



Where Did He Put the Pen of My Aunt? Navajo Revealed

David C. Cates
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Intricate miracles underlie even ordinary events like sunshine, eyesight, and air. Yet their ordinariness seems to stifle the kindling of wonder. This may be the point of a Zennish riddle that lit my screen from an anonymous comic djinn of cyberspace: “Life has its costs and burdens, but it does include free rides around the sun.” Unlike tornados and eclipses, common marvels just aren’t salient enough to penetrate the stress of dailiness. And high among these simple wonders is language: not the elitist niceties academics fuss over, but speech as it arises from the unruly urgencies of life, double negatives and all.

The nature of language is most strikingly revealed when we open ourselves to one culturally remote from our own, the more so the better. As we learn its forms and idioms, we enter a living museum of vanished millennia, forgetting our first impression: impassive gutturals of wary people whose clothing is often fastened with safety pins.

For such enlightenment to occur, we can ease the initial difficulty by selecting a language that’s accessible, culturally intact, thoroughly described and widely taught. There is no doubt that Navajo, at least for Americans, is that language. Its remoteness credentials, moreover, are impressive. Navajo is one of the Athabascan family of Amerindian languages, a newcomer whose diaspora stretches 7,000 years and 4,000 miles from its sub-Arctic beachhead to northern Mexico. And the dialects of Apache, close cousins to Navajo, let us watch linguistic drift across a mere 500 years of separation. Finally, the entirety of “Apachean” grammar and nearly all its lexicon evolved before the 1500s.¹

Accessibility. Among remote languages, Navajo is logistically convenient. First, it’s a lot

cheaper to fly to Phoenix and rent a car than to trek to Port Moresby and scare up a bush pilot with guide. Second, Navajo people are known for sprightly wit, practical jokes, and pantomime², as well as a frequent willingness to converse, explain, guide, and instruct. Third, there is an abundance of language courses, my favorite title being “Navajo Made Easier.” Finally, locating Navajo within Athabascan history—Apache short-term, subarctic cousins long-term—not only deepens our understanding of word origins but recalls the tracing of Indo-European back to its own knowable roots.³

Intactness. Never quite controlled by the Spanish, Navajos were raiders (and raidees) of Utes, Apaches, Hopis, and Mexicans until their defeat in 1863 by troops under the command of Colonel Kit Carson, followed by a 300-mile winter march to southern New Mexico. This traumatic exile came to an end with the 1868 visit of General William T. Sherman. Sent to persuade the Navajos to settle in Oklahoma Territory with the Cherokee and other displaced tribes, he finally let them (now reduced to about 8,000) return to their Land of Emergence, where each family would receive tools, food, and schooling. Navajo population and tribal wealth have risen since, despite the toll of alcohol and drugs.

Scholarship. It was only in the 1930s that a complete description of Navajo was undertaken, directed by the anthropological linguist Edward Sapir. That precedent-setting work—which ranks with the periodic table of Mendeleev—was partially codified in a series of articles (1945–49) entitled “The Apachean Verb,” published in the *International Journal of American Linguistics* (“American” here means the first ones). No other



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preliterate culture has been the subject of such academic firepower! A typical Navajo household of the 1930s was said to consist of a grandmother, her four daughters, three husbands (less the one who couldn't abide mother-in-law tyranny), eight children, fifteen sheep, four goats, and 0.3 anthropologists.

I like to think that Sapir is to Navajo as Chapman was to Homer. Then where was our Keats, our "watcher of the skies" invoking "new plane," "wild surmise," and Navajo as elegant human construct? But Romantic ardor is quickly cooled by sentences like this: "With stems whose perfective variant is reduced and ends in an originally glottalized obstruent, the momentaneous imperfective-optative stem should be low-toned in Navajo."

To be sure, instruction in Navajo thrives in the Southwest, but is altogether utilitarian, directed to health care workers ("Where does it hurt?"), administrators ("This permit has expired!"), storekeepers ("You've exceeded your credit limit!"), local school teachers and even missionaries (whose zeal must surely be tempered once they grasp the profound incompatibility of Christian and Navajo belief).

The phrase "Where did he put the pen of my aunt?", based on that famous French classroom query, seems absurdly culture-bound. Yet the parsing of this simple question lets us dive through the looking-glass into seven distinct Navajo wonderlands:

<u>Looking-glass</u>	<u>Wonderland</u>
"where"	A vast and precise lexicon for location/direction
"?"	Forming a question
"did"	The treatment of tense and aspect
"he"	The curious simplicity of Navajo pronouns
"put"	Verbs for the handling of different kinds of things
"pen"	The naming of non-native artifacts
"aunt"	Kinship terminology



1. *Location/direction.* The eminent anthropologist Clyde Kluckhohn learned Navajo as a teenager when sent by his Michigan family to Ramah, New Mexico, for the relief of asthma. As a teacher, he liked to say that the language was shaped across thousands of years by small groups living close to starvation in trackless land. It was important to be accurate about landmarks, direction, and the ways of coming and going. Compared to English, Navajo is an organized riot of detail on the characteristics of space and its traversing.

2. *Questioning.* Navajo is a tone language. Thus an end-of-sentence interrogatory high tone, as in “Did you go?” won’t work, since each Navajo syllable already has an unalterable pitch. Nor will inversion work (“did you?” vs. “you did”), because in Navajo these elements are prefixes already tightly ordered into the verb construction. Instead, questions are formed with an interrogative suffix, or—more politely—with an uncertainty suffix, as in “Perhaps you forgot to hobble the horses?”

3. *Tense and aspect.* The verb has a chassis similar to the Latin verb, in that a final stem is modified by prefixes! But a Navajo verb under full sail (with prefix spinnakers and mizzen suffixes) also does the work of English pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions. Different modes of action, such as “completed,” “ongoing,” “repetitive,” and “hortatory,” are signalled by phonetic variations of the stem. As for tense (the signalling of “past,” “present” or “future”), this may be implied simply by one’s choice of completed or ongoing mode. Yet certain prefixes and suffixes can override these implications. Thus completed action may be placed in the future, and ongoing action in the past.

“A Vocabulary of Colloquial Navajo,” by Young and Morgan (1951), contains one for Dilbert-lovers: “to serve/file/send a paper” is “to toss [a round object] up.” The round-object stem here refers to the contents, not to the paper itself, which would require a “hide-like object” stem. The dictionary has no entry for our word

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“love,” because its semantic range is too messy. Navajos distinguish between “Love your hat!” “Love you, baby!” and a unique awareness in which beauty, peace, harmony, and blessing combine to make a single word. To illustrate, the best way to say “I love you” is “through you—with me—there is beauty, peace, harmony, and blessing.”

4. *Simplicity of pronouns.* The historical remoteness of Navajo guarantees that we will encounter provocative strangeness of concept and linguistic form. Just as amazing, however, is the presence of very familiar elements. Coming to us from high atop the post-glacial stone age, in other words, are nouns, pronouns, direct and indirect objects, active and passive voice, and clearly articulated modes of action and tenses, along with other tried and true structure elements. It’s as though language evolves to frame a universal set of questions, including “Who, what, where, when, how, and why?”, that discipline of journalism. Why shouldn’t a parallel invention of the framing devices also occur?

The Navajo pronoun system is more truncated than English’s, in two ways. First, third person singular is a monosyllable standing for “he,” “she,” or “it,” depending on context. But there is a third person honorific for, say, one’s grandfather, Coyote, Bear, and always in the verb standing for Sun (‘respected round object rising’). Second, the pronoun for “we” and plural “you” is one and the same. Context can sort out the difference, but the clues can be hard for a novice to find.

Did the politics of matriarchy lead to the genderless pronoun? I have another theory. With its multiple prefixes (many pronoun-possessed), the Navajo verb system is already stretched to capacity. If it is to be learned by children, low-wattage adults, and even missionaries, complexity has to be rationed. This seems to explain both simplifications.

5. *Object-specific verbs.* Some of our “handling” verbs are specific to what’s handled (try saying, “Pour me the newspaper”), but verbs like “put” can be applied to almost any object. Navajo

speakers, by contrast, must use ancient stems, each appropriate to a general class of things, whether a round object, a flexible, rope-like thing, scattered objects, loose granular matter, liquid in a container, etc. If you use the wrong stem (say, “round object” for “arrow”), Navajos will snicker helplessly. The stem for “pen”? “Arrow-like thing.”

6. *Naming artifacts.* The proud and skeptical Navajo spirit has led speakers to invent their own words for things of American make. “Wagon,” for example, is rendered by a construction whose semantic elements are: “wood—here-and-there—rolls.” “Telephone” is rendered as “metal—talks.” The construction for “pen” is a verb, whose literal translation is: “by-means-of-it—on-its-surface—there’s scratching.”

The terminology for auto parts is based on old pan-Athabaskan nouns. The car—first chugging into Navajo country around 1910—was seen as a horse, albeit mechanical. Thus its elements are named after body parts: eyes, heart, liver, knees, legs, feet, stomach, fat, and so forth. And the idiom for “drive” [a car] is identical to that for “ride” [a horse], as in: “to town—with me—it will gallop.” Is it surprising that Navajos are avid mechanics?

The Big Four material contributions of Europeans—firearms, horses, metal, and liquor—make a fascinating chapter in Navajo etymology. For guns there was no cultural precedent, so the name is a verb for “explosion.” (Other tribes reportedly said “thunder stick” or “kills at a distance.”) The horse was given an ancient name for “pet.” In the origin story, Sun had three water monsters as pets or familiars. And Changing Woman gave a pet to each “earth-surface” family. The noun stems for these are the same as for horse.

Metal is named after “stone knife,” another pan-Athabaskan noun stem. The old word was first attached to “metal knife,” then (by extension) to any metal object. “Stove,” for example, is rendered by a construction meaning “metal—in it—fire.” The May 1997 cover of the magazine *Wired* carries a Navajo phrase which I translate



as “metal flexibly extending” (i.e., telecommunication). The –ho– prefix, of course, is present (see below).

Before the advent of liquor, Navajos made a drink from fermented corn, called “grey water.” This was abandoned (after all, liquor is quicker), and the new drink was named “dark water.” But in Navajo there are two concepts of “dark”: earth darkness and that of the four lower worlds. Probably owing to its social toxicity, liquor is named after the latter.

Before we call this naming behavior quaint, think back to how 17th-century Europeans improvised an entire terminology for finance and manufacturing. Talk about strange!

7. *Kinship terminology.* Navajo children grow up in a matriarchy, cared for by their mother and her female relatives. As a result, the term for “aunt” is different for father’s sister.

See how the “pen of my aunt” shows us much about Navajo life and language! I’ll close by describing an entrancing Navajo language phenomenon: a prefix that profoundly changes the meaning of verb constructions in a way that Immanuel Kant might relish.

Navajo prefixes occupy a fixed position relative to one another, like planetary orbits (Sapir identified thirteen, some mutually exclusive). Consider this simple stem-and-prefix construction: “I toss a round object [say, a ball] through a narrow opening [say, a door].” The stem, recall, is one of a class that specifies the general nature of objects handled. The prefix has an equally generic meaning that might reference a doorway, corral gate, or rock cleft (from which water flows). Words specifying “ball” and “door” are not strictly necessary, because these are implied by verb-embedded clues, and by other context.

Now insert the ubiquitous prefix (-ho-) as a semantic catalyst, and the meaning is profoundly altered. The speaker is now saying, “I’m telling a story.” The semantic contribution of the prefix is to signal a “mind-body event”! With the prefix, the round-object stem denotes stories, songs, ceremonies and even contracts, perhaps because

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these have a beginning, middle, and end (hence their “roundness”). Another stem, that for a flexible, rope-like object, can take on—with the prefix—the meaning of “longing.”

The same prefix has two other very different meanings, depending on the context. A pan-Athabaskan verb stem describes the slow linear movement of ceremonial dancers. Prefixed by –ho–, the construction now denotes the passage of time! A similar metaphor is based on a stem whose primary meaning is “horizontal extension,” say, of a rock ledge. With the prefix, we have “time extends.” Powerful imagery, so different from ours. Yet not entirely, as in “Time, like an ever-rolling stream” and “Time’s winged chariot.”

The third meaning of the prefix speaks to the general character of space. A certain white-appearing valley near Chinle, Arizona is described by a verb stem denoting “whiteness,” plus the prefix. Thus the meaning is lifted from a particular whiteness to spatial whiteness.

