

Who it may concern to:

I, who no-one would normally accuse of linguistic snobbery, have asked my colleagues, who I often consult on such things, about Professor Kaye's comments on 'whom' (*ET*28), and they think it's all relative.

Michael Bulley,
Ashford, Kent, England

Whatchamacallem Revisited

There are many words in use today in our various English dialects for a thing or item/entity of which one cannot think of the name, i.e., a goddie. These were discussed in my "Whatchamacallem: A Consideration of Thingummies, Doohickeys and Other Vague Words," in *English Today*, 6:1, 1990, pp. 70–73. The purpose of this short note is to add one more (previously unknown, to my knowledge, in the scholarly literature) to the list from the English dialect spoken in Deweese, Nebraska, as reported by Bob Secter, a reporter for *The Los Angeles Times* in his column "American Album" for October 21, 1991 (page A5 in an article entitled "Town's Pampered Pooch Eats up the Attention"). The local name for a thingummy or doohickey is "Ed," presumably the abbreviation (or nickname) for "Edward." Secter writes that "Ed" is the "local (Deweese is very close to the Kansas border) name for anything that people can't think of the name of."

I would not be surprised to learn from *ET* readers of other proper names which are used exactly in this manner in other English dialects or idiolects. Before I learned of it, I would not have believed it. Now I am saying to myself, "Why not?" It's a

short semantic step from calling a person whose name is unknown "Mac," or "Buddy," or "Ed," to have that proper name itself come to be used for the concept of doohickey.

After discussing the above with my wife Susan this morning over tea, she told me (half seriously) not to forget to pick up that "Alan" on my way home from work at the hardware store, to which I replied (in earnest): "Regular or economy size?"

Alan S. Kaye,
Department of Linguistics,
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Hitting the big time

A new British television programme concentrating on style in Europe titles itself "The Big E" which stretches for recognition – just how many people actually do call Europe the Big E? – but calls up reverberations.

New York is the *Big Apple*, Los Angeles the *Big Orange* while the *Big Easy*, New Orleans, sits on the *Big Muddy*, the Mississippi river. Crime boss *Mr Big* plans the *Big One*, the job that will pay for the villa in Spain.

But all these are just descriptions. Letters bring a hint of threat. Thirtysomethings fear the *Big 40* (pronounced Four Oh). John Wayne loses to the *Big C*, cancer. Pre-orgasmic women contemplate the *Big O*, the little death rather than the *Big D*. That's the one that puts us face to face with Big G.

Perhaps that Big E is trying to tell us something.

Humphrey Evans,
London, England

Tentative editing

Having recently started a quarterly journal (from scratch), I

read David Cervi's and Ruth Wajnryb's "Walking the Editorial Tightrope" (*ET* 26) with empathy. Of course, there are no standard answers to some of the questions they pose, because every journal is different. I imagine that journals written and read by professionals concerned with language involve their editors in exceptional degrees of diplomacy towards their contributors and of scrutiny from their readers. *ET*, which I started to read last year, strikes me as handling its contributors and readers in an exemplary Gandhian winds-of-all-cultures fashion. Unlike Cervi and Wajnryb, however, you are dealing with a worldwide and fairly loose-knit community (as does LOGOS) whereas they are serving a close-knit community as part of a professional association. *ET* and LOGOS have easier rows to hoe editorially, but not in marketing. (Tightropes . . . pandora's boxes . . . hoed rows . . . we editors should check our metaphor quotas).

Another factor which affects the editorial rule-book is whether the articles (I hate the term "papers") are solicited or volunteered. Having been a publisher of professional books, I tend to see the editor's role as more proactive than reactive. He should be constantly thinking of topics and approaching individuals he sees as qualified potential contributors. Even the person who turns you down is pleased to have been approached. An article which is worked up between the editor and contributor makes for easier collaboration than one which comes over the transom (positively my last metaphor in this letter) in a finished state.

I was touched by the sensitive and modestly tentative approach that Cervi and Wajnryb take to their editorial role, and astonished by the despotism, or at least insouciance, treatment they had received as contributors to other

journals. Like them, my experiences as a contributor have influenced my attitudes as an editor and helped the cautious evolution of a few rules, which I am happy to share:

1. Always acknowledge articles immediately, but confine the acknowledgement to gratitude. Criticism comes later.

2. Every proposed change *or* cut *or* suggested addition, whether in structure or substance or vocabulary or punctuation or style or spelling or in the title, should be referred respectfully and persuasively to the author.

