

The Dictionary of Confusable Words

Laurence Urdang



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Foreword

This book came about because over the many years during which I have compiled dictionaries, encyclopedias, and other reference books, I have often encountered people who mix up more or less ordinary things. They have trouble remembering the difference between *cement* and *concrete*, or between a *fission bomb* and a *fusion bomb*; they wonder about the difference(s) between an *accordion* and a *concertina* and between *perfume*, *cologne*, and *toilet water*; they cannot keep straight the difference between *fuse* and *fuze* and have no convenient place where they could check the sizes of *magnums*, *jereboams*, *methuselahs*, and so forth, let alone a source where they could find them all listed in one place. I must confess that I am among them. But, surrounded by reference books, I can usually find the answer or satisfy my curiosity without much trouble. Most people have a dictionary and, perhaps, an encyclopedia. Although much information is contained in the former, it is rarely pulled together in a useful, contrastive way, and it is not the function of dictionaries to list "sets" of terms: that is, one can find the definition of, say, *jereboam* without difficulty, but the dictionary is unlikely to provide the information that *magnum*, *methuselah*, etc., also belong to the same category. Besides, the function of dictionaries is to define, not explain, and the kinds of information referred to here often require more background than a dictionary provides or can be expected to provide.

Encyclopedias, it is true, do provide this sort of information, but they are generally large, multi-volume affairs, and I cannot recall the last time I looked something up in one without having to find (and read) articles in at least two different volumes. Also, if one is seeking some basic information, most of the larger encyclopedias provide far more information and background than is needed, and finding a relatively simple fact usually means reading through a lot of verbiage.

Dictionaries and encyclopedias simply have too much in them for the purpose under discussion: their "universes" are much more extensive than needed to distinguish the kinds of information about which most people have questions. I must confess that I have not

taken a survey to determine and classify the kinds of information about which "most people have questions," and the content of this book is based largely on my own confusions and needs and those I have observed and noted after only 35 years of working with information. Some information has been intentionally omitted, either because it is too abstruse or, at the other extreme, because it can be easily found in a dictionary. Certainly, notions like *General Theory of Relativity* vs. *Special Theory of Relativity* fall into the former category; and the difference between *autobiography* and *biography* fall into the latter.

Undoubtedly, anyone picking up this book will already know some of the things that are in it, immediately prompting the question, "Why did he include *that*!" and the comment, "Everyone knows *that*!" It is hoped, however, that not everyone is so smugly in control of the distinctions between *which* and *that*, between a *tiger lily* and a *day lily*, and between the *X chromosome* and the *Y chromosome* (which male, which female?), between the *Immaculate Conception* and the *Virgin Birth*. And I must confess that having done the research and written this entire book, I find myself referring to it because I have forgotten something.

I have tried, wherever possible, to maintain a *layman's approach* to the many subjects treated here. In a few entries, the discussion becomes a little technical; but that is unavoidable. In compiling the material for this book, I have not only tried to select topics that I thought would be useful but to explain them in a way that is easily understandable. The style is informal, almost chatty, except in those (relatively few) entries that seemed quite cut and dried, admitting of little more than contrastive definitions of the components. I was quite surprised when I came to prepare the Index, for, although there does not seem to be much text, the information that is treated required more than 5,000 references. Thus, the user should not be deceived into thinking that the words in bold type at the head of an entry reveal all that lurks within: to make proper use of this book, one should first resort to the Index. If the term or idea being sought is not listed there, then it probably is not in the book.

It is only when the users of this book have gained some experience with it that its shortcomings will become evident. Suggestions for its improvement and comprehensiveness are welcome and will lead, I trust, to an enlarged, even more useful book in a revised, expanded edition to be published in the future.

Finally, I should like to thank Gerry Helferich, Executive Editor at Facts On File, who accepted on faith my rather vague description of the work at its beginnings and who has exhibited sympathetic tolerance with the manuscript as delivered.

