ROOM'S DICTIONARY OF CONFUSIBLES

Adrian Room

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INTRODUCTION

'Let thy words be few', counsels the unknown author of the Book of Ecclesiastes. Sound advice, too. In everyday life, however, it is an injunction not so easy to obey. Words are *not* few. We are obliged to use words plentifully, even prolifically, if we are to communicate. So round the clock we speak words, hear words, read words, think words and dream words. And it is hardly surprising, therefore, that when communicating we get our wires crossed occasionally. We say one word when we mean another, half-comprehend or misunderstand words, and encounter unfamiliar and 'hard' words daily.

In short, we confuse words.

This dictionary contains a selection of words that are frequently confused, either mentally, and so in unexpressed form, or in our speech and writing. The selection is necessarily a personal one and, of course, it is far from comprehensive. We all have our pet 'confusibles', our own 'I-always-mix-those-up' syndrome. 'Progeny', we read – and half think of 'prodigy'. 'Meaningful dialogue', someone says – and we wonder how meaningful 'duologue' would be in the same context. 'Ostensibly', we write – and reflect that possibly we should have said 'ostentatiously'. Or perhaps even 'ostensively'? It's not just excited children who exclaim: 'She's brought my present!' when they mean 'bought'.

There seem to be two main categories of words that get mixed up. The first type of word is one that is fairly specialised, erudite or bookish. Occasionally it is a rather more familiar word. Either way, it has a knack of involuntarily conjuring up an ordinary, everyday word unrelated to it in origin or meaning, and so produces an incongruous but frequently apt mental association. 'Fatuous', for example. Say, hear or read 'fatuous', and 'fat' will spring to mind. One has the image of a rotund, rather low-grade comic or a portly but not over-witty uncle – an agreeable link. Or how about 'guerrilla'? A corny one, of course, but the association with 'gorilla' is strong enough, and the overtone – common to both words – of hidden danger in the jungle appeals to the whimsical in us.

Such conjured-up words I think of as 'suggestibles'. And a 'suggestible' I would define as 'a word which is involuntarily evoked by another, although unrelated to it in origin or even in meaning'.

Since the germ of 'confusibles' lies in 'suggestibles', it might be interesting to instance one or two more. Here are twenty further examples. For the first ten I indicate what will be, I imagine, the association in most people's minds; for the second ten the reader is left to determine and define his own link, which will probably be both involuntary and spontaneous.

word	*suggestible*	*association*
wainscot	waistcoat	something encircling or surrounding
bombast	bomb	force, power, vigour
latent	late	delayed appearance or materialisation
ambush	bush	concealed snare in the countryside
viking	king	noble ruler or conqueror
jubilee	jubilant	rejoicing, celebration
capstan	captain	symbol of naval strength and authority*
whet	wet	aperitif (which is wet and whets the appetite)
tapir	taper	animal with tapering nose
haggard	hag	wild and ugly looking
hallow	halo	
brackish	bracken	
shrift	shift	
calvary	cavalry	
absinthe	absent	
brunt	blunt	
lemon sole	lemon	
belfry	bells	
greyhound	grey	
walnut	wall	

* Advertising provides another association: that of tobacco and cigarettes.

The last four in this list are vintage suggestibles: words that have come to be firmly yet originally incorrectly associated. 'Lemon sole' has nothing to do with lemons but is derived from a thirteenth-century French word *limande* of unknown meaning. Similarly, 'belfry' has its origin in an old German word *bervrit* or *bercvrit* meaning 'siege-tower' – which the structure once was. 'Greyhound' comes from a conjectured Old English word *grieg*, whose meaning is uncertain, plus 'hound'. (Dog experts claim that greyhounds, moreover, are any colour but grey!) A 'walnut' is not a 'wall nut' but a 'foreign nut'. The Old English word for it was *walh-hnutu*: the first half of this gives Wales and the Welsh their name, since to the Anglo-Saxon invaders they were 'foreigners' in their own land.