Is this stunning linguistic invention, or what? Then stir in this thought: acquaintance with the epistemology of Kant suggests, at least to me, a parallel between the three semantic realms opened by the –ho– switch and the three dimensions which humans, according to Kant, bring to the processing of perception, namely, mind, time, and space.

What an absurd connection to propose! How could a few thousand sub-Arctic scrabblers, lacking an Academy or even an ad hoc committee of grammarians, plan a language whose key semantic elements—the stems and prefixes of verbs—are so generic that “actionable meaning” results only from the semantic intersection of these elements, denotationally weak in themselves? Then, from this already lofty scaffolding of abstractions, what led the committee to devise a further prefix serving as a gateway to yet another level of abstraction?

Creativity seems indicated. Far from being a clumsy creole of disparate grammatic devices, Navajo is elegant to the point of beauty precisely because of its radical design decisions. Thomas Mann, in *Magic Mountain*, speaks of the collective

and anonymous creative style of medieval times. Certainly “collective and anonymous” must also govern the evolution of language, but the creative source of its formal elegance remains elusive.

It’s worth studying the shape, idiom, and history of at least one remote language within a conceptual frame that nurtures our wonder at human inventiveness. And this “new philology” should be written to provoke a wider audience than professional linguists choose to address. The cryptic messages embedded in these perishable time capsules make too exciting a chapter in our shared human history to leave to specialists.

NOTES:

1 Apache and Navajo language guides are available from Audio-Forum, 96 Broad St., Guilford, CT 06437. Sources I used to refresh my understanding of Navajo (acquired by immersion, 1953) include *The Navajo Language* (Young and Morgan, University of New Mexico Press, 1987), *An Ethnologic Dictionary* (1910), and *A Stem Vocabulary* (1951), both by the Franciscan Fathers, St. Michael’s, AZ.

2 A fine collection of ridiculous situations, practical jokes, bawdy humor, and punning is to be found in *Navaho Humor*, by W. W. Hill, George Banta Publishing Co., Menasha, WI, 1943 (out of print). But try the *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* (c. 1937).

3 Young and Morgan contains an appendix on comparative Athabaskan, revealing an extensive shared vocabulary of noun and verb stems.

[David Cates was a long-ago grad student in linguistics and anthropology at University of Chicago, but keeps in touch with Navajos, though less fluently now. Other interests are chamber music and video-making.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

Notice on Moorgate Underground station, London: *Notice to passengers: this exit is an entrance.* [Submitted by Tony Hall, Aylesbury, UK]



“I’m told that when Auden died, they found his OED all but clawed to pieces. That is the way a poet and his dictionary should come out.”

—Francis Steegmuller, *New York Times*, March 26, 1980

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British Football Chants

Pete May

London, England

Only in Britain would Manchester United's David Beckham have to suffer several thousand football fans chanting "Posh Spice takes it up the arse!" sung to the tune of the Pet Shop Boys' *Go West*. Since he married Spice Girl Victoria Adams, poor Beckham has been the butt of much obscene chanting. It started off two years ago when West Ham fans chanted "Posh Spice is a dirty slag [prostitute]!" at Beckham and he responded with aggressive gestures.

This was a mistake. Even if the chants do come from fat blokes with a hang-up about anal sex, most of them can be mollified by a humorous response; the worst thing a footballer can do is show anger, because he will then be baited even more. Beckham has suffered so much from fans envious of his millionaire status, celebrity marriage and good looks, that the Professional Footballers' Association chairman Gordon Taylor recently called for fans to lay off Beckham. Posh Spice herself has shown more of a sense of humour, and has even said in an interview that "I want to say to them 'actually I don't!'"

The first thing that will strike a newcomer at a British football match (it's called *soccer* in the U.S. but, although the word is recognised in Britain, it is rarely used) is the number of taboo words used in chants, such as *wanker* (an English term for a masturbator), *arse*, *shit*, *fucking* and *cunt*. The record for swearing is probably held by the Arsenal fans' dirty ditty (sung to the tune of the 1960s hit *My Old Man*) of "My old man said be a Tottenham fan, I said fuck off, bollocks you're a cunt!"

Although many clubs had songs from pre-war times, chants really developed in the mid-1960s. It was a time when British society was much more restrained by notions of class and "the stiff upper lip", and for many fans chants were a glorious release from dull jobs and social convention. At first they were just impromptu terrace

choirs singing pop songs such as *You'll Never Walk Alone*, as at Liverpool. But slowly they developed into adaptations of tunes that quickly spread across the whole country.

Weekly football matches presented a splendid opportunity for mainly working class males to revel in obscenity, merged with a juvenile delight in using such words in the company of several thousand other fans. They emphasise tribalism, but there is more to chanting than that. For most fans there has always been something pleasingly childish and very funny about 30,000 fans simultaneously chanting "The referee's a wanker!" particularly when it's picked up on TV recordings.

There's also something of the adult nursery rhyme about footie chants. I first noticed while looking after my one-year-old daughter how much she enjoyed football chants adapted to childcare needs: for example nappy changing was accompanied by chants of "On with the nappy, we're going on with the nappy" a variation on the "Sing when you're winning, you only sing when you're winning!" chant.

In a similar fashion to how a toddler spots an animal, there was an incident at Liverpool in the 1960s when a cat ran on the pitch. The fans would normally chant "Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack! Attack!" at their team, but when the feline appeared they instantly chanted "A cat! a cat! a cat! a cat!". Another chant that would be recognisable in a nursery school is that of "Ee-aw! Ee-aw!" directed at any player deemed to be a "donkey"—a clumsy, untalented performer.

And, as in nursery rhymes, there's a strong sense of rhythm, as exemplified by Manchester United's fans staccato homage to Eric Cantona. "Oooh aah Cantona! I said oooh aah Cantona!" Some of the repetition is also reminiscent of children's songs—a popular chant of the 1980s was sung to the tune of *The Dambusters' March* and directed at the successful but reviled Leeds United. It went: "Leeds, Leeds and Leeds and Leeds and Leeds, Leeds and Leeds and Leeds and Leeds, Leeds and Leeds and Leeds and Leeds, we all fucking hate Leeds!" (Not too difficult to learn



the words to that one.) And the chant of “Big nose, he’s got a fucking big nose!” aimed by rival fans at Southampton’s Matt Le Tissier is an example of pure playground humour.

The British football chant is also closely aligned to pop culture— although the odd chant is sung to the tune of something more traditional, such as the anti-referee tirade of “Who’s the wanker in the black?” which is sung to the tune of the hymn *Bread of Heaven*.

In fact, chants are a living memorial to some now-forgotten bands. Who would remember “one-hit wonders” Chicory Tip were it not for the immortalisation of their 1970s hit, *Son of My Father*, as a football chant? It started off as a declaration in favour of a particular player, such as Leicester City fans’ “Oh Frankie Frankie Frankie, Frankie Frankie Frankie Worthington!” This was immediately modified by opposition fans to “Oh wanky wanky wanky, wanky wanky wanky Worthington!”

Nearly thirty years later the tune is still used. When Teddy Sheringham moved from Tottenham to Manchester United in pursuit of trophies but suffered a barren first season, Arsenal fans taunted him with chants of “Oh Teddy Teddy Teddy, went to Man United and you won fuck all!”

When United won the Treble (English League Championship, FA Cup and European Cup) last season this chant no longer applied, but rival fans quickly adapted it to “Oh Teddy Teddy Teddy! Went to Man United and you’re still a cunt!”

Another relatively unknown band, Middle of the Road, have also gained footballing longevity through their song *Chirpy Chirpy Cheep Cheep*. Its chorus of “Where’s your mamma gone?” was often changed to “Where’s your fatboy gone?” and directed at the clubs of Paul Gascoigne, a former England midfielder with a well-chronicled weight problem.

While the initial chant can be simply prosaic, insulting or abusive, many develop to become fine examples of a genuinely adaptive wit. For example, players are often greeted by the cry of

“One Denis Bergkamp, there’s only one Denis Bergkamp!(insert player’s name of choice)” sung to the tune of the Spanish song *Guantanamera*.

When England played in the 1986 World Cup with two defenders named Gary Stevens in the squad, this was cleverly adapted by England fans to “Two Gary Stevens! There’s only two Gary Stevens!” Even better was the version from Kilmarnock fans in Scotland. They sang “Two Andy Gorams, there’s only two Andy Gorams!” at the Rangers goalkeeper, who before the match was said to be “mentally unattuned”. When a fat player is spotted he is taunted with “One Teletubby, there’s only one Teletubby!” a reference to the podgy characters in the pre-school children’s programme.

In turn, the song became “Sing when you’re winning, you only sing when you’re winning!” directed at the opposing fans who sing when they take the lead. When sides played Grimsby, a side from a port, their fans chanted “Sing when you’re fishing, you only sing when you’re fishing!” The Grimsby fans liked this so much that they began themselves to sing “Sing when we’re fishing, we only sing when we’re fishing!” and a group of supporters even entitled their fanzine *Sing When We’re Fishing*. Another version was “Score in a brothel, you couldn’t score in a brothel!” used when a player misses with his shot.

A variation on the numbers theme came at the beginning of the current season when West Ham had just signed the Costa Rican striker Paulo Wanchope, pronounced “one-chop”. The opposition Spurs fans responded with the chant of “You’ve only got Wanchope!” this time to the tune of *Blue Moon*.

Sometimes a chant is tailored exactly to the play. One of the silliest is “Woooooooooh! You’re shit! Aaargh!” This occurs when a goalkeeper takes a goal kick. A group of fans will give an extended “Whoooooah” during his extended run-up, followed by a staccato “You’re shit! aaaargh!” as he kicks the ball.

Chants reflect the social climate of England. In the 1970s and 1980s, when there was a big



problem with football hooliganism, there were aggressive chants such as “You’re gonna get your fucking heads kicked in!” In the 1970s, skinhead fans indulged in “aggro”, short for *aggravation*. “Aggro” was enshrined in a song sung to the opening section of Gary Glitter’s *Hello Hello I’m Back Again!* This chant went: “Hello, hello, West Ham aggro, West Ham aggro, hello hello . . .” and would accompany the first sign of trouble in any part of the ground. Another chant from that time is “Come and have a go if you think you’re hard enough!” which has gained retro-chic and is now the title of the letters page in the British lads’ mag *Loaded*.

But in the 1990s, all-seater stadia, higher prices and Sky TV coverage have meant the game has become largely free of trouble, and it is now an increasingly middle-class and trendy sport. In the 1980s only real fans would admit to following football, but today celebrities and intellectuals have all been desperate to declare their love of the game. In this climate chants have centred less on violence and more on humour, encouraging your side and denigrating the opposition.

Where once there was outright hostility there now tends to be irony. These days a bad piece of

play from the opposition causes taunts of “You’re not very good, you’re not very good!” to the tune of the old London song *Knees Up Mother Brown*.

One of the most popular chants of the past decade has been the Arsenal fans’ adaptation of the chorus of The Pet Shop Boys’ *Go West*. This started off as simply “One-nil to the Arsenal!” a song that celebrated Arsenal’s frequent victories by this very score. This was rapidly adapted by other fans to “You’re shit, and you know you are!” Numerous other versions followed, including “One-nil to the referee!” when a ref was thought to be biased and the already described Beckham/Posh Spice insults.

When Aston Villa striker Stan Collymore was exposed in the British tabloids as having beaten up his girlfriend (the TV presenter Ulrika Jonsson) in a Paris bar, fans ridiculed him in their usual merciless fashion. At first there were chants, again to the tune of *Go West*, of “You’re shit and you slap your bird [girlfriend]!” Even worse, when Collymore checked into a clinic and stated he was suffering from depression, he was mocked with chants of “You’re mad and you know you are!”

When the comedians Baddiel and Skinner recorded the excellent pro-England song *Three Lions* for the 1996 European Championships, its chorus of “It’s coming home, it’s coming home, it’s coming, football’s coming home”, became another fans’ classic. Although it was soon made cruder and used in chants such as “You’re full of shit, you’re full of shit, you’re full of, Tottenham’s full of shit!” When star striker Alan Shearer left Blackburn for his native Newcastle, the club’s fans were taunted with “He’s fucked off home, he’s fucked off home, he’s fucked off, Shearer’s fucked off home!” With similar crudity, Chelsea’s adaptation of *The Red Flag* to “We’ll keep the blue flag flying here”, was altered by the club’s rivals to “Stick your blue flag up your arse!”

