



## Today's Lesson

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Old Lyme, Connecticut

It has long been an issue—in English-speaking countries, of course—between professional linguists and the rest of the universe that there is such a thing as good English and bad English. In these pages, I have advocated a familiarity with what is generally recognized as standard usage not so much for the purposes of poetic elegance as for expediency. On the principle that a speaker who says (or writes) *between him and me* or *he doesn't know* instead of *between he and I* or *he don't know* would not be criticized by his peers as hifalutin or hoity-toity, it would be to his benefit to use the former rather than the latter in seeking a job, particularly if the job involves some use or knowledge of the language, as in almost any kind of selling, dealing with people who are educated (or who might be), and so forth. Those who do not care or notice how others speak, once it is established that they are familiar with the shibboleths of their group, are unlikely to notice standard grammar and accuse the perp (as they might say) of being a traitor to the cause. There is no “cause” on the side of faulty expression, and it is hard to imagine that anyone will be drummed out of the corps for saying *Do it the way he does it* rather than *Do it like he does it*. The despair of some over the parlous state of the language, usually referred to as “the murder of a fine language,” was expressed in a document promulgated in England in 1987:

Nearly 3,000 people have signed a petition urging Mr Kenneth Baker, Secretary of State for Education and Science, to make grammar, including syntax, compulsory to “encourage the clear and accurate expression of meaning.” Among the signatories are . . . Iris Murdoch,

William Golding, Anthony Powell, Ted Hughes, Roy Fuller, Kingsley Amis, Anita Brookner, Malcolm Muggeridge, Brigid Brophy, Sir John Gielgud, Sir Michael Hordern, Auberon Waugh and Lord Scarman. (*The Times*, 30 October 1987)

This sort of rending of clothes, wearing of sackcloth and ashes, and of other forms of open lamentation crops up now and then with a frequency that is probably about equal to that of other events, like reports of alien abduction and tearful statues of the Madonna. It is dismissed by many as tantamount to the same sort of hare-brained obsessiveness. In any event, nobody listens and nothing is done.

Are such people mad or totally out of touch with what is important in life? That depends on what one regards as important. Writers, actors, editors, and other people who have a vested interest in the language (linguists excepted) naturally favor cleaving to some standard or norm, for they have worked hard to learn what it is and to maintain it.

Prejudice and, if you like fancy terms, socio-educational marking are felt (though, in these politically correct times, rarely expressed) in areas of language other than pronunciation, namely grammar and lexicon, or word choice. As for “errors,” in the old days an editor would have rejected an applicant whose résumé contained misspellings and bad grammar and whose interview yielded utterances like, “I ain't never studied no science.” In an article in VERBATIM (XII/3, Winter 1986) Sidney I. Landau wrote, “But usage advice is no more relevant to the English language than shoe polish to locomotion.”



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plus a puzzle, SICS! and EPISTOLAE

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That is true if one does not much care about the appearance of his shoes; but for those who do, for those who eschew fanny packs, bright-colored nylon anoraks, white handbags in London in the winter, wearing baseball caps backwards, and driving a Lada, the manner, expressiveness, accuracy, style—perhaps even the art—with which they speak and write make a difference. Maybe, to paraphrase Gerald Murphy, who, it is lately denied, said, “Living well is the best revenge,” speaking well is the best revenge. At least it doesn’t cost anything.

Judging from what one hears on radio and television and reads in books, magazines, and newspapers, one is prompted to wonder about today’s editors. Is it linguistic snobbery to mark a speaker or writer who uses *infer* for *imply* and *enormity* for *immensity* as semiliterate, undereducated, uneducated, or merely a poor stylist with a bad ear for language? If the applicant aspires to a career in writing or radio or television, he ought to be rejected; if he is going to be an engineer, architect, doctor, artist, computer programmer, or almost anything else, it probably makes very little difference, for it seems to be universally acknowledged that for most people, control of the language demonstrates a kind of prissiness and a failure to communicate with “real” people on their earthy level. When one hears dialogue written for, say, doctors and lawyers, by writers whom we know to be literate and intelligent in which a literate, intelligent character is made to say something like, “It looks like it’s going to rain,” the substitution of *like* for *as if* seems so deliberate that one wonders if the writer feels he will lose some of his audience if the character says *as if* for *like*. Surely, that cannot be the case: there is nothing so stigmatizingly hifalutin about *as if* that it will drive away listeners because the character is not speaking at their level.

There is always the danger, notwithstanding the liberal, unprejudiced views of linguists who themselves are conveniently a few rungs above those whom they would bid to accept them, that certain regional and other accents mark a speak-

er as educated or uneducated, cultured or uncultured, intelligent or stupid. That may well be undemocratic, but it is undeniable. Some prejudicial barriers have probably been breached during the last half century, but others have taken their place. However unfair it might be, pronouncing the name of a composer, artist, or other individual associated with culture in a manner that is at variance with the accepted standard marks the speaker who is making a pretense at familiarity with his subject as an uneducated lout or ignoramus. During the altercation with Iraq in the autumn of 1997, Bill Richardson, US ambassador to the United Nations and former Congressman from New Mexico—presumably a person who managed to get through some institution of higher learning—was on more than one occasion (one being on the *Don Imus Show*, 12 November 1997, 8:45 a.m. ET) heard, in referring to Saddam Hussein’s attitude toward requirements imposed on his country by the United Nations, to use *flaunt* instead of *flout*. The first time might have been a slip; the second time was a clear indication that he didn’t know the difference (and that no one on his staff did, either, or was concerned about his appearing semiliterate, or that someone had a motive for making him look uneducated—at least to those educated enough to spot the difference). Were Richardson just any bureaucrat, his misuse might be overlooked (though still branding him); in the event, he was the US *ambassador*, which carries with it the burden of *diplomacy*, which implies the most careful, adroit use of language. One might very well view with alarm being represented at the UN or anywhere else by someone who doesn’t seem to have a good grasp of the language.

Perhaps it is important to respond to those—especially linguists—who hold that no native speaker can “make mistakes” in his own language. That view, of course, depends entirely on what one regards as a *mistake*. The primary definition of the noun *mistake* (which comes from the verb) in modern dictionaries is ‘error’; the second definition, closer in “etymological” mean-



ing, is ‘misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or misconception.’ If one prefers to interpret the sense of the word in its historic guise, for which there is little justification on the basis of contemporary frequency, then the view of ‘error’ is decidedly more sympathetic. But most people properly use *mistake* to mean ‘error, something that is wrong,’ and when the notion of ‘misunderstanding, misinterpretation, or misconception’ is intended, it is more accurate to use one of those words rather than *mistake*.

Still, regardless—or, as some might say, “irregardless”—of this view, while it must be acknowledged that there is probably no religion on earth threatening speakers with eternal damnation for grammatical or lexical errors, there are some practical aspects to be considered in avoiding them. Those are largely matters of social acceptance and, on another plane, employment. Many speakers who might naturally use constructions like “I ain’t got none” know that there is a more formal level of language in which such an utterance, while not necessarily anathema, nonetheless marks the speaker in a certain way and might well shut off certain opportunities. One of the greatest difficulties in discussing this subject is not that one might himself be marked as prejudiced but that there are so many different ways available for saying the same thing. An unsophisticated speaker might be able to avail himself of only one or two, but a more sophisticated, experienced, and learned student of language might well have several available and be possessed of a sufficiently developed sense of discrimination to make the proper choice. He might say

I have none.

I haven’t any / *but not* “I have not any.”

I don’t have any / I do not have any.

I haven’t one / I do not have one / *but not* “I have not one,” (unless to emphasize utter dearth)

I haven’t got any / I haven’t got one.

There are other ways, through paraphrase, as well, and there are the nonstandard forms, like *I ain’t got none*. These choices reflect different styles. *I have not any* sounds unidiomatic but

might be encountered in older poetry; *I have not one* sounds unidiomatic but might be encountered in older writing of any kind, though rather formal. A speaker of British English would be more likely to say “I have none” and less likely to say “I haven’t got any” or “I haven’t got one” if only because Americans use *got* for *have* more frequently than British speakers do: it is perfectly natural for a British English speaker to say, “Baa, Baa, black sheep / Have you any wool?”; the American speaker, ignoring the utterance as an inviolable quotation, would be more inclined to say, “Baa, Baa, black sheep / Have you got any wool?” or “. . . Got any wool?” or, reflecting a current slogan of American dairy interests, “. . . Got wool?”

These are complex matters to explain for each utterance, and the only way one can learn such things—provided that one cares—is, short of starting over again and being born into the right household, to develop an ear (and eye) sensitive to these nuances. There are indications that some speakers and writers concerned about such things survive in a world of philistine standards. One problem in promoting good style in language is that some cannot tell the differences between good English and an elevated style that succeeds more in communicating a put-down than a thought: language can be (and often is) used to denigrate and belittle another person, sometimes unintentionally. In some parts of the world, speaking the “wrong” language has led to massacre. As a professional lexicographer who has dealt with most aspects of the English language for more than half a century, I am told by some people who have learned what I do that they are afraid to speak in my presence out of possible embarrassment at making an error—“saying something wrong”; some make an obvious effort to speak “correctly”; some remain completely oblivious to their usage; and a fourth category speak properly naturally.

There is probably no other word in the language guaranteed to strike terror into the heart than the little, two-syllable token, *grammar*. I shall therefore not dwell on it except to point out, as teachers of English and linguists have for





decades, that grammar is nothing more than a description of how a language works. It is not handed down from on high, nor does one have to consult a Sibyl or Delphic Oracle to learn its so-called rules, for what many take to be rules are nothing more than systematized classifications of certain kinds of words, based on their behavior in sentences and other utterances. The eight parts of speech are often criticized, despite the convenience in using them to describe what is happening in English, because some are defined on the basis of what they mean (*noun* ‘name of a person, place, or thing’) and others on the basis of how they function (*adjective* ‘word that modifies a noun’). That is not satisfactory, to be sure, but other attempts at creating systems based entirely on function—which would be the desirable option—have not met with much popularity because they are complex and few truly understand them.

One of the most common errors in English is using the wrong case of a pronoun, especially the subjective (or nominative, if one prefers Latin classifications) in place of the objective (or accusative). English is certainly not a heavily inflected language as languages go: Lithuanian, Greek, and Russian have many cases for nouns; English has but four, and three of those sound exactly the same, so only if one is writing need a distinction be made between three of the four. For instance, the form *book* serves for all singular grammatical contexts of the word except for the possessive, *book’s*, as in “the book’s cover”; the form *books* serves for all plural contexts of the word except for the possessive, *books’*, as in “the books’ covers.” The forms *book’s*, *books*, and *books’* are pronounced identically, differing only in their written forms, so why should it be difficult to learn them?

The only slightly complicated declensions in English are those for pronouns. Yet even those are absurdly simple compared with the myriad forms encountered in other languages, the speakers of which are probably making grammatical errors all the time. (Recently, an English editor-

friend, virtually bilingual in German and English, told me how shocked she was, upon her return to Germany last autumn, to hear native speakers—mostly younger ones—using articles *der*, *die*, *das* that did not agree with the gender of the nouns they preceded.) In English, though, it would appear that a significantly large percentage of speakers are totally oblivious to the fact that the language calls for *who* when a subject, *whose* when a possessive, and *whom* when an object.

Prepositions are not hard to recognize: they are words like *like*, *to*, *at*, *between*, *in*, *for*, *from*, and so forth, and they do not always precede the noun they affect. Still, are some speakers so careless and thoughtless that they do not know what they are going to say a few words down the line, at the end of a sentence? Evidently so, for as soon as more than one word intervenes between the pronoun and the preposition, the short-term memory dissolves and the wrong case is selected:

Who are you voting for?

Who do you like to win the World Cup?

The girlfriend, since the acrimonious split with Stephanie de Sykes, is the American scriptwriter Lise Mayer, who he met 12 years ago. (*The Times*, 26 March 1997)

His most consistent focus is on the surplus of unmarried men in their later teens and twenties, whom he contends have been central to the occurrence of historical violence and social disorder. (J. David Slocum, *TLS*, 28 February 1997, page 9)

Pieter Prinsloo . . . sings a morning hymn with his black workers, whom he thinks are “misplaced in the modern world” and objects of pity. (Caption, *The Sunday Times Magazine*, 12 January 1986, page 23)

This last type, where the objective case is used as the subject of a verb, was once the pet of *The New Yorker*, which published some of the more heinous examples under “The Omnipotent *Whom*.” The first two quotations above have no attributions, not because I made them up but because they occur with such frequency that they can be collected from every newspaper every day.



None of the foregoing comes as much of a surprise to teachers, even those few remaining who might know the difference.

“Which school bord are you entitlee to vote for? Are you not curatoship? Do you want to apply for triking off or correction at the Flling Office?” reads the notice.

