ITS ACADEMIC OR IS IT?

Soon, no one will care about correct grammar, and the apostrophe will disappear into infinity

BY CHARLES R. LARSON

If you're 35 years or older, you probably identify a common grammatical error in the heading on this page. Younger than that and, well, you likely have another opinion: "Its all relative"—except, of course, for the apostrophe. Unfortunately, age appears to be the demarcation here. For those in the older group, youth has already won the battle.

I've been keeping a list of places where its is misused: newspapers, magazines, op-eds in major publications and, more recently, wall texts in museums. A few weeks ago I encountered the error in a book title: "St. Simons: A Summary of Its History," by R. Edwin and Mary A. Green. My list is getting longer and longer.

Does it even matter that the apostrophe is going the way of the stop sign and the directional signal in our society? Does punctuation count any longer? Are my complaints the ramblings of an old goat who's taught English for too many years?

What's the big deal, anyway? Who cares whether it's or its? Editors don't seem to know when the apostrophe's necessary. (One of them confessed to me that people have always been confused about the apostrophe—better just get rid of it.) My university undergraduates are clearly befuddled by the correct usage. Too many graduate applications—especially those of students aspiring to be creative writers—provide no clue that the writer understands when an apostrophe is required. Even some of my colleagues are confused by this uggsome contraction.

How can a three-letter word be so disarming, so capable of separating the men from the boys? Or the women from the girl's? When in doubt use both ways, as in a recent advertisement hyping improved SAT: GRE and LSAT scores: "Kaplan locations all over the U.S. are offering full-length exams just like the actual tests. It's a great way to test your skills and get a practice score without the risk of your score being reported to schools. And now, for a limited time only, its absolutely free!"

And now, students, which one of the above spellings of the word is correct: (a) the first, (b) the second, (c) both or (d) neither? Any wonder why Educational Testing Services had to add 100 points to the revised SAT exams?

It's been my recent experience that the apostrophe hasn't actually exited common usage: it's simply migrated somewhere later in the sentence. Hence, "She's lost her marbles" has become the preferred use of this irritating snippet of punctuation in current American writing. "He's not lost his hat: hes lost his brains." "There's gold in them there hills." Or "It was the best of times and the worst of time." The latter, of course, is from Charles Dickens's "A Tale of Two Cities." Or is it Charles's Dickens?

Where will this end? Virtual apostrophe's? At times I wonder if all those missing apostrophes are floating somewhere in outer space. Don't they have to be somewhere.

If—like some philosophers tell us—nothing is ever lost? Lately, I've seen the dirty three-letter word even punctuated as its. What's next? Its? Its?

How complicated can this be? How difficult is it to teach a sixth grader how to punctuate correctly?

Heaven knows I've tried to figure it out, agonized about it for years. I remember being dismayed nearly 20 years ago when I was walking around the neighborhood and discovered an enormous stack of books that someone had put out on the curb, free for the taking. Most of the titles were forgettable: hence the reason they'd been left for scavengers or the next trash pickup. However, mixed among The flotsam and jetsam was a brand-new hardback collegiate dictionary. How could this be, I asked myself? Could someone have too many dictionaries? I think the ideal would be one in every room.

Someone was sending me a signal. If words are unimportant, punctuation is something even more lowly. Why worry about such quibbles? When was the last time anyone ever noticed? Certainly, no one at Touchstone Books caught the errors in a recent ad for "Failing at Fairness: How Our Schools Cheat Girls," by Myra and David Sadker. A testimonial for the book reads as follows: "Reader's will be stunned at the overwhelming evidence of sexism the author's provide." You bet, and the blurb writers' lack of grammatical correctness.

If editors at publishing houses can't catch these errors, who can? Errors common to advertising copy have already spread into the books themselves. I dread walking into a bookstore a decade from now and encountering the covers of classics edited by a new generation of apostrophe-challenged editors: "Father's and Sons." "The Brothers' Karamazov." "The Adventure's of Huckleberry Finn." "The Postman Always's Ring's Twice." "A Midsummer's Night Dream." (Who's wood's these are I think know ...)

The apostrophe is dead because reading is dead. Notice that I didn't say "The apostrophe's dead because reading's dead." That's far too complex an alteration. When in doubt simply write out the full sentence, carefully avoiding all possessives and contractions. Soon, no one will be certain about grammatical usage anyway. Computers will come without an apostrophe key. Why bother about errors on the Internet? E-mail messages are often so badly written they make no sense. Fortunately, they get erased almost immediately. Everything's too quick.

Last week I went to a lamp store to purchase two new floor lamps for our living room: five rooms of lamps and hundreds of styles—except for one minor problem. Not one lamp was designed for reading. Virtually all the lamps illuminated the ceiling: all were designed for television addicts, not readers. So how is one supposed to read TV Guide? The place was so dark (was I expected to hold my book up to the ceiling?) I could hardly find my way out. And speaking of TV, what's the plural: TVs or TV's?

Time to stop this grumbling. Things fall apart. If I start making a list only of the times the apostrophe is used properly, I won't even have to worry about it. I can already hear you say, "Your kidding."

Larson is a professor of literature at American University. His works include 'Academia Nuts' and 'Arthur Dimmesdale.'
In Praise of the Humble Comma

The gods, they say, give breath, and they take it away. But the same could be said—could it not?—of the humble comma. Add it to the present clause, and, of a sudden, the mind is set at ease. One feels the prose quiet, given pause to think; take it out if you wish or forget it and the mind is deprived of a resting place. Yet still the comma gets no respect. It seems just a slip of a thing, a pedant’s tick, a blip on the edge of our consciousness, a kind of printer’s smudge almost. Small, we claim, is beautiful (especially in the age of the microchip). Yet what is so often used, and so rarely recalled, as the comma—unless it be breath itself?

Punctuation, one is taught, has a point: to keep up law and order. Punctuation marks are the road signs placed along the highway of our communication—to control speeds, provide directions and prevent head-on collisions. A period has the unblinking finality of a red light; the comma is a flashing yellow light that asks us only to slow down; and the semicolon is a stop sign that tells us to ease gradually to a halt, before gradually starting up again. By establishing the relations between words, punctuation establishes the relations between the people using words. That may be one reason why schoolteachers exalt it and lovers defy it (“We love each other and belong to each other let’s don’t ever hurt each other Nicole let’s don’t ever hurt each other,” wrote Gary Gilmore to his girlfriend). A comma, one must have known, separates inseparables, in the clinching words of H.W. Fowler, King of English Usage.

Punctuation, then, is a civic prop, a pillar that holds society upright. (A run-on sentence, its phrases piling up without division, is as unsightly as a sink piled high with dirty dishes.) Small wonder, then, that punctuation was one of the first properties of the Victorian age, the age of the corset, that the modernists threw off. The sexual revolution might be said to have begun when Joyce’s Molly Bloom spilled out all her private thoughts in 36 pages of unbridled, almost unperiodized and officially censored prose; and another rebellion was surely marked when E.E. Cummings first felt free to commit “God” to the lower case.

Punctuation thus becomes the signature of cultures. The hot-blooded Spaniard seems to be revealed in the passion and urgency of his doubled exclamation points and question marks (“¡Caramba! ¡Quer saber!”). While the impassive Chinese traditionally added to his so-called inescutability by omitting directions from his ideograms. The anarchy and commotion of the ’60s were given voice in the exploding exclamation marks, riotous capital letters and Day-Glo italics of Tom Wolfe’s spray-paint prose; and in Communist societies, where the State is absolute, the dignity—and divinity—of capital letters is reserved for Ministries, Sub-Committees and Secretariats.

