

OUR LANGUAGE

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This article comprises selections from a newspaper column on 'Our Language' that has been published weekly in **The Natal Witness** since 1985. The first of these composite articles appeared in the previous issue of this journal (Vol.18 No. 1). We are grateful to Mr Rose and to **The Natal Witness** for allowing us to reprint these selections from 'Our Language' in **English Usage in Southern Africa**.

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WHAT'S IN A WORD

Of all the books we regularly consult for information or verification, the dictionary is without doubt supreme for we have recourse to its pages many times a day, and for widely differing reasons: proper spelling, identification of a part of speech, pronunciation, derivatives, etymology, history, proper usage and, of course, meaning.

We tend perhaps to forget that the modern dictionary as we know it, came upon the scene little more than two centuries ago; a decade or so after Halley died, the year Marie Antoinette was born and a mere 101 years be-

fore the birth of G.B. Shaw. The year was, in fact, 1755 and the dictionary was the brain child of Samuel Johnson. In about nine years, and single handed except for some clerical assistance, he accomplished the following:

He selected some 30 000 English words; was the first to arrange them in alphabetical order; was the first to establish an acceptable spelling. He showed how he considered (with justification) they should be pronounced; he gave each a definition; said what part of speech each was and illustrated its usage by a quotation from English literature (often from memory). Finally, he gave each word an etymological curriculum vitae.

Remember, Johnson had no dictionary on which to build his own; all was derived from his own literary and linguistic experience. He worked without scholarly assistance, and in less than a decade accomplished what 40 members of the French Academy had failed to do - with French - in 40 years. Johnson's Dictionary remains today the most towering testimony to his dogged application, often in appalling circumstances, for he received no payment until it was published. The principles he established, both in the dictionary itself and in its preface, are principles which still hold today for all lexicographers - with perhaps one exception.

The single exception was Johnson's self-indulgence in allowing his personal feelings to intrude occasionally, when he eventually found in his work the need to break out of his carapace of objectivity. He defined, for example, lexicography (the writing of dictionaries) as 'a harmless drudge', oats he described as 'a coarse grain which in England is fed to horses but in Scotland is the stable diet of the people'. Now and then he erred, as when he defined pastern as 'the knee of a horse'. A very smart lady upbraided him, asking him why he had defined pastern thus. Johnson's immortal - and invincible - reply was 'Ignorance, Madam, pure ignorance'. The lady has preserved her anonymity ever since.

Johnson's achievement was quite staggering, and resulted in instant and lasting acclaim.

The most monumental successor to Johnson's Dictionary is undoubtedly the great **Oxford English Dictionary**. The **Oxford Dictionary**, or **OED** consists of a shelfful of enormous volumes containing not far short of some

20 000 pages. The variety of type faces on any one page is a printer's and proofreader's nightmare of the nastiest kind, for you are quite likely to come across Greek, Arabic, Russian and Sanskrit without having to search very far.

Moreover, English now contains well over half a million words, each of which has to be spelt correctly, given a standard pronunciation, with a part of speech identification; each has to be listed with its often many derivatives; each word's origin is given, together with its linguistic history in the form of a number of dated quotations from literally thousands of sources - not just literature - showing not only how the word has been used in the past, but how different shades of meaning have been added.

The Oxford English Dictionary contains everything - slang, naughty words, scientific terminology, the specialised vocabularies of poetry, the theatre, politics. If you want to be amazed by the depth of research involved don't look up bubulcitate or prothonotariate. Turn to 'go' or 'be'. That will show you the immensity of this marvellous work of painstaking and dedicated scholarship.

WORDS' COLOURFUL HERITAGE

Lest we should fall into the trap of believing that an interest in our language is merely a matter of finding fault, of right and wrong, let us from time to time take a look at certain parts of our language and try to discover something about the various - and many - elements which go to make up 'English'. This article takes a cursory peek at some of the words in our vocabulary.

Up till that nearly most famous of dates, 1066, the ladies and gentlemen of England (though they never considered themselves in those terms, and the country was the land of the Angles) spoke a rather harsh mixture of languages. Many bits had come westwards across the North Sea from what we now call Scandinavia. The vocabulary in those days was concerned chiefly with the hard and frequently mud-clogged business of living, which was little better than trying to keep alive.

Conversations (if we can dignify them in that way) were mostly about mundane, homely matters. Words abounded like: dog, cat, mud, pig, cow, fork, man, wife, house,

life, dead. You will notice that their meanings are basic, their form limited to one syllable only.

When William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy, landed in what we now call Sussex he brought with him men who spoke two other languages. The nobles spoke French; the educated men - clerks and priests - spoke Latin. These two languages infused into the coarse crudities of Old and Middle English a new refinement, a new level of culture.

We find Englishmen eating not merely cow, sheep, pig, but beef, mutton and pork. Men wore not just woad daubed all over their torsos but armour, jackets and tabards. In the army were gentlemen, riding with the cavalry, carrying pennants and displaying their ancestry on their escutcheons so that others from different demesnes would readily recognise them beneath their caps of maintenance, bascinets and jupons. It will not have escaped your notice that these words not only refer to a heightened quality of living; they are also composed of more than one syllable.

Not until some three centuries later, however, did an English king decree that even if you were more than tweetalig, English was to be the official language of England except in church where Latin held sway.

During those three remarkable centuries, English experienced an amazing growth, as the sophistication of French began to enhance the quality of the English way of life. Behaviour at court gave rise to words like chivalry, honour, marquis, grace, loyalty, courage - with conduct to match. The culinary arts brought in blancmange, gateau, cutlet, dessert, fruit, vintage. The law injected words like liberty, demesne, custom, franchise, appeal.

