

OZWORDS

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EDITORIAL

Language has certainly been in the news. In response to the debate over Ebonics in the United States, and fired by the Oakland School Board's 1996 decision to recognise the language spoken by many Afro-Americans, the Linguistic Society of America resolved: 'The variety known as "Ebonics," "African American Vernacular English" (AAVE), and "Vernacular Black English" and by other names is systematic and rule-governed like all natural speech varieties. In fact, all human linguistic systems — spoken, signed, and written — are fundamentally regular. The systematic and expressive nature of the grammar and pronunciation patterns of the African American vernacular has been established by numerous scientific studies over the past thirty years. Characterisations of Ebonics as "slang," "mutant," "lazy," "defective," "ungrammatical," or "broken English" are incorrect and demeaning'. In Australia, the debate over Aboriginal English has not received the media attention that Ebonics has attracted in the US, but debate has taken place in educational circles. Jay Arthur's *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study* (see 'From the Centre') should do much to increase our understanding of the role of Aboriginal English in Australian society.

DO THEY STILL ROLL THE JAFFAS DOWN THE AISLE?

How would you understand the following sentences?

1. We had the baddest time last night.
2. I saw the cutest babe.
3. The rave was full of hoes.

Most of us would understand the first sentence to mean 'We had a bad time last night', and assume that the speaker had not been taught grammar. Most of us would understand the second sentence to mean either 'I saw a very cute baby' (though this use of 'babe' might seem slightly archaic), or, at a pinch, 'I saw a cute-looking woman' (at the same time decrying the spread into Australian English of this American meaning of 'babe'). The third sentence would be meaningless to most.

An Australian teenager would decode these sentences very differently. Australian teenagers have inherited the new American sense of **bad** to mean 'good, excellent, wonderful', a sense which originated in American Black English (or Ebonics, as we would perhaps now call it). Not only does it have a new sense, but it also has a new grammar — the comparative and superlative, instead of the standard **worse** and **worst**, are **badder** and **baddest**. Thus, the first sentence means 'We had the most wonderful time last night'.

In standard English **cute** means 'attractive, pretty'. It is also one of the buzz words in teenage slang. Take this example from a popular teenage magazine: 'He's cute, he likes you and he's with you right now, but is he the one?' It means 'very attractive physically; sexy', and can be

applied to either sex. As noted in the last issue of *Ozwords*, **babe** has come to mean 'a sexually attractive young person of either sex', and especially in teenage magazines (primarily aimed at teenage girls) the babes are almost invariably male. A boyfriend is a **babester**. A **babefest** is an event, especially a party, attended by many sexily good-looking young people. Thus in a teenage context, the second sentence may well mean 'I saw the most sexy young guy'.

Rave in the sense of a 'a lively party' has been with us for some time, and most of us are now familiar with it as an abbreviation of **rave party**, 'a large frequently illicit party or event, with dancing to electronic music, and especially associated with drugs'. But the **hoes** would defeat most of us. *The Australian National Dictionary* lists the term **hooer** as an Australianism, and suggests that it originates in a British dialect pronunciation of **whore**. It was used as a general term of abuse, but can also have the literal sense of 'whore', as indicated by H. Medcalf in *Rifleman* (1985): 'Anyone would think you were professional pox-doctors, checking the hooers in Palmer Street'. In sentence four, **hoe** does mean 'prostitute', but, alas, it is not a corruption of the Australian **hooer**; it is a new American corruption of **whore**, imported into Australia via rap music.

It is not surprising that teenagers have their own language. No doubt teenagers have always spoken a special language which differed from

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THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL DICTIONARY CENTRE
A JOINT AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY
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DO THEY STILL ROLL THE JAFFAS DOWN THE AISLE?

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

their parents' language. Since the generation conflict needs to be played out again and again, it needs a generational supply of new or recycled words. What is significant about the language of teenagers in the 1990s is the prolific nature of its lexicon. This in part reflects the fact that in the 1990s youth culture is not just one thing but many cultures — there are **goths**, **homies**, **punks**, **skaters**, **hippies**, and so on. There is no one teenage fashion — teenagers dress according to the rules of the culture or 'posse' with which they identify, such as the **homies** (or **homeboys**) with their baseball caps, baggy jeans, and Nikes. So with music.

Australian English produced its own teenage jargon in the past, the most recent being **westie** and **bogan**. Contemporary teenspeak comes from the world of teenage popular culture, and this culture is largely American. Ask a teenager what his or her role model is in the sporting world, and the invariable answer will be Michael Jordan. Listen to a teenager speak, and his or her language will be peppered with Americanisms: **bro** for 'mate', **chill out** for 'relax; become less tense', **d'oh** (from *The Simpsons*) meaning 'I just made a stupid blunder', **geek** for 'a dull or socially inept person', **wicked** meaning 'good'.

