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The New Profanity

Steven R. Finz
The Sea Ranch, California

Only a few decades ago, no person of culture would use the f-word in polite company. Now, although even our courts have stopped shrinking from public pronunciation of the word *fuck*, all America heard O. J. Simpson's defense lawyer ask witness Mark Fuhrman if he had used "the n-word" any time in the past ten years. Ironically, Fuhrman's answer was "No. Never." Have ethnically offensive terms become the only dirty words left to our society?

America holds a traditional belief in the benefits of free expression. United States Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter wrote that one of the prerogatives of American citizenship is the freedom to speak "foolishly and without moderation."¹ Our courts have a long history of protecting this foolishness and lack of moderation, even where racially offensive language is concerned.

In 1949, for example, the United States Supreme Court held that the state of Illinois could not prohibit a speaker from publicly referring to Jews as communistic Zionists and declaring that he didn't want them here, but wanted them to go back where they belong.² Twenty years later, the high court said that the state of Ohio could not stop a speaker at a Ku Klux Klan rally from standing near a large burning cross, wearing a hood, and saying, "Personally, I believe the nigger should be returned to Africa, the Jew returned to Israel."³ Eight years after that, it proclaimed that Nazis could freely march through the streets of the predominately Jewish community of Skokie, Illinois, wearing uniforms and displaying swastikas.⁴

In 1971, the same protection was extended to words generally considered to be vulgar. That

battle began in the corridors of a California municipal court, although it was inspired by a different kind of battle that was taking place in Viet Nam. On April 26, 1968, Paul Robert Cohen walked through a Los Angeles County courthouse, in the presence of women and children, wearing a jacket bearing the words "Fuck the Draft" plainly emblazoned on its back. When Cohen entered a courtroom, he removed the jacket and draped it over his arm. A court officer asked the judge to hold Cohen in contempt, but the judge refused, since no offense had been committed in his presence. So the police were called. Cohen was arrested and convicted of violating a California law that prohibited disturbing the peace.

Cohen claimed that he had a constitutional right to express his sentiments about the war and the selective service system, and that the conviction violated that right. The California Court of Appeal disagreed.⁵ In an opinion written by Justice Alarcon, the court described the language on Cohen's jacket as offensive and below the "minimum standard of propriety and the accepted norm of public behavior." The court said that the expression Cohen chose to display was one usually not used publicly to espouse a philosophy, and that he must have been aware that his behavior would vex and annoy a substantial portion of his unwilling audience. Justice Alarcon thought it was reasonably foreseeable that Cohen's use of the f-word would cause others to rise up and commit violent acts against him to prevent him from subjecting women and children involuntarily to his unprintable language. The court noted that *fuck* is one of the most notorious four-letter



Contents

Vol. XXV, No. 3 Summer 2000

Articles

<i>The New Profanity</i>	Stephen R. Finz	p. 1
<i>The Mouths of Yarmouth</i>	Tony Hall	p. 7
<i>Love Letters (Some Thoughts on the Dictionary)</i>	Susannah Felts	p. 9
<i>Blah, Blah, Blah, Etcetera</i>	Jessy Randall	p. 15
<i>Esperanto: Language for Everybody</i>	E. James Lieberman	p. 20
<i>Interlingua: R.I.P.</i>	Frank Esterhill	p. 21

Columns

Horribile Dictu	Mat Coward	p. 14
Classical Blather: <i>Funny Animals</i>	Nick Humez	p. 17

Bibliographia

<i>Even Monkeys Fall from Trees & Even a Stone Buddha Can Talk</i>	Ron Kaplan	p. 28
<i>Latin Roots and Their Modern English Spellings</i>	Sonya Seifert	p. 28
<i>Flutes of Fire</i>	Curtis G. Booth	p. 29

plus the crossword puzzle and some SICS! and EPISTOLAE

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words in the English language and that it had yet to gain sufficient acceptance to appear in any standard lexicon, other than Partridge’s *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, in which its second letter was replaced by an asterisk. In conclusion, the court said that, while Cohen had a right to speak out against the draft, this did not include the right to express his views by means of lewd and vulgar language.

Cohen tried to appeal to the California Supreme Court, but it denied review, apparently satisfied with Justice Alarcon’s decision. So he went to the United States Supreme Court, which granted certiorari, thus agreeing to hear the case. Justice Harlan, who wrote the Court’s opinion, began by saying that the case was more important than at first blush it had appeared.

Harlan said that since the expression on Cohen’s jacket was directed at an institution, rather than any specific person, no individual reasonably could have regarded it as a direct personal insult or have been inspired to violence by it. Similarly, he said, there was no evidence that substantial numbers of citizens were standing ready to strike out physically at Cohen for assaulting their sensibilities. He added that the fact that there might be some persons with such lawless and violent proclivities would be an insufficient base upon which to erect a government power to force dissidents into avoiding particular forms of expression, calling it a self-defeating proposition that to avoid physical censorship by the violent and lawless, the state may effectuate that censorship itself. Those who didn’t like seeing the word on Cohen’s jacket could simply avert their eyes.

Justice Harlan recognized that much linguistic expression conveys inexpressible emotions as well as precise ideas, and that words are often chosen as much for their emotive as their cognitive force. He added that while *fuck* may be more distasteful than other words, it is often true that “one man’s vulgarity is another’s lyric.” Since government officials cannot make principled distinctions in this area, he said, the Constitution leaves

matters of taste and style to the individual. In conclusion, he wrote that the constitutional right of free expression is powerful medicine that may at times fill the air with verbal cacophony; this is not a sign of weakness but of strength, because it implicates fundamental societal values.

To some extent, Justice Harlan was relying on a legacy left by Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who half a century earlier had added the phrase “free trade in ideas” to the judicial lexicon.⁷ In commenting on freedom of speech, Holmes wrote that “the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market.” In other words, the way to fight a bad idea is with a good idea. He warned against attempts to prevent the expression of opinions, even those that we loathe, unless they so imminently threaten lawlessness that an immediate check is required to save the country.

The First Amendment provides that Congress shall make no law abridging freedom of speech or of the press. The Fourteenth Amendment has the effect of imposing the same prohibition on the states. These freedoms of expression are not absolute, but there is a very finite and specific list of exceptions. Laws may prohibit conduct that appears expressive but does not convey any message and so is not speech.⁸ Obscenity has been placed in this category.⁹ Other exceptions have been made for personally abusive epithets, known as fighting words, that are inherently likely to provoke violent reactions;¹⁰ for words likely to provoke a given group to hostile reaction;¹¹ and for methods of expression that intrude into the privacy of the home.¹²

While laws may prohibit the acts on that list, they cannot prevent those acts from taking place, except in some very special circumstances. The difference between punishing prohibited expression and restraining it in advance is important because a message that has been restrained is withdrawn before ever being communicated. For this reason, government attempts at prior restraint of expression are subject to a very high level of scrutiny by the Supreme Court.



In 1963, the Court said that attempts to restrain expression in advance are presumed to be unconstitutional and are permitted only in exceptional cases.¹³ A list of exceptions created by the Supreme Court in 1931 included language during wartime that obstructs the recruitment system or informs the enemy about the sailing dates of transports or the number and location of troops; obscene publications; and incitements to imminent acts of violence or to the violent overthrow of orderly government.¹⁴

The Court noted that blacks are known to be extremely sensitive to the particular word that had been used, and that knowledge of this sensitivity made its use in the workplace outrageous.

The constitution of the state of California expressly recognizes the distinction between punishment for prohibited expression and prior restraint of expression. It provides:

“Every person may freely speak, write and publish his or her sentiments on all subjects, being responsible for the abuse of this right. A law may not restrain or abridge liberty of speech or press.”¹⁵

Historically, the California courts have put this principle into effect by imposing civil liability for the use of ethnic epithets in the workplace. The legal theory used for this purpose is known as intentional infliction of emotional distress. It makes a defendant liable for committing an outrageous act, calculated to cause severe mental suffering, which does cause such suffering. In general, conduct is not regarded as outrageous unless it exceeds all bounds tolerated by decent society. Motivated by considerations of free expression, courts have said that insulting language ordinarily does not qualify.¹⁶

In 1970, however, the California Supreme Court carved out an exception for racial slurs in the workplace. Manuel Alcorn, a black man, served as union shop steward in the company where he was employed. One day, after he gave advice to a union member, his employer called him a *goddam nigger*. Alcorn sued for intentional

infliction of emotional distress, but the trial court dismissed his case, based on the long-standing rule about insulting language.

The state supreme court reversed, however, permitting Alcorn to recover damages from his employer.¹⁷ In doing so, the court noted that blacks are known to be extremely sensitive to the particular word that had been used, and that knowledge of this sensitivity made its use in the workplace outrageous. The decision said that the slang epithet “nigger” may once have been in

common usage, along with such other racial characterizations as “wop,” “chink,” “jap,” “bohunk,” and “shanty Irish,” but that it had become particularly abusive and insulting in light of recent developments in the civil rights movement.

Subsequently, the California legislature passed the Fair Employment and Housing Act (FEHA), which prohibits racial discrimination in employment.¹⁸ Under the authority of this law, many employees have received damages for the emotional distress they sustained as a result of abusive language in the workplace. Recently, however, the California courts took the protection of minority workers to a new level.

In *Aguilar v. Avis*,¹⁹ seventeen Latinos employed by Avis as lot workers and car transporters sued their employer under the FEHA, claiming that their supervisor, John Lawrence, routinely called them *motherfuckers* and other derogatory names, demeaning them on the basis of their race, national origin, and lack of English-language skills. After awarding damages, the trial court issued an injunction directing Lawrence to “cease and desist from using any derogatory racial or ethnic epithets directed at, or descriptive of, Hispanic/Latino employees of Avis . . . as long as he is employed by Avis” The court also ordered Avis to prevent Lawrence from committing such acts.



Avis appealed, arguing that the injunction was a prior restraint of speech that violated First Amendment guarantees of freedom of expression. The California Court of Appeal affirmed the issuance of the injunction in a decision that used the word *motherfucker* twelve times, but did not use any of the other epithets. Justice King, who wrote the opinion, said that he had no idea why Lawrence called the plaintiffs motherfuckers, recognizing that the word has no special meaning pertaining to job performance and quoting the *New Dictionary of American Slang*, which defines it as “a detestable person.”²⁰

The court admitted that it did not know what else Lawrence called the Latino employees, because neither side had seen fit to inform it. Although Justice King read a newspaper article suggesting that the word *wetbacks* had been used, along with other “racial epithets in Spanish,” he could not accept that information as true, since it was not part of the judicial record. Acknowledging that racist epithets may “express a discriminatory idea or philosophy,” that of racial supremacy, he said that this was not enough to protect their use in the workplace.

The court said it would prefer an injunction like one issued by a federal court in New York that specifically listed the words that county corrections officers could not use when addressing prisoners: *nigger, polack, kike, spic, guinea, honky, mick, coon, and black bitch*.²¹ It was willing, however, to accept the vaguely worded language the trial court had used, saying that the phraseology involved was not technical or arcane, but was plain English. On the other hand, because the injunction also applied to speech outside the workplace, the appellate court said that it went too far and directed that it be modified.

Avis went to the California Supreme Court, where, once again, the injunction was affirmed. Chief Justice George, who wrote the majority opinion, compared the utterance of racial epithets in the workplace to treason committed by telling the enemy the nation’s defense secrets because in both cases, speech is swept up inci-

dentally by a statute directed primarily at conduct. As to Avis’s protest that an injunction against the future use of racial epithets was an invalid prior restraint of speech, the chief justice said that since the words had already been determined to result in employment discrimination, it was not unconstitutional to prohibit their further utterance. In conclusion, he said that the pervasive use of racial epithets in the workplace is not protected by the First Amendment.

Two justices dissented on technical grounds, but only one objected to the substance of the majority’s decision. Janice Brown, a well-known conservative and the court’s only black justice, said it was a bedrock principle underlying the First Amendment that the government may not prohibit the expression of an idea simply because society finds it offensive or disagreeable. Sardonicly, she added, “that is, until today.” She expressed the fear that, if applied generally, the new rule would create an exception that would eventually swallow the First Amendment. She pointed out the danger of prior restraint, because it does not merely place a burden on the speaker’s ability to communicate a message, but erases the message before its effects can be assessed.

