

Dictionary of
**CONFUSING
WORDS AND
MEANINGS**

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INTRODUCTION

This Dictionary is a revised and enlarged blend, in a single volume, of two earlier books: *Room's Dictionary of Confusibles* (first published in 1979) and *Room's Dictionary of Distinguishables* (1981). The aim of those books was to try and sort out a selection of words that are annoyingly similar in sound or meaning, with the former called 'confusibles' and the latter 'distinguishables'. 'Confusibles', thus, are words that not only have a similar sound and spelling, and a common or at any rate apparently common link of meaning, but are even often mutually related linguistically. Examples are pairs such as 'banister' and 'baluster', 'luxurious' and 'luxuriant', 'dominating' and 'domineering'. 'Distinguishables' are words that may be unlike each other in sound or spelling, but are closely related in meaning, such as 'boat' and 'ship', 'referee' and 'umpire', 'town' and 'city'. Many 'distinguishables' are in fact nouns.

English is plagued with words of both kinds, and the wrong use of one in place of another is something that can not only bother us but even disturb and embarrass, or at least frustrate. Someone says, 'He's a real bon vivant', for example, and while mentally sorting out the exact meaning of this we also wonder 'Shouldn't that be "bon vivant"?' Or we may find ourselves saying, 'We've been allocated three tickets', and then wondering whether we should have said 'allotted'. And how about the excited child who runs home and exclaims 'I brought that book!' 'Brought' or 'bought'? Perhaps even both? Such doubts arise in writing, too, and with the many quirky English spellings also to bother about, it is hardly surprising that several 'lookalike' and apparent 'meanalike' words cause problems there as well. And this is to say nothing of the misprints one all too often comes across in the media (can they in fact *all* be misprints?), to add to the general verbal confusion. (In its Court & Social column of 10 January 1985, *The Times* mentioned that the Queen Mother was Colonel-in-Chief of the 'Royal Anglican Regiment'. No doubt, wrote a correspondent subsequently, in a letter to the Editor, the regiment's regimental march was 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.)

Many such pairs of words are more or less coincidental 'false friends', where there is no actual linguistic link, such as 'loot' and 'booty', 'Pom' and 'Peke', 'gad' and 'gallivant', 'mould' and 'mildew'. It is simply the chance similarity of sound and sense that causes the difficulty.

Looking more closely at such pairs (or larger groups), it is possible, however, to pin down some particular areas where confusion may occur. It may be helpful to identify these, and reveal them for what they are,

so that we know what we are up against when we next venture into their hypnotic territory!

The first area is that of 'hard' words generally, ones that form part of our passive vocabulary rather than being in the familiar wordstock on which we actively draw daily to say or write what we wish to communicate. Among such pairs may be ones such as 'abrogate' and 'abdicate', 'assiduous' and 'sedulous', 'faculties' and 'facilities'. These need careful distinguishing if our meaning is to be clear, or if we are to understand exactly what a speaker or writer intends.

The second, more specialised area, but rather a large one, comprises words in technical fields with which we may not be very familiar. Such a field may be in science, for example, or in sport, politics, education, or any other sphere where we do not really feel at home. Many of us have our own field in which we are specialists of a kind, but we cannot be specialists in all the other fields as well, and when we encounter words from those unfamiliar areas, in the media, for example, there can be difficulties. If we are not a scientist, we may thus have problems with such pairs as 'apogee' and 'perigee', 'albumen' and 'albumin', 'polythene' and 'polystyrene', even 'genus' and 'species', and 'comet' and 'meteor' (and which of those, if either, is a 'shooting star'?) Or take medicine, even of the most homely or 'aches and pains' kind. What is the difference between 'measles' and 'German measles' (or 'rubeola' and 'rubella')? If you twist your ankle on a kerbstone, have you 'strained' it or 'sprained' it? Perhaps you have 'wrenched' it, or simply 'ricked' it? It may help to know which is correct, if only to tell the doctor! And if the doctor himself says that you may have fractured your 'fibula', where is this in relation to your 'tibia'? Other specialised fields have similar frustrations.

