Alchemical Calques or the Transmutation of Language

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In the fifth century BC, Empedocles of Acragas, the Greek philosopher, proclaimed that the universe was composed of four primal elements: fire, air, water, and earth. While not, perhaps, the most discriminating descriptive cosmology, this doctrine nevertheless dominated Western philosophical thought for twenty-one hundred years and is today still favorably regarded by born-again astrologists. But it did not completely satisfy Aristotle, who, writing a century later, explained that while these four material elements could define all earthly substances, a fifth immaterial element must define all heavenly phenomena. He called this element *pemptē ousia,* or 'fifth being.'

Nearly two millennia later, the medieval philosophers, busy transmuting lead into gold and discovering the elixir of life, sought to translate this expression into Latin. But classical Latin had no present participle meaning 'being.' Fortunately, however, Cicero had remedied this problem in the first century BC, averting this medieval embarrassment by taking the existing Latin infinitive *esse*—an almost exact counterpart to Greek *einai,* the infinitive governing *ousia*—and extrapolating from it the hypothetical Latin present participial base *essent-,* to create the neologism *essentia*, which corresponds to Greek *ousia*. Then, some fifteen hundred years later, the medieval philosophers prefaced this word with Latin *quinta,* 'fifth,' an ordinal number equivalent to Greek *pemptē,* establishing the Medieval Latin phrase *quinta essentia;* and these two words eventually coalesced and passed into English as *quintessence.*

In this linguistic process the medieval philosophers had unearthed, seemingly without knowing it, a means of transmuting the lead of a dead language into the gold elixir of living discourse.

Philologically, this occurrence, by which Greek *pemptē ousia* was translated, element by element, into Latin *quinta essentia,* is known as a loan translation, or *calque,* a word derived from French *calque* 'an imitation or tracing,' insofar as one language is transposing the elements of another language into its own elements. French *calque,* in turn, is fashioned from the French verb *calquer* 'to trace or copy,' which is derived from the Italian verb *calcare* 'to trace or trample,' itself an adoption of the Latin verb *calcare* 'to tread or trample,' which, for our purposes, finds its source in the Latin noun *calx* 'heel,' as that part of the foot that does the trampling. As such, calques may very well be the philosopher's stone of discourse, the elixir or mother's milk of living language, an archeology of knowledge, transmuting the violent trampling of translation into the intercourse of loan.

Much can be discovered in this archeology. The ancient Romans, as well as the Greeks, have provided English with a potpourri of picturesque calques. Even at the dawn of Roman civilization, as a Tiberine she-wolf (Acca Larentia?) suckled Romulus and Remus, some inhabitant of the Italic peninsula may have gazed at the sky one night and fancied that faintly luminous band of stars overarching the heavens to be a road or way of milk, or *via lactea,* a phrase that was translated by Chaucer in Middle English as *melky weye* and thence *Milky Way,* eventually passing into Modern English, where it became a candy bar. Or instead, I would tender, the Romans may have partially translated their *via lactea* from Eratosthenes' *kyklos galaxias* 'circle of milk,' from which we derive *galaxy,* now a generic term for the Milky Way, though formerly our specific term; and *kyklos galaxias* may further be the source of our obsolete English calque, *lacteous circle*, which would support this hypothesis. In any event, Latin *lac* is cognate with Greek *gala* and English *milk*, all three words having descended from the common

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plus the crossword puzzle and some SICS! and EPISTOLAE

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prehistoric Indo-European base *melg-* 'to stroke, to rub off,' hence, 'to milk,' from which we acquire such English derivatives as *lactate, emulsion,* and *lettuce.*

But the Romans and Greeks are by no means our sole legators of calques. In 1891, Friedrich Nietzsche completed *Also sprach Zarathustra,* in which he elaborated upon his conception of the *Übermensch,* that rationally superior person who spurns conventional Christian "herd morality" and transmutes himself, like a triumphant alchemist, to fully realize human potential and creative mastery. Yet in a secondary transmutation, Nietzsche's *Übermensch,* almost immediately upon publication of *Zarathustra,* was misconceived as a man of extraordinary physical strength with a juggernaut-like "will to power" over others. And in a tertiary transmutation, George Bernard Shaw, in popularizing and recasting Nietzsche's philosophy twelve years later, took on the task of translating *Übermensch* into English. But, evidently, he did not find the native rendering of *overman* or *beyondman* sufficiently mellifluous and instead translated the first element *Über* into its Latin equivalent, creating for his new play and all posterity that immortal, hybrid calque . . . *Superman!*

Faster than a speeding bullet!
More powerful than a locomotive!
Able to leap tall buildings in a single bound!
Look! Up in the sky!
It's a bird! It's a plane!
IT'S ÜBERMENSCH!

Yes, it's Übermensch,   strange visitor from another philosophaster. Yet anyone who has had the pleasure of listening to that scholarly radio serial of the 1940s featuring Bud Collyer, or of watching that intellectual television series of the '50s starring George Reeves (not to be confused with his star-crossed successor of the '70s and '80s, Christopher Reeve) could not help but note the discrepancy between the relatively temperate pronouncements of this commentator and the preternatural, quasi-omnipotent feats that this star character could (and did) perform. Indeed, according to the original 1938 "magazine" (as the television voice-over euphemistically deemed it), this Pimpernel incarnate could do little more than "hurdle skyscrapers . . . leap an eighth of a mile . . . raise tremendous weights . . . [and] run faster than a streamline train," all of which brings him a lot closer to Nietzsche's original, misconstrued

Übermensch. In short, what began linguistically as an accurate calque for a German concept transmogrified into something quite alien, an example, if you will, of semantic hypertrophy.

But few calques have degenerated so bizarrely in such a short a period. Religious calques, for example, have remained relatively stable over the millennia, many of them deriving from the Hebrew or Aramaic languages, the former the language of the Old Testament, the latter the language spoken when Christ lived.

An enlightening religious calque is *scapegoat.* Though no longer commonly associated with anything religious, it originally epitomized the atonement of Yom Kippur in which Aaron, the high priest of the Jews, confessed the sins of his people upon the head of a goat, which was then allowed to "escape" into the wilderness, carrying away those sins.

But the goat . . . shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, *and* to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness. (Leviticus 16:10, KJV)

Scapegoat actually encompasses two calques and is an example of those words that I call doublecalques (with *double* pronounced dōō′blə, in the French manner). The biblical scholar William Tyndale, in preparing his 1530 translation of the Pentateuch, coined *scapegoat* as a calque of the Late Latin (Vulgate) *caper emissarius* 'emissary goat,' itself a calque of Hebrew *'azāzēl,* the name of a desert demon which, etymologically, was understood as *'ēz ōzēl* 'goat that departs'—whence emissary goat, whence scapegoat, whence any person, place, or thing that bears the blame for others.

A more complex religious doublecalque is *Holy Ghost.* This derives from Middle English *holi gost,* which itself derives from Old English *hālig gāst*—elements that can be traced, respectively, to Indo-European *kailo-* 'whole, uninjured' and *gheis-,* an uncertain element expressing awe or fright. However, in ancient Hebrew, a language classified within the Afro-Asiatic family of languages, *ruah ha-qōdesh* meant 'holy spirit,' which was later translated into Greek *pneuma hagion* and thence Latin *spiritus sanctus.* But not until the Roman missionaries brought *spiritus sanctus* to the British Isles in the latter half of the first millennium did the English combine *hālig* with *gāst* to form *hālig gāst.* Thus, while *hālig gāst,* morphologically, is of Indo-European composition,

semantically it is of Afro–Asiatic ancestry. Moreover, since *hālig gāst* is a doublecalque of *spiritus sanctus* and *pneuma hagion,* and *spiritus sanctus* is a doublecalque of *pneuma hagion* and *ruah ha-qōdesh,* I christen *Holy Ghost* a *multiple doublecalque.* (It has been suggested that *Holy Ghost* be designated a *triplecalque;* however, such a neologism would needlessly obfuscate the terminology.)

In contemplating multiple doublecalques, we must not overlook *parallel doublecalques. Groundhog,*

calques *catachresticalques,* after the Greek-derived rhetorical term *catachresis,* as defined, in one of its senses, as 'an incorrect use of a word, either from a misinterpretation of its etymology or a folk etymology.'

Scapegoat, as we have seen, is an example of a doublecalque, but it is also a catachresticalque insofar as Late Latin *caper emissarius,* of which *scapegoat* is Tyndale's English translation, is, in fact, a mistranslation of the Hebrew proper name *'azāzēl.* And in a parallel historical development, Greek *tragos apopom-*

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for example, is commonly asserted to be a calque of Dutch *aardvarken,* which dissects into *aarde* 'ground, earth,' and *varken* 'hog, pig.' But, significantly, a second calque representing an entirely different animal, the South African anteater *(Orycteropus afer),* is also translated from these same Dutch elements, though in this context it is reconstructed from its alternative English counterparts, *earth* and *pig.* So *groundhog* and *earth pig* are parallel doublecalques of Dutch *aardvarken,* which not incidentally yields, through its seventeenth-century offspring language Afrikaans, the loan of our more learned term for the earth-pig anteater, *aardvark.*

But few calques have the vainglory of being doublecalques. Indeed, a large number of what the *mobile vulgus* call calques are not legitimate calques and plead for a new name. *Antinovel,* for example, is an incomplete translation of Jean–Paul Sartre's *antiroman* (though this term was used at least as early as 1627 by Charles Sorel) in which French *roman* is rendered by English *novel,* but in which the *anti* remains unchanged. *X-ray,* likewise, is a partial rendering of Wilhelm Roentgen's *X-strahl,* in which German *Strahl* translates to English *ray,* but the *X,* being an international algebraic symbol for the unknown, remains intact. Such compounds, then, in which at least one major element is *not* translated from the original, I designate as *demicalques.* And certain of these words and phrases, as *tall oil,* which is a demicalque of German *Tallöl,* which itself is a demicalque of Swedish *tallolja,* are, in fact, *doubledemicalques.*

But a more captivating category of calques involves those words in which at least one major element is mistranslated from the original. I call these

paios, 'goat sent out,' of the Septuagint is also a misinterpretation of and, hence, a catachresticalque of *'azāzēl.* So *scapegoat* and *tragos apopompaios* are clearly *parallel doublecatachresticalques* of the Hebrew *'azāzēl.*

But *multiple doublecatachresticalques* have also descended upon the English language. At about the time the Hebrews were completing the Torah, the Greeks were coining the phrase *ourion ōon* 'wind egg,' to refer to certain eggs that do not hatch, presumedly because they are conceived by the wind. Subsequently, this phrase was translated into Latin *ovum urinum,* with the same meaning. But somewhere along the way Latin *urinum* 'wind,' became confused with Latin *urina* 'urine.' So what began, in Greek, as a wind egg was transmuted, in Latin, into a urine egg. Moreover, in Old English, the word for urine was *adela,* which contracted in Middle English to *adel;* and the Old English word for egg was *æg,* which transmuted, in one of its Middle English incarnations, into *eye.* So the compound *adel-eye* 'urine egg' emerged in Middle English, of which the *eye* later dropped out, yielding, once again, a solitary Middle English *adel.* And this word passed into Modern English as *addle.*

So the next time you call someone *addlebrained* or *addlepated,* smile to yourself, for you are saying more about that person than that person might suspect. And smile again, for you're articulating an alchemical calque, that quintessence of loan—which transmutes material as heavy as lead and as light as the wind into the golden immaterial elixir of living language.

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Bacronymic Etymythologies

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A neologistic title: but wait, I can explain. First, what is an acronym? There are various definitions. According to the most restrictive one, an *acronym* is a word that is spelled using the first letter of each of a series of words and that is pronounced as if it were an ordinary word (i.e., generally, not pronounced as if spelled out). For example, *NATO* is an acronym of "North Atlantic Treaty Organization." The full phrase (in this case, "North Atlantic Treaty Organization") can be called the expansion of the acronym. This narrowly defined type can be called a *letter acronym.* Even within this type there is some variation in that small words such as *and, of,* or *the* may be either retained or omitted when making the acronym: thus "National Aeronautics and Space Administration" gives *NASA* (rather than *NAASA*), but "President of the United States" gives *POTUS* (never *PUS*). Good practice requires, I think, that the acronym be formed using an internally consistent standard in this respect; one should keep all the small words or drop them all; needless to say, this rule is not observed strictly in real life. Initialisms that are spelled out in speech do not qualify as acronyms according to my usage: thus, for example, *ATM* fails to qualify since it is pronounced "A, T, M" rather than *atom.* I try to ignore such grotesqueries as *FNMA* (pronounced *Fannie Mae*) for "Federal National Mortgage Association" (perhaps I could call this an *aggronym*).

Usually a less restrictive definition is employed, permitting the first syllable or the first group of letters of a component word to be used rather than only the first letter when constructing an acronym: thus *radar* from "radio detecting and ranging" is considered acronymic although it uses *ra* from *radio,* and the Central Treaty Organization is permitted the acronym *CENTO.* A *syllable acronym* is one that has no loose letters but only initial syllables: for example, "high fidelity" becomes *hi-fi* and "modulator/demodulator" gives *modem* (liberties are taken with hyphenation, syllabification, and pronunciation in many cases, including these).

A *bacronym* is an acronym that is formed in a backward manner: instead of an existing phrase being abbreviated to form an acronym, an existing word is chosen first as the target acronym and a phrase is devised to match it. For example, the name "North Atlantic Treaty Organization" presumably dictated its "honest" acronym *NATO.* On the other hand, the awkward expression "Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere" presumably was contrived specifically to justify the previously chosen bacronym *CARE.* Not all bacronyms are as flagrant as this one (although some are even worse); often in modern times some "discreet" alteration of a proposed name is performed simply to facilitate the formation of a nifty acronym, and there are many borderline cases in which it is not clear which was chosen first, the acronym or its expanded form. (There is also an apparent spelling variant, *backronym.*)

In the investigation of word origins or etymologies, it is often suggested that a word originated as an acronym. In modern times such an etymology is often genuine: for example *jato, scuba, sonar, moped,* and *napalm* are truly and transparently acronymic in origin. Very likely *snafu* is genuine as well. It is interesting to note, however, that the acronym is almost entirely a recent phenomenon in English.[1] Acronyms in English were relatively infrequent before World War II and extremely rare before World War I. The word *acronym* itself has existed only since about 1943: few acronyms were conventionally used much earlier. Initialisms such as *O.K.* are much older, and there was quite a craze for such abbreviations in the U.S. in the late 1830s, but these were pronounced by spelling, and *O.K.* is still *okay* and not *ock.* It is sometimes said that *Seroco* for "Sears, Roebuck and Company" was the first genuine English-language acronym, first used around 1900 or slightly earlier.

The true origin of a word can be acronymic; the true origin cannot be fully bacronymic, however, since a bacronym by definition precedes its expansion. A bacronymic etymology sometimes provides one of several common types of "etymythology." The word *etymythology* refers to false etymology that is associated with a myth or story "explaining" the origin of a word or phrase.[2] Ridiculous etymologies are very common. In recent years, a number of stories about word and phrase origins have circulated widely by email. Some are despicable and offensive and undocumented; others are simply undocumented. It goes without saying that almost all are false. For some reason, false etymologies of the acronymic

(bacronymic) type are particularly popular.[3] Perhaps they are popular because anyone who can spell (even if completely ignorant of history, linguistics, etc.) can follow such a story.