Justice Brown was particularly disturbed by the fact that the court did not know exactly what Lawrence had said, how often he had said it, or what the surrounding circumstances had been. Commenting on the changing nature of political correctness, she noted that every age has some ideas that are fashionable and some that are disfavored. She said that the standard created by the court “turns the world on its head” because it holds, in effect, that the legislature, acting in response to current popular sentiments, can declare certain ideas to be bad, and once a thought is determined to be one of those bad ideas, courts can prohibit anyone from expressing it.

Making a thinly veiled reference to McCarthyism, she noted that in the early part of the last century, the public was particularly thin-skinned about communism, but that the United States Supreme Court struck down all attempts



by state courts to censor the dissemination of communist ideas. In conclusion, Brown wrote:

“Speech is unpleasant sometimes. It may be disgusting. It may be offensive. Contrary to the nursery rhyme, it may even be injurious. But . . . a government that tells its citizens what they may say will soon be dictating what they may think. . . . We are all the beneficiaries of the freedom the Constitution guarantees, and we all pay its costs, even though the price may sometimes be anguish.”

Armed with Justice Brown’s dissent, Avis petitioned the United States Supreme Court for certiorari, but the request was denied.²² In effect, this means that the nation’s highest court refused to hear the case and was willing to accept the California decision. The only dissenting voice was that of Justice Clarence Thomas, like Brown, a conservative and the Court’s only black justice.

Thomas said that to uphold application of the FEHA to pure speech would substantially modify existing First Amendment jurisprudence. Even assuming that the law could validly impose liability for the use of ethnic epithets in the workplace, he believed the injunction was flawed in at least three respects: first, because it prohibits even a single utterance of a prohibited word; second, because it was not necessary, since the threat of further damage awards probably would discourage further use of the offensive language; third, and most important, because the injunction contains no exception for speech that might contribute to reasoned debate.

The views of dissenting justices give heart to those who disagree with the majority but have no legal effect. The decision of California’s Supreme Court stands. It may be distasteful to call an employee a *motherfucker*, but it is not illegal. On the other hand, an employer who uses the n-word, or who permits the use of “any derogatory racial or ethnic epithets,” in violation of an injunction may be imprisoned for contempt of court. Ethnic slurs have truly become the new profanity.

Notes

1. *Baumgartner v. United States*, 322 U.S. 665, (1944).



2. *Terminiello v. Chicago*, 337 U.S. 1 (1949).
3. *Brandenburg v. Ohio*, 395 U.S. 444 (1969).
4. *National Socialist Party v. Skokie*, 432 U.S. 43 (1977).
5. *People v. Cohen* (Cert.Grtd) 1 Cal.App.3d 94 (1969).
6. *Cohen v. California*, 403 U.S. 15 (1971).
7. *Abrams v. United States*, 250 U.S. 616 (1919).
8. *United States v. O’Brien*, 391 U.S. 367 (1968).
9. *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957).
10. *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire*, 315 U.S. 568 (1942).
11. *Feiner v. New York*, 340 U.S. 315 (1951); *Tinker v. Des Moines Indep Comm Sch Dist*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969).
12. *Rowan v. Post Office Dept.*, 397 U.S. 728 (1970).
13. *Bantam Books v. Sullivan*, 372 U.S. 58 (1963).
14. *Near v. Minnesota*, 283 U.S. 697 (1931).
15. *California Constitution*, Art. 1, Sect. 2 (a).
16. *Newby v. Alto Riviera*, 60 Cal.App.3d 288 (1976).
17. *Alcorn v. Anbro Engineering*, 2 Cal.3d 493 (1970).
18. *California Government Code* sections 12960 et. seq.
19. *Aguilar v. Avis*, (Rev.Grtd) 45 Cal.App.4th 933 (1996); 21 Cal.4th 121 (1999).
20. *Snell v. Suffolk County*, 611 F. Supp. 521 (EDNY, 1985).
21. *New Dict. of American Slang* (1986) p. 283.
22. *Avis v. Aguilar*, ___ U.S. ___, 120 S.Ct. 2029 (2000).



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The Mouths of Yarmouth

Tony Hall
Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire

When I look back to my schooldays in England between the mid-1940s and the late 1950s, a period when pre-war standards and mores were being challenged after the turmoil of World War II, I realise that the world in which I grew up was so different from that which today's children experience that they and I might have arisen on different planets. That difference lies rather more in the social world than in that of language, but English grammar was actually taught in school then, and I happen to have been blessed or cursed with a good ear and a retentive memory for linguistic trivia, so in this discursion I shall confine myself to matters of language.

In every age and country, it seems, there are those who seek to defend their tongue from the perceived iniquities of interlopers. Today, the French take matters to the extreme of having an Academie to monitor language usage and to thunder against Anglicisms and Americanisms (presumably they also strive to eliminate Italianisms and any other foreign -ism, but it is their fulminations against English words that get reported in the British press). In the U.K. in my schooldays it was our teachers who tried, with little success, to dissuade us from using "American" constructions and speech patterns. Most of what they condemned is now so much part of everyday speech in these islands that it seems difficult to believe how foreign it sounded to those teachers (and how cool we kids thought it, though the use of *cool* in that sense was far in the future).

I'm thinking of such matters as the use of the auxiliary verb *do* with *have*. "We don't have an electric clock" was to our primary school teachers anathema. "The verb *to have* does not take any auxiliaries," thundered Curly Thompson to us 10-year-olds; "You should say, 'We have no electric clock, or we haven't an electric clock.'" Similar scorn was poured on *haven't got*. We

were told in no uncertain terms that we should say, "My father has no car," never "my father hasn't got a car."

Since I lived in Great Yarmouth, on the East Coast of England, most of my contemporaries spoke with a Norfolk accent and a Norfolk vocabulary, which Curly and his colleagues sought to correct with similar vigour (and, alas, with a similar lack of success). Most of my schoolfellows were likely to say, not "my father has no car," nor "my father hasn't got a car," but rather "moi fa'r in't got no car." And in that regard things have not changed so much: when I go back to Norfolk these days I still hear the same construction, even if the context has been updated—"moi fa'r in't got no digi'al tallavision" would be a likely modern-day equivalent.¹

A word much heard in the playground in those days, usually in argumentative tones, was *squit*. It meant "rubbish," and was actually a shortening of *squit and nonsense*. I don't know whether schoolchildren today use the word, but there was a few decades ago a dialect singer called the Singing Postman, whose repertoire included a ditty entitled *Tha's a lot o' squat*.²

During the summer holidays I sometimes stayed on a smallholding in the hinterland between Yarmouth and Norwich. The son of the farmers had got a girl into trouble and married her, as was expected in those days, but she was less than happy with him, finding him lazy and unambitious. On being asked why she had tied herself to him (the shotgun element of the marriage being of course unknown outside the immediate family), she replied with a remarkable display of the lingering use of the subjunctive: "Oi din't know what he wos goin' a be loike, do Oi un't nor married 'un" ("I didn't know what he was going to be like, or I wouldn't have married him"). The word *do* in this context, still regularly to be heard in Norfolk, means approximately "if I had" or "if you do." So a friendly farmworker might warn a footpath walker, "Don' yew go in that field, do that ol' bull'll git yer." Or, combining two of the delights of the local idiom, a child



might advise a friend, “I shun’t play wi’ yar faar’s shotgun, do yew’ll git bad” (“I shouldn’t play with your father’s shotgun, or else you’ll get into trouble”).³

Another local construction was *feer to*, still not quite extinct but perhaps dying out. Possibly a corruption of *fare*, which is how it is pronounced, *feer* is as tricky to translate as the French *chez*, since England outside East Anglia doesn’t really have an equivalent, but here is an example:

Ha’ yew bin owt? Woss that loike aday? (Have you been out? What’s it like today?)

That feer to be cold. (It’s cold.) (Note the use of *that* for “it,” extremely common still.)

In those far-off schooldays the belief (or fear in some cases) was often expressed that the example of “BBC English” over the radio would wipe out Norfolk and other regional dialects. It hasn’t, not completely—and I can’t say I’m sorry.

Notes

1. For those baffled by this transliteration, it means *my father hasn’t got no digital television*. To speak Norfolk correctly, you must open your mouth like a letterbox, then keep your lips as motionless as possible. If you can contrive to have loose-fitting false teeth, they will add to the accuracy of the impersonation. Any sentence must have a rising inflection at the end, a bit like that used by many Australians, so that it seems either that every utterance is a question, or at least that there is a constantly implied *D’you know what I mean?*—so in a village you might hear a conversation that begins:

Oi went a Narudge yist’dy[?]

Oh, Oi in’t bin thar fer a woile[?]

Translation: *I went to Norwich yesterday/ Oh, I haven’t been there for a while.*

2. The singer’s name was Alan Smethwick, if my memory is accurate. Actually from Lincolnshire, whose dialect is similar but different, he mastered Norfolk speech totally. Among his songs were *Ha’ ye’ got a loight, bor?* (Have you got a light, boy?—*bor* is a quintessential Norfolk term); *Short a rabbit up a tree* (*short* = *shot*); and



They all playin’ dommies in the baar (They’re all playing dominoes in the bar). This last is full of the flavour of the 50s:

Down in the smuk rome, tallavision on,
Sometoimes a quiz show, sometoimes a song;
Than ye’ gets a noosreel, on about the Bomb,
An’ they all playin’ dommies in the baar.
(*smuk rome* = *smoke room*)

3. The spellings of “you” as *yew* and *yer* reflect actual patterns. It’s hard to analyse, but I suspect that *yew* is more emphatic, drawing the listener’s realisation that this is addressed particularly to him, whereas the ending of *yer* is almost a schwa, the word being a throwaway.

[*After 20 years in the book trade, and 10 in market analysis, self-confessed wordaholic Tony Hall now works for an international marketing group.*]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

Under the heading “Most Americans Still Read,” in a publication of the Radio Advertising Bureau, Ginny Crouse of Kane, PA, found this sentence: “The three most popular ways of choosing books are recommendations from friends and choosing books by preferred authors.”

“Deli offerings, access, wait time and flow will be improved. Our new contemporary corporate look of the servery will please the eye and the pallet!” [From an internal memo touting the new “Waltham Cafeteria.” (Everyone knows pallets are notoriously difficult to please.) Submitted by an anonymous subscriber, northwest Boston.]



CORRIGENDA

In VERBATIM XV/3, the poem *Five Legislations* was wrongly attributed to Adrian Baker. The author’s name is Aidan Baker. Our apologies for this error.



Love Letters (Some Thoughts on the Dictionary)

Susannah Felts
Chicago, Illinois

“Words . . . could go on forever, linear, one opening the door to a dozen others, each new one nudging at another door, and so on to infinite mansions of meditation . . . Words bred more words, spawned definition, comparison, analogy.”
—Lynne Sharon Schwartz, in *Ruined by Reading Temptation*

It always begins innocently enough. I go to my *American Heritage* with a single purpose: I want to use a word, but I’m not sure if its meaning fits precisely to my intent. I don’t make the decision to consult the dictionary rashly; in fact, I’ve been thinking about it while staring at my reflection in the window. A few minutes pass, and I realize I’ve forgotten what I was trying to decide. I only know that it was something to do with words. It is always something to do with words.

On the monitor to my left, a sentence hangs open like a half-built bridge over white water. The cursor’s ticking. I reach to my right to slide the navy buckram-bound, 1,568-page book out from its home in the credenza. I’m still trying to remember.

Oh, right: *Preponderance*. Will *preponderance* work here, the way I want it to?

A dull example, perhaps, but apt in its dullness, because this is how the journey begins—with some relatively humdrum word, a word on which I’d rather not waste my time. Already I am susceptible, weak-willed: I am going to the store for milk and toilet paper, but I will have to walk through the bulk candy bins. Is there ever any question that I will hover in front of the chocolate-covered peanuts and scoop a handful while nobody’s watching? Like chocolate, or a new lover, or the possibility of new e-mail, words are one of my welcome distractions, and I’m all too willing to stray from the path.

