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## *Wizard Words: The Literary, Latin, and Lexical Origins of Harry Potter's Vocabulary*

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The *Harry Potter* books, so mind-bogglingly popular in England, the United States, and all over the world, are not just good literature but a treasury of wordplay and invention. In naming her characters, beasts, spells, places, and objects, author J. K. Rowling makes use of Latin, French, and German words, poetic devices, and language jokes. It is not necessary to pick up on the wordplay to enjoy the series—indeed, it is unlikely that most young people, or adults for that matter, have noticed everything there is to notice. Rowling herself may not be sure of the origins of some of the vocabulary. She said in an amazon.com interview, “It is always hard to tell what your influences are. Everything you’ve seen, experienced, read, or heard gets broken down like compost in your head and then your own ideas grow out of that compost.”

### **Muggle: An Old Word, A New Word**

Even those who have not read a word of *Harry Potter* may, at this point, be familiar with the term *Muggle*, which is used to describe nonmagic people, places, and things. Literary agent Jane Lebowitz is quoted in *We Love Harry Potter* saying that *Muggle* has already become part of her family’s everyday vocabulary. This word is the most likely candidate from the series to become a permanent part of the English language, and is currently in consideration for inclusion in a future edition of the *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary*.

We first hear the word *Muggle* in the first book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* (*Philosopher’s Stone* in England—but in the interest of space, I won’t be discussing the texts of the American vs. English

editions). In chapter four, the friendly giant, Hagrid, shows up at Harry’s home to take him to wizard school, warning Harry’s Uncle Vernon not to get in the way:

“I’d like ter see a great Muggle like you stop him,” he said.

“A what?” said Harry, interested.

“A Muggle,” said Hagrid, “it’s what we call nonmagic folks like them. An’ it’s your bad luck you grew up in a family o’ the biggest Muggles I ever laid eyes on.”

So *Muggle* is not just a descriptive term, it’s a pejorative—an insult. And, as with stupidity or coarseness, there are degrees of Mugglehood.

(Naturally, a person can’t help being born Muggle or wizard, and in the fourth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the wizard community debates whether all Muggles are inherently bad. The darker wizard forces believe the wizard “race” to be superior, and want to wipe out all Muggles. Their logic is, of course, flawed, since Muggle parents can have wizard children—Harry’s friend Hermione Granger is one such *mudblood*. The reverse is also true: Argus Filch, caretaker at Hogwarts, tries to hide the fact that he is a *squib*, a wizard-born child who lacks wizard powers. A damp squib in English slang is a firework that fails to explode when lit, or a joke that fails to come off, or any enterprise that fails. Argus, by the way, is a hundred-eyed giant in Greek mythology, and *filch*, of course, is a slang term for the act of petty thieving.)

But back to *Muggle*. It turns out that Rowling did not invent the word, although she may not have been aware of its early meanings. It was the



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Kentish word for tail in the 13th century (also appearing as *moggle*) and, believe it or not, was English and American slang for marijuana as early as 1926 and as late as 1972. Mystery writers Raymond Chandler and Ed McBain used the word this way (“the desk clerk’s a muggle-smoker”; “Some kid was shoving muggles . . .”), and perhaps Louis Armstrong’s 1928 record “Muggles” made use of this meaning. A *muggle-head* was someone who smoked pot; a *mugger* was an addict.

Why does the word work so well to describe unwizardly culture? Perhaps because it echoes so many low, earthly words. In the 19th century, a *muggins* was a fool or simpleton. *Mugwort* and *mugweed* are names for the common plant also known as wormwood. *Muggle* sounds like a combination of *mud*, *muddle*, *mug* (a slang term for face or especially grimace; photographs of criminals are *mug-shots*), *bug* (the Buggles recorded “Video Killed the Radio Star” in 1979—but that seems beside the point), *Mugsy* (a common gangster nickname in film and television—also a character from Bugs Bunny cartoons, whose repeated line is “Duh, okay boss”), and *Mudville* (where Casey struck out). It’s difficult, in fact, to find an echo of anything airy or light in the word, so it’s a good one to describe regular, boring, non-magic aspects of life.

### Characters

Many of the less important characters in the series have alliterative, almost tongue-twister names. These include Harry’s nasty, gluttonous cousin Dudley Dursley; his fellow Hogwarts students Colin Creevey, Gladys Gudgeon, Cho Chang, and the twins, Parvati and Padma Patil; Poppy Pomfrey, the school nurse; Florean Fortescue, who owns the ice cream parlor; Peter Pettigrew, the rat *animagus* (a wizard who can turn into an animal at will—combination of *animal* and *mage* or *magus*, magician); and Bathilda Bagshot, author of the wizard textbook, *A History of Magic*. In the fourth book in the series, the rhyme goes internal: Rita Skeeter is the troublesome journalist who puts Harry in no small dan-

ger. “Miss Skeeter” echoes *mosquito*, a similarly bloodthirsty pest, and indeed, Skeeter is an animagus who takes the form of an insect. More wordplay: she uses this ability in order to *bug*—listen in on—conversations at the wizard school.

The four founders of Hogwarts also have alliterative names: Godric Gryffindor, Helga Hufflepuff, Rowena Ravenclaw, and Salazar Slytherin. It is for these characters that the four houses of the school are named: Gryffindor (for the brave—this is where Harry, Ron, and Hermione are placed), Hufflepuff (for the loyal), Slytherin (for the ambitious), and Ravenclaw (for the witty). A *griffin* or *gryphon*, by the way, is half lion, half eagle, and according to legend is the sworn enemy of the (sly and slithering) snake. And speaking of snakes, a snake named Nagina attacks Harry—this name echoes that of Nag, the cobra in Rudyard Kipling’s short story “Rikki-Tikki-Tavi.”

Harry and those close to him have less cartoonish names. Their names do not give them away. The Potters—Harry and his parents, James and Lily—share a surname with a neighbor family of Rowling’s girlhood. Harry’s friends Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger have non-coded names: Ron is extremely loyal, exhibiting no weasel-like qualities; Hermione has little in common with the daughter of Helen of Troy, nor with the Shakespeare character of the same name.

Many of the professors at Hogwarts, on the other hand, have particularly telling names. Severus Snape (*severe*, *snipe*, *snub*) is an unpleasant and strict teacher who keeps getting passed over for promotion. Vindictus Veridian (*vindictive*, green with jealousy) teaches a class on curses and counter-curses. Professor Sprout runs Herbology. Professor Quirrel is quarrelsome and squirrely. Alastor Moody (*alastor* is Greek for avenging deity) waits many years for his chance to take revenge. Gilderoy Lockhart, the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher in the second book, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, is vanity incarnate. Indeed, his name sounds like that of a character in a Harlequin romance. The



Gild in Gilderoy echoes *gilding the lily*, gratuitous excess—and also *gilt*, fake gold. Certainly Gilderoy is far from worthy of the love and adoration he feels for himself.

Harry's nemesis at school is Draco Malfoy, a name that screams evil: the first part sounds like *dragon* (and indeed, *draco* is Latin for dragon, and Draconian Law, named after the Athenian lawyer Draco, is known for its harshness), the second, like *malevolent*, *malignant*, or *malfeasance*. Also, *mal foi* is French for 'bad faith.' Draco's toadies are Crabbe and Goyle, echoes of *crab* (as in crabby, grumpy) and *gargoyle*. His father's name is Lucius, which echoes *Lucifer*, a name for the devil; his mother's name is Narcissa, as in *narcissistic*. (By the way: the Malfoys' elf-slave in the second book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, is named Dobby, an alternate term for *brownie*, or house elf, in certain parts of England.)

The most evil character of all, Voldemort, is usually identified simply as *he-who-must-not-be-named* or *you-know-who*—clearly, for many people, names have a certain power of their own. (Harry himself never subscribes to this belief.) Voldemort actually has several names; at one point he is known as Tom Marvolo Riddle, an anagram for "I am Lord Voldemort." Each piece of Voldemort's name, broken down, sounds rather unappealing: a *vole* is a rodent, and *mort* is Latin for death. If we treat the name as a loose anagram, we can also pull out *mole*, *mold*, and *vile*. *Vol de mort* is French for 'flight from death,' and indeed, Voldemort manages to escape death repeatedly.

So, names can give away the good or evil nature of a character—and, because nothing in the *Harry Potter* series is that simple, they can also fool you. Language scholars will not be too surprised to learn that Remus Lupin turns out to be a werewolf. According to legend, Romulus and Remus—the founders of Rome—were suckled by a wolf, and the Latin word for wolf is *lupus*. But those who know their plant life may associate him with the *lupin*, a pretty lilac-like

flower, and indeed, the Professor, despite his tendency to turn beastly at the full moon, is a good, harmless soul.

Similarly, Sirius Black (*serious*, *black*) has a name that makes him sound like a terrible villain and is assumed to be so for most of the third book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*. He turns out, however, to be quite the opposite. Black is an animagus who can take the form of a dog (which explains his nickname of Padfoot), and Sirius (Latin, 'burning') is the formal name for the dog star, the brightest star in the constellation Canis Major ('big dog').

Albus Dumbledore is another tricky one. Despite his name, he is most certainly not dumb. He is the "Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards" and the head of Hogwarts. *Albus* is Latin for white; *dumbledore* is an old English word for bumblebee.

Some of the animal names in the series allude to literary or historical characters. The cat who wanders the halls of Hogwarts is Mrs. Norris, very probably named after a character from Jane Austen, Rowling's favorite author. Like the cat, Fanny Price's Aunt Norris in *Mansfield Park* is a terrible busybody of unparalleled nosiness. Hermione's cat is Crookshanks, probably named after the 19th-century English caricaturist George Cruikshank, best known for his illustrations of fairy tales and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist*. (In the "Splendid Strolling" chapter of John Forster's *The Life of Charles Dickens*, Mr. Wilson tells Mrs. Gamp that it was "The great George . . . the Crookshanks" who escorted her into her carriage.) *Crookshanks* is also an old-fashioned insult meaning 'crooked shanks' or 'crooked legs.' In the translations of the *Harry Potter* books, Hermione's cat is named variations on this insult: *Krummbein* in German, *Knikkebeen* in Dutch, *Skeivskank* in Norwegian, and *Koukkujalka* in Finnish.

### Spells

Most of the spells in the *Harry Potter* books are based on English or Latin, and so the meanings are fairly straightforward. *Reducio!* (Latin





*reducere*) reduces the size of an object, for example. *Engorgio!* (Old French *engorgier*) engorges or enlarges it. *Reparo!* (Latin *reparare*) repairs. *Riddikulus!* (Latin *ridiculus*) turns an enemy—usually a Boggart—into something ridiculous or laughable. *Lumos!* (Latin *lumen*, ‘light’) causes illumination. *Impedimenta!* (Latin *impedimentum*) impedes or slows the enemy. *Sonorus!* (Latin *sonor*, ‘sound;’ English *sonorous*) causes one’s wand to become a microphone. *Stupefy!* (Latin *stupefacere*, *stupere*, ‘to be stunned’) stupefies the enemy, causing confusion. *Expelliarmus!* (Latin *expellere*, ‘to drive out’) expels your opponent’s wand from his or her hand.

And then there are the three spells that wizards are forbidden to use on each other: *Imperio!* (Latin *imperium*, ‘command;’ English *imperious*) gives total power. *Crucio!* (Latin *cruciere*, ‘to crucify or torture,’ from *crux*, ‘cross;’ English *excruciating*) causes pain; and *Avada Kedavra* is the death spell. This last term in Aramaic means ‘Let the thing be destroyed;’ it weirdly echoes the magic word every school child knows, *abracadabra*, but incorporates the sound of *cadaver*. (*Abracadabra* is an extremely old word of unknown origin. It may derive from the Aramaic; it may just be a nonsense sound. Another possibility is that the repeated *abras* stand for the first sounds of the Hebrew letters signifying Father, Son, and Holy Ghost: *Ab*, *Ben*, *Ruach*, and *Acadosch*. The first documented appearance of *abracadabra* is in a 2nd-century poem by Q. Severus Samonicus. It is still in use as a magical word today.) A fourth evil spell is *Morsmordre!* which sends the “dark mark”—a skull with a snake coming out of its mouth—into the sky. It is a combination of *mors*, Latin ‘death,’ and *mordre*, French ‘to bite.’ The word also echoes Mordred, the name of King Arthur’s illegitimate son and enemy, and Mordor, the evil area of Tolkien’s Middle Earth, “where the shadows lie.” Mordred and Mordor, in turn, echo *murder*.

There are, of course, a great many more spells beyond these, some used only once or twice in the entire series. *Furnunculus!* for exam-

# Light

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## The Quarterly of Light Verse


### Spelling Lesson

*Capitol spelled with an “o”  
Is where our legislators go.  
Capital spelled with an “a”  
Is what they legislate away.*

—JOYCE LA MERS

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ple, causes horrible boils to erupt all over a victim’s skin, and a *furunculus* (lacking the first *n* in the spell word) is a type of boil. *Tarantallegra!* (*tarantula*, ‘spider;’ *tarantella*, Spanish dance; *allegro*, musical term for ‘fast,’ from the Italian) causes the victim’s legs to dance uncontrollably. *Waddiwasi!* in one case sends a wad of gum out of a keyhole and up a particular victim’s nose. *Peskipiksi Pesternomi!* (“pesky pixies, pester not me”) is useful for handling Cornish pixies.

