

FEATURES
SECTION

Orthodontics v Orthodontia

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet
(Romeo and Juliet II.ii.43–44)

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In this short paper I will give an account of how the dental specialty, now known as 'orthodontics' acquired that name.

Contemporary accounts indicate that the founding fathers of the BSSO, in 1907, agreed on the proposed name, 'the British Society for the Study of Orthodontia', only after careful consideration.^{1,2} Inclusion of the word 'Study', was intended to emphasize that it was not the intention to form a group of specialists discussing particular systems of treatment. All people having an interest in the subject of orthodontia, dental and non-dental, would be welcome. George Northcroft was very keen that the new Society would be known as, 'the British Society for the Study of Odonto-prosopic Orthopaedics'. The term reflected an interest in overall facial configuration and not just limited to the relationship of dental tissues. According to Lilian Lindsay,³ his colleagues rejected this name, saying, 'that it was too recondite, that it would be not understood'.³ Orthodontia, had already appeared in the titles of several of the recently published textbooks on the subject.^{4–6} The actual word 'Orthodontia', can be traced back to Harris in 1849, whose definition of Orthodontia 'was that part of dental surgery which has for its object the treatment of irregularities of the teeth'.⁷

The following year, at the first Annual General Meeting, Carl Schelling, related, how one day during 1908, Sir Howard Warren, then Master of Magdalene College, Oxford, was in his rooms.⁸ He chanced to see a notice headed, 'the British Society for the Study of Orthodontia' and enquired of Schelling, what the word

'Orthodontia' meant. Schelling explained and pointed out the use of the word in North America. Warren suggested that Schelling write to the Reverend Doctor Sir James Murray, the Oxford philologist and Editor of the Oxford Dictionary, to ascertain if it was acceptable. Schelling related that Murray, in his reply, set out various objections to the termination of an 'a' being made to a word of Greek origin, and suggested that an ending in 'c' or even a 'cs', for euphony would be more desirable. The word 'Orthodontics' was therefore accepted and the change in title was confirmed at the next Annual General Meeting.⁹

The change in the Society's name attracted the mischievous interest of the *British Dental Journal*.¹⁰ In that Journal the following appears:

The modern 'Orthodontist', with his scientific classifications and appropriate mechanism for every form of 'irregularity', refined is now mostly troubled with a possible irregularity nomenclature, centred upon that blessed word 'Orthodontia' itself. Certain alternatives—we have not space to mention here—suggest a recourse to Esperanto, but a distinguished orthodontic (we believe this is provisionally correct) practitioner, had the brilliant if somewhat audacious inspiration to appeal direct to no less a highly qualified philologist than Dr Murray, of Oxford—whose pardon we crave for calling names as the champion 'lexicographer'. (We have always doubted the pedigree of this soothing appellation, and when the time comes for forgiveness shall valiantly ask him). What

we started to say was that the distinguished orthodontic interviewer has given us a great privilege of quoting from a letter written by the learned Sir James, who says: –

‘It is not easy to construct scientific names on Greek analogies for things of which the Greeks had no knowledge, or notions which they had never entertained.

I cannot say that *Orthodontia* in “Society for the Study of Orthodontia” is absolutely wrong; but I do not feel it to be quite correct. If I had come across *Orthodontia*, or better *Orthodonta*, without contextual aid, I should have certainly inferred that it meant the condition of being “orthodont” or *straight-toothed* or *erect-toothed*, and was either a term of palaeo-crainiology, or perhaps had some reference to a particular dentition of recent or fossil fishes. I should have admitted also that it *might* mean that the condition of being “rightly or normally toothed”. Words of this form usually, or nearly always, mean a *physical state*: c.f. e. g., amblyopia or *amblyopy*, myopia or *myopy*, and the numerous forms in -cephaly, where we actually have *orthocephaly*, the condition of being normal-headed, normal-headedness, beside brachycephaly, dolicocephaly, etc. I do not think we should consider “the study of orthocephaly” to be a study of the various forms of the skull. After consulting my collaborators, Dr Bradley and Dr Craigie we are inclined to think *Orthodontics* a better term, and on the whole capable of better defence. Names of branches of science, especially of a practical character, end commonly in -ics, from Greek- ι χ σ neuter pl of ads. taken substantively, and meaning “things or matters belonging or relating to”, e.g. *Alphabetics*, *Phonetics*, *Optics*, *Statics*, *Dynamics*, *Tactics*, *Apologetics*, *Mathematics*, etc. In German these are generally fem. sing. in *ik*, in French, in *ique*, in English we generally prefer -ics, but treat them as singular: “mathematics is the science of quantity”—“linguistics” is the more etymological name for philology. So there is no objection to say *Orthodontics* is an important branch of physiology. As your study progresses, you may have need of *Orthodonta* as the name for a normal or ideal condition of dentition or dental development, as opposed to any number of other *Odontics* denoting kinds of irregular conditions. I think that the study of all these would properly enough be included in the term “Orthodontics”, because all these are related to

