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Abigail: Hello, this is Question and Answer of the Week. I'm Abigail.

Feifei: And I'm Feifei. 今天的问题来自广西的 Michelle.

Question

I am confused about two words - alternative and selection. I know the common meaning of the two is choosing, but what exactly is the difference between them?

Feifei: Michelle 想请我们帮忙解释一下 alternative 和 selection 这两个词的区别。So what do you think, Abigail?

Abigail: Well, it's funny, I would never have thought of those two words as similar at all. But now Michelle asks the question, I can see they are quite similar.

Feifei: Abigail 从来没发现其实这两个词很相似, 不过正如 Michelle 所说的, 我们通常在需要做决定的时候就会用到这两个词。It's about choosing.

Abigail: Yes – but one problem is they both have more than one meaning. Which I think makes it quite confusing.

Feifei: 不过这两个词除了在做决定时会用到, 还有很多其它的含义。Let's keep it as simple as we can.

Abigail: Well, I'll do my best. So, if we start with 'alternative'. One simple way to think of it is that it means another thing. Another choice is 'an alternative'.

Feifei: We would say in Chinese “另一个”。

Abigail: It's a choice between two things.

- Feifei:** 是的，两者选一。I think an example would help. How about choosing food?
- Abigail:** Yeah, OK. So, Lots of people don't eat meat. So if meat is offered, they would ask for an alternative.
- Feifei:** A vegetarian alternative 素食选择。How about 'alternative plan' 备用计划?
- Abigail:** Yes, if one plan doesn't work, then you need an alternative plan. Or sometimes there is no other plan, and you have no alternative.
- Feifei:** 是这样的，你可能会听人说 "I had to do it, I had no alternative" 意思就是我必须得这么做，我别无选择 I had no alternative.
- Abigail:** Well, it's a good excuse! But sometimes you *do* have a choice. And sometimes you have several things to choose from. Or a selection.
- Feifei:** That was the other word Michelle asked about – selection.
- Abigail:** So, imagine a shop with lots of things to choose from. Maybe coats in different colours – black, blue, red, white...
- Feifei:** 好，我们打个比方，比如说买一件大衣，你需要从众多款式和颜色中挑选出你最中意的一件，a selection of colours 颜色齐全，a selection of coats 大衣款式繁多。So you look at the selection, and choose.
- Abigail:** Yes, you choose from a selection. So, in that case, 'selection' means a range of things to choose from.
- Feifei:** Yes, 这里 selection 的意思是可供挑选的某类商品。But 'selection' also means the choice you make.
- Abigail:** Yes, I hadn't realised, until Michelle asked this question, that selection also means the particular choice you make. So, you look at the coats, and you make a selection.
- Feifei:** 那么当你在选中了一件大衣后，这件大衣就变成了你做出选择的结果 selection. 不过通常我们用 selection 来形容选择的内容不止一两个。A selection can be a lot of things to choose from.

Abigail: Whereas 'alternative' means one of two possible choices. It's funny, we have a lot of different words for choosing. I hadn't realised quite how many there are.

Feifei: It was a good question - so Michelle in Guangxi, thank you.
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Goodbye!

Abigail: Bye!