This Question of "Synonyms"

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Fowler *(A Dictionary of Modern English Usage)* distinguishes between the narrower and the wider sense in which the term "synonym" may be employed. As to the former, he says that perfect synonyms are extremely rare—that is, "so fully identical that one can always be substituted for the other without change in the effect of the sentence in which it is done." Synonyms in the latter, wider, sense are "words either of which in one or other of its acceptations can sometimes be substituted for the other without affecting the meaning of a sentence." In the first sentence of this article, the last word might have been "used" (instead of "employed") and no difference of meaning would have resulted.

Now, either of these senses rules out such a pair of words as—to take an example from what follows—"thief" and "robber." These are not true synonyms, though often treated as such; one cannot (or at least ought not to) be changed for the other.

Of course, no two languages correspond in this respect. Concerned here only with Greek and English, it is suggested that there are three ways in which the matter should be approached: I. A distinction in Greek which can be reproduced in English; II. A distinction in Greek which is not possible in English; III. A distinction not made in Greek but which can be made in English. Whether the same distinctions can, or cannot, be made in other languages is for those versed in these to decide.

I. 1. *kleptês* 'thief'; *lêstês* 'robber'. The AV distinguishes between Judas being the former (Jn. 12:6) and Barabbas the latter (Jn. 18:40), but does not consistently observe the difference. (Thomas Hobbes: "Robbery is committed by force or terror, of which neither is in theft, for theft is a secret act.") We speak of a highway robbery, where violence, or the threat of violence, is resorted to, but of kleptomania, where furtive shoplifting is concerned.

2. *hieron* is either the whole 'temple' or specifically the outer courts open to worshippers; *naos* is the inner 'shrine' or 'sanctuary'. We see no reason why these English words should not be thus used to follow the Greek connotations. (Our Lord never entered the latter; only the former.)

3. *brephos* 'babe'; *nêpios* 'infant'; *teknon* 'child'; *huios* 'son'. The distinction between the first two is a useful one (cf. Matt. 11:25 and 2 Tim. 3:15); that between the other two is important. *teknon* is cognate with *tiktô* 'bear, give birth to' and is regularly used by John of believers (Jn. 1:12; 1 Jn. 3:1); he never uses *huios* of such.

4. *hagios* 'holy'; *hieros* 'sacred'. It is interesting that the English phrase "the Holy Scriptures" is found twice only in the AV and that in the Greek both adjective and noun are different. In Rom. 1:2

graphai hagiai are 'holy writings'; in 2 Tim. 3:15 *hiera grammata* are 'sacred letters'. The distinction is useful, if not of great importance.

5. *orgê* 'wrath'; *thumos* 'anger'. There does not seem much, if anything, at stake here, but the verbal distinction can thus be easily carried over into English. The two words are associated in Rom. 2:8 and Col. 3:8. Twice in the Apocalypse (16:19, 19:15) the phrase *tou thumou tês orgês* occurs; is not this an example of apposition, 'of the anger, [that is] of the wrath'? Cf. Col. 1:18 for a similar conjunction of two genitives.

6. *baros* 'load'; *phortion* 'burden'. This may seem an arbitrary discrimination in English, but as the latter Greek word is related to *pherô* 'carry, bear', and so suggests anything that is carried or borne, 'burden' seems the word for it, whereas the former word (cf. *bareô* 'weigh, load', *bareôs* 'heavily', *barus* 'heavy') seems to indicate heaviness.

7. *eikôn* 'image'; *homoiôsis* 'likeness' (*homoioô* 'liken'). There are also, as to the latter word, *homoiotês* and *homoiôma*, with the same meaning. This distinction seems to be generally observed.

II. 1. *klêma* 'branch (of a grape vine)'; *klados* 'branch (of any other tree)'. We have but the one word for the two which are thus differently used in Greek.

2. *oikos* and *oikia* 'house'. If, according to Souter, the former is 'a set of rooms' and the latter 'the whole house', this is not a distinction which we can very well observe in English. Both are used in the sense of "household," but the context decides this. The latter does not appear to be used of the Temple in Jerusalem; only the former. But *oikia* is used by our Lord of heaven (?) in Jn. 14:2.

3. *niptô* 'wash (a part of the body)'; *plunô* 'wash (an article of clothing, etc.)'. We have only the one word for these two actions. 'I bathe' is the strict equivalent of *louô*, so the position is as in section I.

4. *katheudô* and *koimaô* 'sleep', one English word for two Greek ones. Only the second is actually used of the sleep of death (at least, such is my opinion; this bears on one's understanding of Matt. 9:24; Mk. 5:39; Lk. 8:52; and of 1 Thes. 5:6, 7, 10).

5. *mnêma, mnêmeion, taphos* 'tomb' ('sepulchre' is now obsolete, and 'grave' suggests modern rather than ancient practice). The first two are cognate with *mimnêskô* 'remember' and may sometimes have the sense of 'monument' or 'memorial (stone)'. The third comes from *thaptô* 'bury'. What Matthew calls a *mnêmeion* in 27:60 and then a *taphos* in 27:61, 64, 66, and 28:1 both Mark (15:46, 16:2) and Luke (23:53, 24:1) describe as a *mnêma*. Mark passes from *mnêmeion* in 5:2 to *mnêma* in verses 3 and 5. The rendering 'tomb' covers all three. In Matt. 23:27 we do find both *taphos* and *mnêmeion;* this is an example of the parallelism of Hebrew poetry and is evidently no more than a stylistic variation to suit this. The idea might be reproduced in English

by letting 'monument' stand for the latter word here (AV has "tombs . . . sepulchres"; RSV, "tombs . . . monuments").

6. *neos* and *kainos* 'new'. There are English words such as "recent" and "fresh" which might be used, but it is doubtful that any verbal distinction is uniformly valid. The same consideration applies to the following set.

7. *archaios* and *palaios* 'old, ancient'. In Lk. 5:36 *kainos* is contrasted with *palaios* as to garments; in the next verse *neos* is used of wineskins in contrast with *palaios*. (By what process of reasoning, by the way, do we have *archae*ology but *palae*ography?)

III. This is the most difficult section, and perhaps others beside me will offer the results of their study.

1. *cure* and *heal:* in the only places in the AV where the former verb is used it is for *therapeuô*, though once as a noun it stands for *iasis*. Otherwise 'heal' represents *therapeuô, iaomai,* and *sôzô*. Indeed, all three Greek words are used interchangeably. We would say in English that an injury (broken leg) is "healed" and a disease (cancer) "cured." But is this a rigid difference? No such distinction appears to be recognized in Greek. Cf. Jn. 5:10, 13.

2. *earth* and *land: gê* may mean one or the other, at the judgment of the translator. In the AV, in fact, the three hours' darkness is said in Matt. 27:45 to have been "over all the land" and in the parallel Luke 23:44 "over all the earth," with "land" in the margin.

3. *tomb, sepulchre,* and *grave:* see II,5 above. The third should not be used at all; it suggests an excavation below ground level into which a corpse is lowered, then covered by soil; this was not the practice current in New Testament Palestine (see Jn. 11:31, 38). The first two are perfect synonyms, but the former should be given the preference.

4. *just* and *righteous (dikaios):* the whole matter of synonyms is complicated by the fact that cognate words may exist in one language but not in the other. We have "justify" (*dikaioô*), but no verb related to "righteous," but only the periphrasis "account righteous."

5. *test, tempt,* and *try (peirazô):* whether it is the evil one tempting one to do wrong ('the tempter', *ho peirazôn,* in Matt. 4:3), or God testing or trying us for our discipline is for the context to decide; so for the cognate noun *peirasmos.*