

WORD WISE

Robert Louis Stevenson's father used to fine his son a penny for each slang word that passed his lips. My father did no such thing, but he did charge me a nickel whenever both of my hands appeared above the table at the same time unless I was cutting my steak or buttering my bread. Consequently, my manners are impeccable, and slang does not intimidate me. In fact, I fear no word regardless of which side of the tracks it calls home. This is due in a circuitous way to Mrs. Thigpen, my sixth-grade English teacher, who advised our class to place a checkmark beside every word we looked up. If a check was already there, we were honor bound to cut off a finger joint. We had twenty-eight chances, therefore, to acquire a good vocabulary; after that we had to fall on a sword. Fortunately my fingers are whole, not because I have a good memory, but because I was blessed with an appreciation of hyperbole and irony.

The Congolese say that the beginning of wisdom is the acquisition of a roof. The Chinese argue that wisdom comes when you learn to call things by the right name. Now I was born with a roof over my head, but I've had a lot of names to learn, and these have sometimes swollen my head as I shall illustrate.

Once one of the young secretaries in the English department was astonished that I could spell the word *twelve* without the assistance of a dictionary. Since then whenever someone calls the department with a word question, she transfers the call to me. One morning a rather urgent call came in before I arrived, so the secretary told the caller to ring back during my office hour later that morning. When I walked into the English office to check my mail, the young woman handed me the following message: "Expect a call about 10 AM from a lady in Seneca who wants to know the other word in English beside *hungry* and *angry* that ends in *-gry*." Standing at her desk, I ran through the alphabet (*angry, bangry, cangry,...*) with no success and then went to my office where I located Paul Dickson's *Word Treasury*. I had a vague recollection that Dickson had something to say about this very question, being one that for some reason the editors at Merriam-Webster often field. Fortunately I found *anhungry* (an archaic synonym for *hungry*) without too much difficulty, but the more I thought about the inanity of the caller's question, the more I wanted to do more than just tell her the answer. Minutes after I located the word, the phone rang, and my mysterious inquisitor shyly asked if I knew "that other word in English that ends in *-gry*." "Indeed I do, Madam," I harumphed in my best academic manner. "It's *anhungry*. Shakespeare used it once, and it can be found on page eighty-five of *Webster's Third International Dictionary*." For a long time there was only silence on the line from Seneca. Finally I heard a stunned voice say, "Thank you" before the receiver fell weakly back into its cradle. I did not tell her that I was given the question in advance the way Charles Van Doren of *The \$64,000 Question* was. For days I fondly imagined this woman telling her husband and friends of the English professor at Clemson who not only knew the word *anhungry* but had counted its frequency and memorized the pagination of an unabridged dictionary! To my credit I must say, I did not tell her that there are a half dozen other English words that end in *-gry*.

Indeed, most of my word triumphs have been of the fraudulent variety though I have never been investigated by a House subcommittee. One weekend after struggling mightily with the morning crossword, I was forced to consult *The New York Times Crossword*

Puzzle Dictionary. With a ragged feather in my cap, I drove to the school's gymnasium to conquer the twenty-five-meter natatorium. As I picked up a towel at the desk, I noticed that the student-clerk was doing the morning crossword that I'd just completed, and from the looks of his knitted brow, he was struggling mightily. My heart leapt.

"Finish it?" I asked as innocently as I could even with victory at my lips.

"Nah.... Where's Creighton?" the clerk asked.

"Omaha," I said a nanosecond too quickly I feared.

"That fits," said the clerk apparently without suspecting anything. "Who's the Babylonian deity?"

"Three letters or four?" I asked with slow if false deliberation.

"Three and it ends in a 'u.'"

"Anu," I pounced, unable to restrain myself any longer.

"Wow, thanks mister."

I walked off swinging my towel, basking in the warmth of the clerk's gaze.

My efforts aren't always so warmly appreciated. Once near Christmas, I was seated in the reference section of the Barnes and Noble bookstore in Greenville. The espresso fumes and the aroma of an *Oxford Shorter Edition* in my lap had wafted me into a pleasurable trance. Suddenly my aromatic dream state was interrupted by a young man who came up behind me, reached over and took down a volume identified by him to the young woman he was with as "the book that won me \$50 at the office."

"Really," she said, not quite believing him. "How did you do that?"

"I told this guy one day in the men's room that a man named John invented the flush toilet. He bet me \$50 bucks that I was wrong, so I brought this book in to prove my case."

Unable to resist, I said, "Uh, excuse me, but I thought Thomas Crapper invented the flush toilet?"

"I really don't remember the details now; it's been a long time," the amateur word-smith said nervously reshelving the book. Without a word of thanks for my emendation, he hustled his puzzled lady friend off toward the espresso bar.

