AUSTRALIAN STYLE

Tasmanian Words

Bruce Moore is Director of the Australian National Dictionary Research Centre at ANU. This is an edited version of the paper he gave for Style Council 2007.

Until recently, Tasmanian words have not been well served by the dictionaries. E.E. Morris in *Austral English* (1898) included a good sampling of flora and fauna: **celery-top pine**, **horizontal** (**scrub**), **Huon pine**, etc.; **badger** (for "wombat"), **inchman** (for a kind of ant), **mutton bird***,* **Tasmanian devil***,* **Tasmanian tiger**, etc.), but few words from other semantic categories. There is **piner** for "one employed in felling Huon pines", **Vandemonian** for a convict of Van Diemen's Land**, badger box** for "a roughly-constructed dwelling", and a few others. There are four words of indigenous origin: **canagong** refers to any of several succulent perennial plants commonly called "pigface"; **boobialla** is applied to a variety of *Acacia longifolia* and to several small shrubs of the genus *Myoporum*; **lubra** is a term for "Aboriginal woman", and although its origin is disputed it is likely that it comes from Tasmania; a **mariner** is a shell used in the making of necklaces.

The next place we might have expected to hear about Tasmanian words would be in Sidney Baker's *The Australian Language*, either in the first edition of 1945, or the second edition of 1966. Although Baker gives a very full list of terms used by mainlanders *for* Tasmanians, he is surprisingly silent on

any Tasmanian regionalisms. The *Australian National Dictionary* (1988) is strong on Tasmanian flora and fauna, but if we were expecting this historical dictionary to provide a great number of "Tasmanian words" from the speech of ordinary Tasmanians, I am afraid that they are not there in any great numbers. There are some terms from the Tasmanian convict system, including **carrying gang** ("party of convicts assigned to carrying logged timber"), **probation system** ("system for the management of convicts, introduced in Tasmania after the abolition of assignment in 1839"), **model prison,** and **separate prison.** The term **muttonbirding** is introduced, and the world of mutton birds is lexically productive: **muttonbird oil**, **muttonbird (-feather) pillow** (not greatly liked!), and **muttonbird gales** "the seasonal gales coinciding with the annual arrival of flocks of muttonbirds". The verb **dizz** describes a method of cooking muttonbirds in their own fat. The term **Tasmanian bluey** for a woollen outer garment appears, as does **tissue** (also **tisher**) for a cigarette paper. But that is about all.

As part of a wider research project to test the extent of regionalism in Australian English the Australian National Dictionary Centre produced *Tassie Terms: A Glossary of Tasmanian Terms* in 1995. It is in *Tassie Terms* that we finally

find some of the "real" Tasmanian words. **Cordial** is used to refer to a carbonated non-alcoholic drink, known elsewhere as a *soft drink* (with the consequence that one of the words used in Tasmania for the mainland word *cordial* has been **syrup**). **Hydro,** an abbreviation of Hydro-Electric Commission is frequently used in compounds such as **hydro bill**, **hydro power**, and **hydro worker**. **Ringtail roarer** is used to describe something that is exceedingly good of its kind.

Two words, **nointer** and **yaffler**, have their origin in British dialect. **Nointer** means "a mischievous child", and derives its

Bruce Moore
(photo courtesy of Kerry Biram)

meaning from the notion of "one who deserves an anointing i.e. a thrashing". **Yaffler** is used to describe "a loudmouthed obnoxious person". **Yaffle** is a widespread British dialect word for the green woodpecker and the verb **yaffle** is recorded in a number of English dialects meaning "to bark as a little dog"; this is no doubt the origin of the Tasmanian sense. These two words are used only by older Tasmanians, and are obsolescent.

There are three Tasmanian terms that would be heard in Englishes in some parts of the world, but not on mainland Australia. **Cock** as a form of address, usually male to male, is recorded in English from the early nineteenth century, and is common in Tasmania. **Rum one**, with a range of connotations from "eccentric person" to "likeable person", appears as **rum'n** or **rum'un** in Tasmania. The standard sense of **cranky** is "of capricious temper, difficult to please", but there is a second meaning "mentally out of gear; eccentric or peculiar in notions or behaviour". It is this second sense, describing irrational rather than irritable behaviour, that has been retained in Tasmania but lost on mainland Australia.

Tassie Terms shows that indigenous culture continued to add terms to the Tasmanian lexicon. **Moonbird** became used as a name for the **muttonbird**, and then an actual indigenous word, **yolla**, became widely used. In order to distinguish themselves from mainland Kooris, Tasmanian Aborigines initially took up the term **muttonbird koori**, and then **Palawa**, a term used by Fanny Cochrane Smith in recordings from 1903.

