



## ***You Sucker! Participatory Humor***

Jessy Randall  
Colorado Springs, Colorado

I have long been fascinated with a particular type of humor, a type that, as far as I can tell, has no name. I have settled on calling it participatory humor, since these are jokes in which the listener (or “victim”) participates, whether she means to or not. Like most of us, I first came into contact with participatory humor on my elementary school playground, where such humor flourishes and probably originated. I have been pleased to see that it lives on in sophomore films of the present day.

The only published description I have found for this sort of joke is in Martha Wolfenstein’s *Children’s Humor*, first published in 1954, in which the author refers to them as “devices by which the victim is increasingly forced to be the agent of attack against himself. He may be maneuvered into the position of asking for it.” In her examples, the listener provides an innocent word or phrase in answer to a question, which the jokester then mocks in grade-school rhyme:

*What’s twelve and twelve?  
Twenty-four.  
Shut your mouth and say no more.*

*What’s eight and eight?  
Sixteen.  
Stick your head in kerosene, wipe it off with ice cream,  
and show it to the king and queen.*

Another set of grade-school jokes is a bit less nonsensical:

*Which would you rather be: a fountain, a tree, or a lollipop?  
A fountain.  
You drip!  
Now which would you rather be, a tree or a lollipop?  
A tree.*

*You sap! Now which would  
you rather be, a lollipop or a  
lollipop?  
A lollipop.  
You sucker!*

At a somewhat higher level of sophistication are jokes in which the answer to the question is the punch line—the listener just needs that pointed out.

*What were you eating under there?*

*Under where?*

*You were eating underwear?! [The Barenaked Ladies use a version of this joke in their 2000 song “Pinch Me”: “I could hide out under there / I just made you say underwear.”]*

*Somebody told me you were an owl.*

*Who?*

*I guess he was right!*

This one works only if the jokester is visibly older than the victim:

*When is your birthday?*

*April 9.*

*Then you are older than I am—my birthday isn’t until April 12! [or some other similar combination of dates].*

Knock-knock jokes, by their very nature, require two people, so they are always participatory in that sense. But only some knock-knock jokes qualify for my definition—those in which the listener is the victim, the unwitting speaker of at least part of the punch line:

*Knock knock!*

*Who’s there?*

*Boo.*

*Boo who?*

*You don’t have to cry, it’s only a joke.*

*Knock knock!*

*Who’s there?*

*Little old lady.*

*Little old lady who?*

*I didn’t know you could yodel!*

*Will you remember me in one year?*

*Yes.*

*Will you remember me in five years?*



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VERBATIM is a trademark reg. U.S. Pat. Off. This journal is indexed by the *American Humanities Index*.

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

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

email: [editor@verbatimag.com](mailto:editor@verbatimag.com) web page: <http://www.verbatimag.com>

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

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



Yes.

*Will you remember me in ten years?*

Yes.

*Knock knock!*

*Who's there?*

*You've forgotten me already.*

*I've got a great knock knock joke. You start.*

*Knock knock.*

*Who's there?*

*[Silence]*

In this last example, of course, the listener's *lack* of a response makes the punch line. Similarly, several participatory jokes count on the victim not knowing the answer to a question. For example:

*They did a survey recently and found out that people either sing or urinate [or masturbate] in the shower.*

*And the funny thing is, the people who sing all sing the same song. Do you know what song they sing?*

*No, what?*

*Ahhhhh.*

*They did a survey recently and found out what smart people eat for breakfast.*

*So, what do they eat?*

*Didn't think you would know.*

Other participatory jokes depend on the victim interrupting to correct or assist the jokester. Here is one extremely tasteless example:

*A guy was driving around in the country and feeling horny. He asked a farmer by the side of the road if there was any place nearby where a guy could get laid.*

*The farmer said "No, but there is a pig in the barn over there that I screw all the time." The guy thought he'd give it a try. Soon he found himself chasing the pig all over the barn. The farmer came in and said "No, no, you have it all wrong. First you have to grab this saddle. Then you put your feet in the ..." [the jokester describes the metal things that hang off of the saddle. The listener suggests "stirrups."] Oh, so you're a pig fucker too!*

A high school friend contributes this rather time-consuming participatory joke, which also requires an interruption:

*A camel and a donkey are making a trip together across the desert. They get very hot and thirsty after all that walking. When they come to the first oasis, though, the camel drinks up all the water. The donkey protests, but the camel says, "Shut up, you dumb ass, I know what I'm doing." They make their way across*

*the desert and come to the second oasis. Once again, the camel drinks up all the water, and the donkey protests. The camel responds, again, "Shut up, you dumb ass, I know what I'm doing." So they keep on going until they get to the second oasis.*

At this point, the listener usually breaks in and says, "You mean the third oasis." To which the jokester responds, "Shut up, you dumb ass, I know what I'm doing." In a nice twist, my high school friend once told this joke twice to the same person—his mother. On the second go-through, my friend's mother let my friend go on and on and on. When he'd gotten to the second oasis for the fourth or fifth time, my friend said, "Mom, haven't you noticed that I haven't gotten to the third oasis yet?" to which his mother responded, "Shut up, you dumb ass, I know what I'm doing."

Then there are the jokes in which the speaker asks you to respond with the same phrase after everything he says:

*What did you have for breakfast?*

*Pea soup.*

*What did you have for lunch?*

*Pea soup.*

*What did you have for dinner?*

*Pea soup.*

*What did you do all night?*

*Pea soup ... argh!*

*I went to the circus.*

*So did I. [Or, in some versions, "So did the fat lady."]*

*I got some peanuts.*

*So did I.*

*I got some cotton candy.*

*So did I.*

*I got a pretzel.*

*So did I.*

*I got a balloon.*

*So did I.*

*The balloon popped.*

*So did I ... argh!*

*I went up one flight of stairs.*

*Just like me.*

*I went up two flights of stairs.*

*Just like me.*

*I looked out the window.*

*Just like me.*

*And there I saw a monkey.*

*Just like me ... argh!*



*Whatever kind of lock I say I am, you say you're that kind of key. I'm a brass lock.*

*I'm a brass key.*

*I'm a silver lock.*

*I'm a silver key.*

*I'm a mon lock.*

*I'm a monkey ... argh! [Or, "I'm a don lock." "I'm a donkey."]*

Another infuriating participatory joke requires the victim to extend his victimhood seemingly infinitely:

*Pete and Repeat were out in a boat. Pete fell in. Who was left?*

*Repeat.*

*Pete and Repeat were out in a boat ...*

Similarly, there's the old children's rhyme:

*Adam and Eve and Pinch Me  
went down to the river to bathe.*

*Adam and Eve were drowned.*

*Who do you think was saved?*

The unsuspecting victim answers "pinch me" and the jokester complies. (The first line of this rhyme has been used as a title for three books—a YA novel, a Ruth Rendell mystery, and a 1922 collection of stories.)

Even the beloved children's television program *Sesame Street* has allowed for the spread of one particular participatory joke, perpetrated by Ernie upon a beleaguered Bert. Ernie begins with "I one the sandbox," and he and Bert take turns with the numbers up until Bert says "I eight [ate] the sandbox." Iona and Peter Opie's *I Saw Esau* (Candlewick Press, 1992) contains a version of this joke substituting "my mother" for "the sandbox," accompanied by a full-page creepy Maurice Sendak illustration of a nursing baby devouring his mother. Another similar joke mentioned in the Opie book begins with "I'll go to A" until the victim states "I'll go to L [hell]." According to a footnote, the L joke dates back to at least the early 19th century.

The Chevy Chase–Dan Aykroyd film *Spies Like Us*, (1985) contains the world-renowned "dickfer" joke, in which the speaker says "There's a dickfer on your shirt" or "Have you ever owned a dickfer" or something like that. The listener asks, "What's a dickfer?" and the speaker answers "to pee with, stupid." Another *Saturday Night Live* alumni production, the 1992 Mike Myers–Dana Carvey film *Wayne's World*, contains a teen-favorite participa-

tory joke: the speaker mumbles "A sphincter says what?" leading the listener to say "What?" before he quite knows what he's saying.

The purpose of these jokes, of course, is to make the victim feel like a complete idiot. And an idiot with no recourse: the only way to avoid being the victim in these jokes is to stop responding to the jokester's questions—extremely difficult to do if the jokester has an audience and some social power, or if, like me, you can't stand not knowing the punch line. So, I am the sucker, the sap, and the drip; I eat underwear and pee soup—and I'll keep on playing the victim this way until I know what smart people eat for breakfast, especially if *VERBATIM* readers will send me their own participatory jokes, care of the magazine.

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## EPISTOLA

Here's a vast improvement over a traditional past tense I overheard at the supermarket:

My wife, very pregnant, and I are buying this and that late one evening, much of it naturally junk food. The clerk pleasantly comments about the relationship between the pregnancy and the junk food. "I know," says June. "I can't help it to a degree, but I'm trying not to completely succumb."

Clerk shakes her head. "Not me," she says. "I sucCAME."

Vast improvement over "succumbed," *n'est-ce pas?*

Second one is just in my head. Am I the only one who thinks the past tense of *breathe* ought really to be *brothe*?

Just wondering and thought you might wonder along with. Could we ask readers of *VERBATIM* whether they overhear or think of similar improvements?

Scott Huler  
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## Hogamous, Higamous!

Tony Percy

Southport, North Carolina

The first time the quatrain below appeared in the *The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations* was in its Fourth Edition (1992), and it is ascribed to the American philosopher William James. The sentiment is not expressed in the sonorous language of the *Book of Moroni*, where one might first look to find such a message. It has more the pithy irrefutability of Paul Jennings' "Man erith; woman morpeth":

*Hogamous, higamous*

*Man is polygamous*

*Higamous, hogamous*

*Woman monogamous.*

When and where did William James, philosopher and psychologist, pillar of Victorian uprightness, and brother of the novelist Henry, pronounce this subversive saying?

The source for the quotation is given, rather surprisingly, as *The Oxford Book of Marriage* (1990), which appears a somewhat incestuous way of defining origins. And indeed, on page 195 of that work, to introduce her section "Dangerous Liaisons," the editor, Helge Rubinstein, introduces the verse as follows: "William James, psychologist and philosopher, woke one night feeling he had solved the ultimate mystery of life. The following morning he found that this doggerel was the great insight he had written down: [as above]." But Ms. Rubinstein gives no source, and the supposed author has no entry under her acknowledgments of copyright later in the volume. The anecdote does not appear in any of the biographies of William James, and the lines do not appear in either his conventional works or his published letters. In what memoirs had this recollection been reported, and how had the incident lain dormant for so long (James died in 1910)?

The earliest published recording appears to be in *Selected Readings in Psychology* (by Don E. Gibbons and John F. Connelly, published by Mobsby, 1970). Chapter 11 of this work ("What a 'Bummer' Is Really Like", echoing the drug-hazed decade of the 1960s) consists of an abridgement from Thomas De Quincey's *Confessions of an Opium Eater*. The authors introduce the piece as follows: "Around the turn

of the century, William James decided to experiment on himself with the effects of opium in order to increase his creativity and powers of insight. In the middle of one drug-induced dream, he suddenly felt a flash of inspiration. Certain that the secret of the universe had suddenly been revealed to him, he managed to write down the content of his inspirational flash before losing consciousness. On awakening, he found to his dismay that what he had written was, 'Hogamous, higamous: Men are polygamous; higamous, hogamous—women monogamous!'"

This poses some new questions. The punctuation and number of the Gibbons-Connelly version differ distinctly from the Rubinstein version. Rubinstein, in turn, sanitized the anecdote to remove any reference to drugtaking. We still have no concrete reference, but the phrase "the turn of the century" sounds a little suspicious, as James had heart problems since well before 1900, and his acknowledged experiments with hallucinogens had taken place much earlier. So the claim that James suddenly, late in life, decided to experiment with opium, with some direct purpose, when he had sampled not only opium, but alcohol, nitrous oxide, ether, hasheesh and chloroform before he published *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, is rather lame. Moreover, Fred Leavitt (in *Drugs and Behavior*, 1994) cites the Gibbons-Connelly source but ascribes the incident to nitrous oxide (not opium) use, which must be owing to either a lapse of memory or to a subconscious desire to improve historical accuracy, given James's well-known, and detailed, accounts of his nitrous oxide experiments.

These experiments occurred in the early 1980s. As one biographer, Ralph Barton Perry, writes in *The Thought and Character of William James*: "We know that sometime in the early '80s he was prompted by the writings of his friend Blood to experiment with nitrous-oxide-gas intoxication, and that he caused some scandal among his philosophical friends by likening the effect to the insight of Hegel." James wrote this up in his essay *On Some Hegelisms*, and was actually a little embarrassed by the frivolity of these events. In his 1896 preface to *The Will To Believe* (in which *On Some Hegelisms* appears), he wrote: "The essay ... doubtless needs an apology for the superficiality with which it treats a serious subject. It was written as a squib, to be read in a college-seminary in Hegel's logic, several of whose members, mature men, were devoted champions of



the dialectical method. My blows were aimed almost entirely at that. I reprint the paper here (albeit with some misgivings), partly because I believe the dialectical method to be wholly abominable when worked by concepts alone, and partly because the essay casts some positive light on the pluralist-empiricist point of view.”

In the essay itself he describes the state of illumination by eternal verities that the intoxication brings and the disappointment that follows. “The effects will of course vary with the individual, just as they vary in the same individual from time to time; but it is probable that in the former case, as in the latter, a generic resemblance will obtain. With me, as with every other person of whom I have heard, the keynote of the experience is the tremendously exciting sense of an intense metaphysical illumination. Truth lies open to the view in depth beneath depth of almost blinding evidence. The mind sees all

as the reputed comment on polygamy. Thus, apart from the general theme of “reconciliation of opposites,” none of the phrases contains any observation approaching the social commentary of “Hogamous”, which lacks that synthetic metaphysical ring and has a definite air of conflict.

So who else might be the source of the story? Bertrand Russell is one candidate. Russell met James for the first time in 1890, and, despite some philosophical differences, they remained friends for the rest of James’s life. Russell relates the following anecdote in his *History of Western Philosophy*: “William James describes a man who got the experience from laughing-gas; whenever he was under its influence, he knew the secret of the universe, but when he came to, he had forgotten it. At last, with immense effort, he wrote down the secret before the vision had faded. When completely recovered, he rushed to see what he had written. It was: ‘A smell of petro-

**When completely recovered, he rushed to see what he had written. It was: “A smell of petroleum prevails throughout.”**

logical relations of being with an apparent subtlety and instantaneity to which its normal consciousness offers no parallel; only as sobriety returns, the feeling of insight fades, and one is left staring vacantly at a few disjointed words and phrases, as one stares at a cadaverous-looking snowpeak from which sunset glow has just fled, or at a black cinder left by an extinguished brand.”

The “disjointed words and phrases” that he records here are not as trenchant or as meaningful as “Hogamous, higamous.” The most memorable are probably:

“Good and evil reconciled in a laugh!”