Yet punctuation is something more than a culture’s birthmark: it scores the music in our minds, gets our thoughts moving to the rhythm of our hearts. Punctuation is the notation in the sheet music of our words, telling us when to rest, or when to raise our voices: it acknowledges that the meaning of our discourse, as of any symphonic composition, lies not in the units but in the pauses, the spacing and the phrasing. Punctuation is the way one beat one beats one beats one beats one beats one. Punctuation adjusts the tone and color and volume till the feeling comes into perfect focus: not disgust exactly, but distaste; not lust, or like, but love.

Punctuation, in short, gives us the human voice, and all the meanings that lie between the words. “You aren’t young, are you?” loses its innocence when it loses the question mark. Every child knows the menace of a dropped apostrophe, that the parent’s “Don’t do that” shifting into the more slowly enunciated “Do not do that”), and every believer, the ignominy of having his faith reduced to “faith.” Add an exclamation point to “To be or not to be . . .” and the gloomy Dane has all the resolve he needs: add a comma, and the noble sobriety of “God save the Queen” becomes a cry of desperation bordering on double sacrilege.

Sometimes, of course, our markings may be simply a matter of aesthetics. Popping in a comma can be like slipping on the necklace that gives an outfit quiet elegance, or like catching the sound of running water that complements, as it completes, the silence of a Japanese landscape. When V.S. Naipaul, in his latest novel, writes, “He was a middle-aged man, with glasses,” the comma adds a little preciosity. Yet it gives the description a spin, as well as a subtlety, that it otherwise lacks, and it shows that the glasses are not part of the middle-agedness, but something else.

Thus all these tiny scratches give us breadth and heft and depth. A world that has only periods is a world without inflections. It is a world without shades. It has a music without sharps and flats. It is a martial music. It has a jackboot rhythm. Words cannot bend and curve. A comma, by comparison, catches the gentle drift of the mind in thought, turning in on itself and back on itself, reversing, redoubling and returning along the course of its own sweet river music; while the semicolon brings clauses and thoughts together with all the silent discretion of a hostess arranging guests around her dinner table.

Punctuation, then, is a matter of care. Care for words, yes, but also, and more important, for what is left unsaid. Only a lover notices the small things: the way the afternoon light catches the nape of a neck, or how a strand of hair slips out from behind an ear, or the way a finger curls around a cup. And no one scans a letter so closely as a lover, searching for its small print, straining to hear its nuances, its gasps, its sighs and hesitations, poring over the secret messages that lie in every caress. The difference between “I love you” and “I love you” (whom I adore and the difference between them both and who I adore marks all the distance between ecstasy and heartache. “No iron can pierce the heart with such force as a period put at just the right place,” in Isaac Babel’s lovely words; a comma can let us hear a voice break, or a heart. Punctuation, in fact, is a labor of love. Which brings us back, in a way, to gods.

Anybody for Eelpout? or Why We Need Commas

Joan James Ben Rob Thomas and Georgie were going eelpout fishing. Before going Joan had to stop at the grocery store to buy ice cream fruit juice butter milk and kumquats. Ben went along but found that on the floor below the store sold sporting goods. He ran down there and asked Mr. Clark do you have any eelpout hooks? However he answered the question Chester Clark knew he was going to be laughed at. Just then Ben saw his aunt Martha Running come into the store. She was exhausted for the box she was carrying was extremely heavy. It was full of fresh fat cat fish. Suddenly in the room above water started to rain down. The water was fire! As the firefighters approached Ben raced for the door. Long after firefighters arrived to put out the blaze smoke was still pouring out of the building. Near the fire hoses filled the streets like giant eelpout. By the way the fire chief was screaming everyone could tell that the fire was out of control. By the time the fire was put out Ben and Joan had missed the fishing trip but they were able to sit down for a nice meal of smoked cat fish. After they had eaten the dog enjoyed the scraps.
Making 'lite' of our changing language

Next stop, the dictionary for some phrases, coined words?

Dear Abby: I enjoyed the poem I'm sending you so much that I hope you will share it with your readers.
— Schoolteacher

Abby says! I'm sure many of them will enjoy it. It reads like the lyrics to a rap song:

Hey, whatcha doing? Whaddaya say?
Do ya wanna read a good poem today?
Hey, gotta sec? C'mon! Let's see!
Our language is changing, you'll hafta agree.
Well, gimme a minute, and lemme just shure
There's a new coined spelling, doncha know?
It's a heckuva note; it's kinda sad.
'Cos our sloppy talking has gotten this bad.
If you're like me, you hate

there to be
Words like ain't in our vocab-
ulary:
Don't be surprised if we're soon gonna see
Sorta or coulda in the dictionary.
Yeah, merchants and stores are doing it, too;
Making things EZ and quik for you.
They'll offer mor-valu; we can sav-rite tonite;
But the spelling's not kool; it's outta classe!
It's "lots of" (not lotsa) and "going to" (not gonna);
And "got to" and "want to" (not gotta or wanna);
It's "extra" (not x-tra) and "light" (not lite).

And who sez it's OK to use shur or nite?
Comic-book lingo; doesn't it getcha?
A whole lotta words like thru and tho:
So why do we all do it?
I dunno!
— George Willink, 1995

One way of looking at speech is to say it is a constant stratagem to cover nakedness.
HAROLD PINTER

What do you think?

To a teacher of languages
there comes a time when the world is but a place
of many words and man appears
a mere talking animal not
much more wonderful than a parrot.
JOSPEH CONRAD

A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.
PROVERBS 25:11

To next in criminality to him who violates the laws of
his country is he who
violates the language.
WALTER SAVAGE LANDOR

The language of the street is always strong.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Words have users, but as well, users have words. And it is the users that establish the world's realities.
AMIRI BARAKA

After reading the articles, do the WA on language as explained on your assignment sheet.

—see back for fun!
Evolving culture spawns host of new words just to keep up

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Go berserk at work, and it’s called “going postal.”

Batter a spouse, and it’s an “OJ.” Walk down the aisle for the first time in this age of divorce, and you’re launching a “starter marriage.”

It’s all part of Americans’ changing language — new words and phrases people come up with as their culture changes.

“People like to invent words,” said David Barnhart, editor of Barnhart Dictionary Companion. “They like to have novelty in their speech.”

Barnhart, one of the experts who reported on the nation’s developing vocabulary at a recent meeting of the American Dialect Society in Chicago, said 10,000 to 20,000 new words pop up each year in the English language, but only 100 to 200 make it into dictionaries.

Computers have had a huge impact.

Among this year’s new or newly prominent words and phrases are World Wide Web, the part of the Internet that combines text, graphics and photographs; and “mouse potato,” a variation of the slothful “couch potato,” meaning someone who’s hooked on computers.

And then there’s House Speaker Newt Gingrich, whose confrontational style has spawned a host of expressions, including Newt Age, Newt Dealer, Newt World Order, Newtonian, Newtopia, Newton bomb, Newtspeak, Newtworking and femineutel.

Said John Algeo of the University of Georgia, “Every time you get new things, you need new words to label them.”

Here is a list of new words and phrases noted by American Dialect Society:

> **Anxious class**
  Middle-class people worried about economic security.

> **Astroturf**
  Phony grassroots movement created by special-interest advertising.

> **Big box**
  Large chain store specializing in one kind of merchandise.

> **Brownfield**
  Vacant city lot.

> **EQ**
  Emotional intelligence.

> **Fuhrman**
  As a verb, to exhibit racial prejudice.

> **Gaydar**
  A gay person’s ability to spot other gays.

> **Generation Y**
  Post-post baby boomers.

> **Joe six chip**
  Ordinary Joe with computer.

> **OJ**
  As a verb, to batter a spouse.

> **Overclass**
  Highly educated, upper-income class.

> **Sero-discordant**
  Partners with conflicting HIV status.

> **Spamming**
  Sending junk e-mail.

> **Spinning (also RPM)**
  Riding stationary bicycle while listening to music.

> **Starter marriage**
  First marriage.

> **24-7**
  Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

> **Testifying**
  Lying under oath.

> **Waymazin**
  Really amazing.

> **Whatever**
  Gratuitous remark.

> **They**
  Singular gender-neutral pronoun.

> **Trunking**
  Taking a joyride in a stolen car and locking the owner in the trunk.

> **V-chip**
  Computer chip that screens out TV violence.

> **Webliography**
  Bibliography of material on the Internet.

Create some original words...

Try it!
The routine use of vulgar language

It’s losing its usefulness as a way to blow off steam

By Madeline Hamermesh

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien, As to be hated needs but to be seen; Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face, We first endure, then pity, then embrace. — from “An Essay on Man,” by Alexander Pope.

These words recur to me every time I hear what used to be called obscene words, especially in movies.

Obscenities that everyone knows are a synonym for excrement and the f-word in all its variations. These words seem to constitute a large part of the language used among wannabe hip adolescents and white-collar professionals alike.

On the Nicollet Mall, I hear them in casual conversations between young girls and between suited men. Modern movies are full of expletives not deleted. The film “Ransom,” for instance, has plenty of bad guys — a rogue cop and his lowlife pawns, who use all forms of the bleep word, which is not bleeped at all. And the hero, mad with frustration and rage, forgets his stature as a very rich man and bleeps at the criminals.

The quote from Pope is relevant, if we substitute obscenity for vice. For the last 20 or so years obscenity, yet another sign of increasing incivility, has become more current in our entertainment and our conversation. The only place still sacrosanct is network television where the four-letter words are routinely bleeped, so that the word bleep itself has taken on vulgar connotations. as in “The bleeping jerk gypped me.” (Now why hasn’t jerk become a no-no? After all, its origin is especially vulgar.)

The four-letter word for fecal excrement is used so routinely that it appears on T-shirts and bumper stickers.

But I remember a time (1962, to be precise) when I had just begun to teach high school English. I called on a male student for an answer to a question for which he was not prepared. He muttered, sotto voce, “S—!” There followed a muted gasp from those around him who had heard. I also heard him (my hearing was sharper in those days), but I pretended that I hadn’t for a few good reasons: First, I didn’t even then consider a whispered obscenity to be a major act of civil disobedience or even a violation of classroom discipline; secondly, I would have been duty-bound to send him to the dean of boys, a tough Marine-type who would have inflicted god-knowledge punishment on this rather naive 15-year-old. I wonder what Jack Smith, the then-dean, thinks of what he hears high school students saying now.

And that’s the point of the Pope quote: At first we were shocked and revolted by filthy words coming out of the mouths of ordinary people, especially young people; then we tried to blame the “misbehavior” on ignorance and class; now we have come to accept it as part of the vulgarization and deterioration of society’s mores. And, as Pope said, we now “embrace.” I personally know a successful attorney who prides himself on constructing a whole sentence consisting of various forms of the word bleep replaces, as in “The bleeping bleeper’s bleeped.” So we can no longer attribute obscene language to slums, poverty and ignorance. And I have found myself able nowadays to utter the ultimate obscenity when I read aloud, something I couldn’t possibly have done even five years ago.

Students of how language is used in society have for some time wondered about how we can safely and constructively express extreme frustration when language no longer fulfills the role of an outlet for anger. That is, if the ultimate in vulgar language is now so commonplace that it has no shock value, will we have anything to say to let off steam when we’re really angry? Shall we then have to toss the hammer when it hits our thumb and let it hit someone else or destroy a window? Will we tear into a spouse or a child when the argument waxes hot? Can this be one reason that intrafamily violence has increased? The point is that obscenity served a socially useful function. We need a proper respect for four-letter words, to be used in extremes, for they can perhaps save us from more destructive behavior.

But I doubt that we can ever return to clean language and thus save our taboo language for times of need. That kind of language change is not easy or common, unless great social pressures force it, as in the progress from colored to Negro to black to African-American. But I see no signs of that kind of social pressure to rid us of former obscenities.

— Madeline Hamermesh, a retired English teacher, lives in Minneapolis.
His vanity is a bonfire for ideas about apostrophes

While on a long driving trip recently I noticed one of those peculiar signs that one finds from time to time atop tall posts outside convenience stores.

Because these signs are put up letter by letter, usually by the young employees (to whom all such annoying work customarily is assigned), they are often unintentional but bone-chilling advertisements for the Special School for Spelling, Capitalization and Apostrophe Remediation of our Youth (SSSCARY).

Consider that the shortcomings of some young people often are combined with a general lack of appreciation for the finer principles of grammar and diction — and a chronic undersupply of certain letters and numerals for the signs — and it is not surprising that one often sees such announcements as these (fictitious but entirely possible) examples:

FRSH TOMATOES
YOU'RE NO MILK SUPPLIER
ECLAIR'S — CREAME PIE

I present fictitious examples only because I have not, thank goodness, kept a notebook of all the interestingly incorrect signs I have ever seen. I have seen lots, and I have tried to forget them. I made a point of remembering this example from my recent trip. It is not made up:

GOURMET COFFEE. 3 VERITIES

This sign immediately earned a special place in my heart for offering amusement beyond mere mistake: It afforded me an opportunity to spend some time, as I drove through the winter afternoon, contemplating what the three verities of gourmet coffee might be.

Human cultural history does not lack for such lists of principles — pillars of wisdom, commandments, truths we hold to be self-evident, secrets of obtaining a mega memory, ways to a firmer butt, and the like. So I was sure that if I spent some time at it, I could think of several unquestionable things we know about gourmet coffee.

And it turned out not to be very difficult to come up with the three that the sign no doubt referred to:

- "Gourmet coffee" costs more than "coffee."
- Preference for "gourmet coffee" over "coffee" is inversely related to age.
- Within five years, at least 50 percent of "gourmet coffee" shops will be converted to artichoke-dip shops, or whatever the craze is then.

SICHERMAN FROM E1

Signs can offer unintended entertainment for travelers

Although I spent perhaps half an hour of pleasant driving coming up with that list, I realize that many people would aver that such a thing has no value whatever — that if it were destroyed, along with much of the rest of my oeuvre, in some cleansing conflagration, nobody would be the poorer. I have not, in fact, a particularly massive oeuvre, so in my case such a bonfire of the verities probably wouldn’t be visible much more than a block away.

But I digress.

As much as I wanted to think about other verities or varieties or vanities or variances or vacancies or valences, I found myself somehow stuck on the subject of apostrophe usage, and I thought I remembered writing a passage about it once as the basis for a short story. I had. And I found it. Fully undeveloped, in my computer. Here it is:

"I didn't do anything. If you apostrophe cop's had any cent's you go after the big criminal's — the, commercial printer's — and leave u's small citizen's alone. Its nobody's business anyway."

