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Capitonyms are Traps for users of English?

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**Abstract**

Capitonym is a semantic ambiguous device where the meaning and pronunciation is altered when capitalized. It refers to a word which mostly changes its meaning and sometimes its pronunciation too when the letter changes the case, for example, from lower case to upper case. Generally, a word is capitalized in case of it being a proper noun or eponym. The word capitonym is a portmanteau word formed with *capital* and the suffix *-onym*. One major challenge with capitonyms is that it is difficult to identify it when used at the beginning of a sentence. The words, *August*, *Lima*, and *Polish*, for example, are always capitalised if used to mean the eighth month, Peru's capital, and one from Poland respectively. On the contrary, words, such as *ill*, *nice*, and *worms* when referred to as sick, good, and crawling creatures respectively start with capital letters only when used at the beginning of sentences. In this paper, we attempt to understand what capitonyms in general are, how they are used, the challenges they pose, and suggest ways to use them properly.

**Keywords:** Capitonyms, Pronunciation, Meaning, Lower Case, Upper Case, Capitalization.

**Introduction**

Capitonym is a word that changes its meaning (and sometimes pronunciation) based on whether or not it is capitalized. (Joshi: 2014). Some of the major characteristics of capitonyms are that they have the same spelling except for capitalization, and different meaning when capitalized; they may have the same or different pronunciation. Capitonyms have distinct meanings or senses when they are capitalized as opposed to generic senses. In other words, they are dual meaning words which change their meaning, and sometimes even pronunciation, e.g. Mobile (the city in Alabama) is pronounced differently than a mobile phone. They are, in fact, a subset of homonyms. They are

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often difficult to identify if used at the beginning of a sentence, or if used during speech. Most often, capitonym pairs feature one word as a common noun and the other as a proper noun, e.g. Turkey (the country) and turkey (the bird). Capitonyms can be nouns, verbs or adjectives, e.g. China (the country) and china (as in porcelain); March (the month) and march (to walk); Titanic (the ship) and titanic (gigantic) etc. Capitonyms can be categorized by separating those that have related meanings and those who are not etymologically related and whose similarity is coincidental, e.g. A set of capitonyms with related meanings is the month of August (named for the Roman leader Augustus Caesar) and the adjective 'august' (meaning respected and impressive) which is derived from the same root that Augustus Caesar chose his name.

Joshi (2014) states:

Capitonyms are case-sensitive words. However, when capitonyms appear at the beginning of a sentence, there is no way to understand which meaning is being referred to except the context in which they are used. Capitonyms also create confusion in the aspect of listening. Because there is no way to understand which meaning is being referred to except the context in which they are used. Capitonyms

generally occur due to one form being a proper noun.

According to an article published in the ToI dated April 11, 2016, "Capitonyms are dual meaning words which change their meaning, sometimes even pronunciation, if the first letter is capitalised. The sentence, *Aturkeymay march in Turkey in May* or *March*, for example, would have been very difficult to understand if capital letters did not exist." Capitonyms generally occurs due to one form being a proper noun- the name of a person, a place, an establishment, etc. and is always written with a capital letter. English is notorious for capitonyms. It is also perhaps the only language with strange and inexplicable features like capitonyms. It poses a challenge to the users to differentiate the meaning of a word on the basis of whether it starts with a lower case or upper case notwithstanding its appearance at the beginning of a sentence. Sometimes, capitonyms also result in ambiguities, especially from the point of view of listening the principal reason being the absence of a way to understand the meaning referred to. But what is more challenging is the change in pronunciation depending on if a word begins with a small letter or capital one. We analyse capitonyms to show how it works.

**Capitalization Rules**

**Capitalization** is the writing of a word with its first letter in uppercase and

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the remaining letters in lowercase. It is governed by some rules. We list below some of them:

Capitalize the first word of a document and the first word after a period. In other words, use sentence capitals, e.g. *The president gave away the Padma Awards.*

Also, capitalize proper nouns and adjectives derived from proper nouns, e.g. *the Golden Gate Bridge, the Grand Canyon, a Russian song, a Shakespearean sonnet, a Freudian slip, an Einsteinian equation etc.* Of course, with the passage of time, some words originally derived from proper nouns no longer require capitalization as in *herculean, quixotic, draconian*. The primary purpose of capitals is to stress on particular elements within any group, e.g. *a park in the middle of the city*, or to be more specific we can say *Gandhi Park*, which, of course, makes it distinct from every other park.

