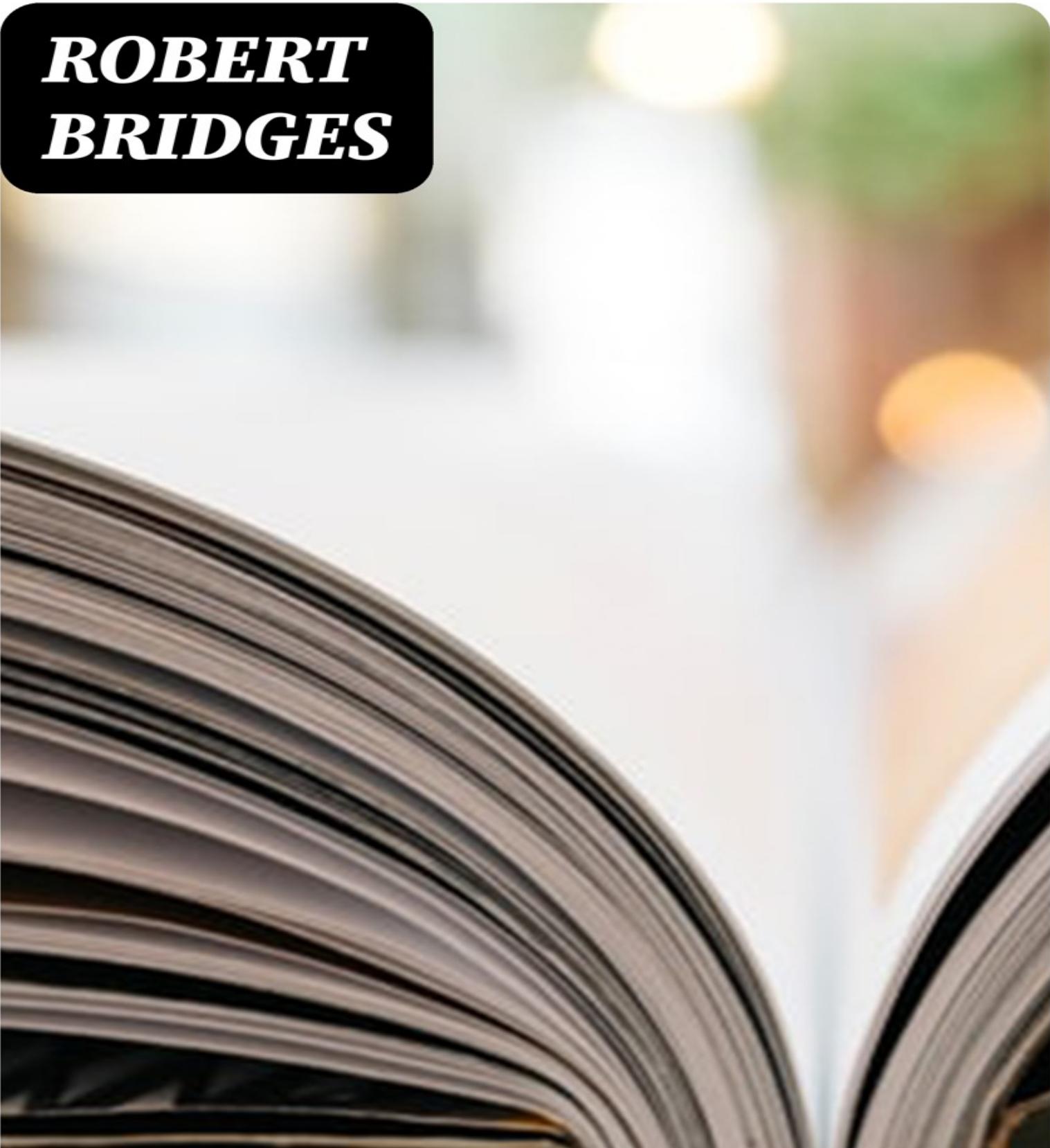


**ROBERT
BRIDGES**



**ON ENGLISH
HOMOPHONES**

Robert Bridges

On English Homophones

Society for Pure English, Tract 02

EAN 8596547246152

DigiCat, 2022

Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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Definition of homophone.

When two or more words different in origin and signification are pronounced alike, whether they are alike or not in their spelling, they are said to be homophonous, or homophones of each other. Such words if spoken without context are of ambiguous signification. Homophone is strictly a relative term, but it is convenient to use it absolutely, and to call any word of this kind a homophone.¹

Homophony is between words as *significant* sounds, but it is needful to state that homophonous words must be *different*

words, else we should include a whole class of words which are not true homophones. Such words as *draft*, *train*, *board*, have each of them separate meanings as various and distinct as some true homophones; for instance, a draught of air, the miraculous draught of fishes, the draught of a ship, the draft of a picture, or a draught of medicine, or the present draft of this essay, though it may ultimately appear medicinal, are, some of them, quite as distinct objects or notions as, for instance, *vane* and *vein* are: but the ambiguity of *draft*, however spelt, is due to its being the name of anything that is *drawn*; and since there are many ways of drawing things, and different things are drawn in different ways, the *same word* has come to carry very discrepant significations.

