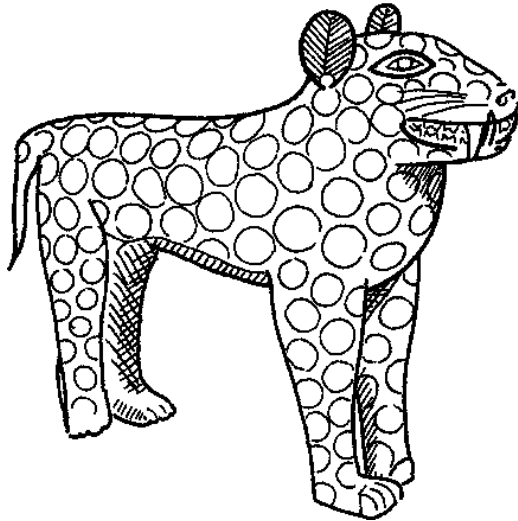


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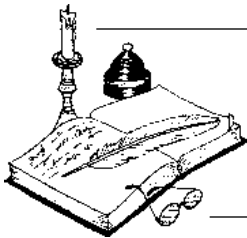
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Physician's Lexicon

The Impermanency of Definitions

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in a variously petulant and scornful tone, "it means what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less." The meanings of English words, from year to year, are not quite that capricious or mercurial; but the intended meanings of some common words can sometimes vary dramatically from one context to another. And knowledge of the etymology of such metastable words only adds to the confusion.

Consider the simple English word *privy* (from the Latin, *privus*, meaning singular or special). The cognate word, *private*, means roughly the same, something belonging to a single person. But closely related words—*privative*, *privation* or *deprive*—convey an opposing meaning denoting the *lack* of something, a sense of poverty. Contrariwise, a *privilege* (from the Latin, *privilegium*, meaning a regulation or law pertaining to an individual rather than a class or family of persons) defines something gained, some-

thing positive and generally sought after. The word, *privy*, can also define opposite things. In general, it denotes something private ("They are privy to certain state secrets") And a *Privy Counsel* (generally an advisory group for a sovereign) or a *Privy Seal* suggests gatherings or things associated with royalty. In contrast, a *privy*—uncapitalized—typically refers to a commode or a chamber pot. And even here its synonym, *commode*, may convey ambiguous meanings. A *commode* is usually a polite way of describing a privy or toilet but it can also define an ornamental cabinet; and when turned into an adjective, *commodious*, it describes something that is ample or spacious and clearly unconnected to bathrooms. And a *commodity*, from the same root (*commodus* in Latin, meaning suitable or convenient) is a noun meaning a product of some merit or value.

Yet another word that must be employed with care is the noun, *prodigy*, currently denoting one or more off-

spring, good, bad or indifferent (but generally suggesting a gifted offspring.) It is from the Latin, *prodigium* meaning a sign, a portent or an omen. But turn it into an adjective, *prodigal*, and we have an extravagant, profligate or wasteful son or daughter (cf. Luke 15: 11-32). Then we may encounter yet another adjective, *prodigious*, meaning extraordinary, marvelous or just wonderful.

The meanings and intents of words shift from decade to decade, sometimes even from season to season. To convey a sense that accurately reflects our intended meaning requires a sensitivity to contemporary language definitions and a judgment-free appreciation of the nuances, the subtle variations in expression, employed by the public. Comparative etymologists have suggested, with ample evidence, that words are much like flora and fauna in that they evolve accordingly to selective - Darwinian—pressures and through the process of natural selection.

— STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD