

Retrospectives

How Joan Robinson and B. L. Hallward Named Monopsony

Robert J. Thornton

This feature addresses the history of economic words and ideas. The hope is to deepen the workaday dialogue of economists, while perhaps also casting new light on ongoing questions. If you have suggestions for future topics or authors, please write to Joseph Persky, c/o *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Department of Economics (M/C 144), University of Illinois at Chicago, 601 South Morgan Street, Room 2103, Chicago, Illinois 60607-7121.

Introduction

As every economist knows, the word “monopsony” refers to a single buyer of a good or service and is the counterpart of “monopoly,” which refers to a single seller. Both terms are derived from classical Greek. However, monopoly is a much older term. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (volume 6, p. 624), the earliest written record of the word monopoly in English occurred in 1534 in Thomas More’s *Treatise upon the Passion*.

Monopsony is a considerably more recent term. The OED attributes it to Joan Robinson of Cambridge in her 1932 classic *The Economics of Imperfect Competition*. At the time, the common term for a single buyer was “monopoly buyer.” Robinson recognized that this term was “illogical,” since it means literally “a single seller-buyer.” She then argues (p. 215): “It is necessary to find a name for the individual buyer which will correspond to the name *monopolist* for the individual seller. In the following pages an individual buyer is referred to as a *monopsonist*.” In an accompanying footnote, she credits classics

■ *Robert J. Thornton is MacFarlane Professor of Economics, Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. His e-mail address is <rjt1@lehigh.edu>.*

scholar B. L. Hallward of Cambridge for the new term, which is derived from the Greek verb *opsonēin* (ὀψωνεῖν), which she says means “to go marketing.” However, the word *opsonēin* is not in fact the most appropriate Greek word for making purchases in a market or buying. In this paper, I discuss the etymology of the word monopsony and describe in some detail how the term came into being. I then examine several other more appropriate terms for “a single buyer” that may have come within a whisker of entering the economist’s lexicon.

Monopsony Means What?

The word “monopoly” is formed from the Greek adjective *monos* (μονος) meaning “alone, only, one” and from the verb *polein* (πωλεῖν) meaning “to sell.” Both Greek words are perfectly appropriate as the bases for the derived word monopoly. Indeed, the combined word *monopolia* (μονοπωλία) was actually used by Aristotle to indicate “an exclusive sale” (*An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, p. 518.) The suffix “y” (and its equivalent “ia”) means “the state of ” or “the quality of.”

However, the stem of monopsony, *opsonēin* (ὀψωνεῖν), has a meaning that is more idiosyncratic than just “to go marketing,” the translation given by Joan Robinson. In classical Greek, the word *opson* (ὄψον) means “fish” (or “cooked meat”). And the verb *opsonēin* (ὀψωνεῖν) that Robinson refers to actually means “to buy *fish*,” making the literal meaning of monopsony a market situation with “a single buyer of *fish*.”¹

There are at least two other more general Greek words for “buy” that one could think of as more appropriate stems for constructing a word for “a single buyer.” Perhaps the most obvious choice is *oneomai* (ὀνειρομαι), but one might also turn to *priamai* (πριαμαι), both commonly translated as “I buy.” Why weren’t these other words used to construct the term for “one buyer”?

Recently Professor David Card shared with me handwritten personal communication that he received in 1995 from B. L. Hallward, the classicist whom Mrs. Robinson credits with coining the term monopony. In the letter to Card, Hallward writes:

It was at tea with Austin and Joan [Robinson] in their home that Joan suddenly turned to me and asked me to make up a word parallel to MONOPOLY but with the emphasis on BUYING rather than SELLING. A classical scholar at once thinks of *oneomai* but it is a deponent verb and

¹ Those who wish to check these translations might begin with Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 1283), or *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (p. 582). In the light of the other meaning of *opson* (ὄψον) as “cooked meat,” it is ironic that the term monopsony has most often been applied to certain low-wage labor markets, which are sometimes derogatorily called “meat markets.”

