



Slayer Slang (Part 2)

Michael Adams
Albright College

Buffy the Vampire Slayer (BTVS), a recent teen television hit, coins slang terms and phrases in nearly every episode, many of them formed in the usual ways, some of them at the crest of new formative tendencies, and some of them interesting, not only lexically, but morpho-syntactically.

Besides contributing items to the slang lexicon, slayer slang intensifies current formative practices in slang: it glories in them, certainly, but it also constitutes, by exaggerating them, a critique of those practices. For instance, the writers acknowledge that slang increasingly trades on references to popular culture by shifting proper names into other parts of speech, both verbs and adjectives. Thus Xander asks, "Does anyone feel like we've been *Keyser Sozed*?" after the character in *The Usual Suspects*, when he means 'tricked, manipulated.' Afraid that Halloween will get out of hand, Xander remarks, "Halloween quiet? I figured it would have been a big ole vamp *Scareapalooza*," from the alternative rock festival Lollapalooza; similarly he argues, "Look, you wanna do *Guiltapalooza*, fine, but I'm done with that." "I cannot believe that you of all people are trying to *Scully* me," he says when one of his companions exercises a little skepticism.

Xander is not the only character who watches television and rents videos. Concerned about the robot boyfriend's influence over her mother, Buffy worries to Willow that "Mom has been totally different since he's been around." "Different like happy?" Willow asks. No, says Buffy, "Like *Stepford*." Men, Faith surmises, in a different conversation, are the less dynamic sex. "Every guy, from *Manimal* to *Mr. I-Love-The*

This is the second part of an article that began in the Summer 1999 issue.

English Patient has beast in him," she warns Buffy, not that Buffy takes Faith's judgments at face value. Sometimes she's sympathetic: "I know Faith's not gonna be on the cover of *Sanity Fair*, but she had it rough." At other times, she's less inclined to be charitable. Buffy's mother, who likes Faith, questions Buffy's mounting criticism: "Does anybody else think Faith is creepy?" "No," Buffy concedes, "But I'm the one getting *single-white-female* here."

Buffy even memorializes some of her school assignments in slayer slang. She resists door-to-door candy sales to support the marching band as diplomatically as she can: "I'm sure we love the idea of going all *Willy Loman*, but we're not in the band." Buffy is not a particularly diligent student and seems not to have understood much about *Death of a Salesman* from Cliffs Notes, but literature is not the primary source of her vocabulary, anyway. She hears patterns in language and reproduces them in slayer slang. For instance, though inattentive during chemistry class, she remembers the sound of phrases like "oxidation reduction reaction" and bends the sound to suit her own slangy purposes: "Before we were going out," her almost boyfriend Scott muses, "you seemed so full of life, like a force of nature. Now you just seem distracted all the time." "I'm getting better, honest," Buffy reassures him, "In fact, from here on, you're going to see a *drastic distraction reduction*. *Drastic distraction reduction* . . . Try saying that ten times fast." Or maybe this phrase is less a deft malapropism than imitation psychoanalytic jargon, for it's Faith, not Buffy, who resists therapeutic regimens: "I don't wanna get all *twelve-steppy*," she warns, while admitting



©VERBATIM®, The Language Quarterly, 1999, Vol. XXIV, No. 4 Autumn 1999. (ISSN 0162-0932).

VERBATIM is a trademark reg. U.S. Pat. Off. VERBATIM is mailed quarterly from 1002 S. 12th Street, Louisville, Kentucky, 40210 USA, and at P.O. Box 156, Chearsley, Aylesbury, Bucks HP18 0DQ, England.

POSTMASTER: send address changes to VERBATIM, 1209 Dundee Avenue, Suite 8, Elgin, IL 60120-2256 (800-554-7470)

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

email: editor@verbatimmag.com

web page: <http://www.verbatimmag.com>

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

For subscriptions in North America (US\$25) or anywhere else not covered above (US\$30), please write VERBATIM, 1209 Dundee Avenue, Suite 8, Elgin, IL 60120-2256 (800-554-7470), or email: editor@verbatimmag.com.

Benefactor: Dr. Warren Gilson

Editor: Erin McKean

Founding Editor: Laurence Urdang

Editorial Consultant: Paul Heacock

UK Representative: Hazel Hall

Copy Editor: Lorraine Alexson

Crosswords Editor: Pamela Wylder

VERBATIM, The Language Quarterly, is published four times a year: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Autumn. VERBATIM is owned by Word, Inc., a non-profit corporation registered in Wisconsin, USA.

Contributions: VERBATIM will publish articles, anecdotes, squibs, letters, and other materials at the discretion of the Editor. If at all possible, please send your submission as an email attachment. Unless accepted for publication, unsolicited submissions will be neither returned nor acknowledged unless return postage is provided by the sender. Queries by email are STRONGLY recommended. Send queries or articles to the Chicago or UK address above.

that she may be an overly enthusiastic killer, a candidate for *Slayers Anonymous*.

Buffy seems especially attracted to words with a retro sound: a vampire forever trapped in 'Seventies garb is *Slutorama*, her boyfriend *Disco Dave*; and while trying to reassure Xander that she's his reliable friend, she sounds a bit like a late-night television commercial: "I'm here for you Xand. I'm *Support-o-gal*." When Faith admires her for her pent-up anger, Buffy demurs: "I mean, you really got some quality rage going," Faith congratulates her, "Really gives you an edge." "*Edge girl*. Just what I always wanted to be," says Buffy, fusing contemporary "Edge" culture with the much earlier *It girl*. Of course, this

"Edge girl. Just what I always wanted to be."

impressive range of cultural reference reflects, not Buffy's command of twentieth-century cultural history, but the combined allusive tendencies of several writers and directors. Such collaboration has established *BTVS* as the mint in which items of current teen slang are struck, mass-produced, and then passed nationwide.

The show likes to push certain formative tendencies to the extreme and, in such mimicry, aptly describes current slang, though particular items thus produced are unlikely to enter the general slang lexicon. For instance, like the core English lexicon, slang considers *-free* a more or less infinitely productive suffix. *Carefree*, formed to replace an archaic sense of *careless*, begat such forms as *guilt-free*, a synonym for *guiltless*, and such forms in turn begat a tribe of advertising words, like *sugarfree*, that have gradually superseded their *-less* counterparts. Buffy and her companions variously describe themselves as *destiny-free*, *move-free*, and, most interesting in this list, *fester-free* and *glib-free*, which push the envelope a little by combining *-free* with verbs and adjectives, previously unlikely parts of speech.

The prefix *un-* is similarly productive: some-



thing that isn't *cool* also isn't °*warm*, but is uncool; a soft drink that contains no cola isn't called, say °*citrusade*, but the *Un-cola*. By analogy, then, Buffy admonishes Giles, "C'mon, Giles, budge. No one likes an *unbudger*;" and Willow can say of Giles, "Actually, he was *unmad*." Though not especially clever or descriptive, such words may reflect meanings inadequately conveyed in the standard lexicon: when one is *unmad*, one certainly isn't angry, but there's no reason to assume that one is happy, either; so the word mediates two common emotional states, and thus identifies a third. Such unusual uses of the prefix *un-* are reinforced by vocabulary specific to vampires. When Drusilla, a recurring vampire character, sends her erstwhile boyfriend, Spike, what Cordelia, in another circumstance, calls a *dump-o-gram*, he petulantly observes, "Yeah, I've got an *unlife*, you know," not a comment on how empty his life will be once she's left it, but an apt description of a vampire's very existence.

At least since Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), vampires have been called the *Undead*, any vampire could be called an *undead*, and vampires have been attributively *undead*. Parallels with *unmad* are obvious: *undead* and *unlife* signify the state that is NEITHER dead NOR alive. And *dead* is just as unlikely to take the prefix *un-* as *mad*, so *undead* sets a precedent for unusual instances of that prefixation in slayer slang. It also generates a sly criticism of so-called political correctness: "You're a vampire," Buffy reminds Angel in the course of an argument, "Or is that an offensive term? Should I say "Undead-American?"

While the prefix *un-* precisely distinguishes exotic states from familiar ones, other prefixes reflect adolescent attitudes best in muddier meanings. In "I Do," the hit single from her album *Firecracker* (1997), Lisa Loeb sings, "I'm tired of overthinking." I suppose that one can think too much or too often about a particular subject at a particular time, yet I am unconvinced that *overthinking* is possible in general; rather, I suspect that the word reflects a frequent adolescent concern, sometimes recovered by adults: an

Table of Contents

Autumn 1999

Slayer Slang, Part 2

Michael Adams

more examination of a pop culture phenomenon and language-making machine (p. 1)

Between the Parentheses: A Pron Chick Reports from the Front Lines

Rima McKinzey

How are dictionary pronunciations made? Rest assured, it's nothing like making sausage. (p. 7)

Primer

David Galef

a poem, but not an epicede (p. 9)

Horribile Dictu

Mat Coward

the "issue" of African-American (p. 10)

Avoiding Offense

John Morris

what constitutes offensive language? (p. 11)

On the Use of *Niggardly*

Sol Saporta

what constitutes offensive language? (p. 13)

Classical Blather: *Money Talk(s)*

Nick Humez

but what does it say? (p. 14)

The Foreignnym

Jim Behling

another -nym word (p. 18)

Menckenisms

William S. Haubrich

words loved by the great writer (p. 20)

Bibliographia

The Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar and Word Usage: Authoritative Answers to Today's Grammar and Usage Questions (p. 27)

The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English (p. 28)

Encarta World English Dictionary (p. 30)

Plus various SICS! and EPISTOLAE



unwillingness to think as hard as certain situations in life demand or deserve. In the same year, Buffy would say of a character that “He’s not exactly one to *overshare*.” *Overshare*, formed along the same lines as *overthinking*, compactly and neutrally expresses the act of being stingy (with things or information, etc.), for which standard English has no word, and for which the slang lexicon in the past depended on pejoratives, like *jew*. But this meaning is produced at the level of the sentence, primarily as a matter of tone, namely, sarcasm. In any literal sense, it’s difficult to conceive what it would mean for someone to *overshare*, or how an observer could judge that, though one had shared adequately, that is, just short of *oversharing*, one somehow had shared too little. Imprecise or illogical words usually express psychologically imprecise states, like hopes, fears, and disappointments, but this criticizes neither such words nor their speakers, because the words perfectly convey incompletely rationalized but nonetheless real experience.

Slayer slang not only imitates and extends current formative tendencies; it also self-consciously, even affectionately, mocks them. The suffix *-age* is used often in the history of English to indicate notions of collection (*sewerage*, *baggage*), relationship (*parentage*), the result of an action, usually formed from the relevant verb (*wreckage*), payment (*linage*), or residence (*vicarage*, *parsonage*), among others. *-Age* pervades our vocabulary, contributing items variously necessary and redundant, graceful and infelicitous: *brokerage*, *orphanage*, *postage*, *foliage*, *plumage*, *steerage*, *clearage*, *prunage*, *leafage*, *poundage*, *blockage*, *breakage*, *personage*, *vicinage*, *girderage*, *vagabondage*, and *fruitage*, to name a few of the more obvious. The *Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* mentions early instances of *-age* in slang, for instance, *dressage*, *understandage*, and *workage*. The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* demonstrates the absurd lengths to which this suffix has taken us, drawing heavily on Eble’s *College Slang 101* (1989) for examples: jocular student use has

guaranteed *-age*’s legacy to slang in items like *studyage*, *rainage*, *bookage*, *snowage*, *foodage*, *neckage* ‘necking,’ *babage*, and *fundage*.

How, then, could Buffy resist the tendency? Buffy frequently excuses herself with, “Sorry I’m late. I had to do some unscheduled *slayage*.” Enough *slayage* leads, as Buffy says, to “world *saveage*.” Cordelia denominates killing with sharp instruments *sliceage*. But not all words formed with *-age* refer specifically to the slayer’s trade: Buffy asks Willow, “Hey, speaking of *wow-potential*, there’s Oz over there. What are we thinking, any *sparkage*?” And Oz eloquently resists the *sparkage* he and Willow both feel on their first date: “It’s, like, freeze frame. Willow *kissage*—but I’m not going to kiss you.” Viewers, though uninspired by words coined with *un-* and *over-*, appreciate and experiment with *-age*: a pacifist writing on a Buffy-related posting board reminds us that “there is no profit in *slayage*.” A page on the same website devoted to plugs and plugging is titled “Pluggage!” and a page on another is called “Written Not Scene: After Script *Slayage*,” both of which develop this standard feature of slayer slang.

Slang often impresses us with its efficiency, nowhere better expressed than in its rampant tendency to clip. Thus vampires are usually *vamps* on the show and in much writing about the show, not only in Buffy-related books and comics, but in the mainstream press, for instance, the pseudo-political magazine, *George Vamp*, in turn, yields novel derivatives, as in *vampy* and *henv vamp*. Several well-known phrasal verbs are regularly, though not exclusively, clipped, too: teens in Sunnydale, like many across America, though dictionaries haven’t yet caught up with them, *flake* rather than *flake out*, *freak* rather than *freak out*, *wig* rather than *wig out*, *bail* rather than *bail out*, *get messed* rather than *messed up*, *team* rather than *team up*, and *deal* rather than *deal with*.

The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* includes early citations for *freak* (not for its slayer slang derivative, *power-freaked*,



though) and *messed*, but it's unlikely that speakers realize that the supposedly clipped forms are, in these cases, actually original forms more or less obliterated by the success of the complementary phrases; in other words, from the vantage of those using slang today, such forms ARE clipped from their immediate predecessors, regardless of their earlier incarnations. *Creep*, from *creep out*, *flake*, and *wig*, all formed by analogy with *freak* and the relatively recent *deal* are missing from most or all slang dictionaries, as are their derivatives, for instance, *wiggy*, *wigged*, *wiggins*, and *maxi-wig*, any or all of which may be slayer slang, but which may also be current American teen slang first "published" in the show. Similarly unrecorded is *genius*, probably clipped from *ingenious* and respelled, though the spelling may indicate a shift from noun to adjective.

