



Notion of Epithet

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Abstract: An epithet 'adjective', from *ἐπίθετος* (*epíthetos*) 'additional') is a byname, or a descriptive term (word or phrase), accompanying or occurring in place of a name and having entered common usage. It has various shades of meaning when applied to seemingly real or fictitious people, divinities, objects, and binomial nomenclature.

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An epithet 'adjective', from [ἐπίθετος](#) (*epíthetos*) 'additional') is a byname, or a descriptive term (word or phrase), accompanying or occurring in place of a name and having entered common usage. It has various shades of meaning when applied to seemingly real or fictitious people, divinities, objects, and [binomial nomenclature](#). It can also be a descriptive title: for example, [Pallas Athena](#), [Phoebus Apollo](#), [Alfred the Great](#), [Suleiman the Magnificent](#), or [Władysław I the Elbow-high](#).

The word epithet can also refer to an abusive, defamatory, or derogatory phrase. This use as a [euphemism](#) is criticized by Martin Manser and other proponents of [linguistic prescription](#). [H. W. Fowler](#) complained that "epithet is suffering a vulgarization that is giving it an abusive imputation."

Epithets are sometimes attached to a person's name or appear in place of his or her name, as what might be described as a glorified nickname or [sobriquet](#), and for this reason some linguists have argued that they should be considered as [pronouns](#). It has also been argued that epithets are a phenomenon with the [syntax-semantics interface](#), because they have components of both, and also a [pragmatic](#) dimension.



An epithet is linked to its noun by long-established usage. Not every adjective is an epithet. An epithet is especially recognizable when its function is largely decorative, such as if "cloud-gathering Zeus" is employed other than in reference to conjuring up a storm. "The epithets are decorative insofar as they are neither essential to the immediate context nor modeled especially for it. Among other things, they are extremely helpful to fill out a half-verse", [Walter Burkert](#) has noted.

Some epithets are known by the Latin term *epitheton necessarium*, as they are required to distinguish the bearers, as an alternative to numbers after a prince's name—such as Richard the Lionheart ([Richard I of England](#)), or [Charles the Fat](#) alongside [Charles the Bald](#). The same epithet can be used repeatedly joined to different names, such as [Alexander the Great](#) as well as [Constantine the Great](#).

Other epithets can easily be omitted without serious risk of confusion, and are therefore known as *epitheton ornans*. Thus the classical Roman author Virgil systematically called his main hero *pious Aeneas*, the epithet being *pious*, meaning religiously observant, humble and wholesome, as well as calling the armsbearer of Aeneas *fidus Achates*, the epithet being *fidus*, which means faithful or loyal.

There are also specific types of epithets, such as the [kenning](#) which appears in works such as [Beowulf](#). An example of a kenning would be using the term [whale-road](#) instead of the word "sea".

Epithets are characteristic of the style of ancient [epic poetry](#), notably in that of [Homer](#) or the northern European sagas (see above, as well as [Epithets in Homer](#)). When [James Joyce](#) uses the phrase "the snot-green sea" he is playing on Homer's familiar epithet "the wine-dark sea". The phrase "Discreet Telemachus" is also considered an epithet.

The Greek term [antonomasia](#), in rhetoric, means substituting any epithet or phrase for a proper name, as "Pelides", signifying the "son of Peleus", to identify



Achilles. An opposite substitution of a proper name for some generic term is also sometimes called antonomasia, as a Cicero for an orator. The use of a father's name or ancestor's name, such as "Pelides" in the case of Achilles, or "Saturnia" in the case of the goddess Juno in Virgil's Aeneid, is specifically called a patronymic device and is in its own class of epithet.

In [William Shakespeare's](#) play [Romeo and Juliet](#), epithets are used in the prologue, such as "star-cross'd lovers" and "death-mark'd love."

Epithets were in layman's terms glorified nicknames that could be used to represent one's style, artistic nature, or even geographical reference. They originated to simply serve the purpose of dealing with names that were hard to pronounce or just unpleasant. It from there went to something that could be very significant assigned by elders or counterparts to represent one's position in the community or it could be a representation of whomever one wanted to be or thought he was. The elegance of this movement was used throughout history and even modern day with many examples ranging from "Aphrodite the Heavenly & Zeus the Protector of Guests" all the way to "Johnny Football & King James".

[American comic books](#) tend to give epithets to [superheroes](#), such as [The Phantom](#) being "The Ghost Who Walks", [Superman](#) called "The Man of Steel", and "The Dynamic Duo" [Batman](#) and [Robin](#), who are individually known as "The Dark Knight" and "The Boy Wonder".

Additionally, *epíteto*, the Spanish version of epithet, is commonly used throughout poems in Castilian literature.

In many [polytheistic](#) religions, such as those of ancient India and Iran (the most ancient of which go back to a common Indo-Iranian period), Greece and Rome, a deity's epithets generally reflected a particular aspect of that god's essence and role, for which their influence may be obtained for a specific occasion:



Apollo Musagetes is "[Apollo](#), [as] leader of the [Muses](#)" and therefore patron of the arts and sciences while Phoibos Apollo is the same deity, but as shining sun-god. "[Athena](#) protects the city as polias, oversees handicrafts as ergane, joins battle as [promachos](#) and grants victory as nike."

