

HOMOS AND HETEROS: THE TRUTH REVEALED

REX GOOCH

Welwyn, Herts, England

In Kickshaws in the February 1998 Word Ways, Richard Lederer does well to raise the problem of describing the relationship between a pair of words in respect of meaning, appearance (spelling) and pronunciation. The last is always likely to cause problems: for example, *wen* and *when* are pronounced the same by most people, but not by those who pronounce the latter as *hwen* (following Old English, and sanctioned by most of my dictionaries). Shades of meaning may also cause disagreements. Derivation may also be of interest, though not always known.

However, I shall stick to the three main classifications. There are eight combinations of spelling, meaning and sound possible, of which we shall consider no further the two cases where the words match in all three respects, and differ in all respects. The table on the next page visualises the six categories of relationship.

In order to describe a relationship between words, we have some parts of words which we can glue together: prefixes such as *homo-* (roughly = the same), and *hetero-* (different); and suffixes such as *-nym* (roughly name or meaning), *-graph* (drawing = spelling), and *-phone* (sound = pronunciation). Thus *homophone* could be used to describe two words which sound the same, and the OED definition seems to say regardless of the other two characteristics, so the OED definition covers three of our six categories of relationship. Unfortunately, the OED defines *homograph* much more exclusively, so that it covers just one of our categories, as both origin (perhaps we may take this as spelling) and meaning must differ. In contrast, Web 3 applies *homograph* to all three categories. How the unnamed characteristics are treated seems quite random: *homograph* in the OED covers just one category, but *homonym* in Web 3 seems to cover no fewer than five of our six categories. It does seem more reasonable that nominating the relationship for one characteristic should not determine other characteristics.

A further difficulty concerns the well-known problem with inclusive and exclusive ors. For *homophone* the OED says "differing in meaning or derivation". Do we take this to mean "or both"?

I am disappointed by the woolliness of the dictionary definitions, both in respect of what they intend to say, and how they attempt to express it. I have used the definitions marked "philological" in the OED but they are not fit for use in serious study. Richard Lederer offers some clear

definitions, but they are inconsistent in the manner in which they exclude other categories, and are at odds with dictionary definitions.

There are two words which seem to be defined in the same way in the OED and Webster 3, and it makes me happy that in both cases the definitions allow the other two categories to be as they will: synonyms are words that mean the same regardless of spelling or sound, and homophones are words which sound the same regardless of spelling or meaning. We therefore have two words which we can use with confidence. For the rest, the serious writer needs to define the relationship in all three categories. Thus we may wish to write about words which are homonymic (semantically similar), heterophonic and homographic; however, it seems kinder to state that we seek words that have the same meaning and spelling, but are pronounced differently. (They do exist: vase is an example.)

Spelling	Sound	Meaning	Synonym	Homonym	Heteronym	Homophone	Homograph
<	<	<	<i>Different in all three respects</i>				
<	<	=	OED, W3				
<	=	<		OED, W3		OED, W3, RL	
<	=	=	OED, W3	W3		OED, W3	
=	<	<		W3	OED, RL		OED, W3
=	<	=	OED, W3	W3			W3
=	=	<		OED, W3		OED, W3	W3, RL
=	=	=	<i>Identical in all three respects</i>				

= means *the same*, <> means *different*

W3 = Webster 3

RL - Richard Lederer

The following are OED philological definitions [with my comments]:

HOMONYM Applied to words having the same sound, but differing in meaning: opp. to *heteronym* and *synonym*. [Web 3 = homophone, or homograph, or same spelling and sound but different meaning!]

HETERONYM A word having the same spelling as another, but a different sound and meaning: opp. to *homonym* and *synonym*.

SYNONYM Strictly, a word having the same sense as another (in the same language); but more usually, either or any of two or more words having the same general sense, but possessing each of them meanings which are not shared by the other or others, or having different shades of meaning or implications appropriate to different contexts. [We take the strict definition. Web 3 says words with the same meaning.]

HOMOPHONE Applied to words having the same sound, but differing in meaning or derivation [or both, we assume. Web 3: different in derivation or meaning or spelling]; also to different symbols denoting the same sound or group of sounds.

HOMOGRAPH A word of the same spelling as another, but of different origin and meaning [Web 3: differing in derivation or meaning or pronunciation.]