Black humour is a particular English strong point. After all, very few clubs actually stand a chance of winning anything, as there are only three major trophies, so the stoic acceptance of



Iean Brunetti



adversity has long been a source for songs. A goal drought can cause chants of “Will we ever score again?” (to the tune of *Bread of Heaven*). Even Vera Lynn’s *We’ll Meet Again* was adapted by long-suffering West Ham fans to “We’ll score again, don’t know where, don’t know when, but I know we’ll score again one sunny day!”

Fans are becoming ever more surreal. When Manchester City were struggling in division one, the club’s fans started singing, to the tune of *Knees Up Mother Brown*, “We’re not really here! We’re not really here! We’re not really, we’re not really, we’re not really here!”—surely a classic of its type.

In short, the British football chant is adaptable to just about any event that might happen on or off the pitch. Chants are subject to a kind of natural selection, which is why the best have survived for decades. They are frequently crude, childish and decidedly non-PC—but they’re also the reason many of us find live football such an enticing experience. And if you’re still mystified by this Brit disease, then there is a football chant that can be utilised. It expresses intellectual scepticism and goes: “You what, you what, you what, you what, you what?”

[Pete May is a freelance journalist based in London. He is the author of Sunday Muddy Sunday (Virgin), a study of Sunday league football teams and co-author of The Lad Done Bad (Penguin), a humorous look at sex, sleaze and scandal in English football.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

Instructions on pot of face cream: Rub in the cream until it visibly disappears. [Submitted by Tony Hall, Aylesbury, UK]



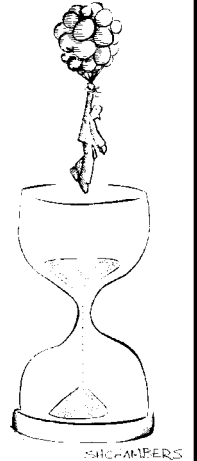
LIGHT

A Quarterly of Light Verse

Popping the cork with aplomb
in the magazine
that regularly prints
work by “the best
unserious poets alive”
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Not So Sharp Image

As I grow older, mirrors
seem to warp my intellect:
I tend to hurry by them
without pausing to reflect.
—JOYCE LA MERS



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INTER ALIA

The First Annual Willard R. Espy Light Verse Competition

To commemorate a modern master of Light Verse, *LIGHT: The Quarterly of Light Verse* is establishing, beginning in the year 2000, the first Willard R. Espy Light Verse Competition. This shall be in any of the traditional light verse forms (epigram, ballade, villanelle, limerick, cleriheW, river rhyme, double dactyl, etc.) but may include any verse that contains rhyme and meter. The length limit shall be forty lines, and the deadline July 1st of each year, beginning in 2000. The winners shall be published in the Spring issue of the following year. There may be only one entry per contestant. First Prize will be \$150, Second Prize \$100, and Third Prize \$50. Two Honorable Mentions will receive Willard Espy’s *The Best of an Almanac of Words at Play* (Merriam-Webster). All entries must include a self-addressed, stamped envelope. There will be no reading fee. No further guidelines are available; do not phone, e-mail, or fax. Send entries to LIGHT QUARTERLY, PO Box 7500, Chicago, IL 60680.



Excerpts from the Baylor College Linguistics Scavenger Hunt

M. Lynne Murphy
Waco, Texas

1. the word for “cheese” in Estonian
2. the longest word in English that uses no letter more than once
3. the name, nationality, and profession of the inventor of the Volapük language
4. a nine-letter English word that has only one syllable
5. the sound that a dog makes in Swedish
6. a language that has only three vowel sounds
7. the regional word for “drinking fountain” that’s used in Wisconsin
8. four different sounds that the letter “s” can symbolize in English spelling (examples)
9. the language that Jesus spoke
10. the American equivalent of the British word “ex-directory”
11. five words that are legal plays in Scrabble and that have only two letters, one of which is “x”
12. a language that doesn’t have the sound /t/
13. a language whose standard word order is Verb-Subject-Object
14. the motto of the Klingon Language Institute
15. a language-related holiday and the country that celebrates it
16. a word that’s included in the Oxford English Dictionary that means “a person whose hair has never been cut”
17. identity of the person who said “England and America are two countries divided by a common language”
18. five-letter English word that’s pronounced the same when you delete four of its letters
19. name of the straight line that is used over vowels to signal that they are so-called “long vowels” (e.g., in dictionary pronunciation guides)
20. what “apples” means in Cockney rhyming slang

[Answers to be found on page 14.]

From Josephus’s Jewish War to the American Civil War: Charles Francis Adams, Jr.’s “Dead Sea Apple”

Michele Valerie Ronnick
Wayne State University

The only example of the phrase “dead sea apple(s)” used during the past 150 years is dated to 1869 by the *Oxford English Dictionary*. The entry states:

Hence forming part of the name of a large number of fruits; as apple Punic, obs. name of the pomegranate; apple of Sodom, or dead Sea Fruit, described by Josephus of fair appearance externally, but dissolving, when grasped into smoke and ashes; a traveller’s tale supposed by some to refer to the fruit of *Solanum Sodomium* (allied to the tomato) by others to the *Calotropis procera*; fig. Any hollow disappointing specious thing.”

The *OED* editors then quote from *The English Mechanic and World of Science*, published from 1865 to 1923 in London by E. J. Kibblewhite: “1869 *Eng. Mech.* 24 Dec. 354/1 Mecca galls, Dead Sea Apples, Sodom Apples, or mad apples . . . are occasionally imported from Bussarah.”

The connection with Josephus is based upon a passage about the city of Sodom found in his *Jewish War*. Describing the fruits grown in the now blasted and cursed land, he states that “one can see cinders reproduced in the fruits, which from their outward appearance seem edible, but after being plucked by hand disintegrate into smoke and ashes.”¹

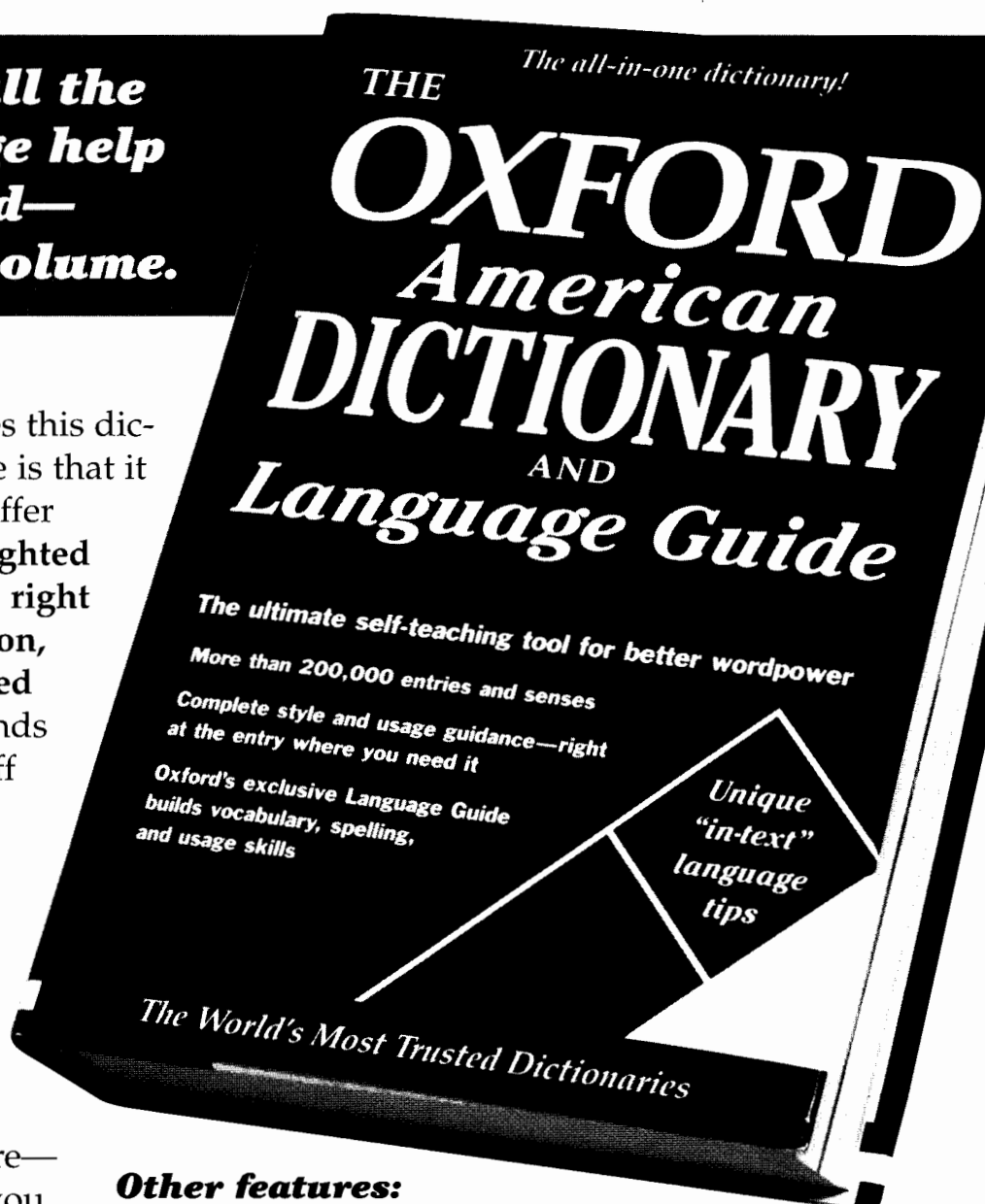
A striking, but heretofore unnoticed, occurrence of the phrase is found in Charles Francis Adams, Jr.’s assessment of his service with the Union forces during the Civil War. Upon his enlistment in 1861 his mood was one of jubilation. Charles Jr. declared in a letter to his father Charles Sr. in 1862: “I would not have missed it [his first experience under fire] for anything . . .



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the sensation was glorious, . . . Without affectation it was one of the most enjoyable days I ever passed.”² By 1864, however, his views had changed. In a letter to Henry Adams dated July 22, he wrote: “My present ambition is to see the war over . . . I am tired of the Carnival of Death.”³

In 1916, the year his *Autobiography* was published, he closed the chapter entitled, “War and Army Life,” with this summation: “As it was in June, I think, I was quietly mustered out of the service, and became once more a civilian. A great experience was over, and its close was for me a Dead Sea apple. But I intended it well!”⁴

How the term came into Adams’ vocabulary is not clear. In his undergraduate years at Harvard he had in his own estimation “rather a fancy for Greek” . . . and . . . “came within an ace of being a fair Greek scholar.”⁵ He might well have read Josephus’ original text in Greek, however the noun Josephus used meant fruit in general, not apple specifically. But regardless of Adams’ source, his words and their reference to the Old Testament city of Sodom provide us with a vivid summation of his feelings about the Civil War—one that would be instantly understood by his fellow Americans, north and south alike. For that was an era whose aesthetic was deeply influenced by the Bible. His is also the first example of the phrase in American letters.

NOTES:

1 For the Greek text, see Josephus, *Jewish War*, ed. and trans. by H. St. J. Thackeray (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 142–144.

2 Edward Chase Kirkland, *Charles Francis Adams, Jr., 1835–1915, The Patrician at Bay* (Cambridge, MA, 1965), 30.

3 Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861–1865*, vol. 2 (Boston, 1920), 167.

4 Charles Francis Adams, Jr., *Autobiography*, (Boston, 1916) 167.

5 Charles Francis Adams, Jr. (note 4 above) 26. [Michele Ronnick is an associate professor in the Department of Classics, Greek, and Latin.]

Linguistics Scavenger Hunt Answers

1. *juust*
2. *uncopyrightable*
3. Johann Martin Schleyer, German priest
4. *strengths* or *screeched*
5. vov vov
6. There are a few of these: Gudanji, Aranda, Greenlandic, Amuesha, etc.
7. *bubbler*
8. Voiceless alveolar fricative (in *sit*), voiced alveolar fricative (in *busy*), voiceless palatal fricative (in *sure*), voiced palatal fricative (in *pleasure*)
9. Aramaic
10. *unlisted* (phone number)
11. *ax, ex, xi, ox, xu*
12. Hawaiian
13. There are a number of these: Welsh, Tongan, Squamish, Tagalog, Maori, etc.
14. “Language opens worlds.” See www.kli.org for the Klingon version.
15. Hangul day—Korea (celebrates the Hangul writing system)
16. *acersecomic*
17. George Bernard Shaw (other people who have said it were quoting Shaw!)
18. *queue*
19. macron
20. from “apples & pears”—means “stairs”



CORRIGENDA

In the Autumn 1999 issue there were (at least) two errors. First, we left contributor Howard Richler’s name off his review of the new Microsoft *Encarta World English Dictionary*. Mr. Richler writes from Montreal, Canada. Also, we misidentified the makers of Crayola brand crayons. They are, and have always been, Binney and Smith, rather than “Binnie and Smith.” Our apologies for these oversights and errors.