Even at the most earthy level we get lovely words developing. Older and Middle English give us window, from the Norse vindr - a wind, and augr - an eye; daisy, the day's eye. From French come dandelion: dent de lion - the tooth of the lion; and pansy: from pensée - a thought. Hagar the Horrible had no such delicacy of imagination.

There's much more to words than first appears. The incredible wealth of information contained in even a modest dictionary illustrates the depth of research

that has been lavished on literally every word in the language. Of course, the vast majority of people who refer to their dictionaries often overlook most of that information. Few, for example, want to identify the part of speech, or discover the word's Norse origins. The commonest reason for opening a dictionary is probably to ascertain the meaning, and after that the spelling, of a particular word.

These various areas of information all have specific names. The correct spelling of a word is called its 'orthography'. 'Semantics' is the study of meanings; 'phonology' is concerned with the sound of the word, and 'etymology' its origins.

Publishers of dictionaries are finding that an increasing number of people - apart from scholars and linguists - get a great deal of fun (and information) out of the 'etymology' section. They are interested not primarily in the original language from which the word is derived, but in precisely how the word came to have its present day meaning.

Silly and nice, to quote but two examples, both originally had meanings far removed from their modern interpretations. Silly comes from Old English **sael**, which meant both time and happiness. **Waes sael** - now wassail - originally meant be happy. Over the years, **sael** became **seel** then **selly** and finally **silly**. Its meaning likewise changed from harmless, simple, to witless (i.e. lacking in intelligence), feeble-minded and hence stupid.

Nice comes from the Latin **nescire** meaning not to know and hence ignorant. Its early meaning, foolishly simple, in time changed to over-particular, hard to please and then fastidious. 'Acting with nice judgement' preserves this interpretation of precise or exact. Today, nice has lost most of these distinctions, and now conveys the sense of merely pleasant - as in a nice taste, a nice book.

Houghton Mifflin, the publishers of **The American Heritage Dictionary**, (one of the best single-volume dictionaries you will find) recently published **Word Mysteries and Histories - from Quiche to Humble Pie**, a book which caters specially for this renewed interest in the history and progress of some of the more interesting curiosities in our language. As one of the

editors observes: 'People are not so much interested in basic etymologies or dates of occurrences as they are in how words came into use, what were the dynamics surrounding the coinages of words, what actually causes the language to be what it is.'

The information contained in this latest contribution to popular linguistics has the ability to fascinate as much as astonish and inform. What, for example, do you know about quiche? The word is derived from the German **Küche**, a diminutive form of the word for cake, which is allied to our word cook, American cookies, Norwegian **kaka**, a cake, and, of course, the Afrikaans **koeke** - cakes.

One of the most intriguing of words is clue which has an astonishing history. Its alternative orthography is clew, which comes from the Old English **cliewen**, derived originally from the particle **gel**. **Gel** meant to roll into a ball, and from it come words like clump, club, clot, clod, globule, conglomerate and even ganglion - all of which clearly have something to do with gathering together.

Clue's present-day meaning derives from Greek legend, when Theseus managed to find his way out of King Minos's labyrinth and thus escaped the attentions of the Minotaur. He found his way out of the maze by following the track which he had cunningly marked on his way in by unwinding a ball of thread.

If you happen to be one of those who are interested in the often surprising histories of words, then you'll find **Word Mysteries and Histories** the kind of book to take with you wherever you go. In the meantime, before you get your hands on it, try warming up your research faculties with these: scruple, rigmarole, lamprey, gland, orchid, shambles and oyez! Good hunting, and don't be surprised by what you discover. Some time ago I had occasion to use the phrase 'a tinker's cuss', and a learned friend immediately phoned to ask me why I indulged in such Victorian prudery. His explanation was most intriguing. Originally, the phrase was a 'tinker's dam', the dam being a small plug of dough which tinkers used to plug the hole in a pot or a pan being repaired. Without the dam, the solder fell straight through, with it, the solder cooled and hardened, the dam was removed and thrown away as useless. So a 'tinker's dam' is something of no value at all. Victorian minds thought

'dam' a word to be shunned in polite company and substituted 'curse' as more respectable. Curse became colloquially 'cuss' and prudery was mollified. But at the cost of almost losing the original - and colourfully graphic - meaning, and that would have been a pity. Thank you, learned friend!

Miniature is another word correctly used but inadequately understood. Because of its initial four letters, its etymology is falsely linked to mini, meaning small as in mini-skirts, cabs, submarines and so on. Its true origin is the Latin 'minium' which means red oxide of lead, which was used extensively in painting. 'Miniature' has come to mean small or diminutive by a totally wrong understanding of its origin.

Another phrase with a fascinating history is 'to eat humble pie' meaning to belittle yourself. It has nothing whatever to do with 'humble' meaning modest or unpretentious. The origin of that humble is the Latin word 'humus' meaning 'ground' which gives us not only the humus beloved of gardeners, but humility also. 'Humble pie' has a more romantic, less earthy story. Humbles - also spelt numbles and umbles - comes from the old French word 'nombles' which means the offal (heart, liver and so on) of a deer. When the nobles went hunting - successfully - the muscular meat of the deer was destined only for aristocratic palates, the 'nombles' were made into a huge pie (to make it go further) and given to those of lesser rank: who thus 'ate humble pie'. Of further interest is the origin of the French 'nombles' which is again a Latin word: 'lumbus' meaning a loin. From lumbus comes our word lumbar.

