KICKSHAWS REVISITED

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Few present-day subscribers of Word Ways remember Dave Silverman, the first Kickshaws editor from May 1969 through November 1975. He was a mathematician at Hughes Aircraft before forming a small consulting company (Research Consultants Unlimited) which operated from his house in West Los Angeles. A cheerleader for Word Ways ("It would be lovely if we could make a success of Word Ways on our own. And I believe we can do it"), he had tons of raw material: "...given time to write [my Kickshaws ideas] up, I could easily fill the next three years of WW...the backlog of K material I have is staggering...if I took 3 days vacation & pulled all the phones out of their jacks, I could retire to my home office, where I can't hear the doorbell when my tape deck is playing, & get off 80 pages of unpadded K contribs...if I add my own stuff, more than 800 pages. I have boxes and legal size letter file boxes crammed full of notes on K". (But he did have one fault exasperating to an editor: he could not deliver Kickshaws on time. Apparently he worked best under pressure: "I like to feel the tug of life—without it I feel a human being is nowhere"). Alas, most of this corpus never saw the light of day: he tragically died on Feb 18 1978 at the relatively young age of 48, reportedly the consequence of a nervous breakdown. Here is a sample of his Kickshaws.

Meaning and Origin

A kickshaw is defined either in a neutral manner as "a bauble, rifle, or knickknack" or more flatteringy as "a fancy tidbit; a delicacy." The purpose of this feature is to satisfy both definitions by presenting linguistic items of light weight and vast diversity, designed to appeal to the tastes of all recreational linguisticians.

The word is of recent origin (from the point of view of the etymologists), having been introduced into American speech in colonial times as a Yankee corruption of the French phrase quelque chose, meaning "something". Once kickshaws became part of our language, it was natural to treat it as a plural form and to coin kickshaw as the singular form—an example of a back-formation. Another such example is the word pea. The plural peas (earlier pease) was originally singular in meaning, though plural in sound. Since sounds almost always triumphs over sight in the evolution of language, pea was formed from peases rather than vice versa.

Ghoti Revisited

Most readers will recall George Bernard Shaw’s clever example of the hopeless disparity between English spelling and pronunciation. By his lights, GHOTI should be pronounced “fish” using the F sound in laugh, the I sound in women, and the SH sound in nation. Using the same principle how would you pronounce NOST LIEUT TOLOM? (Hint: the words from which the sounds are extracted are all military.) Answer: using the O sound in provost marshal, the LEF sound in lieutenant (British version), and the UR sound in colonel, the correct pronunciation is “no left turn”. Using gunwale, boatswain, and colonel again, one can derive “Hello, Zen Master” from HWALEOST, TSWAIN MASTOLO, but for brevity I like FORECAST, pronounced “folks” a la forecastle.