

Homonym, Homonym, Homonym, and Other Word-Pairs

William S. Huff

Department of Architecture, University at Buffalo
Buffalo, New York, 14214, USA

Reliable syntax and minimal inflections render English accessible to many of other tongues. Yet, there is great mischief in its spelling, relative to its pronunciation. Most modern, alphabetized languages have rules of spelling that link it stringently to pronunciation. But exceptions to norms (if not a paucity of norms) in English are considerable. It has been calculated that *scissors*, to satisfy phonetic English, could be written nearly six thousand ways. This contrariness accommodates a richness of divergent and convergent, chance forms, including three different types of homonyms.

The ancient, cosmic trigrams of the *I Ching* (*Book of Change*), comprising a set of eight permutation, can denote the kinds of products that are rendered from interrelating three properties of words—*sight* (upper bar), *sound* (middle bar), *sense* (lower bar)—with two comparisons between words—*same* (unbroken bar, —) and *different* (broken bar, - -).

Homonym means *same name*, but gives no indication whether *name* is visually or orally generated—written or spoken. Other words can help qualify the different homonymic types: homo-, heterographic; homo-, heterophonic.

1. IDENTITY: a *rose* is a *rose* is a *rose*.

Words, having the same sight, sound, and sense, can be only themselves. Nothing is more like anything than itself.

2. HOMOGRAPHIC HOMONYM: *rose rose*; *aspic aspic*; *periwinkle periwinkle*.

HOMOGRAPHIC DOUBLET: *boneset boneset*; *fine fine*; *host host*; *stamina stamina*.

A true homonymic pair must not only have different definitions, but different derivations. I list over 1000. A second sub-set, the *Homographic Doublet*, implicates words with outwardly different meanings, accorded by modern usage, but the same root. Puns exploit both homonymic and doublet types under this and the next trigram.

3. HOMOPHONIC HOMONYM: *rose rows*; *colonel kernel*; *key quay*; *sew so soe sow*.

HOMOPHONIC DOUBLET: *bloc block*; *flour flower*; *indict indite*; *mantel mantle*.

A farmer was *sowing* seeds; his wife was *sewing* clothes; both were *s—wing*. The third clause challenges written, but not spoken, English. I list over 1000—mostly pairs, but sets of up to five. Words with considerably different meanings in present-day parlance, but from the same root, are incorporated by the *Homophonic Doublet* sub-set.

4. HETEROGRAPHIC HOMONYM: *rows rows*; *entrance entrance*; *unionize unionize*.

HETEROGRAPHIC DOUBLET: *imagines imagines*; *nestling nestling*; *oblate oblate*.

These are the rarest and most curious of the three homonymic and doublet types. I have gleaned around 325 of the former; only a half are remarkable. It verges on the absurd that singular combinations of letters are used for different sonations; but accent plays a large part. This does not occur in many Western languages. At least one Western and one Eastern European language have them—Italian: *ancora* (*again*, *anchor*) and *pesca* (*peach*, *fishing*); Serbo-Croatian: *gore* (*upstairs*, *worse*, *mountain*). I know none in French, Spanish, or German.

5. HETEROLOG: *rose*; *elephant*; *and*; *any*; *other*; *word*; *except*; *a*; *coupler*.

In the *Identity* category, there are as many groups as there are words. Conversely, the *Heterolog* characterizes one huge group of all words. However, since this trigram, under which this type occurs, stipulates that all three word properties are dissimilar, a more proper group would have any number of words, as long as one member does not pair with another member in any of the ways that occur under six of the trigrams.

6. SYNONYM: *rows tiers*; *big huge*; *boy lad*; *blossom flower*; *hog pig*; *domain region*.

HETEROGRAPHIC VARIANT: *catchup catsup ketchup*; *imagoes imagines*; *roofs rôoves*.

Synonyms, like homonyms, essentially come from different roots. It is no wonder then that there may be no true synonyms—each word conveying special nuances. E.g., there are

fine distinctions between the meanings of *hog* (mature swine) and *pig* (sexually immature swine); modern usage seldom, if ever, indulges in such hairsplitting between the two. The *Homophonic Variant*, under the eighth trigram, includes *catsup ketchup*; both *catchup* and *ketchup* relate individually to that pair under the *Heterophonic Variant* of this trigram.

7. POLYPHONE: *the the the; vis-a-vis; you, not you, did you.*

DIALECTICAL or CULTURAL PREFERENT: *either either; tomato tomato.*

NON-PHONETIC ICON (Chinese character) and SYMBOL (mathematical term).

If regular aberrations of ordinary speech were overlooked, the Polyphone would be the rarest kind in English. The single word, of all the words in the English language, sounded prescriptively in variant ways, is "the." Phoneticians, however, observe that many common words undergo "morphological conditioning." Phonetic mutations are precise and frequent in French; e.g., *x* is or isn't sounded in *aux, beaux, chateaux*. Either—as "ether" or "ither"—belongs to the class of the *Dialectical* or *Cultural Preferent*. One sub-category, the *Non-Phonetic Icon* and *Symbol*, is represented by the cross-cultural Chinese character (*sight* and *sense*, the same; *sound*, divergent among Chinese dialects and heterogeneous with Japanese) and by the ultimately universal mathematical expression and musical notation.

8. HOMOPHONIC VARIANT: *gray grey; clue clew; draft draught; jail gaol; tycoon taikun.*

HOMOPHONIC SYNONYM: *chute shoot; comptroller controller.*

GRAPHIC or SYMBOLIC VARIANT: AGE *age age; 0 zero; 4 four quatre vier; + plus.*

While there are usually preferential spellings of the *Homophonic Variant*, only some are cultural, as *color* (American) *colour* (British); and some are dated. Either form of thousands of variants are used by persons of the same culture and era. Sticklers deplore phonetic spelling—*sox* for *socks*, yet matter-of-factly use *puny* for *puisne*. This category is generally unthinkable in most Western languages. German spelling had an early 20th century, official standardization: *k* and *z* were substituted for *c*; *t* for *th*, as *Tal Thai; ä ae, ö oe, ü ue* are still interchangeable. The pair *chute shoot* is extraordinary; these words had different origins, but became confused in time and are now interchangeable in the sense of "trough"; they belong to the rarest of all classes, the *Homophonic Synonym*. The *Graphic* or *Symbolic Variant* comes under this trigram. Modern alphabetic systems have two sets of printing-type (upper- and lowercase) and two of script (capital and small)—the double of all are found in German. Japanese has three ideographic systems and their cursive forms. In addition, words can be substituted, cross-culturally, for mathematical terms.

Which other languages have examples in all eight trigrammatic categories, and which abound in examples that are rare in English—as French does in the *Polyphone* type?

