

IN THIS BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE . . . WORDS! *An Omnium Gatherum* of Linguistic Humor and Miscellanea

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When I lend a small sum, or purchase something for a friend as a favor, I casually offer to waive the debt, accompanying the gesture with the quip: “It’s a mere bag of shells.”

I’m no longer surprised when the ostensible beneficiary doesn’t get it. A *bagatelle* is “an unimportant or insignificant thing; a trifle.” The gag originated in a classic episode of *The Honeymooners* sitcom, still endlessly in syndication, as a malapropism uttered by Ralph Kramden, the blustering bus driver played by Jackie Gleason. According to lore, Gleason ad-libbed the joke. I probably heard it as a kid, watching the original broadcast in 1956.

There may be a moral here: Obviously, the producers expected the audience back then to know the word and thus be amused by the blooper. The fact that this is no longer true is yet another indication of how far the state of literacy has plunged.

This is the sixth recreationally linguistic gallimaufry that I’ve written for *Word Ways*. Following are items that the usual themes of my articles didn’t accommodate.

As a handy, all-purpose excuse to people expecting a response or requesting some action on my part, I puckishly say that I am *blizzy*—my own portmanteau of *busy* and *lazy*. Googling didn’t turn up the neologism, at least not with this meaning. But last October, reading a column in *The Wall Street Journal* by financial journalist Jason Zweig, I spotted his invention of *blazy*. The same, only different. Use whichever version you prefer.

In a cartoon, hundreds of two-legged rodents, nattily attired in headbands and Nikes, are running a marathon on a city boulevard. On the sidelines, one briefcase-toting executive complains to another: “I’m tired of this rat race.” (Numerous variations may be found online.) I wonder if anyone else has identified the phenomenon in play here, which I call “literalizing the metaphor.” More examples: A recent headline announced: “Audiences Face the Music Again.” A New Zealand vacation home was burglarized and the thieves really did take “everything but the kitchen sink.” Can you think of others?

A few provocative queries and observations:

- How did silence as a response come to be critically ridiculed by the comment: “Crickets”? Yes, I get the gist. But, after all, crickets are noisy, right?
- Isn’t the professional title “paid assassin” redundant? Would any of them do the job, um . . . *pro bono*?

- Why do we say “related by blood”? The phrase originated in the early 18th century, before genetics was discovered. Maybe they knew something, because DNA can be extracted from white blood cells. Still, I find the expression repellent. Will it ever be abandoned? Frankly, I’m not sanguine about the prospects!
- Two years ago, confirming a flight, I had to read the boarding-pass code, LZHWUB, on the phone to a human customer-service representative. Although I was once in the Navy, I often forget what’s usually referred to as the NATO phonetic alphabet. So I hesitantly recited: “Lima, Zulu, Hotel, er . . . Whatever.” (It’s really *Whiskey*.)
- Whenever I complained to my accountant about an expense, such as his bill, he would invariably retort, “It’s a cost of doing business.” Now that I’m retired, I rationalize each unavoidable monetary obligation as “a cost of doing life.”
- At first, I thought it odd that a theater performance scheduled for a Sunday at 10:30 A.M. was identified as a “matinee.” Aren’t matinees customarily in the afternoon? But the impresarios may have been more on target than they knew. The word is derived from the French *matin*, morning.
- In a reply to a friend: “This topic is above my pay grade.” I then added: “That bromidic expression may now be past its sell-by date.”
- If a writer is guilty of *salting* his work with, say, pretentious references, is that equivalent to *peppering* it?

Finally, I have long been fascinated by rhyming phrases, which are ubiquitous in quotidian parlance: *creature feature*, *dream team*, *fake it till you make it*, *funny money*, *high and dry*, *large and in charge*, *set it and forget it*. A 2018 political campaign slogan and meme was “Jobs Not Mobs.”

I enjoy festooning my conversation and email correspondence with this device: *belated yet related*, *eerie query*, *gist with a twist*, *menu venue*, *minions with opinions*, *pester sequester*, *quid pro oho*.

Rhyme has a natural and universal appeal, as indicated by its longstanding use in poetry, light verse, classic stage plays, and song lyrics. Children play the rhyming game called “Inky Pinky.” Riddles, magic spells, and incantations all deploy the device. And let’s not forget Cockney rhyming slang. So there’s clearly something inherently satisfying about rhyme; perhaps it has an evolutionary origin.

Or is that theory just *pie in the sky*?

Credits: I thought I had invented the article title, then discovered that numerous clever people had beaten me to the punch. Ditto for “cost of doing life.” Unless otherwise attributed, everything else above is original, though that can sometimes be tough to confirm via even the most diligent searching.