



HISTORY AND USE OF THE TERM 'PARALYMPIC'

Origin and meanings of the term 'Paralympic'¹

The origins of the term 'Paralympic' lie in the dark. There is no written evidence as to how, when, and by whom the term 'Paralympic' was used for the first time, and what its original meaning was. It was probably first coined as a pun by paraplegic athletes at Stoke Mandeville in the early 1950's by amalgamating the words 'paraplegic' and 'Olympic.'

The closeness of the Stoke Mandeville Games to the Olympic Games was promoted by Sir Ludwig Guttmann himself who constantly strengthened analogies with the Olympic Games. For instance, he was reported in a 1954 edition of *The Cord*² to have given a speech at the end of the day of the second Stoke Mandeville Games held in 1949, in which he claimed that one day the Stoke Mandeville Games would be acknowledged as the paraplegics' equivalent of the Olympic Games. It did not take long for the press to pick up on this and headlines such as "Olympic Games of Disabled Men is Born at Stoke" in 1949 or "And Now The Wheelchair Olympics" in 1952 appeared in a local English newspaper.³

The earliest written references to the term 'Paralympic' date from 1953: labels such "The Paralympics,"⁴ "Swimming – Latest Paralympic Game,"⁵ or "Stoke Mandeville Paralympics"⁶ can be found in local and foreign newspapers. However, the authors failed to indicate how the term was coined. A possible explanation comes from Brittain (in press) who cites two articles published in *The Cord* in 1954. In one of these physiotherapist Dora T. Bell refers to the "Paraolympics of Stoke Mandeville", and in the other article a nurse speaks of "Paraplegic Olympics"⁷. Therefore, one possible explanation is that the term 'Paralympic' was indeed meant to be a combination of 'paraplegic' and 'Olympics.'

¹ The information contained in this section is partly based on the forthcoming research paper "The evolution of the Paralympic name and the Olympic relationship" by Dr. Ian Brittain in Cashmore et al. (in press).

² The article "Looking Back on a Decade" was written by Guttmann himself and appeared in *The Cord* 6/4 (1954), pp. 9-23. *The Cord* is a magazine established in 1947 for spinal cord patients at Stoke Mandeville Hospital.

³ Referring to two articles in *Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News*, one from Friday, July 29th, 1949, p. 15, and the other from Friday, August 1st, 1952, p. 12.

⁴ Article in *Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News*, Friday, August 7th, 1953, p. 1.

⁵ Article in *Bucks Advertiser & Aylesbury News*, Friday, August 14th, 1953, p. 13.

⁶ Article in *Paraplegia News* (US publication), November 1953, p. 5.

⁷ Article in *The Cord* 6/4, 1954, pp. 42 and 51.

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'Paralympics' or 'Paralympic Games' was not yet used as the official name for the Stoke Mandeville Games at the time. Guttman insisted that the Games be called and advertised officially as the 'International Stoke Mandeville Games'. Although the International Stoke Mandeville Games in Rome in 1960 have gone down in history as the 'first Paralympic Games', this title was not officially introduced until 1988 for the Games in Seoul, Korea. References in official publications by the organizing committees (eg leaflets and posters) to the International Stoke Mandeville Games from 1964 to 1988 vary from "Paralympic Tokyo 1964"⁸, to "I.S.M.G. for the Paralyzed Israel 4-13.11.1968"⁹ (Tel Aviv), "International Stoke Mandeville Games / Paralympics at Heidelberg, Germany, August 1972"¹⁰, "Winter Olympic Games For The Disabled / Örnköldsvik 1976 Sweden"¹¹, "Torontolympiad"¹², "2nd. Olympic Winter Games for Disabled"¹³ (1980 in Geilo), "VII World Wheelchair Games – Paralympics U.K. 1984"¹⁴ (Stoke Mandeville), or "IV. Weltwinterspiele für Behinderte / Paralympics / Innsbruck 1988"¹⁵, for instance. It was not uncommon to use several different names for one and the same Games.

As time went by, the Games grew and other disability groups were included in the 'Paralympics' so that the original intended interpretation could no longer be supported. Therefore the term 'Paralympic' shifted in meaning. Nowadays it officially represents a combination of the English prefix 'para' (ie, a bound morpheme derived from Greek), here meaning 'alongside', and the stem 'Olympic'. This interpretation illustrates how the Olympic and Paralympic movements exist side by side. However, the term 'Paralympic' is increasingly recognised as a unique term referring to a concept of its own, rather than as an amalgamation of two separate words. This process is called lexicalisation.

Why 'Paralympic' and not 'Paraolympic'?

Depending on the interpretation of the etymology of the word 'Paralympic', different explanations are possible as to why the official label is 'Paralympic' and not 'Paraolympic' in English and most other languages nowadays.

With regard to the alleged origin of 'Paralympic' dating from the 1950s, the term represents a special case of morphological word formation process, namely blending. Blending is a process where speakers combine two separate forms to produce a single new form. Typically, as in the case of 'Paralympic', the beginning of the first word ('paraplegic') is joined to the end of the

⁸ Book (Official report?), IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

⁹ Official programme, Archives from the Israel Sport Center for the Disabled, copies kept at IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹⁰ 'Meritorious Award for Participation' certificate, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹¹ Copy of Paralympic Games emblem, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹² Official results book, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹³ Paralympic Games emblem, eg in official results book, on plastic cover for athlete information kit, official programme folder, poster, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹⁴ Official results book for the Games in Stoke Mandeville, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.

¹⁵ Official poster, IPC Archives, Bonn/Germany.



second word ('Olympic'). Although the variant 'Paraolympic' was also used at times, the term 'Paralympic' prevailed over the years. Today's meaning of 'Paralympic,' indicating that the Paralympic Movement exists alongside, or parallel to the Olympic Movement, refers to the morphological word formation process called prefixation. A prefix ('para') is attached to the main word ('Olympic'). However, this does not yet explain the omission of the 'o' in 'Paralympic'. One phonologically plausible reason could be that in 'Paraolympic' the two vowels 'a' and 'o' belong to two different syllables. This phenomenon is called hiatus, which speakers in many languages tend to avoid for ease of pronunciation.

A more pragmatic reason for not using the term 'Paraolympic' as the official label is that that it would have impinged upon the IOC's rights connected to the name 'Olympic' as a trademark. Some evidence pointing in this direction is a letter sent to the Paralympic Division of the Organizing Committee of the Barcelona 1992 Olympic and Paralympic Games (COOB) by the IOC in around 1990. The IOC requested to drop the 'o' from the official name of the Paralympic Games in Spanish ('Paraolímpicos') and Catalan ('Paraolímpics') and to use 'Paralímpicos' and 'Paralímpics' instead. However, no written documents have been found to date which would answer the question whether the elimination of the 'o' in the English version of the label, too, was a conscious (political and/or legal) decision by the co-ordinators of the Paralympic Games or one of the local organizing committees at some point in time.