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Are crustaceans shellfish? A whiff of scandal in English lexicography

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Some years ago I happened to look up *shellfish* in *The Macquarie Dictionary* (1997) and was astonished to find it defined as “an aquatic animal (not a fish in the ordinary sense) having a shell, as the oyster and other molluscs and the lobster and other crustaceans”. It was the last six words of the definition that were astonishing. Until then it had not occurred to me that anyone regarded crustaceans as *shellfish*. A comparison of definitions in eight English dictionaries, from the UK, USA and NZ, revealed that all agree, in essentials, with *Macquarie*. They give the same defining characters (aquatic animal with a shell) and the same two main types (molluscs and crustaceans) and generally cite a similar selection of typical members (usually lobsters, crabs and shrimps, oysters, mussels, and often whelks and winkles). The main point of variation is that half of the dictionaries say that *shellfish* is used especially of a category of food animals, while the other half (including the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *Webster’s Third* and *Random House*) make no reference to this.

I smelt a rat, or at least the scandalous whiff of crustaceans in places where they don’t belong. In New Zealand, where I spent most of my formative years, *shellfish* is a

much-used term. I was pretty sure that my understanding of it – as a generic for molluscs with external shells that live in water, especially when spoken of as food – is standard among New Zealand English speakers and is shared by a good many Australians. Could it be that the definers of *shellfish* in the various dictionaries, instead of checking local usage, had simply assumed the correctness of the definitions given in one or more earlier dictionaries? I proceeded to carry out an informal survey, badgering more than 100 friends and strangers from four English-speaking regions: Australia, New Zealand, North America (the USA and Canada), and the British Isles. The main questions asked were (1) what kinds of things do and do not count as *shellfish*? (2) Does *shellfish* refer exclusively, or chiefly, to animals as a category of food? I consulted written texts too but most uses of *shellfish* in such texts were uninformative as to the scope of reference and did not give essential biographical information about the writer.

By smoothing out rough edges (most importantly, by considering only “typical” members of the class) it is possible to assign 90 percent of informants’ definitions to one or another of the following: (a) edible water molluscs with

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Table: Definitions of *shellfish* in three regions

	USA/Canada		Australia		Great Britain	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
(a) edible molluscs	3	18	24	47	9	45
(b) edible crustaceans	0	0	6	12	0	0
(c) edible crustaceans and molluscs	13	82	21	41	11	55
	16		51		20	

shells, (b) edible crustaceans, (c) edible molluscs plus edible crustaceans. Only two of the four regional groups showed a high degree of internal consistency. North Americans were the only regional group who agreed fairly consistently (82%) with the standard dictionary definition.

For 21 of the 23 New Zealand informants, *shellfish* referred exclusively to water molluscs with external shells. The two exceptions were people working in the food trade where international naming conventions have presumably influenced usage: both included crustaceans as well as molluscs.

Over 50 Australian-raised informants were interviewed, mainly from NSW, Victoria and Tasmania. They were divided between definitions (a), (b) and (c). No clear regional differences were discerned.

Australians in general are less familiar with the term *shellfish* than New Zealanders. For all the New Zealand informants *shellfish* is an everyday term; for many of the Australians, it is not. Most New Zealanders said they sometimes gather them and often eat shellfish whereas most Australians said that they had never gathered any sort of shellfish and a fair number said they had never or rarely eaten them.

Informants from the British Isles were fairly evenly divided between two principal definitions.

The Table above disguises further differences among informants about what counts as typical and

what is marginal or uncertain. The contexts in which English speakers (other than marine biologists) normally speak of *shellfish* are food-related. We gather shellfish (to eat), we like (to eat) shellfish, we are allergic to shellfish. So the most typical members of the category are preferred foods. Nevertheless, some people include as marginal members other molluscs, such as cowries and cones, that are not customarily eaten in English-speaking communities. One Australian informant, a young woman who grew up mainly in Melbourne and Sydney, said “For me, the most typical shellfish are things like pipis – bivalves that live in the sand. But molluscs that live on rocks – like oysters and mussels and periwinkles – are also shellfish.” “How about prawns?” – “Hmm, maybe, but doubtful.” “Crayfish?” – “Even more marginal.” “Crabs?” – “Definitely not.” “What about molluscs that Australians don’t eat, like cowries and trumpet shells?” – “Yes, they’re shellfish, too, the animals in the shells.”

The uniformity of dictionary definitions of *shellfish* raises some troubling questions about the way commercial dictionaries of English are produced and about their accuracy as records of current usage. How carefully do English lexicographers test for variability across the speech community in the meanings of the words they define? In the case of familiar terms (“general vocabulary”) is it normal practice for lexicographers to copy

or accept published definitions without doing original research? Is it reasonable to expect compilers of large dictionaries to check meanings of words with a range of informants selected to reflect the usual socio-linguistic variables: age, area, social background, and so on? Surely it is, at least for words in those semantic fields most likely to show variability. Terms for plant and animal categories, especially generic terms like *shellfish*, *fish* and *tree*, notoriously fall into this class.

