

# Semantic Antics

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## Lexical Multi-valence

At the time of this writing, the Oxford English Dictionary offers these tabulations regarding possible definitions for the following words:

- “set” has 464 (at last count)
- “run” has 396 (though Simon Winchester has recently counted up to 645 distinct meanings)
- “go” has 368
- “take” has 343
- “stand” has 334
- “get” has 289
- “turn” has 288
- “put” has 268
- “fall” has 264
- “strike” has 250...and counting.

How is it that we do not have an aneurism each time we read a text that uses any of the above words? Most English-speaking children have mastered virtually all of the above words by the time they have reached adolescence (though not necessarily every definition). There has never been a dilemma translating any of these words into alternate languages—REGARDLESS of how they are used.

What does such lexical multi-valence mean for translation? Imagine a translator encountering the sentence:

**Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo Buffalo buffalo buffalo.**

The statement means: X that are bullied by other X, in turn bully X that are bullied by other X (where X is bison from up-state New York). {1} Imagine someone not well-versed in English tasked with interpreting this sequence (i.e. the same lexeme repeated eleven times).

A variation on this involves canines addled by other canines further addling each other: **“Dogs dogs dog dog dogs dogs dog.”** Make it about dauntless canines in the past tense, and one can refer to when dogged dogs dogged dogged dogs.

How about when a badger badgers badgers while a horse horse horses around? {2} For the same word being used several times in a row, there are myriad examples. Lexical ambiguity is compounded when one uses neither punctuation nor emphasis / inflection / pauses where it is crucial to conveying meaning—as with: **“Bob, while John who had had ‘had’, had had ‘had had’; ‘had had’ had had a better effect.”** (Here also, the same phoneme occurs eleven times consecutively.)

Language does funny things, but any competent translator can surmise what the author was most likely “getting at” (and just as helpful: where he was “coming from”). This task can be accomplished in the same

manner he might figure ANYTHING out: by employing deductive reasoning. With interpretation, this is usually done by considering what was said in the rest of the exposition (a.k.a. “intertextuality”).

As Shakespeare demonstrated, no language is more idiomatically versatile than English. The good news is that a competently-procured annotation is capable of explicating what something means.

A master of exploiting the idiosyncrasies of the English language was the stand-up comedian, Steven Wright. (Such idiosyncrasies were exploited for years of hilarious material.) Let’s look at some of the more fascinating semantic quirks.

## Lexical Modularity

Funny things happen over generations when people are hearing and relaying lines verbally. Such are the pitfalls of oral transmission; which is why the game of “telephone” can be so amusing.

Phonetics can be cause for confusion. There is a difference between listening to the violins and listening to the violence; between being a trader and being a traitor. There is a big difference between announcing, “I won’t be long” and “I won’t belong”; between responding to a query, “It was discussed” and “It was disgust.”

Semantics can be confusing in other ways, as with: “When one chooses the left one, it will be the right one; but then only the right one will be left.” Such sentences would surely confound someone who was new to English; though the meaning is actually quite straight-forward.

Syntactic ambiguity can usually be resolved by bracketing appropriate clauses—as with “They are hunting dogs” (are the dogs the hunters or the hunted?) and “I shot a hippopotamus in my pajamas” (was or wasn’t the large animal located in my clothing?) If I exhort you to “live for now”, do I mean “live in the moment” or “remain alive for the time being”? There are myriad statements with dual meanings—such as the classic: “I had him for dinner”.

There are simple declarations that can be a negation of THEMSELVES—depending on how syntax is treated. For example, “It can’t be too cold to snow” can be interpreted in opposite ways:

- It is possible for it to be too cold for snow to occur. (In order for it to snow, it must be sufficiently warm. Thus: It CAN be too cold to snow.)
- It is impossible for it to be too cold for snow to occur. (There can be no temperature too low for it to snow.)

The former is technically correct; and—feliculously—is the way the utterance would usually be interpreted. However, taken literally, it would have to be interpreted the latter (fallacious) way.

Language behaves in highly idiosyncratic ways. Take, for instance, when a phrase can be its own opposite. Idiomatic expression often follows its own logic...which is why, when we say an alarm is “going off”, it is actually going ON. We park on a driveway and drive on a parkway. We put a shipment in a car and cargo on a ship. “After dark” really means “DURING dark”. (After dark, it’s LIGHT.) {6} While crime-fighters fight AGAINST crime and fire-fighters fight AGAINST fire, freedom-fighters fight FOR freedom. And there’s nothing civil about civil war.

Thus the exact same statement can mean opposite things. “I’ve been missing work” can mean that I pine for work (as I wish I could be there) OR that I have not been showing up to work (as I have decided not to

go). Thus the same expression can mean EITHER an avid interest OR a complete lack thereof.

Some WORDS can even be antonyms of themselves—as with “obtuse”: wide (as with an angle of greater than 90 degrees) or narrow (as in: myopic thinking). The prefix “con-” can mean either against or with / together.

Language often works in comically idiosyncratic ways; but this needn’t confound us. In Spanish, “la mina” means “mine”—which may refer to a landmine or a gold mine. (In other words: the term may mean something dangerous or something serendipitous. Opposites.) So declaring something to be “la mina” can mean that it is something that one SHOULDN’T do or something that one SHOULD do. (It holds peril; it holds promise.) Yet even this dual meaning poses no confusion when the term is used in metaphorically.

