

## ADVENTURE IN THE SUPERMARKET

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Most of you probably look upon a trip to the supermarket as a routine shopping exercise, one that can even be burdensome or frustrating. Those of us sensitive to the impact of language on thought tend to see it in a different light: as a semantic adventure, a mind-boggling word game, a foray into a verbal fairyland.

Let's walk into the store. The first thing to greet us is usually a sign at the check-out counter proclaiming that SHOPLIFTING IS A CRIME! OFFENDERS WILL BE PROSECUTED! Be honest, now; is it possible for a mere human to lift (and, presumably, to carry away) a shop? Of course not - the management must be nuts.

On our way to the shopping aisles, we pass a display of LADIES' Panty Hose. Are we to surmise that elsewhere in the store is another display, one featuring MEN'S Panty Hose?

Strolling along the aisles filled with tempting merchandise, we are immediately struck by the large number of products labeled NEW, or IMPROVED, or ENRICHED - although the labels seldom go on to explain precisely what it is that makes the products new, or just how they have been improved, or with what they have been enriched. Be that as it may, those words cause philosophical uneasiness. If virtually all the products being sold five years ago have since made incredible strides onward and upward, they couldn't have been particularly good in their heyday. Yet, they were then being promoted in the most glowing terms, raising the suspicion that all of us were the victims of a cruel deception. Furthermore, with the tide of progress sweeping along irresistibly, today's wonder products will just as surely have been superseded a few years hence. Consequently, even the most highly touted of the current marvels will soon be exposed for what they really are: garbage. How, then, can any ethical producer or manufacturer so extol them now?

Similarly conspicuous is the fact that size has become a fetish. Every product, it seems, must inexorably be fitted into a regulation size of some kind. Examining the goods offered to us, we discover endless variations on the theme: regular size, medium size, large size, extra large size, giant size, jumbo size, bath size, table size, pan size, dinner size, travel size, hand size, spoon size, bite size, fun size - and, naturally, assorted sizes. There is only one size in which no produce appears ever to have been sold: SMALL size!

The multiplicity of sizes dangled before us is profoundly disturbing. Each one implies adherence to an absolute, unvarying, self-evident standard - which, unfortunately, is defined neither on the label nor in any dictionary. How, then, comes it about that the "giant" size of one brand of a certain product is manifestly smaller than the merely "large" size of a competing brand standing right next to it on the shelf? Or, think about the "family" size for a moment. Families come in different sizes, you know. How can the same family size bar of soap be equally suitable for a family of three and for a family of twelve? Again, there's a whale of a difference in size between a coffee spoon and a tablespoon, leaving us without a quantitatively meaningful referent for the concept "spoon" size. Are medium-size products used at seances? Will a trial size show up in court? Does travel size fix the length of your trip? Questions, questions, questions!

Akin to size is strength. A variety of products comes in natural strength, effective strength, flexible strength, and extra strength. If one strength is unqualifiedly effective, extra strength beyond it would appear to be superfluous (and also unnatural). If extra strength is a requirement, then anything less is ineffective, and naturalness becomes a vice instead of a virtue. As for flexible strength, this may be related to the claim of a bathroom tissue that seems to approach the ultimate in impossibility, advertising EXTRA STRENGTH! EXTRA SOFTNESS! Since "soft" means "weak, feeble", the claim becomes a juxtaposition of the extreme in irreconcilable opposites. Shall we take a course in Advanced Logic?

The newest descriptive term to make its bow on grocery store labels is that magic word, BIODEGRADABLE (replacing POLYUNSATURATED, the "in" word of just a few years ago). Judging by its rapid spread, it is evidently regarded as conferring a mystical quality on any product to which it is attached, making it so supremely desirable that any further words of praise would be supererogatory. It is pertinent to observe here that while we may not know exactly what "biodegradable" means, we most certainly do know what DEGRADABLE means: liable to be brought into disrepute, or exposed to shame or contempt. Somehow, it doesn't seem all that good. Even if we are in tune with the tenor of the times, and concede the very substantial ecological advantages of using biodegradable products, it still behooves us to ask a simple question: how does the biodegradability of a product redound to the direct, immediate benefit of its purchaser?

As we continue our sally into the fastnesses of the supermarket, we become conscious of the sly, subtle ploys used by product manufacturers to disparage their rivals. One wrapper, for example, announces boldly that it is the soap of beautiful women. The obvious implication is that all other soaps are used only by ugly women. A food package describes itself as the stay-fresh package. We immediately infer that competing products are deliberately packaged in a manner designed to insure swift spoliage of the contents. A cereal box tells us that what is inside is made of the grain

that helps America grow. Evidently, other cereals are produced by subversive outfits using grains that retard America's growth; or, at the very least, using foreign grains. Another cereal boasts that it provides American-style breakfasts, letting us conclude that other cereals are eaten only by aliens. One container trumpets the fact that its product contains REAL applesauce and raisins. Quick as a flash, we deduce that its competitors have created mirage-like phony applesauce and raisins for inclusion in the product.