Given practical limits on the size of entries, how are lexicographers to handle cases where they find considerable variation in definitions within the speech community? Should all recorded variants be listed or only the most common ones? Should informants whose notions of what a term means are vague or in conflict with the experts be discounted? How to deal with the fact that many categories have fuzzy margins? Let me at least put my own definition where my mouth is. The following summary is far from adequate but it does indicate the main variations found in the survey.

shellfish *n.* 1. Applied to a variable range of small edible invertebrates that live in water and that are eaten. (For most speakers not a category of fish.) The most common variant meanings are:

a. molluscs with shells, that live in water. (Usual in NZ, common in Australia and UK, rare in USA.)

b. molluscs and crustaceans. (Usual in USA, common in UK and Australia, rare in NZ, except among professionals in the food trade.)

c. edible bivalves only. (Occasional in Australia and USA.)

d. crustaceans only. (Occasional in Australia.)

2. Food consisting of these animals.

3. Extended by some to all members of the zoological classes listed under 1, whether eaten or not. (UK, USA, Australia, NZ.)

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Writing money

Even the most apparently modern institutions can be remarkably conservative. It wasn't until 2001 that the New York Stock Exchange changed from using "pieces of eight" to dollars and cents, in quoting stock prices. The anachronism lasted 208 years after the introduction of decimal currency in the USA in 1793. Another, more familiar, financial convention dates from the same period. The current practice of placing the pound sign (£) before the number, in writing cheques and contracts, grew from the fear that a crook might add a digit or two at the left-hand end of the number. The end result is that we write one thing and say another. We don't say \$50 as "dollars fifty"; we say "fifty dollars". Putting the dollar sign before the number is clearly inconsistent with how we say the amount. And, just as clearly, we have not yet recovered from the practice of placing the pound sign placed before the number.

Despite the international nature of modern financial markets, the convention is not consistent across different countries. Australia, Brazil, Denmark, Italy, Netherlands, Switzerland, the UK, and the USA place their currency symbols before the number, and Finland, France, Germany, Norway, Spain, and Sweden place their currency symbols after the number. I am not aware of any official policy with the introduction of the Euro, and people may well stick with their current practices and write 1000• in Spain, •1000 in Italy.

Even within Australia, we are not consistent. We put the dollar symbol first, as in \$12.34, but when we are using cents, we put the number first, as in 34¢. Some other nations do the same as us, and others are more rational. The Australian practice of placing the currency symbol before the number leads to some odd results when we choose to combine the dollar sign with other symbols (which are

all conventionally placed after the amount they refer to). For example, at the greengrocers we might see a sign that says \$2 kg and we would read this as "two dollars per kilogram". It would be more logical to write it as 2\$/kg, so that the reading and the speaking could be the same. We might therefore also write two thousand dollars per annum as 2000\$/a rather than the conventional \$2000/a. This system produces odd examples for large amounts, as in \$1000m/a and \$2000bi/y, which I collected from Australian newspapers.

With inflation over many years, the large numbers needed for such things as market capitalisation of major companies or any number as part of a set of national accounts is now largely meaningless to all but a specialist few. We cannot come to terms with these numbers because inflation has gradually made our numerical language insufficient. Fortunately we have available a set of strictly defined and well-established prefixes that can solve this linguistic problem for us. These are the prefixes from the International System of Units (SI). These are not only readily available but they have already been used successfully in many places.

Australians have used the idea of kilodollars for years in the form of "Salary package – 1000 k\$", sometimes loosely written as "100k", without the space between the number and the unit, and without the \$ symbol. In French economic circles, they routinely used kF (kilofrancs) for thousands of francs and MF (megafrancs) for millions of francs until the arrival of the Euro. There are also precedents in the USA. Marc Champion, a staff reporter of the Wall Street Journal referred to gigadollars (G\$) to avoid the use of "billions of dollars", "thousands of millions of dollars", or some other clumsy construction such as \$87.63B or \$2.19bi. In a piece called "Decline and Fall", Champion

Pat Naughtin discusses older and newer monetary expressions. He is the editor of the online newsletter, Metrication matters. You can subscribe by sending an email containing the words "subscribe Metrication matters" to naughtin@bigpond.net.au

wrote these sentences in describing the UK economy:

The government also has promised to find 87.63 G\$ in public and private financing to upgrade the train network over the next 10 years in an attempt to make up for decades of low investment.

As Mr. Blair launched a 2.19 G\$ adult literacy program last week, he said, "in the future, there will be nothing more important".

I suspect it is only a matter of time before these ideas are used routinely in forms such as: k\$ (kilodollars), M\$ (megadollars), G\$ (gigadollars), T\$ (teradollars) and, with inflation, P\$ (petadollars). □





Eats, Shoots and Leaves

Alan Peterson, former editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, reviews *Eats, Shoots and Leaves*, by Lynne Truss, Profile Books Ltd. 2003 (RRP\$29.95)

Lynne Truss, a British writer and broadcaster with a passion for correct punctuation, is a self-styled stickler.

The jokey title of her book, and its cover drawing of a panda painting out the comma after “eats”, are part of her drive to marshal the sticklers. “It’s tough being a stickler for punctuation these days,” she says. “Everywhere there are signs of ignorance and indifference.”

