



## Talk Like a Gamer

Greg Costikyan  
New York, New York

Recently, VERBATIM ran a piece entitled “L33t-sp34k” about the typographical games played with words by hackers, warez d00dz, and other online lowlife (although open source coders will of course complain that “hacker” should be used in its original sense, meaning a programmer of astounding skill, rather than in the popular, degraded sense of an online vandal). The piece touched on the language used by online gamers—some of whom, particularly in the world of first-person shooters—adopt hacker terminology.

The article defined *fragging* (killing another player, from Vietnam era soldiers’ slang) and *gib* (from giblets, the bloody goblets left in the playing field after a player or monster is killed). But *first person shooters (FPSes)*—games in which the player sees the playing area as his (or more rarely, her) character would see it (first person view) and plays mainly by shooting weapons at others—have produced rich terminology.

To *bunny hop* is to leap rapidly about the game world to make yourself a more difficult target. A *rocket jump* is a way of exploiting a feature of a FPS game’s physics model by jumping into the air and detonating explosives on the ground so the blast causes extra lift and lets you jump higher. *Strafing* originally meant ‘moving sideways while firing,’ the derivation from the military term being clear—but has come to mean moving sideways even when not firing. To *telefrag* is to kill someone by teleporting into his location, which usually results in mutual death.

Once you kill an opponent, you often *taunt* him—sending a line of text celebrating your victory, although some games allow you to play a sound file on your enemy’s machine as another form of taunt.

A *low-ping bastard* (or *LPB*) is a player who has a really fast Internet connection and low “ping”

times to the game server, giving him an advantage over (better) players with slower connections. Contrariwise, a *high-ping bastard (HPB)* has such a bad connection that the player is often frozen, offering no help as a teammate and not much challenge as an opponent. A *llama* is a player without much skill—probably derived from *lamer*, itself hacker slang for a wannabe hacker who is basically an idiot.

A *boomstick* is a shotgun; a *BFG* (from ‘big fucking gun’) was originally a weapon in the game *Doom*, but has come to mean any weapon capable of inflicting truly awesome damage. A *bot* is an artificial, computer-controlled character resembling a player character, used to make a multiplayer FPS game playable in single player mode; it’s a clipped form of ‘robot.’

An *aiming bot*, however, is a computer program that a player may run which alters the player’s controls to provide a perfect lock onto an enemy character, meaning the player always aims true. This is a form of cheating, and will get you *kicked* (ejected and banned) from the game’s server if you’re caught.

Shooters are not the only game style to produce interesting vocabulary; massively multiplayer online games, like *EverQuest* and *Ultima Online*, are another rich source, perhaps because interplayer communication is so important in these games.

A *PC* or *player character* is one controlled by a live player, and an *NPC* (*non-player character*) is controlled by the computer. A *monster* is an NPC that exists for the sole purpose of being killed by PCs. All these terms are borrowed from tabletop roleplaying.

Monsters are often called *mobs* (possibly from ‘mobile object’). A *train* is a whole group of mobs, which together are far more dangerous to PCs than a single mob; when someone nearby yells “Train!,” you’re best advised to run like hell. In verb form, to



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VERBATIM is a trademark reg. U.S. Pat. Off.

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@verbatimmag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimmag.com) web page: <http://www.verbatimmag.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](mailto: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@verbatimmag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimmag.com).



*train* is to lead a train, that is, flee ahead of it—this is usually due to misfortune, but sometimes a character will seek to lead a train into a group of waiting comrades, as a means of ambushing the mobs. Thus “That guy is training the skeletons” doesn’t mean he’s seeking to improve their skills, but instead leading them a merry chase across the landscape.

To *kite* is to train but in a way that makes it unlikely that you will be harmed by the mobs. The idea is that your character has appropriate buffs or skills so that it’s trivial for him to get away from the train. Kiting means leading a train, getting a substantial lead, turning to cast spells or use ranged weapons to attack them, then fleeing again before the mobs can close enough to fight you, repeating the process as needed until the train is dead.

A *buff* is a spell or other game effect that temporarily increases a character’s abilities; to *debuff* is to cast a spell on a character that adversely affects his or her abilities.

In an online game roleplaying generally means speaking consistently in character, e.g.,:

*Player 1: hey bitch gimme buffs*

*Player 2: Sirrah! Dost thou address a lady thus?*

Player 2 is roleplaying; Player 1 is not.

Some games have separate gameworlds devoted to roleplayers and to *power gamers*—those who play primarily to become more powerful in the game world and can’t be bothered with such fripperies as pseudo-Elizabethan chat. Power gamers seek to *power level*, increase in ability in the game quickly—often with the help of a more powerful character who provides buffs to allow the character to gain experience rapidly. This practice is called *twinking*—gaining quickly in power or level in a semi-illegitimate fashion through assistance from a more powerful character. The term is obviously derived from *Twinkie*, but the association with a sugary snack is not obvious—I surmise that the usage may come from gay slang, in which a *twinkie* is a cute young man with an older lover.

To gain a level in the game—improving your character’s ability—is to *level up*.

*PKing* (*player killing*) is killing another player character in a game world—generally this is frowned on, and some games prohibit it. Some games allow both *PvP* (*player versus player*) game-

play as well as *player versus environment* play (which, curiously, is never abbreviated), meaning going out and hunting mobs.

One way to hunt mobs is to *camp* their *spawn point*, the place in the gameworld where a particular type of mob appears from time to time; camping means hanging out near that point and waiting until the mob spawns, then killing it. Camping is viewed as morally dubious, since you’re hogging this particular hunting ground; however, *turtling* (just standing around not doing anything) carries no negative connotation.

To *zone* is to move from one area of the game world to another, triggering a big download of gamestate information that will take a while. However, being *in the zone* is being totally focussed on the game and playing it like a master.

Sometimes a player figures out an *exploit*, a way to use some aspect of the game to produce results the game operators did not expect and don’t find appropriate—for instance, an *Ultima Online* player discovered how to create almost unlimited amounts of game money very quickly, causing massive inflation in the game. Exploiters are *banned* (barred from returning to the game); the game operators then *nerf* the game system, preventing others from using the exploit. More generally, to *nerf* is to reduce game power; e.g., if Shaman characters are made less powerful in an update, players of Shamen will complain bitterly that they have been *nerfed*.

illustration to come from  
Ivan



To *group* is to join cooperatively with others for a short period of time (“Hey! Wanna group?”). If you want to join a more permanent group, you join (depending on the theme of the game) a *guild*, *clan*, or *squadron* (collectively called *microcommunities* by game developers). Some clans persist beyond a single game, and will move en masse from one game or server to another.

A *quest* is a set of tasks that, when accomplished, give a player experience, money, and/or equipment that is useful and powerful in the game world; a *FedEx quest* is one that involves delivering some item from point A to point B.

A *mule* is a secondary character used to provide more storage space for the crap you want to hang on to; if your backpack is full, just fire up the mule character and give him/her/it the stuff to carry. A mule will *water ski*, meaning it will automatically follow the main character about, like a boat pulling a water skier.

A *brick* is a powerful fighter, usually devoid of magic or other powers. The implication is that bricks wall off more vulnerable members of a group from dangerous mobs by interposing themselves between the two.

A *newbie* (or *noob* or *n00b*) is a new player who’s just learning the ropes. A *guide* is someone in the game world, usually a volunteer but sometimes employed by the game provider, whose job is to help newbies and resolve problems during play. If the guide can’t solve a problem, he kicks it upstairs to a *gamemaster*, which in a MMORPG is like a guide, but has higher rank and access to software tools that lets him modify the game world—tools sometimes used to produce custom quests or events for players. Another task for guides and gamemasters is dealing with *griefers*—people playing only to interfere with the experience of other players.

In the case of shooters and massively multiplayer games, the language is the product of gamers, the people who play the games. More generally, game developers and gamers together have developed a varied vocabulary to describe the many different game styles on the market and the way people play them.

A *gamer* is someone for whom games is a primary leisure-time activity. Gaming is playing a

game—and gamers are generally snotty that the gambling industry has absconded with the term and used it as a euphemism for their repulsive exploitation of the statistically challenged.

*Gameplay* is a nebulous noun that means something like “the feel you get from playing a game.” It dates back to the early 80s; I first heard it from people at Atari. “It has good gameplay.” A *game designer* is the creative lead, the person who specifies gameplay and interface; *game developer* is a more general term, covering everyone involved in production of a game, including programmers, graphic designers, and management types as well as game designers. “Game designer” was coined by Redmond Simonsen, the art director at SPI, a leading wargame publisher, in the late 1960s; previously, designers were often called inventors or authors. In Germany, that tradition persists; a game designer is a *spielautor*.

The term *videogame* originally meant arcade and home console games, excluding computer games (many of which, in the early days, were text-only); it is still sometimes used that way. In the industry, the term is rarely used; people instead distinguish between *PC* (personal computer) *games* and *console games*. Sometimes, console games are called *platformers*, but the word is also sometimes used to refer specifically to 2D *sidescrollers* like the old *Mario* and *Sonic the Hedgehog* games.

A *wargame* is a game of military conflict.

The term *roleplaying game* (or *RPG*) was first coined in the pages of *Alarums & Excursions*, an APA (pron. “apah,” meaning ‘amateur press association’—first used by amateur printers in the 1920s, then borrowed by science fiction fandom, then carried over into gaming) devoted to games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. In an RPG, each player takes the role of a single character; this was, initially, a paper game medium, but subsequently, *console RPGs* (played on home game machines like Playstation), *computer RPGs* (or *CRPGs*), and *massively multiplayer online RPGs* (*MMORPGs*, sometimes pronounced “morpegs”) have evolved. Because MMORPG is such a mouthful, developers are currently experimenting with alternative formulations—*massively multiplayer game* (*MMG*) and *persistent world* being examples—but none have yet achieved widespread usage. The



implication of “persistent world” is that the game-world persists even with a player is offline—that’s by contrast to games such as *Quake* or *StarCraft* that have no persistent, ongoing nature.

The term *tabletop RPG* is a back-formation to distinguish the earlier, paper, variety from the modern digital variety. In addition, fan groups often stage *live action RPGs* (or *LARPs*, pron. “lahrp”), in which dozens or hundreds of people play together in a single space, moving about rather than sitting around a table.

Although MMORPGs derive partially from the tabletop variety, they are technically an evolution of *MUDs* (pronounced as you’d expect; it’s an acronym for ‘multi-user dungeon’ or ‘multi-user domain’). The first MUD, MUD 1, was developed by Bartle and Trubshaw at the University of Essex in 1979; they’re text-only multiplayer networked games with roleplaying elements, generally (although not always) run non-commercially. Many MUDs are still in existence, along with *MUSHes* (‘multi-user shared hallucinations’) and *MOOs* (a contraction of a contraction: ‘MUD, Object-Oriented’).

A plethora of words have been coined to describe computer game categories. An *adventure* is a game that depends on story-telling and puzzle-solving; the style derives from the academic game *Adventure* (aka *Colossal Cave*), which predates the commercial game software industry. *Text adventures* have no graphics (e.g., *Zork*), while *graphic adventures* (e.g., *Myst*) do. (Confusingly, the Game Manufacturers’ Association, a collection of small hobby game publishers, collectively refers to its industry, which includes publishers of wargames, RPGs, and collectible card games, as the “adventure gaming” industry—even though their games bear scant resemblance to software adventures.)

*Sim* is used in two different senses; there are *flight sims* (or more generally, *vehicle sims*) in which the player controls a single craft; and there are sims in the sense of ‘simulation,’ such as *SimCity*, *Roller Coaster Tycoon*, and *The Sims*.

A *sneaker* is a game like a first-person shooter in which you’re encouraged to gain your objectives by stealth rather than combat (*Thief* is the canonical example). A fighter is a game like *Soul Calibur* in which you control a swordsman, boxer, kung fu fight-

er, or other combatant in one-on-one combat with a similar opponent. Similarly, a *dancer* is a game in which the player must manipulate the controls in a set pattern in time to music, frequently (but not always) controlling an onscreen-character that responds by dancing. In some arcade versions, the player stands on a pressure-sensitive area, and controls the game by stepping (or dancing) on different parts of the platform. (*The Hackers’ Dictionary* uses the term *dance-o-matic* for dancers, but I’ve never actually heard anyone use that word in real life.)

A *real-time strategy game* (or *RTS*) is real-time because it is not turn-based; all players (and computer-controlled *AIs*) perform actions continually and simultaneously, instead of taking actions one turn at a time, round-robin-style. Examples of RTS games are *StarCraft* and *Age of Empires*.

*Action* is another word with multiple senses; an *action game* is a game, generally but not always from a first-person perspective, in which a player controls a single character, and his or her success in the game is based on player skill—the ability to manipulate the interface accurately and precisely—rather than character skill—game abilities gained by the character in the course of play. Thus, shooters are a subcategory of action games, but the term also encompasses games like *Tomb Raider*, in which avoiding traps and overcoming physical challenges are more important to gameplay than simple combat. An *action-adventure* game is like an adventure game in that story and puzzle-solving are important to play, but unlike classic adventures in that they depend on player skill.

*Action game* usually refers to a PC title; the term for consoles (and arcade) is *skill-and-action*. Console skill-and-action games are less often first-person in perspective, but always dependent on player skill. Snotty gamers who prefer more cerebral styles of gameplay deride these as *twitch games*.

A *4X game* is a game of space colonization and combat; it stands for ‘eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate.’ A *god game* is a game in which the player controls a whole empire or civilization; *Civilization* is the canonical god game.

*Miniatures games* are played with little metal figures arrayed on a table; *collectible card games* (or *CCGs*) are played with cards, purchased in *starter*



*decks* and *booster packs* like baseball cards, with a player building a deck from among all the cards he owns before playing with others. *Magic: The Gathering* is a CCG.

An *online game* is a game played over a wide-area network—at present, the Internet, but previously, the commercial online services. A *massively multiplayer game* is online, but one in which hundreds or thousands of people play in the same game world (this is by contrast to non-massively multiplayer games, involving a handful of players at once). A *persistent world* is a massively multiplayer game which is always online and available for play, with characters or game positions retaining their characteristics from one play session to another.

Games, according to gamers, almost always either *suck* or *rock*; there doesn't seem to be a middle ground. A game that sucks is a *coaster*—the implicating being that the game is so bad that all the CD is good for is setting your drink down on. (One game magazine reviewed a game for which David Bowie had provided the music under the headline “We Can be Coasters, Just for One Day.”) One way a game can suck is if the animations *skate*, meaning that they don't synch up properly with the background, so that they appear to be moving too quickly or too slowly given the motion of their walk cycle.

A *patch* is a software update, usually available for free download—gamers don't like them (“Man, they patched that game practically before it shipped—it must be buggy as hell.”) A *walkthrough* is a document describing how to beat a game in detail; a *hint doc* is less explicit. A *cheat* is a game feature, purposefully built into the game by the game developers, that lets a player gain power or abilities, or unlock special game features. Cheats aren't usually described in the game manual; instead, the publisher usually reveals them in a mildly secretive way (mentioning them in an online chat, say), encouraging players to seek out websites that describe the cheats. Some cheats put the game in *god mode*, which renders the player invulnerable.

*Easter eggs* are hidden features included by the developers, usually without their boss's knowledge, that don't help players in any particular way, but are sometimes amusing, and sometimes designed to boost the developer's ego. The first easter egg in a

commercial product is credited to Warren Robinett, the programmer of *Adventure* for the Atari 2600; unlocking the easter egg shows you his name (at the time, developers were almost never credited in console games).

Some terms used by game programmers have passed into general usage, too; *AI* (“artificial intelligence”) is often used to mean “computer-controlled opponent,” and indeed the computer-controlled opponents' choices in the action are determined by very primitive artificial intelligence routines. (“The AI beat crap out of me.”) When a computer needs to determine a route for a unit in a game, it uses *pathfinding* algorithms to determine the best possible route for the unit—but pathfinding algorithms can be computationally very processor intensive, so that many games cut corners by using less than optimal—but faster—algorithms, resulting in such oddities as a unit getting caught in a cul-de-sac. In which case, gamers say “the pathfinding sucks.” And many games boast about their realistic *physics model*, which supposedly helps objects in the game behave more like real-world objects.

Gaming has grown from virtually nothing to a multibillion dollar industry over a remarkably short period of time—since Nolan Bushnell placed the first *Pong* machine in a local bar in 1972. The field continues to mutate and grow amid rapid technological change—currently, the Internet and emerging wireless technologies are reshaping it, even as designers create games like *The Sims*, a simulation of suburban life, that appeal to entirely different types of players. As the mere recitation of the different types of games demonstrates, the game is an enormously plastic medium, and we have yet even to ring a fraction of the changes possible in the form. As new game styles emerge, we can expect continued rapid linguistic innovation among gamers and the developers who cater to them.

[Greg Costikyan has published more than 30 game designs and four novels; he founded *Unplugged Games*, a wireless game firm, and consults and writes about games, game design, and game industry business issues. Thanks to Noah Falstein, Sean Timarco Baggeley, Brian Upton, Kent Quirk, Brian Sharp and Russ Williams for assistance in compiling this article's vocabulary.]



## A Tuesday Afternoon With Hunter Diack

Juliette Shapiro  
East Sussex

Having moved from the country to the town I find myself (more often than is good for me I am sure) in the delightful position of being able to rummage through piles of second-hand books in many of my local bookshops. It was via this renewed but not newfound hobby that I came across Hunter Diack's book *Test your own Wordpower*. This book also goes under the sub-heading of *Wordpower—Your Vocabulary and its Measurement*. I paid a paltry sum, as is more often than not the way with second hand books, for what ended up being a voyage of discovery.

Like the first page of a gripping novel, this book's 350-word introduction grabbed me immediately. "How many words do you know?" asks Diack, clearly not a man to mince the many he is acquainted with. "Hmm, not sure really," I say in a quiet voice that goes on to say nervously, "probably not as many as I should given that I call myself a writer." And there it is. That typical fear of rejection that plagues all scribblers. Before I have finished the introduction (despite being more than familiar with all the words that appear in it) I am feeling startled and a little apprehensive about what the self-imposed test will reveal about my literacy. Diack talks about Literacy League Tables, for goodness sake. Suddenly it gets serious. Which is when I get sceptical. I mean really—I'm reasonably intelligent, at least I manage to persuade others, by bluff and connivance, that I am—so what am I worrying about? Is Hunter Diack (by now he looms, a monstrous intellectual, in my mind) actually sitting behind me, here in my kitchen on a Tuesday afternoon as I approach the first of the tests? The answer to that question is; yes in a funny sort of way, he is.

At first I thought it was going to be difficult to test my own wordpower. Could I be trusted? I assume, as with personality inventories, that tests devised to measure the sitter's vocabulary (particularly in such cases as these when the examinee is

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also the examiner) would prove to be unreliable. After all, when it comes to quantifying one's own literacy, there will surely be the temptation to bluff a little, to claim a greater knowledge than one actually has. I have hardly begun my voyage of discovery when I realise that Hunter Diack (he looms, he looms) does not allow cheating. In his introduction he points out that by sitting three of the tests in the book, I will be able to calculate my vocabulary. Actually it's a little more complicated than that but it's not as complicated as one might expect.

Here's the long story cut short. Each of the three tests consists of six levels. Each of these six levels consists of ten words. Now to explain the word content of each level. In one of the tests (there are 50 from which to choose) the Level 1 list features the word *external* while the listing for Level 6 in the same test includes the words *mithridatism* and *unau*. I, or any one else eager to determine their literary worth, will then be required to read through the words in the levels in order. When I have noted down ten words I feel I cannot reasonably give good meaning to I must stop. But it is very tempting to go on. On my first test I am aware



that although I have listed ten words I cannot explain the meaning of entirely I let my eyes wander to the subsequent words listed and note (feeling a touch frustrated) that I do know their meanings. But this is irrelevant. Those stragglers that I see at the end of the test (despite my familiarity with them) are meaningless now. I have already admitted that I cannot define ten of the words that came before them and I am now obliged to follow another set of instructions.

Having owned up to the fact that ten words elude me before I reach number sixty I must, according to the looming Diack, now list the five words I claimed to know that precede the ten I didn't know. Then I must give a description of each. This is easy, because I know those five words. I have, rather surprisingly, been completely trustworthy and not pretended to know any more than I actually do. This is because I quickly realise that the test is so finely tuned as to suss me out if I attempt to fool it. Remember, it's all on a scale, all divided into levels and league tables. If I fake it and attempt to waltz along as if I am the type of person who not only uses the word *enzootic* but can explain what it means with ease then I will certainly be caught out and be left re-faced. The test is designed to catch me, if I say I know words I don't. It isn't worth bluffing, I will only slip up later when asked to define them. I am allowed (Diack's instructions are clear) to show my knowledge of the said five words I claim to know by means of a synonymous phrase or term or by using any of the said words in a sentence by way of example or ( I think this applies if I really feel cornered) by using a diagram or sketch.

I do this, with frenzied confidence. Then, having decided that I must eventually give up Scrabble and Mensa tests with a view to getting out more I move on. Time to get out the dictionary and check that I really do know what those five words mean. This is where I am tempted to go the shoddy route. I know I know the meanings of those five words. Can I be bothered to check them? Is it really necessary? I could just make a cup of coffee and pretend. Somehow I can't. He still looms.

This is certainly the point at which the whole thing could get vague. I could, with a bit of mental give or take, easily make my scrawled descriptions

tie in with what the *Oxford Reference English Dictionary* has to say about each given word. I breathe a sigh of relief when I realise I won't have to. My descriptions are well within the realms of accuracy. I now make that cup of coffee and comfort myself that I might, at the very least, come out of all this bestowed with the reading age of a clever eleven-year-old. Believe me, there is something a little bit scary about Hunter Diack.

Test two goes as well as the first one. By test three I have decided that the reading age of an eleven-year-old might have been a touch ambitious. One of the five words I claimed to know has mysteriously turned out to be one I didn't. At least it transpires to be one I cannot give a truly clear meaning to when under pressure. And yes, for those of you who raise an eyebrow here, it is a pressure. You have no idea how disconcerting it is when he looms.

Anyway, I get through. I have to deduct another point for the word I couldn't explain but I'm now past caring. It is time to calculate my average score (forgive the impression of underestimating anyone's intelligence by explaining this) by adding my scores for each of the three tests together and then dividing the total by three.

By now Hunter Diack has turned me into a nervous wreck. I cannot add my three scores together without a calculator. So much looming has its effects. This clinical testing environment had made me accuracy crazy. I stare at my average on the calculator's screen. It doesn't look like much. Luckily Diack reminds me that I must now multiply this figure by 600 in order to interpret my literacy. I do this. I am just in the running to be described as a Level 5. Level 6 is the highest, this is the zone in which people whose heads are about to explode with intelligence are situated. I only just get into Level 5 by the back-door (my own head is unlikely to explode). I slip, thrilled and unnoticed I hope, into the illustrious league of people who are in the 24,000–30,000 word bracket. The description reads; Men and women in this range are among the most widely read in the country (it doesn't say which country?). They are to be found in the top echelons of their professions or heading in that direction.

I love Hunter Diack now. He has suddenly stopped all that looming business and is shaking my





hand, presenting me with certificates and giving me warm smiles. It's been an excellent experience. What's more I now firmly believe that Diack's tests are an infallible and accurate measurement of literacy. And it's comforting to know even if I'm not yet in the top echelons of my profession that I am heading in that direction.

Obviously I'd fail any sort of test that requires me to add three numbers together without the assistance of a calculator—but who cares? I know what *mithridatism* means now and I'm planning to use *enzootic* in light conversation if the mood so takes me.

It was worth the nervous breakdown.

[Your Own Wordpower, by Hunter Diack was published by Paladin in 1975. Juliette Shapiro's most recent piece for VERBATIM was "Thesaurusing, A Little-Known Art" in Vol. XXVI/3.]



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

"Earth Worms do not enjoy exposure to wind and sun because it tends to kill them." [From <http://members.shaw.ca/ecologicalsgardens/earth-worms.htm> Submitted by Carl Weisner, Durham, N.C.]

"I am grateful to all the fans, and especially God." [Janet Jackson, at the Billboard Music Awards, Dec. 4, 2001.]



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## Notes on Meiosis

Burling Lowrey  
Washington, D.C.

To completely understand the nature of *meiosis* ('a kind of understatement that dismisses or belittles, especially by terms that make something less important than it is, or ought to be'), it seems useful to investigate the two opposing strains that have constituted American humor since colonial days.

Essayist and social observer, Russell Baker, pinpointed this stylistic phenomenon in his introduction to *Russell Baker's Book of American Humor*. Baker notes:

Two very different strands run through American humor... The distinction may be easier to grasp if we keep in mind why Mark Twain and the *New Yorker* would not have made a happy marriage... Twain was western, the *New Yorker* eastern. Twain came out of nineteenth century frontier culture... *The New Yorker*... represented an Atlantic seaboard culture ... that reached back to a time when Americans were colonials and considered themselves English.

What Baker had in mind here was the traditional understated English style of discourse transplanted to American shores. Baker confesses, "The *New Yorker* has conditioned me to eschew *overstatement*," meaning a brash, direct style that most Americans, at least those regarding themselves as Midwesterners or Westerners, are comfortable with and which seems to have reached its ultimate impact in the "in your face" stance of television comics in our own time.

By the *New Yorker* branch of understatement, Baker was obviously referring to the editorship of Harold Ross, which ran from 1925 to 1951. Ross launched his magazine with a meiotic statement that is now firmly ensconced in America's literary culture—"The *New Yorker* is not for the old lady in Dubuque." This, of course, is a thinly disguised swipe at the early Eastern Seaboard perception of America west of the Hudson River being a vast desert of provinciality and philistinism. Pure meiosis. No one on Ross's staff would have felt inclined to say directly, "This magazine is not for the hicks in Iowa."



One should note further that the “belittling” aspect of meiosis became a trademark of the Algonquin Wits, many of whom were directly associated with Ross’s *New Yorker*. At its most blatant, the understated repartee of these writerly luncheon companions descended to snide “put-downs” aimed at physical traits or personality quirks. George S. Kaufman was a past master at this extreme brand of understatement. The story is told that Kaufman, while strolling on Fifth Avenue with his wife, a native of Rochester, New York, was put off by her running into a number of old friends from her home town. At one point she gushed, “Gee, *everybody* from Rochester must be in New York this week-end!” Kaufman quickly retorted, “Sounds like a good time to visit Rochester.”

Outside of sophisticated literary circles, meiosis can have a double-edged effect—with the writer or speaker being perceived as having “seen it all” and not being impressed—and the person on the receiving end being snidely ridiculed.

In the following passage, an English professor employs double-edged meiosis in replying to one of his students, who naively asked his instructor if “anything important” would be covered in a forthcoming lecture on Shakespeare’s tragedies, a lecture that the student made clear he would not be able to attend. The professor replied,

The question of whether Shakespeare’s tragedies are “important” is, of course, a matter of debate, but you might want to give it some thought. Perhaps when you do return to class you will have read *Hamlet* a play of some interest. We will be spending a little time on a few of the paradoxes in Hamlet’s speeches. The soliloquies should probably be given some attention. .. Following the *Hamlet* lecture, we will delve into *Othello* (a mildly interesting depiction of jealousy, against a background of war), *King Lear* (a rather somber account of an aging monarch going a bit off the deep end), and *Macbeth* (Murder, Incorporated—Shakespeare style). Of these four plays, *Hamlet* seems to be the most rewarding. Therefore, something can be said for scanning its contents at an appropriate time.

A minor companion term for meiosis is *litotes* (lie-TOH-teez), in which intentional understatement

takes a negative form. In this situation, the comment, “I am mindful of your dilemma” becomes “I am not unmindful of your dilemma.” In such constructions of this nature, understatement reaches its outer limits by coming close to “damning with faint praise.” Fowler says that litotes is frequently used to “impress by moderation.”

One should note further that assertion by litotes is deliberately laconic and completely devoid of embellishments and literary flourishes. But there is a danger in too much emphasis placed on laconism: Its verbal sparseness may be interpreted as an oblique dismissal of whatever is being discussed. The following hypothetical situations make the point:

1. A poet asks a friend, whose literary judgment he respects, to critique a sampling of his creations. The friend honors the request. After a thorough reading in the poet’s presence, the friend looks up from the manuscript and says only, “Not bad.” (The poet is crushed by what is left unsaid).

2. In a professional football game, one quarterback is rendered unconscious after being “blind-side” by an opposing tackle. An announcer, noting the powerful hit, says, “The quarterback has not been disabled by the tackle, which was clearly not illegal, and he will probably be back in the game when ‘the bells in his head stop ringing’.” (Serious injuries in professional football are usually downplayed because of the notion that “getting hurt is all part of the game.” A common response to an injury, from an announcer is, “He is slow getting up.”)

3. A brilliant novelist is awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. When a television interviewer asks him if he feels a sense of pride over his newfound fame, he replies, “It was nothing.” (Litotes, in this case, creates a perception of false humility and inverted arrogance.)

To return to meiosis, it is not without its detractors, even including Oxbridge products. English poet, critic, and novelist, Robert Graves, pulled out all stops in saying, “Con conversationally, this style can be charming, but in print it makes for irrelevancy, material omission, faulty connections, logical weakness, and, ultimately, boredom.”

Graves’ careful distinction between the stance of ironic understatement in conversation and in writing is well put, for even in America there are



those, such as the Masterpiece Theater aficionados, who are attracted to the urbane chit-chat of British aristocrats. Meiosis in print is another matter. *Punch* folded, after more than 100 years of thriving on low-key satire, and the rich symbolism of Eustace Tilley, the condescending Regency fop, favored by Harold Ross, passed into near oblivion when William Shawn, Ross's successor, set out to "save the planet."

In contemporary America, meiosis is no longer fashionable, even among the literati, largely due to the intrusion of political egalitarianism into the areas of popular culture and language usage and to the increasing dominance of hyperbole in the vast realm of mass marketing. The last vestige of this sophisticated verbal posture—and its companion, litotes—can be found where those inclined to favor the nuances of stylistics, at least in conversation, have found a safe haven—on university campuses, in "think tanks," and on the staffs of quarterly literary journals. However, what Harold Ross conceived in print is close to being extinct; and any manuscript, written in the meiotic mode today and submitted to an American magazine or journal is likely to be greeted with, "Thank you for thinking of us. We are sorry, but this is not the type of thing we do."

[Author Note TK

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## CORRIGENDUM

In the Spring 2002 issue, on page 19, it was contended that the word *skiddlyboom* appears in *A Coney Island of the Mind*, by Lawrence Ferlinghetti. Mr. Ferlinghetti sent us a lovely signed copy of this work, without a *skiddlyboom* in sight.

We can't find any mention of *skiddlyboom* in our other trusty sources, either.

If you have a citation for *skiddlyboom* in a printed source (other than this one), please send it to us right away. The first respondent will receive a free VERBATIM t-shirt.

—The Editor

## More 180° Homonyms

Dean Juniper  
Reading, England

Everybody knows what constitutes a homonym; homonyms are words of identical sound or form with different meanings. They are very numerous, of course; words like *set* and *match* instantly spring to mind, but they don't seem to bother us, and the reason why is common sense, as the linguists tell us, because we use the contexts in which they're spoken to fix their precise meanings.

So that's all taken care of, isn't it? Well, not quite, because there's a new breed of homonyms, both words and phrases, about. This type doesn't just have varied meanings, they're total opposites. Thus I've recently been confused by "It's more than my job's worth." For years I thought it meant "They've told me what my duties are, and if I do anything different, I can expect much grief." But now I gather that most people take it to mean that the pay, such as it is, does not warrant any extra trouble. Whether Esther Rantzen with her 'jobsworth' campaign has been responsible for this turnaround, for turnaround it is, I do not know. But the shift is significant. My early interpretation blames the bosses; this one the employee.

I've just realised, maybe I'm slow to catch on, that the verb *bless* is also suspect in almost all its forms. *Bless me* and *Well, I'm blessed* are both at least 180° from the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of 'fortunate in the possession of' being closer to cursed than anything else. And neither is easily saved by its context; it would take more than a very good ear to fix *Well, I'm blessed* with accuracy; a very close observation of the speaker's expression might be needed to clinch the precise meaning. *Blessing* however is still standing firm, although the linked phrase *blessing in disguise* shows that we shouldn't be too sure about how loing it will be before it too is cut in half, and turned round.

I'm still all at sea with *chuffed*. I'd like to have *chuffed* pinned down once and for all. When you say, "O, I was chuffed by it all," do you mean you were pleased or disgusted? It seems that a majority



use it as a pleasurable phrase, and its dialect derivation does support them, but somewhere along the linguistic road, the ironists must have staged an ambush and turned the message round. Either that or it has to do with some obscure functioning of pleasure-pain dynamics.

Something is happening too with *sanction*. I used to be very clear about *sanction*. *Sanction* meant being allowed to do what you wished. Now it can mean quite the opposite. Cross the United Nations, or worse still, the United States, and you rapidly get told what you can't do, and you sometimes get a missile to remind you.

It would seem that *cleave* has unaccountably always had two diametrically opposed meanings. To *cleave* is to split apart, but there is also a traditional, perhaps now archaic, *cleave*, which means 'knit together.' Currently *cleavage*, as applied to bosoms or bottoms, seems to take the governing division form, but I'm left wondering if there is not some subtextual burrowing afoot, whereby the implication that such entities perceived as split are really one, is revealed.

I've also never been clear about the expression *to my knowledge*, though I've never been challenged on it, which may or may not indicate that others are equally confused. Does "to my knowledge, they've had that Jaguar for five years" mean "it's quite certain that they've had it for five years since my memory is good, and therefore you should believe me"? Or, does it mean "as far as I know, they've had it for five years, but I don't know everything about them, and I may be wrong"? The first interpretation means it's true without doubt, but the second leaves room for doubt, and it's not clear whether differences in vocal emphasis will assist.

I'm collecting these 180° homonyms. If you've got any good specimens, please post them to me.

[*Dean Juniper is a psychologist by trade, and has authored numerous professional textbooks and articles. He has contributed to the London Magazine, Grand, and the Transatlantic Review.*]

SIC! SIC! SIC!

Reggie Workman . . . spent a decade in Anthony Braxton's great mid-80s Quartet . . . [From the WCFR 88.5 FM Newsletter. Submitted by James Madden, Northampton, MA.]

## Stamp Out Fadspeak!

Richard Lederer

San Diego, California

Some people lament that speaking and writing these days are simply a collection of faddish clichés patched together like the sections of prefabricated houses made of ticky-tacky. They see modern discourse as a mindless clacking of trendy expressions, many of them from movies and television sitcoms.

Why is English discourse in such a parlous state? Maybe it's because verbal knee-jerkery requires no thought. It's so much easier not to think, isn't it? It's so much easier to cookie-cut the rich dough of the English language. It's so much easier to microwave a frozen dinner than to create a meal from scratch. After all, when we were children, we loved to pull the string on the doll that said the same thing over and over, again and again.

That's what fadspeak is—the unrelenting mix of mimicry and gimmickry. Fadspeak comprises vogue phrases that suddenly appear on everybody's tongues—phrases that launch a thousand lips. Before you can say, "yada yada yada," these throwaway expressions become instant clichés, perfect for our throwaway society, like paper wedding dresses for throwaway marriages.

Fadspeak clichés lead mayfly lives, counting their duration in months instead of decades. They strut and fret their hour upon the stage of pop culture and then are heard no more.

Now, would I, your faithful, deep pockets, drop-dead-good-looking language columnist, your poster boy for user-friendly writing, ever serve you anything totally bogus like fadspeak? I don't think so. Not a problem. I have zero tolerance for anything that lowers the bar for what makes good writing.

Work with me on this. I've been around the block, and I know a thing or two. I know that I wear many hats, but I'm not talking trash here. I'm not the 800-pound gorilla out to bust your chops. I feel your pain, and I'm your new best friend. At this point in time, I've got you on my radar screen, and I know you da man! Yessss!

Hey, people, this isn't rocket science or brain surgery. It's simply a no-brainer—a drop kick and a



slam dunk. I, the mother of all language writers, will go to the mat 24–7 for fresh, original language because I get more bang for the buck when I avoid those new clichés. I want to level the playing field and give something back to the community. Join the club. Get used to it. It works for me.

So I'm making you an offer you can't refuse. I'm never going to slip into those hackneyed faddish expressions that afflict our precious American language. How about we run that one up the flagpole and give it a salute? Sound like a plan? It's a done deal because I've got a full plate, and I bring a lot to the table. I come to play, and the ball's in your court.

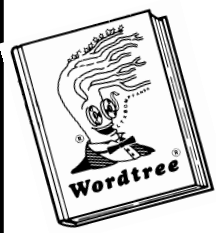
Sheeesh. Get over it. Don't you just hate it when a writer or speaker gives you that same old same old and then try to put a good face on it? Doesn't it just send you on an emotional roller coaster till you crash and burn? Doesn't it just blow you out of the water and make you want to scream, "Oh, puh-leeze! In your dreams! Excuuuuse me! It's my way or the highway! Why are you shooting yourself in the foot? You're history! You're toast! That's so twentieth century! Put a sock in it!"?

As for me, I'm like, "Are you the writer from Hell? Lose the attitude, man. You are so-o-o-o busted. Read my lips! Maybe it's a guy thing, but get real! Get a life! And while you're at it, why don't you knock yourself out and get a vocabulary?"

Anyhoo, off the top of my head, the bottom line is that fadspakers and fadwriters—and you know who you are—are so clueless. I am shocked–shocked!–that they just don't suck it up, get up to speed, go the whole nine yards, and take it to another level. They're afraid to wake up and smell the coffee, push the envelope, and think out of the box. All they do is give you that same-old-same-old, been-there-done-that kind of writing.

Tell me about it. Fadspakers and fadwriters just play the old tapes again and again, and their ideas just fall through the cracks. They're not playing with a full deck. The light's on, but nobody's home. Elvis has left the building. Go figure.

Hel-lo-oh? Earth to cliché-meisters. Duuuh. Booring. What's wrong with this picture? Are we on the same page? Are we having fun yet? Are you having some kind of a bad-hair day? Are you having a midlife crisis? A senior moment? Maybe it's time



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for a wake-up call? Or maybe a reality check? I don't think so. In your dreams. Not even close.

O-o-k-a-a-y. You wanna talk about it? You wanna get with the program? I feel your pain, but why don't you wake up and smell the coffee? How about we cut right to the chase? I mean, what part of "fadspeak" don't you understand? Knock yourself out, and deal with it. You got that right. Or maybe I'm just preaching to the choir.

Whatever. As if.

Now that I've got your attention, here's the buzz on cutting edge communication. Whenever I find one of these snippets of fadspeak strewn about a sentence, I'm in your face. I'm your worst nightmare. Strings of pop phrases just make me go ballistic, even to the point of going postal. After all,—and I'm not making this up—what goes around comes around.

Okay, okay. I understand that you're not a happy camper and maybe you just don't want to go there. But I do because I've got all my ducks in a row. I mean, at the end of the day, is this a great language—or what? I mean, it's a language to die for.

Gimme a break. Cut me some slack. What am I, chopped liver? Hey, what do I know? And now that I've thrown my hissy fit about fadspeak, here's what's going down.

Thanks a bunch for letting me share. Now that I've been able to tell it like it is, it's time to pack it in. I'm outta here. Talk to you soon. Buh-bye—and have a nice day.

*[Richard Lederer is the author of Anguished English and many other funny language books.]*



## As The Word Turns

### Kettell Kall

Barry Baldwin  
Alberta, Canada

If History is Gossip (Oscar Wilde) and *Le Style, C'est L'Homme Même*, then not even Gibbon can beat the gorgeous prose and tasty tattle of anti-quarian-biographer John Aubrey (1625–1697)—veteran theatre-goers already know this from Roy Dotrice's one-man *Brief Lives*.

Starbucks' devotees will point to Aubrey's statement that *Brief Lives* could not have been written "without the modern advantage of coffee-houses, before which men knew not how to be acquainted."

Dr Ralph Kettell (1563–1643), theologian and Oxford college (sic) President, was physically overwhelming—"his gowns and surplice and hood being on, he had a terrible gigantic aspect with his sharp gray eyes," if mentally quaquaversal: "his brain was like a hasty-pudding, where there was memories, judgement, and phancy all stirred together."

Kettell would be astonished by American campus liquor restrictions, observing "the houses that had the smallest beere had the most drunkards, wherefore he always had in his college excellent beere, not better to be had in Oxon, so that we could not goe to any other place but for the worse, and we had the fewest drunkards of any house."

But he would have been at home as an administrator in the hirsute Sixties: "being irreconcilable to long haire, he would bring a paire of cizers in his muffle and woe be to them that sate on the outside of the table. He cutt Mr Radford's haire with the knife that chipps the bread on the Buttery hatch."

There is much about Haire in Aubrey, above all the mysterious conclusion to his Life of James Bovey, "red-haired men never had any kindness for him," perhaps inspiring the *rufonanitis* (irrational fear of red-bearded dwarves) invented by English humorist J.B. Morton, alias 'Beachcomber'.

Kettell's hasty-pudding brain did not impede a literary judgement surpassed in briskness only by the Ayatollah Khomeini on Mr Rushdie: "Seneca

wrote as a boare does pisse, scilicet by jirkes"—a good essay topic. By the way, how came Kettell by this pearl of zoological micturition—dangerously close observation?

An Aubrey informant swore that Kettell "scolded the best in Latin of any one that ever he knew." Alas, no specimen is given. I hope it compared with his English borbology: "when he scolded at the idle boies of his college, he used these names, viz. *Tarrarags, Blindcinques, Scobberlotchers*."

Ivor Brown (*Chosen Words*, 1955) noticed these "weird terms of abuse," venturing no explanations. There's always the chance that Kettell simply made them up, though he also called the delinquents *Turds* and *Rascals*.

The *OED* (neglecting *Blindcinques* and *Tarrarags*) gives no earlier example of *Scobberlotcher*, suggesting a connection with *Scopperloit* (1691 & 1787), meaning 'idle playtime', which Brown perhaps rightly accepts.

Still, I wonder about a link with *Scob*, Winchester School slang for 'desk'—Kettell's Oxford pullulated with public school men. The word has been modernly revived, e.g. by C. Day Lewis (*Dick Willoughby*, ch 10) and the Bournemouth *Daily Echo* (April 21, 1956)—I commend it to teachers everywhere.

Brown didn't remark that Kettell in mock self-deprecation also dubbed himself "an old blind-sincks" when reproaching the Trinity Fellows who "snort and fart at your poor President." *Blind* has been derogatory at least since Dryden's *Wild Gallant* (1663), above all in 'blind drunk'. which could here suit since *Sink* was Leys School slang for 'tippler'. Cognate possibilities include *Cinque* referring to the five senses or *Sink* as in our 'sink of iniquity.'

Is *Tarrarag* the ancestor of 'toe-rag' = low character, now ubiquitous in demotic British, though actually as old as 1875? Other contenders: *Tarry* can variously connote foul/uncultured/slow-coach/thievish—all fit a don's abuse of feckless undergraduates.

[Barry Baldwin will soon give VERBATIM readers a discussion of Religious Slang. More on and from Aubrey will also soon appear.]



## Checking Your References

Tom Bentley  
Watsonville, California

Think of your favorite book. No, better yet, go and get your favorite book, feel its heft in your hand, flip through its pages, smell its bookness. Read a passage or two to send that stream of sparks through your head, the alchemy that occurs when the written word collides with the chemicals of your consciousness. Delight is the fruit of that collision.

Of course, “Go get your favorite book” poses one of those questions that seem almost unanswerable—there are so many books, so many literary lures to ensnare us. All those ways to flip a phrase, sculpt a story: sometimes an author uses a ticking bomb to deliver a message, sometimes you can barely glimpse a beckoning finger leading into opaque gauze.

But it occurs to me that there’s a book that I return to again and again, and it’s no well-knit novel, no tightly integrated set of short stories, no self-help sermon—no, this book is the seeming source, the fount from which all books flow (well, contemporary English-language ones, at least).

Of course, I’m talking about the dictionary. But to call it simply a book is to call a Tyrannosaurus a lizard. The dictionary is an ocean, a continent, a galaxy of language, concept, and thought itself. Here are sheer worlds, word worlds; the dictionary’s comforting bulk is both sailing vessel and staid anchor for passage over the language seas.

Sometime before the age of 10, after I began to read more challenging books, I began to understand—and cringe at—the daunting vastness of our language, and the seeming futility of trying to understand the subtleties of denotation and connotation—or even the simple definitions of the diligent reader’s working vocabulary.

Words, words words—a spilling profusion of them, a fecund maternity ward of words, where older words beget new, and new have multiple conjugation cousins, a prolixity unto endless babble.

But amidst my anxiety about muddling through the meanings of so many new words (and worrying that for every two I looked up I’d forget one), I began

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to see that using the dictionary was itself a literary pleasure, and one I found more and more diverting.

At first, I had one of those fat pocket dictionaries at home, one of the Webster variants, and I well remember pouring over its pages, murmuring unfamiliar pronunciations aloud, sometimes scouting for words that seemed unusual—those excessively long, or that looked or sounded funny. (Of course, I hunted my growing list of profane terms, greatly disappointed that my little dictionary was too illiberal to display “vulgar” terms.)

But frustration with the single-word definitions of my pocket version and its missing-in-action scarcity for many words for which I sought clarification brought me to realize there is a real arena where “size matters”—going from pocket to desktop dictionary was a cosmological leap. Now my dictionary was a true tome, with words that had more gravity—literally, since the darn thing was so weighty, freighted with so many more words.

Of course, a larger lexicographic field has its perils—I began to spend more time looking up words than reading the books bearing those words. Many people express some displeasure in having to interrupt their reading for word sorties, and it’s true that turning the narrative faucet on and off again every few pages can disrupt a story’s flow, but there are definitive rewards.

You can derive so much more texture in your authorial appreciation, when you take the time to consider why your scribe might have used “flummoxed” rather than “foozled” to describe some kind of in-story contrempeps. Of course, you can be



completely catapulted off the story's track by consuming a gingerbread trail of words—one looked-up morsel often leads to another nearby word, equally as fascinating, or your looked-up word's definition itself has a word that commands sleuthing. (That's not even addressing how some definitions—often scientific ones—can send the layperson on a widening spiral of word-wanderings, since the defined terms so often use unfamiliar terms, those themselves defined by unfamiliar terms unending....)

I found myself actually eager to read the dictionary, as much for the delight in the subtleties and shadings of word meanings as for the sense of authority the dictionary conveyed. At that point, I was innocent of great lexicographic debates (do you remember that there was great controversy in the publication of *Webster's Third Unabridged Dictionary*? The dictionary was ridiculed and condemned by publications such as the *New Yorker*, *Atlantic*, and *The New York Times*, its "permissiveness" attacked for sabotaging American morals and learning. They'll probably revoke my application to the The Hoary, Ink-daubed Scholar's Club, but I have to report that I find it amusing to think of a dictionary's publication inspiring controversy.), but I've since learned of the ongoing snipings between lexicographical/grammatical prescriptivists and descriptivists, the sclerotic scholars at war.

I had looked at the reference sections of bookstores with a kind of awe—there were answers, tested and sound, and they were between these pages. But even when that callow sheen of thinking there were any language absolutes faded for me, the glories of dictionary diving did not. There are impossibly bright parrotfish of words that intrigue and inform, great coral reefs of words in every one. There's so much pleasure in finding a new word that resonates: one that you can toy with in your mind, curl aloud around your tongue for the first time, see if it looks suspect or suave in the company of other words on your printed page. And there's that slight embarrassment of testing the word in speech for the first time, the challenge to say it with practiced nonchalance.

There's an odd delight in cornering and taming a new word—or having it crawl away from memory, only to pique your interest anew when you find

it again in new reading. But sometimes the satisfying novelty of greeting (and re-greeting) the personal neologism reminds me of the Chesterton quote: "The mere brute pleasure of reading—the sort of pleasure a cow must have in grazing." Sometimes I fear that dulled sense of intake and digestion in feeding from the larder of words, the sheer mechanics of exercising the mental bowels without higher-level savor.

For a word person I have what are probably relatively few dictionaries—stacked, they are merely a yard and a half of words—but their small number compasses the variety of word compendiums, from appetizer to main course to dessert. My smallest has what look to be worm-eaten pages, a wheat-cracker shade. It's an Abbott's (one of the many companies that published what they dub a Webster's dictionary without benefit of legal association with the original Webster name or its successors.) It's less than 200 pages, and 5 inches high by 2 inches wide, and even though it's outlived the time when vests and their pockets were the rage, it could slip unobtrusively into a purse or even a large wallet (or a sock, if you wanted to carry your dictionary like a concealed weapon).

The Whitman publishing company didn't provide a copyright date on this worthy read, but it does have a Holidays Observed section among its added material in the book's rear that tells me that Armistice Day is celebrated November 11, when it's been called Veterans Day since 1954; this book's pock-marked pages tell me that it's even a more seasoned veteran than that. Those "extra materials" in the backs of dictionaries are often as diverting as the main text. Many dictionaries will offer lists of abbreviations, small citations listing biographical and geographical names, and essays that explore the history of the English language through all its permutations, but often (and more so in the older dictionaries) you'll find things like the *What to Do in Case of Accident* section in my Abbott's vest pocket, covering pressing exigencies like *Dog Bite Treatments* and *Tests of Death*: "Push pin into flesh. If dead, the hole will remain; if living, it will close." It also has a syllabication chart, a compound-word chart, and other adjuncts and byways of the word trade.





But if you're really interested in traveling off the interstates of standard dictionaries, you need something like my *New Twentieth Century Unabridged*, whose imposing bulk makes my vest-pocket edition appear to be some kind of parasitical relation. Sadly enough, the first pages of this bulky book are missing, so I can't check copyright or publication attributions, but it's World War Two provenance seems assured by the series of black and white plates that do begin the book—a glorious photographic run of US Navy Bombers and Warships followed by a spate of pictures displaying US industrial might and inge-

**Any letters I send to a Duchess of the Blood Royal should commence with “May it please your Royal Highness.”**

nuity (five panels alone that illumine Steps in the manufacture of Rayon). A lovely 30-page color *Atlas of the World* precedes the definitions, but once you hit your stride and push pass the finish line 2006 pages later at zyxomma (a dragonfly found in India), you get an additional 376 pages (free!) of useful pages like the *Pronouncing Dictionary of Greek and Latin Proper Names*—you'll never mistake *Brutus* for *Brutulus* again.

I'm very pleased to know the *3000 Words Most Often Mispronounced* (*eczema* perhaps, but why would *oral* puzzle so many tongues?), and for the copy of the Constitution and the History of Canada, but there's more spice in seeing that yes, Flaubert and Twain and Bronte made it to the list of the *World's Great Books*, but how did Francis Turner Palgrave and Pierre Louys? I can puzzle over that while I try to commit to memory, from the *Dictionary of Forms of Address*, that any letters I send to a Duchess of the Blood Royal should commence with “May it please your Royal Highness,”—one never knows when such information might save my peasant's hide.

More modern works lack some of the eccentric extensions of these older efforts, but still there are lexicographic luxuries there too: I have an unabridged Random House from 1981 with crisp illustrations of scientific instruments and interesting animals accompanying worthy definitions, and its hefty back pages include condensed versions of French-English, German-English, Italian-English and Spanish-English dictionaries (what, no

Japanese?), plus some lovely atlas pages in its own right. For me, the most whimsical entries are probably the *Major Ocean Deeps* (The Tonga Trench, at 35,341 feet, easily bests the Bouganville-New Britain Trench, at a mere 29,987). The *Noted Waterfalls of the World* chart is appreciated as well—the King George VI Falls in Western Guyana at 1,200 feet tops the King Edward VIII in Central Guyana at 840. (Major Ocean Deep researchers and aficionados of kings, I hope I haven't offended you.)

I suppose my mainstays are the *Webster's Collegiates*, Ninth and Tenth editions, one at the

ready in the office and one for the beside. The *Collegiates* are purported to be the well-thumbed standard dictionaries found on the copyeditor's desk in many publishing houses, regardless of whether the Oxford reposes in its grand hauteur on some nearby shelf. (Rather than pine for the heavy-weight Oxford 20-volume edition, I always coveted their two-volume edition that came with the magnifying glass, a Holmesian touch that appeals when sleuthing out a slippery word's worth.)

Speaking of the Oxford brings to mind the success of the recently published *The Professor and the Madman*—a book that describes in part some of the processes of putting together the initial *Oxford English Dictionary*, a project that would eventually take 70 years and 12 volumes to complete. Aside from the fascination of the book's central characters, what perked my interest was the notion that the compilers had requested well-read individuals to assemble word lists and quotations that illustrated the meanings of those words. They kept this wildly growing mass of citations in huge alphabetized cubbies—a database that sounds as charming as it was undoubtedly unruly. What gasps would our electronic means of securing and searching information have elicited from these lexicographic pioneers?

But as useful as electronic reference books are—and I use them myself—they simply don't accommodate how the sensuality of language is best brought to the fore by flipping through the pages of some weighty volume, scanning with eye and finger to find the right word, the context of let-



perform and ink and the very smell of the pages themselves. There's a gratification in just the turning of a single well-printed page—a "leaf," in all its organic glory—that is absent in the spin of electrons on screen.

Another happy note from a different dictionary of mine is that the *American Heritage* has a Usage Panel, comprising a body of language mavens, expert and literary gadabouts that range from Maya Angelou to William F. Buckley. You can see the bloodied results of their tacklings of thorny language issues under any contended word. Look at this small serving from the *who/whom* battle: With respect to spoken language, a smaller majority of the Panel recognizes that many persons consider *whom* less natural in speech than *who*, regardless of grammatical requirements. In formal written usage, *whom*, as object of a verb, is the only acceptable choice according to 87 percent of the Panel: *Whom* did you meet? In speech, however, *who* is acceptable to 66 percent.

There are entries for any such grammatical contention—I'm quite pleased to have the Panel's opinions there, because I'd be horrified to think that all these people agreed with one another. Again, that false, but engaging sense of being reassured by an authority.

In some ways though (Usage Panel contentions aside), reference works in and of themselves do present that air of gravitas, that parental depth. Their very size and solidity seem to offer firm conclusions, unveering assertions, even when we know better. Books such as these don't seem transient, seem impervious to trend and time, even though some of my secondary dictionaries, like the *Dictionary of Ideas*, or the *Dictionary of Difficult Words* possibly are only reflections of a confined period, and perhaps their ideas and their very words won't have any currency much beyond their publication date, other than as part of the historical record.

But somehow it's reassuring to see the attempts by authors and editors to capture something—language, ideas—that is always in flux. One of my favorite reference works for skimming is from Consolidated Book Publishers, the 1954 printing of *The Library of Universal Knowledge* (with its winning tagline, *The Practical Self-Educator*). In the

preface, we can find that the editors "have endeavored to bring you authoritative data on every word you are likely to use in school, office or home, and in your daily contacts with people." Bless those editors' dear hearts—if you're going to attempt the impossible, do it with gusto.

Regular feedings at the dictionary can sometimes prompt that old temptation to substitute a gaudy word where a plainclothes one will do. It's been going on a long time: consider Mark Twain giving voice to Eve in his *Eve's Diary*, "We could not know whether we used our words correctly or not; we liked large ones, and I know now that we often employed them for their sound and dignity..." It's still an apple that's hard to resist.

However, I can't think of the dictionary as anything but a stout and well-spoken friend. Samuel Johnson said, "I am not so lost in lexicography as to forget that words are the daughters of earth, and that things are the sons of heaven." Sorry Sam, but words are things, the electricity of the mind, both crippled toadstool and lacy wing, hoarse mutterings in alleys and ringing proclamations in roused halls. Fill your pillows with them at night and pluck their pretty petals in the day. And if you can't remember how to spell them correctly, you know where to look them up.

[Tom Bentley is a freelance editor and copyeditor. He has a Master of Arts in English (Creative Writing) from San Francisco State University.]



Answers to puzzle on page 32:  
 Across: 1 Tease (teas + e), 4 Skin diver (Verdis + km), 9 Ambivalence (ambience + Val), 10 Los (lost + t), 11 Hard-set (amag.), 12 Rhenium (Muir + hen), 13 Arrowhead (amag.), 16 Otter (SHOT FERried), 18 Bassi (MISS ABOUT rev.), 19 Suppliant (supplant + i), 21 Cobbler (Cole + BB + r), 24 Torpedo (amag.), 26 Fat (heath - hh), 27 Old-womanish (amag.), 28 Schilling (shilling), 29 Hence (he + C + NE).  
 Down: 1 Trachea (trace + a + h), 2 Ambergits (amag.), 3 Eaves (heaves -h), 4 Split peas (amag.), 5 Inner (winner -w), 6 Diesel oil (die + soil + el), 7 Valli (valley), 8 Resumer (re + Sumer), 14 Whirlpool (amag.), 15 Diphthong (dip + h + thong), 17 Tragedian (amag.), 18 Bickers (bikers + c), 20 Trochee (tree + o + ch), 22 Batch (Bach + t), 23 Radii (r+a+d+i+i), 25 Reach (preach - p).



## English in Italy

Martin Gani  
Como, Italy

In the morning I read in the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera* a letter by a concerned reader: "At this pace English will be the official language in Italy," he writes, "Italian will only be spoken as an idiom by the intellectuals." In the afternoon on Italian state TV RAI a debate is in course. A teenager comes up with the word *grunge*, the middle-aged presenter assumes a puzzled look and asks for a translation, and judging by the expressions on their faces, most people in the studio are also in the dark. The teenager explains, the presenter, and everyone else in the studio, nods which reads 'that's what she meant.' Later the same day, I sit in the local library of Como, northern Italy, reading a newspaper. A senior citizen sits next to me leafing through the pages of *Il Sole 24 Ore*, Italy's answer to the *Financial Times*. He looks at me and says, "Do you speak English?" "I am English" I say. "He smiles and points to a headline, he doesn't understand what *Far East* means, can I translate? These by no means are uncommon incidents in Italy where English terms have infiltrated the mass media and everyday speech to such an extent that often communication breaks down, unless of course the interlocutors have a good knowledge of English.

Unlike the French, whose crusade against English language impurities is a constant battle, the Italian authorities safeguarding the integrity of their national language hardly seem concerned. One political party, The Northern League, which aims to break away from Italy and form a separate northern state, Padania, has proposed doing away with Italian altogether. They suggest speaking dialects locally and handle inter-regional affairs and the outside world with, English. They may have a case: ISTAT, the body that compiles statistics for the Italian government, points out that only about 45% of Italians use modern Italian to speak to each other.

Support for the Padania entity as a separate state is waning, but Italians in the meantime enjoy lacing their speech with English regardless of their social or educational background. During a *briefing*, an Italian

politician may be threatened with *impeachment* due to irregularities in his *budget* figures, who may respond with *nonchalance* that he needs a bit of *relax* in the hills to consider his position (while travelling in a *ski-lift* during the *weekend*, no doubt.)

A busy mother who has a *full-time* job may need a *baby sitter part-time*, especially if she is going to a *party*. However, if she stays in to watch *TV*, the *quiz show* will be interrupted by a *spot* or two. In that case she may do some *zapping* to find a *horror film* or possibly a *thriller* which is bound to attract a large *audience*. Failing that, she may see *check-up* to catch up on the latest medical *news* and learn that *roast beef* and *hamburger* may not be good for you and round off the evening with an old *Hollywood musical*.

A *manager* working for a *computer* company may go to a *buffet* lunch with his *staff*. After a *drink* or better still a *cocktail*, he might want to discuss *copyright* problems regarding *software* or *floppy disk design* faults. After *dessert* the group may discuss who the *sponsor* will be, their *target* and consider a suitable *slogan*. Before fixing a date for the next *meeting*, the conversation could assume a lighter tone when *trekking*, *golf*, *rally*, *windsurf*, *yacht* and *basket [ball]* may get a mention.

Gone are the days when Mussolini tried to purify Italian from all foreign influence. Without success he tried to substitute *sport* by *esercizio fisico* 'physical exercise' and *bar* by *qui si beve* 'here one drinks.' His attempts to change even the names of jazz hits like *St. Louis Blues*, transformed into *tristezza di San Luigi*, where *tristezza* means 'sadness,' also failed. Nevertheless, he did score with *calcio* which replaced *soccer* successfully.

It would be unfair to say that nobody is lifting a finger to protect Italian. Speaking to the national daily *La Repubblica*, Professor Arrigo Castellani of the prestigious Crusca academy in Florence offered a series of Italian terms to replace their English counterparts currently used in Italy. They were simple literal translations of the English words but he argued they would be perfectly comprehensible to every Italian. Why can't we substitute *Big Bang* with *granbotto*, *spray* with *spruzzo*, *flash* with *lampe* and *best-seller* with *vendutissimo* 'sold really a lot'? Despite the professor's vociferous lamentations, five years on, there doesn't appear to be any takers.



The only other place where Italian is an official language is the Swiss canton of Ticino. Curiously, this Italian speaking area of some 300,000 souls is putting up more resistance to protect Italian than Italians themselves. Many English words used in Italy without hesitation are frowned upon in Ticino. For example, they use *servisol* [from *servire* 'serve' and *solo*] to replace *self-service* and the mass media usually refers to *New York* as *Nuova York*. The humble *hamburger* is called *svizzera* (literally 'Swiss'; I always thought it came from Hamburg!) *rampichino* 'little climber' outruns the mountain bike and *zapping* requires a long-winded translation. My favourite is *mangiasoldi* 'money-eater' which is keeping *slot-machine* at bay successfully. However, it is a losing battle, as the younger generation is proving to be less resistant to the modern appeal of English. One local publication, *Il Caffè*, has recently highlighted that some 90% of those attending high school today choose to study English and the rich and powerful canton of Zurich has decided to replace French with English as a compulsory subject at school. The federal government, alarmed, quickly passed a law (March 2001) to prevent English from taking over as one of Switzerland's four national languages.

In Italy the vertiginous increase of English usage in many walks of life is being fuelled not only by the TV but also by the newspapers and magazines. However, not much thought goes into whether many ordinary Italians really understand what's being written. In one newspaper headline I read, "business, export, boom, boomerang" making up half the sentence, the popular news weekly, *Panorama*, has recently printed "I have a stream," supposedly to inform Italian readers that the telephone company Telecom has acquired a share of the Pay TV (another widely used term) channel Stream. Both the information and especially the allusion to Martin Luther King's maxim proved incomprehensible to most and consequently the clever pun went largely unheeded. The innocent *baby* is extremely misused if not abused and is currently the media's favourite synonym for *underage*. Every other day we read reports of a *baby gang* that has gone on a mugging spree or that finally the number of *baby pensioners* is falling.

The anglophile Italian journalist Beppe Severgnini frequently touches on the subject of English as it is used in Italy. In his 1994 book, *Inglese* he listed around 700 English words and expressions freely circulating in Italy. In an article for the Italian travel magazine, *Touring*, he has light-heartedly pointed out how much confusion may be caused by overzealous use of English by travel companies and airline-staff: "expressions like *departure-slot*, *take-off time*, *transfer*, *card*, *snack*, *airline-food*, *tour-operator*, *group-leader*, *reception* etc. only augment the anxiety of would-be travellers." Severgnini recounts this anecdote to prove his point: he was flying from Milan to Rome, the lady sitting next to him listened to the pilot's announcement and then turned to him and said, "Are they going to repeat that in Italian?" Severgnini explained, "That was in Italian." I can just imagine the lady sheepishly looking ahead, feeling embarrassingly inadequate.

The fervour of English in Italy often leaves the TV screen and the printed pages and takes to the streets. A quick look in yellow pages in any city demonstrates that the ordinary folk want a bit of the action, numerous shops assume awfully modern-sounding English appellations. Alas, sometimes, the less than perfect knowledge of English produces rather odd-sounding business concerns. I flicked through the yellow pages in the Lake Como area where I have lived for more than 15 years. Here is a selection of what I've found: *Virtual Travel* (travel agent), *Head Vanity* (hairdresser), *Big Bag* (leatherwear shop), *Beauty Free* (cosmetics shop), *Brainstore* (computer outlet), *Sweet Service* (cake shop), *Panic* (van rental).

A lot of effort goes into attracting foreign customers, with signs in shop windows to advertise tax-free goods to overseas visitors. However, some just call themselves, "Free Shop," and one wonders how they stay in business. Occasionally, the English used is not incomprehensible, but brings a smile to an English speaker's lips. One dry cleaners in Rome put this sign in the shop window: "Drop your clothes here and spend the afternoon having a good time."

[*Martin Gani's most recent piece was 'Colourful Language' in Vol. XXVII/2.*]



## Easy as ABC?

### *A Brief Guide to the Italian Letter-Writing Tradition*

Roberta Kedzierski  
Milan, Italy

The alphabet. Easy as ABC? Think so? Try this one for size. I went to the dentist here in Milan, and the receptionist struggled to find my records.

Why? She knows my last name and the records are in alpha order of last name. So what's the problem? Quite a big one, actually. She does not know where *K* comes in the alphabet. Why would she? *K* does not exist in Italian, and so there is no reason for her to know where it *would* come if it *did* exist. She was taught the Italian alphabet: a 21-letter version that also eschews *J*, *W*, *X*, and *Y*.

Visits to the dentist may never be the same again, though. The word on the street is that Italian children are soon to be taught those extra five letters that the rest of us (English-speakers) are privy to. They are, after all, used in foreign words that have been imported into Italian.

There's the World Wide Web for a start. Plus Italian dictionaries clearly run to all 26 of them. And the computer keyboard includes them, albeit in different places. (In case you were wondering, *QWERTY* is spelled *QZERTY* in Italian.)

In Italian, the names of companies that are usually known by their initials are often treated as if they were words in their own right. Kind of acronyms by default, if you like. One example is the Italian state broadcasting corporation (*Radio Audizione Italiana*) or *RAI*. Which might *rile* you until you get used to it. But it is OK, because the three letters contain a vowel and could conceivably be a word.

What can get confusing is when English acronyms are adopted into Italian. The same approach is used, of course. As in the case of the "cheea" which is, of course, none other than the *CIA*.

When there is at least one initial, the idea is that you do the best you can. Thus the now-defunct Italian Communist Party (*Partito Comunista Italiano*) or *PCI* was pronounced—using an English approximation—as "pee-cheee".

Sometimes the combination of letters does not work at all, of course, especially when they are all consonants. Take the company that manufactures for Giorgio Armani: *GFT*. Here one just says the letters. No comprehension problems, because these are pronounced pretty much the same in both languages, even though the *F* becomes "effe".

Momentary—and even prolonged—panic can ensue when there are the differences in pronunciation between English and Italian, however. In English, the name of that well-known courier company *DHL* is pronounced "Dee Aitch El" while, in Italian, it is "Dee acca elle". When you mention *IBM* to Italians and they have no idea what you mean, don't infer that globalization is not as rampant as you feared. It's just that, to the Italian eye, these letters spell "ee bee emme".

Once you know, nothing could be easier. Indeed, easy as *abbicci*.

[*Roberta Kedzierski is a freelance journalist specializing in cross-cultural issues.*]

## EPISTOLA

The letter to *VERBATIM* from Elizabeth R. Cardman [Spring 2002] asked why *The New York Times* says salaries have changed "to \$10 from \$8.50 an hour" instead of naturally saying "from \$8.50 to \$10," and your editor's note said you had no idea.

To you from me, this is the journalist's way of putting the newsy number or fact first, to highlight it. Everyone presumably knew the old salary level, but the news flash is the increased level—\$10 an hour. I can't vouch for the *Times's* rationale, but I do know that this procedure of putting the to before the from has long been *The Wall Street Journal's* style requirement, at least in presenting data.

When I joined the *Journal's* copydesk in 1960, the concept that a company's dividend, say, rose to 45 cents from 40 cents, rather than the other way around, seemed awkward indeed. But it soon became second nature, and 42 years later it seems absolutely the natural order of things. (Did you even notice that I referred above to the letter to *VERBATIM* from Ms. Cardman?)

Paul R. Martin

Editor of *The Wall Street Journal Guide to Business Style and Usage* (2002, Simon & Schuster)  
New York



## HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain.

Unnecessary words. You won't find any in VERBATIM, of course—except in inverted commas—but you'll find them everywhere else. Sometimes, when VERBATIM readers find them, they send them to me, care of the magazine. Dave Byrd, for instance, of Arlington VA, wants to know what the *all* is for when TV channels trail a show as *all new*. He wonders if it's "in opposition to partly new, fractionally old, musty, or refreshed."

A long-running, and much repeated, British television show recently put the words "All New" in front of the title of its latest episode to alert viewers to the fact that it wasn't yet another "another chance to see." I'm still waiting to discover how they'll bill the programme when they do repeat it.

Several people have suggested that old favourite, the *live audience*—as opposed, perhaps, to the crowd who might turn out for *An Audience with Count Dracula*. Steve Finz, of The Sea Ranch, California, heard a TV news anchor say, "after receiving a compliment from a colleague," that the feeling was "very much mutual." Steve adds that he found this remark *extremely unique*.

A local travel agent's shop is offering customers the chance to *pre-book* their winter holidays. But if you book something, don't you necessarily do it "pre"? You can't *post-book*, can you? "Good morning, I'd like to visit Spain last week. I know it's short notice, but do you have anything available?"

As we've discussed previously, *challenging* has become a ubiquitous euphemism—though, as if often the way with such terms, it's not all that easy to define precisely what it's a euphemism *for*. I heard a criminologist on the radio the other day discussing a man who had been sent on a course while in prison to "look at his challenging behaviour." What sort of behaviour? Well, he was in prison for wife-beating.

*Up to* is another phrase which must be added to the list of those which are losing their meaning. It ought to mean, surely, an upper limit, but increasingly is used as a redundant intensifier, as in the

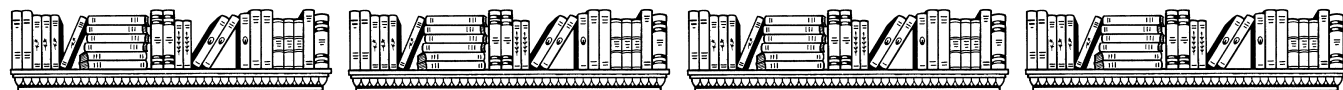
magazine advertisement for a chiminea which asks "Why pay up to and over £300 for similar models?"

Returning to an old favourite, I find this headline in *The Daily Telegraph*: "Immigrants should learn English, say ethnic Britons." You might suppose that an ethnic Briton is one who was here before the Romans arrived, but regular readers will be unsurprised to hear that *ethnic* is being used here to mean black or Asian. The fact that everyone on earth is *ethnic* is one which modern journalists find impossible to cope with.

Having discussed *incredible* in the last issue, I was incredibly pleased to come across an example which almost seemed to have been designed with *Horribile Dictu* in mind, so bold and precise is its juxtaposition of contradictory ideas. In a recruitment leaflet for a pressure group, a supporter is quoted as saying: "Friends of the Earth are doing things I can believe in—incredible things."

An instalment of this column wouldn't be the same without some egregious gibberish (in inverted commas, I mean). When an accountant employed by the commission of the European Union engaged in an act of whistleblowing—warning that the EU's accounting systems were open to fraud and error—a commission spokesman said "We will be putting her in another function, to put it mildly." If he'd put it bluntly, it turns out, he would have said "She's been fired."

illustration to come from  
Ivan



# CLASSICAL BLATHER

## Uncle Fud<sup>1</sup>

Nick Humez

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The pulse of linguists and anthropologist alike quickens whenever an informant's talk turns to kinship terms; for if the family is the basic unit of society, the names we have to tell us who's who on the kinship chart are the vital indicators of who we live with and whom we must avoid, whom we may marry and whom we must not even kiss, where we go (or at least can be made to feel guilty if we don't) to celebrate major holidays such as Thanksgiving, all the way down to who gets which joint of the pig when we have a barbecue.<sup>2</sup> The kinship chart often also suggests where to go in the family for a loan to help us embark on our first venture into economic maturity, and it may also say things about whose wealth we may hope to inherit when its incumbent possessor dies: One often hears of a *rich uncle*<sup>3</sup> who will leave us his estate, but never of a *\*rich cousin* in this connection.

When America's right wing refers to "family values," the sort of family it envisions consists of a *father*, a *mother*, and their assorted children, who refer to both their father's and mother's parents as their *grandfathers* and *grandmothers*, and their parents' sisters and brothers on either side as *aunts* and *uncles*,<sup>4</sup> the children of whom are one's *first cousins*. Sisters and brothers of one's grandparents are *great-aunts* and *great-uncles*, whose grandchildren are one's *second cousins*; first cousins of one's parents or one's children are *first cousins once removed*, a first cousin of a grandparent or grandchild being a *first cousin twice removed*, and so on. As a general rule, it appears that the more nuclear and *neolocal*—that is, living neither with nor close to the families of mother (*matrilocal*) or father (*patrilocal*) after marriage—a family is, the closer to oneself on the kinship chart is the boundary between "close relatives" and those who while technically kin may not lay claim (at least with any predictable degree of success) to prerogatives based on kinship.

The model of kinship described above is, however, by no means universal, but rather only one of

three general patterns; anthropologists call this sort of family organization *Eskimo* kinship because ethnographers early in the last century noted it among the Inuit peoples of the Arctic Circle. Elsewhere in the world, however, there are societies whose kinship model is described as either *Hawaiian* or *Omaha*.<sup>5</sup> In the former, all members of your generation sharing common ancestry are your siblings, and thus off limits for marriage; in the latter, the gender of your parent and parent's siblings count heavily in determining not merely who is eligible as a mate but who is actually the preferred choice—e.g., a girl may assume as a matter of course that when she grows up she will marry her father's sister's son—or, alternately, that this boy of all boys is the one she *mustn't* marry, even if he were the last man on earth. (Anthropologists refer to the children of opposite-sex siblings of one's parents as one's *cross-cousins*.)

Even within American society, patterns of kinship may vary across lines of religion or ethnicity, and terminology may not always carry quite the same implications depending on who is using it. A homely example may be found in the bilingual greeting-card racks of stores in cities such as New York in which there is a substantial Hispanic population: Where the English-language section has cards for boyfriend/girlfriend, the closest the Spanish one comes will be cards for *novio/novia*—that is, "fiancé(e)," since the underlying assumption in that American subculture is that if you are going steady you intend, at least in theory, some day to marry.<sup>6</sup> In African-American communities, to a greater extent than white (Protestant) ones, there may be a far more robust presence of *fictive kin*—those who are related to you but in a more remote way than the term you use for them in everyday speech, from "Aunt" So-and-so, who is actually your first cousin once removed, to "Mama" who is actually your grandmother (and the *de facto* head of your extended matrilineal family).

Then there are *godparents*, who become formal fictive kin from the commitment they make to the church to raise you in the faith if anything happens to your real parents. Among Catholic Americans (as elsewhere in the world where Roman Catholicism is the prevalent religion) godparents will play a very



important role in a child's growing years as parent surrogates who are expected to be one's sponsors and supporters (Mario Puzo's *Godfather* novels naturally spring to mind here). The children of one's godparents, moreover, come to be considered close enough to actual siblings that marriage to them, or even seriously dating, is unthinkable.

Catholic canon law is explicit about whom one can and cannot marry; first cousins are out. Some states outlaw first-cousin marriages as well, ostensibly on eugenic grounds, but others permit them; while neither the law nor the Church forbids relations with second cousins, although these may still, in close-knit extended families, be considered close enough to kin as to fall into that gray area of *kissin' cousins*—that is, those distant enough to kiss, but probably too close to marry (as least without censure from some family members who would have wished for a more exogamous match for either party or for both).

We speak of those who share at least some of our genes (second cousins included) as our *blood relatives*; those who don't, but became kin by virtue of a wedding, are called *affines*. Affinal does not necessarily imply affinity—we share a microculture with our own household growing up to which even the folks next door can be only partly privy, and newlyweds may be baffled by hearing the isolated punchlines of favorite family jokes repeated, to much laughter, at gatherings of their new in-laws until someone fills them in on the stories themselves.<sup>7</sup> It may be no coincidence that a man may often enjoy a joking relationship<sup>8</sup> with his brother-in-law, a socially-sanctioned way of easing potential tension between them centered ultimately on the woman through whom they are related; and mother-in-law jokes are, of course, a staple of our comedic repertoire right down to the present day, as they have been for centuries.

Jewish law originally required that if a man died, his wife was under a sacred obligation to marry his brother, in order to preserve his lineage; this custom is known to anthropologists as the *levirate* (from Latin *levir*, 'husband's brother'), the corresponding custom for men, "that annual blister/Marriage to deceased wife's sister" (as W. S. Gilbert calls it in *Iolanthe; or, the Peer and the Peri*), being called the *sororate* (from Latin *soror*,

'sister'). In the Catholic Church of the early Renaissance, sleeping with your brother's wife was considered incest, however, and it was on these grounds that Henry VIII sought unsuccessfully to have his sonless marriage to Catharine of Aragon annulled because she had, after all, originally been betrothed to his older brother, Arthur (the original heir apparent to the throne, who unfortunately fell off a horse and died, sticking Henry with the crown and the political marriage that went with it). It was the failure of this argument to sway the ecclesiastic courts that ultimately led to Henry's divorcing Catharine anyway, marrying Ann Boleyn, establishing the Church of England, and inaugurating two generations of hostile relations between England and the Tudors' Spanish affines.

The *-fine* suffix of *affine* is derived from Latin *finis*, 'limit' (to which is prefixed a variant of the preposition *ad*, 'towards'); not so the *-fine* (Gaelic for "family, tribe") of such terms as *geilfine*, defined by the *Century Dictionary* as "one of the groups of five, being four males besides the head of family, into which the ancient Irish clans or families were organized."<sup>9</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* cites various examples of this grouping, which could take a number of forms, as shown by these *OED* citations from scholars of Irish history and law: "in the direct line, . . . the father, and the son, and the grandson, and the great grandson, and the great great grandson to the fifth generation" (W. N. Hancock, 1869), "a father and four sons who are not in the same degree" (H. S. Maine, 1875), "the father and the four sons [who] formed a family group of five households" (C. G. Walpole, 1882), or a "system in which four groups of persons, all nearly related to each other, held four adjacent tracts of land as a sort of common property" (P. W. Joyce, 1903). Here the connection between kinship and real estate is very clear: family is who you divvy up your stuff with, as well as who you count on to take care of your children if you die.

Yet, finally, there may be those we choose to treat as family even though no kin at all: the "Auntie" who is not our real aunt but a college chum of our grandmother's, the "Uncle" who is simply the father of our parents' childhood neighbors and playfellows. Like godparents, these fictive kin can stand in a very spe-





cial relationship to us, such that we may say that “They weren’t really our aunt and uncle, but all of us always acted as though they were;” but unlike godparents’ children, we may harbor no reticence about courting theirs. At the far end of the fictive-kin spectrum are those whom we choose to treat as kindly as kin through friendship alone. Such people might be called *voluntary relatives*:<sup>10</sup> the people we truly love for their own sakes and not because the kinship chart says we have to be nice to them; but these are also most likely to be the folks whom our children may come to call fictive “Aunt” and “Uncle” a generation down the family tree.



Errata/corrigenda

Our winter 2002 “Certain Somebodies” (VERBATIM XXVII:1, pp. 20-23) elicited a flurry of comments as well. Tony Percy writes that in addition to Dismal Desmond the Oxford English Dictionary lists “Dismal Jimmy, and also Moaning Minnie. Wet-leg is to be found (with a famous citation from D. H. Lawrence), but it does not offer Willy Wet-leg as such....And what about Hooray Henry—are you familiar with him...? Does Doubting Thomas count?” (For the last, see John 20:26-29.) My fellow columnist Mat Coward contributes another *John*: “In London, traditionally (or perhaps proverbially), male strangers are addressed as ‘John’. In a busy pub, the barman might catch your eye: ‘You being served, John?’ In practice, Londoners use usually use ‘Mate’ like the rest of us in these islands, but John lingers on.”<sup>11</sup> And California law-school professor Steven R. Finz writes that Sephardic Jews speaking the dialect of Spanish called Ladino accord those “entitled to special respect, such as the family matriarch or patriarch,...the Frenchified titles of *M’syoo* or *Madame*. So a young boy who acts too big for his breeches may be called or referred to as *M’syoo Guevo*, translated roughly as ‘Sir Egg.’” Finz further informs us that “The subject of many jokes among Sephardics is a fictional character named *Djo-ha’*, who thinks he is smart, but obviously is not. When a know-it-all pontificates, he may be chided with the remark *Avlo’ Djo-ha’*, which means ‘Djo-ha’ has spoken.’”

Notes

1 The title of a song made popular by Dorothy Shay (1921-78), “The Park Avenue Hillbillie” (sic. She spelled it that way, she explained to newspaper reporters, because she was a woman.) Born Dorothy Sims, in Jacksonville, Florida, Shay took as her stage name the surname of her benefactor, Betty Shay, head of auditions at NBC, who persuaded her to go on the USO circuit, after which she spent a year with Morton Gould’s orchestra before joining Spike Jones and his City Slickers in 1946. According to Robert W. Dana, who covered entertainment for the *New York World Telegram & Sun* during the 1940s and 1950s, “It was quite by accident that Miss Shay acquired the persona of a hillbilly. One night after going through her entire repertoire and the customers still clamoring for more, she stood in front of the microphone, bathed in light and wearing a Dior creation, struck an awkward pose of a mountain girl and sang the lyrics of an obscure number called ‘Uncle Fud.’ The sophisticated audience loved it and night after night thereafter kept calling for ‘that hillbilly song’ ([www.bigbandsandbignames.com/shay.html](http://www.bigbandsandbignames.com/shay.html)). Shay expanded on the hillbilly vein with such numbers as “Feudin’ and Fightin’” and “I’ve Been to Hollywood.” She turned to film with Abbott and Costello in *Comin’ Round the Mountain* (1951) and later made regular appearances as a character actress in film and in the TV series *The Waltons* during the 1970s. “Uncle Fud” explored the complicated kinship relations popularly believed to be prevalent among intermarried Appalachian folk; one bridge of the song states that “I up and married my brother-in-law;/I didn’t have to ask my Paw:/Maw said, ‘Shucks, he ain’t yer paw—/He’s yer Uncle Fud.’” The character of “Uncle Fud” was a staple of wartime hillbilly humor, having been created for radio in the 1930s by comedian Bob Burns, and is thought to be the source of the surname for the Warner Brothers “Egghead” character introduced in 1937 and first given the name Elmer Fudd in a 1938 cartoon entitled *A Feud There Was*, his signature voice being supplied by Arthur Q. Bryan (review at [www.throttle-box.com/Content/1027.shtml](http://www.throttle-box.com/Content/1027.shtml)).

2 Indeed, foodways themselves are considered by some social scientists to be the mainspring of what makes a society tick. Thus Raymond Firth states that “Consideration of what people eat leads to the examination of the economic reciprocity between husband and wife, methods of wider cooperation in work, systems of land tenure, ritual offerings to ancestors and gods for fertility. From here one is led to family history, to political relations, especially those of chieftainship...to bilateral kin relations...to comparative wealth of kinship groups, in relation to population restriction on the one hand and social friction on the other” (*We, the Tikopia*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, p.104).

3 The paradigmatic rich uncle of the cartoon world is, of course, Disney’s Scrooge McDuck. The kinship chart of this particular clan is fuzzy (downy?) on some points;



though we are led to believe that Donald Duck is presumably Scrooge's nephew, and Donald in turn the uncle of the ducklings Huey, Dewey, and Louie (and patently, if often petulantly, their guardian though himself a bachelor), the parents of Huey, Dewey, and Louie are almost never alluded to. In the 1950s, however, the late Carl Barks, principal artist for the series during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, drew a family tree to help keep the quacking clan's relationships straight in his own mind. According to this document, Scrooge was the brother of Hortense McDuck, whose children included Donald and Thelma (originally named Della in the first appearance of the three nephews in the Donald Duck Sunday page of Oct. 17, 1937). Thelma was the mother of Huey, Dewey and Louie; Barks never gave her husband's name but his successor artist Don Rosa, in "Donald Duck's Family Tree," published in 1993, suggests that Daisy Duck was this nameless father's sister, which explains why the three young ducks refer to her sometimes as Aunt Daisy but also why she is a permissible object of Donald's bumbling attempts at courtship. For a comprehensive guide to the characters in the Donald Duck comics, see <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/palace/439/characters/characters.html>; for a synopsis of Barks's duck family tree, see <http://stp.ling.uu.se/~starback/dcm1/chars/cb-tree.html>.

4 English kinship terms, most of them Germanic, go back to Proto-Indo-European, and many most have cognates in the Romance languages, suggesting that this general schema of family organization has been with us for a very long time indeed. It should be noted, however, that Latin *pater*—as in *paterfamilias*, 'male head of household'—was as much a social construction as a genetic one; indeed, in the late Roman republic and Empire, when adoptions became common in order to allow the transmission of property and continued worship of deities particular to individual families thinned out by civil wars and proscriptions, a distinction was drawn between *pater*—'(legal) father'—and *genitor*—'guy who had you by your mom.'

5 This classification is lucidly expounded by Michael Alan Park in his *Introducing Anthropology: An Integrated Approach* (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Co., 2000), whose view of family is "cultural ties modeled on biological ones" (p. 196). I am indebted to anthropologist M. Buchanan (author of "Identity and Language in the SM Scene," VERBATIM XXIV:3 [Summer 1999], pp. 5-8) for this reference (and, indeed, for much of the information in paragraphs 4-6 above, plus the second definition of family in paragraph 9), as well as for the canny observation that in Louisiana, where there was a substantial free population of mixed African-French descent prior to the end of the Civil War, the ability to reckon kinship to quite some distance on one's family tree helped to sort out questions of racial identity, skin color or facial features being unreliable guides to whether one should be considered "black" or "white."

6 Unless, of course, you're a bounder or a wanton, in which case you're presumably not worth a card, or at least not one in your own language. Though material culture may at times give expression to the cutting edge of a society and the shifts in its ultimate concerns, it can also show the inherent conservatism of language and the conceptual baggage carried by terms dealing with kinship, religion, or (in the case of many greeting cards) both.

7 This point was colorfully brought home to me by Jack Hemenway, a retired blacksmith and Episcopal priest who for many years ran Green Head Forge in Stonington, Maine, with his goldsmith wife Harriet. When he first met his new in-laws, he was mystified by their catchphrase "Just enough to win the turkey" until someone told him the rest of the joke (one of many in a common genre whose unifying theme is a penile length competition).

8 In some societies—for example, the Crows and Cheyennes on America's Great Plains—the joking relationship between brothers-in-law is a formal category with a distinct set of explicit licenses and taboos; see Karl N. Llewellyn and E. Adamson Hoebel, *The Cheyenne Way* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), pp. 96 and 266. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, in one of his several ethnographic studies of the Nuer people of the Sudan, describes the joking relationships between paternal cousins, to whom a man is bound "by ties of loyalty which do not derive from, or depend on, either mutual affection or common affection for a third person, . . . and which generally necessitate close contact in situations likely sometimes to engender conflict." The anthropologist astutely observes that "It is perhaps this contradiction between social bonds and personal feelings which gives rise to the joking or teasing relationship." Among the Nuer this often takes the form of "the custom called *leng*, conventionalized exchange of obscenities" (which Evans-Pritchard admiringly describes as "the most extravagant that I have ever heard") in which the two men "abuse each other in turn. . . . The exchange often develops into a contest to see which of the two can continue the longest without repeating himself. As Nuer are practised and have a fertile imagination, the duel may be kept up for several minutes before one of the men cannot think of an obscenity he has not already used and thus loses the duel, which is closed by shouts of laughter on both sides" (*Kinship and Marriage Among the Nuer*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951, pp. 159-60).

9 The *Century Dictionary* (Vol. III, page 2477) goes on to say that the "next group, second in rank to it for purposes of inheritance, was termed the *deirbhfine*, or true family; the third, the *iarfine* or after-family; the fourth, the *indfine* or end-family." All of these were groups of five people. (Why five, one might wonder?) Under *indfine* (Vol. IV, page 3057) the *Century* adds a tantalizing quote from the same H. S. Maine source mentioned in the *OED*: "The eldest member of the *Iarfine* moved into the *Indfine*, and the



eldest member of the Indfine passed out of the organization altogether.” Go figure.

10 In our own family, for example, there was “Auntie Helen” Schubarth, a classmate of our mother’s mother at Framingham Normal, who chaperoned us on our first interstate train trip at the age of six from Boston to Bangor on one of the last runs of the Boston and Maine’s *Flying Yankee*, and “Uncle Charles” Haynes, Sr., a lifelong friend of our maternal grandfather, whose son and namesake we mentioned in our last column. We first encountered the term Voluntary Relatives in the early 1990s as the name of a Downeast string band, and an album released by it, under the nominal leadership of dulcimer artist Barbara Truex.

11 This is very probably the same John addressed in the short but monumentally silly Monty Python song which begins “Do what, John? Do what, John? Come again, do what?” on *Monty Python’s Contractual Obligation Album*, released in the U.S. in 1980 as Arista Records AL9536.

12 Although a version of this is commonly ascribed to Will Rogers (1879-1935), this saying apparently originated, in the form quoted, as a proverb of Josh Billings (the pseudonym of Henry Wheeler Saw, 1818-1885), dated by *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* to 1874. In a footnote, Bartlett’s also mentions a similar sentiment expressed in Part IV of Nietzsche’s *Thus Spake Zarathustra*: “Better know nothing than half-know many things.” Never stopped us.



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Living organ donors outpace dead donors [*headline from the The Journal News (Westchester County, New York) April 23, 2002. Submitted by Stephen E. Hirschberg, MD. Elmsford, NY, who writes “This is consistent with the medical aphorism “Death is God’s way of telling you to slow down.”*]

“I remember I once went on a rafting trip down the Rio Grande with the man who was then my husband and a friend of ours.” [*From the New York Times, May 6, 2002. Submitted by Harold Zeckel, Lexington, MA, who remarks: “I take it the writer and her husband are no longer friends.”*]



## EPISTOLAE

Emerson’s article on the letter *B* [VERBATIM XXVII/2, Spring 2002] was entertaining as well as educational. However, in his gusto to create an interesting case for *B*, he may have surpassed some limits in relating the shape of a letter to certain body parts. For instance, *oo* might better serve for certain parts of a man’s groin; *m* and/or *w* could be equally satisfactory substitutes for *B* in depicting breasts, buttocks, etc. *P* sounds like an exploding *B* and might represent some body parts (particularly the male sex organs) in a more assertive or even aggressive manner. While Mr. Emerson makes some valid and interesting observations, he ought not to overlook contributions made by the other 25 letters of the alphabet.

Speaking of *A* as well as *C–Z*, it would be inviting to consider if there are any mathematical relationships between the target words and their letter group. In other words, Mr. Emerson might have identified 250 words or phrases beginning with *B*. What percentage do those words represent of all the *B* words in his dictionary. Using *B* as a control group, we can perform the same test with *P* or *M* (which has a pretty sexy feel to it when it is attenuated) and determine a percentage of words in the group which follow the same category criteria.

Only after careful scientific appraisal will we know how unique *B* is in identifying body-part words. If nobody else wishes to take up the banner, I will make an attempt myself some day. Right now, I have the head of a pin and some angels to account for. However, *B* letters are next on my list.

David A. Smith  
Encino, CA

[Re: Jessy Randall’s “Anything But Pregnant,” VERBATIM XXVII/2, Spring 2002] In *The Dialogues* of Alfred North Whitehead, the philosopher observed that illegitimate children born in rural England in the early to mid-nineteenth century were often called *Mistykes*. In the pre-WWII south, a banker’s child might be referred to as “interest on a small deposit.”

John H. Felts, M.D.  
Winston-Salem, NC



## Words: The Stealth Weapon of War

Howard Richler  
Montreal, Canada

“We have no assassination policy. We have suicide bombers, and suicide bombers cannot be threatened by death. The only way to stop them is to intercept those who send them.” (Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, August 1, 2001)

As much as any weapon, the virtual war between the Israelis and the Palestinians is a battle fought with carefully selected words. But whereas Shimon Peres avoids the use of the word *assassination*, Hugh Rawson in *Euphemism and Other Doubletalk* lists the word as a euphemism. According to Rawson, the word connotes “a murder or upper-class hit; the five syllable word rationalizes the deed while sliding around it with soft-sounding sibilants.”

Euphemisms quickly become sullied, which is why *assassination* doesn't strike many people as a “soft-sounding sibilant” anymore. *Interception* is much preferred by many Israeli government officials as it implies a defensive move to stop a terrorist act already in progress, rather than an aggressive attack.

Other terms employed by Israeli spokespeople include *active self-defense*, *actions to prevent the killing of Jews* and *liquidation*. The word *liquidation* was first used in Russia, after the revolution, to refer to the large-scale killing of those accused of obstructing the regime. It comes from the Russian word *likvidovat*, ‘to wind up.’ The euphemism was translated into English by 1924 but in recent years has been avoided by many who view it more as a Mafia code word for execution than as a euphemism.

Palestinians also select their battle words very carefully. When a suicide bombing occurs and innocent civilians are killed, Palestinians celebrate the *martyr* who carried out the operation on behalf of the *resistance movement*. Of course, at all costs, Palestinians avoid the word *terrorist*. Much preferred are the terms *militant* and *activist*, which evokes the image of a person partaking in a restaurant sit-in rather than blowing up a pizzeria in a crowded metropolitan area.

The US military also has its preferred euphemisms. One doesn't *kill an enemy*, one *services the target*. Targets aren't *destroyed*, they're *degraded*; sometimes they're not even hit by bombs but by *force packages*. The term *surgical strike* implies that a guided missile doesn't obliterate anything but the intended target. Rarely is the surgery this precise. And of course one doesn't *attack first*, but instead launches a *pre-emptive counterattack*.

One of the most absurd euphemisms is the oxymoronic *friendly fire*. This euphemism refers to being killed shot by someone on your own side, for in any armed conflict there are casualties through genuine mistakes, accidents and panic. But (as President George W. Bush likes to say), “make no mistake about it,” the “fire” is not friendly when it hits you, nor is it any consolation when someone is maimed or killed by a friend. In the Gulf War, hundreds of Americans were injured or killed by friendly fire; in the war in Vietnam, the toll was in the thousands.

The use of euphemisms in war and the political arena is hardly new. As long ago as 250 B.C., the Macedonian commander Antigonus Gonatus refused to admit that he was retreating and instead described his manoeuvre as a *strategic movement to the rear*. Nowadays, some spin doctors refer to retreat as *exfiltration*. In the first century B.C., the Roman historian Tacitus, cognizant of the political manipulation of words, observed, “They make a wilderness and call it peace.”

More recently, when George Washington established his first Cabinet, he set up a *War Department*, which later became the *Navy Department*, and then the *Defense Department* in 1947. Interestingly, the Defense Department was established just as the Cold War was heating up.

Another relatively recent euphemism is *casualty*. Until a century ago, the word referred to an accident or a loss, as in *casualty insurance* and didn't refer to people. Winston Churchill is credited with turning *casualty* the word into a euphemism. Referring to the Boer War in 1900, he said, “In spite of more than a hundred casualties, the advance never checked for an instance.”

Euphemisms for war are not only as old as time, they are also universal; they have been used to



describe wars all over the globe, In Czarist Russia, the detachments sent to punish striking workers were called *pacifying detachments*. In 19th century Australia, the word *disperse* was employed to refer to the killing of aboriginals. The Americans in Vietnam referred to the bombing of villages and the defoliation of crops by the Ninth Division with an operation called the *Accelerated Pacification Campaign*. Another associated term is *neutralization*. In 1984 the CIA distributed a manual to Contra leaders in Nicaragua that said “it is possible to neutralize carefully selected and planned targets, such as court judges, police and state security officials. For psychological purposes, it is necessary to take extreme precautions, and it is absolutely necessary to gather together the population affected, so that they will take part in the act, and formulate accusations against the oppressor.” In the 1970s, the government of Granada kept the opposition in line by its *Volunteers for the Defense of Fundamental Liberties*. This was an improvement and a lot more politically correct than its previous name—*Night Ambush Squad*. Small wonder that when Ronald Reagan sent troops into Grenada in 1983 he called the invasion a *rescue mission*.

It’s interesting to watch an armed conflict and see what new terms emerge. Before United States committed to the invasion of Yugoslavia, Madeline Albright referred to the potential battlefield at one point by saying “we have no plans to have American ground forces in a *non-permissive environment*.”

But Americans can’t hold a candle to the Brits in the art of euphemizing. During the war against Yugoslavia, a bomb launched from a British plane was intended for an ammunition dump. It went off target and struck an apartment building. British Air Commodore David Wilby said that “our bomb appeared to be *seduced off the target*.”

One of the most famous modern military euphemisms was offered by British Prime Minister Anthony Eden during the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis. He said, “We are not at war with Egypt. We are in a state of armed conflict.” Some people have excused him by explaining that in diplomatese being *at war* involves a formal declaration of war, which was not the case. But Eden was addressing the general public, so his statement must be considered an obfuscating euphemism.

A particularly jaded euphemism of recent years is the term *bush clearing*, which was used by the Hutu majority in Rwanda as a euphemism for the slaughter of countless Tutsis. On the flip side, in Burundi, where the Tutsis were the majority and the Hutus the minority, the Tutsi-dominated government described temporary settlements where they placed the displaced Hutu population not as *concentration camps* but as *regroupment camps*. One of my favorite euphemisms was used recently by Commander Simon Trinidad of the rebel group FARC in Colombia.: “We don’t kidnap, we *retain in order to obtain resources*.”

The Nazis were ghoulishly proficient in their use of euphemisms. The intent of Nazi concentration camps was not to “concentrate” people in a restricted area but rather to kill them. The verb *process* was used in a 1941 report which read “97,000 were processed in vans.” This processing was accomplished by exhaust fumes The Nazis also used the phrase *look after* to refer to sending someone to a death camp, as well as the ultimate euphemism, *final solution*.

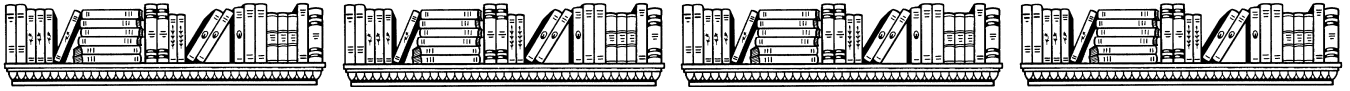
As in previous wars, the war in Afghanistan has brought the term *collateral damage* to the foreground. This is the preferred Pentagon phrase to refer to damage to civilians and their property as a result of military action. This “damage,” however, often results in the deaths of innocent civilians.

The earliest citation is from a July 24, 1972 *New York Times* article about U.S. raids in Vietnam: “‘With “smart bombs” you can assure yourself that there will be no collateral damage,’ one officer said. ‘In other words, they hit the target and not the civilians.’” Throughout the 1970s, the term was most often used to refer to nuclear warfare; cruise missiles and neutron bombs were thought to minimize collateral damage in the event of nuclear war.

While sticks and stones and assorted weaponry will break your bones, make no mistake about it—names and words can definitely hurt you.

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## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

*The Encyclopedia of Civil War Usage: An Illustrated Compendium of the Everyday Language of Soldiers and Civilians*, by Webb Garrison with Cheryl Garrison. 274 pp. Cumberland House, 2001. ISBN: 1-58182-280-4 US\$18.95.

There isn't much wrong with this book that isn't covered by its title. True, it's an *Encyclopedia and Illustrated Compendium* of persons, places, and things related to the U.S. Civil War. But despite its claims that it "explores standard, slang, and substitute [sic] words and phrases in the vocabulary of both Billy Yank and Johnny Reb," it deals little with *Usage*, and even less with the *Everyday Language of Soldiers and Civilians*.

We do learn about horses. Not just Gen. Robert E. Lee's famous grey, Traveller, and the Southern partisan John S. Mosby's high-stepping Coquette, but Ulysses S. Grant's tall Cincinnati and George B. McClellan's black Burns—to mention only two that Union generals rode. One imagines an "everyday" exchange between two combatants as they dodged enemy bullets. "Say, ain't that Gen. Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson's favorite mount Little Sorrel?" "No, I do believe it's Capt. Andrew Hickenlooper's personal mount Grey Eagle."

The linguistic shortfall derives from the fact that the Garrisons' claimed "thirty years of research and writing" only draws on reference books, and fails to tap manuscript and archival sources wherein actual speech might be reflected. The Garrisons—Webb Garrison is advertised as the author of more than 50 books on the Civil War—also have trouble with time-lines. *Dyer's Compendium*, which they make an entry, could not have been on the everyday lips of even civilians, since the massive reference book wasn't published until 1908. They provide a long entry for a 1857 volume by Hinton R. Helper (who wasn't one) entitled *The Impending Crisis*. But they ignore such Civil War harbingers as the Dred Scott Decision, John Brown's Raid (though there's an entry for Harpers Ferry rifle), and "Bleeding Kansas." They define *antebellum* as "the period between 1812 and 1860", conveniently ignoring the unpleasantness of the War of 1812, during which the British captured Detroit and

burned down Washington. Perhaps "1812" is a typo for "1814"—like "1964", which is the date the Garrisons give for the establishment of Andersonville, the notorious Confederate internment camp. Barbarous mistreatment of Union prisoners should not be laid at Lyndon B. Johnson's door.

Nicknames of generals and politicians we have aplenty, as well as names for ships and guns, some of which, like the Lady Polk, a 10-inch piece of naval ordnance, were named for officers' wives. But for every headword that might be peculiar to the Civil War, like *oil of gladness* and *oh-be-joyful*, both terms for home-brew, there are half a dozen standard headwords: *pilot*, *gunboat*, *stretcher*, *habeas corpus*. Such lemma are either defined briefly, as in *abaft*: "N. Toward the stern of a ship; synonymous with AFT", or they become mere excuses to shoehorn in Civil War content. Thus we get *punch through*: "To create a hole through the armor of MONITORS and other IRONCLADS." *Ammo*, a "universal abbreviation of ammunition", leads to a clump of statistics about the war's volume of small arms, cartridges, percussion caps, friction primers, and fuses.

Since the book tries to have it both ways as an encyclopedia (people, places, things) and dictionary (usage, language), the style of exposition is inconsistent. *Boiled rye* is given as "Derisive reference to Southern efforts to brew coffee from substitutes such as parched rye," and *Bold Dragoon* as "A reference to Confederate Gen. J.E.B. 'Jeb' Stuart". Then an entry later, *bolt* is defined (though with no usage label) as "A RIFLE or artillery projectile."

The scholarship is sometimes lazy (the etymology for *bootleg*, an artillery shell, is "unknown"), and the phrasing clumsy. Concerning the USS J.J. Crittenden, a "captured hulk" that the U.S. Navy unwisely bought, we're told that "Although the purchase contract was honored, the ship never sailed. Unfit to serve any other useful function, it was sunk as an obstruction." (Of course, it was also sunk as a sailing vessel.) *Mule*, variously defined as "a MUSKET" or "tough salted meat", gets the primary definition: "A hybrid animal between a horse and a donkey, known for both its strength and its temper." Mules, we must take it, are only found between horses and donkeys, no doubt awkward for all the animals concerned.



As a Canadian, hence always eager to accumulate historical grudges against the United States, I was fascinated to read that a *crimp* was “A BOUNTY BROKER who profitted [sic] by supplying Union forces with recruits who had serious disabilities or criminal records. Numerous crimps operated in Canada, seizing underage boys or getting men drunk and carting them to the nearest recruiting station.” In 1861 the U.S. navy boarded a British mail packet called *The Trent* in neutral waters and seized two Confederate diplomatic agents, which almost started a war with Great Britain. Possibly at the same time the ruthless Yankees were seizing underage or intoxicated Canucks for shipment across the border. Still, it’s news to me.

There ought to be a book that does for words what the great photographer Matthew Brady did pictorially for the weariness and slaughter of the War Between the States. The *Encyclopedia of Civil War Usage* isn’t it. The 13-page “Civil War” section of Stuart Berg Flexner’s *I Hear America Talking: An Illustrated Treasury of American Words and Phrases* holds more of verbal interest than this entire book.

—Fraser Sutherland

## EPISTOLA

Whoa! I came to a hard stop when I hit that word in Fraser Sutherland's review of *Why We Curse...* [XXVII/1, Winter 2002] I don't know how many times I've played the Harry Belafonte version of *Unchained Melody*, but Harry never sang "Whoa". I'm sure I heard other versions, too, and I never heard "Whoa". The lyrics to *Unchained Melody* start "Oh, my love...."

Yes, I know there's at least one Web site that says "Whoa", but it's wrong. Remember: "There's a lot of information available on the Internet ... and some of it's even true."

Songwriters get no respect. Here VERBATIM writes about the Righteous Brothers' hit —without giving credit to lyricist Hy Zaret. This is especially egregious when the lyrics are the whole point of the reference to the song.

Ben Cohen  
Niles, IL

## INTER ALIA

[Recently, on the American Name Society email list, the question was asked “Is there a particular city or town name which appears in all 50 states?” This answer from Roger L. Payne of the US Geographical Survey, is reprinted by permission.]

Regarding places (cities and towns) that occur in every State, our records indicate that there are NONE. We would like to know also if it is otherwise. According to the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), the nation’s official geographic names repository, and available at <http://geonames.usgs.gov>, in this category, the most commonly occurring by State is Riverside with 117 occurrences (189 occurrences in combination with other words) in 46 States. This name, according to our records, and still subject to our ongoing data compilation, does not exist in Alaska, Hawaii, Louisiana, or Oklahoma. If this is not so, we should like to know otherwise. Second in this category is Centerville with 110 occurrences (127 with other words) in 44 States, and apparently not occurring in Oregon (there is one historical place no longer in existence), New Hampshire, North Dakota, Wyoming, Alaska, and Hawaii. By the way, there are 12 occurrences of this name using the spelling Centreville. Springfield is most often proclaimed by these sorts of contests as occurring in every State. We have record of only 63 occurrences (85 with other words) in 33 States (34 including the U.S. Virgin Islands).

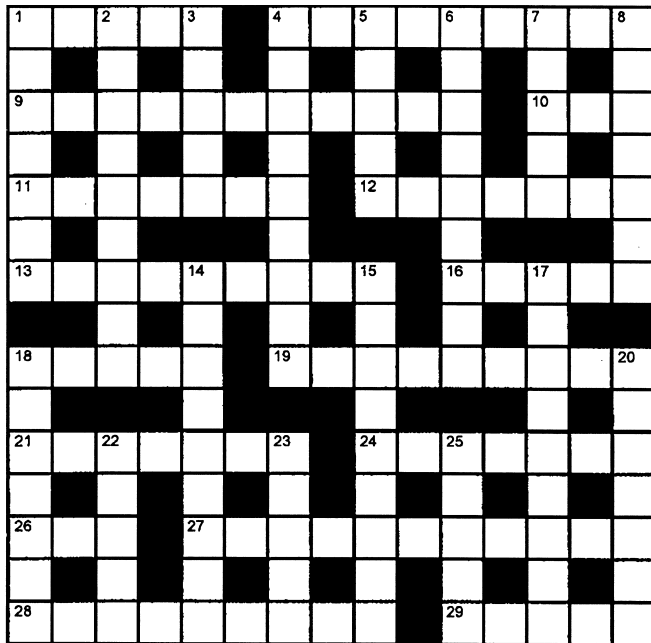
The most common according to volume of occurrence is Midway at 212 (255 with other words, and in 39 States), but with all sorts of provisions. There is no official definition for city, town, etc., and our category of populated place includes in addition to incorporated places (only 18% of communities nationwide), unincorporated places (such as Reston, Virginia) as well as neighborhoods and housing subdivisions. Secondly, the number changes because we are still in dynamic compilation, and 2 years ago Fairview, now at 202 (293 with other words, and in 39 States and the District of Columbia) was number 1.

[If you have evidence of these names in other states, please send them to VERBATIM, and we’ll send them to the GNIS.]



## Cryptic Crossword Number 90

Composed by Pamela Wylder



### Across

- 1 Beverages beginning to excite kid (5)  
 4 Verdi's upset about relative, ocean explorer (4,5)  
 9 Kilmer enters environment with mixed feelings (11)  
 10 The Spanish met defeat, for the most part (3)  
 11 Fixed broken threads (4-3)  
 12 Ecologist returns carrying chicken-it's elementary? (7)  
 13 Had raw ore processed for part of missile (9)  
 16 Shot terrified hiding animal (5)  
 18 Some hiss about returning singers (5)  
 19 Beseeking one to invade, overthrow (9)  
 21 Shoemaker shot, captured by old king-right? (7)  
 24 Projectile demolished pet door (7)  
 26 Dig in unlimited tract of wasteland (3)  
 27 Showman, idol turning anile (3-8)  
 28 Reportedly pretending to be an innocent bystander for money (9)  
 29 From here he leads 100 into New England (5)

## MISCELLANEA

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### Down

- 1 Sketch A includes middle of diaphragm and part of the respiratory system (7)  
 2 Smear brig, sails with waxy substance (9)  
 3 Raises all but the top part of roof (5)  
 4 Soup ingredient? Surprisingly, it's apples (5,4)  
 5 Taking the lead from Victor is essential (5)  
 6 Pass dirt containing railway fuel (6,3)  
 7 It's said Glen is singer who performed Grease (5)  
 8 One who carries on about ancient region (7)  
 14 Eddy or Will, hop out of line (9)  
 15 Among others, I drop hot sandal (9)  
 17 Playwright upset at reading (9)  
 18 Quarrels with those who pedal around center of Clacton (7)  
 20 Poetic feature: tree outside old church (7)  
 22 Composer maintains tenor's collection (5)  
 23 More than one spoke, initially recounting a discussion in Italian (5)  
 25 Come to give a sermon after commencement (5)