OBITER DICTA

To What End Gender Endings?

Susan Elkin
Sittingbourne, Kent

Was John Knox merely respecting a 16th-century lexicographical nicety when he referred to Mary Queen of Scots as ‘a Cruell persecutrix of goddis people’? Or was he having a dig at her for being not only a monarch he resented for her Catholicism and unsympathetic ways, but also for having the effrontery to be female?

There used, in the middle ages, to be a whole raft of these neat feminine nouns with a *-trix*, or sometimes *-trice*, ending. They came from Latin agent nouns ending in *-or*. Thus, in the unlikely event of an adjudicator being a woman, she was carefully called an *adjudicatrix*. And commanders, or *imperators* were chaps, of course. But if, by any faint chance, one wasn’t, she had to be an *imperatrix*.

Chaucer wasn’t having any nonsense about fortune being anything but female either. ‘But, O Fortune, executrices of weirdes’, he wrote in *Troilus and Criseyde* (1374). Then there was *bellatrix*—it was interchangeable with *bellatrice*—for a war-waging woman on the rampage, like Boudica.

An *inventrix* was a female discoverer like . . . well, can you think of a medieval one? Perhaps that’s why the word was never in common use. And a *venatrix* was a female hunter, like Diana, Roman goddess of the moon. Sadly, no one seems to have used the rather splendid *ultrix*, an avenging woman (although I bet there have been plenty of them down the years) since Caxton in the fifteenth century.

Later words such as *administratrix*, *consolatrix*, *mediatrix* and *testatrix* evolved. And by analogy there were coinages such as *inheratrix*, *narratrix* and *perpatrix*.

Some were quite common even in the nineteenth century. ‘In his victrix he,’—Charlotte Brontë’s Dr John in *Villette* (1853)—‘required all that was here visible.’ It was meant to be a marriage, not a war, but Charlotte Brontë manages to take a thumping sideswipe at this relationship in that one word, *victrix*.

Anthony Trollope did something similar in *Barchester Towers* (1857) by naming a chapter *Mrs Proudie Victrix*. In the power struggle between the bishop’s termagant wife and his slimy chaplain, Obadiah Slope, at this stage in the novel Mrs Proudie is winning—to the fury of everyone in male-dominated diocesan politics.

When Amy Johnson *et al* took to the air how could they possibly be described as *aviators* as if they were men? The word *aviatrix* had only a short life. So did the word *oratrix*—presumably because by the time women were no longer expected to be seen and not heard, like their children, orators like Margaret Thatcher and Golda Meyer had to compete on equal terms with men. It’s the same with Hillary Clinton today.

Even today I am carefully described in the legalese of my sister’s will as her *executrix*. Yes, the lawyer seems to be saying, let her execute the will but only because we couldn’t persuade the client to appoint a man.

And *dominatrix* has acquired a whole new meaning in the sex-obsessed present. In the 17th century it just meant a bossy woman. The sado-masochistic overtones are new.

The commoner feminine ending for *-or* and some other words is, of course, *-ess*. *Vicaress* and *rectoress*, which just meant wife of a vicar or rector in the 18th century, have disappeared. And *saviouress*, a use of which was recorded in 1553, along with *farmeress*, which had a brief innings in 1672, seem never to have progressed beyond the fanciful stage.

But there are plenty of very ordinary everyday *-ess* words. *Lioness*, *duchess* and *hostess*, for example. Yet even some of these are on the slippery slope of political correctness.



The mainstream press will still refer to, say, Dame Judi Dench, Meryl Streep or Helen Mirren as “a fine actress,” but you won’t catch a glimpse of the word in *The Stage Newspaper*, the weekly trade journal of the British show business industry. Here, in both advertisements and editorial copy, everyone is referred to as an *actor*. All actors are equal—without the Orwellian corollary.

And have you noticed the job snobbery which hangs murkily around the word *manageress*? If you wear a pinny and run a teashop or a twee hairdressers, it seems to be OK to be a *manageress*. But if you wear a dark suit and are in charge of an investment fund in a merchant bank, then you’ll be a *manager*, irrespective of sex.

The John Knoxes are still among us, waxing critical. There was something mediievally spiteful about the way that a few detractors of British women priests in the early 1990s tried to dub them “*priestesses*”—as if they weren’t Christians. It was a classic example of using a gender suffix for negative reasons. I’m glad it didn’t catch on.

[From her base in southern England, Susan Elkin writes for publications as various as The Times, Daily Mail, The Daily Telegraph, The Stage, Music Teacher, In Britain, and Traditional Woodworking. Her books include a biography, two English literature study guides, and eight education reports. Susan has been in love with words and books for as long as she can remember.]



DACTYLOLOGIA

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From Ragusa to Lombard Street

Martin Bennett
Saudi Arabia

While the Common European currency has its detractors, the international sharing of words has long been a fact of life. Here, at least, is a type of coinage beyond any government’s control. Even the Bank of England, that symbol of national sovereignty, can trace part of its name to the lowly bench, or *banco*, from which the first Italian money-lenders conducted business. It also provides a good starting point for this brief guide to English’s etymological debt to Italian.

To continue the financial theme, take the word *cash*. Its origin, however distant, is from *cassa*, the Italian chest where the cash was kept. Perhaps this was in *florins*—from Florentine *fiorentini*. Or as likely in *ducats*, a silver coin first minted by Roger II of Sicily, and later by Giovanni Dandolo, Doge of Venice, the latter coin bearing the motto ‘Sit tibi, Christi, datus quem tu regis iste ductatus’, the last word of which perhaps furthered the currency of its name. A lesser Venetian coin resurfacing in English is the *gazeta*, one of which could once purchase a *gazetta della novia* or ‘a half-pence worth of news’.

As for quantity, we have the introduction into English of the word *million* from *milione*, reminding us how Tuscan or Lombard bankers once financed the wars of English kings. The fact that *credit* (*credito*) was not always paid back is shown by the adoption of *bankrupt* from *banco rotto* (literally ‘broken bench’, an early banker’s sign of insolvency). (More happily linked with *banco* is *banquet*, this deriving from *banchetto*—a diminutive of *banco*, originally a trellised table on which the banquet was spread.)

Not that the *traffic* (yes, from the Italian *traffico*) between England and Italy was purely financial. Venice and Genoa both had mighty fleets whose *frigates* (*fregate*), *caravels* (*car-*



avele), *barks* (*barche*) and *brigantines* (*briganti*, or pirate ships) all docked in English ports. Then from Ragusa, a port on the Dalmatian coast, comes the word *argosy*, although the English word has an older form, as in ‘Ragusyes, hulks and caravels and other rich-laden ships.’ (Dr John Dee, ‘The Petty Royal Navy’, 1577.)

And so to cargoes and *contraband* (a telescoping of *contra bando*, literally ‘against edict’). As often happens, the names of imported goods get wrapped up in the port of origin. Examples are *Marsala*, the wine from there; *bergamot*, the oil and essence from Bergamo; *baloney*, a type of sausage from Bologna; *travertine*, a limestone from Tivoli on the River Tevere, or Tiber. Less obviously *bronze* (*bronzo*) has been traced to Brindisi, where bronze mirrors were made. *Millinery* was first associated with Milan, albeit hats were one item among many: ‘The dealers in various articles were called *milliners* from their importing Milan goods for sale, such as brooches, spurs and glasses’ (*Shorter Oxford Dictionary*). Another item milliners might once have dealt with was *porcelain*. Originally this was the name for the Venus shell, or cowry. Its shape and sheen, by a rather obscene twist of the imagination, reminded medieval traders in the East of the vulva of a *porcellana*, or small sow. So goes one possible etymology. Webster, more delicately, contents himself with, ‘The shell has the shape of a pig’s back and a surface like porcelain.’

Relating to the early arms trade, *cannon* is from *canone*, an augmentative form from *canna*, a cane or tube. *Pistols* derive from Pistoia, a town once also called Pistolia, once famous for its daggers, or *pistolese*, a word later transferred to the firearm. Then we have the *musket*. Rather tortuously the Elizabethan translator John Florio says this derives from *moschetta*, this name not of a small fly but a hawk, a footnote adding that the names of firearms were often derived ‘from dragons, serpents or birds of prey in allusion to their velocity.’ For dealers in fakes we have another Italian loan-word, *charlatan*, from *ciarlare*, ‘to chatter,’ an ingredient of his sales pitch.

So much for words directly from Italian, albeit most of their endings have been eroded by time in contrast to more recent borrowings (*papparazzi*; *tortellini*). For other words, Italian is less a port of origin than an entrepot, or halfway house. So, however far-fetched, *tulip* winds back via *tulipino* to the Turkish *tulpend* and then the Persian *dulband* until only the shape remains, not of a flower but a turban. *Bergamot*—not the essence mentioned above but the type of pear derives via Italian’s *bergamotta* from Turkish *beg armud*, literally ‘prince of pears.’ (Helping explain the etymology, history notes how by 1507 there were agents of 60 or more Florentine firms in Constantinople.) *Scimitar* (Italian *scimitare*) has its origin in the Persian *Simsir*. Meanwhile there is a whole cargo of English words which can, following the old trade routes, be traced back through Italian to Arabic. *Artichoke*—*articiocco*—*al-kharshuuf*. *Arsenal* (Highbury)—*l’Arsenale* (Venice)—*dar as-Sanaa* (Arabic, ‘house of work’). But the items on the list run to dozens.

Yet the traffic of words mentioned in the title has been far from one way. English, in turn, has provided Italian with pure *anglismi* such as *fifty-fifty*, *egghead*, *sponsor*, *babysitter* and *bypass*. Other *anglismi* have a more local character. So *puzzle* is rephonicised into *ootzlay*; *pocket radio* is inverted to *radio pocket*; *handicapped* becomes *handicappato*; a *top model* is simply *una top*. *Snob* produces a name for not just a string of Italian boutiques, but another verb, *snobbare* with a corresponding gamut of Italian inflections. Likewise from *click* we get *clicare* to set alongside the uninflected *software* and *hardware*.

Outlandish coinages? Perhaps. Except the host language, whether in Rome or London, seems to have its own mechanism for incorporating them until the same coinages become standard lexical currency.

[Martin Bennett read *English at St Catherine’s College, Cambridge, and then taught English and French in West Africa. He now teaches English and Italian in Saudi Arabia. An article on Arabic proverbs—“The Lamps of Speech”—appeared in a previous edition of VERBATIM.*]



HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, England

I suspect that *issues* has been an irritating word for some time. Certainly, I remember it being overused in left-wing and trade union circles twenty-odd years ago, when it meant something like “matters upon which we are or should be campaigning”. There were also *issues around*, as in “we are working on issues around immigration,” where *around* meant “to do with”.

A narrower usage (of US origin, I presume) has recently become common in the UK, under which *issues* (invariably plural) are no longer merely and neutrally topics of interest, but problems, disagreements or dislikes. The phrase “You have raised an interesting issue” will soon, I imagine, be meaningless to anyone under the age of thirty.

An American contributor to an e-mail list discussed the difficulties of looking after a disabled baby, “which has meant all kinds of doctors’ appointments and special feeding issues”. A recruitment advertisement in a British newspaper, for the post of “Head of Equalities” at a county council, was accompanied by a picture of a dartboard. The caption read: “Imagine the board is equal opportunities issues. The darts are people’s attempts to manage them and the holes are the ones in their thinking”.

In another UK newspaper, a writer argued that institutionalised racism was not unique to the USA: “There can be no doubt that Britain has its own issues regarding race”.

When work on an £18 million leisure complex development in Hampshire was halted because the site was found to be home to an endangered species of dragonfly, a spokesman for the developers told reporters “We are resigned to dropping the project . . . we respect green issues.” That application is especially baffling; how does one “respect” a problem, or indeed a topic?

Perhaps *issues* is not properly a *Horrible*, no matter how ugly it sounds to many of us, but rather a word undergoing a transitional period of vagueness; having been stripped of its familiar meaning, it has not yet been assigned a new one, and is therefore available to fill in on a temporary basis as and when required.