The third area, perhaps, consists of those words which you can confidently identify in meaning, but whose different endings cause doubts. We have already mentioned 'luxurious' and 'luxuriant'. Quite clearly, both are related to 'luxury', but to give what particular shade of meaning or usage? Is a soft warm bed a 'luxurious' one or a 'luxuriant' one? Can one lie in summer on 'luxuriant' grass or 'luxurious' grass? If you half mow the lawn, have you 'partly' mown it or 'partially'? There are several closely linked words of this type. Similar hesitations can be caused by words whose second half or ending is identical, yet whose first parts are quite different. Such words may even be opposites, so it is even more important to get the right one! Examples are 'windward' and 'leeward', 'subject' and 'object' (a 'subject' of interest or an 'object' of interest?), and even 'overtone' and 'undertone'.

Certain suffixes can cause difficulties in some of the 'specialist' categories mentioned, especially in science, so that only a real expert can tell you what the difference is between 'chlorine', 'chloride', 'chlorate' and

'chlorite'. Some of these suffixes were purposely devised by scientists for their own esoteric purposes (so that '-ite', for example, denotes the name of the salt of an acid whose own name ends in '-ous', with 'nitrite' therefore being a salt of 'nitrous' acid.) This may be beautifully logical and consistent, but hardly helps the poor non-scientist who may come across such a word on a container or preparation of some kind, and wonder exactly what he is dealing with.

A special area of difficulty can be caused by the quite large numbers of foreign words that have been adopted by English, some in their native spelling and complete with their native accents. Examples here might be 'au fait' and 'au courant', 'baroque' and 'rococo', and even menu French 'mousse' and 'soufflé'. Many individual foreign words and phrases cause problems to the insular English, and our usual reaction is to ignore the precise meaning and go instead for a face-saving schoolboy-type pun. So the Chancellor of the Exchequer (or someone in the news) is 'hors de combat', is he? That will teach the old warhorse! Or not all the wedding guests have arrived yet, *tant pis*. Never mind, auntie will be here when she has finished powdering her nose.

A final type of confusing word is a much more homely one, and much more natural than the rather 'rarefied' scientific and other specialised words already mentioned. This is the sort of word that has a sound matching its meaning, or at least suggesting it, and surprisingly often one finds that there can be a whole group of similar words that all share the same shade of meaning. A word like 'slope', for example, is very like 'slip', and in some contexts it may be difficult to decide whether one wants to say 'slope off' or 'slip off' to mean 'leave quietly and unobtrusively'. The need to produce the right word may be all the more urgent, in fact, since words and phrases like this are mostly used in speech rather than in writing, where there is more time to stop and consider. Both these particular words, with their initial letter-group 'sl-', belong to quite an extensive family of words that all suggest a 'down-gliding' movement. Others in the group are slack, sleek, sleep, sleeve, slender, slide, slither, slobber, slop, slow, slumber and slump. Did the slinky snake slide, slither or simply slip through the open door? Do Eskimos travel with sleighs, sleds or sledges? These words (see **sleigh** in the Dictionary) are part of this group, too.

The whole phenomenon is technically known as 'phonaesthesia' (literally 'sound-feeling' or 'sound-sensitivity') and this term is used by linguists to apply to words that share a common sound and sense, especially a basic one of this type. The late Professor Simeon Potter defined phonaesthesia as 'sound-meaning associations which would seem to be not merely echoic or onomatopoeic but rather linguistically innate and universal'. Not surprisingly, many such words are genuine 'confusibles' for our

purpose, and for others the reader is recommended to refer in the Dictionary to **babble, clang, encumber, scamp** and **solid**.

