



Seinfeldisms

Paul McFedries
Toronto, Ontario

It has become a cliché to say that the TV sitcom *Seinfeld* was “a show about nothing.” But to anyone who loves words and appreciates good (and even bad) word play, *Seinfeld* was really a show about *language*. The absurd situations, the sight gags, and Kramer’s entrances, exits, and pratfalls notwithstanding, the comedy and the commentary in *Seinfeld* was remarkably language-based. In fact, it’s not a stretch to say that no other TV show before or since has been so self-consciously verbal. Yes, other shows have sprouted famous catchphrases, from Jackie Gleason’s “How sweet it is!” to Star Trek’s “Beam me up, Scotty” to Anne Robinson’s “You are the weakest link!”

Seinfeld, too, generated its share of catchphrases, the most famous being *not that there’s anything wrong with that* (“The Outing,” Feb. 11, 1993), and *yada yada yada* (“The Yada Yada,” Apr. 24, 1997). But the *Seinfeld* writers—co-creator Larry David in particular—went far beyond mere catchphrases. They *played* with the language in almost every episode. When a woman tells Jerry—who is pretending to be unfunny—that she thought he was happy-go-lucky, he replies, “I’m not happy and I’m not lucky, and I don’t go. If anything I’m sad-stop-unlucky” (“The Bubble Boy,” Oct. 7, 1992). While discussing a serial killer called “The Lopper” because he cuts people’s heads off, Kramer tells us that the police have had “some internal dissension about the name,” with an alternative being “The Denogginizer” (“The Frogger,” Apr. 23, 1998). Then there’s the following exchange (“The Abstinence,” Nov. 21, 1996):

JERRY: I thought the whole dream of dating a doctor was debunked.

ELAINE: No, it’s not debunked; it’s totally bunk.

JERRY: Isn’t bunk bad? Like, “that’s a lot of bunk.”

GEORGE: No, something is bunk and then you debunk it.

JERRY: What?

ELAINE: Huh?

GEORGE: I think.

Back formations—new words formed by removing a real or imagined affix from an existing word—are also part of “Seinlanguage.” Examples include the verb *bobulate*, ‘to be composed and level-headed’ (from *discombobulate*; “The Parking Space,” Apr. 22, 1992) and the nouns *odorant* (from *deodorant*) and *perspirant* (from *anti-perspirant*; both appeared in “The Smelly Car,” Apr. 15, 1993).

The *Seinfeld* writers also weren’t shy about creating their own euphemisms. For example, a woman with silicone breast implants is *playing with confederate money* (“The Implant,” Feb. 25, 1993); the genital region is *below the equator* (“The Mango,” Sept. 16, 1993); having sex is *going downtown* (“The Label Maker,” Jan. 19, 1995); and a gay person who becomes straight is *changing teams* (“The Doorman,” Feb. 23, 1995).

Turning nouns into verbs is a common neological game, and it’s one that the *Seinfeld* writers enjoyed playing. The following nouns were all used as verbs in *Seinfeld* episodes: *bagel* (“The Strike,” Dec. 18, 1997: MANAGER: I could use someone for the holidays. KRAMER: Alright! Toss me an apron, let’s bagel!); *congeniality* (“The Chaperone,” Sept. 22, 1994: JERRY: You know, you better be careful, you don’t want to get too congenial. They’ll slap that “Miss Congeniality” on you, and you’ll congene yourself right out of the contest); *couple* (“The Sponge,” Dec. 7, 1995: SUSAN: Well, it’s alright, I’m your fiancée. Everyone assumes you’ll tell me everything. GEORGE: Where did you get that from? SUSAN: Well, we’re a couple. It’s understood. GEORGE: I never heard of that. SUSAN:



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Well, you've never been a couple. GEORGE: I've coupled! I've coupled!); *dictator* ("The Gymnast," Nov. 3, 1994: JERRY: So, Ceaușescu. He must've been some dictator. KATYA: Oh yes. He was not shy about dictating. JERRY: He must have been dictating first thing in the morning. "I want a cup of coffee and a muffin!"); *Guggenheim* ("The Big Salad," Sept. 29, 1994: JULIE: So, I guess I better get going. Gotta meet mother at the Guggenheim. Sure you don't want to go? GEORGE: No, you go Guggenheim.); *guile* ("The Truth," Sept. 25, 1991: PATRICE: You mean that? GEORGE: Of course I mean that. I am incapable of guile. JERRY: He's never guiled); *kibosh* ("The Opera," Nov. 4, 1992: JOE DIVOLA: I know what you said about me, Seinfeld. I know you badmouthed me to the execs at NBC, put the kibosh on my deal. Now I'm gonna put the kibosh on you. You know I've kiboshed before, and I will kibosh again); *lesbian* ("The Smelly Car," April 15, 1993: GEORGE: The woman she's lesbianing with? Susan told me she's never been with a guy); *Nautilus* ("The Bottle Deposit," May 2, 1996: SUSIE: It's nice having a big, strong, man around. NEWMAN: You know, those mail bags, they get mighty heavy. I, uh, I Nautilus, of course); *Schnapps* ("The Betrayal," Nov. 20, 1997: ELAINE: George knows that you slept with Nina. That's why he was acting so weird. JERRY: How did he find out? ELAINE: He schnapped me); *spatula* ('to scratch one's back using a spatula'; "The Pie," Feb. 17, 1994: KRAMER: I'm going home to spatula); *steel-toe* ("The Bizarro Jerry," Oct. 3, 1996: JERRY: So how'd it go with Kevin? Did you steel-toe his ass back to Kentucky?).

But what truly distinguishes *Seinfeld* from all other TV shows is the sheer wealth of new words coined by the writers. In the new-verb department, for example, we have *clean house*, 'to pick one's nose' ("The Pick," Dec. 16, 1992); *de-smellify*, 'to remove a smell' ("The Smelly Car," Apr. 15, 1993), *de-sour*, 'to once again enjoy something that one has become soured on' ("Friar's Club," Mar. 7, 1996); *fake-erase*, 'to pretend to erase something' ("The Package," Oct. 17, 1996); *ghost read*, 'to read a book for someone else'(cf. *ghost write*; "The Van Buren Boys," Feb. 6, 1997); and *level-jumping*, 'assuming a closer friendship than actually exists' ("The Bris," Oct. 14, 1993).

The *Seinfeld* writers had an absolute mania about forging new nouns, coining more than 100 of them in the show's 180 episodes. The proverbial space limitations prevent me from giving you a complete list, but here are a few of my favorites: *blow-off number*, 'a phone number other than one's own that one gives to a suitor that one doesn't want to see again' ("The Strike," Dec. 18, 1997); *"I love you" return*, 'the "I love you" that another person says in response to being told "I love you"' ("The Face Painter," May 11, 1995); *kiss-hello program*, 'habitually kissing another person as part of a greeting' ("The Kiss Hello," Feb. 16, 1995); *must-lie situation*, 'a situation in which lying is the only prudent course' ("The Hamptons," May 12, 1994); *non-date personality*, 'the (presumably more natural) personality that one exhibits when not on a date' ("The Masseuse," Nov. 18, 1993); *pull-back*, 'the quick movement of a person's head back from another person who is attempting a kiss' ("The Tape," Nov. 13, 1991); *ribbon bully*, 'a person who tries to force others to wear a ribbon that symbolizes a cause, such as AIDS' ("The Sponge," Dec. 7, 1995); *sexual camel*, 'a person who can go for long periods without sex' ("The Abstinence," Nov. 21, 1996); *tap*, 'a tap on the shoulder to stop a person engaged in oral sex' ("The Mango," Sept. 16, 1993).

Of course, neologisms become mere "stunt" words unless they get picked up and used in other contexts. The above neologisms, clever as some of them are, haven't yet made a dent in the lexicon. There are, however, plenty of Seinfeldisms that have escaped the confines of the show and have struck out on their own:

anti-dentite n. A person who dislikes or is prejudiced against dentists. —adj. (The Yada Yada, Apr. 24, 1997): JERRY: Kramer, he's just a dentist. KRAMER: Yeah, and you're an anti-dentite. *The Hamilton Spectator*, Jan. 24, 2003: She comes back over the years as The Tooth Fairy to claim young victims after they lose their last baby tooth. It's enough to make anyone an anti-dentite. *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 1997: And consider the anti-dentite images on the big screen.

bad breaker-upper n. A person who breaks up with other people in a mean or messy way.



(The Andrea Doria, Dec. 19, 1996): ELAINE: So, I called my friend—you know, the one who set us up—I found out, he's a bad breaker-upper. *Dayton Daily News*, Jan. 3, 2003: Mitch Allan is a bad breaker-upper. *The Capital*, Dec. 31, 2002: You don't want to be labeled the bad breaker-upper.

breakee n. The person that another person breaks up with. ("The Lip Reader," Oct. 28, 1993): JERRY: Well, if a couple breaks up and [has] plans to go to a neutral place, who withdraws? What's the etiquette? KRAMER: Excellent question. JERRY: I think she should withdraw. She's the breaker, he's the breakee. *University Wire*, July 30, 2001: When Ryan and Crowe split, she was on the cover of at least one entertainment magazine to say she was the breaker and not the breakee. *Rocky Mountain News*, May 26, 2001: It's also likely that at the time of the breakup, the breakee didn't change the locks at the house.

conjugal-visit sex n. Sex that occurs when a man or woman visits his or her spouse in prison. ("The Postponement," Sept. 28, 1995): JERRY: In your situation the only sex you're going to have better than make-up sex is if you're sent to prison and you have a conjugal visit. GEORGE: Yeah, conjugal-visit sex. That is happening! *University Wire*, Jan. 21, 1999: I'm willing to bet [long distance relationship sex] rates right by make-up sex and falls right behind conjugal-visit sex.

double-dip v. To dip a chip, take a bite, and then dip the chip again. ("The Implant," Feb. 25, 1993): TIMMY: Did you just double-dip that chip? GEORGE: Excuse me? TIMMY: You double-dipped the chip! GEORGE: Double-dipped? What are you talking about? TIMMY: You dipped the chip. You took a bite. And you dipped again. *Sacramento Bee* Jan. 8, 2003: It's perfect for folks who . . . like to double-dip their chips. *Associated Press*, Dec. 7, 2002: Weaver laughingly suggests posting a "No Double-

Dipping" sign near dips to prevent guests at casual parties from dunking food into a dip after taking a bite.

hand n. Control, especially over a partner in a relationship. ("The Pez Dispenser," Jan. 15, 1992): GEORGE: No everything is not going good. I'm very uncomfortable. I have no power. I mean, why should she have the upper hand. Once in my life I would like the upper hand. I have no hand, no hand at all. She has the hand; I have no hand. *Plain Dealer*, Oct. 4, 1996: It has to do with having what is called "hand" in a relationship, an all-encompassing concept that basically says you are no pushover.

hand sandwich n. A handshake in which one person places their free hand over the top of the other person's shaking hand. (Good News, Bad News ("The Seinfeld Chronicles," July 5, 1989): JERRY: Shake is bad, but what if it's the "two-hander"? The hand on the bottom, the hand on the top, the warm look in the eyes? GEORGE: Hand sandwich. *The Observer*, Oct. 6, 2002: Major is equally expert in one-to-one magnetism, according to the senior women confiding how he entranced them with his 'hand sandwich' grip. *The Times*, Aug. 28, 1996: [LBJ's] two hands covered my right in a hearty hand sandwich.

"it's not you it's me" routine n. Breaking up with a person using the excuse, "It's not you, it's me." ("The Lip Reader," Oct. 28, 1993): GWEN: It's not you, it's me. GEORGE: You're giving me the "it's not you, it's me" routine? I invented "it's not you, it's me." Nobody tells me it's them not me, if it's anybody it's me. *BusinessWorld*, Dec. 20, 2001: She gave me that "it's not you, it's me" routine. *Birmingham Post*, July 12, 1999: The "It's not you, it's me," routine is a line below contempt but it's handy when you can't be bothered to list everything.

low talker n. A person who talks extremely quietly. ("The Puffy Shirt," Sept. 23, 1993): JERRY: You can't believe this woman. She's one of those low talkers. You can't hear a



word she's saying. *Courier Mail*, Jan. 30, 2003: If he'd been the subject of a *Seinfeld* episode, David Caruso would have been the "low-talker." *Phoenix New Times*, May 30, 2002: Schicker is a low talker, a problem possibly exacerbated by the large metal ring through his bottom lip.

master of your domain euphemism Able to refrain from masturbation. ("The Contest," Nov. 18, 1992): KRAMER: Oh. So, did you make it through the night? JERRY: Yes, I'm proud to say I did. KRAMER: So, you're still master of your domain. *Ottawa Sun*, Feb. 27, 1999: Brad Roberts is not the master of his domain. While discussing auto-eroticism . . . Roberts slips his own hands into his pockets. *Alice Magazine*, May 2000: Weird Science . . . that eighties classic (about two boys who were, uh, still masters of their domain).

mimbo n. A male bimbo. ("The Stall," Jan. 6, 1994): JERRY: Elaine, he's a male bimbo, he's a mimbo. *Washington Post*, Jan. 26, 2003: And if a boy doesn't want to become an Abercrombie & Fitch mimbo, well, there are thousands of other companies desperate to help him self-actualize. *Brandweek*, April 22, 2002: [A] Norwegian TV station is counter-programming with a pair of meteorological mimbos.

pre-emptive breakup n. A breakup performed before the other person can break up with you. ("The Pez Dispenser," Jan. 15, 1992): KRAMER: Break up with her. GEORGE: What? KRAMER: You break up with her. You reverse everything that way. JERRY: A pre-emptive breakup. *New York Times*, March 17, 1998: Mr. Shear's new songs are on the folksy side. . . . Some—like "The Last in Love," about a pre-emptive breakup—are two-character vignettes. *Tulsa World*, May 12, 1999: I'm not saying to pull a pre-emptive breakup, but just try not to think it's life or death if it doesn't work out.

regift v. To give as a gift something that one received as a gift. —*regifter* n. ("The Label Maker," Jan. 19, 1995): JERRY: Are you

even vaguely familiar with the concept of giving? There's no grace period. GEORGE: Well, didn't he regift the label maker? *Omaha World-Herald*, Aug. 2, 2002: Angela thinks some of the presents may have been regifted once or twice already. *Wilmington Star-News*, Dec. 3, 1995: Call it tacky, rude, maybe even thoughtless, but "regifting" is about as ritualistic as giving away that lump of jellied fruit every year.

separatée n. A person who is separated (cf. *divorcée*). ("The Fusilli Jerry," Apr. 27, 1995): ESTELLE: Georgie, I'm a divorcee. GEORGE: No, you're not a divorcee. You're just separated. You're a separatée. *Real Estate Weekly*, June 16, 1999: The imaginative "Suddenly Single" Program . . . positions The Envoy Club as a sympathetic heartbreak hotel offering distraught divorcees and/or separatées an aromatherapy candle . . . and a session with a psychic.

shush n. A person who is being shushed. ("The Apartment," April 4, 1991): JERRY: Can you knock on someone's door and tell them to keep it down? You're really altering your whole self-image. I mean, what am I, Fred Mertz now? What's happening to me? Can I do this? Am I a shusher? I used to be a shusher. *Orange County Register*, Feb. 6, 2000: The shush from behind is a most efficacious shush because the shusher has to spend the rest of the performance feeling your eyes searing through the back of his head.