If clarification of the linking concepts of the remaining six words is needed, it will be found at the end of the book, Appendix II, page 153.

So much for a suggestible.

What, then, is a confusible?

Obviously, the term is not a linguistic one. It may make some purists flinch, indeed, but it seems a handy word to describe the phenomenon dealt with by the present dictionary, although itself not found in most standard dictionaries of English.

A confusible, basically, is *a word that not only resembles another in spelling and pronunciation, but one that additionally has a similar or associated meaning.* Put

rather more formally, it is a word having a lexical and semantic (but not necessarily etymological) affinity with another. It is thus rather more than a malapropism – as in Mrs Malaprop's famous 'nice derangement of epitaphs' – and closer, perhaps, to a paronym, although linguists are not fully agreed as to what a paronym really is. One definition runs: 'Paronyms are words with an identical root that sound the same but are different in meaning; they are accented on the same syllable, belong to the same part of speech, and express concepts whose distinctions consist in particular additional shades of meaning that serve to define the concept more precisely' (O. V. Vishnyakova, *Paronyms in Russian*, 'Higher School' Publishing House, Moscow, 1974, pp. 8–9). ('Paronym' has the literal meaning of 'beside name'.)

Whereas, however, a suggestible is a fairly common word conjured up by a rarer one, a confusible can be either narrow (or 'specialist'), or ordinary and everyday. Thus confusibles, like misfortunes, never come singly. They are often as not found in pairs, but – as a glance through the headwords of the dictionary will show – also exist in larger groups, so that one has at times quite sizeable 'confusible clusters'. A is confused with B, which is also mixed up with C and sometimes with D . . . and so on.

Simply on the grounds of space, the field of confusible candidates for this selection had to be narrowed in some way. I did this by applying six fairly well defined criteria. If the confusibles met the criteria, and also, of course, conformed to the overall definition above, they were short-listed. A final selection was arrived at rather more subjectively: if the confusibles seemed to be particularly common, or particularly interesting in some way, they were in. Even in cases where one confusible of a pair turns out, after all, not to be a confusible – that is, the two words mean the same after all – the pair was included, if only to show that the supposed *faux amis* are really *vrais* (see, for example, **daring, inflammable**, and **resource**).

The criteria were established by putting each confusible through six paces:

1 Do the words in the pair or larger group resemble each other closely in spelling? Do they in fact contain a high proportion of identical letters (not necessarily in the same order)? Do the words, in particular, begin with the same letters? Most confusibles meet this requirement.

2 Do the words sound alike – are they, that is, homophones or near-homophones? Examples would be **flair/flare, cord/chord, fraction/faction.**

3 Do the confusibles have the same number of syllables? See, for example, **effective/effectual** (the latter usually being pronounced with three rather than four syllables), **flamenco/fandango, sensitivity/sensibility.**

4 Are the confusibles accented on the same syllable? Examples: **discomfort/discomfit, treacherous/traitorous.**

5 Do the confusibles belong to the same part of speech, i.e. are they both verbs, adverbs, adjectives, etc.? Examples: **triumphant/triumphal** (both adjectives), **ostentatiously/ostensibly** (both adverbs), **undoubted/redoubted** (both verbs – in this case both past participles used as adjectives).

6 Can the confusibles be classified under the same stylistic label, i.e. are they both foreign words, technical jargon, scientific terms, slang expressions or the like? This factor can increase the degree of confusibility considerably. Examples: **ménage/manège** (both French words), **malachite/marcasite** (terms from mineralogy), **kinky/kooky** (slang words), **bear/bull** (financial jargon), **e.g./i.e.** (abbreviations – both foreign).

If the answer is 'yes' to one or more of these, and if the confusibles match up to the basic sight-sound-sense criterion, they are likely to find their place in these pages. In some cases, indeed, confusibles exist that conform to all six criteria. Let us check the pair **fraction/faction**, for instance, through all six steps. They look alike (1), sound alike (2), have the same number of syllables (3), are identically stressed (4), are both nouns (5) and both political terms (6). In addition they share a common meaning – 'militant group'. Confusibles, therefore, *par excellence*.