Exploring and categorising such groups can be a fascinating pastime, and also a useful one, and the reader may like to consider other letter-groups besides 'sl-' for similar sense patterns, and similar 'confusibles', therefore. Many words that begin with 'st-', for example, often denote a fixed or rigid state, such as stable, stand, static, stay, steady, step, sterile, stick, still, stone, stop, stout and 'state' itself. Should we therefore 'take a stand' (or 'make a stand') or 'adopt a stance', perhaps? If something does not move, is it 'static' or 'stationary'? Or take the opening letters 'fl-', which begin many words denoting a light, delicate movement, such as flake, flap, flick, flicker, flirt, flitter, float, flounce and flurry. In this group, if you wish to escape, should you 'fly' or 'flee'? Do the little birds flit, flitter or flutter from tree to tree? Did you 'flick' that cloth or 'flap' it? Again, there could be a difference! Finally, although it is tempting to go on and hunt for more, let us consider some confusingly similar sounds and senses from another such group. Did the dog 'drivel' or 'drool' as you prepared its meal? Perhaps it 'dribbled'? Was it the drops of rain or the dripping rain that drenched you? Are those dull-coloured dresses 'dreary' or 'drab'? Have your spirits 'drooped' or 'dropped' altogether after all these alternatives?

Whether it is 'confusibles' or 'distinguishables' that are in question, this Dictionary, like its predecessors, endeavours to sort them out and clarify them. The actual arrangement of the Dictionary is straightforward. In the headings of the entries, the words are usually given in the order 'familiar before unfamiliar' or 'common before less common'. In some cases, a pair of words may have a traditional order, and this is usually kept to, such as 'port' and 'starboard', 'hawks' and 'doves', 'hardware' and 'software'. Words that are not the first in a heading are cross-indexed separately in their correct alphabetical place.

The definition in brackets after the headwords is the 'common factor' or 'sense link' that frequently springs to mind, even when it is not quite the right one. A 'privilege' and a 'prerogative' are really quite distinct in their meaning, therefore, but the general sense of both words, together with their similar appearance, can justify the definition given for them of 'special right or advantage'. In a few cases, words that are sometimes believed to have different meanings, but actually mean one and the same thing, are included in their own entry. An example can be found for the words 'gorse', 'furze' and 'broom', which are all names of a single plant, the shrub botanically known as *Ulex europaeus*. Again, it does not follow that *all* meanings of a word will be given in an entry. It is only the confusing 'overlap' that is concerned with here. Readers who wish for more detailed information on the various senses of a word, or would like

more examples of usage than are given here, should consult a good, up-to-date dictionary, such as the latest edition of the *Concise Oxford* or *Chambers Twentieth Century Dictionary*. Both Collins and Longman have published good English dictionaries, too, and the latter (*Longman Dictionary of the English Language*) has a number of special comments (so-called 'essays') dealing with the very kind of word, similar in sound or sense to another, that forms the basis of this present Dictionary.

The *Dictionary of Confusing Words and Meanings*, as already mentioned, is not only a revision of the two earlier dictionaries but an expansion of them, so that although a very few entries have now been omitted (mainly ones dealing with obsolete usages), fifty new ones have been added, making a grand total of around 3000 words to be individually treated in pairs or larger groups. Many of the new words now included came from my own material. Several, however, were suggested by correspondents good enough to propose them after the publication of the former books. I would here particularly like to thank Keith Thomas, of Canberra, Australia, who wrote more than once with interesting suggestions for inclusion, Walter Perdeck, of Groningen, Holland, who sent a similar list, and Mrs Margery Green of Chalfont St Giles, who kindly transcribed and despatched an agreeable selection of actual 'clangers' in words and meanings that she had collected over the years from the media, notably radio and television and the local press. I owe the new entry 'oh/o' to an anonymous correspondent who sent me a postcard on which, apart from my name and address, these were the sole words. If he or she should chance to read this, my thanks for the contribution and also the briefest communication I can remember ever receiving.