A petrol station displays a banner: “Come inside for CD’S, VIDEO’S. DVD’S, and BOOK’S. A newspaper poster proclaims: “FAN’S FURY AT STADIUM INQUIRY.” And who was this brave, but lonely fan? It turns out that there was a large mob of furious fans, not just the one indicated by the poster.

The author conducts her “sticklers unite” and “zero tolerance” crusade with vigor, clarity, and a cheerful, sometimes provocative and often racy, style. “The reason it’s worth standing up

for punctuation,” she says, “is not that it’s an arbitrary system of notation known only to an over-sensitive elite who have attacks of the vapours when they see it misapplied. The reason to stand up for punctuation is that without it there is no reliable way of communicating meaning.”

She explains patiently the difference between *its* and *it’s*, and prescribes an agonising death and an unmarked grave for offenders. She deplores those “dark-side-of-the-moon” years in British education when, as in New South Wales, grammar and punctuation were not taught in most schools.

She has some interesting facts to share. The dot with a tail, and its name, comma, date back to ancient Greece. It was part of a system of dramatic notation advising actors when to breathe.

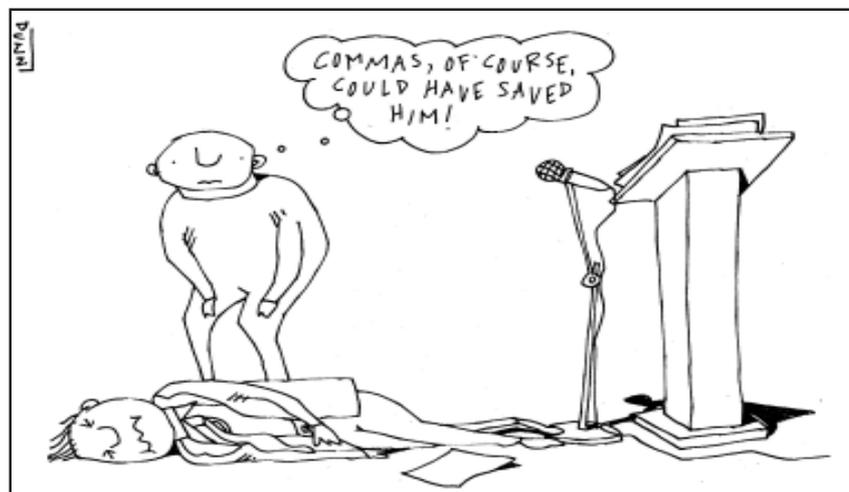
The author gives sound advice on where and how to use commas, and a warning about pairs of commas, for example: “I am, of course, steadily going nuts.” Don’t forget the second comma. “Sensitive people trained to listen for the second comma . . . find themselves quite stranded by that kind of thing,” she says. “They feel cheated and giddy. In very bad cases they fall over.”

Mind, when it comes to matters of style and preference, Ms Truss concedes that the rules are not set in stone. John Keats died in 1821, but argument persists on whether his works are *Keats’s poems* or *Keats’ poems*.

On apostrophes, Ms Truss plumps for “one week’s time” and “two weeks’ notice”. In *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* Pam Peters agrees on “a week’s leave” but allows “five weeks leave”. The Burchfield edition of Fowler says “in four days’ time”.

Ms Truss loads her highest praise on the colon and semicolon. It’s not everybody’s choice. You won’t find either of these in this review. An old style guide of the Oxford University Press in New York says: “If you take hyphens seriously you will surely go mad.”

But Truss herself argues: “We ignore the rules of punctuation at our political peril as well as to our moral detriment.” Do you remember that last year a Cambridge politics lecturer identified a British government dossier on Iraq with a 12-year-old thesis by an American doctoral student? One of the give-aways was a misplaced comma which had remained uncorrected. □



Word of the Day

Logophiles will welcome this compendium of words and phrases selected from ABC Classic FM's "Word of the Day" segment. The book provides a useful archive of Kel Richards' insightful investigations into lexical questions which are often posed by the program's audience. As the Introduction puts it: "the Words of the Day are no longer ephemeral".

Entries range from familiar words with colourful histories, like *crib* or *stuff*, to phrases with obscure origins that we use everyday without a second thought (eg., *hair of the dog*, *the whole nine yards*) and such exotic items as *lagniappe* ("a gratuity") and *pogglethrope* ("someone who is perpetually pleased with themself").

We learn the process by which *nice* has been redeemed from its earliest senses of "foolish" or "lascivious" to its current pleasant state. Richards traces the origins of *wooden spoon* back to the unfortunate member of the famous Wedgwood family who came last in the Cambridge finals examination of 1824. *Throttlebottom*, an American slang term for "a purposeless, incompetent holder of office" is revived, just in case there might be a contemporary use for it.

There are more recent coinages too: *googlemacking* – the game of trying to find pairs of words which have exactly one result when typed into the Google internet search engine; *testipop* – an evocative rendering of the "sudden change in pitch of voice often experienced by teenage boys".