#### Places

Rowling has some of her greatest fun in naming places. The despicable Dursleys, Harry’s adoptive family, live in Little Whinging, Surrey (*whingeing* is British English for *whining*). Dudley Dursley (who is certainly a dud) proudly attends Smeltings School, which is a clever play on the idea of the finishing school, since to *smelt* is to refine, as in ore. *Smelt* as a noun is a type of fish, and as a verb is the British English past tense of *smell*. So Smeltings is a stinky finishing school, perfect for Dudley’s alma mater.



To meet his wizarding needs, Harry visits the shops in Diagon Alley (*diagonally*) and Knockturn Alley (*nocturnally*) before setting up residence at Hogwarts, the wizard school. Hogwarts, an inversion of *warthogs*, also contains the ideas of *hog* and *warts*—in fact, the first line of the school song is “Hogwarts, Hogwarts, Hoggy Warty Hogwarts.”

Other wizard schools are Beauxbatons (French for ‘beautiful wands’) and Durmstrang (an inversion of the German *Sturm und Drang*, ‘storm and stress,’ also the name of a German literary movement in the 18th century whose followers included Goethe and Schiller).

The name of *Azkaban*, the wizard jail, echoes that of Alcatraz, the supposedly inescapable American prison off the coast of San Francisco. Azkaban is guarded by Dementors (who can make you demented).

To travel from place to place, wizards may use Floo Powder, which transports them magically from one chimney flue to another. Perhaps Rowling was thinking of the old tongue-twister limerick, which goes, in one version:

A flea and a fly in a flue  
 Were caught, so what could they do?  
 Said the flea, “let us fly!”  
 Said the fly, “let us flee!”  
 So they flew through a flaw in the flue.

### **Other Stuff**

Wizard candies have the same kind of exuberant, lyrical names as those in Roald Dahl’s books. *Fizzing whizbies* are sherbet balls that make you levitate—strong echoes of the Fizzy Lifting Drink in *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. Everlasting Gobstoppers may not be available, but Hogwarts students do enjoy *Bertie Bott’s Every Flavor Beans* (in flavors including marmalade, spinach, liver, tripe, sprouts, toast, curry, grass, sardine, and earwax), *Drooble’s Best Blowing Gum*, *Chocolate Frogs*, *Pumpkin Pasties*, *Cauldron Cakes*, *Toothflossing Stringmints*, and *Pepper Imps*. Harry and his friends also drink frothy mugs of *butterbeer*, a play on *butterscotch* and *root beer*.

In sports, the Hogwarts students have *Quidditch*—a wizard form of soccer—involving *Bludgers* (who bludgeon), *Beaters* (who beat) and the *Golden Snitch*, which Harry, as *Seeker*, has to snatch out of the sky. To do this, he rides his Nimbus 2000 broomstick, *nimbus* meaning ‘radiant light,’ or a type of cloud.

Besides broomsticks, magical objects found around Hogwarts include the *Mirror of Erised*, which shows what you most desire. *Erised*, of course, is *desire* backward. Harry sees his parents in the mirror and briefly believes them to be alive, until he figures out the secret of the mirror. Hermione, Ron, and Harry make use of a *Polyjuice* potion, which changes them into other shapes; *poly* means many, as in *polyglot* (many languages) or *polygamy* (many spouses). The *Remembrall* is a crystal-ball-like device that turns red when one has forgotten to do something; it is a ball that helps you remember all. And *Spellotape*—a sticky substance used to mend wands and so on—is a play on *Sellotape*, a British brand of cellulose (American *Scotch*) tape. Other magical objects include *Mrs. Skower’s* [scours] *All-Purpose Magical Mess Remover*, the *Pocket Sneakoscope*, the *Put-Outer*, and the *Revealer* (the opposite of an eraser).

### **Passwords**

Along with learning spells and the names of magical objects, wizards-in-training have to memorize passwords. To get into the common room of Gryffindor House at Hogwarts, Harry must pass the Fat Lady, a talking portrait of a woman in a pink dress who usually makes up the passwords. Her choices include the fairly simple *banana fritters*, *pig snout*, and *wattlebird* along with the more evocative *balderdash* and *flibbertigibbet*. *Balderdash* in the 16th century was a jumbled mixture of liquors, but by the 17th century it had come to mean a jumbled mixture of words, and by the 19th it meant obscene language. *Flibbertigibbet*, too, was a 16th century representation of meaningless chatter; it also meant a chattering person, more specifically a prattling woman, or—now quite obsolete—it could be the



name of a devil or demon (in Act III, scene iv, of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*; Edgar speaks of “the foul fiend Flibbertigibbet,” who “hurts the poor creature of earth”).

For a time, when the Fat Lady is out of commission, another portrait is in charge, a knight named Sir Cadogan; his passwords include *scurvy cur* and *oddsbodkins*. This last is an exclamation meaning God’s body, ‘*od*’ being a minced form of *God* (like *gee* for *Jesus*) which came into vogue around 1600. Exclamations of the period included *od’s blood*, *od’s body*, *od’s bones*, *od’s wounds*, and so on, which turned into *od’s bob*, *od’s bodikins*, *odsbodlikins*, *odspittikens*, *odskilderkins*, *odzounds*, and so on. (Sir Cadogan, by the way, is a real person in British history. His portrait shows him with hair secured in back by a ribbon. *Cadogan* became the word for this hairstyle.)

In much the same way as these words serve as passwords to gain entrance into the private rooms of Hogwarts, the invented vocabulary and word-play of the *Harry Potter* books serve as passwords for us Muggles to gain entrance into the wizard world. Someday, perhaps, we will have an annotated version of the *Harry Potter* books (like the annotated *Alice in Wonderland* or *Wizard of Oz*), explaining and expanding on the lexical origins of wizard vocabulary. For now, however, we have to make do with the unwitting collaborative efforts of *Harry Potter* fans all over the world creating websites and writing articles on the subject.

[*Jessy Randall’s last article for VERBATIM was “Blah, Blah, Blah, Etcetera” in XXV/4.*]



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Paving program in Port Allegany should mean smoother sailing [*Headline in the Bradford (Pa.) Era, March 6, 2001. Submitted by Chuck Crouse, Kane, Pennsylvania.*]



## Proverbs Up-to-Date

Graeme Garvey  
Leeds, West Yorkshire

Proverbs, being traditional sayings, throw light on a culture’s attitudes and beliefs. They have been popular both down the centuries and the world over. References abound throughout literature. Just one example is Miguel de Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*, which makes copious references to Spanish proverbs, using them to add weight and authority. Since a proverbial reference has generally been taken to express a supposed truth or moral lesson, it has usually been made with the intent of guiding or commenting on people’s actions.

We have a problem of cultural identity in Britain right now, however, and one manifestation of it is the decreasing familiarity that Britons, especially the younger ones, have with proverbs. To many they seem obscure and old-fashioned. Society has changed greatly in the latter years of the twentieth century, and technology proffers a shining path. There are so many novelties to please and entertain us. What need have we of these odd expressions? Fearing the dire consequences of “information overload” we jettison old things in order to accommodate the new. Further, there is an almost gleeful ignorance of things past amongst young Britons (or *Brits*). A handy illustration is the hugely popular television series *Big Brother* that gripped much of the nation last year. Not only did few younger people seem to know where the programme’s idea or title came from, but also, they could not have cared less once told. The referent is thus lost and the reference, in this case to Orwell, becomes merely the name.

So proverbs are just going to have to change with the times to survive, I reckon. They are going to have to learn to adapt. That way, they will emerge leaner and fitter. Consequently, I wish to propose, in a modest way, how and where we might bring them up-to-date.





The victory of superficiality over depth must be conceded. In our modern world, the surface is everything. Film, television, magazines, newspapers, e-mail, and text-messaging all demand a dimensional reduction. Depth has to go, and this is true in all ways—bodily and intellectually. In the age of the soundbite, things need to be catchy, upfront, and possibly even in-your-face. A number of proverbs lend themselves usefully to adaptation, for instance: *Beauty is skin deep!*—*Official*. This is a confident affirmation of facts, clearly backed by the latest research. “Official” gives it sanction. A close cousin of the above would be, *Beauty is in the eye of the editor*. Without the fashion gurus to light our way, how could we hope to decide for ourselves? Since depth has ceased to count any more, truly *all that glitters is as good as gold*. This new proverb handily recycles two old saws.

It is so hard to know whom to trust. If we can no longer rely on people actually being truthful just because they say they are, we end up trusting someone with an honest face. What a let-down if the hero-figures are finally caught out, be they a presidents or international cricket captains found guilty of taking bribes. When all else has failed, then *honesty is the last resort of the scoundrel*. People can be made to face the truth, literally, in the same way that chairs have come to face the television in most good homes. Many of us are hypnotically drawn to that outer world. We respond to its promptings and stimuli. If a catastrophe happens, how could we know about it without the media? How would we know we had to help without an appeal and a hotline number? Therefore, rightly, *charity begins on TV*. And while we are on the subject, television has no time for modesty. Isn’t it only right to tell the world about good things too? In which case, even *one good turn deserves publicity*. Most certainly *no news is bad news* as far as the media is concerned. It is hard to imagine a front page with blank spaces and an apology from the editor, lamely saying, “Sorry, not much has happened lately.”

One of the problems in trying to explain the past to younger people is that it seems so illogical to them. In the following case, the verb needs stressing because, for many, *silence is boring*. Similarly, as everyone knows, *a rolling stone gathers speed*. That is what stones do once they begin rolling. Moss is a mere side issue.

Things today move fast. The pace of life, yoked to a worldly-wise common sense, leads us now to conclude that those who *marry in haste, repent in haste* also. That same, modern cynicism, this time coupled to advances in technology, leaves those in agriculture wondering how to fill all that spare time. The weather forecast having been watched, what to do? *Red light at night, shepherd’s delight!* Or perhaps not. Haymaking, though, does not soak up the working day as it formerly did, so why not *drink beer while the sun shines?* The grasshopper was simply ahead of his time. It is a truer representation of the real world, one which sees things for what they are. If you *try with all of your might*, do you have to bother with all of your main, too?

Britain, when it can be bothered, is halfheartedly agonising over monetary union with Europe at the moment. How can you decide on anything when you have lost your sense of direction? The mess over metrication does not inspire confidence, but it may be only a matter of time before people come to accept that we are *centimetrising ahead* on this. It might take some while for *a miss is as good as 1.609344 kilometres* to gain universal acceptance and, until we are fixed to the single currency, *in for a penny, in for a variable number of ecus* seems somehow unsatisfactory.

Britain’s prospects of becoming one with Europe might well suffer a physical setback with global warming. *Still, waters run deep*, so that will be a major boost for the water sports industry throughout the British Archipelago of Isles. Somebody, somewhere, tends to benefit from the misfortunes of others (they used to say), but certainly it was *an ill wind that blew nobody any good from Chernobyl*.





In all this confusion we must follow the television—our guide, philosopher, and friend. Through its true-to-life dramas we learn that invariably *where there's a will, there's a feud*. From it, we can learn how to cook properly, via the numberless food programmes. The only possible caveat being *too many cooks spoil the show*. The television might have only one eye, but what an eye! So wise. It even lets us know, thanks to canned laughter and the helpful studio audience, what is funny. Judging by them, *he laughs best who laughs loudest*.

The great thing about these new proverbs is how well they suit the modern world. And when the world has moved on again? Easy, we can throw them out and make up some even newer ones.

*[Graeme Garvey teaches English to teenagers in Harrogate and is relieved to have made it out of the twentieth century.]*



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

“You came within a hare’s breath of being remanded,” Pauley said to Lino, who prosecutors say is a Bonanno family capo. *[From the New York Daily News, March 23, 2001. Submitted by Maary-Louise Bean, Guilford, CT.]*



Blood flow may be critical to female sexual response, but it’s not the whole shebang. *[From Modern Maturity, March/April 2001. Submitted by Patrick J. Sullivan, MD, Chicago, Illinois.]*

### Are you moving?

Be sure to notify VERBATIM of any address changes. Call, email, or write with your new address as soon as possible.

## **An Alphetaphile’s Outrage** *Wherein Caedmon’s ancestors blunder and we pay the price*

Dennis Mills  
Toronto, Ontario

When the English language began to emerge sometime around the sixth century A.D., the lexical authorities either forgot or, more likely, never thought of naming its letters. For example, the letter *a* has no name, nor do most letters. Yes, dictionaries list *aitch* (a word with an uncertain history), but almost all the other letters’ names either don’t exist or are a dog’s breakfast of offerings.

In England, the Jutes, Angles, and Saxons were probably too busy committing carnage or helping Romans decamp to create a useful slate. (Evidently, the language of the declining and departing Empire wasn’t included in the exodus, because the Venerable Bede translated Caedmon’s poetry into Latin for the hardback crowd.) Whatever the cause of this tag-dubbing omission—and call them what you will: appellations, designations, labels, monikers—our letters didn’t get names, and writers and editors have had to deal with the mess ever since.

Phoenicians, the gang who created the beginnings of our alphabet, passed theirs to the Greeks, who added vowels and named their letters  $\alpha$  (alpha),  $\beta$  (beta), etc. Records of that language pre-date ours by nearly a millennium, and Hebrew, which is almost as old, named its letters, too. Latin’s inventors, who adopted and adapted the Greek alphabet, didn’t bother with names or punctuation. Nor did they hasten to devise lowercase letters. Although half uncials showed up in the magnificent *Lindisfarne Gospels* (seventh century) and *Book of Kells* (eighth century), the big moment finally came when Charlemagne asked Alcuin of York, in A.D. 789, to spend the rest of his life at the Monastery of Tours creating the cursive script we now know as Carolingian Minuscule. And it was that form, together with runes, German Gothic, and Roman capitals that



mixed for 500 years and yielded our alphabet. But still no names.

