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## *Inside the Académie*

Thora van Male  
Grenoble

In the Paris of 1629, a group of fashionable young men met two or three times a week in the home of Valentin Conrart, aged twenty-six. They discussed what was going on in town, politics, and poetry. When Cardinal Richelieu, who employed a member of the group, got wind of their activities, he thought it might be useful to keep an eye on them. So he offered to set them up as a *compagnie*, and to be their protector. The original group of nine grew to twelve, and then to thirty-four members; Richelieu suggested they round it out to forty, and gave them his own seal as their insignia: the words “À l’Immortalité” in a wreath of laurel. From this seal came the name given to the members of what soon became the Académie Française: *The Immortels*. In 1635, Louis XIII granted the Académie Française its letters-patent; Conrart became its first head, the *Secrétaire Perpétuel*.

Today, the Académie Française is one of the five learned academies, all state institutions, that constitute the Institut de France. It meets on Thursday afternoons.

### *The Immortels*

The statutes of the Académie Française set out its principal goal as the enhancement and stabilization of the French language, which must be given rules to make it pure and eloquent. The original forty members came from various walks of life; this was true when the company was founded, as it is today. The demographics of the Forty have evolved in terms of social and professional origins over the centuries, but at no time has the Académie constituted a purely literary or philological group. Today, for example, nobles and prelates are much less prevalent than they were before the French Revolution

(1789) and the separation of church and state (1905). Scientists have had their place (Buffon, Pasteur), as have histo-

rians (Bossuet, Dumézil), philosophers (Voltaire, Bergson), politicians (Thiers, Poincaré), and military men (Clémenceau, Weygand). Poets have always been considered “eligible” for the Académie, and playwrights too; novelists, however, have managed to gain admission only in the last hundred years or so.

The Immortels are often referred to as a group of old fogies; it must be admitted that they are not a group of spring chickens. As life expectancy increases, however, the duration of Immortalité, so to speak, does not necessarily follow suit. In 1700, the average accession age was forty, and life expectancy sixty; in 1900, average accession at fifty, life expectancy seventy-one; in 1970, average accession age sixty-six, life expectancy eighty-one. A projection made in 1981 determined that in the year 2100, average age of accession would be ninety-two; life expectancy, however, would be ninety.

### *How to become an Immortel*

Want to get elected to the Académie Française? Generally, a sitting Immortel suggests to an acquaintance that an application would be opportune. The candidate then applies to the *Secrétaire Perpétuel*, and *les visites* start. Though the Académiciens are bound not to promise their vote to any individual, the visits are part of the protocol. The candidate must then be vetted by the protector of the Académie (today, the president of France), and the election can take place. Only the forty members are allowed to vote; the quorum is twenty. An Académicien who feels hostile toward the candidate puts an X on an otherwise blank ballot; often these ballots are numerous enough to prevent a candidate from obtaining the 50 percent majority required for election. It is said that the ballots are burned in an open fireplace after each election, though the analogy with papal elections seems to stop there.

Though nothing in the statutes of the Académie Française stipulates that it is a GOLF group (“gentlemen only, ladies forbidden”), the fact is that women



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were not welcome until very recently. In the hope of securing an armchair for Julie de l’Espinasse, the object of his unrequited love, d’Alembert suggested in 1760 that four of the forty spots be reserved for women. This suggestion was firmly rejected. In the late 1700s, Madame de Genlis, who circulated a manifesto against the Encyclopédistes, was offered an armchair as “hush-money”; she demurred. The application of Pauline Savari in 1893 was not even taken into consideration: “Women are not eligible, since only those who have fulfilled the duties of conscription are French citizens.” In the 1970s, various women applied; Pierre Cardin designed an Académicienne’s costume; but women were unwanted. Finally, in 1980, the Académiciens were starting to see the writing on the wall, and elected Marguerite Yourcenar, though certainly not unanimously. One of them said, “Let’s accept her; she won’t bother us by attending very often.” Such was indeed the case: she attended only twice before her death in 1987. Women’s applications began occurring more frequently, however, and in the ensuing years, a handful of women were elected, including the current Secrétaire Perpétuel, Hélène Carrère d’Encausse.

*The armchair: An essential feature of the job*

Originally, the members of the Académie were seated on straight-backed chairs around a table. Some of the cardinals in the group felt that such plain furniture was beneath their dignity (accustomed as they were, no doubt, to cushier stuff); some men of the cloth did not want to join at all because of the austere seating arrangements. Louis XIV solved both problems by having armchairs brought in for the entire company. Today, it is back to straight-backed chairs, though the term *fauteuil* (armchair) still prevails. Indeed, Jean Cocteau jested, “Ours is the only company whose members, when they die, become armchairs”; what Cocteau did not specify, however, is that the deceased Académicien is only an armchair until someone else sits in it. Very recently, for example, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing was elected to “the Léopold Senghor armchair.” The armchairs are also numbered. Armchairs 26 and 35 tie for the fewest occupants: only thirteen since 1635. Others have heavy turnover: twenty-three occupants for number 4. As Aurélien Scholl declared, the Académiciens are really not much more than slipcovers for the armchairs they occupy.

*The costume: Designer togs*

Though it is generally thought that the Académie uniform is green, it is black with green silk embroidery on the frock coat. In 1799, Napoléon had the artist David design a uniform that would guarantee due respect to the Académiciens; the sword—part of their costume to this day—appeared at the same time. Until Victor Hugo donned long trousers when he was elected in 1841, the Académiciens wore breeches and silk stockings. A silk plush cocked hat completes the outfit.

The costume is usually made to measure (for a cost of about 15,000 euros, which includes two hundred hours of embroidery; the cocked hat costs about 1,000 euros), although the Institut does have a stock of hand-me-downs. For some potential candidates to the Académie, the price of the outfit may be a deterrent. Consider Tristan Bernard, who said, “I’m not applying for the Académie until somebody my size dies.”

Despite its great cost (or perhaps because of it) the official finery is rarely worn; a roster sets out the six Académiciens who must appear in uniform at meetings, just to keep up appearances.

As to the sword, it is traditionally given to the new Académicien as a gift by his friends and acquaintances; the value (from about 7,000 to 45,000 euros) depends on the choice of metal, engravings, and so on. According to the experience of some Académiciens—the only sword-bearing group in France outside of fencing clubs—the difficulty is to figure out how to carry the thing differently from an umbrella.

*Pay?*

The Académie Française is definitely not the place to go if you are looking for a big paycheck (then again, for one afternoon a week . . .). The payment in 2002 was 114.34 euros a month, plus premiums for attending the sessions. The four oldest Académiciens and the four who have been Immortels the longest get double pay. In addition to this income, the Académiciens receive a monthly *indemnité académique* as members of the Institut: this is about 370 euros a month. The Secrétaire Perpétuel receives something more approaching a decent salary.

*Lexicography, anyone?*

Among the various remits assigned to the Académie by statute in 1635, the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie* has over the centuries been its most vis-



ible activity. Only a handful of the forty Immortals are members of the *Commission du Dictionnaire* (today, just fourteen), which meets weekly. A “dictionary service” (comprising a dozen university professors) does the preparatory work, while the commission has the final word.

If the original goal of the Académie Française was to refine and stabilize the French language through eloquence and poetry, the focus of its dictionary has never been what could be called literary:

**The average rate of completion is about one edition every forty years, however, this is quite acceptable to the Académie, which does not want to be “faddy.”**

quotations from famous writers were long eschewed, and the dictionary citations were created ad hoc by the Académiciens. The dictionary was to represent the language as it should be spoken: correctly, but without stylistic frills. A usage dictionary. Technical vocabulary (*les sciences et les arts*) was also excluded on principle.

To retain its hopes of primacy in lexicography, the Académie negotiated an exclusive royal privilege with Louis XIII for its forthcoming dictionary. The king would not grant the privilege to anyone else until the Académie’s dictionary was issued. This protectionist measure, however, was to be infringed from both without (by Richelet in 1680) and within (by Furetière in 1690). Furetière had observed first-hand how slowly the dictionary project was going, and wanted to get a publication out before the cows came home. This he did by publishing the dictionary outside the country. Unsurprisingly, Furetière’s dictionary cost him his armchair.

Things were moving so slowly on the dictionary project at one point that Colbert instituted *jetons de présence* (equivalent to what are today called director’s fees): at each session a kitty was shared by those Académiciens who were present when the clock chimed marking the beginning of the meeting.

The first edition of the *Dictionnaire*, in two volumes, came out in 1694, after fifty-nine years. for two volumes. None of the original Académiciens was still alive. The nomenclature (about 18,000 words) was classified by etymological roots, making consultation awkward. Pure alphabetical order replaced the rootword system as of the second edition, in 1718. Subsequent editions came out as fol-

lows: third: 1740; fourth: 1762; fifth: 1798; sixth: 1835; seventh: 1878; eighth: 1935. The ninth edition is currently up to *N*. The average rate of completion is about one edition every forty years, however, this is quite acceptable to the Académie, which does not want to be “faddy”.

Should you want to consult the current edition (ninth) of the Académie Française dictionary, where would you look? The Web? Good try, if your search concerns words between *A* and *MAP*. The odd

library has the two volumes that *A* to *MAP* constitute (or a CD-ROM version), though few bookshops carry them. What about the other half of the alphabet? Unfortunately, that part of the dictionary is not yet available, at least not completely. And the eighth edition (1935) is starting to get a little dated. You are in luck, however, if your word happens to be between *MAP* and *NEGA*: all you need to do is consult *Hansard*.

*Hansard*, did you say? Well, France’s answer to *Hansard*, which is the *Journal Officiel*. Though the *Journal Officiel* comes out more or less daily in France, twice a year it includes a fascicle of the ninth edition of the *Dictionnaire de l’Académie*; this started in 1993 with *ÉOC* to *ÉTEN*; the most recent fascicle was published on November 13, 2003, and contained the terms between *moue* ‘pout’ and *néga-ton*. Should those two words and the ones between them leave you thirsting for knowledge, the *Journal Officiel* for that day offers numerous other tidbits. On page 7,722 of the senate debates, you will learn that human mobility in Europe rose from 17 kilometres a day in 1970 to 35 kilometres a day today. On page 10,361 of the National Assembly debates, you will be saddened to know that the city of Nîmes (yes, the one that gave its name to *denim*) will incur a loss of 2.3 million euros if Pentecost Monday loses its status as a public holiday in France, since the Pentecost bullfight would have to be canceled. Those with fluttery hearts will be reassured to find on page 19,330 of the Law and Decree section of the *Journal Officiel* that the social security reimbursement for DDD type double chamber cardiac stimulators is fixed at 3408.98 euros.



Though a dictionary supposedly reflects the society whose language it presents, Messieurs les Académiciens have on occasion felt quite free to eliminate terms simply because they did not like them. André Chamson is reputed to have rejected *créativité*, and René Clair *complexé*. Given the statutory objective of the *Dictionnaire* to avoid language that is too technical and to provide definitions comprehensible to a hypothetical “ordinary person,” occasional bloopers may occur (and it must be admitted that the press and the public get great mileage out of them, no doubt enlarging them beyond the original facts). For example, Georges Cuvier, the French naturalist (1769–1832), though an Immortel, was not on the dictionary committee; he was shocked to learn that *écrevisse* ‘crayfish’ had been defined as ‘a little red fish that walks backward.’ He asked for the floor, and said, “The crayfish is not a fish, it is not red, and it does not walk backward. Otherwise an excellent definition, Messieurs.”

Georges Matoré, in his history of French dictionaries (1948) comments thus on the targeted readership of the Académie’s dictionaries: “An abstract being to whom only negative characteristics may be attributed: a being not without culture, but to whom things of a technical nature are foreign; one who reproves coarseness and loose morals; and who reads neither Marot nor Mallarmé, nor the economy section of *Le Monde*.”

The Académie has always been on the receiving end of facetious remarks, epigrams, and sarcastic jest; this is very definitely part of the aura, part of the myth surrounding the institution, and their provenance seems to be universal, both from without and within. The themes are numerous. Extremely common is the snail’s pace of the Académie’s lexicographical production. Boisrobert (the first occupant of armchair number 6) complained:

“They labour together to little avail,  
And *F* has, for ten years, demanded travail.  
Forever I’d stand as the Fates’ obligée  
Should they keep me alive at least until *G*.”

People’s attitudes to the Académie are a fruitful source of snide remarks. Voltaire, long before he was elected (the seventh occupant of armchair 33) affirmed: “The Académie Française is the secret desire of many men of letters: a mistress who is the object of their songs and epigrams until they obtain her favours, and whom they neglect once they have possessed her.”

The hypocrisy pinpointed by Voltaire was also remarked by Fontanelle (the third occupant of armchair 27):

“The world’s at our feet, if thirty-nine we stand,

But if forty we sit, we’re the laugh of the land.”

The fact that the Immortels were not necessarily a group of excellence has caused a lot of ink to flow; interestingly, many who made fractious declarations of this nature did everything in their power to get elected. And it seems such statements did not hinder admittance into the group. Victor Hugo declared, “The Académie is a masterpiece of senile puerility,” and became an Académicien. Georges Clémenceau declared, “Give me forty assholes and I’ll make an Académie Française,” and became an Académicien. Alfred de Vigny declared, “The Académie has one great misfortune: it is the only lasting corporation that has never stopped being ridiculous,” and became an Académicien. Henri Jeanson: “To be Immortal is to be a little bit dead.” And he became a little bit dead.

#### *Exclusions*

Every century has seen its exclusions from the Académie Française (there have been twenty in all). Most of the exclusions were for political reasons. The Académie itself was dissolved under the French Revolution (it had the “gangrene of incurable aristocracy”); when it was reinstated, few of the former members were renewed (some had lost their heads in the interim, others their popularity). Under the Restoration, republicans and Bonapartists were excluded, and Louis XVIII simply appointed new Immortels in their places. Finally, four members were ousted in the twentieth century for collaboration with Germany. Otherwise, members were excluded for such misdeeds as theft (Granier, 1635), absenteeism (Delille 1799; he was later reinstated) or for lexicographical treason (Furetière: 1685). Outside the mass exclusions of the early nineteenth century, where new Académiciens replaced the old, the general principle is that an unoccupied armchair is not filled until its nominal occupant dies.

#### *The Forty-first Armchair*

The “forty-first armchair” is a term used to refer to those deserving writers who, for varying reasons, were not elected to the Académie. In 1855, Arsène Houssaye published the first list of these writers; since then it has been regularly updated. Three categories



may be distinguished. First, those who purposefully did not apply: Descartes, La Rochefoucauld, Pascal, Diderot, Flaubert, Mallarmé, Maupassant. Second, those whose applications were refused: Molière (he was an actor, and such a profession was too low-class for the Académie), Jean-Jacques Rousseau (his Swiss nationality was considered a failing), Beaumarchais, Alexandre Dumas senior, Balzac (he had financial problems, and the Académie did not want in their midst someone who had the bill-collector at the door), Émile Zola (twenty-four unsuccessful attempts), Paul Verlaine, André Gide (his application was rejected for immorality). The third category includes those who died prematurely, before the election process could be completed: Stendhal, Proust, and Giraudoux.

