

“MAN SHOULD NOT SCAMPER WITH THE UNKNOWN!”

A New Chrestomathy of Linguistic Miscellanea

DON HAUPTMAN
New York, New York
donhauptman@nyc.rr.com

Numerous critics and curmudgeons have inveighed against the concept of Facebook “friends,” rightly pointing out that hundreds of people can’t be one’s friends in any meaningful sense of the word *friendship*.

To solve this problem, I propose the locution *'quaint*, which is short for *acquaintance*. (Example of proper usage: “I don’t really know Tom that well; he’s just my *'quaint*.”) Note that the apostrophe, indicating an apheresis or truncation, is mandatory. Otherwise such comments might be misconstrued as pejorative!

Yes, it’s tough to get a new word into the language, but consider this a valiant attempt.

Here’s another roundup of wordplay that didn’t fit my usual article themes. Herein, I deploy epigrams, aphorisms, paradoxes, ironies, neologisms, witticisms, revised familiar quotations, and assorted linguistic observations and trivia.

As always, I began this assignment with a longer list of candidates, then eliminated those that turned up via Internet search. Among the duplicated rejects: *Aristotelian relationship*. Is “*popular culture*” a contradiction in terms? *No good deed goes unfinished*.

Despite such diligent research, I was unable to find other instances where I had been anticipated. It’s possible that someone is living in a cave, lacking online access, yet routinely churning out material identical to what I’ve created. Nevertheless, I’ve endeavored to confirm that everything here is reasonably original.

Below, the latest potpourri:

- Why do scientists say *thought experiment*? Isn’t that a redundancy? After all, *every* experiment involves thought.
- “He was unceremoniously dismissed.” Did you ever notice that whenever an event is described as *unceremonious*, it’s usually something that was unlikely to be accompanied by a ceremony anyway?
- A friend posted an article in which he sternly instructs: “Never give unsolicited advice.” (Wait. What?)
- Speaking of needed new words, here’s another: *plexophobia*. Definition: the nagging fear, prior to the start of a film, that you might accidentally be seated in a theater that’s about to screen a movie other than the one for which you bought your ticket.

- A pharmaceutical company should introduce a remedy for travelers' diarrhea with the perfect name: *Turista Traction*.
- As they say in Nashville: With Faith Hill, all things are possible.
- One evening, at a disappointing theatrical performance, I was tempted to shout, "Is there a play doctor in the house?"
- It's a good practice to read between the lines. Alas, some people evidently restrict their reading to the blank spaces they find there.
- You never want someone to cut you dead, but that's at least better than being cut and then dead!
- In thorny situations, someone inevitably observes that there's no magic pill. Of course, if there were, it would probably be banned by the FDA.
- A fish out of water . . . is soon cooked and eaten.
- At a lecture I attended, the speaker explained *phlogiston*, a hypothetical substance once purported to account for fire and combustion; the theory was discredited long ago. Then he paused and asked rhetorically, "Am I getting this right?" I called out, "It's impossible to get it right!"
- There are none so blind as those who will not seek.
- A few years ago, I was dining alone at a classy restaurant. The waiter recommended a tempting caloric chocolate dessert listed on the menu with the creative name "Heart of Darkness." "I would order it," I riposted, "if I were with a Secret Sharer."
- Writing this article, I fell behind schedule. To meet the deadline, I was motivated to madly rush—splitting an infinitive in the process.

To conclude, a tale containing a lesson. A correction I wrote was published as a letter to the editor in *The Wall Street Journal* on September 9, 2003:

A Sept. 4 letter quotes Mark Twain as saying, "It ain't what he don't know that worries me. It's what he knows that ain't so." This insight must surely rank among the most frequently misquoted and misattributed aphorisms of all time—thus proving its own point! It was Josh Billings who said, "The trouble with people is not that they don't know, but that they know so much that ain't so." The epigram must be popular at the Journal. This is at least the fourth time it has been misquoted, and corrected, in these pages.

The ironies didn't end there. Five years later, despite my reprimand, the editors repeated the mistake, crediting Will Rogers. In *The New York Times* around the same time, Satchel Paige was given the honor. *The Quote Verifier*, a useful reference book by Ralph Keyes, lists still other dubious originators: Yogi Berra, Eubie Blake, Kin Hubbard, Charles Kettering, and Artemus Ward. With each misattribution, the sentiment is creatively reworded. The moral of the story? Truly, it's what they know that ain't so!