Since the publication of *Tassie Terms* the Australian National Dictionary Centre has continued to seek out Tasmanian words. New terms include: **beastly careless** for "utterly indifferent"; **chigga** or **chigger,** deriving from the suburb of Chigwell, regarded as working class and uncultured, and synonymous with other Australian terms such as *westie*, *bogan*, *bevan*, and *booner*; **toothie** another shell used by indigenous people to make necklaces; **Bridgewater Jerry** "a rolling fog"; **fizzy cordial** "a soft drink"; and **Liah Pootah** for another grouping of indigenous people.

One of the trends in both Australia in general, and in Tasmania, is the number of words that are coming into Australian English from Aboriginal languages and cultures—from the revival, the renewal, and the development of those languages and cultures. This alerted me to the fact that one important Tasmanian term has been missed by all of the dictionaries, as illustrated by this recent newspaper passage:

> Britain's Natural History Museum has agreed to hand over some remains of four Tasmanian Aborigines—a partial victory for the state's indigenous people after 20 years of tortuous negotiations to bring their ancestors home for burial. *Sydney Morning Herald* 28 April 2007 p. 22

Many of us will remember the phrase "the last of the Tasmanian Aborigines" which, like the comparable "pillow of the dying race", seemed to legitimise linguistically the notion that this was a doomed people. **Tasmanian Aborigine** must be one of the earliest of "Tasmanian words", and it will certainly find its way into the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*, along with most of the words noted above. □

S C O S E NOTES

Journalists face a dilemma when talent use the language incorrectly in crucial parts of their interviews or when written documents such as media releases contain errors. Singulars and plurals have been tripping up some journalists. "Could we establish once and for all that **goods** has no singular", says one listener, criticising ABC broadcasters who referred to the substance, lead carbonate, as "a dangerous good". The listener is right. In its standard meaning (property or possessions, especially movable property), the noun **goods** is used only in the plural. That's why we have expressions like **goods and services tax, goods lift** and **goods train.** So, lead carbonate is **dangerous goods**.

Then we have the plural noun **premises** (a house or building with the grounds belonging to it), which has no singular form. One listener heard that "the police [had] arrived at a premise in Clovelly" and was prompted to ask, "Did they find a conclusion?"

Another common error is to treat **biceps** as a plural, so we hear of "a bicep". **Innings** is formally a plural but in cricket it serves as both plural and singular: "both innings were interrupted by rain", "England lost by an innings and 95 runs" and "my best ever innings was…". ABC listeners rightly objected to "inningses" as a redundant double plural. In baseball, on the other hand, "an inning" is correct.

Perennial mistakes are "a phenomena", "a criteria" and "a curricula". The singular forms of these words, **phenomenon, criterion and curriculum**, seem in danger of dying out completely. A SCOSE member has jokingly observed that **criterion** now remains only as the name of a certain pub in Sydney.

A thorny question arrives from a member of staff. Is it correct to put an -s on the end of **water cannon** to make it a plural? Well, some say that **cannon** serves both as the singular and plural of the noun but interestingly the *Macquarie Dictionary* is silent on this point, which suggests that the word may be treated the same as an ordinary noun (i.e. that **cannons** is a possible plural).

Still on the subject of singulars and plurals, many people do not know how to identify the head of a complex noun phrase. A recent example:

A group of Filipino men has been paid twelve million dollars…

In the phrase, "a group of men", *men* is the head noun and *a group of* is a modifier. So plural agreement is called for (a group of Filipino men **have** been paid…). When this and similar examples were pointed out, some people seem to have taken it to mean that plurals are in:

New statistics show that the number of SIDS cases nationally have increased…

In this sentence, *number* is the head of the noun phrase, not *SIDS cases*, so the verb should be singular (the number… **has** increased).

Now for an example where the writer got the verb-subject agreement right:

A group of 15 sailors who were captured by the Iranian navy in the Persian Gulf last month **are** expected to return to Britain later tonight.

Elementary, you say? But still, some broadcasters aren't sure what to do. The verb *should* agree with the subject, but what *is* the subject? *Sailors* or *group*? In this case, it is the sailors. So the verb should be plural (*are expected*). The question of singular versus plural hinges on the question, *what are you talking about?*

In the following example the writer got it right the first time but then appears to have accepted some wrong advice. The first version was:

A group of pre-schoolers and teachers taken hostage in the Philippines capital Manila **have** been released unharmed after a nine-hour ordeal.

A plural verb to match *pre-schoolers*

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

and teachers – perfect. But in a later version, the verb was made to agree with *group* ("…has been released").

Even in less subtle cases mistakes are surprisingly common:

…government and business has done barely enough to bridge the gap between black and white living standards.

Here a simple coordinated subject (*government* and *business*) calls for a plural verb. Surely government and business are two separate entities.

