



Rendering the Language of Daad

Orin Hargraves
Westminster, Maryland

I picked up a book at random. “Master, it’s not written!”

“What do you mean? I can see it’s written. What do you read?”

“I am not reading. There are not letters of the alphabet, and it is not Greek. They look like worms, snails, fly dung . . .”

“Ah, it’s Arabic.”

—from *The Name of the Rose*

The novice Adso of Melk in Umberto Eco’s fiction can be excused for expressing bafflement on first viewing the Arabic script. Scholars who would attempt transliteration of it may find themselves similarly perplexed, not because of irregularities in Arabic itself, but because of the difficulty of finding satisfactory analogs for Arabic sounds and letters in English. The Arabic alphabet, despite appearances to the naïve, is in fact very logical and efficient, perfectly expressing in writing the language it evolved for. The Roman alphabet, by contrast, expresses English only through a highly stylized set of conventions, riddled with exceptions and anomalies, that we spend twelve years of education (and then some) trying to master. Arabic uses one letter to represent one sound; English sometimes uses two letters to represent one sound (as *sh* for IPA /ʃ/ and *th* for IPA /θ/ or /ð/), or one letter to represent two sounds (as *x*, representing /ks/, except when initial in which case it represents /z/).

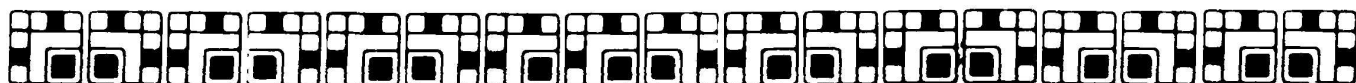
Reconciling these two writing systems, one nearly perfect and the other quite imperfect but rulebound in its own way, is the job of those who would render a word from one language in the other. For words traveling from Arabic to English, the result is often a dog’s dinner. Lexicographers and linguists must be systematic in their approach to the problem, and have devised a variety of systems that rely on special symbols, unusual conven-

tions of capitalization (illustrated in this article by transliteration of the emphatic consonants with capital letters, described below), or extensive use of diacriticals. Newspaper editors, on the other hand, are likely to regard anything that isn’t in basic ASCII as the enemy, and broadcasters may not know an alveolar implosive from a dinnerplate; they want to simplify as much as possible, rendering all words nominally intelligible and pronounceable to all readers and listeners, in a form that will not jar conventional sensibilities. Those who wonder at the highly variable forms found in the media of words taken from Arabic may better understand the reasons for this with some background knowledge.

Of the 28 letters of the Arabic alphabet, ten represent no difficulty in transliteration, having generally the same sound as letters in English. These are *ba*, *fa*, *kaf*, *lam*, *mim*, *nun*, *ra*, and *zay*, conventionally transliterated by *b*, *f*, *k*, *l*, *m*, *n*, *r*, and *z*, respectively. The letters *w* and *y*, when beginning a word or syllable, likewise do very well for Arabic *waw* and *ya*. The rest of the consonants are more or less problematic, as will be described in a moment.

The Arabic vowels generally present no problem for the English speaker and are variously transliterated. There is really no need to be systematic about them because Arabic morphology is such that consonants (typically three in a word, all in the same order for words that are semantically related) tell everything about what the root of a word is. Vowels vary considerably according to context and dialect, and other factors. Thus we see in print today various renderings such as *Taliban*, *Taleban*, *mujahedin*, *mujahideen*, *Muslim*, *Moslem*.

The “emphatic” consonants present a good place to dive into the subject. Arabic has four of them: ص, ض, ط, and ظ, or *Saad*, *Daad*, *Ta*, and *Zaa*, to give an approximation of their names.



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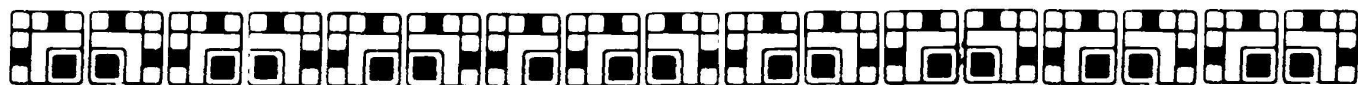
VERBATIM (ISSN 0162-0932) is published quarterly for US\$25 per year by Word, Inc., 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625. Periodicals postage paid at Chicago, IL, and additional mailing offices. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to VERBATIM, 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625. VERBATIM is printed in Canada on recycled paper.

Business and editorial offices are located at 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625.

email: editor@verbatimag.com web page: <http://www.verbatimag.com>

For subscriptions in U.K., Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East (UK£18), please write to VERBATIM, P.O. Box 156, Chearsley, Aylesbury, Bucks HP18 0DQ, or email: verbatim.uk@tesco.net.

For subscriptions in North America (US\$25) or anywhere else not covered above (US\$30), please write VERBATIM, 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago, IL 60625 (800-897-3006), or email: editor@verbatimag.com.



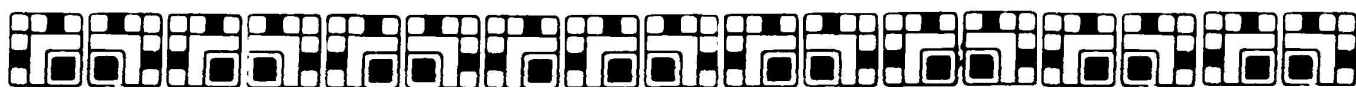
Arabic speakers fancy that theirs is the only language that contains the emphatic d sound, and thus one of the nicknames of Arabic is *al-lughat DDaaD*, which might be clunkily translated as “the language of emphatic D”. These consonants are emphatic versions of the letters *س, د, ت, ذ, sin, dal, ta, and thal*, which correspond closely to English *s, d, t*, and voiced *th (/ð/)*. An Arabic speaker hears very clearly the difference between, e.g., *sin* and *Saad*; the emphatics are pronounced with greater force, with what you might call greater lingual flexion that any English consonant requires. Emphatic consonants also have an effect on the vowels that precede or follow them, tending to both heighten and lengthen them. Consider, for example, the Arabic words *Baghdad*, *Ramadan*, and *Intifada*. The *ds* in *Baghdad* are “ordinary” *ds*, both Arabic *dal*. The *ds* in *Intifada* and *Ramadan* are *DaaD*, the emphatic *d*. The effect on the pronunciation of the preceding (in *Intifada*) and following (in *Ramadan*) vowel is reflected in the English pronunciation of these words, which approximates the Arabic; the “a” sound in *Baghdad* is the same written vowel (in Arabic) as the “a” sounds in *Intifada* and *Ramadan*.

Though not strictly an emphatic/ordinary pair, Arabic also has two *hs*: one, *ه*, whose name is *haa*, is similar to English *h*, though made much deeper in the throat; more like the *h* in *house* than the *h* in *hi*. The other *h*, *ح*, whose name is *Haa*, is voiceless and heavily aspirated. It is represented in IPA as */h̥/*, and sounds something like *hi* whispered at the top of your lungs. In fact English speakers don’t pronounce either of these consonants like an Arabic speaker would, and both invariably appear in English simply as *h*. What is more, English tends to ignore an *h* sound at the end of a word or a syllable. In Arabic they are clearly pronounced, for example the aspirated *h* in *Fatah*, or the more conventional *h* in *Allah*. The result is that the average Arabic speaker would not recognize the typical English pronunciations of such words.

Another problem arises from the attempt to transliterate Arabic letters that have no near equivalent in English. The case can be illustrated by three Arabic letters: *ق (qaf)*, *خ (kha)*, and *ك (kaf)*.

All three of these are transliterated in English, rather whimsically, as *c, k, q*, or *kh*, but invariably pronounced as */k/*. This doesn’t present a problem for the English speaker, who usually knows what is being talked about, but the English renderings are unrecognizable in either speech or writing to an Arabic speaker. *ق, qaf*, is what linguists call a uvular plosive. Take a *k*, move the point of contact of your tongue with the roof of your mouth backwards about an inch, and you’ve got it. This is the initial sound, properly pronounced, in *Qatar*, and *Kandahar*, and the terminal sound in *Iraq*.^{*} *خ, kha*, is what linguists call a voiceless velar fricative, and sounds like the rude “hocking” sound that vulgarians make as a prelude to expectoration. It is the initial sound in *Khartoum* and *Califate*, and the terminal sound in *sheikh*. *ك, kaf*, is the easy one: it is truly like English *k*, the initial sound in *Kuwait*. Innumerable historical transgressions aside, it would be sensible to always transliterate *qaf* with *q*, *kha* with *kh*, and *kaf* with *k*.

Delving even deeper into the subject, and deeper into the throat, we find the two Arabic letters *ع, ayn*, *غ, ghayn*, which may cause the transliterator despair. These have not even approximate analogs in English. *ayn* is what linguists call a voiced pharyngeal fricative, (IPA */ʕ/*). The closest we come to this in English is when trying to make a very convincing imitation of sheep: the terminal sound in *baa* is something like it, when you bring out the sound from deep in your throat. This consonant is largely ignored in transliteration and you would never know that it is a feature of many common words from Arabic. Many English speakers would think that the initial sounds of *Iraq* and *Iran* are the same, but in fact *Iraq* begins with *ayn*, and thus is much throatier when properly pronounced. *ayn* also occurs in the Arabic word *Saudi* and is the initial sound in the common masculine name *Ali*. *ghayn* is the sound of voiced gargling, a “uvular trill” in technospeak, a little like French *r* but more emphatic. English renders it as *gh* and pronounces it is a hard *g*, (as in *Baghdad* and *Afghanistan*), a pale shadow of the real sound.



Though not a letter of the alphabet, Arabic has a glottal stop (glottal plosive in technospeak, IPA /ʔ/). Its name is *hamza* and it is represented by the symbol ء which may sometimes be seen floating above, below, or next to letters in Arabic script. Though English speakers never attempt it in pronunciation of Arabic words, it is sometimes represented by an apostrophe, for example in *al-Qa'ida*, the form for the “terrorist network” that is preferred by some British newspapers. A glottal stop also occurs in the proper pronunciation of the word *Koran*, which might be more sensitively transliterated *qur'an*, and in the name for the minaret crier, usually *muezzin* in English but pronounced /mu:ˈʔaððm/ in Arabic.

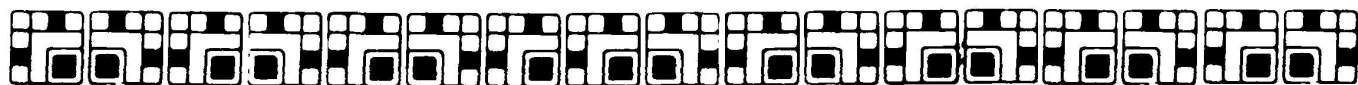
Another extra-alphabetic feature of Arabic is *shadda*, represented by the symbol ّ floating above a letter to indicate that it is doubled; and in Arabic that means really doubled, given twice the duration in pronunciation. This nearly always has semantic implications, and thus doesn't accord well with English consonant doubling, which at the most is a convention of spelling. The majority of words from Arabic with *shadda* arrive with the doubled letter intact (the spelling *Mohamed* is an exception; a better rendering is *Muhammad*). English speakers, however, would probably only raise eyebrows if they really doubled the pronunciation of letters in, for example *henna*, *jellaba*, *Sunni* or *tabbouleh*, all of which are fairly accurate transliterations.

Certain grammatical and phonetic features of Arabic may also throw a wrench into the works of the transliterator, who finds no easy way of treating them in English. The article in Arabic (there is only one), written ﻻ and is cursively joined to the word it is attached to. It is used far more frequently and has much more widespread functionality than the nominally equivalent *the* in English. It is sometimes represented in transliteration as *al-* at the beginning of a word: thus *al-Qaida*, *Allah*, *Almoravid* (the Moorish dynasty). Though nearly always present with nouns in written Arabic, the *l* sound of the article (*lam*) is in fact not always pronounced. The letters of the Arabic alphabet are divided into “sun” letters and “moon” letters. A word beginning with a moon letter and the article prefixed indeed begins with an “l” sound. But

in words beginning with sun letters, the sound of the lam is assimilated to the sun letter and effectively disappears. English speakers know the capital of Saudi Arabia as Riyadh, but a more accurate transliteration would be *ar-riyaD*. Faced with the rather silly looking and repetitive *r* at the beginning, transliterators usually choose to simply chop the article off in words beginning with a sun letter. In fact it would be sensible to always chop off the article when introducing a noun from Arabic into English, except in cases where this never happens in Arabic. Thus, *Allah* is fine, but we don't need *al-Qaida*. “The al-Qaida network” means “the the Qaida network.” So why don't we just call it the *Qa'ida* network, or *Qaida*, as the *New York Times* tried for one day?

It is too late in the day to bring more coherence to the vast number of Arabic words whose spellings are already fixed in English, but those contemplating future borrowings would do well to preserve, as much as possible, the convention of using unique English letters (or in a few cases, pairs of letters) to represent each of the Arabic consonants. That way words that are related in Arabic (derived from the same root) will have something of a similar appearance in English. You don't have to be Dick Tracy to spot a connection between *jihād* and *mujaheddin* (their common root is *jahada*, ‘strive’), but the vagaries of historical transliteration might cause even serious word detectives to overlook the fact that *Luxor* and *alcázar* have a common root (it is the article *al-* affixed to different forms of *qSar*, ‘castle’). It is probably going too far, however, to ask for unique letters to represent the emphatic consonants. English speakers will never distinguish them in pronunciation anyway, and besides we don't have the letters to spare. For the present there are probably not enough words coming from Arabic to cause ambiguities to arise because of this, though it is perhaps worth noting, along these lines, that *Hamas*, the terrorist organization, has no relationship to *hummus*, the chick-pea-based foodie's delight; that's the emphatic *s* at the end of *hummus*, and the ordinary one at the end of *Hamas*.

[Orin Hargraves is a freelance lexicographer and the author of *London at Your Door*, *Culture Shock! Morocco*, and the forthcoming *Transatlantic English*.]



Unexpected Surprises

Gerald Eskenazi

Place here, New York

It was back in a creative writing class in college, and we had to do a paper on a visit to a museum.

“The best surprises,” I began, “are those that happen unexpectedly.”

It might have been my first non-sequitur in print, but I think, after 8,000 bylines that followed in *The New York Times*, not my last. Over the years I have been guilty—inadvertently, of course—of these leads. I daresay, so have the victims ... er, subjects, I have written about.

Often I have quoted people without realizing—until I saw it in print—that what they said looked odd or awkward or simply silly when set in black type against white newsprint.

Sometimes, I have burnished a non-grammatical quote to avoid embarrassing the speaker. But there have been times, I admit, when I took delight in a phrase’s wrong turn. Still, I had my moments—unexpected surprises?—after realizing what had slipped by me.

As a young reporter, I was asked to look into how the sports world was dealing with a drought that had struck the East. I spoke to a groundskeeper at a public golf course. This is how I began my story, quoting him:

“We care for the greens the way you’d care for your aged grandmother—we roll it, aerate it, and water it.”

I even made Charles Schulz, the creator of the beloved *Peanuts* comic strip, look bad.

Here was my idea: for a column at Christmas-time, I thought it would be nifty (okay, I learned words like that from watching Judy Garland-Mickey Rooney movies) to interview Schulz. He not only was a hockey fan, he owned his own skating rink in California.

The premise was simple—what would Snoopy give Gordie Howe, the great hockey star of the 1950’s and 1960’s, for Christmas?

“He’d give him an elbow,” said the mischievous Schulz.

Great line, I thought.

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The Big Bang blew. From nearly
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We’ve grown to this galactic
place,
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space?

—BOB MCKENTY

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An “elbow” in hockey parlance means a whack to the body, using the elbow.

This was before computers. Usually, I went into the office to type my story. But I had phoned Schulz from my home, and I was facing a deadline situation. So I used the “phone room” of *The Times*. We had several people standing by telephones, and a reporter’s story would be transcribed if he or she could not do it in person, or via wire. In phoning in a story, I always was careful to spell out the names of people, and to make a distinction between such letters as “m” or “n.”

