

Words Poorly Used #83 — Pseudo, Quasi, Para, Alternative

Pseudo, Quasi, Para, Alternative

These are four very subtle word parts — either prefixes or modifiers. Let's look at each, then we'll look at the lizards' thicket in which they thrive:

Pseudo — from a Greek word signifying “falsehood, untruth, a lie.” As in “a lie is a pseudo fact.” A pseudofact is totally apart from a real, corellary fact. A shortstop is an outfielder. That's a pseudo-assertion from one who sounds as if he knows baseball, but may not.

Quasi — from Latin quasi, “as if, as it were.” To wit, “different way of looking at or seeing a thing that is much like the thing itself, the degree to which it is a lie is in the degree that it omits important, fundamental likeness.” An infielder is a shortstop.

Para — from Greek *para-* from *para* (prep.) “beside, near, issuing from, against, contrary to.” One might say “his version apparently comes from a parallel universe, maybe *bizarro world*.” A baseball manager is a para-player, someone who needs to know all the techniques of all of the players. An assistant manager is a para-manager. That a football coach (manager) could manage (coach) a baseball team is a paradox — from Greek *paradoxon*, ... “contrary to expectation, incredible,” from *para-* “contrary to” + *doxa* “opinion,” ... [m]eaning “statement that is seemingly self-contradictory yet not illogical or obviously untrue” POTUS “T” says his inauguration crowd was bigger than that of POTUS “O.” Baseball manager “A” says his team can beat the team managed by “B.”

Alternative — from Latin *alternatus*, past participle of *alternare* “do one thing and then another, do by turns.” In other words, “his take, being either a lie or the truth, precludes the existence of alternative fact or fiction. You cannot do two things at once. Your “facts” as compared to my “facts” cannot be fact both at once. A is A. A is not B. B is B. B is not A. A shortstop is not any of the other positions on the field. Of course both “facts” or one “fact” can be fiction.

These analyses are not formal syntax, but they do point toward the possibility for much semantic mischief. In computers, as in society, semantic errors can produce vastly larger effects than syntax errors. Syntax just causes stoppage, semantics can allow an incorrect statement to perform as if appropriate until the system breaks.

— Kilgore Forelle