Predicting New Words

The Secrets of Their Success

Allan Metcalf

Houghton Mifflin

Predicting
New Words

The Secrets of Their Success

Allan Metcalf

For Molly
Now it's your turn!

Contents

Introduction

I knew it was an outrageous idea. But it just might work.

If *Time* magazine could choose a Person of the Year for its year-end review, why couldn't the American Dialect Society choose a New Word of the Year? We didn't have the clout or circulation of *Time,* but our little group of people curious about the English language in North America did have the leading experts on new words — scholars who studied new words and dictionary editors who were on the lookout for new words.

We had, in particular, John Algeo, who with his wife Adele edited the column "Among the New Words" in the society's quarterly journal, *American Speech.* Each installment contained dozens of freshly gathered new words too recent to appear in any dictionary.

We also had David K. Barnhart, managing editor since 1982 of the *Barnhart Dictionary Companion,* the only periodical devoted to new words. It was founded and edited by his father, the eminent dictionary editor Clarence L. Barnhart. Each quarterly issue contained detailed evidence and definitions for hundreds of new words.

The idea to make use of their talents came to me in

midsummer 1990. As executive secretary of the American Dialect Society, I was arranging the details for our annual meeting in December. With the guidance of these experts, I thought, we could choose the new words that mattered most in the year gone by and proclaim them. I wrote to Algeo and Barnhart, and they agreed.

MAKING HISTORY

And so on December 29, 1990, at 7 p.m. in the St. Clair Room of the Barclay Hotel in Chicago, history of a sort was made. As I had anticipated, the nominations for New Word of the Year were intriguing and the debate was vigorous. As I had not anticipated, however, the results were anything but predictable. I had imagined that the experts would present us with a few candidates of obvious importance, words headed straight for our everyday vocabulary and secure places in the dictionaries. Instead, the experts presented us with many words, none of which seemed more important than any of the others.

So it was that after spirited discussion of words in various categories — Most Original, Most Outrageous, Most Useful, Most Amazing, Most Unnecessary, and Most Likely to Succeed — the assembled members and friends of the American Dialect Society voted the New Word of the Year 1990: *bushlips.*

What's that? Hardly anyone knew it, even then. *Bushlips,* we were told, meant "insincere political rhetoric." It referred to President George H. Bush's declaration, "Read my lips: no new taxes," a promise he had broken in approving a tax increase in 1990. The word caught members' attention because of its cleverness and the point it made about politicians. Even in 1990, though, it was not at all well known or widely used. Since then, instead of ending up in dictionaries, it has ended up on the ash heap of history.

RAISING QUESTIONS

From these obscure beginnings this book was born. I didn't know it at the time, but the questions raised by the choice of *bushlips* and by subsequent Words of the Year were challenging enough that they required a whole book to do them justice. This is that book.

The very first New Words of the Year vote raised puzzling questions. We know that hundreds of new words enter the vocabulary every year — words like *jazz* in 1913, *hijack* in 1923, *supermarket* in 1933, *acronym* in 1943, *UFO* in 1953, just to take a few examples from earlier in the twentieth century. So where were the words of 1990 that would become part of our vocabulary? Why hadn't the experts identified them?

One of the subcategories in that first New Words of the Year selection was Most Likely to Succeed. Maybe long-lived words could be found there. In 1990 there were two winners in that category: *notebook PC* and *rightsizing.* Neither has been especially stellar since. The former term, designating a lightweight portable computer, has had staying power, although nowadays it is usually referred to simply as a *notebook.* The latter was noted as a euphemism for firing employees to make a company the "right size." That term still has marginal use, but it is far lesser known than the more direct *downsizing.*

Even in 1990, incidentally, it was clear that *Word* in *New Word of the Year* would have to be interpreted in its broader sense as "vocabulary item" — not just words, but phrases (like *notebook PC*), acronyms (like *PC*), prefixes (like *e-* to indicate something in the world of the Internet), and suffixes (like *-gate* to indicate a scandal), because units of meaning do not always correspond to single words. That wasn't a problem. The problem was to find the right vocabulary items, the truly significant ones that would take root in the language and continue to be used for generations. It was apparent that we had no way of

doing this, no guidelines to follow. We just guessed. And we were often wrong.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that a more significant 1990 entry in the vocabulary was the prefix *e-,* applied not just to *e-mail* (in use since 1982) but *e-text* and later *e-payment, e-commerce, e-currency,* and the like. According to a 2001 note in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* this *e-* was "perhaps the most productive element in word-formation of the late 1990s and early 2000s." But none of the experts proposed *e-* for the 1990 vote.

MOTHER OF ALL NEW WORDS

Still, we kept trying. For 1991 we chose a more popular item: *mother of all.* This was a translation of a phrase used by Saddam Hussein on January 16, 1991, in response to the attack by the international coalition at the start of the Gulf War: "The mother of all battles has begun." With Saddam's quick defeat in that war, the phrase just as quickly became ironic and was applied to matters of lesser as well as greater import. It still is today, for example, in *mother of all search engines, mother of all excuses, mother of all actuarial glossaries,* and *mother of all paellas* (Valencian paella), phrases I have found by searching the Internet. So *mother of all* was, and remains, fairly successful.

We now know that for 1991 we also could have chosen *carjacking, ethnic cleansing,* and *FAQ,* as well as *spam,* in the sense of junk e-mail. But *mother of all* wasn't too bad, and for Most Likely to Succeed in 1991, our choice was *rollerblade.* That too remains in today's vocabulary and marks a case in which a successful trademark has gained a generic use. Perhaps we had found the way to pinpoint significant words.

Not! That expression of dramatic negation, as in *That's a great idea. Not!,* was the Word of the Year for 1992. It

was also an indication that we were back to our losing ways. *Not!* was indeed a popular expression that year, made famous by *Saturday Night Live* and the movie *Wayne's World,* but as we soon discovered, it was anything but new. Jesse Sheidlower, now head of the American office of the *Oxford English Dictionary,* and Jonathan Lighter, editor of the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang,* soon found evidence of the same *Not!,* with slightly different punctuation, in a Princeton University student publication of 1893, and with the exact modern punctuation in 1905. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Rex Stout had used it, too, in the intervening years.

So another puzzle had emerged. A word we had crowned New Word of the Year was a century old. How could something so old have escaped the notice of the experts for so long?

Our 1992 choice for Most Likely to Succeed was fairly successful: *snail mail,* or *s-mail.* While the abbreviated *s-mail* (patterned after *e-mail)* is not widely used today, the rhyming *snail mail* for physically delivered mail remains common. As a supposed new word, though, it too had a problem with age, though compared with *Not!* it was a mere youth. *Snail mail* goes back at least as far as 1983 (and in the *New York Times* at that), nearly a decade before it was the society's choice as a New Word of the Year.

With the benefit of hindsight, we now know that 1992 made a more significant contribution to the vocabulary. That was apparently the year *cyber* became an adjective, able to stand by itself in referring to anything related to computers. The society did recognize it as Word of the Year — in 1994.

Questions about our judgment continued to be raised by our choices for 1993. The New Word (or Phrase) of that year was *information superhighway,* a term for the Internet popularized by newly elected Vice President Al

Gore. Even in 1993, however, *information superhighway* never posed a serious challenge to the name *Internet,* and it faded from use along with Gore's involvement in promoting the Internet. There was also the question of whether *information superhighway* was a new term. Gore claimed to have invented it some fifteen years earlier, and he was indeed an active promoter of Internet use and high-speed Internet connections from the time he became a member of the House of Representatives in 1976. The earliest evidence unearthed so far for *information super-highway* is from 1988, but even that is five years before it was chosen as our New Word (or Phrase) of the Year. Once again, the new-word experts were behind the curve.

Most Likely to Succeed presented the same problem that year. Our choice was none other than *like* used to introduce a thought or quotation, as in "I'm *like,* 'This is such a great idea!'" That *like* has indeed continued in widespread use. The only problem is that it had been in widespread use earlier than 1993 — since 1982, at least.

NO LONGER NEW

By the mid-nineties, in fact, the difficulty of finding truly new words led to a change in the policy for the annual vote. Now, instead of New Words of the Year, the vote was simply for Words of the Year, characterized as words that were new "or newly prominent" in the year just past. That change took care of the embarrassment of repeatedly discovering that "new" words weren't so new, but it only highlighted the question: Why was it so hard to recognize significant new words from the beginning?

Nobody ventured answers, and the society continued to make what might be called schizophrenic choices, ex-emplified by the 1995 voting that ended in a tie between *World Wide Web* and *newt.* The former was well known but not that new; the latter was brand new but not that well known. *World Wide Web* was also chosen, justifiably,

as Most Likely to Succeed. That was a safe enough bet after it had been around and developing for a few years; the Web itself, as well as its name, was invented by Tim Berners-Lee (with help from Robert Cailliau) in 1990.

Newt, on the other hand, was new but so obscure, even at the time, that it required explanation. After the Republicans thrashed the Democrats in the elections of November 1994, Newt Gingrich, Republican from Georgia, became Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives. He was an outspoken advocate of a Republican "Contract with America" that attempted to drastically curtail government expenses and operations. The verb *newt* appeared in 1995 and meant to make aggressive changes, especially reductions in government. But the Contract with America soon ran out of steam, and after the Republicans lost their majority in the House of Representatives in the 1998 elections, Gingrich's star faded, and *newting* faded with it.

The story has remained much the same with the Society's choices to the present day. (For a complete list of American Dialect Society Words of the Year through 2001, see the appendix.)

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

By this point, the Words of the Year experiences had evoked a whole cluster of questions:

> Why are prominent new words often just a flash in the pan?
> Why are not-so-prominent new words often the most successful?
> Why do successful new words often turn out to be older than we thought?
> And above all: How can one pick the winners? What are the qualities that make for success?

Enough information has accumulated over the years to make it conceivable that some answers can be found, that

a crystal ball can be fashioned that will help predict which words will succeed. Perhaps some criteria can be crystallized for choosing the enduring words from the crowd of transient ones. Perhaps, indeed, some criteria can be identified that will help someone who wants to coin a new word and make a success of it.

This book is my attempt to answer these questions and determine these criteria. My method is to review the case histories of numerous words — not only those chosen by the American Dialect Society, but many others — to see if they have anything in common. As it turns out, they do.

A well-known linguist (but no one remembers who!) once said: Each word has its own history. A well-known author (Tolstoy) once said: All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Borrowing from both authors, I think it can be said: Each new word has its own history, but successful new words are alike in ways that promote their success, while unsuccessful new words are alike in ways that promote their failure.

The rest of this book will explain why this is so.

A Note on Sources

The sea of new words would quickly drown any investigator were it not for the life rafts, arks, and cruise ships provided by researchers past and present.

The ark that preserves more of the English language than any other is the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Its capacious volumes (originally ten, now twenty) hold three hundred thousand separate entries with two and a half million quotations to illustrate the origins and histories of words. Although some of the entries were written as long ago as 1884, the dictionary is now being completely revised to bring it up to date. As befits a twenty-first-century work, it has shed its paper form and become ethereal,

available by subscription on the World Wide Web. This allows the revisions to be posted and available for inspection almost as soon as they are made.

Two current historical dictionaries of American English are modern cruise ships that hold words beyond the scope of the *Oxford English Dictionary.* There is the *Dictionary of American Regional English,* edited by Frederic G. Cassidy and Joan H. Hall (Harvard University Press, 1985–), now in four volumes from A through the middle of the letter S, and the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang,* edited by Jonathan Lighter (1994–), in two volumes, A through O.

Books specifically about new words are abundant, but few have reliable historical information. The most useful are the Barnhart series, culminating in the *Third Barnhart Dictionary of New English* by Robert K. Barnhart, Sol Steinmetz, and Clarence L. Barnhart (Wilson, 1990), and the two editions of the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words* (Oxford University Press, 1992 and 1997), different in content though they have the same title.

Two periodicals, mentioned earlier, keep track of new words and their histories: the *Barnhart Dictionary Companion,* a quarterly journal edited by David K. Barnhart, and "Among the New Words," a column now edited by Wayne Glowka in the American Dialect Society's quarterly journal *American Speech.* A collection of those columns from their beginning has been published as *Fifty Years Among the New Words: A Dictionary of Neologisms, 1941–1991* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), edited by John Algeo, who also provides a valuable interpretive overview. Numerous other articles on new words and their origins have appeared in *American Speech.* The most notable are Allen Walker Read's five articles on the origins, history, and folklore of *OK,* published in 1963 and 1964.

The volume on my new-words bookshelf I turn to most often is an index to all the rest: *The Barnhart New-Words*

Concordance by David K. Barnhart (Lexik House, 1994, with a 2001 supplement).

Stories of older new words are found in *The Merriam-Webster New Book of Word Histories* (1991) and *Coined by Shakespeare: Words and Meanings First Used by the Bard* by Jeffrey McQuain and Stanley Malless (Merriam-Webster, 1998). New words of a century ago are brought to life in *Word-Coinage: Being an Inquiry into Recent Neologisms, Also a Brief Study of Literary Style, Slang, and Provincialisms* by Leon Mead (Crowell, 1902). The master storyteller about words of American English is H. L. Mencken. The final revision of his classic book *The American Language* is the one-volume abridgment by Raven I. McDavid, Jr. (Knopf, 1963).

The most important current publication on the origins and history of American slang is the monthly *Comments on Etymology,* edited and published by Gerald Cohen at the University of Missouri–Rolla. Amazingly, it has a subscriber list of less than a hundred.

Only a few scholars have ventured to propose factors that make for the success of new words. One is Göran Kjellmer, whose article "Potential Words" in the journal *Word* for August 2000 also reviews previous proposals. He and I reach different conclusions.

Along with books and periodicals, there is the Internet, my other major source of everything but the kitchen sink, and sometimes even that. In particular, the Internet makes possible extensive searches for examples of how words are actually used today. I have searched the two billion pages indexed by Google.com countless times to find current uses of words under discussion.

Acknowledgments

People as well as publications have helped make this book possible. First of all there are those who attended the 1999 meeting of the Dictionary Society of North America and

gave me their reactions when I proposed the first version of what I now call the FUDGE scale.

Almost every day since, I have become further indebted to members of the American Dialect Society: those who join in the search for Words of the Year at the society's annual meeting and especially the members of the society's e-mail discussion list, ADS-L. Among those who dive deep for the origins of words and report their findings on ADS-L are Fred Shapiro of the law library at Yale University and the tireless researcher Barry Popik of New York City. I am particularly grateful for Barry's extensive postings on *scofflaw* and *OK.*

Then there are the indispensable people who helped directly with the making of this book. As usual, I thought it would be easy, and as usual, I learned better. Sustaining me through two years of effort was my editor at Houghton Mifflin, Joseph Pickett, who patiently insisted not only that I get it written, but that I get it right. He was indefatigable in asking for revision after revision and bringing me back to my point when I began to stray from it. At key moments his colleagues Steve Kleinedler and David Pritchard also provided important inspiration.

Others at Houghton Mifflin who helped bring this book into being were Margaret Anne Miles, senior art and production coordinator, and publicist Gracie Doyle. Diane Fredrick did a meticulous job copyediting the manuscript. I appreciate them all.

My thanks also go to Mary Ellen Blackston of Henry Pfeiffer Library at MacMurray College, who cheerfully obtained through interlibrary loan all manner of articles and books for me. I appreciate William DeSilva, who provided stimulating conversation almost every day of the week while keeping my office clean. I am grateful for my reliable and creative student assistant Erin Klee, who kept the office running, reformatted the manuscript at deadline, and told me about *skategate.* And as always I appreciate

my wife, Donna, for her relentless insistence on readability and excellence.

And now it's time to meet the new words. They're a hard bunch to pin down. They come and go, and just when you think you have them in focus, they're likely to jump up and move around. But it's possible to gain an understanding of them in their native habitat all the same. Let's take a look.

The Mystery of Success

The history of new words is largely a tale of failure. New words are as numerous and evanescent as straws in the wind. They are like acorns, not many of which grow into oaks. Sometimes it seems as if a new word has about as much chance of developing into a permanent addition to our vocabulary as a single sperm has of fertilizing an egg and developing into a fully grown human. New words don't have it quite that bad, but the odds are strongly against them.

On the other hand, new words are not like new babies. Each day in the United States more than ten thousand babies are born. Nearly all of those, about 99 percent of each day's ten thousand, survive and thrive. Similarly, each day in the English language at least as many thousands of new words are born. Yet after a year's time, only a few hundred of these will remain as serious candidates for the dictionary and a place in our permanent vocabulary. Here is the mystery: Why so many and yet so few? And is it possible to predict which few will be successful? Thanks to vastly increased knowledge about words and their histories, it is now possible to answer both questions: the first with good

reasons, the second with "Yes." That's what the rest of this book will do.

Words are not living things. Yet new words appear to undergo a Darwinian struggle of survival of the fittest. As with living creatures, the fittest often are not the biggest and flashiest, but rather those best able to camouflage themselves.

Each word has its own history. So this book will proceed case by case. But from these individual examples will emerge the general principles that not only explain the secrets of successful words but establish a five-item scale that enables precise predictions of the future success or failure of new words. This will provide the opportunity to evaluate some recent candidates for their probable staying power. After that, it will take just forty years to see if the predictions come true.

BACK TO THE FIFTIES

That's because it takes about two generations to know for sure whether a word will be a permanent addition to the vocabulary. The investigation of new word successes and failures, then, needs to begin at least forty years back.

New in 1957, *moonlighting* and *sputnik* both were inspired by lights in the nighttime sky, but only one prevailed in the lexicon. *Moonlighting* derived from a familiar word that underwent a metamorphosis of meaning that year, and this new meaning has become firmly established. *Sputnik,* on the other hand, was not at all familiar, and it proved to be just a brilliant flash in the pan, surviving only as a historical relic.

Time for Moonlighting

Moonlight, of course, was anything but new to the vocabulary, but it gained a brand new meaning in 1957 as the verb *to moonlight* and its related noun, *moonlighting.*

Time magazine, then as now a spotter of trends and showplace of smart vocabulary, beamed *moonlighting* at its readers in its issue of July 22, 1957. It probably was not the first appearance of this old word with its new meaning, but this seems to have been its debut with the general public. According to *Time,* it was in fact not just a new name, but a new trend and a new concern. "MOON-LIGHTING," proclaimed the headline: "A Problem Born of Prosperity." The editors evidently thought the word was unfamiliar enough to require a definition, so *Time* provided one in the first sentence of the story: "One of the paradoxes — and problems — of the U.S. full-employment prosperity is moonlighting, i.e., holding two jobs at once." The article continued with statements like these:

"Now one in 18 U.S. workers is a moonlighter. . . ."

"To Columnist Abigail Van Buren a wife complained about her moonlighting husband. . . ."

"In some lower-salaried groups, or those with short hours, moonlighting is already traditional."

"The amount a man makes on his regular job does not necessarily determine whether he moonlights."

"Furthermore, moonlighting is a powerful argument in itself against the shorter week, and against short hours v. the acquisitive nature of man."

All told, the article used *moonlighting* or its relatives *moonlighters* and *moonlight* sixteen times. By the end of the article, the reader had been thoroughly moonstruck.

As a noun, *moonlight* goes back with the moon itself to the beginnings of the English language and even earlier to the Germanic and Indo-European ancestors of English. Presumably ever since humans could speak, they have talked about the light of the moon. As a verb, *to moonlight* is more recent, but it still goes back to the nineteenth century. From the start it has meant doing something by the light of the moon, but at first this was something that

could get one arrested. In the nineteenth century, *moonlight* was a slang term for the activity of burglars, who benefited from moonlight at their work. In the twentieth century, it was also used for herding cattle and hunting deer by moonlight. Whether it was the illegal work that in 1957 caused the transmutation of *moonlight* into a standard term for legal work, or whether this new meaning was independently derived from the original *moonlight,* nobody knows. And it doesn't matter much. Either way, *moonlight* meaning "the light of the moon" easily took on its second meaning of "to work a second job," and Americans have been moonlighting ever since. This second meaning seems likely to stay in the vocabulary, as long as people continue to hold down second jobs.

The Traveler

In 1957 a momentous event in the night sky brought another change to our language. It came in a wake-up call from space, first heard at 8:07 p.m. Eastern Time on Friday, October 4, 1957. The NBC and CBS networks interrupted their television and radio programs to broadcast live the pinging signal received from the first artificial satellite in history as it passed over the United States for the first time. To a startled world, the Soviet Union announced that the signal came from a sphere 22 inches in diameter and weighing 184 pounds, which was circling the earth every hour and a half at an altitude of 500 miles.

What should this new creation be called? On its front page the next day, the *New York Times* used terms like *man-made earth satellite, artificial moon, artificial satellite,* and, quoting the Soviet news agency Tass, *artificial earth satellite.* Most often it was simply *satellite,* the term still used today.

But we also learned the Russian word for it. By the following day, the *Times* was explaining the word to its readers: "To a Russian, the earth satellite launched by the Soviet Union is 'something that is traveling with a traveler.'

That is the literal translation of *sputnik,* the Russian word for the satellite." And while the *Times* continued to use *satellite,* others quickly made *sputnik* at home in our language. In its first two articles on the event, *Time* magazine used the Russian word exclusively after introducing it with a brief translation. "Highly surprised scientists and military men drew some quick lessons from sputnik's success," wrote *Time,* and "U.S. intelligence had no warning of the firing of the sputnik," and "In choosing an orbit for the sputnik, the Russians were daring." The first example from *Time* uses *sputnik* like a proper name, without *the,* but the rest of *Time*'s discussion makes *sputnik* a generic word, with an article and no capital letter. It took just that long (in *Time*'s reckoning) for *sputnik* to make itself at home in our vocabulary.

In Russian, the *s* of *sputnik* means "together," *put* means "path or road," *nik* means "someone who." Together, therefore, they mean "one who travels along" (with the earth, in this case). As a professor at Clinton College explained in a letter to the *New York Times* in November, "*sputnik* is the technical term for an astronomical satellite; preferably one of second and not of first degree. That is — the moon is not, in the narrower sense, a *sputnik;* but asteroids flying about the earth would be." (*Sputnik* is also not to be confused with *popútchik,* another Russian word that translates as "fellow traveler" but means a non-Communist who sympathizes with Communism.)

In adopting *sputnik* we pronounced it our own way. The Clinton College professor admonished, in vain, that "the 'u' in *sputnik* is approximately as the 'oo' in 'hoot.' All those who are rendering it as the 'u' in 'but' are actually talking Bulgarian, not Russian." But at that point *sputnik* wasn't just a visitor from Russia; we were adopting it into our own language, and an adopted word has to play by our rules. So in English it kept the sound of *but* or *sputter.*

A Dog's Tale

The Russian *sputniks* inspired first awe, then humor. The humor came with the launch of the second *Sputnik* on November 4, 1957. This one orbited at more than 900 miles high, weighed more than a thousand pounds, and carried a dog.

That shaggy dog story was irresistible for the wags in the media. *Time* admiringly noted that newspapers nicknamed the satellite *muttnik, pupnik, poochnik, woofnik,* and *sputpup.* That creativity, in turn, inspired the addition of the suffix *-nik* to anything associated with satellites. In the journal *American Speech,* Louise M. Ackerman noted the use of *puffnik* for a flare rocket, *mousenik* for a rocket designed by schoolboys that carried a mouse, and *spooknik* for a "ghost" radio image of Sputnik I. Other inventive combinations with the Russian (and Yiddish) suffix *-nik* included *kaputnik, flopnik, stayputnik,* and *dudnik* when the first American attempt to send a satellite into space, a Vanguard rocket, fizzled on its launching pad on December 6, 1957.

So *sputnik* took on the extended meaning of any artificial satellite, even an American one. Although the word

sputnik

satellite was never entirely displaced, the Russian *sputniks* had a lead of nearly four months before the first American satellite went up on January 31, 1958, so the talk of the time increasingly used *sputnik* for all artificial satellites.

That it was an important word was immediately apparent to those who make dictionaries. One even stopped the presses for it. Upon hearing the news and the name *sputnik,* Clarence L. Barnhart, editor-in-chief of the *Thorndike-Barnhart Comprehensive Desk Dictionary,* pulled the page where *sputnik* would appear, consigned a lesser word to oblivion, and inserted a three-line definition of *sputnik* in its place. Only then would he allow the new printing of the *Thorndike-Barnhart* to proceed.

As the most talked-about phenomenon in the heavens, with a comfortable Englished pronunciation, and drawing further attention to itself with lots of wordplay, *sputnik* seemed a sure bet for permanent residence in the English vocabulary. To this day it is listed in every general dictionary. But where it used to be considered a synonym for *satellite,* as is still the case in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary,* nowadays most dictionaries limit its definition just to those early Soviet versions. The fourth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary,* for example, defines *sputnik* simply as "Any of a series of Soviet satellites sent into Earth orbit, especially the first, launched October 4, 1957."

In 1997, forty years after the first *sputnik,* a replica built by Russian and French teenagers was launched into orbit from the Mir space station. By then *Sputnik* was always spelled with a capital letter in English and used only as a proper name for the first Russian satellites, never a general word meaning satellite. But back in late 1957, *sputnik* as well as *moonlight* seemed destined to become permanent additions to the English vocabulary. Indeed, at the time, *sputnik* was much more the talk of the country. Why then did *sputnik* fail as a general word while *moonlight* succeeded?

Perhaps it looked too strange. *Moonlight* was an old familiar word; *sputnik* was not only new but decidedly foreign-sounding. English is used to words of many shapes, but the ending *-nik* is not one of them. Only a handful of *-nik* words were already resident in English, all still foreign-looking. There was *nudnik,* Yiddish for a person who is a pest; *kolkhoznik,* a member of a collective farm in Russia; and *kibbutznik,* a member of a collective farm in the new state of Israel. All use *-nik* to indicate a person, not an object in space or elsewhere.

Strangely enough, the only lasting *-nik* coinage apparently inspired by *sputnik* was *beatnik,* invented by *San Francisco Chronicle* columnist Herb Caen for a column on April 2, 1958. Years later Caen explained: "*Beatnik* slipped out of my typewriter one day when I was writing about one or another of the Beat types — Kerouac, Ginsberg et al. — who flourished here at the time." This is what slipped out of his typewriter on that occasion:

> Look *magazine, preparing a picture spread on S.F.'s Beat Generation (oh, no, not AGAIN!), hosted a party in a No. Beach house for 50 Beatniks, and by the time word got around the sour grapevine, over 250 bearded cats and kits were on hand, slopping up Mike Cowles' free booze. They're only Beat, y'know, when it comes to work.*

Why did *beatnik* survive when *sputnik* didn't? Perhaps just because *beatnik* is an offbeat word, appropriate for describing an offbeat person.

In turn *beatnik* quickly produced an offspring, *neatnik,* a person who is extremely or obsessively neat. It appeared thus in a 1959 *New York Times* article: "The beatniks and the neatniks had at each other this week." But being just a clever twist on *beatnik, neatnik* is little used nowadays.

No More Skyjacking?
Another forty-year-old word referring to the sky is now falling from favor: *skyjacking.*

Is it because the hijacking of airplanes has come to an end? Of course not. The most horrible skyjackings of all time occurred on September 11, 2001, and despite all precautions instituted since that date, there is no way to be sure of preventing future skyjackings.

But the word *skyjacking* itself seems on the way out. It has been around since the first hijackings of American airplanes in 1961 (for flights to Cuba), so it was on the verge of making a permanent place for itself. Recently, however, it seems to be used less and less. Why? Apparently it's too clever, too much of a joke. Even four decades after it was coined, it still is an obvious play on words. The rhyme of *hi* and *sky* makes light of a serious situation. Given its decreasing use, *skyjacking* may well be dropped from future editions of dictionaries, just as *ecofreak, masscult,* and *data diddling* (manipulating or falsifying data) were dropped from the fourth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary.*

In contrast, *skyjacking*'s cousin, *carjacking,* first used in 1991, does not suffer from over-cleverness (*car* doesn't rhyme with *hi*). Furthermore, it has developed its own distinct meaning: taking a car from its owner rather than stealing an unoccupied car. So *carjacking* may well survive into a long life, if that unfortunate practice continues.

NINETIES WORDS

The puzzle of prediction is further exemplified by two splendiferous words introduced in the early 1990s: *digerati* and *sylvanshine.*

> digerati: Experts in computers and the Internet.
> sylvanshine: The reflected glow of some forest trees at
>   night.

There is an unusual opportunity to examine these particular words closely, because it is known exactly how they each originated. A decade is not enough time to tell

whether a new word will be a success, but an out-and-out failure would be apparent by now. To date, one of these words has held on to its tenuous place in present-day use, while the other has sunk utterly from sight.

The two words had equally glittering and reputable beginnings. *Digerati* came first. Like many successful new words, it made its initial appearance without announcement or explication. It was lucky, however, to be born in an upscale neighborhood, the business section of the *New York Times.* On Wednesday, January 29, 1992, in a story about a design for a "radically different supercomputer," it appeared in a somewhat prominent place as the last word of a long paragraph:

> *Igniting the Kendall Square controversy was an article by the economist George Gilder, published this month in a narrowly circulated but closely read Silicon Valley magazine called* Upside. *Mr. Gilder, perhaps best known as the supply-sider whose book* Wealth and Poverty *provided the intellectual underpinnings of the so-called Reagan revolution, has no experience in computer design. But he has written widely on the subject in recent years and his opinions, though often controversial, are taken seriously among the computer digerati.*

Even though the word had never appeared before, its meaning was clear from the context. "Digerati" must refer to people like the knowledgeable readers of *Upside.* That they are experts on computers is clear not only from the identification with the *Upside* readership and from the article's earlier reference to a "community of elite scientists and engineers," but also from placing the word *computer* in front of *digerati.*

And the word itself has elements that associate it with both computers and experts. The first syllable of *digerati* is the same as the first syllable of *digital,* the all-purpose word used to refer to computer technology. (How *digital* developed from fingers to numbers to computers is another story, but the article had already mentioned "a com-

puter designer at Digital Equipment.") The last part of *digerati* is a play on *literati,* a dignified Latin word used in English since 1621 to mean "scholars" or more exactly, "persons of letters" — that is, people really good at reading and writing. Helping the popularity of *literati* was a related coinage, circa 1940, *glitterati,* referring to those that we might nowadays label *celebrities.*

But there was no need to be aware of the sources of *digerati* in order to catch its meaning. The context made it clear.

The Birthing of *Digerati*

Thanks to a later report, we know the exact circumstances of its birth. An editor, Tim Race, introduced the word into the story by John Markoff. Perhaps Markoff had originally written something like "computer literati," a playful substitution of *literati* in the phrase "computer literate." Whatever Markoff wrote, Race took it a step further and ended up with *digerati.* Still, buried deep in a continuation of a story on page B7, *digerati* might have faded from sight after its creation. Such is the usual fate of invented words; the word sparkles and then vanishes from sight, all the more sparkling because of its evanescence.

But in this particular case, the word made friends in high places. Markoff's story happened to be read by the editor-in-chief of Time Warner, Jason McManus, who in turn notified William Safire, language columnist for the *New York Times.* Safire hadn't noticed the new word, but upon learning of it from McManus he inserted a birth announcement in his "On Language" column in the *New York Times Magazine* of March 1, 1992. "It did make me smile with appreciation," McManus wrote to Safire, "in the trust it was Mr. Markoff's invention to lighten up a highly technical story."

Safire investigated and discovered that Markoff had merely provided a foster home for the word; Race was the actual birth parent. So Safire courteously permitted Race

to define his creation. *Digerati,* according to Race, are "people highly skilled in the processing and manipulation of digital information; wealthy or scholarly techno-nerds."

Once a word is born it takes on a life of its own, sometimes defying the wishes of its creator, but *digerati* has managed to stick close to its original meaning. The mock elitism of the word, so suited to its meaning, may have encouraged its use. Safire reflects this mockery in his heading: "Dig Those Digerati." Its cleverness, on the other hand, like the punning in *skyjacking,* may keep it so conspicuous that it can't slip into the permanent vocabulary. Whatever the ultimate outcome, *digerati,* with a serious definition now, is ensconced in discussions of the computing world, and in the *American Heritage Dictionary* and other leading dictionaries of the early twenty-first century.

Night Light

Just two years after *digerati,* an even more glittering word was coined. It was based not on computers, but on a natural phenomenon anyone can observe — only in the summertime, to be sure, only at night, only in a forest of blue spruce, and only with a flashlight or automobile headlights. Maybe those special conditions are why nobody had written about this phenomenon before Alistair B. Fraser came along. Fraser, a professor of meteorology at Pennsylvania State University, was driving through the woods of British Columbia one summer night when he noticed the varied effects of his headlights. In the same light, some trees shone brightly, while others remained dark. The headlights weren't flickering. If this wasn't an enchanted forest, what was it?

Fascinated by this mystery that seemed to defy common sense, Fraser returned to spend night after night in the woods, shining a powerful flashlight at different trees and shrubs and measuring their reflection. He discovered that when you shine a light at certain trees and shrubs — blue spruces, yews, and rhododendrons — they

don't merely become visible; they light up like Christmas trees, or like snow-covered trees in winter moonlight.

It's a remarkable sight on a warm summer night: a tree that seems to be blanketed in snow. And Fraser arrived at the explanation. It has to do with drops of dew on the leaves acting as mirrors to reflect and diffuse the light. Why just certain trees? Because the reflection depends on the shape of the leaves. When the angle of reflection increases above 140 degrees, as is the case with those particular trees and shrubs, the reflection is spectacular.

All this Professor Fraser explained in the July 1994 edition of the scientific journal *Applied Optics.* And as the first to describe this reflection, Fraser was entitled to name it. He chose a name that, like the glow itself, was strangely beautiful: *sylvanshine.*

Like most new words, *sylvanshine* was based on others that were already well established. *Sylvan,* a poetic word referring to the woods and its inhabitants, dates back more than four hundred years in the English language alone. It traces its origins to ancient Rome; Sylvanus was a Roman god of fields and forests. *Shine* can be both precise and poetic, and goes back even farther in our language, more than a thousand years. Put them together and you have a beautiful word for a beautiful phenomenon.

But there was more to it than that. Fraser had scientific reasons for calling his phenomenon *sylvanshine.* He modeled his word on *Heiligenschein,* the technical term for another optical illusion of the outdoors, namely the bright daylight halo that appears on dewy grass at the edges of a person's shadow. *Heiligenschein* is a German word, *Heiligen* meaning "saint" and *schein* meaning "shine," that is, the shine around a saint's head — in English simply a *halo.* Fraser substituted the woods (*sylvan*) for the saint (*Heiligen*) and changed the spelling of *schein* to its English equivalent, thereby transforming a plain German term to an enchanting English one.

Applied Optics has a limited circle of readers, but Fraser's

discovery was spectacular enough to warrant a news report in the June 9, 1994, issue of the widely circulated British journal *Nature,* which made prominent mention of the new name. That in turn earned it special mention in the American Dialect Society's annual search for Words of the Year. A new category, Most Beautiful Word of the Year, was created for it and has never been used since. A dazzling name for a dazzling phenomenon, it would seem.

