A DAY AT THE YOU KNIGHTED NAY SHUNS

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It was a chilly afternoon on December the seventh, 1967, the 26th anniversary of Pearl Harbour. Dmitri Borgmann was sitting in the reading room of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. He had come down from Oak Park, Illinois for a few days to do research on synonyms for baldness after noticing that his hairline was receding. For him the NYPL was a haven of solitude, an asylum which sheltered him from the madness of the sixties. He was browsing through an original 1933 edition of Science and Sanity: An Introduction to Non-Aristotelian Systems and General Semantics by Alfred Korzybski. At page 26 he felt an overpowering urge for some shuteye. Just as his head it the table he was tapped on the shoulder by a petite blonde in a red miniskirt. ‘Mister Borgmann? Mister Dmitri Borgmann?’ Dmitri grunted sleepily. Was she an overzealous librarian, he wondered, or an NYU sophomore wanting him to autograph her copy of his best-selling Language on Vacation?

‘The Secretary General would like to meet with you straight away.’

‘Does the New York Public Library now have a Secretary General?’ he replied. ‘Bureaucratic titles are becoming inflationary these days. I would have thought the designation Chief Librarian or Library Director was quite sufficient.’

‘No, the Secretary General of the United Nations, Mister U Thant. I’m his private secretary, Miss Spelling. U’s a big fan of yours. He’s keen to discuss a highly important matter with you. The official limousine is waiting outside. Please accompany me.’

Dmitri was fazed by this strange invitation but, aware that life in the Big Apple has a tendency to unexpected craziness, abandoned Korzybski and followed this mysterious lady in red down the steps and into the back of a white stretch limo. In profile she looked a bit like Eva Maria Saint’s character in Hitchcock’s North by North West, and Dmitri was beginning to wonder whether this escapade might not also end up as some UN spy thriller, climaxing in a desperate chase on Mount Rushmore. He fantasized that he was Cary Grant rescuing Miss Spelling from the tip of George Washington’s nose. As he ogled the hemline of her miniskirt, he experienced a pleasurable excitation. Schmidt’s Cyclopedic Lexicon of Sex had a word for that, he remembered. What was it again?

‘Brachycraspedonia!’ he ejaculated. ‘Gesundheit!’ she replied. The spell was broken. Roger Thornhill slipped off the Washington proboscis and plummeted to his doom somewhere in the Black Hills of Borgmann’s imagination.

Seriously though, why was the UN interested in him? The Secretary General had no doubt heard of his excellent consultancy work in coming up with the name Exxon. That language excursion could turn out to be a nice little earner for both him and the company, provided (as he had recently warned the CEO) that the brand name was never used in conjunction with any other word containing negative letters like V and Z. Should that happen, the consequences could be disastrous.
The limo pulled up outside the UN Secretariat building on First Avenue and they took the
elevator up to the top floor. While Dmitri was waiting for U Thant in the reception area, Miss
Spelling reappeared with a copy of Reader’s Digest.

‘U will be with you soon. You might like to do the word power test while you’re waiting, Mister
Borgnine.’

‘Borg-mann’ he snapped. ‘Borgnine is an Oscar-winning Hollywood actor and a well-mixed
transposal of RINGBONE. Just call me Dmitri.’

‘Oh, you have the same first name as that famous musician, Dmitri Potemkin.’

Miss Spelling flounced off. Dmitri completed the word power test in a few seconds, then lapsed
into one of his typical logological daydreams. He was intrigued by the initial U. Was U—like M
and Q in the James Bond movies—a unisyllabic acronym designed to preserve the Secretary
General’s anonymity for security reasons? Or was U appointed because his given name was the
same as the first letter of the UN itself? If that were so, the former Burmese premier, the
palindromic U Nu, would have been a more appropriate choice. Then he recalled that U was in
fact a Burmese word for ‘uncle’. Possibly all family relations in Burma were designated by an
appropriate initial—A for aunt, B for brother, C for cousin, D for daughter and so on. It occurred
to him that this might be an ingenious method for mapping all family relationships in English
into a genealogical algebra such as AM for a maternal aunt, 3C2 a third cousin twice removed, S6S7
for the sixth son of a seventh son. This alphabetic schema could also be used for indexing other
social groups like the British peerage—A for archduke, B for baron, C for count, D for duke and
so forth. Korzybski’s notion of mapping the individuality of apples into apple1, apple2, etcetera,
could also be applied to kinship. He made a mental note of this fascinating idea and resolved to
pen an article about it as a contribution to a future issue of his new journal for recreational
linguistics called Word Ways.

An appellation jerked him out of his reverie. ‘Dmitri Alfred Borgmann.’

Dmitri turned around, half expecting to see Ralph Edwards from This is Your Life or someone
resembling James Mason. Instead, he was confronted by a short bespectacled gentleman in a
pinstriped suit.

‘My name is U Thant. It’s an honour to meet you, sir. Your reputation has preceded you.’

Dmitri shook the Secretary General’s outstretched hand. Not to do so might be considered non-U.
‘How do you do, Mister Thant?’ he said, with a reverential bow of the head.

‘Skip the Thant. Call me U for short. In Burma it’s pronounced ‘oo’ but around here everybody
says ‘you’. These are troubled times, Mister Borgmann. Troubled times indeed. We at the UN are
trying our best. But these days all we seem to do is hose down the hot spots, put out brush fires
and mop up after the conflagrations of war. What we must do in the future is play a proactive role
in establishing world peace. One of the major contributors to global misunderstanding and
conflict is the human tongue. Peace among nations is being sabotaged by rhetorical doublespeak,
weasel words and bureaucratic bombast. International cooperation is continually threatened by
heads of state who use words and phrases without understanding what they mean. As Wittgen-
stein once observed, ‘the limitations of our world are the limits of our language’. That is why I
have invited you here this afternoon.’ U Thant paused, cupped his fingers and stared at Dmitri.
through half-closed eyes.
'I would like you to be a special UN consultant to our fledgling organisation LAUGH.'

'LAUGH?'

'Yes. It's an acronym for Language Activism to Undermine Global Hostilities. Your appointment to LAUGH will be initially for 26 weeks and you will report to the head of the operation, General Semantics. You will of course receive a generous honorarium. Well, Mister Borgmann, what do you say? Can we run up the blue and white flag and see if you salute?'

Dmitri felt deeply honoured by this invitation. He quickly saw the opportunity to test out some of his basic logical laws and principles in the practical arena of international politics. The consultancy would give him material for his planned magnum opus *Logology: The Ultimate Force Behind Recorded World History*. And the extra pocket money wouldn't go astray.

'I would be proud to accept your offer, U.'

'Fine, fine. I'll ask Miss Spelling to take you around to the General's office right away. He'll brief you on LAUGH and introduce you to the rest of the team. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to engage in a frank and earnest discussion about Biafra with the Nigerian delegate.'

U left the office. Miss Spelling returned with a bundle of papers under her arm.

'Congratulations on your appointment, Dimitrios.'

'How did you know?'

'U just told me. He asked me to arrange your introduction to General Semantics. Follow me.'

Thereupon she opened a secret door behind a bookcase in the Secretary General's office which gave access to a winding staircase leading to a mezzanine floor. She tripped down the steps with Dmitri puffing in her wake and stopped outside a door with the sign *GENERAL SEMANTICS: LAUGH*. She pushed open the door to reveal a small smoky room containing a desk littered with papers and wall-to-wall bookshelves packed, Dmitri was pleased to note, with a galaxy of dictionaries, thesauri and gazetteers as well as textbooks on linguistics and the philosophy of language.

'Now I have to go and proofread the minutes of last week's Security Council meeting,' said Miss Spelling. 'I've got to check all those goddamn boring proceedings for spelling mistakes. The General said we can shorten the meetings by changing the word 'minutes' to 'seconds'. That should speed up their deliberations by a factor of sixty to one and make my job a lot easier.'

With that she disappeared back up the staircase, leaving Dmitri to browse the spines of the tomes on the shelves. He noticed a first edition of *Science and Sanity* and couldn't resist the temptation to take a peek inside. On the frontispiece there was an inscription 'To General Semantics, my esteemed colleague – Keep up the good work. Alfred.'

Suddenly a voice bellowed 'Dmitri Borgmann'. Dmitri quickly replaced the book and turned to discover a tall military gentleman with a handlebar moustache dressed in the field service uniform of an officer of the British Expeditionary Force. He was a hybrid between Lord Kitchener and Basil Fawlty.
'General Quentin Semantics' he snorted. 'Mister Borgmann, I am to be your personal strategist in matters of word meaning and grammar in respect of all official documents and publications of the organisation. You come highly recommended by Professor S. I. Hayakawa of San Francisco State College, the author of *Language in Thought and Action* and a disciple of the late and great Count Alfred Habdank Skarbek Korzybski.' The General stood to attention and saluted.

'He's a big fan of yours. So am I.' He produced a tattered paperback from beneath his cap. 'A first edition of your *Language on Vacation: An Olio of Orthographical Oddities*. I wonder if you would do me the honour of autographing a copy.'

Dmitri obliged. The General refiled the book under his cap.

'Thanks, old chap. Much appreciated.'

He cleared some space on the desk, parked his derriere on a corner and produced a list of words from inside his breast pocket. 'Now down to business. What we have here is a classified listing of what is known in the trade as weasel words, circuitous circumlocutions, euphuistic euphemisms, acrimonious acronyms, wishy-washy initialisms, that sort of thing.'

'Weasel words?' Dmitri enquired.

'Yes, just as weasels can suck out the contents of an egg without breaking the shell, weasel words are phrases that suck the sense and originality out of our language while pretending to keep the meaning intact. You Americans are particularly fond of them. How can we forget weasels like 'new and improved' 'more people than ever' 'at the end of the day' and 'triple bottom line'? Well, the LAUGH team lays traps for the little mongrels in locations where they often pop up—like media conferences, TV commercials, newspaper editorials, press releases, etcetera. We watch them and haul them in here for interrogation. We whack them on the back with a question mark, deflate them by poking them in their presumptuous prefixes and spurious suffixes, then attach their tails to our stylistic lie detector. Only last week I had to cross-examine the word 'emergency'. A tricky animal, that. He's quite ubiquitous these days, almost as omnipresent as 'terrorism'. Have you noticed how much 'terrorism' sounds like 'tourism' and 'missionary' resembles 'mercenary'? Politicians often get them confused. Our Fuzzy Phonetics Lab has done a lot of research on those quasi-homophones. They're dangerous little buggers.'