“You can consult the list of electors an apply for entry, striking off or correction at the Flling Office which will be open at . . .” reads the letter, which goes on to list addresses of “Flling Offices.” ([Toronto] *Globe and Mail*, 19 October 1994)

This quotation, carefully copied letter for letter to make sure that no new creations were superimposed on the old, is a notice from the English, not French, Baldwin-Carter School Board. In an ironic comment from the president of the National Health Insurance Company, in Arlington, Texas, prejudice is expressed in a manner that proved intolerable, not because of the manner of expression but because “some insurers are refusing coverage to people who don’t speak or read English”:

“An individual who cannot speak, understand or read English at a minimal level are considered ineligible for our coverage.” (*Austin* [Texas] *American-Statesman*, 14 February 1992)

People often get carried away by their own rhetoric and produce mixed metaphors that are so incongruous that they make us laugh. *The New Yorker*, now as in an earlier regime, occasionally publishes such gems for the amusement of readers under the heading “Block That Metaphor!” There is another, slightly different category that might be termed a “ruptured metaphor.” Here are some examples that have been collected over the years from various periodicals:

It’s turned out to be one of those red herrings around our necks. (*The* [San Bernardino, California] *Sun*, 26 April 1988)

It is not often that one tries to help his fellow man/woman and is bitten by the hand that feeds him. (Letter in the *Syracuse Herald-Journal*, 31 July, 1985)

“We’re going to look at it with a fine-tooth comb,” Meginniss said. (*The Miami Herald*, 9 January 1986, page 1PB)

The cost-containment snowball won’t leave any stone unturned,” said Larry Feinberg, an analyst with Dean Witter Reynolds Inc. (*The New York Times*, 30 December 1985, page 21)

Confused or inept examples of word order often yield laughable results when a modifier is misplaced or, to be specific about some instances, when a participle is left dangling. Most often, the modifier is a clause:

Grilled in foil or alongside a ham, turkey, or chicken, those who shied away from onions before will delight in their new found vegetable. (Waldbaum’s Foodmart circular)

As the mother of an 18-month-old daughter with an M.A. in education who has decided to stay home to raise my child (difficult and soul-wrenching decision), I resent the characterization of the full-time mother as one who is occupied with ‘laundry, shopping, preparing dinner,’ to the exclusion of one-to-one contact with my child. (Letter to the Editor of *The Toronto Star*, 16 July 1988)

Mereu stayed with 50 of Angius’ 400 sheep, dressed in dirty and ragged canvas clothing and shoes with holes. (*Des Moines Sunday Register*, 6 December 1987)

Hidden in the dining room breakfront, in a blue-enameled box bedecked with handpainted flowers, Molly Darrah keeps the keys to 18 neighbors’ houses. (*The San Francisco Chronicle*, 10 February 1986)

Mr Muskie broke down before the cameras while defending his wife’s honour on a flatbed truck in New Hampshire. (*The Economist*, 30 March 1996)

Often, it is the faulty use and placement of a relative pronoun that causes the mischief:

Suskin was later found guilty of putting up posters in Hebron depicting Islam’s Prophet Mohammed as a pig that provoked Arab riots and incensed Moslems worldwide. (Caption, *The New York Times*, 31 December 1997)

In ordinary circumstances, referring to a group as a *school* (*of fish*) might prove a felicitous metaphor, but not when one is discussing a seat of learning:



Loners don't last. Neither do those who don't embrace the group of their peers, or learn to swim with the school as the predatory upper-classmen pick off those who drift to the edges. (*Palm Beach Post*, 17 April 1994)

Ambiguity makes double entendre nonsense out of this, too:

Japan, an export superpower, must accept rice imports "for our own sake and the world's sake." (From *The Washington Post* in *The* [Gainesville, Florida] *Sun*, 14 December 1993)

And a regional outdoor sport appears to be encouraged near Detroit by this highway road sign, with no light evident in its vicinity:

Pull to Right When Flashing

One is given to wonder about the success of a subscription renewal notice sent by Gannett's *Courier-News* in New Jersey, which bears this notice [6 June 1993]:

Renewal time: Your subscription is about to expire. Please remit now to avoid uninterrupted delivery.

Unwed moneylenders might take heart from this headline:

No single factor can guarantee pregnancy (*The* [San Bernardino, California] *Sun*, 19 September 1994.)

From the same newspaper one gains insight to early training on America's west coast:

Toddler slain in shooting suspected of being gang-related. (31 August 1994.)

A journalist produced this incongruity:

However, the school's Principal John Connell said no student complained of stomach problems to the school nurse after workers washed down the metal areas where some bats had been found using an ammonia-based household disinfectant. (Beverly Ford, *The Boston Herald*, 28 October 1985, page 2.)

One might suppose that the Anastasia mystery deepened when it was revealed that she, known as Anna Anderson, "requested she be cremated before her death." (*The Washington Post*, 6 October 1994)

Apparently, the police in one Massachusetts town take care of things in their own way:

Sale, 49, was found strangled with a nylon stocking around her neck and bludgeoned to

death by Lexington Police. (*The Boston Globe*, 30 December 1994, page 1)

"Misplaced modifier" is not quite the right name for what can best be described as "unfortunate or incongruous juxtaposition," and if there is another term I don't know it. As will be seen below, a *New York Times* reporter, David Kocieniewski, seems to come in for more than his fair share of criticism, and for the moment we can say that the unfortunate juxtaposition of *beating* and *beat* should have been avoided to make sure that bad marriages like the following do not occur:

Insisting that he has not yet read two reports issued by his own Task Force on Police/Community Relations, the panel he created after the Abner Louima beating, Mayor Rudolph Giuliani announced Wednesday that he would grant one of its major recommendations: pay increases for thousands of patrol officers who choose to remain on the beat in city neighborhoods. ("Giuliani Hikes Pay for Officers on Beats, Says Action Not Linked to Task Force," David Kocieniewski, *The New York Times*, n.d.)



Ivan Brunetti

An especially unfortunate juxtaposition occurs in a television commercial, current early in 1998, for Imodium, a drug said to prevent diarrhea. The sufferer is an astronaut about to blast off into space wearing, naturally, a space suit. "Control" announces a delay owing to the astronaut's impending attack of diarrhea, using the expression, "We'll miss our window," a sad commentary that might make some people wonder





what goes on inside space suits. Disaster is averted by the quick administration of the drug (which, I assume, had been tested in double-blind experiments), sparing observers below.

Aware that in the 1940s and '50s many of the people working in advertising, especially as copywriters, were well educated, I have had occasion to wonder whether the advertising agencies, which produce the materials that occupy almost a quarter of the time and space of radio, television, magazines, and newspapers, have slowly become more and more stupefyingly obtuse or if they have deliberately plotted to reduce everything they do to appeal to the lowest possible common denominator. A recent newspaper article confirms that from spellings to grammar, those who plot against our money while wasting our time spend long hours purposely distorting reality to make it fit their image of what people like and, particularly, what they can and want to identify with. Setting aside such obvious and overworked subjects like the Winston cigarette slogan, which, it must be admitted, certainly fits into the most common speech pattern of English speakers in the latter half of the twentieth century, one reporter fastens on a current slogan of Toyota, "Toyota everyday," questioning whether *everyday*, which means 'common, ordinary,' should be shown on television in that form or as *every day*, 'each (and every) day.' While acknowledging that the two-word form is to be preferred, an executive of the advertising agency reported that

after six months of "huge arguments," Saatchi deliberately chose to use the incorrect spelling because the single word looked friendlier and more suitable as a zippy slogan. "It's more than just a word. It's how the word looks. It's how you deconstruct the message." (Yumiko Ono, *The Wall Street Journal*, 4 November 1997.)

In this case, *deconstruct* is a currently fashionable euphemism, affected particularly by artistes and their lot, for 'destroy carefully,' as distinguished from 'take apart systematically.' Ono also discusses Apple Computer's "Think different," which the company and its agency defended in an "elaborate and somewhat convoluted

explanation," several points of which were that in the slogan, which still smacks of being a take-off of IBM's "THINK" (or, as one wag had it a generation ago, THIMK),

the word "different" shouldn't even be treated as an adjective, as it usually is, but as a noun. "Because 'different' is not a modifier but a 'thing,' the message of the tagline now tells us WHAT TO THINK ABOUT, rather than HOW to think."

In another example, Seagram advertises Captain Morgan Spiced Rum by urging drinkers to "Get Spicey" rather than "Get Spicy" because the company determined that consumers thought that "'spicy' rum would be fiery hot, like a jalapeño pepper." Is the insertion of an *e* supposed to suggest 'easy'? Is the spelling *spicey* less cool than *spicy*? It boggles the mind to contemplate what these companies and their agencies spend their high-priced minds doing to earn their keep.

In *The New York Times* appeared an advertisement bearing the following headlines:

Erectile Dysfunction (ED) Attracts Competition Oral Therapies Expected to Dramatically Expand the Market (Business Section, 9 November 1997, page 17)

Ignoring the split infinitive (which is not an error in English anyway), this looks like an advertisement for mail-order fellatio. Scores of other examples can be drawn from the SIC! SIC! SIC! collections in VERBATIM, from thousands sent in by readers. Here is a sampling (from advertisements only):

Free lays to the first 50 people! (Invitation to a "Blue Hawaii" Beach Party in Staff Bulletin No. 31, p. 6, of the Madison (Wisconsin) Area Tech College)

No detail is too small to overlook. (Advertisement for a lawn product on KCMO-TV, Kansas City, Missouri, 20 April 1988)

. . . EXTERMINATING: We are trained to kill all pets . . . (From *TV Hi-Lites* [Flushing, NY], Dec. 27 to Jan. 2, 1988)

WARNER'S BUY 6, GET 2! (Macy's advertisement in *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 29 November 1990)





For gift delivery anywhere call 800-CHEER-UP (except where prohibited by law). (Advertisement for Grand Marnier, *FMR*, Christmas 1985, back cover)

Spend less in our floral department. (A&P supermarket advertising flyer.)

“Blessing of the Animals” . . . Pets of all denominations welcome. (Advertisement by the Basilica of Saint Mary in the [Minneapolis] *Star Tribune*, 27 September 1992)


Better than a hotel. Luxury suites, elegantly furnished with daily maid & linen service. (Advertisement for the Bristol Plaza in *New York Magazine* repeatedly)

Our Hopes For The New Year Are Soaring! (Advertisement for Swan Funeral Homes in the *Pictorial Gazette East*, 29 December 1990)

WORD PROCESSORS—TEMPORARY—several positions open proficiency with at least 1 language necessary. Call The Agency. (Advertisement in the [Springfield, Massachusetts] *Union-News*, 30 November 1991)

To those who maintain that advertising copy does not set the tone or character of the language, the reply is that it might not have before 1940, when advertising had relatively less impact than it does today. But when a television advertisement is repeated, again and again, throughout the weeks and the months of a campaign, it has a far greater impact than does a solecism, committed by chance or out of ignorance, that appears once in a single editorial article and does not receive the exposure of a commercial watched by millions—if not billions, across the world—on a telecast of, say, the Superbowl. Cigarette manufacturers have been accused of “corrupting” the youth of America by using cartoon figures, like Joe Camel, who are designed to appeal to a certain age group, in posters and print. Is it conceivable that editorial matter on television, on radio, or in a magazine or newspaper could possibly receive such wide exposure and have a similar effect, or do advertising copywriters, themselves speakers of the language, merely reflect the language of the day? If so, then Wrangler, the clothing manufacturer, should have been besieged by irate feminists who encountered their late 1980s

**LIGHT**  
A Quarterly  
of Light Verse



More balancing acts  
in the magazine  
that regularly prints  
work by “the best  
unserious poets alive”  
(X. J. Kennedy).

*Jarring News*

The price of pots in Athens!  
It really made me burn  
when the potter told me just how much  
I owed on a Grecian urn.  
—JACK LITTLE

*Subscribe to the journal Reader's Digest called  
“polished, clever, sophisticated.” At Barnes & Noble,  
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Subscriptions, Box 7500, Chicago IL 60680.  
www.litline.org/LIGHT*

television commercial in which “special fitting” was stressed; the slogan they emerged with was, “It’s not a better body you need, it’s better genes.” And one wonders what bucolic reveries might have inspired those who advertised in *The Sunday Times* (27 September 1987) an eight-year-old whisky named *Sheep Dip*.

Grammar is the system of stringing elements together that characterizes a given language group or, more narrowly, a given language. Syntax is the way words are strung together to make sentences. In English, which has few endings, or inflections, of nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs, word order is an essential feature of the language, and meaning depends on it: *Man bites dog* does not mean the same thing as *Dog bites man*, even though the forms are identical. In languages like Latin, Greek, Russian, and many others that have elaborate patterns of inflection, the relationship between the words in a sentence can be expressed by those inflections, though word order might remain an element of style or art. Thus, if *man* is in the nominative, or subjective



case, one knows that *man* is the subject of the sentence, the actor of the verb; if *man* is in the accusative, or objective, case, one knows that it is the thing acted upon. Even though there are basic criteria for word order in English, there is an enormous amount of leeway for the insertion of other parts of speech, especially adverbs.

