

KICKSHAWS

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WORDS ABOUT WORDS

With cultivated scholarship, fertile wit, and down-to-earth common sense, I now make a modest attempt to turn the vast and unweeded terrain of word-cluster classification into a manageable garden of delight.

To begin, jettison the term *homonym*--and if you've never heard of or read it before, pretend that I never mentioned it here. *Homonym*, you see, has started to resemble the word *love*. We modern English speakers love our parents and children; we love our spouses and paramours. We love our country; we love country music. We love God; we love our new shoes. We love *The Iliad*; we love *Love Story*.

Like the word *love*, *homonym* has become a do-it-all-purpose convenience label that signifies all manner of word pairs, including the types that I'm about to cover. Whatever sound and fury *homonym* may have once possessed now signifies nothing.

Instead, employ the following labels:

Homographs: two or more words that are written alike and sound alike but have different meanings. Sometimes the words will share derivational DNA: *plot* (storyline), *plot* (a small area of ground), and *plot* (a secret plan) are the same word with different meanings (polysymy). Sometimes the words will be etymologically unrelated: *bat* (mammal) and *bat* (wooden implement for hitting a ball) and *mint* (aromatic plant) and *mint* (place where money is manufactured) share no common ancestry.

Homophones: two or more words that sound alike but are spelled differently and have different meanings, as *bare bear*, *malicious militias*, and "A three-toed toad towed a load." To call these phonetic clusters *homonyms* is to invite taxonomic chaos. The classical word parts of *homograph* and *homophone* clearly signify "same writing" and "same sound" respectively.

Heteronyms: pairs of words with the same spelling but different pronunciations, meanings, and derivations. Among the best of these are entrance (opening) and entrance (beguile) and moped (motorbike) and moped (sulked).

A HYMN TO HETERONYMS

Why do we know so little about the salivary glands?
Because they are so secretive.

Membership in the exclusive club of heteronyms is strict, and tandems such as *resumé* and *resume* and *pâté* and *pate* are not admitted because the accent constitutes a change in spelling. Pseudo-heteronymic pairs like *insult* (noun) and *insult* (verb), *refuse* (noun) and *refuse* (verb), *read* (present-tense verb) and *read* (past tense verb), and *primer* (beginner's book) and *primer* (base coat of paint) are fairly common in the English language, but they are not true heteronyms because their etymologies are so closely related.

Here's my list of genuine, authentic, certified heteronyms. Accept no substitutes!

agape	forte	present	skied
alum	grave	pussy	slaver
axes	hinder	putting	slough
bases	incense	rape	singer
bass	liver	raven	sol
bow	lower	reprobate	sow
buffet	lunged	resent	stingy
coax	mare	reside	sundries
console	minute	resign	supply
content	mole	resort	tarry
converse	moped	routed	taxes
coop	more	row	tear
deserts	nestling	rugged	toots
do	number	sake	tower
does	overage	salve	tush
dove	palsy	secretive	unionized
entrance	pasty	sewer	wicked
evening	peaked	shower	wind
fillet			wound

A HETERONYMBLE TRIAD

Three heteronymic words are each plurals of two different singulars. *Axes* is the plural of both *axe* and *axis*, *bases* is the plural of both *base* and *basis*, and *taxes* is the plural of both *tax* and *taxis* (the response of a simple organism to a stimulus). The pronunciation of *axes*, *bases*, and *taxes* depends on which singular is the *axis* and *basis*.

Note the elegant pattern of this triad: The singular axis and the heteronymic plural axes (when it signifies the plural of axe) are homophones; the singular basis and the heteronymic plural bases (the plural of base) are homophones; and the singular taxis and the heteronymic plural taxes (the plural of tax) are also homophones. In other words, axes, bases, and taxes are each homophonic with a singular of which each is not the plural.

A CAPITAL IDEA

A capitonym is a word that changes pronunciation and meaning when it is capitalized. My mother, Leah Perry Lederer, was born in Reading (Pennsylvania), a capitonym, and, for thirty-five years, I lived in Concord, capitonymic capital of New Hampshire.

