Contemporary medicine and its current vocabulary is the grateful recipient of the lexical riches of two successive, classical languages: Greek and Latin. Inevitably, then, roots derived from these Classical tongues may look much like each other but carry differing meanings. These resulting ambiguities are best illustrated by the ped-, pedi-, and pes- roots, from the Latin, generally meaning foot. And the podo– from the Greek, also meaning foot; but then there is, from the Greek, pai– or paio– (in English, spelled as pedo– or paedo–) meaning boy or child of either gender.

The Latin root, ped–, generates such English terms as pedal, peduncle, pedometer, pedestal, pedestrian, pedicure and pediment, each pertaining to the foot, or uses of the foot. The word, pedigree, is derived from the French phrase pie de grue, meaning a crane’s foot because it resembles the genealogic marks used in defining family trees. Orthopedics is literally straight, or corrected, feet, as is orthodontia, meaning straightened teeth.

But then we encounter the words, pediculosis (louse-ridden) and pediculocide (an agent used to kill lice.) The parasitic genus, Pediculus, is composed of many-footed insects and hence its name.

The Greek, podo– root also gives rise to numerous words pertaining to the foot: words such as podagra (an obsolete term for gout), podiatry, podium and podophylhum (literally, a plant with leafed feet.)

The paio– or pai– Greek root pertaining to male child in general, yields English words such as pediatrics (the iatrikos root meaning physician or healer), pedagogue (a teacher, with the Greek root, agogos, meaning to lead, to guide and sometimes to flow forth as in words such as cholagogue), pedant (a teacher of children), paediatric (an adjective describing the trait of excessive scholarliness; Ambrose Bierce once described pedantry as dust shaken out of a book and into an empty skull) and pederasty (sexual molestation of children).

The pes– root, pertaining to the foot, is used in such medical phrases as pes abductus (talipes valgus) and pes cavus.

Pessimism, the belief that the evil in this world outweighs the good, comes from the Latin, pessimus, meaning worst and probably stems, earlier, from the Latin ped’s mal, meaning a bad foot or a bad foundation. The English word, pejorative, is a descendant of pessimus.

Peddle and peddler, on the other hand, come from a Germanic root meaning basket.

— Stanley M. Aronson, MD