

PL8 SPEEK, THE LANGUAGE OF VANITY PLATES

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In states and provinces of North America, the popularity of vanity license plates appears to be increasing by leaps and bounds. Any trip can be enlivened by the simple pastime of collecting vanity tags en route. (On a drive between Washington and Richmond, one can expect to turn up at least thirty vanity tags.)

The subject matter for vanity plates is as varied as language itself. In many cases the tags express the personality, attitude, avocation or even the profession of the owner. They may be acronymic (ESAD eat shit and die), alphanumeric (10SNE1 tennis anyone), axisymmetric (ATOY-OTA), chemical (C6HTENO5, sugar), crude (HV2HVIT, GR8TTS, IB6UB9), cryptic (GGGGGGG G-string, TTTTTTTT tease), explicit (IN DEBT, CEMENT), gastro-nomic (RATA2E ratatouille, COCOANUT), geographic (SANIBEL, TRNIDAD), foreign language (NEST PAS, DEPECHE), mirrorized (3M TA3 eat me, YX32 sexy, TOH MI I'm hot), onomatopoeic (SSSSSS--seen on a Cobra), palin-dromic (BAAB--seen on a Saab) or phonetic (ZMEGOBY see me go by, AIR4CE). Some are simply scary (CYCOPHTH, BADSEED1).

Books have been written on vanity plates and scores of collectors on as many Internet web sites share lists containing hundreds of plates. A trip to the Internet will reveal information on the cost of plates in each state and province, together with material from enough plates to fill a volume of Word Ways.

The medical profession is fertile ground. Dentists seem to love vanity plates (2TH FXR, DRILLER, 2TH DR, FT DKY, 2 3PAIR, B4DKCME) as do urologists (WE WE DR, UPP4ME) and ophthalmologists (DR IIII doctor for eyes).

Vanity plates have found their way into American literature. In *Prairie Erth*, William Least Heat Moon describes a conversation with a Kansas girl who left home for the bright lights but followed her bliss back to the farm. Her plate expressed her state of mind. "After I was out the door and in the cool and dewed night, a chuck will's widow calling from a wooded slope, I noticed for the first time her jeep license-plate letters, IMNXTC."

While vanity plates are interesting and amusing individually, their use as a means of communication offers potential for the future. The possibilities were brought home to me in a Virginia parking lot when IM DOT parked just a few cars away from IB ED. Later, a New York newspaper

editor described her (unsuccessful) attempts to get APPLE PIE to park next to CHEESE since they frequented the same diner.

In the hands of imaginative people, vanity plates speak a unique (if tinny) language. In California, where more than one million personalized license plates are registered with the Motor Vehicle Bureau, Daniel Nussbaum used only 154 plates to create his own version (inserting punctuation marks) of an ancient Greek tragedy. Mining this road lode, Nussbaum added a subtitle to the classic tale by Sophocles: Oedipus the King (of the Road).

ONCEPON ATIME LONG AGO IN THEBES IMKING. OEDIPUS DAKING.
LVMYMRS. LVMYKIDS. THEBENS THINK OEDDY ISCOOL. NOPROBS.
OKAY MAYBE THEREZZ 1LITL1. MOTHER WHERE RU? WHEREAT MYDAD?
NOCALLZ NEVER. HAVENOT ACLUE. INMYMIND IWNDER WHOAMI?
IMUST FINDEM. JO MYWIFE GOES "OED DONT USEE? WERHAPI NOW;
LETITB." IGO "NOWAY, IAMBOS. DONTU TELLME MYLIFE. INEED
MYMOM. II WILL FINDHER. FIND BOTHOF THEM."

SOI START SEEKING DATRUTH ABOUT WHO IAM. ITGOEZ ULTRA
SLOWE. THE SPHYNXS RIDDLE WAS ACINCH BUT NOTTHIZ.

SUDNLEE WEHEAR SHOCKING NEWS. WHEN IWASA TINY1 THISGR8 4SEER
SED IWOOD OFFMY ROYAL OLDMAN, THEN MARREE MYMAMA. SICKO
RUBBISH, NESTPAS? WHOWHO COULDBE SOGONE? STIL MOMNDAD SENT
MEEEEEE AWAY. MEE ABABI AWAAAY.

NOWWWW GETTHIZ. MANY MOONS GOBY. IMEET THISGUY ONATRIP.
WEDOO RUMBLE. WHOKNEW? ILEFTMY POP ONE DEDMAN.

UGET DAFOTO? MAJR TSURIS. JOJO MYHONEE, MYSQUEEZ, MYLAMBY,
MIAMOR, MYCUTEE. JOJOY IZZ MYMOMMY.

YEGODS WHYMEE? YMEYYME? LIFSUX. IAMBAD, IAMBADD, IMSOBAD,
STOPNOW THIS HEDAKE. THIS FLESH DUZ STINK. ITZ 2MUCH PAYNE
4ONE2C. TAKEGOD MYEYES! AIEEEEE!

Nussbaum's story may set the standard for future creative artists who wish to work in PL8 SPEEK. In his hands the dialog rockets along at a clip that would do credit to Mickey Spillane or Raymond Chandler. Tags he selected contain a metallic harshness well suited to tragedy. It won't be easy to beat this performance.

Based on information circulating on the Internet, others may be planning to give Nussbaum competition. An obvious starting place is to simply request the lists of vanity plates from a state DMV. Recently, a PL8 Speaker from Ontario, Canada queried the Ministry of Transport concerning a complete listing of vanity plates. The Ministry put the cost at \$2087, half up front. The requester complained, "Furthermore, if I want to use the list for commercial purposes, they want a contract and royalties. Seems like a lot of money just for a copy of their database

(without names or addresses, just plates)." The same reporter adds that someone in Oregon got a complete data base of Oregon tags for only \$222.

In October 1996, Parade magazine ran the results of their vanity plate contest which received more than 7000 entries. The ten winning plates were:

IRIGHTI right between the eyes (NJ)
 RUD14ME? are you the one for me (NC)
 HAHAAHAHA ha ha ha ha (NY)
 XQQSME excuse me (MA)
 IM12XL I'm one to excel (OR)
 ULIV1S you live once (AR?)
 AXN28D+ accentuate the positive (NC)
 VAN GO Van Gogh (OK)
 H20UUP-2 what are you up to? (VA) [20 = tare]
 TI-3VOM move it! (MO) [reversed]

More PL8 contests are inevitable. PL8 collections, lists and dictionaries exist, with new ones in the making. What we need now is literature. WHERE RU, R2D2?

TAKE MY WORD FOR IT

Word Ways contributor Robert Richler writes a "Speaking of Language" column in the Books Section of Montreal's Daily Gazette. He has collected a number of these columns into a book with the above title, published by Ronsdale Press (ISBN 0-921870-42-6) in paperback for \$14.95. A sampling of chapter titles will perhaps convey the book's flavor (and Richler's deft ways with words): English is Nice and Feisty and That's No Poppycock, Fifty Yiddish Ways to Curse your Neighbour, The Greatest Wordmaker [who else but Shakespeare?], Supporting Your Football Team in Italy can be Dangerous to Your Health [don't use the Texan "hook 'em horns" sign], Mrs. Malaprop Lives on in North American Politicians [as in Quayle's "Republicans understand the importance of bondage between mother and child"], and To Play or Not to Play: That's The Pitch [baseball words in everyday speech]. Strict letterplay is limited to a sampling of palindromes, and onomastics is covered in two chapters, Move Over Michael, Matthew's the #1 Kid in Town; It's Hard Keeping up with the Smiths in Any Language.