Homographs and Pseudo-Homographs

DONALD A. DRURY
Long Beach, California

Homographs, not to be confused with homonyms, are words which happen to be spelled identically but which have totally different meanings and etymologies. In addition to spelling, most homographic words share the same pronunciation. And so great is the spread of meanings—through association, figurative uses, and other influences—that many other words in English could be labeled pseudo-homographs: words with such widely disparate meanings that one would suppose them to come from entirely different sources, as the authentic homographs do. For reasons to be explained later on, the compiler of this study has found it useful to establish still another category, quasi-homographs, for certain words derived from different sources which turn out to be closely associated by accident or to be, etymologically speaking, kissing cousins.

Let it be confessed that this investigation began entirely by accident, out of idle curiosity. It has turned out to be a much larger, more complex, more fruitful inquiry than expected. I had once jotted down such homographs as entrance (noun and verb), arch (noun and adjective), swallow (verb and noun) and a few others. And I had assumed that by a diligent search one might find as many as 35 or 40 such words in English. Then I mentioned this modest project to some friends and colleagues at Long Beach (Calif.) City College. In no time at all, I found myself literally overwhelmed by list upon list of potentially homographic words.

A few more definitions may be helpful here before we plunge into the lexical maze of homographs, pseudo-homographs, and related curiosa:

Homonyms—words with the same sound but with different spelling, meanings, and derivation. Examples would be bare—bear, boar—bore, choir—quire, team—teem, etc. Some dictionaries and handbooks confuse homonyms (pronounced alike) with homographs (spelled alike).

Homophones—different letters or groups of letters having the same sound (k and the hard c, uff and uph, etc.). Applied to whole words, the term homophones is equivalent to homonyms.

1. I am particularly indebted for research assistance to my wife, Gracia Drury, and to Charles O. Cunningham and Norma Matlin. Useful lists and suggestions were also provided by Frances Britey, F. Allen Bundy, Drew Featherston, Thoreis Haga, and Howard Pinckard.

WORD WAYS
Homographs and Pseudo-Homographs

Heteronyms—a relatively rare term designating words with the same spelling but different pronunciations, meanings, and derivations. In other words, heteronyms are non-homophonetic homographs. Examples: **lead** (the verb) and **lead** (the metal); **buffet** (to bang about) and **buffet** (sideboard, refreshment counter); **gill** (the unit of measure) and **gill** (breathing organ of a fish).

Doublets—pairs of words derived from the same source but differing somewhat in spelling, pronunciation, and/or meaning. Examples: **kirk** and **church**, **guard** and **ward**, **skirt** and **shirt**.

Cognates—words in two or more different languages which may be traced to the same original source. Examples are such words as **father** (English), **vater** (German), and **pater** (Latin), all from a common Indo-European root.

It seems reasonable to assume that many of the genuine, pseudo- and quasihomographs in modern English have been affected by one or more of the following processes: (1) derivation from words which themselves are homographs in the parent language; (2) influence upon spelling, pronunciation, and/or meanings of certain words through association with (or confusion with) homonyms or doublets in the parent language; and (3) the derivation of many closely-related English words from cognates in various languages. Process #1, for example, would explain why the adjective **fast**, which the lexicographers trace to Anglo-Saxon **faest**, has such diametrically opposed meanings as "fixed, firmly rooted" and "swift, moving rapidly." As a logophile who does not pretend to be a qualified philologist, I offer this particular set of conjectures to the experts for further investigation.

1: Homographs

And now for a close look at a number of English homographs. Some will be explored in detail in the section immediately following, and others will simply be listed. For the convenience of those who may wish to look up the etymologies in full, each group of words is presented in alphabetical order.

ARCH: The noun **arch** (a structural member) is not derived from **architecture**. It comes instead from Old French **arche**, an arcade. The adjective **arch** comes from the Greek prefix **archi** (chief, eminent). Linguistically, an architect is not a builder of arches but a chief artificer or master builder. The adjectival **arch** (sly, coy, cunning) seems to have acquired its meaning through association with such terms as arch rogue and arch-wag.

BAIL: Of four separate listings in an unabridged dictionary, three of these are not true homographs. The four are as follows: (1) n., a bond or surety and v., to release "on bail"; (2) n., a bucket or pail and v., to remove water from; (3) n., a hoop-shaped support or handle; (4) n., outer wall of a castle, palisade. Meanings (1), (2), and (4) all seem to be derived, ultimately, from L. **bajulare** (to bear a burden) via **bajulus** (porter, carrier) or **bajula** (a vessel, container).

