

KICKSHAWS

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Kickshaws is currently being assembled by a series of guest editors; all contributions should be sent to the editor in Morristown, New Jersey.

Curious Comparisons

Maxey Brooke reports two sets of curious comparisons supplied by the late Mario Pei. The first was "be utiful, be more utiful, be most utiful" -- a concept that can be extended indefinitely, as in:

-- Utiful

Emboldened by a snooty full,
I begged my dear love dutiful
"Be beauti, uti, utiful;
Be more, more uti, utiful;
Be most, most uti, utiful."
(Ah -- I had made a blunder.)

"To one with such a snooty full,
What maid could be but beautiful,"
Quoth she -- "be more, more utiful,
Be most, most uti, utiful?
But would she be so utiful
Were you not three sheets under?"

"When no more is your snooty full,
Say then if I be utiful;
Be more, more uti, utiful;
Be most, most uti, utiful.
If so, I'll still be dutiful;
If not, we two must sunder."

Professor Pei's second set of curious comparisons consisted of "handsome, handmore, handmost." There is a seductive speciousness of logic here:

Maids who toast handsome fellows some,
And handmore fellows more, will toast
From present day till kingdom come
The handmost of us fellows most.

The comparative of "handsome" could as easily be "handsommer." In that event one might treat "handspring" as the superlative. Unfortunately, I find no authority in either the OED or Webster's Second for "handfall" ("less handsome"), or "handwinter" ("least handsome").

Macaronic

I did not need the foregoing reminders of how much I miss Mario Pei, who even in his failing years never stinted in dipping from his encyclopaedic knowledge of language to lend some ignoramus like me a hand. It was a particular pleasure to consult him, usually by telephone, on the mot juste in recreations of macaronics like this one, which I received from B. F. Skinner, the behavioral psychologist:

There once was a frolicsome flea
 Son chien lui dépluit comme abri
 Er wollt' einem Kater
 Sed observat mater
 Non lasci i parenti cosi.

But he listened not to their prayer
 Il quittà son père et sa mère,
 Er springt' auf 'ne Katze
 Sed haec rasiat se
 Lo mangi, orribile a veder.

Around and about the gore flew
 Aie pitié du petit fou
 Mit lautem Geschrei
 Vae mihi, o vae,
 Il povero acese in giu.

The moral of this little tale:
 Ne tentez la force de vos ailes;
 Bleib' ruhig zu Haus
 Sit domui laus
 Alla casa dimora fedel.

The foregoing specimen is fairly simple, repeating English, French, German, Latin, and Italian lines; but Mario treated it as seriously as if it were a scholarly thesis, calling at length to discuss any refinement that occurred to him. Here is how the English version came out:

A Flea, bored with Dog as a diet,
 Heard of Cat, and decided to try it.
 He cried, "Let me go!"
 But his parents said, "No!"
 Stay at home on our Dog and keep quiet."

The Flea didn't need them a mite;
 He jumped on a Cat for a bite.
 This maddened the Puss,
 Who scratched the Flea loose

And ate him -- a horrible sight.

The dying Flea popped with a splat;
 Oh, pity the poor little brat,
 Crying, "Mom, take me back!"
 As, alas and alack,
 He slides down the throat of the Cat.

My Moral, dear friend, is a hot one:
 What seems like a snack may be not one.
 If you live on a pup,
 Stay at home and shut up;
 Be glad of a home if you've got one.

Mario Pei never failed to respond when he was needed. We are poorer without him.

Nine Sneezes

Another of Mr. Brooke's contributions to this department is the sound of a sneeze in nine languages. I repeat the nine in this verse:

"Kushami!" says the Japanese
 In the spasm of a sneeze.
 The inscrutable Chinese
 Rings the welkin with "Hah-chee!"
 "A-tchouin!" the plosive French let fly.
 ("Gesundheit!" is the right reply.)
 Hebrews in their burning bush
 Put the fire out with "Itush!"
 The Pole's "Kichniecie!" is a speck
 Like "Kychnuti!", which is Czech
 The Russian sound comes out "Ap-chi!"
 "Ker-choo!" must do for you and me.

The Kinship of Homo and Humus

We are no longer expected to call a leg a limb for the sake of propriety. If we still refer to a male chicken as a rooster, or to an ass as a donkey, the usages are only hangovers; indeed, the pendulum has swung so far toward filth that one wonders if words have worn out their sphincter muscles. Yet a number of expressions with innocent connotations spring from origins that would once have brought a blush to innocent cheeks. Though a few of the sources listed below are arguable, the derivations are worth pondering. (Other words whose earthy backgrounds have been forgotten would be welcome for this space.)

The well-known vulgarism for 'defecation' is etymologically associated with schism, a highly respectable term meaning 'a breach of the unity of the Church.' Similarly, poppycock is from Dutch pappekak (soft dung); the coccagee, or cider apple, from Irish cac a gheidh (the dung of a goose), both objects having the same greenish-yellow color; the lovely cowslip and oxlip after the droppings of cattle. Ref-

erence to a venal lawyer as a *shyster*, perhaps popularized in the last century by a lawyer named *Scheuster*, traces to German scheissen (to defecate).