3. Never ask for a re-write. If the substance is good, it is the editor's job to collaborate on improved packaging.

4. House-style, for better or worse, is inviolate. Every journal must have its own character, and this is for the editor to define and then implement.

5. Better blank pages or a short issue than sub-standard material.

6. Editors do not contribute to their own journal. They write editorials.

7. Speeches should never be published verbatim. The spoken word needs to be translated into the written word.

8. Contributors should receive edited texts before keying, if changes have been substantial, and also pre-publication proofs.

9. If the editors don't sweat over every contribution, they are not doing their jobs. They are not mere conduits.

These contributions to what you presumably have in mind – "A Tentative Guideline for Tentative Editors" – assume that both the editors and the contributors are engaged in honorary pursuits, motivated by service to their professions. This is the most cogent reason for treating all journal contributors more respectfully than bestselling authors.

Gordon Graham,
Editor, *Logos: The Professional
Journal for the Book World*,
Marlow, Buckinghamshire,
England

Left Glove Left

Left glove left right
at my door today.
Of all useless things
what is more useless
than a left glove,
except to a leftie?

On the other hand,
a right glove
is always right.
That's the one I remove
to dig for bus money,
a key or a ballpoint,
and then I lose it.

I go through life
left-gloved, pretending
the mate is in my pocket.
A right glove left right
at my door today
would have been
downright handy.

Alma Denny,
New York

Asymmetrical impregnation

David Crystal's concept of semantic asymmetry (in *ET28*) can be developed beyond the point at which he left it. Crystal discussed only imbalances of the type 30% v 70%, or 60% v 40%. But what about 0% – an actual semantic gap?

I came across such gaps when teaching English in Africa and touched on the topic in *ET7*. The following is the most interesting example in my records:

In everyday British and American English we can say that women "conceive/give birth to/bear/have" children. But what everyday word do we have for the male part in procreation? None, so far as I can see. Men "fuck, make love to, lie with, take" women, but that's not actual procreation. We can say "He's the father", but this means much more than just procreation. We can also say men "impregnate/

inseminate" women, but these words are so technical that they usually imply the agent isn't the legal father.

Since this gap doesn't exist in the African languages I know about, Africans fill the English gap in their own ways. The commonest is, for example "He preg-nated my eldest sister". Once when discussing this gap with a class of girls, I was told of a local colloquial word: "He ballooned her". I also came across a very succinct sentence in a letter from Nigeria to "Dear Dolly": "He will be going to the USA. He wants to impregnate me before he leaves". Perhaps, if she'd been British, she might have written "give me a child" instead of "impregnate me", but this totally misses its mark – a visit to the supermarket, perhaps.

I suggest that readers might keep a lookout for such semantic gaps while looking for Crystal's imbalances. But I want to stress that for teachers of English in other cultures the discovery of gaps and imbalances is not just a way of "whiling away a wet weekend". It poses the serious ("half-baked", according to Sir Randolph Quirk) practical question: "What shall I do – teach them the 'correct, Standard' English that men have no explicit part in procreation, or accept their English, their way of looking at things?" Finally, might not this gap serve as the stimulus to start a movement for Men's Lib?

Tony Fairman,
Maidstone, Kent, England

Anyone for anyone?

In *ET25* (Jan 91), writing on Greek roots and scientific coinages, I objected to *piezoelectric*, *palynologist* and *tribology* because they joined a verb to a noun (or adjective). In *ET28* (Oct 91), Jeremy H. Marshall defends these, adducing Aristotle's *schizopous* for a cloven-hoofed animal. I am grateful for his

correction; however, I never meant (as he seems to infer) to imply that the -o- in such words was ignorantly taken from the first person singular present indicative active-voice verb-ending: it is simply that Greek verbs are normally cited in the 'I do' form instead of the infinitive.

Three other 'bad words' (or inept constructions) are: *anyon(s)* (*Scientific American*, May 1991, used as title of Professor Frank Wilczek's article); *helicity*, cited in F. David Peat, *Superstrings*, Scribners, 1991; and time *dilation*, long universally used in relativity contexts.