Laurence Urdang

Old Lyme, Connecticut
January 1988

A. Note on the INDEX

1. Entries in the Index appear in several forms, which ought to be distinguished:
 - (a) Entries in *italics* (e.g., *burglary*, *burro*) are references to definitions, comments, and other information about the term itself.
 - (b) Entries in *roman* (e.g., *burglary*, *Caesar*) are used in the text as words or illustrations but are not, necessarily, commented on. Thus, *burglary* refers to the entry *burglary* / where "burglary" is defined and discussed. But "burglary" is also mentioned in the entry for *homicide* / though it is not discussed there.
 - (c) Entries in quotation marks in the index follow the style in the text.
2. (a) Most of the entries in the text have unique headings (e.g., *European plan* / *American plan*, *prefix* / *infix* / *suffix*. To save space, these have been shortened to include only the first term, up to and including the virgule, and thus appear in the Index as *European plan* /, *prefix* /.
- (b) In a few cases, however, the same term may appear as the first element in the heading of more than one entry; to avoid ambiguity, references to such entries have been extended to include the second term. Thus, there are three entries that contain "acute" as the first element; these are shown at the left, below, with the form in which they appear in the Index at the right:

<i>acute</i> / <i>chronic</i>	<i>acute</i> / <i>chronic</i>
<i>acute</i> / <i>grave</i> / <i>circumflex</i> / <i>umlaut</i> / <i>tilde</i> /	<i>acute</i> / <i>grave</i>
<i>cedilla</i>	
<i>acute</i> / <i>obtuse</i>	<i>acute</i> / <i>obtuse</i>

Define Your Terms

A horizon / B horizon / C horizon

These are terms designating three main types of soil layers that occur in nature—that is, they do not pertain to cultivated areas. The uppermost is the *A horizon*, characterized by weathering and by the greatest proportion of organic matter; the middle layer, or *B horizon*, which is not exposed to weathering, consists of humus and other organic materials that are leached into it through the *A horizon* by rain and other water; the bottom layer, or *C horizon*, consists of partially decomposed rock and, to a limited degree, some of the elements leached through from the *B horizon*. Below all is the bedrock.

a / an

The standard practice governing the choice between *a* and *an* is very simple:

(1) *a* is used before all words beginning with a consonant sound, including words beginning with *h* when it is pronounced, as in *home*, *honey*, *hug*, etc. It is used in Britain before *herb*, but not in the U.S., because in Britain the *h* in *herb* pronounced. The *h* in *herbaceous* is pronounced in the U.S., so a *herbaceous border* is said in both countries. *A* is also used before words that begin with a *y*-sound, like *united*, *use*, *Yugoslavian* (whether spelled with a *Y* or a *J*), *yew*, etc.

(2) *an* is used before all words beginning with a vowel sound; that includes words that begin with an *h* that is not pronounced, like *honest*, *hour*, and, in the U.S., *herb*. Unless the speaker is using some variety of English in which normal initial *h* is not pronounced, like Cockney, the standard preferred form is a preceding words like *hotel*, *history*, *historical*, *hysterical*, etc. Saying "an historical novel, an hotel, an hysteresis curve, an hydrangea," etc., on the grounds that the first syllable is not stressed is affected and not in keeping with normal English pronunciation anywhere, nor does it appear in standard writing.

abbreviation / acronym / initialism

An *abbreviation* is any shortened form of a word, phrase, name, title, or other formation, whether formed from the initials of separate words, as *C.O.D.* for 'cash on delivery' or *D.S.O.* for 'Distinguished Service Order', from the initials of parts of the same word, as *Gb* for 'gilbert', from a collapsing of a word or phrase by removing parts, as *mdse.* for 'merchandise' or *pd.* for 'paid', from the retention of only the first syllable, letter, or other part of a word, as *ped.* for 'pedal,' *ave.* for 'avenue', or from any combination of these, as *etc.* for 'et cetera'. As can be seen, the use of periods varies: the practice in England till recently was to omit the period (called "full stop" there) in shortenings that include the first and last letters of the word, as *Mr*, *St* (for *Saint*), etc.; but that is no longer followed universally, and periods are sometimes used in such abbreviations. *Acronym* has become specialized in common usage to refer to any kind of abbreviation that produces a pronounceable word, like *UNESCO* for 'United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization,' *radar* for 'radio detection and ranging,' or *niacin* for 'ni(cotinic) ac(id) + -in (a special suffix)'. By that criterion, *U.S.A.* (or *USA*) as an abbreviation for 'United States of America' would not qualify as an acronym because it is not pronounced "oosa" or "yoosa." Conventionally, acronyms are written without periods. *Initialism* is a recent coinage used in referring to any kind of shortening. Since WWII many names have been bestowed on various associations, societies, processes, etc., merely with an eye toward the kind of acronym they would produce or to ensure that an acronym would, indeed, be yielded; for example, *START* for 'Strategic Arms Reduction Talks', *WIPO* for 'World Intellectual Property Organization', *IGFET* for 'insulated-gate field-effect transistor'.