One more rule is to capitalize titles when such titles are used before names, as in the example: *The scientist will address Congress*, and do not capitalize occupations before full names, e.g. *director Satyajit Roy, owner Nita Ambani, coach Anil Kumble*, and also capitalize a formal title as in: *Will you return the money, Professor?; or We're sorry to inform you, Captain, one sailor is missing. We also*

*need to capitalize kinship names when they appear before a personal name, e.g. We discovered out that Dad is there; or You don't look happy, Mom. Another important rule is to capitalize nicknames as in Meet my friends, Herb and Magic; or I just met two guys named Apple and Car.*

When we talk of specific geographical regions, we need not capitalize points of the compass, e.g. *We left Mumbai and drove south; or The east coast of India is cold this time of season.* And in exceptional cases, 'the' is capitalised if it is an integral part of a name, e.g. *We visited The Hague* but not necessary to capitalize *city, town, county*, etc., if it comes before the proper name, e.g. *the city of Mumbai*. Moreover, the first word in a complete quotation, even if it appears in the middle of a sentence, is capitalised as in the example: *Alex said, "The case is far from over, and we will win."* Also, quoted material that continues a sentence is not capitalised, e.g. *Jane said that the case was "far from over" and that "we will win."* Art movements are also capitalised, e.g. *I like Surrealism, but I never understood Abstract Expressionism, but not the first item in a list that follows a colon, e.g. Buy me the following: sweets, fruits, and chocolates. Similarly, use capitalisation when writing a title of a book, e.g. The King's English: A Guide to Modern Usage.*

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**Capitonyms Affect Pronunciation**

First we discuss below a good number of capitonyms (these words have been *italised* for the purpose of convenience) with respect to the case in pronunciation, which is how the change of the first letter of a word from lower to upper case affects the accent. For the sake of clarity and disambiguate, we have supplied the pronunciation of each word within /double slashes/. Let's take the word *Ares*, for example, which when capitalized is pronounced as /eəri:z/ as opposed to its counterpart beginning with lower case, *ares* which is pronounced as /a:z/. Similarly, *August* is pronounced as /ɔ:'gʌst/ and *august* as /ɔ:'gəst/, the difference being the second vowel sound, or *Begin* when capitalized is pronounced as /beɪɡɪn/ but when the capitalization is removed, it is spelled *begin* and is pronounced /bɪɡɪn/ (note the difference with respect to the first vowel sound).

**Word Examples**

Look at the words *Degas*, *Embarrass*, and *I'll*, for example, all beginning with the upper case are pronounced as /dəgeɪ:/, /em'bɒrəs/ and /aɪl/ respectively. But their counterparts, beginning with lower case, *degas*, *embarrass*, and *ill* are pronounced thus: /dɪgæs/, /ɪm'bærəs/, and /ɪl/ respectively. Let's look at some more pairs of words (beginning with capital letters and the same words beginning with small letters) with

their transcriptions: *Job* /dʒəʊb/ and *job* /dʒɒb/, *Jubilate* /dʒu:bɪlə:teɪ/ and *jubilate*/dʒu:bɪleɪt/, *Junker* /jʊŋkə/ and *junker* /dʒəŋkə/, *Lima* /laɪmə/ and *lima* /li:mə/, *Liver* /laɪvə/ and *liver* /lɪvə/ to understand how capitonyms affect pronunciation.

Or take the words *Magdalen*, *Male*, *Manes*, *Natal*, *Nestle*, *Nice*, and *Polish*, for example, which when capitalized are pronounced thus: /mægdəlin/, /mə:li:/, /mə:neɪz/, /nætəl/, /nesleɪ/, /ni:s/, and /pəʊlɪʃ/ respectively. Their pronunciation, on the other hand, changes to /mægdələn/, /meɪl/, /meɪnz/, /neɪtəl/, /nesl/, /naɪs/ and /pɒlɪʃ/ respectively when the upper case is replaced with lower case. One more set of capitonyms with the pronunciation of the words with capital letters and small letters such as *Rainier*/reɪnɪeɪ/ and *rainier* /reɪnɪə/, *Reading*/redɪŋ/ and *reading*/ri:dɪŋ/, *Said*/saɪd/ and *said*/sed/, *Scone*/sku:n/ and *scone* /skɒn/, *Seat*/si:t/ and *seat* /si:t/, *Slough* /slɒf/ and *slough* /slaʊ/, *Tang*/tɑ:ŋ/ and *tang* /tæŋ/, and *Worms*/wɔ:mz/ and *worms* /wɜ:mz/ respectively to justify the statement. Capitonyms are not limited to words alone; they can be found in sentences too as would be evident from the following illustrations:

**Sentence Examples**

The stress from my *job* and my marriage has me feeling like *Job* in the Bible.

