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Translating Guidebooks - Twitchers, Gricers & “Doing Doughnuts”

Tony Wheeler is the co-founder of Lonely Planet. This is an edited transcript of the talk he gave for Style Council in October, 2005.

Lonely Planet’s travel guide books in English cover the world. Many of our books are also available in translations. We produce guides in Japanese, Korean, French, Spanish, Italian, German and even in Hebrew. To put it bluntly, guidebooks are horrible things to translate. For a start, the market for most titles in any language you choose is going to be far smaller than the English language one. You can sell German guides in parts of Switzerland as well as Austria and Germany. You can sell French guides in part of Belgium, Switzerland and Canada as well as France. But you can sell English language guides all over the place. Plus there are many places where English is not the first language but people will still cope very well with an English language guidebook, the Netherlands or the Scandinavian countries for example.

In addition, English is a pleasantly compact language. When you’re already fighting to make the figures add up the last thing you want is for the book to be longer than the original. And most important, your work is never finished. Translate a novel and it’s done forever, translate a guidebook and 24 months later you’ll have to do most of it all over again. Plus a substantial slice of the book won’t translate at all – the

reading list for the English language edition is useless if the books mentioned aren’t available in the other language. Similarly your German reader has no interest in how you get to Timbuktu from Sydney or Los Angeles, and your French reader couldn’t care less about the British embassy in Tokyo or the New Zealand one in New Delhi.

And interests differ. Talking with an international group of travel publishers after the Frankfurt Bookfair one year we discussed the particular interests of different markets. “French guidebooks must cover food and restaurants more thoroughly,” the French publishers insisted. I think they meant the sort of food associated with the Michelin Red Guide, not the stuff you find under the Golden Arches. Of course really good coverage of cinema is equally important in a French Guidebook. “Well it’s very important that we get the timetables down accurately,” confessed a German publisher. Who then went on to complain about how long everything tended to be in German and what a battle it was to contain a translation’s length. “But there is one place we can always save space,” he announced, suddenly brightening up. “Birdwatching. We simply cut out all that stuff on bird watching. It’s purely an Anglo-Saxon interest.”

IN THIS ISSUE

The Origin of “Furphy”	3
SCOSE Notes	4
Australex 2006	5
From the Editor	6
Letters to the Editor	7
Book Notes	8
<i>Dr Johnson’s Dictionary</i> <i>Port Out Starboard Home</i>	
Feedback 27	10
Feedback Report	11
Rubicon	12





There are places where it's important to cater for twitchers (obsessive birdwatchers) – Kenya and Ethiopia, for example, with extensive bird populations, are very popular with twitchers. So is Australia. But they evidently don't belong in German language guide-books. The same goes for gricers – those addicted to the fine old English pastime of trainspotting. We have learnt not only to grapple with these sorts of specific interests but also the differing regions that are of interest. Why bother translating all of Canada into French when they're only interested in Quebec? Why do all of the Eastern Caribbean when it's only the French islands they're going to visit, Barbados and Trinidad are of zero appeal.

But let me illustrate some real life translation mishaps. I'm sure we've all played around with Babelfish and more sophisticated translation software. My favourite little game is with avocados, *avocat*

in French. But of course lawyers are also *avocat* in French. So take this handy little recipe for avocado salad and feed it through the translation software: "Salade aux Avocats. Épluchez et coupez en morceaux trois avocats". Chances are you'll come up with this result. "Lawyers Salad. Peel and slice three lawyers."

Not a bad use for lawyers some of us might think. Don't laugh, I have seen lawyers salad in a Parisian restaurant with a bilingual menu. Then there were the topless bars in our Hong Kong guide. Wanchai was where you found Hong Kong's topless bars, our guide commented. A German translator wrestled with this one for a while before coming up with this translation process. The top means best in English. So *topless* must be absolutely the best, unsurpassable. The German translation announced that the very best bars in Hong Kong were found in Wanchai.

But our best translation horror

story came straight from outback Australia. We still speak in awe of what not just one French translator but a whole group of them did with the Australian outback lad's love of jumping into his V8 ute, driving to the edge of town and doing doughnuts. Now how does "doing doughnuts" translate into French? Well we all know what doughnuts are like and here in Australia we know what you need to "do doughnuts". One edition of our Australia guide commented that life in a certain outback town in Western Australia was so dull that on a weekend evening the local lads could find nothing better to do than to drive to the edge of town and "do doughnuts". "What on earth could this mean," the French translators pondered? "Gallettes", one finally announced. "Isn't a doughnut a bit like a galette?" "Well, yes." "And what do you also call a galette?" "Well, a little treat." "But if you give your boyfriend a little treat, aka a galette, what do you give him?" "Why a blow job." So the text was translated that in this outback town life was so boring that on a weekend evening local boys just drove out to the edge of town and gave each other blow jobs. Fortunately we caught it before it went to press.

