



Name Choices among the Xhosa of South Africa

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Name giving among the Xhosa of South Africa takes on other proportions than in a Euro-Western context. A name is not only a label, identifying and referring to a unique individual, but it also conforms to cultural dictates. This view is strengthened by the fact that Xhosa first names are generally semantically transparent: the lexicon of the Xhosa language serves as the inspiration for the choice of name. Hence, all that is often necessary to interpret the meaning of a name correctly is knowledge of the linguistic system or language of the name carrier. For this reason the name stock in Xhosa society is reasonably finite because not all lexicon entries can serve as the basis for names.

The following categories regarding the motivations in choosing a name are the most popular ones. These names then also indicate a very strong link between name and culture.

Expectations/Aspirations

The names express some sort of expectation or aspiration from the name givers for the child. It is often direct and clear, at other times subtle and shrouded. A common manifestation is a name that reflects a good or positive human quality or attribute. The parents obviously wish that their children will one day exhibit this particular character trait. A child, in growing up, may respect his parents' wishes and expectations or, by some stroke of luck, may naturally exhibit that characteristic. When this happens, the Xhosa are fond of saying: *Ulilandele igama lakhe* ("He follows his name"). This ties in with the term *aptonym*. According to Scheetz (1988), an aptonym is "presumably, an apt or suitable name," from English *apt*; from Latin *aptus*, *aptere* 'to fasten, to join, to fit.' The South African amateur astronaut Mark Shuttleworth was cited as having an apt name.

Some examples:

Thembeke	<thembeke 'to be reliable'
Nomonde	<umonde 'patience'
Lukhanyo	<ukhanyo 'light'
Mncedisi	<umncedisi 'helper'
Mkhululi	<umkhululi 'saviour'
Mthobeli	<umthobeli 'the obedient one'
Nomathamsanqa	<ithamsanqa 'good fortune, luck'
Nompumelelo	<impumelelo 'success'
Thandeka	<thandeka 'to be lovable'
Ndileka	<ndileka 'to be dignified'
Lulama	<lulama 'to be meek/soft-spoken'
Ntombokhanyo	<intombi 'girl' + ukhanyo 'light' = girl of the light
Thanduxolo	<thanda 'love' + uxolo 'peace' = peace lover

It is easy to see the positive personality traits embedded in these names. There are many examples. One wonders how many of these name carriers turned out to be aptonym carriers as well.

Gratitude to God/Ancestors

Most Xhosa speakers do believe in some supernatural force that dictates, guides, punishes, facilitates, or, in short, exerts influence upon people in their daily lives. This could either be the Christian God, *uThixo*, or *uQamata*, a faraway deity that is not approached directly. In the traditional religious context, departed ancestors play an important role as mediators. It is extremely important in such traditional contexts to seek the blessing and benevolence of the ancestors, hence the careful compliance with ritual. The birth of a child may therefore also result in a name acknowledging and thanking the ancestors for their benign influence, indicating that the ancestors or the supernatural forces were favorably disposed toward the parents in question.





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Many names suggest the idea of gratitude in one way or another, and this may then be to either the Christian God or to the ancestors, and it is not inconceivable that both are implied.

The idea of joy, happiness, as well as that of a gift or blessing is also common in names, supposedly because of the arrival of the newborn. Examples:

- Nkosinathi** <inkosi 'Lord' + na- 'with' + thi(na) 'we/us' = the Lord is with us
- Nkosiphendule** <inkosi 'Lord' + -phendula 'answer' = the Lord has answered
- Mandlenkosi** <(a)mandl(a) 'power' + enkosi 'of the Lord' = the Lord's power
- Nombulelo** <(u)mbulelo 'gratitude'
- Nomthandazo** <thandaza 'pray,' umthandazo 'prayer'
- Vuyo** <uvuyo 'happiness'
- Ndivuyeleni** <ndi- 'me' + -vuyela 'be happy for' + ni (plural suffix) = Be joyful over me/my birth
- Ntsikelelo** <sikelela 'bless,' intsikelelo 'blessing'

This category of names will remain popular in spite of the reduplication of many names.

Composition/Extension of the Family

A man with many sons is ensured that the family line will continue, but unless he also has daughters, he is in danger of becoming extremely impoverished due to the *lobola* system, whereby he has to "pay" a number of cattle to the bride's family. On the other hand, if a man has many daughters but no sons, he will become rich in cattle (or other forms of worldly possessions), but the family line may die with him, and so do the ancestors. Ideally then, a family should be nicely balanced in terms of sons and daughters. In that way, both these, that is, the family line (and eventually ancestral status), as well as the wealth aspects, are taken care of. Parents, aware of the implications, may name children to reflect the circumstances around the balance or imbalance of the family composition, and it is common to use lexemes that explicitly represent the sex of the child. Those knowing the family and its composition would then have some "inside" knowledge as to how the new addition should be viewed: restoring the balance or creating an imbalance.

Some male name examples:

- Mzwamadoda** <umzi 'home' + wamadoda 'of men' = House (full) of men. The name clearly suggests the gender composition of the family: the males dominate.

- Madodonke** <(a)madoda 'men' + onke 'all' = All men. This ties in with the previous example.

Examples of female names often include the lexeme '*intombi*' in one way or another:

- Ntombentsha** <intombi 'girl' + entsha 'which is new' = New girl
- Ntombifikile** <intombi 'girl' + ifikile 'has arrived' = A girl has arrived.
- Ntombomzi** <intombi 'girl' + (y)omzi 'of the house' = Girl of the house
- Ntombizodwa** <iintombi 'girls' + zodwa 'only' = Only girls
- Nokwayiyo** <kwa 'also' + yiyo 'it is one' = It is also one (a girl).

The *no-* marker indicates that this is a female name. The parents are exasperated: it appears as if they have only girls, and the latest addition merely drives home the point. Not only are they disappointed, they have even run out of possible and sensible names for the baby girl. In terms of linking name and identity, this example is an interesting one: the baby girl finds an identity only by virtue of and through her sisters born before her.

Some names suggest that the parents have decided they have enough children, and the last-born then gets a name signifying this. Sometimes the name refers to the gender issue only, that is, suggesting that there are now enough girls or boys. This might be a way of invoking the ancestors' sympathy for their specific situation. The verb *anela/-anele* 'become/be enough' features regularly.

- Ntombizanele** <iintombi 'girls' + zanele 'are enough' = The girls are enough.
- Zanele** <zi- 'they' = girls + -anele 'are enough' = They (= the girls) are enough. (This is essentially just a shortened form of the example above).
- Mzwanele** <umzi 'home' + -anele 'be enough' = The home is full; the family is big enough.

The names of twins are often marked in the sense that they are paired semantically, and sometimes morphologically. Examples:

- Bezile** <ba- 'they' + izile 'have come' + be- 'they being' + manyiwe 'united' = They have come united.

The phrase consisting of two words then also functions as the names for the twins, that is, *Bezile* and *Bemanyiwe*. Identity is then clearly expressed in terms of a kind of collective identity.



Qukeza and Khuthala <qukeza/-khuthala 'be diligent'

Not wanting to distinguish between the two, they received names essentially identical in meaning.

The composition of a family has exceptionally strong cultural implications. It is therefore not surprising that these names feature so prominently.

Circumstances around Birth

Innovative and often amusing names are triggered by events or situations around birth. The appearance of the newborn may give rise to a name.

- Nontsikizi** <intsikizi 'black bird' = Female baby with a dark complexion
- Notumato** <Eng. 'tomato.' The respondent remarks that she was beautiful at birth, with 'a reddish complexion,' hence the name.
- Nofoto** <Eng. 'photo.' The name carrier claims she was the spitting image (= photo) of her grandmother at birth.



Nocawe <icawe 'Sunday' = A female child born on a Sunday

Nomvulo <uMvulo 'Monday' = A female child born on a Monday

Nomgqibelo <uMgqibelo 'Saturday' = A female child born on a Saturday

However, it is the unusual, the extraordinary, and unforeseen events that give rise to many interesting names. A young woman went into labor and then there were complications. The doctors decided to deliver the baby through a caesarean incision and informed the would-be father of their intentions, seeking his consent. The husband refused: *Nada nathi makatyandwe, nakanye!* meaning "Did you say she must be operated upon [cut open], never!" He was, however, persuaded that the procedure was best for both the mother and baby and reluctantly agreed. Both mother and baby girl were fine, and the child was summarily registered as *Nada nathi makatyandwe nakanye*, although in everyday life, she was simply called *Nada*.

However, it is the unusual, the extraordinary, and unforeseen events that give rise to many interesting names.

Fairly ordinary circumstances, that is, events that occur regularly, occasionally give rise to names:

- Nontsasa** <intsasa 'early morning' = A girl born early in the morning
- Nomvula** <imvula 'rain' = A girl born when it was raining
- Nomaqabaka** <iqabaka 'cold' = A girl born during a cold spell
- Nokresimesi** <ikresimesi 'Christmas' = A girl born on Christmas day
- Nopasika** <ipasika 'Easter' = A girl born during Easter

Even births during mealtimes have resulted in the following rather unimaginative names:

- Nobrakfesi** <ibrakfesi 'breakfast' = A female born at breakfast time
- Nodinalla** <idinalla 'dinner' = A female born at dinner time
- Nosopholo** <isopholo 'supper' = A female born at supper time

In some African communities it is also common practice to name children for the day on which they were born. This happens frequently, for example, in Ghana, but also in Xhosa society:

A local newspaper carried a story about a mother on a Greyhound bus en route to Umtata. The bus had to stop, allowing the woman to give birth. The child was named *Umtata Greyhound*.

A pregnant squatter was so shocked by the sight of bulldozers destroying her shack after a legal eviction order that she gave birth. The name of the baby girl? *Eviction*. One can understand the motivation of the distressed mother at that point, but the question obviously remains: how will the name carrier respond to her name once grown up? One can only hope that she might have turned into a more benign *Evy* or *Vicky*.

Perhaps acceptance and even pride in these names come precisely from the fact that they are unique.

Death: Survival and Consolation

The death of a child is traumatic in any society, perhaps even more so in a society where successful conception and the resultant birth is seen as a benevolent act from some supernatural power. Should a child then die, it is often interpreted as the influence of evil forces, and it is not easily accepted as "normal" that children should die before their parents do. Xhosa society grapples in its own way with the questions that death brings, and sometimes a child who is born after the death of another receives a derogatory name. The



frustration and despair that arise from the recurring misfortune of stillbirths, miscarriages, and early mortality force the parents to give meaningless and derogatory names to the newborn. The thinking is that such a name would suggest that the child is not valued, and that the parents do not really mind whether the child lives or not. It is a message to those forces, believed to have had a hand in the earlier misfortune, that they really should not care about this one: nobody does. In this way the child has a better chance of surviving. The terms *derogatory protective* and *survival names* are sometimes used. Some examples:

Nomatyhifilili ‘ugly and unappetizing’

Nontwingento ‘worthless’

The other possibility that occurs regularly is that parents are extremely grateful when a birth follows the death of a child. Such a child will often get a positive name and is seen as some form of compensation and consolation after the death of the previous child. Examples:

Nomathamsanqa <*ithamsanqa* ‘good fortune, luck.’ She was the only daughter who lived; all the others died.

Nontuthuzelo <*intuthuzelo* ‘comfort, consolation.’ She was taking the place of her deceased brothers, comforting the rest of the family and restoring peace again.

Nomalizo <‘one who comforted us.’ She was born after the death of her older sister and received the name as a “comforter.”

This appears to be a small category, which suggests that parents and family may have come to grips with the issue of early mortality and may be addressing it in other ways, not through naming anymore.

Commemorative Names

These deal with names that commemorate a person, an event, or affiliation. It is not always easy to identify commemoration, but family members, friends, and famous persons are often commemorated in this way.

If a child nowadays is called *Rolihlahla* (or *Rholihlahla*, which represents the correct orthography), one may be reasonably sure that Nelson Mandela is being commemorated because that is his Xhosa first name, and a slightly unusual one at that. If a child carries the name *Samora*, most people would make the connection with Samora Machel, the former president of Mozambique and a sup-

porter of the struggle for freedom in South Africa. Parents also commemorate Christianity by giving their children an English name from the Bible, for example, Samson, Deborah, Moses, Rachel, which are occasionally transphonologized into Xhosa: *Yakobi* (Jacob), *NomaKorinte* (Corinthians), and *NomaEfese* (Ephesians). I also collected the name *Nomasirayeli* (Israel) and the name carrier’s explanation was simply that she received this name because her parents were Christians.

As regards Xhosa names, this category is best illustrated through clan affiliation. Xhosa speakers, through their clan names (*iziduko*), are linked to a common ancestor. Should Xhosa speakers meet for the first time, they will usually ask about clan affiliation: *Ngubani isiduko sakho?* (“What is your clan name?”) In that way they are trying to establish clan relationship. The following are examples of such names, incorporating or referring to a clan (listed in brackets):

Mahlubi/Nomahlubi (Hlubi)

NomaWushe (Wushe)

NomaBhele/Bhelekazi (Bhele)

NomaTshawe (Tshawe)

Occasionally the clan name is linked to another phrase, often suggesting an increase in numbers through the use of the verb *-anda*, or an exhortation to look after the affairs of the clan:

Mahlubandile <*amaHlubi* ‘the Hlubi people’ + *andile* ‘have increased’ = The Hlubi clan has increased.

Jongamabhele <*jonga* ‘look at/after’ + *amaBhele* ‘the Bhele people’ = Look after the Bhele clan.

Examples of events are few:

Nonkanyamba <*inkanyambe* ‘storm.’ The name carrier’s response: “I was born on a day when there was a great storm, which is called *inkanyambe* by the Xhosa people.”

Langalibalele <*ilanga* ‘sun’ + *libalele* ‘it beat down’ = drought. The name carrier’s response: “I was born during the time of a great drought.”

Nomfazwe <*imfazwe* ‘war.’ A family member’s response: “When she was born there was a war between the Xhosas and the Zulus in Durban, where she was born. So she was given this name.”

This category will probably remain active in years to come. Aside from clan identification, there will always be other persons or events that will find their way into names through commemoration. Through the ages, humanity has been impressed by



the achievements of others and by memorable events. Being named after a family member or friend is also a tradition that will probably live on.

Derogatory/Negative Names

The bestowal of names in Xhosa society is essentially a very positive activity. It often highlights a positive aspect of the individual or his or her family, whether it has to do with noble aspirations for the newborn, their envisaged role in life and in the family, “boasting” about the increase in the family, or commemorating some worthwhile person or event.

Within such a context, it should be obvious that something dramatic must have happened to upset the equilibrium, prompting name givers to resort to names atypical of the tradition to reflect a negative circumstance. The fact that Xhosa names are semantically transparent exacerbates the situation for the name carrier: every time the name is mentioned, he or she is forcefully reminded of the unfortunate events giving rise to the name.

It is easy to identify such negative names based on their meanings, but there is understandably little information on the circumstances giving rise to the name. Name carriers and name givers alike are often reluctant to talk about, to expand on, or to give particulars about such names. The name itself is enough. Those in the know will know, others can only guess. An example:

Nyakambi <*unyaka* ‘year’ + *mbi* ‘is ugly/bad’ = A bad year

The respondent understandably prefers not to comment on the name, merely saying that nobody calls him by this name, that everyone uses his English name. One can only deduce that the name carrier’s family must have experienced very unpleasant circumstances in the particular year of the birth. It is reminiscent of the remark by Queen Elizabeth of England when she said that 1992 had been an *annus horribilus* (Latin for ‘horrible year’) for her family.

Nongangen-gazalwanga ‘I wish she had not been born.’ The name carrier for obvious reasons does not use the name, but prefers her English name.