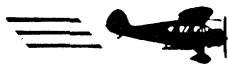
spongeworthy adj. Worthy of having sex with, particularly when it requires the use of a contraceptive sponge. ("The Sponge," Dec. 7, 1995): JERRY: I thought you said [sex] was imminent. ELAINE: Yeah, it was, but then I just couldn't decide if he was really spongeworthy. *New York Observer*, Jan. 19, 2001: Who knew that women were deeming men "spongeworthy" as early as the 1840's? *Chicago Tribune*, Dec. 15, 2002: Barbie needs: Either a female condom or a contraceptive sponge. . . . The ultimate question: Is Ken "spongeworthy"?



unshushables n. People who refuse to stop talking even after having been shushed. (“The Apartment,” April 4, 1991): JERRY: Some people you can’t shush in a movie theater. There’s always that certain group of people, isn’t it. They’re talking and talking, and everyone around them is shushing them and shushing them. They won’t shush. They’re the unshushables. *New York Times*, Sept. 20, 1998: Then there are “unshushables,” Jerry Seinfeld’s term, derived from Yiddish, for those in a movie theater who just never shut up.

A few newspaper citations doesn’t mean that any of these terms are dictionary-bound, not by a long shot. But it is remarkable that, five years after the show went off the air, so many Seinfeldian coinages have embedded themselves in people’s vocabularies. This is a testament to the creativity of the *Seinfeld* writers, although we shouldn’t discount the power of syndication, where in some markets the show can still be seen three or four times a day. Not that there’s anything wrong with that.

[Paul McFedries is the proprietor of The Word Spy <http://www.wordspy.com>, a website devoted to new words. He is currently working on a book about new words that will be published in 2004.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

A dead man’s family slapped a former Quincy dominatrix with a \$1 million lawsuit in federal court yesterday charging she failed to use “safe, sane sadomasochistic techniques” when she dismembered “Big Mike” Lord and hid his body parts. [from the *Boston Herald*, January 17, 2003. Submitted by David Derow, Haverhill, MA, who asks just what “safe, sane sadomasochistic techniques” should be employed for a dismemberment.]



Product Names

Mike Warburton
Cheshire, England

Today we are faced with countless products competing for shelf space in our supermarkets. Not only that, for every product, there are dozens of different brands, each with its own range of goods to tempt the confused customer. Manufacturers try to entice us by using various sneaky tactics: the promise of improved health, the simple attraction of paying less, or increasingly, how valuable our contribution to the world’s environment would be if we were to make a particular purchase.

Another strategy employed by companies is their imaginative—and I use this word loosely here—use of names to sell their merchandise. Advertising and marketing chiefs have been trying to impress us for years with such titles as *Spam*, *Vimto*, *Daz*, *Bovril*, all of which have survived the test of time. We seldom question their linguistic derivation or aptness, because they have managed to ingrain themselves into our culture. Yet how do today’s product names compare? How do they originate or reflect 21st-century society? Will they even last beyond the end-of-year sales figures?

Charmin toilet rolls, or bath tissues, to be precise, have gradually infiltrated the aisles of British emporiums. But this is not a new phenomenon, as U.S. households have experienced their soft, strong, and absorbent qualities since 1928. This curious sounding product was coined by a Wisconsin employee who believed it to be, yes, you’ve guessed it, charming. Such a bizarre view of life suggests that the residents of Wisconsin possess more refined toilet habits than most. Or maybe he uses the smallest room for his particular method of snake-charming.

There are certain dangers to beware of when inflicting new names on an innocent society. We have been p-p-picking up a *Penguin* since it was introduced in 1946 by Macdonalds. This was the company that innovated individual packets of biscuits when only tins had existed. Then in 1997, ASDA (the UK’s Wal-Mart) entered the fray with its own brand, the *Puffin*. Strangely, the Puffin was also a chocolate-covered, oblong-shaped, cream-



filled sandwich biscuit with a similar wrapper. How would United Biscuits, which made the Penguin, react? The matter was taken to court in 1997, when ASDA were deemed to have sufficiently deceived the public. They were ordered to change the package design to differentiate. So although ASDA may have lost the battle, they seem to have won the war.

The makers of the soft drink *Ribena* also suffered at the hands of the powers-that-be but managed to acquire (possibly intentional) publicity on the way. They devised the *Ribena Toothkind* range. Not only had it been scientifically proven to minimise tooth erosion, it was the only drink accredited by the British Dental Association. According to the Advertising Standards Authority, however, there was not enough medical evidence to support these claims. Maybe if *Ribena*'s makers had put as much research into that contrived, synthetic name, the ASA might have been more sympathetic.

Economic globalisation has a lot to answer for. We had been happily chomping on our *Marathonbars*, content in the knowledge that they would see us through the 26.2 miles of exertion if necessary. Then all of a sudden, in 1990, *Snickers* appeared as their cosmopolitan replacement. Such a practice is "mono branding," as experts call it. It clearly benefits a worldwide manufacturer that has been turning over x million *Marathons* plus y million *Snickers*, when the end product is just the same. But was it really a matter of international politics, or just an excuse to increase the price?

And were we ever consulted?

A similar demise befell the humble *Opal Fruit*, which had been "making your mouth water" for generations before being rechristened the more in-your-face, Euro-friendly *Starburst*. The *Opal Fruit Party* website is actively campaigning now to save the original identity of the multiflavoured confectionery.

Oil of Ulay is now *Oil of Olay*, a move that will appeal to all budding English bullfighters seeking perfect skin. You may have noticed that the household cleaner *Jif* has now become *Cif* in the UK, a word which had already existed in 60 countries. But how are we to pronounce this oddity: *Sif*, *Chif*, *Shif*, *Kif*? No doubt every country has its own version, which seems to defeat the object of uniformity.

Those boffins from the world of cosmetics, particularly the Laboratoire Garnier stable, have been blinding us with science for years. With elaborations like *Plenitude*, *Fructis*, and *Neutraia* being bandied about, who are we to argue? Still, when they start creating new compounds like *Lip-Finity* and *Lash-Finity*, then the rudiments of the English language are being challenged. Will we have lips or lashes so perfect that they will last beyond the grave? It is, however, a brave lexical invention, which may spawn a family of *-finities*, as *Ribena* may have started with *Toothkind*. We may have mocked when *user-friendly* and *child-friendly* slipped into the vocabulary in the 1980's, but today their use goes unremarked.

Everybody loves ice cream, but many of us love the sound of *Häagen Dazs* ice cream more than other brands, even though it may appear similar. It just sounds so . . . well, sexy . . . as they say these days, when referring to anything from a hammer drill to a food mixer. Their sensuous advertisements certainly testify to this. The choice of the words *Häagen Dazs* is the ultimate use of a product name as supreme marketing tool. It conjures up images of the exotic and the luxurious, even though it was a red-blooded American company that first concocted it more than thirty-five years ago. Yet the makers believe that taste speaks for itself, proclaiming shamelessly that "Häagen-Dazs is to ice cream as 24-carat is to gold, as Kobe is to beef, as extra virgin is to olive oil, as truffles are to the mundane mushroom."

Wall's has been the UK's leading ice cream company for more than seventy-five years, and in 1999 its products represented nineteen out of the top twenty best sellers in the impulse market. But this didn't prevent them from launching a range (within the so-called Premium Sector) with the Frenchified name *Carte d'Or*. Similarly, the name of Unilever's *Gino Ginelli* (launched in 1994) bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the Italian immigrant family, *Granelli*, makers of ice-cream since 1889. All this consumer choice seems a far cry from when you used to be confronted by the ice cream vendor who asked "Just one scoop or two?"

Breakfast cereals were at one time limited to little more than *Scott's Porage Oats*. The packet which depicts a Highlander putting the shot is virtually a



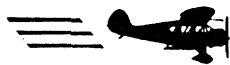
twentieth-century icon. Since then, we've had the brilliantly onomatopoeic *Rice Krispies* and the politically-precarious *Sugar Puffs*. But the last two decades have seen a marked increase in punchy, racy efforts to lure the hungry early riser. There is the mighty *Sustain*, the ever-so-friendly *Cheerios*, the colloquial *Just Right*, and the insane *Marshmallow Blasted Froot Loops* (not helped by the unnecessary misspelling, but that's another story).

Despite a strong brand name, image is still king. Image development goes hand in hand with advertising campaigns, one of the most famous being that of Guinness. Many will say that the black stout does not require any marketing gimmicks, the product selling on its own merit. If done correctly, constant references, be they verbal or visual, can only enhance appeal and subliminally affect us all.

"Guinness is Good for You" may not have been the most original of taglines, but the alliteration helps it to be stored in memory. Then the *Guinness* theme of the 1980's entertained us with its quirky humour—without Guinness, you had the affliction of being *Guinness*. Advances in media technology make us automatically associate the award-winning surfing horses commercial with the drink.

A survey was conducted recently, asking British expatriates which things they missed the most while living abroad. The top three items were *Marmite* spread, *Paxo* stuffing, and *Bisto* gravy. These well-established names might be considered wacky at first, but if the product suits the populace, then the label could last forever, even to infinity.

[*Michael Warburton wrote about Pub Names in Vol. XXVI/3.*]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

Some customers may be experiencing difficulty with inbound mail or using our Webmail system. We are currently working to correct this issue, and apologize for any inconvenience that this issue may be causing for our customers.

[*Submitted by Meredith Warshaw, whose ISP posted this message on its Usenet newsgroup.*]

The Case for Small Words

Richard Lederer
San Diego, California

When you speak and write, there is no law that says you have to use big words. Short words are as good as long ones, and short, old words—like *sun* and *grass* and *home*—are best of all. A lot of small words, more than you might think, can meet your needs with a strength, grace, and charm that large words do not have.

Big words can make the way dark for those who read what you write and hear what you say. Small words cast their clear light on big things—night and day, love and hate, war and peace, and life and death. Big words at times seem strange to the eye and the ear and the mind and the heart. Small words are the ones we seem to have known from the time we were born, like the hearth fire that warms the home.

Short words are bright like sparks that glow in the night, prompt like the dawn that greets the day, sharp like the blade of a knife, hot like salt tears that scald the cheek, quick like moths that flit from flame to flame, and terse like the dart and sting of a bee.

Here is a sound rule: Use small, old words where you can. If a long word says just what you want to say, do not fear to use it. But know that our tongue is rich in crisp, brisk, swift, short words. Make them the spine and the heart of what you speak and write. Short words are like fast friends. They will not let you down.

The title of this essay and the four paragraphs that you have just read are wrought entirely of words of one syllable. In setting myself this task, I did not feel especially cabined, cribbed, or confined. In fact, the structure helped me to focus on the power of the message I was trying to put across.

One study shows that twenty words account for twenty-five percent of all spoken English words, and all twenty are monosyllabic. In order of frequency they are: *I, you, the, a, to, is, it, that, of, and, in, what, he, this, have, do, she, not, on, and they*. Other studies indicate that the fifty most common words in written English are each made of a single syllable.

For centuries our finest poets and orators have recognized and employed the power of small words



to make a straight point between two minds. A great many of our proverbs punch home their points with pithy monosyllables: “Where there’s a will, there’s a way,” “A stitch in time saves nine,” “Spare the rod and spoil the child,” “A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.”

Nobody used the short word more skillfully than William Shakespeare, whose dying King Lear laments:

And my poor fool is hang’d! No, no, no life!
 Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,
 And thou no breath at all? . . .
 Do you see this? Look on her, look, her lips.
 Look there, look there!

Shakespeare’s contemporaries made the *King James Bible* a centerpiece of short words—“And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good.” The descendants of such mighty lines live on in the twentieth century. When asked to explain his policy to parliament, Winston Churchill responded with these ringing monosyllables: “I will say: it is to wage war, by sea, land, and air, with all our might and with all the strength that God can give us.” In his “Death of the Hired Man,” Robert Frost observes that “Home is the place where, when you have to go there,/They have to take you in.” And William H. Johnson uses ten two-letter words to explain his secret of success: “If it is to be,/It is up to me.”

You don’t have to be a great author, statesman, or philosopher to tap the energy and eloquence of small words. Each winter I asked my ninth graders at St. Paul’s School to write a composition composed entirely of one-syllable words. My students greeted my request with obligatory moans and groans, but, when they returned to class with their essays, most felt that, with the pressure to produce high-sounding polysyllables relieved, they had created some of their most powerful and luminous prose. Here are submissions from two of my ninth graders:

What can you say to a boy who has left home? You can say that he has done wrong, but he does not care. He has left home so that he will not have to deal with what you say. He wants to go as far as he can. He will do what he wants to do.
 This boy does not want to be forced to go to church, to comb his hair, or to be on time. A good time for this boy does not lie in your reach, for

what you have he does not want. He dreams of ripped jeans, shirts with no starch, and old socks. So now this boy is on a bus to a place he dreams of, a place with no rules. This boy now walks a strange street, his long hair blown back by the wind. He wears no coat or tie, just jeans and an old short. He hates your world, and he has left it. —*Charles Shaffer*

For a long time we cruised by the coast and at last came to a wide bay past the curve of a hill, at the end of which lay a small town. Our long boat ride at an end, we all stretched and stood up to watch as the boat nosed its way in. The town climbed up the hill that rose from the shore, a space in front of it left bare for the port. Each house was a clean white with sky blue or grey trim; in front of each one was a small yard, edged by a white stone wall strewn with green vines.

As the town basked in the heat of noon, not a thing stirred in the streets or by the shore. The sun beat down on the sea, the land, and the back of our necks, so that, in spite of the breeze that made the vines sway, we all wished we could hide from the glare in a cool, white house. But, as there was no one to help dock the boat, we had to stand and wait.

At last the head of the crew leaped from the side and strode to a large house on the right. He shoved the door wide, poked his head through the gloom, and roared with a fierce voice. Five or six men came out, and soon the port was loud with the clank of chains and creak of planks as the men caught ropes thrown by the crew, pulled them taut, and tied them to posts. Then they set up a rough plank so we could cross from the deck to the shore. We all made for the large house while the crew watched, glad to be rid of us.—*Celia Wren*

You too can tap into the vitality and vigor of compact expression. Take a suggestion from the highway department. At the boundaries of your speech and prose, place a sign that reads “Caution: Small Words at Work.”