BALE: (1) evil, woe; (2) fire, as in **bolefire** (funeral pyre); (3) bundle; (4) n. and v., doublet of **bail** (bucket).

BAND: (1) n., strip or ribbon and v., to fasten; (2) n., troup or group and v., to gather, unite (from Gothic **banduwa**, a sign). Band (1) is related to **bond**, **bind**, **bandage**, and **bandy**.
BANK: (1) n. and v., establishment for or act of storing or exchanging money, etc.; (2) n. and v., a row or tier; (3) n. and v., as in a river bank, cushion of a billiard table, etc. Both (1) and (2) are related to bench. Bank (1), the financial establishment, was originally a money-changer’s bench.

BEAR: (1) the animal; (2) to endure, carry; (3) barley; (4) pillowcase

BILL: (1) bird’s bill, bill of a cap, etc.; (2) pike, pickaxe (from AS bill, sword); (3) statement, document, letter (from ML billa an alteration of bulla). See BULL.

BUCK: One unabridged dictionary has 12 separate entries for buck. Counting all the technical and obsolete meanings, there are six or seven distinct homographs involved here.

BULL: (1) the animal and related n. and v. meanings; (2) seal affixed to a document, especially one from the Pope, and hence an official document or decree from the Pope; (3) a lie, brag, or absurd and illogical statement (as in “Irish bull”). Note: Meanings (2) and (3) derive respectively from L. bulla (knob or seal) and, by way of OF boule, from L. bulla (bubble)—possibly an example of homographs in Latin. Bull (2) is related to bill (3), above.

CASE: (1) example, instance, legal action, etc.; (2) container, from L. capsa (box, chest) and hence related to capsule and to chase (3).

CHASE: (1) n. and v., pursuit and to pursue; (2) v.t., to ornament, inset with gems; (3) a type form (printing), groove or furrow, bore of cannon.

CLEAVE: (1) v.i., to cling, adhere, etc.; (2) v.t., to divide, split, cut.

COCK: (1) male fowl, and related meanings; (2) v.i., to strut or swagger, or to turn up (as to cock an eye or an ear)—probably related to (1); (3) v.t., to set the hammer of a firearm—possibly related to (2); (4) n., a shut-off valve in a water or gas pipe; (5) pile of hay, etc. (from Dan. krok); (6), n., a cockboat (from OF coque).

COW: (1) bovine animal; (2) to daunt, intimidate, browbeat. See coward, under “Curiosa.”

DRILL: (1) v. and n., to make a hole, a tool for drilling; (2) kind of cloth, from G. dirilich, from L. trixix (having three threads). Drill (1) is related to through, thrill, and nostril.

FAN: (1) a devotee (probably from fanatic); (2) n. and v., all other meanings (from AS fann, from L. capsus, basket for winnowing grain). Fan (2) is related to wind and winnow.

FLAW: (1) faulty part, defect, blemish; (2) gust of wind, burst of stormy weather (akin to ON flaga, gust).

HOST: (1) n., cap., the Eucharist (ult. from L. hostia, sacrifice or victim); (2) landlord, one who receives or entertains, or (biology) harboring a microorganism or parasite; (3) army, multitude, great number. Note: Host (2) is derived from L. hospes (stranger, guest, host) and is related through L. hostis and possibly IE ghosti- to guest, hostile, and hospitality.

LARK: (1) n., the bird; (2) v.t. and n., to play (“lark about”). Lark (2) is related to lay (4) (poem, song).

LAST: (1) adj., superlative of late; (2) n., structural part of a shoe (from AS laest, trace or footstep); (3) v., to endure—related to (2); and (4) measure or weight (AS last).

WORD WAYS
Homographs and Pseudo-Homographs

LAY: (1) v.t., to put or place; (2) v.i., past tense of lie; (3) adj., of the laity, non-professional (from L. laicus, the people); (4) kind of poem, song—related to lkark (2).

LIMB: (1) arm, leg, etc.; (2) edge, border (astronomy, biology—from L. limbus). Limb (2) is related to Limbo (a realm bordering Hell set aside for just souls ineligible to enter Heaven) and also, distantly, to lapse, limp, and lump.

MASS: (1) religious service; (2) lump, quantity, etc. Mass (1) is related to dimiss, missa, and missal.

PALE: (1) n., a fence, stake, paling; (2) adj., wan, ashen. Careless readers associate the phrase “beyond the pale”—which has nothing at all to do with suntan lotion commercials—with the wrong homograph.