Willow and Oz sometimes employ elliptical items that also participate in the general tendency to abbreviate forms, for instance, "So I'd *still*, if you'd *still*." "I'd *still*. I'd very *still*," and "Do you like it?" "I *like*. I more than *like*," a speech habit perhaps learned from the film *Heathers* (1988), which includes elliptical *very*, as in "How *very*" and "Don't worry, Ram's been so sweet lately, consoling me and stuff—it'll be *very*," or formed by analogy with the now ubiquitous elliptical *with*.

Borrowed from popular culture, prefixed, suffixed, and clipped, slayer slang takes a snapshot of current American teen slang and its formative practices; but slayer slang also includes unexpectedly novel items. For instance, the writers shift adjectives to nouns more frequently than is generally the case. Sometimes the shift operates on a slang item, as in "Just seeing the two of you kissing after everything that happened, I leaned towards *the postal*." But such shifts mostly reinvigorate common items from the standard lexicon: "If Angel's doing something wrong," Xander insists, "I want to know—'cause it gives me a *happy*"; "Stop with *the crazy*; go talk to Angel," Willow suggests; "Relax, Will," Buffy reassures her, "I was making with *the funny*";

Reliable, Accurate, Unique English Language Reference Books

VERBATIM Books

- Word for Word \$39.95
- Private Lives of English Words \$34.95
- Numerical Intrigue \$34.95
- Names & Nicknames Places & Things \$6.95
- Suffixes \$34.95
- Prefixes \$49.95
- Picturesque Expressions \$39.95
- Colonial American English \$24.95
- A Grammar of the English Language
 - Vol. I: Parts of Speech \$29.95
 - Vol. II: Syntax \$32.95
 - Both Volumes \$60.00
- VERBATIM: Volumes I & II \$20.00
- VERBATIM: Volumes III & IV \$20.00
- VERBATIM: Volumes V & VI \$20.00
- VERBATIM: Index to Volumes I to VI \$20.00
- VERBATIM: Volumes I to VI & Index \$70.00

*For details about these useful
English language reference books
see our catalogue at:*

www.verbatimbooks.com

VERBATIM Books
4 Laurel Heights, VM
Old Lyme, CT 06371



“What’s with *the grim?*” asks Xander; “Love makes you do *the wacky,*” Buffy pronounces, and isn’t it the truth?

Slayer slang’s most impressive, and subversive, innovation is a newly vigorous adverbial *much*. Colloquial English already recognizes this use, blurring former distinctions between *much*, *a lot*, and *often*. Most of us are comfortable saying, “Do you go to the movies *much?*” or, skeptically of someone who has just tripped, “Walk *much?*” Thus we readily accept such slayer slang as “Having issues *much?*” and “Over-identify *much?*” The tacit rule allows terminal adverbial *much* when it modifies a verb or verb phrase. But in slayer slang the possibilities are apparently end-

unattested *crush v.* Similarly, a participant on a *BTVS* posting board wonders of her obsession for a favorite actor, “Fetish *much?*”

Now that Cordelia has let the cat out of the bag, *Mademoiselle* sees no limit for *much*: “Q: My ex-fiancé is getting married in two weeks. Now I realize I still love him. Should I tell him? . . . A: Meanwhile, *My Best Friend’s Wedding/Friends much?*” Perhaps few will employ Cordelia’s *much* so inexplicably, but less flamboyant uses, supported by the show’s popularity and by major print publications, could find a place in general American slang.

Unlike *much*, many items of slayer slang will never permeate the barrier between television

“Hockey season gives me a really big happy, too.”

less, and the rule altered radically, if not dispensed with altogether. Cordelia, episode after episode, proves herself the mistress of *much*, and she prefers to combine it with adjectives, as in “Pathetic *much?*” and “Morbid *much?*” Only once before, to my knowledge, has *much* modified simple attribution: in *Heathers*, a film that apparently impressed itself on the *BTVS* writing team’s collective memory, a character asks, “Jealous *much?*”

Cordelia’s *much* serves a dual purpose, as she questions both whether the person of whom she inquires is morbid OFTEN, and also whether that person is GREATLY morbid or GREATLY pathetic. In context, she cares about frequency only obliquely; she is most concerned to find superfluous morbidity or patheticness at that moment, and her novel *much* saves her from having to invent words like “patheticness” to express that concern. Cordelia’s *much* has captured the imaginations of many viewers, some of them notably influential. One posting board participant muses about an actress who appeared in a minor role, “Typecast *much?*” the typical construction. But the 1998 *Seventeen Guys Issue* opens an article with the headline, “Crush *much?*” which either collocates *much* with a noun for the first time, or newly shifts the well-attested *crush n* to

and the American slang lexicon. Yet many items already have: besides *much*, clipped *freak* appears on a *BTVS*-related posting board, as does *happy n*: “Hockey season gives me a really big happy, too.” As already mentioned, so do words formed with *-age*, a tribute to *Buffy*’s exaggerated use of an otherwise too common suffixation. One website has used *smoochies*, another *kissage*; one posting board participant forms *not-daughter* from the show’s *not-boyfriend*, and another signs herself, among other things, “Hopes to one day be 5 x 5 with Faith.” Many websites include pages of *Buffy*-isms, *Willow*-isms, *Xander*-isms, and *Cordelia*-isms, while fan books and magazines include the same, and/or compile glossaries of slayer slang. Viewers clearly enjoy slayer slang; they not only listen to it, read it, and repeat it, but develop it. And with so many published points of departure, it’s likely that some items coined for the show will achieve more general use. The Web allows viewers to share slang they have just heard, and would otherwise likely forget, with a huge international audience; slang items reproduced on the Web enter public awareness swiftly and, just because they have left conversation for a literate medium, with greater than usual force. In other words, the Web spreads slang more



quickly and, in some cases, more durably than conventional word-of-mouth. And though *undead* is a relatively old word, and *vamp* unlikely to find contexts at any distance from a Hellmouth, *Rolling Stone*, *Spectrum*, *George*, *Details*, and *In Style* magazines have all published the former in their accounts of the show, and *George* has picked up the latter, as well. All of this linguistic activity—creation, alteration, and transmission—reminds us that, while slayer slang may provide a snapshot of current American teen slang, slang and language generally demand a moving picture. As Buffy would say, slayer slang “is all part of the glamorous world of vampire slayage.” But soon it may not belong only to that world, as some of the “unchosen” have already begun to prove.

EPISTOLA

This may be of interest to you, or your readers:
 A man walked into a bar in Ancient Rome.
 “Martinus and lemonade please,” he asked.
 “Don’t you mean Martini and lemonade?”
 asked the barman.
 “No,” said the man, “If I’d wanted more than one, I’d have said so!”

A pleasing, though unlikely tale, serves to introduce a similar, but sadly true, story from my time when I served with the Royal Air Force in Berlin. Our daily toil resulted in the production by each airman of a Technical Summary of activity, which was submitted at day’s end for analysis.

These Technical Summaries became known, not surprisingly perhaps, as “Techsums.”

On one delicious occasion our Commanding Officer, who arguably should have known better, felt it necessary to post a notice for all to see which read:

“In the future completed techsa are to be filed by 23.59 hrs.”

Thank you for VERBATIM, it is a joy to read.

Roger N. Taylor
Roger.N.Taylor@tesco.net

Between the Parentheses: A Pron Chick Reports from the Front Lines

Rima McKinzey
Rkm@slip.net

Thanks primarily to Dutch printers, English spelling does not match pronunciation: you’ve seen the poem *The Chaos*, by G. Nolst Trenit, a.k.a. Charivarius (1870–1946), bemoaning the non-intuitive pronunciations of English, which begins:

Dearest creature in creation
 Studying English pronunciation.

I will teach you in my verse

Sounds like corpse, corps, horse, and worse,
 and that “ough” can be pronounced nine different ways. (We’ll ignore the “ghoti” as *fish* issue here.)

You’ll hear no bemoaning from me.

Dictionary publishers hire me to do the pronunciation editing of new or new editions of American English dictionaries precisely *because* English pronunciation can be unpredictable.

I am a pronunciation editor, or orthoepist. When I tell people what I do for a living, I get one of three standard responses. One is surprise that anybody actually does this, and that they never knew anyone else who did. This one is kind of fun. The second is concern: “Will you be correcting everything I say?” (I don’t correct anyone unless asked.) The third is an accusatory-sounding, “My, you must have a very large vocabulary.” My vocabulary then regresses to four words and I can no longer get out a coherent sentence. I was very relieved to learn that other dictionary editors have the same reaction to these responses.

VERBATIM’s editor, though, had a non-standard response: she wanted to know the details. How does a pronunciation editor decide what to put into the parentheses?

Step One: Check the Relevant Sources What do previous editions have as the pronunciation? If a sense of an entry word is being added or



changed, does the new definition require a new pronunciation? Sometimes, an entry with the same etymology requires a different pronunciation that has been previously overlooked. For example, *chador*. In most dictionaries, it is pronounced CHUD er (rhyming with SHUD der). The etymology is Hindi, meaning a large shawl or scarf. However, the more common usage today refers to the long, black covering worn by Muslim women in Iran. In this context, it should be pronounced chah DAWR (rhyming with bah MORE). At this writing, I think only the *American Heritage Dictionary* (3rd ed.) has recognized this.

Older dictionaries sometimes demonstrate how pronunciation has changed over the years. Pronunciations usually change slowly and dictionaries are relatively conservative, with a fine, though often squiggly, line drawn between the “prescriptivists” and “descriptivists.” However, stress may shift; *exquisite* previously was stressed only on the first syllable, but now is almost exclusively stressed on the second. Variants may disappear. Most dictionaries still reflect the regional variants of entries such as *hoarse*, i.e., hawrse/hohrse, but this variant is disappearing among younger speakers even within those areas where it was previously the norm. The same may be said for losing the distinction between *which/witch* or *whale/wail*.

Step Two: Do Original Research If the entry is a new one, and particularly if it is in a specialized field (as the majority of new entries are), I call someone who uses the term. Much of my time is spent on the phone. I have a wall full of Post-it®s with numbers of resources I have collected over the years. Want a speaker of Finnish? I’ve got one. A professor of pharmacology? A mineralogist? Botanist? An expert in pesticides? Horsemanship? Medieval arms and armory? Just check my wall. I call computer people for computer terminology, pharmaceutical companies and doctors and pharmacists for medical terminology and drugs, foreign consulates for currency terms, and even called the New Orleans shop that created the Muffaletta sandwich (rhymes with poof a JETta).

Step Three: Formulate the Pronunciation Style The specific symbols used to denote speech sounds (diacritics) vary with each dictionary. Choosing the symbols invoke many stylistic decisions made, after some discussion, by the dictionary’s senior editors. American dictionaries have settled into self-pronouncing orthographic style, despite an occasional academic’s paper on how IPA (the International Phonetic Alphabet) should be used. The pronunciation is as close to the actual spelling of the entry word as possible, since most dictionary users have not learned IPA and have great difficulty even with the limited diacritics already used in the “pron” field. The relatively recent use of the schwa (ə), an enormously effective and useful symbol, caused many letters to be written about why the dictionary had so many pronunciations with an upside down *e*.

Variants are a major obstacle to using IPA. British dictionaries, with Received Pronunciation, don’t generally reflect any variants. American dictionaries, however, attempt to reflect the various pronunciations considered acceptable throughout the country. When the variants are common enough, they are given in the pron field. When they are not, the self-pronouncing aspect of the pron code, i.e., *a* as in *cat*, will enable the user to pronounce the entry within his/her normal speech pattern. IPA, on the contrary, is one symbol/one sound. It would be not only an enormous task, but take up more room than is reasonable in a finite publication, to reflect all acceptable pronunciation variants using IPA symbols. Of course, Bloomsbury (and Microsoft) have recently tried to do just this (in their *Encarta World English Dictionary*) for the entire English speaking world!

Each dictionary has somewhat different stylistic considerations and therefore different requirements. ESL (English as a Second Language) dictionaries, for instance, use more IPA symbology because IPA is taught more in other countries, since other languages do not have the variants in pronunciation and spelling that English does. On the other hand, ESL dictionaries, to keep things simple, do not give as many pronunciation vari-



ants, while unabridged editions have more room for variants than do college editions.

What decisions are made? What is included? What is left out? Often, the most pressing considerations are those of space, budget, and deadline. A more limited budget would mean less time spent on any given aspect, such as research time. Limited space would mean fewer variants. A closely approaching deadline would also have an impact on research time, possible variants, whether or not to pronounce run-ons, multiple word entries, hyphenated entries, or use cut-backs.

Style also affects the variants. In what order should they be placed? The usual method is for the more common pron to be first, followed by a comma and any variants. This is still a two-dimensional medium, and therefore even if variants are equally common, one must come first. A common misperception is that the first variant is the “preferred” variant. No, no, no. It is only the most common, or the first entered because one pron cannot be printed over another (not if it is to be legible, anyway).

Some dictionaries decide that the older pron should come first, some the newer. Some dictionaries give the more informal pron first, followed by the more formal. All decide in which order the commonly given variants will appear. All are acceptable.

Step Four: Encode the Pron My talent is the ability to translate the actual sounds people use (as opposed to those that people think are being used) into the specific diacritical style. Will the *a* in *cat* be represented as an *a*? an *a* with a breve? the digraph *æ*? When I give a pronunciation for a foreign entry, I use the Jerk Rule: When you use this word (or phrase), you may not sound native, but you shouldn’t sound like a jerk, either.

As long as the language continues to evolve, as long as new terms are created, used, and entered into the language, as long as English continues to be somewhat unintuitive in its pronunciation, I’ll still be needed. And can occasionally pull rank!

[*Rima McKinzey, as she admits above, is an orthoepist living in California.*]

Primer

David Galef
Oxford, Mississippi

The *epigram*’s a pithy saying,
Full of paradox and wit.
The *epithet*’s a brief description,
A clever name that scores a hit.
The *epigraph*’s a type of preface,
Like the lead-in to a writ.
The *epitaph* is seen on tombstones,
Related to who’s under it.
All four are commonly confused,
But in each usage, three don’t fit.