Some products - soaps, detergents, toothpastes, cough remedies, hair sprays, and others - owe their miraculous effectiveness to the presence of a SECRET INGREDIENT. Let's look at some typical cases, in which only the names have been changed, to protect the guilty (as well as ourselves, from libel suits).

One popular soap specifies that it contains JZ74\*. The asterisk attached to this cryptic code name is intended to refer us to an explanatory footnote elsewhere on the label. Sequestered on another side of the box, in tiny print that can just barely be made out with the powerful magnifying glass that the average housewife invariably carries with her when she goes shopping, we find an asterisk and the explanation that the active antiseptic ingredients are TRIBROMSALAN, CLOFLUCARBAN, and TRICLOCARBAN. The names are impressive, are they not? A search through half a dozen medical, chemical, technical and general unabridged dictionaries fails to locate even one of them!

Other products speak of magic ingredients known as CM-8\*, P-3\*, X-91\*, and VQ-56\*. Following up on the asterisks produces the startling intelligence that these are the manufacturers' pet names for chemicals such as sodium monofluorophosphate, or zirconyl hydroxychloride, or dextromethorphan hydrobromide. Plowing through dictionaries for these compound names is a largely fruitless task. Finds are so few and far between that it is a thrilling experience to light upon the following entry in Hackh's Chemical Dictionary (Fourth Edition, London and New York, 1969):

DEXTROMETHORPHAN HYDROBROMIDE.  $C_{18}H_{25}ON$ ,  $HBr \cdot H_2O = 370.31$ .

3-Methoxy-N-methylmorphinan hydrobromide. White, bitter crystals, m.127, soluble in water; a cough suppressant (BP)

Unless, however, you are a professional chemist, all you will glean from this definition is that dextromethorphan hydrobromide is a cough suppressant - which could have been surmised from the fact that is is the secret ingredient in a number of well-known cough medicines.

Not all secret ingredients are invested with code names, in military counterespionage style. Some have real, word-type names. For example, a cough syrup proclaims proudly that it contains QUIET-UM, "the cough silencer" (formerly, "the modern cough silencer"). Yes, indeed ... there are so many effective cough silencers. Why not use an even stronger one, like the electric chair?

A leading toothpaste owes its potency to SHIELDALL, while another

performs heroically with the aid of HELIOSTAN. These dentifrices and others promise teeth white as the driven snow, breath fresh as mint, and instant sexual conquests.

Prominent in every supermarket is a mind-boggling display of breakfast cereals. They come in 169 different varieties, each one in three different sizes. The first feature of the cereals to attract our attention is the fact that most of them are fortified with eight essential vitamins. (Would the cereals collapse if the vitamins were removed?) Why only eight vitamins, as long as we are dealing with an already overvitaminized American public, anyway? There has obviously been a grievous oversight on the part of the manufacturers here!

The cereal cartons faithfully list all of the fortifying vitamins. Why hasn't Vitamin E been included, which is essential for normal fertility? Or Vitamin K, essential for normal blood-clotting? Or Vitamin L, essential for normal lactation? Or Vitamin T, essential for the growth and regeneration of diseased or injured human tissue? Or Vitamin U, essential for the healing of a peptic ulcer?

For that matter, why not do a thorough job, and add Vitamin B<sub>5</sub>, essential to maintaining weight in pigeons; Vitamin B<sub>10</sub>, essential to the feathering of chicks; and Vitamin B<sub>t</sub>, essential to the nutrition of the meal worm? Then there's Vitamin H, essential to preventing "egg white injury" in rats; Vitamin J, essential to the development of guinea pigs; and Vitamin M, essential to keeping cellular elements in the circulating blood of monkeys. The callous negligence of the cereal manufacturers in not endowing their products with a truly comprehensive vitamin content is shocking beyond belief.

There is more to the cereal story, however. In addition to obviously nutritive elements, the cereal boxes also enumerate chemical substances included in the products. A brief survey brings up ingredients such as sodium caseinate, sodium phosphate, sodium ascorbate, calcium phosphate, calcium carbonate, calcium pantothenate, tricalcium phosphate, glyceryl monostearate, monoglycerides, propylene glycol, lecithin, gum acacia, oil of cassia, Vitamin A palmitate, Vitamin E acetate, ferrous fumarate, iron phosphate, and potassium iodide. Rarely if ever are we informed why these chemicals are present. Are we being drugged for some sinister "Big Brother" purpose?