“What’s nausea but a kind of -ausea?”

“Constantly opposites united!”

“Reconciliation of opposites; sober, drunk, all the same!”

“That sounds like nonsense, but it is pure *onsense!*”

James himself recorded that “the most coherent and articulate sentence which came was this: ‘There are no differences but differences of degree between different degrees of difference and no difference.’” James added that “this phrase has the true Hegelian ring,” but it is not nearly so accessible to the masses

leum prevails throughout’. What seems like sudden insight may be misleading, and must be tested soberly, when the divine intoxication has passed.” Again, no source is given. The wording (“describes a man ...”) suggests a written source, but Russell may have been oblique on purpose. In his writings, moreover, James often referred to a third party (e.g., a European professor whom his autobiographers cannot hunt down) to record the effects of hallucinogens, as he was probably keen to promote the impression that he was not an overindulgent user of hallucinogens himself.

So James may have told Russell this anecdote over a convivial lunch, when James was visiting Oxford. Maybe there were further phrases that James felt uncomfortable recording in print, but which he was happy to relate in the company of his male friends. He had an impish nature (Perry writes: “James was incorrigibly and somewhat recklessly curious, and he derived enjoyment from deflating the solemnity of the pundits”), but Mrs. James would not have appreciated the comments related to matrimony. Moreover, his brother Robertson had died of alcoholism, so drugs were a sensitive subject. Thus his expressed concerns about the tone of flip-



pant interlude to an otherwise serious paper (which could have affected his reputation) might have encouraged him to keep some of the revelations off the printed page.

And, of course, there are other anecdotes about post-trance revelations of the secret of the universe. For example, in his biography of George Orwell, Michael Shelden recounts the tale of Capt. H. R. Robinson, an army captain who was dismissed from the military police in Mandalay because of his opium addiction and claimed that he had discovered the secret of the universe. “During a long crazy night of dreaming about this secret,” Shelden writes, “he managed to write down the pearl of wisdom, but when he looked at it the next morning, all it said was, ‘the banana is great, but the skin is greater.’”

Lastly, the quatrain has been attributed to Dorothy Parker. It certainly has a Parkerian feel to it. The nonsense aspect of it could be confused with the lines she composed, on the spot, in response to a challenge from Somerset Maugham: “Higgledy piggedly, my white hen;/She lays eggs for gentlemen,” followed up swiftly with “You cannot persuade her with gun or lariat/To come across for the proletariat” (in *The Uncollected Dorothy Parker*, p 43). Parker writes of the battle of the sexes elsewhere. *The General Review of the Sex Situation* (from *Enough Rope*) runs as follows:

*Woman wants monogamy;  
Man delights in novelty.  
Love is woman’s moon and sun;  
Man has other forms of fun.  
Woman lives but in her lord;  
Count to ten, and man is bored.  
With this the gist and sum of it,  
What earthly good can come of it?*

But no trace of “Hogamous” appears in Parker’s works.

Thus there is a good chance that the whole anecdote is apocryphal. The Oxford University Press has not responded to my inquiries. Professors Gibbons and Connelly are untraceable. A James scholar I contacted can shed no light on the connection with the philosopher. Maybe the creation of the verse was a spoof, but a very successful one. After all, the phrase now appears in the hallowed *Oxford Dictionary of Quotations*, and, once a citation appears in a respected reference book, it appears that the proof of accuracy now shifts from the authority to the challenger. (It

would be nice to think that the compilers of such august works would check their references first, but that does not seem to be the case.) After all, how can anyone prove that James did *not* say (or even write) this item of trivia? Have all the memoirs of his acquaintances been scoured, all the little magazines pored over, all the letters retrieved? And so the search must continue—unless someone owns up to what would be a highly alluring fraud.

*[Tony Percy moved from the UK to the USA in 1980. When not playing golf or bridge, he indulges his love of language by constructing and solving cryptic crosswords, and investigating quotations and other literary/historical trails.]*



## ***Verlan: The French Pig Latin***

J.J. Davis

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Verlan, a French slang, began as a way for criminals and drug users to communicate in front of police and other authorities. It was a secret language that the everyday citizen did not know. Verlan now, though, continues to evolve, as it is incorporated into everyday French.

Verlan, similar to English pig Latin, involves separating a word into syllables and then reversing them. Verlan is used every day in French, unlike pig Latin in America. Many words have become so common in Verlan that their French equivalents have fallen by the wayside. Some words have even been “re-verlanned.”

To “verlan” a word is simple. First, separate it into syllables, then reverse the syllables. With a few minor spelling alterations, your word has successfully been “verlanned.” The spelling alterations can be quite complicated, though, as they have no set rules. Repeated letters are often dropped, while others are added for ease of pronunciation. Not every word can be verlanned, and most words that can be verlanned already have been.

For example, let’s consider the word *verlan*, which in itself is a verlanned word. The original French word, meaning to reverse, was *l’envers*.



Now, separate it into its syllables, *l'en* and *vers*; reverse into *versl'en*; and adjust the spelling to *verlan*. Here is a diagram if you couldn't follow that:  
*Len vers* > *versl'en* > *verslen* > *verslan* > *verlan*

Single-syllable words, which obviously cannot be separated into syllables, are simply reversed. For example, *bus* becomes *sub*.

Here is a brief list of French words that are commonly verlaned. As you will notice on the list, most of the words that have been verlaned are commonly used by children, but many adults use verlan words without even realizing it.

French	Verlan	English
<i>bande</i>	<i>deban</i>	<i>group</i>
<i>bizarre</i>	<i>zarbi</i>	<i>weird</i>
<i>Black (Eng.)</i>	<i>kebla</i>	<i>black person</i>
<i>bloqué</i>	<i>kéblo</i>	<i>blocked</i>
<i>bonjour</i>	<i>jourbon</i>	<i>hello</i>
<i>bus</i>	<i>sub</i>	<i>bus</i>
<i>cablé</i>	<i>bléca</i>	<i>trendy</i>
<i>café</i>	<i>féca</i>	<i>café</i>
<i>classe</i>	<i>secla</i>	<i>class</i>
<i>dope</i>	<i>pedot</i>	<i>cigarette</i>
<i>cool (Eng.)</i>	<i>looc</i>	<i>cool</i>
<i>démon</i>	<i>mondé</i>	<i>demon</i>
<i>disque</i>	<i>skeud</i>	<i>album</i>
<i>fais chier</i>	<i>fais iéche</i>	<i>it's boring</i>
<i>femme</i>	<i>meuf</i>	<i>woman</i>
<i>flic</i>	<i>keuf</i>	<i>cop</i>
<i>fou</i>	<i>ouf</i>	<i>crazy</i>
<i>français</i>	<i>céfran</i>	<i>French</i>
<i>jobard</i>	<i>barjot</i>	<i>crazy</i>
<i>laisse tomber</i>	<i>laisse béton</i>	<i>drop it</i>
<i>l'envers</i>	<i>verlan</i>	<i>reverse</i>
<i>louche</i>	<i>chelou</i>	<i>shady</i>
<i>mec</i>	<i>keum</i>	<i>man</i>
<i>mère</i>	<i>reum</i>	<i>mother</i>
<i>métro</i>	<i>tromé</i>	<i>train</i>
<i>musique</i>	<i>sicmu</i>	<i>music</i>
<i>père</i>	<i>reup</i>	<i>father</i>
<i>piscine</i>	<i>cinépi</i>	<i>pool (swimming)</i>
<i>poulet</i>	<i>lépou</i>	<i>pig (slang for police officer)</i>
<i>pourri</i>	<i>ripou</i>	<i>corrupt</i>
<i>rap</i>	<i>pera</i>	<i>rap (music)</i>
<i>truc</i>	<i>keutru</i>	<i>stuff</i>
<i>vas-y</i>	<i>zvva</i>	<i>go for it</i>

## (Not) Spelling it Out For You

Nicholas E. Meyer

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There is an anomaly in the language which is so flagrant that it escapes general notice only because it has always been right under our noses.

The whole point of having words for things is that, when we refer to the things, we use the words for them instead of having to produce the things themselves—and physically show them to our interlocutors. It could be argued that none of the diverse functions of language gets much more basic than that: it saves us from having to locate and haul in a piano when we want to refer to one—we just say the word *piano*. Yet, when writing, there is a particular category of things for which the convention is to actually exhibit the things—instead of using the words for them. And we consider it so normal to do so that we don't even realize how anomalous such a procedure is, how different from the overwhelming majority of instances of usage in the language.

Even linguists and writers, the people who are most sensitive to language and thus presumably to its functions and normal ways of operating, use this procedure all time. In fact, they do so more often than other people because by the nature of their work they are more frequently called upon to write about this particular category of things. Except that, as said above, they don't really "write about" them: they produce them, the actual things, for their readers' inspection.

Further, there is yet a second category of things for which we also exhibit the actual things, but in this case, we don't do it *instead* of using the words for them. Here we are in a different pickle. We do it because—also usually unremarked—there simply are no separate words for them.

Enough mystery already. You may have guessed by now: the things in the first category mentioned are the letters of the alphabet. When we write, "cross your *t's*" instead of "cross your *tees*," we are writing about a thing, the letter *tee*; but in place of spelling it out, we mostly don't even imagine that we can do so (or, if we do imagine it, we are unsure what the spelling is). So we present the actual thing, in this case, the letter. The *t* in italics is that: the thing itself, the letter, not its name, *tee*.





There is an interesting consequence of this odd exception to the general procedure of language. It is that the letters of the alphabet constitute a group of very common words which despite being frequently said aloud are virtually never written down (and not because they're blue!) To such an extent is this so, that for some of them there isn't an accepted spelling, or much of a dispute over their spelling, or even recognition that they do require any spelling. This aspect of the question has been perspicaciously dealt with in *VERBATIM* by Dennis Mills in "An Alphabetophile's Outrage" (vol. XXVI, no. 2). Mills expresses it by saying that most letters have no name.

*Aitch* as he also points out, is the most notable exception, another being *zee* or its variant *zed*.

It can be argued, on the other hand, that letters are less in need of names than of spellings. Take the second and third letters in the English alphabet, for example. To refer to them as *bee* and *cee* may classify them among the cases that Mills describes, in the context of their Spanish equivalents, as "too suspiciously like phonetic transliterations." Still, that's what we call them, in verbal communication. It's in the written form that we don't call them—we exhibit the actual things—because we're not used to spelling them out.

When I wrote to a columnist (who shall remain nameless) on English-language matters, asking whether recognized spellings did exist for the names of all letters, he called this—in print—"an odd request." The very idea that one might want to know how to spell these words—the words that refer to the letters of the alphabet—struck him as odd. *That's* how unusual all this is, beneath our surface familiarity with the letters we live and work with.

He did, after that, provide the list of spellings of those letters that do have one, at least according to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (second edition, 1989): *bee, cee, dee, ef/eff, gee, aitch, ell, em, en, pee, cue, ar, ess, tee, vee, zee/zed*. Not even *jay* and *kay* were included.

The choice of *ef* or *eff* is not owing to the difference between U.S. and British English, as in the case of the last letter of the alphabet, but simply allowed as a matter of preference.

Therefore the rest of the alphabet remains, in this day and age, linguistic virgin territory. With the remaining letters, one can still act like the first discoverers of celestial bodies who give them a name of their devising; in our case, what one can give them is a spelling. It will stand as well as any others offered,

until, and if, the matter is settled by some kind of general agreement. Here, then, I submit my list: *ey, ee, ay, jay, kay, ough, yoo, doubleyoo, ex, wye*. Strange. Then again, virgin territory often is like that—strange.

But back to the central issue of this article, the things that are usually presented themselves rather than replaced by the words for them, against all the usual logic of the language. Above I mentioned that there is also a second category of things for which this happens. In this second group it's not because—as in the case of the letters of the alphabet—it is the custom to write only the things themselves instead of spelling out the words for them. It's because, curiously, they just lack separate words.

The things that have this characteristic of lacking separate words for them are none other than words themselves.

The more one thinks about it, the more one notices how anomalous this is. For the concept "piano," there are two entirely different things: the piano—the actual thing of wood and ivory—and the word *piano*. One refers to the other, but it is certainly not the same thing as the other. For every other thing in the universe (that we know about) except words, there is this same situation: the thing is given a word that is a separate entity from itself.

For words, on the other hand, the things—the actual words—are not given words to refer to them. The very things are the words for the things, and vice versa. This is a highly exclusive characteristic.

I am not suggesting that we invent a word, as we do with everything else in every other category in the world—say, *pianoword* for the word *piano*?—to refer to each word. (Among other consequences, once the new word exists, under those same new rules, it would require a word for itself in order to differentiate between the thing itself—the word *pianoword*—and the word for the thing. That would lead to *pianowordword*, and that way lies madness—an unending *en abîme* construction). But at least, for people interested in words, it's good to be aware of this phenomenon about them. In a way unlike that of any other category of things, words are doubly themselves: they are the thing and the word for the thing. Curiouser and curiouser.

[Argentine author-journalist Nicholas E. Meyer writes mostly in English. A film history and a biographical dictionary have been published; a novel, a travel book and a book on atheism haven't.]



## R. A. Acronyms

David Galef

University of Mississippi

"If we're going to such an upscale lunch, I have to use the ATM machine first," said my friend the other day. Not "go to the bank," which is what people used to say when embarking on a costly enterprise. These days, you can avoid human contact by dealing with a machine, and a machine identified only by an acronym, at that. But what does ATM mean, anyway? In fact, it stands for 'automated teller machine,' which makes some sense, given its function, though no machine has yet asked me, "Would you like that all in small bills?" Still, ATMs have been around for years, and people have grown used to them, as with automated phone menus. Automated teller machines have been shortened to an acronym, and even if ATM hasn't got a clever spell-sound, like Aroused Citizens Representing Oppressed New York Minorities, the acronym still feels comfortable in the mouth. But why do people say ATM machine, which when unpacked becomes 'automated teller machine machine'?

This puzzle is part of a larger phenomenon. Why do reputable journalists still refer in their newspaper articles to the *SALT talks*?—when that's really 'strategic arms limitation talks talks.' The same is true, occasionally, when you see references to the *NATO organization*, or 'North Atlantic treaty organization organization.' The point is that an acronym arises because the original phrase is too long or clumsy to trip off the tongue, but after it achieves status as a word, the initial meaning gets lost, and people feel the need to qualify the acronym.

At our university, for instance, you can't register for classes unless you have a *PIN*, or 'personal identification number.' But most students long ago forgot exactly what that stands for, other than 'thing we gotta know to register,' and when they ask for it, they ask for their PIN number. As a faculty member who helps register students for their classes, I ask hopefully for their PIN codes, but as with correcting people who misuse the word *hopefully*, I long ago gave up strong-arming them into acronymic accuracy. Similarly, at the university bookstore, title and author may be important in locating an item, but

the quickest way is to list the *ISBN number*, as many people say, which translates into 'international standard book number number.' And some of our foreign students take the TOEFL test, even though *TOEFL* stands for 'test of English as a foreign language.'

These redundancies aren't restricted to bemused students, either. The financial sector has long hid behind a tangle of acronyms, from CD to SEC, but Merrill Lynch offers advice on CMA accounts, though *CMA* stands for 'cash management account.' The same holds true for its *IRA accounts*, or 'individual retirement account accounts.' And an *HSBC Bank* is really a 'Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation Bank,' if that counts.

In fact, redundant acronyms aren't a terribly recent phenomenon. During the Cold War, military pundits talked a lot about *ICBM missiles*: 'inter-continental ballistic missile missiles.' People talk about B-52 bombers, too, though the *B* stands for 'bomber.' They also refer to the *DMZ* (demilitarized zone) zone. These days, I get told to send something in *PDF format*, or 'portable document format format.' This is not to say that everyone qualifies acronyms. Computer geeks in particular like to spray their sentences with acronyms like RAM, CPU, and HTML without explaining themselves. Only a layperson would talk about *RAM* (random access memory) *memory* or *HTML* (hyper-text mark-up language) *language*.

Other, related redundancies can also creep into acronyms, especially when the redundancy occurs in translation. I recently received an invitation to a party that requested me to "please RSVP." Given that *RSVP* means '*répondez s'il vous plaît*,' or 'respond if you please,' that first "please" is a tad unnecessary. To cite another, though nonacronymic, instance: a sign for the Yodogawa River in Hyogen, Japan, is primarily for foreigners since *gawa* means 'river.'

Of course, now that I'm attuned to redundant acronyms, I search for them everywhere, only to be disappointed in most instances. No retiree talks about the AARP association. Nor does anyone refer to the FDA administration. And women insert IUDs, not IUD devices, to avoid pregnancy. But I haven't given up. I'm currently on the lookout for an acronymic disease that ends in *s* for "symptom," on the off chance that people will add "symptom" when referring to it.

It's an HP—harmless pursuit—really.

[David Galef's latest book is the short-story collection *Laugh Track*.]



## Email and Good Writing

David Isaacson  
Kalamazoo, Michigan

If they were alive, I wonder what E. B. White and William Strunk Jr. would have to say about email. In the 1972 preface to the second revision of *The Elements of Style* White quotes Strunk:

*Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.*

White's comment is impassioned: "There you have a short, valuable essay on the nature and beauty of brevity—sixty-three words that could change the world." Strunk and White think brevity is a moral, not just a literary virtue. In the conclusion to White's classic children's story, *Charlotte's Web*, Wilbur the pig eulogizes Charlotte, the spider who has martyred herself for him: "She was in a class by herself. It is not often that someone comes along who is a true friend and a good writer. Charlotte was both."

Strunk, White, Wilbur, and Charlotte might welcome email for its brevity. For those of us too busy or lazy to take pen to paper, email facilitates letter writing. Just as the word processor has replaced the typewriter, email may already have just about done away with snail mail. We live in such truncated times I bet some people don't even know that email is short for 'electronic mail.' It is supereasy, even if you have nothing worth writing at all, to "process" email. Email may be sent, received, replied to, forwarded, and saved in less time than it takes to write the first paragraph of an old-fashioned letter. Email is faster than express mail, less fuss than a fax, and easier to understand than voice mail. Email may strengthen friendships. It can also create new ones. Long-lost relatives may no longer be lost. Acquaintances can become instant "friends." Perhaps email intimacies are even more voyeuristically fulfilling than the telephonic romance in Nicholson Baker's novel, *Vox* because there's more control over what you can get away with. Some people are so used to email that a new word, *face-time*, has been coined to refer to that quaint old custom that

used to be called conversation.

Email streamlines business. With a minimum of trouble I can arrange a meeting, memo myself, cc: the boss, get feedback from absent colleagues, send minutes to the whole company, and even determine if my message has been opened. If I make a boo-boo and discover that my recipient has not yet opened the message, I can save face and cover my posterior.

If good writing is effective communication between a writer and a reader, then email should promote good writing. By this pragmatic definition, email may even make bad writers into good ones. Email users typically do not spend much time composing. It's possible to send hard gemlike flames into cyberspace, but you're a fuddy-duddy if you do. Email is not meant to be literary; it is a medium somewhere between speech and writing.

It's easy to save email, but how much is worth saving? As Thoreau said in *Walden* about the telegraph: "We are in great haste to construct a magnetic telegraph from Maine to Texas; but Maine and Texas, it may be, have nothing important to communicate." (*Walden*, chapter 1, p. 67, 1966) Like the tree falling in the forest without anyone to hear it fall, does email that isn't converted to "hard copy" really exist?

If good communication simply means you understand what I've said, then written words, like spoken ones, don't have to be sculpted, just comprehensible. And while I may regret something said on email, the casualness of the medium lets me get away with some things much harder to justify on letterhead. Email communication is the equivalent of 'casual Fridays,' in which a normally buttoned-down Monday through Thursday person dresses down on Friday.

Even otherwise uptight writers may be laid-back on email. Some writers don't bother to spend extra time looking for the caps key on email, making them look like e.e. cummings or archie and mehitabel. If I want colleagues to understand me, email may grab their attention better than speech. Taking the extra time to be correctly grammatical on email may be a *faux pas*. Just as it is prissy to reply to a telephone caller who asks you your name, "Yes, this is he," if you observe all the formal grammatical niceties on email it's like eating a hot dog at the ballpark in a tuxedo.

Business email is like Alice's white rabbit, forever scurrying lest he be late for a very important date. Business email has no time for *bon mots*. If America's





business is business, then email helps to move ‘product.’ In fact, for many web-based companies, email follow-up ads are inseparable from product.

It is a good idea not to get too emotional on email. In fact, you ‘flame’ someone at your peril. To *flame* means to overuse exclamation marks or otherwise demonstrate anger. Listservs usually have rules against flaming, and conscientious moderators will censor or rebuke flame throwers.

But sometimes the line between business and personal email gets blurred. Because an online company promptly responds to you does not mean that someone in the company loves you. In the culture of Jerry Springer, the old-fashioned verbal decencies White and Strunk modeled in *The Elements of Style* seem quaint. But since we still may want to express feelings as well as thoughts when we write, a set of cutesy-pie typographical conventions serves as a shorthand. Someone has dubbed these symbols ‘emoticons.’ With emoticons there’s no need to figure out the right syntax and rhythm to convey irony; a smiley-face such as :-) does it for you.

If you use your business email for personal reasons you could get into legal trouble. Theoretically, whatever is said on your boss’s email is not protected speech. But I know I am not the only employee to waste my company’s time forwarding a joke or the first person to wish he hadn’t mouthed off in this medium. A major character in Philip Roth’s novel, *The Human Stain*, mistakenly sends the text of an ad seeking a lover, which was meant for *The New York Review of Books*, to all her colleagues in the Foreign Language Department instead.

But even if you’re on a private account, some conventions of pre-email writing still apply to this medium. The most important quality of email is that one is understood. Email is both democratic and pragmatic. John Dewey would have welcomed it as a tool for promoting education for everyone. Anyone with an email address may ‘address’ anyone else. Even celebrities may be inclined to respond to commoners on email where they might not take the time to give away their signatures for free in a ‘regular’ letter. For all practical purposes, anyone communicating by email with anyone else, in private, may establish his or her own rules.

If a modern-day Henry James and Marcel Proust wanted to chat each other up, they could be as prolific as they wanted. I bet Dickens would have been even more prolific if he had used a typewriter. With a word

processor, Sir Walter Scott might not have written himself to death to pay his debts. Thomas Wolfe would have driven Maxwell Perkins insane with endless email revisions to his mountainous manuscripts.

But imagine if you were a young Henry James just starting to feel your prose oats today. You could exchange manuscript drafts with your creative writing teacher and your fellow students. You could have the thrill of quick, sometimes even immediate, responses to your work. In fact, you could use your web site to broadcast any version—or all versions—of your latest story to the whole world. Just think what Samuel Richardson would do if he were to rewrite his epistolary novel, *Clarissa*, on email. In fact, we, his breathless readers, could help him write the novel as hyper-text. If you did not want to claim sole ownership of a ‘text,’ you could ‘publish’ your novel as a work in progress and invite others to finish it. Critics could then inter-subjectively examine this text, adding their readings to it. Each of these deconstructive reactions would be just as ‘real’ as the original text. A few years ago, no less a big-name author than John Updike wrote the first and last chapters of a murder mystery, *Murder Makes the Magazine*, in a writing contest for the online bookseller Amazon.com. Forty-four co-authors, chosen from the thousands who submitted entries, collaborated with Updike by writing daily chapters in this novel (*Time*, intl. ed., Nov. 17, 1997, p. 60). This may be the literary wave of the future.

I feel bereft if I don’t have daily email exchanges. I would much rather do business with some people by email than over the phone or in person. I have reunited with old friends I haven’t seen in years—and may never again see in person—over email. I keep in touch on email with my siblings less expensively and more regularly than over the telephone. In a world without moral consequences, I might pursue numerous fantasies on email and its beguiling imitation of “virtual” reality that probably would have little to do with virtue. But meanwhile, in a world in which snail mail, non-online books, and printed journals still coexist with email, I regret to say that email will not necessarily make me, like Charlotte, either a true friend or a good writer :-).

(David Isaacson has been a reference librarian for thirty-two years, and was a college English professor for five years before that. He loves dictionaries to pieces, which is okay, because most don’t come in fascicles anymore.)





## The Joy of English

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Campbell, California

[This essay won the 2004 Simon Winchester Nonfiction Writing Award at San Jose State University.]

English was not my first language. In fact, according to my mother, I created a language that was entirely my own. Between my Russian parents, who only spoke their native tongue, and my elder sister, who spoke only English to me, by the time I was three, I began muttering a mix of each. The downside to this newly created Anglo-Russ tongue was that no one ever understood what I was trying to say, which was soon followed by frustrated gesticulations and eventually full-blown tantrums. As such, perhaps owing to the realization that the tide was against me, English became my primary language.

Being raised in a bilingual home, I had the unique opportunity to compare and contrast English and Russian. It struck me that the Russian words I heard, and even the manner in which they were expressed, were far more melodic and lilting than English. English was practical and fell flat upon my ears; it wasn't nearly as poetic or hypnotic as other languages. French, Italian, Spanish—they all sang to me even in their most mundane uses. Yet English was what I was most reliant on for communication. Although I understood most of what my parents spoke, I found it difficult to imitate all they said and how they said it. What's more was that my Russian had a thick American accent to accompany it, and I was too ashamed to exhibit this second-rate imitation.

As I advanced in age and grade level, new words were introduced to me through vocabulary exercises in English class, such as *melancholy*, *sequester*, and *mandolin*. None of these sounded to me as particularly beautiful, just a jumble of consonants and vowels with more syllables than I was used to. Besides, I couldn't ever envision myself using *melancholy* in a sentence when *sad* was just as good.

Added to that was the lack of proper translation that I had discovered. Though my vocabulary in English grew, I still found Russian words that didn't seem to have an equivalent in English, and I was frustrated not being able to find an adequate match. Imagine not having a single word for smoked fish or

a country house! Even my name sounded different when my mother used it as opposed to my friends. If my name was shortened, they'd call me Flo, but mom would say *Flora*. *Flora* in one breath, and it seemed to evoke a bouquet of flowers or a spring breeze. But I would never be *Flora* to anyone outside my own little Russia.

By middle school the English language was even less impressive in the midst of adolescent slang and with interruptions of "like" and "you know" that pervaded hallway gossip and notes on ruled paper scrawled in hot-pink ink. My father cringed with every "you know" that casually rolled out of my mouth. "No," he'd say stubbornly, "I don't know." My English teacher was no less dissatisfied with the descent of the English language every time a student asked, "Mr. Harris, can I go to the bathroom?" to which he would quickly quip, "I don't know, *can* you?"

English remained a stiffly functional language for me. It was a channel of communication, not song, not poetry. That was the case, however, until I took the trouble to read a Shakespeare play.

*If I profane with my unwortheist hand,  
This holy shrine, the gentle fine is this,  
My lips two blushing pilgrims, ready stand  
To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss.* [Romeo and Juliet, Act 1, Scene V]

This was not what I was used to hearing. This was the kind of wording that begged to be read aloud. It was then that the sounds, the rhythm, all of it flowed so smoothly and melodic that I was forced to give the language I thought I knew another look.

*Good pilgrim, you do wrong your hand too much,  
Which mannerly devotion shows in this;  
For saints have hands that pilgrims hands do touch,  
And palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss.* [Romeo and Juliet, Act 1, Scene V]

I had no idea that the words I spoke without another thought could be strung together in such a fashion, that they had this kind of potential. It was that particular phrasing, the intent, the passion for words that I lacked. So there was more to this language than I had first come to believe. Words like *melancholy* did have a place and were better than simply recycling *sad*. In fact, words like *morose*, *grave*, and *dismal* were also excellent substitutes. The English language was just more elusive, less obvious. Poets like Byron exhibited a fluid sense and a descriptive potency that I had not fully appreciated.



*She walks in beauty like the night  
Of cloudless climbs and starry skies,  
And all that's best of dark and bright,  
Meet in her aspect and her eyes.*

*Thus mellowed by that tender light  
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.*

I drew in each word and memorized them by heart. If ever the drabness of everyday communication weighed me down, I needed only to repeat a few lines of Keats or Rossetti to make it sparkle once more.

That is not to say that Russian lost its charm for me. My mother taught me a small verse that she was taught to recite as a child:

*Ya malenkaya devotchka, igrayu i poiyu, ya Lenina  
ne videla, no ya evo lublyu.*

The translation:

*I'm a little girl, I love to sing and dance, I never met  
father Lenin, but I love him nonetheless.*

Among the poetry and phrases of English and American writers, I memorized this line as well. Mostly to impress my friends with my fair knowledge of Russian, I would repeat it aloud. A small crowd would form, all with smiling, hopeful faces, to get a taste of the language that they knew nothing about. When I finished, some would sigh in appreciation, saying, "That was beautiful! I wish I knew how to speak a foreign language." When I revealed the meaning, however, the English translation was met with a laugh. "Really?" they'd ask, as though I had cheated them of its true meaning or tarnished it in some way through the translation of it.

This simple, propagandistic phrase always drew attention, but if I offered to recite any of the poetry I had learned by heart in English somehow they were less intrigued. Claiming that you knew a line from *Romeo and Juliet* would receive an appreciative nod; say that you knew Russian and suddenly their eyes lighted up. "Say something!" and it wouldn't matter what. I suppose they craved for that same aesthetic auditory experience that I had thought eluded English. Then again, it may be that Italian to Italians is just a drab way of conversing, while English, in contrast, appears exotic and new.

The grass truly appears greener on the other side, but we need not envy what is not ours. Instead, we should look nearer to what is already in our grasp and investigate what it has to offer. There is that typical phrase people like to use, "that words cannot

describe" I have found this statement to be false.