Now for some pronunciation boo-boos. It's **Kiev** [KEE-uhf], with the stress on the first syllable, not [kee-EV], and **Danube** is [DAN-yoohb], not [duh-NYOOHB]. The broadcasters who pronounced **inimitable** as [in-uh-MIT-uh-buhl], **aquifer** as [AK-wah-figh-uh], **satyr** as [SAT-igh-uh] or **tryst** as [TRIGHST] probably don't understand the meaning and morphological structure of these words. Spelling pronunciations might seem a safe option if you're not sure, but they backfire when **Torumbarry** (Victoria) [tuh-RUM-buh-ree] comes out as [toh-rum-BA-ree] and **Nimmitabel** (NSW) [NIM-i-tuh-bel] as [nim-ee TAY-buhl]. □

Kamiks, mukluks and toves
Style Council 2007

Robyn Colman of Word Wise, *based in Hobart, reports on Style Council 2007, held on 12 May.*

It was a privilege to have Style Council in Hobart, where it was held in conjunction with the third national editors conference. This was the first time that Style Council had been to Tasmania and we were delighted with the emphasis on "southern" English.

We had a lot to learn. Tasmanian English is less extensive than we Tasmanians thought. Bruce Moore [see lead article] surveyed specifically Tasmanian words and phrases appearing in the first and (soon to be published) second editions of the *Australian National Dictionary*. Hardly any of the examples recorded from Tasmania on the ABC-Macquarie word map are actually uniquely Tasmanian. A lot of the words we like to think are ours have their real origins in British dialects – for example, *rum 'un*. Food for thought here, cobber.

Bernadette Hince took us south to Antarctica, showing what were easily the most beautiful slides of both conferences. We learnt about some of the words that explorers and scientists from many countries, mainly from the north of the northern hemisphere, have given each other for use in that cold, unutterably beautiful region. From seals to penguins, to motorised vessels and boots (*kamiks* and *mukluks*), Antarctic English is rich in exotic nouns and witty slang.

Pam Peters gave an elegant demonstration of the difference between anecdotal accounts of language change and measured indications of it. Her descriptivist approach was a useful reminder to sticklers among the delegates that we need to be flexible (though not spineless) when refining our own and others' usage. Things are changing fast (how quickly "clever" has become a politically insulting term this year) and it was fascinating to learn more about the directions of change.

Adam Smith's paper [see p.5] surveyed language columnists – the Ruth Wajnrybs, Murray Waldrens and William Safires who comment regularly on language matters in newspapers. They come in various categories, which seem largely to be determined by their level of ease or wrath when it comes to language change. It's been fun to assign categories to people one knows.

Perhaps the most imaginative topic of the day was "Verbs in the language of place", a paper given by Tasmanian-based Australian author Danielle Wood. Danielle eloquently argued for the importance of verbs in establishing atmosphere and a sense of place, giving vivid examples from several writers but primarily Tim Winton, that master of descriptive writing. An impromptu audience-wide recitation of "Jabberwocky", led by Danielle, was also a highlight.

In the afternoon Style Council was open to the public and they came in droves to hear a panel – Yvonne Rolzhausen (US English), Kim Lockwood (Pacific English) and Pam Peters (impacts of technology) – talking about different kinds of English; what the future might hold; how the Internet is or isn't influencing usage around the world, and much more besides. Christopher Lawrence, from ABC radio, wittily and ably chaired the panel and their genial audience, all contributing vigorously to the debate. □

The usage panel, Style Council 2007. L to R: Rolzhausen, Lawrence, Peters, Lockwood (photo courtesy of Kerry Biram)

Language Columns and Columnists

Language columns are in a genre that is distinct from other records or commentaries on language usage. Whatever the longevity of a particular column, it can never have the authority of a dictionary, a style manual or a usage manual. Nor does a periodical allocation of words in a newspaper or magazine give a writer the opportunity to build a recognisable stance or argument towards particular uses of language, in the way that recent books by Don Watson on public language, or Lynne Truss's on punctuation do.

American linguist, Steven Pinker, in *The Language Instinct* (1995), criticised what he saw as the ill-informed, conservative stance of language writers like William Safire (who has been writing his column "On Language" for the *New York Times Magazine* for nearly 30 years). By looking at a range of Safire's recent columns, along with those of the *Sydney Morning Herald*'s Ruth Wajnryb and *The Australian*'s Murray Waldren, we can gauge whether Pinker's criticism is reasonable.

The stance adopted by all three columnists over the last 6 months falls broadly into a category designated "Wordwatcher" by Pinker. That is to say, their typical topic is the sense and history of particular words or phrases. They do not quite fit Pinker's criterion of being chosen for their eccentricity (*get one's goat* and *pumpernickel* are the examples he uses), tending rather to be terms of current interest because they are recent creations or have acquired a new shade of meaning.

A typical example is Safire's investigation into the sense of the phrase "third rail" in a statement by George Bush: "Social security – they used to call it the third rail of American politics, because when you talked about it you got singed". He explains the sense through the system of using a third rail in the subway that supplied electricity, and traces its first use as a political metaphor back to a *Newsweek* article in 1982.

