

## Greetings from the Land of Total Nickels

*Zounds! I was never so bethump'd with words  
Since I first call'd my brother's father dad.*

— William Shakespeare  
*The Life and Death of King John*

“Sorry to do this, but I’m out of *uno*’s. I’m going to have to give you change in—like—total nickels.”

Writer Anne Lamott recently overheard the above sentence at a country inn in California. The language employed (or disemployed, depending on your point of view) is the subject of a chapter in *Do You Speak American?* by Robert MacNeil and William Cran. The book is the companion publication to the three-part PBS program of the same name.

The chapter mentioned above, “Language from a State of Change”, catalogs the many ways in which Cal-Speak is influencing the language of the rest of the United States, and slowly—deviously?—that of the entire English-speaking world.

Influenced by having heard Mr MacNeil speak a few days ago, I decided to devote this month’s column to a review of words, language trends, and books and sources about them.

If you missed Mr MacNeil’s PBS program, you should visit its companion Web site at [www.pbs.org/speak](http://www.pbs.org/speak). The site is endlessly informative and entertaining and, among many other things, includes a clickable map (“Radio America”) that lets you listen to audio clips of local residents collected from 95 stations in all 50 states so that you can hear regional usage and accents. I also enjoyed the Q-and-A section featuring the opinions of noted language expert Edward Finegan (click on “Ask an Expert”).

The use of the *trés californienne* “like” in the opening sentence provides an example of what linguists call “quotatives”—narrational signposts that keep the hearer on track or function as oral “two-wiggled-fingertips”, much as *go* or *to be all* did in recent years. (“And so I go, ‘Wait, you can’t do that!’ And he goes, ‘I can too!’” “And I was all, ‘Who does she think she is?’”) But beyond strict quotation, Cal-speakers use *like* to verify that the listener is following the sense of the

utterance, or just as a filler, especially in the phrase *it’s like*, which seems to be this year’s conversational corn-borer worm. Read more on these topics at [www.pbs.org/speak/words/sezwho/like](http://www.pbs.org/speak/words/sezwho/like) and [www.ling.ed.ac.uk/%7Epgc/archive/2002/proc02/buchstaller02.pdf](http://www.ling.ed.ac.uk/%7Epgc/archive/2002/proc02/buchstaller02.pdf).

**Are you a word-dog?** “Word-dogs” reading this column (see Barbara Wallraff’s March 2005 column at [www.theatlantic.com/doc/prem/200503/wallraff](http://www.theatlantic.com/doc/prem/200503/wallraff)) will also enjoy Paul McFedries’s **The Word Spy**, a “Web site . . . devoted to *lexpionage*, the sleuthing of new words and phrases”. The Word Spy is at [www.wordspy.com](http://www.wordspy.com). Suggestion: Click on “My Favorite Words”.

**Test your WOTY.** Lexperts should also visit the American Dialect Society (ADS) site ([www.americandialect.org](http://www.americandialect.org)). Click on “Words of the Year” (WOTY). Entries date from 1990 to 2004. Test your wordcraft against that of its members: Pick the word that best captures the year, the decade (1990s), the century, and the millennium; then test your picks against those of the ADS. (No fair peeking.)

**The other side of the smile.** Lake Superior State University (LSSU), Sault Ste Marie, Michigan, publishes an annual List of Banished Words culled from submissions of its worldwide logophiliacs: [www.lssu.edu/banished/current](http://www.lssu.edu/banished/current). It’s interesting to see that the ADS’s top choice for 2005 is also that of LSSU, but for different reasons.

**World Wide Words** ([www.worldwidewords.org](http://www.worldwidewords.org)), by Michael Quinion, is an enduring favorite of *this* logophile. Quinion “writes about international English from a British perspective”. Type *third world* (is there a first or second?) or *naked street* (rest your beating pulse) into the site’s search engine for some illuminating reading. Chuckle: One of London’s designated naked streets is Exhibition Road.

**A.Word.A.Day.** I subscribe to this service. Run by Anu Garg, this site is a sumptuous banquet for the *linguaphile* (one of Garg’s coinages, that word may now be found

in the pages of *The American Heritage Dictionary*): [www.wordsmith.org/lawad](http://www.wordsmith.org/lawad).

**Quick!—Under the Copy Desk!** Ruth Walker wrote an interesting piece (“A Vanishing Syllable”) about a controversy that “raged” (briefly) in the copy department at the *Christian Science Monitor* over *wood* vs *wooden* baseball bats ([www.csmonitor.com/2005/0513/p18s05-hfes.html?s=hns](http://www.csmonitor.com/2005/0513/p18s05-hfes.html?s=hns)). Her view: Attributive nouns such as *wood* in *wood bats* are more-and-more muscling into realms traditionally reserved for adjective-noun couples. Following Walker’s mention of it, I tried [Googlefight.com](http://Googlefight.com) (not a *Google.com*-affiliated site) to test some variations, nonstandard formations, and illiteratisms (*underway/under way/under weigh; alright/all right; I seen/I saw*) but found it unreliable.

**In Other Words.** This recent (2004) book by Christopher J Moore explores words and usage around the world. A quick glimpse: Strangers in a foreign country played a game wherein they were asked for a word that summed up their faraway homeland—“the thing that each person most looked forward to on their return.” An Italian chose *tavola* (table). A British citizen chose *privacy*. Moore writes, “*Table* has implications for an Italian, and in Italian, that it does not have for the English or in English. It speaks of aspects of family life and of good fellowship, of mealtimes both as rituals and celebrations, of a whole world of food preparation and kitchen conversation and all sorts of other things that only an Italian could justly describe.”

**RIP, Eleanor Gould Packard.** Copyeditor for more than a half-century at *The New Yorker* (she started in 1945 and never missed a day of work), she had abilities in that realm that were beyond legendary. Legions of famous writers and fans attested to her talents. *New Yorker* Editor David Remnick said that she always strove for “a kind of Euclidean clarity—transparent, precise, muscular. It was an ideal that seemed to have not only syntactical but moral dimensions.”

**Remembering Doctor Sam.** Finally, I can’t conclude this column about words without remembering Dr Samuel Johnson on the 250th anniversary of the publication of his dictionary. In an appreciation in the 17 April *New York Times*, author Verlyn Klinkenborg quoted Dr Johnson’s self-described task as trying to capture “the boundless chaos of a living speech” and said that “Johnson published his dictionary not as the conqueror of the language but as the person who knew best how unconquerable it really is”.

I think Dr Johnson would love the state of the language were he alive in the 21st century.

Don’t take any total nickels.

**Chuckle of the month.** Bumper sticker, parking lot of local spay-and-neuter clinic: “I ♥ my cat so I had her ♠.”