Order & Chaos

I sit sideways in my chair, with the computer monitor at my back, my head bowed, the dictionary resting in my lap. Its pages spread open, luring me in, and I only have to take the quickest glance before I’m on the edge, eager to abandon my original search for the turgid Latinate of *preponderance* in favor of simple English gems, unfettered by setting. Who needs context? I relish its absence, and yet the dictionary’s rigid structure also appeals to me in a fundamental way: I frequently see such contradictory impulses in my behavior, my loves and hates. I am a compulsive list-maker, yet I never for a second expect to cross all the items off. The dictionary feeds a similar appetite for paradox: from start to finish, it pleases me with one-hundred-percent pure organizational logic, and yet I can think of no assemblage of words so well-suited to the play of random association. Not long ago, I approvingly underlined Lynne Sharon Schwartz’s observation, in *Ruined by Reading*: “I like to cling to the John Cage-ish principle that if randomness determines the universe it might as well determine my reading, too; to impose order is to strain against the nature of things. Randomness continuing for long enough will yield its own pattern or allow a pattern to emerge organically, inscrutably, from within—or so I hope. On the other hand, how comforting to have a plan. It harks back to the satisfaction of pleasing authority and earning a gold star.”

At the same time, I wonder if the opposite isn’t equally true. From a book so fastidious in nature—from its large-scale structure of alphabetization, columns, and margins, to the micro-organization of a single entry—I am free to compose my own dissonant tune of mental riffs, a song of appropriated bits and pieces, pausing here and there like a radio on perpetual scan.

Here is page 1176, *S* section: illustrations of the Sphinx, a sphygmomanometer, a spider monkey, a spigot. On the facing page: *spinnaker*; *spiny lobster*; *spiral*.

It is just as often the pictures that get me drunk on the dictionary—the miniature black-



and-white sketches, photos, and diagrams, rather than the columns of words themselves. For what is this spider monkey, its arms and legs stretched out like a triumphant gymnast, doing inches from a wooden spigot? What is a spiny lobster, so delicate-looking in ink, doing underneath a spinning wheel and its bonneted user? This is the only place they could ever belong near one another. (I am challenged to dream up other places, but no time now! I've got itchy feet. I want more surprises. I can never stay with one page of unrelat-

Alice and her EAT MEs and DRINK MEs. This sign says PROCRASTINATION.

I rationalize; I tell myself that I'm working toward a future in which all the lovely, necessary words are alive and shoving for the choice view in my head when I can just pluck them out and drop them into conversation and each one will sink snugly into articulate context, the finest tailoring, exquisite needlework. That gal's got some vocabulary, my audience will think. All because I sat here, my rounded back beginning to feel the

I think of Wonderland, of Alice and her EAT MEs and DRINK MEs. This sign says PROCRASTINATION.

ed words for long.) Sometimes I stop for pictures, sometimes for text. Both catch my eye as randomly and swiftly as strangers on a crowded sidewalk. But here, I can linger with one if I want. Here is a sooty grouse, sooty mold, sop. Sippy. Here is a slot machine, a man in a three-piece suit collecting his winnings from its tray.

Here is a girl on a pogo stick . . . a salamander . . . some flower named *trailing arbutus*. Here are vasculature . . . milkweed follicle . . . blesbok blimp bleeding heart.

To find persimmons sharing space with a Persian cat and Persephone might not strike another person as fanciful, but surely there is one page, one thin white slip in this stack of almost sixteen hundred, where she will find an assortment of objects too odd to ignore. If only she would try. If only she weren't too busy, too distracted with getting things done. I try to convince myself that I'm doing just that when I wander into the dictionary, but I know better. It is more like a retreat, a secret passageway at the back of a closet. The closet is one of those walk-in kinds that people joke about living in. It's got plush carpet and cubbyholes and secret compartments for jewelry. It's stuffed with clothes, but rarely do I come out wearing a coordinated, accessorized outfit. The closet is marked with a sign: tiny capital letters of gold. I think of Wonderland, of

strain of poor posture, reaching up with a cold hand—the product of poor circulation—to poke and rub my neck, one leg jiggling with nervous, wasted energy that should be expended elsewhere. I jump hundreds of pages at a time, I breathe a word out loud now and then, like an incantation. *Margaric. Ligula. Kraken. Kumquat.* Sometimes I wish I could spend hours every day in the dictionary, consumed yet never threatened by words. On the screen at my back, they tend to grow little fangs, stare back at me with expressions of contempt. Or they hide. They refuse to come out and play. I do not want to fear something I love so much, but it happens all the same.

Leaps

And at this point, I've completely forgotten what brought me here. I need a break from the pages—some time spent staring at my smudgy reflection again, or perhaps a quick nuzzle of the cat's belly—before I can call it up: “Oh yeah. *Preponderance.*”

It thuds out of my mouth; it even sounds dull. I would rather look up *phosphorescence*. I know what it means, but returning to favorite words in the dictionary can be as satisfying as sifting through new ones. I can visualize memorable moments from my past, but a richer experience can be had if I'll take the dusty photo albums off the shelf and reacquaint myself with the images inside.



So maybe I'll stick *preponderance* back in my brain like a wad of still-sweet gum to a bedpost, swearing to come back to it before it's too hard to chew, because now there are other words coming to mind, not entirely randomly this time, but through some daredevilish cognitive leaps. I've got to make some of those leaps before I'm done here. I've got to be reminded right now (and for the eighty-seventh time) of what *perspicacity* means, and after that I'll have to pause at the *Ls* for *lanuginous*—covered with soft, short hair; downy—and the *Ss* for *sidereal*—of, pertaining to, or concerned with the stars or constellations; stellar. Then I've got to see if there's an illustration of *anemone*. To my disappointment, there is none, neither for the petite red, white, or purple petaled flower of the North Temperate Zone, nor for the exotic ocean creature to which jellyfish are related. But on the next page, I come across an adorable Angora goat. He has a whole margin to himself, but there are Angora cats and rabbits at play nearby. One column over there's *anilingus* scandalously near *animal crackers*. I'm a ways off, yet, from *preponderance*.

I want to return briefly to *sidereal*, a lovely word that first came to my attention as part of a weekly exercise in my high school English class, sophomore year. From third grade to senior year, all students at the preparatory school I attended were required to complete *Wordly Wise* lessons, which came bound, each school year, in a paper-back workbook with a dopey illustration of a bookish owl on the cover. The lesson format was simple; it never changed, only the words did, about fifteen new ones each time. Short definitions were given for each word, followed by a series of exercises in which you used these words in order to get firm purchase on their meanings and usage. On Fridays we were quizzed; on Mondays it started all over again with a new set of words.

I never much minded these weekly drills. I liked the predictable style of the lessons, the slim workbooks with their unsullied pages waiting for my obedient markings; I liked, above all, the

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13-Word Book Review

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

—J. PATRICK LEWIS

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seemingly endless supply of new and unusual words. In my most maturely reflective moments, I suppose I was even grateful for *Wordly Wise*. I knew then that its impressions would be lasting in a way that sines and cosines, or the Periodic Table of the Elements, never would. I did not, however, voice any affinity for it, as to do so would have brought me only the wrong kind of attention, the kind teenagers go to great pains to avoid. Most of my peers found *Wordly Wise* a terrible chore, a tinge reactionary in its method, which seemed almost a leftover from the old-school days of rote memorization. In the halls right before class on quiz days, you could hear pairs of friends quizzing each other, one firing off words, the other definitions: *Unguent*. "Ointment." *Nadir*. "Low point," and so on, until the bell rang and we took our quizzes and moved on to discussions of Jane Austen or Richard Wright.

Wordly Wise came into my life in the eighth grade, but students who'd been attending our school since their elementary days couldn't have



imagined education without it; they had been completing a different colored workbook each year since the third grade. Today, when I ask a friend what's the earliest *Wordly Wise* word he can recall, he answers without hesitation, "*Bazaar*. That was in third grade." Indeed, old friends and I sometimes compare words that, for us, will always be known, almost fondly, as *Wordly Wise Words*, as much a reminder of our high school years as any shriveled corsage or grid of yearbook mugshots. *Sidereal* is, of course, my choice specimen, although there are others, *unguent* and *nadir* among their ranks. Now when I come across them, I wonder about the many I've forgotten, the ones whose *Wordly Wise* status I don't recall. I come across a familiar word and, for a moment, think, Was that a *Wordly Wise* word? Ultimately, it doesn't matter. If my dictionary-browsing impulses can be considered habit, or addiction, *Wordly Wise* can definitely be credited as one of my enablers.

Proof

Occasionally I'll go to the dictionary on a unique kind of quest: to see if a word is "in there." If it is, I will slap the dictionary down on the table, its force quivering letter tiles on the *Scrabble* board. Ha! There it is—the word I swore was real. Give me my 36 points, my double word score. It is proved.

Conversely, a player will take pleasure in the absence of a word, in the act of not finding it. There are few more glorious moments in a *Scrabble* game than the challenge which only the dictionary's lacunae can make fruitful. Your partner swears a word is for real, and you, certain of his error, consult the big book. With joy you come up empty-handed; there is no such configuration of letters in the only place it could be. The alphabet never lies; the word is right here or, for Scrabblian purposes, it doesn't exist. "Take those letters away," I tell my boyfriend gleefully. "Consider yourself skipped."

As eminent an authority figure as the dictionary is, it does not always have the final say. Language can't really be contained; it wriggles

away no matter how much you pin it down with phonetic symbols and corral it into columns. Words take new shapes in the mouths of their speakers: they grow new limbs and lose old ones; they breed—and they are understood. If a word does its assigned work—that is, it communicates something—but it is not in the dictionary, can it still be a legitimate word? Even my dictionary hasn't decided, and so it offers up two essays in its introductory pages. Mr. Dwight Bolinger says yes to the statement that "the prevailing usage of its speakers should be the chief determinant of acceptability in language." And Mr. William F. Buckley says, not surprisingly, no. I must admit I've read neither argument—for this is more organized reading than my dictionary-tripping mindset will allow—but for the record my answer is yes, and not just because I'd like to side against Buckley (although I know nothing of Mr. Bolinger's politics). The dictionary itself will support me: on page 837, with the word *neologism*. Given this one tiny entry, it seems the dictionary knows its limitations as well as the weight of its authority.

My grandfather had a word to describe tasty things, usually of the sweet and sugary type. We'd be sitting at the dinner table on Thanksgiving, taking our first bites of my mother's peach cobbler, or pumpkin pie with homemade whip. As time-honored as the desserts themselves, Walter's reactions to his daughter's meals were usually the first and always the most gracious: "Susan," he'd start slowly, in his genteel drawl, "this is so good; it's *larrapin*." I was surprised to find that *larrapin*, according to my *American Heritage*, doesn't exist. There is *larrigan*, "a moccasin with knee-high leggings made of oiled leather," and *larrup*, "To beat; flog; thrash," but nothing in-between. I don't know where my grandfather found his favorite term of gustatory praise, but nobody told the dictionary. Somebody should.

Or maybe they shouldn't. There is space for words outside the lexicographical world, as surely as there are stars that haven't been named.



Parental Guidance

I made up a lot of words as a child. This generally delighted my parents; in a few cases my creations became part of our familial lexicon. There’s no better example than *twirly-twist*, a noun I coined at age four to describe my father in the midst of one of his trademark blowups. The fact that I came up with this term is perhaps the source of its sweetest irony, since most of the temper tantrums in the house then and for about the next fifteen years were mine. Nobody, I am willing to bet, has since been so-described as frequently as I.

Misled by the early acceptance of my personal glossary, I became belligerent for a time about the use of made-up words. I used them in school essays, and they came back circled in red, with a note: *I don’t think this is a word*. The occasional enlightened teacher appreciated them and left a check mark instead. Naturally I sided with the latter response, but even so, I’ve noticed myself creating language less as I’ve become more involved in working with it. These days I’m less interested in making up my own words than adding already codified ones to my usage repertoire, which always seems insufficient. I envy strong vocabularies the way I envy extensive record collections and chic wardrobes. The critical difference being, of course, that vocabularies can be built for free, but I haven’t found them as easy to use appropriately and on short notice. I can stop right here, grab the *AH*, and pick out, say, ten new and wonderful words. I can write them in my journal, as I’ve done before: earlier volumes are scattered with mini-lists of words I once thought it important to remember for future use. How many of these, or even the ten I could locate right now, could I use correctly tomorrow, a week from now, two months from now? Never enough. But I console myself with the fact that I’ve got a while to work on this vocabulary project: I like to imagine myself at sixty-five, still reading like a fiend, still forced to interrupt a *New Yorker* article with a trip to—and possibly through—the dictionary. A short silk slip-dress might not look so great on me then, but I can always stylishly use a new word.

