

Chapter 2

Meanings

Abstract Meaning is understood in this chapter not only as semantics (lexis = word meaning) but as morphology, both lexical and derivational, in an overarching cultural context. Etymological analysis is invoked where relevant, as are examples pertaining to classes of words like onomastics and social/professional jargons. Contemporary English vocabulary is seen as the cumulative result of diverse historical residues, and the frequent oblivion of older meaning norms is specified wherever generational and cultural differences lie at its root.

2.1 ‘Virtuous’ Redefined

Glossary

affix, n.: a word element, such as a prefix or suffix, that can only occur attached to a base, stem, or root

base, n.: a morpheme or morphemes regarded as a form to which affixes or other bases may be added

Christological, adj. < *Christology*, n.: the theological study of the person and deeds of Jesus; a doctrine or theory based on Jesus or Jesus’s teachings

deriving, adj. < *derivation*, n.: the process by which words are formed from existing words or bases by adding affixes, as *singer* from *sing* or *undo* from *do*, by changing the shape of the word or base, as *song* from *sing*, or by adding an affix and changing the pronunciation of the word or base, as *electricity* from *electric*

root, n.: the element that carries the main component of meaning in a word and provides the basis from which a word is derived by adding affixes or inflectional endings or by phonetic change

stem, n.: the main part of a word to which affixes are added

Apropos of the concluding thoughts in the authorial note appended to “The Genius of the Mot Juste” (Chap. 6.2), the second entry under the word *virtuous* in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed., 2006) defines it as ‘possessing or characterized by chastity; pure: *a virtuous woman*’. The example cited is straight out of the King James version of the Old Testament (Proverbs 31: 10). This version is closer to the Hebrew tradition than any previous English translation when it comes to the non-Christological portions of the Old Testament; cf. the following translations of the word in question in its fuller Proverbial context:

- 10 Who can find a **virtuous** woman? for her price is far above rubies.
- 11 The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, so that he shall have no need of spoil.
- 12 She will do him good and not evil all the days of her life. (King James Version)
- 10 A wife of **noble** character who can find? She is worth far more than rubies.
- 11 Her husband has full confidence in her and lacks nothing of value.
- 12 She brings him good, not harm, all the days of her life. (New International Version)
- 10 aleph mulierem **fortem** quis inveniet procul et de ultimis finibus pretium eius
- 11 beth confidit in ea cor viri sui et spoliis non indigebit
- 12 gimel reddet ei bonum et non malum omnibus diebus vitae suae (Vulgate)
- 10 אֵשֶׁת-חַיִל, מִי מְצָא; וְרוֹחַק מִפְּנִינִים מְכָרָהּ. A woman of **valor** who can find? for her price is far above rubies.
- 11 יֵא בְטַח בָּהּ, לֵב בַּעֲלָהּ; וְשָׁלָל, לֹא יִחָסֵר. The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her, and he hath no lack of gain.
- 12 יֵב גָּמְלָתָהּ טוֹב וְלֹא-רָע—כָּל, יְמֵי חַיֶּיהָ. She doeth him good and not evil all the days of her life. (The Masoretic Text, i.e., the authoritative Hebrew text of the Jewish Bible)

The latter text is traditionally glossed as follows:

1. She is a virtuous woman—a woman of power and strength. אֵשֶׁת חַיִל *esheth chayil*, a strong or virtuous wife full of mental energy
2. She is invaluable; her price is far above rubies—no quantity of precious stones can be equal to her worth.

The deriving base of the adjective in question is Latin *virtus*; cf. Greek ἀρετή, both of which mean something like ‘moral excellence’. In turn, Latin *virtus* is derived from *vir* ‘man, hero’. This last meaning was doubtless what the translators who rendered the King James version must have had in mind, since they followed the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible. Hence the meaning ‘a woman of valor’, which is precisely the definition answering to the purport of the authorial note in Chap. 6.

2.2 An Embarrassment of Onomastic Riches

Glossary

ex parte: from or on one side only, with the other side absent or unrepresented (Latin)

krepiet, v.: to die (Yiddish)

onomastic, adj.: of, relating to, or explaining a name or names

orthography, n.: (correct) spelling

patrial, n.: the word for the name of a country or place and used to denote a native or inhabitant of it

Listening to the radio and hearing one's namesake, Jeff Schapiro (never mind the German variant orthography) of the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, expatiating on the vagaries of Virginia politics, one was reminded yet again of the seeming perfusion in America of the surname that derives from that of the Jewish residents of the medieval German city of Speyer, who eventually migrated to Eastern Europe, including Lithuania. In fact (according to my father, whose ancestors came from Radoshkovichi in what is now called Belarus), there were so many Shapiros in Vil'na (the Russianized name of the capital, Vilnius) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that some of them changed their name to *Vilenkin*, a Yiddish-Russian hybrid deriving from their patrial.

Not all *Shapiros* are created equal. When in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries Jews immigrated to America from the Pale of Settlement in their thousands, many of them arrived at Ellis Island in New York bearing unpronounceable Polish, Ukrainian, Byelorussian, and Bessarabian names. This apparently didn't sit well with immigration officials, so in order to simplify matters, they frequently assigned the name Shapiro *ex parte* to these onomastically-impaired newcomers (Cohen and Levy not being suitable because of tribal restrictions).

As they used to say in the Soviet Union before it *krepiet*, "Dva mira—dva Shapiro" ("Два мира—два Шапиро" [rhymes in Russian]) 'Two worlds—two Shapiros'.

2.3 Associative Meaning Fields: Interlingual Gaps and Overlaps

Glossary

derivational, adj. < *derivation*, n.: the process by which words are formed from existing words or bases by adding affixes, as *singer* from *sing* or

undo from *do*, by changing the shape of the word or base, as *song* from *sing*, or by adding an affix and changing the pronunciation of the word or base, as *electricity* from *electric*

etymology, n.: the origin and historical development of a linguistic form as shown by determining its basic elements, earliest known use, and changes in form and meaning, tracing its transmission from one language to another, identifying its cognates in other languages, and reconstructing its ancestral form where possible

etymon, n.: a foreign word from which a particular loan word is derived
forma mentis: form of mind; mental framework (Latin)

interlingual, adj.: of, relating to, or involving two or more languages

morphology, n.: the system or the study of (linguistic) form

Peircean, adj.: of, pertaining to, or deriving from the philosophy of C. S. Peirce (1839–1914)

root, n.: the element that carries the main component of meaning in a word and provides the basis from which a word is derived by adding affixes or inflectional endings or by phonetic change

All languages have meaning fields, which is to say that words enter into associative networks formed by connotative variants that extend basic dictionary meanings into semantic nooks and crannies that accommodate subsidiary concepts. In the European languages that share Latin and Greek etyma as historical points of departure, post-medieval and modern developments do not necessarily dovetail, producing interesting differences in semantic utilization of recognizably similar or identical roots. An interesting case in point are the Latin and Greek antecedents of two common words, *grammar* and *letter*, in English and Russian.

In English the word *grammar* is given the following etymology in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed., 2006):

Middle English *gramere*, from Old French *gramaire*, alteration of Latin *grammatica*, from Greek *grammatikē*, from feminine of *grammatikos*, *of letters*, from *gramma*, *grammat-*, *letter*

In Russian the word is *grammatika* (грамматика), which adheres more closely to the Greek etymon. The latter, as it is captured in the above etymology, derives from the word for ‘letter’, which shows us how rules of language structure (alias *grammar*) and the symbols of written language were directly associated in Greek derivational morphology.

Our English word *letter*, by contrast, has the following Latin etymology (also from the *AHD*): “Middle English, from Old French *lettre*, from Latin *littera*.” The adjective *literal* and the substantive *literature* no longer maintain the double *t* of the original and have departed from the Latin sense to configure the modern meanings we have today that are still rooted in the concept of being “lettered.”

In Russian, the word *litera*, also from the same Latin patrimony, now has only a somewhat recondite meaning, viz. ‘letter’ (archaic) and ‘type’ (the typographical

entity), although the word for ‘literature’ is practically the same as in English, namely *literatura*. Whereas English uses *literal* to mean ‘adhering strictly to the letter’, by contrast Russian resorts for this meaning to the adjective *bukval’nyj*, derived from the word *bukva* ‘letter’, which is of proto-Germanic provenience (whence E *book*; cf. G *Buch* ‘book’) and shows up as a borrowing from the same source and with the same meaning in all of the Slavic languages.

Russian deviates from Germanic and Romance, however, in how it treats the word borrowed from another version of Greek *gramma*, namely *grammata* (pl.) ‘letters’. This comes into Russian as a singular noun *gramota* (грамота), with the primary meaning ‘letters, the alphabet’, as in (учиться грамоте) ‘learn one’s letters’, i.e., ‘learn how to read and write’, whence the adjective *gramotnyj* ‘literate’.

It is at this point that English and Russian part company when it comes to associative meaning fields and just here we can discern how words determine not just thought but one’s *forma mentis*, depending on the semantic peculiarities of one’s native language.

Where English uses the word *competent* to denote either the person or the product that shows a certain level of skill or accomplishment, the older and (practically) demotic word for this concept in Russian is *gramotnyj* (грамотный), although *kompetentnyj* also exists as a newer vocabulary item. There is thus a strong association in Russian between being ‘lettered’ and being ‘competent’ that is scanted in English, despite the extended meaning of *literate*. This gives rise in Russian to phrases like *gramotnyj kompozitor* ‘competent composer’ and *gramotno napisano* ‘competently composed’ [of music] which define a whole conceptual field that is denied to its English counterparts.

One would be hard put to find a more perspicuous proof of pragmatism (in the Peircean sense) than this differential mapping of associative fields in the two languages.

2.4 Bad Guys

Glossary

characterological, adj. < *characterology*, n.: the study of character, especially its development and its variations

hypocoristic, adj.: endearing; belong to affective vocabulary

subcutaneously, adv. < *subcutaneous*, adj.: (here, figuratively) beneath the surface, subtle, relatively imperceptible

The phrase *bad guys* has been used incessantly by the media—and by ordinary speakers influenced by media language—as a handy substitute for *enemy* or *terrorist* in referring to the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. This can perhaps be understood

as a convenient covering reference to an enemy that does not belong historically to the conduct and nomenclature of traditional warfare. They wreak evil and are “bad,” but they are often not soldiers in the conventional sense, since they may not belong to a conventional army.

But the use of this phrase is semantically fraught with the wrong connotations, for the following reasons. First, *guy* is a colloquialism that is associated with an informal attitude to the referent that is, moreover, at least stylistically neutral if not entirely hypocoristic in contemporary English. Second, and more tellingly, the phrase derives from the world of Hollywood motion pictures, where evildoers of all sorts have always been referred to as “bad guys,” in opposition to “good guys,” when denominating the characterological identity of the *dramatis personae* of movie (and, by extension, television, etc.) plots.

There is thus a strong current of trivialization whenever the enemy and terrorists are referred to by this phrase. This colloquialization has the unintended effect of MINIMIZING the evil wrought by them, just as does its frequent equivalent *bad actors*. Both must be expunged from public discourse because any reference to the enemy or to terrorists that even subcutaneously allows for a quasi-endearing evaluation of their status can result in a weakening of the resolve to defeat them. It is thus a failure of thought that should not be countenanced for moral as well as rhetorical reasons.

2.5 Clichés: Corpses from the Necropolis of Dead Metaphors

Glossary

necropolis, n.: a cemetery, especially a large and elaborate one belonging to an ancient city

trope, n.: a figure of speech using words in nonliteral ways, such as a metaphor

tropological, adj. < *tropology*, n.: the use of tropes in speech or writing

There once lived a woman who hated clichés. This essay is intended to explicate her linguistic animus.

Clichés exist in every language. They are typically old, worn-out, fatigued figures of speech which have fossilized through constant use into words and phrases that have a rigid meaning and are repeated *ad nauseam* because they render complex semantic relations compactly.

Here is a contemporary example, in context, of a tired trope, *perfect storm* (meaning ‘a confluence of events that drastically aggravates a situation’):

“You had this perfect storm where in his Middle East speech Obama didn’t explain very well what he meant by ‘land swaps,’ Netanyahu was so upset by the mention of 1967 borders that he basically mischaracterized the president’s proposal for four days, and as a result the whole visit became hyperpartisan at a time when Israel was looking for bipartisan support from the United States,” said David Makovsky, director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (James Kitfield, “Netanyahu’s ‘Unvarnished Truth’ Tour,” www.theatlantic.com, 5/25/11)

Instead of saying “a confluence of events” the writer has resorted to the tired cliché, “perfect storm.” It may be more apt than usual, given the politically fraught context, but it is nonetheless a token of a mental slovenliness that elicits stylistic contempt. Perhaps only a deliberate revivification of the phrase via semantic disinterment (e.g., “the perfect storm didn’t have much wind at its back”) could ever hope to rescue this freshly-laid corpse—along with all its lifeless congeners—from their tropological resting place. *RIP* would be a fitter fate.

2.6 Discontinuous Lexica and Linguistic Competence

Glossary

aureole, n.: a circle of light or radiance surrounding the head or body of a representation of a deity or holy person; a halo or aura

conjugate, adj.: joined together, especially in a pair or pairs; coupled

differentia specifica: distinctive feature (Latin)

déformation professionnelle: a tendency to look at things from the point of view of one’s own profession rather than from a broader perspective (French)

etymological, adj. < *etymology*, n.: the origin and historical development of a linguistic form as shown by determining its basic elements, earliest known use, and changes in form and meaning, tracing its transmission from one language to another, identifying its cognates in other languages, and reconstructing its ancestral form where possible

Hippocratic, adj. < *Hippocrates*, n.: Greek physician who laid the foundations of scientific medicine by freeing medical study from the constraints of philosophical speculation and superstition

idiolectal, adj. < *idiolect*, n.: the speech of an individual, considered as a linguistic pattern unique among speakers of his or her language or dialect

lexicon, n., pl. *lexica*: the words of a language considered as a group

metricist, n.: a specialist in the study of metrics (versification)

peripeteia, n., pl.: a sudden change of events or reversal of circumstances, especially in a literary work

risus sardonicus: ‘sardonic smile’ (Latin), a highly characteristic, abnormal, sustained spasm of the facial muscles that appears to produce grinning, most often as a sign of tetanus
vilipend, v.: to view or treat with contempt; despise

It is a truism of linguistics that the grammars of native speakers are *discontinuous*, by which is meant the principle of language competence encompassing the idea that no two speakers have exactly the same grammar of the language they share as native speakers. To a very large extent, precisely what is discontinuous is their *vocabularies*, their command of the lexical stock of the language. They may also have a differential knowledge of syntax, but since syntax is the technique (rules) by which words are combined into phrases, sentences, and discourses, the focus is properly on the lexicon, hence the discontinuities between speakers’ grammars come down to the knowledge of words.

This whole topic constitutes a missing chapter from standard accounts of linguistic competence. Here is some material that might go toward filling the lacuna.

Within one adult speaker’s grammar or knowledge of their native language, a profile of competence can be characterized variously by reference to such parameters as active versus passive knowledge, knowledge of specialized (technical) vocabulary, acquaintance with foreign languages etymological knowledge (i.e., knowledge of word origins, including historically earlier stages of the native language), dialectal material, and literary texts in the round, including but not limited to poetry and folkloric data (nursery rhymes, riddles, etc.). This may be taken as an exhaustive inventory of the diverse sources that constitute the lexical stock of a given individual’s idiolect.

To perhaps a greater extent than other idiolectal features, a speaker’s vocabulary is never completely fixed or static. Even beyond childhood and adolescence, when the greatest accretions to one’s lexical knowledge occur, there is always the possibility of adding to one’s vocabulary. This comes about naturally through contact with different linguistic milieux, geographical as well as social, and with written texts whose complete comprehension may demand looking in dictionaries and thereby acquiring new vocabulary items—a process that goes on ceaselessly as long as one remains open to new texts, fresh milieux, and heretofore unassimilated knowledge.

No matter how similar phonetically or grammatically the speech is of members of a relatively homogeneous speech community, there are always differences in style and discourse between individuals. These may be a function of education and family history as well as of idiosyncrasy (personality). One particularly interesting *differentia specifica* is the use of foreign words and phrases in one’s native speech (including writing). In contemporary English, the traditionally most likely items of this sort are from Latin and French, followed in no particular order of frequency by Greek, German, and Italian. This intrusion of foreign locutions may be conditioned by the speaker’s profession. Thus college professors of French quite often pepper

their native English with French words, even where perfectly good English equivalents would do. Perhaps this is a kind of linguistic badge—what the French call *déformation professionnelle*—that is flashed to parade not only their special knowledge but their solidarity with their profession and the country whose language and literature they profess. In some cases, of course, the foreign locution may in fact supply a particular stylistic flavor that the native equivalent may lack.

A good illustration of the employment of foreign words and phrases, including literary citations, inserted in an otherwise perfectly English oral discourse can be found in that masterpiece of narrative, Arthur Conan Doyle's novel *The Sign of Four*. Here are three such cases that issue from the mouth of Sherlock Holmes, in the latter two of which Holmes's is actually a slightly inaccurate version:

[Latin] "Quite so They are in a state of extreme contraction, far exceeding the usual *rigor mortis*. Coupled with this distortion of the face, this Hippocratic smile, or '*risus sardonius*,' as the old writers called it, what conclusion would it suggest to your mind?"

[French] "He can find something," remarked Holmes shrugging his shoulders. "He has occasional glimmerings of reason. *Il n'y a pas des sots si incommodes que ceux qui ont de l'esprit!*"

[correct version: *Il n'y a point de sots si incommodes que ceux qui ont de l'esprit.*—François de la Rochefoucauld, *Maximes*, no. 451. English translation: 'There are no fools so troublesome as those who have some wit'.]

[German] "And I," said Holmes, "shall see what I can learn from Mrs. Bernstone, and from the Indian servant, who, Mr. Thaddeus tells me, sleeps in the next garret. Then I shall study the great Jones's methods and listen to his not too delicate sarcasms. '*Wir sind gewohnt das die Menschen verhöhnen was sie nicht verstehen.*' Goethe is always pithy"

[correct version: *Wir sind gewohnt, daß die Menschen verhöhnen / Was sie nicht verstehn*, (which continues) *Daß sie vor dem Guten und Schönen, / Das ihnen oft beschwerlich ist, murren; / Will es der Hund, wie sie, beknurren?*—Goethe *Faust*, Part 1, ll. 1205-09. Munich: Beck, 2007, p. 43. Bayard Taylor's English translation (New York: Collier Books, 1963, p. 113): 'Of course we know that men despise / what they don't comprehend; / the Good and Beautiful they vilipend, / finding it oft a burdensome measure. / Is the dog, like men, snarling displeasure?']

("Sherlock Holmes Gives a Demonstration," *The Sign of Four*, ch. 6, in Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Annotated Sherlock Holmes*, I: *The Novels*, ed. Leslie S. Klinger. New York: Norton, 2006, pp. 278, 280, 282.)

The question of "flavor" is conjugate with another essentially emotive value of language, viz. what may be called the "semantic aureole" of a word (to borrow a phrase coined by Russian metricists for the study of verse forms). Each individual's life experience includes certain language items that have a particular, singular, emotional resonance—their "aureole"—that is of idiosyncratic derivation. Here is an anecdote to illustrate this phenomenon.

While boarding an airplane for a recent flight from Cleveland to Los Angeles, painted on the fuselage I noticed the words "Continental Airlines. The airline that flies to more international destinations than any other U. S. airline." That made me

think of the drink called the continental, which I had ordered at a restaurant in Vermont just days before, which segued into Fred Astaire and the song he sings called “The Continental” in the movie “Flying Down to Rio,” which I saw on television long ago. For some reason, this then triggered a chain of memories associated with the international word *continental* that occurs in all European languages, including Russian, particularly as a designation of certain buildings, like hotels.

More precisely, a true story came bobbing up from the backwater of my memory, which had been recounted to me many years before by my father about his cousin, a certain “Diadia Misha” (Russian for ‘Uncle Misha’), who ended up in Paris after the Russian Revolution, became an arms dealer there between the World Wars, and lived to be a centenarian. Uncle Misha was living in Kiev when the Revolution broke out and was arrested as a bourgeois—therefore, considered an enemy of the people—by the Communists when they seized control of the city, and was brought before a people’s tribunal to be tried. The penalty of death by firing squad in such cases was not out of the question, and it hovered over our poor Uncle Misha. However, after questioning him, the president of the tribunal suddenly announced that he was free to go. Naturally, Uncle Misha’s relief and incredulity knew no bounds. Then the president came over to him and, extending his hand, said (in Russian), “Ia iz Kontinentalia” [Я из Континенталья] (‘I’m from the Continental’). At first, Uncle Misha was completely flummoxed. But then he recognized the president as a waiter from the restaurant at the Hotel Continental in Kiev, where he had eaten many times, and whom he had been in the habit of tipping generously. These munificent gratuities now turned out to be Uncle Misha’s salvation.

Such are the peripeteia that define the course of one’s life. One can understand why the word *continental* should have a special associative aura in my lexicon—and that of no other person outside my family.

2.7 DO, v., Trans.

Glossary

nonce word: a word used only ‘for the nonce’, i.e., for the specific purpose
Vermontian, adj.: ‘pertaining to Vermont’ (nonce word)

Do is undoubtedly the most protean verb in the English language. All one has to do to be convinced of this fact is to look under the entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*.

A man and a woman, both of a certain age, come into a Vermontian tavern and sit down at the bar. They each order a glass of wine. When the bartender pours the

drinks, there is some confusion as to which patron wishes the white wine, which the red, so the female customer says: “He *does* the white, and I *do* the red” [emphasis added]. A strange utterance under the circumstances, no?

Whatever could she have meant? That her male companion habitually drinks white wine, and she red, implying that this distribution is at odds with the norm for the two sexes? It’s impossible to interpret the woman’s utterance with certainty.

One is reminded of the fact that just as characters in novels don’t always know their own motives, so with people in real life.

2.8 Enjoy! Whatever ... (Calques)

Glossary

calque (=loan translation), n.: a form of borrowing from one language to another whereby the semantic components of a given term are literally translated into their equivalents in the borrowing language. English *superman*, for example, is a loan translation from German *Übermensch*
echt, adj.: real; genuine (German)

paralinguistic, adj. < *paralinguistics*, n.: the aspects and study of spoken communication that accompany speech but do not involve words, such as language, gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice

patois, n.: the special jargon of a group

semiotic, adj.: pertaining to elements of or any system of signs, defined as anything capable of signifying an object (meaning)

sociolectal, adj. < *sociolect*, n.: a variety of a language that is used by a particular social group

univerbal, adj. < *univerbation*, n.: the creation of one word from two or more

The ubiquitous interjection “Enjoy!,” minus its otherwise normative direct object and pronounced-with emphatic intonation as a one-word sentence, can be heard from speakers of American English, particularly as addressed to their customers by waiters and waitresses. Little do they realize that this usage must have originated in the language of Yiddish speakers in New York an idiom influenced by the overwhelmingly Slavic—specifically, Russian—milieu from which these speakers’ ancestors immigrated to the New World. That this special use in American English of an Anglo-Norman word (Middle English *enjoien*, from Old French *enjoir*) could have a Russian provenience via Yiddish has not generally been acknowledged, doubtless owing to (1) the rarity of a thorough knowledge of Russian among those who concern themselves with Yiddish borrowings into English; (2) the ignoral of CALQUES as the likely source.