A dozen more examples of auto-antonymy in English:

- “**cleave**” and “**hew**” (split; join / adhere)
- “**admonish**” (rebuke; entreat)
- “**discriminate**” (to discern based on perspicuity, so to be judicious; to discern based on prejudice, so to be injudicious)
- “**unqualified**” (inadequate; complete, as in an “unqualified success”) {3}
- “**betray**” (thwart, as in trust; reveal, as in feelings)
- “**bolt**” (rapidly depart; hold in place)
- “**table**” (introduce into discussion; remove from discussion)
- “**nonplussed**” (unperturbed; perplexed)
- “**screen**” (veil; show)
- “**refrain**” (desist; repeat)
- “**oversight**” (something that has been completely over-looked; something that has been completely looked over)
- “**sanction**” (censure; endorse)

“Screening” something can be either a matter of obfuscation or an exhibition. “Refraining” can entail an abstention or an encore. Construing “oversight” in a certain way makes the difference between over-LOOK and over-SEE. The status “full capacity” can mean nothing left or everything left. And since “sanction” can mean to either restrict or approve, mis-interpretation can easily occur.

Meanwhile, antonyms can sometimes be used to mean the same thing, as in “prostrate” (face-down) and “supine” (face-up), both of which can indicate vulnerability / submissiveness. Both “obtuse” and “myopic” can mean narrow-minded, even as the former is the opposite of acute (which means narrow). A term can even be the converse of itself, as with “cull”: extract the most desirable vs. kill off the least desirable. Thus “culling” can mean select in order to keep or select in order to reject.

Over time, the meaning of lexemes can transmogrify into their own antitheses. Terms that mean one thing in one epoch can mean virtually the opposite in another epoch—as has been the case with:

- “**awful**”: from awe-inspiring to repugnant
- “**terrific**”: from terrifying to wonderful
- “**tremendous**”: from tremor-inducing to monumental
- “**outstanding**”: from anomalous to extraordinary
- “**pompous**”: from majestic to arrogant
- “**artificial**”: from well-crafted to phony
- “**incredible**” / “**unbelievable**”: from something of dubious verity to something awe-inspiring

- **“egregious”**: from distinguished / eminent to conspicuously bad
- **“passion”**: from suffering to ecstasy [the etymology of “com-passion” is suffering with]
- **“normalize”**: from making the deviant conform to the ordinary to accepting the deviant as the new ordinary

The term “revisionist history” used to mean re-writing history (via fabrication). It is now sometimes used to mean correcting what had been depicted erroneously (by setting the record straight). That is: It used to mean concocting faux history (by creating misconceptions); and it now often means elucidating what really happened (by eliminating misconceptions).

One does not need to be an expert in diachronic linguistics to recognize that “semantic drift” sometimes occurs. The loaded term “holocaust” originally meant “burnt offering” in Koine Greek; now it means GENOCIDE. Thus it went from a pious act to an atrocity. Go figure.

In other cases, there are dual meanings embedding in manners-of-speaking, which can pose problems for translators. If one “dusts” or “trims” something, one may be either adding or removing (as with “kutoa” in Swahili). In Hindi, “kal” can mean either today or tomorrow. In Spanish, “porque” can mean either “why” or “because”. Etc. Such hermeneutic ambidexterity might be confusing at first blush; but it poses no problems for translation.

If one modifies “moving” with “fast”, it means higher speed; yet if one modifies “holding” with “fast”, it means remaining stationary. If one “rents” something, one could be renting TO or renting FROM. Asking “Who IS left?” is the opposite of asking “Who HAS left?” (Thus “left” can indicate a state of either remaining or departure.)

Other words have connotations that can go in one of two ways—as with “patronize” (to mock or to support). The term “glory” means something very different when it is used in the last line of the Nicene creed (as sanctified as it gets) than when it is used for “glory hole” (as salacious as it gets).

In American slang, “sick” can mean amazing; “bad” can mean very good; and “wicked” can mean fantastic.

Some words are used as slang in idiosyncratic ways. “Bob is down” can mean that Bob is sad, Bob is interested, or that Bob is lower in elevation. One might even say that Bob is “down and out”.

Dual meaning can also occur with phrases. “A great deal” can mean either a large amount or a bargain. “Take a cut” can mean either to take MORE money or take LESS money. Meanwhile, “backing down” often involves “backing up”. To “break WITH” and “break FROM” mean the same thing: to break away. Something that is “in” (fashionable) can be said to be “far out” or “out of sight”.

Such is the nature of demotic language.

**Idiomatic expressions** are often context-dependent—which is why we shouldn’t say that we’re being “held up” at the bank when we were delayed due to long lines at the teller. Only those proficient in English might make sense of the seemingly paradoxical, “He let me down by NOT letting me down” (“He disappointed me by keeping me elevating”).

Semantic elasticity becomes NON-straight-forward when idiomatic phrases use opposites while meaning roughly the same thing. In describing someone’s emotional state, to “light up” is to become excited whereas to “lighten up” is to become relaxed. “What the devil / hell...?” is the same turn of phrase as “What in god’s / heaven’s name...?”

Understanding idiomatic usage is what enables us to understand the statement: “When the rumors spread, her legs will follow suit.” When people go through a break-up, it’s often due to some kind of breakdown. Note the difference between causing relief wherever one goes and causing relief whenever one goes. A breakthrough is good; but if something falls through, it’s bad. There’s a difference between an outstanding performance (very good) and outstanding parking tickets (bad). Of course, the latter might be construed as tickets for phenomenal parking skills.

Idiomatic expression can sometimes pose (temporary) problems in translation if one is not careful. Semantic elasticity can be confounding for those not well-versed in a language’s signature idiosyncrasies. It’s is how “what’s up?” and “what’s going down?” can mean the same thing...which is the same as asking: “What’s going on?” or “What’s happening?” or “What’s popping?” or “What’s shaking?”