In many ways this is a companion volume to Richards' earlier collection, named *WordWatch* (2001) after his segment on ABC NewsRadio. Drawing heavily again on listeners' queries, *WordWatch* has the same kind of range of

vocabulary and the same focus on tracing the origin and development of expressions. There are even a few entries which appear in both books, where Richards has new insights or explanations to add. For example, an alternative derivation of the phrase *bob's your uncle* – from the phrase *Bob's your uncle and Fanny's your aunt* – is suggested in *Word of the Day*.

The new volume has shorter and fewer entries (about 200 compared to about 400), and has a more playful tone and format. *Word of the Day* is genuinely pocket-sized, and includes Richards' "terse verses" – witty amalgamations of the week's featured words (although the necessary alphabetical rather than chronological organisation of the entries makes the placing of the verses in the text rather random).

Another extra feature comes in the form of Clive Robertson's comments or "interruptions", which are inserted into many of the entries. Fans of the radio program may well enjoy this attempt to replicate the banter between Robertson and Richards, but they might equally find the exchanges come across as stilted and somewhat pointless in print. Richards rarely gets the chance to respond to the asides which are sometimes clever but more often sarcastic, as in "you're such a help, Kelvin", or just plain contrary: "I think you're wrong". Robertson's contributions tend to come across like those of a schoolboy trying to draw attention away from the teacher and onto himself by making facetious remarks from the back of the classroom. This is an unnecessary distraction when the teacher is so entertaining and informative in his treatment of this rich and varied subject. □

Adam Smith is a researcher with Style Council and executive editor of AS. He reviews ABC Classic FM's Word of the Day by Kel Richards (with interruptions by Clive Robertson), ABC Books, 2004 (RRP \$16.95)



Communicating in Style

Pam Peters is editor of Australian Style and author of the Cambridge Guide to English Usage (2004) which has just been published. Here she reviews Communicating in Style, by Yateendra Joshi, TERI, 2003 (RRP Rs300/-, £7.50, US\$12) ISBN 9179930165

Communicating in Style, published by the Energy and Research Institute in New Dehli (TERI), is in some ways comparable to the Australian government *Style Manual* (6th ed. 2002), a copy of which is shown on the front cover alongside other style manuals of the world. It spans a large number of editorial issues from abbreviations to zip codes, and gives fuller attention than most to such things as the styling of headings, the formatting of lists, and the uses of bullets and enumerative devices. But it puts

more weight on matters important in scientific and technical writing, including the setting of tables and the uses of charts, diagrams, maps and photographs. The book devotes several chapters to the kinds of communication in which scientists need to be competent, including oral presentations, posters, and the submission of manuscripts to scholarly journals.

The book's author, Yateendra Joshi, draws on a large range of sources, general and specialist. Some are listed at the end of each chapter, others made visible by reproduction of their covers as illustrations where they are most pertinent. (The *Australian Style* masthead is itself pictured as one of the resources in matters of style.) Particular sources are chosen to detail issues on the verso page, and they provide a counterpoint to the main discussion and recommendations on the recto pages. For example, the WHO (World Health

Organization) *Editorial Style Manual* (1998) is invoked to explain how to refer to the currencies of two different countries whose monetary units go by the same name.

The style of writing is crisp, efficient and engaging. It often uses imperatives to get to the point, but their impact is mitigated by the helpful explanations that follow. Joshi is obviously alive to the impact of writer on reader, and offers advice to others on "effective letters, faxes and emails", in a chapter nicely titled "Remote control". Many of his chapter titles involve word play, among them "Alphabet soup" for the one on abbreviations, acronyms, etc.; and "How long is a piece of string?" for one on units of measurement.

Communicating in Style promises and delivers well within its compact paperback proportions, with generous use of black-and-white illustrations. □

Feedback Acknowledgements

Many thanks to all the following people and groups who sent in sets of questionnaires for Feedback 22, helping to make it a worthwhile survey. They include:

- Years 11/12 English Class, Launceston College (TAS) x 43
- Robyn Whiteley and friends (VIC) x 41
- Frank Nicholls and friends x 19
- Rosemary Milne (VIC) x 18
- City of Mitcham (SA) x 11
- U3A Writing Class (NSW) x 8
- Felicity Triglone and friends (WA) x 8
- Jim and Laurie Malone et al. (NSW) x 7
- North Coast U3A (WA) x 5
- South West TAFE (VIC) x 4

Style Council 2004

The fourteenth Style Council Conference takes place 9-11 July, 2004 at the State Library of NSW, in Sydney. The theme is "Public and professional discourse", and the keynote speaker will be Dr Neil James of the newly launched Plain English Foundation, who will address a range of issues raised by Don Watson's book on the decay of public language.

The conference will bring together editors, communications trainers and interested members of the public, in the common quest for clarity. Texts from annual reports and e-documents to PhD theses will be under scrutiny, with papers focusing on their language as well as the editorial problems that they can create. Nominations for the top ten clichés will be taken, and an award made at the end of the conference for the most widely used cliché. The conference will provide in-service training for professional communicators, writing teachers, editors and all who grapple with academic, corporate and bureaucratic documents.

Dates and other registration details are available on the Style Council website at www.ling.mq.edu.au/style

Feel free to contact the Conference Administrator Adam Smith on 02 9850 8783 for further information.



