AUSTRALIAN STYLE

Figuring out numbers

Dr Robert Eagleson, a Plain English consultant and Member of the Corporations Law Simplification Task Force, argues the case for representing all numbers mentioned in texts as figures, not words.

Traditionally style manuals have promoted a mixed approach for presenting numbers – using words for some and figures for others. In number 49 of the international journal *Clarity,* all numbers were presented as figures. Why not follow suit?

Those who advocate using words cannot agree on a threshold, some arguing for words to be used for numbers under 100, others, for numbers under 10. Nor are they as cleancut in their practice as might appear from their pronouncements. Figures – not words – rule in expressions of dates (*8 July*), money (*$5*) and in several other contexts. From this oscillation between words and figures it follows that there is no wholesale, intrinsic objection to figures, and that loyalty to words in a few contexts flows from unthinking acceptance of tradition, not principle. What principle makes *4 June* acceptable, but not *4 sheep*?

A harmful distraction

My interest in the matter stirred when I became a consultant in plain English to a major legal firm, and began to receive enquiries from lawyers on how to treat a number. There seemed to be an advantage in allowing all numbers to appear as figures everywhere. It would rescue writers from being distracted by yet another arbitrary rule and allow them to concentrate on the critical goal of achieving clarity in their documents.

Developments in our usage support adopting figures in all contexts. Today English newspapers around the world restrict words to 1-9, and have handed over 10-99 to figures. In Australian and New Zealand legislation, figures have been long used for all numbers, except at the beginning of sentences. An established book publisher in Britain starts sentences with figures, and a government agency in Singapore uses figures everywhere.

A special preserve!

The sixth edition of the [Australian] *Style Manual* recommended that "In documents of a general kind – where descriptive or narrative text is predominant and numbers are not a significant focus – use words for numbers up to one hundred" (p 162). This is somewhat subjective given that the *Manual* restricts the rule to numbers under 100. Wouldn't 6,392 be even more unsympathetic? And what of numbers under 100 occurring as figures because the convention operates halfheartedly, for example

"… at two in the morning of 3 March" (*Rumpole and the Penge Bungalow Murders* p.49*)*? Again, why do style manuals protect literary texts from figures for 1-99 but impose words for 1-9 on scientific texts?

In the first place

The May 2005 issue of *The Village Observer,* which circulates in Lane Cove Municipality, carried the sentence: "1992 was the Silver Jubilee of the start of teaching …" (p 29). The editor had copied the sentence exactly from a document supplied by the Vice-Chancellor's Office at Macquarie University. Here were 2 then who were prepared to start a sentence with a figure!

During a discussion the editor pointedly asked: "How else would you do it?" Traditionalists would require "The year" or a similar circumlocution in front of the figures, prompting another query, "Why would you do this?" Figures, to which the concepts of upper and lower case do not apply, serve just as well for the start of a sentence as a word beginning with a capital. The punctuation at the end of 1 sentence is an adequate marker that what follows is a new sentence.

Clarity 49 also contained sentences that began with figures, such as "3 examples of changes to the law demonstrate some of the benefits". In objecting, a Canadian revealingly commented: "Virtually all of your audience has been taught since grade school that where a number appears at the beginning of a sentence it should appear in words". The cat is now out of the bag! The stumbling blocks are familiarity and shortsightedness. The former conventions on punctuation in addresses were tediously taught at school and, while some had difficulty in converting to current procedures, change we all did over a short space in time. Those who are having trouble with sentences starting with a figure – and many do not – could find that with exposure to the practice, their difficulty similarly disappears.

Figurative headings

Newspapers sometimes run headings with a single digit figure instead of the usual word: "Militants' Blast Kills 2 Palestinians" (*New York Times* 11.08.04); "Perfect house found in 4 weeks" (*Sun Herald* 22.08.04). Space is the determining factor, but editors are able to substitute a figure because they are requiring the community to cope, not with something novel, but simply with a much-used linguistic sign in yet another position. That few object to – or even notice – these substitutions is instructive: most readers have no trouble with figures for 1-9 in any context.

The inconsistency of the conventions of using words for numbers induces many lapses, and the threshold is being constantly whittled away. Growing rejections in community practice and clear-sighted assessment remove any ground to protect them. Writers who select figures for all contexts in their publications merit immediate acceptance, and a liberty equal to that enjoyed by those who fancy words spasmodically. □

Going...Going...Gone

Do you know what a "Dear John letter" is? When was the last time you heard anyone say, "It's not cricket!". Do people still have *chinwags*? Are *shotgun weddings* a thing of the past? Do we ever refer to something as *bung* when it's broken? Are kids thought of as *scallywags* any more? Apart from barbeques, when do we see a *galore*? Does anyone ever *shoot through* any more?

New words are often called *buzzwords* presumably because they make a lot of noise when they arrive. We're wont to greet them wryly as a momentary fashion – they're put in inverted commas, or "air quotes". We might get a laugh out of them, we might spread them around a bit, but we don't take them very seriously. We expect them to make a bit of a splash, and then exit. We don't expect to see them included as "real words" in dictionaries.

All this buzzing about marks a new word's entry. It's an entirely different circumstance when an old word finally exits. There's no grand curtain call, no media releases. Fading doesn't happen on centre stage; it's a slipping-away when no-one's looking. The only people who might give the matter any import are the intrepid lexicographers who make the decision to add an italicised *obs* (obsolete) or *arch* (archaic).

The coastline of English is a quietly shifting phenomenon, and a major factor in the shift is the fading away of words of earlier generations. Publisher Richard Walsh speaks nostalgically about the words that were un-selfconsciously part of baby boomers' growing-up years and now "are simply fading like old photographs".

Yes, old photos fade. So does the colour of jeans, the sunset, the print on old faxes, the washing instructions on clothing labels, hair colour (natural and bottled) and music. Even memories fade, and, at the end of a long day or even a life, people fade.

And fading also happens to words. The lexicon of any given generation differs subtly from the one before it, as it did from the generation before. I sense, however, that the process is accelerating. And the fading process is elusive especially contrasted with the ostentatious arrival of a new word. A term like *metrosexual* bursts onto the lexical stage, but old ones, like *bed clothes* or *petticoat* or *cheerio*, slip from view with nary a ripple. Absence is (nearly always) easier than presence to not-notice.

Now, by "fading words", I don't mean slang, which comes and goes as is its nature. And I don't mean Crocodile Dundee words. *Throw another prawn on the barbie*, *stone the crows* and others like these became caricatured in depictions of Australia that served to reinforce the expectations of northern hemisphere tourists or consumers of popular culture. They're no more real than a talking skippy.

And I don't mean the lost bits of dinkum quaintness, words that go back to Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson and time-piece movies of our various myths/legends. Words that are used, when they're used, with something akin to embarrassment, certainly self-consciously.

And I don't mean words for things we don't have any more – like (Sydney) trams, record players, transistor radios (we still have *trannie* but it's morphed) and soon-to-be-

obsolescent, video cassettes. And while technology drives a lot of change, some words – *wallflower*, *cracker* , *struth* and *twerp*, for instance – have no digital switch.

The fading principle that I am highlighting here applies to the mainstream of baby-boomer-speak. There are words that are gradually losing their lustre; they're used less frequently, and so you don't read them or hear them as once you did. Before you know it, a new generation has grown up. A parent or grandparent says "crikey" or "bells and whistles" or "Blind Freddie" or "time and tide" . The progeny reacts in bewilderment.

WELL, I WAS GOING TO SHOOT THROUGH... BUT NO ONE KNEW WHAT THAT MEANT ANYMORE!
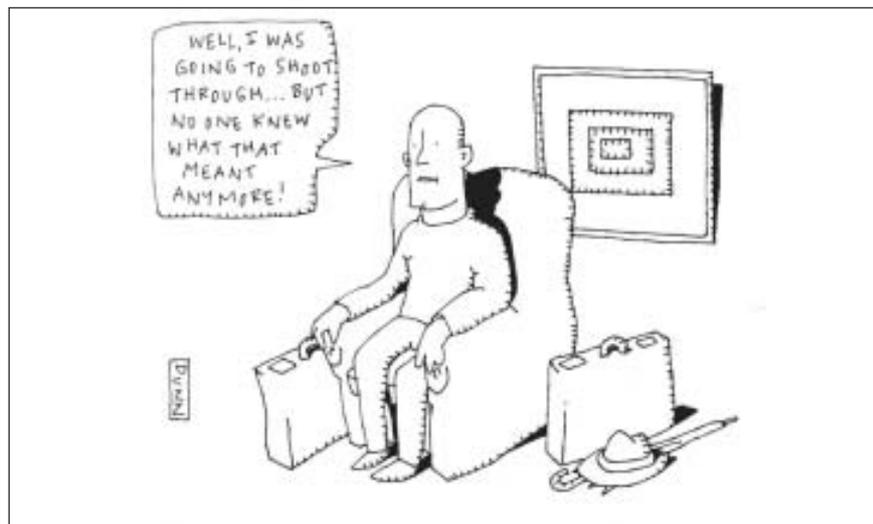
Style Council 2005

Style Council 2005 takes the theme "Style in context, Australian and international". It will be held in Melbourne on 15-16 October, dovetailing with the National Editors conference at the Eden on the Park Hotel.

The conference will open on Saturday evening with a celebration of the fourth edition of the *Macquarie Dictionary* featuring Australian author Thomas Keneally.

On Sunday morning, the keynote speaker is Professor Kate Burridge from Monash University, launching the conference theme with a wide-ranging paper on communicating with different audiences. Other papers will focus on the details of adapting publications for local and overseas consumers. There are details of editorial style to attend to, in spelling and punctuation adjustments; and adjustments to weights and measures, and to the institutions referred to, e.g. "Canberra" for the central government. The text's cultural positioning often requires some adjustment to work outside the Australian context.