Other words on the move include *advice*, which seems to be taking on a more sinister role. When South Wales police charged an officer with neglect of duty and discreditable conduct, newspapers reported that “another officer is to be admonished and three others will receive ‘advice’”. The inverted commas, and the context, suggest that this *advice* forms part of a disciplinary, and not an educational, process.

Ethnic (now commonly a euphemism for “non-white”) and *literally* (increasingly used to mean either “very” or “metaphorically”) will require a column to themselves. Meanwhile, have you noticed what is happening to *officially*?

In 1999, the England cricket team fell, for the first time, to the lowest position in an unofficial league table. Every newspaper report I read of this major national tragedy declared in its headline or opening paragraph that England was “officially the worst team in the world”—although many of them then went on to explain the unofficial nature of the unsought title!

Officially was therefore being used to mean “definitely” or “undeniably”. I lack the learning to name this phenomenon, but it seems to me that words which are useful precisely because their purport is narrow or broad are rendered “lite” when their precincts are stretched or straitened.

And, to quote a politician I recently heard interviewed on the BBC, “Inevitably, one could have issues with that”.

(Readers are invited to suggest “issues” for this column, or to supply further examples of those already discussed. Please contact me via VERBATIM’s UK or US offices. My thanks to those who have already been in touch—be assured that all your contributions are read, enjoyed, and carefully filed for future deployment).



INTER ALIA

We all have had the experience of finding an intriguing word in the dictionary when we were supposed to be looking up something else, but Dr. Mardy Grothe has turned his experience into a charming little book of quotations, each and every one of which is an example of chiasmus.

What's *chiasmus*, you ask? Well, besides being the word that distracted Dr. Grothe from his original target, it's the reversal in the order of words in two otherwise parallel phrases. The title of the book is itself chiasmic: *Never Let a Fool Kiss You or a Kiss Fool You*. (ISBN 0-670-87827-8)

If, after reading this book (actually, I recommend dipping into it at random; if you read the whole thing straight through you'd probably speak in chiasmus the rest of the day!) you want more, check out www.chiasmus.com, where there will soon be a chiasmus email mailing list.

My favorite quote in the book? "It is well to read everything of something and something of everything" (Henry Brougham). Make this book one of either somethings. *Erin McKean*



EPISTOLAE

I was most interested to read the article "Identity and Language in the SM Scene," by M. A. Buchanan in the Summer issue (XXIV/3).

But I think the comment that there is no Spanish equivalent for the English terms *boyfriend* and *girlfriend* is inaccurate. I believe the terms *novio* and *novia* convey the modern American meaning the author refers to—at least these days. My Spanish-speaking gay friends use the term to refer to their partners, as do straight couples who have no intention of marrying.

The time that people seem to move away from the terms, and use such "modern" terminology as *compañero sentimental* or *pareja* (loosely, 'partner') instead, is when they reach an age at which the term seems odd. (And after 20



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years of cohabitation, would English-speaking couples still speak of themselves as "boyfriend" and "girlfriend"? In both languages, the terms suggest relative youth, and experimentation. Each culture then has its own tradition of formality, or lack of it, in pre-nuptial relationships.

Incidentally, Gerald Brennan, in his book *South from Granada*, describing southern Spain in the 1920s (in many ways a deeply conservative Catholic society), says that it was considered quite normal for a girl to have many "novios".

Limits on acceptable behaviour may be encoded into our language, yes: but people still continue to use words to mean what they want them to mean. My last "girlfriend", who was Spanish, called me her "novio"; but she didn't believe in marriage.

Matthew Perret
Brussels, Belgium

While I do not know the meaning of the Thai word (from "On the Use of Niggardly", 24/4) the anecdote reminded me of a story from a friend who served in the Army during the second world war. After weeks in the field, he was assigned for a few days of respite to live with a family in the Flemish-speaking part of Belgium. Almost his first request was "Wash my clothes please." This was greeted with stunned silence since the Flemish word for "testicles" was pronounced "clothes."

Quincy Abbot
West Hartford, CT



Have Your Salt and Eat It, Too

Steve Kleinedler

American Heritage Dictionaries

It's dinnertime, and you're about to enjoy a tasty meal, but you find the food in need of seasoning. You ask the resident sarcastic adolescent at the opposite end of the table, "Can you pass the salt?" and you get the terse reply, "Yes," but you don't get any salt.

Protestation only elicits the response: "But you didn't ask if I would pass the salt, you asked if I could pass the salt, and yes, I'm physically able to do so." Depending on the way your household functions, you may end up with screaming parents, a punished child, passive-aggressive silence, or possibly some salted food. You know that you know what the kid meant, but in your head there's a small voice thinking, well, I suppose technically that's what *can* means.

Actually, you should trust your initial instinct. What the surly teenager has done is perversely ignored a maxim of conversational implicature, and in doing so, disregarded an indirect speech act.

Within the linguistic subfield of pragmatics, implicature, presupposition, entailment and indirect speech acts have long been a focus of inquiry, with countless philosophers picking apart sentences such as "The King of France is bald." Among the topics most fun to explore is *conversational implicature*.

For an appropriate starting point, we turn to H. Paul Grice, a British-born philosopher who taught at Berkeley for much of his career. In 1967, he delivered his William James Lectures at Harvard University. One significant lecture first appeared in print as "Logic and Conversation" in 1975 in the third volume of *Syntax & Semantics*. Many subsequent works concerning conversational implicature and discourse theory draw from it heavily. As an added bonus, it's fairly comprehensible to the layperson.

Grice observes that conversations aren't usually made up of disjointed comments. Rather,

speakers generally adhere to what he calls the Cooperative Principle (CP): "Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged" (p. 45).

It may sound like he's stating the obvious, but his analysis of the CP yields four conversational maxims, by which we can analyze how conversations and implications function the way that they do. These maxims are (p. 47):

The Maxim of Quantity

1. Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange).

2. Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

The Maxim of Quality—Try to make your contribution one that is true:

1. Do not say what you believe to be false.

2. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

The Maxim of Relation—Be relevant.

The Maxim of Manner—Be perspicuous.

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.

2. Avoid ambiguity.

3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).

4. Be orderly.

Grice then lists four ways that one can fail to fulfill a maxim (p. 49):

1. He may quietly and unostentatiously violate a maxim; if so, in some cases he will be liable to mislead.

2. He may OPT OUT from the operation of both the maxim and of the CP; he may say, indicate, or allow it to become plain that he is unwilling to cooperate in the way the maxim requires. He may say, for example, "I cannot say more; my lips are sealed."

3. He may be faced with a CLASH: he may be unable, for example, to fulfill the first maxim of Quantity . . . without violating the second maxim of Quality.

4. He may FLOUT a maxim; that is, he may blatantly fail to fulfill it. On the assumption that



the speaker is able to fulfill the maxim and to do so without violating another maxim (because of a clash), he is not opting out, and is not, in view of the blatancy of his performance, trying to mislead, the hearer is faced with a minor problem: how can his saying what he did say be reconciled with the supposition that he is observing the overall CP? This situation is one that characteristically gives rise to a conversational implicature; and when a conversational implicature is generated in this way, I shall say that a maxim is being exploited.

Here, B's answer is not as informative as A would need to make a decision as to whether C can be visited, and thus B's response can be seen as a violation of the first maxim of Quantity. But, A would not expect B to opt out. So, A then infers that for B to say anything more informative than "Somewhere in the south of France" would violate the maxim of Quality. Thus, A infers that B doesn't know the town that C lives in (pp. 51–52).

The third group is large, consisting of "examples that involve exploitation, that is a procedure by which a maxim is flouted for the

"Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc."

The fun comes in analyzing discourse sequences to determine how implicatures are made by flouting or exploiting these maxims. Grice discusses three kinds of conversational implicatures. (The examples below are taken from his examples.)

The first group consists of "examples in which no maxim is violated" (p. 51).

Scenario: A is standing by a disabled car. B approaches:

A: I'm out of gas.

B: There's a station around the corner.

Here, B implicates that B thinks that the gas station is probably open, otherwise B would be flouting the maxim of Relation. If both participants are adhering to the CP, A has no reason to believe that B would be flouting the maxim, and so understands that B intends A to think that at that gas station A can get gas and no longer be out of gas.

The second group consists of "example[s] in which a maxim is violated, but its violation is to be explained by the supposition of a clash with another maxim" (p. 51).

Scenario: A is going on a vacation in France. A and B both know that A wants to visit C if it's not out of A's way.

A: Where does C live?

B: Somewhere in the south of France.

purpose of getting in a conversational implicature by means of something of the nature of a figure of speech" (p. 52).

Many figures of speech can be explained and analyzed by this approach. Grice shows that violations of the first maxim of Quality are responsible for irony ("X is a fine friend," when it's obvious that X is not); metaphor ("You are the cream in my coffee"); meiosis ("He was a little intoxicated," used of one who has trashed a room); and hyperbole ("Every nice girl loves a sailor") (p. 53).

Violations of the first maxim of Quantity include tautology ("War is war"), but are also evident in less extreme situations such as Grice's classic "letter of recommendation" scenario: "A is writing a testimonial about a pupil who is a candidate for a philosophy job . . . : 'Dear Sir, Mr. X's command of English is excellent, and his attendance at tutorials has been regular. Yours, etc.'" (Gloss: A cannot be opting out, since if he wished to be uncooperative, why write at all? He cannot be unable, through ignorance, to say more, since the man is his pupil; moreover he knows that more information than this is wanted. He must, therefore, be wishing to impart information that he is reluctant to write down. This supposition is tenable only on the assumption that he thinks Mr. X is no good at philosophy. This, then, is what he is implicating" (p. 52).



Notice that such implications can be culture-bound. I have heard that such succinct recommendations are the norm in Germany. (And if I have been informed incorrectly, it's certainly within the realm of possibility that there is some culture where this is the norm; the point being, implicatures that one draws may be particular to a culture or subculture.)

Grice offers the following as an example of a Relation violation: "At a genteel tea party, A says Mrs. X is an old bag. There is a moment of appalled silence, and then B says, 'The weather has been quite delightful this summer, hasn't it?' B has blatantly refused to make what he says relevant to A's preceding remark. He thereby implicates that A's remark should not be discussed and, perhaps more specifically, that A has committed a social gaffe" (p. 54).

Among violations of Manner are ambiguity, obscurity, and failure to be succinct. Grice invites us to compare "Miss X sang 'Home Sweet Home'" with "Miss X produced a series of sounds that corresponded closely with the score of 'Home Sweet Home'" (p. 55). A reviewer writing the second sentence would eschew the simple sentence to imply that her "performance suffered from some hideous defect."

Laurence Horn, a linguist at Yale, has carried on Grice's work. He has condensed the four maxims, focusing on one that is speaker-based and one that is hearer-based. (Others, such as Dan Wilson and Dierdre Sperber, have condensed

them into one, Relation.) In a 1984 article, Horn demonstrates that these two opposing forces and their interactions are responsible for generating Gricean maxims and the inferences derived from them. Horn's two principles are (p. 13):

The Q principle (hearer-based)

1. Make your contribution sufficient. (Cf. Grice's first maxim of Quantity.)
2. Say as much as you can (given the R principle)

The R principle (speaker-based):

1. Make your contribution necessary. (Cf. Grice's maxims of Relation, Manner, and the second maxim of quantity.)
2. Say no more than you must (given the Q principle).

Q-principle implicatures are very common. Examples are those that arise from scalar predictions: "Some X are p" implies "Not all X are p." That is, "Some dogs are brown" implies "Not all dogs are brown." If speaker knew that all dogs were brown, and if such information were relevant to the hearer, the speaker would be obliged to obey the Q principle and say so. The hearer's assumption that the speaker is obeying Q (and thus adhering to the CP) allows the hearer to infer that the speaker does not know the stronger predication, "All dogs are brown." to be a fact (p. 13).

Other Q examples are those that entail a lower bound ('at least'), and implicate an upper bound ('at most'). Conjoining these brings about conveys 'exactly' (p. 13). Horn offers the example "He ate 3 carrots." This sentence entails "He ate at least 3 carrots" and implicates "He ate at most 3 carrots," the conjunction of which gives "He ate exactly three carrots." Intentionally violating the Q principle results in the act of the speaker intentionally misleading the hearer. That is, to say "He ate 3 carrots," when he in fact ate 4 or 5 carrots, is not untruthful; it's misleading (p. 14).