No problems here. I phoned in my story. The next morning, I picked up the paper to see what I had wrought. I was so proud of my coup.

That disappeared when I read through the piece and discovered that instead of an “elbow,” *Peanuts* was giving Gordie Howe an “oboe.” Or at least that’s the way my Brooklyn accent made it sound on the phone.

I still have Schulz’s little hand-written note to me. It reads, “That is the worst typo I have ever seen.”

My early writing years were filled with hockey, a sport in which fighting often overshadowed the play. The general manager and coach of the New



York Rangers was a feisty little guy named Emile (the Cat) Francis, who wanted to change the image of his perennial last-place team.

Thus, he was quite pleased after one game, in which his players retaliated to some bullying by the opposition.

“They certainly didn’t play by the Queen of Marksberry rules,” he said with a grin. That, I thought, was a wonderful blend of “Burke’s Peerage” with boxing’s Marquis of Queensberry Rules. I didn’t let him off the hook, though, and quoted him verbatim.

I did that, too, to a fellow named Drew (Bundini) Brown. Mr. Brown was Muhammad Ali’s factotum. I knew that people addressed Brown by his nickname of Bundini, whatever that meant.

So I began a conversation, “Bundini...”

He interrupted me.

“It’s ‘Bo-dini,’” he explained. “You pronounce it different from the way you says it.”

I had more compassion for a hockey coach in the early 1970’s. That was the era when all of us in the sportswriting business talked about change. A new generation of athlete was suiting up. Some actually had long hair and questioned authority.

I asked the coach: “How do you relate to this new breed? Have you had to change your style?”

“No,” he said, and added, in a misspoken attempt to be hip. “They know where I’m coming at.”

Well, what’s a preposition between friends? I thought. “Coming from,” “coming at.” It winds up at the same place, doesn’t it? I cleaned up his quote.

No such luck befell Wes Westrum, who managed a woebegone New York Mets team for a time in the 1960’s.

His team had just squeezed by for a rare victory.

“Well,” he announced with some satisfaction, “that certainly was a cliff-dweller.”

Yes, we in the writing fraternity left him to hang out to dry. We quoted him exactly.

You see, we sportswriters sometimes have been burned by our own editors or unintended mistakes—so what’s a little Schadenfreude between friends? And I don’t mean the Bavarian soccer star.

[Gerald Eskenazi has written sports for The New York Times since 1959.]

A Column on Columns

David Galef

University of Mississippi

When my nephew wanted to know about Greek columns, I figured I didn’t need recourse to the dictionary. Like most students of my generation, I learned the three basic types: Ionic, Doric, and Corinthian. “Ionic is the simplest,” I began my lecture. “It has a square base—or is that Doric? The one with the leaves at the top, I think that’s Corinthian...” My nephew was giving me the fish eye. I realized that what my generation learned was well over a generation ago, and I’d forgotten some of the particulars. “Tell you what. Let’s check the dictionary.” And I hauled down the unabridged *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, second edition, a replacement for my poor *Webster’s New International Dictionary*, second edition, that had quietly fallen to pieces over the period 1980 to 1995.

The good part about the Random House edition is that it was published in 1987 and therefore contains words like *cryogenic* and *pheromones* that weren’t around for earlier dictionaries to include. Also, it has fairly comprehensible entries, perhaps reflecting a more straightforward age. Or so I assumed. But when I looked up the entry for Doric, this is what I found:

“*Doric column*: a channeled column without a base, having as a capital a circular echinus supporting a square abacus, above which comes a plain architrave, a frieze of triglyphs and metopes, and a cornice the corona of which has mutules on its soffit.”

I read it aloud, in increasing wonderment, to my nephew. I knew what was coming.

“What’s an ... icky-ness?”

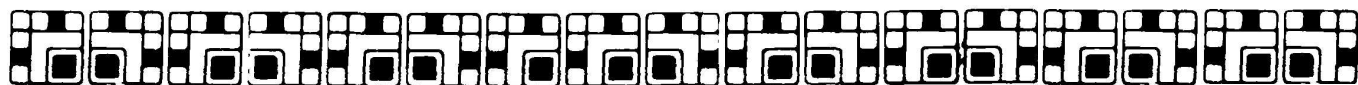
“It’s an *echinus*,” I corrected him, “and I don’t know, either.”

“All right, then, what are meadow peas?”

“*Metopes*.” This time, I quickly thumbed to the entry and read, “*metope*: any of the square spaces between triglyphs.”

“Between what?”

Time for the quick shuffle-and-search again. I found the right page and began to read: “*triglyph*:



the structural part of a frieze, separating two metopes and consisting of a rectangular block with two vertical grooves or glyphs, and two chamfers or half-grooves at the sides, counting as a third glyph, for three flat vertical bands on the face of the block.”

“Oh.” After a pause the opposite of pregnant, he asked, “So what’s an Ionic column?”

I found the entry. “*Ionic column*: a fluted column with a molded base and a capital composed of four volutes, usually parallel to the architrave with a pulvinus connecting a pair on each side of the column, and an entablature typically consisting of an architrave of three fascias, a richly ornamented frieze, and a cornice corbeled out on egg-and-dart and dentil moldings, with the frieze sometimes omitted.”

“Let’s play Monopoly,” suggested my nephew, and that’s what we did for the rest of the afternoon.

But after he left, I also checked *Corinthian* and found the definition equally opaque: “*Corinthian column*: similar in most respects to the Ionic but usually of slenderer proportions, and characterized by a deep capital with a round bell decorated with acanthus leaves and a square abacus with concave sides. The Corinthian capital has typically two distinct rows of acanthus leaves above which appear eight fluted sheaths, from each of which spring two helices, of which one curls beneath a corner of the abacus as half of a volute and the other curls beneath the center of the abacus.”

I am not a proponent of EZ vocabulary, but I found these definitions singularly unhelpful. My confidence was so shaken that I finally begin looking up words I thought I knew, such as the humble *cornice*, only to find “the uppermost member of a classical entablature, consisting of a bed molding, a corona, and a cymatium, with rows of dentils, modillions, etc., often placed between the bed molding and the corona.” Checking out *dentil* led to “any of a series of small, rectangular blocks, used especially in classical architecture beneath the coronas of cornices.” But when I tracked down *corona*, I read “the projecting, slablike member of a classical cornice supported by the bed molding or by modillions, dentils, etc., and supporting the cymatium.” So I looked for *modillion* and found “an ornamental cantilever beneath the corona or similar member of a cornice, stringcourse, etc.” And thence to

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cymatium, defined as “the uppermost member of a classical cornice, usually a *sima recta*.” Chasing down *sima recta*, not to mention *stringcourse*, I began to suspect a trick. My quest seemed doomed to circularity, in which one word is defined as another and vice versa. Illustrations would have helped, and I eventually found them under the heading of *column*. Meanwhile, in retaliation, I spent a while looking up each term in question, and even a few I knew, on the off-chance that they’d shifted ground after my adolescence. Here, with a little recapping, is what I found:

abacus: a slab forming the top of a column’s capital.

anthemion: an ornament of floral forms in a flat radiating cluster.

architrave: the lowermost molding of a classical entablature, resting upon a column.

balluster: a bolster—a structural support.

cantilever: a bracket for supporting a balcony, cornice, etc.

capital: the upper end of a column.

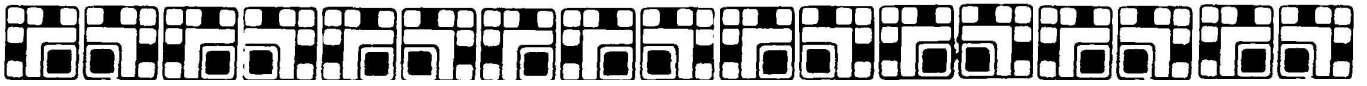
cavetto: a concave molding the outline of which is a quarter circle.

chamfer: a cut made at a 45% angle.

corbel: any bracket of brick or stone.

cornice: the uppermost member of a classical entablature, consisting of a bed molding, a corona, and a cymatium, with rows of dentils, modillions, etc., often placed between the bed molding and the corona.

corona: the projecting, slablike member of a classical cornice supported by the bed molding or by modillions, dentils, etc., and supporting the cymatium.



cymatium: the uppermost member of a classical cornice, usually a *sima recta*.

dado: the part of a pedestal between the base and cornice of a column.

dentil: any of a series of small, rectangular blocks, used especially in classical architecture beneath the coronas of cornices.

echinus: a prominent circular molding.

egg and dart: a design for enriching an ovolo or echinus, consisting of a closely set, alternating series of oval and pointed forms.

entablature: the entire construction of a classical temple or the like between the columns and the eaves, usually composed of an architrave, a frieze, and a cornice.

fascia: any relatively broad, horizontal surface, as the outer edge of a cornice, a stringcourse, etc.

fillet: a narrow portion of the surface of a column left between adjoining flutes.

flute: a channel, groove or furrow in the shaft of a column.

frieze: the part of a classical entablature between the architrave and the cornice, usually decorated with sculpture in low relief.

helix: a spiral ornament.

lister: a border.

metope: any of the square spaces between triglyphs.

modillion: an ornamental cantilever beneath the corona or similar member of a cornice, stringcourse, etc.

mutule: a projecting, flat block under the corona under the Doric cornice, corresponding to the modillion of other orders.

ovolo: a convex molding forming or approximating in section a quarter of a circle or ellipse.

plinth: a slablike member beneath the base of a column.

pulvinus (also *pulvinar*): either of two convex forms on an Ionic capital having on their ends two of the volutes.

scotia: a deep concave molding between fillets, also called trochilus.

sima: the uppermost member of a full classical order, usually a *cyma recta*, representing a roof gutter; a *cymatium*.

soffit: the underside of an architectural feature, as a beam, arch, ceiling, or cornice.

stringcourse: a horizontal band or course, as of stone, projecting beyond or flush with the face of a building, often molded and sometimes richly carved.

torus: a large, convex molding, more or less semicircular in profile, commonly forming the lowest molding of the base of a column, directly above the plinth, sometimes occurring as one of a pair separated by a scotia and fillets.

triglyph: the structural part of a frieze, separating two metopes and consisting of a rectangular block with two vertical grooves or glyphs, and two chamfers or half-grooves at the sides, counting as a third glyph, for three flat vertical bands on the face of the block.

trochilus: see *scotia*.

volute: a spiral ornament, found especially in the capitals of Ionic, Corinthian, and Composite orders.

The question, of course, is what the hell's going on here. And for whom are these definitions written? Presumably, whoever looks up these terms doesn't have a full-scale knowledge of classical architecture, so why are so many of these somewhat obscure words described in equally arcane terminology? Were no other *mots justes* available?

On the off-chance that this lexicographical tail-chasing was peculiar to Random House, I went into the study (all right, the living room) and hauled out our microscopic-print edition of the unabridged *Oxford English Dictionary*, second edition. It lists *Doric* merely as "The name of one of the three Grecian orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian), of which it is the oldest, strongest, simplest." I flipped to *Ionic*: "Name of one of the three orders of Grecian architecture (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian), characterized by the two lateral volutes of the capital." Fair enough for somewhat repetitive entries, though it's interesting that they've dropped the "The" at the start and changed "three Grecian orders" to "three orders of Grecian," possibly because some transcriber grew bored. As for *Corinthian*, it had the longest entry, befitting the most embellished column: "The name of one of the three Grecian orders (Doric, Ionic, Corinthian), of which it is the lightest and most ornate, having a bell-shaped capital adorned with rows of acanthus leaves giving rise to graceful volutes and helices."



My battered *Webster's* second edition, whose leaves I've bound together with a stout rubber band, divulged similarly scant material. For *Doric*: "Arch. Of, pertaining to, or designating, the oldest and simplest of the Greek orders, or a modified form adopted by the Romans." The accompanying illustration said it all. The entry for *Ionic* followed the same winning formula: "Arch. Of, pertaining to, or designating, the Ionic order, of architecture, one of the three Greek orders, or a modified form of it adopted by the Romans, distinguished esp. by the spiral volutes of its capital." *Corinthian* also followed suit: "Arch. Of, pertaining to, or designating, the lightest and most ornate of the three Greek orders, characterized esp. by its bell-shaped capital enveloped with acanthus leaves. It became a favorite order with the Romans." Under *column* was a helpful sketch of all three types.

I put my coat on and took a trip to the library. The columns in *Webster's* third edition were unsurprisingly similar to those in the second, though someone put a shim in the definition for *Doric*, in which the echinus is separated from the shaft "by one or more annulets and supporting a square unmolded abacus." An *annulet*, it turns out, is "an encircling band, molding, or fillet, as on the shaft of a column." The fourth edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary*, that bastion of plain speaking, talks simply of "plain, saucer shaped capitals" in the Doric order but refers to "two opposed volutes in the capital" in the Ionic order. The colored illustrations, on the other hand, were most illustrative. Even the latest edition of the student's standby, the *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, refers to scroll volutes in the capitals of Ionic columns. I'm still looking for concision and clarity, though not at the expense of accuracy.

Coda: I've since invited my nephew back, but have promised not to discuss volutes.



[David Galef teaches at the University of Mississippi. His latest book is the short-story collection *Laugh Track*.]

The Slang of the Day

In 1901, the citizens of Colorado Springs filled a metal chest with letters, photographs, and other materials, and sealed it up until 2001. When we opened the chest at Colorado College on January 1 of this year, we found this letter from D. Russ Wood on "the slang of the day."

For more information about the Century Chest, visit www.ColoradoCollege.edu/library/SpecialCollections/CenturyChest/Appdx.html

*—Jessy Randall, Curator and Archivist
Colorado College Special Collections*

Colorado Springs, Aug. 3, 1901.

Louis R. Ehrich, Esq.,

City.

Dear Sir:

In reply to your request for an article on "The Slang of the day", to be placed in the proposed Century Chest, I herewith attach a short sketch, being an alleged conversation between two persons into which I have done my best to weave the principal slang words and phrases of the present day.

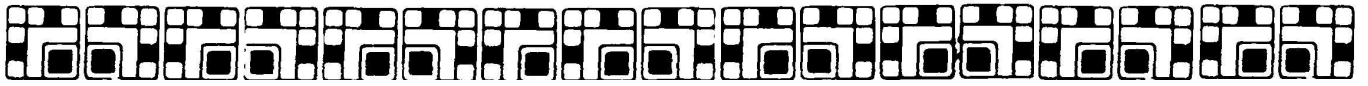
No doubt the readers of this one hundred years from now will have great cause for surprise, as I feel sure by that time a great many of the present slang words will have become good English. The slang words of today often find their way into the dictionaries of the future. This has been true of the past and there is no apparent reason for a change.

You will kindly notice that all the words or phrases which I have termed "slang" are placed within quotation marks, and are followed by reference numbers in parenthesis. To ascertain the meaning of the various words and phrases, it is only necessary for you to turn to the last three sheets where you will find the various reference numbers in order, with explanatory notes following each one.

Although the work of compiling the enclosed has not been extremely difficult, yet I have not found it an easy task, and fear I have perhaps omitted a number of slang expressions which should rightfully have their position in the story.

Yours Very Truly,

D. Russ Wood



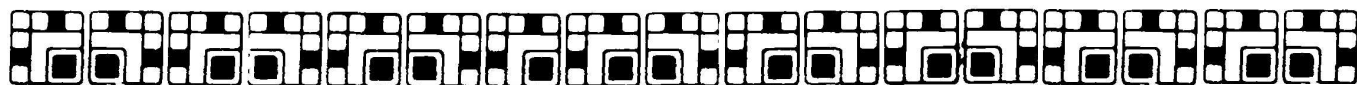
“Wouldn’t that Scald you”, (1) remarked the “Booze Clerk” (2) as he passed over a second “Tub of Suds” (3) to the “Piker” (4), who was leaning against the bar. So the “Coppers” (5) have “Nailed” (6) Jimmy, have they? That’s what a man gets for being too grasping. Why didn’t he quit “Shoving the Queer” (7) while his reputation was good? And you say it was necessary to use a “Billy” (8) on him, and also adorn him with a pair of “Bracelets” (9) before he would come along peacefully. He always was a “Scrapper” (10) and many a time has told me he would rather fight than eat. “Short-Horse” (11) Tom was in this morning and told me Jim had a “Rough House” (12) well under way when the “Hurry Up” (13) backed up to the door. This “Berg” (14) is certainly getting on the “Bum” (15) these days. Suppose he will get about ten years in the “Pen” (16). It all goes to show that things ain’t what they used to be. The “Knockers” (17) are getting a trifle too numerous around these parts for me, and it won’t be long until yours truly packs up his “Duds” (18) and hies himself to pastures new.

This morning a “Swell Brace of Dames” (19) came floating down the “Pike” (20) looking fine and dandy, and a great big “Lobster” (21) of a “Club Swinger” (22) came up and told them if they didn’t get a two cent “Move On” (23) and get under cover he would call the “Hoodlum” (24) and “Run them in” (25). Now that’s the kind of “Doings” (26) that makes me “Sore” (27) on the town. I can “Stand” (28) for most “Any Old Thing” (29), but when it comes to driving people off the street I am for “registering a Kick” (30). It’s all right to “Call” (31) a fellow occasionally, but to be continually making him “Look like thirty cents” (32) is entirely too much of a good thing. “The Main Squeeze” (33) over at Police Headquarters came into this “Joint” (34) yesterday and “Handed me a nice Bunch of Talk” (35). Some “Short Skate” (36) has been “Squealing” (37) and now it is “Up to Me” (38) to stop all “Canning” (39) in this “Booze Shop” (40). He says it is going to cost me fifty “Bones” (41) for the first offense and that he will “Set me back” (42) one hundred for every offense that follows. It would do me good to “Land” (43) a couple on some of the “Two Spots” (44) who help to swell the population of this town. A man in business here is “Up against it” (45) all the

time. No more Sunday “Side Door Business” (46), and if you are not closed good and tight at 12 P.M. there is trouble. Some one is all the time trying to “Rub It In (47). The “Gospel Sharks” (48) are continually talking “Hot Air” (49) to the members of their churches until almost every one in town is “Sore” (50) on us fellows. The women come “Rubbering” (51) around at night trying to “Spot” (52) something out of the ordinary so as to be able to make a “Holler” (53) the first chance they get. It ain’t no use trying to “Run the Games” (54). The whole town would be “On to you” (55) in no time. “On the square” (56) I get so disgusted at times I feel very much like hunting up a few of the so called “Real Things” (57) and “Landing a couple” (58). Talk about getting “Cold feet” (59), I feel more like a “Quitter” (60) every day. A few years ago it was different. The “Gang” (61) used to come in here, do as they pleased, and there would be “Nothing doing” (62). They’ed “Play the wheel” (63) and probably “Drop” (64) twenty or thirty “Bucks” (65), but never a “Murmur” (66). Is that the way things are now? Well I guess “Nit” (67). Let one of the alleged “Sports” (68) come in here now, and if he accidentally “Bucks up against” (69) something too heavy for him and gets “Separated from a little bunch of coin” (70) he will never stop “Chewing the rag” (71) until he has “Queered” (72) the place with about a dozen. Nine-tenths of the “Suckers” (73) around here will tell you the town is being run properly, and that the “City Dads” (74) are “Onto their job” (75), but they have got to “Show me” (76).

EXPLANATORY NOTES

- 1 An expression of surprise. Such as “You surprise me”.
- 2 Bar Tender
- 3 Glass of Beer.
- 4 A person who is always receiving something from someone else, and never offers to return the favor. One who generally makes himself obnoxious. A generally disliked individual.
- 5 Policeman.
- 6 To Catch. To Arrest.
- 7 To Pass Counterfeit Money.
- 8 Policeman’s Club.
- 9 Hand-Cuffs.
- 10 A Fighter.
- 11 One who is always behind in paying what he owes.



12 To put a place in general disorder. To throw things about.

13 Patrol wagon.

14 Sometimes used in referring to a certain town or city.

15 A word frequently used to express disgust. For example "The Play was very Bum", meaning "The Play was very poor".

16 Penitentiary.

17 One who is continually finding fault. A hard person to please.

18 Belongings.

19 Sometimes used in speaking of two women.

20 A word sometimes used in place of the word Street.

21 Used to express disgust of another person. (See 4)

22 Policeman (See 5)

23 Quite frequently used when urging one to hurry. To move as if in a hurry.

24 Same as (13).

25 To Arrest.

26 A word frequently used when referring to something that has taken place.

27 To become disgusted.

28 To endure. To put up with.

29 Anything.

30 To make a complaint.

31 To reprimand.

32 To make one look foolish. To embarrass.

33 Sometimes used in referring to the head man of any organization.

34 Sometimes used in referring to a saloon, gambling hall, etc.

35 Meaning to talk with considerable meaning.

36 See (11).

37 To tell something which has been told you in confidence.

38 To become one's duty. To perform a command.

39 To sell beer to people in cans or other receptacles allowing the same to be taken from the place.

40 Saloon.

41 Dollars.

42 Will charge.

43 To strike. To punish. To beat.

44 A word which can be substituted for Numbers (11) and (36).

45 In hard luck.

46 To allow the side doors of one's place of business to remain open on Sundays in violation of the city laws.

47 To say mean things about a person. To act unkindly.

48 Ministers.

49 To say things you do not mean. To talk without knowledge.

50 Same as (27).

51 To be continually looking about.

52 To try to see something which does not interest you personally.



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53 To make a complaint.

54 To conduct a gambling establishment.

55 To become aware of the fact.

56 Meaning "To tell the truth."

57 To imagine one's self above comparison.

58 Same as (42)

59 To become disgusted.

60 One who gives up.

61 A crowd.

62 No trouble.

63 Gamble on the roulette table.

64 Lose.

65 Dollars. Same as (40)

66 Not to complain. To say nothing.

67 A word very frequently used in place of the word "Not".

68 To be interested in sorting matters.

69 To have hard luck. To undertake something you cannot accomplish.

70 To lose some money.

71 To continually talk.

72 To talk against a place. To make a place unpopular.

73 One easily managed. An easy person to get money from.

74 Members of the City Council.

75 To understand one's business.

76 To explain. To prove to.

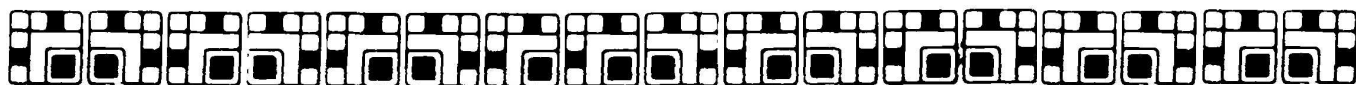
SIC! SIC! SIC!

The National Society of Collegiate Scholars

Will hold it's first meeting of the semester on:

Tuesday, January 22, 2002 in 358 Willard at 7:30 p.m.

[From The Daily Collegian, January 22, 2002, the daily student newspaper of Penn State. Submitted by Bill Simon III, State College, Pennsylvania.]



Fancy a Viking, Sooty?

Steve Powell
Hiroshima, Japan

It is often said that Japanese is one of the hardest languages for Westerners to master. True or not, it is by no means the only linguistic challenge awaiting newly-arrived expats. They also have to come to grips with the unique variety of English used in Japan. It's not just the TV aerobics lessons called "Let's Lifeness!" nor the T-shirts proclaiming "I am full of play mind". English words also undergo significant changes in pronunciation, spelling and even meaning as they pass into modern Japanese. There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, unlike some countries, Japan has a totally open door policy towards foreign words. Like avid collectors of exotic insects, the ever-watchful media snaffle up the latest buzzwords, technical jargon and hip slang within nanoseconds of their appearing in their native country.

Japanese even has a special set of characters (called *katakana*) just for transliterating imported words. The *katakana* syllabary was originally developed back in the 8th century as a simplification of the complex *kanji* characters, which were themselves originally borrowed from Chinese. *Katakana* consists of 46 basic phonetic syllables, plus sixty or so variations. It's an ingenious system, not least because by having foreign words written out phonetically, even people with zero knowledge of other languages can get reasonably close to the original pronunciation.

I say "reasonably close" because the system does require a few subtle changes to be made, to accommodate Japanese rules of pronunciation. For example, as consonants are usually followed by vowels in Japanese, English consonant clusters are broken up by the insertion of a *u*, while consonants at the ends of words are either dropped (so *toilet* becomes *toire*) or have a vowel tacked on (*keki* = 'cake'). My name, for instance, becomes *Su-te-i-bu Pa-u-e-ru* (that's *Sooty Boo Power-oo*), which takes a little getting used to. Trying to decode which actors are in what movie from the Japanese TV guide provides hours of harmless amusement, not to mention good practice at reading *katakana*, whether it's *Ke-bu-i-n Ko-su-na*

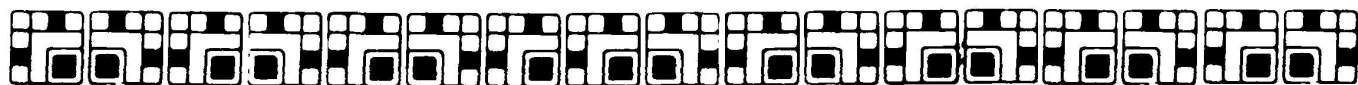
(Kevin Costner), *E-bu-a Ga-do-na* (Ava Gardner) or *U-pi Go-ru-do-ba-gu* (Whoopi Goldberg).

Another important feature is that no sound can exist in Japanese outside those expressed by the syllables of *katakana*, so any foreign word must be forcibly shoehorned into the closest-sounding syllable. For instance, as there is no exact distinction between an *f* (which doesn't actually exist in Japanese) and an *h* (which sounds exactly like an *f*), people talk about the actor *Tom Fanks* or the rock group *Za Fu* (i.e. The Who), while I'm constantly asked what I think of "Japanese hood," (that's *hood* as in sushi and seaweed). Ordering my morning cup of *kohi* (coffee) is now second nature.

The sounds *v* and *l* don't exist either, so *v* becomes *b* and *l* becomes *r*: I learnt this when a student wrote that her electric organ could make a sound like a fruit, which I thought was a marvelously surreal idea till I realized that a *fruit* was in fact a long metallic wind musical instrument. Similarly, there is no distinction between the sounds *si* and *shi*, which leads to some great typos in the spelling of *city*.

Borrowed words are further distanced from their original version by the Japanese passion for shortening things. They abbreviate words with the same gusto with which they miniaturize electronic gadgets. This linguistic equivalent of bonsai gives us a wealth of gems, from the world-famous *Pokemon* 'pocket monster' to machines like *erebeita* 'elevator,' *terebi* 'television' and *pasu-con* 'personal computer'—not to be confused with *maza-con* 'mother complex.' As Japanese women slowly become aware of their rights, it's increasingly common to hear complaints about *seku hara* 'sexual harassment' and *sutorukazu* 'stalkers,' while prime minister Mr. Koizumi's economic reforms have triggered a rash of *risutura* 'restructuring.' Even the ever-popular *karaoke* is in fact a compound of *kara* (Japanese for 'empty'), and *oke* (a Japanese English abbreviation of 'orchestra').

Proper names aren't spared this truncation either. More and more youngsters are foregoing the healthy Japanese diet for a dead-cow burger down at the golden arches of the local *Maku Do*'s, while many young girls rave over *DiCa*, which may sound like something you'd order in Starbuck's, but is in fact the star of the movie *Titanic*.



Furthermore, words are not only re-spelled and foreshortened but frequently have their meaning changed too. For some reason this is particularly true with clothes. Once I was explaining to a class of high school girls what *trainers* were, but they assured me they already knew the word. They confirmed this by going to their lockers, pulling out their sweatshirts and saying *turainazu*. When I tried explaining that, for us Brits at least, *trainers* were a kind of sports shoe whereas sweat shirts were a kind of jersey, one girl attempted to show her grasp of this tricky concept by returning to her locker, fetching a pair of tracksuit trousers and asking “you mean a jersey like this?” They probably all went home after class and slipped into a *one-piece* (i.e. a dress).

In a similar vein, someone once complimented me, or so I thought, on how smart I looked. I was disappointed to discover that they were actually expressing concern over my sudden loss of weight (*smart*, pronounced, of course, *sumaruto*, actually means ‘thin’). The list is endless. “Give me a sign” means “Can I have your autograph?” while if someone asks if you “fancy a Viking,” they are actually inviting you to an all-you-can-eat buffet. Meanwhile back at the office, remember that floppy discs are known as *sofuto* ‘software’ and a photocopy is a *print* (pronounced *purinto*). Amusing as these transformations may be, you better get used to speaking like that yourself if you want people to understand you.

The most disconcerting thing about a nation of 110 million non-native English-speakers all using English words to mean something quite different to what you use them for is that, after a while, you end up thinking that maybe you’re the one who’s wrong and that jerseys really should be worn on the legs.

Sound confusing? Maybe, but it goes to show that all those foreigners who complain that Japanese people don’t speak English simply aren’t listening. It’s just that they speak a slightly different English to what you’re used to. But the great advantage is that, on those occasions when you don’t know the Japanese word you need (which in my case is most of the time), you can just say the English word confidently with good Japanese pronunciation, and you’ll almost certainly be understood.

[*Steve Powell has taught ESL for 17 years.*]

L33t-sp34k

Erin McKean
Chicago, Illinois

If you are older than fifteen and only use your computer for e-mail and balancing your checkbook, or—*quel horreur*, have no computer at all, then you probably aren’t familiar with the preferred online communication style of online gaming geeks, hacker wannabees, and adolescent chat-room denizens: l33t, pronounced “leet.”

Supposedly, l33t (also written l337 and l33+) arose as a way to beat automatic government surveillance programs (especially the fabled Echelon program) that looked for keywords in online postings. As with most language origin stories, this should be taken with a grain of salt, but it is commonly accepted among l33t users.

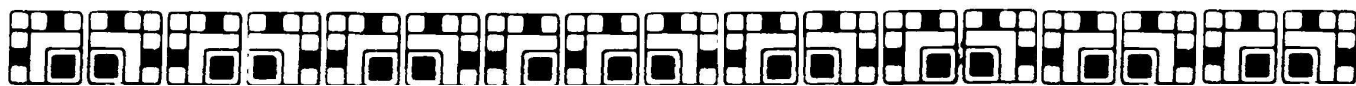
L33t, like other in-group languages, is deliberately complicated to keep the cognoscenti in and everyone else out. However, it has to be (more or less) intelligible in order to be propagated. And being the province of the compufolk, it has fairly regular rules, so that translator programs can be written to convert plain old boring (semi-)standard English in and out of it.

You may have already realized that in l33t, the numeral 3 makes a handy substitute for the letter *E*. A quick glance across the number pad may show you that it’s not inconceivable that 4 could substitute for *A*, 1 for *I*, 0 for *O*; 7 for *T*, and 5 for *S*. These are the basic substitutions, but there are many others. For example,

- 1 is often used for *L* as well as *I*;
- 6 and 9 are occasionally used for *G*,
- 8 can fill in for *B*,
- + for *T*, and
- \$ for *S*.

The more ambitious, obnoxious, and nimble of finger use |_ for *H*, |3 for *B*, (for *C*, |) for *D*, |[for *F*, | for *I*, |< for *K*, _| for *J*, |_ for *L*, |V| or ^^ for *M*, |_ for *N*, |o for *P*, 0, for *Q* (that’s 0 plus comma), |2 or the truly opaque |)\ for *R*, V for *V*, |^| for *W*, / for *Y* and -_ for *Z*.

In addition, one can use 8 for the ‘ayt’ sound (e.g., 18 or L8 for ‘late’); @ for the ‘at’ sound (as



well as for the letter A), 0r for –er endings, # for the ‘ash’ sound (e.g. *c#* or *k#* for ‘cash’), K for hard c spelled *c* (e.g. *k@* or *k@+* for ‘cat’) *q* for *ck* (*fuq*), *j* for *y* (mostly in *j00*, ‘you’), *x* for the sound spelled *ck* (e.g. *h4x0r* for ‘hacker’), *eh* for word-final *y* (e.g. *happeh* for ‘happy’), *z* for voiced *s*, *00* for long *U*, and *PH* for the ‘f’ sound, as in *phear* or more l33t-ly, *phj34r*.

Random capitalization is also encouraged. The use of *teh* as a deliberate misspelling of ‘the’ is the norm. Verb tenses are optional, with the present tense sufficing for all uses. Objective pronouns are used for subjective pronouns. Occasionally, the \ (or sometimes *:::* or ****) is used to highlight an action, usually a real-world action: “\Me g0 gr4b s0Me k0ph33.” (“I’m going out for some coffee.”)

Some users differentiate between ‘light’ (or ‘llama’) and ‘heavy’ (or ‘hardcore’ or ‘advanced forum’) dialects of l33t, depending on how far from standard English it diverges. Some users even recommend that you use light with friends and heavy with superiors (e.g., people who are better gamers than you are).

To be truly l33t, not only your spelling but your rhetoric must change. Instead of “I don’t agree” you might say “F00! B0W T0 M3!” If you agree, you may say “U R0XX0r!” Since much of l33t-sp33k takes place in gaming contexts, there’s a rich array of gaming jargon. If your idea of a fun Saturday afternoon (or more likely, a fun Tuesday 3 a.m.) is pretending to be a hyper-warrior and killing everything in sight, you’re probably familiar with these terms already. That killing, by the way, is usually called *fragging*, but can also be *dropping*, *capping*, *icing*, or *wasting*. To *gib* is to kill something and have the corpse explode. If you gib someone, that means they probably *suxor* ‘suck’ or are a *t00l* ‘tool’. They may also be a *n00b* (for ‘newbie’) a *llama* or a *lamer* (a poor or inexperienced player or all-around wimp). In any case, you can exclaim *Own!* or *Own3d!* because you beat them. Then you will have *Own4ge*. You might also want to say “ph33r my l33t 5ki115” (fear my elite skills!).

If others agree with you, they will chime in with *k3wl!* (cool) or *d00d!* (dude). If they are really impressed, they may add *w00t!* or *h00mba!* (‘cool’). If someone beats you—by cheating or their

astounding good luck or your own ill-luck, not through any lack of skill on your part, of course—you might want to call them a *cunt0r* or a *fuX0r*. If the victorious player is female, you can feel free to call her a *skrut* or a *skrutwh0re*. If your teammates let you down, you can say “gg backup” meaning “way to go backup,” with implied heavy sarcasm. If you were beaten because your connection is slow, you might be called a *HPB*, or ‘High Ping Bastard.’ (The ping number is an indicator of the speed of your connection. Lower is better, as in golf). If your ping is erratic, your player might have *warph4x*, causing it to jump around in the playing space and be difficult to hit. Or, if your game freezes for a couple of seconds, putting you in some random area of the playing space, you would call that *warpz0r* or *lagspike*. If you are a player with serious *own4ge*, combined with a mocking manner (you might type *h4w h4w h4w* ‘haw haw haw’ quite a bit), you are a *pir8* ‘pirate.’

If you hang around a particular area in the game to kill something or grab a treasure as it appears, you’re *camping*, which is highly frowned upon. (Refusing to work towards common objectives in team games is also called *camping*.) Someone too concerned about their standing in the game (so much so that it gets in the way of normal play) is a *rank h00r* or a *stat h00r*. A player who hasn’t got enough weapons and starts playing with just a small gun and no armor is a *c0nch*.

You might not have even paid for the game software you’re using; if you downloaded it from the ‘net you would call it (and other illegally-obtained software) *warez*. If you attempt to enter systems or create viruses using programs that others have written (and that you patently don’t understand), you’re a *skript kiddie*. Online pornography is always called *pr0n*. Microsoft is nearly always referred to as *Micro\$h1t*, *Microscoff*, *Microshaft*, etc.. The word *l33t* itself also means ‘cool,’ as does *ph@* or *ph4t* ‘phat’.

L33t is a very flexible mode of communication (except of course that it only exists for the most part in electronic messages). It reflects its world limpidly. Like most languages of youthful display, l33t combines a casual obscenity with a touching sincerity of expression. *L33t r0x0rs!*



HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, Britain.

“The multibillion-dollar sportswear company Nike admitted yesterday that it ‘blew it’ by employing children in Third World countries,” says a newspaper report. The use of teen slang in glaringly inappropriate contexts seems to be a rapidly growing habit; see, for instance, the Pentagon’s press briefings during the war against Afghanistan, in which senior, white-haired warriors frequently sounded like enthusiastic small boys describing an effects-laden film they’d rented from Blockbuster.

Is this a deliberate strategy, I wonder, designed to lessen the impact of controversial statements? If so, I suppose we can expect to hear “One of our smart bombs hit an old folk’s home—it went, like *blam*, man, which is so totally not cool.” But perhaps it’s not deliberate; perhaps the truth is just that people in positions of authority are incapable of saying what they want to say, simply and directly.

That would explain the PA announcement currently popular on British trains: “Customers wishing to leave the train at a request stop are advised to inform a member of the on-board train crew”. In Plainlish, this would be: “If you want to get off at a request stop, please tell the guard,” since the *on-board crew* consists in its entirety of a driver and a guard—and distracting the driver while the train is in motion is discouraged. (There’d be little point, surely, in delivering your request to a member of the *off-board crew*).

Adding an unnecessary extra word is generally a good way of irritating the sort of people who read this column (and who are, as always, invited to submit their most hated Horribles via VERBATIM’s postal or electronic addresses). Spy satellites searching for evidence of biological weapon research in Afghanistan in October apparently “photographed the images of animal corpses”. Does this mean they photographed photographs? Surely that’s not the sort of evidence which would stand up in court?

Meanwhile, the German equivalent of the FBI was seeking new powers to spy on (that is, *to monitor*) dissidents suspected of working against “the peaceful co-existence of nations”. Specifically, it turns out, the Feds were worried about anti-war campaigners. Do we need a new word for *irony*, do you think? Is the old one worn out?

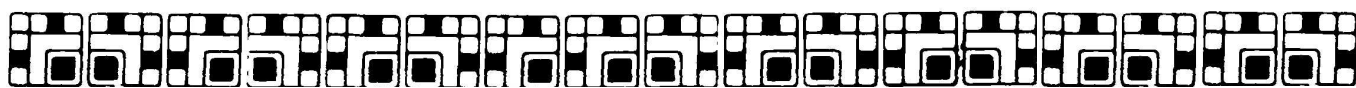
As we seem to be living in an age unprecedentedly rich in doublethink, it is sometimes hard to remember to get upset about lesser issues, such as the headline on a reader’s letter in my local paper which read “Together We Can Beat Issues”. But I keep trying.

The next FIFA World Cup is to be held in the Far East, which prompted soccer officials (rather cheekily) to advise South Korean restaurants to remove canine dishes from their menus, so as not to offend visiting Westerners. One journalist noted that “so-called ‘meat dogs’ are often raised in unhygienic conditions.” Since he was referring to dogs which are raised for meat, it’s hard to imagine what purpose his *so-called* might serve; except, of course, to distance himself from what he sees as a repulsive dietary practice.

A British judge told a court last autumn, following the acquittal of two men accused of rape, that “Some people may think the justice system in this country is too fair”. There seem to be two possibilities in this case: that m’lud is a headline-seeker, and thus is careful to speak in headlines (the headline, indeed, was *Rape Trial Judge: Justice Is Too Fair*); or that this nation’s liberties are partly in the hands of a man who honestly believes that *fair* and *lenient* are synonyms.

A term which took on a more-or-less acceptable new meaning quite recently, but which I fear is edging towards Horribleness through excessively broad use, is *friendly*, as in “environmentally-friendly”. In a gardening catalogue, I found a listing for a type of crop netting which warned “Please note: the mesh is bird-friendly, but will prevent them getting at the crop”. Wouldn’t *bird-unfriendly* be a better description of a product designed to prevent birds eating?

[Check out Mat Coward’s web page at <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/matcoward/myhome-page/newsletter.html>]



Palaver Sauce

A Thematic Selection of West African Proverbs

Martin Wilmot Bennet
Rome

“If you never offer your uncle palmwine, you’ll not learn many proverbs,” prompts a Ghanaian saying. The advice seems to have been well-heeded. Proverbs throughout West Africa are in plentiful supply. Naming ceremonies, marriages, funerals; conversations in urban beer-parlours or by the palm-winetapper’s fire; traditional folk-tales, some modern West African novels, highlife lyrics: These are just a few possible sources. Sierra Leoneans say: “Proverbs are the daughters of experience.” Or to put it another way, “When the occasion comes, the proverb comes.” (Oji, Ghana)

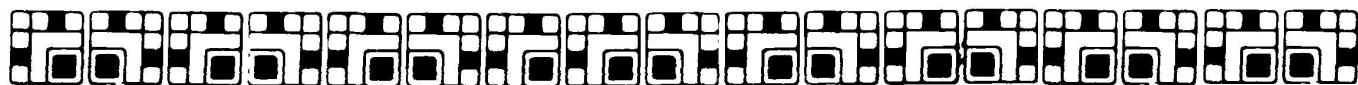
Whereas in Western societies proverbs have been mostly relegated to quaint decoration, in West Africa they are still part-and-parcel of everyday discourse, a sort of soundbite for the everyman. Thus the claim: “When a proverb is told, only a fool needs it explained.” “Proverbs are horses for solving problems” claims another example. “When truth is missing, proverbs are used to uncover it.” And if the thought expressed is often less than original, it doesn’t matter: “Other people’s wisdom frequently prevents the chief from being called a fool.” As a Yoruba saying has it: “He who knows proverbs can settle disputes.” Not only can a well-aimed proverb save a thousand words of explanation; it can also help in discussing awkward home truths with a minimum of embarrassment. Seriousness and humor, focus and distance are authoritatively combined. Perhaps this is what underlies: “When a chief deals out a dish, it becomes cold.”

One practical function of proverbs, then, is keeping matters in perspective. Indeed the structure of many proverbs resembles a pair of scales. “There are forty kinds of madness, only one kind of common sense.” (Akan, Ghana) The idea of balance is also found in: “Exuberance is not good, but meanness is not good at all.” More symmetrical still is “When your guns are few, your words are few.” (Oji) There’s further weighing things up in “This

year’s wisdom is next year’s folly.” Striking a happy medium, a Yoruba proverb reminds parents: “If with the right hand you flog a child, with the left draw him to your breast.” The telling contrast also serves to remind us of the wider scheme of things: “When carrying elephant’s flesh on one’s head, one should not look for crickets underground.” Or, for another occasion: “The keeping of one’s head exceeds the keeping of one’s hat.” (Fulani) Paradox is majestically embodied in the Akan: “The moon moves slowly, yet it crosses the town.” Continuing the theme of measurement and scale, consider: “Debt is measured in a hippo’s footprints” (Tiv, Central Nigeria) And truth? According to the Ibo, it “is worth more than a dozen goats.”

Already we see how animals are a common proverbial feature. One reason, as in folk tales, is to provide a element of humor. “If a baboon could see his behind, he’d laugh also”; “The cock crows proudly on his own dunghill” are just two examples. Another reason is that animals supply easy scapegoats for our all-too-human failings. On our general fallibility we get: “A horse has four legs, yet often falls.” (Tiv) For laziness: “The dog’s happy dream produces no meat.” For the nastier type of opportunism: “Ants surround the dying elephant.” On the non-payment of debt: “Spider hides under a stone.” (Ewe, Ghana) On the age-old gap between rich and poor, you may hear the pidgin: “Monkey dey work, baboon dey chop.” For obstinacy, or a heavyweight equivalent of the English dog in a manger: “The hippo blocked the road and nobody could get across.” (Tiv) For caution: “In new surroundings the hen walks on one leg.” (Ibo) To conjure a sinister sense of occasion again the Ibo use: “The toad does not jump in the daylight for nothing.” Even more disquietingly portentous is the Sierra Leonean: “The bat hangs downwards because of the words told it by the sun.” As a portrait of the very human know-all, it’d be hard to beat the Yoruba: “I know it perfectly’ prevents the wasp from learning to make honey.” Arrogance, for better or worse, is vividly dealt with in: “The lizard jumped down from the Iroko tree, and said, ‘If there is nobody else to praise me, I will praise myself.’”

In the world of proverbs not only animals take on human dimensions; so, rather more ingeniously,



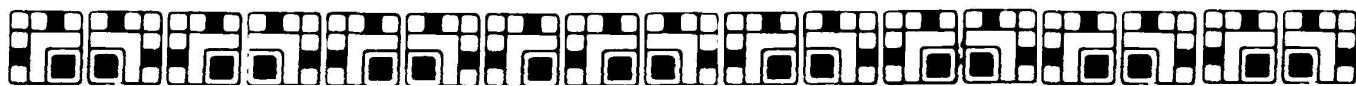
do everyday objects. “The ax forgets; the tree does not,” states one vivid example. “An empty sack cannot stand up, a full sack cannot bend,” cautions another from Nigeria, in a homely expression of the golden mean. Respect for the elders is embodied in “A pond is not a companion to a river” (Ibo); secrecy in “Try to hide your secret and even grass is a spy”; the dangers of opinionation in the animistic: “The stream won’t be advised; therefore its path is crooked.” For an emphatic equivalent of our own English proverb, consider: “Walls have ears, and little pots too.” As an injunction against haste, the Ga say: “A hot needle burns the thread.” For the delicate business of looking for a wife or husband, one might use, “There’s a lid for every pot, a key for every lock.” And then, after finding one, try: “The cleared field looks good, the growing crop looks better,” this a proverbial echo of the more literal “Children’s laughter is music to the ears of the elders.” (Akan) For cooperation, marital or otherwise, take the mysteriously obvious: “The sharpest knife cannot carve its own handle.” For a less than ideal view of family there’s the Duala saying: “The spear of kinship soon pierces the eye.” The same language expresses the naturalness of hard work in the more peaceable: “The pot is not tired of cooking.” To bring home the division of labour, the Ho in Ghana use other utensils: “The spoon does his job, the dish does his.” On the possibly unfair results of work (or lack of it), another saying points out: “The pot cooks; the plate gets the name.”

Communication depending largely on what we have in common, another source of proverbial metaphor is, not surprisingly, the human body. So, for a nurturist view of crime, ponder: “The stomach has done the head an injury.” (Duala) Covetousness is embodied in the Efik: “The eye is a thief.” On appetite we have the festive “The beard dances when food approaches.” As for the inevitability of arguments, the proof is in our very mouths: “Even the tongue and the teeth quarrel now and then.” On talkativeness in old age, there is the ageless: “Although the teeth drop out, the tongue does not tire.” Then, on how words can be literally a matter of life and death: “The tongue kills a man; the tongue saves a man.” (Oji) The mouth features yet again in the Ewe: “The gums understand the

teeth’s affairs.” Against pride, there’s a point-blank riposte in the Nigerian: “A big head is a big load.”

So much for the head. Let’s now move lower down. “The house of the heart is never full,” swells a saying from the Duala, this echoed elsewhere by Yoruba’s similarly emotive “A man’s heart is like an ocean; all the oceans cannot fill it.” (As a second thought Duala has an alternative proverb in: “The heart’s case is hard to open.”) Specifically for travellers, a Nigerian proverb advises, “The traveller leaves his heart at home.” Co-operation, a bodily necessity, is again expressed in “One can’t tie a bundle with only one hand.” Below the waist we meet the lowly suggestive: “The laughing penis does not enter” (Akan.) Continuing downward: “A man’s legs are his brothers and sisters; on what else can he rely?” Or to rephrase it with another limb: “The soles of the feet may feed the mouth.” (Duala)

Many West African proverbs, however, dispense with metaphors completely, making do with sharp-eyed observation, arresting reportage. “Three men can ruin a country,” resounds with the air of historical truth. Like a bizarre newspaper headline, an Ojising announcing: “The feast reveals the European’s wooden leg.” Proving how a single proverb can save several paragraphs of tedious moralizing and still stick better in the memory: “When the slave-trader preaches the Koran, it’s time to watch over one’s daughters.” Equally concise yet recognizable: “You hide your faults behind a wall, parade your neighbor’s in the marketplace.” From the Yoruba we have “Ask for alms and see the misers” while, to bring a smile to the sternest moralist, another proverb stipulates: “He who excretes in the road will likely meet flies on his return.” Sermon over. Similar matter-of-factness features in “Your wife’s tongue can turn your friends into enemies.” Again on the cynical side of truth, consider the “I told you so”: “If you want to be blamed, marry. If you want to be praised, die.” In one sentence a proverb often provides a character sketch which might take a novelist whole pages. So for entrepreneurs we get the cunning cameo: “Having become rich, jump for joy in a quiet corner.” Or from the Ho in Ghana: “The water-carrier drinks no slime.” Worth a chapter out of *How to Win Friends and Influence People* is “A soft voice



loosens the gift from the Chief's hands." Meanwhile for those seeking fame and worried about their height, the Nupe observe how: "A man's never so tall that he can be seen in the next town; it's his name that goes before." Teachers everywhere might want to use the Fulani: "Nobody is without knowledge except they who ask no questions," or, as pithy again, the Gambian "Not to know is bad; not to want to know is worse."

Obvious enough, yet many proverbs work by spotlighting those daily realities we prefer to ignore. "All the sages in the land cannot prevent misfortune," is one such rhetorical reminder. "One cannot take medicine for someone else"; "Who can make another woman his own mother?"; "Without children the world would end"; "There's no medicine against old age" are four others. Not that the obvious doesn't have a cunning corner or two: "The doctor is never killed when the patient dies." (Ibo) In a similar vein is: "When really big business is on hand, the flag is not flown." Or, as a timely put-down: "A man may be famous in the world, yet small in his own house." Equally beady-eyed is: "The mistaken doctor leaves by the backdoor." Then, showing how obviousness is relative, there's the sniggeringly accurate: "The news has gone round and round, yet the person it concerns is deaf." (Ibo) More disconcertingly general is the Hausa "Love yourself and others will hate you; hate yourself and others will love you." Lest all this proverbial advice and censure makes us self-righteous, the Akan have an antidote: "If you have an anus, do not laugh at your neighbor's farts." As they say in Kamtok, a Cameroonian pidgin: "Man no dey fit look other man's buttocks wey dey no show he own."

Not all proverbs are as down to earth as the ones just quoted. Passed down by the ancestors, many West African proverbs are distinctly otherworldly, a homespun guide to the Great Beyond. "The words of an epileptic are the utterances of a dweller of another world," warns a saying in Yoruba. Another states "A cripple may serve the gods as a porter at the gate." Throughout West Africa the supernatural is never far away. "God creates dreams" say the Efik in Eastern Nigeria. That the supernatural has a horrific side is shown in: "A

sorcerer's zombie dies twice." As alarming is "A witch can harm you with your own footprints." Along with references to possession and witchcraft, we are also handed tips on how to deal with ghosts: "When a ghost puts out its hand, draw yours back." Eerie etiquette is again available in this adage from Ghana where local custom demands food be left wherever it may have dropped: "A ghost does not wait for the living to eat before it begins to eat." On the strange phenomenon of wait-about ghosts or the spirits of those killed before their time, the advice goes; "It's the living man who causes the ghost to long for mashed yam." (Akan) Or, to explain the existence of such a ghost in the first place: "The Supreme Being has driven him out, the spirit folk have driven him out." Still sceptical? Well, also Akan, is the caution: "The native doctor tells of his victories, not of his defeats."

Related to the otherworldly is the subject of death or "Sleep's elder brother" as a Nupe saying puts it—not so much a taboo as a proverbial favorite. "The priest will die; the doctor will depart this life; nor will the sorcerer be spared," warns an Ibo saying matter-of-factly. The same fate lies in store for the miser, as in the Akan: "Death has the keys to the miser's chest." Equally salutary is the Ibo, "The day one knows all, let him die." From the same language comes what might serve as a motto for travellers on Nigeria's roads: "He who fears for his life is liable to be killed by a falling leaf." Rather less menacingly an Akan proverb says, "If you want to know death, look on sleep." Yet Death is nothing if not many-sided: "The old man runs away from death; the young child stands and stares at it." Sometimes death comes quickly as in: "A man's death is but a day." (Nyang, Cameroon) Sometimes not so quickly: "Little by little the leper pays his debt to the grave." (Nupe, Northern Nigeria) Or, for the two time frames merged into one metaphysical paradox, the Nupe have: "Death is the owner of the house and is no stranger, yet when it comes it will be a stranger that day."

Last and perhaps foremost on the West African proverbial agenda is not death but Providence. A trip to any West African *moto-park* will bear this out, the vehicles there painted with mottoes like "God Dey," "Destiny," "Not as You Think," "God's



Time De Best,” “Who Knows Tomorrow,” and “God Never Sleeps.” Also reminding us that there are higher powers than magic, one proverb says, “It is God who pours rain for the sorcerer’s garden.” From Hausa, West Africa’s lingua franca, comes “A grain of wheat upon a rock—God must give it water.” Or again: “If you’re going to ask from God, make sure you take a big calabash.” If one saying wittily stipulates “Not even God is ripe enough for a woman in love,” (Yoruba) another acknowledges how the same God “pounds fufu for the one-armed woman” (Akan), “drives flies from the tailless cattle” (Yoruba again), “fills your gourd with palmwine and when you throw it way, fills it up for you once more.” The Nupe express this idea with: “God who made the mouth will not sew it up.” “If the Supreme Being gives you sickness, He gives you medicine as well,” says the Akan. Most poetic of all, perhaps, is another proverb from the same language: “If God gave the swallow nothing else, he gave him swiftness in turning.”

The proverbs here were gathered using various methods. The most direct one was keeping an ear open at various naming ceremonies, weddings, memorial ceremonies and other occasions both in Ghana and Nigeria where I worked for several years. (As the Ibo proverb goes, “The calabash of the ear is never full.”) Other proverbs were provided by friends: Thomas Agwu, Isaac Sonny Mensah, Atemkeng Achanga, and also by my Ghanaian wife and various in-laws. I also relied to an extent on Rattray’s collection of Ghanaian proverbs, now out of print, and other proverb collections of which there are several. Other sources include the backs of speeding mammy-wagons, highlife song-titles and lyrics, and then modern African novels, those of Chinua Achebe being particularly rich in this regard. To use a proverb cited in *Things Fall Apart*: “Proverbs are the pepper with which words are eaten.”



[Martin Wilmot Bennet lives and works in Rome. He wrote about Arab proverbs in “The Lamps of Speech” in VERBATIM XXI, No. 1]

EPISTOLA

As a former medical health administrator, I found Roger Smith’s “Medical Malapropisms” (XXVI/3) quite amusing. I thought he might wish to add the following to his collection:

While discussing treatment with the father of a bipolar girl, he stated a number of times that his daughter suffered from “maniac-depression.” Indeed, it may well have been a most apt description.

D. A. Thomann
Woodstock, New York



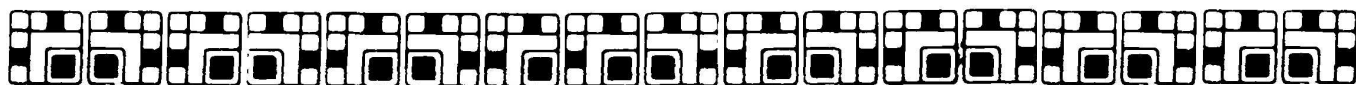
SIC! SIC! SIC!

No one sent any letters to Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle or Minority Leader Trent Lott about their pay raise because the public is unformed. [From the The Sound and Town Report of January 11, New Rochelle, NY, Submitted by Edwin Rosenberg, Danbury, Connecticut. It was sent to him by his brother, Fred Rosenberg, who commented “Did we re-enlist when I wasn’t looking?”]

Across: 1 Striped (st + rpe + d), 5 Comedic (OUTCOME DICKens), 9 Limericks (lime + ricks), 10 Roper (vaqueRO PERhaps), 11 Mashed potatoes (pasta soothed me), 13 Baton (batON), 14 Chocolate (catch Leo + O), 16 Scoundrel (Rod’s mcle), 18 Suce (sucRE), 20 Intermediaries (inter + ME + diarics), 24 Imply (imp+ly), 25 Trimarans (try marinas - - y), 26 Nestled (relents), 27 Gathers (gat + hers).
Down: 1 Sole (2 defs.), 2 Rampart (ram + part), 3 Parthenon (part + hen + on), 4 Diced (d + ice + d), 5 Castor oil (it colors a), 6 Maria (m + aria), 7 Diploma (diplomat - t), 8 Christened (third scene), 12 Abyssinian (abyss + in + Ian), 14 Carpenter (crept near), 15 Observant (OB + servant), 19 Cremate (creMate), 21 Royal (lay (or), 22 Icing (basic INGredients), 23 Isis (is + is).

MOVING?

Let us know as soon as possible—by mail, phone, or email. Don’t miss a single issue!



CLASSICAL BLATHER

Certain Somebodies

Nick Humez
argentarius@juno.com

“There was a certain man...” begins many a parable; yet the identity of the man is anything but certain. Monty Python’s reluctant messiah in *The Life of Brian*, dropped by a joyriding space buggy onto a Jerusalem Speakers’ Corner, tries to blend in: “There were these two men...,” he begins. “What were their names?” demands a heckler. Thrown off his stride, Brian improvises, “They were Simon and Adrian.” He’s making it up as he goes along!” the heckler jeers. (Which, of course, Brian is.)

Nowadays we can avoid Brian’s embarrassment by using stock names for generic somebodies. In antiquity the formula “a certain man...” was *aner tis* in Greek and Latin *homo quis* in Latin, both meaning ‘man’ plus the interrogative pronoun ‘who?’ signalling that the assertions to follow were about a particular someone, for the sake of the argument, but in fact could be applied to plenty of others, possibly to everyone.

But neither the ordinary Greek nor the average Roman seem to have had a generic name for rhetorical use. The earliest administrative forms we have call him or her simply *n.*, short for *nomen* ‘name’ or sometimes *n. n.* (standing either for first and last name, or for *nomen nescio*, “the name, I do not know”¹). So where did *John Doe* come from—and how would we say him in a language and culture other than our own?

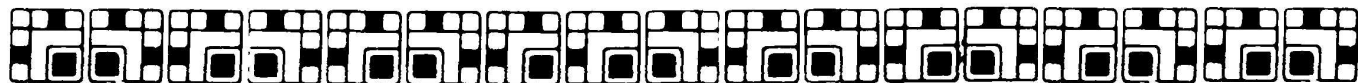
Doe and his alter ego, *Richard Roe*, have been used by English speakers, if not from time immemorial,² at least for seven centuries: They first appear in writing as names by way of example in an account of a bill providing for the orderly ejection of tenants by landlords, debated in Parliament under Edward III (r. 1327-77). Modern British law, when additional names are needed, will call upon *John Stiles* and *Richard Miles*; a female somebody is given the name *Mary Major*.³

In Britain, the ordinary guy is commonly called *Joe Bloggs*. But since the early 19th century, the

generic British footsoldier has been known as *Tommy Atkins*.⁴ (His Royal Navy equivalent is called a *Jack Tar*.⁵) This stems from a specific document, the manual issued to all army inductees since 1815, which included instructions to the recruit on how to supply such details as name, date of birth, and date of enlistment, “Thomas Atkins” being the name on the sample forms. To this day the infantry is often collectively called the *Tommies*.⁶

Although there is no corresponding official American military name, popular culture has given us a number of them, such as *GI Joe*, probably both related to and reinforced by the second member of the pair Willy and Joe, two World War II infantrymen (usually bestubbed and muddy) created by Bill Mauldin for the cartoons he drew for the service magazine *Stars and Stripes*. Perhaps the most celebrated American name for the body politic personified is *John Q. Public*, often depicted (in contrast both to the gangly, top-hatted and striped-trousered *Uncle Sam* and his British Equivalent, the beefeater *John Bull*) as a Walter Mittyish sort of fellow, somewhat less than robust and looking more than a little bewildered—and a rare example of a character in popular mythology and iconography getting a ship named for him during that same war.⁷

A host of specialized generics exist as well, designating particular sectors of society or character types, some of them picked up like Willy and Joe from published sources gone pop: *Nancy Nurse*, *Sally Sorority*, (*Happy*) *Harry Homeowner*, *Big Brother* (the dictator in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*), *Beau Brummel* (an English dandy of the Regency), *Silly Billy*, *Skinny Minnie*, *Plain Jane*. While readers may note the resemblance of these alliterative or rhyming names to the minimal-pair reduplicative words, often onomatopoeic, in last issue’s *Classical Blather* column (“Baddabing, Baddabang,” VERBATIM XXVI/4, Autumn 2001), there are other names for somebodies which do not fit this acoustic pattern but earned their currency from the popularity of the published works in which the names first appeared (*Goody Two-Shoes*, *Pollyanna*, *Man Friday*, *Old Adam*, *Mrs. Malaprop*), while the origin of still others is deep in the soup-kettle of pop culture (*Holy Joe*, *Johnny on the Spot*, *Johnny One-Note*, *Good Neighbor Sam*,



Joe Cool, Mr. or Mrs. Gotrocks, Mr. or Miss or Ms. Right, John Law, Susie Cupcake). Whatever the provenance of such names, there seem no limits to the commonwealth of cleverness which thinks them up.⁸

Nor borders, for this ingenuity is by no means confined to the English-speaking world. The web site *www.funnyname.com* lists about a hundred generic somebodies from around the world. Old-world Spaniards may informally use the first names *Fulano, Mengano, Zutano* or *Sultano, Perengano*, and *Perencejo*, *Fulano* being the usual if only one name is needed, but if more than one, then usually in the order given (much as we would say *Tom, Dick, and Harry* but never **Dick, Harry, and Tom*); more formally, the unknowns may be referred to as *Juan Perez, Pablo Perez*, and, oddly, *Juan de los Palotes* ('John of the big sticks'). Seaborne trade is a fertile breeding ground for cross-cultural borrowings: In Indonesia they say *Si Polan*, *Polan* probably a loan word from *Fulano* and *Si* a title much like "Mr." (Thus in Malaysia the generic name is *Si Anu*, *anu* meaning 'whatsis' or 'thingie'.)

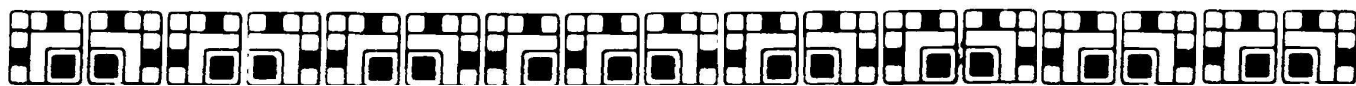
In Norway the default couple is *Ola* and *Kari Nordmann* ('Northernfolk, Norseman'), though to designate a stupid or redneck couple Norwegians may use *Ola* and *Kari Dunk* instead. The generic Swede may be named *Mendelsvensson*; in the Netherlands *Jan Modaal* ('John Average') is common,⁹ though the Dutch will use *Jan Lul* when a slightly derogatory flavor is intended. In Iceland, where patronymics still flourish and *Jón* and *Jóna* are as common as *John, Jane*, or *Joan* in the United States, the generic names are *Jón Jónsson* and *Jóna Jónsdóttir*. Germans nowadays speak of *Otto Normalverbraucher* ('Otto Ordinaryconsumer'), if only since the post-WW II economic resurgence; much older is *Jedermann* ('Everyman'), rejuvenated early in the 20th century in Germany by Hugo Hofmannsthal's modern adaptation of the medieval English morality play *Everyman*. The generic German woman is sometimes given the name *Lieschen Müller*.¹⁰

In Russia, John Doe is apt to be named *Ivanov* (like 'Johnson'; the female equivalent is *Ivanovna*¹¹) or even *Ivan Ivanovich Ivanov* if one's belaboring it. *Funnyname.com* says that if two or

three such names are needed, to *Ivanov(na)* can be added *Petrov(na)* and *Sidorov(na)*—and that a common name for an anonymous person on Russian internet is *Vasya Pupkin*, also used by techies to refer to "a 'lamer', a tech-ignorant but very pretentious young hacker." Anna Bendiksen informs us that there are also several terms specifically for "man in the street," the most neutral being *chelovek s ulytsy*, which means just that. *Prostoj chelovek* is "the simple man," with the mixed connotations of not being well-read or caring about it but nevertheless an no-nonsense regular fellow. (Tolstoy, according to Bendiksen, uses *prostoj* as a high compliment.) *Srednij chelovek*, on the other hand, means "average guy," with a distinct implication of mediocrity.¹²

Inquiries among Japanese friends failed to turn up a Japanese John Doe for official forms or the personification of sociometric data, but yielded two relatives. People who forget to write their names on an exam or an application form are made fun of by being called *Nanashi no-Gombe* ('No-Name Gombe'), while the unnamed deceased in Japanese detective fiction, is usually referred to politely as *hotoke*, 'Buddha(-like)' because of the belief that after death the soul may achieve a state of enlightenment on a level above that of ordinary mortal life.

Pejorative generic names for opponents in politics, religion, or war (the *Jerries*, the *Ivans*, the *Boche, Christian, Witch/Wiccan, Quaker*) sometimes come to be adopted with pride by those so designated; such was the case with *Brother Jonathan*, a term of derision for the inhabitants of New England employed by British occupation forces prior to the American War of Independence,¹³ and arguably true as well for *Johnny Reb*, the term used by Yankee soldiers for those who fought for the South during the Civil War. Minorities emerging from second-class status in society may likewise attempt, with greater or lesser success, to co-opt the mainstream's terms of opprobrium and convert them ironically into a badge of ethnic pride: I was recently startled to discover, on compiling my list of students' e-mail addresses for the current term, that one young woman from a New Jersey county with a substantial Italian-American population has adopted the



screen-name *dagobroad40*; and the festival lapel button for the annual Kermesse, in the heavily Franco-American manufacturing town of Biddeford, Maine, bears the image of an enormous grinning frog.¹⁴

Notes:

1. This usage would spread throughout post-Roman Europe: Norwegians still formally use *n. n.* (as *nomen nescio*) in this fashion, according to an entry on the website *funnynames.com* (a rich source for this article, and well worth a visit). *N.* as “[fill in] name [here]” appears frequently in the Anglican *Book of Common Prayer*; and Montclair State professor Caroline A. Scielzo tells me that Russian fiction nearly always has *N.* or *N—* for unspecified town names. In Latin, *quis* as ‘anybody’ also appears in conditional legal or moral statements: *Si quis aget rem...*, ‘If anyone do a thing...’ while the adjective *quidam*, ‘a certain,’ has survived into modern standard French as a noun meaning “somebody whose name one does not know or does not say” (*Nouveau Petit Larousse Illustré* 1951; Claude and Paul Augé, eds.)

2. That is, prior to 1189 A.D. See Humez, “It’s About Time,” *VERBATIM* Vol. XXV No.2 (Spring 2000), page 13, and footnote 7 on page 15 of the same issue.

3. My source for this is the entertaining if not always accurate website *word-detective.com*. According to *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, whose centenary edition, edited by Ivor H. Evans, was published by Harper and Row in 1970 and reprinted in 1981, variants (given on page 615) are *John-a-Nokes* and *John-a-Stiles*. The character of *John Bull* first appeared in print in 1712 when Dr. John Arbuthnot published his satirical *Law Is a Bottomless Pit* (reprinted later as *The History of John Bull*); see *Brewer’s*, page 614.

4. From the *Brewer’s* entry for *Tommy Atkins*, appearing on page 1125. *Joe Bloggs* was supplied to me by British and American informants (respectively Harry Bird and David Howard) from the cyber-newsgroup Café-Blue.

5. *Brewer’s* (p. 600-603) states that *Jack*—either from the common nickname for *John* or from French *Jacques*—is a very common term for [Every]man or generic male, as in *every man jack of us*, *jack of all trades*, and *jackass* (the female of which is *jennyass*), and that *tar* for sailor is short for *tarpaulin*, nowadays shortened to *tarp* and designating a waterproof dropcloth or cover made of any material (e.g. plastic) but originally canvas treated with tar (from Old English *teoru*, ‘tar’ + *paulin*, from Latin *pallium*, ‘cover[ing], coverlet’ and by extension ‘[Greek] cloak’) from which were made not only tarps but also sailors’ foul-weather hats, coats, and trousers. *Jack* is also used in the sense of ‘dummy, generic piece,’ as in the jacks used in the children’s game so named, or the jacks of a harpsichord—the vertically-sliding pieces resting on the far end of the

keys and carrying the quills or leathers which pluck the individual strings.

6. In this connection it may be worth reminding readers that a common euphemism for “penis” in England to this day is *John Thomas*.

7. Such was the fame achieved by Mauldin’s dogfaces that he could count on Americans recognizing them four decades later. His response to Ronald Reagan as president decorating the graves of SS troopers at a military cemetery in Bittburg, Germany, was to draw a now elderly Willy, glowering in front of the TV screen he has just thrown his shoe through, as two bewildered children complain that now they’ll “never know how World War Two came out.” During the war the *Boston Herald’s* Francis Dahl drew on a news item about the launching of the *John Q. Public* (“the little guy who pays the bills”) to spin a six-panel fantasy about the ship nearly foundering, then righting itself, shaking off water like a dog, and optimistically steaming off. While the origin of the name remains obscure, a joke almost as old as the name itself purported explain it: “Q. What is the Q. in *John Q. Public* short for? A. When he was born his parents looked at him and said, ‘Let’s call it Quits.’”

8. Three Café-Blue members from the Deep South kindly supplied me with the items in this paragraph; I am beholden to Kate Thorn of Florida (for *Nancy Nurse*), and to Alabamans Sandra Rose for *Susie Cupcake* and *Sally Sorority* and Anne Armentrout for most of the others. *Susie Cupcake* may have been the source for Frank Zappa’s teenybopper groupie *Susie Creamcheese*, introduced to pop culture on the Mothers of Invention double album released by Verve in 1966. Poet-pyrotechnician Sherri Kline of Michigan reminds me also to mention *Mrs. Grundy*, the spoilsport matron who was the self-appointed guardian of propriety among Victorians, particular in regard to relations between the sexes.

9. Both *Funnyname.com* and Café-Blue member Bruce Harris Bentzman confirm this, Bentzman’s unnamed Dutch informant adding *Jan met de pet* (‘Jan with the cap’), for the ordinary working stiff.

10. Current in the early 20th century, though obsolete today, was *der gute Michel* (= ‘Good [O]’ Mike’), the title of one of Heinrich Kley’s caustically satiric pen-and-ink caricatures, in which a prone figure, pipe in his mouth and his nightcap fallen over his eyes, crawls blindly along bearing a dozen ermine-robed, crowned humps on his back and led on a string through his nose by a Lilliputian parson and bishop. The cartoon can be found on page 50 of *More Drawings* by Heinrich Kley, Dover: 1962—a reprint of Kley’s *Leut’ uind Viecher* and *Sammel-Album*, published by Albert Langen in 1912 and 1923 respectively.

11. Strictly speaking, “Johnson” would be the equivalent of the patronymic *Ivanovich*, used as a middle name, as in *Nikolai Ivanovich Lobachevsky*, the Russian mathe-



matician who developed hyperbolic geometry (and the title of a Tom Lehrer spoof song of the 1950s). Alexander Zinoviev's monumentally satiric novel *The Yawning Heights* is set in a country called *Ibansk* (a play upon the Russian verb *ebát* 'to fuck'); see Richard C. DeArmond, "On the Russian Verb 'Ebát' and Some of Its Derivatives" in Zwicky et al. [eds.], *Studies Out In Left Field* [Linguistic Research, Edmonton and Champaign: 1971; republished by John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam and Philadelphia: 1992, with a new introductory essay by Regna Darnell]. All of the inhabitants of Ibansk are of course named *Ibanov*. (The Russian letters *bay* and *vay* are both derived from upper-case Greek *beta*. The stop /b/ and fricative /v/ are very close to each other in the mouth—a fact not lost on speakers of modern Greek either, by whom initial *beta* is now pronounced /v/ and who represent the sound of initial /b/ by preceding the *beta* with a *mu*.) For more on Zinoviev see Edward J. Brown, *Russian Literature Since the Revolution* (Harvard University Press: 1982), pp. 381-385.

12. I am indebted to fellow VERBATIM contributor Jessy Randall for passing on my query about John Doe names to Bendiksen, currently a doctoral candidate in Russian Literature at Yale, who also writes that *chelovek s ulytsy* is "interesting to me because of the sharp distinction Russians draw between public and private space. The "man off the street is a complete wild card—you don't know whether he'll fit in at your kitchen table, or try to murder everyone in your family. But then again, he just might become your bosom friend, because sometimes with a wild card, you get lucky. (To be Russian is to gamble.)" Café-Blue member and VERBATIM contributor Paul Sampson writes that "the Russian equivalent of 'Joe Blow'...is *Ivan Durakh*...meaning 'John Blockhead'."

13. British troops often referred with contempt to the inhabitants of New England as *Yankees* or *Jonathans* (Boston and vicinity they called *Pumpkinshire*.) An anonymous novel probably written by a British naval officer, *The Adventures of Jonathan Corncob, Loyal American Refugee Written by HIMSELF*, was published in London in 1787; Noel Perrin's introduction to its 1976 edition (published by Godine) reports the observation by a Englishwoman visiting America in the 1830s that the inhabitants of New York "found the name *Jonathan* 'highly offensive,' at least from English lips" (pp ix-x). But *Jonathan* is also the name given to a highly sympathetic if comical character, the rural "waiter" of Colonel Manly, in Royall Tyler's *The Contrast*, a five-act comedy published in Philadelphia in 1790. The comic Yankee servant would become a stock figure in American letters, in a stage tradition of trickster subalterns from Beaumarchais and Molière all the way back to Plautus and Menander.

14. For an excellent discussion of the *Johnny Reb* figure in Southern popular culture, and American culture in

general, see James Storey's "Visualizing Johnny Reb: When Myth Clouds Reality" on pp. 20-25 of *Salad Bowl*, Vol. 26 (2001), an annual journal published by the Rutgers University American Studies Department (Ruth Adams Building 024, Douglas College, Rutgers University, 131 George St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901-1414). Storey makes a good case for the existence nowadays of real, if sometimes ambivalent, Southern pride in this formerly pejorative label. However, there is some question about the extent to which one can convert an emblem of suffering and shame into a proud token of minority identity and solidarity. When blacks address one another as *nigger* it cannot be dismissed out of hand as mere self-brutalizing minstrelsy: According to the black pop artist Ludacris, quoted by Hilton Als in "More Harm Than Good" (*New Yorker*, Feb. 11, 2002, pp. 82-88), "Nigga is...almost like saying brother," a sentiment echoed by rapper/producer Ice Cube in the same article. But Als is probably correct to conclude that "to call one's brother a 'nigger'...is not self-determination. It is black Americans acting out of nostalgia for a past that has discredited them as human beings." It remains to be seen whether the "n-word" can be rehabilitated from the grassroots up; at present, Webster's *Tenth Collegiate* warns that *nigger* "now ranks as perhaps the most offensive and inflammatory racial slur in English" with the qualification that "[i]ts use by and among blacks is not always intended or taken as offensive," while the *American Heritage Dictionary*, less mealy-mouthed, unequivocally labels it "offensive slang."



EPISTOLA

A comment on "Eponymous Ailments" by Nick Humez (XXVI/3).

The reference to Mr. Pickwick (#22) in the article is misleading. The character in *The Pickwick Papers* who exhibits the symptoms of Pickwickian Syndrome is not Mr. Pickwick himself but Joe, the fat boy in Mr. Wardle's employment.

The reference is at the end of Chapter LIII / beginning of Chapter LIV. Joe appears earlier as the boy "who wants to make your flesh creep" (Ch. VIII) after spying on Tracy Tupman and the spinster aunt.

Arthur Beaven
Kington Langley Wiltshire



EX CATHEDRA

Favorite Word Contest Results

Last year sometime (we're very exact here at VERBATIM world headquarters) we asked you to send us your favorite words. Not necessarily the words whose meaning you most admired, but the words you found a joy to say, write and hear (and as some of you pointed out, to sing and read as well).

We got quite a few responses, both from subscribers and from people who stumbled across our contest on the website. And now, after tallying the responses, we have winners.

The winning word is *mellifluous*, both by name and by nature. *Preposterous*, you say? Well, that was number two, along with *ubiquitous* (it's everywhere!) It probably is more than serendipitous that *serendipitous* is the number three word. The other top vote-getters, in alphabetical order, are *callipygian*, *conundrum*, *delightful*, *flummox*, *hope*, *ineffable*, *isthmus*, *language*, *lovely*, *murmur*, *oxymoron*, *quintessential*, *quelch*, and *tintinnabulation*. Winners all!

Here is the complete list of words entered, occasionally with comments from the enterer: *accoutrements*, *Aconcagua*, *adrift*, *aedeagus*, *amanuensis*, *amaranth*, *amaryllis*, *anemone*, *anhedonia*, *anomaly*, *antepenultimate*, *anthropomorphic*, *aphrodesiac*, *asunder*, *banshee*, *bedraggled*, *billows*, *blessing*, *bombast*, *boomerang*, *brio*, *brutal*, *calla lily*, *calliope*, *callipygian*, *careen*, *carfuffle*, *cataclysm*, *catafalque* (at the wake, have a bier!), *charisma*, *charity*, *chasm*, *chicanery*, *chimera*, *cicisbeo*, *compassion*, *compelling*, *conundrum*, *crapulent*, *crapulous*, *curmudgeon*, *cuspidor*, *d'oh*, *daft*, *dast*, *dayspring*, *defile*, *delicious*, *delightful*, *desultory*, *dimity*, *discombobulate*, *dream*, *ebullient*, *eek*, *electric*, *endorphin*, *entrancing*, *epizootic*, *esperanza*, *eternity*, *euphoria*, *eureka*, *exacerbate*, *faith*, *fascination*, *fathomless*, *felicity*, *firkytoodle*, *flabbergasted*, *flim-flam*, *flophouse*, *flugelhorn*, *flummox*, *fogy*, *forfend*, *forlorn*, *fortuitious*, *frumious*, *fuck*, *galactic*, *gracious*, *graciousness*, *halcyon*, *harmony*, *heart*, *heliotrope*, *hella*, *hope*, *huggle*, *humanity*, *hurdy-gurdy*, *hyacinth*, *idiosyncrasy*, *imagination*, *imagine*, *incomprehensibility*, *ineffable*, *infinite*, *infinity*, *insidious*, *ironic*, *isthmus*, *Jabberwocky*,

jeepers, *jibber-jabber*, *justice*, *kinesthetic*, *kiss*, *lackadaisical*, *language*, *laugh*, *lexicon*, *liminal*, *lollapalooza*, *lovely*, *ludicrous*, *luminescent*, *lush*, *lust*, *lustworthy*, *melancholy*, *mellifluous*, *meow*, *mercenary*, *Merioneth*, *mindful*, *Monongahela*, *muggle*, *murmur*, *myrmidon*, *myrrh*, *mystery*, *naysay*, *nepenthe*, *nifty*, *oligodendroglioma*, *omphaloskeptic*, *onomatopoeia*, *orthography*, *owl*, *oxymoron*, *pachyderm*, *painting*, *palpable*, *pandaemonium*, *paper*, *pariah*, *passionate*, *pellucid*, *performance*, *perspicacious*, *philanthropist*, *pickle*, *plethora*, *polynya*, *pop*, *preposterous*, *presidential*, *prestidigitiation*, *prolixity*, *punctilio*, *pungent*, *purr*, *quaff*, *quagga*, *qualm*, *quintessential*, *quirk*, *radiance*, *rainbow*, *rampage*, *rapture*, *rhythms*, *rutabaga*, *saliva*, *satiare*, *schmuck*, *scrimshandrix*, *segue*, *serendipitous*, *serendipity*, *serene*, *Shakespeare*, *she*, *Shenandoah*, *shibboleth*, *shinny*, *shopworn*, *sibilant*, *silken*, *sinuous*, *sizzle*, *skulduggery*, *sockdolager*, *somnambulist*, *soothing*, *spaghetti* (origin: Franco-American), *splendor*, *squeamish*, *quelch*, *stillslop*, *subsume*, *surreptitious*, *susurrus*, *swivet*, *synchronicity*, *syzygy*, *Tantalus*, *tintinnabulation*, *toady*, *totally*, *triskaidekaphobia*, *twilight*, *twitter*, *ubiquitous*, *universe*, *usufruct*, *vacuous*, *verdure*, *verity*, *vespertilian*, *vitality*, *vortex*, *waffle*, *weird*, *whisper*, *wilderness*, *yclept*, *yearning*, *yummy*, and *zest*.

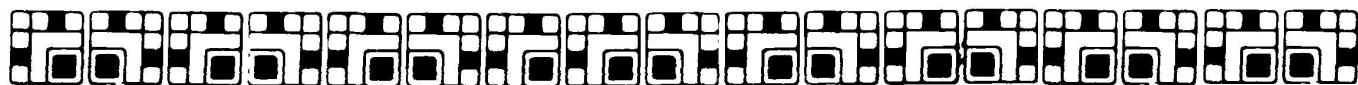
The winners of the new desk dictionaries (of their choice) are Geoff Martin, who entered *crapulous*, and Linda Besnette, who chose *mercenary*.

This contest was so much fun that we feel the need to have another one (slightly different). It will be announced in the Spring issue, due to be mailed April 15. Suggestions are welcome.



SIC! SIC! SIC!

An internal website for a major stockbroking house has this link at the top "TODAY'S BUSINESS: actionable sales items". [Submitted by David Smith of Northridge, California, who comments "And stockbrokers wonder why the public is suspicious..."]



BIBLIOGRAPHIA

Why We Curse: A Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory of Speech, by Dr. Timothy Jay, 328 pp. John Benjamins, 1999. ISBN: 1556197586 US\$35.

Well, what do you say when you hit your thumb with a hammer? Chances are, you utter a “response cry”, rising straight from your brain’s right hemisphere, seat of the emotions, maybe with a flight-or-fight boost from the subcortical limbic system. If you enrich your anger with a little thought, you may draw on the left hemisphere for a spot of “propositional cursing”: “This is the last time I’ll use this goddamn hammer to drive in a fucking nail”—my own example, not Dr. Timothy Jay’s.

Jay, whose scholarship on cursing and related matters occupies a page and a half of his own bibliography, ventures that cussing usually is a product of anger. Although this recalls one definition of sociology—“the painful elaboration of the obvious”—he’s right, of course. He’s not so accurate about the grammar of the hammer. “One will call an insensitive man an *asshole* and an argumentative woman a *bitch*,” he says. “However, a speaker never curses at a hammer with words like *bitch* or *asshole*.” This may be true of Jay’s hammer, but not of mine.

In *Why We Curse*, Jay offers a tripartite “Neuro-Psycho-Social Theory” to explain how, where, and when we get hot and bothered. Cursing is an essential part of language, and we come neurologically equipped to do it well. The proof is what happens when things go wrong with the brain’s wiring: one symptom of Tourette’s Syndrome, Alzheimer’s Disease, or brain damage may be the affected person’s giving vent to volleys of oaths. Learning to curse, we acquire and retain for life certain choice expletives. We judge where and when to use or not to use them. Small boys and college students of both sexes favor *fuck* as a curse; small girls, *bitch*; lads at a Boy Scout camp call gravy on boiled rice *shit on lice*. Cursing peaks in adolescence, but persists into old age. (One study of nursing-home residents showed *damn* to be their overwhelming favorite—a pretty mild oath, all things considered.) Cursing’s influenced by our personalities gender: men curse more than women,

and extraverted Type A-personality men most of all. The culture around us specifies what words are perceived as profane or taboo, and these are typically linked to sexual activity or religious beliefs. He claims that dirty jokes at weddings betray sexual anxiety and that “The Pope is a fool” is a blasphemous statement. “People with high religiosity and high sexual anxiety tend to be offended by profanity and sexual slang.”

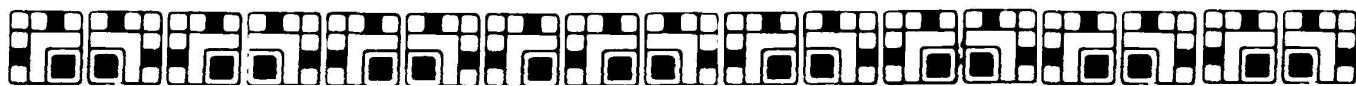
In Jay’s view, cursing is the revenge of the powerless against the powerful, or at least an act of desperation. “The situation of teenagers is similar to that for the lower working class and the politically disenfranchised; they have no power, and so they have nothing to lose by cursing.” This sounds plausible, but if it were universally true, why did politically under-represented women traditionally curse less? Perhaps they had something to lose. In denying the “myth” that “Cursing is bad, but it can be eliminated from use”, he says that “We have to look at the psychological need to express emotion, counterbalanced by the sociocultural need to control emotions. It is an ancient struggle.”

Indeed it is. We’re cursed by cursing, and e-mail adds an exciting new outlet in the form of flames. One study showed that, on the person-to-person level, both men and women considered that *Just to teach you a lesson I’m going to smash your motherfucking face in* would most result in fisticuffs, an example of “fighting words” that are legally defined in some states. But what are the worst things men and women can call each other? Jay notes a 1987 study that he summarizes in tabular form:

woman to man: *bastard, prick*
 man to woman: *cunt, slut*
 man to man: *faggot, gay*
 woman to woman: *bitch, slut*

Maybe, but if I wanted to curse my gay friends I know I’d have to use stronger stuff than “gay.”

The rules that Jay formulates for what he self-importantly terms “NPS Theory” take the form of conditional if-then statements: “IF neurological state + psychological state + sociocultural setting, THEN (+) or (-) likelihood of cursing.” He drives home the point by littering the text with irritating plus or minus signs: “Learning environments pro-



duce different thresholds for using offensive language, with children raised in a permissive manner being more likely (+) to use curse words than children from conservative backgrounds (-).” A certain hilarious solemnity sets in:

“Curse words used as metaphors to express anger are also meaningful (Jay, 1992a). For example, one curses at a person who has committed a thoughtless deed, “You shithead!” This term, *shithead*, metaphorically denotes the doer of the misdeed as having “a head full of shit.” Pragmatically, this metaphor informs the target, in a meaningful manner, that the speaker is upset about his misbehavior.”

The author has an awkward way around metaphors. Referring to the old-fashioned practice of washing out with soap the mouth of a cussing child, Jay says, “One could claim that washing the curser’s mouth is based on the dirty word and dirty mouth metaphor, as if a ‘dirty’ mouth is cleansed with soap during the punishment.” One certainly could claim that. In any case, Jay and a colleague once designed “a study to see if figurative speech is harassing to women,” running 128 randomized metaphors by female respondents, among them *you hop from bed to bed* and *I hunger for your touch*. The latter irresistibly suggests the Righteous Brothers hit, “Unchained Melody” (“Whoa! My love, my darling, / I hunger for your touch...”) but context is everything, and Jay’s women rated it at 4.57 (near the top score of 5 for harassment). Yet it’s hard not to believe that any libidinous male who tried this line around the office rubber plants would be laughed out of the building.

As might be expected in a humorless book, Jay is not strong on the topic of humor. From George Legman (*The Rationale of the Dirty Joke*) and ultimately from Sigmund Freud, he wheels out the tired idea that jokes are masked forms of hostility, calling the phenomenon “essential” to his NPS Theory. Many jokes certainly are actively or tacitly hostile, but jokes are only one stylized form of humor. I suspect that, these days at least, comedians are more intent on ingratiating themselves with their audience than in insulting it. Affectionate ribbing among friends affirm a shared humanity as much as malice, and even the competitive exchange

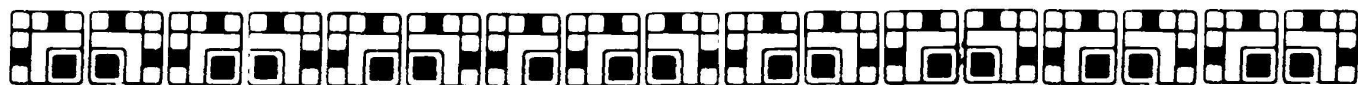
of insults may testify more to creative than to murderous instincts.

Yet *Why We Curse* is not utterly devoid of humor, thanks to the clinical studies it cites. Did you know that New Mexico restaurant employees cited in a 1995 study termed ‘a walk through the restaurant to check female customers for particularly large breasts a *tit run*? If the American Dialect Society did not declare this the winner in the “Most Outrageous” category of its annual “Word of the Year” poll it should have.

One study of patients with left-brain damage had its subjects match famous persons’ names to their photographs: “Patient 2, who had the most profound language deficit...chuckled while correctly matching name of Rachel Welch and produced an expletive when correctly matching the name of Ronald Reagan to the corresponding photographs.” Jay doesn’t specify whether Patient 2 was a Republican or a Democrat. Some might argue that, if a Democrat, he wasn’t brain-damaged at all.

Never let it be said that free-association researchers can’t have fun. During a sex-anxiety test involving “double-entendre sentence completion,” half the male subjects had to cope with the sentence “The lid won’t stay on regardless of how much I (a) turn it, (b) screw it, (c) twist it, or (d) tighten it” while “having the experimental materials administered by a sexually provocative female experimenter.” No doubt there were blushes aplenty in the lab that day.

Convinced that researchers of cursing should study people, not words, Jay has little use for dictionaries, claiming that they “represent offensive words statically and ignore the purpose of emotional speech in the communication process,” popularize “offensive language in order to entertain readers without explaining its role in language,” and thus “marginalize offensive speech and perpetuate slang’s taboo status rather than revealing emotional language as an essential aspect of human communication.” Yes, and may camels defecate on your mother’s grave. The fact is that lexicographers use a variety of usage labels, and are significantly adding speech components to massive corpora of language use. (A tape recorder set up at a construction site would yield useful results, one supposes.) Robert



Chapman’s *New Dictionary of American Slang* marks entries with symbols to indicate emotional impact; the wealth of examples in J.E. Lighter’s *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* would have been more rewarding to Jay than many of his arid academic studies. If he’d read some dictionaries he might have accurately deduced that in recent decades taboo words concerning sexuality and body functions have lost their offensive sting, but those involving race have gained it. In terms of stigma, the *f-word* has lost ground to the *n-word*.

Jay’s own linguistic competence does not inspire faith, notably in his discussion of “fuck”. *Fuck*, that marvel of the English language, can serve as virtually any part of speech almost anywhere in syntax. But Jay approvingly quotes from one study which claims that the verb *fuck* and the phrase *fuck you* can appear only “in a limited set of sentence types” and that the following sentences are inadmissible: **please fuck you*, **wash the dishes and fuck you*, **describe and fuck communism*, and **fuck those irregular verbs tomorrow afternoon*. Equally illegitimate, says another study, is **Nixon’s statement and his answer to my question were crocks of shit*. Yet one need not be a scriptwriter, or Elmore Leonard, or Irish, to devise scenarios featuring all these expressions. Tired and fed-up student doesn’t look forward to a French test: “Fuck those irregular verbs tomorrow afternoon!”

Jay’s editor should have warned him about the perils of using participles as adjectives. The author is forever using phrases like “cursing rules”, “cursing styles”, and “cursing environments”. Speaking personally, I have spent a lot of time cursing rules, styles, and environments. One of Jay’s chapter titles is “Future of Cursing Research”. What are the prospects for cursing research? They’re damned good.

—Fraser Sutherland



Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world’s languages, by Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine. 241 pages. Oxford University Press, 2000. ISBN: 0195136241 US\$30.00

Recently I went out to dinner with a friend of mine who is a writer, and naturally the topic of conversation turned to deadlines. He told me about the project he was earnestly toiling on, and I mentioned that I was reading a book that I needed to write a review of. When he asked me about the book, I responded that the book’s title said it all: *Vanishing Voices: the extinction of the world’s languages*. Briefly, I discussed the plight of endangered languages. He looked thoughtful, picked some cheese off his garlic bread, and casually commented that it had never crossed his mind that languages were in danger of dying out.

His offhand comment intrigued me. Having been involved with linguistics and lexicography since the late 1980s, I have long been aware of the notion of language death. At that dinner, it suddenly hit me—news outlets and advocacy groups keep information about the destruction of the rain forest or the extinction of plants and animals in view—most Americans are at least on some level aware of such destruction. The issue of language extinction, however, is completely off most people’s radar screens. Suddenly, the review seemed even more urgent, because *Vanishing Voices* is a work that deserves the attention of the widest audience possible. The grim statistic is, as the authors Daniel Nettle and Suzanne Romaine explain early on, tjat almost half of the world’s known languages have disappeared in the last 500 years, and the process has greatly accelerated in the last 200 years.

Nettle and Romaine provide a compelling look at the ways in which languages are rapidly disappearing from the face of the earth, at the factors which hasten the demise of endangered languages, and at the ways people, government, and organizations have been attempting to minimize the damage and loss. As they point out in the first chapter, in the area that the United States now encompasses, over 300 languages were spoken at the time of Columbus’ journey in 1492; only 175 are spoken today—most of which are teetering on the edge of extinction. Only six (including Navajo, for example), are spoken by more than 100,000 people. This pattern of depletion is evident throughout the world, much of which has a far higher density of languages than existed in the States. (Papua New Guinea, for



example, is home to over 860 languages.)

Vanishing Voices has eight chapters. The first, entitled “Where Have All the Languages Gone?”, makes the extinction of language personal. The authors sketch brief biographies of the last person (photographs often are included) known to speak particular languages—so with the death of these speakers, their language has passed into extinction. They examine the death of the Turkish language Ubykh in 1992, Catawba Sioux in 1996, Cupeño in 1987, Manx in 1974...the list goes on. And there are so many more languages heading toward extinction because the few fluent speakers that remain are not passing it on to their children at home. Irish, for example, even though it is taught in schools, falls into this category. The authors enumerate why biolinguistic diversity remains important, especially for indigenous peoples, who suffer the brunt of language death.

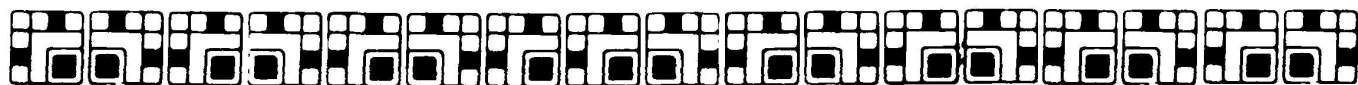
The second chapter, “A World of Diversity,” provides a summary background of the global situation, including a list of the numbers of speakers of the 15 most widely spoken languages (English is number two, after Mandarin). Almost half of the world speaks these 15 languages. The hundred largest languages account for 90% of the global population, with the remaining 10% speaking about 6,000 languages. Again the wealth of information about the degree of linguistic variation throughout the world is stunning (for example, there are 27 Quechuan languages spoken in Peru). Here, the authors also define the basic linguistic terminology that they discuss (*diglossia, isolate languages, language stocks, genetic classification, typological classification, word order variation*) in a way that is very accessible to the non-linguist. However, the meat of the chapter discusses the importance of biolinguistic diversity and the global impact of the loss of indigenous habitats and indigenous languages. Nettle and Romaine explain why the sheer magnitude of the linguistic equivalent of rainforest destruction also has serious global consequences. (Of course, the destructive parallels are not limited to the rainforest; for example, consider the plight of the Saami of Finland, whose reindeer stocks were decimated following the Chernobyl disaster.)

“Lost Worlds/Lost Words” is the third chapter. It explains how language dies: sudden death (the loss of

a population due to disaster, for example) or gradual death (the loss of transmission of the language from generation to generation). Importantly, the authors discuss the wealth of information a language has to offer—information that is lost forever once the language dies. They point out how modern science is almost completely based on western observation, and the extent to which indigenous knowledge of indigenous ecologies is largely outside the realm of previously observed western scientists. For example: “[T]he naming of fish and fishing practices in the Pacific islands show how native perceptions and detailed knowledge of the environment have been encoding in the patterns of naming of fish, fish behaviors, fishing practices, and technology. When these words are lost, it becomes increasingly difficult even to frame problems and solve them in any but the dominant culture’s terms and scientific classification schemes, which are not always adequate to the task.”

The topic of chapter four, “The Ecology of Language” is very simple to explain and very compelling to read. This brilliantly written chapter clearly illuminates two main concepts. First: how and why so many thousands of languages have evolved (using the island of New Guinea as a case in point). Second: the processes by which a language undergoing gradual death slowly succumbs—language loss by population loss, forced language shift, and voluntary language shift. Obviously, there is overlap among these three phenomena, particularly, they examine the difficulty in distinguishing “coercion from choice.” Again, numerous well researched examples are provided. This core chapter alone is well worth the price of the book.

Just as their scope is global, it also provides an expansive view across the millennia. The next two chapters (“The Biological Wave”; “The Economic Wave”) document historical shifts that in turn set great shifts in languages into motion. First, they discuss the effects of the rise of agriculture, which, over centuries, ultimately led to the spread of Indo-European populations (and crops) throughout the Western Hemisphere and Australia. The authors place under the microscope the power shifts brought about by economic advantages of “metropolitan” (as opposed to “peripheral”) languages. As a case study, they detail the demise of the Celtic languages. These passages also include grim testa-



ments from world history, including the slaughter of the indigenous population of Tasmania.

So far, the authors have laid out a series of facts and observations about what has already occurred. The last two chapters (“Why Something Should Be Done” and “Sustainable Futures”) elaborate the authors’ views on the importance of the issues they have been relating, with a strong focus on sustainability. Thankfully, they also provide a few success stories of groups (Hawaiian, the Karaja of central Brazil, the Passamaquoddy of Maine) that have turned the tide and have been able to maintain their threatened native languages, although such examples are sadly rare in comparison to the peoples whose tongues are extinguished. They also examine the state of bilingualism in the United States.

There is a section for references and further reading, as well as a bibliography. The book is well-indexed, and features numerous charts, tables, and photographs. This work is free of academic jargon that can be so annoying to those who are not versed in that special vocabulary. The only example of academes I could find was on page 58, where the authors use the capitalized term “Other.” A profusion of unexplained terms such as these would have made the book inaccessible, but one sole instance is forgivable as an accidental inclusion. The language is, in fact, very clear and precise. *Vanishing Voices* should be very accessible even for people who have little or no background in linguistics. If you have an interest in preservation, conservation, the environment, social justice, global politics, or linguistics, there is something to recommend for you in *Vanishing Voices*.

—Steve Kleinedler

[NB: In the interests of full disclosure, I must point out that the editor is also employed by Oxford University Press, but had nothing to do with *Vanishing Voices*.]

Language Play, by David Crystal. University of Chicago Press, 2001. 248 pp, ISBN: 0226122050 US\$16 (Originally published by Penguin UK, 1998.)

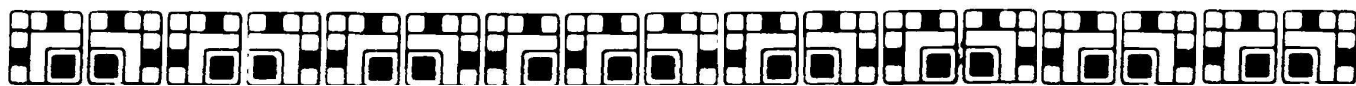
David Crystal’s book *Language Play* is a grab-bag of information and examples concerning the ways in which adults and children play with language. He covers rhyming, punning, typographical

word-play, regional accents, and more. The second half of the book is devoted to an exploration of children’s spontaneous language play and what it means for their linguistic development. Crystal speculates that children’s textbooks should feature elements of language play that would make learning to read a more enjoyable process, arguing that the long-term acquisition of linguistic skills would be enhanced by such an approach.

Although there are lots of appealing kernels of information in this book, I didn’t enjoy it quite as much as I had expected to. This stems in part from the foray into children’s learning in the second part of the book. Crystal’s experience as a linguist includes research into children’s language development, and it is clear that he is very qualified to write on this subject. Although he refrains from shifting into a scholarly mode, the discussion still seemed rather lengthy and labored to me. While parents and educators may benefit from his examples of books that do try to incorporate language play, I found myself tiring of the topic: I was ready to believe his argument quickly enough, and didn’t need all the particulars to convince me.

The earlier sections of *Language Play* provide a more general exploration of the ludic use of words. Yet I found something problematic about this part of the book, too: while I fully agree with Crystal’s claim that the playful function of language is just as fundamental as its goal of communication, his examples of language play just aren’t very funny. At the beginning of chapter 1, he recounts an example of “Ping-Pong Punning,” his term for a string of puns produced by a group of people. In real life, I have no doubt that this could be highly entertaining (moreover, the author mentions that his anecdotal participants have been drinking wine), but in print it just seems silly and artificial. Perhaps this is part of the phenomenon of language play itself: it may need to exist in its real-life socio-linguistic context in order to be humorous.

When Crystal moves into the domain of language play in writing, his examples become much more meaningful and informative. He touches, for instance, on *lipograms*—pieces of prose that avoid using a particular letter of the alphabet. Lipograms, it seems, are nothing new, having been found in



classical Greek from the sixth century B.C., and Crystal mentions two famous examples from the twentieth century: Ernest Vincent Wright's *Gadsby* (1939), a novel inspired by Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* that entirely omits the letter e, and Georges Perec's 1969 novel *La Disparition* (valiantly translated in 1995 by Gilbert Adair as *A Void*), which avoids the same vowel. Crystal includes many entertaining examples of word-games and word-tricks, and suggests some for the reader to play. The only drawback for an American reader is that he sometimes relies on British jokes and Britishisms. Perhaps this fact can serve to illustrate the nature of language play: it has its roots in the personal and the familiar, because, as Crystal argues, it is such a large part of our individual and cultural identities.

—Kate Deimling

The Way We Talk Now by Geoffrey Nunberg 242 pp.+ xi American Heritage, 2001. US\$14/UK £ 9.78 paperback, ISBN 0618116036

So much language commentary (these pages excepted, of course) is shrilly excitable; the general tone is one of high-pitched complaints piercing the gloom. This book, a collection of Nunberg's *Fresh Air* radio pieces with some print articles thrown in, is calm without being overly detached; cool without being expressionless. Nunberg has a gliding style laced with sly humor that never has to work too hard for the smile, if not the guffaw. His pieces have a softness that's not bland, and a smoothness that's not treacly, and they make for pleasant reading. I picked this up to read on my way to the annual meeting of the American Dialect Society, which meets in January along with the Linguistic Society of America. I finished the entire book on the flight, and half of that flight time was spent reading Richard Scarry's *Cars and Trucks and Things That Go!* to a vehicle-mad toddler. In other words, it's not heavy going.

The pieces are short enough to make discussion of them a bit problematic; two sentences and you've spoiled Nunberg's elegant presentation and taken the pleasure out of the approach—the difference between being the first one at a newspaper section on Sunday or the last, with only three blanks left in the crossword.

My favorite piece, in part because I agreed with

it least, was "Distinctions," in which Nunberg (who has written usage notes for the *American Heritage Dictionary*, and worked with their "usage panel" a group of more than two hundred "eminent writers and scholars" that the *AHD* editors poll for their views on usage), fesses up that even the usage-note-writers can't keep some of the rules straight. For him, it's the distinction between *in behalf of* and *on behalf of*. (For those of you without the *AHD* or another manual ready, *on behalf of* is used when one person is acting as an agent for another, and *in behalf of* is "for the benefit of" as in charity.)

In "Distinctions," Nunberg discusses the painful (to purists) fact that even Johnson and Webster weren't able to follow all of the rules (for example, the one that lays out the difference between *each other* and *one another*)—and sets up the question "why don't we just bag it?" He sets it up to knock it down; he says we have to keep setting down these rules, even though we know that they are often bunk, prejudice, and folklore rolled up together, and "spun by grammarians out of whole cloth." Why? Because people believe that where there is a difference there must be a distinction, and because it affords certain people the satisfaction of deludedly believing that they are using words more precisely than other people (even if those other people are Jane Austen and James Joyce).

Even though I disagree with this argument, it's well made, and I'm sure it will be received sympathetically by many VERBATIM readers. I don't think we should keep setting down rules more honored in the breach than the observance, especially if we can trace their origins back to mincing grammarians dedicated to making distinctions where there were only differences. At most, I think we should note them as historical curiosities, like the humor theory of disease or phlogiston.

I think both those that agree with Nunberg and those that disagree will find much in this book to enjoy. It's rare to find a writer you can pleasantly disagree with and enjoy the disagreement—like eating salsa that's hotter than you'd like but too delicious to put aside.

—Erin McKean

EPISTOLAE



The Prostrate Prostate Syndrome*

My own (Revised) General Theory
Of Evolutionary Linguistics
(See part II, section 4, sub-para (iii)),
In point of fact, actually predicts

That, quite significantly above chance,
Demotic pressures will tend to select
Repeatedly to favour ignorance
And the survival of the incorrect.

*Footnote to Roger Smith, VERBATIM,
Vol. XXVI, No. 3 Summer 2001 (Page 10)

Ian White
Ian.White@centrica.co.uk

Perhaps I'm grasping the wrong end of the stick here, but is Brookes saying that flipe ought to be in dictionaries, or that it has been struck out in error? To me this is a good Scots word. Apart from the meaning attributed by Brookes, to fold back (for example a sweater sleeve), the meaning I learnt as a child was the action of folding together the open ends of socks to prevent them separating in the drawer. And isn't nuciform used by stone-masons to describe ornamental stones of that shape atop pillars? Or perhaps I'm dreaming that one up too; but it does seem appropriate.

Many thanks for a splendid magazine

Dr. Andrew Rankine
Director, Safety and Environmental Protection
Services
University of Glasgow

Your Spring 2001 issue (XXVI/2) included Barry Baldwin's suggestion that we revive some words beginning with X including xenagogue to describe a guide who shows foreign visitors around England. His suggestion reminded me of my invention of xenoepiscopus for a late 20th century innovation, the "flying bishop". My church magazine started an A-Z to terms related to church life and worship. I asked what they would include for X and

they were relieved by my offer to search the CD version of the OED for a suitable entry. My search failed, so I invented xenoepiscopus to describe the "flying bishop" appointed to Church of England parishes that rejected their own bishop because he supported the ordination of women.

I understand that the OED Editors require at least three printed uses of a word before they will consider including it. It has appeared in St James's Beckenham Magazine, so if you print this letter, I need only one more entry! Perhaps I should write an article for the Church Times, thus following the lead of Ronald Blythe whose delightful invention of xylophonically gained him the "coveted Baldwin Prize for Creative Neologism".

Joshua Fox
London

I'm probably a bit late for this remark, but I have just been catching up on my reading and the "loo" article really captured my interest.

I have always assumed that *loo* is Cockney for 'water closet' (toilet), and my English friends affirm my belief. Cockney rhyming slang usually takes an expression that rhymes with the object word or phrase and then substitutes a non-rhyming word in the phrase for the object word. Thus, *head* becomes *loaf of bread*, or *loaf*. The focus is typically on the last word in either the object phrase or the rhyming phrase. But I believe that *loo* is a variant on this process, rhyming first words and using the last word of the phrase as the substitute; hence *water closet* to *Waterloo* to *loo*.

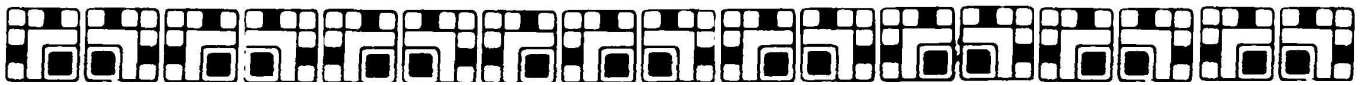
I will appreciate if someone more learned than I can point out the error of my armchair etymologies. Any takers?

David A. Smith
Encino CA

Across

1 Lined street with fully grown boxwood ulti-

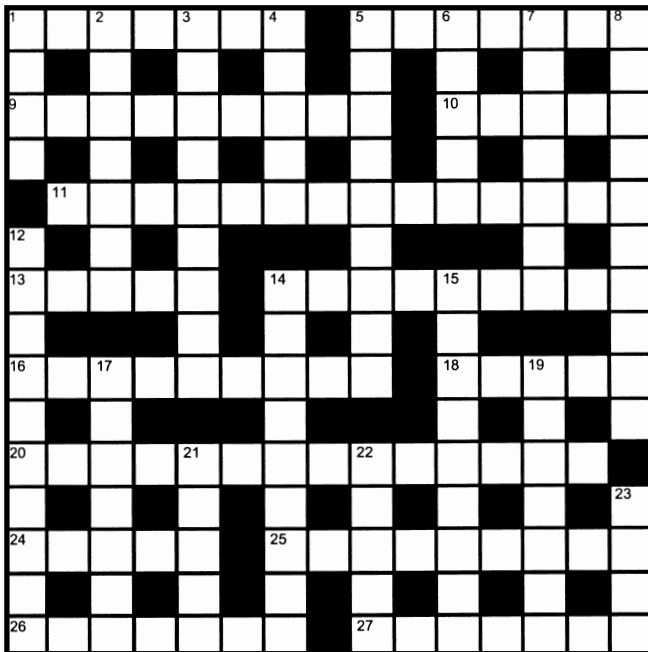
Schedule Notes: we're late. (For which we apologize profusely.) This Winter issue should arrive just as the buds of spring appear (your hemisphere may differ) and the Spring issue should arrive on time, mailed April 15 from Canada. Please allow two weeks after mailing date for delivery. Subscriptions run by issue, not the calendar, so a Spring expiration means that issue, not that season. Thank you for your forbearance.



Cryptic Crossword Number 88

Composed by Pamela Wylder

MISCELLANEA



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mately (7)

- 5 Outcome Dickens has penned in a humorous manner (7)
- 9 Nonsense poems in Green Haystacks (9)
- 10 "Vaquero" perhaps describes one? (5)
- 11 Side dish of cooked pasta soothed me (6,8)
- 13 Outlaw holds leaders of temporary office staff (5)
- 14 Catch Leo excitedly eating doughnut and some candy (9)
- 16 Rod's uncle playing Bill Sikes, for example (9)
- 18 Source of conflict in certain South American capital (5)
- 20 Negotiators bury Middle Eastern records (14)
- 24 Hint at something like a little devil? (5)
- 25 Boats try backing out, sailing around marinas (9)
- 26 One who settles down and oddly relents (7)
- 27 Assembles gun belonging to that gal (7)

(answers on page 19)

Down

- 1 Unique fish (4)
- 2 Support computer memory fragment (7)
- 3 Leave poultry on Greek temple (9)
- 4 Cut 500 diamonds before heading to Durban (5)
- 5 It colors a fluid lubricant (6,3)
- 6 Musical's original song for *Sound of Music* character (5)
- 7 Most of statesman's official document (7)
- 8 Version of third scene used for the first time (10)
- 12 Great depth in author Fleming's Red Cat (10)
- 14 Builder crept near rocks (9)
- 15 Alert obstetrical attendant (9)
- 17 Ocean denizen in autumn composition? (7)
- 19 Burn produce containing bit of mold (7)
- 21 Regal set or mounting (5)
- 22 Basic ingredients providing sugary confection (5)
- 23 Goddess lives with equals (4)

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