

Homographs and Pseudo-Homographs

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Homographs, not to be confused with homonyms, are words which happen to be spelled identically but which have totally different meanings and etymologies. In addition to spelling, most homographic words share the same pronunciation. And so great is the spread of meanings—through association, figurative uses, and other influences—that many other words in English could be labeled *pseudo-homographs*: words with such widely disparate meanings that one would suppose them to come from entirely different sources, as the authentic homographs do. For reasons to be explained later on, the compiler of this study has found it useful to establish still another category, *quasi-homographs*, for certain words derived from different sources which turn out to be closely associated by accident or to be, etymologically speaking, kissing cousins.

Let it be confessed that this investigation began entirely by accident, out of idle curiosity. It has turned out to be a much larger, more complex, more fruitful inquiry than expected. I had once jotted down such homographs as *entrance* (noun and verb), *arch* (noun and adjective), *swallow* (verb and noun) and a few others. And I had assumed that by a diligent search one might find as many as 35 or 40 such words in English. Then I mentioned this modest project to some friends and colleagues at Long Beach (Calif.) City College. In no time at all, I found myself literally overwhelmed by list upon list of potentially homographic words.¹

A few more definitions may be helpful here before we plunge into the lexical maze of homographs, pseudo-homographs, and related curiosa:

Homonyms—words with the same sound but with different spelling, meanings, and derivation. Examples would be *bare—bear*, *boar—bore*, *choir—quire*, *team—teem*, etc. Some dictionaries and handbooks confuse *homonyms* (pronounced alike) with *homographs* (spelled alike).

Homophones—different letters or groups of letters having the same sound (*k* and the hard *c*, *uff* and *uph*, etc.). Applied to whole words, the term *homophones* is equivalent to *homonyms*.

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Heteronyms—a relatively rare term designating words with the same spelling but different pronunciations, meanings, and derivations. In other words, heteronyms are non-homophonic homographs. Examples: *lead* (the verb) and *lead* (the metal); *buffet* (to bang about) and *buffet* (sideboard, refreshment counter); *gill* (the unit of measure) and *gill* (breathing organ of a fish).

Doublets—pairs of words derived from the same source but differing somewhat in spelling, pronunciation, and/or meaning. Examples: *kirk* and *church*, *guard* and *ward*, *skirt* and *shirt*.

Cognates—words in two or more different languages which may be traced to the same original source. Examples are such words as *father* (English), *vater* (German), and *pater* (Latin), all from a common Indo-European root.

It seems reasonable to assume that many of the genuine, pseudo- and quasi-homographs in modern English have been affected by one or more of the following processes: (1) derivation from words which themselves are homographs in the parent language; (2) influence upon spelling, pronunciation, and/or meanings of certain words through association with (or confusion with) homonyms or doublets in the parent language; and (3) the derivation of many closely-related English words from cognates in various languages. Process #1, for example, would explain why the adjective *fast*, which the lexicographers trace to Anglo-Saxon *faest*, has such diametrically opposed meanings as "fixed, firmly rooted" and "swift, moving rapidly." As a logophile who does not pretend to be a qualified philologist, I offer this particular set of conjectures to the experts for further investigation.

I: Homographs

And now for a close look at a number of English homographs. Some will be explored in detail in the section immediately following, and others will simply be listed. For the convenience of those who may wish to look up the etymologies in full, each group of words is presented in alphabetical order.

ARCH: The noun *arch* (a structural member) is not derived from *architecture*. It comes instead from Old French *arche*, an arcade. The adjective *arch* comes from the Greek prefix *archi* (chief, eminent). Linguistically, an architect is not a builder of arches but a chief artificer or master builder. The adjectival *arch* (sly, coy, cunning) seems to have acquired its meaning through association with such terms as arch rogue and arch-wag.

BAIL: Of four separate listings in an unabridged dictionary, three of these are not true homographs. The four are as follows: (1) n., a bond or surety and v., to release "on bail"; (2) n., a bucket or pail and v., to remove water from; (3) n., a hoop-shaped support or handle; (4) n., outer wall of a castle, palisade. Meanings (1), (2), and (4) all seem to be derived, ultimately, from L. *bajulare* (to bear a burden) via *bajulus* (porter, carrier) or *bajula* (a vessel, container).

BALE: (1) evil, woe; (2) fire, as in *balefire* (funeral pyre); (3) bundle; (4) n. and v., doublet of *bail* (bucket).

BAND: (1) n., strip or ribbon and v., to fasten; (2) n., troupe or group and v., to gather, unite (from Gothic *bandwa*, a sign). Band (1) is related to *bond*, *bind*, *bandage*, and *bandy*.

BANK: (1) n. and v., establishment for or act of storing or exchanging money, etc.; (2) n. and v., a row or tier; (3) n. and v., as in a river bank, cushion of a billiard table, etc. Both (1) and (2) are related to *bench*. Bank (1), the financial establishment, was originally a money-changer's bench.

BEAR: (1) the animal; (2) to endure, carry; (3) barley; (4) pillowcase

BILL: (1) bird's bill, bill of a cap, etc.; (2) pike, pickaxe (from AS *bill*, sword); (3) statement, document, letter (from ML *billā* an alteration of *bullā*). See **BULL**.

BUCK: One unabridged dictionary has 12 separate entries for *buck*. Counting all the technical and obsolete meanings, there are six or seven distinct homographs involved here.

BULL: (1) the animal and related n. and v. meanings; (2) seal affixed to a document, especially one from the Pope, and hence an official document or decree from the Pope; (3) a lie, brag, or absurd and illogical statement (as in "Irish bull"). *Note:* Meanings (2) and (3) derive respectively from L. *bullā* (knob or seal) and, by way of OF *boule*, from L. *bulla* (bubble)—possibly an example of homographs in Latin. Bull (2) is related to bill (3), above.

CASE: (1) example, instance, legal action, etc.; (2) container, from L. *capsa* (box, chest) and hence related to *capsule* and to *chase* (3).

CHASE: (1) n. and v., pursuit and to pursue; (2) v.t., to ornament, inset with gems; (3) a type form (printing), groove or furrow, bore of cannon.

CLEAVE: (1) v.i., to cling, adhere, etc.; (2) v.t., to divide, split, cut.

COCK: (1) male fowl, and related meanings; (2) v.i., to strut or swagger, or to turn up (as to cock an eye or an ear)—probably related to (1); (3) v.t., to set the hammer of a firearm—possibly related to (2); (4) n., a shut-off valve in a water or gas pipe; (5) pile of hay, etc. (from Dan. *kok*); (6), n., a cockboat (from OF *coque*).

COW: (1) bovine animal; (2) to daunt, intimidate, browbeat. See *coward*, under "Curiosa."

DRILL: (1) v. and n., to make a hole, a tool for drilling; (2) kind of cloth, from G. *drillich*, from L. *trilix* (having three threads). Drill (1) is related to *through*, *thrill*, and *nostril*.

FAN: (1) a devotee (probably from *fanatic*); (2) n. and v., all other meanings (from AS *fann*, from L. *vannus*, basket for winnowing grain). Fan (2) is related to *wind* and *winnow*.

FLAW: (1) faulty part, defect, blemish; (2) gust of wind, burst of stormy weather (akin to ON *flaga*, gust).

HOST: (1) n., cap., the Eucharist (ult. from L. *hostia*, sacrifice or victim); (2) landlord, one who receives or entertains, or (biology) harboring a microorganism or parasite; (3) army, multitude, great number. *Note:* Host (2) is derived from L. *hospes* (stranger, guest, host) and is related through L. *hostis* and possibly IE *ghosti-* to *guest*, *hostile*, and *hospitality*.

LARK: (1) n., the bird; (2) v.t. and n., to play ("lark about"). Lark (2) is related to lay (4) (poem, song).

LAST: (1) adj., superlative of *late*; (2) n., structural part of a shoe (from AS *laest*, trace or footstep); (3) v., to endure—related to (2); and (4) measure or weight (AS *hlaest*).

