

# WE NEED A WORD FOR THIS!

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According to Dmitri Borgmann in *Beyond Language* (Scribner's, 1967), the English language contains two to three million words. However, this is not enough to take care of all situations one meets in daily life:

- What do you call it when one nods off for a few seconds and then jolts awake? *catsnap*
- I'm looking for the term describing the confusion experienced by everyone near a ringing cell phone—who does it belong to? *pandephonium*
- What do you call plastic bags caught in trees and flapping in the wind? *foulage*
- Is there a word for a fear of running over squirrels? *swervousness*

Many questions like these are amusingly answered in Barbara Wallraff's clever new book *Word Fugitives* (Collins, 2006). The editor of the columns Word Court and Word Fugitives in The Atlantic Monthly for the past decade, she has received enthusiastic help from her readers.

In the book, she traces the history of this type of wordplay, identifying a number of predecessors. Perhaps the earliest ones are the coinages of Lewis Carroll, who created both portmanteau words like *slithy* (lithe + slimy) and utter nonsense such as “did gyre and gimble in the wabe”. A few years later, Ambrose Bierce instituted a different sort of wordplay, the cynical definition of a standard word. This resulted in the landmark *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), previously *The Cynic's Word Book*.

**Diplomacy** the patriotic art of lying for one's country

**Bigot** one who is obstinately and zealously attached to an opinion you do not entertain

**Hers** his

He spawned a host of imitators such as Gideon Wurdz's *The Foolish Dictionary* (1904), featured in the Nov 2005 Kickshaws.

Gelett Burgess wrote *Burgess Unabridged* (1914), subtitled “A New Dictionary of Words You Have Always Needed”, perhaps the first time the necessity for language enlargement was specifically recognized.

**Digmix** to engage in a necessary but painful task

**Jurp** a haughty inferior; an impudent servant or clerk

**Nink** a useless “antique” object, preserved in worship of the picturesque

**Udney** a beloved bore; one who loves you but does not understand you

These effusions were accompanied by doggerel.

It was a jurp who answered back,  
 Impenitent and pert;  
 A filthy beast, who drove a hack—  
 You should have seen his shirt...



Amazingly, one of his inventions, *blurb*, subsequently entered the English language.

English may have niches that cry out to be filled, but it also contains dictionary-sanctioned words that fill unnecessary niches. These might be termed over-specialized words; some splendid examples are found in Webster's Second Unabridged:

**Ucalegon** a neighbor whose house is on fire

**Nosarian** one who argues there is no limit to the possible largeness of a nose

**Qualtagh** the first person one sees on going out from home on a special occasion; the first person entering a house on New Year's Day

**Wayzgoose** an annual holiday or entertainment for printers

**Serein** a mist or fine rain which sometimes falls from a clear sky a few moments after sunset

A more extensive collection can be found in Eric Albert's "A Lode for Logastelli" in the November 1988 Word Ways. (Tom Pulliam exhibits strange rather than over-specialized definitions in "Merry Am Webster!" in the February 1976 issue.)

Some words are over-specialized because they refer to activities no longer pursued. The classic example is collective nouns for groups of animals. Apparently used during hunts in the Middle Ages, collections of such words are found in several medieval manuscripts, notably *The Book of St. Albans* (1486): a shrewdness of apes, a knot of toads, a murder of crows, etc. The oddness of such collective nouns has been recognized for centuries, and in fact have been the inspiration for coinages in related fields: James Lipton's *An Exaltation of Larks* (Grossman, 1968), and follow-ons like *An Exaltation of Business & Finance* (1993), *An Exaltation of Home & Family* (1993), and *An Exaltation of Romance & Revelry* (1994). Willard Espy wrote a charming poem on collective nouns for the February 1975 Word Ways:

He asked, as he had asked before,  
How much is horror more than whore?  
To flautists set aside their flutes  
And listen when a prostitutes?  
He said, I saw a lively group  
Of laughing ladies on a stoop.  
I asked my friends, I asked my teachers  
For names to call the pretty creatures;  
And they, as is their wont to do,  
Replied from varied points of view:

An orchestra conductor led:  
'A flourish of strumpets, lad,' he said.  
To which the butcher boy rejoins:  
'I say...a pride of loins.'

In ringing tones a campanilist knells:  
'A peal...of Jezebels.'  
A teacher of domestic arts:  
'A jam...of tarts.'



A dietician diagnosed the bawds:  
 'An expanse of broads.'  
 A jeweler assayed the self-same maids:  
 'A ring of jades.'

'To me,' said a dancer, 'a wiggle of wenches.'  
 'To me,' said a chemist, 'a beaker of stench.'  
 'A cargo of baggage'—such was the guess  
 Of Henry, who drives for American Express.