"Just come along quietly and nobody'll get hurt."

"Oooh! Apostrophe's before L's! You think your pretty smart, don't you, copper? Just keep rubbing it in. One fine day you're going to find you're daughter use's apostrophe's wrong. Then what will you say?"

"You'd better leave my daughter out of this!"

"Wow! And now before a D! Pretty fancy contracting for a flatfoot."

"Why, you..." That's the entire fragment. Verily, I think I'll add it to the bonfire.
How important is English anyway?

Author delves into importance of the language

The echoes of distress now ring from numerous cultural arenas. Whether it’s education, or business, or government, or religion, or family structures, the angst sounds the same. “There’s an erosion of values ... we’re losing ground to high standards ... we’ve lowered the bar too far ... etc., etc.” I’m sure you’ve heard or said something similar recently.

A number of years ago, I debated a teacher regarding her low expectations for my child’s spelling. Though the work contained one misspelled word after another, never was the child held accountable.

“How can a student spell so poorly and still get a happy face?” I asked.

“At this age, we want to encourage the student’s effort,” came the reply.

“Terrific,” I answered, “but the effort falls short.”

“We don’t like to think of it in those terms,” the teacher explained. “Your child gave their best effort and we want to affirm the fact that they tried.”

“But it’s not their best effort if word after word is wrong,” was my retort. “My child needs to learn correct spelling. They need to be held accountable for their performance, and their effort. If the word is wrong, show them, so they can learn and do it right.”

“But,” the teacher continued, “your child’s self-esteem is also at stake here. Today we find that it isn’t helpful if the child encounters bad feelings about their performance. A sense of failure can be devastating to a child’s development.”

“But their self-esteem is not built up by lowering standards,” I argued.

As you can see, the debate got nowhere. Unfortunately, the teacher and I had stepped into a deadly snare — the binary trap. This trap limits options to “either/or” when the needed response is “both/and.” Sadly, most of us step into it at one time or another and, thus, our society falls prey as well.

Think back to your years in school. Which teachers helped you achieve your greatest success in the classroom? The ones who established high standards and held you accountable? Or the ones who let you get by with less-than-exemplary work? To this day I am grateful that my high school English teacher demanded excellence in performance and effort. True, I hated it at the time, assuming, “I don’t need so much English in my life.” However, she could see the future which lay beyond my horizon. Today, I am grateful for her high ideals, because now excellence in communication is my life.

Just this week a good friend sent me the following, which he had found on the Internet. It illustrates well the need to hold onto high ideals which encompass performance and effort:

“Having chosen English as the preferred language in the EEC (now officially the European Union, or EU), the European Parliament has commissioned a feasibility study in ways of improving efficiency in communications between government departments.

“European officials have often pointed out that English spelling is unnecessarily difficult; for example: cough, plough, rough, thorough and thorough. What is clearly needed is a phased programme of changes to iron out these anomalies. The programme would, of course, be administered by a committee staff at top levels of participating nations.

“In the first year, for example, the committee would suggest using ‘s’ instead of the soft ‘c’. Sincerely, civil servants in all states would receive this news with joy. Then the hard ‘c’ could be replaced by ‘k’ since both letters are pronounced alike. Not only would this clear up confusion in the minds of clerical workers, but typewriters could be made with one less letter.

“There would be growing enthusiasm when in the second year, it was announced that the troublesome ‘ph’ would henceforth be written ‘f’.

“This would make words like ‘fotograf’ 20 percent shorter in print.

“In the third year, public akseptanse of the new spelling can be expected to reach the stage where more komplikated changes are possible. Governments would encourage the removal of double letters which has always been a deterrent to akurate spelling.

“We would all agree that the horrible mes of silent ‘c’s in the language is disgraceful. Therefore we could drop thes and kontinu to read and writ as though nothing had hapend. By this time it would be four years since the skem began and peopl would be sepsive to steps suth as replasng ‘th’ by ‘z’. Perhaps zen ze funkntion of ‘w’ could be taken on by ‘v’, visth is, after al, half a ‘w’. Shortly after zis, ze unesesary ‘o’ could be dropd from words containing ‘ou’. Similar arguments vud of kors be aplid to ozer kombinations of letters.

“Kontinuing zis proses yer after yer, ve vud eventuall hav a reli sensibl riten styl. After twenti yers vud be no mor tubus, difficults end evrivin vud fin it ezi tu understand ech ozher. Ze drens of ze uvermnt vud finali hav kem tru.”

“Sant Pal razd ze bar ven he sed zis in Colasens zre, vers sevnten, ‘Vatev yu du in verd or ded, du al in ze nam of ze Lord Gezus.’ Boi, duz Pal ofer a hi standirt for egzalen.

“Tu mi felo soajmers ... ses lorin ze bah!”

(Marlin Meendering is a motivational and spiritual speaker from Eden Prairie. He shares this space with the Revs. Tim Power of Pax Christi Catholic Community and Matt Marzluft of Eden Prairie Presbyterian Church. “Spiritually Speaking” is one of several commentaries and opinion pieces appearing regularly in this newspaper.)
Language once limited to teens now being used by older people

The point is: Prestigious degrees won’t do much good if they can’t project professionalism. Last year, Smith introduced “Speaking Across the Curriculum,” demanding that students do more oral presentations whether in science or literature courses. At Mount Holyoke, classes have been marked off with greens to indicate a lack of emphasis on speaking, and the school has a new speaking center where students and faculty members can practice with speaking and listening assistants and speaking mentors. They videotape and critique other students who were unprepared, they told us, they know. "You know" instead of "I don’t know."

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the College of the Holy Cross and Wesleyan University are incorporating more speaking requirements and oral examinations in courses. Stanford and the University of Pennsylvania have consulted with Mount Holyoke professors about setting up programs. There is also less-programmatic therapy. "There are some students," Simmons says, "I just grab them by the shoulders and say, ‘Do not say ‘like’ one more time.’"

Creeping teenspeak

Some would dispute whether the state of American conversation has really declined, or whether this is simply the age-old complaint. But others say they worry more that lanugage once limited to teenagers is now heard from those in their 20s and 30s.

"Where will we be in another 30 years?" Simmons asks. Perhaps predictably, the blame often lands on TV, where characters speak in slang, declarative statements often end with a question mark, and mid-punctuation are not unusual.

"There is a certain kind of inarticulateness," said Steven Pinker, a professor of psychology at MIT and author of "The Language Instinct." "Nobody wants to be the teacher’s pet. What the ‘likes’ and ‘you know’ are do make the speaker sound less emphatic and less dominant." They both bring you down to the same level as everyone else.

More TV usually means less reading, and less exposure to the full range and precision of vocabulary. Meanwhile, education itself has become less structured. "School has become less formal over the years, so people don’t feel as pressured to be as articulate as they were in the olden days," says Carrie Aime, a 19-year-old sophomore and speaking mentor at Mount Holyoke. "A more casual atmosphere can be more conducive to learning in some ways, but the result is, students don’t have much experience in speaking in high school."

Alumni demand

At several colleges, the new emphasis on speaking came out of discussions on how to redefine the curriculum. At Mount Holyoke and MIT, formal alumni surveys cited a demand for students with better speaking skills. Professors, too, said they worried about how the decline in communication skills was affecting classroom discussion.