LAY: (1) v.t., to put or place; (2) v.i., past tense of *lie*; (3) adj., of the laity, non-professional (from L. *laicus*, the people); (4) kind of poem, song—related to lark (2).

LIMB: (1) arm, leg, etc.; (2) edge, border (astronomy, biology—from L. *limbus*). Limb (2) is related to *Limbo* (a realm bordering Hell set aside for just souls ineligible to enter Heaven) and also, distantly, to *lapse*, *limp*, and *lump*.

MASS: (1) religious service; (2) lump, quantity, etc. Mass (1) is related to *dismiss*, *mess*, and *missal*.

PALE: (1) n., a fence, stake, paling; (2) adj., wan, ashen. Careless readers associate the phrase "beyond the pale"—which has nothing at all to do with suntan lotion commercials—with the *wrong* homograph.

PATTER: (1) frequentative of *pat* (series of light, rapid taps or the well-known sound of "tiny feet"); (2) cant, jargon, glib talk, mechanical recitation of prayers, etc. (from L. *paternoster*).

PEER: (1) n. an equal; (2) v., to look intently (possibly from a contraction of *appear*). Peer (1) is related to *par*, and peer (2) to pore (1).

PORE: (1) v., to look, gaze, ponder; (2) n., opening, passage.

PUMP: (1) water pump, etc.; (2) type of shoe. Pump (1) is related to *bomb*.

ROW: (1) n., a line or rank; (2) v., to propel with oars; (3) n. and v., quarrel (possibly a back formation from *rouse*).

SPIT: (1) n. and v., pointed rod for holding meat over fire, slender point of land, etc.; (2) n. and v., saliva, ejecting saliva. *Note*: The phrase often now rendered as "the spittin' image" was originally "the spit *and* image."

VENERY: (1) sex, lust, etc. (from Venus, goddess of love); (2) hunting, sports of the chase, etc. (from L. *venari*). The adjective *venereal* comes from venery (1).

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Since space will not permit detailed discussion of each one, fascinating as that might be, a list of 117 additional homographic words follows. Numerals in parentheses indicate the number of separate homographs involved for each—counting mainly words and meanings which are in reasonably current use. Starred words (*) are discussed further under "Curiosa," in a later section of this article.

BALL (2)	DOCK (4)	HAY (2)
BAN (2)	DUCK (3)	HEEL (2)
BANG (3)	EAR (2)	HELM (2)
BARK (3)	FAIR (2)	HEM (2)
*BEGUINE (2)	FELT (2)	HIND (3)
BLOW (3)	FILE (3)	HIP (4)
BLUFF (2)	FLATTER (2)	*HOCK (4)
BORE (2)	FLOCK (2)	JOG (2)
BOUND (3)	FRET (3)	JUNK (2)
BROOK (2)	GAM (2)	KILL (2)
BUNK (3)	*GRATE (2)	LAP (2)
BUSTLE (2)	GUM (2)	LEAVE (3)
BUTT (4)	HAIL (2)	LEFT (2)
CARD (2)	HACK (3)	LET (2)
DIE (2)	HATCH (3)	LIE (2)

LIGHT (2)	PUNT (2)	SPAN (3)
LIME (2)	RACE (2)	SPAR (3)
*LIST (4)	RAKE (2-3)	SPAT (S) (2)
MAST (2)	RANK (2)	SPELL (3)
MATCH (2)	*RAP (3)	*SPIRE (2)
*MEAL (2)	RASH (2)	SPOKE (2)
MEET (2)	RIDDLE (2)	SQUASH (2-3)
MINE (2)	RING (2)	STALL (2)
MISS (2)	RIP (3)	STEER (2)
MULE (2)	RUM (3)	STERN (2)
MULL (2)	RUSH (2)	STILL (2)
MUST (3)	RUT (2)	STRAIN (2)
PAD (2)	RYE (2)	STUD (2)
PAGE (2)	SACK (2-3)	STY (2)
PAINTER (3)	SAGE (2)	SWALLOW (2)
*PALL (2)	SAP (2)	TART (3)
PALLET (2)	SCALE (3)	TATTOO (2)
PAN (4)	SHED (2)	TEND (2)
PEACH (2)	SHIVER (2)	TENSE (2)
PICK (2)	SHOCK (2)	TICK (4)
PINE (2)	SHORE (2)	TILL (4)
POST (2-3)	SICK (2)	*TILE (R) (2)
PRESS (2)	SKATE (2)	TIRE (3)
*PUNCH (3)	SNARL (2)	TRAPS (2)