To beef up its vocabulary, English has never had scruples about swiping words from other languages; it adopts them with abandon. (Only a quarter of our words have their origins in Old English.) And we invent words at a startling pace. So why are our letters minus a nomenclature?

Among modern Western language enthusiasts and abecedarians, some Spaniards pretend their letters are named *a*, *be*, *ce*, and a few Portuguese bluff with *á*, *bê*, *cê*, but these look too suspiciously like phonetic transliterations to be taken seriously. German, Italian, French, Finnish, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, and Hungarian have no names—or so few as to be worthless. In English, assorted dictionaries offer *ae*, *ay*, or *eh* in their attempts to name the letter *a*. Other letters are similarly spelled as phonetic sounds or phonemes (*eff*, *em*, *wye*) or as prefixes (*ex*) or suffixes (*ess*) or by creating neologisms (*double-u*).

What adds to the puzzle is that we have names for cardinal numbers: *one*, *two*, etc., and their ordinals: *first*, *second*, *third*; we label punctuation marks: *period*, *comma*, *semi-colon* (and who can forget Victor Borge's *interrobang*?); a medley of typographical devices are called *ampersand*, *apostrophe*, *asterisk*, and even *tilde*; and the dot on the letter *i* is termed *tittle*. Is all this just some pathetic offering in atonement for the original blunder?

Thanks (or not) to our language founders' dereliction or indifference, wordsmiths have been forced to improvise solutions or create bizarre systems. Aspiring stylists have devised sundry techniques, which range from almost workable to ugly: italics (*a*), bold (**b**), caps (C), quotation marks ('d' or "d"), or various combinations of these.

The *Chicago Manual of Style* suggests lower-case italics: *a*, *b*, *c*, etc.; but *The Globe and Mail Style Book* recommends lower-case letters in roman. However, if we want to specify the sound of a letter, do we write "the sound of *k*" (which

could be mistaken for the sound *ck*) or "the sound *kay*"? And look what happens with plurals: Mind your *p*'s and *q*'s; there were three *bs* (or *b*'s or *B*s); Children learn their *ABC*s—or is that *ABC*'s?

Letters, of course, have other applications. An MD might send an IOU; A-frames are built with I-beams in U-shaped valleys; buildings can have ell extensions; a road can have a T-junction or an S-curve; and A can sue B. Mathematicians speak in letters, not words; and in music, A has no lack of status: worldwide, every night, when an oboe sounds that note, every instrument in every symphony orchestra joins in a mighty, swelling, glorious reverberation.

Samuel Finley Breese Morse created a set of signals for letters; other semaphores use flags and mechanical arms; and sundry codes have been invented for computers, espionage, and security. But with letters qua letters: why are they not named? It's not as if English has lost the names, as has happened with so many words; letters' names (runes aside) were never there to lose. To compound the mystery: humans have a habit of naming things, especially important things. When God says, "I am Alpha and Omega" (Rev. 22:13), that sounds astonishingly important. Thank heavens William Tyndale or King James I's minions didn't turn that into "I am A and Z."

So, nameless things are what? Irrelevant? Unimportant? (Do unnamed letters reveal early evidence of our victim-prone, self-esteem-seeking society?) Or are innominates too sacred for words, pace YHWH or JHVH? To put another spin on it, stores once sold no-name brands, but they just became another label. At which point, one enterprise switched from no-name to *President's Choice*. Go figure.

Of course, if the Greeks had opted for hieroglyphics or cuneiform, each with 600-odd signs, or if Homer's descendants had not lost their earlier language—an act that can only (charitably) be described as careless—we might be speaking and writing almost anything. Which some might argue is exactly what we do.



Therefore, like Don Quixote in pursuit of dreams, or Ludwig Zamenhof's championing of Esperanto, language lovers could create a dazzling docket for their third-millennium project. Although *aitch* and *izzard* (another name for *zed* or *zee*) are entries in both the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Merriam-Webster's*, those rubrics don't tip any scale that measures elegance. Ergo, contributors' attention to grace and sophistication will be applauded, and their efforts will be graded *A*, *B*, or *F*.

Just sign with an *X*. OK?

[Dennis Mills is a freelance editor in Toronto.

A version of this article appeared earlier in Canada's Quill and Quire magazine.]

## EPISTOLAE

In VERBATIM XXV/1, Naftali Wertheim suggests that the mystery Thai word Sol Saporta alludes to that foreign learners avoid using is *fuk*, meaning the vegetable 'squash.' I think Mr. Wertheim is half-remembering an article I wrote about interesting Thai words and expressions ["Bespeaking a Muse or What?" XXI/4] where I said *fuk tong*, literally "squashed gold," is the Thai for 'pumpkin.'

Learners of Thai are far more likely to encounter *fuk hat*, however, which means 'to practice.' I've found that Thais tend to avoid using it more than learners of Thai!

Cordially,

Paul Blackford  
Bangkok



This issue [XXVI/1] is one of the very best ever. Thank you for Laurence Urdang and Nick Humez especially, as well as all the other interesting items. It is lovely not to have to plow through a technical article on the linguistics of a language one probably never will encounter. (I know, those articles have their place, but this issue was pure fun.)

Julie May  
Los Angeles

## CLASSICAL BLATHER

### *-ists, -ites, and Other Ends*

Nick Humez

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In a letter to the editor of the *New York Times Book Review*, published on Feb. 18, 2001, Harold Tickin of Cleveland, Ohio, took to task the author of an article in an earlier issue for referring to followers of the philosophy practiced by the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan as *Reaganites*. The suffix *-ite*, the correspondent claimed, has a negative connotation; a more neutral and therefore more correct term for such conservatives would be *Reaganists*. While fanciful, this distinction got us to wondering about these two suffixes, and some others. Are *-ite* and *-ist* essentially interchangeable, conveying only "a distinction without a difference?"<sup>1</sup>

Etymologically, the latter is Greek, while the former is sometimes Greek and sometimes from or through Latin. Two Greek sources for words ending in *-ist* derive from verbs: the noun-ending *-isté*s (the *e* is an eta, not an epsilon—that is, it is long rather than short) comes from verbs whose present tense includes the theme-consonant *-z-*, such as *baptizein*, "to baptize." Many such verbs, particularly those connected with religion, have been borrowed more or less intact into English, and retain the *-z-*: *proselytize*, *evangelize*, and so on.) A Sophist, from the Greek adjective *sophistes*, originally meant a specialist in *sophia* ('wisdom') though when the followers of the rhetorical philosopher Protagoras dubbed themselves by this term it provoked reactions ranging from mirth to contempt on the part of fifth-century Athenians. (The verb *sophizein* has not, perhaps regrettably, come down to us as *\*sophize*,<sup>2</sup> but we do have a verb whose meaning is sort of similar, and no less scornful, "to wise around.")

The suffix *-ist* can also denote the object of an action, likewise derived from a verb: *chrein* is Greek for 'anoint'—ecclesiastical circles still





speak of *chrism* as the act of anointing—and hence *christos* simply means ‘anointed,’ though it came to be used exclusively with a capital *C* to denote Christ as the Messiah (which also means the same thing, being a transliteration of Aramaic *mashiah* and cognate with Arabic *meshiha*.)

It is the former type of verb which gives us Baptist—not merely one who has been baptized (most Christians are, sooner or later) but a follower or practitioner of that brand of Protestantism that believes in the baptism of consenting adults. This is the *-ist* in *evangelist* as well (literally, one who is in the business of announcing good news (*eu-*, ‘good-’ plus *-angellein*, ‘to announce, be a herald’—whence *angel*). By analogy, the suffix also appears in *Seventh-Day Adventist*,<sup>3</sup> *Spiritualist*,<sup>4</sup> and *Unitarian-Universalist*<sup>5</sup>—indeed, as the ending indicating an adherent of any of a multitude of belief systems (heretical and otherwise), such as *atheism*, *solipsism*, *socialism*, *nationalism*, *hedonism*, *Epicureanism*, *Zoroastrianism*, *Gnosticism*, *Catharism*, *Jansenism*, *Mesmerism*, and *Ubuism*.<sup>6</sup> It also transcends etymological boundaries, giving rise to such hybrid job descriptions or pastimes as *jurist*, *cartoonist*, *lutenist*, *sitarist*, and *canoeist*.<sup>7</sup>

There is another Greek *-istos* which is a superlative suffix corresponding to English *-est* (e.g., *megas*, ‘great’ gives *megistos*, ‘greatest’) but its appearance in our tongue is usually in disguise and often filtered through Latin. Thus we read of the legendary Hermes Trismegistus (Hermes thrice-greatest), whose second name a fictional new father of high-minded Enlightenment principles intended to bestow on his child, but somewhere between the first floor and the second it got misremembered by a maidservant—whence the title of Laurence Sterne’s *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy*. The adjective *megistos* also survives in the name given by the Arabs, through whom it was transmitted to Christendom, to the treatise on astronomy originally written in Greek by Claudius Ptolemaeus: the *Almagest*, which firmly codified the geocentric worldview until it

unravalled in the face of anomalous observations and proliferating sub-theories around the time of Copernicus in the fifteenth century.<sup>8</sup>

The suffix *-ite*, when denoting a person, also derives from the Greeks (*-ités*, again with an eta), for whom it meant someone who lived in a certain place (an *eremités*, ‘hermite, hermit’ was someone who lived in a desert or wilderness (*eremia*) or came from a given tribe or country.) Hence many names of societies or peoples were given this ending when the Old Testament came to be translated into Greek in the version known as the *Septuagint* (so called from the threescore-and-ten scholars who worked on the project, *septuaginta* being Latin for ‘seventy.’). It is for this reason that Aramaic *Hitti* (Anatolian *Hatti*) became Hittite, *Emori* became Amorite, the descendants of *Lewi* became the Levites, and the children of *Israel* the Israelites. By extension, the *-ite* suffix got attached to the names of founders of movements, much like *-ist*: Luddites, Mennonites, Owenites, Millerites, and so on.<sup>9</sup>

A second kind of *-ite*, like the first kind of *-ist*, comes from the fourth principal part (the so-called *supine*) of Latin verbs whose theme-vowel is *i*. This is a common suffix<sup>10</sup> in the nomenclature of minerals—*Alexandrite*, *Labradorite*, *pegmatite*, *granite*, *lignite hematite*, *graphite*, *quartzite*, *steatite*, *diorite*,<sup>11</sup> etc.—and chemical compounds, in which it is in contradistinction with *-ate* to indicate one less oxygen atom in the negatively-charged radical. Thus sulfur compounds that are sulfites end in an *-SO<sub>3</sub>* radical (e.g. copper sulfite, *Cu<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>3</sub>*), but sulfates in *-SO<sub>4</sub>*. (Similarly, the nitrate of potassium, better known as saltpeter, is *KNO<sub>3</sub>*; there is also a potassium nitrite, which is *KNO<sub>2</sub>*.) The suffix *-ide* is used to indicate a negative radical of an atom per se, without oxygen or other frills. So a *sulfide* ends in just sulfur: copper sulfide is *Cu<sub>2</sub>S*, and hydrogen sulfide, that staple end-product of high school chemistry stinkbombs, is *H<sub>2</sub>S*. Similarly, bromides end in bromine (silver bromide, a component of photographic emulsions, is *AgBr*), nitrides





in nitrogen (copper nitride is  $\text{Cu}_3\text{N}$ ), and fluorides in fluorine: stannous fluoride, the active ingredient in most fluoride toothpastes, is  $\text{SnF}_2$ , not to be confused with stannic fluoride ( $\text{SnF}_4$ ).

And why *-ous* versus *-ic*? Because some metals, tin (Sn) among them, can have different valences, or electrical charge units, depending on what compounds they're in. Iron (Fe), for example, can have either a valence of two (indicated as  $\text{Fe}^{++}$ ) or three ( $\text{Fe}^{+++}$ ). The higher valence is designated by *-ic* (from the Greek adjectival suffix *-ikos*, as in *Hellenikos*, 'Greek,' borrowed into Latin as *-icus*): Ferrous chloride, or *lawrencite*, is  $\text{FeCl}_2$ ; ferric chloride is  $\text{FeCl}_3$ .<sup>12</sup> One might suppose that *-ous* (from the Latin suffix *-osus*, meaning 'full of'<sup>13</sup>) would designate the higher valence, but no.

In its ordinary English sense, *-ic* simply means "of," as in *scientific* nomenclature, *Gallic* wit, or the *Mohorovicic* discontinuity. The apparent stammer in this last name, used adjectivally, made for double takes when it first came into use, in the late 1950s, to refer to an apparent density boundary between layers in the earth's crust, discovered by sonar, which seemed much deeper beneath continents than under the ocean floor. The geological anomaly's comparative shallowness underseas (only four miles beneath the ocean floor) spurred scientists to obtain funding for a long-term drilling project to bore what was promptly dubbed "the mohole," just to find out what *was* down there. As it happened, the project was rendered moot by the emergent plate tectonic theory a decade later, the discontinuity being explained away as the underside of the moving plates of the lithosphere. And the puzzle of the two *-ics* proved to be due only to another boundary, the one between the adjectival *-ic* and the surname of the scientist for whom the layer was named: Mohorovic, a patronymic whose final consonant—pronounced *-vitch*—had lost its haček<sup>14</sup> while crossing the border between Slavic and English orthography.



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#### Notes:

1 I am obliged to classicist Jane Cates for calling my attention to the *NYTBR* letter, and thus for the genesis of this column. The quote is from Federal-period playwright Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, the third play ever produced in New England, subscribers to whose initial printing included President George Washington (two copies). It is uttered by the foppish valet Jessamy in response to his opposite number, Col. Manly's comic-Yankee aide-de-camp Jonathan, bristling at being called the colonel's "servant" rather than his "waiter."

