



Question: Are the words *prior* and *previous* synonyms? If not, how do they differ?

Answer: Although dictionaries sometimes list them as synonyms, the two are not always interchangeable. You can use either word if you mean “existing or occurring before something else.” For example, “He had a previous (or prior) appointment,” or “That incident occurred just prior (or just previous) to his death.” (But why not say “just before death,” which is shorter and just as clear?)

Both adjectives have been in use for a long time, and both came into the English language from Old French, which had borrowed them from Old Latin. Those of you who have studied Latin will recall that *prior* (“before”) was the comparative form of the Latin adjective *pri*. in Old Latin. The adjective *previous* is younger, derived from the Late Latin prefix *prae* (“before”), but both words are still in wide use today.

The prefix *prae* (“before”) plus the noun *via* (“way”) eventually became “previous.” Both *prae* and *prior* arrived in English along with the Norman invasion in 1066—*prae* as an adjective, but *prior* as a noun. It referred to an administrator in a monastery, with a rank just below that of an abbot.

However, both are now adjectives meaning “former” or “preceding in time.” Be cautious, however, about using them interchangeably in a phrase like “previous in time” or “prior in time.” The adjective *previous* sometimes carries a pejorative connotation, meaning “hasty” or “ill-advised because it is premature.” That comes across in a statement like, “They were too previous in condemning the defendant on such skimpy evidence.”

Question: I notice the constant use of the expression “gone missing” in a context like, “He has gone missing.” Why add the word “gone” instead of just saying “He is missing” or “He has been missing”?

Answer: Your question is about “aspect,” the grammatical term for a verb that indicates the relationship of an action to time. If you say, “He is missing,” you are not indicating how much time you mean. He could have been missing for a long time or for only for an instant. But when you say, “He has been missing,” you indicate a duration of time and also that his absence is somehow connected to the present time.

English speakers intuitively understand this distinction. For

example if someone tells you, “I’ve smoked for a long time,” you might ask, “Have you tried to quit”? But if the person says, “I smoked for a long time,” you might instead ask, “When did you quit”?

The English language needs aspect to clarify meaning, although Latin does not, because English verbs have at most only five inflections while Latin verbs may have as many as 120, incorporating aspect within the verb itself. For example, the English verb *think* has only four inflections: *think*, *thinks*, *thinking*, and *thought*. So to express time, we use auxiliary verbs: “I will think about it,” “I am thinking about it,” “I have thought about it,” “I used to think about it,” and so on, while Latin incorporates that indication within the verb itself.

The English phrase “has gone missing” implies that the action described occurred recently and is somehow connected to the present situation. Thanks to the correspondent for sending this interesting question that most readers would not think to ask.

Potpourri

Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable, 16th edition, 1999, lists facts you may never have learned and perhaps never cared to know under the heading “Nouns of Assemblage.” The classifications sometimes seem strange. A *swarm* of gnats sounds reasonable, but why an *exultation* of larks? Other strange titles: a *charm* of finches. Finches may actually charm some people; but do chickens really gather to *brood* in a *brood* of chickens? And ferrets have no “business” being called a *business* of ferrets.

A group of ducks in a lake is called a *paddling*, but in flight ducks are a *team*. Geese are also allotted two titles: On the ground they are called a *gaggle*, but in flight, geese are called a *skein*. People in church are reasonably dubbed a *congregation*, but why, when they are not in church, are they sometimes called a *staff*? And why do actors come in a *troop*, police in a *posse*, and savages in a *horde*? (That sounds biased.)

Speaking of titles, I have noticed a title that U.S. airlines have selected to avoid offending obese customers. They are carefully label them *passengers of size*.

But here’s a group title you might consider appropriate: a *congress* of baboons! ☺