

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.

What is a kickshaw, anyhow? Well, it began life in France as quelque chose, "something". Then it entered English in 1598 meaning "a fancy dish in cookery". By folk etymology, it changed its spelling to kickshaw but retained its meaning. It was used by Shakespeare in the play Henry IV.

It soon changed its meaning from a little something to eat to simply "a little something, a trifle, a gewgaw; elegant but comparatively useless". It was thus used by Shakespeare in the play Twelfth Night.

Note that kickshaws was originally a singular word, and our present kickshaw came about by back-formation.

Name That Town

In the August 1981 Kickshaws, Faith Eckler quotes one Charles J. Reilly of Eustis, Florida who (in 1957) delighted in making up imaginary town names followed by a state abbreviation. This game has been around even longer than that; when I was in college they were playing it, too. In addition to Reilly's OOLA LA and INCOME TEX, I recall such absurdities as SEARCH ME, DADDY O, MAUN PA, GEE WIS, FYVAN TENN, BOYAMEYE ILL and TURNO VA.

Rule of Grammar

When I was quite young, my language teacher tried to impress on me that I should never, never, never end a sentence with a preposition.

Any time an inflexible rule of grammar is promulgated, logologists look for ways to violate it. Even the rule itself was subverted: "Prepositions are what you should not end sentences with."

A classic example of preposition-ending is the bedtime complaint of the little boy on the second floor who asked, "Why did you bring that book I didn't want to be read to out of up for?"

In the November 1968 Word Ways, Darryl Francis asked why a certain record of the 1960s was brought from Australia to England: "What

did he bring 'Over, Under, Sideways, Down' up from Down Under for?" (Had he lived in Alaska instead, he could have terminated the sentence with 'up from Down Under to Up Over for', using a sobriquet for the state mentioned by Mencken in The American Language.) Though 'sideways' is not normally regarded as a preposition in spirit, just as much as its companions in the title.

Malcolm Dyson of chemical nomenclature fame proposed the query "Whom shall I send a card to with 'up from out of in under for' on?" -- ten terminal prepositions.

Dyson's technique opened the flood-gates. Using it, we can add prepositions ad infinitum. For example: "What was the message 'Whom shall I send a card to with 'up from out of in under for' on' by?" Having now proved that the number of possible terminal prepositions is infinite, there is no longer any incentive to construct involved sentences containing more and more of them.

As is often the case, the British had the final word. Winston Churchill dismissed the rule with "It is something up with which I will not put".

Gravy

Geneva was cooking hominy grits and frying ham.

"What kind of gravy do you want?" she asked.

"Redeye!" I replied.

You make redeye gravy by pouring hot water into the skillet in which you fried the ham. This loosens the ham crispies and a little ham grease. When you eat this on hominy grits, you understand what the Greeks meant by ambrosia.

The alternate is cream gravy. To make this, you add a little flour to the skillet and mix it with the ham crispies. You then add milk and cook it until it thickens.

Cream gravy and redeye gravy were names I was brought up with. Geneva's family calls them big gravy and little gravy, respectively. And my friend Al Yates calls them short gravy and long gravy.

I have a sister-in-law in North Texas who calls redeye "get up gravy" and cream "go to sleep gravy". Recently, a Yankee acquaintance referred to them as water gravy and sawmill gravy. I wonder what other regional names exist.

This I know: if hot buttermilk biscuits were served with cream gravy to the United Nations, peace would break out.

The Battle of the Sexes

Recently, an ardent feminist rewrote the Bible, removing or changing all words she considered sexist -- that is, words with some device that indicated a masculine gender. Many find such gnat-straining as CHAIRPERSON or PERSONHOLE amusing, but for others it is a deadly serious business.

I suspect the zealots are doomed to failure. Gender (Latin gener, "race") goes back to the very beginnings of language. The ancient Proto-Indo-European languages used inflections to indicate three genders: masculine and feminine for persons and animals, neuter for objects without sex. The Romans reduced genders to two; all nouns were either masculine or feminine without regard to sex. This is called endowed gender and makes for some interesting situations. In Latin and Italian, FLOWER is masculine, but in French and Spanish it is feminine.

