



# Retronyms

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# HISTORY OF THE TERM



*Frank Fabian Mankiewicz*

The word “retronym” was invented by **Frank Mankiewicz** (May 16, 1924 – October 23, 2014), a journalist, Senator Robert Kennedy’s press secretary and the president of National Public Radio.

He collected this peculiar combinations of words, and coined a name for them.

# HISTORY OF THE TERM

A new form of compound word has been created to help old words avoid technological displacement. Consider the word "guitar." In olden times, you could play a Spanish guitar or a Hawaiian guitar, but your instrument was accurately denoted by the single word "guitar."

Along came the electric guitar. No longer could you say, "He plays the guitar," for fear of being immediately asked, "What kind — the electric guitar or the old-fashioned guitar?" Since people do not like to be old-fashioned, especially in the music world, players of "regular," or nonelectric, guitars have come to call their instruments "acoustic guitars."

Similarly, "natural turf" is the phrase now being used by sportscasters to differentiate that old-fashioned field from "artificial turf." Another word for natural turf is "grass"; we can soon expect all signs to read: "Keep off the natural turf."

Frank Mankiewicz, president of National Public Radio, collects these terms and calls them "retronyms" — nouns that have taken an adjective to stay up-to-date and to fend off newer terms.

*An actual extract from the William Safire's article, published in July 27, 1980.*

William Safire was the first one to mention this word in print. It made its appearance in his article "On Language" in "The New York Times Magazine" (July 27, 1980).

So William Safire popularized the term and opened it to the public.

# HISTORY OF THE TERM

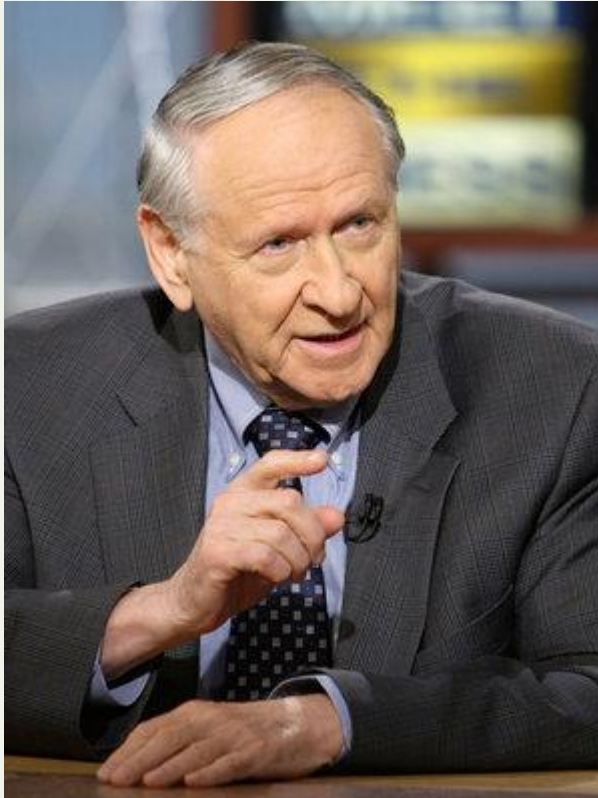
... - “a word or phrase created because an existing term that was once used alone needs to be distinguished from a term referring to a new development.”

“The American  
Heritage Dictionary”

In 2000 “retronym” officially appeared on pages of the 4th edition of “The American Heritage Dictionary”.

The unabridged version of the dictionary was the first major publication to include the term and, moreover, give its definition.

# HISTORY OF THE TERM



William Safire

William Safire wrote numerous articles on this topic in “The New York Times Magazine”.

He shared with his readers interesting examples of retronymy such as: “*skirt suit*”, “*free-range chicken*”, “*white male president*”.

He even insisted on using the word in The Times’s crossword puzzle, which sure became a challenge for some readers to guess.

He defined retronyms as “nouns that have taken an adjective to stay up to date and to fend off newer terms”.

From my own experience I learned that the easiest way to understand the term is probably not reading the definitions and looking up the scarce theory, but taking a good look at examples.

Classic example is an **acoustic guitar**:



Once guitar was just a guitar.



But in 1930s **electric guitars** appeared, and, in order to tell the two types apart, we started using the term **acoustic guitar**.

In this case the **acoustic guitar** is a retronym.

Here's another example of a retronym that is extremely common and can relate to almost everyone.

Modern stores can offer you all kinds of milk:

**Skim milk**



**All kinds of percent milk**



**Lactose-free milk**



To distinguish the usual milk, we started calling it the **whole milk**. It is a retronym.

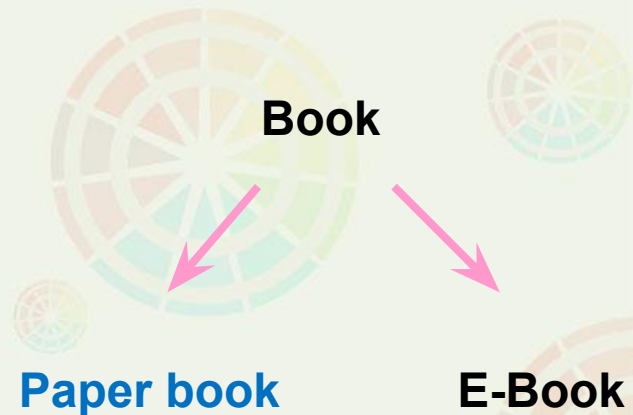


# WHY DO THE RETRONYMS APPEAR

Retronyms are created to express contrast and to differentiate already existing things from newer inventions.