SCOSE has been kept busy reminding staff of the correct meaning and use of certain words. According to ABC listeners, some journalists have a misconception about the location of an earthquake's *epicentre*. The epicentre of an earthquake is the point on the Earth's surface directly above the focus of the earthquake, which is deeper down below. It cannot be five kilometres underground, as stated in one news bulletin, which apparently wasn't an isolated example.

Likewise broadcasters were reminded that *ancestor* is not a synonym for *descendant*. A TV promo for Dhakiyarr vs The King had to be pulled from broadcast and revoiced because it said "now Dhakiyarr's ancestors work for reconciliation", and on another occasion a news item stated that "...ancient human bones should not be held in museums without the consent of the ancestors of the deceased".

A non-standard use of the verb *wreck* attracted attention in a report which said two young Jewish settlers in the West Bank were suspected of "wrecking hundreds of Palestinian olive trees". SCOSE pointed out that the verb *wreck* applies to man-made objects such as ships and cars. For trees, it's better to say they're *uprooted* or *destroyed*.

A Melbourne surgeon told SCOSE he'd noticed an increasing tendency among young sportspeople to say things like "I've had four surgeries on my right knee". SCOSE agreed with this listener that it was inappropriate for journalists and presenters to "parrot such imprecise language", as one reporter did when he said a certain footballer was going to hospital "for a surgery on his shoulder". Instead broadcasters should use standard terms such as *operation*, *procedure* or *surgical operation*, reserving "a surgery" for the room or office of a doctor or dentist.

It's good to know the ABC is popular outside Australia. A New

Zealander who is a specialist in infectious diseases was eager to be spared any further sleepless nights because of the misuse of adjectives such as *pneumococcal* and *meningococcal* (and "etceterococcal"). Like many other ABC listeners, he's not impressed with hearing these words used without a following noun, as in "an outbreak of pneumococcal". Pneumococcal what? Our New Zealander suggested proper combinations, such as "deadly meningococcal disease, nasty pneumococcal infection, horrible staphylococcal infection and appalling streptococcal infection".

There was a mixed response from ABC staff when SCOSE recommended using the term *petrol bomb* instead of *molotov cocktail*, which seemed to glamorise the item unnecessarily. One journalist had also suggested that *molotov cocktail* was outdated and probably unfamiliar to many young people. But others defended *molotov cocktail*, saying that in fact people know immediately what the item is – a simple, hand-made object. Not so with petrol bombs, which many films portray as mid-tech devices with dials and chemical detonators.

A consensus was more easily reached over urging journalists to avoid using the term *recreational drugs* after a number of listeners voiced concerns about it. Like the term *shooting gallery* (properly referred to as *injecting room*), *recreational drug* suggests that it's acceptable or even glamorous to use the drug, and there could be an

assumption that taking the drug is not a kind of addiction. It was pointed out that there are two types of drugs, legal and illegal, and that no drugs are officially labelled as being recreational, so to say that a particular drug is recreational is a social judgment. Yet another objection to the term was that it can hide double standards. For example, it clearly would be inappropriate to use the term in a story involving petrol-sniffing. Yet the term is often used in connection with wealthy young football players.

Several listeners objected strongly to the way the term *so-called* had been used in some news reports. One example was the phrase "so-called stolen generations". A listener rightly pointed out that "stolen generations" is an accepted and understood term and that by using *so-called* with it the writer implied that the stories of forced removal of Aboriginal children from their parents were not true. Another listener was offended by the phrase "so-called totally and permanently incapacitated veterans".

SCOSE decided against putting a blanket ban on *so-called* because the term does have a more neutral use. Instead broadcasters were urged to take special care to avoid using it with negative connotations. □

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From the Editor

The waves created by Don Watson's book *Death Sentence: the decay of public language* (2003) are not yet fading into ripples. Bill Krebs's article on it in the December issue of *AS* prompted a number of correspondents to write in, with comments on their experiences with bureaucratise and government-speak in various quarters.

Hans Colla (VIC) remembered being carefully tutored in it as a junior public servant (see email reproduced opposite). It is perpetrated by governments of all persuasions, as Caroline Kraina pointed out in her email. Syd Curtis (QLD) reported that sinking feeling when he opened a letter from his car insurance company, which said that "pursuant to new Commonwealth legislative requirements...", he was being issued with a new 43-page policy document. He was however pleasantly surprised to find that the text was written in clear language, and not the reading chore that he feared it would be. "I can't really say that I enjoyed reading it, but I did enjoy the fact that every sentence could be understood at first reading." It's something to be thankful for.

Newspaper prose raises other kinds of stylistic and grammatical issues. Shirley Beaver noted in her email the frequent use of *may have* in conditional sentences where you would expect *might have*. Feedback 22 provided one such example in the test sentence "She may/might have died if the ambulance hadn't come", where *may* was the choice of almost three quarters of respondents under 45 for writing. But less than a third of those over 65 endorsed *may*: most preferred *might*. The generational difference is clear, though the underlying reasons are still debated. To older people, *might* is still the past tense of *may*, and needed for consistency of tense with *had...come* in the *if* clause, to put the possibility of death into the

"remote past". For them the use of *may* seems to open the lid on what actually happened – which could be part of the intention. Some commentators note that *may have* makes the crisis seem more immediate, and so journalists – among others – use it to engage their readers. Certainly it has been noted in the press in both Britain and the USA for several decades.