As can probably be imagined, the collating and combining of the entries of the two previous dictionaries to make this new one was a sizeable 'paste and scissors' task, as well as an editorial one, and for timely and willing assistance in the physical preparation of the new material I would like to acknowledge the help of Louise Hamer, who completed the assignment in under a week, thus enabling me to meet my own deadline.

Finally, any comments that readers may feel like sending on their own pet 'confusions', whether included in the Dictionary or not, will always be welcome. We who speak English, or are learning the language, are after all the masters, and we must make these annoying differences our servants, not our stumbling-blocks!

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Adrian Room

What is the difference between a warder and a jeweller?
One watches cells and the other sells watches.

Age-old schoolchildren's **riddle**, which is a **conundrum** containing a double **pun**. (See **pun** itself for the difference between the three of these, and even **warden** for the difference between him and a **warder**.)

A

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'.

abbey see (1) **cathedral**, (2) **monastery**

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'.

abdomen see **stomach**

abeam see **abaft**

ability see **capability**

ablaut see **umlaut**

abolition/dissolution/prorogation
(ending or annulling of something)

The terms are used for the ending of something that has been legally or politically sanctioned or established. 'Abolition' means ending for good, and is used in particular of slavery and capital punishment – both of which were suddenly found to be shameful and entirely undesirable. 'Dissolution' is

used more of the breaking up or dispersal of something, especially parliament for a new session, or historically the suppression ('Dissolution') of the monasteries by Henry VIII in the 1530s. 'Prorogation' is the discontinuing of the meetings of parliament without a 'dissolution', that is, the official ending of one session, when parliament 'stands prorogued', until the day of meeting of a new session. The 'prorogation' of parliament usually extends from late July or early August to October or November, when another session will begin.

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 *bruscus* (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.

absolution see **acquittal**

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**

accent see **dialect**

acciaccatura see **appoggiatura**

accident/incident (mishap, casualty or disaster, sometimes with loss of life)

An 'accident' is a general word for a disaster or mishap of some kind, such as a road 'accident' or a train 'accident'. Common 'accidents' that make news locally or nationally are fires, crashes and explosions. An 'incident' can be any of these, but the word is normally used by those who deal with it professionally, such as a rescue service (for example police or firemen) or reporters. An 'incident' at sea might thus mean a collision of ships or a fire or explosion on a ship. 'Incidents' are usually seen as single occurrences in the professional life of the people involved, such as military personnel or hospital staffs. An 'incident' can also, however, be a diplomatic encounter of nationalities at a border, with or without casualties, and an 'incident' outside a pub may be not much more than a minor public disturbance, a drunken brawl or threat of violence. These are not 'accidents'. The media sometimes seem to find it difficult to decide which word to use when reporting a disaster or tragedy. *The Times*, for example, when reporting (in its issue for 12 January 1985) an event headlined 'Three killed in Pershing accident', begins by talking of an 'accident' but ends by referring to it as an 'incident'. Even the professionals sometimes hesitate. A senior London fireman, interviewed on television about an explosion in a block of flats, began a sentence 'This accident . . .' but then corrected himself to 'This incident . . .', almost as if the former word were not quite 'professional' enough.

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.

accordion/concertina (portable musical instrument with reeds and bellows)

The 'accordion' first appeared in Vienna in the 1820s. The early models had buttons at both ends – unlike the modern 'piano accordion', which has a piano-style keyboard for the right hand – and were so-called 'single action', meaning that the instrument's reeds, arranged in pairs, gave one note on the press or push and another on the draw or pull. Later models, and always the 'piano accordion', have 'double action', meaning that both reeds in a pair are tuned to the same note so that both the press and the draw of the bellows will give an identical note. The 'concertina' appeared a few years after the 'accordion' in London, with its characteristic hexagonal bellows and buttons, never a keyboard, at both ends. 'Concertinas' are almost always 'double action', with the reeds producing the same note when the bellows are either compressed or expanded. There is, however, a type of German 'concertina', known in its more sophisticated form as an 'Anglo-German concertina' (just an 'Anglo' to professionals), which is 'single action', like the early 'accordions'. On both English and German 'concertinas' alternate notes of the scale are produced by the right hand and the left, but in the so called duet-system 'concertina' a complex chromatic scale is provided for each hand. Although largely superseded by the 'accordion' in the twentieth century, the 'concertina' must not be under-rated: Tchaikovsky has four of them in the score of his second orchestral suite, opus 53.