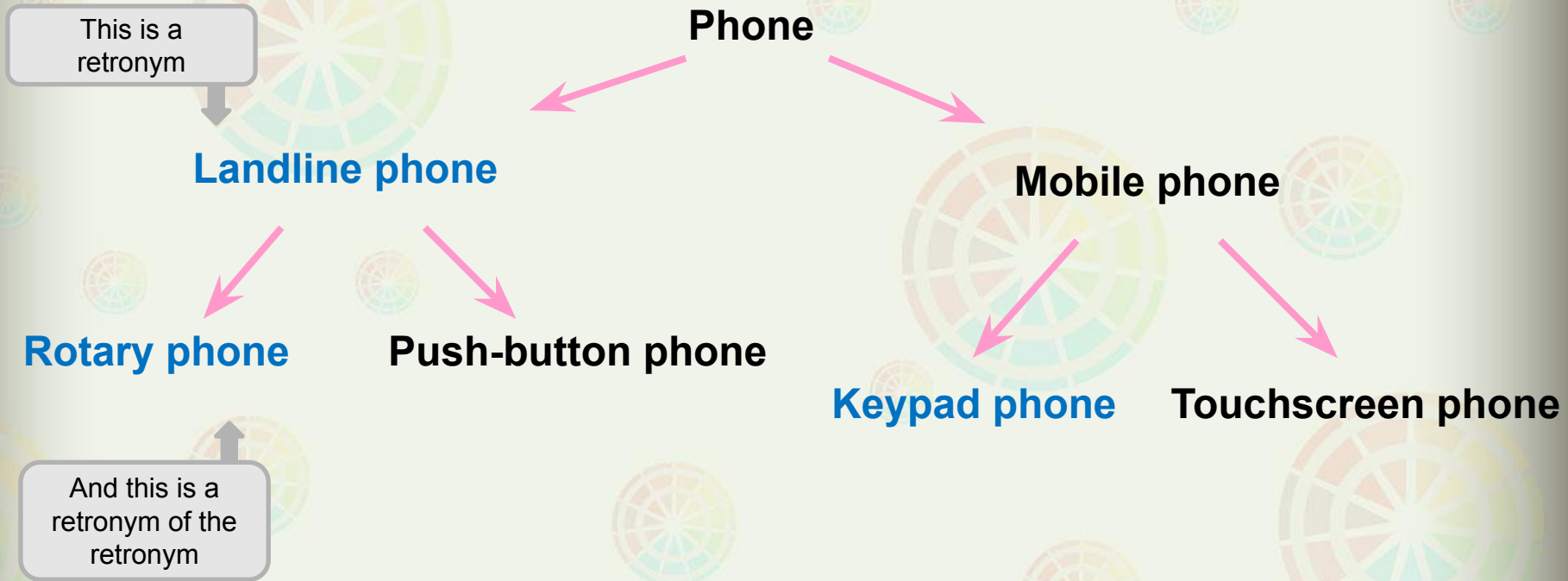
Books didn't need more precise definition, when only paper books existed.

But once E-Books were invented, it triggered development of a contrasting retronym.





And if we look into it deeper, we can find quite curious complications.



## Proper names can be retronyms too:



**ICE  
AGE**

When there was only the first film of the “Ice Age” franchise, we could refer to it simply calling in “Ice Age”. But when in 2006 a sequel came out, it became necessary to distinguish the films. Therefore, we need to call it “**Ice Age Part I**” (and that is a retronym).

**ICE  
AGE 2  
THE MELTDOWN**



**Vanilla Minecraft** stands for the original version of the game, the one without custom mods.



Adding adjectives like **usual**, **regular**, **traditional** is a very common way of creating retronyms.



**Traditional wedding** (white wedding with a traditional ceremony)



**Regular coffee** (caffeine-containing)

And thanks to health-conscious trends, **whole**, **organic**, **natural** are also popular among “edible” retronyms.

**Organic plants**



**Natural juices**



**Free-range eggs**



# DEFINITIONS

Oxford  
English  
Dictionary

**Oxford English Dictionary** gives a following definition to the term retronym.

"a neologism created for an existing object or concept because the exact meaning of the original term used for it has become ambiguous (usually as a result of a new development, technological advance, etc.)."

Merriam-  
Webster

**Merriam-Webster Dictionary** once made "retronym" a word of the day.

"a term consisting of a noun and a modifier which specifies the original meaning of the noun."

Retronyms are a consequence of technological development,

**Tape recorder**



**Natural grass**



**Wet signature**

*Signature*  
KITCHENS & BATHROOMS

Of evolution,



**Prehistoric people**

Or of the natural progress of history.

**The First World War**

**Neither of these things are avoidable, so we need to embrace retronyms and to learn to notice and love them.**

“...the retronym has become a key to the observation of rapid, profound cultural linguistic change.”

*William Safire*

The appearance of retronyms in a certain sphere of life proves that the sphere functions properly. And the language benefits from new collocations.

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