

Words About Words (#57 / September 2006)

A Monthly Column of Observations and Opinions for Clients, Colleagues, Associates, and Friends

Honk if You're a Goose

Photo caption in the *Boston Globe*: “A ranger with the Department of Conservation and Recreation rode along Carson Beach in South Boston yesterday, which was empty except for some Canada geese.”

South Boston empty except for some geese? That story should be worth front-page coverage. Maybe the whole human population just got fed up with fowl weather.

A World of Difference

From a *Washington Post* article about battles in Bolivia between landowners and peasants: “Property in Latin America is more unevenly distributed than anywhere on the planet, and Bolivia is no exception.” Larry Magne checked his atlas and was relieved to find that Latin America is apparently still situated on Earth. By inserting “else” after “anywhere,” the writer could have saved that region from temporary exile—perhaps to some lonely galaxy far, far away.

Killer Application

“So much marketing writing today is flat and clichéd,” observes Jon Friedman, “that I think we should give credit when a company is clear or even brutally honest about what they do. So my hat is off to Ensconce Data Technology, a company whose products wipe out data on the hard drives of computers that are being sold or discarded.

“Their unconventional but arresting tag line: ‘Creators of Dead on Demand™ Products.’”

The Motion Is Carried

This month’s Department of Redundancy Department entry offers two for the price of one: “general consensus of opinion.” A *consensus* is a state of unanimous, or nearly unanimous, agreement—hence “general” and “of opinion” merely add unnecessary baggage.

But wait, there’s more. Although you might say they both have to do with counting heads, “consensus” and *census* are spelled differently because they’re derived from different Latin roots. “Consensus” traces its origins to *sentire*, to feel, which also gives us *sense*, *sentiment*, and other kindred words. “Census,” registration of citizens, is a byproduct of *censere*, to assess.

Buzzwhackery

Toilers in the corporate vineyards often exhibit a certain cynicism, as can be seen from this sampling of definitions from those madcap folks who contribute to buzzwhack.com:

Clockroaches: Employees who spend most of their day watching the clock instead of doing their jobs.

Groundhog Day: When a company’s management ignores obvious problems, allowing them to resurface on a daily basis. Name borrowed from the title of the Bill Murray movie.

Megadigm: A profound change. Coined by change management experts (replacing the less impressive sounding “paradigm shift”) to describe growing customer expectations that managers can no longer ignore.

Sarbox: Consultant-speak for the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, which requires top executives to personally validate their performance. Intended result: corporate financials the public can trust. Actual result: more jobs for consultants selling Sarbox expertise.

Talk show host: Someone who knows just enough to appear to be “in the know.” When he fails to meet goal, he blames someone else and moves on to another audience.

Time frame: Term that makes it sound as if a job will be done at a future date (“We’ll do that in the June time frame”), but more often signals that the job will never be completed at all.

Please Don’t Please RSVP

RSVP (or R.S.V.P., if you like those funny little dots) is an abbreviation for the French “Répondez, s’il vous plaît.” (“Respond, if you please.”) Therefore, “Please RSVP” is redundant. Omit the “please,” please.

Unpalatable Confusion

The ever-vigilant Ginny Dodge recently came across a reference to a “cleft pallet.” “Unless the writer is referring to a broken loading platform,” she comments, “it should be *palate*. Then, of course, there is *palette*, which has yet a third meaning.” Granted that there’s little excuse for a professional wordsmith to mix those up, let us observe a moment of pity for anyone learning English and trying to figure out which one is which when they’re all pronounced the same way.

Falling Through the Quacks

Here it is, your moment of Zen from a newspaper op-ed column: “But in the bare-knuckles world of the lame-duck Romney administration, the priorities are different.”

In the comic strip *B.C.*, one of the characters was astonished to discover that “clams got legs!” He might be just as astonished to discover that “ducks got knuckles!” But in truth, that’s just one more example of how metaphors get mixed and sometimes waddle out of control.

That’s the last word for this month’s *Words About Words*. As always, your comments, suggestions, criticisms, philosophical observations, and writing/editing assignments are welcome.

Until next month ...

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