[*Richard Lederer’s two most recent books are Sleeping Dogs Don’t Lay and The Bride of Anguished English. His next book is A Man of My Words, from St. Martin’s Press. Visit his website at <http://www.verbivore.com>.]*



Going But Not Quite Gone

Susan Elkin
Sittingbourne, Kent

If someone gives you short shrift in a new-fangled way, it probably puts you on your mettle because you don't want to eat humble pie or be hoist with your own petard. These are common, easily understood expressions—but what about *shrift*, *newfangled*, *mettle*, *humble pie*, and *petard*?

It's actually very odd how often we unthinkingly use words without knowing what they mean. We're confident that getting away with an exploit *scot-free* is to achieve something vaguely risky without incurring any penalty, payment, or injury, but what exactly was, or is, a *scot* (as opposed to a *Scot*, which is a native of Scotland)? It was an English municipal tax or the payment or levying of it, and it comes from an old Norse word *skot*, meaning 'a shot or contribution.'

Words are organic. They develop. They are born, they live, and they die. The life cycle of a word can span a millennium or more; but sometimes it achieves near-immortality by living on in the language idiomatically, the lexical equivalent of a biological throwback.

"My teenage children are beginning to *kick against the traces*," you might hear a parent say. Kicking against the what? A *trace* was one of two straps, chains or lines of a harness for attaching a horse to a vehicle, and the word comes via Old French from the Latin word *tractus*, which is the past participle of the verb *trahere* 'to pull or to draw.' A lad (or lass) who is kicking over the traces is therefore resisting restraint. Still in the realms of bestial metaphor, he or she might just as easily be *kicking against the pricks*, or not responding to being prodded by the sort of spurs or goads used to control domestic animals in the past.

So what was *short shrift*? Remember *Romeo and Juliet*? The nurse has to find a plausible way of getting Juliet out of the house with minimum supervision and fuss as cover for her secret marriage to Romeo. "Have you got leave to go to shrift today?" she asks in perfectly balanced iambic pentameter. *Shrift* was the confession of sins and the granting of absolution, so it meant a convenient private appointment with a priest. The past participle

of this delicious word was *shriven* and the associated adjective *shrove*. In Britain, the Tuesday before the first day of Lent (*Mardi Gras* in most of Europe and the U.S.) is still called *Shrove Tuesday* because it was the day on which it really was essential to get a sin-free clean slate with which to begin the Lenten fast.

Anyone who got *short shrift* received little time and sympathy from the priest and so felt put out. That's what getting short shrift still means. Someone who gives it to you is not giving you the time and attention you think you deserve.

New-fangled is a nice word too. Laden with negative connotations, it means, of course, modern and unnecessarily complicated or gimmicky. It stems from the Old English word *fangen*, the past participle of *fon* 'to take or seize.' Thomas Wyatt's early sixteenth-century poem "They Flee From Me" describes his former lover leaving him to "use newfangleness."

Mettle—that you might be put on—is just an alternative to *metal*, meaning 'strength' or 'defensive,' but *humble pie* and that *petard* that you, like Hamlet, might be hoist with, are interesting.

Obliged to eat humble pie means you have no choice but to abase or humble yourself by apologising. The expression is really a pleasing pun on an obsolete word. *Humples* were the offal of deer, and anything made with them was very lowly, or humble, food. So if you put yourself in the wrong, you must swallow your pride as if you were eating this unglamorous dish.

A *petar* or *petard* comes from the jolly Early French word *peter*, which means 'to fart.' It was a case for carrying explosives for military detonation and later it came to mean a firework with a loud report. To be 'hoist' with it means in effect that you've blown yourself up with your own bomb or your suffer from a misfortune you were planning for someone else. Hamlet, through whom Shakespeare coined the phrase, meant that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who are in the pay of King Claudius to despatch Hamlet to a watery grave in the middle of the North Sea, would be outwitted and themselves drown instead.

While we're on the subject of Hamlet, what about that useful old suffix *-monger* from Old English

manger, itself from the Latin *mango*, *mangonis* ‘a dealer, especially in slaves.’ It now means a trader or dealer, or a person who attempts to stir up something petty or disreputable. That’s why Hamlet, in his simulated madness, pretends to think that the obnoxious Polonius is a fishmonger. Old trade names, such as *fishmonger* and *ironmonger* have all but died out now, but we still use the suffix in coinages like *war-monger* or *lie-monger*.

One of the interesting things about the *man-gere*-derived *monger* is that, surprisingly, it has no etymological kinship with the two separate meanings of ‘mangle.’ A *mangle*, a machine with rollers for pressing the water out of laundry, comes from the Dutch word *mangel* via High German and Middle High German and originally from Latin *manganum* from the Greek *manganon* ‘a pulley block.’ *Mangle*, on the other hand, meaning ‘to hack, crunch, or spoil,’ comes from an Old French verb *maynier* ‘to maim.’

Another delightful word which survives idiomatically, but not otherwise, is *fettle*. If you’re in *fine fettle*, you’re fit and ready for action. It originates in the Middle English verb *fetten* ‘to shape or prepare,’ which in turn developed from the Old English word *fetel* ‘a girdle.’ So the sense is that if you’re appropriately belted, you’re ready for anything, but don’t try taking your *filthy lucre* (from the Latin *lucrum* ‘a gain’ and related to *lucrative*) and asking for a *fetel* in your local department store.

If you do, you might end up with a *pig in a poke*, the most attractive thing about which is the monosyllabic alliteration. What use would a pig be to anyone if it were small enough to fit in a pocket? A *poke*—which often had female sexual connotations because of its hollowness—is an old form of the word *pocket*, and both are related to *pouch*, from the Middle English *poket* and Early French *pokete*.

While on the subject of alliterative plosives, do you ever describe anyone or anyone as *plain as a pikestaff*? If so, do you actually know what a pikestaff was? It was a spiked walking stick for use in picking your way across slippery ground; in other words, a practical safety device, not a objet d’art. It was also the staff of a foot soldier’s pike, a weapon consisting of a long rod with a pointed steel head. An unlovely item, its name derives from Early

Light

~~~~~

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Colorful vocabulary.  
(He learned the expletives he hurls  
Listening to teenage girls.)

—BOB MCKENTY

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French *piquer* ‘to pick’ and originally, rather charmingly, from the Latin word for ‘woodpecker,’ *picus*.

*Ramshackle* is a faintly onomatopoeic word meaning ‘badly constructed, in need of repair or falling down.’ It is the past participle, and only surviving part, of the obsolete verb to *ransackle* although we still have the parent verb to *ransack*. *Ransackle* took a *-le* suffix because it was a frequentative. To *ransackle* was ‘to ransack often,’ just as to *suckle* was ‘to suck repeatedly’ and to *sparkle* was ‘to spark again and again.’

“I believe in the quick and dead” states the Apostles’ Creed. *Quick* meant living, from Old English *kwic* ‘alive.’ That’s why, until recently, a mother or midwife would talk of an unborn baby *quicken*ing once the pregnant woman felt foetal movement. It also accounts for the expression *It cuts me to the quick*, meaning that the speaker is so deeply hurt that it’s as if living flesh were damaged.

These leftover words have long histories, of which we only see the barest traces.

[Susan Elkin’s most recent article was “Epithets” in XVII/2.]



## Lame Words

Some words are lame  
If they're not shared;  
They're not the same  
If they're not paired.

Take cry from hue;  
It's still a word,  
But not a hue  
That can be heard.

Take to from for,  
And it's no go;  
Take hither from yon,  
And yon is gone;

Take it from thither,  
And you dither.  
Take span and spic's  
No more than nix.

Take time from ago  
Or much from ado;  
And what does it show  
But residue?

Hue and cry and to and fro,  
Hither-thither, spic or yon  
Made some ado a while ago,  
But now they vex our lexicon.

—Henry George Fischer

## It's Summertime.

In order to be more in tune with the actual, as opposed to the theoretical seasons, this issue is Volume XXVII, No. 2, Summer 2003 and not Spring 2003, as it would be in the usual order of things. Since most of our library subscribers keep track of us by the numbers, we hope this change won't be too disruptive. Volume XXVI-II/3 will be Autumn 2003, and Volume XXVI-II/4 will be Winter 2003. Volume XXIX will begin with Spring 2004.

## Such a Fine Pot of Curry

*South Asian Influences on the English Lexicon*

Mike Youngblood  
New York, New York

Although we often celebrate the ease—some would even say predaciousness—with which the English language adds new words to its lexicon, it is with far less frequency that we celebrate and acknowledge many of the non-Western languages that have played contributory roles in shaping our wonderfully polygenetic vocabulary. With this in mind, I would like to dwell a moment on some of the common English words that derive from South Asia, one of the many regions of the world to which speakers of English owe a surprisingly large debt of gratitude.

Among the contemporary nations of South Asia, the languages and cultures of what is today northern India have historically played a prominently influential role. Some commonly used words from India stand out clearly in our minds as “foreign” or “Indian” loan words, perhaps because we still perceive them to represent something peculiar and distant despite their proven usefulness and wide-ranging applications. A short list of these recognizable words would include such spiritual and philosophical words as *yoga*, *yogi*, *pundit*, *bhagwan*, *mantra*, *Brahmin*, *karma*, *maharishi*, and *nirvana*. *Guru* is another in this group of words that, while retaining a strong Indianesque flavor, resides comfortably and meaningfully in everyday English. This short list could also include familiar words relating to Indian musical instruments and styles, such as *sitar* and *raga*, as well as food words, such as *curry*, *vindaloo*, *pilaf*, and *masala*. Most of us would easily attribute an Indian connection to words such as these.

Their Indian-ness is easy to recognize, in part, because their popular circulation is recent. Many of these words, though long available to English speakers, did not begin to enjoy wide circulation in spoken American and British English until the 1960s, when a fascination with Indian culture, music, and transcendental philosophy reached new heights in the popular youth counterculture. Yet most of the South Asian

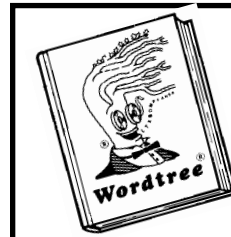


words for which we are in debt have been in wide use for a much longer time. They have insinuated themselves so neatly into the language that we rarely find ourselves cognizant of their true origin.

The fact is that new words have been entering European vocabularies from India and other parts of South Asia for centuries. The region's influence on European languages, and ultimately upon English, extends as far back as the period of pre-Christian trade and military contact between South Asia and Greece and Rome (both of which were almost as keen on India in their day as Columbus was in the 1400s, when he inadvertently went to the Americas instead of India, and as Americans themselves were in the peace and love generation of the 1960s). This linguistic commingling between South Asia and Europe became even more pronounced with the rise of Persian and Arab commerce in South Asia, which picked up around the eighth century AD, and greatly expanded the exchange of goods and ideas between India and points to the west.

There are all sorts of indispensable and now fully naturalized words in the English glossary that resulted from these early relations. They are predominant terms related to the trade of the time and include such useful items as *candy* (traced to Sanskrit *khand*, meaning 'to break'), *ginger* (from Sanskrit *shringaveram*, literally 'horn body' in reference to the shape of the root), *mango* (from the Tamil word *maankaay*), *opal* (traced to the Sanskrit *upalas* 'precious stone'), *pepper* (from Sanskrit *pippalii*), *camphor* (from the Sanskrit word *karpuuram*), *sugar* (Sanskrit *sarkaraa*), and even the name *India* itself (which was *indos* to the Greeks and *hind* to the Persians, derived from association with the river Indus which flows through modern India and Pakistan).

Many of these words evolved substantially before entering the English vocabulary, undergoing transformations through the passage of time as well as through space, as goods exchanged hands in various ports and markets along their westward journey. The word *anil*—not as common as candy or pepper, but it does turn up with peculiar frequency in crossword puzzles—offers a nice example of this evolution. *Anil*, the English term for blue dye derived from the indigo plant, traces to the word *niil*, meaning 'dark blue' in Hindi, Marathi, and



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other Sanskritic languages. The word was often used to refer to the indigo plant itself rather than just the derivative dye, and as such it was picked up by Arab traders, who combined it with the Arabic article *an* (the) to create *an niil* (the indigo). *An niil* eventually passed into Portuguese as *anil* and from there entered English with its spelling unchanged. Just for fun, we can follow the journey further. The English word *aniline* (also sometimes called *aniline oil*) is the common name for a colorless, synthetic compound that, beginning in the nineteenth century, came into use as an artificial replacement for organic anil in the manufacture of dyes. Although this word is substantially distanced from its original links with the indigo plant, or blueness, its heritage is essentially tied to Sanskrit and early South Asian trade.

The most important chapter in the saga, however, began about three hundred years or so back, with the advent of efficient and direct French, Portuguese, and British oceanic trade. This period also represents a sort of branching out in the English-language relationship with the region. While most of the early contributions came from northern India, colonial Europeans now began adopting a wealth of words from throughout the region, including the areas that we know today as Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. At about the same time that Rudyard Kipling penned the famous words "East is east, and West is west, and never the twain shall meet," European traders and administrators, spreading throughout the subcontinent, began to adopt all sorts of new customs and vocabularies from their



Eastern acquaintances. At one time, the local English spoken by British colonial residents in the region was so interwoven with South Asianisms, that it almost evolved into a new language of its own. (For the curious, see Yule and Burnell's classic dictionary of Anglo-Indian English, called *Hobson-Jobson*, first published in 1886). Most of these colonial words have now faded from our modern English vocabulary, but a surprising number of them have survived. These include words that were borrowed without much change in their pronunciation or meaning, as well as others that originated in South Asian words and concepts but got a little garbled in the transfer.

A marvelous example of the first type is *pajama* (*pujama* in British English). How many of us, when we talk about pajama parties, jammies, or just 'PJs,' even momentarily recognize their South Asian-ness? Of course we don't; PJs are deeply English. Right? The truth is, *pajamas*—literally 'leg clothing' in Urdu and pronounced 'payjaama'—are the quintessential South Asian men's garments. Not just for sleepwear, variations on the payjaama are worn daily by millions of people.

Other words that have been deeply naturalized without significant change include *cheetah* (from the Hindi *chīṭā* for the same animal, which traces back to the Sanskrit word *chitra*, meaning 'spotted' or 'patterned'), *jungle* (Hindi *jangal*, from Sanskrit *jangala* 'forest'), *mongoose* (from Marathi *manguus*, meaning, as you'd expect, 'mongoose'), *bungalow* (*bangalo* in Gujarati and *bangalaa* in Hindi and Marathi, referring to a one-story house with a surrounding yard that is 'typical of Bengal'), *anaconda* (from Sinhalese *henakandayaa* 'whip snake'), *atoll* (from Maldivian *atolu*, for the islands of the Maldives), *bangle* (Hindi *banglii* 'bracelet'), *cashmere* (referring to the fine wool of Kashmir, in the Himalayas), *cummerbund*, (from Urdu and Hindi *kamar* 'waist' and *band* 'wrap'), *dinghy* (from Hindi *dingii* and Bengali *dingi*, for a small boat or raft), *hookah* (from the Urdu *hukkah*, a 'jar' pipe), *khaki* (from Urdu *khaakii* 'dust colored'), *loot* (Hindi *luut*, meaning 'plunder' or 'exorbitant profit'), and *mogul* (likening to the magnificence of the great Mughal emperors who once wielded effective control over much of the region).

The second group of colonial-era words—those that share a somewhat lesser resemblance with their indigenous pronunciation or meaning—includes gems such as *bandanna* and *cushy*. Most readers in the United States would probably guess that the *bandanna* was invented by American cowboys, right? Wrong. In the middle of the nineteenth century, when John Wayne types ranged through the Old West, variations on the bandanna had already enjoyed a long popularity in England. But the word comes from a corruption of the Hindi verb *bandhanaa*, meaning 'to fasten, bind, or tie.' The English word *bandanna* originally referred only to hankies that had been tie-dyed—a technique that Europeans learned in India. What about *cushy*? This word that we usually use as a synonym for 'soft' sounds very much like native English slang and would appear to extend from the French-derived English word *cushion*. Not at all the case. It comes from the Urdu word *khushii*, meaning 'pleasure' or 'happiness.'

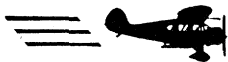
A brief sampling of other words of this type could include *juggernaut* (meaning, in English, some sort of an enormous vehicle or 'an unstoppable force'). This word has its origin in a south Indian festival during which an image of the Hindu deity Jagganaatha is transported in procession upon an enormous carriage. *Punch* comes from the Hindi word *paanch*, the number 'five,' and was originally used in English to refer to a beverage made from five fruits. The twin-hulled boats that we call *catamarans* take their name from the Tamil *kattumaram*, meaning 'tied wood.' The ruffians we call *thugs* can trace their appellation to the Hindi and Marathi word *thag* 'swindler.' The slang word *chintzy* (cheap or inferior quality) comes from the Hindi *chiint* (painted, spattered) via *chintz*, an English corruption used to refer to patterned textiles manufactured in India. There's also *calico* (a corruption of the Malayalam textile port *Kozhikode*; it was *calicot* to the French, as a reference to the fabrics of that port, which was then adopted in English without the silent 't'), *pariah* (an English word for any type of social outcast, but one which comes from the Tamil word for a particular low-status community, *paraiyan*, meaning 'hereditary drummers') and even *cheese*. Cheese? No, not the dairy product. Rather, *cheese* as used in



the phrase ‘the big cheese.’ It is said to be colonial army slang, from the Hindi and Urdu *chiiz*, meaning ‘thing.’

Fortunately, the story doesn’t end with the colonial period . . . or even with the Beatles era. Speakers of English have continued to borrow new words and ideas from South Asia right up into the present decade. Case in point: *chai*, that magnificently spiced South Asian tea that is fast becoming the latest marketing juggernaut in neighborhood coffee houses across the United States. And, as everyone knows, the secret to a great chai, just like a great curry, or punch—or language, for that matter—lies in its unique and masterful blend of ingredients.

[Mike Youngblood, a cultural anthropologist, collected and researched English loan words from South Asia as a hobby while living in India. He is currently completing a book on the subject.]



## EPISTOLA

Re: (Vol. XXVII/4), “The American Spelling Reform Movement”

Mark Twain’s excerpt had several spelling errors and omissions. For example, Twain’s work starts, “For example,” which is omitted. The word *of*, which Twain proposed spelling *ov*, is misspelt as *av* more than once. The error that caught my attention was *orxogrefkl*, which is misspelt *orxografikl*. The word *kohirnt* is missing from the text, but included in the translation. Thus, the excerpt isn’t *orxogrefkli kohirnt* or verbatim.

Spelling errors in a spelling article in a magazine called VERBATIM. A Zen masterpiece!

Congratulations,  
Kris Tilford  
Topeka, Kansas



## CLASSICAL BLATHER

### *Pants on Fire*

Nick Humez

*argentarius@juno.com*

Though some vices and virtues seem culture-specific, in that a frailty that one society may view with indifference may be considered a serious failing in another, most of humanity would probably agree that telling lies is wrong—and that most people do it, at least now and then. An abundance of English words denoting lying (or at least tinkering with the truth) bespeaks a society in which veracity is praised but mendacity commonplace.

*Mendacity*, the (unstrained) quality of lying, comes from Latin *mendax*, ‘liar,’ a learned word (as was *prevaricate*) not modified by going through French first.<sup>1</sup> Both *mendacity* and *prevaricate* are attested in English writing by the early 1600s, *prevaricate* having first appeared in 1580 in an earlier and now obsolete general sense of deviating from a path (from Latin *varus*, ‘knock-kneed,’ whence *varicare*, ‘to walk with a straddling gait’).<sup>2</sup> With prevarication comes the mental reservation, employed by Catholics in Protestant England to save their priests or themselves from the rope or the blade: *Equivocate*—answer the king’s inquisitors with the truth, but only such parts of it, and so phrased, that none shall hang for it—and whenever possible, obfuscate (from Latin *fuscus*, ‘brown’).<sup>3</sup>

Yet English had plenty of terms for lying before the age of Shakespeare and the King James Bible. *Lie* itself has been around since the inhabitants of Britain spoke Old West Saxon;<sup>4</sup> convergence with the other *lie* (of unrelated root) has led to puns such as *lying like a rug*, while *liar* turns up in a number of picturesque expressions (*liar’s poker*, *liar’s paradox*).<sup>5</sup> The *Century Dictionary* defines a *lie out of whole cloth* as “a story or statement wholly fabricated”;<sup>6</sup> *fabrication* in the sense of a lie is first attested only in 1790,<sup>7</sup> whereas English authors since 1300 have been using *fable* (from Latin *fabula*, ‘story’)<sup>8</sup> in its specialized sense of ‘tall tale’ or ‘terrible story’.<sup>9</sup>



While lying generally meets with opprobrium, there are degrees, from the *white lie* and *fib*,<sup>10</sup> to the *whopper*.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, there are sometimes thought to be extenuating circumstances: Medieval churchmen carefully distinguished between the *mendacium perniciosum*, or pernicious lie—one told with intent to do harm—and the *mendacium officiosum*, or officious lie, which as Cullen Murphy puts it, “is to achieve some useful end or to prevent some distinct harm. (Examples might include a doctor misleading a terminally ill patient or a prisoner lying to enemy interrogators.)”<sup>12</sup> Most of us would regard in a similar light our lying to those seeking an innocent man they intend to kill, when they ask us which way their quarry went.<sup>13</sup>

Yet as soon as we accept some kinds of lying as morally acceptable or at least preferable to the alternative, we find ourselves on slippery ethical ground. We may for the most part accept a doctor’s *euphemisms* and *placebos* as falling within a permissible degree of deception;<sup>14</sup> indeed, it is from such benign clinical deceit that we get the expression *sugarcoated* (applied to what would otherwise be a bitter pill to swallow). When is a government with democratic pretensions justified in withholding the truth from its citizens? American English is full of contemptuous references to bureaucratic disinformation and cover stories, official versions and inoperative concepts. When a disingenuous state functionary is forced to admit that he *misspoke* himself,<sup>15</sup> we tend to regard such a disclaimer as simply bogus,<sup>16</sup> dismissing it as mere *double-talk*<sup>17</sup> and *weasel words*.<sup>18</sup> Experience teaches many of us to be cynics: We expect our politicians to lie—but we lambaste them if we catch them at it.

One might argue, of course, that popular ideals of government veracity are naïve, as are our appreciations of the shadings of truth deemed necessary by members of certain professions,<sup>19</sup> and that (as D. R. Olson puts it) the “person who does not clearly see the difference between an expression of intent and a promise . . . , or between a falsehood and a lie, should avoid a legal career or, for that matter, a theological one.”<sup>20</sup> Perhaps so, but we do expect people to tell the truth in court, and not to perjure themselves,<sup>21</sup> and we empower our judges to punish them summarily if they do.

Moreover, in daily life we expect a reasonable degree of honesty from one another as well, and are quick to decry *fraud* and *fakery*,<sup>22</sup> *flimflams*, *scams*, and *con jobs*,<sup>23</sup> *fairy stories* and just plain *bunk*.<sup>24</sup> Nor do we regard kindly those who tell us *half-truths* or who speak with *forked tongue*,<sup>25</sup> those who would *hoax* us, *delude*, *deceive* or *befool* us, or at least *mislead* us, *bamboozle* us,<sup>26</sup> or try to *pull the wool over our eyes*.<sup>27</sup>

It is perhaps no accident that in *Roget’s Thesaurus* the words associated with falsehood outnumber those regarding truth by nearly five to one. Almost all of us have been in situations where we were less than candid because we felt that under the circumstances telling the unvarnished truth would be harmful or at least painful to people we cared about. We are seldom proud of our lies, and are quick to feel indignation when we find that someone has lied to us. Lying undermines epistemology itself:<sup>28</sup> Much of what we think we know must of necessity be second hand (Fred says he saw Sam take the money; the survivor says there was an explosion before the boat sank; the Ministry of Truth’s press release says that Oceania is not, and never has been, at war with Eastasia), but what knowledge can we trust beyond that of our own senses when the reports we have from other persons may or may not be true?

Yet there are instances when the veracity of our interlocutors may turn out to be irrelevant. In a classic logic problem, a traveler journeys through a land inhabited by two types of people: those who always tell the truth and those who always lie. He comes to a fork in the road with no signpost and sees two people standing by the intersection. The traveler points to the left fork and says, “Is this the road to [Town X]?” One of the bystanders answers him with a word not in his vocabulary: “Rumber!”<sup>29</sup> The other says, “He said yes, but he’s a liar.” Can the traveler determine the proper road on the basis of this exchange? Yes, because if the second speaker is telling the truth, both halves of the statement are true. If he’s a liar, then both halves are lies. So he’s either affirming that the incomprehensible bystander said yes but the truth was the opposite, or else lying wholly, in which case the other fellow really said no, and was telling the truth. In either case the left fork is not the way the traveler should go, and the right fork is.<sup>30</sup>





Notes:

The origin of the couplet “Liar, liar/Pants on fire” is obscure, its specific meaning even more so. Is the fate of the liar to burn in Hell, and thus by synecdoche his/her pants (i.e., the posterior inside them; cf. army drill sergeant usage, “Your ass is grass and I am the lawnmower”)? Or are the fiery pants merely the consequence of predictable parental chastisement? Or does the verse imply that liars will or should meet their ends by being burned to death, as suggested by a Midwestern informant who knew this rhyme as a quatrain ending “Funeral pyre,” whose third line she has unfortunately forgotten? Any readers who can shed additional light on this item should not hesitate to write in.

1 *Mendacity* mustn’t be confused with *mendicity*, which the *Century Dictionary* (p. 3707) has as ‘condition of being a beggar,’ a less common variant of its exact synonym, *mendicancy* (whence friars who live on alms are called *mendicant clergy*); both derive from Latin, *mendicus*, ‘beggarly.’ Thus in French, a *mendiant* is a beggar; but *mentant* means ‘lying’ (present participle of *mentir*, ‘to lie’; a liar is a *menteux*).

2 The *Oxford English Dictionary* (two vols.) gives examples from 1646 for the later sense of *prevaricate* (p. 2293C) and for *mendacity* (p. 1769A), though the first example of *mendacious* is dated 1616.

3 To *equivocate* is literally to ‘call equal[ly]’ (from Latin *aequus* ‘equal,’ and *vocare* ‘to call’); an obsolete meaning is ‘to resemble in sound, to be a homophone.’ Secondary meanings include ‘to use words in more than one sense, to deal in ambiguities,’ and hence ‘to say one thing and mean another, to prevaricate’ (*OED*, p. 888D, where the earliest attestation is 1590). *Obfuscate* (*OED*, p. 1962D) first appears in 1536 in a passage in *Henry VIII* that accuses the pope of exercising a ‘usurped auctorite’ to ‘obfuscate and wrest goddes holy word.’

4 The earliest *OED* citation is from 971 (spelled *leah*).

5 *Liar’s poker* is played by a group of people, each of whom holds up a high-denomination bill of which only the possessor can see the serial numbers. It is a winner-take-all game like its relatives *liar’s dice* and the card game *I doubt It*, where success in the game rests primarily on one’s ability to bluff credibly. (I am indebted to Jane Cates for this information.) The *liar’s paradox* is also known as *Epimenides’ paradox*, from one of its classic formulations: “All Cretans are liars,” said by Epimenides the Cretan.

6 *Century Dictionary*, p. 3439.

7 In J. Bruce’s *Source of the Nile*, cited in the *OED* on p. 945C.

8 *OED*, p. 945A.

9 Both expressions came into currency in the nineteenth century: *tall tale* in America—the *OED*’s earliest citation (p. 3229A) is 1846—and *story-teller* in Britain, first published in Richardson’s seminal novel, *Clarissa*, in 1748 (*OED* p. 3073C). Gilbert and Sullivan fans will recall Major-General Stanley’s patter-song admission that his

daughters would have been married en masse against their wills if he “hadn’t in elegant diction/Indulged in an innocent fiction/Which is not in the same category/As telling a regular terrible story” (Act I, *The Pirates of Penzance, or The Slave of Duty*, 1880; see Deems Taylor, ed., *Plays & Poems of W. S. Gilbert*, Random House, 1932, p. 160). *Story-teller* also turns up (in triple recitative by Jupiter, Apollo, and Mars) in the first full-length Gilbert & Sullivan operetta, *Thespis, or the Gods Grown Old* (ibid., p. 34). Gilbert’s libretti also use the word *taradiddle* to refer to a lie, both in a song refrain in the 1882 operetta *Iolanthe, or the Peer and the Peri* (“taradiddle, taradiddle, tol lol lay!” ibid., p. 260) and in its own right five years later in *Ruddigore, or the Witch’s Curse*, in the act I finale (“When I’m a bad Bart. I will tell taradiddles.” *Ibid.*, p. 432). A *taradiddle* should not be confused with the drum riff called a *paradiddle*, which consists of four rapid strokes, right-left-right-right; a *double paradiddle* is a normal paradiddle (\**orthoparadiddle*?), followed by its mirror image. There is also a *triple paradiddle*. A percussionist once explained to me that “the triple paradiddle has the diddle in the middle.” (David D. Potter, personal communication, ca. 1964.)

10 Indeed, the *Century Dictionary* (pp. 3440) gives *fib* as a synonym for *white lie*. *Fib* as a verb first appeared in Dryden’s *Amphitryon* in 1690, but as a noun nearly eight decades earlier (*OED*, p. 990C).

11 As a word meaning ‘a thundering great big one of something’ (e.g., the house specialty at Burger King) *whopper* is attested in the *OED* no earlier than 1785 (p. 3770D, which it is cross-references to *thumper*), but it had already been used in a merry song of a knavish tinker and a “comely dame of Islington” included in the 1720 edition of Thomas D’Urfey’s *Wit and Wisdom, or Pills To Purge Melancholy* (“a good old Copper/But well may’t Leak, for I have found/A Hole in’t that’s a whopper.” The entire poem is in E. J. Burford, ed., *Bawdy Verse: A Pleasant Collection*, Penguin: 1982, pp. 248–249.) In its narrower sense of an egregious falsehood, *whopper*’s first appearance in print is dated by the *OED* to 1791 (ibid.).

12 Cullen Murphy, “The Lie of the Land: Equivocations, Deceptions, Fibs, and Other Forms of Not Telling the Truth” (reproduced at [www.slate.com](http://www.slate.com)). Another category of innocuous lie was the *mendacium jocosum*, or ‘joking lie,’ a transparent falsehood told with humorous or ironic intent.

13 On the other hand, Immanuel Kant, from whom this well-known example comes, believed that if we hold truth-telling an absolute virtue and apply his principle of the categorical imperative, we would be obliged not to lie nor even to prevaricate to the pursuers even though it would surely mean the death of their undeserving victim.

14 *Euphemism* comes from Greek *eu-* ‘good’ and *phemi* ‘I speak.’ *Placebo*, a ‘medicine’ with no medicinal content but only the superficial appearance of one, is Latin for ‘I shall please.’



15 From Latin *ingenuus*, originally ‘native-born, not foreign’ and hence ‘worthy of a yeoman.’ Later it also came to mean ‘weakly, delicate, tender’—cf. *ingénue*—because free-born folk were assumed to be less hardened to labor than were slaves (E. A. Andrews, *A Copious and Critical Latin-English Lexicon*, Harper Bros.: 1852, p. 800).

16 Eric Partridge’s *Dictionary of the Underworld* (Macmillan: 1950, p. 58) gives *bogus* as a device for making counterfeit coin, with its earliest citation in America being a Painesville (OH) *Telegraph* article of 1827. Soon *bogus* came to refer to counterfeit money itself, then by extension to any counterfeit. Partridge tentatively derives the word from “*cal(l)ibogus* . . . a beverage composed of rum and spruce beer (an inferior beer, it was).”

17 Geoffrey Chaucer refers in the *Parson’s Tale* (*Canterbury Tales*, ca. 1386) to people speaking with *double tongue* “suche as speken faire biforn folk and wickedly bihynde” (cited in the *OED* p. 791C), on which more at note 26 below. *Doubletalk* was originally a mixture of plain speech and gibberish; the *OED* has no reference to it as such. *Webster’s 10th Collegiate Dictionary* (Meriam-Webster: 1997, p. 438) gives its earliest attestation as 1936. According to the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Houghton Mifflin, 1992: p. 555) subsequent to the publication (in 1947) of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *doubletalk* came to be synonymous with his Newspeak coinage *doublespeak*.

18 The *American Heritage Dictionary* (p. 2023) defines a *weasel word* as one ‘of an equivocal nature used to deprive a statement of its force or to evade a direct commitment,’ deriving it from ‘the weasel’s habit of sucking the contents out of an egg without breaking the shell.’ *Weasel* as a synonym for ‘a prisoner who is an informer,’ synonymous with *rat*, dates from the 1930s (Partridge, op. cit., p. 762).

19 Sissela Bok, for example, in *Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life* (Vintage Books: 1978, p. 185) asks whether there can be “exceptions to the well-founded distrust of deception in public life.” And acknowledging that “white lies . . . are as common to political and diplomatic affairs as they are to the private lives of most people,” she nevertheless warns that “given the vulnerability of public trust, it is never more important than in public life to keep the deceptive element of white lies to an absolute minimum, and to hold down the danger of their turning into more widespread deceitful practices” (p. 186).

20 Olson, “Intelligence and Literacy,” in Sternberg and Warner, eds., *Practical Intelligence* (Cambridge University Press: 1986, p. 341), cited by Keith Stanovich in “The Fundamental Computational Biases of Human Cognition,” in Janet E. Davidson and Robert J. Sternberg, eds., *The Psychology of Problem Solving* (Cambridge University Press: in press.) Nevertheless, as Bok (op. cit, p. 10) points out, “Most thinkers who confuse intentional deception and falsity nevertheless manage to distinguish between the two in their ordinary lives.”

21 *Perjury* is literally going back on one’s oath, e.g. on the affirmation required of trial witnesses to tell “the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth,” formerly adding “so help me God,” though this and the Bible to swear upon have quietly disappeared from American courts with the recognition of a cultural diversity that includes both atheists and people of cultures that do not recognize the Bible as Holy Writ. Nevertheless, the phrase *could swear on a stack of Bibles* remains alive and well in colloquial usage as an intensifier indicating that a story is altogether true, or at least thoroughly believed by the teller.

22 *Fraud* is straight from Latin and was one of Cicero’s two categories of injurious human conduct, the other being malice. For a fascinating thumbnail history of the categorizing of wrongdoing from Aristotle to Dante, see *Hell*, Dorothy Sayers’s translation of *The Inferno* (Penguin: 1949). *Fake* is first attested in the *OED* (p. 953A) in a citation from 1812 as underworld cant for ‘do’ (cf. Latin *facere*, ‘to make, to do’) and to have taken on the special sense of making something spurious only by midcentury.

23 All three words refer originally to criminal deceptions in which the perpetrator gains the victims’ confidence, only to diddle them later. Often this is accomplished by playing to a sucker’s greed, as when the flimflam man obtains a substantial amount of money from the mark, under the pretext of needing it to facilitate recovery of a much larger sum in which the mark is promised a share, which subsequently disappears along with the swindler.

24 Calling a lie a *fairy story* in English is mirrored by German usage, *Märchen* meaning both ‘fairy tale’ and ‘fib’ (*New Cassell’s German Dictionary*, Funk and Wagnalls: 1958, p. 311). *Bunk*, with which history was famously equated by Henry Ford, is short for *buncombe*. The *OED* (p. 295A) states that the term arose during a debate in the 16th Congress over Missouri statehood (its admission to the union as a slave state was coupled with that of Maine as a free one in 1820 in what is still known as the Missouri Compromise), during which the representative from Buncombe County, North Carolina, felt obliged to give an extended speech for the benefit of his constituents back home. The term soon became popular on both side of the Atlantic, often spelled *bunkum*; cf. *hokum*, thought by the compilers of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (p. 961) to be a fusion of *bunkum* and the first syllable of *hocus-pocus*. The cartoonist Al Capp claimed to have invented the surname of his hillbilly protagonist “Li’l Abner” Yokum by combining *yokel* with *hokum*.

25 This is what Hollywood Indians are always accusing the White Man of doing, not without justice. But the double tongue preceded the silver screen by four or five centuries: Caxton’s *Fables of Avian*, which he printed in 1484 (one of the earliest instances of a proverbial expression with tongue in it cited by the *OED*, p. 3347C) says that “the felaulship of the man whiche hath two tongues is nought.” The comparison to



a snake's tongue is obvious, and its fabled potency as 'the stinging organ' first appears in published English writing in 1581, with at least two instances in Shakespeare dating from the 1590s (*ibid.*). In fairness it must be conceded that not all apparent prevarications in settlers' dealings with Native Americans were due to a malicious intent to deceive, some arising from inadequacies of linguistic and cultural translation instead. A tragic root of the hostilities that resulted in the massacre, enslavement, and subjugation of much of southern New England's indigenous population in the late seventeenth century lay in the "profound misunderstandings in how the new England native and the New England European viewed the land, and the wealth that the land represented," according to Eric B. Schultz and Michael J. Tougias (*King Philip's War*, Countryman Press: 1999, p. 18).

26 The *OED* (p. 162A) gives the first appearance of this word in print as 1703, in a work by Colley Cibber, adding that it was one of several words (including *banter*) that had been decried by purists as colloquialisms allowed to enter and degrade the English language, and suggesting that it originated in underworld cant.

27 Nancy LaRoche et al., *Picturesque Expressions: A Thematic Dictionary* (Gale Research Company: 1980), defines this expression as 'to deceive or delude, to hoodwink or bamboozle,' adding that "attempts to account for the use of wool in this expression are unconvincing" but that "this Americanism dates from the 19th century" (pp. 350–351). It may be related to "throw dust in [someone's] eyes," which LaRoche and her coauthors state first appeared in the 1600s (*ibid.*) and which appears with *hoodwink* in the Lord Chancellor's song in Gilbert and Sullivan's *Iolanthe*: "I'll never throw dust in a juryman's eyes/(Said I to myself—said I)/Nor hoodwink a judge who is not overwise...." (Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 254). The earliest reference to *hoodwink* in the *OED* is 1610 (p. 1327D).

28 The root of *epistemology* is the Greek verb *πιστευειν* 'to trust.'

29 Nor in most of ours either: This charming nonsense word was made up by Rudolph Carnap in his contribution to the *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science* (vol. 1, no. 3, *Foundations of Logic and Mathematics*, University of Chicago Press: 1939) as an example to illustrate the analysis of language: "On certain holidays the lake is called 'rumber'; when using this name, the people often think—even during good weather—of the dangers of storm on the lake" (pp. 5–6. The rest of the time, Carnap says, the lake is called "titisee," a name associated with "plenty of fish and good meals.")