For example, the word *only* can “float” in a sentence, in the sense that it can be put in different places:

*Only she loves me.* (‘Nobody else loves me.’)

*She only loves me.* (‘She doesn’t otherwise have any other feeling toward me. She doesn’t like me.’)

*She loves only me.* (‘She loves nobody else.’)

*She loves me only.* (‘She loves nobody else.’)

(The last two mean the same thing and might be said to be stylistic variants of each other.) The placement of a word does not always have such an effect, nor does every possible appropriate word function that way: if one went through the exercise with *alone*, it wouldn’t fit into the first sentence unless followed by a comma (*Alone, she loves me*), and it wouldn’t fit into the third sentence at all, because *alone* cannot be used idiomatically in an attributive position—that is, preceding a noun or pronoun. Thus, the matter of word order is somewhat tempered by the words one wishes to order.

The end of this story can *only* be written by you. [That is, you cannot do anything about the end but write it.] (*Run of the Arrow*, RKO, 1957).

Bernard Arnault, chairman of LVMH, the French company that owns 14 per cent of Guinness, was only told of the plan on April 28. [He had *read* about it earlier?] (*The Times*, 13 May 1997, page 27.)

Another category must be set aside to include utter nonsense:

Fetus taken from womb to perform surgery. (*Petoskey* [Michigan] *News-Review*, 7 October 1986)

Afterwards, the Bishop walked among the crowds, eating their picnic lunches. (*Southwark* [England] *News*, July 1987.)

Jesse Jackson Arrested At Rally For Striking Conn. Health Workers (Headline, *The Boston Globe*, 17 June 1993)

It’s hard to get medical aid if you’re HIV-infected in many areas. (Dr. Richard J. Howard in *The New York Times*, 11 November 1990)

On that sunny June afternoon, Whitehall was thronged with sightseers when most of the royal family arrived for the ceremony in a striped canvas marquee. (*The Times*, 10 November 1993)

In another department, we find what can be described only as the fractured idiom:

. . . played loose and fast with . . . (Jack Perkins, *A&E Biography*, 8 p.m., 23 September 1997.)

People with a shaky or maladroit control over grammar are usually best off rephrasing what they have to say to avoid problems; but that assumes that they are aware of a problem and, if they are, that they care enough to avoid it. The way the language is used these days, one must despair of anyone’s caring about much of anything. The ironic expression of that state of mind is, *I could care less*, when what is clearly meant is *I couldn’t care less*. Sometimes, the carelessness is an administrative fault in placing responsibility into the hands of those who can ill discharge it. It is highly unlikely, for example, that the Scarborough Chamber Players in Squantum, Massachusetts, were advertising a pederasty ring in their invitation to buy “tickets: \$7, \$5 children under 12 available at door or call —” (November 1992) Meanwhile, at the other end of the country, Artists InterActive Video Productions advertised “Stimulating hands-on workshops with live models . . . hands-on exercises with nude male & female models.”

If you haven’t seen as many of these as I have, you would be tempted to think them made up, which is why citations are always included.

A Serbian soldier monitors the trajectory of a tank shell just fired through binoculars on a hill southeast of Sarajevo Sunday. (Caption, [Stroudsburg, Pennsylvania] *Pocono Record*, 11 February 1993)

Pop megastar Michael Jackson revealed he has a disorder that destroys his skin pigmentation and insisted he had “very little” plastic surgery during a live television interview with Oprah Winfrey on Wednesday. (*Ibid.*)



It does no good to pretend that things were any better years ago, when Marlowe and Jonson and the other Elizabethans wrought their epic prose and poetry undefiled by solecisms, or later, when Donne and Addison and Steele graced literature with the benign beauty of their writings. In the first edition of Thomas Sheridan’s treatise *British Education: or, the source of the Disorders of Great Britain* (1756), the subtitle read:

Being an Essay towards proving, that the immorality, ignorance, and false taste, which so generally prevail, are the natural and necessary consequences of the present defective system of Education. With an attempt to shew, that a revival of the art of speaking, and the study of our own Language, might contribute, in a great measure, to the cure of those evils.

Amen, one might be tempted to say till the atrocious punctuation is examined, with a comma between verbs and their objects. Perhaps punctuation, which is far from desirable in modern British practice, is unimportant. Still, if studying (if not learning) our language could contribute to even a diminution, let alone an elimination, of the “immorality, ignorance, and false taste” that generally prevail even to this day, then we ought to give it a try: surely, it can do no harm, and, as far as I am aware, such a program has not been attempted for at least a hundred years. Thomas Sheridan, incidentally, was a lexicographer, the father of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the playwright, who gave us *The Rivals* and the inestimable Mrs. Malaprop.

As Arthur M. Schlesinger pointed out in an interview (*Booknotes*, C-Span, 10 May 1998), education in the United States has been in a decline since the turn of the century; and here we are turning another century with little having been done. That is not strictly speaking true. A great deal has been done to expose people in America to education, especially through the G.I. Bill and other veterans’ benefit programs. But exposing people to education is scarcely the same as educating them, as we, who have been left with a legacy of semiliterates, are only too well aware. Lest the reader think that *semiliterate* is

too strong a word, it should be noted that it is considerably weaker than *illiterate*, which, as statistics will readily show, is what many adults are today—at least in the United States. By *semiliterate* I mean people who are knowledgeable enough, for example (like those who used to run our local television cable company), to be familiar with the word *pursuant* but who think it is spelled *persuant* and displayed it in that form on the screen of blacked-out programs for at least a year, despite letters advising them of the error. In another manifestation, *semiliterate* describes the store clerk who proved unable to subtract \$53.25 from \$153.25 without resorting to a calculator. Instances and examples abound, though not, presumably, among those who are reading this, hence, as usual—for a happy sense of security if nothing else—one preaches to the converted.

[*Laurence Urdang is the founder and former editor of VERBATIM. This is an abridgement of a longer essay which can be found on our website at <http://www.verbatimmag.com/todayslesson.html>.]*

## EPISTOLA

About words with two opposite meanings: a review in the 10 August edition of the *London Review of Books* contains the passage: “In fact ‘mess’, like other key words here, is what critics following Plato and Derrida call a ‘pharmakon’, since it has a double set of connotations, one generally deemed positive (a pharmakon is a remedy) and the other negative (a pharmakon is a poison); the English word ‘drug’ carries the same two meanings. The co-occurrence of opposites is not a paradox but rather an index of the powerful tensions located within language, and thus within the possibility of what is thought. Freud noted ‘the antithetical sense of primal words’ (the same German word, *Boden*, means garret and ground, the highest and lowest places in the house; the same Latin word, *sacer*, means both sacred and accursed). ‘Dirt’, which means ‘unclean matter’ . . . is also soil or earth . . .”.

Yours sincerely,  
Emma Tristram





## CLASSICAL BLATHER

### *Silly Songs*

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Comic songs have been documented almost as far back into antiquity as we have records of songs at all. In Roman times the farces presented at the theater of Atella, roughly ten miles north of Naples, included funny ditties as part of their satiric mix of stock comic plots, slapstick, and pointed topical allusions.<sup>1</sup>

And there has been no dearth of comic songs since. Ideals of love and war, the two primary concerns of the medieval ethos of chivalry, were subverted in songs throughout Renaissance Europe,<sup>2</sup> and the growth of Western theater guaranteed an audience for comic songs both embedded in drama<sup>3</sup> and as stand-alone components of English music hall,<sup>4</sup> American minstrel shows, vaudeville and burlesque.<sup>5</sup>

This column will examine a distinct subset of the comic song repertory: the *silly* song.<sup>6</sup> Nonsense poems enjoyed a great flowering in the Victorian age, particularly in England, producing such memorable absurdities as Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat," Lewis Carroll's "Jabberwocky," and W. S. Gilbert's "Nightmare Song" from the Savoy operetta *Iolanthe*.<sup>7</sup>

Although America had a few songs with nonsensical refrains in circulation in the 18th and 19th centuries,<sup>8</sup> silly songs in America appear to have had two distinct heydays. The first was during the Depression, which produced such hits as "Three Little Fishies,"<sup>9</sup> "Keep on Doin' What You're Doin'" (Though It's Leadin' Me to Ruin),<sup>10</sup> and the "Hut Sut Song."<sup>11</sup> Several classic silly songs introduced during the 1920s, such as "Mairzy Doats," enjoyed big-band-era revivals,<sup>12</sup> while the advent of World War II spurred songwriters on to such classic additions to the repertory as "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition"<sup>13</sup> and "In der Fuehrer's Face."<sup>14</sup>

A second spike in the popularity of silly songs came in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Black vernacular a cappella groups were already making rich use of semantic-free vocalization<sup>15</sup> in such songs as "Get a Job,"<sup>16</sup> but the nonsense choruses themselves became the subject of rock and roll discourse, as in the 1961 hit "Who Put the Bomp in the Bomp Ba Bomp Ba Bomp."<sup>17</sup> Moreover, a keen interest in the space race, spurred by the Russian launch of the first artificial satellite, *Sputnik*, in 1957, led to an explosion of spaceman numbers such as "Purple People Eater,"<sup>18</sup> with special-effect weird voices produced by slow-recording and then running the tape at regular speed. (This technique all by itself could be said to have made the career of one artist, Ross Bagdasarian, who in 1958 used it in the twelve-bar-blues-structured "Witch Doctor" and later that same year created the voice of Alvin the Chipmunk for the smash hit "Christmas, Don't Be Late.")

But like the earlier spike during the Depression, the flood of silly songs (or songs with at least some nonsense lyrics) of the first wave of rock and roll seems to have crested and then subsided to a trickle by the late 1960s. Of course, there are still examples being written to this day (the same joining of disparate meanings which produced "Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition" may be said to underlie the 1982 country-western divorce lament "She Got the Goldmine, I Got the Shaft"<sup>19</sup>), but they are few and far between. What might explain the two peaks?

One possibility is that silly songs are a reaction to societal stress. During the Depression and at least the early part of the war which followed it, escape from the dreary or even frightening realities of day-to-day life was welcome, and absurd songs may have provided such relief. The stresses of the 1950s were perhaps less obvious, but for the young, at least, growing up in the shadow of the Cold War and its arms race, coupled with a chafing at what had come to seem a depressingly conformist society, rock and roll—





with words the older generation couldn't understand—provided a territory where there was safety in an impenetrable counterculture and the manic comic relief of the absurd.

Such a defense mechanism may have underlain the Victorian British appetite for nonsense as well, in an age where industry was burgeoning, sexuality was repressed, and the empire was problematic. Martin Gardner, in his introduction to *The Annotated Alice*,<sup>20</sup> reminds us that “nonsense, as G. K. Chesterton liked to tell us, is a way of looking at existence that is akin to religious humility and wonder. The Unicorn thought Alice a fabulous monster.” When there is something wrong with the dominant culture that nobody really wants to talk about directly, a silly song, like the mythic Trickster figure, can pop up and turn reality on its head, subverting disaffected hearts and minds more surely than any leaflet or manifesto, yet escaping the retribution which normally falls on overt revolutionaries caught in the act—for after all, it's only nonsense, and it's only a song.

Notes:

1. Not even the emperor was immune. Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus reports in his history of *The Twelve Caesars* that during the infamous Year of the Four Emperors (69–70 A.D.) Galba, the governor of Spain whom the army made Caesar after the assassination of Nero, attended a performance of an Atellan farce shortly after his accession. As it happened, this show included a well-known song satirizing bumpkins, “Here comes Onesimus, down from the farm.” (*Venit, io! Onesimus a villa.*) Editorializing upon the provincial manners of their new emperor, “the whole audience,” says Suetonius, “took up the chorus with fervor, repeating that particular line over and over again.”

2. E.g., the German song *Ich het mir ein endlein fürgenommen*, in which the singer comes to a midnight tryst with his lover only to find the house in such an uproar that he hides behind the kitchen stove, and “Under the Bed Was He,” one of the songs collected by Thomas D'Urfrey in his Restoration-era collection *Pills To Purge Melancholy*, where a servant and her lover make so much noise that her employer, the parson, is awakened, and the young man is forced to hide

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under the bed in what proves to be a vain effort to escape detection. A grimmer variant on the second theme was well known in French Canada into the 20th century: *Perrine était servante* relates how the lovers are surprised by the homecoming of the priest for whom Perrine works; she hides her lover in a chest, and then forgets about him for six weeks, at the end of which the rats have eaten him, from his head to his toes. The French folk-song repertory also includes several songs beginning with the line *Mon père m'a donné un mari*; in one version, from Normandy, the singer's husband is so lax about his conjugal duties that she pricks him with a pin, whereupon he runs away with his new bride in hot pursuit. War and the braggart soldier (a stock figure going back to Roman comedy and beyond) were lampooned in *L'homme armé*, whose words warned of “the man at arms/Who fills us all with wild alarms” and whose tune was used by Josquin des Prez and several other composers as the unifying theme for their choral settings of the ordinary of the Catholic mass.

