Physician’s Lexicon

Behold, the Ambiguous Root

Homo sapiens [Latin, sapere, to be wise] is the Linnaean designation given to the human species, with the genus name for primates, Homo, also from the Latin, meaning man. In both medical and theological texts, Homo has been, unambiguously, a name for human or humanoid creatures. In a fateful declarative in the Scriptures, for example, Pontius Pilate, the sixth Procurator of the Roman province of Judea, points to Jesus and declares: “Ecce Homo”, [Behold, the man.]

Yet four virtually identical roots in English terminology, especially medical vocabulary, result in much misinterpretation of words incorporating the root, homo-[home- or homeo-].

Words such as homicide and homunculus [meaning little man, from the Latin diminutive of Homo] both clearly descend from the Latin root meaning man.

But then there are words such as homosexual, homogamous, homeopathic and homophony where the homo- [or homo-] root stems not from the Latin, homo- but from the Greek, ono- meaning resembling, similar to or identical. Therefore homosexual means having sexual desire for one of the same gender. And a homophone is a word identical in sound to another word but differing in meaning [eg, sale, sail or bear, bare]. Still other terms derived from the Greek homo—there is no letter ‘h’ in Greek—are homodont [teeth of similar form], homogenize [to blend, to make similar], homologous [agreeing, of being of one mind], homoplastic [of being of the same form], all conveying the sense of two or more things resembling or identical to each other in one or more characteristics.

But then we have a cluster of words such as homiletic [pertaining to sermons or the art of preaching] and homily [a sermon]. These are based upon the Greek word omilos, meaning to be together, to converse with, to assemble for conversation and are related, indirectly, to the Greek ono.

Finally, there are words based upon the English word, home, all of Old Germanic origin and spelled variously as hem, ham [as in hamlet], heim [as in Blenheim or Mannheim], or hjem. The hem- root also crops up in the geographic term, Bohemia [Boi-heim], meaning the home of the Boi tribes of Celtic ethnicity.

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