But those brief mentions were all the publicity it got, and that turned out not to be enough. With all its potential, *sylvanshine* didn't succeed. You will look in vain for it in any dictionary, even the compendious *Oxford English Dictionary* or the *Barnhart Dictionary Companion,* which specializes in new words. If you hear of *sylvanshine* at all nowadays, it's because a few people liked the sound of the word and applied it to other things. It is the title of a song for the album *Natural Language 0098* on the now-defunct em:t label. It's the name of a white iris developed in 1997 that, according to an iris website, "blooms with the tall beardeds and Siberians" and has an "attractive rounded form with a slight violet tinge at its base." And among the sixteen horses owned by the novelist Jane Smiley is a broodmare called Sylvanshine, a.k.a. Jackie.

Aside from these odd names and occasional references to Professor Fraser's studies, *sylvanshine* never became visible in our language. And though the woods still shine any time you drive at night through a forest of blue spruce, *sylvanshine* is nowhere in sight. There is no guaranteeing that even the brightest of words will catch on.

So neither beauty, nor ingenuity, nor the need for a name for a new object or phenomenon can guarantee the success of a word. Even auspiciously inaugurated ones like *sputnik* and *sylvanshine* have fallen by the wayside. But maybe there is a knack for creating successful words; there certainly are people renowned for the words they have created. The next chapter will look at the creations of famous wordsmiths to see what their inventions can tell us.

2

How to Be a Loser

> As advice for the aspiring coiner, I can offer only this: Culti-
> vate your dark side and listen for the potential fragments of
> innovation scattered in commonplace speech. . . . keep at
> it, but don't be **pittwitted.** If the word you invent turns out
> to be unnecessary or inelegant, let it go and accept the fact
> that at times **swakkle** simply will **denuggify** your **whoop-
> dujour.**
>
> — *Paul Lewis, "A Week in the Life of a Neologist"*

Most new words are born in obscurity. If their par-
entage ever was known, they soon become orphans, to be
adopted or ignored by others according to standards to be
explained later. In some cases, to be sure, like those of
digerati and *sylvanshine,* we do happen to know the exact
circumstances of their birth. But there is one other class
of new words that had a privileged start: those created by
experts, people for whom creating words is not just an
occasional byproduct, but a focus of their work. They tend
to be playful, but they devote considerable effort to the
making of their words. Indeed, several have made entire
books of their creations.

This chapter will look at the bountiful work of some of
these creators, ranging from the great humorists Edward
Lear and Lewis Carroll of the mid-nineteenth century to
Adam Hanft and Faith Popcorn of the present day. The
creations of the latter pair are too new to know what will
become of them, but the rest have taken the test of history.
Most have failed.

Frankenfood
parody of Kellogg's Tony the Tiger character on a breakfast cereal box

THE FRANKENFOOD MONSTER

A new word's success or failure does not seem to rest on how clever or ambitious its creator is. Take the case of *Frankenfood,* a scary word for genetically modified foods. It's a fairly successful new word, and we know exactly how it came into being. It was a deliberate coinage by Paul Lewis, humorist and English professor at Boston College. In a 1992 letter to the editor of the *New York Times,* he presented his newborn word to the world:

> *Ever since Mary Shelley's baron rolled his improved human out of the lab, scientists have been bringing just such good things to life. If they want to sell us Frankenfood, perhaps it's time to gather the villagers, light some torches and head to the castle.*

Lewis's breezy humor provides a context that makes the meaning of *Frankenfood* perfectly clear. With a twist on the General Electric slogan "We bring good things to life," Lewis reminds us of the monster artificially created

from human spare parts by Victor Frankenstein in Mary Shelley's novel of that name. Remembering the evil obsession of that scientist-creator as well as the deadly horror he created, we recognize that *Frankenfood* means artificially created food, viewed as the evil product of an evil scheme.

This shot in the dark was heard round the world. It was first noticed at the *Times* itself, where a writer following the developments in genetically modified foods used it in a front-page article twelve days later. Finding *Frankenfood* ideal for scare headlines, an environmental news service picked it up, and before the summer was over it was in newspapers and magazines from London to Los Angeles and was discussed on National Public Radio.

In short, the word was an instant success. Professor Lewis was delighted, and he thought he knew why it was such a hit. In October he explained its virtues to a *Boston Globe* reporter: "It has a phonetic rhythm, it's pithy, and you can use the 'Franken-' prefix on anything: 'Frankenfruit,' say. You can say, 'We're breathing Frankenair.' 'We're drinking Frankenwater.' 'It's a Frankenworld.' "

SCHMOOZING NEW WORDS

Lewis's success with *Frankenfood* inspired him to try another, which he revealed to the *Globe* in that interview: *schmoozeoisie,* a combination of *schmooze* and *bourgeoisie.* "This is that class of people who earn their living by talk. It includes such traditional groups as teachers and therapists, but it's expanding. Oprah's a member of the schmoozeoisie elite. Government is all schmoozeoicrats taking trillions and giving back words."

This word too seemed destined to become a success when it caught the attention of two eminent authorities on language. One was the author of the "Word Watch" column in the *Atlantic Monthly,* dictionary editor Anne H. Soukhanov. She included *schmooseoisie* (with a change of the *Globe* reporter's spelling) in her 1995 book *Word*

Watch: The Stories Behind the Words of Our Lives. Her listing, in turn, caught the attention of *New York Times* language columnist William Safire, who reported Lewis's new brainchild later that year.

With these accomplishments, the professor decided he had found a new calling. His second success inspired Lewis so much that he spent a whole week in the fall of 1995 inventing new words. It is rare to be able to watch a coiner of words in action, but happily he gave an account of this experience, "A Week in the Life of a Neologist," in a column in the *Boston Globe* a month later. His tone is tongue-in-cheek, as befits a humorist, but his coinages seem sincere. And his method is one that previously led him to success: "I sew words up (like puns) out of existing linguistic units."

In that article he put into circulation ten new words involving politics, the media, and teen culture. His political words were *Republicants,* Republicans who wanted to limit government spending; *Republicuts,* budget cuts resulting from the Republicants' views; and *Democrits,* "aging progressives deep in denial of their past record as supporters of the programs now subject to Republicuts." All this he considered a *Newtmare,* named after Republican leader Newt Gingrich.

He had just one media coinage, *celebfatigue,* "induced by excessive exposure to the mundane details of the lives of the undeservedly famous," like O.J. Simpson.

His teen culture words were inspired by a visit from his fifteen-year-old Californian niece. He wondered whether she would be *MPeedout* by excessive viewing of the television show *Melrose Place.* He observed her shopping habits and wondered whether she risked "becoming mall-minded, succumbing to mallitis, or just being malled." And he also wondered if she would become *pittwitted,* trapped in "a bubble-headed frame of mind that results from constant consumption of stories about Brad Pitt's favorite hairstyles, T-shirts or lipsticks."

Lewis also lists a few words he wouldn't create: happy words like *whoopdujour* or obscure ones like *denuggify* and *swakkle.*

CATCHING THE CULTURAL WAVE

His enterprise attracted attention. To a reporter for the *Boston College Chronicle* he explained in 1996: "There are those who do this sort of thing seriously, but for me it's just fun. I stumbled into it with *Frankenfood,* and it got me thinking about how new words are created. In working towards words like *mall-minded* or *Newtmare,* I am trying to catch a cultural wave." He told the reporter about his latest creation: *likespeak,* "teen dialect based on the assumption that objects and concepts only approximate what they pretend to represent."

Lewis was on a roll. Or was he? As it has turned out, all of his later coinages never made it to first base. With *Frankenfood,* Lewis had beginner's luck. Everything else vanished from sight.

That includes even *schmooseoisie,* despite its auspicious launching. Despite significant help from Soukhanov and Safire, it was picked up by only a few other writers about words (one chose it as a "Word of the Day") rather than actually put to use. Among the more than two billion pages archived by Google in early 2002, for example, there is only one actual use of *schmooseoisie.* That comes in a 1996 speech to the Society for Information Management, Atlanta chapter: "The digital future has fallen into the clutches of the schmooseoisie — pseudo-experts engaged in content-free opinionizing." The schmooseoisie themselves have failed to use it. And despite Soukhanov's earlier championing of the word, *schmooseoisie* is not among the 100,000 entries of the 1999 *Encarta World English Dictionary* for which she served as American editor.

Why would *schmooseoisie* be such a failure when *Frankenfood* was such a success? Maybe because *schmooseoisie*

is more funny-looking. Yes, the images evoked by the two words make *Frankenfood* the odd one; monsters created of human spare parts are certainly more grotesque than people who earn their living by talk. But when the words themselves are considered, *schmooseoisie* sounds sillier. Its first part comes from the down-to-earth slang *schmooze* (from the Yiddish); its second from the genteel *bourgeoisie* (from the French). It's a blatantly mixed marriage.

Frankenfood, on the other hand, has two straightforward parts that simply combine to reflect the concept it expresses. *Frankenstein,* of course, is the creator of the monster in Mary Shelley's legend. And *food* is just food. Put them together and you have food created by a modern-day Dr. Frankenstein.

Lewis's other coinages disappeared even faster than *schmooseoisie.* You'll look in vain for any instance of *celebfatigue* or *pittwitted.* As for *Newtmare* or *mall-minded,* the cultural wave Lewis tried to catch seems to have gone flat before those words could surf it. The *Newtmare* of the mid-1990s came and went without any employment of that word. The occasional sightings of *mall-minded* are surely independent spontaneous coinages rather than references to Lewis's invention: "star jock Zack gets dumped by his mall-minded girlfriend" in a 1999 review of the movie *She's All That,* for example, and "Beyond the valley of parking lots/and Mall minded credit seeking/Card carrying members/of Neon Society" in a 1998 poem by Bedros B. Afeyan.

Similarly, a search of the World Wide Web using the Google search engine turns up only one instance of *LikeSpeak,* and it seems unlikely to be Lewis's doing. Michigan diarist Erica M. Mercer seems to have reinvented the word in 1999 as she considered the way girls talk on the phone: "They talk around these parts in like language. Like is? . . . like are, . . . like I think, like I do not know, like . . . Really! . . . oh my god. . . . They speak extremely

fast running all and any words in between the likes together." The next day her diary records, "Moo left a message on the machine last night that was totally unintelligible. I had to play it back 20 times before I had the brilliant idea of simply turning the volume down, which allowed me; the worry mother [to] decipher this phrase in LikeSpeak *smgnimgingtotpoftheparkhomemidnit,kay* click." (She doesn't provide a translation.)

There are also very few instances of *Democrits,* none of them with Lewis's definition. The word is evidently a spontaneous coinage in a political website comment just before the close presidential election in November 2000: ". . . I wholeheartedly disagree with your thesis (shared by many, I'll grant) [that] the Democrits and the Repulsivecans are identical. . . ." Other seemingly spontaneous pairings of that time include "Damnocrats and Repulsivecans" and "Desperationcrats and the Repulsivecans."

FRANKENFAILURES

And *Frankenfood* did not develop the variants Lewis predicted. His *Frankenair, Frankenwater,* and *Frankenworld* are not to be found. They might have rhythm, as Lewis said, but they didn't have resonance. Apparently Lewis did not realize the monstrous significance of the *Franken-* prefix he brought to life: it doesn't mean something "polluted" or "damaged," but focuses on an unnatural creation, possibly by someone with sinister motives. That's why *Frankenfood* caught on among those who oppose genetically modified food. Like *pro-life* and *pro-choice* in the abortion debate, it was a loaded word. *Frankenfood* has been more widely used in Britain than in the United States, because concern about genetically modified food has been greater there. British writers also began using the expanded version *Frankenstein food,* to make the allusion even more obvious.

Frankenfruit got a small breath of life in 1999, seven

years after Lewis coined it, when a "WTO Welcome Committee" announced that it had destroyed genetically modified *frankenfruit* trees in Summerland, British Columbia, in advance of the World Trade Organization meeting in nearby Seattle. But this *frankenfruit* may well have been an independent coinage based on *Frankenfood* rather than a recollection of Lewis's earlier invention.

A number of *Franken-* variants Lewis hadn't foreseen have enjoyed limited but occasional use. *Frankenchickens* has been used in connection with an urban legend about KFC switching from real chickens to "genetically manipulated organisms" when it changed its name from Kentucky Fried Chicken to KFC. Genetically modified salmon have raised concerns about *Frankenfish,* and there is a rock group *Frankenscience.* All these are natural outgrowths of the original *Frankenfood,* rhythm or no.

In short, Lewis succeeded only with the one coinage that adapted itself naturally to our language. It was an instant hit, although he apparently did not notice why. And it seems quite possible that *Frankenfood* itself will eventually vanish into the frozen wastes, much as Shelley's monster does. Any serious discussion about the perils of genetically modified foods will not refer to them as *Frankenfoods* more than once or twice, by way of acknowledging the attitude that the word epitomizes. *Frankenfood* is and always will be a joke, and it's hard for a joke to find a permanent place in our vocabulary.

HALL OF FAME

In his avocation as humorist–word creator, Lewis was following an illustrious (or at least illustrated, by Arnie Ten) predecessor who made the creation of new words a popular sport in the 1980s. From 1984 to 1989, comedian Rich Hall ("& Friends") produced a series of books full of *sniglets,* which he defined as "Any Word That Doesn't Appear

in the Dictionary but Should." The success of the first book inspired a daily comic panel that in turn led to several more compilations. After *Sniglets* and *More Sniglets,* Hall continued with *Angry Young Sniglets, When Sniglets Ruled the Earth,* and *Unexplained Sniglets of the Universe.*

Here are some of the original sniglets:

flirr: A photograph that features the camera operator's finger in the corner.

mustgo: Any item of food that has been sitting in the refrigerator so long it has become a science project.

orosuctuous: Being able to hold a glass to one's face by sheer lung power.

tacangle: The position of one's head while biting into a taco.

Hall is long since retired from the enterprise, but others have continued the sniglets tradition into the twenty-first century. Practitioners in different fields have customized them. Various authors offer hairstyling sniglets:

crudzia: Random foreign objects stuck in your hair.

cruffle: The action of pulling your fingers through the ends of curls to get them to separate.

meno-dreads: The hair around your ears that gets soaked during hot flashes.

snaglet: A tiny hair snarl that occurs in the wispy tendrils around the face.

There are emergency medical service sniglets:

blurrections: Unintelligible directions to the scene of a call; usually utilizing landmarks with names like "Jed's tractor graveyard" and "Where the big wreck was in '69."

breathanol: The still potent form of gaseous alcohol wafting from the mouths of drunk patients.

dashtritus: The assortment of hamburger wrappers, run report code sheets, billing forms, and other detritus that accumulates on the dashboard of the ambulance.

There are quilting sniglets:

fabflipate: Sewing one piece of fabric inside-out.
smeld: Sewing your project to your clothes.
erratiseams: Seams that don't match.

There are computer sniglets:

covlexia: When, after something has been installed, the
    cover on the computer just won't go back on as easily
    as it came off.
micro-inch: The amount of extra length needed on the key-
    board cord to allow you to sit somewhere besides
    right in front of the monitor.
ttyyppeelexia: When typing one character somehow yields
    two.

And there are Jewish sniglets:

drashush: Sounds made by the congregation to request that
    people be quiet for the rav's drasha.
shaboss: The mother who gives her children strict rules
    about cleaning up before Shabbat.
yarmulcult: The practice among those who are not Jewish of
    wearing colorful yarmulkes on their heads because it's
    fashionable.

tacangle

These and many more examples show that *sniglet* itself has become a word. As one writer observes, "The linguaphiles call new words neologisms, but the rest of us call them Sniglets." True, you still won't find *sniglet* in most dictionaries, but that may be because the makers of dictionaries are behind the times; they may not have noticed that *sniglet* is used freely by others besides Rich Hall.

But even more striking is that the sniglets themselves — the words that are sniglets, that is, not the name *sniglet* — remain outside the language. Hall's books present hundreds of them, and there probably have been thousands more since. Yet apparently not a single sniglet has had any appreciable use outside of the books and articles that introduce it.

It's not because sniglets have no usefulness. After all, there truly is no word for "Possessing the ability to turn the bathtub faucet on and off with your toes" (sniglet: aquadextrous) or "The act, when vacuuming, of running over a string at least a dozen times, reaching over and picking it up, examining it, then putting it back down to give the vacuum one more chance" (sniglet: carperpetuation) or "Manhandling the 'open here' spout on a milk carton so badly that one has to resort to using the 'illegal' side" (sniglet: lactomangulation). When we talk about these matters, or others like "The slime that accumulates on the underside of a soap bar when it sits in the dish too long" (sniglet: slurm), we have to resort to more than one word. It would seem more efficient to have one word for one thought, yet we still resist the sniglet opportunities.

Why have all the sniglets failed? One reason may be that the proposed words are too odd, as was the case with *schmooseoisie.* You might well get a laugh if you admitted to *carperpetuation* or said you were going to get rid of the *slurm.* Or you might get a blank look. Your listeners would not know what you meant; the words have a familiar sound, but they are clever jokes, and the definitions turn

out to be surprising punchlines instead of self-evident combinations. Take this test: Can you guess the meanings of these original sniglets?

    genderplex
    krogt
    snacktrek
    cinemuck

Here are the official sniglets definitions:

    genderplex: The predicament of a person in a restaurant
        who is unable to determine his or her designated
        restroom (e.g., turtles and tortoises).
    krogt (chemical symbol, Kr): The metallic silver coating
        found on fast-food game cards.
    snacktrek: The peculiar habit, when searching for a snack,
        of constantly returning to the refrigerator in hopes
        that something new will have materialized.
    cinemuck: The combination of popcorn, soda, and melted
        chocolate that covers the floors of movie theaters.

Of these four, only *cinemuck* is straightforward enough to allow a reasonable guess. Perhaps you figured out that it was used to mean "muck in a cinema." Because of its relative transparency, one may actually find a stray use of that word with that meaning, as in this 1995 article: "The complete movie experience requires rickety seats, concessions with absolutely no nutritive value whatsoever, four to six inches of cinemuck on the floor. . . ." But in actual use it also can refer to the content of the movie itself, as in this reviewer's complaint about *Me, Myself, & Irene:* "I would've walked out of the theater in the first 20 minutes except I get paid to sit through even the worst cinemuck." This different usage indicates that this instance of *cinemuck* was an independent creation owing nothing to the original sniglet.

One or two such instances, of course, don't get a word into any dictionary. Rich Hall & Friends introduced hundreds of new words. All he wanted was to get laughs with

them, and that was all they yielded, except for the word *sniglets* itself. His sniglets are useful models for humorists, but not for those serious about coining words.

RUNCIBLE SPOONS AND CHIMPS

Or maybe those examples are just not foolish enough. Could the secret to success be utter nonsense? To find out, let's go back a century before Lewis and Hall to those ultimate practitioners of nonsense, Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll.

The year 1871 was a great one for nonsense verse. In that year Edward Lear, the Englishman who had cleaned up the limerick (it didn't stay clean long) and introduced it into polite society, published *Nonsense Songs, Stories, Botany, and Alphabets.* Among the poems in that book was "The Owl and the Pussy-cat," which included these memorable lines:

> *They sailed away, for a year and a day,*
> *To the land where the Bong-tree grows. . . .*
>
> *They dined on mince, and slices of quince,*
> *Which they ate with a runcible spoon;*
> *And hand in hand, on the edge of the sand,*
> *They danced by the light of the moon.*

A *Bong-tree!* What's that? And a *runcible spoon?* Lear provided no explanation of either in his deadpan verses. Children (and adults) throughout the English-speaking world would recite his poems and learn those words. But repeating a word whose meaning is unknown won't make it part of one's vocabulary, and words like *Bong-tree* bore no fruit. It was not till the next century that *bong* became a word in the English language, and none of its twentieth-century meanings (the sound of a bell, a mountaineer's piton, a water pipe for marijuana) appears to have anything to do with Lear's 1871 tree.

Dolomphious Duck

Runcible might have had the same fate, except that Lear continued to use it as if it were a perfectly ordinary word. In an illustrated alphabet in his 1872 *More Nonsense, Pictures, Rhymes, Botany, etc.,* he presented "The Dolomphious Duck, who caught Spotted Frogs for her dinner with a Runcible Spoon" as well as "The Rural Runcible Raven, who wore a White Wig and flew away with the Carpet Broom." (About *Dolomphious,* don't ask; it went the way of the *Bong-tree.*) His *Laughable Lyrics* of 1877 tell of "Aunt Jobiska's Runcible Cat with crimson whiskers," and the 1888 edition of his *Nonsense Songs and Stories* introduces Mr. Lear himself with his "runcible hat." That year, unfortunately, Mr. Lear himself died, but his lyrics continued to be published, and the 1895 edition of *Nonsense Songs and Stories* has "What a runcible goose you are!" and "We shall presently all be dead,/On this ancient runcible wall."

Evidently these uses were enough to establish the word. In the early twentieth century a consideration of its possible meanings led one scholar to the conclusion that "A runcible spoon is a kind of fork with three broad prongs or tines, one having a sharp edge, curved like a spoon. . . . Its origin is in jocose allusion to the slaughter at the Battle of Roncevaux [in Spain in 778], because it has a cutting edge." Lear's own illustration of the Dolomphious Duck with her Runcible Spoon suggests otherwise, but never

mind. With this 1926 interpretation, later writers on etiquette calmly mentioned the *runcible spoon* as if it were a centuries-old term.

Still, *runcible* is marginal at best. Forget Mr. Lear's hat, raven, cat, goose, or wall; only the phrase *runcible spoon* maintains a precarious existence in our language and in our dictionaries. The rest of Lear's copious coinages remain confined to the pages of his nonsense books.

They were copious, to be sure. Let us sample just one year's output. His 1872 alphabet depicts the *Fizzgiggious Fish* and the *Scroobious Snake,* not to mention the "The Yonghy-Bonghy-Bo, whose head was ever so much bigger than his Body, and whose Hat was rather small." The "Nonsense Botany" in his 1872 book includes sketches of such plants as *Stunnia Dinnerbellia* (shaped like a dinnerbell), *Washtubbia Circularis* (with a washtub as a flower), *Shoebootia Utilis* (with shoes and boots as its fruits), and *Barkia Howlaloudia* (with barking dogs' heads for flowers). "Nonsense Cookery" has recipes for an *Amblongus pie, crumbobblious cutlets,* and *gosky patties.* Everywhere one turns, other freshly minted words show up: "On the top of the Crumpetty Tree/ The Quangle Wangle sat," begins one poem, and another ends with a sparrow remarking, "Witchy witchy witchy wee, Twikky mikky bikky bee, Zikky sikky tee."

Surprisingly, aside from *runcible,* the only other established word for which Lear might possibly deserve credit is *chimp.* This is just a possibility, not a certainty, because when Lear mentions *chimp* in "The Dong [don't ask!] with a Luminous Nose" in his 1877 *Laughable Lyrics,* the word is not explained:

> *Over those plains still roams the Dong;*
> *And above the wall of the Chimp and Snipe*
> *You may hear the squeak of his plaintive pipe*

If that *chimp* is in fact an abbreviation for *chimpanzee,* Lear gets credit for first use. But it's hardly likely that this

glancing mention influenced any writers or speakers of the twentieth century who shortened *chimpanzee* to its first syllable (the first example in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from 1928). No, even the great popularity of Lear's poems did not make his inventions into household words.

WHAT ALICE FOUND

For all the appeal of "The Owl and the Pussy-cat" when it appeared in Lear's *Nonsense Songs* in 1871, it would be eclipsed at the end of that year by an even greater (or at least more famous) nonsense poem also making its first public appearance. It was in the middle of the first chapter of *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There,* a children's story by a mild-mannered Oxford mathematician using the pseudonym Lewis Carroll, that readers first encountered "Jabberwocky," probably now the best-known and most often memorized nonsense poem in the English language. On the other side of the mirror in her parlor, while trying to help the White Queen and White King, Alice notices a book with mirror-image writing. Holding it up to a mirror, she reads a short epic that begins:

> *JABBERWOCKY*
>
> *'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves*
> *Did gyre and gimble in the wabe*
> *All mimsy were the borogroves*
> *And the mome raths outgrabe.*

Alice finds herself awash in strange words: " 'It seems very pretty,' she said when she had finished it, 'but it's *rather* hard to understand!' (You see she didn't like to confess, even to herself, that she couldn't make it out at all.) 'Somehow it seems to fill my head with ideas — only I don't exactly know what they are! However, *somebody* killed *something:* that's clear, at any rate —' "

Humpty Dumpty

If she had left it at that, the poem might have receded into obscurity while Alice continued on her adventures. But it comes back with renewed interest in chapter 6, where Alice meets Humpty Dumpty, linguist par excellence. "I can explain all the poems that were ever invented — and a good many that haven't been invented just yet," he declares. So Alice asks him about "Jabberwocky," with the results as indicated on the next page.

Brillig, slithy, toves, gyre, gimble, wabe, mimsy, borogroves, mome, raths, outgrabe: You too very likely have heard, possibly even memorized this poem with all the odd words in it. The question is, can you remember Humpty Dumpty's definitions? Have you ever used, or heard, any of these words outside of "Jabberwocky"?

Probably not. Despite Humpty's more or less logical explanations, placing the words within the usual word creation practices of English, there is little evidence of any independent uses of these words either in Carroll's time or today. *Gyre* might be an exception, but it turns out that *gyre* is also the one word that wasn't new. It had been in the English language with the meaning "revolve, gyrate" since at least 1593.

As it happens, this first stanza of "Jabberwocky" was originally created by Carroll in 1855 as a fake "Stanza of Anglo-Saxon Poetry," with slightly different interpretations

Humpty Dumpty's Explanation of "Jabberwocky" Words

" '*Brillig*' means four o'clock in the afternoon — the time when you begin *broiling* things for dinner."

"That'll do very well," said Alice: and '*slithy*'?"

"Well, '*slithy*' means 'lithe and slimy.' 'Lithe' is the same as 'active.' You see it's like a portmanteau — there are two meanings packed up into one word."

"I see it now," Alice remarked thoughtfully: "and what are '*toves*'?"

"Well, '*toves*' are something like badgers — they're something like lizards — and they're something like corkscrews."

"They must be very curious looking creatures."

"They are that," said Humpty Dumpty: "also they make their nests under sun-dials — also they live on cheese."

"And what's to '*gyre*' and to '*gimble*'?"

"To '*gyre*' is to go round and round like a gyroscope. To '*gimble*' is to make holes like a gimlet."

"And '*the wabe*' is the grass-plot round a sun-dial, I suppose?" said Alice, surprised at her own ingenuity.

"Of course it is. It's called '*wabe*,' you know, because it goes a long way before it, and a long way behind it — "

"And a long way beyond it on each side," Alice added.

"Exactly so. Well, then, '*mimsy*' is 'flimsy and miserable' (there's another portmanteau for you). And a '*borogove*' is a thin shabby-looking bird with its feathers sticking out all round — something like a live mop."

"And then '*mome raths*'?" said Alice. "I'm afraid I'm giving you a great deal of trouble."

"Well, a '*rath*' is a sort of green pig: but '*mome*' I'm not certain about. I think it's short for 'from home' — meaning that they'd lost their way, you know."

"And what does '*outgrabe*' mean?"

"Well, '*outgribing*' is something between bellowing and whistling, with a kind of sneeze in the middle: however, you'll hear it done, maybe — down in the wood yonder — and when you've once heard it you'll be *quite* content."

of the words than Humpty Dumpty gives. Carroll's 1855 translation is: "It was evening, and the smooth active badgers were scratching and boring holes in the hill-side; all unhappy were the parrots; and the grave turtles squeaked out." The six stanzas he added for *Through the Looking-Glass* were more sparing in the use of obscure words and therefore more successful: one can deduce the meanings of the strange words from the context of familiar ones. "He went galumphing back" declares one line of the poem, and "He chortled in his joy" says another. *Chortle* and *galumph*—both of them what Humpty Dumpty calls *portmanteau words*—are both in use today. *Chortle* comes from "chuckle" and "snort"; *galumph* comes from "gallop" and "triumph."

MR. CARROLL'S PORTMANTEAU

Still, in view of the large number of nonsense words Carroll created, these few mark only a small success. Carroll had greater success with a word that is not nonsense at all. In the conversation with Humpty Dumpty about the words of "Jabberwocky," the most successful of Carroll's innovations is not any word of the poem, but *portmanteau* in Humpty's explanation.

In fact, Humpty's remark has kept *portmanteau* in the English vocabulary even after the portmanteau itself has disappeared. In Carroll's time, a portmanteau was a small piece of luggage, a stiff leather bag that opened like a book. We have long since traded portmanteaus for briefcases, overnight bags, and backpacks. But linguists have used Humpty's explanation, "two meanings packed up in one word," to create the technical term *portmanteau* to describe new words or forms made by combining others. So *portmanteau word* is firmly established.

Even that term, though, is likely to draw blank stares from most of the English-speaking population; only those

few who study and write about words will know and use it. The *Oxford English Dictionary,* whose editors were busy collecting examples of contemporary usage during Carroll's day, quotes him dozens of times and gives him credit for the first examples of *bandersnatch, curiouser and curiouser, frabjous, frumious, jabberwock, jubjub, manxome, mimsy, mome, outgrabe, phlizz, portmanteau (word), rath, slithy, snicker-snack, thingum-a-jig, tove, tulgey, uffish, unbirthday, vorpal,* and *wabe,* as well as *chortle* and *galumph.* But their acceptance in that dictionary of dictionaries was no guarantee of success. Most of those words appear only in Carroll's poems and stories or in allusions to them.

Perhaps it is more than coincidence that Charles L. Dodgson, a.k.a. Lewis Carroll, was a professor at the very institution that sponsored the *Oxford English Dictionary.* Lear, who wasn't a professor anywhere, got no such royal treatment from that dictionary for his creations.

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER

So well known are Carroll's works that when his created words do appear elsewhere, they are usually in a context recalling what Carroll wrote. Take the phrase *curiouser and curiouser,* for example. It occurs for the first time in the 1865 *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* at the start of chapter 2: " 'Curiouser and curiouser!' cried Alice (she was so much surprised, that for the moment she quite forgot how to speak good English); 'now I'm opening out like the largest telescope that ever was!' " It's not "good English" because of the rule that *-er* may to be added only to words of one or two syllables; a three-syllable word like *curious* requires the use of *more* instead, so Alice would properly have said "More and more curious!" But, recalling Alice and her truly curious adventures, *curiouser and curiouser* has passed into general use as a phrase to evoke any situation so curious as to cause one to forget "good English."

In short, Carroll's writings are more famous than his words, so any use of his words recalls his writings, and his words therefore do not have much of an independent life in the vocabulary of English. However, there is one apparent innovation of Carroll's that has entirely escaped the confines of the Alice books to enter the general vocabulary. It is a different sort of innovation than any of his made-up words, and it fits so naturally into present-day English that its originality is hard to detect. It occurs in this passage from chapter 1 of *Through the Looking-Glass:*

> *"Kitty, dear, let's pretend —" And here I wish I could tell you half the things Alice used to say, beginning with her favourite phrase "Let's pretend." She had had quite a long argument with her sister only the day before — all because Alice had begun with "Let's pretend we're kings and queens;" and her sister, who liked being very exact, had argued that they couldn't, because there were only two of them, and Alice had been reduced at last to say, "Well,* you *can be one of them then, and* I'll *be all the rest."*

What's so modern about this passage? It's the use of *pretend* in the sense "To feign in play; to make believe," as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it. According to the evidence of that dictionary, Carroll may well have been the first to use *pretend* in that way, as opposed to the earlier (and still current) adult sense of making a false claim.

This emergence of a highly successful new meaning of a familiar word is very different from the creation of novelties of vocabulary in "Jabberwocky." Imagine for a moment how you might interpret the passage containing *pretend* if you lived when it was first published. You would be well acquainted with *pretend* in uses like "She pretended she was my friend," but back then you might never before have heard or seen the phrase "Let's pretend." Still, in the context of child's play, and with full explanation by the author, "Let's pretend" would seem a natural extension

of the older meaning. You might even use it yourself the next time you played with a child, and children would learn "Let's pretend" as they read the book or had it read to them. In that way, the word in its new sense may have spread as easily as *like* or *way* in today's teen talk.

The success of this new meaning comes from its *not* calling attention to itself. And that may be the lesson to learn from the humorists and would-be coiners of new words: If you want a new word to succeed, don't use it to make a joke. Don't brag about it; better yet, don't even mention it. Just slip it in where it will seem natural and pass unnoticed. Maybe it's best if you don't even notice it yourself. It's quite possible that Carroll wasn't aware he was offering a new meaning for *pretend.*

BROMIDES AND BLURBS

After Lear and Carroll, the next great coiner of nonsense words was an American, Gelett Burgess. At first he seemed destined for unparalleled success. A century after he coined them, two of his words are firmly established in our vocabulary. Well, maybe one. . . .

To succeed in coining new words is so rare an accomplishment that even one success is worth celebrating. Success with two words is rare indeed, and worthy of extreme hype. It is appropriate, then, that one of the most successful coiners of the twentieth century, the father of two (well, maybe one) well-established words, is known especially for his own shameless and amusing promotion of those words. He is the humorist-writer and illustrator Gelett Burgess (1866–1951), and his words are *bromide* and *blurb.* His invention of both the name and the function of the blurb helped him take the art of self-promotion to new heights.

The success of the first word, *bromide,* led to the invention and success of the second. Burgess presented to the

world, or at least to readers of the magazine *Smart Set,* a new meaning of *bromide* in a 1906 article entitled "The Sulphitic Theory." According to the mock psychology of this theory, some people are *Bromides:* boring and utterly predictable. Their opposites, the much rarer people who think for themselves, are *Sulphites.*

Bromide wasn't a new word. It is a chemical term from the early nineteenth century meaning a compound made with the element bromine. One such compound, potassium bromide, was and still is used as a sedative, and in this use it is often simply referred to as *bromide.* So Burgess seized on the name of a sedative to label the type of person who puts you to sleep.

Not content with expounding his theory in *Smart Set,* later that year Burgess found a publisher for a whole little book on the subject, grandly titled *Are You a Bromide? Or, The Sulphitic Theory Expounded and Exemplified According to the Most Recent Researches into the Psychology of Boredom, Including Many Well-Known Bromidioms Now in Use.*

Here are a few of his *bromidioms,* as hackneyed now as they were a century ago:

—I don't know much about Art, but I know what I like.
—My mother is seventy years old, but she doesn't look a day over fifty.
—I thought I loved him at the time, but of course it wasn't really love.
—Why, I know you better than you know yourself!
—Now, this thing really happened!
—It isn't so much the heat (or the cold), as the humidity in the air.
—You can live twenty years in New York and never know who your next-door neighbor is.
—He's told that lie so often that he believes it himself, now.
—Don't worry; that won't help matters any.

The opposite personality was *Sulphitic:*

> *Sulphites are agreed upon most of the basic facts of life, and this common understanding makes it possible for them to eliminate the obvious from their conversation.*

Burgess's article and book made both *bromide* and *sulphite* the talk of the town. Frank O'Malley of the *New York Sun* joined in the fun; Burgess credits him with coining *bromidiom* and being "one of the most ardent and discriminating collectors of Bromidioms." But the fad soon faded. *Sulphite* never caught on as the designation of a personality and reverted to its purely scientific use. *Bromide,* on the other hand, gradually drifted from Burgess's definition and acquired the related meaning of a remark uttered by a person who is a *bromide,* that is, a platitude such as the bromidioms listed above. In that sense, it has stayed with the language ever since.