The world is already full enough of intriguing cultural variety. There's no need to add to that store by mistranslation. Lonely Planet will continue to endeavour to translate this confusing, lovely planet to as wide an audience as possible through our ever-expanding range of guidebooks in English and other languages. (See <http://www.lonelyplanet.com/> for further details.) □

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The Origin of “Furphy”

The *Macquarie Dictionary* (2005) defines *furphy* as “a rumour; a false story”. Since WWII, the usual explanation of its origin is that, in WWI, water carts manufactured by John Furphy of Shepparton, Victoria, supplied water to troops and were focal points for dubious gossip spread by their drivers; then (somehow) the name Furphy came to mean rumour. However, this explanation is not supported by the documentation of the earliest authors, ie, those writing during and shortly after WWI. These include: “Aloysius”, the *Bulletin* (Sydney) 7/10/1915; Australia’s WWI historian, Charles Bean (*The Anzac Book* 1916, p.56, and *The official history...* vol. 1, 1921, p. 92); *Two Blues: Magazine of the 13th Battalion of the A. I. F.*, Dec. 1918; A. W. Keown *Forward with the Fifth* 1921, p.13; and the A. G. Pretty *Glossary...* 1924 (Australian War Memorial, Canberra) [AWM].

The above authors establish that *furphy* originated in the Broadmeadows Army Camp, Melbourne, in late September/early October 1914 in association with Furphy water carts used as “rubbish” or “sanitary” carts with a “scavenging” function. FURPHY was painted in large letters on their sides. They were also used to supply water and were known colloquially as “furphies”. At this time there were several unexplained delays in embarkation due to the unknown whereabouts of German war ships. With associated press censorship: “wildest rumours... flew through both the people and the troops” (Bean, 1921).

Bean (1921) refers to Furphy “sanitary” carts “scavenging through the lines” which suggests that they were collecting sewage of some form, probably urine, as a Furphy water cart is only suitable for carrying liquids. Army regulations at the time advocated the use of urine tubs in army camps. The *Manual of Elementary Military Hygiene* –

1912, p.76, reads: “iron tubs are usually provided, these being placed adjacent to the ordinary latrines for day use, and during the night at selected spots convenient for the tents.”

While the early authors establish a time, a place and evidence of specific rumours, none explain precisely how the name Furphy was associated with rumour. A plausible explanation was not “spelt out” until 1986. In a radio broadcast on 2CN on 8 July, R.E. (Bob) Cowley, (an ex-soldier and a Curator at the AWM), assumed that the carts were carrying sewage and drew on early authors: “soldiers would have seen a very clear connection between the load of rubbish being carried in a Furphy cart and the rubbish they would have been fed from time to time as misinformation.” [transcript in the AWM] Cowley’s euphemistic use of “rubbish” demonstrates it to be a neat double entendre that also makes the connection with the *wildest rumours* (“nonsense”) rife in the Camp at the time. This explanation is somewhat vulgar, which may be why the early authors failed to “spell it out”.

The scavenging (“collecting filth”) function of the “sanitary” carts effectively argues against an origin of *furphy* based on gossip around Furphy carts containing water, despite John Barnes’ attempt to derive this explanation from the early authors (John Barnes & Andrew Furphy *Furphy: The Water Cart and the Word* (2005) pp.75-84). But could *furphy* have originated from gossip around Furphy carts carrying something less savoury than water?

Gossip around “rubbish” carts by “fatigue parties” is mentioned as a source of rumour by “Aloysius” [in: Barnes & Furphy p.76]; also the “sanitary squad” (Pretty Glossary), but otherwise there is no indication of contact between soldiers and rubbish/sanitary carts. It was the latrines where “rumour was made widely disseminated”

Roger Frankenberg is writing a longer version of this article for the Australian War Memorial journal.

(Keown). AWM photo (DAOD 1824) c. Sept. 1916 has the caption: “Waterman collecting camp rubbish”. This shows a Furphy water cart with soldiers but there is no evidence of the driver collecting anything of a physical nature. Therefore, if “rubbish” here means “nonsense”, this indicates that the driver is collecting gossip.

All that these examples prove is that drivers of service vehicles can collect and spread gossip – which undoubtedly occurred with water carts throughout WWI – but it does not prove *per se* that such gossip lead to the origin of *furphy*. In the Broadmeadows Camp in 1914, it was the significance and impact of the “wildest rumours” about embarkation that was a key factor in the origin of *furphy*. They flew through both the Camp and the civilian population; and two false starts caused irritation and frustration among the soldiers (Keown). There was no restriction of information between the Camp and the public: soldiers were often in the city until the early hours of the morning. It did not need gossiping drivers of water carts or sanitary carts to spread these rumours.

Cowley’s explanation is essential
continued on page 4



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

“Surgeons are to operate to restore part of Ariel Sharon’s skull, which was removed in previous surgery after he suffered a massive stroke in January.”

Meaning, of course, that Mr Sharon’s skull was removed earlier, and part of it is now to be restored. (Operation on a severed head?) How better to illustrate the difference between relative clauses introduced by “which” and those introduced by “that”?

What happens when we change “which” to “that” in the quotation? “Surgeons are to operate to restore part of Ariel Sharon’s skull that was removed in previous surgery...” An even clearer correction would be: “Surgeons are to operate on Ariel Sharon’s skull to restore a part (of it) that was removed in a previous operation...”