Waldren deploys both wit and research to diffuse the outrage of some readers at the use of the phrase *the lay of the land* in a book title. They consider it ungrammatical or (perhaps worse) American. But Waldren shows that British and American dictionaries allow either *lay* or *lie of the land*: the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* in fact traces the use of *lay* as a noun back to the early 19th century. Google shows *lay* is now five times as popular as lie, so "lie-lovers should lay off".

Other grammatical issues that arise in the columns surveyed are the use of "you and me" versus "you and I", and the subjunctive. As a trained linguist, Wajnryb is able to explain succinctly how the confusion over whether to use *I* or *me* arises from an unhelpful imposition of the rules of Latin grammar onto English. In fact the two are interchangeable more often than not – "the primary function of language is to communicate intention and the matter of form is secondary". This is very different to the stance Safire takes when corrected on his (non)use of the subjunctive "were" by a reader, when he wrote "'If Labor was to be replaced…'". Admitting his mistake, Safire states that the subjunctive aids precision, and we should use it "when expressing a wish, making a suggestion or describing a circumstance that we know just ain't so". This is just the kind of prescriptive position that Pinker criticised him for. His case is weaker given that the conjunction "if" already does the job of expressing a hypothetical that he reserves for the subjunctive verb.

The stance that Safire adopts in this particular column is more "jeremiah" than wordwatcher, as he despairs for the state of the language: "It is not this column's policy

Adam Smith (senior research assistant at the Dictionary Research Centre, Macquarie University and executive editor of Australian Style*) published the original version of this article in the Higher Education supplement of* The Australian, *9 May 2007.*

LANGUAGE COLUMN: PUTTING LANGUAGE ON A PEDESTAL?
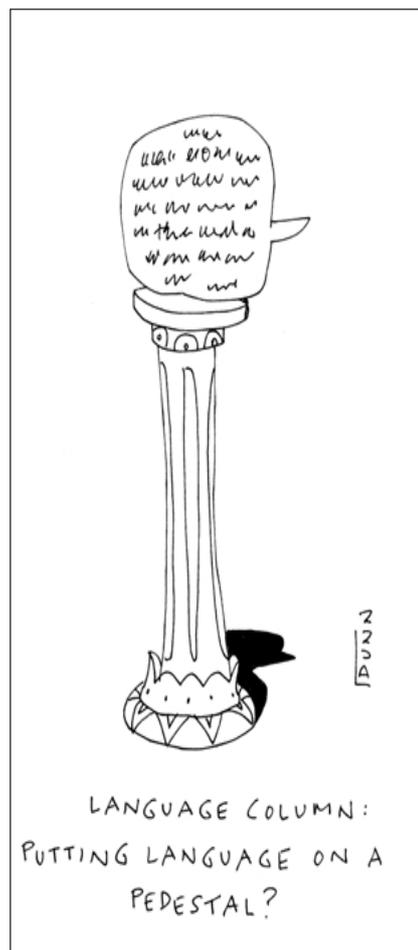
Book Notes

Cambridge Guide to Australian English Usage

Kim Lockwood is Managing Director of Editing Services Australia and is a regular contributor to Style Councils. This is the feisty speech with which he launched Pam Peters' Cambridge Guide to Australian English Usage *at the Style Council conference in Hobart.*

I'm flattered, honored and de lighted to be asked to launch this brilliant new edition of Pam Peters' guide to the use of English in Australia. Most of you will know the original – *The Cambridge Australian English Style Guide* – which was first published in 1995.When I was a wage slave I had it on the bookshelf in my office beside the Macquarie Dictionary and Fowler, and it was a rare week that my hand didn't reach for it at least once. And I never regretted reaching for it. It solved whatever the problem was or answered whatever the question was every time.

Now, as Peters points out in her preface, electronic communication has become almost universal, with word processors the primary means of drafting documents. This new medium affects many aspects of language and style which are reflected in updated entries in this new edition. The internet can be used to glean data to show us exactly how we are using the language *today*, not 10 or 20 years ago.

We'd be here for hours if I canvassed all the changes, so let's pick the main ones from the first two letters of the alphabet.

The first entry in the book is for *the @ sign*, the ubiquitous curly thing in all our email addresses. Some dictionaries list it where the word *at* or the phrase *at sign* appear, but since its frequency is enormous, there is a case for putting it up front, as in the *Cambridge Guide*. (And why didn't you tell us what to call it, Pam? In Danish it is "the elephant's trunk". In Chinese it is "the little mouse". In Russian it is "the little dog" and in Swedish it is "the cat's foot". The Dutch call it "the monkey's tail". French, Italian, Hebrew and Korean use "snail". Take your pick! Doesn't "the at sign" sound bland!)

Aboriginal or *Aborigine*? The first two parts have been rewritten in light of the 6th edition of the Australian Government *Style Manual*, which has changed its recommendation with *every* edition since 1978. It's time to settle down! The latest says we should use the singular *Aboriginal*, the plural *Aboriginals*, and *Aboriginal people* for official documents. This flies in the face of the Australian Corpus of English which finds a ratio of 11:3 for *Aborigine* for the singular and 133:13 for the plural *Aborigines*.