Nompazamo <*impazamo* ‘a mistake’ = Mistake. The name carrier’s response: “I was not a planned child and I was born outside marriage, and so my birth was said to be a mistake. That is why I was given such a name.”



Others, suggesting sexual offences or illegitimacy, are:

Velaphi <*-vela* ‘come from’ + *phi* ‘where’ = Where do you come from?

Nontshaba <*intshaba* ‘enemies’ = Mother of enemies

Nonyewe <*unyewe* ‘controversy’ = Mother of controversy

Other examples:

Zifihlephi <*Zi-* ‘you’ (reflexive) + *-fihla* ‘hide’ + *phi* ‘where?’ = Where can you hide?

Danisile <*-danisa* ‘cause to disappoint’ = one who has disappointed

Mhlebekile <*m* ‘she’ or ‘he’ + *-hlebekile* ‘has been gossiped about’ = One who is easy to gossip about

Mpisendlini <*impi* ‘warring faction’ + *endlini* ‘in the home’ = There is a fight in [our] house.

Sonosakhe <*isono* ‘sin’ + *sakhe* ‘of him’ = his sin

One can only speculate over the possible reasons for these negative names.

Names in Xhosa society are, in L. T. Ntwana’s words, “little volumes of social history in themselves as well as evocations of friends and loved ones” (1994: 4). The choice of name reveals a great deal about the feelings of the community, the general circumstances of life for the relevant family at the point of birth, the attitudes of the community members toward many issues, and the relationship between the name recipient and name giver. Xhosa names and their interpretation serve as a wonderful entry into the cultural life of Xhosa speakers.

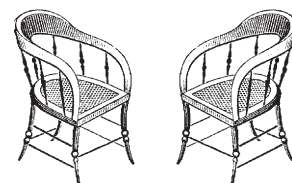
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CLASSICAL BLATHER

Eons and -eons

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“People, look east!” So advised Eleanor Farjeon, in her familiar Christmas carol.¹ And it is tempting to turn our eyes thither—at least as far as Greece—for the origin of those words that end in *-eon*: The neuter singular ending of the Greek first declension is *-on*, and English has gratefully imported such Hellenisms as *chameleon*,² *surgeon*,³ *pantheon*,⁴ and *eon*⁵ itself, together with a number of proper names (*Acteon*, *Anacreon*, *Odeon*)⁶ and scientific terms (*neon*, *nucleon*, *pleon*).⁷

But we need look no farther east than the Straits of Dover for an array of *-eon* words that seem on their face as thoroughly English as a band of stalwart West Saxons lined up behind their shield-wall at the battle of Brunanburgh, whose streams teemed with *sturgeons* and *gudgeons*, even as flocks of *pigeons* and *widgeons* darkened the sky above.⁸ And woe to he so rash as to get the local lord into a high *dudgeon*⁹ (e.g., by suggesting that his younger son was a blot on the family *escutcheon*):¹⁰ Stout vassals in *habergeons*¹¹ would be certain to thump the rash speaker with *truncheons*,¹² *bludgeons*,¹³ or even *puncheons*¹⁴ before immuring him in a dank *dungeon*¹⁵ (perhaps crawling with *hurcheons*¹⁶) and throwing away the key.

In fact, Anglo-Saxon as such words may sound, all of them (save *widgeon*, *bludgeon*, and perhaps *dudgeon*) are borrowings from French, their *-eon* ending a survival from the French suffix *-on*. Not so for *luncheon* (nowadays shortened to *lunch*, to which in turn the *br-* of breakfast has come to be elided to make the portmanteau word *brunch*): It seems originally to have been *nuncheon* ‘light snack’ from Middle English *non-schench* ‘noon drink’¹⁷—making the once-familiar executive “liquid lunch” something of a tautology.

Then there are a couple of Hispanic loan-words: The large, three-masted, square-rigged ships called *galleons* were the backbone of the Spanish commercial and military fleets during the Renaissance; *galeon* was Spanish for ‘big galley,’ the latter word borrowed from Old French *galie* and deriving from medieval Greek *galea*,

such ships being powered both by sails and by oarsmen. (English got *galley* by a separate route: Old French *galie* became Middle English *galei*.¹⁸) *Peon* is a later borrowing into American English of a Spanish word meaning ‘day laborer,’ though it has come to mean specifically someone who is bound to work until his debt to his employer is paid off, and *peonage* has the sense of a servitude indistinguishable in practice from serfdom.¹⁹

There is the occasional oddball *-eon* word as well—notably *simoleon*, American slang for ‘dollar.’ According to etymologist Robert Hendrickson, this word “may derive from the British word *simon*, for ‘sixpence,’ which can be traced back to about 1700. First the British *simon* became our *simon* for a dollar (ca. 1859 but now obsolete).” Hendrickson goes on to suggest an eponymous derivation of *simon* from Simon Magus, mentioned in Acts 8:9–24 (also the source of the term *simony*, the selling of ecclesiastical office.)²⁰

Finally, there are compound adverbs ending with *on* and beginning with locators: *hereon*, *thereon*, *whereon*; but since they are not relevant to our purposes above, we may bypass them and move on.

Errata/Corrigenda:

Regarding our column on indeterminates (“Whatsisnames and Thingamajigs” VERBATIM XXIX/2), Olivier Kaiser has emailed from Paris that while *quoi-que-se-soit* as a synonym for “thingamajig” is not standard French, “there are actually a great many other words that serve the same purpose, such as *machin*, *truc*, *bidule*, as well as such combinations as *machin truc*, *machin chouette*, *bidule chouette* or *trucmuche*, all of which would be apt translations for *thingamajig* and the like. Most of these can also be used for people . . . although there are other nameless people’s names, such as *Tartempion* and *Duchmoll* (variable spellings), among others.” Kaiser went on to tell us that “Greek letters, strangely, or rather their transliteration into French, are also called upon to designate a negligible amount (*c’est epsilon* would roughly translate as “it’s peanuts”) or a nondescript, generic individual (*un individu lambda*). Finally, in France just as in the US or Germany, there are several indeterminate place names, *Trifouillis-les-Oies* being perhaps the best-known example.” We stand corrected, and felicitously expanded upon.



Notes:

1 Eleanor Farjeon (1882–1965), a granddaughter of American actor Joseph Jefferson, was a native of London, a devout Catholic, and a prolific author of poems, stories, and plays for children — a “master at presenting the world as romance,” much of whose verse “echoes the wild, fresh poetry of ballads and singing games, and all of it is lyrical” (Frances Claire Sayers, reviewing Farjeon’s *A Room with a View*, in the October 1956 issue of *Hornbook* magazine). Set to a French carol melody (“*Chantons, Bargiés, Noué, Noué*”), “People Look East” was first published in *The Oxford Book of Carols* in 1928. But even without this now ubiquitous Advent song, Farjeon would still be famous for another inspirational hit: “Morning Has Broken.” Another *-eon*-surnamed writer of no mean accomplishment is the eclectic Beth Gutcheon, who went from quilter to quilt-circuit teacher to bestselling quilting author (*The Perfect Patchwork Primer* and *The Quilt Design Workbook*) to public-television show host (*A Show of Hands*, originating at WGBH-Boston) to novelist (her second, *Still Missing*, she rewrote as the screenplay for the 20th Century Fox film *Without a Trace*; her seventh novel, *Leeway Cottage*, is scheduled to be released in May 2005).

2 *Chameleon* is from Greek *khamai* ‘on the ground’ plus *leon* ‘lion’; the *American Heritage Dictionary* (third edition [1992], hereinafter *AHD*), source of many of the etymologies below, adds that the word is a straightforward gloss of Akkadian *nesh-qaqqari* ‘ground-lion.’ According to the *Columbia Encyclopedia* (fourth edition [1975], p. 501), the common chameleon (*Chamaeleo chamaeleon*) is today found throughout Mediterranean countries; if not merely a loanword but an actual translation were necessary, this would suggest that diffusion of this lizard to its present habitat was by no means complete in antiquity, with speakers of Greek first encountering the reptile as an indigenous species in Mesopotamia. The common chameleon should not be confused with the American chameleon, a different species altogether (*Anolis carolinensis*) related to iguanas.

3 *Surgeon* and its older version *chirurgion* are cognates of French *chirurgien*, derived (via Latin) from Greek *cheir-* ‘hand’ plus *ourg-* ‘worker’ (from *ergon*, ‘work’).

4 From *pan-* ‘all’ plus *theo-* ‘god(s),’ *pantheon* is the collective term for all the gods and goddesses of a given belief system (the Norse pantheon, the Sumerian pantheon, and so on). With a capital P, it is the name of a temple honoring all the gods, built under the emperor Hadrian in the second century A.D. and donated by the tyrant Phocas to the Christians for a church in 609 (see Peter Aicher, *Rome Alive*, Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2004, vol. 1, pp. 143–145). Construction of its Parisian namesake, the Panthéon, was begun in 1764 on the site of an earlier church dedicated to Ste. Geneviève; its dome was completed in 1781, after the death of its architect, J. G. Soufflot. The building now houses the tombs of the most celebrated French citizens (*Columbia Encyclopedia*, p. 2059).

5 An *eon* (also spelled *aeon*) is a very long time; in geological time it is the longest division, being made up of two or more eras. Its Greek source is *aion* (with a long *o*), cognate

with Latin *aevum* (the *-(a)ev-* of *medi(a)eval*) and meaning ‘a space or period of time, a lifetime, an age’ and by extension ‘eternity.’ Personified as a god, Aion was the *Chronokrator*, or Time-Lord (*Doctor Who* fans take note!), an attribute subsequently appropriated for their god by the worshipers of Mithras. (See David Ulansey, *The Origins of the Mithraic Mysteries* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1991] for a fascinating discussion of the iconography of the Mithras/Perseus cult.)

6 Acteon was the hapless witness of Artemis at her bath, subsequently changed by her to a stag and ripped apart by his own hunting hounds; Anacreon was a Greek poet of the fifth century B.C., famous for his praises of love and wine and the subject of a drinking song, “The Anacreontic Hymn,” whose melody was borrowed as a setting for Francis Scott Keyes’ “The Defense of Fort McHenry,” better known nowadays as “The Star-Spangled Banner.” An *odeon* is a hall for musical performances (cf. *ode*); the original Odeion at Athens was built under Pericles in the 5th century B.C. and gave its name (minus the *iota*), to a similar theater constructed for the emperor Domitian around 100 A.D. and usually Latinized to *Odeum* (Aicher, op. cit., p. 231–33;). Odeon is also a trademark of the Gramophone Company of India, Ltd., headquartered at Dum Dum. A *nickelodeon* was originally a movie theater with a five-cent admission, then a name for a player piano, and still later an early variety of jukebox.

7 *Neon*, literally ‘new thing,’ is the inert gas discovered in 1898 by William Ramsay and M. W. Travers, so handy for converting electrical stimulation into loud lighting; *Freon*, on the other hand, is a trade name (rapidly becoming generic and going lowercase; cf. *kleenex*) for any of several fluorinated hydrocarbons formerly widely used as coolants and aerosol propellants (the latter largely thanks to an enterprising neighbor of the late president Nixon, Robert Abplanalp, inventor of the spray-can valve, whose home in Key Biscayne, Florida, was north of the Nixons’, separated by a house owned by Bebe Rebozo; for more on this thick-as-thieves block, see www.miami.com/mld/miamiherald/news/local/9211360.htm?1c) until it was discovered that their escape into the upper atmosphere was depleting the ozone layer and thus increasing the worldwide risk of skin cancer. A *nucleon* is a constituent particle in an atomic nucleus, i.e., either a proton or a neutron. *Pleon* (Greek neuter singular ‘full, more’) is the anatomical term applied to the abdomen of a crustacean and particularly to the telson—the unpaired part of the tail—of a king crab (*Webster’s New International Dictionary of the English Language*, [1933] p. 1655. The ponderous quarto “Web One,” as it is affectionately nicknamed, is an Ali-Babaesque grotto of delightful words, many of which can be sought in vain in subsequent American lexicons, including “Web Two,” its second edition; etymons thought even then to be obscure were thoughtfully included below a bar at the bottom of the page, such as *plenitudinarian* ‘a plenist,’ *pleodont* ‘having solid teeth,’ and the Russian loanword *plet* ‘a kind of whip having three lashes tipped with lead balls.’)

8 *AHD* states that Anglo-Norman *esturgeon* is of Germanic origin, adding that sturgeons are “valued as



a source of caviar and isinglass” (p. 1785). The *gudgeon* (from its Latin name, *gobio*, by way of Old French *goujon*) is a small fish used for bait, and by analogy, a dupe; but its doublet *gudgeon* (this one derived from French *gojon* ‘peg’) is a socket for a turning pin, as on a rudder, and a *gudgeon pin* is the same thing as a *wrist pin*, which “attaches a connecting rod to a wheel, crank, or piston” (ibid., p. 2061. The *gudgeons* of an old-fashioned cannon are called *trunnions*.) *Pigeon* comes from Old French *pignon*, possibly derived from Latin *pipio* ‘young chirping bird’ (ibid., p. 1371); like *gudgeon*, it can also mean ‘dupe’ (and with the prefix *stool*, an informer, i.e., one who ‘sings’; cf. *fink*, a slang adoption of the German/Yiddish word meaning ‘finch’). A *widgeon* is a type of duck (*Anas americana* in North America, *Anas penelope* in Europe); according to *AHD*, the name is of unknown origin.

9 Although *dudgeon* as ‘snit’ is also of unknown origin, its doublet *dudgeon*, now in disuse, is the name of a wood from which the handles of knives were formerly made, and hence a dagger whose hilt is so made; *AHD* gives its etymology as Middle English *dogeon*, “possibly from Anglo-Norman.”

10 *AHD* derives *escutcheon* from Anglo-Norman *escuchon*, in turn from Latin *scutum* ‘shield’—likewise the source for the names of several coins bearing a shield on their reverse (e.g., the Portuguese and Spanish *escudo*, the Italian *scudo*, and the French *écu*. In establishing a common currency, Europe missed the opportunity for a charming pun that would have acknowledged this cross-cultural numismatic tradition, for its ministers of finance might have agreed to call it the European currency unit, or **ECU* for short. Alas, they went with the bland *euro* instead.)

11 A *habergeon*, or *haubergeon* (from French *hauberjon*) is a short chain-mail coat whose full-length version is called a *hauberk* (French *hauberc*). In the song “*L’Homme Armé*,” popular throughout Europe in the 15th century (and employed by several composers as the unifying theme for choral masses), the listener is advised to protect himself against the marauding soldier of the title by acquiring “un hauberjon de fer [iron],” in a debunking of the chivalric ideal typical of the waning of the Middle Ages.

12 The *truncheon* carried by British police comes from Middle English/Old North French *tronchon* ‘club, broken off piece [of wood],’ from Latin *truncus* ‘trunk.’ Americans call it a *nightstick* or *billy club*—the latter, says *AHD*, either from *billet* in its sense of ‘piece of firewood’ or else an alteration of *bully*.

13 A *bludgeon* is a club that is generally heavier at one end. *AHD* says, “origin unknown” (p. 207), but one might hazard a guess that some onomatopoeia is lurking just around the corner. It appears nowadays to be more common in American English as a verb than as a noun, particularly in crime journalism.

14 *Puncheon* has a variety of meanings, and like *dudgeon* and *gudgeon*, is a doublet with two derivations. The first, yielding ‘upright piece of wood for framing,’ ‘broad piece of timber with only one face planed flat,’ or ‘goldsmith’s punch,’ is from an Old French noun *ponçon/ponchon* ‘punch, stamp,’ in turn from Latin *pungere* ‘to prick.’ The second comes from

Old French *poinçon/poinchon* (also from *pungere*) and means ‘cask of 72 to 120 gallons, or amount of liquid sufficient to fill one,’ *AHD*’s hypothesis being that such casks were stamped to indicate that they were indeed of the capacity advertised.