Not the least interesting or informative element of the words in our language is the history attached to each: in other words, its etymology. (Etymos is the Greek for 'true'.) The study of a word's origin can tell us something about what was happening at the time of its incorporation into the language. A good dictionary, like the Shorter Oxford or larger, will give us some indication of the first recorded use of the word in question. If we look at a whole cluster of words together, we shall find even more of interest.

For example, Chaucer's **Canterbury Tales**, written just before the end of the fourteenth century, and not long before Henry V went campaigning at Harfleur and Agincourt, contains a number of words to do with the re-

finements of cooking, an art at which the French have long been renowned. In the Tales we find mention of blancmange, literally 'white food'. Nowadays blancmange is a mushy type of milky pudding, beloved of hospital dieticians and school matrons, but in Chaucer's time it was closer to its French connection and referred to a wider spectrum of foods, including the white meat of poultry cooked in milk or cream.

Several words in current use relating to culinary matters remind us of the Frenchman's monopoly for many centuries of the gastronomic arts: restaurant, chef, menu, à la carte, chicken à la king, ragout (literally an appetite restorer), and many more. These have passed into English - with countless others, virtually unaltered except perhaps in their anglicised pronunciation.

Some of the culinary words bear investigation, for their literal meanings tell us something about their nature and, perhaps, manufacture. Biscuit (bi - twice; coquere - to cook) was once bread that had been twice baked to make it crisp. Vinegar (vin - wine; aigre - sharp) was made by the addition of green, and hence sour grapes to give it 'bite'. 'Aigre' comes from the Latin word 'acer' from which we derive acrid, acerbity and acrimonious.

Mustard was made with a strong powder obtained by crushing the seeds of the wild mustard plant to which was then added the 'must' of grapes. The original product was called 'mout ardent' - a burning must. In time, the final ent was dropped, leaving the French moutard and our mustard. The French still make their mustard with wine or vinegar, while the English, in order not to demolish the flavour of roast beef, merely mix the powder with water.

Barbecue was a word that went across the Atlantic with those Frenchmen who emigrated to such places as Canada and Louisiana (hence New Orleans) and then crossed the Atlantic again to England. Our 'braaivleis' is a much less evocative word than barbecue, which literally means 'beard or whisker to tail' originally 'barbe à la queue', signifying that the animal was roasted whole over an open fire.

You might like to root and dig up the origins of some or all of these words; goulash, ratatouille, chowder,

bouillabaisse, macédoine, mayonnaise, gin, brinjal, brandy, smörgåsbord, soupçon (a surprise there!), cream, crayfish and sage. Bon appetit!

DYNAMIC ENTITY

Any language worth its salt is a living, dynamic entity, with a soul and character of its own, as well as a unique kind of independence that is blissfully immune to the tinkering of cranks, bores, fops, fundis and other kinds of linguistic do-gooders who fondly believe they can alter its relentless course. History has shown that whenever someone (or a group of someones) tries to 'fix' a language, then one of two things invariably happens: either the fixer comes to a sticky and unsuccessful end, or the language itself becomes moribund and petrified.

Because of its dynamic existence, a language is constantly being fed at one end with new words (as well as other elements) from various sources. At the other end, it throws out those items of vocabulary and syntax, grammar and usage for which we no longer have any current purpose. Any attempt to interfere deliberately with this process of linguistic nourishment and digestion will conclude - we can confidently predict - in failure.

The sources of replenishment of the vocabulary, for instance, are many: foreign languages, new skills, human pursuits, developments in science and technology among them. Although I have no statistical data to support me, I suspect that the last category is the most fecund source of new words. Every day, new drugs, new plastic compounds, new techniques, new processes, new discoveries appear, each one needing a verbal label of some kind, if only to placate the patent lawyers. Words like ecosystem, barbiturate, geodetic, transducer, deuterium, polypropylene are examples in this category. You will notice that if you have a little Greek and less Latin, some terms may appear quite familiar.

Other, not necessarily scientific, terms are sometimes generated by making compound nouns from well-known words which, when combined, take on a new significance, for example, pacemaker in cardiac surgery, control tower, slide projector, gas pistol, water-table, space capsule, blood bank.

Another rich quarry is the special language employed by computers and their operators. Such words tend to be entirely new concoctions like Rom, byte, diskette, gosub; or old words given a fresh lease of life: peek, subroutine, string, nested, floppy disc.

Further augmentations to the vocabulary come from our giving commonplace words a new significance, again often in compound form: take-off, moses basket, hypermarket, rat's tail (applied to cutlery design), sky-diver.

Words which become redundant often have simpler and more to be preferred synonyms (except in bureaucratic circles): deracinate for uproot, septentrion for north; or are dropped because of their offensive connotations: nigger, coon (except in certain contexts), Hun, Bosche. Many words, too, have a temporary slang popularity which, having served its ephemeral purpose, are encouraged to be on their way: wizard prangs, lucifers, roadster, motoring, charabanc all have a dated mustiness about them presaging their inevitable departure from the language. They will not, of course, be allowed to pass into perpetual limbo, for the great Oxford Dictionary will record their use, their meaning and the period during which they remained current - information for which some scholars in the future may have some use.

Attempts to interfere artificially (that is, without due cause or reason) with the vocabulary are highly unlikely to bring any lasting renown - and certainly not of the desired kind - upon those hoping for it.