Take the world of tennis, from which we can muster the Austrian star Thomas Muster, pronounced "Mooster." Hey, guy. Don't forget French tennis luminary Guy Forget, pronounced as "Gee Forjay," a double capitonym. And maybe you'd want a date with the recently retired Japanese star Kimono Date. Joining Muster, Forget, and Date are Bill Amend, who draws the comic strip *Fox Trot*, and Berkeley Breathed, creator of *Bloom County* and *Outland*.

Now sound out this list of prominent capitonyms in both their lower case and capitalized forms:

amend	colon	guy	millet	polish
askew	concord	herb	mobile	rainier
august	date	job	muster	ravel
begin	degas	levy	natal	reading
breathed	forget	lima	nice	tangier

CAPITONYMBLE VERSES

Job's Job

In August, an august patriarch,
Was reading an ad in Reading, Mass.
Long-suffering Job secured a job
To polish piles of Polish brass.

Herb's Herbs

An herb store owner, name of Herb,
Moved to rainier Mt. Rainier,
It would have been so nice in Nice,
And even tangier in Tangier.

GRAMMAGRAMMATICAL VERSE

Can you translate the following poem?:

YURYY
 Is EZ to
 U should B called
 "XLNC."

U XEd NE
 MT TT.
 I NV how U
 XL with EE.

A BILINGUAL FOUR-BY-FOUR

Woody Rowe has sent me two astonishing four-by-four crossword puzzle squares (source not identified). Fill in the grids:

1	2	3	4
2			
3			
4			

Across

1. What mosquitoes do.
2. What snakes do.
3. What dogs do
4. What teeth do

Down

1. Insects
2. Optical organs
3. Annoy
4. Comfort

The resulting grid reads: B I T E
 B I T E
 B I T E
 B I T E

The Down rows now read bees (B's), eyes (I's), tease (T's), ease (E's).

Incredibly the gramogram crossword puzzle gimmick works also in French!:

Across

1. Que font les moustiques
2. Que font les chiens
3. Que font les serpentes
4. Que font les dents

Down

1. aime (loves)
2. au (water)
3. air (air)
4. dé (thimble)

The resulting grid reads: M O R D
 M O R D
 M O R D
 M O R D

TOUGH STOUGH

The letter string ough can be sounded at least ten different ways:

bough	cough	hiccough	rough	through
bought	dough	lough	thoroughbred	trough

To illustrate how tough ough can be (and accepting both trawf and trawth as legitimate soundings of troth), let's add one or two or three letters at a time after the t in tough to create:

tough trough though through thorough,

none of which rhyme with each other.

Tough Stough

The wind was rough.
The cold was grouggh.
She kept her hands
Inside her mough.

And even though
She loved the snough,
The weather was
A heartless fough.

It chilled her through.
Her lips turned blough.
The frigid flakes
They blough and flough.

They shook each bough,
And she saw hough
The animals froze--
Each cough and sough.

While at their trough,
Just drinking brough,
Were frozen fast
Each slough and mough.

It made her hiccough--
Worse than a sticcough.
She drank hot cocoa
For an instant piccough.

HOP UP TO KANGAROO WORDS

Being a marsupial, a mother kangaroo carries her young in her pouch. Kangaroo words do the same thing: Within their letters they conceal a smaller version of themselves--a joey, which is the name of a

kangaroo's offspring. The joey must be the same part of speech as the mother kangaroo, and its letters must appear in order. The special challenge of kangaroo words is that the joey must be a synonym; it must mean the same as the fully grown word. A plagiarist is a kind of liar. On the job, your supervisor is your superior, one of the largest joeys in captivating captivity.

In the May 1996 issue of Word Ways, I explored kangaroo words; now I have the chance to take my investigation further.

Prepare to be hopping glad as onto the Kickshaws stage bounds an outbreak of Outback--a troupe of cute-faced, tall-tailed, ab-original, deep-pocketed kangaroos.

Ab-Original Words

Hop right up to those kangaroo words,
Slyly concealing whiz-bangaroo words,
Accurate synonyms, cute and acute,
Hidden diminutive words, so minute.

Lurking inside of myself you'll find me.
Just as inside of himself you'll find he.
Feel your mind blossom; feel your mind bloom:
Inside a catacomb's buried a tomb.

Kangaroo words are precocious and precious
Flourishing, lush words that truly refresh us.
We're nourished; they nurse, elevate and elate us.
We're so satisfied when their synonyms sate us.