2 I here follow the linguists' convention of marking unattested forms by preceding them with an asterisk. I am indebted to Dr. Timothy Renner, chair of the Department of Classics and General Humanities at Montclair State University in New Jersey, for a very helpful discussion on March 5, 2001 of the first two types of Greek-derived *-ist* suffixes during a lull in a nasty nor'easter.

3 Seventh-Day Adventism is the lineal successor to an apocalyptic cult founded by one William Miller, an American rural mystic whose painstaking biblical analysis concluded that the Second Coming of Jesus would take place sometime during a one-year-period beginning in March of 1843. The movement attracted numerous followers, dubbed the Millerites, not all of whom abandoned the faith when the global catastrophe failed to materialize. For a fascinating hands-on description of a 20th-century end-of-the-world cult and its durability of belief in spite of disconfirming evidence, see Festinger et al.'s controversial sociological study, *When Prophecy Fails* (Harper & Row, 1956). Seventh-Day Adventism continued to thrive, observing a Saturday sabbath, practicing a regimen of temple-of-the-body abstention from coffee, alcohol, tobacco, and other toxins, and running excellent hospitals in several cities and towns such as Brunswick, Maine.



4 Spiritualism enjoyed a robust following in the late 19th century, and although the National Association of Spiritualists was not formed until 1893, local groups were active a generation earlier. Thomas Bassett, in his history of religion in the Green Mountain state, *The Gods of the Hills* (Vermont Historical Society, 2000), states that although believers were “sprinkled thinly over the whole state,” they had their own newspaper, the *Banner of Light*, which carried the most extensive reports on the Rutland Free Convention of radical reformers (including abolitionists) during the religious revival of 1858. The denomination began holding its own annual statewide conventions after the Civil War, and by 1880 had raised the money to buy Queen City Park in Burlington from the Vermont Central Railroad, which it then managed, according to Bassett, as “a sort of camp meeting center,” with “no-liquor, no-gambling grounds; forenoons free to ‘all who wish to express their ideas on any progressive subject’; speakers and séances in the evenings.”

5 Unitarianism in the United States began as a liberal movement within the Congregationalists (now, United Church of Christ), resulting in the formation of the American Unitarian Association in 1825; as the name implies, Unitarians do not believe in a triune God and hence reject the notion that Jesus was uniquely God incarnate. Universalism, founded in the 18th century, was so called from the belief that an infinitely merciful God would save all people from damnation (a view covertly held through the years by some members of other churches as well, such as Anglicans Isaac Newton and Lewis Carroll). The two sects formally merged in 1961. The suffix *-(i)an* is a common Latin adjectival ending (e.g. *Roma*, ‘Rome’ yields *romanus*, ‘Roman’), and was pejoratively added to the Latinized form of the Messiah’s Greek name to label adherents of the upstart Eastern cult as *Christiani*.

6 Solipsism combines the Latin adjective *solus* (‘alone’) with the pronoun *ipse* (‘oneself’). Greek *hédoné* (etas both) means ‘pleasure,’ and is related to the adjective *hédys*, ‘sweet;’ Epicurus has been sold rather short by being dismissed as a mere hedonist, as readers of his surviving writings may see for themselves. (A *Harvard Classics* volume conveniently includes excerpts of his work sandwiched between several of the better-known dialogues of Plato and the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius.) Zoroastrianism, the state religion of the Persian empire and its Parthian successors from the 6th century B.C. on, was named for Zarathustra and centered on the worship of Ahura-Mazda, creator of the world, source of light, and the embodiment of good (and as such the opponent of the archdemon of darkness, Ahriman, whose name probably comes from Avestan *anra mainyu*, ‘evil spirit’). Gnosticism was an early form

of Christianity which promulgated a doctrine of gradations of sacred wisdom (from Greek *gnosis*, ‘knowing’) and thus for the main-line church uncomfortably close to Greek-style mystery cults like those of Demeter or Orpheus. Catharists (from Greek *katharos*, ‘clean, undefiled’) combined features of Gnosticism (there were ranks of membership) and Manicheanism (itself owing a good deal to Zoroastrian dualism) in their belief that the universe was embroiled in a conflict between spiritual forces (led by God) and material ones (led by Satan) and that an ascetic life was the path to salvation. The sect, also known in France as the Albigenses, was active in the Middle Ages until ruthlessly suppressed by St. Dominic and his followers in the 15th century. Jansenism, named for the 17th-century Dutch theologian Cornelis Jansen, was a puritan movement within the Roman Catholic Church which denied free will, proclaimed the total depravity of humankind, and embraced predestination. Its adherents included the mathematician Blaise Pascal. Mesmerism took its name from Franz Mesmer, an Austrian physician who discovered that people could be hypnotized. It was also known as animal magnetism and was a source of fascination in parlors and consulting rooms down to the beginning of the 20th century, with such divergent practitioners as the young Sigmund Freud and an even younger Mary Baker Eddy. Ubuism seems to have nothing to do with the title character of *Ubu Roi*, Alfred Jarry’s scurrilous burlesque of *Macbeth* which so scandalized Paris during the “Banquet Years” preceding the first World War. This exotic belief system would be utterly unknown to me save that I chanced to spot a small card with white lettering on a black background, thumbtacked to the wall of a lavatory shared by several units in an old-fashioned apartment house in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in the early 1960s and assuring the reader (in French) that “Happiness is not the recompense of Ubuism, but Ubuism itself.—Mutembi.” If there is any reader who can possibly shed more light upon this tantalizing clue, I would be most grateful.

7 The stems are respectively from Latin (*ius/iuris*, “law”), Italian (*cartone*, ‘(fresco) painter’s/tapestry-weaver’s plan,’ the intensifier *-one* being added to *carta*, ‘chart, plan, map’), Arabic (*a lute* is from *al ‘ūd*, the ‘ūd being an oud, a stringed instrument with a round belly and a neck, still widely performed upon in the Middle East and northern Africa), Hindi/Urdu (*sitar* is cognate with Greek *kithara*, whence also medieval English *cittern* and modern *guitar*), and Arawak (*canoa*, as the invading Spaniards rendered it, being the name used by natives of the West Indies for their smallest watercraft).

8 The story of how an earth-centered cosmology was supplanted by a sun-centered one is briefly discussed in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (University of Chicago Press, 1962; revised edition 1970) and



described in much fuller detail in *The Copernican Revolution* (Harvard University Press, 1961), both by the ground-breaking science historian Thomas Kuhn.

9 While there is no intrinsic stigma attached to this suffix, it's possible that calling a group Brighamites instead of the Church of the Latter-Day Saints, or Gingrichites as opposed to Social Nationalists, may indeed have the effect of robbing those so designated of some of the cachet they might hope for by choosing their own name and having it stick, since it tends to reduce a broader movement to the ideas and charisma of a single eponymous founder. Ned Lud(d) gave his name to the Luddites, who destroyed textile machinery between 1811 and 1816 in a fruitless attempt to hold back the inevitable degradation of the small-craft hand-worker into the industrial wage slave; Mennonites are evangelical Protestant followers of Menno Simons (1492–1559), many of whom emigrated from Europe to more tolerant Pennsylvania on account of their refusal to swear oaths or join armies. Owenites were 19th-century socialists on the model set by a Welsh admirer of the utopian theories of François Marie Charles Fourier, Robert Owen. Owen's New Lanark mill was an early and moderately successful experiment in social engineering, though its New World imitations, such as Bronson Alcott's Fruitlands and Brook Farm (immortalized satirically in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*), tended to fail ignominiously. (For the Millerites, see note 3.)

10 There is, however, one instance of the second sort of *-ist* turning up in a mineral name: *schist*, the term for any metamorphic rock which cleaves along thin planes, such as mica, from the same Greek verb for 'splitting' which gives us *schism* and *schizophrenia*. But in any case one couldn't very well call it *\*schite*, at least not in decent company. In this connection Sir John Harington's *Metamorphosis of Ajax* (Richard Field [London], 1596; modern edition ed. by Elizabeth Story Donno, Columbia University Press, 1962) at one point coyly refers to a privy as "a shooting place writ with Pythagoras[']s letter," alluding to the Crotona Pythagoreans' use of Greek upsilon (Y) to symbolize the divergent paths of virtue and vice.

11 Pegmatite, from Greek *pegma/pegmata* ('something that fastens something else together') is a kind of coarse granite typically found as veins shooting through surrounding country rock; lignite, a form of coal which often shows the grain of the original wood (Latin *lignum*) from which it formed, is midway in hardness between bituminous coal (from Latin *bitumen*, 'mineral pitch, asphalt') and anthracite (from Greek *anthrax*, 'coal'). The *hema-* of hematite is from Greek *haima*, meaning 'blood,' as the iron-rich mineral weathers to a reddish earth. Steatite is so called because it feels greasy,

*stear* being Greek for 'hard fat' (compare *steatopygia*, 'having (egregiously) fat(-storing) buttocks,' a naturally-selected survival trait among some peoples and manifest from Ice Age Europe in the famous figurine called the Venus of Willendorf). This talc-bearing mineral is more commonly known as soapstone, and was variously used by contractors in the early 1900s for laundry sinks and by hippies in the 1960s for carved objets d'art. Diorite, a hard, black igneous rock with fine crystalline structure, comes from Greek *diorizein*, 'to distinguish,' itself a compound of *dia-*, 'through, apart,' plus *horizein*, 'to define,' the *horizon* being the line which sets off earth from sky; the durability of this stone accounts for the survival of such important archaeological survivals as the 2,750-year-old Code of Hammurabi, which was carved on a diorite pillar surmounted by a bas-relief of the Babylonian king receiving the laws from the hand of Shamash, the god of the sun and of justice.

12 My source for much of this information about the nomenclature of chemistry is the 1962 edition of the perennial *Handbook of Chemistry and Physics*, published by the Chemical Rubber Publishing Company of Cleveland, Ohio, and hence affectionately known to science wonks as the "Rubber Bible." Together with the *C.R.C. Tables*, it is the core of any physical science reference shelf.

13 The suffix *-ous* retains its 'full of' connotation in English as well. Its opposite, Latin *-ulus*, 'little' survives almost exclusively in borrowed words such as *miniscule*, but some nouns retain the diminutive suffix *-et(te)*, which is also from (late) Latin via Italian and French, in preference to Germanic *-ling* or *-kin*. So we speak of *suffragettes* (called *suffragists* in England) *baronets* and *coronets*, Victorian-era maidens' *pantalettes*, backwater *hamlets*, *dinette* sets, and *gimlets*—this last being derived (as is *wimble*, which means the same thing) from medieval Dutch *wimmel*, 'auger.' Jane Cates (see note 1) recalls a Manhattan grocery store at 72d street and Broadway called the Superette; she says, concerning its melding of magnifier prefix and diminutive suffix while dispensing with a root word altogether, that "it doesn't get any better than that."

14 *Haček* is the diminutive of Czech *hak*, meaning "little hook;" it's the sign shaped like an inverted French circumflex accent (ˇ) which is placed over a letter to indicate a different pronunciation from the same letter without it. How to sound C has been a problem since republican Rome (where it was pronounced like K but also used in place of G in *Cn.* as the abbreviation for *Gnaeus*), and its phonetic adventures throughout the European languages would fill a whole column on their own.

[Nick Humez is currently indexing vols. 7–25 of VERBATIM. Shhh! Don't bother him.]





## HORRIBILE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain

I received an invoice from a US publisher the other day which was addressed to “Mat Coward, Valued Customer.” In fact, *Valued Customer* was the second line of the address, appearing in the envelope window between my name on the first line and my street address on the third. I’ve seen houses named *Dunroamin* or *Mon repos*; perhaps Valued Customer is the modern equivalent, suited to an age in which individuals exist only as consumers.

Readers wishing to contribute their favourite *Horribiles* to this column need not flatter me with empty salutations; an unadorned letter or email to either of VERBATIM’s usual addresses will do fine. Hilary Worsfold of Watford, Herts, noticed a placard outside a local garage promising *Hyper low prices*. “I have suggested to the owner he changes it to hypo low prices, to no avail,” says Hilary, who goes on to wonder what are the origins of *Bear with me*, when used by call centre staff, and allied trades. I’m afraid I can’t say where or when this heart-sinking phrase arose, but I can tell you what it means: it’s telephonese for “Would you like to listen to some Muzak for the next fifteen minutes?”

From somewhere in Cyberspace, Chatham Reed is convinced that the style handbook of the “Gannett newspaper empire” includes “directions for sports writers to use the phrase *looking to* or *look to* in headlines and stories. Here’s an example: *The Wildcats are looking to win the state title*. I am curious if this is a local phenomenon, or widespread.” It’s universal, I fear, and not confined to the sports pages—or to print, at all. I’ve heard it said by journalists on TV and radio, where it sounds even uglier. It also clashes with another news cliché; does “Farmers look to government for aid” mean that the farmers are expecting aid, or merely hoping for it?

Perhaps *look to* is related to *complete*, meaning *do*, as in “NASA says the astronauts will complete space walks.” This simply means that they will perform space walks, I suppose, rather than that they have at last got the funding they need to finish off some space walks they began back in the good old days of Neil Armstrong and his one small step.

Our campaign against the misuse of the word *literally* must, so far, be counted a failure, given the quality and range of the latest additions to the file. A gardening magazine advises feeding wild birds on oatmeal, “not to be confused with the stuff that helps you toss cabers, oatmeal is a cheap, stodgy favourite that literally costs buttons.” An advertisement for a portable TV boasts that “there is literally no place the Telemate 1404 can’t be used,” though I bet they wouldn’t give me my money back if I tried to use it literally under water. Depressingly—if enigmatically—a circular advertising National Libraries Week in the UK carries the slogan: “The future. Literally.”