15 Although we nowadays think of a *dungeon* (from Middle English *donjon*) as a prison cell deep within the bowels of a castle, *donjon* survives in its own right as the term for a fortified stronghold or keep, such as the original Tower of London. *AHD* has proposed an ingenious and plausible derivation from Late Latin *domnio* ‘tower belonging to a lord’ [Latin *dominus*]), but it has also been seriously suggested that *dungeon* may come from the same (Germanic) root as *dung*.

16 *Hurcheon* is a British and Scots dialect word (already obsolete even seventy years ago when Web One listed it at the bottom of page 1048), for (a) ‘hedgehog’ or (b) ‘[sea] urchin.’ *Urchin* is from Middle English *urchone*, itself from Old French *erichon* (the modern form is *hérisson*), all three words meaning ‘hedgehog’ and derived from Latin *ericus* ‘spiny like a hedgehog,’ which is in turn from Latin (*h*)*er* ‘hedgehog.’ Ernout and Meillet (*Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine* [Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1979], p. 200) add that by extension *er* was also the name given to a piece of defensive military equipment having lots of spikes with iron tips (rather like the more modern *cheval de Frise*), noting that *eres* were often placed in front of a camp gate, sure to break up any potential rush of hostile infantry. This was a passive device only, however; for mobile field operations, at least, the Greeks preferred ‘scythe-bearing carts’ (*harmata drepanophora*), which could scatter a hoplite square in no time and whose use they may have learned from the Persians (see, e.g., Xenophon, *Anabasis* I.9).

17 *Scencan*, the root of *-schench*, was Old English for ‘pour out.’ *AHD* postulates assimilation of the initial *l* in *luncheon* from a dialect word *lunch*, meaning a piece of bread or cheese.

18 The Romans had galleys as well, of course, named them according to how many banks of oars (*remi*) they had: *Triremes* had three, *quinqueremes* had five, and so on. *AHD* suggests that *galea* may have been a variant of *galeos* ‘shark,’ or possibly came from *galeë* ‘weasel.’

19 An intelligent and ruthless landlord will make sure that the interest on the debt is such that the peon can never pay off the principal, but will spend his life in debt service—a principle lately and profitably extended to debtor nations by their First World creditors. The source of *peon* is a medieval Latin word for foot soldier: *pedo(n)-*, a replacement for classical Latin’s *pedes/peditis* (from *pes/pedis* ‘foot’).

20 Henderson, *The QPB Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, Quality Paperbacks, 1997, p. 615.

[Among his other picaresque exploits, Nick Humez teaches mythology to undergraduates at Montclair [NJ] State University. His CD, *Myth Songs*, was released this month.]



Foxen in the Henhice

Richard Lederer
San Diego, California

Recently I undertook an extensive study of American dialects, and a friend told me about a farmer named Eben Pluribus who spoke a most unusual kind of English. So I went to visit Farmer Pluribus, and here is a transcript of our interview:

“Mr. Pluribus, I hear that you’ve had some trouble on the farm.”

“Well, young fella, times were hard for a spell. Almost every night them danged foxen were raiding my henhice.”

“Excuse me, sir,” I interjected. “Don’t you mean foxes?”

“Nope, I don’t,” Pluribus replied. “I use oxen to plow my fields, so it’s foxen that I’m trying to get rid of.”

“I see. But what are henhice?” I asked.

“Easy. One mouse, two mice; one henhouse, two henhice. You must be one of them city slickers, but surely you know that henhice are what them birds live in that, when they’re little critters, they utter all them peep.”

“I think I’m beginning to understand you, Mr. Pluribus. But don’t you mean peeps?”

“Nope, I mean peep. More than one sheep is a flock of sheep, and more than one peep is a bunch of peep. What do you think I am, one of them old ceet?”

“I haven’t meant to insult you, sir,” I gulped. “But I can’t quite make out what you’re saying.”

“Then you must be a touch slow in the head,” Farmer Pluribus shot back. “One foot, two feet; one coot, two ceet. I’m just trying to easify the English language, so I make all regular plural nouns irregular. Once they’re all irregular, then it’s just the same like they’re all regular.”

“Makes perfect sense to me,” I mumbled.

“Good boy,” said Pluribus, and a gleam came into his eyes. “Now, as I was trying to explain, them pesky foxen made such a fuss that all the meese and lynges have gone north.”

“Aha!” I shouted. “You’re talking about those big antlered animals, aren’t you? One goose, two geese; one moose, a herd of meese. And lynges is truly elegant—one sphinx, a row of sphinges; one lynx, a litter of lynges.”

“You’re a smart fella, sonny,” smiled Pluribus.

“You see, I used to think that my cose might scare away them foxen, but the cose were too danged busy chasing rose.”

“Oh, oh. You’ve lost me again,” I lamented. “What are cose and rose?”

“Guess you ain’t so smart after all,” Pluribus sneered. “If *those* is the plural of *that*, then *cose* and *rose* got to be the plurals of *cat* and *rat*.”

“Sorry that I’m so thick, but I’m really not one of those people who talk through their hose,” I apologized, picking up Pluribus’s cue. “Could you please tell me what happened to the foxen in your henhice?”

“I’d be pleased to,” answered Pluribus. “What happened was that my brave wife, Una, grabbed one of them frying pen and took off after them foxen.”

I wondered for a moment what frying pen were and soon realized that because the plural of *man* is *men*, the plural of *pan* had to be *pen*.

“Well,” Pluribus went right on talking, “the mis-sus wasn’t able to catch them foxen so she went back to the kitchen and began throwing dish and some freshly made pice at them critters.”

That part of the story stumped me for a time, until I reasoned that a school of fish is made up of fish and more than one die make a roll of dice so that Una Pluribus must have grabbed a stack of dishes and pies.

Pluribus never stopped. “Them dish and pice sure scarified them foxen, and the pests have never come back. In fact, the rest of the village heard about what my wife did, and they were so proud that they sent the town band out to the farm to serenade her with tubae, harmonicae, accordia, fives, and dra.”

“Hold up!” I gasped. “Give me a minute to figure out those musical instruments. The plural of *formula* is *formulae*, so the plurals of *tuba* and *harmonica* must be *tubae* and *harmonicae*. And the plurals of *phenomenon* and *criterion* are *phenomena* and *criteria*, so the plural of *accordion* must be *accordia*.”

“You must be one of them genii,” Pluribus exclaimed.

“Maybe,” I blushed. “One cactus, two cacti; one alumnus, an association of alumni. So one genius, a seminar of genii. But let me get back to those instruments. The plurals of *life* and *wife* are *lives* and *wives*, so the plural of *fife* must be *fives*. And the plural of *medium* is *media*, so the plural of *drum* must be *dra*. Whew! That last one was tough.”

“Good boy, sonny. Well, my wife done such a good job of chasing away them foxen that the town newspaper printed up a story and ran a couple of



photographim of her holding them pen, dish, and pice.”

My brain was now spinning in high gear, so it took me but an instant to realize that Farmer Pluribus had regularized one of the most exotic plurals in the English language—*seraph*, *seraphim*; so *photograph*, *photographim*. I could imagine all those Pluribi bathing in their bathtubim, as in *cherub*, *cherubim*; *bathtub*, *bathtubim*.

“Well,” crowed Pluribus. “I was mighty pleased that everybody was so nice to the missus, but that ain’t no surprise since folks in these here parts show a lot of respect for their methren.”

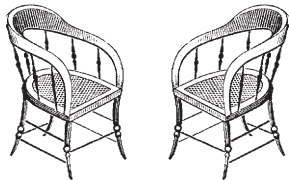
“Brother, brethren; mother, methren,” I rejoined. “That thought makes me want to cry. Have you any boxen of Kleenices here?”

“Sure do, young fella. And I’m tickled pink that you’ve caught on to the way I’ve easified the English language. One index, two indices, and one appendix, two appendices. So one Kleenex, two Kleenices. Makes things simpler, don’t it?”

I was so grateful to Farmer Pluribus for having taught me his unique dialect that I took him out to one of them local cafeteriae. Then I reported my findings to the American Dialect Society by calling from one of the telephone beeth in the place.

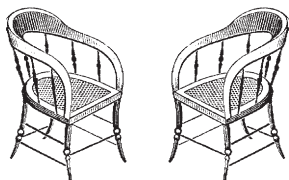
Yep, you’ve got it. One tooth, two teeth. One telephone booth, two telephone beeth. Makes things simpler, don’t it?

[Richard Lederer is the author of more than 3000 books and articles about language and humor, including his current boo, *the reverence of Anguished English*. His web site is www.verbivore.com.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

On Google News [3 May 2005] there was a link to KVUE, TX that read, “Runaway bridge originally planned to flee to Austin.” [Submitted by Thomas Fair.]



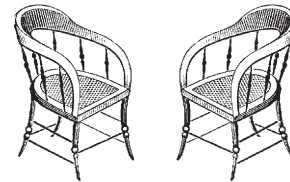
Abecedary Musings

Simple as ABC, we say,
For all, at first, seems plain as day,
But some complexity ensues
When we must mind our p’s and q’s;
And having mastered q’s and p’s,
Must dot our i’s and cross our t’s.

Some struggle to identify
The value of an x or y,
While nearly everybody trims
Some words by means of acronyms,
Deducting f ineffably,
Taking the itch from s.o.b.

But all must know, before they’re dead,
Whether to end with **zee or zed**.

Henry Fischer



EPISTOLA

Reading Rob Schleifer’s “Alchemical Calques” in your Summer 2004 number has given me food for thought. The translation of a term, element by element, may give a changed meaning. Here are some examples: *Synagogue*, from Greek *syn* ‘with, together’ translates into Latin *con*, Greek *agein* ‘to lead, to bring’ = Latin *ducere* this gives us *conduct*. Similarly *symbiosis*—*convival* ‘living together.’ How about *chirurgery* (and old term for surgery) from *cheir*, ‘hand’ and *ergon* ‘work’ = Latin *manus* and *labor* ‘manual labor’ or maybe ‘hand work.’ Would Mr. Schleifer call these calques or are they my miscalculations?

With all my best wishes,

Naftali Wertheim
Emek Beth Shan, Israel



Like a Hyphen between Troubled Words

Mark Peters

Buffalo, New York

If I could be any punctuation mark, I would be a hyphen. Why? Hyphens have more fun.

Though there are plenty of ways new words are coined in English—such as blending, borrowing, and clipping—the most common method by far is combining, and there just isn't an easier way of making a combination than with the help of our friend the hyphen. A couple of recent articles have reminded me of how uncommonly fresh and amusing these words can be:

A *Rolling Stone* feature on *Penthouse* publisher Bob Guccione's career and recent financial meltdown uses the adjective *un-Guccionesque-sounding*.

In a Slate.com roundtable on a Sopranos episode, Jeffrey Goldberg quotes an FBI agent who describes a friendly gathering in a restaurant like this: "What you have here is a *just-released-from-jail-party-type-situation* going on."

Chronicle of Higher Education columnist Jon T. Coleman writes, in reference to a previous column he wrote about job frustration and the destruction of Christmas ornaments, "Instead of molding my attitudes and persona to fit other historians' expectations, I put my strange, angry, genuine, *penguin-abusing* self out there."

An interview on Salon.com with humorist Sandra Tsing Loh refers to a recent frenzy of censorship as being part of the *post-Janet-Jackson's-breast* age. An AP story with the headline "Some Frozen Lobsters Return to Life" discusses some seemingly reanimated lobsters, and one lobster expert insists that no living lobster could return from the grave (or the refrigerator)—it must be a *robo-lobster*.

Aside from articles in publications like VERBATIM, there won't be much use for these words. It's unlikely that any aspect of *robo-lobsters* will be part of a *Washington Post* exposé. The entertainment industry may indeed be experiencing *post-Janet-Jackson's-breast* censorship and engaging in more and more wholesome, *un-Guccionesque-sounding* programming, but who will say so in exactly those words? No one attending a *just-released-from-jail-party-type-situation* will describe it that way in a Christmas card, and unless penguins are discovered to have unforeseen terrorist sympathies or destructive potential, I doubt

penguin-abusing will join *weapons-grade* as a popular adjective any time soon.

There's a term for this type of word, coined for a particular purpose or situation and unlikely to be used or heard from again: *nonce word*. Almost all the hyphenated words I'll be discussing are nonce words, but some might also be considered *stunt words*, a type of nonce word intended to get a laugh and show off the virtuosity of the speaker or writer. A great sample of stunt words is a David Letterman list—"Top Ten Least Used Hyphenated Words"—which I first read years ago and may just be the origin of my hyphen-obsession:

- | | |
|----|----------------|
| 10 | Lick-proof |
| 9 | Owl-flavored |
| 8 | Hat-resistant |
| 7 | Trunk-ripened |
| 6 | Gumbel-scented |
| 5 | Post-moistened |
| 4 | Hitler-riffic |
| 3 | Casket-tested |
| 2 | Pants-happy |
| 1 | Mookie-proofed |

All these words are adjectives—the most common type of hyphenated word. These words are often coined to avoid confusion; for example, an *iguana eating fish* is considerably different from an *iguana-eating fish*. Hyphenated adjectives have another common (though less grammatical) purpose: to sell and describe products. These words are frequently found in advertising copy and product labels, and this is the type of language that's so well spoofed by the Letterman list.

But—like Starbucks and rats—hyphenated adjectives can be found just about anywhere. By flipping through Frank S. Todd's book *10,001 Titillating Tidbits of Avian Trivia*, I can find dozens of bird-describing hyphenated adjectives, such as *tooth-billed*, *red-footed*, *crinkle-edged*, *black-capped*, *supra-orbital*, *seed-eating*, *yellow-crowned*, *wedge-shaped*, *two-egg*, *river-dwelling*, *short-eared*, *non-domesticated*, *bare-legged*, *island-breeding*, *noxious-tasting*, *wooly-necked*, *chickadee-like*, and *pink-backed*. In a somewhat different book, *The Official Splatter Movie Guide*, the following examples can be found: *long-suffering*, *blood-splattering*, *must-see*, *Michigan-made*, *Brooklyn-accented*, *B-movie*, *devil-cult*, *brain-dead*, *throat-slashing*, *death-dealing*, *religion-crazed*, *long-dead*, *suspicious-looking*, *thumb-cutting*, *mid-eighties*, *splatter-punk*, *plague-infested*, *none-too-bright*, *ultra-gore-filled*, *half-man*, *half-fish*, *chainsaw-wielding*, *full-throttle*, *wacked-out*, *sex-crazed*, *3-D*, and *gun-and-grenade-toting*.

Wherever hyphenated adjectives are found,



they tend to follow a few patterns; one of the most common of these is noun + present participle. I've collected hundreds of words that fit this pattern, like *cradle-robbing*, *goatee-having*, *stomach-churning*, *self-milking*, *Fidel-adoring*, *ass-whomping*, *Confucius-quoting*, *sausage-making*, *sewer-dwelling*, *milkshake-swilling*, *turkey-munching*, *hair-sniffing*, *radiation-spewing*, *mind-relinquishing*, *aquarium-cleaning*, *dumpster-diving*, *vampire-eating*, *follicle-stimulating*, *ego-destroying*, and *bunny-boiling*. These words work particularly well in insults, so the next time you think of calling a friend or colleague a jerk, think how much more mileage and pleasure you'd get out of calling them a *sun-obscuring*, *life-degrading*, *pie-humping*, *thumb-sucking* jerk. Now those are fighting words.

