TRITE AS A CLICHE

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A cliche is a stale, commonplace, worn out word, phrase, or figure of speech that many speakers and writers fall into using out of hurry or sheer laziness.

It is one of the ironies of language that vivid comparisons soon become cliches precisely because they initially express an idea so well. These comparisons catch on, are picked up by many people, and quickly become trite and dead in the sense that they no longer strike us as original or clever.

The prevailing triteness in modern writing led the English novelist and critic George Orwell (Animal Farm, 1984) to lament that "prose consists less and less of words chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated henhouse."

Take the hackneyed formula "(adjective) as a (noun)." Offer the first half of the phrase and instantly into the minds of almost everybody flashes the second half. If, for example, I say "dead as a . . .," most readers will say "door-nail." In fact, this expression has been wheezed for more than 600 years, back to at least 1350, when an anonymous poet, describing the hunting of a deer, wrote:

And happened that I hitt hym be-hynde the left sholdire. Dead as a dornayle was he fallen.

The very fact that the second half of such comparisons skips so easily into the mind is a danger sign. It means that everyone else would use the same simile, and this is exactly what makes for triteness. To prove my point, I present over one hundred " . . . as a . . ." cliches; see how many you can complete correctly. The first set is completed by inserting members of the animal kingdom:

1. blind as 8. cross as 15. happy as
2. brave as 9. drunk as 16. happy as
3. busy as 10. dumb as 17. healthy as
4. clean as 11. fat as 18. hungry as
5. crazy as 12. free as 19. loose as
6. crazy as 13. gentle as 20. mad as
7. crazy as 14. hairy as 21. mad as
Complete the following by using types of food:

22. naked as 27. quiet as 32. snug as
23. nervous as 28. sick as 33. strong as
24. plump as 29. silly as 34. strong as
25. poor as 30. slippery as 35. stubborn as
26. proud as 31. sly as 36. wise as

Complete the following by using objects often found in the house or associated with houses:

37. American as 42. nutty as 47. soft as
38. brown as 43. pleased as 48. sweet as
39. cool as 44. red as 49. warm as
40. easy as 45. red as 50. wrinkled as
41. flat as 46. slow as

Complete the following by using things found in nature:

51. bald as 58. hard as 65. sharp as
52. big as 59. high as 66. smooth as
53. black as 60. limp as 67. soft as
54. cute as 61. neat as 68. stiff as
55. deaf as 62. pretty as 69. tight as
56. deaf as 63. rough as 70. tough as
57. dull as 64. safe as 71. white as

Complete the following by using hackneyed adjectives:

72. cold as 77. fresh as 82. old as
73. dry as 78. good as 83. pure as
74. dry as 79. hard as 84. right as
75. easy as 80. hot as 85. solid as
76. fast as 81. light as

Now, for a change in approach, fill in the beginning of each cliche by inserting the appropriately hackneyed adjective:

86. as an arrow 101. as Methuselah
87. as a bell 102. as a new-born babe
88. as a bell 103. as a new penny
89. as Croesus 104. as night
90. as day 105. as a pistol
91. as the day is long 106. as a rail
92. as the day you were born 107. as shootin'
93. as a dollar 108. as sin
94. as a drum 109. as thieves
95. as a fiddle 110. as a tomb
96. as a ghost 111. as a two-dollar bill
97. as a hatter 112. as a whip
98. as a judge 113. as a whistle
99. as life 114. as a wink
100. as a lord