For his sheer inventiveness, I am inclined to forgive the fire brigade safety officer who, warning about the unsuspected dangers inherent in Christmas puddings, wrote: “cook one of those things for ten seconds too long and they literally go into orbit”. I wonder if orbital puds might provide a low-cost method of protecting the Earth from killer comets.

Just to prove that we’re not the only ones who take an interest in keeping up-to-date with our dynamic language, I’ll close this instalment with a recent item from a British newspaper: “The Broadcasting Standards Commission has ruled that a BBC TV show in which the Queen was referred to as a “bitch” was not offensive. It said when a black comic used the word it was not insulting because it simply meant ‘woman’.”

And I’m, like—are they a bunch of cool mothers at that Standards Commission, or what?

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





## *The Humble Origins of the Chad*

Fred R. Shapiro  
New Haven, Connecticut

Last fall, millions of Americans, not to mention onlookers around the world, were riveted by one of the great questions of our time. Do I mean by this the controversy as to whether George W. Bush was stealing the Presidency from Al Gore, or vice-versa? No, I refer to a truly titanic issue, namely, the origin of the term “chad” referring to the punched-out portion of a punch-style voting ballot.

The “chad” has emerged, with astonishing rapidity, as the most prominent newly familiar word of our era. Faced with this novel expression, journalists and commentators have quickly zeroed in on the fact that the chad’s provenance was from a computer milieu, rather than a political one. Two theories have emerged as the favorites.

The first popular theory is that “chad” is an acronym for “Card Hole Aggregate Debris.” The second, which has received the most support, is that “chad” is what linguists call a “back-formation” from a proper name, Chadless. The online *Jargon File*, a canonical repository of computer hacker folklore, describes this derivation as follows: “The Chadless keypunch (named for its inventor) . . . cut little u-shaped tabs in the card to make a hole when the tab folded back, rather than punching out a circle/rectangle; it was clear that if the Chadless keypunch didn’t make them, then the stuff that other keypunches made had to be ‘chad.’”

Although etymology is usually regarded as an arena for conjectures that can never be proven or disproven, in fact it is sometimes possible to establish the truth or falsity of etymological stories through historical research. In the case of “chad,” some pundits have discovered that the *Oxford English Dictionary* dates the term from 1959. It turns out that the *OED*’s 1959 source is a book on telegraphy, which noted: “The small hinged discs of paper, called ‘chads’, remain attached to the body of the tape.”

I have been able to improve upon the *OED*’s evidence by consulting with the Merriam-

Webster Company. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary files contain a 1947 occurrence of “chad.” The September 1947 issue of the *RCA Review*, published by that company’s Laboratory Division, contained this passage: “The sample tape shown in Figure 2 . . . is known as chadless tape because the small discs, called chads, which are perforated to form the code combinations are not cut completely from the tape.”

A similar early usage can be found through a search of the JSTOR electronic journal archive, which pulls up a 1962 advertisement in the journal *Science* for a paper-tape recorder whose “resulting chadless tape may be visually interpreted, or it may be read by a reflected-light tape reader.” Both the 1947 and 1962 sources, as well as other old documents I have examined, use “chadless” without capitalization and make no mention of a company or person named Chadless. It is clear that “chadless” was coined as a normal derivative of “chad” to indicate that the tape or card was punched without the chad detaching, rather than “chad” being a back-formation from a supposed Chadless name.

There is also no mention of Card Hole Aggregate Debris in the early references. What, then, is the etymology of “chad”? Again Merriam-Webster seems to have the best information. Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* suggests that “chad” derives from a Scots word for gravel. Scots dictionaries define “chard” as gravel or small stones in a riverbed. In such round fragments may lie the linguistic origins of our celebrity word.

The political meaning of “chad” did not spring fully formed from the brow of Palm Beach County functionaries. The oldest use of electoral “chad” in the Westlaw legal database is from a 1981 Indiana court case that even talks about “hanging chads.” The full-fledged elegant taxonomy of “hanging chads,” “pregnant chads,” “dimpled chads,” “tri-chads,” and “swinging-door chads,” however, may have been first articulated in that unfortunate county.

*[Fred Shapiro is the Associate Librarian for Public Services and a Lecturer in Legal Research at Yale Law School.]*



## EPISTOLAE

Dear Friends: I just encountered an item for the Department of Startling New Attributions. *Honest Doubt* by Amanda Cross [otherwise Carolyn G. Heilbrun, Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities Emerita at Columbia University] advises us [p. 181] that “Tennyson . . . really, you know, he wrote some good lines. Virginia Woolf especially liked his phrase ‘ancestral voices prophesying war.’”

Coleridge, I suspect, would be as surprised as Woolf or Tennyson to hear this notion about who really wrote “Kubla Khan.”

Donald K. Henry



One would think that Laurence Urdang could have found a better example of flawed usage by a putatively erudite speaker—in this case, Bill Richardson, former US ambassador to the United Nations and a graduate of Tufts University (BA) and the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy (MA) —than citing Mr. Richardson’s “misuse” of *flaunt* instead of *flout* in divers broadcast interviews.

Under modern usage, it has become accepted, although some might argue begrudgingly, that *flaunt* used in the transitive sense can have the same meaning as *flout*; that is, to treat contemptuously.

The most popular English dictionary, *Merriam Websters Collegiate, Tenth Edition*, cites examples of this usage by writers who doubtless rise to the author’s exacting standards of literacy; such as: “meting out punishment to the occasional mavericks who operate rigged games, tolerate rowdyism, or otherwise flaunt the law.” Oscar Lewis. “. . . observed with horror the flaunting of their authority in the suburbs, where men... put up buildings that had no place at all in a Christian commonwealth.” Marchette Chute. Finally, “. . . in our profession . . . very rarely do we publicly chastise a colleague who has flaunted our most basic principles.” R. T. Blackburn.

The opposite usage, where *flout* is used in the sense of *flaunt* is also given with an example from the distinguished Bard of Chicago, Mike Royko. “‘The proper pronunciation,’ the blonde said, flouting her refined upbringing, ‘is pree feeks.’”

It would seem that under any reasonable application of descriptive linguistics, *flaunt* and *flout* have joined the ranks of those other pesky English bugaboos such as *flammable* and *inflammable* having identical meanings. It may not make sense, but that is how respected speakers and writers in English are using it, so maybe we should cut Ambassador Richardson and “his staff” a break. Anyway, we will always have George W. Bush.

With kindest regards,

David A. Grey  
Red Rooster Ranch  
Los Olivos, California



On page 30 of the just-arrived issue [XXVI/1 Winter 2001], David Henige faults someone else’s arithmetic: “The increase from 110% to 120% is not 10% but 9.1% (120 divided by 110).”

In turn, Mr. Henige can be faulted for his parenthetical “explanation.” In fact it is 9.1%, but that’s the increase divided by the original amount (10 divided by 110), multiplied by 100, to be sure, to make it a percentage.

[Also,] I think you’re straining for your Sic, Sic, Sic column (p. 27). Peter How’s complaint about “calender” is valid, but has nothing to do with spell-checking. Certainly both “calendar” and “calender” are very nice words.

The “bear-breasted mermaid” is probably a mistake, but an interesting image.

The middle one of the three is just bad writing, but nothing remarkable.

Barry Goldstein  
Newtonville, Massachusetts

P.S.: The best typo/error I’ve seen was a New Yorker filler, a newspaper headline that read “Predicting the future of technology is fraud with peril.” Truer than what they should have written.



## EPISTOLAE

Does anyone know a word meaning ignorant and proud of it? I feel sure there is one and it would be so useful today. Further to Margorie Collins's letter of October 1998 concerning plurals, one particular horror I have come across in the press is *medias* (as a plural of medium).

With best wishes,  
Yours sincerely,  
Clive Exton  
axolotl@which.net



Gloria Rosenthal's puzzle, *Awesome Foursomes* (Winter 2001), was quite clever, but there were multiple solutions for some of the entries:

#1 *Reach, slay, latch, + mull* : (Replace the first letter with p). An alternate solution is *reason*, the only word containing an 'a' among the three options. 5,4,5,4 word lengths also yields her answer.

#4 *Pound, bellow, page, + warden* : (Famous last names). Same solution, but in this case, noticing that the vowels are in alphabetical order.

#5 *Novelties, marshmallow, decorations, + apricots*. (Month abbreviations at start of words). *Pasta* is an alternate answer, insofar as those four can be broken up into two consecutive words.

#8 *demon, bosun, brewed, + virtues*. (Words end in day abbreviations). Another solution is *straits*. Those four comprise two words, one forwards, one backwards.

#14 *Waco, rind, gala, + mice*. (Remove inner letters to leave "word game"). Try a simpler solution—*star*. None of those four contain an 'e'.

#15 *age, hole, date, + go*. (Add 'man' to beginning). Or, one can add a 'd' to the end.

It's tough to make word puzzles that can't be cooked!

Carl Huber  
York, Pennsylvania



## *Hell Is All Around*

Jerome Betts  
Torquay, Devon

Seated one day at the dictionary I was pretty weary  
and also pretty ill at ease,  
Because a word I had always liked turned out  
not to be a word at all, and suddenly I found  
myself among the v's,  
wrote that amiable language-bender Ogden  
Nash. He then proceeded to hang an amusing  
mini-sermon on the word *velleity*.

However, that much-less-rarefied items of  
English vocabulary can prompt profitable  
recourse to the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, particularly  
when encountered in two new contexts  
in one day, witness the ubiquitous word *hell*.

"Have you tried the original beer from Hell?" asked a sign in a local supermarket recently. It appeared that Hell (UK) Ltd were importing a premium-quality black lager made by the Hell Brewery in Slovakia. According to the label on a bottle of the dark and smoky-tasting beverage, the name *Hell* probably derived from an old Czech mining term for *lager*. Whatever the real story, the fortunate result for the company is that the word now provides an opportunity for some eye-catching advertising in the English-speaking world.

A local evening paper acquired on the same shopping trip coincidentally had a historical item about 2000 "healing stones" being bought in 1780 for the church of St John the Baptist, Paignton. This dialect usage was not an example of some folk-medical metaphor for "healing" a wounded structure, but referred to slates for covering the roof. The same process also appears as *helling* or *haling*, and those who carried it out were thus known as *helliars*, still encountered as a surname like *Slater* or *Tyler*.

The curative sense of *healing* is derived from Old English *haelan*, related to *whole* and *hale*, as in *hale and hearty*, whereas the sense of 'cover-





ing' comes from Old English *helian* meaning 'to hide or conceal.' This is the sense giving Hell as the abode of the dead, an enclosed or covered place.

Modern spelling often disguises linguistic roots, but roots of the literal kind are what gardeners cover when they "heel in" plants. It came as a surprise to find this is apparently the only non-dialect survival of *helian* in the sense of 'hide or conceal' and has nothing to do with using the heel to do the covering. *Heel* in the anatomical sense comes from a third Old English word, *hela*, and the nautical *heel*, as in 'heel over,' probably from yet another, *hieldan*.

But tubers, shrubs and saplings are heeled in to be protected until they are replanted and burst into new life and growth, so perhaps the sometimes misunderstood expression can in this case yield a positive message. Meanwhile, although concepts of the after-life have changed, a temporary reminder of the old idea of a place of bodily torment below could very likely be gained by the effects of overindulgence in that sombre Slovakian lager. They might indeed have driven Ogden Nash to rhyme *velleity*, meaning 'a low degree of volition not prompting to action,' with *helleity*.

[Jerome Bett's last piece for VERBATIM was "Name of a Dog" in XXV/3.]



## As the Word Turns

### X files

Barry Baldwin  
Calgary, Alberta

On reaching this letter in his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson wrote with evident pleasure, "X begins no word in the English language."

The doctor may have fallen lazily back on the 1636 pronouncement of his homophonic predecessor, Ben Jonson: "X begins no word with us, that I know, but it ends many."

Both J-men are showing their Latin. Excluding proper names, the *Oxford Latin Dictionary* lists only 17 words beginning with X. All are transliterations from Greek. Olympic Games fans will like *xysticus* 'athlete,' but the jewel in this alphabetic crown has to be *xylospogium*, defined as "a stick with a sponge attached used for the same purpose as modern toilet paper."

As John Travolta and friends almost sang, *Greece* is the word. Ones beginning with X occupy 14 pages in Liddell & Scott's *Lexicon*, as opposed to 8 in the *Oxford Dictionary of Modern Greek*. Since it had implications for their English, our J-men should have taken in this 1530 observation by John Palsgrave on French orthography: "X, if he be the fyrste letter of a worde, as 'xenotrophe,' 'xylobalsome,' which they sounde but S, for they can nat gyve X, whiche is also a greke letter, is true sownde."

Both J-men were wrong, Ben having more excuse than Sam. There were some X-words in English from the 16th century on. One, *xaraff* (also *xaroff*) found its way from India into writings on that country in 1628 and 1662, e.g. "We lye at the mercy of the xaroffs or exchangers of monie." Modern tourists will sympathise.

Another, French *chebec* 'a small warship,' appeared in English as *xebec* in the *Gentleman's Magazine* (for which Johnson himself often wrote) in August 1756, and frequently thereafter in naval warfare reports of that decade. I dare say Canadians would prefer to pronounce this word "Quebec."

