

# RETRO-ACTIVE WORDS

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Have you noticed that a number of simple nouns have recently acquired new adjectives?

What we used to call, simply, books we now call **HARDCOVER BOOKS** because of the production of paperback books. What was once simply a guitar is now an **ACOUSTIC GUITAR** because of the popularity of electric guitars. What was once just soap is now called **BAR SOAP** since the invention of powdered and liquid soaps.

Frank Mankiewicz, once an aide to Robert Kennedy, invented a term for these new compounds. He called them **retronyms**, using the classical word parts **retro** (back) and **nym** (name, word). A retronym is an adjective-noun pairing generated by a change in the meaning of the noun (called a **protonym**), usually because of advances in technology. Retronyms, like retrospectives, are backward glances.

When I grew up, there were only Coke, turf and mail. Nowadays, Diet Coke, new Coke, artificial turf and e-mail (electronic mail) have spawned the retronyms **REAL COKE**, **CLASSIC COKE**, **NATURAL TURF** and **SNAIL MAIL** or **HARD MAIL**. Once there were simply movies. Then movies began to talk, necessitating the retronym **SILENT MOVIES**. Then came color movies and the contrasting term **BLACK-AND-WHITE MOVIES**. Once there was television. Along came color television and then cable television with the retronyms **BLACK-AND-WHITE TELEVISION** and **ON-AIR TELEVISION**.

Even time, which used to wait for no man, now does because it can be captured on audio and videotape. As a result, we now have something called **real time**. Once, all we had was reality--what could be more real? Now we have virtual reality. So what are the retronyms--**UNREAL TIME** and **ACTUAL REALITY**?

I remember being astonished when one of my students at St. Paul's School told me that he had missed my class because he had set his alarm for p.m. rather than a.m. On our old clocks, that would have been impossible, but on digital clocks it happens all the time. So what used to be just a clock (or watch) is now an analog clock, versus a **DIGITAL CLOCK**.

Other retronyms we use today include:

protonym	new term	retronym
watch	wrist watch	pocket watch
telephone	Touch-Tone telephone	rotary phone
play	radio/television play	stage play

cigarette	filter cigarette	nonfilter cigarette
milk	skim milk	whole milk
peanut butter	crunchy peanut butter	creamy peanut butter
pen	ballpoint pen	fountain pen
baseball	night baseball	day baseball
razor	electric razor	straight razor

Coining a retronym for an object is sometimes like waving it a nostalgic goodbye. Retronyms can signal that the thing double-labeled has become outmoded and obsolete, the superseded exception rather than the rule. This is what has happened to BLACK-AND-WHITE TV, MANUAL TYPEWRITERS, TREADLE SEWING MACHINES, REEL-TO-REEL RECORDERS, LEADED GASOLINE and ROTARY PHONES.

Given the dizzying pace of commercial innovations, retronyms are bound to keep on coming. Any day now, we'll have brand new retronyms such as CORDED TELEPHONE, PHONELESS CAR, LOW-DEFINITION TV and NONMICROWAVE OVEN.

What with phone sex and safe sex, could we one day use the retronym FULL-PARTICIPATION SEX? Will the proliferating circuitry of artificial intelligence generate the retronym REAL HUMAN INTELLIGENCE? I hope not. Other retronyms I pray will never come to pass include GRAFFITILESS WALL, NONELECTRONIC BOOK, TEACHER-STAFFED SCHOOL, LIFELONG MARRIAGE and DOUBLE-PARENT FAMILY.

### Anagram Genius for Windows

Select a set of letters and anagram them to form a list of words. Simple? Tedious! For 15 to 20 letters, there will typically be hundreds or thousands of such word-lists. The computer can find them, but the human eye cannot sort the wheat from such an enormous pile of chaff. In this software program, Anagram Genius for Windows (DOS 3.1+, 386 processor), William Tunstall-Pedoe has come to the rescue. His strategy is to "score" each word according to its usability in an understandable anagram, and then rank the anagrams (word-lists) according to the sum of their word scores; the 500 highest-scoring ones are presented for evaluation. The human eye is still required to arrange the words into a clever anagram, but one can quickly scan a wide set of possibilities. Some examples of the output are WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE (I am a weakish speller), SOIXANTE-NEUF (sex union feat), BERTIE WOOSTER (restore bow-tie), GUINNESS IS GOOD FOR YOU (serious sounding? goofy!) and DOLLY PARTON (droll top? nay!). Most users of Anagram Genius will seek what can be done with their names. The lexicon size is 80,000 words.

The program is available from Genius 2000 Software, PO Box 395, Cambridge CB3 9PJ for 23.64 pounds sterling (add 5 pounds for bank charges, and convert to dollars at the current rate). One can also pay by Visa or Mastercard. His Email is [agenius@genius.demon.co.uk](mailto:agenius@genius.demon.co.uk) and his Web site is <http://www.demon.co.uk/genius/index.htm>.