In 1996, an American Internet site invited teenagers from any country to send in their slang terms. Australian teenagers provided **sick**, **mad**, **groovy**, **zesty** for 'good'; **seedy**, **krusty**, **festy**, **sad** for 'bad'; **budget** for 'uncool' ('That's so budget'); **mate**, **dude**, **bro** for terms males use to males; **babe** and **bud** for terms girls use to female friends; **mega** for 'large; extremely', and **unreal** for 'ultimate

best'. Finally, **G'day mate** was offered, but this is now an international cliché! But where were the typical Australian terms? What is the fate of **bewdy**, **dinkum**, **furphy**, **grouse**, **wowser**, and so on? Already terms such as **bonzer**, **sheila**, etc., have a decidedly dated and fusty feel.

In order to ascertain the kind of language teenagers are being subjected to, we looked at the language used in popular teenage magazines such as **Dolly**, **Girlfriend**, and **Smash Hits**. Given their audience, and the expectations of that audience, one would expect these magazines to speak largely in the language of American popular culture.

If the language of the present Generation X, and its successors, the Nintendo Babies, has been so influenced by American culture, is Australian slang therefore doomed?

These magazines often use forms such as **kinda** (= 'kind of'), **wanna** (= 'want to'), **gonna** (= 'going to'), and **gotta** (= 'got to'). The American use of **gotten** is common: 'your mouth seems to have gotten off quite lightly'. More typical are the American words — a world of **lush babes**, **budsters**, **buddies**, **chickadees**, **hip chicks**, and **dudes**. Leonardo DiCaprio is 'one sexy **babe**', a '**lush** sex god'.

Take this passage:

BABE WATCH

Where can you find your favourite luminary this month? Who's holed up with Courtney Love? Which young punk is playing grown-ups and is being very responsible indeed? Which sassy stud is crisscrossing the planet in order to mingle with his adoring fans? Cast your eyes upon the world's superbabes to find out! KEANU REEVES. From May through July, Keanu will be holed up in Minnesota

with Courtney Love! Shock-horror! But there's no need to worry, gals, they're not there snogging it up for real, in fact they're there with Vincent D'Onofrio and Cameron Diaz making the movie *Feeling Minnesota*. It's a story about a bloke who steals his brother's fiancée seconds before they tie the knot... The next time you see Keanu on the big screen in your home town, though, will be in October in a flick called *A Walk in the Clouds*.

At first glance this does not look promising. Note that the American 'May through July' rather than the standard Australian 'May to July' is used. The term **sassy**, meaning 'saucy, impudent, cheeky; bold, lively; stylish'

is marked by the *New Shorter Oxford Dictionary* as 'chiefly North American'. We know that the term **superbabe** (again, a male) has its origin in the United States. But what

about **snogging**? The verb **snog** meaning 'to kiss and cuddle' (origin unknown) appeared in the middle of the twentieth century (and the present teenage use is a good example of recycled slang). But in this case its area of use is Britain and Australia, and would not be understood by an American audience. The term **gal** is still marked in the dictionaries as 'chiefly North American', and is not naturalised in mainstream Australian English, although this American term appears to be in common use among teenagers. Yet most Americans would have trouble with the term **flick** (from 'flicker') for a 'movie'. Thus in a passage such as this we are getting a mixture of American, British Australian, and American-Australian terms.

Take this passage:

What's your idea of the perfect night out? **a**. A romantic dinner for two and a soppy movie, finished off with major

snogging in front of an open fire. **b.** A huge party chockers with loads of babelicious guys? **c.** Dancing the night away with a huge group of your best mates. **d.** Seeing the local theatre company's production of *Macbeth*.

The term **babelicious** (pronounced 'bay-buh-lish-uhs'), a blend of **babe** and **delicious**, appears in American English in the 1970s, but finds its way into international English as a result of its use in the cult film *Wayne's World*. **Snogging** reappears, but we now know that this is not American. While **mates** is international, its use is especially intensive in Australia, and it is comforting to see that **buds** or **budsters** has not taken over. **Chocker** is a version of **chock-a-block**, but in Britain the abbreviated form usually means 'fed up, disgusted'. The form **chockers** meaning 'full' appears to be Australian.

So is there more Australian language in these magazines? In some sentences the Australianism is often a long time coming. The April edition of *Girlfriend*

tells its readers: 'Plus we gorge on lush boys with our glossarama poster spesh on page 98, and some unsuspecting snoggers on page 58. Keep your *GF* discount card handy, as we're gonna give you all the best **pressies** ever, all year'. But it eventually gets there. Elsewhere, we find the following: 'the dreaded first visit to the **gyno**' (abbreviation of 'gynaecologist' with the Australian '-o' suffix); 'he'll think you're gorgeous even when you're wearing your **daggiest** sloppies'; 'Maybe you're thinking that this is the third time this month that she's laughed in your face and called you a pathetic **dag**' ('dag' in the sense 'a socially awkward adolescent', someone who is not 'with it', is Australian); 'Kylie **chucked a wobbly**' (Australian version of the British 'throw a wobbly' meaning 'have a fit of bad temper, go crazy'); 'I'd like to **pash** Elle Macpherson — but doesn't every guy on this planet?' (the noun 'pash' is common to Britain and Australia, but the verb is Australian); 'It seems Bry has found

his forte in **sooky** love songs' ('sooky' is Australian); 'the unsanctioned story of the **larrikin** lads from Manchester' ('larrikin' is certainly Australian).

One of the magazines alerts its readers to differences of language:

Next time you're O.S. beware when you open your mouth — you may just offend your hosts. For instance, in Britain a jaffa is not a tasty sweet to roll down the aisle, but a man who can't produce bobbies. In the USA, a fanny pack is a bum bag — but let's not mention what it might be here. And in both countries spunk is not a cute young lad, but rather his . . . er . . . baby making juices.

The report card from these teenage magazines is not entirely depressing. Teenage language is continually changing, and many of the current buzz words will not last. The American influence is strong, but it is not overwhelming. And it is encouraging to learn that Australian teenagers still roll their jaffas down the aisle.

NEW FROM OXFORD

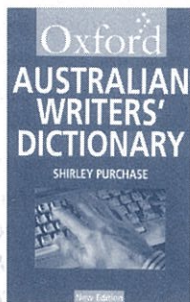
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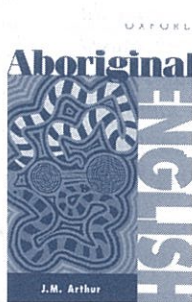


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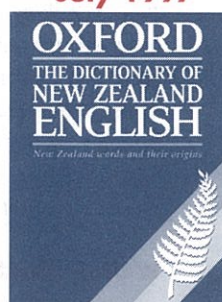
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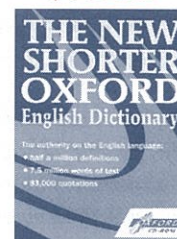
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MAILBAG

We welcome readers' comments on their recent observations of Australian usage, both positive and negative, and their queries, particularly those not easily answerable from the standard reference books.

TAKING THE 'ATCHET TO AITCH?

Why is it that so many people get upset by the pronunciation of the letter **H** as 'haitch'? When we pronounce any other letter of the alphabet, we pronounce it in a way that reflects how it's heard in speech. The pronunciation 'aitch' gives no idea how the letter sounds. We are told that we should not drop our '(h)aitches' so that we shouldn't be confused for Cockneys. Why is there such a social taboo against the eminently logical 'haitch'?

Joan Kelly
NSW

Well, the letter **h** isn't always sounded, is it? — as the honest *h*'actor said with hauteur to the hairy heir? And it's not the Cockney alone who drops her/his aitches. They're dropped even by Adelaidians in such words as **exhaust, exhortation, shepherd**; and the most refined speakers of Cultivated Australian will drop the aitch in such words as **he, his, him, her**. Surprised? You can win a bet on this: get your speaker of Cultivated Aussie to say 'I met him on his horse': the **h** in 'him' and 'his' will certainly be dropped — unless the speaker is enunciating each word as a separate entity. Nor is it entirely true to say that "[w]hen we pronounce any other letter of the alphabet, we pronounce it in a way that reflects how it's heard in speech". What about letters such as **m** (*em*) and **n** (*en*)? We don't say **emoney** is **enice** to 'ave.

These petty quibbles apart, I agree with you entirely that 'aitch' is the oddity: it's the only letter which does not contain in its name the sound it represents. Those people who say **haitch**, therefore, have a certain amount of logic and commonsense on their side.

It is largely a matter of social convention that **aitch** is regarded as the 'correct' pronunciation. I say 'largely', because at least in this case the arbiters of correctness have some historical evidence on their side. The pronunciation 'aitch' goes back to Middle English **ache** which in turn goes back to a late Latin ***accha**, reflecting the fact that in late Latin the aspirate had been dropped in pronunciation and often in writing as well: the earlier Latin name for the letter was **ha**.