"For 'tis the sport," said Hamlet, "to have the enginer / hoist with his own petar." A *petar*, a small explosive device for blowing a breach in a wall, took its name, because of the sound it made, from Latin pedere (fart). *Partridge* is from Greek perdix (the farter) because when flushed the bird makes a sharp whirring sound reminiscent of the breaking of wind. To *fizzle*, as in 'fizzle out,' is from obsolete fist (break wind silently), as is *fizz*.

If you manage to 'keep countenance' in an awkward situation, you are maintaining your self-possession; the phrase was first 'to keep continent' -- that is, to hold bowels and bladder under control.

Testimony, testament, testify -- all grave and respected words -- are from Latin testis, in the common gender meaning 'witness' but, in the masculine, 'testicle,' which precious parts a male witness at law formerly shielded with a hand to emphasize that he was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. The name *avocado* corrupts the Nahuatl ahuactle (testicle) from a fancied resemblance. The orchid is named from Greek orkhis (one or both testicles), for the same reason.

The slang word for the penis (perhaps inspired by the strutting attitude of fighting cocks) takes on femininity -- if not quite respectability -- in the word *coquette*, a girl or woman who trifles with a man's affections. The source is French coqueter (to show off like a cock before hens).

The French word foutre (to copulate with) has been borrowed for the English *footle*, 'to waste time or trifle'. The adjective form is *footling*, 'trifling, stupid'.

Who would have thought there was any relationship between the words *vulva* and *porcelain*? The latter word, from Latin porcella (little sow), reflects a perceived similarity of appearance between the cowrie shell and a sow's vulva.

The lovely word *madrigal*, identifying an equally lovely form of music, originates in Greek matrix (womb) -- specifically the Virgin Mary's womb, in which Jesus Christ was engendered. *Madrigal* today retains none but reverent associations. *Paramour*, on the other hand, was first a devotional term for the relationship between the Virgin and God, but took a downward turn, and now describes an illicit lover.

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey, and a ho, and hey nonino . . .
(As You Like It, Act V, Scene 3)

The refrain "hey nonny no" in verses of the Elizabethan period are familiar to us all; I took them for the most innocent nonsense until I was a man grown. It was only then that I learned the refrain was a

specific camouflage of indelicate allusions -- what Michael Drayton called "These noninos of filthie ribauldry."

Reverting to when I began (the era when it was indecent to call a leg a leg) a number of words have vanished from polite conversation -- though never permanently, so far as I know -- because of unwarranted associations. This seems to be happening today with intercourse, which once meant 'interchange' but is now increasingly confined to 'sexual intercourse.' The word occupy is rarely to be found in works of the seventeenth and most of the eighteenth centuries due to its common slang use 'have to do with sexually.' The word conversation underwent the same ostracism a century earlier; the sense survives in the legal term 'criminal conversation' for illegal cohabitation.

On a visit to Australia during the Vietnam War, President Johnson was scheduled to deliver a speech including the sentence "Our soldiers who have passed through wish to be remembered to you." Fortunately for our relations with Australia, an alert aide pointed out in time that in Australia 'to pass through' meant 'to copulate.'

A good word is not diminished by an earthy background. The name of Adam, first of men, means 'from the dust.' It is no coincidence that Latin homo (man) and humus (earth) have the same etymon:

Her urgent dust admits the thrust
Of urgent dust wherefrom
In hurricane of blood and pain
New urgent dust shall come.

Since man in dust is drawn, and shall
Resolve into the same,
We walk a road umbilical,
Attested by a name:

For homo, man, and humus, earth,
Though seeming two, are one;
Together facing from their birth
Annihilation.

As man and dust, so life and death
Are one, and Christ and clod;
Their common heritage the breath
Inspired, expired, of God.

The Birthdays of Words

The birthdays of many once-proprietary words are on record: on March 14, 1884, for instance, Burroughs, Wellcome & Company registered as a trademark for a compact pill the word Tabloid, which soon joined the vernacular to describe a newspaper of small dimensions, and frequently sensational in its treatment of events. Some day I must list the registration dates of once-proprietary words -- daguerreotype, lucifer, listerine, heroin, and so on -- throwing in, while I am about it,

words in common usage that are still legally owned, such as Xerox, Levi and Coke.

More interesting, though, would be a list of words plucked from the air at a particular time that promptly entered the vulgate. Here the seeker may have to settle not for a birthday certain, but a birth-year, or even a birth-decade. Sometimes, though, the date is fairly precise.

During the Kaffir wars, for instance, British officers who had proved incompetent were often assigned to posts where they could do no harm -- in particular to Stellenbosch, a town and division of Cape Colony. On June 16, 1900, Rudyard Kipling wrote in the Daily Express a story containing this passage:

"After all," said one cheerily, "what does it matter, old man? You're bound to be Stellenbosched in three days."

To stellenbosch thus went on record as meaning 'to relegate an inept commander to a position in which he can do little harm,' and is still so used in British military slang.