Randi Bartlett, a Smith professor of economics who was one of the first to suggest an emphasis on speaking when Smith reviewed its curriculum two years ago, recalls eagerly anticipating a student who was going to present what, in writing, had been a persuasive and powerful research project. But what came out in class was the oral equivalent of stufling her feet across the floor.

"Here was this intelligent woman with intelligent ideas, and it all came out in monotone, almost mumbling," Bartlett says. "All those intelligent ideas lost their importance. Her voice was saying, ‘you don’t have to pay much attention to me!’"

Bad speaking, professors say, reflects and projects bad thinking. Learning to speak effectively, then, is learning to think effectively.

"We think we haven’t educated them well if they can’t write well," Bartlett says. "Why shouldn’t we have the same concerns about speaking well?"

-Colleges worry if students can’t speak effectively, they can’t be effective participants in a democracy. And in that fear, they have company outside academia.

Listening to Monica

In July, long before the Capitol Hill had ever heard Monica Lewinsky’s taped voice say, “I mean, this is like, you know, he’s like a normal person,” Sen. Robert Byrd complained on the Senate floor about the “pernicious” phrase of the vernacular on American discourse.

The West Virginia Democrat mockingly imagined whether Abraham Lincoln could have rallied the nation’s determination if the Gettysburg address began, ‘Four score and seven years ago, our forefathers, uh, brought forth, you know…’

But professors warn that it’s more than just teaching students how to give public speeches. And they allow that there is a time and a place for the vernacular.

“We don’t want to stuff them under a standard of formal speech,” said Lee Bowe, director of The Speaking, Arguing and Writing Program at Mount Holyoke. "The point is, there are rhetorical choices, and the ability to choose properly is high." University should be one of them. The reason people use the vernacular is that they haven’t been taught a range of rhetorical choices. Once people can choose a voice for the occasion, the vernacular doesn’t look so much like a problem, but an option."

To define goals, they look again to the Senate. What colleges don’t want, Bowen said, is to encourage the kind of "crossfire" that is displayed too often in the impeachment debates.

"But if you look at [the Arkansas senator], Dale Bumpers’s model," he said, "he really did bring home the effectiveness of rhetorical style, what some of the standard moves are, how effective it is to craft an address that is responsive to the precise audience you’re talking to."
American dictionaries add about 100 words a year

By Ivelisse DeJesus
Newhouse News Service

"Fashionista," a word that means devout follower of fashion trends, has come into vogue itself and won a place on the Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary’s list of last year’s new words.

This also is true of “digerati” (computer geeks), “eye candy” (superficially attractive person) and “dot-com” (need we define?).

And in a year perhaps most notable for a famously long presidential election, esoteric legal terms such as “certiorari” and “recurso” gained widespread use, landing them on another list — of the lexicon’s most frequently looked-up words.

Not surprisingly, most of the new and newly intriguing words owe their popularity to technology, medicine and the rollercoaster presidential election that unleashed an onslaught of legalize into everyday conversation.

“People are interested in these words and want to look them up and learn more about them,” said John Morse, president and publisher of Merriam-Webster Inc.

Since Nov. 7, Election Day, the most frequently looked-up word on the dictionary’s online edition (http://www.m-w.com) has been “chad.” Trailing it was “per curiam,” (a brief, usually unanimous court decision).

But not all of the most popular lexemes stem from that end-of-the-year event. The editors at Merriam-Webster spend all year monitoring newspapers, magazines, repair manuals and newsletters for frequently used new words.

“If words are showing up in mainstream publications, then it really is time to put the word in the collegiate dictionary,” Morse said.

First published in 1898, the Merriam-Webster dictionary (which has about 215,000 words for the collegiate and 470,000 for the unabridged) undergoes a comprehensive rewrite every 10 years. Its online edition, launched in 1996, receives updates quarterly.

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Slow to change, the English language is composed of approximately half a million words that have for the most part been used for some time, give or take the few hundred that surge into vogue for a time, Metcalf said.

“Chad, in fact, is a term that was widely used by teletype operators.” Metcalf said. “It was sort of a specialized word used by few people. Now, it has widespread use.”

These days, television, movies and the Internet subject words to rapid dissemination — and at times regional usage that becomes either very Washington or very Hollywood, Metcalf said.

Still, chances are that the words we use today, largely the same ones used since the Normans conquered England in 1066, will be used hundreds of years from now.

Ultimately, new entries to Merriam-Webster reflect not so much their current popularity as their potential staying power.

“That’s really the job of a dictionary editor. It’s to put words in the dictionary that are likely to be looked up in the future,” Morse said. “That’s because most people, once they buy a dictionary, keep it for years.”

Only time will tell if this year’s select words, such as “digerati” (people well versed in computer use and technology) hold their course, or if, like “Y2K” (one of last year’s most popular words), they “max out” (a new entry this year).
Whose Standard?  
Teaching Standard English

By Linda Christensen

When I was in the ninth grade, Mrs. Delaney, my English teacher wanted to demonstrate the correct and incorrect ways to pronounce the English language. She asked Helen Draper, whose father owned several clothing stores in town, to stand and say “lawyer.” Then she asked me, whose father owned a bar, to stand and say “lawyer.” Everyone burst into laughter at my pronunciation.

What did Mrs. Delaney accomplish? Did she make me pronounce lawyer correctly? No. I say attorney. I never say lawyer. In fact, I’ve found substitutes for every word my tongue can’t get around and for all the rules I can’t remember.

For years I’ve played word cop on myself. I stop what I’m saying to think, “Objective or subjective case? Do I need I or me here? Hmmmm. There’s a lay coming up. What word can I substitute for it? Recline?”

And I’ve studied this stuff. After all, I’ve been an English teacher for almost 20 years. I’ve gone through all of the Warriner’s workbook exercises. I even found a lie/lay computer program and kept it in my head until I needed it in speech and became confused again.

Thanks to Mrs. Delaney I learned early on that in our society language classifies me. Generosity, warmth, kindness, intelligence, good humor aren’t enough — we need to speak correctly to make it. Mrs. Delaney taught me that the “melting pot” was an illusion. The real version of the melting pot is that people of diverse backgrounds are mixed together and when they come out they’re supposed to look like Vanna White and sound like Dan Rather. The only diversity we celebrate is tacos and chop suey at the mall.

Unlearning “Inferiority”

It wasn’t until a few years ago that I realized grammar was an indication of class and cultural background in the United States and that there is a bias against people who do not use language “correctly.” Even the terminology “standard” and “nonstandard” reflects that one is less than the other. English teachers are urged to “correct” students who speak or write in their home language. A friend of mine, whose ancestors came over on the Mayflower, never studied any of the grammar texts I keep by my side, but she can spot all of my errors because she grew up in a home where Standard English was spoken.

And I didn’t, so I’ve trained myself to play language cop. The problem is that every time I pause, I stop the momentum of my thinking. I’m no longer pursuing content, no longer engaged in trying to persuade or entertain or clarify. Instead I’m pulling Warriner’s or Mrs. Delaney out of my head and trying to figure out how to say something.

“Ah, but this is good,” you might say, “You have the rules and Mrs. Delaney to go back to. This is what our students need.”

But it doesn’t happen that way. I try to remember the rule or the catchy phrase that is supposed to etch the rule in my mind forever like “people never get laid,” but I’m still not sure if I used it correctly. These side trips cost a lot of velocity in my logic.