Alternatively, the epithet may identify a particular and localized aspect of the god, such as a reference to the mythological place of birth or [numinous presence](#) at a specific sanctuary: sacrifice might be offered on one and the same occasion to Pythian Apollo (Apollo Pythios) and Delphic Apollo (Apollo Delphinios). A localizing epithet refers simply to a particular center of veneration and the cultic tradition there, as the god manifested at a particular festival, for example: Zeus Olympios, Zeus as present at Olympia, or Apollo Karneios, Apollo at the Spartan [Carneian festival](#).

Often the epithet is the result of fusion of the Olympian divinity with an older one: [Poseidon Erechtheus](#), [Artemis Orthia](#), reflect intercultural equations of a divinity with an older one, that is generally considered its pendant; thus most Roman gods and goddesses, especially the [Twelve Olympians](#), had traditional counterparts in Greek, Etruscan, and most other Mediterranean pantheons, such as [Jupiter](#) as head of the Olympian Gods with [Zeus](#), but in specific cults, there may be a different equation, based on one specific aspect of the divinity. Thus the Greek word Trismegistos ("thrice grand") was first used as a Greek name for the Egyptian god of science and invention, [Thoth](#), and later as an epitheton for the Greek [Hermes](#) and, finally, the fully equated Roman Mercurius [Mercury](#) (both were messenger of the gods). Among the Greeks, T. H. Price notes the nurturing power of Kourotrophos might be invoked in sacrifices and recorded in inscription, without specifically identifying [Hera](#) or [Demeter](#).



Some epithets were applied to several deities of the same pantheon rather accidentally if they had a common characteristic, or deliberately, emphasizing their blood- or other ties; thus in pagan Rome, several divinities gods, and heroes were given the epitheton [Comes](#) as companion of another (usually major) divinity. An epithet can even be meant for collective use, e.g. in Latin *pilleati* 'the felt hat-wearers' for the brothers [Castor and Pollux](#). Some epithets resist explanation.

Catholics, [Eastern Orthodox](#) Christians, and Christians of other churches practice the use of epithets in the veneration of [Jesus](#) (e.g., "Christ"; "[Prince of Peace](#)"; "[The Good Shepherd](#)"), of [Mary, Mother of Jesus](#) (e.g. "[Mother of God](#)"; "[Panagia](#)"), and of the saints (e.g. "[Pope Saint John Paul the Great](#), [Saint Theophan the Recluse](#)"). "[Our Lady of Lourdes](#)" is essentially [periphrasis](#), except where some aspect of the Virgin is invoked.

Orators have a variety of epithets that they can employ that have different meanings. The most common are fixed epithets and transferred epithets. A fixed epithet is the repetitive use of the same word or phrase for the same person or object. A transferred epithet qualifies a noun other than the person or thing it is describing. This is also known as a *hypallage*. This can often involves shifting a modifier from the animate to the inanimate; for example, "cheerful money" and "suicidal sky".

Orators take special care when using epithets so as to not use them as smear words. Orators could be accused of racial or abusive epithets if used incorrectly. American journalist [William Safire](#) discussed the use of the word in a 2008 column in [The New York Times](#): "I am working on a piece about nationalism with a focus on epithet as a smear word,' writes David Binder, my longtime Times colleague, 'which was still a synonym for 'delineation' or 'characterization' in my big 1942 Webster's but now seems to be almost exclusively a synonym for 'derogation' or 'smear word.'"



... In the past century, [epithet] blossomed as 'a word of abuse,' today gleefully seized upon to describe political smears."

An expression added to a Name as a characterizing description, before it in *glorious Devon*, after it in *Richard Crookback*, with a definite article in William *the Conqueror*, *Scotland the Brave*, Alexander *the Great* like a descriptive title.

2. Also *Homeric epithet*, *poetic epithet*. A formulaic phrase containing an adjective and a noun, common in epic poetry: *grey-eyed Athene*, *rosy-fingered dawn*, *the wine-dark sea*.

3. A word or phrase that substitutes for another: *man's best friend for dog*, *the water of life for whisky*.

4. A word or phrase used to abuse and dismiss: *bastard*, *bugger*, *shit*, especially when used directly (*You shit!*, *You son of a bitch!*) or as a description (*The silly old cow!*).

5. Such a phrase as *that idiot of a lawyer* and *a devil of a doctor*.

6. An adjective or other descriptive word.

Epithets are such attributes which describe objects expressively.

Assigned features. It is essential to differentiate between *logical attributes* and *epithets proper*.

Logical attributes are objective and non-objective.

a round table, *green meadows*, *next day*, *second boy*, *loud voice*.

Epithets proper are subjective and evaluating, mostly metaphorical.

These qualities make epithets expressive:

loud ocean, *wild wind*, *glorious sight*, *irresistible charm*, *crazy behaviour*.

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