In addition to the *heteronyms* already mentioned (lead, buffet, and gill), here are other non-homophonic homographs, with various pronunciations indicated:

AGAPE: (1) AGapee (a primitive Christian love-feast); (2) a-GAPE (full of wonder)

ENTRANCE: (1) n., ENtrance; (2) v., enTRANCE

EXCISE: (1) n., EXcise (tax); (2) v., exCISE (to cut out, remove). Also see excise (1) under "Curiosa."

RAVEN: (1) n., RAY-ven (the bird); (2) v., RAV-en (devour greedily, etc.)—related to *ravenous*, *rapine*.

SAKE: (1) n., sake (end, purpose, benefit, etc.); (2) SAH-kee (Japanese beverage)

SEWER: (1) SO-wer (one who sews); (2) SUE-er (conduit to remove water, sewage)

TEAR: (1) "teer" (salty fluid from lachrymal gland); (2) "tare" to rip, pull apart)

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Quasi-homographs, briefly mentioned in the introduction, may be defined as pairs of words of apparently quite different origin which turn out to be related in etymology, however distantly, or by some association of meanings.

CANON and CANNON both derive from Greek words meaning *reed*. But *canon* (guide, rule, etc.) gets its meaning from a reed in the sense of a rod, a straight line; *cannon* comes from *hanna*, a reed as a hollow tube.

GULL: (1) n., the bird; (2) v. and n., to cheat or trick, a gullible person. The latter is traced through an obsolete word *gull* (to swallow), possibly from *guzzle* as influenced by dialect *goll*, from ME *golle* (unfledged bird).

HOLOGRAPH: The original meaning is of course a handwritten manuscript (as a holographic will), and the derivation is from Gk. *holos*, whole + *graphein*, to write or produce an image. The developers of the new laser-beam method of diffraction photography, by which a three-dimensional image is produced, have "borrowed" the same sources—so that we now have two new words, *hologram* and *holography*, related to this process.

HIDE: (1) skin, pelt; (2) to conceal, etc. It seems likely that (2) is ultimately from the same source as (1) in the basic sense of "to cover (as with skin)."

PAP: (1) nipple, from ME *pappe*; (2) baby food, from L. *pappa*, *papa*, infant's cry for food. Here is another example of words related by association rather than etymology.

SCRUPLE: (1) unit of weight ($\frac{1}{4}$ dram), minute amount, jot, iota; (2) ethical or moral consideration, twinge of conscience. Both are related, however tangentially, to L. *scrupulus* (a small, sharp stone).

SPRUCE: (1) n., the tree or its wood, from ME *spruce*, variant of *Pruce* (Prussia), an early source of spruce lumber; (2) adj., neat, smart, dapper, from (*s*)*pruce* as the name of a fine leather imported from Prussia.

II. Pseudo-Homographs

Many of the words investigated as likely homographs turned out (quite astonishingly, in some cases) to have the same derivation for what seemed at first glance to be totally unrelated meanings. As in the preceding discussion of the actual homographs, I will examine some of the pseudo-homographs in detail and list others for further exploration by those interested.

ADDRESS: place of residence, formal speech, etc.

BAG: All meanings are related. It is interesting to note the differences and similarities between *bag*, *baggage*, "old bag" and "young baggage."

CONDUCT: Both the noun (behavior) and the verb (to guide) are from L. *conductus*.

CONTENT: The adjective (satisfied) and the noun (material contained) are both from L. *continere* (hold together, restrain)—as are all meanings of *continent*.

COURT: to woo; enclosure; crowd, royal entourage, etc. In the sense of wooing, *court* is probably derived from the attention paid to a person in power, hence courtship in the later, romantic sense.