EPISTOLA

I hope that you or VERBATIM readers can advise me of a word about which I’ve been queried. What is the word to describe the use of a trade name, like *Xerox*, as a verb—for example, “Xerox this letter.” Is there such a word?

Milton Horowitz

Jackson Heights, New York

[*Thanks to Fred Shapiro for pointing out that this is called generification.—Ed.*]

In our house there was no higher compliment for an outstanding meal than my grandfather leaning back, loosening his belt and proclaiming the feast “Spongotius!” (say spun-GOAT-e-us)

Growing up I said it and found myself embarrassed when someone called attention to the fact that they had never heard of the word. Now that I am older and wiser I find it charming to think that my grandfather might have invented the word.

I have searched but never found anything close. I have even looked in Gaelic dictionaries as he and we are of Irish descent.

Donald Foy

Atlanta, Georgia

[*Readers, please write to VERBATIM with information about spongotius.—Ed.*]



HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, Britain

Americans, it sometimes seems, consider words more dangerous than guns. On BBC TV, during the 1999 Wimbledon tennis championships, Chris Evert said of one player that she had “been to you-know-what and back.” Evert had obviously forgotten that on this occasion she was addressing an audience of heathen Britons, who are capable of hearing the word *hell* uttered on the airwaves without burning down any public buildings. And, hey—shouldn’t that be you-know-*where*?

One of the *issues* this column plans to deal with (I’ll be giving *issues* a bloody good spanking soon; please send me your favourite examples) is the belief that all ugly and absurd English usages originate in the USA. Even most American-language lovers seem ready to accept this prejudice, but I refuse to believe that the rest of the anglophone world is guilty of nothing worse than replicating American sins. As always, I rely on readers to supply the evidence.

Mr E. A. Livingston of Glendale, New York, tells me that his “pet peeve in neologisms will not pertain in the UK as it is strictly an Americanism.”

He’s wrong, as it happens; the absurd and insulting *African-American* is proving disturbingly transplantable. In an interview in a UK newspaper (*The Mirror*, 3 August 1999), Iman (“the first ever black supermodel”) spoke of her attempts to give “ethnic girls” a start in modelling, and her frustration that in multi-ethnic London “all the pictures sent to me were of African-American or Caribbean girls. Where were all the Asians, Indian, Pakistani girls who live here?”

This reminds me of a story which I had previously supposed was apocryphal: an American TV reporter is said to have described Nelson Mandela as “the leader of South Africa’s African-Americans.” She knew she wasn’t allowed to say

black; she also knew that Comrade Mandela was not (at that time) the leader of South Africa’s whites. What was she to do, poor thing?

As Mr Livingston points out, A-A is more than just irritating and clumsy: it is misleading and inaccurate. It includes, but does not intend to include, white Africans (and their descendants?) who have emigrated to the USA. It excludes, but does not intend to exclude, Americans of Caribbean descent, and black Africans living in America who are not US citizens.

If used as a straight synonym of *black*, then A-A is frankly imperialistic; apart from anything else, where is this country called Africa? There are similar problems with *Native American* when used to describe a Navajo born overseas to American parents, but not a white child born in America. In any case, it was only ever for the convenience of white settlers that a single term was needed to encompass the many discrete tribes and nations of North America, whether it be “Red Indian” or “Native American”. Why not call a Cherokee a Cherokee, just as an Italian is an Italian and not a “European”? (And while we’re at it, could Americans please stop referring to everyone who lives in the British Isles as “English”? Thanks awfully.) In Britain, it is often noted, a black person who commits a crime is “West Indian,” while a black person who wins an Olympic medal is “British.”

One thing seems clear; in the USA, the more elaborate the euphemism for *Negro* becomes, so the proportion of young black men incarcerated by the justice system increases. The purpose of a euphemism, remember, is to avoid naming something which frightens or embarrasses us. Perhaps *African-American* should be dumped in favour of that old standby—“you-know-what.”

SIC! SIC! SIC!

“RAW SEWAGE AND FOOD—The dread of cholera has completely cured people of lobster eating. Two thousand were thrown overboard the other day at Gloucester, Mass.” [From *Scientific American*, July 1999, quoting the July 1869 issue. Submitted by Israel Wilenitz, E. Setauket, NY].



Avoiding Offense

John Morris
Eau Claire, Wisconsin

The incident in the office of the mayor of Washington, D.C., in which a staff member temporarily lost his job for using the word *niggardly* was widely reported in the media. It seems that another staff member was offended by this word. Notwithstanding the fact that *niggardly* is derived from an Old Norse word completely unrelated to the offensive N-word, the consensus seemed to be that *niggardly* should be avoided. After all, it was frequently pointed out, there are numerous other words that can be used to convey the same meaning: *parsimonious*, *stingy*, *penurious*, *frugal*, *tight*—to name just a few. The appropriateness of the innocent word is apparently not as important as avoiding even the possibility of offending someone.

The conclusion that the word should be avoided rather than risk offense made the comics. On March 12, 1999, the strip *Mallard Fillmore*, which my local paper places on the op-ed page along with *Doonesbury*, opens with the politically-correct TV producer saying, "It doesn't MATTER that the word 'NIGGARDLY' isn't a racial slur! . . . If enough people think it is, then nobody should use the word!" To which Mallard replies, "Why stop there?! Let's just replace our dictionaries with opinion polls!" Next day's strip continues with a monologue by the producer, who says, "Besides, no matter what a word really means . . . if enough people think it's offensive, it's offensive! It's perception, not reality, that counts." Then the producer thinks to himself, "Gee! . . . Where's he been for the past seven years?"

On March 10, 1999, *The Wall Street Journal* (WSJ) published a news story with the heading: "After Hue and Cry, Crayola Will Scrap Color 'Indian Red.'" The subheading reads: "Meaning Has Nothing To Do With Native Americans, But Kids Think It Does." Binnie & Smith, the company that makes Crayola® crayons, announced that it was changing the name of the reddish-brown

LIGHT

A Quarterly of Light Verse

More debonaire poise
in the magazine
that regularly prints
work by "the best
unserious poets alive"
(X. J. Kennedy).



13-Word Book Review

Your book declared
That life is good—
Life must have spared
You parenthood.

—J. PATRICK LEWIS

Subscribe to the journal Reader's Digest called "polished, clever, sophisticated." At Barnes & Noble, B. Dalton. \$16/1 yr, \$28/2 yr, \$24 international. VISA/MC: 1-800-285-4448, or checks to LIGHT, Subscriptions, Box 7500, Chicago IL 60680. Please note that rates will rise in 2000. www.litline.org/html/lightquarterly.html

hue "after teachers and others complained that many in the under-12 set think the color refers to the skin color of Native Americans." Actually, the name refers to a pigment found in clay in India. A spokeswoman for Crayola is reported to have said that the fact that "some consumers feel strongly that it confuses children is reason enough for us." The company is inviting customers to suggest a new name for the crayon. The new name, "chosen by a panel of color experts based on creativity, originality and 'appropriateness,'" will be announced this summer. The *Mallard* producer appears to be correct that "perception" is what counts. The National Congress of American Indians, according to *WSJ*, said that the company's decision was a sign of progress. The group applauded the increased sensitivity "to images and symbols which have been perceived as offensive to Native Americans."

Binnie & Smith announced that it had only changed color names twice before. In 1958, "Prussian blue" became "midnight blue," not, we are told, because people in spiked helmets com-



plained, but because children did not know where Prussia was. Four years later, the company changed “flesh” to “peach” in recognition of “the nation’s growing consciousness about civil rights.”

Most people would agree that one should avoid offending others whenever possible, but to what lengths? In the examples cited above, in the rush to ban the offending word, opportunities to educate and enlighten were missed. For example, with regard to *niggardly*, it could have been pointed out that, in addition to the fact that it is etymologically unrelated to the N-word, it just by happenstance contains a homophone of the N-word. Homophones are sound-alikes and are common in English. For example, the *hood* in *neighborhood* and in *childhood* is not the same as the *hood* of an automobile or the *hood* committing crimes in a neighborhood. With regard to “Indian red” and “Prussian blue,” the opportunity for a geography lesson was missed, not to mention the historical fact that the European explorers misnamed the Native Americans because they thought at first that they were in India.

Though the connection between “the nation’s growing consciousness about civil rights” and the changing of “flesh” to “peach” is not clear, it is clear that “flesh” as a color refers only to an idealized Caucasian skin color, as in “flesh-colored tights.” Perhaps this one should have been changed, not because it might have offended non-whites, but because it is inaccurate. Though the use of *flesh* to name a pinkish white color evidences a racial chauvinism, it is not a civil rights violation. We have not yet declared that the right not to be offended is a civil right. It appears, however, that we have agreed by a kind of media consensus that avoiding even the possibility of offending is more important than the truth or the integrity of our language. If that is true, then there will be interesting consequences.

In advertisements for mouthwash, one hears frequently the claim that the product “kills germs on contact” or something to that effect. Though everyone “knows” that the word *germ* means bacterium, the word itself contains a major part of the

word *German*. To avoid even the possibility of offending a whole nation of people and many fellow Americans, we should not use the word *germ*. We can substitute its more formal synonym *bacterium* in all contexts. The mouthwash ads will say, “kills bacteria on contact.”

The not-too-common word *gauche* means “awkward, lacking in social graces” when used in English, but its first meaning in French is “left” as in “left-handed.” Left-handed people do not choose to be left-handed. They are born that way. Thus they should be protected from ridicule or offense. We should avoid *gauche* and use *awkward* instead. The discrimination against the left-handed does not stop with *gauche*. The word *sinister*, meaning “threatening, ominous, evil, bad,” borrowed from Latin, originally meant “left hand.” Its present meaning can be crushingly offensive to the left-handed. We should avoid it. We should also avoid *adroit*, which means “skillful in a physical or mental way.” Its present meaning is innocent enough, but it comes from French *à*, “to” + *droit*, “right.” The implication is that the left-handed are unskillful both physically and mentally. Clearly this offensive word should be avoided. The related word *maladroit*, from French “bad right” and by implication “left,” should also be avoided.

The phrase “my right-hand man,” meaning “my most reliable assistant,” is potentially doubly offensive. All left-handed people could find it offensive, and right-handed women surely find it so. “My ambidextrous person” is not acceptable as a substitute because *ambidextrous* literally means “both hands are right hands”!

One of our most popular Christmas songs, *White Christmas*, has the potential of offending all non-whites. We know that the word *white* in the song is supposed to refer to snow, but it could also be understood to refer to an ethnically exclusive Christmas, particularly in places where snow is rare or absent at Christmastime. If we wish to avoid the word *white* to avoid the potential of offending non-whites, we will have to find a word that rhymes with *bright*. Perhaps *lite* would be a good choice. It avoids the possibly offensive



white and, at the same time, promotes more healthful habits during the holiday season! How does “I’m Dreaming of a Lite Christmas” sound?

As you can see from the examples above, avoiding offense is not going to be easy. To be successful, we must systematically go through our dictionaries and delete all words that have the potential to be offensive to any protected group. And nowadays almost everyone is a member of one or two protected groups. There may be other consequences to the commitment to avoid offense at all costs, but this is the most obvious one. There is an alternative. We could try to inculcate the attitude expressed in the old bromide, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but names will never hurt me!” If we were all able to become thick-skinned enough to be immune to slur-words, to be able to laugh at them, we could, by not reacting, disarm the hate mongers who really use slur words to insult or hurt another. Which shall it be?

[John Morris taught at the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. His specialties were 19th century British literature and the history and structure of the English language.]

OBITER DICTA

On the Use of Niggardly

Sol Saporta

University of Washington, retired

An aide to the mayor of Washington, D.C., used the word *niggardly*. The reactions, on virtually all sides, were heated, intense, emotional, and sometimes irrational. At one extreme, was the position that anyone who used the word was at best insensitive, and probably a bigot. At the other was the view that anyone who was offended by the word was at best hypersensitive, and probably illiterate. Rational debate was almost precluded.

Steven Pinker (*New York Times*, February 2, 1999) characterized the word as “a disaster waiting to happen.” Pinker points out that in hearing words, we often parse them in multiple ways,

before identifying the intended meaning. Indeed, puns are by definition based on precisely this feature of multiple meanings being associated with the same sequence of sounds.

Folk etymologies are common, and it is not unheard of for innocuous words to be associated with emotionally charged words. So, for example, is the case of the person who interpreted the word *sextet* as meaning something like ‘six dancing girls,’ or the one who understood the word *titillate* to refer ‘to the act of a woman removing her bra.’ So, it is hard not to think of the racial slur when hearing the word *niggardly*.

As a result, it may very well turn out that, in this case, the innocuous word will become taboo, or at least used sparingly. This eventuality seems to disturb some purists who are upset at the ‘impoverishment of the wonderful instrument that is the English language.’

But the phenomenon is not unusual. So, many speakers prefer to use *donkey* instead of *ass*, and *rooster* instead of *cock*, and nobody *pricks* their finger anymore. Common words are avoided because of their phonetic identity with homonyms that are themselves taboo. Furthermore, there is some evidence that speakers of English, on learning Thai, avoid a perfectly straightforward word because its pronunciation is identical to that of an English epithet. [Editor’s Note: Does anyone know what this Thai word is?]

So, although most people agree that the aide’s resignation and its acceptance were hasty, one ought not, I think, completely dismiss as irrational or illiterate, the reaction of his audience.

[Sol Saporta is a retired professor of linguistics who lives in Seattle.]

SIC! SIC! SIC!

“Next week we shall be celebrating the transfiguration of Christ from Liverpool Cathedral.” [From *Sunday Worship*, Radio 4, August 1, 1999. Submitted by Fabian Acker, London.]