Now, that particular bete-noir most of us shudder at: *alright* as one word, a-l-r-i-g-h-t. The new guide outlines the yes/no history of the word, including Fowler's admonition that it is a vulgarism, then says that at the start of the 21st century it is high time we used it without second thoughts. (All right, Pam, I'll do that when you also recommend *alwrong* as one word.)

Another thing many of us hate is *Americanisation*, which is one of the new entries in the guide. As it points out, we have been absorbing US usages since the mid-19th century, including, curiously, *dago*, which we thought was ours. Without such absorption we would not have *teenager,*

know-how, gimmick, stunt, bulldozer and many more. Of course scattered borrowings are not going to change the whole character of Australian English. But do we have to use them when a perfectly good Australian English word already exists? Let's have *lifts*, not "elevators"; let's play *draughts*, not "checkers"; let's *work it out*, not "figure it out"; and let's have *ordinary* or *normal* sizes, not "regular" sizes. Something is regular if it happens every second Tuesday.

In editorial entries, all standard references (dictionaries, grammars, style manuals) have been updated to their latest editions. This tells you nothing about their impacts on the text, but serves to illustrate the breadth and depth of the updating. Under *audiovisual and electronic media*, the *Cambridge Guide* has new sections on referencing websites, electronic documents, CD-ROMs, DVDs and the like. The entry on bibliographies has been updated with regional style references, as has the entry on British English. Additional dot points draw attention to the newest member of the punctuation inventory: *bullet points*. Now almost as ubiquitous as *the at sign,* they have earned themselves a new entry in the guide.

Moving on to B, we find the entry on *barbecue or barbeque,* revised with research showing the the rise of the *-que* ending. Twenty years ago the *-cue* spelling outranked *-que* in the Australian Corpus of English by 10:1. In Australian documents on the internet the ratio is now closer to 3:2. It is only a matter of time before dictionaries change the spelling of the headword. This is one we put in the same basket as *disinterested.* The game is lost.

It begs the question? The guide's redesigned entry on this troublesome child shows the evolution of secondary meanings and dictionary acceptance of them. We have now moved so far from the original meaning of the phrase – taking as a proven fact the very question that should be discussed – that we must consign it with the spelling *barbecue,* and *disinterested* into the graveyard of usage. (And jumping to the letter I, we'll soon be putting *imply*, meaning to suggest, into the same coffin. *Infer*, meaning to deduce, is slowly but surely eroding the two original meanings.)

But of course this edition of the guide is not purely a description of how we are using English. It provides, as did its predecessor, guidance on *preferred* forms – good to see a bit of prescriptivism here and there! – and basic facts to do with grammar, syntax, punctuation, spelling and all the other paths that can lead us astray.

My copy will sit on the shelf next to the *Cambridge Australian English Style Guide*, and I have no doubt I will reach for it and consult it just as often as I did its shelfmate. It's with great pleasure that I launch Pam Peters' *Cambridge Guide to Australian English Usage.* ☐

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to hurry along any great shifting sands; on the contrary, I take my stand on grammar's burning deck until all the rest have fled". While the epic pose here is a mock one, a self-deprecating exposure of the futility of opposing change, Safire still claims a measure of authority by using the word "policy". Rather than simply observing he is exercising his influence, and by drawing attention to his own failing is encouraging vigilance in his readers.

This approach is very different to that of the two Australian columnists, who tend to promote a shared experience of language, not a struggle between good and bad usage. Wajnryb, in particular, writes about discourse situations that are common to all language users, such as ways to end a conversation, where questions of correct usage become irrelevant in the face of social or cultural expectations.

Where they do all share common ground is in their awareness of the vitality of language and their close observation of its changes. Recognising the widening of the sense of *reticence* to make it a synonym of *reluctance*, or a new application of *existential* in the description of the war against terror as an "existential conflict", are not mere exercises in mindless pedantry as Pinker might have us believe. They can, in Safire's words "call attention to subtle changes in common usage that offer linguistic clues to vast cultural change" ☐

Adam Smith
(Photo courtesy of Kerry Biram)

From the Editor

Many thanks to all those who contributed to the Editor's very interesting intray of paper and electronic correspondence. We're most grateful for those hundreds of Feedback questionnaires which contribute to our research on Australian usage, and especially for the entrepreneurial work of all those names on the roll of honor below.

In the December issue we raised the question of whether publishing AS purely online would impact negatively on our readers. Just a few wrote in, mostly saying that they would miss out on the magazine if it had to be accessed via the internet. A couple were comfortable with e-medium, and asked indeed if they could return their Feedback questionnaires electronically. The answer is that we don't have an electronic quiz facility at the moment, but you're welcome to scan your Feedback questionnaires if you have access to a digital photocopier, and return them to us as an electronic file. Assuming that the ratio of letters for and against going electronic is like that among our thousands of readers, we probably need to retain the print medium for the moment.