The proportion of everyday confusibles, however, is greater than is perhaps expected. But to confuse 'fuggy' with 'fusty' or 'scamp' with 'scrimp' is not entirely just a matter of a slip of the tongue or of an inadequate mental 'vetting'. Often there is another influence at work. This is the phenomenon known as phonaesthesia – a word as linguistically impressive as 'confusible' is non-technical and general. In the Addenda to the second edition of his *Changing English* (André Deutsch, 1975), the late Professor Simeon Potter defined phonaesthesia thus: 'sound-meaning associations which would seem to be not merely echoic or onomatopoeic but rather linguistically innate and universal'.

Such a definition ties in closely with the nature of a confusible. In practice, phonaesthesia implies that words sounding alike suggest a common general meaning. This is particularly noticeable of many very ordinary words beginning with the same consonant grouping. A number of words starting with 'st-', for example, denote a fixed or rigid state, such as stable, stand, state, static, station, stay, steady, steep, step, stereotype, sterile, stick, still, stone, stop, stout. Several words, again, beginning with 'sl-' express the general notion of a downward gliding motion, such as slack, sledge, sleek, sleep, sleeve, slender, slide, sling, slip, slither, slobber, slope, slow, slumber, slump. The reader may like to apply the idea to other consonants. Try, for example, the dullness and tediousness expressed by 'dr-' words (drag, dreary, dregs, drizzle, droop, drudge), the lightness and superficial rapidity of 'fl-' words (flake, flap, flee, flick, flirt, float, flounce), or the conciseness and precision evoked by 'cl-' words (clasp, class, clean, clench, clever, clinic, clock, cluster). Many words with phonaesthetic properties turn out to be confusibles – see, for instance, **babble, clang, encumber, scamp** and **solid**.

The sixth and last of the criteria, however, is far from being the least important. It is possible, in fact, to consign many pairs or groups of confusibles to the same specific subject category. Words familiar to us because they fall within our own 'speciality' – we are all specialists these days – will not of course confuse. Words outside our own range of subjects or specialities, though, may well turn out to be confusibles. The dictionary includes confusibles from a fairly wide range of subject

categories. Here is a bird's eye preview of some of the more common ones to be represented:

Animals: **crayfish, draught horse, gerbil, macaw, swordfish**
Architecture: **bay window, conduit, pagoda, plaza, suburbia**
Art: **amber, Art Nouveau, baroque, op-art, passe-partout**
Diplomacy: **honourable, mufti, nabob, signor**
Entertainment: **Cinerama, Emmy, flamenco, Gaiety girls, razzmatazz**
Ethnology: **ayah, kraal, Mohawk, mulatto, Scottish**
Fashion: **cashmere, magenta, nylon, organdie, sari**
Food and drink: **amontillado, burgundy, chive, gourmand, viniculture**
Geography: **Arctic, leeward, Micronesia, prairie, tundra**
History: **czarevitch, Gestapo, Ming, rajah, Renaissance**
Linguistics: **Celtic, epsilon, phoneme, umlaut**
Literature: **dialogue, epic, euphemism, preface**
Mathematics: **million, numerator, ordinal, perimeter, rhombus**
Medicine: **bacteria, bile, larynx, orthopaedic, typhoid**
Military: **ammunition, Bren gun, corvette, strategy**
Music: **clavichord, largo, meistersingers, solfeggio, zither**
Mythology: **augury, dryad, jinn, Minotaur, nymph**
Religion: **Buddha, Capuchin, hoodoo, miracle play, sexton**
Science and technology: **albumen, carbon monoxide, cyclotron, quasar**
Sport: **judo, marathon, matador, veteran car**

As well as 'ordinary' words, a certain leavening of proper names has been included. I would have liked to add a seasoning of abbreviations, but confusible abbreviations are legion and really demand a dictionary of their own. A thin representation of abbreviations will nevertheless be found.