What is one to make, for example, of an assertion that the venerable F-word itself is originally an acronym, based on "Fornication Under Consent of the King" or perhaps "For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge"? Of course, usually some fable is presented to support the etymology. The initial assessment of the claim is simple enough: if the word predates World War II, an acronymic origin is unlikely; if it predates World War I, it's extremely unlikely. Another clue: if two completely different acronymic origins are put forth, it's certain that one is bogus, and it's pretty likely that both are. Still, one ought to keep an open mind, and in this case I for one would be willing to inspect the old documents supporting the claim. What? There are none? What a surprise. Well, then, one might (provisionally at least) take the word of a respected scholar as published in a refereed journal. What? No such paper can be cited? Imagine that.

Bacronymic etymythologies that are frequently encountered and just as frequently debunked include those associated with the words *tip* (meaning '[give a] gratuity') and *posh*. The word *tip* in the current sense seems to have developed from a sense like 'light[ly] tap,' and it dates from the early eighteenth century in this sense, making acronymic origin extremely unlikely by the chronological argument. The fables suggest acronymic formation from such phrases as "to insure prompt service" and "to improve performance." Needless to say, documentation is not forthcoming.

Supposedly "POSH" was printed on premium tickets for round-trip sea passages from Britain to India, denoting "Port Out[ward], Starboard Home." Such a ticket supposedly would have entitled the holder to a compartment on the port side of the ship during the trip to India and a starboard side accommodation on the return voyage. The accompanying fable may include reasoning about the desirability of such an arrangement, which might optimize ventilation or minimize exposure to the tropical sun or provide a better view. The actual etymology of *posh* is uncertain, but *posh* was nineteenth-century slang meaning 'fop' or 'dandy' and also 'money,' supposedly specifically 'halfpenny,' possibly from a Romany

word meaning 'half.' The adjective in the modern sense dates from about 1918 with certainty, so the acronymic origin is unlikely, verging on extremely unlikely. The next thing to seek is the documentation (for example, one of those tickets would be a good start); the major dictionaries haven't found any supporting documentation, however, and neither have any of a number of interested scholars over the last several decades.

Among the few true acronyms developed before 1920 are *Anzac,* meaning "Australian and New Zealand Army Corps," and *AWOL,* meaning 'absent without leave.' It is claimed that the abbreviation *AWOL* existed in its modern sense as early as the American Civil War; this story doesn't seem unbelievable, although I don't know of any convincing evidence; however, it is highly doubtful that the acronymic pronunciation was used in the 1860s, since this type of pronunciation of an abbreviation was not natural then. The spelled-out pronunciation "A, W, O, L", sometimes still employed today, was the expected pronunciation before acronyms became fashionable, and as late as 1929, as Mencken reports, "George Philip Krapp's curious declaration that *a.w.o.l.* was pronounced as one word, *áwol*, in the Army" was derided in print.[4]

Recent words, particularly those that did not exist before World War II, are not uncommonly of acronymic origin. But there are also many spurious acronymic etymologies presented for new words. In some cases, it is not possible either to confirm or to refute the acronym stories. I'll present a few examples that have come to my attention; when no firm etymology is available, I'll present my best guess.

In the broad field of information processing or computer science, there are, of course, many true acronyms, including amusing ones such as the well-established *WYSIWYG* (pronounced "wizzy-wig") 'what you see is what you get.' Often an "honest" acronym will be followed by a series of bacronyms, but usually there's not much effort to disguise them. For example, *MUD* (referring to virtual-environment software) is said to be an acronym for "multi-user dungeon" or "multi-user dimension"; one of these may be an honest expansion, but I don't know with certainty. Its descendents, however, are clearly frivolous bacronyms, including *MUCK* 'multi-user created kingdom' and *MUSH* 'multi-user shared hallucination.' The transitive verb *mung* (unrelated

to these), meaning to modify (usually for the worse) or disable or destroy, was in my opinion probably invented around 1960 based on the earlier slang noun *mung* (which was equivalent to 'crud'). There is a claimed acronymic etymology based on "mash until no good," which surely smells bad to me; of course the alternative recursive (self-referential) acronym from "mung until no good" can only be a bacronym. There are other recursive acronyms (generally obvious jokes), including the famous *GNU* (which is pronounced *g'nu*, with the *G* sound intact, like *Gnu* in German), standing for "GNU's not Unix!" As an example of the rapidity with which patently false acronyms appear, note the recent bacronymic analysis of the word *spam,* meaning "unsolicited bulk e-mail." This term is only about a decade old, and its origin is well understood (from a Monty Python skit in which the trade name *Spam* was employed). Nonetheless, bacronyms such as "self-propelled advertising message" have been put forth.

In the field of medicine there are of course numerous true acronyms. There are also acronyms in associated slang or informal jargon, and some of these have false etymologies. For example, consider the group of derogatory epithets for obnoxious or undesirable patients (or other persons). The best known, *gomer,* is said to stand for "Get out of my emergency room!" This etymology has a false ring to it, it is not supported by the early record, and I don't believe in it, but the true etymology is not definitely established. I'm a little more certain about *toad;* this is a conventional epithet meaning more or less "repulsive [little] creature." The purported acronymic origin from "trashy old derelict" is inept in sense and also in construction since it doesn't even provide the observed pronunciation, and it is surely false in my opinion. Perhaps a better (although probably still false) acronymic etymology exists, using something like "trashy old alcoholic derelict," but I haven't seen an assertion to this effect myself. There are harsher epithets, which I will omit, and there are less harsh ones, such as the probably at least partly genuine double acronym "*LOL* in *NAD*" for "little old lady in no apparent distress" (sometimes ". . . acute distress"), where the *NAD* is possibly a bacronym based on the probably genuine acronym *NAD,* meaning "no acute/active disease," which is sometimes used in seriousness as a casual summary of a patient's evaluation.

As a final example that had a brief period of notoriety in recent years, consider *chad* meaning 'paper fragment,' often denoting small pieces punched out of cards or paper tapes in various applications (including the obsolete Hollerith card and the archaic paper ballot). The claimed acronymic origin of *chad* is "card hole aggregate debris." The word *chad* seems to be related to computers, so it's presumably recent enough to have had a genuine acronymic etymology. A little research, however, quickly reduces the plausibility of this etymology. The earliest instances of this word *chad* (as far as I know) are several dating from between 1939 and 1950. In all of these cases the word refers to debris that is not from a card but rather from a paper tape used in telegraphy. Furthermore, the word was not used for an aggregate; in fact, it usually appeared in the plural form *chads* in these early citations. The bacronym presumably was promulgated after keypunch cards had become more familiar than telegraphy tape, certainly not much before 1960, and after the word had been reinterpreted (likely through an intermediary term such as *chad box*) as (optionally) an uncountable noun referring to a mass of debris. The true etymology is not firmly established; however, I tentatively believe there is reason to equate this word with an older dialectal word, *chad* or *chat,* which referred to various small items or fragments, originally probably catkins (whence the form of the word) but extended to cover stones, twigs, etc.[5]

Some questions I cannot answer at all. Who invents the etymythologies? And why? Do they originate as serious speculations, or as deliberate jokes, or in both ways?

The subject of acronymic etymologies is addressed at several sites on the Web.[6] The topic of acronyms in general receives an amusing popular treatment in a book by Don Hauptman, *Acronymania*.[7]

Notes

1. The acronym tradition is considerably older in some other languages. Old acronyms based on Hebrew sometimes go by the name *notaricon* (or *notarikon*). Do "consonantal" alphabets such as the Semitic ones lend themselves more readily to acronyms? Probably, since any set of letters (i.e., of consonants) in such a system is pronounceable, with routinely interpolated vowel sounds. *Tanach*, the English rendition of the Hebrew word for the "Old Testament," is apparently originally acronymic in Hebrew, based on *Torah + Nebhi'im + Kethubhim* 'Pentateuch plus Prophets plus Hagiographa'

(kabbalists and others, please forgive my casual transcription and disregard for the diacritical marks). The fish as a Christian symbol is said to be from an acronym in Greek (Jesus Christ Son of God Savior, written in Greek "Iesous Christos Theou Yios Soter," giving the acronym *ichthys,* meaning 'fish'); but some claim it's a bacronym. There were early acronyms used as noms de plume in English—such as the famous bacronymic *Cabal* (ca. 1670), and the peculiar *Smectymnuus* (1641), which appears in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*—but apparently this was the limit for acronyms in English until recently . . . or is there a counterexample?

2. The fine word *etymythology* apparently was introduced recently by Laurence Horn of Yale University in discussions under the aegis of the American Dialect Society.

3. Fortunately for me, the most repulsive of the recent etymythologies (those that deal with the slave trade, with lynchings, and with the Black Plague, for example) mostly are not of the bacronymic type, so I can avoid any further discussion of them except to note in passing that they too are generally entirely bogus and without merit.

4. H.L. Mencken, *The American Language: Supplement II,* New York: Knopf, 1948, p. 379.

5. This *chad* as a variant of *chat* appears in the *English Dialect Dictionary,* for example, but consider these excerpts from a large American general dictionary, the *Century Dictionary* (1889): "*chad*[2] (chad), n. [E. dial. var. of *chat*[4], q. v.] 1. A dry twig: same as *chat*[4]. . . . [Prov. Eng. . . . , usually in plural.]"

"*chat*[4] (chat), n. [A particular use of *chat3*, a catkin, or . . . .] 1. A twig; a little stick; a fragment."

This *chad* is an English provincialism, of course, but what jargon would be expected to be more cosmopolitan than that of telegraphy? The plural word *chats* meaning gravel or mine tailings is used in the United States; I believe it is probably essentially the same word originally. The Scots word *chad* meaning *gravel* is likely closely related.

6. One good site is "Wilton's Word and Phrase Origins," *(www.wordorigins.net)* where there are discussions of the bacronyms *gay, golf, cop, cabal,* and *caucus,* for example.

7. Don Hauptman, *Acronymania* New York: Dell, 1993.

SIC! SIC! SIC!

From the Summer 2004 issue of *Art & Antiques:*

"Art mogul Charles Saatchi considers the works consumed in the East London Momart warehouse fire irreplaceable in the history of British art. 'Hell,' 2000, a 28-square-foot installation with hundreds of toy Nazis, by Jake and Dinos Chapman, is one of many pieces that set the art world aflame. Now a glob of burnt plastic, Saatchi reportedly spent $900,000 for the piece."

[Submitted by Julie May, Los Angeles, California, who says "Poor Saatchi! I hope he can be restored."]

Presidential Words

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Perhaps the most useful expression of universal communication ever devised, *OK* is recognizable and pronounceable in almost every language on earth. *OK* is so protean that it can function as five parts of speech—noun: "I gave it my *OK*"; verb: "I'll *OK* it"; adjective: "He's an *OK* guy"; adverb: "She sings *OK*"; and interjection: "*OK,* let's party!"

The explanations for the origin of *OK* have been as imaginative as they have been various. But the late Allen Walker Read proved that *OK* did not derive from *okeh,* an affirmative reply in Choctaw; nor from the name of chief Old Keokuk; nor from a fellow named Orrin Kendall, who manufactured a tasty brand of army biscuit for Union soldiers in the Civil War; nor from the Haitian port Aux Cayes, which produced superior rum; nor from *open key,* a telegraph term; nor from the Greek *olla kalla,* 'all good.'

Rather, as Professor Read pointed out in a series of articles in *American Speech,* 1963–64, the truth is more politically correct than any of these theories. He tracked down the first-known published appearance of *OK* with its current meaning in the Boston *Morning Post* on March 23, 1839: "The 'Chairman of the Committee on Charity Lecture Bells' is one of the deputation, and perhaps if he should return to Boston, via Providence, he of the Journal, and his train-band, would have the 'contribution box,' et ceteras, o.k.—all correct—and cause the corks to fly, like sparks, upward."

Read demonstrated that *OK* started life as an obscure joke and through a twist of fate went to the top of the charts on the American hit parade of words. In the 1830s, in New England, there was a craze for initialisms, in the manner of *FYI, PDQ, aka,* and *TGIF,* so popular today. The fad went so far as to generate letter combinations of intentionally comic misspellings: *KG* for 'know go,' *KY* for 'know yuse,' *NSMJ* for ''nough said 'mong jentlemen,' and *OR* for 'oll rong.' *OK* for 'oll korrect' naturally followed.

Of all those loopy initialisms and facetious misspellings, *OK* alone survived. That's because of a presidential nickname that consolidated the letters in the national memory. Martin Van Buren,

elected our eighth president in 1836, was born in Kinderhook, New York, and, early in his political career, was dubbed "Old Kinderhook." Echoing the "Oll Korrect" initialism, *OK* became the rallying cry of the Old Kinderhook Club, a Democratic organization supporting Van Buren during the 1840 campaign. Thus, the accident of Van Buren's birthplace rescued *OK* from the dustbin of history.

The coinage did Van Buren no good, and he was defeated in his bid for reelection. But the word honoring his name today remains what H. L. Mencken identified as "the most shining and successful Americanism ever invented."

Stuffed bears were popular before Theodore Roosevelt came along, but no one called them *teddy bears,* not until November, 1902, when the president went on a bear hunt in Smedes, Mississippi. Roosevelt was acting as adjudicator for a border dispute between the states of Louisiana and Mississippi. On November 14, during a break in the negotiations, he was invited by Southern friends to go bear hunting. Roosevelt felt that he could consolidate his supporters in the South by appearing among them in the relaxed atmosphere of a hunting party, so he accepted the invitation.

During the hunt, Roosevelt's friends cornered a bear cub, and a guide roped it to a tree for the president to shoot. But Roosevelt declined to shoot the cub, believing such an act to be beneath his dignity as a hunter and as a man: "If I shot that little fellow I couldn't be able to look my boys in the face again."

That Sunday's *Washington Post* carried a cartoon, drawn by Clifford Berryman, of President Theodore Roosevelt. T. R. stood in hunting gear and with rifle in hand with his back turned toward the cowering cub. The caption read, "Drawing the line in Mississippi," referring both to the border dispute and to animal ethics.

Now the story switches to the wilds of Brooklyn and Morris and Rose Michtom (rhymes with *victim*), Russian immigrants who owned a candy store, where they sold handmade stuffed animals. Inspired by Berryman's cartoon, Rose Michtom made a toy bear and displayed it in the shop window. The bear proved enormously popular with the public, and the Michtoms began turning out stuffed cubs labeled *Teddy's Bear,* in honor of our twenty-sixth president. As the demand increased, the family hired extra seamstresses and rented a warehouse. Their opera-

tion eventually became the Ideal Toy Company.

"They claim to have written to T. R. for permission and to have received a response from T. R., saying, 'I don't know what my name may mean to the bear business but you're welcome to use it,'" said John A. Gable, executive director of the Theodore Roosevelt Association. "Alas, the letter was lost."