Over the years my English teachers pointed out all of my errors — the usage errors I inherited from my mother’s Bandon, Oregon dialect, the spelling errors I overlooked, the fancy words I used incorrectly. They did this in good faith, in the same way, years later, I “corrected” my students’ “errors because I wanted them to know the rules. They were keys to a secret and wealthier society and I wanted them to be prepared to enter, just as my teachers wanted to help me.

And we should help kids. It would be misleading to suggest that people in our society will value my thoughts or my students’ thoughts as readily in our home languages as in the “casual language” as Jesse Jackson calls it. Students need to know where to find help, and they need to understand what changes might be necessary, but they need to learn in a context that doesn’t say, “The way you said this is wrong.”

When Fear Interferes

English teachers must know when to correct and how to correct — and I use that word uneasily. Take Fred, for example. Fred entered my freshman class last year unwilling to write. Every day during writing time I’d find

Students must be taught to hold their own voices sacred, to ignore the teachers who have made them feel that what they’ve said is wrong or bad or stupid.
Fred doodling pictures of Playboy bunnies. When I sat down and asked him why he didn’t write, he said he couldn’t.

I explained to him that in this class his writing couldn’t be wrong because we were just practicing our writing until we found a piece we wanted to polish, in the same way that he practiced football every day after school, but only played games on Fridays. His resistance lasted for a couple of weeks. Around him, other students struggled with their writing, shared it with the class on occasion and heard positive comments. Certainly the writing of his fellow students was not intimidating.

On October 1st, after reading the story, “Raymond’s Run” by Toni Cade Bambara, about trusting people in our lives, Fred wrote for the first time:

I remember my next door neighbor trusted me with some money that she owed my grandmother. She owed my grandmother about 25 dollars.

Fred didn’t make a lot of errors. In this first piece of writing it looked like he had basic punctuation figured out. He didn’t misspell any words. And he certainly didn’t make any usage errors. Based on this sample, he appeared to be a competent writer.

However, the biggest problem with Fred’s writing was the fact that he didn’t make mistakes. This piece demonstrates his discomfort with writing. He wasn’t taking any risks. Just as I avoid lawyer and lay, he wrote to avoid errors instead of writing to communicate or think on paper.

When more attention is paid to the way something is written or said than to what is said, students’ words and thoughts become devalued. Students learn to be silent, to give as few words as possible for teacher criticism.

Valuing What We Know

Students must be taught to hold their own voices sacred, to ignore the teachers who have made them feel that what they’ve said is wrong or bad or stupid. Students must be taught how to listen to the knowledge they’ve stored up, but which they are seldom asked to relate.

Too often students feel alienated in schools. Knowledge is foreign. It’s about other people in other times. At a conference I attended recently, a young woman whose mother was Puerto Rican and whose father was Haitian said, “I went through school wondering if anyone like me had ever done anything worthwhile or important. We kept reading and hearing about all of these famous people. I remember thinking, ‘Don’t we have anyone?’ I walked out of the school that day feeling tiny, invisible, unimportant.”

As teachers, we have daily opportunities to affirm that our students’ lives and language are unique and important. We do that in the selections of literature we read, in the history we choose to teach, and we do it by giving legitimacy to our students’ lives as a content worthy of study.

One way to encourage the reluctant writers who have been silenced and the not-so-reluctant writers who have found a safe and sterile voice is to encourage them to recount their experiences. I sometimes recruit former students to share their writing and their wisdom as a way of underscoring the importance of the voices and stories of teenagers. Rochelle, a student in my senior writing class, brought in a few of her stories and poems to read to my freshmen. Rochelle, like Zora Neale Hurston, blends her home language with Standard English in most pieces. She reads the following piece to open up a discussion about how kids are sometimes treated as servants in their homes, but also to demonstrate the necessity of using the language she hears in her family to develop characters:

“I’m tired of washing dishes. Seems like every time our family gets together, they just got to eat and bring their millions of kids over to our house. And then we got to wash the dishes.”

I listened sympathetically as my little sister mumbled these words.

“And how come we can’t have ribs like the grownups? After all, ain’t we grown?”

“Lord,” I prayed, “seal her lips while the blood is still running warm in her veins.”

Her bottom lip protruded farther and farther as she dipped each plate in the soapy water, then rinsed each side with cold water (about a two second process) until she felt the majority of the suds were off.

“One minute we lazy women can’t keep the living room half clean. The next minute we just kids and gotta eat some funky chicken while they eat ribs.”
A sense of community encourages students to share their writing.

... Suddenly it was quiet. All except my little sister who was still talking. I strained to hear a laugh or joke from the adults in the living room, a hint that all were well, full and ready to go home. Everyone was still sitting in their same spots, not making a move to leave.

“You ought to be thankful you got a choice.”

Uh-oh. Now she got Aunt Macy started. ...

After reading her work, Rochelle talked about listening to her family and friends tell their stories. She urged the freshmen to relate the tales of their own lives — the times they were caught doing something forbidden, the times they got stuck with the dishes, the funny/sad events that made their freshman year memorable. When Rochelle left, students wrote more easily. Some. Some were afraid of the stories because as Rance said, “It takes heart to tell the truth about your life.”

But eventually they write. They write stories. They write poems. They write letters. They write essays. They learn how to switch in and out of the language of the powerful as Rochelle does so effortlessly in her “Tired of Chicken” piece.

Sharing Lessons

And after we write, we listen to each other’s stories in our read-around circle where everyone has the opportunity to share, to be heard, to learn that knowledge can be gained by examining our lives. (See “read-arounds” page 186.) In the circle, we discover that many young women encounter sexual harassment, we learn that store clerks follow black students, especially males, more frequently than they follow white students, we find that many of our parents drink or use drugs, we learn that many of us are kept awake by the crack houses in our neighborhood.

Before we share, students often understand these incidents individually. They feel there’s something wrong with them. If they were smarter, prettier, stronger, these things wouldn’t have happened to them. When they hear other students’ stories, they begin to realize that many of their problems aren’t caused by a character defect. For example, in Literature in U.S. History, the class I teach with Bill Bigelow, a young man shared a passionate story about life with his mother, who is a lesbian. He loved her, but felt embarrassed to bring his friends home. He was afraid his peers would think he was gay or reject him if they knew about his mother. After he read, the class was silent. Some students cried. One young woman told him that her father was gay and she’d experienced similar difficulties, but hadn’t had the courage to tell people about it. She thanked him. Another student confided that his uncle had died from AIDS the year before. What had been a secret shame became an opportunity for students to discuss sexual diversity more openly. Students who were rigidly opposed to the idea of homosexuality gained insights into their own homophobia — especially when presented with the personal revelations from their classmates. Those with homosexual relatives found new allies with whom they could continue their discussion and find support.

Sharing also provides a “collective text” for us to examine the social roots of problems more closely: Where do men/women develop the ideas that
women are sexual objects? Where do they learn that it’s OK for men to follow women or make suggestive remarks? Where is it written that it’s the woman’s fault if a man leers at her? How did these roles develop? Who gains from them? Who loses? How could we make it different? Our lives become a window to examine society.

Learning the “Standard” Without Humiliation

But the lessons can’t stop there. Fred can write better now. He and his classmates can feel comfortable and safe sharing their lives or discussing literature and the world. They can even understand that they need to ask “Who benefits?” to get a better perspective on a problem. But still when they leave my class or this school, some people will judge them by how their subjects and verbs line up.