The arrangement of the dictionary is straightforward. In the headwords of the entries, confusibles are normally given in the order 'familiar→unfamiliar' or 'general→specific'. This is because in many cases it is the second word that is regarded as a confusible of the first. In some instances, however, this order is not observed, notably where there are more than two confusibles. The order, too, is an arbitrary one where the confusibles are equally current. Confusibles that are not the first headword in an entry are cross-indexed in their appropriate alphabetical place.

The definition in brackets after the headwords is the 'common factor' that unites the confusibles in meaning. It is naturally not a dictionary definition in the accepted sense, but simply a pointer to the association between the words that will occur to most people when they encounter either word of the pair. The definition will show that in many cases the associative link is a limited one: not all senses of a given word are dealt with in the entry. See, for example, the specific confusible sense of **let, move** and **vacant**.

The main entry usually treats the words in the same order as they appear in the heading. In some cases, too, pronunciation and alternative spelling is indicated, and a few entries mention confusibles that, since they do not conform to the basic

criterion, do not appear in their own right (for example 'compliment' in the entry on **supplement**). The main task of each entry, however, is to define and distinguish the words, and this is done mostly by means of brief definitions and examples of usage. The origin of several confusibles is given, especially when it is unexpected. The etymology of a word, in fact, can sometimes give a clue as to *why* the word has come to be a confusible.

Prefixes and suffixes present a particular hazard in the world of confusibles, and they are dealt with separately in Appendix 1, p. 147.

Finally, the dictionary, in its limited and modest scope, aims to be, like its older and wiser brother, the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, 'essentially descriptive rather than prescriptive'. I have tried to show how a given word is actually used – and confused – rather than point to its 'correct' usage. Only rarely is this objective departed from, and then usually in connection with a definition cited by a particular dictionary (see, for example, 'rangy' at **randy**).

References in the text to specific sources or dictionaries indicate the provenance of the confusibles themselves and the authorities consulted concerning them. *Chambers*, for example, is *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary* (revised edition with new supplement, 1977), and *SOED* the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (third edition with corrections, 1975).

Many of the confusibles were extracted from the pages of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* (sixth edition, 1976) where one word and its definition conjured up another or where pairs of confusibles were found lying in reasonably close proximity to each other on the same page. Others were taken from the columns of *Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* (Longmans, 1962) and Martin Lehnert's *Reverse Dictionary of Present-Day English* (VEB Verlag Enzyklopädie, Leipzig, 1973), where over 100,000 words are listed in alphabetical order starting with their final letters. Combing these three works for confusibles was a time-consuming but intriguing operation, which in fact yielded far more candidates than could be accepted.

Other dictionaries consulted apart from *Chambers* and the *SOED* were the first two volumes of the *Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (A–G, 1972 and H–N, 1976), the Hamlyn *Encyclopedic World Dictionary* edited by Patrick Hanks (1971), and the great doyen of American dictionaries, *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (1971 edition, with addenda). This last work's treatment of etymologies is unrivalled.

Partridge invariably refers to Eric Partridge's useful, if now rather dated, *Usage and Abusage* (Penguin Books, 1970), which itself has several entries disentangling confusibles. Another source of a smallish but very valid group of confusibles was the *Associated Press Stylebook* edited by Howard Angione (The Associated Press, New York, 1977). Confusibles can plague a journalist more than most, perhaps.

Specialized words and their meanings I checked in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (fifteenth edition, 1976), and in a number of specific authorities ranging from L. P. Bloodgood and P. Santini's *The Horseman's Dictionary* (Pelham Books, 1963) to J. A. Cuddon's superb *Dictionary of Literary Terms* (André Deutsch, 1977).

I owe, too, a debt to Philip Howard's stimulating little book *New Words for Old*

(Hamish Hamilton, 1977) and Kenneth Hudson's unusual *Dictionary of Diseased English* (Macmillan, 1977). May works such as these, and the BBC's two printed collections of broadcast talks, *Words* (1975) and *More Words* (1977), continue to guard and guide the course of the English language. May they encourage, too, more of us to be word-watchers.