You are right about there being some social taboo surrounding 'haitch'. It is often regarded in Australia as reflecting either a 'working class' background or a Catholic education. There is a story (apocryphal?) that 'haitch' was introduced to Australia by Irish Sisters of Mercy and Irish Christian Brothers teaching in their Irish Australian schools. Wherever the very logical 'haitch' came from, there is little doubt that it is still considered by some people to be a social marker in Australia. The prevalent perception is that 'middle classes aitch' and that 'workers and Micks haitch'. I find this too glib to be true. As for me, sad to say, I neither haitch nor aitch — I etch.

SWELL FOOP

The actor, Yvonne Mitchell, had a nice story to tell about Macduff's (not Banquo's) statement 'What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop' and the Betty Martinisation of 'at one fell swoop' into 'one foul swoop'. One Macduff she was working with garbled it completely so that it came out 'What, all my chitty Dickens and their pram in one swell foop' — overcome by the tragedy, no doubt? A colleague at work drew the scene: a pram full of chitty Dickens (elderly, bald-headed, grey-bearded babies) waving their arms excitedly as the pram careered downhill. They were all having one hell of a swell foop. 'Swell foop' is now our preferred option.

L.G. Norman
NSW

A delightfully multiple spoonerism — almost as good as Spooner's 'queer old Dean'! As for Banquo's chitty Dickens — ouch! I've taught Macbeth for years, and yet I not only caused poor dead Banquo to father Macduff's chicks in my article but continued to let him do so through all the various stages of proof-reading. Something bafflingly Freudian in my psyche, no doubt.

WORD FAILS ME

This puzzle appeared in the Jan/Feb issue of the [UK] Society of Freelance Editors and Proofreaders' Newsletter: 'There are only three words in the

English language that end in **-gry**: 1. **Angry**. 2. **Hungry**. 3.? The word is something that everyone uses everyday and knows what it stands for. If you've listened very carefully I've already told you what it is. What is it?'

Damned if I know — and it's driving me nuts! Do you know?

John Bangsund
Victoria

No, I don't — bother you, John! — and not knowing was so much to my vexation that I cheated and had a computer search done in the 20-volume Oxford English Dictionary for words ending in **-gry**. The computer spat out the following with disdain: **aggry, angry, begry, conyngry, gry, higrigry, hungry, iggry, meagry, menagry, nangry, podagry, skugry, and unangry**. Most of these words are obsolete and none of them fits the bill. I hope some kind reader will send me the answer and put me out of my misery. There should be a law against driving editors of Ozwords meagry and mad!

VERBA NOVA

At the beginning of the year a United States Dictionary Society put out a list of words of 1996. These included **soccer mom** and **alpha geek**. Does your Centre put out a similar list for Australia?

L. Stojanovic
NSW

We haven't in the past, although we may well take up the idea in the future. Bruce Moore often discusses such words on radio programmes. Last year's words included **dewog** and **dewogging**, the new senses of **crimp** and **crimping**, **headland speech**, **cow lotto**, **road rage**, and **V-chip**. Other terms which were in existence prior to 1996 came to prominence in 1996. These included **mad cow disease** (and its technical name **bovine spongiform encephalopathy** or **BSE**), **Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease**, **stolen generation** and **stolen children**, and **lyssa virus**. The year ended with the term the **Wik decision of the High Court**: the term **Wik** will no doubt assume as much importance as **Mabo**.

REVIEW

by Professor Ralph Elliott, Australian National University

THE NEW FOWLER'S MODERN ENGLISH USAGE

Third Edition, edited by R.W. Burchfield, OUP, 1996, pp.xxiii + 864. \$35.00. ISBN 0-19-869126-2

It was 'illegitimate' in 1906, a 'vulgarism' or 'false idiom' in 1926, but had become widely current by 1996, so that the evidence of contemporary usage 'cannot be gainsaid'. And all this because Richard Grant White, author of *Words and Their Uses*, had written in 1871: 'Usage, therefore, is not, as it is often *claimed* to be, the absolute law of language', using the word *claim* when he ought to have written *asserted* or *maintained* or just plain *said*.

Time has not only established the verb *to claim* as admissible in the given context, it has also elevated common usage to a much higher position of authority than R.G. White would allow. It was Ben Jonson who said (or *claimed*) that 'custom is the most certain mistress of language, as the public stamp makes the current money', although he hastened to add: 'Yet when I name custom, I understand not the vulgar custom...but that I call custom of speech, which is the consent of the learned'. Two learned scholars who heartily endorsed Jonson's sentiment were the brothers Francis George Fowler and Henry Watson Fowler, authors of *The King's English* of 1906, a work which laid the foundation of a century of guidance in English usage 'the world over', as OUP proudly *claimed* in 1965 when Sir Ernest Gowers revised the original *Modern English Usage* of 1926.