abnormal / subnormal

Normal means 'ordinary; common; regular; typical'; *abnormal* simply means 'not normal; different from normal' and should not be confused with *subnormal*, which means 'below normal.' Thus, a person's behavior might be abnormal without being subnormal.

abridged / unabridged

In the United States, where quality and quantity are often confused, the word *unabridged* as applied to dictionaries has taken on the mean-

ing 'complete.' Although that was not the original intention of the publishers of "unabridged dictionaries," they have thrived on the misunderstanding. The literal meaning of *unabridged* is, of course, 'not abridged,' in other words, 'not cut down from a larger source.' In referring to an ordinary book, it means 'uncut, in its original form'; but it has taken on the meaning of 'the largest of its kind' in reference to dictionaries. Publishers have leapt at the opportunities afforded by this usage: without qualification, if an entirely original dictionary only 100 pages in length were published it could properly be called "unabridged," since it was 'not cut down from a larger source.' (If the "source" considered is the entire language, then there is no such thing as an "unabridged dictionary.") Although they have not gone that far, publishers have labeled as "unabridged" dictionaries containing 260,000 entries, 450,000 entries, and 600,000 entries—none of them, of course, "complete descriptions of the English language"; in fact, the publisher of the 600,000-entry "unabridged" put out the 450,000-entry edition about 35 years later and called that one "unabridged," which emphasizes how meaningless the word has become when applied to dictionaries. Meaningless as it might be in lexical terms, *unabridged* retains a magical cachet in commercial contexts.

abscissa / ordinate

In a plane Cartesian coordinate system, the *abscissa* is the vertical, or Y-axis, the *ordinate* the horizontal, or X-axis.

absorption / adsorption

Absorption in its everyday sense is the noun for the processing of *absorbing*, as what a sponge does to water. In chemical parlance, it refers to the process by which an absorbed substance penetrates the pores and membranes of another substance (the *absorbent*). In biology, it refers to the phenomenon of osmosis by which a fluid or dissolved substance passes through the membrane of a cell. *Adsorption* is a specialized term in physical chemistry for the process by which a layer of a gas clings to a surface, usually of a solid but sometimes of a liquid, as the *adsorption* of a gas by activated charcoal.

abstract noun / concrete noun

Abstract nouns are the names of abstract ideas, like *goodness, evil, beauty, fear, love, health, panic, thought*; *concrete nouns* are the names of physical objects that can be seen and felt, like *table, apple, moon*.

AC / DC

AC, or *alternating current*, is an electric current generated by a device that causes the current to reverse its direction at a specific rate, in most commercial applications at 50 or 60 cycles per second. The voltage of an alternating current can be increased or decreased by a transformer, with proportional loss or gain in amperage. *AC* current is in wide use in the world partly because it is easier to transmit, but the amperage and voltage vary from country to country. *DC*, or *direct current*, completes its circuit in one direction only; its voltage can only be decreased by a transformer, not increased. It is the electric current produced typically by a battery.

Acadia / Arcadia

Acadia is the name for the (formerly French) Canadian Maritime Provinces, that is, Nova Scotia, the setting for Longfellow's *Evangeline*. There is evidence that its French name, *Acadie*, is from the name of the river *Shubenacadie*, presumably a local Indian name. *Arcadia* has a more complex history. Originally one of the four main dialect areas of ancient Greece (along with *Aeolia*, *Doria*, and *Ionia*), it is today a department of Greece. It was associated with pastoral, bucolic ancient Greek poetry and, presumably for that reason, was chosen by Sir Philip Sydney for the title of his pastoral romance (1590), which was based on *Diana*, a pastoral by Montemayor, which, in turn, was based on *Daphnis and Chloe*, the Greek pastoral love story by Longos (A.D. 4th century), which goes back to the idylls of Stesichorus (632 B.C.). According to legend, *Daphnis* was the originator of pastoral poetry. As a consequence of all this, *Arcadia* was adopted by later writers as the setting for pastoral romances and is still used in that sense.