Offers of (20 minute) papers on these and related topics are welcome, to be submitted by 30 July. Please send abstracts of 300 words or three paragraphs to the conference administrator Mr Adam Smith online: adam.smith@ling.mq.edu.au

Australex 2005

The 2005 AUSTRALEX conference (Australian and New Zealand Society for Lexicography) will take place at the University of Melbourne on Tuesday 27 September, at Trinity College. The conference theme will be "Dictionaries and the community", designed to examine the contexts of dictionary-making and dictionary use. Keynote speaker for the conference will be Dr Ghil'ad Zuckermann, currently a Research Fellow at the Latrobe University Centre for Language Typology, who will focus on the role of the Hebrew language academy in compiling and creating a lexicon for modern Israeli speakers, both in Israel and overseas. Papers on dictionaries and other kinds of lexica compiled for communities in the Australia-Pacific region and beyond are most welcome.

Abstracts of 300 words should be submitted online by 15 July to the AUSTRALEX secretary Mr Adam Smith: adam.smith@ling.mq.edu.au

For the first time AUSTRALEX is offering travel support to postgraduate students who would like to present a paper at the conference. For information about these student bursaries, please see the website at: www.australex.org

A version of this article was first published in The Sydney Morning Herald *(SUNDAY LIFE).*

When I said "cheerio" to my daughter the other day as she was walking off towards the bus stop, she turned abruptly and said "cheery WHAT?".

How do we explain the fading principle? Partly it's that the brand-new is perceived as more valuable than the stale-old. Partly, it's an egalitarian spirit that resists what is perceived of as "highbrow", while equating "highbrow" with "classist". Partly, it's a reaction against the clichéd as platitudinous and insincere. Partly, it's the changing national demographic that does not call on the same traditions of cultural literacy (think the Bible, the Bard, Gilbert and Sullivan, as tasters) as the more homogenous demographic of previous generations.

I accept that death is part of life. But I've set out now to track down our fading words. Not for the purpose of performing any last-minute cardiac massage. Simply to have a record of the shifting coastline, for its own sake. □

S C O S E NOTES

The staff of a large government institution became the latest victims of the jargon of the payroll industry when this bewildering statement appeared in an email from the Human Resources department:

"An 'Offline Payment Post 2002' entry will show in the 'Deductions' box and this is merely the recovery of the earlier off-pay payment which will be offset by the actual retrospective payments for pay period 23."

Clear as mud? Sir Humphrey would have been proud of this example of doublespeak.

It turns out that this statement affects those employees who have been inadvertently overpaid over the past three years. Unfortunately many employees are likely to have ignored the message because it's incomprehensible. A SCOSE member who was in the know about such language explained that an "offline payment" is the taking back of sums of money that have already been paid to an employee, i.e. it's a deduction. Too bad if you were not expecting this to happen to you. The moral of the story, said SCOSE, is that office memos about important matters such as staff pay and workplace safety should be written in clear, unambiguous language.

Does being born in Australia entitle you to refer to yourself as "Indigenous", or at least "indigenous"? ABC staff say that, in emails and talkback radio discussions, some non-Aboriginal Australians are claiming to be indigenous. Leaving aside the possible motivations for such claims, it has to be said that this interpretation of the meaning of *indigenous* isn't supported either by standard usage or by the dictionary definitions.

In standard parlance, the word *indigenous* refers to things that are accepted as being native to a particular country. So, for example, a plant that's indigenous to Australia is one that originates in Australia – we distinguish non-indigenous plants like poplars, grapevines and daffodils from indigenous plants like wattle and bottlebrush.

When referring specifically to people rather than things, the same general principle applies, but there's a spelling difference. The Australian government *Style Manual* (2002: 56,57) makes it clear that *Indigenous* should be used to refer to the original inhabitants of Australia and that *indigenous* (not capitalised) can be used in a general sense to refer to the original inhabitants of other countries. In other words, *Indigenous* does not refer to non-Aboriginal people who were born in Australia.

An ABC listener was intrigued by an unfamiliar word – *tsunamic* – and wanted to know whether it was a proper word. An internet search yielded some results but, with predictable remarks like "adjective" and "rare", threw little light on its use.

When new words find their way into news stories, they often seem contrived and unconvincing. It takes a certain feel for the language to adapt a word to a new use. A word like *tsunami* lends itself to hyperbole but who would have expected to find its derivative in a story about the late Graham Kennedy? The word was brought to life in this statement from a reporter on the ABC's AM program: "Television critic, Doug Anderson, says Graham Kennedy was a one-off whose impact was tsunamic and won't be seen again."

Speaking of hyperbole, ABC listeners were amused to hear the word mispronounced as [HIGH-puh-bohl]. That must be the next thing up from Superbowl!

A caution was issued by SCOSE about the term *abortionist*. A reporter had used the term with respect to a doctor who performs occasional abortions as part of his role as a Medicare funded general practitioner. SCOSE warned that the term is pejorative and refers to a person who makes a practice of performing illegal abortions.

Another word with the suffix *-ist* attracted a caution from SCOSE. Journalists were advised to avoid the term *Islamist* after phrases like "a crackdown on Islamist militants" suddenly started to appear in news stories. Although *Islamist* is listed in dictionaries, there are no clear definitions of its meaning. It's generally encountered in limited contexts suggesting fanaticism with which the speaker doesn't agree, i.e. it carries an implied value judgment. One listener says it appears to have crept into use since "September 11" to describe anyone engaged in violent activities to support an extreme religious view. Perhaps it's another example of the kind of language that's generated in what Gore Vidal calls the "perpetual war for perpetual peace". In any case, given that the word is still rarely used, has no established usage and seems heavily loaded, it's better to stick to the standard adjective *Islamic*, which is neutral.