In the chemistry of language, “that” bonds with “part” (of Sharon’s skull), “which” doesn’t – it bonds with “skull”, lower down in the phrase structure tree. This is the classic difference between the “restrictive” and “nonrestrictive” clauses of traditional grammar.

In former times people’s intuition in such matters was sharpened by formal instruction in grammar but in recent decades explicit instruction has been out of fashion, with the result that even university graduates in English or Communication can come to journalism lacking basic writing skills.

On the pronunciation front, a curious thing is happening with *negotiate*. Instead of [nuh-GOH-shee-ayt] some speakers are saying [nuh-GOH-see-ayt]. That is, they are not assimilating the letter “t” with the “i” after it as you normally would in words like *mention*, *patient*, *contentious* and *venetian*. This avoidance of assimilation seems to be part of a more general tendency to use spelling pronunciations. It will be interesting to see what happens next.

It’s been a very eventful six months in the world and especially at such times the clichés, buzzwords and hyperbole are

massing on the frontier ready to invade our news reports. All the usual suspects are there: “the great escape”, “a hero’s welcome”, “the waiting game”, “loved ones”, “miracle”, “tragedy”, “carnage”, “flowing tributes”, “batten down the hatches”, etc. The Commonwealth Games brought out “raising the bar”. Why do we keep hearing these same worn-out expressions? Because it’s so much easier to repeat a familiar turn of phrase than to think of a fresh image.

We’d gladly not hear “iconic” again, said SCOSE when NSW “lost its most dominant, iconic political figure” – the word has been killed by overuse.

“Decimate” got a good run after Cyclone Larry. ABC listeners were quick to point out the original meaning of the word but we have to accept that it’s now normally used to mean “wipe out almost entirely”. But even with this intended meaning, it has to be used carefully. “Decimate” does not sit well with losses of property other than lives, and can lead to absurdities when it is applied to a specified part of whatever is being decimated. ABC listeners were critical of statements such as these: “Ninety percent of the banana

continued from previous page

entially consistent with the documentation of the early authors. From his experience as a soldier it was an obvious explanation (pers. comm.). Any soldier in the Camp would have delighted in derisively associating the unsavoury contents (“load of piddle”) of the Furphy “sanitary” carts with the “wildest rumours” about embarkation. Given that there were at least 4000 soldiers in the Camp at the time, it is highly unlikely that not one of them would have made this connection – it only needed one. The weight of evidence favours this explanation.

Significantly, no early author offering an explanation of *furphy* mentions soldiers’ gossip around carts supplying potable water. This appears to be a “default” version that arose in WWII, due in part to the failure of the WWI authors to explain precisely how *furphy* became rumour, but also to the relative obscurity of the early documentation which has been overlooked by most subsequent authors. □



crops have been reported decimated”; “...every second house was decimated...”.

The tired old cliché “carnage”, referring to human roadkill, at least contains the original sense of the word because it refers to meat, flesh or bodies, but to describe the flood damage at Broken Hill as “carnage” loses the whole point of the metaphor.

A “dead metaphor” is one whose imagery has been forgotten, but which still lingers in common use. The trouble comes when the speaker forgets the original image but the listener doesn’t. “Growth industry” is both a catchphrase and a dead metaphor, but when applied to the hydroponic cultivation of cannabis it miraculously comes alive – hence the observation that there is actually no such thing as a dead metaphor. (Calling it a “growth” industry originally would have evoked a more vivid image than the more neutral “expanding” industry.)

Broadcasters with annoying verbal tics risk alienating their audience. An ABC listener says he feels like an idiot when he listens to presenters who have a habit of prefacing many of their statements with “of course”. By glibly saying “of course”, a speaker implies that



the subsequent statement is something that should be obvious to everyone. For the presenter, the use of “of course” may be no more than a filler (like “ah”, “um”, “y’know” and “if you like”) but if it leads listeners to think they’re being patronised, remedial action is indicated.

Let’s have no more of the cloying euphemism “loved ones”. “Family and friends” will often suffice – “or maybe we should adopt the horse racing parlance of ‘connections’”, quipped one SCOSE member. And “a serious question that remains unanswered” is why anyone would use such a fatuous expression. □

Australex 2006

The annual Australex conference (Australasian Association for Lexicography) with the theme *Dictionaries: Uses and Users* will be held at the University of Queensland on 6 July.

The keynote address will be presented by Dr Dianne Bardsley from the New Zealand Dictionary Centre, on “Serving several masters: New Zealand’s lexicographical landscape”. The program also features international contributions on dictionaries for French, Spanish and Italian; and papers on terminology

from areas such as bureaucratise in the state sector in New Zealand, and language testing. A special panel discussion on the assimilation of English loanwords into other languages such as modern Hebrew and Turkish will examine and compare their different manifestations in non-English dictionaries.

The closing address by Professor Kimiyuki Nishide will be concerned with Australiana and Australianisms in English-Japanese dictionaries.

For further information, you can contact the conference administrator by email: adam.smith@ling.mq.edu.au or visit the association’s website at www.australex.org





From the Editor

A question for *AS* readers from the electronic mailbag. Have you noticed any unusual use of that quintessentially Australian word *cooee* recently? If you have, please let us know by letter or email or pigeon post!