PATTER: (1) frequentative of pat (series of light, rapid taps or the well-known sound of “tiny feet”); (2) cant, jargon, glib talk, mechanical recitation of prayers, etc. (from L. paternoster).

PEER: (1) n., an equal; (2) v., to look intently (possibly from a contraction of appear). Peer (1) is related to par, and peer (2) to pore (1).

PORE: (1) v., to look, gaze, ponder; (2) n., opening, passage.

PUMP: (1) water pump, etc.; (2) type of shoe. Pump (1) is related to bomb.

ROW: (1) n., a line or rank; (2) v., to propel with oars; (3) n. and v., quarrel (possibly a back formation from rouse).

SPIT: (1) n. and v., pointed rod for holding meat over fire, slender point of land, etc.; (2) n. and v., saliva, ejecting saliva. Note: The phrase often now rendered as “the spittin' image” was originally “the spit and image.”

VENERY: (1) sex, lust, etc. (from Venus, goddess of love); (2) hunting, sports of the chase, etc. (from L. venari). The adjective venereal comes from venery (1).

Since space will not permit detailed discussion of each one, fascinating as that might be, a list of 117 additional homographic words follows. Numerals in parentheses indicate the number of separate homographs involved for each—counting mainly words and meanings which are in reasonably current use. Starred words (*) are discussed further under “Curiosa,” in a later section of this article.

BALL (2) DOCK (4) HAY (2)
BAN (2) DUCK (5) HEEL (2)
BANG (3) EAR (2) HEM (2)
BARK (3) FAIR (2) HIND (3)
*BEGUINE (2) FILE (3) HIP (4)
BLUFF (2) FLATTER (2) *HOCK (4)
BLOW (3) FRET (2) JUNK (2)
BORE (2) FLOCK (2) KILL (2)
BOUND (3) FRET (8) LAP (2)
BROOK (2) GAM (2) LEAVE (3)
BUNK (3) *GRATE (2) LEFT (2)
BUSTLE (2) GUM (2) LET (2)
*ButT (4) HAIL (2) LIE (2)
CARD (2) HACK (3)
In addition to the heteronyms already mentioned (lead, buffet, and gill), here are other non-homophonic homographs, with various pronunciations indicated:

**AGAPE**: (1) AGape (a primitive Christian love-feast); (2) a-GAPE (full of wonder)

**ENTRANCE**: (1) n., ENtrance; (2) v., enTRANCE

**EXCISE**: (1) n., EXcise (tax); (2) v., exCISE (to cut out, remove). Also see excise (1) under "Curiosa."

**RAVEN**: (1) n., RAY-ven (the bird); (2) v., RAV-en (devour greedily, etc.) — related to ravenous, rapine.

**SAKE**: (1) n., sake (end, purpose, benefit, etc.); (2) SAH·kee (Japanese beverage)

**SEWER**: (1) SO-wer (one who sews); (2) SUE-er (conduit to remove water, sewage)

**TEAR**: (1) “teer” (salty fluid from lachrymal gland); (2) “tare” to rip, pull apart

*Quasi-homographs*, briefly mentioned in the introduction, may be defined as pairs of words of apparently quite different origin which turn out to be related in etymology, however distantly, or by some association of meanings.

**CANON** and **CANNON** both derive from Greek words meaning reed. But canon (guide, rule, etc.) gets its meaning from a reed in the sense of a rod, a straight line; cannon comes from hanna, a reed as a hollow tube.

**WORD WAYS**
GULL: (1) n., the bird; (2) v. and n., to cheat or trick, a gullible person. The latter is traced through an obsolete word gull (to swallow), possibly from guzzle as influenced by dialect goll (unfledged bird).

HOLOGRAPH: The original meaning is of course a handwritten manuscript (as a holographic will), and the derivation is from Gk. holos, whole + graphein, to write or produce an image. The developers of the new laser-beam method of diffraction photography, by which a three-dimensional image is produced, have "borrowed" the same sources—so that we now have two new words, hologram and holography, related to this process.

HIDE: (1) skin, pelt; (2) to conceal, etc. It seems likely that (2) is ultimately from the same source as (1) in the basic sense of "to cover (as with skin)."

PAP: (1) nipple, from ME poppe; (2) baby food, from L. poppa, papa, infant's cry for food. Here is another example of words related by association rather than etymology.

SCRUPLE: (1) unit of weight (¼ dram), minute amount, jot, iota; (2) ethical or moral consideration, twinge of conscience. Both are related, however tangentially, to L. scutulus (a small, sharp stone).