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To us anthropologists, they are all parts of the language. (But we did reject one would-be scholar who conceded that his only viewing of his submitted word had been in a dream of a newspaper page!)

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My father, especially, should be credited with my current obsession with the dictionary. A physician, he is prone to peppering his speech with medical phraseology, and around the time I came up with *twirly-twist* I told him that I believed he knew “all the words in the world!” From that day on, although I didn’t consciously realize it for many years, I was determined to lay claim to my fair share of the world’s words, too.

As a child, I resisted asking my father for the definition of a word. I knew he knew the answer, but I also knew what he’d say in response: “Why don’t we look it up?” His dictionary was an imposingly heavy *American Heritage* that he’d received as a gift in medical school. It was bound in a rough, red, canvas-like material, and the cover was lettered in gold. He never neglected, while pulling this giant text off the shelf, to tell me what a wonderful resource the dictionary was, how I should consult it regularly. It wasn’t enough that we look up the word; he was adamant that I learn to use the guide words at the top of each page. I remember him trying to explain to me how they worked. “I know,” I’d say, ever petulant. I liked fitting my fingers into the little half-moon craters on the side of the book to find the correct letter—why couldn’t some of my books be thusly decorated?—but I balked at using the guide words. I don’t know what I had against the concept, but it probably related to my general tendency to reject parental advice; if I thought I could do something well enough my way, I was completely uninterested in any alternative strategy my parents might suggest.

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I remember the two of us sitting on the sofa, hunched over the dictionary laid open over our laps, my father licking his index finger before turning each page (that irritated me, too). He called out the guide words, and then, finally, his finger slowly traced the correct page's columns up, down, until it came to rest on the word I'd asked about. (By then I was sure an hour had passed.) He'd say the word and read the entry out loud to me. Often he'd be inspired, in the same way that I am now, to hunt for other words. My question answered, I'd go back to whatever I was doing before—likely reading some grown-up book I shouldn't have been into in the first place—leaving him alone with his dictionary and his finger-licking page-turning ritual.

To this day, I can't make myself use guide words. On the other hand, my father's fondness for the dictionary carried over, stuck fast. Anticipating a visit home, I decide that I will find some word to ask my father about while we are sitting around the den after dinner, reading, as is our custom. And if by chance he doesn't go immediately to his red *American Heritage*—it's never been replaced, even though it smelled and looked awfully ancient to me as a kid—I'll take over and do it myself. "Let's see what the dictionary has to say, shall we?"

[Susannah Felts is a writer living in Chicago. She teaches essay writing at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and is at work on a collection of short stories. Her writing has appeared in The Sun and the Chicago Reader. Her most recent, favorite vocabulary addition is saturnalia.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

"Kane has very little lighting of Fraley Street but we would like to put in two street lights and four alley lights, more for the safety of the individuals using the center than for ascetics."

[From a memo from the Kane Area Community Center, Inc. Submitted by Ginny Crouse, Kane, PA. We believe ascetics prefer unlit streets.]



HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, Britain

Several readers have kindly contributed further examples of "stressification," which I wrote about in my last column. Jessy Randall has noticed on recent plane trips "a flight attendant vernacular which uses the *do* formation in almost every sentence: 'We *do* know you have a choice in air companies, and we *do* thank you for choosing us.' Also, they always say they are *more than happy* to help with any problem I might have, which seems unlikely".

"More than happy" is indeed an annoyingly meaningless usage, which reminds me of the toe-curling *101%* cliché, as in "We are *101%* committed to customer satisfaction". This very day (or just—*this day*, if you insist), I heard an Australian cricket commentator say: "And he's a coach who doesn't demand *110%* of his players—he demands *120%*. That's *10%* more." Well, you can't fault his maths.

"Headline Speech" is irritating, writes Richard Thompson of Parker, Colorado. Most often heard in local news broadcasts, he says it is "characterized by the omission of the verb and dependence upon the naked gerund," and he offers as examples: "Firefighters having an increasingly difficult time," and "Traffic coming to a standstill". A related form of truncation, which he finds "equally peevish," is employed by executives unwilling to waste their valuable time on pronouns: "Need to get down to business here. . . . Was thinking about this problem as I drove in today." In both cases, it is clear that the speaker is too busy, too important, to speak in complete sentences.

Know what you mean, Richard. Needs stamping on. I suffer a similar spasm of irritation whenever I see the traditional newspaper headline *Joe Smith Dies at 97*, where the present tense seems to suggest an habitual act, rather than a final one.



Anne Stratton of Mequon, WI, emailed to tell us that “I cringe whenever I hear *as we go forward*,” which is popular with “so many of the business folks with whom I serve on committees”; but she was rather taken with the mail order clerk who “promised to get in touch with me *as soon as the availability arrives*. I’m not sure how an availability gets anywhere”.

I’m not sure either, but then I’m not sure of anything much, since I received junk mail from a digital TV company promising me, “Your television is no longer something you just sit in front of, because now you can literally reach into it and control the action!” Compared to that technological miracle, sending availabilities around the country by mail should be easy.

A “qualifying note” on my ridiculing of the term *conveniency* is offered by Major Brian Hanley of the USAF Academy. I’d assumed it was a stressified neologism, but Brian tells me that it’s actually an archaism, used by Shakespeare, Lord Chesterfield, and Samuel Johnson. However, he does feel that “it should be used *only* when the extra syllable contributes indisputably to clarity”.

I recently bought an over-the-counter cold remedy which had the following stern warning on the label: “Do not use if you are allergic to any of the ingredients”. No problem with clarity there, but I suspect that statements of the staggeringly obvious—particularly those clearly inspired by corporate lawyers—belong in this column. I shall discover whether or not you agree with me, I hope, when I read your letters and emails; as ever, please feel free to join the *Horribile*-hunt by contacting me, care of the VERBATIM offices.

I celebrated, or at least survived, my fortieth birthday this year. A tactless relative gave me a badge which lights up, plays music, and flashes the depressing message, *Life begins at 40 . . . I’m ready!* I did, though, enjoy the caution printed on the back: “Not suitable for children under 3 years of age”. As statements of the obvious go, that one surely deserves some kind of award.

Blah, Blah, Blah, Etcetera

Jessy Randall
Colorado Springs, Colorado

We have always had, and needed, a short way of saying “and so on and so forth.” In English, we have *etcetera* (*etc.*), which comes from Latin. (Often used to sign off 18th- and 19th-century letters, it can be also be written *andcetera* or *&c.*, as in I remain, Yours, *&c.*, So-and-So.) The Germans have *und so weiter*; and, more archaic, *und so weiter und so fort* (“and so forth and so on”). In French the term is *et caetera*, in Russian *i tak dalee* or *i tomu podobnoe*, in Norwegian *og så videre*, and in Greek *kai ta loipa*. Most of these can be abbreviated to a three-letter version.

Etcetera has made its way into both great literature and popular culture. Shakespeare used it, and Austen, and Dickens. In the 20th century, Rodgers and Hammerstein made it the catch phrase of the king in *The King and I*, in a slyly humorous song called “A Puzzlement” with the lyrics, “I must go on living life. / As leader of my kingdom I must go forth, / Be father to my children and husband to each wife / Etcetera, etcetera, and so forth.” The poet e. e. cummings repeats the term in a similarly grand and sweeping way in his war poem “my sweet old etcetera,” with lines like “my / mother hoped that / I would die etcetera” and ending “(dreaming, / et / cetera, of / Your smile eyes knees and of your Etcetera),” so that *etcetera* at the last follows definition 2b from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “a substitute for a suppressed substantive, generally a coarse or indelicate one.”

A relatively modern method of expressing the same kind of idea is the phrase *blah blah blah*, which is not even one hundred years old. The noun *blah* (alternately spelled *bla*) came into American discourse in the mid-1920s, and was especially in use among publishers and journalists. It means nonsense, silly or empty talk, deliberately wordy talk, insincere talk, or window-dressing, i.e., extra, talk, and may derive from the



French *blague*, German *Blech*, or, most probably, from the Scottish and Irish *blaflum*, all meaning approximately the same thing: nonsense, bunkum, idle talk. American variants include *blah-de-blah*, *blah-zee-blah*, *blah flah*, *blap*, *blap-pity-blap*, *bloppity-blop*, and, I am sure, many others.

A single *blah* as an adjective can denote blandness, to describe a house or a person or a color. One could also have *the blahs*, a dull malaise not quite extreme enough to be called depression. *Bleah*, of course, is quite different—it denotes disgust.

One version of *blah blah blah* (that is, a phrase lacking all content, used to mean “words words words here”), dating back to the 16th century, is the scrambled Latin text used to show a sample of a font or a layout. This text almost always begins *Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet...* and continues with something like *consectetur adipiscing elit, sed do eiusmod tempor incididunt ut labore et dolore magna aliqua*. Printers began using some form of it in the 1500s, on the theory that if sample text has any legible meaning, it will distract. *Lorem ipsum...* derives from a passage in Cicero’s treatise on ethics, *de Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* (45 B.C.), which begins “*Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem ipsum quia dolor sit amet, consectetur, adipisci velit . . .*,” translated “There is no one who loves pain itself, who seeks after it and wants to have it, simply because it is pain.” A search for “lorem ipsum” on the Internet will turn up scores of websites in their infancy, along with further bowdlerizations of the text, sometimes by accident (typographical errors repeated ad infinitum) or on purpose (inserted jokes like “*Et harumd und lookum like Greek to me*”). Indeed, using the Latin text is called *greeking*.

It may be hard to find *blah blah blah* in modern literature or poetry, but it’s practically ubiquitous in popular culture. In some versions of the email program Eudora, there is a “blah blah blah” button, which, if clicked, reveals all headers. In 1990, at a Norwegian conference on climate

change, protesters surrounded a bus full of officials and chanted “blah blah blah!” pointing out that government officials are all talk and no action, seldom keeping their promises to save the environment.

In music, British rocker Iggy Pop released an album in the mid-1980s titled *Blah-Blah-Blah*; here are some of the illuminating lyrics of the title song, co-written by David Bowie: “Violent peace / Blah blah blah / Buy it right now / Blah blah blah / We are the world / We are so huge / Blah blah blah // Johnny can’t read / Blah blah blah / I can’t see / Blah blah blah / Tuna on white / Guns all night / Blah blah blah.” Also, according to their website, a midwestern band called Blah “combines the modern punk style with 50’s surf music and rockabilly to create a unique and exciting genre all their own in the Christian market.” Blah Blah Blah Records is an independent music company in Australia, and bla-bla.com is a New York-based company that does something, although I can’t tell what, involving music.

An alternate, and currently popular, form of *blah blah blah* is of course *yada yada yada* (also *yadda* and *yata*). This phrase was part of Lenny Bruce’s comic vocabulary, but reached a larger percentage of the masses via the NBC television program *Seinfeld*. (One *Seinfeld* Internet forum exhorts viewers, “Get your *yadas* out!” a reference to both the *yada yada* episode and the Rolling Stones album “Get Your Ya-Yas Out.”) In the *Seinfeld* episode, *yada yada yada* serves a similar purpose to *etcetera* at the end of Cummings’s poem, standing in for something sexual or at the very least, indiscreet.

Verbs that describe people talking nonsense, like *blab*, *blabber*, *blather*, and *babble*, exist in abundance. *Blab* (“to speak with a loose tongue, tell tales”) and *blabber* (“to speak inarticulately”) both date back to the 14th century, but the *OED* denies any etymological relation between them, similar as they may sound. *Babble* is no older than these, despite its semantic similarity to the biblical Tower of Babel. In my high school in the mid-1980s, “What are you babbling about?” was



a particularly virulent, obnoxious comment among my teenage cohorts, who may have learned it from the Judd Nelson character in the teen-angst movie *The Breakfast Club*.

Chatter is one of the oldest of this family of words, in use as early as the mid-13th century, with later forms including *chatterbox*, *chatter-basket*, *chitter-chatter*, and of course we have internet *chat rooms*. There is also *blather* and *blether*, in use in the 18th and 19th century interchangeably (I believe the second has fallen out of favor in the 20th). *Yammer* dates back to the 15th century with a meaning akin to *wail* or *whimper*, and *natter* (19th century) meaning especially “to scold.”