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I ate a delicious *scone* in *Scone* when I traveled to Scotland.

The *Polish* woman had lovely nail *polish*.

Do they eat many *lima* beans in *Lima*,  
Peru?

A *turkey* *march* in *Turkey* in *May* or  
*March*!

The feature can be found in poetry also as is seen in “Job’s Job” from Richard

Lederer’s *The Word Circus*:

In *August*, an *august* patriarch  
Was *reading* an ad in *Reading*, Mass.  
Long-suffering *Job* secured a *job*  
To *polish* piles of *Polish* brass.

### Capitonyms Affect Meaning

After discussing exhaustively how change of case affects pronunciation, let us now examine how it has a bearing on the meaning as well.

The capitalised words *Ares*, *August*, *Begin*, *Degas*, *Embarrass*, *I’ll*, *Job*, *Jubilate*, and *Junker*, for example, mean God of War, the eighth month of the calendar, Israeli politician, French painter, a River in Illinois, future, author of a Biblical book, a psalm, a member of Prussian govt respectively. And the lower case words *ares*, *august*, *begin*, *degas*, *embarrass*, *ill*, *job*, *jubilate*, and *junker* mean thus: plural of area, important, to start, to remove gas, to make somebody uncomfortable, sick,

employment, to rejoice, and an old car respectively.

### Word Examples

Here are some more words (the meanings given within brackets against each capitalized word and lower case word), *Lima* refers to the Capital of Peru, but with the lower case (*lima*), it refers to a type of bean. *Liver* refers to comedy duo Liver Birds whereas *liver*, to an internal organ; *Magdalen* is an Oxford college but *magdalen* refers to a reformed prostitute. Similarly, *Male* is the Capital of the Maldives and *male* refers to a gender; and *Manes* refers to deified spirits of Rome as opposed to *manes* which is plural of mane. A few more words, *Natal* is a region of South East Africa but the same word with a lower case (*natal*) means something relating to birth; whereas *Nestle* is a company producing chocolate, *nestle* is a verb meaning to stay put; *Nice* is a French city but nice is pleasant.

Some more words such as *Polish* which refers to someone from Poland as contrasted with its lower case counterpart (*polish*) which is what is used to shine shoes; or *Rainier* is a prince of Monaco, but *rainier* is the comparative degree of rainy; and *Reading* refers to a borough in England and *reading* is what we do with a book. Let’s look at a few more words: *Said* is an Egyptian port and *said* is the past or past

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participle form of say; *Scone* is a village of central Scotland but the same word beginning with a lower case (*scone*) is pastry; or *Seat* is an automobile manufacturer and *seat* refers to something like a chair. Similarly, *Slough* refers to dead skin of an animal while *slough*, a borough; *Tang* refers to Chinese dynasty but *tang* with small letter refers to a sharp flavour; *Worms* is a city in South West Germany contrasted with *worms* which refers to a number of wriggling creatures etc. See the use of such words in sentences:

#### Sentence Examples

A *Bohemian*, someone from the regions of the Czech Republic historically called Bohemia, need not be *bohemian*, or socially unconventional.

It's important not to confuse *Cancer*, the constellation and zodiac sign, with *cancer*, the disease of uncontrolled cell multiplication.

The Asian nation of *China* produces a fair amount of *china*, or porcelain dishware.

The Christian period of renunciation preceding Easter called *Lent*, is completely different from *lent*, the past tense of the verb lend.

The most common language in the world, *Mandarin*, takes its name from *mandarin*, or scholar-official of the Imperial Chinese government, but only the language needs

the capital letter. The tasty mandarin orange also takes the lower case.

The third month of the year, *March*, is not the same as a *march*, or organized walk.

Last *March*, we attended a *march* at the Capitol.

The capitalized *Mercury* could be the first planet in the solar system or the messenger god of ancient Rome, but *mercury* is always the toxic liquid metal at number 80 of the periodic table.

*Turkey*, the Eurasian nation, has nothing in common with *turkey*, the delicious American bird.