SPRUCE: (1) n., the tree or its wood, from ME spTuce, variant of Pruce (Prussia), an early source of spruce lumber; (2) adj., neat, smart, dapper, from (s)pruce as the name of a fine leather imported from Prussia.

II. Pseudo-Homographs

Many of the words investigated as likely homographs turned out (quite astonishingly, in some cases) to have the same derivation for what seemed at first glance to be totally unrelated meanings. As in the preceding discussion of the actual homographs, I will examine some of the pseudo-homographs in detail and list others for further exploration by those interested.

ADDRESS: place of residence, formal speech, etc.

BAG: All meanings are related. It is interesting to note the differences and similarities between bag, baggage, "old bag" and "young baggage."

CONDUCT: Both the noun (behavior) and the verb (to guide) are from L. conductus.

CONTENT: The adjective (satisfied) and the noun (material contained) are both from L. continere (hold together, restrain)—as are all meanings of continent.

COURT: to woo; enclosure; crowd, royal entourage, etc. In the sense of wooing, court is probably derived from the attention paid to a person in power, hence courtship in the later, romantic sense.

CROP: All senses of this word—from the crop of a bird to the crop that is harvested and the verb crop (to cut, chop)—derive from AS cropp (variously a bunch, cluster, flower, ear of corn, crop of bird).

DRAFT: All meanings (draft horse, current of air, to draw or compose, etc.) come from ME draft and AS drogan (to draw, pull, drag, etc.). Draft is closely related to draw and drag.

EXACT: Both the adjective and the verb are from L. exactus (precise), pp. of exigere (drive out, demand, enforce, finish, determine, measure). Related in the verb sense to exigent and exigency.
GORGE: All meanings are from OF gorge (throat, gullet), from LL gorga (throat, narrow pass) and L. gorges (whirlpool, stream). Gorgeous comes from a word denoting ruff, ribbon, or other colorful decoration for the neck. Also see gorge.

INTIMATE: Both the verb and the adjective are ultimately related to L. intimus, inmost. The verb intimate comes directly from intimatus, pp. of intimare (put, drive, press into, announce); the adjective was originally spelled intime.

INVALID: Both the noun (sickly, infirm person) and the adjective (not valid, null and void) are from L. invalidus (in, not + validus, strong).

LATE: Both primary meanings (deceased, tardy) are related.

MINCE: The verb (to chop up) and the adjective (affectedly elegant or dainty) are both related to minute. Also see minnow and minut.

OBJECT: All meanings, noun and verb, are from ML objectum, something thrown in the way, from objectus, a casting before, or that which appears.

REFRAIN: The verb (desist, abstain, avoid) and the noun (recurrent phrase, line, verse are both from MF refraindre (restrain, moderate, echo).

REFUSE: In the sense of trash, refuse is that which has been refused, discarded.

SPOON: All verb and noun meanings are from the same source; spoon in the sense of to court, bill and coo, etc., may come from the Welsh custom of the newly-engaged man presenting his fiancee with a "love spoon."

And here are still more words which, despite wide divergence in meanings, have the same derivation and may therefore be classified as pseudo-homographs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BACK</th>
<th>BALK</th>
<th>BED</th>
<th>COUCH</th>
<th>CRAFT</th>
<th>DECLINE</th>
<th>DIVINE</th>
<th>DOG</th>
<th>DRAG</th>
<th>DRAW</th>
<th>FARE</th>
<th>FLAT</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FLY</td>
<td>GROUND</td>
<td>IMPORT</td>
<td>LIKE</td>
<td>LOCK</td>
<td>MANUAL</td>
<td>PARK</td>
<td>PART</td>
<td>PARTIAL</td>
<td>PASS</td>
<td>RELIEF</td>
<td>SHIFT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SHY</td>
<td>SMART</td>
<td>SPARK</td>
<td>STAY</td>
<td>STOCK</td>
<td>STUMP</td>
<td>TACK</td>
<td>TELL</td>
<td>TELLER</td>
<td>TRACE</td>
<td>TRACT</td>
<td>TRIP</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

III. Curiosa: Incidental, Accidental Discoveries

In the course of looking up hundreds of words to check meanings and etymologies and to distinguish between actual and ostensible homographs, this investigator made (for himself, anyhow) a number of unexpected discoveries. Inevitably, one thing (word, source, synonym) led to another, and sometimes to extended side-trips which had little to do with the homograph project as such. This report concludes with a section on some of the surprises encountered along the way.

BALL is related (through Latin, French, or Italian) to ballot, balloon, bullet, bowl and bollix.

BANAL, apparently a satirical coinage, comes from ban, a proclamation.