Language researcher Irene Poinkin summarises recent discussions at SCOSE, the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English.

From the Editor

Many thanks to all those who wrote in, with responses to questions posed in the December 2004 issue of AS, and fresh observations on language trends within Australia. Not all points can be covered on these editorial pages, but we do appreciate your correspondence. It's a vital part of the information exchange on Australian English which we aim to maintain through *AS*.

The question of how to refer to the midnight hour was very helpfully pursued by more than a dozen correspondents, two of whose letters/e-mails are quoted opposite. The ISO (discussed in James Campbell's letter opposite) is clearly open to both 24:00 and 00:00, depending on whether it is the end or start of a period. This point was taken up by both David Lindstrom (VIC) and Bill Royston (VIC). But the possibility of using 23:59 or 00:01 to underscore which side of the bewitching hour one stands on, was also taken up. Noel Carter (QLD) and Audrey Gardiner (QLD) reported that the RAAF did indeed use these one-minute-off conventions for periods ending and starting at midnight, as did the army: see O'Connor's letter opposite. An anonymous correspondent from the ACT pointed out that the airlines do something similar, making it 23:58 or 00:02.

Yet other industries apparently have strong preferences. A small sample of people in the Queensland health industry (reported by Michael Farr) agreed with those in South Australia (quoted by Rebecca Miller, Letter to AS, December 2004) that midnight was definitely 24:00. However John J Howard (NSW) reported never having encountered any notation other than 00:00, in all his experience (a) as an intern in Sydney hospitals; or (b) working with the media: BBC Radio and TV, CBC and ABC-TV, the Australian Film,Television and Radio School.

Other interesting aspects of the question come to light with the timing devices we all use. Mark Blunt (email) reported that while the household oven worked with 24:00, the video and radio recorders had 00:00. A correspondent from the ACT also reported 00:00 for her VCR. A relevant comment here from Renato Iannella (QLD) was that the instrument using 00:00 for midnight makes fewer changes as it passes on into the next day (00:01 etc.) than one which goes via 24:00 to 00:01. So there may be a mechanical incentive to use 00:00, despite human needs to be more flexible, as suggested in the previous paragraphs.

Among the letters on language, several were inspired by Ray Kelley's inventive poem using the *-en* suffix on a suite of new verbs, including Lois Grosse (ACT): see opposite. *Enrichened, I am,* said Kerry Gray (NSW) with the suffix underscoring the prefix. The prefix is also available to anyone in the community and the media, of course, and Audrey Gardiner (QLD) noted its use in *enculturised* in a comment made on the ABC: "GIs in Iraq are enculturised by violent movies, videogames and rap music to be killers". The *de-* prefix was spotted by Dick Kimber (NT) forming new words in the Territory's newspapers: *degonged* for someone who had lost his OA award; and *desnagging device* for what every amateur fisherman needs. *Ex-chalkie* remakes the familiar abbreviation for "teacher" to designate someone who has found a new career in the Centre (or anywhere else); while *rellie-run* is apparently an Alice Springs term explaining the absence of a resident who is off reconnecting with the family in other parts of Australia.

In fact, colloquial creations are a feature of local newspapers, in the text and in headlines, where their brevity is an asset. Thus *genny* for "generator", and *vollies* for "volunteers" – from headlines reported by Dick Kimber (NT).

Both of them grab attention, either because you know them and their local importance, or because you don't and have to read on to find out what they mean! *Troopy* for "troop carrier" was a further example with that familiar Australian suffix, spelled either with *–ie* and *–y,* the "hypocoristic" which was discussed by Roly Sussex in the December issue of *AS*.

Abbreviations sometimes look strange when pluralized. Amar Germani (NSW) noted how *uni* becomes the slightly odd *unis* (never *unies),* and might indeed benefit by an apostrophe: "uni's". That however goes against the current trend to reserve *'s* for possessives, even though it has in the past been used with plural acronyms/initialisms, e.g. *MP's ask for rise.* These days the government *Style Manual* (6th ed, 2002, p.153) recommends *MPs (ask for a rise).* □

Letters to the Editor

Dear Pam Peters

Re: Plain English

Enclosed is an article from a metropolitan newspaper's Food and Gardening column. I am bemused by the following paragraph which quotes a ceramicist speaking about her parents' garden and her art work:

"'Their entrenched belief in productivity and the self-sufficient ability to make-do was materialised by my father's conversion of the grassy lawns of our family home into a generative amalgamation of vegetable beds, orchard-inspired arrangements and various home-made habitats for an array of product-supplying animals over the past several decades,' she says."

Could someone really speak like this ("she says") or did she write these words? Perhaps she learnt this style when writing her Master's thesis. Even written, it sounds like bureaucratese at its worst. I think she means that her father turned grass into a vegie patch, planted fruit trees and kept chooks, or perhaps ducks or rabbits, but who would know?