More often than not I have read the lines to some novel in which the author writes of a moment, a feeling, a situation, or a person in such an honest manner that I needn't be surprised or ask of myself, "Could it be that I am not alone in that perception?" There is a unique connection, not merely of communication, that can occur between writer and reader. That may be why we are so fond of our favorite poets, authors, and playwrights, as though they were dear friends. They have exposed the human condition, and we take it personally.

*[Florence Ginzburgsky is a graduate student in English Literature at San Jose State University.]*



## **Cheers!**

Martin Gani  
Como, Italy

The chemical ethanol, aka alcohol, has been lubricating social interaction, generating conviviality, loosening tongues, morals, and much else since time immemorial. The consumption of this universal drug, whether straight, iced, watered, or concocted, has also spawned an accompanying verbal ritual with a different flavour in different cultures. A journey into the vocabulary of this inebriation ceremony is at times amusing, often fascinating, and nearly always illuminating.

"Let's drink a toast to Mr. Smith and Mrs. Jones," English speakers would say and their choice of word, *toast*, would be clearly understood by the French and Germans, who also say *toast* in such formal address. Italians, on the other hand, have imported *toast* to mean 'a toasted sandwich' and would be quite puzzled by its utterance on such occasions. Their looks would read, "Why do they want to give an unsophisticated hot snack to the distinguished guests?" They would instead opt for *brindisi* (toast), which has no culinary connotation.

Italians and Spaniards get two birds with one stone when they say *salute* and *salud*, respectively, the



same word means both ‘greetings’ and ‘good health,’ hence a perfect way to initiate a drinking session. The French assume a more sober attitude and keep their greetings, *salut*, and health, *santé*, quite separate. They hold up their glasses and go “*à votre santé*.” Italians must be drunk to use the universally recognised onomatopoeic, *cin cin*, to mimic clinking glasses. However, a word of advice may be appropriate at this point. Unless you intend to make an indecent proposal to your host or guest, you should avoid mentioning *cin cin* in Japan.

### Unless you intend to make an indecent proposal to your host or guest, you should avoid mentioning *cin cin* in Japan.

The Japanese way of alcohol consumption, be it beer, wine, or warm sake, is ushered in by *kampai* (pronounced come-pie). Ironically, it translates “let’s clink our glasses” so is akin to *cin cin*. In Japanese, whether you want to say, “good health,” “cheers,” “bottoms up,” “down the hatch,” “let’s make a toast,” “success,” “compliments,” “*skoal*,” “here’s mud in your eye,” or other drink-related social utterances with which English throngs, all you have to do is say *kampai*, simple as a zen garden.

In Germany, drinking is anything but a simple affair. Social etiquette requires that if you’re drinking wine, you stick to *zum wohl* (good health), and sip your drink, not gulp it. If, on the other hand, you’re informally having a jolly time in a beer garden getting through large amounts of lager, *zum wohl* would be totally out of place. You should choose *prost*; and if well into the swing of things and trying to get as drunk as you possibly can, you ought to articulate, if you can, *prost und ex* (all in one go). Further north, German *prost*’s Swedish cousin, *prosit*, is a false friend; it is the automatic response to someone sneezing. *Skoal* is the appropriate term that precedes any drinking, serious or otherwise.

In Hungary, Germany’s *prost* is the more zestful *proszit*. But that’s not the whole story. Hungarians consider it bad luck to clink glasses and consider drinking a religious experience. Why else would they say *egészségedire* (god bless you) just before indulging in alcohol? Those less versed in Hungarian should adhere to *proszit*; articulating *egészségedire* is arduous even in more favourable circumstances.

An instruction to down an alcoholic beverage in one breath is not exclusive to German or English; it also exists in Spanish. “*Fondo blanco* [blank bottom] *olé*,” might the tipsy drinkers say in Madrid.

Sophisticated, wine-drinking Italian urbanites do not go beyond *cin cin*, *salute*, or *auguri* (good wishes) but the local dialect of country folk in colder northern Italy has come up with *lascial voi* (leave it empty), to encourage drinking partners to speed up the drinking process and also lift their body temperatures and moods as well.

The Chinese apparently prefer the bottoms up style of alcohol consumption and repeat *campa* to remind the drinkers to get through as much stuff as they possibly can in as short a time as they can. The only problem is that a Chinese meal might be washed down with water, tea, beer, milk, wine, and rice brandy simultaneously. Do you say *campa* with only the ethanol-enriched liquids, or all of them? To avoid making mistakes, most foreigners emulate the host.

In Turkey *Serefe* (to your honour) is what drinking partners say to one another as they raise their glasses containing *raki*, the national aniseed-based, deceptively sweet-smelling drink that turns milky when water is added to it. This innocuous-looking beverage, which can quickly cloud the mind, is also the national drink of neighbouring Greece but is called *ouzo*. More laid-back Greeks easily forget the Turks’ honorary formalities and say cheers with *yia-sou*, which means both ‘hello’ and ‘cheers.’

The Arabs are responsible for inventing *alcohol*, not the substance but the name, which derives from *al-kohl*. It seems ironic that Muslim Arabs, whose religion prohibits the consumption of alcohol, should give the evil liquid—for which they themselves have no use—its universally recognised appellation. This is not as mysterious as it sounds. *Alcohol* in Arabic means ‘the finely ground’ and refers to the antimony sulphide powder the Arab women used as a cosmetic to darken their eyelids and look more beautiful, just like the ancient Egyptians. The term was subsequently applied to impalpable substances in general and in the 16th century specifically to define the



mind-obfuscating alcohol evaporated from boiling wine. Unsurprisingly, whether it is the wine-sipping Lebanese or whisky-downing Egyptians, the Arabs indulging in alcohol have no equivalent of cheers. They just drink the stuff and leave the verbiage to others. They might whisper, *bismillah* (god willing) but they say that before starting anything. Tunisians sometimes say, *sihhat* (good health) but this comes at the end of the eating-drinking episode, not the beginning.

The Russians are perhaps unbeatable when it comes to drinking rules. The whole nation's favourite drink, vodka, is downed in one go, preceded by a hearty, *na zdarovie* (cheers). Vodka was invented in 15th-century Poland and was first used as a medicine to treat flu and stomach trouble, one reason it is still gulped, just like medicine, not sipped. And forget about smashing your glass against a wall afterwards. As Russian journalist Vitali Vitaliev points out, "Glass is too precious a commodity to dispose of in such a barbaric way. A glass is not only important, it's indispensable. Only the most degraded of alcoholics would drink vodka straight from the bottle." Just remember to say *na zdarovie* after each dose of medicine, and remember the side effects. Cheers!



## SIC! SIC! SIC!

Conductor Martin Alsop comes bang up to date, taking in space travel, nuclear power, the synthesizer and the mobile phone before whizzing off on a motorbike with Swedish composer Jan Sandstrom and an amazing gang of trombonists. [From an issue of Radio Times. Submitted by Tony Hall, Aylesbury, who adds: "Not the least amazing thing about them must be their ability to balance on one another's shoulders!"]

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

## A Short Hike through Arroyo Lingo

Larry Tritten

San Francisco, California

Words are my hobby as well as the tools of my vocation, and there are so many of them to know about that it's a daunting enterprise. During my childhood, when the Western movie was in its ascendancy, I saw hundreds and hundreds of mesas and buttes on movie screens, but it wasn't until earlier today that it finally occurred to me to wonder what precisely the difference is between the two. Having done a little research, I've got something of a fix on it, although I can't help thinking that the difference between a mesa and a butte is something I'll be eternally fated to repress and be unable to remember, like the difference between a stalagmite and a stalactite and a *schlemiel* and a *schlamazel*. Two weeks on a troop ship helped me to remember the difference between port and starboard, which at the moment I'm not sure I remember correctly.

My *American Heritage Dictionary* says that a *mesa* is a broad, flat-topped elevation with one or more cliff-like sides, common in the Southwest United States, and that the word is Spanish, meaning 'table.' A *butte* is defined as 'a hill that rises abruptly from the surrounding area, has sloping sides and a flat top,' and the word derives from the old French word meaning 'mound behind targets.' I can't help wondering—what targets? But I don't want to get lost in digression. Fortunately, each word is accompanied by a photograph, and the photos lead me to conclude that buttes are more abbreviated, less extensive, than mesas. There are, I believe, mesas in Monument Valley that are 'beauts,' but I don't know if there are any buttes that are equally pretty. Also, I've never been to Mesa, Arizona, but I have been through Butte, Montana, both of which presumably have at least a couple of members of MENSA. It is interesting that in Mexico the organization MENSA is known instead as MESA, because the word *mesa* is a slang term that loosely translates as "stupid woman." I'm not a member of MENSA, but I have been called a *mensch* by a Jewish friend who may or may not be a schlemiel or a schlamazel. The Latin word *mensa*, incidentally, means 'table,' and ain't that a beaut?

I may end up wishing I'd never delved into this. After all the Roadrunner cartoons I've seen it never





occurred to me to wonder whether my role model, Wile E. Coyote (who is heroically persistent) was falling off a mesa or a butte. And when Richard Dreyfuss made his pilgrimage to Devil's Tower in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, I never wondered if it's a butte or a mesa, and I doubt that the extraterrestrials did, either. My dictionary photos lead me to conclude that Devil's Tower is a butte, but then, I'm not a member of MENSA, so don't quote me.

Now consider the synchronicity attending the fact that there's a word, *mesa*, in Malayam, the language spoken in Kerala, the southern tip of India, that also means 'table.' And ponder the fact that there's an area in South Boulder, Colorado called Table Mesa. Table Table? Well, there's Walla Walla, Baden Baden, and Pago Pago—places so nice apparently they named them twice. This may be a case for someone from MENSA.

Then there are Black Mesa Butte in Utah and Middle Butte Mesa in my home state of Idaho, places whose names smack of linguistic miscegenation, with blurred nuances thrown into the bargain, not to mention a soupçon of redundancy. And, to be sure, there's a joker in this deck, namely the word *plateau*—you know, that elevated area you get to when you move to the next highest level on a game show. The word *plateau* comes from the French word 'platter.' The dominant characteristic in all these cases is flatness. My dictionary describes a *plateau* as 'a tableland,' presumably a land that would be the natural habitat of platters. Curiouser and curiouser, in the words of Lewis Carroll. And, incidentally, while they may not have mesas or buttes in England, they do have Stonehenge, which might be thought of as some sort of geological kismet cousin.

Emilee Riley, a teacher in Salt Lake City, may have the best overview of the whole thing. She has written about her students: "First of all, to explain the different sizes of plateaus I would explain the following: the largest plateau is called a plateau. To help them remember it I called it 'Papa Plateau!' The next size is a mesa, therefore 'Mommy Mesa.' Next, 'baby butte.' and finally 'Pee Wee Pinnacle.'" Got it!

[Larry Tritten has written for Vanity Fair, The New Yorker, and Playboy.]

## Of Clouds and Clottie Dumplings

Clare Passingham  
Headington, Oxford

On a road through the Howgill Fells in England's wet northwest is the little hamlet of Stennerskeugh. Look closely at the map and you will see marked high on the hillside above the village the words Stennerskeugh Clouds. From the foot of the hill you might mistake them for clouds, but climbing the steep hillside, you can see they are large limestone outcrops gleaming through the green turf. This is Viking country—and no doubt the Viking named Steinarr was deceived then as we are today. It set me thinking that the word *cloud* must be related to *clod*, and this sent me scurrying to my *Shorter OED* to unravel the mystery. So I find the word comes originally from Old English *clúd* meaning 'lump or clod of earth,' and thence to *cloud*, used occasionally, as in this case, as a descriptive place name.

*Clod* leads us to *clot*, also a kind of lump, as in blood clot or clotted cream. Here we have the first hint of "stickiness" in the meaning: as also in *clay* (from OE *clæg*), the kind of soil that sticks to your boots, and *claying*, a taste that doesn't leave your mouth. Stickiness of a different form brings us to *cleave*, that Janus word beloved of VERBATIM readers. *Cleavers* or goose-grass, a weed in my garden, is the stickiest of plants, both seeds and leaves clinging tenaciously to clothing, thus spreading it everywhere. The *OED* suggests a link to *climb* and *clamber* (these from OE *climban*), which takes us back to the rocky imagery too. *Clay* is related to *clog* ('block up,' 'hamper,' or 'hinder') and *claggy* (which means 'sticky'). *Claggum* is an old dialect word for treacle toffee, and *clagger* is a nautical term for a pudding made "from flour and slush," a somewhat cryptic description from my dictionary of historical slang. *Glue* and *glutinous* come from the same root too, only this time not through Old English but through Latin. *Clog* has a double meaning: the other, for a wooden shoe, meant initially 'a block of wood' (lumps again!).

*Clamp* and *clump* are "sticky" words as well, and take us to *clammy* (damp or slimy) and *clumsy* (heavy or awkward), this last one conveying an image of objects slipping, not sticking! *Clam* (from OE 'clam':



to bond, fetter) and *deat* (a device to stop rope from slipping) are two words meaning ‘tight gripping’ or ‘clasping,’ and this sense appears again as *clinch*, *clench*, *cling*, and *club* (in the sense of ‘club together’).

*Clout* is another word for a lump of earth but has other meanings too that take us down a different path. “Ne’er cast a clout till May be out” was the old saw repeated in my childhood, when we shivered in thin clothes during a cold snap in early summer. *Clout* here means ‘clothing,’ and ‘cloth’ and ‘clothes’ too. These all derive from Old English *cláþ*. The word *clothes* is one of the most difficult for an English learner to master, requiring great agility of tongue movement, both in and out. So it’s not surprising therefore to find a shortened version *do*’ in the *OED* too, a 19th-century cockney word.

*Clad* and *cladding* continue the thread of meaning from cloth, with the added notion of ‘wrapping,’ and have the same derivation. This is where we get to *clootie dumpling*, ‘a sausage-shaped fruit pudding wrapped in a muslin and steamed’; it is not unlike an English Christmas pudding in taste and is eaten all year in Northumbria and Scotland. *Clootie* is a ‘rag’ or ‘cloth’; however, this derivation is a bit of a puzzle, as *Auld Clootie* is also a northern nickname for the devil, and is said to derive from *cloven* (as in cloven-hoofed). This would come therefore from the other face of the Janus word *cleave*, this one meaning ‘to split.’

*Cloth*, *clod*, and *clot*, and *clay* too, have often been tied to terms for stupidity and clumsiness, such as *cloth-eared*, *cloth-head*, *clod-hopper*, *clodpole*, and *clay-brained*. And *you silly clot!* was a common insult in my (now far-off) schooldays—immortalised in English literature by that wonderful creation of Geoffrey Willans in the 1950s, the hilarious misspeller, Nigel Molesworth.