Here the Russian item serving as the model for a Yiddish-influenced loan translation into English are the imperative forms of the verb *naslazhdát'sia* (наслаждаться), i.e., *naslazhdájsia* (наслаждайся [sg.]) and *naslazhdájtes'* (наслаждайтесь [pl.]). What might weaken this motivation is the fact that Yiddish seems to have no univocal equivalent. Also: (1) Russian does not use the imperatives of the verb *naslazhdát'sia* (наслаждаться) in a way that would validate the Yiddish borrowing—and thereby the usage—of “Enjoy!” in contemporary American English; and (2) any such calque would consequently have to be motivated by Yiddish speakers’ flawed knowledge of idiomatic Russian usage.

It should be noted that the proper author of this attribution’s line of thought is Marianne Shapiro. With her matchless etymological acumen, she recalled from her own New York childhood that the use of “Enjoy!” originated with (and was popularized by) its frequent occurrence in the speech of Molly Goldberg in the long-running American radio and television show, *The Goldbergs* (excogitated by the native New Yorker, Gertrude Berg, née Tillie Edelstein, who also played its lead character).

The transplanted version of the New York Yiddish milieu would also seem to be the source of the slang use in American speech of *whatever*, notably in its echt *r*-less form, viz. [wátévə]. This was the pronunciation used repeatedly, for instance, by the main character, Archie Bunker, on the 1970s television show, *All in the Family*, shot in Hollywood but set in New York City (Queens). The use of this word may have originated earlier in the Yiddishized patois of female Hollywood show business types (wives and girlfriends of producers?), whence it migrated into general American speech via popular films (like *Clueless*) that featured the sociolocal mannerisms of female Southern Californians known as “Valley girls.”

Its ultimate semiotic pedigree could perhaps be traced to an unusual variety of calqueing namely the loan translation into speech of a (wordless) gesture—a shrug of the shoulders, inclination of the head, elevation of the hands, or all three—signifying the semantic amalgam now embedded in the word. These are in fact just the paralinguistic body movements commonly associated with Yiddish/(-ized) speech.

2.9 Good Work ≠ Good Job

Glossary

axiological, adj. < *axiology*, n.: the study of the nature of values and value judgments

superordination, n.: higher rank, status, or value

What used to be the standard way in American English of complimenting someone on a job well done, viz. “good work!” has largely been replaced by the phrase “good job.” This change in usage is underlain by a shift in the value system, as an analysis of the two variable words reveals.

The difference comes down to the fact that *work* applies as a noun to the AESTHETIC value of the object resulting from an action. We habitually designate, for instance, art objects as *works*, not *jobs*. One can be “good at one’s job” but not “good at one’s work.” One’s work can be one’s job, and in the latter sense *job* can connote one’s duty, whereas *work* does not. And so on.

This kind of trip through the connotations of the words at issue will always abut in the conclusion that the accomplished result of what we do when we designate the series of actions as *job* or *work* makes the first word concentrate on the acts and not on the product in the traditional usage that rewards the aesthetic value of the product with the designation *work*.

This value did not accrue in the past to *job*. Now it does, meaning a hierarchical superordination of the ACTION over the RESULT. In this way, American culture reinforces the axiological dominance of process over result that can be encapsulated in the motto “you are what you do.”

2.10 Infantilization of Lexis

Glossary

apotropaic, adj.: intended to ward off evil or danger

infantilism, n.: a state of arrested development in an adult, characterized by retention of infantile mentality; marked immaturity, as in behavior or character

lexis, n.: the aggregate of a language’s words (vocabulary as distinguished from grammar)

neologism, n.: newly-minted word

timbre, n.: the combination of qualities of a sound that distinguishes it from other sounds of the same pitch and volume

tropism, n.: [here used figuratively] the turning or bending movement of an organism or a part toward or away from an external stimulus, such as light, heat, or gravity

vocable, n.: a word considered only as a sequence of sounds or letters rather than as a unit of meaning

Up until a certain age American children, like children in other countries, articulate the vocables of their native language in a childish way because their linguistic abilities are commensurate with their physical development in other respects.

Whereas until about forty years ago these childish speech patterns were outgrown from pre-adolescence on, it is now typical of the speech of young American women in particular to retain what used to be purely puerile traits into adulthood. This recessive infantilization of language broadly affects the vocal timbre as well as the intonation of female adult speakers, to the point where a young American woman who doesn't sound like a superannuated child is exceptional. (Those who are familiar with female speech patterns in Japanese will immediately recognize the cross-cultural similarity to the contemporary American situation.) Whether speaking like a child into adulthood is to be reckoned an apotropaic linguistic adaptation, of a piece with other behavioral strategies calculated to forestall conflict, is an open question.

Infantilization can also affect lexis as well as phonetics. The current preference for the *Lallwörter* (German 'nursery words') "mom," "dad," and "kid" instead of their grownup counterparts "mother," "father," and "child" is clearly an example of this phenomenon. With increasing frequency, public speech (both oral and written) refers to "single mom" and "stay-at-home mom" regardless of the stylistic register of the context in which these phrases are embedded. In fact, the media routinely eschew designating parents by their stylistically neutral names. Particularly jarring is the neologism "grandkid," connoting as it does (regardless of the age of the child) yet another instance of an American cultural tropism toward a state of permanent infantilism—here tellingly of BOTH the grandchild AND the grandparent.

2.11 Issues ≠ Problems

Glossary

forma mentis: form of mind; mental framework (Latin)

Change in linguistic usage can be motivated by a variety of factors, including a concomitant change in ideology or value system. With respect to the latter, the ubiquitous contemporary American substitution of the word *issue* for *problem* is a good case in point.

The increasing tendency to avoid *problem* in favor of *issue* is a sign of an ideological change in values whereby nothing is judged to be inherently problematic or in need of correction on its face. So is the frequent recurrence in public discourse to the word *challenge* instead of *problem*. In this attitude, which underlies the word usage, everything pertaining to the social or personal sphere is potentially unproblematic and automatically amenable to repair in the long run, hence one encounters only *challenges* rather than *problems*. Consequently, for instance, there are no longer any *health problems*, only *health issues*, and one *has issues*, not *problems*.

Fortunately, this delusionary *forma mentis*—a failure of thought—cannot intrude into the mathematical sciences, since such obfuscation is systematically rooted out as the enemy of clarity, hence of solubility and, ultimately, of truth.

2.12 It's Chinese to Me

Glossary

derivational: adj. < *derivation*: n., the study, process, or result of word formation

lexical: adj., pertaining to the lexicon or to words

morphology: n., the study of (linguistic) form

Many languages have a phrase corresponding to *It's Greek to me* to signify that something is incomprehensible or makes no sense to the utterer/writer. The English version may have started in the Middle Ages as a translation of the Latin phrase, *Graecum est, non legitur* 'It's Greek, [hence] not readable', at a time when knowledge of Greek among scribes was on the wane.

When it comes to other languages (Arabic, French, Hebrew, Russian, among others) however, it is Chinese that is most commonly referred to, and what is meant specifically is the writing system rather than the spoken language. This is confirmed by the Japanese version, *sanbun kanbun* 'gibberish', where the literal meaning of the two components is 'prose' (*sanbun*) + 'Chinese script' (*kanbun*). Russian *kitajskaja gramota* (китайская грамота) 'Chinese charter/alphabet' also makes explicit reference to the script.

All the Slavic languages have in fact incorporated what can be interpreted as the ultimate degree of unintelligibility of speech by likening the speakers of one foreign language in particular—German—to those who cannot speak at all, namely mutes: R *nemeckij* [jazyk] (немецкий язык) 'German [language]', etc., takes its formal and semantic designation from the Common Slavic adjectival base *nem-* 'mute'.

In English, when we want to single out speech or writing as crabbed, miscegenated, or full of incomprehensible words—and, therefore, evaluated as a degraded form of language—we typically resort to words like *jargon*, *lingo*, *pidgin*, *patois*, and *argot*; or to derivatives utilizing the suffix *-ese*, as in *bureaucratese*, *legalese*, etc.—doubtless derived in the first instance from an extension of the morphology of the word *Chinese*.

Speaking of *jargon* (which is probably of French—at any rate, of Romance—provenience), it is interesting to note that in pre-revolutionary Russian (the language of my parents), the word жаргон was also in common use to mean Yiddish, specifically by Jews themselves. Speakers of Yiddish evidently felt no pejorative taint in resorting to a label in Russian that reflects their rich mother tongue's hybrid (German, Hebrew, Slavic) grammatico-lexical makeup.

2.13 Just Semantics

Glossary

anamnesis, n.: the complete history recalled and recounted by a patient

hyperplasia, n.: an abnormal increase in the number of cells in an organ or a tissue with consequent enlargement

hypertrophy, n.: a nontumorous enlargement of an organ or a tissue as a result of an increase in the size rather than the number of constituent cells

The endocrinologist wore a white coat to match the thatch of white hair surmounting his pate and wrote my anamnesis down hurriedly without looking up, occasionally repeating his questions because he hadn't heard my answers. (The doctor was hard of hearing but, typical of his profession, obviously hadn't bothered to remedy the condition.)

When my narrative came to benign prostatic hyperplasia, I interrupted to ask about the difference between 'hyperplasia' and 'hypertrophy', since the condition is vernacularly known as 'enlargement'. His answer, pronounced with what passed for a smile, was: "That's just semantics." Then, evidently embarrassed, he backed up and gave a short definition of each of the terms.

This common denigration of the science of meaning is particularly unfortunate coming from a physician, who of all professionals should be sensitive to the profound bond between words and feelings, hence to the prominent role language and its precise use play in the healing arts.

2.14 *Magnimonious Poster Childs

Glossary

catathresis, n.: the misapplication of a word or phrase; the use of a strained figure of speech, such as a mixed metaphor

contamination, n.: the process by which one word or phrase is altered because of mistaken associations with another word or phrase; for example, the substitution of *irregardless* for *regardless* by association with such words as *irrespective*

As is well known, even adults speaking their native language occasionally make grammatical mistakes. These can be slips of the tongue, which may then be corrected in the same breath. But they may also be out and out errors which go

uncorrected for one or another reason, including lack of awareness on the utterer's part that an error has been committed.

Errors are not uniformly of the same kind. Roughly speaking, they fall into two main categories, motivated and unmotivated. The first category subsumes those that lend themselves to some kind of reasoned explication; the second, those that are catachrestic pure and simple.

On the National Public Radio program "Morning Edition" (VPR, January 24, 2011), the co-host, Renee Montagne, was interviewing the economics editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, David Wessel, who uttered the phrase "one of the poster childs," i.e., failed to say the grammatically correct form of the plural, *children*.

This mistake allows for a quasi-explanation, in that there exists at least one precedent for a deviation from the normal plural, namely in the phrase *still lifes* (when speaking of an art object). Here a distinction is being made between the plural of *life* in the ordinary sense (*lives*) and its special transferred sense in the case of a genre of pictorial representation.

No such explication of motivatedness in the grammatically strict sense is available, however, for the blunder the same host made in the interview a few minutes later, when she uttered (without self-correction) the mangled form **magnimonious* instead of the correct *magnanimous*. This instance of catachresis was evidently the simple product of contamination between adjectives that sound vaguely alike (*sanctimonious*? *parsimonious*?).

2.15 Memoirs (plurale tantum)

Glossary

lexical, adj. < *lexicon*, n., pl. *lexica*: the words of a language considered as a group

plurale tantum: occurring only in the plural (Latin)

The traditional designation of an autobiographical account as a literary genre has always gone by the name *memoirs*, in the plural, not the singular. Recently, however, writers and readers have begun referring to it exclusively in the singular, viz. *memoir*. This change can in part be accounted for by the fact that of all contemporary literary genres *memoirs* was the only one whose designation occurred in the plural only, the singular being reserved for other kinds of written account such as a memorandum, notice, special study, monograph, or history. The change, therefore, can be seen as a lexical normalization.

A possibly covert other reason for the change is the simple fact that speakers and writers—particularly of American English—are ignorant of the original meaning of the word, namely 'remembrances' or 'memories'. The (French) form that took root

in English to mean the genre obscures its origin and its attendant meaning, hence facilitating the new recurrence to the singular and the oblivion of the traditional plural.

2.16 Of Proofs in Puddings and Roosters in Cabbage Soup

Glossary

alliterative, adj. < *alliteration*: n., the repetition of the same sounds or of the same kinds of sounds at the beginning of words or in stressed syllables

catachrestic, adj. < *catachresis*, n.: the misapplication of a word or phrase, as the use of *blatant* to mean ‘flagrant’; the use of a strained figure of speech, such as a mixed metaphor

deverbal: adj. (also *deverbative*), formed from a verb; used in derivation from a verb; n., a deverbative word or element

faiblesse: n., weakness (French)

metanalysis: n., a boundary shift

terminus ad quem: a goal or finishing point; a final limiting point in time (Latin)

English—as everybody knows—has a *faiblesse* for alliterative phrasing, but this otherwise appealing poetic ornament can also turn itself into a false friend by inducing a loss of sense. Such is the case of the degradation of the proverb *The proof of the pudding is in the eating*, which is at least as old as the seventeenth century in England, perhaps older.

As was demonstrated yet again on the NPR program, “Morning Edition” (KPCC, Pasadena, 10/2/08), in responding to the co-host’s question about the impending Vice Presidential debate, the correspondent Mara Liasson (otherwise a model of good diction and of uncatachrestic speech) reduced this proverb to *The proof is in the pudding*, as is now commonly done (cf. my Letter to the Editor, “Sour Pudding,” *Barron’s*, August 17, 1998, p. 46). The reason for this degraded version, which apparently has been around since the 1950s, if not earlier, is nowhere mentioned by the several bloggers who have treated of it but is clear nonetheless: we are dealing here with the proverbial sacrifice of meaning to sound as a *terminus ad quem* of linguistic change.

Notice: “proof in the pudding” is utterly meaningless, even if one understands proof to have the older meaning “test,” as in *The exception proves the rule*. It IS perfectly understandable, of course, in the authentic version, “The proof of the pudding is in the eating.”

This sort of counter-sensical development can be seen in other languages as well. The Russian locution *popast’ kak kur vó shchi* (попасть как кур вó щи) ‘land in

the (cabbage) soup, get into a mess’ is known to every Russian speaker in just that form but is actually a historically degenerate version of the phrase *popast’ kak kur v óshchip* (попасть как кур в óщип) ‘end up being plucked like a rooster’, where *kur* ‘cock, rooster’ is the archaic or dialectal word for Modern Russian *petux*, and *óshchip* is the suffixless deverbal noun ‘plucking [clean]’ < *oshchipat* ‘pluck [clean]’.

Notice: the meaninglessness of the contemporary form, where the final consonant [p] of *óshchip* has been apocopated, occasioning a metanalysis and a concomitant reinterpretation (*v óshchip* > *vó shchi*), and the preposition in *vó shchi* appears irregularly with the stressed full vowel [ó], is exactly parallel to the English example. Just as proofs are not to be found as ingredients of puddings, no recipe—Russian or otherwise—calls for a rooster to go into cabbage soup, although such a bird can sensibly end up getting plucked.

2.17 The Linguistic Ecology of the Proverb

Glossary

lexica, pl. n. < *lexicon*, n.: the words of a language considered as a group

paroemic, adj. < *paroemia*, n.: a proverb or adage; aphorism

paronomasia, n.: a play upon words in which the same word is used in different senses or words similar in sound are set in opposition so as to give antithetical force

Every language has proverbs. English, Russian, and Japanese have not only the largest lexica but also the greatest number of proverbs with the most comprehensive Japanese proverb dictionaries approaching a six-figure total. English in all its varieties differs from Russian and Japanese in the ecological prominence of proverbs in actual use, which is to say that speakers and writers of English no longer habitually recur to proverbs. When was the last time you uttered the words—or heard anyone else say—*A stitch in time saves nine*?

By contrast, Russians and Japanese sprinkle their speech with proverbs at every turn. This paroemic predilection has nothing to do with the speaker’s class or education, nor with urban versus agrarian social context. When a Russian resorts to the proverb *na net i suda net*—literally, ‘to a NO there’s no justice/court’—to express resignation before an insuperable impasse, they are employing a piece of paronomasia that conveys its meaning with a poetic punch not available to a purely discursive statement.

Beyond paronomasia, there is also the frequent special force of figuration conjured up in proverbs that is colligated with their analogical imagery. When a Japanese says *setchin-mushi mo tokorobiiki* (雪隠虫も所蟲負) ‘even the dung

beetle loves its own bailiwick’, a whole world far removed from contemporary mores comes to life that endows the utterance’s context with a particular purport. The linguistic ecology of modern-day English is, by comparison, all the poorer for having abjured the paroemic riches at its disposal.

2.18 Running the Show

Glossary

Anglophone, adj.: pertaining to an English-speaking person, especially one in a country where two or more languages are spoken
forma mentis: form of mind; mental framework (Latin)

No other language than English has expressions with equivalents for the word *show* to mean being in charge (“running the show”). In fact, the modern European languages (cf. R *shou*) have borrowed E *show* for varieties of theatrical presentation because they lack equivalents that would straddle the whole semantic range of this useful little word. But what the expression betrays is something much deeper, going to the most fundamental characterization of the English nation, to wit, that THE WHOLE WORLD IS A STAGE. Shakespeare was only putting into words what has been known about his nation from the beginning of time. (That outlook also accounts for the fact that English philosophers have no metaphysics.)

Apropos, note the spread of words like *actor* and *player* in contemporary Anglophone discourse as substitutes for *participant* and other words meaning ‘person in charge, important personage’. What’s uppermost for the English *forma mentis* as expressed in language use is “putting on a good show” and “making a good show of it,” hence the typical British expression “good show!” to signify approval.

2.19 Semantic Contamination

Glossary

catachrestic, adj. < *catachresis*, n.: the misapplication of a word or phrase; the use of a strained figure of speech, such as a mixed metaphor
fillip, n.: a spur or impetus; an embellishment that excites or stimulates

When words or phrases occupy adjacent or overlapping semantic fields they may begin to interfere with each other in the sense that one contaminates the other, thereby changing usage such that the contaminated version supplants the earlier one.

This has happened recently in the American English catachrestic construction “good-paying job,” which has all but replaced the traditional “well-paying job” (with or without the hyphen). It is a further instance of the usurpation of the adjective/adverb “well” by “good.”

In analyzing how and why this has happened, one must start by comparing the constructions “good job” and “well paid.” The compound adjective “well-paying” is the result of adjectivizing “well paid.” Note that one can say “The job/John is well paid” but not “*The job/John is good paid.” The component “well” is then supplanted by “good,” a result of contamination with “good job.” A good job is now preeminently taken to be a well-paying job: whatever else it may entail, the level of remuneration is primary and is reflected in the change to “good-paying.” So there is an underlying value change that motivates the change.

The same may be said of the now ubiquitous “I’m good” for “I’m well” in the speech of persons under a certain age (45?). As possibly in the previous case, “well” is all but avoided when juxtaposed with a human agent because it has been relegated to the meaning field associated with health (cf. the neologism “wellness”). “Feeling good” is evidently not the same as “feeling well” (cf. the difference between “I [don’t]/feel good” and “I [don’t]/feel well”). A fillip comes from the extacy of “I don’t feel good about it” but not “*I don’t feel well about it.” Cf. the standard “She paid him well” with the dialectal or nonstandard “She paid him good.”

2.20 The Evisceration of Meaning

Glossary

bathetic, adj. < *bathos*, n.: insincere or grossly sentimental pathos; banality; triteness

nullity, n.: the state of being null or nothing; want of efficacy or force; nothingness

When the first Gulf War (“Desert Storm”) broke out, I invented a joke, which goes as follows:

Question: “Where’s Kuwait?”

Answer: “Between a rock and a hard place.”

Now, whatever humor this inanity may exhibit depends on the new pronunciation of Iraq as [irák] instead of the traditional [iræk].

But what I want to concentrate on is the non-jocular sense of the answer, which everybody knows is a fixed expression meaning “confronted with equally unpleasant alternatives and few or no opportunities to evade or circumvent them.”

Why do Americans use this utterly flat locution? No self-respecting originator of English proverbs would ever have coined such a phrase. The English nation gave us “a stitch in time saves nine.” It gave us “In for a penny, in for a pound.” But “**a hárd place?**” How bathetic can you get?

“Hard place,” with its obligatory primary stress on *hard* to signify a derived compound, carries absolutely no punch at all. It’s the veriest dishrag semantically, with a meaning so eviscerated as to be almost void of meaning.

Yet people launch this lead balloon of a phrase all the time, just as they do the compound noun “wake up call.” Think of it! Something whose origins are mere telephone calls from the front desk of a hotel to a guest who asks to be woken at a certain hour is now used ubiquitously to mean any kind of unexpected alert or alarm (even though “wake up call” in its original use was anything but unexpected). “9/11 was a wake up call for the nation.” **THE ATROCITY OF THE CENTURY A WAKE UP CALL?** Bathos on a stick!

Now, compare this metaphorical nullity with “Between the Devil and the deep blue sea;” or—even better—“Between Scylla and Charybdis,” which means “In a position where avoidance of one danger exposes one to another danger.” It exists as an expression in every European language.

Scylla and Charybdis are two sea monsters of Greek mythology who inhabited opposite sides of the Strait of Messina between Sicily and Italy.

Charybdis takes the form of a monstrous mouth that swallows huge amounts of water three times a day before spewing them back out again, creating whirlpools. She was originally a naiad, a sea-nymph who stole Heracles’ cattle until Zeus became angry, threw her into the sea, and, as punishment, turned her into a sea monster.

Scylla was a grotesque creature with six long necks surmounted by grisly heads, each with a triple row of teeth, that devoured six men at a time. She wore a girdle of dogs’ heads about her loins.

The myth has Charybdis lying on one side of a narrow channel of water. On the other side was Scylla. The two sides are a stone’s throw from each other, so close that sailors attempting to avoid Charybdis would pass too close to Scylla and vice versa.

Next time you’re tempted to utter the phrase “Between a rock and a hard place,” think of Scylla and Charybdis. It’ll be a wake up call.

2.21 The Jazzification of Musical Terminology

In the modern period, now more than ever due to the spread of electronic media, popular culture seeps upward into high culture, whereas in the pre-modern period the reverse was true. In particular, this (invidious) movement from below has come to affect the terminology of classical music, as follows.

Forty or fifty years ago, no classical musician would have been caught dead referring to an engagement as a “gig,” a word which applied strictly to jazz but is

now routinely uttered by young and old alike when referring to classical music. Nor would the syntactic means to designate performing on an instrument in classical music have omitted the direct article, as is routine in jazz. Thus, whereas one says “on the saxophone” in naming the soloist in the Glazunov Saxophone Concerto in E flat major (Opus 109A), a jazz musician’s role is designated as “on sax,” e.g., “John Coltrane on sax.” Note also the typical abbreviation of the instrument’s full name in referring to jazz instruments, a usage not to be found in the language of classical music (except for words canonized by tradition such as “cello” for violoncello and “bass” for contrabass).