account/bill/invoice/statement

(document stating debit, credit or balance)

An 'account', in commercial terms, is a record of money or goods or services received and expended, as typically an 'account' settled with a firm monthly by a private customer. A 'bill' – as if we didn't know – is a note of charges for goods delivered or services rendered, payable either on receipt or entered in an 'account'.

An 'invoice' is a list of goods sent or services performed, with prices and charges. Firms usually indicate if an 'invoice' also serves as a 'bill'. A special type of 'bill' is a 'bill of exchange'. This involves the payment of money and is an official order in writing, signed by the person giving it, to pay a particular sum to a specified person or to the bearer – that is, to the person who presents it. A well known form of 'bill of exchange' is a cheque. A 'statement' is a formal record of a customer's or client's liabilities and assets, or of an amount due to a tradesman or firm. A bank 'statement' – in full, 'statement of account' – records transactions made through a bank, by cheque and otherwise, over a given period, the balance, or amount one has in the bank ('when overdrawn marked OD'), being noted on the occasion of each transaction.

account (in phrase 'on one's own account')
see **accord**

acerbic see **acid** (sharp, stinging)

ache/pain (sensation of bodily discomfort)
An 'ache' can be dull or sharp, and is usually fairly persistent, as a 'headache', 'toothache' or 'backache'. A 'pain' is usually sharp rather than dull, but is sudden and normally of short duration, as a 'pain' in one's leg from cramp or in one's ankle from a sprain. 'Pain', too, may be mental or emotional, as the 'pain' of parting, but 'ache' – apart from 'heartache' – is usually a physical thing. English spelling is capricious, heaven knows, but why can't 'ache' be spelt 'ake'? The answer is that it once was, at least the verb was, while the noun, spelt as now, was actually pronounced 'aitch'. This went on till about 1700, when the noun, keeping its spelling, came to be pronounced the same way as the verb 'ake'. (Compare the similar pair of 'make' and 'match' – where, however, the noun is still pronounced with a 'tch'.)

achievement/exploit/feat (special accomplishment)

An 'achievement' often implies a number of setbacks and difficulties, all of which had to be dealt with and overcome, resulting finally in success. An 'exploit' connotes bravery of

some kind, or an act performed with ingenuity or even cunning. The word comes to English from the Latin, via French, meaning 'something unfolded', almost so that one sees it as a flowering or blooming, which can be looked back on and admired. A 'feat' implies the carrying out of something difficult, usually a single act of some kind, as a 'feat' of showmanship or of strength. It's a word not frequently used in English, no doubt because of the rather ludicrous image conveyed by such a phrase as 'Walk in space – astronaut's great feat'. In the original Latin it means, rather prosaically, 'something done'.

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'.

acid/alkali (corrosive chemical substance)
Chemically, the two are opposites, as shown by litmus paper, which is turned red by an 'acid' and blue by an 'alkali'. Since they are chemically opposites, the one therefore neutralises the other, which is why a primitive way of reducing the irritation of an insect bite ('acid') is to put washing soda on it ('alkali'). In a complementary way, too, an 'acid' reacts chemically with an 'alkali' to form a salt. The first known 'acid' was vinegar. Chemically (again), the definition of an 'acid' is a substance which in solution in an ionising solvent (usually water) gives rise to hydrogen ions. An 'alkali' is a base – today the more common word in chemistry – that is soluble in water, when it forms a caustic or corrosive solution,

as caustic soda (sodium hydroxide) or ammonia. The word, like a surprising number of words starting 'al-' (alcohol, algebra, alcove) is Arabic, and means 'the calcined ashes': 'alkalis' were formerly obtained from wood and bone ashes.