Cooee was among the earliest borrowings (before 1800) from Aboriginal language around Port Jackson. In the Dharug language it was *gumi* meaning “come here”, and for generations of bush walkers since it has been a generalised signal to attract the attention of anyone within earshot. Over the years it has been grammaticalised as a noun, as in (*not*) *within cooee*, and a verb: *they cooeed into the darkened gully* – without changing its meaning...

That’s why a new development seems remarkable. *Cooee* has recently been heard in ordinary conversation as an exclamation meaning approximately “Wow-ee!” Its meaning and function are changed thereby, making it a reaction rather than a stimulus, and its special capacity to resonate over distances becomes unimportant. But stranger things have happened to exclamations – such as *Hooray!* which means “Wow-ee” to some Australians and “goodbye” to others. Likewise *bello/bullo/hallo*, which is a muted version of the huntman’s cry *Halloo!*, used to urge the hounds on to the chase.

New words and new usages were reported particularly from Queensland, though *charrette* has also been spotted in Western Australia. What’s that, you ask? Jim Pillis (QLD) sent a helpful cutting of its use in relation to Wynnum on the Brisbane River. The word is French for a cart, though that doesn’t explain how it applies to an urban planning process in which interested parties, both professionals and citizens, get together to find collaborative solutions for the redevelopment of a town. This use of *charrette* in Australia seems to have come via urban designers

familiar with its American application, to the intense final effort made by architectural students to finish their projects. Their counterparts in late nineteenth century France, at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, had to get their projects onto a cart (*charrette*) sent around by the professor, which thus symbolised both the deadline and the finished design project. The design project rather than the deadline seems to be the essence of its use here.

A different kind of decorative activity i.e. *tartery* was documented by Herb Compton (QLD) with a clipping from the *Courier Mail*. *Tart (up)* is never a flattering comment about appearances, and in this case the target of criticism was the state premier, wearing in his lapel a yellow ribbon of solidarity with the community protesting the closure of its hospital emergency department. That application of the word seems a tad hyperbolic, but the word itself may be a useful addition to the English language.

An anonymous (and stateless) correspondent drew attention to a very old English word, or rather contraction, namely *won’t* – asking why it stands for *will not* but doesn’t really match it. Compare *don’t* with *do not*, which match up perfectly. The answer lies in the large number of variants for *will* that flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, including *woll*, which was associated especially with the negative forms, sometimes in two syllables as in *wonnot*, and also *won’t* with a single-syllable, documented from the seventeenth century on.

Email correspondence from Peter Davis (SA) brought the interesting question as to which order the titles *Dr* and *The Honourable* should appear in for a parliamentarian. He was aware of earlier advice to use *Dr the Honourable*, as well as the current public service practice of using *The Honourable Dr*. The combination is

rare enough to be passed over in the Australian Government *Style Manual* (2002), but usage as found in Australian documents on the internet is overwhelmingly behind *The Honourable Dr*. It’s also in line with the sequence in *The Honourable Mr Justice Gleeson*, *The Honourable Sir Anthony Mason* for judges of Australia’s courts, and the *Rev. Dr Martin* etc. for ministers of religion. □

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Letters to the Editor

Dear Dr Peters

KOKODA: TRAIL OR TRACK?

The controversy's noticeable. Common usage tends to like "trail"; the veteran community prefers (noisily sometimes) "track". The Australian War memorial has reported that the Australian media divide 50/50 on the suitable term. Why fuss?

Of course, both words have great and overlapping ranges of uses. In this context we might think we are looking at near synonyms. But – oh dear – the nuances. "Trail" is American usage; "track" is Australian. Consider two similar pop lyrics from last century:

United States:

*There's a long long trail a-winding
To the land of my dreams*

Australia:

*There's a track winding back
To an old-fashioned shack*

No doubt about that.

Australian veterans are touchy about General MacArthur's headquarters – in those days – attributing most Pacific land actions in WWII to "Allied" (read "US") troops, regardless of specific commands. Apart from that, the American tinted "trail" diminishes the Kokoda experience.

A "trail" is going to be leisurely, pleasurable, as it will be in any of the walking trails that our governments have been constructing. A "track" is gruelling ("hard yakka" in fact) as Kokoda notoriously was. Contemporary Australian adventurers may walk the Kokoda Trail; old soldiers remember the Kokoda Track. It would be good to honour their preference.

Edgar Castle
Tungkillo, SA

Dear Pam Peters,

I have an idea in which you may be interested. It's about "grouse" and "extra grouse".

I suppose you have considered this, but I wonder if the source of the word/phrase is in the brand of blended Scotch whisky, "The Famous Grouse," which came on to the Aussie market in the early to mid 1920s. It seems to be at about that time that the expression is first found in print (e.g. Simes). The peculiarity of this whisky is that it contains, although blended, two single malt whiskies, and is hence of better quality than most others. Maybe it was also of better quality in the 1920s.