The tense distinction between *may* and *might* is probably not seen by younger people, and modern grammars (e.g. *Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English*, 1999) report its decline. Perhaps younger people find *may* more formal than *might*, and therefore more appropriate for writing. This is in line with the fact that the majority of Feedback respondents of all ages preferred *might* for speaking. All that apart, *may* is now a good deal commoner than *might* in written usage, and this alone would explain why it seems to be displacing *might*.

Another curious grammatical phenomenon was reported by GW Williams from the Hunter Valley NSW, who has heard people referring to a student as "the boy of Jones" rather than "Jones's son", and "the girl of Johnson" instead of "Johnson's daughter". Just why the longer phrase should be used there is unclear, though it is less remarkable when referring to the older generation: compare "the father of Jones" and "Jones's father". If you have observed this happening anywhere else in Australia (or you can confirm it from within the Hunter Valley), please write and let us know.

Many people have observed that the English pronoun system is now a bit ragged at the edges, with subject/nominative forms such as *I* and *we* appearing where you might expect the object/accusative forms *me* and *us*. Neil Whitelock (VIC) reports hearing a professor saying "They invited Freda and I to dinner". This may not have been a

"senior moment"! Rather it may show that educated speakers – and those who say "between you and I" – are not too fussed about the selection of pronouns when they are conversing. Alternatively it could be a form of "hyper-correction", whereby people avoid using *me* because they remember being corrected long ago for saying "Me and James rode our bikes to school" and urged to use *I*. The subject/object case distinction probably didn't make sense then, and may not seem crucial to making the point now. Either way, this indifferent use of personal pronouns is strongly associated with impromptu speaking, though the distinctions are still maintained in writing.

Words old and new were commented on by other correspondents. Both T.A. (NSW) and Charles Long (NSW) were familiar with the use of *gentles* for "fishing maggots", as an alternative to the *gents* reported by Sue Butler from the Wordmap project (*AS* December 2003). The word *barong*, shown in the Northern Territory dress code (also *AS* December 2003) was a new one for several correspondents. It refers to a formal kind of shirt with embroidery on the front and elsewhere (see *barong Tagalog* in the *Macquarie Dictionary*, 1997). *Barong* meaning "shirt" seems in fact to be based on a word from Tagalog (a language of the Philippines), whereas *barong* referring to a kind of knife renders the Malay word "parang".

Finally, what could a "boot tree dreaming" be? RG Kimber (NT) reports seeing it in the latest issue of *Outback* magazine, an allusion to the window decoration of a Central Australian shop, whose proprietor has hung up his worn-out RMW boots on a piece of dead gum-tree. It seems to hijack the Aboriginal world of creation mythology, referred to in English as "dreaming". □



Letters to the Editor

Dear Editor,

May I offer the following comments on two words frequently misused in Australian speech and writing. *Prevaricate* is now being used as a synonym for *procrastinate*, for no other reasons, it seems, than that they both start with *p*, both end in *-ate*, and have the same number of syllables. *Procrastinate*, as everyone knows, means “to delay or defer until another day” (from the Latin *cras*, meaning “tomorrow”). *Prevaricate*, on the other hand, means “to act or speak evasively”, “to deviate from straightforwardness”. It is interesting to note that the word derives, appropriately, from that Latin *praevaricator*, meaning a dishonest lawyer, which in turn came from the verb *praevaricari* meaning “to walk knock-kneed or crookedly”. The confusion between *prevaricate* and *procrastinate* may have been compounded in modern society by the fact that politicians, government departments and bureaucracies habitually do both.

John Healey
Semaphore, SA

fact that Mr Jones now has fewer accumulated assets I respectfully recommend that... and in consideration of the... and in pursuance of the Social Services Act 1948...”. He then armed me with a wondrous array of bureaucratese, clichés, redundancies and verboisities. Admittedly this “recommendation” was for intra-departmental purposes only; yet letters to pensioners were just as verbose and clichéd. I soon acquired this public service-speak. Twenty years later, as a proofreader/editor at university level, I surfed the new wave of Plain English, where every bureaucrat was urged, in spite of early training, to write simply and plainly. To be fair, most public service letters (e.g. from Centrelink) are now just that: simply written and easily understood.

Hans Colla
Highton, VIC

Dear Pam,

Sue Butler wrote that saying “piece” instead of “sandwich” revealed a Scottish background. (*Australian Style*, December 2003). I find that assertion intriguing on two grounds. Firstly, “piece” was widespread among us children of the 1930s-1940s raised on the southern outskirts of Birmingham, England, where my mother’s ancestors had been born for generations. Not a tartan in sight. Secondly, a “piece” was one slice of bread, usually spread with jam, and could easily be eaten on the run by a lively eight-year-old. A “sandwich” was another thing altogether: two slices of buttered bread with cold meat; a sit-down job cut into two or more manageable sections. (“Posh Moms” cut the sandwich corner to corner into triangles).