The R principle mirrors the Q principle. Whereas (p. 14), "a speaker who says 'p' may license the Q inference that he meant 'at most p,' a speaker who says 'p' may license the R inference that he meant 'more than p.'" The most



Ivan Brunetti



obvious examples are indirect speech acts. (This brings us back to the salt.)

Horn states: "If I ask you whether you can pass me the salt, in a context where your abilities to do so are not in doubt, I license you to infer that I am doing something more than asking you whether you can pass the salt—I am in fact asking you to do it." If the speaker knows that the hearer is able to pass the salt, then the question of whether the hearer is physically capable of doing so is pointless. By the Relation maxim, the hearer infers that the speaker means something more than the speaker says. Intentional violations of the R principle (that is, violations of the maxim of Relation) are "merely unhelpful or perverse" (p. 14).

So, when the salt scenario looms large in your dining room, you can respond by saying "Until you can adhere to the Cooperative Principle, you are excused to your room," and hand the violator this essay.

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As the Word Turns

Barry Baldwin
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Unless any scientific compound usurps it in the forthcoming new edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *floccinaucinihilipilification*, as John Simon guessed in his *Paradigms Lost* (1981), is the longest word there. Weighing in with 29 letters, it beats by one its sesquipedalian opponent *antidisestablishmentarianism*.

This majestic monster found a place in Russell Rooke's *Grandiloquent Dictionary* (1972), being there defined as "the action or process of estimating a thing as worthless." Our word is compounded from four Latin expressions for such low evaluation: "non flocci facio"—I don't give a flock for; "non nauci facio"—I don't give three flocks for; "non nihili facio"—I don't care nothing for; or "non pili facio"—I don't give a hair for.

It looks like a Samuel Johnson kind of word. Celebrated for his long Latinate terms, the Great Cham defended their use in an essay in the *Idler*: "Few faults of style, whether real or imaginary, excite the malignity of a more numerous class of readers, than the use of hard words. But words are only hard to those who do not understand them, and the critick ought always to enquire, whether he is incommoded by the fault of the writer, or by his own." Boswell duly defended his hero: "Mr Johnson has gigantick thoughts, and therefore he must be allowed gigantick words."

In fact, it was William Shenstone (1714–1763) who imported our word into English, in one of his published letters, in 1741: "I loved him for nothing so much as his *floccinaucinihilipilification* of money." Shenstone was best known as a poet, though no contemporary thought highly of him ("that water-gruel bard," giped Horace Walpole). He had no particular reputation for sesquipedalianism. His use may have been disingenuous: the poet Gray's reaction to his Letters was "Poor man! He was always wishing for money."

After Shenstone, the word languished a good sixty years before the poet and critic Robert



Southey took it up in an 1816 essay in the *Quarterly Review*. Then Sir Walter Scott tried it out in a journal entry on 18 March 1829, thus: “They must be taken with an air of contempt, a floccinaucinihilipilification of all that can gratify the outward man.” This same spelling occurs elsewhere in Scott: mistake or deliberate alteration?

And that is the complete history of the word, according to the *OED*. Has any reader seen it in modern literature? I’ve noticed the spin-off adjective *floccinaucinihilipilificatory* in occasional pieces of fugitive journalism. I used to recommend the noun to my students as a good one for debates and pub conversation. Overall, it evidently never caught on. Just TOO big, perhaps?

Well, if that’s the problem, there are less jaw-breaking allotropes. In his *English Dictionarie, or An Interpreter Of Hard Words* (1623), Henry Cockeram introduced and defined the verb *flocchiefie* (‘to set nought by’), but this one seems to have died quickly after Blount’s 1656 rehash of Cockeram in his *Glossography*. The chronicler Edward Hall (1499–1549) had already tried out *floccipend* (“Every honest creature would abhorre and floccipend”) in 1548, but this one had to wait for Walter Thomson’s 1882 essay on Bacon and Shakespeare (“A profession prone to floccipend old locks of thought from wooly-headed thinkers”—a groanable triple pun) for its next outing, and it still awaits its third.

Southey himself, in critical essays of 1826 and 1829, came up with “a floccinaucical signification” and “floccinaucities to which so much importance is attached”; neither found a taker. So, if the floccular processes of your cerebellum have been flocculated by this flocculent flourish, fear not to write floccosely—English and Latin are on your side, and it beats the hell out of the Nineties Newspeak of academics and computers.

[Barry Baldwin grew up in England during and after World War II. Now in Canada, he has published 12 books and some 600 articles on Greek/Roman/Byzantine/18th-century history & literature. His chief passions are cricket, English soccer, and eating.]

A Visit from Aunt Rose: Euphemisms (and Pejoratives) for Menstruation

Jessy Randall

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Now it can be told. There are over one hundred codes for menstruation, from the gentle euphemism (*that time of the month*) to the vulgar (*riding the cotton pony*) to the downright peculiar (*the woodchuck has arrived*). Some of the terms are nearly international; others are extremely localized, used by a small group of women friends or within a family or other small community. Why do we cloak menstruation in subterfuge? Sometimes out of embarrassment or a sense of decorum, but also, I think, there is the appeal of having an inside joke, speaking a private language, talking about something that is not to be talked about. I am not sure that we are all that shy about menstruation here at the close of the 20th century, but with a modern-day ironic sensibility, it seems funny to pretend to be and to use outlandish codes to discuss something secret in plain view.

The codes fall roughly into four categories: periodicity, personification, allusion to blood, and allusion to emotional state. Of course, many codes overlap two, three, or even all four categories, and some cannot be categorized.

The simplest and most common coding for menstruation relates to its periodicity. *Having one’s period* is so straightforward that it can hardly be called coding; similarly, women can say it’s *that time of the month* or the *bad, wrong, or funny* time of the month. A woman can have her *monthlies*, her *cycle*, or her *moon-days* or *moon-time* (these last two are fairly new terms, perhaps even new-age). In her 1870s teenage diary, Alice Stone Blackwell (daughter of suffragist Lucy Stone and social reformer Henry Blackwell, who was brother to Elizabeth Blackwell, the first woman doctor) abbreviated menstrual period to *M.P.*, as in “*M.P.* number 3.” In the euphemism-



laden 1950s in Wellsville High School in Wellsville, New York (and probably in many other schools as well), girls could cite their *monthly excuse* to get out of gym class. Right before the menstrual period begins, some women say they are *fixin' to start*, abbreviated *F.T.S.* And I know someone in the 1990s who refers to her *Visa bill*, which arrives monthly, although she wishes it wouldn't.

The personification of the period, odd as it may be, is a popular coding. Generally the period takes on the identity of a friend or relative, usually female, who comes for a visit: *my friend*, *my little friend*, *my aunt*, *my grandmother*, *Mother Nature*, *Miss Rachel*, *Sophie*, or *Mary Lou*. Description of the visitor can get quite elaborate: *my aunt from Redbank* or from *Redwood City*, *Reading*, or *Redfield* (with the place name incorporating the color of blood) or *my red-haired aunt from the South* (incorporating both redness and the idea of the vagina, colloquially *down South* or *down there*.) Sometimes the visitors even have names—*Dot*, *Dottie* (incorporating the idea of dots of blood), *Aunt Rose* (incorporating the idea of redness, i.e., blood) or *Aunt Flo* (i.e., *flow*, incorporating the idea of the flow of blood). On the Comedy Central cartoon series *South Park*, Stan Cartman's Aunt Flo, who happens to be a redhead, comes to visit once a month. While Mrs. Cartman's monthly visitor is in town, Mr. Cartman sleeps on the couch.

Other visitors might include a *midnight visitor* (acknowledging the surprise factor), a *communist* (redness), *the chicks*, and male visitors such as the *Cardinal* (redness again) and *Charlie*, *Herbie*, *Kit*, and *George*, etymology unknown. (These men not only come to visit but become romantically entangled: *going steady with George* is another term for having one's period.) One woman I know has developed an entire personality for her monthly visitor, Doris, who drives a brown Chevy Nova and is a large woman with cat-glasses, her appearance similar to women in the old *Far Side* comics. In bad months, Doris drives up on the lawn, knocks over trees, and generally makes a nuisance of herself.

Codes that refer to blood include *the red flag is up* (sometimes shortened to just *the flag is up* or *the flag is flying*; also sometimes *flying Baker*, since *Baker* is the Navy code for B, and the B flag is red), *the Red Sea is in*, *having the painters in*, *the reds*, *wearing red shoes*, *are you a cowboy or an indian?* *a red-letter day*, and *riding the red horse*. Mrs. E.R. Shepherd, a late 19th-century advice writer, used the term *course* in *For Girls: A Special Physiology* (1884), reporting: "I have met numbers of women and some of them young who knew nothing of their coming 'course' until they were upon them." Other blood codes make reference to the gushing or flowing of blood, such as *Old Faithful* (which also suggests periodicity) or *on a streak* (the Rolling Stones song "Satisfaction" includes the lyric "Baby, better come back / later next week / 'cause you see / I'm on a losin' streak"). And in Act I Scene I of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Gonzalo describes a ship as "leaky as an unstanched wench."

Then there are the codes that stem from unpleasantness, like *the curse* or *the curse of Eve*. The origin of this, of course, is *Genesis*: God curses Eve for eating of the tree of knowledge, saying "in sorrow shalt thou bring forth children," implying, I suppose, that in sorrow shalt we also have cramps. (Later, Rachel successfully uses a menstruation euphemism to hide stolen goods underneath her on a camel, saying in *Genesis* 31:35, "Let it not displease my lord that I cannot rise up before thee, for the custom of women is upon me.") There are *the nuisance*, *G.D.N.* (*God-damned nuisance*), *the poorlies*, and *being unwell* or *that way*. There are also *female troubles* (a term that can refer to any number of things, menstruation being one of the least troubling).

Of course, the unpleasantness terms have their flip side. At least one woman I know has turned *the curse* around, calling her period *the blessing* since it is proof that she is not pregnant. And Anne Frank called menstruation her "sweet secret" despite its "pain and unpleasantness." (Her father, Otto Frank, edited out these lines for the 1947 Dutch version of the diary.) In the



1950s, *Seventeen* magazine featured articles on how to cope with *special days*, a euphemism if I ever heard one. Other pleasant terms include the *miracle of menstruation*, *becoming a woman* (for the first period), and, in an early Kotex booklet entitled “Marjorie May’s Twelfth Birthday,” *wonderful purification*.

(Sanitary supplies have a whole set of euphemisms to themselves, and indeed, the word *menstruation* does not appear in any Kotex publications until the year 1942, in an ad for a booklet: “Why get all involved trying to explain the facts of menstruation to your little girl . . . when there’s a simple, easy way to do this dreaded task? Let the new booklet ‘As One Girl to Another’ do this job for you!” Other educational pamphlets had suggestive but non-explicit titles like “You’re a Young Lady Now” and “Very Personally Yours.”)

A favorite graphic term for menstruation is *on the rag*, i.e., using pads of some sort (originally cotton rags, now usually store-bought combinations of paper, plastic, and cotton batting) to staunch the flow of blood. This can be abbreviated *O.T.R.* and used to describe not only women menstruating but anyone, regardless of gender, who is in a bad mood. One man I know uses the term *raging*, which derives, he says, from *on the rag*. And comedian George Carlin spoke of women *riding the cotton pony*, again a reference to pads or tampons, which have their own euphemisms: *mouse mattresses*, *the white horse*, *manhole cover*, *coyote sandwich*, *saddle blankets*, *teddy bears*, and the industry-sanctioned *sanitary napkins* or *feminine supplies*. (From this last, one man I know invented the term *feminine days* for the menstrual period, a sort of ur-euphemism.) The 1895 Montgomery Ward catalog advertised a “Faultless Serviette, or Absorbent Health Napkin,” an object so layered in euphemism that I’m shocked anyone figured out what it was in order to buy it.

Then there are the inscrutable terms, like *flower days*, which according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* referred to the menses from

as early as the 1400s until the 1800s. There’s *the boat’s in dry dock*, which as far as I’m concerned simply makes no sense, and stands in direct opposition to the (especially male) expression *too wet to plow*. *Falling off the roof* is another code no one seems able to figure out: it may originate in the idea of a wound from falling, or possibly from the location of rag-laundering—one woman I know heard from her grandmother that women attended to this task in the attic in order to keep it secret from the men in the family.

