

Ask about English

'Go back' and 'come back'



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Margo asks:

Hello. Could you, please, tell me what is the difference in meaning between 'go back' and 'come back'?

Catherine Walter answers:

Hello Margo, I'm going to answer your question about 'go back' and 'come back' because this is an interesting pair that belongs to a family of interesting pairs – and these pairs are differentiated on the basis of the position of the speaker.

So we use 'come' when we are talking about movement towards the speaker. So I might say to someone who's walking away from me "come back". That is what a linguist would call the 'prototypical' usage of 'come' – that is to say, the usage around which the other usages are based. But you can also use it when you're talking about a speaker's past or future position – so "They came back to our house" or "Can you come to the party?" In those two cases we're talking about the location of the speaker.

We can also, if we're telling a story, locate the centre of the action in one of the people in the story, so that 'come' is about movement towards the person we are focusing on and 'go' is about movement away from the person we're focusing on. So you might say: "He begged her to come back to him" or "He begged her to go back to her family". So 'come' is towards the speaker or towards the person you are talking about and 'go' is away from the speaker or away from the person you are speaking about.

It's a neat and pretty clear rule. Lots of rules in English aren't neat and clear but this one is and I hope that helps you.

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