Maureen Bell
ACT

Dear Pam

The term "the girl of Clark" was in common use in Inverell/Glen Innes in the 1950s. It sounded funny to meet an old friend of those years still using the expression in the 1980s. I believe it was only used when the family was locally known. It was more likely to be used for a girl than a boy!! Eg Jim Brown married a girl of Smith. If the family had one daughter it was "the girl of Smith". If there were more it was "a girl of Smith". It was never used of a stranger to the town, that "A girl of Smith came from Sydney to teach at the high school". But if she was local, it was "a girl of Smith has started to teach at the high school".

Anon.

Hi Dr Peters!

I just spotted the "Signage" section of the Australian Style Newsletter. It brought to mind my very first job at a fish and chip shop in North Ryde. As well as making mountains of chips, my tasks included mopping the shop floor after we'd closed. To ensure any late customers didn't ruin my clean floors, I had to flip over a handwritten sign on the door. Instead of being greeted with "Yes! We are opened!", customers were informed, "Sorry. We are close."

Ross Gow
via email

Dear Pam

"ISO8601:2000(E) Data elements and interchange formats – Information interchange – Representation of dates and times" allows both 0000 and 2400 as representations of midnight – 0000 as the begining of a day, 2400 as the end. However it notes that "[t]he choice of representation ... will depend upon any association with a date, or a time-interval. Representations where [hh] has the value [24] are only preferred to represent the end of a time-interval".

I have noticed a suggestion that 0001 or 2359 be used when the creative inaccuracy will not create other problems.

James Campbell
via email

Dear Pam

No matter which way an institution decides to indicate midnight – 2400 or 0000 – there will be confusion. Someone, somewhere, will think that Thursday is being referred to instead of Wednesday, or vice versa.

An institution to which I used to belong, the army, realised this and banned midnight altogether. In the army, nothing ever happened at midnight, although lots of things happened at 23.59 hours and 00.01 hours.

Who said "military intelligence" was an oxymoron?

Terry O'Connor
via email

A comment on English and Adjectival Verbs, echoing Ray Kelley's poem, published in *Australian Style*, Dec. 2004 (p.9)

They keenen its edge and bolden its vigour,
Simplen our language, and besten its tone,
Exacten the meaning, shorten most sentences,
These punchy verbs have a life of their own.

Lois Grosse
ACT

Book Notes

Word Map

Bill Krebs is Associate Professor of Language and Literature at Bond University. He reviews Word Map *by Kel Richards and The Macquarie Dictionary, published by ABC Books, RRP $22.95*

I have long sought an excuse to deploy the term *ludicity*. This wonderfully Latinate term [*ludus* game], for which *playfulness* might be a fair non-technical equivalent, has recently been restored to currency at least amongst students of Australian language studies, by my learned colleague Professor Roland Sussex. He has a lot of fun supporting his claim that one distinctive and endearing feature of Australian English is the delight taken by Australian English speakers in mucking about with (or *mucking up* with?) the sounds and meanings of their language, and entertaining themselves and others in the process: this feature he terms *ludicity*.

This little paperback, *Word Map*, is an eloquent testament to Australian lexical ludicity. It is full of the entertaining bits of witty nonsense which have tickled the fancy of the local linguistic community, and local currency elevates them to the status of localisms. It is a lot of fun. It is a perfect book to take to a dinner party, particularly if the guests hail from many different regions of Australia. If for example, someone claims to be born and bred in Perth, you could test this assertion by asking them to explain the term *unleaded*. And if someone from Melbourne, who claims never to have been polluted by sandgroper-speak, pipes up to tell you that *unleaded*, as everyone knows, is medium alcohol beer, then that person should log on very smartly to www.abc.net.au/wordmap and register the fact that the term is known in Melbourne as well!

Word Map is born of the constructive and ludic collusion of the ABC and Macquarie Dictionary in that website. Everybody and anybody can enter their own gems of local usage if they think the term or phrase is distinctive to particular areas of Australia. The Macquarie editors try to weed out terms which are recorded across the country (and are therefore Australianisms but not regionalisms) and the result is then the best indicator we have to date of the degree to which Australian English shows traces of its own lexical dialects. There is a long way to go before this extensive but delightfully demotic sampling will yield results on which researchers could base confident general assertions about Australian regionalisms, but that doesn't detract from the fun provided now by *Word Map*.

There are many occasions where your fellow dinner party guests will interject: "Hang on, we kids in Queensland were told to pick some *silver beet* from the vegie patch for dinner: you can't tell me that term for that sort of spinach is only Victoria and Adelaide!" Assertions about the provenance of many terms in the book are best taken as "as far as we know" statements: a point which is made by Susan Butler and Kel Richards in their introductions. The tone of writing in many of the definitions and explanations is pleasantly informal and occasionally facetious. This tells us not to take it all too seriously, and it also helps water down the effect of the large number of vulgarisms, which are certainly the best (and the most *ludicrous*: get it?) bits. Whether ludic and ludicrous vulgarity is also a distinguishing feature of Australian English, only further research will tell!

