

Q. Is there a difference in the meanings of *exacerbate* and *exaggerate*? I consider them to be synonyms, but lawyers tend to use *exacerbate* and ignore the old-fashioned *exaggerate*. Perhaps there is a difference.

A. The two verbs are synonyms in some contexts. In the definition of *exacerbate* dictionaries list “to exaggerate” as one meaning. Both verbs are transitive (that is, they are used with an object), and both mean “worsen or aggravate,” as in, “This conduct exacerbates (or “exaggerates”) the danger.” The antonym of both verbs, when used in this sense, is “ameliorate, mitigate.”

As the reader suggested, people currently tend to choose *exacerbate* instead of *exaggerate* or *aggravate*—both verbs they previously chose. The reason for this is what I call “fad behavior.” A word becomes a fad when some currently famous or notorious individual uses it on television; those who notice add it to their vocabulary, and voilà, the word suddenly seems to appear everywhere.

But to answer the rest of the reader’s question: Although one meaning of *exacerbate* is “exaggerate,” the two verbs are not always synonymous. Although www.Dictionary.com lists *exaggerate* as one meaning of *exacerbate*, the site does not list *exacerbate* as a synonym of *exaggerate*. The verbs are both descended from Latin, but they have different origins. The verb *exacerbate* is derived from *exacerbatus*, the past participle of the verb *exacerbare* (“to increase severity, violence, or bitterness”). The word is related to the Latin word *acerbus*, the origin of the English adjective noun *acerbity* (“sharpness or bitterness in temper or mood”) and of the adjective *acerbic* (“bitingly ironic”).

Other listings for the verb *exacerbate* are “to increase the violence or bitterness of,” as in “His speech exacerbated ethnic tensions,” or “to become more severe,” as in “Because she did not consult a doctor, her illness exacerbated.” In that sentence, *exacerbated* means “became aggravated.” Try using the verb *exaggerate* in either of those sentences, and you will see that it does not exactly fit.

Incidentally, as an aside, *aggravated* is still considered proper among careful users only when it refers to things, not to people. Situations or illnesses are aggravated; people are irritated, annoyed, or aggrieved. But so many English speakers ignore that grammatical distinction that it is predictable that in time *aggravated* will be acceptable in reference to people.

A number of word pairs that look similar but aren’t include the nouns *observance* and *observation*. Both nouns originated in the Latin verb *observare* (“to observe”), but their meanings have diverged. The noun *observation* has retained more of its original sense, but it no longer implies merely a “look,” but an instance of noticing or perceiving or of attentive watching. It can also mean “a comment or remark”—the result of that perception or attention.

On the other hand, *observance* contains the sense of following or obeying or conforming to a law, custom, or ceremony. It was borrowed into Middle English from Old French in about 1225.

The two adjectives, *single* and *singular* are also sometimes confused. In a recent newspaper article, an Associated Press journalist stated, “Since [a recent candidate] lost his bid for the nomination, he has had a singular mission.” It is possible that the candidate’s mission was singular, but the journalist probably did not intend to say so. He assumed, no doubt, that *singular* meant *single*, which means “sole.” In fact, *singular* was once a synonym of *single*, but that sense is now obsolete. *Singular* now means “extraordinary, remarkable, strange, or odd.”

The pair *sometime* (an adverb) and *some time*, in which *some* is an adjective modifying the noun *time* seem deceptively similar. But “I’ll wash the car sometime” means “at an indeterminate date,” or “whenever I get around to it.” But in the sentence, “The coach saved

some time by calling for a time-out,” *some* means “a certain amount” or “an exact amount though unstated.” Notice too the difference in stress. The adverb *sometime* is pronounced with equal stress on both syllables; in the adjective-noun phrase *some time* the stress is placed on the noun *time*, as is typical in English. There is also an adjective *sometime*, which means “former or occasional,” as in “Her sometime companion,” in which the stress is equal in both syllables, with the strong stress placed on the noun *companion*.

From the Mailbag

My thanks to Anthony Vittoria, an attorney in Baltimore, Md., who wrote that he has found a new verb that seems to be a candidate for inclusion as a backformation, a subject about which I wrote in my July “Language for Lawyers” column. The verb is to spectate, which is “backformed” from the noun “spectator.” Vittoria says that he heard it recently and “kind of liked it.”

Spectate is not really a backformation; to fit that designation, there must have been an original verb with the same meaning. An example of a backformation is the verb *administrate*, which was formed from the noun *administration*. The original verb *administer* means the same thing, so there was no need for a “new” one. But there is no verb “to spect,” so if it is needed, a verb will be created, and Vittoria may be the first to report its creation. **TFL**

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