Recently two new word books showed up the same day in the new books at the library, both small-format hardbacks: *Word Fugitives: In Pursuit of Wanted Words* by Barbara Wallraff (HarperCollins 2006), $14.95; and *The Meaning of Tingo and Other Extraordinary Words from Around the World* by Adam Jacot de Boinod (Penguin 2006), $19.95. I recommend the former. *Word Fugitives*, overtly less serious but better informed, is devoted to recreational word-coinning. It’s based on Wallraff’s Word Fugitives’ column, first in the *Atlantic Monthly* Website and later in the magazine itself. This column grew out of Word Court, devoted to resolving reader’s language disputes, when a reader asked for a word meaning the area between a hole being dug and the pile of dirt from it. Why anyone would want such a word is a puzzlement, but it led to better things, many of them in this book.

Wallraff is well aware of her predecessors, such as *Burgess Unabridged* by Gelett Burgess, *The Meaning of Liff* by Douglas Adams and John Lloyd, *Sniglets* and its four sequels by Rich Hall, and *In a Word: A Dictionary of Words that Don’t Exist, But Ought To* by Jack Hitt. She quotes from these and more, mostly in match the word to the meaning quizzes throughout the book. Also cited are books of obscure and obsolete words, such as *The Word Museum: The Most Remarkable English Ever Forgotten* by Jeffrey Kacirk.

There are different sorts of recreational logopoeia. Contests like the *Washington Post* Style International and the *New York Magazine* competitions tend to start with wordplay, such as altering an existing word. My one contribution, quoted on page 163, is of this sort: origasmi, the art of folding paper marital aids. But Wallraff prefers to call for words for which someone has actually felt a need. And then enjoy the wordplay.

For example, there’s a phenomenon that most NPL solvers are probably familiar with: reading about something (like a new word) for the first time and then encountering it everywhere. This isn’t surprising for something truly new and trendy, but when it’s a word or place that’s been around for many years, something else seems to be going on. Suggestions included (p. 33) attention-surplus disorder and newbiquitous (better newbiquity?), but the winner was déjà new. None have caught on, and she continues to get requests for the word.

Another chapter covers the popular category of words for *them*, like noisy perpetual cellphone users (yakasses). One querent wanted a word analogous to hysteria, for the behavior of men under stress. By far the most popular response was testeria, perhaps because its by far the best, compared to coinages like male-pattern badness. Or the redefinitions that were particularly rife in this case, like malevolence, mania (pl. menia), musth, testiness, and the winner, ballistic. The existing testosterone poisoning was also proposed but I think its more general than what was asked for.
Another much-requested word: We’ve all been in the situation of walking on a sidewalk when someone coming toward us comes directly into our path. We step to one side; they step to the same side; we move to the other side; they do too. A comical dance ensues, until someone takes the initiative to move out of the way. What should we call this? Past suggestions include avoidance,bossa no va, walkstrot, and the sniglet shuggleftulation. I remember seeing pas de deux somewhere, and that’s my preference.

Perhaps of most NPL interest is the chapter on words about words. One reader requested a word for mistakenly written homonyms like your for you’re. I think it’s hard to improve on the accepted term of art, mistake. But people tried: misteak, misstake, nonronym, errerr, illiration. Another reader asked for a self-descriptive word for palindrome (p. 139). Wallraff quoted a 1995 Word Waves article by Robert Maier that offered palnilap, from Greek palin (again) and nilap (spelled backwards). The plural is palnilaps. And of course there’s the request for a third-person singular neuter animate pronoun, something people have wanted for most of a century, but for which nothing has ever caught on. Readers of my Graffiti on the Sphinx will recall that I prefer to use tey/ter/tem, which is not one of the suggestions quoted.

In each chapter is a section where Wallraff let her friends and authors of her sources say a few words. Those quoted include F.Aro and Hex.

A final chapter, on what makes coinages work, suggests that none of the words in the book will catch on. But that’s OK; the fun is in the coinig.

The Meaning of Tingo (a veiled reference to the Liff book?) has its predecessors too, like There’s a Word for It by Howard Rheingold, but you couldn’t tell from the book itself: no citations, no bibliography, no index. Like those predecessors, but much more so, it’s full of the unexotic presented as the exotic, misunderstandings, and simple blatant errors. Such as razblyuto, a nonexistent Russian word for the feeling for someone once but no longer loved, no doubt picked up from Rheingold. Rheingold gives a source which led a word detective to trace it back to a putative origin in the TV show The Man from U.N.C.L.E., where it was perhaps a typo for razlyubleno fallen out of love. Other Rheingold words I noticed were anga-anga, hooponopono, mokita, mono no aware, ngaobera, and tingo itself, but where Rheingold provides a page or so of cultural context and discussion to suggest why we might be interested in them, de Boinod just plunks them on the table and says ain’t foreigners odd?

