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25 Words That Are Their Own Opposites

BY JUDITH HERMAN

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Here's an ambiguous sentence for you:

"Because of the agency's oversight, the corporation's behavior was sanctioned."

Does that mean, "Because the agency oversaw the company's behavior, they imposed a penalty for some transgression," or does it mean, "Because the agency was inattentive, they overlooked the misbehavior and

gave it their approval by default”?

We’ve stumbled into the looking-glass world of contronyms—words that are their own antonyms.

1. *Sanction* (via French, from Latin *sanctio* (*n-*), from *sancire* ‘ratify,’) can mean “give official permission or approval for (an action)” or conversely, “impose a penalty on.”

2. *Oversight* is the noun form of two verbs with contrary meanings, “oversee” and “overlook.” *Oversee*, from Old English *ofersēon* (“look at from above”) means “supervise” (medieval Latin for the same thing: *super-*, “over” plus *videre*, “to see.”) *Overlook* usually means the opposite: “to fail to see or observe; to pass over without noticing; to disregard, ignore.”

3. *Left* can mean either remaining or departed. If the gentlemen have withdrawn to the drawing room for after-dinner cigars, who’s left? (The gentlemen have left and the ladies are left.)

4. *Dust*, along with the next two words, is a noun turned into a verb meaning

either to add or to remove the thing in question. Only the context will tell you which it is. When you dust are you applying dust or removing it? It depends whether you're dusting the crops or the furniture.

5. *Seed* can also go either way. If you seed the lawn you add seeds, but if you seed a tomato you remove them.

6. *Stone* is another verb to use with caution. You can stone some peaches, but please don't stone your neighbor (even if he says he likes to get stoned).

7. *Trim* as a verb predates the noun, but it can also mean either adding or taking away. Arising from an Old English word meaning "to make firm or strong; to settle, arrange," *trim* came to mean "to prepare, make ready." Depending on who or what was being readied, it could mean either of two contradictory things: "to decorate something with ribbons, laces, or the like to give it a finished appearance" or "to cut off the outgrowths or irregularities of." And the context doesn't always make it clear. If you're trimming the tree are you using tinsel or a chain saw?

8. *Cleave* can be cleaved into two homographs, words with different origins that end up spelled the same.

Cleave, meaning "to cling to or adhere," comes from an Old English word that took the forms *cleofian*, *clifian*, or *clīfan*.

Cleave, with the contrary meaning "to split or sever (something)"—as you might do with a cleaver—comes from a different Old English word, *clēofan*. The past participle has taken various forms: *cloven*, which survives in the phrase "cloven hoof," "cleft," as in a "cleft palate" or "cleaved."

9. *Resign* works as a contronym in writing. This time we have homographs, but not homophones. *Resign*, meaning "to quit," is spelled the same as *resign*, meaning "to sign up again," but it's pronounced differently.

10. *Fast* can mean "moving rapidly," as in *running fast*, or "fixed, unmoving," as in *holding fast*. If colors are fast they will not run. The meaning "firm, steadfast" came first; the adverb took on the sense "strongly, vigorously," which evolved into "quickly," a meaning that spread to the adjective.

11. *Off* means "deactivated," as in *to turn off*, but also "activated," as in *the alarm went off*.

12. *Weather* can mean "to withstand or come safely through" (as in *the company weathered the recession*) or it can mean "to be worn away" (*the rock was weathered*).

13. *Screen* can mean to show (a movie) or to hide (an unsightly view).

14. *Help* means "assist," unless you can't help doing something, when it means "prevent."

15. *Clip* can mean "to bind together" or "to separate." You clip sheets of paper together or separate part of a page by clipping something out. Clip is a pair of homographs, words with different origins spelled the same. Old English *clyppan*, which means "to clasp with the arms, embrace, hug," led to our current meaning, "to hold together with a clasp." The other clip, "to cut or snip (a part) away," is from Old Norse *klippa*, which may come from the sound of a shears.

16. *Continue* usually means to persist in

doing something, but as a legal term it means stop a proceeding temporarily.

17. *Fight with* can be interpreted three ways. “He fought with his mother-in-law” could mean “They argued,” “They served together in the war,” or “He used the old battle-ax as a weapon.” (Thanks to linguistics professor Robert Hertz for this idea.)

18. *Flog*, meaning “to punish by caning or whipping,” shows up in school slang of the 17th century, but now it can have the contrary meaning, “to promote persistently,” as in “flogging a new book.” Perhaps that meaning arose from the sense “to urge (a horse, etc.) forward by whipping,” which grew out of the earliest meaning.

19. *Go* means “to proceed,” but also “give out or fail,” i.e., “This car could really go until it started to go.”

20. *Hold up* can mean “to support” or “to hinder”: “What a friend! When I’m struggling to get on my feet, he’s always there to hold me up.”

21. *Out* can mean “visible” or “invisible.” For example, “It’s a good

thing the full moon was out when the lights went out.”