Yak is a relatively recent addition with a similar meaning (along with an additional one, “to vomit”). It is the first usage that comes up in the 1958 Coasters song “Yakety-Yak (Don’t Talk Back),” in which a married couple has a conversation that goes, “Take out the papers and the trash . . . yakety-yak, Don’t talk back.” In a parody of this song on the Cartoon Network program *Tiny Toons*, a rap star called Vanilla Lice performs “Yakkity-Yak, Don’t Talk Back,” which involves a yak. The online magazine *Verbosity* has a Letters to the Editor section called *Yackity-Smackity*; another website, *Leisuresuit.net*, has a *Yak Shack* for commentary and discussion.

In German, words for talking nonsense include *schwätzen*, *schnattern*, and *plappern*; the French have *babiller* and *caqueter*; the Spanish have *charlar* and *chirriar*. In Serbian, there are *blebetati* and *brbljati*, where the *j* is pronounced like *y*. And on those babbling sounds I will stop all this blah-blah-blahing and get back to my etcetera, etcetera, and so forth . . .

[*Jessy Randall's last piece for VERBATIM was A Visit from Aunt Rose, Vol. XV/1, Winter 2000.*]



CLASSICAL BLATHER

Funny Animals

Nick Humez
argentarius@juno.com

European settlers arriving in the Western Hemisphere were obliged to perform many tasks, both physical and intellectual.¹ Among the latter was the mapping of their knowledge of and nomenclature for Old World fauna onto the animal kingdom of the New.

This was easy enough in the case of creatures common to both. Foxes are foxes; bears are bears,² deer are deer, snakes are snakes,³ and squirrels are squirrels.⁴ To be sure, sometimes the local birds and beasts bore only a superficial resemblance to the one with the same name back home: The robin of England and the robin of American are biologically unrelated, the New World robin being so named solely because, like the British variety, it has a striking red breast.

Some species, however, such as *fireflies* (a.k.a. *lightning bugs*) have no European analogues. In many instances the names Americans use for these creatures are adaptations from Native American languages: *Woodchuck* was originally *ochuk*,⁵ an Algonkian word; *skunk* is likewise borrowed by the English settlers from Algonkian-speakers (specifically, the tribe called the Massachusetts);⁶ as is *opossum* (first attested in Virginia in 1610, in the 1610 *True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie in Virginia*, where it is spelled *apossoun*).⁷ *Caribou* is from Canadian French from Micmac (*galipu*, apparently derived from proto-Algonkian *mekalixpowa*, from the roots *mekal-*, “scrape,” and *-ixpo-*, “snow”);⁸ *chipmunk* (originally *chitmunk*) is thought to be from Ojibwa *adjidamoon’*, “red squirrel.” *Coyote* is from *coyotl*, the name for the “prairie fox” in Nahuatl, an indigenous language of Central America and also the source of *ocelotl*,⁹ borrowed into English from French as *ocelot*; *condor* is (from Spanish) the name for the (now nearly



extinct) variety of vulture known in Quechua (another Central American language, still spoken in, e.g., Guatemala) as *cuntur*.

In other instances a New World animal was simply named anew by the settlers, and whoever first got to the territory where it lived gave it the label that stuck: Texans are proud of the aptly named *armadillo* (“little armored one,” the diminutive of Spanish *armado*, “arm[or]ed”);¹⁰ settlers of Vermont dubbed the local variety of cougar the *catamount* (and then hunted it nearly to extinction). The *Gila monster* is a large, venomous lizard of the American Southwest (named for the Gila River, which rises in western New Mexico and flows westward to join the Colorado River at Yuma, Arizona). *Copperheads* are snakes, also poisonous, of the eastern and central United States, so called for their reddish-brown scales. (In the early 1860s, by analogy, the name was pejoratively bestowed by Republicans upon northern Democrats sympathetic to the secessionist South, or at least lukewarm on the prosecution of the Civil War.)

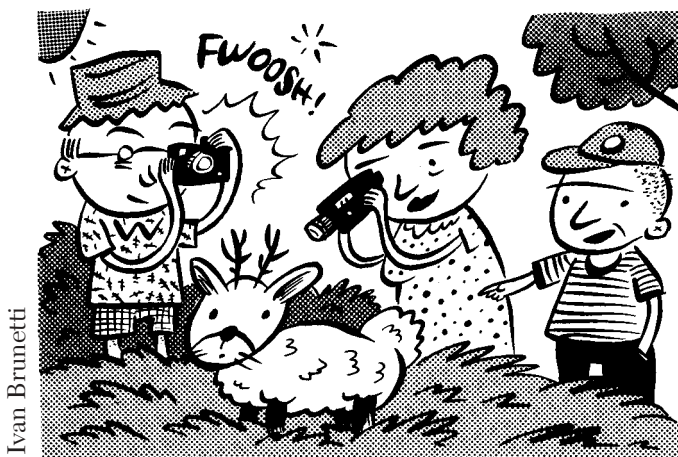
On the other hand, a number of animals were unknown in the New World before European settlement. The Spanish were the first to bring the horse (although a number of protohorses are represented in fossil-bearing strata in America, none of their descendants survived the last ice age),¹¹ but the French and English may have



thought to have entered Maine from Scotland by way of Newfoundland and spread south and west from New England in colonial times.) In more recent times other exotic species have been introduced as well, notably ostriches, which have become fashionable in the past few years as a food fowl of high protein yield and low cholesterol. (Ostrich burgers are now available in Manhattan.) And in a twist of geographic vectoring, the bison, depicted in cave wall paintings but extinct in Europe since the last glaciation, has been brought back from the western plains to be raised for food as far east as Maine, where a herd grazes alongside Route 3, the main road from Ellsworth, shire town of Hancock County, to nearby Bar Harbor. And then, of course, there are Norway rats, without whom no sewer or subway in the New World would be anywhere near as interesting a place (and whose fleas arguably catalyzed a significant shift toward a better bargaining position for the working class in Europe in the Middle Ages by carrying the Black Plague, which at its height wiped out a third of the continent’s population).

Knowledge is power; local knowledge includes the site-specific power to have more than a little fun at the expense of gullible visitors “from away.”¹² Such folklore frequently includes allegations about the local fauna. There’s the *Arkansas Razorback*, a breed of pig said to have legs shorter on one side than the other in order to negotiate the Ozark slopes; the southwest states boast the *jackelope*, featured on many a postcard photomontage of a jackrabbit with antelope’s horns stripped in.¹³ And an informant from central Maine recalls her French-Canadian grandfather often telling her that the peculiar sounds one could hear coming from the forest at night were made by two creatures (never seen, so nobody knew what they looked like) called the *Rak-a-ree-bos* and the little *sidehill winder*.¹⁴

Addenda and corrigenda: Mat Coward, already familiar to VERBATIM readers from his “Horribile Dictu” column, has pointed out to me that the term “Labourite” (“Classical Blather:



Ivan Brunetti

simultaneously introduced the domestic cat. (Polydactyl cats—the “double-pawed” variety with extra claws and a mittenlike forepaw—are




Getting Out the Vote,” VERBATIM XXV/3) is almost never used by Britons (“sometimes used by British commentators,” he says, “. . . but never catches on,” though it does appear in at least one British dictionary) and amends my gloss of the origin of the party: “[M]ost of those who were informally Whigs subsequently became, formally, the Liberal Party. The Labour Party . . . was founded specifically as a break with the Liberals . . . [and] represented (in Parliament) the organized working class, for the first time ever, whereas the Liberals represented primarily the non-landed bourgeoisie. The only way in which Labour could be said to be a successor to the Whigs (except in the crudely functional sense of replacing the Liberal Party as the chief non-Tory party . . .) is that it inherited a certain amount of the liberal, middle-of-the-road, vaguely progressive, basically anti-Tory opinion which had originally been Whig. But even that, only to a limited and fractured extent. Ideologically, Whigs today would belong in the Tory Party—the individual vs. the state, free trade, etc.” I stand corrected.

Notes

1. A précis of the labors of one such group, the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, is given in a 17th-century book entitled *New-England's First-Fruits*, an apologia explaining to the colony's investors back in the British Isles why the place had yet to make any money but why they could still feel good about it: “After God had carried us safe unto New England, and we had builded our houses, provided necessities for our livelihood, reared convenient places for God's worship, and settled the civil government, one of the first things we longed for, and looked after, was to advance learning, and perpetuate it unto posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the people when our present ministers shall lie in the dust.” (The tangible result of this last resolve was Harvard College, now in its 365th year.)

2. Kat MacElroy, my correspondent in North Pole, Alaska, informs me that the word for polar bear among the Inupiaq-speaking native people is *nanook*—also the pseudonym given



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by explorer-turned-cinematographer Robert J. Flaherty to Allariallak, the star of the pioneering ethnographic silent film *Nanook of the North*. (A recent article, informative and sympathetic, about Flaherty and his 1922 documentary can be found at <http://www.oneworldmagazine.org/seek/nanook/main.htm>.) The German for polar bear is *Eisbär* (ice-bear), hence the title to a song by the German Special New Wave band Grauzone, popular around 1980, to the effect that “I'd like to be a polar bear/At the cold [North] Pole:/Polar bears/Never have to cry.”

3. However, whereas the poisonous snakes of Europe are adders and vipers, rattlesnakes are peculiar to the Americas. For this information, and for a number of the exemplary animals mentioned in this column, I am deeply indebted to a couple whose eclectic (and encyclopaedic) acquaintance with facts lurking off the beaten track spans an ocean: Bruce Harris Bentzman and Barbara Keogh, raised in Bucks County, Pennsylvania., and Wales, respectively.

4. Ms. Keogh points out that the squirrels in Britain are mostly red squirrels, who have been driven to the edge of endangered-species status by the invasion of the more aggressive gray squirrels from the European continent. Martin Breitschaft, who is a boatbuilder in Salem-Mimmenhausen, Germany, tells me that one of the German names for “squirrel” is *Eichkätzchen* (Oak-kitten). The word *squirrel* is an Anglicization of French *écureuil*, itself via Vulgar Latin *scuriolus* (diminutive of *scurius*, a metathe-

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sis of *sciurus*) from Greek *skiouros*, “shadowtail” (*skia*, “shadow” + *ouros*, “tail”).

5. The same animal as the *ground hog*, sometime also called a *whistle-pig*. Both terms are used in Appalachia, e.g., in the sprightly hunting-song made famous by Doc Watson and members of the Carter family, “Old Ground Hog.”

6. Also called *polecat* and sometimes, humorously, *wood-pussy*; the tendency to relate wild creatures of similar size to the domestic cat would seem to be a widespread one, e.g., cf. *Eichkätzchen* in note 4 above. The pungent spray released by skunks in self-defense has given rise to a number of picturesque metaphors, e.g., as a noun denoting a person of egregious misbehavior (“She went to his house, but the dirty skunk/Had packed his bags and done a-bunk,” says the fallen-woman song “Poor Unhappy Bella”) and a verb meaning to defeat an opponent by a wide margin, especially by preventing any score at all—or specifically in the game of cribbage, by so great a margin that the loser has not even made the turn into the final row with his pegs. *Skunk-works* is sometimes used facetiously in industry to refer to a semi-autonomous research-and-development facility, often physically separated from the main operations center, from the “Skonk Works,” the place in Al Capp’s hillbilly cartoon strip *Li’l Abner* where the character Big Barnsmell manufactured his bootleg concoction, *Kickapoo Joy Juice*.

7. To the best of my knowledge the New World’s only extant marsupial species, apart from imports from Australia in zoos, *possums* appear to have been spreading north from South America at a slow but steady pace. First spotted in New York’s Central Park in 1975, they can now be found at least as far north as northern New England, where, however, observers have noted that the poor creatures not infrequently lose toes to frostbite owing to the harsh winters. The Algonkians in Virginia also gave us the word *raccoon*; in German the raccoon is called, appropriately enough, *Waschbär*, from its habit of washing its food.

8. Ms. MacElroy (see note 2 above) is at pains to point out that caribou are native to North America, whereas *reindeer* (from German *Renn-tier*, “running animal”), which they resemble, are strictly Old World; Alaska has both today, she adds, only because reindeer were “domesticated and imported into Alaska in the 1920s as a food source.”

9. And of *tomatl*, our *tomato*, a large berry of the nightshade family unknown outside the Western Hemisphere in pre-Columbian times. A lovely example of the ludicrous errors which can escape Associated Press editors deficient in general education occurred in the mid-1990s when a wire-service photo ran showing a tomato festival in Spain which, according to the caption copy, had been going on since the Middle Ages—a manifest absurdity if one considers the Renaissance to have already been well under way by the time the Spaniards arrived in the New World. Indeed, Italian cuisine as most of us know it is a by-product of Renaissance exploration: tomatoes from America and pasta (thanks to Marco Polo) from China.