CROP: All senses of this word—from the crop of a bird to the crop that is harvested and the verb crop (to cut, chop)—derive from AS *cropp* (variously a bunch, cluster, flower, ear of corn, crop of bird).

DRAFT: All meanings (draft horse, current of air, to draw or compose, etc.) come from ME *draht* and AS *dragan* (to draw, pull, drag, etc.). *Draft* is closely related to *draw* and *drag*.

EXACT: Both the adjective and the verb are from L. *exactus* (precise), pp. of *exigere* (drive out, demand, enforce, finish, determine, measure). Related in the verb sense to *exigent* and *exigency*.

GORGE: All meanings are from OF *gorge* (throat, gullet), from LL *gorga* (throat, narrow pass) and L. *gurgēs* (whirlpool, stream). *Gorgeous* comes from a word denoting ruff, ribbon, or other colorful decoration for the neck. Also see *gorget*.

INTIMATE: Both the verb and the adjective are ultimately related to L. *intimus*, inmost. The verb *intimate* comes directly from *intimatus*, pp. of *intimare* (put, drive, press into, announce); the adjective was originally spelled *intime*.

INVALID: Both the noun (sickly, infirm person) and the adjective (not valid, null and void) are from L. *invalidus* (*in*, not + *validus*, strong).

LATE: Both primary meanings (deceased, tardy) are related.

MINCE: The verb (to chop up) and the adjective (affectedly elegant or dainty) are both related to *minute*. Also see *minnow* and *minuet*.

OBJECT: All meanings, noun and verb, are from ML *objectum*, something thrown in the way, from *objectus*, a casting before, or that which appears.

REFRAIN: The verb (desist, abstain, avoid) and the noun (recurrent phrase, line, verse) are both from MF *refraindre* (restrain, moderate, echo).

REFUSE: In the sense of trash, *refuse* is that which has been refused, discarded.

SPOON: All verb and noun meanings are from the same source; *spoon* in the sense of to court, bill and coo, etc., may come from the Welsh custom of the newly-engaged man presenting his fiancée with a "love spoon."

And here are still more words which, despite wide divergence in meanings, have the same derivation and may therefore be classified as pseudo-homographs:

BACK	FLY	SHY
BALK	GROUND	SMART
BED	IMPORT	SPARK
COUCH	LIKE	STAY
CRAFT	LOCK	STOCK
DECLINE	MANUAL	STUMP
DIVINE	PARK	TACK
DOG	PART	TELL
DRAG	PARTIAL	TELLER
DRAW	PASS	TRACE
FARE	RELIEF	TRACT
FLAT	SHIFT	TRIP

III. Curiosa: Incidental, Accidental Discoveries

In the course of looking up hundreds of words to check meanings and etymologies and to distinguish between actual and ostensible homographs, this investigator made (for himself, anyhow) a number of unexpected discoveries. Inevitably, one thing (word, source, synonym) led to another, and sometimes to extended side-trips which had little to do with the homograph project as such. This report concludes with a section on some of the surprises encountered along the way.

BALL is related (through Latin, French, or Italian) to ballot, balloon, bullet, bowl and bollix.

BANAL, apparently a satirical coinage, comes from *ban*, a proclamation.

BEGUINE: Readers on my side of the Generation Gap will perhaps recall a popular song of the 30's, "Begin the Beguine." The reference was presumably to a native dance of Martinique—but Beguines were also members of a lay sisterhood organized in the Low Countries in the 12th Century.

BIGOT: One dictionary traces this word "probably" from Spanish *hombre de bigot* (man with a mustache); another suggests that the source is Old French and Norman *bigot*, perhaps from early English *bi God*.

BULLY originated meant sweetheart, fine fellow; later it came to mean pimp, and still later took on its present meaning. Survivals of the earliest meaning may be seen in such phrases as "bully for you" and "bully boy" (gallant, dashing fellow).

BURSA, the name of a frequent locale for bursitis, is related to bourse, bursar, purse, purser.