*Clout* has several more meanings: ‘a *clout* on the head (a blow),’ linked again to *club* (something to hit with). *Clout* is also used figuratively to mean ‘having influence’: Her new job brought her a great deal of *clout*.’ You might say that *clouds* are only figurative ‘lumps’ too. This brings us back full circle; they are, of course, just floating lumps of water vapour. And the derivation of *Stennerskeugh*? Well, I’m hoping one of you will answer that.

[Clare Passingham is a freelance EFL teacher.]

## Voice Over

Before I knew I had a choice  
—Attention was not paid—  
I used to write in the passive voice.  
“Mistakes were made.”

—Edmund Conti

## OBITER DICTA

Joseph A. Grispino  
Tucson, Arizona

The Annual Meeting of the North American Society of the Friends of Grammar Program of invited papers and panel discussions:

- 1 Should grammar be downsized?
- 2 The last sighting of the dangling participle.
- 3 On the insufferable hubris of the imperative. A humble rejoinder.
- 4 A video of *The World Congress for the Unification of Punctuation Marks* hosted by the late Victor Borge.
- 5 The correlation between the use of interjections and heart attacks.
- 6 The liberation of the colon from its physiological connotations.
- 7 The abuse of the confrontational conjunction “but” in the post-classical period.
- 8 Can a prefix ever become a suffix?
- 9 All you ever wanted to know about the period but were afraid to ask.
- 10 The apposite locus in Dante’s *Inferno* for uses of the ungrammatical phrase “between you and I.”
- 11 Why choppy sentences are more appropriate for minestrone.
- 12 The hyphen: the disputed variety of its length in the pre-classical Latin manuscripts in the British Museum.
- 13 The incurable predilection of German writers to prefer paragraphs to sentences.
- 14 The greed of the possessive case in the tragedies of Sophocles.
- 15 Vote YES in favor of a sin tax for misspellers.



# HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward  
Somerset, Britain

“You may be surprised,” wrote famous British medical columnist Dr Miriam, “but your back begins to age at around 30—younger if you’ve had a back injury.”

I was surprised, I admit; if I’d ever thought about it at all, I’d have assumed that my back, like the rest of me, began to age roughly at the moment of birth. Does this mean, I wonder, that thirty years after I’m dead my back will still be wandering around Somerset, worrying sheep and getting banned from pubs?


But then, health advice can often be confusing. The same newspaper offered tips on dealing with a heat-wave. “At the end of the day,” readers were cautioned, “it’s not a good idea to be running around in the mid-day sun.” True; time travel can be dangerous.

The other week I bought a tube of toothpaste formulated for sensitive teeth and was baffled by the warning on the packet: “Do not use if you are sensitive to any of the ingredients.” But if I’m not sensitive to at least some of the ingredients, will the product do me any good?

An advertisement for an air conditioner asks, “Do you suffer from: Asthma? Hay fever? Cold and Flu? Passive smoking? and other allergies? Also, do you: live in a polluted area? have breathing problems? have children? have pets?” Well, that must cover 99.9 per cent of the population, surely? Oh, hold on a second ... there’s more: “If your answer to any or all of these is ‘Yes,’ or even ‘No,’ then your environment will always be improved” by spending several hundred pounds on one of their machines. So that’s the other 0.1 per cent dealt with. What about if some of my answers were “Maybe”—would that help?

The concerns of Robert Wachal, of Iowa, are more general. “I wish,” he writes, “that members of congressional committees and Don Imus of MSNBC would stop addressing and referring to Ashcroft as ‘General.’ He is not a general, but an attorney. He is a General Attorney, but the Norman law used French word order. Other examples: ‘Notary Public’ and ‘Surgeon General.’”

I hope all VERBATIM readers feel empowered to send their own *Horribles* to this column.



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Perhaps the word *empower* is one of them. Interviewed about her latest installation—a cluster of 364 robins cast in white wax and coal ash—an artist explained her use of repetition: “You can empower something by making lots of it, and then it takes on a new meaning.” Or, possibly, a new meaninglessness.

No less worrying is the finding of an official enquiry into policing in Humberside which discovered that “the visibility of officers had declined from 18.1 per cent to 15.9 per cent.” Oh well, makes going undercover easier, I suppose.

*Kicking in*—meaning taking effect, as in medicines—is a cliché I find irritating, belonging as it does to that group of phrases which might have sounded quite neat when fresh but are ruined by ubiquity and by ever-widening application. Still, attempting to avoid tired idioms by minting something slightly different isn’t always a good idea, either. My brain produced some frankly disturbing mental images in struggling to process a local paper’s report of a lecture on the history of underwear, which included the revelation that “Edwardian underwear was very pretty, with fine linen, cotton or silk, and the first bra came about. Coloured underwear also began to filter in.” *Filter in?* For the first time, I can see the attraction of “Don’t even go there!”

Do you know “how gender is incorporated into the delivery of foreign policy”? If not, I’ll bet you’re keen to learn all about such a fascinating subject. Britain’s Foreign Office certainly thought so when it issued a press release advertising the launch of a booklet on that very topic. Sadly, the first statement was shortly followed by another, regretting that “this briefing has been cancelled due to lack of interest.” No! Who’d have ever thunk it?

[*Mat Coward’s latest book is Success and How To Avoid It, available from [www.ttapress.com](http://www.ttapress.com).*]





## CLASSICAL BLATHER

*Stuff and Nonsense*

Nick Humez

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“Stuff and nonsense!” Thus Alice characterized Wonderland’s novel notion of having a sentence first and a verdict afterward.<sup>1</sup> English has a rich inventory of synonyms for the nonsensical, from the recondite *Buncombe* (better known by its phonetic equivalent, *bunkum*, and the latter’s vernacular abbreviation, *bunk*)<sup>2</sup> to the vulgar *bullshit* or the quasimythological *horsefeathers*.<sup>3</sup>

From a sampling of synonyms for ‘nonsense/meaningless talk’<sup>4</sup> emerge several categories: Some expressions emphasize the illogical nature of the utterance, others its essential worthlessness, and still others the fact that it is speech devoid of semantic content. In the first category we find *sophistry*,<sup>5</sup> *Greek*,<sup>6</sup> *gobbledigook*,<sup>7</sup> *double Dutch*, and *doubletalk*,<sup>8</sup> as well as the ecclesiastically derived *hocus pocus* and *all my eye and Betty Martin*.<sup>9</sup> Likewise in the “illogical” class arguably fall the (Anglo-)Irish expressions *blarney* and *blatherskite*.<sup>10</sup>

This last term crosses the border into the “worthless” category, nothing being of less value than excrement—*skite*,<sup>11</sup> like *shite*, being a thinly veiled euphemism for *shit*. While *bullshit* can also function as a verb,<sup>12</sup> *horseshit* would seem to occur only as a noun—and we are unaware of synonyms featuring the droppings of other animals.<sup>13</sup> By the same token, one may say that a nonsensical utterance is *crap* or even *crapola*,<sup>14</sup> *shit* by itself is something that a talker of nonsense can be said to be full of, sometimes softened to “You’re full of *beans*,”<sup>15</sup> possibly because of the latter’s association with flatulence. Again, one may say that someone is *full of what makes the grass grow green*, which manages to combine an unmistakable allusion to manure<sup>16</sup> with a delicacy of avoidance whose effect is to highlight, not camouflage, its vulgarity.

There is likewise a coarseness to the anatomical exclamation *balls*,<sup>17</sup> one may similarly dismiss nonsense as a *load of balls*, *load of cobblers*<sup>18</sup> (British), or *load of rubbish*; hence, in keeping with this last sense of epistemic trash or garbage, nonsense can also be *rot* (or even *tommyrot*),<sup>19</sup> *bilge*, *hogwash*, or *muck*.

For “vacuous utterance,” per se, we have *clap-trap*, *buzzwords*, *psychobabble*, *artspeak*, *fiddle-faddle*,<sup>20</sup> *hoo-hah*,<sup>21</sup> *hot air*, *hoey*, *vaporing*, *bombast*, *flannel*, *flummery*, *prattle*, *twaddle*, *piffle*, *bosh*, *yada yada yada*, and *jabberwocky*,<sup>22</sup> while there is at least an oral association in the culinarily contemptuous *applesauce*, *baloney*, and *linguickia*.<sup>23</sup>

Other terms that do not readily fall into one of the three categories above are *bushwa*,<sup>24</sup> *fustian*,<sup>25</sup> *humbug*, *balderdash*,<sup>26</sup> and *galimatias*.<sup>27</sup> Compound expressions include *a tale of cock and bull*,<sup>28</sup> *sky hooks and striped paint*, and *that and a nickel will get you a cup of coffee*.

And new terms are being minted every day. Consider this recent exchange from the Cafe Blue newsgroup: First, Chris Lott wrote that “there are all sorts of synonyms for nonsense if we open up the field a little: postmodern literary theory, RSS specifications, military intelligence, etc.” Paul Sampson replied with “Compassionate conservatism. ISO 9001—those who have been exposed to it will know; the rest of you can thank whatever you pray to that you have been spared.” To which Jane Cates, added, “Oh fine then: Let’s throw in the Black Scholes Option Pricing Model—dumbest thing ever to win the Nobel Prize for someone ... And Variance at Risk—don’t get me started.”

It’s a wide open field. And it’s full of ... oh, never mind.

Notes:

1 On p. 161 of Gardner, ed., *The Annotated Alice* (Cleveland: World Publishing Company, 1963). It is only fair to say that the contempt with which Alice here dismisses an absurdity is balanced by a genuine appetite on the part of her real-life prototype, the “Secunda” who, as Carroll tells us in the dedicatory poem to *Alice’s Adventures Underground* “In gentler tones ... hopes/ ‘There will be nonsense in it’” (ibid., p. 21). In fact, the second daughter of Henry George Liddell, dean of Christ Church College at Oxford—himself best known nowadays (at least to classics wonks) as half the authors of Liddell and Scott’s *Greek Lexicon*—was by no means atypical in her fondness for the preposterous. Deems Taylor, in his introduction to *The Complete Poems and Plays of W. S. Gilbert* (New York: Random House, 1931, p. xxv), writes that nonsense, especially in rhyme, has “always been the weakness of the Anglo-Saxon. Offer ... entertainment whose chief excuse for being is its complete silliness, and he seizes it with a whole-souled delight that is likely to attract the perplexed stares of his Latin or Teutonic brothers. Particularly does he enjoy logical nonsense. Give him a completely ridiculous major premise, and develop it for him





with perfect gravity and strict logic, and you make him very happy.” At no time was the thesis more sustainable than at the height of Victoria’s reign, during which flourished Carroll, Gilbert, Edward Lear, and many others of lesser caliber. Two world wars may have somewhat curbed this robust appetite among the English, but such BBC series as *Benny Hill*, *Blackadder*, and *Monty Python’s Flying Circus* plainly show that it is by no means extinguished.

2 The name of a county in North Carolina, whose representative in Congress (according to both *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and the *American Heritage Dictionary*) excused an egregiously florid and impassioned speech he had just given with the rejoinder, “I was not speaking for the House, but for Buncombe.” (*Bunk* is unrelated to *bunco*, ‘a swindle,’ which is thought to come via Spanish *banca*, the name of a card game, from Italian *banca*, ‘bank.’)

3 A patent euphemism for *horseshit* (or its slightly politer variant, *horsepuckey*), *horsefeathers* agreeably replaces the profane with the preposterous: Horses are by definition featherless quadrupeds, with the exception of the mythical Pegasus, once familiar as the icon of Mobil gasoline stations. Pegasus and the autochthonous warrior Chrysaor were the offspring of Mother Earth when the blood of Medusa fell on the sand of the beach where she and her sisters had been sleeping. The winged steed thus forms an actual plot link between the suspiciously similar stories of gorgon-slaying Perseus and chimera-slaying Bellerophon. (See Graves, *The Greek Myths* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1960), §§73 and 75.) A southeastern Pennsylvania informant, Estelle Elliott, uses the alliterative form *happy horseshit* when describing bureaucratic nonsense in particular, *happy* here meaning something closer to ‘silly’ than ‘joyful.’

4 Most of the expressions in this article were responses to a request for synonyms posted early this fall to the Cafe Blue, an Internet newsgroup established a decade ago to discuss electronic publishing, and a spinoff of the still-flourishing e-zine *Blue Moon Review* (<http://www.thebluemoon.com>). Admittedly this may be a more erudite set of speakers than a random sample of the population, but it seems not unlikely that even asking the first twenty people one met on the street would produce a list no less eclectic. Particular thanks are owed to respondents Bruce Harris Bentzman, Jane Cates, Ana Doina, David Graham, Harriet Green, Dwain and Jordanne Kitchell, Sherry Linn Kline, Chris Lott, Sally Russell, and Paul Sampson. Another indispensable source for this column has been the centenary edition of *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Ivor H. Evans, ed., New York: Harper and Row, 1981).

5 Philip Wheelwright writes that “the word *sophistês* is composed by adding to the word for wisdom [*sophia*] a suffix connoting a man who practices a profession, adding that for most Greeks it was “as meaningless to speak of an expert in wisdom as to speak of an expert in goodness. Nevertheless, Protagoras and his followers did in fact make this claim” (Wheelwright, *The Pre-Socratics*, New York: Bobbs-Merrill/Odyssey, 1966, p. 236). Protagoras, who is

nowadays best remembered for his aphorism “Man is the measure of all things,” maintained that our ability to acquire metaphysical knowledge was constrained in the end “by the obscurity of the matter and the brevity of human life” (ibid., p. 240), and hence that we ought to concentrate our inquiries instead on human affairs, particularly language. His followers became notorious teachers of rhetoric, and many became very wealthy, including both Protagoras himself and his equally famous colleague Gorgias: Wheelwright tells us that “the principal skill which the Sophists taught, and of which an ambitious Greek youth would be eager to acquire mastery, was the ability to win debates and to influence public opinion through the art of persuasive speech” (ibid., p. 238). Socrates was highly critical of this, and Plato frequently takes up the cudgel against the Sophists and their ethical pluralism on his old teacher’s behalf (see especially his *Protagoras* and *Theaetetus*.) And indeed, it is the Sophists, not the Socratics, whom Aristophanes is actually lampooning in *The Clouds*: His Socrates is a professional teacher of forensic oratory to whom a rather dim young man has come to learn how to win his pending lawsuit.

6 Given currency by Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar* (Act 1, scene 2), in which Casca reports that a speech he had just heard Cicero give in the Forum at Rome was incomprehensible to him, having been entirely in Greek. This is the origin of the term *greeking* in page design, referring to blocks of meaningless body copy pasted up for position where the real copy is eventually to go. A favorite text, readily available on commercial Letraset, began “Lorem ipsum” which is of course fake Latin instead, a garbling of an actual Cicero passage beginning with the accusative case of the word for pain and suffering: “*Dolorem*.” Among sexual nonconformists, at least in the 1960s, the verb *to greek* had already come to mean ‘to sodomize’ (Michelle Grieves, personal communication, 1964).