The bear was a prominent emblem in Roosevelt's successful 1904 election campaign, and teddy's bear was enshrined in dictionaries in 1907. Clifford Berryman could have made a million dollars had he chosen to sell his idea to a toy manufacturer, but he refused, saying, "I have made thousands of children happy; that is enough for me."

OBITER DICTA

VERBATIM readers with email access are probably already receiving several word-a-day emails, including Anu Garg's (*wordsmith.org*), Paul McFedries's (*wordspy.com*), and maybe even a weird word a day from VERBATIM's editor (*http://www.oup-usa.org/mailman/listinfo/us-weirdand wonderful-l).*

However, if you still have room in your in-box, Grant Barrett, the project editor for the *Historical Dictionary of American Slang,* has started a new site for the words he comes across in his off-hours, "Double-Tongued Word Wrester," at *doubletongued.org,* where you can sign up for another daily email.

Recent emails have included the words *Yuma* 'In Cuba, a nickname for the United States,' *smitty* 'a type of automobile muffler known for its (powerful or resonant) sound,' *noodle* 'to hunt bare-handed in water for fish or turtles,' *sousveillance* 'the watching of the watchers by the watched; countersurveillance by people not in positions of power or authority,' *zhing-zhong* 'merchandise made in Asia; cheaply made, inexpensive, or substandard goods,' and *murderabilia* 'collectibles from, by, or about murders, murderers, or violent crimes. Also *murderbilia.*' The emails provide links to the site, where full citations are given. Well worth adding to your daily to-read list.

—*Erin McKean*

The Ethnocentricity of Email

Simon Darragh
Greece

HELO!!!

SOU EYXOMAI PERASTIKA GIA OTI EPATHES! H DIEYTHINSH MOU EINAI . . . . PERIMENO! BYE-BYE

That, with the omission of a few personal details, is the text of an email I received recently. Here's another from the same person:

TI KANEIS RE SIMON? SYGNOMY POU ARGEISA NA SOU APANTHSO ALA DEN ELENXO TA E-MAIL VERY OFTEN. HOW ARE YOU AND WHERE ARE YOU NOW? I'M IN LIVERPOOL AND I'M STUDDING SAN TRELH!!!!!!!!! DISTIXOS DEN THA MPORESO NA ERTHO GIA THN DOULIA EXO TOSO POLY DIABASMA GIA TIS EXETASEIS META TA XRISTOUGENA KAI PREPEI NA DOULEPSO FULL TIME STO ESTIATORIO!! BUT THANK YOU ANYWAY!!!

PERIMENO NEA SOU SOON O.K? MANY KISSES . . . .

And here, leaving out the name of the addressee, is one of my replies:

Pos paei, . . . mou; opos uposxethika, sou exo steilei ena gramma me to saliggari taxudromeio. Agapi kai filia, Saïmon.

So what's the language? It seems to contain a few English words, such as *Helo* (sic) and *Bye-bye,* or perhaps the writer is showing off her English. Churchgoing readers may recognize *Agapi* but expect an *e* rather than an *i*. My name is Simon; why the odd spelling *Saïmon*?

Well it's Greek, but not as we know it. And I'd better say at once that by "Greek" I mean "the language spoken by Greeks." It's necessary to state what seems obvious because many people who ought to know better think "Greek" means "a dead language that used to be taught in some Northern European schools, and which bears a structural, but almost no phonetic, similarity to a language which was spoken two thousand years ago by a minority of the inhabitants of what is now called Greece." At about the time of these two e-mails I read in the *Guardian* that something or other was "As outmoded as the Greek

vocative case." The writer evidently neither knew nor cared that the vocative case was in regular daily use throughout Greece, not to mention Cyprus, Sydney, and Camden Town. No wonder Greeks are so touchy.

But surely Greek is written with another alphabet? Yes, but you can't conveniently tap out emails in other alphabets. Even if you always send your message as an attachment, you can't be sure that the recipient will have a Greek font in his computer, or even that the same keystrokes on one computer will give the same letters on another. Until everyone uses Apple Macs as God intended, sending Greek from one computer to another will continue to produce Double Dutch. Because of these difficulties, I've carefully avoided using any Greek letters at all in this article. What I really needed for my title was a word like *Alphabetocentricity.*

To overcome the problem, Greek users of email have developed a phonetic transliteration into the roman alphabet, resembling that used in phrase books for English-speaking tourists, whose writers are convinced, probably rightly, that English speakers would rather learn wildly incorrect pronunciations than another alphabet. The two alphabets are, after all, very similar, especially in the upper case; many Greeks, especially those less literary, like to keep the caps lock key firmly depressed. The trouble is, very often the letters only look the same; they don't sound the same. Beta, gamma, and delta, for instance, are pronounced not like our *B, G,* and *D,* but like, respectively, our *V,* something like our *Y* but with a slight closing of the throat, and like our voiced *TH*. Indeed, the pronunciation as *B, G,* and *D* is a staple of Greek cartoonists wanting to represent the barbaric *(varvariko)* speech of foreigners. Since no single letters represent these sounds in Greek, they have to use the diphthongs mu pi, gamma kappa, and ni tau.

How does all this work for a Greek writing an email? Vaguely, and not very well. Take the word DIEYTHINSH from the first example. It's a transliteration of the Greek word for 'address,' and it's pronounced 'The eff sin thi,' the first *th* being voiced and the second not. Thus the *D* represents a Greek delta, the *EY* the Greek vowel digraph epsilon upsilon (which is pronounced, in this case, 'eff'), the *TH* represents a Greek theta, and the final *H* represents a Greek ita, one of Greek's many *i* sounds. In this last

case *H* is used only because it happens to look like an upper case ita.

What about the odd spelling of my name? Well, Greek has no single letter that can represent the *i* in *Simon* pronounced the English way. It must use the alpha sound followed by the iota sound. But the alpha iota vowel digraph is pronounced like the *a* in *end,* so a diaeresis is needed over the *i.* So when I'm writing an email to a Greek, but perforce using the English alphabet, I spell my name *Saïmon,* otherwise I tend to get called *See-mon.*

What about those *X's* in obviously unpronouncable places? Well they're not *X's,* they're chis. The Greek letter chi, pronounced rather like a German or Scots *ch,* happens to look, especially in upper case, just like an English *X.* Greek does have a letter (Anglophones call it *xi*) equivalent in sound to our *X,* but it doesn't look like any English letter. This is a source of confusion to most English users of Greek and vice versa, a confusion further confounded by the rise of Greek emailese.

And the accents, or rather stress marks, that are such a feature of written Greek? Well, we just have to manage without them. Indeed, there's a move to eliminate them from Modern Greek, but I'm glad to say it's being resisted. One should always resist linguistic change: not because it's always a bad thing, still less because the resistance has a hope in hell of succeeding, but simply because by resisting it one gets people to think about language.

Most of the time, Greeks, translators from Greek, English people with Greek friends, and so on, use Greek emailese without even thinking about it, and most of the time it works, more or less. Greek emailese is, I'm sure, going to cause unexpected changes in the Greek language, especially the written language. Like most linguistic change—think of non-adverbial uses of *hopefully,* or the use of "beg the question" to mean invite, rather than evade, the question—these changes will have been brought about by people who would claim no special interest or skill in language; they just want to talk to one another.

Oh, I nearly forgot; the translations:

Helo!! I wish you a quick recovery from what you had! My address is . . . . I'm waiting! Bye-bye. How are you Simon? I'm sorry for the delay in replying but I don't check my email very often. How are you and where are you now? I'm in Liverpool and studying like mad!!! Unfortunately I won't be able to come for the job; I have so much reading for the exams after Christmas and I have to work full-time in the restaurant!! But thank you anyway!!! I'm expecting your news soon, O.K? Many kisses, ...

How's it going, my . . . ? As I promised, I've sent you a letter by snail mail. Love and kisses, Simon.

EPISTOLA

I've really enjoyed your articles on Ersatz languages. You haven't mentioned ARPtalk yet. It's formed by adding ARP before each vowel. I learned it in the early 1940s. My maiden name was Kebe, which turns into KARPEBARPE.

I am really puzzled over the increasing use of *legendary* when *famous* or *well-known* is meant. It's used on TV for athletes, singers, and even for a recipe!! Wouldn't *famous, immortal,* or *illustrious* be more appropriate? When I hear *legendary,* I think of imaginary, mythical, or fabulous.

I am amused by a product I heard about on TV. It is for a skin lotion, and it's called SARNA. I'm a Spanish-English interpreter/translator, and *sarna* in Spanish means 'mange, itch, scabies.'

Mary Louise Bean
Guilford, Connecticut

SIC! SIC! SIC!

Headline from *The Journal News* (Westchester County, New York) July 25, 2004:

Kerry fills war chest with broad range of donors

[Submitted by Stephen E. Hirschberg, M.D., of Elmsford, New York, who remarks "I hope they have proper ventilation in there."]

I Didn't Catch Your Name

Robert M. Rennick
Prestonburg, Kentucky

Most of us feel fairly confident when faced with most of the names we come across in our language. We're pretty sure we know how they're pronounced, and, for the most part, they easily trip off our tongues and no one complains. For we follow the conventional rules of American pronunciation that names are pronounced the way they're spelled and that a particular name will be pronounced the same way regardless of who's bearing it.

But that's not always the case. There are times when we find ourselves confounded by a name that seems to defy the rules. Especially a name in another language. How many American students, short of hearing the name pronounced by their teachers, can handle *Goethe*? Not to mention *Van Gogh*? Or *Queuille*? I once had to deal with the Irish name *Beauchamp Urquhart Colclough* and was ready to give it up when I read in *Notes and Queries* that it was pronounced *Beecham Urcurt Cokely*.[1] And what if the name is nothing but consonants? Elsdon Smith once told us of the two Illinois men, *Casimir F. Przypyszny* and *Michael Hrynyszyn,* but never gave us a clue how to pronounce their names.[2]

In dealing with names of any kind I've come to the conclusion that the only sensible rules about pronunciation are that there are no across-the-board standards, that each name should be examined on its own, and that the only acceptable pronunciation of someone's name is simply the way he pronounces it himself, regardless of how it's spelled or how the spelling has been changed, by himself or others, inadvertently or otherwise, over the years. If I've learned one thing about pronunciation, it's that the spelling of a name is not always a reliable indication of how it's pronounced. Historians have told me that until the twentieth century, the spelling of names, including one's own, wasn't considered very important, and rules of orthography, if they were known at all, were seldom consistently followed.

Yet, at the same time, people have been very particular about how their own names are pronounced, becoming very indignant, even belligerent, when they hear them mispronounced. Since one's name is often his proudest possession, the worst insult to him is to mispronounce it. Maybe the second worst is to ask him about it.

Rex Lardner once told how the deliberate mispronunciation of a name helped win a football game. Army, favored over Notre Dame in 1923, had a key player named George Smyth, who insisted on pronouncing his name to rhyme with *wife* and wouldn't tolerate any other sounding of it. Accordingly, the Notre Dame coach instructed his linemen to call him *Smith* (rhymed with *miff*) at every opportunity. "Hey, Smith, are you going to run with the ball?" Or "Don't you think it's time to punt now, Mr. Smith?" Smyth got so mad that he got careless and made some wild passes and other costly errors. Thus Notre Dame pulled off the upset of the year, defeating Army by 13 to 0.[3]

The writer Percy MacKaye, in a letter to pioneer name fancier Alfred H. Holt, recalled how he once responded to a lady who had asked the pronunciation of his name:

Dear Madam: I
Am named MacKaye.
While one man's lackey
Calls me Macky,
Another's may
Call me McKay,
But they—they lie.
My name's MacKaye.[4]

Holt also recalled a little jingle in the *Chicago Tribune* about the various ways people mispronounced the name of another American author, James Branch Cabell, who pronounced his name to rhyme with *gabble:*

I do not like you, J. B. Cabell,
I'm bored by your recondite gabble.
Your risque wit, so frankly Gallic,
Suggests an erudite smart Aleck.
And so in public, James Cabell,
I give your stories merry hell—
Mainly because your equivoques
Seem to annoy my women folks!
They say there's something vaguely vile
Under your mocking subtle style.
So privately, when I am able,
I love to read your stuff, dear Cabell.[5]

Virginians still recall the tale of the Enroughty family, whose name has long been pronounced *Darby.* When the Enroughtys arrived in America

they found their name was quite a mouthful for their new neighbors. But the neighbors soon solved their difficulty by calling the family after its progenitor, Darby Enroughty. After a while people forgot the original surname and assumed it was actually Darby, and succeeding generations were called this too. Yet, the first Darby Enroughty and his descendants clung tenaciously to *Enroughty* in all written accounts.[6]

Sometimes the bearer of a simple name like Turner will see fit to make something of it that becomes an unwanted burden on those who see it written down. One Mr. Turner insisted on signing his name *Phtholognyrrh,* while continuing to pronounce it Turner. When asked to explain the strange spelling he said: "Look, the *phth* is like *phthisic,* which is pronounced *t; olo* is like *colonel,* which is pronounced *ur; gn* as in *gnat* is pronounced *n;* and *yrrh,* as in *myrrh,* is pronounced *er.* So you have *Turner.* Nothing could be simpler."[7]

People tend to hear what they think they hear, and often they don't believe it. A young man brought his fiancee around to meet his elderly grandfather, who was quite deaf. "Hey, Gramps, I'd like you to meet my new girl, Gisella Birdwhistell Foushee." "I'm sorry," said the old man, "I didn't quite get her name. Will you repeat it?" "Sure, Gramps, this is Gisella Birdwhistell Foushee." "I'm really sorry," said the old man, "I'm getting along in years and my hearing has gotten so bad. Will you tell me her name again?" "Gisella Birdwhistell Foushee," the boy fairly shouted. "It's no use," said Gramps, "My hearing must really be getting worse. It sounded like you said *Gisella Birdwhistell Foushee.*"

A Philadelphia rabbi named Elmalah pronounced his name so that it sounded something like *O'Malley* and often found this of help in dealing with people who esteemed the Irish. Once, on his return from a trip abroad, he was stopped by an Irish-American customs official who informed him that all his luggage would have to be inspected, a time-consuming procedure that travelers seek to avoid. Then he was asked his name. "O'Malley." "Well," said the official, "Why didn't you say so? Be on your way."[8]

Some good old "English" names, usually of Gaelic origin, have posed difficulties for many Americans traveling to the British Isles. How do you handle a name like *Clough?* Do you pronounce it *Cloo? Cluff? Clawf? Claw? Clow? Clowf?* And what of *Home*? Unless you'd kept up with BBC's

broadcasts of world affairs, would you have known that British Prime Minister Sir Alex Douglas-Home pronounced his name *Hume,* following an old family tradition? Or that *St. Leger* is pronounced *Sillinger?* Or *Colquhoun* is pronounced *Calhoun?* Or *Harwick* is sometimes pronounced *Hoik?* Or *Wriothesley* is pronounced *Risley?*

And what do you do with the name of the famous English diarist Samuel *Pepys?* Is it *Peppis? Peeps? Pepps? Pipps?* Most of Samuel's descendants have insisted on pronouncing it *Peppis* and not *Peeps,* as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* would have us believe. But Samuel, himself, is said to have preferred *Peeps* and at least one branch of his family, the Encyclopedia's principal informants, continues to pronounce it that way. But *Pipps* and *Pepps* have never been taken seriously.[9]

Several stories are told of parents who, looking through books of names for nice names for their children, find some that are attractive in print but haven't the foggiest idea how they're pronounced. I once interviewed a girl whose name sounded like *Feemolly.* I said that's an odd name and asked her how it was spelled. F-E-M-A-L-E. That's how it was on her birth certificate. A Georgia girl named *Whyvonnya* turned out to be Yvonne.[10] *Gooey* was Guy, and an oft-told tale goes like this: A boy comes to a newly integrated school in Georgia on the first day of classes and tells his teacher his name is *Gooey.* Incredulous, the teacher asks him again. Still *Gooey.* Later, his mother confirms it. "That's surely his name." Said she'd seen it in a book and thought it was a pretty name. Showed the teacher the book and there it was—*Guy.*[11] The same story is told in the Ozarks but with a slight variation. The teacher has the name on a printed form. Takes attendance. Calls out the name Guy. No answer. Teacher knows the boy is in the classroom and wonders why he didn't answer when his name was called. Confronts the child later to learn that the boy simply didn't recognize *Guy.*[12] The same story was told by a recent arrival from Scotland, who said she'd heard it from a Glasgow school teacher.[13]

It goes without saying that unfamiliar accents can make it hard to decipher names. Not to mention the cockney tendency to add or detract *H*'s at the beginning of a name. One East End mother proudly introduced her children to a visitor. "Ere's *Enry* and *Ubert*, and *Arold* and *Orace*, and *Arry* and *Ilda* and

Azel. All their names begin with a haitch except for the last one. We named 'im *Harnold.*"

Then there's the Scandinavian tendency to pronounce *J* as *Y,* and the story of the banker who was quite impressed with his new teller, who seemed to know exactly what he was doing as he counted a large number of bills from his teller cage. To become better acquainted the banker asked him where he had gotten his training. "Yale." Now he was really impressed. "And what's your name?" "Yensen."