KEEPING EVERYTHING HEALTHY

A living language is always absorbing new words and relegating its verbal redundancies to the attic - where they are then stored in historical dictionaries. Another symptom of a language's vitality is its ability to add layers of meaning to existing words - meanings sometimes far removed from the literal or customary interpretations we give them. Nowadays, you can't - if you're an American, for instance - be both republican and democrat at one and the same time. But in Victorian England you might - had you been so inclined - have managed both.

A certain body of people were in favour of dispensing with the services of Queen Victoria and establishing in her place a democratic form of government in a republic. Such people, favouring a democratic regime in a republican state professed virtually one and the same thing.

Another example, though with a difference, occurs with the word 'washable' which can have diametrically opposite meanings according to the context in which it is used. If we apply the word to both wallpaint and ink, a paradox arises: the former means in effect 'permanent'; the latter, 'soluble'. Try wiping washable paint on your shirt and you're in trouble.

Partly because of transatlantic influences, there's a lot of confusion over 'inflammable' which in English means 'it will burn merrily'. Its opposite is 'non-inflammable'. But with the advent of 'flammable' meaning 'combustible' some confusion arises, for its opposite takes the form of 'inflammable', which presumably means 'not combustible'. So take care!

The latter part of this century has thrown some quite embarrassing situations at us with regard to certain words which now have meanings far removed from those of, say, fifty years ago. All manner of terminology connected with homosexual behaviour, for example, now causes us to pause before we use words like gay, queer, queen, AC/DC and the like.

Politics, not to mention various forms of xenophobia, have both contributed their fair share of words which some are reluctant to use; liberal, conservative, progressive, nationalist; and the propagandised terms for people of other races: Wops, Wogs, Chinks, Kaffirs, Huns, Frogs, Eyeties and so on - though such terminology, as the world has grown smaller and we have discovered that westernised oriental gentlemen are really quite civilised, has fallen into disuse.

Certain political situations give rise to new connotations as with collaborator or necklace. Both of these are 'harmless' words in most contexts, though some situations, like the present, can make one chary of using them lest misunderstandings arise.

Now I think it is undesirable that we should throw overboard a number of perfectly legitimate, useful

words simply because they may, in certain contexts, have unhappy or pejorative connotations. We are not Victorians, needing in our prudery to drape the legs of our vocabulary in frilly lace or red plush velvet. A current and perhaps temporarily unpleasant meaning has no right to infect, like a canker, the healthy tissue of language, and the best possible way of keeping that tissue healthy is to give it plenty of exercise; in other words, use it!

'ANGST' ABOUT IMPURITIES

A number of people have asked me recently to examine some of the obviously non-English words and phrases commonly used today. But before I do so, let's clear our minds of any residual cant that may be lingering, concerning the 'purity of the language'. English is not a 'pure' language; it's no purer than the American nation, or the English nation for that matter. Certain 'impurities' are a nation's and a language's great strength and vigour, allied to the willingness and ability to accept and absorb all manner of importations. English itself is a wholly bastardised conglomerate of Old Norse, German, Dutch, Gaelic, Arabic, African, Greek, Latin, American, French...the list is virtually endless. Many importations are now no longer considered 'foreign', since they have been so completely assimilated as to be almost indistinguishable from other words. Schooner, skipper, assassin, caravan, curry, restaurant, chef, blitz, pianoforte, mezzanine - and thousands upon thousands of others are no longer thought of - or even recognised - as linguistic immigrants.

Some words and phrases, however, still preserve their undoubted foreign characteristics. That they enjoy currency in our language testifies to the fact that, in the past, literate people were sufficiently au fait with foreign languages to make translation superfluous. Nowadays, most of us have to dash to a dictionary just to confirm what we think the meaning is.

A huge number of Latin tags and phrases originate in the law which, because of its international ramifications, uses (or used to use) Latin as a lingua franca. Phrases like *sine die*, *caveat emptor*, *in alteram partem*, *vide ceteris paribus*, *per stirpes* all stem from legal Latin.

But why do we persist in using foreign phrases when we could quite easily render them into English? The chief reason is to allow the original to preserve its contextual significance. If, for example, we translate 'Lebensraum' simply as 'living room' then all sorts of unwarranted connotations are added, since 'living room' in English is far removed from the context of German colonial expansion. 'Tête-a-tête' sounds quite ridiculous in 'They were having a little head-to-head'. And what the English call 'esprit de corps', the French delight in calling 'le team spirit'.

Occasionally, you meet phrases which can - and should be - anglicised. Government utterances are besotted with 'inter alia' which is just as effective when converted into 'by himself' or 'by itself'.

Some phrases, however, have special connotations which would be totally lost in translation, with serious diminution of their meaning. The German terminology of psychology - stemming from Freud and Jung (et al) - loses all significance in translation. 'Weltanschauung' translated as 'outlook on the world' is disastrous; 'Angst' is more than just 'anxiety' or 'worry'. One reader asked about 'déjà vu', which literally means 'seen already'. In literary or artistic contexts it is applied to unoriginal material, something which has been done before - the implication being that the later writer or artist, consciously or otherwise, is putting forward 'old hat' material.

To the behavioural scientist, 'déjà vu' refers to that curious phenomenon when you believe that you are experiencing an event or a conversation that has happened in the past. There is no precise English term to identify this experience, hence it is known universally among psychologists as 'déjà vu'.

