

# CURIOUS CONTRONYMS

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In his August 1977 *Word Ways* article on words ending in -onym, George Scheetz asked readers if they could identify contronym or charactonym, neither of which appears in standard dictionaries. The former word was apparently coined by Jack Herring, who defined it as a word which can be used in two contradictory senses. In an article in the February 1962 issue of Merriam-Webster's now-defunct magazine, *Word Study*, he proposed four examples:

- FAST (1) firmly fixed; stable; unyielding (2) moving or able to move rapidly  
 SCAN (1) to examine point by point; scrutinize (2) to look over hastily (Colloq.)  
 PHENOMENON (1) any observable fact or event (2) an exceptional or abnormal person, thing, or occurrence  
 CLEAVE (1) to adhere closely; to stick; cling (2) to part, divide; to split; crack; separate

The idea was independently developed by Joseph Shipley in his 1960 book Playing With Words (he called it autantonym), and has occasionally been explored in earlier issues of *Word Ways*, first by Dave Silverman in the May and August 1969 *Kickshaws*, and later by Tom Pulliam in "Merry Am Webster" in February 1976.

Contronyms are closely related to Jezebel Q. XIXX'x "Strange Paradoxes" featured in the February 1977 and later issues (you down Seven-Up; you chop down a tree and then chop it up), as well as to evolutionary changes in word meaning that yield startling results (see Silverman's history of stink in May 1970, or Dennis Welch's "Way/ Words: Etymological Deviance," August 1976, for more examples). In like vein, Harry Hazard notes that cavalier and chivalrous, cognate and at one time similar in meaning, seem destined to become antonyms.

In their book 30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary, Wilfred Funt and Norman Lewis relate the etymological tale of King George the First and Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of Saint Paul's Cathedral in London: "Upon completion of the masterly edifice, the king told Wren that his work was 'amusing, awful, and artificial'. Sir Christopher was delighted with the royal compliment, inasmuch as three hundred years ago amusing meant amazing, awful meant awe-inspiring, and artificial meant artistic."

That was three centuries ago. Today, the older, flattering meanings of amusing, awful and artificial have virtually disappeared from popular use. Indeed, the general rule is that, when a single word develops two diametrically opposed denotations, one will tend to become obsolete. Occasionally, though, two contradictory meanings survive for a single word -- the contronyms of Jack Herring.

Here are some of my favorite contronyms which (except for overlook) I believe have not previously appeared in Word Ways:

- OVERLOOK (1) to look over or through; inspect (2) to pass over; ignore (recall "I'm looking over / A four-leaf clover / That I overlooked before")
- WEAR (1) to endure use; last under use (2) to diminish or decay through use (hence, the two statements "I want a cloth that will wear" and "I want a cloth that will not wear" can mean exactly the same thing)
- DISTRACT (1) to provide amusement (2) to confuse; disrupt
- TERRIFIC (1) very bad; awful, frightful (2) unusually fine or gratifying (similarly, TERRIBLE, TERRIBLY, producing the ambiguous statement "The President's staff is terribly organized")
- LEAVE (1) to permit to remain (2) to go away or depart from (Smith, Jones, and Clark share an apartment. Smith and Jones go home for the holiday; Clark remains behind. Someone asks you, "Who's left?" How do you answer?)
- HOLD UP (1) to support, sustain (2) to check, impede (tennis player to doubles partner; "Sorry I'm holding you up; I guess you'll have to hold me up")
- OF (1) function word indicating the agent or doer of an act or action (2) function word indicating the object of an action (hence the ambiguous phrase "the shooting of the hunters")
- COMMENCEMENT (1) act of entering upon, beginning (2) the awarding of academic degrees, signifying the completion of a period of study
- KEEP UP (1) to stay up (2) to continue ("I hope the rain keeps up -- so it won't come down")
- UNBENDING (1) not bending; unyielding (2) given to relaxation ("Smith is so unbending; he just won't unbend")
- DUST (1) to make dusty (2) to make free of dust
- HANDICAP (1) an advantage, as in golf (2) a disadvantage
- TEMPER (1) to soften (2) to make stronger; toughen
- MORTAL (1) deadly (2) subject to death
- WIND UP (1) to bring to a conclusion; end (2) to start, as to wind up a watch