Now here is how *bromide* happened to lead to *blurb.* Burgess was a popular writer, so his publisher gave the 1906 book version of *Are You a Bromide?* a special sendoff at the 1907 convention of the American Booksellers Association. This is how *blurb* was coined, as publisher B. W. Huebsch later explained:

> *It is the custom of publishers to present copies of a conspicuous current book to booksellers attending the annual dinner of their trade association, and as this little book was in its heyday when the meeting took place I gave it to 500 guests. These copies were differentiated from the regular edition by the addition of a comic bookplate drawn by the author and by a special jacket which he devised. It was the common practise to print the picture of a damsel — languishing, heroic, or coquettish — anyhow, a damsel, on the jacket of every novel, so Burgess lifted from a Lydia Pinkham or tooth-powder advertisement the portrait of a sickly sweet young woman, painted in some gleaming teeth, and otherwise enhanced her pulchritude, and placed her in the center of the jacket. His accompanying text was some nonsense about "Miss*

> Blinda Blurb," and thus the term supplied a real need and
> became a fixture in our language.

Burgess's special book jacket not only introduced "Miss Blurb," but with its effusive language set an example that other publishers soon followed. Every hardcover book jacket nowadays has its *blurb* on the inside front flap, foreshadowing the book's contents in glowing terms.

So Burgess now had two successful new words. And the second one was a total surprise; it swept into general use without Burgess even trying. Granted, neither word had the particular meaning originally intended by Burgess, but both had meanings that derived from his intentions. Not surprisingly, these successes inspired him to numerous other coinages. He proudly presented exactly one hundred of them in *Burgess Unabridged: A New Dictionary of Words You Have Always Needed,* published in 1914. Proudly among the hundred was a full page on *blurb.* Burgess had invented the word, not the definition, but he contentedly went along with the meaning that had developed:

blurb *n.* 1. A flamboyant advertisement; an inspired testimonial. 2. Fulsome praise; a sound like a publisher.
blurb *v.* To flatter from interested motives; to compliment oneself.

In the front of the book he defines *blurb* more briefly as "Praise from one's self, inspired laudation." These definitions make no reference to the key element of *blurb* as we know it today, its location on a book jacket. But Burgess's discussion of the word includes that as well:

> On the "jacket" of the "latest" fiction, we find the blurb;
> abounding in agile adjectives and adverbs, attesting that
> this book is the "sensation of the year;" the blurb tells
> of "thrills" and "heart-throbs," of "vital importance" and
> "soul satisfying revelation." The blurb speaks of the novel's "grip" and "excitement."

So Burgess can be crowned as one of the champion coiners of modern times. Yet even he was far from

automatically successful. *Bromide* made it, but it was such a natural extension of the medicinal meaning that it might have been coined anyhow. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* around the time of Burgess's *Smart Set* article another publication called the *Daily Chronicle* included the comment, "Literature is resentful at being mistaken for bromide."

Blurb was unquestionably original as well as successful. In this case, however, Burgess did not set out to coin a word. He drew a cartoon of an attractive woman, named her "Blinda Blurb," and added some hype about his book. It must have been a bookseller or publisher — or perhaps Burgess himself, later — who transferred the meaning from the woman to the words of praise.

And what was the fate of the other ninety-nine words he invented for *Burgess Unabridged*? Failures, all of them. They are charming failures, to be sure, with ingenious definitions. In fact, it is tempting to quote them all. Here are some:

agowilt: Sickening terror, unnecessary fear, sudden shock.
alibosh: A glaringly obvious falsehood or exaggeration.
bleesh: An unpleasant picture, vulgar or obscene.
cowcat: An unimportant guest, an insignificant personality.
critch: To array one's self in uncomfortable splendor.
diabob: An object of amateur art, adorned without taste.
edicle: One who is educated beyond his intellect, a pedant.
eegot: A selfishly interested friend, a lover of success.
fidgeltick: Food that it is a bore to eat; a taciturn person.
flooijab: An apparent compliment with a concealed sting.
gowyop: A perplexity wherein familiar things seem strange.
gubble: Society talk, the hum of foolish conversation.
hyprijimp: A man who does woman's work; one alone amid women.
impkin: A superhuman pet, a baby in beast form.
jirriwig: A traveller who does not see the country.
jujasm: An expansion of sudden joy after suspense.

kipe: To inspect appraisingly, as women do one another.

meem: An artificial half-light that women love; gloom.

nink: An "antique" resurrected for decorative effect.

oofle: A person whose name one cannot remember; to forget.

pawdle: One vicariously famous, or with undeserved prominence.

rawp: A reliably unreliable person, one always late.

spigg: A decoration of overt vanity; to attract notice, paint.

tashivation: The art of answering without listening to questions.

tintiddle: An imaginary conversation; wit coming too late.

udney: A beloved bore; one who loves but does not understand.

vorge: Voluntary suffering, unnecessary effort or exercise.

wijjicle: A perverse household article, always out of order.

wog: Food on the face; unconscious adornment of the person.

wumgush: Women's insincere flattery of each other.

yamnoy: A bulky, unmanageable object to be carried.

To each of these and the rest of his hundred words, Burgess devotes a full page of definition and commentary, along with an eight-line poem. Even a century later, the humor is not stale. Here is part of what he has to say about *wog,* for example:

> *Have you ever seen the gentleman with the Niagara-Falls moustache? Pretty woggy, what? When beautiful Bessie drinks buttermilk and forgets her napkin, what can you say? . . .*
>
> *But facial stalactites are not the only wogs, alas! Millicent's hair is wogged — prithee catch the hairpin before it falls. As you pick a thread that wogs your wife's grey gown, she discovers a blonde hair on your coat-collar, the most embarrassing of all wogs. . . .*

Burgess Unabridged is perhaps the most entertaining dictionary since Ambrose Bierce's *Devil's Dictionary,* but it didn't contribute even one new word to our language,

except for *blurb,* which was already there. Perhaps the failure of the words in *Burgess Unabridged* comes from Burgess's impish way of inventing words. In his introduction, he shows that he knows how words usually come into being, derived in familiar ways from existing words. "But to invent a new word right out of the air or the cigarette smoke is another thing," he notes, and then declares, "And that's what I determined to do."

Winning Creations

After the examples of the previous chapter, it's time for a note of encouragement. If you're reading this book in hopes of creating a word of your own, don't let the failures of the experts dissuade you. There are successes too (but not by self-appointed experts in word coinage) and lessons to be learned from both successes and failures. And there's still plenty of room at the top. An amateur may actually have a better chance for success, because many of those who try more seriously for vocabulary fame go about it the wrong way.

Furthermore, it's an innocent hobby. No animals are harmed in the making of a word, and you can splice all the word-genes you want without creating a genetically modified *Frankenfood.*

To be sure, if you want to contribute to the vocabulary, you must have a nonprofit attitude. You can't collect a toll every time someone uses your word, because speech is free and words can't be copyrighted or trademarked. (Brand names are different, but they too can be used freely as long as the user is not trying to profit from them.) Dictionary makers don't pay for the words they use, either, and (to add insult to injury) they won't accept a new word

unless they can find independent evidence that the word is widely used.

But none of this has stopped people from trying, and this chapter will reveal the secrets of some ringing successes.

ALL WORDS WERE ONCE NEW

When even the experts are near-perfect failures at creating successful new words, amateurs might be discouraged. But though most new words fail, some obviously succeed. Depending on how one counts them, there are many thousands of words in each person's vocabulary, more than a hundred thousand words in a standard desk dictionary, and nearly half a million words in the biggest dictionary of all, the *Oxford English Dictionary.* Even that great dictionary misses many of the words we use. Of all these hundreds of thousands of words, only a few thousand at most have survived from the Old English of a thousand years ago. These are mostly basic words like *hand, fish, swim,* and *love.* All the rest were once newcomers.

And new words continue to find places for themselves. The English language as a whole often seems like Teflon, so smooth that no new additions can cling to it, but sometimes it turns to Velcro and snags them. From the exceptional words that have succeeded, it will be possible to find clues to assist in the success of words yet to be born.

THE SUCCESSFUL SCOFFLAW

First prize for Successful Word Coinage (Twentieth Century) goes to a term whose success as a word is proportional to its failure to eradicate the thing it describes. It was invented to serve the noble cause of preventing people from drinking alcoholic beverages. That "great experiment" failed, but the word created to shame those who flout the law lives on.

The place was Boston, home also of America's most successful coinage of the nineteenth century, *OK* (in 1839). The year was 1923. The need arose like this: In 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution had been approved, prohibiting "the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors" in the United States. That same year Congress passed the Volstead Act to enforce this prohibition. That should have ended America's problem with alcohol. And yet . . . to the chagrin of the triumphant prohibitionists, people ignored the new law and went right on drinking.

A prominent member of the Anti-Saloon League and graduate of the Harvard Class of 1895, Mr. Delcevare King of the Boston suburb of Quincy (the "City of Presidents," home to John Adams and John Quincy Adams), viewed the situation with concern. In October 1923 he wrote to the Harvard Glee Club to protest their singing of "Johnny Harvard," a song he called "the most drinking of drinking songs" and one that "comes pretty near to scoffing at the prohibition law."

He had a point. The song goes like this:

> *Oh, here's to Johnny Harvard! fill him up a full glass,*
> *Fill him up a glass, to his name and fame,*
> *And at the same time don't forget his true love;*
> *Fill her up a bumper to the brim.*
> *Then drink, drink, drink, drink,*
> *Pass the wine cup free,*
> *Drink, drink, drink, drink,*
> *Jolly boys are we. . . .*

An attitude change clearly was needed. King decided that this might be accomplished by a word, a word that would sting and shame the drinker. A man of means, he offered a prize of $200 for a word "which best expresses the idea of lawless drinker, menace, scoffer, bad citizen, or whatnot, with the biting power of 'scab' or 'slacker.'" The cause was noble and the sum significant, so by the contest deadline of January 1, 1924, he had received

25,000 suggestions. Among them, according to a report in the *Boston Herald*, were:

> *Vatt, still, scut, sluf, curd, canker, scrub, scuttler, dreg, drag, dipsic, boozlaac, alcolog, barnacle, slime-slopper, ell-shiner, still-whacker, sluch-licker, sink, smooth, lawless-ite, bottle-yegger, crimer, alcoloom, hooch-sniper, cellar-sifter, rum-rough, high-boozer,* and *law-loose-liquor-lover.*
>
> It is Mr. King's hope [the *Herald* continued] that the word that he selects will be so opprobrious and soul stirring that the liquor law violators will hang their heads in shame, promise themselves not to drink any more and, perhaps, even persuade their lawless friends to do likewise. He admits that if he finds a word that will accomplish a reformation of the steady drinkers, it will indeed be a powerful word. But he says it is worth many times $200 to him to arouse the public to serious thought regarding violations of the prohibition law.

scofflaw
excerpt from the January 16, 1924 issue of the Boston Herald

On Wednesday, January 16, 1924, the *Herald* announced the winner: *scofflaw,* proposed separately by both Henry Irving Dale of Andover and Miss Kate L. Butler of Dorchester. Entries had come from every state and a few foreign countries, but the winners were in the *Herald* circulation area.

The newborn word wasn't left to sink or swim on its own. King immediately sought to nurture it, and thereby fight the foes of Prohibition, by announcing another contest with prizes totaling $200. This contest solicited essays of 100 words or less on why those who drink illegal liquor should be called *scofflaws.* And he had evidently nurtured it privately, too; by the time of the *Herald* announcement he had already persuaded the organizers of a conference on law enforcement to adopt the word as a slogan for their meeting in the coming week.

Other newspapers reported the choice of *scofflaw,* some with amusement, some with approbation. The *New York Times* opined on January 17:

> *Perhaps it will serve, though it lacks the merit of coming trippingly from the tongue, and, at least when first heard, is a sound with little or no meaning.*
>
> *Carefully considered, the term becomes significant enough, and, as intended, it may turn the more or most sensitive sinners from their evil ways. Its weakness lies in the fact that said sinners will not be startled nor abashed at being told that they do what they never have tried to conceal, and they will ask to have it proved that they who scoff at one law necessarily and inevitably are scoffers at all law.*

And the *New York Tribune* dismissed its chances:

> *It is much easier to manufacture synthetic rubies than synthetic slang. The prize contest for a word "to stab awake the conscience of the lawless drinker" has enriched the language with* scofflaw! *This grotesque compound is not likely to leave a trail of bleeding consciences.*
>
> *To feel its feebleness put it alongside specimens of the real thing that just grew —* roughneck, highbrow, boob,

> jazz, hootch, hoodlum, *and so on. Words like these were not produced by competition and couldn't be. If George Ade, Finley Peter Dunne, Mark Twain and Artemus Ward were to collaborate they might be able to invent a pricklier noun than* scofflaw, *but the chances would be against it. Slang and poets are born, not made, and the unknown geniuses who coin catchwords do so in inspired moments, never by malice aforethought.*

Scofflaw was taken up by others outside the Prohibition movement, but with different results than anticipated. The scofflaws themselves evidently relished the term rather than flinching from it. On January 18, in his column "The Conning Tower" in the *New York World,* Franklin P. Adams offered this poem by "C.W.":

> *I want to be a scofflaw*
> *And with the scofflaws stand;*
> *A brand upon my forehead*
> *A handcuff on my hand.*
> *I want to be a scofflaw,*
> *For since I went to school,*
> *I hate to mind an order,*
> *I* hate *to keep a rule.*

Three days later, Adams foresaw the quick demise of the word:

> *An announcement comes from Preferred Pictures Corp. to the effect that that organization is about to begin work on a production to be called "The Adorable Scofflaw." The picture, the announcement concludes, will be released in the spring. We don't believe it. We don't believe, that is, that it will be released under that title. For unless we are wrong — and nothing in the past leads us to suspect we ever could be — by St. Valentine's Day only a few antiquarians will recall the word.*

But it would prove to have staying power, despite or perhaps because of the mockery. On January 27, for example, just eleven days after the first public announcement

of the word, the *Chicago Tribune* reported this reaction from Paris:

> *Hardly has Boston added to the gaiety of nations by adding to Webster's Dictionary the opprobrious term of "scofflaw," when Jock, the genial manager of Harry's Bar in Paris, yesterday invented the Scoff-Law Cocktail, and it has already become exceedingly popular among American Prohibition dodgers.*

A cocktail website yields the ingredients in Harry's Scofflaw Cocktail: one ounce Canadian whiskey, one ounce dry vermouth, a quarter ounce lemon juice, "and a hearty dash of both grenadine and orange bitters." This drink was popular until Prohibition itself came to an end with the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1933.

Within a few months after its introduction, *scofflaw* was well ensconced in the vernacular. In June 1924, for example, sportswriter and storyteller Ring Lardner wrote a humorous column proposing "Sane Olympics": "contests which will show if a man or woman will make a good or a bad husband or wife." The first event of his "new pentathlon" was:

> *1. Patience. Each contestant is required to set a table in a scofflaw cabaret with her pretended husband. The winner is the one that don't say let's go home.*

Scofflaw is significant not only for its success when launched, but for the criteria used to choose it from among the 25,000 entries. According to the *Herald,* the judges (the secretary of the Massachusetts Federation of Churches, the regional superintendent of the Anti-Saloon League, and King) had five specific "principles" in mind. In its form, the judges wanted a word of just one or two syllables. They wanted it to begin with *s,* to give it a "sting." In its meaning, they wanted it to refer not to all drinkers but just the illegal ones. They wanted to emphasize the law, rather than liquor, so they looked for a word with *law,* not *liquor,*

as its basis and one that would apply to all lawbreakers, not just liquor violators. Their last "principle" was to find a word that could "be linked to the statement of President Harding, 'Lawless drinking is a menace to the republic itself.'"

These principles seem level-headed compared to the ones apparently followed by others who made a point of coining words. Instead of looking for the most clever and innovative creations, they wanted a short plain word. Instead of a limited specialized meaning like "a photograph that features the camera operator's finger in the corner" (Rich Hall's sniglet *flirr*), they wanted a word widely applicable beyond the specific act of illegal drinking.

And they judged wisely in wanting their word to be based on something as familiar as *law.* That word had been at home in English for nearly a thousand years. The contest winners joined it to *scoff,* a word that had been in English both as a noun and as a verb since the 1300s. Both *scoff* and *law* are from the Old Norse language, a close cousin of English that also gave us familiar words like *scare, scrap,* and *scold,* all of like antiquity. In fact, the two words *scoff* and *law* are of such similar background and age that they could have been combined seven hundred years earlier. They might have been, if the sheriff of Nottingham had thought to offer a reward for a word to characterize the insolent lawbreaker Robin Hood. As it was, the sheriff could only call Robin an *outlaw.*

It may have helped that the new word had a distinguished sponsor and was to be used for the most worthy of purposes. Its association with high society prevented any possible objections to it on the grounds of unknown or vulgar origins. Paradoxically, it may also have helped that the contest and the word received so much scorn and mockery from the scofflaws themselves.

But perhaps the most important reason for the success of *scofflaw* was that it didn't seem new. Even though we know better, it fits so well in the crowd of *law* words that

it seems as if it has been around a long time. Our usual defenses against newcomers are disarmed.

ANOTHER SUCCESS: SKYCAP

Not all words are coined for such solemn purposes as was *scofflaw.* In a lighter vein, a prize of $100 was offered in 1940 to find a suitable name for the porters (at the time, always African-American men) who carried luggage for airline passengers at New York City's airlines terminal on 42nd Street at Park Avenue. According to a *New York Herald Tribune* article of December 24, 1940, found by researcher Barry Popik, there were 2,780 entries in the contest. The winner was Willie Wainwright of New Orleans with the term *skycap.* His term was another instant success, or at least an enduring one, because airline porters across the nation are still called *skycaps* to this day.

What made *skycap* so successful? Once again, it was because it seemed so natural that it hardly seemed new. In 1940, everyone in America knew that railroad porters were *redcaps,* so called since the early days of the century because of the red caps they wore. Wainwright substituted another three-letter word for the first syllable of that word, and the *redcap*'s cousin the *skycap* was born.

Today there are so few railroad passengers and so few redcaps that that word is almost obsolete, but skycaps keep busy with curbside check-ins.

NINE-YEAR-OLD WONDER: GOOGOL

The youngest successful word coiner on record is Milton Sirotta, responding to a request by his uncle, the mathematician Edward Kasner. Milton was nine at the time, or maybe eight, depending on which story you follow; the year was perhaps 1938. In other words, the exact details are uncertain, but there is no doubt that the name *googol* arose in a conversation between nephew and uncle, and

apparently so did the name for a much larger number based on the googol, the *googolplex.* Here is the story of their origins, as related by Kasner and James Newman in their 1940 book, *Mathematics and the Imagination:*

> *Words of wisdom are spoken by children at least as often as by scientists. The name 'googol' was invented by a child (Dr Kasner's nine-year-old nephew) who was asked to think up a name for a very big number, namely, 1 with a hundred zeros after it. He was very certain that this number was not infinite, and therefore equally certain that it had to have a name. At the same time that he suggested 'googol' he gave a name for a still larger number: 'Googolplex'. A googolplex is much larger than a googol, but is still finite, as the inventor of the name was quick to point out. It was first suggested that a googolplex should be 1, followed by writing zeros until you got tired. This is a description of what would happen if one actually tried to write a googolplex, but different people get tired at different times and it would never do to have Carnera [Primo Carnera, an Italian boxing champion] a better mathematician than Dr Einstein, simply because he had more endurance. The googolplex then, is a specific finite number, with so many zeros after the 1 that the number of zeros is a googol. . . . You will get some idea of the size of this very large but finite number from the fact that there would not be enough room to write it, if you went to the farthest star, touring all the nebulae and putting down zeros every inch of the way.*

The *googol* and the *googolplex* were presented as specific examples of a very big number and a very much bigger number. In the standard terminology, the googol is equivalent to 10 *duotrigintillion,* but that is too exotic a name to remember, and even a little hard to say. *Googol,* in contrast, was simple yet also properly scientific-looking with its *-ol* ending, as in familiar words like *aerosol* and *alcohol* and more exotic ones like *dinitrophenol* and *pentylenetetrazol.*

Most nine-year-olds — indeed, most children and people of all ages — are quick to invent new words. Most of

these get no use beyond their own families, if that. The difference in Milton Sirotta's case is that his uncle was the expert, the first to write about the properties of *googols* and *googolplexes.* The scientist who invents a new idea usually gets to name it.

TURN ON, TUNE IN, DROP OUT

> *To fathom hell or soar angelic*
> *Just take a pinch of psychedelic.*

What do you call those drugs that alter your state of consciousness? Hallucinatory? Psychotic? Those terms seemed too negative to a certain scientist and his writer friend who were experimenting with them in the mid-twentieth century. In the 1950s, Dr. Humphry Osmond, clinical director of a hospital in Saskatchewan, Canada, had been studying the benefits of mescaline and LSD for treating alcoholics. In 1953 when Aldous Huxley, author of *Brave New World,* inquired about his work, Osmond responded by bringing him a vial of mescaline. By 1955 Huxley had tried LSD, too. Seeking a term to affirm the value of mind-altering drugs, Huxley in a 1956 letter to Osmond coined the word *phanerothyme,* meaning something like "revealing the soul." He presented it in a poem:

> *To make this trivial world sublime,*
> *Take a half a Gramme of phanerothyme.*

Osmond thought he had a better idea and replied with the couplet at the start of this section, introducing the word *psychedelic.* Like *phanerothyme,* it used a combination of classical Greek words to mean "mind-revealing." In 1957 Osmond began using *psychedelic* at conferences and in scientific papers. When the counterculture of the 1960s began to "tune in, turn on, and drop out," they followed Osmond's lead and turned on with *psychedelics.*

Ever since Aristotle, of course, serious science has displayed its seriousness with words derived from Greek. Both *psychedelic* and *phanerothyme* are suitably based on

Greek, but *phanerothyme* is less diaphanous to English speakers. We are familiar with words about the mind that begin with *psych-,* including the name *psychology* itself, but there is no such easy recognition of *phan-.* If we recognized it from the word *phantom,* it might suggest a ghost rather than a soul or the mind.

Once Osmond the scientist began using *psychedelic,* others followed. The word seemed to legitimize and dignify the experience of tripping out.

SPEAKING WITH FORKED TONGUE

No book has called as much attention to the political possibilities of language as George Orwell's *1984,* published in 1949. In that book, under Big Brother's rule, not even one's thoughts are permitted to deviate from the party line; it is *crimethink* to do so. The party is busy reducing the English language to a simplified version, *Newspeak,* designed to make *crimethink* impossible by making it unthinkable. The words *crimethink* and *Newspeak* reflect the simplification of form and vocabulary achieved by Newspeak: they use *think* and *speak* instead of *thought* and *speech* in order to keep variety in the vocabulary at a minimum and fend off impolitic thoughts. "All words grouping themselves round the concepts of liberty and equality, for instance, were contained in the single word *crimethink,*" Orwell wrote in an appendix on Newspeak, "while all words grouping themselves round the concepts of objectivity and rationalism were contained in the single word *oldthink.* Greater precision would have been dangerous." Although *1984* is written in *Oldspeak* (the English we know) — not just because it's the language of Orwell's readers, but also because, according to the story, Newspeak was just being developed in 1984 — the novel gives a number of examples from the new language: *goodthink,* for example, which means "political orthodoxy,"

and *duckspeak,* "to quack like a duck" in repeating the party line without thinking — a good thing.

Four of the Newspeak words of *1984* have made their way into the *Oxford English Dictionary: unperson, double-think, Newspeak,* and *Oldspeak.* In *1984,* an *unperson* is one who, having "incurred the displeasure of the Party," vanishes completely, not just from present notice but also from the rewritten records of the past. It is as if the person never existed. The bluntness of *unperson* has brought it into general use for those who are treated as if they don't exist by various authorities.

Doublethink is the logic, or illogic, that allows a loyal party member to believe everything the party says, even if it is contradictory or contrary to the evidence of the senses. Winston Smith, the protagonist of Orwell's novel, learns that $2 + 2 = 4$ or 5 or whatever the party wants it to.

But the most successful of the words generated by *1984* is one Orwell did not use in the book: *doublespeak.* It's a combination of the first part of *doublethink* with the last part of *Newspeak* or *Oldspeak,* and it means the speaking of nonsense, or replacing unpleasant truths with euphemism. It is a twist on *doubletalk,* but while doubletalk can be innocent, doublespeak is malicious.

In turn, *Newspeak, Oldspeak,* and *doublespeak* have made *-speak* into a productive suffix referring to jargon, often insincere or meaningless. For example, a recent essay by Louis Menand, a professor at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, uses *deanspeak:*

> Talk about "values" and "civic education" is still mostly *deanspeak; it's the philosophical padding for certain intellectual changes for which no one has yet devised a very coherent public-relations-tested rationale.*

The many other varieties of *-speak* include *business-speak, childspeak, computerspeak, cop-speak, doctorspeak* or *medspeak, sciencespeak, sportspeak,* and of course

Bushspeak and *Clintonspeak.* The use of *-speak* where *-speech* or *-talk* would be expected is a reminder that the language so characterized is facile rather than thoughtful.

YAHOO!

Long before Yahoo.com existed as a search engine on the Internet, there was a *yahoo.* No, it wasn't a cheer either. Those who have read Lemuel Gulliver's account of his voyages to exotic places nearly three centuries ago recognize the *yahoo* as — us.

Jonathan Swift, of course, is the satiric author behind the four volumes of Gulliver's *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World,* published in 1726. The fourth volume is "A Voyage to the Country of the Houyhnhnms," where Gulliver encounters civilized horses, the Houyhnhnms, leading peaceful, rational lives in harmony with nature. He also encounters filthy brutish creatures, servants to the Houyhnhnms, who turn out to be biologically human, as he is reminded to his disgust and embarrassment when one of the females jumps his bones. These *yahoos,* he observes, "appear to be the most unteachable of all animals. . . . Yet I am of opinion this defect ariseth chiefly from a perverse, restive disposition. For they are cunning, malicious, treacherous and revengeful. They are strong and hardy, but of a cowardly spirit, and by consequence insolent, abject, and cruel." For page after page Gulliver horrifies his Houyhnhnm masters by explaining the vile practices of the European yahoos. When he is forced to leave the land of the Houyhnhnms and returns home, he can't stand the company of humans and spends much of his day conversing with his horses.

Yahoo, then, is humanity in its most disgusting aspect. Ever since, the label *yahoo* has been used for humans who behave in an uncivilized manner. The word itself has the form of a shout, which reinforces its meaning of boorishness. The shout and the prominence of Yahoo.com

Lilliputian

have nudged the word's modern meaning more towards exuberance rather than crudeness.

One other contribution to the English vocabulary from *Gulliver's Travels* is *Lilliputian,* meaning miniature. Many who have never made it to Book IV still have enjoyed Book I, where Gulliver finds himself shipwrecked on an island where everyone and everything is one-twelfth his size. Thus the ordinary human Gulliver becomes *Quinbus Flestrin,* "the Great Man-Mountain." That Lilliputian term and most of the other words from the languages Gulliver encounters — like *splacknuck* from his visit to Brobdingnag, where he is the one who is one-twelfth the size of everyone else (and where he is the size of a *splacknuck*) — remain within the covers of the book. But because Gulliver's story of Lilliput is so well known, *Lilliputian* has entered our vocabulary; and *yahoo* is so successful that it is known even among those who have no knowledge of Swift's book.

THE AGNOSTIC

In the early days of the Christian era, the apostle Paul came to Athens, where he debated with Epicurean and Stoic philosophers and then gave a sermon. Looking for common ground, he said, "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, 'To an unknown god.' What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. . . ." In the original Greek, "To an unknown god" is *agnostōi theōi.*

Nineteen centuries later, at a meeting in 1869 of the Metaphysical Society in London, the scientist Thomas Henry Huxley, grandfather of Aldous Huxley, took the first word of that inscription and added *-ic* to form a new word of English, *agnostic.* It meant someone who does not know whether God exists, in contrast to the much older word *atheist* (first used in the 1500s), referring to one who denies the existence of God. For those who know Greek, Huxley's was a logical choice; *gnostic* refers to a "knowing" person, in particular one who has spiritual knowledge, and *a-* is a prefix meaning "not."

The word was immediately accepted because of Huxley's prominence in public discussion of the debate between science and religion. And even though it doesn't look like an everyday English word, it had the advantage that our language has made ample room for words of Greek origin that have to do with *philosophy* and *theology* — both of these words, indeed, being from the Greek.

THE QUIRK OF THE QUARK

Greek and Latin are the usual sources for scientific and psychological terminology in English, as in the cases of *psychedelic* and *agnostic.* But in science the inventor or discoverer has considerable authority over nomenclature, so a quirky departure from the solemn ancient languages

is also possible. That was the case with *quark,* the name chosen in 1963 for a hypothetical subatomic particle by the theorist who postulated it, Murray Gell-Mann. Instead of looking in a Greek dictionary for something meaning "small," he simply used a word that suggested smallness to him, *quork.* Shortly after he had labeled his particles *quorks,* he was reading James Joyce's obscure and punning novel *Finnegan's Wake* and came upon a line from Joyce's poem about legendary King Mark: "Three quarks for Muster Mark!" At the time, Gell-Mann had posited three kinds of quarks (there are now six), so Joyce's word seemed suited to his new concept. Accordingly, Gell-Mann changed the spelling to match Joyce's *quark.* Joyce himself apparently got the word from German, where it means "curds" and "nonsense." If Gell-Mann happened to be aware of those meanings, they would have reinforced his whimsical choice.

The existence of *quarks* has since been confirmed by experiments. Since Gell-Mann initiated the discussion of *quarks* and was respected by other physicists who followed up and confirmed his hypothesis, there was no doubt about *quark* being the word they all would use. In 1969 Gell-Mann was awarded the Nobel Prize in physics for his discovery.

BRUSH UP YOUR SHAKESPEARE

All the creations in this chapter, impressive as they are, pale when set next to the accomplishments of William Shakespeare. In addition to being the unquestioned champion of English literature, he is also the champion coiner of new words in English. In fact, the two championships go together. Shakespeare's writing is so memorable that the words he created remain in our collective memory. And of course they are repeated every time his plays are performed, which is often.

Shakespeare's plays and poems have a vocabulary of

more than 20,000 words, greater than that of most other writers. His creative use of language and wordplay are apparent. Not surprisingly, then, he has been credited with coining not just one or two but hundreds, perhaps even more than a thousand new words.

Unfortunately, there are no notes from Shakespeare's desk or commentaries from Shakespeare's time about any of his coinages, so it's not possible to learn his techniques from looking over the great wordsmith's shoulder. We can only judge from the results.

The list of words for which he has been given first credit is amazing. Here are just a few:

amazement	fashionable	noiseless
assassination	frugal	obscene
auspicious	generous	pedant
bandit	gloomy	premeditated
birthplace	gust	puke (verb)
circumstantial	hint (noun)	quarrelsome
cold-blooded	hurry (verb)	seamy side
courtship	jaded	shooting star
critic	Judgment Day	swagger (verb)
deafening	lackluster	tranquil
downstairs	laughable	undress (verb)
dwindle	lonely	unreal
employer	misquote	watchdog
eventful	monumental	well-behaved
excitement	mountaineer	wild goose chase
farmhouse	negotiate	worthless

In addition, Shakespeare has many coinages that involve switching verbs to nouns or vice versa. He apparently was the first to use the nouns *design, dialogue, scuffle,* and *shudder,* for example, made from older verbs, and the first to use the verbs *drug, elbow, gossip,* and *lapse,* made from older nouns.

Until just recently, there had been no doubt that Shake-

speare holds the all-time record for bringing new words into the English language. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary,* the authority on such matters, Shakespeare's use is the earliest evidence for more than a thousand words that we use today. But there is growing evidence that Shakespeare was not the inventor of quite so many words, just the popularizer of them. The editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* are discovering this new evidence as they revise that work for the twenty-first century. They are scrutinizing many lesser known texts of Shakespeare's time, texts that were passed over in making the first edition of the dictionary. In this process, time and again they have found other authors using words before Shakespeare did.

Work on the current revision of the *Oxford English Dictionary* has begun with the letter *M.* In just the first section of entries for that letter, there are half a dozen words formerly credited to Shakespeare that now have earlier attributions: *madcap* (adjective), *majestic* and *majestically, manager, marketable, marriage-bed,* and *metamorphize.*

These discoveries, however, do not detract from Shakespeare's importance in the creation of new words. As later chapters will show, the most successful new words are those so close to the edge of the vocabulary that they are invented over and over again till they finally catch on. By virtue of his matchless use of language, Shakespeare's lines and words were given unparalleled opportunity for success. Words that otherwise might have flickered and faded have become permanent presences in our vocabulary through his works.

Consider *marketable,* for example, a word originally credited to Shakespeare. The current editors of the *Oxford English Dictionary* have discovered that in 1577, when Shakespeare was just thirteen years old, one John Dee used *marketable* in a book called *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfecte Arte of Navigation:* "At the

time of their being marketable . . . they would evidently appear, so, to be rated." It was a quarter of a century later when Shakespeare used it in *As You Like It:*

> Rosalind: *Then shall we be news-crammed.*
> Celia: *All the better: we shall be the more marketable.*

Shakespeare's turn of phrase makes *marketable* memorable. The word may not have needed that boost, but it certainly didn't hurt.

When the editors have finished revising the *Oxford English Dictionary,* Shakespeare may be seen as one who made brilliant use of the words of others rather than inventing so many himself, just as he made brilliant use of the stories of others rather than inventing them himself. But his importance in popularizing them will remain. And this development is further evidence of an important principle: New words don't come just from a few geniuses; they come from everyone. John Dee was just as likely, or almost as likely, to come up with a successful new word as was Shakespeare.

The Myth of Gaps

> Yes, my modest "Unabridged" will "fill a long felt want." It will solidify the chinks of conversation, express the inexpressible, make our English language ornamental, elegant, distinguished, accurate.
>
> — *Gelett Burgess,* Burgess Unabridged

What's the best way to ensure the success of a new word? Some say it's this: find a gap in our language and fill it.

It's easy to see why so many people follow this principle. After all, the vocabulary of a language is not just a haphazard heap of words (a great heap, in the case of English), but an organized whole. It's a network, a great web, with one word tied to another. If there were no connections, word associations would be impossible. But there are connections. Say *cheese,* for example, and a listener will think of mozzarella or mice or photographs; say *cheesecake,* and the listener will think of dessert and perhaps even pinups. Psychologists use word associations to test our preoccupations and also our intelligence, because our knowledge and our thinking depend on the connections we make among words.

Everyone has firsthand experience of these connections in language. From searching among several related words to find the right one, or trying to retrieve a word on the tip of the tongue, we know that words are indeed related in our minds. And it's in our minds that we create new words. They are born there, not on the pages of dictionaries.

Now if words form a mental network, mightn't that network have some missing nodes? Mightn't there be gaps in our language just waiting to be filled? If this were so, the surest way to succeed in coining a word would be to find such a gap and fill it. It would be like finding a missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. Or like filling a pothole in the road that everyone has had to swerve around, thus providing a public service.