Last of all, but of course not least of all, I must thank my unassuming but most competent secretary, Nicola Village, for watching my own words and setting them all out so well for the printer.

Stamford, Lincolnshire — Adrian Room

DICTIONARY

abaft/abeam (not ahead – of a ship at sea)
Draw an imaginary line through the centre of a ship at right angles to it. Anything behind this line will be 'abaft' – as distinct from 'astern', when it will be to the rear of the stern. Anything actually on this imaginary line, to left or right – port or starboard – will be 'abeam'.

abdicate/abrogate/arrogate/derogate (cancel or alter a person's status)
To 'abdicate' is to renounce formally, as most commonly by a monarch of the throne. The verb can also apply to other kinds of authority or standing, so that one can 'abdicate' one's power, office, duties or rights. To 'abrogate' a law is to cancel it or annul it. To 'arrogate' something is to seize or claim it without right, as when a person 'arrogates' certain privileges to himself. To 'derogate' is to lessen or detract from in some way: to 'derogate' a person's authority, for example, is to undermine it, and to 'derogate' someone's rights is to restrict them. The 'ar-' prefix in 'arrogate' is a form of 'ad-', that is, 'to', with the '-rogate' root of three of the verbs meaning 'ask'.

abeam see **abaft**

ability see **capability**

ablaut see **umlaut**

abrogate see **abdicate**

abrupt/brusque/brisk (peremptory)
'Abrupt' has the basic sense of 'sudden', and referring to someone's manner can suggest rudeness, and imply a discourteous interruption. An 'abrupt' manner can, of course, actually be a sign of shyness, but it tends to be more the hall-mark of extroverts than of introverts. 'Brusque' suggests a businesslike manner, not necessarily a discourteous one. Here, too, brusqueness can indicate the introvert, especially if it takes the form of a kind of gruffness. If 'brush-off' suggests 'brusque' so much the better: the word ultimately goes back to the Latin *brucum* (broom). 'Brisk' is the most extrovert of the three, with no suggestion of shyness. The word implies a lively efficiency and frequently connotes an almost hale and hearty state, as when one walks at a 'brisk' pace in a 'brisk' wind.

abstruse see **obscure**

abuse/misuse (as verb: use improperly; as noun: improper use)
To 'abuse' something is to use it wrongly or badly, as when 'abusing' a privilege or one's authority. To 'abuse' a person is to malign him. To 'misuse' something, on the other hand, is simply to use it for a purpose for which it was not intended, as one's knife for putting cheese into one's mouth. All too often a rarish word gets 'misused' – but hardly ever 'abused'.

Abwehr see **Bundeswehr**

abyss see **crevice**

accidental see **incidental**

accord/account (independently, in the phrases 'of one's own accord', 'on one's own account')
The two phrases are sometimes confused both in meaning and formation ('on' for

'of', and vice versa). To do something 'on one's own account' is to do it with some kind of initiative, whether by oneself or for oneself. Something done 'of one's own accord', however, is done voluntarily, without prompting. Here, too, a measure of initiative is suggested.

account see **accord**

acerbic see **acid**

acid/acrid/acerbic (sharp, stinging)
Apart from its use as a chemical term, 'acid' basically denotes a sharpness or sourness of taste, as of a lemon or an 'acid' drop. Applied to a person it implies a sharp temper or kind of caustic hostility, as seen in an 'acid' remark or an 'acid' tongue. In addition to sharpness, 'acrid' suggests a stinging or smarting quality; an 'acrid' remark is a biting one, and stronger than an 'acid' one. In its literal sense, 'acrid' is often used for smoke and fumes that sting the eyes and nose. 'Acerbic' is less often used as an adjective than 'acid' or 'acrid', but as a noun ('acerbity') is quite often used of words spoken bitterly and usually snappily, as when one is stung into making some kind of retort. The literal sense of 'acerbic' is 'sour-tasting'.