On July 3, 1905, the following statement appeared in the London Globe:

"The other day at a meeting of the Public Health Congress Dr. Des Boeux did a public service in coining a new word for the London fog, which he referred to as 'smog,' a compound of 'smoke' and 'fog.'"

The birth-year or birth-decade of many such words is certain, and doubtless could be made more precise by anyone with the energy to trace them down. English has incorporated, for instance, many words of romance origin ending in -ation. Yet as far as I know there are only two words dating back to early English that became substantives by adding -ation, and in each case the when and how of the adaptation is on record.

The first word to be so prettied up was flirt. In 1718, the actor and poet Colley Cibber wrote, "You know I always loved a little flirtation." The new substantive was soon as widespread as the concept it described.

Fifty-seven years later -- in 1775, during a debate in Parliament on a bill 'for restraining Trade and Commerce with the New England Colonies' -- a member named Henry Dundas expressed doubt that the measure would prove sufficiently strong to produce the famine at which it aimed. Opponents at once turned to the sturdy English word starve, added -ation, and taunted him as 'starvation Dundas.'

Still other examples:

Blatant. The word was first used in print in 1592, in the twelfth canto of the fifth book of The Faerie Queen, to denominate the Blatant Beast, which has a hundred tongues and a sting. With his tongue he speaks things 'most shameful, most unrighteous, most untrue.' With his

sting he steeps words in poison. Spenser may have adapted an old word meaning to bleat like a sheep or bellow like a bull.

Philistine. Though ancient as the Bible, Philistine in its present sense as 'one lacking culture' dates only from 1683. In that year a university student at Jena, Saxony, was killed in a riot between town and gown. The funeral speaker took his text from Judges: 'The Philistines be upon thee, Samson!' Students began to call the townspeople, their natural enemies, Philistines, and the word spread to mean cultural barbarians in general.

Panjandrum. In 1755 Samuel Foote invented this word in a nonsense paragraph supposed to test the claim of the actor Macklin that he could memorize any passage at a reading. The paragraph -- which Macklin refused indignantly to recite -- went:

So she went into the garden to cut a cabbage-leaf to make an apple pie, and at the same time a great she-bear came running up the street and popped its head into the shop. "What? No soap?" So he died, and she -- very imprudently -- married the barber. And there were present the Picninnies, the Joblillies, the Garyulies, and the Grand Panjandrum himself, with the little red button a-top, and they all fell to playing the game of catch-as-catch-can till the gunpowder ran out at the heels of their boots.

Tomcat. Until 1760, the male of the cat was known as a gib, shortened from Gilbert. In that year, however, a tale was published entitled The Life and Adventures of a Cat, with Tom the Cat as its hero. Tom proved so irresistible that gibs disappeared.

Golliwog. It is a bogeyman, taking its name from the black doll designed in 1895 by Florence Upton for The Golliwog Series, written by her sister Bertha. The word was perhaps suggested by 'polliwog.'

Blurb. In 1914, Gelett Burgess brought out Burgess Unabridged, which had a dust jacket embellished with a drawing of a lovely young woman named Miss Belinda Blurb. 'Blurb' came to mean inflated publicity, especially the exaggerated praise frequently found on book jackets.

A clutch of recent examples: googol, coined in the 1930s by the nephew of the mathematician Edward Kasner as a term for the number 10 raised to the power 100; egghead, first used to describe an intellectual in 1952, because Democratic Presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson, considered to be of that stripe, had a bald and somewhat egg-shaped head; middlebrow, coined by Russell Lynes in 1940; mid-cult and mass-cult, introduced by Dwight MacDonald in 1965.

Space has given out, but I shall be most grateful to any readers who can refine or correct the dates given above, and especially to those who can furnish more of the hundreds of anecdotes about word-birthdays that must be available.

Hidden Familiar Proverbs

Boris Randolph submits the following anagrammed proverbs, each beginning with a Christian name. "There are 13 girls and 13 boys, a baker's dozen of each," he writes. "Have fun."

1. Molly has weak set
2. Omar loaded last role
3. Kate's was the same
4. Ramon worried, feeds fear
5. Ann real devil
6. Ethelbert tan veteran
7. Ruth's term won
8. Edgar hoes shady ivy
9. Theresa is thief of wit
10. Eli fits me
11. Polly says, wear sea hose
12. Florian saw an idle rival
13. Norah matched drawls
14. Timothy has racing bee
15. Irene sees sea suburb flop
16. George off TV drain
17. Esther envies Toyota
18. Amos eyes coy age
19. Betsy hit nice cow
20. Igor tore hood
21. Nona wasn't wet tot
22. Daniel buys key to spine
23. Trudie warns wives riot
24. Lester's pint-law rude
25. Olga's nice ribs sin
26. Levi begins, in siege

Stumped? See Answers and Solutions at the end of the issue.

AN APPEAL FOR HELP

The editor is considering publishing a memorial anthology of J. A. Lindon's poetry as part of the Word Ways Monograph Series. Readers with copies of his poetry are encouraged to send Xeroxes to the editor, or to let him know where to write.