“Positive” test results aren’t always a positive thing. Nor is a positive feedback loop. “I’ve been missing work” could indicate that one does want to work or that one does NOT want to work. Similarly: “See who’s lying behind the curtain” can mean “Reveal the identity of the person who is clandestinely deceiving us” OR “Find out who’s in a supine position on the other side of the drapery.” The difference, then, is between “deception from” or “repose in” a secluded place.

**Punctuation** is crucial to meaning; yet it can only be conveyed verbally via inflection, emphasis, and pauses. There is a difference between “I bought my wife a boat and a car” vs. “I bought my wife, a boat, and a car.” This creates the same ambiguity as “I enjoy cooking my family and my dog” vs. “I enjoy cooking, my family, and my dog.” There’s also a difference between “I quit drinking for the rest of my life” and “I quit. Drinking for the rest of my life.”

Once, in a letter to his sister-in-law, Angelica (who was in love with him), Alexander Hamilton began: “My Dearest, Angelica” rather than “My Dearest Angelica,” ...which, of course, intimated something very different than the anodyne address he intended. (The dual meaning of this opening was dramatized in the Broadway musical, “Hamilton”.) Even more dramatic is the difference between “I’m sorry; I love you” and “I’m sorry I love you.” Such punctuation snafus can have grave repercussions. Imagine confusing “Don’t! Stop!” with “Don’t stop!” Also consider the request: “Let’s eat, Grandma” as opposed to “Let’s eat Grandma.”

Minor adjustments can make a crucial difference—as with inserting / omitting “be”: “come apart” (to divide) vs. “become a part” (to join)...or, for that matter, “come to be a part”. Meaning can transform by simply omitting an indefinite article: “There are a few remaining” emphasizes what still exists; whereas “There are few remaining” emphasizes what no longer exists. “I address racism in my book” (discuss the topic of racism) vs. “I address the racism in my book” (admit being racist). This can happen even by misplacing an indefinite article: “I’m a just man” vs. “I’m just a man.”

Even a hyphen can make a big difference—as with “I resent your gift” vs. “I re-sent your gift”. Crucial differences can also result from the commission or omission of a SPACE. Behold: “It will not be long” (it is immanent) vs. “It will not belong” (it will be incongruous). Thus: Asked if you might be expected at the social gathering starting presently, the response “I won’t be long” [Yes, I’ll be there soon] intimates the opposite of “I won’t belong” [I’m reticent to come, as I feel I won’t fit in].

Also take, for instance, “meantime” (interim) vs. “mean time”. The former means “interim”. The latter can mean either of two things: the average duration OR a cruel / arduous period.

A single word makes a big difference, and can be lost in translation. This can be a matter of changing an

indefinite article to a definite article (a vs. the). Hence the difference between saying “I’ll do it a week before” vs. “I’ll do it the week before.” Definite vs. indefinite articles change meaning—as with, say: “a week before” vs. “the week before”.

The Russian language has no definite or indefinite articles; so the crucial distinction between “There are few problems” and “There are a few problems” might be lost in translation. By merely inserting the indefinite article (“a”), the emphasis goes from there NOT being many problems to there BEING problems. Hence “don’t be too concerned with problems” becomes “there are some problems of which you should take note.” Also, observe what happens when one inserts the definite article (“the”) into “You are shit!” (derogatory)...rendering “You are the shit!” (laudatory).

The simple insertion of a preposition can also do wonders. One can change “I want to have sex with you” to “I want to swindle you” by simply inserting “over” at the end, yielding “I want to fuck you [over].” Indeed: the insertion of a single, bracketed word can completely transform a statement.

Simply insert “up” instead, and one can turn an invitation to copulate into an invitation to fight. Indeed: “I want to fuck you” and “I want to fuck you UP” makes the difference between wanting to engage in coitus and wanting to engage in battery. {4} Simply inserting “up” changes making love to violent combat. The difference between “I’m fucking you” and “I’m fucking [around] with you” is quite important, as “copulating with” and “joking with” are two rather different things. {5} The drastic change from simply inserting “with” is something a less-than-astute translator might do. After all, when one is fucking someone (sex), one is—indeed—doing something WITH them.

Meanwhile, reversing X and Y in “X on Y” does not change the meaning when X is “[someone’s] mind” and Y is a subject of thought. Though native speakers often forget the distinction between “thinking of X” (which intimate caring) and “thinking about X” (which simply specified content).

Grammar is often inconsistent. We do something AT noontime, yet ON Saturday, and IN September; even as we schedule something FOR tomorrow. I can protect you and respect you; but while I do the former for your protection, I don’t do the latter for your respectation.

Across languages, a seemingly identical word can come to mean different things. Take, for instance, “frontier”. In English, it connotes place of potential expansion (i.e. of possibility)...as with new horizons. Yet in French, it connotes a BOUNDARY (i.e. a limit)...as with “Médecins Sans Frontières” [Doctors Without Boundaries]. (This is why M.S.M. is translated into English as “Doctors Without [national] Borders” rather than “Doctors Without Frontiers”. As it turns out, boundless doctors actually have ENDLESS frontiers.)

Bracketing is also an issue. “I shot an elephant in my pajamas” is a classic example. “When I shot it, I was wearing my pajamas.” Or “When I shot it, the elephant was wearing my pajamas.” Or “When I shot it, I was wearing the pajamas; and the elephant was (somehow) also inside my pajamas.”

Qualifiers are not even straight forward. (Is a “criminal lawyer” and lawyer who PROSECUTES criminals or a lawyer who IS a criminal?) Such idiosyncrasies can be easily addressed by astute translators.