3. E.g. “I'm 'Emmery the Eighth, I Am,” written in 1911 by R. P. Weston and Fred Murray and revived to great success by the rock band Herman's Hermits in 1965, and “The Biggest Aspidistra in the World,” popularized by Gracie Fields in the 1940s.

4. Stephen Foster's “Camptown Races” and Henry Clay Work's “Kingdom Coming” are two songs which have long outlasted the (blatantly racist) theatrical genre of which they were a part. The former has remained well enough known to give rise to numerous parodies and burlesques, such as Alan Sherman's “Catskill Ladies” in his 1960s Borscht Belt comic-song revue, *My Son, the Folk Singer*.



5. Burlesque originally differed from vaudeville in centering specifically on takeoffs on “serious” works, but the two types of theater converged, with considerable crossover in performers, in the early part of the last century, before burlesque degenerated into girlie shows and vaudeville went its own way. I discuss this form at greater length at the entry “Burlesque” in the *St James Encyclopedia of Popular Culture* (Gale Press, 2000). A typical burlesque song of the late 1930s was entitled “He Likes To Nibble on My Cupcakes.”

6. This is partly a matter of definition: A song can be funny without being silly; but while a silly song—that is, one which relies on a certain amount of *non-sense*—can in theory be dead serious, I would argue that in practice it had better be funny if it is to be well received and long remembered.

7. It may be argued that Gilbert’s absurdities would not be anywhere near so well recalled today but for their felicitous settings by Sir Arthur Sullivan. However, that is to overlook the poems which Gilbert wrote during the decade before his first collaboration with Sullivan at the rate of one a week for the *Punch* imitator *Fun*, furnishing them with his own whimsical-to-grotesque illustrations. Although these *Bab Ballads* are not as well known today as the operettas, some are every bit as clever; and as Deems Taylor has pointed out, the names in them alone would assure Gilbert admission to the hall of fame for great Victorian nonsense poets: “Macphairson Clonglocketty Angus M’Clan,” “The Bishop of Rum-ti-Foo,” “Thomas Winterbottom Hance,” “Gregory Parable, L.L.D.,” “Sir Barnaby Bampton Boo,” “Calamity Pop von Peppermint Drop, the King of Canoodle-Dum” and his daughter, “Hum Pickety Wimple Tip.”

8. Such as the drinking song “Twankydillo,” popular at the time of the American War of Independence, whose refrain began “Twankydillo, twankydillo, twankydillo, -dillo, -dillo, -dillo. . . .”

9. Words and music by Saxie Dowell, 1939.

10. Words and music by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby, 1933. This song was featured in the show *Hips Hips Hooray*, starring Ruth Elkins and Thelma Todd. I am indebted to my uncle, Dr. Harold W. Gleason, Jr., for this example, as well as several others mentioned in this column.

11. Words and music by Leo Killion, Ted McMichael, and Jack Owens, 1941, featured in *San Antonio Rose*. The song may fall under the category of

orientalisms, a perennial source of entertainment in the Western world going, arguably, back to medieval times and the narratives of such travellers as Sir John Mandeville and Marco Polo. The theme of orientalism in literature has been ably expounded by (among others) Lisa Lowe in *Critical Terrains* (Cornell University Press, 1991), which examines French and British literary framings of the Mysterious East from Lady Mary Wortley Montagu to Roland Barthes. Musically, orientalism has been part of the popular song repertory at least since the scurrilous “Kafoozelum” of 1861 (words by S. Oxon, music arranged by F. Blume); other examples include Robert Stoltz’s “Salome,” of which covers were released during the Roaring Twenties by the Paul Biese Trio (Columbia Graphophone pressing #79952) and the Joseph C. Smith Orchestra (Victor Black Seal pressing #18816–A), and Abe Olman and Rudy Wiedoeft’s “Karavan,” which the Smith orchestra released on Victor as well (pressing #18662–A). Biese, an enormous man from St. Louis who played tenor saxophone with jittery ornamentation, is also listed as the co-composer on the ensemble’s release (Columbia Graphophone pressing #79215) of “In the Land of Rice and Tea,” possibly the first instance in recorded music of the four eighth-notes, four quarter-notes, and a half-note motif “lalalala sol sol, mi mi sol,” as signifier for “Far Eastern music.” In this category arguably also falls the Biblical number “Shadrach” (Robert McGinsey, 1931), recorded by the Mills Brothers—influenced Golden Gate Quartet for Victor (red seal) in the late 1930s or early 1940s, and by Louis Armstrong and his All Stars with a ten-voice backup chorus in 1958 on a classic LP called *Louis and the Good Book*. No list of latter-day orientalisms would be complete without “Istanbul (Not Constantinople),” with words by Jimmy Kennedy and music by Nat Simon (1954), and the Lewis Harris–John Loeb “The Maharajah of Magador” (1948), a hit for Vaughan Monroe on RCA (and reissued in the “Wacky Hits” collection cited in note 12 below), of which a more recent (and bizarre) cover was recorded by Incredible String Band alumnus Robin Williamson on his *Journey’s Edge* solo album for Flying Fish Records in 1977.

12. The Merry Macs were one of numerous bands to do covers of “Mairzy Doats”; their version may be heard on a marvelous two-CD compilation on the MCA label called “44 Wacky Hits”



(MSD2-35180/GMD 80041). In addition to the Monroe “Maharajah” cover, it also includes the “Hut Sut Song” performed by Freddy Martin and His Orchestra, Mel Blanc and the Sportsmen doing “The Woody Woodpecker Song,” and Alvino Rey’s cover of “Cement Mixer (Put-ti, Put-ti).”

13. Words and music by Frank Loesser (1942). This supposedly was based on a real quote from one Chaplain Maguire, aboard a U.S. Navy warship en route to Pearl Harbor. The tune is indebted to “Old Grey Mare,” widely performed as early as 1917 and attributed to Gus Bailey, which was in turn based on J. Warner’s 1858 “Down in Alabam’,” soon recycled with new words as “Old Abe Lincoln” during the 1860 presidential campaign. I am indebted to David Rinaldo for playing me, some 40 years ago, a 1920s novelty which burlesqued “Old Grey Mare” to poke fun at the unreliability of the then-newfangled automobile—it began, “The old spare tire, it ain’t what it used to be . . .”—and the consequent revival of the old grey mare to haul the vehicles away. One verse ran: “O the farmer gets six bucks/Towin’ them cars and trucks./Now he’s the one that we call a boob,/We call him a hick, and we call him a rube;/But he ain’t stuck with a flat inner tube,/Him and his old grey mare.”

14. Words and music by Oliver Wallace (1943), featured in the musical film of the same title. Spike Jones and His City Slickers did a famous cover of this tune, whose musical style was a broad parody of German oompah polka bands.

15. The use of wordless vocals to imitate instruments had been one of the trademarks of the Mills Brothers, who managed to get a big-band sound with just their voices and an acoustic guitar in a wonderfully mellow cover of “Solitude” in the 1940s. But the tradition goes back much further, e.g. to the *puert-a-beuil*, or “mouth music” of Scotland, which had been invented after the British had put down the last of the Jacobite uprisings in the 18th century and outlawed the vernacular use of the bagpipe.

16. Words and music by Earl T. Beal, Raymond W. Edwards, William F. Horton, and Richard A. Lewis (1958). Its vocalise would be taken over as the name of a rock group, Sha Na Na, a generation later.

17. Words and music by Barry Mann and Terry Goffin. The “Bomp Ba Bomp Ba Bomp” in question may allude to the vocalise under an immensely popular up-tempo revival by the Marcells of the crooner

standard, Rodgers and Hart’s “Blue Moon.” All Music Guide (<http://allmusic.com>) lists no fewer than 533 covers of “Blue Moon,” ranging from Billie Holiday, Louis Armstrong, Dizzy Gillespie, Oscar Peterson, and Django Reinhardt to Elvis Presley, Merle Haggard (!), the Tijuana Brass, and Sha Na Na.

18. Words and music by Sheb Wooley (1958). Analogous to the late-1950s fascination with outer space may have been the concomitant surge in the popularity of grade-B horror films, giving rise to such songs as the Bobby Pickett–Leonard Capizzi collaboration “Monster Mash” (1962) and the 1959 recording by the Raunch Hands (a Kingston Trio wannabe group of enterprising Harvard students) of the calypso novelty “Zombie Jamboree.”

19. Words and music by William Dubois. The classical Greek term for joining two objects of different sense with a verb or other linking word whose meaning is ambiguous (e.g., “I took his advice and a taxi”) is *zeugma*, literally “yoking.”

20. This invaluable single-volume edition of *Alice’s Adventures Underground* and *Through the Looking-Glass* was originally published by Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., in 1960, and reprinted as a Forum paperback by World Publishing Company in 1963. Gardner was for many years the “Mathematical Games” columnist for *Scientific American*.



## EPISTOLA

A correction to “Baby-San’s Lingo,” by D. Gordon and R. L. Spear (XXV/3 Summer 2000). The newspaper in which Hume’s cartoons appeared was not *Stars & Stripes* (Pacific edition). It was *Pacific Stars & Stripes*, a separate publication, not an appendage of the European paper. I served on *Pac S&S* in 1953/54 and belong to the Stars & Stripes Assn. made up of alumni and current staffers of both papers, as well as those who served on the *Midpacifican*, precursor to *Pac S&S*.

Yours,  
Robert R. Knepper  
Lakewood, California







## Twelve Notes on the Canadian Oxford Dictionary

John Considine  
University of Alberta

The publication of the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary* (*COD*) in 1998 established, according to one of its publisher's publicity brochures, "a new authoritative standard for dictionaries in Canada."<sup>1</sup> This is, I think, true. But excellent as the dictionary is, there are inevitably a few points at which its coverage might be questioned or supplemented. The following notes, arranged alphabetically by headword, suggest some of those points. They have been put together with the assistance of a class of twenty-four engineering students at the University of Alberta (Section C1 of English 199, fall term 2000), with whom I discussed a number of points which I had noted as a reader of *COD*, and to all of whom I am grateful.<sup>2</sup>

**blood work:** explained as "= blood test." This indicates that blood work is a count noun (*blood test* is defined as "a scientific examination of a blood sample"), whereas it is surely a mass noun: when students were asked to use *blood work* in a sentence, none of those who understood it used \**a blood work*, and the most usual collocation (9 of 24) was *some blood work*.

**boo hoo** (interjection): explained as "expressing weeping," but it is perhaps worth noting that it is often, if not usually, used ironically: 21 of 24 students who were asked how it would be used specified or strongly implied sarcasm or a lack of sympathy, offering sample sentences such as "boo hoo, cry me a river."

**book-smarts:** not in. Known to 23 of 24 students. Of those, 6 of 23 regarded it simply as equivalent to "academic ability," while 17 of 23 suggested that it could imply lack of common sense or social competence, sometimes opposing it to *street-smarts* (for which *COD* does have an entry).

**F-word:** not in (but mentioned in a usage note s.v. *fuck*, of which it is a euphemistic abbre-

viation). Familiar to every student who responded (23 of 24), and surely more common than *f-number* (which is in).

**giani:** not in. The officiant in Sikh worship. Not known to any of the students sampled, but a word which I have encountered in student essays, and surely an important one for many Canadians. Not in *OED*.

**Golden Arches:** not in. The emblem of the McDonald's restaurant chain. Presumably a proprietary term, but surely one so widely used (known to all the 23 of 24 students who responded, i.e., more familiar than *Golden Gate* or *Golden State*, which are in) as to be worth including.

**golden shower:** not in. "Urination on another person as a sex game." Known to 15 of 24 students. Not in *OED* in this sense (but recorded there in two other senses: as a kind of firework and as a kind of tree).

**irregardless:** not in. Variant of *regardless*, and no doubt disapproved of by conservative users of English. A class canvassed informally about its appropriateness agreed that they accepted it as an unremarkable form.

**N-word:** not in. Euphemistic abbreviation of *nigger*. Known to nearly every student who responded (22 of 23), although generally agreed to be less common than *F-word*.

**peg** (noun, in the sense "a measure of liquor or wine"): labelled as Brit., but rare or archaic there, although I have encountered it in unaffected use by a student of Punjabi ancestry, suggesting that it may be preserved in the English of India.

**Stewart:** entries in *COD* for the racing driver Jackie Stewart, the actor James Stewart, and the singer Rod Stewart. Asked which persons with that surname they would expect to find in the dictionary, the television personality Martha Stewart was named by 14 students, the actor Patrick Stewart by eight, the actor James Stewart by four, James Stewart (author of a calculus textbook) by three, Jane Stewart (a Canadian politician) by three, Payne Stewart (a golfer) by two, and Jackie Stewart by two. The absence of Martha Stewart from *COD* is particularly striking.