CLASSICAL BLATHER

Money Talk(s)

Nick Humez

argentarius@juno.com

Next to sex, money was the top taboo subject in the childhood of many middle-class Baby Boomers,¹ for whose parents an era of unprecedented prosperity had followed the Second World War. Reluctance to discuss the long green may have arisen from the uneasiness parents felt about the competitive subtext of suburban life, and an awareness of their children's uncanny ability to articulate plainly their elders' beliefs; none of us may be free of a morbid interest in keeping up with the Joneses, but very few of us wish our offspring to grow up as economic snobs.²

Nevertheless, wealth has been a hot topic of conversation for millennia. Between the agrarian revolution, when societies began abandoning the comparatively easy but risky nomadic hunter-gatherer life in favor of settling in one place and tilling the fields around the end of the last ice age (about 10,000 B.C.) and the invention of money as such (about 8000 years later), a reliable way to tell how rich someone was would have been to count his livestock. The old-fashioned English adjective *pecuniary* betrays this underlying economy: *Pecus* was Latin for "herd (of cattle)";³ by extension, the related word *pecunia* went from meaning "cattle" to "property, wealth," and later "money."

Wealth does not require money if it is in goods intended for home consumption, even on a fairly lavish scale. It is only when exchange creeps in that things get complicated, for then one's holdings are fungible only by barter, often a clumsy way of doing business, with uncertainties of exchange introduced at every step. (Consider the folk-tale, common to several European countries, in which the country bumpkin swaps his horse for a cow, his cow for several sacks of grain, and so on until he ends up with a millstone, which he acci-

dentally, but gratefully, loses by dropping it into a river while crossing a bridge.)

The first actual money appears to have been tools, of a sort that everybody used and which therefore had a generally-accepted value. One type was the iron spit, the ancient Greek name for which was *obolos* (related to our modern word *obelisk*, because obelisks, like shishkebab skewers, are long and pointy). When metal coinage was introduced to Greece (probably from Mesopotamia), *obolos* was the name given to the smallest coin, equal to 1/6 of a *drachmé* (related to *dragma*, "handful"), itself 1/100 of a *mina*, which in turn was 1/60 of a *talanton*—both a standard weight of silver (about 55 lbs.) and the *talent* in the parable of Jesus.⁴ (Given that the average daily pay of a Greek cavalryman at the time of the Persian Wars was a *drachmé*, five centuries earlier, the amount entrusted even to the feckless third servant was by no means trivial, being the equivalent cost of hiring a mounted squadron of twelve for a year and a half.)

In addition to the *obolos*, the Greeks also had a quarter-drachmé coin called the *nomos* or *noumnos*, the second borrowed into Latin as *nummus*, which first mean "cash" and later "small and insignificant coin" (cf. English *groat*). *Nomos* also meant "law," in the sense of just apportionment. *Nomoi* was the name given to the laws of Solon—under whom took place the first minting of the *drachmé* at a clear profit to the state of 5% over the usual ratio of 6000 drachmas to a talent of silver—in contrast to the draconian *thesmoi*, or edicts, of his predecessor, the tyrant Draco. In this sense *nomos* is clearly related to *nemesis* (i.e., just deserts from the gods) and gives us the *-nom-* of *economy* (the *eco-* part is from Greek *oikos*, "house"). Aristotle, in his treatise called the *Oeconomica*, makes a clear connection between the two senses of *nomos*, as well as giving one of the best functional definitions of *money* ever offered, describing it as "a medium or mean which measures everything . . . such as the number of shoes which are equal to a house or a good meal" and "a kind of security which we possess



such that, if we do not want a thing now, we shall be able to get it when we want it.”

Money comes from *Juno Moneta* (the epithet is of uncertain origin, possibly one of Latin’s few borrowings from Carthage along with the idea of silver coinage itself), whose temple housed Rome’s mint (a word also related to *moneta*). But the connection between temples and finance goes back at least to Greece, where it was possible to deposit money at a temple in one place and have someone else draw a like amount from the treasury of the temple to the same god somewhere else. By extension, temples also served as logical places to go looking for change if you happened to arrive in town with a sack of the wrong kind of coins, which explains what the money-changers were doing on Temple Mount in the first place when Jesus came along and upended all their tables.⁵

Fiscus and *bursa* were Latin for “little basket” and “little sack” respectively; both came to have the specialized sense “for keeping money in,” whence our adjective *fiscal*, and the nouns *disbursement* and *bursar*. (*Bursa*, the source of the English word *purse*, is also still used in the medical sense of a sac cushioning the joint between two bones, e.g., at the shoulder, the inflammation of which is called *bursitis*.) The importance of pay in the military apparatus of imperial Rome cannot be understated. The word *soldier* itself originally meant “someone who fights for pay”—specifically, for the Roman *solidus*, originally a gold coin whose value would shrink dramatically over succeeding centuries. (From *solidus* comes the name of the smallest-denomination French coin of the *ancien régime*, the *sou*.)

Although some aspects of their system of property and sale persisted in surprisingly archaic forms,⁶ by the last century of the empire the Romans had acquired a great deal of business sophistication, including the reckoning of risk. A form of insurance in which loans were issued to merchant shippers whose repayment (with interest) was contingent on the vessels’ safe arrival had been in use in Mesopotamia since before the Code of Hammurabi, but the earliest surviving

example of an actuarial table which grappled with the statistical likelihood of risk is a mortality spreadsheet recorded by the Roman jurist Ulpian around 220 A.D., possibly in aid of premium calculation for the burial societies which had become common in Rome by that time.

The quantification of risk, however, came into its own only in the Renaissance, largely thanks to such pioneers in mathematics as Leonardo of Pisa, better known as Fibonacci (whose *Liber Abaci* built a strong case for the adoption of arabic numerals in place of roman ones—particularly the powerful zero, for which Greece and Rome had neither symbol nor use), and Luca Paccioli and Girolamo Cardano, both of whom wrote treatises on the algebra of gambling.⁷

The first bank set up explicitly for risk-sharing (apart from burial societies) seems to have been the Monte dei Paschi in Sienna, established in 1473, which functioned as the agent for a farmers’ mutual-aid fund, making payments out of a common pool to members whose crops failed. Britain was much slower—by nearly two and a half centuries—to establish its first formal insurance companies, the Royal Exchange Assurance Corporation and London Assurance Corporation.⁸

By that time, however, Edward Lloyd’s coffee-house near London’s docks had been going strong for over 30 years; open almost round the clock and doing a brisk business in coffee, tea, and sherbet, it was a favorite resort of seacaptains and others in maritime trade, for whom Lloyd astutely furnished pen and paper and, after 1696, posted “Lloyd’s List,” both a gazette of London ship departures and arrivals and a business news service for conditions abroad (anticipating Reuters by nearly 200 years). In 1771, a group of about 80 regular Lloyd’s customers formed an association in which each pledged to underwrite the company’s risks to the full extent of his personal fortune; thus was Lloyd’s of London born.

The original Lloyd’s “Members” (subsequent partners are known as “Names”) were not people who would be described in modern terms as “risk-averse.” Nowadays those of us who have any capital to invest at all (whether it be in the savings



account we faithfully put that five-dollar bill from Grandma we have been getting every Christmas since we were tots, or a rapid-growth tech-stocks mutual fund we plowed our entire inheritance into when Grandma died, full of years, leaving us the bundle) fall somewhere on a continuum in what has been referred to as the eat well/sleep well tradeoff, so called because the conventional wisdom is that you can have good earnings (i.e., eat well) or low-risk, peace-of-mind investments (i.e., sleep well) but rarely both—and usually in inverse proportion to each other.

Stock exchanges and other financial markets have been a bountiful source of American colloquialisms from the earliest days of the republic. Some have entered the mainstream; others have remained specialized, and, as fashions in speech changed their meanings has been lost. In 1819 a Philadelphia newspaper, the *Aurora*, carried a letter to the editor from a pseudonymous reader, including such expressions as “horses at livery,” “shin peeler,” and “little plug top,” to which was helpfully appended a brief glossary “giving the true meaning of the terms . . . to enable gentlemen to go into the money market with reputation.” *Horses at livery* were “accommodation notes, which are supposed to be taken in by the banks, by the year, in contradistinction to business paper, which is like a traveller’s [sic] stopping for a single night”; a *shin peeler* was “a loss of money, whether it be from a marine risk, or a shaved note”; and the *little plug top* was a nickname for “one of the banks in the city [i.e., Philadelphia]” on account of “the facility it possesses of spinning its capital out to three times its length.”⁹

Modern financial slang is no less colorful. When the stock market has suffered a *melt-down*—a term stolen fair and square from the nuclear-power industry—it often will stage a dramatic resurgence; cautious traders learn to judge whether this is a *melt-up* (that is, a true recovery) or simply an example of a *dead cat bounce*. Since sales of large blocks of stock can disrupt a market, or at least start ugly rumors, the sellers may resort to a practice called *bearding*, in which the assets are broken up and sold through several different brokers.¹⁰ This term almost cer-

tainly derives from the vernacular use of “beard” to designate a male escort at a social function with a woman who is not, as supposed, his romantic or spousal connection, she being in fact involved with someone else (e.g., another woman).¹¹

The bond market has its own shorthand as well: There are *kitchen sink bonds*, which, as one hedge fund manager told me,¹² are “securities collateralized by left-over odd pieces from other securities. Dealers who have pieces left over that they can’t sell will re-amalgamate them into something else”—hence the name. Such bonds are favored by managers of speculative funds, he adds, because they tend to be “high yield/high risk,” with “great lack of liquidity.” At the opposite end of the risk-benefit scale are the government securities nicknamed *flower bonds*, “a type of US government bond that, regardless of its cost, is acceptable at par value in payment of estate taxes if the decedent was the hold at time of death; also called an estate tax anticipation bond.”¹³

In addition to trading in securities themselves, there is a brisk business in such derivatives as options. A *swaption* is an option on an interest rate swap, in which a borrower pays a slight premium to lock in a rate no worse than the current London Interbank Offered Rate (LIBOR) for a given period, but can escape the commitment if market interest rates change in the borrower’s favor.

Options are one of the driving forces behind the so-called triple witching hours, the generic term for the third Fridays of March, June, September, and December, which are the expiration dates for many options, index options, and futures contracts. On such days the market is characterized by massive trading and roller-coaster volatility. (There are also smaller-scale *witching-hour* days tied to other options and futures, usually falling on the third Friday of one of the other months.)

In an era of international finance, money does not merely talk but seems at times to have the gift of tongues. Many terms of the market are cognates across linguistic boundaries, but there are a few surprises here and there, as when Spanish



translates “equity/capital” as *patrimonio* and shares of stock become *acciones* (as in French, where they are called *actions*.) 14

Corrigendum: Frank Holan, whose article on bats and good luck appeared in the previous issue of VERBATIM (XXIV:3), offers a fine-tuning of my dating of *boondocks*’ debut in American English. “Early in 1941, the bugler from Troop A, 11th Cavalry,¹⁵ who had recently returned from the Philippines, used the word, which he pronounced ‘bon-docks.’ It therefore appears that the word had begun to seep into the American lexicon before there were any Pacific Theater veterans of World War II.”

Notes:

1 Indeed, I know of one instance in which a parent wishing to discourage a child from eavesdropping on a parental conversation about sex resorted to the euphemism *money matters* to gloss the nature of the conversation. The child, a 1950s summer playmate of mine who had ears a mile long, was not fooled.

2 In some instances this very reticence may have inculcated a reverse snobbery among those same offspring who embraced the hippie philosophy of the 1960s, during which time there was a premium on living on as little money as possible. An example of this ethos is a slim volume self-published by Tuli Kupferberg: *1001 Ways To Live Without Working* (New York: Birth Press, 1966). Kupferberg, in addition to being celebrated in Allan Ginsberg’s *Howl* as the man who jumped off the Brooklyn Bridge and lived, was also a co-founder of a notorious anarcho-syndicalist band called the Fugs.

3 Another word for *herd* was *grex*, “flock,” whence English *congregate*, *aggregation*, *gregarious*, and *egregious*.

4 Matthew 25:14–30. A variant is at Luke 19:12–27.

5 Matthew 21:12–13; Mark 11:15–17. The incident is mentioned, though not the money-changers explicitly, at Luke 19:45–46.

6 Such as the requirement that both buyer and seller actually had to be present at a ceremony involving the touching of a set of ritual scales with a coin for the sale to be a complete legal transaction. For more on this, and how Roman property-owners living at some distance from the property being sold managed to get around this quaint restriction, see Justinian, *The Digest of Roman Law*, translated by C. F. Kolbert (New York: Penguin, 1979), particularly the “Property” section of Kolbert’s introduction (pp. 56–60).

7 The evolution of risk from the more traditional, stoic concepts of chance, fortune, or fate is traced in Peter L. Bernstein’s *Against the Gods: The Remarkable Story of Risk* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1996), from which much of this paragraph and the next is gratefully cribbed. Another English word for *risk* in its negative sense, borrowed through French, is *hazard*, whose origin is Arabic *al zahr*; “the die.” The Romans were great dice-throwers, up to and including the emperor Claudius, who is depicted as

being condemned to rattle the pig’s knuckle dice called *astralagi* in a bottomless cup for all eternity in Seneca’s spiteful satire *The Pumpkinification of the Divine Claudius*, reproduced in a translation by Robert Graves at the end of his novel *Claudius the God* (New York: Random House/Vintage, 1962) and, more recently, as an appendix to J. P. Sullivan’s translation of the *Satyricon of Petronius* (New York: Penguin, 1986).

8 And then, according to Bernstein (op. cit.), only because George I was not impervious to a bribe.

9 A further note explains that the president of this (never-named) financial institution was known as “Betsey Dawson,” so called because it was an oath he was fond of swearing in place of a stronger curseword (also unidentified). The article was reprinted in the New York *Evening Post* of August 14, 1819; the date of its original publication in the original *Aurora* is not mentioned but was presumably just a few weeks before. According to Jessy Randall (co-author of “Assing Around,” VERBATIM XXIV:2), a complete set of copies of the *Aurora* published in that year is in the collection of the Library Company of Philadelphia, should anyone wish to pursue this curious item to its ultimate source.