Our language would become immeasurably the poorer were we to purge it of such 'foreign' vocabulary. Happily, those attempts in various languages to achieve, artificially, a state of sterilised perfection have resulted in either failure or the demise of the patient. And in English, where exactly would you draw the line between the acceptable, indigenous vocabulary and the undesirable alien interlopers? Those who favour such pastimes are but cymini sectores, unlikely to carry much weight with either the cognoscenti or the hoi polloi.

HAIRY, SLENDER AND DISMALLY ACADEMIC

One of the many glories of the English language, then, is the rich choice of words at our disposal, many of them meaning more or less the same thing but with implications and suggestions that flesh out the bare bones of literal meaning with additional, more interesting matter. Hirsute, in some circumstances, is more expressive, more accurate, than just plain hairy; slender is more graceful than skinny.

The late Bertrand Russell, in one of his more frivolous moments, invented a little intellectual diversion which requires absolutely no equipment other than a reasonable command of English vocabulary. You merely conjugate, changing the final word so that the first person is complimentary, the second is neutral, the third decidedly uncomplimentary - like this: I am generous, you are kind, he spends money like water, I am broad minded, you are tolerant, she hasn't two morals to rub together; we look for reform, you prefer the status quo, they are absolute stick in the muds; I think quickly, you are quite intelligent, he jumps to conclusions.

Have a go with these - and you'll have to decide whether each falls into the neutral, pro or con category first: resolute; stingy; plump; shortsighted; enthusiastic; tone-deaf; non-committal; fastidious; crafty.

Now while this may be only an amusing intellectual game, it has profound implications for those whose business is words - especially those folk whose unenviable task it is to earn their livings by employing words to manipulate people: advertising copywriters, political rhetoricians and the like. They are the ones who are highly conscious of the power of the word, and if we are wise, we shall arm ourselves with the protective insulation of awareness. In such hands, words like democracy can mean anything you like, or they like, or even nothing rational at all. A pebble thrown in a riot/disturbance/protest march/funeral can soon become a rock. A mildly twisted ankle on the football field can become a serious injury likely to put the player out for the rest of the season - if you happen to support his particular team. A violent mob on the rampage may, in fact, be nothing more than half-a-dozen people chanting uncomplimentary epithets over a fence. One man's traitor is another's hero, is a rebel, is a

freedom fighter, is a loyalist, a guerrilla, an enemy of the state, a patriot, a reactionary... .

This leads us on to the difference - frequently exploited by those who use vocabulary for manipulatory ends - between the denotation and connotation of words. A word's denotation is its literal referent, the thing (or person or idea) to which the word literally refers. Its connotation is the implication of a secondary meaning which can change radically when the context alters.

If we say: 'He has no academic qualifications', we are using 'academic' in its denotative form, meaning merely 'from a school or university or other recognised institution of learning'. If, on the other hand, we say. 'The whole thing is just of academic interest anyway' we mean far more than 'This is the kind of topic that interests only the learned men (and women) at universities'. The implication is: 'The whole idea is so far-fetched that no one in his right mind is going to waste time following up a concept that has no feasible or practical applicability'. In other words, 'academic' takes on the connotation of 'futile, time-wasting, irrelevant, not really linked with hard reality' - all of which have a decidedly uncomplimentary ring about them.

We could say: 'The day of the inauguration dawned dark, dismal and damp - with more than a hint of the coming storm'. Dismal suggests 'greyness, a lack of sunlight, a mood of depression and gloom'. In the sentence. 'The accused's responses to his cross-questioner painted a dismal portrait of a man devoid of responsibility and self-respect' dismal has overtones of sadness, tragedy, deprivation, of opportunities lost or never seized.

Like most things in life, words can be used - and abused. Our responsibility, as competent and caring users of the language, is to keep ourselves aware and alert to the way the language and possibly ourselves are being manipulated. In that way, we shall be proofed against the devious schemes of word-sharpers.

DOUBLESPEAK

Doublespeak has become, regrettably, an inevitable feature of modern life, like recycled sewage (which is much more useful) or television (which is of dubious utility). The term 'doublespeak' is the brainchild of George Orwell and is a portmanteau derivation from

'doublethink' and 'newspeak'. (Read 1984 for further details.)

He coined the word to describe language which makes the bad seem good, the unacceptable acceptable, the impossible possible...and so on. Basically, it is language that pretends to convey meaning but does nothing of the kind. 'Mankind,' said T.S. Eliot, 'cannot bear too much reality,; and our language reflects that aspect of our natures.

In its mildest and most harmless form, doublespeak is merely euphemism, a gentle way of expressing something unpalatable or difficult: passing on, kicking the bucket, had it, instead of saying simply 'died'; light-fingered for 'thieving'; promotions consultant for 'bill-poster'; vertical transportation facilitator instead of 'lift-operator'. No real damage is done by such usages, though of course the user may, in certain circles, lay himself open to being considered somewhat odd employing circumlocutions where more literal terminology would be more appropriate.

When doublespeak is deliberately used to conceal or deceive, then the trouble starts, for then the truth is the first victim. Governments and their 'spokesmen' and various subsidiaries are, of course among the worst offenders for often it is in their own interests that the truth be hidden. When we describe mass sackings as 'the elimination of redundancies in the human resources sector' or a fire in a nuclear power station as 'rapid oxidation' then we are heading for trouble. Political terminology is riddled with such duplicity: consider the uses of words like democratic, homeland, resettlement areas - even unrest.