acquittal/exoneration/absolution (freeing from blame)

An 'acquittal' is a release from a particular accusation. The word has a legal ring to it, and in law it actually means a setting free not only from the guilt of an offence but also from the suspicion of an offence. (Someone who has been officially acquitted of a criminal offence may plead *autrefois acquit* or 'formerly acquitted' if subsequently charged with an offence that is legally the same.) An 'exoneration' is a clearing from the blame of an offence – even when the person concerned has actually admitted to the act. The word is of Latin origin, meaning 'disburdened'. An 'absolution' has something of a religious overtone: the formal act of a priest pronouncing the forgiveness of sins to those who are penitent and confess them. Of the three words here, however, 'absolution' is the most general in meaning.

acrid see **acid** (sharp, stinging)

Act/Bill (type of parliamentary law)

An 'Act', in Parliament, is properly a 'Bill' that has been passed by both the House of Commons and the House of Lords and assented to by the Queen. A 'Bill' is a draft 'Act' of Parliament which can be presented to either House, either as a Public 'Bill' (the majority), which involves measures relating to public policy, or as a Private 'Bill', which relates to matters of individual, corporate or local interest. (The latter is not the same as a Private Member's 'Bill', which is a Public 'Bill' introduced by a private member, that is, an MP who is not a minister.) A 'Bill' is passed by three readings in the House in which it was presented, and is then sent to the other House. When it has passed through these stages and received the Queen's formal assent, it becomes an 'Act' – in legal vocabulary, a statute. However, under the provisions of the Parliament 'Acts' 1911 and 1949, a 'Bill' passed by the House of Commons may

receive the royal assent and become an 'Act' without the agreement of the Lords.

act (thing done) see **action**

action/act (thing done)

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 confusable (see **perceptive**).

acumen see **acuity**

acute see **chronic**

addenda see **supplement** (at end of book)

adder see **viper**

added 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 £2.50'.

admission (acknowledgment of guilt)
see **confession**

admittance see **admission** (right to enter)

ado see **to-do**

adventuresome see **adventurous**

**adventurous/adventuresome/venture-
some/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

advice note/delivery note (document indicating that goods are on their way)

An 'advice note' is sent by the supplier to the customer before the invoice (see **account**). It is sometimes sent in advance of the goods, or alternatively together with them. A 'delivery note' is similar, but it always accompanies the goods and is often in duplicate, the recipient signing one copy and returning the other. The signed copy is then taken by the deliverer back to the vendor as evidence that the goods have been delivered.

aeon see **era**

aerodrome/airport/airfield (place where aeroplanes take off, land, and are housed and serviced)

An 'aerodrome' is a general word for an 'airfield' that is usually a smallish, civil and private one. An 'airport' is a large 'aerodrome', especially one for public passengers, and often of international status, with several large buildings. 'Airport' is very much a twentieth-century word, arising on an analogy with a sea **port**. An 'airfield' is much more than just a field, of course. The word particularly applies to service (RAF) air bases. The term gained popularity after the Second World War. Churchill, in his *The Second World War*, wrote, 'For "aerodrome" either "airfield" or "airport"'

[should be used]', adding, 'the expression "airdrome" should not be used by us'. So far, it has not been.

aerospace see **airspace**

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 abstinence 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**

African elephant/Indian elephant
(species of elephant)

These are two vintage distinguishables, eminently suitable for quizzes and general knowledge contests. 'The African elephant is distinguished from the Asian elephant by its larger ears and flatter forehead', says *Everyman's Encyclopaedia*. Probably the ears are the obvious feature: the 'African elephant's' ears come right down over its shoulders, while the ears of the 'Indian elephant' are strikingly small by comparison. The 'African elephant' is also in fact rather a

darker grey, and inclined to be fiercer. It is also rarer than its Asiatic cousin. A further, delicate distinction is that the 'African elephant' has two sensitive 'finger-tips' at the end of its trunk, whereas the 'Indian elephant' has only one.