*yeah*: the expression *oh yeah?* is identified in *COD* as expressing incredulity. Asked “when people say ‘oh yeah?’ what sort of message are they sending? In what circumstances might someone say it?” students gave a very wide range of intuitive responses, many of them suggesting two or three functions. Nine suggested that it expressed interest or agreement. Five suggested that it might specifically have an aggressive function—“For example [if] someone says ‘I can kick your ass,’ one would reply ‘oh yeah?’”—and five identified it as expressing incredulity. three suggested that it was an uninterested response, and two each that it expressed shock, recollection, or pleasure.

These notes are, in a way, evidence for the very high quality of *COD*'s coverage, since the gaps they suggest are, on the whole, matters of detail or of the sort of colloquial usage which is difficult to handle in a dictionary. They also suggest one of the ways in which lexicography can be brought into the classroom. Undergraduate students have large vocabularies and trained critical minds, and they are highly aware of and receptive to modern idiomatic usage. They make, in fact, good and nonconservative usage consultants, if the right questions can be put to them, and this fact might be borne in mind by lexicographers. They also benefit from a chance to see, practically and in detail, that their competence as language users is such that not even an excellent dictionary documents all that they know.

Notes:

1. For the quotation, and for other material on *COD*, see J.P. Considine, “Fourteen Words for Moose: Cultural and intercultural contexts of four Canadian dictionaries, 1977–1998,” in H. Antor and K. Stierstrofer, eds., *English Literatures in Intercultural Contexts* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 2000).

2. I should also like to thank my former students Margheritat Bracken, Amadeep Dhaliwal, and Terry Prockiwi, all of whom suggested lexical items to me.

*[John Considine's wrote "Antedatings from a Correspondent of Brown Willis" in issue XXV/2.]*

*[Disclaimer: I have taken a new "day job" as the senior editor for U.S. Dictionaries, Oxford University Press. I will remind readers of this whenever OUP books are discussed in VERBATIM, to avoid the appearance of a conflict of interest. —Ed.]*

## AS THE WORD TURNS

### *Where Do They Come From?*

Barry Baldwin  
Calgary, Alberta

Recent newspaper stories report linguists claiming that babies prattle in the same sound-patterns that make up the hypothetical protowords deduced from how they think the earliest words must have sounded if they generated modern ones.

Such academese will get us nowhere; it never does. I'd rather go for Brillat-Savarin's notion (*The Physiology of Taste*, 1825) that primitive man first learned to talk during meals, either because words were necessary there (“please pass the pterodactyl sauce”) or the post-feast relaxation naturally induced confidences and loquacity. As to Savarin's famous “You Are What You Eat,” any Englishman will point out that EAT is an anagram of TEA—a clear case of QED!

Voltaire said you should judge a person more by their questions than their answers. Full marks, then, to the ancients for their enquiries into the origins of words. Especially two: a Roman poet-philosopher and an Egyptian king.

In his *On the Nature of Things*, bk. 5, vv. 1028ff., Lucretius—I put it in plain space-saving prose—suggests: “Nature obliged our ancestors to utter various sounds, and use established the names of things. Compare young children: their lack of speech forces them to gesture and point at things they see. To think that one individual genius gave everything a name and taught these names to men is stupid. How could this prototype find every name and vocalise it when no one else could? If no predecessor had communicated thoughts through sounds, how could he? What is so great about humans using different sounds for different emotions? Even animals, wild and tamed, have various noises to express their fears or pains or joys.”

For Shelley (*The Revolt of Islam*), who saw speech as the gift of the rebel demigod Pro-



metheus, this Lucretian eloquence was “the wonder of mankind.”

A bridge between our “baby-linguists”, Lucretius, and the Egyptian king is provided by Jacobs and Stern’s *General Anthropology* (1947): “Claims that the earliest words were sound-imitative (onomatopoeic) or emotion-determined—namely the well-known ‘ding-dong’, ‘bow-wow’, or similar theories of the origin of the language—cannot be substantiated. The dynamic processes of change in languages are much more important to ascertain than are the crude initial ventures, which in any case cannot ever be ascertained.”

Wishing to confirm the chauvinist view that his country was the oldest, Psammetichus I (663–609 BC) conducted the first-ever child psychology test. To learn what their first unprompted word would be, he confined two children to a remote hut, guarded by a goatherd with instructions not to utter a sound in their presence. His animals provided their milk. After two years, the goatherd reported that he had been greeted by the toddlers with outstretched hands and the word *bekos*. Further linguistic research elicited that this was the Phrygian for ‘bread’, hence the king proclaimed that the Phrygians (in modern Turkey) were the oldest people.

His experiment was repeated by Frederick II of Sicily, Akbar the Great of India, and James IV of Scotland, whose infant guinea pigs, isolated in the care of a mute, startled the king by speaking “guid Hebrew.”

Jay Ingrams in *Talk Talk Talk* (1992) says, “We know Psammetichus was wrong, but we’re not sure what is right.” Herodotus, who tells this story (*Histories* 2. 2), had no such qualms. One ancient scholar, however, giped that *bekos* simply imitated the sound of the goats the children had heard. I subjoin another wrinkle, since no one else has: in Albanian, whose origins predate even Greek, *bekos* means ‘Bless You’, a natural greeting for lonely infants to address to their surrogate father.

Of course, it would be congenial for anglo-phones to connect Phrygian *bekos* ‘bread’ to ‘baker’—but I fear that would be crummy philology!

[Barry Baldwin’s last piece for VERBATIM was “Some High and Low Cs” in Vol. XXV/3.]

## English Place Names

Susan Elkin

Sittingbourne Kent

In Lincolnshire is a signpost pointing to two villages: “To Old Bolingbroke and Mavis Enderby,” beneath which a witty graffiti-ist has added the words “a son.”

Toponymy is fun—and nowhere more so than in England. This is an incongruous pair of names—the former with Plantagenet Shakespearean overtones and all the skulduggery of Richard II and Henry IV parts one and two and the second with its lighter weight connotations of blackbirds and a rather outmoded 20th century forename. Put them together, use a bit of imagination, and you have, as the punning graffiti writer evidently thought, a whole new story.

From *Pauperhaugh* in Northumberland to *Mousehole* in Cornwall and from *Stockdalewath* in Cumbria to *Old Wives Lees* in Kent, there are more than 30,000 place names in England to delight the student of onomastics. More than half have an eccentric English ring reminiscent of thatched cottages and warm ale. Consider *Lower Slaughter* in the Cotswolds, *Little Snoring* in Norfolk, *Sexhow* in Yorkshire, *Fulking* in Sussex (watch your handwriting on envelopes as with *Hucking* in Kent), *Sixpenny Handley* in Dorset, Kent’s *Thannington Without* (without what? the medieval walls of Canterbury, of course), and *Fugglestone St Peter* in Wiltshire.

Place names are to philology what fossils are to anthropology. About 98 percent of English place names date from before 1500. They tell ancient stories of different times and a different way of life. Some of the names, as Bill Bryson points out in *Mother Tongue* (1990), were repeatedly reshaped by successive waves of Celts, Romans, Danes, Vikings, Angles, Saxons, Jutes, and Normans and have origins going back two thousand years or more. For example, *Brightlingsea*, an Essex coastal town, has been spelled 404 ways since the earliest invaders first



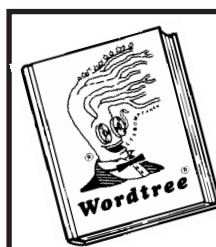
changed the Celtic *Brittich*, according to P.H. Rarney's *The Origin of English Place Names* (1985).

For another example of history being unfolded in names, take *Harrow*, now part of London, *Peper Harow* in Surrey, or *Arrowfield* in Worcestershire. A *hearg* was a pagan shrine or temple. So we know from the names that the first Anglo-Saxon settlers worshipped in these places. As they did at *Weedon* in Northamptonshire, *Winwood* in Hertfordshire, and *Wye* in Kent, all of which derive their names from *weoh* or *wog*, another Old English word for a temple.

Many names are basically topographical. *Ham* in Old English, for example, was a village, whereas *haam* was land in a water bend of a meadow. Hence such colourful place names as *Saxmundham* in Suffolk, *Garboldisham* in Norfolk and *Babraham* in Cambridgeshire—all with a personal name prefix—amongst the dozens of the more ordinary-sounding *Birminghams*, *Nottinghams*, *Chippenhams*, and the like.

In feudal England the manorial name often attached itself to the nomenclature of the place. The wonderfully named *Kingston Bagpuize* in Oxfordshire, for example, was the manor held, according to the Domesday Book of 1086, by Ralph de Baquepuize, from Baquepuis in Normandy. *Stansted Mountfitchet* in Essex, whose lords hailed from Montfiquet, also in Normandy, was named to distinguish it from *Stansted Abbots* not far away in Hertfordshire. The pretty village name *Sydenham Damerel* in Devon means 'a broad riverside pasture held by John D'Albermarle.'

Animals and plants creep unstoppably into place names too. The old word for a badger was *brock* which was presumably very common at *Brockenhurst* in Hampshire and *Brockhampton* in Gloucestershire, just as there must once have been oaks at *Sevenoaks* in Kent and at *Five Oaks* and *Three Oaks*, both in Sussex. During the hurricanes which wreaked havoc in the south of England in 1987, one of *Sevenoaks's* "original" oaks fell—or so the local press alleged. An



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unlikely tale since, however venerable the tree, the town's name almost certainly predated it. (The original Old English form was *oet oem sefan acum*, which had become *Seuoenaca* by 1100, *Sevenacher* by 1200, and *Seuenok* by 1610). But that didn't stop a lot of waggish speculation about whether the town should be renamed *Sixoaks*.

Some very grand-sounding English village names tell the tale of Latin as the language of government and public life in medieval times. *Ryme Intrinseca* in Dorset, for example, was *Rima* (a *rime*, 'edge or border,' in Old English). By 1611 it was known as *Ryme Intrinseca*, the Latin addition meaning 'inner, within the bounds' (to distinguish it from the former manor of *Ryme Extrinseca* in nearby Long Bredy). *Ashby Puerorum* in Lincolnshire was assigned for the benefit of the choir boys in Lincoln Cathedral, and the addition of *Magna* or *Parva* to indicate large or small is quite common, as in Leicestershire's *Appleby Magna* and *Appleby Parva* or *Ash Magna* and *Ash Parva* in Shropshire.

In his Barchester novels Anthony Trollope chose to base the fulminating and often pompous, yet curiously attractive, Archdeacon Theophilus Grantley at a fictional village named *Plumstead Episcopi*. The Latin suffix means 'of the bishops.' Trollope's daytime job was with the Post Office so he must have known a thing or two about place names. Presumably he was thinking of, for example, real villages, such as *Wick Episcopi* in Worcestershire, or *Huish Episcopi* and *Kingsbury Episcopi*, both in Shropshire.





Some English place names have an unsqueamish medieval bluntness about them too, although they were often politely “adjusted” in the nineteenth century. *Shitterton* (‘farm at a stream used as a sewer’) in Dorset now often appears on maps politely renamed as *Sitterton*, and Bill Bryson swears that until the late eighteenth century there was a road in the City of London frequented by prostitutes and consequently called *Gropecunt Lane*.

And, as recently as 1956, the inhabitants of *Puddletown* in Dorset rebelled because the council wanted to revert to the earlier form of *Piddletown* (the town is on the River Piddle). The Puddletonians, however, insisted that *Puddletown* “sounded nicer” and they won.

[Susan Elkin’s last article for VERBATIM was “To What End Gender Endings?” in issue XXV/1.]



## George Orwell, Meet Regis

Fred R. Shapiro  
Associate Librarian for Public Services and  
Lecturer in Legal Research, Yale Law School

If there is a Truth-tellers Heaven, and they have a TV set through which they can keep tabs on terrestrial folly, I wonder whether George Orwell watches ABC’s phenomenally popular game show, “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire.” If Orwell was watching Joe Trela’s appearance on the show recently, he would have seen Trela win a million dollars, only the third contestant to do so, for picking a clearly wrong answer. Orwell, who wrote so eloquently in 1984 about the manipulation of history for political purposes, would have seen a different kind of historical distortion, presenting myth as fact to a mass audience. Today’s broadcast inaccuracies erode the notion of truth as surely as propaganda does, and pave the way for future demagogues to lie with impunity because respect for the historical record has died.

Trela’s million-dollar question was the following: “What insect shorted out an early supercomputer and inspired the term ‘computer bug?’” The choices were a moth, a roach, a fly, or a Japanese beetle, with “moth” being the supposedly correct response. Underlying the query was the celebrated folklore that the computer terms “bug” and “debug” derive from an actual moth found inside an early computer by the pioneer computer scientist Grace Hopper in 1945.

Even forgetting the absurd description of the primitive Mark II as a “supercomputer,” this folklore is just that, and can be demonstrated to be false.

