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equivocal, *adj.* and *n.*

Pronunciation: /ɪˈkwɪvəkəl/

Forms: Also 16 **equivocall**, **æquivocall**, 16–18 **æquivocal**.

Frequency (in current use):

Etymology: < late Latin *aequivocus* ambiguous (< *aequus* equal + *vocāre* to call) + *-AL* suffix¹.

A. *adj.*

†1. Equal or the same in name (with something else) but not in reality; having a name, without the qualities it implies; nominal. *Obs.*

- 1643 SIR T. BROWNE *Religio Medici* (Authorized ed.) I. §12 This visible world is but a picture of the invisible, wherein, as in a pourtract, things are not truely, but in equivocall shapes.
- 1661 J. USSHER *Power of Princes* (1683) I. 34 They being subject to the over~sight..of the Ephori, were but equivocal Kings, such in name, but not in deed.
- 1744 G. BERKELEY *Siris* §210 From the sun's light, which is corporeal, there springs forth another equivocal light which is incorporeal.

2.

a. Of words, phrases, etc.: Having different significations equally appropriate or plausible; capable of double interpretation; ambiguous.

- 1601–2 W. FULBECKE *Parallele or Conf. Law* I. 68 Your libel..should be certaine, and without ambiguous or equiuocall tearmes.
- a1616 SHAKESPEARE *Othello* (1622) I. iii. 216 These sentences to sugar, or to gall, Being strong on both sides, are equiuocall .
- 1656 A. COWLEY *Pindaric Odes* Note 47 These vast accounts arose from the æquivocal term of a Year among them.
- 1712 F. T. *Shorthand* 25 Even in Long-Hand oftentimes equivocal Abbreviations are often written.
- 1757 tr. J. G. Keyssler *Trav.* IV. 48 He..takes care that his answers be so equivocal as always to secure him a retreat.
- 1818 W. CRUISE *Digest Laws Eng. Real Prop.* (ed. 2) VI. 187 There was perhaps no word in the language of more equivocal effect than the word *or*.
- 1868 W. E. GLADSTONE *Juventus Mundi* (1870) vii. 184 To say..that the Greek religion as it grew old improved..would be to use equivocal and misleading language.

b. Of evidence, manifestations, etc.: Of uncertain bearing or significance.

- 1769 'JUNIUS' *Stat Nominis Umbra* (1772) I. xxvii. 196 Some..less equivocal proofs of his munificence.

1794 R. J. SULLIVAN *View of Nature* V. 87 No very equivocal symptom of antiquity.

1842 H. ROGERS *Ess.* I. i. 3 An equivocal indication of merit.

c. *nonce-use.* Of a person: Expressing himself in equivocal terms.

a1616 SHAKESPEARE *All's Well that ends Well* (1623) v. iii. 253 As thou art a knave and no knave, what an equiuocall Companion is this?

3.

a. Of uncertain nature; not admitting of being classified, 'nondescript'.

equivocal generation *n.* the (supposed) production of plants or animals without parents; spontaneous generation.

1658 SIR T. BROWNE *Garden of Cyrus in Hydriotaphia: Urne-buriall* iii. 135 The Æquivocall production of things under undiscerned principles, makes a large part of generation.

1662 E. STILLINGFLEET *Origines Sacræ* I. iv. §9 Born by the same æquivocall generation that mice and frogs are from the impregnated slime of the earth.

a1676 M. HALE *Primitive Originat. Mankind* (1677) IV. ii. 306 Whether those imperfect or equivocal Animals were created or no, it is not altogether clear.

1735 SWIFT *Humble Addr. to Parl.* in *Wks.* IV. 229 If any new ones [party and faction] shall spring up, they must be of equivocal Generation, without any Seed.

1790 *Coll. Voy. round World* I. ii. 29 The sea was tinged..with these equivocal substances.

1796 C. MARSHALL *Introd. Knowl. & Pract. Gardening* ii. 16 Equivocal generation we reject.

1830 SCOTT *Lett. Demonol. & Witchcraft* v. 143 The equivocal spirits called fairies.

1863 C. LYELL *Geol. Evid. Antiq. Man* xx. 391 The old doctrine of equivocal or spontaneous generation.

b. Of sentiments, etc.: Undecided, not determined to either side. Chiefly in negative sentences.

1791 E. BURKE *Corr.* (1844) III. 219, I am sure the sentiments of London were not equivocal.

1845 S. AUSTIN tr. L. von Ranke *Hist. Reformation in Germany* (ed. 2) I. 139 The equivocal and half hostile attitude he had assumed.

c. *Music.* **equivocal chord:** one which may be resolved into different keys without changing any of its tones.

4. Of advantages, merits, etc.: Dubiously genuine, questionable.

a1797 H. WALPOLE *Mem. George III* (1845) I. ii. 19 A Churchman..whose sanctity was as equivocal as their own.

1838 W. H. PRESCOTT *Hist. Reign Ferdinand & Isabella* II. I. xix. 210 In the sciences, their success was more equivocal.

1847 B. DISRAELI *Tancred* I. II. vii. 185 Without that equivocal luxury a great country house.

1878 R. B. SMITH *Carthage* 159 To set against this equivocal gain, the Romans had lost 700 ships.

5. Of persons, callings, tendencies, etc.: Doubtful in character or reputation; liable to unfavourable comment or description; questionable; suspicious.

1790 E. BURKE *Refl. Revol. in France* 198, I shall always..consider that liberty as very equivocal in her appearance, which has not wisdom and justice for her companions.

1833 E. BULWER-LYTTON *Godolphin* I. v. 48 The equivocal mode of life he had entered upon.

1863 'G. ELIOT' *Romola* II. i. 13 The preparations for the equivocal guest.

†**B.** *n.*

An equivocal word or term; a homonym.

1653 T. URQUHART tr. Rabelais *1st Bk. Wks.* ix. 45 Æquivocals so absurd and witlesse that [etc.].

1668 BP. J. WILKINS *Ess. Real Char.* 17 Great variety of Equivocals. So the word Bill signifies both a Weapon, a Bird's Beak, and a written Scroul.

1707 J. DENNIS *Person of Quality's Answer in Crit. Wks.* (1939) I. 130 Shall two or three wretched equivocals have the force to corrupt us?

1715 R. BENTLEY *Serm. Popery* 20 The scandalous shifts of Equivocals and Mental Restrictions.

1775 in J. Ash *New & Compl. Dict. Eng. Lang.* ; and in mod. Dicts.

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