Some of the ingredients are particularly curiosity-arousing. Why put sodium bicarbonate in a cereal, unless it is so upsetting to the stomach that a built-in antacid becomes a necessity? Degermed yellow corn meal sounds good: we are certainly in favor of removing all germs from cereal, but why not degerm all other constituents as well? Besides, the degermed yellow corn meal in some cereals is offset by the toasted wheat germ put into others. Does toasting the germs kill them or honor them? Sodium acetate is a chemical used in photography and in dyeing; are we safe in taking it internally?

Two favorite chemicals making their appearance in cereals are

BHA and BHT. We are told that these preserve product freshness. Why do some cereals use only BHA, others only BHT, and still others both? If using both prolongs the life of the product, why not add both to all cereals? Furthermore, what do BHA and BHT stand for? No available dictionary, general or special, chooses to enlighten us on that score (we simply can't believe that the British Humane Association and the Bureau of Highway Traffic are chopped into the food we eat). Why is there a conspiracy among all of the cereal-makers to keep these two particular ingredients an impenetrable mystery?

The relentless recital of product ingredients is just one aspect of the precision with which packaged commodities are explained to the would-be consumer. That precision reaches its pinnacle on a can of spray deodorant, which instructs its user to hold the can 6 inches from his or her underarm, and to apply it for 2 seconds. That's just peachy for people who keep a metal tape rule and a stopwatch in the bathroom, and who have split-second reflexes, but what about the rest of us? The inferences to be drawn from the admirably unambiguous instructions are clear. Holding the can only 5.8 inches away, or applying the spray for 2.2 seconds, will result in serious and permanent injury to the skin (cancer, perhaps?) On the other hand, holding the can 6.2 inches away, or applying the spray for only 1.8 seconds, is a totally ineffective use of the product, an utter waste of time, money, and effort!

No supermarket is complete without cigarettes ... and more, and more, and yet more of them. They exhibit a glorious diversity of lengths, strengths, flavoring, filter type, and packaging, too well publicized in recent years to merit further comment here. The one feature all have in common is this statement, unobtrusively printed somewhere on each pack and on each carton:

WARNING: The Surgeon General Has Determined That  
Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous To Your Health

One could be inclined to assume that if the tobacco companies were ethical enterprises, they would stop manufacturing cigarettes, for the benefit of suffering humanity, but that is a development for the occurrence of which there is, as yet, scant evidence.

Like most other products, cigarettes engage in curious semantic acrobatics. One claims to provide REAL taste. Another escalates or refines the claim to REAL tobacco taste. What, pray tell, would "unreal" taste or tobacco taste be like? Many brands claim to be SMOOTH. What is a "rough" cigarette? One brand tastes good, like a cigarette should, reveling in its misuse of English ("as," not "like!").

Unlike most other products, cigarettes have failed to broaden the base of their appeal to the public. Why aren't we being offered cigarettes in orange, chocolate, pistachio, and tapioca flavors?

Whichever way we turn in the supermarket, astonishing news leaps out at us from every label, every poster, and every sign.

That news is the incredible bargain-basement price level at which all goods on the premises are being sold. We are surrounded by low, low prices, discount prices, inflation-fighting prices, drastically reduced prices, 50%-off sales, virtual giveaway sales, and \$8.00 values being sacrificed for only \$2.95.

The more we buy, the more we spend, the more we save. Purchase three containers of some particular product and receive a fourth one for just a penny extra. Present coupons clipped from your daily newspaper, or sent to you through the mails, and you get so much off on a host of purchases. For each dollar you spend in the store, you receive ten trading stamps, which you can redeem to obtain all sorts of free but valuable merchandise later on.

And so forth, ad infinitum and ad nauseam.

Seeing is believing, they say, but how can we believe something so violently at odds with the totality of our experience and knowledge? Can the game of words played at the level of its utmost intensity and earnestness in the supermarket really overpower our innate sense of reality and make us agree that black is white, that wrong is right, that true is false? This, perhaps, is where language faces its supreme test, failing to meet that test. Unutterably sad as it is for us to admit it, there is a definite limit to the power of words. Beyond that limit we dare not venture without losing all.

### *BURGESS UNABRIDGED*

*In the summer of 1985, browsing through a used bookstore in Camden, Maine, I came upon a delightful book with the above title by Gelett Burgess; I purchased it for \$17.50. Burgess, a word-coiner in the fine tradition of Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear (remember goop, blurb, and bromide?) created 100 words to describe exasperating social situations of the type nowadays limned by Ann Landers and Miss Manners:*

*AGOWILT* That frisson of dismay whey you realize you have left your bags on the train

*KIPE* To inspect critically, as one woman does another

*SPILLIX* Undeserved good luck, such as finding money in the street

*VOIP* Food that gives no gastronomic pleasure

*WOWZE* A woman who is making a fool of herself and doesn't know it

*This linguistic gem, originally published in 1914, has been reprinted by Archon Books in 1986, with a foreword by Paul Dickson - for \$17.50, the same price I paid in Maine. Buy it!*