So I teach Fred the rules. It’s the language of power in this country, and I would be cheating him if I pretended otherwise. I teach him this more effectively than Mrs. Delaney taught me because I don’t humiliate him or put down his language. I’m also more effective because I don’t rely on textbook drills; I use the text of Fred’s writing. But I also teach Fred what Mrs. Delaney left out.

I teach Fred that language, like tracking, functions as part of a gatekeeping system in our country. Who gets managerial jobs, who works at banks and who works at fast food restaurants, who gets into what college and who gets into college at all, are decisions linked to the ability to use Standard English. So how do we teach kids to write with honesty and passion about their world and get them to study the rules of the cash language? We go back to our study of society. We ask: Who made the rules that govern how we speak and write? Did Ninh’s family and Fred’s family and LaShonda’s family all sit down together and decide on these rules? Who already talks like this and writes like this? Who has to learn how to change the way they talk and write? Why?

We make up our own tests that

speakers of Standard English would find difficult. We read articles, stories, poems written in Standard English and those written in home language. We listen to videotapes of people speaking. Most kids like the sound of their home language better. They like the energy, the poetry, and the rhythm of the language. We determine when and why people shift. We talk about why it might be necessary to learn Standard English. Asking my students to memorize the rules without asking who makes the rules, who enforces the rules, who benefits from the rules, who loses from the rules, who uses the rules to keep some in and keep others out, legitimates a social system that devalues my students’ knowledge and language. Teaching the rules without reflection also underscores that it’s OK for others — “authorities” — to dictate something as fundamental and as personal as the way they speak. Further, the study of Standard English without critique encourages students to believe that if they fail, it is because they are not smart enough or didn’t work hard enough. They learn to blame themselves. If they get poor SAT scores, low grades on term papers or essays because of language errors, fail teacher entrance exams, they will internalize the blame; they will believe they did not succeed because they are inferior instead of questioning the standard of measurement and those making the standards.

We must teach our students how to match subjects and verbs, how to pronounce lawyer, because they are the ones without power and, for the moment, have to use the language of the powerful to be heard. But, in addition, we need to equip them to question an educational system that devalues their life and their knowledge. If we don’t we condition them to a pedagogy of consumption where they will consume the knowledge, priorities, and products that have been decided and manufactured without them in mind.

It took me years to undo what Mrs. Delaney did to me. Years to discover that what I said was more important than how I said it. Years to understand that my words, my family’s words, weren’t wrong, weren’t bad — they were just the words of the working class. For too long, I felt inferior when I spoke. I knew the voice of my childhood crept out, and I confused that with ignorance. It wasn’t. I just didn’t belong to the group that made the rules. I was an outsider, a foreigner in their world. My students won’t be.

Linda Christensen teaches at Jefferson H.S. in Portland, Ore. and is a Rethinking Schools editorial associate.

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Editor's note: Time is forever ticking on, and sometimes we notice. A clock strikes 1, and we're startled that an hour has passed. A birthday arrives or a decade concludes, and we dwell for a moment on the fleeting visit life grants us. And once every thousand years, the calendar takes such a dramatic turn that we're moved to look back not just over lifetimes, but across centuries. That's what this millennium business seems to be all about: taking stock of what 1,000 years can bring.

The millennium almost past has brought a great deal, and to humanity it has delivered one exquisite gift: the printed word. The credit belongs to a German goldsmith named Johannes Gutenberg, who in 1452 rigged up a printing press and unwittingly jostled the planet. The centuries since have seen the conjuring of countless words into trillions of sentences, offered in bulk to a multitude. A world that once counted upon the diligence of monks to turn out hand-copied Bibles was soon awash in mass-produced words.

Thus did a goldsmith start a revolution. His invention enabled the widespread sharing of ideas, the possibility of common knowledge among common people. It brought the dawning of public discussion. It created an informed citizenry, capable of asking questions and yearning for liberty. And perhaps most important of all, Gutenberg's printing press stoked vibrant life into a great and ancient proposition: that mere words can shake the world.

That hypothesis now counts as precious fact. "The pen is mightier than the sword," observed the British writer Lord Lytton, and history proves the claim. Conceived by the Romans and put to ingenious use by every learned culture, the persuasive essay has done more to alter the course of human events than all the despots and generals ever born.

Consider what the millennium's great persuaders have wrought in 1,000 short years. With mere words and great courage, they have toppled dictators, freed slaves, emboldened uprisings, launched movements, averted wars, inspired belief, prompted reform, founded nations and opened millions of minds. Delivered in resonant voice or dispersed on tattered paper, their arguments have reshaped societies and remade lives.

Many will commemorate the millennium now ending by hailing its explorers and scientists, politicians and musicians. But those fond of a good argument may prefer to dwell instead on the millennium's most compelling essayists. Their numbers are great enough to fill a year's worth of Commentary pages, and it's too late for that. It seems better to stick with December, with daily samples of the great persuaders. It's a good way to bid farewell to a remarkable age — a time when words became plentiful enough, and writers bold enough, to shake up the world.
In the commerce of speech use only coin of gold and silver.
JOSEPH Joubert

Look wise, say nothing, and grunt. Speech was given to conceal thought.
WILLIAM OSLER

It is a sad thing when men have neither the wit to speak well, nor the judgment to hold their tongues.
JEAN DE LA BRUYÈRE

The tone of people with low aims is always a high one: the talk of those who live purely for the good is appalling.
LOGAN PEARSALL SMITH

I know only two words of American slang, 'swell' and 'lousy.' I think 'swell' is lousy, but 'lousy' is swell.
J.B. PRIESTLEY

Dialect tempered by slang is an admirable medium of communication between persons who have nothing to say and persons who would not care for anything properly said.
THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH

To a teacher of languages there comes a time when the world is but a place of many words and man appears a mere talking animal not much more wonderful than a parrot.
JOSEPH CONRAD

Articulate words are a harsh clamor and dissonance. When a man arrives at his highest perfection, he will again be dumb.
NATHANIEL HAWTHORNE

Every individual or national degeneration is immediately revealed by a directly proportional degradation in language.
JOSEPH DE MAISTRE

The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.
LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Meanings receive their dignity from words instead of giving it to them.
BLAISE PASCAL

Write with the learned, but speak with the vulgar.
THOMAS FULLER

A person gets from a symbol the meaning he puts into it, and what is one man's comfort and inspiration is another's jest and scorn.
ROBERT JACKSON

A Text . . .
A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver.
PROVERBS 25:11

Sent in by Louis Butler, New Orleans, La. What's your favorite text? The Forbes Scrapbook of Thoughts on the Business of Life is presented to senders of texts used.