'Fuzzy Phonetics Lab?' Dmitri's curiosity was piqued.

'Yes, those guys are our front line troops against hyperbole. They are like the sappers in the Great War. They dig tunnels under all the pretentious mud and mire of political doublespeak. They crawl beneath the entrenched positions of stylistic bombast and blow up turgid expressions and pompous phrases. Come, let me introduce you to the head of the unit, Doctor Fanny Noyes.'

The General charged off down the corridor. At the end they came to a door with a peephole. The General knocked three times and peered through the judas. The door swung open to reveal what looked like a high school computer laboratory. In the middle of the room a plump fifty-something woman in a white lab coat was sitting in an armchair with a strange contraption on her head. It looked like a cross between a hairdryer and an astronaut's helmet, and was connected by dozens of wires to a mainframe computer which was blinking away in the background. A young male assistant with red hair who rejoiced in the name of Mickey Finnigan was reading aloud from a list of random phonemes and the woman would then rattle off a string of associated words and
phrases. When he announced ‘spec’ she blurted out ‘Did you mean speck speculation speculative spectator aspect suspect expect expectorate or microspectrophotometer?’ and when he read out ‘fond’ she replied ‘Did you mean plafond fondu latifondi fondly fondling Henry Fonda or absence makes the heart grow fonder?’ Finnigan then punched her enunciated output into a database stored in the computer using the Soundex System patented by Robert C. Russell of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania in 1918.

Now and then the pair would interrupt their phonetic improv sessions and Mickey would read to Fanny from a book of proverbs which she would translate into Anguish Languish warts and friezes such as

Marnie Cant Bayou Hep Penis
Arse Snow Quest Yon Sand Here Know Lice
Farm Hilarity Breeze Conned Hemp

‘Cutting-edge technology, that,’ the General remarked incisively. ‘The device on Fanny’s head is called a blinking cap. Those wires are attached to a computer which contains a corpus of all English words on the planet, gleaned from billions of digitised publications and recorded utterances. The phonemes are first hyperlinked to all their potential morphemes and are then transmitted into the language processing regions of Fanny’s brain. There the allophone and allomorphs play a game of leapfrog between the Broca’s and Wernicke’s areas of her cortex before coming out of her mouth as fuzzy words and expressions. Vannevar Bush helped us set the whole thing up since most of us army chaps have only a fuzzy idea about what fuzziness means.’

The woman noticed her visitors and motioned for her assistant to stop keyboarding. Then she carefully removed the hairdryer with its attached leads and placed it on a chair.

‘Fanny, this is Dmitri Borgmann, the famous Swiss logologist,’ blared the General. ‘Borg, may I introduce you to Doctor Noyes, the head of our Fuzzy Phonetics Unit. Fanny’s my gadget woman. She is to me what Q is to James Bond.’

‘Police two meat chew. Knob buddy spicks mile anguish’ said Fanny sadly.

‘You must forgive Noyes,’ he said Apollo genetically. ‘It takes her a while to lose her Anguish Languish and get back into the swing of linear English. See that?’ He gestured toward the back of the laboratory. ‘This is her piece de resistance. We call it Fanny’s Fuzzy Gazetteer.’

Dmitri’s eyeballs jumped to attention, marched in the direction the General was pointing and stopped in front of a blackboard on which were written the words SOCK SOCRATES, THROTTLE ARISTOTLE AND THROW A PLATE AT PLATO – THE MAP IS NOT THE TERRITORY. Below the slogan was scrawled what could be best described as glorified gobbledygook. The General grabbed a billiard cue, polished its tip and rapped on the blackboard.

‘What you see here is the fruit of two years of intensive research,’ he announced proudly. ‘Henceforth, in the spirit of linguistic egalitarianism the names of all member nations will be fuzzified into their most amusing phonetic approximations. This will rid them of their jingoistic allegiances and associations and provide a humorous foundation for international cooperation and ultimately world peace. For example, South Africa will in the future be known as Sour Paprika, Russia as Rush Hour, France as For Aunts, Germany as Germy Knee and Australia as Horse Trailer. With such silly names it is hard to imagine any country taking another seriously, let alone wanting to invade it. Chauvinistic rejoicing by singing patriotic anthems like ‘Advance Horse
For North and South America it has created You Knighted Sedates Hover Merry Car, Makes It go, Bra's Ill, You're A Guy, Knicker Rag You Are, and Chilly. For Europe it has come up with Poor Chew Gal, Littlie, Hungry, Sweeten, Doorway, Spaying, Pollen, Grease, Lost Rear and You Knighted King Dumb. Suggestions for fuzzified countries in the Asia and Pacific regions include Ma Lays Ya, A Merry Cancer Mower, Polly Needs Ya, Melon Needs Ya, Fee Gee, Packer's Tan, Bang Lard Dish, Singer Poor, Tie Land, Layoffs, Filler Beans, and Tie One. For Africa and the Middle East it has discovered Madder Gas Car, Say Shells, You Gander, More Rock Oh, I Wrack, Eye Ran, Coo Wait, Bar Rain, and Catarrh. Impressive, what?

Dmitri nodded politely but he couldn’t help feeling that General Semantics had only a tenuous grip on both science and sanity.

Mikey piped up ‘General, here is your itinerary for next month’s good swill tour. I’ve just downloaded it from our database of crazy cities.’

