It's time for another roundup of entertaining language-related trivia that couldn't find a logical place in my usual articles. I last compiled this sort of potpourri for the November 2006 issue of *Word Ways*.

To begin, here are a few more tongue-in-cheek questions and conundrums:

- The word “vanilla” is used colloquially to mean plain. So why does yogurt come in both vanilla and plain? And if you reject the plain flavor, would you be justified in disparaging it as “vanilla”?
- When a romantic attraction is physical, why do people say that it's “chemistry”? Shouldn't it be “physics”?
- Why is a serious or controversial matter often described as “a yawning question”? Doesn't that word imply that the issue is boring?
- Too bad you can't give someone a kudo. Wouldn't it be a singular compliment?

Occasionally, while reading an interview or published rendering of conversation, dialogue, or other speech, I'm surprised to discover the use of parentheses.

After all, how does the writer know that the speaker was using parentheses? This practice is especially questionable if the utterance has been transcribed from a phone conversation or recording. It's possible—albeit unlikely—that the speaker signaled his meaning via the use of “finger parentheses.” This gesture and term are not yet as ubiquitous as “finger quotes.” But an Internet search reveals that a few other people have thought of the idea.

Speaking of journalistic conventions, I recently observed, in a newspaper account of the current presidential election campaign, a reference to “Gary Hart,” local chairman of the Democratic Party in an Iowa county.

Is that the Gary Hart, the former Colorado senator and presidential aspirant? No, it turns out, it's someone else with the same name.

To preclude confusion in such cases, the media should supply an explanation. For example, consider how the following would clarify matters for readers: “Linux systems administrator Christopher Columbus (not the explorer) will speak on XML programming on Thursday at . . .”
Amusing mishearings, or *mondegreens*, have probably achieved their greatest popularity in citations of misinterpreted song lyrics. Entire websites are devoted to these bloopers, and Gavin Edwards has compiled them into a passel of books. Their flavor may be conveyed by two of his book titles: *When a Man Loves a Walnut* and *He's Got the Whole World in His Pants*.

Here are two of my own mondegreen experiences:

On one occasion, I witnessed a play group of preschoolers led by a woman who cheerfully announced (or so I thought), “Let’s do our dime-store march!” Dime-store march? Only after a recorded children’s song began did I realize that it was a *dinosaur* march.

My gym recently posted a list of house rules, including warnings about inappropriate attire. Prohibited are “short shorts and mid-drift tops.” That’s either a mondegreen—or a scary new fashion trend! Online research indicates that this mishearing occurs with astounding frequency.

From a newspaper editorial:

“The White House, and a shamelessly politicized Justice Department, have done too much damage to the Constitution and the nation, and the Congress has shamefully gone along.”

Aren’t the words “shamelessly” and “shamefully” pretty much interchangeable here? Via Richard Lederer’s books, this has become a classic example of “Crazy English.” The words are often cited as “opposites that mean the same thing.” But that’s not exactly true. As language purists observe, committing a shameful act *should* create a sense of shame, but if the perpetrator is shameless, it won’t.

In December 2006, Yoko Ono’s chauffeur was charged with attempting to extort money from his employer and threatening her life. After his arrest, the driver and his lawyer emphatically denied the charges. According to a report in *The New York Times*, the defendant said in court that “his legal team was ‘ready to kill Yoko.’” To which Ms. Ono’s lawyer asked if he was speaking metaphorically. Mr. Karsan, a Turkish immigrant, replied, “No, no, no, no metaphorically, I’m telling it literally.” By this [defense counsel Robert Gottlieb] said, Mr. Karsan clearly meant that his lawyers ‘would literally kill her in court.’” What is going on here? What do they *really* mean? And some people claim that using language with precision isn’t important!

A few years ago, a Bed Bath & Beyond opened in my neighborhood. In Manhattan, space is so valuable that below-ground floors are often used for retailing. In this branch of BB&B, only a small entrance foyer with elevators and escalators is on the street level; the sales areas are on two subterranean levels.

On entering the store one day, I overheard two little old ladies, puzzled by the unfamiliar layout, asking how to get upstairs. An attendant replied that everything is downstairs. The LOLs, still confused, pointed out that one of the two sales floors is called the “upper level.”

The attendant and I patiently explained that the upper level is the higher of the two lower levels. In an attempt to be helpful, I continued: “It’s sort of like saying that we drive on a parkway and park in a driveway.”

The attendant chuckled and said, “They probably pay people to write those things.” “I know,” I riposted. “I’m one of them.”