The rest are all Greek. None, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, were revived in the 20th century. Some deserve to be. Visitors to England might like to be shown around by a *xenagogue*, the word for guide in 16-17th century descriptions of the counties. At Christmas, we hope for lots of *xenia* 'presents.' Did I say Christmas? Johnson did not note that the shortening of it to *Xmas* began in 1551 and was common in his own day; likewise the denoting of





kisses by a row of Xs. *Xenodochy*, the entertainment of strangers—something famously cherished by Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar*, first attested in 1623, occurred often enough to engender the adjective *xenodochial* in 1716. This kindly procedure turned into *xenisation* in the 19th century. I fear racists would prefer the concurrent *xenolasy*, or expulsion of immigrants.

From warmer parts, whose inhabitants might wear *xilinous* or cotton garments (1656) and stroll under a covered *xystus* (1664) and worship *xoana*, or idols (1706), English traders imported *xylobalsamum* (1398), *xyloaloes* (1545), *xylocassia*, and *xylocinnamon* (both 1555).

Any hungry readers may now take a break for *xerophagy* (1656) or the consumption of dry meats, especially if toiling through this essay has given them sore eyes or *xerophthalmia* (1656). As a sufferer thereof, Johnson ought to have known this one. If the current high price of oil brings on a fuel crisis, we may all be reduced to *xylophory* (1757) or carrying wood into the house.

The host of new X-words in the *OED* are almost all Greek-based scientific compounds. As a fan of the instrument in jazz, I sound my final note with *xylophone*, which entered English more with a bang than a tinkle in this April 1886 rave review in the *Athenaeum* magazine of “a prodigy who does wonderful things with little drumsticks on a machine called the xylophone.”

Disregarding the reviewer P. J. Kavanagh’s “only Mozart could pretend to take the xylophone seriously,” I award the coveted Baldwin Prize for Creative Neologism to Ronald Blythe for his description in a *Church Times* essay of a collapsing brick floor as “clinking xylophonically.” X-cessive? No, X-cellent!

[Barry Baldwin’s last piece for VERBATIM was “Where Do They Come From?” in XXVI/1.]

## Hazlitt on Wit

Hazlitt’s doubtful about wit  
And thinks that ill may come of it;  
When any joke is made, it hurts  
Someone or other, he asserts.

There’s little doubt that wittiness  
Tends often to be pitiless,  
And even less that ridicule  
Is more than just a little cruel.

The humorists cannot resist  
A tail that they may give a twist,  
And poke their pens with mordant nibs  
Between the nearest pair of ribs.

They’re apt to let what latterly  
Had won but praise and flattery  
Be deflated like a flat tire,  
Punctured by the tooth of satire.

A pun that seemed but verbal fun,  
Has been the death of more than one,  
For every dolt that laughs at it  
Another’s teeth are made to grit.

A kind of wit that many fear  
Is what the French call pince sans rire;  
They find almost a menace in  
A quip that’s made without a grin.

The greatest poet’s plagued by wits  
Long after he has lived, for it’s  
When he is dead and buried, he  
Is most exposed to parody.

Though Hazlitt finds this kind of wit  
Has something to be said for it;  
Indeed I think it needn’t slight  
Immortal bards, and that it might,

By eliciting a chortle,  
Make them even more immortal!

—Henry George Fischer



## Denaturalized Profanity in English

Ralph H. Emerson  
South Glastonbury, Connecticut

The Third Commandment in Exodus 20:7 warns us, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain”—don’t say *God* unless you really mean it. Unfortunately, few of us have ever been much good at respecting this rule. We can’t help it. We pick up profanity as children, and later when we are angry or excited, God’s name automatically bubbles up to our lips and we exclaim *God, oh God, my God, by God, God damn*. I heard a surprised three-year-old say “My God!” the day before I wrote this. God is the immediate witness, the basic interjection, the first word that comes to mind—hardly even mind, actually, for impulsive swearing is controlled by a much more primitive part of the brain than ordinary speech.

Yet “the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.” What to do? We’re forbidden to say what we can hardly help saying. Well, nothing gets the creative wheels turning like a good prohibition, so we’ve devised several sneaky ways to bend the rule without quite breaking it. H. L. Mencken called the results “denaturalized profanity.” Most of it is disguised so well that I never even guessed its original function until recently, or its importance, either. Denaturalized profanity is so common that a huge proportion of modern English interjections, no matter how innocent-sounding, began as masks for taboo religious words.

### Fun with First Letters

The best way to say “God” without really saying it is to keep the emotional release of the hard *g* and change the rest of the word. That’s where *gosh* and *golly* came from. And lots of others: *my Gawd, my goodness, goodness gracious, good gravy*, Charlie Brown’s *good grief, by gum, by gad, by Godfrey*, and Ireland’s *begorra* and *begob*. (*By* used to be pronounced like *be*.) The

curse “God blind me” produced the Cockney interjection *gorblimey* or *blimey*; and the hard *g* in the *gor*, tweaked into its sister sound, hard *c*, produced another characteristic Cockney interjection, *cor!* Cockneys also say *coo!* Our forbears turned “ah, God” into both *egad* and the hard-*c ecod*. Modern Americans use a hard *c* in *holy cow*; there’s also one in *great Scot!* The second-oldest “God” euphemism in English had two hard *c*’s, one at each end: the medieval *cock*, tweaked from the even earlier *gog*. My favorite *g* euphemism is from a 1940s high school yearbook: one girl’s pet phrase was “Oh Goo!”

First-letter euphemisms do not honor God the Father alone. They exist for all the major figures of Christianity. “Jesus” appears as his respelled first syllable *gee*, whose fancier cousins include *gee whiz, gee whizzikers, and gee whillikers*; plus *jeez, jeez Louise, and sheesh*. We find “by Jesus” in *by George, by jingo, by jiminy, by Jerusalem*, and the Irish *bejesus* and *bejabbers*. “Jumping Jesus” cloaks itself as both *jumpin’ Jehoshaphat* and the mock-Swedish *yumpin’ yiminy*. (Jehoshaphat was a biblical king, “ja-HOSH-a-fut,” like *wash a foot*.) “Jesus” joins “Christ” in *jeepers creepers, jiminy Christmas, and jiminy crickets*—that’s where Pinocchio’s insect friend Jiminy Cricket comes from in the Disney movie. “By Christ” becomes *by cracky*, plain “Christ” becomes *cripes, crikey, or criminy*, and “for Christ’s sake” becomes the incomparable *for cryin’ out loud!*

“Lord,” of course, rounds up the *l*s: *Lordy, Lor, Law, Lawsy, my land, land o’ Goshen, land sakes alive!* And the *m*’s come out for “Mary.” In Shakespeare’s England, they switched it into *marry*, as on the first page of *As You Like It* and a thousand other places: “Marry, sir, I am helping you.” Modern Americans replace “Holy Mary” or “Holy Mother of God” with *holy Moses, holy mackerel, holy moly*—even *holy smoly, samoly, or shamoly*.

The “Devil” gets his due with *d*’s: what the *deuce*, a *dickens* of a time, scared the *daylights* out of ‘em. (Plenty of *d* substitutes exist for



“damn” too, but we’ll save those for later.) And of course we roll out the *h*’s for the Devil’s realm “Hell”: what the *heck*, what the *hey*. I’m told that members of the Dutch Reformed Church in Ohio and Michigan say “What the *hob*?”

**Cock’s Bones, by Jove!**

Another way to skirt a taboo word is to substitute a word of related meaning, whether it has the same first letter or not. For example, Hell can be referred to by the name of its pagan equivalent, which also happens to begin with *h*: Go to *Hades!* Or by various Jewish equivalents: to *Sheol*, to *Gehenna*. Or by suggestiveness: to *blazes*, to *the warm place*, *wayyyyyy down South*. Or by outright whitewashing, as in “What in the *world* is this?” instead of “What in the hell. . .” What about Heaven? That often stands in for God: *good heavens*, *heavens above*, *heavens to Betsy*, *thank heaven!* God’s pagan equivalent, the king of the gods, can stand in for him as well, by any of his several names: *by Jove*, *by Jupiter*, *by Zeus*. Indeed, we can appeal to the whole Greco-Roman pantheon at once: *Ye gods! Ye gods and little fishes!* And by the crackle and sizzle of Jupiter’s emblem, the thunderbolt, we can invoke both God’s power and Hell’s: *by thunder*, *thunderation*, *thunder and lightning*, *fire and brimstone*, *holy smokes!*

Most swearing in early English called Christ to witness the truth of one’s statements, usually by invoking various aspects of Christ crucified. Except that people didn’t say, “*I swear to you by Christ’s bones*, this rain is awful.” They simply said, “*God’s bones*, it’s wet!”—using “God” to mean God the Son (that is, Jesus Christ) rather than God the Father. Most of the one-syllable “God” euphemisms mentioned above did their work in this context. As I said, one of the earliest was *cock*. “For God’s bones’ sake” became Chaucer’s fourteenth-century “for Cock’s bones.” And later came many other “distorted or minced pronunciations” of *God*, as the *OED* says, both the *c* and *g* ones mentioned above (*cod*, *gor*, *gad*) and others like *dod*, *dad* (as in *bedad* “by God”) and the very common *’od*, which left the *g* off

altogether. Others can be found at the entry for *God* in the *OED*, definitions 13 and 14.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which were the great creative days of denaturalized profanity, there were scores of these God-for-Jesus oaths. They’re all obsolete now, but a few still draw smiles of recognition in the Language Museum. Here are some: *odds bodies*, *odsbodkins*, or *gadsbodikins*, all “God’s (dear little) body,” *odspitikins* “God’s dear pity,” *gadsbud* “God’s blood,” *cock’s blood*, *cock’s heart*, even nonsense ones like *odsfish* and *odsbobs*. Eventually, the *ods-* ones lost even their initial *od*, leaving behind nothing of God but his possessive *s*, so that something like *odswoons*, “God’s wounds,” turned into *’swoons* or *zounds*, *od’s death* into *’sdeath*, and others into *’sfoot*, *’sblood*, *’sheart*, and so on. (Hard to say, aren’t they?) *Zounds* usually rhymed with *pounds*, according to pronunciation guru Charles Elster, although some people said “zoons.”) The wildest career of all belonged to *gadzooks* or *odzooks*, supposedly from “God’s hooks” (hands?). Clipped down to *zooks*, it whimsically regrew into *zookers*, *zoon-ers*, and *zoodikers*. “Zoodikers!” marvels someone in *Tom Jones*: “She’d have the wedding to-night!”

**Dad Gum It!**

Now, why exactly should we pay attention to that commandment about not swearing, not to mention the other nine? Because if we don’t, God might damn us to hell—condemn us to hell, for *damn* is a specialized form of the word *condemn*. And if one takes seriously the threat it represents, *damn* is a very hot potato, and should be handled gingerly.

Sometimes it’s wrapped in first-letter euphemisms like *darn*, *drat*, and *doggone*. I mention those three first to show the contortions English will put euphemisms through in order to create the much-prized matching-first-letter equivalents—to get *d*’s, in this case. *Darn* apparently began life as “eternal damnation,” a phrase pronounced centuries ago as “tarnal damnation,” telescoped into *tarnation* or *darnation* and





finally clipped to *darn*. (There's a similar *d/t* switch in *tomfool* for "damn fool.") *Doggone* and *drat* both began as curses like "a pox on it." The first was "a dog on it," whose offspring include both "I'll be *dogged*" and the African-American *daggone*, sometimes shortened to *dag!* *Drat* is from "Od rat it"—may God infest it with rats. ("Oh, *rats!*") The similar *drot* is from "Od rot it." Other *d*'s include the laconic *durn* and *dang* and the quaint *dem* and *dash*. *Dear me is* supposedly a softening of "damn me," and both *hot dog* and *hot diggity* stand for the exultant "Hot damn!"

Hot as hell. Or *perdition*, as they used to call it, meaning ruin, destruction, damnation. "Condemned as worthless and thrown into the fire": that's what *God-damned* means, so several of its euphemisms in phrases like *an infernal nuisance* have to do with heat: *infernal* 'hellish,' *all-fired* 'hell-fired,' *blasted* 'roasted.' *Blasted* is also a euphemism for the British *bloody*, which is used so much like *damned* (as in *a bloody nuisance*) that whatever its origins, it certainly has one foot firmly in the *damn* camp today, together with its whole cohort of mostly *b* euphemisms: not only *blasted* but also *blistering*, *blooming*, *bleeding*, *blinking*, *blithering*, *bally*, *jolly*, *ruddy*, and even the neatly contradictory *blessèd* of "the whole *blessèd* thing." (The marked *e* means that the *-ed* makes a second syllable.) Compare these too: Oh, *bother!* Oh, *brother!* Well, I'll be *blowed!*

That takes care of the *d*'s and the *b*'s, but there are also quite a few *c*'s, representing the familiar *c*-for-*God's-g* switch that we saw earlier. Thus instead of "the whole *goddam* thing," people have variously said *confounded*, *cotton-pickin'*, *cock-eyed*, *consarned*, and even *cursèd* and *cussèd*. (More honest than *blessèd!*) Several of these *c* euphemisms soften the meaning as well as the sound. For example, both *confound* 'confuse' and *consarn* 'concern' reduce damnation to a mild sort of troubledness, rather like "Why, I'll be *shook!*" or "Dod *fetch* it!" or the stronger "*Hang* it!" There must be many more of these "shook-up" euphemisms out there; inven-

tive people probably come up with new ones every day. Here's a wonderful one from a Sherwood Anderson story: "I'll be starched. Well, well, I'll be washed and ironed and starched!"