### *No Escaping from Immortality*

Resignation is not an option for Immortals; the only thing an Académicien can do to express his (or her) disagreement, be it definitive and terminal, is to stop attending the sessions of the Académie. Such was the case, for example, of Félix Dupanloup, the bishop of Orléans. He was outraged by the election of Émile Littré, the lexicographer (but more important, an atheist) to the Académie. Dupanloup had done everything in his power to prevent the election, including publishing a pamphlet against Littré. After the election, he stated “I cannot sit beside an individual who defines man as ‘a mammal in the order of primates’ and for whom the spirit is ‘a group of faculties resulting from encephalic functions.’” Dupanloup never again set foot in the Académie, and his seat remained empty until his death.

### *Prizes and awards*

Alongside its recognition of literary excellence in the form of prizes, the Académie also honors virtue by bestowing numerous *prix de vertu*. The awards for virtue now outweigh all other prizes, both in number and in financial worth, yet they are in no way connected to the original activities of the Académie.

The *prix de vertu* were inaugurated by the legacy left to the Académie by the baron of Montyon in 1782. Since then, people without heirs (or people who want to disinherit their heirs) have often left their estates to the Académie Française as an endowment or foundation. But with instructions! A few examples:

- The Rémond-Potin prize: for a French family in the Eure-et-Loir department; the father must be

under forty, have lived in the department for at least seven years, and must have at least seven children.

- The Savourat-Thénard prize: for an unmarried maid who with great devotion served a family, a lady, or preferably *une demoiselle*, during and after their adversity.

- The Huot-Conte prize: for a girl born into a favourable situation, but through setbacks of fortune has had to work and has bravely accepted a life of poverty.

Even some of the literary prizes come with stipulations:

- The Ancel prize: for a poet who propagates no sign of discouragement or political sectarianism and who in no way violates the Christian ideal.

- The Capuran prize: for the best poem written on a moral or religious subject, or a play that serves the betterment of young people.

- The Eugène-Brieux prize: for a three-act play with social and moralizing tendencies, but with no pamphleteering aspect.

Last year, the Académie distributed eighty “literary” awards and some two hundred “virtue” awards. As concerns the endowment prizes, inflation has led to conflation; many of today’s awards are in fact the grouping of several endowments whose individual monetary value has decreased so as to threaten their very existence.

Once you’ve fitted all that into a Thursday afternoon, what else can you do?

[*Thora van Male teaches at the Institut d’Etudes Politiques de Grenoble.*]



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Sign on the outside of a Seattle bar: “Waitress wanted. 25-cent hot dogs every other weekend.”  
[Submitted by Steve Roth, also of Seattle, who wouldn’t work for those wages either.]





## Simply Singlish

Keith Hall

Perth, Western Australia

One of the delights of the English language is the ease with which it produces new words by promiscuously recycling parts of existing words from many sources. Thus, coffee shops have adopted the *-cino* ending of *cappuccino* to describe drinks like *muguccino*, *soyccino* and even *skinnyccino*. Similarly, the word English has spawned many *-lish* words like *Chinglish*, *Gerlish*, and *Japlish* to describe blends of English with Chinese, German, and Japanese. These *-lish* words generally carry overtones of mixed humor and disapproval, and are typically seen as misuses of English by non-native speakers.

*Singlish*, the version of English spoken in Singapore, is a major exception. To start with, it is not a blend of English and “Singaporean,” since there is no such language. In fact, *Singlish* is a creole formed from elements of English, Malay, Cantonese, and Hokkien Chinese. While Singlish has plenty of humor—much of it deliberate—and is frowned on by authorities as not being politically correct, it does have its own well-developed vocabulary, idioms, and grammatical structures. Thus, some academics avoid the word *Singlish* and refer to *Singapore English* instead. But on the streets of Singapore and in the local newspapers there is no debate; it is simply called Singlish.

### *New uses for old words*

Foreigners in Singapore quickly notice that Singlish uses some familiar English words in new ways. Take the words *on* and *off*, for example. In English they can be used as prepositions and adverbs, but in Singlish they can also be used as verbs. A friend in Singapore recently told me that he enjoys working from home because he “can on some music.” And a sign on the photocopier in an office advised staff to “kindly off the machine at the end of day.” In the same way, it is common to “on the light” or “off the TV.” *Action* is also used as a verb, meaning ‘to show off.’ To *arrow* means to delegate a (typically unpleasant) task to somebody, as in “I was arrowed by my boss to work on Saturday.”

If you ask someone to do something, the typical response will be “can.” If you want to check whether

someone is able to do something, you ask, “Can or not?” a literal translation of the Hokkien Chinese expression. A conversation might go like this:

Q: Lend me \$5, can or not?

A: Can.

Q: And lend me your phone?

A: Also can.

With the explosive growth of sending SMS (Short Message Service) text messages by phone, *text* has become a verb in Singlish, as it has in other varieties of English. You can *text* somebody; the act of sending text messages is known as *texting*. (Newspaper advertisements for mobile phones appear to redefine the word *free* when they say “900 free SMS for only \$25.”)

The English adjective *blur* is adapted in Singlish to describe someone who does not know what is going on. A woman in a meeting told me “This is my first day back at work after maternity leave, and I am feeling totally blur.” In fairness, *blur* is also used in this way in Hong Kong, so perhaps we should consider it *Asianglish*, not just Singlish.

*Alphabet* is used to mean a letter of the alphabet. So it is acceptable in Singlish to ask, “How many alphabets are there in *Singlish*?” Of course, the answer is eight. On the subject of the alphabet, note that Western names are arranged in alphabetical order by first names, not family names. In music stores you will find John Lennon between John Denver and John Mellencamp, from the Asian norm of stating your family name before your personal name. (Mao Zedong was Mr. Mao). As a result, you will find this alphabetical order by first name in China and Japan as well as in Singapore.

### *Imported words*

Many people in Singapore are native speakers of Malay, Mandarin, Cantonese, or Hokkien Chinese, and it is not surprising that some words from these languages have been adopted into Singlish. An excellent example is the Hokkien-derived adjective *kiasu* (pronounced “kee-ah-soo”), meaning ‘fear of losing out to others’ or ‘losing face.’ *Kiasu* is a quintessentially Singaporean behavioral characteristic, shown by car drivers who speed up to get in front of pedestrians or by commuters who won’t let others alight from the subway before they push in. This behavior is deplored by many Singaporeans, who label people exhibiting excessive *kiasu* “ugly Singaporeans.”



In a country where eating and shopping are national obsessions, *makan* ('eat' in Malay) is a useful word. You will often hear the question, "Have you makan yet?" The Malay-derived adjective *shiok* (pronounced "shee-oak") means 'delicious,' though it is sometimes used outside the context of food to mean 'great.' *Shiok* can also take English word endings to produce comparatives like *shiokest*. Food and drink stalls often use the Malay words *kopi* and *teh* instead of the English terms *coffee* and *tea*.

*Chim*, pronounced "cheem" and derived from Hokkien Chinese, means 'profound,' 'deep,' or 'difficult to understand.' It is used in statements like "The movie was very *chim*. I didn't understand a single thing." It has been amusingly adapted into the noun *chimology* by adding a Greek ending. The Malay adjective *ulu* (pronounced "oo-loo") means 'a rural or deserted place' and is used in sentences like "This place is so ulu, you hardly see anyone around." Chinese expressions like *hah* (roughly meaning 'I beg your pardon') and *wah* (wow!) are also heard regularly.

Although Singlish uses some English swear words, swearing and cursing are mainly carried out using Hokkien and Cantonese expressions, some of which are admirably colorful and vulgar. Caucasians are generally amused to learn that in Singlish they are called *ang mor* (literally 'red hair' in Hokkien). This description is sometimes expanded into the more pejorative expression *ang mor kwai* 'red-haired devil.' But don't take it personally; Singlish has equally affectionate terms for Malaysians and Chinese.

#### *Sentence endings*

Singlish sentences often end with the particle *lah*, for example "It's okay, lah," "Believe me, lah," and "Cheaper, lah." This particle comes from Chinese and serves as a full stop, though it can also be used for emphasis or to add nuance to the sentence. The use of *lah* transcends social level. You will hear it being used by taxi drivers, food-stall owners, and government officials. It is clear that Singaporeans have a sense of humor, since the comic potential of *lah* is wellrecognized. It is exploited in T-shirts printed with statements like "Relax, lah" and "How To Use the Lah." In a similar manner, the Chinese-derived particle *meh* is used to end questions.

#### *Abbreviations*

Singapore is one of the most "wired" countries in the world, and sending SMS messages by

telephone has been the rage for several years. This has added new energy and direction to the use of abbreviations.

Older abbreviations include *HDB* for Housing and Development Board and *NSmen* for National Service Men. The nearby Malaysian city of Johor Bahru is always called *JB*. The two largest universities are called *NUS* (National University of Singapore) and *NTU* (Nanyang Technological University). The major highways have three-letter abbreviations like *PIE* (Pan-Island Expressway), and the railway system is the *MRT* (Mass Rapid Transit).

A more convoluted expression is *ACBC*, which stands for the combined Hokkien-English expression *act cute buay cute*. A girl is described as being *ACBC* if she acts cute to get her boyfriend's attention but fails miserably. An *OCBC* (Overseas Chinese, Bukan Cheena) is a derogatory term for a Chinese person who doesn't act sufficiently Chinese. An *SPG* (Sarong Party Girl) is a local girl who goes out only with Caucasians. *NATO* means 'no action, talk only' and describes someone who is full of empty promises. *BGR* stands for 'boy-girl relationship.'

Singapore even abbreviates itself. The country is typically written as *S'pore*, and its inhabitants are *S'poreans*. The local currency is always called the *Sing dollar*. The *Five C's* are frequently mentioned among young Singaporeans and in advertising aimed at them. The term typically refers to *car*, *credit card*, *condominium*, *cash*, and *country club membership*, though sometimes other *C's*, like *children* and *career*, are substituted. An *HP* is a mobile phone, abbreviated from the term *hand phone*, which rather confusingly refers only to mobile phones, never to stationary, hard-wired phones.

Most of these abbreviations are used in both speech and writing. Interestingly, the spoken form is generally spelled out rather than being said as a word or acronym. Thus, the *Pan-Island Expressway* is always pronounced as "pee-eye-ee," never as "pie." Abbreviations derived from SMS messages have spilled over into other written communications, like email. They do not appear, however, to have crossed over into spoken Singlish yet. Examples include *c u later*, *cud* 'could,' *wkend* 'weekend' and *biz* 'business.' I recently received an email from a friend in Singapore asking, "Which university u will be lecturing nx semester?" Newspapers use humorously mystifying headlines like "Txt msg ur tip-offs abt graft" and "SMS OK, but not 4 exams."





*Advanced Singlish*

Most people who live in Singapore for more than a few months learn some Singlish words and expressions to facilitate communication. They are used in newspaper articles, by Singaporean staff in offices, and by taxi drivers and shopkeepers. Taxi drivers will more easily understand where you want to go if you use Singlish instead of English. If you want a taxi to go to Orchard Road, you are better off asking “Orchard Road, can?” than “Could you please take me to Orchard Road?”

The examples I give here can be described as Basic Singlish. I have generally used only one Singlish word or expression in a sentence in order to keep things simple. This type of Singlish sounds polite. However, on the streets of Singapore you will hear much more complicated Singlish. This “Advanced Singlish” is almost incomprehensible to the average native English speaker and is typically far from being polite. It is spoken quickly, and many of the words and structures differ significantly from Standard English. It includes irreverent and humorous wordplay and the mixing of different languages to produce striking and amusing expressions. Consequently, few non-Singaporeans become fluent in Advanced Singlish.

*Politics*

In Singapore, the distinction between the words *language* and *dialect* is more political than linguistic. Thus, Mandarin Chinese is called a language, while Hokkien and Cantonese are always called dialects. Speakers of these languages, however, are mutually unintelligible (though they can read one another’s writing since they use the same Chinese characters). So to a linguist, they are all languages. But the Singapore government’s push to speak Mandarin has led to a higher status for Mandarin.

Surprisingly, Singlish itself has been very much in the political limelight in Singapore for the past few years. The government instituted a “Use Proper English” campaign, with the laudable goal of making Singapore more internationally competitive. Newspapers have been running regular columns to teach readers the correct way to use English. The flipside of this campaign is a perceived denigration of Singlish. Many people fear that the plan is to eradicate Singlish. There are even reports of TV sitcom scripts being rejected if they contain Singlish expressions.

The situation is developing into an interesting standoff because the average Singaporean and the entertainment industry are both very attached to Singlish. They correctly see Singlish as one of Singapore’s few unique defining features. It is a common language understood by people from all the different racial groups making up Singapore. Furthermore, recent movies like “I Not Stupid” and “Talking Cock” have featured Singlish and helped to build public support.

At present Singlish is at a critical point in its development. Will the government’s “Use Proper English” campaign gradually oust Singlish? Or will the ordinary person continue using Singlish, despite the fact that it is not politically correct? My view is that people, not governments, make languages, so I suspect that Singlish is here to stay.

If you want to know more about Singlish, two essential books are *Singapore English in a Nutshell* by Adam Brown and *The Cxford Singlish Dictionary* by Paik Choo. Since Singlish is alive and evolving, the web site [www.talkingcock.com](http://www.talkingcock.com) is also useful for obtaining the latest words and expressions.

*[Keith Hall has a Ph.D. in chemistry from the University of Western Australia and has worked as a Research and Development manager in England, Australia, Japan, China and Singapore. He recently reinvented himself as a writer, focusing on the humorous aspects of language, culture, and travel.]*



OBITER DICTA

If you enjoy VERBATIM (and if you don’t why have you even read this far?) and have access to the Internet, we think you will also like the blog *Language Log*. It’s a bit more technical than VERBATIM, and, being a blog, it’s also a bit more concerned with the immediate and the technological. It has the unfortunately long URL <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog>, but simply googling “Language Log” will bring it right up. Arnold Zwicky, of our very own board, is a contributor, as are the linguists Geoffrey Pullum and John McWhorter. Well worth adding it to your daily online must-read list.