Even when there are three genders, logic does not always prevail. In German, KNIFE, FORK and SPOON are neuter, feminine and masculine, respectively.

In English, gender is almost completely logical, with gender following sex. Male names such as BROTHER or STALLION are masculine; female names such as WOMAN or EWE are feminine; and names of objects such as BOX or MACHINE are neuter. If the sex is indeterminate, as in PARENT, BIRD, SERVANT or WRITER, the gender is common or epicene. This is natural gender as opposed to grammatical gender.

In some cases, English retains the old Anglo-Saxon -ess inflection to indicate the feminine gender: GOD/GODDESS, TIGER/TIGRESS. In some incompletely assimilated foreign words, the feminine words characteristic of the language of their origin have been retained: CZAR/CZARINA, EXECUTOR/EXECUTRIX, HERO/HEROINE.

In some American Indian languages, the gender disregards sex and indicates whether or not the words represent animate or inanimate objects.

The seeming logic of English gender runs into a snag known as personification. Things or abstractions are sometimes endowed with a personality that may be either masculine or feminine. Thus, SUN, TIME, ANGER and WAR are generally made masculine when personified. However, MOON, SHIP, VIRTUE and CHARITY are usually made feminine. The reasons for these assigned genders are partly psychological, partly mythological, partly etymological.

Other languages have other conventions. It is interesting that the Germans say "The sun in her glory, the moon in his wane".

Magic

"What's your name?"

"Puddin Tame. Ask me again and I'll tell you the same."

A child's game? No, indeed! It's magic. Ancient, primitive magic. Protective magic.

The map is the territory. If a stranger learns your name, he has power over you. So you never reveal your true name. You use another.

My grandfather's grandfather could have seen witches being burned. My grandfather believed in voodoo, even though he denied it. My father would go around the block to avoid a black cat. I throw a pinch of spilled salt over my shoulder. It may do no good, but it will certainly cause no harm.

Nowhere are the vestiges of magic more evident than in our use of words. What happened to "old folks"? They became "senior citizens". To give them dignity, we say. But really, isn't it because we are vaguely afraid of the bony footsteps of old age behind us? "Don't never look back," said Satchel Paige, "somethin' might be gainin' on you!"

How long has it been since you heard that a person died? They may "pass away", "go to their reward", "buy a farm", "expire", "enter into rest", but they seldom die. One person wrote that he listed fifty-two synonyms for "died" in the Houston Post's obituary column. Down deep, there is a fear that Death might respond too rapidly to the sound of his own name.

The Greeks had a word for this process, euphēmismos, meaning "to use words of a good omen" showing how superstition can affect linguistics.

We speak of social taboos against certain offensive words. But originally taboos were not social, they were religious. Taboo is a Polynesian word meaning "sacred". We must not speak of sacred things lest the gods become angry and punish us. The opposite of taboo is noa or "profane". More word magic.

"What's your trade?"

"Lemonade. I'll show you some if you're not afraid."

The goblins will get you if you don't watch out.

Gematria

Many ancient languages were acrophonic -- that is, they used the same symbols to represent both letters and numbers. In Greek, A was both the letter "alpha" and the number "one". B was both "beta" and "two".

It was inevitable that certain numbers also spelled out words. This was a great mystery and was much studied under the name gematria, a word of unknown origin.

For example, the Jews do not use the number 15 because, in Hebrew letters, it is the same as the initial letters of Yahweh. They substitute $9+6$. Similarly, the Greeks avoided 9 because it was the initial letter for "death". Instead, they would write $8+1$ or $4+5$.

