adversary & advertisement

Adversary traces back to the Latin adversus, “turned against.” That’s smart advice. An adversary is an enemy, someone who is against you, someone you don’t turn away from...lest he shoot you in the back.

Advertisement comes from the same root. The operative concept is “turn.” An advertisement turns you toward something: the seller’s product or cause. In a sense, every advertisement calls out, “Hey, look over here, pay attention to me.”

We know, of course, that not all advertisements have our best interests at heart. Therefore, the next time an advertisement tries to turn you around, and tempt you to part with your purse, think of that paid-for message as your adversary. And if that’s not enough to protect your money or your well being, think of another Latin phrase: caveat emptor: buyer beware.

affluence & influence

The connection between wealth and power isn't news. More than 2000 years ago, a freed slave Publilius Syrus wrote: "Money alone sets all the world in motion."

How appropriate, then, that there is a strong etymological link between affluence and influence. The former comes from the Latin affluere, literally "flow toward," which connotes the idea of wealth flowing to a lucky person, or in today's idiom, "positive cash flow."

The etymology of influence is almost identical. The Latin influere mean literally "flow into." But there is a detour in our story. Originally, the word was used astrologically to describe power that flowed from the stars and controlled a person's destiny.

In the centuries that followed, influence came to refer to the impact of non-astronomical forces such as alcohol ("under the influence") and germs (influenza, later clipped to flu) and especially financial power.

While many have spoken negatively about the rich ("If all the rich men in the world divided up their money amongst themselves, there wouldn't be enough to go around"), we found only one authority that observed a case where money had no influence. Comtesse De Voigrand wrote: "There are poor men in this country who cannot be bought: the day I found that out, I sent my gold abroad."

alimony & alimentary canal

Pillsbury's famous slogan—"Nothing says lovin' like something from the oven"—suggests a tie between romance and rations. Whether or not that bit of doggerel is true, there's evidence that even after love dies, even after matrimony has been put asunder, food still links ex-partners. We're speaking of course of alimony.

Alimony comes from the Latin alere, to nourish. This same ancient word gives us alimentary, "related to food," most commonly used in the phrase "alimentary canal," which begins, romantically enough, at the kisser, and ends...at the other end.

We should note that the final syllable of alimony—mony—does not relate to money even though alimony usually involves the payment of money. Rather, –mony is a suffix that refers to "the means of accomplishing something," for example, supporting a former spouse. It also means "a state of being," for example...matrimony. But isn't this where we came in?

astronaut & disaster

Two Space Shuttle explosions forever linked the words astronaut and disaster. But the etymological connection is thousands of years older.

Astronaut derives from the Greek word astron, “star.” The same root gives us astronomy, asterisk, and astrology.

Disaster fits in this group, combining dis-, “against,” with aster, a relative of astron. So that disaster suggests “going against the stars.” Because in ancient times people thought that the stars had our best interests in mind, this was a bad move.

Five hundred years ago, Shakespeare challenged this idea by having Cassius deliver a piece of modern existential advice: “The fault dear Brutus lies not in the stars but in ourselves that we are underlings.”

As with most poetical observations, the poet’s words had zero impact. Astrology is probably more popular today than it’s ever been. However, the folks at Mission Control might not be too happy if they observed astronauts consulting their astrologers prior to liftoff.

awesome & awful

These days, awesome and awful are antonyms, the former meaning splendid and astounding, the later meaning horrible and rotten. But a few centuries ago, awesome and awful were synonyms.

Both, of course, are based on awe, which comes to English from the Old Norse agi, "fright, terror," which etymologists trace back to a hypothetical ancient German word, agis, "fear."

The word's use in Biblical texts—such as "Princes have persecuted me without a cause: but my heart standeth in awe of thy word" (Psalm 119)—added the sense of respecting and wonder. Thus awe could consist of a medley of emotions, such as what was felt by those observing the detonation of the first atom bomb.

By the sixteenth century, awesome came to mean "good" in everyday contexts, and it has remained positive over the centuries, while losing most its spiritual connotations.
Meanwhile, awful went in a completely different direction. While it retained its positive sense up to the mid-nineteenth century—for example in Lord Tennyson's line "God made Himself an awful rose of dawn"—by the early twentieth century, it referred to a large amount with a negative association as in this Bessie Smith blues lyric—

When my bed is empty,
Makes me feel awful mean and blue.