7 The *American Heritage Dictionary* (hereinafter *AHD*) suggests that *gobbledigook* is imitative of the meaningless vocalizations of a turkey; interestingly, *to talk turkey* means ‘to speak with candor’ (see Urdang and LaRoche, *Picturesque Expressions: A Thematic Dictionary*, Chicago: Gale Research, 1980, p. 34, for a fanciful etymology). *AHD* lists the origin of the slur *gook* as unknown; might this have been a backformation from [*speaker of*] *gobbledegook*? (The precedent of Latin *barbarus*, ‘babbling,’ whence English *barbarian* and *Berber*, springs to mind here.) However, there are two flaws in this argument, one phonetic—*gook* rhymes with *spook*, not *shook*—and the other historical: A poem from the last months of WW II’s European theater (in a print source encountered some forty years ago whose author and title eludes recall) admonished GIs “Don’t bunch up/You silly gookus:/They still have 88s/and Stukas,” the 88 (short for *Ju[nkers]-88*, and not to be confused in this context with the Allies’ 88-mm antiaircraft gun) and the *Ju-87 Stuka* being two notorious types of German dive-bomber. (For a hair-raising WW II battle story with a bewildering inventory of aircraft on allsides, including both of the above, see Jim “Twitch” Tittle’s “Gauntlet of Blood” (



17 [combatcrewmen.org/GauntletofBlood.htm](http://combatcrewmen.org/GauntletofBlood.htm)). *Gookus* (plural and singular?) evidently meant ‘idiot, dummy’ (cf. *doofus*); a net search failed to retrieve either the poem or the term in this sense, but did turn the latter up as a synonym for ‘gunk, glop’ in several appliance-repair sites, e.g., “A sure indication was the brown junk/gookus leaking out of the rear bearing area and the belt has spewed it around in the drum” ([http://www.applianceaid.com/frigidaire\\_frontload\\_washer.html](http://www.applianceaid.com/frigidaire_frontload_washer.html)).

8 Surely an inspiration for George Orwell’s Newspeak portmanteau word *doublethink* in the dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1947), though he uses the term specifically to mean cognitive duplicity without dissonance. (Might this tidy dactylic neologism also have been suggested rhythmically by a chewing gum known on both sides of the Atlantic, Wrigley’s *Doublemint*? By contrast, most compound phrases beginning with “double” have two stresses: *double dactyl*, *double Dutch*, *double indemnity*, *double or nothing*, *double-quick*, *double-tongued*, *double trouble*, and so on.)

9 Supposedly from *Hoc est corpus*, said by the priest consecrating the wafer during the Eucharist, *hocus pocus* was the start of a string of fake Latin reeled off by comics since at least the early 1600s (see *Brewer’s*, p. 557; for more on reduplicative minimal pair expressions, see my “Baddabing, Baddabang,” VERBATIM XXVI/4 [Autumn 2001], pp. 19–22. Cf. also *mumbo-jumbo*, originally, according to *Brewer’s* (p. 764), the name of an African bogey used by the men to intimidate women and children, and made famous in Vachel Lindsay’s poem “The Congo.”) *All my eye and Betty Martin* has been ascribed to an English speaker’s mishearing of an Italian beggar’s exclamation *Alme ah beate Martine!* (Oh nurturant Saint Martin!)—Martin of Tours being a patron saint of mendicants—though *Picturesque Expressions* (p. 118) quotes and rejects a similar and even more implausible derivation, noting its attribution to the Joe Miller of the long-selling eponymous jest book.

10 *Blarney* refers to the gift of eloquence supposedly to be acquired without fail by kissing a famous stone in Blarney Castle, Ireland, so probably has one foot in our “empty rhetoric” category as well; *AHD* gives its first meaning as ‘smooth, flattering talk,’ and its second as ‘deceptive nonsense.’ As an undergraduate, Brian O’Nolan had published a newsletter entitled *Blather* before graduating to his column *Cruiskeen Lawn*, a regular feature in the *Irish Times* over the byline Myles na gCopaleen (Myles of the little horses), and writing several novels, including *At-Swim-Two Birds* and *The Third Policeman* under the pseudonym of Flann O’Brien. Variants of this word include *blether* and the participial *blithering*, as in a *blithering idiot*. *AHD* derives it from Old Norse *bladhra*, ‘to prattle’ (for what it’s worth, the Vikings frequently raided, and in some places settled, the Irish coast), related to English *bladder* and deriving from the Proto-Indo-European root *\*bhle-*, meaning ‘blow.’

11 Thus Sir John Harington, in his prologue to his *New Discourse of a Stale Subject, Called the Metamorphosis of Ajax* (ed. Elizabeth Story Donno, New York: Columbia University Press, 1962), cites the phrase “bad skite upon

Ajax” (p. 69), a *jax* (= *jakes*) being an archaic word for a privy. The Proto-Indo-European root of *shit* is *\*skeid-*, an extended form of *\*skei-*, ‘cut, split,’ also yielding English *skate* (in its sense of ‘decrepit horse’) and *shyster*.

12 As can *shit* itself: *You’re shitting me!* This is not to be confused with the “quasi-verb” *shit* [on], discussed at some length in James D. McCawley’s mischievously seminal paper “English Sentences without Overt Grammatical Subject,” originally published in the journal *Languages* in 1968 under the pseudonym Quang Phoc Dong and reprinted as the leading article in the mock-festschrift *Studies out in Left Field* (Arnold M. Zwicky et al., eds., Edmonton: Linguistic Research, 1971).

13 Could this be because horse manure (itself a euphemism for *horseshit* as ‘nonsense’) and cow dung are common fertilizers, peculiarly combining foulness and utility? At any rate *\*cat shit*, *\*dog shit*, and even *\*pony shit* are, so far as we know, unattested in this sense.

14 Thus *cut the crap* can be addressed to a complaining person in the sense of ‘stop your nonsense.’ (Still in use today, it was certainly current by 1965, when an Indiana informant, Heather Hollingshead Oesting, reported that she had heard it often enough from her own father.) The *-ola* of *crapola* began as a diminutive suffix, derived from Latin *-ulus/-ula/-ulum* (as in *crustulum*, ‘cookie, little cake,’ or *gladiola*, ‘flower that looks like a little sword [gladius]’) but somehow became an amplifier instead: An affectionate nickname for large-nosed Jimmy Durante was *Schnozzola*. Again, *crapola* may also be related to the alliterative expression *doesn’t know shit from Shinola*, *Shinola* having once been a widely marketed shoe polish.

15 The bean as a unit of worthlessness appears in English at least as early as Chaucer (in a pretty poem beginning “Since I from Love escapéd am so fat/I never thought to be in his prison lean”), and *not worth a hill of beans* is still proverbial. One suspects, however, that there is more to it: It was the Roman custom for the paterfamilias to walk through the house throwing beans over his shoulder to propitiate the ancestral ghosts abroad during the two nights a year celebrated as the *Lemuria*; and Pythagoras enjoined his followers at Crotona to abstain from the eating of beans, later ironically making his escape by running through a bean field when the locals burned his cult’s compound. It is quite possible that both practices arose from the sulfurous smell of flatulence being associated with corruption and decomposition.

16 See note 13 above.

17 In one of his early novels the Canadian writer Robertson Davies quotes a quatrain with this offending word as its truncated but obvious rhyme. An American vernacular equivalent is *nuts*, the famous reply of General Anthony McAuliffe to an invitation to surrender given him by the troops of Field Marshall Karl Rudolf Gerd von Rundstedt after the Germans had surrounded the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne at Bastogne at the start of the Battle of the Bulge on 21 December 1944 ([http://www.fact-index.com/b/ba/battle\\_of\\_the\\_bulge.html](http://www.fact-index.com/b/ba/battle_of_the_bulge.html)). At Waterloo in 1815 the French commander of the Guards, Pierre Jacques Étienne Cambronne, under similar circumstances replied to the British, “*Merde!*” (Shit!), giving rise to the euphemism *le mot Cambronne* (Cambronne’s Word) (<http://>



[//www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/3807/features/quotes.html](http://www.geocities.com/Athens/Forum/3807/features/quotes.html).  
 18 I.e., cobblestones, stones being a familiar euphemism for testicles. Chris McArdle cites *load of codwallopers* as a variant familiar during her youth in the United Kingdom; for what it's worth, *cod* is an obsolete term for the scrotum (cf. *codpiece*).  
 19 The *Tommy* of *tommyrot* is undoubtedly the *tom* of *tomfoolery*: a euphemism for *damm(ed)*. See pp. 23–24 of Ralph Emerson's article "Denatured Profanity in English," VERBATIM XXVI/2 (Spring 2001).  
 20 As a verb, *fiddle-faddle* is attested as early as 1633, in John Ford's play *The Broken Heart*; as a commercially packed popcorn-based snack, it dates from the 1970s. Related terms are the exclamations *fiddlesticks!*—the vulgar term for violin bows once they departed from the Renaissance arcuate design and took on their present form with frog and nut—and *fiddle-de-dee!* (The last example, used by W. S. Gilbert in the song "You Understand? I Think I Do" from the first act of *Ruddigore, or, the Witch's Curse*, might be used to usher in a discussion of nonsense refrains, some of which are mere onomatopoeia, such as *whack fol the diddle fol the die do day*, while others are pregnant with archaic incantation gone to seed, such as *skowan errol grey ... and yetter kangra norla*. But for want of space we must pass the subject by, just now.)  
 21 Well, almost; but not without mentioning Alan "My Son the Folk Singer" Sherman's burlesque on Stephen Foster: "Catskill ladies sing this song—'Hoo-hah! Hoo-hah!'—sit-tin' on the back porch playin' Ma Jongg" etc.  
 22 The title of a famous poem by Lewis Carroll embedded in *Through the Looking Glass*, composed largely of portmanteau words (the term was Carroll's own invention), some of which have become standard English, e.g., *chortle*. It is probably safe to say that no English nonsense poem has been translated into more languages, or spawned more burlesques. See Gardner, op cit., pp. 191–197.  
 23 *Baloney* is sausage of a type and ingredients originally associated with the Italian city of Bologna; *linguica* is a Portuguese sausage much favored in southeastern Massachusetts, Cape Cod, and the islands of Martha's Vineyard and Nantucket, where it is pronounced *lingweesa* and slit, fried, and placed on a bun in the manner of a frankfurter.  
 24 Class struggle in mufti here? *Bushwa* approximates the pronunciation of French *bourgeois*.  
 25 Fustian, according to *Brewer's* (p. 460) was a coarse cotton cloth approximating velvet, deriving its name from Fustat, a suburb of Cairo; the term was current for 'inflated talk' as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century.  
 26 Not, as one might suppose, from the Norse god Balder the Good, but according to *AHD* an apparent corruption of medieval Latin *balductum*, 'posset.'  
 27 Originally French, meaning 'gibberish.' *Gibberish* is what one *gibbers*, so probably should have been up above in the body of the article, in paragraph 2. (Too late now.)  
 28 Dating to at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century, according to *Brewer's* (p. 250), which adds that a French equivalent is *faire un coq à l'âne* ('make a rooster out of a donkey'), giving rise to the Scottish term *cockalayne* for a tall tale, satire, or rambling story. Cf. *cockamamie*.

## Turning Spam into Haiku

Jim Veihdeffer  
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At the risk of offending true lovers of poetry, a new form of versification has arisen, a structure that performs a kind of *jujitsu* on email spam, turning the very rawness of its attack back onto itself.

We are, in effect, "repurposing" meaningful texts—in this case, email subject lines—to create a kind of found verse much in the way that modern graphic artists turn ordinary found objects into *objets*.

In fairness, there are actually several forms of spam-inspired doggerel now snaking their ways along the byways of the Internet.

One format, dubbed spamverse by a correspondent who understandably wishes to remain anonymous (the better to retain his day job as a corporate lawyer), has a simple rule: you must take whole subject lines from a selection of spam messages, including wacky punctuation. These are incorporated into a poem having the desired verse form.

*amazing hover toy—limited stock only*  
*Matt Damon sex scandal??? Sarah Michelle nude!*  
*A woman and a man, naked ... havin sex!*  
*You are Approved.*

Another format, called SpamKu by its apparent originator, Allen Hutchison, uses a software program to generate random haiku-like verses every fifteen minutes. Two examples will suffice:

*Paradise is*  
*wating for you Guadagno*  
*facilissimo*

*burn baby burn faster*  
*and better with nero Cars*  
*as low as Heat up*

At the risk of seeming to disparage an inherently disparageable form, it might be pointed out that the traditional haiku 5–7–5 syllabic structure is not necessarily preserved and one needs to look very hard indeed to discern meaning.

More of these are available at <http://www.hutchison.org/allen/spamku/spamkuHistory.html>

There is also a form called Spam Haiku which is haiku written about the much-maligned Hormel Spam™ product: <http://www.spamhaiku.com/spamhaiku/site/>.





Turning, however, to the more serious endeavor of creating meaningful verse, let's revisit the concept of "haiku" to see why seemingly random bits of email subject lines can somehow make transcendent sense.

According to Jane Reichhold writing in the *Journal of the Haiku Society of America* (<http://www.ahapoetry.com/haiartjr.htm>), haiku uses a variety of techniques, such as contrast and association, and often riddles, to convey a new experience of a well known situation, a nonmetaphorical first impression from daily life. This 16<sup>th</sup>-century oriental form may inspire meditation and Zen-like perceptions.

Here, for example, is a moment of enlightenment guised as a rhetorical question, composed entirely of actual spam email subject lines:

*As fast as you are*  
*Accuracy citizon*  
*When will you be back?*

The following ku counterposes the most mundane of subjects with the promise of eternal life, equating them with an undemanding closing perception:

*Septic tank Info*  
*Anti aging formula:*  
*Just waiting for you*

A deceptively sophisticated response to life's daily grind can be perceived in the simplicity of a no-nonsense Sufi-like koan ku:

*Prevent work boredom*  
*Prevent job monotony*  
*FW: Get started!*

Note how the classic ku-like use of a colon in the first line of this next example leads to an apparent conclusion in the second ... only to be triumphantly trumped by the exuberance of the third line:

*Prevent work boredom:*  
*Clean browser cache files!*  
*!!!!!!REFINANCE YOUR HOUSE!!!!!!*

Often the very meaninglessness of the phrases that spammers inexplicably favor can be used to dredge meaning from the void:

*Bhame brepch cmmmp*  
*Give her more than a mouthful*  
*Oym teg mkpflaz*

Haikus frequently use puns or wordplay. In this case, adopting the haiku technique of "narrowing the focus," the extravagant promises of modern advertising are resolved by an uncomplicated expedient:



*Re: Age Reversal*

*Re: Get your Youth Back*

*Refinance your house*

And finally, even an esteemed literary vehicle can contain practical, albeit sexist, advice when the haikuist's art is brought to bear:

*don't procrastinate*

*know\_what-WOMEN\_really-WANT!*

*fix the car asap*

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## L

No poems for three months, no near poems, I revise, clean up, throw out. I index the survivors by first word or key word. No X or Z, of course, but at least one poem for every other letter—except L. And how can that be? The one who loves her family, loves her friends, loves her lovely garden, loved the lovers who long ago moved on, has nothing left to say?