2.22 The Last Straw

Glossary

hypertrophy, n.: inordinate or pathological enlargement

The growing power of linguistic hypertrophy in present-day American English (in particular) can be measured *inter alia* by the incorrect rendering of fixed phrases wherein the traditional form is replaced by a LONGER one. This is happening to the normative version of the expression *the last straw*, which is increasingly heard as *the final straw* (for instance, in a report by my namesake Ari Shapiro, on the 12/3/09 installment of the NPR program “All Things Considered”).

Recently I was waiting to pick up some laundry early in the morning at a cleaning establishment in Westwood, Calif. when an elderly gentleman came in and said to me “the early bird gathers the worm.” I couldn’t restrain myself and corrected him: “You mean ‘gets’ the worm.” He said nothing and looked at me with incredulity.

Note the greater length of *gathers* vis-à-vis *gets*.

2.23 The Onomastic Infantilization of Females

Glossary

hypocoristic, adj.: endearing; belong to affective vocabulary

onomastic, adj.: of, relating to, or explaining a name or names

orthographic, adj. < *orthography*, n.: (correct) spelling

timbre, n.: the combination of qualities of a sound that distinguishes it from other sounds of the same pitch and volume

During the last half-century there has been a noticeable increase in a particular kind of first names for girls, specifically non-traditional forenames that derive from largely Anglo-Saxon surnames and end orthographically in *-(e)y* or *-i(e)* (pronounced identically, i.e., [-iy]). Whereas in earlier times this (quasi-)suffix—which also occurs in boys’ nicknames that are abbreviations (*Bobby* < *Robert*, *Mickey* < *Michael*, etc.)—modified (mainly WASP) girls’ nicknames like *Missy*, *Sissy*, or *Trixie*, it is now the unifying mark of popular Christian names like *Tiffany*, *Kimberly*, *Hailey*, *Ashley*, *Avery*, *Kaylee*, *Riley*, *Bailey*, *Aubrey*, *Kiley*, *Sidney*, *Mackenzie*, and even *Serenity*, *Trinity*, and *Destiny*, not to speak of older staples like *Emily*, *Lily*, *Lucy*, *Molly*, *Naomi*, etc. (NB: all these names—except for *Missy*, *Sissy*, and *Trixie*—are drawn from the list of 100 most popular girls’ names compiled by the Social Security Administration for May 2011.)

Forenames like *Ashley* and *Kimberly* have the advantage of sounding like surnames while maintaining a tie with hypocoristic vocabulary, which means that they can do double duty for children and for adults, and not be mistaken for nicknames despite their phonetic resemblance to the latter.

It is clear that the attractiveness of names ending in [-iy] stems to a considerable extent from the (subconscious?) desire of parents to infantilize their female offspring in perpetuity, a motive that does not apply to males for obvious reasons. This onomastic trend is evidently of a piece with another linguistic feature, viz. the infantilization of female vocal timbre (“little girl voice”) beyond childhood into adolescence and adulthood, a trend that has been increasing in North American English for several decades, and that can only have the lamentable effect of subtly undermining some of the social gains of the feminist revolution.

2.24 The Vocabulary of Self-Delusion

Glossary

catachrestic, adj. < *catachresis*, n.: the misapplication of a word or phrase;
the use of a strained figure of speech, such as a mixed metaphor
elision, n.: the act or an instance of omitting something

In the essay entitled “Issues ≠ Problems” (vide supra) I broached the subject of a failure of thought associated with the substitution of the words *issue* and *challenge* for *problem* in contemporary speech and writing. The nub of this failure is the elision of the semantic core of the word *problem* when using the other two. Mathematical and related uses aside, the word *problem* necessarily connotes SOMETHING WRONG, implying a need for rectification. By contrast, the words *issue* and *challenge* are noncommittal as to wrongness, the former properly connoting something inviting discussion, the latter connoting a difficulty to be overcome. So that by substituting the latter two words for *problem*, when something is patently

wrong, one is effectively deluding oneself (and possibly one's interlocutors) into thinking either (1) that no problem *sensu stricto* exists; or (2) that whatever is wrong can necessarily be rectified (or both). These are typically American instances of a blithely optimistic outlook undergirded by a value system that eschews analytical rigor in speech and thought.

Such self-delusion can be dangerous, particularly in the political arena. It is favored, of course, by media language, whose practitioners work hand in glove with politicians and their minders in "crafting" messages that are meant to thwart thought. It is no surprise, then, to hear President Barack Obama constantly substituting *challenge* for *problem*, as in the catachrestic phrase "solving our fiscal challenge," which he uttered in the course of his appearance on 2/17/2010 at the White House before an audience of small-business leaders (reported by Andrea Seabrook, "Commission Charged With Controlling Federal Deficit," NPR, Morning Edition, February 18, 2010; also reported by Sheryl Gay Stolberg, "Obama and Republicans Clash Over Stimulus Bill, One Year Later," *The New York Times*, National Edition, 2/18/2010, p. A16). Here is another instance of the substitution in the same issue of the newspaper, this time from the pen of a marriage and family therapist writing on the Op-Ed page: "This challenge is not as great as widespread preconceptions would suggest." [referring in the preceding sentence to the damage suffered by children when their parents divorce] (Ruth Bettelheim, "No Fault of Their Own," p. A 21).

This usage has been adopted not only by non-Americans but by non-native speakers of English as well—no surprise, of course, seeing as how American media language has come to be the main vehicle for the transmission of English throughout the world. Thus, again in the same issue of *The New York Times*, an Israeli identified as the director of the Center for International Communications at Bar-Ilan University in Ramat Gan, Eytan Gilboa, is quoted as saying "This country's main challenges are the false comparison people make with an apartheid state and the questioning of its right to exist" (Ethan Bronner, "Positive Views of Israel, Brought to You by Israelis" (p. A6). No example could be more strongly illustrative of the self-delusory nature of the substitution of *challenges* for *problems*.

2.25 What's in a Name?

Glossary

argosy, n.: a rich source or supply

aureole, n.: a quality, condition, or circumstance that surrounds and glorifies a given object

constituent, n.: a functional unit of a grammatical construction, as a verb, noun phrase, or clause

icon, n.: a sign exhibiting a similarity relation to its object (meaning)

iconic, adj.: of, relating to, or having the character of an icon [vide supra]; exhibiting iconicity [vide infra]
iconism, n. = *iconicity*, n.: the conceived similarity or analogy between the form of a sign (linguistic or otherwise) and its meaning
marked, adj.: clearly defined and evident; noticeable
morphological, adj. < *morphology*, n.: the system or the study of (linguistic) form
onomastic, adj.: of, relating to, or explaining a name or names
tant pis: so much the worse (French)

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet.” (*Romeo and Juliet* [II, ii, 1–2]). When Juliet utters these words, little does she know how wrong she is, both in the play and generally. Every name has a particular semantic aureole, and its meaningfulness can be enhanced by its relative transparency, both as to constituent structure (if any) and its iconic potential. In the event, the beauty—here, the goodness of fit—is definitely in the ear of the beholder.

Languages and cultures differ quite widely in the latitude they countenance as to onomastic structure and use. With reference to fore- and surnames, there are cultures (like Indonesian) in which persons typically go by only one name (cf. some performers in Western cultures). If they regularly allot more than one name to their members, there may be a range of variability, such as middle names beside first and last names in Anglo-Saxon and Romance countries. Russian occupies a unique place with its *de rigueur* triplet of forename, patronymic (father’s name modified by a suffix), and surname, the latter two differing—within morphological limitations—according to the sex of the bearer (e.g., the daughter of *Mikhail Konstantinovich* [Michael, son of Constantine] is always known as *Avigeia Mikhailovna* [Abigail, daughter of Michael], regardless of a change in surname through marriage, etc.). Some cultures (like Hungarian and Japanese) impose a reverse order of given and family names compared to that of Western European ones, viz. last name before first.

What is interesting in the American context is the huge variety of naming practices, owing to the fact of the multicultural population and the historical persistence of certain patterns inherited from bygone eras, such as giving offspring the mother’s maiden name as a forename. The upshot is an impression that any combination is possible, but this is not strictly so. Jews, for instance, adhere traditionally to Biblical forenames preceding obviously Jewish surnames, although this custom is undergoing fragmentation, so that one now encounters formerly unthinkable combinations like “Kevin Shapiro” or “Scott Goldberg.” And the Anglophone Chinese, particularly in Hong Kong, have, of course, long masked their proper given names by substituting Christian ones.

Depending on knowledge of and sensitivity to language, each speaker of American English will have a reaction to or evaluation of the particular combination of names borne by someone else in the culture, ranging from neutral to marked. The unusualness or rarity of a surname, for instance, may elicit questions as to its provenience.

Returning to the Shakespeare lines with which this discussion began, one should note that “Rose” is nowhere to be found among the hundred currently most popular girls’ given names in America, having been elbowed out by argosies of Tiffanys, Courtneys, Kimberlys et al. *Tant pis!*

2.26 Willy-Nilly

Glossary

Americanism, n.: a word, phrase, or idiom characteristic of English as it is spoken in the United States

nec plus ultra: the highest point, as of excellence or achievement; the ultimate (Latin)

The compound *willy-nilly*, corresponding to Latin *nolens volens*, has acquired a meaning in American English that is absent in British English, namely the second of the senses in each of the following parts of the entry in *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed. 2006):

adv.

1. Whether desired or not: *After her boss fell sick, she willy-nilly found herself directing the project.*
2. Without order or plan; haphazardly.

adj.

1. Being or occurring whether desired or not: willy-nilly cooperation.
2. Disordered; haphazard: willy-nilly zoning laws.

[Alteration of *will ye (or he)*, *nill ye (or he)*, *be you (or he) willing*, *be you (or he) unwilling*.]

Compare the above with the following entry in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*:

A. adv.

Whether it be with or against the will of the person or persons concerned; whether one likes it or not; willingly or unwillingly, *nolens volens*.

- 1608 T. Middleton *Trick to catch Old-one* i. sig. B, Thou shalt trust mee spite of thy teeth, furnish me with some money, wille nille.
- 1797 E. Berkeley in G. M. Berkeley *Poems* Pref. p. ccxxix, But her Ladyship would, *willi nilhi*, constantly join the one who drank the waters every morning, and converse with her.
- 1807 *Salmagundi* 25 Apr. 166 He was sure, willy nilly, to be drenched with a deluge of decoctions.
- 1818 J. Brown *Psyche* 121 From whence it follows, will y' nill y', The thought of your's is mighty silly.
- 1884 A. Griffiths *Chron. Newgate* II. vii. 306 He?conceived an idea of carrying her off and marrying her willy nilly at Gretna Green.
- 1898 L. Stephen *Stud. of Biographer* II. vii. 272 You are engaged in the game willy-nilly, and cannot be a mere looker-on.

B. adj.

1. **That is such, or that takes place, whether one will or no.**

- 1877 Tennyson *Harold* v. i, And someone saw thy willy-nilly nun Vying a tress against our golden fern.
- 1880 *Cornhill Mag.* Feb. 182 All willy-nilly spinsters went to the canine race to be consoled.
- 1882 Tennyson *Promise of May* ii. 119 If man be only A willy-nilly current of sensations.

2. **erron. Undecided, shilly-shally.**

- 1883 F. Galton *Inquiries into Human Faculty* 57 The willy-nilly disposition of the female in matters of love is as apparent in the butterfly as in the man.
- 1898 W. Besant *Orange Girl* ii. vi, Let us have no more shilly shally, willy nilly talk.

When confronted with the semantic Americanism 'haphazard (ly)' from the *AHD*, the person who prompted this essay, Jacobus (alias Pops), wrote: "Could the dictionary be wrong? I was unaware of 'willy nilly' being used to mean 'haphazard' or 'disoriented'."

His query, it should be noted, is pure Goliadkin, the protagonist of Dostoevsky's masterful fiction, *The Double* [Двойник]. To be convinced of the aptness of the identification, read this early (1846) novella and then see the *nec plus ultra* exegesis by Marianne Shapiro in *Russian Literature*, 56 (2004), 441–482 (revised version as ch. 2 in her book, *The Sense of Form in Literature and Language*, 2nd, exp. ed. [2009]).

2.27 “You’re Correct.” Hyperurbanism as Hypertrophy

Glossary

hypertrophy, n.: an inordinate or pathological enlargement

hyperurbanism, n.: a pronunciation or grammatical form or usage produced by a speaker of one dialect according to an analogical rule formed by comparison of the speaker’s own usage with that of another, more prestigious, dialect and often applied in an inappropriate context, especially in an effort to avoid sounding countrified, rural, or provincial; hypercorrection

The contemporary surge of hyperurbanisms into the mainstream of American English discourse is part and parcel of the penetration in late twentieth-century and early twenty-first-century America of literacy and the written word into previously marginalized sectors of the speech community.

One such case—a particularly grating one—is the substitution of *correct* for *right* as an adjective applied to persons, *correct* having two syllables where *right* has only one. Consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* one finds—leaving aside the new meaning ‘Conforming to a dominant political or ideological orthodoxy’—the following definitions of *correct* as an ordinary adjective applied to things:

(1) ‘In accordance with an acknowledged or conventional standard, esp. of literary or artistic style, or of manners or behaviour; proper;’ (2) ‘In accordance with fact, truth, or reason; free from error; exact, true, accurate; right. Said also of persons, in reference to their statements, scholarship, acquirements, etc.’ When it comes to persons, the definition further reads ‘Adhering exactly to an acknowledged standard’ which subdivides depending on whether it applies to (a) ‘literary or artistic style’; and (b) ‘manners and behaviour’.

In light of these definitions there is no avoiding the interpretation of the penetration of “You’re correct” as anything other than an instance of *HYPERTROPHY* *correct* being longer than *right*. The term is used here advisedly, by analogy with its clinical sense, to designate an abnormal growth that is in need of amelioration by means of excision.

2.28 Anglo-Saxon vs. Latinate: The Semantics of Verbal Inanition

Glossary

catachrestic, adj. < *catachresis*, n.: The misapplication of a word or phrase; the use of a strained figure of speech, such as a mixed metaphor

inanition, adj.: the condition or quality of being empty

Latinate, adj.: of, derived from, or suggestive of Latin

postposition, n.: a word or element placed postpositionally, as a preposition placed after its object

simplex, n.: a word that has no affixes and is not part of a compound; a simple word

There is a tendency in latter-day English on both sides of the Atlantic, but especially in America, to substitute the combination of native verbs + postpositions for simplex Latinate verbs, e.g., *push back* for *resist*, *step down* for *resign*, *reach out* for *extend* (oneself), *give back* for *recompense*, etc. The last example in particular, in the meaning of donating or making a contribution (to charity, to the community, etc.), is now ubiquitous despite being catachrestic (for omitting the direct object, i.e., *giving [something] back*).

Although avoidance of the Latinate synonym for an Anglo-Saxon word has long been recognized as a stylistic desideratum in the service of plainspokenness, there is no gainsaying the effiteness and vacuity of these verb combinations, since *step down* and its congeners have only the fuzziest relation, if any, to the action they have been lazily adapted to connote.

2.29 Conflation via Opacity of Constituent Structure

Glossary

agentive, adj.: of or relating to a linguistic form or construction that indicates an agent or agency, as the suffix *-er* in *singer*

instrumental, adj.: of, relating to, or being the case used typically to express means, agency, or accompaniment

orthoepic, adj. < *orthoepy*, n.: the study of the pronunciation of words; the customary pronunciation of words

When the constituent structure of a word or phrase fades over time, i.e., when the meaning and resultant separability of the constituents cease to be transparent to the speakers of a language, the word or phrase may be conflated with another one, whose meaning is similar, leading to variants that are not on a par orthoepically. This is what has happened with the phrase *on behalf of* in the recent history of (American) English.

More and more in public discourse, instead of *on the part of* in its strictly instrumental (agentive) meaning speakers substitute *on behalf of*, whose traditional meaning is ‘for the benefit of; in the interest of’ rather than ‘as the agent of; on the

part of'. *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* (4th ed., 2006) records this substitution and (typically) makes no distinction in its Usage Note:

Usage Note: A traditional rule holds that *in behalf of* and *on behalf of* have distinct meanings. *In behalf of* means "for the benefit of," as in *We raised money in behalf of the earthquake victims*. *On behalf of* means "as the agent of, on the part of," as in *The guardian signed the contract on behalf of the minor child*. The two meanings are quite close, however, and the phrases are often used interchangeably, even by reputable writers.

But as the etymological data in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* entry give one to understand, the present-day ascription of purely instrumental meaning to *on behalf of*, by which this phrase is equated with *on the part of*, is a misconstrual of its structure. Here are the two relevant etymologies, for *half* and *behalf*, respectively:

Etymology: A Common Germanic n.: Old English *healf* (feminine) = Old Saxon *halba* (Middle Dutch, Middle Low German *halve*), Old High German *halba* (Middle High German *halbe*), Old Norse *halfa* (*hálf*), Gothic *halba* side, half ... The oldest sense in all the languages is 'side'.

Etymology: Used only in the phrases *on*, *in behalf (of)*, *in*, *on (his, etc.) behalf*, which arose about 1300, by the blending of the two earlier constructions *on his halve* and *bihalve him*, both meaning 'by or on his side' ... By the mixture of these in the construction *on his bihalve*, ... previously a preposition, and originally a phrase, *be healf* 'by (the) side,' became treated, so far as construction goes, as a n., and had even a plural *behalfes*, *behalfs* in 16–17th cent. The final *-e* of Middle English was the dative ending. In modern use, construed either with a possessive pronoun (in my behalf) a possessive case (in the king's behalf), or with *of* (in behalf of the starving population); the choice being determined by considerations of euphony and perspicuity. Formerly *of* was sometimes omitted.

The explanation for the misconstrual and resulting conflation of the two phrases is to be sought in the opacity of the word *behalf*, which has no currency outside of the two idiomatic phrases noted.

2.30 Emotive Force and the Sense of Form (Balaam's Ass)

Glossary

derivational, adj. < *derivation*, n.: the process by which words are formed from existing words or bases by adding affixes, as *singer* from *sing* or *undo* from *do*, by changing the shape of the word or base, as *song* from *sing*, or by adding an affix and changing the pronunciation of the word or base, as *electricity* from *electric*

inflectional, adj. < *inflection*, n.: an alteration of the form of a word by the addition of an affix, as in English *dogs* from *dog*, or by changing the form

of a base, as in English *spoke* from *speak*, that indicates grammatical features such as number, person, mood, or tense

marked: of or relating to that member of a pair of sounds, words, or forms that explicitly denotes a particular subset of the meanings denoted by the other member of the pair. For example, of the two words *lion* and *lioness*, *lion* is unmarked for gender (it can denote either a male or female) whereas *lioness* is marked, since it denotes only females

morphology, *n.*: the system or the study of (linguistic) form

Grammatical form may have an emotive force as is the case with gender in those languages where gender distinctions are an obligatory category of grammatical structure. This is not to confuse biological sex with gender. In German, for instance, a maiden (*das Mädchen*) is neuter, and in Russian a male servant (*sluga*) is desinentially (inflectionally) feminine while being of masculine gender (a female servant is called *prisluga*—also of feminine gender).

In those cases where feminine and non-feminine are opposed in the designation of biological sex, the non-feminine—alias masculine—is the unmarked (generic) member of the opposition because it applies to both sexes, whereas the feminine is marked, being applicable exclusively to the female of the species. Thus in Russian, the unmarked word for ‘donkey’ is *osël* (осёл), whereas the word for ‘she-ass’ is formed by adding a suffix {-ica} to the deriving base {osl-}, resulting in *oslitsa* (ослица). This sort of play of derivational morphology can be accompanied by emotive force, as in the English compound *jackass*, which is marked with respect to the simplex *ass*. Interestingly enough, the Russian pejorative counterpart of *jackass* is the masculine noun *osël* (not the feminine *oslitsa*).

This is all by way of introducing a familiar Bible story known as Balaam’s Ass that appears in Numbers 22:

21 And Balaam rose up in the morning, and saddled his ass, and went with the princes of Moab. **22** And God’s anger was kindled because he went; and the angel of the LORD placed himself in the way for an adversary against him. Now he was riding upon his ass, and his two servants were with him. **23** And the ass saw the angel of the LORD standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and the ass turned aside out of the way, and went into the field; and Balaam smote the ass, to turn her into the way. **24** Then the angel of the LORD stood in a hollow way between the vineyards, a fence being on this side, and a fence on that side. **25** And the ass saw the angel of the LORD, and she thrust herself unto the wall, and crushed Balaam’s foot against the wall; and he smote her again. **26** And the angel of the LORD went further, and stood in a narrow place, where was no way to turn either to the right hand or to the left. **27** And the ass saw the angel of the LORD, and she lay down under Balaam; and Balaam’s anger was kindled, and he smote the ass with his staff. **28** And the LORD opened the mouth of the ass, and she said unto Balaam: ‘What have I done unto thee, that thou hast smitten me these three times?’ **29** And Balaam said unto the ass: ‘Because thou hast mocked me; I would there were a sword in my hand, for now I had killed thee.’ **30** And the ass said unto Balaam: ‘Am not I thine ass, upon which thou hast ridden all thy life long unto this day? was I ever wont to do so unto thee?’ And he said: ‘Nay.’ **31** Then the LORD opened the eyes of Balaam, and he saw the angel of the LORD

standing in the way, with his sword drawn in his hand; and he bowed his head, and fell on his face. **32** And the angel of the LORD said unto him: 'Wherefore hast thou smitten thine ass these three times? behold, I am come forth for an adversary, because thy way is contrary unto me; **33** and the ass saw me, and turned aside before me these three times; unless she had turned aside from me, surely now I had even slain thee, and saved her alive.'

Now, the Hebrew original uses an archaic word of feminine gender *athon* (אֲתוֹן) 'female donkey', which is reproduced in the Vulgate (L *asina* [fem.] rather than *asinus* [masc.]), and not the newer masculine *hamor* (חָמֹר) 'male donkey'. The upshot of the feminine gender to designate the animal for the emotive force of the word in the Biblical narrative is stylistically crucial. All the poignancy of the animal's suffering is tied up with its biological sex as conveyed by its grammatical gender. Therefore, those translations which use *donkey* or *ass* instead of *she-ass* are necessarily scanting the emotional core of this marvelous story.

2.31 The Significance of Spontaneous Back-Formations

Glossary

affix, n.: a word element, such as a prefix or suffix, that can only occur attached to a base, stem, or root

back-formation, n.: a new word created by removing an affix from an already existing word, as *vacuum clean* from *vacuum cleaner*, or by removing what is mistakenly thought to be an affix, as *pea* from the earlier English plural *pease*

morpheme, n.: a meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts

nonce word: a word used only 'for the nonce', i.e., for the specific purpose

substantive, n.: a noun

viva voce: by word of mouth (Latin 'live voice')

Back-formations are among the most productive sources of new vocabulary in English, particularly the creation of a verb from a noun (as in *enthuse* < *enthusiasm*). At the initial stage of spontaneous production as nonce words, they signify something over and above what would be signified by a traditional phrase.

