



Confusion over next Friday tells of a Scottish heritage



WHEN is next Friday? Assuming you are reading this on Wednesday, it might be in two days' time or in nine days' time.

New Zealanders disagree about which is right, and can be confused when they hear someone using the other. People taking bookings in restaurants and motels have to be careful to get a date.

The problem arises because the Scots have the wonderful expression "Friday first" to mean the Friday that is only two days away. So "next Friday", for the Scots, is the Friday after Friday first. The English, on the other hand, do not have the expression "Friday first".

Accordingly, they interpret "next Friday" as meaning the first Friday we come to – the one that's only two days away.

The trouble in New Zealand is that some of us come of English stock, while others come from Scottish stock. Neither side uses "Friday first", but both use "next Friday" with the meanings their ancestors used.

Ian Gordon, the late professor of English at Victoria University and a language columnist, used to say that he could predict whether a New Zealander had a Scottish granny or not by which of these meanings they used.

What is clear is that the two meanings co-exist side-by-side in New Zealand. If you don't want to miss the party, make sure you know not only that it will be held next Friday, but what date that Friday is.

A CLASSIC car is one thing, but a classical education is another. Classic means something different from classical. Yet although we might have our preferences about which to use, syntactic and syntactical mean the same thing.

In Wellington, we are not always consistent in whether we talk about the Botanic Gardens or the Botanical Gardens, but we always mean the same place.

Is there any way of telling what the difference will be between an -ic word



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and an -ical word, if there is one? Is there any way of telling when there will be a difference? The simple answer to these questions is “no”, although the longer answer can be found in a book originally written as a Finnish doctoral thesis a few years ago by Mark Kaunisto.

As has been pointed out by many linguists who have looked closely at the ways in which words develop new meanings historically, each word has its own history. What is true of one is not necessarily true of another. And the meanings associated with particular words are peculiar to those words, not part of a general trend. So knowing about the difference between classic and classical will not necessarily help you when it comes to distinguishing economic and economical, electric and electrical, or historic and historical.

The best way to keep them apart will often be to think of the company they keep. Electric goes with blanket, chair, guitar, motor (where the electricity drives something), but also with blue and eel; electrical goes with engineer, fault, fire, shops (where the electricity is clearly not the motive power), but also with equipment and goods (where it

might be, but at a more abstract level).

In some cases, though, either word will do – electric shock or electrical shock? You can find both.

The same basic principle applies with a pair like continuous and continual. There is no general rule. If it rains continuously, it just does not stop, while if it rains continually, there are breaks between the showers. You just have to know that. Some people don’t know it, and confuse those of us who think we do.

Only in chemistry can we guess what the difference between ferric and ferrous, sulphuric and sulphurous, cupric and cuprous will be (the -ic form indicates higher valency than the -ous form) – and that’s because the system has been invented and rigorously applied by scientists, not left to develop naturally and idiosyncratically.

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