Some common suffixes for hyphenated adjectives are *free* (gender-free, fat-free, office-free, guilt-free), *friendly* (Atkins-friendly, pet-friendly, senior-friendly, Palestinian-friendly), *minded* (small-minded, absent-minded, community-minded, like-minded), *sized* (super-sized, city-sized, pocket-sized, Texas-sized), *proof* (rabbit-proof, idiot-proof, crash-proof, mildew-proof), *soaked* (sweat-soaked, testosterone-soaked, bullshit-soaked, Pepsi-soaked), *shaped* (Barbie-shaped, weapon-shaped, football-shaped, duck-shaped), *flavored* (coffee-flavored, Cajun-flavored, beef-flavored, Detroit-flavored), *intensive* (female-intensive, data-intensive, writing-intensive, dog-excrement-intensive), and *happy* (slap-happy, hate-happy, headline-happy, scrapbook-happy). As you will see in the *penguin-happy* finale to this article (no peeking), just about any word can be grafted onto any of these suffixes, no matter how odd the result may be.

Hyphenated nouns are a bit less common than their adjectival brethren, but they can be just as diverse and entertaining; some of my favorites are: *powers-that-be*, *stepmom-to-be*, *you-know-what*, *Buddha-nature*, *bird-god*, *ape-poopy*, *semi-sleazoid*, *super-honkie*, *googly-eyes*, *lady-in-waiting*, *techno-spectacle*, *pushy-face*, *chest-thrustage*, *mom-cam*, *donor-kebab*, *butcher-bird*, *spokes-fembot*, *mega-spatula*, *Bat-gadget*, and *poo-machine*. As with the adjectives, the only limits to what may be done are the creativity and chutzpah of the writer.

There are patterns to hyphenated nouns though, one of the most popular being what I call a *noun-verber*, which works like this: *gland-robber*, *apple-polisher*, *muffin-choker*, *egg-implanter*, *stool-softener*, *ambulance-chaser*, *bottom-feeder*, *hair-puller*, *weed-whacker*, *money-maker*, *weenie-roaster*, *rocket-launcher*, *glad-hander*, *wife-swapper*, and *brain-switcher*. Another type is the X-turned-Y word, which is

very useful in these days of rapid career change. Any of us—well, a few of us—could end up as a *rock critic-turned-priest*, *quarterback-turned-con-vict*, *optometrist-turned-sharpshooter*, *adversary-turned-beau*, *beau-turned-adversary*, or *pimp-turned-preacher*. Then there's a group of hyphenated nouns starting with a letter of the alphabet, like *A-bomb*, *G-string*, *Y-chromosome*, *C-note*, *X-men*, *B-girl*, *T-bird*, *D-minus*, and *U-boat*, plus those ubiquitous abbreviated names like *J-Lo*, *A-Rod*, and *C-Webb*.

From Paul McFedries' great website and book, *The Word Spy*, I learned that the poodle-breeding world has developed a new type of hyphenated noun to go with all those dogs: the *poo X* (pronounced "poo cross"). These words almost always have a hyphen, as do *Bernie-poo*, *Jack-a-poo*, *Maltie-poo*, *Poma-poo*, and *Yorkie-poo*, which indicate a poodle crossed with a Bermese mountain dog, Jack Russell terrier, Maltese, Pomeranian, and Yorkshire terrier, respectively. Another type of noun combo takes several words—rather than two species—and hogties them into one, often with *Mr.* as a prefix, like *Mr.-Lives-with-Girlfriend* (from columnist Judy McGuire) and *Mr. I'm-on-Jordan's-level* (from late columnist Ralph Wiley). The linguistically innovative *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* writers were particularly gifted at making up words of this type, such as *Mr. I'm-so-tortured*, *Miss I-chose-my-major-in-playgroup*, *Miss Not-over-yourself-yet*, *Mr. Billowy-coat-king-of-pain*, and *Mr. I-don't-take-orders-now-where-do-I-stick-my-ax?*

Hyphens are most often used to join two root words (*Judeo-Christian*), a prefix and a root (*non-Euclidean*), or a root and a suffix (*hygienically-challenged*), but the prefix and suffix have a less-well-known sibling called the infix—a word stuck in the middle of a root, which is almost always an expletive and an intensifier. *Fan-fucking-tastic* and *guaran-damn-tee* are classic examples of infixated words. Hyphens aren't always used in infixes—*absoschmuckinglutely* (thank you, Michael Adams) has none, for instance—but hyphens and infixes go together often enough that I can stay on topic and still include this list of hyphenated, infixated, mostly filthy words: *disa-fucking-greeable*, *in-goddamn-consistent*, *pre-diddly-ictable*, *terra-extremely-firma*, *vice-fucking-president*, *yee-fucking-haw*, *brand-spanking-new*, *woo-motherfucking-hoo*, *no-bloody-way*, *a-freakin'-men*, *eu-freakin'-reka*, and *me-fucking-ow*.

This next type of hyphenated word includes several parts of speech and consists of silly-sounding, rhyming pairs, most often with a long-*e* ending, like *whoopsy-daisy*, *hootchie-kootchie*, *creepy-crawly*, *goody-goody*, *wishy-washy*, *willy-nilly*, *ticky-tacky*, *tootsy-*



wootsy, namby-pamby, teenie-weenie, freaky-deaky, lovey-dovey, palsy-walsy, hanky-panky, heebie-jeebies, wowie-zowie, itty-bitty, topsy-turvy, hokey-pokey, and honey-baby. This kind of repeated sound is called reduplication, but rather than dwell on the technical details, I'd rather revel in some non-long-*e* words of this species: *glug-glug, pooh-pooh, go-go, choo-choo, yo-yo, yum-yum, dingle-dangle, gibber-jabber, pitter-patter, razzle-dazzle, hodge-podge, rope-a-dope, rub-a-dub, mama-yama, pish-posh, and teeter-totter.*

Though I haven't discussed hyphenated verbs, hyphenated-*Americans*, or what happens when two young people decide to marry and hyphenate, I'm now going to leave behind the rigors of research and start making stuff up. What follows is a bunch of hyphenated stunt words I've created, since all this talk about other people's words has me jonesing to come up with a few of my own. These are inspired by many of the words I've cited, but especially *penguin-abusing*. I assure you that no penguins were injured in the making of these paragraphs.

(Why penguins? Well, I guess I like penguins almost as much as I like hyphens—I certainly think my often-frigid home of Buffalo, NY, could be improved by the addition of penguins, and surely the penguins wouldn't mind. We never run out of ice).

Though I am neither *penguin-sponsored* nor *penguin-whipped*, I am a somewhat *penguin-admiring* kind of guy. So if you consider yourself a *penguin-buster* or a *penguin-dozer* with a *penguin-weary* attitude, you might want to take your *penguin-hating* self elsewhere and stop reading now. As we leave the mostly *pre-penguin* part of my article behind, brace yourselves for the *penguin-infested*, *penguin-dominated*, *penguin-intensive*, *penguin-oriented*, *penguin-laden*, *penguin-filled* paragraphs to follow.

Many made-up *penguin* words seem silly now, and they may always be silly, but some could become a silly reality as genetic-engineering (or poodle-breeding) techniques eventually get applied to flightless waterfowl. Important research by smart scientists may create these tuxedo-clad beasts: *turbo-penguins*, *super-penguins*, *astro-penguins*, *perma-penguins*, *mini-penguins*, *penguin-poos*, and *super-maxi-penguins*. I particularly look forward to the invention of helpful *robo-penguins* and yummy *choco-penguins*, though I dread the day I look upon an unholy *ape-penguin* or a book-cooking *execu-penguin*.

In the future (or a strange, bad movie), *info-penguins* may explain to children how the *Euro-penguin* descended from the *Paleo-penguin* and the *sub-penguin*



gave rise to the *uber-penguin*. If penguins gain political power, *penguin-baiting* and *penguin-bashing* will be strictly prohibited, as will the barbaric practices of *penguin-eating* and *penguin-whacking*. *Penguin-centric* federal programs will create *penguin-affirmative* programs that are *penguin-compliant*, including the invention of *penguin-tested*, *penguin-approved* breakfast cereals that *omni-penguins* and *penguin-ish non-penguins* alike will eat. *Pay-per-penguin* entertainment and the *rent-a-penguin* industry will increase in popularity, as good *penguin-minded* people will enjoy *penguin-o-ramas* in the privacy of their *penguin-themed* homes. Plus, *penguins-in-training* will go on to become *penguins-at-law* who give jobs to their marginally qualified *penguins-in-law*, as *nepo-penguin-tism* spreads throughout the corporate world (or, ah, the Antarctic circle). Whichever.

On that confusing note, I must admit I have more questions than answers about the rest of the words I've created:

What's the difference between a *pseudo-penguin* and a *quasi-penguin*?

Is *aqua-penguin* redundant?

Since penguins can't speak, is a *spokes-penguin* out of the question?

Do *penguin-scented* products carry *penguin-borne* diseases?

If a *tree-hugger* loves the environment and a *panda-hugger* loves China, what does a *penguin-hugger* love? (Proms? Nunneries?)

Does the *vice-penguin* take control if the *penguin-in-chief* dies? If so, of what?

Well, I insincerely apologize for my *hyphen-happy*, *penguin-wacky* paragraphs. It's all over now though, and the *penguin-phobic* and *hyphen-hating* among you can relax—I now return you to your regularly scheduled issue of VERBATIM.

Oh, I almost forgot: Good-freakin'-bye.

[Many more hyphenated words—such as *aggo-goofitude*, *cat-nookiepalooza*, *glacier-appropriate*, *mega-destructo*, and *testosterone-marinated*—can be found on Mark's language blog *Wordlustitude* (<http://wordlust.blogspot.com>), a dictionary-in-progress of ephemeral words. Mark has written about other topics in *All About Mentoring*, *Alt-X*, *The Buffalo News*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *McSweeney's*, and *Teaching Artist Journal*. Mark is also a mentor for *Empire State College in Buffalo, New York* and a *five-ball juggler who is available for parties*.]



An Entire Alphabet of Scarlet Letters

Craig Conley

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Is it preposterous to wonder whether letters of the alphabet have an inherent color? As I conduct ongoing research for the *One-Letter Words: A Dictionary*, I can't help but ask myself why it is that letters are so often described as having a rosy hue. Most readers will recall the infamous red *A* of Nathaniel Hawthorne's classic novel, but as Steven Heller pointed out, "*The Scarlet Letter* is not the only scarlet letter" (*The Education of an Illustrator*). Nor are scarlet letters solely brands of shame, sin, or doom. A *red letter day* is a holiday, or at least a memorable or happy day (the phrase likely dating from 1549, when saints' days were marked in red in the *Book of Common Prayer*). Can there be a natural wavelength that writers instinctively pick up on? Virginia Woolf's eyes seemed keen enough to detect infrared all the way to *Z*: "After *Q* there are a number of letters the last of which is scarcely visible to mortal eyes, but glimmers in the distance" (*To the Lighthouse*).

Biblical allusions associate the color scarlet with sins of the body, and by coloring their letters red, authors seem to flesh them out and add a spark of life. Take, for example, this description by Brian Moynahan: "[W]hen I came to read [the psalms], they seemed written in letters of fire or of scarlet" (*The Faith: A History of Christianity*). Nathaniel Hawthorne also mentioned a burning quality to his scarlet letter: "[Placing it to my breast,] I experienced a sensation not altogether physical, yet almost so, as of burning heat; and as if the letter were not of red cloth, but red-hot iron" (*The Scarlet Letter*). Sparkling red letters can even burn the imagination: "In my head a scarlet letter blazed," says Betty Fussell (*My Kitchen Wars*). Whether or not the context involves physical branding with a red-hot iron (examples would be rather too gruesome for inclusion here), blood imagery often figures in. As John Lawton wrote, "She rubbed the [handkerchief's embroidered] scarlet letter between finger and thumb, felt the crispness of dried blood" (*Bluffing Mr. Churchill*). George C. Chesbro dramatically combines both blood and fire imagery in his depiction of an alphabet volcano "spewing what appeared to be incomplete, fractured sentences and clustered gobs of words that were half submerged in a river of blood red lava" (*The Language of Cannibals*). And consider this more serene example by poet Madeline Defrees, who seems to agree that scarlet letters are written by nature herself and in turn read by nature as well: "And who, / when scarlet let-

ters / flutter in air from sumac and maple, / will be there to / receive them? Only a sigh / on the wind in the land of bending willow" ("Almanac," *Blue Dusk: New and Selected Poems, 1951–2001*).

In most cases, scarlet letters have a dazzling quality that you can't help but notice. Here's one example by Wilkie Collins: "[B]elow the small print appeared a perfect galaxy of fancifully shaped scarlet letters, which fascinated all eyes" (*Hide and Seek*). Groucho Marx recalled being fascinated by similar red letters: "In large, scarlet letters [the handbills] said, 'Would you like to communicate with your loved ones even though they are no longer in the flesh?'" (*Memoirs of a Mangy Lover*). It is as if the letters of Groucho's handbill had a rosy flesh of their own and enough charge to bridge the gap between the living and the dead. Here's another example of a dazzling red letter, by Ian Rankin: "There was a big letter *X* marking the spot [for a parachute jump]. It was made from two lengths of shiny red material, weighted down with stones" (*Resurrection Men: An Inspector Rebus Novel*). Michael McCollum sums up nicely the impact of scarlet letters: "The [comet collision] display froze, save for a single blinking word etched in scarlet letters: *Impact!*" (*Thunderstrike!*) Red letters have impact, all right!

What follows is an entire alphabet of scarlet letters that I have collected, many as marks of shame but others simply pulsing with the red blush of life (or at least a strawberry birthmark). In a few cases I cite more than one favorite example from literature. Whether or not red is definitively the natural color of the alphabet is a question that is bound to remain controversial, but the body of evidence is certainly mounting.