The peculiarities of various languages are endless. But in all cases of poor translation, it is the translator that should be blamed, not the source language. (For further discussion of this matter, see my work on the “L.I.T.” card.)

The most infamous alteration in word-meaning is “Israel”: originally used to name a PEOPLE, yet pursuant to Revisionist Zionism, it was used to name a PLACE (as I discuss in my essay: “The Land Of Purple”).

Such semiotic switch-a-roos are not uncommon. Indeed, taxonomies often flip. In the mid-19th century, the Progressive caucus in America was known as the “Radical Republicans”. Now, “Republican” refers to an ultra-Reactionary party: the proto-fascist cult that is the G.O.P.

And the socio-political (and economic) term “liberal” has undergone so many hermeneutic turns (and a flowering of disparate connotations) that it’s hard to keep track. It GENERALLY means that one is against authoritarian systems—which could mean Soviet-style communism or fascism or corporate power. But sometimes it means only one of those things.

In 1843, Karl Marx wrote: “The glorious robes of liberalism have fallen away; and the most repulsive despotisms stands revealed for all the world to see.” He was referring to highly-concentrated economic power (and top-down control). John Stuart Mill was considered a “classical liberal”; but what does THAT (19th century term) even mean NOW (in the 21st century)? After all, even Mill considered himself a (Marxian) “socialist”—prescribing, as he did, the pursuit of “common ownership of the raw materials of the globe.” Abraham Lincoln was against bankers and other private tyrannies (read: corporate power). {7} Meanwhile, in 19th-century Germany, “liberals” were allied with nationalists / imperialists! And Benjamin Constant was a European “liberal” who is a forerunner of modern CONSERVATISM.

By the post-War era, “liberalism” seemed to correlate with the thinking of the intelligentsia—leading Lionel Trilling to assert (in 1950) that liberalism in America was “not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition.” Yet even this was deceptive. Once the Chicago School established the “Washington Consensus”, there emerged the patently RIGHT-wing “neoliberal” order. The “liberal” in “neoliberalism” means the promotion of corporate power, and the espousing of free-market fundamentalism. (!) All THAT translated to right-wing foreign policy—projecting imperialist power whilst fueling the military-industrial complex, all with COMPLETE disregard for human rights. So what, then, did “liberal” mean?

Of course, SOCIALLY liberal means anti-traditionalist, willing to buck convention and question authority.

Other lexical transformations are illustrative of hermeneutic flexibility. “Gay” used to mean gleeful, and now typically means homosexual. “Savage” used to mean primitive and unsophisticated, and now typically means barbaric. “Bachelor” used to mean a student of the lowest rank at a university, and now means an un-married man. What begins as mere catachresis can eventually become a transformation in the vernacular. The funniest example is “penis”: from backside to frontside (originally Latin for tail, now the name for male genitalia).

In politics, nomenclature has been turned on its head in several instances:

- **“Federal-ism”**: Originally a descriptor for centralized government; it has become a euphemism for “state’s rights” (divestment of Federal power). It used to mean power concentrated at the federal level of the Federal government; now it means the opposite (deference to each state’s prerogative). Alexander Hamilton was a Federalist; now he’d be an anti-Federalist.
- **“libertarian-ism”**: Originally a descriptor for anarcho-syndicalism (stateless socialism); it has become a euphemism for anarcho-capitalism (free-market fundamentalism). At first, it referred to freedom from the control of hierarchal (top-down) institutions; and was thus a LEFT-wing ideology—in keeping with Stateless socialism (a.k.a. “libertarian socialism”), the epitome of which was anarchism (including anarcho-syndicalism). NOW it often refers to a RIGHT-wing ideology: free-market fundamentalism (i.e. anarcho-capitalism). {8}
- **“property rights”**: In the original Lockian sense, the idea was to ensure that people could not be disenfranchised by a tyrannical government (via confiscation). It is now invoked as an excuse to put

property rights over civil rights (thus prioritizing private financial power over civic-mindedness). The former was against arrogating highly-concentrated power at the expense of the commonweal; the latter is FOR doing so.

Some terms now have DUAL meanings—sometimes in a way that discombobulates the public discourse. Two examples:

- **“nationalism”** can mean a kind of tribalism. It can also mean an endeavor to effect self-determination. The former, being a conceit that involves some kind of Exceptionalism, is typically a right-wing phenomenon; as it has generally accompanied fascistic movements. The latter, as resistance to domination / exploitation / marginalization by (external) powers, is typically a left-wing phenomenon; and has generally accompanied movements promoting democratic socialism. The difference, then, is a matter of either promoting or combating imperialism.
- **“populism”** can mean a gimmick to appeal to the masses by generating mass-hysteria / mass-mania. It can also mean taking into account the concerns of the everyman. The former, being some combination of pandering and exploitation, is typically a right-wing phenomenon. The latter, being a matter of genuinely caring about the common-folk, is typically a left-wing phenomenon. The difference, then, is between bolstering a mob mentality (for the benefit of a few well-positioned insiders) and looking out for the little guy. {9}

Semantic elasticity should not be confused with—or fashioned as—lexical fungibility. It is important to recognize that definitions (i.e. definitive meanings) EXIST; and that a respect for formal language entails acknowledging that certain things unequivocally mean what they mean.

To cultivate aptitude in a language is to understand such semantic quirks; and the ways in which those semantic quirks can be exploited by those adept in the art of casuistry. We see this with buzz-words like “reform”, “radical”, and “liberty”. Such things do not confound an astute translator. For no adept translation need be hamstrung by the idiosyncrasies of language. Honest translators recognize such things for what they are (and so take them into account when crafting the new articulation).