MONO prefixed does not produce an attractive (in rhythm or sound) word MONON—A new word if coined must have coinage sound and sense. OPSONEIN was a common classical Greek word “to make . . . purchases often of dried fish.” It is used by Aristophanes twice in the *Wasps*, [by] Plutarch, and also it is common in the New Testament. MONOPSONY as parallel to MONOPOLY at once sounded good and has won acceptance by economists.²

Are Hallward’s reasons for selecting monopsony as the appropriate term convincing? The “deponent” nature of the verb would not really be a problem. A deponent verb is passive voice in form (such as in the sentence “we were beaten”) but active voice in meaning (“we lost”). Both the Latin and Greek languages contain many deponent verbs, though there are no deponent verbs in English. The point here, though, is that many English words have been constructed from deponent Latin and Greek verbs: for example, dynasty, mortuary and arbitration.

What about Hallward’s other claim, that the use of (ὀνεομαι) would have resulted in a word that was not “attractive in rhythm or sound”? Prefixing mono (μονο) to *oneomai* (ὀνεομαι) could have produced the word “monoōny,” where the two dots over the last “o” (a “diacesis”) indicate that the “o” is sounded separately as in “cooperative.” Thus, this term would sound like a Cockney pronunciation of monotony, with no “t” sound. More likely, though, one of the double “o” sounds would have been dropped (as Hallward seems to imply in his letter), thus producing the word “mónony,” which would rhyme with “hominy.”

In a one-page 1939 communication in the *American Economic Review*, Vanderveer Custis and J. Clyde Murley suggest that monony would be their preferred term. Their objection to the term monopsony is similar to that expressed here—namely that it is “unsuitable for the [general] use for which it is intended . . . [such as] . . . the situation in which there was a sole employer of a certain type of labor in one of our industrial towns” (p. 348). This short note from 65 years ago appears to be the only previous objection to the term monopsony on etymological grounds, and it seems to have been ignored and forgotten.

The second Greek word for “I buy,” as mentioned above, is *priamai* (πριαμαι). If the stem of this verb (“pria”) were to be coupled with “mono” as its prefix, the resulting word for “a single buyer” would be *monópria*. Just as the early form *monopolia* became Anglicized to monopoly, *monopria* might have become monopry.

² Liddell and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon* spells the word with an initial long o (ω, omega) rather than with a short o (ο, omicron), as does Hallward.

Which Sounds Better?

Whether monopsony is a word that is really more “attractive” sounding than monoöny, monony, monopria or monopoly is ultimately a matter of opinion. Those who would argue that Hallward surely made the right choice might well reflect on the reactions (smiles, chuckles, surprised looks?) that instructors often receive from students when they hear monopsony (or oligopsony) for the first time.³ It is likely that professional economists have simply become accustomed to the word, as they would have become accustomed to whatever term became conventionally used.

The term oligopsony was not coined by Hallward, however. In his book *Monopsony in Motion* (2003, p. 2), Allan Manning credits the invention of the word oligopsony to E. Ronald Walker (1943), who wrote (p. 61): “It is surely only a matter of time before No. 23 [a market situation with two or more large buyers] is christened ‘oligopsony.’ ” Manning remarks that this “matter of time” turned out to be “the time necessary for [Walker] to finish writing the sentence”! However, there are mentions of oligopsony in the economics literature that predate Walker’s use of the term by several years: Martin Bronfenbrenner (1940) and Benjamin Higgins (1939), for example.

B. L. Hallward went on to pursue an interesting career after composing the term monopsony for Joan Robinson, as discussed in the biography by Winterbottom (1995). He established his reputation as a classicist principally by his several chapters (including “The Fall of Carthage”) in the 12-volume *Cambridge Ancient History* series. He was an acquaintance of A. C. Pigou and often accompanied Pigou on climbing expeditions in the Swiss Alps. In Oscar Wilde’s *Picture of Dorian Gray*, the artist who painted the picture that grows old and monstrous was also named Hallward, after a cousin of B. L. Hallward who was a friend of Wilde. In 1948, Hallward became vice-chancellor (executive head) of the University of Nottingham, where he served until 1965. The B. L. Hallward Library at Nottingham bears his name. The father of the term monopsony celebrated his 102nd birthday in May 2003.

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³ For a time in the 1930s and 1940s, the economics profession seemed to have an obsession for using Greek to coin new terms for various market structures, some of which have faded from the economist’s lexicon. Among them would be “polypoly,” or many sellers. (The first “poly” means “many” [from *πολυς*] and is unrelated to the second “poly,” which again is from the word “to sell.”) The list would also include “plipoly,” by Fritz Machlup (1942), to indicate “more sellers” (newcomers), as well as “heteropoly” and “homeopoly.” See Machlup (1952).

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