A—"The next day she had felt that the scarlet letter *A*—for Alcohol—was seared across her forehead, but her parents continued in their befuddled ignorance." —*This Body: A Novel of Reincarnation* by Laurel Doud

B—"The shirt and bloomers [of the baseball suit] were gray, with narrow red stripes. There were two big red letter *B*'s lying loose in the box." —*Carney's House Party* by Maud Hart Lovelace

C—"From now on Joe is the man with the Scarlet Letter. He has '*C*' [for Communist] written on his coat, put there by men who know him best." —*Joseph McCarthy: Reexamining the Life and Legacy of America's Most Hated Senator* by Arthur Herman

D—"Some of the women students dressed in black and pinned a red '*D*' on their sweaters. 'It's my scarlet letter,' one explained. 'I dance. I'm a sinner.'" —*Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* by Pete Daniel



“[S]ince there is a no-fault divorce law, a party can be perfectly innocent and still get the scarlet letter—in this case a *D*—stitched on his shirt.” —*Breach of Promise* by James Scott Bell

E—“Barring sewing a scarlet letter *E* on her clothes, they knew enough about her daughter’s mental illness [erotomania] and past history to keep her away from, or at least warn, any female authority figures who might unwittingly cross her path.” —*I Know You Really Love Me: A Psychiatrist’s Account of Stalking and Obsessive Love* by Doreen Orion

F—“[T]here had been an incomplete letter painted in blood red on Sarah’s wall. At the time, Francesca and Bragg had thought it might be an *F*.” —*Deadly Caress* by Brenda Joyce

“I was going to fail. Fail! No B, no gentleman’s C—Fail. F. The big one: my own Scarlet Letter. Branded on my forehead—*F*, for Fuckup.” —*A Fistful of Fig Newtons* by Jean Shepherd

“Never mind that they are doctors, lawyers, world leaders; they must still wear a scarlet letter, a giant red *F*, if, heaven forbid, they’re fat.” —*The Blessed* by Sharon McMahon Moffitt

G—“The first illustration was of a young man with short wavy hair and a fringe of reddish beard, standing by himself inside the arc of a giant red *G*.” —*Codex* by Lev Grossman

H—“You look and smell like a street whore from the slums. Did you know it is within regulations for me to brand you with the letter *H* for harlot? . . . Tomorrow night I will fetch the brand which imprints the scarlet letter. I think I will put it upon your breasts. Yes, an *H* upon each. Two *H*’s. They will brand you forever as Helford’s Harlot!” —*The Pirate and the Pagan* by Virginia Henley

I—“Has a big red letter ‘*I*’ appeared on my chest, branding me as infertile to the world?” —“The Goddess Speaks” by Dot Shigemura

J—“If they do walk free, they should carry a warning to the rest of us. Maybe a scarlet letter *J*, for jackal, sewn onto all their clothes.” —“Bottom Line Attracts Bottom Feeders” by Michael Miller

“Unless Jesus appears before us with a scarlet letter *J* on His forehead and unless Jesus shows us the wounds in His side, we treat Him as just another of life’s encounters or acquaintances.” —“Prayers of the Passion” by Sue Eidahl

K—“Mark born or unborn [children] with a red letter *K*.” —“Count Your Sins” by Audrey Tarvids

L—“It was like I’d been branded with a scarlet letter *L* for liar, and I felt as though no one treated me



the same for weeks after that.” —*Emotional Blackmail: When the People in Your Life Use Fear, Obligation, and Guilt to Manipulate You* by Susan Forward

“For years, many on the left have ducked the ‘*L*’ word. While characterized by the right as pink, the letter, unfortunately, has become tainted as scarlet.” —*Red, White and Liberal: How Left Is Right and Right Is Wrong* by Alan Colmes

M—“Sometimes, I feel as though I’m wearing a horrifying scarlet letter—only the letter is *M*, for Murderess.” —*Hide and Seek* by James Patterson

“Even when out on her own she felt as if she were wearing a scarlet letter. *M* for miscegenist.” —*Cloud Mountain* by Aimee Liu

N—“When a brand-new exhibitor with her first dog joins a kennel club, she wears a large scarlet letter (*N* for Novice) on her breast that is visible to everyone but her.” —*Dog Showing for Beginners* by Lynn Hall

O—“A giant *O* [referring to the stigma of an open relationship] would hang above our house, a scarlet letter emblazoned upon the sky for the general protection of the citizenry.” —*The Bastard on the Couch: 27 Men Try Really Hard To Explain Their Feelings about Love, Loss, Fatherhood, and Freedom* by Daniel Jones

P—“Half-way up the hill a prominent lump of grey stone the size of a hayrick had been painted with a large, lop-sided letter *P* in scarlet paint, so that it was visible to any ship anchored in the lagoon.” —*Blue Horizon* by Wilbur Smith

Q—“I didn’t know that there was a pain like that in the world. And I writhed from the torture of it—a clotted red letter ‘*Q*’ spread across my eyes and started to quiver.” —*Die Reise nach Petuschki* by Wenedikt Jerofejew

R—“Our lucite deal mementos would need to be amended to add this [subscript] *R*, now the scarlet letter of derivatives.” —*F.I.A.S.C.O.: The Inside Story of a Wall Street Trader* by Frank Partnoy

“The weight of an invisible scarlet letter *R*, for rapist.” —*The Pledge* by Rob Kean

S—“Once she was defeated, she put on the scarlet letter—*S* for secrecy and shame—and did not tell either of her two husbands or her son about me.” —*Journey of the Adopted Self: A Quest for Wholeness* by Betty Jean Lifton

“It’s all getting to be a real burden for those of us who still smoke.’ Susan Saunders says. ‘Today’s “scarlet letter” is the big red *S* we smokers feel we wear around our necks.’” —*The No-Nag, No-Guilt, Do-It-Your-Own Way Guide to Quitting Smoking* by Tom Ferguson



T—"I was only good for punishment, and punished I was, never fear. I pinned on my scarlet letter—mine would be a *T*, for toe-sucking—and wore it everywhere, with a sort of perverse comfort." —*My Story* by Sarah Ferguson

"Basically, being temporary means you don't exist in the federal system. You're invisible. . . . 'Do I get to have a scarlet letter *T* painted on my forehead?'" —*The Loop: A Novel* by Nicholas Evans

U—"[A]nyone who challenges their policies is threatened with the new Scarlet Letter—*U*—for Unpatriotic." —"Support Our Troops?" by Gregory Reck

V—"Although self-pity thwarts self-acceptance, wearing the scarlet letter *V* (for victim) allows us to take the moral high ground." —*Ruthless Trust: The Ragamuffin's Path to God* by Brennan Manning

"[W]hat have we come to, that the scarlet letter these days isn't *A*, but *V* [for Virginity]?" —*Him/Her/Self: Gender Identities in Modern America* by Peter G. Filene

W—"Davenport marked all nomads in his [eugenics] table with a scarlet *W* (for Wanderlust, the common German term for 'urge to roam'). He then examined the distribution of *W*'s through families and generations to reach one of the most peculiar and improbable of conclusions ever advanced in a famous study: nomadism, he argued, is caused by a single gene." —*The Lying Stones of Marrakech: Penultimate Reflections in Natural History* by Stephen Jay Gould

X—"Branded with the scarlet letter 'X' in the new MPAA ratings system, *Midnight Cowboy* nonetheless encountered absolutely no difficulties at the box office." —*The Sixties: 1960–1969* by Paul Monaco

Y—"It is the symbols of Communism that return to attack and kill Benny, and in the last lines of [Benedikt Erofeev's] novel [*Moscow Circles*], it is the red letter 'Y' that spreads before Benny's eyes as he dies. Throughout the novel, it is this letter that has symbolized Benny's participation in the symbolic order, as it is the only letter his baby son knows." —"Moscow Circles" by Avril Tonkin

Z—"Sesar got up and looked at his watch. In the center of the black face was a red letter *Z*. It began to flash." —*Neo-Zed* by Anonymous

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Let's Ban These Words (and Why)

James Lynn Page
Horwich Bolton

I recall an episode of the British television comedy series *Blackadder*, in which the titular character enjoys a joke at the great Dr. Johnson's expense. Edmund Blackadder is taking wry delight in expressing his contrafibularatories now that the doctor has finally completed his dictionary. Johnson does a double take, aghast to hear a word with which he is unacquainted being uttered by a mere butler. It soon becomes clear, too, that there are many other absurdly long utterances Johnson has never encountered, thus rendering the doctor's magnum opus incomplete. As the butler gets into his stride, Johnson vainly strives to write down these new and peculiar words. Blackadder is frasmotic to have caused the doctor such pericom-bobulations and, as he exits the room, announces he will return interfrastically.

Beyond these occasions for mirth, though, the subtext is clear: Blackadder's piece of wry one-upmanship satirizes the use of verbose language itself when employed, say, as a sign of social aspiration or a lofty intellect. While this is very much a case of Horace's *sesquipedalia verba* (words a foot and a half long), as far as the creative use of English goes these days, it seems loquacity is not the problem; rather, it is the use of sloppy construction, euphemism, and loathsome phrasing that one would cross the road to avoid if they were people.

Relatively new to the lexicon, then, we have *culture vulture*, *happy clappy*, *bonkbuster*, *touchy-feely*, *aga saga*, *policy wonk*, *edutainment* and the self-contradictory *charm offensive*. Of course, my objection to these unwelcome and inelegant transgressors of the language is on aesthetic grounds; they upset both eye and ear. (In some cases, the stomach too.)

Other offenders come from the category of political correctness. From about 1980 we find that *animal companion* was first used as a means of avoiding the suggestion that the animal's worth is diminished in some way by calling it a pet. Those favoring the use of *animal companion* would have the rest of us believe that pets, quite contrary to our usual relationship to them, are less inferior to humans than we would like to imagine. Their role is now to be elevated to that of an equal,



though in which respects one cannot be sure. But perhaps our time-honored assumption that pets are, on the whole, inferior to humans persists because it is true, and the entire issue of animal companions is nothing short of absurd:

Cardinal Newman . . . had the intriguing idea that those humans who live more or less virtuously endow their animal companions with personhood and an accompanying share in immortality (*Guardian Weekly*, 10 Oct. 1993).

Isn't *euphemism* a wonderful thing? It is, as its Greek origin indicates, a word or phrase that is 'fair of speech,' in that it is used to replace a much harsher synonym, though I must say I prefer the definition by Professor Ernest Weekley, who calls it "a form of speech which avoids calling things by their names." The politically correct often have a field day here, and while one cannot reasonably object, say, to *plump* (for 'fat'), or *plain* (for 'ugly') it seems there are no lengths to which certain people will not go. For instance, *The Independent* on Sunday (26 Aug. 2001) reported that the dish spotted dick, a suet pudding containing currants, "has just been renamed 'spotted Richard' to save lady shoppers' blushes." If there really is a case to be made for the protection of sensibilities in the supermarket, perhaps fairy cakes and puff pastry should be altered so as to excise any remaining vestiges of homophobia. Presumably, after we have exchanged tarts for something less embarrassing, the finer feelings of certain shoppers can remain safe. Then again, we could go further: what about altering dessert names appended with *fool* or *rolly-poly*, so as not to offend the cerebrally or calorifically challenged?

Both politics and employment are areas ripe for euphemism. We have such moonshine terms as *stakeholder economy*, *third way*, and *care in the community*: a government program entailing little care at all. But if the politically correct euphemism exists for the purpose of discretion, its equivalent in the workplace verges on the degrading. This shameful avoidance of "calling things by their names" results in job titles like *floor technician* (cleaner), *refuse collector* (as in dustbin-man), and—believe it or not—*glass technician* (window cleaner), whereby euphemisms are employed as insults to human intelligence. But you can take revenge upon your boss: having secured work, you may at some time be involved with *industrial action* (going on strike) whereupon the company may retaliate by *downsizing*, which means you will soon be out of work again. After being *dehired* (made redundant), you may make a *successful benefit claim* (go on the dole), though if you buck the system and *commit benefit fraud* (an ille-



gal, though often ingenious, way of increasing one's income), you may have to serve some prison time at her Majesty's pleasure. (This latter prompts me to wonder: Does her Majesty actually derive pleasure from having her subjects locked up?)

But it's not just particular euphemisms that should be banned. Entire styles of language, if only they were simplified, would make life much easier. Sadly, the formal and technical language that constitutes legalese still believes in its own long-windedness. In most cases the retaining of its stylistic tradition (e.g., the use of archaisms or a woeful absence of punctuation) seems inexcusable. Is it really too much trouble to replace nouns like *testator*, *lien* and *chattels*, or words conflated into adverbs like *theretofore*, *therewithal*, and *hereunder*? Some lawyers argue that legalese avoids the risk of ambiguity inherent in plain English, that its preciseness and consistency are its very strengths. That it is pompous and dull, even tautologous, need not concern us. But when we are faced with its unwieldy phrases and a style inimical to a reader's general sanity, can it really be argued that tradition must nevertheless prevail? Sometimes there is simply a surfeit of detail:

"The following provisions of this Act shall extend only to shops that is to say those provisions of section six and section eight which relate to the approval by occupiers of shops of orders made under those sections the provisions of paragraph (c) of subsection (1) of section seven and the provisions of paragraph (a) of section twelve" (*The Evening News*, 25 Feb. 1938).

Government departments, on the other hand, ought to receive awards for sheer inventiveness: a tax increase becomes a *revenue enhancement tax-base erosion control*, while a vehicle from which to sell goods is not a 'barrow' or 'cart,' but a *movable and peripatetic apparatus by means of which sales are enabled to be made*. One lady requesting a certain book from a government officer was "authorised to acquire the work in question by purchase through the ordinary trade channels." The simple answer, "You can buy it in a shop," would, plainly, have been a reckless desertion of duty.

Pace the Plain English movements of Britain and North America, here is an extract from the 1982 British Golden Bull Awards. If anything, it shows that a love for detail is the very quintessence of those brave souls working in insurance:

"A disablement gratuity of 21.50 based on an assessment of 3% per week from 8.6.83 to 22.11.83 and 11.12 per week from 23.11.83 to 6.12.83 based upon an assessment of 20% for

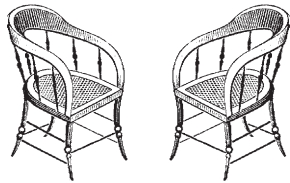


the period 8.6.83 to 1.12.83 and a disablement gratuity of 52.75 based upon an assessment of 3% from 2.12.83 to 1.6.84 are awarded for the same accident for which a disablement gratuity of 21.50 based upon an assessment of 3% from 24.3.83 to 7.6.83 and a disablement pension of 10.72 per week from 8.6.83 to 22.11.83 and 11.12 per week from 23.11.83 to 13.12.83.”

In the unlikely event of even understanding these calculations, needless complexity would remain an issue. Of course, complications can arise for the opposite reason; where there is an absence of precision. Thus, woolly ambiguity, self-contradiction, and strange new similes of the writer’s own devising which, occasionally, stimulate a general feeling of mirth in the reader. Apropos of this, I close with the following brief, though priceless, extract from John G. Brandon’s *The Regent Street Raid*; and far from wanting such words banned, long may his work be fondly read, I say:

“Billy the Dip’s job was, as usual, outside man; which most important duty he would perform in the company of another ferrety-eyed person not present, who owned to the name of Abe Snitzler, and in whom was combined the cunning of the rat with the swiftness of the eel. These two would station themselves, the first on the corner of Regent and Maddox Street, the second in the alley at the rear of the premises by which route the loot and get-away would have to be made.”

To those who have worked out how it is possible to perform a duty in the presence of someone not there, I offer my heartfelt contrafibularatories.



SIC! SIC! SIC!

The car of choice for many—including the police chief, fire chief, and sheriff—remains the omnipresent Ford Crown Victoria. But many of those cars are getting long in the tooth. [Submitted by Catherine Joseph, Oakland, California.]



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EPISTOLA

Route 17, heading East-West through the Southern Tier in New York State near the Pennsylvania border, dips so close to that border that if one takes Exit 61 onto Spring Street and heads south, one is immediately in the Keystone State. Within a hundred yards, just south of the parking lot for the Grand Victorian Inn, a Best Western hostelry on the right, appears this road sign:

AGGRESSIVE DRIVER
HIGH CRASH AREA
Next 4 1/2 miles

Such a sign of course raises questions:

- (1) Is a particular aggressive driver being warned to be careful for the stated distance?
- (2) Are all drivers being warned about that particular driver? If so, why don’t the local gendarmes simply get him/her off the road?
- (3) Is the sign aimed at *all* aggressive drivers (in which case “DRIVER” needs to be plural)?
- (4) After 4 1/2 miles, does the crash likelihood decrease? If so, why?

I admit: we did not have nerve enough to drive that 4 1/2 miles and investigate. Next time ... maybe.

Edwin Rosenberg



Vocabulary Acrobatics

Walt Starkey
Yorba Linda, California

The acrobatic capability of English words to change their meaning in accordance with their context poses the temptation to fabricate amusing statements like the following:

Most people seem to get enough sleep, but the restless rest rest less. (Here the context changes the meaning of “rest” from remainder to repose.)

If your offspring can’t solve their money problems, perhaps your will will if you are willing. (“Will” changes from specification of inheritance to possible future action.)

Words that mate with other words through a property that can be thought of as a sort of syntactic covalence also display the capability of changing meaning with context. For example, “Jack struck out” might mean that Jack fanned in a baseball game, started on a journey, threw a punch, or got nowhere with his girlfriend. If Jill “made out,” she may have succeeded romantically, completed a form, managed to discern something written or spoken, or hit an easy-to-catch fly ball.