If we take all the menace out of damnation, all that's left is the bother and uselessness. That's what's expressed in "damn" euphemisms like "I don't give a *hoot*" or "I don't care a *fig*." But here's the fun part: if we scramble together all the "God" euphemisms we've discussed with all the "damn" euphemisms, we get marvelous strings of cowboy curses: "Put that in yer pipe and smoke it, ya *gosh-darn*, *gum-blasted*, *dad-burned*, *ding-busted* toad-eatin' varmint, *dang ya to heck!*"

### *Where Is God?*

"Oh, my! That's no way to talk!" Oh my? What do you mean, *Oh my?* Oh my what? "Oh my (God)," that's what. And what's this *Dang ya to heck?* It's short for "(May God) dang ya to heck." Did you just sneeze? *Bless you!* I mean, "(May God) bless you!" *Mercy!* Eh? You mean, "(May God have) mercy!" *Bye-bye!* What? Where are you going? Did you say Bye-bye? It's *Goodbye*, "God be wi' ye, (may) God be with you!" Wait, wait! Come back!

There. That's the last and surest way to get around saying God's name: don't mention him at all, stop before you get there. *Oh, dear!* (God!) *I declare!* (to God!) *So help me!* (God!) *Well, I'll be!* (God-damned!). The same impulse is behind all those subjectless imprecations and blessings, earnest and not-so-earnest, that we hear from time to time. It's understood that God is the one asked to do the work requested: *Bless your soul!* *Bless my buttons!* *Shiver me timbers!* *Dog my cats!*

Likewise God is the one to vouch for us when we plead that we're telling the truth: *I swear it's true, I swear to God!* Denaturalized profanity begins and ends with avowals like that. They are the main concern of the third commandment, which I quoted at the beginning. It says: "Don't ask God to help you lie, don't call on God to witness the truth of what you say unless you really are being truthful—or else." It doesn't say: "Never utter the word *God*."





Still, the sheer number of euphemisms we've welcomed into our language suggests that collectively we have always felt, where mentioning God is concerned, that it's better to be on the safe side. Natives of my own New England in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries probably took this further than anyone. They wouldn't ever even utter the word *swear*: "I *swan*," they said, "I *swan to man*!" Or "I *swamp*." Or *swow*, mixing *swear* with *vow*. Even *vow* was a little much for them. They said *vum*, and Bartlett's 1860 *Dictionary of Americanisms* quotes a sermon by the Reverend Mr. Dow enjoining us to avoid even that. *I vum*, says he, is "just the same in spirit" as *I vow*, and *I declare to goodness* is every bit as profane as *I swear to God*. "It is as much the same thing as a bobolink with a new coat of feathers"!

That is certainly all we need to know about denaturalized profanity for today. So endeth the lesson, gentle readers. Peace be with you.

[Ralph Emerson's last article for VERBATIM was "The Most Lively Consonants in the World" in XXV/3.]



## Out of the Mouths of . . . Twins

Susan Elkin  
Sittingbourne, Kent

*Idioglossia*, *cryptophasia*, *twin speak*, the phenomenon of an exclusive language sometimes developed by twins has fascinated us for so long that we've coined a nice list of Latinate, Greek, and Old English terms for it. It's the usual human response—if in doubt about something, name it.

And there seems to be more of it about. Reproductive technology—IVF and the like—means that in developed countries nearly 50% more twins are born now than were born 20 years ago. In the UK, for example, one child in 36 is now born a twin. The rate of triplet birth has increased threefold too. So naturally there is more interest than ever in the—sometimes

strange—language development of twins and other multiple-born children.

Remember Michael Apted's 1994 film *Nell*? It tells the story of a young woman born, one of twins, to a reclusive mother in a remote forest. Half-wild Nell, whose twin sister drowned when they were children, is found by a concerned doctor (Liam Neeson). Nell is able to speak only her own, one-person language.

The romance of the tale—based on Mark Handley's play *Idioglossia*—means that, rather than Nell's eventually learning English as she begins to join the world, Liam Neeson's character teaches himself Nell-speak so that he can communicate with her. The allure of this film and the acclaim it achieved are, in part, indicators of the level of interest in the particulars of twin language.

The point is, of course, that children learn language from listening to those around them. In the case of a single-born child this will be adults or older children. First they absorb nouns—*Mummy*, *Daddy*, *cup*, and self-contained phrases such as "all gone" or "fall down." Then come the verbs with which to stick the nouns together.

In the case of twins, however, because they spend a lot of time together, sometimes they don't hear as much adult language as other children do. The isolated fictional Nell is an extreme example of what can happen if they spin off their language experiments only with each other and never with anyone else. And it makes no difference whether the twins are identical or fraternal. It's the fact that the children have been together since birth that matters.

That's why the self-help organisations for parents of twins—Twins and Multiple Births Association (TAMBA) in the UK, for example—strongly recommend that parents, grandparents, and anyone else who's around should spend some time playing with, and talking to, each twin on his or her own for a while as often as possible. But they also stress that, although later-than-average language development is common in twins, private twin-language is actually quite unusual—and not a



cause for alarm, provided that the children also communicate normally with other people.

Twins Tessa and Emma Byford are now aged 17 and live in southern England. “Yes, we had our own language and I suppose we still have it to an extent,” said Tessa. “When we were very little I don’t think we even knew we were doing it. We just communicated with each other and when you’re two or three years old you don’t think consciously about how that happens.”

Emma adds “I’m sure we could understand other people though. I have no memory of not knowing what Mum or Dad or our older sister Charlotte was saying to us—and I think they must have understood some of what we said too. We always said *voo-voo* for ‘vacuum cleaner’ and *teep* was our verb for ‘sleep.’ *Len* meant ‘drink’ and we called our socks *potters*.”

Although they can still recall fragments and a few words have, over the years, just become affectionate shared jokes—as family words for things often do even when there are no twins or multiples in the equation—Emma and Tessa have forgotten most of their twin language. “When we were about four we started going to speech therapy because Mum was getting worried. We were talking more or less like everybody else before we started school.”

Perhaps it’s inevitable that twins should relate to each other in a way which excludes others and that the development of conventional speech patterns is often delayed. John Barth, American novelist and himself a twin, observes:

“[Twins] share the curious experiences of accommodating to a peer companion even from the beginning; even in the womb; or entering the world with an established sidekick, rather than alone; of acquiring speech and other skills *a deux*, while in the meanwhile sharing a language beyond speech and before speech. Speech, baby twins may feel, is for Others. As native speakers of a dialect regard the official language, we may regard language itself: it is for dealing with outsiders; between ourselves we have little need of it.”

So what, if we want to be accurate, should we call it, this form of communication which some

twins occasionally develop? In the 1980s Dutch psychologist P Bakker rejected *cryptophasia*, which had been coined by an earlier French psychologist, R. Zazzo. The *crypto-* suffix implies secrecy; and Bakker argued that twins never speak a secret language because there is no intention of trying to obscure meaning to others. On the contrary, such twins usually get vexed when others fail to understand them.

*Idioglossia* wouldn’t do for Bakker either because these “languages” are primarily dialect versions of the mother tongue rather than entirely new creations (The Byfords’ *teep*, for example, is clearly a corruption of ‘sleep’) Neither would Bakker have *twin-talk* or *twin-language* because, he argued, such language occasionally occurs amongst children who are not twins.

That leaves us with *autonomous language*—the choice of Russian scientist A. R. Luria. A bit pedestrian perhaps, and linguistically much less inspiring than the delights of *cryptophasia* and *idioglossia*—but it’s a good workable term which seems to fit the bill.

[Susan Elkin’s last article for VERBATIM was “English Place Names” in XXVI/1.]



## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

*American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, Hardcover, 2076 pp. Houghton Mifflin Co., 2001. ISBN 0395825172. Edited by Joseph P. Pickett et.al.. US\$60

A dictionary that has gone through four editions has developed a certain immunity to criticism of its style and content. Its very endurance demonstrates an acceptance by the public. As a consequence, it is futile to complain about its editorial idiosyncrasies and better to get right to the chase, so to speak, with an examination of what is new according to its editor’s introduction.

The *American Heritage Dictionary, Fourth Edition*, is, of course, a direct descendent of the dictionary compiled to fill a perceived gap in the record of English created between the G&C Merriam Webster’s *New International*



*Dictionary*, second edition, and the third edition of that book made in 1963. For those who do not remember the outcry of indignation over the publication of Webster's *Third*, it might be instructive to say that language conservators were, at the least, upset by the absence of usage labels and other cautions to linguistic behavior in entries and definitions considered outside the norm.

Since the *American Heritage Dictionary* was created to fill in the void thought of as left by the Merriam-Webster editorial team, it has consistently devoted much attention to usage. The fourth edition continues to do so today—to an even greater extent. There are, according to the introduction, more than 650 notes that cover the Living Language, Regionalisms, and general usage. There are also more than 400 Synonym Studies, which attempt to differentiate meaning, but some tend to muddle their purpose by blurring distinctions and give examples that are interchangeable, as for instance at *apprehend*. In this synonym study the sense of *apprehend* (to understand, but not all relationships or implications) with the example “Intelligence is quickness to apprehend.” and the sense of *comprehend* (to understand completely) with the example “To comprehend is to know a thing as well as that thing can be known” are indistinctly compared with each other and with *understand* (also combined with *comprehend*) “No one who has not had the responsibility can really understand what it is like to be president;” and *grasp* (to seize firmly) “We have grasped the mystery of the atom.” If a comparison is made between words in the synonym study and definitions in the respective entries, the result is hopelessly complex. In the entry list, *AHD* defines *apprehend* as ‘to grasp mentally, understand, and comprehend as to take in the meaning, nature, or importance of, grasp,’ and *grasp* as ‘to take hold of intellectually, comprehend,’ and, finally, *understand* as ‘to perceive and comprehend the nature and significance of, grasp.’ This situation develops more out of the nature of English than the imprecision of the *AHD* staff, but it does illustrate a certain futility in devoting a great deal of space to an

ambiguous synonym study in a book of limited scope. It also demonstrates the need to choose or even to concoct sentences that force meaning rather than using those that merely cite usage. After all, synonym studies are perhaps the most technically difficult part of dictionary making.

Another type of explanatory note that appears in *AHD* is the kind describing usage of words and phrases in general. The recommendations and conclusions they set down are usually reinforced by citing some proportionate number of usage committee members but never who or what type (say, authors or poets or journalists or public figures or educators). That would make the judgments more effective statements by allowing the user to interpret the level of usage.

This matter aside, there are other curiosities that surface in the usage notes, not the least of which is placement. The spelling *disc/disk* would naturally fall under one form of this word if the note for it were not artificially entered at *compact disk*. Because the explanation of the spelling is buried at *compact disk*, the user must hunt through the book or, less likely, the list of usage notes at the front of the dictionary to eventually find a discussion of *disc/disk*. The explanation is narrowly focused on the music industry versus computer manufacturers and avoids a discussion of any influence of *disco*, however remote, and fails further to explain the use of *disc* in *disc brake* and the like. While a usage note at *disc/disk* would be better placed, one also looks in vain for any guidance at *light<sup>2</sup>/lite* and at *pant/trouser* for an explanation of modern usage, especially in the singular forms of *pant* and *trouser*; though every use in the *AHD* definitions refers to the words as *pants* and *trousers*.

Among the more than 1,000 Notes in *AHD*, there are some 400 or so that deal with the etymologies of a wide variety of words. Most users will find these notes of interest, though some are rather strained in making associations among words. Perhaps letting the facts speak for themselves instead of creating a narrative style would have been an effective use of valuable space, as at *abacus*. For example, the connection in *AHD* of *abacus* with *dust* or *dusty* from the Hebrew *ābhāq*





is only a possibility, and though this is the early emphasis of the narrative, its later association with a counting board, then with a frame of beads on wires, is obscured by the mention of a board for geometric design, and then a Latin form intervenes before its appearance in Middle English. On the other hand, interesting etymologies that deserve explanation are overlooked, as at *apricot*.

According to the editor's introduction, the fourth edition of *AHD* includes more than 10,000 new words buttressed by a new electronic corpus that replaces the time-tested practice of collecting citations. The corpus seems to be the answer to an absence of a citation or quotation file in a few dictionary houses these days, but in fact, the corpus is little better than a word count. It does not itself provide the new words so markedly lacking in many of our latest dictionaries. We have anomalies such as *waitron* but not useful new additions to English such as the verb sense of *whiteout* or *cherrypick*, both omitted in *AHD*. Neither does one find *light rail* or the verb *pond*, and while *cluster bomb* is entered, *cluster bombing* is not. Other desirable but missing entries are *engineered wood* and *social dialectology* or *variation* (though curiously explained in the editor's introduction). Also overlooked is the specificity of *prenuptial agreement*, mistakenly entered as an illustrative phrase under *prenuptial*, when, in fact such an agreement is restricted to a financial arrangement between two people about to be wed, and accordingly deserves a definition.

For a dictionary of perhaps 185,000 entries with much space devoted to color pictures, *AHD* is very similar to the four or five college dictionaries currently on the market. Though it devotes much space in its backmatter to the hypothetical roots of the English language, its etymologies are short and devoid of glosses and explanations of shifts in meaning, so that the average user is left to puzzle out what many of the connections may be. But dictionaries are, unhappily, not noted for being designed to help users so much as they are examples of adherence to the rigid mold of their editorial logic.

—Robert K. Barnhart

*They Have a Word for It: A Lighthearted Lexicon of Untranslatable Words and Phrases*, by Howard Rheingold. Louisville, Kentucky: Sarabande Books, 2000. (Reprint of 1988 edition, Jeremy Tarcher/Putnam.) ISBN: 1889330469 US\$16.05

This book is a trove of interesting and bizarre words and phrases, the majority of them taken from less frequently studied languages such as Bantu, Kiriwana (spoken in New Guinea), or Navajo. Read straight through or opened at random, it offers fascinating glimpses of concepts and practices characteristic of a variety of cultures.