Thus when one hears the *viva voce* sentence "I video-conversate with my nephew" emanating from the mouth of a native speaker of American English (a 27-year-old male college graduate), instead of what would be normative, i.e., "I have video conversations with my nephew," the phenomenological intention embedded in the back-formation can be explained as springing from the incorporation of the word *conversation* in a verbal form that goes beyond the attested verb *converse*.

One motive, to be sure, could simply be the avoidance of a certain stiltedness resulting from the stylistic register of the latter verb. But the more likely explanation must have to do with the semantic premium gained by incorporating the first of the two morphemes in the compound suffix *-at-ion* (the second morpheme being truncated in the process of back-formation), thereby alluding to the abstract backbone of the substantive as part of the nonce verb.

2.32 Moldiferate, v. , intr. (Portmanteau Words)

Glossary

sprezzatura, n.: ease of manner, studied carelessness; the appearance of acting or being done without effort; *spec.* of literary style or performance (Italian)

A ‘portmanteau word’ (alias ‘blend’) is a word formed by blending sounds from two or more distinct words and combining their meanings, e.g., *smog* from *smoke* + *fog*. Apparently, the word *portmanteau* was first used in this meaning by Lewis Carroll in *Through the Looking Glass*: “Well, ‘slithy’ means ‘lithe and slimy’... You see it’s like a portmanteau—there are two meanings packed up into one word.” The etymology (according to the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*) is from Middle French, French *portemanteau* ‘officer who carries the mantle of a person in a high position’ (1507 in Middle French), ‘case or bag for carrying clothing’ (1547), ‘clothes rack’ (1640) < *porte-* *porte-* comb. form + *manteau* *manteau* n. In the British English of Carroll’s time, a portmanteau was a suitcase. In modern French, a *porte-manteau* is a clothes valet, a coat-tree or similar article of furniture for hanging up jackets, hats, umbrellas, and the like.

In the twenty-first century, portmanteau words are omnipresent in media language and in that of advertising. One such coinage by the present author is *stupravity*, to appear in the title of his forthcoming book, *A Word Paints a Thousand Pictures: The Consolation of Philosophy in the Age of Stupravity*.

A well-remembered example, created with her nonpareil linguistic *sprezzatura* by my wife Marianne Shapiro (1940–2003) to describe the situation otherwise known as ‘contemplating one’s navel’, is *moldiferate* (*mo[u]lder* + *proliferate*), an intransitive verb meaning ‘to waste one’s time doing nothing while decomposing spiritually’. Another one of her creations in that vein is *pestiferate* (*pestiferous* + *-ate*), which she coined to mean ‘to cause to be pestiferous’. Both words were part of her habitual vocabulary. Neither word is in the *OED*, but they ought to be.

2.33 Disfluent like: Toward A Typology

Glossary

anaesthetic, adj.: producing, or connected with the production of, insensibility

apotropaism, n.: an act or ritual conducted to ward off evil or danger

approximative, adj.: pertaining to or embodying an approximation

disfluent < *disfluency*, n.: impairment of the ability to produce smooth, fluent speech; an interruption in the smooth flow of speech, as by a pause or the repetition of a word or syllable

extragrammatically, adv. < *extragrammatical*, adj.: outside of or going against grammar

figurative, adj.: transferred in sense from literal or plain to abstract or hypothetical (as by the expression of one thing in terms of another with which it can be regarded as analogous)

filler, n.: a short word or phrase that is largely devoid of meaning and has mostly a phatic function

nonce, adj.: the one, particular, or present occasion, purpose, or use

ontologically, adv. < *ontological*, adj. < *ontology*, n.: the science or study of being; that branch of metaphysics concerned with the nature or essence of being or existence

parasitical, adj.: dependent but contributing or producing little or nothing

phatic, adj.: employing or involving speech for the purpose of revealing or sharing feelings or establishing an atmosphere of sociability rather than for communicating ideas

quotative, adj.: pertaining to or embodying a quotation

ticastic, adj. < *tic*, n.: a frequent usually unconscious quirk of behavior or speech

verisimilar, adj.: having the appearance of truth

viva voce: by word of mouth; expressed or conducted by word of mouth

In the contemporary American English of adolescents and young adults (typically, females), the word *like* is a constant presence extragrammatically i.e., as a disfluent filler or discourse marker. Observation *viva voce* of raw speech specimens yields the following (non-exhaustive) typology of functions of the word, in rough order of frequency.

- (1) **TICASTIC**: for many speakers, the word is a verbal tic (whence the nonce adjective “ticastic”), replacing “you know” and its congeners, and having no other function than as a meaningless filler;
- (2) **PHATIC** (perhaps as a sub-species of the ticastic): keeping the channel of communication open, sometimes for no other reason than to forestall a response from one’s interlocutor(s);

- (3) QUOTATIVE: as a prefatory marker before the report of someone else's utterance (s) or inner speech;
- (4) APPROXIMATIVE: as a means of qualifying the extent or validity of the word or phrase immediately following, including its literal meaning;
- (5) ANAESTHETIC: as a way of deflecting the assertory force of anything following, usually as an apotropaism.

Prompted by new specimens of raw speech overheard *viva voce* into thinking further about the distribution of approximative and quotative *like*, I now suspect that the latter may be derivative of the former. The logic behind this relation resides in the implied judgment that no report of direct or indirect speech can ever be precise because only the speech act itself—and not its retelling—can ever authentically stand for itself. By this logic, no statement of anything that contains figurative expressions can ever be considered verisimilar. With respect to the use of the word *like*, this would then have the advantage of accounting as well for the currently ticastic British qualifying phrase (pre- or post-posed), *if you like*.

At bottom, all these modern-day extensions derive from and are parasitical on the word's original meaning and its membership in the grammatical categories of adverb, preposition, and conjunction. What unites these originary uses is the fundamental sense of SIMILARITY underlying all of them.

While it might be ontologically defensible to assert that some degree of similarity is characteristic of all relations, in this case what is being undermined is the very concept of IDENTITY. More precisely, the promiscuous extension of *like* in contemporary speech can be seen as yet another manifestation—here, linguistic—of the general historical tendency in American culture toward THE LEVELING OF ALL HIERARCHIES.

2.34 A Grammatical Hyperurbanism

Glossary

abstracta, n. [pl]: abstract words (Latin)

desinence, n.: a grammatical suffix or ending

hyperurbanism, n.: a form, pronunciation, or usage that overreaches correctness in an effort to avoid provincial speech

inflectional, adj. < *inflection*, n.: an alteration of the form of a word by the addition of an affix, as in English *dogs* from *dog*, or by changing the form of a base, as in English *spoke* from *speak*, that indicates grammatical features such as number, person, mood, or tense

morphology, n.: the system or the study of (linguistic) form

There are some speakers of American English for whom the plural of *process* involves altering the inserted unstressed vowel of the desinence {-s} from [i] to [iy] so that *processes* is pronounced [prósēsíyz], as if it were a word of Greek origin via Latin, like *basis* or *thesis* or *hypothesis*, which regularly alter the last vowel to form plurals without adding a desinence (thus pl. *bases*, *theses*, *hypotheses*).

Noting that the regular alternation of the final vowel occurs in abstracta that belong by definition to originally learned—and hence stylistically elevated—vocabulary, the pronunciation of *processes* as if it were similarly of Graeco-Latin origin (which it is not) can only be adjudged a HYPERURBANISM (hypercorrection), in that speakers who resort to it (subconsciously) analogize its inflectional morphology to that of *analysis* or *neurosis* rather than *glass* or *ace*. Whether this mistaken plural form should also be considered an affectation—as with all hyperurbanisms—is in the ear of the beholder.

2.35 Etymology, Re-Cognition, and Knowledge

Etymology, the science of word origins, is a venerable and well-established branch of (historical) linguistics in need of no explication, but what is not sufficiently appreciated is the variable extent to which a speaker's internalized knowledge of their language involves a so-called etymological component. One prominent aspect of language use that exploits historical knowledge is paronomasia or punning, where occasionally the force of a pun simply cannot be appreciated without such knowledge.

The knowledge of a word's origin can also have cognitive force, and even the power to expand one's experiential horizons. For instance, sitting in an authentic Provençal brasserie in the wilds of rural Vermont during a rain-swept, gloomy afternoon, suddenly one recalls that the English word *restaurant* is (after all) derived from the present participle of the French verb *restaurer* 'restore' (< Old French *restorer*), this sort of eating establishment as a cultural institution having originated in France.

Whereupon, one feels restored despite the weather, for as the poet said:

By order Lydian
And virtue pyramidian
I am allowed to love you just a bit.

But heart's desire
And Music's lyre
Make me for moral quite unfit.

I see you often in my dreams
And then your radiant eyes throw beams
Just in my bosom.

But after all the clouds do vanish
And sinful thoughts I have to banish,
The ghosts of love, I lose 'em

2.36 The Fixed Distribution of Synonyms in Idioms

Idioms are fixed phrases that are normally not subject to alteration, proverbs being the longest of such constructions. Any of the components of idioms may have a set of (near-) synonyms, but these semantic alternatives are not available for substitution in idiomatic expressions. Thus, one says “break a leg,” but not “break a foot,” when one intends to wish someone good luck.

Apropos, words that name the parts of the body are particularly frequent in idioms in all languages. A generalized reference to the head in American English, for example, can be made by using *head*, *mind*, *brain*, *cranium*, *skull*, *noggin*, *noodle/noddle*, *pate*, etc. But the contemporary idiom “get one’s head around” cannot be altered, though one occasionally hears even native speakers mistakenly tampering with it in utterances recorded by the broadcast media.

Parenthetically, the professional linguist’s injunction to “Leave your language alone” not only encourages users to turn a deaf ear to prescriptivism but may also license a linguistic freedom which turns a blind eye to error.

2.37 Pity and Its Lexical Congeners

I once said to a class of undergraduates in a course on the Philosophy of the Russian Novel that pity—a subspecies of love—was the most important emotion. The context was a discussion of the four Jerusalem chapters in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*, the greatest novel of the twentieth century. Parenthetically, the two greatest novelists of the Russian canon might both be said to privilege pity indirectly, each in his own way: Dostoevsky by posing the question, “How do we live a life?,” Tolstoy by asking, “How do we achieve happiness?”

In English, the word *pity* is part of a lexical family that includes *mercy*, *compassion*, and perhaps even *loving-kindness*, a compound noun coined by Myles Coverdale for his Coverdale Bible of 1535 as an English translation of the Hebrew word *khesed* חֶסֶד ‘kindness’, which appears in the Vulgate as *misericordia*.

Here is some historical information from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* that helps situate the centrality of *pity*:

pity

- a. The disposition to mercy or compassion; clemency, mercy, mildness, tenderness
- b. Tenderness and concern aroused by the suffering, distress, or misfortune of another, and prompting a desire for its relief; compassion, sympathy

Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *pitē*, *pittee*, *peté*, *peti*, Anglo-Norman and Old French *pitet*, *pitée*, *pitie* (Middle French *pitē*, *pitie*, French *pitie*) compassion (c1100), piety (15th cent.; rare) < classical Latin *pietās*.

The sense of Latin *pietās* ‘piety’ was in post-classical Latin extended so as to include ‘compassion, pity’ (Vetus Latina), and it was in this sense that the word first appears in Old French in its two forms *pitie* and *pieté*. Gradually these

forms were differentiated, so that *pieté*, which more closely represented the Latin form, was used in the original Latin sense, while *pitié* retained the extended sense. In Middle English, both pity n. and piety n. are found first in the sense ‘compassion’, and subsequently in the sense ‘piety’, and the differentiation in sense is not complete until the 17th cent.

It is both interesting and germane to realize that *pity* is related to *piety* and *pious*, whose classical Latin etymon *pīus* means ‘dutiful, devout’:

pious

- a. Of an action, thought, resolve, etc.: characterized by, expressing, or resulting from true reverence and obedience to God; devout, religious
- b. Of a person: having or showing reverence and obedience to God; faithful to religious duties and observances; devout, godly, religious.

Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *piu*, *pi*, etc. and Middle French *pīus* (end of 10th cent. in Old French) and its etymon classical Latin *pīus* dutiful, pious, devout (cognate with Oscan *pihiúí*, Umbrian *pihaz*; perhaps related to classical Latin *pūrus* pure adj.) + -ous suffix, perhaps after Middle French *pieux* (1st quarter of 15th cent.; compare Old French *pieus*, *pious*; French *pieux*). Compare Old Occitan *pis*, *piu* (c1070), Catalan (rare) *pio* (1560), Spanish *pío* (late 14th cent.), Italian *pío* (1255 or earlier).

Mercy is subtended by a moral compass pointing toward a different azimuth, the most surprising datum being its origin in the language of commerce (payment and reward):

mercy

- a. Clemency and compassion shown to a person who is in a position of powerlessness or subjection, or to a person with no right or claim to receive kindness; kind and compassionate treatment in a case where severity is merited or expected, esp. in giving legal judgment or passing sentence.
- b. *spec.* Forbearance, compassion, or forgiveness shown by God (or a god) to sinful humanity, or to a particular person or soul.

Etymology: < Anglo-Norman *merci*, *mercie*, Old French *merci* (c1000; Middle French, French *merci*), *mercet* (c1000), *mercit* (c900) < classical Latin *mercēd-*, *mercēs* wages, fee, bribe, rent, price, commodity (in post-classical Latin also: favour, grace (see further below)), cognate with *merx* (see market n.). Compare Old Occitan *merce* favour, mercy, thanks (12th cent.), Catalan *mercè* favour, mercy, thanks (c1200), Spanish *merced* reward, favour (1207), Portuguese *mercê* payment, reward, favour (13th cent.), Italian *mercè* grace, mercy, (arch.) reward, thanks (13th cent.), *mercede* payment, reward, (arch.) mercy (13th cent.).

The basic sense ‘wages, payment, reward for service’, present in classical Latin, survives in several Romance languages, but this sense seems not to have been present in Gallo-Romance (Middle French, French †*mercede* is a borrowing < Spanish: see *merced* n.). Senses attested in post-classical Latin include

‘pity, favour, (secular) grace, heavenly reward’ (6th cent.), ‘thanks’ (9th cent.), and the earliest senses attested in Old French are ‘pity, (secular or divine) grace, discretionary judgement, mercy’. Except in certain fixed expressions, *merci* is in modern French chiefly restricted to use as noun or interjection in the sense ‘thanks’ attested in Old French from the mid 12th cent., frequently in the phrase *grand merci* (see *gramercy* int.); in religious application *merci* has in French been largely superseded by *miséricorde* *misericord* n.

The Middle English adoption < Anglo-Norman shows stress-shifting and shortening of the final vowel, although, in common with many other words showing Middle English *ī* of various origins in a post-tonic syllable, variants with secondary stress and the reflex of Middle English *ī* in the second syllable are recorded in the early modern period by orthoepists. Forms in *a* show normal late Middle English lowering of *e* to *a* before *r*. Regional pronunciations with loss of /r/ and a short vowel in the first syllable probably result from assimilation of /r/ to a following /s/.

Contrast the above with the history of the word *compassion*:

compassion

The feeling or emotion, when a person is moved by the suffering or distress of another, and by the desire to relieve it; pity that inclines one to spare or to succour. Etymology: < French *compassion* (14th cent. in Littré), < late Latin *compassiōnem* (Tertullian, Jerome), n. of action < *compati* (participial stem *compass-*) to suffer together with, feel pity, < *com-* together with + *pati* to suffer.

That even the designation of the most fundamentally benign emotions can become linguistically perverted is attested by the partial historical coalescence of the adjectives *pitiful* and *pitiable*:

pitiful

1. Full of or characterized by pity; compassionate, merciful, tender.
2. Characterized by piety; devout.
3. Arousing or apt to arouse pity; deserving pity; moving, affecting.
4. Evoking pitying contempt; very small, poor, or meagre; paltry; inadequate, insignificant; despicable, contemptible.

How *pity* came to be degraded in meaning from ‘loving-kindness’ to ‘contempt’ would be an object lesson in human morals were its trajectory not a commonplace of historical semantics.

2.38 Seeing Is Not Hearing

During a practice session with a twenty-seven-year-old filling in for his father as tennis coach, I heard him use the verb *see* instead of the traditional *hear* to refer to his attendance at a classical music concert (“I *saw* [rather than *heard*] Garrick Ohlsson at Carnegie Hall.”) It should be noted that this was uttered by a classical musician with a master’s degree in music theory studying for a second one in

conducting. Given that the utterance's reference (to a concert performance and venue) excluded merely listening to a recording, it is significant that a member of the younger generation chose to elevate seeing over hearing.

This example of rehierarchyization of the two senses involved in the speech of younger speakers could be multiplied manyfold. It testifies yet again (see earlier essays) to the inroads of popular culture (specifically, rock and jazz) into the sphere of classical music, audiences for which are, alas, graying apace. Moreover, as a cultural datum evidenced by language use, it tends to support the widespread valorization of seeing over hearing, whatever the domain, in a culture that has long prized exhibitionism.

2.39 *Multiple, Not Many: The Irruption of Bookishness*

Glossary

hypertrophy, n.: an inordinate or pathological enlargement

hyperurbanism, n.: a pronunciation or grammatical form or usage produced by a speaker of one dialect according to an analogical rule formed by comparison of the speaker's own usage with that of another, more prestigious, dialect and often applied in an inappropriate context, especially in an effort to avoid sounding countrified, rural, or provincial; hypercorrection

irrefragable, adj.: impossible to refute or controvert; indisputable

penchant, n.: a definite liking; a strong inclination

purlieu, n. pl: environs, neighborhood; precincts, contexts; n. sg.: a place where one may range at large; confines or bounds.

valorization, n. < *valorize*, v.: To give or assign a value to

One of the characteristics of contemporary speech and writing is the constant irruption of bookishness (if not outright hyperurbanisms), by which is meant the substitution of bookish words and expressions even where traditional colloquial locutions would do. This is the case of the ubiquitous present-day replacement of the word *many* by *multiple* (which, despite its dissyllabic written form, is phonetically trisyllabic).

Even taking into account the growing prevalence of linguistic hypertrophy in all purlieu of contemporary American English, trisyllabic *multiple* instead of dissyllabic *many* is to be accounted for by the irrefragable assault of bookish diction, which at bottom is actuated by a penchant for any linguistic token that would tend to signal the psychologically dominant valorization of written over spoken language as a matter of (largely imaginary) prestige in twenty-first-century American English usage.

2.40 American vs. British Versions of Idioms

Glossary

irrefragably, adv. < *irrefragable*, adj.: impossible to refute or controvert; indisputable

paronomastic, adj. < *paronomasia*, n.: a play upon words in which the same word is used in different senses or words similar in sound are set in opposition so as to give antithetical force

purlieu, n.: a place where one may range at large; confines or bounds.

There are some idioms in English which differ slightly as between American and British versions. Thus, for instance, *sweep under the carpet* in British English comes out as *sweep under the rug* in American. Similarly, *bat an eyelash* in American English corresponds to *bat an eyelid* in British. Both versions, to be sure, can be heard in both varieties of English, but the preferential forms are as stated.

It is, of course, foolhardy to generalize on the basis of a mere two examples, but the trend is worth noting nonetheless. American English tends to use the paronomastically full-fledged [NOT “fully-fledged!”] version, which involves the repetition of vowels (both stressed and unstressed)—hence the rhyme of American *under* and *rug* or *bat* and *eyelash*, lacking in the British version.

Whatever the (cultural) cause, even these isolated examples make it irrefragably clear that paronomasia is patently not the exclusive purlieu of poets.

2.41 The Vogue for Portmanteau Words (*Stupravity)

Glossary

aperçu, n.: a short outline or summary; a synopsis (< French)

portmanteau, n., adj.: a word formed by blending sounds from two or more distinct words and combining their meanings, e.g., *smog* from *smoke* + *fog* (< French)

slough, n.: a depression or hollow, usually filled with deep mud or mire; a state of deep despair or moral degradation

tant pis: so much the worse (French)

An earlier vignette (Sect. 2.32 above) was an *aperçu* of the subject of blends or portmanteau words, for which there is now a decided vogue, especially in advertising and the media. In the spirit of this trend, here is a coinage—*stupidity* + *depravity*—

that will perhaps gain some notoriety when and if book that introduces it, *A Word Paints a Thousand Pictures: The Consolation of Philosophy in the Age of Stupravity*, is ever published.

This planned first foray into the sloughs of social criticism will bring an ancient genre to bear on the moral topography of twenty-first-century America and consist of an imaginary dialogue between Confucius and Boethius (the influential Latin philosopher [ca. 480–524 or 525 AD]), moderated by Lady Philosophy. No mean task. And realistically, not likely ever to see the light of day. *Tant pis!*

2.42 Exactly Wrong

Glossary

antonym, n.: a word having a meaning opposite to that of another word
sensu stricto: in the strict sense, strictly speaking (Latin)

In contemporary American English the phrase *exactly right* has acquired near-universal currency as the emphatic equivalent of the simple adjective *right*. What underlies the spread of this phrase has nothing to do with emphasis, however, but with the loosening of the semantic boundaries that define the adjective in its moral dimension, whether it pertains to straightforward accuracy/correctness or to ethics *sensu stricto*.

The adjective *right* and its antonym *wrong* are ABSOLUTE ADJECTIVES, by which is meant a grammatical category that does not admit of scalar values. Relativization, as implied by the use of the phrase *exactly right*, is thus in a fundamental sense a FAILURE OF THOUGHT, comparable to graded uses of the adjective *unique* (< Latin *unicum* ‘one of a kind’). The kind of moral relativism that licenses *exactly right* in both its emphatic and non-emphatic senses can thus be identified as evidence for—and of a piece with—the powerful cultural trend in present-day American discourse that scants ethical absolutes while privileging (the quicksands of) a value-free outlook in the name of “freedom of choice.” Alas, the integrity of both language and morals is degraded as a result.

2.43 ‘Atrocity’, Not ‘Tragedy’

Glossary

abut, v.: to bring (two things) together
forma mentis: form of thought (Latin)
scant, v.: to give scant attention to

Contemporary Anglo-American news media and politicians persist in calling the heinous murder of innocents a ‘tragedy’ rather than an ‘atrocitiy’, thereby blunting the force of the act by scanting the role of human agency. This is not just a linguistic failure but a noxious failure of thought, and therefore a moral failure with important social and public policy consequences.

The word ‘atrocitiy’ is defined as ‘savage enormity, horrible or heinous wickedness’. That is the proper description applying to the recent (2012) killings in Connecticut.

By contrast, the word ‘tragedy’ is defined in the first instance as ‘a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion’. Its extension, as to consequences, beyond playwrighting and the theater as a substitute for the proper term ‘atrocitiy’ should everywhere be resisted. Beside the debasement of the purport of mass murder, the effect of constantly using the transferred meaning of a word from theatrical nomenclature necessarily abuts in a tendency to equalize horrific crimes committed by human beings against their fellow humans with excogitated or imaginary acts; and, more significantly, with impersonal events such as natural cataclysms that are unavoidable. Nothing could be further from the truth, nor more inimical to the *forma mentis* betokened linguistically when the prevention of further such crimes is the overriding social goal.

Words matter.