Tighter editing would produce a tidier little book. An example: one of the best party-pieces *Word Map* offers is a recitation of the three dozen regional terms for Speedos (*budgie smugglers, boasters, lolly-baggers, fish frighteners, wog togs,* etc) which occupies a couple of inches of text. But at the entry for every one of thirty-something of these terms (with its regional label) we are invited to "see also" followed by the whole list again, and again. This is a lot of wasted lexicographical space. The items on the list in every one of these entries carry no regional label, so the only way you could do a comparison of the distribution (so to speak) of these terms across Australia, would be to look up each word and make your own list of comparisons. This same gripe applies to many other terms like words designating cask wine (*cardboard handbag*, *vino collapso*, etc) Savings for publishers and readers could be made by cleverer cross-referencing.

But this is not (yet) a serious exercise in dialect lexicography. *Word Map* is an entertaining and useful lexicographical guide to how Australian linguistic inventiveness varies across 27 regions of the country. It is a great piece of ludilexicography. □

IT WOULD SEEM 'FILL 'ER UP WITH UNLEADED' HAS DIFFERENT CONNOTATIONS IN PERTH!

Wordwatching

To judge this book by its cover, it could be the modest offering of a retired Victorian clergyman. The pairing of "Wordwatching" with "field notes" in the title conjures the echo of "birdwatching", supported by the cover graphics of winged words. Moreover, "amateur philologist" heightens the sense of an enthusiastic hobbyist offering humble observations on an uncontroversial topic. This image is distinctly at odds with the public face of the author, Julian Burnside, the passionate advocate for the rights of asylum seekers. So which of these contrasting expectations is to be confounded?

There is certainly no doubting Burnside's enthusiasm for language. In the introduction he writes of how his interest in words was stimulated at an early age, and that sense of discovery is retained throughout the 39 short chapters that follow. He writes equally engagingly about the romantic origins of *halcyon* and *clue*, the curious histories of *pedigree* and *tawdry*, and the shifting senses of *obnoxious*, *miscreant* and *baffle*. Sometimes the thrill of the verbal chase sends him on surprising detours – the first chapter, nominally about words ending in *-al,* ends up talking about *battledores* and *shuttlecocks,* whilst the chapter entitled "Collective Nouns" digresses into the misuse of *fulsome, ilk* and *eke*. But this is not a serious fault in what is a collection of occasional essays rather than a systematic treatment of language issues.

While Burnside has sensible things to say about such grammatical bugbears as split infinitives and the use of prepositions at the end of sentences, the main focus of his book is the history of individual words. He is particularly fascinated by how words and expressions can develop their senses, over centuries, as with *nice*, or almost immediately. A *quantum leap* or *jump*, for example, refers to a tiny change in energy, but "perhaps because the

theory itself was so revolutionary and its effects so profound…[the term] almost instantaneously came to be used as signifying a gigantic step".

The author is generally accepting of the fact that languages are dynamic, changeable entities, and at least philosophical about historical changes of meanings (referring to the blurring of the boundaries between the senses of *reticent* and *reluctant,* or *surprise* and *astonish,* as "battles already lost"). But he is less accepting of what he sees as contemporary shifts, such as the erosion of the distinction between *disinterested* and *uninterested*. He makes a fair point that the two words embody usefully distinct senses, while overlooking the fact that the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*) dates the erosion back to the 17th century.

Another example of Burnside being somewhat selective with his information is in his treatment of the role that dictionaries take in preserving and codifying senses. He writes: "The *Macquarie Dictionary*…is sometimes attacked as a haven for the libertarians, as it notes without censure the most ignorant misuse alongside the original meaning. See, for example, its note in the third edition under the entry for *fulsome*: 'the shift in meaning of this word from "offensive to good taste" to "lavish, unstinted" offends some writers but seems to have gained acceptance with the majority'." Not only does he slyly omit a rather relevant parenthesis within this usage note: that the sense he is objecting to is "ironically, the original sense of this word", but he follows it up with a list of words that have been tainted by "repeated misuse", like *alternate*, *decimate*, *exotic*. Burnside is being rather naughty here (the reader may choose the degree of criticism to apply from the helpful survey of the senses of *naughty* in Chapter 23), in implying that the *Macquarie* advocates corrupted senses of all these words and is

exceptional in doing so. The 2nd edition of the *OED*, which the author cites as an exemplary authority throughout his book, also includes most of the disapproved senses, and both dictionaries employ usage notes or glosses to warn readers where a usage is contended. This is a more widely accepted approach for contemporary dictionaries than to rebuke their readers for "ignorant misuse".

While misuse may sometimes be a nuisance, it is for the language of deliberate falsehood that Burnside reserves his most cutting remarks. In the chapter entitled "Doublespeak", he attacks the language of the Howard government concerning refugees by comparing it directly with the deceptions of Hitler's regime: "In Nazi Germany (before the concentration camps became death camps), 'undesirables' were 'placed in protective custody' or 'resettled'. In Australia, 'illegals' are held in 'Immigration Reception and Processing Centres' behind 'energised fences', receiving regular 'security checks' and occasional 'extractions'."

