



In his regular column, *Babel's* resident etymologist, **Simon Horobin**, explores the wonderful world of word origins

Janus words

If I invited you to peruse this article, would you skim it or study it very carefully? Since the word can be used in both senses, you could reasonably do either. As such, 'peruse' is an instance of a Janus word: one that is its own opposite. Common examples include 'cleave', which can signify both 'stick together' and 'split apart', and 'sanction', meaning both 'give permission' and 'apply a penalty'. The term derives from the Roman god Janus, depicted with two faces looking in opposite directions. As the god of beginnings and transitions, his name is also the origin of 'January'. Other terms that are sometimes used are 'auto-antonym' and 'contronym'.

How do Janus words emerge? In the case of peruse, it is the result of semantic change. The word's meaning has broadened

from 'scrutinise' to the looser sense of 'browse' or 'scan'; although this use was well established by the 16th century, it is still felt to be incorrect by some who insist on the older sense. In the case of 'cleave', the confusion is the result of sound change: distinct verbs in Old English (*cleofan* and *cleofian*) have become identical in modern English. Another cause is the introduction of similar words through borrowing. The verb 'clip', meaning 'fasten with a clip', is from Old English *clyppan*, which originally meant 'hug' or 'embrace'. Subsequent changes in pronunciation left it identical with 'clip', meaning 'cut off', which is a borrowing of Old Norse *klippa*.

In some cases, the resulting clash has led to one of the words becoming restricted to specialised contexts, as happened with 'let'. The verb meaning

'allow' is from Old English *lætan*, which became identical to a word meaning 'prevent', from Old English *lettan*. As a result, 'let' meaning 'hinder' became restricted to sporting contexts, where it is used to refer to a point replayed because of an obstruction, and in the legal phrase 'without let or hindrance'.

Although these changes may seem to promote confusion rather than communication, Janus words continue to appear today, especially in slang use. If someone were to describe this article as bad, wicked or sick, should I be pleased or offended? ¶