

ALL GOOD THINGS MUST COME TO A TREND

More Quirky Linguistic Observations, Conundrums, and Miscellanea

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Some years ago, I received Crate & Barrel's festive holiday catalog. Two edible products were featured: "Coffee Crunch" and "Mocha Melts." Both sounded like my favorite kinds of treats, so I rushed to a nearby C&B, waved the torn-out page, and asked where I could find these caloric confections. Most likely because they were seasonal, the salesperson was thoroughly baffled. "Maybe," I suggested helpfully, "they're stocked in the . . . Alliteration Department?"

Once again, it's time for a salmagundi of language oddities, queries, quips, and other trivia that don't fit my usual article themes and agendas. I periodically assemble these compilations from dozens of nibbled scrotes—er, I mean: scribbled notes (don't ask!). Thus, for all such items, my procedure is the same: I write them down—and then write them up. Let us proceed. . . .

An editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* last year scolded a prominent prosecutor for overreach after he dropped charges against a group of executives unjustly accused of insider trading. "He owes his targets an apology, not a press-release apologia."

A nice point and a neat pun. The word *apologia* doesn't mean apology. Rather, it means defense, as in John Henry Newman's classic *Apologia Pro Vita Sua* (1864). It's striking that the *Journal's* editors assumed that their 2.2 million daily readers would understand the distinction. The words are among many common English "confusables."

In another case of cultural literacy in the news, a reporter mentioned Theodore Low De Vinne (1828-1914), an American printer and expert on typography, explaining that the name "rhymes with Pliny." But this is more ambiguous than heuristic. After all, how many people these days know how Pliny (in fact, there were two in ancient Rome) is properly pronounced? We might call such examples "phony phonetics." A superior rhyming pronunciation clue would be *tinny*.

And further. . . .

- A ferocious debate is raging about whether potentially harmful expression should be censored. My view: Those who want to ban hate speech . . . *hate speech*.
- Prior to retirement, when I was a freelance advertising copywriter, I observed that my publisher clients routinely abbreviated *paragraph* as *graf*. Because we sometimes worked with visual graphs, however, this jargon could have caused confusion. So instead I used the truncation *para*, which was, I thought, less subject to misinterpretation. These are clippings, or technically, *apheresis* (when the front of the word is removed) and *apocope* (when the ending suffers that fate).

- We say “one cat,” “two cats” . . . but “*no cats*.” Zero is an even lower number, so why is the form plural? Allan Sherman, the musical parodist who was popular in the 1960s, wrote and performed an amusing song about peculiar singulars and plurals, but he somehow omitted this example.
- An outspoken podcaster likes to boast about his originality and creativity. Toward the end of one recent episode, he pronounced: “I have a horror of repeating myself. *I have a horror of repeating myself.*” As far as I could tell, the humor was unintentional, and he was oblivious to the irony.
- ““Yo, dude. Wassup wit’ dat? ,’ shouted the peasant farmer in the rural Chinese village.” Really? Did he say that in English—or was it translated from Mandarin? Of course, this is a hypothetical and mischievous example, but I’m frequently puzzled when, in foreign media coverage, the language in which a quotation was originally uttered is rarely specified.
- When I was in the Navy during the Vietnam War period, a fellow sailor, writing home, asked me the proper way to begin a letter to an aunt with whom he had been out of touch. I wryly suggested, “How about ‘Dear Obligation’?”
- Many common surnames derive from ancestral occupations, e.g., Baker, Carpenter, Mason, Smith, Taylor, Wheeler. Which leads me to ponder whether, in the future, people might be named Frank Blogger or Susan Webanalyticsdeveloper.
- Also related to professions: A cynical cliché characterizes dentistry with the words “drill, fill, bill.” Parole officials say, “trail ’em, nail ’em, jail ’em.” In law, consulting, investment banking, and other fields, staffers are described as “finders, minders, and grinders.” I wonder how many other such occupational rhyming trios exist. This is a situation where Google isn’t much help. Know any I’ve missed?
- The word *ephemera* originally referred to things that were short-lived and of little or no value, such as postcards and train tickets. Yet today, it’s used to mean collectibles that have been carefully preserved and sometimes sold for large sums. Thus, ephemera might qualify as a contronym: a word with contradictory meanings, such as *cleave*, *fast*, *oversight*, and *sanction*.
- Called upon to introduce a friend, I did so, thus: “He’s a language stickler, just as I.”

And one final true tale: For four and a half years, I wrote a weekly online column of advice on grammar and usage. In one installment, I recommended eschewing *a number of*. Why? Because this familiar locution is wordy and vague. I suggested substituting a specific number—or, absent that information, *several* or *many*.

Drafts of my columns were routinely vetted prior to publication by a prominent language guru. When he read this item, he admonished, “I’ve never heard this before. Who’s your authority?” Of course, I couldn’t resist. I replied, “Who’s my authority? *I’m* the authority!”

A race to one’s credit: I thought the title of this article was original, but Googling revealed that at least half a dozen clever people had anticipated me—referring to, e.g., home births, shaving beards, and the closing of a nightclub.