Mother takes her little girl to school on the first day. "And what is your name?" the teacher asks the girl. "Shelly," says the child. "That's a very pretty name. Were you named for the poet?"

The child shrugs. The teacher asks the same question of the mother, who is nonplussed. "Is Shelly Temple a poet?"[14]

New York's Brooklyners are supposed to pronounce anything spelled *oy* as if it were *en* and anything spelled *en* as if it were *oy.* Even if that's not so, it's generated several stories like the one told of an old Dodger broadcaster who noted an injury to pitcher Waite Hoyt: "Oh, my God, Hurt's hoit!"[15]

There are some mnemonic devices to assist people who can't deal with awkward pronunciations. Over the years many Acadians have crossed the Sabine River separating Louisiana from Texas and settled in the largely English-speaking section east of Beaumont. Among them was a family of Heberts whose name in Louisiana is characteristically pronounced like "A bear." In Texas it becomes Anglicized to *Herbert.* But these Heberts preferred to retain the French pronunciation of their name and drew a picture of a large grizzly bear on the side of their mailbox, under which was painted their name Hebert.[16]

But sometimes the use of mnemonic devices doesn't work. According to Norman Mockridge, the Notre Dame football coach Ara Parseghian was to be introduced at a dinner whose host made it clear he couldn't pronounce the man's name. "Why don't you try it this way?" said the coach. "Think of *par* as in golf, *seag* as in Seagram's, and *yen* as in Japanese money. *Par-seag-yen.* Got it?" The host thought he had, until it came time to introduce his guest: "I can't pronounce this guy's name, but it sounds like a drunk Japanese golfer."[17]

Speaking of Japanese, a number of Americans have complained that many Polish names, as prop-

erly pronounced in the old country, often sound to Americans like Japanese names. And on the telephone, at least, some Polish name bearers have been thought to be Japanese, with predictable consequences. A Mr. Pomykala, whose name is pronounced *pomy-kah-wah,* has to spend much of his time turning down invitations from civic and commercial clubs in his city that keep asking him to talk about Japanese business practices.

San Diego–area broadcasters and other media people, back in the mid 1980s, were delighted when catcher Doug Gwosdz was sent back to the minors. It would give them more time to learn to pronounce his name *goosh.* But American broadcasters in the late 1940s had to contend with French Premier Henri Queuille, whose name was pronounced *cuyl.*

More often, though, we North Americans will take difficult foreign names in stride, not worrying too much about how they should sound and pronouncing them in ways most sensible and convenient for us. So a California family hired a cement worker named Krč (which is Czech for 'dwarf') and called him Kur/zee.[18] Jacques families in English-speaking Ontario have had to accept being called *Jakes.*[19] Yet such mispronunciations are often expected by some of the name bearers and, at least among second generationers, even preferred. Louis Adamic reported on a Cicero, Illinois, high school teacher of Czech parentage who found that many of his students resented his accurate pronunciations of their names, so used were they to the standard mispronunciations.[20]

Sometimes people feel they can't manage the name at all and don't even want to try. They go one step beyond Parseghian's host and don't even show up for his dinner. A newcomer to town is caught double parking on Chicago's Dearborn Avenue, a serious offense. He's spotted by a cop who's determined to bring him in and have him booked for disorderly conduct. Asks the man's name. *Przybylski.* "Well," says the cop, "don't let me catch you doing it again." Radio broadcasters are not fond of hearing stories of their brethren who have to report the death of some important eastern European dignitary and end up announcing that his name is being withheld pending notification of his next of kin.

Notes
1. *Notes and Queries,* 3rd ser. V. 7, Apr. 22, 1865, p. 322.
2. Elsdon C. Smith, *Treasury of Name Lore,* New York: Harpers, 1967, p. 183.

3. "What Your Name Means to You," *Pageant,* v. 17, July 1961, pp. 125-29.

4. Alfred H. Holt, *Wild Names I Have Met,* Williamstown, Pennsylvania, 1933, p. 20.

5. Ibid., p. 8.

6. William Shepard Walsh, "Curiosities of Names," in his *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities,* Philadelphia, 1892, p. 784.

7. *Reader's Digest,* Jan. 1941, p. 42.

8. *National Jewish Post,* Mar. 6, 1953.

9. AP release, Sept. 26, 1961.

10. Violet Moore, Montezuma, Georgia, personal communication, Sept. 29, 1969.

11. Larry Ratner, Nashville, Tennessee. personal communication, Dec. 27, 1966.

12. Martha Lou Stohlman, *Saturday Review,* Jan. 23, 1971.

13. May Nicolaisen, Binghamton, New York, personal communication, Mar. 31, 1972.

14. Norton Mockridge's syndicated column, Oct. 26, 1966.

15. *New York Times* Sept 9, 1984, IV p. 26.

16. Charles T. Butler, Beaumont, Texas, personal communication, Dec. 2, 1968.

17. Norton Mockridge's syndicated column, Feb. 1, 1967.

18. Sedoris Daniels, San Jose, California, personal communication, Oct. 23, 1971.

19. W.B. George, Delhi, Ontario, personal communication, June 3, 1969.

20. Louis Adamic, *What's Your Name?* New York: Harpers, 1942, p. 105.

SIC! SIC! SIC!

"Independents and anarchists coordinated their activities."

[From NPR around 8:20 AM (EDT) September 1, 2004, during a discussion of protesters' doings at the Republican National Convention. Submitted by Ed Rosenberg, who adds, "I guess they just don't make anarchists the way they used to."]

Lipograms
The Presence of Absence

Susan Elkin
Sittingbourne, Kent

"She woke up early, drank a cup of strong unsugared coffee, then sat down at her word processor. She knew more or less what she wanted to do, and that was to create a story that possessed a granddaughter, a Boston fern, a golden apple and a small blue cradle . . ."

Thus, in characteristically unforced prose, begins "Absence," a story in the *Dressing up for the Carnival* collection (2000) by the sadly missed Carol Shields, who died last year.

Shields's elegantly witty, eleven-hundred-word story is about a woman trying to be creative on a keyboard on which one of the letters is broken "and, to make matters worse, a vowel, the very letter that attaches to the hungry self." The story is, of course a lipogram. It unravels itself neatly and effortlessly without ever using the letter *i*. Fun to do, probably, but very far from easy. Try it.

Lipograms go back a long way. The Greek poet Lasus (born in Achaia 538 BC) wrote an ode to the centaurs and a hymn to Ceres without recourse to the letter *s*. A thousand years later, in the fifth century AD, Tryphiodorus amused himself by writing twenty-four books, each one of which excluded a different letter of the alphabet. Then there was Fulgentius, who wrote a book with twenty-three chapters, each of which also eschewed a different letter of the alphabet. Pindar had a go at it too. One of his odes has no *s*.

It is tempting to assume that the word *lipogram* is an etymological relation of *liposuction*. They both relate to 'taking out,' after all. Phony philology! Actually, *lipogram* derives from Greek *leipein* 'to omit' and *grammatos,* 'a letter.' *Liposuction* comes from the Greek word *lipos,* 'fat.'

It wasn't just those antique Greek and Roman chaps who relished these self-imposed limitations on writing. Peter Riga, a canon at Notre Dame in Rheims who died around 1209, clearly didn't have enough to do. He summarised the old and new testaments in Latin verse, which he called Aurora. In the first chapter he does without *a.* In the second he rejects *b,* and so on. As the twentieth-century histo-

rian F. J. E. Raby commented: "Misplaced ingenuity could go no further."

Meanwhile, in Spain, Lope de Vega produced a quintet of stories, each one of which omitted one of the vowels, and an anonymous seventeenth-century novel, *Estebanillo Gonzalez,* ends with a jolly little *o*-less romance. Still in Spain, Don Fernando Jacinto de Zurita y Haro wrote a 170 page discourse without the letter *a.* "Laus Deo" (praise God!) he wrote, self-indulgently, at the end. One sympathises.

In 1816, *Piece sans A,* by Ronden, was staged at Théatre de Variétés, which shows that lipography has, at times, penetrated various literary forms—short fiction, poetry, novels and drama. There was for example, *Gadsby,* a 50,000-word novel in English by Ernest Vincent Wright, published in 1939. (The full text of this novel is available online at *http://gadsby.hypermart.net/index.htm.)* It rejected the letter *e,* as did the French novel *La Disparition,* by Georges Perec, thirty years later. So the eccentric ingenuity of letter exclusion is certainly not the province of just one language. The children's rhyme "Mary had a little lamb" was lipographically rewritten several times by A. Ross Eckler. This is his *s*-free version:

Mary had a little lamb
With fleece a pale white hue
And everywhere that Mary went
The lamb kept her in view
To academe he went with her,
Illegal and quite rare;
It made the children laugh and play
To view a lamb in there.

If you think that's tricky, then consider the univocalic. It's a further refinement of the lipogram. It uses only one vowel, as in "Persevere, ye perfect men/Ever keep the precepts ten" (W. T. Dobson, *Literary Frivolities,* 1880). It rejects the other four vowels, which make it a lipogram four times over, as it were.

C. C. Bombaugh wrote a series of univocalic poems in 1890. Clever they may be, great poetry they are not. "Incontrovertible Facts" includes the lines: *No cool monsoons blow soft on Oxford dons Orthodox, jog trot, book-worm Solomons . . .* and ends: *Nor dog nor snowdrop or on coltsfoot rolls, Nor common frogs concoct long protocols. . . .* which all sounds as though it ought to mean something.

My favourite univocalic is by George Marvill, who won a competition in the *New Statesman* in

Britain in 1967. His owlish discourse is not only univocalic, it's also a palindrome, so start from whichever end you like:

"Too hot to hoot!"
"Too hot to woo!"
"Too wot?"
"Too hot to hoot!"
"To woo?"
"Too wot?"
"Too hoot! Too hot to hoot!"

Or go one step further. Consider a lipogram combined with a pangram (a text, preferably a single sentence, that includes every letter of the alphabet in the minimum space such as "Xylophone wizard begets quick jive form" or "How quickly daft jumping zebras vex") This verse is a lipogram because it has no *e,* but a pangram because it includes every other letter:

A jovial swain should not complain
of any buxom fair
Who mocks his pain and thinks it gain
To quiz his awkward air.

Not everyone liked, or likes, this sort of jokey linguistic gymnastics, though. Humourless Thomas de Quincy, perhaps because he couldn't do it himself, was funambulatorily dismissive of it in *Confessions of an Opium-Eater* (1856):

"Some of us laughed at such a self-limitation as a wild bravado, recalling that rope dancing trick of some verse-writers who, through each several stanza in its turn, had gloried in dispensing with some one separate consonant, some vowel, or some diphthong, and thus achieving a triumph such as crowns with laurel that pedestrian athlete who wins a race by hopping on one leg or wins it under the inhuman condition of confining both legs within a sack."

Poor Tom. He clearly couldn't recognise witty expertise when he saw it.

All of which bring us back to just how great a writer Carol Shields was. Nothing feels contrived in "Absence." It may be an artificial constraint—almost a conceit—but, at a first reading, how many of us would actually have noticed the missing *i* in "Her head-bone ached; her arm-bones froze; she wanted only to make, as she had done before, sentences that melted at the centre and branched at the ends, that threatened to grow unruly and run away, but that clause for clause adhered to one another as though stuck down by velcro tabs"? Delicious stuff.

The Skinny on the Dictionary of One-Letter Words

Craig Conley
Chapel Hill, North Carolina

Ever since I wrote the very first edition of *The Dictionary of One-Letter Words*, I haven't had to pay for a single drink. But I didn't set out to create the ultimate secret weapon for winning bar bets. I mean, a dictionary is supposed to be scholarly, right? Then again, a dictionary like mine obviously doesn't belong sitting on a dusty reference shelf next to a highbrow encyclopedia. Something this weird was bound to grow wings of its own, and it has now found itself at the center of an Internet phenomenon, the recipient of a tribute song in Sweden, the subject of radio programs, and even a prop in stand-up comedy routines. Why? *Y* indeed!

Upon being told about my dictionary, the average person will laugh in disbelief, then—certain that I must be joking—ask just how many one-letter words there could possibly be. Nine out of ten people will guess that there are just two: the pronoun *I* and the article *a*. The occasional smarty-pants will grant that *O* might make a third, as in "O Romeo!" It's when I retort that there are 700 one-letter words that wagers are made—and won.

The fact of the matter is that a word is any letter or group of letters that have meaning and are used as a unit of language. So even though there are only 26 letters in the English alphabet, my research shows that they stand for 700 distinct units of meaning.

One-letter words are the building blocks of communication. I like to joke that learning them is easy and spelling them is even easier. But I definitely don't sell them short.

The most important English words are *small* ones. And those small words—which occur most often in our speech, reading, and writing—are relatively few in number. Just ten words account for twenty-five percent of all the words we use, and they all have only one syllable. Fifty words account for fifty percent of all the words in our speech, and they, too, all have only one syllable.

Two of the top six words we use in speech and writing have only one letter: *a* and *I*. *A* is the third most frequently occurring word in the English lan-guage. *I* is the sixth most frequently occurring. And there are other important one-letter words, that comprise the majority of my dictionary.