acrid see **acid**

act see **action**

action/act (thing done)
As *Partridge* points out, an 'action' applies in particular to the doing of something, whereas an 'act' refers to the thing done. One can thus take avoiding 'action' – the thing one does is to avoid – as the result of a deliberate 'act' – one that is intentional and thus has a definite consequence. An 'act', too, is usually of short duration, while an 'action' may take some time and indeed consist of several individual 'acts'. This temporal difference is illustrated by such legal terms as 'Act of God' and 'civil action'.

activate/actuate (set working)
'Activate' has the basic sense 'make active' and as such is used mainly in scientific expressions, as to 'activate' sewage (aerate it) and 'activate' carbon (make it more active). 'Actuate' is a more general word whether used in a literal sense of things – to 'actuate' a switch is to operate it – or in a figurative sense of people, where it is usually passive, as when one is 'actuated' by selfish motives. It is in fact close in meaning to 'motivated'.

actuate see **activate**

acuity/acumen (sharpness of mind)
'Acuity' – related to 'acute' with its sense of sharpness – is used of any human faculty and applied to any of the five senses as well as the mind. 'Acumen', however – sometimes wrongly accented on the first syllable instead of the second – is applied to mental sharpness only, suggesting a penetrating mind or a discerning one. It is therefore a virtual synonym for 'perspicacity' – itself a confusible (see **perceptive**).

acumen see **acuity**

addled see **muddled**

adjacent/adjoining (close to, next to)
If one thing is 'adjacent' to another, it borders it or is next to it, without necessarily touching, as a field that is 'adjacent' to the road and 'adjacent' angles in geometry. An 'adjoining' object, however, has a common point with some other object, as an 'adjoining' room or yard, which leads off or into some other part of the premises.

adjoining see **adjacent**

adjure/conjure (entreat)
Both these verbs – each accented on the second syllable – have the general sense of making an earnest request. To 'adjure', however, as implied in its origin from Latin *adjurare* (swear), suggests that the person entreated is put under some kind of oath, whereas to 'conjure', with its origin in Latin *conjurare* (swear together), is properly better applied to more than one person. The verbs are very bookish, though, and can be easily avoided by means of such alternatives as 'implore', 'urge' or 'beg'.

admission/admittance (right to enter)
The difference is between physically entering a place – as in the familiar notice 'No admittance except on business' – and the granting of the right to join a particular group of people, as the 'admission' of a guest to one's club, a patient to hospital, or an immigrant into a foreign country. *Partridge* points out that when these two factors are combined, as when one goes to the cinema or enters a sporting contest, 'admission' is used, often referring to the price demanded – 'Admission 50p'.

admittance see **admission**

ado see **to-do**

adventuresome see **adventurous**

adventurous/adventuresome/venturesome/venturous (bold)
An 'adventurous' person is one who seeks adventure, with the implication that a risk is being taken or that courage is needed. Such a person may well have an 'adventurous' spirit, and enjoy trips that for one reason or another are 'adventurous'. An 'adventuresome' youth, however, takes more of a risk than a purely 'adventurous' one – his involvements may well be foolhardy ones. Rasher still is a 'venturesome' youth, who constantly takes risks and whose exploits are usually hazardous. The word is frequently used to describe a mood or inclination. 'Venturous' is close to 'venturesome' in meaning but describes more the nature of the enterprise than the attitude that prompted it. If a prisoner, one would make a 'venturous' bid for freedom rather than a 'venturesome' one.

adverse to see **averse to**

aeon see **era**

aesthetic/ascetic (refined – of taste)
The basic meaning of 'aesthetic' is appreciating what is beautiful. If one has a well developed 'aesthetic' sense one is, by implication, more artistic than practical. But in their different ways both an athlete and an artisan will have an 'aesthetic' sense if they are aware of the beauty of what they create, in spite of the fact that the artisan, at least, is involved in a practical craft. Someone whose outlook is 'ascetic' is also aware of the finer things of life, but in his case his aims are usually harshly idealistic, with the implication that abstention is the best means of achieving the end. The word has religious connotations – it is therefore not surprising to find its origin in the Greek *asketes* (monk).