## Two Fingers Up to the French

Madeleine McDonald  
Hornsea, East Yorkshire

It was the one and only time I saw a joke stop the show. The buildup was slow, the audience at Strasbourg's *Le Barabli* cabaret somewhat restive as a mock class of schoolchildren underwent a history lesson, learning by rote the manifold benefits of the long French occupation of Alsace. In a sudden change of tempo, the teacher announced a geography lesson. "Now children, as you know, in Alsace *il y a le Lac Blanc, le Lac Noir et le lack mir am Arsch*" (there is the White Lake, the Black Lake, and the lick my arse). Germain Muller himself, the founder and director of the *Barabli*, came on stage and called for silence—unsuccessfully, for the audience was too busy enjoying the joke.

That's my Alsace: earthy bilingual puns and two fingers up to the French. Over the centuries, this strip of territory sandwiched between France and Germany, claimed by both and invaded by both, remained unconquered in its heart and mind. Absorbed but undigested by the occupying power of the moment, Alsace always looked to itself for its salvation.

Yet, in a brief thirty years or so, television has almost succeeded where centuries of warfare and invasion have failed. It is wiping out the distinctive local culture.

The anti-French spirit is illustrated by the old joke about a man drowning in the Rhine. Seeing someone on the bank, he calls for help: "*Au secours, au secours.*" The passerby strolls over and informs him: "*Hetsch besser schwimme gleert anstatt Franzeesch*" (You would have been better off learning how to swim instead of learning French) before leaving him to drown.

It is also found in the historical mispronunciation of one of Strasbourg's largest squares, *place Broglie*, named after a former military governor of the city. Tourists from *l'intérieur* who ask for directions to *Broy* Square, as the "inland" French pronounce it, are baffled to be told "You mean *Brogly* Square."

Yet the worst insult you can throw at the Alsatians is to assume that they are Germans. All in

all, weighing subsidies and special privileges against genuine grudges, France is seen as a more benevolent overlord than Germany ever was. Carnival processions in the villages fall in behind the tricolour French flag, and the performers in the backstreet cabarets sing of the heroic schoolmaster who laid down his life saving a tin of French sweets from the Prussian invader. Never forget that this is the land where people truly risked their lives painting the number 11 on walls and roads during the Second World War. Eleven, or *elf* in German, stood then for "*Es lebe Frankreich*" (long live France).

It is impossible to understand the use of language in Alsace without a knowledge of its bloody history. As the old song laments: "*Strassburg, o Strassburg, du wunderschöni Stadt, darinnen sind begraben so maniche Soldat.*" (Strasbourg, O Strasbourg, a wondrously beautiful town, and the graveyard of so many soldiers). In the Middle Ages, the independent cities and the surrounding rich plains of Alsace were invaded time and again by powerful, covetous neighbors. France finally subjugated Alsace in 1681, for good, as King Louis XIV thought. Germany seized it in the Franco-Prussian War and occupied it from 1870 to 1918. When Germany again invaded France, in 1940, Alsace was declared a German province, and its young men rounded up for service in the German army.

Oppressed by each side in turn, it is no wonder that Alsatians sought refuge in a fierce loyalty to their native towns or villages, a loyalty which transcended that owed to their province. Trickling down to modern times, this has produced a climate of political infighting and shifting alliances. The splintered nature of local politics is aptly illustrated by the, no doubt apocryphal, story of the politician who completed his speech with the plea: "*Mir muen zsame halte, nit wie de Arschbacke, wo fir jeder Pfurz üssenander gaan*" (We must stand together, not like the cheeks of your arse, which fly apart at the slightest fart).

Nor did the subversive attitude to all forms of authority spare the figureheads of village life. As recently as a generation ago, schoolteachers were still addressed as *Herr Lehrer* or *Frau Lehreri* and placed on a par with the doctor or the mayor. Such deference did not prevent the sly joke that "*Gott weiss alles. De Herr Lehrer au, awer besser*" (God knows everything. Teacher too, but he knows it better).

Then there is the tale of the priest who was stopped by a gendarme for having no lights on his



bicycle. “*Ich fahr mit Gott,*” (God is with me) came the confident reply. To which the gendarme replied, “*Zwei uf eme vélo isch non e contravention*” (Two of you on one bicycle, that’s another fine).

An oppressed people also sought refuge in one-upmanship, typified in the tale of Catholic Joseph and Jewish Salomon, who lived next door to each other in an Alsatian village. As their affairs prospered and they rose in the world, each sought to outdo the other. Joseph believed that he had won when he invited the local priest to publicly bless his newly acquired 2CV car, but a few days later the resourceful Salomon parked a brand new Mercedes in front of his house, and in full view of the village had the rabbi saw off the end of the exhaust pipe.

Bilingualism handed the Alsatians a superb weapon in their quest to preserve their identity and to take revenge, however fleeting, on their oppressors. Few invaders (and to some native eyes, that includes the current administrative authorities) could grasp jokes that relied on familiarity with two languages, or even three if one counts written German. And what could not be understood could not be punished.

At the heart of Alsatian culture lies the fact that Alsatian is an oral dialect. Like its close cousins Swabian German and Swiss German, it has no agreed written form, only phonetic transcriptions. Ask an Alsatian to write something down for you, and he will automatically change it into *Schriftdeutsch* (literary, or High German), transforming word order and grammar in the process. Thinking in one language but writing in another means that local authors can appear bland.

Linguists spot the similarities between Elsässerdeutsch, Swäbisch, and Schwytzerdeutsch, all oral dialects derived from the medieval form of German spoken in this corner of Europe before Luther translated the Bible into High German and imposed a common standard on the Germanic world. However, with their fierce pride in local identity, Alsatians prefer to emphasize the slight differences heard from one town to another. People from Saint Louis in the south claim that it is difficult to understand those from Strasbourg in the north, “*wo a charabia sprooche*” (who speak gobbledygook). As for the inhabitants of the hills, the plainsfolk dismiss them as having “*l’esprit aussi étroit que leurs vallées*” (minds as narrow as their valleys).

# Light



## The Quarterly of Light Verse

WEATHER OR NOT

What’s lion-lamb crazy? What’s clownish?  
 What’s dancing on—oops!—fallen arches?  
 What’s weather-wise—help!—up and downish?  
 And inside-out too? Heavens, *March* is!

—MAUREEN CANNON



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When I first visited Alsace in 1955, on a school exchange, the Second World War had not long been over, and children were still forbidden to speak dialect in the playground. That was the government policy of the time, designed to bring the lost province back into the French fold, with the slogan: “*Il est chic de parler français*” (It’s cool to speak French). Yet my host family spoke Alsatian among themselves, and had to make an effort to address me, the visitor, in French.

Even as a schoolgirl, I remember eavesdropping on buses and in shops, fascinated by the linguistic soup that surrounded me. French words and phrases that I understood emerged from a form of German that bore very little resemblance to the one I had learned at school. I was flummoxed by the sudden changes back and forth from one language to another.

By the time I went to live in Alsace in the early 1970s, my knowledge of both French and German had improved, and I began to make sense of its bilingualism. At that time the majority of people still spoke Alsatian. Administrative notices were issued in both languages, and the German edition of the local newspaper outsold the French edition, which is not



surprising when one considers that most of the older inhabitants had completed all their schooling under the last-but-one German occupation. After a while I puzzled it out: French words were used for modern inventions and in referring to administrative matters. This then acted as a trigger to complete a sentence or two in French, before the speaker lapsed back into dialect. Take, for example, the sentence “*Nooch der retraite il a pris un coup de vieux*” (after he retired, he aged all of a sudden), and note that it obeys the rules of grammar in that the noun *la retraite* in French is preceded by a feminine article in the Alsatian German.

Alas, such delightful mixed-up sentences are becoming a rarity. A culture that survived for a thousand years is dying on its feet: the few authors and stand-up comics who practice their trade in dialect have a negligible impact compared to the monster of television, which has imported and imposed inland French culture. In a token gesture to regionalism, the French state channel F3 broadcasts a program in dialect for a mere half hour, three times a week.

Young people today worry about unemployment, and their parents encourage them to learn French in order to get ahead. As part of a drive to promote European integration, around 250 *écoles paritaires*, or bilingual schools, have been set up since the early 1990s, schools in which subjects are taught not in French alongside Alsatian but in French alongside High German.

Shop assistants greet customers in French rather than Alsatian. Schoolchildren sing the pop songs of the day rather than traditional refrains, and future generations of children will no doubt chant “*Der Hans in Schookelloch het alles was er will*” (Hans in the mosquito-ridden hole has everything he wants) in the same uncomprehending way that English children chant *Frère Jacques*. And will their parents even remember the expression “*Wenn de Bur nimme jammert un de Pfarrer nimme sammelt, dann isch s End de Welt*” (When farmers no longer complain and priests no longer pass the collection plate, it will be the end of the world)?

End of the world or not, a unique way of life is indeed vanishing, and it is well worth a visit before it is to be found only in the dry pages of history books.

[*Madeleine McDonald is a freelance translator and writer who lived for many years in Saint Louis, Alsace. As a Scot raised in England, she had no difficulty in understanding the Alsatians' ambivalent attitude towards the French.*]

## Notes from a Cross and Down Competitor

Edmund Conti  
Summit, New Jersey

By early Friday afternoon the lobby of the Stamford Marriott Hotel is beginning to fill up with a lively and motley crew of individuals—what someone has called a bunch of introverts getting together once a year to become extroverted and witty and gregarious and charming with one another. It is the weekend of the twenty-seventh annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Stamford, Connecticut, and 479 competitors will eventually arrive to test their word skills and catch up socially with old friends.

This is my ninth year at the tournament and I still feel like an outsider among all these friendly people: men and women, old and young, smart and smarter, from Maine to California, as well as France, Switzerland, and Canada. A list of the preregistered contestants shows teachers, attorneys, physicians, one cat attendant, one slacker, and one excursion boat captain. I am the only poet. I have also found myself a niche in the standings—consistently finishing at the top of the bottom third.

The festivities get under way Friday evening with opening remarks by Will Shortz, the crossword puzzle editor of the *New York Times* and director of the tournament. Will, as he seems to do every year, reads letters addressed to the *Times* puzzle editor. The gist of many of them seems to be that Will is a fool and an idiot and definitely no (take your pick) Margaret Farrar, Will Weng, or Eugene Maleska. He also reads a letter from a man who has somehow figured out the answer to the clue “West of Memphis.” The answer is *Dottie*. Our correspondent goes on to say he has scanned several maps of Tennessee and found no *Dottie*. There is a great outburst of laughter from everyone except me. Later someone explains that *Dottie West* is a singer of country music. (And now you know why I languish in the bottom of the standings.)

Several word games follow, with the audience shouting out answers while I’m still listening to the questions. It has taken me nine years to figure this out, but I think I am out of my element. A wine-



and-cheese reception puts me in a happier mood and I go to bed to rest up for Saturday's six puzzles.

Saturday morning finds us in a large ballroom seated on both sides of long tables. By the time I arrive, fifteen minutes before kickoff time, most of the seats are filled, the waiting contestants busy at more crossword puzzles that they have brought with them. (Note to self: Do more puzzles before next year's tournament.) I find a seat and see that a zigzag cardboard partition down the length of the table separates me from the prying eyes of my neighbors to the right and left of me, as well as from those across from me.

The first puzzle is a simple warm-up, on a 15 x 15 grid (the size of the daily *Times* puzzles), 78 words and a fifteen-minute limit. You score 10 points for each correct word filled in, 150-point bonus for getting then all right, and 25 points for each full minute you finish early. I'm helped by the fact that I've just seen 17 across, the 2002 DiCaprio-Hanks movie, *Catch Me If You Can*. I have a tin ear and think that 34 down, "triangle's sound," is *tink*. This causes me to slow down at 45 across, "corner fold." I have *dokear* and fear something is wrong. Minutes go by until I realize that triangles go *ting* and voila! I have *dog ear*. Ah, the tings you learn in crossword puzzles! Still, I finish in twelve minutes, giving me a score of 1005, 780 for the 78 words, 150 for all correct and 75 points for finishing early. By contrast, the eventual winner, Trip Payne, had 1205 points, meaning he has finished the puzzle in four (four—count 'em—four!) minutes. I'm happy for both of us.

Puzzle 2 was on a 17 x 17 grid with a twenty-minute limit. Among the answers were the usual suspects: *orca*, *ewok*, *frau*, and *sumo*. I was held up for a bit by an instrument that goes *tootle-te-tootle*. It was a fife. (But you knew that.) I managed to finish with a minute to spare and was beginning to hope that this would be the year I got all seven puzzles done correctly on time. Trip Payne, if you must know, finished fourteen minutes early. Evidently he tootle-te-tootles to the beat of a different fife.

I don't want to talk about Puzzle 3. We had thirty minutes—an eternity in crossword years—to finish. I didn't. It was a fun puzzle by Merl Reagle, one of my favorite constructors. I was able to solve 101 down, "European bird of the genus *Turdus*." He's making that up I thought. But no, the answer was *merl*. Ah Merl, a *rara avis*. But now it was time for a lunch break.

I finished Puzzles 4 and 6 after lunch. I was pleased to see that Puzzle 5 also stumped at least half of the contestants. At the evening's festivities it was announced there were possible errors in judging the sixth puzzle. Of course, that was my best puzzle. It was by Maura Jacobson, whose name when announced as a puzzle constructor always draws great cheers. Maura likes dreadful puns and straight clues. I've been solving her puzzles in *New York Magazine* for years. She keeps me coming back to the tournament knowing I'll have one pretty good score. Fortunately the errors didn't affect me.

The seventh and last puzzle was on Sunday morning. A good idea (unless you're Trip Payne and company and don't have time for such niceties) is to first read the title of the puzzle for clues. This one said "AND THE FIRST SHALL BE LAST/Containing eight ingeniously related phrases." For example, 22 across, "The U.S.S. *Maine* was built there." The answer, *Brooklyn Navy Yard*, however, did not fit. What did fit was *Brooklynnavyard*. After that, unlike the *Maine*, it was clear sailing for me.

I finished the tournament ranked 344 out of 479, where 1 is good and 479 is not so good. I received a lesson in humility and will no doubt be back for another one next year. I received no prizes, although there were lots of them. The top scorers in each of the skill groups, A, B, C, D, and E receive prizes. I was a D minus. I think I'll be dropped to an E next year. There were prizes for each geographical group. I was low in the New Jersey section. There were also age groups, and I did better there: 12 out of 36 in the seventy-plus group. There were no prizes for poets.

Will I be back next year? See 1 across and 3 down. *Yes Sirree*.

[Edmund Conti likes to do the *Times* crossword puzzles in ink. This makes a nice talking point but invariably results in very messy puzzles. At the tournament he uses a *Paper Mate Erasermate*. He wonders if he is the 344th best crossword puzzler in the world or—horrors!—in the bottom third of all puzzlers.]



The next American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is scheduled for March 11–13, 2005. For more information, go to <http://www.crosswordtournament.com>.



## EPISTOLAE

I started reading the comic strip *Pogo* in the 50s. Kelly was an old newspaper guy, and he would sneak in vague, obscure references to the profession from time to time. Etaoin Shrdlu showed up one day (I believe as a character), and I was totally baffled. Several years later I got a job as a proofreader at the local newspaper. From time to time *etaoin shrdlu* would show in the the proofs. This was the day of hot lead and linotypes. I was watching one of the operators one day as he started his shift, and there it was: he ran his finger from left to right on the first row to make sure the lead was molten. Eureka!

Chat Reed



Saul Ricklin's letter (XXVIII/4) quotes some "health re-definitions," such as "Dilate, to live long." I first saw these in an article in the *Nursing Times* for April 2, 1997. They are similar to "Daffy definitions," which are described in my book *The Oxford Guide to Word Games* (things like "Shamrock, a fake diamond"). I sent some new medical definitions to the *Nursing Times*, including these:

Accident, knocking out someone's teeth with an axe

Anaesthetic, Oscar Wilde

Blood count, Dracula

Detumescence, stomach medicine

Gallstone, it annoys Tony

Incontinent, a member of the European Community

Medicine, a health film

Neurosis, fresh flowers

Pacemakers, Jesus called them "blessed"

Penis, mightier than the sword

Testicle, an exploratory tickle

Urologist, someone who talks on water

Vaseline, an inscription on a Greek vase

Tony Augarde  
Oxford



Perhaps you [or your subscribers] can answer a question I've had for some time. What's happened to how (almost) everyone says the numbers? I refer to inserting *and*, such as in "a hundred and fifty" or "two thousand and four." I was taught that this is incorrect. But folks we once used as good usage references, such as network news reporters on TV, NPR, etc., are, with rare exception, all doing it this way. How are the schools teaching it these days?

Park Waldrop  
Atlanta



Susan Elkin ("Going But Not Quite Gone," XXVIII/2) asks "What use would a pig be to be to anyone if it were small enough to fit in a pocket? A *poke* . . . is an old form of the word *pocket*."

I don't think the reference is to a pocket at all.

The oldest meaning of *poke* (if the *OED* is to be believed) is a bag or sack. The phrase "a pig in a poke" (according to the *OED*) means to buy something without seeing or knowing its value, that is, an object of claimed value (a pig) that the buyer is unable to examine because it is hidden inside a bag or sack (the *poke*).

Another marvelous saying is, I believe, related. After the price is paid, the buyer opens the *poke* and discovers, instead of a valuable pig, a worthless cat. That's called "letting the cat out of the bag." The *OED* reports the meaning of that phrase is to disclose a secret, i.e., that the pig in the *poke* is actually a cat.

The *OED* doesn't make the connection between these two phrases, and I can't tell you where I first heard or read it, but it has been with me for many decades.

Benjamin H. Cohen  
Chicago





## Fighting the Contras

David Galef

University of Mississippi

“You know Doug,” said a voice at the restaurant table next to mine last month. “He’s a real opportunist.” I leaned sideways (“That’s rude,” said my companion), hoping to hear how Doug bilked two gullible widows out of their pensions when the chance presented itself. Instead, the voice continued, “I respect that. It’s a real gift.”

“I know what you mean,” said the voice’s interlocutor. “Enterprising.”

“Now, that’s a switch,” I remarked later to my companion, who’s used to my going on about language. “When I was growing up—”

“When you were growing up, people lived in caves and used the subjunctive properly.”

I ignored that. “Let’s put it this way. An opportunist is supposed to be someone who takes advantage of others. *Enterprising*, that’s a usage only Machiavelli could love.”

The conversation drifted toward one of those “What is this world (or word) coming to?” finishes, and I ended up paying for lunch, as usual.

That was the last of it, or so I thought. But the very next week at the same restaurant, I heard someone talk about what a steal a cashmere sweater was. A pair of bargain hunters, I presumed. But no: “At \$350, it’s a total rip-off!”

This time I wasn’t with my companion, so I had to suffer in silence. When had *steal* changed hands from the buyer to the seller? In fact, in the ensuing days I conducted an informal poll, the only kind I’m capable of conducting, and found out that most people still regard *steal* as a bargain so steep that it’s like stealing from the owner.

And there the matter rested until I heard someone quote a proverb that I’d heard a lot in my youth, when people still lived in caves. This time it wasn’t at a restaurant but at a fund-raising event, where the political speaker was talking about the need to move away from a losing situation. “A strong person doesn’t wait to abandon ship.” The speaker pointed his finger upward. “It’s like what they always say: “When the going gets tough, the tough get going.”

Huh? This maxim, worn out as it is, always meant one thing: when matters grow difficult, those

with true grit rise to the occasion. This mangled version seemed to praise desertion as a virtuous strategy. I would have accosted the politico after his speech, but he was mobbed by illiterate fans.

Searching for a term to cover these shifts, I came up with “contra language,” in which a word, phrase, or saying set one way is reworked in the opposite direction. These are not to be confused with *Janus words*, which legitimately contain two opposed meanings [see “The Trouble with Janus Words” in *VERBATIM* XXVII/2]. Rather, these are words and phrases that someone inept has misconstrued to mean the opposite of what they should. They’re malapropisms of a sort, with the twisted logic of the species, but diametrically opposed to the original intent; hence the term *contras*. Of course, once you label a phenomenon, you’re bound to spot it more often. Since then, I’ve seen *fulsome* used as praise: “She has a pleasing, fulsome figure,” read a description in a write-up of plus-size fashion. *Fulsome*, of course, used to mean ‘overdone’ or ‘excessive.’ Not too long after that, I saw *enormity* used to mean not ‘great fault’ but ‘awesome size’: “the enormity of Niagara Falls,” the context didn’t remotely suggest that the water was guilty of any misdeed. By that line of usage, *priceless* should mean ‘absolutely worthless,’ and *timeless* should apply to those pressed for an extra minute.

On the other hand, I try hard not to be one of those wrist-slapping purists who decrees that all linguistic shifts are illegal, in which case we’d all be exclaiming “Ods bodkins!” and asking “Prithee wilt thou?” After all, few people use the word *nice* in its original meaning of “persnickety,” and that’s okay, especially since the noxious pleasantry “Have a nice day” has mostly gone the way of “prithee.” Provided one can get one’s mind around these linguistic shifts (and stop retreating to the third-person to claim the high ground), *contras* should be acceptable.

But I confess that I’m not entirely a *laissez faire* linguist, in case you haven’t guessed, and I have to be convinced of the contra’s legitimacy by sheer numbers. Let’s face it: some of these shifts start out embarrassingly like malapropisms. For instance, *noisome* doesn’t yet mean ‘loud,’ despite a mistake I saw in print a few years back, and *parlous* doesn’t mean ‘talkative,’ perhaps disappointing a few Francophiles. Those two examples wouldn’t be *contras*, anyway, but simply mistakes, unless sheer force of incorrectitude alters the meanings.



So where do the contras hang out? They're particularly prevalent in book reviews, where *disturbing* and *unsettling* are now sought-after adjectives for a new exposé, but not *disconcerting*. Similarly, you want your sexy romance to be *provocative* but not irksome, your latest thriller to be *chilling* without inducing numbness.

Naturally, teen-speak is great for reversing a previous generation's usage. In the sixties, *square*, or 'honest and upright,' as in "square dealer," turned to 'flat and conventional.' When did *outrageous* turn to 'great'?—a century after *sensational* and *incredible* lost their opprobrium, or around the time when people stopped using words like *opprobrium*. Or take *shit* (please): there's no getting around the mephitic connotations of that word, yet what about, "He knows his shit" or "Get your shit together"? And everyone knows that *bad* equals *good* in the cool, tough sense, as in "He's one bad dude."

One of the latest contras is *extreme*, which used to mean 'dire,' as in the extreme unction administered by a priest to a person about to die. But now the word is contra, used in everything from *extreme sports* to *extreme web sites*. In fact, the marquee of our local Sonic drive-in recently ran "TRY OUR EXTREME TOTS!" I did, and they turned out to be a conglomeration of Tater Tots, melted cheese, chili, sour cream, and jalapeños. Not bad, but hardly the stuff of last rites, unless the calorie and cholesterol count induce coronary infarction.

Maybe context is all. "One can never be too rich or too thin," remarked Wallis Simpson, the Duchess of Windsor, but not if we're talking about desserts or a man's hair. In that case, a whole host of sayings becomes suspect. "It's all downhill from here" is lousy if you're an economic forecaster but fine if you're on a bicycle. Regarding that stoic chestnut "Into every life some rain must fall": are you a pessimist or a farmer? Maybe the problem with contras is just a problem of outlook. Meanwhile, when opportunists knock, look out.

[David Galef is a professor of English and the administrator of the MFA program at the University of Mississippi. His latest book is the short-story collection *Laugh Track*.]



## EPISTOLAE

I enjoyed Paul Bayliss' "Famous Last Words" (XXVIII/3) and have often pondered my own. I think I've narrowed it down to:

"Honey, hand me that fork. The toast is stuck again."

William S. Murray  
Chicago



Names of sandwiches mentioned in the article by Dave Wilton include *wedge*, which is a male working class slang expression for a sandwich, normally eaten as part of a workman's lunch.

The word appears to be a shortening of *sandwich*, in the form of a mispronunciation, *sandwedge*, thus on to *wedge*.

Another phrase in common use is *door stopper*, where the bread is cut thick to disguise the thinness of the meat inside.

There are many words for the honest roll, including *bap*, *roll*, *barm cake*, and *oven-bottom muffin*, those just from an area of about ten square miles, each town having a different name for the humble roll.

Brian Robinson  
Brentwood, Essex



## OBITER DICTA

"The Wonderful World of Words," a weekend for word lovers, will take place November 5–7, at Mohonk Mountain House, in New Paltz, NY. Featuring word games, puzzles, prizes, and guest speakers (including Will Shortz, the puzzle editor of the *New York Times*). It's conducted by *GAMES'* contributing editor (and *VERBATIM* contributor) Gloria Rosenthal. Contact: (800) 772-6646 for reservations. For more information, call Kathy Preston at (914) 255-1000, or email Gloria at [worldofwords@optonline.net](mailto:worldofwords@optonline.net)





## Revert, Pervert!

Ed Rosenberg  
Danbury, Connecticut

As I aimed our electromechanical, fuel-driven appliance southwesterly on I81 at my usual conservative eight miles over the posted speed limit, attempting to stay in some lane or other, my wife peered from her perch in the shotgun seat and suddenly said: “Revert, pervert!”

“Triviality,” I responded. We lapsed into a brief silence.

Another attempt at one-upmanship in a family feud? No: just another round in the game we had devised to enliven car trips from our Connecticut home to the Boston area, Vermont, Canada, and North Carolina.

It had fortuitously started at a large midday family gathering in a Connecticut restaurant while adults were relaxing over coffee, which I don’t drink. I took two grandsons, aged nine and eleven, outside before they became instigators or recipients of mayhem. How to amuse them for half an hour?

Wandering around the parking lot, I looked at license plates. Since the proliferation of automobiles over the years has produced more than a million cars on the road in most states, the number of different plates with no more than six numerical digits could not exceed one million. Even to reach that number, one plate would have to display six zeroes. Vanity plates with people’s initials or cute symbolism might account for a few thousand more, but a solution creating many more combinations was needed.

One was found. Combining three numerals with three letters produced not just  $10^6 = 1,000,000$ , but  $10^3 \times 26^3 = 17,576,000$  possibilities. That would do for a while.

“Look at that license plate, boys,” I said, pointing to one of them. “Three numbers and then the first three letters of the alphabet. Can you make up a phrase with three words beginning with those three letters, in the same order?” (All right: I didn’t say “phrase,” but stumbled around the idea until they got it.) “You know, like . . . oh, ‘All Boys Cheat.’”

“Hey, Grandpa,” said the younger. “No, we don’t! Um . . . ‘A Bread Crust.’”

“Oh,” said his brother, reluctantly getting into the spirit. “How about ‘Auntie Boils Candy?’”

“I think you’ve got it,” I replied. “Can you do the same with the letters on the next license plate?”

Thus we worked our way around the parking lot, spending the time needed for indoor adults to child-proof themselves for the coming week. And so also was developed the game with which my wife and I have challenged each other in many states.

Tuning the game to an adult level, our basic requirement is that license plate letters must be used not only in the same order, but in a single word. From time to time, as might be expected, we have come up with versions of varying difficulty. (1) All three letters must be contiguous. (2) No two of the three may be contiguous. (3) Letters must have exactly one (or two, etc.) intervening letters: “RDC” produced *traduce* and *radical*. (4) Plurals, past tenses, and gerunds may be prohibited to eliminate an easy final *s*, *d*, or *g*.

We’ve also introduced a rule that the one who calls out “Foreign!” before the other comes up with a word may make a foreign word. Before I could say *murder*, for example, the letters *MRD* provoked such a call from my wife. Her round.

Oh, yes: the letters we spotted that triggered the opening exchange were, as you probably figured out, *RVT*.

Further modifications to suit interests and abilities can easily be invented. No proper nouns. Only proper nouns. Only verbs, adjectives, or adverbs—or none of the preceding. Use the six permutations of three (different) letters. Revisions are limited only by players’ ingenuity and patience.

Be warned, however, that the increasing need for new plates has resulted in considerably more difficult combinations. What, for example, is one to do with *RZJ*?

[Ed Rosenberg, a retired maths professor (Western CT State U., Danbury), and his wife, Harriet, enjoy playing with words. His wife reads a lot; he writes a lot. Fortunately [he says—we would like to differ—Ed.] most of his efforts are not published.]

## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Does anyone have plans for building a bat house that you’d be willing to share with me? [From a letter in the March 2004 issue of Country Extra. Submitted by Harriet Rosenberg, Danbury, Connecticut.]



## HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain

“It’s very important that it’s no longer something for the silent minority, and it’s become normalised,” said a think-tank wallah, greeting the news that half of all British households now have an Internet connection. “Silent majority” has long been a superglued phrase, but this is an interesting development; it appears that the attachment between *silent* and *majority* is now so irreversible that it is leaking sideways.

Another instance of supergluing, suggested by a couple of readers, is *keen fan*, presumably coined to differentiate a keen fan of Manchester United, for instance, from a lukewarm, or even indifferent, fan. And here’s a quote from a review, in a leading British newspaper, of a concert by the singer Beyonce: “This is one of the least slick, and most shambolic shows I’ve ever seen from a major superstar.” Well, you can understand the reviewer’s disgust; I mean, fair enough, if he’d gone to see a *minor* superstar, he’d have lowered his expectations accordingly. (This column is always delighted to receive *Horribles* from readers, superglued or otherwise, via any of the usual VERBATIM addresses.)

I was puzzled to read the other day of the launching of “the first British book site to specifically target urban communities.” How strange, I thought; surely most books are sold in urban areas, along with just about every commodity in Britain, other than pigfeed. After all, the great noisy majority of people in the UK live in one of a handful of conurbations.

But then I read on, and discovered that the new site was in fact “an online black bookseller”—that is, a retailer dealing in books aimed at people of a particular ethnicity. No doubt it’s old news to US readers that *urban* is yet another euphemism for black, but it’s a classic example of why importing jargon from abroad is so often unwise.

A related problem was illustrated last summer by the case of a man in Yorkshire who gained brief international fame when he complained that it was impossible to get taxi dispatchers or pizza delivery firms to accept his orders, and that teenagers, with their trousers pulled down, routinely posed for photographs next to the sign at the end of his street: Butt Hole Road.

A generation ago the difficulty wouldn’t have existed (unless the local council had renamed his road Arsehole Avenue, which seems pretty unlikely even in Yorkshire), because the US usage of *butthole* was almost unknown over here. Most media coverage of the Butt Hole saga blamed the British love of silly and childish humour, but I feel that cultural imperialism, and its attendant linguistic homogenisation, is the real villain—a stance I will maintain until I hear of, say, a shopping mall in Minnesota called Bum Crack Vistas.

My local post office closed permanently last month, a significant inconvenience—sorry, “modernisation”—which wasn’t made any easier to stomach by a press statement from the post office’s “Head of commercial urban areas in the West.” (Does the *urban* in that job title imply that segregation is being introduced to the West’s stamp counters?) “We consulted customers, MPs, and other community representatives,” said the Head, justifying a closure that had met considerable public opposition, “explaining why we were proposing these changes.” What a giveaway! We all know, of course, that in such a context, *consulting* invariably means *telling*, but it’s not often we get official confirmation.

Who invented *mission statements*? Whoever it was needs arresting, in my view. I was trying to do some online window shopping recently, and rapidly became infuriated by having to click my way through horrible little sermonettes before I could get to the goods I was after. The best—in the sense of most vacuous and irritating—was this one: “What we stand for. We have integrity and respect for people. We believe in communication and a strong customer focus. We work together to find innovative solutions that add value.”

It didn’t conclude with “We talk utter bollocks because our brains are mush,” but it should have, don’t you think?

[Have a Horrible to share? Send it in, please, to [editor@verbatimag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimag.com), or to our Chicago postal address.]





## *Eighteenth Century Collections Online:*

*The Words and Images of History*


Fred R. Shapiro  
Yale Law School

In 2001 I wrote in this journal: “Electronic resources presenting text and images through the World Wide Web are rapidly revolutionizing the study of history.” Now, in 2004, the revolution has reached a mature phase. Perhaps the most exciting of the online history resources is Gale’s Eighteenth Century Collections Online (ECCO).

ECCO is the most ambitious digitization project ever undertaken. It makes available digital facsimile images of every significant book published in Great Britain between 1701 and 1800, as well as thousands of important works printed in the Americas. The completed database will include more than 33,000,000 pages and nearly 150,000 books and span subjects including history, geography, social science, fine arts, medicine, science, technology, literature, language, philosophy, religion, law, and general reference. Every word or phrase in this comprehensive electronic library is searchable (searching a variety of sophisticated “metadata” fields, or browsing texts by author or title, is also possible).

The power of ECCO’s full-text searching can be spectacularly illustrated by using it to trace the origins of words and phrases. For more than 150 years, the *Oxford English Dictionary* has pursued the world’s greatest humanities research project, with thousands of editors and contributors employing the most diligent and ingenious methods to ferret out the earliest known usage of each term in the English language. Simon Winchester’s *The Professor and the Madman* made the best-seller list, chronicling one of the most remarkable stories of *OED* research into “first uses.”

In literally a few seconds of searching, however, ECCO can often outdo *OED* first uses and furnish earlier evidence from eighteenth-century books. The richness of ECCO’s contents and the power of its ability to search the full text of books for occurrences of desired words make for an extraordinary tool for linguistic investigations, and, of course, for countless other researches.



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I asked John Simpson, chief editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, to summarize how the *OED* staff is using ECCO in their work. Here is his answer:

“Some commentators have suggested that quotation evidence in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is less comprehensive for the eighteenth century than for other periods. It is perhaps no surprise, therefore, that ECCO has proved an extremely productive resource over the short time it has been available. Of the six hundred illustrative quotations already added to the dictionary database to date from ECCO, around one third represent antedatings of the first-known occurrence of a word or sense previously recorded in the *OED*. Impressive examples found so far come from the world of medicine (*oesophageal*, antedated from 1807 to 1786; *pelvic*, antedated from 1828 to 1799), botany (three out of the four senses of *peduncle* have been antedated), textiles (*organdie*, antedated from 1785 to 1714), and architecture (*peripheral*, antedated from 1826 to 1768).

ECCO is also a rich source of documentary evidence for informal varieties of English. A notable example is the following:

Richard Low . . . and his Camrade being one Day very Peckish, and meeting with a Boor in Ghent loaded with Capons . . . , they struck up a Bargain with him for half of them.

Alexander Smith, *History of the Lives of the Most Noted Highway-men* (ed. 2, 1714)

This use of the adjective *peckish* antedates the previous first-known example, an entry in Francis Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*, by just over seventy years.



Another area of particular strength, as compared with other resources, is in words loaned from non-European languages, which occur frequently in the types of texts (letters and memoirs, for example) found in the collection. Examples of such terms for which new first examples have already been found include *Padouca*, *ongon*, *obeah man*, and *occo*. As we continue with the process of revising the *OED*, our ability to search ECCO will undoubtedly lead to considerable gains in our understanding of eighteenth-century English.”

I have used ECCO to improve upon the historical record for many important terms. For example, the *OED*'s first citation for the word *baseball* is dated 1815. An ECCO search, however, retrieves the following, much earlier, example from a children's book:

BASE-BALL. The *Ball* once struck off, Away flies the Boy To the next destin'd Post, and then Home with Joy.

*A Little Pretty Pocket-Book, Intended for the Instruction and Amusement of Little Master Tommy, and Pretty Miss Polly* (1760)

The *OED*'s earliest record of the word *librarian* is from 1713, but ECCO yields an occurrence twelve years prior to that:

The Library is furnish'd already with Books, to almost the number of 4000, and will daily increase by an annual Salary of 116 l. per Ann. settl'd upon it for that purpose, and for the maintenance of a Librarian.

Herman Moll, *A System of Geography: or, a New & Accurate Description of the Earth in All its Empires, Kingdoms and States* (1701)

I set forth below a few other interesting “antedatings,” from a variety of subject areas, that I have discovered with ECCO full-text searches. The date of the *OED*'s first use for the term is given in parentheses. My results, through the lens of studying the history of words, suggest the limitless potential of ECCO for studying the history of culture and ideas.

*biographer* (*OED* 1715)

The *Author*'s descending too particularly to the lesser and more private Actions of Mankind; which makes him fall from the Majesty of a *Historian* to that of a *Biographer*.

Laurence Echard, *The Roman History* (1702)  
*biology* (*OED* 1819, in another sense 1813)

Physiology therefore—or more strictly *biology*—by which I mean *the doctrine of the living sys-*

*tem in all its states*, appears to be the foundation of ethics and pneumatology.

Thomas Beddoes, *Contributions to Physical and Medical Knowledge, Principally from the West of England* (1799)

*dentist* (*OED* 1759)

Bouchard is the Name of the Dentist she employed at Bourdeaux, already mentioned.

Mainie Anne Cathcart, *Copies of Miss Cathcart's Letters to Sir John Houstoune, Since She Came Away from Him* (ca. 1746)

*engineering* (*OED* 1720)

The 17th of this Month proved fatal to the famous Lieutenant General *Coborn*; who, without Vanity, was the ablest Engineer in his Time: He rose by small Gradations in the Military and Engineering Arts, to the high Posts he so worthily filled, under the States-General.

David Jones, *A Compleat History of Europe: or, a View of the Affairs Thereof, Civil and Military, for the Year, 1704* (1705)

*oxygen* (*OED* 1790)

We have acted agreeable to these conditions by adopting the word *oxygen*, deriving it as Mr. Lavoisier proposed . . . We shall therefore say that vital air is oxygen gas, and that oxygen unites with sulphur.

Louis Bernard, Baron Guyton de Morveau, *Method of Chymical Nomenclature* (1788)  
*revolutionary* (*OED* 1774)

No Roman Catholick was oblig'd to oppose the Revolutionary Measures in Conscience, much less in Policy.

Alexander Ramkins, *The Memoirs of Majr. Alexander Ramkins, a Highland-Officer, Now in Prison at Avignon* (1719)

*vampire* (*OED* 1734)

It is some Satisfaction to him [a Dutchman] to know that he is not giving from his Family what he has earned with the Sweat of his Brows, to . . . gratify the Rapine of a fat-gutted Vampire.

Charles Forman, *A Second Letter to the Right Honourable Sir Robert Walpole* (1733)

[Fred R. Shapiro is associate librarian and lecturer in legal research at Yale Law School and the editor of the forthcoming Yale Dictionary of Quotations (Yale University Press).]



# CLASSICAL BLATHER

## *Amongst Our Weaponry*

Nick Humez  
argentarius@juno.com

*Arma virumque cano*: “Arms and the man I sing,” begins Vergil’s *Aeneid*, squarely in the middle of a literary tradition whose discourse of weapons goes back as far as writing itself. During the agrarian revolution after the last ice age, fertile river-bottom floodplains tempted some of our ancestors to cultivate long-grained grasses such as barley and wheat instead of just gathering them where they grew. Other folk, however, remained pastoral nomads on the steppes, herding their flocks hither and yon in search of indigenous pasturage and occasionally raiding the farmers in the valleys below, who likened such incursions to storms sent by quarrelsome pantheons,<sup>1</sup> and took care to leave at least some of their swords unbeaten into plowshares so long as the danger should last.

That the distinction between weapon and tool should be fuzzy the further back we turn, beyond the dawn of written language, to the ambiguous testimony of silent artifacts, should not surprise us. But that this taxonomic overlap is alive and well today, we are reminded by the atmosphere of heightened anxiety about terrorism in our new century, in which the common hardware of everyday life may be viewed by an edgy guard at the airport check-in portal as a potential vector of mayhem.<sup>2</sup>

Startling as this may be to those who have had to surrender sewing scissors and packets of shorts and sharps for the duration of a flight, it comes as no surprise to either the constabulary or the writers of crime fiction. Thus Lord Posby’s crushed skull, described in the forensic pathologist’s report only as trauma from the impact of an unspecified “blunt instrument,” may be shown by the ingenious and relentless Detective Inspector Zote to have resulted specifically from a sharp whack on the temple with a Queen Anne candelabrum that the elderly butler, Yawffles,<sup>3</sup> happened to be polishing just at the moment his master decided to give him a week’s notice after an unfortunate incident involving the manorial winecellar, the upstairs maid (also dis-

missed), a cricket bat, five fathoms of hempen postal twine, and Lady Posby’s pet Yorkie. Viewers of TV and feature-film Westerns know very well that pistol butts can be used in a pinch as hammers (though this, too, is not recommended).

To the rescue comes the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which glosses *weapon* as “an instrument of any kind used in warfare or in combat to attack and overcome an enemy,” and *tool* as “any instrument of manual operation; a mechanical implement for working upon something, as by cutting, striking, rubbing, or other process, in any manual art or industry.” Purposefulness lurks behind both definitions,<sup>4</sup> but a society’s habitual use informs the design of the objects themselves: Most people can, in practice, tell a handsaw from a *harpé*, the short sword with a hook on one side,<sup>5</sup> with which Perseus was often shown decapitating the gorgon Medusa.<sup>6</sup>

Here we shall discuss weapons that bash, slash, and stab.<sup>7</sup> Physiologically, all three types serve the tactical function of helping to prevent one’s opponent from offering further resistance, while their metaphorical purpose has been described by one scholar as the inversion of outside and inside, the exposing of the interior of the human body.<sup>8</sup> The *battle-ax* accomplished this with a vengeance, whether in the hands of a Saga-Age Norse warrior (“Battle-Troll” was the affectionate name given his ax by Njal’s quick-tongued follower, Skarp-Hedin, who boasted that whenever he raised it, it was sure to find its mark)<sup>9</sup> ,or an American Indian confronting the first English settlers with his tomahawk.<sup>10</sup> Here one cannot help feeling that the line between implements of peace and war was a permeable boundary, for one thing common to the Vikings and the indigenous *skraelings* (wretches) whom they discovered in their westward forays was the everyday need to deal with wood. (Similarly, was the hand-ax with which Gilgamesh was instructed to cut multiple punting poles a tool or a weapon?<sup>11</sup>) Cautious archaeologists hedge their bets by giving the name *neoliths* to rocks that show evident signs of New Stone Age artisanship in progress but whose ultimate function is indeterminate.

Extensions (literal and figurative) of the battle-ax are the *halberd* and *spontoon*,<sup>12</sup> almost interchangeable terms for an ax on a five-to-seven-foot pole with a spear point on top. But our vernacular term for either one, *poleax*, stems from a misunderstanding: the word was once *poll-ax*, not an ax for bash-



ing *polls* (heads), but rather one that had a slab of iron welded on the opposite side of its head from the blade, so as to combine improved balance with additional clout. Here the ax shifts from chopper toward club, its sheer mass rendering its sharpness increasingly moot. At the far end of the slash-bash continuum are the war hammer, as used by France's legendary king Charles Martel and the Norse god Thor (the latter's hammer, when thrown, struck as unerring lightning, but the touch of its handle could restore the dead to life), the mace and its tetherball offspring, the morningstar, and the Aztec warclub, which was studded with obsidian teeth just to be on the safe side.<sup>13</sup>

Slashing weapons presuppose a strong arm and a precise stroke quicker than one's foe can evade or parry. Originally a cavalryman's sword, the curved *sabre* is still seen as part of the dress uniform of such services as the United States Marines,<sup>14</sup> though a maritime analogue, the *cutlass*,<sup>15</sup> is nowadays largely confined to swashbuckler films and comic theater. The *scimitar* of the Islamic world adorns the flag of the Saudis, and they mean it: Capital crimes there have earned decapitation with just such a sword.<sup>16</sup> In the Middle Ages the best of them were said to come from Damascus and Toledo, whose swordsmiths, like those of Japan, had discovered that repeated heating over a charcoal forge and hammer-folding multiple layers increased the carbon content of the steel, producing an exceptionally tough blade. Until recently the only scimitars most Americans saw were of painted jigsawed plywood at parades of Shriners, burlesquing the Muslim world in a orientalist fantasy reaching past the Enlightenment (e.g., Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*) to the late Middle Ages.<sup>17</sup>

Striking from horseback adds the momentum of the horse to the stroke; it was only in the past century that the difference in elevation between infantry and cavalry combatants' became merely strategic and no longer social as well.<sup>18</sup> The war chariot, drawn by pairs of horses or wild asses and carrying both a driver and a fighter first appeared and spread throughout the Middle East early in the second millennium B.C.; ideally suited for hot pursuit on a flat plain or river bottom, it afforded a steadier platform than horseback for shooting arrows, throwing a spear, or just plain smiting, besides showing off a warrior monarch to most flattering advantage in profile bas-reliefs commemorating his victories over

cringing or dismembered enemies.<sup>19</sup> By the time of the Romans, chariot racing was a regular entertainment: Rome's Circus Maximus was merely the largest racecourse of many in which the *quadrigae*, the four-horse chariots, competed in a spectacle of light and sound of which the sulky races at such modern tracks as Maine's Scarborough Downs offer only the palest of echoes. Other four-footed auxiliaries have ranged from war elephants to guard dogs, including such specialties as cavalry camels and transport mules.