What about Laughter? What about Life?  
 Am I waiting to be named queen of loss and loneliness?

Better to settle for lunch in the small French restaurant downtown, where a casual companion lifts my hand to his lips: *La langue, time now to speak of light verse.*

—Annette Basalyga







## BIBLIOGRAPHIA

***The Elephants of Style: A Trunkload of Tips on the Big Issues and Gray Areas of Contemporary American English***, by Bill Walsh. (McGraw-Hill, 2004. 238 pp. ISBN 0071422684, US\$14.95).

It was a tall order for Bill Walsh to improve on *Lapsing into a Comma*. Not the book itself—which was fine but far from exhaustive—it was that winsome title that seemed to defy a worthy pun for a sequel. But the title of his second book succeeds in two ways. First, while *Lapsing* focused on finer points of journalistic style for fellow copy editors (Walsh is the copy chief for national news at the *Washington Post*), *Elephants* is hunting big game, or, as Walsh puts it, “the major usage points that educated people sometimes disagree about (or should that be *about which educated people sometimes disagree?*)”

Even better, the title is a play on what many English teachers regard as the owner’s manual for the English language: Strunk and White’s *The Elements of Style*. “Elephants” suggests the pachydermal bearing with which Strunk and White’s book looms over the shoulders of English 101 students, sometimes rendering their writing more rote than written. Walsh challenges the notion that the elephants of *Elements* are huge, immovable objects. He initially claims that *Elements*’ argument against beginning a sentence with *However* is about the only one he finds “unconvincing.” However, he ends up inveighing against various Strunk and White prohibitions, many in his chapter “Lies Your English Teacher Told You.” “I attach a big asterisk to the ‘Omit needless words’ credo from the original *Elements*,” Walsh says. “I like a little writing with my writing,” so long as it isn’t “bright-and-breezy-magaziney.”

Then there’s the split infinitive, the cardinal sin everyone loves to really hate. Trying too hard to keep an infinitive intact can lead to sentences like this one in a 2003 wire story: “Secretary of State Colin Powell said Iraq failed totally to account for its weapons of mass destruction.” (Powell was saying Iraq’s accounting was incomplete.) Move *totally* too far afield, Walsh says, “and the sentence sounds like the work of a thirteen-year-old Valley girl (‘Iraq, like, *totally* failed to account for the weapons!’).” Walsh also says that *none is* sounds “stilted,” as does *it is hoped that* for *hopefully*, and recommends a response

to complaints about your sentence fragments: “So what?”

So although Walsh identifies himself as a curmudgeon, you might call his approach compassionate prescriptivism, or at least flexible fussiness. And while many of his examples come from journalism, he has good advice for anyone looking to stay out of the SIC! SIC! SIC! department of this publication.

Start with Walsh’s chapter on spelling, since, as he quotes the United Press International stylebook, it is important to know *burro*, an ass, from *burrow*, a hole in the ground. If you, like me, suffer constant embar . . . , uh, shame trying to remember how to spell *accommodate*, *aficionado*, *Cincinnati*, *embarrassment*, and *poinsettia*, then bookmark chapter 2. (While you’re at it, highlight *inoculate*, *liaison*, *liquefy*, *millennium*, and *occurrence*.)

When it comes to capitalization, things aren’t as cut-and-dried. It’s *President Jacques Chirac* but should be *French president Jacques Chirac*, Walsh says. *President Ford* becomes *former president Ford* when a new guy takes the oath of office (as if losing an election weren’t belittling enough). “*Congress*, *the Bible* and *the Constitution* are up, but *congressional*, *biblical* and *constitutional* are down.” It’s *herculean* but *Kafkaesque*. Many in the *Victorian* era lived in *spartan* conditions. Go figure.

Speaking of figures, numbers can be another gray area. Newspapers take pains to spell out one through nine, but the *New York Times* makes exceptions for what it calls numbered expressions, including *no. 1*, *chapter 2*, *page 3*, *room 4*, *act 5*, and *size 6*. Walsh throws in *2 percent*, *3 degrees*, *4 pounds*, and *2 to 1 odds*. You have a *5-year-old daughter* but live in a *six-year-old building*. And how many of us Yankees know there’s a difference between an American billion (a thousand millions) and a British billion (a million millions)? The American billion is the British *milliard*.

Walsh is big on hyphens, so as to steer clear of the dreadful place evoked by the report of Nancy Reagan’s visit to *an anti-child abuse center*. And he has more than one opinion on plurals, including the quasi-plurals *data* and *media*, which he says have become collective singulars. Even if *politics* is your favorite sport, remember that your *politics* are your own business. Mr. and Mrs. Jenkins are *the Jenkinse*. It’s the *people’s choice*, but *indigenous peoples’ religions*. Watch out for what Walsh calls the “false singular,” as in a radio ad that asked listeners to “donate a school supply.”



Walsh closes with another installment of “The Curmudgeon’s Stylebook,” where he asks, “How much of the future is foreseeable?” (go with *near future*) and observes, “To call an Afghan an afghani is like calling an American a dollar.” Walsh’s book is a spirited and useful handbook for anyone who knows that being imprecise and inelegant is something to hopefully avoid.

—Nathan Bierma



***Word Myths: Debunking Linguistic Urban Legends***, by David Wilton. (Oxford University Press, 2004. 240 pp. ISBN 0195172841, US\$21.95)

***Ballyhoo, Buckaroo, and Spuds: Ingenious Tales of Words and Their Origins***, by Michael Quinion. (Smithsonian Books, 2004. 280 pp. ISBN 1588342190, US\$19.95)

Every so often, in our bibliophilic journeys, we come across a word or phrase that seems to stick in our minds. Who decides on their meanings? How have these definitions developed over time? And how do we know we’re getting the true story?

Finding these answers is the job of the folk etymologist, a linguistic investigator who looks into all these explanations and attempts to separate fact from fiction.

As luck would have it, there are two new books guaranteed to deliver entertaining theories (some of which may actually be true): Dave Wilton’s *Word Myths: Debunking Linguistic Urban Legends* and Michael Quinion’s *Ballyhoo, Buckaroo, and Spuds: Ingenious Tales of Words and Their Origins*.

Many of the words appear in both books, and the authors’ approaches are alike—up to a point. Both authors also “host” web sites devoted to the fine art of verbal archaeology.

In *Word Myths*, Wilton compares his methodology to those who study what he terms the hard sciences: “Every researcher ... uses a set of tools to verify facts and make new observations.” Those tools in his profession include several varieties of dictionaries: historical, etymological, and “slang,

jargon, and dialectal directories,” as well as other written works.

The problem lies in knowing which ones to trust. Wilton’s particular joy lies in “Debunking the Big Boys” (the title of his first chapter). One such linguistic legend surrounds the origin and meaning of the standard nursery rhyme, “Ring around the Rosey.” Many believe it to be a reference to the Black Death of the Middle Ages. The “rosey” alludes to the skin lesions of those suffering from the plague; the posies are employed to dull the stench of the corpses, the ashes referring to mass cremations.

“Just as a physicist does not claim a hypothesis is true without experimentation and observations, an etymologist does not plump for a story simply because it sounds logical,” Wilton writes regarding this bit of doggerel. Are there other versions? Does the individual word or phrase make sense in the light of deeper investigations? Indeed, he offers several other variations on some.

With good-natured humor, the author recognizes that some might view this picayunishness as being “spoil sport,” but a true scientist doesn’t let the scoffing of naysayers deter him.

Quinion, a contributor to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the editor of *WorldWideWords.org*, presents *Ballyhoo* in a more formal encyclopedic format. Wilton, who, according to the book jacket, has enjoyed an “eclectic career” and is the creator and editor of *Wordorigins.org*, groups his words and phrases by broad categories.

Quinion, who hails from Great Britain, includes a sizable assortment of words taken from British idiom that will doubtless be unfamiliar to many American readers. Not that there’s anything wrong with that; “All mouth and trousers” (Americanized to “all talk and no action”) or “Bob’s your uncle” (lucky stiff), are just two examples.

More so than Wilton, in counterpart, he can be infuriating as he repeats excuses for not having a hard-and-fast answer to where these words came from: “no one knows,” “we’re not sure,” or “who can say.” Both gentlemen offer plausible yet apparently incorrect explanations for many of them, but fail to convincingly state their own rationale. Why *couldn’t* some of these old proffered theories be correct?

Let’s compare a single, simple word that’s a staple of language today, ok? No, that’s the word *ok*, as in “okay, so what word shall we use as an example?”



Wilton devotes six pages to various theories of origin, analyzing claims that:

—It has been attributed to President Andrew Jackson, a notorious misspeller, who wrote “oll kor-rect” instead of “all correct.”

—It was an abbreviation of “old Kinderhook, a nickname for President Martin Van Buren.

—It could have come from any number of languages, including Greek (*olla kalla*), German (*Obert Kommandant*); Scottish (*och aye*), Finnish (*oikea*), and even Native American tongues.

Of all these legends, Wilton believes the presidential anecdotes “are closest to the truth, but still not quite right.”

So what *is* the right answer? “[T]he origin remains a mystery still.”

Thanks a lot.

Quinion calls the feisty little word: “without doubt the best-known and widest-traveled Americanism, used and recognized even by people who hardly know another word of English.” He echoes several of his colleague’s choices and adds a few more, but in a more businesslike three pages, before solemnly declaring it a combination of answers. A Boston political club known as the Anti-Bell Ringing Society, “which campaigned to get a law banning the ringing of dinner bells rescinded [in 1839]. It seems to have been a fanciful way of writing ‘all correct’ that was itself a part of another popular craze of the time for misspellings as a humourous device and that echoes the story about President Jackson from the previous decade.”

What makes the final dispensation all the more confusing is that both authors cite the same source, yet come away with different answers. (Compare this with the relatively sparse explanation of OK in Robert Hendrickson’s *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins* (Facts on File, 1987).)

Before the age of the World Wide Web, people used to avoid work by making photocopies of interesting pieces of insignifica and passing them along to friends and office mates. Before you knew it, discussions based on these articles blossomed into theories and linguistic legends.

These days, thanks to the Internet, far-ranging sources that were heretofore unavailable to the average researcher are now within easy grasp. But this ease can also be a hindrance, Wilton claims, prey to hoaxes perpetuated by the humorous, the bored,

or the malicious. Now we can email the same bit of fluff to our friends, and they to their friends, and the word spreads in geometric increments, and soon the “legend becomes fact.” As a case in point, he devotes a chapter to “the Elizabethan Email Hoax.”

“A prime example,” Wilton writes, was a bit of “internet folklore” entitled *Life in the 1500s*, which included several—inaccurate—theories explaining phrases such as “throw the baby out with the bath-water,” “raining cats and dogs,” and “bring home the bacon,” among others.

The authors also discuss, in their individual styles, the stories behind words based (or not) on people, like *hooker*, the *real McCoy*, and *crapper*; acronyms, such as *AWOL*, *SOS*, and the hip-hop *phat*; and CANOE(s) (technically, “Conspiracy to Attribute Nautical Origins to Everything,” but which Wilton describes as “common patterns in linguistic legendry ... for people to attribute the origins of words and catchphrases to a field that interests them”).

“In the end,” Wilton concludes, “whether these stories are true or whether they are false is not really the point. What is important is the process we use to evaluate them, that we engage the brains nature gave us and examine the evidence and arguments critically.”

“Final answer,” as Regis Philbin might say.

—Ron Kaplan



***Do You Speak American?***, by Robert MacNeil and William Cran. (240 pp. Doubleday, 2005. ISBN 0385511981, US\$23.95)

How ironic is it that the author of a book of American language is Canadian by birth? Yet there is no person more qualified than Robert MacNeil, whose stentorian and authoritarian tones have been a staple of the news world for decades.

Such chauvinism—the philosophy that the way one group (regional, cultural, or age-oriented) speaks is better than others—is a main component of *Do You Speak American?* the companion volume of the PBS



documentary on the development of English across the United States. From coast to coast, MacNeil and his co-author, William Cran, scouted out different voices (literally and figuratively) to learn how words differ according to time and place.

America has been described as both a melting pot, in which different cultures blend together, and a salad bowl, where each component, each nationality, still retains its own characteristics. With all that in mind, how strict can or should language usage be? Some analysts believe we should strive for one “official” voice—“standard American English”—while others cling to their ancestral and social cultures.

John Simon, a New York theater critic and author of *Paradigms Lost* (and, ironically, Yugoslavian by birth), represents the “prescriptivists,” those who believe that there is one proper way to do things linguistically and that modern-day English is “going to the dogs.” In the other corner is Jesse Sheidlower, an editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, champion of the “descriptivist” school of thought, which holds that change is natural and even beneficial. MacNeil and Cran spend the rest of the book seeking to support Sheidlower’s point of view. From Appalachia to hip-hop, from “Valleyspeak” and “surf dude talk,” the American lexicon is ever-expanding,

The slimness of the volume belies its wealth of information. The authors find not only differences between regional dialects, but differences in *perceptions* people have when hearing them. Molly Ivins, the Texas-born syndicated columnist, explained the benefits of “style shifting”—changing one’s vocal mannerisms to appear more intelligent. In the case of people with Texas (or Southern) drawls, she said, “people generally subtract about fifty points from your IQ the minute they hear the accent.”

MacNeil was once a product of such stereotyping himself. He began his adventure with a trip to the small New England town where he was bitten by the acting bug, spending a summer in a “barn theater” some fifty years ago. One of the first things he was told by the troupe’s director was that he would never get far with his Nova Scotian accent. (Canadians must be as tired of people’s clichéd of mimicking their pronunciations—“oot and about in a boat”—as New Yawkers are of hearing “toidy-toid street and toid avenue.”)

From New England, MacNeil followed a Charles Kuralt-ian path as he traveled the country in search

of answers to how the American voice has come to its present state.

The younger generation continues to have a great impact on language, whether it’s the hip-hop culture or the instant messengers who develop their own shorthand (composed mainly of misspelled words) to communicate with one another while they multitask.

As an extension of text messaging, *Do You Speak American* also applies to computers, as engineers design the most ergonomic voices to use in automated systems, such as “smart houses” and automobiles. The psychology that goes into the planning of which sex, race, and age to use as the official “voice” is quite thought-provoking and begs the question, “Who do you want telling you what to do?” (Germans, for example, generally object to female voices in positions of authority.)

The authors get credit for looking at serious issues rather than just coasting on the pop culture train. For example, they explore the phenomenon of “Black English,” and its affect on an African-American community striving for equality and acceptance. “Inner city African Americans talk less like white Americans than they did two and three generations ago.” One telling point comes in an experiment in which an African American researcher applies for an apartment over the phone. In one call he affects an accent that would be described as urban black; in another, he uses a Hispanic voice; and in a third he uses a neutral tone. Guess which persona gets the most positive feedback?