10. The Cenozoic era produced a giant armored mammal in South America called the *glyptodont* (from *glyptos*, “carved” plus *-dont*, “tooth,” so called because its teeth were fluted), which the *Century Dictionary* glossed as a “fossil armadillo.” Glyptodonts and armadillos are both classified as members of the order *Edentata*, but whereas *Glyptodon clavipes* (nailfoot) could attain a length of fifteen feet, the ordinary Texas armadillo, if curled up in a defensive ball, can fit in a breadbox.

11. Ancestral horses include *Eohippus*, *Mesohippus*, and *Pliohippus*, each larger and with fewer toes than its predecessor. At some point in the Upper Pleistocene, donkeys, or asses, branched off from the horses. This is an example of speciation recent enough that donkeys and horses can still mate, producing a mule; but the hybrid will not breed true, for mules are sterile. Frank Holan, whose article on bats appeared in VERBATIM XXIV/3 (“Bats as Symbols”) has written me that *horse* is “allegedly from ‘ME



hors, OE *hors*, ultimately from Germanic *hors-* (unattested),’ whereas most European words for ‘horse’ are variants of Latin”—specifically, Vulgar Latin *caballus* (whence, e.g., French *cheval* and English *chivalry*). “However,” he adds, “two early Saxon invaders of England were called Hengist and Horsa (the stallion and the mare); the German word for ‘stallion’ is still *Hengst*.”

12. “[From] away” is Downeast for “not-[from]-Maine”; it corresponds to the use, by inhabitants of Martha’s Vineyard, of “off-island.” (For a charming exposition of the island sense of place, and its sociological corollaries, see Nathaniel Benchley’s novel, *The Off-Islanders*.)

13. Cartoon spinoffs of the jackelope joke abound, perhaps the most classical being a depiction of a woman with antlers seated at a loom, captioned “Penelope.”

14. Marguerite Viens, a maker of teddy bears in Fairfield, Maine, who accordingly chose “Rak-a-ree-bos” as the company name when her cottage industry took off in the late 1980s.

EPISTOLA

RE: *Herself, the Ed., responds*. Worry not about occasional guilt in word choice. One of my great joys in high schools, sixty years ago, was diagramming sentences, a process which helped me understand uncertain English usages a lot better. It also increased my tolerance for error since I could appreciate mine more. Something good can come from mistakes. I once had to prepare and write up cases for clinical pathological conferences (CPCs) as medical school teaching exercises. Complicated cases were discussed by physicians who sought to reach the right tissue diagnosis before the pathologist told the true story. A regular attendant was overjoyed to find I had made an error in a write-up and reported it to me with great glee. Because he seemed so pleased with his discovery, I always made an error or two in my preparations thereafter. Sometimes he discovered them. Sometimes he didn’t.

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Esperanto: Language for Everyone

E. James Lieberman
Washington, D.C.

The world contains thousands of languages, but many people, including most of those who rely on courses in school, never master more than one. It’s not for lack of effort: millions of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese children spend years studying English, but only a small fraction ever reach fluency. Here in the U.S., many students take a foreign language, but most get discouraged rather than comfortably immersed. Languages are tough to learn.

Suppose you wanted to design a language that was much easier to learn than ethnic tongues but still able to express big ideas as well as small talk. Chosen as a second language, it would enable people to communicate as equals around the world. Such a language would have to be both flexible and clear, able to be translated into and translated from other languages accurately. As a living, working language it would grow and change, but without splitting into dialects.

That’s a tall order. Most people would throw in the towel (that’s an example of a language problem: what do towels have to do with quitting?). But quite a few bright and brave souls have built new languages, and several hundred have been offered to the world, from Volapük to Klingon.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of languages disappear every year because not enough people are using them. Why add another one? If it worked the way it should, it would enable ordinary folks to be at ease in the world, comfortable as informal diplomats without interpreters. As an adopted language it would not replace anyone’s mother tongue, but help everyone speak and listen more effectively in the global village.

About 120 years ago an idealistic teenager in Poland, Ludovic Zamenhof, decided to work out such a language. By the time it was ready he had



graduated from medical school. Although he found time for a social life and student activism, he would later recall spending the best years of his life wrestling with the problem he had set for himself.

The young man was smart, passionate, and determined. Born in 1859, Zamenhof grew up in a community torn with conflict over language, religion, and ethnicity. Part of a Jewish minority mixed in with Poles, Russians, Lithuanians, and Germans, he felt the curse of Babel, according to which “the Lord confounded their language that they may not understand one another’s speech” as a punishment for the people’s arrogance. (Genesis xi.) Was it arrogant for Zamenhof to think he could restore linguistic unity?

He had the tools. A gift for learning languages was necessary, of course, but not sufficient. Besides Polish and Russian, Zamenhof studied Latin and Greek in school. The Jewish community spoke Yiddish, a mixture of Hebrew and German that had a literature and culture of its own—an international language without a country. For a while he wanted to revive Latin, once Europe’s lingua franca. But soon he found out it would be too hard for most people to learn. And it lacked terms for many features of modern life.

At fifteen Zamenhof got started building a new language, about the same time he first studied English. The grammar of English is simpler than most: there is no need to remember masculine, feminine, and neuter nouns or tricky subjunctive verbs. Plurals usually end in *s*; there are few case changes (*she, her, hers; I, me, mine*). Word order indicates subject and object; the verb is in-between. But English spelling and pronunciation are terribly difficult. That could be fixed in a new language (George Bernard Shaw promoted spelling reform to make English phonetic, like Spanish or German, but it failed).

Zamenhof made lists of short words, thinking they would be easy to learn: *ab, ad, ba, be, da, eb*, etc. But he couldn’t remember what they meant! He figured the vocabulary would have to come from existing words in a few languages because



people could not learn everything from scratch. He chose vocabulary from Latin, German, and Russian, especially words that were international already. He used English as a model of simple, regular grammar.

When he was about seventeen, he realized that he could borrow a feature from Russian (found also in Turkish and other languages): agglutination. That means making words by attaching pieces (affixes and roots). Prefixes and suffixes are tacked on before or after a root to change its meaning in a logical way. For example, in English the prefix *un-* means *not*, as in “unhappy,” “untrained,” etc. The suffix *-et* or *-ette* as in “cigaret” and “kitchenette,” means small. In agglutinative languages there are many affixes and they are used often. Zamenhof realized that anyone who understands the meaning of each part will know the meaning of the word.

Building vocabulary suddenly became child’s play! Zamenhof chose *mal-* to mean “opposite,” and instantly created two meanings for many roots:

<i>rapida / malrapida</i>	fast / slow
<i>bela / malbela</i>	beautiful / ugly
<i>sana / malsana</i>	healthy / sick

He used the suffixes *-et* and *-eg* for “small” and “large”:

<i>domo</i>	house
<i>dometo</i>	cottage
<i>libro</i>	book
<i>libreto</i>	pamphlet
<i>domego</i>	mansion
<i>librego</i>	tome; large book

As these examples show, Zamenhof went one better than any existing agglutinative language. He gave word categories (parts of speech) their own endings, making them instantly recognizable. Adjectives end in *-a* (pronounced “ah”), nouns in *-o*. Adverbs end with *-e* (“eh”): *rapide* “quickly, fast”; *facile*, “easily.” In English *-ly* usually marks adverbs, but in Esperanto the rule always applies: no exceptions! Endings are user-friendly signs, like green, red, and yellow traffic lights. There’s no confusion. There’s less to



learn—and to forget. Verbs have “coded” endings too, of course. One example will serve, since there are no irregular verbs.

<i>ami</i>	to love
<i>amu</i>	love!
<i>amas</i>	loves
<i>amanta/amata</i>	loving/beloved
<i>amis</i>	loved
<i>aminta/amita</i>	[past participle]
<i>amos</i>	will love
<i>amonta/amota</i>	[fut. part.]
<i>amus</i>	would love

Participles take inflected endings (adjectival -a, above). “Esperanto,” from *esper*, “to hope”, is a present active participle (*esper/ant/o*) marked as a noun, and means “one who is hoping.” Zamenhof’s strategy was to provide rules that enable the learner to figure out compound words from their elements, and to become active in using the language early on. You can be creative and still be correct in Esperanto—quite unlike any usual language system.

As children we learn rules of grammar automatically, without thinking about them. And until we know better, we tend to make language regular. Children will say “slided” and “bleded” instead of “slid” and “bled.” They’ll say “foots” instead of “feet” and “mouses” for “mice.” In other words, they do what Esperanto does, creating forms that make logical sense but are wrong in their mother tongue despite the rule. (What do humans gain by having irregular, difficult languages? For one thing, we can tell who was born into the group and who arrived later. For another, linguistic correctness elevates a speaker’s status in many contexts.) Zamenhof was willing to play with language, bridging child and adult worlds, doing away with the oddities that capriciously trap learners.

Combining logic with aesthetics, Zamenhof constructed an attractive, user-friendly language. While the vocabulary is largely European, it is by far the easiest language for non-Westerners to learn and is politically neutral, besides. (Few people realize that the difference between, say,

Korean and Chinese is as great as the difference between either of them and English.) Esperanto becomes the psychological property of its users while enhancing what they already have. As Goethe said, we do not really know our mother tongue until we have learned another language well.

At eighteen, Zamenhof taught his language to a few friends. His father and mother were impressed. Marcus, a professional translator, appreciated his son’s genius, while Rosalie admired his idealism—the hope that a second language for everyone would help bring peace to the world. For her son’s nineteenth birthday Rosalie hosted a party. He and his friends celebrated with speeches in the new language and a hymn to the unity of all peoples written and set to music by Zamenhof.

An outstanding student in high school, Zamenhof was well liked by teachers and students. He had been accepted by Moscow University to study medicine, so it came as a shock when a friend of Marcus’s said that Zamenhof’s devotion to Esperanto was a sign of serious mental problems. Marcus was so worried that he asked his son for all the language notebooks, and made him promise not to work on it again until he had graduated. Zamenhof had to obey. He asked his father only to keep the papers safe for him.

Zamenhof excelled in his medical studies. After two years, owing to political turmoil in Russia, he transferred to Warsaw University. He had kept his promise about the language. Now twenty-one and on vacation, he asked his mother if she could get his father’s permission to work on the project. She told him that Marcus had burned the notebooks because of his fears. Zamenhof quietly confronted his father, saying he was no longer bound by his promise not to work on the language. He did agree to keep the project secret until he finished his M.D. degree, but he had to reconstruct everything from memory.

In 1885, at twenty-five, Zamenhof graduated



and began medical practice. By then, Martin Schleyer, a German linguist, had created an international language called Volapük, or “people-speak.” Zamenhof took it up and found it to be much more difficult than his own creation. With renewed determination he set about writing an introductory textbook.

In 1887 Zamenhof married Klara Zilbernick, whose father considered him a genius. With Klara’s dowry and her enthusiastic support, Zamenhof was able to publish a forty-page book, *La Internacia Lingvo*, by “Dr. Esperanto.” On the title page it said: “For a language to be universal, it is not enough to call it that.” Was Dr. Esperanto being modest, or was that a slap at Volapük? Probably both. Zamenhof was proud of his work but knew it had to be put to a real test. Unlike some authors of planned languages, he was not possessive or domineering: “An international language, like every national one, is the property of society,” he wrote, “and the author renounces all personal rights in it forever.”

The first book was in Russian, but interest in the new language, which soon became known by the doctor’s pseudonym, led to translations in several other languages. Henry Phillips, of the American Philosophical Society, produced an English version in 1889. Leo Tolstoy, linguist Max Müller, and other respected intellectuals in Europe were enthusiastic, but there was plenty of opposition. The czarist Russian government viewed an international language as a threat, shutting down the first Esperanto periodical because of an article by Tolstoy.

Over a decade passed before Esperanto societies began to take root in the freer countries of Europe. In 1905 the first international congress Esperanto was held in France, with about seven hundred Esperanto speakers from twenty countries. There were no radios or tape recorders to guide pronunciation, so this was a crucial test. People understood one another in lecture halls, small groups, and in one-to-one conversations. The meeting was a great success, and Zamenhof, who opened and closed the congress, became a hero to many.