10 Bank analyst Jane Cates, interviewed in June 1999, is my source for these three examples. *Bearding* was the subject of an article in the daily newspaper *American Banker*, October 12, 1998.

11 Thus the *American Heritage Dictionary* gives as its fourth definition of the noun *beard*, “One that diverts attention or suspicion from another.” *AHD* also notes that *beard* as a verb can mean “to confront boldly,” an interesting example of a word with two meanings almost diametrically opposed. For an insightful discussion of the similarity of such ambivalent etymons (e.g. *cleave*) to the mechanism of dreaming, see Freud’s *General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1960), Eleventh Lecture.

12 My classmate Barry Finer, also the source of the explanation on interest rate swaps in the next paragraph.

13 According to Jane Cates. “I don’t think you can still do this,” she adds.

14 For more of these, see the international glossary published by the World Bank.

15 Some readers may be astonished to learn that there was still cavalry in the U. S. Army as late as 1941. A holdover from the previous World War, in which the futility of cavalry charges against machine-gun emplacements had been demonstrated by the French with appalling casualties, horsemen nevertheless continued to make themselves useful as dispatch riders in the infancy of electronic Signal Corps technology. Shortly after Pearl Harbor the cavalry as such was disbanded and its units reassigned—some to armored divisions, others to the army’s air corps. As a result, Holan soon found himself in what eventually became the U. S. Air Force, from which he retired as a colonel in the early 1960s.



EPISTOLA

I can understand why the Mexican folks are amused (or perhaps bemused) by the fun things Joseph Slap says to them (XXIV/2) but I must question whether their reaction stems from the pure wit of the poetry or from its complete ungrammaticality. “A day for cleaning” could be expressed *un día para limpiar* or *día de limpiar* but never *por limpiando*. The infinitive, never the gerund (or present participle) follows a preposition in Spanish and the difference between *para* and *por* with their overlapping English meanings continues to confuse millions upon millions of anglophone students.

The form, expression, and charm of the opening poem, “*Quando estoy con un párajo. . .*,” hints at a more literary origin. In the first place, *cuando* and *cual* have not been spelled with *q* for a century or so, and the expression *cual yo* (like me) instead of *como yo* is literary usage, not normal standard Spanish. Most interesting is the fact that Spanish speakers would not consider this to be a “non-rhyming poem” at all. In contrast to English with its complicated vowel system, Spanish has five clear vowel sounds that vary hardly at all in pronunciation. This makes the Spanish language very comfortable with assonance (the rhyme of vowels only) which is indeed the traditional Spanish ballad rhyme, dating back to the early middle ages. The Spanish speaker would therefore perceive a rhyme in *yo* and *corazón*.

Donald E. Schmiedel
Las Vegas, Nevada

INTER ALIA

Among other books received lately at the VERBATIM offices is an adorable copy of the new Houghton Mifflin *Abbreviations Dictionary*, compiled by Robert S. Wachal (and edited by Steve Kleinedler). I say adorable because I am a sucker for small-size books, of which this is a very good example. Small, but in no way cramped or lacking, it even included my favorite self-referential acronym; *TLA*, which stands for, of course, Three Letter Acronym. (ISBN 0395-92691-2, \$5.95) —*Erin McKean*

The Foreignym

Jim Behling
Granger, Indiana
Jim.Behling.2@nd.edu

Of all the “nyms” encountered over the years, the best known are *antonyms* (words that are opposite in meaning), *homonyms* (words that sound alike) and *synonyms* (words with similar meanings). But there is one more.

The most recently discovered nym is the *foreignym*. This new nym has actually existed for thousands of years, probably since the dawn of verbal communication, when neighboring tribes met, grunted, and then groaned about not understanding one another’s grunts.

Nobody recognized foreignyms as anything special, not way back then and not in recent times. You won’t find “foreignym” in any English language primer or dictionary. On the academic level, the concept of foreignyms has never been formally acknowledged, or even informally considered, by any of our most learned professors in our most esteemed liberal arts colleges. Not even self-appointed and revered guardians of language like James J. Kilpatrick and Edwin R. Newman have hit upon this yet.

However, thanks to our recent discovery, the foreignym’s days of anonymity are finally over. Here’s what they’re all about and how they came to be:

Our world has become a multi-lingual global community in which millions of people know their own language reasonably well and are able and willing to use basic phrases of other languages. The casual combining of languages is at the heart of foreignyms, which Webster may someday define as: “Words or phrases from two different languages which sound alike and occur naturally and immediately adjacent to each other in writing or conversation.”

What’s that, you say?

This example might clarify the definition:



An American family arrives at the Louvre in Paris about five minutes before the museum is scheduled to open its doors to the public. A member of the family, eager to view the priceless works of the Impressionists, pleads with the guard: "We'd like to go in now! May we?" "*Mais oui*," the obliging guard replies, thereby completing the foreignnym.

"May we" and "*Mais oui*," pronounced exactly the same, one phrase English and the other French, and occurring immediately adjacent to each other, make up the foreignnym. (A dose of reality: As many Americans who have traveled to France would tell you, it is highly unlikely that the museum guard would have said "*Mais oui*," which means "yes" or "but of course," since the Louvre never opens early for ordinary tourists and the French, particularly Parisians, usually show little regard for visitors, particularly Americans. However, we altered the guard's likely response—"Mais non!"—because "*mais oui/may we*" made for a great foreignnym.)

Here are a few more foreignnyms:


A Spanish tour guide, concerned about an American visitor who misplaced his travel documents the night before, asks him: "*Señor*, seen your passport this morning?"

The foreignnym is the Spanish word "*Señor*" followed immediately by the English words, "seen your."

This next one requires a bit of imagination and some rudimentary Russian:

During the climactic days leading up to the President Clinton impeachment vote, a Russian in Moscow asked an American embassy official: "Has your country thrown out Clinton yet?" "*Nyet*," replied the American as he proudly displayed his knowledge of the local language.

In this example, the foreignnym is a bit obscure. But if you read the story aloud and conversationally, and if you pronounce the President's name "Clint 'n," not "Clin ton," you will note that the last four letters of the English words, "Clinton *yet*," produce a sound exactly the same as the Russian word "*nyet*," which means "no."



**CAN YOU PASS THE
"VOCABULARY TEST"?**

The essence of intellect is vocabulary. But how can you shine with resources* structured centuries ago? (*Thesaurus, about 1800. Dictionary, 1604.)
Dr. Henry G. Burger has discovered that any procedural (transitive) verb can be expressed via its two simpler processes: To Explore & Test = to

PROSPECT: To Roam & Prospect = to TOMCAT, etc. His *Wordtree* lets you move up, down, & sideways—backward towards causes and forward towards effects. "Brilliant, original, and of great importance," reports *Science and Public Policy!* And that's only a sample of the 50,000 words already showered on The *Wordtree*® by over 85 periodicals.

1/4 million listings fill this computer-organized reference book. (∞) ISBN 0-936312-00-9. USD \$149. If foreign, add \$6. Send a numbered Purchase Order, or prepay, to: The Wordtree, 10576 Bradshaw W12, Overland Park, KS 66210-1145, USA. All-hour phone (+1)913-469-1010. Play our vocabulary game on the Internet: www.wordtree.com. Free brochure on solving word problems.

©1978-97/2006©MICMNCIX by the Wordtree

This next tale is set in a one-room, rural American schoolhouse during a period of heavy German immigration late in the 19th century:

Gustav Schmidt, the immigrant teacher, was a brilliant mathematician, but after less than a year in America he still had a tendency to revert to his native tongue when suddenly frustrated by the limitations of his students. One day, during a simple arithmetic review, he asked one of his students: "Johann, what is 7 plus 3?" The boy answered with some hesitation: "Nine?" "*Nein!*" an exasperated and impatient Gustav shouted in German, as he unknowingly completed yet another foreignnym.

Here's an example of a would-be foreignnym, but upon careful analysis, it fails to meet the strict criteria. See if you can detect the flaws.

A party of six Englishmen gathered around a table after touring a Spanish winery. Two of the party were teetotalers. When the waiter asked the group if they'd like to sample the winery's finest, the spokesman for the Brits replied: "Pour for four, *por favor*."

Pronounced sloppily, this reply just might pass for a clever and witty foreignnym, but upon closer examination, it twice fails to meet the test. The last English syllable—the word "four"—starts with an "f" sound, while the last Spanish syllable—"vor"—starts with a "v." Also, the English word "for" and the Spanish syllable "fa" sound clearly dissimilar when crisply pronounced, though this is a less serious violation. In a friendly game, you might get credit, if you said



“please,” which, of course, is the meaning of “*por favor*.” In formal foreignym competition, the judges would just shake their heads and snicker derisively.

So now you get the idea and understand the subtlety of the rules.

What we’ve discovered is that creating foreignyms has become a challenging, educational, and fun game for many of our friends and co-workers (on their break time, of course). The only limitations are the number of languages one knows and one’s imagination. In all our examples, English was one of the languages, but it needn’t be. In fact, the creation of foreignyms can and should be international in scope.

So the next time you and your friends get together, set aside Scrabble, Monopoly, Mr. Twister, or whatever typically turns you on, and turn on to foreignyms. You’ll be surprised how contagious and stimulating they can be.

(And if you come up with some particularly good foreignyms, e-mail them to me at Jim.Behling.2@nd.edu.)

SIC! SIC! SIC!

“Then, on July 20, 1969, he and Neil Armstrong made their historic *Apollo XI* moon walk, becoming the first two humans to set food on another world.” [From the program notes for the 1999 PNC Bank Concert Series with the Philadelphia Orchestra at the Mann Center for the Performing Arts, Charles Dutoit, Artistic Director, Wednesday, July 21, at 8 p.m. Submitted by Jonathan Rockey, Glenside, PA.]

EPISTOLA

The explanation of the term *rhubarb* I read was that an early talking picture director told extras in crowd scenes to repeat the word *rhubarb* in order to simulate the random mutterings of a crowd. I assume the term this generated was transferred to baseball, if the explanation is accurate.

John Stanley
Merced, California

Menckenisms

William S. Haubrich
La Jolla, California

Of all the joys of reading, none has been more rapturous for me than the writings of Henry Louis Mencken, “the sage of Baltimore,” who lived from 1880 to 1956 and whose popularity as a literary critic peaked in the first three decades of the 20th century. I found there are two ways to read Mencken: for what he says, and for how he says it. One can be regaled by his pointed, pithy, often outrageous remarks, as well as be delighted by his singular choice of words to express his ideas. I cannot agree with all that Mencken espouses or condemns; some of his comments are outdated, some are patently specious, some are ludicrous, and some seem to me downright wrong. But I never fail to admire his means of expression.

Mencken writes clearly and succinctly. One is never left in doubt of what he intends to convey. Much of what he writes is phrased in plain English, easily understood. But often he inserts words that the average reader, myself included, will find odd, idiosyncratic, and quaint if not quirky. With one or two exceptions, these are not terms that Mencken has coined; they are words listed in any worthy standard dictionary, but they are words not in common parlance. The meanings of some of these odd words are evident by their context and by faint recollection; for the precise meaning of more than a few I was obliged to “look it up.”

After a second or third sampling of some of Mencken’s works, I undertook to make a list of certain of the author’s words that struck me as peculiar. What better place to look for singular expressions than in my well-thumbed copy of *A Mencken Chrestomathy: His Own Selection of His Choicest Writings* (originally brought out by Knopf, Mencken’s favorite publishing house, in 1949; a soft-cover edition was made available by Vintage Books in 1982). Indeed, *chrestomathy*



itself is an odd word. I had never seen or heard the word before I came across the title of Mencken's book. Sure enough, it was listed in several of my unabridged dictionaries. I learned that *chrestomathy* is pronounced with the accent on the second syllable, and that it is a collection of choice literary passages, usually by one author and often as an aid to the study of language. As one might guess, the term is from a Greek word that can be translated as "useful learning." How useful is Mencken's *Chrestomathy* might be argued; nevertheless, from it one can learn, and surely it is entertaining.

Picked at random from this source are words that, in the perspective of their peculiar usage, might be called "Menckenisms." I offer a list:

antinomian, as in, "Marriage services drawn up by antinomians for the use of nonbelievers lack humor." (from "Clarion Call to Poets", in *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 103-112). Or, as in, "What got it [the Mann Act] upon the books was the constant gabble in the rural newspapers about the byzantine debaucheries of urban antinomians" (from "The Husbandman," in *Prejudices: 4th series*; 1924, pp. 43-60). An antinomian, of course, is one who believes that moral laws are relative in meaning and application, as opposed to being fixed and universal. Mencken uses the term for people given to "loose living" and held in disdain by strict constructionists who inhabit the Bible Belt.

Asphodel, as in, "I have grazed upon the fields of asphodel" (from *In Defense of Women*; 1918, revised 1922, pp. 209-210). Asphodels are lily-like flowering plants native to the Mediterranean littoral of Europe; in Greek mythology they are flowers of Hades and the dead. Mencken imagines himself having lolled in such a flowering field during a quiet interlude with an attractive woman.

Asseverations, as in, "And it is then that they [grown men] are in the mood for poetry, and get comfort out of its asservations of the obviously not true" (from "The Poet and His Art", *Prejudices: 3rd series*; 1922, pp. 150-170). This unusual word is not listed in my standard

American dictionaries; I had to go to the ponderous *Oxford English Dictionary* to learn its definition: "solemn affirmation, emphatic assertion." Thus, *asseveration* comes close to *assertion*, but is a stronger word, and doubtless this is why Mencken chose it.

Aurochs, as in, "The gallant Frog himself [the French boxing champion Georges Carpentier], an honest as well as reckless man, has testified clearly that, by the time he came to the second round, he was already substantially done for, and hence quite incapable of doing any execution upon so solid an aurochs as Dempsey" (from "How Legends Are Made", *Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 5, 1921). *Aurochs* is another word I had never seen before or since (and probably never will). The *American Heritage Dictionary* (3rd edition) tells me that *aurochs* is an obsolete German term for an ox. Mencken was fond of inserting here and there (but not to ostentatious excess) foreign words or phrases. His background in German lore must have led him to this one.