Kangaroo and joeys astound us and stun.
They're so darned secure that we're sure to have fun!
With charisma and charm, they're a letter-play wonder.
They dazzle and daze us with pleasure down under.

In my article, I identified two supreme multi-generational kangaroo words, in which a kangaroo give birth to a joey that, in turn, yields another joey.

expurgated
purged
pure

frangible
fragile
frail

Now I offer a third:

disclosure
clue
cue

OPINIONATED KANGAROOS

Some kangaroos carry multiple words that form an expression closely related to the parent word. Chocolate is an ingredient in hot cocoa.

When Moses separated the water, he parted the Red Sea. A government rules over men. It is but a short leap to make kangaroo-watching an exercise in social satire and editorial opinionizing:

*Investigative reporters often instigate negative results.

*Is the Internal Revenue Service fraught with inner vice?

*These days, politicians make us want to throw pots and pans at them. That's because political promises reveal themselves to be a piles of lies and pap -- merely poll prose and poll poses.

*To Democrats, Republicans are relics--mere replicas of nineteenth-century conservatism.

*People who attend a Democrat picnic make Republicans exclaim, "Drat! Demonic!"

*If you're seeking discordance, just go to a disco dance.

*Is carjacking on the increase because of crack?

*America's youth has got to be persuaded that school is cool.

*The Internet produces many an intent but inert hacker.

*It's an act of compromising when one ends up composing today's popular music and lyrics.

*A prosperous financier is likely to have a more proper and fancier fiance than we do. That's because people who are affluent with a fortune are bound to have fun, fun.

*Tensions in the Middle East have caused many a Semite to smite another.

*Inside the head of many a wacko are visions of Waco.

*The world has watched Prince Charles pay the price of being heir to one of the world's most famous thrones and go through the throes of a very public divorce.

*In the expectorations of Pavlov's dogs were great expectations. Indeed, the salivation of those dogs became the salvation of experimental psychology.

*If imperialism is a peril, is democracy in decay?

*How do we know that Russia is experiencing difficulty with its economy?

Because the ruble is in trouble.

CHARADES IN EVERYDAY LIFE

Many a pun and riddle raids the concept of charade words.

*When is a door not a door? When it's ajar (a jar).

*Don't assume because it makes an ass out of you and me.

*What's the cost of earrings for pirates?

A buck an ear.

*What did the acorn exclaim when it grew up?

"Gee, I'm a tree!"

*I scream for ice cream.

*Why is O the only vowel we hear?

Because the rest are inaudible (in audible).

*Fire is the forest's prime evil.

*"Triumph is simply umph added to try."

*What do you call two people who each have a Ph.D.?

A paradox.

*What's the difference between a one-winged angel and a two-winged angel?

It's a matter of a pinion.

*The word *politics* formed from *poly*, which means "many" (as in *polygon*, *polyglot*, *polytheism*, and *polygamy*), and *tics*, which are blood-sucking parasites.

*An angry insect is a cross tic.

*What's the difference between a weatherman and a corpulent bladder expert?

One is a meteorologist; the other is a meaty urologist.

*I tried to impress my boyfriend with my puns, but not one pun in ten did."

*In *The Word Circus*, all the letter play is in tents.

TRIPLE PLAY

Can you marshall any other word than marshall that can be charaded in three ways?:

MAR SHALL

MARS HALL

MARSH ALL

MEANINGFUL CHARADES

The most magical mystical charade words are those that fly open to yield other words that retain their spelling exactly and are related to the mother word:

- *Many a new adage comes to us in an AD AGE.
- *Alienation characterizes A LIE NATION.
- *We atone to be AT ONE with the universe.
- *Poetry lovers are never averse to A VERSE.
- *We try to avoid A VOID in our lives.
- *Barflies live in an atmosphere of BARF, LIES.
- *A barrage of beer bottles often accompanies a BAR RAGE.
- *On a beanstalk, do the BEANS TALK?
- *Your adventures in brokerage could send you into a BROKE RAGE.
- *When a metropolis is filled to capacity, it's time to CAP A CITY.
- *A caravan often includes A CAR, A VAN.
- *A conspiracy is a CONS' PIRACY.
- *A cutlass can CUT LASS and lad.
- *A daredevil DARED EVIL.
- *Nations try diplomatically to acquire a DIPLOMATIC ALLY.
- *A generation is a GENE RATION.
- *To be gentlemanly is to be GENTLE, yet MANLY.
- *Just as after a gunshot, the GUN'S HOT, being within earshot of gossip about you will make your EARS HOT.
- *The Heisman trophy could be renamed the HE IS MAN trophy (or the IS HE MAN trophy).
- *When we study history, we say, "HI, STORY!"
- *If you initiate a trip to a restaurant, soon after you might exclaim, "IN IT I ATE!"
- *Our identity is our I.D. ENTITY.
- *Someone who is irate about being neglected might shout, "I RATE!"
- *An island IS LAND.
- *An incompetent mendicant might exclaim, "MEND? I CAN'T!"
- *A novice is more likely than a veteran to have NO VICE.
- *An onus is ON US.
- *When governments overtax, they use an OVERT AX on our wallets.
- *Gail Sheehy's book Passages studies how we PASS AGES.
- *Pungent wit makes a PUN GENT.
- *A soap opera makes us sigh, "SO, A POP ERA."
- *An equestrian will reinforce a horse's good habits by applying the proper REIN FORCE.
- *Our hard-earned money is theirs because they are THE IRS.
- *One might call out to yeoman, "YE, O MEN."

EXOTIC BEHEADMENTS

A number of beheadments of a single letter generate no essential loss of meaning. Often the discarded letter is s, which seems to act as a kind of intensifier:

s/elect	s/mash	s/pike	s/quash -
s/lather	s/melt	s/plash	s/tumble

Beheadments of letters other than s also result in synonyms:

a/live	b/rash	l/edge
a/massing	b/rim	p/rattle
a/rouse	c/lump	p/reserve
a/shame	e/specially	r/amble
a/vow/vow	g/rumble	r/oust

Alone and upraise can be doubly beheaded and still retain its essential meaning:

alone	lone	one
upraise	praise	praise

Some beheadments produce the opposite of their basewords:

b/onus	n/either	p/review	t/here
l/awful	n/ever	s/he	y/ours

With a few rare beheadments, it is possible to double the number of syllables when a letter is lopped off from the front. The basewords tend to end in -ed, as in:

d/ragged	d/rugged	p/aged	s/naked	t/winged
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Identify one baseword that does not wag an -ed tail but still doubles its syllables when it becomes headless.

OFF WITH THEIR HEADS!

The prelate did relate a tale
 Meant to elate both you and me.
 We stayed up late and ate our meal,
 "Te Deum" in key of e.

By removing an initial letter, then a second initial letter, list the words that correspond to the following synonyms? For example, the clue "yell(6), best part, measure" yields scream/cream/ream. The parenthesized numbers indicate the length of each baseword.

1. tendency (5) , tear apart, conclude
2. frown angrily (5), monk's hood, bird

3. rubbish (5), foolhardy, residue trash
4. tiny seed (5), skin opening, raw mineral, in reference to
5. use or deplete (5), in abeyance, finish
6. gulp down (7), slop around, permit, close to ground, exclamation of pain
7. brave (5), pester, away
8. location (5), fabric, expert
9. unchanging (5), furniture, competent
10. slant (5), frisk, song, yes
11. sermonize (6), range, every
12. basket (5), spool, fish
13. backsliding (6), pass, mistake, part of a church
14. placed (6), dragged, indebted, married
15. oriental (7), behind, severe, bird
16. spite (6), Carroll's heroine, insects, frozen water
17. woman (5), first man, barrier, is
18. increasing (7), propelling, in debt, pinion
19. defraud (5), warmth, consume, preposition
20. females (5), portent, males

OFF WITH THEIR TAILS!

Among the most fascinating of curtailments are those involving the removal of a terminal S:

bras/s	cares/s	discus/s	his/s	needles/s
bugles/s	deadlines/s	handles/s	I/s	posses/s

With the loss of the terminal S, words such as princess and ogress turn into the plural of their male counterparts--princes and ogres.

How many words can you identify that gain a syllable when curtailed?