WORD WAYS
**Homographs and Pseudo-Homographs**

BEGUINE: Readers on my side of the Generation Gap will perhaps recall a popular song of the 30's, "Begin the Beguine." The reference was presumably to a native dance of Martinique—but Beguines were also members of a lay sisterhood organized in the Low Countries in the 12th Century.

BIGOT: One dictionary traces this word "probably" from Spanish *hombre de bigot* (man with a mustache); another suggests that the source is Old French and Norman *bigot*, perhaps from early English *bi* God.

BULLY originated meant sweetheart, fine fellow; later it came to mean pimp, and still later took on its present meaning. Survivals of the earliest meaning may be seen in such phrases as "bully for you" and "bully boy" (gallant, dashing fellow).

BURSA, the name of a frequent locale for bursitis, is related to bourse, bursar, purse, purer.

COVARD is not related to *cowed* (daunted, intimidated) but to OF *cunrt*, from *coue* (tail), from L. *cauda*—the sign of cowardice being the tail between the legs.

EXCISE (tax) and *cenSus* are very closely related. The former is derived from *accise*, in turn from L. *accensus* (ad, to + *census*, tax).

GRAM, the weight comes from the Latin root *gram* (something written or drawn) and is related to grammar. Many related English words are from the Greek cognate root *graph-.*

GRATEFUL is not derived from English *grate* but from Latin *gratus*, pleasing, thankful, etc.

HOCK, one of the four distinct homographs with this spelling, means "to sport about" and comes from the early English festival of Hockday or Hocktide (formerly celebrated on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter).

INDIGENOUS and INDIGENT are not from the same source.

JEOPARDY, denoting a situation which could hardly be considered amusing, is distantly related to joke. It comes from OF jeu parti (divided game, game with even chances) and ultimately from LL *jocus partitus* (even chance, alternative) and L. *jocus* (play, game, joke).

LIST (tilt, incline), as in "a listing ship," is related to *lust*. It comes from ME *listen* and an apparent doublet *lusten* from AS *Iystan* (to yearn, incline toward).

MEAL (lunch, food, etc.) is not related to *meal* (coarsely ground grain) but derives instead from AS *mael* (measure, fixed time—and probably by association a regular time for assembling to eat).

MESS (quantity of food, etc.) comes from L. *missus* (a course at a meal) and ultimately from L. *missus* (to send, put); it is therefore related to such words as mass, missile, and mission.

MINESTRONE (the soup) is related to minister; minister (servant) is the obverse of magister (lord, master).

MORES (customs, etc.) is a plural; the rarely-used singular is *mos*.

OYEZ ("Hear ye") is an imperative form of an otherwise defunct verb. Oyez is also a noun—and its plural is oyesser!

PALL, as in the "pall of night," is not from *appoll* (to frighten), but ultimately from L. *pallium* (mantle or cloak).

THE JOURNAL OF RECREATIONAL LINGUISTICS
PUNCH (the beverage) comes from a Sanskrit word meaning five flavors or ingredients—which tells us something about the original concoction.

RAP: The expression “don’t care a rap” is not related to rap in the sense of strike, knock, or be sentenced to prison (“take a rap”). It comes from the German rappe, a coin of little value.

SPIRE, as the root of such words as aspire and inspire, is not from spire (peak, steeple) or spiral; it comes from L. spire (to breathe or blow).

TILE (v.), TILER (n.): In addition to the standard meaning, the verb tile has the sense of to close or seal (figuratively) to insure privacy. In one of his novels, Anthony Trollope describes a family’s discussion of personal matters once “the door was tiled” and the servants had retired. And there is an official Tiler (doorkeeper) at Masonic and Elks lodges whose duty it is to keep unauthorized persons from entering. Quite a different use of the word is seen in the old phrase “out on the tiles,” signifying a debauch or drinking spree.

And so comes to an end, hundreds of dictionary thumbings later, this informal study which began months ago with a list of half a dozen words. Perhaps some WORD WAYS readers will be interested in adding to the list of English homographs and pseudo-homographs, or in exploring the same phenomena in other languages.

* * *

ANAGRAMS

Christianity
Charity’s in it. 

Circumstantial evidence
Actual crime isn’t evinced.

The cockroach
Cook, catch her!

The coming Presidential campaign
Damn! Elected time is approaching.

Here the exclamation injects humor into the anagram and cannot be classed as a mere leftover.

Committees
Cost me time.

That’s no lie!

Complexion beautifier
I bemix pure face lotion.

The compulsory education law
You must learn: police do watch.

WORD WAYS