

Let's Schmooze

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Heir vs. Heirling

Some have asked, "What is the difference between the term *heir* and the term *heirling* ~ don't they mean the same thing?"

Well, they do ~ and then they might not. Let's look at it together. The question revolves around the use of the suffix *-ling*.

Words ending in *-ling* ~ such as duckling, yearling, stripling ~ usually refer to something that has the incipient or suggested attributes of something else.

Some examples ~

A duckling is a baby bird that has the potential to grow into a duck. Even though denotatively (technically) the duckling is indeed a duck, we don't think of it as a duck nor do we refer to it as a duck until it matures into an adult duck. Connotatively (in common everyday usage) we perceive a difference between a duck and a duckling ~ a duckling has the incipient potential to become a duck.

A yearling is an animal that is roughly a year old. The suggested attribute is to the age of the reference animal.

A stripling is a youth; adolescent humans are notably on the thin side as their muscular development lags behind their skeletal development ~ turn them sideways and they look like a strip. The suggested attribute is to the metaphorical appearance of a teenager.

Now, back to the question at hand.

Denotatively, the terms **heir** and **heirling** mean exactly the same thing. They both refer to someone who generally stands to inherit something from someone else.

However, connotatively, we can tease out a difference between the terms. An **heir** can be perceived as someone recognized as standing in line for the handout, whereas an **heirling** can be perceived as someone who could easily become a recognized heir ~ for example, if an older sibling passes on without leaving progeny.

The distinction between the terms **heir** and **heirling** is perhaps more useful when dealing with transcendent subjects instead of with ordinary subjects.

Suppose we start with the widely-held belief that we are the "children of God," and as such, we are all God's heirs.

Those who are fully cognizant of this, and in their daily life act upon this belief, can be viewed as fully-aware heirs. But, those who do not accept this belief, or have lost sight of it, and who go thru life as just flesh-and-blood humans ~ they can be viewed as heirlings. They have the incipient attribute of being a divine heir, if they would just realize it and act upon it.

A number of terms in the English language have differing denotative and connotative meanings. Judicious use of the suffix **-ling** can help tease out the connotative distinctions.

~ *'til we meet again* ~