A first sign of trouble comes in the foreword, where de Boinod explains the origin of the book: . . . I picked up a weighty Albanian dictionary to discover that they have no fewer than twenty-seven words for eyebrows and the same number for moustache, ranging from mustaqe madh, or bushy, to a mustaqe posht, one which droops down at both ends. These aren’t words, they’re phrases. And one really needs to ask how many are real terms, like handlebar mustache, and how many simply citations to show usage, with no more dictionary nature than, say, bushy mustache. (How many English terms for mustaches can you think of? 11C has four, and NL3 adds at least toothbrush mustache.) We also get 62 Eskimo words for snow (p. 166), one of which is qux. No way. The discussion of colors (p. 180) is confused, one section implying that only 69 languages exist.
There are a number of annoying false etymologies. French ordinateur computer was not invented to avoid the sounds of con and pute (p. 9); my Petit Robert shows computat(ion) going back 500-600 years. Snob doesn’t come from sine nobilitate (p. 11). I hardly think that Greek b razón means both Aa slap in the face and Aa policeman because of the American use of the word Acop to mean Aswipe. Batsos means slap-giver and the derivation from batsos cop (from Turkish bac tax collector) needs no help from English. Russian vokzal railway station (p. 40) does indeed come from Vauxhall in London, but given other errors, how could you trust the claim?

In Web discussions, native speakers have pointed out many errors (you can Google for confirmation). Albanians do not always use mbyllizogojen, a contraction of a sentence meaning may God close his mouth, to avoid a taboo word for wolf (p. 8). The Albanian word is ujk/ulk and that mouthful is unknown to most Albanians. Angushli zaid (Persian) someone with six fingers (p. 23; wrongly called Russian in the UK edition) reportedly just means too many fingers. German Scheissbedauern, the disappointment one feels when something turns out not nearly as badly as one had expected (p. 51), is not German, but an invention of the American Joel Queenan. Koshatnik (Russian) a dealer in stolen cats (p. 88) just means ‘cat fancier’. Seigneur-terrasse (French) one who spends much time but little money in a café (p. 94) doesn’t exist; there are about 980 Google hits for it, all Tingo-related. Dutch plimpplamppletteren ‘skipping stones’ (p. 103), if it exists, is not a standard word. And I’ll add a few: In hanage o nuku handy ‘to dupe’ (p. 34) the ‘handy’ doesn’t belong. Koro (Japanese) the hysterical belief that one’s penis is shrinking into one’s body (p. 70) is real, but Indonesian. Latin vomitarium was not ‘a room where a guest threw up in order to empty his stomach for more feasting’ (p. 84). A vomitorium was a passageway in an amphitheater that ‘vomited’ spectators into their seats. Txiv xaiv (p. 138) is Hmong, not Chinese. Japanese yabuhebi ni naru ‘to poke at a bush and get a snake (to backfire)’ (p. 151) is literally ‘become a jungle snake’ (metaphorically, a hornet’s nest). In xihuitl barq (‘Arabic) lightning without a downpour (a disappointment, a disillusionment or an unkept promise)’ (p. 165), barq is indeed ‘lightning’, but xihuitl is clearly not Arabic. It’s Nahuatl for ‘year’, among other things.

Many of the words don’t even have oddity value. Thus de Boinod express surprise in a couple of places that something can mean both ‘hello’ and ‘goodbye’. Like ‘good morning’, say? Maori o’nitta means ‘to speak evil of someone in their absence’; unlike him, I don’t see how this particularly differs from ‘gossip’. ‘Why doesn’t English have an expression for the space between the teeth when Malay does Bgigi rongak?’ (p. 21) It does C’diastema’Cand anyway, Ben Zimmer points out in a Language Log review, the Malay term actually means ‘gap-toothed’ or ‘gapped teeth’. For lagierlarlarpok (p. 21), Inuit for ‘the gnashing of teeth’, we have ‘gnashing’. Wagiman (Australia)jahja and Afrikaans waal ‘the area behind the knee’ (p. 24) is ‘ham’. Ulwa (Nicaragua) yupuaka (p. 24) ‘having the sensation of something crawling on one’s skin’ is ‘formation’, assuming as I do that the ‘having’ is superfluous. Chinese gung gung chi chuh ‘a bus’ (p. 40), is ‘bus’. Persian wazahat ‘the little bit of sweat and dung attached to a sheep’s groin and tail’ (p. 155) is ‘dag’. Quechuan ch’ililpy ‘to mark livestock by cutting their ears’ is ‘earmark’. Not a few terms are naturalized English words such as kibitzer (p. 48), schmuck (and related words; p. 53), quiniela (p. 104), zapateado (p. 108), and iceblink (isbliik in Swedish; p. 165). All these, except the NIS ‘ortion’ and ‘serene’, are N1C words. Similarly, Danish alevandring ‘the migration of the eel’ is ‘eel migration’; big deal. Danes just happen to write more compounds solidly than we do. Similarly for fyrisistent ‘an assistant lighthouse keeper’ (which in fact means simply ‘lighthouse keeper’: fire attendant) and hundeskole ‘a dog-training school’ (p. 158).
Ancient Greek marilopotes ‘a gulper of coal dust’ is amusing, but if de Boinod wonders ‘[w]hen and why . . . would a man be [so] described’, why doesn’t he look in Liddell and Scott and find the context? My guess was that it was a humorous term for a coal miner, but it turns out to be applied to a blacksmith in Aristophanes’ comedy Plutus. Ditto for other Ancient Greek hapax legomena that got into dictionaries only because they were coined in classic works. Another is panaphelika ‘to be deprived of all playmates’, actually an adjective in the Iliad (22.490). I also like Japanese bakku-shan ‘a woman who appears pretty when seen from behind but not from the front’ but it would have been more interesting if he’d noted that it’s a Japanese foreign compound, ‘back schön’.