After his brother's death in 1918, H.W. Fowler carried on alone to battle for non-vulgar, 'good', indeed 'correct' English, with such resounding success that 'Fowler' became a household word whenever and wherever questions of English usage were raised or, more commonly, hotly debated.

The French have their Academy, the Germans have their Duden, English speakers have their OED — and their Fowler,

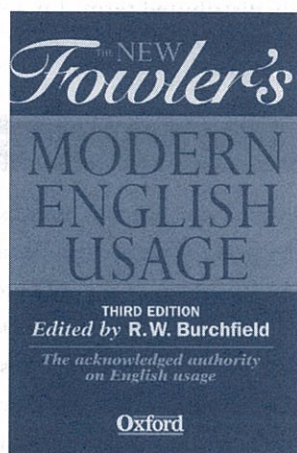
now thoroughly revised and updated by R.W. Burchfield, for many years chief editor of the Oxford English dictionaries. When another distinguished lexicographer, Eric Partridge (like Burchfield New Zealand-born), produced his *Usage and Abusage* in 1947, he did so 'not to compete with H.W. Fowler's *Modern English Usage* (that would be a fatuous attempt — and impossible) but to supplement it and complement it, and also to deal with usage of the period since 1926, when Fowler's work was issued'. Another fifty years have passed and now Robert Burchfield has done the same thing all over again, albeit with the aid of electronic data bases in place of the

(or perhaps even *assume*) that Burchfield is right when he predicts that 'as time goes on, such vocabulary is bound to become part of the day-to-day language of the whole community, as will the corresponding terminology in France, Germany, and everywhere else'.

'Everywhere else' certainly applies to English-speaking countries 'the world over', whose existence Fowler, in his schoolmasterly isolation, disregarded, but which now have their place in the Burchfield revision. American words, idioms, pronunciations, spellings, all figure prominently in the New Fowler, and other varieties of English, notably Australian, New Zealand, Canadian, and South African, are noted where appropriate, not least in the quotations from printed sources to illustrate specific entries.

At the same time Burchfield's diachronic emphasis adds an often welcome historical perspective to some particular usage. Thus we find, for instance, that Chaucer split a couple of infinitives some 600 years before Peter Carey did likewise in 1988. H.W. Fowler, who devoted three pages to split infinitives, might (not *may*) not have supported the Booker Prize for a splitting *Oscar and Lucinda*. Another example is the much debated question of which preposition goes with *different*, until we learn from Burchfield, citing the OED, that *different to* co-existed with *different from* as early as the 16th century, and that *different than* was recorded in 1644, long before it became common in America or was used by another Booker Prize winner, Thomas Keneally, in Australia.

Split infinitives, *different to*, and 'the dread preposition at the end' are among Fowler's



clerical labours of his predecessors, and using the International Phonetic Alphabet instead of Fowler's diacritics.

Much remains in the new edition, including some of the 'schoolmasterly, quixotic, idiosyncratic' Fowlerisms of the original work, but at the same time much has changed. We need, for example, only think of the 'entirely new layers of words and meanings' embedded in the category *computerese*, of which Burchfield gives but a modicum of examples, like *hacker*, *menu*, *modem*, *mouse*, *software*, and the rather endearing *wysiwyg*. We may presume

NEW PUBLICATIONS

March saw the publication of two important books. Shirley Purchase edited the *Oxford Australian Writers' and Editors' Guide*. In 1996 Shirley was a Centre Visitor, and completely revised the text of this book. It appears in a new edition as the *Australian Writers' Dictionary*.

Jay Arthur has been working for some years on Aboriginal English. Aboriginal English has until recently been regarded as an 'inferior' or 'sub-standard' form of English. It is now more widely recognised that Aboriginal English is a dialect (or series of dialects) of Australian English. It differs from Standard Australian English in phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Jay's book, *Aboriginal English: A Cultural Study*, focuses on the semantics of Aboriginal English.

Under commission from OUPA, Maureen Brooks and Joan Ritchie edited the *Papua New Guinea Oxford Mini Dictionary*.

REGIONALISMS

We are continuing our research into regional Australian English. In 1997 we will finish our research into South Australia, and also look at the Northern Territory. The following items all refer to actual or potential regionalisms.