accent / pitch / tone

In language, *accent* can mean either the way a person pronounces a language—that is, whether he has a Northern, Southern, Yorkshire,

French, or other accent—or the stress given a particular word or syllable: *The accent is on 'low' in 'below'.* In this latter sense, it may refer to the loudness with which a syllable or word is uttered in relation to the other, surrounding elements or to the fullness of the vowel in the syllable. In some languages, as Chinese, *tone* is a feature essential to the meaning, in the sense that a word spoken with a certain tone pattern may have a meaning completely different from the same word uttered with a different pattern. Tone should not be confused with intonation or inflection, which can be a factor in conveying meaning both in English and in Chinese: a statement like *Are you ready?* said with a rising inflection is usually merely a question, but the tone in which it is said may carry with it a sense of impatience, annoyance, exasperation, or other emotional overtones. Strictly speaking, intonation is connotative in nature, not grammatical. (See also **connotation / denotation**.) Another instance might be the way one says the word *Ready*: with a rising inflection, it is a question; with a falling inflection, it is a confirmation that the speaker is "prepared." *Pitch* is not used in linguistics as a feature, but it nonetheless describes the level at which a sound is made: in speaking of "rising" and "falling" inflection, above, it is the pitch, or number of vibrations per second that determines how "high" or "low" a sound is. A bassoon or bass viol, for example, produces sounds of lower pitch than those of a piccolo or violin.

accordion / concertina

The *accordion* and the *concertina*, both dating from the 1820s, operate on the same basic principle: they consist of a pair of headboards between which is a bellows. When the headboards are pulled apart and pushed together, the air to and from the bellows passes over reeds in the headboards; these reeds, which produce a sound not unlike that of the harmonica, are controlled by a number of buttons in the headboards of the concertina and, in the accordion, by a pianolike keyboard at one end for notes and buttons at the other for chords and other effects. The accordion is rectangular and rather bulky, the concertina hexagonal and more easily portable. The accordion is not generally used in playing serious music, but the concertina, which is said to produce a finer tone, has been used in symphony orchestras, and several modern composers have written passages for it, including Tchaikovsky.

account receivable / account payable

In accounting and bookkeeping, an *account receivable*, informally called a *receivable*, is a record of an amount owed to a company or individual. It may include payment for any kind of transaction, that is, for the goods or services sold by the company, for capital assets sold, etc. An *account payable*, informally called a *payable*, is a record of an amount owed by a company or individual to others for goods or services of any kind.

acute / chronic

In medicine, *acute* describes a disease of sudden onset and short duration, *chronic* one slow to develop and, often, of long duration, though without any implication of incurability.

acute / obtuse

In geometry, these terms describe different kinds of angles, *acute* referring to an angle of less than 90°, *obtuse* to one of more than 90°.

acute / grave / circumflex / umlaut / tilde / cedilla

These are the names of various accents, or diacritical marks, that are frequently encountered on foreign words borrowed by English. In some cases, they may be dropped; whether or not they are retained depends on the extent to which the individual word has been assimilated into English, on the style of the material in which the word is used, and on the availability of the particular character in the typefaces used. The *acute accent*, which angles upward to the right, is found in French over *e* (*séance*, *soigné*, *méchant*) to indicate a change in quality of pronunciation or to mark the full pronunciation of a syllable (*risqué*), usually interpreted in English as a mark to pronounce the *e* as AY; in Spanish it is used over vowels to indicate that the syllables in which they appear are to be stressed though they normally would not be (*cimarrón*, *tropical*, *tía*). The *grave accent*, which angles upward to the left, is also found in French over *a* or *e* (*à la carte*, *misère*, *frère*) to denote a certain quality of the pronunciation and in Italian and other languages over the vowel of a syllable that does not ordinarily bear the stress of the word to indicate that it