In reality, the computer “bug” was merely a specialized application of a general engineering term dating from the 1800s. Thomas Alva Edison frequently referred to “bugs” in this sense, as most clearly evidenced in an 1889 newspaper article quoted by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: “Mr. Edison . . . had been up the two previous nights discovering a ‘bug’ in his phonograph—an expression for solving a difficulty, and implying that some imaginary insect has secreted itself inside and is causing all the trouble.” This meaning was common enough by 1934 to be recognized in *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, whose definitions for “bug” included “a defect in apparatus or its operation.”

The moth myth is widespread in popular culture, but its disproof is hardly a secret. In addition to the evidence in the standard dictionaries, I have published articles in *Byte Magazine*, the *Annals of the History of Computing*, and *American Speech* setting the record straight. My refutation has been picked up by the online Jargon File, which is widely copied throughout the Internet, and by the bestselling *Hacker’s Dictionary*. Yet the researchers for “Who Wants To Be a Millionaire” managed to miss all this and went with fallacy rather than history for their grand-prize question.

In 1986 J. Presper Eckert, the coinventor of the first electronic digital computer, was asked about Grace Hopper’s “bug” story. Eckert





responded, “I’ve never called her up and told her that that’s nuts, but it is nuts. That term was in wide use before then.” I suspect Eckert would have thought it “nuts” that a quiz show whose very essence is the separation of correct, winning answers from incorrect, losing answers would base the awarding of a million dollars on a selection among choices all of which were wrong.

The quest to preserve the virtues of accuracy and truth in a media-dominated world that spreads error far more effectively than Orwell could possibly have envisioned is much on my mind nowadays. I have recently been named editor of a major new quotation dictionary, tentatively titled *The Yale Dictionary of Quotations*. This project will use state-of-the-art research methods to trace the sources of quotations.

Existing quotation dictionaries often fail to capture the authentic provenance of famous sayings. “There’s no such thing as a free lunch,” for example, is attributed to Milton Friedman by *Bartlett’s*, but actually originated as the punchline to an economist’s joke appearing in the *San Francisco News* in 1938. Regis, if you are going to have future questions about the origins of terms or quotes, please have your researchers check the facts with me. I would like to think the ghost of George Orwell would be gratified.



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Atticus does not believe in omens, but . . . when John Swinney made his first trip to Brussels as SNP leader last week, he paid a courtesy call to Scotland House, the Euro base of the Scottish executive. On walking through the door of the executive office, a Union flag promptly crashed to the ground. [From *The Sunday Times*, 12 November 2000. Submitted by Kaye Sykes, *The Netherlands*.]



## Plain Talk, or the Case of the Vanishing Vocabulary

David Galef  
Oxford, Mississippi

Plenty of people have written plenteous articles on words that have dropped from our speech. The tone is often ruefully nostalgic, a middle-aged wordlover sad that a cherished term has either faded from use or else been somehow tainted. At the risk of generalizing, though it’s what I love to do, I’d say that words in the modern era leave common parlance for one of three reasons. First, a term may have become archaic, usually a victim of technological progress. How many people know what a *greave* or a *creese* is? Since our fights no longer involve suits of armor or swords, this ignorance isn’t surprising. Social change also leaves certain words in its wake, such as *serf* or *fief*. Second, political correctitude and its euphemisms have forced certain words to hide for shame: no more *bums* or *cripples*, for instance. A related trend abducts words for “enlightened” labels that obliterate the old uses. Decades after the gay pride movement delivered its message, it isn’t uncommon to hear an old gent annoyed that he can’t use the words *queer* or *gay* anymore in their old senses. Third, slang and other up-to-the-minute vocabulary quickly become dated. Few people nowadays talk about *moxie* or *pizzazz*.

I read these articles with interest, mentally raising my arm to the vanishing vocabulary: *Ave verba morituri saluto*. I know that language is a changing entity, and change in usage is inevitable. But what I can’t quite fathom is why certain garden-variety words silently pass into the great sea of desuetude without so much as a fare-thee-well, and I’m not talking about *fathom* and *fare-thee-well*, which I employ here merely for effect (which is to note that some words, perfectly straightforward in their original incarnations,



come back in a campy or exaggerated sense with invisible quotation marks around them; witness *contretemps*, *thug*, *nifty*, *newfangled*, *fiend*, and *chivalrous*).

So what are these vanishing oral species? Well, how come people are so rarely *nonplussed* anymore? Or is it just that they don't have the *gumption* to admit it? Whatever happened to the derring-do duo *pluck* and *verve*? When was the last time someone was described in your hearing as *bumptious*? I don't want to be romantic about this loss of lexicon. It's not that these words leave an irreparable void. Instead of *nonplussed*, *puzzled* or *confused* will do. *Gumption* yields grudgingly to *fortitude* or *aggression*, just as *bravery* and *spirit* can substitute in a pinch for *pluck* and *verve*. And in our ego-inflated age, so many synonyms exist for *bumptious*, from *arrogant* to *self-assertive*, that it's hard to claim we've become deficient in that area.

As with the gradual extinction of certain organisms, finding examples of ordinary words no longer with us is difficult precisely because—to put it like a Zen koan—what's the sound of a word not being pronounced? I don't have *chums* anymore, just good friends. Am I *chagrined* at this state of affairs? No, probably just a bit hurt. I suppose I could be *miffed*, but I haven't been that since I stopped saying it twenty years ago. I hear it now only in its arch inflection. In any event, it isn't my *wont* to carry grudges, though it might *behoove* me to do something about it.

What of *scrappy* types, as well as *chumps* and *dopes*? *Slatternly* women, *feckless* men, and *fractious* children? I feel somewhat . . . *asea*. The departure of these terms has been so silent, not like the huge colorful gap left by *mugwump* or *hornswoggled*, whose entertainment value was as clear as their built-in evanescence. What has caused these perfectly serviceable words to pass on? Was *chum* too male? Was *dope* too insulting, *miffed* too British, or *asea* too poetic for this unpoetic age? Does behavior so influence language and vice versa that no one in this narcissistic age wants to admit being *chagrined* anymore,

hovering between disappointment and humiliation, and so the term has therefore become outmoded? And while we're at it, how come no one these days feels *chipper*? Why does no one *simper*? Whatever happened to *spry* old folks and *surlly* moods?

Of course, I should acknowledge the distinction between spoken and written English. As I've tried to indicate, I'm tolling the bell mainly for words that used to exist in conversation. In fact, there's also a whole class of polysyllables, from *abashedness* to *zealotry*, that used to appear in novels and essays. The long list includes words like *imbroglio*, *querulous*, *temerity*, *curmudgeon*, *calumny*, *unprepossessing*, and, to my consternation, *consternation*. But I rarely used these words when I spoke to others. Instead, they rang in my reader's ears, creating a tintinnabulation that echoes to this day, but always silently, befitting words on a printed page.

Still, I confess to being chagrined at the loss of *chagrin*. That was a word worth hearing aloud. *Wont* and *behoove* are still used by a colleague of mine in our English department, but with the ironic pronunciation that indicates a deliberately employed archaism. I guess children aren't *fractious* anymore, or even *unruly*. They're just *cranky* or *bratty*. People are still *feckless*, of course, but nowadays just plain *losers* or, to put it more politely, *nonperformers*. At least they're not *ne'er-do-wells*, which would be a real throwback.

That's the point: it's no good mourning the loss of *varlet* or *reeve*. You can't really save a word that's already extinct, save to embalm it in irony. Old slang sounds too dated, and trying to resuscitate a term like *hobo* won't win you many friends. What's left? As I proceed with my antennae out for vanishing verbiage, I have to test each candidate as I hear it (or divine its absence). It can't be just any old word but a common oral usage that has become uncommon. Does *hoopla* belong? No, too slangy. How about *caterwaul* or *cockamamie*?—which survives tenuously in its link to *scheme*. This last instance opens up a whole class of words that would have been lost but for an



enduring phrase: an *offhand manner*, a *cavalier disregard*. Should I follow this *primrose path*, or does this way lead to overextension?

The other day, I mentally resuscitated *pert* and its cousin *brash*. So the search continues. So I build up my meager collection, rejecting most of what comes under my scrutiny. Should *disgruntled* and *winsome* be placed on the endangered list, or were they always more literary than conversational? And once I find my specimens, what then? My one-man campaign to reintroduce *bedlam* hasn't exactly been a howling success. But am I *dismayed*? Should this essay end with hand-wringing and a sense of belatedness? But why call it belated? Maybe I'm just *tardy*, that's all.

[David Galef is a frequent contributor. His last piece in VERBATIM was the poem "Primer" in issue XXIV/4.]



## The Use of Quotes

*I'll send them both to jail, blabs 'leaky' judge.*

The punctuation is correct, with single quotes to mark what's just alleged, though what's alleged may not be just.

'Peace' within quotes: a journalistic thumb jerks its contempt for such a word.

But in *Perhaps the mayor would like to come* (a plea of not-in-my-backyard)

*and live with them "urinating in the lounge"*

quotes mark unlettered emphasis, eyes screwed to relieve out-of-focus rage.

Let's call it a 'non-standard' use.

—Aidan Baker



## OBITER DICTA

### *Bangkok Unabridged*

Paul Blackford  
Bangkok, Thailand

Some Welsh are perhaps inordinately proud of the fact that their principality boasts the longest place name in the English-speaking world: Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwlllantysiliogogoch. It is necessarily abbreviated to Llanfair PG, except on some signs and on the town's Souvenir Railway Platform Tickets, which are clearly just gimmicks to attract and delight tourists with little better to do (cf. the Swedish town of Hell, which markets a nice and lucrative line in *Postcards from Hell* and a lesser-known small town in Germany yclept Wank, whose staid burghers have so far chosen not to exploit the low-market tourist appeal of their town's name. In southern France, however, the inhabitants of Condom are cashing in as fast as they can—*Genuine Condom Condoms* and so on).

The small town in Wales was originally called Llanfairpwllgwyn, which meant 'St. Mary's Pool of the White Hazel' and was lengthened by a cobbler who wanted to pinpoint further its location near St. Tsylio's church and a red cave.

If you find that impressive and interesting, you should consider the official name for Bangkok, which truly shows this truncated Welsh effort the door (there are no spaces between words in written Thai): *krungthepmahanakhonrattanakosindramahindrayutthuyamahadiloppopneparattanaradchaniburiromudomrachnivetmahastnanmornipimarnavatatarsatitsakatuttiyavishnukarmprasit*.

This, the capital of Thailand, is abbreviated to Krungthep by all Thais who only ever refer to it as *Bangkok* (which means 'Grove of the Wild Plums') when talking to foreigners.

What then does it mean? Basically: City of Angels, Great City and Residence of the Emerald Buddha, Impregnable City of the God Indra,





Grand Capital of the World, Endowed with Nine Precious Gems, Abounding in Enormous Royal Palaces which resemble the Heavenly Abode where reigns the Reincarnated God, a City given by Indra and built by Vishnukarm. (Not too sure about the capitalization there, which written Thai doesn't have either.)

Most Westerners I've told this unabridged name to have variously pronounced it contrived, prolix, pretentious, and pompous. All true in some measure, no doubt, but much of the euphony and music particularly inherent to a tonal language like Thai is lost in the translation, of course, and the same may well be as true of Llanfair PG as Krungthep. Both the full Welsh and Thai names were coined in the 18th century, and I think it is true to say that the Welsh wins hands down in imparting information to a faltering wayfarer!

Incidentally, a piece of ancient invective translated from the Welsh by Robert Graves would suggest that the Welsh once set great store by their ability to direct your average faltering wayfarer to his or her destination, a propensity the literal meaning of Llanfair PG would seem amply to attest to.

*The Traveller's Curse after Misdirection*

May they stumble, stage by stage  
On an endless pilgrimage.  
Dawn and dusk, mile after mile,  
At each and every step, a stile;  
At each and every step, withal  
may they catch their feet and fall;  
At each and every fall they take  
May a bone within them break;  
Not be, for variation's sake,  
Now rib, now thigh, now arm, now shin,  
But always, without fail, THE NECK.

[Paul Blackford's articles for VERBATIM have included "Some English Loanwords in Thai," "Japanese Pop Group Nomenclature," and "Bespeaking a Muse or What?"]



# HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain.

War, what is it good for? Well, one thing it's quite good for is feeding this column. I was fascinated to hear that NATO's recent war against Yugoslavia (or rather, its "forcible humanitarian countermeasures") has been the subject of an inquiry by a United Nations commission which found it to have been "illegal, but legitimate"—a precedent which is cheering news for defence lawyers everywhere, no doubt.

The war against meaninglessness continues to be fought by VERBATIM readers, and I am always delighted to receive their communiques, care of the magazine's usual addresses. Harold J. Ellner, of Richland, Washington, notes that "whenever one hears a statement beginning, 'as far as . . .', one fully and routinely expects to hear ' . . . is concerned' somewhere before the end of a sentence. Of late [in media prose], this has often become an unfulfilled expectation. The omission of 'is (are) concerned' is equivalent to a dangling participle or unclosed parentheses, and results in the same sensation of a lack of closure."

