

## “MA IS THE MEASURE OF ALL THINGS”: A LINGUISTIC POTPOURRI

DON HAUPTMAN

New York, New York

donhauptman@nyc.rr.com

This is it: the inevitable “desk-clearing” article of miscellanea and ephemera that didn’t fit elsewhere.

Like all writers, I accumulate jotted notes and embryonic ideas, many of which don’t warrant an article or book. Such material includes puns and other wordplay, observations on language and usage, conundrums, paradoxes, oxymorons, ambiguities, redundancies, arch questions of the “why do we say that?” genre, and similar oddities. This field has been popularized by, among others, Richard Lederer, George Carlin, Steven Wright, and Andy Rooney. In recent years, it has found its natural home in lists circulated via e-mail and the Internet.

Here are some of my own contributions. . . .

A newspaper headline in October 2005 announced, “Senate Pushes Back Debate On Stem Cell Research to ’06.” I’m hardly the first to note this peculiar and confusing expression. Observes one language watcher: “‘Back’ is in the past. How can rescheduling something to occur further in the future be described as ‘pushing it back’?” It works the other way, too. Recently, unexpected publicity motivated the publisher of a controversial book to release it sooner than planned. According to a news report, he “brought forward the publication date . . . by two weeks.”

Perhaps a clue to help explain this phenomenon can be found in Aymara, an Indian language spoken in the Andes, particularly in Bolivia and Peru. In Aymara, the past is always perceived, and referred to, as ahead—and the future as behind. But then, this interesting discovery may not enlighten us on the “pushes back” mystery after all, because scholars tell us that no other language employs this surprising concept of time.

Now for a few linguistic puzzles involving apparent opposites that function as synonyms. . . .

- A *running* joke is the same as a *standing* joke.
- If someone is *roundly* defeated, he is also *squarely* defeated.
- The phrase “the forces at *work*” is synonymous with “the forces at *play*.”
- If you are living *on* an inheritance, you’re also living *off* an inheritance.
- Similarly, a party to a deal or contract who signs *off* also signs *on*.

And to pose a slightly different question of antipodes: If someone is given a dressing *down*, why isn’t that the opposite of dressing *up*?

On a TV weather report, I heard a meteorologist predict rain for the following day. The forecast for the day after that was described in an on-screen graphic as “Little Better.” But apparently, no one spotted the ambiguity. Does this phrase mean that the weather will be slightly improved over the previous day—or does it mean that it will be not much brighter?

Let’s move on to a few other curious issues. . . .

- To pop music professionals and fans alike, a hummable melody used to be *catchy*; now it has a *hook*. That’s the same metaphor, isn’t it?
- It seems odd that repeating a word, rather than confirming or intensifying its meaning, sometimes indicates the opposite instead: disbelief, skepticism, or sarcasm. Examples: “Promises, promises!” “Shocked, shocked!” “Yeah, yeah!”
- “Black Monday” (October 19, 1987, the day of a record stock market plunge) is bad, while “Black Friday” (the day that each year immediately follows Thanksgiving, when retail sales soar) is good.
- One way to abbreviate words is by clipping syllables, such as *fridge* for *refrigerator*. In street slang, *neighborhood* can be shortened to both *nabe* and *'hood*. One can imagine (with some effort) a cool dude saying, “Hey, what’s happening in the nabe—or ’hood?”
- The Healthy Choice brand has a line of frozen foods called “Familiar Favorites.” But isn’t a favorite by definition familiar?
- *Caijing* is the name of a Chinese business magazine; the word means “finance and economy.” Is it just a coincidence that the word sounds like *ka-ching*?
- In a seafood restaurant, if you order orange roughly, is it appropriate to accompany it with an orange smoothie?
- The expression *sun-drenched* borrows an image from rain—which presumably isn’t the idea those using it intend to convey.
- Why is *lucrative* good—while *lucre* is invariably modified by *filthy*?
- The word *flaccid* (which means limp or lacking stiffness) is frequently mispronounced. But you can remember the proper pronunciation via a simple—albeit suggestive—mnemonic: “First you have a hard C, then you have a soft C.”

And finally, this anecdote seemed best saved for last. . . .

In 1973, military conscription was abolished and replaced by a volunteer army. Several of the people responsible for this historic achievement are friends and acquaintances of mine. Almost no one knows this remarkable story. Last year, I decided to write a brief article about it. I sent the rough copy to two of the principals for fact checking. At the bottom of the document, I typed three words I routinely use in manuscripts. Only later on did it occur to me how unexpectedly appropriate they were in this context. The words? “End of Draft.”