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# The Euro Coin and the Inadequacy of our definition of “Obverse”

By Don Sucha

On January 1, 2002, the European community,  
following the decisions made in the Single  
European Act of 1986 and the Treaty on  
European Union of 1992, introduced its common

currency, the Euro. The move was controversial not only economically, but Numismatically as well. The Introduction of the Euro forced changes on those who collect European coins and bills, closing one door for the collector while opening another.



One Euro Coin showing common, Greek and Dutch sides

The Euro coin, however, raises a more fundamental question about how we look upon certain aspects of our hobby. One side of the Euro coins (designed by Luc Luycx of the Royal Belgian Mint) is common to Euros of all the member countries. The other side is country specific, designed by each of the member countries. As all the coins are meant to be a common currency within all the member countries, which side, then, can be considered the “obverse”? The answer to this question is not as simple as it initially seems, nor is it entirely philosophical. Although many Numismatists and Numismatic dealers tend to describe the Euro as having a common reverse, the [official website of the Euro](#) does not mention “obverse or “reverse” at all preferring the terms “common side” and

“country specific side”. In order to explore this question, we must first look at how we define “obverse” and why it is important to have as precise definition as possible.

Obviously, we need precise definitions in order to facilitate communication. We can not be expected to communicate effectively on any topic unless we can be assured that we are all talking about the same thing. The various definitions available for the term “obverse”, however, tend to be vague and sometimes contradictory. Take, for example the two following definitions of “obverse”:

- “The front or face side of a coin, generally the side with the date and principal design” (Jake’s Numismatic Dictionary)
- “The front or face side of a coin. Usually the date side.” (Professional Coin Grading Service)

In order for a definition of this term to be useful, it must provide us with a means of distinguishing the obverse from the reverse of any particular coin without prior or additional knowledge. The proceeding examples are inadequate because they are vague. In order to decide which side of any particular coin is the obverse using the above definition, we first have to know which is the “front” or “principal design” and we can not know what is the principal design unless we know which is the obverse.

Plus, saying that the obverse is the dated side of the coin is of no help because of the number of counter examples. Canadian coins, for example, are dated on the reverse.

At this point, we should consider the purely physical definition of “obverse”. Patrick Glassford, in the [Canadian Error Coins Website](#) states that the obverse die is always the bottom die in the minting process. This is also of no help in identifying the obverse of any given coin because it requires prior knowledge of the practices of each individual mint. We can not know which die is on the bottom unless we know which side is the obverse and we can not know which side is the obverse unless we know which die is on the bottom. There are also counter examples for the “bottom die” definition as well. During the minting of the American 1986 “Ellis Island” half dollar, for example, the die for the image generally accepted as the obverse was placed on the top to facilitate the quality of the strike.

Equally vague are definitions which refer to the “heads” side of a coin. Consider these two definitions:

- “...the side of a coin bearing the bust of the ruler or some other important person” (The Canadian Numismatic Society Canadian Numismatic Correspondence course glossary)

- “The more important of the two sides of a coin. In most countries it is the “Heads,” the side bearing the bust of the ruler or some other important person.” ([Canadian Coin Reference Site](#) )

Referring to “heads” or “bust of the ruler” is vague because of the number of counter examples available. The 1965 British “Churchill” crown is an example of a coin featuring two heads, one of a ruler and one of an important person. It may be argued that, of course, the side with the portrait of the Queen is the obverse of the Churchill Crown, but we know this because we know the cultural traditions of striking British coins and the personages represented on this particular coin.



1965 British “Churchill” Crown

The ability to distinguish obverse from reverse using these definitions becomes more difficult the further we remove ourselves, culturally, from the coin. Take, for example, the 1928 Czechoslovakian 10 Korun coin featuring the Czech coat of arms on one side and a portrait of

Thomas Masaryk (one of the founders of the first Czech Republic) on the other.



1928 Czechoslovak 10 Korun

Compare this to a the Canadian fifty cent coin which, since 1937, has shown a portrait of The Monarch on one side and the Canadian Coat of Arms on the other. Using the “ruler or other important person” definition, we deduce, quite rightly, that the obverse of the Canadian fifty cent coin is that featuring The Monarch (In the Example shown, King George VI).



1951 Canadian Fifty Cent

If we apply the same definition and logic to the

Czech coin, we would then say that the side featuring Masaryk is the obverse, but we would be wrong. The obverse of Czech coins is that which features the coat of arms of the Czech Republic. We only know this, however, because we know that Canadian coins are distinguished as coins of the realm by the portrait of The Monarch whereas Czech coins are so distinguished by the coat of arms of the Czech Republic. In order to make the definition more precise, then, we could possibly use a definition of “obverse” that incorporates this distinction. We could then define “obverse” as “That side of a coin which distinguishes it as a coin of the realm”.

Returning to the Euro now, we see that even this more precise definition is also inadequate. What is, exactly, the “realm” when referring to the Euro? Is it the European Union in general or is it the individual member states? From the point of view of the Union, the Euro coins are distinguished as coins of the realm by the common side. From the point of view of any particular member state, however, the coins are so distinguished by the country specific side.

So, which side of the Euro is the obverse? One answer would be that it depends on how one defines “obverse”. Another answer would be that the terms “obverse” and “reverse” simply don’t apply to the Euro, or apply differently depending on ones point of view. Regardless, it seems that

formulating a single, precise, definition of the term that covers all the possible counter-examples is difficult if not impossible.

Numismatics is a broad and complex area of study connecting with many different areas of human endeavor. We may not be able to come up with precise definitions which take care of all the counter examples, but we still must be careful in how we define the terms within our discipline and how we use these terms. We must, likewise, look at how the introduction of new items pushes the boundaries of our discipline and discuss these issues as they arise. This is why coins are an important part of the body of our knowledge and not simply collectibles.



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