2.44 Hic Sunt Leones

Glossary

cartographer, n.: map maker

recumbent, adj.: having a horizontal position; lying down

All thought is in language. Plato says (in a number of his dialogues, for instance, in the *Cratylus*) that thought is the conversation of the soul with (phases of) itself. What comes into thought when this conversation takes place is another matter. In the first instance, the dialogic aspect is determined in large part by the memory of past experiences as these are brought to the forefront of one’s consciousness; secondarily, by external stimuli.

Here is a contemporary example. Standing outside the New York Public Library at the entrance to the Research Library on Fifth Avenue and Forty-Second Street in Manhattan and waiting to be allowed in, I turn around to see the two sculptured recumbent lions on their pedestals that guard the building on the Fifth Avenue side. This immediately summons forth the Latin phrase my beloved wife Marianne (a Latinist and medievalist) taught me long ago, *Hic sunt leones* ‘here are lions’, which was to be found on ancient maps to signify that the cartographer did not have

knowledge of what lay beyond the boundary at that point (and assumed that wild beasts lurked there).

Clearly, the Latin phrase was triggered by the stone lions outside the Library. But it could not have been part of my thought in an immediately summonable linguistic form without the cherished memory of the person who taught the phrase to me.

2.45 The Frenchification of Spanish Words in English (Chávez)

Glossary

affricate, n. < adj.: a complex speech sound consisting of a stop consonant followed by a fricative; for example, the initial sounds of *child* and *joy*
à la française: ‘in the French style’ (French)

et al.: abbreviation for Latin *et alia* ‘and others’

fatuous, adj.: foolish, pretentious, and silly, especially in a smug or self-satisfied way

Frenchification, n. < *Frenchify*, v.: to make French in qualities, traits, or typical ideas or practices; to make superficially or spuriously French in qualities or actions

fricative, n. < adj.: consonant, such as *f* or *s* in English, produced by the forcing of breath through a constricted passage

gloss, v.: to insert glosses or comments on; to comment upon, explain, interpret

orthographic, adj. < *orthography*, n.: (correct) spelling

pace, prep.: with all due respect or courtesy to

phonetics, n.: the system of sounds of a particular language

Q. E. D., abbrev.: *quod erat demonstrandum* (Latin) ‘which was to be demonstrated’

quasi-, adv.: as if; as it were; in a manner; in some sense or degree

ultima, n.: last syllable (Latin)

With the recent death of the Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez, there has been a fatuous flurry of stories in the media about his life and times. In the broadcast media this has involved saying his surname in English countless times. In that connection, one hears frequent instances of a known mispronunciation of the name, viz. the substitution of the fricative [ʃ] for the affricate [č] as the initial consonant, which is at complete odds with Spanish phonetics. The reason for this mistake has an interesting history.

First, it should be noted that American English in particular has a marked tendency to Frenchify loan words i.e., to apply quasi-French phonetic patterns to borrowings regardless of source language. This is what accounts not only for end-stressed pronunciations like *Stalín* and *Lenín*, where the stress mistakenly makes a Russian surname into a borrowing from French, with its obligatory stress on the ultima, but for the resort to [ʃ] instead of [č] for orthographic *ch-* (as in French) as well.

As for Chavez et al., it is relevant to note that a distinctly American word like *chaparral*, which the *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)* glosses: “A thicket of low evergreen oaks; hence *gen.* Dense tangled brushwood, composed of low thorny shrubs, brambles, briars, etc., such as abounds on poor soil in Mexico and Texas. (The word came into use in U.S. during the Mexican War, c1846.),” is pronounced with the French-style initial fricative consonant in American English, *pace* the phonetic misinformation given in the *OED* definition (“Pronunciation: /tʃæpəˈræl/ Etymology: < Spanish *chaparral*, < *chaparra*, -arro evergreen oak + -al a common ending for a grove, plantation, or collection of trees, as in *almendral*, *cafetal*, etc.”).

The historical account of this sort of phonetic Frenchification in general can be verified by the change in pronunciation of a word like *chivalry*, which in contemporary American English is pronounced only *à la française*, i.e., with an initial [ʃ], even though in British English it can be pronounced alternately with a [č], witness the *OED* entry:

Pronunciation: /ˈʃɪvəlɹɪ/ /ˈtʃɪvəlɹɪ/ **Etymology:** Middle English, < Old French *chevalerie* (11th cent.), *chivalerie* = Provençal *cavalaria*, Spanish *caballería*, Portuguese *cavallería*, Italian *cavalleria* knighthood, horse-soldiery, cavalry, a Romanic derivative of late Latin *caballerius* (Capitularies 807) < Latin *caballāri-us* rider, horseman, cavalier n. and adj.: see -ery suffix, -ry suffix. (The same word has in later times come anew from Italian into French and English, as *cavalerie*, cavalry n.) As a Middle English word the proper historical pronunciation is with /tʃ/; but the more frequent pronunciation at present is with /ʃ-/ , **as if the word had been received from modern French** [emphasis added—MS].

Q. E. D.

2.46 Iconicity in Action (Singulative Deverbal Nouns)

Glossary

aspect, n.: a verbal category of which the function is to express action or being in respect of its inception, duration, or completion, etc.

deverbal, adj.: derived from a verb

icon, n.: an image; a representation, specifically, a sign related to its object by similarity

idem, n.: the same as previously given or mentioned (Latin)

nominalization, n. < *nominalize*, v.: to convert (another part of speech) into a noun, as in changing the adjective *lowly* into the *lowly* or the verb *legalize* into *legalization*

singulative, adj. < (idem) n.: a grammatical form or construction that expresses a singular entity or indicates that an individual is singled out from a group, especially as opposed to a collective noun, as *snowflake* as opposed to *snow*

suffixal, adj.: containing a suffix

zero, adj.: having no formal content

Occasionally, matters usually reserved for treatment in professional linguistic journals spill over into the mass media. This was illustrated by Henry Hitchings' essay, "Those Irritating Verbs-as-Nouns" (*The New York Times*, Sunday Review, March 31, 2013), which is rich in illustrative detail but fails to explain the difference between what he calls Type A nominalization (i.e., with suffixes, as in *investigate/investigat-ion*, *read/read-ing*, etc.) and Type B nominalization (i.e., without suffixes, alias "zero-derivation," like *launch*, *call*, etc.). The second type encompasses SINGULATIVE DEVERBAL NOUNS, since the meaning involves a single completed action rather than a process.

The explanation lies in the category of VERBAL ASPECT. In English, verbs are distinguished by what is called PERFECTIVE versus IMPERFECTIVE aspect. The perfective necessarily signifies the completion of the action, whereas the imperfective is noncommittal as to its completion. This categorical distinction also pertains to nominalizations. A suffixal nominalization like *investigation* or *reading* makes no overt reference to the completion of the action but does contain a suffix signifying a process, whereas unsuffixed nominalizations like *read* ("it was a good read") or *take* ("what's your take on it?") necessarily signify a completed act but not a process. Crucially for their history in English, in both types THE FORM IS AN ICON OF THE MEANING: a "zero suffix" coheres with the *absence* of a processual meaning, whereas a "real suffix" coheres with its presence. This explains the difference.

2.47 Generational Slippage in the Retention of Obsolescent Vocabulary

Glossary

ad hoc: for the particular end or purpose at hand and without reference to wider application or employment (Latin)

- chattel*, n.: an item of tangible movable or immovable property except real estate, freehold, and that movable property which is by its nature considered to be essential to such an estate
- corporeal*, adj.: tangible and palpable; not insubstantial
- fee simple*, n.: a freehold estate of inheritance in land or hereditaments that may last forever and may be inherited by all classes of both lineal and collateral heirs of an individual owner or grantee
- fee tail*, n.: an estate in fee granted to a person and his issue or a designated class of his issue that is subject to the possibility of reversion if there is no such issue or no alternative gift to a designated person in case there is no such issue, that is subject under modern statutes to being converted into a fee simple absolute by the owner's barring the entail by executing a deed in his lifetime or to being converted to other types of estates more in harmony with present social conditions
- freehold*, n.: a tenure of real property by which an estate of inheritance in fee simple or fee tail or for life is held
- go-between*, n.: one who promotes a love affair especially by carrying messages and arranging meetings; one who negotiates a marriage
- hereditament*, n.: heritable property; lands, tenements, any property corporeal or incorporeal, real, personal, or mixed, that may descend to an heir
- ineluctable*, adj.: unavoidable, inescapable
- knight-errant*, n.: a wandering knight; esp. one traveling at random in search of adventures in which to exhibit military skill, prowess, and generosity
- marriage portion*, n.: dowry
- obsolescent*, adj.: going out of use; falling into disuse especially as unable to compete with something more recent
- portionless*, adj.: having no dowry or inheritance
- sic transeunt onera mundi*: 'thus do the burdens of the world pass [from it]' (Latin)

Dictionaries of a major language like English are full of obsolete and obsolescent vocabulary, words that are recorded in written repositories but circumscribed by historical periodization and rarely uttered in everyday speech. Knowledge of such vocabulary is subject to inter-generational slippage. Older speakers may have it as part of their education, experience, or passive knowledge. But younger speakers, who have no living access to words and phrases belonging to past manners and morals, typically encounter them only as part of book learning at best, as when exposed to knights-errant in reading *Don Quixote*.

The gradual but inexorable oblivion of the lexical riches of a language becomes apparent, for instance, when one teaches a class of twenty eighteen-year-olds in a course on Masterpieces of European Literature at an Ivy League university. All are native speakers of contemporary American English, but in discussing the so-called marriage plot in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, one quickly discovers that

words and phrases such as *go-between*, *marriage portion*, *portionless*, *chattel*, etc. are not even part of the students' passive word stock (although *dowry* is) and have to be glossed ad hoc. One could take the view, of course, that it is fortunate for the current generation that the mores of twenty-first-century American mating and marriage rituals dispense with all the baggage that used to be the ineluctable burden of young women (in particular) seeking to make their way in a man's world. *Sic transeunt onera mundi*.

2.48 Terms of Affection and Their Gradience

Glossary

affect, n.: the conscious emotion that occurs in reaction to a thought or experience

affective, adj.: expressing emotion

affix, n.: a sound or sequence of sounds or, in writing, a letter or sequence of letters occurring as a bound form attached to the beginning or end of a word, base, or phrase or inserted within a word or base and serving to produce a derivative word

augmentative, adj.: indicating large size and sometimes awkwardness or unattractiveness; used of affixes and of words formed with them (such as Italian *casone* "big house," from *casa* "house," and Italian *-one* in words like *casone*)

demotic, adj.: of or relating to the people; common

diminutized, v. < *diminutive*, adj.: indicating small size and sometimes the quality or condition of being loved, lovable, pitiable, or contemptible; used of affixes

gradience, n.: the property of being continuously variable between two (esp. apparently disjunct) values, categories, etc.; an instance of this property, a continuum

instantiation, n. < *instantiate*, v.: to represent (an abstraction or universal) by a concrete instance

pejorative, adj.: having a tendency to make or become worse; depreciatory, disparaging

ramified, adj. < *ramify*, v.: to separate into divisions or ramifications

root, n.: the simple element (as Latin *sta*) inferred as common to all the words of a group in a language or in related languages

set, n.: mental inclination, tendency, or habit

stem, n.: the part of an inflected word that remains unchanged except by phonetic changes or variations throughout a given inflection, is sometimes

identical with the root, but is often derived from it with some formative suffix

traduttore, traditore: ‘translator, traitor.’ (Italian)

Languages differ in their capacity to grade words according to the emotional set of the utterer or writer toward the person or thing named by the word. In this respect, Russian (like the other Slavic languages) is incomparably richer than English or any other European language, let alone an East Asian one like Japanese, which is almost totally lacking in affective vocabulary (or profanity, for that matter). Whereas an English name like *Robert* can only be diminutized (thus rendered the affectionate instantiation of the full name) univerbally as *Rob*, *Robbie*, *Bobbie*, and *Bob*, a Russian forename like *Avdót’ya* (as in the name of Raskol’nikov’s sister in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*), which is the demotic form of *Evdokiya* = Евдокия (< Classical and ecclesiastical Greek Εὐδοκία), can be turned into *Dúnya*, *Dunyásha*, *Dunyáshen’ka*, *Dúnechka*, *Dúnen’ka*, *Dunyáshechka*, etc. (A full registry of the pet names in Cyrillic could include Доня [Дона], Дося, Доша, Дуся, Авдоня, Авдоха, Авдоша, Авдуля, Авдуся.) Beyond the dropping of all but the medial consonant *-d-* (preceding the stressed syllable of *Avdót’ya*) in this case, each addition of a diminutive suffix to the remaining consonantal stem comports a further grade of affection, so that the speaker or writer can vary the emotional investment in the person so addressed by the build-up of affective suffixes. (This is not to touch upon the ramified means at a Russian speaker’s disposal when going in the opposite direction affectively by adding pejorative or augmentative suffixes to nominal stems, to those of common as well as proper nouns.)

While other aspects of the language of the original may cross over easily into a translation without appreciable loss of meaning in the round, the force of affective vocabulary—as the Russian case demonstrates—is liable to be lost completely when trying to convey the nuances of affect the characters in a novel like *Crime and Punishment* feel when speaking, especially when its author evidently places so much stress on their variable forms.

No wonder one of the older (now obsolete) meanings of *traduce* was ‘translate’! Or as they say in Italian, “Traduttore, traditore.”

2.49 The Rise of *multiple* as a Substitute for *many*

Glossary

disyllabic, adj.: consisting of two syllables

iconicity, n. < *iconic*, adj. < *icon*, n.: an image; a representation, specifically, a sign related to its object by similarity

QED, abbrev. < *quod erat demonstrandum*: ‘which was to be demonstrated’ (Latin)

schwa, n.: a mid-central neutral vowel, typically occurring in unstressed syllables, as the final vowel of English *sofa*; The symbol (ə) used to represent an unstressed neutral vowel and, in some systems of phonetic transcription, a stressed mid-central vowel, as in *but*

telos, n.: goal (Greek)

For more than a decade or two, contemporary American English speakers have gotten into the habit of substituting the bookish adjective *multiple* for the simple count adjective *many*, as in the followings usages (adapted from the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* online):

1. ‘many, manifold, several’ < multiple achievements in politics and public life— <multiple minds functioning together>—<multiple copies of a speech>
2. ‘occurring more than once or in higher degree than the first; repeated’ <multiple roots>

In all of the cited examples, the more direct way of denoting ‘more than few’ would be with the word *many*. Why, then, is there a trend in recent years to replace it with *multiple*?

The answer may be the principle of **ICONICITY AS THE TELOS OF LINGUISTIC CHANGE** (cf. Sect. 5.34 below). The word *many* has only two syllables, whereas *multiple*, while seeming orthographically to have two as well, is actually pronounced with a schwa vowel between the consonants at the end of the word, making it tri- and not disyllabic. A trisyllabic word is more adequate iconically to the meaning of multiplicity than is a disyllabic one. *QED*.

There is an alternate explanation, however (the two explanations are complementary, not mutually exclusive). *Multiple* may have arisen as a designator of number because it is non-committal as to whether it means ‘many’ or ‘several’. This new meaning—something between the two—evidently fits a semantic niche that speakers and writers wish to exploit when neither *many* nor *several* fills the bill. This new connotation of *multiple* is: ‘not as few in number as *several* and not as great as *many*’.

2.50 Misuse of the Word *Gentleman*

Media reporters, particularly of the broadcast stripe, often misuse the word *gentleman*, in referring to criminals or terrorists. A man who is **EVIDENTLY** the perpetrator of a crime, as is the case of the brothers who committed the Boston Marathon bombings and related murders—whether the crime has already been proven at trial or not—ought not to be named in speech or writing by a designation necessarily comporting a measure of politeness, elevation, or deference toward the referent. The stylistically appropriate word in such instances is *man*, not *gentleman*.

2.51 Lost in Transliteration (Russian Hypocoristics in English)

Glossary

affective, n.: (a word or form) expressing emotion

desuetude, n.: discontinuance from use, practice, exercise, or functioning

diminutive, n.: indicating small size and sometimes the quality or condition of being loved, lovable, pitiable, or contemptible; used of affixes

forename, n.: first (given) name

hypocoristic, adj.: endearing; belong to affective vocabulary

onomastically, adv. < *onomastic*, adj. < *onomastics*, n.: the science or study of the origin and forms of proper names of persons or places

Pale of Settlement: geographic area in Czarist Russia where Jews were allowed to live (translation of R черта оседлости)

transliteration, n. < *transliterate*, v.: to represent or spell (words, letters, or characters of one language) in the letters or characters of another language or alphabet

Wunderkind, n.: a child prodigy (German)

Russian hypocoristics (pet names) comprise a rich onomastic lode, perhaps unparalleled among the world's languages. When they are transliterated into English (or other languages using the Roman alphabet) their status as affectives is not necessarily recognizable as such by those who have no knowledge of Russian.

In this respect, the incidence of diminutives as first names among well-known Russian-Jewish violinists and pianists of the twentieth century born in the Pale of Settlement (Odessa, in particular) is to be explained by the fact that these were child prodigies who simply continued to use the hypocoristic form of their Russian forenames into adulthood as stage names. Thus the famous violinists Jascha Heifetz (R Иосиф Рувимович Хейфец), Mischa Elman (R Михаил Саулович Эльман), and Tossy(a) Spivakovsky (Натан Давидович Спиваковский) had the given (official) forenames Joseph (not Jacob, curiously enough, from which Jascha is the proper derivative), Michael, and Nathan, resp.; and the full forename of the pianist Shura Cherkassky (R Александр Исаакович Черкасский) was Alexander (Шура < Сашура < Саша < Саня < Алкесандр).

This early twentieth-century custom among Russian-Jewish child prodigies of keeping their pet names is understandable, given the desirability of maintaining reputations first won in childhood. In the event, for audiences and a general public outside the Russophone milieu the hypocoristic force is lost, and with time, even for a Russian speaker, the fact of a familiar performer well on in years appearing under a diminutive as a first name ceases to be onomastically dissonant.

It should be added that the older practice of keeping a pet name as a stage name fell into desuetude sometime between the wars. Odessa didn't stop producing

Wunderkinder (cf. David Oistrakh), but musical prodigies who post-dated the Mischas and Jaschas of yesteryear did stop following the older practice.

2.52 Hypertrophic Emphasis in Neology (*begrudging*(ly))

Glossary

affix, n.: a word element, such as a prefix or suffix, that can only occur attached to a base, stem, or root

grading, adj. < *grade*, v.: to determine the grades or degrees of *hypertrophy*, n.: inordinate or pathological enlargement *morphological*, adj. < *morphology*, n.: the system or the study of (linguistic) form *neologism*, n. < *neology*, n.: the use of a new word or expression or of an established word in a new or different sense; the use of new expressions that are not sanctioned by conventional standard usage; the introduction of such expressions into a language

prefixed, adj. < *prefix*, v. > *prefix*, n.: an affix, such as *dis-* in *disbelieve*, attached to the front of a word to produce a derivative word or an inflected form

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

subserve, v.: to serve as an instrument or means in carrying on (as an activity) or out (as a plan) or in furthering the ends of (as a person)

A recent morphological change in American English is the mistaken substitution of the adjective/adverb *begrudging*(ly) for the normative *grudging*(ly). This has come about as an indirect result of the fading into obsolescence of the verb *grudge* (*intr.* ‘to murmur; to utter complaints murmuringly; to grumble, complain; to be discontented or dissatisfied’), whereas its prefixed successor *begrudge* (‘to grumble at, show dissatisfaction with; *esp.* to envy [one] the possession of; to give reluctantly, to be reluctant’) is currently alive and well.

Beyond the particular morphology of the neologism, however, lies the general contemporary tendency in English toward hypertrophy, which in this case means the expansion of *grudging*(ly) by the prefix *be-*. This tendency includes the substitution of previously emphatic forms for their neutral counterparts, a process which always comports a difference in semantic grading. In the case of *begrudging*(ly), part of the explanation for the neologism would accordingly make reference to the felt need (by younger generations of speakers, but not only) to emphasize (heighten) the negative—i.e., uncharitable—meaning of *grudging*(ly), an end subserved by the prefixed form(s).

2.53 Attenuation of Arbitrariness in the Semantics of Quantification

Glossary

diagrammaticity, n. < *diagrammatic*, adj. < *diagram*, n.: (in Peirce's sign theory) an icon of relation

iconic, adj. < *icon*, n.: (in Peirce's sign theory) an image; a representation, specifically, a sign related to its object by similarity

individuation, n. < *individuate*, v.: to give an individual character to; to distinguish from others of the same kind; to individualize; to single out, to specify

marked, adj. < *markedness*, n.: the evaluative superstructure of all semiotic ('sign-theoretic') oppositions, as well as the theory of such a superstructure, characterized in terms of the values 'marked' (conceptually restricted) and 'unmarked' (conceptually unrestricted)

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

semeiotic, adj. < *semeiotic*, n.: any system of signs, defined as anything capable of signifying an object (meaning)

The overall drift in language development is toward greater diagrammaticity (iconicity) between sound and meaning which thereby necessarily results in the attenuation of the arbitrariness characterizing the fundamental relation of all language structure.

This can be illustrated in the history of English by the gradual gain in scope of the quantifier of mass nouns *less* at the expense of its counterpart *fewer*, which according to the traditional norm is reserved for count nouns. Many speakers of American English (but not only) regularly substitute *less* for *fewer* where the norm specifies the latter to the exclusion of the former.

The iconic motivation of this usage is twofold. First, *less* is shorter than *fewer*, thereby fitting it more adequately than its counterpart to its meaning, namely 'lesser quantity'. Second, individuation as a semantic category is marked (more restricted in conceptual scope) than non-individuation, so that a drift toward non-individuation is a movement toward the unmarked member of the opposition, instantiating the general iconic (semeiotic) principle according to which language change favors replacement of marked units, categories, and contexts by unmarked ones.

2.54 Well and Good (anent “I’m good”)

Glossary

anent, prep.: in reference to

appositive, adj. < *apposition*, n.: a grammatical construction that consists of two nouns or noun equivalents referring to the same person or thing, standing in the same syntactical relation to the rest of the sentence without being joined to each other by a coordinating conjunction, and typically adjacent to each other

apropos, prep.: with respect to; concerning, regarding *binomial*, n.: having or characterized by two names

concomitant, adj.: accompanying or attending especially in a subordinate or incidental way; occurring along with or at the same time as and with or without causal relationship

eponymous, adj. < *eponym*, n.: one for whom or which something is named or supposedly named

gargantuan, adj.: of tremendous size or volume

hegemony, n.: preponderant influence or authority

irreversible, adj.: not capable of or lending itself to being reversed

lexical, adj.: pertaining or relating to the words or vocabulary of a language

neologism, n.: a new word

notional, adj.: of a thing, a relation, etc., not substantially or actually existent; existing only in thought

penchant, n.: a strong leaning or attraction: strong and continued inclination

perfunctory, adj.: characterized by routine or superficiality; done merely as a duty

Pninesque, adj.: resembling the eponymous character in Vladimir Nabokov’s (best) novel, *Pnin*

purport, n.: that which is conveyed or expressed, esp. by a formal document or speech; effect, tenor, import; meaning, substance, sense

quasi, adv.: as if; as it were; in a manner; in some sense or degree

risible, adj.: arousing, exciting, or provoking laughter

sesquipedalianism, n. < *sesquipedalian*, adj.: given to or characterized by the use of long words

solecistic, adj. < *solecism*, n.: an impropriety or irregularity in speech or diction; a violation of the rules of grammar or syntax

tropism, n.: with reference to people: a natural or innate instinct, tendency, or impulse; now more generally: a preference, an inclination

My father’s first cousin, Yakov Malkiel (Яков Львович Малкиель, 1914–1998), was a Pninesque professor of Romance philology who had a risible penchant for sesquipedalianism and measured scholarly success in any given year by meeting an arbitrary quota of 200 printed pages. My mother, a concert pianist and pedagogue, remembered little Yasha (as he was known in the family) appearing in short pants

as a child for his weekly piano lessons in Berlin in the early 1920s, a period when Nabokov was also resident there among a notable group of Russian émigrés. While the overwhelming majority of his gargantuan scholarly output was in the field of Romance philology, Malkiel is perhaps best associated in a wider disciplinary context with his much-cited article on “irreversible binomials” (“Studies in Irreversible Binomials,” *Lingua*, 8 [1959], 113–160), of which *well and good* (like *thick and thin*, *dawn to dusk*, *part and parcel*, etc.) is only one example among a familiar and numerous lexical repertory in English.