One of my favorites has to be *X,* which boasts nearly 60 definitions of its own. *X* marks the spot on a pirate's map where treasure is buried. It's a hobo symbol meaning handouts are available. *X* tells you where to sign your name on a contract, and it's also an illiterate person's signature. *X* indicates a choice on a voting ballot, and a cross stitch of thread. Mysterious people may be named *Madame X,* and the archetype of a mad scientist is *Dr. X. X* is an incorrect answer on a test, and it's a rating for an adult movie. *X* is a power of magnification, an axis on a graph, and a female chromosome. It is a multiplication operator, a letter of the alphabet, and an arbitrary point in time. *X* is a kiss at the end of a love letter.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly when I first got the idea to write a dictionary of one-letter words. I remember once hearing about a bizarre Japanese crime novel from 1929, *The Devil's Apprentice,* by Hamao Shiro, and how the entire work consisted of a single letter. The single letter was obviously a written correspondence, but I initially envisioned a single letter of the alphabet. And I marveled at how bizarre indeed it would be to write a detective story that all boiled down to a solitary letter of the alphabet! I imagined some sort of gritty retelling of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel *The Scarlet Letter,* where a bloody letter *A* serves as the only scrap of evidence to unravel a seedy tale of adultery, heartbreak, and murder.

I also remember how the poet Karen Drayne once wrote about an imaginary country where the language was so simple they had only one letter in the alphabet, and it worked because "context is everything." That got me thinking about how a single letter of the alphabet can represent all sorts of distinct meanings, depending on the context.

I wrote the very first entry for my dictionary in a fit of procrastination. I was in graduate school, spending many hours a day in the library, purportedly working on my thesis. All those enormous unabridged dictionaries on the shelves intrigued me, and on a whim I started looking up the entries for the 26 letters of the alphabet. I jotted down all sorts of fascinating tidbits, and those notes became the bare bones for my dictionary of one-letter words. But I wasn't content to end it there. I knew that

there must be even more meanings, and I went on a long quest to discover them, scouring novels, plays, newspaper articles, magazine features, movie scripts, and writings on the Internet.

I wasn't satisfied with collecting mere definitions, however. I wanted to prove the legitimacy of those definitions with examples from literature. For example, one definition of *T* is "perfectly," and I found a simple quotation from the eighteenth-century novel *Tristram Shandy* to accompany it: "We could manage this matter to a T." For a rather boring definition of *W,* "someone designated W," I found a line by comedian Woody Allen: "Should I marry W? Not if she won't tell me the other letters in her name!"

The occasional idiosyncratic usage of a one-letter word didn't bother me, because I knew that people were discovering new concepts every day. Shakespeare, for example, coined more than fifteen hundred new words that were adopted into the popular culture. If people were using one-letter words in new ways, I wanted to be there to document them.

Once I had a modest little booklet put together in 1991, I contacted a New York literary agent. She was delighted by my dictionary but eventually decided not to take it on, believing there wasn't a big enough market. I felt discouraged from pursuing other agents, but not from continuing to expand the dictionary in my spare time.

About four years ago, I finally put a free version of the book online at *blueray.com,* as a way of sharing my research with whatever audience I could find. I dedicated the web version of my dictionary to the White Queen character from *Through the Looking Glass.* She famously told Alice, "I'll tell you a secret—I can read words of one letter! Isn't that grand?" It turned out that the White Queen and I weren't the only ones who were finding one-letter words to be grand.

All on its own, the online version of my dictionary was creating a firestorm of interest. In a matter of weeks, nearly 1,200 other web sites were linking to my site. Ninety-three of those sites are university, high school, and community libraries that recommend my dictionary on their reference links pages.

Bloggers were reviewing my work as well, giving it some funny praise. Doug MacClure called it "the most perverse yet serious reference manual on the web." Edward Pelegrino called it "interesting and possibly useful." (I like his use of the word *possibly.* It's so full of possibilities!) The Martinova blog dubbed it "Fun for bored lit-geeks." I got the biggest kicks when I found out the likes of professional wordsmith Richard Lederer and the *Encyclopedia Britannica* Online were linking to my site. All this web linkage reassured me that while my research may be quirky, it isn't necessarily superfluous.

Before I knew it, CNET Radio was emailing me to do a spot on a morning program. I was initially terrified, but I made it through an interview with talk show host Alex Bennett in his "Weird Web Wednesday" segment.

Unbeknown to me at the time, a musician in Sweden was recording a tribute to my dictionary entitled, you guessed it, "The Dictionary of One-Letter Words." Artist Kristofer Ström, whose band is called Ljudbilden & Piloten, composed his ambient-rock-style tribute using guitar, bass, zither, trumpet, strings, drums, human voice, and field recordings. Released by the Barcelona label Nosordo Records in 2003, the track is still receiving radio play.

As I read for pleasure, now and then I continue to find new examples of usage to quote in my dictionary. So the project is always growing and evolving. In addition to the free online version at *blueray.com,* a print edition is available at *CafePress.com.*

I've lately branched out to write two smaller companion dictionaries: all-consonant words and all-vowel words. These have been of particular interest to Scrabble players, especially since I seek to document my definitions with literary citations. However, competitive Scrabble players have to be sticklers when it comes to rules, and I don't care to get in the middle of any controversy. I just do this stuff for fun.

To the best of my knowledge, my dictionary of one-letter words is the first known such volume since the sixteenth century, when a Buddhist lexicographer named Saddhammakitti enumerated Pali words of one letter in a work entitled *Ekakkharakosa.* It may have taken three hundred years to bridge the gap, but I like to think that Saddhammakitti's tradition lives on in my own dictionary of one-letter words.

[Craig Conley left academia to be an author, editor, web content provider, and music producer. He lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. His web site is www.blueray.com.*]*

Holy Crapola!

Mark Peters
Buffalo, New York

Though there are usually many varieties of crap cluttering my brain, I started thinking about *crap* as a word only after visiting my old friend Darrell and his family. Darrell observed, with some displeasure, that *crap* had become a common word in the vocabulary of his seven-year-old son and five-year-old daughter.

Since I have no children of my own, I shared none of Darrell's low-grade horror, but I did see plenty of high-quality humor in his *crap*-slinging tykes. I also realized that *crap* is a delightful word that I had taken for granted too long. *Crap*, with its short, flat sound, is polite enough for television, too vulgar for many conversations, and just right for many more situations. Like *boobs* and *ass*, *crap* is mildly inappropriate and intensely childish, a combination that, much to the chagrin of my friend, bodes very well for the future of *crap* and merits a brief look at its numerous uses and humorous variations.

According to the *New Oxford American Dictionary,* the primary meaning of *crap* is "something that is of extremely poor quality." This meaning is easy to recognize and well demonstrated by a conversation from the movie *Ed Wood*:

George Weiss: *I don't make major motion pictures. I make crap.*
Ed Wood, Jr.: *Yes, but if you take that crap and put a star in it, then you've got something.*
George Weiss: *Yeah, crap with a star.*

Given the high complaint-quotient of nearly any conversation, it's not hard to understand the popularity of *crap.* This ubiquitous usage is also present in a headline of humor magazine *The Onion* ("High-definition Television Promises Sharper Crap") and a catchphrase made popular in a *Saturday Night Live* skit ("If it's not Scottish, it's crap"). Wherever we find junk, garbage, rubbish, nonsense, or bunk, you can be sure we have found *crap,* and there seems to be no end to it.

The first meaning of *crap* is nearly inseparable from the second: 'excrement' or 'an act of defecation.' The exact origin of *crap* is not absolutely known, but the frequently cited English plumber

Thomas Crapper—and the toilets that carried his name—certainly served at least to reinforce this meaning. Since excrement is the body's garbage, it's no surprise that these meanings often blur, making it hard to decide whether a crappy item is more garbage-like or excrement-like.

Both these related meanings are shared by *crap's* seedier, nastier, and generally more uncouth sibling *shit*, and some of *crap's* inappropriate flavor can be traced to its close link to *shit*. In fact, *crap* and *shit* are so synonymous that they can be used interchangeably in many expressions, though not always with the same company. (I would think twice before saying *crap* during a job interview, but I would think ten times before saying *shit* in the same circumstance.)

Exclamations such as *Holy shit! Oh shit!* and *Aw shit . . .* are more common, but no less understandable than *Holy crap! Oh crap!* and *Aw crap . . .* Popular dismissive expressions such as "I could give a shit," "I don't give a shit," "You look like shit," "I don't take no shit," "This tastes like shit," and "What a load of shit" can all be translated into a slightly more appropriate tone just by substituting *crap.* Being on the *crap list* or up *crap creek* is just as bad as being on the *shit list* or up *shit creek,* and when sniffing out sincerity or a lack thereof, a *crap detector* works just as well as a *shit detector.*

Though *crap* and *shit* are almost identical in meaning, *crap* does seem to carry a little more of the 'garbage' meaning, while *shit* carries a little more of the 'excrement' meaning. Case in point: With apologies to The Clash and their album *Cut the Crap,* Neil Young has penned the most memorable musical use of the word—his song "Piece of Crap," which features lyrics like:

I tried to plug in it
I tried to turn it on
When I got it home
It was a piece of crap

"Piece of Shit" would clearly have worked as an alternate title for Young's song, but possibly wouldn't be as well suited to this litany of complaints about shoddy purchases. Young didn't let appropriateness get in the way of dropping the F-bomb repeatedly in his 1997 song "Fuckin' Up," so I think he let meaning rather than manners guide him in using *crap* for this song.

Like *shit, crap* can also by modified endlessly to distinguish different stripes and types of crap. Politically minded namecallers speak of "feminist crap," "multiculturalism crap," "right-wing Republican crap," "imperialist crap," and even "Virgin Mary on a taco crap." On the last episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer,* Buffy Summers expresses frustration with two undead ex-boyfriends at once by saying to Spike, "Good, good! I haven't had enough jealous vampire crap for one night." If *Buffy* aired on HBO, she might have complained of "jealous vampire shit," though not necessarily; on the profanity-laden *Sopranos,* Carmella Soprano once implored her mother-in-law to drop the "poor-mother-nobody-loves-me-victim-crap."

Though there's not much difference between a *shithead* and a *craphead* or a *shithole* and a *craphole, crap* can't take the place of *shit* so effortlessly in all expressions. The ever-popular *bullshit* is sometimes toned down to *bullcrap,* but this expression has no ring to it (to my ears) and little popularity (to my knowledge). Rather, *B.S.* seems to be a far more effective PG-version of *bullshit.* "Are you shittin' me?" may be a widely used bit of slang, but there's no "Are you crappin' me?" and the ever-popular assonance of "No shit, Sherlock" is completely resistant to any introduction of *crap. Crap* also doesn't have a positive meaning that I'm aware of—there's no "This is good crap," though "This is some real good shit" applies perfectly well to drugs and food.

Crap also works better than *shit* as a replacement in various religious/blasphemous exclamations. "Sweet merciful Zeus"—goofy and archaic enough on its own—becomes even sillier when amended to become "Sweet merciful crap." "Holy mother of crap" butchers the serious expression "Holy mother of God," but is certainly more radio-friendly than "Holy

mother of shit." I'm not really sure whether "crap on a cracker" or "Christ on a cracker" is the more absurd phrase, also *crap* has a more pleasing sound.

For me, the most delightful aspect of *crap* is its ability to spawn endless (and ridiculous) variations. Some branches of the *crap* tree are related to the game of craps, such as *crapped out* and *crapshoot,* and the Internet has spawned a few new variations, like *e-crap* (just what it sounds like) and *craplet* (a Java applet of really poor quality). A *crapper* can refer to a bathroom, a toilet, or an actual bottom, and a *crapper dick* refers to a "vice squad officer on the washroom beat," according to *The Queen's Vernacular: A Gay Lexicon.* Meanwhile, a *crap-slinger* or *crap artist* dishes out *crapola* to whoever will believe it.

But this is just the tip of the *crapberg.* I'll conclude my article by looking at three of my favorite *crap* variations, with no offense meant to such gems as *crap-o-rama, crapathon, crapbrain,* and *crapfest.*

Crapalicious

This is a, well, yummy-sounding word that can be used to describe many shoddy events and products. Unfortunately, I don't hear this word every day, but a quick Google search yielded many examples, such as:

So yes, for years now, foul smelling, biting, crapalicious lady bugs have invaded my home every fall and made my life beyond miserable.

Ok, it's come to my attention, thanks to the crapalicious iMacs at my school, that this layout looks kinda screwy on macs.

Although the fish sandwich is crapalicious, the rest is pretty OK.

I find the last example particularly appealing (and nauseating), and I would suggest that *crapalicious* is a particularly apt descriptor for bad food.

Crapulence

During *The Simpsons* episode "Who Shot Mr. Burns Part 2," I thought I noticed another new variation of *crap* when Burns claims to have been "wallowing in [his] own crapulence." I assumed this to have been an invention of the writers, who in other episodes have coined great words like *craptacular* and *ape-poopy.* Perhaps, I thought, *crapulence* was a mix of *crap* and words like *opulence* and *flatulence*—very appropriate words for the doddering, wealthy, evil, and entirely noncorpulent Mr. Burns.

However, upon consulting Tom Dalzell's *The Slang of Sin,* I found a whole series of alcohol-specific *crap* words, starting with *crapulate* 'to drink heavily' that seem to have developed as close parallels to the garbage- or excrement-related *crap* meanings. These variations include *crap* 'the dregs in a barrel,' *crapula* 'a hangover,' *crapulous* 'hungover,' *crapulence* 'excessive drinking,' and *crapulent* 'hungover.' While it's still possible that *The Simpsons* writers created the word anew without knowing its history, I'd say that *crapulence*—like *Pu-Pu platter*—is one of those words that's equally amusing whether you know what it means or not.

Crap-happy

This has to be one of the most fun and least successful variations of *crap* that I've found, as well as the only word I know of that rhymes with *slap-happy.* This word is defined in a few slang dictionaries as 'foolishly happy' or 'silly,' and, in *Partridge's Concise Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English,* as part of the expression *crap-happy pappy:* "a young father who takes the incidentals of fatherhood in world-view stride." Apparently, this term comes from low rhyming puns of the '40s and '50s, specifically the following racist joke and answer: "Q: Describe a feckless Nipponese whose father has diarrhea. A: A slap-happy Jappy chappy with a crap-happy pappy." I'd be pleased to see the last two words rescued from this nasty couplet and resurrected in the language as a common synonym for "diarrhetic dad," and even more happy to see *crap-happy* become more widely used on its own. Unfortunately, I don't think I'll get my wish.

I hope this has been an educational and entertaining look at *crap,* and that even if you think my article is, like so much in the world, "something of extremely poor quality," you'll think twice before dismissing it with the bland adjective *crappy.* Though I may not be as smart as a *shithouse rat,* I hope I've proved as clever as a *craphouse mouse.* And I trust that my work is, at the very least, a *crap-tastic piece of crap-eroo*—or, dare I hope?—a *craptacular crapapalooza.*

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Offending Words

Gerald Eskenazi
New York, New York

It didn't take me long, in my forty-something years writing sports for the *New York Times,* to learn that words connoting sexuality of any kind would never insinuate themselves into the old gray lady, as other newspapermen loved to call us.