When verbs and prepositions get together, they demonstrate an especially strong syntactic covalence, enriching our vocabulary with colorful new compounded nouns and verbs like the examples listed below:

hang up (v), hangup (n), hang out (v), hangout (n), hang in (v), hang around (v), shake up (v), shakeup (n), shake down (v), shakedown (n), shake off (v), let up (v), letup (n), let down (v), letdown (n), let in (v), let off (v), break in (v), breakin (n), break out (v), breakout (n), break up (v), breakup (n), break down (v), breakdown (n), break off (v), knock out (v), knockout (n), knock down (v), knockdown (n), knock up (v), show up (v), showdown (n), show off (v), showoff (n), take off (v), takeoff (n), take out (v), takeout (n), take in (v), walk out (v), walkout (n), walk up (v), walkup (n), walk in (v), let up (v), letup (n), let down (v), letdown (n), withdraw (v), withhold (v), withstand (v)

Antonymic pairs of adverbs (e.g., *in, out; up, down; on, off*) seem to be particularly active in combining with a given verb to compound new nouns and verbs. There is an almost irresistible urge to make use of these newly minted verbs and nouns to

fabricate amusing sentences like the following:

If I pretend that your adverse criticism doesn’t bother me, I put on that I can put up with your putdown.

If a power failure interrupted the gossip in a hospital ward, you might say that the shut-down shut up the shut-ins.

One party in a long-standing dispute might challenge his adversary to show up and put up or shut up.

To increase the revenue from television, the league decided it would pay off to put off the playoff.

Although they are far less prevalent than preposition-verb compounds, preposition-noun compounds also offer examples of syntactic covalence, such as the following:

flame up (v), flameout (n), bottom out (v), top off (v), monkey around (v), horse around (v), outman (v), outgun (v), cave in (v), beef up (v), gloss over (v)

Preposition-adjective compounds offer other examples:

warm up (v), warmup (n), black out (v), blackout (n), rough up (v), cozy up (v), tidy up (v), green up (v)

It seems plausible that *brown* became a verb in our vocabulary after first appearing as the compound verb *brown up*, i.e., while we now say “brown the biscuits,” we used to say “brown up the biscuits.” If so, we may soon be saying “green the lawn” instead of “green up the lawn.” Preposition-adjective compounds include the curious instance of antonymic prepositions compounding with the same adjective to yield two different verbs with the same meaning: *slow down* and *slow up*.

In a number of compounded nouns and verbs, the preposition element has the acrobatic ability to vault from one side of the verb element to the other, providing two compounds with the same elements but different meanings. For example:

upset, set up; inset, set in; upstart, start up; output, put out; upbringing, bringing up; input, put in; intake, take in; outbreak, break out; back out, outback; shot up, upshot; shoot off, offshoot

Such transformations can fuel sentences like the following:

If you watch an apprentice mechanic get a motor running, you see the upstart start up the motor.

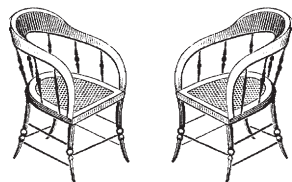
If a computer user is disgruntled with her results, she is put out by the output.

Just as there is no inherent sin in splitting an infinitive, there is no inherent sin in splitting a compounded verb. However, the freedom of locu-



tion that lets you split the verb is sometimes vetoed by the object of the verb. For instance, you can say “hang up the phone” or “hang the phone up”; you can say “climb up the ladder,” but not “climb the ladder up”; you can say “put in the coins” or “put the coins in;” you can say “dive in the lake,” but not “dive the lake in;” you can say “take down the picture” or “take the picture down”; you can say “walk down the road,” but not “walk the road down.”

If, in the days to come, you find yourself immersed in fashioning sentences like the examples used above, you can’t say I didn’t warn you. Don’t feel guilty, though. It is a harmless pastime and can be a lot of fun.



EPISTOLA

I just heard someone in a television commercial for a pet spray say that, “We used Zero Odor and literally killed the odor.” That literally killed me.

I am obviously writing this from the grave.

But wait. Do you think that I am starting a rant that the word literally must be used in the strict or literal sense only, or I will mock the usage?

No, unapologetically and gleefully I shall always hear the benighted gentleman in the commercial say that he extirpated, slew, and executed that damned odor. He confessed to the killing. Call the police, call the coroner!

But there’s more. To think that I may ever want to proscribe word usage is literally ridiculous. Really, you must on yourself get a grip, cease rainbows to chase, and furthermore, stop trips of the head. Besides, if this potential for confused and double meaning, no matter how deep one has to dig for it, were suddenly and magically to disappear from language, where’d be the fun?

I am a charter subscriber, and I literally love VERBATIM.

Regards,
Gary Cyr
garycyr@pacbell.net

Offensive Names

Robert M. Rennick
Prestonsburg, Kentucky

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, central and eastern European Jews were compelled to adopt surnames and pass them on to their children. While most readily obeyed the directive and were allowed to choose their own names and naturally took those with pleasing sounds and connotations, those who were reluctant to comply and others who occupied a comparatively low status in sane communities often had uncomplimentary and even ludicrous names imposed on them by petty officials assigned by their respective governments to register their names. A body of tradition emerged that relates how some overworked and underpaid German and Austrian officials found in this commission lucrative opportunities for graft by extorting money to register or assign pleasant sounding names.

The most attractive names—those derived from gems and flowers (*Rosenberg*, *Blumenthal*, *Goldberg*, etc.)—are said to have commanded the highest prices, while penniless Jews were given highly unflattering names designed to disparage and inflict suffering. In some places officials, given precious little time to process the registrations or enjoined to avoid a duplication of names, resorted to unique and ingenious designations, coining names from ordinary words or even phrases.

Dislike of individual Jews or Jews in general seems to have played a key role in the tradition of arbitrary name assignment, accounting for the greater number of such names on record. To illustrate the extent of the imagery allegedly applied by prejudiced and unscrupulous officials, and to suggest how extremely unpleasant they must have been to the families they were given to, I have listed below, with their English translations, some of the more ludicrous of these names. Many of these names were recorded in the several writings of Karl Emil Franzos (1848–1904), a Galician-Jewish belletrist from Czernowitz (in Bukovina, in the present Ukraine)¹; and some were given by Curtis Adler in a 1940 issue of *Israel’s Messenger*,² while others were sent to me in personal correspondence.

We may reasonably assume that some of the names on my list are not authentic, but others can be considered genuine since they’re known to have been borne by real persons, probably descendants



of their recipients, and a few are even still in use. Some authorities on European Jewish names have narrowed the incidence of the more ludicrous naming to a comparative handful of malicious officials in the Polish sections of Prussia and Austria, especially Galicia and, to some extent, both sections of Bukovina.³ The preponderance of German names on the list probably reflects the limitations imposed on the naming officials as representatives of German-speaking suzerainties. Here are the names:

Affenkraut	monkey cabbage
Afterduft	rectal smell
Aftergeruch	rectal smell
Armenfreund	friend of the poor
Ausfresser	mischief maker
Bettelarm	destitute
Beutelschneider	pickpocket, swindler
Bloeder	stupid
Borges	money lender (?)
Butterfass	butter barrel
Butterweich	soft-hearted (lit. 'soft as butter')
Drach	dragon
Drachenblut	dragon's blood
Dupa or Dupsky	rear end (Polish)
Durst	Thirst
Elephant	elephant
Eselkopf, Eselkaupt	donkey's or ass's head
Fresser	glutton
Galgenstrick	rogue (lit. 'gallow's noose')
Galgenvogel	vulture (lit. 'gallow's bird')
Garfinkel	carbuncle
Geldeschränk	money chest
Geschwür	abcess, boil, running sore
Getreide	grain (a dealer in grain?)
Gewürz	spice (a dealer in spices?)
Gleichgewicht	equilibrium
Goldgräber	golddigger
Goldlust	lust for gold
Gottlos	Godless or impious
Grabscheid	spade (for a grave digger)
Groberklotz	a crude or boorish fellow (lit. 'coarse log')
Heuschreck	grasshopper
Hintergesitz	rear end
Honig(mann)	honey (for a salesman of honey?)
Honigwachs	honey wax

Hunger	hunger
Hungerleider	starveling, needy wretch, poor devil
Kanalgeruch	canal or sewer smell (or possibly smelly pipe)
Kanalgitter	sewer cover
Karfunkel	carbuncle
Katzenellenbogen	cat's elbow
Kirschrot, Kirschrut	cherry red
Kohlkopt	cabbage head
Kratzer	scratcher
Krautkopf	cabbage head
Kuratz	excrement (in Croatian)
Küssemich	kiss me
Ladstockschwinger(?)	someone who inflicts a swinging blow with a ramrod (?)
Lumpe	hoodlum, scoundrel
Maschindendraht	machine thread or wire
Maultier	mule
Maulwurf	mole
Muttermilch	mother's milk
Nachgeschirr	chamber pot
Nachtkäfer	nightbug
Nachtschweiss	night sweat
Nashorn	rhinoceros
Niedergesäss	lower ass
Niemand	nobody
Nierenstein	kidney stone
Nothleider	beggar
Nussknacker	nutcracker
Ochenschwanz	oxtail
Pfeffer	pepper
Pferd	horse
Pisoheles	urinator
Pitschpatsch	scoundrel who should get boxed on his ears
Pore	pig (Rumanian)
Profitlich	profitable
Puderbeutel	powder bag
Pulverbestandteil	gunpowder particle or ingredient
Raubvogel	bird of prey
Reberiwurzel	vine stock
Rettig	radish
Rindskopf	ox (or cow) head
Salz(mann)	saltmaker or salt merchant



Sauerstrom	sour discharge
Sauger	sucker (in the sense of nipple or teat)
Saumagen	sow's paunch
Schames	genitals
Schamröt(e)	blusher
Schmalz	grease or lard, animal fat
Schmetterling	butterfly
Schnapser	heavy drinker
Schöndufter	sweet smeller
Schulklopper	an assiduous attendant of a synagogue
Schwefel	sulphur or brimstone (Does this allude to the Devil?)
Schweinburg (?)	pigsty (?)
Schweinigel	hedgehog or swine
Schweissloch	sweat hole
Singmirwas	sing something to me
Süsskind	sweet child
Sussmann, Süssmann	sweet man
Taschengreifer	pickpocket
Temperaturwechsel	change of temperature
Teufel	devil
Tintenpulver	ink powder
Tod(t)schläger	murderer
Totenkopf	death's head
Treppengelaender	stairway railing or banister
Trinker	drunkard
Veilchenduft	scent of violets
Wanzenknicker	louse cracker (or one who kills lice with his fingernails)
Wasserstrahl	discharge of urine
Weinglas	wine glass
Weisheitsborn	well of wisdom
Wohlgeruch	good smeller
Zentnerschwer	hundredweight
Zimmt	cinnamon (a dealer in cinnamon?)
Zucker(mann)	sugar merchant
Zuckersüss	sugar sweet
Zweibeldurft	onion thirst
Zweibelsüss	onion sweet
Zwergl (?)	dwarf

Some of these names, of course, might have borne a distorted allusion to the condition of life or some physical attribute or eccentricity of the individual so named. An outdoorsman, for example,

might have been named *Veilchenduft* (scent of violets) or *Lilienthal* (valley of lilies).

Kohlkopt could well have been a stupid fellow, and *Butterfass* might have been excessively overweight, while *Eselkaupt* may have made an ass of himself in attempting to convince the naming official to assign him a better name. *Süssman* was probably a seller of sweets.

Kanalgeruch might have lived near a foul-smelling canal or emitted an unpleasant odor of his own.⁴ *Karfunkel* might have been a "pain in the neck" though the word literally refers to one variety of precious stone. (Some authorities on Jewish names, like Albert Parry, have held that this name was not coined by central European anti-Semites at all but by Jewish jewelers from a beautiful red gem.)⁵ Rebecca *Küsse mich* likely appealed to the more prurient side of the naming official. Curtis Adler tells of a Miss *Himmelblau* (sky blue), a pretty blue-eyed student from Cracow, and of Ernst *Profitlich*, an ambitious young fellow who worked hard to support his family.⁶ Mr. *Pulverbestandteil* was thought to be "worth no more than a shot of gunpowder."⁷ *Temperaturwechsel* was the name of an attractive young dancer.⁸

The late John Leighly, of the University of California, Berkeley, once recalled having found *Aftergeruch* in a 1950s French onomastic journal. The story that the name had been assigned, in the late 18th century, to an Alsatian-Jewish family. One member of that family later became a personal physician to the Austro-Hungarian emperor. In that position, he was ennobled and told that if he wished he might change his name. He replied, "I have brought honor to my horrible name, and shall keep it."⁹

Katzenellenbogen is often thought to be a joke, but *The New York Times*, back in 1881,¹⁰ reported on a distinguished old German Gentile family that had borne this name for several hundred years. According to N. Pearlroth, another authority on Jewish names, the name came from that of a Hessian town and may have derived originally from *Cattimalibochi*, a combination of three ancient Germanic tribes. He recalled the never-confirmed legend of Saul Katzenellenbogen, who, for one night, was named king of Poland and whose descendants adopted the name *Wahl* that was later Polonized as *Wol* (ox).¹¹

According to Professor Leighly, an expert on German names, there are two German words



expressed in English as *powder*. These are *pulver* (from the Latin *pulver*) or the utilitarian powders (e.g. baking powder, gunpowder, etc.) and *puder* (from the French *poudre* or ‘powders used in the toilet’ (e.g., hair powder, face powder, etc.). *Puderbeutel* probably referred to “the bag through the meshes of which the powder was applied to the skin or hair.”¹²

Leighly literally translated *Schulklopfer* as ‘school knocker’ or ‘beater’ and suggested that it might refer to the infliction of corporal punishment on pupils. But then he thought that, since *Schul* is the Yiddish word for synagogue, *Klopfer* could also refer to knocking on a door, and thus *schulklopfer* could have been someone who answered the knock on a synagogue door.¹³

A few names are said to have derived from officials’ misunderstanding of the replies to their question, “What is your name?” Theodore Gaster, in his brief article on names in the *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, reported at least two examples of this:

A Jew who stated in Yiddish that his name was “poshet Yankele” (simply Yankele) was promptly registered as *Yankele Poshet*, and a family who remarked in Hebrew, when asked their surname, “Ano lo neda” (we don’t know) were entered as *Neuda*.¹⁴

In many cases, though, there was probably no connection between name and person. One of the most unusual of these imposed names, alleged to have been given to a Viennese family, is *Kanalfestergitterbestandteil* (literally, ‘a grated sewer cover’),¹⁵ which is said to have been seen, in a somewhat modified form, in 1912 on a signpost in front of a store in the Jewish section of Cracow.¹⁶

On Polish estates in the 19th and early 20th centuries, “witty” aristocrats were known to have given their peasants names derived from parts of the anatomy, particularly the genitals and their functions, while some of the streets of small Polish towns and villages were also named for such parts of the human body.

On the other hand, in the czarist-occupied section of Poland, some of the most wretched Jews were given names borne by the highest Polish aristocracy, ostensibly to embarrass the latter. These two practices were done away with a few years before the Second World War, when a law was enacted in Poland that offensive names could be changed at no cost. Until that time, nearly any kind of change was costly and complicated.¹⁷

Many of the names on my list, authenticated or otherwise, and this name-giving practice itself, have given rise to a body of anecdotal material such as the examples that follow:

Theodore Gruen of New York City gave this account of his mother’s family name, *Rothensies*:

“When the Jews were asked to select German family names, my ancestor appeared before the mayor of the village [of Zwingenberg in Hesse] and replied in local Hessian German to the mayor’s question as to what name he wanted: ‘rothensies’ (*raten sies*), which means ‘you guess it.’ When my ancestor then asked the mayor what the new name would be, the mayor answered ‘I put down exactly what you said—Rothensies.’ All my ancestor’s protestations did not make the capricious or perhaps anti-Semitic mayor change his mind.”¹⁸

This is the rendition of a family narrative that may be the prototype of the popular Jewish jest about Ephraim, the practical joker, who, when asked his present name by the registrar, answers “*Ich weiss net. Raten sie*” (I don’t know. Guess it) and then is given the name *Ratensies*.¹⁹

In another version, Ephraim may simply be asking for the official’s advice in choosing a name (replying “*raten*”, which also has the meaning of advice or counsel).²⁰

A variation of that story involves a similar word, *röten* (to redden or make blush), and here the naming official, referring to the timidity of a name seeker, observes that the latter is clearly blushing and records his name as *Rotensies* (he’s blushing).²¹ Or else the name seeker simply misunderstands that remark and assumes that this is to be his new name (another popular theme in name acquisition lore.)