‘Good man, Finnigan. It’s a whirled bismuth strip,’ he explained, ‘although I’m hoping to combine leisure with pleasure by visiting one or two fleshpots at the end.’ He gave Dmitri a man-of-the-world wink. ‘I’ll sink a pint in Lung Dung, nip over to Double Gin and Belch Fast, then whisk across to Glass Go and Leaden Bra. I’ll down a geneva in Geneva, have a drinking spree in Burl Inn, and milk a couple of Black Russians in Moss Cow. In Bhang Cock I’ll sip cocktails with Mary Jane before completing my good swill tour in A Merry Car where I have scheduled sessions with Senator Jack Daniels in Last Vagueness and Congressman Jim Beam in Nude Whore Leans.’ He thrust the itinerary into his breast pocket and motioned with his thumb for Mickey and Fanny to return to their collaborative research.

‘Come, let’s meet Dex.’ With that, the General hurried Dmitri back down the passageway and knocked on a door with a sign displaying an index finger pointing up at a Sierpinski triangle. Beneath the digit were the words ‘When a wise man points at the truth an idiot stares at his finger’.

‘Dexter I Point is a digit head from MIT,’ the General explained. ‘He once worked with Claude Shannon and Norbert Wiener. He’s our number crumper. Point’s considered to be a mathematical genius. He generally forms sentences containing deictics and demonstratives for the word ‘point’ such as ‘come to the point’, ‘your point being?’ and ‘no point in doing that’. His chef d’oeuvre is his database of appointments. It’s like a global calendar. Our staff phone in from all around the world using an acronymic device called a modem and log their meetings on our network computer. He also maintains a databank of disappointments. The UN gets a lot of them these days. Dex is currently working on a new communications thingummy linking all our computers through telephone lines. It’s called we-mail. Brilliant stuff. Brilliant.’

As they entered the office, Dexter Point emerged from beneath his desk. He looked like an escapee from a fifties radio comedy show and resembled Stan Freberg with his crew cut, red bow tie and dark horn-rimmed glasses. He had a pointy nose and Spockish ears and accompanied his sentences with an emphatic prodding movement of the right index finger.

‘What are you up to, Point?’ asked the General.
‘Oh, this and that, this and that. That’s neither here nor there if you get my point.’ He pointed to his mail tray with its two compartments labeled THIS and THAT.

‘Dexter, this is our new consultant on the LAUGH Project, the renowned Austrian onomatologist, Dmitri Borgmann.’

‘Your boy seems intense, Quent.’

‘What tense might he be in, Dex?’

‘Oh, I’d say present conditional. All newbies tend to be in the present conditional on their first day.’

‘I hope he’s not perfect. Otherwise he’d be a has-been,’ the General chuckled.

‘No,’ Dmitri confessed, ‘I’m imperfect.’

‘Then we’ll try to make your future tense,’ said Point pointedly. ‘If I can help you with this or that here and there let me know if you need a few pointers.’ Dexter pointed to the door, then dived back under his desk.

‘Come along, Dim, let’s pop down to the caff for a cuppa,’ Stentor roared. The General charged off again down the corridor, dragging Borgmann by his sleeve. ‘Point’s a sharp fellow. But you can only trust him up to a point.’

While Dmitri was busy dunking a Twinkie into his glass of Russian tea in the staff cafeteria, the General proceeded to debrief him on LAUGH. He took out a meerschaum pipe, leant over and prodded his consultant in the chest.

‘I’ll let you into a little secret,’ he whispered, glancing furtively over his shoulder. ‘Wrapped around Mother Earth is an invisible cloud of letters, sounds and thoughts which is constantly changing shape under the impact of mankind’s global conversations, ideas and non-verbal expressions. This reticular formation resembles a gigantic toroidal Scrabble board onto which are constantly tumbling letters of the alphabet, phonetic utterances and verbalised thoughts. These letters, sounds and ideas interact in random ways and bounce about like volatile molecules forming strange attractors and fractal relationships. You’re familiar with Chaos Theory, I take it?’

Dmitri nodded. He had recently read Benoit Mandelbrot’s paper in Science entitled “How Long is the Coast of Britain? Statistical Self-Similarity and Fractal Dimension”. However, being somewhat suspicious of mathematicians, he had remained sceptical of the theory’s application to natural languages. Yet he was curious to hear more about the General’s weird notions so he decided to humor him.

‘Well, this global web of language—what we call the lingosphere—is like Mandelbrot’s invisible coastline. It can explain many of the world’s political problems. When we give a name to a person, place or object, we are really trying to dominate it, force it in directions which may be at odds with the natural logological laws of the lingosphere. For instance, do you realise that most of the world’s trouble spots begin with the letter B? Now B is a voiced labial which possesses a negative resonance. You can see that in contemporary invective with aggressive B-words like bloody, bastard, bugger and bitch. And just consider the names of flashpoints we have had to deal with since the end of the Second World War. They nearly all begin with B—Berlin, Belgian
Congo, Belfast, Bangladesh, Biafra. In the future we’ll have to keep our eye on places like Beirut, Beijing, the Balkans, Bosnia, Baghdad, Bhopal, Bali and Beslan. Do you see the pattern?

Borgmann grunted agreement. He wasn’t sure if he was dealing with an idiosyncratic genius or a genial idiot, an illuminated luminary or a loopy loony with a B in his bonnet. Was the General a genuine visionary or a mind out of control like the eponymous train in Buster Keaton’s classic comedy?