30 David E. Humez, my father, first introduced me to this delightful brain-teaser in my youth, under the title "Which Way to Albuquerque." My brother Alex and I adapted it into a Latin translation exercise, concerning a traveler interrogating two Etruscans on the road to Rome's neighbor, Alba Longa, in our primer for grown-ups *Latin for People/Latina pro Populo* (Little, Brown: 1976, pp. 86–87).

## HORRIBILE DICTU

Mat Coward  
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"Cheaper Elsewhere!" says the cover of a computer supplies catalogue I received the other day. "Phone Us FIRST! Before YOU Buy!" Is the merchant boasting that his prices aren't competitive—or is this further evidence of the creeping extinction of the question mark? (Enjoy the punctuation at the end of that sentence; it might be one of the last in captivity.)

A telephone company, writing to try to persuade me to switch my account, promised that to make savings I had "only to pick up the phone and prefix the number. Simple isn't it." In the absence of either a question mark or a comma, I read that as a statement—and decided that if it wasn't simple, I wouldn't bother with it.

Many people have abandoned apostrophes because they find them too complicated to use, but how do we explain the vanishing query?

Come to that, why have *you* and *me* been largely replaced, in commercial circles, with *yourself* and *myself*? Are phrases such as these: "following your letter to ourselves" and "if you have not heard from myself by then" (both received by myself in the last month), the result of stressification, or clumsy attempts at formality?

*Men* and *women* have pretty much disappeared, too. We're all agreed, I suppose, that anyone who uses the disgusting infantilism "lady" is asking for a smack (in the tummy, probably), but even more chilling are the increasingly common *males* and *females*. A local adult education institute, for instance, offers mixed exercise classes, at which "males are welcome," as well as ones for "females only." Are words like *man* and *woman* now considered too explicit, too sexy?

VERBATIM readers (many of them differently gendered, I note) continue to delight me by contributing their own "Horribiles" to this column, via any of the magazine's usual virtual or actual addresses. Rosemary Darmstadt wants to know why, "whenever I receive a bonus with a purchase



I am told I am being given a *free gift*? The *American Heritage Dictionary* says a gift is something bestowed voluntarily and without compensation.”

I'm not sure, but it could be the same impulse which explains the BBC's habit of issuing *special CDs*, containing music from TV series. As far as I know, the corporation has never trumpeted the release of a *bog standard* CD.

Roger Taylor offers further examples of “super-glued” words: “One I've noticed recently on TV and local radio is *sheer weight of traffic*. Whatever happened to “traffic” which has made the weight of it “sheer”? Oh, and “why is it,” he adds, “that coincidences are always *pure*?”

I have a question of my own: what does “the eighteen hundreds” mean to you? That's not a rhetorical question; I really would be interested to know whether others share my confusion. To me, *the early eighteen-hundreds* is 1802, perhaps, or 1803, but I'm gradually realising that in media-speak and officialese the phrase refers to any date from 1800 to around 1830, since “the eighteen-hundreds” now means the nineteenth century. If so, how are we supposed to refer to the first decade of a century, without people thinking we're talking about the *entire* century?

Early in this century (and, as it happens, in the twenty hundreds), a survey by the Food Commission in the UK drew attention to what it calls “label lies”—words used on packaging to make products sound more “pure” and “natural” than they are. My favourite example concerned a discount store's tinned mackerel fillets labelled *ocean fresh*, despite carrying a three-years-hence sell-by date.

Perhaps the label liars should take lessons from the PR genius who seems to have been advising Kentucky Fried Chicken. Several times, in the past few months, I've read newspaper reports of animal rights protests against allegedly “unacceptable” welfare standards in the production of the fast-food chain's main ingredient. In each case, a spokesperson for the company has responded with what is clearly the official line: “KFC is committed to the well-being of chickens.” By frying them? Why, it's almost as if words have no meaning any more.

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## Diction Slips

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The problem arose when I corrected the paper of a student I'll call A—for *Argument*. “Why did you change that word?” asked A, pointing to a sentence on the first page. “And what does ‘dict.’ mean?”

“It means your diction is off.” I read the offending sentence. The paper had to do with a scary overnight bicycling trip past an old graveyard. “‘The road we biked on was steep and torturous.’ You mean *tortuous*. No *r*.”

“What's the difference?”

I tried not to sound like a pedantic English teacher I'd had in high school. “*Torturous* means painful, as in *torture*. *Tortuous* is twisted, winding—like certain roads.”

She frowned. “But it was so hilly and crooked, it really was painful to pedal up it.”

I sighed. “Well, maybe. Look, let's move on. Here you have ‘The epigram on his tombstone read, ‘He who laughed last.’” What you mean is *epitaph*.”

“But you told us that an epigram is a witty saying.” She began to flip through her class notes. “I actually took it down . . . somewhere.”

“I probably did say that, but—”

“So why can't a joke be on a gravestone?” She folded her arms.

“All right, never mind. But here”—I moved on to the next page—“you talk about how *illusive* the man's ghost was. You mean he can't be tracked down easily, right?”

A suspected a trap. “Maybe....”

“Then you mean *elusive*.” I explained the term.

“But ghosts are illusions, so they're hard to spot.”

“Yes, but—”

“So he's *elusive* because he's *illusive*!”

And here I draw a veil over the rest of the proceedings, as they used to say in old-fashioned novels. Let's just say that A got a B instead of a C. Why? Not just because I wanted to get rid of her, though that rationale may have figured partly in my calculations, but because I thought she had a point. The reason that certain words are often confused is not just that they're spelled or pronounced similarly, but rather that their meanings are entwined.



For example, when someone—an English teacher correcting your paper, let’s say—*deprecates* your work, he probably also *depreciates* it. That is, if he expresses disapproval of it, he may well be lessening its value by marking it down. I know this to be true because I’m an English professor, though students instinctively know it, too. Similarly, one doesn’t have to be a police officer to recognize that many people who *flout* the law are just the types to *flaunt* their crimes in public. People who scorn the rules of society are often show-offs.

Let’s return to that epitaph on the gravestone. Grave markers sometimes *do* feature *epigrams*, which may also function as *epigraphs* in poems if they strike the right note. I’ve seen Oscar Wilde’s “One should always be a little improbable” on a marble marker in Woodlawn, but I’ve also seen it heading up an odd little poem about quantum mechanics. To add further confusion: gravestones may also include *epithets* describing the deceased, such as “Dave, the Incomparable.” [For more on the confusing words *epitaph*, *epigram*, *epigraph*, and *epithet*, see the poem “Primer” in VERBATIM XXIV/4.]

But where do we draw the line? *Strunk and White*, that bastion of common sense, make a point of distinguishing between *compose* and *comprise*, though decades of sloppy diction have made a hash of the distinction. A sentence from section IV, “Words and Expressions Commonly Misused,” reads helpfully: “A zoo *comprises* mammals, reptiles, and birds”(because it embraces, or includes, them).” But a zoo is *composed* of those same three groups (and these days, here and there, butterflies).

My poor student confused *elusive* and *illusiv*e, but just as vexing is the conjunction of *allusion* and *illusion*. I think the problem is in describing an allusion as “an indirect reference,” which makes it shadowy as an illusion. The sad truth is that, for far too many students taking required literature courses, subtle allusions might as well be illusions.

Or maybe the students are just uninterested in the material, though they’d probably describe their mood as disinterested. The logical connection is clear to anyone who’s ever sat in a court of law: How easy to be *disinterested* (impartial) when one is *uninterested* (couldn’t care less). And when the teacher at the front of the room makes yet another indirect statement or allusion, the students have to

*infer* or guess what the teacher *implies* or suggests (students often write *infer* for *imply*, but for some reason not vice versa).

Other pairs are similarly fused causally, and some even come in quadruplets, to wit: Certain factors may *affect* the *effect*, as in turning up the thermostat and altering the temperature of the room. To perform this act is to *effect* a change, and perhaps induce a psychological *affect* of warmth. Then there are the triplets *insure*, *ensure*, and *assure*, which have several meanings but share one sense: ‘to secure or guarantee.’ That is, if the game is fixed, the outcome is assured or insured or ensured (usually the British variant). But *insure* has become entangled with the legalized gambling known as insurance and therefore has lost some of its happier persuasive import. Look at the history of what was once called life assurance, as if life were guaranteed by paying the premiums, and note how it shifted to the more grounded “life insurance”—after a forgettable period of utter realism when it was known as “death insurance.”

So slow students aren’t the only ones who muddle these words. The problem is further complicated by the often-linked etymology of the terms. After all, *assure* and its brethren all partake of surety. *Torturous* and *tortuous* both derive from the notion of twisting—as in the rack or as in crooked. And so on. The simple word *limit* or *boundary* is often cruelly abandoned for its more grandiose cousin *limitation*, which often implies (not infers) a drawback of some kind, though, as with *compose* and *comprise*, the two words often slew together. Yet William Safire of the *New York Times* argued for just such a distinction, practically the same day that a *Times* headline proclaimed “Term Limitations” for political offices. I might ask, if the distinction is so clear, why we have statutes of limitations. If that isn’t the limit! (Safire has also taken glee in pointing out the difference between *nudge* and the Yiddish *noodge*, or to “push” versus to “pester,” but surely one nudges people because one is a noodge.)

Is there any refuge from these diction slips? Well, at least they stem from attempts to broaden one’s vocabulary. Most students don’t confuse *imminent* with *immanent* because they don’t know the second word, and the same is true of *energize* and *enervate*. So we’re safe there. Maybe we can take some insurance from that.



## EPISTOLAE

I overheard an elderly (old) man (such as myself) reply to the polite question, “How are you?” with, “I’m still on the green side of the grass.”

I had never heard this expression before and am wondering whether it is familiar or was possibly coined by him.

Erik Nappa  
Brick, New Jersey



Jessy Randall’s notes on “Gesundheit” and its relatives (XXVII/4, Autumn 2002) brought to mind the expression my brother and I—82 and 78 years old, respectively—use when either hears the other sneeze: “Gatti-Casazza.”

Another old-timer recently overheard this reaction and turned to us. “I haven’t heard that name for decades! How come you use it?”

We explained that Giulio Gatti-Casazza (the impresario, or general manager, of the New York Metropolitan Opera House from 1908 to 1935) had been mentioned when we were youths by relatives who were opera buffs.

His name had such a mellifluous sound that we adopted it as the proper response to a sneeze.

Today, in the lobby of Lincoln Center’s Metropolitan Opera House, visitors can find an impressive bust of the impresario.

Ed Rosenberg  
Danbury, Connecticut



## God-Damns

Barry Baldwin  
Alberta, Canada

Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785) is not only a source of scatology as shown in VERBATIM (XXVII/2). His inventory of religious slang has something to offend just about everyone and provides a bean feast for historians and philologists.

In what follows, all quoted definitions are Grose’s own. Working from the outsiders in, we start with the Jews. Despite a common view that there was little anti-Semitic content in eighteenth-century English because the Scots were a more obvious target, Jews continued to suffer from traditional Christian antipathy and gentile jealousy of their supposed business acumen. Though not admitting the verb, Grose’s denotation of the noun *Jew* (his *Levite* is more generally contemptuous of priests and parsons of all sects) is blatant: “an over-reaching dealer, or hard, sharp, fellow; an extortioner; the brokers behind St Clement’s Church in the Strand were formerly called Jews by their brethren the taylors.” The topographical precision is notable, as in the entry for *Duffers*—Arthur Dailey spiv types who sold local Spitalfields goods at inflated prices, claiming that they were expensive smuggled items. Another sly activity graphically stigmatised is *Queer Bail*: “insolvent sharpers, who make a profession of bailing persons arrested: generally styled *Jew bails*, from that branch of business being chiefly carried on by the sons of Judah. The lowest sort of these, who borrow or hire clothes to appear in, are called Mounters, from their mounting particular dresses suitable to the occasion.”

Two further rubrics accuse them of outright criminality. *Reader Merchant*: “pickpockets, chiefly young Jews, who ply about the Bank to steal the pocket-books of persons who have just received their dividends there”; nowadays they would be said to hang around bank machines. *Sweating*: “a mode of diminishing the gold coin, practised chiefly by Jews, who corrode it with *aqua regia*.”

A continental influence shows up in *Dutch Smous* (a German Jew) and in *Swindler*, said by Ernest Weekley, in his *An Etymological Dictionary*



of *Modern English* (1921) to be ‘picked up in 1762 from German Jews in London.’ Jews were also called *Porkers*. Did this at all influence the Cockney rhyming slang *Pork Pies/Lies/Telling Porkies*?

By way of dark modernity, the second definition of *Jew* in the *Dictionary of the Greek Language*, by George Babiniotis, reads ‘a person who minds above all his own interests—stingy, avaricious.’ Though unoffended by this, an Athenian judge in 1998 ordered that the dictionary be withdrawn until its second definition of *Bulgarian* as ‘pejorative and insulting—applied to a sports fan or player from Thessaloniki’ was expunged.

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Roman Catholics were also outsiders. Lord Chesterfield might joke to an English Jesuit, “It is to no purpose for you to aspire to the honour of martyrdom; fire and faggot are quite out of fashion,” but as late as 1874 the *Times* could editorialise over news of the conversion of Lord Ripon thus: “A statesman who becomes a convert to Roman Catholicism forfeits at once the confidence of the English People. Such a move can only be regarded as betraying an irreparable weakness of character.”

Grose’s words and phrases poke fun at particular aspects of alleged Catholic behaviour rather than indulge in blanket theological condemnation. No less than three separate terms (*Breast Fleet*, *Brisket Eater*, and *Craw Thumper*) allude to their beating of breasts when confessing their sins. *Church Latin* produced “a celebrated writer’s explanation of *Hocus-Pocus* as ‘a ludicrous corruption of *hoc est corpus*, used by the popish priests in consecrating the host.’ Grose, though, did not see such a source for *All My Eye and Betty Martin*, unlike John Camden Hotten, whose slang dictionary (1859) elucidates it as ‘a vulgar phrase constructed from the commencement of a Roman Catholic prayer to St Martin, *O mihi, beate Martine*.’ Eric Partridge and other modern philologists dismiss this as too ingeniously complicated.

Both converts and converters suffer from *Pot Converts* ‘proselytes to the Romish church, made

by the distribution of victuals and money.’ A tendency to drink is suggested by *Bumper*: ‘a full glass. Some derive it from a full glass drunk to the health of the Pope—*au bon pere*.’ *Pope’s Nose* (the rump of a turkey), still common in parts of North America, but omits the interchangeable variant *Parson’s Nose*.

An Irish element operated at two different levels. *Holy Father* (cf. *Odds Plut and her Nails* for a Welsh equivalent): ‘a butcher’s boy of St Patrick’s Market, Dublin, or other Irish blackguard; among whom the exclamation, or oath, *By The Holy Father* (meaning the pope) is common.’ Irish Presbyterians, on the other hand intoned the expletive *Sorrow Shall*

*Be His Slops*. There were also *Irish Legs*: ‘thick legs, jocularly styled the Irish arms. It is said of the Irish women that they have a dispensation from the Pope to wear the thick end of their legs downwards.’ This need not be taken too seriously. *Irish* had been a common derogatory prefix to pretty well anything since the late seventeenth century, e.g., Grose’s *Irish Beauty* ‘a woman with two black eyes.’