Some of the coiners in the previous chapters have sought to fill gaps, but they haven't succeeded very often. Could it be that they didn't recognize the right gaps? Or is the gap theory fatally flawed? To test the theory, let's identify some prominent gaps and see what fits.

A NEW CENTURY, A NEW DECADE

In the late 1990s, an obvious gap in the language began to open. As the turn of the century approached, the gap got wider and wider and the need to fill it grew more urgent. Everyone assumed it would be filled, but it wasn't. It just gapes at us as we step around it in our present-day conversation.

What is that gap? A name for the first decade of the twenty-first century.

We needed a time-specific label to apply to the trends, fads, and characteristics of this decade, just as we had for most of the decades of the twentieth century. Especially after World War II, our culture seemed to divide itself into decades: the prosperous and complacent *fifties,* the rebellious *sixties,* the Me Decade of the *seventies,* the Greed Decade of the *eighties,* the booming *nineties.* Those decades gained their names readily enough, so naming the new one shouldn't have been too difficult. It was just the matter of finding the right word for the new decade so the pundits and prognosticators could go to work labeling its themes, predilections, and styles.

So after the *fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties,* and *nine-*

ties would come the — whats? As the nineties came to a close, the experts made their predictions. We would call the new decade the *aughts* or the *naughts* or the *zeros* or the *ohs* or maybe even the *oh-ohs.* Then everyone settled back to see which term would prevail. January 1, 2000, came and went . . . and January 1, 2001, . . . and January 1, 2002. Now, several years into it and against all expectations, the question still remains: What should the decade be called?

It turns out we have found no way to name this decade that would fit the pattern of the *twenties, thirties, forties, fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties,* and *nineties.* All attempts to come up with an alternative have failed because they were too obtrusive, too noticeably different from the established pattern. The gap remains.

The lesson of the Decade That Wouldn't Be Named is plain: Just because a word seems needed doesn't mean we will find one. Instead, we may resort to circumlocution rather than adopt a word that doesn't fit. So the first decade of the twenty-first century is just that: *the first decade of the twenty-first century* and nothing more.

One other lesson of the Decade That Wouldn't Be Named is the answer to the follow-up question: What will we call the decade 2010 through 2019? It doesn't take a linguist to figure out that the name will have to be *the second decade of the twenty-first century* or *the decade of the tens and teens* or another phrase, rather than a single word.

But just wait till we approach the year 2020! Headline writers, pundits, and prognosticators will welcome the *twenties* with open arms. Gentlemen and ladies, start your books now, with your title *The Twenties: Decade of . . . .*

THE EVENTS OF SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

On September 11, 2001, the peace of a sunny late-summer morning was shattered by the impact of four hijacked airplanes on the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon,

and a field in Pennsylvania. There were more direct casualties in these disasters than on any previous day in American history, and soon the entire country felt the impact in damaged or destroyed lives, businesses, and sense of security. Out of the ashes came patriotism, resolve, unity. And out of the ashes came new words, too, to describe new situations never before imagined.

Or did they? Here would seem to be a gap in the language as big as that where the World Trade Center towers had stood. But the day and its events are so far beyond our imagining that we cannot come up with a word for it.

A place name won't do as a designation for those events. The events stir memories of *Pearl Harbor* and *Oklahoma City,* and we refer to other memorable occasions by their locations — *Lexington and Concord, Gettysburg, Little Big Horn,* and *Wounded Knee* — but in this case that won't work. It's not just because several places were involved, but also because the places are too famous. *New York City* and *Washington, DC,* have too many other connotations; so do the *World Trade Center* and the *Pentagon.*

For lack of a suitable designation deriving from place, we have used the date as a reference point: *September 11.* That does have a well-known precedent. One other event in American history is referred to by its date: *July 4* or *the Fourth of July,* the date in 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed in Philadelphia.

In addition to the spelled-out month and day, the numerals *9/11* or *9-11* have been used. Never before has such a historic event been so labeled (we don't write *7/4* for the Fourth of July), but because of the striking coincidence that *911* is the telephone number to call for help in an emergency, that numerical designation has been a success. Headline writers like the concision of this expression, just three numerals to take in all the events of that day. Further, there is a precedent in using paired numbers as a word in *24/7,* the recent slang term for 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Still, the use of numbers in this way

has no precedent in our vocabulary for commemorating a date, and the casualness of *9/11* seems not in keeping with the devastating personal loss and serious political consequences associated with the events. So as time goes on, we are more likely to use a phrase in referring to what happened on that day instead of filling the gap with a single expression. We will say *the events of September 11, 2001,* or *the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001,* or some other phrase that appropriately encompasses the day's events.

So far, the events of that day have resulted in just one new term: *ground zero,* for the place of impact, the center of destruction in New York City where the World Trade Towers once stood. That phrase has succeeded because it is not really new; it's an old term for the location on the ground directly under a vast atomic explosion, corresponding to *air zero,* the location in the air above the ground where the bomb goes off. *Ground zero* had been gathering dust on the shelf in recent years because of a fortunate lack of atomic explosions. No one knows who first said *ground zero* in reference to the site where the World Trade Towers were attacked and collapsed, but the term immediately caught on because of its familiarity and emotional power.

A CORNUCOPIA OF GAPS

But back to the gaps. If you look closely enough, there seem to be gaps everywhere. For example, there seems to be no word for the "Tom Sawyer syndrome — using false joy to try to talk someone into sharing an undesirable task," or "hoping to debauch someone through false joy." Diana Welch of Woodland Hills, California, noticed that gap. She proposed in a 1992 letter to the *American Heritage Dictionary* that someone who does this could be called a *toyeur,* and the act *toyeurism.* "I think it's an excellent new word for our society," she explained, "as

toyeurism is a common problem and there doesn't seem to be an appropriate word." She said she derived her terms "by somewhat condensing the words Tom Sawyer, knowing that most words in our English are simply condensed statements." *Toyeur* remains unused, however, and those who want to discuss this condition still have to say *Tom Sawyer syndrome.*

Specialists sometimes see gaps that would not be noticed by the rest of us. For example, who is aware that we have no word to describe the distinctive form of rhyming phrases exemplified by *fat cat, funny money,* and *night flight?* For most of us, it would probably do to say that these are *two-word rhyming phrases,* but apparently that's awkward when you're a specialist trying to construct a puzzle. Charles A. Mueller of Maryland, a creator of puzzles and word games, is another who sent a suggestion to the *American Heritage Dictionary* in 1992: "I've devoted an enormous amount of time researching the precise term, but without success. Several of my puzzles require extensive use of this phrase, and being unable to find a proper one, I was inspired to coin one to meet these needs." His proposal was *birhymagram,* from *bi* meaning "two," *rhym* meaning "rhyme," and *gram* meaning "message." A perfectly reasonable proposal, but it hasn't caught on at all in the decade since he proposed it, so it's still necessary to say "two-word rhyming phrase."

FOREIGN AID

One way we can confirm that there are gaps in our own language is to observe other languages. Anyone who has tried to translate from a foreign language into English knows the frustration of finding gap after gap where a single foreign word has to be patched with a whole phrase of English.

Take German, for example, our close kin as a language because we share a common ancestor. Someone trans-

lating German *Mann* or *Buch* will have no problem rendering those as the single English words *man* and *book.*
But suppose a *Mann* with a *Buch* visits a *Konditorei.* What then? A *Konditorei* is a kind of café where you can indeed get coffee, but it's also much more of a bakery than we think of with the word *café.* And it gets harder. What about German *Gemütlichkeit,* for example? That word refers to a pleasant state of mind, but *pleasantness* hardly begins to cover the ground of *Gemütlichkeit,* which includes everything from friendliness to approachability to good nature. Or there is *Sprachgefühl,* to take another example. Its literal translation is "feeling for language," but more precisely it means having a sense of the nuances of expression in a language. And Volkswagen recently made a point of advertising the *Fahrvergnügen* of its cars, seemingly so much more than just the English "driving pleasure."

If a foreign term is important enough, a translator may want to bring it into English rather than having to resort to paraphrase time and again. That has happened with some German words that are now somewhat at home in English even as they keep a bit of a foreign look. In English-language dictionaries you'll find *Wanderlust,* the strong desire to travel. And you'll find that great aesthetic term *Kitsch.*

Kitsch is best defined as art that aims high and falls low. It is monumental, but in the sense that artwork so labeled stands as a monument to bad taste. It is earnestly banal. It is portraits of Elvis on velvet, lava lamps, paintings of dogs playing poker, pink flamingoes on the lawn — when these are taken seriously, that is. If you laugh at kitsch, its spell is broken.

FRENCH GAPS

When we borrow words from French, they look more at home. That is because speakers of French ruled England for nearly four hundred years, starting with William the

Conqueror's victory in 1066, and their domination of England resulted in deep influences on the English language. As a result, French is the language that has been the most generous in bequeathing words to English. Nearly half of our present-day vocabulary (including the words *language, generous, present,* and of course *vocabulary*) comes from French. Down to the present day, English speakers have continued to borrow words from French, everything from *prairie* (1773) to *entrepreneur* (1852), *elan* (1880), *decoupage* (1960), and *bustier* (1979). But even with a hundred thousand or so words from French already in English, there are still many French concepts we haven't borrowed.

Here's one. Have you ever heard of a *psychoéducateur?* No, it's not a teacher gone mad, but an occupation in French-speaking Canada. The word designates a professional who applies the insights of both psychology and education to the treatment of troubled children and adults. "The originality of this profession lies in the conviction that the daily life of these people offers privileged occasions for intervention," explains one source, "and, consequently, intervention in shared life situations becomes the cornerstone of the later developments." For such a person we might use a phrase — *educational psychologist* or *developmental psychologist* — rather than the single word *psychoéducateur.*

Another French word knocking at the door of English, so far unsuccessfully, is *terroir.* It means something like "territory," but with a human touch. That is, *terroir* is the land that nature provides, together with the way humans cultivate it. Because of this combination, every region has a unique *terroir.* It is argued that no matter how one might try, one can't produce the same wine, or for that matter the same potatoes, in two different places. *Terroir* is thus a matter of grave consideration (and contention) for winemakers, and is also the underpinning for the European

Community notion of "protected designation of origin"; no place can substitute for another. Although we could use *terroir* in English, we don't, except for a few wine lovers discussing French conditions. Instead, we use a phrase when that topic comes up.

How about *volupté?* That French word is related to the more ponderous English *voluptuousness,* but it has a *je ne sais quoi* that resists simple translation. It means taking pleasure in the senses.

Turning from the senses to the mind, we find the terms introduced into philosophical discourse by the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss: *bricoleur* and *bricolage.* As Levi-Strauss explains it in *The Savage Mind* (1962), a *bricoleur* is someone adept at performing a great number of diversified tasks. In contrast to an engineer, however, the *bricoleur* doesn't look for materials and tools specifically suited to each project; the *bricoleur* makes do with whatever is at hand.

There is a potential English equivalent for *bricoleur* in the name *MacGyver,* the eponymous hero of a television show who for seven seasons (1985–1992) saved the day by improvising solutions via kitchen science. In one episode, for instance, MacGyver used the case of a ballpoint pen to fix a fuel line and then fashioned a cannon out of a muffler, seat stuffing, gasoline, and a steering wheel knob — don't try this at home! But the words *MacGyver* and *MacGyverism,* used to refer to any of the hero's extemporaneous inventions, remain limited mainly to their old fan base. *Bricoleur* and *MacGyver* reveal a gap in the vocabulary of English, all right, but we are evidently comfortable leaving that gap unfilled.

AROUND THE WORLD IN EIGHT GAPS

Now that it's possible to circle the globe on the World Wide Web, it's easy to find translators struggling with

gaps in the English language wherever you look. Here are eight examples of words for which translators have found no equivalent in English:

Spanish: desengaño. According to Wooil M. Moon, translator of the works of Baltasar Gracian (1601–1658), a Spanish Jesuit priest, in *desengaño* lies the beginning of wisdom. "*Desengaño* is more than 'disillusionment'; it implies the dispelling of deceit (*engaño*) and an awakening to truth. It is the moral straightedness, tempered with skepticism; a putting aside of naive and sentimental illusion."

Greek: kairos. In 1990 Carol Goss recorded her month-long travel in Turkey on videotape, 35 millimeter slides, black and white film, and a journal. These were the basis of the video art program she calls *Kairos,* explaining that "*kairos* is the Greek word for 'epochal time' or a 'changing of the gods,' for which there is no equivalent in English, because the cultural memory of that language group is too brief."

Hebrew: hesed. According to the Gospel of Luke, Mary's response to being chosen the mother of Jesus is the "Magnificat," a song or poem praising God, based on an original in the Hebrew Bible. One verse translates "And His mercy reaches from age to age for those who fear Him," but a translator offers this note: "*hesed* is the Hebrew term used for 'mercy' — there is no equivalent in English, but it involves God's mercy, tenderness, and His love for His people."

Arabic: Rabb. Here is a passage from an English translation of the Qur'an: "And thy Rabb has decreed that you obey none but Him, and do good to parents." Commentator Naseer Ahmad Faruqui Sahib explains: "I have not tried to translate the word *Rabb* in the above text as there is no equivalent in English language. The nearest rendering of the connotation of the Arabic word *Rabb* is One Who creates and then evolves and fosters through gradual stage to perfection or the goal of creation. This is an illustration

of the excellence of Arabic over other languages. One simple word contains a whole world of meaning."

Sanskrit: shraddha. Shri Sai Baba was "a personification of spiritual perfection and an epitome of compassion" who lived in Shirdi, India, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. One of the cardinal principles of the "Sai Path" is *shradda.* A follower of Shri Sai Baba explains: "At best it can be understood as faith with love and reverence. Such faith or trust is generated out of conviction, which may not be the result of any rational belief or intellectual wisdom, but a spiritual inspiration."

Japanese: shakaijin. If you're a respectable working person holding a suitable job, you're a *shakaijin* in Japanese. Dori Digenti, Director of Training of the MIT Japan Program, explains how the *shakaijin* is molded: "From early childhood, the priority of the Japanese child-rearing and education system is to create the *shakaijin* (a responsible member of society). Through imparting Confucianist values of merit and achievement, combined with societal values of perseverance and competition/cooperation, the educational and training systems serve as a vetting mechanism for the large Japanese company. When the young recruit enters the company, he is further trained in the company culture, resulting in a malleable, effective, and highly competitive human resource base."

Tagalog: takal. Even as concrete and simple a concept as *takal,* in the Tagalog language of the Philippines, has no equivalent in English. A translator comments, "It basically means the number of 'scoops,' 'cups,' 'liters,' etc., the volume of grain using any measuring instrument — it could be a cup, a glass, etc."

Wolof: jom. In 1982 Ababacar Samb of Senegal in West Africa made an 80-minute feature film entitled *Jom, The Story of a People.* He explained, "*Jom* is a Wolof word which has no equivalent in English or French. Jom means courage, dignity, respect. It is the origin of all virtues." A critic, Roy Armes, commented that "the film travels

exuberantly through time to capture situations linked only by their common concern with the concepts of honor and dignity, the importance of keeping one's word and not being bought or corrupted."

GAPS LEFT AND RIGHT

Almost everywhere the mind turns, it seems, a gap presents itself. In the *Vocabula Review* for August 2001, for example, Julian Burnside points out a foreign gap and some domestic ones:

—An equivalent for Italian *ma gare,* meaning something like "Ah, but that it were so."

—A word for the sensation of disaster narrowly averted and later remembered from the vantage point of safety, and for the opposite, a moment when you feel guilt despite knowing you are innocent.

—A word to take the place of *yes,* when it is used in conversation to signify that the hearer is understanding, but not agreeing with, the argument being developed by the speaker.

—A word for the sensation when sleepiness swerves briefly back into alertness at the moment your head drops forward during a dull lecture.

—A noun corresponding to the verb *ignore,* but different from *ignorance,* one that could be used in a statement like "She treated him with contempt and ignore."

Needless to say, none of these gaps shows signs of being filled. The English language continues to discuss such matters in more roundabout phrasing.

THE NEEDIEST CASES

Even the most visible gaps can remain gaping long after they are exposed. In 1955, for example, in the *New York Times Magazine,* the editor of the bridge column pointed

out seven major gaps in the English vocabulary that were far from trivial. The author, Albert H. Morehead, wasn't an uninformed crank; he was in the midst of a second career as an editor and publisher of dictionaries, thesauri, and encyclopedias. The gaps he noted weren't obscure matters like labels for two-word rhyming phrases. They weren't sniglet situations like the sound an empty aluminum can makes when it's crushed or the position of one's head while eating a taco. Instead, they dealt with situations in everyday life. These are Morehead's seven neediest cases:

1. A dignified substitute for *boyfriend,* suitable for women who are no longer teenagers but have a committed relationship with a member of the opposite sex.
2. A similar substitute for *girlfriend.*
3. A replacement for *am not* in questions that would avoid the stuffiness of *am I not,* the stigma of *ain't I,* and the supposed ungrammaticality of *aren't I.*
4. A word meaning brothers and sisters that does not specify gender. In other words, *siblings,* but that's too scientific a term.
5. A word meaning "to state an opinion." You can say *opine,* but people are likely to laugh.
6. A word to indicate that you're listening to someone: not *yes,* which implies agreement with what the person has to say, or *Indeed!* which sounds stuffy, and not just a nod or grunt. (Nearly fifty years later, Burnside expressed a similar wish in his *Vocabula Review* article.)
7. A word to mean *he or she.* (Yes, even back in 1955, before the women's movement and its demand for pronoun equality, it didn't seem right to have a non-gender-specific *they* for more than one person but to be forced to choose between *him* or *her* for just one.)

Morehead saw these as gaps to be filled and was optimistic that they would be. "Usually when there is a serious gap in a language someone invents a word to fill it," he concluded. "At first the new word may be called slang,

but if it pleases the public it will eventually become respectable."

More than two generations have passed since he wrote that plea, time enough for words to be invented to fill those gaps and become established in our language. At the start of the twenty-first century, do we still recognize these as gaps, or have they been filled?

The answer is apparent: Every one of those seven gaps still remains.

These examples — and there could be countless more — demonstrate that there are indeed abundant gaps in our vocabulary. Some are trivial, but some are serious. Though we have half a million words at our disposal, we could easily use half a million more.

But a gap in the vocabulary does not mean a gap in the language. Our language, like all human languages, can express anything. Sometimes we use a single word; sometimes we use a phrase. The evidence of this chapter shows that we are often quite satisfied with the phrases. Gaps there are, but they resist filling. Calling attention to a gap in the language is largely a waste of breath.

In fact, as we will see later, multitudes of new words are created day after day, month after month. They are in the air all around us, like snowflakes falling from the sky of human creativity. Some, like *jukebox* (1939) and *fast food* (1951), fall in newly opened gaps, giving us a term for something that was just invented. Some, like *teenager* (1941) and *24/7* (1985), land on solid ground, where we already had a perfectly good word or set phrase (*adolescent, round the clock*). These words do not fill a gap at all but give an additional perspective to something familiar.

Since there are many more concepts than there are pre-existing words, there will always be gaps in the vocabulary of any language. Many of these gaps will go unfilled, despite being called to our attention and despite any number of ingenious and utilitarian proposals to fill them. Whether a new word survives thus does not depend on whether it

fills a perceived gap in our vocabulary, and not even on whether it is useful, since the landfill of discarded new coinages has an ample supply of useful terms. It depends rather on whether the word resonates with the speakers of a language, and that depends on a number of factors that we will investigate a little further on.

Exceptions That Test the Rule

As we have seen, the notion that gaps in a language must be filled doesn't hold up under scrutiny. Gaps there may be, but it's possible to talk around them. A language doesn't need a word for everything as long as it has sentences.

But what about new things: new products, new discoveries, new ideas, new causes? Don't they need new words? In these cases, wouldn't the things help the words succeed? Well, yes and no.

BRAND NAMES

If there's anything a new product needs, it's a brand name. To the extent that the product succeeds, the name will too. It's a sure thing, the one way to guarantee that a new term will be a success: spend mighty amounts of money on marketing, persuade people to buy and keep on buying a product, and they will call it by the name you give it. *Cadillac* or *Coffeemate, Vaseline* or *Viagra* — if it sells, they'll talk about it.

Of course, a name is a special kind of word. Most brand names, like other kinds of names, aren't included

in dictionaries, because they aren't part of the general vocabulary of a language. They designate one particular thing, while words in the general vocabulary accommodate whatever thing of a certain type comes along. For example, *Big Mac* designates only a particular kind of hamburger sold by McDonald's (in this case consisting of two beef patties, sesame seed bun, American cheese slice, sauce, lettuce, pickles, onions, salt, and pepper), while *hamburger* or *cheeseburger* can apply to any such item of food regardless of who makes it.

When you want a product, a company would like you to think of its brand name rather than a generic term. Think *Listerine* instead of *mouthwash, Jell-O* instead of *gelatin dessert, Clorox* instead of *bleach, Band-Aid* instead of *adhesive bandage, Ben & Jerry's* instead of *ice cream.* It is a measure of their success that these brands need no further explanation. One needn't say *Listerine mouthwash, Clorox bleach, Ben & Jerry's ice cream;* the brand name alone will do. Lesser-known brands do require the generic term for clarification: *Mentadent mouthwash, Friendly's ice cream.*

Sometimes successful product names cross over and become generic terms. It's a kind of success that companies hate, because a word in the general vocabulary is no longer private property. As long as a company can keep its brand name out of the general vocabulary and restricted to its product, it can prevent anyone else from using that name for a rival product. But the company does want people to talk about the product. There's the dilemma.

The Coca-Cola Company wants people to think of a *Coke* when they want a soft drink. But if the marketing is successful enough and the name *Coke* is embedded in people's vocabulary, people will ask for a *Coke* and be satisfied if they get a Pepsi. In fact, in the southeastern United States, home of Coca-Cola, *Coke* is such a successful brand that many people there (and in the rest of the country) refer to any soft drink as a *coke.*

Nevertheless, Coca-Cola is able to maintain the distinc-

tiveness of its brand by aggressive marketing and vigilant lawyering. The two go together. To the extent that marketing buys success for a brand name, it is also likely to foster use of the name as a generic word. The company's lawyers try to keep the name on a leash, warning rivals as well as innocent bystanders not to play with it so freely.

Despite such efforts, however, some brand names have slipped the leash, run wild, and joined the pack of the general vocabulary. Here are some of them:

aspirin: A name for acetylsalicylic acid, trademarked by the
Bayer Company of Germany at the start of the twentieth century.

elevator and escalator: Both originally trademarks of the
Otis Elevator Company.

zipper: A name given to a "separable fastener" by the B.F.
Goodrich Company many years after it was invented. The new name helped the zipper attain popularity in the 1930s.

loafer: For a moccasin-like shoe.

cellophane: For a transparent wrap made of cellulose.

granola: A trademark registered in 1886 by W.K. Kellogg,
now used for a "natural" kind of breakfast cereal.

ping-pong: For table tennis, a trademark registered by
Parker Brothers in 1901.

Still on the edge nowadays, although straining at the leash, are:

Xerox: For photocopier.

Kleenex: For facial tissue.

Band-Aid: For adhesive bandage.

Tupperware: For storage container.

Scotch tape: For transparent adhesive tape.

Jacuzzi: For whirlpool bath.

Jazzercise: For exercise to jazz music.

Unlike most brand names, these words on the edge do show up in dictionaries. That makes the companies un-

easy, because the presence of a word in a dictionary is an indication that the word is being used as a generic term. Lawyers for the companies scrutinize new editions of dictionaries and send letters to their publishers asking them to make sure that the names of their products are listed as trademarks.

CREATING BRAND NEW BRAND NAMES

Most brand new words arise naturally, as the next chapter will explain. But most brand new brand names are different. They are consciously created, like the words discussed in chapters 2 and 3. While most of those deliberately coined words fail, brand names have something to cling to. They stay around as long as the product itself— unless someone decides to rename the product.

To be sure, some brand names arise by natural processes. It's natural to give a product the name of its originator. So our cars are *Fords* and *Chryslers,* our soup is *Campbell's,* our chocolate is *Hershey's,* our fast food is *McDonald's,* our department stores are *Sears* and *Macy's* and *Marshall Field's.* The possessive *'s* shows that the sense of proprietorship remains strong, even if (as with McDonald's, for example) the original proprietor is long gone. It's considered such a positive influence that some products are given made-up names like *Aunt Jemima* and *Betty Crocker.*

It's also natural to use a place name: *Old Milwaukee* beer, *California Pizza Kitchen, Kentucky Fried Chicken.* Or to use a self-explanatory name: *Payless Drugs, Save-On-Foods, Thrifty Car Rental.*

Today, however, trendy companies want something more than a handle for a product. They want a name that will sell it. So they go to experts in creating brand names.

And what do the creators of brand names look for? Strangely enough, the same things that creators of new

words look for. You can hire Yourdictionary.com, for example, to design a brand name for you that will have all these qualities:

—Clear meaning.
—Creative structure, a combination of elements that suggest the desired qualities of the product.
—Appealing sound.
—Recognition value.
—Prestige value, conveyed for example by a French or Italian name.
—Catchy rhythm: "A roller coaster named 'Super Duper Looper' may sound silly, but people remember the name."
—Emotive value of words such as *American, mother,* or *family.*

Lexicon, a California company that designs brand names, waxes poetic:

> *Conventional wisdom suggests that a good name is distinctive, memorable and easy to pronounce. We agree. But a great name is a different story. A great name speaks for you. It leads the way, breaking down old perceptions and creating new ones.*
>
> *A good name gets your attention. A great name changes your thinking. Like a well-written poem, a great brand name has a purpose; it provokes, inspires, uplifts. Don't settle for less.*

What poems has Lexicon written? Here are a few of the brands they have named:

Pentium, Celeron, Itanium, and Xeon (for Intel)
Slates (dress pants for men by Levi Strauss & Co.)
Forester and Outback (for Subaru)
VUE (for Saturn's SUV)
Embassy Suites
Optima (for American Express)

As well known as these brand names are, most consumers probably would not classify them as provoking,

inspiring, or uplifting. They just seem reasonably familiar and comfortable, qualities that help any word succeed. The Intel names sound properly scientific; the Subaru names sound properly outdoorsy (with a whiff of Australia in *Outback*); *VUE* is nearly an anagram of SUV; *Embassy Suites* is descriptive with an air of prestige; and *Optima,* so close to "optimum," conveys "the best."

Lexicon was more provocative when it invented the name *Dasani* for Coca-Cola's bottled water. The Dasani website gives this answer to a question about the name:

> *People are having a lot of fun guessing the origin of the name* Dasani. *One Coca-Cola executive jokingly said it sounded like a "Roman god of water." Actually, the name* Dasani *is an original creation. Consumer testing showed that the name is —*

Wait just a minute. Before you find out what qualities consumer testing showed, take just a moment and consider what the name *Dasani* suggests to you. Don't read ahead!

OK, ready? According to the website, the name *Dasani* "is relaxing and suggests pureness and replenishment."

That seems a heavy and unlikely load for a word that doesn't have any close relatives in the English vocabulary. If any associations are possible, the *-ani* ending might suggest something Italian like *frangipani* (a flower) or *timpani* (kettledrums), or perhaps something altogether different, like *Pakistani.* This is not to say *Dasani* is a failure as a name, just that it's hard to imagine the name *Dasani* by itself generating sales. The tail rarely wags the dog, and a brand name is the tail.

Lexicon also invented *Swiffer,* the name of Procter & Gamble's disposable mop. It competes with SC Johnson's *Grab-It.* Is either product going to grab the greater share of sales because of its name?

And finally, Lexicon came up with the name *Nexcare Active Strips.* What might they be? They are 3M's counter-

part to *Band-Aids* and *Curad Adhesive Bandages*. Compared to these names, *Nexcare* is more creative, but it doesn't convey what the product does.

Consumer testing can determine whether people like a name. But consumers are curious about the product, not its name. A company that specializes in brand name creation can be helpful in warning against names that will cause a negative reaction, but even an ugly name need not prevent a brand from succeeding: "With a name like Smucker's, it has to be good!"

The "meaning" of a brand name can be manipulated. Consider *Marlboro.* After *Coca-Cola, Marlboro* is the most recognized brand name in the world, and it is far and away the best-selling American cigarette. Thanks to "the Marlboro man," the brand now conveys an image of the rugged outdoors. But it began as quite the opposite: a dainty ladies' cigarette, introduced in 1924 with the slogan "Mild as May." In 1955 it was abruptly repositioned as the cigarette of "the Tattooed man" who was utterly manly even as he accepted a filter in his cigarette. Pictured as a cowboy, the Marlboro man and his Marlboro cigarette became icons of ruggedness. No matter, either, that the name migrated to the United States in 1902 from *Marlborough* Street in London, England, where the British Phillip Morris company had its main factory.

With all those changes, *Marlboro* is doing fine as a brand name, in part because it isn't clever. Cleverness is a problem facing Segway, the name of the personal transporter unveiled in 2001 as the urban answer to the automobile. It's a witty respelling of *segue.*

A good brand name, like a good new word, won't be too obtrusive, and this may present the biggest problem for a company in hiring a professional firm to create a brand name. Like the creators of new words, creators of brand names often want recognition, and recognition comes from doing something conspicuous. That will not succeed with words or with brands.

OPERATION SMART NAME

We have come to expect a lot from a certain kind of brand name, the name for a military operation. Assigning code names for such operations began in the twentieth century, and namers quickly realized that the designations shouldn't be arbitrary. A name had to serve three purposes: safety, to avoid revealing the strategy or goal of an operation; dignity, so soldiers would not appear to be sacrificing their lives for trivial or comic purposes; and inspiration. To these ends Winston Churchill issued these instructions to his commanders during World War II:

> *Operations in which large numbers of men may lose their lives ought not to be described by code words which imply a boastful or overconfident sentiment, . . . or, conversely, which are calculated to invest the plan with an air of despondency. . . . They ought not to be names of a frivolous character. . . . They should not be ordinary words often used in other connections. . . . Names of living people—Ministers and Commanders—should be avoided.*

Following these principles, the originally proposed name *Roundhammer* for the invasion of Normandy was recognized as too frivolous and was changed to *Overlord.*

With varying degrees of success, U.S. namers of operations have followed these principles in recent years. For the 1983 invasion of Grenada, the U.S. Atlantic Command chose the somewhat overblown designation *Urgent Fury.* The invasion of Panama in 1989 was named *Just Cause,* soon to be followed by *Desert Shield* and *Desert Storm* of the Persian Gulf War.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the United States embarked on an unprecedented war against terrorism. The uncertain nature of the war was reflected in the code name for the operation, which underwent two changes within the first two weeks after September 11. At first it was *Noble Eagle,* then *Infinite Justice.* But on September 20 a reporter raised a question about this in a

press conference with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld:

> Q: Speaking of vocabulary, is Infinite Justice the name of this operation? And I ask that for a very specific reason.
>
> A: I have heard those words. I do not know that they've been adopted, and I think they're probably under review.
>
> Q: Because in talking to several Islamic scholars, they find that name offensive. The only person or thing that can grant infinite justice, according to their religion, is Allah.
>
> A: I understand. I understand. And obviously the United States does not want to do or say things that create an impression on the part of the listener that would be a misunderstanding, and clearly that would be.

The name was soon changed to *Enduring Freedom.*

Such experiences have taught military namers to avoid exaggeration as well as frivolity. If a name is not carefully vetted, it can lead to trouble. A website that randomly generates names for military operations shows the potential trouble thoughtless coining could bring. Here is a recent list generated by the American Military Operation Name Generating Device:

1. Operation Expansive Hellhound
2. Operation Nervous Daisy
3. Operation Shining Bull
4. Operation Beaming Wolverine
5. Operation Ireful Knife Blade
6. Operation Overpriced Sucker Punch
7. Operation Fabled Turban
8. Operation Bisexual Explosion
9. Operation Red Demon
10. Operation Bloodthirsty Hydra

To overhear discussion of *Operation Nervous Daisy* or *Operation Bisexual Explosion* would certainly confuse an en-

emy, but those names would confuse our own soldiers, too. Churchill's rules still apply.

SCIENTIFIC TERMS

Suppose you're advancing the cause of science rather than pitching a product, and you have something new to report — a new element, a new compound, a new species. How does it get a name?

Paradoxically, if instead of creating a new word you aim to create new understanding of the physical world, any word you create has a much better chance of succeeding than does a new word in the general vocabulary. Scientific terminology is different from everyday vocabulary. There is no official register for the ordinary words of English, no dictionary that has the force of law, no Academy of the English Language to set standards for admission. There are no judges. It's the law of the jungle, survival of the fittest.

But it's different with scientific terms. Just as scientists take animals and plants from the wild and protect them in sheltered environments to study them, so they take words they have coined for new discoveries and give them special protection. In science, there are national and international associations that set policy and give approval for the names of new things.

If you discover a new element, for example, you must get approval for its name from the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry. There can be a fierce argument, but it will be settled by the international union rather than the law of the jungle. Sometimes there is indeed considerable disagreement about the names of elements. In the 1990s Americans, Russians, and Germans had created new elements 104 through 109 in their laboratories, and all wanted their roles in the creations properly honored by the names. For element 106, for example, the

Lawrence Berkeley Laboratory in California wanted *seaborgium,* in honor of one of their chemists, Glenn T. Seaborg. Others wanted to call element 106 *rutherfordium,* in honor of physicist Ernest Rutherford, a New Zealander. After long negotiations, the union finally ruled that element 106 would be called *seaborgium,* while element 104 would have the name *rutherfordium.* That was it; everyone abides by that decision.

All aspects of chemistry have strict rules for terminology, governed by the International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry. Organic compounds, for example, use the "Hantzsch-Widman suffixes" in their names. If they have three rings containing nitrogen and are unsaturated, the suffix must be *-irine;* three rings containing nitrogen but saturated, *-iridine;* three rings without nitrogen and unsaturated, *-irene;* three rings without nitrogen but saturated, *-irane.* Numbers also must be stated according to a specified pattern. For example, if a compound consists of 486 of something, its name must begin with the prefix *hexaoctacontatetracta-,* which breaks down as: *hexa-,* "six"; *octaconta-,* "eighty"; and *tetracta-,* "four hundred."

In biology, the method of naming organisms is well known. Following the system established by Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) in 1758, the name of the genus or family comes first, then the species name. Both names come from Latin or are made to look like Latin: *Homo sapiens* (that's us), for example, or *Raphus cucullatus* (that's the extinct dodo). Each species also belongs to larger named categories that can include kingdom, phylum, class, order, suborder, infraorder, superfamily, family, subfamily, and tribe before getting to genus and species.

Common names of plants and animals are quite different. As part of the general vocabulary, most of them were in existence long before Linnaeus. They operate by the conventions of everyday language, not the logic of scientific analysis. As a result, while the scientific names are orderly and agreed upon, the common names show wide

variety and disagreement. One creature may have many common names, like the fish called *alewife, big-eyed herring, blueback herring, branch herring, gaspereau, kyack, river herring, sawbelly, skipjack,* and *spring herring.* To biologists those are all simply *Alosa pseudoharengus.* Conversely, one common name may cover a multitude of different species. The plant name *Jacob's ladder* can refer to *Polemonium caeruleum* and other species of the genus *Polemonium,* as well as *Smilax herbacea, Celastrus scandens, Linaria vulgaris, Streptopus roseus, Chelidonium majus, Diodia virginia,* and several others. It is only the scientific names, not the common names, that respect the authority of the scientists.

