Onward and Upward With Prefixes

Physician’s Lexicon

The often-used Greek prefix, *epi-* conveys a bushel of meanings including the sense of on, beside, above or anterior to; in general, though, it tells the reader that the word carries the sense of being above or directionally superior to. In anatomy, the prefix appears in words such as epicardium, epicene, epicenter, epiglottis, epigastrium, epididymis, epicanthus, epinephros [in Latin, suprarenal] and epidermis, all self-evident in meaning. Some words need a bit of etymological imagination to understand such as epistaxis [literally to let fall upon in drops], epilepsy [to take hold of, to seize] or epidemic [prevalent in, or upon, the people.] And when the root begins with a vowel, the “i” of *epi-* is then dropped [as in ependyma, ephebic, ephedrine and epaxial.]

Problems, semantic ambiguities, do arise with many of the non-medical terms beginning with *epi-. For example, ephemeral [literally upon a single day] is employed to describe insects, and other non-biological phenomena that are short-lived, such as the mayfly or some Broadway shows. The entomological genus for insects with very brief adult lives is *Ephemera.*

Then there are theological words beginning with *epi-.* Episcopalian pertains to a bishop [Greek, *episkopos,* meaning overseer]; epiphany [a divine apparition, and more broadly a divinely inspired thought]; and epistle [originally meaning to set in order; then later pertaining to orders conveyed by a letter or missive.] An epilogue is a sermon or peroration said at the end of the day.

An epicure is a person given up to sensual enjoyment. The word is patterned after Epicurus [an Athenian philosopher, 342 – 270 BCE, who defined a school of philosophy that proclaimed joy, sensual pleasure and lack of pain as the goals of humanity.] His name may be freely translated as “about youth.” An episode was originally meant to designate something that arrived additionally, something extra and *udos,* meaning a path or way.

The meanings of four nouns beginning with *epi-* [epigram, epitaph, epithet, eponym] tend to be confused with each other. An epigram means a brief, witty statement, literally meant to write upon or to supplement something that had already been written. [“What is an Epigram? A dwarfish whole. Its body brevity, and wit its soul” Coleridge.] An epitaph is a funeral oration or is something written or inscribed upon a tombstone. An epithet is something appended to a person’s name as a sobriquet adding some attribute to the name [e.g., Alexander the Great, Joe DiMaggio, the Bronx Bomber.]

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