Weapons that poke instead of slicing or bludgeoning include stationary ones, such as pikes and certain types of swords and daggers (e.g., the *épée*, now tamed to the modern fencing foil; the *poignard* and its relative the *miséricorde*,<sup>20</sup> so called because its threatened use at the throat of an armor-encumbered fallen knight was supposed to get him to cry mercy and surrender, to be ransomed later for a tidy sum) as well as passive hindrances such as caltrops (small tetrahedral spiked jacks strewn to hobble the hooves of oncoming horses) and their jumbo-sized relatives, *chevaux-de-frises*, whose rows of sharpened pickets too high to jump would break up even the most determined cavalry charge.<sup>21</sup> But poking can also be done at a distance, by spears (including javelins, assegais, and the like, whether thrown by hand or with the assistance of an *at-atl*, or spear-thrower),<sup>22</sup> arrows, *quarrels*, or *darts*.

Though arising from straightforward archery (the composite recurve bow, whose size made it easier for a riding archer to discharge it, had spread through the Middle East at about the same time as the chariot<sup>23</sup>), the last three types of missiles took on new lethality when propelled by the medieval *cross-bow*, or *arbalest*.<sup>24</sup> This latter name in both English and French (later *arbalêt*) derives from Latin *arcus* 'bow' plus *ballista* 'catapult.'<sup>25</sup> Like Latin *catapulta*, *ballista* drew on Greek, in which the underlying verb is *ballein* 'to throw.' Though it is tempting to derive *ball* from this verb as well, *ballein* actually comes from \**gwele-* 'throw, reach, pierce' while *ball* has the Indo-European root \**bhel-*,<sup>26</sup> one of whose meanings is 'blow, swell.' That's just the way it bounces.

#### Notes

For the title of this issue's column I am indebted to the "Spanish Inquisition" sketch from the 1970s BBC-TV show "Monty Python's Flying Circus." As a menacing churchman, Michael Palin repeatedly makes a melodramatic entrance—"NO-one expects the Spanish



Inquisition!”—that dissolves into ratiocinative farce as his categories multiply in robust defiance of Occam’s Razor: “Our chief weapon is surprise. And fear. Our TWO chief weapons are . . .”

1 This account of the neolithic revolution is drawn from the splendidly illustrated *Past Worlds: Harper Collins Atlas of Archeology* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 80; its information about the postglacial Near East’s wild grain belt is largely derived from a 1966 paper by J. R. Harlan and D. Zohary, “Distribution of Wild Wheats and Barley” (*Science* 153:1074–1080). S. H. Hooke’s *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1963) elaborates on the tension between agriculture and pastoralism in his discussion of the Sumerian myth of Inanna’s courtship by Enkimdu and Dumuzi (pp. 34–35) and astutely notes the similarity between this myth and the biblical contest between Cain and Abel, each of whom had hoped to win God’s favor for his offerings (Genesis 4:1–8). The simile of storm and raiders appears in a translation of a lament to a pillaged city’s tutelary deity, quoted by Thorkild Jacobsen in his essay on the Mesopotamian worldview in H. Frankfort, H. A. Frankfort, John A. Wilson, and T. Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1951). The swords-into-plowshares reference occurs both at Isaiah 2:4 and at Micah 4:3.

2 As can a commercial airplane itself; the atrocities of September 11, 2001, demonstrated that this requires only a few hours’ flight training in banking and turning combined with a fanatical capacity for self-immolation. The broader lesson is not lost on sociologist Erving Goffman, who observes that an awareness that we may be in the company of a mentally disturbed person whose behavior is unpredictable can prompt us to reevaluate an astonishing range of objects, hitherto thought harmless, in terms of the possible harm they could do in the hands of the deranged; thus “each time he holds a sharp or heavy object . . . the family will have to be ready to jump,” he says of a patient who has had a florid manic episode, adding that “professionals who manage the actively suicidal are acutely alive to the unconventional lethal possibilities of domestic equipment.” (Goffman, “The Insanity of Place,” in *Relations in Public* [New York: Harper/Colophon, 1971], p. 377 and note 27.)

3 Afficionados of the late Edward Gorey will not fail to detect my homage in shamelessly appropriating these names from his fanciful abecedarian bestiary, *The Utter Zoo* (New York: Meredith Press, 1967).

4 That such an implement normally has innocuous uses can affect a defendant’s fate as well; Yawffles may

be able to get off on manslaughter on the ground that the candlestick just happened to be in his hand when he was provoked to an (unpremeditated and unaccustomed) fit of rage, whereas he would surely be tried for first-degree murder had he shot his employer in cold blood after having expressly procured from the gunroom his Lordship’s cherished octagon-barreled, percussion-cap fowling-piece.

5 From the Greek verb *harpazein*, ‘to snatch away, capture,’ to which are also related the Harpies (*harpuiiai*), generally depicted as birds with women’s faces, who tormented blind king Phineus of Thrace: They would swoop down on his supper as soon as it was set before him, snatching away most of it and befouling the rest, until Jason arrived with the Argonauts and disposed of them in exchange for directions for the rest of their journey to retrieve the Golden Fleece. By analogy, *harpy* came to refer disparagingly to any feisty woman; most modern speakers of English would probably use the term interchangeably with *virago*. Liddell and Scott’s *Greek Lexicon* adds that *harpuia* originally meant simply ‘whirlwind.’

6 However, the hero is sometimes depicted holding a sickle instead. A flint-edged sickle was also the tool-turned-weapon with which the titan Kronos was thought by the Greeks to have castrated his father Ouranos. A similar implement figures no fewer than three times in the Hittite myth of Kumarbi: Originally employed by the old chthonic gods, the Anunnaki, to sever the heavens from the lower regions, it was later used by Kumarbi to geld *his* father, and still later requisitioned by Ea, the god of wisdom, from the Anunnaki as just the right tool for lopping off the diorite giant Ullikumi at the feet from the shoulder of Uppeluri, the Hittite Atlas, where Kumarbi had planted him. See Hooke, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–98.

7 They can also burn, suffocate, or explode, especially since the introduction of gunpowder to the West; its efficacious use in the Turkish cannons demolished the last defenses of Christian Byzantium in 1453. China had had gunpowder for centuries before that, but had used it almost exclusively for recreational purposes, such as festival pyrotechnics. However, by 1588 R. Parke, in his *History of China* (translated from Spanish) could write that the Chinese “vse . . . in their wars . . . many bomes of fire, full of olde iron, and arrowes made with powder & fire worke, with the which they do much harme and destroy their enimies.” (This is the *OED*’s earliest citation for *bomb*.) For want of space, however, discussion of such weapons must be deferred to a future column.



8 I owe this analysis to Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain*, for which it was my good fortune to be asked to write the index when it was first published by the New York branch of Oxford University Press in 1985. See especially p. 188, in the chapter entitled "The Structure of War," where Scarry writes passionately of "the precious ore of confirmation, the interior content of human bodies, arteries, lungs, hearts, brains, the mother lode that will eventually be connected to the winning issue, to which it will lend its radical substance, its compelling, heartsickening reality." It is no coincidence that one of the first centers for the study of anatomy was the hospital attached to the gladiatorial school in the Roman city of Pergamum, in Asia Minor, since the wounds suffered by combatants in the ring afforded ample opportunity for physicians to learn a great deal about what lies beneath the crucial boundary of our skin.

9 Magnus Magnusson and Hermann Palsson (tr.), *Njal's Saga* (Harmondsworth, U.K.: Penguin, 1979), p. 249. Skarp-Hedin's boast is addressed to the braggart Thorkel, whom he then cows into submission by threatening to "drive my ax into your head and split you to the shoulders" during booth-to-booth rounds at the annual assembly, the Althing, by a party of Njal's sons and supporters in an attempt to round up support for a blood-feud settlement proposal.

10 The word *tomahawk* entered English thanks to Capt. John Smith, whose "tomahack" was the closest he could come to the Virginia natives' *tämähk* (derived from the Rénape verbal form *tämähken* 'he uses for cutting,' itself from *tämäham* 'he cuts.' The *OED* gives as related forms Delaware *tamoihecan*, Mohegan *tumahegan*, Abenaki and Micmac *tam[a]higan* (or *tmeegn*) and Passamaquoddy *tumhigen*, suggesting a distribution well into the Canadian maritimes for this mixed-use ax. Its handle was generally about two feet long, with a long stone for its head having one end flaked sharp or edged with deerhorn or, where available, copper, until supplanted almost entirely by iron trade-tomahawks supplied by Europeans. Interestingly enough, the author of *Eiriks Saga*, writing around 1265, claims that the skrælings (wretches) of Vinland (now thought to lie somewhere between the Gulf of Maine and the top of Newfoundland), behaved as though they had never seen an ax before, stripping one from a dead Viking and taking turns cutting trees with it until one of them tried it against a stone and ruined it; see Gwyn Jones, *Eirik the Red and Other Sagas* (New York: Oxford, 1999), pp. 150–153. But this saga was written a full two and a half centuries after the events it pur-

ports to relate, and elsewhere shows the influence of the travel-narrative genre already popular in continental Europe (Marco Polo would dictate his *Travels* just a generation later), including a cameo by a favorite of bestiary writers, the fabulous *uniped*, at that time commonly believed to live in Africa. One must suspect the ax-ignorance story to be authorial embroidery, drawing on a "stupid hick/barbarian" comedic tradition at least as ancient as fifth-century Greek jokes about the egregiously dullwitted *polis* of Kymé.

11 Gilgamesh cut three hundred poles so that he and the ferryman Urshanabi might cross the waters of death in quest of the immortal Uta-Napishtim the Distant, discarding each pole at the end of its stroke to avoid contamination by the lethal sea. This episode appears on Tablet X of the Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh epic, dating from around 1500 B.C. See Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia* (New York: Oxford, 2000), p. 104.

12 The *OED* glosses *halberd* (var. *halbert*) as a 'combination of spear and battle-axe, consisting of a sharp-edged blade ending in a point, and a spear-head.' Its shorter cousin-several-times-removed, the eighteenth-century *spontoon*—Spanish *esponton*, Italian *spuntone* (cf. *punto* 'point')—was 'a species of half-pike or halberd' carried by officers only, the rank-and-file infantryman relying instead on his bayonet.

13 A version of the mace is still carried by dignitaries in such processional opening ceremonies as college commencements and the opening of parliaments. In its original form it had a heavy iron head, often with spikes. The morningstar was a mace head attached to its handle by a chain, by which it would be whirled to add centrifugal force to its impact. A Japanese analogue (the name is in the Okinawan dialect) might be the *nunchaku*, two heavy sticks attached to each other with a ring or strap, used for half a millennium as a defensive weapon by country folk after the samurai seized the monopoly on possessing metal arms; it is clearly related to the winnowing flail, also used as a martial-arts implement.

14 *Sabre* is cognate with Spanish *sable* and German *Säbel* ("an unexplained alteration," says the *OED*). Americans tend to spell it *saber*, as in the sabertoothed tiger (genus *Smilodont*), of which some splendidly preserved fossils were first yielded by California's La Brea tarpits in the early twentieth century.

15 *Cutlass* is from a French augmentative of *couteau* 'knife', *coutelas*, cognate with Italian *coltellaccio*. Introduced into English in the sixteenth century, its various spellings have included *coute-lace*, *cut-lash*, *curtal-ax*, and *cuttleass*.





16 Like the sabre, the scimitar is well suited to fighting from horseback. Its use for judicial beheadings was shockingly presented to English-speaking viewers of public television in the 1980 BBC docu-drama *Death of a Princess*. (The government of Saudi Arabia was predictably indignant at what it maintained was prejudicial coverage.) Beheading with a broadsword was a privilege reserved for the nobility in both France and England until the seventeenth century; by the end of the Enlightenment, the French were guillotining the condemned without regard to class, while the English were sending all theirs to the gallows, except that instead of a hempen rope, gentlefolk were still entitled to swing from one that had been plaited of silk. See Barbara Levy's lurid but fact-packed history of seven generations of the Sanson family, *Legacy of Death* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1973).

17 See note 10.

18 The Roman *equites* 'knights' had a property qualification second only to the senatorial class. By contrast, the United States Army's cavalry was arguably one of the worlds most democratic by the time it finally disbanded at the start of the Second World War, by which time its role had shrunk to specialties such as dispatch riding. The cavalry units were metamorphosed into a variety of new assignments: armored divisions, the "air cavalry" forces operating in Vietnam's forested interior in helicopters, and the Army Air Corps which subsequently became the U. S. Air Force—the launch site for the career trajectory of VERBATIM contributor Frank Holan, a 1941 cavalry enlistee who retired from the USAF as a colonel in the early 1960s. (The winning strategy for the marksmanship medal in the cavalry, he once told me, was to know your stable and to choose the least flappable horse from it on the day of your shoot.)

19 *Past Worlds* puts the war chariot's introduction at about 1800 B.C., adding that cavalry would not eclipse it in strategic importance for at least a millennium (p. 142). However, a lost-wax copper casting from Sumer, dating to about 2700 B.C., clearly depicts a two-wheeled cart carrying two figures and drawn by a team of four donkeys (*ibid.*, p. 120); the true date probably lies somewhere between those two. Bas-reliefs of Sargon II (r. 721–705 B.C.) at Khorsabad and Ashurbanipal (ca. 640 B.C.) at Nineveh show both Assyrian kings shooting what appear to be Asiatic recurve bows (*ibid.*, pp. 154 and 156 respectively); v. *infra*, note 23.

20 Edwin Tunis, *Weapons* (New York: Times Mirror/World Publishing, 1972), pp. 49–50. This author-illus-

trator's etymologies are often unreliable, but his line drawings are very clear. It must be noted that many sword types, including the Roman gladius, straddle the last two categories, being equally well suited for slashing and thrusting.

21 A mobile slashing analogue of *chevaux-de-frise* (Frisian horses) is mentioned in Greek military writing, notably Xenophon's *Anabasis*: the diabolical *harmata dropenophora* (scythe-bearing carts), which could be rolled toward the opposition to send infantry squares scattering.

22 Many cultures seem to have independently invented a wooden handle with a pocket to hold the butt of a spear, extending the thrower's effective arm length and increasing his angular thrust. The term *atlatl* is a portmanteau word from the roots for "water" and "throw" in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, who used it habitually in hunting waterfowl and, during the Spanish invasion, to propel their spears so hard as to pierce the conquistadors' armor ("The Atlatl Weapon," by Grant Keddie, curator of archaeology, at <http://rbcm1.rbcm.gov.bc.ca/hhistory/atlatl/atlatl.html>, part of the web site of the Royal British Columbia Museum in Victoria). C. W. M. Hart and A. R. Pilling, in their wry anthropological monograph, *The Tiwi of Northern Australia* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960) state that the aborigines of Melville and Bathurst Islands regarded spear throwers as suitable toys for children but that an adult warrior would consider it beneath his dignity to use one.

23 Kent Benjamin Robertson, in the fifth chapter of his "novel-journal" *Butterfly, Owl, and Eagle: Athena Marie Prima* ([http://einstein.periphery.cc/boe\\_5.htm](http://einstein.periphery.cc/boe_5.htm)), states that "evidence of a sophisticated recurve composite bow was unearthed in what is now called Iran, estimated origination, about 2,500 B.C." This interesting work of fiction lacks footnotes, and some of the other dates Robertson gives in the narrative are at variance with other authoritative sources, but it seems safe to say that he is probably off by less than a millennium. Composite recurve bows were widely used by the mounted archers of the Parthian empire that took over Mesopotamia from the Seleucid successors of Alexander the Great, making their hit-and-run "Parthian shot" legendary. Hideous casualties were inflicted by Mesopotamian archers who easily outflanked the infantry of the avaricious triumvir Publius Licinius Crassus during his expedition against the Parthians in 53 B.C., which cost him his head (recycled as a stage prop in the king's court) and the freedom of the surviving half of his army of forty-



two thousand, some of whose descendants have been recently shown by DNA testing to be alive and well in Central Asia: Their captured ancestors had been sent to guard Parthia's eastern frontier, and there is evidence to suggest that about 150 of them escaped and fled to the Huns, in turn to be taken prisoner by the Chinese, who deployed them to build a border fortress later called Li-quian or Li-jien (a Han dynasty term for "Rome"). See Henry Chu, "Digging for Romans in China," *Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 24, 2000, reproduced at [www.100megsfree4.com/farshores/romchin.htm](http://www.100megsfree4.com/farshores/romchin.htm).

24 Though a form of the crossbow had been known to the Romans, its use in Europe became general only in the Middle Ages. Though powerful and accurate, it required much more time to load and discharge than the Welsh-English longbow: At the battle of Crécy in 1346, during the Hundred Years' War, a contingent of crossbowmen from Genoa fighting for the French were pathetically outshot by British yeoman archers. During the 1300s the crossbow would steadily decline at the expense of the longbow, which remained the predominant deliverer of firepower well past the introduction of early firearms, also very slow to load and shoot. A concise and useful summary of the history of archery can be found under "Bow and Arrow" in the *New Columbia Encyclopedia* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1975), p. 347.

25 See Tunis, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–56. The ballista was a catapult capable of flinging heavy stones; a smaller version was called the *onager* (wild ass), probably on account of its recoil. In medieval France it bore the name *mangonneau* (*mangonel* in English). The *OED* dismisses as highly improbable the suggestion by Tunis and others that a shortening of this word to *gonne* was the source of our present-day word *gun*. The largest medieval catapults had counterweighted arms made from whole tree trunks; the French called them *trebuchets* and the English, *trepegettes* or *tryppettes*.

26 This root, the second of the three *\*bhel-* stems listed in the Indo-European Roots appendix to the third edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992), is also the root of *phallus*, *bulk*, *bull*, and the *-bol-* of *embolism*.



## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

*Dewdroppers, Waldos and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century*, by Rosmarie Ostler. (Oxford University Press 2003. 239 pp. ISBN 0-19-516146-7, US\$25.00)

In the 1960s it was "hippie speak." In the 1980s we had "Valspeak." Now there are "cyber words."

Rosmarie Ostler, in her fascinating new volume *Dewdroppers, Waldos and Slackers: A Decade-by-Decade Guide to the Vanishing Vocabulary of the Twentieth Century*, compares synonyms over the past century as she relates how each time span influenced the American lexicon.

So where do these words come from? According to the author, just about any aspect of daily life—fashion, food, music, technology, or politics—can add to the dictionary. There were the "-ins" of the 1960s: *sit-ins*, *love-ins*, *wade-ins* (swimming at segregated beaches), and *wed-ins* (hippie marriages). The misadventures of the Nixon administration in the 1970s gave us *-gate*, as in *Floodgate* (the improprieties of Rep. Daniel J. Flood of Pennsylvania), *skategate* (the confrontation between Tonya Harding and Nancy Kerrigan before the 1994 Olympics), and even *Gate-gate*, the proliferation of adding the suffix to describe scandals of various import.

Like pet rocks and Rubik's Cubes, language fads come and go—and sometimes return. Many phrases are appropriate only within a specific historical context, while others seem to endure. *Groovy*, for example, was an offshoot of "in the groove," a musical term in the 1930s to describe a jazz musician who was particularly proficient. It was still in use in the 1940s but then became un-hip until its resurrection in the 1960s (and 1990s, thanks to Austin Powers movies).

In the postwar years, young people became increasingly anti-authoritarian in their behavior. Blame it on Marlon Brando in *The Wild Ones*. One way to keep the old folks at bay was to cut them out of your communications.

But in reality, the same could be said for every generation. "Kids," a song from the 1960 musical *Bye, Bye Birdie*, asks the musical question, "Who can understand anything they say?" Young people develop their own code to set themselves apart from their elders. And trying to understand doesn't help; it's a source of embarrassment to even try. The beatnik culture of the 1950s created its unique language, and if you weren't hep to what they were saying, daddy-o, you were living in Squaresville.



New technologies (and, to a degree, the advertising used to popularize them) are other sources of cutting-edge communication. The introduction of the automobile, television, plastics, the space program, and computers each came with expressions that gradually infiltrated everyday language. “Insider slang and fringe-group jargon are usually in use for a while before they enter the linguistic mainstream,” Ostler writes.

As a current example, let’s look at *Google*. Used as a noun, it is the name of the popular Internet search engine. But it can also be used as a verb, as in “to google,” meaning to use that conveyance for research (especially in terms of personal background checks).

Phrases based on historical events can be quite blunt or sarcastic. President Herbert Hoover was the target of a great deal of acrimony during the Depression. *Hoover blankets* were newspapers used to keep warm while sleeping outdoors; *Hoover flags* were empty pockets turned inside out; and *Hoover shoes* had holes in the soles.

The use of abbreviations and acronyms also helped people feel they were in the know. Thanks to the New Deal, Americans could take part in programs designed to get them back on their feet while time providing invaluable services, such as the *TVA* (Tennessee Valley Authority) and the *PWA* (Public Works Administration), which should not be confused with the *WPA* (Works Progress Administration).

And, of course, sex has always “sold.” As the march of time has worn the veneer off youthful innocence, language has become increasing graphic and, in the opinion of many, vulgar. Over the years, a cute girl has been known as a *peacherino* (1910s); *sheba* (1920s); *whistle bait*, *dream puss*, and *zazz girl*, among others (1940s); *dolly* (1950s); *fox* (1970s); and *hottie* (1980s). The 1990s term—*sunflower*—seems anachronistic, more appropriate for use a century ago.

Ostler guides the reader through these linguistic time capsules in a manner both entertaining and educational, putting the words in their historical context, rather than just listing them dictionary-style.

And now that this review is done, black time’s here, termite. Gotta split. Enjoy the tome, which, to paraphrase Saddam Hussein, could turn out to be the mother of American popular language studies.

*Keep on truckin’.*

—Ron Kaplan

*Garner’s Modern American Usage* (Oxford University Press, 2003. 879 pp. ISBN 0-19-516191-2, US\$39.95)

Although Bryan Garner’s *Dictionary of Modern American Usage* (*DMAU*) spends most of its time on a shelf beside my desk, I must confess that I’ve taken the *DMAU* to bed with me on more than one occasion. And it’s not just me—other converts to the Church of Garner will also admit to toting it on the subway, bringing it into the bathroom with them, or looking up the Harvard comma and continuing to read the book like a novel for another hour.

It’s an ideal language resource—scholarly but not smug, thorough but not overly arcane—which didn’t seem to require improvement or expansion. Happily, the newest edition features the same accessible arrangement and attitude (and the occasional tart expression of annoyance) as in the original.

Now called merely *Garner’s Modern American Usage* (or “the *GMAU*,” I suppose), the latest version builds on a number of entries already familiar to Garner loyalists. The expanded capitalization entry now covers headlines, compass directions, up-style headings, titles and their articles, and overcorrection. The essay on metaphors delineates wayward figures of speech more formally than in the previous iteration.

Previous entries have disappeared here and there—the place-names topic, for example, has been merged with other appropriate entries—but the text wouldn’t have suffered from more extensive cuts. Many of the shorter items (like *consignee* and *polygamy*; *polyandry*; *polygyny*) address pronunciation or explicate a Venn diagram of definition, work a basic dictionary could do. Others (*ocher*; *ochre*, for one) address alleged confusion between American and British spellings, but most readers will either already understand the differences presented, or rely on their word processing programs to help them avoid Anglophonic mistakes.

But the changes in the *GMAU* are primarily additions, and some of these seem extraneous as well. Again, if a usage maven worries that she’s spelled *anilingus* incorrectly, she can check her *Webster’s 11C*. This entry in *GMAU* isn’t about spelling, but rather tells you that employing the variant *anilinctus* is needlessly pretentious. Meanwhile, the entry *profanity* declines to comment on its use, except to recommend other resources. Why include an item for the sole purpose of remarking that it lies beyond the



scope of the book? And the inclusion of a new essay on mondegreens is something of a mystery, until Garner explains that saying “for all intensive purposes” instead of “for all intents and purposes” is essentially the same as hearing Jimi Hendrix say “scuse me while I kiss this guy.” It’s amusing enough, but not really pertinent to the methodology of written English.

New entries also include those on the history and practice of functional variation (“the ability of a word to shift from one grammatical function to another”), denizen names (Garner furnishes a comprehensive list of country names and the accompanying adjectival forms), the cultural definition of “Standard English,” and numerical prefixes. Several of these, like the entries for names and diminutives, serve as handy guides for formal correspondence and present key information more concisely than, say, the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

Another noteworthy addition to the *GMAU* is Garner’s introductory essay, “Making Peace in the Language Wars,” in which he gives the reader a bit of background on prescriptivism vs. descriptivism. (In case you don’t know the usage-fascist lingo, prescriptivists want the line held on the rules of English; descriptivists insist that we should let the language evolve, even if that means the word *irregardless* becomes accepted usage.)

Garner declares himself “a prescriber who uses descriptivist methods—in effect, a descriptive prescriber,” which lends his observations a better-reasoned air than many on the subject. His recommendations for reconciling the two sides of the debate make sense, but he’s essentially preaching to the choir, as anyone who purchases the *GMAU* is by definition likely to take an interest in, if not insist upon, grammatical rectitude already. Still, said purchasers will find in the essay’s footnotes a veritable garden of linguistic-resource delights with which to pad their Amazon wish lists, from Zinsser to Safire to David Foster Wallace’s now-infamous screed for *Harper’s*—and Garner uses the word *fripperies* at one point, which is its own reward.

The new *GMAU* is, essentially, more of the same. Readers in search of quick spelling fixes or answers to hyphenation questions will still find them, and more; casual browsers hoping to get distracted by numerous cross-references, then drawn into a discussion of ergative verbs, can still do that, and spend more time at it. For every seldom-used



*reconnoiter*; *reconnoitre* entry, Garnerites will find a useful and enlightening one, for instance, on the difference between *remember* and *recollect*. It’s probably not a necessity for owners of the older edition, but it’s a solid investment.

[Sarah D. Bunting writes about usage, baseball, and cats (among other subjects) at <http://www.tomatonation.com>.]

[Disclosure: The Editor is employed by Oxford University Press and was involved in the acquisition of Ms. Ostler’s book (but not in the acquisition of Mr. Garner’s).]



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

“TURKEY: Snowstorm Pummels Bosphorus Straights” [headline from the (Danbury, CT) *News-Times*, February 14, 2004. Submitted by Ed Rosenberg, who writes:

“My first reaction to [this headline] was shock. By now many of us believe sexual preferences and practices that do no harm should be of no interest to others. Yet here was an example of harassment of people with “normal” practices.

As a friend put it after I showed him the headline, “Perhaps the Bosphorus Straights have been singled out as a trial group. If that succeeds, they’ll next be after the rest of us.”

True, at first glance I thought the Bosphorus Straights might be a Turkish soccer club. Then I wondered if it was a legendary mid-East character, akin to our Mississippi Fats.

Fortunately a passing relative (my wife) explained it was merely a typo. Oh.]

## MISCELLANEA

Fact or fiction—both are welcome in the writing competition run in 2004 by the British Czech and Slovak Association. A first prize of £300 and a second prize of £100 will be awarded to the best 1,500 to 2,000-word pieces of original writing in English on the links between Britain and the Czech/Slovak Republics, or describing society in transition in the Republics since 1989. Topics can include history, politics, science, economics, the arts or literature. For more information, visit [www.bcsa.co.uk](http://www.bcsa.co.uk). [We’re running this because we really want to read the fiction entries to this contest. Especially the romance novels. —Ed.]



## As The Word Turns

Another Grose-Out

Barry Baldwin  
Calgary, Alberta

“With the genitalia the exigencies of taboo mean that slang has the cover-up role of euphemism to perform”—John Atyo, *The Oxford Dictionary of Rhyming Slang* (2002).

Having inventoried (XXVII/2) male and female organs in Grose’s *Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785), I import the idioms for their copulation. All quoted definitions are his.

There are at least thirty. Grose would have chuckled over the American toponym *intercourse*. Some were antique, e.g., Chaucer’s *swyve*, which died out c. 1800, also *make the beast with two backs* (cited from Othello), laughably indexed thus in R. W. Holder’s *How Not To Say What You Mean: A Dictionary of Euphemisms* (2002): “See BEAST WITH TWO BACKS (THE).”

