A CASE OF MISTAKEN ANTONYMY

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Antonyms are two words that are opposed on a dimension of denotative meaning. Unlike the concept of synonymity, which dates back to Aristotle, the concept of antonymy is of recent origin -- the Webster's New Dictionary of Synonyms dates the first use of the term to 1867. Since the term was coined, people have accepted the concept and have felt quite capable of recognizing or generating antonyms. However, little thought has been given to opposites which resemble antonymy but are clearly not antonyms. These words, called pseudoantonyms, appear to be antonyms at first glance but closer inspection shows that they are not. For example, 'popular/shy' appear initially to be antonyms; in fact they are not opposed in the required manner. 'Popular' is opposed to 'unpopular' and 'shy' is opposed to 'bold'. 'Popular' seems to be opposed to 'shy' because 'shy' is a connotative or associated property of 'unpopular'. When we ask people whether words are antonymous, they readily identify 'popular/unpopular' as antonymous and 'popular/famous' as not antonymous. In contrast, when presented with 'popular/shy', people generally have considerable difficulty in making their judgement and occasionally conclude the pair is antonymous.

To illustrate how easy it is to mistakenly perceive pseudoantonym pairs as antonymous, we invite you to take a pseudoantonym quiz. The list below contains pairs of antonyms, pseudoantonyms and synonyms in random order. Read through the list and identify which pairs are pseudoantonyms. You will find that the pseudoantonyms engage your thought longer than antonyms or synonyms. We also believe that if you classify a pseudoantonym as an antonym, additional consideration of the pair will lead you to agree it is a pseudoantonym after all.

absent/present	alive/dead	gifted/poor
clear/foggy	naked/nude	hit/miss
loud/noisy	rapid/swift	dirty/clean
hot/cold	strong/diseased	empty/complete
foolish/skilled	large/big	close/near
slim/trim	nice/ugly	wet/dry
absolute/relative	sick/ill	guilty/innocent
believe/deny	soft/rough	right/bad

Answers can be found in Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue.