



Translating the Language of Birds

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Many hobbyists who look for wild birds call themselves *birders* rather than *birdwatchers*. In addition to being able to identify species by plumage, skilled birders tend to be familiar with bird songs and calls. Vocalizations sometimes provide the only reliable information for identifying a species in the field.

Birders who are not musically gifted (including me) face the difficult task of learning and remembering vocalizations for hundreds of species. The challenge is daunting because a particular species may utter multiple territorial songs, contact calls and regional dialects. An effective learning technique is to translate the vocalizations of a species into familiar words or phrases. Just as many people cannot remember lyrics to popular songs without singing the melody, many birders cannot remember bird songs and calls without thinking of mnemonic phrases. Because of the difficulty of translating sounds into words, birdsong mnemonics can feature vastly different (and creative) interpretations of the same song.

Some birds are named for their vocalizations. One of the most familiar is the cock, named after the first syllable of its song. The common cuckoo of Eurasia and Africa is named for the song used in countless clocks. (The song of the roadrunner, one of America's indigenous cuckoos, is a similar *coo coo coo coo coo coo*, not *meep meep* as in the cartoons). Among the many species named for their vocalizations are the *boobook owl*, *chachalaca*, *chickadee*, *chiffchaff*, *chowchilla*, *curlew*, *dickcissel*, *hoopoe*, *kiskadee*, *pauraque*, *pipit*, *towhee*, *veery*, *whip-poor-will*, *willet*, and *wompoo pigeon*.

Ornithologists classify birds and decide on scientific names for species, while ornithology organizations decide on accepted common names. Non-ornithologists often get to know species from vocal-

izations and use songs or calls to create colloquial names. The willet, which was named for its song, also is known by the colloquial names *bill-willie*, *pill-willet*, *pill-will-willet*, and *will-willet*. In Australia, a colloquial name for the magpie-lark is *peewit*.

Many bird names describe a vocalization rather than represent the actual sound. Examples include the *laughing gull*, *whistling kite*, *piping plover*, *whooping crane*, *chipping sparrow*, *plaintive cuckoo*, *melodious blackbird*, *musician wren*, *snoring rail*, and *dark chanting goshawk*. *Cisticolas*, which are small, brownish songbirds found mostly in Africa, are accomplished vocalists. The adjectives used in their species names include *bubbling*, *chattering*, *chirping*, *churring*, *croaking*, *piping*, *rattling*, *siffling*, *singing*, *tinkling*, *tink-tink*, *trilling*, *wailing*, *whistling*, and *zitting*.

The Northern mockingbird mocks and mimics the songs of other species, as reflected in its scientific name, *Mimus polyglottos*. *Babblers* are named for their babbling, *trillers* for their trilling, *whistlers* for their whistling, *screamers* for their screaming and *chats* for their chattering. The mourning dove is named for its mournful cooing, but the mourning warbler is named for its funereal plumage. The song of the Eastern whipbird resembles a whipcrack. Bellbirds and the bell miner sound like ringing bells. The trumpeter swan trumpets. The cicadabird sounds like a cicada. The saw-whet owl sounds like a saw being sharpened. The call of the gray catbird in America sounds like a mewling cat, while the unrelated catbirds in Australia sound like alley cats in heat. Some nouns of assemblage are based on bird vocalizations, such as a *chattering* of *choughs* and a *murmuration* of *starlings*.

Not all bird names based on vocalizations accurately reflect how the birds sound. Warblers in



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plus a crossword puzzle, some SICS! and EPISTOLAE

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America generally do not warble. They were named for their physical similarity to unrelated European warblers that warble. Some birds are named for a vocalization of a species in the same genus or family, even though they themselves do not make such vocalizations. Not all cuckoos say *coo-coo*, just as not all birds called *kingfishers* hunt for fish. A flycatcher called the Eastern wood-pewee says *pee-a-wee*. But in Central America, the closely related greater pewee sings *Jo-se Ma-RI-a*. The Eastern phoebe, another flycatcher, spits out its *phoe-be* song. But the song of the closely related black phoebe sounds more like *pee-wee*. In Australia, the olive-backed oriole sings *or-i-ole*, but this is a coincidence that has nothing to do with the bird's name.

The translation of a song into words may be influenced by the location and culture of those listening. The white-throated sparrow is common in many parts of North America. A familiar interpretation of its song is *Old Sam Peabody Peabody Peabody*. In Canada, the interpretation is more likely to be *Oh Sweet Canada Canada Canada*. The song of the short-billed pigeon, found in Central and South America, sounds like *who-COOKS-for-YOU* to people speaking English and *dos TON-tos SON* ('they are two fools') to Spanish speakers. *Dos tontos son* is the Spanish name for the species.

The use of familiar words or phrases in some mnemonics involves a sacrifice of accuracy so that birders can more easily remember the songs. David Sibley's *North American Bird Guide* portrays one of the songs of the black-throated green warbler as *zo000 zeee zo zo zeet*. Richard Walton's recordings of North American birdsongs describe it as *trees, trees, murmuring trees*. Sibley's description is more accurate but harder to remember. Walton describes the slow song of the black-throated blue warbler as *beer beer beer beeee*. Some birders portray it as *I'm so la-zy*. The latter, while less precise, helps birders to remember more easily the slow, lazy quality of the song.

The *beer* uttered by the black-throated blue warbler is one of many food and drink references in birdsong. The olive-sided flycatcher, which is in the same genus as the pewees, says *Quick, free beer!* or *Quick, three beers!* The song of the white-eyed vireo is sometimes portrayed as *Pick up the beer*

check quick. For the nonalcohol crowd, there are the Eastern towhee, who tells us *Drink your tea*; the Carolina wren, who loudly sings *teakettle, teakettle, teakettle*; and the song sparrow, whose complex song Richard Walton describes as *Maids maids maids pick up the tea kettle kettle kettle*. The flight call of the American goldfinch sometimes is portrayed as *potato chip*. The barred owl hoots *Madame, who cooks for you?* One guide to North American birds describes the song of the Acadian flycatcher as "an explosive *peet-suh*" (perhaps topped with hearts of napalm).

In Southern Queensland, naturalist Glen Threlfo helped me to learn the songs of three common Australian "walking" birds in the rainforest. He said the brown pigeon asks *Didja walk? Didja walk?* The Wonga pigeon says *walk walk walk walk walk*. And the loud but elusive noisy pitta screams *walk to work*. Richard Walton uses a similar teaching technique to Threlfo's; he groups similar vocalizations and explains the differences. The American robin has the clear pleasant song *cheerily, cheer-up, cheerily*. Walton describes the scarlet tanager as sounding like "a robin with a sore throat." The tanager's song has a similar length and rhythm to the robin's but sounds burry.

A familiar characterization of birdsong is *tweet*, as reflected in the cartoon character Tweety Pie and the lyrics to the song "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street." Few little birdies actually say *tweet tweet tweet*. One that does is the prothonotary warbler, which became a topic of controversy during the Alger Hiss trial in the 1950s. Its song sounds like *tweet tweet tweet tweet tweet*. The yellow warbler's song comes close with *sweet sweet sweet a little more sweet*.

Bird vocalizations sometimes include a familiar name. The Northern bobwhite was named for its two-note *bob-white* call. In Costa Rica, I heard the three-note call of the spotted-bellied bobwhite that sounds like *rob-ert-white*. The California quail screams *Chicago*, while the long-tailed manakin says *Toledo*. The chestnut-sided warbler says *see see see see Miss Beech-er*. The gray-cheeked fulveta sometimes says *sweet sweet Georgie*. The white-crowned sparrow is sad that *Poor JoJo missed his bus*. If JoJo missed a school bus, he might be



chastised by his teacher, who is in the ovenbird's song: *teacher*, *TEACHER*, *TEACHER*. The song starts softly and becomes loud.

Some bird vocalizations sound like the melodies of popular songs. In Australia, part of the song of the grey butcherbird sounds like the melody portion of *Little Green Apples* with the lyrics "And if that's not lovin' me . . ." The three-note song of the spotted pardalote sounds like the first three notes of XTC's song *Melt the Guns* (although some Australians claim the bird is saying *tough titty*).

Birds sometimes seem to be talking to birders. The red-eyed vireo says *Here I am. Where are you?*; the statement and question reflect the two distinct parts of the song. The song of Australia's green catbird is the ungrammatical *Heeere I aaaare*. The Swainson's warbler says *look look look look at me*. The black-breasted wood quail asks *Where are you? Where are you?* while the common yellowthroat asks *Which is it? Which is it? Which is it?* A rufous-browed peppershrike I heard in Costa Rica seemed to say *I'M-A-RU-FOUS-PEP-PER-SHRIKE*.

The Skutch and Stiles guide to Costa Rican birds describes the song of the male stripe-breasted wren as *who's to SEE/me, little me/who's to SEE/me, little me*. The slashes represent places where the male slows down to allow the female to join in a duet. Similarly, the male riverside wren sings *victory/we-do-it/victory/we-do-it*. To celebrate, the king rail sometimes says *hip hip hurrah!* In Australia, the grey whistler sometimes says *TIC TAC TOE*, while the MacLeay's honeyeater screams *a free TV*.

Some birds make comments that sound negative or antisocial. The common potoo whines *POO-or me, O, O, O, O*. The inca dove says *no hope*. The brown quail complains *not faair, not faair*, while the marbled wood-quail is a killjoy, saying *burst the bubble, burst the bubble*. In Australia, the little friarbird sometimes protests *Ow, ow, don't pull my hair-air*. The helmeted friarbird says *poor devil*, while America's red-headed woodpecker says *queer, queer*. In tropical America, the bright-rumped attila says *beat-it, beat-it, beat-it naow*. Australia's little wattlebird threatens *fetch the gun, fetch the gun*. The late Graham Pizzey, author of

the most comprehensive field guide of Australian birds, portrays the song of the crested shrike-tit as *knock at the door—whack!* Once when I was staying at Graham's home, a Willie-wagtail sang outside my bedroom window around 3 A.M. and seemed to say *I'm trying to an-NOY you*. For pure negativity, one cannot beat the fish crow, who likes to say *uh-uh*.

When words fail, birders resort to analogous sounds to describe vocalizations. The gang-gang cockatoo and Montezuma oropendola sound like creaking hinges. The black-and-white warbler sounds like a squeaky wheel, while the field sparrow sounds like a ping-pong ball bouncing on a table. The pine siskin makes a sound resembling a needle dragged across a phonograph record, while the rufous whistler can sound like a stuck record. The female emu booms like the drum at a college football game. The sooty owl sounds like a falling bomb. The spangled drongo sounds like an alarm clock buzzer. The sharp-tailed sparrow sounds like a piece of hot iron plunged into cold water. Brown-headed nuthatches sound like squeeze toys, while red-breasted nuthatches sound like toy trumpets. Masked plovers sometimes sound like someone dragging a shovel across concrete. The clapper rail can sound like an old car engine, while the malleefowl sounds like an accelerating sports car with a manual transmission. The eclectus parrot makes a sound like an old-fashioned car air-horn. The alarm call of noisy miners sounds like a beeping car alarm. Eastern kingbirds sound like electrical sparks. Pizzey compares the song of the pheasant coucal to water glugging from a bottle and the song of the white-tailed nightjar to an axe repeatedly striking a hollow log.

Some vocalizations resemble sounds made by people and other animals. The call of the Australian raven sounds like Phyllis Diller's laugh. European starlings make a wolf whistle. The shining bronze-cuckoo sounds like someone whistling to a dog, while the rufous piha sounds like a whistle to beckon a person. The barking owl barks like a dog. Wood ducks sound like a puppy whose foot has been trod on. The Henslow sparrow makes a weak hiccup. Bush stone-curlews wail like banshees. Pizzey likens the song of Tasmania's yellow wattlebird to coughing and vomiting. The trumpet manucode



sometimes sounds like he is clearing phlegm from his throat. In Costa Rica, I heard a group of prong-billed barbets whose *ha-ha* call in unison sounded like a Hollywood laugh track. Some penguins bray like asses. A group of Australian magpies can sound like an orchestra tuning up. The nightingale wren sounds like he is randomly blowing a reed instrument, while the flight call of the cotton pygmy-goose sounds like someone playing a kazoo. The rainbow bee-eater sounds like the frequent whistles blown by referees during Olympic waterpolo matches. The tawny frogmouth utters a monotonous *oom oom oom . . .*, resembling a Buddhist chant. A call of the marbled frogmouth sounds like the *woo woo woo woo* noises made by Curly of the Three Stooges.

One cannot begin to understand a Beethoven symphony by reading a pile of music books and not listening to the actual work. Likewise, one cannot learn about bird vocalizations by reading mnemonics and not hearing the actual birds. Shelley wrote in his famous poem about a skylark, “I have never heard praise of love or wine that panted forth a flood of rapture so divine.” I doubt Shelley would have been so effusive had he merely read about the skylark’s song in the new Collins guide to European birds: “A variety of calls, all rather dry rolling sounds, e.g., ‘prreet’, ‘prrylh’, ‘prrit-üt,’ and ‘prreeh-e.’ Sometimes, often when anxious, a more piping ‘p(r)eeh.’”

Birds use their language to communicate information about territory, sexual availability, threats, and other aspects of their existence. In *The Minds of Birds*, Alexander Skutch theorizes that birds have an aesthetic sense and may sing for the delight of hearing themselves. The language of birds is marvelously complex and can be both beautiful and entertaining. I’m glad I have learned something about this language so that I can eavesdrop on so many remarkable conversations.

[William Young is a writer who lives in Arlington, Virginia. His other interests include anagrams and limericks.]



War Is Hell, Naming Them Ain’t Too Easy Either

Kathleen E. Miller
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When historians sit down to write about a war, they must consider the political and economic causes of the conflict, but rarely what to call it. The major wars of the United States of America have come down to us already named. The name that stuck, however, was never the only option. Our seven major wars, fought between 1775 and 1975, fall somewhat neatly into three naming categories based on power, purpose, and politics.

“To the victor belong the spoils” (originally a statement about political good-ole’-boy favoritism) is a “philosophy” of power that gives us what I’ll call the *Winner’s Pick* category (“spoils system” is already taken.) In these cases history and revisionism give us the victor’s view of the conflict—name and all. The second category is one of *official designation* based on purpose. This involves the wars on such a grand scale that the entire world seemed involved. The third is an example of *political euphemism*, where something that wasn’t “officially” a war has one popular name reflecting what it was, and a government name reflecting what it wasn’t.

The Winner’s Pick

On April 19, 1775, shots rang out at the battles of Lexington and Concord, sparking what most of our history books call the *Revolutionary War*. But that depended on what side you were on. Fought between the British and the colonies of America for six years, it is usually portrayed as a righteous fight of an oppressed people against the errors of their king. It has also, however, rather irreverently been referred to as the *Rebellion against the King* by a “bunch of slave-owning aristocratic white males who didn’t want to pay their taxes.” Several colonies declared themselves to be in open *rebellion*. John Hancock, president of the Continental Congress, worried about a *civil war* when he had Congress declare the “necessity of taking up arms” (7. 6. 1775). King George III continued the *rebellion* motif (8. 23. 1775), while the *loyalists* (mostly



Canadians, and a surprisingly large contingent of the populations of New York and New Jersey), clung to the *Civil War* idea. Most of the arguing was over what it was, rather than what to call it, but as more and more colonists jumped on the kick-out-the-king bandwagon, *The Revolution* and our *Revolutionary War* began to hold more sway. The colonials triumphed at the Battle of Yorktown, prompting Cornwallis's surrender on October 19, 1781. During the waning years of the war and the few years after, history books sported titles about the *Present War*, the *American War*, and the *American Revolution*.

The "United States" had been in existence since the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776; and, now that the war was over, it was truly a free and independent country. Years after the last battle, however, another name for the conflict would appear—the *War for Independence*—a title that makes it clearly more an overthrow of an unwanted government than an insurrection or rebellion. Had the United States lost, our history books would have covered the *Rebellion against the King* or the *American Insurrection*, but victory and revisionism make it a glorious *Revolution*—loyalists be damned.

The next war that fits in the *Winner's Pick* category has no fewer than forty-six appellations. It was our bloodiest war (per capita), claiming the lives of more than 200,000 Americans as they fought one another from 1861 to 1865. Commonly referred to as the *Civil War*, the reasons behind it, and what to call it, are still a bone of contention to many. The official record calls it the *War of the Rebellion*. Contemporary headlines in northern papers read simply, *The Rebellion*. The victor, the Army of the United States of America (the North, the Union Army, the Yankees) fought for their commander in chief, Abraham Lincoln. It was his politics and election in 1860 that prompted many southerners to fear that their way of life was at risk. In December 1860 South Carolina left the union with its Ordinance of Secession. In February 1861 the states that followed South Carolina's example formed their own government—the Confederate States of America—with Jefferson Davis at its head. The *War of Secession* started that April.

Many of the names for it come from the defeated (the Confederates, the Rebels, the Southrons). Clinging to the idea that they were wronged, they bandied designations about that made the North look like "bad guys." They called it the *War of Northern Aggression*, the *Yankee Invasion*, the *War for Southern Freedom*, the *War for States Rights*, *Mr. Lincoln's War*, and the *War To Suppress Yankee Arrogance*. Less inflammatory but still partisan titles included: the *War of the North and South*, the *War for The Union*, the *War for Nationality*, and the *War for Constitutional Liberty*. As it was technically a rebellion of a "new" government against the established one, it also carried the appellation of the *War for Independence*, often with the qualification, the *Second War for Independence* (the second war to carry that name, as we shall later see.)

Poetic terms also cover the *Civil War*. It has been called the *Uncivil War*, the *Brother's War*, the *Old Confederate War*, and my personal favorite, the *Late Unpleasantness*. The war ended when Gen. Robert E. Lee capitulated to Ulysses S. Grant at the courthouse at Appomattox on April 9, 1865. The reunion of the North and the South allows such designations as the *War Between the States* and the *American Civil War*. A contemporary poet (Walt Whitman) wrote in 1872 that "*The Four Years' War* is over—and in the peaceful, strong, exciting, fresh occasions of to-day, and of the future, that strange, sad war is hurrying even now to be forgotten." He was wrong; "even now" there are pockets of the South where Confederate flags still wave, the topic is still heatedly debated, and people speak simply of The War.

Official Designation

Gavrilo Princip, of the radical Serbian group "Black Hand," shot Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the Austrian throne, on June 28, 1914, sparking a chain of events that would lead to the *European War*. Eventually the Allies (mostly the Big Four—England, France, Italy, and, starting in 1917, the United States) battled the Central Powers—Germany, Austria, Turkey, Hungary, and Bulgaria. Other countries too numerous to name here were involved as well, even Japan, giving Asia representation in the fight and, therefore, allowing the war to gain the appellation the World War.



Another contemporary name was the *Great War* (which was also a designation of the *French Revolution* and *Napoleonic Wars*).

Descriptive phrases involving the purpose of the war rather than an encompassing name ranged from the *War To End All Wars* (possibly from the title of a book by H.G. Wells), the *War To Make the World Safe for Democracy* (a phrase of Woodrow Wilson), the *War against Militarism*, the *War for the Cause of Civilization*, and the *War for the Freedom of Europe*. It ended in 1918, and as early as that it was referred to as the *First World War*, mostly by cynics who rightly guessed that it wouldn't be the last. In 1919, Woodrow Wilson addressed his secretary of war, Newton Baker, with a letter suggesting the war be called the *World War*. The War Department concurred, and on October 7, 1919, directed: "The war against the Central Powers of Europe . . . will hereafter be designated in all official communications and publications as "The World War.""

The cynics were proved right when the *Second World War* broke out with Hitler's invasion of Poland in September 1939. As early as 1919, the *Manchester Guardian* wrote of *World War 2*. Now it was upon us; a *Second European War*. The Axis, Germany, Italy, and Japan were at war with the Allies, Britain, and France, with the United States joining after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941. As usual, names were thrown around. Thousands of letters arrived on FDR's desk suggesting such names as the *War of: Deliverance, Democracy, Freedom, Individual Liberty, Liberty, the Ages and the People*. The president himself preferred the *War for Survival*, which he spoke of at a press conference in 1942. The newspapers chimed in with *Hitler's War*, the *Nazi War*, the *Nutsy War*, and the *Little War That Wasn't There*. Austrian Prime Minister John Curtin thought the *People's War* best fit the situation in which the world found itself.

The war came to its end when the Japanese surrendered to Gen. Douglas MacArthur, supreme commander of the Allied Powers, on the deck of the battleship *Missouri* on September 2, 1945. By mid-September an official name was declared. The secretary of war, Henry Stimson, and the secretary of the navy, James Forrestal, would send a letter to Harry Truman quoting Wilson's 1919 letter to

Light


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## The Quarterly of Light Verse

LIMITATIONS

Since parted from youth  
The painful truth  
Is: I can't  
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Baker. The secretaries wrote that "as a matter of simplicity and to insure uniform terminology, it is recommended that 'World War II' be the officially designated name for the present war." Truman approved the suggestion on September 11, 1945. But eventually, "as a matter of simplicity," both the world wars would be shortened to WW.

### *Political Euphemism*

Our next two "wars" had to do with the country and political system that would be our arch-nemesis for the next fifty years: the Soviet Union and its policy of global communism. Incidentally, this "battle" between the United States and the U.S.S.R. has a name as well. It is called the *Cold War*, a 1945 phrase attributed to both George Orwell (*OED*) and Herbert Baynard Swope, to differentiate what was going on with Russia from a "shooting war," namely, taunting and threats. (*Cold War II*, more than likely coined in the mid-70s by Richard Whalen, referred to the period directly after détente, when things started to heat up again.)

From 1950 to 1953, U.S. troops were stationed in South Korea, in an attempt to halt the Northern Korean Communist regime (lead by Kim Il Sung,



installed by the U.S.S.R.) from swallowing the entire country. Calling it war officially was never an option. For the Korean conflict to be a war, it would have required a “Declaration of War” from the Congress of the United States. That never occurred, so we call it the *Korean Conflict* or simply, *Korea*.

War, according to the *American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, is “a state of open, armed, often prolonged conflict,” which this—three years and over 33,000 KIAs—certainly was. The American populace considered it such and it was, almost instantaneously, referred to as the *Korean War*. Another name for it is the *Forgotten War* (again, not the only one with this title), a reflection of the veterans of the conflict feeling that more importance was bestowed on the soldiers of other wars than they were awarded, and a phrase that was uttered as early as 1952 by Eisenhower himself, “I hope and believe that our fighting men in Korea shall never harbor the thought that they might be fighting a forgotten war.”

At the exact same time that the United States was engaging in a war in Korea, the president was sending “advisors” into another Asian country—*French Indochina*. If anything falls into the definition of war it is this—*Vietnam* (twenty-five years long, claiming 47,410 U.S. lives). Again, as in *Korea*, it was an American attempt to contain the spread of communism (following the “containment policy” of George F. Kennan). Ho Chi Minh declared independence from the colonial power of France in 1945. In an ironic twist, he first came to the United States for support; basing his declaration largely on Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence. But, when support was not garnered, he eventually turned to the Soviet Union. The United States stuck with France, and upon the French defeat at the Battle of Dienbienphu in 1954, America firmly sealed its support against a communist takeover of Vietnam. The early stages consisted of nothing more than a steady influx of “advisors.” A ten-year imbroglio ensued.

In August 1964, two U.S. ships—the *Maddox* and the *Turner Joy*—came under fire in the Tonkin Gulf and the decisions, Washington and President Johnson made from that point forward drove the United States into *America’s Longest War*. Again,

U.S. troops were dedicated to a fight that was never officially declared a war—this “quagmire”—the *Vietnam Conflict*.

### **Well, What about . . .**

I spoke earlier of “seven major wars” and how they “fall somewhat neatly” into three categories. I have given you only six. That’s because this war doesn’t fit “neatly” anywhere. Fought between the United States and Britain between 1811 and 1815, its name does not reflect who won, why the war took place, or any “official” title. the *War of 1812* started with a naval battle off the coast of Virginia on May 16, 1811, and “ended” with the Battle of New Orleans (1. 6. 1815), fought a mere fifteen days after the treaty ending the war was signed.

For the British, it was simply an extension of the *Napoleonic Wars*. For the United States, however, it went through several designations before we settled on a name. It has been called the *War of Faulty Communications* and the *Unnecessary War*, large because the final battle occurred after the war was over and the beginning hung on a communiqué received too late. Opponents of the war (mainly New Englanders) called it *Mr. Madison’s War*; blaming it on the president’s politics, or the *War of Iniquity*. Contemporarily it was also called the *Second War for Independence*, making the *Civil War’s* claim that it was the second a little late. Like *Korea*, it wasn’t a popular or played-up war and also carries the same appellation—the *Forgotten War*. The most frequent term, though, as late as 1938, when the “Last Surviving Widow of the War of 1812” (Carolyn Poulder King, aged 89) died, was the *Second War with England*.

### **And now**

Since the end of Vietnam in 1975, we have engaged in several “conflicts”: the *Gulf War*, the *Wars* in *Nicaragua*, *Somalia*, and *Bosnia*, and now *Afghanistan*—the *War against Terror*. Time will tell what names history has in store for these.

[*Kathleen E. Miller holds a master’s degree in military history from the George Washington University. She is the research assistant for William Safire’s “On Language” column in the New York Times Magazine and lives in Alexandria, Virginia.*]





## Everything You Always Wanted To Know about Pig Latin But Were Afraid To Ask

Melanie Falcon  
Burnaby, British Columbia

‘Oday ouya easkspay Igpay Atlinay’?

Thousands of people all over the world do—speak Pig Latin, that is. Pig Latin is a constructed or “play,” language that has been popular for years among children—and adults.

It’s generally used as a secret language in an effort to hide the actual message being relayed from anyone not in the know. Children use it to communicate in their own private language and many adults, who once spoke Pig Latin as children, revert to it when they want to discuss something in front of their offspring that they don’t want them to understand.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines Pig Latin as “an invented language formed by systematic distortion of the source language.”

As in most constructed languages the basis of Pig Latin is formed by transposing the letter order of a word and adding a meaningless syllable. When translating words that begin with a consonant, the first letter is dropped and an “ay” is added at the end: the word *frog* becomes *ogfray*, *good* becomes *oodgay*, and so on. Words that begin with a vowel are transformed by adding “way” to the end and *out* translates into *outway*.

There is an infinite variety of play or “little” languages, but Pig Latin is considered the most popu-

lar and is in general use, in one form or another, throughout the world. Some of the other common “little” languages include “oppish,” “eggy peggy” and “ong.”

“Oppish” appears to be the most complex of the three languages as “op” is added after each consonant in a word, making a simple word such as *umbrella* into a tongue-twisting *umophbopropeloplpa*. “Eggy peggy” requires inserting “egg” at the beginning of a word: *Well* become *weggell*, and *this* changes into *theggis*. In “ong” you just add “ong” after every syllable.

But how and when did the whole Pig Latin craze get started? There are many theories about its origins, but no one seems to have a definitive answer.

Some scholars speculate that this form of constructed language has been around since the First World War, or even earlier, under a variety of names, including *Dog Latin* and *Hog Latin*.

*The Cat’s Elbow and Other Secret Languages* (Alvin Schwartz, Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1985) cites the play language as “so easy to learn even a pig could learn it, hence: *Pig Latin*.”

One humorous, and anonymous, web site description credits the origins of Pig Latin to have been: “discovered by a hunter in the Amazon jungle. He was wounded by a poisonous snake. Almost dead, a tribe of pigmy warriors found him and nurtured him back to health. But the hunter was not ready to go back to civilization: he stayed and worked and learned how to live in peace with animals. During his five years with the pigmy tribe he learned to speak their language. He went back to the States and, by habit, started talking the pigme (sic) language.”

However obscure its origin, documented references to the use of Pig Latin in North America date back as early as the 1920s. Author Raymond Chandler is credited with the first use of the term in written form in a 1937 edition of *Dime Detective Magazine*, where he has one of his characters announcing “Don’t give me any of that pig Latin.” In 1956 author Beverly Cleary referred to Pig Latin in a story in *Fifteen* magazine.

Over the years, more and more references cropped up: World War II musician/comedian Spike Jones included a Pig Latin version of “Jingle

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Bells” on one of his Christmas albums and U.S. political hopeful Peter Vallone gave his Democratic acceptance nomination speech in Pig Latin in 1998.

Pig Latin has also contributed more words to general slang than all other “little” languages combined. Who could forget Fred Flintstone’s admonition to his friend Barney Rubble to “ixnay, Barney, ixnay,” in other words, “nix, Barney, nix Barney!” or “Keep your mouth shut, Barney!”

No matter where, or how, it started, Pig Latin appears to be here to stay, particularly on the Internet. There are literally dozens of web sites that will instantly translate any text into Pig Latin with a single click, and entire web pages can be likewise converted. Or, you can do a web-based search in Pig Latin, if you choose.

You can also hear synthesized voice translations, read the Bible or Book of Genesis, peruse a list of famous left-handed people, enjoy ezine humor or email friends and family, all in Pig Latin.

In March 2001 a Canadian company, Pulse Media Network, associated with the University of Toronto, Ontario, introduced a software program in Pig Latin that music lovers could use to take advantage of free music downloads. The program was used to disguise the popular Napster web site files by altering the MP3 files of band names so that fans could still download free music after a ban required Napster to pay royalties for the music it had been making freely available.

The program was pulled after a week or so, but the company reported more than 100,000 downloads the first morning it was offered.

So if you are thinking of learning another language, you might want to consider adding Pig Latin to your repertoire, just for fun.

[Melanie Falcon is a freelance writer with more than twenty years of journalism experience. She lives in Canada and has been fluent in Pig Latin for many years.]

## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Seen on a door in Chicago: “Motion, Inc. has moved. Please drop off all packages and mail to Suite 150, 1st floor.” [You can’t say they didn’t warn you.]

## Say It with Words

Martin Gani  
Como, Italy

Let’s be frank. To say *I love you* is magical yet arduous. The phrase is dense with commitment, renders the utterer vulnerable, carries huge, long-term risks, more often than not leads to irrational behaviour, emotions unhealthily ride a roller-coaster, Nirvana looms tantalizingly on the horizon, legal responsibility sooner or later ensues, marriage materialises in its definitive, irreversible guise: ‘Till death do us part.’ Much pain is endured to disentangle the emotional, and financial, mess if the chemistry (or biology) is later found to be incompatible. Even so where would we be without it? At this moment somebody somewhere is probably saying *I love you*. A journey into how this universal sentiment is conveyed in different cultures is as fascinating as the notion of love itself.

As articulated by English speakers, *I love you* sounds as simple as the simple present tense in which the sentiment is packaged. Perhaps the pragmatic nature of Anglo-Saxons is hidden in this subject-verb-object structure but there is also room for mystery: *I love* may be followed by a pause to create suspense, the object of desire that is still to follow may well be *Kevin* or *Megan* or *chocolate*. *I* precedes all, one may argue this is a clear indication of all-important self-importance or self-centredness, *I* comes before *love* and certainly before *you*. *Love* stuck in the middle between *I* and *you* plays the kingmaker. A little shift accordingly shifts the balance of power.

The French declare love with, *je t’aime* (I you love). The only analogy with English is that the same three fundamental words are again in contention. The utterance is rendered less strenuous by reducing the syllables to two, *I* and *you* are not separated by *love*, and to pronounce *je* the mouth pouts as if blowing a kiss; *you* and *love* unite as *t’aime*. Now if that’s not the utmost in romance, I don’t know what is.

*Ich liebe dich* say the Germans, repeating exactly the same syntax as English. From the land of pragmatism and efficiency, nothing different could have been expected. A closer analysis, however, reveals that considerably more effort goes into articulating



these Teutonic sounds; we're now faced with four syllables, and the rounded, crisp sounds of English turn harder. An invisible warning seems to have been attached to them: love is not an easy field to venture into. *Dich* positioned at the end impersonates an exhalation, as if the courageous German speaker is relieved to have come to the end of the endeavour.

The Italians and Spanish speakers express romantic love for one another with *ti amo* and *te quiero*, respectively. Both do away with *I* since the verb clearly indicates the doer. This interesting disappearance of *I* and placing the object of love first, some argue, throws some light on the passionate, dramatic, explosive, even decentralised, self-denying nature of amorous exchanges in these cultures. But eye-catching differences do exist. Italians aren't too shy to use *amo* (I love) but Spanish-speakers apparently are: *quiero* is really 'I want.' Saying *I love you (te amo)* is considered stuffy, old-fashioned; a cold-blooded interpretation may be "I want to play it safe." Love, after all, carries too many responsibilities. In the meantime, *te quiero*, "we'll see what the future holds." How did Romans speaking Latin, the ancestor of Italian, Spanish and French, say it? *Amo te* (I love you), just like the Anglo-Saxons. For some reason, the descendants of Latin turned it around and put *you* before *love*. Whether this was done for grammatical, phonetic, or aesthetic reasons, we'll never know, but the fact remains: Anthony expressed his adoration for Cleopatra with *amo te* and not the other way round.

Turks when enamoured take the plunge into this unsteady realm with the six-syllabled whisper *seni seviyorum* (you I'm loving). As any grammar book will tell you, present progressive is good for temporary actions taking place within a limited time span, "Kevin is courting Megan," "Megan is dating Steve," —for now, is understood. Turks therefore seem to wisely treat falling in love as a transient condition. Their neighbours the Greeks, however, fall in line with the rest of humanity when they say, *s'agapo* (you I love). Three two-letter syllables melted into one breath are all that's needed to get it over with, as if the Greek hero or heroine had better things to do than linger with wordy trivialities. After all, they've had Aphrodite for more than two millennia, what's probably going through their minds is "Isn't it time we moved on to discuss the fruits of love rather than dwell on its communication?"

If you're positive you're in love in Japan and feel impelled to disclose it, then take a deeeep breath and go, *watashiwa anatao aishiteimasu* (I love you). Needless to say, you'll be one of a very small number of true extroverts with a hefty dose of lionheartedness to execute this mammoth job. Even when the moon, mood, lights, bank balance and hormone levels are at optimum level, the Japanese, more so than others, will have much trouble unequivocally stating "I love you." They might hint at it by craftily taking their love interest to a karaoke establishment and attempting to sing an old, old, David Cassidy song, "I Think I Love You." That will, however, be an uncharacteristically bold strategy; they will more probably opt for the equivocal, *suki desu*, better known as the lifesaver "I like you," which can be interpreted as "I'm too timid to say more," "the consequences of being in love terrify me," or "I don't know what I want but let's keep it friendly for the present." Incidentally, "I Think I Love You" first appeared in 1971, but again topped the charts in 1992, sung by Bee Hive, and again in 2002, voiced by KC. That should provide sociologists with enough material for an entire conference.

In Russia it's best to give voice to your amorous, engaging announcement before downing several vodkas and masticating chunks of steak in your stroganoff, as all your mouth, tongue, and lip muscles as well as articulation skills will be needed to get out *ya tebya lyublyu*, which in plain language is "I love you." To formulate the all-important love-word, *lyublyu*, the lips sculpt a double kiss in quick succession, challenging French for romantic efficacy. The Russians of course have no difficulty dining, vodkaing, and romancing simultaneously. What's more, Russia is severely cold, Siberia is icy, so, for most of the year a dip into a heart-warming love serenade can only comfort all concerned. Once you cross over from the Russian Federation into the People's Republic of China, the heart is warmed over tea and several hundred steaming dishes. The Chinese declare their love to their potential loved-one-to-be with the sounds I can best decipher as *wall I knee*. As conceived by my non-Chinese, English-speaker ears, the threesome sounds wonderfully illogical, and so akin to love in all its irrationality. I wonder if the Chinese find it arduous to say these magic words.

[*Martin Gani wrote about English in Italy in Vol. XXVII/3.*]



## Getting Hitched or Shacking up and Other Domestic Arrangements

Devorah Stone  
Richmond, British Columbia

My aunt once referred to my father, with disdain, as “that man your mother lives with.”

I informed her my parents are legally married. I had seen the marriage certificate.

My aunt glared at me. “She still lives with him.”

True, people who are legally married usually live together. However, normally when we say a couple *lives together* we mean they are not legally married. Neither church nor state sanctioned their union.

The terms used by those not legally married range from the legal (*common law marriage*) to the jocular (*shacking up*). *Living together* is a neutral and nonjudgmental expression. *Cohabiting* is a clinical, sterile term used by statisticians. (It is also how animal behaviorists describe what wild boars do when they're not foraging.) A colorful phrase used in the 1920s in England—*married on the carpet with the banns up the chimney*—describes what was seen as a careless if not reckless union. It's also similar to the judgmental phrase—*living in sin*.

Since the 1970s, couples living together outside marriage have found new ways to introduce each other, including *apartmates*, *convivante*, *main squeeze*, *significant other*, *jellyroll*, and *paramour*. There is the silly and hardly used acronym *POSSLQ* meaning Person of the Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters. Many of these terms are no longer in common use. Many people simply say, “This is my friend.” Others who simply value their privacy (and who tire of constant explanations) will use *husband* or *wife*. *Life partner* and *soul mate* are also currently popular.

Now that unmarried heterosexual domestic arrangements have become commonplace, the next linguistic challenge is terms for gay unions. *Lover* used to refer to a partner in an illicit affair. Now many describe their life partners or significant others as *my lover*. When homosexual couples are unable to marry legally or formally, they often use the same expressions as unmarried heterosexual cou-

ples. Now that many same-sex couples can have their relationships registered in Vermont and New York and in some Scandinavian countries as a *civil union* or *registered partnership*, new terms should emerge.

Marriage has always been seen as an entangling and final state, as expressed in a sixteenth century phrase for marriage, *to tie a knot with one's tongue that cannot be untied with the teeth*. *Tying the knot* is one of many expressions describing the wedding ceremony, along with *getting hitched*, *taking the plunge*, *jumping the broomstick*, and *hand in hand*.

How heterosexual married couples describe each other has also changed over the years. Men have called their wives their *spouse*, *helpmate*, *consort*, *mate*, *partner*, *lady rib*, *missus*, *my old woman*, *she who must be obeyed*, and *trouble and strife*. Before the 1600s, *better half* could mean a good close friend or lover. Now it usually refers to a wife. Rarely do women introduce their husbands this way. Interestingly, there are also fewer names to specify a husband than wife—*hubby*, *old man*, *brown bagger*, and *breadwinner*.

With so many changes in modern life, traditional, ritually-based formal heterosexual marriages are becoming increasingly fragile. Trend watchers are using terms to differentiate between marriages by length of union. A *starter marriage* refers to a first marriage that falls apart before the bridesmaids have unloaded their gowns at the thrift shop and the photographer has finished developing the photos. *Keeper marriages* last until the youngest child goes to college. Anything longer lasting than that is a miracle.

The *serially monogamous* need new words to illustrate former and current marital partners. A *trophy wife* denotes a young second wife. A young second husband is a *boy toy*. There are no terms for first wives or husbands. There are also no standard words or expressions in English to describe a woman's husband's ex-wife or a man's wife's ex-husband. Future terms might include *his former*, *her former*, and *wex* and *hex*. I'd like to suggest *last half*, *the last mister*, and *she who is no longer obeyed* for former spouses.

[Devorah Stone has a visual arts degree from the University of Victoria and hosts the Historical Fiction Writing and Critique forum at <http://www.writersbbs.com>.]



## HORRIBILE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain

“Men who have sex twice a week or more,” according to a newspaper’s healthy living page, “have 50 per cent less chance of dying than those having sex less often, say doctors at the University of Bristol.” In other words, if a man has enough sex, he will live forever—which is precisely what teenage boys have been saying for thousands of years.

Many of us find the language of numbers difficult. In the last issue, I noted that the phrase *up to* was losing its sense, and several readers pointed out that *from* is going the same way. A supermarket promotion, for instance, boasts of a range of meals which “Cost from 99p per person.” Presumably, this category would include a meal which cost £300 per person. Perhaps it was a spokesman for the same retail chain who defended his company’s stock diversity policy by insisting that “we carry over about twenty different types of cheese.”

But then, what does meaning matter? As the British prime minister told his party conference last year: “*Reform* is a word. It has no meaning in itself.” This is, it often seems, the credo of most broadcast journalists. A BBC radio reporter, covering a pro-hunting demonstration, concluded his report by sharing with listeners the following profound thought: “The question is whether much of the radical change taking place in the countryside is both inevitable and unavoidable.”

One broadcaster, forced to apologise for using inappropriate language on his local radio show, told the press: “I was 65 in August and perhaps this was nature’s way of telling me that I was not up to speed with modern connotations to survive in the current broadcasting climate.” Isn’t nature clever?

The so-called *greengrocer’s comma* continues to irritate or amuse many VERBATIM readers. Julie May of Los Angeles spotted “one of those street repair warning signs made up of lightbulbs on a major street in Santa Monica, which says: ROAD REPAIRS AHEAD—EXPECT DELAY”S.” As she says, “I am used to the all-too-often misuse of apos-

trophes for plurals, but two of them at once (or is it a quotation mark?) is a new one on me.” (Julie, are you sure you didn’t mean to type *apostrophe’s*?). This column is always delighted to hear of reader’s own Horribiles, sent via any of VERBATIM’s usual addresses.

Some phrases are such notorious traps that they would be best avoided altogether by public servants; I’m thinking, amongst others, of a British government report on drug abuse which gave unintended reassurance by warning that “the misery this causes cannot be underestimated.” This particular mistake is now so common that I fear it is well on its way to becoming standard usage.

I wonder if the same civil service author was involved in writing the leaflets which were dropped on Iraq during the winter, giving details of the terrible consequences likely to befall servicemen who defended their country against Western invaders. “The leaflets,” said one newspaper, were “part of a white propaganda war being masterminded by British experts.” Would I be right in thinking that one’s own side never engages in *black* propaganda?

Quite apart from the fact that assigning moral values to colours in this context seems astonishingly unhelpful to the cause of world peace, I must admit that I’ve never before heard of “white propaganda.” Since propaganda itself is not an automatically pejorative word, the opposite of *black propaganda* ought, surely, to be *propaganda*.

Still, governments do sometimes get things right. The UK’s minister for School Standards has reportedly “urged parents to take part in a talent competition in the new year to find and stretch the country’s most intelligent youngsters.” When I was at school we would often get hold of revoltingly brainy kids by their arms and legs and pull from each end as hard as we could, with the aim of teaching them some manners; I’m very pleased to learn that this is now government policy.

[Have Horribiles for this column? Send them to [editor@verbatimmag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimmag.com). Mat Coward also writes for The Fortean Times and Organic Gardening. His web site is <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/matcoward/myhomepage/newsletter.html>.]



## CLASSICAL BLATHER

### *Hellenic Damnation and Other Afterlives*

Nick Humez

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Everybody likes to see the bad guys get their just deserts, if not in this world then in the next, and the Greeks were no different. They believed in a number of divinities whose express purpose was to punish wrongdoers, notably Nemesis (her name is related to the *-nom-* of *nomos*, which meant “apportionment” in the sense of share and share alike, and later, by extension, “law,” finding its way into such words as *economy*, originally the ordering of a household [*oikos*]). Nemesis concerned herself specifically with the punishment of infractions of fairness; by contrast, the *Erinyes*, or Furies, pursued impious murderers such as parricides and matricides (e.g., Orestes, when, in order to avenge the murder of his dad, Agamemnon, had to kill his mother, Clytemnestra, because it was she and her lover Aegisthus who had slaughtered the poor old king in his bath fresh from his victory at Troy).<sup>1</sup>

On the other hand, the Greeks also recognized that we do not always get our just deserts in this life, and that some things happened by fate. The Three Fates—Clotho the spinner, Lachesis the twister and measurer, and Atropos the cutter—were supposed to determine the span of people’s lives, and even the Olympians were said to be subject to their activities. Fate as an abstract concept, on the other hand, was called *ananké*. At a relatively late date the Greeks also personified fortune or chance as the goddess Tyche (the verb *tunchano*, from which the noun *tyché* is derived, meant ‘to happen’). One could live virtuously and bind oneself by solemn oaths, invoking the displeasure of Zeus or other gods if one misbehaved, but sometimes evil triumphed over good anyway, and there was nothing much one could do about it here on earth.

But in the afterlife—ah, that was a different story. People who had lived lives of exemplary virtue went to dwell happily ever after in the Elysian Fields, something of a rural paradise; the not-so-virtuous (but not terribly evil either) were

assigned to another part of the underworld called the Asphodel Fields, something like an economy-class version of Elysium. (Another version of the afterlife myth was that those who were not actually bad drank from the river of forgetfulness, called Lethe, and then were reborn as babies on earth again.) Conspicuous evildoers, however, went to Tartarus, a place of eternal and often ingenious punishments.<sup>2</sup>

When a Greek died, a coin (usually an *obolos*, the smallest denomination) was put in his or her mouth to pay Charon, the ferryman who conveyed souls across the river Styx.<sup>3</sup> (Charon, along with some other features of the Greek underworld, survived into medieval Christian ideas of the afterlife to turn up strikingly depicted at the lower left of Michelangelo’s *Last Judgment* swatting a damned sinner out of his ferryboat towards the mouth of Hell proper with his oar.) *Styx* means ‘hated,’ and was originally the name of a stream in Arcadia, the wild country of the Peloponnese. No coin, no passage; you had to wander around forever as a wraith on its near shore, unable to find your final resting place. (This unenviable state was replicated in the Christian “easiest room in Hell” for the unbaptized, which Roman Catholics called Limbo, and which was declared to be a fiction by the church only in the middle of the twentieth century.) Once you got across the Styx, you went past the three-headed dog Cerberus and went before the three judges of the dead—Minos, Rhadamanthys, and Aeacus—who would determine how you would spend eternity.

If you had been particularly wicked, your troubles really started. Sisyphus, a trickster who contrived to talk his way out of the underworld, was dragged back down and condemned to roll a rock up a hill forever; just when it got almost to the summit it would roll back down, and he would have to start all over again. (His name is a reduplicative form of *sophos* ‘wise’ and is thus glossed by some scholars as ‘overwise,’ ‘too clever for his own good,’ or ‘smartypants.’) Tantalus, a king of Lydia in Asia Minor, committed two gross culinary sins: First he divulged the secret of the gods’ feeding on nectar and ambrosia by sharing some with his friends, and then committed an even more horrible crime by killing his son Pelops, butchering his flesh, and



serving him up to the gods in a stew. From his sentence—to stand in water up to his neck with a bunch of grapes above his head, both inaccessible, so that he suffered perpetual hunger and thirst—we get the English verb *tantalize*, and in Britain the noun *tantalus* for a kind of liquor cabinet with a glass front and a lock such that one can see the bottles but not get at them without the key. Another king, Ixion of the Lapiths, met an even more gruesome fate for bragging of his supposed liaison with Hera (the offspring of whom were the centaurs, half human and half horse): He was bound to a fiery wheel, which turned about forever. And the fifty Danaïds, who murdered their husbands, were condemned to draw water from a well and carry it some distance in a vain attempt to fill a cistern, for the buckets had holes in them, and all the water would leak out along the way.

The tradition of Hell as primarily a river or lake of fire, so popular among latter-day Protestant preachers (e.g., Jonathan Edwards' eighteenth-century "great and bottomless pit, full of the fire of wrath"<sup>4</sup>), owes a lot to Phlegethon but was reinforced by the latter-day Jewish idea of Gehenna as a place of torment in the afterlife (split off from Sheol, which is simply a place of departed spirits). Some derive Gehenna from the Valley of Hinnom, which functioned as ancient Jerusalem's city dump, a place of bad smells and continuous fires from the spontaneous combustion of whatever was abandoned there.<sup>5</sup> Images of being confined in a burning pit turn up early on in several of the apocryphal gospels which did not make it into the canonical New Testament: For example, the *Apocalypse of Peter*, which was written by Gnostic Christians early in the second century A.D.,<sup>6</sup> describes "men and women, gnawing their tongues without ceasing, and tormented with everlasting fire . . . the servants who were not obedient unto their masters" and says that there shall be "a river of fire, and all who are judged shall be drawn down into the middle of it," and "wheels of fire, and men and women hung thereon . . . the sorcerers and sorceresses" (Ixion comes to mind here), all presided over by an angel named Tatirikos (that is, *Tartaruchos*, 'keeper of Tartarus'). Peter goes on to say that the blessed will enter into a field called Aneslasleja (=Elysium?),



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where "they shall adorn with flowers the portion of the righteous."

Peter's *Apocalypse* was suppressed as part of the drive to eliminate heresies, conducted by what became the mainstream church by the end of the third century and culminating in the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D., over which the emperor Constantine personally presided. Nevertheless, orthodox Christian writers in the centuries to come continued to borrow freely from the Greek plan of the hereafter for their own visions of Hell. The offertory from the Roman Catholic requiem mass includes the phrase *Ne absorbeat eas Tartarus*, 'Let Tartarus not swallow them up,' and the three rivers Acheron, Styx, and Phlegethon are part of Dante's allegorical geography of the terraced pit of Hell, being crossed just before the poet and his guide, Virgil (an obvious choice because Virgil himself had described a *katabasis*—the Greek term for a descent to the underworld—by Aeneas, guided by the Sybil from Apollo's oracular shrine at Cumae, near the bay of Naples) enter, respectively, Limbo, the heretics' City of Dis (Dis was originally another name for Hades/Pluto, then for the underworld itself), and the Wood of the Suicides.<sup>7</sup>

Dante's *Inferno*, however, goes far beyond the traditional Greek ideas of the hereafter in its meticulous subdivision of categories of sin. His schema partly draws on Aristotle, who divided wrong behavior into *incontinence* (that is, uncontrolled appetite), *bestiality* (perverted appetite) and *malice* or *vice* (abuse of the faculty of reason). Another of



his sources was the lawyer-turned-senator Cicero, who during the increasingly violent final years of the Roman Republic wrote that all injurious conduct derived either from *violence* or *fraud*. Dante combined this scheme to divide Hell into sins of incontinence (of which he lists four categories), violence/bestiality, and two categories of fraud/malice, to which he added two sins of wrong belief: *unbelief* (whence Limbo) and *heresy*. This gave him nine circles in all, with characteristic torments tailored to fit the particular type of sin whose perpetrators are confined there.<sup>8</sup>

Like Roach Motel tenants, once you were booked into the Greek underworld you weren't supposed to check out (at least not without having your memory banks wiped clean), but there were occasional exceptions. Theseus of Athens went down on a fool's errand with his buddy Pirithous to try to abduct Persephone and got glued to the Chair of Forgetfulness, from which he was torn loose only with difficulty a few years later when his cousin Heracles came down to fetch back Cerberus to his boss, King Eurystheus, as one of his Twelve Labors. (The story adds that part of Theseus remained stuck to the chair, which is why the Athenians said they could always tell his descendants by their small buttocks [*micropygia*].) One who famously went to the underworld and back was Orpheus, whose myth has captivated poets and musicians from antiquity because of its suggestion that music can have so powerful an effect that the laws of nature are temporarily suspended: wild beasts become tame, and even the hard hearts of Hades and Persephone are softened to the point of allowing the two lovers to ascend to the surface of the earth, again providing Orpheus doesn't look back—a test he flunks and so loses Eurydice forever. (Later he himself is killed and dismembered by Dionysus's maenads.) It has been suggested that the latter part of the Orpheus story, in which he offends Dionysus by instituting a form of sun worship in Thrace venerating Apollo Helios as the greatest of the gods, reflects a fugitive remnant of priests from Egypt who fled after the collapse of Akhnaten's short-lived attempt at converting all his country from polytheism to the worship of one god, the sun disk Aten.<sup>9</sup>

The Egyptians had a well-developed afterlife script, and the discovery of the intact and unlooted tomb of Akhnaten's son-in-law and successor, Tutankhamen, in 1922 showed how robust their funerary practices could be when a king was involved. The dead person would be led by the ibis-headed Thoth (who in addition to his role as psychopomp was also the master of mathematics) to a hall of judgment, where twenty-eight judges would assess his or her conduct in life, and then taken before the king of the dead, Osiris, where a pan balance would weigh the heart of the deceased against the feather that was the hieroglyph for the word *ma'at* (usually glossed as 'justice').<sup>10</sup> The virtuous, whose heart was as light as the feather, would go to perpetual bliss in the afterlife; but to the wicked, whose heart was heavy and whose tongue had commanded injustice, would come annihilation, the death-after-death in the crocodile jaws of the monster Amemait.

The view of the afterlife in ancient Mesopotamia was decidedly gloomy. The Sumerians of 2000 B.C. believed that the dead were ruled by Ereshkigal, sister of the love goddess Inanna, and that the old gods, the Anunnaki, served as their judges. In a coda appended to the Gilgamesh Epic, the ghost of the hero's dead friend Enkidu is allowed to visit him and describes the condition of even the virtuous as gloomy, dusty, and dark. And of those who die without people to bury or mourn them, he says "Garbage is what they eat. A dog would not eat what these people must eat."<sup>11</sup> It may come as no surprise that the Babylonians, who added this twelfth tablet to their translation of the Sumerian epic, were said to be terrified of ghosts.<sup>12</sup>

Fear of the dead has been present in many other societies across the world as well. Twice a year the Romans celebrated the *Lemuria*, a feast on which the ghosts of deceased family members were thought to revisit their former homes, with the risk of taking the living with them; the *paterfamilias* propitiated them by walking through the house throwing beans over his shoulder instead.<sup>13</sup> Ghost stories are also an integral part of the folklore of Japan and China. An extreme attitude is the profound uneasiness among Navajos in the American Southwest about *anything* having to do with death





and their revulsion at those disruptive acts by witches who employ “corpse powder”; at the other end of the continuum are Tibetan Buddhists, from whose universe of discourse of death and dying the malicious ghost is wholly absent.

As in India, the usual outcome of death in Tibet is to be reborn in another body. (The Greek term for the transmigration of souls is *metempsychosis*, which literally means something like ‘ensoulment beyond [death].’) The soul is believed to remain in the vicinity of its former body for forty-nine days, during which it passes

## **The Greek term for the transmigration of souls is *metempsychosis*, ‘ensoulment beyond [death].’**

through three postmortem states of consciousness called the *Bardos*. The *Bardo Thodol*, sometimes referred to as the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, is a series of instructions spoken to the departed by the living at the various stages of existence, starting with the moment of dying (the First, or *Chikhai*, Bardo), ranging from opting out of the cycle of rebirth altogether by embracing the white light of true reality, to protecting itself from the Second (*Chonyid*) Bardo’s frightening or seductive illusions and choosing a suitable womb from which to be reborn at the end of the Third (*Sidpa*) Bardo.<sup>14</sup>

Indeed, there seems to be no culture in which the enigmatic boundary between the dead and the living does not excite interest, whether fascination, avoidance, or denial. Tibetans appear to accommodate their passing with grace, while contemporary Americans are often at great pains to stave off even thinking about it. Thus, as C. FitzSimons Allison, an Episcopal bishop in North Carolina, has astutely observed, our modern secular society’s obsession with sex is in large part a way of denying death,<sup>15</sup> sometimes by equating the two; perhaps it is no coincidence that a common euphemism for orgasm over the past two centuries is the *little death*.<sup>16</sup> Of course the liaison of love and death can go beyond mere metaphor: the French charmingly refer to a fatal heart attack during intercourse as *la morte douce* (the sweet death), and surely there are worse ways to go.

### Notes

1 For the classic version of this story, and how Orestes eventually was able to rid himself of his pursuers, see Aeschylus’s *Oresteian Trilogy*, of which there are many good English translations, e.g., Philip Velacott’s (Penguin, 1979).

2 The souls of the dead were conducted to the underworld by Hermes; the Greek term for this job was *psychopomp* (*psyche* meaning ‘soul’ and *-pomp* from *penpo* ‘I escort’). This is a secondary function of gods in other societies as well, notably the Egyptian Thoth (see above) and the Norse Odin, whose eight-legged horse Sleipnir, as Ellis Davidson points out (in *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* [Penguin, 1964], pp. 142–143) was a metaphor for four men carrying a dead body. My primary print source for much of the Greek material in this column is Robert Graves’s peren-

nial *The Greek Myths Complete* (Penguin, 1971).

3 Graves, §31, p. 124, n. 4. There were five rivers in the underworld altogether: In addition to the Styx and Lethe, there was a river of fire called Phlegethon, a “river of wailing” named Cocytus, and a “river of woe” called Acheron, though the latter two are considered metaphorical, and comparatively late inventions. The Romans sometimes referred to the underworld by the euphemism *orae Acheruntis* ‘Acheron’s shores.’ In his *Inferno*, Dante gives the name Cocytus to the lowest section of Hell, containing traitors to their kindred, country, guests, and lords.

4 The full text of this classic hellfire-and-brimstone homily, preached at Enfield, Connecticut, on July 8, 1741, can be found at <http://www.ccel.org/e/edwards/sermons/sinners.html>. Though we think of him as a quintessentially New England Puritan pastor, in the last months of his life Edwards accepted an invitation from theologically congenial Dutch Reformed divines in New Jersey to be the first president of the college that eventually turned into Princeton.

5 As Sir John Harington noted in 1596 in his droll *New Discourse on a Stale Subject, Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax* (Columbia University Press, 1962, edited and annotated by Elizabeth Story Donno. See p. 146.)

6 Its full text appears in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, translated and edited by Montague Rhodes James (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1926), pp. 505–521. It is discussed at length as an explicitly Gnostic work in Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (Vintage Books, 1981), p. xv and elsewhere.

7 The *-basis* of *katabasis*, like the *-bat* of *acrobat*, comes from the Greek verb *baino* ‘I walk’; the prefix *kata-* meant ‘from above, down from, down to.’ Hoofing it up to someplace was an *anabasis*, the title of an account by Socrates’ former pupil Xenophon describing the up-country advance (and harrowing retreat) of the 10,000 Greek mercenaries hired by the upstart satrap of Ionia, Cyrus, in his unsuccessful attempt to overthrow his brother, Artaxerxes, the rightful king of Persia.

8 For a helpful discussion of Dante’s taxonomy of the damned, see the introduction and notes by Dorothy Sayers in her postwar *Inferno* translation, *Hell* (Penguin, 1949).



9 Graves offers this explanation at §28, n. 3, on pp. 114–115, as provocative an hypothesis as Freud's assertion in *Moses and Monotheism* that Akhnaten's solar heresy was where Judaism got the idea of one God. Evidence to support either thesis seems to me quite circumstantial, but it would also appear difficult to *disprove* either one.

10 *Ma'at*, however, meant more than simple equity, especially the higher you were in the government bureaucracy. Thus, as John A. Wilson points out in a perceptive essay on Egypt (in Frankfort et al., *Before Philosophy* [Pelican, 1963]), "The ruler who dispensed justice was urged to dispense it in relation to need, indeed, to give more than was due. The state . . . [had] a responsibility to act with initiative to meet the needs of the nation." For some poignant examples of how tomb-village workers at the Valley of the Kings sometimes petitioned the government for a redress of their grievances, and how such letters came to be preserved at the temples at Thebes on the Nile (present-day Luxor) for several millennia, see John Romer's *Ancient Lives* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1984).

11 I loosely follow David Ferry's translation *Gilgamesh* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1993).

12 See, for example, S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Penguin, 1963), p. 40.

13 See the entry for the earlier date, the ninth of May, in Ovid's *Fasti*. (A useful facing-Latin-and-English translation is by Sir James Frazer [Loeb Library/Heinemann, 1931]). Ovid's description on the Lemuria (Book V, verses 419–492, pp. 291–297 of the Loeb edition) is thorough, but his derivation of the name quite fanciful. *Lemur* is also the name given by zoologists to a nocturnal arboreal prosimian indigenous to Madagascar.

14 A more literal translation of the title, according to <http://reluctant-messenger.com/tibetan-book-of-the-dead.htm>, is "liberation by hearing on the after-death plane." Although orally recited from memory for some time previously, the *Bardo Thodol* is said to have been written down in the eighth century A.D. by the great holy man Padma Sambhava, who is credited with introducing Buddhism to Tibet. A translation with good notes but archaic diction is that of Lama Kazi Dawa-Samdup, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, edited by W. Y. Evans-Wentz (Oxford University Press, 1960).

15 In his *Guilt, Anger, and God* (Morehouse-Barlow, 1972), p. 91, where Bishop Allison approvingly quotes Rollo May's *Love and Will* (W. W. Norton, 1969, p. 106): "[T]he awareness of death is widely repressed in our day. . . . What would we have to see if we could cut through our obsession about sex? The clamor of sex all about us drowns out the ever-waiting presence of death." Not surprisingly, the prelate ties this anxiety to the fading of once-prevalent beliefs in the resurrection of Jesus and in a general resurrection to come.

16 Conversely, death has been frequently likened to the lover one sleeps with, as well as, of course, sleeping itself. "Death" is one of the largest entries in the index of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, the sixteenth edition of which (Little, Brown, 1992) lists more than 500 examples within the body of the book.

[Nick Humez is hard at work on the VERBATIM index. Watch this space!]

## What's So T about a T-Shirt?

### A textual and etymological analysis of T-shirts

Keith J. Hall

Singapore

The history of the T-shirt is the history of the twentieth century in microcosm: from unspoken to outspoken, from humble origins to a symbol of rebellion, to the badge of the cool jet-setter.

So what's in a T-shirt for the language lover? The name itself looks interesting, but a quick check shows that the etymology is more descriptive than romantic. The "T" simply refers to the shape of the shirt when it is laid out flat. But fortunately for this article, the T-shirt has many additional levels of verbal relevance. In fact, it is probably the most verbal item of clothing worn by human beings.

Historically, the T-shirt originated in Europe. It was discovered there by American soldiers during World War I. They found that the cotton undershirt was cool and comfortable beneath their woolen uniforms. The T-shirt returned to the United States with the soldiers, and quickly established itself as standard underwear for laborers.

The first literary reference to the T-shirt was in F. Scott Fitzgerald's 1920 novel, *This Side of Paradise*. His character Amory sets out for New England with "six suits winter underwear, one sweater or T shirt, one jersey, one overcoat, winter, etc." The name *T shirt* is not explained. It sounds rather heavier than a modern T-shirt, but that's another story.

*T-Shirt* entered dictionaries in the 1920s, but a few more developments were needed before the T-shirt stepped onto the world stage, both as a fashion item and as an item of interest to linguists.

In the 1950s, the T-shirt was transformed from a humble piece of underwear into outerwear. And not just outerwear, but outerwear with an image and a message. This unlikely transformation was achieved through a number of classic movies. In "The Wild One" (1953), Marlon Brando and Lee Marvin wore white T-shirts, black leather jackets and blue jeans. They created the classic biker image. The T-shirt's image as a symbol of rebellion



was further reinforced in “A Streetcar Named Desire,” “Rebel without a Cause” and “West Side Story.” But the T-shirt’s message was still implicit, not linguistic.

All that changed in the 1960s when the Protest Movement produced a generation with something to say. The T-shirt was seen as a tabula rasa, just waiting to be emblazoned with messages of protest: *Ban the Bomb*, *Make Love Not War*, etc. This is where the T-shirt took on its modern significance as a “Text-shirt.”

In the final decades of the twentieth century, the T-shirt industry underwent explosive growth. This was fueled by big clothing companies, which saw the market potential of T-shirts, and by improvements in printing technology, with mass production and diversification.

Even though the T-shirt has become a “Trendy-shirt,” it is still primarily of interest as a “Text-shirt”. This is shown clearly by the fact that the most relevant classification of T-shirts is by their printed message. All other classifications (e.g., color, fit, etc.) are secondary.

As a compulsive T-shirt reader and a born classifier, I cluster T-shirts into the following main groups. The classification is unashamedly opinionated and is designed to stress the T-ness of each group.

*Travelers:* These are the familiar souvenir T-shirts, ostensibly from Australia, Beijing, Chiang Mai, Colorado, Dallas, Ecuador, Fifth Avenue New York, Florida, Germany, Havana, Italia, Jamaica, Knightsbridge, Langkawi, Las Vegas, London, Massachusetts, Norway, Oregon, Paris, Phuket, Queensland, Roma, Saigon, Salt Lake City, San Francisco, Texas, Thailand, Uruguay, Vietnam, Wales, etc. (though mostly manufactured in Southeast Asia). For the linguist, this is the least interesting category of T-shirt. The most common variety simply states a place name, often accompanied by a flag or a relevant picture of an iconic object, like a tuk-tuk (for Manila), Michelangelo’s *David* (Italy), Sydney Harbour Bridge, or the Tower Bridge (London). Very familiar destinations simply get abbreviations, like “NYC” or “USA.” And others are just implied, as in “I came, I saw, I hiked the Canyon.”

Presumably many people choose this class of T-shirt to tell others about the interesting places they

have visited. But of course, the problem is the reader’s suspicion that many people wear T-shirts advertising places that they have never visited. This seems to be especially true of “NYC” and “USA” T-shirts. The situation is analogous to the number of people who wear tennis shoes or basketball tops, but who never actually play tennis or basketball. True travelers must be very frustrated by all the pseudotravelers wearing exotic T-shirts. But the unfortunate truth is that most people don’t really care where you have been. Having said that, it does have to be admitted that a “Singapore” T-shirt earns more respect in London than it does in Kuala Lumpur. Other reasons for wearing these Travelers T-shirts are nationalism (e.g. the many recent variations on “USA” T-shirts) or insecurity/identity-confirmation (e.g. “Canada” and “Australia” T-shirts). It is also claimed that expatriates living in countries where political tensions can run high (e.g. China) should own a “Norway” T-shirt, since Norway never features in global politics. When US-China relationships are tense, you simply wear your “Norway” T-shirt. “Canada,” “Australia,” or “New Zealand” would also serve the same purpose.

T-shirts from famous sports teams can also be worn by Travelers. For example, visitors to Cincinnati often buy a Reds T-shirt as a souvenir. Souvenir shops in airports all over the world cash in on this situation by ensuring that they are well-stocked with T-shirts from the local sports teams.

*Trademarks:* These are all the famous brands, like Adidas, Asics, Benetton, Calvin Klein, Carlsberg, Champion, Coca Cola, Disneyland, D&G, DKNY, Esprit, Fendi, Fubu, Ford, Gotcha, Hanes, Harley Davidson, Hello Kitty, Kappa, Le Coq Sportif, Lee Cooper, Levi’s, Mambo, Mizuno, Nautica, New Balance, Nike, Oakley, Omo Plus, Puma, Quiksilver, Reebok, Rip Curl, Sharp, Stussy, Tiger Beer, Umbro, Versace, Vodaphone, Volkswagen, Wilson, Xerox, and Yves St Laurent. Companies that can sell their advertising to consumers and then get them to wear it all around town must feel smug! Famous sports teams also fit into this category, since their T-shirts are often marketed more as brand names than as sports accessories. Common examples include Chicago Bulls, Liverpool Football Club, Manchester United, and



New York Yankees. Famous movies, for example, *Star Wars* and *Titanic*, and cartoon characters, for example, Mickey Mouse, Pokemon, and Snoopy, have also been turned into trademarks.

People wearing these branded T-shirts probably want to show that they belong to a group by wearing a recognizable identification label. Depending on the wearer's interests, the T-shirt group could project an image of being mass-market (e.g., Coca Cola), rebellious (e.g., Harley Davidson), trendy (e.g., Nautica), unconventional (e.g., Mambo) or exclusive (e.g., Yves St Laurent). Of course, some wearers may have simply received a free Carlsberg T-shirt when they bought a case of beer.

*Trademark violations:* These are often more interesting than the genuine article. Some have colors or features that the originals never thought of, and some have very amusing misspellings. In Hong Kong I saw a *Charmie Broom* T-shirt, complete with a picture of Charlie Brown! But don't mistake *Miki House* (Japan) for a Disney-pirate; it is a real brand name. *Nike* has many look-alikes, sometimes with names like *Mike* or *Enik* plus the familiar swoosh logo. Similarly, there are *Hand Ten* T-shirts with the familiar *Hang Ten* footprints logo, and *Dokkeb*, which is presumably a corruption of *Dockers*. *Esprit Spirit* also sounds suspiciously fake.

Wearers of these famous fakes are probably bargain hunters who have been on vacation in Asia, where the recycling of famous brand names and logos has become almost an art form.

*Threatening:* These T-shirts carry aggressive slogans like "All Out War," "Kill," "Army," "Marines," "Ordnance Specialist," "Fear is in the eye of the beholder—Don't let it be you," "Destroy No Dead," and "Sniper: One Shot One Kill." "Hard Penis" is also threatening in a different way; though the young lady wearing the T-shirt looked neither threatened nor threatening. Some pop groups also fall into this category, for example, *Megadeth*.

The motivation for wearing T-shirts like these is probably a mixture of mild aggressiveness and a desire to shock the reader. But people who are really threatening don't need to wear such T-shirts. Their aggressiveness is manifest in their behavior and body language.

*Trivial:* These T-shirts often have short, generic

messages, like "American Cowboy," "Athletics," "Active Outdoors Gear," "Air Cargo," "Butterfly," "Canoe Proficiency Instructor," "Chill Out," "Cowgirls Wanted," "Cute Girl," "Deep Blue Sea," "Diesel Project," "Exhaust," "Famous," "Fancy Dress," "Fleet," "Fitness Encounter '94," "get it going," "Golf and Country Resort," "Good job runners!" "Graphic Art Simplicity" (sic), "Highjump," "Hollywood Ranch Market," "Hot Summer," "I Love Rock," "It's Feeling!!!" "Jewel Mania," "Love and Happenings," "Make the team," "Mezzo Piano," "Modern Explorer," "Monkey Business," "Natural Style," "Nature," "Nautical," "Navigate: No Problem Yachting," "Peace," "Phys Ed Department," "Property of Athletic Dept," "Replay," "Rocker Lady!" "Rodeo Girl," "Save the Rain Forest," "Save the World," "Snow Time," "Soccer League," "South Coast Voyage," "Southern Athletic," "Sports," "Spring Bloom," "Style Altered Images," "Sunlight Plants Winds," "Surf," "Surf Origins," "Surf Factory," "Surplus Dept Utility Outfitter," "Sweat + Sacrifice = Success," and "Sweet Memories," "The athletic relays," and "Urban Modernity."

People probably wear T-shirts like these because they like the mood evoked by the message. The Japanese will often tell you that such words give you "a comfortable feeling," which is as good an explanation as any.

For linguists and crossword fanatics there is the very appropriate message "Dictionary People." Or you can choose highly tantalizing text like "Babie Soldie," "Gainly Gagwrietey," "alimits ident," "9SVN6 XXX Varsity," and "happyok." T-shirts can also have amusingly meaningless messages like "Lets Sport: All Round Sportive Sports Club" (sic) and "Feel the best basic: U2 Sporty." Some of these nonsense messages are quite long and creative, for example, "Mercy Euthanasia High Mass—LaGirl—I think, I think I am, therefore I am," "California Spirit of 02—The Spirit of 1849—The Winner of There," "Best 1 Happy together—2002—Let's go to the paty" (sic), "Hello—PiYo.'s Summer Friend—What are you doing now" and "Rocker Lady! BSA Triumph Rock'n Roll Baby Face Hardy." I hasten to add that these Spellcheck-defying messages are all from real T-shirts. I could never invent such unlikely text.



These nonsense messages are common in Asia, where English text gets lifted from anywhere and boldly reprinted on T-shirts. One favorite in Singapore had the impressive message “Unaffected Clothing: Comfortable & Finest Quality & Material—Casual Comfortable Washable.” Another claimed to be “Weather Tested Water Proven.” Further eye-popping examples include “Seven from heaven—To keep you fair ano cooleri, easy to remove once transfer cools, for cotton clithing, canvas bags, vivid, washable colours placemats, use with heat press needed and gifts,” “Puree Bear: The more art is directed, limited and worked upon, he freer it becomes.” (Excuse all the typos, but they are reproduced here exactly as printed on the T-shirts.) Others simply print part of a novel or car repair manual. As a chemist by training, my personal favorite is a T-shirt that had the entire Periodic Table of the elements printed on the front. And for mechanics, there are Volkswagen T-shirts with extensive text plus two different cross-sections of the engine with about thirty engine parts labeled.

People who wear these T-shirts probably see the text more as a design than as words. The situation is analogous to Westerners who like to wear T-shirts with Chinese or Japanese characters printed on them. And I have certainly seen T-shirts with inaccurate Japanese text, which can be just as funny as the mock-English quoted above. The message here is obvious: Never buy a T-shirt that you can’t read! Young men in Asia wearing T-shirts with messages like “Elle” and “Comme ca du Mode—Fille” could also heed this advice.

*Tongue-in-cheek:* These are the humorous messages, both intentional and unintentional. Intentional humor includes “If at first you don’t succeed, redefine success,” “I smell inside” (with Intel graphics), “Beam me up, sporty,” “Don’t Trust Anyone Over 30,” “Skateboarding Ruined My Life,” “No brain, no headache,” “Australia—16777 km, it’s a bloody long way,” “Booze & Brain—Poles Apart,” “\*&%#,” and “New World Odor.” But T-shirts with what appears to be unintentional humor are typically much funnier. In Japan I saw “Shibuya T: Made in Tokyo Toilet.” Even knowing that Shibuya is a fashionable Tokyo suburb doesn’t help.

Residents of Surfers Paradise, a seaside beach resort in Australia, must be bemused by “The

Surfers Paradise, a tiny island in the Ocean.” Other favorites of accidental humor include “I’m a Mess,” “Assitalia,” “Junk Have Balls,” “Fruity Tart,” “Sex Jeans & Co.,” “Sexy Graffiti,” “Sexy Rock,” “Hardcore Superstar,” “Look Deeper—Streetwear Forever,” “Accidentally Chic,” “Hysteric Angel,” “Easy Tiger,” “Live Fast—Die Pretty,” “GREY: Say it with colour,” “My Shoes Made Me Do It,” and “I’m addicted to surfing” (referring to the cyber variety, not the aqueous one). And one has to assume that messages like “Extra Denim,” “Jeans,” and “Khakis” belong to T-shirts with an identity crisis.

One subclassification is humorous T-shirts that appear to be a direct, literal translation of a Chinese proverb by a translator with limited English capability. Examples include “Hard time don’t last, hard man do,” “Friendship . . . will last forever if not ask to lend money,” and “Flower Made Paradise, Its Environment.” The meaning of these messages becomes more apparent with rereading.

People who wear T-shirts with deliberate humor are understandable enough. They like the joke and want you to laugh along with them. Basically they are mild extroverts, trying to catch other people’s attention. But the wearers of T-shirts with accidental humor are presumably not aware of the joke themselves. So others are likely to laugh at them, rather than with them. Of course, seeing a plump girl wearing a “Little Elephant” T-shirt is slightly sad. However, I have seen a happy (and definitely nonreptilian) person wearing a “Happy Gekko” T-shirt. So we shouldn’t conclude that messages on T-shirts are always a direct expression of the wearer’s personality.

*Text-free:* This class of T-shirts has no explicit message, though sometimes the implicit meaning can be quite clear (for example, if the wearer is rippling his muscles, revving up his motor bike, and ogling your girlfriend). As in the 1950s, this can still be a message in its own right! But it has limited academic interest for linguists.

And then there are T-shirts that bridge two or more categories. They can be called “Hybrid T-shirts” (with apologies to rose lovers). One familiar example is the hackneyed “My Uncle went to London & all he bought me was this lousy T-shirt,” a (feeble) attempt to bring humor to the



tourist T-shirt. Slightly more successful is “Singapore is a FINE city,” referring to the fact that almost everything is a finable offence in Singapore. Singapore also has many T-shirts that make amusing use of the local version of English (called *Singlish* and featuring the word “lah” at the end of most statements), with messages like “Relax lah,” “No Sweat Lah,” and “Okay Lah.” *Hard Rock Cafe* and *Planet Hollywood* T-shirts have successfully become Hybrid Travelers–Trademark T-shirts.

As we have seen, T-shirts have a lot more T than just their shape. They are now so common that we hardly notice them. But they are a subject of real interest and amusement for the observant linguist. Shakespeare wrote that “the apparel oft proclaims the man” (Hamlet I.3.72). Obviously he had never heard of the T-shirt, but his words have proven to be surprisingly apt.

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## EPISTOLA

In Branford, Connecticut, is located a company whose white trucks ply highways and roads, bearing the legend: “CINTAS—The Uniform People.”

Are they really all the same size and shape? Do they reproduce? If so, how? Are government efforts to prevent cloning too late? What is going on in Branford, and what are those trucks distributing?

Best regards from a worried friend.

Ed Rosenberg  
Danbury, CT  
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## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

### *Two New Kids on the Block*

I suspect other readers of *VERBATIM* also share a sense of excitement whenever a new American English dictionary makes an appearance. We’ve struck it rich this time, with two dictionaries from distinguished publishing houses: *The American Heritage College Dictionary, Fourth Edition (AHCD)* (Houghton Mifflin, 0618098488, US\$26.00) and *The Oxford American College Dictionary (OACD)* (Putnam, 0399144153, US\$25.95). Both are based on larger works, *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition (AHD4)*, and *The New Oxford American Dictionary (NOAD)*.

Although *AHCD* does not lack provocative new features, *OACD* is the less traditional dictionary. For example, perhaps on the theory—axiomatic among lexicographers—that hardly anyone reads front and back matter, Oxford has kept these sections minimal. The front matter contains a preface stating the book’s goals, a “how-to-use” guide that consists of sample pages, and a pronunciation key. Period. But given that *OACD* features innovative grammatical labeling, explanations would have been helpful. Without access to the front matter of the larger *NOAD*, users may not realize that “in sing.” signals a count noun that is not usually pluralized in a particular sense (an *ear* for music; the *promise* of peace) or that “submodifier” labels an adverb that modifies an adjective or another adverb (as shown at *too* but—oddly—not at *very*). Actually, *submodifier* is an entry in the book, as is *sentence adverb*, a label that other dictionaries would do well to consider. So if a baffling label is made up of whole words, you’re probably in luck.

*OACD*’s back matter has a punctuation guide, a usage guide with helpful distinctions between formal and informal English, and an instructive, easy-to-read essay on the history of English, palatable enough for curious high-school students yet appropriate for curious adults.

*American Heritage* front matter is far more extensive. In addition to a preface, lists of staff and consultants (including the members of their well-known usage panel), a full guide to the dictionary, a



style manual, a section on abbreviations and labels used in the dictionary, and an explanation of the book's pronunciation system, *AHCD* includes Geoffrey Nunberg's essay "Usage in *The American Heritage Dictionary*." Shunning both rigid and out-of-date prescriptivism and undiluted descriptivism, this essay is amazingly lucid and balanced—virtually worth the price of the book.

*AHCD*'s back matter is a treasure. The six-page essay by Calvin Watkins, "Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans," although quite technical, is well worth the challenge and serves as background for the "Appendix of Indo-European Roots." These features of *American Heritage* dictionaries have long informed and delighted language lovers who are fascinated—even obsessed—by word origins. (Readers will have to consult *AHD4* for the new corresponding essay and appendix regarding Semitic roots.)

*AHCD* has a diacritical pronunciation system of the sort familiar to users of American dictionaries. *OACD*'s is something of a hybrid, essentially the same sort of respelling system but with some conventions borrowed from the International Phonetic Alphabet—/æ/ for "short a" and no syllable breaks. This can make the pronunciation of a long word daunting for the uninitiated.

Both books offer word history notes, usage notes, and—a boon to generations of frustrated dictionary users—origins for some idiomatic phrases. Oxford's extensive biographical definitions, especially for prominent political figures, are far more useful than the perfunctory offerings in some other books. *AHCD* too has more than minimal biographical information, although not as ample. A mark of the difference in their approach to the lexicon can be seen at *Madonna*, where *OACD* includes the pop icon, and *AHCD* includes the now obsolete "form of polite address" likely to be encountered by readers of historical fiction. *AHCD* features other notes—synonym paragraphs, regional notes, and notes called "Our Living Language." These last, introduced in *AHD4*, illuminate how American English varies not only by region but by social group and over time. The note discussing *like* as a way to introduce quotations is a gem.

To some extent, the books select different usage issues. *OACD* includes notes at the taboo

terms *nigger* and *fuck*, where *AHCD* simply has appropriate labels. Many of *AHCD*'s notes deal with grammatical and sociolinguistic questions—the verb *contact* in the sense 'to communicate with'; the current proliferation of the word *lifestyle*. Obviously, there is some overlap. The books give similar advice at *disinterested*, as they do at the fading feminine ending *-ess*, and their notes about the use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb supplement each other. In general, *AHCD*'s notes reflect the balanced judgment of Nunberg's essay, but it is a bit more difficult to detect a consistent philosophy in *OACD*. A note at *they*, for example, embraces the growing opinion that because *he* as a gender-neutral term is sexist, *they* is the term of choice even when the antecedent is singular, but the note at *between* perpetuates the somewhat old-fashioned notion that it is invariably restricted to two items. Both books include notes on changing or controversial pronunciations, as at *err* and, of course, *nuclear*. *OACD*'s are brief and to the point; *AHCD*'s are more detailed. Both are pretty much on target.

With 1,672 pages of A–Z text for *OACD* and 1,597 (on lightweight paper) for *AHCD*, the former comes in as a thicker, heavier book. On their jackets, *OACD* in this, its first incarnation, claims more than 400,000 entries and definitions, while *AHCD*, in a third revision of an established work, boasts 7,500 new entries. Numbers like this have come to mean little. Editors of all major U.S. dictionaries include as many entries and as much additional information as they can, given the constraints of time, space, and a need to preserve legibility. They must make difficult choices. Long entries mean fewer entries. Undefined terms, like derived forms and variant spellings, increase the official entry count, but supplementary notes, however enlightening, do not.

Given these constraints, *OACD* has chosen to sacrifice etymologies (labeled "ORIGIN" in *NOAD*). Although some people couldn't care less about word origins, for those of us who do, caveat emptor. *OACD*'s word history notes do cover etymological information, but in the fifteen pages from *Etna* to *Ezra*, I found notes only at *eulogy*, *exaggerate*, and *expletive*. Although these notes are



eminently readable and free of arcane etymological symbols, that's still an average of only one for every five pages. *American Heritage*, renowned for its concern with word origins, continues that tradition with both revised etymologies and expansive word histories. At *hacker*, for example, the etymology suggests that the form of the word evolved from *hack* 'to cut' or from *hacker* 'amateurish player,' while the note traces the word's semantic evolution from skillful computer programmer through skillful computer prankster to its usual present-day meaning, the skillful perpetrator of break-ins into other people's computer systems—a sense that still rangles those skillful computer programmers.

With the advent of computer-aided revisions, dictionaries are less reluctant than they once were to include brand-new terminology. Any dictionary will miss some new items; neither *AHCD* or *OACD*, for example, has identity theft. But both of these books make a concerted effort (*earwitness*, *feng shui*, *XML*), although they haven't always chosen the same terms. If *AHCD* has *weaponize* and *za* (short for pizza), *OACD* has *racial profiling* and *hot button*.

But the heart of a dictionary is not in etymology or neology but in its definitions. Here, too, *OACD* deliberately departs from convention—aiming, according to the preface, at “fewer meanings with sharper, crisper definitions.” Perhaps this was the motive for omitting the infinitival *to* in its verb definitions, but by doing so *OACD* loses an essential signal of verbness, without which it can take a moment for the brain to sort out whether one is dealing with a verb or a noun. In the definition at *hang* ‘exhibit or be exhibited, as in a museum,’ only the fact that the intransitive sense (“be exhibited”) is combined with the transitive keeps the definition from being simply “exhibit, as in a museum.” In *AHCD*'s more traditional “to display by attaching to a wall or other structure,” the *to* precludes noun-verb confusion. In addition, omitting *to* can give the reader a disconcerting sense of being ordered around: “behave or move in a listless . . . manner”; “tell a lie.”

Any time that you look up the same word in two dictionaries, you are likely to find one definition more nuanced or complete or helpful or satisfying than the other. Consider the politically sensitive affirmative action, defined by *OACD* as

action favoring those who tend to suffer from discrimination, esp. in relation to employment or education; positive discrimination.

Mentioning both employment and education is laudable, but this still seems a bit vague; what sort of action? performed by whom? Another element of mystery is added by reference to *positive discrimination*, defined in *NOAD* but not here. (It turns out to be a British term for *reverse discrimination*.) *AHCD*'s entry for *affirmative action* strikes me as subtly but significantly more focused:

A policy or a program that seeks to redress past discrimination by increasing opportunities for underrepresented groups, as in employment.

This wording makes it clear that the action is institutional rather than personal and clarifies what its objective is.

On the other hand, the benefits of *OACD*'s access to a corpus—a text database of the sort that has been available to British lexicographers for some time—are exemplified in its editors' handling of recently emergent senses. While *AHCD*'s definition of *lame* (“weak and ineffectual; unsatisfactory”) is certainly adequate, for those of us who strain to comprehend the language of the younger generation, *OACD* shines by making finer distinctions:

(of an explanation or excuse) unconvincingly feeble.  
(of something intended to be entertaining) uninspiring and dull.  
(of a person) naive or inept, esp. socially.

Often the books complement each other. At single, both have “unmarried,” but *AHCD* adds “lacking a partner: a single parent,” and *OACD* adds the new meaning that has taken off in recent years, “not involved in a stable sexual relationship.” I would hate to choose just one of these books when using both is so much more informative.

In sum, if I may anthropomorphize, *AHCD* is reliable, professional, comfortable to be with, and good to look at. Definitions and notes are focused, accessible, and often beautifully written. *OACD*—innovative and exciting—is not afraid to try out new ways of presenting and clarifying information. It invites exploration. If it is also occasionally undisciplined, it is bound to improve as it matures in future revisions. I would not allow either one to be taken away from me.

—Enid Pearsons





## Prewarned Is Preamed

Orin Hargraves

Westminster, Maryland

Since learning some time ago that a friend of mine has a pronounced negative reaction to abuses (as he sees them) of the prefix *pre-* in word formations, I have made a special point of bringing these to his attention whenever I find them. Evoking petty indignation is a cheap thrill, but after a certain age, thrills of any kind are a welcome diversion. Somewhat to my surprise and consternation, I have found over the years that I agree to an extent with my friend. There is abuse of *pre-*; it doesn't always belong with the words it is attached to; and perhaps worst of all from a lexicographic point of view, its behavior is not adequately documented in dictionaries.

Two points can be identified where the troubles began—one for my friend, one for me—and each of these illustrates a problematic use of *pre-*. My friend first effused disdain when he came across the term *predelinquent*. “What does *pre-* actually mean here?” he demanded. As a lexicographer, I sought refuge in the dictionary; but I found no comfort there. *Predelinquent*, though having considerable currency in sociologese and legalese (e.g., *predelinquent boys/homes/behavior/crimes*), has not yet made its way into general dictionaries, and it doesn't even make the “list words” at *pre-* in most dictionaries.

Consider some lexicographic treatments of *pre-*. Here's the entry from the *10th Merriam-Webster Collegiate*:

*prefix*

1 a (1) : earlier than : prior to : before  
Precambrian prehistoric

(2) : preparatory or prerequisite to: premedical

b : in advance : beforehand: precancel prepay

2 : in front of : anterior to: preaxial premolar

Where does *predelinquent* fit in? Does it describe preparation or prerequisites for true delinquency? Does it characterize delinquency in advance of the real thing, and if so, how do you tell the difference? Is a *predelinquent* the young thug who got there first? I examined a couple of other

reliable dictionaries for their treatment of *pre-*, the *New Oxford Dictionary of English (NODE)* and the *Random House Unabridged Dictionary (RHUD)*. *NODE* has a cursory treatment:

*prefix* before (in time, place, order, degree, or importance): *pre-adolescent* | *precaution* | *precede*

Would this suggest that the *predelinquent* is less important, or less serious, than the true delinquent? Or merely earlier in time or place? None of the choices really seems to capture what is intended when courts, or mental health professionals, characterize a youth or behavior as *predelinquent*. *RHUD* has by far the most complete treatment of *pre-*:

a prefix occurring originally in loanwords from Latin, where it meant “before” (*preclude*; *prevent*); applied freely as a prefix, with the meanings “prior to,” “in advance of,” “early,” “beforehand,” “before,” “in front of,” and with other figurative meanings (*preschool*; *prewar*; *prepay*; *preoral*; *prefrontal*).

By including the slippery “with other figurative meanings,” *RHUD*'s definition might be said to include the meaning of *pre-* in *predelinquent*, but the wording does not really capture it specifically. I think *predelinquent* belongs in a small class of words with a similar use of *pre-*, where it means ‘at risk of becoming X’ or ‘likely to develop into an X state,’ where X represents the affixed-to adjective or noun denoting something undesirable. Other examples include *precancerous* and *preeclampsia*, words that get full definitions rather than list treatment in dictionaries.

My own objections to *pre-* began on other grounds, with the use of the term *preowned*. Observers of usage will have noted that the range of application for this adjective is quite restricted. You don't shop for *preowned* clothing, and nobody ever bought a *preowned* Chevy Cavalier, but there is a considerable market in *preowned* Cadillacs and other luxury cars. *Preowned* jewelry and Rolex watches also show up frequently in WWW word searches. No one is really deceived that *preowned* is just a refined way of saying ‘used’ or ‘second-hand.’ (Who wants a second-hand Rolex, anyway?) This is what I think of as the *pre-* of privilege, a euphemistic use that arrogates exclusivity to the



things or people affected by it, and is cherished by said people on that account, though it is not terribly impressive to others. It contravenes the sensible rule of language that things should be called by their proper names.

Some other uses of *pre-* fall generally into these two classes: those like *predelinquent* that, while having some claim to legitimacy, are not properly treated in dictionaries, and those, like *preowned*, that constitute one of various abuses of the prefix. Herewith, some other examples:

(1) Consider this sentence from a recent British newspaper: “One of the main aims is to have a creche where mothers can drop off their babies in emergencies without having to pre-book.” Uh, shouldn’t that just be *book*? Surely the idea of ‘beforehand’ is implicit in the verb *book*, and there is no reason for attaching the prefix to it. The same rule applies to certain uses of other *pre-* words, which are often used in place of their unadorned attachments needlessly. *Prearrange* is a case in point: one of the meanings of *arrange* is ‘to prepare or plan,’ and these are things that one always does for the future, at least in the universe as constituted at present. Therefore it is unnecessary to *prearrange* something, or note that something is a *prearrangement*, unless there is a real need to distinguish the subject at hand from some other arrangement. Other frequently misused examples of this type include *preplan*, *preschedule*, and *prespecify*.

(2) Related to this phenomenon is a wide range of participial adjectives to which the muddy-headed or overzealous are wont to attach *pre-* needlessly. This usage has a conceptual relation to the *pre-* of privilege: lurking behind the prefix here is the idea that something is already done for you so that you don’t have to do it yourself. However, the thing done—that is, the action represented by the root verb—is usually of an irreversible and obvious nature, and the participial form alone adequately conveys the idea of ‘already done.’ (Isn’t that why we call it the past participle?) Therefore it is completely unnecessary to affix *pre-* because the meaning is not changed thereby. Case in point: *presliced*. Now what, really, is the difference between *presliced bread/olives/peppers/salmon* and the same objects when merely sliced? Those tempted to prefix words

in this class with *pre-* would do well to remember the idiom “the greatest thing since sliced bread,” and note that this benchmark of greatness was not achieved by preslicing the bread. Trawling through a corpus turns up any number of *pre-* misalliances along these lines: *prebaited*, *prebent*, *preoiled*, *prewritten*. Mind you, this is not to say that there is not scope in the language for such useful and mainly technical terms as *prefabricated*, *precooked*, *preprinted*, etc. These have mostly arisen as retronyms to distinguish their associated nouns from the unmodified form: e.g., *prefabricated houses*, as distinct from the kind built in situ. The proper use of these technical terms does not, however, provide license to attach *pre-* willy-nilly to other participles. This use of *pre-* can be abused in another way, as in the case of *preselected*, meaning, uh, *selected*. What people want it to mean is ‘selected in advance to save you the trouble.’ What it usually means is ‘narrowed down before you even get to see what might have been available.’ This citation, from a corpus, more or less says it all: “Microsoft’s preselected choices.”

(3) What dearth of imagination caused figures in both the sports and the legal world to come up with the monstrosity *pre-preliminary*? *Pre-preliminary hearings* are now a standard feature of many court cases, and *pre-preliminary competitions*, particularly in skating, take place almost daily. Surely such usages cause the past champions of English to roll their eyes heavenward as they turn in their graves. No stone of the language should have been left unturned to avoid using a word such as this, but it has now become so firmly fixed in its specialized fields that it is not likely to be replaced. The temptation to tack *pre-* onto a word already beginning with *pre-* should be accompanied, in any true-blooded native speaker, by the conviction that it’s time to overhaul a whole system of nomenclature.

(4) Acquaintances of mine recently told me that they had been out *preshopping*. “How is that different from shopping?” I ask innocently. “You don’t actually buy anything,” they said. “You just look around to see what’s available, and then you go back later after you’ve made up your mind and buy what you want.” I held my tongue, before consulting my thumb-indexed companions, but after doing so I find



that I am fully justified in finding this usage objectionable. Consider *RHUD*: ‘to visit shops and stores for purchasing or examining goods.’ Visiting a retail venue with the sole object of examining goods is surely subsumed under the idea of ‘shop.’ There is no need ever for anyone to *preshop*, and certainly no need for them to talk about it. This is an abuse of *pre*-in which the user divides an activity into stages it does not actually contain, and it has cousins. Our rapaciously consumerist society has given rise to frequent invitations to *preorder* something: “They’re not released yet, but you can preorder any of these upcoming titles!” Why is this necessary? If we *preorder*, do we then have to order later on? Of course not, because when we *preorder*, we are in fact ordering; we are usually ordering something that isn’t available yet. Most dictionaries treat *preorder* as a list word, which doesn’t seem quite adequate in light of its fairly fixed usage noted here.

I have already intimated that I am of an age at which thrill-seeking is undertaken incautiously, and I am a little concerned that the tone of this article may seem pre-fuddy-duddy to some readers. In response to that charge I would say only: usage alone, in the long run, dictates what words will mean, and when they clearly begin to mean something that they didn’t used to, whether we like it or not, it’s time for dictionaries to catch up. But we all, as grateful heirs of the glory that is English, owe the language a certain respect, which we can pay by using its resources judiciously and with due precaution.

[*Orin Hargraves is the author of Mighty Fine Words and Smashing Expressions: Making Sense of Transatlantic English (Oxford, \$27.50). His last piece for VERBATIM was “Rendering the Language of Daad” in XXVII/2.*]

## EPISTOLA

Re p. 7 of VERBATIM XXVII/4, I don’t have a proper source for this observation, but *Cackylacky* sounds suspiciously like the German word *Kakerlaken* “cockroaches.” (And the etymology of *Kakerlak* bears looking into. Was it, like the English *cockroach*, borrowed from Spanish *cucaracha* and folk-etymologized into its current form?)

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## I before E?

Pat Sheil  
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There is a school of thought, admittedly not a large one, but a school nonetheless, that argues that being classed as a complete dunderhead in one’s school years is an almost certain guarantee of great success later in life.

Of course, nine times out of ten a prepubescent dunderhead is a dunderhead for life. Be that as it may, it has reassured generations of morons to learn that Henry Ford and Thomas Edison were considered academic basket cases for their entire scholastic careers, only to go on and put hundreds of runs on the board, to the eternal credit of goofballs everywhere.

As a less-than-ideal student, I too took solace from these exceptions that proved the rule. Whether or not I’ve since transcended my fundamental ignorance is not for me to judge, but I have, I think, come up with an elegant explanation of my greatest academic failing—a complete inability to spell words of more than one syllable.

You see, I was cursed with a surname that breaks the first spelling rule, flogged into the back-sides of dyslexic dunderheads everywhere. I refer, of course, to that axiom of the grade three blackboard, “I before E except after C.”

Presented as it was as self-evident truth to a boy of sensitive nature and half-formed intellect, I naturally found this edict perplexing and indeed, a trifle offensive. As a living, breathing violation of the rules, I was at once on the outer, English-wise. My very existence was an affront to the by-laws of the language. I was born a dunderhead, and so I would remain.

I was behind the eight ball.

Eight ball?

Yes, eight ball! With a blinding flash, in a rare synthesis of mathematics and literature stumbled upon during a routine recital of my eight times table, I realised that I’d been had. *I before E* my arse!

At once I realised that The Rule had been devised by evil men determined to baffle rather than enlighten, crusty pedants who would have us believe that English can be regulated, just as 3B could be stood to attention in the playground before being marched off to Scripture class. By God, they’d get their comeuppance, or my name wasn’t . . . a spelling mistake!



At night I would compile long lists of exceptions to their dictum, each one a jewel to be treasured. I remember sitting by the weir, wrapped in my eider-down, staring up at the Pleiades, musing on what kind of society would perpetrate such heinous crimes on the mind of a young lad.

The time came for a showdown. One day, having failed a spelling test, I addressed my tormentor:

“I will not feign disappointment at my failure to win this preposterous eisteddfod. If you will pardon the sleight sir, you reign over us like a cruel sheik, while we are mere villeins to be inveigled and kept under constant surveillance. But we are neither, and you are nothing but a beige cardigan, your very being a disgrace to your species.

You, with ice in your veins, heir to an ancient Zeitgeist and a discredited science, would deign to crush the flowering prescience of youth? Ha!

Call me an atheist if you will, but I reiterate, your weird pronouncements are the height of absurdity and carry no weight.

Why, I would as soon listen to the man in the vermeil coat, his reindeer pulling a sleigh and its freight of kaleidoscopic dreams!”

Of course, this was just a feint—I was feeling feisty, and the true blow was yet to come. Turning to my astonished classmates, I continued in similar vein.

“Raise your steins, neighbours! He is but a poltergeist! We have ripped his veil asunder and seen him for what he is! We shall eat Madeira cake tonight and burn their Pleistocene manuals of repression at our leisure! This is a seismic shift! Seize the day!”

To a rousing cheer, I was carried upon a dozen shoulders into the middle distance, only to be expelled some hours later.

But this was a trifle next to my triumph of the morning. I realised shortly thereafter that the greatest dunderhead of them all, Albert Einstein, was similarly cursed, and twice in two syllables to boot.

He’d done all right.

Since that glorious day, I have been completely at ease with my iconoclastic label. The way I see it, if it’s good enough for Einstein, good enough for our sovereign, and good enough for even the Deity Himself, then it’s quite sufficient for Pat Sheil.

[Pat Sheil is an Australian journalist, specialising in subjects others have seen fit to leave well alone. His most recent books include the muckraking *Olympic Babylon: The True Story of the Olympic Games*, and a life-threatening guide to *high-octane cuisine*, *Cooking with Fat*.]

## The Verbal Ape

### How Evolutionary Pressures Set the Stage for Language Purists

August Rubrecht  
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After one of my performances at a storytelling festival, a couple came up to say they enjoyed my stories. It is important to note that I tell many of them in the vernacular of my native Ozarks. The woman simply complimented me, but her husband tempered his compliments by saying, “I can’t get over how you have a Ph.D. in English, and yet you butcher the language that way.”

I said, “Oh no, I don’t butcher it, I just slap it around a little. Got to show it who’s boss.”

His culture had taught him which usages were “good,” implicitly tagging the rest “bad.” Though culture supplied the details, I don’t think it had to teach him the principle. There are good empirical and theoretical reasons to conclude that a tendency to adopt and try to enforce linguistic conformity stems from the same source that gives rise to humans’ innate language capacity—our evolutionary heritage.

You may be able to find some empirical evidence inside your own head. Even if you have now developed the same level of usage tolerance as our editor, don’t you recall times when you have thought something like, “Now, why would so-and-so call a *bedstead* a *bedframe*? Doesn’t she know the right word?” If you’re a Northerner, haven’t you thought, “I just don’t see how Southerners can make two syllables out of the word *that*”? Or if a Southerner, “Those people up north clip their words off too short”? Even though I try to be a principled tolerator, I still sometimes find myself wishing folks from the lower Hudson Valley could see their way clear to pronounce the vowel in *dog* and *fawn* some other way. Nobody ever taught me to disparage the pronunciation. I liked the classmate I first heard it from, so my feeling cannot be explained as personal antipathy transferred to an innocent diphthong. It just welled up.

Also, the tendency appears too early in a child’s development to be readily explained as being a



result of culture. My son learned his English here in Wisconsin, modeling at least as much on his daycare providers and playmates and on his older sister as on my wife and me. When he was about two, before he could differentiate between /f/ and /p/, he could already consistently pronounce /aI/ before /r/. I don't. I would lead him to our wood stove and say, "Ward, come help me stir the fahr."

He would look up indignantly and correct me with "No, *pye*-er!"

