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JUN. 01, 2015

Science Diction: Sun

BY HOWARD MARKEL



Relief showing Helios, from the Temple of Athena at Ilion (Troy). Credit: Gryffindor/Wikipedia/(PD)

Throughout human history, the sun's powerful energy has long assured its role as the undisputed "star" of our solar system.

The ancient Greeks personified the sun as a handsome god named Helios. His astronomical pedigree was impeccable: He was the son of the Titan Hyperion and the Titaness Theia. Helios was also the brother of Selene, the goddess of the Moon, and Eos, the goddess of the dawn.

Said to be crowned with a radiant burst of sunbeams, Helios daily drove his chariot of the sun, drawn by what the ancient Greek poet Pindar called "fire-breathing horses," across the sky. Along the way, he delivered sunshine around the world. Helios repeated his appointed rounds each morning after his sister Eos announced the new dawn.

With the passage of time, Helios became associated with Apollo, the god of light, but most ancient Greeks believed them to be separate gods, mainly because Helios was a Titan and Apollo, a member of the higher order of gods known as Olympians.

During their empiric reign, the Romans continued to worship several sun gods, but they replaced the Greek word for sun, *Helios*, with the Latin *Sol*, a root word that continues to refer to the sun in the present day, such as in the term “solar system.” The most powerful sun god in ancient Rome was Sol Invictus, meaning “Unconquered Sun.”

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word sun comes from many sources, including the Latin *sol*. The Old English *sunne* likely derives from the old Germanic *sunne*; both attached a feminine gender to the “heavenly body.” There exist several variants of the word in other languages, such as *zon* or *zonne* (Dutch), *sunna* (Old High German, Gothic, and Old Norse), and *sonne* and *son* (Middle German). An Old Irish cognate is *fur-sunnud*, or “lighting-up.”

Conforming to usage of the Old English *sunne*, the feminine pronoun continued to be applied to the sun until around the 16th century. At this point, the masculine pronoun was more commonly used but “without necessarily implying personification,” and without any hard or fast rules. (The moon, on the other hand, was typically referred to with the feminine pronoun during this period. For more on the origins of the word “moon,” check out [this Science Diction piece](#)).

Shakespeare notes in his play *The Comedy of Errors* (written between 1589 and 1594, but first published in 1623): “When the sunne shines, let foolish gnats make sport, but crepe in crannies when he hides his beames.” (II, ii, 30). Moreover, several English Christian devotional poets, such as George Herbert, enjoyed making puns with the word sun and the “son of God,” thus further emphasizing a masculine beam to solar literary references. During the mid- to late-1600s, the now more familiar spelling of the word, *sun*, came into popular use.

Words aside, scientists long debated the astronomical relationship between the sun and the Earth. During the 4th century, B.C., Plato and Aristotle espoused a theory called geocentrism, which proposed that the sun revolved around the Earth. The Aristotelian or geocentric model was further elaborated by Claudius Ptolemy in the 2nd century, A.D. These “proto-scientists” were so revered that their ideas drowned out the far less influential Aristarchus of Samos, of the 3rd century B.C., who was probably the first to propose a heliocentric theory, wherein the Earth revolves around the sun. Plato, Aristotle, and Ptolemy’s geocentric theory prevailed for more than a millennium.

For our modern understanding of how the planets in our solar system revolve around the sun, we must thank the Renaissance astronomer and Catholic cleric Nicholas Copernicus (1473-1543), who first proposed a predictive mathematical model now known as heliocentrism, Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who furthered the theory by predicting elliptical orbits of the planets, and, of course, the essential telescopic observations of Galileo Galilei (1564-1642). Solar studies have been rising, no pun intended, by leaps and bounds ever since.



Regardless of how we understand it or even what we call our star, every morning (at least for the foreseeable future), we can rejoice in saying, as the late and multi-talented musician George Harrison eloquently wrote, "here comes the sun"!

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