More often, it conveyed the sense that something was bad in the extreme as when King George V said: "Is it possible that my people live in such awful conditions?...I tell you, Mr. Wheatley, that if I had to live in conditions like that I would be a revolutionary myself."

candid & candidate

Many of us who were introduced to the word candid by the television show "Candid Camera," first believed that the term meant "secret" or "sneaky." This is not surprising given the fact that the program used a hidden camera to capture people in a variety of hilarious situations.

But eventually we learned that the true meaning of candid was almost the opposite. Along with its close relative candle, candid traces back to the Latin candere, "to shine," By the seventeenth century metaphorical extension had given candid the contemporary meaning of "being honest or frank in what one says."

A cynic might wonder: "But what does candor " (to use another offshoot of candere) "have to do with candidate?" To answer that question, we must return to ancient Rome. There, we find the Latin word candidatus naming the shining white togas worn by Roman office seekers. Candidatus, of course, comes from candere.

This etymology leads to the speculation that Thomas Jefferson—who once wrote, "The whole of government consists in the art of being honest"—would rather watch "Candid Camera" than coverage of contemporary election campaigns with their incendiary rhetoric that sheds more heat than light.
Or as the homey philosopher Kin Hubbard put it, "We'd all like to vote for the best man, but he's never a candidate."

cosmetics* & cosmos

"If I have been able to see farther than others," said Isaac Newton, "it is because I stood on the shoulders of giants."

One of those giants was Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, who might have been the first to use kosmos ("order") as the name for the universe. This was nearly three millenniums before modern scientists started playing with the concepts of "the Big Bang" and chaos.

Whether or not the universe is actually well ordered, to the ancients, orderliness was at the heart of beauty. Kosmos had spun off kosmetikos, "skilled in adornment," a word that entered English as cosmetics not much before the time that Newton was developing his theories about orderly forces that held the cosmos together.

The use of cosmetics is more ancient that the word, as demonstrated by Egyptian art dating from 4000 BC. And controversies about cosmetics are also old news. In the eighteenth century, the British Parliament passed a law that warned: "...women found guilty of seducing men into matrimony by a cosmetic means could be tried for witchcraft."

deadline & linen

People who write about writing favor words like imagery and inspiration. But for the working stiff—the journalist, the professional novelist, the ad writer—deadline comes more often to mind.

Deadline is obviously compounded from dead and line. Dead is one of those sturdy, four-letter Old English words that seemingly have been in the language forever—not traceable to Latin or Greek. When etymologists try to take it back further—they run into a dead end.

Surprisingly, the homely word line has a more interesting biography. Although it too is an Old English word, it can be traced back further to the Latin phrase linea restis, from linea, “linen” and restis, “string.”

Eventually, line was clipped from linea restis, and, presumably because a piece of thread could be pulled straight, it came to name the geometric figure that joins any two points. Linen, of course, was also used to make cloth, which in ancient times, was used to wrap the dead. But we’re more interested in the fact that line semantically flowered to give us a plethora of words, including: linear, lineage, ocean liner, a line of poetry, pipeline, streamline, and newspaper headline, which—even though a line is supposed to be straight—brings us back to deadline.

We may wonder why a simple cut-off date deserves such a scary synonym as deadline. Perhaps the word was coined when editors threatened procrastinating writers with death if they didn’t get the copy in on time. Or maybe, as etymologist Doug Hubbard suggests, it’s a borrowing from Civil War prisons where dead-line referred to a physical boundary “over which no man could pass and live.”

salon & saloon

Salon brings to mind the Enlightenment era, with its elegant Parisian rooms, where one might find great musicians, painters, poets, authors, and philosophers engaged in brilliant conversations and displays of virtuosity, such as Chopin launching his career in 1832 in one of Pleyel's salons.

Saloon, on the other hand, suggests a setting for crooked gamblers, drunks, bullies, gunslingers, player pianos, prostitutes (with hearts of gold), and...ham sandwiches:

> A ham sandwich goes into a saloon and says, "Bartender, "I need a drink." And the bartender replies, "Sorry, we don't serve food here."

As different as these two words seem, they are kissing cousins etymologically speaking. Salon, borrowed directly from a French word for "reception room," can be traced back through a different path to an Old English word, sele, "hall."

Saloon was originally simply an Anglicized version of the word—pronounced differently but with the identical meaning. Transported to America in the middle of the nineteenth century it became a synonym for a drinking establishment, especially catering to the sort of people who didn't frequent salons.