

NAMING THE CHRONISMS

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Not long ago, I went into a store and told the man behind the counter that I needed a needle for my record player.

"Oh," he replied. "what kind of stylus do you want for your turntable?"

This took place in a shopping center which people keep reminding me is now called a mall.

This got me thinking about the way words date what we say. For instance. I count myself among those who are more terrified by the image of an atomic bomb than a nuclear device (which sounds like it should be used to describe a smoke detector). If you listen to me talk long enough, you'll know that I came from the group just before the baby boom: the one that listened to rock 'n roll, not the one that listened to rock music.

I was therefore thrilled when I came upon an article by William Safire in which he announced the coining of **chronism** for "words quivering in the aspic of time, perfect for use by dramatists who want to give historical scenes the flavor of authenticity, starring Vera Similitude, my 1940s **heartthrob**."

Now that I knew what to call them, I decided to begin a chronism collection.

Some chronisms are simply words that apply to things which were once common but which are now rare: milk bottles, slide rules, dime stores, adding machines, linoleum and soda jerks.

Others have changed with a turn in technology, sensibility or fashion. Ice boxes first became refrigerators and now, according to an ad in a recent Better Homes and Gardens from one of the leading manufacturers, should be called food storage systems. The Victrola, of course, became the phonograph, a hi fi, then a stereo and now a stereo system (or system for short). Meanwhile, the jump from record to disc is being speeded up with the advent of the CD. On the food front, spaghetti, noodles and macaroni are now terms used by middle aged people who can't hear the word pasta without thinking of pasta fazool.

Pals have turned into peers and heroes into role models. Pep is now energy, the blues now have a number of clinical. Latinate names and to admit that you feel like a sap (or chump) is to admit your age rather than your foolishness. If you say teenager more often than adolescent, it proves you were one a long time

ago. Sometime a while back, brothers and sisters gave way to siblings, pinups to playmates, boundaries to parameters and simple to simplistic. Sex is fast becoming a real verbal antiquity as it is now widely referred to in terms of sexuality. Job applications now ask for gender rather than sex.

No realm is safe. I recently read in a stamp and coin column in the paper that the term magnifying glass was passe and today's magnifier is a "loupe. glass or scope." In photography, the totally appropriate term snapshot has been driven out by the wordprint.

I find that I am often being amended, corrected or confused. At a meeting not long ago, I suggested appointing a committee; it was rephrased by someone else so the final motion had me creating a task force. To these ears a task force requires at least a few destroyers, an aircraft carrier and an admiral. A college administrator corrected me recently when I said "higher education." He said, "The proper term is now post-secondary education, many people feel that higher education is elitist." Near where I live there is a "career center" which I suddenly discovered was a vocational high school when I read an article about it in the paper. Time was that these places were called trade schools but that was when dinosaurs roamed the earth. Jails are now detention centers and junior colleges are likely to be called community colleges.

Then there are the special chronisms:

The boomerang chronism which occurs when an old term is replaced by a new one, only to have the old one fight its way back. A case in point is "media center" which was a term which was brought in to replace library, stuck for a while and then headed off into the sunset with the open classroom and areas they called pods.

The bouncing chronism. This is a term that is likely to change so quickly that one is hard-pressed to have the latest one on the tip of one's tongue before the next comes along. Such is the case with junior high schools which were soon just plain junior highs, until they became intermediate schools and middle schools which, if nothing else, has been a boon to the sign painters. In some places there were distinctions between the three, but they got lost in the confusion. The other night I was at a meeting at a local school where the principal referred to "jim schools." The term produced a murmur of confusion in the roomful of parents so he stopped and explained, "That's a general reference to junior, intermediate and middle schools -- JIM for short." If he had not stopped to explain, I would have been forced to conclude that he was talking about schools with gymnasiums.

The slang chronism. "The modern ballplayer," said Vin Scully during a 1986 World Series telecast, "calls them flares, not Texas Leaguers." Scully was referring to that particular hit that loses oomph in midcourse and drops in for a hit. No matter what they say, they will always be Texas Leaguers to me and the new term will always sound like something from the realm of dressmaking.

Perhaps all of this is as it should be, a way of marking time and generations with words. I think of my childhood and the people who said *divan* when I said *sofa* and who could never break themselves of the habit of saying they were going to listen to the television.

DICTIONARIES, ENCYCLOPEDIAS, AND OTHER WORD-RELATED BOOKS

This two-volume work, published by Gale Research Company for \$495, is the fourth (1988) edition of a listing of approximately 35,000 dictionaries, encyclopedias, concordances, gazetteers, glossaries, lexicons, thesauri, topical indexes, vocabularies, and wordbooks for which Library of Congress index cards have been created. Each entry consists of a reproduction of the material on the card, and they are listed according to the alphanumeric code found in the lower left corner (that is, from *Philosophy and Religion* to *Military, Naval, and Library Science*). At the end of the second volume is a cross-index using the classes of the Library of Congress classification system (such as *English language--slang, Mathematics--terminology, River Boats, etc.*).

The greatest strength of this reference work is its ability to identify highly-specialized dictionaries and encyclopedias (for example, would you have guessed there exists a book listing the city parks of Mishawaka, Indiana?). For the logologist, the book is a fine source of specialized dictionaries, particularly those related to slang and jargon. There are many dictionaries devoted to synonyms, antonyms, and homonyms; there are crossword puzzles dictionaries (Baus, Swamfeldt, Pulliam, etc.), and letter-position dictionaries (Griffiths, Schwartz and Landovitz). There are even dictionaries of two-letter words (Wood, Scott and Pollack) and one-syllable words (Moser). However, the only anagram dictionary appears to be the one by Hunter. I noted the appearance of Dahl's book on frequencies of spoken American words, and the Thorndike listing of the 20,000 most common words in written text, but two seminal works on word-frequency by Kucera and Francis were missing.

Curiously, a handful of non-reference logological works appear, such as Brandreth's *Joy of Lex* and *More Joy of Lex*, Espy's *Another Almanac of Words at Play* (but not the first *Almanac*), and Mencken's *The American Language* (but where are the two *Supplements*?).

Be aware of the occasional typo that may mis-index books; for example, on pp. 1165-6 *language* becomes *langue, languge, langusge, lanugage, lanuguage, and lnaguage*, and *English* is metamorphosed into *Englsih, Enlgish, and Enlish*.