In a note on *Boswell’s Life* (vol. 3, p. 429), Giuseppe Baretta fulminated apropos the Gordon Riots, “So illiberal was Johnson made by religion that he calls here the chapel a mass-house.” Actually, the Italian is demonstrating his own ignorance of English vernacular. In Grose, *Mess John* is a collateral term for Scottish Presbyterians, while *Steeple House* was applied to the Anglican Church by Dissenters (their meeting places and preachers being in turn *Schism Shops* and *Schism Mongers*) and (in West Yorkshire) to Quakers. Likewise, *Crop*, an old term of reference to the Roundhead close tonsures, was reapplied to Presbyterians, while *Chop Churches* (simoniacal dealers in livings, or other ecclesiastical pefements) knew no sectarian bounds.

Did Baretta know the *Pantile Shop* (a Presbyterian, or other Dissenting meeting-house, frequently covered in pantiles; called also a cock-pit)? Or the *Calves’ Head Club*: ‘a club instituted by the Independents and Presbyterians, to commemorate the decapitation of King Charles I. Their



chief fare was calves' heads; and they drank their wine and ale out of calves' skulls.' King Charles fared linguistically no worse than his adversary Cromwell—*Oliver's Skull* denoted a chamber-pot.

Grose's definition of *Quaker*, 'a religious sect, so-called from their agitations in preaching,' would not have sat well with the Society of Friends, which disdained the very nickname. Nor the cognate *Autem Quaver*—*Autem* (church) features in several such diversely targeted compounds: *Autem Bawler* (parson); *Autem Cacklers* and *Prickears* (Dissenters of every denomination); *Autem Cackle Tub* (a conventicle or meeting-house for Dissenters); *Autem Dippers* (pickpockets who practise in churches; also churchwardens and overseers of the poor). The strange-looking *Aminidab* (a jeering name for a Quaker), not in the *Oxford English Dictionary* might mean 'dab-hands' (*Dab* in Grose means 'an adept') at saying Amen.

Denoting Methodists as *belonging to the New Light* looks complimentary in print, but could of course be sarcastically voiced, and the phrase occurs several times in Smollett's account of Humphry Clinker's comic flirtations with that sect. A particular branch of South Wales Anabaptists suffers from burglarious reputation under the word *Jumpers*, while Anabaptists are unambiguously branded as pickpockets under their own entry and that for *Dippers*. Defining a Non-Conformist as *Shit Sack* looks a good deal less than kind, but Grose's exegetic anecdote (far too long to quote) is perhaps more amused than cruel, its butt being the preacher who befouls himself in terror at a musical blast mistaken by himself and his congregation as the Last Trump.

*Parson Palmer* 'a jocular name, or term of reproach, to one who stops the circulation of the glass by preaching over his liquor, as it is said was done by a parson of that name whose cellar was under his pulpit.' If Parson Palmer belonged to the eighteenth century, he might be one of the two divines of that name in Boswell's *Life* (the *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* has no pre-Victorian Palmers), namely the Reverend Thomas Fysche Palmer (1747–1802), a Unitarian minister eventually transported to New South Wales for sedition; his Scotch connections would help along any English canard. Of course, it might not be a

proper name at all, but an expression analogous to *Mr. Palmer* (one who palms a bribe).

Hard to say who has the darker etymological fate, Dr. Lob or Dr. Sacheverel. *Lob's Pound* 'a prison. Dr. Lob, a dissenting preacher, who used to hold forth when conventicles were prohibited, had made himself a retreat by means of a trapdoor at the bottom of his pulpit. Once being pursued by the officers of justice, they followed him through divers subterraneous passages, till they got into a dark cell, from whence they could not find their way out, but calling to some of their companions, swore they had got into *Lob's Pound*.' Just to rub it in, this dungeon-drear term also became slang for 'vagina.'

*Sacheverel*: 'the iron door, or blower, to the mouth of a stove: from a divine of that name, who made himself famous for blowing the coals of dissension in the latter part of the reign of Queen Ann.' This was Henry Sacheverel (1674–1724), whose fiery High Church oratory earned him impeachment and a three-year ban on preaching in 1709. But there was worse in store for the booming cleric. *Piss Pot Hall* 'a house at Clopton, near Hackney, built by a potter chiefly out of the profit of chamber-pots, in the bottom of which the portrait of Dr Sacheverel was depicted.'

A mixed bag of both general and particular sexually charged expressions serves as pleasant transition to the Anglican Church. An *Abbess* is a brothel keeper; *Abbots* too, in other such dictionaries. *Nunnery* retained its Elizabethan sense of 'bawdy-house,' so, I add, lest secular professors snigger, did *Academy*. The curious and obscure *Nose Gent* denoted a 'nun.' Eric Partridge connected it with *Nazy-Nab* (drunken coxcombe), but I fancy we need something more sexual, and the term may suggest a whore good at sniffing out potential customers; Grose has many colloquial examples of *Nose* both as noun and verb, along with his *Eve's Custom House* (where Adam made his first entry—i.e., 'vagina') and *Family of Love* (lewd women; also a religious sect). This equation of religion and sex, of course, serves a long-standing pornographic fantasy, evidenced, for example, in the anonymous novel *Autobiography of a Flea*.

Grose's *Monks* and *Friars* (printing terms for black and white) rather let down the erotic side. Still, we can harken back to James le Palmer's mar-





ginalia to his fourteenth century *Omne Bonum* encyclical: “Note, you mendicant friar-sycophants, daily consorting with women, how gravely you sin by such scandalous behaviour.”

The attitudes captured by Grose support the admission by the *Penguin Dictionary of Eighteenth-Century History* that the period from 1689 to 1833 “has been castigated as the bleakest era in the history of the Church of England.” Protestations of clerical poverty (Johnson mentions “a clergyman of small income who brought up a family which he fed chiefly with apple dumplings”) cut little ice with the poor outside the church door, who would have tittered at Johnson’s anecdote, *Apple Dumpling* being slang for ‘the female bosom.’

The grasping cleric was immortalised as a *Turnpike Man* ‘a parson; because the clergy collect their tolls at our entrance in and exit from the world.’ Collins writes in *Pride and Prejudice* that “the rector of a parish must in the first place make such an agreement for tythes as may be beneficial to himself.” Also as a *One-In-Ten*, along with sardonic compliments to their *Priest Craft* (the art of awing the laity, managing their consciences and diving into their pockets) and the *Parson’s Barn* (never so full but there is still room for more). A similar spirit animates Grose’s definition of *Church Warden* (a Sussex name for a shag, or cormorant, probably from its voracity), while lack of faith in the Church’s long-term benefits is manifest in *Church Work* (said of any work that advances slowly).

Those who evaded their tithes were said *To Pinch On The Parson’s Side*. Few apparently did elude the *Black Fly* ‘the greatest drawback on the farmer, i.e. the parson who takes tithe of the harvest.’ Meanwhile, their City counterparts would be lamenting the hypocrisy of the *Finger Post* ‘a parson, so called because he points out a way to others which he never goes himself.’

Clerical venality is colourfully skewered by the explanation of *Patrico/Pater Cove* as ‘the fifteenth rank of the canting tribe; strolling priests that marry people under a hedge without gospel or common prayer book; also any minister or parson.’ There was also a *Hedge Priest* ‘an illiterate unbeneficed curate, a patricio.’ The latter was also known as a *Puzzle Text*. Sacerdotal stupidity was more than a

joke. Johnson was so vexed by a young clergyman’s nescience that he complained, “His ignorance is so great, I am afraid to show him the bottom of it.”

Men of the cloth also suffered in popular parlance for their forbidding uniform. A visitation from the clergy was known as *Crow Fair* or *Review of the Black Cuirassiers*, though the latter looks more literary than everyday. A parson was also a *Pudding Sleeves*, no doubt an intellectual as well as a sartorial slight, given Grose’s *Pudding-headed Fellow* for an ignoramus. Another parsonical dress term was *Mr. Prunella*, clerical garments ‘frequently being made of this fabric.’ Likewise, *Japan*, a black cloth, produced *Japanned* (to be ordained). A more obscure classification (or am I just being a puzzle-text?) is *Shod-All-Round*, ‘a parson who attends a funeral is said to be shod all round, when he receives a hat-band, gloves and scarf; many shoeings being only partial.’

The eighteenth century shared the universal antipathy to *Long Winded* (a parson) sermons. Preachers with a Fidel Castro-like pulmonary power were known as *Cushion Thumpers*, *Tub Thumpers*, and *Spoil Puddings*, their pulpits being dubbed *Clack Lofts*, *Hum Boxes*, and *Prattling Boxes*. On the other hand, those divines who hastened over their services were branded *Chop And Changers* and *Postillions of the Gospel*. On balance, this undermines Johnson’s contention that congregations preferred sermons to prayers, “it being much easier for them to hear a sermon than to fix their minds on prayer”; Grose includes the *Religious Horse* ‘one much given to prayer, or apt to be down on his knees.’

Grose is a model of concise condemnation. Cautions: “I. Beware of a woman before; II. Beware of a horse behind; III. Beware of a cart sideways; IV. Beware of a priest every way.”

NB: *God-Damn* ‘an Englishman’. This engaging equation is derived in the *OED* from the French *Goddam*, with examples from texts from 1431 to 1893. The Larousse French dictionary, however, fixes the latter’s origin in 1787. These illustrious lexicons cannot both be right.

[Barry Baldwin’s semiregular column, *As the Word Turns*, will return in the next issue.]



## *Words Can't Begin To Describe What I'm Feeling*

David Shields  
Seattle, Washington

I'll be honest with you: I'm here to tell you: The big key is: The bottom line is:

There's no question about it. There's no doubt about it. You got that right. I couldn't agree with you more. Obviously, the statistics speak for themselves.

He's a highly touted freshman. Last week was his coming-out party. He has all the makings of a great one. He has unlimited potential. He's a can't-miss prospect. You'll be hearing a lot from him. He can play at the next level. He can play on Sundays. He's got his whole future ahead of him. He's a youngster who bears watching. He's being groomed for a future starting job. The team is really high on him. He's going to set the world on fire. He's a rookie phenom.

He moves well for a big man. He's sneaky-fast. He has lightning-fast reflexes. He has great lateral mobility. He can pick 'em up and put 'em down. He has both speed and quickness. He's a cutter and a slasher. He has speed to burn. He's fleet-footed. He's a speed merchant. He can fly. He can flat-out fly. Speed kills. You can't teach speed.

He's a unique physical specimen. He has a low center of gravity. He plays bigger than his size. He's built like a brick shithouse. He's a stud. He's a warrior. He's a bulldog. He has a linebacker mentality. He's fearless. He's a physical player. He's an impact player.

He's a tough, hard-nosed player. He's their spark plug. He's their role player. He understands his role on this team. He lets the game come to him. He's the consummate team player. He's an unselfish player. He's a real throwback. He plays with a lot of emotion. He has a passion for the game. He always gives 110%. He plays for the name on the front of the jersey, not the name on the back of it.

He's their playmaker. He's their field general. He's their floor general. He's a good table-setter. He's the glue that holds this team together. He makes the players around him better. He's a stand-up guy. The team looks to him for leadership. He's a leader on this team. He's a leader on and off the field.

He's a true professional. He's a professional hitter. He just goes out there and gets the job done. I was just doing my job. I was just hoping I could make a contribution in whatever way they needed me.

He's some kind of player. He's the real deal. He's legit. He can flat-out play. He's as good a player as there is in this league. He's one of the best in the business. He's in a league of his own. He's a franchise player. He's a future Hall-of-Famer. He's a first-ballot lock. You can't say enough about him.

He's got ice-water running through his veins. He thrives under pressure. He always comes through in the clutch. He really comes through at crunch time. He's their go-to guy when the game's on the line. He's money. He can carry the team on his shoulders. He can take them to the promised land.

He's shooting well from downtown. He's making a living behind the three-point arc. He's getting some good, open looks. He's shooting the lights out. He's in a zone. He's feeling it. He's in a groove. He's lighting it up. He's on fire. He's hot. He's locked in. He's unconscious. He blew them all away.

They pay him to make those catches. That pass was very catchable. He's usually a sure-handed receiver. He usually makes that catch. He heard footsteps. He's become a little gun-shy. He's got all the skills; he just needs to put them together. He needs to bulk up in the off-season. He needs to elevate his game. He's playing out of position. He lacks the killer instinct.

He's only played sparingly this season. He's the subject of trade rumors. He's being shopped around. He's on the trading block. He has a new lease on life. He's bounced around a lot. He's a journeyman. He's the player to be named later. He's lost a step. He's their elder statesman. I just want to give something back to the community. He's a great role model. He's a winner in the bigger game of life. I just want to be able to take care of myself and my family.

He doesn't have that good fastball today. He's getting by with breaking stuff. He took something off that pitch. He's getting shelled. He's getting rocked. They're teeing off on him. Stick a fork in him; he's done. They need to pull the plug. He hits the showers. Today I didn't have my plus-stuff. Regardless of what kind of stuff you have on a given day, you just try to go out there and pitch to the best of your ability and give your team an opportunity to win.



He got hung out to dry on that play. That was blown coverage. That was a missed assignment. They've playing in the shadow of their goalposts. He couldn't turn the corner. They're looking at third down and forever. They have to establish the running game. They have to air it out more. They have to take care of the football. That missed extra point could come back to haunt them. You gotta hit the holes they make for you. You gotta follow your blockers out there. He's been quiet so far; they need to get him some more carries in the second half. This is their deepest penetration of the half. They've got to punch it in from here. They can't cough it up here. They need to just go out and make football plays.

He has all the time in the world. He has all day back there. He has all kinds of time. He has an eternity. He threw into double coverage. He threw up a prayer. He'd like to have that one back.

We just couldn't execute. We weren't able to sustain anything. They got us out of our game plan early. They took us completely out of our rhythm.

We got beat like a gong. They beat us like a drum. They outplayed us. We ran into a buzzsaw. We didn't execute. Turnovers absolutely killed us. We didn't get any calls. Sometimes this game just comes down to the way the ball bounces. We didn't get any breaks. The better team won. They were the better team today. Give them credit. We just didn't get the job done. We weren't mentally prepared. For some reason they've just got our number. We didn't come to play. They stepped up and made football plays. They wanted it more than we did. We have to put this loss behind us. This was a wake-up call. I tip my hat to them. We beat ourselves. We only have to look in the mirror. I don't want to point any fingers. We came up a little short. We had our chances. They wanted it more than we did. They outplayed us in every phase of the game. They just made the big plays and we didn't. We dug ourselves a deep hole. We have to put this game behind us. It's going to be a long plane ride home.

The coach is on the hot seat. His head is on the chopping block. Unfortunately, there are days like this. We're in the business of winning. It's the nature of this business. It's time to move on. We have to look forward. We need a change of direc-

tion. We need a clean slate. We need someone who can take us to the next level.

I feel the time has come for new leadership of this ballclub. Everyone has to be held accountable. It's all about winning and losing. I take the blame. I'm not going to stand up here and make excuses. Obviously, I'm disappointed things didn't work out. This is my responsibility, and I feel badly I haven't been able to get us going where we should be going. I want to thank our great fans. I'm looking forward to the next chapter in my life. First I'm going to spend more time with my family.

I'm excited about this opportunity. I'm looking forward to the challenge. I have high expectations for this team. This franchise has a great winning tradition. We've got a good, solid foundation to build on. We're going to right the ship. We're going to get things turned around. This is a great sports town.

They stumbled coming out of the gate. They got off on the wrong foot. They're finally showing signs of life. They need a late surge. It's been an up-and-down-season. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

This team is starting to make some noise. The players have bought into the system. He's got them headed in the right direction. He's a players' coach. He's more of a people person than an X's-and-O's guy. These guys have been busting their tails for him. He gets the most out of his players. They've turned the corner. They've raised the bar. They've gotten over the hump. They've finally gotten off the schneid. They're loaded this year. They have a strong supporting cast. There's no "I" in "team." They've added a new wrinkle to their offense. They're finally getting the respect they deserve. They're for real. They're here to stay. They're playing with new-found confidence. They've got great team chemistry. This team is like a family. Everything's clicking. We're starting to gel. Everybody's on the same page. We're hitting on all cylinders now. Everybody's contributing.