Charles Long
Mollymook, NSW

Dear Pam,

Professor Bill Krebs’s article about Don Watson’s book – *Death Sentence: the decay of public language* – reminded me of my time as a Social Services pension clerk in 1962. My job was to do minor assessments of pension payments. The registrar’s job – the boss of a regional office – was to (dis)approve my recommendations. For my first assessment I must have written my recommendation far too plainly. He called me into his office and said kindly: “Hans, this is not the way we write in the public service. We have our own language. Here, I’ll show you. Instead of “Mr Jones should get four shillings p.f. more because...”, write: “In view of the

A photo of a Feedback fieldtrip, captured by Robyn Whiteley



FEED BACK

—23—

VERBAL OPTIONS (2)

Verb phrases in the following sentences could all be expressed in more than one way. Please tick the box for whichever of the two versions you generally use. If you would tend to use one when speaking and the other when writing, could you add a note to that effect.

- 1(a) They insisted that the complaint be presented in writing.
(b) They insisted that the complaint should be presented in writing.
- 2(a) Many would take advantage of the system, if it was available in the country.
(b) Many would take advantage of the system, if it were available in the country.
- 3(a) That problem has been solved long ago.
(b) That problem was solved long ago.
- 4(a) If I get phoned by the bank, I know that it isn't good news.
(b) If I am phoned by the bank, I know that it isn't good news.
- 5(a) The seat had a strange effect on her, as if she was suspended in space.
(b) The seat had a strange effect on her, as if she were suspended in space.
- 6(a) I know Joanna is around somewhere – Alex has just spoken to her.
(b) I know Joanna is around somewhere – Alex just spoke to her.
- 7(a) Next the people will be asking for cake.
(b) Next the people will ask for cake.
- 8(a) She expressed the wish that her jewelry should be given to charity.
(b) She expressed the wish that her jewelry be given to charity.
- 9(a) Andrew got struck by lightning on his farm.
(b) Andrew was struck by lightning on his farm.
- 10(a) You speak remarkably good French. Have you ever lived in France?
(b) You speak remarkably good French. Did you ever live in France?
- 11(a) A shuttle bus system could be being introduced in the next few weeks.
(b) A shuttle bus system could be introduced in the next few weeks.
- 12(a) Have you told them the news yet?
(b) Did you tell them the news yet?

Would you please indicate your age bracket and sex:

10-24 25-44 45-64 65+ F/M

and the state in which you live:

ACT NSW NT QLD SA TAS VIC WA

Please return this Feedback questionnaire to:

Style Council Centre, Linguistics Department, Macquarie University, NSW 2109 Australia.

Alternatively, the questionnaire may be faxed to the Style Council Centre at (02)9850 9199.



FEED BACK

Report

The questionnaire on “verbal options” (Feedback 22) attracted responses from 382 people representing a range of ages from 10-100. There were 49 respondents aged 10-24 (Group 1), 41 aged 25-44 (Group 2), 117 aged 45-64 (Group 3) and 173 aged 65 and over (Group 4). We are most grateful to the individuals and groups who went to the trouble of sending in their responses (see pp. 6,8 and 9). The questionnaire data have been painstakingly entered by Deanna Wong, expertly processed by Adam Smith, and are discussed here by Peter Collins (Head of Linguistics at the University of New South Wales).

The questionnaire focused on the semantics of modal verbs, a class that is of interest to language scholars for several reasons. In contemporary English, the popularity of some modals is challenged by the corresponding quasi-modals (e.g. *will* by *be going to*, *must* by *have got to*); others are undergoing rapid loss of currency (e.g. *ought to*); and others have changed their meaning despite being subject to prescriptivist censure (e.g. *can* used with the sense of permission).

Respondents were presented with sentences containing alternative modal and quasimodal expressions, and asked to indicate which they would use in a casual conversation with a close friend (typically in speech), and which in a letter about a serious matter written to someone not known to them (typically in writing). The two modes of communication are thought to affect the choice of modals.

Several of the quasimodals surveyed are gaining ground on the corresponding modal verb. In the expression of futurity, *be going to* has become more popular than *will* in Australian speech. In the sentence “I am sure it [’s/is going to] [will] be very entertaining”, *is going to* was endorsed by the majority (a ratio of 6:4). By contrast *will* was strongly preferred in writing.

When expressing obligation, the quasimodal *have to* provides an alternative to the modal *must*, especially in conversation. Faced with the sentence “They [have to] [must] be in Adelaide by Tuesday”, most respondents (a ratio of 3:1) preferred *have to* for

speech. In writing, by contrast, *must* was considered more appropriate by a ratio of just over 2:1.

Have got to is yet another way of expressing an obligation to do something, and respondents were offered the choice between it and the briefer *have to* in the sentence “We [have to][’ve/have got to] replace the back fence”. A two thirds majority here preferred *have to* over *have got to*, in both speech and writing, reflecting perhaps the traditional bias against *got*.

Obligation can also be expressed in English by means of *should*, and the quasimodal *ought to*, though the decline of the latter has been noted in several major varieties of English. The questionnaire tested this with the sentence “You [ought to] [should] consider joining the group”, and confirmed the trend for Australian English too. *Should* proved more popular with the respondents than *ought to* in speech (ratio 2:1) as well as writing, where the ratio was closer to 3:1.