The cabala was a mystical tradition handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. The Hebrew name is qubbalah, "tradition". Among the traditions is one that shows God is Truth. Truth is em-th and in the Hebrew alphabet the numerical value is 441. The digits of 441 sum to 9, and 9 is an invariant number which can be identified with the invariance of God. And why is 9 invariant? Because $9 \times 1 = 9$ and $0 + 9 = 9$; $9 \times 2 = 18$ and $1 + 8 = 9$; . . . , $9 \times 9 = 81$ and $1 + 8 = 9$. This type of reasoning flourishes today under the name of numerology.

Paperbacks

Along with movable type, the paperback book is one of the greatest inventions of all times. I have hundreds of them, cluttering up bookcases and stored in the attic and the garage.

At least fifty of them are on logology or philology. I have been collecting these for years. Remember the Little Blue Books you could buy for a nickel? I have four of them on language. My Loom of Language is an armed forces paperback that I picked up on Kwajalein and carried around for the remainder of the war.

When I accompany my wife on a shopping trip to a mall, I usually spend my time browsing in the bookstores. And almost always I buy a paperback.

Recently, I picked up The Merriam-Webster Book of Word Histories (Pocket Books, 1976; \$1.95) "for anybody who loves words, works with them, or is fascinated by the miracle of human speech". It takes the etymology of words as given in Webster's Third New International Dictionary, expanding and humanizing some 300 of them from ACADEMY to ZWEIBACK. Even though it is written in an easy style for the casual reader, it contains much information of interest for the serious philologist. Everyone who reads Word Ways should have this book.

My latest paperback acquisition is Paul Harvey's The Rest of the Story (Bantam, 1977; \$2.95). It is a collection of essays on little-known facets of famous men. The essay of most interest to Word Ways readers describes the first meeting of Dr. James Murray, editor of the Oxford Dictionary, with one of his most prolific contributors, Dr. W. C. Minor. Dr. Minor turned out to be a pen pal of Murray's in more ways than one -- he was, in fact, an inmate of the Broadmoor Criminal Lunatic Asylum!

Rhyme Time

The Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary defines rhyme as "the correspondence, in two or more words, of terminal sounds."

The emphasis is on words. So, like any good logologist would, I began to look for exceptions.

Once in a contest to rhyme the refractory word orange, I saw something like this:

Mix red and yellow in a porring-
-er: the color you get is orange.

Part of one word rhymes with another. This is sometimes known as word splitting.

The ultimate in word splitting is to use only letters, as in this jingle I learned when a kid:

Bob and Susan in a tree
K - I - S - S - I - N - G.

The technical term is spelling rhymes, and we need not restrict ourselves to the Latin alphabet:

The best fraternity I know
Is good old

The next logical step is to move to numbers. Some years ago I cited in Word Ways a limerick by Leigh Mercer which could be entirely expressed by an equation. Lewis Carroll, however, wrote a much earlier poem in this genre:

Yet what are all such gaities to me
Whose thoughts are full of indices and surds?
 $x^2 + 7 + 53$
= 11/3.

Finally, we move on to punctuation marks:

Mary on her roller skates
Was both fast and brisk;
Wasn't she a silly fool
Her little * ?

This is as far as I have carried the matter, but I'm sure some of my fellow logologists will top this essay.

Punctuation

Back in the August 1971 Word Ways, Ralph Beaman wrote an article describing the many different special characters needed for the logologist's typewriter. Some of these are peculiar to certain foreign languages; I give a sampling of those I have noted in Roman alphabets:

- a cedilla under a t is characteristic of Rumanian
- a breve over an a is characteristic of Rumanian

- a hook under an a or e indicating a nasalized value is Polish
- an o with a slanting bar through it is Danish or Norwegian
- an i without a dot is Turkish
- a tilde over n is Spanish
- a small circle over an a is Swedish or Norwegian
- an umlaut over a or o is Swedish or German
- accents on e or a are French or sometimes Spanish

Anyone care to expand on this?

Whadda Ya Mean?

Words, particularly English words, are almost like living organisms: they change with time. They change in spelling, they change in function, and they change in meaning.