For any given language, there is a beguiling plethora of idiomatic expressions that can’t be translated literally. The same goes for other quirks—as with a metonym, a zeugma, a syllepsis, or—as is often encountered in sacred scripture—hyper-anaphora (repetition of a word or phrase for rhetorical effect). However, such rhetorical devices (tropes, catch-phrases, figures of speech) can be always articulated in alternate languages—even if via annotation. This is especially the case for texts that claim to be timeless. (Surely, an omniscient author would be aware of locutions that might become dated; and thus misleading.)

We needn’t be thrown into paroxysms of bewilderment each time we encounter lexemes that have myriad connotations. The quintessential example of this is the Sanskrit term, “ishvara”. In its earliest (Vedic) usage, it was used for lord, king / queen, or even just one’s soul (“atman”). In medieval (Hindu) usage, it could mean supreme being (“brahman”), personal god (“ishta-deva”), or simply the self. Shaivists use the term synonymously with their patron deity, Shiv[a]. Vaishnavists use the term synonymously with their patron deity, Vishnu. Etc. (We also encounter semantic elasticity with the Sanskrit term, “purusha”.)

Lexical multi-valence might make translation less straight-forward, but it doesn’t doom us to some semiotic quagmire either. Annotation is always available; and perspicacious translators avail themselves of judicious annotation, as needed. Some of this must be done via anthropology / philology—as when discerning the probable meaning of antiquated colloquialisms. Some of this must be done via intertextuality (assuming hermeneutic consistency throughout the work). The conveyance of MEANING is all that matters in the final analysis.



## A Lexical Cornucopia:

As Orwell reminded us in the dystopian future of his novel, “1984”, it is difficult to fully exercise free speech with an impoverished vernacular. Wittgenstein rightfully noted that the bounds of our language are the bounds of our world. Insofar as our lexical domain is constrained, so, then, are our horizons for speculation.

Such constraints also impose a handicap on our capacity to apprehend and express. The Koran furnishes votaries with a very limited vocabulary—the only compliment of linguistic tools, they are given to believe, that they shall ever need to grasp life, the universe, and everything. Insofar as one is behooved to articulate all things in just those terms, one’s thinking can’t help but be drastically circumscribed.

Take, for instance, the ubiquitous—nay, incessant—usage in Urdu of “Insh-Allah” (from the Arabic for “god willing”). This is engendered by—and, in turn, engenders—a mentality, whereby one’s control over one’s own destiny (“qadar”) is removed from the equation (to wit: one’s say in the trajectory of one’s own life). Consequently, Urdu does not have modals for hypotheticals like “could”, “would”, and “should”. In Urdu, the only word to convey possibility is “shayad”, which has more to do with what MIGHT happen (as in the sort of “maybe”), still resigning the course of things to god’s will.

This is a reminder that, insofar as one’s vocabulary is limited, critical inquiry is stunted.

The next time someone who fetishizes [insert language here] decides to rhapsodize about how many different ways one can articulate something in said language, ask him to compare the size of that language’s thesaurus with the size of an English thesaurus. Then ask him to mosey on over, meander on over, roam on over, stroll on over, amble on over, sally on over, sidle on over, step on over, canter on over, waltz on over, wander on over, and—if there’s still time—saunter on over. That’s a dozen different ways to say, “walk casually” (oops, make that 13).

That’s not to be confused with romp / rollick / rove / jog / dawdle / march / straggle / ramble / shamble / shuffle / scuffle / scuttle / scutter / scoot / stalk / stamp / stomp / tromp / tramp / traipse / trounce / [teeter-]totter / trudge / trot / trod / plod / hop / hobble / gad / galumph / gambol / glissade / frolic / flounder / flit.

Slightly modify some of these terms, and the meaning changes. Append “ch” to “scoot”, and it means to move by shimmying. Append “-scotch” to “hop” and one is doing it in a pattern. Append “-se” to “tromp” and it has more oomph. Append “-le” to “tramp” and it insinuates that damage has been done. Take “-le” away from “scuffle”, and it involves dragging one’s feet. (That’s forty MORE ways to say “perambulate” / “peregrinate” by the way. Oops; make that 42 more.)

Then there’s lumbering and clambering. There’s also sashaying, prancing, and flouncing. We can wend our way over...and even stray. Move quickly, you say? Well, then run, race, lope, lunge, bound, bolt, hustle, dart, dash, spring, sprint, scurry, scamper, skit[ter], hop, hoof it, book it, and haul ass. Then there’s flee, jet, skedaddle, scam, vamoose, split, shoo, steal away, get lost, take a hike, make tracks, take flight, hightail it, get a move-on, and make a break for it. (That’s forty MORE.) But whatever you do, don’t tarry / lag / lolly-gag / [ma]linger / loiter / [a]bide / alight / straggle / [dilly-]dally / [diddle-]dawdle.

This many ways to say “be on your way” and “move your butt” (using your legs) reflects the remarkable versatility of the English language. Its vast assortment of lexical capabilities is breathtaking to contemplate. If something so simple as “go over there on foot” can be expressed in so many different ways, one can imagine that the potential for articulating more profound things is virtually limitless.