Malcolm MacMillan
via email

Dear Pam

Two amusing misspellings I observed recently from my favourite Turkish restaurant and the next door pizza palace. The first advertised a dish including CHILLY BEANS, which I suppose is rather like frozen peas. Next door was a blackboard offering passersby CHOC MOOSE, which did not sound all that appetising.

John McArthur
Carlton, VIC

Dear Pam,

Here I was 120% aciously advoc8 an up-2-d8 use of numerals in text – mainly 2 allevi8 ¾s of the 4arm pain caused by over-typing. This 4ray in2 lexicology was 2 be my 2ur-de-4ce. But now my 6th sense tells me 2 4get it – my anticip8ed 5-star contribution would probably annihil8 the language and I'd be remembered 4 years 2 come as the instig8or of the 3-Mile Island of English.

Colin Macpherson
Yeppoon, QLD

Dear Pam,

Having studied Fiji English extensively when I lived and worked in Fiji during the 1990s, it was good to see Kim Lockwood's interesting article "Turning VB into Kava" (*Australian Style* 13.2, p.3). Very little is ever written, let alone published on Fiji English, to establish what its standard consists of. The publication of the *Macquarie English Dictionary for the Fiji Islands* (due out later this year) will document numerous expressions like those Kim mentioned, including *discuss about*, *to be on the alarm* and *furnitures*, which are regularly used in Fiji English. Other expressions belonging to Fiji English are *grog* used to mean "kava"; *alphabet* "a letter of the alphabet"; *to bump* "to knock or hit with considerable force"; *to pick someone/something* "to pick up someone/something"; *a foolscap* "a sheet of writing paper"; *netter* "a netball player"; *a punt* "any shallow draught open boat". All have widespread use in Fiji. Although such expressions may not be considered "standard" in mainstream Englishes, their appearance in the dictionary will (we hope) help to formalise their status as standard Fiji English.

Dr Jan Tent
Macquarie University





Dr Johnson's Dictionary

Pam Peters is editor of Australian Style and director of the Dictionary Research Centre at Macquarie University. Here she reviews Dr Johnson's Dictionary by Henry Hitchings, published by John Murray 2005, RRP \$44.95

The year 2005 marked the 250th anniversary of the publication of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary of the English Language*. The event is underscored by Henry Hitchings's very readable account of the dictionary's genesis, compilation and impact, in *Dr Johnson's Dictionary: The Extraordinary Story of the Book that Defined the World*. The hyperbolic subtitle echoes Simon Winchester's *The Map that Changed the World* without making quite such a big claim, though the world defined by Johnson was strictly speaking the English-speaking world, and then only the Old World part of it. But there's no doubt that Johnson's dictionary set the standard for English lexicography for almost 150 years, until superseded by the twelve volume *New Oxford Dictionary* (1884-1928).

Hitchings structures his life of Johnson in chapters titled with words from A to Z, as befits a work dealing with lexicography. Some such as *Opinionist*, *Publication*, *Reception* are quite transparent in their focus. Others refer to crucial incidents in Johnson's life, e.g. *Apple* (youthful sallies into his father's book collection), *Pastern* (used to comment on his coverage of technical areas – apart from horse anatomy), and *Patron* (recounting Johnson's prickly relationship with Lord Chesterfield over the publication of the dictionary).

Beneath each chapter headword, its multiple definitions are cited, and they are an effective reminder

of the changing semantics of many English words over the last three centuries. Hitchings also provides an interesting list of them in his chapter X, along with Johnson's comment that "X is a letter, which, though found in Saxon words, begins no word in the English language". In fact he declined to list any of the twenty words beginning with X which could be found in Bailey's *Universal Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1721 and later), on the grounds that they were too obscure. With which one could only agree – words such as *xerophagy* ("the eating of dry meats") and *xyster* ("a surgical instrument, used for scraping bones").

Within the later chapters, Hitchings also makes extensive use of definitions and quotations drawn from the dictionary, to document details of Johnson's life experience and his values. He thus creates a kind of *lexicobiography*, a prose genre especially suited to bringing a dictionary-maker to life through his own definitions of words. Straight biographical information is skilfully woven in as well, and there are occasional black-and-white reproductions of contemporary paintings of the man, including a portrait of a reflective "Johnson in middle age" (1756-7) by Sir Joshua Reynolds.

The book is strong on the tangible world in which Johnson lived, and on the people who were contemporaries and friends, including Reynolds, David Garrick, and Robert Dodsley, the bookseller/publisher/entrepreneur who engaged Johnson to write the dictionary. Despite its lasting fame, the dictionary was less profitable than Dodsley would have wished, partly because of Johnson's alienation from Lord Chesterfield. Johnson himself was a complex, driven person, subject to melancholy (to which one chapter is devoted). Reynolds offers the

definitive comment with "the great business of his life was to escape from himself". To others he was a large physical presence: Hester Thrale likened him to both an elephant and a haunch of venison (p.4).

The longer chapters in Hitchings's book deal with lexicographical topics of perennial interest, such as definitional style, where Johnson's expansive profiles of words are a great advance over Bailey's dependence on synonyms. On this, Bailey's dictionary belonged to the previous century, when dictionaries concentrated on the less familiar loanwords, and supplying an everyday English gloss for them was a useful strategy. Johnson however wrestled with defining the commonest English words, including 64 senses for *fall*, after which he noted "This is one of those general words of which it is very difficult to ascertain or detail the full signification"!