Who gets to bestow the scientific name on an animal or plant? That honor goes to the author of the first publication using a valid name. There is an International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature that determines standards for names of animals and an International Association for Plant Taxonomy that does the same for plants.

Although scientific names are decided by higher authority rather than by the open competition of the general vocabulary, there is one principle that applies to both: a successful new term needs to fit in. Rules established by the governing bodies see to that in the case of scientific words, while the law of the jungle that puts a premium on camouflage sees to it in the case of ordinary vocabulary.

IDEAS AS BRAND NAMES

What about those who have nothing so tangible as an element or a new species to tell about, but instead have a new idea to offer? This too needs a name. Some people who have become famous because of their ideas find that the ideas take on their names: *Darwinism* or *Freudian psychology,* for example. Others may use their names in hopes of making both themselves and their ideas famous, as with *The Peter Principle: Why Things Always Go Wrong* by Dr.

Laurence J. Peter and Raymond Hull (1969). (This principle can be stated in a single sentence: "In a hierarchy every employee tends to rise to his or her level of incompetence.")

Most authors, however, aren't celebrated or brash enough to use their own names as new words, especially when they are just beginning to advance an idea. Instead, they invent a word or phrase that gives an inkling of the idea. They then wrap it in a book and add a subtitle that explains what the word means. For example:

Your Erroneous Zones: Step-by-Step Advice for Escaping the Trap of Negative Thinking and Taking Control of Your Life by Wayne Dyer (1976).

The Cinderella Complex: Women's Hidden Fear of Independence by Colette Dowling (1981).

Selfishians, Otherishites and Fairishers: A Guide to Harmonious Relationships by Costas Hercules (1982).

Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know by E. D. Hirsch, Jr. (1987).

Innumeracy: Mathematical Illiteracy and Its Consequences by John Paulos (1989).

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990).

Edge City: Life on the New Frontier by Joel Garreau (1991). An "edge city" is defined as a new city springing up around freeway interchanges on the outskirts of an established city.

The Pinball Effect: How Renaissance Water Gardens Made the Carburetor Possible, and Other Journeys through Knowledge by James Burke (1996).

GoodStress: How Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy Can Help You Change Unwanted Emotions and Behaviours by Wayne Froggatt (1997).

Interface Culture: How New Technology Transforms the Way We Create and Communicate by Steven Johnson (1997).

Friendshifts: The Power of Friendship and How It Shapes Our Lives by Jan Yager (1999).

Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There by David Brooks (2000).

Sometimes two thinkers hit upon the same word to characterize their ideas, as in the case of two recent books for bereaved women:

Widowing, Surviving the First Year by Jane Krimbill and Nancy Brown (1995).
Widowing, A Guide to Another Life by Nancy H. Payne (1997).

Sometimes, too, the new word is sufficiently clear from its constituent parts not to need a subtitle. *Barkitecture* by Fred Albert (1999), a book about the architecture of doghouses, is an example.

For all the publicity that the marketing of a book provides, however, most words invented as brand names for ideas fail to become adopted. They are usually too clever for their own good.

barkitecture

Futurologists and predictors of trends have been especially active in coining new words for the new circumstances they foresee. The titles of Alvin and Heidi Toffler are examples, starting with *Future Shock* (1970), referring to the fear of rapid technological change and telling how to cope with it. Then came *The Eco-Spasm Report* (1975), warning of economic and social collapse. *The Third Wave: The Classic Study of Tomorrow* (1980) informed us that we live in a *third wave,* an information age which has replaced the earlier agrarian and industrial cultures. Next came *Powershift: Knowledge, Wealth, and Violence at the Edge of the 21st Century* (1990). And recently the Tofflers wrote a foreword to promote *Cyberschools: An Education Renaissance* by Glenn R. Jones (1997).

FAITH IN THE FUTURE: 99 TRENDS

Today nobody works the future as assiduously as Faith Popcorn. Back in 1986, she foresaw that Americans would be going out less and staying home more. Expressed that way, the prediction might not have been recognized as brilliant insight. But Popcorn invented a word for it — *cocooning* — and with that one word, she made staying at home a fashionable trend. The once-despised *couch potato* suddenly had a front-row seat at the cutting edge.

Popcorn's *cocooning* was a successful coinage that now has a place in most dictionaries. It established her reputation as a predictor and apparently whetted her appetite for coining words. She has made many predictions and coined many words since.

In 1996 she wrote a book with Lys Marigold titled *Clicking: 16 Trends to FutureFit Your Life, Your Work, and Your Business.* Not only the title, but the 17 trends (she increased the number by one for a later edition) have names of her own invention: *99 Lives, Anchoring, AtmosFear, Being Alive, Cashing Out, Clanning, Cocooning, Down-Aging, Egonomics, EVEolution, Fantasy Adventure, Icon Toppling,*

Mancipation, Pleasure Revenge, Small Indulgences, Save Our Society, and *Vigilante Consumer.*

In 2000, again with Lys Marigold, she expanded one of the 17 trends into a book of its own: *EVEolution: The Eight Truths of Marketing to Women.* The paperback version in 2001 had a double subtitle: *EVEolution: Understanding Women: Eight Essential Truths That Work in Your Business and Your Life.* The book's premise is that women are different from men not just biologically, but *shopologically.*

Also in 2001, this time with Adam Hanft, she produced a *Dictionary of the Future: The Words, Terms, and Trends That Define the Way We'll Live,* in which new coinages are the center of attention. The book presents future words in thirty-five areas ranging from Aging to New Behaviors, Technology and Transportation. Each chapter includes ten or twelve brand-new words created by the authors (they "found voids in the language that needed to be filled") as well as numerous additional words recently invented by others. The chapter on Biology and Biotechnology, for example, is full of words like *Anti-IgE* (a new kind of asthma treatment) and *pharmacogenomics* (creating drugs customized to an individual patient's genes), plus eleven words of the authors' own, including:

bio-freedom: Freedom to indulge oneself after gene testing has determined one is not at risk for a certain factor like high cholesterol.

GENEology: The study of one's genetic history.

womb service: Fertilizing and growing a fetus to maturity outside of a woman's body.

It should be mentioned that, however successful she has been in predicting trends, Popcorn has generally failed to add words to our vocabulary. Only the first of her coinages, *cocooning,* has become part of the language. The conspicuous cleverness of her coinages, not to mention the occasional bizarre use of capital letters, makes them

ill-adapted to everyday communication. That may be the way she wants it; they are bait to hook readers for her books.

IN THE NAME OF . . .

One other source of new words is new causes. Causes will naturally acquire descriptive labels, but those who advocate a cause often seek language that promotes their cause in addition to describing it, words that have the right connotations as well as denotations. For example, we are familiar these days with the clashing language about abortion from *pro-life* and *pro-choice* advocates. The former speak of the *right to life* of *unborn children,* while the latter uphold a woman's *right to choose* to abort a *fetus.*

In the late twentieth century, the women's movement perceived pervasive patriarchalism in the English language and made considerable efforts to change it. Publishers, professional organizations, and teachers have responded sympathetically to the numerous guidelines for nonsexist language that have been promulgated as a result of the movement. We now know not to say *man* when we mean *person,* not to say *he* when we mean *someone,* not to automatically refer to a doctor as *he* and a nurse as *she.* Usage has changed to the point that writing *they* for an unspecified individual, instead of *he,* has become the norm (*he or she* is a rarer choice, to the chagrin of those who would preserve the separateness of singular and plural). We have learned to say *flight attendant* rather than *stewardess, firefighter* rather than *fireman, letter carrier* rather than *mailman, server* rather than *waiter* or *waitress* (the odd ending of *waitron* has pushed that alternative into the background).

But certain new words advanced by some in the women's movement have been less successful. *Herstory* as an alternative to *history* and *womyn* as an alternative to *women* make their point by erasing *his* and *men* but are

too clever and conspicuous to have received general acceptance. And the problem posed by the need to choose between *he/him* and *she/her* in the singular has proved utterly incorrigible. Over the centuries suggestions for a gender-neutral singular pronoun have been plentiful, including *shey, heshe, herm, em, en,* and *et;* but it is a gap that remains resistant to filling. English hasn't had a new pronoun for about a thousand years, and there is no sign it will acquire one any time soon.

In other words, the changes in the language achieved by the women's movement are relatively natural and inconspicuous ones. They are none the less significant, however, for being unobtrusive.

Names of different ethnic groups have shifted over the years to reflect the perspectives of those who belong to the group rather than that of outsiders. Finding a term that conveys the proper connotations can remain a problem, however, even after a name change. Also, since not all members of the groups share the same perspective, the terms continue to evolve.

American *Indians,* so named first by Columbus in the mistaken belief that he had reached India, have been renamed *Native Americans.* Yet there is a problem with this term, too, in its not being as distinctive or traditional as *Indian;* so some American Indians—perhaps the majority—prefer the older term.

Americans of African ancestry have been treated so badly by white persons that they have shifted several times from the names given them by whites. *Negro* was once the polite term, as was *colored,* but both words acquired negative associations as Americans of African ancestry continued to be the subject of pervasive discrimination. In the 1960s came the assertive, proud, plain, direct *black.* Today, with a shift of focus from color to ancestry, *African American* is the preferred term.

The kinds of new words discussed in this chapter represent special cases. Words for brands, science, ideas, and

political causes operate under different rules than the ordinary words in our vocabulary. All involve people deliberately choosing terms they want adopted as standard in a certain forum, whether it is a market or a scientific field or a political cause. They all have institutional machinery, from publicity departments to political organizations, to promote the words they propose. To the extent that the things they stand for succeed, the words will too. This is very different from the conditions surrounding the birth of most new words. The next chapter turns to that natural process that governs the way most words come into being.

6

Natural Birth
and Rebirth

Don't make up your own language. If a word doesn't exist in
a dictionary, how can other people understand its meaning?
— *Nick Wright,* Plain English Network: The Business
of Government in the Language of the People

Sorry, Nick. It can't be helped. Despite Wright's
admonition, countless new words are born every day.
They are part of a perpetual process of birth and rebirth
natural to all living languages. As you mostly uncon-
sciously search your memory for words to express your-
self, you use not only the words that are already there
but also new combinations of familiar elements. The proc-
ess is so normal that it often goes without notice, even
by yourself. Even if you are as cautious as Wright, you
can hardly spend a day without coining a new word
or two.

Not only are words easily born, they are also easily re-
born. The majority of new words that endure are coined
not just once, but many times before they become estab-
lished. The circumstances that tempt one inventor are also
there for another. Just as the calculus was independently
invented by both Newton and Leibnitz when mathematics
was ready for it, so new words appear again and again
when the language is ready.

Most words come into being naturally. They need no
high-tech lab, no fertility drug, no artificial insemination.

People just naturally give birth to words every day. These naturally born words are the healthiest and most likely to survive. Here are some true stories of natural word-birth:

> *In a department store, a mother became frustrated with her eight-year-old son. "Stop asking me to buy everything you see," she ordered. When that didn't work: "You'd better stop before I* childabuse *you!"*
>
> *Another mother to child: "You must behave." Child to mother: "I'm* being have.*"*

In such cases, multiple independent births are common. That is, if a word is ripe for being born, it's likely to be born again and again. Here's one more true story to illustrate that point, with yet another mother to a child: "You won't get any treats at grandma's if you don't start *being have.*"

THE MAYOR "SCRUTINED"

It happens in high places, too. At a press conference in August 2001, Mayor Richard M. Daley of Chicago was asked about the increased scrutiny he would have faced if his brother Bill had decided to run for governor. The mayor replied:

> *Scrutiny? . . . Go scrutinize yourself! I get* scrutined *every day, don't worry, from each and every one of you. It doesn't bother me.*

It was a newborn word: *scrutined* instead of *scrutinized.* But the mayor wasn't the first to give birth to this new form. Here are a few other examples from the Internet:

> *But as surely as Ephesian Artemis represents the edibility of the pine nut, so too should other plants such as her Artemisia specie, named for her, be scrutined as possible sources of sustenance. Praise the Old Ways!*
>
> — World Seed Fund

The enduring appeal of community as 'being in common' needs to be scrutined as well. More specifically, how are communities brought together?

> — Sociology department,
> Lancaster University, England

The Williams family has done and are doing so much for professional tennis and the thanks they get is harassment and their every move is analyzed, scrutined, and ostracized.

> — Message board for the "Fabulous
> Williams Sisters," March 2001

In an ASCII form, a trace can be easily scrutined or generated using any text editor.

> — Paper at International Symposium on
> Memory Management, October 2000

The means and ends of organizational activities must be scrutined and a way must be found to routinize the ethical analysis involved in their creation.

> — Course outline, New Jersey
> Institute of Technology, Fall 1999

Despite this evidence of use, *scrutined* is unlikely to make its way to acceptability any time soon as long as *scrutinized* is established and well known. But it will continue to be born and reborn, and if enough mayors and tennis fans say it, one day it might become the norm.

REGARDS

Consider the well-known phrase *in regard to.* Unnoticed even by experts on language, in recent years a variant, *in regards to,* has not only been born again and again, but is nearly as widely used as *in regard to.* In early 2002 a Google search found 850,000 instances of *in regard to,* but also nearly 500,000 of *in regards to.*

In fact, there are those who regard *in regard to* as wrong. After all, we say *Give my regards to* and *as regards,* so why not *in regards to?* Traditionalists would reply that

regard in *in regard to* means "look," and there would be one look, not many. In fact, one could construct a logical argument either way. *In regard to* has an advantage as the older phrase, but more and more modern writers find *regards* more natural, so it has a good chance for success.

LINNER TIME

When you give birth to a word, it seems entirely your creation. But often it turns out that others came independently to the same thought.

In the summer of 2001 Elaine A. Rauser of Hudson, New Hampshire, asked: "Could you please tell me if there is such a thing as 'word registration'? I have thought of a new word and would like to preserve its origin." Her word, she explained, is *linner* — "the meal which is eaten between lunch and dinner. . . . I told someone here at work and he said that he and his friend were just talking about that this weekend — the fact that there isn't a word to describe this event."

Something does seem to be missing from our present-day language: *brunch* is in the dictionary (and in our vocabulary), but *linner* isn't. As the previous chapter has shown, a gap in the language won't necessarily be filled, but here is a filler ready-made. Surely others will see how useful it is?

Yes indeed, and that turns out to be the surprise: *linner,* a straightforward combination of *lunch* and *dinner,* has been invented again and again. Here are a few examples from the Internet:

> *I had a cheeseburger for lunch/dinner. Linner. Dunch. It was yummy.*
>
> *— The Reject's Journal*
> on LiveJournal.com, March 3, 2001

> *you know, brunch is the most important meal of the day. not quite breakfast, not quite lunch. um, i dunno why*

they do not have lupper (lunch/supper) or linner (lunch/ dinner).

— "dan the kitti man" on
LiveJournal.com, March 4, 2001

Basically a bunch of us [Turbo Toyota] mr2 freaks get together and chat for about an hour, then go for a short drive. After the short drive we eat linner (lunch/dinner).
— Alexius M. Ludeman Own Little Page, January 2001

We actually went out to linner (lunch/dinner) on Sunday, at one of my favorite Mexican restaurants, Rio Grande (great chips and salsa, good veggie fajitas, everything else is mediocre).

— Kerry in Virginia, February 2000

Due to an unexpected setback, we had a late lunch that day. It started a new tradition we liked to call "linner" — part lunch, part dinner — usually observed around 3–6 PM.

— Utah State University student trip
to Washington, DC, March 2000

. . . my dog barked upstairs. From that, I logically deduced that someone had broken into the house and was just waiting to kill me. So I went up to see what was wrong, and ended up hand-feeding her her lunch/dinner (linner? dunch?). It's now 4:43. . . .

— "Hazard Lights" at Diaryland.com,
January 2001

Spivak invented linner as the seventh important meal of the day after breakfast, brunch, lunch, linner, dinner, dipper and supper. Spivak couldn't hold down a job because he was always coming in late but he was never late for any of his meals.

— *The Shining,* version by
"Mauve Guest," October 2000

If brunch is a cross between BR-eakfast and l-UNCH, then is there a word for a cross between lunch and dinner? Luner? Dunch? Linner? Luer? Lun-Din?
— "contours provocations" journal,
February 1999

And finally, from David Letterman's Top Ten list for December 14, 1998, Things That Have Crossed President Clinton's Mind: No. 9, "How about a new meal between lunch and dinner called 'linner.' "

The examples could go on and on, but these are typical. By giving definitions, putting *linner* in quotation marks, speculating on other possible words for combinations of meals, asking if there is a word for it, or saying there should be a word for it, the various authors make it clear that each of them is inventing the word anew.

As "contours provocations" says, *linner* follows naturally on the pattern of *brunch.* Inspired by *brunch,* there have undoubtedly been thousands who have invented *linner* in the century since *brunch* was coined (in 1895 by an Englishman, Mr. Guy Beringer, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary).* As long as people hunger for a meal between lunch and dinner, there will probably be thousands more who coin *linner.*

But though *linner* is naturally and easily coined, it remains an open question whether it will ever make its way into the established vocabulary of English. There are some strikes against it, as can be seen in comparison with *brunch,* the word that inspired it. In *brunch,* the two words that make up its elements are more visible, including distinctive combinations of consonants, *br* and *nch.* In contrast, in *linner* the thin *l* is all that remains of *lunch,* and the isolated consonants *n* and *r* are the meager remains of *dinner.* And unfortunately, *inner* is a word by itself, unrelated to meals, so when someone uses *linner* to mean "a meal between lunch and dinner," an explanation always seems necessary.

Then too, the meal *linner* refers to is not nearly as firmly established as *brunch.* Many restaurants as well as homes serve *brunch,* but *linners* are rare. In fact, you may have to go as far as Moscow for an example. There the luxurious Hotel Baltschug Kempinski advertises its *linner,*

explaining it as "a Sunday feast between lunch and dinner." But this *linner* appears to be little more than an advertising gimmick. Baltschlug *linner* is evidently just a late brunch, served from 12:30 to 7 p.m. The *Moscow Times* restaurant guide explains *linner:* "The hotel's Sunday brunch includes unlimited amounts of sparkling wine, red and white wine, beer, juices, tea, coffee and fresh fruit, plus buffet brunch."

Nevertheless, *linner* remains readily available, frequently re-created in case of need or desire. If our eating habits shift significantly to later in the day, *linner* may be ready to establish itself.

MEALER INSTEAD?

Elaine Rauser still wanted credit for originating a word, so she came up with a truly original one. Abandoning *linner,* she proposed *mealer* as a name for a meal between lunch and dinner.

With *mealer,* there's no worry that someone else thought of it first. Rather, the problem is persuading anyone else to use it. Although it is composed of the familiar word *meal* and the familiar suffix *-er,* the combination of the two does not achieve a natural name for a meal. The *-er* suffix generally means "one who," so *mealer* naturally suggests "one who eats a meal" (and in fact there are instances of this use, as in *half-mealer,* one who eats just half a meal).This is the dilemma of any coiner who wants credit for a new word: If it's a natural creation, chances are someone else already has thought of it; if it's not natural, others are not likely to use it.

GOING TO PLERK

Plerk? That's *play* plus *work,* of course. It was coined by . . . Barry Stevens, a Gestalt therapist, author of *Don't Push the River.* No, it was coined by . . . Hans Ostrom, a profes-

sor of English at the University of Puget Sound. But when *plerk* is mentioned in a report on future jobs in the Brisbane region, commissioned by the city council of Brisbane, Australia, it's unlikely that the author relied on either Stevens or Ostrom. It's just another new word being born and born again.

MULTIPLE SOFTWARE

Well-established words as well as marginal ones have been born more than once. Take *software,* for example. That computer term was invented by John W. Tukey, a statistician at Princeton University. As long ago as 1958 he used the word in the *American Mathematical Monthly:*

> *Today the "software" comprising the carefully planned interpretive routines, compilers, and other aspects of automative programming are at least as important to the modern electronic calculator as its "hardware" of tubes, transistors, wires, tapes and the like.*

Tukey was already known for inventing another now-famous computer term. In 1946 he used the little word *bit* as the designation for a unit of information, a "binary digit" with value 0 or 1. That led a decade later to *bytes* (groups of bits, now always eight, a term invented by Werner Buchholz at IBM) and to today's *kilo-, mega-,* and *tera-bytes* of computer storage and information.

No wonder his inventions succeeded. They are natural developments of existing vocabulary, so natural that they hardly seem coined. A *bit* is indeed a "bit" of information, as well as a binary digit, and *software* perfectly contrasts with the physical *hardware* of a computer. The word is so natural it's surprising no one else thought of it.

Well, perhaps someone did. Here is the story of the birth of *software* as told by Paul Niquette, a California electrical engineer:

> *Until 1953, like most people at that time, I had never seen a stored-program digital computer — a von Neumann Machine. Then, while in my junior year at UCLA, I was actually paid to program the SWAC. It was in October of that year, that I coined the word "software" more or less as a prank. I never expected the term to be taken seriously. Although I uttered it in dozens of speeches and lectures, followed invariably by its definition, the consequent shrugs and smirks hardly provided an incentive to accept — let alone seek — any kind of credit for the word "software."*

In other words, *software* too most likely had multiple parentage. There is no reason to doubt that, indeed, each person independently invented that word that was ready to be born.

PRO AND CON

Multiple births are most often natural and unobtrusive, but they can be conspicuous too. An example is *prosultant.* It's not natural, because it requires a clever reanalysis of the components of *consultant.* The prefix *con-,* a variant of *com-,* means "together," as in *conduct* (lead together), *conform* (shape together), *contract* (draw together). That's what it means in *consult* (take counsel together). By itself, however, *con* can be a negative, the opposite of *pro.* Interpreting it this way, two different enterprises have recently chosen to emphasize the positive in their consulting business by using *prosultant.* One is Prosulting Solutions, Inc., an information technology company in Ohio. President Michael D. Ochocki of Prosulting Solutions explains:

> *We are defining a new level of service above and beyond the level of "consultant" that you may have experienced in the past. This new level combines professionalism, leadership and expertise and may best be identified as "Prosultant."*

Another is run by David S. Isenberg, author of "The Rise of the Stupid Network," who calls himself *Principal Prosultant^sm* and explains:

> *PRO and CON are opposites. So a Prosultant^sm is everything that a CONsultant isn't. A Prosultant^sm is PROvocative, PROductive, PROactive. A Prosultant^sm has an attitude that's different from yours. A Prosultant^sm doesn't bring you fish, but goes fishing with you (and brings a big hook). A Prosultant^sm wants results, not employment. . . .*

As the *sm* indicates, Isenberg has even registered *prosultant* as a "service mark," so if you want to advertise yourself as a prosultant, you need his license. Whether *prosultant* will ever enter the general vocabulary of English is another matter. It seems too clever by far to displace *consultant.*

AN INVENTIVE TRILEMMA

Another tempting coinage, more logical than *prosultant,* has emerged repeatedly over the centuries. In 1860 it was proclaimed by James Robinson Graves, a Southern Baptist preacher, to introduce his book *The Trilemma; or, Death by Three Horns:*

> *TRI-LEMMA! Tri-lemma! It is not in the Dictionaries. Pray, what is a tri-lemma asks the Reader.*
>
> *When one is pinned between two difficulties, we say he is in a Di-lemma.*
>
> *When he is pinned between two difficulties, and pierced through by a third, may we not say he is in a TRI-LEMMA?*
>
> *Read and decide if Protestantism is not in just such a situation.*

Graves thought he had invented *trilemma,* and for his purposes he had; but he was far from the first to do so. The *Oxford English Dictionary* offers this example of *trilemma*

from the diaries and letters of English preacher Philip Henry in 1672:

> *Wee are put hereby to a Trilemma either to turn flat Independents, or to strike in with the conformists, or to sit down in former silence.*

And, in a 1725 book titled *Logick: or the Right Use of Reason in the Enquiry After Truth,* Isaac Watts, preacher and composer of hymns, wrote:

> *This sort of argument may be . . . composed of three . . . members, and may be called a Trilemma.*

So the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries had inventors of *trilemma,* and the twentieth did too. Josh McDowell invented it for his 1972 book, *Evidence Which Demands a Verdict,* which uses historical evidence to argue for the truth of Christianity. His trilemma derives from the choices presented by Christian apologist, scholar, and fantasy writer C.S. Lewis, who posited that Jesus had to be one of these three: liar, lunatic, or Lord.

In 1998, *trilemma* was invented yet again by Gwen Morgan for her book *A Hitchhiker's Guide to the Child Care Universe.* Her trilemma lay in the relationship among ratios, wages, and price: in other words, quality for children, compensation for staff, and affordability for parents.

It doesn't matter that *trilemma* is in the dictionary now — at least in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* though not in less comprehensive ones. It is still not in most people's vocabulary, but it lurks at the edge ready to be born again. If people know *dilemma* and are faced with three choices, they will be able to invent *trilemma* on the spot, for the nth time.

AN OBJECTION

"If a word doesn't exist in a dictionary," Nick Wright reminds us in the statement at the start of this chapter, "how

can other people understand its meaning?" That's an important obstacle faced by new words: being understood. But the dictionary isn't the problem; a dictionary is a recorder of new words, not their source. Even if the writers of dictionaries chose to introduce new words, no one would know how to find them there, since you need to know a word before you can look it up. The few dictionaries of made-up words, like *Sniglets* and *Burgess Unabridged,* are amusing but utterly unsuccessful in persuading anyone to adopt their words. No, it works the other way around: people invent new words and, if these succeed, the makers of dictionaries then include them.

Of course, we do learn new words from dictionaries, but they are words we have already heard or read, words that are already established in our language. They are new to us, but not to English as a whole.

Alas for the publishers of dictionaries, we learn most of our vocabulary without their help. A typical adult vocabulary has been estimated to consist of sixty thousand words; even a six-year-old knows more than ten thousand. How many of these does anyone learn from a dictionary? Most of us learn most of our words instead from their shape and their context.

THE SHAPE OF NEW WORDS

The shapes of words we know lead us to shape new words. John Algeo, a leading scholar of new words, has demonstrated that almost all new words have familiar origins. They are extensions of our established vocabulary rather than completely new creations. In a study of some three thousand new words introduced between 1941 and 1991, Algeo noted six types of sources:

1. *Combining.* More than half of all new words result from making compounds, adding suffixes, or adding prefixes. *Moonlighting* is a compound, as is *scofflaw* and *doublespeak.* Some compounds may be spelled with hyphens,

like *also-ran* and *user-friendly,* or with spaces, like *dark matter* and *mad cow disease,* but these count as compounds because they are different than the sum of their parts. Familiar suffixes like *-ism, -ed,* and *-aholic* have helped create new words like *ableism, gendered,* and *shopaholic.* Prefixes like *pro-* and *docu-* have been used to create words like *prosultant* and *docudrama.*

2. *Shifting of meaning.* About 15 percent of new words are simply old words with new meanings. In recent times, we have seen *spin* take on a new political meaning, while *web* and *dot* have new uses in computer contexts.

3. *Shortening.* Somewhat less than 10 percent of new words result from either cutting back on existing words — like *bus,* from *omnibus,* or *fax,* from *facsimile* — or using acronyms — *radar,* from *ra*dio *d*etecting *a*nd *r*anging; *scuba,* from *s*elf-*c*ontained *u*nderwater *b*reathing *a*pparatus; or *dink,* from *d*ual *i*ncome, *n*o *k*ids.

4. *Blending.* Compared with the other ways of forming new words, blends that use just parts of words rarely succeed, accounting for only about 5 percent of new words. That may be another reason why *linner* or *plerk* is unlikely

scuba

to attain a place in the established vocabulary. But *digerati* and *Frankenfood* have been moderate successes, and an all-time winner from the late nineteenth century is *smog.*

5. *Borrowing.* English is famous for swallowing words whole from other languages. In the Middle Ages, when England was ruled by speakers of French, English took in so many French words that French now accounts for perhaps half of our total vocabulary. We still borrow, but today only about 5 percent of our new words are taken from other languages. They are especially prevalent in the names of foods: *focaccia, salsa, vindaloo, ramen.*

6. *Creating.* The previous five categories provide for adaptation or adoption of words that already exist; this one involves making up words that have no connections to any others. At first glance this might seem the most likely kind of creation, but in fact, as Algeo says, "To make something out of nothing does not seem to be a human talent." None of the three thousand new words Algeo studied were without some foundation in existing words.

Created words may fail because of lack of clues to their meaning from the established vocabulary. Burgess's method of inventing new words for *Burgess Unabridged* helped ensure their failure; he knew that most new words came from old ones, but he preferred pure invention.

A few words (less than half of one percent of all successful new words) seem to have been invented solely because of the way they sound. *Burp, bebop,* and *gobbledygook* are among Algeo's examples.

ACTIVE *-ATE*

The lure of creation with familiar elements is almost irresistible. Consider the suffix *-ate,* for example. It means action! The *-ate* changes a noun or adjective to a verb, thus making a new word (and often requiring minor changes to the end of the original word in the process). Put it at the end of a quiet word, and it springs into action. Add it

to the noun *origin,* and you *originate* something; to the adjective *valid,* and you can *validate* what you originated. If it's *active,* you can *activate* it; if it's *alien,* you can *alienate* it; if it's *equivocal,* you can *equivocate.* And so on. Even when you can't *separate* (ahem!) the suffix from the rest of the word, a word ending in *-ate* usually means action. *Celebrate, illuminate, differentiate, fascinate, annihilate, appreciate, associate, automate, bloviate, congratulate* — the pattern is clear. (There are other uses for *-ate,* as in *acetate* and *conglomerate,* but those need not concern us here.)

The suffix *-ate* is such a powerful goad to action that we sometimes add it to words that already are verbs. We sometimes say *orientate,* for *orient; administrate,* for *administer; commentate,* for *comment.* We have done so for a long time, incidentally: *orientate* goes back to at least 1849, *administrate* to 1639, *commentate* to 1794. There are those who object to these *-ate* words as unnecessary, but the ease of creating them (*create* is another *-ate* word) makes them too strong to resist. If they were banished from dictionaries and eliminated (*eliminate* is another!) completely from our present-day language, they would immediately sprout anew from many voices and hands.

But *-ate* is so natural that it spreads far beyond the bounds of any dictionaries. Had a conversation recently? That is, did you *conversate?* You won't find that word in dictionaries, but it's all over everyday conversation, in person and on the Web. For example, there's the club Hawaii 808, a website that provides an electronic place for Hawaiians to meet:

> *This Club was created to allow individuals from Hawaii, and others throughout the world, full access to this club. It's a place to make new friends, conversate about topics, and simply have fun at the same time.*

Gospel musicians "Chris and Chubby" of Oakland, California, have a religious song called "Conversate" that begins:

> *If you want to talk then let's conversate*
> *I got spiritual food to fill your whole plate*
> *I pray that you find fear in the Lord's name*
> *and hope that you leave here not like you came. . . .*

Sandy Close, executive editor of the *Pacific News Service* and founder of the teen magazine *Youth Outlook,* says it's a youth phenomenon:

> *Most young people I meet today have never had a conversation with a teacher outside the classroom. Yet, as members of a generation raised in empty households, they are so hungry for conversation they have turned it into a verb: they want to "conversate." . . .*

Maybe it's youth, or maybe it's Kansas. "Olivia," a young woman from Kansas, has a story of a flirtation on her website:

> *Last Monday while I was closing up at the mall, a guy dressed in a Papa John's Pizza uniform came over to shoot the breeze. He got around to asking if I was looking for a boyfriend, but just from the way he acted and from the things he said, I could tell he didn't have a chance in the world with me. After I was done closing up, he was still following me and yapping away in his rural Kansas accent.*
>
> *"Are you going to walk me to my car?" I said, making sure to keep my cool so he wouldn't be able to detect how nervous I was that he was possibly a psycho child molester.*
>
> *"No, I was hoping you'd hook me up with your number so we can get together and conversate."*
> *"Conversate," I repeated with a giggle.*
> *"Yeah, conversate."*
> *"Well, I'm a busy girl."*

Maybe it's the movies. Counting Down, "the ultimate fan site," posted this photo caption in April 2001:

> *This picture showcases actors Julia Roberts, Matt Damon (as seen from the back) and George Clooney conversating on the set of upcoming* Ocean's Eleven.

Or it could be African-American. Here's the refrain of a song called "Conversate" by the African-American singer Case:

> *Tell me can we conversate*
> *So we can get to learn each other*
> *I don't think that we should wait*
> *If this is a forever thing*
> *I know we made a few mistakes*
> *And in return we hurt each other*
> *We really need to conversate*
> *If this is a forever thing*

"Caramelly" (born 1978, raised on the South Side of Chicago) on the "Words and Ruminations" page of her website recognizes *conversate* as a black phenomenon:

> *Whassup my people. Let's talk for a minute. I mean can we rap about this word* conversate. *This word is not in the dictionary people. It is nowhere to be found yet my black people love to use it while thinking they sound so intelligent. The word to be used when you insert conversate in a sentence is actually* converse. *Converse is the word people, but if you can't remember that just say talk. Don't use a word unless you are sure it belongs. It doesn't take but a minute to look a word up in the dictionary. If you want your own proof that* conversate *is not a word look it up for yourself when you don't find it then you'll be feeling my words.*

Caramelly's comment is revealing in a number of ways. She hears the word used by black people and assumes it is used by them, just as Sandy Close listens to young people and assumes it's their word. (They're both right.) Caramelly resists the word because it's not in the dictionary, but even if it were, she probably still wouldn't like it and would accuse the dictionary of being too permissive. In doing so she recognizes that *conversate* conveys a different attitude than *converse.* The attitude may be described as the hunger or eagerness for conversation that Close mentions. To *conversate* is to be more actively conversa-

tional (there's that "active" connotation of *-ate*) than is the case with to *converse.*

Caramelly's argument is not likely to win many converts; those who like to *conversate* are not likely to rein themselves in because of a dictionary. But those opposed to *conversate* will resist just as vigorously, so we shouldn't expect to see *conversate* in standard dictionaries any day soon.

