Words don't always cleave to meanings

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WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

WHO'S left now that they've left? In a recent e-mail, Robin Ferrier shared an example remembered from a British newspaper some 40 years ago, where a football manager was "resigning". Was this "quitting" or "signing again"?

The fuller context made it clear in this case, and by using a hyphen we could certainly indicate the second of these meanings rather than the first (note also the difference in pronunciation). But Robin raised the question of whether there are other words, like "resigning", that appear to have two quite opposite meanings.

We can distinguish two types of words like this. One type consists of two words which have opposite meaning (they are antonyms), and which share the same form, even though they are different words. If the hyphen is omitted then "resign" is an antonymic homograph (the words are spelled the same though they sound different); there are also instances of antonymic homophones (different words that sound the same), like "the building they had just raised was razed to the ground in the fire".

The other type is where what is historically the same word has developed two opposing meanings — this is an autoantonym. We need to know quite a bit about the history of words to know for sure whether we have an autoantonym or an antonymic homonym.

Perhaps the best example of a word with opposite meanings is "cleave". It can mean "to split" (as in cleft palate and cloven hoof) or "to cling together" (as in to cleave to one's spouse). No wonder this word has become so rare. This particular word is instructive: there are actually two different words which have both ended up with the form "cleave".

This is probably part of the reason why nobody seems to be very sure what the past tense and past participle forms of the verb are. We cannot say "cloven palate" or "cleft hoof", but outside these fixed expressions, is it cleave, cleft, cleft; cleave, clove, cloven or cleave, cleaved, cleaved? What we usually expect to find for words that have become as rare as this is that the regular form (cleave, cleaved, cleaved) takes over entirely; perhaps the word will vanish from use before this happens.

The late Ian Gordon was delighted with the definition in the 6th edition of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* of the word "chuffed". The definition read "Pleased; displeased". A less confusing definition has been used since the 8th edition.

Those of you who have British passports will know that officials everywhere are enjoined to allow you to pass without "let or hindrance". "Let" can mean "allow", but it can also mean "block, blockage". If you are fast, are you rapid, or are you stationary? You can run fast and be stuck fast, and the two are pragmatically distinct.

One category of words that regularly produces autoantonyms is the case of verbs which have the same form as their corresponding nouns. Take the noun "dust", for example. This gives rise to a verb "to dust". But that verb can be used in sentences like "I dusted the sideboard" where the meaning is "remove the dust", or in sentences like "Dust the cake with icing sugar" where the meaning is "cover in (something that is like) dust". Most such words have only one meaning in common usage ("to water" means to put on, "to milk" means to take away), but in principle, as "to dust" shows, the same form can mean either.

Some words only become problematic in context, like the sign in a pharmacy saying, "We dispense with accuracy". These may be intentional or they may be lapses, but they are really puns rather than autoantonyms. The case of "Go, Fleming!" is less clear: do you want him to leave or are you exhorting him to exert himself, and is it a pun or an autoantonym?

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■ *Send your questions about language to words@dompost.co.nz*