The incoming correspondence brought observations on old conundrums and new never-before-seen expressions entering the English language – or at least putting a toe in the water. A prize for the most outstanding neologism spotted should go to *chaoplexology*, sent in by Dierk von Behrens (ACT). For those like me who need an explanation, it represents the ultimate abstract scientific thinking at the frontiers of mathematics and computing, using a combination of chaos theory and complexity to explain the universe. Not that there are very many chaoplexologists so far...

The runner up for the prize must be Dick Kimber's (NT) word *burkini*, a new garment which is a remarkable compromise between burka and bikini, pictured in the Brisbane Courier Mail (with photocredits to AFP). As pictured from the hips up, it's a fullcover swimming costume designed for Muslim women who want to enjoy swimming at the beach like everyone else. In fact it's rather like the athletic gear worn by Cathy Freeman when she won the 400 m at the Sydney Olympic games in 2000, except that hers was bluey-green, and the burkini shown is black..

Fullcover swimming gear of more improvised kinds (though not covering the head) has been around for some time in northern Australia, as a defence against the attacks of box jelly fish. Called a *stinger suit*, it's recommended generally for swimmers during the jelly fish season by the Northern Territory News. Perhaps the pendulum is swinging away from minimal clothing on the beach.

Close encounters with dignitaries such as the prime minister were the focus of correspondence from Judith Rodriguez (VIC), who reflected on how little contact there was when he visited "on the fly", or there was merely "token access" at a public event. As Crikey! reported it, what anyone with a serious issue wants is "face time" with the PM, or even better, a "private audience". The terms make an interesting scale of relative encounters.

Other problems in encounters with pollies were noted by NM Stubbs (Tas): that when you finally do get some words with or from them, the expression may be rather ambiguous. There's the interpretive challenge posed by statements such as "don't underestimate...", urging you not to set your sights too low, while presumably avoiding the danger of overestimating as well. While trying to walk the tightrope on that, you hear that the speaker "wouldn't wish to understate" something, but could he indeed overstate it? Expressions like these create problems of interpretation rather like the double negative, waylaying the conscientious listener, though they are probably not meant to convey anything very exact. They are among the weasel words of Don Watson's decaying public language – to mix metaphors!

Another elusive kind of negative that we may all utter from time to time is "didn't use to" - or should it be "didn't used to"? You can't easily tell from the pronunciation, because the "d" on "used" merges with the "t" of "to". Grammarians generally argue for "didn't use to", because "didn't used to" puts the past tense twice into the same verb phrase. In British usage "didn't used to" is actually more common that "didn't use to", whereas in Australia both are outnumbered by "used not to", as if Australians are uncomfortable with the "didn't" constructions. In "didn't use to", the infinitive "use" is an old verb meaning "be accustomed", which now only appears in this negative construction. It was once more widely used in this way.

The interplay between pronunciation and grammar underlies a problem reported by Janice Bevan (NSW), who saw "was cowered" being used instead of "was cowed", as in "was cowered with fright". The

Letters to the Editor

Dear Pam

I was interested to read the article by Cherie Connor on Sea Words in the December 2006 issue of Australian Style. There are certainly parallels in Australia with the New Zealand example of dogfish changing name to pioke, and elephant fish to white fillets.

In south-eastern Australia, fish-and-chip shops commonly sell fillets of shark (many types) as flake. In addition, the name gemfish which is now in common usage, was coined to distinguish this fish, with its previous common Australian name of hake, from the different, lesser quality, European hake.

Phil Helmore
Via email

Dear Ms Peters,

With reference to the "email" from David Meagher (*AS*, Dec. 2006, p. 5), I seem to remember signing off letters to mates with *Cheers* in the late 1950s. In fact, one of my then correspondents used to amplify it by adding *and Beers*. Personally, I always assumed that *Cheers* was derived from *Cheerio* (which, indeed, had something of a British flavour). Anyhow, I still use it, regularly.

More recently, *Cheers* seems to have acquired the additional sense of *Thanks* (as evident in the English television series *"The Bill".*) Nowadays, I fancy I am hearing it used here (in Sydney) in both senses – although it is often hard to distinguish which of these is intended by the speaker; it could even be both, simultaneously (i.e. *Thank you and goodbye*).

John Groenewegen
North Ryde, NSW

Dear Ms Peters

In the June 2006 edition of Australian Style, John McArthur from Victoria mentioned a local pizza palace offering customers "Choc Moose". I have recently braved the guffaws of my dining companions and enjoyed a dish the restaurant billed as: "Chocolate Mouse Muffin". I couldn't find any whiskers but the nose was delicious.

Stephanie Edwards
Daw Park, SA

Australlex 2007

AUSTRALEX 2007 (annual conference of the Australia and New Zealand Society for Lexicography) will take place in Adelaide on September 25, in conjunction with LINGAD. Its thematic focus will be specialist vocabulary and dictionaries, to which both local and international speakers will contribute.

The plenary presentation on the TermFinder project (discipline-specific online termbanks for beginning students at Macquarie University) will explore the relationship between terminology and computer corpora. This theme will be applied by other speakers to specialist fields such as music and Thai cuisine, and to other computer-based techniques for dictionary compilation. Other papers will deal with problems in lexicology and new frontiers of toponymy.

For further details, visit the website at www.australex.org.

second syllable of *cower* is the final vowel of a triphthong, which tends to disappear when followed by the past tense ending. However the opposite can also happen, so that "er" is written into it when not really intended, helped by the nearness of *cower* and *cow* in meaning. Both imply being intimidated, though *cower* is usually active ("was cowering"), whereas *cow* is usually passive "was cowed".

The decline of the gerund (verbal noun) in the pages of AS was commented on by Dick Sanders (NSW) by which he meant the use of accusative rather than possessive in expressions such as "prevent them taking" rather than "prevent their taking", which would make "taking" more of a verbal noun and less of a verb. It isn't our policy to suppress the gerund, but as it happens, it reflects the fact that a majority of Australians are tending that way, as emerged from Feedback survey 21 (2003). Test questions with *-ing* words produced majority endorsements (79-91% overall) for the accusative pronoun.

Have you noticed how the slash can switch its direction? The sign for "care of", i.e. *c/o* has been spotted by Peter Horton (NSW) with a backslash, as both *c\o* and *c\-*. There's no support for the backslash in any style manual. But there does seem to be some confusion about whether "slash" pure and simple always means a forward slash – except when it's designated as a *backslash...*

This June issue of AS has been put together by Yasmin Funk, while Adam Smith is away on well-earned long-service leave. In his absence Yasmin has quickly acquired skills in using the program with which we format the copy, and extends her thanks to Peter Vitez (NCELTR) for his assistance. □

FEED BACK 29

The following sentences all present grammatical options in modern English. Please indicate which of the two alternatives you would most naturally use – and whether you would do differently in speech and writing.

1. He didn't seem to notice *them/their* talking all through.

2. The school asked that at least one parent *should come/come* along with the child.

3. The committee *has/have* taken that issue into account.

4. The company tried to prevent *them/their* taking a class action.

5. Will there be enough places for my wife and *me/I*?

6. We were concerned about *you/your* working there.

7. It was their intention that the family property *be/should be* sold for charity.

8. Our local government may adapt the regulations at *its/their* discretion.

9. They recommended that she *submit/should submit* an updated proposal.

10. She felt as if the world *was/were* crumbling around her.

11. How do you like the idea of *them/their* staying with us?

12. The team *were/was* practising in the rain last night.

13. Many would take advantage of the system if it *were/was* available here.

14. Your work will be reviewed by your line manager and *I/me*.

15. You must insist that the question *should be/be* presented in writing.

16. The panel will announce *its/their* decision tonight.

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.

Passive constructions

English verbs often couple together to express the finer points of action, and so it is with using *get* in passive constructions, e.g. *get married/divorced* as opposed to *be married/divorced.* With *get* as the auxiliary verb, there's a much stronger sense of managing the process, making it rather less passive than the name suggests. However the verb *get* has been heavily proscribed in primary education, and this showed through in the results for the test sentence in the table below. While the overall result was 50/50, it was very strongly age graded. Most younger people (under 45s) were comfortable with *get/got,* but older citizens especially those 65 and over, endorsed "were" in the same construction.

Catenative verbs

English has numerous "catenative" verbs, i.e. ones which forge links with a following verb, using *to +* infinitive*,* an *-ing* form, or sometimes a plain infinitive, which brings them close to being modal verbs in some cases. It varies with the individual verb. In the sentence with *help,* (*help them (to) find),* 61% of respondents preferred the form without *to;* whereas with *prevent* the majority preferred to construct it with *from,* as shown in the table below.

When the catenative verb was *start,* there was a big majority for using *working,* the gerund, and a smaller majority for *buzzing.* But the results shown in the table below also show that younger respondents are more likely to plump for the *-ing* form in each case, and the strength of their response is what boosts the overall majority for *start working.*

Catenatives such as *like* and *prefer* are swingers though also moving towards *-ing* forms of the verb than a *to + infinitive.* The overall differences shown in the table below are not marked, yet younger respondents are definitely more inclined to the *-ing* forms. The test sentences used did however raise questions about whether the two constructions meant exactly the same thing in each case. Who exactly was doing the *singing/driving?*

May and *might*

Two of the test sentences focused on the alternation between *may* and *might* in hypothetical verb construction:

may/might have died/escaped. Here the results were remarkably constant across all age groups, and an overall majority of 73%/70% endorsed the *might* construction in each case. The distinction between *may* and *might* is thus still meaningful for many readers.

Perfect v. past tense

The simple past tense was affirmed in sentences like *Yesterday's avalanche... killed three skiers,* rather than the media-reporting style *Yesterday's avalanche...has killed...* Most respondents (85%) were disinclined to try to build the here-and-now dimension into statements of that kind. ☐

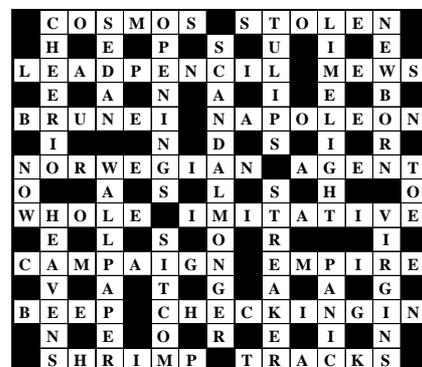|	Total	Age 1+ 2 (168)	Age 3 (142)	Age 4 (153)
..**were** divorced...	50%	24%	62%	74%
..**got** divorced...	50%	76%	38%	26%
..prevent them **from taking**...	68%	72%	73%	59%
..prevent them **taking**...	32%	28%	27%	41%
..start **working**...	80%	86%	82%	71%
..start **to work**...	20%	14%	18%	29%
..start **buzzing**...	67%	71%	63%	64%
..start **to buzz**...	33%	29%	37%	36%
..likes **to sing**...	54%	43%	60%	63%
..likes **singing**...	46%	57%	40%	38%
..prefer **driving**...	52%	63%	50%	41%
..prefer **to drive**...	48%	37%	50%	59%

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 <u>initial</u> letters will spell a category. As a bonus, which six of your answers belong to the category in question?

Envelopes etc (10)
Most ornate (10)
On-deck jumper, commonly (10)
Other half? (10)
Essential wear on wet days (9)
High-rise home (9)
Oceanic idea? (9)
Olympic city of 1928 (9)
Policy of racial segregation (9)
Ye central spot for sea-dogs? (9)
A sign for GPs (7)
A steamy NZ locale (7)
City's admin body (7)
Compound shared by fridges and fertilizers (7)
Discover (7)
Free of pretence (7)
Heartening omen for Noah (7)
Hot paste (7)
Lasted (7)
Lost Czech kingdom, or any arty realm (7)
OK'd (7)
Opposite of woofer (7)
Appeared in a play, hiding... (5)
...apprentice journo (5)
Echoing Alpine cry (5)
Namely Cronus or Hyperion (5)
Not a reality (5)
Zestfully absorb a tutorial (5)
Nonsense (4)
Sirius, say (4)
Terns turn in here (4)
Usual inclusion among the woodwind (4)
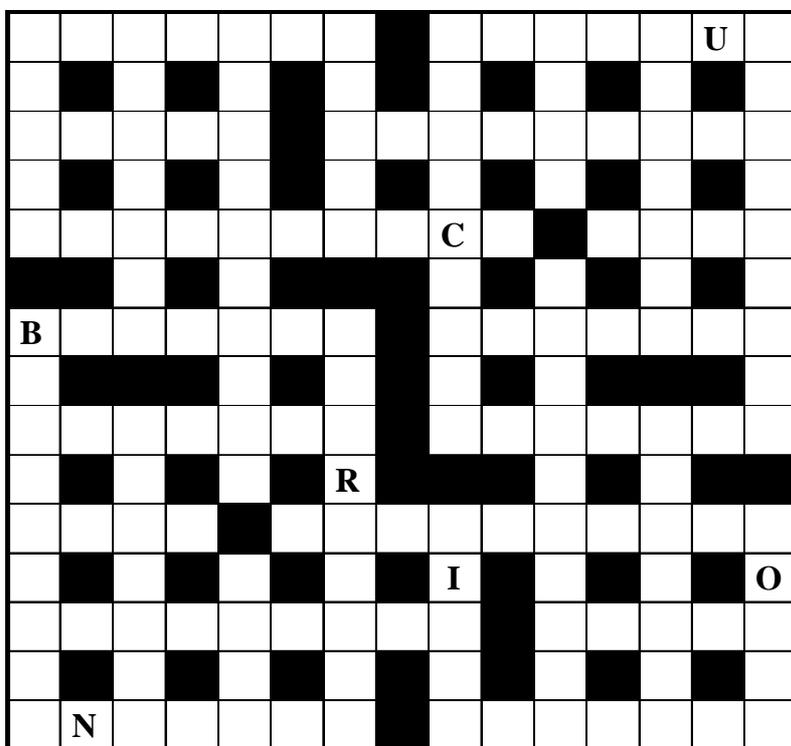
Solution to Rubicon in last issue
VARIOUS MAINSTREAM MAGAZINE TITLES: Cosmos, Campaign, Empire, Tracks, Wallpaper, Limelight

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