Now the use of *crapper* to mean "toilet" surely was influenced by the nineteenth-century sanitary engineer Thomas Crapper, despite what Tony Thorne says in *The Dictionary of Contemporary Slang*, a copy of which lay beside me. *John*, however, is more problematic. The most plausible guess is that it derives from John Adams, the first American president to enjoy indoor plumbing in the White House. But the biggest mystery was how this careless fellow had won \$50 with a wrong answer. Had he bet his colleague that a man named Crapper invented the flush toilet and forgotten the details; had he bet that a president named John had the first White House crapper, or was he making the whole story up to impress his girl friend? Now I must admit that I too wooed my future wife with word lore, but I tried to be accurate lest she look a word up for herself. I imagine the young man's girl friend looked the word up after leaving, but the truth is that I have no idea how the episode played itself out, and that is why I prefer to be a more central player in the word operas in which fate casts me.

The role of spoiler is my favorite in these miniature melodramas. On a 1995 trip to Germany, for example, a pompous young man was showing me his new Volkswagen Pink-Floyd-Edition Rabbit. When he began telling me how much better German cars

are than the Japanese Toyota I drive, I asked him if he knew what “pink Floyd” meant in American slang.

“It’s a British rock group that took their name from two American blues musicians,” he said.

“Yes, I know,” I replied, “but what male body part does ‘pink Floyd’ refer to?”

“I give up. What?” he asked.

“A white man’s reproductive organ,” I said, marveling at how rapidly his crest fell.

Another word-melodrama in which I played a slightly different role involved a colleague of mine from the Clemson Speech Section. She had left academe and moved to California to pursue a job in television, which she found about the same time that she married. I heard from her every second or third Christmas, so I was surprised when she called one Sunday afternoon and said that her husband had recently left her and a thief had stolen \$2500 worth of her belongings including her computer. But the real reason she had called was that she had a word question for me. My heart leapt.

“I’m looking to leave California,” she explained, “and so I have sent my résumé all over the English-speaking world. A few days ago I heard from a station manager in Southampton, England, isn’t that great? I’m very excited by his interest, but I don’t understand one word of his letter.”

“What is it written in,” I asked jealously, “Klingon?”

“No,” she said. “There’s just one word that I don’t understand even after looking it up. Do you mind if I read it to you?”

“Of course not, Debbie,” I said pontiff-like. “It always helps to hear a word in its fullest context.”

“OK,” he says, “Yada, yada, yada, could you please amplify the penultimate paragraph.” Now I’ve shown this sentence to four people at the station, and the best guess is that the manager thinks life is like an essay, so he wants me to explain what I want to do before I retire, retirement being the ultimate paragraph. Do you think this is right, Skip? I’m at a loss.”

Savoring an imminent triumph, I paused and trying my best not to patronize, said, “I do not think so, Debbie. I fear that your friend at the station is over ingenious. “Do you have a copy of the letter that you sent to England? I think that’s what the station manager is referring to, not a forecast of your life. What was in the next to the last paragraph of your cover letter?”

“Oh, my God, of course, you’re right,” Debbie said with a mixture of amazement and exasperation.

“Of course, I am,” I said, “but what did you write him? You did save a copy, didn’t you?”

“Oh, no!” she shouted in despair. “My cover letter was on my hard drive that was stolen last week.”

Gradually, however, her letter came back to her with the full realization of her false assumption. She had assumed that anyone who could use *penultimate* must be learned and complex, and so the most Byzantine interpretation of the text had seemed most plausible to her and her station friends.

“Debbie, Debbie, Debbie,” I said, fully patronizing her at last. “When there are multiple solutions, always seize the simplest one.”

I have no idea where that pompous oversimplification came from, but it sounded

Solomonic at the time. Of course, like most home-grown prophets and proverbs, they're usually untrustworthy. Many complex solutions are preferable to simple ones simply because they work. The best solution, therefore, is not necessarily the simplest or the most complex, but the one that gets the job done.

Nevertheless, sometimes the best solution *is* the simplest, but it may be the most difficult to locate. In the early nineties, a colleague brought me a movie review with an observation by the reviewer that the film in question was "a Merchant-Ivory production." The context provided no further clues, and so ignoring the capital letters, I began to search for a discussion of relative ivory grades. My guess was that "merchant-ivory" was a cracked tusk that superficially had been made to look good for rapid sale. If Roman marble merchants had waxed inferior-grade Carrara to unload it on the unwary, why not unscrupulous ivory dealers? Though I never found anything to support my explanation, I confidently presented this etymology to my colleague. He, however, had had the good sense to walk down the hall to a woman who teaches film, and from her he learned to my everlasting regret that Messrs. Merchant and Ivory are two prominent British film producers who specialize in grandiose, Edwardian-era reproductions. Accepting defeat with dignity is easier when you realize that you're completely outgunned, outmanned, outmaneuvered, and wrong.

Indeed, this was the case on April 28, 1995 when thirty-five people stood up to prove my error. It seems that for years one of my closest friends and colleagues, Dr. John Idol from Boone, North Carolina, and a word-haunted man himself, had been calling a ski or knit cap a toboggan. I told him on several occasions with the confidence of Adam that a toboggan was a sled, not a cap, though you might wear one riding a toboggan. Unfortunately I never bothered to look up the word, violating my first rule of maintaining vocabulary one-upmanship.