Some doublespeak - especially of military origin - displays a grotesque and cynical disregard for accuracy. Political murders are 'elimination with extreme prejudice'; retreating becomes 'engaging in tactical re-deployment', a bombing raid is a 'strategic support mission'. Truly we are not far removed from the Orwellian horrors of a Ministry of Love whose function is to make war, or a Ministry of Peace which organises national confrontations. You might now like to play this sickly little game (see box below).

My comments on doublespeak and the 'game' are unashamedly based on an article in NATENEWS, the magazine

of the National Association for the Teaching of English in Britain. It points out that doublespeak is all round us ('an optional 12 percent surcharge is added to your bill') to such an extent that a **Quarterly Review of Doublespeak** is now published in the U.S.

Send your contributions - if you wish - and with proper authentication to: Committee on Public Doublespeak, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Road, Urbana, Illinois 61801 - or to me if you've crossed enough Rubicons and are not now seeking undue demographic sector acclamation.

Match the two columns, placing the letter of the translation in column B with the appropriate doublespeak term in column A.

A. Doublespeak

1. explosion
2. bullet wound
3. poor, black, Hispanic
4. slum, ghetto
5. invasion
6. medical malpractice
7. to die
8. profits
9. budget reductions
10. library
11. automobile mechanic
12. school desk
13. teach
14. civilian casualties in a nuclear war
15. tax increase

B. Translation

- A. terminal living
- B. learning resource centre
- C. time on task
- D. receipts strengthening
- E. energetic dissembly
- F. inner city
- G. revenue excesses, or negative deficit
- H. disadvantaged
- I. pupil station
- J. collateral damage
- K. automotive internist
- L. advanced downward adjustments
- M. ballistically induced aperture in the subcutaneous environment
- N. predawn vertical insertion
- O. therapeutic misadventure

THE USE AND MISUSE OF JARGON

'On those dead calm days when the floating line comes

back at you with line-wake, the intermediate, because it's just under the surface, retrieves without a sign.'

Despite the fact that you probably know the meanings of every word in that sentence, the whole says very little to those of us not in the know. The reason is simple: the words used are jargon. Jargon, in its pejorative sense, means the kind of empty gobbledegook uttered by many politicians and others who have little to say and are attempting to disguise that fact. In its more specialised and acceptable sense, jargon means the particular vocabulary used all the time by people engaged in some common pursuit or activity.

Every sport, every academic discipline, the arts, technology, typewriter mechanics, computer programmers, ballet dancers, printers - and countless other people all use in their daily work highly developed vocabularies which are not readily available and accessible to those 'outside'.

These vocabularies have several functions. The first, and probably the most important, is to provide a kind of shorthand, an abbreviated, concise statement which might otherwise require many more words. Secondly, they serve to promote a bond of understanding between those engaged together on similar pursuits. Thirdly, because of their precise meaning, jargon terms are less likely to be misinterpreted by those in the know.

Jargon generates its terminology either by inventing entirely new words or by giving a new significance to words already in use. You can find countless examples in any book on computer programming. Words like Fortran, chad, gigabyte, spreadsheet, picosecond, firm-ware did not exist a couple of decades ago. Words like gate, packages, overlay, parallel interface, synchronous communication, plug compatibility add new dimensions to the current vocabulary.

There's nothing wrong with jargon provided (and this goes for many other things besides jargon) you use it properly. Improper use is when you try to cover up your own inadequacies (very common) or when you pretend you are saying something significant when you are doing nothing of the kind (even commoner in some circles, especially when making speeches) or when you're blinding an innocent housewife with mechanical terminology:

'Oh, Madam, we've got big troubles! Your sprocket nut has bushed on to the jink spiggle so the magnetoid splat valve can't open properly. We'll have to rackle the solenoid flotters - and that means glomping the rear knockle-shaft.'

When faced with this sort of verbiage, bid the perpetrator good day and seek a second opinion.

Cleverly used jargon in the wrong context can be highly amusing. In a couple of memorable pages Churchill used the following: heavy with destiny, arrested, silent veto, affronted, shield, infinite precaution, challenge, cataleptic, chariot, frantic, cowering, fate, avenged, violence, beserk fury, awe. Typical Churchillian belligerence - and his topic? Learning how to paint with oils!

The sentence which began all this will be readily understood by anyone between the ages of 10 and 102 - provided they are experienced flyfishermen.

MRS MALAPROP'S LEGACY

One of the rich sources of linguistic humour in English is the malapropism - that is, the use of one word closely resembling the one intended, though with an entirely different and wholly incongruous meaning. 'Ill-literate him from your memory' advises Mrs Malaprop, whose name (meaning 'illsuited' or 'out of place') has been given to this practice, even though earlier characters in literature - and no doubt in real life too - were guilty of the same malpractices.

The trouble with malapropisms is that - even if you intend them for humorous reasons - people tend to look down their noses, considering you ignorant and perhaps vain and affected. That was indeed Sheridan's purpose with regard to Mrs Malaprop herself. So here, lest we fall into some traps, are some English words that can, if we aren't careful, be easily confused.

Prone, supine. Both these mean 'lying down', the difference being the way you happen to be facing when you do so. Prone is flat on the face' supine flat on the back. The former also means 'having a tendency to', as in: 'She was prone to fall in love with Spanish swimming bath attendants.' Note that 'prone' must be followed by an infinitive (as in the example) or a noun as

in 'prone to indigestion'. 'He is prone to mispronouncing people's surnames' is not acceptable.