Smuggled between the polite-looking covers of this book is a forceful and eloquent call for vigilance in protecting the ability of English to convey meaning accurately. We may sometimes see truth as being more relative than the author does, but it is hard to argue with his assertion that: "When truth matters, language is often the first victim; and, in times of stress, truth matters very much". □

FEED BACK 25

LEVELS OF AGREEMENT

Grammatical agreement is often on the surface of language, visible in the way a singular subject goes with a singular verb (*it does*) and plural with plural (*we do*). But this "formal" agreement is not shown with some particular words and constructions, where the agreement is "notional", i.e. reflecting some underlying sense of singularity or plurality, as when the cricket commentator says, "*Australia are all out for 105*". Formal agreement in that case would dictate "*Australia is all out for 105*", and for some people that's the only possibility. Each of the sentences below poses the same kind of question, and we'd welcome your judgement as to which of the alternative verbs or pronouns you would use. Please underline the one you'd prefer – or both, if they would each go with a particular kind of discourse, e.g. speech rather than writing.

1. The army *is/are* on the move.

2. Bed and breakfast *was/were* available in the town

3. The committee was slow to announce *its/their* decision.

4. Despite all their problems, the impoverished family *has/have* a lot of stamina.

5. If it's ethics that *concerns/concern* him, he should say so.

6. I wonder if the government really *believes/believe* that.

7. You'll find the dry cleaners *is/are* opposite the bank.

8. Her staff *was/were* informed about the change.

9. I don't think the orchestra *has/have* tuned their instruments yet.

10. Woolworths *has/have* made really big profits this year.

11. The team couldn't get into the gym for *its/their* warmup routines.

12. Six days of rain *was/were* not what we expected in the sunshine state.

13. The uncertain status of foreign advisers *makes/make* problems for the regional offices.

14. The panel must identify a single winner, mustn't *it/they*?

15. Any of the paintings you see *is/are* worth millions.

16. A spate of well-publicised terrorist attacks *has/have* affected the flow of tourists.

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 grammatical conundrums of Feedback 24 were tackled by a grand total of 561 *AS* readers, who returned the questionnaire as individuals and in groups (their names are gratefully acknowledged in the Editor's column (p. 6). In all there were 134 responses from ages 10-44, 209 from ages 45-64, and 218 from those over 65. With them we have a very solid basis of information on which to describe some of the finer points of Australian English grammar. The data sets were carefully processed by Style Council research assistant Yasmin Funk, and computer-analysed by *AS's* executive editor, Adam Smith. [PP]

Negatives

Several questions invited readers to choose between contracting the negative (*not*) and contracting the auxiliary verb preceding it, i.e *I wouldn't* or *I'd not, I won't* or *I'll not*. This is a known point of variability between southern and northern British English, with northerners more inclined to contract the auxiliary. Scottish preference for *I'd not* may explain its greater use in New Zealand, at least in the South Island. But Australians responding to Feedback 24 were very little inclined that way, and voted very strongly for *I wouldn't* (92%) and *I won't* (90%) when offered the choice.

Not is the preferred pattern for expressing the negative across all registers of English, and so *There isn't any garage* is generally preferred to *There's no garage.* Yet when the verb *have* is involved, grammarians have found that it goes the other way. This was indeed true in responses to Feedback 24, where *They have no opportunity* was favored by 72% of Australian readers over *They haven't any opportunity.* Interestingly this puts Australians more in line with American than British conversationalists (the latter still prefer *haven't any…),* according to *Longman Grammar* (1999) research. But *have no…* seems to be preferred when writing, everywhere in the English-speaking world.

Negatives and nonassertives expressed with *any* are often grouped together in modern grammars, and so Feedback 24 tried out two forms of a nonassertive question: *Do you have any…?* v. *Have you any…?* Here again there's a well-known usage divide, with Americans typically preferring the first and Britons the second. A majority of Australians in this survey (64%) tended to favor the American formulation *Do you have…?*, though there was a clear age gradient, with younger respondents much more in favor (81%) than older ones (51%).

Other aspects of *have*

Apart from its auxiliary and main verb uses, *have* also serves as a "light" verb in structures such as *have a drink/a bath* etc. The verb *take* can also be used as the light verb in those examples, and preferences vary somewhat with the region. Research has found that overall British English is rather more likely to use *have* and American *take,* and Australian preferences could go one way or the other. The examples tested in Feedback 24 went both ways: *have a look* was endorsed by 58% of respondents, whereas *have a walk* gained only 34% acceptance. But the preference for *take a walk* was a good deal stronger among younger respondents (under 45s) than the older generation (over 65s). It ranged from 77% for the former to 58% for the latter. Taken with the less than overwhelming majority for *have a look,* this declining use of *have* as a light verb (in favor of *take*) suggests another front on which Australians, especially younger ones, are modifying their idiom in line with American norms.

Determiners and quantifiers

Three questions turned on the word *number,* to see how far it now serves as a complex determiner rather than headword of the noun phrase in which it appears. This can be tested by seeing whether the verb following is most naturally singular or plural, when either is possible, as in *a number of persons was/ were...* Respondents to this question voted firmly for the plural (79%), showing that "persons" was taken to govern the verb, not "number". This means that *a number of* , like *a lot of,* is simply taken as a complex determiner of the head noun. Even when the expression was somewhat embellished to draw attention to itself, as in *a large number of students of French…,* the preference for the verb was solidly plural (78%), suggesting that "students" was still taken as the head.