Though such words as these² are often inconveniently and even distressingly ambiguous, they are not homophones, and are therefore excluded from my list: they exhibit different meanings of one word, not the same sound of different words: they are of necessity present, I suppose, in all languages, and corresponding words in independent languages will often develop exactly corresponding varieties of meaning. But since the ultimate origin and derivation of a word is sometimes uncertain, the scientific distinction cannot be strictly enforced.

False homophones.

Now, wherever the same derivation of any two same-sounding words is at all doubtful, such words are practically homophones: —and again in cases where the derivation is certainly the same, yet, if the ultimate meanings have so diverged that we cannot easily resolve them into one idea, as we always can *draft*, these also may be practically reckoned as homophones.

Continent, adjective and substantive, is an example of absolute divergence of meaning, inherited from the Latin; but as they are different parts of speech, I allow their plea of identical derivation and exclude them from my list. On the other hand, the

substantive *beam* is an example of such a false homophone as I include. *Beam* may signify a balk of timber, or a ray of light. Milton's address to light begins

O first created beam

and Chaucer has

As thikke as motes in the sonne-beam,

and this is the commonest use of the word in poetry, and probably in literature: Shelley has

Then the bright child the plumèd seraph came
And fixed its blue and beaming eyes on mine.

But in Tyndal's gospel we read

Why seest thou a mote in thy brother's eye and perceivest
not
the beam that is in thine own eye?

The word *beam* is especially awkward here,³ because the beam that is proper to the eye is not the kind of beam which is intended. The absurdity is not excused by our familiarity, which Shakespeare submitted to, though he omits the incriminating eye:

You found his mote; the king your mote did see,
But I a beam do find in each of three.

And yet just before he had written

So sweet a kiss the golden sun gives not
To those fresh morning drops upon the rose,
As thy eye-beams when their fresh rays have smote

The night of dew that on my cheeks down flows.

Let alone the complication that *mote* is also a homophone, and that outside Gulliver's travels one might as little expect to find a house-beam as a castle-moat in a man's eye, the confusion of *beam* is indefensible, and the example will serve three purposes: first to show how different significations of the same word may make practical homophones, secondly the radical mischief of all homophones, and thirdly our insensibility towards an absurdity which is familiar: but the absurdity is no less where we are accustomed to it than where it is unfamiliar and shocks us.

Tolerance due to habit.

And we are so accustomed to homophones in English that they do not much offend us; we do not imagine their non-existence, and most people are probably unaware of their inconvenience. It might seem that to be perpetually burdened by an inconvenience must be the surest way of realizing it, but through habituation our practice is no doubt full of unconscious devices for avoiding these ambiguities: moreover, inconveniences to which we are born are very lightly taken: many persons have grown up to manhood blind of one eye without being aware of their disability; and others who have no sense of smell or who cannot hear high sounds do not miss the sense that they lack; and so I think it may be with us and our homophones.

But since if all words were alike in sound there would be no spoken language, the differentiation of the sound of words is of the essence of speech, and it follows that the more homophones there are in any language, the more faulty is that language as a scientific and convenient vehicle of speech. This will be illustrated in due course: the actual condition of English with respect to homophones must be understood and appreciated before the

nature of their growth and the possible means of their mitigation will seem practical questions.

Great number.

The first essential, then, is to know the extent and nature of the mischief; and this can only be accomplished by setting out the homophones in a table before the eye. The list below is taken from a 'pronouncing dictionary' which professes not to deal with obsolete words, and it gives over 800 ambiguous sounds; so that, since these must be at least doublets, and many of them are triplets or quadruplets, we must have something between 1,600 and 2,000 words of ambiguous meaning in our ordinary vocabulary.⁴

Now it is variously estimated that 3,000 to 5,000 words is about the limit of an average educated man's talking vocabulary, and since the 1,600 are, the most of them, words which such a speaker will use (the reader can judge for himself) it follows that he has a foolishly imperfect and clumsy instrument.

As to what proportion 1,700 (say) may be to the full vocabulary of the language—it is difficult to estimate this because the dictionaries vary so much. The word *homophone* is not recognized by Johnson or by Richardson: Johnson under *homo-* has six derivatives of Herbert Spencer's favourite word *homogeneous*, but beside these only four other words with this Greek affix. Richardson's dictionary has an even smaller number of such entries. Jones has 11 entries of *homo-*, and these of only five words, but the Oxford dictionary, besides 50 words noted and quoted beginning with *homo-*, has 64 others with special articles.

Dr. Richard Morris estimated the number of words in an English dictionary as 100,000: Jones has 38,000 words, exclusive of proper names, and I am told that the Oxford dictionary will have over 300,000. Its 114 *homo-* words will show how this huge number is partly supplied.