

## THE DEBASEMENT OF LOVE

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The first morning my husband and I were in England on holiday, the landlady came into the breakfast room of our bed and breakfast lodgings carrying our fried eggs, bangers, grilled tomatoes, soggy toast and my inky black tea and asked me cheerily, "Did you sleep well, Love?"

"Quite well, thank you," I managed to answer with a smile and thought how extraordinarily affectionate she was.

Then the waitress came in and asked my husband, "White coffee or black, Love?"

"Gee, they really do say it," I said to him. "I thought it was just a joke like in Andy Capp," and to make it perfectly clear the maid spoke to us as we entered our room, "Would you need some clean towels, Love?"

It wasn't a joke. Everyone really does say, "Love," or "Luv," as it is sometimes spelled, in Merrie Olde England. It is all-pervasive. The English are in the midst of runaway linguistic inflation of terms of endearment. As with the monetary variety, the words are tremendously abundant but their value has become reduced to less than a continental. It didn't take long to see that all this affection was pushbutton automatic and I soon became so desensitized that I was half surprised that the huge, lordly black and white tomcat didn't say "Pardon me, Love," as he wove about my feet in the breakfast room.

Yes, everyone says it over there. When coming out of a restaurant the maitre d' said to us, "Did you enjoy your meal, Love?"

When you get into a taxi the driver says, "Where to, Love?"

In a theatre a man walked in front of me, forcing me to get up and push my seat back and he nodded. "So sorry, Love."

In the United States an occasional saleswoman (hennaed hair with a mass of curls pinned on top, bright red lipstick and lots of costume jewelry) calls me "Darling" or "Honey" and there is even that rare waitress who calls me "Dearie." Fortunately for my taste it is still pretty unusual but, after all, monetary inflation isn't so bad here yet either.

In England, on the other hand, not only does everyone "Love" everyone but they "Darling" and "Sweetheart" them frequently as well. One time I asked a man in a grocery store where the post office was. He looked at me then came over directly around my

shoulder with fine disregard for my husband standing there and said, "Well, Darlin', just come outside a moment and I'll set you straight." I went outside and he pointed down the street as he proceeded to give me the directions, ending with "You can't miss it, Love."

In one restaurant the proprietor walked about from table to table calling all his customers "Darlins." No one seemed to regard this as worthy of notice except for the American tourists who smiled bemusedly at this local color.

The thing that I wonder about is what terms of endearment do the English use with their lovers - with that special girl, or that one-and-only guy. With the kind of devaluation of the word they have going on, what can be used that projects sincere value and affection?

The exclusivity of a word (as with any other object) can increase its value. So much spurious affection is circulating that when someone calls you "Love," "Darling" or "Sweetheart," it produces no particular response - as indeed it shouldn't because it is in the same category as "Good morning," "Goodbye" or "How are you," Leo Buscaglia notwithstanding.

I used to see the definition of Gresham's Law in the dictionary now and then as I was on my way to some other word. It was stated as the economic principle that "bad money drives out good." With my penchant for trivia I retained that definition.

It remained a useless mental tidbit until our country started coining sandwich coins made of a token portion of silver over less expensive copper. Almost at once, real silver coins became impossible to find. The poor-value coins made the high-quality ones so much more desirable they were collected and hoarded. Bad money was driving out good.

It occurred to me that there must be a linguistic Gresham's Law as well, alive and operating in England at a high rate of linguistic inflation. I wondered if English lovers didn't feel frustrated at having to pay out (or be paid) sincere love with such debased coin. "Love" and "Darling" are hardly worth stooping to pick up. Don't they long for the time when they were solid silver - or gold?

While sitting in a restaurant in London one afternoon I overheard two men conversing about a disagreement between a couple of their friends. They were workman types with rather strong Cockney accents who had dropped in for an afternoon "cuppa."

"It got worse and worse, ya know," one said, "and pretty soon he said to t'other, he did, 'Well, up yours, Love!' he said."

I call that pretty linguistically devalued - or something.