I am happy to report he soon learned /f/, and by age four he could not only tolerate my pronunciation but articulate it as well, when he chose to. The point again: nobody needed to teach him to show disapproval for a pronunciation different from his. It was tolerance that had to be taught.

Evolutionary theory offers a number of reasons for why we should be expected to carry this tendency in our genes. The most obvious is simply the need for accurate communication. Members of all social species warn others in their group of outside danger, and many use different calls or other signals to distinguish between airborne and earth-bound threats. If a few members of a monkey troop misunderstand the simian equivalent of "Snake!" to mean "Hawk!" and dive into the bushes instead of standing up to see which way to dodge, they are likely to get eliminated from the gene pool early. If they regularly give the wrong cry, they endanger their fellows, and that whole troop will (as evolutionary biologists put it) suffer a selective disadvantage compared with troops with dependable communications. Such selective pressures may cause a species to develop hard-wired signals—the dances of honeybees or the laughter of human beings, for example—but not necessarily. Survival does not require the message to take a particular form, only that it be understood. So a species that evolves a tendency to follow, and if necessary enforce, group norms will be well served even if different groups develop different norms.

Our human tendency to follow and enforce group norms goes far beyond the requirements of accurate communication, of course. Priests carry out rituals. Diplomats follow protocols. School principals impose dress codes. Suburbanites insist their neighbors keep their lawns mowed. Hostesses

hope guests will use salad and seafood forks during the appropriate courses. And linguistic purists expect the rest of us not to split infinitives.

As culturally bound as each example is, the list as a whole points to a profound human universal: the need to define and unify "our" people. This is the second reason we should expect human communities to promote linguistic conformity. Until agriculture permitted the rise of cities, our human and prehuman ancestors lived in small groups. Harsh conditions exerted evolutionary pressure by killing many individuals before they reached breeding age and preventing many that did from raising enough offspring to sustain their lineages. Within each village or nomad troop, some members succeeded better than others at finding food or building shelters or forming alliances. Here is where biology ushered in culture as the dominant survival strategy for our species. Selective pressures favored not only the innately successful individuals, but also those born with a tendency to imitate the successful. The process worked in more than one way. By imitating a few of the behaviors, such as weaving fibers, knapping flint, and keeping track of seasons, the imitators picked up cultural solutions to survival problems, directly increasing the likelihood they would survive and procreate. By imitating other behaviors, such as dressing and dancing and speaking a certain way, imitators symbolically associated themselves with the successful, increasing their own chances of attracting desirable mates with whom they could produce viable offspring. There was another benefit as well. Without group support individuals could not thrive, so selective pressures favored those who maintained strong social bonds. People form group bonds by many means—exchanging work, sharing food, and playing together, for example—but some of the most important ways they reaffirm and reinforce those bonds are by dressing and acting and talking alike. At first people do these things voluntarily; then the choice develops into an obligation, and nonconformists are ridiculed or punished. Eventually some behavior

**MOVING? You know the drill—let us know right away, by phone, email, or those funny things with stamps on. Don't miss any issues of your favorite language magazine.**



patterns, especially those of speech, turn into habits people cannot change even if they want to. At this point these behavioral norms serve to separate as well as unify; they allow group members to distinguish fellow members, who deserve support, from outsiders, who do not.

Obviously, the tendency examined here promotes linguistic diversity as well as conformity—diversity between speech communities and conformity within them. In fact, when regional or social subgroups form, they often take pains to cultivate differences, including linguistic ones, that set them off as distinct. But this is not the place to explore the forces promoting linguistic diversity.

A well-known insider/outsider anecdote—the archetypal one, in fact—is told in the twelfth chapter of Judges. The Gileadites, at war with the Ephraimites, could identify an enemy soldier trying to pass through a checkpoint by a simple linguistic test, explained in verse 6: “Then said they unto him, Say now Shibboleth; and he said Sibboleth: for he could not frame to pronounce it right. Then they took him and slew him at the passages of Jordan: and there fell at that time of the Ephraimites forty and two thousand.” I often meditate on this passage when confronted by those who inform me I have violated some current shibboleth. It reminds me how much I would rather have someone correct my pronunciation than slay me for it. I should even feel flattered, I guess; after all, in expecting me to conform to their norms, they imply I belong in their group, and they are reaching out to me. I don’t feel flattered, though, and the reason is suggested in the phrase *their norms*.

In stressing so far only the role played within groups by cooperation and bonding, I have told only half the story. As small-group animals, human beings do not ordinarily run in undifferentiated herds, like wildebeests. We maintain hierarchies, like wolves and baboons. Within those hierarchies we scramble to rise higher, or at the very least to avoid falling lower. This ambition for status implies a third reason for linguistic conformity. For our human and prehuman ancestors, the drive for status was a deadly serious matter because high rank meant access to scarce resources. In lean and perilous times, low-status individuals died or failed to

reproduce. Thus, evolutionary pressures ensured that competition would play as big a role in our relationships as cooperation. Even though in industrialized nations starvation and predation pressures are largely off now, and even that of disease is vastly lessened, our inherited competitive drive remains. Not only do we make sure to wear appropriate clothes to show we belong, we put on the finest we can afford to show we belong at the top. Or if we desire to rise to the top of a punk group, we wear the grungiest and most outlandish costume we can put together. The aim is the same: to exhibit the values of our group to an extreme degree. In discourse, we try to attain prestige by talking like those who already have it. If we already have it, we try to maintain it by insisting that our kind of talk is the kind others should imitate, and then reminding them when they try that they haven’t quite got it right. Is it any wonder we use the expression *put down* to describe how we feel when someone corrects our English?

If I am right, then, it is only natural for human beings to correct the language of others. What we have to remember is that civilized life requires natural impulses to be channeled and sometimes curbed. The small groups we evolved in have coalesced into supergroups with complex, confusing overlaps. Instead of belonging to a village or tribe, where religious, occupational, recreational, and family life all go on within a single speech community, most of us associate closely with several distinct groups and interact peripherally with a far larger number. It is foolish to expect the parochial uniformity our remote ancestors enjoyed—or endured. Under these conditions our best course is to channel our corrective efforts toward promoting clear and frequent communication. We need to practice linguistic tolerance and cultivate it among our fellows. We need to curb our tendency to put others down. Fortunately, our evolutionary heritage has bestowed upon us a vast capacity for shaping behavior through culture. We can do it.

[August Rubrecht shared his reminiscences of the DARE project in VERBATIM XXIII/4 and discussed why we have got ‘have got’ in XXIV/1.]



## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

A great many books have found their way to the VERBATIM offices in the past few months, so it's time for another brief roundup.

The first is Anu Garg's delightful *A Word A Day* (Wiley, US\$14.95, 0471230324), and if you are a subscriber to VERBATIM and do not also receive the Word A Day email (check out <http://www.word-smith.org>), you must not have a computer at all. Readable, friendly, and crammed with information, this is a must-have book.

If you don't have a computer, you might not need *You Send Me*, by Patricia T. O'Conner and Stewart Kellerman (Harcourt, US\$17.95, 0151005931) but you might want it anyway, because their common-sensical and good-humored tips for writing good email certainly apply to non-electronic communication as well.

George Eliot said "I have the conviction that excessive literary production is a social offense," and I must admit that I often have the same thought, especially when faced with a stack of books to review. However, Bob Perlongo has assembled a kind of writer's commonplace book, *The Write Book: An Illustrated Treasury of Tips, Tactics, and Tirades* (Art Direction Book Company, 0-88108225-2) that distills some of the excessive literary production of the past century or more (including the quote above) into a collection that, if not as readable as the other books mentioned here, is at least as browsable.

William Safire has already used his *New York Times Magazine* column to praise both *The Dimwit's Dictionary* (Marion Street Press, \$19.95, 096651760) and *The Dictionary of Concise Writing*, by Robert Hartwell Fiske, but I might as well add my voice to the chorus. It's refreshing to see that Fiske does not just dispose of tired clichés and wordy phrases, but instead proposes sensible alternatives, and often includes example sentences. (And yes, I checked to be sure "tired clichés" wasn't on his list.) My only quibble is that I would have preferred to have both books in a single volume, to save tedious flipping from one to the other.

—Erin McKean

## OBITER DICTA

Oxford University Press is looking for two US quotations readers to help with quotations research.

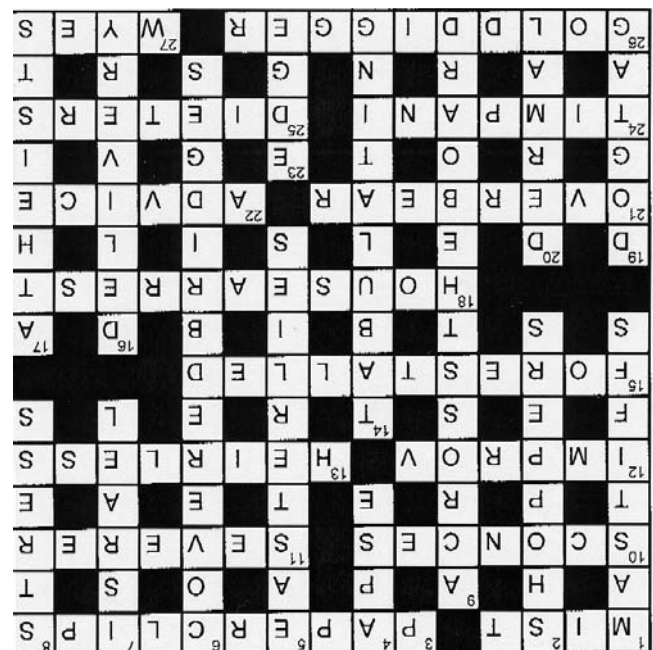
Readers will collect and send in new and interesting quotations or examples of old quotations enjoying new popularity in print media. Compensation will be in Oxford books.

Interested parties can inquire for further details or submit résumés to [mckeane@oup-usa.org](mailto:mckeane@oup-usa.org), or to Erin McKean, 4907 N. Washtenaw Avenue, Chicago IL 60625.

## IN MEMORIAM

We are very sorry to note that Dr. Warren Gilson, VERBATIM's friend and benefactor, passed away November 4 at the age of 85. A noted businessman, entrepreneur, and inventor, with many patents to his credit, Dr. Gilson will be sorely missed. VERBATIM was only one of his many philanthropies.

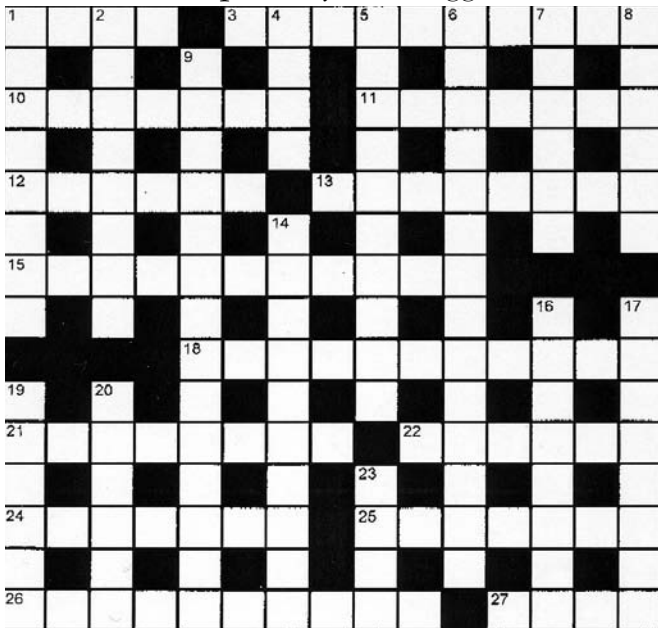
He never failed to comment on each issue, and in five years only made one editorial request: for VERBATIM to run an article on alternatives to the gender-specific third-person singular pronoun. That article was commissioned shortly before his death and will run in a future issue.





## Cryptic Crossword Number 92

Composed by Bob Stigger



### Across

- 1 In conversation, noted the absence of fog (4)  
 3 Office supplies terrible apple crisp (5,5)  
 10 South Carolina, formerly the leader in stylish candle brackets (7)  
 11 Simpler cleaver (7)  
 12 A type of comedy better left unfinished (6)  
 1.3 Speaker's still without a legal successor (8)  
 15 Frustrated, Al held the top spot behind Woods (11)  
 18 60 Minutes, others describing Marine detention method. (5,6)  
 21 Keep total control, or beaver spread (8)  
 22 Opinion of commercial immorality (6)  
 24 Great—I'm panicking around kettledrums (7)  
 25 A bit of incredible stuffing discourages calorie-counters (7)  
 26 Strange girl dogged wealth-seeking woman (4,6)  
 27 Railroad switching layouts work OK (4)

### Down

- 1 Mother's run-ins with large canines (8)  
 2 At the mail, they buy false teeth with a new crown (8)  
 4 EPA takes last of asbestos from behind sanctuary area (4)  
 5 Spring holiday locations with some winds (10)  
 6 Novel described grove with points of interest in Madison County (7,7)  
 7 Shakespearean king's ego upset country (6)  
 8 Place importance on the opening of Suez lock (6)  
 9 Decorators' bash is wild, in general (6-3-5)  
 14 Listing of banned Latin writing's final (10)  
 16 Shipment of purchased goods is quite beneath food store (8)  
 17 They don't believe this tea's blended (8)  
 19 Party gag—hiding student's last ID (3,3)  
 20 Tender, malleable covering of the skin (6)  
 23 Cheese chunk lacks initial sharpness (4)

## MISCELLANEA

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

**It'll Never Show On Camera**—an insider's tell-all memoir from the so-called Golden Age of Live Television. Our young hero is exposed to the delightfully seamy side of practical jokes, assignments gone awry, semi-lewd Santas, too-tight spacesuits and getting even with tyrannical bosses.

The perils of weather shows done outdoors, robotic cameras leering at scantily clad models, the Studebaker from Hell, cranky kiddies and maniacal monkeys in out-of-the-way TV studios are indispensable tidbits in William S. Murray's coming-of-age on the other side of the screen. *It'll Never Show On Camera* is a delightful peek at events that (mostly) never show on camera.

\$19.95 to Visibility Group, box 11-746, Chicago 60611 or [www.visibilitygroup.com](http://www.visibilitygroup.com)

**up/dn**, a Dictionary and Contradictionary of Anagrams, Palindromes and Polyanagrams, by Anil. "Brilliant; sure to delight anyone interested in wordplay" — Martin Gardner. 86 pp. \$10 US; \$15 elsewhere. WORD WAYS, Spring Valley Rd., Morristown, NJ 07960.

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