THE RANCH

Bruce Cook of Queensland reports that he can recall that in road construction camps the single men's boarding area was called **the ranch**. The actual ranch was a hut organised by the foreman's wife — the

FROM THE CENTRE

THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL
DICTIONARY CENTRE

The Australian National Dictionary Centre is jointly funded by Oxford University Press Australia and the Australian National University to research all aspects of Australian English and to publish Australian Dictionaries and other works.

men slept in tents, but received their meals (for a payment) from the ranch. Do other readers know the term?

BARLEY

This is a term used in children's games, when a person wishes to claim a temporary truce. It first appears in English in the fourteenth century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, and appears to be related to French 'parlez'. Iona and Peter Opie in *The Lore and Language of Children* (1959) report that in Britain it is one of a number of regionally distributed terms for a truce. **Barley** is unknown in eastern and most of southern England, where the terms are

fainites, kings, crosses, cree, and scribes. **Barley** is the term in Scotland and the west of England. **Bars** is used in Devon. In Swansea the term is **bar**. In Aberdeen and a few towns in England the term is **barleys**. We know that these four forms are used in Australia, and suspect that they are distributed regionally. Victorians say **barley**, but people in New South Wales say **bar** or **bars**. There is some evidence for **barlies** in Western Australia. We would welcome your evidence.

PUDDOCKS

This is a Scots word, and in Scotland it means 'an impromptu type of cricket played with a round stick for a bat and a pail laid on its side or the like for a wicket, into which the ball is aimed'. We have evidence for the term **puddocks** being used for a similar cricket game in NSW schools from the 1950s. Was it used more widely in Australia?

TRAP

Another children's cricketing term. There is an English game called **trap-ball**, in which a ball placed on one end of a trap (a shoe-shaped wooden device with a pivoted bar) is thrown into the air by striking the other end with a bat, then hit away with the bat. In Australia, the term **trap** appears to have been used for a form of **tip-and-run** (or **tippety-run** or **tips**), and is possibly a transfer from **trap-ball**. Can anyone provide more information?

BRUCE MOORE
DIRECTOR, ANDC

REVIEW: CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

'fetishes', which are defined as 'current literary rules misapplied or unduly revered'. Burchfield's list is shorter, but he has separate entries for many of today's fetishes, like the use of *hopefully* as a sentence adverb or of *criteria* as a singular. We all have our own *bêtes noires*, no doubt, like *disinterested* used to mean *uninterested* which, so Burchfield reports, 'attracts more unfavourable comment from [BBC] listeners than any other word...with the possible exception of *hopefully*'. Another anathema is the use of *less* instead of *fewer*, as in 'You have made less mistakes than last time'. And how about the current 'prodigious overuse' of the adverb *basically*?

Let me add one of my own pet aversions, namely the current ABC practice of dispensing with capital letters where Fowler and Burchfield unequivocally prescribe them, as in personal names,

titles, geographical names, months and days of the week. When I drew the attention of the Chairman of the ABC to this form of illiteracy, Mr Donald McDonald replied that 'in recent years there has been a change in lettering styles, most notably in the advertising industry...and the Corporation also needs to keep up with modern trends'. Perhaps the next edition of Fowler's *Modern English Usage* will take note of this development and be printed throughout in lower case.

After all, fashions change, the language changes, and this is how it has always been, and English continues to be irrepressibly alive, dynamic, inventive, indeed *zippy*, no matter whether you say *chairman* to a woman, *unflammable* to avoid burning, or *their* as a singular pronoun, or whether you like *Ms* or pronounce *research* and *frontier* in the American way.

Burchfield admits that ours is 'an uneasy age linguistically', and the great achievement of his new edition is to maintain a wise balance between being authoritarian and prescriptive on the one hand, and accommodating, tolerant, and descriptive on the other. Some users of the New Fowler may wish for more dogmatic pronouncements; others will be quite happy to make up their own minds after reading what author and editor have had to say, and of these your reviewer is one. But please note that as Latin is no longer taught in many schools, the phrase *ex nihilo* on p. 520 should perhaps have been explained like *ex officio* and *ex parte*; that the IPA symbols are on p. xvii, not p. xv, and that the word *casualties* [sic] on p. 184 is decidedly 'incorrect'.

WOW FOR WOWSER!

The term **wowser** — surely one of the most impressive and expressive of Australian coinages — is used to express healthy contempt for those who attempt to force their own morality on everyone. The person who abstains from alcohol (for whatever reason) is not thereby a wowser: s/he's just probably very fit. But when s/he tries to force everyone else to do as s/he does, then s/he is a wowser. Or as C.J. Dennis defines the term: 'Wowser: an ineffably pious person who mistakes this world for a penitentiary and himself for a warder'.