#### How To Avoid Confusion

Now that we are aware of the ways in which the pronunciation and meaning change depending on whether the first letter of the word is lower case or upper case, it is necessary to also know how we can avoid the confusion arising out of capitonym. Of course there are no fool proof means to eliminate the challenge but we suggest an exhaustive list of words with their meaning and pronunciation which will help users to get some hands-on practice. The first set of words pertains to change in pronunciation when the word begins with a capital letter or a small letter:



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**Practice Set For Capitonyms Vis A Vis Pronunciation**

*Ares*:/eəri:z/(God of War)  
*ares*:/a:z/ (pl of unit of area)  
*August*:/ɔ:'gʌst/(eighth calendar month)  
*august*:/ɔ:'gəst / (Important)  
*Begin*:/beɪɡɪn/(Israeli politician)  
*begin*:/bɪɡɪn / (to start)  
*Celt*: /kɛlt/ (who speaks Celtic language)  
*celt*: /sɛlt/(a prehistoric tool)  
*Degas*:/dɛɡɑ:(French painter, sculptor)  
*degas*:/dɪɡæs/(remove gas)  
*Embarrass*:/ɛm'bɒrəs/(river in Illinois)  
*embarrass*:/ɪm'bærəs/  
*Ill*:/aɪl/ (future)  
*ill*:/ɪl/(sick)  
*Job*:/dʒɔʊb/ (author of a Biblical book)  
*job*:/dʒɔʊb/(employment)  
*Jubilate*:/dʒu:bɪlə:teɪ/  
*jubilate*:/dʒu:bɪleɪt /  
*Junker*:/jʊŋkə/(member of Prussian govt)  
*junker*:/dʒɒŋkə/(old car)  
*Lima*:/laɪmə/(capital of Peru)  
*lima*:/li:mə/(type of bean)  
*Liver*:/laɪvə/(Comedy duo Liver Birds)  
*liver*:/lɪvə/(an internal organ)  
*Magdalen*:/mægdəlɪn/(Oxford college)  
*magdalen*:/mægdələn/(pros)  
*Male*:/mə:li:/ (capital of the Maldives)  
*male*:/meɪl/(a gender)  
*Manes*:/mə:neɪz/ (deified spirits of Rome)  
*manes*:/meɪnz/(pl of mane)  
*Natal*: /nætəl/ (region of SE Africa)  
*natal*:/neɪtəl/(rel to birth)

*Nestle*:/nesleɪ/(a co producing chocolate)  
*nestle*:/nesl/(Stay put)  
*Nice*:/ni:s/(French City)  
*nice*:/naɪs/(pleasant)  
*Noel*: /'noʊəl/ (name)  
*noel*: /noʊ'el/ (a Christmas carol)  
*Polish*: /pəʊlɪʃ/ (one from Poland)  
*polish*:/pəʊlɪʃ/ (shoe)  
*Rainier*:/reɪnɪeɪ/(prince of Monaco)  
*rainier*:/reɪnɪə/(more rainy)  
*Reading*:/redɪŋ (borough in England)  
*reading*:/ri:dɪŋ/(a book)  
*Said*:/saɪd/(Egyptian port)  
*said*:/sed/ (spoken)  
*Scone*:/sku:n/(village of central Scotland)  
*scone*:/skɒn/ (pastry)  
*Seat*:/si:t/(car manufacturer)  
*seat*:/si:t/(chair)  
*Slough*:/slɒf/(dead skin of an animal)  
*slough*:/sləʊ/(a borough )  
*Tang*:/tɑ:ŋ / (Chinese dynasty)  
*tang*:/tæŋ/(sharp flavour)  
*Tangier*: /tæŋ'dʒɪər/ (in Morocco)  
*tangier*: /'tæŋjɪər/ (more tangy)  
*Worms*:/wɔ:mz/(city in SW Germany)  
*worms*:/wɜ:mz/(pl of worm)

**Practice Set For Capitonyms Vis A Vis Meaning**

Here are words (the meanings given within brackets against each capitalized word and lower case word) in which case the meaning changes with the change in the case:

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<i>Ares</i> (God of War) (plural of area)	<i>ares</i>	<i>Lima</i> (the capital of Peru)	<i>lima</i> (a type of bean)
<i>August</i> (the eighth month) (something important)	<i>august</i>	<i>Liver</i> (comedy duo Liver Birds) (an internal organ)	<i>liver</i>
<i>Begin</i> (an Israeli politician) start)	<i>begin</i> (to	<i>Magdalen</i> (an Oxford college) <i>magdalen</i> (a reformed prostitute)	
<i>Bohemian</i> (from Bohemia) (socially unconventional)	<i>bohemian</i>	<i>Male</i> (capital of the Maldives) (a gender)	<i>male</i>
<i>Cancer</i> (the zodiac sign) <i>cancer</i> (a disease)		<i>Mandarin</i> (language of China) (orange)	<i>mandarin</i>
<i>China</i> (Asian country) (porcelain dishware)	<i>china</i>	<i>Manes</i> (deified spirits of Rome) (plural of mane)	<i>manes</i>
<i>Cuban</i> (from Cuba) (relating to cubes)	<i>cuban</i>	<i>March</i> (the third month) <i>march</i> (organized walk)	
<i>Degas</i> (a French painter) (to remove gas)	<i>degas</i>	<i>May</i> (the fifth month)	<i>may</i> (modal verb)
<i>Divine</i> (relating to God) (to discover by intuition)	<i>divine</i>	<i>Mercury</i> (a planet)	<i>mercury</i> (the toxic liquid metal)
<i>Embarrass</i> (a river in Illinois) make sb uncomfortable)	<i>embarrass</i> (to	<i>Mosaic</i> (relating to Moses)	<i>mosaic</i> (a kind of decoration)
<i>Gallic</i> (an ancient terr of Gaul) (relating to galls)	<i>gallic</i>	<i>Natal</i> (a region of SE Africa) (relating to birth)	<i>natal</i>
<i>Hamlet</i> (a play by Shakespeare) <i>hamlet</i> (a small town)		<i>Nestle</i> (a company)	<i>nestle</i> (to stay put)
<i>I'll</i> (future) (sick)	<i>ill</i>	<i>Nice</i> (a French city) (pleasant)	<i>nice</i>
<i>Ionic</i> (relating to Ionia) (relating to ions)	<i>ionic</i>	<i>Piedmont</i> (a region of NW Italy) (a slope)	<i>piedmont</i>
<i>Job</i> (author of a Biblical book) (employment)	<i>job</i>	<i>Polish</i> (one from Poland) (used to shine shoes)	<i>polish</i>
<i>Jubilate</i> (a psalm) <i>jubilate</i> (to rejoice)		<i>Rainier</i> (prince of Monaco)	<i>rainier</i> (more rainy)
<i>Junker</i> (of Prussian govt) (an old car)	<i>junker</i>	<i>Reading</i> (a borough in England) (of a book)	<i>reading</i> (of a book)
<i>Lent</i> (period preceding Easter) (the past tense of the verb lend)	<i>lent</i>	<i>Regency</i> (in 1811–20 in Britain) (a govt by a regent)	<i>regency</i> (a govt by a regent)



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<i>Roman</i> (of Rome) (the ordinary type of printing)	<i>roman</i>
<i>Rosemary</i> (a name for female) <i>rosemary</i> (a bush)	
<i>Said</i> (an Egyptian port) (spoken)	<i>said</i>
<i>Scone</i> (a vill of cent Scotland) (pastry)	<i>scone</i>
<i>Scot</i> (a native of Scotland)	<i>scot</i> (tax)
<i>Seat</i> (a car manufacturer)	<i>seat</i> (chair)
<i>Self</i> (a popular Am magazine) (character)	<i>self</i>
<i>Slough</i> (dead skin of an animal) (a borough)	<i>slough</i> (a borough)
<i>Tang</i> (Chinese dynasty) (a sharp flavor)	<i>tang</i>
<i>Traveller</i> (of Irish origin) <i>traveller</i> (a person who is traveling)	
<i>Turkey</i> (the Eurasian nation) <i>turkey</i> (anAmerican bird)	
<i>Warren</i> (a name) <i>warren</i> (holes where wild rabbits live)	
<i>Worms</i> (a city in SW Germany) (plural of worm)	<i>worms</i>

**Conclusion**

Capitonyms are usually coincidental and the two words in the pair are completely unrelated. However, sometimes the difference between the two words in the pair is not very noticeable. (Joshi: 2014) So, they are confusing especially when the words are proper nouns or are used at the beginning of sentences. It poses problems for users of English relating not only to

pronunciation but also meaning. One more issue pertains to the mode: if it is written, the user can at least see the word and make out whether it is capitalized or not; and if capitalized, whether as a proper noun or because of its being at the beginning of a sentence. But if it is spoken, it becomes really challenging for the hearer to make out the difference. We have suggested sets of words with their meanings and pronunciation too for practice which will help users to know as many instances of capitonyms- covering both pronunciation and meaning- as possible so that they can be aware of the problem and tackle it accordingly. It is not enough to only be aware of the words or sets of words, we should also be using them in our day-to-day context. Another important tip is to always keep our eyes and ears open so that whenever a new word crops up, we should look for all aspects of it, e.g. the spelling, the pronunciation, the meaning, the usage etc.

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