

Racing with the Moon, Dancing with the Stars

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So far in this thematic cluster, the sky's been the limit. Now let's soar up, up and away to outer space. There we'll discover words and phrases that are out of this world.

The moon is our nearest celestial neighbor. I'm over the moon about moon words. Have you ever wondered why the words *lunatic* and *lunar* begin with the same four letters? Etymology supplies the answer. *Lunatic* derives from *luna*, Latin for "moon," which when it is full, is said to render us daft—*moonstruck* and *loony*.

We keep time with the moon. *Monday* began as Old English for "moon day," and *month*, again from Old English, is the duration between full moons, the time it takes our lunar satellite to complete its voyage around our planet.

A *honeymoon* is an early harmony in any relationship, especially marriage. Here we come to the juncture of "honey" and the long-ago way of saying "month": *moon*. The first month of marriage is often the sweetest, but just when the moon is full and bright, it begins to wane as can sadly happen with matrimony.

The opportunity to read an explanation about the phrase *once in a blue moon* comes along once in a blue moon, when pigs fly and hell freezes over. A blue moon is the second full moon in a single month, a phenomenon that occurs, well, once in a blue moon. These bonus full moons present themselves on average once every 2.7 years. The expression has nothing to do with the actual color of the moon, but whenever certain natural conditions align, such as volcanic eruptions or titanic fires sending particles into the atmosphere, the moon can actually appear to be tinged with blue.

Some of us distill or drink *moonshine* (“illegal liquor”) or babble *moonshine* (“nonsense”). Some of us *moonlight* with a second job that we perform at night. Others of us *moon* over a desired lover. Then there’s that other verb *to moon*. I’ll leave you to figure out how that act got its name.

Moving right along to another body part, that whitish crescent at the base of each of your fingernails (none on your toenails) actually has a name—*lunule* or *lunula*, French-Latin for “little moon.”

Scientists got tired of watching the moon go around the earth for twenty-four hours. They decided to call it a day.

Have you ever dined at the restaurant on the moon? The food is great, but the place doesn’t have any atmosphere.

After those moonstruck, loony jokes, let’s go dancing with the stars, which eclipse the moon when it comes to the intensity of the light they shine upon English words. In an astronomical number of ways, the English language sees stars. We are so starstruck and starry-eyed that we call our stage, screen, and athletic celebrities stars. May this verbivorous book be a *lodestar* (“way” + “star”), a source of inspiration in your life. A lodestar is used in navigation to show the way.

The nearest star to our Earth is the sun. Christmas occurs shortly after the winter solstice, when the sun reaches its most southerly excursion relative to the celestial equator. The winter solstice enfolds the longest night of the year, just before the days slowly fill back up with brightness. At the time of the summer and winter solstices, the sun, before journeying back toward the equator, appears to stand still. This phenomenon is reflected in the Latin roots of the word: *sol*, meaning “sun,” and *sistere*, “to stand still.”

A Latin word for “star” is *stella*, whence the adjective *stellar*, the noun *constellation*, and name *Stella*. Another starry Latin word part is *astrum*, a prolific root that gives us *aster* (“a flower with star-shaped petals”), *astrology* (“star study”), *astronomer* (“star arranger”), *asteroid* (“star form”), and *astronaut* (“star sailor”). An asterisk is a symbol that looks like a “little star.” You may wish to dispute these celestial etymologies, but I think you’d be an asterisk it.

In William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Cassius warns that “the fault, dear Brutus, lies not in our stars, but in ourselves.” Nevertheless, for centuries, people have believed that the stars and their heavenly positions govern events on earth. If the conjunction of the stars is not propitious, disaster will strike. Created from the Latin *dis*, “bad, against,” and *astrum*, *disaster* literally means “against the stars”—ill-starred, star-crossed. In the ghostly opening scene of *Hamlet*, Horatio speaks of “stars with trains of fire and dews of blood, disasters in the sun.”

From time immemorial, astrologers have hunted for (sought) divine messages in the stars. Coming from the Latin *dis*, meaning “asunder” and *astrum*, meaning “star,” a disaster means that the stars are (aligned against you and that ill fortune is close at hand. Just ask the dinosaurs, who were annihilated by an asteroid, from the Greek word *asteroeides*, meaning “starlike.”

Astrologers used to study the stars to see how their coming together at a person’s birth would influence his or her future. *Desire* is star-spun from the Latin *de*, “from,” + *sidus*, “star.” The idea is that we wish for and desire fortunate outcomes that stream from our lucky stars. In the same constellation is *consider*, which radiates from the Latin *cum*, “with” + *sidera*, “stars.” The first meaning of *consider* was “to examine stars together to gauge their effects on our fate.” The influence of the stars reposes even within the word *influence* itself. *Influence* originally meant a flowing or streaming from the stars of an ethereal fluid that acted upon the character and destiny of human beings.

The ancients also believed that the influence of a star generated the *dog days*, summer periods of triple *h* weather—hazy, hot, and humid. In the days of the Romans, the six or eight hottest weeks of the summer, roughly July through the first half of August, were known colloquially as *caniculares dies*, or “days of the dog.” According to Roman lore, the dog star Sirius rose with and added its heat to the sun, making a hot time of the year even hotter.

Thousands of years ago, ancient Greek stargazers looked up at the sky and saw a white river of light arcing overhead. The Greeks named that broad band of stars *galaxias*—which stems from the word *glaxias*, meaning “wilk. To this day, we call our galaxy the Milky Way.

Galaxy, a Greek through Latin word that describes ginormous, humongous clusters of stars, originally meant “milky,” as in *lactose* and *lactic*. We call our galaxy the Milky Way.

Derived from Greek *ekkentros*, “out of the center,” from *ek*, “out of” + *kentron*, “center,” *eccentric* first appeared in English in 1551 as an astronomical term describing “a circle in which a heavenly body deviates from its center.” Modern-day astronomers still use *eccentric* in that way.

Greek also bequeaths us *zodiakos*, “circle of little animals.” *Zodiac* is the ancient Greek name for the heavenly belt of twelve signs believed to influence human behavior. The *zo-* in *zodiac* is related to the *zo-* in *zoo* and *zoology*—“life.”

Truth be told, I’m a Gemini, so I don’t believe in astrology.