Mrs. Martin Brock, of Oakland, California, recalled her uncle Alwin Pitschpatsch, a well-to-do Berlin furrier, whose name gave rise to ridicule. *Patsch* is, strictly speaking in Yiddish parlance, a ‘box on the ear’ and *Pitschpatsch* means that one is a scoundrel, and thus each ear should be hit.²² For a considerable bribe he arranged for a change of name to *Pietsch* (*peye/ehthch*), while his brother, a clothier, had his name simply shortened to *Pitsch*.²³

A family living near Braunschweig requested a name to designate their home town but were forced to accept a registrar’s selection of *Schweinigel* (‘hedgehog’ or ‘swine’) for its play on the second syllable of that place name.²⁴

An unsuccessful attempt to change a distasteful name was reported by Ada Kinsbrunner of Montreal:



“In the town of Vatra-Dornei in the Dukedom of Bukowina lived a family by the name of *Porc*. You can imagine how cruelly the children were teased. When the father sought to change their name by applying to the District office he was told ‘the *porc* being one of the most useful animals there is no reason for a change.’”²⁵

Rudolph Kleinpaul, an authority on German-Jewish personal names, is usually credited with the first printed rendition of the most often told of the “offensive naming” stories, paraphrased as follows: Two friends meet after their naming to compare notes. One had been given a very good name *Weisheit* (wisdom), but the other had been labeled *Schweisshund* (bloodhound or, literally, ‘profusely perspiring dog’).

Appalled at his friend’s inelegant name, *Weisheit* asks why he didn’t follow his advice and pay a sufficient bribe to the naming official. “Gott in Hirmiel,” the other answers, “I paid half my fortune to get the “w” into my name so I wouldn’t be called a dirty dog.”²⁶ (This tale has been recounted in several of the standard texts on personal names, notably Harrison’s *Surnames of the United Kingdom*, Cecil Henry L’Estrange Ewen’s *A History of Surnames of the British Isles*, and H. L. Mencken’s *The American Language*, fourth edition.)

A variant of Kleinpaul’s tale was given to me by Ernst Maass, the U.N. librarian:

“Two daughters and a father around 1812 in Prussia are forced to choose a family name. The girls ask him to ‘get a nice name for us.’ For a long time he’s gone and they’re getting nervous. He finally comes home looking very sad. ‘So what’s our new name, Papa?’

‘Schweissheimer,’ he says (*schweiss* means ‘sweat’).

‘But that’s a horrible name. Why couldn’t you have gotten us a nice name like Rosenberg?’

‘If you know the truth,’ he said, “how much I paid for just the ‘w.’”²⁷

Then there’s the story told of how the great grandfather of Yiddish writer Shalom Asch persuaded an official with a purse full of ducats to remove the *r* from the name that he was to be given. *Arsch* is just what it sounds like.²⁸

That even in Russia the Jews fared no better with their names can be revealed by this story told by John Robboy, a Cleveland, Ohio, physician:

“By edict of the czar, all Jews were to assume surnames. Those able to pay a good bribe were given beautiful names. The poor, unable to give bribes, were given ugly names.

This is how my forebears got the name *Rabei*, which, in the Ukrainian language, means a freckled person or anything with mixed coloring. When myself and my brothers and sisters grew up and became sophisticated, we Russianized the name to *Ryaboy*. Then, upon reaching the States, an Americanized cousin thought it should be *Robboy*, and that is how it came to be.”²⁹

Among others fortunate enough to be able to change their offensive names later in life was a Mr. *Lügner* (liar) who, according to Maass, changed his name to *Amitai* (man who tells the truth).³⁰

Not all offensive name bearers were disheartened by their names. While not exactly glorying in his, a cashier in a local Chernovitsy theater accepted the name *Geschwür* (‘ulcer’ or ‘abscess’) with good nature and laughed off all the rude jokes to which he was exposed.³¹ But I suspect that his reaction was rare. Few such name bearers were so insensitive or indifferent as not to have felt hurt by, not so much the names themselves, but the way they were bestowed. The names were but reminders of the sentiments about Jews held by some of the government namers. Of course, some of the bearers may not have been aware of the meaning of the names they were given.

How many such names were given in the 19th century or how handicapping they were in dealing with others or how many of these have been borne by succeeding generations is unknowable. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Jews felt comparatively little attachment to names arbitrarily bestowed on them by others, especially if, having little to do with their Gentile neighbors, they had little need to refer to them. For the record and in occasional dealings with the larger community, they would use their assigned names, but among their fellow Jews in the ghetto, their traditional name patterns (the use of the patronymic, occupational titles, and house signs) were usually sufficient. It’s also likely that when the bearers had the opportunity to change them, as when they moved to another country, those with the more offensive names replaced them with apparent little concern and less self-consciousness.³² We know that Jewish immigrants were more inclined than most other peoples to change their names.

Notes:

1. Especially in his essay “Namenstudien.”
2. Curtis Adler, “Where These Fancy Names Come From,” *Israel’s Messenger*, 37, July 12, 1940, reprinted from an article in *Better English*, Dec. 11, 1939.
3. Zvonko R. Rode, Washington, D.C., personal com-



munication, March 13, 1967.

4. According to Elsie Lacks, San Francisco, CA, personal communication, March 14, 1967, Friedrich Kanalgeruch was a Berlin singing master.

6. Adler, op. cit.

7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

9. John Leighly, Berkeley, CA, personal communication, Jan. 10, 1983.

10. *New York Times*, Aug. 13, 1881, p. 3.

11. N. Pearlroth in one of his "What Does Your Name Mean?" columns in the *Jewish Post*, June 22, 1945.

12. Leighly, op cit.

13. Ibid.

14. 1942, 8, p. 96–97.

15. A. Kunst, New York, NY, personal communication, June 3, 1963.

16. William B. Jurim, San Francisco, CA, personal communication, June 23, 1967.

17. Kunst, op cit.

18. Theodore Gruen, New York, NY, personal communication, June 23, 1967.

19. Adler, op cit.

20. Henry Harrison, *Surnames of the United Kingdom*, 2, London, 1918, p. xiii.

21. Dornheim, Brooklyn, NY, personal communication, March 13, 1967.

22. Mrs. Martin Broch, Oakland, CA, personal communication, March 13, 1967.

23. Ibid.

24. Walter Heinemann, M.D., New York, NY, personal communication, March 12, 1967.

25. Ada Kinsbrunner, Montreal, Quebec, personal communications, June 15 and August 20, 1969.

26. Rudolph Kleinpaul, *Menschen und Völkernamen Etymologische Streifzüge auf dem Gerbeite der Eigennamen*, Leipsig, 1885, p. 118.

27. Ernst Maass, New York, NY, personal communication, August 23, 1967.

28. Benjamin J. Oriel, New York, NY, personal communication, March 10, 1967.

29. Dr. John Robboy, M.D., Cleveland, Ohio, personal communication, January 25, 1967.

30. Maass, op cit.

31. Kinsbrunner, op cit.

32. Benzion C. Kaganoff, "Jewish Surnames Through the Ages," *Commentary*, September, 1956, p. 249–59.

A Lost Dialect

Conrad Geller

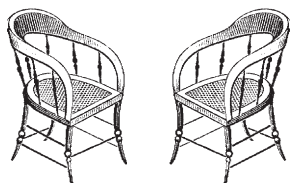
Mount Kisko, New York

Anyone old enough to remember nickel candy bars will certainly remember the B movies of those days. One of the most popular genres of the period, and one of my own boyhood favorites, was the jungle adventure, in which an intrepid white man deals summarily with treacherous, dark-skinned locals, often acquiring the devotion of a dusky maiden in the process. Ah, those were simpler, if less equitable, times. They are irretrievably gone by now from all but a few late-night television screens, and I suppose none too soon.

The loss of the jungle adventure, however, has meant the collateral loss of the special dialect of English—let's call it for simplicity "Cinema Primitive"—developed by the screenwriters and consistently spoken by certain natives. Mainly it is the chief who uses Cinema Primitive when he converses with the hero, his evil white antagonists, or his own native advisors (by which we can infer that the dialect derives from the grammar of the indigenous language). The common tribesmen speak that language to one another, mostly at times of stress and in the imperative mood. The chief, too, uses it when issuing orders, and even the hero is capable of it in short bursts. A curious exception, however, is the dusky maiden, who somehow speaks a meticulous Standard English, often with a British accent.

The controlling idea behind the screenwriters' creation of this dialect seems to be the erroneous notion that tribes of hunter-gatherers, along with their crude technologies, must use a language that is somehow also undeveloped, rudimentary, and, in a word, primitive, like them. Yet even though the screenwriters must have conceived this dialect out of linguistic naiveté, their creation displays a consistent syntax, as all human languages must. In short, there is correct Cinema Primitive. Interestingly, the dialect in its simplicity conforms not to the realities of the speech of peoples like the Xhosa or the Aleuts, whose syntax is very highly inflected, but projects forward the eight-hundred-year trend of English itself toward the dropping of forms.

All the illustrations in the following descriptive material, by the way, come from my own embedded knowledge of the dialect. I have seen enough movies of this type, I believe,





to qualify as at least a virtual native speaker. The examples themselves will outline a generic plot line of the familiar type.

Most notably different from Standard English are the personal pronouns. The first-person singular is always *me*, even in the nominative: “Me want you meet my dusky daughter.” Similarly, the third-person singular masculine pronoun is uniformly *him*: “Him come to island on big bird that crash, my daughter. Him hurt. Take care of him.”

Strangely, however, *she* is used nominatively for the feminine form for the feminine pronoun: “I think she like you, Bwana.” (By the way, does anyone know the origin of this universal native term for masterful white people?) The other forms inflected in Standard English, *we* and *they*, are fully inflected in Cinema Primitive: “We meet with evil trader now”; “Him make many promises to you”; “They not our friends”; and “We tell them come back tomorrow.”

The possessives are the same as in Standard English, though sometimes they are omitted: “Evil white trader want marry my daughter, but my daughter not like him,” or “Daughter not like him.”

Primitives, finally, do not use *whom*, but then neither does anyone else, mostly. Verbs, too, are less inflected than ours, mainly existing in the basic, or infinitive, form, without regard to person, number, or even tense: “Yesterday we go to camp, find much trouble there.” “Tomorrow we go up river.” “Him go up river, come back today.” The copulative is missing: “Him white trader. Him very treacherous.”

Primitive chiefs, as the illustration above shows, do sometimes display a rather sophisticated vocabulary. Usually, however, they don’t follow the practice, nearly universal elsewhere, of borrowing technical terms from their visitors, preferring their own labored metaphors. So *airplane* remains *bird* throughout the duration of most jungle adventures, *rifle* remains *fire stick*, and so forth.

The only regular exception to the infinitive form rule is in the use of the past participle. In the passive, for example, though the copulative verb is gone, the past participial form appears in perfect usage, proving that the natives are capable of inflecting verbs after all: “Our people saved by you, Bwana. We never forget you.” “Daughter thrown into volcano to appease gods. She say tell you goodbye.”

Articles as well as the conjunctive *and* are often omitted, though all the prepositions and subordinating conjunctions are present, maybe with the exception of *although*, a construction calling for rather

advanced industrialized thinking, I suppose.

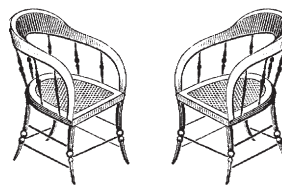
So here is a bare outline. It is hoped that this work will spur others to continue, ferreting out the subtleties, possibly even writing the definitive grammar of the dialect before, like the language of the Easter Islanders, it is forever lost.

Other fascinating cinematic language realms remain to be explored. For example, there is the elaborate, ominously accented English of treacherous viziers who advise cruel caliphs. The main feature of their speech is formality and a lack of contractions (“I do not know the infidel’s whereabouts, Sire, but he must die!”). It survives today in the speech of villains in the Saturday morning cartoons (“Seize them! They must not be allowed to escape!”) and some sci-fi aliens—but not in the *Star Wars* series, where aliens except for Yoda speak idiomatic American English.

Another possible area of study is the dialect of film gangsters, slightly punch-drunk in pronunciation and full of pleonasm (“The boss, he wants to see you!”).

I leave that work to other scholars.

[Conrad Geller writes film reviews for *Cineaste* magazine. He is formerly chairperson of the Committee on Public Doublespeak of the National Council of Teachers of English.]



SIC! SIC! SIC!

We’re moving! To better serve our patients, the Wound Healing Institute, Community Surgery Clinic, and I.V. Services will be conveniently relocated to the second floor of Stevens Hospital as of August 30, 2004. We hope to see you there! [Submitted by Elspeth Alexander, of Shoreline, WA, who says that her response their kind invitation was “Thank you just the same.”]



HORRIBLE DICTU

Mat Coward
Somerset, Britain

The British government recently announced that bullying, at work or at school, is *unacceptable*. A lot of things seem to be unacceptable to governments throughout the Anglophone world, including terrorism, drug smuggling, street violence, and the abuse of children. That's not a complete list—merely a few examples I've jotted down as I've noticed them, over the past few years. I have to ask: when a thing is *unacceptable*, does that make it more tolerable or less acceptable than that which is declared *intolerable*?

As a columnist on the *Morning Star* noted, government plans to deal with bullying seem to consist mainly of “increasingly impassioned reiterations” of its unacceptability, unaccompanied by much in the way of practical measures. This fits a pattern, in which the more unacceptable an evil is, the less there seems to be that anyone can do to stop it. Indeed, I think we are approaching the point where a law might be promulgated: whatever a government describes as unacceptable is something it has concluded it has no choice but to accept.

The BBC's new director general was reported during the summer to have made a new pledge on behalf of the corporation: that in future it would “strive for excellence” in program-making. I wasn't alone in wondering what it had been striving for previously—*quite nice* programs? *Fairly good* programs? *Really, all things considered, not-all-that-bad* programs?

To be fair to the BBC, it is only one of several large organizations that have announced a conversion to the cause of excellence. The blame lies, of course, with what we might call Mission-Statement Inflation—once one entity has publicly embraced excellence, how can another commit to less? That would be wholly unacceptable.

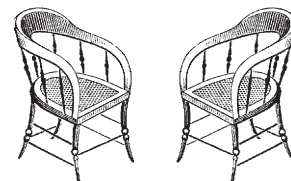
“Classic Waldorf Salad is so flexible,” according to a recipe card I have here. Well, no, surely not—not if it's *classic*. If it's Liberal or Reformed Waldorf Salad, then it can be as flexible as it likes, but shouldn't a classic dish always be made to the same recipe? Unless *classic* these days simply means “tasty.”

I bought something (not a Waldorf Salad) a while ago and then decided I didn't want it after all. Under the terms of the vendor's returns policy, however, I'd spent too long thinking about it, hence this emailed regret from a Customer Care Assistant: “Unfortunately I am unable to suggest a uplift and refund in this case.” I always thought—albeit vaguely—that a *uplift* was something to do with bras, but in this context it presumably means “collection”; an *uppick*, one might say. I replied to Customer Care that their message had caused me to undergo a disappointment.

