

Linguistic Lightning: The Power of the Right Word

The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter—it's the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

— Samuel Clemens (*Mark Twain*), Letter to George Bainton, 10/15/1888

OK, Sam, how did *you* do it?

To my ear, it is always easier to detect the *wrong* word, the word that clunks when it should ring, the one that obfuscates rather than clarifies, the one that replaces a stout, strong, time-honored linguistic building block with a limp piece of vogueish fudge (*finalizing* a task is no improvement over *finishing* it). And certainly, no word should sound a false alarm.

Of all the pernicious pieces of technical miswriting of the past decade, the laurel for the worst, in my view, rests on the head of the wretch at Microsoft who dredged up the following warning for the Windows 98 operating system: "This program has performed an illegal operation and will be shut down."

Coupling the word *illegal* with the passive voice construction *will be shut down* conjures the image of the FBI at your door, axes drawn, about to beat it in, handcuff you, and seize your computer. I wonder how many elderly newbies in Iowa keeled over at the keyboard the first time they saw *that* one flash on their screen. Changing *illegal* to *incompatible* and taking *be* out of *will be shut down* might have prevented some ambulance runs.

The thoughtful writer shifts the burden off the reader. She or he does the work of supplying precise meaning so that all the reader has to do is read, not reread, rationalize the meaning, or recover from a heart attack. This implies that the writer 1) commands a sufficient stock of synonyms—or access to one—from which to choose (see "Oxford has a word for it", below) and 2) takes time to review, reflect, and rewrite—for clarity if not for eloquence.

Trade in your blunderbuss for a .44 magnum. Writers should take dead aim at their readers. Many (I'll say it—lazy) writers habitually reach for catch-all words

that convey a broad sense of their meaning rather than searching for more accurate words that help the reader grasp it. Such words are what Sir Ernest Gowers (*The Complete Plain Words*) called "blunderbuss words"—words that spray pellets of meaning like a shotgun, hoping that some will hit the target. This kind of author uses words "in the front rank of the armoury" rather than "troubling to search in the ranks behind for one that is more likely to hit the target in the middle."

Here are six examples from the recent scientific press that make Gowers' point, focusing mainly on the weak verbs *have* and *show*, with suggestions for improvement:

"The juvenile gamont specimens of a single clonal population, produced during asexual reproduction, should thus have [read *display*] very little genetic variability."

"According to results of a recent study of planktonic species, fluctuations of this concentration may have [read *exert*] minimal influence on foraminiferal Mg/Ca."

"Transmission electron microscopy and negative staining of the helical ribonucleo-protein capsid show [read *reveal*] a herring-bone appearance."

"Electron probe measurements showed [read *detected*] Mg/Ca variability within a single chamber."

"These results show [read *suggest; imply; indicate; demonstrate; prove*] that Mg concentrations of high-Mg species are somehow controlled by temperature."

"The NCBI site contains several major resources. The most well known [read *best known*] among these is probably GenBank."

Sam would have loved Sir Winston. As

an example of the power of the right word in the right place, consider Sir Winston Churchill's speech of 18 June 1940 to the House of Commons. Many have termed it the greatest speech of the 20th century. In his summation, Sir Winston exhorted, "Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, 'This was their finest hour.'" (Listen to a RealAudio clip at www.earthstation1.com/pgs/churchill/dos-wc047.wav.html.)

Try substituting any other word for *finest* in the last sentence. "This was their *best* hour?" "Most *noble* hour?" "Most *courageous* hour?" Nothing else serves as well as *finest*. You can hear the lightning crackle.

Oxford has a word for it. The excellent *Oxford Thesaurus of English* (2004) can help you locate the right word. Did you know that there are no fewer than 48 synonyms for the adjective *peculiar*? How many can you think of? Test yourself, then click on www.askoxford.com/worldofwords/thesauri/?view=uk to see how you did.

Thinkmap's Visual Thesaurus is also an excellent digital resource to suggest and sort out crisscrossing connotations: www.visualthesaurus.com. Type a word in the text box, hit "Look it up", and VT flies to its task, popping up clusters of connotations like flowerets in blossom around key synonyms from its 145,000-word vocabulary. It will even pronounce unfamiliar terms and display both British and American spellings.

The legal eagle is also a word hawk. The *New York Times* (29 August 2005, A1) described Supreme Court nominee John Roberts as "a cheerfully ruthless copy editor" who has "demanded verbal rigor from his colleagues and subordinates, refusing to tolerate the slightest grammatical slip."

The paper concluded, "If Judge Roberts is confirmed, and his word-consciousness follows him to the court, it will put him in the upper tier of justices who have put a premium on the English language."

Querily we roll along. The Word Hawk requests your opinion: What do you think about the usage "unhoused" over "homeless"? Useful connotation? Political hypercorrectness? www.paloaltoonline.com/weekly/morgue/2005/2005_08_24.homesidea.shtml. (Save your Google search: 14,700 hits for "unhoused" and 12,900,000 for "homeless".) Please reply to wordhawk@pacbell.net.

News knocks numb nouns. The *Palo Alto Daily News* of 10 August 2005 noted the following all-caps city warning on some newsracks: "NEWSRACK ORDINANCE COMPLIANCE VIOLATION WARNING AND FIXTURE IMPOUNDMENT NOTICE: CORRECTIVE ACTION REQUIRED." Nine nouns in 12 words. The *News* also printed a suggested fix penned by visiting Stanford linguistics professor Arnold Zwicky: "This newsrack violates city ordinances and will be removed unless the violation is fixed." Ahem! That's 14 words, professor—but at least you eliminated a 5-noun string.

Chuckle of the Month. "Hix Nix Stix Flix" is a headline out of the past from *Variety*, Hollywood's show-business review. It meant that movies about rural life did not sit well with farm folk. William Safire parodied it with his "Hix Nix Blix Fix" column in the 24 October 2002 *New York Times* (about the Bush administration's refusal to accept a North Korean nuclear nonproliferation scheme floated by Hans Blix, the head of the International Atomic Energy Agency).