Only when *number* was prefaced by *the,* did the balance tip the other way. With *the number of appeals is/are…,* a majority (60%) voted for the singular verb *is,* thus making "number" the headword. But it left a sizable 40% who were prepared to pass over it as a candidate for head of the phrase. In fact those under 45 were much more inclined to endorse *are,* and within that age group they formed a majority (61%). Thus quantifying phrases like *the number of* may also predispose readers to choose a plural verb – or in this case, the fact that the immediately preceding noun ("appeals") was plural, and so agreement with it (i.e. "proximity agreement") seems more natural than formal agreement with "number". □
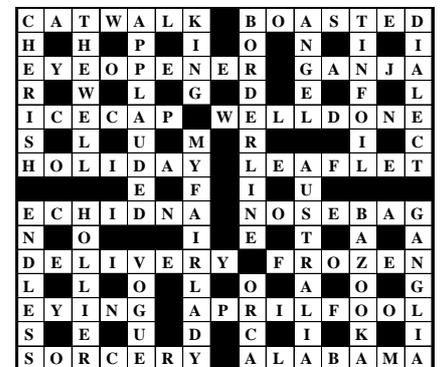
RUBICON
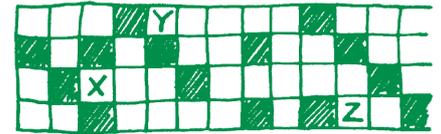
RUBICON, devised by David Astle, is a hybrid of crossword, jigsaw and acrostic. First, solve as many clues as you can and begin to fit the answers inside the grid. (The scattered letters of RUBICON should give you a toehold.) When the grid is completed, arrange the *clues* from the first Across to the last Down – their 26 <u>initial</u> letters will spell a category. As a bonus, which six of your answers belong to the category in question?
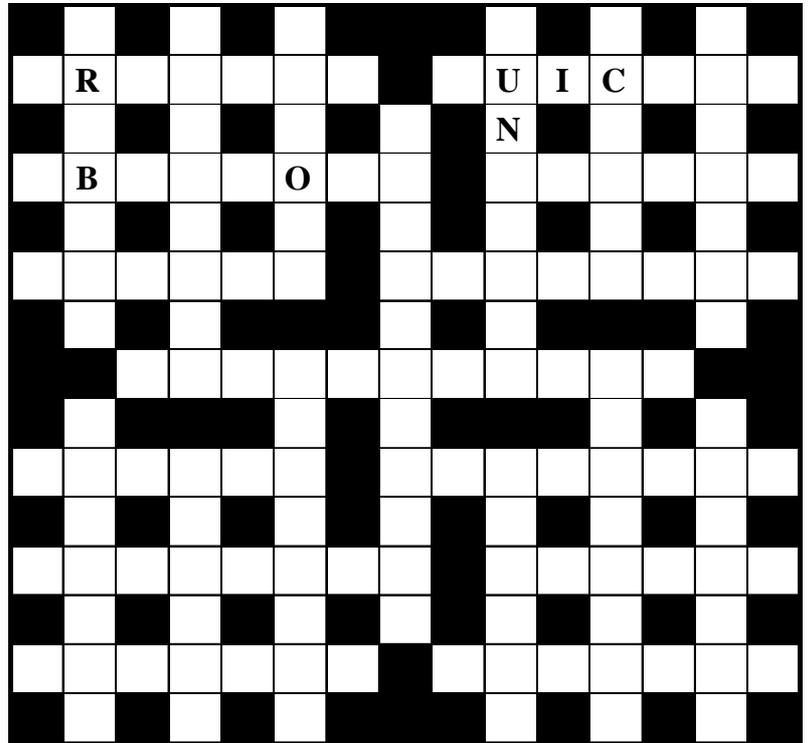
Comfortably lodge (11)
Easygoing when it comes to morality (5-6)
A shambles, literally (8)
Dungarees (8)
Exacted a penalty upon (8)
It's gained in EACH DIVE (8)
Large city on the Jumna River (3,5)
Leave one's spouse (8)
Stoked (8)
Wearer of braces, often (8)
Carry on (7)
It comes gratis – slang (7)
Lickety-split (7)
Lump of wood beneath a railroad (7)
Multicoloured Australian parrot (7)
One-coin-one-song-machine? (7)
Recurring ad infinitum (7)
Snag (7)
A variety of gym – or Jim (6)
Death's beds? (6)
Like a restless volcano, or direct voice (6)
Power of recall (6)
Salon where a chaplain changes (6)
Saruman of Tolkien fame (6)
Subject of van Gogh's floral canvas (6)
You can expect fervour from this type (6)

Solution to Rubicon in last issue
CHART-TOPPING POP TRACKS FROM MADONNA: Holiday, Frozen, Cherish, Borderline, Angel, Vogue

C	A	T	W	A	L	K		B	O	A	S	T	E	D
H		H		P		I		O		N		I		I
E	Y	E	O	P	E	N	E	R		G	A	N	J	A
R		W		L		G		D		E		F		L
I	C	E	C	A	P		W	E	L	L	D	O	N	E
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H	O	L	I	D	A	Y		L	E	A	F	L	E	T
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L		L		O		L		O		A		O		G
E	Y	I	N	G		A	P	R	I	L	F	O	O	L
S		E		U		D		C		I		K		I
S	O	R	C	E	R	Y		A	L	A	B	A	M	A