

MORE ON PSEUDOANTONYMS

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In an article in the last issue of this journal (Word Ways 44.1, February 2011), Anil uncovered a number of examples of pseudoantonyms in the realm of English negatory prefixes. A pseudoantonym consists of an affixed word and the corresponding unaffixed base which one would expect to be antonyms on the basis of the meaning of the affix, but which are instead synonyms (or near synonyms). For example, the prefix DE- has a primary meaning ‘to do the opposite of’ in examples such as ACTIVATE ~ DEACTIVATE, but not in FEND ~ DEFEND. Since the latter two words can be synonymous, they are pseudoantonyms.

In this note I present a number of English pseudoantonyms involving the prefix RE-. According to the usual sources there is a single prefix RE- with the principle meaning ‘again’ or ‘anew’. Word pairs consisting of a verb and the same verb with RE- include VISIT ~ REVISIT, WIND ~ REWIND, USE ~ REUSE, TRAIN ~ RETRAIN, THINK ~ RETHINK, TAKE ~ RETAKE, START ~ RESTART, etc. Also attested is a secondary meaning, namely ‘back’, or ‘backward’, e.g. CALL ~ RECALL.

If a pair of words with RE- is a pseudoantonym, then we would not expect either of these meanings to be observable in the prefixed word. Examples of pseudoantonyms include the following:

Figure 1: Pseudoantonyms with the prefix RE-:

MINDFUL ~ REMINDFUL	SOUND ~ RESOUND
MOVE ~ REMOVE	SOLVE ~ RESOLVE
PINE ~ REPINE	VIEW ~ REVIEW
SEARCH ~ RESEARCH	

The word pairs in Figure 1 are pseudoantonyms because the unprefixed verbal base has a meaning which is either identical or very similar to the meaning of the corresponding word with RE-. A humorous pseudoantonym in which the base and the prefixed word are not synonyms but which nevertheless bear an apt semantic relationship is TIRED ~ RETIRED.

Additional pseudoantonyms involving RE- differ from the ones in Figure 1 because the base is a noun, e.g. FLEXION ~ REFLEXION and BAR ~ REBAR ‘a steel bar with ridges for use in reinforced concrete’. In the pair MOTE ‘a small particle’ ~ REMOTE ‘small in degree’, the first word is a noun and the second an adjective.

Many of the examples of pseudoantonyms in the domain of ‘negatory’ prefixes discussed in the Word Ways 44.1 article are tongue-in-cheek, two of my favorites being E-BOOK ~ NOTE-BOOK and ORNIS ‘any bird’ ~ NOTORIS ‘a New Zealand bird’. These pairs differ from all of the examples discussed above because the element added to the second word is not a prefix with an identifiable meaning, but instead a sequence of letters that is coincidentally identical to a negatory word. An amusing pair involving RE- along these lines which does not involve synonymy is ALLY ~ REALLY. Examples in which there is a closer semantic affinity between the two words include A-LIST ~ REALIST, ALMIGHTY ~ REAL MIGHTY, ALTRUISM ~ REAL TRUISM, ALLITERATE ~ REAL LITERATE, ALLOCUTION ~ REAL LOCUTION and ARBITER ~ REAR BITER. Whether or not the last word pair is a true synonym is a question I leave open for readers of this journal to ponder.