LINGUISTIC ILLUSIONS

DARRYL FRANCIS
Hounslow, Middlesex, England

The reader is probably familiar with optical illusions, where one doesn’t think one sees what in fact one is seeing. For example, the reader may be asked to judge which of two lines is longer. From the way that the two lines are presented, one line does indeed look longer than the other. However, on measuring the lines with a ruler, they are found to be identical in length. This is an optical illusion -- your eyes and brain have tricked you into seeing something that isn’t really so.

The purpose of this article is to acquaint the reader with the linguistic analog of optical illusions, namely what we term linguistic illusions. Linguistic illusions are words which quite obviously look as if they mean one thing when in reality they mean something quite different.

Let’s start by considering the penultimate word in the first paragraph of this article, REALLY. We all know what this everyday word means. But logically, oughtn’t it to mean “to ally for a second time”? Another common word is PROFESS. Surely, this could be interpreted as a slang word for a female professor, made up from the two parts PROF and -ESS. Of course, PROFESS means no such thing.

We hope that the reader has now got the hang of what we mean by linguistic illusions, and is ready to be presented with a number of other examples. Take the word TOWNSITE, the site of a town. Looking at the word in a coldly logical manner, we see that it is composed of the two parts TOWNS and -ITE. Since there are numerous minerals named after their discoverers (e.g. COLLINSITE, EVANSITE and ROGERSITE were discovered by individuals called COLLINS, EVANS and ROGERS), we would be doing nothing more than following a precedent if we chose to interpret TOWNSITE as the name of a mineral discovered by someone called TOWNS. On the other hand, there is a mineral called WELLSITE, named after its discoverer who was called WELLS. We could, if we wanted to, decide to look on WELLSITE as a compounding of the two parts WELL and SITE. Thus, WELLSITE would have the meaning "the site of a well". Having in-
stanced both TOWNSITE and WELLSITE, we now come to MILLSITE. Is this the name of a mineral, discovered by a Mr. Mills? Or is it the site of a mill? Logically, it could be either. In fact, it is the site of a mill.

Let's look at the two words SEALESS and TEALESS, which differ only in their initial letters. Is SEALESS formed by conjoining SEA and -LESS, implying that SEALESS means "without a sea"? Or is it formed by conjoining SEAL and -ESS, implying that SEALESS is a female seal? If you answered yes and no, in that order, you are right. SEALESS does indeed mean "without a sea". Having mentioned that, we now go on to TEALESS. Is this (a) TEA and -LESS, implying "without tea", or (b) TEAL and -ESS, implying the female variety of the teal, a widely distributed duck? In fact, (a) is the right answer. TEALESS is formed in analogy with SEALESS, by the addition of -LESS to the original noun.

Now consider SONGSTRESS. This is the female form of SONGSTER, someone who sings. However, the discerning eye will note that this word could be interpreted as being made up of the two parts SONG and STRESS. If this were really so, the definition would run something like "the interpretation or stress that should be used in the presentation of a song". From one apparent STRESS to another, how about FORESTRESS? Is this the female form of FORESTER, formed in analogy with SONGSTRESS? Or is it formed from the parts FORE- and STRESS, with the meaning "to place stress on the first, or fore-, part of a word"? Illogical as it seems, FORESTRESS is not formed a la SONGSTRESS, but is made up from FORE- and STRESS as indicated above, and with the meaning given above. If FORESTRESS is made up from FORE- and STRESS, how is FORESTATION made up? Is this a type of station placed at a frontier (i.e. a fore-station) or is it used to indicate the act of covering an area with a forest? We leave the reader to find out for himself or herself.

Let's now examine the pair of words INTERMINE and INTERMINABLE. The first is a verb meaning "to penetrate with mines". Obviously, this is formed from the amalgamation of INTER- and MINE. The word is not formed from IN- and TERMINE, an obsolete verb meaning "to terminate". How should we view INTERMINABLE? It ought to mean "able to be intermined". Unfortunately, this is not the case. The word really means "lasting for a long time" and is made up from IN- and TERMINABLE. Thus, INTERMINE and INTERMINABLE are completely unrelated words.

If you, the reader, wanted to stable a horse for a second time, you would, as surely as night follows day and day follows night, restable it. Alas, the word RESTABLE is not endowed with that meaning, but instead it means "able to be restored". It is formed by the addition of -ABLE to the verb REST, implying that a horse can be returned to a condition of being stable. However, in the case of planetesimal aggregates, they are not endowed with the property of being able to be restored to their original condition. In fact, planetesimal aggregates are treated as a solid mass, with a relatively stable structure. This is why we use the term "restable" to denote something that can be returned to a previous state, whereas the property of being "able to be restored" is not applicable to planetesimal aggregates.
RESTABLE is not formed by prefixing the verb STABLE with RE-, but instead is formed by adding -ABLE to REST. Thus, RESTABLE means "able to rest". Would anyone care to predict what RESPIT means? You're leading yourself up the garden path if you have the notion that it means "to spit again". RESPIT is actually a reformed spelling of the common word RESPIRE, an interval of rest.

Three other words that can be discussed together are BEDRABBLE, BEDRAPE and BEDRUG. These are all verbs formed by adding the intensive verb prefix BE- to the verbs DRABBLE (to draggle), DRAPE and DRUG. It doesn't require much imagination to view these three words in an alternative way. Consider each of them as a noun, formed by joining BED to the three nouns RABBLE, RAPE and RUG. BEDRABBLE could be looked on as a collective noun meaning "prostitutes", i.e. rabble which can be found in beds. BEDRAPE can be assigned the meaning "rape taking place in a bed". And BEDRUG could surely be thought of as a rug put over a bed, a forerunner of today's bedspread.

If we wanted to coin a word with the meaning "a member of the same race", then undoubtedly the word we would conjure up would be RACEMATE. However, we would be dismayed to find this word already in existence. A RACEMATE is a salt of racemic acid. Just as salts of nitric acid are called nitrates, salts of racemic acid are called racemates. We'll have to think up another word meaning "a member of the same race"!

Hands up all those who've ever seen a NEGRO COP standing on a street corner. If anyone raised their hand, we are just slightly amazed. You see, a NEGRO COP is a type of stork which is also called the jabiru. The reader will be forgiven, though, for thinking that a NEGRO COP was a black policeman. Here's a thought for all ornithologically-minded logologists: support your local negrocops!

Two similar-looking words are PLANETABLE and PLANTABLE. The first is a verb meaning "to use a plane table, a type of surveying instrument". The second is an adjective meaning "able to be planted". However, could not PLANETABLE be assigned the meaning "able to be endowed with planets"? This will obviously be a necessary word when planetary engineers of the future start to create artificial planets for planetless stars. Conversely, could not PLANTABLE be interpreted as a kind of table for putting plans on? That would be eminently sensible, would it not?

We close by asking the reader if they know, or can guess, the meaning of REDOX, which is not a ruddy-colored bovine quadruped, but something else. Any other linguistic illusions that the reader may care to send us would be greatly appreciated.