

## Let's Have Some Good Ol' Linguistic Fun!



Traditionally, I utilize the opportunity that *The Angler* provides to rant about some terrible misconception you all have about poor ol' language. But not today! In the spirit of whatever holiday slash scrumptious gorging fest you may be celebrating, and of course bearing in mind the fact that you will have to talk with all your might for days on end to relatives, in-laws and snaggable strangers at New Year's parties, I will provide you with some nice linguistic stories and anecdotes. No rants: just fun. Well alright, a small one. Be warned: when you tell these kinds of stories, you do conform to what people think linguists do. But of course we do interesting research into semantics and micro-variation and lord knows what. We're not just anecdote machines you know. Just think this: it could be worse. I have a friend who does research into urban legends and jokes. Anytime he starts talking about his research the only thing anyone ever says is: "So tell a joke". Horrible. Anyway, tell a joke, tell a story, tell an anecdote, but please impart some sense of the importance of linguistics into your family this holiday season. Merry Holidays!

### **And so, to the end of history, words shall breed words**

Just think for a minute about how many words there are. A lot. Loads. Heaps. Then, think about how many words you use on a daily basis. You would be surprised: it is also heaps and loads. Then think about how many words you use in your lifetime. Staggering blinding heaps. Now there's a number. Of course you use some words more than others: you can check frequency lists to see which these are (hint: it's articles). There are a lot of words that you may use only once, and there are even lots of words that you never use. Isn't that a darn shame? There are so many nice words! So, for the holidays, here is my pick of interesting, chic, holidayesque words. Use them. See what it feels like. People will be astounded, and you'll be the Prince(ss) of Parties.

1. jentacular. Very applicable for the holiday season, when even breakfast is chic: *jentacular* means "pertaining to breakfast". Use it in a sentence? Golly, I will: "What is the jentacular situation vis-à-vis bacon?"
2. vis-à-vis. I love a good French expression: it makes everything sound as if it has a mustache. This just means "with regard to", but it sounds nicer.
3. amuse bouche. Ok one more French expression. An amuse bouche is an appetizer, but I am a proponent of meaning expansion for this word to include all kinds of things that preclude other things: please use this word as meaning sexual foreplay, the foreword of a book, or the band that plays before the actual band that you came to see ("Yes, I think Coldplay had an excellent amuse bouche this tour").
4. scabrous. Also its Dutch equivalent: scabreus. Meaning harsh, repulsive, but mostly "referring to sex in a rude way". Again, why use the word for what it means when you can extend the meaning? "I think Aunt Agatha is wearing a scabrous dress tonight".
5. Deipnophobia. There is a list on the interweb, called phobialist.com. Any of the words mentioned on this page are worth remembering (especially the phobia for long words), but this "fear of dinner parties" is of course the very best excuse not to go to anything this holiday season. "I'm sorry I can't come, I have been diagnosed with a severe case of deipnophobia."

### **Tit for tat, and a nym for everyone!**

Words stem from all kinds of different places: and they all have groups. Lots of names are completely arbitrary: there is absolutely no reason why that thing in your

kitchen is called a *table*. But there are also lots of words that do have either a relationship between form and meaning (look under onomatopoeias and sound symbolism), or they have a connection with the inventor of the word, or with the place of invention. Words named after people, after places: all kinds of jolly fun. Again: be the heart of the feast and amaze friend and enemy alike with some knowledge bombs! And you also get a semantic bonus: contronyms. Unreal, that's what they are.

1. The place is the name. Everything is invented somewhere, and sometimes the inventee is named after the geographical location. We all know that rugby was named after the school there where the ball game was invented. Did you know however, that the Arabic word for *orange* is *burtuka*? A bastardization of *Portugal*! Because the chaps who imported the fruit where from Portugal, and hey presto! a place became a word. Compare also *mandarin* by the way.
2. The thing is the man. These things, where a thing is named after its inventor, or a feeling is named after the feeler, are called eponyms, and we know plenty of them. The most famous examples probably are the sandwich (named after Lord Sandwich), the cardigan (named after the Earl of Cardigan), and of course sadism (named after that scabrous Marquis de Sade).
3. Contronyms. These are by far the weirdest of nyms: contronyms are words that are homonymic (several words that sound the same) but have opposite meanings. Bi-frikking-zarre. And really unlikely: several theorists have postulated that languages tend to avoid homonyms when the meanings are too similar, but here we have words that mean the exact opposite! Please sir, have some confusion, there's plenty to go around! An example? *To dust* means both to clean dust off of something ("She dusted the

vases") as to put a layer of dust **on** to something ("He dusted the cake with sugar").