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 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**

airfield see **aerodrome**

airport see **aerodrome**

airspace/aerospace (space in which aircraft fly)

The two terms are confusingly similar. 'Airspace' is the territorial air – the equivalent of territorial waters – that lies above a country and that is within its jurisdiction. One thus has 'violation of "airspace"' when an aircraft of one country flies through the air over another country who will not permit such an incursion for political or strategic reasons. 'Aerospace' is the umbrella term for the region of flight of aircraft *and* spacecraft, that is, flight in the atmosphere and outer space. More commonly the word is used of the technology of such aviation. The expression is American in origin, although Britain uses it in this sense and indeed had a Minister for 'Aerospace' in the Conservative government of 1970–4.

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**

ale/bitter/mild/stout/lager (type of beer)
The word 'ale' is now a historic one for beer except as used commercially or as a trade name, such as India Pale Ale ('IPA'), a pale or light beer originally brewed for export to India. 'Mild' and 'bitter' have names accurately reflecting their respective tastes: 'mild' beer is not strongly flavoured with hops, 'bitter' is. ('Mild and bitter' is a mixture of the two, which rather seems to negate the point of the flavouring.) 'Stout' is a strong, dark beer with roasted malt or barley, while 'lager' is 'continental beer', a light kind of beer which properly is kept in cold store (German *Lager*, 'store') for some months to mature and then drunk chilled. All beers have long been a staple drink in England, with 'stout' something of a connoisseur's beverage (Guinness is a well-known brand of it), and 'lager' increasing in popularity from the 1970s.

alkali see **acid** (corrosive chemical substance)

alliance see **loyalty**

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.

alligator see **crocodile**

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/All-hallows/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.

alternating current/direct current (type of electric current)

'Alternating current' (AC) is the one most commonly found in the home and in commercial use. The voltage 'alternates', that is, the flow reaches a maximum in one direction then decreases and reverses until it reaches a maximum in the opposite direction. This cycle is repeated continuously. 'Direct current' (DC) has a flow that does not change direction. This is the current produced in batteries and fuel cells. It lost out commercially to AC in the 1880s because it cannot be transmitted over long distances at a high voltage and then transformed economically at a low voltage. DC made something of a comeback in the 1960s and is sometimes used today in conjunction with predominantly AC systems. (In 'underground' or 'hippie' jargon 'AC/DC' means 'bisexual', the reference being to an electric appliance that can operate on both types.)

alternatively see **alternately**

alto see **treble**

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. 'Umbre' 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'armunition*. '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 or sherry-type wine)

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', however, so called from its likeness to a 'montilla', 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 Sanlúcar, 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.

amplifier see **loudspeaker**

amps see **volts**

amulet see **charm**

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 at the outbreak of the war, was a smallish prefabricated shelter, usually half buried in the back garden. The 'Morrison shelter' was essentially an indoor construction, made of steel and shaped like a table. It was designed to give protection if the house collapsed, and was named after Herbert Morrison, British Secretary of State for Home Affairs from 1940 to the end of the war.

anger/fury/rage/indignation (strong sense of annoyance)

These are specialised types of temper. 'Anger' often involves a strong feeling of revenge for a wrongdoing, and may be suppressed or suddenly expressed. 'Fury' is great 'rage' – which itself is violent 'anger'. This leaves 'indignation', which usually implies a moral or 'proper' 'anger', especially when directed against something unworthy or outrageous. See also **fury** itself.

angle/tangent (point where one line meets another or leaves it)

An 'angle' is a space between two meeting (straight) lines. A 'tangent' is a line that meets a curved one at a point and has the same direction at this point, so touches it. Both words are used figuratively, as the 'angle' or viewpoint from which something is considered, or a speaker or writer who goes off at a 'tangent' – suddenly diverges from the matter in hand. (In this latter phrase, the line is seen as leaving the curve, not meeting it.)