affect/effect (exert influence on)
To 'affect' something is to have an 'effect' on it. Smoking thus 'affects' your health. If something 'affects' you it concerns you. The possible harm caused by smoking thus 'affects' all of us. To 'effect' something – the verb cannot apply to people – is to bring it about. Heavy smoking may well 'effect' a deterioration in your health, therefore. The difference lies in the prefixes: 'affect' has *ad-* (towards); 'effect' has *ex-* (out). The first of these denotes a cause; the second . . . an 'effect'.

afflicted see **inflicted**

aggravate/exacerbate/exasperate (irritate)
To 'aggravate' something is to make it worse, as by scratching a mosquito bite. To 'aggravate' a person is to annoy him – a use of the word that some people deplore. To 'exacerbate' a thing – the word is related to 'acerbic' (see **acid**) – is to increase its bitterness or harshness, especially of a disease or someone's bad mood. To 'exasperate' someone is to irritate him in the extreme, usually to a degree of frustration. The root of the word is Latin *asper* (rough).

agnostic see **atheist**

albumen/albumin (substance found in the white of an egg)
Both words derive from Latin *albus* (white). 'Albumen' actually *is* the white of an egg – as a general scientific term – or else the nutritive matter, called the endosperm, round the embryo of a seed. 'Albumin', a narrower chemical term, is the name of a class of proteins soluble in

water. Some biochemists, however, equate 'albumin' with 'albumen', and dictionary definitions of both words vary considerably.

albumin see **albumen**

allegory see **analogy**

Allhallows see **All Saints' Day**

allies/Axis (united forces in Second World War)
Both words denote an alliance of countries. The 'allies' were the armed forces of the allies of Britain, in particular the Americans, French and Russians. These fought against the 'Axis', the name used for the alliance of Germany, Italy and Japan and originating historically from the Rome–Berlin Axis of 1936. The idea was that the 'axis' was the line joining Rome and Berlin – and later extended to Tokyo – with the alliance being the pivot on which the countries revolved. But there was also a London–Washington 'axis', and subsequently a Moscow–Peking one.

allocate/allot (appoint as one's due or share)
To 'allocate' something is to set it aside for a specific purpose. One can thus be 'allocated' a place to park one's car, or a room in a hotel or hostel. To 'allot' something is to give it, but with an implied restriction, and the understanding that one is sharing something. If you are 'allotted' five minutes to make your speech, you must thus share the overall time with everyone else. There's no choice; that will – quite literally – be your lot.

allot see **allocate**

All Saints' Day/All Souls' Day/ Allhallows/Hallowe'en (late autumn festival of religious origin)
'Hallow' means 'holy', so that 'Allhallows' is another name for 'All Saints' Day' on 1 November, when the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches commemorate all the saints thus including all those who have no day of their own at any other time in the year. The day after this is 'All Souls' Day', dedicated by the church to the memory of the faithful departed. These are strictly religious festivals. 'Hallowe'en', originally 'All-hallow-even', is thus the eve of, or day before, 'All Saints' Day', 31 October, which in the old Celtic calendar was the last night of the year. The pagan ceremonies of the day were not very successfully transformed by the church into the eve of a major religious festival. They survive quite healthily in the form of 'Hallowe'en' parties and other traditional customs smacking romantically of witchcraft and general black magic.