And then, when we had freed the paper of libidinous prose as the millennium approached—why, we then made sure we offended no one, not even hockey teams. I'll explain.

Many of the words of caution I received from the copy desk weren't in the "style book" (the compendium of do's and don'ts), but were part of *Times* tradition. It ensured—as much as anything can—that we never made a reader gasp. And sports, which one would think should be free of deadening rules, was under even more of a constraint than other sections.

For example, at the *New York Times,* a horse never came from behind in the stretch. So we called it a "comeback victory," or "winning with a late charge." When parochial schools were competing, you'd better not write, "St. Dominic's tops St. Cecilia's," or, worse, "downs St. Cecilia's." I often wondered, what if it were the other way around? But I'm daydreaming.

Also, gratuitous *damns, butts,* and other words that could offend—even in direct quotes—were to be avoided, if not officially verboten. And I must admit that if you used even mild curses gratuitously, you would deflate them of any meaning when someone really important used them. When, say, a person of some significance, who normally doesn't use profanity or language that could offend, did in fact speak that way, then using such a word makes a telling point and is not simply gratuitous. Use it to quote the late baseball bad boy, Billy Martin, and you've merely wallowed in his syntax. Quote, for example, such classy icons as Billie Jean King or an Arnold Palmer with a *damn,* and you've got a better story with the same quote.

One day, before I was about to cover a New York Rangers' hockey game, one of the editors called me over.

"Try to avoid using the word *puck,*" he told me. When I asked why, he explained, "Labor negotiations are going on with the linotype operators, and sometimes they misspell words on purpose."

Aha. So I wrote 800 words about a hockey game in which the word *puck* never was used (think baseball, and writing a story without using the word *ball*). I don't remember how I did it. I think I called the puck the *disk,* or the *frozen rubber.* At least, I avoided having the paper embarrassed by a linotype operator with a puckish sense of humor.

Over the years, as America became much more sensitive to language that could offend various groups, my paper often went overboard in making sure it would offend no one. Oh, it took a while. Billie Jean was "Mrs. King" for much of the '70s. It was no easy time for the *Times* to turn to *Ms.* Then we had another radical departure in sports when it came to identifying women. Always, when I started, a woman in a second reference was either *Mrs.* or *Miss.* Then she became *Ms.* Finally, even that honorific has been done away with in writing about sports figures.

Now, when we write about, say, the tennis-playing Williams sisters, we simply call them by their second name, just as we do male athletes (except, of course, if they get into trouble with the law and wind up outside the sports pages, and they become *Mr.* or *Ms.* again). While sportswriting in particular is freer these days at the paper, the famous "style" book is bigger than ever. When I joined the paper I was given a copy, a little red book of some 96 pages. Now it is a full-sized tome of more than 360 pages, and counting.

But language also is about perception. Many years ago I wrote a piece about the Jets' aging tight end, a free-spirited fellow named Jerome Barkum. He was from Mississippi. Thus, he enjoyed feasting on typical down-home cooking.

In my story, though, he pointed out that because he was getting older, he was trying to get away from foods such as, in his words, "fried chicken and pork chops." That was a direct quote. Yet, my editor, Sandy Padwe, who was a gifted newspaperman, red-penciled it.

"It could sound racist," reasoned the '60s-sensitive Padwe, who was to become a dean at the Columbia University School of Journalism. "But he said it," I objected. "That's what he eats. He's from Mississippi."

My logical argument fell on deaf ears. Jerome Barkum was aging and watching his weight by eating more healthful foods. The reader never learned what he had cut out.

Of course, many of the nicknames in sports we used once upon a time probably were racist or stereotypical or insensitive. We avoided those at the paper. I never thought twice, though, of describing the exciting Montreal Canadiens hockey team as the "Flying Frenchmen."

Books had been written using that name in the title. The team thought of itself that way, much as the New York Yankees were proud of the sobriquet "Bronx Bombers," but since the advent of worldwide terrorism, you can't say that any more. Virtually every player on the Canadiens *was* French-Canadian when I started writing about them in the 1960s.

One day, in the '90s, after many years of not covering hockey, I did a New York Rangers–Canadiens game. Naturally, I called the Canadiens the Flying Frenchmen. At least, I tried to. One of the copy editors called me in the press box and said, "We don't describe them that way. It's a stereotype." I tried to buttress my case with a historical perspective. I lost.

In the intervening years, not only had the Frenchmen found a sensitive ally at the *Times,* so had gypsies. I hadn't realized they were now a protected minority. So I quoted an athlete who talked of being *gypped* by his agent. Uh, unh. No negative gypsy connotations, I was told.

Yet, I made my contribution to the language of journalism and helped spark a debate over the use of a word that gets into the *Times* once every 20 years. I refer, of course, to *fart.*

Don't hyperventilate, gentle reader. The word never saw print in my paper. At least not in my story. I wish it would have. It was, in fact, the crux of the story. I will explain:

The Jets had just lost a game in the Seattle Kingdome on Monday Night Football when punter Chuck Ramsey messed up a kick. I dashed down to the locker room at game's end and collared Ramsey. He was crying.

"What is it—that punt, Chuck?" I asked. "You're pretty upset."

"How would you feel," he asked, "if your coach told you, in front of the entire team, 'I can fart further than you can punt'?"

I made one of the great efforts of my life not

to laugh. But I had to be serious. Chuck was really upset. Who could blame him? Coach Walt Michaels was one of the most honest people I had known. He was one of the most accessible coaches, also. I confess: I loved being around the big lug. I enjoyed hearing his stories of working in the Pennsylvania coal mines, of listening to morals he learned from Polish fables his father, from the old country, had told him. Above Walt's desk was a portrait of his father done by a family friend. Underneath it was the inscription, "Glad he made the boat."

In Walt's very basic world, there were no excuses. He enjoyed telling the story of the Polish sea captain who went through a terrible storm. The owner of the boat told him later, "Don't tell me if the sea was stormy. Did you bring my boat in?"

Yes, Walt was crude, too. So . . . *fart*. How to handle this indelicate word in the delicate world of the *New York Times?* We recently had been advised by our assistant managing editor and protector of the written word, Allan M. Siegal, that if we really felt a bad word belonged in a story, to consult with the copy editors first. He also said that we were not to alter the word if it were not used, but instead use an ellipsis, or three dots, to indicate the word had been removed. Or we might bracket a different word to show this was the meaning, if not the actual word. None of my pleadings made an impression on the copy desk. I was told I couldn't use the word and had to soften the quote. In other words, I was to change the word. This I did. Thus, Michaels's outburst came out as "I can spit farther than you can punt."

When I returned to New York the next day, I got my hands on all the other papers to see how their erudite desks had handled this sensitive matter. One paper simply put a dash where the *fart* had been. Another avoided the quote. But *Newsday,* the big Long Island paper, to its credit actually used the quote accurately. In Monday's paper, at any rate. When I picked up *Newsday* on Tuesday, I discovered it had now bracketed the word and replaced it with another in a follow-up story.

This caught the eye of *Newsday's* media critic, who had a Sunday column. He wrote an entire piece about how the New York media had handled the word *fart*—perhaps mishandled would be more accurate—which I'm sure was a first in the history of sports journalism in America. He noted how *Newsday* alone had accurately used the word in its

Monday story, but then backed off a day later. And how the *Times* had changed the word to "spit." When he called Siegal and asked about altering the quote, Siegal told him that was against *Times* policy and would not happen in the future.

In a way, I felt vindicated, but still I was left without a *fart* among the millions of words in my clips. Eight thousand bylines—and not a fart to be found.

[Gerald Eskenazi's fourteenth book, a memoir, has just been published by the University of Missouri Press: A Sportswriter's Life: From the Desk of a *New York* Times *Reporter.]*

SIC! SIC! SIC!

"An investigator pretentiously intones; 'When you deal with death on a daily basis, you realize how precious it is and how fleeting if is.' Duly noted."

[From a TV movie review in the Los Angeles Daily News; week of May 31, 2004, Submitted by David Smith, Encino, California.]

We need your SICs! Please keep an eye out for sentences that make you think twice, give you an unusual mental image not at all what the author intended, or make you grin. Your fellow readers will thank you!

As the Word Turns
Y, O Y

Barry Baldwin
Calgary, Alberta

"We all know the *y* section of the alphabet has mighty slim pickings" (Erin McKean, VERBATIM XXVIII/4). Thanks, Boss, for inspiring this essay.

Y, the third shortest letter, after *X* and *Z*, occupies pages 681–788 in the 1989 *OED*'s final volume; cf. Simon Winchester, *The Meaning of Everything: The Story of the OED* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 214, 230, for the history of this particular material.

Dr. Johnson, thanks to lavish quotations, found it six pages (Arno Press repr., New York, 1979), observing, "*Y* was much used by the Saxons." The first mention of it is indeed in *Aelfric's Grammar* (2.5, c. AD 1000).

Bede derives *Yule,* the only *Y*-word in Jeffrey Kacirck's 2004 *Forgotten English Calendar,* from Anglo-Saxon *hweol* 'wheel.' A glance at (e.g.) my Albanian, French, German, Italian, and Romanian dictionaries yielded similar shortages.

This paucity is explained by corresponding classical dearth. In Greek, *Y* is capital *U.* No Latin word begins with it, the letter being reserved for lower-case transliterations from foreign ones: "Romans have no need of *Y*" (Terentianus Maurus, *On Letters, Syllables, Metres,* v.247).

No *Y* ones in Ivor Brown's *Chosen Words* (1961). Only four in Anthony Burgess's *Clockwork Orange* (1962): *yahzick* 'tongue,' and *yeckate* 'to drive,' Russian-derived; *Yahoodies* 'Jews,' and *yarbles* 'testicles' not. Despite listing *Clockwork Orange* as a source, the *OED* omits these.

Initial signs include *Y-fronts,* mathematical *Y,* genetic chronosome *Y,* and the *Y* used by collectors of *Plusia* (a species of moths). The *OED* goes from *ya* to *ywrought,* Johnson from *yacht* to *yux* 'hiccough,' (not in the *OED*). From the common *(year, yellow, yes, yesterday, you/your)* to multilingual exotic *yabba* 'large Jamaican cooking-pot,' *yabber* (Australian Aboriginal) 'to talk', *yakamite* 'a South American bird,' and *yamstchick* (Russian) 'post-horse driver.'

Onomatopoeic terms prosper: *yaw-yaw* 'to talk effectively' (Dickens 1854—cf. Churchillian *jaw-jaw*); *yap/yip/yelp* (mainly of dogs); *yow/yowl* (feline);

yex, 'belch' (1629); *yoop,* 'convulsive sobbing' (1848); *yike* 'the woodpecker's call' (1891); *yoicks,* the fox-hunting call, imminently illegal in Britain; *yah* 'pseudo-phonetic representations of House of Commons ejaculations' (1886), reborn as a 1980s Yuppie affirmative.

Likewise, words based on proper names: *Yale; Yapp,* 'a style of bookbinding in limp leather' (1882); *Yarborough,* 'hand containing no card above a nine'— cf. Bond's trick bridge hand in *Moonraker; Yarmouth,* 'herring' (c. 1660); various terms based on *Yorkshire,* including the cricketing *Yorker* 'ball that pitches under the bat' (1870). *Yorkshire* itself I once heard used on *Are You Being Served?* to denote testicles.

Yerk (1520) takes the versatility prize: 'to draw stitches tight'; 'to crack a whip', 'to fling heels', 'to carp at.' Johnson adds 'to throw out, or moves with a spring.' His *Y*s embrace *yellowboy* 'a gold coin,' dubbing it "a very low word" (it comes from John Wilson's 1662 play *The Cheats*), also *youthy* 'young, youthful. A bad word' (1712; cf. Scott's "a withered beauty who persists in looking youthy").

Speaking of *yellow,* one of seventeen words— none sexual, save *yellow cats* (whores who frequented the Strand's Golden Lion brothel) in Grose (1796)— is *yellow-belly*: 'A native of the Lincolnshire fens: an allusion to the eels caught there.' That comforts myself, a Lincolnshire man: the sobriquet is modernly taken to indicate cowardice. Grose also has *Yorkshire tyke* 'a cheat.'

Y words fill six pages of the *Dictionary of the Underworld* (1950, by Grose's editor and successor, Eric Partridge), where *Y* is a verb for 'double-cross' ("I plugged him when he *y*-ed me," Howard Rose, 1934), and *YMCA* is American tramps' 1931 acronym for "You Must Come Across" (sc. with the money)—Did the Village People know that?

Reviewing (*TLS,* Dec. 10, 1993) the *New Shorter Oxford* (which is now the old *New Shorter Oxford,* a new edition having come out last year), David Nokes remarks, "A surprisingly high number of slang terms begin with a *y*, suggesting a fondness for childlike (or tabloid) phonetics: along with *yuppie,* there is *yippie;* we have *yomp* and *yump*, *yuck* and *yucky*, *yack*, *yowza*, and *yipes.*"

Methinks we are now *Y*sed up.

[Barry Baldwin wrote on Grose's Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue *in* VERBATIM *XXIX/1.]*

HORRIBILE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, Britain

"Well, that's then," said a continuity announcer on BBC radio, linking one programme trailer to another, "but coming closer to now . . ." Actually, I'm coming closer to then, with this quote from a newspaper's end-of-year roundup of 2003's big stories: "The shooting of four teenagers at a new year party did nothing to calm fears of a gun crime epidemic." Well, it wouldn't, would it? If you were trying to calm fears of a gun crime epidemic, shooting teenagers would be a simply daft way of going about it.

I no longer allow myself to include the sayings of TV weather forecasters in this column; shooting fish in barrels is not a gentlemanly sport. Besides, to do the subject justice we'd need to start a new magazine: *They Said It on the Weather Illustrated Monthly!* I suspect Dave Byrd of Arlington, Virginia, knows how I feel. "To date I have avoided writing about TV language," he writes, "for obvious flogging of dead horse reasons." However, one particular telly commercial has broken through his resolve. The ad is for loans and urges prompt action because "the chance of interest rates going up in the near future is a very REAL possibility." Dave notes: "It seems to me this actually says 'the chance . . . is a possibility.' Whoever wrote that line should probably get some credit for being able to craft that into a scary ad tactic. Most ads are puffery and exaggeration, but this is one where they are speaking completely accurately, yet make it sound as though it's breaking news."

This redundant *very real* reminds me of the strange usage of *genuinely,* which has recently become so widespread in the UK. Here's a good example, taken from an interview with a newly recruited reporter on a town newspaper, in which he told of his enthusiastic commitment to the local social scene: "I genuinely love the pubs here, because they are kind of old school and have retained their individual characteristics."

As far as I can tell, *genuinely* in this context means *really* (which is fair enough, I suppose) or *very much*; in other words, it's just another instance of stressification—merely to say that one loves local pubs would be to risk general doubt. "Ah, but does he *genuinely* love those old-school boozers? Or is he faking it?" Not long ago, I heard a woman tell a TV news programme that she was "genuinely horrified" to discover that her son's school had unwittingly employed a convicted child molester. I, for one, believed her.

