

## SEVENTEEN SYNONYMS OF SEMORDNILAP

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One finds in the published literature on palindromes and their ilk an odd disparity: whereas there is presently only one name of any significance in the language for a palindrome, there exists a bewildering plethora of names for the palindrome's sibling, the word (or words) which forms a different word (or words) when read in reverse, an item hereinafter referred to generically as a half-palindrome, to select a neutral term. Even among the current majority of those who favor some form of the word REVERSAL, there is an apparent lack of consensus as to whether that word alone is sufficient, or whether some more qualified term such as WORD REVERSAL, REVERSAL PAIR, REVERSAL SENTENCE, etc., is required. Moreover, few of the writers who discuss the half-palindrome appear to be aware of the existence of most of its alternative names; communication on this point seems to have been unusually poor. This latter observation suggested the present project, which is simply to try to assemble in one place as many as possible of the various published names which have ever been used in English to designate a half-palindrome. To my knowledge, this has not been done before in any comprehensive way.

Some authorities state that the original meaning of the word ANAGRAM was confined to that of a word formed by the reading of the letters of another word backwards; and indeed, according to O. V. Michaelsen in his 1997 book *Words at Play*, that is the first or "most exact" meaning given by some standard reference works even as late as the mid-twentieth century. Evidently these two competing understandings of the word coexisted in the language (perhaps one in scholarly and the other in popular use) for several hundred years before the broader sense eventually prevailed.

In what may have been the first modern attempt to give a specific name to the half-palindrome, the English puzzlemaster Henry E. Dudeney, reports Michaelsen, used the term ANTIGRAM (a word now having a completely different wordplay meaning) in a 1929 newspaper column. Michaelsen further identifies REVERSION and INVERSION as two common names for the half-palindrome in previous decades, adding that in recent times WORD REVERSAL is the term most favored by word-puzzlers and logologists.

If so, that preference is by no means a universal one. The word SEMORDNILAP, apparently first mentioned in the 1961 Dover reprint of Bombaugh's *Oddities and Curiosities of Words and Literature*, gained considerable prominence in the 1960s and 1970s, and still seems to have

a significant following. (This word has been erroneously said to appear in Lewis Carroll's *Sylvie and Bruno*.) Apart from this camp, other dissenters have been such writers as Joseph T. Shipley, who in his 1972 book *Word Play* referred to half-palindromes as both REVERSIBLES and REVERSAGRAMS; Steven Chism, who in his 1992 book *From A to Zotamor* embraced the word PALINODE; and Peter Newby, who in a February 1996 *Word Ways* article proposed the word DROW as a superior alternative to SEMORDNILAP. Michael Donner, although endorsing the term REVERSAL in his 1996 palindrome encyclopedia *I Love Me, Vol. I*, differs from Michaelsen in his choice of modifying words, specifying REVERSAL PAIR and REVERSAL SENTENCE for one-word and sentence-length half-palindromes.

Reference works of the present day tend to call half-palindromes REVERSALS if they notice them at all, but a few do contribute some novel names to the menagerie. The *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) advises that one name for the half-palindrome is RETRONYM, although that word is not to be found in the OED or other major dictionaries. (It has lately been recoined in another wordplay role.) The *Encyclopedia Americana*, meanwhile, which earlier in the century had been one of the authorities to insist that half-palindromes were properly termed anagrams, has in recent editions thrown its considerable weight behind the term RECURRENT PALINDROME. And not to be overlooked is the little-used word ANANYM, which dates to the nineteenth century and which is defined by general dictionaries that list it as a pseudonym created by the reversal of a person's name. However, three specialized dictionaries, Joseph T. Shipley's *Dictionary of World Literary Terms* (1970), J. A. Cuddon's *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (1991), and David Crystal's *Dictionary of Language and Languages* (1992), either state or imply (by the example cited) that any reversed word may be called an anonym.

Then there is Harry Edwin Eiss' 1986 lexicon of wordplay, the *Dictionary of Language Games, Puzzles and Amusements*. This compendium lists three alternative names for the half-palindrome: SEMORDNILAP, REVERSAGRAM and Eiss' own first preference, REVERSIBLE ANAGRAM. In addition, Eiss identifies the SOTADIC PALINDROME (see note 1) as "a reversible anagram where the reversed words also present a moral injunction," giving as an example the half-palindrome "Deliver no evil [Live on reviled]." While moral injunctions are no doubt interesting, a definition of greater logological utility might be that a sotadic palindrome is any multiword half-palindrome which forms one or more complete sentences in both directions.

Lastly, the term HALF-PALINDROME itself, having now been published, seems to meet the criteria for membership in the club. Based on an inevitably incomplete search of the literature, I recapitulate the 18 names I know of for this nomenclatural lodestone of logology (see note 2): anagram, anonym, antigram, drow, half-palindrome, inversion, palinode, recurrent palindrome, retronym, reversagram, reversal, reversal

pair/sentence, reversible, reversible anagram, reversion, semordnilap, sotadic palindrome, word reversal.

Has any other element of wordplay ever managed to inspire so many different synonyms?

Note 1: So named for Sotades of Maronea, a third-century B.C. Alexandrian Greek who is often celebrated as history's first identifiable palindromist. Alas, no authentic palindromical writings of Sotades survive, and in fact it may not even be possible to reliably infer from historical sources that he ever published so much as one complete palindrome. It seems certain, however, that Sotades was responsible for penning a number of notoriously coarse and ribald half-palindromes which, while more or less innocuous when read normally, disclosed scurrilous, obscene and/or seditious comments when read in reverse. A tamer example of the genre might have gone something like:

Let a rare-lifed god deliver a reward to--oh, ay!--aloof Midas, eh?"  
[He's a dim fool--ay, a hoot-drawer, a reviled dog-defiler, a ratel!]

Legend has it that such diversions eventually landed Sotades in cold water; be that as it may, he is undoubtedly a most fitting eponym for the sotadic palindrome, however that is defined.

Note 2: And by what name, in the end, should the half-palindrome properly be known? Given its close familial relationship to the palindrome, the best answer might well be HETERODROME.

NEVER LET A FOOL KISS YOU OR A KISS FOOL YOU

This is the title of a 1999 hardcover book (ISBN 0-670-87827-8) compiled by Mardy Grothe and published for \$17.95 by Viking. Chiasmus, a rhetorical device defined as a reversal in the order of words in two otherwise-parallel phrases, seems an unlikely topic for a full-length book--but who would have predicted the popularity of oxymorons? This 126-page book contains at least 500 such phrases, drawn from many sources. Be warned: it is best to read this book in small bites to avoid literary indigestion!

Certain aphorisms (bon mots) can be termed Implied Chiasmus. These involve the reversal of words in a well-known phrase to produce a novel effect. It is unnecessary to quote the original:

Work is the curse of the drinking class  
Time wounds all heels  
A hangover is the wrath of grapes  
Track meet officials: the souls that time men's tries