposites, such as

*good times - bad times,*  
*the ups and downs* a.s.o.

Synonymy is present, too, although symmetries are only partial, restricted to the context of occurrence.

Here are some examples of synonyms, including synonymic relations restricted to this context, as well as partial synonymy combined with partial reiteration:

stores	business
economic activity	business activity
trough	depression
below the norm	recession
(in this context )	
bad times	the downs
good times	the ups
the normal level of activity	the norm

The more general *bad times* and *the downs* could be regarded as synonymic (in this context) with both *recession* and *depression* (otherwise they might be considered in a relationship of hyponymy).

Since the source text is the first subchapter of an economics textbook chapter, we could consider that the role of synonymy in this context is that of smoothly familiarising the novice audience with specialised vocabulary [18].

There are also two other words that are used synonymically in general, as the following dictionary entries prove [2]:

<i>norm</i>	(N. sing: <i>the + N</i> ) = typical
2. If you say that a situation is <i>the norm</i> , you mean that it is usual and expected. E.G. <i>in Russia, working wives have been the norm throughout the Soviet era.</i>	
<i>normal</i> (Adj. Qualit)	= typical = the opp. of <i>abnormal</i>
1. Something that is <i>normal</i> is usual and ordinary, in accordance with what people expect.	



**rule** (N. sing. the + N)  
= norm

3 If something is *the rule*, it is the normal state of affairs. E.G. *Short haircuts became the rule... Breast feeding is the exception rather than the rule.*

**exception** (N. count)

1 An *exception* is a particular thing, person, or situation that is not included in a general statement, judgement, or rule. E.G. (...) *As always with human behaviour, there are exceptions to this general rule.*

In this text *the norm* and *the rule* are used in contrasting contexts, and, therefore, cannot be treated as synonyms in this particular text; the word-meaning of the two is the same, but the sentence-meaning is not, which only proves the power of context.

If we have a look at related dictionary entries in different dictionaries, we can realise how complex synonymy is and to what extent ambiguous definitions can confuse the NNS-student. The main problem in this case is that authors use different terms to refer to the same phenomenon/reality, which may impede communication, if the NNS-audience is not aware of this.

In the case of *intratextual synonymy*, for instance, the authors sometimes resort to signalling elements, esp. in textbooks, lectures, dictionary entries, e.g.

"The terms flexible rates and floating rates are used *interchangeably*" [Dornbusch, 1990, p.84];

"That cost may be the individual's time or it may be a cost explicitly paid to someone else to make the transfer. For convenience we refer to it as a broker's fee." [idem]

### 5. Concluding remarks

In the present article we have tried to show that with the growing complexity of expression in different specialised domains, such as economics, it is important to draw the NNS-students/readers' attention to linguistic means that can be of help in decoding messages and that awareness of synonymic relations both within a text and among texts can play a role to enhance reading comprehension.

Starting from the findings of the analysis of several genre-related corpora, activities have been developed to illustrate synonymy in action and to enhance reading

comprehension, e.g. of the textbook genre [19].

As for other genres, in news reports, for instance, repetition is particularly frequent. When dealing with 'hot issues', breaking news, there is neither time nor space for an elaborate choice of words, it is only the information contained in the text that matters. This may be called 'anti-style' by certain language analysts and style of a particular sub-genre (e.g. the financial report) by others.

As compared to the discourse type mentioned above, the articles of economic analysis (such as the texts in *The Economist*) are more elaborate in the choice of linguistic and stylistic means. Even so, synonymy is to be found at semi- and non-terminological level, esp. at rhetorical level, for specific strategic purposes, alongside with other rhetorical devices [19].

It is for all these reasons that we consider that a discussion of genre-specific synonymy, in relation to the writer's communicative purpose, should not be left out of ESP-research in general, and should definitely be included - in the form of meaningful activities - in the EAP / EBE-seminar (where EAP = English for Academic Purposes; EBE = English for Business and Economics).

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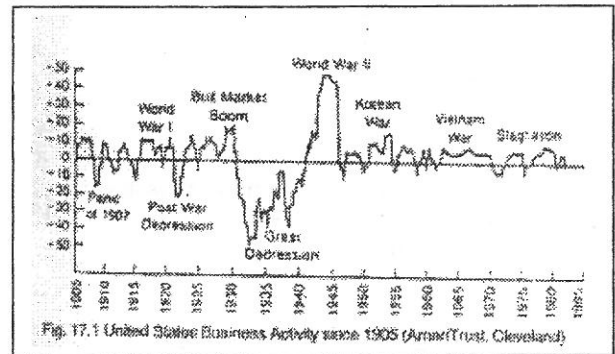
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Appendix

America's economic history has been marked by both good times and bad times. In good times, jobs are plentiful, stores are busy, and the nation's factories hum with activity. In bad times, just the opposite is true. Jobs are scarce, business is slow, and factories and machines stand idle. These changes are shown in Figure 17.1, which illustrates business activity since 1905. As you can see, changes in the level of the nation's economic activity have been the rule rather than the exception.



The ups and downs in the level of economic activity are commonly referred to as the business cycle. In Figure 17.1, the 0 line represents what economists decided should have been the normal level of activity for a particular year. The jagged line indicates the extent to which actual economic activity was above or below the norm.

The graph shows that, although no two cycles have been identical in either duration or intensity, there has been a consistent up-and-down pattern through the years. Economists studying business cycles have identified four phases through which these cycles pass as they swing down, up, and back again. Figure 17.2 shows that these phases are (1) recession, (2) trough, or depression, (3) expansion, or recovery, and (4) peak, or prosperity.

(From Gerson Antell, *Economics: Institutions and Analysis*, New York AMSCO School Publications, 1985, 321-32 – text quoted in [17])

