When Australians speak of The Cup they are not referring to the FA Cup or the World Cup in Soccer, or to the Davis Cup: in Australia, The Cup means one thing only — the Melbourne Cup, the first Tuesday in November, Cup Day. When the first Melbourne Cup was run in 1861 the Argus reported: 'His Excellency visited the saddling paddock during the half-hour preceding the Cup Race. By 1864 it was necessary only to mention 'the Cup': 'The slippery state of the ground made the results of the race for the Cup altogether unreliable (Australian 8 November). By 1865 the Cup was an event which fleecingly enabled Melburnians to put all cares aside: 'In Melbourne all was bustling and excitement — the crisis, the drought... seemed to have been entirely forgotten in the all-absorbing topic of the Cup' (Illustrated Melbourne Post November). Soon after Federation the national significance of the event was recognised by Parliament: 'The Federal Houses are frankly recognising the Cup. There is to be a parliamentary holiday' (Huron Times 2 November). By 1916 'T.O. Ling' in the Australian Comic Dictionary was able to proclaim the Cup to be a national institution and to define the Cup Race as 'the Australian Race witnessed by the Australian race'. On 5 November 1996 the Cup will once again be the event that briefly stops the nation. It is the day when myriads of Australians who couldn’t tell a dead bird from an emu, a monkey from a gorilla, a sprinter from a stayer, a quinia from a trifecta, a monty from a skinner, or an asparagus from a pea, will splurge millions of dollars on a 3200-metre horserace.

Much of the language of the turf is international. The phrase home and hosed was originally used of a horse which had completed a race, was back in its box, and had been hosed down; thus a horse which is described as being home and hosed during a race is a certain winner — it will be back in its box before the rest of the field has finished. A flitter is a small bet, and a saver is a hedging bet, a bet laid to insure against loss on another (more risky) bet. A horse which has been nobby (as Big Philou was before the 1969 Cup) has been tampered with by drugging or laming to prevent its winning.

Many racing terms are, however, distinctly Australian. Here are some of the terms you might hear on Cup Day. Many of them you might have heard on Cup Day 100 years ago. Most interestingly, a number of them have developed extended meanings beyond their original racing contexts.

**asparagus** a punter who is a fountain of ideas about which horses are going to win, and who offers hot tips to all and sundry — in other words, a person who ‘has more tips than a tin of asparagus’.

**bollover** the unexpected defeat of a hot favourite; a surprise result. Our earliest evidence for this use is from 1871. The term was later used in contexts outside horseracing for an unexpected result in any context.

**bolter** this is an Australian horseracing term with a number of senses. A bolter is a horse with only a remote chance of winning: an outsider. The term can therefore also be applied to an outsider that unexpectedly wins. It is also used to describe an outsider that races well clear of the field, especially at an early stage in a race. The origin of the term and its meanings are not entirely clear. In general English bolter is used for a horse which escapes from control in nineteenth century Australian English a bolter was a runaway convict or absconder. In the twentieth century the phrase a bolter’s chance appears, meaning ‘only a remote chance of succeeding: no chance at all’ (and therefore synonymous with Buckley’s chance), and if this phrase is a development from the convict/absconder meaning, it may be that the bolter of contemporary meaning has taken place.

**daily double** a pair of horse races selected (usually from a programme by a racing club) for a starting-price double conducted by a totalisator betting agency. The term is used more widely in Australian English in a jocular way to describe any two major events. Nancy Kerling in *Lily on the D.batul* (1982) writes: ‘A Sydney woman said of a friend’s daughter that she had won the daily double but missed out on the trifecta: the young woman in question was having her wedding at the fashionable St Marks, Darling Point, the reception at the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, but had missed out on the honeymoon in Fiji.

**dead bird** (often shortened to bird): an absolute certainty to win. This term was established in Australian horseracing circles by the 1880s, a transferred use from pigeon shooting where a pigeon about to be released and shot by a marksman was regarded as being as good as dead, or, as a writer of 1889 suggests: ‘A dead bird signifies that a horse is considered certain to win, the analogy being
taken from pigeon shooting, the scorer calling 'dead bird' when the bird is shot dead.

eto run a drum: In the early twentieth century the term drum in Australian English came to mean 'a reliable piece of information', probably deriving from the signal given out by the percussion instrument. It often appears in the phrases to get the drum or to give the drum, and usually in racing contexts: 'It beats me how the punters get the drum (1915); 'I got the drum on the way out to the races' (1922). From this developed the phrase to run a drum meaning '(of a racehorse) to perform as tipped'. The phrase is now almost invariably used in the negative — he didn't run a drum meaning the horse didn't perform as tipped. Some commentators see the influence of rhyming slang here, and suggest that drum is also an abbreviation of drum and race rhyming slang for 'place'. Thus a horse that doesn't run a drum fails to run a place.

pea: A favourite: a likely winner, especially as chosen by a stable which has a number of runners in a race. This term derives from the pea in the game of thimble-rig, the sleight-of-hand game played at country fairs. The thimbles and a pea, the thimbles being moved about and the bystanders encouraged to place bets as to which thimble the pea is under. The thimble-rigger knows where the pea is, and the betters are duped; by analogy, the stable knows which of its runners will win, and so the punters are again the dupes. In Australia it has developed an equivalent sense; someone in a favoured or favourite position; a person expected to win a job etc. over other applicants.