The term originally meant 'A person who is obnoxious or annoying to the community or who is in some way disruptive' and was applied, for example, to prostitutes and public drunks. Feminists and equal opportunists got the 'wowser' guernsey too: *Truth* (Sydney) (1902): 'Another of his whims or freaks was to promise a number of wowsers of the "wild woman" type (to use a term coined by Mrs Lynn Linton) that he would supplant men in the Public Service with women'. These 'wild women' wowsers were seen as on a par with 'the warrigal wowsers of Waine' whom *Truth* (1904) castigates as 'lewd larrikin louts'.

The shift to the present sense of **wowser** (to wit, a mealy-mouthed hypocrite, a pious prude, one who condemns or seeks to curtail the pleasures of others or who works to have his or her own rigid morality enforced on all) occurs at the turn of the century. The earliest citation for this sense in *The Australian National Dictionary* is 1900. In 1903 *Truth* bugles again: 'He ridicules the mournful croakings of "the wasted wowsers" who denounce every earthly pleasure as sinful'.

Truth, in fact, is rich in anti-wowser invective: 1904: 'The watery wowsers who wouldn't be seen sipping a nobbler in a public house, but who swig good stiff inches from the big black bottle on the bedroom shelf'; 1904: 'WHITE-EYED WOWSERS simulating sanctity... whose whole life is one pious yelp against the ordinary joys of common humanity'; 1906: 'Those pious, Puritanical, pragmatical, pulpit-pounding self-pursuers whom we call wowsers'; 1912: '...the denunciation of Sunday golf and every kind of rational Sunday recreation — except that of putting "tray-bits" in the Sabbath plate — which it is the wowser's recreation to count up in the vestry afterwards'; 1914: 'Governor Strickland was asked recently for his definition

of the new word "wowser". The Governor said it was generally defined as a man who objected to three inches of an open-worked stocking, but sweated his employees'; 1916: 'Because of the howls of the wowsers, the venereal diseases are just those that are most carefully concealed....'; 1916: 'The Wowser is invariably a member of the exploiting class or one of his professional, clerical, or other hangers-on'; and, best of all, I think: 1915: 'The wowsers enjoy the whine of life'.

The noun **wowser** gave rise to the adjective **wowser** and to coinages such as **wowseress**, **wowserette**, **wowserine** (all three mercifully defunct), **wowserdom**, **wowserish**, **wowserism** (all three probably still alive and kicking). Best of all, the noun **wowser** gave birth to the rich and wonderful verb **to wowse**: *Truth* (1909): '... on tea the crowd carouses, and the whiskered wowser wowses, And old women garbed in trousers interject their deep "Ah-mens"'; *Bulletin* (1968): 'But, to be precise about wowsers and wowsing... a wowser was not necessarily a teetotaller, it was not meant to describe the man who led a good and pure life, but the kill-joy, the professional moaner about everything that made life pleasant'; *National Times* (Sydney, 1983): 'You bunch of wowsing do-gooders...'

The origin of our wonderful Aussie **wowser** is uncertain. John Norton, the editor of *Truth*, claimed to have invented the word. He used it in a headline in 1899, and later said:

I invented the word myself. I was the first man publicly to use the word. I first gave it public utterance in the [Sydney] City Council, when I applied it to Alderman Waterhouse, whom I referred to as... the white, woolly, weary, watery, word-wasting wowser from Waverley.

'When I [first] used [the word]', said Norton in the Supreme Court of Victoria, 'I did not know what it meant. I had to find a definition afterwards' (*Truth* 1914). 'Asked [in the Supreme Court] to define the word "wowser," Mr. Norton said it had been defined by Cardinal Moran [of Sydney], thus showing that the word was already a guest in the halls of the Princes of the Church, [although] we others know, by common knowledge, that the word "wowser" is in common use in less exalted and less holy places'. 'A wowser', continues this article in *Truth*, 'is —

A pernicky kind of person, always objecting to everybody else who does not agree with him; he will interfere with the pleasures and enjoyments of others; thinks that he alone has the right conception of right conduct, and a monopoly of the narrow way to paradise....' [*ibid.*]

Truth speculates quite interestingly on the source of Norton's inspiration: 'The nidus of the word "wowser" may be found in the vicinity of the word "puppy" as applied to human beings (the conceited and self-sufficient puppy standing in contrast to a full grown and dignified dog). A dog "baying at the moon"... is too virile to be used as a suitable allegorical cartoon of a wowser baying at the good things of life, that he is too pernicky to enjoy himself, and too mean in spirit to let others enjoy without cavilling at them. But when we debase the "bark" of the "honest watchdog" into the "...wow, wow" of the "self-sufficient" puppy, we are treading close on the track of Mr Norton's mental flash, that has so happily added to the descriptive treasures... of our mother tongue.'