This is by way—an admittedly eccentric one—of introducing the topic of a contemporary change in American English, whereby *well* is being supplanted by *good*, as in the all-but-ubiquitous retort, “I’m good” (instead of the traditional “I’m well” or “I’m fine”) in answer to the question, “How are you?”; cf. the grotesque present-day solecistic construction, **good-paying job*. What is evidently at stake in such cases, which can be characterized as the recession of the scope of *well* and the concomitant hegemony of the scope of *good*, is a change in the NOTIONAL CONTENT of the two words in appositive position. Thus, while one can only say “You did the job well,” where the word *well* is an adverb, as an adjective it has become restricted to a quasi-medical meaning (as in the neologism *wellness*.) This then suggests that “How are you?” is no longer taken to be a query apropos the addressee’s well-being or health but one aimed rather at eliciting (an admittedly perfunctory) report on the latter’s STATE OF MIND, hence the linguistic tropism toward *good*, with its ETHICAL PURPORT in the global sense.

2.55 Words in Desuetude

Glossary

desuetude, n.: discontinuance from use, practice, exercise, or functioning

lexicon, n.: the morphemes of a language considered as a group

malefactor, n.: one who commits an offense against the law; one who does ill toward another

morpheme, n.: a meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts

obsolescent, adj.: going out of use; falling into disuse especially as unable to compete with something more recent

English has a huge lexicon, probably the largest word stock of the world’s living languages. As with all languages, some words in dictionaries carry the designation ‘obsolescent’, some ‘obsolete’, some ‘archaic’; and some are never (or very rarely) used in speech or writing. One such word is *desuetude*, a very good substitute for *disuse*, since it has a richer semantic range. But it has fallen into desuetude, just like

malefactor, which is infinitely superior in every sense to the currently popular but utterly disposable phrases *bad guy* and *bad actor*. In this meaning field, *evildoer* is also superior to the latter two phrases and unwarrantedly neglected.

English vocabulary is unequalled for richness and eminently mineable for the most varied nuances of meaning that any writer or speaker might wish to express. Sad to say, however, words like *malefactor* and *desuetude* sleep the slumber of the dead in dictionaries, waiting only to be summoned into service by those who know of their existence and can exploit their aptness.

2.56 The Supersessionist Drift of American English

Glossary

lexeme, n.: a meaningful speech form that is an item of the vocabulary of a language

The cultural dominion of American English as reflected in language use is well known. Native words in many languages of the world are habitually being replaced in ordinary speech (especially in media language) by items adapted from American English. Franglish has long been the bane of purist French speakers, and Japanese is increasingly being overwhelmed by English lexemes in their American forms (with the appropriate phonetic overlay). British English is no longer the default model for such adaptations.

Speaking of the British variant of English, it is noteworthy that the Americanization of Britain has affected language as well as other aspects of culture. When one listens to the BBC World Service, for instance, one regularly hears the use of *truck* instead of *lorry* (which has practically disappeared from the speech of English presenters), and even the noun *patent* pronounced to rhyme with *latent* has all but disappeared under pressure to conform to the American pronunciation. Apropos, it should be noted that for purist native speakers of American English the adjectival form retains the traditional British phonetic form.

2.57 “Going Forward” (The Triumph of Agency)

Glossary

agency, n.: the capacity, condition, or state of acting or of exerting power
concomitant, adj.: occurring along with or at the same time as and with or without causal relationship

dichotomy, n.: division into two parts, classes, or groups and especially into two groups that are mutually exclusive or opposed by contradiction

forma mentis: form/way of thought/thinking (Latin)

locative, adj., n.: belonging to or being a grammatical case that denotes place or the place where or wherein
mimic, v.: to copy or imitate very closely especially in external characteristics
motive, adj.: of or relating to motion or the causing of motion
quotidian, adj.: commonplace, ordinary
semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

Over the last few decades the American finance industry has given birth to the phrase “going forward” as a replacement for the quotidian and conventional phrase “in the future” to designate time, e.g., “If it is true that America’s biggest banks are too big to be ‘resolved’, this has profound implications for our banking system *going forward* [emphasis added] ...” (Joseph E. Stiglitz, *Freefall: America, Free Markets, and the Sinking of the World Economy* [New York, 2010, p. 118]). No one in the finance industry doubtless thinks twice about the cognitive implications of this substitution, but an analysis that links language necessarily to its users’ *formae mentis* will demonstrate that the upshot is hardly trivial.

All languages of the world deal with time by spatializing it. Accordingly, *in the future* is a phrase that localizes/locates future time, just as *in the past* and *in the present* do. By contrast, *going forward* specifies future time as a point that is achieved by motive force, with the added connotation of reaching that point through AGENCY. Although it is true that time is conceptualized as something that “goes/proceeds/travels forward,” the motion involved is embodied by an agent, human or otherwise, as in the sentence fragment quoted above (“banking system going forward”), where the phrase can also be secondarily interpreted as detached from any agent to mimic the grammatical status of *in the future*.

The semantic content comported by the new phrase vis-à-vis its traditional variant turns on the presence of the verb *go*, with its necessary grammatical reference to time and a concomitant implied agent—a content absent from the spatialized phrase in the locative. There has thus been not merely a linguistic change but a conceptual—and cultural—shift in the increasing preference for *going forward*: time has thereby been assimilated to agency, showing (yet again) that the purported traditional dichotomy between language and society is false.

2.58 Etymology as Present Knowledge

Glossary

cognate, n.: (of languages) descended from the same original language; of the same linguistic family; of words: coming naturally from the same root, or

representing the same original word, with differences due to subsequent separate phonetic development

etymology, n.: the history often including the prehistory of a linguistic form (such as a word or morpheme) as shown by tracing its phonetic, graphic, and semantic development since its earliest recorded occurrence in the language where it is found, by tracing the course of its transmission from one language to another, by analyzing it into the component parts from which it was put together, by identifying its cognates in other languages, or by tracing it and its cognates back to a common ancestral form in a recorded or assumed ancestral language

morpheme, n.: a meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts

paronomasia, n.: *paronomasia*, n.: a play upon words in which the same word is used in different senses or words similar in sound are set in opposition so as to give antithetical force

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

As with any kind of knowledge, information about word origins varies from speaker to speaker and affects language use accordingly. Clearly, one does not have to know anything about the etymology of the words in one's native language in order to have an adequate command of the language. However, in speaking with an interlocutor who uses etymological data implicitly in order to convey a meaning—principally, in puns or other species of paronomasia—one is at a disadvantage in fully understanding an utterance that utilizes paronomasia without sharing the knowledge that underlies such word play.

The lack of etymological knowledge may also lead to erroneous word use. A typical contemporary case in both British and American English is that of the phrase “begging the question,” which is a direct translation of Latin *petitio principii* and is a type of fallacy in which an implicit premiss would directly entail the conclusion (i.e., basing a conclusion on an assumption that is as much in need of proof or demonstration as the conclusion itself). Speakers and writers ignorant of the phrase's origin use it more and more frequently as a substitute for “raising the question,” and some usage manuals now recognize this erroneous meaning as acceptable.

Knowledge of a word's origin and meaning field can also serve to heighten one's sense of the semantic implications of the word. A good case in point is *filibuster*, which was notorious in the recent past in connection with a certain U. S. senator's legislative shenanigans. Here is the word's etymology, as cited from *The Oxford English Dictionary Online*:

Etymology: The ultimate source is certainly the Dutch *vrijbuiter* in Kilian *vrij-bueter* (see freebooter n.). It is not clear whether the 16th cent. English form *flibutor*, of which we have only one example, was taken from Dutch directly or through some foreign language. Late in the 18th cent. the French form *flibustier* was adopted into English, and continued to be used, with occasional variations of spelling, until after the middle of the nineteenth century. About 1850–54, the form *flibuster*, < Spanish *flibustero*, began to be employed as the designation of certain adventurers who at that time were active in the W. Indies and Central America; and this has now superseded the earlier *flibustier* even with reference to the history of the 17th cent.

The derivation of *flibuster* from *freebooter* ‘originally: a privateer. Later more generally: a piratical adventurer, a pirate; any person who goes about in search of plunder. Also fig. and in extended use’ only serves to aggrandize the meaning:

Etymology: < Dutch *vrijbuiter* privateer, pirate, robber (1572) < *vrijbuit* prize, spoils, plunder (1575; chiefly in the phrase *op vrijbuit varen* to go capturing ships or plundering, *op vrijbuit gaan*, and variants; < *vrij* free adj. + *buit* booty n.; compare Middle Low German *vribūte* (> Swedish *fribyte* (1561)), German *Freibeute* (1571 as *freye peuth*, or earlier)) + -er -er suffix. Compare Middle Low German *vribūter* (> Swedish *fribytare* (1559)), German *Freibeuter* (1569 as *fribuiter*, or earlier); also Middle French *vributeur*, *vributer* (1582; < Dutch), all in sense ‘privateer, pirate’. Compare *flibuster* n.

The original meanings of both *flibuster* and *freebooter* are now lost to most speakers of English. A pity, given that the behavior of ‘one who practices obstruction in a legislative assembly’ can and should be evaluated in the light of the words’ etymology.

2.59 “Heiße Magister, heiße Doktor gar” (Goethe, Faust, Pt. 1, “Night”)

Glossary

appellation, n.: a name or title by which a person, thing, or clan is called and known

bifurcation, n.: separation or branching into two parts, areas, aspects, or connected segments

designee, n.: one who is designated or delegated

“*Heiße Magister, heiße Doktor gar*” (Goethe, *Faust*, Pt. 1, “Night”): ‘I’m called Master [of Arts], and Doctor [of Philosophy] too’ (German)

hypertrophic, adj. < *hypertrophy*, n.: an inordinate or pathological enlargement

nomina sunt odiosa: names are odious (Latin)

nonce, n.: the one, particular, or present occasion, purpose, or use

odious, adj. < *odium*, n.: the state or fact of being subjected to widespread or deep hatred and severe condemnation and often loathing or contempt usually as a result of a despicable act or blameworthy situation

sidebar, n.: something incidental

German is no longer a commonly studied language in America, which is a great pity, given its power and scope. One interesting and rather quaint feature of traditional German onomastic practice is addressing the wives of men who bear the academic titles “Doctor” and “Professor” as “Frau [Mrs.] Doktor so-and-so” and even “Frau Professor Doktor so-and-so.” (Note that “Professor” precedes “Doctor.”)

In contemporary American academe (note the use of the traditional designation rather than the hypertrophic current variant “academia”), there is a strange bifurcation in the use of the titles “Dr.” and “Professor” whereby students and teachers in junior, community, and state colleges—notably in the rural South and the Southwest, where this also applies to private institutions—typically use only “Dr.” for designees with doctorates, even when the person so named/addressed is of professorial rank, whereas in Northern private (esp. elite) universities the habitual appellation is “Professor.” This bifurcation seems to apply, for instance, even when the person addressed is a private university professor, so long as the colleague speaking is from a Southern or a regional public institution. Thus I am routinely addressed/referred to by my former students who now teach at Southern universities as “Dr. Shapiro.”

Some narrowly literal-minded academics withhold the title “Professor” from persons who do not occupy professorial positions at the time they are being addressed. A grotesque instance (remembered here from bitter experience) is the treatment of my late wife—the most accomplished and versatile American Italianist of the twentieth century—by a nincompoop of a male colleague (*nomina sunt odiosa*), who referred to her as “Professor Shapiro” only as long as she was teaching and held professorial rank but stripped her of this title whenever she was between jobs, at which times he invariably referred to her as “Dr. Shapiro.”

A final personal sidebar, for the nonce: one of my oldest and dearest friends, an eminent prosthodontist, always introduces me as “Dr. Shapiro.” Coming from him, I take this as a special mark of honor and respect. After all: any fool can be a professor—but not a doctor!

2.60 Stomping Ground (Folk Etymology)

Glossary

diagrammaticity, n. < *diagrammatic*, adj. < *diagram*, n.: (in Peirce’s sign theory) an icon of relation

folk etymology: the popular perversion of the form of words in order to render it apparently significant

icon, n.: a sign exhibiting a similarity relation to its object (meaning)

All languages tend to develop in a certain direction, which can be characterized by the technical term *diagrammaticity*, denoting a closer fit between form and meaning, or more accurately, between sets of forms and sets of meanings, since a *diagram* (in Peirce's semeiotic) is an *icon of relation*. When a word or phrase seems to go against this principle, a change may occur—first in popular speech, then gradually in most if not all styles—that reflects a reinterpretation of the unrecognizable or ill-suited elements of the word or phrase in question. This process is instantiated in what goes by the phrase *folk etymology* (a calque [loan translation] of the German *Volksetymologie*). For example, the modern word *bridegroom* is the result of folk etymology: in Old English it was *brydguma* 'bride-man', but when the Old English word *guma* 'man' (cognate with Latin *homo*) fell out of use, the latter was reinterpreted as *groom*. Here is a description of the process from the *OED*:

Etymology: α. Old English *brydguma*, < *bryd*, bride n. + *guma* 'man' (poetic) < *Old Germanic *gumon-*, cognate with Latin *homin-*. The compound was Common Germanic: compare Old Saxon *brūdigomo* (Middle Dutch *brūdegome*, Dutch *bruidegom*), Old High German *brūtigomo* (Middle High German *briutegome*, German *bräutigam*), Old Norse *brūðgumi* (Swedish *brudgumme*, Danish *brudgom*) < Old Germanic **brūdigumon-*; not preserved in Gothic, which has *brūpfabs* = 'bride's lord'. β. After *gome* n. became obsolete in Middle English, the place of *bridegome* was taken in 16th cent. by *bridegrome*, < *grome*, groom n. 'lad'.

The contemporary American phrase *stomping ground*, in the meaning of 'a place where one habitually spends/spent much of one's time' is the product of folk etymology in two respects. First, the form of the verb, viz. *stomp*, is an American dialectal version of the English *stamp*, which has replaced the original in most meanings. Second, the original meaning of *stamping ground(s)* referred to a place where animals (esp. cattle) habitually gathered, as in this example from the *OED*: "1862 *Harper's Mag.* June 34/1, I found myself near one of these 'stamping grounds', and a simultaneous roar from five hundred infuriated animals gave notice of my danger." A dwindling minority of speakers of American English still preserve the original form of the phrase, but its complete replacement by the newer one is inevitable.

2.61 Words Qualified and Contrasted

Glossary

affixation, n. < *affix*, v. < *affix*, n.: a word element, such as a prefix or suffix, that can only occur attached to a base, stem, or root
apposite, adj.: suitable; well-adapted; pertinent; relevant; apt
base, n.: a morpheme or morphemes regarded as a form to which affixes or other bases may be added

morpheme., n.: a meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts

prefix, n.: an affix, such as *dis-* in *disbelieve*, attached to the front of a word to produce a derivative word or an inflected form

root, n.: the element that carries the main component of meaning in a word and provides the basis from which a word is derived by adding affixes or inflectional endings or by phonetic change *suffix*, n.: a grammatical element added to the end of a word or stem, serving to form a new word or functioning as an inflectional ending, such as *-ness* in *gentleness*, *-ing* in *walking*, or *-s* in *sits*

winged words: highly apposite or significant words

Every culture regards words as special things, and languages often reflect this view by qualifying them through the affixation of adjectives; or by contrasting them with non-verbal realia, typically animals. Thus in English we have winged words, fighting words, leaden words, etc., etc.

One feature of the spoken word from the perspective of folk wisdom and the traditional agrarian milieu in which proverbs and sayings arise is the irretrievability of words once uttered. Thus in Russian one says: Слово не воробей, вылетит (выпустишь)—не поймаешь (*slovo ne vorobej, vyletit/vypustish'—ne pojmaesh'*), literally: ‘a word is not a sparrow; if it flies out/if you release it, you won’t catch it’; or in Japanese (courtesy of my brother Jacob): 驕も舌に及ばず (*shi mo shita ni oyobazu*, which goes back to Confucius’ *Analec*t)s)—literally: ‘even a four-horse team/carriage is not the equal of/cannot catch up with a tongue’. Ergo: Watch what you say!

2.62 The Lure of Latin (Sherlock Holmes and the Science of Abduction)

Glossary

abduction, n.: the formation or adoption of a plausible but unproven explanation for an observed phenomenon; a working hypothesis derived from limited evidence and informed conjecture

abductive, adj.: pertaining to or the product of abduction [vide supra]

adversion, n. < *advert*, v.: to turn one’s attention; to take notice, take heed, attend, pay attention

deduction, n.: the process of deducing or drawing a conclusion from a principle already known or assumed; spec. in logic, inference by reasoning from generals to particulars; opposed to induction

extant, adj.: currently or actually existing

factitious, adj.: produced artificially or by special effort (as for a particular situation)

Hippocratic, adj. < *Hippocrates*, n.: Greek physician (“Father of Medicine” [c460–c377 B. C.])

homo abducans: ‘abducting man [nonce phrase]’ (Latin)

induction, n.: the process of inferring a general law or principle from the observation of particular instances

James, n.: William James (1842–1910), American psychologist and philosopher

ne plus ultra: the highest point capable of being reached or attained; the summit of achievement (Latin)

nonce, adj.: for the particular occasion; for the time being, temporarily; for once

obsolescent, adj.: going out of use; falling into disuse especially as unable to compete with something more recent

palliate, v.: to reduce the violence of (a disease); cause to lessen or abate; ease without curing

Peirce: Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), American logician and scientist

pragmatism, n.: an American movement in philosophy founded by C.S. Peirce and William James and marked by the doctrines that the meaning of conceptions is to be sought in their practical bearings

propensity, n.: a natural inclination; innate or inherent tendency

rigor mortis: rigidity of muscles after death depending in time of onset and duration upon variable factors in the body and in the environment (Latin)

risus sardonicus: a fixed, grin-like expression resulting from spasm of facial muscles, esp. in tetanus (Latin)

syllogism, n.: an argument expressed or claimed to be expressible in the form of two propositions called the premisses, containing a common or middle term, with a third proposition called the conclusion, resulting necessarily from the other two

trigeminal neuralgia: also called *tic douloureux* [French], a chronic pain condition that affects the trigeminal or 5th cranial nerve; a form of neuropathic pain (pain associated with nerve injury or nerve lesion)

unassailable, adj.: not open to adverse criticism

To a writer of the old school like the author of these pages, whose academic training dates back to the '50s and '60s of the last century, working in a Latin phrase is akin to flashing a badge of one's scholarly credentials, and the lure is strong. At one time, before the onset of the digital age, there was nothing unusual about reading

the following utterance of Sherlock Holmes to Dr. Watson in Arthur Conan Doyle's novel, *The Sign of the Four*:

"Quite so. They are in a state of extreme contraction, far exceeding the usual *rigor mortis*. Coupled with this distortion of the face, this Hippocratic smile, or '*risus sardonicus*,' as the old writers called it, what conclusion would it suggest to your mind?"

Here, note Holmes's stylistic qualification, viz. "as the old writers called it," marking the Latin phrase as already somewhat obsolescent at the time of writing. Speaking of Holmes and the lure of Latin, here is a fresh example (meant originally for the public press).

Lately, in these pages [*The NY Times*] and elsewhere in the media—including movies, plays, and even letters to the editor—there have been numerous mentions of and adversions to Sherlock Holmes, the fictional master detective created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. In Conan Doyle's early second novel, *The Sign of the Four* (1890), the opening chapter is entitled "The Science of Deduction," meant to characterize the mode of reasoning ("deduction") that is Holmes's stock in trade and that enables him to solve even the most abstruse cases. Indirectly, moreover, that is what the famous retort—"Elementary, my dear Watson," by which we all know Sherlock but which he never actually utters in any of the Holmesian canon—refers to, which is his power of making correct inferences or educated guesses from seemingly unconnected pieces of evidence.

But the word "deduction" as used by Conan Doyle and all other writers before and after is actually a misnomer. The correct name for the type of reasoning at stake is "abduction," and the distinction is far from trivial. The name was coined in 1867 by the greatest intellect the Americas have ever produced, the philosopher-scientist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), whose work in logic alone places him in the same rank as Aristotle and Leibniz.

Deduction, induction, and abduction are the three fundamental modes of reasoning that constitute the traditional syllogism of logic. Deduction proceeds from correct premisses and valid cases to reach unassailable conclusions. Thus if "All men are mortal" (premiss) and "Socrates is a man" (case), then the deduced conclusion "Socrates is mortal" follows without fail. Induction, by contrast, tests the law (premiss) by applying extant cases to it. Hence, if "Socrates is mortal" is a valid conclusion and "Socrates is a man" a valid case, then the law "All men are mortal" is valid by induction.

But—crucially—stating that something is the case is the only mode of reasoning that is fallible, since it is invariably subject to further testing, wherein its validity may or may not be borne out. Knowing that (1) all men are mortal and that (2) Socrates is mortal does not prove that (3) Socrates is a man because Socrates may turn out to be a horse or an inanimate object and not a man at all. We may guess wrong despite the evidence, although as Peirce argued, we have a propensity to guess right, otherwise we wouldn't have survived as a species. Using Peirce's word in its verbal form, we all have the power to abduce the truth from (typically scant) evidence. In this respect, Sherlock Holmes is only a superlatively talented exemplar of *homo abducans*.

All new knowledge, therefore, comes about exclusively through abduction, which is the technical logical term synonymous with the more familiar “hypothesis.” All advances in science begin as hypotheses (abductive inferences) that are borne out upon (repeated) testing. Here is how Peirce put it to the audience of his lectures on pragmatism at Harvard in 1903: “The surprising fact, C, is observed; But if A were true, C would be a matter of course. Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.” The verb “suspect” is particularly apt in the context of Holmes’s powers of detection. This word describes the action of the educated guess. Equally apt, accordingly, is the phrase “matter of course”. This is implicit in the opening adjective of the factitious phrase “Elementary, my dear Watson.” QED.

Peirce was so great a thinker that no university could find a place for him during his lifetime. He suffered terribly at the end, living on the charity of his friend William James and taking morphine for the trigeminal neuralgia and cancer that ultimately killed him. But just like Sherlock Holmes, who palliated his boredom with violin-playing and cocaine, Peirce will live forever in history and in our imagination as an icon of that uniquely human cognitive capacity, abduction, to which he gave a name and Holmes embodied *ne plus ultra*.