Since then Esperanto has developed a world-wide community of users, an impressive library of original and translated works, dozens of current magazines, websites, conferences, interest groups, networks of pen pals and travel help, and even some families whose children speak it as “natives” alongside their national languages. Major Esperanto congresses have been held every year except during the two world wars. Zamenhof went to Washington in the summer of 1910 for the fifth World Esperanto Congress. He died in 1917 of a heart condition, terribly discouraged by the war that was devastating Europe, but still hopeful that better communication would help create a better world.

Esperanto’s grammar and pronunciation have remained stable, while its vocabulary has grown with the times to include everything from baseball to haiku, and its literature has expanded to thousands of volumes. The World Esperanto Association, headquartered in the Netherlands, has consultative relations with UNESCO and publishes a yearbook with a directory of Esperantists in more than a hundred countries who can be contacted for help with travel, education, and an array of interests and hobbies. Today, of course, there are websites to visit, tapes to learn from, e-mail to use for correspondence, as well as short-wave broadcasts in Esperanto, dozens of magazines, and hundreds of books published each year. Some universities have credit courses in Esperanto, including the University of California at Berkeley. Research has been conducted to show that Esperanto can be used as a bridge language for translation between two other languages—with an accuracy as good as direct translation. Some educators believe that learning Esperanto for one year will help students learn ethnic languages more quickly because they will grasp the idea of a “foreign” tongue without spending so much time on memorizing irregular conjugations of verbs and declensions of nouns.

Zamenhof said that Esperanto was to a national language as a canal is to a river. You don’t have to make the canal winding and irregular to



imitate a river; it can be straight and simple to fulfill its function and still be beautiful. I think of another comparison: the bicycle and the car. Esperanto is neat and efficient and inexpensive to use; English (or German, French, Chinese, etc.) is big and powerful but can also be overwhelming and hazardous to use if you don't invest what it takes to master it. Each has its place.

Information Resources (including free lessons):

Esperanto League for North America, P.O. Box 1129, El Cerrito, CA 94530, an affiliate of the Universala Esperanto-Asocio (Rotterdam). 510-653-0998

www.esperanto-usa.org links to radio broadcasts from Europe and Asia.

Esperantic Studies Foundation, 3900 Northampton St. NW, Washington, D.C. 20015. 202-362-3963 www.esperantic.org supports research and education on world language problems.

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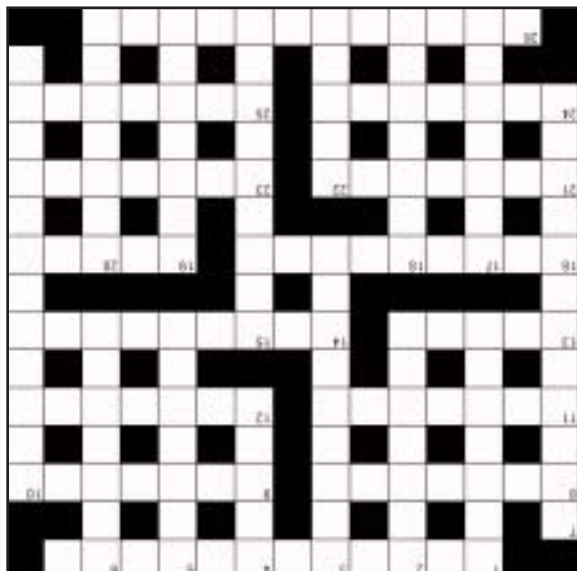
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Answers to this issue's crossword puzzle:



Interlingua—R.I.P.

Frank Esterhill
New York

Several “international” languages were invented in the second half of the 19th century by a series of amateurs (Pirro, Sudre, Schleyer, Zamenhof, Sotos-Ochando, Foster, and a multitude of others), but it was Louis Couturat, professor of philosophy (and successor to Henri Bergson) at the Collège de France who brought both intellectual respectability to the topic with the discovery of unpublished manuscripts of Leibniz [1678] (discussing, *inter alia*, Descartes [1629] on the subject) and popular appeal with the publication of two extensive historical studies.¹ Along with his colleague, Léopold Leau, he organized the Délégation pour l'adoption d'une langue auxiliaire internationale, whose Comité, instead of recommending an extant project, proposed as a reform candidate its own language, Ido, in 1908. The proponents of Ido recognized from the start that the ultimate test of any “constructed” language would be its usefulness for scientific communication, yet such success always eluded them.

As early as 1902, the Nobel Laureate, Wilhelm Ostwald, at the University of Leipzig, had interested his student, the young chemist, Dr. Frederick Gardner Cottrell, in the idea of an auxiliary language. After the First World War, Cottrell, Chairman of the Committee on International Auxiliary Language (which had been set up in 1919) of the International Research Council, persuaded two wealthy and prominent New Yorkers, Alice Vanderbilt Morris and Daven Hennen Morris, to found the International Auxiliary Language Association [IALA] in 1924, with an illustrious team of leading academics and business leaders. Replacing the dilettantism which had preceded it with a new professionalism, IALA, for a dozen years, sponsored linguistic research (under the aegis of Edward Sapir, Otto Jespersen, and William E.



Collinson, together with Albert Debrunner, Edgar von Wahl, Giuseppe Peano, and others) and organized meetings dedicated to the task of effecting conciliation between the already existing auxiliary language systems.² Then, in 1937, realizing that all of the previously elaborated interlanguages were fundamentally flawed and that compromise was impossible, IALA reverted to its original intention of doing its own independent work.³

With a grant from the Rockefeller foundation, IALA undertook the second stage of its research, the registration of the international vocabulary, under E. Clark Stillman at the University of Liverpool. Upon the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939, IALA's files and records were safely transferred to New York where Stillman assembled a new team to continue the work. He enlisted the support of an able assistant, Alexander Gode, who assumed the direction of IALA when Stillman left for war duty. By the time World War II was over, IALA had completed its basic work and was ready to offer to the public, in its General Report 1945, three variants of its proposed interlanguage, grounded in the solid foundation of the international vocabulary. In 1946, André Martinet joined IALA's staff briefly, formulating an analysis of IALA's (now) four variants—the *Présentation des Variantes*. After Martinet's abrupt departure in 1948, Alexander Gode once again assumed the direction of IALA's staff and brought the work to completion with the publication of the *Interlingua-English Dictionary* and the *Interlingua Grammar* in 1951.

The application of Interlingua to the sciences began the next year with Forrest F. Cleveland's *Spectroscopia Molecular*, and it advanced further in 1953 with the inception of *Scientia International*, the monthly abstracts of *Science News Letter*. Over the span of almost twenty years, Interlingua summaries appeared in more than two dozen medical journals (including *Journal of the American Medical Association*), and Gode supplied Interlingua abstracts for eleven world medical congresses

from the 7th World Congress of Cardiology (1954) to the 12th International Congress of Dermatology (1962). In his lifetime, Gode alone published approximately a million words of Interlingua. Abstracts in Interlingua, prepared by Eduardo I. Juliet, M.D., were then printed in *New York State Journal of Medicine* for a decade from 1974 on. The Interlingua translations (Esterhill) in the *Multilingual Compendium of Plant Diseases* (1976 and 1977) published by the American Phytopathological Society in cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture, marked the final milestone in the distinguished history of Interlingua in the service of science.⁴ What had been the goal from the start of the 20th century—serious and professional use of an auxiliary language in science—had never materialized until the publication of Interlingua. And—ironically—it came to an abrupt end shortly after that.⁵

There was no need (and no use) ever for the “international” languages of the late 19th and early 20th centuries; and today, with the unparalleled ascendancy of English, there is no longer any need for Interlingua. The languages of the European littoral have become the tongues of the New World and subsequently the idiom of the whole civilized world, bringing the Latin vocabulary of which they are the carriers to its ultimate dissemination as the patrimony of the entire world. Just as the Roman Empire of the West gave its language as its most important and its most durable legacy, so too the nations of Europe have exported their idioms as one of their most valuable contributions to mankind.⁶

[Frank Esterhill was the last Executive Director of the Interlingua Institute, the successor organization to IALA.]

Notes:

1. *La logique de Leibniz, d'après des documents inédits*, Paris, 1901 (reprinted G. Olm: Hidesheim, 1961); *Opuscules et fragments inédits de Leibniz, extraits des manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Royale de Hanovre*, 1903 (reprinted G. Olm: Hildesheim 1961). Descartes in his let-



ter to Marin Merseune, November 20, 1629, was responding to a placard in Latin with six propositions. For the popularizations, see Couturat, *Histoire de la langue universelle*, Hachette, Paris, 1903, and *Les nouvelles langues internationelles*, Hachette: Paris, 1907.

2. Julia S. Falk, "The Women Foundation Members of the Linguistic Society of America," *Language* 70 (1994). 455–490; "Words Without Grammar: Linguists and the International Auxiliary Language Movement in the United States," *Language & Communication* 18 (1995), 171–180, and *Women, Language and Linguistics: Three American Stories from the First Half of the Twentieth Century*, Routledge: London and New York, 1999.

3. Frank Esterhill, *Interlingua Institute: A History*, New York, 2000: 4. Cottrell and IALA explicitly stated that IALA was working for the adoption or modification of an existing language "or the creation of a new language."

4. For a fuller documentation of IALA's final fifteen years, see Esterhill (2000), which makes use of many still-unpublished documents contained in the Archive of IALA that was donated to the New York Public Library at the end of 1999.

5. Interlingua, the only interlanguage every adopted for use in the sciences, survived little more than a quarter of a century, and there is no reason to believe that it could now be revived.

6. Both Alberto Liptay and Julius Lott, at the end of the 19th century, had already recognized that any international language had to be based upon the modern idioms. Peano, at the start of the 20th century, made explicit (in his *Latino sine Flexione*, later renamed *Interlingua*) their intuition that it was the surviving elements of the Latin language which lent to the modern tongues their character of internationality. IALA, in tribute to Peano's insight, petitioned the *Academia pro Interlingua*, in 1949, to sanction the use of the name for its own language. (Esterhill 2000: 52–53.



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a shop curtain.

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Artistic Endeavors

Paul Heacock and Carol-June Cassidy
 Larchmont, New York

The world of art and artists is embellished by a number of terms that themselves could be displayed on pedestals. Many of these items are employed outside the art world to give an artistic feel to more commonplace activities.

- chef-d'oeuvre** an artistic or literary masterpiece
 - chiaroscuro** the light and shade in a picture or drawing
 - grisaille** a three-dimensional effect obtained in painting by using monochromatic gray patterns
 - kouros** a statue of a naked boy or young man standing with his hands by his sides and his left leg coming forward, which was typically made in ancient Greece
 - oeuvre** all the works produced by an artist, writer, or musical composer
 - opuscule** a minor, unimportant work
 - pentimento** a visible hint or trace of an earlier painting that can be seen through the surface of a finished painting as it ages
 - putto** a figure of an infant, male angel, or cherub in painting, sculpture, or decoration
 - telamon** a supporting column sculpted in the form of a male figure
 - trompe l'oeil** a painting style that creates the illusion of three-dimensional reality
- [From the forthcoming *Difficult Words*.]



BIBLIOGRAPHIA

Even Monkeys Fall from Trees: The Wit and Wisdom of Japanese Proverbs

Even a Stone Buddha Can Talk: More Wit and Wisdom of Japanese Proverbs

Compiled and translated by David Galef. Illustrations by Jun Hashimoto. Tuttle Publishing, Boston. Each \$12.95.

Anytime you see the phrase “wit and wisdom,” you have to take it with a grain of salt. Each country, each culture, has its own way of looking at things. What makes sense to Americans might be totally illogical to the Australian aborigine. Some concepts, however, are universal.

That’s the premise behind these two books by David Galef, a teacher of literature and creative writing at the University of Mississippi. Looking at the Japanese version of “Western” proverbs, the author proves that there is more than one way to skin a cat. In the preface to *Stone Buddha*, he writes:

“As always with these kinds of projects, the act of translation . . . involves a double projection: first, to throw oneself into the world of another culture, and second, to travel back centuries when life was often a short, hard scramble in the soil, and existence itself depended on the sometimes-grudging cooperation of neighbors. . . . The saying . . . ‘counting a dead child’s years,’ is simply heartbreaking. But in the days of high infant mortality, it was a rather common occurrence and aptly describes a fruitless endeavor.”