4. The place is another place. You know when you are talking about your upcoming holiday to mysterious India, and you talk about Mumbai, being fully aware that it is no longer *bon ton* to say Bombay, and that annoying cousin-twice-removed with the mustache and the turtle-neck coughs and says: "Well, actually it is pronounced "Moo-m-bu(t)-ee"". Well, just reply by saying that you are of course very much aware of the *native* pronunciation of the word, but that English has a great many exonyms, one of which you happen to be employing, which is perfectly allowed, THANK you very much. Exonyms are names of geographical locations that are changed in other languages. This is extremely common, and extremely normal, and only posers use all the native terms.

### The World's Coolest Linguistic Anecdotes

That may be stretching it a bit, but as far as linguistic anecdotes go, I always have great success with these. And the big advantage is that you can employ them at any given time, such as when an uncomfortable silence descends upon the table when your drunken uncle comments on the "way too gay" outfit of your in-the-closet nephew that only he does not know about.

1. No left or right. For us, left and right are concepts so deeply ingrained in society and everyday life that we could not possibly live without them. However, there are more than a score of languages which do not have left and right, but which employ other means of orientation. The most boring (although still rather impressive one) is of course cardinal orientation, based on North-South-East-West (used in for example Tagalog: this leads to splendid

sentences such as “Can you pass that pen that's lying North of you to the person East of you?” Even more impressive is Tagalog, and Gyalrong.

2. Can I count on you? Unless you are a computer programmer, there is a very real chance that never in your life will you encounter any other way of counting than from one to ten, and from 10 to 100. HOWEVER, there is great variety amongst world languages as to counting systems: some systems use 6 as a root, others 20. The most exciting one by a long-shot is Oksapmin. They use system based on 27: starting from your thumb on one side, past your other-side eye (15) to your other side thumb (27). Fun tip for the holidays: look this counting system up in Nick Evans' *Dying Words* (page 60) and try to sing *99 Bottles of Beer on the Wall*. It will go something like this:

*other-side middle finger bottles of beer  
on the wall,  
other side middle finger bottles of beer  
you take one down, you pass it around  
other side ring finger bottles of beer*

3. Who's your daddy? Most people think that their own language is best: it is the clearest and most efficient way of expressing yourself. However, when you look at Dutch or English familial structures, there is actually quite a lot of vagueness. When I say that “Bob is your uncle”, do I mean that he is your father's brother, or your mother's sister's husband? And in Dutch, a *neefje* (cousin) can be your brother's son or your mother's brother's son. Some more confusion? Let me get some from the kitchen! Other languages have much more elaborate indexes for familial relationships. Take, for example, Serbian, which seems to have five different words for different sisters-in-law: from

šurnjaja (wife of your wife's brother) to zaova (your husband's sister).

4. This is a sad one, but it is also pretty darn funny (I think). Think about the relationship between land and language: for us the language has to do with a political unity: in the UK we speak English, in the Netherlands Dutch etc. But we are still allowed to speak our own language when we cross the borders: chances are that people won't understand, but it is still worthwhile when you want to gossip about the two flaming hot girls sitting opposite you in the train from Prague to Ostrava. Anyway, there are places when in the event of a border-crossing you have to speak another language. This is common for example in Northern Australia. Language is intimately connected to the land: to speak another language on a piece of land where it does not belong is seen as an act of aggression. Take for example a hapless WO II pilot, whose plane crashed in the sea, after which he swam ashore. There he found a native man. The pilot said something in English (presumably “help me” or something along those lines), but he spoke the wrong language, not the one of the land. Therefore the Aboriginal saw him as an invader and clubbed him to death.

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