or connected with “orthodonta”, as the normal or ideal form to which they approximate, or from which they deviate. I do not see any ground for using a quasi-Latin form in -*odontia* in writing English.’

Yours very truly,

J. A. H. Murray.

For many years, it has been widely believed that this was the first occasion when the word ‘orthodontics’ was used in the English language.¹¹ It has, however, recently been noted, that in no less a source than the *British Dental Journal* itself,¹² the word ‘Orthodontics’, was used in the title of an abstract of a paper by S. H. Guilford, which had appeared originally in, *Items of Interest*.¹³ Surprisingly, the title of Guilford’s original paper used the word ‘orthodontia’, rather than ‘orthodontics’. Thus, it appears that ‘Orthodontics’ had been used in the *BDJ*, 3 years prior to Murray’s letter of recommendation.

The word, ‘Orthodontics’, was gradually adopted throughout the English-speaking world. Lischer, in the title of his widely read textbook, uses ‘Orthodontics’, rather than ‘Orthodontia’.¹⁴ Weinberger,¹¹ relates how in 1924, when he used ‘Orthodontics’ in the title of his book on the early history of orthodontics (Weinberger 1926):

much dissatisfaction was expressed upon the choice of the word, and it has been only within the past decade that ‘orthodontics’ has been accepted officially in preference to ‘Orthodontia’.¹⁵

Weinberger, however, continued to occasionally use the word ‘Orthodontia’, even as late as 1936.¹⁶

Perhaps surprisingly, the forerunner of the *American Journal of Orthodontics*, known originally as the *International Journal of Orthodontia* and first published in 1915, did not change its name to the *American Journal of Orthodontics and Oral Surgery* until 1938. The first appearance of the word ‘orthodontic’ in the Index of the *International Journal of Orthodontia* occurred in 1916 and usage in the Index gradually increased, until by 1937 it was used approximately three times as frequently as ‘Orthodontia’. The word ‘Orthodontia’ completely disappeared from the Index in 1938, the year of the change of journal name.

In that year the *American Journal of Orthodontics and Oral Surgery*, carried an editorial, explaining:¹⁷

the name has been altered primarily because the time has arrived when the term Orthodontics is believed

to be more appropriate and comprehensive than Orthodontia . . . Professor Price, of the Oxford Dictionary staff and member of the Faculty of the University of Michigan, wrote to Dr G. R. Moore, Chairman of the Nomenclature Committee of the American Association of Orthodontists, as follows:

‘the term Orthodontia suggests that it means a flower, a disease, or a city in Asia. Orthodontics, on the other hand, is neat in appearance, easy to pronounce, and tells you at once, more or less, what it means. It is on a line with physics and statistics and similar words. The case of *ics* is more simple. Since the 15th century it has been used in English to denote a science. It is a direct translation from the Greek, and we may say that this sort of ending has been used to denote a science for thousands of years. If you speak of Orthodontics I know at once that you are speaking about a science and do not need to start guessing wildly in which of half-a-dozen categories I misplaced the word’.

This short paper sets out to describe how the dental speciality, now known as orthodontics, acquired that name. The name was originally controversial, but has now become used universally.

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