2.63 The Mentality of a Neologism (game-changer)

Glossary

artifice, n.: an ingenious expedient, a clever stratagem; (chiefly in negative sense) a manoeuvre or device intended to deceive, a trick

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

Since sometime in the early 1990s, two words have entered American English vocabulary that are frequently heard and read in the media, as noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, namely:

game-changer n. orig. *U.S.* (a) *Sport* a player who, or tactic, goal, etc., which decisively affects the outcome of a game; (b) (in extended use) an event, idea, or procedure that produces a significant shift in the current way of thinking about or doing something.

game-changing adj. orig. *U.S.* (a) *Sport* that decisively affects the outcome of a game; (b) (in extended use) that produces a significant shift in the current way of doing or thinking about something.

Now, there is nothing out of the ordinary about these two words in their meaning as applied to sports, but the “extended use” warrants commentary because it betrays

yet again the mentality of speakers of American English in particular, derived in large part from the general English heritage of an attitude that regards everything as either “a show” or “a game.” Sentences like “Let’s get the show on the road” or “Who’s running the show?,” when no stage performance is literally involved and the application of the word *show* is in a purely transferred sense, is a special feature of English, hence not to be encountered in other languages. The same transference applies to *game*, whereby everything is capable of being likened to play-acting or artifice. Note, interestingly, that *play* and *show* are part of the same semantic universe, denoting as they do some variety of staged event for entertainment that is more properly to be observed in a theater, a stadium, or an arena than in real life.

2.64 The Supersession of Literal Meaning (Incredibly, Unbelievably)

Glossary

athwart, prep.: in opposition to; contrary to

beggar, v.: to exhaust the resources of, go beyond, outdo

conduce, v.: to lead or tend especially with reference to a desirable result

figurative, adj.: transferred in sense from literal or plain to abstract or hypothetical (as by the expression of one thing in terms of another with which it can be regarded as analogous)

privative, adj.: a word denoting the negation of a quality otherwise inherent

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

supersession, n. < *supersede*, v.: supplant and make inferior by better or more efficiently serving a function

trope, n.: a figure of speech using words in nonliteral ways, such as a metaphor

troping, n. < *trope*, v.: create a trope [vide supra]

tropologically, adv. < *tropological*, adj. < *tropology*, n.: the use of tropes in speech or writing

valorize, v.: place a value on; assign a value to

In contemporary American English parlance (but not only), the words *incredibly* and *unbelievably* have all but replaced *very*, *highly*, and *extremely* as designations of the ultimate degree of the adjective they qualify. The fact that the literal meaning of the former—namely, ‘not susceptible of belief’—runs athwart the assertion of

ultimate degree looms as a perverse semantic development: if something cannot be believed or is not credible, how can it simultaneously be valorized as obtaining for the adjective thus qualified?

The answer, of course, lies in the tendency of all languages to create new meanings through troping, i.e., by subordinating or submerging the literal in the transferred sense. Here the state of not being believable is given the figurative meaning of ultimate degree. Ultimacy is to be interpreted, accordingly, as the state of beggared belief. The ultimate degree of assertibility, in other words, lies in a semantic space beyond believability, and it is only the tropologically established convertibility between the two states—assertibility implying believability—that conduces to the rise of the new counter-literal meaning of the two privative adverbs.

2.65 Twerk: An Etymology

Glossary

cognate, n.: (of languages) descended from the same original language; of the same linguistic family; of words: coming naturally from the same root, or representing the same original word, with differences due to subsequent separate phonetic development

connote, v.: to signify in addition to its exact explicit meaning

etymology, n.: the origin and historical development of a linguistic form as shown by determining its basic elements, earliest known use, and changes in form and meaning, tracing its transmission from one language to another, identifying its cognates in other languages, and reconstructing its ancestral form where possible

icon, n.: A sign exhibiting a similarity relation to its object (meaning)

lascivious, adj.: tending to arouse sexual desire

portmanteau, n.: a word that is composed of parts of two words (such as *chortle* from *chuckle* and *snort*), all of one word and part of another (such as *bookmobile* from *book* and *automobile*), or two entire words and that is characterized invariably in the latter case and frequently in the two former cases by single occurrence of one or more sounds or letters that appear in both the component words (such as *motel* from *motor hotel*, *camporee* from *camp* and *jamboree*, *aniseed* from *anise seed*) (French)

In the twenty-first century generally, and more recently in particular, the verb *twerk* (from which the dance called *twerking* is derived) has become widely known in popular culture to denote ‘the rhythmic gyrating of the lower fleshy extremities in a lascivious manner with the intent to elicit sexual arousal or laughter in ones [sic] intended audience’ (*Urban Dictionary*). The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it

as follows: ‘dance to popular music in a sexually provocative manner involving thrusting hip movements and a low, squatting stance’. And *Dictionary.com*, basing itself on the *OED*, says:

twerk [twɜrk]

verb (used without object) Slang. to dance to hip-hop or pop music in a very sensual way typically by thrusting or shaking the buttocks and hips while in a squatting or bent-over position.

Origin: 1990–95, Americanism; probably alteration of *work*, as in “Work it”

There is no accepted etymology for the word, but here is a plausible hypothesis that reposes on the form-meaning relations between the initial and final sequences in *twerk*, on the one hand, and a synthetic meaning that can be assembled from the generalized meanings of words that contain these sequences, on the other. Far from being a portmanteau word (blend), therefore, *twerk* is what should be called a synthetic icon. Here is the evidence.

The initial sequence *tw*—occurring in words like *twist*, *twerp*, *twine*, *twig*, *twit*, *twitter*, and (N.B.) *twat* can be generalized to signify an icon of an additive meaning consisting of the elements ‘contorted’, ‘thin or of limited extent’, and ‘awkward or devalued’. The final sequence—*rk* that occurs in words like *jerk*, *quirk*, *dork* (N. B.!), and *snark* can be analyzed as connoting something that is ‘egregious’, ‘marginal’, ‘outlandish’, and ‘rude or sarcastic’.

Twerk, accordingly, is a composite or synthetic product of these semantic elements as realized in a verb that particularizes the elements by applying them to a specific kind of dance. This, then, is the most plausible etymology of the word.

2.66 Cultural Differences in the Reception of the Graeco-Roman Patrimony

Glossary

admirative, adj.: characterized by or full of admiration; admiring

alas and alack: idiomatic phrase used to express regret or sadness

Anglophone, adj.: English-speaking

calque, n.: (= *loan translation*) a form of borrowing from one language to another whereby the semantic components of a given term are literally translated into their equivalents in the borrowing language. English *superman*, for example, is a loan translation from German *Übermensch*

connotative, adj. < *connotation*, n.: the signifying in addition; inclusion of something in the meaning of a word besides what it primarily denotes

demotic, adj.: of or relating to the people; common

emblematic, adj. < *emblem*, n.: a typical representative

epistemological, adj. < *epistemology*, n.: the study of the method and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity; broadly, the theory of knowledge

epitomical, adj. < *epitome*, n.: a typical representation or ideal expression

hypostasis, n.: a reified abstraction

index, n.: something (such as a manner of speaking or acting or a distinctive physical feature) in another person or thing that leads an observer to surmise a particular fact or draw a particular conclusion *patrimony*, n.: an inheritance from the past

pleophonic, adj.: (In the East Slavic languages) a type of vowel duplication whereby the sequences -oro-, -olo-, and -ere- have developed from earlier -ra-, -la-, -le-, and -re- occurring between consonants; the process of development of this phenomenon

reception, n.: the action of receiving mentally; comprehension

reify, v.: regard (as an abstraction, a mental construction) as a thing: convert mentally into something concrete or objective

root, n.: the simple element (as Latin *sta*) inferred as common to all the words of a group in a language or in related languages

Russophone, adj.: Russian-speaking

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

Typically without realizing it, we speakers of English utilize utterly common phrases that are calques from Latin and Greek. Nothing is more emblematic of this phenomenon than the phrase *common sense*, whose origin (ca. 1525–35, according to the *OED*) is Latin *sēnsus communis*, itself a translation of Greek *koinē aísthēsis* (< Ancient Greek αἴσθησις ‘perception’ < αἰσθάνομαι [*aisthanomai* ‘I perceive’]). Among the modern European languages, this comes out as French *sens commun* [or colloquial *bon sens*].

Here are some meanings of the phrase from current online dictionaries:

- I. sound practical judgment that is independent of specialized knowledge, training, or the like; normal native intelligence. (1) Perception from the senses, feeling, hearing, seeing. (2) Perception by the intellect as well as the senses. (3) That which is perceived: scent. (4) Ability to perceive: discernment. (5) Cognition or moral discernment in ethical matters
- II. (1) An ‘internal’ sense which was regarded as the common bond or centre of the five senses, in which the various impressions received were reduced to the unity of a common consciousness. *Obs.*. (2a) The endowment of natural intelligence possessed by rational beings; ordinary, normal or average

understanding; the plain wisdom which is everyone's inheritance. (This is 'common sense' at its minimum, without which one is foolish or insane.). (b) More emphatically: Good sound practical sense; combined tact and readiness in dealing with the every-day affairs of life; general sagacity. (3) The general sense, feeling, or judgement of mankind, or of a community. (4) *Philos.* The faculty of primary truths; 'the complement of those cognitions or convictions which we receive from nature; which all men therefore possess in common; and by which they test the truth of knowledge, and the morality of actions' (Hamilton *Reid's Wks.* II. 756). *Philosophy of Common Sense*: that philosophy which accepts as the ultimate criterion of truth the primary cognitions or beliefs of mankind; e.g. in the theory of perception, the universal belief in the existence of a material world. Applied to the Scottish school which arose in the 18th c. in opposition to the views of Berkeley and Hume.

- III. (1) a sense believed to unite the sensations of all senses in a general sensation or perception (2) good sound ordinary sense: good judgment or prudence in estimating or managing affairs especially as free from emotional bias or intellectual subtlety or as not dependent on special or technical knowledge < too absurdly metaphysical for the ears of prudent *common sense*—P. E. More > (3a) *among Cartesians*: something that is evident by the natural light of reason and hence common to all men (b) (1): the intuitions that according to the school of Scottish philosophy are common to all mankind (2): the capacity for such intuitions (c) the unreflective opinions of ordinary men: the ideas and conceptions natural to a man untrained in technical philosophy—used especially in epistemology.

In Russian, by contrast, the phrase comes out as здравый смысл, where the adjective corresponding to 'common' is здравый, whose primary meaning is 'healthy' (cf. the translation of L *mens sana in corpore sano* 'a sound mind in a sound body' as здоровый дух в здоровом теле, where the demotic [pleophonic] form of the root is utilized rather than the Church Slavonic form). What is interesting here is the substitution of the word meaning 'healthy', moreover in its Church Slavonic (= high style) hypostasis, for L *communis* 'common'. Even allowing for connotative nuances of the Russian word (not just 'healthy' but 'rational' and 'sane'), there is a world of difference between the meanings 'common' (English and French) and 'healthy'. English 'common' shades into connotations that are hardly admiring, whereas Russian здравый never veers from its positive semantic core.

One would think that the upshot for the difference between the English and the Russian attitudes toward what constitutes something as basic in the cultural stock of meanings as the phrase *common sense* could not be more epitomical, viz. 'a sense shared by the community' versus 'a sense that is healthy/sane'. Alas and alack, no scrutiny of the modern history of the two nations—the Anglophone and the Russophone—can sustain any argument that would be grounded in this linguistic difference. So much for language as an index of virtue.

2.67 Soundas an Icon of Sense (*meld*)

Glossary

affricate, adj., n.: a complex speech sound consisting of a stop consonant followed by a fricative; for example, the initial sounds of *child* and *joy*

attenuate, v.: to lessen the amount, force, or value of

cognate, n.: (of languages) descended from the same original language; of the same linguistic family; (of words) coming naturally from the same root, or representing the same original word, with differences due to subsequent separate phonetic development

constrict, v.: to draw together or render narrower (as a mouth, channel, passage)

distinctive, adj.: serving or used to distinguish or discriminate (applied spec. in linguistics to a phonetic feature that is capable of distinguishing one meaning from another) *etymology*, n.: the origin and historical development of a linguistic form as shown by determining its basic elements, earliest known use, and changes in form and meaning, tracing its transmission from one language to another, identifying its cognates in other languages, and reconstructing its ancestral form where possible

fricative, adj., n.: consonant, such as *f* or *s* in English, produced by the forcing of breath through a constricted passage *icon*, n.: a sign exhibiting a similarity relation to its object (meaning)

lax, adj.: of a speech sound: produced with the muscles involved in a relatively relaxed state (the English vowels [i] and [u] in contrast with the vowels [ē] and [ū] are lax)

marked, adj.: vide infra under *markedness*

markedness, n.: the evaluative superstructure of all semiotic ('sign-theoretic') oppositions, as well as the theory of such a superstructure, characterized in terms of the values 'marked' (conceptually restricted) and 'unmarked' (conceptually unrestricted)

nasal, adj., n.: articulated by lowering the soft palate so that air resonates in the nasal cavities and passes out the nose, as in the pronunciation of the consonants (m), (n), and (ng) or the nasalized vowel of French *bon*; a nasal consonant

nota bene: mark or note well (Latin)

obstruent, n.: a sound, such as a stop, fricative, or affricate, that is produced with complete blockage or at least partial constriction of the airflow through the nose or mouth

onomatopoeia, n.: formation of words in imitation of natural sounds: the naming of a thing or action by a more or less exact reproduction of the sound associated with it (as *buzz*, *hiss*, *bobwhite*); the imitative or echoic

principle in language *parallelism*, n.: resemblance, correspondence, similarity between two things or groups

Peirce: Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), American logician and scientist
phonemically, adv. < *phonemic*, adj. < *phoneme*, n.: the smallest unit of speech that distinguishes one utterance from another in all of the variations that it displays in the speech of a single person or particular dialect as the result of modifying influences (as neighboring sounds and stress)
phonetically, adv. < *phonetic*, adj. < *phonetics*, n.: the system of sounds of a particular language

plosive, adj., n.: of, relating to, or being a speech sound produced by complete closure of the oral passage and subsequent release accompanied by a burst of air, as in the sound [p] in *pit* or [d] in *dog*

protensity, n.: category of phonological distinctive features comprising the acoustic opposition tense versus lax, defined by the longer (vs. reduced) duration of the steady state portion of the sound, and its sharper defined resonance regions in the spectrum

raison d'être: reason for being (French)

semeiotic, adj. < *semeiotics*, n.: the theory of signs, esp. that of C. S. Peirce

stop, n.: one of a set of speech sounds that is a plosive or a nasal

symbolism, n.: a system of symbols or representations

tense, adj.: of a speech sound: produced with the muscles involved in a relatively tense state (the English vowels [ē] and [ū] in contrast with the vowels [i] and [u] are tense)

truism, n.: an undoubted or self-evident truth; esp. one too obvious or unimportant for mention

unmarked, adj.: vide supra under *markedness*

voicing, n.: the action or process of producing a speech or breath sound with vibration of the vocal cords; the change of a sound from voiceless to voiced

That words mean largely by convention is a well-established truism of language analysis, attenuated only by the knowledge that there are such phenomena as onomatopoeia, among a range of sound-sense symbolisms/parallelisms. A more indirect manifestation of the latter is contained in the final consonant *d* of the newish verb *meld* in the meaning ‘merge, blend; to combine or incorporate’, whose first attestation (according to various dictionaries) is dated to 1936. The original meaning was quite other, viz. ‘announce’, as in cards; also ‘make known (by speech), reveal, declare’, the etymology being Germanic (as e.g., in Old Frisian and Old English). The origin of the new verb is explained as a blend between *melt* and *weld*.

What is interesting in this process is the appearance of the sound *d* evidently borrowed from *weld*. Why would this phonemically lax (erroneously characterized as “voiced,” which it is phonetically) stop lend itself to the new meaning of the verb, which can be generalized as ‘merging’, ‘fusing’, etc.? The answer resides in the

semeiotic characterization of laxness in stops in languages, like English, which have distinctive protensity in their obstruent system (unlike languages like Russian, for instance, where voicing is distinctive rather than protensity). Thus *d* (the lax member of the opposition) is to *t* (the tense member) as unmarked to marked. Markedness, *nota bene*, is defined as the restriction of conceptual scope; hence the marked member is always relatively more restricted conceptually than its unmarked counterpart. That is exactly what we have in the new meaning of the verb *meld*, viz. unrestrictedness, here concretized to mean indistinctness i.e., ‘merging’ or ‘fusing’. That is the *raison d’être* for the sound *d* in *meld*, of which it is the icon of the verb’s new sense.

2.68 Ideology and Semantic Change (*sex* and *gender*)

Glossary

descry, v.: to spy out or come to see especially with watchful attention and careful observation of the distant, uncertain, or obscure *gainsay*, v.: to deny, speak against, contradict

individuate, v.: to give an individual character to; to distinguish from others of the same kind; to individualize; to single out, to specify

The meanings of words are generally stable over time, but when a shift does occur it can often be attributed to a change of ideology in the culture. This is the case for the fading of the word *sex* as the traditional designation of the biological category and its replacement by the word *gender*, which was once restricted to the field of grammar.

The *Oxford English Dictionary Online (OED)* gives the following definition as the primary one for the word *sex*:

“Either of the two main categories (male and female) into which humans and many other living things are divided on the basis of their reproductive functions; (hence) the members of these categories viewed as a group; the males or females of a particular species, esp. the human race, considered collectively.” A secondary definition reads as follows: “Quality in respect of being male or female, or an instance of this; the state or fact of belonging to a particular sex; possession or membership of a sex.”

With regard to persons or animals, the entry supplies the following commentary:

“Since the 1960s increasingly replaced by *gender* ... when the referent is human, perhaps originally as a euphemism to distinguish this sense from ... Physical contact between individuals involving sexual stimulation; sexual activity or behaviour, *spec.* sexual intercourse, copulation. to have sex (with): to engage in sexual intercourse (with). Now the most common general sense. Sometimes, when denoting sexual activity other than conventional heterosexual intercourse, preceded by modifying adjective, as *gay*, *oral*, *phone sex*, etc. ... The word *sex* tends now to refer to biological differences, while *gender* often refers to cultural or social ones.”

It is both interesting and ideologically relevant to note that many foreign languages (and not just the European ones) have borrowed the English word *sex* in the meaning “denoting sexual activity,” e.g., Russian *секс* (*seks*) and Japanese *seksu* (セクス).

With respect to the native English cultural development, there is no gainsaying that the linguistic substitution of *gender* for *sex* serves to individuate the latter word in its social sense as part of the pervasive sexualization (including that of children, in the United States at least) so characteristic of modern culture all over the globe. Insofar as a devaluation of the dignity of the individual human being can be described in this phenomenon, English as the language that first offered up its linguistic expression can only be reckoned to bear full responsibility.

2.69 World View and Untranslatability (The Case of Yiddish)

Glossary

by the bye: by the way; incidentally

connote, v.: to signify in addition to its exact explicit meaning

contiguity, n.: the state of being contiguous; intimate association or relation; close proximity

couplet, n.: two successive lines of verse usually having some unity greater than that of mere contiguity (as that provided by rhythmic correspondence, rhyme, or the complete inclusion of a grammatically or rhetorically independent utterance)

epistemological, adj. < *epistemology*, n.: the study of the method and grounds of knowledge especially with reference to its limits and validity; broadly, the theory of knowledge

excogitate, v.: to evolve, invent, or contrive in the mind

exemplar, n.: one that serves as a model or example

putative, adj.: commonly accepted or supposed; reputed

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

takeoff, n.: an imitation especially in the way of caricature

vocable, n.: a word considered only as a sequence of sounds or letters rather than as a unit of meaning

Because of the deep historical and cultural connectedness between world view and language in traditional societies, it has often been pointed out by anthropologists and linguists that words and phrases are not necessarily translatable from one language into another. Yiddish stands as a well-known exemplar of this situation, despite the steady penetration of Yiddish vocables into languages (like English or Russian) whose speakers include sizable Jewish segments.

It has been remarked that for Jews—and not only those from the ghetto—life consists of four elements, designated by the following Yiddish words (all derived from Hebrew originals): *tsores* (צרה) ‘troubles’, *nakhes* (מכה) ‘pleasure, especially that of a parent from a child’, *makes* (מכות) ‘abcess; scourge, plague’, and *yikhes* (ייחוס) ‘descent, lineage, pedigree’. Of these, perhaps the most familiar one to English speakers is *tsores* (also transliterated *tsures* and *tsuris*). But the translation ‘troubles’ cannot do justice to what the Yiddish word connotes in the Jewish world view. Here is a piece of personal linguistic folklore that will illustrate this assertion.

A paternal distant cousin of the present author known in the family only as “Uncle Misha” was routinely cited in the appropriate conversational context for his having excogitated the humorous rhyming couplet (a takeoff on Cicero), “[Latin] O tempora or mores/[Russian] O vremena, o tsores [О времена, о горес; see Sect. 1.27 above].” The original has Cicero deploring the viciousness and corruption of his age, for which the literal translation is ‘oh what times!, oh what customs!’

The use of the Yiddish word *tsores* in Uncle Misha’s version immediately shifts the semantic dimension into the age-old experiential context of Eastern European Jewry, a world utterly incompatible with that of ancient Rome. By the bye, this is the same Uncle Misha who made an appearance at Sect. 2.6 above, namely the picaresque personage who escaped death by firing squad in revolutionary Kiev, immigrated to Paris, and lived there into his hundreds as a wealthy arms dealer. Among his other (putative) witticisms was (in French) “Il y a une différence entre air et courant d’air.”

2.70 Sinning Against Usage (Dead Last, but Flat Broke)

Idiomatic phrases and constructions are part of linguistic usage and as such not amenable to alteration. A command of one’s own language includes the knowledge of idioms. Violation of the idiomatic norms of a language is a sign of deficiency.

In a recent utterance attributed by the media to Hillary Clinton, Mrs. Clinton mentioned that when she and Bill left the White House, they were “dead broke.” American English does not have such a phrase, the idiom being “flat broke.” One can be “dead drunk” and “dead last,” but not **dead broke* (in linguistic notation the asterisk signifies either an incorrect or a reconstructed—hence questionable—form).

How should one evaluate a sin against usage? In the case of a prominent politician like Hillary Clinton (who actually writes remarkably well), one can perhaps chalk the mistake up to the heat of the media moment. At the same time, usage is a form of truth, since by its very fixity it is immutable. A violation of usage

—whatever the circumstances—is, therefore, a transgression against verity, i.e., a sin against truth. Such a mistake, especially emanating from the mouth of a politician, thereby speaks against their veracity.

2.71 Phrase, Not Term

Glossary

plurale tantum: a noun which is used only in plural form, or which is used only in plural form in a particular sense or senses (Latin)

In contemporary media language, an increasingly frequent phenomenon is the misapplication of the word *term* when what is meant is *phrase*. This was exemplified in full by a discussion on July 8, 2014 on the NPR program *Morning Edition* that explored how Americans of a certain age wish to refer to themselves (as well as hear themselves referred to). In assessing phrases like *older adult* and *senior citizen*, the discussants mistakenly kept using the word *term* instead of *phrase*.