22. *Out of* means “outside” or “inside”:

“I hardly get out of the house because I work out of my home.”

23. *B***ch* can derisively refer to a woman who is considered overly aggressive or domineering, or it can refer to someone passive or submissive.

24. *Peer* is a person of equal status (as in a jury of one’s peers), but some peers are more equal than others, like the members of the peerage, the British or Irish nobility.

25. *Toss out* could be either “to suggest” or “to discard”: “I decided to toss out the idea.”

The contronym (also spelled “contranym”) goes by many names, including auto-antonym, antagonym, enantiodrome, self-antonym, antilogy and Janus word (from the Roman god of beginnings and endings, often depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions). Can’t get enough of them?

The folks at Daily Writing Tips have rounded up even more.

This piece originally ran in 2015.

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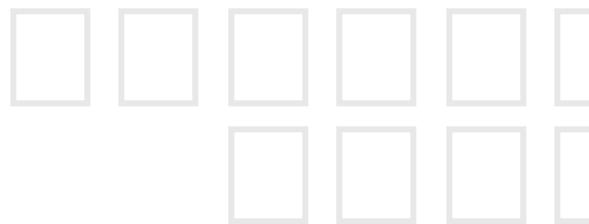
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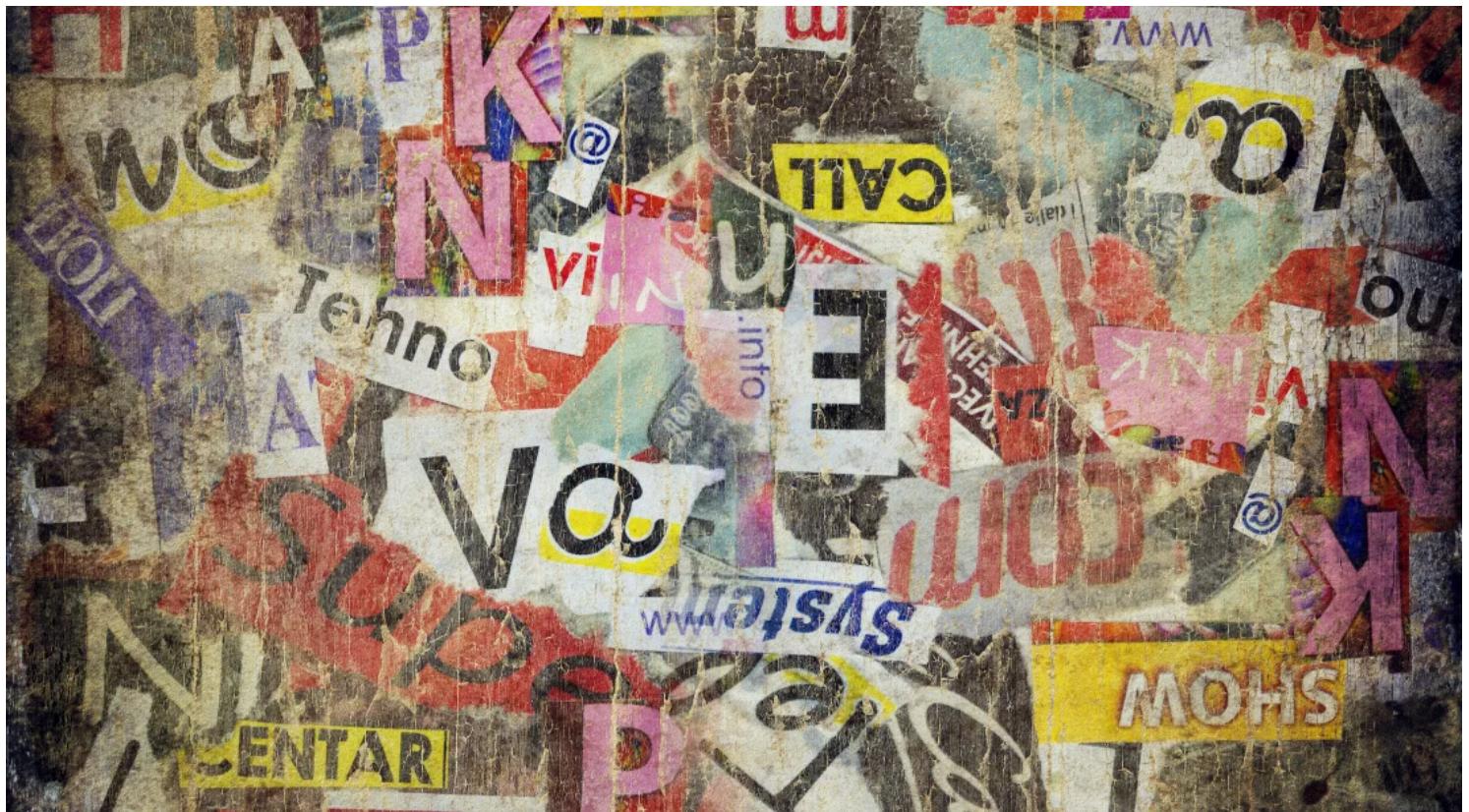
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WORDS