And so it goes: We can go skylarking or galavanting, carousing or parading, prowling or lurking, jaunting or promenading. We might even weave our way over. If distraught, we might mope or skulk. If listless, we might putter or potter. If confused, we might stravage. If sneaky, we might slink. If proud, we strut. If awkward, we might waddle. If gleeful, we might skip. If flamboyant, we might flounce. If injured, we might limp. If restless, we might mill. If we're being quiet, we might tip-toe. If we have four legs, we might gallop. If we're in a meadow, we might graze. If we're lazy, we might slog. If we're tentative, we might malingering. If we're drunk, we might stagger...or stammer...or stumble. If we're panicked, we might scramble. If we're feeling festive, we might carouse. If playful, we might gallivant. Shall we also discuss the carriage one has during peregrination? Or the pace at which one paces? How about the stride of one's stride? The lexical possibilities are endless. (*That makes 130, by the way.*)

Can any other language do this? Aside from intoning the kind of gait one has during bipedal locomotion (zoinks, there's another one!), English offers a resplendent buffet of options for almost every concept imaginable.

One way to ascertain the nuances in a language is to survey the scope of quasi-synonyms. A concavity in the landscape, you say? You mean a valley? Or perhaps it was a vale...or a swale? Or a ditch, a dale, or a dell? Or even a gulch, a gully, a grove, a gorge, or a glen? Or maybe even a fen? Nope. Turns out it was a canyon...not to be confused with a ravine or a basin or a channel or a coulee or a notch. For lexical versatility, it's not merely the size of the dictionary; it's the size of the thesaurus.

Want nuance? What's the difference between crotchety and cranky and crabby and grumpy and grouchy? What's the difference between peace, placidity, tranquility, and serenity? Welcome to the stupendously vast English lexicon. No other language has such a vast assortment of options for articulating nuance.

What's the difference between cuddle and snuggle, hoist and foist, wipe and swipe, poke and prod, [s]mash and smoosh, squish and squash, wack and smack, flicker and shimmer and glimmer and glisten? Is it a quibble or a squabble? A fracas and ruckus? Pandemonium, bedlam, or mayhem? Is one being adventuresome or adventurous, exploratory or explorative? There's whirl and swirl and twirl. There's grasp and grab and clutch and cling and clench.

Let's look at the lexical multi-valence of one final term.

## **PROSTITUTION?**

The oldest avocation in history is universal across all cultures. But is it really describing just ONE THING? Or is this not so straight-forward?

Upon hearing "prostitute", we might picture a buxom floozy—wetting her lips with a probing tongue as she coyly cinches up her skirt to offer passers-by a fleeting glance at her supple loins. Are we right in forming such a picture?

Or are we to picture, instead, a feisty, pig-tailed tart—winking at her beguiled target-customer as she licks her lollipop? Or is it a fellow at some prestigious "think-tank" willing to sell his policy positions to whatever corporation pays his salary?

This poses a quandary. Perhaps we should picture a sassy strumpet in pink thigh-highs carousing the city's trendiest night-clubs—a desperate pleading in her eyes as she tentatively bites her bottom lip (and showcases her cleavage at opportune moments). But then again, perhaps we should picture a Senator

willing to support legislation that favors the interests of his biggest donors.

So what is it to be a “prostitute”? Are there any defining features? There is, after all, a difference between, say, a giggling trollop at a Thai massage parlor commiserating with male tourists who are anxiously seeking quick gratification as they fumble for their wallets...and, say, a cunning harlot canoodling with corporate executives in a luxurious penthouse suite, with a wry smile and a penchant for limitless credit cards.

The notion of “prostitute” seems rather simple at first blush (and well beyond the second blush); yet we soon find that the term can refer to many KINDS of things.

Is it like a belching medieval tavern wench, bursting from her strained bustier as she beckons provocatively from a corner table, legs splayed wide as she chugs a pint of lager...before slathering her heaving bosoms in frothy drool?

- Or is it more like a preening debutant, gingerly fidgeting with her garter-belt as she bats her eyelashes...willing to please any suitor with deep pockets?
- Or is it more like a rambunctious, disheveled hooker, prowling the dark streets in the sketchy part of town during the witching hour?
- Or is it more like a high-end call-girl, sashaying through a ritzy casino in a fetching evening dress, seeking a high roller with libidinal cravings?
- Or is it more like a husky vamp in a seedy brothel signaling her desire to guzzle any patron’s sperm...if, that is, the price is right?
- Or is it more like the ambitious starlet on the casting couch, eager to ingest copious amounts of semen to advance her acting career?
- Or is it more like a nubile gamine who furtively twirls her hair while popping her bubble-gum, eager to straddle the next eligible bachelor...but only if he is willing to take her shopping?
- Or is it more like a flirtatious bimbo parading her overly-oiled curves, as she struts down the boardwalk in a florescent orange bikini, awaiting a sugar-daddy to whisk her away on his yacht?
- Or is it more like a voluptuous femme fatale serving as the honey-pot for an unsuspecting “mark”, who is apt to divulge proprietary information at the enticing prospect of impending copulation? (That would make them BOTH prostitutes.)

What is the one thing that all these characters have in common?

In other words: What is a prostitute? It is not necessarily a solicitous tramp yearning for the next deluge of igneous ejaculate to be strewn across her visage...in exchange for cash. On the other hand, it might be a well-coifed, ladder-climbing careerist willing to devour a superior’s throbbing phallus in return for a lucrative promotion. (After all, a quid pro quo is a quid pro quo.) Both are fishing for potential gulls. Both are engaging in the lascivious craft of Machiavellian seduction: one bawdy, one polished.

Regardless of the context, we find a woman selling access to her body...and a man selling access to other things of value. Thus the amount of glamour involved is entirely beside the point.

So what, then, is the difference between a disheveled, termagant skank beaconing to passers-by in the parking lot behind a suburban food-mart...and, say, a dapper gigolo soliciting high-end clientele at a swank country club? At what point does someone qualify as a prostitute?