animal/mammal (living creature, usually warm-blooded)

All 'mammals' except man are 'animals', but not all 'animals' are 'mammals', although popularly the two words are equated. Strictly speaking, 'mammals' are all 'animals', including man, that nourish

their young with milk from their *mammary* glands, i.e. from the breast of the female, and that usually have their skin more or less covered with hair. (Whales are an exception here, because of the hydrodynamics needed for their mostly submarine existence.) 'Mammals', too, are usually four-footed and warm-blooded. On the other hand, 'animals' in a loose sense can include just about any living creature, even reptiles and fish, so that the word is contrasted with 'plant' rather than 'mammal'. Popularly, however, 'animals' equate with 'mammals' as defined here, and the word embraces those creatures with which man is most familiar in homes, fields and zoos.

announce/pronounce/proclaim (declare publicly)

'Announce' is the general word – to say what is going to happen. One thus 'announces' one's plans for the future or the time of the proposed next meeting. To 'pronounce' something is to declare it solemnly or authoritatively, frequently in public. The key point in the Anglican marriage service is when the priest 'pronounces' that the man and woman 'be Man and Wife together'. To 'proclaim' something is to 'announce' it – but widely, so that it is generally known, as the results of an election. Something 'proclaimed', such as a holiday, may result from a decision of some kind.

annual/perennial (occurring every year)

If something is 'annual' it happens every year, once a year. We are all familiar with 'annual' visits to the dentist, tax returns and Christmas parties. The literal meaning of 'perennial', from Latin *per* (through) and *annus* (year) is 'lasting right through the year', i.e. continuous. The word is often used, though, to mean 'recurrent', as a 'perennial' problem. The noun 'perennial', meaning the plant, is technically regarded as one that lasts more than two years, as distinct from the 'annual', which lasts one year, and the 'biennial' (see **biannual**).

anorak/parka (warm weatherproof jacket with a hood)

The 'anorak' originated in the Arctic as a Greenland Eskimo word for the skin or cloth

hooded jacket worn in the icy polar regions. It is now the word for a similar jacket, often a blue or green quilted one, used for everyday wear as an outdoor coat. A 'parka' is similar, but tends to be used for specific purposes such as mountaineering. It, too, is an Eskimo word in origin, but from much further east, from the Aleutian Islands, off the south-west coast of Alaska. The garment is in fact more of a thick smock, slipping over the head, than the 'anorak', which usually has a front fastening, as a zip. Genuine Eskimo 'parkas' are much longer, too, reaching to the thighs or even knees. Many so-called 'parkas' today, however, are simply glorified 'anoraks', although they usually have a fur-lined or fur-fringed hood and thus resemble the Eskimo original, which is fully lined with caribou, seal or other fur. (Eskimo women wear 'parkas' that have an extra hood in which a small child can be wrapped.)

antagonist/protagonist (leader of a cause or campaign)

A 'protagonist' is, properly, the leading character in a novel or play. Possibly under the influence of the better known 'antagonist' it has come to acquire the popular meaning of one who champions or supports a cause. But an 'antagonist' is really someone opposed to someone else, an opponent. Confusion over 'protagonist', too, has occurred through Greek *protos* (first) being misunderstood as the prefix 'pro-' (for).

Antarctic see **Arctic**

antiquarian/antiquary (one dealing in old or historical objects)

Basically, an 'antiquarian' is a person who is interested in old objects and an expert on them. An 'antiquary' – the accent is on the first syllable – is by contrast someone who tends to concentrate more on old objects that are curiosities rather than, say, the findings of an archaeological expedition. This is not to say that an 'antiquary' is not an expert; he can in fact be a real professional or specialist, even if his occupation seems more of a hobby than a full-time occupation. The two words can overlap, though, since they have a common