A word whose present meaning is essentially the same as its root word, even though the spelling and/or pronunciation has changed considerably, is a denotative word. The old Indo-European root kwotwar meant "four". It has come to us through the Old German petwar, the Anglo-Saxon fiuwar, the Old English fewer, to our modern four.

But if the meaning of a modern word has changed from that of the root word, even to the point of complete difference, that word is called connotative. The spelling and/or pronunciation may have remained essentially the same. Idiot, a person with little or no ability to learn, comes from the Greek idiotes, "a person who does not hold public office". Today, we idiots support those who do hold public office.

Oil Patch Slang

Several years ago, Mario Pei asked me to assemble a list of oil field slang. When I finally got around to sending him my material, he thanked me and promised to use it in his next book -- but he died before this book was written. Perhaps Word Ways readers would be interested in a sample of this pungent jargon:

- BS AND W** The water and sediment that settles to the bottom of a tank oil makes a thick emulsion that is difficult to remove. Officially, this stands for Bottom Sediment and Water, but I am sure that readers can fill in the scatological alternative
- CALIBRATED EYEBALL** A person who has been certified to determine smoke density by visual observation
- DOCTOR SOUR, DOCTOR SWEET** A hydrocarbon product that contains mercaptans is doctor sour, and one that doesn't is doctor sweet; in the old days, when a chemist reported mercaptans present, the operator would say "the doctor says the gasoline is sour"
- DUTCHMAN** Anything difficult to remove, as a piece of pipe that breaks off in a fitting
- FUZZ** The boss is "the man with the fuzzy balls" and a particularly tough boss is "old fuzz"
- HORSE'S COCK** The hose connecting the pump for pumping drilling mud down the drill stem (to lubricate the drill bit) to the pipe that

turns the drill bit

PIG An apparatus that is run through a pipeline to clean it out; more generally, when you clean something, especially on the inside, you pig it

PUMP KNOCKER A man who repairs pumps

SCREAMING MEEEMIE A gas-fired turbine

SCREW-CAT In the days before welded pipelines, they were made of screwed pipe; a pipeliner on such a job was a screw cat

STUD GOOSE The person having ultimate authority

SWAB To clean the inside of a drill stem; more generally, when you try to get information from someone you swab him

THIEF An apparatus for sampling oil from the bottom of a tank; more generally, it means extracting information by devious means

Logological Mystery Stories

I am an avid reader of mystery stories, and am always on the lookout for those with logological themes. A sampling of my discoveries:

"The Obliette Cipher", by James Powell, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Nov 1974. The solution to the mystery hinges on the interpretation of a French homonym.

"Double Negative", by David Carkeet (Dial Press, 1980). The mystery is set in a linguistics institute, and the victim is a linguist. The murder is solved by a linguist using the technique of idiophenomena, the linguistic patterns of children.

"A Sleeping Life", by Ruth Kendall. The solution hinges on the definition of "eonism".

"The Palindrome Syndrome", by Charlene Weir, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Feb 1976 (reprinted in Aug 1981 Word Ways). This describes a man obsessed with palindromes, to his wife's distraction.

"The Inelegant Conspiracy", by M. A. DeFord, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, May 1973. The solution to the mystery involves an anagram.

"The Fourth Side of the Triangle", author not given, Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, date not given. The solution to the murder is achieved by an anagram.

Quickies

"Ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny" has been said to convey more information with fewer words than any other sentence in English. It is difficult to compose meaningful sentences using eight-letter or longer words. Mario Pei suggested "Constantinopolitan maladministration superinduces denationalization". That is very good, but I wager our Kickshavians can top it.

"The principal objection to the double negative," said the lecturer in grammatics, "is that two negatives form a positive. Fortunately, there are no known cases of two positive statements meaning a negative." Sarcastic voice from the rear, "Yeah, yeah!"