Slang is the speech of him who robs the literary garbage cans on their way to the dumps.
AMBROSE BIERCE

The language of the street is always strong.
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

I wonder what language truck drivers are using now that everyone is using theirs.
BERYL PFIZER

More than 6,000 "Thoughts," indexed by author and subject, are available in a two-volume boxed set at $31.95 ($18.50 per volume if purchased separately). Also available, a one-volume edition of over 3,000 "Thoughts." Price: $16.50. Send check and order to: Forbes Inc., 60 Fifth Ave., New York, N.Y. 10011. Add sales tax on orders in New York State and other states where applicable.
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Dictionary debuts

Among the words added to the Merriam-Webster College Dictionary recently:

- Digirati: People well-versed in computer use and technology.
- Dot-com: A company that markets its products or services online via a Web site.
- Electronica: Dance music featuring extensive use of synthesizers, electronic percussion and samples of recorded music or sound.
- Enculturation: The process by which an individual learns the traditional contents of a culture and assimilates its practices and values.
- Eye candy: Something or someone superficially attractive to look at.
- Fashionista: A designer, promoter or follower of the latest fashions.
- Gated community: A residential area protected by a private security force, enclosed by physical barriers, and entered through a controlled gate.
- GPS: Global positioning system, a navigational system using satellite signals to fix the location of a radio receiver on or above the Earth's surface, also the radio receiver so used.
- Max out: To be at the upper limit; to use up all available credit on credit cards.
- Nutraceutical: A foodstuff (such as a fortified food or dietary supplement) that provides health benefits.
- Terabyte: A unit of computer information storage capacity equal to about 1 trillion bytes; specifically: 1,099,511,627,776 bytes.
- 24-7 or 24/7: For twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.
- Wakeboard: A short board with foot bindings on which a rider is towed by a motorboat across its wake and especially up off the crest of aerial maneuvers.

— Source: Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary.
No dead-cat bounce for English in new Webster's

By Trudy Tynan
Associated Press

SPRINGFIELD, Mass. — A former dot-commer working a McJob was listening to some headbangers while laying out the last of his dead presidents for longnecks and some less than heart-healthy Frankenfood.


Once a decade, Merriam-Webster updates its best-selling dictionary. The 11th edition, available in bookstores Tuesday, includes 10,000 new words and more than 100,000 new meanings and revisions among its 226,000 definitions.

Pop culture remains a vibrant source of new words, with such additions as "headbanger" (defined as both a hard rock musician and a fan), "dead presidents" (paper currency), "McJob" (low paying and dead-end work), "Frankenfood" (genetically engineered food) and "longneck" (beer served in a bottle with a long neck).

Some of the new words have been a long time getting the widespread recognition that words from the unabridged dictionary to the Collegiate. The citation file on the Yiddish exclamation "oy," for example, dates to the immigrant waves of the 1890s. Others have zoomed into the language with the speed of the Internet.

The Web has spun the biggest influence on the American language in the past decade both with the new words it has spawned and the speed with which they have been adopted by the public, said John Morse, president and publisher of Merriam-Webster:

"Typically, it takes 10 to 20 years before a word moves out of usage by small groups into the larger populace," Morse said. But dot-commer, someone who works for an online outfit, made the cut in a scant five years.

That's not the only trend, he said.

"In new words for diseases and cures, we are clearly seeing the effect of aging on the Baby Boomers," he said.

"Macular degeneration" (an eye problem that primarily affects the elderly), and the adjective "heart-healthy" (good for the heart) are new to the 11th edition. Along with them have come a host of new words dealing with how we pay for medical services, such as "primary care."

"It is a reflection of society's changes," Morse said.

To glean new words and usages, Merriam-Webster's editors spend a large part of their day reading newspapers, magazines and other popular publications. Each new word and usage—along with a snippet from the publication showing how it was used—goes into an electronic database as well as the company's enormous card files. The files are started by America's first dictionary editor, Noah Webster, contain more than 15 million words and their usages dating to 1790.

Merriam-Webster's Collegiate is the best-selling hardcover dictionary on the market with more than 55 million copies sold since 1886, according to Arthur Bicknell, a spokesman for Merriam-Webster.

Buying and spelling on eBay

By Diane Jean Schemo
New York Times

When Holly Marshall wanted to sell a pair of dangling earrings, she listed them on eBay once but got no takers. She tried a second time, but still no interest.

Was it the price? The fuzzy picture? Maybe it was the description: a beautiful pair of chandelier earrings.

Such is the eBay underworld of misspellings, where the clueless and careless sell laptop computers, throwing knives, Art Deko vases, camcorders, comforters and sapphire.

They do get bidders, but not many. Often the buyers are those who troll for spelling slip-ups, buying items on the cheap and selling them all over again on eBay, but with the right spelling and for the right price.

John H. Green, a jeweler in central Florida who sells by the name Touches!E! is one of them.

He once bought a box of gers for $2. They were gears for pocket watches, which he cleaned up and put back on the auction block with the right spelling. They sold for $200.

"I've bought and sold stuff on eBay and Yahoo! that I bought for next to nothing" because of poor spelling or vague descriptions, Green said.

David Scroggins, who lives in Milwaukee, also searches for misspellings.

EBAY continues on A6:
— Site did $23 billion in sales in 2003.

EBAY from A1

Internet has cast a spell on language

His company provides entertainment for weddings and corporate events and microphones for shows at Wisconsin's casinos. He has bought Hubbell electrical cords for a tenth of their usual cost by searching for not only Hubbell but also Hubbel. And he now operates his entire business by laptop computers, having bought three Compacs for a pittance simply by asking for Compacts.

No one knows how much misspelling is out there in eBay land, where more than $23 billion worth of goods were sold last year. The company does flag common misspellings, but won't list them, for fear of turning up similar misspellings. So that buyers and sellers frequently read past the Web site's slightly bashful line asking whether, by any chance, "Did you mean chandelier?"

An unofficial survey — an hour's search for creative spellings — turned up dozens of items, including bycicles, telefones, dimonds (both Neil and the sparkly kind), mother of pearl, cutlery, bedroom suits and beds of antiks.

Contacted, the sellers were often surprised to hear they had misspelled their wares.

Marshall, who lives in Dallas, said she knew she was on shaky ground when she set out to spell chandelier. But instead of flipping through a dictionary, she did an Internet search for chandaleer and came up with 85 or so listings.

She never guessed, she said, that results like that meant she was groping in the spelling wilderness. Chandelier, spelled right, turns up 715,000 times.

Some say there is no evidence that people are spelling worse than they ever did. But with the growth of instant messaging and e-mails, language has grown more informal. And much as calculators did for arithmetic, spell checkers have made good spelling seem like an obsolete virtue.

Not that spell checkers are used by everyone. Indeed, experts say the Internet — with its discussion boards, blogs and self-published articles — is a treasure trove of bad spelling.

"Before the Internet came along, poor spelling by the public was by and large not exposed," said Paige Kimble, the director of the National Spelling Bee. "Now anybody can get out there and expose themselves."

Henry Gomez, vice president for corporate communications at eBay, said the company had no way of gauging how many sales might have involved misspelled listings.

All the bases

But some sellers clearly bear in mind the potential for linguistic disasters when preparing their ads. Warren Lieu of Houston, who was selling hunting and fishing knives on eBay recently, covered all the bases. His listing advertised every sort of alphabetic butchery for his knives, including knives and knife.

Lieu, a computer programmer, keeps a list of common misspellings, including labtop for laptop and Cusinar for Cuisinart.

His strategy of listing multiple spellings, he said, is based on his experience as a buyer.

"I'm a bad speller myself," he said. So his mistakes in searching for items led him to realize that he could buy up bargains.

"I'd go ahead and deliberately misspell it when I searched for items," he said.

Jim Griffith, whose official title at eBay is dean of eBay education, teaches 40 to 50 seminars a year around the country. Although eBay points out common misspellings, he said the most common question he gets is, "When will e-Bay get a spell checker?"

His answer? "You go to a store called a bookstore, and you buy something called a dictionary."