The chapter titled *Opinionist* ("one fond of his own notions") discusses Johnson's fabled personal biases, as expressed in quirky definitions and the selection of quotations. Hitchings finds them pretty localised, although Johnson's commitment to Tory politics and antipathy to Catholicism as well as Protestant non-conformism are more pervasive. His rather dysfunctional family background is reflected in disenchanted quotations about marriage. Yet one of the dictionary's reviewers (Adam Smith for the *Edinburgh Review*) found it not judgemental enough, when it came to commenting on usage. He wished that Johnson had "oftener passed censure upon those words which are not of approved use", and that his approach was not "sufficiently grammatical" (p.199). In this respect, Johnson's stance on language was more descriptive than many of his contemporaries – for which we can only be thankful. □



Port Out Starboard Home

Australian Style readers may already be familiar with Michael Quinion's expansive, informative and wittily titled website World Wide Words (www.worldwidewords.org). Both there and in this book he writes with a style that is entertaining without being facetious, scholarly without being dry, and displays an infectious enthusiasm for word origins and the stories we tell about them.

Given that such similar ground is covered on his website, we might expect to be familiar with a good deal of the content of this book, but Quinion has ensured that a large proportion of *Port Out Starboard Home* is either new material or is significantly re-written (as is the case with *all mouth and trousers* for example, which appears only as a query on the website, not a fully-developed article). Only occasionally does the difference between mediums work to the printed material's disadvantage: for instance when discussing the phrase *the whole nine yards*, the author of the book has to concede "we are unlikely to find out the truth about this one", whereas he has updated the internet article to present a recent explanation.

The book's subtitle is "The fascinating stories we tell about the words we use", and Quinion is at least as interested in the implausible stories about word origins as the plausible ones. While folk etymologies, such as the one which derives the word *crap* from a Thomas Crapper who apparently invented the flush toilet, are ultimately debunked, there is obvious pleasure in their telling. Some readers may be disappointed in the number of entries that end up as "origin unknown", but all the disproved stories are testament to human ingenuity. As a lovely epigraph to the book says: "Man...abhors the vacuum of an unmeaning word. If it seems life-

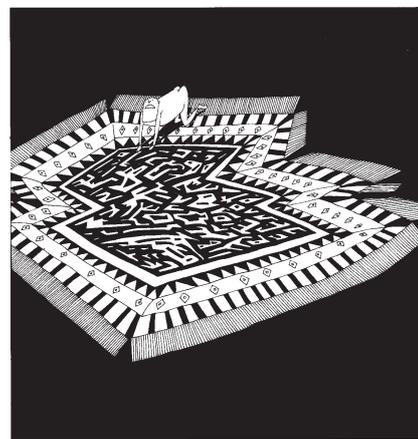
less, he reads a new soul into it, and often, like an unskilful necromancer, spirits the wrong soul into the wrong body."

For many examples the true explanation is just as intriguing as the false one. The entry for *barbecue* takes us to the Arawakan Indians of Hispaniola, with a side-trip to connect the word to *buccaneer*. *Curry favour's* origins are located in a French medieval poem, with the original sense of "to stroke a fawn-coloured horse", and proud owners of *penthouses* may be piqued to discover the name of their luxury dwelling comes from the word for an open-sided shed or outhouse.

Though Quinion is English, his focus is by no means purely on British words. There are many examples of words that originated in the US too, as the title of the American edition testifies: *Ballyhoo, Buckaroo and Spuds* (although why the British *spuds* gets in there is a bit of a mystery). Distinctively Australian words are less well-represented, although there are entries for *chunder, dinkum, kangaroo* and *Pom*. In these the author has to reject the entertaining suggestion that Pauline Hanson is speaking Chinese when she says "fair dinkum" (from the Cantonese *ding kam*, "top gold"), and advocates the pomegranate explanation of *Pom* over the various acronymic ones. As a rule, we are told, acronyms are to be mistrusted as explanations for word origins, even the one that gives the book its title.

Quinion is not just an enthusiastic amateur – he describes himself as "a field researcher and advisor to the *Oxford English Dictionary*" and "writer of much of the second edition of the *Oxford Dictionary of New Words*". It is part of the pleasure of his book that we are given an insight into the processes an etymologist has to go through to prove, disprove or generate new theories. In a field where there are as many self-appointed ex-

Adam Smith, a researcher with Style Council and executive editor of AS, reviews Port Out Starboard Home by Michael Quinion, Penguin 2005, RRP \$19.95



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perts as there are dubious stories about word origins, it is refreshing to have a voice that can both enjoy the tall tales and comment knowledgeably on them. □



FEED BACK

—27—

PUTTING IT IN THE NEGATIVE

English has a variety of ways of saying “NOT”, though some are clearly more popular than others in particular parts of the world. Please indicate (by circling it) which of the two negative constructions you would be more likely to use in the examples below. If it's six of one and half a dozen of the other, you might like to note in the space alongside whether the context (e.g. speech v. writing) might influence your choice.