Balderdash is a term neither obscure nor unfamiliar, and given Mencken's disdain for what he viewed as nonsense, it is not surprising he savored the word. An example: "An overpowering, paralyzing dread that some extra-eloquent Red, permitted to emit his balderdash unwhipped, may eventually convert a couple of courageous men" (from "American Culture," *Prejudices, 2nd series*; 1920, pp. 65-78). Mencken here is inveighing against "humorless persons . . . who take the platitudes of democracy seriously." *Balderdash*, seldom heard these days except in the precincts of stuffy London clubs, is said to have come from the Latin *balductum*, "a posset," i.e., an incongruous mixture of liquors. Now, of course, it refers to any pretentious, bombastic, essentially senseless utterance. Mencken found a plentiful harvest in the emissions of congressmen and bishops, and *balderdash* was how he described their flatulence.

Blowsy (or *blowzy*), as in "Every time a new revolutionist [painter] gives a show he issues a



manifesto explaining his aims and achievements, and in every such manifesto there is the same blowsy rodomontadizing that one finds in the texts of the critics” (from “The Fringes of Lovely Letters” in *Prejudices: 5th series*; 1926, pp. 108–124). *Blowsy* rhymes with *lousy* and describes a coarsely ruddy and bloated state; the word may have come from the obsolete *blowze*, ‘a beggar wench.’

Boob, *boobery*, *booboisie*, and *booby* are instantly recognizable as Menckenisms. Again, Mencken did not invent *boob*, but he surely relished the way the word came popping out the lips. This derisive term for a stupid, doltish person can be found in 18th-century English writings. Its origin is uncertain. According to Stuart Berg Flexner, *boob* has been around since 1909 in America, as a short form of the 18th century *booby*. It may have come from the German *Bube* ‘a boy,’ especially a rascal or knave, perhaps related to the imitative Latin adjective *balbus* ‘stammering.’ *Boobery* and *booboisie* are pure Mencken, the latter a play on the French *bourgeoisie*. Examples abound: “He [Teddy Roosevelt, in his misguided Bull Moose campaign] swallowed at one gigantic gulp, and out of the same herculean jug, the most amazing mixture of social, political, and economic sure-cures ever got down by one hero, however valiant, however athirst—a cocktail made up of all the elixirs hawked among the boobery in his time” (from “Roosevelt: an Autopsy” in *Prejudices, 2nd series*; 1920, pp. 107–128). Also: “And the communism or super-communism of tomorrow, I suppose, will be sold to the *booboisie* as the only true palladium of peace, justice, and plenty” (from *The Smart Set*, February 1922, p. 26).

Bozart as in, “Such persons [tone-deaf clods who ‘not only sit through the infernal din made by the current jazz-bands; they actually like it’] inhabit the sewers of the bozart” (from “The Allied Arts” in *Prejudices: 2nd series*, 1920, pp. 194–196). In his masterpiece, *The American Language*, Mencken admits that *bozart* never made its way into standard dictionaries, but he

claims, “It has been used as the name of a magazine of verse, as the name of a lead pencil, and in the title of business firms, including one with quarters in Radio City, New York.” It is a slangy way of saying *beaux arts*. Mencken used it, too, in the title of his hilarious put-down of the American South, “The Sahara of the Bozart” (in *Prejudices: 2nd series*, 1920, pp. 136–154).

Brummagem is among the odd words most often used by Mencken. One among many examples that might be cited: “But they [Southern Confederates] were in favor if it [the abolition of slavery] on sound economic grounds, and not on the brummagem moral grounds which persuaded the North” (from “The Calamity of Appomattox” in *The American Mercury*, September 1930, pp. 29–31). What attracted Mencken to this seldom-used word? The mere fact that it is odd? Its curious provenance? I suspect the latter. *Brummagem* is a vulgar provincial corruption of *Birmingham*, the name of the industrial city in the midlands of England. The city became notorious in the late 17th century as the source of counterfeit groats (four-pence coins, silver when genuine, circulated at the time in Britain), and later for the cheap plated or lacquered ware manufactured in Birmingham. In time, *brummagem* came to describe anything shoddily showy or false. Such a description could be applied to much that Mencken observed to be tawdry or tasteless.

Buncombe, as in, “Here, I hope, I will not be suspected of inclining toward the Eddyian buncombe” (from “Christian Science” in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, February 18, 1927). *Buncombe* (or *bunkum*) is empty or insincere talk, claptrap; more often it appears in its shortened form as *bunk*. These are not to be classed as odd words, but one seldom sees use of the full word *buncombe*. The term is taken from *Buncombe*, the name of a county in North Carolina, whose congressman in the 1820s felt called upon to make a vaporous speech on the floor of the House of Representatives; he excused his falderal by saying he was obliged to “speak for Buncombe.”



Catchpoll, as in, “The husbands [i.e., those accused of wifebeating], in their defense, almost invariably pleaded justification, and some of them told such tales of studied atrocity at the domestic hearth, both psychic and physical, that the learned magistrate discharged them with tears in his eyes and the very catchpolls in the courtroom had to blow their noses” (from *In Defense of Women*, 1918; revised 1922, pp. 162–165). A *catchpoll* is a sheriff’s officer, especially one who arrests debtors. This archaic term comes through the Norman French *cachepol*, that combines derivatives of *chacier*, ‘to chase,’ and *poul*, ‘rooster.’

Colporteur, as in, “But a degree of forfeiture [as punishment for a crime], taking over all his goods and making invalid any contract made with him or any security owned by him, would have converted him [John D. Rockefeller, Sr.] into a penniless Baptist colporteur overnight, and so brought down the price of gasoline” (from “The Criminal Law” in *The Smart Set*, May, 1922, pp. 30–34). A *colporteur* is a peddler of devotional literature. The French word includes *col* that originated in the Latin *collum*, ‘neck’ (from the custom of peddlers carrying trays of goods suspended by a strap around the neck), plus *porteur*, ‘one who conducts a business.’

Contumacy, as in, “The slings and arrows that he [a true Christian who is beholden to a predominantly good God] suffers, he believes, are brought down upon him by his own ignorance and contumacy” (from “The Nature of Faith,” in “High and Ghostly Matters,” in *Prejudices: 4th series*; 1924, pp. 61–65). *Contumacy* is not a particularly odd word, but it is seldom heard. It means a stubborn rebelliousness, and that is the meaning Mencken intended to convey.

Fly-blown, as in, “It is as corrupting to preserve them [i.e., outworn friends] after they have grown fly-blown and hollow as it is to keep up the forms of passion after passion itself is a corpse” (from “The Friend,” in *Prejudices: 3rd series*; 1922, pp. 276–277). A *flyblow* is the egg or larva of a bowfly, typically deposited in carrion or dead

meat, which is thereby contaminated. Hence, *fly-blown* has come to mean ‘tainted or corrupted.’

Fugleman, as in, “He [James Huneker] was fugleman, in his time, for more than one cause that was lost almost as soon as it started” (from “Huneker: A Memory,” in *Prejudices: 3rd series*; 1922, pp. 62–83; first printed in the *Century* magazine, June 1921, pp. 191–197.) A *fugleman* is a leader, particularly a well-trained soldier who serves as a guide or model for his company. *Fugle* is an alteration of the German *Flügel*, ‘a wing or flank.’

Fustian, as in, “Any mention of an aristocracy, to a public fed upon democratic fustian, is bound to bring up images of stockbrokers’ wives lolling obscenely in opera boxes, or of haughty Englishmen slaughtering whole generations of grouse in an inordinate and incomprehensible manner, or of bogus counts coming over [to America] to work their magic upon daughters of breakfast-food and bathtub kings” (from “American Culture,” in *The National Letters, Prejudices: 2nd series*; 1920, pp. 65–78.) *Fustian* likely comes from the Latin *fustis*, ‘a club or cudgel,’ as used in beating, hence ‘contentious or pretentious bombast.’

Gaudy is neither a particularly odd or unfamiliar word, but Mencken liked to use it and did so often. An example: “His [i.e., of a man as regarded by his women-folk] most gaudy sayings and doings seldom deceive them; they see the actual man within, and know him for a shallow and pathetic fellow” (from “The Feminine Mind,” *In Defense of Women*, 1918, revised 1922, pp. 3–22.) *Gaudy*, of course, means showy in a tasteless and vulgar way. It may have descended by a tortuous path from the Latin *gaudere*, ‘to rejoice.’ Someone once asked Mencken why, in the light of the disdain with which he regarded much of American culture, he chose to remain in this crass republic. “Ah!” said Mencken, “It is such a gaudy show!”

Hinds, as in, “Such aphrodisiacal tales [i.e., accounts of adultery], read beside the kitchen-stove by hinds condemned to monogamous misery



with stupid, unclean and ill-natured wives” (from “The Husbandman” in *Prejudices: 4th series*; 1924, pp. 43–60). In this case a *hind* is a rustic country bumpkin.

Imbecile, *imbecility*, as in, “the evangelical sects plunge into an abyss of imbecility, and declare a holy war against every decency that civilized men cherish” (from “The Collapse of Protestantism” in *Prejudices: 5th series*; 1926, pp. 104–119). *Imbecile*, along with its variants, is another among Mencken’s favorite words and appears frequently in his writings. *Imbecille* is an obsolete French word, probably coming from the Latin *imbecillus*, ‘weak or feeble’; the *im-* indicating ‘without’ and the latter part being related to *bacillum*, ‘a rod or staff.’

Kidney is not an odd word except when used, as Mencken occasionally did, in the archaic sense of ‘trait’ or ‘ilk.’ Certain ancient philosophers regarded the renal organs, along with such other viscera as the spleen, as seats of emotions. An example of Mencken’s usage: “There is, indeed, fair ground for arguing that, if men of that kidney [i.e., business ‘geniuses’ who intellectually were ‘blank cartridges’] were genuinely intelligent, they would never succeed at their gross and driveling concerns” (from “The Feminine Mind,” *In Defense of Women*, 1918, revised 1922, pp. 3–22).

Lucubrations, as in, “I am not, of course, privy to the secret lucubrations of Yahweh, but it is certainly imaginable that a hearty, incandescent boil gives Him quite as much satisfaction as a damask cheek, and maybe a great deal more” (from “Comfort for the Ailing,” in *The American Mercury*, March 1930, pp. 188–189). I daresay I am not the only reader who is obliged to repair to an unabridged dictionary to be informed that *lucubration* is ‘laborious study or meditation, especially that pedantic or pretentious.’ The Latin *lucubrare* means ‘to work at night by lamplight.’

Mudsill, as in, “As for the Methodists, the Baptists and other such mudsills of the Lord, it must be obvious that doubts [i.e., of the verity of demons] among them are confined to a few advanced intellectuals, debauched by reading the

epicurean poetry of Edgar A. Guest” (from “The Powers of the Air” in *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 125–131). Not many people know that a *mudsill* is the lowermost supporting beam of a structure, at or below ground level—but Mencken did.

Mulct is not really an odd word, but neither is it encountered in everyday parlance; however, Mencken apparently liked its sound. An example: “The intelligent man, when he pays taxes, certainly does not believe that he is making a prudent and productive investment of his money; on the contrary, he feels that he is being mulcted in an excessive amount for services that, in the main, are useless to him, and that, in substantial part, are downright inimical to him” (from “Memoirs of a Subject of the United States,” in *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 53–61). To *mulct* is ‘to penalize by fining or demanding forfeiture;’ also ‘to obtain goods or money by fraud.’

Mullah, as in, “One of the favorite notions of the Puritan mullahs who specialize in pornography is that the sex instinct, if suitably repressed, may be ‘sublimated,’ as they say, into idealism, and especially into esthetic idealism” (from “The Blushful Mystery,” in *Prejudices: 1st series*; 1919, pp. 197–198). *Mullah* is an Islamic title of respect for one who expounds sacred law; it can be thought of as an Arabic equivalent of “Master.” Mencken could have used any one of several alternative terms in the cited sentence, but none would have conveyed quite the twist of *mullahs*.

Poltroon, *poltroonery*, and *poltroonish* all are words that appear frequently in Mencken’s writings. A few examples: “A patriot is a bigot, and, more often than not, a bounder and a poltroon” (from “The Good Man,” first printed in *The Smart Set*, July 1923, p. 47). Also: “And that burden of errors [i.e., his ‘stock of sweet beliefs,’ his ‘corpus of high faiths’] is what distinguishes man, even above his capacity for tears, his talents as a liar, his excessive hypocrisy and poltroonery, from all other orders of mammalia” (from “Meditation on Meditation,” in *The Smart Set*, June 1920, pp. 45–46). And: “A tradition of truculence operating



upon a population [inhabitants of the old Southern Confederacy] that is congenitally timorous and even poltroonish" (from "The Confederate Mind," in *The Smart Set*, October 1922, pp. 42–43). A *poltroon* is a craven coward or a mean-spirited wretch. The term is said to come from the Old Italian *poltrone*, 'an idler,' literally 'one who lies abed,' probably related to the obsolete *poltro*, 'bed.'

Popinjay, as in, "A genuine popinjay, whatever that is, is as a shrinking violet compared to him [i.e., the average vain man]" (from "The Eternal Male," in part from *In Defense of Women*, 1918, revised 1922, pp. 77–78; and in part from *The Smart Set*, November 1919, p. 71). Mencken, of course, was referring to a vain person given to bombast. I'd be surprised if Mencken did not know that *popinjay* in Middle English meant a parrot or 'gay bird.' The origin of the term is in *babbagha*, the Persian word for parrot.

Pother appears in Mencken's introduction to a critique of Professor Thorstein Veblen, originally in *The Smart Set*, May 1919, pp. 138–144, that aroused "a considerable pother." A *pother* is a commotion or fuss; the origin of the term is unknown, but it would seem to be a variant of *bother*.