This error evidently derives from the mindless transference of the *plurale tantum terms*—as in phrases like *on good terms with*, *terms of an agreement*, etc.—to the designation of the singular *term*, where the latter, strictly speaking, consists of a single word and not more than one. Lamentably, this error has now been legitimated as standard usage in dictionaries, as reflected, for example, in the following definition: ‘a word or group of words designating something, especially in a particular field, as *atom* in physics, *quietism* in theology, *adze* in carpentry, or *district leader* [sic!] in politics’ (Dictionary.com).

The historical process exemplified by what started as an error needs to be taken account of in describing the range of factors underlying linguistic change. All living languages, wherever they are spoken, inevitably include examples that owe their origins to failures of thought and other species of misinterpretation but become canonized over time as correct by speakers who have either lost the feeling of their erroneousness or been born at a stage of the language when the transition is largely complete.

2.72 Barba non facit philosophum (The Power of Proverbs)

Glossary

animadversion, n. < *animadvert*, v.: to comment critically (on, upon), to utter criticism (usually of an adverse kind); to express censure or blame

hirsute, adj.: of or pertaining to hair; of the nature of or consisting of hair
paronomastic, adj. < *paronomasia*, n.: a form of word play which suggests two or more meanings, by exploiting multiple meanings of words, or of similar-sounding words, for an intended humorous or rhetorical effect; pun
physiognomy, n.: a person's facial features or expression (originally freq. considered as indicative of the mind and character); the face, the countenance; also: the general cast of features or the facial type of a people, group, etc.

All languages have a store of proverbs and similar sayings, Russian Japanese, and English (my three “native” tongues) having numerically the greatest ones. These formulaic utterances are commonly stored in the linguistic data banks of users, to be recalled, sometimes silently, when the occasion prompts them. Their typically paronomastic form (“A stitch in time saves nine”) enhances the thought encapsulated in them and makes them easier to remember.

Thus it was last week, when the author attended the Charles S. Peirce International Centennial Congress at the University of Massachusetts Lowell (cf. the account by Spencer Case, “The Man With a Kink in His Brain,” www.nationalreview.com, July 21, 2014), that the perfusion of bearded men among the attendees caused the Latin proverb, “Barba non facit philosophum” (‘A beard does not a philosopher make’), to insinuate itself into his brain during all four days of the gathering. The story of the origin of this saying includes an animadversion not only on the concerned individual’s facial hair but on his beggarly attire as well.

Needless to say, in this day and age when academics—let alone philosophers—have succumbed to the general impulse to dress informally, the attendees of the male persuasion in Lowell strove mightily, not only to explicate Peirce’s cast of mind but to replicate his (hirsute) physiognomy. One can only wonder whether the Latin proverb ever gave them pause.

2.73 Irrefragably!

Three earlier essays (at Sects. 1.7, 3.2, and 3.62) have focused on the ubiquity in contemporary English of the adverb *absolutely* as an intensified version of the simple affirmatives *yes*, *of course*, etc. This speech habit has reached such a degree of pervasiveness as to constitute a verbal tic and a source of annoyance.

In order to counteract the tendency to absolutize affirmation in English, the author wishes to offer herewith a worthy substitute, viz. *irrefragably*, pronounced not as recommended in dictionaries with stress on the second syllable but with the more natural stress on the third syllable, the stressed vowel being the same as in *ragged*.

The word is based on the adjective *irrefragable*, characterized as follows in the *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary*:

ir-ref-ra-ga-ble [i(r)'refrægəbəl] adjective (1) impossible to gainsay, deny, or refute <irrefragable arguments> <irrefragable data> <these irrefragable authorities> (2) impossible to break or alter: inviolable, indestructible <irrefragable rules> <an irrefragable cement>—**ir-ref-ra-ga-bly** [i(r)'refrægəbli]

Origin of IRREFRAGABLE Late Latin *irrefragabilis*, from Latin *in-*¹*in-* + *refragari* to resist, oppose (from *re-* + *-fragari*—as in *suffragari* to vote for, support) + *-abilis* -able
First Known Use: 1533 (sense 1)

Readers are urged to try *irrefragably* on for size whenever the urge to say *absolutely* comes over them.

2.74 A Semantico-Syntactic Portmanteau (*Enjoy!*)

Glossary

absolute, adj.: of a clause, construction, case, etc.: not syntactically dependent on another part of the sentence; of a word: used without a (customary) syntactic dependant; spec. (a) (of a transitive verb) used without an expressed object; (b) (of an adjective or possessive pronoun) used alone without a modified noun

adumbration, n. < *adumbrate*, v.: to suggest, indicate, or disclose partially and with a purposeful avoidance of precision

complement, n.: one or more words joined to another to complete the sense

diagram, n.: an icon of relation

diagrammatize, v.: make (into) a diagram

(of) *iconicity*, n. < *iconic*, adj. < *icon*, n.: the conceived similarity or analogy between the form of a sign (linguistic or otherwise) and its meaning

markedness, n.: the evaluative superstructure of all semiotic ('sign-theoretic') oppositions, as well as the theory of such a superstructure, characterized in terms of the values 'marked' (conceptually restricted) and 'unmarked' (conceptually unrestricted)

portmanteau, n.: a word that is composed of parts of two words (such as *chortle* from *chuckle* and *snort*), all of one word and part of another (such as *bookmobile* from *book* and *automobile*), or two entire words and that is characterized invariably in the latter case and frequently in the two former cases by single occurrence of one or more sounds or letters that appear in both the component words (such as *motel* from *motor hotel*, *camporee* from *camp* and *jamboree*, *aniseed* from *anise seed*) (French)

provenience, n.: origin

reflexive, adj.: of, relating to, or constituting an action (as in "the witness perjured himself" or "I bethought myself") that is directed back upon the agent or the grammatical subject

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

semeiotic, adj. < *semeiosis*, n.: the process of signification, sign action

synchrony, n. < *synchronic*, adj.: of or relating to the study of phenomena, such as linguistic features, or of events of a particular time, without reference to their historical context

teleological, adj. < *teleology*, n.: the doctrine or study of ends or final causes, esp. as related to the evidences of design or purpose in nature; also transf. such design as exhibited in natural objects or phenomena

Contemporary speakers of American English are used to hearing the imperative *Enjoy!* uttered by waiters and waitresses upon presentation of the food ordered, but they are doubtless unaware of the usage's provenience (Russian via Yiddish, as detailed at Sect. 2.8 above). Be that as it may, the lack of a complement—a direct object or a reflexive pronoun

—after what is in standard English a transitive verb, is here to be explained as what might be called a functional ambiguity. Not specifying a complement syntactically allows BOTH the meaning of the direct object (*it*, i.e., the food) AND of the reflexive (*yourself*) to be implied despite their absence. This useful semantic portmanteau, of two meanings only by adumbration and not by the explicit presence of either, is what accounts for the spread of *Enjoy!*

By way of explanation from the structural perspective provided by markedness theory and its semeiotic understanding, the absolute (= intransitive) use of an otherwise reflexive verb to denote a state can generally be seen as an instance of iconicity: the reflexive-less form diagrammatizes the nonspecific (broadly defined unmarked) meaning of the verb, whereas the form with the reflexive pronoun diagrammatizes a specific (narrowly defined, marked) meaning. Hence the change in the syntactic properties of *enjoy* that allows for its absolute use is just a garden-variety case of synchrony being the (cumulative) result of a teleological process.

2.75 Back-Formation and the Drift toward Linguistic Hypertrophy in American English

Glossary

hypertrophy, n.: inordinate or pathological enlargement

morphologically, adv. < *morphological*, adj. < *morphology*, n.: the system or the study of (linguistic) form

Among different types of language change, American English has had a long history of what has come to be called back-formation, that is “the creation of a new word by removing an affix from an already existing word, as *vacuum clean* from *vacuum cleaner*, or by removing what is mistakenly thought to be an affix, as *pea* from the earlier English plural *pease*.” (*American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed.). But this reduction of words is now being counter-balanced by engorged versions, in line with an opposite tendency, viz. toward hypertrophy, instanced here on several previous occasions.

Besides the verb *commentate* (< *commentator*) instead of *comment*, we now often have *cohabitare* (< *cohabitation*) instead of *cohabit*. This enlargement of the verb is given impetus by the relative frequency of its morphologically affiliated noun. In the case of *cohabitare*, ignorance of the normative verb is also doubtless a factor.

What may now seem like an isolated instance can be reevaluated as the instantiation of what the pioneering American linguist Edward Sapir called “drift”—alias the principle of final causation in language—and characterized as follows:

“Wherever the human mind has worked collectively and unconsciously, it has striven for and attained unique form. The important point is that the evolution of form has a drift in one direction, that it seeks poise, and that it rests, relatively speaking, when it has found this poise.”

Present possibilities with greater or lesser powers of actualization exist at any given historical stage of a language. Innovations that come to be full-fledged social facts, i.e., changes, must have something about their form that enables them to survive. The aggregate of such innovations-become-changes is what constitutes the drift of a language. Items such as *commentate* and *cohabitare* are thus an early manifestation of change in what can rightfully be reckoned a drift toward hypertrophy in American English.

2.76 The Frisson of Etymological Discovery

Glossary

etymology, n.: the origin and historical development of a linguistic form as shown by determining its basic elements, earliest known use, and changes in form and meaning, tracing its transmission from one language to another, identifying its cognates in other languages, and reconstructing its ancestral form where possible

Fennicist, n.: specialist in Finnish and Finno-Ugric philology

Finno-Ugric, adj.: of, relating to, characteristic of, or constituting the Finno-Ugric languages

frisson, n.: an emotional thrill

lexical, adj. < *lexis*, n.: the aggregate of a language's words (vocabulary as distinguished from grammar)

Ugric, adj.: of, relating to, or characteristic of the languages of the Ugrians (an ethnological group including the Magyars [Hungarians] and related peoples of western Siberia)

unreflectively, adv. < *unreflective*, adj.: not reflective; unthinking, heedless

Every word has a history. But the history of most words in a speaker's vocabulary is obscured from view until discovered, often serendipitously and rarely by dint of inquiry. For ordinary language use the etymology of a word need not be known to speakers in order for them to have a command of the lexical stock of a language. Words are tokens absorbed unreflectively in the process of acquiring a language's lexis, and whose meaning seems largely to have been established by convention along with the habits of their proper usage.

Occasionally, however, even a professional linguist can experience the thrill of etymological discovery. This is what happened to the author on January 31, 2015 while reading a history of music and learning that the word *conservatory*, which now means a music school in all the European languages, goes back to the Italian *conservatorio* and its original meaning 'orphanage' (= a hospital or school for orphans and foundlings). It seems that orphans were "conserved" in institutions that, besides giving them housing and sustenance, trained them in music so as to enable them to make their way in the world when they left the orphanage.

For someone who loves language, the experience of learning the etymology of a word for the first time is akin to hearing a passage of music performed with great skill by a virtuoso. Closer to home, the linguistic experience akin to the musical one can only be realized, for instance, by hearing the inexhaustibly rich explanations of such an expert as the author's lifelong friend, the great Finnish-American Indo-Europeanist and Fennicist Raimo Anttila, whose knowledge of word origins can only be called miraculous.

2.77 The Markedness of the Female Sex

Glossary

epicene, adj.: having but one form to indicate either male or female sex (such as Latin *bos* "a bull, ox, or cow")

marked, adj. < *markedness*, n.: the evaluative superstructure of all semiotic ('sign-theoretic') oppositions, as well as the theory of such a superstructure, characterized in terms of the values 'marked' (conceptually restricted) and 'unmarked' (conceptually unrestricted)

Why do people (of all sexual orientations) speaking English persist in using the syndetic phrase “gays and lesbians” when the epicene word *gay* alone would do for both male and female homosexuals? As anyone who has read the author’s squib in *American Speech* (65 [1990], 191–192) knows, the reason has to do with the marked value of the female sex, as of the feminine gender. Since *lesbian* can only pertain to females, whereas *gay* does service for both males and females, there is no need to single out females unless males are explicitly being excluded from the universe of discourse. That female homosexuals still require linguistic individuation is strong evidence of the abiding marginal status of the feminine in an age that strives for equality between the sexes.

2.78 Pluralia Tantum and Their Contemporary Misconstrual

Glossary

morphology, n.: the structure, form, or variation in form (including formation, change, and inflection) of a word or words in a language; the branch of linguistics that deals with this *pluralia tantum*: nouns which are used only in plural form, or which are used only in plural form in a particular sense or senses (Latin)

semantic, adj. < *semantics*, n.: the study dealing with the relations between signs and what they refer to, the relations between the signs of a system, and human behavior in reaction to signs including unconscious attitudes, influences of social institutions, and epistemological and linguistic assumptions

In the European languages, including English, there are words which either appear exclusively in the plural form or do so with particular meanings. Thus, for instance, the Russian word часы ‘clock/watch’ is a *pluralia tantum* in the meaning of a timepiece, the singular form being used to mean ‘hour’.

In English there is a long history of *pluralia tantum* such as *qualifications*, *finals*, *negotiations*, etc., but in contemporary speech (especially American English, but not only) these words are being misconstrued to mean things rather than activities (the latter being their proper semantic category). Thus, the last match in a tennis tournament is properly called “(the) finals,” NOT “the final,” but this normative and traditional form is now routinely being replaced by the word in the singular. Speakers who make this mistake evidently take the event to be a thing rather than an activity, whence the change in morphology.

2.79 The Vocative and Its Functions in Discourse

Glossary

conative, adj. < *conation*, n.: the conscious drive to perform apparently volitional acts with or without knowledge of the origin of the drive
de rigueur: prescribed or required by fashion, etiquette, or custom especially among sophisticated or informed persons

intercalate, v.: to insert between or among existing elements

phatic, adj.: of, relating to, or being speech used to share feelings or to establish a mood of sociability rather than to communicate information or ideas

The traditional designation for the form of a noun when a member of this word class is used not just to name but to address someone or something is “vocative.” Together with the imperative of verbs, the vocative, strictly speaking, serves the so-called conative function. Thus the Indo-European languages (but not only) have to one or another extent maintained a vocative case and its concomitant separate desinence (ending) in the paradigm devoted to this naming or addressing function, although the overarching tendency in the history of these languages is for the vocative to fall together with the nominative in form. In a language like Russian, for instance, where the vocative overwhelmingly gave way to the nominative (except for the recent resurgence of the so-called “new vocative”), the form of the noun used for address is the same as the nominative, although Russian still has fossilized instances of the old vocative in religious terms like *Боже* (for nom. *Бог* ‘God’) and *Господи* (for nom. *Господь* ‘Lord’), which are now just part of common parlance as exclamations rather than terms of address.

Like any other language, English has a vocative intercalated in discourse that is identical in form with the nominative (subjective); moreover, as in all languages, English vocatives serve the phatic and emotive functions over and above the conative. A word like *sir* in military practice, for example, is a token of deference and is *de rigueur* in speech whenever a person of higher rank is addressed. This sort of practice can be called the “formulaic” use of the vocative, which also occurs in other contexts, such as in advertising and marketing, where agents who are serving customers or clients are encouraged to sprinkle their utterances with the addressees’ names (usually preceded by a term of deference such as “Mr.” or “Miss/Mrs./Ms.”).

A particular instance that is worthy of further study is the variable phatic and/or emotive use of the vocative as a feature of an individual speaker’s predilections when addressing an interlocutor. Speakers typically differ from each other in the frequency with which they resort to naming their interlocutors as part of discourse. Constant interspersion of one’s wife’s or husband’s name in addressing a spouse may start as a sign of endearment but may also ultimately devolve into a verbal tic devoid of emotive meaning and destructive of genuine affection. Similarly, the

same speech habit in addressing a customer or client can easily lead to annoyance on the part of the addressee and subvert the very psychological affect that the utterer is aiming to engender in order to further their mercantile goal.

2.80 Word Length and Emphasis (*incredibly*)

Glossary

hypertrophy, n.: inordinate or pathological enlargement

iconically, adv. < *iconic*, adj. < *icon*, n.: an image; a representation, specifically, a sign related to its object by similarity

In the last decade or more speakers of American English have almost dropped using the word *very* as a modifier for emphasis or intensification and have resorted to the near-ubiquitous use of *incredible/incredibly*, in the face of the literal meaning of this adjective/adverb ('that which cannot be believed'). Quantitative increase is one way of iconically signifying semantic force, just as elongating the stressed syllable of any word (as of *very* itself) necessarily adds emphasis to it over and above the normal length of the vowel.

Of course, the use of *incredibly* can also be classed as HYPERBOLE. This fits one of the overarching themes of contemporary American usage namely HYPERTROPHY as has been instanced many times in this book.

2.81 Ticastic so

Glossary

ticastic, adj. < *tic*, n.: a frequent usually unconscious quirk of behavior or speech

In a preceding essay (at Sect. 4.6 above), the increasing presence of the particle *so* at the beginning of discourses was analyzed and its presence ascribed to the jargon of geeks and to Yiddish. In the last few years it has also become evident—at least in contemporary American English—that *so* is not limited to the beginning of discourses but actually has spread to a much more frequent status as the initiator of utterances regardless of their position in discourse. Moreover, when *so* occurs at the beginning of discourses it serves as a linking particle not only to preceding utterances but even to linguistically yet unexpressed material that has formed in the speaker's mind as content that is relevant to the conversational context.

Beyond this linking function, for some speakers *so* has evidently become a verbal tic, to the point where such speakers cannot initiate almost any utterance—particularly at the beginning of a discourse, but not only—without prefixing *so*. This ticastic *so* is especially prevalent among young female speakers but is becoming increasingly characteristic of their male counterparts as well—and not just of geeks. Without rising (yet?) to the frequency of ticastic *like* (cf. Sect. 2.33), this trait has even become a habitual feature of the speech of some pre-teenagers and is growing apace.

2.82 Russian Patronymics

Glossary

affix, n.: a word element, such as a prefix or suffix, that can only occur attached to a base, stem, or root

allegro, adj.: in a quick, lively tempo (Italian)

antepenult, n.: the third syllable of a word counting from the end; the syllable preceding the next-to-last syllable (as *cu* in *accumulate*)

base, n.: a morpheme or morphemes regarded as a form to which affixes or other bases may be added

elide, v.: to omit or slur over (a syllable, for example) in pronunciation

inflectional, adj. < *inflection*, n.: an alteration of the form of a word by the addition of an affix, as in English *dogs* from *dog*, or by changing the form of a base, as in English *spoke* from *speak*, that indicates grammatical features such as number, person, mood, or tense

morpheme, n.: a meaningful linguistic unit consisting of a word, such as *man*, or a word element, such as *-ed* in *walked*, that cannot be divided into smaller meaningful parts

onomastic, adj. < *onomastics*, n.: the science or study of the origin and forms of proper names of persons or places

patronymic, n.: a name derived from that of a father or male ancestor, esp. by addition of an affix indicating such descent; a family name

suffix, n.: an affix [vide supra] added to the end of a word or stem, serving to form a new word or functioning as an inflectional ending, such as *-ness* in *gentleness*, *-ing* in *walking*, or *-s* in *sits*

ultima, n.: the last syllable

Although Russia is the biggest country in the world and has played a prominent role in modern world history, few people have any first-hand knowledge of Russia or the Russians, let alone of the Russian language. One of the special linguistic and cultural features of the latter (which it shares with the other East Slavic languages) is the obligatory use of an individual's father's name plus the suffix {ov/-iĭch} for

males and {ov/ič + -na} for females—called a *patronymic* (pronounced [ˌpætɹəˈnɪmɪk])—as a middle name between one’s given name and surname. Every Russian person has and uses all three names. This triad appears on all formal documents, and the first two together (i.e., the forename and patronymic) are routinely used in formal and semi-formal speech (minus the surname). In colloquial speech the patronymic can be and is used alone as a substitute for the forename.

In Russian therefore, the author—whose father’s name was Constantine, i.e., Константин in its Russian form—goes by Михаил Константинович ‘Michael son of Constantine’ with stress on the ultima in the forename and the antepenult in the patronymic.

In allegro speech routinely and a few instances regularly for all styles, the patronymic utilizes a contracted version of the father’s forename, so that, for example, my daughter Abigail (‘father’s joy’ in Hebrew, as in reality) is called Ави́гея Михайловна ‘Abigail daughter of Michael’. The name Михаил ‘Michael’ is unique as to vowel contraction because in fact the last vowel is elided before the patronymic in formal speech as well, as it is in the patronymic, so that my name comes out as Михал Консти́ныч (note the dropping of the suffix {-ov-}), and his daughter’s as Ави́гея Михална.

The existence of this onomastic pattern in Russian turns out to be uniquely useful as a cultural norm in ordinary discourse because it affords an intermediate stylistic means for addressing persons with whom the use of the forename alone would be ruled out because of familiarity and that of the surname preceded by a title (like Mister or Professor) awkward because of its formality. Thus, for instance, a student can avail him/herself of the forename + patronymic in addressing a professor instead of resorting to the equivalent combination in the typical Western European formal pattern.

As it happens, a particular irony of my forename and patronymic duple is the fact that Mikhail Konstantínovich just happens to be the name historically of a Grand Duke (Великий Князь in Russian), i.e., a member of the Russian Imperial family. You can be sure, therefore, that when I introduce myself for the first time to a Russian speaker by saying my forename and patronymic, I never misses the opportunity to add the phrase “like the Grand Duke.”

2.83 When Only Learned (Recondite, Recherché) Words Will Do

Glossary

adumbrate, v.: to suggest, indicate, or disclose partially and with a purposeful avoidance of precision *apothegm*, n.: a short, pithy, instructive saying; a terse remark or aphorism

interpretant, n.: a sign or set of signs that interprets another sign; the response or reaction to a sign

Latinate, adj.: of, relating to, resembling, or derived from Latin

Peirce: Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), American logician and scientist

recherché, adj.: rare, choice, exotic (French)

semiotically, adv. < *semiotic*, adj.: pertaining to elements of or any system of signs, defined as anything capable of signifying an object (meaning)

Even if we adopt the translation theory of meaning, wherein every immediate object (to use Peirce's terminology) has an interpretation in terms of another immediate object (meaning), there is one such "object" that escapes ultimate characterization: the individual human being. This latter creature in its individuality can only be captured linguistically by the use of two learned words and no other (in English, at any rate) (1) *haecceity* defined as the status of being an individual or a particular nature; otherwise individuality, specificity, thisness; specifically that which makes something to be an ultimate reality different from any other; and (2) *quiddity*, defined as the essential nature or ultimate form of something; what makes something to be the type of thing that it is.

These two Latinate words cannot be supplanted by any others from the rich storehouse of native English vocabulary because only they capture what is semiotically true—and at the heart of Peirce's apothegm (meant asexually), "Man is a sign"—quite apart from such abstract defining characteristics of human personhood as thought and consciousness. The *haecceity* ("thisness") of any given human person necessarily adumbrates a concomitant *quiddity* ("suchness"), and the two jointly body forth a unique, unreplicable *figura* that underwrites all the interpretants adumbrated thereby.

Only English, with its uniquely mottled Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-Norman history, has the capacity to use learned vocabulary to such precise ontological effect.



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