Once we discount the level of glitz, it becomes difficult to articulate exactly what we might be referring to. Indeed, prostitution can be tawdry or refined, devious or wistful. It can come in the form of a libertine

beldam prepared for unbridled sex with any bystander at the drop of a hat. Or it might be a coquettish sorority girl seeking a higher grade from a libidinous professor after office hours (one exchange, two prostitutes).

As it turns out, even a term as simple as “prostitution” is not a simple thing at all. It could refer to one who is willing to sell one’s mind OR one’s body. Either way, it is one who can be “bought”. To wit: It refers to somebody who is prepared to sacrifice one’s principles on the alter of avarice.

Indeed, prostituting oneself can involve things other than sex. One does not have to be a conniving vixen offering a quick shag for lucre; it can be a politician selling legislation to the highest bidder...or an academic willing to mold his “findings” according to the ideology of his paymasters. There is something just as licentious about the graft of an oligarch perched in his luxury penthouse as there is about a hooker dolling out hand-jobs in a dingy public restroom.

With respect to sex, this simple label MIGHT refer to a sultry dominatrix donning a leather corset and chain-link thong, snapping a cat-o-nine tails in her dimly-lit, underground layer. However, it might INSTEAD refer to the gadabout gold-digger hobnobbing with plutocrats on a posh rooftop terrace...parading her god-given endowments in haut-couture, while demurely sipping a martini. One is licentious, the other just tacky.

In EITHER case, it is:

**Someone who exchanges sexual favors for financial gain.**

The key difference is that the gold-digger seeks one customer at a time while the “professional” prostitute is apt to move from one customer to the next. {10}

The fact that someone settles on a single customer (indefinitely) does not disqualify it from being prostitution; it simply changes the terms of exchange. Monogamy and prostitution are not mutually exclusive. Choosing a unique partner for financial benefit is—effectively—signing up for (voluntary) concubinage. One no more has to operate in a brothel to be a prostitute than one has to operate in a cathedral to be a preacher.

Rarely, though, does the galavanting socialite—seeking to fill her coffers—admit to being a prostitute; even as she hobnobs with the movers and shakers of high society, purchasing status using the world’s oldest currency. In fact, her pretense makes her station all the more mendacious. She believes that being less forthcoming about her scheme somehow makes her modus operandi less tawdry. It doesn’t. (At least the OVERT prostitute is more honest about what she is doing.)

Even as “prostitution” ranges from the prurient to the pragmatic, a person who is for sale (in some shape, manner, or form) is a prostitute; irrespective of the context. A promiscuous Playboy bunny earning her keep by satiating the carnal hankerings of her high-rolling audience isn’t fooling anyone. {10} In the final analysis, a hussy is a hussy.

Few people fuss over the wide variety of people this simple word accurately describes. After all is said and done, there is indubitably a profound difference between the slutty jezebel cavorting with townies at the local saloon and the fabled whore of Babylon. Indeed, we can be quite certain that the derisive idiom found in the Book of Revelation is not referring to the inebriated vixen at the end of the bar offering to perform fellatio for a free drink. {11}

The disproportionate reference to females prostituting themselves in the sexual sense (gigolos were only

mentioned once) is not due to the fact that females are somehow more depraved than men. Rather, the massive disparity can be attributed to two things:

- Men are far more manipulatable by (the prospect of) sex. Barring scenarios involving gay men, women are better positioned to take advantage of this weakness. (There's a reason lesbian prostitution has never existed.)
- Due to the prevalence of patriarchal societies, men tend to have much more sense of entitlement (including sex with women of their choice). This undergirds the objectification of women (as well as the commodification of sex); which invariably leads to the exploitation of women (spec. for the sexual gratification of men).

There is a simple litmus test for prostitution: Is the person for sale? Prostitution is not a simple quid pro quo (a basic condition of human interaction); it involves "selling out" (that is: abandoning one's principles in order to materially benefit). {12} Many politicians, bankers, and corporate executives sell their souls. Academics who succumb to intellectual capture sell their integrity. Dogmatists sell their minds. Yet we are not inclined to characterize such things as "prostitution"; nor are we inclined to call a lobbyist a Senator's "sugar daddy".

As we've seen, when sex is involved, it's a bit more complicated. Hookers sell their bodies for the duration of a trick; gold-diggers sell their bodies—and contrived affection—for the duration of the liaison / betrothal. All of this is a kind of prostitution. In the least opprobrious cases, those in dire straights are seeking a means to survive. In the most opprobrious cases, it opportunists are valuing money over humanity. The former is tragic; the latter is odious. The former kind of prostitutes have regrettably lost their dignity, the latter kind of prostitutes have wantonly relinquished it.

What often elides this distinction is the fact that the former are typically forthcoming about what they're doing, whereas the latter put on airs. Hookers engage in prostitution overtly, without any pretense that they are doing otherwise. For doing what they do is a matter of desperation. By stark contrast, gold-diggers create a facade of super-charged dignity—even as they have none. (They misconstrue their vanity as dignity.) Doing what they do is a matter of avarice, so it invariably involves some sort of duplicity.

When assigning this loaded descriptor, we mustn't be distracted by pretenses. A grift is a grift. This taxonomic discrepancy is because we associate "prostitute" with debauchery rather than with sophistication; as if "selling out" (especially sexually) was strictly a function of low socio-economic status. Thus we accord towering stature to the dregs of humanity (standing in the halls of power) while impugning those who are often impoverished (standing on a street corner).