‘And just look at the history of warfare,’ the General rattled on. ‘Many of the decisive defeats begin with the letter B—Bosworth, Boyne, Bannockburn, Blenheim, Baltic, Bunker Hill, Borodino, Balaclava, Bloemfontein, Bataan and the Battle of Britain. The LAUGH Project has done serious research in this area and our theory is confirmed by randomised evidence-based double blind crossover trials using the letter P as a placebo.’

‘What do you propose to do about this B problem?’ Dmitri proffered.

The General, in a hushed tone, proceeded to outline his linguistic strategy for world peace. ‘Change the language and you change the world. Plan A is to commission a team of linguistic Seabees to officially remove the first letter from all the B place names in atlases, gazetteers and street directories. Plan B is to move the entire populations residing in those potential trouble spots to places with a friendlier initial letter. That might be a logistic nightmare, however, so Plan A is our preferred option at this stage.’

He paused significantly, then added a personal observation. ‘By the way, Borgmann, you would be well advised to drop the B from your moniker if you want to enjoy a long and prosperous life, although the duplicate Ms and Rs in your names may compensate for that handicap. Here at LAUGH we have developed a special alphabetical order which ranks all letters according to their positive life force. M and R are at the top but N and B, those two nattering nabobs of negativity, are down at the bottom along with vile, violent and vitriolic V and the whoreson Z, that unnecessary letter.’

Dmitri noticed that General Quentin Semantics actually had four Ns in his name, but thought better of pointing that out. He also observed that his given name and surname began with Q and S respectively, reminding him of his own hypothesis that alphabetical second-halfers tend to be less competent and successful in their endeavours than first-half humans. He was beginning to wonder whether he could work with such a man or even with U Thant himself, another second-halfer.

Sure, the LAUGH project was a challenge and could establish the name of Dmitri Borgmann in the annals of history. The front cover of Time magazine or even a Nobel Prize might not be out of the question. But he himself was a loner, the self-styled Robert Mitchum of logology. He was not a manager of people. And he realised that organising this mob of linguistic loonies would be like trying to herd all the rats in Manhattan into the elevators of the Empire State building.

The general clattered on. ‘Our Astrologology Section actually plots the future political careers of nations and individuals according to the configurations of letters in their names. Take Germany in the Second World War, for example. We predicted their inevitable downfall, given the number of key place names containing both B and N, notably Berlin, Berchtesgaden, Bremen, Bonn, Nurnberg and (nota bene) not forgetting Treblinka, Birkenau, Buchenwald and Bergen-Bergen.’

‘How do I fit into all this?’ asked Dmitri, changing the subject.

‘Are you familiar with the work of the great French linguist Ferdinand de Saussure?’
Dmitri nodded. He had indeed read *Cours de Linguistique Générale* and was vaguely au fait with the ideas of structuralist linguistics and semiology.

‘You may not be aware that Saussure, toward the end of his life, came across an anthology of modern Latin odes containing a myriad of anagrams. He suddenly discovered a mysterious terra incognita of purely formal connections nestling in that twilight zone between the signifier and the signified, between langue and parole. He had inadvertently centered the magic world we know as logology. This discovery defied the logic of science and challenged his theory about the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. He called this weird phenomenon *Signs of Accordance*. He actually wrote to the author of the poems for an explanation but never received a reply. Sadly, Saussure, once so sure, died a confused man feeling his life’s work had been in vain. Not many people know that.’

He paused and stared at Dmitri intently. ‘My friend, our structured linear language has gone on vacation to some postmodern Cloud Cuckoo Land. One day, overburdened with work and worry, it upped and left the safety of its descriptive grammatical home and its faithful orthographic wife, dumped its logical baggage on a revolving carousel at the Derrida Airport and took off for some strange country where words no longer contain thoughts and ideas. The LAUGH operation wants to get at the truth behind this fugue and we want you to come on board for the ride. Now let’s meet the rest of the team.’

The General rose from his chair and was about to stride off when Miss Spelling reappeared with a black valise. ‘General, U wants you to go over these agency business plans tonight and ferret out any weasel words.’

‘Only too glad to ambush the little blighters, Miss Spelling.’

She hitched up her miniskirt, winked at Dmitri and minced across to the samovar. The General tucked the valise under his arm, marched out of the cafeteria with his consultant in tow and galumphed off down another dark winding corridor. ‘Tomorrow all the various agencies of the UN will be presenting their business plans for the coming year,’ he boomed.

‘Who’s on first?’ Dmitri enquired.

‘No, WHO’s on second. The World Health Organization is reconstituting its various committees and subcommittees to create a common linguistic look and feel. For example, WHERE is the World Health Epidemiological Research Executive which publishes WHEN, the World Health Epidemiology Newsletter. WHAT is the World Health Agency for Toxicology and WHICH is the World Health Investigative Committee on Hydrofluorocarbons. WHY is World Health for Youth and WHETHER is the World Health Enterprise for Training in Health Education and Research. SLURP, their Social Language Usage Reengineering Project, is most impressive. They are changing all those old-fashioned designations used in public health which we have inherited from the military and religious terminology of the 19th century. Words like CASUALTY, WARD and DELIVERY are being dropped in favour of more accurate and up-to-date terms such as WALKING WOUNDED, SICK BAY and BIRTHING LIBERATION. Henceforth a PATIENT, a passive sufferer faced with lengthy hospital waiting lists, will be known as an IMPATIENT, a HOSPITAL will be renamed a HOSPITALITY to make it sound more hospitable, and an AMBULANCE will become a MOTORANCE. The tautological DECEASED will be replaced by CEASED or IMMORTALLY CHALLENGED OTHER, and an INVALID will be called a VALID, somebody with a legitimate claim to quality healthcare. The word ACCIDENT will be proscribed from usage altogether. Whatever happens is always the fault of someone or something.'
In language, as in evolution, accidents always have a purpose. And they can never ‘take place’ because if they did they wouldn’t have any place for them to happen.’