And then there’s my own teenage term, *woodchuck*, which I and two friends used for both menstruation and sanitary supplies (as in, “My woodchuck has arrived, do you have any woodchucks?”) None of us can remember the etymology of this term, even though we invented it. We think it may have arisen from another friend saying once on the telephone “I have to go, there’s a woodchuck in my yard,” a nonsensical expression of surprise and urgency that stuck with us and demanded to be morphed into inside-joke-hood.

Another known but highly localized menstruation code includes a reference to *Mrs. Skeen*, in honor of a woman one particular family knew who always managed to refer to her menstrual cycle in any conversation. And one group of neighbors use the term *damned old Cox*, because a tenant who was behind in rent went to see the landlord, Mr. Cox, and complained “I was so upset I started my period early—damned old Cox!” One group of girls in the late 1970s used the expression *back in the saddle again*, sometimes humming the Gene Autry tune. I have no doubt that there are many more such codes, but they are by their very nature difficult to document.

[Jessy Randall curates the Women’s History collection at the Library Company of Philadelphia. She co-authored “Assing Around” in the Spring 1999 issue of VERBATIM.]





CLASSICAL BLATHER

Chances Are

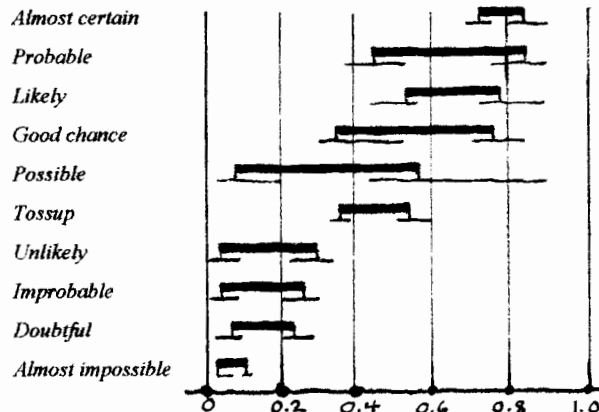
Nick Humez
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Because the present is fleeting, and the past is immutable, according to C. S. Lewis's administrative-level demon, Uncle Screwtape, it is the future that is least like eternity; and that is why the powers of Hell encourage human beings to focus on it¹. However one may be tempted to disagree with this philosophy, it cannot be denied that we do think about what has not yet come to pass, and how to make sure the odds break in our favor, whether we are underwriters hoping that more premiums are paid in than losses paid out, racetrack habitués betting on our favorite horse to win rather than place or show or not finish at all, or simply picnickers guessing how likely it is that we can finish our *al fresco* lunch before that ominous cloud on the horizon metamorphoses into a full-blown thundershower bursting overhead. Indeed, most of our waking hours may be spent weighing prospective risks and benefits in a constant calculus so second-nature to us that we are rarely aware of its extent. Experience teaches consequences from which we predict future events in turn; but often we are extrapolating not from physical certainties ("If you push something hard enough it will fall over"²) but from familiar probabilities ("The chances of a coin coming up heads on the toss are 50/50"³).

Or from other people's estimates of familiar probabilities: We ask our office-mate, who we know has heard the weather report we just missed that morning, owing to our toast having fallen from the table and landed butter-side down⁴ at the critical moment, "Will it rain tomorrow?" "There's a good chance of it," is the reply. If we then carry an umbrella the next day, is the actual probability that we will need it significantly greater than 0.5? No, for two reasons: First, the actual probability of rain falling anywhere on the

earth on a given day is quite low, even on a cloudy day; second, a team of psychologists elicited the vernacular meaning of "good chance" from a group of experimental subjects a decade and a half ago and found it to range from an actual probability slightly less than 0.6 down to smaller than 0.4, depending on the informant⁵. The graph shows the researchers' results for other common terms of likelihood as well; perhaps the most startling are "tossup"—which one might suppose would be a range centered precisely on 0.5 (the real-world probability of the coin toss from which the expression derives), but in fact is shifted towards improbability, lying roughly between 0.38 and 0.55—and the range of "probably," whose high end is scarcely less than that of "almost certain" and whose low end is pegged to a probability markedly smaller than 0.5 (about 0.45, or 10% less than even odds.)⁶

Informants' estimates of what probabilities are, in actuality, designated by vernacular terms below.



After Wallsten *et al.* (1986), "Measuring the Vague Meanings of Probability Terms," *J. Exper. Psychol.* 115:34-65.

Other folk beliefs about likelihood fly in the face of logical appearances as well. Murphy's Law, commonly stated as "Anything that can go wrong, will,"⁷ has given rise to a distinct class of one-liner jokes in imitation: "If there are two ways to spell someone's name, you will pick the wrong one;" "The part requiring the most consistent repair will be housed in the most inaccessible location;" "Washing machines break down only during the wash cycle;" "When leaving work late, you will go unnoticed, but when leaving



early, you will meet the boss in the parking lot.” (A corollary: “The less important you are to the corporation, the more your absence or tardiness is noticed.”)⁸ Older readers will recall that this genre of jocular pessimism was also the theme of the one-panel sidebar “They’ll Do It Every Time” with which cartoonist Jimmy Hatlo used to embellish the Sunday edition of his long-running comic strip *There Oughta Be A Law*.

Positivist-empiricists, especially in the scientific community, may be all too quick to dismiss such folk formulae out of hand as “nothing more than the product of our selective memory for those times when things don’t go well,” according to Robert A. J. Matthews, a science correspondent for the London *Sunday Telegraph*⁹. But there is a sound basis for at least *some* pessimistic folk beliefs which seem at first blush irrational: The thirteenth of the month is, in fact, more likely to be a Friday than any other day of the week,¹⁰ and the likelihood of your having picked a checkout line other than the fastest one in the supermarket increases as a linear function of how many lines there are: If there are but two, your chances of being in the fast lane are even; if four, the odds are three to one against you.

Our inability to know the future—and specifically, whether good or bad things may lie in store for us—has given rise to a plethora of everyday expressions by which we resign ourselves and others to the vicissitudes of Providence or at least our own lack of control, such as *seek one’s fortune*, *hazard a guess*, *leave it up to chance*, *dicey*, *at risk*, *the luck of the draw*, *their poor lot*, *the fickle finger of fate*. Many of these terms were historically impartial but have taken on color (positive or negative) over the intervening years: As mentioned in a footnote in our last column¹¹, *hazard* comes to us from an Arabic word for a gambler’s die, but whereas *par hasard* in French is equivalent to the value-neutral “by chance” in English, our *hazardous* has become far more sinister than the unprejudicial *dicey*. It appears that *lot*—derived from the sort of lot one casts, and thus akin to *lottery*—may be likewise edging

from neutrality towards the sense of a short straw: One can still speak of a *happy lot* but already the expression sounds quaint, while more often it seems one hears of a *sorry lot*. (Watch this space.)

Among the Romans, *fortune*—good or bad—was personified as the goddess Fortuna¹², much as the Greeks before them had made statues of Tyche¹³; but gradually, as people came more and more to think about and invoke Fortune in her beneficent aspect, *fortuna* without a qualifying adjective came to mean simply and solely *good fortune*¹⁴. Although English preserves the neutral sense in the expression *to seek his fortune*, when we speak of inheriting a fortune it is generally presumed that what has been handed down is not simply a heap of bad luck.

Luck comes down to us through Middle English from Middle Dutch *luc*, a shortened version of the word *gheluc*, cognate with Middle High German *gelücke*, which became modern German *Glück*, “(good) fortune, luck, happiness.” Luck, like *Fortuna*, can be personified: “Luck, Be a Lady Tonight,” sings the gambler Nathan Detroit in the mid-century smash-hit musical *Guys and Dolls*, a sentiment no doubt echoed at many a gaming-table (and slot machine) before and since. Like Lady Luck, Fate can nowadays personified in order to lament her fickleness (the finger of Fate being the Romans’ *digitus impudicus*, or, as we would nowadays say, the Bird); this is reductionism at work on the original Three Fates of Greco-Roman mythology, who together had charge of the thread of each person’s life: Clotho, the spinner, Lachesis, who twisted the cord, and Atropos, wielding the grim scissors to cut it off. (The Latin word *fatum* comes from the verb *fari*, to speak, and means “pronouncement, prophecy, doom.”)

Risk comes into English from French *risque*, itself from Italian *rischio/risco*, all meaning the same thing: the danger of hurt, damage, loss, etc.¹⁵. Chance, which derives from the Latin verb *cadere*, “to (be)fall,” has been elegantly defined¹⁶ as an “unknown and unpredictable ele-



ment in happenings that seems to have no assignable cause” or a “force assumed to cause events that cannot be foreseen or controlled,” and thus a synonym for luck. In the plural, *chance* can mean “likelihood . . . possibility or probability.” Thus: “Chances are that ‘likely,’ like ‘daily,’ will be widely used as both adjective and adverb, even in print, by the turn of the century.” (An all-too-likely story, alas.)

NOTES:

1 C. S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters* (New York: Macmillan, 1971 [15th printing]), Letter XV (pp. 67-69).

2 This principle was given the name “Fudd’s First Law of Opposition” by the Firesign Theatre comedy troupe on their classic recording *I Think We’re All Bozos On This Bus* (Columbia Records, 1971).

3 A common bit of nonsense derived from this common-sense fact is manifest in the assumption that if a coin has been flipped three times and come up tails all three times, the odds should be three to one it will come up heads. In fact, the odds remain 50/50, just as they were on all tosses before: prior events do not affect the probability of present or future ones; they merely form a body of statistical evidence, and the larger the data base, the greater the likelihood (or meta-probability, if you will) that the actual data will reflect the theoretical probability—which is why, all other things being equal, statisticians tend overwhelmingly to prefer larger samples over smaller ones (which is itself a meta-probabilistic assertion about the behavior of social scientists engaged in studies grounded in probabilities).

4 The likelihood of the toast landing butter side down is *not* 50/50, as Robert A. J. Matthews explains in “The Science of Murphy’s Law” (*Scientific American*, April 1997, pp. 88–91). The significant constants for falling buttered toast (and paperback books) are (1) rate of spin as the result of torque induced by gravity and (2) the height of the table. If a table were sufficiently high, the toast would land butter side up; but tables are the height they are because people are only so tall as they are—and *that*, says Matthews, following the earlier reasoning of Harvard astrophysics professor William J. Press, is because human beings are essentially tall cylinders whose stability against toppling falls off dramatically as a function of height, not only increasing the risk of skull fractures but augmenting their severity as a linear function of initial cranial altitude. So it might be argued that the real reason the toast lands butter side up is the result of natural selection, any possible genes for nine-foot bipedal hominids having been weeded out a very long time ago.

Cats, on the other hand, land on their feet by executing a corrective twist during the fall; this maneuver, coupled with a very accurate balance mechanism in the cat’s

inner ear and a tendency to relax and spread out, minimizing terminal velocity and landing with flexed limbs, would appear to count for the curious discovery, from a 1987 study by veterinarians Wayne O. Whitney and Cheryl J. Mehlhass published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, that cats who accidentally plummet from apartment windows in New York had fewer injuries when the fall was from a height of seven or more stories than they did when falling from a lower floor. For the mathematics of the buttered-toast problem, see Ian Stewart, “Mathematical Recreations,” *Scientific American* 273:6 (December 1995), page 104; for more on how cats fall and survive, see Jared M. Diamond’s article discussing Whitney and Mehlhass’s work in *Natural History*, August 1989, pp. 20–26. The posting of May 28, 1998, by Thomas M. Greiner, Assistant Professor of Anatomy and Physical Anthropology at New York Chiropractic College, to the website of Washington University Medical School (<http://madsci.wustl.edu/posts/archives/may98/896646615.zo.r.html>) examines the anatomy of the midair cat flip. See also Thomas A. McMahon and John Tyler Bonner’s *On Size and Life* (New York: Freeman, 1983), a lucid and fascinating book explaining how the laws of physics govern parameters of physiology in creatures ranging from ants to sequoias.

5 Wallsten *et al.* (1986), “Measuring the Vague Meanings of Probability Terms,” *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 115:34–65.

6 Barbara Laud, a reference librarian at the Maplewood (NJ) Memorial Library, has astutely suggested that this may be due to people’s innate unwillingness to be the bearers of bad tidings.