COWARD is not related to *cowed* (daunted, intimidated) but to OF *cuart*, from *coue* (tail), from L. *cauda*—the sign of cowardice being the tail between the legs.

EXCISE (tax) and *census* are very closely related. The former is derived from *accise*, in turn from L. *accensus* (*ad*, to + *census*, tax).

GRAM, the weight comes from the Latin root *gram* (something written or drawn) and is related to *grammar*. Many related English words are from the Greek cognate root *graph*.

GRATEFUL is not derived from English *grate* but from Latin *gratus*, pleasing, thankful, etc.

HOCK, one of the four distinct homographs with this spelling, means "to sport about" and comes from the early English festival of Hockday or Hocktide (formerly celebrated on the Monday and Tuesday after Easter).

INDIGENOUS and **INDIGENT** are *not* from the same source.

JEOPARDY, denoting a situation which could hardly be considered amusing, is distantly related to *joke*. It comes from OF *jeu parti* (divided game, game with even chances) and ultimately from LL *jocus partitus* (even chance, alternative) and L. *jocus* (play, game, joke).

LIST (tilt, incline), as in "a listing ship," is related to *lust*. It comes from ME *listen* and an apparent doublet *lusten* from AS *lystan* (to yearn, incline toward).

MEAL (lunch, food, etc.) is not related to *meal* (coarsely ground grain) but derives instead from AS *mael* (measure, fixed time—and probably by association a regular time for assembling to eat).

MESS (quantity of food, etc.) comes from L. *missus* (a course at a meal) and ultimately from L. *mittere* (to send, put); it is therefore related to such words as mass, missile, and mission.

MINESTRONE (the soup) is related to *minister*; *minister* (servant) is the obverse of *magister* (lord, master).

MORES (customs, etc.) is a plural; the rarely-used singular is *mos*.

OYEZ ("Hear ye") is an imperative form of an otherwise defunct verb. *Oyez* is also a noun—and its plural is *oyesses*!

PALL, as in the "pall of night," is not from *appall* (to frighten), but ultimately from L. *pallium* (mantle or cloak).

PUNCH (the beverage) comes from a Sanskrit word meaning five flavors or ingredients—which tells us something about the original concoction.

RAP: The expression “don’t care a rap” is not related to *rap* in the sense of strike, knock, or be sentenced to prison (“take a rap”). It comes from the German *rappe*, a coin of little value.

SPIRE, as the root of such words as *aspire* and *inspire*, is not from *spire* (peak, steeple) or *spiral*; it comes from L. *spirare* (to breathe or blow).

TILE (v.), TILER (n.): In addition to the standard meaning, the verb *tile* has the sense of to close or seal (figuratively) to insure privacy. In one of his novels, Anthony Trollope describes a family’s discussion of personal matters once “the door was tiled” and the servants had retired. And there is an official *Tiler* (doorkeeper) at Masonic and Elks lodges whose duty it is to keep unauthorized persons from entering. Quite a different use of the word is seen in the old phrase “out on the tiles,” signifying a debauch or drinking spree.

And so comes to an end, hundreds of dictionary thumbings later, this informal study which began months ago with a list of half a dozen words. Perhaps some WORD WAYS readers will be interested in adding to the list of English homographs and pseudo-homographs, or in exploring the same phenomena in other languages.

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ANAGRAMS

Christianity
Charity’s in it. *Ardmore Puzzler*, August 1, 1905

Circumstantial evidence
Actual crime isn’t evinced. *Amaranth, Enigma*, December 1910

The cockroach
Cook, catch her! *Eureka, Enigma*, October 1924

The coming Presidential campaign
Damn! Electing time is approaching. *Hercules, Enigma*, October 1924

Here the exclamation injects humor into the anagram and cannot be classed as a mere leftover.

Committees
Cost me time. *Enavlicm, Newark Puzzler*, January 5, 1907

That’s no lie!

Complexion beautifier
I bemix pure face lotion. *Atlantis, Enigma*, March 1925

The compulsory education law
You must learn; police do watch. *Amaranth, Enigma*, February 1916

WORD WAYS