Physician’s Lexicon

The Ubiquitous -nyms of English

An earlier Greek word, meaning the father’s name, evolved into the Latin, *patronymicus*, an adjectival noun meaning from the father’s name. The Latin, *patr-* meaning father, appears in words such as patrician, patricide, patrimony, patriot and patrilineral. A name descended from the mother, on the other hand, is called a metronym. The Greek, *metron*—ultimately meaning uterine, appears in words such as parametrium, endometritis and metropolis (mother city). A wide range of English words stem from the older Greek root, -*nym*, both in medical and general usage.

An acronym defines a word composed of the initial letters of a well-known phrase such as FEMA or NATO. The Greek prefix, *akron-* meaning an extremity or utmost, appears in numerous medical terms such as acrodynia, acromegaly and acromion (the lateral extremity of the scapula) and in general terms such as acrobatic, acrophobia and acropolis. But, contrariwise, words such as acrimony, acridine and acrid are descended from the Latin, *acer-* meaning sharp or bitter; and is earlier related to the Greek *aker* meaning fields or pastures leading to such English words as acrid, agrarian and acre.

An eponym is a real or mythical name used to describe a larger social unit such as a clan, tribe or nation in words such as Napoleonic or Caesarian. And, in the case of medicine, the name of a disease, procedure or biologic group named after its discoverer such as Pavlovian psychology. Fractures such as Colles’, Duverney’s and Pott’s are named after their medical discoverers.

A homonym, from the Greek root meaning the same or similar, as in medical words such as homeopathy, homeostasis and homocentric; and general terms, defining words that sound alike but provide different meanings such as aile/ail, air/heir, aisle/isle and altar/alter. The list of such words is wondrously long and reflects the many languages which had coalesced to form standard English.

The -*nyms* of English also include the synonyms, the antonyms and even the contronyms (those words which are spelled alike and pronounced alike but may lead to sharply divergent meanings. The word, cleave, for example, may mean to bring together; or, alternately, to split apart. And the word, awful, may mean filled with awe and wonder or, alternately, something worse than terrible.)

And finally, a pseudonym defines a fictitious or false name to hide the real authorship, a pen-name. The Greek prefix, *pseudio-* means false or feigned, as in clinical words such as pseudarthrosis, pseudopod, and pseudotabes. Anatole France (1844-1924) once declared: “Chance is perhaps the pseudonym of God when he did not want to sign.”

—STANLEY M. ARONSON, MD