On the occasion of John's retirement after I had roasted and toasted my friend to a fare-thee-well, John rose, pulled from his brief case a ludicrous, orange-tasseled knit cap, tugged it down to his ears, and explained our running feud over *toboggan*. He then asked anyone in the audience to stand if they had ever heard *toboggan* used for "this thing that I have on my head." I did a cervix-snapping double-take when I turned around and saw thirty-five of his Tar Heeled relatives standing behind me in a fine show of familial solidarity. I was had. These people had been forewarned, for they had risen as one. I laughed with the rest, but I was stung.

As soon as I could, I made tracks to the library's dialect dictionaries and found the following entry in *The Dictionary of American English*, "**toboggan**...A long-tasseled stocking cap, in full *toboggan cap*." The phrase "in full" brought a smile to my face, but in the list of citations, there was the following quotation from a 1948 issue of *Pacific Spectator*: "He had on faded overalls with new blue patches on the knees, a sweater under the overalls, and a knitted blue toboggan on his head against the cold." The definition was some comfort, but the quotation proved that the single word *toboggan* had made it into the dictionary in the sense that my North Carolina friend had been using it all of his life.

As E. E. Cummings wrote in his Sonnet 39:

all ignorance toboggans into know
and trudges up to ignorance again....

Whenever I picture ignorance now, I imagine a boy like Bill Watterson's cartoon character Calvin oscillating between dumb and smart, riding a toboggan and wearing one too.



I have illustrated how language may be used to puncture pretensions, deceive, trump a rival, and patronize a friend. For my linguistic sins, it is only fair that I have been made to eat the rump of crow. Though I have frequently been guilty of playing light and loose with words, I recognize that language is a matter of the utmost gravity. Let me conclude, therefore, with two anecdotes of a different stripe.

When I was a Young Pioneer at the First Presbyterian Church in Columbus, Georgia, Rev. Thomas (the kids called him "Doubting") taught us that "in the beginning was the Word." "The Word," of course, was God's word which had the force of creation itself. After the dust settled, "the Word" was the Bible, which Rev. Thomas read and freely interpreted, I now realize, with our class's help. We laughed crudely when Ehud killed the evil King Eglon and caused his bowels to run. We gaped as only adolescent boys can at the image of King Solomon climbing the palm tree of his bride-to-be and "squeezing her coconuts," as Rev. Thomas said. We booed when Elisha whistled for a bear to kill forty boys like ourselves because they called him "Baldy." We debated whether the Red Sea might have been the Reed Sea that anyone could part and elude an army in. We scorned in virtual unison the Bible's stand on capital punishment, the role of women, slavery, and a host of other social issues. When word leaked to the church elders what the Young Pioneers were up to, however, Rev. Thomas "received a call" from the University of Georgia Graduate School. He moved north to work on his Ph. D. in history, and I never read anything the same way again. When I discovered the word *piss* in 2 Kings 18:27, for example, I decided that if a prophet of God could use crude language then no word in and of itself was intrinsically bad or sacred. I still remember two of my friends cheering me at fourteen when I spoke my first *damn* with conviction. If God and His people, I reasoned, used obscenity, wit, and metaphor, then I could too. If God's people expressed indignation, sensuality, and love in language, then this was a model for us all.

The human soul or self, in fact, is as much a product of language as it is a gift of nature. Until a human infant learns to speak, that child has only the most rudimentary of identities or personalities. A friend of our family is a woman of thirty-five years now who was born brain damaged. For fifteen years she had no speech and could not write, yet the flicker in her eyes and a thousand ways of smiling and frowning suggested there was much more lurking below the surface of her facial expressions. Finally, she gained enough control over her neck muscles, even as her arms and legs continued to flail, so that with a strapped-on helmet equipped with a rubber-tipped pointer curving down to about twelve inches before her nose, she could type. Almost immediately, a torrent of words came from her Sears Electric and with them a truly complex and intelligent self emerged from the darkness. As she typed herself into existence, into a full-blown being, her parents and friends discovered who this person really was whom they had fed, bathed, and loved for over a decade without fully knowing because there was for the most part only her physical self to know.

“The limits of my language,” Wittgenstein said, “are the limits of my world.” Without limits to language acquisition and expression, I would add, the self can develop infinitely. Fine words butter no parsnips, Southerners like to remind those who speak with more eloquence than they do, but without language man might as well be a boiled parsnip. Words then have a gravity and a gravitational force of their own; indeed, as I once wrote:

A hawk cannot soar
and ask itself why—
words are too heavy
for hawks to fly.

Weighted as we are
with all of our words,
our feathered language
lifts us like birds.

ACCEPTING RESPONSIBILITY

Shoulder your small part
with a fragrant grace—
every rose petal
holds the world in place.