Another now-overlooked Shakespearianism was *occupy*, an “odious word” in *Henry IV*, pt 1, II.4.159, thereafter avoided in seventeenth and eighteenth-century literature; cf. C. T. Onions, *A Shakespeare Glossary* (1911).

Some supposed modernisms have a long pedigree. No *bonk*, of course, this being pre-Boris Becker. No *knee-trembler*: whores specialising in them were *threepenny-uprights*, also absent from Eric Partridge’s *Dictionary of the Underworld* (1950), where *kneeling at the altar* gets in as pederasty. No *rumpy-pumpy*, either, though *pump* and *rump* had many nuances, including “buttocks.” But *hump* is already there, denoted by Grose as old-fashioned, before its American renaissance. *Niggle* had a similar cis-Atlantic revival, though when was it last so used? *Knock* lives on, both in British *knocking-shop* and American *knock-up*, the latter famously validating Wilde’s dictum of two countries separated by the same language.

Eighteenth-century gallants were already *rogering*, archly defined by Boswell’s Yale editor Frederick Pottle as “a word of other meaning than that acquired since the introduction of radio-telephony,” *screwing* (not in the original *OED*), and *shagging*, now spoiled by Austin Powers’ association and muddled by its curious gamut of meanings from

“carpet” to “school dance” to “strong tobacco,” plus in old English public school argot it meant “masturbate,” a social as well as sexual divide; according to Atyo, Melvyn Bragg (ubiquitous British TV cultural pundit—watch for his new book, *English: Biography of a Language*) now stands for *shag*—surely some cognate scope here for the likes of Alan Funt.

Modern canine imagery is eclipsed by *dog’s rig* ‘to copulate till you are tired, and then turn tail to it,’ while *dicket* (copulation of foxes, thence used for that of men and women) would suit the vulpine ladies of *Sex and the City*.

*Blow off the groundils* (variant: *blow off the loose corns*) ‘To lie with a woman on the floor,’ is as topographically precise as *green gown* ‘To tumble a girl on the grass.’ Had Henry VIII this in mind when penning *Greensleeves*?

Other expressions more exotic, hence more obscure, include *pully hawly*; cf. British *pull* ‘to get off with a man or woman,’ and the interchangeable *ride Rantipole* and *ride St. George*. Johnson helps a little with his *Dictionary* gloss on *Rantipole* as “a low word.” But what of Grose’s lemma for *riding St. George*: “The woman uppermost in the amorous congress. this is said to be the way to get a bishop.” *Bishop* is elsewhere explained by Grose as the largest condom available from Mrs. Philips of Half Moon Street, London’s chief purveyor of contraceptives.

As for the F-word, Grose prints it *f-k* (likewise *c-t*), indicating its social and semantic status. Partridge traces its modern debasement to being “very much used by the British soldier in 1914-1918,” though Jane Austen (remember her naval sodomy joke in *Mansfield Park*, recently chewed over on the *TLS*’s letter page by starchy academics) may hint at this when remarking in *Sense and Sensibility* (ch. 21) that “the letter *F*, productive in countless jokes, has long been established as the wittiest letter in the alphabet.”

Grose does not have every last word. The great thespian and friend of Johnson, David Garrick, writes of his housemaid Molly: “As for Cautherly *mansquibbing* her (which he certainly does), I don’t mind—but I suspect she has all kinds of fellows in our absence, and I don’t know what may be the consequence.” As Ian MacIntyre unimprovably puts it in his Garrick biography (1999, p. 377): “*Mansquibbing* is an activity unknown both to the editors of the *OED* and to Eric Partridge—possibly Cautherly was showing Molly his etchings.”



## A Glib Punner's Bright Scheme

A. H. Block  
Bronxville, New York

Match the description with the name

- |  |                                       |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. Falstaff                                  | A. Undernourished lion                |
| 2. Mistress Quickly                          | B. Frappe or malted milk              |
| 3. King Lear                                 | C. The clumsy Mr. Kazan               |
| 4. Goneril<br>thponge                        | D. Brand of thynthetic                |
| 5. Regan                                     | E. Dr. "J" spots his wife             |
| 6. Shylock                                   | F. Masquerade as Paul                 |
| 7. Portia                                    | G. In-law of Jackie                   |
| 8. Othello                                   | H. Pooh's friend, in first draft      |
| 9. Desdemona                                 | I. Restart the clock                  |
| 10. Iago                                     | J. Harmless bacteria                  |
| 11. Troilus                                  | K. Error on 1997 marquee              |
| 12. Romeo                                    | L. Elemental relationship             |
| 13. Juliet<br>product                        | M. Spokesperson for Nestle            |
| 14. Cymbeline                                | N. Light-rail transit                 |
| 15. Titania                                  | O. Designing Ferdinand                |
| 16. Hamlet                                   | P. Site of Rlus. Plus. Ilus.          |
| 17. Ophelia                                  | Q. West African brook                 |
| 18. Horatio                                  | R. Football play (Latin)              |
| 19. Julius Caesar<br>campaign                | S. Colombian anti-drug                |
| 20. Katharina<br>subject                     | T. Full first name of da Vinci        |
| 21. Bianca                                   | U. Resident of Latvian capital        |
| 22. Titus Andronicus                         | V. How Ms. Child ended her<br>program |
| 23. Timon                                    | W. Royal expression                   |
| 24. Ariel<br>pronounced by tot               | X. "My kind of town"                  |
| 25. Caliban                                  | Y. Withdrawn bolt                     |
| 26. Shakespeare<br>by Cathay Pacific Airways | Z. Sports center sponsored            |

[Answers next page.]

**MOVING? You know the drill—let us know right away, by phone, e-mail, or even with a real letter, stamps and all. Don't miss any issues of your favorite language magazine.**

## EX CATHEDRA

Those of you with sharp eyes for a finely carved letterform may have noticed that, with this issue, we have switched from our old staid face of New Caledonia to this elegant and (we think) more readable Bembo. Tony Kellers, of Studio Twelve3, developed these new pages for us. (The magazine is now also being laid out with Adobe InDesign, for those of you who follow such things.) Another change is the UPC symbol on the first page which (theoretically, at least) makes it easier for VERBATIM to be sold in bookstores. If you'd like VERBATIM to be sold in your local bookstore, please let us know; we'll send you a sample copy and distribution information to give to them.

Some news of one of our frequent contributors: Jessy Randall's new book of poems, *Slumber Party at the Aquarium*, is available from Unicorn Press in a signed, limited edition of one hundred copies. The price is \$11.95 plus \$1.95 for shipping, total \$13.90. (If for some reason you buy more than one copy, you still pay only \$1.95 for shipping.) The ISBN, should you need it, is 0-87775-253-2. Make checks out to Unicorn Press, Inc., and mail to:

Alan Brilliant/Unicorn Press  
201 N. Coulter Dr.  
Bryan, TX 77803

Please don't forget that we're still looking for recommendations for our list of books that every word-lover should know—we'll put the list up on our web site, with annotations. A few that have already come in: the punctuation thriller *Eats Shoots & Leaves*, by Lynne Truss, a best-seller in the UK and just lately published in the US with a new foreword by Frank McCourt, and *Oxymoronica*, a collection of paradoxical quotes from Dr. Mardy Grothe, such as "The true leader is always led" (Carl Jung) and "I always advise people never to give advice" (P. G. Wodehouse).

Those of you in New York may want to pencil June 13 in on your calendars—that's the date of the Council of Literary Magazines and Presses Literary Magazine Fair, at the Housing Works Bookstore, from noon to five. VERBATIM will be there, as well as many, many other magazines. All copies are only \$2, and proceeds benefit the charitable programs of Housing Works. Come by and say hello!



Unless you have been in a sensory-deprivation tank for the last three months, at least, you must have heard of *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, the new “punctuation book” by Lynne Truss. Perhaps you were a bit dismissive. “I don’t need a book about punctuation,” you might have thought. “I know where mine should be!”

Even if you do know the proper placement of every last apostrophe, semicolon, and mark of interrogation, go out and get this book. It’s worth it for just for the her great good humor; nevermind what you may or may not learn along the way. I giggled so hard while reading it on the subway that I made someone get up and change seats—a certain sign of a good book. (They were lucky I didn’t read aloud.)

Truss quotes from a (possibly apocryphal, at least, I’ve never seen it) style guide from Oxford University Press that supposedly states “If you take hyphens seriously, you will surely go mad.” If you take this book in the lighthearted spirit in which it was written, you will surely be entertained.

Another recent book that deserves your attention is *Your Own Words*, by Barbara Wallraff. It doesn’t score as high on the laugh-a-minute scale as *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, but is certainly off the charts on the usefulness meter.

This is probably the one book that every lexicographer would like to compel users of dictionaries and other reference works to read. The cover line says “The bestselling author of *Word Court* explains how to outsmart the reference books and BE YOUR OWN LANGUAGE EXPERT,” but what Wallraff is doing here is not so much teaching you how to “outsmart” reference books as how to be an educated consumer of them. She gently leads people away from the notion that there will ever be (or ever has been) one primary, indisputable language authority to which one can turn for all questions of meaning, usage, punctuation (sorry Lynne!) or style, and instead encourages those with such questions to take a more empirical (and less, shall we say, fundamentalist) approach to answering them.

Her examples are clear and engrossing—they’re like little mysteries, and you enjoy following them through to the end. As a lexicographer, I beg you: Do yourself a favor and read this before you look anything else up.

—Erin McKean

Answers to *A Glib Punner's Bright Scheme*:  
 1. J. false staph 2. M. Mistress Quik(ly) 3. W. king leer 4. Q. Ghana rill 5. U. Rigan 6. Y. shy lock 7. O. Porsche 8. D. O-Cel-O (with lisp) 9. T. Desdemona (Lisa) 10. X. (Ch)i(c)ago 11. P. Troy(Ins) 12. G. Rome(y) O. 13. V. Julie e 14. A. Simba lean 15. K. Titani(c)a 16. H. Ham(Pig)let 17. C. oaf Elia 18. L. H-O ratio 19. E. Julius sees her 20. Z. Cath Arena 21. F. be Anka 22. R. tigh(t)us) end run(ticus) 23. I. time in 24. N. airy el 25. S. Cali ban 26. B. shake's peer

- 23. WREAK (hom.)
- 20. E VADER (2 defs.)
- 19. P(RIM)AL (rev.)
- 17. T(ETHER)ED
- 16. ABS TRACT (2 defs.)
- 15. THIR(D)-RATE (anag.)
- 11. GATE-CRASHERS (Spoonertism)
- 8. Y(ODE)LS (sly rev.)
- 7. (b)OTHERS
- 6. I(N)TERPRET (prettier anag.)
- 5. CAVEAT EMPTOR (anag.)
- 3. peppermint ROLLS
- 2. SALV(o) + ADOR(n)
- 1. MA + STIFFS

**DOWN**

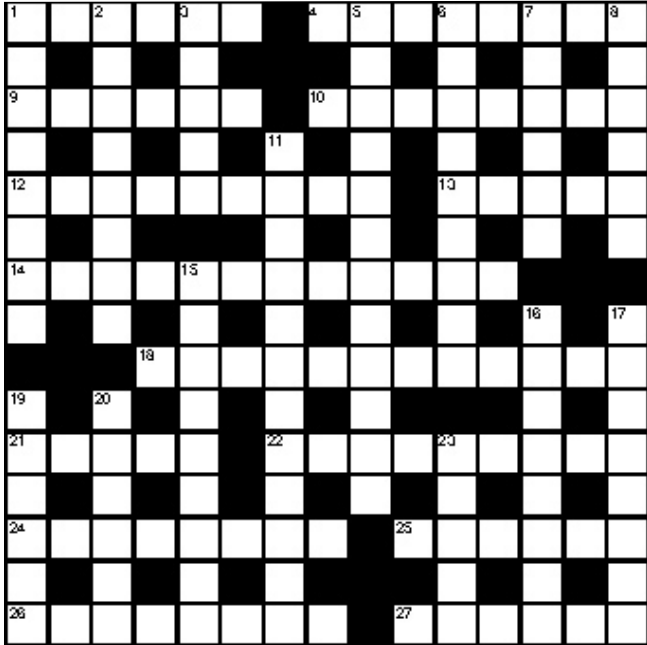
- 27. miss KATE Drummond
- 26. LARGESSE (anag.)
- 25. REPAIR (2 defs.)
- 24. MEDI(FA)TED
- 22. S(TOP)WATCH
- 21. R(AVE)D
- 18. DIS(RE)PUTABLE
- 14. FROM THE HEART (anag.)
- 13. R + URAL
- 12. WHAT A ROMAN Incredibly
- 10. K(V)ETCH + ED
- 9. SALT)UTE
- 4. A + CR(I)M)ONLY
- 1. MOSAIC (2 defs.)

**ACROSS**

*Solutions to Cryptic Crossword 96*



## Anglo-American Crossword No. 96



Compiled by Robert Stigger

### Across

- 1 Colored-stone picture of a Hebrew prophet (6)
- 4 I'm overwhelmed by a chum's bitterness (8)
- 9 Praise a dish cooked in butter infused with a hint of licorice (6)
- 10 "A sailing ship's gaining velocity," Ed griped (8)
- 12 What a Roman incorrigible perversely offers lover (9)
- 13 Country right next to a river that flows to the Caspian (5)
- 14 Honestly, Mother, Father's crazy (4,3,5)
- 18 Dubious about a couple of reports of poor quality (12)
- 21 Talked incoherently of one abbreviated thoroughfare dividing another (5)
- 22 Chronometer is best wrapped in a piece of cloth (9)
- 24 Was a peacemaker thought gutless? (8)
- 25 Fix up resort (6)
- 26 Generous gifts of reconditioned GE lasers (8)
- 27 Miss Kate Drummond's shows emulated Torvill and Dean (6)

### Down

- 1 Mom hired men with big dogs (8)
- 2 Dali's unfinished round deck (8)
- 3 Some peppermint rolls for a first course? (5)
- 5 A warning, Pam—a Corvette's complicated (6,6)
- 6 Explain a bit of nastiness found in prettier novel (9)
- 7 Head off troubles for everyone else (6)
- 8 Poetry is incorporated into subtle, reflective Tyrolean songs (6)
- 11 Uninvited, they sneak in with Reverend Spooner's box cutters (4-8)
- 15 Inferior dirt, earth, ground (5-4)
- 16 Theoretical treatise of interest to body-builders? (8)
- 17 Given an anesthetic, Ted is restrained (8)
- 19 First Russian space station, caught by wind, overturned (6)
- 20 One avoiding the successor to D. Vader? (6)
- 23 Vent audience's stench (5)