Overall, *Do You Speak American* is both entertaining and informative. One of the drawbacks of such a book is that *reading* cannot have the same impact as watching, or more precisely, listening, to the documentary. No matter how carefully the words are written in dialectic form, what one hears in the “mind’s ear” may not be the same as hearing it with, for lack of a better expression, the “ear’s ear.” Everyone’s perception is different, like describing the experience of vanilla or describing a color.

There remain unanswered questions; perhaps MacNeil and Cran are saving them for their next project.

—Ron Kaplan





## EPISTOLAE

In his enlightening Classical Blather article, “Whatisnames and Thingamajigs” (VERBATIM, Vol. XXIX/2), Nick Humez cites the German slang expression, *das Dingsda* (literally, ‘that thing there’) as an example of an “indeterminate placename.” English equivalents include *anywhere* and *nowhere*.

One use of this locution may be familiar to non-German speakers—or at least those of us who are as passionate about operetta as we are about language and wordplay.

Eduard Künneke’s 1921 operetta, *Der Vetter aus Dingsda* (The Cousin from Nowhere) is in the same genre as *Die Fledermaus* and *The Merry Widow*. The composer’s biggest hit, it was performed throughout Germany and Austria, and, in translation, in London and New York City.

The story is set in Holland. A woman is in love with her cousin, who has been in Batavia (now Jakarta), Indonesia, for the past seven years. To the forlorn female, he is so far away that he might as well be “nowhere.” Then the fellow returns—or does he? In typical light opera fashion, mistaken identities and other complications ensue.

In contrast to the period milieux of most operettas, this one has a contemporary setting (a character mentions going to a movie) and no chorus, giving it the intimacy and charm of a chamber opera.

The score, available on CD, is delightful and melodic. One song, *Ich bin nur ein armer Wandergesell* (“I’m Only a Strolling Vagabond”), became a popular favorite beyond the show itself. Richard Traubner, perhaps the world’s leading authority on operetta, told me that the German libretto and lyrics were unusually sophisticated and clever for their time, presaging the comic dialogue in the films of Lubitsch and others.

*Der Vetter aus Dingsda* is still frequently produced in Germany and other German-speaking countries, although it is not often staged today in the U.S. In August 2002, however, I saw an excellent production at the summer festival of The Ohio Light Opera. Traubner adapted and translated it, and the title became *The Cousin from Batavia*.

Back to the word. As the VERBATIM article notes, *Dingsda* is the source of the colorful American slang word *dingus* (a device or gadget the name of

which is unknown or forgotten). And *Ding an sich* (thing in itself) is a term familiar to every student of philosophy.

According to a friend in Berlin, the word *Dingsda* has fallen into desuetude and is rarely used today. When it is, however, the reference, per the literal translation, is not to a place but to a more tangible object. But *Dingenskirchen*, another term for an indeterminate place, is now in common use. *Kirche* is the German word for church, and the names of many cities and towns end in *-kirchen*.

Don Hauptman  
New York, New York



In her article on Lipograms (VERBATIM XXIX/2) Susan Elkin mentioned the e-less novel by Georges Perec, *La Disparition*, but did not really do it justice in my opinion. This lipogrammatic novel, published in 1969, is a 300-page masterwork of linguistic ingenuity, for the letter *e*, by far the most common letter in French,<sup>1</sup> is used in many of the most common French words (such as *le* (the), *et* (and), *je* (I), and *être* (to be)). But beyond that it is also full of subtle allusions to the absence of the never-used letter *e*, of more or less cryptic references to this conspicuous presence-absence and of clever rewritings of famous texts. Did I say «conspicuous»? Perhaps not so much after all, since at the time it came out some critics supposedly reviewed the book without noticing its most distinguishing feature. Although I’d like to think it is because the text does flow incredibly smoothly despite the self-imposed limitation, this may well be another one of those apocryphal literary anecdotes which are repeated from reference book to linguistic journal article to specialized website.

What is not apocryphal, and arguably an even more awe-inspiring feat than Perec’s original novel, is that the book was actually translated into English! Almost as hopeless a task as “translating” Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* into any language, it adds to the naturally challenging exercise of translation a constraint even more daunting than having to write a whole book without the most frequent letter in the alphabet: having to write it while following another author’s script!



The result, published in 1994<sup>2</sup> by British author and columnist Gilbert Adair under the title *A Void*<sup>3</sup> (HarperCollins Publishers), more than meets the high expectations of bilingual readers. In many cases, Adair manages to stay surprisingly close to the original. Thus, the first sentences of the first chapter:

“Anton Voyl n’arrivait pas à dormir. Il alluma. Son Jaz<sup>4</sup> marquait minuit vingt. Il poussa un profond soupir, s’assit dans son lit, s’appuyant sur son polochon. Il prit un roman, il l’ouvrit, il lut; mais il n’y saisissait qu’un imbroglio confus, il butait à tout instant sur un mot dont il ignorait la signification.”

This becomes:

“Incurably insomniac, Anton Vowl turns on a light. According to his watch it’s only 12.20. With a loud and languorous sigh Vowl sits up, stuffs a pillow at his back, draws his quilt up around his chin,<sup>5</sup> picks up his whodunit and idly scans a paragraph or two; but, judging its plot impossibly difficult to follow in his condition, its vocabulary too whimsically multisyllabic for comfort, throws it away in disgust.”

You may have noticed that the last name of the hero in French is the word *voyelle* (vowel) with all three e’s taken out (as well as one extra l), and that Adair “translated” this into the equivalent *Vowl*. It is this Vow(e)l who disappears early in the book and is being sought by his friends. Did I mention it seems almost impossible that critics could have missed clues as obvious as this one?

On a different but just as enjoyable tack, Perec included in his novel, as one among many potential clues to the whereabouts of his hero, well-known texts supposedly copied by Voyl/Vowl on a manuscript. Of course, these texts have also been «lipogrammed». In French, they are from authors such as Mallarmé (re-christened Mallarmus) and Victor Hugo. Rather than translating texts which would not have been easily recognized by English-speaking readers, Adair calls upon British or American authors, among whom a certain William Shakspar. His contribution seems oddly familiar, doesn’t it:

Living, or not living: that is what I ask:  
If ‘tis a stamp of honour to submit  
To slings and arrows waft’d us by ill winds,  
Or brandish arms against a flood of afflictions,  
Which by our opposition is subdu’d? Dying,  
drowning;

Waking not? And by drowsing thus to thwart  
An aching soul and all th’ natural shocks  
Humanity sustains.”

Don’t be fooled by the apparent facility of the poetic licence which allows the substitution of an apostrophe for some e’s. As Susan Elkin mentioned in the article that triggered this longer-than-anticipated letter, writing meaningful lipograms is much more difficult than may appear at first.<sup>6</sup> If you don’t believe us, you could try “lipogramming” Shelley’s poem *Ozymandias*, and compare it with what Gilbert Adair makes of it in *A Void*. To get you started, here is the first line in the original and the modified versions: “I met a traveller from an antique land”/“I know a pilgrim from a distant land.” As all three parts of Percy Bysshe Shelley’s name contain an e, he is only identified as PBS in the book. For another famous author with a three-pronged name, Adair uses a different and amusing trick: it shouldn’t take you long to figure out who wrote the long poem renamed “Black Bird” using “Arthur Gordon Pym” as a nom de plume, so to speak. I can’t resist giving you another clue however, not only to the author’s identity, but also to Adair’s genius: the same author is also very famous for a tale called “the Purloined Letter,” which strikes me as an incredibly apt hidden reference in a book from which what has disappeared happens to be a letter of the alphabet. Yes, O Ye of Little Faith, it could also just be a very lucky coincidence ...

Both Perec’s *La Disparition* and Adair’s translation are full of many more exciting linguistic and literary subtleties, which I hope you will want to discover yourselves as much as I enjoyed rediscovering them to write this.

To be complete, I should add that *La Disparition* was also translated into Spanish. The book was published by Anagrama in 1997, and it took a team of five translators to do the job.<sup>7</sup> Its title is *El Secuestro*, which translates as “The Kidnapping.” But, I can hear you say, there are three e’s in the title! Aha, yes, but that is because in Spanish, e is usually not considered as the most frequent letter, rather a is.<sup>8</sup> Anybody who is foolhardy enough to undertake such a major task is not going to take the “easy” way out!

Olivier Kaiser

1 In French, listing the most common letters in descending order forms the pronounceable “word” ESARTINULOC, just as in English it reads ETAOIN SHRDLU, as Kathryn Wilkens reminded us in



VERBATIM XXVIII/4. Note that in French the letter e also includes for this particular purpose all its accented forms (é, è, ê and ë), which helps explain why it is so much more common than other letters, but also makes it that much more difficult to omit from any meaningful text.

2 Perec unfortunately could not enjoy it, since he died in 1982.

3 The "proper" translation of "La Disparition" would have been "The Disappearance," but of course there are way too many e's in those two words. The title chosen by Adair is very subtly clever, just as the rest of his translation, since it obviously refers to the void left by the absence of the vowel, but is also pronounced exactly the same as «avoid»: avoiding the darn letter must indeed have been uppermost in his mind when he translated Perec's novel.

4 For those who may wonder why they can't find this word in their French dictionary, it is actually the commercial name of a brand of alarm clocks relatively common in France in the 60's. All common nouns for like devices (réveil, horloge, montre) contain an e, so this is just one of many instances where Perec showed his skill ...

5 No part of this clause can be found in the French original, and it therefore seems perfectly superfluous, but I'm not one to blame Adair for having a little fun on the side!

6 For instance, just the first paragraph of this article contains all the letters of the alphabet with the sole exception of q, and that letter appears as early as the second paragraph.

7 Marisol Andrés, Marcé Burrel, Marc Parayre, Hermes Salceda and Regina Vega.

8 I understand this is disputed however, and indeed the only frequency list I could find for Spanish puts e before a as follows: EAOINS RLDTCU. Frequency lists are in fact often subject to variations according to the source. This is most likely because the only way to come up with such a list is to first find or create a reference text, and then to let a computer do the math. Which obviously means that the frequency will heavily depend on the reference text, both in terms of length to achieve critical size from a statistical perspective, and in terms of contents (it should ideally be a mixture of styles, including colloquial, technical, poetical and literary sources). The French list mentioned in footnote 1 is the best-known one, and the one used by Perec in other word games he created, but it is just as likely that it was arrived at because it is conveniently pronounceable in French (and therefore easy to memorize) as that it was the true outcome of scientific computation.

United States Postal Service Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation. Form 3526, October 1999. Includes fields for publication title, frequency, circulation data, and contact information for Erin McKeane.

Solutions to Cryptic Crossword 98 ACROSS 1. PAS + TRAM + I (rev.) 5. WAMPUM (middle letters) 10. R + URAL 11. S(NATCH)ING 12. Q(UI(BL)E) (e) 13. BAR + NOW + L 14. (P)ASHER 15. M(ILKS)OP 18. S(O)ANDS + O 20. CONGA (Tonga, changing T) 22. E(XOTIC)A (toxic anag.) 24. S(TIP)END 25. PATRICIAN (anag.) 26. AZTEC (as tech hom.) 27. S(h)p + R(AT)S 28. S(O)U(R)NS DOWN 1. PAR(A)QUAT 2. S(TRA)IGHTS + HOOTER (ant rev.) 3. RO(L + LB)AR 4. M(IST)ER + MED 6. (J)AC(k) + CORDS 7. POISON-PEN LETTER (anag.) 8. (S)MUGGLE 9. WIL-IAM Butler 16. LO(O)K(S)INTO (lohon anag.) 17. PAD + DOCKS 19. ANIMIST (anag.) 20. CHIC + A + GO 21. SYSTEM POSITively 23. A + XIS (rev.)

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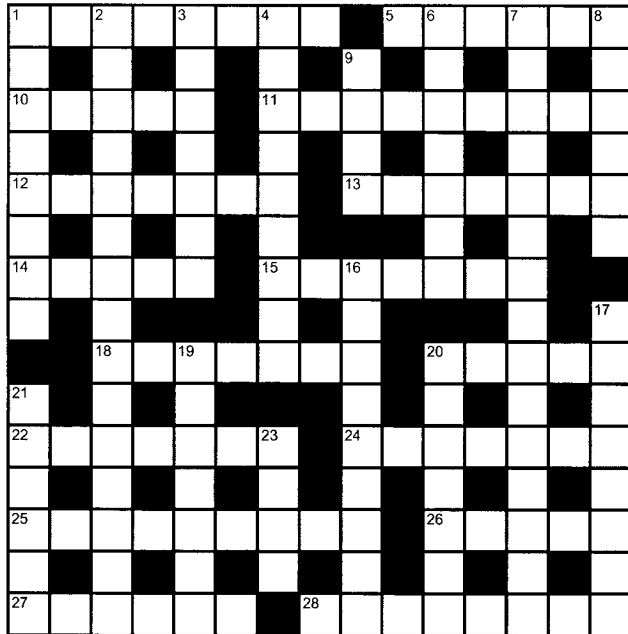
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### Across

- 1 I store juice, crawfishes, smoked brisket (8)
- 5 Money centers in Antwerp had promise despite tough times (6)
- 10 Red River country (5)
- 11 Seizing and of course stuffing troll (9)
- 12 Carp circling barrel, nearly silent (7)
- 13 Bird in pub immediately left (4,3)
- 14 Jacob's son, a sprinter, surrenders lead (5)
- 15 Wimp of sorts sporting charwoman's equipment (7)
- 18 Someone unnamed polishes off about a pint (2-3-2)
- 20 Dance from Polynesian nation, newly introduced (5)
- 22 Strange things, each filled with toxic plastic (7)
- 24 Allowance or gratuity accepted by cast (7)
- 25 Aristocratic pair actin' stupid (9)
- 26 A Mesoamerican state thought to be technological (5)
- 27 Herring shop's empty, darn it (6)
- 28 Day in Paris added to children's vacations (8)

### Down

- 1 Herbicide lot injected with bluish color (8)
- 2 Honest John, spectacles on schnozzola, admitting craft capsized (8,7)
- 3 Invest 50 pounds in full sound protection for auto occupants (7)
- 4 Sir, medicine's improperly labelled (9)
- 6 Jack unwrapped cables for some Hondas (7)
- 7 A malicious communication let opponent's ire spread (6-3,6)
- 8 After initiation, secretly bring in a non-wizard to Harry Potter (6)
- 9 Something stuck in William Butler Yeats's foot? (4)
- 16 Investigates approvals given to adulterated lotion (5,4)
- 17 Exercise areas and stuff where ships unload (8)
- 19 A pagan saint? I'm confused (7)
- 20 Stylish actress's head shot for Oscar-winning film (7)
- 21 System positively displaying rates of speed (6)
- 23 1/3 of Satan's number start to advocate building evil alliance (4)