My use of *one* in the previous paragraph was, I hope, legitimate. There can't be many English pronouns that have the power to irritate, but *one* is certainly one. I daresay psychoanalysts could explain why certain sections of the upper crust find it embarrassing to refer to themselves as I; I just wish someone would take them to one side and explain that *one* and *I* are not *always* interchangeable. Then again, it's even more painful when some poor, tortured toff clearly knows that he should avoid the word and almost gets through a sentence without it . . . only to succumb right at the end. The other day I read a magazine interview in which a very posh actor told us that he was “hardly ever recognized. I travel on the tube all the time, and nobody ever remarks upon one.” Of his interest in theatrical costuming, he said: “I always design what one's wearing in a part.”

The warnings about naughtiness printed in TV listings magazines continue to amuse me (and I'd be most interested to see examples from other countries). This one is almost too good to be true: “Rude Girls. An intimate film that delves into the daily lives of three groups of teenage girl gangs. They bunk off school, beat people up and swear like troopers. Why? Strong language.”

[*Mat Coward's latest book is Success and How to Avoid It, published by TTA Press. You can check out his web site at <http://hometown.aol.co.uk/matcoward/myhomepage/newsletter.html>*]





From Hand to Mouse

Jerome Betts
Torquay, Devon

‘Tis a pity, cried my father one winter’s night, after a three hours’ painful translation of Slawkenbergius— . . . putting my mother’s thread-paper into the book for a mark, as he spoke—that truth, brother Toby, should shut herself up in such impregnable fastnesses, . . .

Here, in the mouth of Laurence Sterne’s Walter Shandy of the 1760s, are the constituents of the present-day word *bookmark*, but not yet in combination. The earliest reference to a bookmark, equally improvised, seems to be from 386 A.D., in St. Augustine’s *Confessions*, just after the episode of the mysterious voice crying “*Tolle, lege*” that preceded his conversion.

The future Bishop of Hippo duly took up a codex of St. Paul’s Epistles, read, and then closed the book, keeping the place by inserting “either my finger or some other mark” (*aut digito aut nescio quod alio signo*). He was in a small Milanese garden and had previously mentioned a fig tree, so the candidates for the *signum* might well lie between finger and fig leaf. The latter would be in line with the later use of leaves to mark the place in printed Bibles, particularly in the US, giving the name *Bibleleaves* or *bookleaves* to several plants.

In medieval Latin, *registrum* or *registerium* was used for strips of parchment or leather fixed to the headbands of books to facilitate reference, before the use of page numbers. Some of these “registers” had sliding and revolving place and column indicators. *Registrum* was translated *Buch Schnur* (book cord) in a 15th-century Latin-German vocabulary and presumably survives today in one of the Spanish words for bookmark, *registro*.

In the 19th century, pieces of ribbon or embroidered cloth for use with Bibles or prayer-books were in English called *markers*. When printed markers started to become common, from the 1870s onward, they were identified as *bookmarkers* or *bookmarks*, the latter being slightly more frequent, but both printed with or without hyphens, and as one word or two. Today the form *bookmark* predominates, though *bookmarkers* is still encountered.

Marker apparently continues to be the normal term when the *book* element is omitted. Perhaps the associations of the word *marker*, in the sense of something used to write, as in *laundry-marker*, work against the combination *bookmarkers*, since bookmarks may mark places, but not in pencil or ink. There are also those, of course, like Professor Frank Roberts of the University of Northern Colorado, who have pointed out that bookmarks are devices for finding pages, not books, so it would be more logical to call them *placefinders*, *pagefinders*, *pagemarkers*, or *placemarkers*.

Welsh to some extent takes this path. The Advanced Celtic Studies Unit of the University of Wales, Aberystwyth, confirms *dalen nodyn* as the standard translation for *bookmark*. This is literally ‘leaf note,’ though *dalen* is also used generally for “page,” even if, strictly speaking, “page” is *tudalen*, ‘side-leaf.’

Some other languages also go this way, or reflect the reading-aid aspect of bookmarks. Dutch has the noncommittal *boekenlegger*, something to be laid in books, but also *bladwijzer* ‘leaf-guide’ or ‘page indicator’ as well as *leeswijzer* ‘reading guide’. Similarly, German has *lesezeichen* ‘reading sign.’

A listing of words for bookmark round the world, on the back of a marker produced by Utrecht Public Library some years ago, included such delights as Slovene’s almost edible *Knjižni znak*, as well as Hawaiian’s almost emetic *Maka puke*. The French *signet* is presumably a lineal descendant of that first al fresco Augustinian *signum*, and for this reason, as well as the neat fit in Anglicised pronunciation it makes with the *philst* and *phily* endings, is, arguably, a strong candidate for forming one of those mock-scholarly “collecting” group terms. Or would some people assume a “signetophilist” was a collector of signet rings?

Bookmark may look a little puny in such exotic company, but it has extended its reach to punch above its weight. In the same way that originally nautical terms took to the air and beyond, it has transferred into cyberspace with the use of *bookmark* by Internet browsers. It has also acquired a new role as a verb, “to bookmark.” Perhaps in the not-so-distant future it will evolve into a complete linguistic fossil, reminding us only of erudite and antiquarian-minded manuscripts and codices, rather than mice and cursors.

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



The Language of LSD

Raymond Humphries
Bridgend, Wales

The government-sponsored campaign to make us forgo our *avoirdupois* in favor of grams and kilograms is moving very slowly. When I go into my local supermarket and ask for half-a-pound of cheese or a pound of sausages, no one turns a hair, and the subject of decimal weights and measures hasn't so far been so much as mentioned.

This, despite the “official” notices to the effect that imperial measurements are a thing of the past in that supermarket and that we should all think metric now.

Perhaps it was easier to pick our pockets than control our minds. At all events, the decimalization of UK currency on 15 February 1971 went remarkably smoothly, as anyone over the age of about forty should remember. There were a few diehards who tried to persist with the old coinage for a few weeks, but these were soon forgotten. The only real mistake seems to have been to retain the pound, rather than go for a basic unit of half that value. One hundred pence would have made a “Britannia,” as I remember. To go for the larger unit made the new arrangements marginally more difficult to learn and allowed some small-scale profiteering as the lesser sums were inevitably “rounded up.”

That's all in the past now and will probably be of interest only to historians, sociologists, and people like me who delight in this sort of detail. One rarely mentioned casualty of decimalization was the language of LSD, which at that time still just meant “pounds, shillings, and pence” rather than a hallucinatory drug. Pounds was represented in this by *livres*, the old French word for both the weight and the coin or note, hence the *L*. True, things like the *ton* (£100), *pony* (£20 or £25, depending on where you live) and *monkey* (£500) still have a theoretical, wraithlike existence in informal currency terms, but the rich terminology for anything under a pound was swept aside almost overnight in February 1971.

The words for our coinage were built up over many years, and nothing has really replaced them. Indeed, this is an area where our language has become noticeably poorer. The odd-sounding *pee*

and the ungrammatical *one pence* now heard in our shops and supermarkets are hardly substitutes and suggest that people regard these terms as a purely temporary phenomenon. In the case of “one pence,” thanks to the pressures of inflation, they may be about to be proved right.

The smallest coin that I remember, in fact, the smallest coin that we've had in the UK, was the *farthing*. Obviously the word was derived from a fourthing, just that fraction of a coin.

In value this was worth just a quarter of a pre-decimal penny—slightly over the tenth of the value one of our present smallest coins. Just before they were withdrawn from use, we local boys used to collect eight of these metallic outcasts with the Robin Redbreast motif and exchange them for an ice-lolly at our newsagent-cum-general store. The shop assistant would look with distaste upon these small coins—small in size as well as value—and wouldn't take them unless they were accompanied by an abject apology for wasting her time. As far as I know, there was no familiar term for the farthing—probably people didn't think that it was worth the effort. The reverse was true in linguistic terms—*farthing* came to signify anything that was small or worthless in much the same way that *sou* did in French—a *Tom Farthing*, for instance, was a person of low intelligence or simply a fool.

The same was true to a great extent of the *half-penny*—pronounced ‘hapeny.’ The terms *half a copper* and *mite* never really caught on, at least in my hearing, but *halfpenny stamp* for “tramp” is a term that at least some readers will be familiar with. The *penny* is of course a very old word, as it is a very old coin. This originated from the Saxon *penning* and is related to the German *pfennig*. There have been some slang words for *penny*, like *copper*, *bun* and *cent*, but people seem to have had too much respect for this coin (at one time a substantial, heavy coin—you wouldn't want to carry too many of the 18th-century cart-wheel pennies around in your pocket or purse). At one time before their large incarnation they were pure silver coins. *Penny* has in fact had a more vigorous life as an informal name for the US cent than was ever true of the reverse. And of course expressions like *penny dreadful*, *penny ante*, *penny-pinching*, and a host of others will be familiar to most.

It is not until we get to the dizzy heights of the *sixpence* piece (2½d) that familiar words for coinage seem more or less to have replaced the proper names. *Tanner* (derived from the Latin *tawno*, a



name for small jokes about St. Peter’s heavenly job as the keeper of the Pearly Gates, or perhaps from the Cockney rhyming slang *Susy Anna*) was clearly the favorite, but *sprowsie*, *Susy*, *Simon*, and *Lord of the Manor* (yet another example of Cockney rhyming slang, as was *Goddess Diana*) all had their adherents.

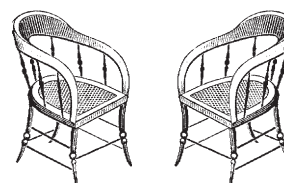
The *shilling* (5p) was of course the *bob* (from *bobstick*, or as much gin as you could drink for that price). This word seems to have driven all its rivals away. Even *ogg* (or *'og*) is an antipodean term seemingly derived from the same sound. The *two-shilling* (10p) piece had an alternative, “official” name that actually appeared on the coins themselves. This was the *florin*, originally the name of a 13th-century gold coin in Florence, *fiorino*. It received its original name because it carried a representation of a lily of the valley on the obverse; the Italian word for flower is *fiore*. The British coin, or at least the versions of it that I saw, also included a lily. Other than the obvious multiple of *bob*—*two bob*—I never came across a familiar term for it.

We are getting into what was serious money with what used to be our largest coin, the two-and-sixpenny bit, or *half-crown* (12½p). The ten shilling piece wasn’t introduced until 1968 (as a stealthy forerunner of the fifty-pence piece and the full crown [25p] was minted only on special occasions). The half-crown also had other names, like the *half-dollar*, *two-and-a-kick*, and *two-and-a-tanner*, but generally the formal word was used as becoming its dignity. Curiously, a *half-crown word* used to be a long and difficult word. As I’ve said, the ten-shilling coin used to be a banknote until less than forty years ago. It was a rather unattractive brown thing as I remember, but no less valuable for that. The expressions for this were largely derived upward from the shilling: e.g., *ten bob*, or downward from the pound: e.g., *half-a-sheet*.

Many of the expressions for *pound* are still with us, like *quid*, a word of obscure origin—though it might have come from the Latin *quid* or *what* (i.e., in this case, what you need or wherewithal). The word originally meant a *guinea* (the coin struck in that African country) or a *sovereign*. There are and were many other expressions for the pound, many of which shade off into alternatives for money or currency itself. Words like *notes*, *ackers*, *pelf*, *readies*, *smackers* (or *smackeroonies*, the more extravagant word that I particularly remember), *bills*, *oncers*, and so many more spring to mind.

We’ve come a long way linguistically over the

years. “Pee,” even twenty-five of them, just doesn’t have the same ring to it, does it?



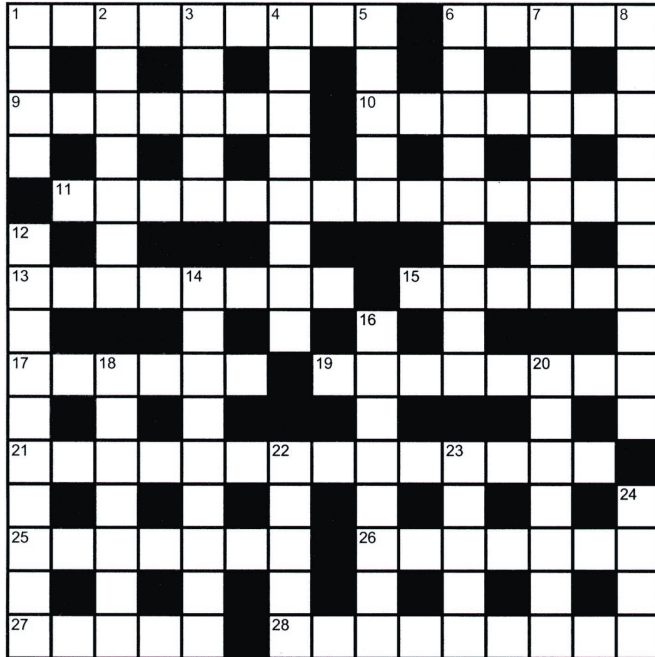
- 24. E-DEN
 - 23. N.I. + CHE
 - 22. HARRE + M
 - 20. NULL SET (anag.)
 - 18. HO(WE)VER
 - 16. BAN + JOIST
 - 14. SCAFFOLDS (anag.)
 - 12. CABAL + L + EROS (sore rev.)
 - 8. SPLA + SH(D)OWN (A[ps rev.]
 - 7. RE(ADO)PT.
 - 6. BUSH + W + HACK
 - 5. (t)ROUGH
 - 4. TERAFLOP (anag.)
 - 3. KNO(t) + CK.
 - 2. EXTREME (hid.)
 - 1. IGOR (first letters)
- DOWN
- 28. MO(THE)AT + E,N
 - 27. SURFS (hom.)
 - 26. INCISED (anag.)
 - 25. REV. + ILE + R (lie anag.)
 - 21. LAW OF THE JUNGLE (anag.)
 - 19. MAC(KIN)AW
 - 17. A + SH(R)AM
 - 15. WASTED (hom.)
 - 13. AVER + SI(m)ON
 - 11. NECK OF THE WOODS (anag.)
 - 10. UNSNARL (anag.)
 - 9. OUTDO + OR
 - 6. BARKS (2 defs.)
 - 1. ICE SKATER (hid.)

ACROSS
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Across

- 1 Services Katerina offers Torvill or Dean (3,6)
- 6 Bays for sailing ships (5)
- 9 Best alternative word for "alfresco" (7)
- 10 Straighten out URLs, Ann ordered (7)
- 11 Neighborhood recycling foe shocked town (4,2,3,5)
- 13 Declare Mr. Cowell's heartless, with disgust (8)
- 15 Having an hourglass figure, we hear, is useless (6)
- 17 One rupee is invested in phony guru's retreat (6)
- 19 Relative's wearing brilliantly colored parrot coat (8)
- 21 Jane fought well, restored Tarzan's Code (3,2,3,6)
- 25 Disparager spread lie behind Reverend Spooner's back (7)
- 26 Cut indices out (7)
- 27 Hangs five peasants for a dictator (5)
- 28 Decrepit-looking article found in trench outside of Euston (4-5)

Down

- 1 Prototypical horror-film character is going off rocker, initially (4)
- 2 In context, remedy is drastic (7)
- 3 Company reduced check? Strike! (5)
- 4 Late prof perfected unit for measuring computational speed (8)
- 5 Crude feedbox without a cover (5)
- 6 Sneakily attack the President (Dubya) and a hireling (9)
- 7 Again vote to accept report without fuss (7)
- 8 Spacecraft landing in mountains to the North proved to involve a bit of danger (10)
- 12 Secret plotters: 50 upset, angry horsemen (10)
- 14 Scoffs lad, "Abstract painters use these" (9)
- 16 Forbid support for musician (8)
- 18 Seated in float, our group is still (7)
- 20 U.N. tells off group of mathematicians? (4,3)
- 22 Bunny mother's opening a residence for women (5)
- 23 Northern Ireland revolutionary's calling (5)
- 24 Paradise is a virtual thieves' hangout? (4)