Usually words lead to abbreviations. It is rare for the opposite to take place. One case is the theatrical "cue". It stands for the letter Q, which in turn is the abbreviation of the Latin quando, "when" used in old scripts to indicate that the actor was to begin his lines (a bit like "say when").

Know what a hapax legomenon is? It is a word or phrase that has been used only one time. I cannot give you an example -- if I did, it would no longer be a hapax legomenon.

What is the opposite of "poppycock"? I submit that it is "bushwa". I base this on the derivations: "poppycock" is from the Dutch pappekak "soft dung", whereas "bushwa" is from the French bois de vache, "cow's wood" or "dried dung". It is the equivalent of the American "cow chip".

Consider the word preposterous. It is derived from two prefixes, pre- and post-, and literally means "before the behind".

English proverb: "You can't make a silk purse from a sow's ear".
Portuguese proverb: "You can't make an arrow from a pig's tail".
Greek proverb: "You can't make a sieve from an ass's tail". Any more, you Kickshavians?

What is more Scottish than "auld lang syne"? Back when Gaelic was the native language of Scotland, they borrowed "auld" and "lang" from the Anglo-Saxons and "syne" from the Anglo-Normans, and made them part of their native tongue. The words were reimported into English about the time of the Reformation.

"Well, well, well!" I remarked.

"That's a deep subject", replied my wife.

"'Tis deep indeed" I answered.

Note the last sentence. English is the least inflectional and most positional of languages, yet the three words of this sentence can be arranged in all six permutations without changing its meaning. Can anyone do it with four or more words?

"Wine" and "wicket" are two of a very few words of Latin origin beginning with W; contrariwise, "verse" and "vixen" are two of a very few words of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic origin beginning with V. Can readers supply others?

I can think of only two words containing pronounceable triphthongs: WOW and SWAY. Any others?

Want to remember how to spell MAYONNAISE? Starting at the I and reading backward, it becomes "I annoy Ames". In Language on Vacation, Dmitri Borgmann christens word-pairs of this nature circular reversals.

What do you call words that result from both front-clipping and back-clipping? Thus, VAN comes from both CARAVAN and VANGUARD, and

GIN from both GENEVA and ENGINE.

Want to know how to sneeze in nine languages?

Chinese HAH-CHEE
Czech KYCHNUTI
English KER-CHOO
French A-TCHOUIN
Hebrew ITUSH

Indonesian WA-HING
Japanese KUSHAMI
Polish KICHNIECIE
Russian AP-CHI

Two homonymic trifles: WRIGHT, WRITE 'RITE' RIGHT (advice to an illiterate craftsman); the NEW GNU KNEW 'NU' (a just-born literate African antelope).

People whose work day starts variously from 11 PM to 1 AM are said to work the midnight shift, the graveyard tour, or the dog watch. What other terms are there for working this time of night?

In the series "least mean, less mean, mean, more mean, most mean" is the mean mean "mean"?

L'Envoi

I have some talent for writing. This is not bragging, it is a fact. But note that the word "talent" is relative.

In Sweeny (population 3194), I am known as the "local writer", probably in the same sense as the "town drunk" and the "village idiot".

But in spite of having written some hundreds of articles, stories, books, reviews, essays and poems, including such deathless prose as "The pH of Non-Aqueous Colloidal Carbon Sludges" and "On the Digital Roots of Perfect Numbers", the Texas Academy of Letters has not seen fit to elect me to membership.

I used to envy Dave Silverman. Being editor of Kickshaws was a fine thing. All you had to do was assemble a group of short interesting items.

Some time ago, I was invited to be guest editor. I assembled a group of short interesting items and when I finished it looked like an assemblage rather than a column.

Still, I submitted them. Ross Eckler rearranged them, deleted from some, added to others, rewrote a few and lo! a column emerged. And I got full credit. That was when I learned the difference between a writer and an editor.

So it is with this. I have furnished the raw material, but Ross has polished it. Let there be no mistake; this is as much his column as it is mine.