Also in the ‘so what?’ category are the numerous ‘False friends’ sections that inform us that, say, Aukan machete means ‘how’. Anyone with a big foreign-language dictionary and no concern for pronunciation can dig up hundreds of these. I find a little interest in cases where there’s some relationship of meaning, like Amharic aye ‘no’ (not pronounced ‘aye’, I’m sure) or Sahela no ‘correct’, but he has few of these. (One of the few things I retain from Hebrew school: hu is ‘he’ and hi is ‘she’ and dog is ‘fish’.)

There are a lot of interesting things here as well. Jiwali (Australia), with four words for ‘we’, meaning ‘we two including you’, ‘we two excluding you’, ‘we all including you’, and ‘we all excluding you’ (p. 4). Albanian çq ‘a negative exclamation of mild disappointment’ (p. 5); so they have ‘tsk’ too. Mahj ‘(Persian) looking beautiful after a disease’ (p. 63). Rujuk ‘(Indonesian) to remarry the wife you’ve already divorced’ (p. 77). Tingo ‘(Pascuanse) to borrow things from a friend’s house, one by one, until there’s nothing left’ (p. 95), à la Herb in Blondie. Verbunkos ‘(Hungarian) a dance performed to persuade people to enlist in the army’ (p. 108). Bakwe ‘(Kapampangan) to smoke a cigarette with the lit end in the mouth’ (p. 110). Kusyad ‘(Persian) hard black stone thrown into the water to attract fish’ (p. 114). Soft or brown stones don’t count. Giomlareachd ‘(Scottish Gaelic) the habit of dropping in at meal times’ (p. 117). World sneezing etiquette (p. 126). Zirad ‘a rope tied round a camel’s neck to prevent it from vomiting on its rider’ (p. 153), one of many hyperspecific camel terms from Somali. And Persian kalb ‘the practice of imitating barking to induce dogs to respond and thus show whether a particular dwelling is inhabited or not’ (p. 156), clearly from the Arabic word for ‘dog’. But which of these, if any, are real?

To finish off, let’s see what the two books have in common.

WF has no answer to the question (p. 50), ‘What do you call a catchy melody or jingle that keeps replaying in your head and you can’t stop it?’ The phenomenon is an old one; Mark Twain described it in ‘A Literary Nightmare’ (1876), inspired by a poem published earlier in the year. (‘Conductor, when you receive a fare!/ Punch in the presence of the passenjare!’) MoT gives German Ohrwurm (‘ear worm’), which fits perfectly, on p. 107. The loan-translation ‘earworm’ has achieved some currency, with 423,000 Google hits (excluding ‘corn earworm’) and a Wikipedia article.
WF asks (p. 103) for a word for ‘a problem caused by a blundering or heavy-handed attempt to cure another problem’. Suggestions included boomerwrong, ouchcome, fixasco, solvo (my favorite), and side defect. MoT has the related neko-neko, ‘one who has a creative idea which only makes things worse’ (p. 48). But Zimmer, again, notes that this is an error; it’s a predicate verb or adjective meaning ‘doing all sorts of things unnecessarily’ or perhaps ‘sticking one’s nose where it doesn’t belong’. Rheingold, by the way, gives a perfect German word: Schlimmbesserung.

WF asks (p. 114) for a word for a ‘tendency to make more mistakes . . . if a very critical person is watching’. Suggestions included the sports term ‘choke’ and ‘carper-fumble syndrome’. Two people pointed out fisselig ‘flustered to the point of incompetence’ in Rheingold; it’s in MoT (p. 51) as well.

WF asks (p. 158), ‘What do you call it when an individual nods off for a few seconds and then jolts awake?’ The medical term ‘hypnic jerk’ fits, but Wallraf went for more entertaining terms like compecking, snaptime, the bobs, nodding off and on, and catsnap. MoT offers teklak-tekluk ‘(Indonesian) the head bobbing up and down with drowsiness’ (p. 35). But WF is better with foreign languages too; readers offered Quebecois cogner des clous (literally, ‘hammer nails’) and Polish ‘to sleep like a woodpecker’.