It is curiously tempting to accept the Norton provenance of **wowser**: it would be wonderful if it were true. Less credible provenances abound. One theory has it that the word 'wowser' comes from the initials of a slogan (a self-justifying wowser one?): **We Only Want Social Evils Righted**. Another theory is mentioned in passing by Bill Hornadge, in his *The Australian Slang* (1980): 'Yet another version has it that it came into being in the 1870s in Clunes (Victoria) where hot-gospellers became known as "Rousers". This version has it that a member of the Town Council who had difficulty pronouncing his *rs* had referred at a public meeting to "Wowsers" — and the name stuck.' These two theories sound a bit All-my-eye-and-Betty-Martinish to me.

However, there is a British dialectal word *to wow* meaning 'to mew as a cat, howl or bark as a dog, wail, to whine, grumble, complain', and it is possible that this is the true origin of the word.

Whatever its origin, **wowser** is one of our most successful Ozwords. It has even been exported to the UK and the US and has been happily naturalised there for decades.

Ozwords Competition No. 6

Competitors were asked to invent a witty collective noun, preferably with a distinctively Aussie flavour or relevance. The response was a tsunami of collectives: I began to drown in collectives: I couldn't see the wood of wit for the trees. And swearing at that unnecessary and needlessly literate nun, Dame Juliana Berners, who started it all, didn't help me in the slightest (a *superfluyte* of nonnes indeed!). The panel of judges who came most kindly and sanely to my rescue made judgment as follows:

HONOURABLE MENTIONS (in random order): Kent, Alison, Kai, and Tony of Mrs Cull's Year 9 Class, Tom Price Senior High School, WA, for a **pod of pavlovas**; Diana Lawrenson of Malvern, Vic. for a **cark of cockies**; Jay Howard Finder of the USA for a **waddle of wombats**, a **byte of computer**

programmers, and a root of etymologists; Ronald Rose of Bateman's Bay, NSW, for his prescient a **pique of Kosciusko spellings**; and Hans Colla of Geelong, Vic. for a **piddle of pedants**, an **effluence of plumbers**, and a **slab of AFL footballers**.

2ND PRIZE [\$50 worth of books from the OUP catalogue]: Richard Evans of St Kilda, Vic. for a **hanson of rednecks**, a **click of Japanese tourists**, a **bond of businessmen**, and a **skase of bankrupts**.

1ST PRIZE [\$100 worth of books from the OUP catalogue]: David Mercer of Brighton, SA, for his 20 entries which include: a **flight of Cazalys**, a **rabble of rousers**, a **combine of harvesters**, a **Melba of boomerangs**, a **Mass of Catholics**, a **battery of electricians**, a **sheaf of straw voters**, and a **wave of Barcoo salutes**.



Ozwords Competition No. 7

Two of our readers were responsible for bringing this Competition on your heads.

Helen Cushing of NSW wrote: 'I recently spent some time with a woman whose colourful language was part of her character. She regularly used a selection of visually dramatic metaphors to great effect. The following were new to me and constantly reminded me what a startlingly creative art spoken language can be. Here they are: **As ugly as a hatful of bums**; **A coupla sheep short in the back paddock** (abbreviated to **A coupla sheep short**) meaning someone who is not the full quid; my favourite I keep until last — **noodle benders**, meaning men's speedos, often called sluggos around the Sydney beaches. Has anyone else heard of noodle benders? Maybe it's regional. My friend grew up in Bendigo and now lives near Wollongong'.

The simile **as ugly as a hatful of bums** is as tersely pithy and evocative as the best Aussie similes are. The metaphor she quotes for a person deficient in intelligence or slightly mad — a **coupla sheep short in the back paddock** — echoes such other marvel-

lous Aussieisms as a **brick short of a load**, a **sandwich short of a picnic**, and a **tinnie short of a sixpack**.

On this note, another reader, **Jan Howard Finder** of Albany, New York, USA, wrote: 'It might be worth a contest. A few years ago I came up with **He/she has 7 bits to the byte and a 2-bit processor** to describe someone who is 19/6 to the quid, has lights on, but no one is home, etc. Your readers might wish to come up with others'.

It is worth a contest. Your challenge is to come up with a new simile or metaphor which demonstrates 'what a startlingly creative art spoken language can be'. The only rule is that your entry should be 1. original and 2. full of Aussie flavour. The pithiest and wittiest invention wins first prize (\$100 worth of books to be chosen from the Oxford University Press catalogue). Second prize (if awarded) is \$50 worth of books from the OUP catalogue.

Entries close 31st July 1997.

PS I should like to hear if other readers know the term **noodle benders**.

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