

ON THE BIRTH (AND DEATH?) OF A WORD

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In this article I offer a brief anecdote, one which shows that the English language (like any living language) is always changing, that it grows at the local and even at the personal level, and that many of the new "growths" bloom quickly, like some exotic flower, and can fade just as quickly.

My wife and I were visiting our friends Bill and Jan Hofelt one night last August, and as usual we were just sitting around talking. Somehow, the conversation had drifted to boating, and Bill was telling us about white-water rafting on the Ohiopyle. Now, Bill, as all his friends know very well, is a great talker, and he loves to narrate his adventures at great length and in great detail. He was just beginning to hit his stride (or should I say "hit his stroke"?) when his son Aaron came in and sat down. Aaron listened quietly for a few minutes, but then began interrupting his father's narrative to argue about what seemed like every detail (the size of the rapids, the size of the boats, the number of rapids, etc.).

But even with the interruption and ensuing "discussions" the narrative proceeded, not as smoothly as before, but it proceeded. Until Aaron began interrupting in a new way. Now, instead of arguing, he began chanting *specker*, *specker* in a playful yet accusing way. Bill bravely tried to continue his story, but Aaron got louder and louder, and by this time we were all more interested in this seemingly new word *specker* than in white-water rafting.

From the context, and from Aaron's tone, it wasn't too hard to guess that for Aaron *specker* meant something like liar. And, as we soon found out, that is exactly what it meant. One of Aaron's friends, whose last name is Speck (I don't know his first name; may future historians forgive me) had, deservedly or not, gained quite a reputation as a teller of tales, and in Aaron's mind anyone engaging in the kind of activity associated with his friend Speck merited the epithet *specker*.

So there it was. A new word. Witnessing its birth, or seeing it so soon after birth (it was impossible to say which was true), was a shock and a revelation. Charlton Laird, in The Miracle of Language, has written of "amoebas in the dictionary," of the tendency of words to bisect themselves and acquire new meanings. But the miracle we had just witnessed seemed like something of a different order entirely, something more like spontaneous generation than mitosis.

Now **specker** may never grow to maturity, may never become a full-fledged word, one in good standing with the defenders of the English language. Aaron's friend may never join the ranks of General Schrapnel, Charles C. Boycott, Louis Pasteur, Etienne de Silhouette, and the other famous people who have contributed namesakes to our language. For all I know (we moved two days later), Aaron may have stopped using **specker**, and his friends, if they ever used it, may have stopped too. For all I know, that hot August night may have been the only time he ever used it. Perhaps no one in Huntingdon (the Hofelt's home town), perhaps no one in the world - with two notable exceptions - currently uses the term.

Specker, Aaron's **specker**, may never make the dictionary, may never become legitimate. But then again it might, because I am tempted to walk over to the Webster's Third New World Dictionary (unabridged) here in the Writing Center and, in pencil - or maybe even pen - make Aaron's contribution at least temporarily permanent. On page 2187, column 3, I may add, immediately below

specker...n-s: one that specks, esp. a worker that removes specks from something

the entry

2 specker...one who specks, that is, one who embellishes a story.

And, in the interest of completeness, I may move up the column and between

2 speck...vt...l: to produce specks and esp. blemishes on or in

(some interesting semantic similarities to Aaron's **specker** here) and

3 speck...n-s: patch

add my

2a speck...vi: to add, delete, or otherwise alter information in a narrative, usually oral.

But, since the space here is so small, I may have to settle for the very blunt "to lie."

As far as I know, everyone in the world, with two exceptions, is getting along just fine without **specker** in his vocabulary. These two exceptions, who just can't seem to do without the new term, are my wife and I. Since that night at the Hofelt's, I have to admit that, on numerous occasions, each of us has had reason to deem the other a **specker**.

There is an interesting sidelight to this little story, one which provides some insight into the ways we humans "make sense" of this fantastically varied world. When Aaron first uttered **specker**, I was completely at a loss. But not my wife. She has some German relatives, had studied German, and had grown up with phrases

like "putting on some speck" for "getting fat" - and she simply supplied (or created) her own meaning, based on her past experience. (And, against incredible odds, she was right.) Thinking of "her" word **speck**, she just assumed that Aaron was expanding the meaning of her term, and accusing his father of padding the story, of adding "fat." Which was exactly what he was doing - only he wasn't doing it the way she thought he was.

Aaron's **specker** was relatively simple, but things have gotten complicated. In language, they always do. (That's what dictionaries are for.) When my wife and I use **specker** now, it is a different word; it is no longer the simple **specker** of Aaron Hofelt but a **specker** that has grown, a **specker** that has, so to speak, put on some speck, that now carries the additional weight of "one who adds fat." When we use **specker**, we have more in mind than Aaron did. Language changes. We can see the changes here in miniature.

Now this little tale may strike some as being too pat to be believable, and they may think it simply has to be contrived. But I assure you, there is not one speck of specking here. And if you don't believe me, ask Aaron Hofelt.

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