Borgmann smiled politely like a psychiatrist might when confronted by a ranting lunatic. He was developing a semantic reaction to General Semantics.

The General, however, was just getting started. ‘In the course of these lexical reforms we will change UNIVERSITY to POLYVERSITY. Our learning institutions should be encouraging pluralistic versions of the truth. And what about the word UNIVERSE itself? Why was it not called UNIPROSE? If there is such a thing as a UNIVERSE there must also be UNISONNETS, UNIBALLADS and UNILIMERICKS. And, strictly speaking, CONTINENTS should be called INCONTINENTS since their rivers are continually micturating into the sea and their landmasses are circumfluous.’

‘Yeah, I suppose so, Quentin,’ replied Dmitri. He was feeling dizzy now and hoped the General would stop. But no. Off the loco went, steaming down another absurd siding with his captive listener desperately clinging to the cowcatcher of common sense.

‘And here in A Merry Car some of your ageing place names could do with a verbal facelift and an injection of toponymic Botox. Take Congress, for example. Everyone knows that congress is the antonym of progress, but are you aware that congress is a synonym for fornication? Nomen est omen. The naming of your seat of government was a little prank played on posterity by your founding fathers, notably Thomas Jefferson who knew more about acts of congress than all the hippies in San Francisco. And of course some of your more recent presidents have indulged in their own congressional activities, haven’t they? Why don’t you Americans dump your Presbyterian hang-ups, call a spade a shovel and simply rename it ‘Intercourse’? That would preserve the original metaphor and at the same time encourage the free and frank flow of communication between your nation’s representatives.’

‘What about the Senate?’

‘I’m glad you brought that up. Senate is a homonym of Sennett, as in Max of the Keystone Cops. You might as well call it Keaton, Lloyd or Hope. Hmm… on reflection, Hope wouldn’t be a bad choice. And we could pay homage to famous comedians by introducing humorous political terms that Senators could use in their debates, like filibusterkeaton, jerrylewismander and rodneyclear-andpresentdangerfield. I know. Let’s rename the Senate ‘Chaplin’ in honour of the immortal Charlie. That would also give the place a certain gravity reflecting the ministerial duties of its homophone, chaplain.’

‘And what about the Supreme Court?’ the General added. ‘It sounds like a pizza parlour that delivers judgments with nine different toppings. You might as well call it Capriccioso Court or Super Special Court. And while we’re at it let’s change Capitol Hill to Capital Hill to reflect the dominance of the free market economy.’

‘Come, let’s meet Rex.’ The General marched off down another corridor, stopped outside a door with a sign saying REX SENTANCE – SYNTACTIC OPERATIONS and entered without knocking. A short tubby gentleman wearing jungle fatigues and boots, Saigon-mirror sunglasses and a ten-gallon hat was performing calylesthencics on his desk.

‘Rex, this is our new consultant on the LAUGH Project, Dmitri Borgmann, the noted Norwegian linguist,’ the General announced. ‘Rex’s mission is to deconstruct the humble English sentence
and liberate it from the tyranny of nouns and their sycophantic adjectival flunkeys. We believe that all power should be vested in pronouns, verbs, conjunctions and prepositions. After all, they do most of the work. Nouns and adjectives are like the decadent kings and queens of a declining era. They only have a nominal role in the grammatical action. They just lie around between full stops, displaying their fancy cases, declensions and plurals like the A-list at the Oscars, while backstage the minor parts of speech are working behind the scenes to make them look good. In agglutinating languages like English, verbs and preposition have become a major democratising force. In our New Word Order, substantives and their motley crew of modifiers will be exiled from dictionaries and grammar books altogether.

Rex interrupted his exercises, jumped off the desk and spoke. ‘Yes sirree,’ he barked. ‘We will launch a worldwide offensive against such an offensive use of grammar. As Nietzsche once said, ‘While we still have grammar we have not yet killed God’. We will introduce a New Word Order. In parsing we will overthrow nouns from their pride of place in the government of syntactic minorities. We will put the sentence on trial and sentence it to senescence. And finally,’ said Rex with a gleam in his eye, ‘we will pull out all stops and banish syntax forever from the grand old republic of human conversation.’

‘Attaboy. Sick ‘em, Rex,’ said the General, patting him on the head.

Sentence resumed his calylesthenics. Semantic grabbed Borgmann by the ear like a schoolmaster about to punish a naughty boy and dragged him off down another dusky corridor. Dmitri wasn’t quite sure whether he was dealing with a lunatic or a genius. He felt like Alice chasing the Mad Hatter down a Black Hole in the tree trunk of language. They came to a door bearing the sign LEX WORDSWORTH – LEXICOLOGY. The general barged in without knocking.