The *-ate*s just keep on extending themselves. Has anyone ever heard of *lamentate, temptate, provocate,* or *obituate?* Probably not. No dictionary carries these words. A teacher or editor would tell you to use *lament* for *lamentate, tempt* for *temptate, provoke* for *provocate,* and maybe something like *write an obituary* for *obituate.* Yet we don't always have teachers or editors in our heads, and so we just might, at suitable occasions, surprise ourselves and others by "activating" words like these. It's not just hypothetical. Here are some actual examples from the World Wide Web:

> *Man this 'revolution' is straight up to date*
> *Comin' through the headphones so tight it makes me*
> *   lamentate*
> > > — lyrics to "Revolution: Revolution"
> > > by Shadow of the Locust

> *Banality or kitsch doesn't temptate you?*
> > > — Czech interview with
> > > musician Bob Ostertag

> *Satani — Seduce me!*
> *Satani — Awake me!*
> *Satani — Temptate me!*
> > — "Fallen Angel's Symphony" by C. Anderle

> *HOW DOES IT FEEL*

> *How does it feel to provocate the agonizing pain.*
> *How does it feel to be captured in this world of hate.*
> > — Praga Khan, "Tattoo of Pain"

> *educate . . . don't obituate!!!*
> > > — "Graffiti" website

There are *-ate* words that knock on the door and are relentlessly rejected, only to be born again and again. Some invented by nonnative speakers of English follow natural processes of word formation but evoke only our laughter and criticism. For example, a tour guide in Iceland says *abandonated,* admitting that he's not sure it's a word. In Italy, a Cross-Country International Equestrian Vacation describes in its itinerary: "The landscape loses its wildness to more charming agricultural developments typical of centuries of occupation — picture-book Tuscany. We pass by abandonated farm houses. . . ." *A History of the Maya* explains that "many of these [Mayan] centers were mysteriously abandonated by the end of the Classic period." And a German expert discussing rebreather apparatus for divers says on his website, "I heard about diving experiments in 1994 that were abandonated due to problems with CO_2 and with eyesight."

When a native speaker of English uses *abandonated,* it's an occasion for laughter or poetry. As an example, consider this exchange in the Poet's Corner of a "Seniority Forum" on the Internet: when she learns that Lottie is going on holiday, Idris from Niagara, Canada, comments, "Oh oh, abandonated! Now i am in big trouble." To this, Bill from Ontario replies, "Good morning, poets. No, you have not been 'abandonated,' Idris. . . ."

With such resistance, it is unlikely that *abandonated* will be adopted into the vocabulary of English any time soon. It will no doubt continue to be reborn, however, and in some future situation — perhaps if a president of the United States utters it in all seriousness — it might just begin to gain a foothold.

MISUNDERESTIMATING THE PRESIDENT

"The folks who conducted to act on our country on September eleventh made a big mistake," said President George W. Bush on September 26, 2001. "They under-

estimated America. They underestimated our resolve, our determination, our love for freedom. They misunderestimated the fact that we love a neighbor in need. They misunderestimated the compassion of our country. I think they misunderestimated the will and determination of the commander in chief, too."

You won't find *misunderestimate* in any dictionary — yet. But it's lurking in the language of President Bush, who had used it before. "They misunderestimated me," he told an audience in Bentonville, Arkansas, on November 6, 2000, the day before the election.

And he used it unabashedly on April 12, 2001, in a ceremony celebrating Thomas Jefferson's birthday:

> *Most people don't realize this, but Thomas Jefferson and I share a hobby. We both like to make up words. (Laughter.) According to the* Oxford English Dictionary, *Mr. Jefferson contributed more new words to the language than any other U.S. President. I especially like his term for barbaric pirates:* barbaresques. *(Laughter.) I'm also impressed by his words* debarrass *and* graffage.

Thomas Jefferson

> *The other day I tried a new word for our press corps:* misunderestimate. *(Laughter.) It's not quite in Jefferson's league, but I am giving it my best shot.*

Debarrass, incidentally, means to dis-embarrass — to distance oneself from anything embarrassing. And *graffage,* according to Jefferson, is "a wooden frame somewhat like a Stile, placed in a bank, where there is a water-course." Both words are indeed in the *Oxford English Dictionary,* but neither has much currency now.

Misunderestimate's chances might be all the better for not being in Jefferson's league. It's made up of a familiar prefix followed by a familiar word. The intent of the prefix evidently is to intensify the word, and *mis-* clearly intensifies the negative effect of *under.* Furthermore, we are already familiar with the combination of *mis-* and *under* in the word *misunderstand.* So although it is in no dictionary, there is no misunderstanding *misunderestimate.*

Talking with *USA Today* reporter Judy Keen about his ranch in August 2001, Bush rose to new creative heights. According to Keen:

> *An expert in Texas trees, described by Bush as "an arbolist," is coming soon to identify all the varieties at the ranch. "Look up the word," he said. "I don't know, maybe I made it up. Anyway, it's an arbo-tree-ist, somebody who knows about trees."*

President Bush may seem to be especially gifted in coining natural new words, but in fact he is only doing what most of us do. The difference is that he doesn't censor himself.

Here are a few more of his coinages, from the collection of *Bushisms* by Jacob Weisberg and Bryan Curtis on the *Slate* website:

> *subsidation:* Governor Bush will not stand for the subsidation of failure.
> — *Larry King Live,* December 16, 1999

mential: This is still a dangerous world. It's a world of madmen and uncertainty and potential mential losses.
> — At a South Carolina oyster roast, as quoted in the *Financial Times,* January 14, 2000

analyzation: This case has had full analyzation and has been looked at a lot. I understand the emotionality of death penalty cases.
> — *Seattle Post-Intelligencer,* June 23, 2000

subliminable: I don't think we need to be subliminable about the differences between our views on prescription drugs.
> — Orlando, Florida, September 12, 2000

All of these inventions involve familiar suffixes applied in unexpected places, although not entirely unexpected; Bush was not the first to use *subsidation*, *mential*, and *analyzation* (a widely used substitute for *analysis*). Of the four preceding examples, only *subliminable* may be truly original.

President Bush gives new meanings to old words, too. Here are a few examples:

vile for *viable:* It's going to require a president who understands it's in our strategic interests to have a peaceful and economically vile hemisphere.
> — March 2000

hostile for *hostage:* We cannot let terrorists and rogue nations hold this nation hostile or hold our allies hostile.
> — Bartlett, Tennessee, August 18, 2000

pacemakers for *peacemakers:* We'll let our friends be the peacekeepers and the great country called America will be the pacemakers.
> — Houston, Texas, September 6, 2000

reliant for *reliable:* I support current efforts to make Amtrak more efficient and competitive. I believe these efforts will result in better, more extensive and more reliant rail service for the millions of Americans who travel by train.
> — Associated Press, September 17, 2000

> *anecdote* for *antidote:* A tax cut is really one of the anec-
> dotes to coming out of an economic illness.
>
> — *The Edge With Paula Zahn,* September 18, 2000
>
> *resignates* for *resonates:* They said, "You know, this is-
> sue doesn't seem to resignate with the people." And I
> said, you know something? Whether it resignates or not
> doesn't matter to me, because I stand for doing what's
> the right thing, and what the right thing is is hearing
> the voices of people who work.
>
> — Portland, Oregon, October 31, 2000
>
> *gracious* for *grateful:* Anyway, I'm so thankful, and so
> gracious — I'm gracious that my brother Jeb is con-
> cerned about the hemisphere as well.
>
> — Miami, June 4, 2001

The president's example emboldens others. In the Web
magazine *Slate* in July 2001, one writer declared, "Listen
don't misrepresentify (Thanks George now I can construct
the words I want to hear too) what I'm implying here."
And in the September 6, 2001, issue of *Atlantic Unbound*
a reviewer of the *Bush Dyslexicon* makes this point:

> *Bush's ascent is a sign to intelligent people with poor
> educations that they can overcome the social stigma
> attached to bad grammar. The fact that we almost always
> know what Bush means — an even-handed foreign policy,
> an education message that will resonate — bears out
> common experience. People with Bush-like problems get
> their point across all the time.*

From time to time, most of us have Bush-like problems
with language even as we are getting our point across. The
right word is not always at the tip of our tongue. When
we inadvertently create a new word, the response we get
is the normal one — laughter.

And laughter has been underrated as a conservative
force in language. When we back off from an accidentally
invented word, it's usually not because of teachers or edi-
tors but because we know our friends will laugh. George
W. Bush just happens to have a national audience for his
creations, and he doesn't back off.

George W. Bush

Laughter will stop the president's innovations, too, unless people misunderstand and mistake the mistake for the right word. Despite the efforts of purists, that has often happened in the long history of English. Some famous examples: both *nice* and *dizzy* originally meant "foolish." *Boy* was once the name for a servant, of either gender. And of course in the middle of the twentieth century *gay* and *queer* took on new meanings.

STRATEGERY

One of the best-known Bushisms was in fact not used by Bush at all. It began as a joke on *Saturday Night Live* a month before the election of 2000, at the end of a parody of the first presidential debate in which cast members portrayed moderator Jim Lehrer and candidates Al Gore and George W. Bush.

> *Jim Lehrer:* Well, that brings us to the close of tonight's debate. Each candidate will now give a brief closing statement.

....

Make the Pie Higher

(For George W. Bush's inauguration in January, 2001, Richard Thompson, cartoonist for the *Washington Post,* composed this poem entirely from the President's own statements.)

I think we all agree
The past is over.

This is still a dangerous world.
It's a world of madmen
And uncertainty
And potential mental losses.

Rarely is the question asked
Is our children learning?
Will the highways of the Internet
Become more few?

How many hands
Have I shaked?

They misunderestimate me.
I am a pitbull on the pant leg
Of opportunity.
I know that the human being
And the fish
Can coexist.

Families is where our nation
Finds hope
Where our wings take dream.

Put food on your family!

Knock down the tollbooth!
Vulcanize Society!
Make the pie higher!
Make the pie higher!
Major league.

....

Al Gore: Jim, may I make two closing statements?

Jim Lehrer: I'm afraid not. In fact, we are almost out of time, so I will instead ask each candidate to sum up, in a single word, the best argument for his candidacy. Governor Bush?

George W. Bush: Strategery.

Jim Lehrer: [stunned] Vice-President Gore.

Al Gore: Lock-box.

Jim Lehrer: This concludes the first debate. Thank you, and "Live, from New York, it's Saturday Night!"

Strategery was never uttered by the real George W. Bush. It was invented by *Saturday Night Live* writers to satirize Bush's propensity for inventing words — and unabashedly uttering them.

Yet even *strategery* is natural enough not to be entirely original. A year before it was dreamed up for *Saturday Night Live, strategery* appeared on the World Wide Web in the description of a computer game:

> *Warhammer 40,000 is a wargame involving many differing rules, races, vehicles, and miniatures. The main aim of the game is to over come your opponent with superior strength, be this strategery, cunning or power.*

But it was essentially a new creation, and it captured the imagination of Bush friends and foes alike. After the third presidential debate, Bush's communications director, Karen Hughes, jokingly explained why she and Bush felt "upbeat" with a Top Ten list that concluded: "And the No. 1 reason why George W. Bush won the debate: Strategery."

There were harsh responses to Bush's success with his *strategery.* A columnist for the short-lived website "Association" wrote in February 2001:

> *I'm apart of the dumbing down of society, for it is my strategery, to lower your brain cells, then as i adjust on my throne of skulls, calmly push the random red button that swallows you all whole, into a deep dark murky void. . . .*

And a political website supporting Democrats and ("when they occasionally do something right") Republicans made this request:

> *We are also looking to implement a 'strategery' (sic) of cataloging and indexing a lexicon of Bushisms, which the best we can tell is a hybrid between Ebonics, Southern, and potentially Texas smog asphyxiated brain damage.*

But *strategery* also gained aficionados as Bush gained the presidency. A writer for the *Gay Advocate* mused:

> *I have a new favorite word: strategery. . . .*
>
> *Strategery. It has a nice ring to it, tripping lightly off the tongue — and guaranteed to stop people in their tracks when dropped unexpectedly into an otherwise serious conversation. For example, Brian Bond, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Victory Fund, has begun to use it in meetings focused on the future of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender politics. He uses the word as a means to an end: It helps the participants think outside the self-imposed traditional approach to activism.*

And then Bush's advisors adopted the term themselves. On April 22, 2001, the *Washington Post* reported:

> *They call it the Strategery Group.*
>
> *Once a week, the dozen most senior White House staffers walk over to Room 208 of the Eisenhower Executive Office Building for a brainstorming session. Seeking inspiration in that storied room — the place where Secretary of State Cordell Hull confronted the Japanese in 1941 with evidence of the Pearl Harbor bombing — they think big thoughts about what should happen months, even years, from now.*
>
> *"We tried to come up with a nice sounding name," said Karl Rove, President Bush's chief political adviser. "We meet in the Cordell Hull Room, but nobody's buying off on the 'Hull Group.' I think we're going to be stuck with Strategery. . . ."*

A few days later Karen Hughes, now officially Counselor to the President, explained in a CNN interview:

> *I think the tone that you're hearing from this administration is different, and I think there's been a little bit of, you know, I think a mischaracterization of what we jokingly call the "strategery group." It's an office of strategic initiatives. And it really is not so much political as it is long-term planning. . . .*

Using *strategery* for this new purpose evoked both admiration and suspicion. Both were expressed by Bob Greene in a column in the *Chicago Tribune:*

> *It says one of two things:*
> *These people have a wonderful sense of humor — and are confident enough of their own skills, and their own intellect, that they can refer to themselves as the Strategery Group. The phrase says: Hey, we know what some of you think of us. Doesn't matter. We're good enough that we can laugh at it.*
> *The other thing it might say is that they are merely Machiavellian — they know that telling the world that they are the Strategery Group will make them appear to have fine senses of humor, will make them seem to be willing to laugh at themselves.*

As long as *strategery* remained humorous, it was unlikely to wedge its way into the general vocabulary of English. With the naming of the *Strategery Group,* however, there was at least a slight chance that the humor might recede into the background as the serious work of the group attracted public notice. Just possibly it could go the way of *gerrymander,* originally a cartoonist's response to Governor Elbridge Gerry's redistricting of Massachusetts in 1812, and now a serious political term. But the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, changed the mood of the country and of Washington politics. Planning for global and governmental matters was not to be joked about, and *strategery* dropped out of sight.

THE REAL THING: OK-NESS

As we have seen, the majority of our everyday inventions come from new combinations of old words. It's what the

Coca-Cola Company tried a decade ago when it introduced a new drink.

Ask yourself: Do you have a feeling of *OK-ness*?

Think about it for a minute.

OK. Whether you have that *OK-ness* feeling or not, you've just witnessed the birth of a word: *OK-ness.*

Chances are you've never heard *OK-ness* before, or if you have it's so rare you've forgotten it. You won't find it in your desk dictionary, yet it seems natural enough that you don't need to look it up to understand it. Ask others if they are feeling *OK-ness* and they may wonder at the question, but probably not at the word.

You understand *OK-ness* because it's made up of two familiar parts put together in a familiar way. Take (almost) any adjective — *happy, sad, strange, nervous* — and add *-ness* to it, and you have a noun, a thing: *happiness, sadness, strangeness, nervousness.* So even though you probably haven't encountered *OK-ness* before, you know that it means a thing, the state of being OK.

The procedure is so natural that it's likely *OK-ness* has been coined before. Actually, it's certain. On the World Wide Web we can find evidence of *OK-ness* being born and born again. For example:

> *On a website titled "I'm O.K., You're O.K.: Oh, Really!?" Tim Knappenberger writes, "For most of my life, my sense of well being ('OK-ness') has been based on how this list totals up. If there are more O.K.'s than Not O.K.'s, life is, well, a—O.K.!"*
>
> *On the* ParentNews Magazine *website, Michael K. Tonjum, PhD, offers this Behavior Tip: "When we turn to our family and friends to tell us we are ok, rather then validate ourselves, we may find ourselves doing and saying things to others that we wish we could take back. By holding your own OK-ness you remain in control of yourself and not needing to control others as much."*
>
> *In a discussion of archery in the Society for Creative Anachronism, Siegfried Sebastian Faust asks, "What if some Kingdom has (or soon after makes) an award*

> not for 'excellence' in archery, but for 'ok-ness' in ar-
> chery."
>
> In a discussion of the After-Holidays Blues, Dan King
> writes, "Did you make it through the holidays without
> becoming an emotional casualty? In some families there
> was considerable pain. Oh, there was a lot of energy used
> to keep it stuffed down inside. But it was there, and after
> the holidays, B-A-H-R-O-O-O-F! The pain pushed its way
> up against the layers of external 'I'm O.K.-ness' that were
> stacked on it."
>
> On Buddha's Village Forum, "Tim" posted this mes-
> sage: "The major change Buddhism has brought to me is
> a sense of 'ok-ness,' of confidence that what's uncomfort-
> able for me isn't necessarily a bad thing. I don't automati-
> cally judge a situation as bad or good at its inception."
>
> A website advertising David Leifeste's workshop "I'm
> Not OK, You're Not OK, But That's OK" explains: "David
> will equip participants to face the more vulnerable areas
> of pain and dysfunction and facilitate the discovery pro-
> cess that starts with admitting, 'I'm not OK.' From this
> self discovery comes not only 'OK-ness,' but also true self-
> acceptance."

The list could go on, but this is enough to show the fre-
quent birth and rebirth of *OK-ness.*

Or does it? Do these quotations instead demonstrate
that *OK-ness* is an established word that should be listed
in dictionaries? Is there any reason to suppose that these
instances of *OK-ness* are separate creations?

Yes, there is. In most of these examples, *OK-ness* is en-
closed in quotation marks. That's the way writers call at-
tention to words as words. To put *OK-ness* in quotation
marks is to acknowledge, or proclaim, that it is not an
everyday word. Furthermore, in some of the cases, the
coiner has felt the need to provide a definition: "sense of
well being" or "confidence that what's uncomfortable for
me isn't necessarily a bad thing."

It's not just individuals who give birth to words. In 1994
the Coca-Cola Company tried its hand at *OK-ness.* That

summer Coca-Cola began test marketing OK Soda, a beverage combining the flavors of fruit drinks and cola and aimed at teenagers, especially teenage boys, who at that time were said to be disillusioned and cynical. The marketing campaign for the drink included references to *OK-ness:* "The true nature of OK-ness is elusive. OK-ness embraces mistakes and contradictions. It is optimistic, yet ironic."

A word so contradictory in meaning would not seem likely to succeed. This *OK-ness* of Coca-Cola didn't catch on, nor did its drink. But the company didn't give up. In January 1995, a Coca-Cola project manager wrote to Houghton Mifflin, publishers of the *American Heritage Dictionary,* offering the word for inclusion in the dictionary with this definition: "An optimistic feeling that in spite of the complications of day-to-day life, things always work themselves out." Why should it be included? "Over the past year, this word has become a well-known slang term among youth, particularly teenagers," the Coca-Cola official wrote. "In addition, it has been frequently referred to by business and consumer press."

Well, hardly. "Well-known" and "frequently referred to" were wishful thinking, and in the summer of 1995 Coca-Cola ended its test of OK Soda, having sold only a million cases in eight markets over the course of a year. So you'll look in vain for the entry *OK-ness* in the *American Heritage Dictionary,* or for that particular definition of *OK-ness* anywhere else. When others use it, as in our previous examples, they don't agree that it stands for "an optimistic feeling."

What is surprising about Coca-Cola's effort is that, evidently unknown to them, *OK-ness* is in fact already in the dictionary — at least in the *Oxford English Dictionary.* There it is defined as "The fact or quality of being O.K.; acceptability" and attested as early as 1935 ("orthodoxy, decency and general o.k.ness of the . . . article"), 1950 ("O.K.-ness of French literature"), and 1962 ("theatrical

OK-ness"). But the examples of current usage show that, dictionary or no, *OK-ness* has not achieved widespread use; on each occasion it is coined anew. Like so many other words that lurk at the edge of the established vocabulary, *OK-ness* maintains its presence by being born and born again, reinvented as the opportunity arises.

Forget the Joke and Fly Under the Radar

Humor makes us notice a new word or phrase, but it also makes us resist adding that item to our vocabulary. Therefore, if a new term is introduced as a joke, it faces an especially high hurdle. To have a better chance of success, it should hide its origins and lose its sense of humor.

Here's an example: *Couch potato.* Get the joke?

Nowadays most of us don't. And because we don't, *couch potato* has become an everyday term for even the most serious discussions of our way of life.

Indeed, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the *couch potato* is often a cause for serious concern. As the National Association for Sport and Physical Education solemnly warns, "a childhood spent as a couch potato produces an adult who is more open than others to chronic ailments such as heart disease." More succinctly, the BBC declares: "Couch potato women risk heart disease."

"In the past, exercise would have reduced the sugar circulating in the blood," wrote Mitzi Perdue for the Scripps Howard News Service in 2001. "But today we're in an era of the couch potato, of TV, Nintendo, Game Boy and the Net, and more of it is stored as fat."

Even when the focus is not on the problems it presents, *couch potato* seems pretty solemn. With a straight face, people promote "couch potato investing" (indexing as opposed to active management), "couch potato marketing," (marketing on the Web), and "couch potato dad gifts" (a CD of TV commercials, for example).

No self-respecting dictionary would go to press or website today without *couch potato:*

"A person who spends much time sitting or lying down, usually watching television" — *American Heritage Dictionary*

"A lazy and inactive person; especially one who spends a great deal of time watching television" — *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*

"A chronic television viewer" — *Webster's New World College Dictionary*

"One who spends too much time watching TV" — *User's Webster Dictionary*

"A person who spends leisure time passively or idly sitting around, esp. watching television or videotapes" — *Oxford English Dictionary*

At first, it was just a joke. As long as the joke was recognized, *couch potato* remained at the edge of the vocabulary. As the joke was forgotten, however, the image of the potato on a couch remained, and the *couch potato* now is a fixture of our language.

True, there's residual humor in the term. *Couch potato* conjures images of a big potato on a couch, all eyes on the television. The image fits so perfectly that it's easy to imagine it was coined spontaneously by someone thinking of potatoes — dumpy, heavy, unmoving — on soft couches. But as *couch potato* settles more and more into its comfortable seat in today's authoritative dictionaries (some of which label it "slang"), its laughable origins become dimmer and dimmer. Not many English speakers

couch potato

today remember that in its first heyday in the 1980s, *couch potato* was a joke, and a well-marketed joke at that.

According to an illustrated history, *The Official Couch Potato Handbook* (1983), written by two of the perpetrators themselves—"Elders" Jack Mingo and Robert Armstrong—the saga began in the 1960s with nine Southern Californians who got together on Thursday nights to watch *Lost in Space.* Calling themselves the "Lost in Space Club," they soon began meeting to watch other television shows as well. "One of them," the story continues, "known only as 'The Hallidonian,' soon made the discovery that any day, any time was all right for prolonged, indiscriminate TV viewing."

Then, reportedly on July 15, 1976, another of the nine "Elders," Tom Iacino, uttered the term *couch potato* in making a phone call to The Hallidonian. The illustrated history depicts the moment: "Hi, Annie Jo — Can I speak to the 'couch potato'?" asks Iacino's telephone voice, to which Annie Jo responds, "The wha——?" while across the room The Hallidonian relaxes on his couch, watching *The Flintstones.*

Why *couch potato?* Well, the members of the Lost in Space Club were *tubers,* that is, devotees of the *tube* (or *boob tube*), as television had come to be known in the land of slang. Here is how the *Official Couch Potato Handbook* explains it:

> *What better symbol for an organization dedicated to the pursuit of Inner Peace through Prolonged Television Viewing than the noble spud? Like its namesakes, the potato is a Tuber. It is the essence of vegetation. It is covered with eyes.*
>
> *The name came to an early Couch Potato Elder in a cosmic revelation, one of many such documented "experiences" induced by Prolonged TV Viewing. The irony of Couch Potatoes being forced to live underground in the early days of the movement has been interpreted by the Elders as a sign of Divine approval.*

The potato as tuber, the potato with eyes, the potato as vegetating, the potato as existing underground — these evidently were the qualities that inspired Iacino's "cosmic revelation." But as the historians explain, for years the term *couch potato* spread no further. "The only outlet these Tubers had for their ideas at first was the Underground Comics. In them they began placing obscure references to their organization . . . not yet daring to hint at the secrets they'd discovered." It was still "The wha—?" for several more years.

Indeed, *couch potato* might have remained in permanent obscurity but for the Doo Dah Parade in Pasadena, California, a spoof on the Tournament of Roses Parade held there on New Year's Day. For the second annual Doo Dah, in 1979, the Couch Potatoes entered a float that carried members sitting on couches and watching television. That was their only year in the parade; the next year motorized floats were outlawed, and no Couch Potato wanted to make the effort to pull the "Ceremonial Couch." But the 1979 appearance caught the attention of the public, and *couch potato* soon sprouted prodigious progeny.

Knowing a good thing when they saw it, Couch Potato Elders trademarked the name and began to market Couch Potato books, newsletters, bumper stickers, rabbit-ear pennants (to attach to the "rabbit ear" antennas of television sets in those pre-cable, pre-satellite-dish days), and "viewing tunics" (T-shirts with the Couch Potato emblem). There were caps, hats, and fezzes; dolls, parlor games, pillows, and soft stuffed Couch Potato dolls.

From Couch Potato World Headquarters in Dixon, California, the Elders issued *The Tuber's Voice: The Couch Potato Newsletter.* There were books, too, to explain it all. The first was *Dr. Spudd's Etiquette for the Couch Potato* (1982), followed by *The Official Couch Potato Handbook* and *The Couch Potato Guide to Life* (1985).

During the 1980s the World Headquarters also offered membership cards and certificates and encouraged local clubs. The appendix of the *Couch Potato Guide to Life* lists 128 "Couch Potato viewing lodges worldwide." Many of them had names recalling the humorous connection between "potato" and "tuber," including "The All-Seeing Tubers" (New Mexico) and "The Tubular Belles" (New Hampshire).

But it was not in the nature of Couch Potatoes to exert themselves, and by the 1990s the commercial Couch Potato fad had faded. Perhaps the Elders were just too tired to pursue profits when they could be watching television instead. In 1991, Armstrong let the trademark on *Couch Potato* expire, and the term went into the public domain.

It proved to be a turning point. The humor, the capital letters, and ™ fell away, and the modern *couch potato* was born. A new generation learned it as a descriptive (and negative) term for one who watches (too) much television. In recognition of this widespread use, it was entered in dictionaries. It had become a real word (or term).

In the twenty-first century, only historians and elders (the non-capital-letter variety) readily recall the punning origin of *couch potato.* Others are clueless. "Hey Guys!"
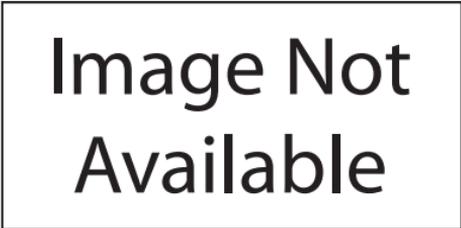
gerrymander

writes "Laura" on the *Filters Magazine* ("pop/sub/fringe culture") website. "I was wondering if anyone could tell me the origin of the slang term 'couch potato' or at least give me a somewhat reasonable lie. It's a school project and I can't find anything." A website for the public television station at Pennsylvania State University includes *mouse potato* ("a person who spends large amounts of leisure or working time operating a computer") in a list of new words and explains that it is "a take-off on another 1990's word, couch potato" — thereby obliterating the first two decades of *couch potato.* A website of 1980s slang misses the humorous beginning of *couch potato* entirely,

giving this explanation for its origin: "With the boom of cable, MTV and home video, more people parked their butts on their couches."

To the historian of words, it's a sad falling-away from the truth, but to the champion of a new word, it's cause for rejoicing. A word needs to stop kidding around and get serious if it wants to enter the general vocabulary.

GERRYMANDER

One of the most celebrated words in American politics also owes its origin to a joke. The word is *gerrymander,* and the story is well known to historians. Back in 1812 Elbridge Gerry, governor of Massachusetts (and a signer of the Declaration of Independence), crowned his political career by causing the election districts of the state to be rearranged to the maximum advantage of his Democratic party. The partitioning in Essex County was particularly blatant, with one district running along the west and top edges of the county in a sinuous pattern. Gerry's opponents, the Federalists, were outraged when they saw the map of the redistricted county. It may have been the great painter Gilbert Stuart himself who added a head, wings, and claws to the outline of the reptilian-appearing district. Someone said, "That will do for a salamander," and someone else improved on the joke, calling it a *Gerrymander.*

There are conflicting stories about whether the drawing was made at a political meeting or in a newspaper office. Whether Stuart made the drawing and who coined the word are also in dispute. There is no doubt, however, that the term was applied to the image derived from the map of Essex County, and that *gerrymander* quickly spread into general use, at first for Governor Gerry's redistricting and then for any deformation of electoral boundaries designed to give one party an advantage.

Historians have kept knowledge of the word's origins alive even as they have disagreed on the details. But of

those who use *gerrymander,* probably few know or remember the story. The two parts of the word no longer are clear reminders of its origins, either. The connection to Governor Gerry is less obvious: for one thing, the word is no longer capitalized; for another, Governor Gerry pronounced his name with a "hard *g,*" as in *guest,* and the word today begins with a "soft *g,*" as in *gem.* Few nowadays remember Governor Gerry, so even if the spelling and pronunciation were faithful to the original, most people wouldn't make the connection. The second half of the word is also obscure. What the original coiner characterized as a salamander, we would be more likely to identify as a dragon.

So *gerrymander* lost its topical humor, allowing it to become a serious technical term, fully accepted in our capacious language.

THE AFTERNOON SOAPS

It was another joke, more than a century after *gerrymander:* the *soap opera.*

In the late 1930s some clever person bestowed that name on the serial dramas aired on the radio. They were *operas* because they were so melodramatic. They were *soap* operas because they were sponsored by makers of detergents and soaps (like Procter & Gamble, Lever Brothers, and Colgate-Palmolive-Peet). *Soap opera* must have been funny the first few times.

In the course of time the daytime dramas moved from radio to television, and their original soap sponsors gradually yielded to those who promoted other products. But the popularity of the genre continued into the twenty-first century, and so did the term designating them, now usually reduced to *soaps.* These changes eliminated the humor; nowadays the joke is detectable only by a historian or a linguistic archaeologist. It is easy to find serious discussion of the *soap opera* today:

The defining quality of the soap opera form is its seriality. A serial narrative is a story told through a series of individual, narratively linked installments. Unlike episodic television programs, in which there is no narrative linkage between episodes and each episode tells a more or less self-contained story, the viewer's understanding of and pleasure in any given serial installment is predicated, to some degree, upon his or her knowledge of what has happened in previous episodes. . . . (Museum of Broadcast Communications)

The term lives on, entirely free of its funny beginnings.

BIG BANG

In 1950, the astronomer Fred Hoyle held to the generally accepted belief that the universe was in a more or less steady state. Speaking on BBC radio in a series entitled "The Nature of the Universe," he criticized the rival theory advanced by George Gamow that the whole universe had originated from a single dense spot and dismissed it as "big bang cosmology." It was a joke, Hoyle thought.

In the decades to come, more and more evidence appeared that made an initial *big bang* seem more likely. Today physicists and astronomers generally accept the theory that billions of years ago the universe did indeed get its start from a single small point. It's no longer a joke, so the term is used freely and seriously by all concerned. In fact, it's such a natural and self-explanatory combination of familiar words that nothing has been able to dislodge it, despite attempts to coin a more scientific term.

Some forty years later *Sky & Telescope* magazine held a contest to determine a better name for the *big bang.* They got a big response: The March 1994 issue announced that they had received nearly 14,000 entries, including *Big TOE* (*T*heory *O*f *E*verything), *Super Seed, The Grand Expansion, Space-Time Zero, Bertha D. Universe,* and *Jurassic Quark.* Needless to say, none of them displaced the *big bang.*

HOT DOG

The archetype of American food, the *hot dog* — so much in demand at the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah that the original 500,000 from Usinger's in Wisconsin were consumed in the first five days, necessitating an emergency resupply of 200,000 more — began as a joke. And not a pleasant joke, either. Not until the joke had been firmly forgotten could Americans begin to swallow *hot dogs* with enthusiasm.

A *hot dog,* of course, is a sausage in a bun. During the nineteenth century, it was a running joke that sausages were often made not from beef or pork, as claimed by those who made them, but from whatever stray animals were at hand, especially stray dogs. Students at Yale University in the 1890s referred to sausages as *dogs,* and the lunch wagon where they were sold as a *dog wagon.* Served hot, in a bun, the sausages were thus *hot dogs.*

College students could stomach such a joke, perhaps, but others might be squeamish. As *hot dogs* became the fad food of the twentieth century, a legend arose that a famous cartoonist (T. A. "Tad" Dorgan) had invented the name by drawing a cartoon of a sausage that looked like a dachshund, in a bun, for sale at a baseball game. He didn't, but that kinder legend served to legitimate the *hot dog* for the rest of that century and into the twenty-first.
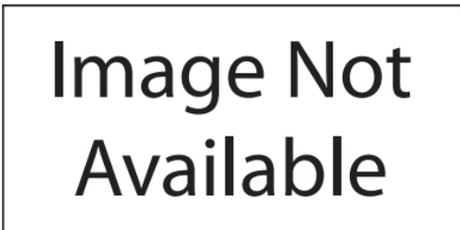
hot dog

YOUNG AND URBAN AND PROFESSIONAL

Yep, one of the great successes of the 1980s was the *yuppie.* It began as a joke but soon became as serious as the people it described, who were, on the whole, quite serious about their upwardly mobile status.

The word made its first known appearance in print in 1982. Two years later, after publication of *The Yuppie Handbook,* with tongue-in-cheek instructions on how to recognize and be one, *yuppie* was a major story in *Time* and *Newsweek,* the latter declaring 1984 "the Year of the Yuppie."

Yuppie came into being as a clever twist on several words and phrases. Its prehistory can be traced to the abbreviation *YUP* for *Young Urban Professional,* a term used at least since the late 1970s by public opinion analysts. This abbreviation fit the pattern of the first syllable of two other lifestyle words that had been around since the 1960s, *hippie* and *preppie,* so it was natural to add the *-pie* suffix to *yup* as well. A similar combination had been made in 1968 when the radical Youth International Party was founded; modeling the name on *hippie* and *preppie,* the members of that party ironically called themselves *yippies.* This was the connection explained in a March 1983 column by *Chicago Tribune* columnist Bob Greene that spread the word on *yuppie:*

> *While [Jerry Rubin] and Abbie Hoffman once led the Yippies — the Youth International Party — one social commentator has ventured that Rubin is now attempting to become the leader of the Yuppies — Young Urban Professionals.*

The conscious play on words is apparent in the early appearances of *yuppie.* Interviewed for *People* magazine, the authors of *The Yuppie Handbook,* Marissa Piesman and Marilee Hartley, said they had heard *Y.P.* and *Yo-Pro* but "picked Yuppie because it sounded like *preppy* and *hippie* and had the right ring."

Yuppie has become the model for other coinages. After *yuppie,* there have been *yumpies,* young upwardly mobile professionals; *suppies,* Southern yuppies; *buppies,* black urban professionals; *guppies,* geriatric urban poor persons; *dinks,* those with dual income and no kids; and *skippies,* school kids with income and purchasing power. These tend to fall by the wayside because they are too clever. *Yuppie* now stands firmly as the norm.

OK, OK

No better example of forgotten humor can be found than the most famous expression ever invented in America, or perhaps the whole world: *OK.* This expression has an amazing rags-to-riches story. It began as an obscure joke, the least likely of new words to succeed. A twist of fate, though, brought it seriousness and myths of noble origins, and today it is used every day by almost everyone, not only in English but in many other languages around the globe.

Thanks to the research of Allen Walker Read, the great historian of American English, and to further research by Barry Popik and others, we know the story of *OK* in detail. We know, then, that it had its beginnings in a craze for humorous abbreviations that filled Boston newspapers in the late 1830s. Here is the world's first *OK,* as published in the Boston *Morning Post* of March 23, 1839:

> The "Chairman of the Committee on Charity Lecture Bells" is one of the deputation, and perhaps if he should return to Boston, via Providence, he of the [Providence] Journal, and his train-band, would have the "contribution box," et ceteras, o.k. — all correct — and cause the corks to fly, like sparks, upward.