HEADS AND TAILS

Combining beheadment and curtailment can produce intriguing results, as you'll find when you solve this riddle:

I am an odd figure.
 Behead me: I'm even.
 Curtail me: I'm twilight
 And maiden in Eden.

Is there any other word like eclipse? Behead and curtail simultaneously and you get clips, which sounds like the original word minus a syllable. Keep on beheading and curtailing simultaneously, and you produce:

ECLIPSE
 CLIPS
 LIP
 I

ULTIMATE DELETIONS

In queue, we can curtail the last four letters and still retain the original pronunciation. In what word can we can behead the first four letters and still pronounce the word the same?

FIRST ADDITIONS

The opposite of a beheadment and curtailment is the adding of a letter to the front or back of a base word. In a few instances, a one-syllable word can triple the total of its syllables:

1. Add the letter A to the beginning of a four-letter word that means "a charge upon a debt" to create a three-syllable word.

2. Add the letter A to the end of a three-letter word that means "exist" to make it three syllables.

3. Add the letter O to the end of a four-letter word that means "arrived" to make it three syllables.

4. Add the letter I after the first letter of a five-letter word that means "grin" to make it a three-syllable word.

LETTER SUBSTITUTIONS

The only four-letter word that can yield thirteen different words by adding a letter at the front (if we count qu- as a single unit) is *ills*--*bills, dills, fills, gills, hills kills, mills, pills, quills, rills, sills, tills, and wills*. *Ears* generates twelve different words by adding an initial letter--*bears, dears, fears, gears, hears, nears, pears, rears, sears, tears, wears, and years*. For a dozen variations on a six-letter word, look to *ailing* (again counting qu- as a single unit)--*bailing, failing, hailing, jailing, mailing, nailing, pailing, quailing, railing, sailing, tailing, and wailing*.

Two two-letter words--*at* and *ad*--can generate thirteen different words when one letter is added at the start--*at: bat, cat, eat, fat, gat, hat, mat, oat, pat rat, sat, tat, and vat* and (again with qu- as a single unit) *ad: bad, cad, dad, fad, gad, had, lad, mad. pad, quad, sad, tad, and wad*.

VOWEL MOVEMENTS

Now let's have a vowel movement in order to change one word into another:

A flea and a fly in a flue
 Were imprisoned, so what could they do?
 Said the flea, "Let us fly."
 Said the fly, "Let us flee."
 So they flew to a flaw in the flue.

This compact gimerick about the flea and the fly suggests a challenge: How many words can we turn into other words using each of the five major vowels? *Flay/flee/fly/flow/flew* do it phonetically, but not orthographically.

Lest you think this is just a bunch of pap, let's start with *pap* itself. Not only is *pap* a palindrome, but it can transmogrify into seven different words by changing the internal vowel--*pap, peep, pep, pip, poop, pop,* and *pup* (to which we may add--phonetically, if not palindromically--*pipe*). Is it mere coincidence, then, that a *pap* ornaments a *mam, mom,* or *mum*?

Here's an array of other one-syllable words run the gamut of each major vowel:

bad	bed	bid	bod	bud
bag	beg	big	bog	bug
ball	bell	bill	boll	bull
band	bend	bind	bond	bund
last	lest	list	lost	lust
mad	med	mid	mod	mud
mash	mesh	mish	mosh	mush
mass	mess	miss	moss	muss
mate	mete	mite	mote	mute
pack	peck	pick	pock	puck
pall	pell(mell)	pill	poll	pull
pat	pet	pit	pot	put
tan	ten	tin	ton	tun

Now move up a syllable and listen to the jangle of a nursery jingle:

Betty Botter bought some butter,
 "But," she said, "the butter's bitter.
 If I put it in my batter,
 It will make my batter bitter.
 But a bit of better butter
 Is sure to make my batter better."

So she bought a bit of butter
 Better than her bitter butter.
 Then she put it in her batter,
 And the batter was not bitter.
 So 'twas better Betty Botter
 Bought a bit of better butter.

Botter, of course, is not a word, but the rhyme presents the challenge of finding a two-syllable word that can integrate all five major vowels, one at a time. Three sequences fill the bill:

blander	blender	blinder	blonder	blunder
patted	petted	pitted	potted	putted
patter	petter	pitter-patter	potter	putter
patting	petting	pitting	potting	putting