should be stressed (Italian *cantò*, *è*, *città*; English *agèd*, *belovèd*, *cursèd*). The *circumflex accent*, which resembles a small inverted "v," occurs in French over *a*, *e*, *i*, or *o* (*pâté*, *être*, *maître*, *rôle*) and in other languages to mark a change in the usual pronunciation of the vowel; in French the circumflex often indicates the omission of a sound that has been omitted (as the omission of the -s- of Latin *costa* from French *côte* 'coast'). The *tilde* occurs in Spanish over *n* (*mañana*, *cabaña*, *señor*) and in Portuguese over vowels to indicate their nasalization (*pão*, *torrão*, *verão*). The *umlaut* is used in German over *a*, *o*, or *u* (*Götterdämmerung*, *Führer*). *Hacek*, pronounced HAH-check and also written *hâček*, is the name for the inverted circumflex that may appear over *s* or *c* in words from Czechoslovakian. The *cedilla* is used under a *c* to indicate its pronunciation before *a*, *o*, or *u* as *š* in French (*français*, *garçon*, *reçu*) and in Portuguese (*abastança*, *destroço*, *roça*). The name for the two small dots, once regularly used in English over words like *naïve* (where it still appears in the original French) and *coöperate*, but now generally abandoned, is *diaeresis* (also spelled *dieresis*); its function is to indicate that two vowels written together are to be pronounced separately, not as a diphthong. The small, u-like crescent used in some pronunciation systems over a vowel is called a *breve mark*, often used to indicate a "short" sound like that of *at* in contrast to a long sound like that of *ate*. A small curved line used to link two letters together is called by its typographic name, *ligature*; it may appear above the letters (as in the old-fashioned way of printing *ſt*) or below the letters (as in the pronunciation systems of some dictionaries in which *sh* indicates that the sound is as in *show* rather than as in *gashouse*). The straight bar over a vowel, as used in transcriptions of Latin and in some pronunciation systems, is called a *macron* or, informally, a *long mark*. The small, hooklike symbol that appears under *a*, *e*, or *o* in Polish (as in *Częstochowa*) is called an *ogonek* and serves to nasalize the vowel; the mark in Polish that looks like an acute accent but is used over *n* (as in *Gdańsk*) is called a *przecinek* (which actually means 'comma') and serves to indicate that the preceding vowel is nasalized. The diacritics used in Greek have their own names: the one preceding a word beginning with a vowel and resembling an open single quotation mark (') is called *rough breathing*, or *spiritus asper*, and signals the pronunciation of an *h*; the one preceding an initial vowel and resembling a closed single quotation mark (') is called *smooth breathing*, or *spiritus lenis*, and signals the absence of an *h*. The *hamza*, or *hamzah*, is a hooklike mark writ-

ten over a letter in Arabic to indicate that an *alif* is to serve as a consonant (a glottal stop), and not as a vowel. The foregoing are the main diacritical marks encountered in the transcriptions of foreign languages into English. Their uses in the individual languages varies considerably and can only be touched on here: Except for Arabic, Greek, Russian, Hebrew, Yiddish, and, formerly, German, all the other Western European and Middle Eastern languages normally use the Roman alphabet or some version of it.

adagio / allegro / largo

These terms are musical directions for the relative tempos (or tempi) at which a piece or passage is to be played. *Adagio*, which comes from the Italian meaning 'at ease,' is a direction to play the passage so marked slowly; *largo*, from Italian 'large, broad,' is a direction to play the passage grandly and broadly, though somewhat faster than *adagio*; *allegro*, which means 'cheerful, merry' in Italian, is an indication that the passage be played at a lively, brisk fashion. Further refinements are *adagietto* 'slowly, but not as slowly as *adagio*'; *larghetto* 'slowly, but not as slowly as *largo*'; *largamente* 'at a slow, majestic, dignified pace'; *allargando* 'tending towards a slower tempo and in a dignified, more powerful manner'; *allegretto* 'briskly, but not as quickly as *allegro*'; *andante* 'at a moderate tempo' or *andantino* 'at a modified—quicker or slower—pace than *andante*'; and *agitato* 'at a rapid tempo.'

adapt / adopt

As the spelling indicates, these are two completely different words: *adapt* is a verb (its noun is *adaptation*) meaning to 'conform, adjust, change, or modify, to suit different conditions'; *adopt* is a verb (its noun is *adoption*) meaning to 'accept as one's own something (often a child) that belongs to someone else; select and pursue a plan; assume or take on'. Something that has undergone adoption is said to be *adopted*: an *adopted child*; the person or people who do the adopting are said to be *adoptive parents*.