Observance, observation. Both words clearly have something to do with watching or seeing. Observation is the action of watching. Observation balloons were common enough on the Western front in 1914. The observation of the night sky is the practice of astronomical observatories. Observance, on the other hand, means looking at a code of behaviour and seeing that you adhere to it: the observance of the rule of the road; or of a club's traditions. Hamlet speaks of his disdain of the Danish habit of drinking heavily and says that, as far as he is concerned, 'it is a custom more honoured in the breach than in the observance.'

Confusion sometimes arises, perhaps because it's an easy spelling mistake to make, between lightning and lightening. The latter contains, of course, not only an extra 'e', but another syllable in consequence, so perhaps the spelling error is compounded by mispronunciation. Lightning has two syllables, lightening three. The former is what we see during a thunderstorm - a bright flash occasioned by an electric discharge. Lightening, by contrast, has nothing whatever to do with electricity. It means either the fact of making lighter - in terms of hue or colour, or of weight or mass. 'He felt an immediate lightening of his spirits following her admission!' 'She was obsessed with the idea of lightening the walls of the sitting room.'

Two further examples: gourmand and gourmet. The latter comes from a French word meaning 'a wine-maker's assistant', hence a gourmet is a person of taste and discrimination usually in wine, but now more generally in matters of the palate: a person with a fine sense of what constitutes good food and drink. Gourmand is a person concerned not so much with the quality but the quantity of food and drink, hence one who likes good fare and consumes a hearty sufficiency of it.

See how you go with these easily confused words equitable, equitable; revenge, avenge; comic, comical; continuous, continual; instantly, instantaneously; timely, timeously; childish, childlike; Arabic, Arabian.

NEAR MISSES

Advertising men who should (and probably do) know bet-

ter, are happier using 'proven' than 'proved'. The former is an old fashioned past participle of 'prove' and used to mean, especially in Scotland, 'not proved nor disproved'. If you emerged from a Scots court of law with a 'not proven' verdict over your head, it could mean that the court thought you were guilty but didn't have enough conclusive evidence to say so. Such a slur one would not wear lightly in a strict Calvinist society far from averse to forming its own judgements and acting accordingly. Cars of 'proven' reliability could thus be less reliable than those whose dependability is, without doubt 'proved'. Use 'proved' rather than 'proven'.

If I am uninterested, I am simply not interested. My disinterest is another matter entirely and implies my impartiality, my lack of bias. I am not concerned with the pros and cons; I do not mind who wins. All good umpires should be disinterested, even when they are sworn at by irate tennis players disputing line calls.

We frequently read, alas, of drunken behaviour, drunken drivers, drunken sailors, Such usage is perfectly correct, though a trifle outmoded. We use drunken as an adjective when it is placed in front of the noun - that is when it is used attributively. If we use it after the verb, that is predicatively, then we must say 'drunk'. 'He was impossibly drunk - too drunk to sign his own name.' Most people nowadays use drunk in both positions - both before and after the verb. Note that the past tense of 'to drink' is 'drank'. 'I drank a whole pint' - not 'drunk'.

Much more trouble arises with the deceptively simple phrases 'due to' and 'owing to'. Due is an adjective and must therefore relate to a noun or a pronoun. 'Due to his bad language, she left at once' is wrong, for clearly 'she' cannot be governed or qualified by 'due'. 'Owing to his bad language, she left at once' is better. 'His silence was owing to his innate shyness' is also incorrect. Say rather 'His silence was due to his innate shyness'. The general rule is that 'due to' should introduce an adjectival phrase, while 'owing to' should introduce an adverbial phrase.

Be careful not to use unnecessary words as in: 'The cause of his distress was due to his stupidity'. Sufficient is it to say either: 'The cause of his distress

was his stupidity' or 'His distress was due to his stupidity.

When in doubt about whether to use 'due to' or 'owing to' you can always duck out and use 'because of' which happily can take the place of either - due to the flexibility of English. Or should it be 'owing to...'?

EVASIONS AND AVERSIONS

One reason why English poses so many problems for those learning it is the similarity between words. English contains a vast number of words which sound the same but are spelt differently: bow, bough; fare, fair; team, team; cereal, serial and so on. In addition, some words are spelt identically, but have a different sound in different contexts: a lead weight, lead the way; and those minefields for South African speakers - prótest (noun) and protést (verb), défect and deféct.

To make matters even more complicated, several words have almost similar spellings but meanings that differ radically: climatic, climactic and climacteric, for instance. Confusion - and not a little amusement - ensues when the wrong choice is used, as happened recently when a local cricket team, at a crucial stage in a game, was said by the reporter to 'have reached a climacteric moment'. Climacteric means 'pertaining to a change of life' - something the sportsmen were no doubt hoping to stave off for a while longer.

If you wish to avoid accusations of snobbery, then try not to use long words which you understand only partially or not at all. Remember the Irish landlady in Behan's **The Hostage** who is an object of mirth when she claims that 'Men of good taste have complicated me on that carpet'.

A much subtler difficulty arises when we use a word which has more or less the same meaning as the one we intend, but not quite. A recent newspaper article contained this sentence: 'Tax avoidance to the tune of R243 million had been uncovered.' A better word in that context would have been 'evasion'. Avoidance means the 'act of avoiding' - as in avoiding an obstacle in your path, or your relatives at Christmas. Evasion means the act of escaping from your responsibilities, and hence is a better word for trying to dodge the Receiver.

A speaker on the radio last week claimed that 'the two parties found the matter a bone of content' - and implied that they had reached amicable agreement. The phrase is actually 'a bone of contention' which means exactly what the speaker did not, namely a matter of disagreement. I once knew a person who thought that 'hoi polloi' meant the upper classes, and consequently used the phrase to others' amusement, though without ever finding out why people laughed at him.