Such inconsistent classification is a reminder that demotic language can be misleading. It is no surprise that politicians, bankers, corporate executives, and gold-diggers are typically not given this derogatory characterization. We tend to oblige prostitutes who don't admit that they are prostitutes—even as they add a level of dishonesty to their gambit. While we are inclined to exalt the jaunty hedge-fund manager (who wreaks havoc on society), we are apt to scoff at the lowly street-walker (who's biggest crime is being party to some customers' infidelity). In keeping with this errant dichotomy, we assign the epithet "prostitute" exclusively to the menial sex worker; and reserve terms of approbation for august scoundrels.

These demimondes are seen as pariahs more than as victims. Stigmas prevail over formal conceptualization.

So what IS prostitution? In any given exchange, it comes down to whether or not one is compromising one's rectitude in order to advance one's socio-economic standing. This is also called "selling out". A simple litmus test is: Whenever one is deigning to "sell" something (be it political influence or sexual

intercourse), one need only ask oneself: “In selling this, am I also selling my integrity?”

It just so happens that sex-for-financial-gain is the oldest—and most common—form of prostitution. A close second is graft. The former is tragedy; the latter is perfidy. But ALL of it is labeled the same thing: prostitution. Sometimes even the simplest words aren’t so simple after all.

## **FOOTNOTES:**

{1 More accurately, when “buffalo” is used as a verb, it means to coerce via intimidation. Bison and buffalo are technically two different kinds of bovine. The city of Buffalo is actually located in western New York state. Another version of this sentence contains seven, rather than eleven, words. But the object-phrase of the sentence—in the shorter version, just a single word—can be identical to the subject-phrase, which is comprised of five words; thus yielding: [subject-phrase] [verb] [object-phrase].}

{2 Other than buffalo (coerce), badger (harass), dog (addle), and horse (play), there are many occurrences of animal-names being used as verbs: fawn, ape, parrot, carp, rat, weasel, ferret, snake, hawk, fly, bear, fish, etc. What’s the difference between “monkey around” and “horse around”? (The same as the difference between going bananas and going nuts.) When it comes to creative exploitation of semantic idiosyncrasies, it’s important not to be out-foxed.}

{3 That’s not all. The descriptor “without qualification” can mean either “having insufficient credentials” (thus mitigated) or “no provisos, no catches” (thus unmitigated).}

{4 One can even insert “up” in different ways. To say someone “fucked up” is to say someone made a mistake; whereas to say someone “IS fucked up” is to say that they are in some sort of disarray (inebriated, deranged, battered, etc.) Meanwhile, to say someone “fucked up” another person is to say they damaged them; whereas to say someone “fucked over” another person is to say they bamboozled them. So there is a difference between “you fucked up” (you mishandled something) and “you fucked me up” (you injured / discombobulated me). Likewise, there is a difference between “my closet is packed” (filled) and “my closet is packed up” (vacated). Of course, adding “up” does not ALWAYS change the meaning: “wrap it” and “wrap it up” typically mean the same thing. In the event that idiomatic expressions are involved, this complicates things—especially when one is translating from a language in which syntax (or word order) does not work in the same manner.}

{5 To “fuck around”, “joke around”, “horse around”, and “monkey around” mean the same thing. In this context, “fuck” = “joke” = “horse” = “monkey”.}

{6 This is the reason we forget that, in the northern hemisphere, days get SHORTER during most of the summer; as it is the period following the summer solstice (which falls on June 20). The days between March 20 and June 20 have the same average length as those between June 20 and September 20.}

{7 Lincoln’s party was, indeed, the LIBERAL party—at the time called the “Republicans”. In fact, the left-most faction was called the “Radical Republicans”. A clue that Lincoln would have been on the so-called “Left” was his great suspicion of corporate power. In a letter to Col. William F. Elkins dated November 21, 1864, he wrote: “I see in the near future a crisis approaching that un-nerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned; and an era of corruption in high places will follow. [Consequently], the money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands and the Republic is destroyed. I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever

before, even in the midst of [the Civil War].”}

{8 This inversion of the meaning of “libertarianism” has been attributed to the polemicist, Murray Rothbard, who recognized that appropriating the term for free-market fundamentalism would be a boon to the cause. He was correct. After all, its root is “liberty”; and who could argue with THAT? Now, in America, if one uses “libertarian” in the original sense (as in: libertarian socialism), it is seen as oxymoronic. The original (Progressive) incarnation of “libertarianism” was populist in nature; so was consummate with civic-minded-ness. The RIGHT-WING incarnation of “libertarianism” amounts to “every man for himself; devil take the hindmost.”}

{9 This is how both Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, polar opposites in every conceivable way, can both be described as “populists”. Democratic socialists are populists (in one way), yet so are fascists (in an entirely different way). The former, it might be said, are GENUINE populists (have the best interests of the masses at heart); whereas the latter are FAUX populists (only appealing to the masses in superficial, though perfidious, ways). For a history of GENUINE (Left-wing) populism, see Thomas Frank’s “The People, No”.

{10 There is often a blurred line between a finely-primed harem girl lackadaisically dangling grapes on a chaise lounge and, say, a sleazy barmaid in a dive-bar pounding shots of Jägermeister, legs akimbo. One demands a high sum for access to her body; the other is inclined to provide access to her body (and/or some ego-boosting sweet-talk) for a round of hastily-poured libations. As it turns out, prostitution attains irrespective of the amount of compensation...or the number of customers.}

{11 The “whore of Babylon” in Christian lore was probably an adaptation of the Avestan “Jahi” [“Jeh” in Pahlavi] from Zoroastrian lore.}

{12 What of vocation? Employees don’t sell THEMSELVES; they sell their time / skills / knowledge; and typically do so without compromising their moral principles. Hence compensation for labor does not qualify as prostitution. Working for money isn’t a grift. Not every quid pro quo can be characterized as “selling out”.