We've got the league's best offense against the league's best defense; something's gotta give. We've got an intriguing matchup. This is a pivotal game. This game is for the bragging rights. These teams flat don't like each other. There's no love lost between these two teams. There's bad blood between these two teams. It's gonna be a war out there. When these two teams get together, you can



throw out their records. You have to respect their athleticism. You have to respect their quickness. They have tremendous leaping ability. They can put up big numbers. They do a great job defensively. They play tough D.

They're feeling each other out. Here's the pay-off pitch. He chased a bad pitch. Tough to lay off that pitch. three up, three down. This is shaping up to be a real pitchers' duel. That ball should be playable. It's a can of corn. The ball took a bad hop. Strike-'im-out, throw-'im-out double-play. Inning over. He got a good jump. That brings the tying run to the plate. He hits 'em where they ain't. He's a long-ball threat. He hit a solo-shot back in the fifth. He's seeing the ball real well. He wears them out. He made good contact. He hit that ball squarely. He hit that ball on the sweet spot. He knocked the cover off the ball. In any other ballpark, that's a home run. Chicks dig the long ball. He's sitting on dead red. He got all of it. He went yard. He hit it into the cheap seats. He flat jacked it. He went deep. He went downtown. Going, going, gone. It's outta here. See ya later. Goodbye, baseball. Kiss it goodbye. Aloha means goodbye.

It's been all theirs to this point. It's theirs to lose. They're not playing to win; they're playing not to lose. They're putting the ball in the deep freeze. They've gone to the Four Corners. Now's the time to run some clock.

Looks like we've got some extracurricular activity going on out there. Let's hope cooler heads prevail. They're mucking it up in the corner. He stood him up on the blue line. That's gotta hurt. He was mugged. He's gonna feel that one on Monday. Looks like we've got a player shaken up. Looks like he got his bell rung. That hit really cleaned his clock. He ran into a brick wall. He was literally run over by a freight train. He was blind-sided. He's slow getting up. He was really clotheslined. They can ill-afford to lose him. Their locker room must look like a MASH unit. X-rays are inconclusive. He left the field under his own power. We hate to speculate on the nature of the injury.

There's a flag on the play. It depends where they spot it. Terrible call, terrible call. We got hosed. We got jobbed. We got robbed. Highway robbery. They're the best refs money can buy. The

refs should just let them play. Bad calls even out over the course of a season.

As Yogi said, it ain't over 'til it's over. It ain't over 'til the fat lady sings. They won't go quietly. We've still got plenty of football left.

You can feel the momentum shifting. Big Mo. They're going for the jugular. They can smell blood in the water. They're within striking distance. Now we've got a football game. It's a whole new ball-game. This team shows a lot of character. This team shows a lot of poise. This team shows a lot of resiliency. This team shows a lot of heart.

It all started out with good field position. They've marched down the field. That was a goal-scorer's goal. He lit the lamp. He went high to the top shelf. He put the biscuit in the basket. He found the twine. He went upstairs. He nailed the buzzer-beater. She really stuck the landing. He hit paydirt. Nothing but net. This should be a chip shot for him. The kick splits the uprights.

What an incredible turnaround.

We found a way to win. A win is a win. It wasn't pretty, but we'll take it. I'm really proud of the way our guys hung in there. This is always a tough place to play. We're just glad to get out of here with a W. We're happy we could pull this one out at the end. They're tough competitors. They gave us all we could handle. They're a class act. Give them a lot of credit. I tip my hat to them. There are no easy games in this league. The game was a lot closer than the final score indicates. They weren't going to come in here and just lie down for us. We're going to use this as a building block. We'll use this win as a stepping stone to the next level.

What a difference a week makes.

We were really on our game. We took them out of their game. We really came to play. We brought our A-game. We knew what we had to do and went out and did it. We answered the call. This team has finally learned how to win. It was a total team effort. Obviously, this was a great win for us. It was a big win for us. We came to play. We stuck to the game plan. It was a total team effort. We wanted to make a statement. We sent a message. We came through when it counted. We're going to savor the victory tonight, then tomorrow morning we'll start looking at film.

The only thing that matters in the Stanley Cup



playoffs is the man between the pipes. You can't win an NBA championship without a dominant big man. You can't win in the NFL without establishing the run. Offense puts fannies in the seats; defense wins championships. You've got to have pitching if you're going to make it through the postseason.

We just need to go out there and take care of business. It all just comes down to execution. You can't leave anything on the table. We have go out and leave it all on the ice. We need to bring it. We need to dig deeper than we've ever dug before. We just gotta go out tomorrow and have fun.

They've battled back from the brink of elimination. They're down but not out. They're in a must-win situation. They need a win to stave off elimination. Lose and go home. There's no tomorrow. I know it's a cliché, but we just have to take it one game at a time.

We gotta stick to the basics. We need to remember what got us here. You gotta dance with who brung you. This is it. This is for all the marbles.

They need to keep up their intensity. They have to stay focused. They have to get after it. They have to rise to the occasion. They've got tremendous mental toughness. They're a blue-collar team. They're overachievers. They've come out of nowhere. They're a real Cinderella story. They have to stay hungry. They're loaded for bear.

The city has rallied around this team. We've got die-hard fans. We feed off the energy of our fans. Our fans are our twelfth man. We've got the greatest fans in the world.

We're happy to be in the postseason and now we want to go out there and do some damage. We're capable of going deep in the postseason. We're not just happy to be here. This team has a chance to do something special. Hopefully, we can steal one on the road. In the playoffs, anything can happen.

Game time.

The fans are on their feet. This crowd is going wild. This place is a madhouse. This place is pandemonium. You can feel the electricity. Ya gotta love these fans. You gotta love this game.

{David Shields's new book, *Body Politic: The Great American Sports Machine*, is being published by Simon & Schuster next year.}

## No Trivial Matter

William S. Murray  
Chicago, Illinois

For some years now there has been an alarming trend that has apparently gone unnoticed by our nation's leaders. Maybe we Americans have become jaded to the many cries for conservation and guardianship of the legacy and burden that we are going to pass on to our children and our children's children. There are, after all, so many well-meaning and anxious organizations that call for us to have a care as to how we're mistreating this old planet that some issues are bound to slip through the crack.

But someone's got to point out the predicament we're headed for, and the problem is just getting worse at a faster rate.

Of course, I'm talking about running out of quality trivia questions.

I'm guessing that *Jeopardy* or *The Weakest Link* must go through seventy or eighty questions per episode. *Who Wants To Be a Millionaire* has to burn off at least thirty or forty. *Wheel of Fortune*, *Street Smarts*, *Win Ben Stein's Money*, and *Tic Tac Dough* must account for another couple of dozen each, although you could easily argue that *Wheel's* answers aren't really to questions. Some of these programs are on the air five days a week. By my count, those seven alone are consuming nearly a thousand trivia questions per week. Liberally discounting for re-runs, that's got to be at least twenty-five thousand per year, and most likely a lot more. Year after mind-numbing year. Gone. Forever! Like the Passenger Pigeon (in itself a pretty good trivia answer).

Trivia is, to some extent, a self-renewing resource. And unlike, say, oil, it doesn't take nearly so long for something that was once alive and walking around to transmogrify into a more useful product for the rest of us to use. I mean, someday someone will not so easily be able to recall how many face lifts Michael Jackson has had or what U.S. vice president thought it necessary to add an 'e' to *potato*. Still, these things do take some time, and we're burning through the good stuff at an alarming and—with the move of *Weakest Link* to a five-day-a-week daytime schedule—rapidly increasing rate.



I'm not talking here about the puff questions they use on the "celebrity editions" of these shows—although, frankly, I'm often stumped just trying to identify some of the "celebrities." Future generations can easily live without questions like "What is the capitol of North Dakota?" or "Who's buried in Grant's Tomb?" or "How many states make up the Lower Forty-Eight?" The same goes for the length of the Hundred Years War—unless, of course, they're asking who were the participating countries.

No, I'm concerned about the tough ones like "What is the definition of turnbuckle?" or "Where is a dingo dog found?" or "What's a scupper?" or "Does a squid have eight or ten tentacles?" or "What does the "B" in Rutherford B. Hayes stand for?" (or even "Who was Rutherford B. Hayes?"). "What did Kane mean by 'Rosebud'?" or "What's the name of the little crease in your upper lip just below your nose?"

For proof that the rapid burn rate is already having an effect, just check out any of the Jaywalking segments of *The Tonight Show*. Sure, maybe some people don't know who sewed the first American flag or the meaning of "www" in a dot-com address, but not knowing who was the host of *The Gong Show*. Come on!

Truth be told, while I think I know what an aglet is, sometimes I have trouble deciding whether it was Clara Barton or Florence Nightingale who founded the Red Cross. And once in a while I can't be certain if the Congo is longer than the Nile or the Amazon, but I do know that the president with the dual middle initials was the father of some other president, probably a Bush or maybe an Adams. And that's the point. These are exactly the kind of tough questions that must be held back to help preserve our rich heritage of semi-useful knowledge.

It seems to me that we have a responsibility to those who will come after us. We should preserve such quality trivia as the name of the movie where Alfonso Bedoya declared that "no stinkin' badges" need be shown and what to call that dimple in the bottom of a wine bottle.

I understand that the people running our country have other things on their minds these days, but it feels as though no one has even raised this important issue, much less proposed some sort of plan for conservation. I'm pretty sure that even Dave Barry

hasn't addressed this. Maybe now that Dick Cheney seems to have less to do, it's something he could tackle from his undisclosed secure location.

Let's see, Sacajewea, the one on the new dollar coin: something to do with the Pilgrims?

*[William Murray is the author of It'll Never Show on Camera, a memoir from the other side of the TV screen during the so-called golden age of television. Excerpts are at <http://www.VisibilityGroup.com>.]*



## EPISTOLA

Three cheers for Mat Coward's "Horribiles"! I was especially glad to see "Up to" challenged in the Summer number. That has long been one of my favorite objects of derision. Quite a number of years ago I was asked by a publisher to review a manuscript for a wildflower book, and one of my major criticisms was the author's use of phrases like "Up to 3 feet or more" (for the height of a plant)—which, I pointed out, covered everything from zero to infinity. Just this past summer our state automobile club magazine published a "Correction," stating that in promoting one of its products it had declared, "Save 50 percent or more . . .". The alleged correction? "Save up to 50 percent or more . . .". As I pointed out in a letter (unacknowledged, of course) it would be simpler just to say "Save something." "Up to" by itself simply means [nearly] "less than" or "no more than." It is more a warning than a major promise!

Overdoing the arithmetic is also illustrated by the slogan of a local supermarket many years ago: "No one packs more in a bag for less." Apparently other stores could pack more in a bag for the same price, or perhaps the same groceries in a bag at less cost. Some time ago Toyota used a similar phrase in advertising, to the effect that no other car provided more features for less; in other words, some other car might offer the same features for less (or more features for the same price). Very strange admissions in advertising indeed!

Edward G. Voss  
Ann Arbor, Michigan



# EX CATHEDRA

## *For That Which We Have Received*

One of the best parts of editing a small, specialized (not to say quirky) magazine is reading the submissions to it. One of the worst parts of editing a small, unusual (not to say eccentric) magazine is reading the submissions to it.

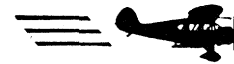
Lately, as VERBATIM comes (back) to the attention of more and more people, the number of submissions in both categories has been rising. A mention in *Poets Roundtable* has led to a massive influx of verse, much of it . . . inappropriate, but also given us one or two gems, which you will see soon. Notice of the magazine in other writers' periodicals has resulted in query letters, submissions, prison correspondence, and random pieces of suspicious mail, and also a few new subscribers. (Welcome!) I thought I would take this space to discuss, briefly, our editorial policy, so that the readers are not the last to know it.

I am frequently asked how I choose what appears in VERBATIM. I refrain from answering "by Magic Eight Ball," although I understand that it may sometimes appear as if that is, in fact, our editorial method. I look for articles that explain and illuminate without condescending; that are funny; that are moving; that are fascinating; that are less than 3,000 words; that are all of the above. I sometimes strong-arm learned professors into writing about their areas of expertise, and I accept unsolicited manuscripts from people with no academic credentials at all. I ask readers (in surveys and in private communications) what subjects interest them, and I search out that material.

There are some Holy Grail articles that I would like to see, that in many cases I have asked for, and that have not yet come into my hands: an article on brain injury and language; an article on Verlan, the Pig Latin of French (or articles about invented languages and cants of other, non-English languages). An article on interesting features of African languages, contrasting real languages with the Bwana-Great-White-Hunter languages of the movies. Articles on the insider jargons of professions: best boys, dental hygienists, taxidermists, sous-chefs, prison wardens . . . . Articles about bygone language theories. And there are many more on my wish list.

If there are topics we haven't covered on *your* wish list, please send those ideas to me. If you want to see a particular person's byline in VERBATIM, send that in as well. In fact, suggestions of any kind are welcome (although there's a limit to the number of times we can act on "go soak your head!") to any of our snail-mail or email addresses, or even by phone. Request away! I'll be here, reading.

—Erin McKean

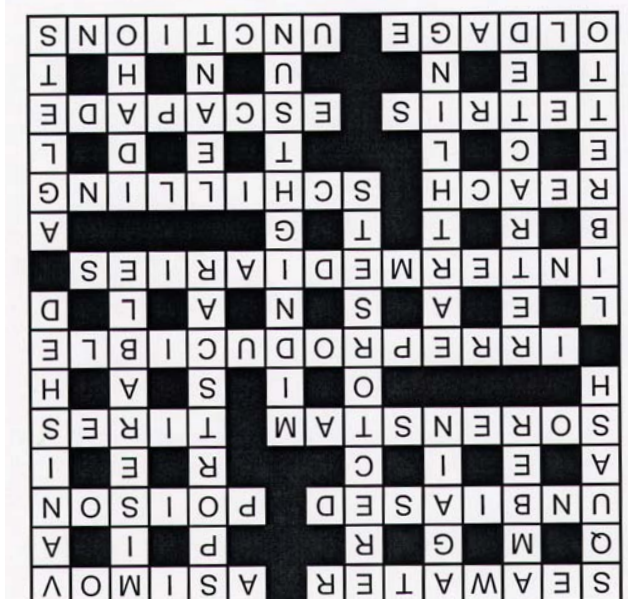


## *Dear Editor*

Thank you for your rejection slip  
Which received a careful read.  
We regret your contribution  
Does not fill our current need.  
Please don't consider this rejection  
To be in any way reflection  
On your skill as an editor.  
But we receive so many slips  
We're not accepting any more.

—Dan Rustin

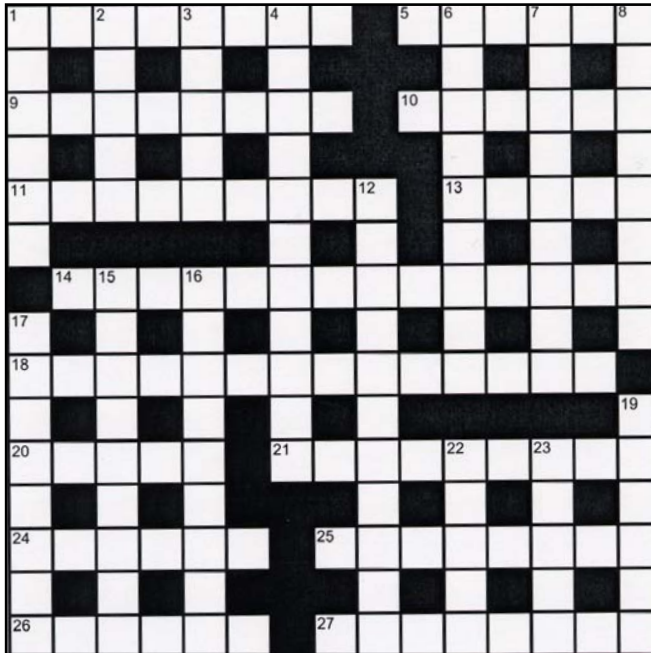
[Dan Rustin is the 2002–2003 Senior Poet Laureate.]





## Anglo-American Crossword No. 93

by Bob Stigger



## 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.

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### Across

- 1 Whales swim in this waste, are lost (8)
- 5 Some quasi-moviemaker, a sci-fi author (6)
- 9 Neutral forum for all countries situated outside Iraq's capital (8)
- 10 Fermented taro, my boy, is deadly stuff (6)
- 11 Golfer Annika's on Masters broadcast (9)
- 13 They're indispensable, for the car runs out of gas (5)
- 14 I order republic broken up. That cannot be repeated (14)
- 18 Agents bury me with personal journals (14)
- 20 Range Rover's right for every person (5)
- 21 Pitching ace Curt is hustling for an audience (9)
- 24 Sitter reprogrammed computer game (6)
- 25 Ed quickly hides piece of suet left for a lark (8)
- 26 Yikes! Look in the mirror! Time for retirement? (3,3)
- 27 Oils couplings, removing cover (8)

### Down

- 1 Crush a gourd (6)
- 2 Chambermaid's carrying ancient bug-catcher? (5)
- 3 Dang patient is oddly ignored once more (5)
- 4 Before heading to town wearing ladies' undies, boys play with these (7,4)
- 6 Mark acquires computer jacks for snazzy auto (6,3)
- 7 Deplorable display's put up in distance (9)
- 8 Truck I cast off disappeared (8)
- 12 Nudism thing is ridiculous sight in the Arctic (8,3)
- 15 Backing ex-President, Kennedy withdrew (9)
- 16 A Tellurian thing—real strange (9)
- 17 Words from an opera title Rob translated (8)
- 19 Silver stands for lace sheaths (6)
- 22 Rested in spare time (5)
- 23 State a wedding vow, maintaining expression of contentment (5)