12 Old Words That Survived by Getting Fossilized in Idioms

BY ARIKA OKRENT
NOVEMBER 4, 2015

English has changed a lot in the last several hundred years, and there are many words once used that we would no longer recognize today. For whatever reason, we started pronouncing them differently, or stopped using them entirely, and they became obsolete. There are some old words, however, that are nearly obsolete, but we still recognize them because they were lucky

enough to get stuck in set phrases that have lasted across the centuries. Here are 12 words that survived by getting fossilized in idioms.

1. WEND

You rarely see a *wend* without a *way*. You can wend your way through a crowd or down a hill, but no one wends to bed or to school. However, there was a time when English speakers would wend to all kinds of places. *Wend* was just another word for *go* in Old English. The past tense of *wend* was *went* and the past tense of *go* was *gaed*. People used both until the 15th century, when *go* became the preferred verb, except in the past tense where *went* hung on, leaving us with an outrageously irregular verb.

2. DESERTS

The *desert* from the phrase "just deserts" is not the dry and sandy kind, nor the sweet post-dinner kind. It comes from an Old French word for *deserve*, and it was used in English from the 13th century to mean "that which is deserved." When you get your just

deserts, you get your due. In some cases, that may mean you also get dessert, a word that comes from a later French borrowing.

3. EKE

If we see *eke* at all these days, it's when we "eke out" a living, but it comes from an old verb meaning to add, supplement, or grow. It's the same word that gave us *eke-name* for "additional name," which later, through misanalysis of "an eke-name" became *nickname*.

4. SLEIGHT

"Sleight of hand" is one tricky phrase. *Sleight* is often miswritten as *slight* and for good reason. Not only does the expression convey an image of light, nimble fingers, which fits well with the smallness implied by *slight*, but an alternate expression for the concept is *legerdemain*, from the French *léger de main*, literally, "light of hand." *Sleight* comes from a different source, a Middle English word meaning "cunning" or "trickery." It's a wily little word that lives up to its name.

5. DINT

Dint comes from the oldest of Old English, where it originally referred to a blow struck with a sword or other weapon. It came to stand for the whole idea of subduing by force, and is now fossilized in our expression "by dint of X" where X can stand for your charisma, hard work, smarts, or anything you can use to accomplish something else.

6. ROUGHSHOD

Nowadays we see this word in the expression "to run/ride roughshod" over somebody or something, meaning to tyrannize or treat harshly. It came about as a way to describe the 17th century version of snow tires. A "roughshod" horse had its shoes attached with protruding nail heads in order to get a better grip on slippery roads. It was great for keeping the horse on its feet, but not so great for anyone the horse might step on.

7. FRO

The *fro* in "to and fro" is a fossilized

remnant of a Northern English or Scottish way of pronouncing *from*. It was also part of other expressions that didn't stick around, like "fro and till," "to do fro" (to remove), and "of or fro" (for or against).

8. HUE

The *hue* of "hue and cry," the expression for the noisy clamor of a crowd, is not the same *hue* as the term we use for color. The color one comes from the Old English word *hiew*, for "appearance." This *hue* comes from the Old French *hu* or *heu*, which was basically an onomatopoeia, like *hoot*.

9. KITH

The *kith* part of "kith and kin" came from an Old English word referring to knowledge or acquaintance. It also stood for native land or country, the place you were most familiar with. The expression "kith and kin" originally meant your country and your family, but later came to have the wider sense of friends and family.

10. LURCH

When you leave someone "in the lurch," you leave them in a jam, in a difficult position. But while getting left in the lurch may leave you staggering around and feeling off-balance, the *lurch* in this expression has a different origin than the staggery one. The balance-related lurch comes from nautical vocabulary, while the lurch you get left in comes from an old French backgammon-style game called *lourche*. Lurch became a general term for the situation of beating your opponent by a huge score. By extension, it came to stand for the state of getting the better of someone or cheating them.

11. UMBRAGE

Umbrage comes from the Old French *ombrage* (shade, shadow), and it was once used to talk about actual shade from the sun. It took on various figurative meanings having to do with doubt and suspicion or the giving and taking of offense. To give umbrage was to offend someone, to "throw shade." However, these days when we see the term *umbrage* at all, it is more likely to

12. SHRIFT

We might not know what a shrift is anymore, but we know we don't want to get a short one. *Shrift* was a word for a confession, something it seems we might want to keep short, or a penance imposed by a priest, something we would definitely want to keep short. But the phrase "short shrift" came from the practice of allowing a little time for the condemned to make a confession before being executed. So in that context, shorter was not better.

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