At least, in Dr Ellner's example, the result is abbreviation. An advertisement I saw in a gardening magazine offered a shelving system which "frees up growing space in your greenhouse." *Free up*, meaning *free*, and *head up*, meaning *head* (as in, "She heads up our Customer Satisfaction Service, based *out of* London) are, I believe, fairly new arrivals in Britain. They and their kin are loathsome, but their attraction is obvious: he who uses two words where one would do, must be cleverer, trendier and more powerful than you.

A similar *Horrible* is the ubiquitous "would"—as in, "We would apologise for any inconvenience," where "We apologise for any inconvenience" would convey precisely the same message and sound rather more sincere. Or so it would seem to me, anyway.



Food packaging is always a rich source (a vitamin-enriched source, even) of words which turn out not to have quite such precise meanings as the innocent customer might expect. I have here a can of “Traditional Style Lemonade, made with real lemons,” also described as “Traditional Style Lemonade with sugar and sweeteners, made with real lemons to give a refreshing lemon tang.” Evidently, it is the *real* lemons which give this product its desirable *Traditional Style*. I am intrigued, therefore, to see that there are only two mentions of lemon in the statutory ingredients list: “reconstituted comminuted lemon 2%” and “reconstituted fruit juices 2% (orange, lemon).”

I continue to derive a kind of masochistic delight from the various euphemisms misemployed by broadcasters to warn their viewers against potentially offensive programmes. “From the outset, this episode contains expressive language and behaviour” is going to take some beating, I suspect. (You may be interested to know, incidentally, that the expressive language in question was *arse*, while the expressive behaviour was a man displaying his naked arse. It is my duty to warn you that the sentence you have just read contains *arses*, and that parents may wish to exercise guidance.)

Here are a few further instances, taken from a TV listings magazine: “Contains explicit scenes”; “contains a degree of swearing”; and “This film contains explicit imagery of body parts, specifically a depiction of tongue-piercing.” A *degree of swearing* seems particularly unhelpful—shouldn't there be a statistic in there somewhere? “This programme consists of 48% swearing, 32% expressive behaviour, and 20% reconstituted comminuted lemon.” I'm also confused by the use here of *specifically*; is the tongue-piercing all I've got to look forward to, or will there be other explicit imagery of body parts? In short, is it worth setting the VCR to record, or not?

More distressing, perhaps, is this newspaper headline from a report concerning sex education: “Explicit material to be banned in schools.” *In upsum*, as the weather forecasters say, I fear that the wider uses of the word *explicit* are lost forever.

[*Mat Coward's web page is* <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/matcoward/myhomepage/newsletter.html>.]

## Lapsed Language of Appalachia

John H. Felts, MD  
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

Our knowledge of old speech is too limited for us to really hear how earlier communities talked and what they talked about. We can, however, learn something of their religious beliefs, customs, politics, and prejudices by examining words and phrases that have survived in small, poor, remote social groups, fixed in time and place. The careful student can thus trace a Darwinian natural selection in language as it is preserved and mutated under the stress of historical change.

Charles Frazier, the author of *Cold Mountain* (1997), a well-written tale laid in the North Carolina mountains during the waning days of the Civil War, uses verbal relicts to give the reader a sense of historical authenticity. While a critical examination of Frazier's novel is beyond the aim of this article, a look at his word selections may be illustrative. The dates of the first written recording of some of them, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, are noted parenthetically.

*Chine* (1390) Hog back bone. Back bones and spare ribs were meats often eaten in North Carolina before World War II when all the pig but the grunt was considered edible. In the kitchen a *keeler* (1440), a vessel, and a *piggin* (1554), a pail to drink from, could be found. There apple mash might be prepared with a *spurtle* (15??), a wooden potstick, and *pomace* (1555), apple pulp left from cider making. The cider was usually kept in a *demijohn* (1769), a bottle with a capacity of about 5 gallons plugged with a *stopple* (139?). Apples before processing were often kept in a straw *skep* [1300], a basket. A century earlier, before it became a basket too, a *skep* (1199) was the amount of straw required to fill the basket. The door to the cabin might be hinged with a *gudgeon* (1400), a spindle or pivot, into which a *pintle* (1486), a pin, was inserted to make the joint. *Gudgeon* and *pintle* are also the



names of fish, *pintle* derived from the same root as *penis*, it being upright, and the fish being of similar shape. If there were windows, their *muntins* (1330) were central, vertical pieces of wood between the panels of its sill.

A marauded *bantling* (1593), a brat, possibly illegitimate, could well be a member of the family. Such a child was often “as ragged as a *heckered* (1575, ‘clumsily cut’) nail” and might have “ropy *harls*” (1821 ‘small amounts of snot’), running from his nose from which “a bare *rindle*” (885) of blood was occasionally seen. If the child had shoes (unusual), their soles were probably *smutched* (1530), ‘dirty or black’.

Around and inside the house hounds roamed freely, their *flews* (1575), ‘lower jaws’, hanging below their *chaps* (1855), ‘cheeks’. Sometimes the dogs were *maundered* (1400), afflicted with a dry, scaly skin eruption about the neck. Horse language, blown away by automobiles, included *tocking* (1848), the sound of gallop like the tick-tocking of a clock, and *thills* (1325), shafts to which horses were harnessed.

Across the twisted *taliped* (1857) landscape, (after *talipes*: ‘clubbed foot’) a peddler, usually Jewish, might be seen, bringing news and needles, his backpack held by a *tumpline* (1850) across his chest or forehead. He might offer *fleams* (1000), surgical knives for blood letting by local healers. On his way along vague trails the peddler sometimes found the forest floor *duff* (1838), ‘spongy’, and the trees *doty* (1428). The *OED* quotes (1893), “In North Carolina, it is said of trees dead at the top that they are doted or have doted.” If a mountaineer got lost he might have been *frabled* (1685), ‘confused’, leading his waiting wife to wonder what had happened to “her husband’s *harns*” (1154), ‘brains’. Perhaps he had drunk too much *metheglin* (1533), ‘spiced mead,’ before starting home.

Frazier also refers to the lining of a scabbard’s mouth, a *sputcheon* (1842) and to an *Eprouvette mortar* (1781), a device for testing gunpowder still in use during the Civil War. Thus in telling his story he uses terms appropriate to time and

place just as by playing period instruments musicians seek to create sound like that heard during the lifetime of the composer.

In his afterword, Frazier acknowledges his debt to Horace Kephart’s *Our Southern Highlanders*, a sympathetic study of the mountain people of a century ago. In his chapter, *The Mountain Dialect*, Kephart described their terminal elisions, aspirations, sound substitutions, dropping of first syllables, and a broad range of diphthongal disasters. Such variations were not consistent in that the speakers, natural mimics, modified their usage to be consonant with the dialect of their visitors, a respectful accommodation, not a patronizing gesture. Such alternating speech is still common in the South, possibly more so in black populations, which favor white talk in mixed encounters and their own dialects among themselves. These variations suggest the evolutionary natural selection of word choice and pronunciation in response to changing conditions. If Frazier had tried to reproduce these variants, his novel would have been much less readable.

Isolated communities are less bound by formal syntax in general and less concerned with the propriety of verb tenses and the agreement of subject and predicate and are more inclined to verbalize nouns as *blithen* (from *blithe*, 1824) and neologize modifiers. Many outlanders, some who came to the mountains as missionaries, religious or secular, tended to think of the objects of their good intentions as deprived, unintelligent, and degenerate (partly because they thought that the desecration of proper English was a mark of a degenerate people), but possibly teachable and certainly candidates for salvation. *Cold Mountain* tells how Ada, one of the heroines of the story, overcame this attitude, held by her preacher father, after his death, as she learned to understand, value, and rely on the virtues and strengths of her neighbors.

Perhaps the best response to those who thought mountain people degenerate and “poor white trash” is that of Cecil Sharp, cited by Maud





Karpels in her biography of the English ballad collector, who visited the southern Appalachians several times. In the early years of the 20th century, she wrote, “The people were mostly unlettered and had no money—serious shortcomings in the eyes of American city-dwellers—but though they had none of the advantages of civilization they had a culture which was as much a tradition as the songs they sang. ‘A case of arrested development?’ Cecil Sharp replied to a facile critic, ‘I should prefer to call it a case of arrested degeneration.’”

*Suggested reading:*

Frazier’s *Cold Mountain* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 1997) and Kephart’s *Our Southern Highlanders* (University of Tennessee Press, 1976) have been mentioned. The quotation by Karpeles is from her *Cecil Sharp, His Life and Work* (University of Chicago Press, 1967). Eliot Wigginton’s *Foxfire Books* (Anchor, from 1971) provides valuable photographs and commentary about a vanishing society, and Corra Harris’s *A Circuit Rider’s Wife* (University of Georgia Press, 1998), an autobiographical novel by a Methodist minister’s wife isolated in North Georgia in the late 19th century, first published in 1910, is an accurate depiction of her times. Cleanth Brooks’s *Language of the American South* (University of Georgia Press, 1985) is a short, trenchant commentary about the evolution of Southern speech. Chapter 12, “Blueprints and Borrowed Letters,” and Chapter 13, “Necessity’s Mother,” in Jared Diamond’s *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (Norton, 1998) are excellent brief considerations of the origin and evolution of language and its handmaiden, technology.

[Dr. Felt’s last article for VERBATIM was “More Servings from the Periodic Table” in issue XXIV/1.]



**Ah! Ah! Elle est bien bonne!  
(Ha ha, that’s a good one!)**

There are a lot of ways to laugh,  
Some wholehearted, others half;  
Laughter often seems to burst,  
And yet it sometimes is reversed:

For when we laugh, we say “ha ha,”  
Whereas the French emit “ah ah,”  
Showing, since the “H” comes after  
“A,” that they implode with laughter.

But, though it’s against their nature  
to enunciate an aitch,  
Whenever they’re inclined to laugh  
As Rabelais did, *on s’esclaffe*.

And if, in other words, *on pouffe*,  
The French, like us, may raise the roof!

—Henry George Fischer

**SIC! SIC! SIC!**

She said none of the other submarines—including one with a nude child and still another topped with a bear-breasted mermaid—have caused a fuss. [From the New Haven Register, Aug. 22, 2000. Submitted by Mary-Louise Bean, Guilford, Connecticut.]

“We observed and heard some screeching (of tires),” she said. [From the New Haven Register, Aug. 22, 2000. Submitted by Mary-Louise Bean, Guilford, Connecticut.]

Convenient—includes useful features like a spell checker, calculator, calender with personal notes and a printing option. [From an advertisement for The MailStation, an email appliance. Submitted by Peter How, University Park, Florida.—It’s only like a spell checker, or else it would have caught “calender.”]



## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

*How We Talk: American Regional English Today*, by Allan Metcalf, Houghton Mifflin. \$14 /£8.95 paperback \$24/£14.95 hardcover, 224 pages. ISBNs: 0–18–04363–2 hardcover; 0–618–04362–4 paperback.

*How We Talk* is an essential book for any person interested in, well, how we talk. Friendly, accessible, and scholarly (Allan Metcalf is the executive secretary of the American Dialect Society; more information about the society is available at [www.americandialect.org](http://www.americandialect.org)), *How We Talk* is a wonderful overview of American English in all its variety. Covering all fifty states as well as American ethnic dialects, this book has answers to dialect questions you may not have even known you had.

Metcalf relies (as do we all) on the *Dictionary of American Regional English (DARE)*, the *Linguistic Atlas of the U.S. and Canada*, and the *Atlas of North American English*. By distilling a vast amount of dialect scholarship (as well as quite a bit of new research done on the Internet and elsewhere), Metcalf creates a book that is lighthearted without being lightweight.

My favorite sections were the ones that made me homesick (North Carolina and Florida) and that made me want to revisit favorite spots (New Orleans and Seattle). The language of a place has as much charm as the food and the scenery (and is much harder to make overcommercialized and watered down for the tourist trade). This guidebook for the linguistic traveler might spark some trip planning just to hear these accents and words. (I can see the tour groups now—instead of whale watching, see someone who calls green peppers *mangoes*, or who uses *one* for *a*: “I get one headache!”)

*How We Talk* also includes a section on dialect in the movies, pointing out good (and not so good) cinematic examples of regional American English.

*How We Talk* is a book that is sure to become a favorite. (You might as well get two copies; one to keep and one to lend.)

—Erin McKean

## EPISTOLAE

The Coasters’ 1958 hit “Yakety-Yak” most assuredly did NOT feature a conversation between a married couple. It was a parent-to-offspring song, clearly meant to be father-to-teenage-son, as evidenced in this stanza:

*Don’t you give me no dirty looks/Your father’s hip, he knows what cooks/Just tell your hoodlum friends outside/You ain’t got time to take a ride.*

Throughout the song the dad is grouching at the kid to do his chores and not to give him any “lip” about it.

Rob Meurer

Re Jessy Randall’s piece, I had always thought “Blah, Blah, Blah” was derived from “hablar” probably via Mexico—at least, “blah, blah” is fairly common here in Spain and with the usual meaning. Used by men about women blah, blah, blahing about children & family; by women about men blah-blahing about sports and politics.

