In his August 1977 Word Ways article on words ending in -onym, George Scheetz asked readers if they could identify contronym or charactonym, neither of which appears in standard dictionaries. The former word was apparently coined by Jack Herring, who defined it as a word which can be used in two contradictory senses. In an article in the February 1962 issue of Merriam-Webster’s now-defunct magazine, Word Study, he proposed four examples:

- **FAST**
  1. firmly fixed; stable; unyielding
  2. moving or able to move rapidly

- **SCAN**
  1. to examine point by point; scrutinize
  2. to look over hastily (Colloq.)

- **PHENOMENON**
  1. any observable fact or event
  2. an exceptional or abnormal person, thing, or occurrence

- **CLEAVE**
  1. to adhere closely; to stick; clinging
  2. to part, divide; to split; crack; separate

The idea was independently developed by Joseph Shipley in his 1960 book *Playing With Words* (he called it autantonym), and has occasionally been explored in earlier issues of *Word Ways*, first by Dave Silvertan in the May and August 1969 *Kickshaws*, and later by Tom Pulliam in "Merry Am Webster" in February 1976.

Contronyms are closely related to Jezebel Q. Xixx’s "Strange Paradoxes" featured in the February 1977 and later issues (you down Seven-Up; you chop down a tree and then chop it up), as well as to evolutionary changes in word meaning that yield startling results (see Silverman’s history of stink in May 1970, or Dennis Welch’s "Way/Word: Etymological Deviance," August 1976, for more examples).

In like vein, Harry Hazard notes that cavalier and chivalrous, cognate and at one time similar in meaning, seem destined to become antonyms.

In their book *30 Days to a More Powerful Vocabulary*, Wilfred Funt and Norman Lewis relate the etymological tale of King George the First and Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of Saint Paul’s Cathedral in London: "Upon completion of the masterly edifice, the king told Wren that his work was 'amusing, awful, and artificial'. Sir Christopher was delighted with the royal compliment, inasmuch as three hundred years ago amusing meant amazing, awful meant awe-inspiring, and artificial meant artistic."
That was three centuries ago. Today, the older, flattering meanings of amusing, awful and artificial have virtually disappeared from popular use. Indeed, the general rule is that, when a single word develops two diametrically opposed denotations, one will tend to become obsolete. Occasionally, though, two contradictory meanings survive for a single word -- the contronyms of Jack Herring.

Here are some of my favorite contronyms which (except for overlook) I believe have not previously appeared in Word Ways:

OVERLOOK (1) to look over or through; inspect (2) to pass over; ignore (recall "I'm looking over / A four-leaf clover / That I overlooked before")

WEAR (1) to endure use; last under use (2) to diminish or decay through use (hence, the two statements "I want a cloth that will wear" and "I want a cloth that will not wear" can mean exactly the same thing)

DISTRACT (1) to provide amusement (2) to confuse; disrupt

TERRIFIC (1) very bad; awful, frightful (2) unusually fine or gratifying (similarly, TERRIBLE, TERRIBLY, producing the ambiguous statement "The President's staff is terribly organized")

KEEP UP (1) to stay up (2) to continue ("I hope the rain keeps up -- so it won't come down")

UNBENDING (1) not bending; unyielding (2) given to relaxation ("Smith is so unbending; he just won't unbend")

DUST (1) to make dusty (2) to make free of dust

HANDICAP (1) an advantage, as in golf (2) a disadvantage

TEMPER (1) to soften (2) to make stronger; toughen

MORTAL (1) deadly (2) subject to death

WIND UP (1) to bring to a conclusion; end (2) to start, as to wind up a watch

Indeed, for many contronyms were an effort to elude the task of dictionary-making in a quarter-century before the Oxford English Dictionary was published. He certainly had the early years of contronyms before his time.

One can only marvel at the years which, while we have only in recent time looked upon their significance at the same time we have come to realize much to history which was not at all obvious to people with a more obvious vision.

Move for the first time, for it...