‘Lex is our lexicologist. Wordsworth has devoted his whole life to appreciating words’ worth.’

Meditating on the floor was a balding middle-aged academic in jeans and a blue and white T-shirt which displayed the words IF BRIX DOESN’T SPELL BRICKS WHAT DOES IT SPELL? He spoke with a California drawl, and Borgmann surmised that in his linguistic theology Wordsworth was probably more of a Whorfian Fundamentalist than a Chomskyite Revivalist. ‘Words, words, words,’ said Lex. ‘I gotta use words when I talk to ya. Did you know that the word WORD rhymes with BIRD CURD FYRD GIRD HERD JIRD NURD SURD TURD and YIRD? My word! Isn’t that an interesting associative array of four-letter lexical items?’

‘Sure is, Lex,’ the General replied. ‘By the way, how are Alexis and all the little Lexemes?’

‘Fine, General, fine. Baby Alex performed his first speech act yesterday.’

‘What was it?’

‘Antidisestablishmentarianism’ Lex announced, beaming from ear to ear.

‘A chip off the old block, eh?’

‘Yeah, I was so proud of junior.’

‘Lex, let me introduce Dmitri Borgmann, the distinguished Danish wordsmith.’
'Love your work, Dmitri. I'm a big fan. Alexis recently picked up a copy of your book *Beyond Language: Adventures in Word and Thought* while she was visiting Australia. She reads it as a bedtime story to our five-year-old daughter. Last night, little Alexandra said 'Mummy, what did you bring the book that I do not wish to be read on to out of up from Down Under for?' Admittedly she finds the plot a tad boring, but the narrative sure improves her knowledge of fifteen-letter isograms.'

Dmitri was moved. He had no idea how much logology meant to Middle America.

'Shall we tell him about the Uranian dictionary, General?' said Lex, jumping to his feet.

'Shh. That's all very hush-hush, Lex.' The General gave him an admonishing glare.

Dmitri had never heard of a Uranian dictionary. Come to think of it, he'd never heard of a Martian or a Venusian one, either. His curiosity was piqued. 'I think I should know about this matter, General,' he heard himself saying, 'if I am going to be working with your team as a consultant.'

'Point taken, Dim. Okay, Lex, give him the good oil about the Uranian dictionary.'

Lex chimed in enthusiastically. 'In 1947, General Semantics was appointed as a special advisor to the Majestic Twelve after a minuscule holographic device was found aboard one of the alien spaceships which crashed at Roswell, New Mexico. On closer examination the hologram turned out to contain a multidimensional index, a floating assortment of allomorphs without meanings, similar to those lists of random letter combinations that tournament Scrabble players compile.'

Lex groped about in the back pocket of his jeans and produced a small object resembling a white M&M. 'Our experts have since informed us that its provenance is the planet Uranus. The Uranians had teleported all our spoken and written languages and, using a process known as atomic engraving, had captured inside this hologram the linguistic history of Earth's civilisation.'

Lex held the little sphere in front of his right eye and peered into it. 'Within this miniature cosmos,' he said in a quavering voice, 'I can make out universal alphabets of all shapes and sizes dancing together in a fantastic quantum kaleidoscope. The letters and hieroglyphs appear to have a living energy of their own as they coo and babble in a myriad of accents like they are talking in tongues. The Tower of Babel has been rediscovered inside a holographic pearl. Oh, my God! It’s a beautiful thing.'

Borgmann was mesmerised. Wordsworth held the strange object in the palm of his hand.

'The Uranians have no concept of syntax and semantics, or even of alphabetical order,' Lex explained. 'Their morphemes have no definition, only fuzziness, and they are continually morphing into different shapes. For them there are no lexemes or phonemes as we know them, only the fractal affinities that exist in that deep attractor basin between the shapes of letters and the disembodied sounds of phonic utterances. Just as our poets on Earth play with the forms and musicality of what we arbitrarily call 'words', so have the inhabitants of Uranus created a complex linguistic universe far removed from the denotations and connotations of our linear human logic.'

Dmitri felt as if he were on the verge of an epiphanic experience, a personal Pentecost. He saw himself as a latter-day Galahad about to come face to face with the Holy Grail of logology. This
tiny extraterrestrial hologram might solve the mystery of language itself. With reverence he took
the sacred orb from Lex’s palm and raised it towards the light.

Suddenly the General snatched the white M&M from Dmitri’s fingertips and flicked it across to
his colleague like an aggie. Lex popped it into his mouth and swallowed it. ‘Isn’t it amazing,
Wordsworth, what comes from Uranus?’ he guffawed.

Borgmann’s flabber was ghasted. Lex slapped his thigh, doubled up and rolled about the floor
screaming with merriment. ‘Lighten up, Dim. We were only jerking your chain. We’re not called
the LAUGH team for nothing. Come, let’s meet Anna.’

Quentin Semantics charged off with a dazed consultant in his wake. Farther down the hallway, he
stopped outside a door bearing the sign ANNA GRAMSCI – ANAGRAMS AND PALINDROMES. He knocked three times and entered.

Anna Gramsci was a pale Dianne Keatonish woman in her late thirties. She sported a black beret
and an Ivy League scarf, and held in her left hand Greek worry beads, or komboloi, which she
kept twisting around her fingers as she spoke.

