DOUBLE DUTY ADJECTIVES

SOLOMON W. GOLOMB
Los Angeles, California

Several common English adjectives have two distinct meanings, revealed by clearly distinguishable opposites. Here are several antonym pairs that illustrate this.

- right/left, right/wrong
- light/dark, light/heavy
- hard/soft, hard/easy
- quick/slow, quick/dead
- old/new, old/young
- more/less, more/fewer
- new/old, new/used

There are surely more examples.

In other languages, two different words usually correspond to the two distinct opposites. In colloquial American English, “fewer” is being displaced by “less” (e.g. the supermarket check-out line for “ten items or less”); but the Scandinavian languages not only distinguish less from fewer, but also more (not less) from more (not fewer). Most Indo-European languages (but hardly any others) fail to distinguish old (not new) from old (not young). I’ve seen books on Chinese that claim the two Chinese words for “old” are old for people vs old for things; but then claim that for some reason the phrase “old friend” was the old for things. Nonsense! An “old friend” is a “not-new friend” rather than a “not-young friend”.

Sometimes two antonyms of an adjective are merely synonyms as in big/little vs big/small. Sometimes the same antonym pair can be used in two different contexts, e.g. “sharp/dull” can refer either to knives or intellects.

We saw that while old can mean either “not new” or “not young”, new can mean “not old” or “not used” (as in the case of a car). Similarly, while hard can mean either “not soft” or “not easy”, soft can mean “not hard” or “not loud” (referring to music). Also, while right can mean “not left” or “not wrong”, left can mean “not right” or “not taken” (as in “left luggage”, a sign at any UK airport).

Sometimes ambiguities can arise. “This can of paint is light” could mean that the can is not heavy, or that the paint is not dark. A politician referred to as “right” could either be “not wrong” or “not left”. “This is my old friend” usually means “not new”, but in context could mean “not young”.

211