Yet the author makes a rather grandiose claim for a book which presents itself as a "lighthearted lexicon." Starting from the idea that our language shapes the way we perceive the world, he concludes that by importing these foreign words into American speech, our society will be revolutionized. While words do shape our worldview, it does not follow that importing a word is the same thing as importing the institution or practice that it represents. I wonder if Rheingold seriously thinks that the Hawaiian custom of *ho'oponopono* 'solving a problem by talking it out' could be a realistic alternative to family court. ("Instead of a custody battle, why don't we *ho'oponopono*," he suggests saying to your soon-to-be ex-spouse.) Although I agree with him that learning these words is an enriching experience, I found that his emphasis on integrating these expressions into readers' daily lives became tiresome and made the book read a bit too much like a self-help manual: "If you find yourself in X situation, try using Y word."

The book is divided into thematic chapters treating subjects such as beauty, family, work, love, and spirituality. My personal favorites were Japanese words for different types of beauty. Words such as *aware* 'the feelings engendered by ephemeral beauty,' *wabi* 'a flawed detail that creates an elegant whole,' and *shibui* 'beauty of aging' reveal a way of thinking about beauty and time that is radically different from our Western perspective. Another interesting discovery was



the Russian term *razbliuto*, ‘the feeling a person has for someone he or she once loved but now does not.’ Somehow it seems so appropriate to find this melancholy word in the language of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky.

Rheingold has discovered the words in his book through readings in anthropology and through contact with native-speaker or academic informants. There is an index of anthropological studies that discuss some of the words, such as those connected with ritual or social structure. As the book is meant as a collection of words rather than an academic study, Rheingold offers very little etymological information. The words have been chosen for their intrinsic appeal, and some are actually idiomatic expressions rather than lexical items, such as the Italian *cavoli riscaldati*, which literally means ‘reheated cabbage’ and which refers to the attempt to revive an old relationship. Speaking of reheating, I have a quibble with this re-edition: the book was originally published in 1988, and just a little bit of re-editing could have eliminated outdated statements such as, “As the late 1980s move into the 1990s, nostalgia for the 1970s will undoubtedly have its heyday.”

Overall, the lasting interest of this book is that it shows that, even in an era of globalization, the world is still vibrant with cultural differences. As Rheingold puts it, “Untranslatable words help us notice the cracks between our own worldview and those of others.”

—Kate Deimling



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

AFFORDABLE QUALITY AUTO REPAIR  
*[From a sign in Kailua, Hawaii. Submitted by Mary M. Tius.]*

“Downtown Minneapolis is going to be like the State Fair, only no admission to get in.”  
*[From the Minneapolis Star Tribune, March 27, 2001, page C6. Submitted by Robert Farlee.]*

## EPISTOLAE

Your call for words that deserve to be resurrected came at a propitious time for me. Just yesterday I found *chalybeate*, tucked between *receivable* and *neutrality* in list no. 35 of William T. Adams’ “A spelling-book for advanced classes” (c1868).

*Webster’s New International Dictionary*, 2nd ed., unabridged (1944) defines *chalybeate* as “impregnated with salts of iron; having a taste due to iron”. In those communities with fluoridated water any underlying taste of iron may be muted, but I’m sure there are still many to whom its distinctive qualities are well known.

Nancy Birkrem  
 Rare Books Librarian, Mount Holyoke College  
 South Hadley, Massachusetts



The editorial in VERBATIM Vol. XXVI, No. 1, is, as an editorial should be, provocative and has provoked some thoughts in my mind, to wit:

Did the words you offer as examples of locutions you would like to see restored to daily usage ever have daily usage to be restored to? If so, surely they would turn up in old print, and I don’t think I have ever encountered “mitify,” “Maronist,” “diffarreation,” “nidgery,” “macilent,” or “afong” in speech or print during [my] decades of attention to language.

And anyway, since the purpose of language is communication, would it be desirable to restore obsolete words to everyday usage? My wife was once taken to a hospital emergency room with a snapped tibia, and there two nurses were trying to make her as comfortable as possible till the surgeon could come to set the leg. She, in pain mitified by bravado, cried out, “Don’t cozen me!” The nurses looked quizzically first at each other and then to me, asking, “What did she say?” I replied, “I think she doesn’t want you to pamper



her,” and the nurses silently went on about pampering her as best they could. But communication under stress had hardly been enhanced by my wife’s use of an obsolete word.

I’m going on eighty, and the only word I can think of that was widely used in my youth but that has dropped out of everyday usage is *swell* in the sense of great, grand, good. In that sense *swell* has been replaced by *cool*, which substitution is okay by me. Once a word enters the mainstream vocabulary, it seems to be enduringly embedded there, though it may be assigned shifting meanings and vary in frequency. Consider *chaps*, cited in “Lapsed Language of Appalachia” by John H. Felts, M.D. (also Winter 2001). It seems to me to be the only word of several cited by Dr. Felts that was ever in standard English, not in possibly Scottish dialect, and far beyond dating from 1855, it occurs twice in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*. In the slightly variant form *chops* it survives to this day (e.g., When he tried to kiss her, she smacked him in the chops).

Words endure, but their meanings change. Or vice versa, things, actions, or concepts remain essentially the same while the words used to express them change. This is sometimes regrettable, as in the case of *gay*, where taking on new meaning has left a semantic gap in our vocabulary.

Come to think of it, though, there is one word besides *swell* meaning ‘cool’ that has pretty much dropped out of usage during my long lifetime, and as a certified oldster I have a right to wish it could be restored. That old-time, down-home, heart-warmed word, hallowed in verse and song, is *old*. It has been supplanted by *senior* as in “senior citizen” or “senior minute.” But how does “Senior Folks at Home” sound? Or *The Senior Man and the Sea*? Shortly after my father died, many years ago, I overheard a senior friend of his remark about my Dad, “He was a nice old man. And not only was he a nice old man, he was a smart old man.” Thankfully (oops!), the friend was an Okie rancher whose English was somewhat archaic; so he didn’t say, “He was a nice senior citizen.”

William H. Dougherty  
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Some corrections to “English Place Names,” by Susan Elkin [XXVI/1 Winter 2001].

Archdeacon Grantly’s surname does not have an *e*, and Huish Episcopi and Kingsbury Episcopi are in Somerset, not Shropshire. Wick Episcopi may well be in Worcestershire, but I cannot find it in any of my gazetteers or in Pevsner.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Beaven

Kington Langley, Wiltshire



Two words come to mind that could certainly use greater currency. The first, *slantendicular*, is easily understood and often usefully descriptive. The second, *henciquently*, is in the same minor portmanteau tradition as *irregardless* but can be slipped into formal speech almost unnoticed while adding a patina of elegance to the utterance.

Richard Thompson, MD



In XXV/4 (Autumn 2000) you published two articles about Esperanto and INterlingua (pp. 21–27). The article about Interlingua indicated that it is now dead.

This is not exactly true. The Union Mundial pro Interlingua is a very active organization that sells a substantial quantity of books in Interlingua. Its electronic address on the Net is [www.interlingua.com](http://www.interlingua.com). This site has a links section connecting it with other Interlingua sites.

The most recent site is *Interlingua in interlingua*, <http://www.ia-in-ia.GQ.nu>.

Though this site has not been completely developed, it will have a large quantity of articles on the sciences and international tourism. It will also have a good selection of resources for learning Interlingua, as well as literary contests.

Harleigh Kyson, Jr.

Long Beach, California

[This letter was also sent in *Interlingua*.—  
Ed.]





## EX CATHEDRA

VERBATIM is conducting a “Favorite Word” contest, along the lines of the contest run last autumn by the London Festival of Literature. What are your favorite words? What are the words you love to say, write, read, or sing? Send your nominations to VERBATIM: The Language Quarterly, 4907 N. Washtenaw Ave., Chicago, IL 60625, or check out our website at <http://www.verbatimmag.com>. Several entries selected at random will receive a new desk dictionary of the winner’s choice. The UK’s top ten words were: 1. *Serendipity* 2. *Quidditch* (from the Harry Potter books) 3. *Love* 4. *Peace, why* (tie) 5. *Onomatopoeia* 6. *Hope* 7. *Faith* 8. *Football, muggle, hello, family* (tie) 9. *Compassion, home* (tie) 10. *Jesus, money* (tie).

There’s more to the London Festival of Literature story at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid\\_930000/930319.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/hi/english/uk/newsid_930000/930319.stm).

This call has been on our website for a month or so, and some favorite words have already been proposed, including *halcyon, lolpalooza, anthropomorphic, shinny, hella* (slang for ‘very’), *isthmus, cicisbeo, forlorn, Shakespeare, flummox, ubiquitous, rainbow, language, fascination, chimera, adrift, shibboleth, defile, and callipygian*. The last is an adjective meaning “having beautifully proportioned buttocks,” surely a favorite word for many reasons.

I hope the above words inspire VERBATIM readers to send in favorite words by the bucketful. (UK readers who voted in the London Festival are welcome to cast another vote here.) I was fairly annoyed by the London Festival list; surely, I thought, no one thinks the word *love* is a lovely word on its phonetic merits, or on the shape of its letters alone? There must have been a considerable amount of semantic tainting. The only half-decent words in the bunch are the Harry Potterisms, *serendipity*, and *onomatopoeia*. I have faith in the favorite words of VERBATIM readers—we can knock those London Festival words into a cocked hat. *Football* and *money* indeed.

## MISCELLANEA

The classified advertising rate is 40¢ per word. A word is any collection of letters or numbers with a space on each side. Address, with remittance, VERBATIM, 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60625.

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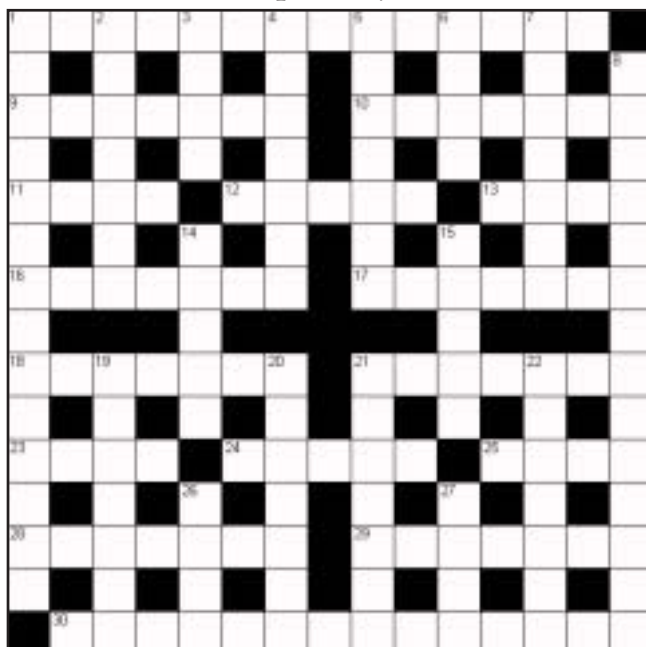




## Cryptic Crossword Number 87

Composed by Cullen

## INTER ALIA



### Clues—Across

1. Celebrate what you can do with hating (4,1,5,2,2)
9. Story about a sheep in America (7)
10. Brave to take a clout with a garden-tool, say? (7)
11. Topless page giving variety show (4)
12. Non-Christian element among Irish in Dublin (5)
13. A follower takes a jug to the brook (4)
16. Principal hall of ancient house, for example, discovered in Roman ruins (7)
17. Balance to settle around the fourth of January (7)
18. Celebration drink for Pygmalion's beloved (7)
21. A cheerless morning in David's refuge (7)
23. Girl rejects completely unhelpful identification (4)
24. He's terrific as Cassius in part of a conspirator (5)
25. Before long you'll see nothing in the girl (4)
28. Novel Russian farming aid (7)
29. They look cherubic, naked, or in a skimpy garment (7)
30. Musician and sultan go morris dancing (5,9)

A few notes about our website (<http://www.verbatimmag.com>): PDF files of selected back issues are now available: if your printer is relatively good you will be able to print very nice copies with all original art, borders, and puzzles. We now also have a bulletin board where VERBATIM readers can post messages and hold discussions, and where the editor may pop in from time to time to answer pressing questions such as what three words end in *-gry* (just kidding; the question's a hoax.) Wear your heart on your sleeve, or better yet emblazoned across your chest, with our new VERBATIM t-shirts, as you drink from a VERBATIM mug while merrily clicking away across a VERBATIM mousepad. (These are at <http://www.cafepress.com/verbatimmag>.)

### Clues—Down

1. Ask me along if I'm involved in medicine (4,2,8)
2. Well proportioned like the US composer in stirring finale (7)
3. One in a thousand? Just the opposite—that's the point (4)
4. Spaniard, perhaps, might be found Kamchatka, given sufficient start (7)
5. Frost upset red squirrel (7)
6. Where a female may be beheaded in the Middle East (4)
7. Disposed to be angry as one gets African coin with copper content (7)
8. Revoking the order of the noble Queen, and in ancient Chinese (14)
14. Jar that sounds impressive (5)
15. Children causing controversy? (5)
19. Back pain causing head of production to leave plant (7)
20. Exotic walk of an unconvincing lawyer (7)
21. Welcome demand on account (7)
22. Facial spottiness appears advanced. Exit yours truly (7)
26. Bond reported in from part of Asia (4)
27. Old blockhead who was left in a spot (4)