

ENGLISH IS A CRAZY LANGUAGE

RICHARD LEDERER
Concord, New Hampshire

The English language is the most widely spoken in the history of our planet. The English language has acquired the largest vocabulary and the noblest literature in the history of the human race.

Nonetheless, English is a crazy language.

In the crazy English language there is no butter in buttermilk, no ham in hamburger, and no cottages in cottage cheese. To add to the insanity, blackboards can be green, hot dogs can be cold, darkrooms can be lit, and silverware can be plastic.

In the weird English language a titmouse is not a mouse, wormwood contains neither worms nor wood, and bathrooms often don't have any baths in them. In fact, a bathroom isn't always a room since a dog can go to the bathroom under a tree.

In this wacky tongue that we try to speak a woman can man a station but a man can't woman one. A man can father a movement, but a woman can't mother one. And a king rules a kingdom, but a queen can't rule a queendom.

English is a crazy language.

A writer is someone who writes, and a stinger is something that stings. But fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce, hammers don't ham, and humdingers don't humding. If you rang a bell yesterday, why can't we say that you also flang a ball? If you wrote a letter, why can't we say that you also bote your tongue?

In this zany language of ours "I could care less" really means "I couldn't care less," "I literally fell over with surprise" really means "I figuratively fell over with surprise," a near miss is really a near hit, to put on one's shoes and socks really means to put on one's socks and shoes, to be head over heels in love really means to be heels over head in love, to go back and forth really means to go forth and back, and to do something ass backwards really means to do it ass frontwards.

Sometimes you have to believe that all English speakers should be committed to an asylum. In what other language can a boxing ring be square and a young Communist be called a green Red? In what other

language would a man with hairs on his head probably be balder than a man with hair on his head? In what other language can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell the next?

Things really become ridiculous when you realize that if a cavalier acts in a cavalier manner, he isn't being a good cavalier, that if you decide to be evil forever, you have chosen to be bad for good, and that if you are wearing your left shoe, your right one is left. Right?

I mean English is absolutely wacko. How can it be that "loosen" and "unloosen" and "ravel" and "unravel" can mean the same thing? How can it be that "I want a piece of cloth that will wear" can convey exactly the same message as "I want a piece of cloth that won't wear"?

Can anybody explain why it is that when the stars are out, they are visible but when the lights are out, they are invisible? How is it possible that when we wind up a watch we start it but when we wind up a conference, we end it and that when we trim a tree, we may be embellishing it (especially at Christmas) or cutting it away?

Doesn't it seem just a little weird to you that you can make amends, but never just one amend, that there are annals of history but never just one annal, and that you can never contract a measles or a heebie-jeebie?

Why in English aren't there any horseful carriages or strapful gowns, healthless junk foods or beautiless paintings? Why don't we ever meet people who are spring chickens instead of meeting people who are no spring chickens? And why don't we ever run into someone who is com-bobulated, chalant, or gainly?

Actually, if the truth be told, all languages are kind of crazy. Consider the following stanza from Bob Feinsteins' "Musings on the English Language" in the January 1981 Westways:

For all its flaws, toward English I remain a staunch defender. Thank God its common nouns are learned without including gender.
In France, they think that milk is male; I find this rather comic.
The Germans neuterize their girls, a puzzle anatomic.
In Spain, an interruption is a female kind of word.
Yet interlude is masculine; don't ask how that occurred.
So though our English language could be helped by overhaul,
I use it without question, and I love it, warts and all.

Still, you have to wonder about a language in which your house can burn up and down at the same time, you fill in a form by filling it out, you add up a column of figures by adding them down, and you first chop down a tree, and then you chop it up.