Interesting if not vital.

Regards,  
Robert Kennedy

Stephen Finz [“The New Profanity”, Vol. XXV/4] has got the chronology of the California State Fair Employment Practices Act wrong; it became law under that title when Governor Pat Brown signed it in April 1959, not subsequent to the Alcorn Decision of 1970, nor under the title of the Fair Employment and Housing Act. The authority to deal with discrimination in housing was added in 1963, but the titles of the act and the commission were not changed for some time thereafter; perhaps that is the source of the confusion. The act instructed the commission to seek to overcome discrimination in employment because of race, religion, national origin or ancestry through “conference, conciliation and persuasion”; habitual abusive language directed toward employees on one of these bases was taken as evidence of violation, in that it helped create intol-



erable working conditions for the persons involved.

Nick Humez [“Funny Animals,” Vol. XXV/4] probably has some basis for seeing Nahuatl as a Central American language, rather than (more usually) as the dominant language of Mexico at the time the Spanish invaded (and it is still widely used), but he must be wrong in identifying Quechua also as Central American. Surely that language is that of the Incas, and confined to South America.

Donald K. Henry  
Mill Valley, California

D. L. Emblen’s diatribe about *prequel* falls short.

First, while my CD-ROM version of the *Random House Unabridged* [RHUD] isn’t dated prior to 1992, it does date the term to 1970-75.

Second, my 1982 *OED Supplement*, volume III, is dated prior to 1992 by a full decade and lists *prequel*: “A book, film, etc., the events portrayed in which or the concerns of which precede those of an existing completed work.”

1973 *Britannica Bk. of the Year* 1972 732–3

“*Prequel*, a literary work whose narrative sequentially precedes that of an earlier work.”

1997 *National Observer* [U.S.] 1 Jan. 1–4

Cammer has just written a book, *Freedom from Compulsion* . . . He calls it a ‘prequel’ to his earlier book, *Up from Depression*. “‘Prequel is a word I coined,’ he explains. “It’s a sequel except it’s on a subject that comes before.” 1977 *Globe & Mail* [Toronto] 17 Sept. 37/5 *The Silmarillion*, for which Tolkien coined the term *Prequel*, describes not only the creation of Middle Earth, but of the universe. 1979 *Films & Filming* Mar. 11 In this ‘prequel’ Tom Berenger stars as Butch Cassidy and William Katt as Sundance.

Third, the usage reported in the *Washington Post*, “The sequel takes up where the prequel left off” seems misguided, if not erroneous. A film or book to which a prequel exists, is not a sequel. My *RHUD* defines a *sequel* as “a literary work, movie, etc., that is complete in itself but continues the narrative of a preceding work.”

Hence the book or film which takes up where the prequel left off isn’t a sequel at all, because IT was the preceding work. I don’t know of a term that means the existing work whose events those of a prequel precedes, but *sequel* certainly isn’t it. The first “Star Wars” movie was not a sequel, though it has a prequel (and also a sequel). So, the *Washington Post* notwithstanding, there is something between the prequel and the sequel.

Finally, I wonder how D. L. Emblen feels about the year 1 B.C.E. being followed by the year 1 C.E. without a year in-between. I don’t think this leads into any troubling philosophical waters, despite the number of people who seem convinced that the 21st century began on 1 January 2000.

Benjamin H. Cohen  
Chicago, Illinois

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*[Another note from the -quel front: the aquel, which is defined as a book not successful enough to have spawned a sequel (or a prequel, for that matter). A cite is available at <http://www.dendarii.com/chalion.html>. –Ed.]*

Answers to *Awesome Foursomes*:  
1. Mull (*p* can replace the first letter in each word).  
2. Slap (dropping the first letter creates new words).  
3. Cute (adding *a* before each word creates new words).  
4. Warden (all last names).  
5. Apricots (first three letters of all words are abbreviations of months).  
6. Reveal (item of food in each word).  
7. Nope (first three letters of each word are in alphabetical order).  
8. Virtues (last letters are abbreviations of tons of days of the week).  
9. Reward (all can be read backward).  
10. Cares (adding an *s* creates new words).  
11. Break (all words have opposite meanings).  
12. Revolt (drop last letter and read backward).  
13. Rose (all are girls’ names).  
14. Mice (drop middle letters of each word; remain-ing letters spell *word game*).  
15. Go (add *man* before each word to spell new words).  
16. Hollywood (all four place names can be broken into two words).





On p. 14 of the latest issue, you discuss this fellow's math. Actually it *can* be faulted. The increase from 110% to 120% is not 10% but 9.1% (120 divided by 110).

David Henige

In your Autumn article on Buffy the Vampire Slayer slang, VERBATIM says: "Of course, the show employs plenty of familiar slang, some recorded in dictionaries and some not. The oldest item, *five-by-five*, Faith may have gleaned from the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, where it appears, in the sense Faith employs, in a single quotation from 1983: "How are you?" Buffy asks Faith, to which she responds, "Five-by-five."

From my understanding, *five-by-five* is a military expression meaning "loud and clear" in reference to radio transmissions. The first number referred to the loudness, and the second number referred to the clarity. So, if someone said, how is this transmission, and it was loud enough, but full of static, you might answer "five-by-one." On the other hand, if it was somewhat clear, but not very loud, you may answer "two-by-four." "Five-by-five" is the best it can be, and Faith uses this expression mostly when Buffy asks her if Faith is getting the message, and Faith answers "five-by-five."

Rob Bernard  
*minusone@alumni.princeton.edu*

Re: VERBATIM XXV/4 Autumn 2000, page 20—I disagree with the bit about Al Capp's Skonk Works being a manufacturing plant for Kickapoo Joy Juice. The Joy Juice was made by Hairless Joe and Lonesome Polecat in their cave. Big Barnsmell and his brother, Barney, were inside and outside men at the Skonk Works but Capp never (or at least I can't find it) said just what was produced there. That in itself made the name of Skonk Works appropriate for Lockheed's highly classified plant in California. Seems there was a smelly factory nearby plus nobody outside

really knew what was being designed in the place—at least until after it was built, tested, and in service. So, Skunk Works is a top-secret facility and Skonk Works was too. But Kickapoo Joy Juice was not a product of that Capp industry. Ben Rich of Lockheed made the same mistake in his book *Skunk Works*, in which he mentions the Joy Juice as a Capp Skonk Works product. Not so.

Sincerely,  
Tom S. Reyenga  
Del City, Oklahoma

*[I have queried Al Capp's trademark holders, and perhaps we can clear this up.—Ed.]*

1. I am sure you will get many comments on this subject. Vol XXV, No. 4 page 21, Esperanto, paragraph 3. In days of old when I was young, 'throwing in the towel' to quit was done frequently during boxing matches when a man was losing badly and did not know it; his seconds would literally throw a towel into the ring to signal the referee to stop the fight.

2. In a listing of unusual words, I found the word *threpterophilia*, a noun meaning 'a fondness for female nurses.' I hesitate to use it at the hospital where I am a volunteer unless I have some confirmation that it is, if not a true word, is at least not objectionable.

3. I have searched without success for an antonym for *xenophobia*, and I do not mean *xenophilia*. It must carry the full opposite meaning, i.e., A hatred of all things in one's own culture, language, art, music, literature, etc., and an endless love for all things (carefully chosen things) foreign. I now usually think of it as Patri- or Matri-phobia, and that it is formed as a life-long smoldering resentment for having been subjected to potty-training. I would appreciate any help.

James Kottemann  
*JIMLUDDITE@webtv.net*



EX CATHEDRA

At the beginning of every year, it seems, various groups look back and reflect upon their language, giving joy to the lifestyle-section newspaper editors who print their pronouncements.

This year (as it seems it does every year), Lake Superior State University in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan, has listed *chad*, *dot.com*, and “Have a good one!” as expressions that should be avoided. They received 700 nominations for words to be abjured in speech and writing. Last year “e-anything” made their hit list, although the prefix *e-* was the American Dialect Society’s word of the year (not that this is a commendation, much like *Time*’s Man of the Year) in 1998.

There is a great deal of pleasure to be found in condemning words and phrases that grate upon the ear (especially those used by those at least ten years younger than you are), but it seems unduly negative. Why not promulgate a list of words that need to be used *more*?

I’m not advocating a sappy list of sappy platitudes like “love” and “peace” and “tolerance,” (those are *things* that we need more of; the *words* are thrown around plenty). Instead, I propose a list of words, that, through no fault of their own, have fallen into disuse. (David Galef’s “Plain Talk,” in this issue, touches upon this very subject.) I’m not advocating that all VERBATIM readers try to use *chum* in an unironic, non-shark-related way in the year 2001, but instead propose that some of the following be added to your daily or weekly vocabulary:

For instance, *mitify*, which means ‘to soften, mitigate’ hasn’t been used much lately (not since 1744) but seems ripe for a resurgence, if only to put in the way of those who can’t distinguish between *militate* and *mitigate*.

*Maronist*, ‘a disciple of the poet Virgil,’ seems to be a handy thing to call anyone who’s passed fourth-year Latin. If you know any such persons, feel free to spout this one off.

*Diffarreation*, a kind of Roman divorce, could be nicely extended to use about the celebrity divorces that seem to fill the news. “I don’t need

to hear any more about Meg Ryan’s *diffarreation*,” you could say, and certainly mean it. Since *confarreation* was the highest form of marriage among the ancient Romans, it seems apt to use both words to describe the joinings and disjoinings of the people who people the tabloids.

*Nidgery*, meaning ‘trifling, foppish,’ and *nifle*, ‘trifle,’ are both fine-sounding words to add to your language for 2001. I am sure that there will be no dearth of nidgery and nifling things, new millennium or no.

If you’ve tired of *anorectic* and *skeletal*, or that favorite of weight-loss ads, *trim*, perhaps *macilent* might cheer you up, especially if you’re facing a New Year’s diet. You can also use it to mean ‘lacking in substance.’ It’s a useful double-edged word; they won’t know if you’ve called them skinny or superficial!

*Afong* is a lovely, resounding word, meaning ‘to take’ or ‘to accept.’ “Certainly, I’d be happy to afong,” you say to an invitation or to a plate of little snacky things.

When you resolve to add words to your language you may not necessarily add concepts, but you certainly add different perspectives, different etymologies, different sound-shapes rolling in your mouth. And with these words (or any others marked *obs. rare* in your *OED* or *Chambers*) you are saving them from abandonment, certainly a noble cause. (Not incidentally, if these words are put in circulation again, there will be much revising of dictionary entries and consequently full employment for lexicographers!)

So, please send me your list of words you would like resurrected, and I will prepare a press release to gladden the black, despondent hearts of the Sunday-supplement editors next January. (For those unclear on the concept: do not, under any circumstances, write this magazine to suggest that “please,” “thank you,” and “excuse me” be restored to the language. Write *Miss Manners* instead.) Candidates can be sent, as always, by mail to either address on page 2, or by email to [editor@verbatimmag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimmag.com).

—Erin McKean



## Awesome Foursomes

Gloria Rosenthal  
Valley Stream, New York

Your task is to make a foursome of the three words in the first group by selecting one word from the second group that fits the series. There is a connection, sometimes obvious, sometimes less apparent, sometimes downright obscure.

Example: for the list “apple, Alaska, potato” your choices are: “Arizona, ziti, envelope.” Choose *ziti* (because “baked” can go before each word).

1. reach, slay, latch:  
think, reason, mull
2. stones, brook, slime:  
urge, push, slap
3. venue, bout, cross:  
cute, bright, small
4. pound, bellow, page:  
warden, convict, guard
5. novelties, marshmallow, decorations:  
cocoa, apricots, pasta
6. beggar, troller, hamster:  
sigh, nod, reveal
7. defendant, hijacker, student:  
nope, maybe, okay
8. demon, bosun, brewed:  
virtues, strengths, traits
9. mined, stressed, laced:  
cited, reward, honor
10. bus, bras, doe:  
cares, adores, dislikes
11. citation, cleave, trim:  
break, smash, shatter
12. derby, diary, devils:  
fight, revolt, surrender
13. May, June, iris:  
dogwood, diamond, rose
14. Waco, rind, gala:  
mice, rats, hamsters
15. age, hole, date:  
go, stay, put
16. Broadway, Newark, Colorado:  
Miami, Hollywood, Tennessee

## DACTYLOGIA

The border for this issue is Hf Hobofont™ 1.0, a font by Jonathan Macagba. This font reproduces authentic hobo symbols. The characters are intended to look like chalk-drawn symbols on a wood surface. The symbols used here mean (from left to right, repeating): *This way; Kind woman lives here—tell pitiful story; Good place for a handout; Fresh water—safe campsite; Food here if you work; Man with a gun lives here; Trolley stop; Doctor here won’t charge.* Hobofont is \$5 shareware; for more information see <http://www.adcrobatcs.com>.

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