COMMON OR VULGAR ERRORS

You won't have far to look to find a number of words - especially verbs - which are misused, possibly through confusion with other similar verbs. 'Please refrain your child from playing on the escalator' an obvious confusion with restrain. Refrain is a purely personal action, since it means 'stop yourself' or 'desist' as in 'Please refrain from smoking' or 'Desist from spitting on the stairs'. Notice that both refrain and desist have no direct object, but are followed by the preposition 'from'.

A similar confusion arises between convince and persuade, which have meanings with much in common. They cannot, however, be used interchangeably. 'He convinced me to vote for Rajbansi' is not acceptable - grammatically speaking, of course. 'He persuaded me...' is better. 'He convinced me that he was speaking for his people' has a greater degree of certainty than 'He persuaded me ...'. A conviction - even a criminal one - is more decisive and permanent than a persuasion.

'He broke his one leg'; 'My one arm is in a sling' are both commonly heard and are, except in the cases of one-legged pirates or one-armed bandits, not justified, since both imply an anatomical singularity of a rare kind. Say rather 'He broke a leg' or 'one of his legs' in the case of a horse, and 'My left/right arm...'.
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Menus, especially in places which aspire to heights greater than actuality warrants, are common sources of sometimes quite amusing errors, especially where foreign languages are involved. Last week I came across 'gratinated parmesan', which sounds terribly posh until you look at and think about it. The composer of the menu apparently thinks that 'gratinated' is an up-market form of 'grated' which will add 'tone'. It doesn't for there's nothing wrong with grated anyway.

'Au gratin' is certainly French for the grated topping of a dish - either breadcrumbs or cheese - but to coin the anglicised form 'gratinated' is unnecessary. In any case, parmesan ungrated is well-nigh unnegotiable to normal human teeth, and is usually grated or thinly sliced.

I have also seen at various times café o'lait and café au late as variants of café au lait - literally coffee and milk. Perhaps café o'lait is Irish coffee, just as café olé may be Spanish.

There's sometimes a tendency to use 'if' to mean 'when', an error given respectable currency by the poet Rupert Brooke who said: 'If I should die, think only this of me...'. Well, there's no question about if we should die, because it's just about the one certainty left to us all in these shifting times. 'If I should die overseas ...' or 'If I should die in debt' are hypotheses. If introduces a possibility: 'If you win the marathon...'. When presupposes a greater degree of certainty: 'When you've finished lunch, I'll fetch the car.'

NEARLY, BUT NOT QUITE

A few seconds' browsing (but not grazing) in a good dictionary will soon show you the enormous numbers of words, often sharing a common origin, which look very similar but have widely differing meanings.

Perhaps the most bothersome - especially to second language users - are the three short verbs lies, lie and lay. You will soon see how they differ if you examine what are called their 'principal parts'. These are, in order, the first person singular present, the first person singular past, and the past participle used to complete the 'perfect' tense:

I lie (= I tell a lie); I lied; I have lied.

I lie (= I lei down); I lay; I have lain.

I lay (= I lay a garden parth); I laid; I have laid.

The first is regular; the first and second are 'in-transitive' - that is they cannot have an object; the third is transitive - that is you can lay something - an egg, a trail, a table or a railroad. You will often hear economic, economical; historic and historical misused. In brief, they should be used thus: economic

means 'to do with economics', while economical means 'thrifty, careful about the way you spend your cash or your time'. So we should say that 'Economic necessity demands a high level of exports' and 'It's more economical to boil only the amount of water you are likely to need'.

Historic means 'notable, worthy of being remembered'. Thus 'It was a historic decision to build the Channel Tunnel'. Historical means 'relating to history': 'Historical records are prime sources of our knowledge of the past'. 'A historic novel' makes history; its impact is worthy of being remembered for some special reason. 'A historical novel' may be instantly forgettable, since it deals only with events of the past, or people who lived in days gone by.

Such terms as lend and borrow are often mixed up by children. 'Can I lend your spade for a moment?' should, of course, be 'May I borrow ...'. Borrow is the action of the recipient, lend of the donor.

'He learned me all I know' suggests a similar confusion. Teach is the 'giving' part; learn is the pupil's responsibility.

Subtler differences cause some problems with words like observance and observation, dominant and domineering. The first two obviously have something to do with keeping something in view or watching. Observance is the practice of watching over one's responses to the law, or some kind of accepted ritual or practice. 'The observance of the Sabbath' or 'observance of the Traffic Ordinance'. Observation means literally 'watching'; 'Observation shows that Venus has phases like the Moon'.

Similarly the second pair are concerned with having authority, priority or power over something or someone: 'In cards, the five of trumps is dominant over the King of Spades'. Domineering means using your power or authority in a bossy, unpleasant way: 'Her domineering manner resulted in near mutiny.'

Some similar words are so nearly identical in meaning that one need not trouble to distinguish between them. Educationalist and educationist both mean 'one skilled and experienced in matters educational'. Flautist and flutist, violinist and violist have similar meanings, the latter in each case being the American version. At

one time some people were unduly fussy about the distinction between Scots, Scotch and Scottish. Scots referred to the people; Scotch to what they drank; Scottish to things pertaining to Scotland. Nowadays, Scots and Scottish are virtually interchangeable and Scotch still comes from a bottle. But we have Scotch eggs, and Scotch mists which have nothing to do with whisky.