Have you recently *had a re-role* at work? If so, I'd be delighted if you would tell me whether or not this is, as I assume, a euphemism for demotion. Some euphemisms are funny, some irritating, and some purely breathtaking. When photographs surfaced of US soldiers torturing prisoners in Iraq, the BBC decided (after much corporate introspection, no doubt) that the pictures should be referred to as depicting *mock torture*. Ah, I think I get it: only Bad Nations commit torture. Therefore, by definition, the worst that a Good Nation might get up to is mock torture. Whether the distinction is appreciable by the victims is debatable.

A London reader of this column is a little worried by signs currently appearing on the Underground, urging vigilance against terrorism. If they see a suspect package, passengers are instructed: "Don't touch, check with other passengers, inform station staff or dial 999." Are they at least allowed to panic?

The Plain English Campaign's list of the ten most annoying clichés in Britain (winner: "at the end of the day") received a predictably huge amount of press coverage. My favourite story appeared in the *Mirror,* and concluded thus: "There is, though, an antidote to all this gobbledygook. The *Daily Mirror* has won the Plain English award for its clear use of language on three occasions."

Congratulations, *Mirror,* but I can't be alone in thinking that, if the paper can manage to use clear language three times, it shouldn't be beyond ambition for it to do so four, or maybe even five times.

If you have Horribiles to declare, you may send them by mail to either address on the masthead or by email to *editor@verbatimmag.com.*

CLASSICAL BLATHER
Whatsisnames and Thingamajigs

Nick Humez
argentarius@juno.com

It is an ethnographic commonplace that language discontinuously maps itself onto reality, such that the continuum of all the things we might name or describe shows gaps between our actual terms to designate them. But one need never be at a loss for a word even for the unnameable, thanks to a rich lexical inventory—ripe for etymological and morphological speculation, belonging to an oral culture, rarely written down till long in circulation, and even then often undocumented altogether in mainstream dictionaries, being omitted as ephemeral slang—remedying the want of a name on the tip of our tongue or just beyond it,[1] whether due to aphasia,[2] an unwillingness to say a word we know very well,[3] or simple ignorance of the proper term (if, indeed, any exists).

In this last category fall words for machines or devices: *dingus* (almost certainly related to German *Ding* 'thing;' see final paragraph before notes below) and its offspring *dohinkus,*[4] *doohickey, dingus, dingbat* and *dingsbums* as well as *frammis,*[5] *unit,*[6] and *twonky,* the last two in vogue during the last three decades of the 20th century, especially among persons given to tech talk.[7] Generic names for unspecified devices include *gadget* (which the *American Heritage Dictionary* suggests may be from French *gâchette,* 'catch [of a lock]') and *gizmo* (origin unclear but current throughout most of the 20th century).[8] A small gadget is often called a *widget.*

An unspecified thing that is not necessarily mechanical can be called a *thingummy, thingumibob, thingamajig, whatsis, whatchimacallit, who(o)sis, doodad, do flicky,*[9] *doomyflotchet,* or *flapstick.*[10] The relationship of the first three to "thing" is self-evident. The fourth through sixth are thinly disguised phonetic spellings of "What's this," "What-you-may-call-it," and "Who's this;" an analogous process gives us the generic–person terms *whatchimacallim, whatsisname,* and *whatsisface,* with *whosis* doubling for persons as well as things.[11] And the *do(o)-* of *doodad* and *dohinkus* is quite possibly the verb *to do* turned into a prefix (compare *do-nothing, dogooder,* and *doff*).[12]

There are fortunate exceptions to the oral–only rule. Michael Quinion, publisher of the web site *World Wide Words (http://www.worldwidewords.org)* devotes a page to *oojah,* a term that American soldiers in World War I brought home, having learned it from their British counterparts. Quinion discovered an article in the *Washington Post* from July 1917 (very probably the earliest American publication of this term), that defined *oojah* as "any object in Heaven or earth; it is the thing which has no name or the name of which you have temporarily forgotten." Although it has the look and feel of many of the terms British soldiers borrowed from India, Quinion says that *oojah* "has no known origin. If it did come from that country, nobody can tell from what word in which language."

Meanwhile, a generation before the Great War, W. S. Gilbert provided a tidy (and rhyming) list of generic personal names in the final verse of the Lord High Executioner's self–introductory song, "I've Got a Little List," enumerating types of people we would all would be better off without: Ko-ko says he would be happy to rid society of

. . . apologetic statesmen of a compromising kind
 Such as What-Ye-May-Call-Him, Thingumibob, and
  likewise . . . well, Never Mind,
 And Tut-Tut-Tut, and What's-His-Name, and also
  You Know Who —
But the task of filling up the blanks I'd rather leave to you,
 For it really doesn't matter whom you put upon the list:
 They'd none of 'em be missed—they'd none of 'em be
  missed!

—an apparent aversion to naming names outright that may reflect the robust libel-litigation climate of Victorian England.[13]

Several indeterminates are related to nonsense refrains (worth an entire column in themselves). Here euphemism is often alive and well: In a recent French film, an actor referred to a woman's vulva as a *tra-la-la,* while certain midwesterners have been known to call it a *do-wah-diddy.* Nor is this solely a modern phenomenon: An English round dating back at least to the 17th century advises us that

He who would an ale-house keep
 Must have three things in store:
 A chamber and a feather bed,
  A chimney and a hey-nonny-nonny . . .

Something of the same sort seems to be going on in the chorus to another Gilbert and Sullivan

number, a duet between an able seaman and a bad baronet,[14] who merrily sing that "painful though the duty be/To shirk the task were fiddle-de-dee!"

While nonsense refrains are often attempts to mimic an instrumental break (e.g., *whack fol the diddle fol the die doh day, too-rie-oo-rie-addie,*[15] *diggi-do-da-do-dinde*[16]) or yodel (*come a tie-yie-yippy-yippy-yay, yippy-yay*[17]), it has been suggested by folklorists that at least some of them may be corruptions of very old incantations; if so, their use as euphemisms for sexual terms may not be coincidental, since the latter (as students of pornolinguistics and scatalolinguistics well know) are words of evocative power great enough to alter normal rules of syntax.[18] But apparent refrains can be used as innocent generics as well—e.g., *folderol, fiddley-wah-diddle*—often with the connotation of "stuff and nonsense" (as in ". . . and then he gave me the usual folderol about the girl behind the curtain being his cousin").

Stuff itself functions as a generic for which other indeterminates may serve as synonyms, often pejoratively, such as *junk, chazerei, tschatschkes* (the last two are borrowings directly from Yiddish), *crud, shit, crap,* and *goober.* Goobers (sometimes *goober peas*) are, of course, peanuts; but I have heard the word also applied to a stray dollop of paint or plaster laid down by inexpert hands.[19] *Goober* as miscellaneous stuff, however, is singular: "Look at all the goober in this junk drawer."[20] As the end of a series, *. . . and stuff* can be replaced with *. . . and whatnot, . . . and suchlike, . . . 'n' shit, . . . and so on/forth* and (especially when referring to spoken stuff) *. . . and blah blah blah.*

As some of the examples above show, indeterminates are by no means unique to English. While writing this column I asked a dozen informants for examples in other languages and learned from Stephen Barnett that "Italians say *cosaccio* 'ugly thing' or *chechessia* 'what it might be'; the French likewise have *quoi-que-ce-soit* (three syllables, not four),[21] meaning exactly the same as the latter. Anastasia Antonacos tells me that modern Greek seems to be thin in such terms but cites *postonelend* 'what's-his-name'[22] (for which she also supplies Arabic *sh'ismah*). Jennifer Holan reports German *Dings* (note the final *s*!) for 'whatsis' and *Dingsda* (*Dings* + *da* 'there') for an indeterminate placename (as Americans might variously say *East Overshoe, Podunk, Anytown, Metropolis,* or, thanks to Samuel Butler, *Erewhon*). Spanish includes *chingadera,* a slightly naughty

equivalent of "this lil sucker"[23] from the Spanish-speaking American southwest, courtesy of James Cervantes, and *comosellam'eso* (whatsisname, simply a contraction of *come se llama eso*) from the Columbian auto mechanic of David Gubkin, who adds, for the birds, "*LBJ* (little brown job = birdwatcher talk for unidentified sparrow)."[24]

Notes:

1 Among the more charming divinities of the Celtic pantheon was the demiurge Lir, who had only half a tongue; hence, according to the composer Henry Cowell, the universe is flawed because half of the god's directives for its creation were never heard, so remain unexecuted to this day. "The Tongue of Lir" was one of a series of piano sketches in unorthodox techniques that Cowell wrote between the World Wars for a never-completed opera on Irish mythology and recorded in the 1950s for release on the CRI label as a 12" LP with the composer's spoken commentary on a smaller disk in a sleeve on the album's back cover.

2 Aphasia can be the persistent result of organic brain damage from trauma or progressive diseases such as Alzheimer's, or a temporary condition attributable to overloading of short-term memory. For an enlightening discussion of the relationship between short- and long-term recall and its ramifications for user-friendly devices, see Donald A. Norman, *The Design of Everyday Things* (New York: Doubleday/Currency, 1990), pp. 66–67. According to the author, who is also the director of the Institute for Cognitive Sciences at the University of California, short-term memory is capable of juggling very few (about seven and at most ten) items at any given time and is notoriously prone to distraction as well. This is why, he explains, nine-digit ZIP codes are probably the limit for what one can memorize casually (and thirteen-digit ones strictly the province of written record). Why the expansion from seven-digit phone numbers to the inclusion of area codes as well has proved less chaotic may be because area codes are already in our long-term memory as classifiers linked to external rather than internal and arbitrary information: Most of us have come in practice to associate "212" with Manhattan, and many of us can match "617" to Boston, though we may be temporarily discommoded by expansion codes such as the bifurcation of northern New Jersey into "201" and "973."

3 This can result from delicacy: An Ohio informant reports *thingy* for 'genitals' (a usage going back at least as far as Thomas D'Urfrey's *Pills To Purge Melancholy* anthology of bawdy songs of the early 18th century, one of which is entitled "My Thing Is My Own"), while a Monty Python's Flying Circus sketch of the 1970s uses *thingy* to mean 'sexual act.' Such euphemisms can be quite localized in time and place: My maternal grandfather, Harold W. Gleason, once wrote a light-verse paean to "the 'you-know' down in the well," for the amusement of his summer-colony friends in Maine, among whom it was the current term during the

Prohibition years for a certain neighbor's openly secret contraband alcohol stash. But a second reason for not naming what one knows very well can be the rhetorical requirement to keep its referent generalized; in this connection see my earlier column "Certain Somebodies" in VERBATIM XXVII:1 (Winter 2002), pp. 20–23.

4 *Dohinkus* (pronounced *doo-*) appeared in print at least as early as the 1940s in the science-fiction stories of Lewis Padgett (pseud. of Henry Kuttner) about an inventor named Gallagher much enamored of strong drink.

5 *Frammis* was a favorite of *Mad Magazine,* appearing in many issues during the '50s and '60s. (Mad also promulgated the term *veeblefetzer* through its parodic annual report to employees of the North American Veeblefetzer Company, ca. 1961, which conceded that "as yet nobody has figured out what a veeblefetzer is used for.") As far as I know, *frammis* is unconnected with Framus, the manufacturer of an excellent line of banjos.

6 Donald McLean of Windham County, Vermont, called my attention to this usage some twenty-five years ago, together with *product*; both appear to have entered generic currency from manufacturers' instruction booklets included with the units or products in question. As of this writing *module* appears to be undergoing a similar process; watch this space.

7 This term is from another Lewis Padgett sci-fi short story, "The Twonky," published in 1942 and adapted for film in 1953; *twonkies* were console entertainment centers that aggressively censored a family's listening and viewing habits. (Padgett's sinister take on this technology is all of a piece with an aphorism repeated to me some years ago by Gail Gutradt of Bar Harbor, Maine, from a vaudeville veteran's comment about the then-novel device television: "Never trust furniture that talks.") I first heard MIT alumnus Ross Faneuf use *twonky* as a synonym for "generic black-box device" in the early 1990s.

8 *Device* itself has come to be a generic term in its own right; thus Tom Lehrer, in the spoken introduction to his song "Who's Next?" on his 1965 album, *That Was The Year That Was,* a collection of ditties written for performance on the TV show of almost that name (. . . *Week* . . .), said that "This week China, which we call 'Red China,' exploded a nuclear bomb, which we called a 'device.'" The *American Heritage Dictionary* traces this word to the Old French verb *deviser,* which meant either 'to devise' or 'to divide,' depending on the context.

9 Jamaican patois. I am much obliged to Estelle Hewlett-Elliott for this variant.

10 Stephen Barnett, who grew up in western Massachusetts, reports this as an term used by his father, who had lived in both Kansas and California.

11 Matthew Brady's mobile daguerrotype darkroom was referred to by Union soldiers of the American Civil War as "the Whatizzit." Michelle Buchanan reports *whutchacoms* ("As in: 'I was in the store and I had to buy those whutchacoms for the party, you know, balloons'") for things rather

than people, in Virginia; here the double el of *call* appears to have dropped out (lengthing the *o*?), trumped by the final *em* of *him* or *them. Whatsisface* would seem to point to the fact that we often can remember faces quite well even after short exposure, but by no means always with names attached. Feminine versions exist, but not for all terms: *Whatsername* and *whatserface* seem perfectly interchangeable with their masculine-gender counterparts, but does anyone say *＊whatchimacaller*?

12 A variant of *thingumibob* attested by one of my midwestern informants is *thingamado.* The verb *do* may also underlie *doobie*, one of numerous euphemisms for "marijuana cigarette," possibly by back-formation from *do up,* itself a euphemism for "prepare and consume the means to get high," both terms being current in the 1960s countercultural druggie scene.

13 The song appears in the first act of Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado.* The Marquess of Queensbury's (deliberate?) misspelling of the most provocative word in his challenge addressed "To Mr. Oscar Wilde, posing as a somdomite"[*sic*] failed to keep the matter out of the courts—to the plaintiff's ultimate undoing, since evidence emerged during the trial of his libel suit against Queensbury to the scandalous effect that Wilde had indeed performed illegal sexual acts with young men, as a result of which the flamboyant aesthete found himself in the dock, was convicted on retrial in 1895, and got sentenced to two years' imprisonment at hard labor.

14 "You Understand?/I Think I Do," from Gilbert and Sullivan, *Ruddigore,* act I.

15 The Clancy Brothers, with Tommy Makem, recorded songs containing these refrains, respectively "God Bless England" (*Songs of Ireland and Beyond,* a 1999 Sony CD compiled from several of their earlier vinyl releases) and "Courtin' in the Kitchen" (on their *Come Fill Your Glass with Us,* a Tradition Records LP issued in 1959).

16 From the French Canadian song "Perrine Etait Servante," recorded by Theodore Bikel on the Elektra LP *An Actor's Holiday* in 1956.

