

ENGLISH WORDS SPELLED THE SAME BUT PRONOUNCED DIFFERENTLY (also known as homographs or heteronyms)

by James F Carley, PhD

For many years I have collected about 100 such words.

There are at least two types of homographs. Most frequently encountered are Type 1, in which words of closely related meanings perform as different parts of speech when pronounced differently. In one of Marilyn vos Savant's columns ("Ask Marilyn", *Parade* magazine, some time in year 2000), she printed a letter from Gerald Bryson, of Basking Ridge, NJ, asking: "What do the following words have in common: console, produce, project, rebel, reject?" Marilyn replied:

"When pronounced with the accent on the first syllable, the words are nouns. But when pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, the words are verbs. This is a common principle in the English language, and knowledge of the pattern can aid us in pronouncing other words correctly, too. For example, when we want to use the verb "contest" in a statement that conveys a meaning similar to "I want to argue the point," we must accent the second syllable and say "I want to contest that point." If we mistakenly accent the first syllable instead, the word becomes a noun, as in the statement, "I won a contest." This is an important distinction—one that often signifies the difference between an educated speaker and an uneducated one."

As usual, Marilyn was correct in what she said. Her example, "contest", is one for which the different meanings are very closely related. The same is true for four of Mr. Bryson's examples, but *not* of the first one, "console". The verb and noun may have a common etymological root but their current meanings are unrelated. Those homographs that are very close in their meanings are often those in which one part of speech has evolved (e.g., the noun, *defense*—some grammarians would say misused) into the other; and later, the necessity to distinguish the two rather different word uses led to the different pronunciations. Note that the two parts of speech are not always noun and verb, nor are the pronunciations always a difference of emphasis alone. In a number of instances, the letter "s" changes from voiceless to voiced. I classify all these as Type 1 homographs. Type 1s I've collected are listed below.

absent, abstract, abuse, annex, appropriate, arithmetic, attribute, bases, close, closer, combine, commune, compress, conflict, console, consort, consummate, content, contest, convert, defect, deliberate, do, drawer, estimate, exploit, expose[†], forte[†], frequent, graduate, intimate, learned, live, multiply, object, patent, perfect, permit, prayer, predicate, present, primer, produce, project, read*, rebel, recess, record, recreation, refuse*, reject, reserve, resign, resort, subject, suspect, use[†], used[†].

The two starred words, 'read' and 'refuse', are special cases. 'Read' is both the present tense and past tense (and past participle) of the verb, pronounced differently. The noun and the main sense of the verb 'refuse' have the usual close relationship, but the verb refuse (= fuse again) can also have the unrelated meanings of remelt or reinstall a fuse into an electrical device or circuit. Both 'use' and 'used' have different meanings when the 's' is voiceless or voiced. 'Expose' and 'forte' are slight cheaters since the second forms are properly (but often not) printed 'exposé' and 'forté'. Note: I did not list "**research**", which is used as a noun, adjective and verb, because I have heard it pronounced in two ways, "ree-surch" and "ru-surch" in all three applications. Professionals doing research mostly emphasize the second syllable; lay persons, the first.

Personally, I take greater delight in the Type 2 homographs, for which the term *heteronyms* may be more apt. The meanings of these pairs are unrelated or remotely related, though the *OED* and *Webster's New International Dictionary* (second edition) find common etymology for some of them, e.g., **bow**. Those I've collected over many years are listed below.

ablative, arete*, **axes, bass, bow, buffet, coax, console, converse, coop, denier, descent, desert, dingy, do, does, dove, entrance, glower, incense, inter, invalid, lead, lied, lineage, mead, micrometer, minute, moped, mow, muse, nonanal, number, pate***, **polish, poll, putter, putting, resent†, reserve†, resign†, resolve†, resort†, resume***, **routing, row, sewer, shower, sow, special, stingy, tarry, tear, tinged, tower, unionized, windy, wound.**

'**Reserve**', with the letter 's' voiced, is a Type 1 homograph. However, it is also a Type 2 with the 's' unvoiced, meaning : to serve again.

The second meanings of **coax** and **coop**, both two syllables, are shortened forms of 'coaxial' (adjective) and 'cooperative' (noun) that have pretty much replaced their longer forerunners in daily usage. **Coax** (2) has also become a noun meaning 'coaxial cable'.

The second meanings of the words marked with (*) properly require the final 'e' to be accented 'é'.

My personal favorites are, in order of rising ticklement, are:

1. sewer: Pronounced **soo**-er, it's a channel for the carrying away of liquid wastes. But as **soh**-er, it's a person who works with needle and thread or a sewing machine, or even the machine itself.

2. micrometer. Pronounced my-**krahm**-eter, it's an instrument for the precise measurement of (usually short) linear dimensions. But pronounced **my**-croh-**meet**-er, it's the international length unit equal to one millionth of a meter.

3. moped. Pronounced as one syllable, **mohpd**, it's the past tense (and participle) of the verb mope. But pronounced **moh**-ped, with equal emphasis on both syllables, it's a small-wheeled motorized bicycle, a motor scooter that can also be propelled by pedaling.

4. denier. Pronounced de-**ny**-er, it is a person who has denied a fact or statement of his own presumed guilt. Pronounced **den**-yay, with slightly more emphasis [in the U S] on the first syllable, it is a measure of the lineal density of a fiber or filament.

5. descent. Pronounced du-**sent**, it's a going down or decline. Pronounced **dee**-sent, with only slightly more emphasis on the second syllable, it means to deodorize, as in removing the scent gland of a pet baby skunk.

6. nonanal. Pronounced **non**-ain-ul, it means not relating to or preoccupied with the human anus. Pronounced **noh**-na-**nahl** or **noh**-na **nal**, it is a straight-chain aldehyde containing nine carbon atoms (usually the 1-monoaldehyde of nonane).

7. unionized. A word that describes workers who formerly worked without a union and now have formed or joined one. But, so very different to a chemist (even if unionized!), if it's pronounced un-**eye**-on-ized, meaning not dissociated into ions.

I was very recently directed to a magnificent scholarly collection by Prof. James B. Hobbs, *Homophones & Homographs*, fourth edition, published by McFarland & Company in 2006. I heartily recommend this book to anyone interested in these matters. Despite the exhaustive, thrice repeated searching by Dr. Hobbs (alas, now deceased), some 25 of the homographs listed here by this humble amateur and former editor, were not presented in *Homophones & Homographs*. Others may yet be found by eager logologists of the marvelous English language!

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