


**Laurie Bauer**

Emeritus professor of linguistics at Victoria University of Wellington

Not the river of Alfred, Lord Tennyson's lyrical ballad *The Lady of Shalott*, but this view of the Waimea Plains and Waimea River does lend itself to Tennyson's use of the word "either", with crops and farmland on either bank. STUFF

# Either can be right

**Language Matters**

In my last column I commented on the word *akimbo* being used for having "two guns, one in either hand". A reader sent in an email to ask whether I should have said "one in each hand". I certainly agree that "one in each hand" would have been possible, and possibly less ambiguous. But was the use of *either* grammatically incorrect?

My first clue came from Alfred, Lord Tennyson, who, in *The Lady of Shalott*, writes "On either side the river lie/ Long fields of barley and of rye". Clearly, here, *either* means "both" and not just one. If it's good enough for Tennyson, it's good enough for me!

A quick look at the *Oxford English Dictionary* shows that either can certainly mean "just one of two". A recent example from the *OED* is "A 'break clause' . . . allows either party to end the tenancy early". But an older meaning is 'both of two', a meaning which now arises particularly in phrases like "on either side", "on either hand", "on either bank", and so on, where the things discussed appear in pairs.

*Either* was not always restricted to just two things, but in modern standard English, like *both*, implies just two options.

*Both* is one of the few ways in English of expressing "precisely two", something that is much more common in other languages, including Māori, where, for instance, *kōrua* means "you two".

English also has many remnants of the element *two* whose meaning can be vaguely discerned in words like *between*, *twain*, *twice*, *twin*, *twine*, *twist* and *twilight*.

The word *alternative* is another word apparently involving two, a word that sometimes raises ire. *Alternative* and related words are based on Latin *alter,* "one of two".

But in modern English, as the *OED* states, it is used "frequently of more than two things", as in "plan ahead for it by identifying at least three alternative ways to approach it" or, as a noun, "Most people most of the time cannot rank many alternatives open to them".

To return to *either*, it may seem odd to have one word which can mean "just one of two" or "both of two", depending on the context.

Some people, including some linguists, see the situation in which every word has just one meaning and every meaning is represented by a single word as some kind of ideal. English (and probably every language) has plenty of examples where this is not true.

My favourite example is the entry in the 6th edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1976) for *chuffed*, defined as "pleased; displeased", pointed out to me by the late Ian Gordon. The difference is apparently dialectal. Although both meanings are still occasionally found, by the 8th edition, the *COD* had opted for the positive meaning, with a gloss of "delighted".

*Cleave*, though, may have two opposite meanings in the speech of a single individual, as in "cleave asunder" and "cleave together".

*Let* can mean "allow" as in "Let me in", but also "prevent", as we see in the nominal forms in "let or hindrance" and *let* used in tennis.

Such autoantonyms (or Janus words, in honour of the two-faced god whose name also appears in the name of the month of January) have to be distinguished by the context in which they appear, and the same is true of *either*.

Words carry meaning in context, not just in isolation.

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**Viewpoint**

StarTribune
Minneapolis

# Such injustice diminishes us all

Views from around the world. These opinions are not necessarily shared by *Stuff* newspapers.

A year ago, a Minneapolis police officer squeezed the life out of George Floyd a minute at a time as the handcuffed 46-year-old Black man lay sprawled on the pavement. Onlookers were powerless to stop it, fellow officers unwilling. Those minutes galvanised a movement, crystallising the grief and rage from countless similar incidents that came before. This one death spurred millions across the nation and the world to march on behalf of a simple but too often ignored truth: Black lives matter.

A year later that movement has gained strength, sustained by a widening coalition of those determined to make this truth recognised. The difficulty here is not to be underestimated. It is not enough to say "All lives matter". That ignores the special horrors to which Black people have been subjected since slavery.

There is much more to do. Not nearly enough has changed materially in the lives of Black Americans. Housing discrimination remains. Black maternal death rates are higher. They are incarcerated at higher rates. A disproportionately large number die at the hands of police. The forces driving racial injustice are insidious, quietly leaking in wherever they find an opening.

We are all diminished by such injustice: Black, white, officer, civilian. We are all lifted up and empowered when we take action to combat it. Let us all, each in our own way, commit to that fight.