

About the Meaning of “Handicap” by Ron Amundson, Dept. of Philosophy, University of Hawaii at Hilo

Jerry: “I didn’t know you played golf, Bob. What’s your handicap?”

Bob: “One of my arms is longer than the other.”

The Bob Newhart Show, American sit-com c. 1975

Many disability rights advocates hate the term handicap. Some of them claim that the term has an evil and insulting history, and they hate it for this history. Most of these histories are myths. I’m writing this small commentary to dispel the myths.

Most versions of the handicap-etymology myth claim that handicap was derived from “cap-in-hand” which refers to begging in the street. (No one bothers to explain why the word isn’t “capihand.”) Some versions even put a date on it, and a dramatic story about disabled war veterans and a king who allowed only people with impairments to beg in the streets.

It’s all false. Here’s the true etymology of handicap, as far as we know it.

The Oxford English Dictionary is the acknowledged best source of information on etymology words in the English language. It provides quotations from written sources of the earliest known uses of terms. It carefully distinguishes between the earliest meanings and later derived meanings, using quotations to illustrate each.

The earliest use of the term handicap is from a quotation dated 1653. The definition for this use is this: “The name of a kind of sport having an element of chance in it, in which one person challenged some article belonging to another, for which he offered something of his own in exchange.” I will discuss this “sport,” because it is interesting to trace how the meanings change. The sport itself is seen in reports as early as the fourteenth century. Only the term handicap was new in the seventeenth century.

The original sport was a trading game, involving two traders and an umpire or matchmaker. Each of the two traders offered a particular item for trade, and also put up a small sum of forfeit-money into a hat or cap. The 14th century example (from *Peirs Plowman*) involved the trade of a cloak for a hood. The umpire of the game decides on the difference in value between the two trading items. This difference is called the “boot” or “odds.” The judge might decide, for example, that the hood was worth six pence less than the cloak. He would propose that the cloak be traded for the hood plus the boot of six pence.

The tricky part of the game is that each trader has the choice of accepting or rejecting the umpire’s proposal. The traders’ decisions determine what happens to the forfeit money. Both traders put their hands into the cap, and draw them out at the same time. An open hand is an agreement to trade and a closed hand is a refusal to trade. If both traders make the same decision (either to accept or reject the trade), then the umpire takes the forfeit money. If one trader refuses and the other agrees, the trader who agrees

takes the forfeit money. The umpire is left with nothing, and the refusing trader loses his forfeit money.

This game was called *handy-capp* or *handicap*, apparently from the fact that both traders put their hands in the cap and removed them to indicate their willingness to trade. Notice the *game* is called *handicap*. The difference in value is called the *boot* or the *odds*. Notice also that the game is designed to reward the umpire's fairness in judging the *boot*. The umpire wins the forfeit money if both players agree to its fairness. If both reject the trade, the traders would never have agreed to any trade, and the umpire is rewarded for the traders' stubbornness.

To me this sounds more like the stock market than a sport. But it survived for several hundred years. Definition #2 began around 1750, when the term *handicap* began to apply to horseraces. The "boot" was the difference in the weight carried by two horses in order to make the match equal. Again, the weight difference was not called the *handicap*. As horse racing became more organized, with larger fields, the matchmakers became professionals and forfeit money was abandoned. The matchmaker became known as a *handicapper*, and the race was called a *handicap race*, or just a *handicap*. The term was later applied to other contests. The OED's definition #3 (from 1875) is "Any race or competition in which the chances of the competitors are sought to be equalized by giving an advantage to the less efficient or imposing a disadvantage upon the more efficient."

Notice that the term *handicap* *still* does not apply to disadvantages themselves. It applies to the contest. But about the same time the term began to be used metaphorically to refer to disadvantages. These were still usually in the context of sport, but sometimes referred to economic competition between nations; "A high expenditure and heavy taxation handicaps a country." (That modern-sounding quotation comes from 1894.)

It is interesting to notice that the oldest British sports still use the term in a way that resembles the old uses. A *handicap* in horse racing still refers to a race, not to the extra weight. In golf (a game almost as old as horse racing) the *handicap* is a *benefit* given to inferior players, not an extra burden on superior players.

Finally, the first use of *handicap* to designate mental or physical impairment is recorded in a 1915 photo caption: *The Handicapped Child*.

In all this discussion about etymology, I am not trying to defend the use of the term *handicap* to mean impairment. Many people dislike the term because of its association with old-fashioned attitudes towards impairments. That's a perfectly good reason to avoid the term. We don't *need to* have an evil etymology in order to discourage the use terms that we find offensive. And we look especially foolish when we claim myths to be true. They are too easy to refute.

Some disability rights advocates have used a more accurate etymology to explain their dislike for "handicap." They say that its earlier association with sports is too competitive. It implies that disabled people should be trying to "overcome" their handicaps in the same way that heavily weighted horses do. If sports metaphors bother you, that's ok with me. But I still don't think we need to dream up etymological explanations in order to justify our preferences. I know plenty of people who dislike the term but don't care about sports metaphors one way or the other.

Consider the history in the United States of the changing terminology that applies to people of African descent. The NAACP even has the term “colored people” embedded in it, but that terminology is no longer acceptable. There is no reason to invent a mythological history to explain how the term “colored people” has an evil etymology. When terms become associated with outmoded ways of thought, the terms have to be changed.

There is some bad news in this, too. As we activists get older, the younger activists will scold us for our old-fashioned ways of talking. Some of them will probably dream up ridiculous etymologies to prove that our ways of talking are politically reactionary. Oh, well. That’s life.