And another, in the Morning Post three days later:

> Many of O.F.M. and several futcheons had the pleasure of taking these "interesting strangers" by the hand, and

> *wishing them a speedy passage to the Commercial Emporium. They were o.k.*

It would take a whole chapter to explain what this writer is talking about. Suffice it to say that he is trying to be funny, and in so doing he is using an abbreviation for "all correct" that is entirely not correct, since the initials of both words are misspelled. (*O.F.M.,* incidentally, is *our first men.* The *Commerical Emporium* is the Boston editors' epithet for New York City, in contrast with the *Literary Emporium,* their hometown. No one knows who the *futcheons* are.)

The misspelling of *o.k.* put it in a class with its predecessor *O.W.* (all right) and with a number of equally short-lived misspelled abbreviations that appeared later in 1839, when the fad had spread to New York: *K.G.* (no go), *K.Y.* (no use), *K.K.K.* (commit no nuisance, in those innocent times before the founding of the Ku Klux Klan), and *N.S.M.J.* ('nough said 'mong gentlemen). But only *OK* survived the quick fading of the fad for misspelled initials.

The case of *O.W.* in particular presents a striking contrast. It got its start nearly a year ahead of *O.K.* and was used for much the same purposes. Here it is in the Boston *Morning Post* for June 18, 1838: "We jumped in, and were not disappointed either with the carriage, distance, or price. It was O.W. — (all right)." The phrase that it stands for, *all right,* was then and is now an expression of approval — better known and more widely used than *all correct.* So why shouldn't *O.W.,* the humorous abbreviation of the more popular phrase, be the one used today?

Actually, that's the wrong question. It's unlikely that any abbreviation so obscure that it requires explanation would survive beyond a brief season in the sun. Even the most astute language prognosticator would not have given either *O.K.* or *O.W.* much of a future in 1839. In the whole history of English, no such misspelled abbreviation had become part of the general vocabulary.

The question, then, is not why *O.W.* didn't survive, but

why *O.K.* did. The answer lies in the presidential election that took place the following year. The election sobered it up and gave it respect. In that 1840 election, William Henry Harrison, a Whig, challenged incumbent Martin Van Buren, a Democrat. Whigs jeered at Van Buren as a "Kinderhook cabbage planter," in reference to his birthplace, Kinderhook, New York. The Democrats turned this into a positive epithet: *Old Kinderhook.* O.K.?

Yes, that was it. By March 1840, a *Democratic O.K. Club* in support of *Old Kinderhook* had been formed in New York City, and *O.K.* became a militant slogan. According to the Whiggish *New York American* of March 28, 1840,

> *The* war cry *of the [Democratic] locofocos was O.K., the two letters paraded at the head of an inflammatory article in the New Era of the morning. "Down with the whigs, boys, O.K." was the shout of these poor, deluded men.*

Thanks to the accident of Martin Van Buren's birthplace beginning with the letter K, then, *OK* extended its range from light humor into serious politics. By the end of the nineteenth century its laughable origin had been totally forgotten, so there was nothing to hinder *OK* from attaining the utmost respectability. Numerous stories were invented about its origin, all of them more plausible to the twentieth-century mind than a comic misspelling. Allen Walker Read devoted a twenty-page article to the folklore of *OK,* documenting these theories:

— It began as a telegraphers' abbreviation for *open key,* indicating that "all is right" for receiving a message;
— No, it came from the Choctaw Indian *okeh* or *oke* (with a strong stress on the second syllable);
— No, it came from the Mobile or Chickasaw trade language;
— No, it was an abbreviation for *Old Keokuk,* an early nineteenth-century leader of the Sauk Indians;
— No, it was an abbreviation for the Haitian port city of *Aux Cayes,* supposedly known for its excellent rum;

— No, it came from *OK* stamped on biscuits made for the army during the Civil War by *Orrin Kendall* & Sons of Chicago;

— No, it was Greek, from *ola kala* meaning "all good," supposedly used by the Spartans in 600 BC;

— No, it was German, from the letters *OK* standing for *Ober-Kommando* on documents signed by Baron von Steuben, who served with the U.S. Army in the war of independence;

— No, it was French, from *au quai,* approving a bale of cotton to be taken to the dock in New Orleans for export;

— No, it was Provençal, a misspelling of the word *oc* meaning "yes";

— No, it was Finnish, from *oikea* meaning "correct";

— No, it was Scottish, from *och aye* meaning "oh yes."

Its shameful origins thus disguised, *OK* won acceptance in the highest office in the land. President Woodrow Wilson, our only chief executive with a PhD, accepted the Choctaw explanation and somewhat pedantically wrote the Choctaw spelling *okeh* on government documents to signify his approval. From there it was a short distance to the ubiquitous *OK* or *okay* of the present day.

What can we learn about the acceptance of new words from the story of *OK?* It had peculiar success by managing not to seem peculiar. It entered the language with a crowd of other humorous abbreviations, moved quickly to the more serious crowd of political expressions, assumed distinguished myths about its ancestry, and thus became what it is now, the most ordinary of everyday expressions. All of its odd fellows — *O.F.M., O.W., K.Y.* (no use), and the like — were long ago left in the dust, eliciting only a few chuckles before vanishing.

FLYING UNDER THE RADAR

When a new word applies for entrance into the vocabulary of a language, it has an advantage if it meets certain quali-

fications. One, as we have seen, is seriousness. People use words to make jokes but don't want the words themselves to be jokes; a language is a serious matter.

The more general principle is that a word shouldn't call attention to itself, by humor or by any other means — its looks or origin, for example. If it does attract notice, chances are it will be rejected. If, however, it is unobtrusive and sounds familiar even if it is not, those who hear or see it are more likely to think it's something they have missed rather than something missing from the language. In that case, listeners or readers are inclined to give it a welcome rather than the boot.

There are professionals who are on the lookout for new words, either to capture them for their dictionaries or to shoot them down so they will not enter their cultivated language preserves. If a new word can sneak past these experts, it has a good chance of making a home for itself.

Here are a few that have made it: "stealth words," they could be called, ones that evaded the new-word-detection radar. Because they were so successful, their stories are short; we don't know who introduced them, how, or where.

New Words 101

One of the great stealth successes of recent times is this inconspicuous designation for a beginning college course. It slipped past the watchdogs of words, so there's no telling when *101* first extended its meaning to cover any introductory treatment, although there is evidence that it had done so at least as far back as the 1970s.

Nowadays on the Web you can find Romance 101, Breakups 101, Roman Numerals 101, Blackjack 101, Golf 101, Pumpkin Carving 101, Chops 101 (guitar playing), Aromatherapy 101, Toiletology 101 (the repair of toilets), Satanism 101, Cults 101, Free Stuff 101, College 101 (what they won't tell you in the official college handbook), Grammy Fashion 101 (what the stars were wearing at the

Grammy Awards ceremony), and countless others. Magazines, newspapers, and books will introduce any subject with *101.*

In the *Illinois Legal Times,* a 1998 article titled "Try Adding Civility, Kindness to Law School Curriculum" begins like this:

> *Here's a course for any lawyer who wants to originate business: Friendship 101. The syllabus might read: "How to make friends and deepen friendships, listen well, support others and help them feel comfortable in your presence."*

The tag *101* seems to be a favorite with headline writers. It will often appear in the headline but not in the body of the story, indicating that it was added by the person who wrote the headline. In February 2002 the *New York Times* carried this headline: "Campuses Across America Are Adding 'Sept. 11 101' to Curriculums," but the story itself had no *101.*

Plan B

What happens if things don't work out as intended? Go to *Plan B.*

It has entered our language under the radar. It's such a natural term that the experts have no idea where or when it began. But we all know what it means.

There's something impressive about *Plan B.* It means you actually have an alternate strategy in case your first attempt fails. It means you aren't giving up, and you aren't just trying the same thing over again. You're smart.

That's why the smart lawyers on the television show *The Practice* regularly talk about *Plan B:*

Bobby: What about Plan B?

Eugene: Do you think we should?

Bobby: Well, nothing else is working, is it? Can you think of an alternative?

Eugene: It could backfire. You know the risks involved. . . .

Not surprisingly, *Plan A* is not nearly as widely used. It's often not a plan at all, just the thing you first do. Only when that won't work do you implement a carefully thought out *Plan B.*

Heads-up

In ancient times, back in the mid-twentieth century, when someone called out *heads up!* listeners knew to lift up their heads and watch out for something dangerous. Nowadays *heads-up*s are plentiful, but they are nothing to worry about, just announcements or news. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration science news website is titled *Heads Up!* but warns of no danger. You can find *heads-up*s about seminars, auditions, special offers, headaches, ringworm, a new album, new search technology, quality products that prevent snoring, and this year's fall flight of ducks, just to name a few.

Some *heads-up*s are still in the nature of warnings. You can get a *heads-up* about recognizing college scholarship scams, handling a chemical accident, accepting all those credit card offers you get in the mail every day, or being aware of crabmeat fiber stuck in your teeth. Still, these are not warnings of imminent danger, and instead of the original exclamation, the two words have merged to become a plain noun. Most often today *heads-up* is used the way the UrbanStyle website has it:

> *In addition to fantastic shopping, our localScene features keep you up-to-date with the latest fashion trends and give you the heads-up about the hot talent, boutiques, and shows in the city.*

Hopefully

In the 1960s and 1970s, the most hated word in American English was *hopefully.* Guardians of the purity of the language were shocked to discover its widespread use as the equivalent of *I hope* in statements like "Hopefully, the rain will stop" or "Hopefully, I'll find a job soon" or "Hope-

fully, the crime rate will go down." A book on usage published in 1975 recorded these reactions to *hopefully* from its panel of "distinguished consultants":

— The most horrible usage of our time.
— Chalk squeaking on a blackboard is to be preferred to this usage.
— Strike me dead if you ever hear me using it in this way.
— This is one that makes me physically ill.
— Its adherents should be lynched.

Why did they oppose it? They gave logical technical reasons: You can't have an adverb modifying a sentence, they said, ignoring similar acceptable adverbs like *thankfully.* Their real reason, consciously or subconsciously, was probably that suddenly everyone was using *hopefully* as a weasel word. *Hopefully* is a way to express optimism and imply that one should get credit for a favorable result, without making promises and without taking responsibility in case what is hoped for doesn't happen. No wonder politicians, business executives, and workers of all kinds brighten their reports and build in an escape hatch with *hopefully.* We could hardly do without it nowadays.

Thankfully or regrettably, depending on your point of view, by the twenty-first century the controversy about *hopefully* had died down. It's still a point of contention in dictionaries and books of usage, but those who warn against its use are preaching to a small choir.

If *hopefully* caused such a stir, how can it be considered a stealth word? Because it was not in fact a new word at all in the 1960s. A thorough computer-aided search by researcher Fred Shapiro recently demonstrated, in his words, that "*hopefully* was in common use as a sentence adverb in both formal and informal speech by the 1930s. Its origins may go back a century or more before that." His many examples include this one from the *New York Times Book Review* in 1932:

> *He would create an expert commission . . . to consist of ex-Presidents and a selected list of ex-Governors, hopefully not including Pa and Ma Ferguson.*

And this from the *American Political Science Review* in 1934:

> *The breakdown of existing forms of industrial organization may hopefully direct attention to adequate measures of security for the worker.*

He found it, in fact, in the writings of New England Puritan minister Cotton Mather in 1702:

> *Although a Pastor should be willing to encounter many Difficulties and Infirmities with his People; yet, in case that Chronical Diseases, which evidently threaten his Life, might hopefully be relieved by his removal, it should then, on all hands, be allowed and advised.*

These uses of *hopefully* would raise no eyebrows today. *Hopefully,* then, in its widespread modern sense was around for more than two and a half centuries before the experts took notice. Hopefully that qualifies it as a stealth word.

The FUDGE Factors

As previous chapters have shown, the success or failure of new words is not entirely random. Some factors evidently make for success, while others hinder it. It appears, for example, that a word has a better chance for success if it is modest and inconspicuous than if it is showy and clever. It also appears that some factors expected to be influential don't matter; for example, a word that fills a gap in the vocabulary seems to have no particular advantage over one that doesn't. A language isn't a brick wall; it seems comfortable with gaps.

There will never be a purely objective way of determining which words will succeed and which won't. Generalizing from the examples in the preceding chapters, though, it is possible to construct a scale that will focus attention on key factors and allow accurate prediction of a word's future success — at least, a more accurate prediction than one based on a vague premonition or a wild guess. The factors that make for success can't be measured by instruments or calculated objectively, so a scale to predict the success of new words will need to be one that employs human judgment rather than one that circumvents it. It

Dr. Virginia Apgar
creator of the Apgar scale

has to delineate factors clearly, but it can't be too complicated.

THE APGAR SCALE

Fortunately, there is a model for such a scale, one developed by Dr. Virginia Apgar in 1952 to predict the future success of — you. It's not a scale that has a spring or a balance beam, but is a judgment scale that estimates the health of a newborn baby.

Thanks to Dr. Apgar, if you were born later than the mid-twentieth century, you probably took your first test one minute after emerging into the world. Four minutes later, you were given a second chance. You probably passed, too, or you wouldn't be reading this chapter.

The test is an instant physical examination for newborns, designed to tell medical attendants immediately if the baby needs help in staying alive. It requires no invasive procedures or laboratory analysis, just observation of five signs: heart rate, respiratory effort, muscle tone, reflex

irritability, and skin color. Nowadays, for convenience in remembering them, the signs are labeled to correspond with the letters of Dr. Apgar's name: Appearance, Pulse, Grimace (reflexes), Activity, and Respiration. Each of these gets 0, 1, or 2 points, the higher the better. A score of 6 or lower usually calls for intervention; 7 or higher means the infant should be doing fine on its own. If you earn an Apgar 10, you have a great start on life.

Before Dr. Apgar's invention, medical attendants at birth had only inexact terminology to express the overall viability of a baby: "The baby looks healthy" or "It's in trouble." With the Apgar scale, the details of a complex situation could be precisely communicated to everyone present for appropriate action.

Although babies are one thing, and words quite another, both are complex human creations seemingly impervious to easy evaluation. Dr. Apgar's system, permitting simple and reliable assessment of something as complicated as human life, can be an inspiration for a scale that predicts the viability of new words. Her brilliant inspiration was to direct attention to five distinct and readily observed vital signs and to allow just three possible scores for each. That is precise, yet easy enough to remember and apply. More categories or more degrees would make judgments more difficult and would distract from the purpose of the scale, which is not to focus on itself but to reach an overall determination of an individual's likelihood of success.

Although it is designed for use by doctors and nurses, the Apgar scale does not require years of medical training to understand or to apply. A layperson can use it too, at least to get an approximate sense of whether a baby is in trouble. In fact, it teaches the lay observer as well as the medical professional what to look for.

Dr. Apgar's ingenious model can be applied to a rating system for new words. That is what the rest of this chapter will attempt.

THE FUDGE FACTORS

Dr. Apgar's invention is especially pertinent as a model for new-words prediction because here, just as in the Apgar scale, there appear to be five significant factors. They can be expressed in a scale like Dr. Apgar's that allows a grade of 0, 1, or 2 for each factor. And the initial letters of the factors spell a word, too. In this case it's FUDGE:

Frequency of use
Unobtrusiveness
Diversity of users and situations
Generation of other forms and meanings
Endurance of the concept

Exactly how to apply and judge a word by these factors will require some explanation and examples. The examples are not brand-new words but words from at least several decades ago whose success or failure we already know. They will thus serve as benchmarks for testing newer words whose fate remains to be determined.

Factor 1: Frequency of Use

This factor can also be expressed as popularity, plain and simple. Or perhaps not so plain and simple, because popularity can be defined in several ways. The kind of popularity a new word needs is attention: "Attention, attention must be paid," as Linda Loman says in *Death of a Salesman.* Attention brings a word from the fringes of language toward the center.

And so it is with Frequency. When first coined, a word or phrase has a frequency of 0, and 0 it remains as long as only one person uses it. Even a handful of friends, family, or coworkers won't be enough to raise the rating for Frequency above 0. Examples of words with frequency 0 are numerous, but by definition you won't have heard of most of them. Occasionally, though, there will be words

that capture a bit of attention without inspiring anyone else to use them. These include many of the deliberate creations of serious (or not so serious) word coiners, like Gelett Burgess's *bleesh, critch, cowcat,* and *hyprijimp* and Paul Lewis's *pittwitted, denuggify,* and *whoopdujour.*

Level 1 of Frequency, the next step up, reflects spreading usage. Words at Level 1 are recognized by more people than you can count and used by more people than you know; we're talking thousands here, maybe hundreds of thousands. Perhaps you remember the story of *heaven-o*? It's the polite alternative to *hello* officially adopted by the county commissioners in a Texas town in 1997. News of the new word spread far and wide, though few seem to have adopted it. That year *heaven-o* was at Frequency Level 1; since then it apparently has slipped back to Level 0.

If Level 0 of Frequency is like a struck match, a flame ready to flicker and go out, Level 1 is like applying that match to a fuse, where a word can smolder, waiting for an opportunity to explode to Level 2. Or think of the fringe vocabulary of a language (Level 1) as a field sown with seeds ready to sprout. The seeds are the words invented and reinvented by individuals. There are some small sprouts, the words used by members of a family, neighbors, workers in a particular trade, hobbyists with a particular devotion. When the larger public showers attention on a particular part of the field, the seeds sprout, the sprouts shoot up.

A perfect example of Frequency Level 1 rising to Level 2 is *chad.* Until the presidential election of November 2000, it was an obscure word, known to those few who had occasion to work with punch cards. But when the hotly contested Florida vote for president attracted intense political and media attention to punch cards, *chad* became a front-page word. It sprouted varieties like *hanging chad* (chad hanging by a corner) and *pregnant chad* or *dimpled chad* (punched but not dislodged).

....

Article Not Available

....

Etymological experts burned the midnight oil to discover ancestral remains of present-day *chad,* tracing it as far back as 1939 to a patent application for a "chadless" telegraph tape. That application defines *chad* as "pieces of waste" (from a perforated tape). From 1939 to 2000 *chad* remained at Level 1, a specialized word confined to the communications of people who had to deal with it. In November 2000, suddenly everyone had to deal with it, and *chad* soared to Frequency Level 2. By 2002, especially in the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, *chad* had drifted down to Frequency Level 1 again.

New words that have attained Frequency Level 2 are, almost by definition, those that are the most familiar. Computer technology in the 1990s contributed a number of Level 2 words: *dot* (for "period" in an address, as in *dot-com*) and the prefix *e-* (as in *e-mail),* for example. In other examples, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, raised *jihad* and *ground zero* to Level 2. *Ground zero* had been at Level 2 some decades earlier, when attention was focused on atom and hydrogen bombs, but the end of the Cold War had lowered it to Frequency Level 1. After the terrorist attacks, someone thought of *ground zero* as an appropriate analogy for the devastation at the World Trade Center site, and the term quickly attached itself to discussions of that location.

From these examples it is clear that a word or phrase can change levels of Frequency with changes in national attention. It is clear also that no one could have predicted the need for *chad* before November 7, 2000, or *ground zero* before September 11, 2001. But there remains a sharp divide between Frequency Levels 0 and 1. It's unlikely that *chad* would have risen to Level 2 if it had not already been in circulation. And now that it has been at Level 2, it's unlikely it will ever fall to Level 0; it is too firmly embedded in the historical record.

So the most important leap in Frequency a new word faces is from Level 0 to Level 1. How does this happen? Deliberate coiners of words rely on whatever bully pulpit they have available, their publications or their own celebrity, to get the word out. That by itself, though, is not enough. There are four other factors to consider.

Factor 2: Unobtrusiveness

Unobtrusiveness. In plain English, you don't notice it. A successful new word flies under the radar. It camouflages itself to give the appearance of something we've known all along. We might imagine a moat around our language, and high walls to keep out strange terms. Only a few are

admitted through the gates: scientific terms, mostly, which have established procedures for nomenclature, and names of new inventions, where for the most part we allow the inventors to give names to their brainchildren. As for the rest of the infiltrators, if we detect them, we usually reject them.

There are professional critics who lead the charge against new words, defending the supposed purity of older vocabulary against incursions of new. But we really don't need the professionals. They lead the charge against words and phrases that have already attained wide acceptance — *hopefully, I'm like,* even (a long time ago) *OK.* If we had to wait for the judgment of the professionals, all the new words already would have crowded in.

But we don't wait. Each of us has our own wall around the words we use, a wall that turns away suspicious-looking strangers. Our minds are inclined to reject a conspicuous new word; it has to blend into the familiar landscape (or wordscape) before we can let it in.

Unobtrusiveness Level 0 applies to those words that are very obtrusive, very conspicuous. At this level are words that stand out because they are extremely foreign sounding: *sputnik,* for example, or *Infobahn.* As mentioned in chapter 1, the first is that Russian word for an artificial satellite, still looking Russian long after it was introduced to English in 1957, and still limited in English to a designation for certain of the earliest Russian satellites. As for *Infobahn,* it was a German rendition of *information superhighway,* with *superhighway* translated as *bahn* (from *Autobahn*). It crashed and burned a number of years ago. Both terms remained at Unobtrusiveness Level 0 because they were the opposite of unobtrusive; they remained strongly noticeable throughout their flirtation with English.

Also at Unobtrusiveness Level 0 are the many of the coinages of those who attempt their own inventions. Some

are too bizarre, some are too clever. Remember these sniglets from chapter 2: *flirr, mustgo, orosuctuous, tacangle*? Or Gelett Burgess's *oofle,* a person whose name one cannot remember? Too bizarre, too clever.

Level 1 of Unobtrusiveness applies to words that are noticeable but not outrageous. Level 0 words are like guests who come to a wedding dressed in Halloween costumes; Level 1 words are like those who dress casually for a formal wedding, or formally for a casual one — they stand out a little but don't look that strange. At Level 1 we have Burgess's Miss Blinda Blurb naming a self-promotion on a book jacket after herself; we have mildly humorous *couch potato,* shaking off the terrible pun that kept it at Level 0 when it was born; we have consciously coined words like *acronym* and *Ebonics.*

Other words that were introduced at Unobtrusiveness Level 1 include Edmund Yates's *smog,* Aldous Huxley's *agnostic,* and Henry Irving Dale and Kate L. Butler's *scofflaw.* They all attracted notice but didn't shock. At Level 2 are such unobtrusive coinages as *moonlighting, boondoggle* (in the tradition of words like *bunkum, hornswoggle,* and *skedaddle*), and *server* (nonsexist for *waiter* or *waitress*). Level 2 also includes words and phrases so inconspicuous they escape the notice even of the experts, like *101, Plan B,* and the *heads-up* of *Give me a heads-up on that, will you?*

This crucial factor can determine the fate of competing words. *Waitron* has lost out to *server* as a neutral designation for *waiter* or *waitress.* The ending *-on* rarely is used for humans and thus puts *waitron* at Unobtrusiveness Level 1, while *-er* is natural and thus puts *server* at Unobtrusiveness Level 2.

Factor 3: Diversity of Users and Situations

It's not enough to have a lot of people using a new word. It also needs to be used by a variety of people in a variety

of situations, or to make the point more emphatic, a Diversity of users in a Diversity of situations.

Here's a word that gets Level 0 for Diversity: *amuse-bouche.* Heard of it? Well, if you are a chef in the French tradition or a patron of French restaurants, you probably have; otherwise, not. *Wine Spectator* magazine explains: "The best restaurants offer a tiny serving of something interesting soon after you sit down, which ideally previews the cooking style of the restaurant. Most use the French term amuse-bouche (literally 'mouth amusement'). In some restaurants, it's also a way to present something luxurious to favored customers."

How about *fusin*? Biologists studying viruses know that it's a protein, discovered and named in 1996, that makes it possible for the AIDS virus to attack white blood cells. There aren't many others with *fusin* in their vocabulary.

Or take *usageaster,* invented in 1980 by linguist Tom Clark as analogous to *poetaster.* A *poetaster* pretends to write poetry; a *usageaster* pretends to know about questions of usage in language. If you happen to be one of the handful of researchers who write about the people who write about American English usage, you'll know the word. Otherwise you've probably never heard of it.

When technical terms run amok, when they begin to break out of the confines of their specialty and enter into general conversation, they rise to higher levels on the Diversity scale. At Level 1 are words that still cling to their technical reference but are known to outsiders. Politics, for example, gives us the Level 1 word *gerrymander;* psychology gives us *transference.* From computer technology we have such Level 1 words as *spam, spooler,* and *newsgroup.*

Another restricted category is slang. As long as a word is used just in the inner city or in the suburbs by those of a certain gender, race, and age, it is at Level 0. But since marketers and the media are on the lookout for the latest

"in" language, slang often is quickly elevated to Level 1. That's the fate of everything from *homey* to *grody* to *dude.* If terms cross over from slang into general conversation, they reach Level 2. One that crossed over in the twentieth century is *guy.*

Level 2 words on the Diversity scale are used by anyone anywhere. A notable twentieth-century invention at Level 2 is *teenager;* there were *adolescents* in previous centuries, but that word has remained a Level 1 technical term while *teenager* has captured the better part of present-day culture. Another twentieth-century success story is *jazz,* referring not just to a kind of music developed by African Americans that came into its own during the century, but also to a historical era (the *jazz age*) and the spirit of energy and enthusiasm associated with the music.

Level 0 words are found only in specialized publications. Level 1 words will appear occasionally in general circulation newspapers and magazines, but often with a brief explanation. Level 2 words make themselves so much at home in general publications that they need no introduction.

Factor 4: Generation of Other Forms and Meanings
A new word that generates others also generates a greater chance for its own success. Like a plant that is watered and fertilized and gets plenty of sunshine, a successful new word grows. Branching out, it generates new forms and meanings.

Blockbuster is a simple example of a word at Generation Level 2 because of its variety of meanings. It was introduced during World War II as a term for an aerial bomb that could destroy a whole block of buildings. Even by war's end, though, the word was being applied to anything big and brilliant: a *blockbuster* idea, a *blockbuster* movie or book (one with spectacular sales). Taking *block* literally, *blockbuster* also was used in the late twentieth

century for the unscrupulous real estate tactic of frightening homeowners into selling at low prices.

Or take *Watergate,* for example. Before 1972 it was simply the name of a posh residential and office building on the banks of the Potomac River in Washington, DC. But after an office burglary there that eventually led to the resignation of the president of the United States, *Watergate* took on a new meaning as the name for that scandal. If that had been the end of it, it would have remained at Generation Level 0, but *Watergate* took on water wings, as it were. Pundits, politicians, the public, and the media began talking about *Watergaters, Watergatology,* and *Watergatese* (the language used by those involved in the scandal), among other variations.

Even more flourishing was the second part of the name. Detaching itself from *Watergate, -gate* then attached itself to other political scandals, like *Winegate* (1973, the substitution of cheap wine for expensive Bordeaux in France), *Motorgate* (1975, fraudulent warranty claims submitted to General Motors), *Cattlegate* (1976, contaminated cattle feed), the Reagan administration's involvement in *Iran-*

Watergate
the Watergate complex

gate or *Contragate* (selling arms to Iran to support anti-Communist Contras in Nicaragua), all the way to *travelgate* and *Whitewatergate* during the Clinton administration of the 1990s, and *Shawinigate* in 2001, a conflict of interest scandal involving the Canadian prime minister. At the 2002 Winter Olympics in Utah, the scandal over judging in the pairs figure skating competition was immediately dubbed *skategate.* As long as *-gate* remains so productive, it will be at Generation Level 2.

Also generating new forms at Level 2 is *cam,* referring to a video camera aimed at a particular place or event. It developed from *minicam* and *action-cam* to *webcam* and its derivatives on the Web, including *traffic cams, news cams, scenic cams,* and countless individual *cams* beginning with *Jennicam* in 1996.

Some successful new words sprout new meanings as well as new forms. That great invention of the 1890s, the *hot dog,* not only is a staple of the American diet, but is also a flashy guy. *Hot-dogging* is showing off, and *hot dog!* is an exclamation of enthusiasm.

To the consternation of purists, nouns sprout verbs and verbs sprout nouns at the higher levels of the Generation factor. At Generation Level 1, for example, is *uptalk,* the practice of raising the pitch of the voice at the end of a sentence to make it sound like a question? *Uptalk* is a noun, but it quickly generated the verb *uptalk,* which in turn generated the noun *uptalking,* which generated the category of people known as *uptalkers.*

A similar sequence happened with *baby-sit* when it was introduced in the mid-twentieth century. Which came first, *babysitter* or *baby-sitting*? There is earlier evidence for *babysitter,* but the two are so closely linked that one probably generated the other soon after it was introduced.

At the low end of the scale, Generation Level 0 is related to Diversity Level 0. A term that is used in only a single technical sense in a single context, like *amuse-bouche* or

fusin, is not likely to generate other forms. Other Generation Level 0 examples include *tower,* referring to a computer with a vertical profile, and *gustnado,* a name for a gust of wind that has the effect of a small tornado.

Factor 5: Endurance of the Concept

Factor 5 addresses the Endurance, or durability, not of the word itself, but of what it stands for. The relationship between a word and what it stands for is like the relationship between a flea and a dog. If the dog is healthy, so is the flea. If the dog dies, so does the flea — unless it's able to find another dog. *Icebox* is like the flea that finds another dog; when boxes holding blocks of ice to keep food cool were becoming extinct, *icebox* jumped over as an alternate name for the electric device that replaced it. Perhaps the reason *icebox* has remained alive as a synonym for *refrigerator* is that *icebox* could be reinterpreted as a box that holds or makes ice. Since refrigerators that make ice seem likely to endure for the foreseeable future, *icebox* would rate as Level 2 in Endurance.

Typewriter is another word whose dog died around the end of the twentieth century after a century of prominence. All was not lost, however. From *typewriter* came the verb *to type,* which has survived the obsolescence of the mechanical typewriter to apply itself to keyboards of electronic devices. So *type* continues at Endurance Level 2.

Many other words weren't so lucky and perished with the things they stood for. Here are some of the fleas on dead dogs of the twentieth century: *jalopy, phonograph, caboose, whistle-stop, streamliner.* Also gone are events (or situations) like the *space race* and the *Cold War.* All of these were enduring enough in their time that we still talk of them today; memories, revivals, and historical accounts keep these words on life support at Endurance Level 1. At Level 1 for the same historical reason we find certain kinds of clothing: *bustles, bloomers, zoot suits,* and *leisure suits,*

for example, though the clothes themselves have been consigned to the dustbin of history. Level 1 also holds the hairstyle known as the *D.A.* and such fads as *flappers, kewpie dolls, pet rocks,* and the *Macarena.*

If these names for obsolete things are Level 1, is there anything so ephemeral that it merits Endurance Level 0? Yes, that level is for things that have been too brief in the spotlight to have left any enduring memories. There was the zany *Benigni moment,* referring to Roberto Benigni's exuberant behavior at the 1999 Oscars when he received the Best Actor award: climbing over chairs, leaping on stage, proclaiming his happiness so fast that he would start a new sentence before finishing the previous one. That moment is over. Another Level 0 example is the *Milly,* the dance commissioned by the city of Chicago to welcome the arrival of the new millennium on January 1, 2000. These might be called "firefly words," those that designate fads, fashions, and obsessions that come and go so quickly as to barely leave a mark. Slightly more enduring, but still at Level 0, is *Y2K,* the designation widely used during 1999 for the year 2000. It was associated with the phrase *Y2K problem* or *Y2K bug* — worries about whether computers would properly recognize dates in the 2000s. By early in the year 2000 those worries were gone, and *Y2K* faded away too. Another term unfortunately too short-lived to have left behind anything but a few regrets is *peace dividend,* a 1990 term anticipating reduced military spending because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War.

But the highest Endurance rating goes to new words that express intangible qualities that never will disappear: *hopefully,* for example, and the all-time success story, *OK.* There was no "need" for *OK* in our language; George Washington wasn't able to send his troops into battle with "OK, guys, let's go!" but he evidently found an alternative, as did everyone else until 1839 when *OK* was invented.

Actually, few people bothered to use *OK,* even in slang, until about 1900, managing to make do with *all right* and *certainly* and *correct* and the many other synonyms we still use today. But *OK* evidently stands for an enduring human attitude and response, because not only is it firmly embedded in American English, it has made its way into languages around the world. Endurance Level 2.

WHAT DOESN'T MATTER

Those five are the factors that seem to be the key ones for determining (or at least predicting) the success of a new word or phrase. There are other qualities that might matter but don't seem to.

For example, it doesn't seem to matter whether a word is brand-new or not. Many successful words — like *chad* and *hopefully,* to take two quite different examples — lurked in the language for a long time before attaining general notice. Others like *role model* (from 1957), *yuppie* (a 1982 coinage), and the phrase *mother of all* (meaning "greatest," a 1991 term inspired by the rhetoric of Saddam Hussein) seem to have caught on at once.

It also doesn't seem to matter if a word is already used for something else. *Dot,* for example, had its own meaning for centuries before encroaching on *period* in computer usage. *Media* was used by painters for a quite different purpose before advertisers began addressing themselves to particular *media* in 1921. Or consider *pork barrel,* a term that survived the demise of its literal meaning to become the conventional phrase for self-indulgent legislation early in the twentieth century.

In a larger sense, the elements from which a new word is constructed don't matter, as long as they don't make it look odd. Whether a prefix or a suffix is added to a familiar word, or two familiar words are combined to make a new one, or a familiar word simply gets a new meaning, doesn't

affect its chances for success, as long as the result is un-obtrusive. That's why relatively few foreign words are di-rectly imported into our language with success: they look too foreign.

The novelty of a word's meaning also doesn't seem to be a crucial factor. Brand-new things and situations often get new names, like *software* and *affirmative action* from the mid-twentieth century, but newness isn't necessary. There was no compelling reason to introduce *go postal* in the 1990s when English already had *run amok* and *go ber-serk,* for example. And as we have seen, a new concept doesn't always produce a new word, as evidenced by the missing name for the first decade of the twenty-first cen-tury.

It might seem that the obviousness of a word's meaning would be a deciding factor in its acceptance and that ob-scure meanings would prevent acceptance. But think of *couch potato,* for example. The association with "humans watching television" would be difficult to deduce from the combination of those two words, but that didn't slow it down. Or consider these other examples of new vocabu-lary from the late twentieth century: *rocket scientist, yup-pie,* and *aerobics* — none of them is self-explanatory, but they were as widely accepted as *wannabe* and *rip-off,* two words whose meanings can be deduced from their compo-nents.

Surprisingly, even inclusion in a dictionary doesn't guarantee success for a new word. Being chosen for a dic-tionary is like being called up to the major leagues of base-ball: that's where you belong if you're good, but if you don't perform well, you can soon be sent back to the mi-nors. Some terms that were dropped from the 2000 fourth edition of the *American Heritage Dictionary* just six years after appearing in the third edition are *ecofreak* (a zealous environmentalist), *masscult* (short for culture popularized by the mass media), *microfloppy* (now called a *floppy*

disk), *China syndrome* (nuclear reactor meltdown, a name taken from a 1979 movie), *scent strip* (a strip of paper dipped in perfume to provide a sample for consumers), and *binge-purge syndrome* (now *bulimia*).

