

Ambition

What one is ambitious for will vary with the individual's desires and needs. Possession of a certain style of baseball cap colored purple will be the ultimate prize for Johnny, who is five. His ambition is to acquire one of those caps. Johnny's sister, who is sixteen, has spotted a coral green ball gown, which would be her heart's desire for the upcoming prom. Her ambition is to get and wear one of those at the prom. As for her dad he doesn't say much but everyone knows how much he covets the new position opening up in sales. It would be the culmination of his career. That promotion is his ambition.

Are all three of these desiring individuals ambitious in the colloquial sense, or do we need to fine tune our discussion of the usage of the term ambition? Do we need to parse out the notion of ambition, and figure out what ambition involves in this or that case?

Is one of our three characters more ambitious than another? Dad is the most traditionally and transparently ambitious, though as an acculturated white male he is reluctant to state his ambition directly. (He may also want to cover himself for disappointing outcomes.) Goal orientation is clearly at stake here, possibly even bread and butter on the table.

Johnny's sister has taken a fancy to a gown, and though her fancy is hardly more than a whim—proms are still chiefly fun for her—her ultimate interest is in the mating game—which means that her ambition is at least more existentially founded than that of young Johnny, who just wants to show off the next day to the kids in his class. Johnny has very little skin in the game at this point. He may as well acquire and then trade off the cap the next day.

To learn a language deeply is to learn the various implications of the uses of specific words. In that sense a language may be thought of as a culture turned inside out. What is implicit in a culture will out itself by the contexts in which it lets its words be used.