17 From the traditional cowboy ballad "The Old Chisholm Trail." A reversal of the euphemizing process above takes place in the bawdy burlesque of this ditty ("Jumped on My Horse, My Horse Wasn't There"), the originally innocuous refrain being replaced by the raunchy "Gonna tie my pecker to my leg, to my leg."

18 See the seminal paper by Quong Phuc Dong [James D. McCawley], "English Sentences without Overt Grammatical Subject," in A. Zwicky et al., eds., *Studies out in Left Field: Defamatory Essays Presented to James D. McCawley on the Occasion of His 33d or 34th Birthday* (Edmonton/Champaign, Canada: Linguistic Research, 1972).

19 My own hands, in fact, as remarked upon with this locution by my summer employer in 1964, the Boston photographer Stephen F. Grohe.

20 Attested at second hand both from Wisconsin (David Graham reports his wife uttering sentences like the one

given) and Idaho (from the father of the Rev. Stanley Jenkins of Queens, NY).

21 Pronounced something like *Quack Is Wah*—perhaps an apt name for an eatery specializing in Peking Duck. Within sight of the Watchung Avenue railroad station in Upper Montclair, N.J is a storefront takeout whose proprietors, obviously recognizing a good pun when it was handed to them on a platter, named their restaurant *Wah Chung.*

22 That is, *pos tone (e)lene,* the *o* in *pos* being long omega but in *tone* short omicron, and all the *E*s short epsilon (including the one dropped because of the elison with *tone*).

23 As most readers will probably know very well, the verb *chingar* literally means 'to fuck'; it is derived from Latin *cingere* 'to gird(le), to wrap around,' also the source (via its supine stem plus a couple of prefixes) of English *precinct* and *succinct.*

24 Thanks are owed to informants not elsewhere credited who kindly emailed me many of the items in this article, as well as others omitted for want of space: Marcus Bales, Michelle Buchanan, Jane Cates, Leslie Edwards-Whiting, Paul Howell, Dwain Kitchell, Beverly Rainbolt, and Paul Sampson.

OBITER DICTA

Good Cap, Bad Cap

Edmund Conti
Summit, New Jersey

There it was on the kitchen table, a note from my wife, "Go buy yourself some new t-shirts." Right off, something about that note bothered me. What was it? That she was sitting at the table right across from me? Had she now taken up writing notes to me as a gentle hint that I should start wearing my hearing aid again and stop saying "Huh?" to her every comment? No, that wasn't it. Was it that I didn't really need any new T-shirts, that she was just trying to confiscate a few of the more holey ones for dust rags? Again, no. Was it that she usually just buys me new underwear without telling me?

Are you perplexed too or did you see right away my problem? Yes, her spelling of *T-shirt* as *t-shirt*. A T-shirt, of course, is so-called because it resembles a capital *T.* Well, sort of. What it doesn't resemble, not even sort of, is a lower-case *t.* OK, some of my more holey ones may . . . (hmmm, maybe my wife is even cleverer than I thought).

Of course, there is no way my wife could have gotten that note right. She wrote it in her inimitable cursive longhand as taught by the public-school systems back in that other millennium. No way is her written capital *Tl* going to look like any of my T-shirts (of which I don't need any more).

Fortunately, her note didn't also wonder if we should buy an a-frame in the country. I wonder what that would look like. Something a little more offbeat that the simple classic lines of an A-frame. In any event, I would make sure the plumber knows the difference between an l-shaped pipe and an L-shaped one.

I'd like to do a U-turn here but there's no turning back now. Just how would you make a u-turn? Maybe that's what you do when you see a parking space across the street. Swing around and then back up into the space. (Kids, don't try this at home.)

Another thing you kids shouldn't try at home is building a skyscraper with i-beams. I beam to think of it. You just know that those stand-alone dots will make the building structurally unsound.

Now that I have you thinking big, this might be a good time to consider that age-old camel question—one hump or two? If you spell *Bactrian* and *Dromedary* with capital letters, you will never forget that the Bactrian has two humps and the Dromedary one. If you spell them with the lower case *b* and *d,* then you might improperly conclude that one has a hump on the right side and one one the left.

There you are, I've just crossed all the *T'*s and dotted all the *I'*s. (No, wait a minute, I can't do that.)

I rest my case (UPPER).

(By the way, this piece was written on an iMac, and I don't want to hear any more about that.)

[Edmund Conti wrote about his adventure at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in VERBATIM *XXIX/1.]*

EPISTOLA

John Huebl's fine account of the misspellings that his name is subjected to (VERBATIM XXVIII/4): if it's any comfort, many people with commoner surnames than his also suffer to some extent. Ask anyone with the surname *Jonson* or *Stephens.* Or *Kahn*—that's easy, everyone in the UK knows it's spelt K-H-A-N. Over the phone, anyway. When face to face, the more thoughtful functionaries do show some hesitation (I'm not South Asian in appearance), though even when I provide the spelling, most of them end up writing *Khan* anyway, or occasionally *Cahn.* Some research needs doing on surname-spelling strategies. (Perhaps our editor could tell us how she conveys the spelling of her surname over the phone?)

[*Me: M-C-K-E-A-N.*

Hapless transcriber: M-C-K-E-E-N.

Me: No, that's E-A-N, like 'bean.'

HT: Oh, okay then. Eric (or Ann, or Erwin) McKean. —Ed.]

For what it's worth—prior to changing the spelling of my surname by deed poll—I'm trying a last-ditch strategy of my own: first, insist, "Let me spell that for you"; then explain "It's very tricky—it's not the way you expect," and finally, bracket the orthography craftily: "K-A . . . (pause while they take it down, then hit them with the clinching sequence) . . . H-N." No, it still doesn't work. All thoroughly disheartening. Even the "Airspeak" phonetic alphabet (listed by Paul J. Sampson in VERBATIM XXIV/1) doesn't help: "*K* for Kilo, *A* for Alpha, *H* for Hotel, *N* for November." Oh well, for light relief, you can always try one of the "unhelpful alphabets" instead —either "*K* for teria, *A* for 'orses . . ." or "*K* as in knowledge, *A* as in aisle . . ."

In the same issue, Jacqueline Schaalje notes how Dutch can fuse words almost ad infinitum into compound nouns, as in *muisklikactivisme* 'mouse-click activism.' That compounding is part of the genius of Germanic languages generally (as distinct from Romance languages, say): consider the standard apocryphal example in German, *Hottentottenpotentatenmutterattentätertöten* 'killing the assassin of a Hottentot potentate's mother,' or the Icelandic *bílvélaíhlutaframleiðsluaðferðir* 'manufacturing processes for car-engine components.'

English, though less extreme, is actually no exception: Nursery-school teacher-training course-fee subsidy applications must be submitted before November. Stylistically inelegant perhaps, but idiomatic enough, and certainly grammatical. It's only the (arbitrary) tendency of English to separate the elements with a space or hyphen that marks the eight-element conglomeration as a "noun cluster" rather than as a "compound noun." English lexicographers owe a debt of gratitude to that tendency. They find it relatively easy to decide and justify what is and isn't included in dictionaries: *powerboat* and *joyrider* yes (single, set-solid word), *power plant* and *pleasure principle* yes (phrase or spaced term, but opaque), and *power struggle* and *pleasure trip* no (transparent phrase). (It may look odd sometimes—*backache* yes, *back pain* no, *back number* yes—but it is consistent.)

German lexicographers, by contrast, risk considerable angst. *Kraftwerk* 'power plant' demands entry, fair enough, and *Shifffahrt* too 'navigation, shipping'—literally 'ship journey.' But why *Machtkampf* 'power struggle,' *Motorboot* 'powerboat,' and *Vergnügungsfahrt* 'pleasure trip' when they're transparent, and all the more so why *Dampfkraftwerk* 'steam-powered power plant' and *Dampfschifffahrt* 'steam navigation'? Luckily there is a standard admissions policy in German dictionaries, it seems. Broadly, any two-element compound merits entering (unless exceptionally infrequent), and any compound of three elements or more requires excluding (unless exceptionally frequent, seriously opaque, or cross-referenced). It is an admittedly arbitrary and unsatisfactory policy, but the best available, and without it, as one leading German lexicographer reportedly explains, "lexicographers would have to think."

A digression. That word *Shifffahrt*: note the spelling. Love those three *f*'s in the middle! A few years ago, they would have been reduced to two, but all three are now required by the 1996–98 revisions to formal German orthography. Icelandic doesn't blink at triple letters: *fjalllendi* 'highland,' *tolllaus* 'duty-free,' *krossspýta* 'crossbar.' In the old days, Danish could create *Raaaaaal* 'an eel from Raw River,' (Today it would be rendered *Rååål,* I think.) What about English? (The standard *zzz, mmm, oooh!* and *aaargh!* are irrelevant here.) The most plausible candidates occur in such formations as our *raisin'n'nut* muffins, the museum's *free-entry day,* and *a clean well-*

lighted place. One could try to force better examples by exploiting analogy:

Prof. Priml is a specialist archaeozoologist, sub-specialising in *archaeooology.*

What alienates the workers isn't Sir Jasper's inherited ownership of the factory but his bullying *bossship* of it.

It's not a windless day, but it is a *squallless* day—ideal for sailing!

The trouble is, convention would probably dictate a hyphen in each case to separate the two elements. Punctuation for the eye or the processing faculty rather than the ear or syntax faculty.

Back to *VERBATIM* now, and a final issue in the issue at issue. Dr John Peters, in an epistola, asks if anyone knows the word for the quality in babies that elicits the "cute response" in adults. Agreed it's not *neotony* 'the retention in adults of juvenile characteristics.' Nor its synonym *paedomorphism*. Nor the coinage *brephometrics*. Just a wild suggestion, but what about *cuteness?*

John Kahn
Leeds, England

EX CATHEDRA

VERBATIM has been exceedingly lucky this summer to have two interns working in its office. Tina Ramirez, of Beloit College (in Beloit, Wisconsin), has been working to put together the press materials to celebrate our thirtieth volume, which is now only two issues away. To that end, if you would like to supply us with a pithy quote about why *VERBATIM* is your favorite magazine, it would be much appreciated and gladly received at the address on the masthead or by email at *editor@verbatimmag.com. (*We would also like to hear from contributors who would like to be featured in press releases aimed at their hometown newspapers. The "local angle," you know!)

Trevor Croxson, of the University of Chicago, has been working on entering data in our shiny new submissions database, which will, we hope, cut the amount of time it takes us (okay, me) to respond to submissions. Just as a reminder—all submissions, even those sent by email, should include a postal address. (Otherwise, we cannot send out checks.)

The office is becoming even more cluttered with books than usual, and we're hoping to include

reviews of Michael Quinion's *POSH: Port Out, Starboard Home* and David Wilton's *Word Myths* in the next issue. (Don't feel that you must wait!)

One book that must be mentioned now, however, is Allan Metcalf's *Presidential Voices*. Combining an overview of presidential oratory and word choice (and even word creation) with short speechographies of each president, Metcalf shows the changing demands placed on the presidents as speakers and how they lived up to (or not lived up to) them. Certainly an essential read in an era when the reach of a presidential malaprop (or more rarely now, sterling phrase) cannot be misunderestimated.

—Erin McKean

Solutions to Cryptic Crossword 97

ACROSS

1 C(ALL + I)OPE
5 SITES (cites hom.)
8 CHATTIER (anag.)
9 U(SURE)R
11 (w)INNER
12 INAN(I + MAT)E
13 DILETTANTISH (anag.)
17 BIRD WATCHERS (word botchers Spoonerism)
19 APPA + LOO'S + A (Papa anag.)
21 BEER GArdens
23 I + D(E)ATE
24 DECIPHER (anag.)
25 ESS + EX
26 ASSES + (n)SED

DOWN

1 C(ACT)I
2 LEARNT (anag.)
3 INTERVIEW (anag.)
4 PREDI(LE)CTION
5 gives US Hiccups
6 TERRA(P)IN
7 SCREEC(H)Y (secrecy anag.)
10 FAITH HEALERS (anag.)
14 NOR + MA(LIZ)E (Ron rev.)
15 A + BRA(SI)VE (is rev.)
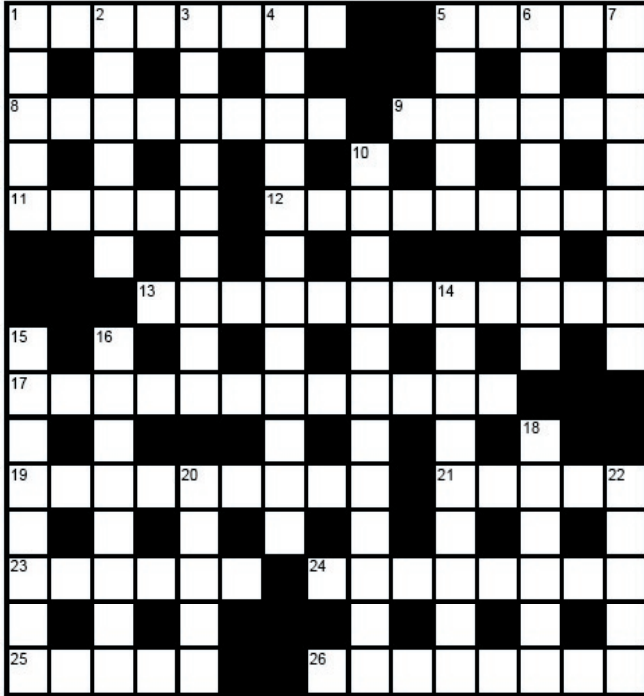16 WRAPPERS (rappers hom.)
18 BRA(HM)S
20 LATE + X
22 EA. + RED

Anglo-American Crossword
No. 97
Compiled by Robert Stigger

MISCELLANEA

Across

1 Organ and everything I contributed to deal (8)
5 In speech, commends positions (5)
8 More voluble, theatric bent (8)
9 "Extremely unpopular" describes certain moneylender (6)
11 Obscure champion lacking dash of Woods (5)
12 Dull and stupid, I get tangled up inside (9)
13 Amateurish cast hid its talent (12)
17 Hobbyists of his own kind, to Rev. Spooner? (4,8)
19 Running, Papa John's a hardy horse (9)
21 Square surrounded by retro beer gardens (5)
23 Think of one energy-packed fruit (6)
24 Perch die off. Explain (8)
25 S★x spot in England (5)
26 Valued beasts of burden employed behind the front (8)

Down

1 101 hedges seem to be desert plants (5)
2 Became acquainted with buggy rental (6)
3 "Reporter's questioning Evert win," I snarled (9)
4 Bias the French built into forecast (12)
5 Rice-and-seafood stuffing gives us hiccups (5)
6 A pinch of paprika's added to ground turtle (8)
7 Harsh punishments essentially shrouded in terrible secrecy (8)
10 Some shamans destroyed Haile's father (5,7)
14 Make regular director Howard upset with sul-try actress West, fetching actress Taylor (9)
15 A warrior's holding back is causing ill will (8)
16 They cover entertainers like P. Diddy for *The Listener* (8)
18 Composer Her Majesty introduced to some supporters (6)
20 Until recently, an unknown source of rubber (5)
22 Each Marxist is handled a certain way (5)