adenoid / sinus / tonsil

These organs are situated in the throat and head but are sometimes confused because they are somehow associated with upper respira-

tory ailments. The *tonsils* are small masses of (mainly lymphoid) tissue on each side of the throat; their precise function is unknown, and, in the past, they were removed if they became inflamed or infected; earlier in the 20th century they were thought to be associated with the onset of a number of diseases and were routinely removed from young children whether or not they gave any sign of inflammation or infection. The *adenoids*, properly called the *pharyngeal tonsils*, are situated at the top of the back of the throat, where the throat connects with the nasal passages. These organs can swell and obstruct the flow of air through the nose, especially in children; if they become inflamed or infected, they are sometimes removed. Blockage of the nasal passage can result in an abnormal, muted, nasal manner of speaking. The *sinuses*, properly the *paranasal sinuses*, are air cavities in bones around the nose, between the eyebrows, above the upper teeth, and in the forehead. These may become inflamed and obstructed as a result of any number of disorders, in which case slight changes in atmospheric pressure may cause headache and local pain and tenderness. If the cause is infection, antibiotic medication is usually administered; in other cases, decongestants, analgesics, and inhalants may be prescribed; surgery may be the resort in the event of severe and chronic sinusitis. (See also **upper respiratory tract / lower respiratory tract**.)

adjective / attributive noun

Linguists have classified languages into several types according to their grammar and, consequently, their syntax. (See **grammar / syntax**.) Without going into detail, it is useful to note that in some languages, like Latin, Greek, Sanskrit, Polish, and Russian, the relationships among the words of an utterance are indicated by the various endings that are added (mainly) to nouns, adjectives, and verbs; such endings are called *inflections*, and the languages are classified as *inflecting languages*; some inflecting languages have more inflections than others and are further described as *highly inflecting*, *inflecting*, or *partly inflecting*. Other languages, like Hungarian, Turkish, American Indian languages, and Finnish, express the relationships of ideas in a sentence by combining strings of meaningful elements (called *morphemes*); such languages are called *agglutinating*

languages; to some extent, inflecting languages do that also, but not to the same extent. Although English is a Germanic language, it has developed differently from Modern German in the sense that German has retained many of its earlier characteristics of an inflecting language while English, though it has kept some inflections (especially in the personal pronouns), has lost most of them and depends on word position to determine the relationships among words in a sentence. Chinese functions in a similar fashion, and such languages are called *isolating languages*, with, again, various degrees noted among them. A simple illustration of an important difference between inflecting and isolating languages can be seen in a comparison between a sentence in Latin and one in English. In Latin, *Femina puellam videt* means 'The woman sees the girl'; setting aside matters of style (in which emphasis might be affected by word order), these words could appear in any order—*Videt femina puellam*; *Videt puellam femina*; *Femina puellam videt*; *Puellam femina videt*; *Puellam videt femina*—without any loss of the sense of 'who sees whom.' In English, however, *The woman sees the girl* and *The girl sees the woman* mean entirely different things (and other orders, like, *Sees the girl the woman*, while not entirely impossible if the realm of grammar is to include poetic licence, create gibberish in ordinary English). In Latin, the relationship between *femina* and *puellam*, as to which is the subject of *videt* and which the object, is expressed by the endings -a and -am; although English had such endings at an earlier stage in its development, about a thousand years ago, they gradually disappeared, and *word order* became the criterion by which the relationships of words came to be expressed. It is true that some inflections remain in English—personal pronouns have been mentioned, and the possessive and plural of nouns, though phonetically indistinguishable from one another for the most part, are still different from the only other form—but their numbers cannot be compared with those in truly inflecting languages; some tenses of verbs, for example, are now expressed almost entirely by auxiliaries, like *will* and *have*, rather than by changes of endings attached to roots. In inflecting languages, adjectives usually agree with the nouns they modify in number, gender, and case. In the Latin illustration given above, if the adjective for 'beautiful,' *bella*, were added, in that form it would modify *femina*; in order to modify *puellam*, it would have to be in the same case, *bellam*. (Although most adjectives in Latin can have three genders and five cases each in singular and plural, for various reasons there are only twelve forms to choose from instead of