Anyon will be confused with 'anion'; but is specifically derived from English 'any', thus insulting several linguistic proprieties and inviting international mispronunciations, such as (instead of 'enny-on') 'ann-yon', 'a-nigh-on', 'ah-nee-awn', 'ah-nü-ohn'. Its hypothetical subject is a mathematically free-range particle: Wilczek's article says (p.28, lines 2-12): 'the amplitude for a complete winding in the clockwise direction will be $\beta^2 \dots$. There is no requirement that β be either 1 (as for bosons) or else -1 (as for fermions). Bosons and fermions are merely two extreme cases; there is a continuous range of possibilities between them. The term "anyons" expresses this freedom to choose any complex number.'

If the existence of such a class of particle survives investigation, it would be better made respectable by changing to *anyton* which could be safely derived from the Attic dialect participle meaning 'achieving'. On 8 Aug 91, having at last discovered the proper authority, I wrote to the International Union of Pure and

Applied Physics. In June or July, a senior member of Leeds University had written on my behalf to Professor Wilczek; in his reply of 10 Oct 91 (he had been away), Wilczek says, 'It is, however, much too late to change the name which is already used in hundreds - perhaps thousands of papers.' The cause against this ridiculous and offensive invention would seem therefore to be lost. A Greek suffix is shackled to an English triviality.

Helicity (possibly from Penrose) 'could be thought of as the "spin" of a massless object such as a twistor, null line or photon of light'. It is quite a naughty word, basking in a spurious felicity: *felix* is a Latin adjective, but *helix* is an originally Greek noun (with short *e*); did *helicity* seem too cumbersome or specific? Thank heaven no one thought of coining *helicity* in imitation of *proximity* (from *proximus*)!

Dilation is an old (1598) mistake for *dilatation* (Latin verb *dilatare*); *dilation* itself can, properly speaking, only mean 'delay', 'postponement' (compare *dilatatory*). Ignorance of Latin (and of Greek) is at the root of these unfortunate errors, as well as ignorance of or contempt for the principles of language.

David I. Masson,
Leeds, England

Simpler spelling?

Among the suggestions put forward in his letter in *ET27* (Jul 91) Hou Yongzheng proposed that the spelling of English might be simplified by replacement of consonant-doubling in, inflected forms, with consonant-singling.

Unfortunately, this happens to be one of the rare instances where English orthography/grammar/pronunciation rules have a measure of consistency and logic. The orthography rule is that regular verbs ending in a single consonant preceded by a single short vowel in the present tense, double the consonant in

inflected forms: thus, *bat/batting/batted*, *wed/wedding/wedded*, *pot/potting/potted*, *sin/sinning/sinned*, *pun/punning/punned*. (In fact in these examples, all three rules are observed.)

The pronunciation rule, though less consistently, is the same, more or less (a lot of qualification, I admit, but this is English, and it's something to be able to present *any* rule with a modicum of consistency). Here, while no rule can be made for a *single* consonant flanked by two vowels, with most combinations of two or more consonants (excluding, *r*, *l*, and *h*, which sometimes blend with the vowel, as in 'harper', 'called', 'ached' and the like) flanked by vowels, the preceding vowel is pronounced 'short'. With the result that Hou Yongzheng's proposal would confuse, rather than simplify, differences such as *batted/bated*, *slatted/slatted*, *bared/barred*.

It will be observed that, in each case, the double-consonant rule with short preceding-vowel (and vice versa) applies. Also, that the meaning is significantly changed by the addition/omission of the extra consonant. Try these:

'There was batted breath in the close as the last man bated his heart out. The slatted roof kept the public from the rain, while eyes of eager schoolboys peered through the slated fence. An excited woman with barred breast had been bared from the pitch; a man she claimed had rapped her was raped across the knuckles; he claimed she had been robbed at the time, and that he had been robbed of the compensation she received. His wife, she had in fact spitted him for *slopping off on the quiet* to meet a raged gamine he dotted on. As she ragged at him, spited on Justice's skewer, members of the public dotted about the field sought shelter from the rain *slopping* about their ankles.'

Ahum!

Frederick G. Robinson,
Glasgow, Scotland

Readers' letters are welcomed. *ET* policy is to publish as representative and informative a selection as possible in each issue. Such correspondence, however, may be subject to editorial adaptation in order to make the most effective use of both the letters and the space available.