7 There was, in fact, an actual Murphy, although the law named after him differs slightly from what he actually said. In 1949 Captain Edward A. Murphy, USAF, had designed a body harness whose electrodes were intended to measure, by means of electrodes, the effects of rapid deceleration on pilots, using volunteers strapped into rocket-propelled chairs. When an initial run failed to produce data, and the harnesses were shown to have been wired improperly, an exasperated Murphy swore that “If there are two or more ways of doing something, and one of them can lead to catastrophe, then someone will do it.” When this formulation was repeated at an Air Force press conference as an example of a good working assumption in engineering equipment on which people’s safety might depend, the press gleefully picked up the gist of the idea, simplified it, christened it “Murphy’s Law,” and launched it into the widespread popularity it has enjoyed ever since. Murphy himself is reported not to have been amused by this. (Matthews, *op.cit.*, p. 89.)

8 I am indebted, for the list of whimsical “laws” from which these examples are taken, to a recent e-mail communication from retired social sciences professor (and accomplished Celtic harpist) Georgia Houle.



9 *Op. cit.*, p. 88.

10 A fact cleverly proved by a correspondent in the British *Mathematical Gazette* in 1969: S. R. Baxter, at that time a 13-year-old schoolboy at Eton.

11 “Money Talk(s),” VERBATIM XXIV:4 (Fall 1999), pp.14–17.

12 An image carried forward into medieval iconography, e.g., in the manuscript of the *Carmina Burana*, the marvelous book of poetry and music at the abbey of Benediktbeuern, Germany, whose illustration above the song “Fas et nefas ambulans” depicts the goddess sitting at the hub of a great wheel which, as it turns, bears aloft one king to power and prosperity while another, on the descending side, tumbles to his ruin.

13 *Tyche*, “chance,” is the Greek noun related to the verb *tungchanein*, “to [just plain] happen.” *Eutuchos* (*eu-*, “good” plus the adjectival form of *tyche*) meant “fortunate” (and not—*pace* Hellenized Israelites under the rule of the Herods—“callipygian”).

14 This sentence is a syntactically free translation, but semantically a direct steal, from Ernout and Meillet’s excellent *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* (Paris: Éditions Klincksieck, 1979), p. 249, under *Fortuna*.

15 *Risk* should not be confused with its homophone, the cybernetic acronym RISC, which stands for Reduced Instruction Set Computer, a device whose processors execute a very small number of very simple commands very quickly, ideally one item per tick of the system’s internal clock.

16 By the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1992).



EPISTOLAE

Your Autumn 1999 issue prompts me to make several comments:

Firstly, Jim Behling’s Foreignyms have a name at last. I have encountered them or many years, as most of your bilingual and multilingual readers must also have done; indeed, a foreignym appears in that very issue of VERBATIM, brought by your reader Sidney Brotman: *Aqui es una mesa*—Spanish/Yiddish. Foreignyms occur in jokes, anecdotes of misunderstanding and real-life situations. The most striking I have come across appears in Willard Espy’s *Another Almanac of Words at Play*. It is a sixteen-line poem, a macaronic alternating Hebrew and Italian lines, every pair of lines sounding almost

exactly the same and having the same subject matter; a lament of a beloved teacher on his death, written by Rabbi Leone of Modena in the year 1584 when still a child.

Secondly, you ask for the meaning of a Thai word in Sol Saporta’s “On the Use of Niggardly.” maybe I am wrong, but could that word be (the Thai word for ‘squash’, the vegetable), pronounced “fuck.”?

And finally, what gives with the proof-reading? In the review of *The Wordwatchers Guide to Good Grammar*, you have *gramma* for *grammar*, and in the same article *ordinance/ordinance* should surely be *ordinance/ordnance* (and maybe also *ordonnance*?)

Best wishes from your faithful reader,

Naftali Wertheim

Israel

[We are striving to reduce silly errors, but occasionally articles are not ready in time to receive the ministrations of our volunteer professional proofreader & copyeditor, Lorraine Alexson. —Ed.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

“I remember when I used to see bushels of them,” said Alden “Bud” Miller, gesturing toward a four-door 1923 black-trimmed maroon Buick with a white soft top, wooden hickory smoked wheels and thick white walls. [From the Center Daily Times, State College, Pennsylvania. Submitted by Bill Simon III]

Across 1. REP+ROOF 5. CAR+MINE 9. D+RIVE
10. REVEILLES (anag.) 11. CAN+TONS 12. SHE(LT)ER
13. TIES (This hom.) 14. GO+BET+WEE+N
18. DISPORTED (2 defs.) 20. CO(P)Y 22. MA(JESTY)
25. IMP+ROVE 26. TERMACANT (anag.) 27. O+SAGE
28. RUSHEES (anag.) 29. N+ASCENT
Down 1. RED+ACT 2. PEIGNOIRS (anag.)
3. OCCELOTS (rev.) 4. F(ORES)IGHT 5. CAR+VES
6. R(AIM)ENT 7. INLET (hid.) 8. ENSURING (anag.)
15. BAD+MINT+ON 16. ESPIONAGE (anag.)
17. O(DO+MET)ER (REO rev.) 19. ON(STAGE)
20. COP+IOUS 21. BEHE(F)T 23. JERKS (1st let.)
24. Y(E)ATS (rev.)



BIBLIOGRAPHIA.

Bureaucratic Language in Government and Business, by Roger W. Shuy, 190 pp. Georgetown University Press, 1998. (£15..50/US\$19.95).n

Written and oral communication can be dangerous to one's mental health. If we can't figure out the message, we can't be expected to act appropriately. Moral: if the medium of the message is broken, fix it.

In ten chapters, nine of them case studies on the consequences of muddled bureaucratic language and the final one a discussion of what can be done, Shuy reveals his talent and skill in applying the tools of linguistic and textual analysis to the solution of common problems in written and oral communication. His is not a modern version of Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, but rather a modern version of linguistic analysis of texts. Shuy's general conclusion is that bureaucrats do not write for the public (clients, customers, citizens) but for other bureaucrats. They have developed their expert talk for other experts and have missed the point. And, in missing the point, the lack of clarity results in misspent hours and dollars in litigation. All this, Shuy says, could be avoided with a little education. Ah, but education too is a dangerous thing.

"Tools in a toolbox" is the expression I remember most from my years as one of Shuy's colleagues. Develop and refine those tools (writer's purpose, message purpose, audience analysis, structural analysis, word choice, logical v. intended meanings), he would say, and apply them to textual analysis. See what you come up with. Clarity, accuracy, and comprehensibility are the goals of writing. When did some writers lose sight of those things? Probably when they (bureaucrats and corporate copywriters) decided to write not for clarity but for authority. High-falutin' words and sentence structures, jargon-laden phrases, structural organization, logic, use of white space on the page, graphic presentation, these are the targets of Shuy's analysis and instruction.

In a series of case studies, Shuy demonstrates how the practical conclusions drawn from text analysis, conversation analysis, pragmatics, speech acts, semantics, and discourse analysis can be stitched together in an instructional program that will improve writing. His purpose is to instruct others in the tools of analysis so that they can instruct others. The resulting improvements in writing will come from an understanding of the processes that shape communication through language. The knowledge that comes from an understanding of the display or use of status, power, authority, roles, message, grammar, and word choice is powerful knowledge for the writer. Some writers are more intuitive than others about these notions. Those who are not can benefit from instruction and experience.

The distillation of his knowledge and experience in these nine cases represents for Shuy the efforts of a writer, a teacher, a linguist, and a consultant. His is a hands-on approach to the problems of language created by the writer of notices, reports, advertising, surveys, product labels, agreements; he even takes on telephone interviews and conference communication. It is the way Shuy practices his analytical craft that is important to his story: he provides a platform to empower others to improve communication.

Through a series of careful analyses, Shuy takes the reader through the original texts (written or transcriptions of oral language), through the application of principles, through author re-engagement, through rethinking and revision, and through client reaction. He reminds the reader that the typical front-end investment in clear, accurate, and effective communication has enormous payoffs in comprehensibility and goodwill.

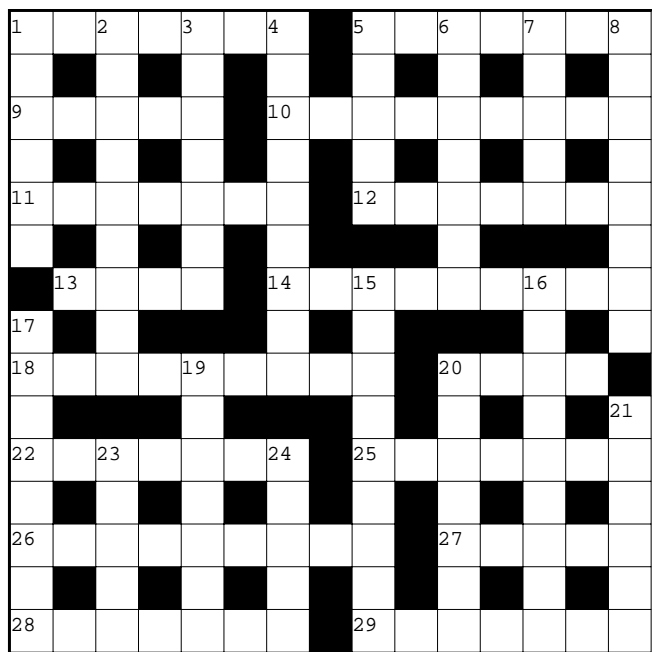
Professor John J Staczek
Vice President for Faculty (Academic
Affairs) and Chairman
Department of Modern Languages
Thunderbird—The American Graduate
School of International Management





Anglo-American Crossword No. 83

Compiled by Pam Wylder



Verbal Analogies

Dr. P. A. Pomfrit

1. Foppishness : Dandism :: Prudishness : ? (9)
2. Carpenter's plane : Jointer :: Bricklayer's pointing tool : ? (7)
3. Type of woolen cloth : Hodden :: Tomboy : ? (6)
4. Flesh : Sarcophagous :: Wood : ? (11)
5. Deposit eggs : Oviposit :: Prize for student in second place : ? (8)
6. A whim : Vagary :: Legal restitution of criminals : ? (8)
7. Swimming : Natatorial :: Governor : ? (13)
8. Well-stored : Locoplete :: Smooth and cylindrical : ? (6)
9. Barefoot : Discalced :: Disfigured by weeping : ? (11)
10. Dispersion, especially the Jews: Diaspora :: Immigration of Jews to Israel : ? (6)
11. An air passage : Duct :: A fine : ? (5)
12. Percussion : Tapotement :: Stroking movement : ? (10)
13. Act of dividing : Partition :: Casting by lots : ? (9)
14. Bookkeeper : Accountant :: Insurance calculator : ? (8)
15. Flayed alive : Marsyas :: Torn to pieces by mares: ? (7)
16. Christian : The Lord's Prayer :: Sihk : ? (5)
17. Hospitality : Xenial :: Gift to guest or ambassador : ? (6)

Across

1. Censure Congressman in front of House (7)
5. Red explosive device behind vehicle (7)
9. Head of dealership split to take a spin (5)
10. Evil leers spread rude awakenings? (9)
11. Preserve large number of political divisions (7)
12. Lieutenant occupying flimsy tent (7)
13. Joins Southeast Asians in conversation (4)
14. Referee of Japanese game put money on small number (2-7)
18. Did away with wine and made merry? (9)
20. Reticent about Picasso's first reproduction (4)
22. Lighthearted mood amidst might and grandeur (7)
25. Better wander around following mischievous child (7)
26. Grant met a terrible shrew (9)
27. Old wise Native American (5)
28. She sure upset some frat guys (7)
29. Incipient northern advancement (7)

Down

1. Edit revolutionary decree (6)
2. Reposing, I dressed in lingerie (9)
3. Running back sacked Colorado Wild Cats (7)
4. Thoughtful provision regarding future dispute about minerals (9)
5. Yields sculptures without resistance (5)
6. Try putting on ripped clothing (7)
7. Opening passage from chain letter (5)
8. Making safe plastic resin gun (8)
15. Disagreeable new working game (9)
16. Page one is all about undercover work (9)
17. Effect encountered in REO turning over mileage indicator (8)
19. Individual eating unaccompanied before an audience (7)
20. Abundant police debts? (7)
21. Robbed female wearing wool cap (6)
23. Stupid people initially just enjoy reading kids' stories (5)
24. Mounting support envelops excellent Irish poet (5)

Answers to Verbal Analogies: 1 Grundyism 2 Jointer 3 Hoyden 4 Hyllophagous 5 Accessit 6 Inagary 7 Gubernatorial 8 Terete 9 Beblubbered 10 Altyah 11 Mulet 12 Effleurage 13 Sortition 14 Actuary 15 Clancus 16 Ardas 17 Xenium