All Souls' Day see **All Saints' Day**

allure see **lure**

alternately/alternatively (relating to one of two)
'Alternately' means one after the other, in time or space; 'alternatively' means one *instead* of the other. It's as simple as that.

alternatively see **alternately**

amah see **ayah**

amatory see **amorous**

amber/umber/ochre (shade of yellow or brown)
'Amber', deriving ultimately from an Arabic word meaning 'ambergris', is the colour of the fossil resin, pale yellow, or of the resin itself, which is yellowish brown. Conventionally it is the colour of the 'caution' traffic light and urine. 'Umber' is a type of earth, perhaps originally from Umbria, in Italy, that produces a reddish brown pigment, known also as burnt 'umber'. 'Ochre' is also an earth – a metallic oxide of iron ranging in colour from pale yellow to orange and red and, like 'umber', used as a pigment.

amend/emend (change, alter)
To 'amend' something is to improve it. A bill 'amended' in Parliament is thus altered for the better. The very common verb 'mend' is in fact derived from it, with the improving sense still clear in such an expression as 'mending' one's ways. To

'emend' something, on the other hand, is to correct it, remove the errors from it. The word is most often used with reference to a text of some kind that has been corrected. The noun of 'amend' is 'amendment'; of 'emend' it is 'emendation'.

amiable/amicable (friendly)
'Amiable' is used of a person or his nature or facial expression, so that an 'amiable' workmate might well have an 'amiable' smile to indicate his 'amiable' disposition. 'Amicable' refers to something done with goodwill, in particular an agreement or combined undertaking such as an exchange of views. It is always pleasant when differences can be settled in an 'amicable' way, which can happen when one of the sides is, for once, in an 'amiable' mood.

amicable see **amiable**

ammunition/munitions (offensive weapons)
'Ammunition' comprises virtually all missiles and means of attack fired from weapons of all kinds and includes weapons that are their own means of attack such as bombs, mines and chemical agents. The 'am-' is not a prefix, as the word derives from French *la munition*, which was originally taken as *l'amunition*. 'Munitions' widens the offensive to embrace both 'ammunition' and weapons of all kinds. A 'munitions' factory may thus produce not only shells but the guns that fire them.

amok see **berserk**

amontillado/Montilla/manzanilla/marsala (type of sherry)
Only two of these are true sherries. 'Montilla' is a dry, sherry-type wine made in the region around Montilla, in southern Spain, and 'marsala' is a light-coloured wine resembling sherry shipped from the Sicilian port of Marsala. 'Amontillado', like 'Montilla', comes from the Montilla district, but is a real sherry, a medium dry one, its dry equivalent being called 'fino' and the sweet variety 'oloroso'. 'Manzanilla' is a very dry pale sherry, with its name not deriving from a place but from the Spanish word for 'camomile' (see **calamine**). The sherry itself comes from the vineyards at the mouth of the Guadalquivir in southern Spain – properly from the town of Sanlucar, eight miles west of Seville, near which, intriguingly, there is in fact the small village of Manzanilla.

amoral see **immoral**

amorous/amatory (loving)
An 'amorous' poem could, if the writer chose, be an erotic or even lewd one. An 'amatory' poem, however, is simply one written by a lover. Similarly an 'amorous' look could mean business, but an 'amatory' look is just one given by someone in love. Put another way, 'amorous' may imply the physical aspect of love; 'amatory' pertains to love in the abstract.

anaesthetic/analgesic (as noun: deadener of pain or bodily sensation)
The prime purpose of an 'anaesthetic' is to deaden sensation locally or generally, the latter resulting in unconsciousness. An 'analgesic' may also deaden sensation, but its basic aim is to relieve or remove pain by blocking the transmission of nerve impulses. A mild 'analgesic' is aspirin, a strong one is morphine. Both words have the Greek prefix *an-* denoting absence of, respectively, feeling and pain.

analgesic see **anaesthetic**

analogy/allegory (artistic device whereby one thing is compared to another, unlike it)
The essential feature of an 'analogy' is that although two things may partially resemble each other, or be alike, they are basically of quite a different nature. Compare death to sleep and you have an 'analogy'. You also have a metaphor if you say death *is* sleep, and it's an extended metaphor that is the basis of an 'allegory', which is a story told in symbolic terms. Examples of an 'allegory' are, in literature, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and, in art, Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat*.

Anderson shelter/Morrison shelter (type of air-raid shelter in Second World War)
The 'Anderson shelter', named after Sir John Anderson, British Home Secretary