He asked, as he had asked before,  
 How much is horror more than whore?  
 Do flautists set aside their flutes  
 And listen when a prostitutes?

Howard Rheingold recognized that there are highly-specialized words in other languages than English, devoting *There's a Word For It* (Severn House, 1988) to this topic.

**Koro** (Chinese) the hysterical belief that one's penis is shrinking  
**Tsuris** (Yiddish) grief and trouble caused by a son or daughter  
**Papierkrieg** (German) complicated paperwork connected with making a complaint  
 (consciously-created red tape)  
**Hari Kuyo** (Japanese) a shrine for broken sewing needles

Douglas Adams, whose affinity for the number 42 was described by Will Nediger in the February 2005 Word Ways, is the co-author of *The Meaning of Liff* (1983) and its successor *The Deeper Meaning of Liff* (1990). He has a different take on the necessity for new words to fill language niches: recycle place names. Although there are more than a million of them to choose among (see, for example, the National Imagery & Mapping Agency database), it is not always easy to find the *nom juste*.

**Ramsgate** doors that open the opposite way to the one you expect  
**Grimmit** the small bush on the side of a cliff from which cartoon characters dangle  
**Brithdir** the first day in winter on which your breath condenses in the air  
**Piddletrenthide** a trouser stain caused by the last few drops of male urine  
**Whasset** a business card in your wallet belonging to someone you have no recollection of

Piddletrenthide was the subject of a May 1975 Word Ways article by Darryl Francis, reporting London Times correspondence in the summer of 1974 on odd British place names, inspired by a news item mentioning the reassignment of a Church of England cleric!

The foregoing examples of much-needed words were largely created by the authors or their friends. During the 1960s Mary Ann Madden, the editor of a column in the New Yorker Magazine, introduced the final essential component of such investigations—the solicitation of reader contributions to a posed linguistic problem. The results of these competitions were summarized in three books: *Thank You For the Giant Sea Tortoise* (Viking, 1971), *Son of Giant Sea Tortoise* (Viking, 1975) and *Maybe He's Dead* (Random House, 1981). The competitions were set on a wide variety of word-oriented recreations, not specifically niche-filling words; the flavor of her material is given in various Word Ways issues (February 1972 p 16, August 1977 p 178, February 1977 p 40, May 1981 p 92, 108). Among the more logological ones were one-letter misprints (small apartment for runt), famous name anagrams (William Randolph Hearst : news



arm had hilltop lair), near misses (a man, a plan, a canal—Suez!), and repunctuated names (Walt W., Hitman).

Paul Dickson sought contributions from others when collecting nonce-words used only by members of a family. Some were sent in response to his book *Words* (Delacorte, 1982); others come from listeners of radio talk shows, and audience response at public lectures and speeches. The result was an alphabetized collection in *Family Words: The Dictionary For People Who Don't Know a Frone from a Brinkle* (Addison-Wesley, 1988). These words were obviously created to fill linguistic niches, at least within family groups if not for society at large.

**Frone** a particle that still sticks to a plate after being washed

**Brinkle** the mark on your face from the upholstery on a chair or sofa you've napped on

**Kerfunkle** a car with one back light out

**Kidney Buster** a very watered-down drink (as when nearly out of liquor)

**Rios** dry cereal eaten by hand as a snack (from Cheerios)

**Gilgahoos** small spots of light reflected on the ceiling, from water trembling in a glass

**Plernscrabble** ice cream beginning to drip and melt down the side of a cone

Perhaps the most fecund objects for name creation are the dust balls that collect under furniture: pummies, tumbleweeds, kittens, mice, mung balls, goofa feather, koodla, bed fluff, dust bunnies, slut's fluff, fizziewiggle, smirf, bouse, scobies, leap jeeps, lazy maids, osse, woozies, foomacha, bunny tails, woolyboogers, feezla, woolywiley, flugs, dust hippos, monk-monks, and people coming and going! A Word Ways example of family words (mostly from mispronunciations) is given by "Slub Gub" in the May 2005 issue.

So there you have it. *Word Fugitives* owes something to all of these predecessors, but one essential ingredient has not been mentioned—puns. Puns and reader contributions, plus Wallraff's impeccable taste are what make this wordplay sparkle. (Her final chapter explains the criteria she uses to pick the best coinages, and analyzes why so few of these words make it into the English language.) Word Ways material appears three times: Robert Maier's palindromic form for the word palindrome (palinilap), Faith Eckler's family words (see above), and Dave Morice's dictionary of words beginning with X.

Shouldn't there be an expression for the feeling you get when you finish reading a book you don't want to ever end (asked by Barry Cranmer)?