Puling, as in, "To shrink from giving so much happiness [i.e., by expressing love] at such small expense, to evade the business on the ground that it has hazards—this is the act of a puling and tacky fellow" (from "Appendix on a Tender Theme," in *Prejudices: 2nd series*; 1920, pp. 236–237). To *pule* is to whine; both words may be of imitative origin.

Ratiocination, as in, "This [a listing of characteristics of 'the leisure class']. I believe, was a fair specimen of the Veblenian [i.e., of Thorstein Veblen] ratiocination" (from "Professor Veblen" in *Prejudices: 1st series*; 1919, pp. 59–83). *Ratiocination* is not a particularly odd word, but it is one seldom seen in current literature. It means a process of reasoning, being a near borrowing of the Latin word for calculation or deliberation.

Rodomontanizing, as in the quotation cited for *blowsy*. *Rodomontade* is 'vainglorious boasting or bluster.' The term is taken from the name *Rodomonte*, the Saracen king of Algiers, in *Orlando Innamorato*, by Matteo Boaido and *Orlando Furioso*, by Ludovico Ariosto.

Sempiternal is a word I never saw before reading Mencken, and I doubt I'll see it again. An example: "Sound ideas, when by chance they become articulate, annoy it [i.e., the human race] and terrify it; it prefers the sempiternal slobber" (from "Forgotten Men," in *The American Mercury*, March 1928, pp. 280–282). As one might guess, *sempiternal* means eternal, but with redundant emphasis. The word combines the Latin *semper*, 'always,' and *aeternus*, 'eternal.'

Snickersee, as in, "Well, Hale [William Bayer Hale, who once wrote a devastating piece on the philosophy of Woodrow Wilson] spreads it out on his operating table, sharpens his snickersee upon his bootleg, and proceeds to so harsh an anatomizing that it nearly makes me sympathize with the author [i.e., Wilson]" (from "The Archangel Woodrow," in "Memoirs of a Subject of the United States," *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 43–44). A *snickersee*, I found when obliged to look it up, is a knife resembling a sword. The term is an alteration of *snick* and *snee*, 'to cut and thrust in fighting with a knife,' from the Dutch.

Sophistical, as in, "I pass over the theological objections to self-destruction as too sophistical to be worth a serious answer" (from "On Suicide," in "The Human Mind," *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 85–91). In this sentence, why did not Mencken use "sophisticated"? Because that is not what he meant. *Sophistical* relates to *sophistry*, plausible but fallacious argumentation.

Strophe, as in, "All I propose is that the committee of poets imitate them [i.e., the authors of the Book of Common Prayer], but with an avoidance of the strophes objectionable to heathen doctrine" (from "Clarion Call to Poets," in *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 103–112). A *strophe* is a stanza recited by a chorus (classically a Greek chorus) when turning from one side of the



audience to the other. The term is a direct borrowing of the Greek word for turning.

Teetotum, as in, “But psychology still lured him [C. E. Ayres, who wrote a book called *Science: the False Messiah* in 1927], and he began to investigate it—just in time to see the behaviorists turn Man into a teetotum, not unlike the electron” (from a review of Ayres’ book in *The American Mercury*, September 1927, pp. 126–127). A *teetotum* is a toy top, usually having lettered sides, used to play various games of chance.

Usufruct appears frequently in Mencken’s writings but seldom is encountered elsewhere. A few examples: “It [democracy] offers John Doe a means to rise above his place beside Richard Roe, and then, by making Roe his equal, takes away the chief usufructs of the rising” (from *Notes on Democracy*, 1926, pp. 202–206). Or: “Every American college president, it appears, is in duty bound to write and utter at least one book upon the nature, aims and usufructs of the Higher Education” (from “The Boon of Culture,” in *The American Mercury*, September 1931, pp. 36–48). And: “The late herculean combat [i.e., prize fight] between Prof. Dempsey and Mons. Carpentier, in addition to all its other usufructs, also had some lessons in it for the psychologist—that is, if any psychologist can be found who is not an idiot” (from “How Legends are Made,” in *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, July 5, 1921). A *usufruct*, I had to be reminded by my *American Heritage Dictionary*, is the right to use and enjoy the profits and advantages of something belonging to another as long as the property is not damaged or altered in any way. The term is a near borrowing of the Latin word for ‘use of the fruits.’

Wikinski is the only one of Mencken’s odd words that I have been unable to find in any standard dictionary. It appears in the sentence: “By 1922 he [Harry Hopkins, FDR’s adviser and close friend] was beginning to be known as a promising uplifter, and in that year the Red Cross made him its regional manager and wikinski at New Orleans” (from “Wizards,” in *The Baltimore*

Evening Sun, May 27, 1935). In his weighty tome *The American Language*, Mencken claims an Amerindian origin of the political term *wikinski* (or *wiskinski*), meaning ‘a functionary assigned to collect contributions.’

Wowser, *wowserism*, as in, “Every Sunday School in the land is full of such wrecks [i.e., persons whose concupiscence has been puritanically suppressed]; they recruit the endless brigade of wowsers” (from “The Democratic Citizen,” in “Memoirs of a Subject of the United States,” *Prejudices: 6th series*; 1927, pp. 61–70). And: “If the [Civil] war had gone with the Confederates, [there would be no Ku Klux Klan] . . . and the more homicidal variety of wowserism” (from “The Calamity of Appomattox,” in *The American Mercury*, September 1930, pp. 29–31). *Wowser* is cited as a word used in Australia for an obnoxiously puritanical person. In Mencken’s *The American Language*, he quotes an Australian author who defines a *wowser* as ‘an ineffably pious person who mistakes this world for a penitentiary and himself for a warder.’

These are but a few of the odd or unusual words that appear in Mencken’s writings. Any avid reader of Mencken can ferret out at least as many more. Why was Mencken so often prompted to use arcane or quaint expressions? Surely not to exhibit his vast vocabulary; he would be sorely hurt should anyone accuse him of pedantry. Surely not to obscure his meaning—although I suspect he might have been pleased if a reader resorted to a dictionary, thereby learning more of an unusual term, then adding it to the reader’s own store of words. My guess is that Mencken in his writings chose to occasionally insert odd words simply for the fun of it. At the same time he was careful to pick the odd word that particularly expressed his intent.

Where Mencken found felicity, we can find it, too—and be forever gratefully enriched.

[*William S. Haubrich, MD FACP, author of Medical Meanings: A Glossary of Word Origins, was a consultant in the life sciences for The American Heritage Dictionary (3rd Edition).*]



BIBLIOGRAPHIA

The Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar and Word Usage: Authoritative Answers to Today's Grammar and Usage Questions, Morton S. Freeman, 304 pp, 1999, Medford Press, ISBN 0966674804 \$19.95/£14.99

In his preface to *The Wordwatcher's Guide to Good Grammar*, Morton S. Freeman asks, "Who determines the correct way to say or write something?" and answers, "Here are the canons of usage that merit the respect of those qualified to judge which expressions are acceptable in an educated society."

I would ask, "Who are those qualified to judge," and "Whatever makes Freeman think that we are living in an educated society?" but perhaps this is an unduly pessimistic attitude. In fact, judging by the questions on which these canons are based, there are indeed plenty of educated people out there who want to know how to use their language well.

Reading this book has made me distinctly nervous of putting pen to paper (yes, "literally"—see p. 162 of *Wordwatcher*), even though as a long-time teacher of English grammar and style I might be considered one of "those qualified to judge." The text is based on actual questions about grammar and usage asked of the author by the readers of his "Word Watcher" column. I approached it first by looking up some of my own *betes noires* (I was going to say, "pet peeves," but Freeman says that the word *peeve* is not recommended in formal writing), and was pleased to find myself nodding agreement in most cases. His note on *hopefully* as a sentence adverb, for example, is a sheer delight to those of us who deplore this usage. However, I would like to assume that Freeman is being funny when he says, "Trying to correct the masses is probably a futile task. Which is no reason for an educated person to ignore correct usage" (and which is no reason for sentence fragments, either). Not that I disagree, mind you.

As I read on, I found myself more and more frequently relating entries to sections of my advanced grammar course, so much so that I am adding this book to the required reading list.

Freeman says that this book is not a text; it's not, but it will certainly provoke discussion, not least in the differences between Canadian and American usage. One such difference occurs at the entry for *also*, where Freeman states, "Many grammarians frown on the use of *also* when it begins a sentence, even if used adverbially"; Canadian dialectologists generally agree that this usage is one of the few syntactic markers of Canadian English.

Another is Freeman's unequivocal ban on the use of *i.e.* in formal writing, whereas the *Guide to Canadian English Usage* says, "These abbreviations [*i.e.* and *e.g.*] . . . appear increasingly in running text in works of all kinds." Certainly few theses and dissertations could survive without them (though I do wish people would learn the difference between them!).

One feature of this book that is especially interesting, and that stems from its being based on real questions, is the inclusion of problems that the average grammarian (if such exists) would probably not think of addressing.

For instance, what is the adjectival or past participle form of *hamstring*—*hamstringed* or *hamstrung*? Or where does the "z" in the abbreviations *oz.* and *viz.* come from? Other useful entries concern pairs or triplets of words that are easily confused, such as *hangar/hanger* or *ordinance/ordinance*.

Freeman also pursues such normally untravelled paths as the difference in meaning a hyphen can make, as in "great grandfather" (he has a super personality) versus "great-grandfather" (he is three generations superior to me), or tracing words that each have completely opposite meanings, like *cleave*, *ravel*, or *sanction*. The book contains a brief but clear section on sentence structure; it will make a good review exercise. Freeman's answer to the question, "Are sentence fragments used by good writers?" exemplifies his use of whatever structure is under discussion in his answers, *viz.*, "Occasionally. *Fragments* can emphasize. Especially in a suitable context. Try one. Just like this. But with restraint." An effective technique, indeed.



But all is not quite perfect. My main quibble—though I think it's rather more than that—is Freeman's somewhat cavalier attitude to registers and levels of usage. He consistently confuses register, that is (or *i.e.*), such styles as formal, colloquial, casual, etc. with level: standard versus non- or substandard usage. He seems to feel that colloquial speech and writing have no place in the repertoire of educated speakers, as when he says of the adjective phrase *all kinds of* (in the sense of "a lot"): "It is an unacceptable colloquialism." It is colloquial, certainly, but our everyday speech would be dull indeed if we did not indulge in colloquialisms, yes, and slang too. Had Freeman paid more attention to register, he would not have implied that "informal" speech (which can include two and possibly three separate styles) is careless usage; he classifies *afraid* as in "I'm afraid he's wrong," as not being standard English. What about tactful usage? Swan's *Practical English Usage* (essentially a reference for second-language learners) gives it as the equivalent of "I'm sorry" when used to introduce apologetic refusals and bad news. It is certainly standard in Canadian English in this sense. The author would do better not only to pay more attention to register, but also to differentiate between written and spoken usage. They are not and should not be the same. Who wants to "talk like a book"?

All books on grammar and usage are by their very nature subject to criticism and cavil; grammarians are like tax accountants—no two of them ever agree. After all, that's what keeps us in business! This particular book is useful, stylish, and frequently witty. In my marginal notes, "Yes!" far outnumbers "!" or even, once or twice, "Nonsense!" To put it more formally, this book's merits far outweigh its disappointments. Read it, use it, enjoy it, and pass it on to your friends (but be sure to get it back).

Barbara Harris
Department of Linguistics
University of Victoria
Victoria B.C.

The Word on the Street: Fact and Fable about American English, by John McWhorter. Plenum Trade Publishing, ISBN 0306459949, 1998. \$27.95/£19.95

I wish that I had read this book a year ago, when it first appeared. Written by an associate professor of Linguistics at University of California-Berkeley, it sat on the shelf for a while (despite the attractive cover design) before I managed to pick it up. When I did, I was pleasantly surprised. A well-written and engaging book, it is also the linguistics equivalent of a page-turner, as unlikely as that may be.

McWhorter has an involving writing style and uses some wonderful metaphors to get his points across. (I was especially fond of his comparing English to a lava lamp.) Although the lamp is constantly changing, he writes, "In no sense is the clump of lava decaying—if one piece is beginning to drip or split into strands . . . other pieces are joining together."

The real strength of the book, however, is his common-sense yet linguistically sound takes on some of the most controversial language topics of the day, including gender-neutral pronouns, the grammar police, and "The Tragedy of Shakespearean Language" (or why Johnny doesn't enjoy King Lear.) A full third of the book is given over to the Ebonics controversy in California, and there McWhorter shines in his analysis and commentary.

He describes the problem so well and discusses the roles of the players and their theories so intelligently that I am wary of giving away too much of the pleasure of reading it by going into his conclusions here. Suffice it to say that this was the first writing on the topic that left me feeling truly enlightened and not just lobbied.

McWhorter is also kind enough to include a thoughtfully annotated bibliography and a good index to the book as well.

Certainly, I would search this book out right away—don't leave it on the shelf as long as I did!

Erin McKean



EPISTOLAE

In regard to Gary Wiener's plaint (Summer 1999) regarding his last name (strangely, in my first seventy-nine years of life—protected, I suppose—I have never heard the phallic connotation). I would like to question a minor point in his article. He refers to the "rotten Germanic rule that dictates that the latter vowel, or *e*, determines the pronunciation and not the former." Well, I am not a student of German but I was born and spent my early years in Germany. I speak and read the language. The German word *Wiener*, meaning resident of Vienna, is pronounced "Veener" in Germany. The *i* in German is pronounced like the English long *e* sound, while the letter *e* is pronounced somewhat like the letter *a*, as in *bake* in English. So, it is actually the former vowel, *i*, that determines the pronunciation of the name he finds so regrettable.

Erik Nappa
Brick, New Jersey

[Mr. Nappa is correct. Thank you for writing to point this out.]

While I realize that using plurals to refer to a singular subject has become common where "he or she" seems cumbersome and recasting the sentence would require effort, I expect VERBATIM to put forth whatever effort is required to rise above the common level. I'm appalled to find on page 27 of the Spring issue: "A person so bored *they* have completely shut off *their* brain" (italics mine).