So the difficulties in translation, then, are two-fold: putting it on a level which can be understood by “Western sensibilities,” not only in a linguistic sense, but in a historical sense as well.

Then there is the inevitable “it loses something in translation” issue. “Certain proverbs do not translate well or have no clear-cut English equivalent,” notes Galef. “Others have two or more.”

Each book consists of a hundred phrases. The whimsical illustrations are quite evocative in themselves, and seem to be more than just pictures describing phrases.

The proverbs provide an excellent exercise in analysis as the reader is challenged to see the Japanese adage in its English equivalent. Some are evident: “Do quickly what is good” becomes “Strike while the iron is hot.” Similarly, “Add caution to caution” easily turns into “Look before you leap.” Included in these twin volumes are such well-known maxims as, “A friend in need is a friend in deed,” “Necessity is the mother of invention,” and, “If at first you don’t succeed, Try try again.”

Conversely, there are several sayings that might leave readers scratching their heads, either because the English proverb is itself unfamiliar, or the Japanese version is too “Zen”-like: “Dumplings are better than flowers” becomes “Pudding before praise.”

Don’t worry if you can’t quite figure out the Japanese renditions. Each book contains a list of the English counterparts, as well as the items written in Japanese characters and a transliteration.

Galef’s collections are entertaining, but more so, they are thought-provoking as they provide a different way of looking at conventional wisdom; new wine in old glasses, perhaps?

Ron Kaplan

Latin Roots and Their Modern English Spellings by Raymond E. Laurita Camden, Maine. Leonardo Press. 364 pp. \$24.95

“Does spelling count?”

Children ask their teachers this question with alarming frequency. The American populace seems to feel that the spelling of their language is so difficult that it is unfair to hold them accountable for it. This is, in part, because much of spelling education focuses on differences (e.g. *desert* is not *dessert*). Raymond E. Laurita has devoted a large part of his thirty-five-year teaching career to developing an alternate approach to teaching spelling. Instead of focusing on how words differ, he focuses on the similarities between words that developed from the same underlying root structure.



Latin Roots and Their Modern English Spellings is the second of a trilogy which Mr. Laurita has written to aid people in perceiving the regularity and rhythm within the much maligned English spelling system. He accomplishes this goal admirably, using an unusual format and a multitude of examples. The dictionary consists of 1,400 separate roots and more than 12,000 example words. Unlike other dictionaries, he has created individual entries for roots with identical spellings but different meanings or histories. For example, the root *mine* is split into eight different entries, for the eight Latin root words: *minuere*, to lessen; *minor*, less; *minister*, servant; *minium*, red lead; *mina*, mine; *minae*, threats, projecting as points; *minere*, to threaten, project or jut out; and *memini*, to remember. Following each of these roots are many examples showing how they retain the basic root form and meaning of the source word.

Reading this dictionary also highlights the fact that knowing spelling is sometimes only part of the process. Understanding that identical roots have different meanings is tricky for some students, but essential when covering the breadth of the English language. In this dictionary the stem *ape* has three very different meanings—one from *aperio*, *aperire* (to open), one from *apex* (a summit) and one from *apis* (a bee). Thus, when readers come to words with an *ape* stem, they will be able to narrow the meaning to those having to do with an opening, a summit, or bees. From that point on, students can use context to figure out the sense of the word.

One of the most enjoyable parts of reading the dictionary is the historical explanations that Mr. Laurita has written to explain variations in the spelling or meaning of the modern word. Under the entry for the root *pupe*—which comes from the Latin *pupillis*, little boy, we find an interesting explanation for the two meanings of the word *pupil*.

The connection between the idea of one who is a “pupil,” or a student, and the “pupil” in the sense of “the apparently black center of the iris of

the eye, through which light passes to the retina,” is an interesting and logical one. In Latin, the word *pupilla* meant “little doll,” and the idea of connecting it with the iris resulted from the fact that when one looked into the iris, the image there appeared as a miniature of reality, or a “little doll.”

We also learn about the checkered past of commonplace modern words. The word *buckle* in the sense of “the cheek strap of a helmet,” derives from *buccula*, diminutive of *bucca* “cheek.” It evolved into Old French as *bouclier*, from *boucle* (boss on a shield), into Middle English to *bokeler*, and on to its present form in Modern English.

The only addition to this excellent dictionary that one could wish for is the inclusion of pronunciation guides and definitions for the exemplar words. Mr. Laurita’s goal, however, to show the contribution of Latin to the order and structure of English, is accomplished admirably in its current format. The lack of definitions, however, makes a traditional dictionary a necessary reading partner.

I congratulate and thank Mr. Laurita for this interesting and comprehensive dictionary of roots. It will be of great use to students of English and to those interested in learning about the linguistic history of English. I also strongly recommend it as a tool for teachers to use in teaching both spelling and derivatives. I look forward to reading his first dictionary on Greek roots and the arrival of the third in the trilogy on Middle English roots. The next time a person asks me the relevance of Latin today, I will refer that uninformed person to *Latin Roots and Their Modern English Spellings*, and whisper, “*Tolle, lege.*”

Sonya Seifert

[Sonya Seifert is a Latin teacher in Chicago.]

Flutes of Fire, by Leanne Hinton, Berkeley: Heyday Books, 1994. (Some of the essays have coauthors.) 272 pp. \$18.00

Our fresh century will be vexed by the loss of over half the world’s languages by the time it ends. Or so the experts tell us. Some fifty of them say up to 90% of the six thousand or so natural



languages spoken throughout the world in the year 2000 will have disappeared by 2100. Of languages indigenous to the United States, the linguist Michael Krauss predicted in 1995 that 45 would be extinct by 2000(!), 125 by 2025, and 155 by 2050, leaving a mere 20 with tenuous chances of existing into the 2100s. In California, a region of great linguistic diversity, some fifty—representing at least six major language families—of the original hundred or so native languages are still spoken, but all of them are moribund. No young people are learning them as their first or native languages. Most are spoken by a mere handful of older people, and when those people are gone, their languages will be gone with them.

Leanne Hinton's fine collection, *Flutes of Fire: Essays on California Indian Languages*, is a humane and bracing tonic against this bitter forecast. "Every language in the world has its own power, and humor, and beauty, and genius," she says, and then she goes on to pay homage to the rich diversity of the languages of California and to the intrepid few who still speak them and are attempting to preserve or revive them. The essays are interspersed with historical and contemporary photographs and drawings, excellent maps, excerpts from traditional stories, and writings of such scholars as A. L. Kroeber, William Bright, Edward Sapir, and John Peabody Harrington.

Hinton has studded these essays with personal anecdotes that naturally lead to her exposition of larger concerns. Her tone is calm, her arguments are elegantly reasoned, and her scholarship is accurate and exceptionally well informed. She doesn't shy away from the technical where necessary (for example in her system for transcription or her descriptions of number systems and grammatical features such as instrumental prefixes), but she is always lucid and never condescending.

She even includes a lovely poem of her own on the loss of languages—Her passion for the languages and the people who speak or spoke them bursts through. "I have always been of the persuasion that the presence of many different languages enlivens the world. There are so many delightful,



playful ways that different languages structure themselves. All in all, it seems to me that a world without Kashaya instrumental prefixes would be a little bit sadder to live in," she writes.

She touches on an astounding variety of linguistic topics for such a relatively short book: song, humor, terms for directions, the linguistic relativity hypothesis, language families and historical linguistics, etymologies, counting systems, specialized vocabulary (basketry, acorns as food, and shamanism, for example), men's and women's speech, songs without words, the origins of tribal names, pine nuts and pine trees, the U.S. government's turn-of-the-century English-only policies, the 1990 Native American Languages Act (by which "the government has officially recognized the right of Native American languages to exist"), John Peabody Harrington and his obsessive language-salvage work, writing systems, and language preservation and revival programs among California Indians.

Many such language programs have proceeded on their own or with help from established scholars like Hinton. She lists six language communities that have such programs, sets out some guidelines to help make them work, and calls on linguists and others in California to be responsive to the needs of these communities. But she also makes it clear that the initiative for such programs must come from and be nourished by the people themselves.

To those who might wonder why anyone would go to all the trouble to try to preserve a dying language or revive a dead one, Hinton says simply, "Speech communicates a great deal more than just the topic of discussion. It communicates a lot about the sort of situation one is involved in at the time, who one is, and what the relationship is between speakers. Speech expresses one's social identity. It is no wonder, then, that people feel an emotional attachment to their own languages."

Curtis G. Booth



EPISTOLA

A little something for your New Word Department, Jargon Division:

prequel, as used in the Late Spring 2000 Daedalus Books catalog: “The novel is a prequel to Montana 1998. . . .” What next—a *coquel?* (one of two books on the same subject by different authors); a *biquel?* (one book by two authors); a *forquel?* (a book rather too like the author’s earlier work); a *whyquel?* (a book the reviewer thinks hardly worthy of notice); a *whatquel?* (a book the reviewer doesn’t understand) a *soquel?* (a book to be read on the northern California coast near Santa Cruz).

Friends tell me *prequel* is not a new word, but I don’t find it in dictionaries prior to 1992. My *American Heritage* (3rd ed.) provides this definition: “A work taking place in or concerned with a time before the action of a pre-existing work,” and it cites the following usage from the *Washington Post*: “The sequel takes up right where the prequel left off.” A rather disturbing statement when you stop to think about it. There’s a pre- and a post-, but shouldn’t there be something in between? This could lead one into troubling philosophical waters: there’s no now—only a before and after.

D. L. Emblen
Santa Rosa, California

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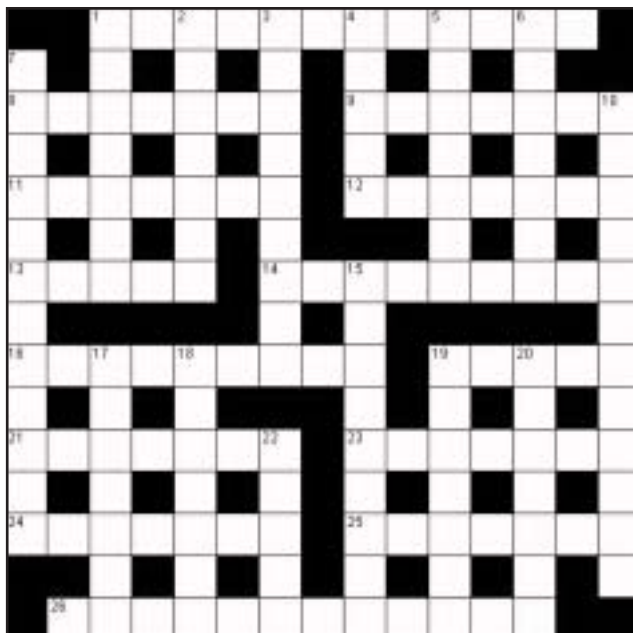
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Across

1. Mediator finding her rent-books showing some confusion (6,6)
8. Animals reared by religious establishment caught between having nothing and plenty! (7)
9. Mercury, perhaps, aware of the birds (7)
11. Baggage—author’s lost key (7)
12. A voice in Schumann’s first work conducted with love (7)
13. Dash! I’m having to turn the light back on (5)
14. Point to a cut lip and hear why treatment produces blue gums (9)
16. G-man, perhaps, to sing softly about “One from the Dordogne” (9)
19. Allow about a quarter—that’s the minimum (5)
21. He didn’t trust his wife to return a greeting (7)
23. “Far from the madding crowd’s ---- strife”—Gray (Elegy) (7)
24. Prominent foreigner got in the way (7)
25. Celebrate one going in the register (7)
26. Perverse to ask whether the ship is able to circle America (12)

Down

1. One who’d turned out for a dance (7)
2. In mid-morning there’s lots of food (7)
3. Such useless uphill work! (9)
4. False and treacherous place, America (5)
5. Like a complex little dictionary I become familiar with (7)
6. Piece of fruit I note wrapped in crumpled paper (7)
7. Stubborn Scotsman first to count out debtors’ notes (12)
10. Wounded? This should help (4,2,3,3)
15. Against the conversion of e.g. Eric Porter (9)
17. Catastrophe liable to hide classic suicide (7)
18. Complaint of one beset by mental trouble (7)
19. Facial spottiness appears advanced. Exit yours truly (7)
20. A noble Roman moving right up the tree (7)
22. Decimal—frequently recurring (5)