The use of the modal *can* rather than *may* in questions has traditionally been proscribed as rather impolite, though commonly heard. Responses to the test sentence “[Can][May] I offer you some advice?” showed that *may* was firmly endorsed in writing (a ratio of almost 12:1); whereas the tendency in speech went quite strongly the other way. *Can* was preferred by almost 3:1.

Thus the mode of communication often affects the choice between modal and quasimodal, and the latter are clearly gaining ground in ordinary conversation (except for *ought to*). At the same time, the written factor works more strongly for older people, it seems. Respondents (45+) were more inclined than those under 45 to use *will* rather than [*be*] *going to*. They also preferred *may* over *can* for a polite question. □

Total (382)	in conversation	in a letter
's going to is going to will	35% 26% 39%	4% 13% 84%
have to must	76% 24%	34% 66%
have to 've got to have got to	64% 21% 16%	65% 21% 16%
ought to should	35% 65%	27% 73%
can(?) may(?)	73% 27%	8% 92%



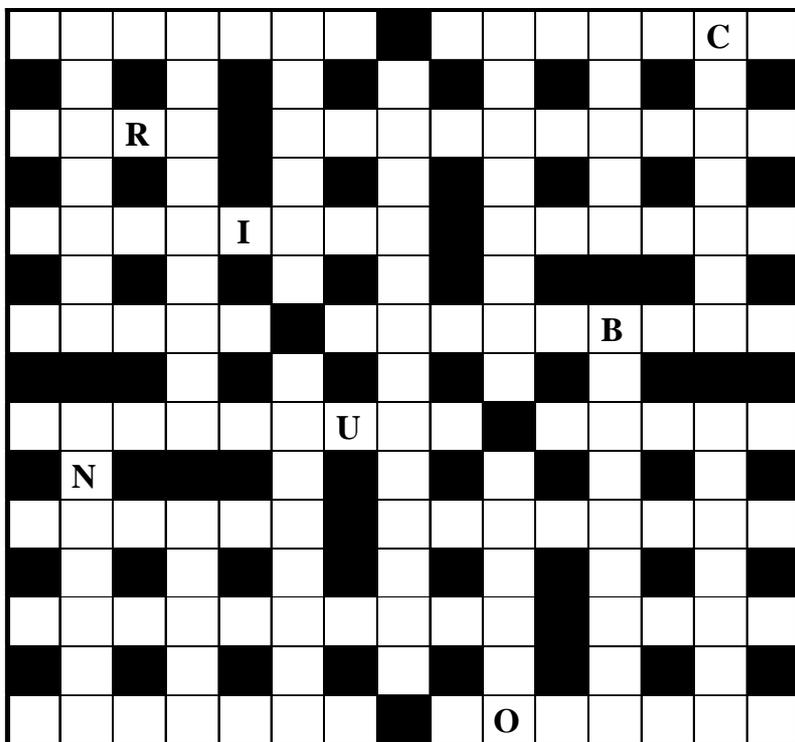


RUBICON



RUBICON, devised by David Astle, is a hybrid of crossword, jigsaw and acrostic. First, solve as many clues as you can and begin to fit the answers inside the grid. (The scattered letters of RUBICON should give you a toehold.) When the grid is completed, arrange the *clues* from the first Across to the last Down – their 29 initial letters will spell a category. As a bonus, which six of your answers belong to the category in question?

- Topsoil enrichment (13)
- Dramatist contracting Hay Fever? (4,6)
- Moved into panic mode (7,3)
- Absolute carnage (9)
- Homespun name for crude oil, expressing its value (5,4)
- Note of commendation from a prior employer (9)
- Treasury of goods (9)
- Cricket team + a crowd? (8)
- Really appreciative (8)
- Single-reed instrument (8)
- Someone from whom you're descended (8)
- Eye closely (7)
- In circulation (7)
- Ocean fish that 'possessed pier' (7)
- Open territory beyond the urban sprawl (7)
- Opposite of kindness (7)
- Resistant malady also known as wool-sorter's disease (7)
- Word of valediction (7)
- Wound for tribal purposes; loosen soil (7)
- Enforcing a monetary penalty (6)
- Openly confused state (6)
- Skin picture (6)
- The 25th anniversary (6)
- Fix a hole with a piece of cloth (5)
- Ha-ha-ha, it says (5)
- Song of praise (5)
- Wooden fastener (5)
- Naughty phrase; pledge (4)
- Roam the internet (4)



Solution to Rubicon in last issue
 WORDS OR NAMES SOMEHOW
 LINKED TO APPLE:
 TELL (William), SNOW WHITE,
 NEW YORK (Big Apple), FUJI,
 DELICIOUS, JOBS (Steve, founder
 of Apple computers)



How to contact Australian Style

On editorial matters

Please contact the Editor at Macquarie University as follows:

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Concerning the mailing list

If you change your address, or need to alter your details on the mailing list in any way, or would like to add the name of a friend or colleague to the list, please contact: Australian Style c/- Australian Government Information Management Office, GPO Box 390, Canberra ACT 2601 or by email: subscribe.style@agimo.gov.au

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