But the FUDGE factors do seem to matter. The next chapter will apply the FUDGE test to current new words to estimate their chances for success.

The Crystal Ball

The evidence presented in the previous chapters is overwhelming: most newly coined words fail. They encounter resistance or indifference. And the more clever and conspicuous they are, the more likely they are to crash and burn. They are tourists who do not become residents. They are "firefly words" that may have a lively life in our short-term memory but do not make the transfer to our permanent language memory bank.

Yet every year some new words and phrases do succeed. As the previous chapters also have shown, there are five factors that seem to determine a word's chances for success: Frequency of use, Unobtrusiveness, Diversity of users and sources, Generation of additional forms and meanings, and Endurance of the thing or concept that the word refers to.

Of the five factors, Unobtrusiveness seems especially important. If a word seems familiar rather than new, it will insinuate itself into our vocabulary, as a cowbird insinuates its look-alike eggs into the nests of other birds, who then raise the chicks as their own.

Applied to known successes and failures of the past, the five factors seem to work, as illustrated in the preceding

chapter. But that could be considered fudging; it's always possible to adjust predictions to fit already known results. This chapter will boldly go where many have unsuccessfully gone before to look at current candidates for permanent residence and predict which few will succeed.

THE FORTY-YEAR RULE: WORDS OF 1960

Admittedly, it will not be known right away which predictions for present-day new words are correct. Even if a new word or phrase seems spectacularly successful, past experience indicates that it will take about two generations, or forty years, to determine whether that word will embed itself in the permanent vocabulary. It's not enough for a word to have wide use at a given moment, or even for a decade; it needs to be adopted by succeeding generations rather than seen as the peculiar property of just one era. *Flapper,* for example, was very much in fashion in the 1920s as a designation for what we would nowadays call a cool young woman. But when the Roaring Twenties became the depressed thirties, the flappers vanished like Cinderella at the stroke of midnight.

Going by the forty-year rule, we can be reasonably confident about the long-term success or failure of new words introduced as recently as 1960. Here, for example, are some words of around 1960 that have stayed with us: *biorhythm* and *laser* in science; *neonatology, open-heart,* and *house call* in medicine (before then, it went without saying that doctors made house calls; by 1960, this had become such a rare event that it needed a label); *minivan, valet parking, health spa, dreadlocks, crudités, no-frills,* and *theme park* in contemporary culture; *dullsville, rap sheet, screwup* in slang; and *global village, big picture,* and *square one* in fashionable jargon.

Other momentarily successful words of 1960 failed to take root. *Castroism* and *Fidelista* were coined to refer to
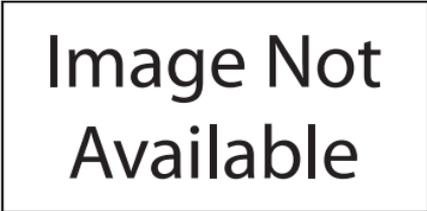
flapper

the Communist regime Fidel Castro imposed on Cuba after his successful revolution of 1959. They gradually faded from conversation as his brand of Communism became less threatening to the rest of the hemisphere, even while Castro himself continued to rule in Cuba.

Another phenomenon of the 1960s, the *sit-in* to end racial segregation, was short-lived because it was so successful. The word *sit-in* itself, which dates from the 1930s, has remained because it is an enduring form of protest against all sorts of authority. Its spinoffs, though, have not had much staying power: the *kneel-in* to racially integrate churches in the South, the *wade-in* to integrate beaches, the *read-in* to do the same for libraries, the *play-in* likewise for parks.

Other momentarily successful words of the 1960s may have failed because they were too conspicuous. The *discomfort index* begun by the U.S. Weather Bureau in 1959

sit-in

Marlon Brando speaking with members of the Congress of Racial Equality at a sit-in at the California State Capitol in 1963

was so uncomfortable for the public that it was discontinued the next year; forecasters now tell us about the *heat index* and the *wind chill index.* And we no longer use *exosociety* to refer to intelligent life in other parts of the universe, nor do we refer to a nubile young actress nowadays as a *sex kitten.*

WORDS OF THE EARLY 2000s

But back to the future. What can we expect of words that have been newly coined or are newly prominent in the first few years of the twenty-first century? Here are some educated guesses. To find out if they're correct, you'll need to set this book in a safe place with the notation "Open in 2042." Before you do, you might write in some predictions of your own. Forty years from now, you or

your descendants can let me or my descendants know how they turned out, and the 2042 edition of this book can be adjusted accordingly.

Here is a potpourri of words floating at the fringes of the English language in 2002. Will they sink or swim? Let the FUDGE scale help us predict.

AtmosFear

Faith Popcorn, diviner of future trends, named this major trend accelerated by the September 11, 2001, attacks: nervousness about pollution and possible attacks on our air, water, and food.

Frequency 1: actively promoted by a highly visible seer.

Unobtrusiveness 0: a conspicuously clever misspelling and mid-word capitalization.

Diversity of users 0: so far used only in her own publications and pronouncements. Maybe she likes it that way, keeping it proprietary.

Generation of meanings and forms 0: no derivatives.

Endurance of the concept 1: Acute fears may subside, but we'll never be perfectly safe.

Total score 2: very likely failure.

boomeritis

Yes, the baby boomers have their very own disease. And it's not just the whimsical creation of a boomer columnist, but a bona fide condition announced in 2000 by the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons. They have even trademarked the word, so to get treatment you'll have to go to a certified orthopaedic surgeon. What exactly does it mean? The academy defines it simply as sports injuries— among people born between 1946 and 1964.

Frequency 1: The Academy endorsement gives it some publicity.

Unobtrusiveness 1: noticeably clever, but constructed by its inventor, Dr. Nicholas DiNubile, along the lines of *arthritis, tendinitis,* and *bursitis.*

Diversity of users 1: has appeared in a variety of popular media concerned about health.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: just the original form and meaning so far.

Endurance of the concept 1: The Academy endorsement gives it some durability, but boomers themselves will be history in a couple of generations. As time marches on, the Academy may be tempted to rename the condition *Generation Xitis.*

Total score 4: a boomlet, perhaps, but it won't live forever.

chad

Who could forget the dimpled and pregnant chads of the Florida ballots in the 2000 presidential election? We could, that's who, now that those usually insignificant bits of paper have returned to insignificance.

Frequency 2 (in late 2000), 1 (after the inauguration of George W. Bush in January 2001): central to American discourse, but only while the presidential election depended on it.
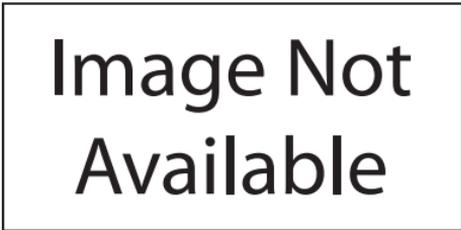
chad
inspecting a ballot in Florida in an effort to determine the outcome of the Gore/Bush presidential election of 2000

Unobtrusiveness 1: not a familiar word, but not an odd one
either.
Diversity of users 1: till the election, only a specialists'
word, afterwards becoming widely known.
Generation of forms and meanings 2: generated compounds
like *hanging chad, pregnant chad,* and *dimpled chad.*
Endurance of the concept 1: short attention span for the
election and its indecisive aftermath, but the thing itself
will last as long as punch cards do.
Total score 6: hanging on by a thread.

clue stick

Virtual rather than actual, this is a stick whose impact is used
to get the attention of someone who doesn't have a clue. In
the old joke, a stick is needed to get the attention of a mule,
hence the *clue stick.* The term has been around for a while.
Frequency 1: used on the Internet and in youth slang.
Unobtrusiveness 1: ordinary words, but the humor is obvi-
ous every time you use it.
Diversity 0: has yet to spread in the mainstream media; still
used mostly in humorous contexts.
Generation of forms and meanings 1: generated the related
term *clue-by-four,* alluding to the two-by-four used to
get the attention of the mule.
Endurance of the concept 2: There will always be clueless
people.
Total score 5, for now. If it should get more attention, it
could stick.

cosmeceutical

Albert Kligman, a controversial doctor at the University
of Pennsylvania, not only discovered that Retin-A fights
wrinkles, but came up with this name for the combination
of cosmetic and pharmaceutical products about twenty
years ago. It's not just a cosmetic term for consumer con-
sumption but is seriously used by medical practitioners. In
1998 *Cosmetics and Toiletries* magazine published a book

entitled *Cosmeceuticals: Active Skin Treatment* to bring together serious studies by Kligman and other authorities. It includes articles like "Melanogenesis Inhibitor from Paper Mulberry," written by eight coauthors. So what's keeping it from a place in our dictionaries?

Frequency 1: Thanks to articles in magazines and newspapers, many patients as well as medical practitioners know this word.

Unobtrusiveness 1: noticeably clever, but a familiar kind of combination.

Diversity of users 0: limited to dermatologists and their patients, and the cosmetics industry.

Generations of forms and meanings 0: both an adjective and a noun, but not extended beyond its literal meaning.

Endurance of the concept 2: As long as people grow old, there will be a market for cosmeceuticals.

Total score 4: perhaps too conspicuously clever to use beyond its original specialized meaning.

desk rage

This one is one of the thousand-and-one varieties of anger that seem to be sprouting in every nook and cranny and on every occasion in American life. According to its second annual survey of office workers to determine the extent of *desk rage,* Integra Realty Resources reported in 2001 that "stress leads to physical violence in one in 10 work environments. And almost half of those surveyed said yelling and verbal abuse is common in their workplaces."

This particular phrase, coined in 1999, is too clever to expect a permanent place in our vocabulary, although *rage* itself in all its combinations is likely to become as established for anger as the suffix *-gate* has for the name of a scandal. As far back as 1988 there was mention of *road rage,* the phenomenon of drivers losing their tempers. In the late 1990s, that *rage* began to diversify. Commentators began to worry about such matters as *air rage* (1996), airline passengers losing their tempers and endangering

everyone on a flight; *Web rage,* users of the World Wide Web losing their tempers at delays and unwanted ads; and *trade rage* (1999), day traders losing their tempers at the losses they encounter. As for *desk rage:*

Frequency 1: The survey got good publicity.

Unobtrusiveness 2: fits so perfectly into the *rage* pattern that it's hard to know whether it's new or old.

Diversity of users 1: The survey gives the casual term extra respectability, but the term is limited to discussions of work.

Generation of forms and meanings 1: part of the fertile *rage* complex, but has not generated new meanings of its own.

Endurance of the concept 2: As long as human beings work, there will be opportunities for rage.

Total score 7: likely to be reinvented if it ever drops out.

ground zero

This is the spontaneously generated name for the site of the World Trade Towers after they collapsed on September 11, 2001. In general use the term was as old as, and was associated with, the atomic bomb, designating the ground directly below the explosion. Its application to the World Trade Center site recalls not only the place but also the magnitude of the destruction.

Frequency 2: very widely used in the still frequent discussions of the site.

Unobtrusiveness 2: natural extension of the meaning of a familiar term.

Diversity of users 2: used in solemn declarations as well as ordinary conversations.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: refers to just one place in the aftermath of one event.

Endurance of the concept**:** 2: depends on the use to which the site will be put. If a prominent memorial is built, *ground zero* is likely to remain the unofficial name for the site. If buildings are put in place so that little is left

as a reminder of the tragedy, the Endurance of the term
could drop to 0.

Total score 8, very likely to succeed if the site remains a
memorial; 6, not so likely if it does not.

homeland

In contrast to citizens of other nations, Americans have
referred to their country as "my home, sweet home" but
rarely as their *homeland.* The word gained new promi-
nence in America with the appointment of a Director of
Homeland Security in the aftermath of the September 11,
2001, attacks. Its new popularity still lies mostly in the
phrase *homeland security.*

Frequency 1: not a household word, but the new concern
has been widely reported and discussed.

Unobtrusiveness 2: What could be more homey?

Diversity of users 1: throughout the government as well as
in discussion of government response to the September
11 attacks.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: not only not generating
new forms, but mostly limited to the phrase *homeland
security.*

Endurance of the concept 1: As long as there is an Office of
Homeland Security with a big budget ($38 billion for
2002–2003), there will be talk. To give *homeland* a rat-
ing of 2 on the Endurance scale would be too pessi-
mistic.

Total score 5: needs government support to endure.

nasdaq

In January 1992 the *Wall Street Journal* front-paged its
sighting of a new use for the name of the NASDAQ stock
market: "a synonym for loser." The noun had generated
a related verb, *to nasdaq,* the equivalent of *collapse* or *fail.*
Sightings began a year earlier, coinciding with the steep
fall in values in that market.

Frequency 1: The *Journal,* at least, put it on the front page.

Unobtrusiveness 1: a well-established name, but making a proper name into a verb is a little out of the ordinary.

Diversity of users 1: not just specialist jargon, but still restricted to the context of the stock market.

Generation of forms and meanings 1: a verb generated from a noun.

Endurance of the concept 0: the Achilles heel. NASDAQ can't tank forever or even for very long. When it bounces back up, any noun or verb derived from its name will have the opposite meaning.

Total score 4: Failure seems certain because of lack of endurance.

paradessence

Alex Shakar invented this word for his first novel, *The Savage Girl,* a satire on trendiness and trend spotting published in late 2001. He defines *paradessence* as: "The paradoxical essence of a product. Two opposing desires that promise to satisfy simultaneously." As examples he cites the simultaneously stimulating and relaxing effects of coffee, and the eroticism and innocence of ice cream.

Frequency 0: So far just the author and his reviewers and readers have used the word.

Unobtrusiveness 0: a clever combination of two highfalutin words.

Diversity of users 0: just that one book so far, and one poem and one comment on advertising inspired by the book.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: potential for new forms if more widely used.

Endurance of the concept 2: an enduring idea.

Total score 2: probably too conspicuous a word to enter the vocabulary of others.

plaino

Not your plain old *plain old,* but a shortened version of it, as in "plaino text file," "plaino white (Elmer's type) glue," or even "a plaino-jaino database table." It means

plain with emphasis on simplicity. Why would anyone bother to use it instead of plain *plain*? That's its problem.

Frequency 0: just a few widely scattered uses.

Unobtrusiveness 1: based on a well-known word but with an odd ending.

Diversity of users 0: only in a few Internet communications.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: nothing else.

Endurance of the concept 2: We will always have plain vanilla.

Total score 3: no chance unless pundits and presidents start yearning for the *plaino* life.

quarterlife crisis

Why wait till middle age? Now you can go through soul-searching and behavior changes while still in your twenties. Give the experience a name and you can write an article in *Mademoiselle* and turn it into a best-selling book: *Quarterlife Crisis: The Unique Challenges of Life in Your Twenties,* by Alexandra Robbins and Abby Wilner. Both the article and the book were published in 2001.

Frequency 1: a major magazine, a major publisher, major reviews; a good start.

Unobtrusiveness 1: noticeably clever but a logical twist on an established term, *midlife crisis.*

Diversity of users 1: used in media aimed at a particular demographic.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: just the term so far.

Endurance of the concept 1: as long as we believe in life crises.

Total score 4: good for a flirtation, but not for a lasting relationship.

secondhand speech

Another Popcornism, this term is from the *Dictionary of the Future* by Faith Popcorn and Adam Hanft (2001). If you are forced to overhear someone talking on a cell phone in a public place, you're suffering from *secondhand speech.*

second-hand speech

It's a natural takeoff on equally irritating (if perhaps more harmful) *secondhand smoke.* If you have heard of it, it makes good sense, but most people haven't.

Frequency 0: one entry in one book.

Unobtrusiveness 1: natural, but conspicuously clever.

Diversity of users 0: one entry in one book.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: nice association with *secondhand smoke,* but no derivatives of its own.

Endurance of the concept 1: Cell phones may be just one stage of evolution.

Total score 2: needs to be talked up if it is to succeed.

she-eo

Referring to a woman CEO, this is an irresistible play on words for headline writers, contest organizers, and singers. It has various spellings: *she-e-o, she e o, she-eo,* sometimes with capital letters. In the year 2000, a Canadian company sponsored a *She-EO* contest for women only, awarding $250,000 Canadian for the best dot-com business plan. And then there is the women's a capella singing group at Harvard Business School that calls itself the *She E O's.*

Frequency 1: some headlines.

Unobtrusiveness 0: blatantly clever.

Diversity of users 0: strictly business, and not in other forms
of writing.
Generation of forms and meanings 2: lots of spellings, and
meaning stretched beyond simple CEO.
Endurance of the concept 2: Surely more women will break
through the glass ceiling.
Total score 5: too clever for its own good.

shoshkele

A high-tech ad erupts onto a webpage that you've been
looking at. Maddeningly enough, it can be programmed
for particular times, locations, and service providers.
That's a *shoshkele.* Why isn't it called by a more familiar
name that involves *cyber, e-, web,* or *advertise?* Because
it's not just a method, it's proprietary software belonging
to United Virtualities, and *shoshkele* is said to be the mid-
dle name of the company founder's daughter. The term is
trademarked.

Frequency 1: beginning to be talked up in the media.
Unobtrusiveness 0: This one stands out, not just as an un-
usual combination of vowels and consonants, but also
for uncertainty about the ending; some mistakenly con-
sider *shoskeles* singular as well as plural.
Diversity of users 0: just in the field of computer advertising
so far.
Generation of forms and meanings 0: hard to imagine a re-
lated meaning or form.
Endurance of the concept $\frac{1}{2}$: Innovations on the Web tend
to be short-lived.
Total score $1\frac{1}{2}$: doomed.

slackadem

Unless you're a student at Rice University, you probably
won't have heard of this. In fact, not even all Rice students
know of it. Here is how it was defined by students in a
1998 linguistics class at Rice: "A term used by science/
engineering majors at Rice University for a person ma-

joring in humanities or social sciences due to a perceived lack of work or effort put forth by the latter." They give this example of its use in conversation: "If you'll excuse me, I've got to study for a test. Not everyone can be a slackadem and watch TV all day."

Frequency 0: used by just a few.

Unobtrusiveness 1: combined from familiar words, but a little odd in leaving off the ending of *academic.*

Diversity of users 0: used by just one group in one place.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: if it were to spread, it might generate new meanings.

Endurance of the concept 2: Humanities and social sciences majors are likely to be around for a long time, as are science and engineering majors to look down on them.

Total score 3: unless it spreads to other campuses, not a chance.

so September 10

This term characterizes the activities or mindset of Americans just before the greatest calamity in American history. As many commentators have said, September 11, 2001, changed everything. Thus a proponent of "e-conferencing" declared in October 2001 that "face-to-face giant conferences held in big city hotels and convention centers now are so September 10," and May-May's Diary from Shanghai on November 17, 2001, explained: "If someone suggests something fun or extravagant to you, here is the correct response: 'Oh that's so September 10!!!'" The expression is said to have been invented by Bill Maher of ABC's *Politically Incorrect.*

Frequency 0: very few instances.

Unobtrusiveness 1: affected, but natural.

Diversity of users 1: a variety of sources for the few instances.

Generation of forms and meanings 1: both serious and frivolous meanings.

Endurance of the concept 0: the post–September 11 state

of high alert and high seriousness lasted only a few months.

Total score 3: let it go.

szhoosh

Famed window-dresser Simon Doonan invented this word and explained it in his 1999 book *Confessions of a Window Dresser:* To jazz up a display or the result of that action — "Szhoosh that wig up a bit" or "How's that for a bit of szhoosh?"

Frequency 0: just Doonan and friends.

Unobtrusiveness 1: a bit odd, but akin to words like *swoosh* and *zoom.*

Diversity of users 0: just the fashion world.

Generation of forms and meanings 1: both a verb and a noun.

Endurance of the concept 2: no reason *szhooshing* can't endure.

Total score 4: not likely to step out from behind the window glass.

weapons-grade

In February 2000 the software firm BeVocal announced, tongue-in-cheek, that "a large container of weapons-grade Costco Extra Spicy Salsa explodes in the BeVocal offices." Nowadays we also find references to "weapons-grade cryptography," "a weapons-grade pdf library," and even "weapons-grade Playstation 2," with a computer chip so powerful that an unfriendly country could use it to guide missiles. There have also been sightings of weapons-grade comedy, charisma, mascara, mozzarella, and hypocrites. But the most widespread recent use of *weapons-grade* was in reference to anthrax, after the anonymous mailings of fall 2001. All these are extensions of the original long-established meaning of *weapons-grade* to refer to enriched uranium or plutonium suitable for use in atomic and hydrogen bombs. Predictions for the extended meanings:

Frequency 2: widespread, especially with reference to anthrax.

Unobtrusiveness 2: natural extension of meaning of an established word.

Diversity of users 2: from serious discussions of military situations to jokes about salsa.

Generation of forms and meanings 1: no derivative forms, but the meanings of the word continue to extend.

Endurance of the concept 2: until all swords are beaten into plowshares.

Total score 9: We will have weapons-grade worries for the foreseeable future.

women of cover

"I see an opportunity at home when I hear the stories of Christian and Jewish women alike, helping women of cover, Arab American women, go shop because they're afraid to leave their home," President George W. Bush told U.S. State Department employees on October 4, 2001. At a press conference a week later, he repeated *women of cover* twice, and he continued to use that phrase in 2002. So far others haven't followed his example.

Frequency 1: When a president says it, the media notice.

Unobtrusiveness 1: like the familiar *women of color,* but *cover* is quite different from *color,* except in spelling.

Diversity of users 0: only the president.

Generation of forms and meanings 0: no new meanings or forms.

Endurance of the concept 2: As long as much of the world follows the Koran, there will be women who cover their heads for religious reasons.

Total score 4: not likely unless Bush attracts more of a linguistic following.

A score of 4 or less on the FUDGE scale indicates almost certain failure. With a score of 5 to 7, a word has a chance to hang on. Words with scores of 8, 9, or 10 are likely

successes. Any survey of current newcomers, like the one above, will discover most scores to be toward the low end. In this collection of twenty words, only *weapons-grade* with a score of 9 and *ground zero* with 8 seem likely to succeed. *Desk rage,* at 7, is also a good candidate, especially because it can be easily re-created from the pattern *X rage. Chad,* with a current FUDGE score of 6, seems likely to endure, if mostly as a historical artifact. At 5, *clue stick, homeland,* and *she-eo* have a chance, but there's one additional obstacle: If a word scores 0 for Unobtrusiveness or Endurance, it's unlikely to succeed no matter how high its score otherwise. A 0 for Unobtrusiveness thus eliminates the too clever *she-eo.*

As this brief survey indicates, even the most notable of current new words face challenges to incorporating themselves in our general vocabulary. Looking back in 2042, the makers of dictionaries may pick out words of 2002 that were so successfully unobtrusive they escaped notice in their youth. There's a lesson here: There will always be room for more in our vocabulary, but if you want to create a successful new word, make it one that doesn't call attention to itself. And check it on the FUDGE scale before you launch it into the world.

A Word of Your Own

So after all this, you still want to plant a word of your own in the English language? Well, now you know what you have to do to give it a chance to grow. Take these steps:

1. Camouflage it.
2. Smuggle it in.
3. Talk it up.

And through it all, keep a straight face.

In other words, don't be clever. The more you show off your cleverness, the less likely the word is to be accepted by anyone else.

Instead, be sneaky. Spread your word without announcing it. Use it among friends and acquaintances. Like the cuckoo, plant your egg in the nests of others — your word in their vocabulary — so they will raise it as their own.

Don't be afraid to use it publicly. Not ostentatiously or awkwardly, but as if it's the most natural word in the world. Whenever you have a wide audience of listeners or readers, include it in your remarks. Put it in the articles and books and newsletters and bulletin board

announcements you write. But do not do as the pundits and wits of the mass media do, patting yourself on the back and proclaiming your cleverness even as you propound your word. And whatever you do, do not hire a public relations firm to promote it. That would call too much attention to it. A regular word is not a brand name.

Above all, don't make your word a joke! Or if you must, pray that people won't get it. If they get the joke, they probably won't take the word.

Even if it's not for humorous effect, don't do anything to demonstrate your own brilliance and creativity. Such a demonstration rarely inspires admiration or emulation in others.

TELLING TALES

You can also help your word by making up a good story about it. Above all, be sure to claim that the word has been around for many years. Then, instead of having to persuade others to adopt something new, you'll have them eager to learn a word they think they've missed. This makes embarrassment work to your advantage. If people know a word is brand new, they may be too embarrassed to use it and possibly make fools of themselves. But if a word seems long established, they may be embarrassed not to use it and possibly make fools of themselves.

A good story will have the important effect of deflecting any suspicion that you may have made up the word. But how can you get others to believe that your word is long-lived? Choose a subject in which you're more expert than your listeners, use the word, and when they look puzzled, explain that this is the term everyone uses in that particular field.

Your story can also link the word to a favored group. "Favored" is a relative notion, of course, but you can follow the example of the myths about *OK* (its origins have been claimed to be Choctaw, Chickasaw, Haitian,

Greek, German, French, Finnish, Scottish, and African, among others) and say the word came from whichever group — ethnic, social, regional, occupational — your listeners would admire.

FULL CREDIT

But what about getting credit for your word? If you hide behind a story that credits someone long ago, how can you claim authorship once your word has succeeded?

Since you have read so far, I'll make a deal with you. Send me a letter with your word and its definition, along with any story you make up about it. Don't send anything as ephemeral as e-mail; make it a real old-fashioned letter on real paper, so its authenticity can't be questioned. I'll keep it in my registry of new words, and if it should succeed, I'll let know everyone know who should get the credit. I'll make a particular point of notifying the people who make the dictionaries, such as the authoritative *American Heritage Dictionary,* which, like this book, is published by Houghton Mifflin Company. Send the word to:

Allan Metcalf
English Department
MacMurray College
447 East College Avenue
Jacksonville, Illinois 62650

Of course, even with the best of planning, any new word has only a slim chance of spreading throughout our general vocabulary. If yours happens not to succeed, don't be too surprised or discouraged. I'll arrange for my registry of new words to be permanently archived, so that the words may be examined by future researchers and perhaps promulgated by them many years from now. In that case, you'll still get credit.

Good luck!

American Dialect Society Words of the Year

Since 1990, the American Dialect Society has included in its annual meeting a vote on Words of the Year, the words that were most notable, prominent, and characteristic of the discourse of the year just past. At first the choices were restricted to new words, those that had not yet appeared in any dictionary. After a few years, however, it became evident that many apparently new words were actually not so new, and the most notable words of a given year were often not new at all, so the strict limitation to new words was lifted. But the emphasis on new words remains.

Although the society's members are watchful observers of our language, and their choices are assisted by the leading experts on new words, in retrospect the society's selections have often missed the significant and enduring new words of a given year. Why that should be is the subject of this book. The Introduction discusses the questions that arise from these choices.

2001

Word of the Year: *9-11, 9/11* or *September 11,* terrorist attacks on that date.

Most Likely to Succeed: *9-11.*

Most Useful (tie): *facial profiling,* using video "faceprints" to identify terrorists and criminals; and *secondhand speech,* cell phone conversations overheard in public places.

Most Creative: *shuicide bomber,* terrorist with bomb in shoes.

Most Unnecessary: *impeachment nostalgia,* longing for the superficial news of the Clinton era.

Least Likely to Succeed: *Osamaniac,* woman sexually attracted to terrorist Osama bin Laden.

Most Outrageous: *assoline,* methane used as fuel.

Most Euphemistic: *daisy cutter,* large bomb that explodes a few feet above the ground.

Most Inspirational: *Let's roll!* words of Todd Beamer to start the attack that foiled the hijackers of United Flight 93 on September 11.

2000

Word of the Year: *chad,* a small scrap of paper punched from a voting card.

Most Likely to Succeed: *muggle,* Harry Potter term for a non-wizard; a mundane, unimaginative person.

Most Useful: *civil union,* legal same-sex marriage.

Most Creative: *dot bomb,* a failed dot-com.

Most Unnecessary: *sudden loss of wealth syndrome* (the meaning is obvious).

Least Likely to Succeed: *kablokeys,* used in phrases like "It scared the kablokeys out of me."

Most Outrageous: *wall humping,* rubbing a thigh against a security card scanner to gain access without removing the card from one's pocket.

Most Euphemistic: *courtesy call,* an uninvited call from a tele-marketer.

Brand New (coined during the year, not previously attested): *un-concede,* to rescind a concession, as presidential

candidate Al Gore did on election night. (It was later discovered that candidate Bob Dole had *unconceded* the presidential election in 1996, and there have been occasional instances of this word going back several centuries.)

Also chosen in January 2000: Word of the Decade: *web.* Word of the Twentieth Century: *jazz.* Word of the Millennium: *she.*

1999

Word of the Year: *Y2K,* the year 2000.

Most Likely to Succeed and Most Useful: *dot-com,* a company operating on the Web.

Most Original: *cybersquat,* to register a Web address with the intention of selling it at a profit.

Most Unnecessary: *Milly,* dance commissioned by the city of Chicago for the millennium.

Most Outrageous: *humanitarian intervention,* use of military force for humanitarian purposes.

Most Euphemistic: *compassionate conservative.*

Brand New: *Pokemania,* obsession with Pokemon.

1998

Word of the Year: prefix *e-* for "electronic" as in *e-mail* and newly prominent *e-commerce.*

Most Likely to Succeed and Most Useful: *e-.*

Most Original: *multislacking,* playing at the computer when one should be working.

Most Unnecessary: the entire Monica Lewinsky word family, including *Big She* as a synonym for M. L., and the verb *Lewinsky,* to engage in what might be sexual relations.

Least Likely to Succeed: *compfusion,* confusion over computers.

Most Outrageous: *Ejaculation Proclamation,* the president's confession.

Most Euphemistic: *senior moment,* momentary lapse of memory due to age.

Brand New: *-agra* or *-gra* (from the drug name *Viagra*), suffix denoting substance prompting men to perform unusually, as in *Directra,* which causes men to ask for directions.

1997

Word of the Year: *millennium bug,* also known as *Y2K bug* or *Y2K problem,* that causes computers to think that the year after 1999 is 1900.

Most Likely to Succeed: *DVD,* Digital Versatile Disk, optical disk expected to replace CDs.

Most Useful (tie): *-[r]azzi,* an aggressive pursuer; and *duh* (with falling intonation), used to indicate someone else's stupidity.

Most Original: *prairie dogging,* popping one's head above an office cubicle for the sake of curiosity.

Most Unnecessary: *heaven-o,* replacement for "hello."

Most Outrageous: *Florida flambé,* fire caused by Florida electric chair.

Most Euphemistic: *exit bag,* bag placed over the head to assist in suicide.

Brand New: *El Nonsense,* illogical association of an event with El Niño.

1996

Word of the Year: *mom,* as in *soccer mom,* newly significant type of voter.

Most Likely to Succeed: *drive-by,* designating brief visits or hospital stays.

Most Useful: *dot,* used instead of "period" in e-mail and URL addresses.

Most Original: *prebuttal,* preemptive rebuttal.

Most Unnecessary: *Mexican hustle,* another name for the Macarena (which is Spanish, not Mexican).

Most Outrageous: *toy soldier,* land mine.

Most Euphemistic (tie): *urban camping,* living homeless in a city; and *food insecure,* said of a country where people are starving.

Most Controversial: *Ebonics,* African-American vernacular English.

1995

Word of the Year (tie): *World Wide Web* on the Internet; and *newt,* to make aggressive changes as a newcomer.

Most Likely to Succeed: *World Wide Web* and its variants *the Web, WWW, W3.*

Most Useful: *E.Q.* (for Emotional Quotient), the ability to manage one's emotions.

Most Original: *postal* or *go postal,* to act irrationally, often violently, from stress at work.

Most Unnecessary: *Vanna White shrimp,* large shrimp for the restaurant market.

Most Outrageous: *starter marriage,* a first marriage not expected to be the last.

Most Euphemistic: *patriot,* one who believes in using force of arms if necessary to defend individual rights against the government.

1994

Word of the Year (tie): *cyber,* pertaining to computers and electronic communication; and *morph,* to change form.

Most Promising: *Infobahn,* the Internet.

Most Useful: *gingrich,* to deal with government agencies, policies, and people in the manner of U.S. Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

Most Imaginative: *guillermo,* an e-mail message in a foreign language (the Spanish name *Guillermo* has the nickname *Memo*).

Most Trendy: *dress down day* or *casual day,* a workday when employees are allowed to dress casually.

Most Euphemistic: *challenged,* indicating an undesirable or unappealing condition.

Most Beautiful: *sylvanshine,* nighttime iridescence of certain forest trees.

1993

Word of the Year: *information superhighway,* network linking computers, television, telephone, and other electronic means of communication.

Most Likely to Succeed: *like* with a form of the verb *be* to indicate speech or thought.

Most Useful: *thing* premodified by a noun, for example, "a Chicago thing."

Most Imaginative: *McJob,* a generic, unstimulating, low-paying job.

Most Amazing: *cybersex,* sexual stimulation by computer communication.

Most Unnecessary: *mosaic culture,* to describe a multicultural society.

Most Outrageous: *whirlpooling,* assault of a female by a group of males in a swimming pool.

Most Euphemistic: *street builder,* a homeless person who constructs a shanty.

Most Unpronounceable: *Jurassosaurus nedegoapeferkimorum,* a new dinosaur.

1992

Word of the Year: *Not!* expression of disagreement with a previous statement.

Most Likely to Succeed: *snail mail, s-mail,* mail that is physically delivered, as opposed to e-mail.

Most Useful: *grunge,* a style of clothing.

Most Original: *Franken-,* genetically altered.

Most Amazing: *Munchhausen's syndrome by proxy,* illness fabricated by a caregiver about a person in his or her care in order to evoke sympathy for the caregiver.

Most Unnecessary: *gender feminism,* belief that sex roles are social, not biological.

Most Outrageous: *ethnic cleansing,* purging of ethnic minorities.

1991

Word of the Year: *mother of all* —, greatest, most impressive.

Most Likely to Succeed: *rollerblade,* skate with rollers in a single row.

Most Successful: *in-your-face,* aggressive, confrontational, flamboyant.

Most Original: *molecular pharming, pharming,* genetically modifying farm animals to produce human proteins for pharmaceutical use.

Most Amazing: *velcroid,* a person who sticks by the (U.S.) President, especially for photo opportunities.

Most Unnecessary: *massively parallel,* many small computers yoked together to process a program.

1990

Word of the Year: *bushlips,* insincere political rhetoric.

Most Likely to Succeed (tie): *notebook PC,* a portable personal computer weighing from 4 to 8 pounds; and *rightsizing,* adjusting the size of a staff by laying off employees.

Most Useful (tie): *technostupidity,* loss of ability through dependence on machines; and *potty parity,* equalization of toilet facilities for the sexes.

Most Original: *voice merging,* the oral tradition of African-American preachers using another's words.

Most Amazing: *bungee jumping,* jumping from a high platform with elastic cables on the feet.

Most Unnecessary: *peace dividend,* anticipated savings in military spending due to improved relations with Soviet Union (just before it collapsed).

Most Outrageous: *politically correct, PC,* adhering to principles of left-wing social concern in language use.

Index

Picture Credits