The sentence could easily have been altered to read, "So bored as to have completely shut off the brain," or "So bored that the brain has been shut off," without its becoming awkward.

In a publication dedicated to excellence in word choices and usages, a writer's breach should not excite my gasp, or what's an editor for?

B. J. Seymour
Portland, Oregon

[Although some despise it, this is a very old construction (Jane Austen used it!) that shouldn't be excised, especially in humorous writing.—Ed.]

RE: ASSING AROUND: Add "I'd like to pound sand up his ass," said in anger by a friend of mine years ago.

FUN THINGS TO SAY IN SPANISH, etc. Another fun thing is "*a qui es una mesa*," which means "here is a table" in Spanish, but "a cow eats without a knife" in Yiddish.

And when I was in Mexico recently, I bought a cream for mosquito bites, called *Quadriderm*; i.e., Four Skin.

As long as I'm here, I'd like to share this with you:

I was driving in my car and thinking idly about subletting the house we had rented in Mexico, when the letters of *sublet* started to rearrange themselves in my head, and in a few minutes I came up with this sentence: *Her bustle was not subtle; it was the bluest I had seen since she sublet the house.* (It made my day.)

Sidney Brotman
Watchung, New Jersey

In response

to reader's requests, we are now able to offer binders that can accommodate up to four years (16 issues) of VERBATIM, The Language Quarterly. These sturdy dark-brown binders, with "VERBATIM" stamped in gold on the spine and front, will be sent in individual cartons to any address in North America for (US)\$15.00 postpaid; the price outside North America, via surface mail, is (US)\$17.00 or £10.00 sterling each, postpaid.



Orders should be sent to the address most convenient for you:

VERBATIM
4907 N. Washtenaw Ave.
Chicago, IL 60625

VERBATIM
P.O. Box 156
Chearsley, Aylesbury
Bucks. HP18 0DQ

or email: binders@verbatimag.com.

Checks, Mastercard, and Visa accepted.



BIBLIOGRAPHIA.

Encarta World English Dictionary, edited by Anne H. Soukhanov (US), Kathy Rooney (UK) 2078 pp., St. Martins Press, ISBN 0747543712. 1999. \$50.00/£30.00

gene: one of the elements of the germ plasm serving as transmitters of hereditary characteristics and usu. regarded as portions of deoxyribonucleic acids linearly arranged in fixed positions and functioning through control of the synthesis of specific polypeptide chains

Huh?

For the quintessential, post-modern, science-challenged person, the preceding definition of *gene* found in *Webster's Third International Dictionary* can be somewhat intimidating if not downright incomprehensible. Recognizing this, the lexicographers of the *Encarta World English Dictionary* (EWED) have sought a more user-friendly approach. Kathy Rooney, in her introduction to the first edition, says, "We have tried to bring the same criteria of clarity and transparency to our scientific and technical definitions that have characterized our approach to other definitions. *Gene* in EWED is defined as "the basic unit capable of transmitting characteristics from one generation to the next. It consists of a specific sequence of DNA or RNA that occupies a fixed position in a chromosome."

U.S. general editor Anne H. Soukhanov says in her introduction that "today's dictionary users are in a hurry, not wishing to pore over line after line of small type to find the meaning sought." To solve this problem EWED provides "quick definitions" in small-capital letters. So if you're seeking a concise definition of the word *dialectic* the EWED provides "tension between conflicting ideas." Ms. Soukhanov also declares that the EWED is a "window upon other cultures; it includes thousands of English words used by English speakers the world over—English words—but not U.S. words. These are words that we and our children do and will encounter with increasing frequency as we correspond with others in

far-flung lands, via e-mail." The *Oxford Companion to the English Language* lists hundreds of varieties of English, some of them rather obscure, such as Hawaii Pidgin English and Camfranglais, words from French, Kamtok, and local languages in the English of Cameroons. There are in any case at least eight categories of World English: African, American, Australian and New Zealand, British and Irish, Canadian, Caribbean, East Asian, and South Asian. Each of these varieties can be further subdivided. Canadian English can be broken down into Atlantic, Canadian Standard, Inuit and Quebec, and East Asian can be divided into Hawaiian, Hong Kong, Malaysian, Philippines and Singapore types.

The United States represents the country with the largest number of English speakers but it only represents 20% of the world-wide total. At present there is roughly an equivalent number of people speaking English as a first or second language, but within fifty years it is estimated that there will be 50% more second-language speakers than first-language speakers. In any case, as Salman Rushdie said some years ago, "The English language ceased to be the sole possession of the English some time ago."

Many of the best English language novels emerging in the past 20 years have come from novelists such as Rushdie, fluent in the "other Englishes," so that having a familiarization with terms from these other Englishes can enhance one's appreciation of the literature.

Especially because of the proliferation of e-mail, people from different parts of the globe are communicating to a much greater extent. If someone from Southern Asia says they are going to send you their biodata, would you know what to expect? Opening up your *Encarta* dictionary would inform you to expect their "curriculum vitae." If a Canadian informs an American that he used to work as a *bagman*, and the American checks his *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* (W3) it would suggest only an illicit sense of collecting funds. The *Encarta World*



English Dictionary, however, points out that in Canada *bagman* can be merely a synonym for *fundraiser*. The *EWED* also includes such Canadian food words as *poutine* and *bangbelly*, the word *pogey*, “unemployment pay,” and the term *caisse populaire*, “credit union,” that are absent from *W3*. Of course, there are many Canadianisms that are absent from *EWED*, such as *Arborite*, “plastic laminate used for counter-tops,” *all-dressed*, “dish with all the trimmings,” and *download*, to mean “to shift a cost from one level of government to another.”

North American English has been enriched by countless words of aboriginal origin, such as *kayak*, *toboggan*, *moose*, *raccoon*, *hickory*, *woodchuck*, *squash*, and *pecan*. Australian English has similarly been bequeathed many aboriginal terms. Some of them are well known, such as *kangaroo*, *wombat*, and *boomerang*; others such as *kookaburra*, “a kind of bird,” and *corroboree*, “a ceremonial dance,” are all found in *EWED*. Similarly, you’ll find these words from Maori that are present in New Zealand English *kiwi*, *mana*, “power and authority,” and *tupuna*, “ancestor.”

There are many words one would expect to find in a World English dictionary that are absent from *EWED*. In India, it is estimated that there are 50 million people competent in English yet there are many Indian English words absent from *EWED*, such as *cousin-brother*, “male cousin,” *dining-leaf*, “a banana leaf used to serve food,” *kumkum mark*, “mark on forehead,” *kaccha road*, “dirt road,” *grameen bank*, “village bank” and *swadeshi cloth*, “home-made cloth.” Absent from Australian English are such words as *brumby*, “wild horse”, *bludge*, “to act as a prostitute’s pimp” and *dinkum*, “hard work.” Missing also were the Malaysian English *makan*, “food,” the Singapore English *towkay*, “proprietor,” and the Hong Kong English *mafoo*, “stable hand.”

Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe said that “the price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. I feel English will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a

new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.”

Although *EWED* is a good start at compiling a world English dictionary, the definitive world English dictionary has yet to be compiled.

EPISTOLAE

Am I the only person who is troubled by the following passage in “Assing Around” (Spring 1999): “. . . a male pederast . . . is . . . in search of a *piece of ass*. (In prison slang, a *butt pussy* is an anus” (p 8).

It seems to me that this confuses anal intercourse, homosexual acts, and child molestation! In fact, the use of the term *a piece of ass* in the sense “anal sexual penetration” is neither necessarily nor sufficiently related to pederasty (the sexual molestation of children). Pederasty may involve any one of several sexual acts that do not necessarily implicate the anus at all.

Likewise, anal sexual penetration is practiced by many couples, not just “male pederasts.” The phrases *taking it up the ass* and *taking it in the ass* (both of which the authors inexplicably overlook) are frequently employed to describe this widespread sexual practice.

Ron Butters
Durham, NC

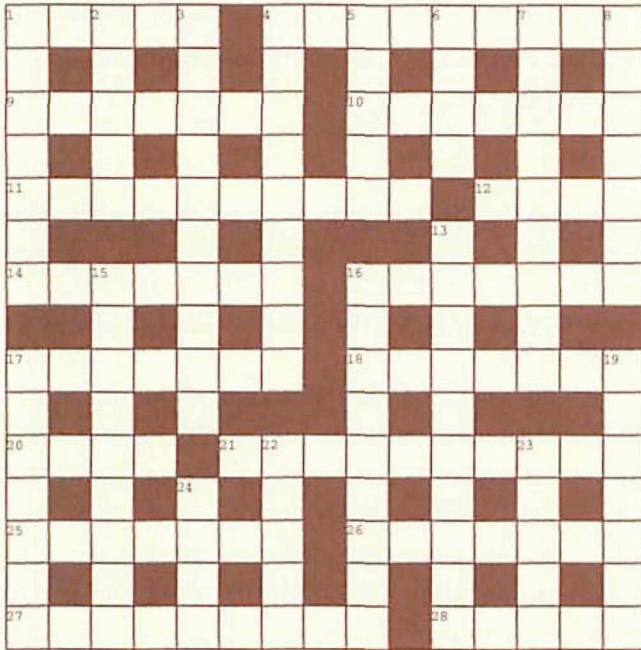
[We certainly don't want to be perpetrating that tired old saw that homosexuality and child molestation are in any way equivalent! I should have picked up on this earlier.—Ed.]

ACROSS 1. TO WIT (2 defs.) 4. TOO + TH(P)ICK 9.
IMP + ENDS 10. GLISTEN (anag.) 11. LARGENISTS
(anag.) 12. GOAT (2 defs.) 14. T + RUFFLE 16. VI + A
+ D + U + C + T 17. D + ODDER + S 18. CYGNETS
(hom.) 20. SERF (hom.) 21. MEAL TICKET (anag.) 25.
RE(A + L)IGN 26. AN + I + MATE 27. DREAMLIKE
(anag.) 28. C + LAIDS DOWN 1. TRIPLET (2 defs.) 2.
WIPER (substitute !p for a.t in water) 3. TEN + DERF
+ EET (rev.) 4. TASTINESS (anag.) 5. SOUGHT 6.
HAIL (hom.) 7. INTRODUCE (anag.) 8. KIN + G +
TUT 13. BAR + GAINING 15. UNDERTAKE (anag.)
16. VAC(ILL)ATE 17. DE(SIR)ED 19. SETTERS
(anag.) 22. ENNUI (hid.) 23. KO(A)LA 24. FIR + M



Anglo-American Crossword No. 82

Compiled by Bob Stigger



Verbal Analogies

Dr. P. A. Pomfrit

1. Corpuscles : Corpuscular :: Twilight : ? (11)
2. Alike : Similar :: Yellow alloy used for cheap jewelry : ? (7)
3. Cicero : Ciceronian :: Cicero : ? (7)
4. French dance : Cancan :: Comic-strip character : ? (6)
5. Hollow-horned : Cavicorn :: A group of beetles : ? (9)
6. 7 : Heptahedron :: 30 : ? (15)
7. Turning aside : Aversion :: Turning inside out : ? (8)
8. Expose to sunlight : Insolation :: Deprive of sunlight to bleach plants: ? (10)
9. Untamed fierceness : Ferocity :: State of being fertile : ? (8)
10. Squinting : Strabismus :: Lock-jaw : ? (7)
11. Plot, scheme : Machination :: Laugh loudly : ? (12)
12. Needle : Acicular :: Cup : ? (9)
13. Sponge : Poriferal :: Ivy : ? (7)
14. Poultice : Cataplasm :: Mustard-plaster : ? (8)
15. To give life to : Animate :: To make parallel : ? (9)
16. Growing straight : Orthotropical :: Rotatory : ? (10)
17. Obstetrician : Obstetrix :: Govenor : ? (7)
18. Second-rate finery : Frippery :: Self-satisfied pomposity : ? (11)

Across

1. Specifically, how to move a disabled vehicle? (2,3)
4. Very skinny person is too heavy after eating 1/3 of pie (9)
9. Threatens mischievous child with consequences (7)
10. Ordered singlet with glitter (7)
11. Interclass struggles for robbers and thieves (10)
12. Attack farm animal (4)
14. Gourmet's ultimate frill (7)
16. Six diamonds follows a (slightly unusual) clubs opening in tournament bridge (7)
17. Caught between daughter and son, stranger trembles (7)
18. Young swans and small seals related (7)
20. Peasant waves to an audience (4)
21. A person off whom one sponges fresh milk, tea, etc. (4,6)
25. A Liberal breaks rule to cooperated iwht a different faction (7)
26. An Irishman's first wife is spirited (7)
27. Fanciful plastic rim leaked (9)
28. Flowers from one of garbage men (5)

Down

1. Threesome's mini-vacation? (7)
2. Water—one pint, not a teaspoon—makes auto glass cleaner (5)
3. Novices Peg and Fred catch up (10)
4. Savor sea stints when traveling (9)
5. After inaugural, sought nothing (5)
6. Expressed hearty greeting (4)
7. Institute reckless reduction (9)
8. Relatives, at edge of grave, voice contempt for Pharaoh (4,3)
13. Prohibit making a profit in negotiations (10)
15. Agree to perform a Kern duet drunk (9)
16. Taking ill, quit, or be indecisive (9)
17. Longed for gentleman, in fact (7)
19. Hunting dogs worked streets (7)
22. Rotten nuisance, concealing boredom (5)
23. Nut-producing tree shelters a marsupial (5)
24. Solid pine mantelpieces's original (4)

Verbal Analogies Answers: 1. Crepuscular 2. Similor 3. Tullian 4. Timin 5. Clavicorn 6. Thracontahedron 7. Eversion 8. Etiolation 9. Feracity 10. Trismus 11. Cachinnation 12. Calicular 13. Hederal 14. Sinapism 15. Collimate 16. Pentropal 17. Rectrix 18. Podsnappery