After the formal introductions, the General cupped his hand to his mouth and whispered in
Dmitri’s ear in a gesture of fraternal bonhomie. ‘Anna gives great anagrams. She can sit on my
eomordnilap any day. Gramsci comes up with aptagrams for the names of countries and their
nizens. Go on. Take her for a spin.’

‘United States of America,’ declared Dmitri. ‘I, SAM, STUNT, ERADICATE FOE,’ she replied.

‘South Africa.’ ‘A FIASCO HURT.’

‘Philippines.’ ‘HIP LIP PENIS.’ ‘That reminds me of my last R&R in Manila,’ said the General
with an odd animal grin.

‘Australian,’ Borgmann continued. ‘SATURNALIA.’ The General chuckled. ‘Australians are
quite partial to occasions of orgiastic revelry and licentiousness. I know all about that. I was
stationed in Sydney during the War.’

‘North Vietnam.’ ‘NET VARMINT, HO...VAIN MET THORN...VET THRO IN NAM.’

Dmitri was impressed. In his younger and friskier days he used to be crazy about women like
Anna Gramsci, those good-time gals who love to be teased by a teaser or punished with a pun,
and who get pally with a palindrome or enjoy a feisty wrestle with a rebus.

‘Would you like one for the road, Dimples?’ She purred seductively and tweaked Dmitri’s nose.

‘United Nations,’ he ventured. ‘IT NUDE ONANIST’ was her immediate response.

The General decided it was time to nip this budding romance in the bud. ‘Anna,’ he said palin-
dromically, ‘We can’t have our permanent staff casually flirting and trifling with the consultants.’

‘Come up and see me sometime, MITRID FLARED BRONG MAN. I play a mean game of
Twister,’ said Anna with a strange emicting smile. ‘There you go again, scaring a man wildly,’
Quentin remarked with a cryptic expression.
As they left Anna’s office, Dmitri noticed on the other side of the hallway what looked like a broom cupboard with the number 101 over a large question mark on the door. ‘What goes on in there?’ he asked nervously.

The General raised his eyebrows and lowered his voice. ‘That’s our interrogative room. This is where we cross-examine subversives. Last year we had to sequester a Russian Abecedarian. He belonged to a weird Anabaptist sect which subscribes to the belief that all the evils of the world can be blamed on the invention of the alphabet. That rascally Russky was rushin’ around the Lower East Side with placards saying FUNK AND WAGNALLS ISN’T FUNKY and WEBSTER’S WEAVES A WEB OF DECEIT. We hauled him in when he set fire to a copy of Doctor Seuss’s Amazing Alphabet Book on Avenue B in Alphabet City. Our lads eventually broke down his resistance by restricting his diet to bowls of Cyrillic alphabet soup served three times a day for 26 weeks. He finally recanted and admitted that the ABC was a thing of beauty and joy. Now and then we incarcerate a dry-as-dust prescriptive grammarian or some harmless drudge of a lexicographer. We tickle their funny-bones in therapeutic sessions of puns and double entendres, then send them back to work with a twinkle in their eye.’

The General took out his meerschaum pipe, tamped down the tobacco and lit it. ‘Well, that’s the end of your guided tour. You have now met all the members of the LAUGH team with the exception of Tex Riddle who is in charge of Cryptograms, Pangrams and Lipograms, and Homer Graff, our expert on Homonyms, Pseudonyms and Eponyms. They are currently overseas on sabbatical. Tex is taking part in an Oulipian colloquy on Italo Calvino in Ouagadougou, and Homer is on a tour of all the world’s homonymic countries arranged alphabetically—Brazil, Canada, Chad, Chile, China, Cyprus, Greece, Guinea, Japan, Jordan, Morocco, Panama, Qatar, Russia, Spain, Tonga, Turkey and Wales. Graff’s doing comparative field work on autonyms, taunonyms and autantonyms. He’s a busy man.’

The General escorted Borgmann to the foot of the staircase. ‘Great to have you on board, Dim. I’ll see you back here tomorrow at nine hundred hours with your sleeves rolled up and ready to give us one hundred and ten per cent.’ He clicked his heels, saluted, performed an about turn and marched off back down the corridor and into the darkness.

Dmitri climbed the stairs pensively and reentered the Secretary General’s office via the secret door. The room was empty. He slumped into an armchair and pinched himself to make sure he wasn’t dreaming. Gradually he began to realise that the world was not yet ready for the manic onomatomanity of General Semantics, or for the gramarye of Dex, Lex, Rex and Tex. And he was still to be convinced that language itself was the key to global peace. Words could be a force for evil as well as for good. Man’s inhumanity to man, he believed, had more to do with vagaries of the heart than vagueness of the tongue. Borgmann had reached the conclusion that the time was not yet ripe for logology to be thrown into the melting pot of international politics. He would first need to establish the credentials of his fledgling ology as a playful activity in the public mind. Through his new magazine he hoped to help liberate the English language from the straightjacket of logic. This would be his one small step for mankind, his humble contribution to the progress of civilisation.

He wrote his resignation and left it on Uncle Thant’s desk. Then he walked out of the office, took the elevator downstairs and wandered back along 42nd Street to the New York Public Library. Korzybski was still there. Science and Sanity lay open on the reading room table where he’d left it. Dmitri sat down, nestled his cheek against page 26, fell asleep and returned to his dream.