1. Are you sure there **isn't anything/is nothing** you want to tell me first?
2. **I wouldn't/I'd not** want to be there in the cyclone season.
3. There's **nobody/no one** in front of you to look at.
4. **I don't have any/haven't any/have no** respect for him.
5. We pulled the blind down so **no one/nobody** could see in the window.
6. **They'll not/They won't be** here on time.
7. **Have you any/Do you have any** photos of the wedding?
8. Richardson's work is neither particularly Australian **nor/or** particularly political.
9. We **have no/don't have any/haven't any** option but to wait and hope.
10. Neither Queensland **nor/or** NSW **nor/or** Victorian police expected too much trouble.
11. **I haven't any/have no/don't have any** real reason to go.
12. There **are no/aren't any** short cuts to discovering the truth.
13. **Do you have any/Have you any** recollection of the circumstances?
14. Cat authorities say there **aren't any/are no** breeders in Tasmania.
15. There **is no/isn't any** answer.

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

different from/to/than

The survey presented three examples in which people vary over the choice of preposition, and where *from* represents the traditional selection. The alternative in the UK is *to*, and in the US *than*, so no surprise that both of those are used in Australia. The table below shows the three-way split for each sentence, with a similar pattern for each: that *from* gained the largest response (46-57%) overall, followed by *to* (33-41%), and *than* weighing in with only 7-20%.

Underlying those results are signs that younger respondents are more inclined to use *to* than their elders (compare the percentages for Age 1 and 3 for the first and third sentences). The response from younger people actually puts *to* on top, when the comparison simply involves a following (proper) noun, as in the first example. But the third examples presents *different* with a following clause, and there *from* gets the largest vote across the age range, despite the stronger support for *to* in Age 1. Crystal (1984) suggested that this is where *than* is most likely to be preferred, because of its simplicity, but this does not show up in these results.

The second sentence in the table below shows a higher response for *than* than the other two, probably because *different* is separated from the preposition by a noun. With that greater distance, the collocational effect of *different* is

Feedback survey 26 (“In Comparison”) received a total of 620 welcome replies from all over Australia. Special thanks go to those who shared the questionnaire with friends, family, colleagues and students, whose input is acknowledged on the Editor’s page above (p.6). Altogether there were 114 respondents in the age group 10-44 (Age 1); 239 in age group 45-64 (Age 2); and 264 in age group 65 and over (Age 3). They provide a rich database on contemporary usage of comparative constructions. The data were carefully processed by Style Council research assistant Yasmin Funk, and computer-analysed by AS’s executive editor, Adam Smith. [PP

	Total		Age 1(114)		Age 2 (239)		Age 3 (264)	
	<i>fewer</i>	<i>less</i>	<i>fewer</i>	<i>less</i>	<i>fewer</i>	<i>less</i>	<i>fewer</i>	<i>less</i>
There were <i>less/fewer</i> jobs...	79%	21%	69%	31%	76%	24%	85%	15%
With <i>fewer/less</i> interruptions...	75%	25%	70%	30%	74%	26%	79%	21%
... <i>less/fewer</i> than ten applicants...	51%	49%	42%	58%	46%	54%	58%	42%
... <i>fewer/less</i> than four hours drive...	8%	92%	5%	95%	7%	93%	9%	91%

reduced, and speakers and writers are probably less constrained by whatever they may have been taught about the preposition following it. Still it’s a minority result (20% overall) in the three-way split with *from* and *to*, but more popular with Age 1. These result are quite similar to those for the sentence which tested the preposition following *superior* (“The new recipe is far superior *than/to* the old one). There *than* gained 20% support in a two-way split, with slightly more (25%) coming from Age 1.

Overall then, *than* is still the minority variant, but *to* is clearly on the rise in the most straightforward comparisons, by its strong showing with Age 1.

fewer and less

These words are both pronouns and determiners, which were the focus of two pairs of test sentences, shown in the table above. According to the rule articulated in Fowler’s *Modern English Usage*, (1926), *fewer* is to be used with plural (countable) nouns and *less* with singular (uncountable) ones. This is reflected in the overall results for the first pair of sentences, where *fewer/less* are determiners. *Fewer* gets 75-79% of the vote, and *less* only 21-25%. There’s a slight

age differential, showing that Age 1 respondents are more inclined to *less* than those older than them, bringing its support up to 30%. But for the majority, *fewer* still seems to be the determiner of choice.

The picture changes quite dramatically when *fewer/less* serve as pronouns (preceding *than*), as in the third and fourth sentences tested. In the third example, *less* is preferred except by the oldest group (Age 3), though their sheer numbers take the overall percentage just below 50%. In the fourth example, *less* is overwhelmingly preferred: by 92% overall, including Age 3 respondents. Usage books sometimes suggest that the rules for *fewer/less* are relaxed with quantitative phrases, though it’s also the effect of it being a pronoun rather than determiner in such cases.

Why then the difference between those two results for the pronoun? It’s possible that the contents of the third example (faintly bureaucratic) pushed the overall response more in the formal direction. *Fewer* is at home in more formal style, as grammars and usage books agree. The fourth example has everyday content, and the straightforward *less* was endorsed by almost everyone. The deployment of *fewer* and *less* is thus a intriguing intersection of grammar, style and social identity. □

	Total			Age 1(114)			Age 2 (239)			Age 3 (264)		
	<i>to</i>	<i>from</i>	<i>than</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>from</i>	<i>than</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>from</i>	<i>than</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>from</i>	<i>than</i>
...different <i>to/from/than</i> Joe’s	41%	52%	7%	53%	40%	7%	41%	52%	7%	35%	58%	7%
...different direction <i>than/to/from</i> the others	34%	46%	20%	36%	40%	24%	35%	43%	22%	33%	50%	18%
...different <i>to what/from what/than</i> they expected	33%	57%	10%	40%	48%	12%	33%	55%	12%	29%	62%	9%



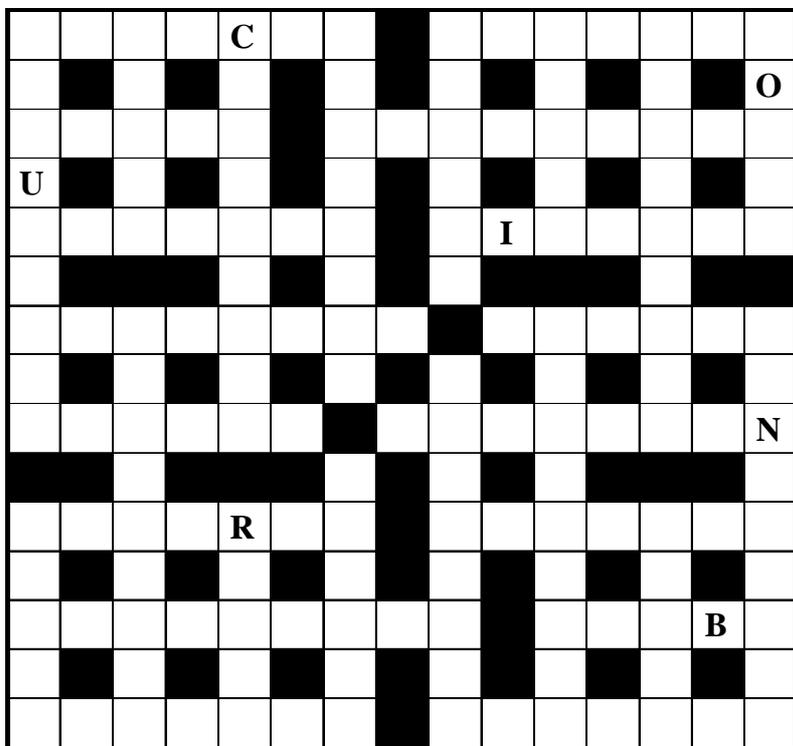


RUBICON



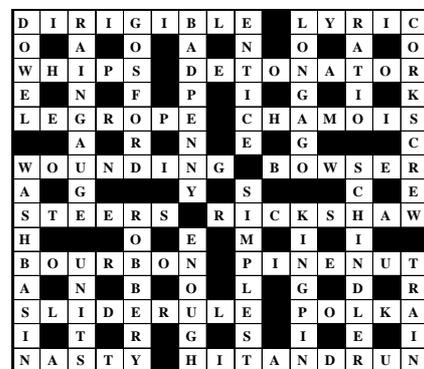
RUBICON, devised by David Astle, is a hybrid of crossword, jigsaw and acrostic. First, solve as many clues as you can and begin to fit the answers inside the grid. (The scattered letters of RUBICON should give you a toehold.) When the grid is completed, arrange the *clues* from the first Across to the last Down – their 32 initial letters will spell a category. As a bonus, which six of your answers belong to the category in question?

- Alternative to portraiture (9)
- Deeply painful (9)
- Flammable metal (9)
- Lion-hearted feat (7-2)
- Movie studio; comprehensive (9)
- Obsession to set off? (9)
- Raunchy addresses of the furred kind? (9)
- Time helps mariners ascertain this (9)
- Handwoven hanging (8)
- Intrinsically mediocre (8)
- Rabbit's foot? (8)
- Rester's pad (8)
- Abiding (7)
- Drake achieved one below this rank (7)
- Export of Cuba (7)
- It never rains but it pours! (7)
- No small accomplishment (7)
- Scaffold for vines (7)
- Suitability (7)
- Trappist vow (7)
- Anagram of HUSTLE (6)
- Openly loving touch (6)
- VAT for one (6)
- Way a pirate stashes treasure? (6)
- Book of maps (5)
- Crate on the road (5)
- Embark on (5)
- Empty-headed individual (5)
- Gang slang (5)
- Historic cousin of bossa nova (5)
- Imperial term of office (5)
- Rocky's side-swings (5)



Solution to Rubicon in last issue
THINGS MADE OR DEVELOPED
BY CLERGYMEN: Detonator,
 rickshaw, bourbon, slide rule,
 corkscrew, rain gauge

(With due acknowledgements to
Vitamin Q by Roddy Lumsden,
 Chambers Harrap 2004, for inspiring
 the theme)



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