

THE SKY'S THE LITMUS!

Another Gallimaufry and Salmagundi of Language and Wordplay

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While strolling in my neighborhood, I was accosted by a young woman whose T-shirt proclaimed that she was hawking a food home-delivery service.

In a cultivated English accent, she deployed her pitch: “What do you like to eat?” Deciding to have a little fun, I replied, “Omnivore.” She looked thoroughly baffled. “What does that mean?”

Although I’m accustomed to the appalling illiteracy prevalent here in the U.S., I had naïvely assumed that the Brits, equipped with superior educations, outperformed us. Sadly, that conclusion was unwarranted.

This is my fifth *Word Ways* roundup of miscellanea: linguistic oddities and trivia that don’t fit my usual categories. All have been certified as original coinages or observations, at least as far as can be determined by Google searches, except where I was anticipated, and due credit is given in those cases. So let us proceed. . . .

The word *literally* is ubiquitously misused to describe situations that are decidedly nonliteral, such as “He literally exploded with anger.” But in a newspaper report quoting an official of a social services agency, the mistake proved unintentionally appropriate: “The demand for affordable senior housing is literally through the roof.”

In Las Vegas to attend a convention, I discovered that the TV in my hotel room had a channel entirely devoted to “Responsible Gamin.” Obviously, the final letter had been dropped from the graphic, which appeared repeatedly over several days. But the typo inspired me to consider writing a children’s book series featuring a plucky young French hero and his picaresque exploits.

One fine morning, unprompted, I thought: “Curiosity skilled the cat.” I congratulated myself on this clever quip, reasoning that it might be more accurate and profound than the original proverb. Then I Googled and found over 7,000 links. (Oddly, however, no one had taken the next logical step, setting the revised aphorism in the Catskills.)

Last year, a municipal official was quoted in news reports, explaining why he had made a unilateral decision: “I can’t wait for the bureaucracy.” It was clear that, because of the urgency of the situation, he chose to act immediately and independently. But out of context, the statement might be ambiguous—implying that he was eager for the bureaucrats to arrive.

A friend had just returned from a conference devoted to the work of H.L. Mencken. Wondering what goes on at such an event, I archly inquired: “Does everyone sit around all day underestimating the intelligence of the American public?”

Business signs with funny errors are a staple of blooper collections. Here are examples I spotted, and in some cases captured for posterity with my phone camera:

In a pharmacy: “All controlled prescriptions must be followed by picture I.D.” Similarly, in a café: “We respectfully ask for a collaborating I.D. when paying by credit card.” (The proprietor presumably meant *corroborating*.) In a grocery/deli, a posted warning to watch one’s belongings was addressed to “Dear Costumers.” In the restroom of a frozen yogurt shop: “Press hardly to flush.” And in a gift shop: “This door will close when speaker stobe is activated.” (An inquiry revealed that this helpful alert somehow referred to the emergency alarm system.)

Here a few briefer items:

- Printed on a restaurant check I received: “Suggestive tip.”
- Isn’t Thoreau’s famous dictum, “Simplify, simplify” a contradiction? After all, it would be a lot simpler if it weren’t redundant.
- On NPR, a reporter referred to “festive mourning.” This surely qualifies as a paradox or oxymoron, though the Internet confirms that it accurately describes traditional celebrations in some cultures.
- A local hair salon is named “Beyond Beauty.” Other identically yclept establishments populate numerous U.S. cities. But doesn’t the name imply that whatever the shop delivers is something *other* than beauty?
- In an e-mail message I wrote: “That’s what friends are for. To end sentences with prepositions.”
- A revised aphorism: “Revenge is best dished.”

To conclude: Arriving at a lunch event, I asked a fellow diner if a particular place was taken. The reply: “It’s not married in stone.” This is a *malaphor*, unintentionally combining two idioms. If this genre appeals to you, a collection was published last year: *He Smokes Like a Fish and Other Malaphors*, by David Hatfield, available via Amazon or the author’s website, malaphors.com. Examples from the book: “We barely scratched the tip of the iceberg.” “You’re a tough nut to follow.” “He shoots from the cuff.”

In yet another case of being beaten to the punch, I thought I had invented “Sky’s the litmus,” but a search turned up one result: an earlier coinage on the website of Eric Darton, a writer and college instructor.