rughie: a horse that is a rank outsider, or an outsider with some chance of winning (my rughie for the Melbourne Cup is Fred's Boy).

skinny: a horse at odds of very long odds; any betting connection. This sense appears in Australian English in the 1890s, and probably derives from British slang skinny 'a person who strips another of money'. In British slang, to skin the lamb was also a term used to describe bookies when a horse at long odds won, i.e. the punters were fleeced.

trifecta: a form of betting in which the first three places in a race must be predicted in the correct order. The word is a blend of tri ('three') + perfecta (a chiefly American term, the equivalent of our quinella, and an abbreviation of American Spanish quiniela perfecta 'perfect quinella'). The term trifecta is also used in America, but it has a special place in Australian English because it is used in contexts that are not such, where it means 'a string of three major events'. Greg Norman's three wins in the South Australian Open were described in the newspapers as a trifecta. One writer attributes a trifecta to Bob Hawke: 'Bob Hawke was going for the big trifecta. He'd tipped Hawthorn in the Aussie Rules on the Saturday, Parramatta in the League on the Sunday, and had his money on Australia winning the America's Cup next week'. (See also daily double.)

The most famous Australian term to derive from racing parlance is droongo, meaning 'a fool, a stupid person, a simpleton'. The origin of this term has sometimes been wrongly traced to the bird called the droongo. The spangled droongo, Dicurus bracteatus, a glossy black bird with iridescent blue-green spots on its head, neck, and breast, is found in northern and eastern Australia, as well as in the islands to the north of Australia, and further north to India and China. It is called a droongo after the name of a bird from the same family in northern Madagascar. Some of the drongos of eastern Queensland are migratory, and in winter travel either north to New Guinea or south to as far as Victoria. One ingenious theory has it that any bird which travels towards Victoria in winter must performe be stupid, but there is no convincing evidence that the droongo acquired the reputation of the galah.

The origin of droongo belongs with a horse rather than a bird. There was an Australian racehorse called Droongo during the early 1920s. He was a bay horse by Lanius-Lys d'Or, and, according to the Australasian Turf Register, he had 5 starts in 1923, 15 starts in 1924, and 17 starts in 1925. He scored no wins. Yet he wasn't an absolute no-hoper of a racehorse: he ran second in a VRC Derby and St Leger, third in the AJC St Leger, and fifth in the 1924 Sydney Cup. He often came very close to winning major races, but in 37 starts he never won a race. In 1924 a writer in the Melbourne Argus comments: 'Droongo is sure to be a very hard horse to beat. He is improving with every run, and in the Herbert Power Stakes at Caulfield he was a close third to Easingwold and Wallace Mortlake at weight-for-age'. But he never did win.

Tradition has it that soon after Droongo's retirement racegoers started to apply his name to horses that were having similarly unlucky careers, and that it then became more negative, and was applied also to people who were not 'unlucky' so much as they were 'hopeless cases', 'no-hopers', and thereafter 'fools'. Even with this explanation there are some lexicographical problems — there is a big gap between the time of Droongo's racing career, and the first appearance of droongo in the transferred sense. We must jump 15 years to the Second World War. Many of our citations from the early 1940s are associated with the Royal Australian Air Force, where the term is applied in a derogatory way to a recruit. Yet even in military contexts, the association with the racehorse is made. We have anecdotal information that the horse Droongo appeared in cartoons by Sam Wells in the Melbourne Sun-Herald of the early 1930s, but we have been unable to confirm this as yet. If that is true, the cartoons would provide the missing link. At least in the popular imagination the origin of the Australian term droongo rests with the unfortunate horse of the 1920s.
SPLIT INFINITIVES

When I was at school it was dinned into me never to use (not ‘to never use’) split infinitives. When I complained about their use recently to a young teacher of English, she came back at me with a line she claimed was from Star Trek — ‘To boldly go where no man has gone before’ — as if sci-fi has become the arbiter of grammatical correctness.

Vic Sutton
NSW

Why, I wonder, should nineteenth century grammarians be ‘the arbiter of grammatical correctness’ in this particular instance? They were the ones who flew in the face of centuries of excellent usage (‘To slowly trace the forest’s shady scene’ — Byron) and quite arbitrarily laid down the almost divine law: Thou shalt never split an infinitive.

What is the infinitive of a verb? It is the form of a verb expressing the verbal notion without a particular subject, tense, etc. Thus ‘I saw’ and ‘he sees’ are finite forms of the verb ‘see’. The infinitive (unmarked for subject, tense, etc.) appears most commonly in two kinds of constructions: 1 We have to come to see the Wizard; 2 We may see the Wizard tomorrow. In the second example there are no problems since the infinitive (‘see’) is unsplittable. The problem arises with the first example (‘We have to come to see the Wizard’) where the infinitive is understood to be not simply ‘see’ but ‘to see’.

Our grammarians argued that in this construction one cannot put a word, especially an adverb, between the ‘to’ and the ‘see’. To do so is to produce a ‘split infinitive’. And when the pedant gives us this description it really does sound like a mortal sin. Thus instead of He promised to never err we should say He promised never to err.

As soon as we hear that example it becomes clear that with the split infinitive we are not talking about linguistic correctness. We are dealing with the subjective issue of style. Split infinitives often sound ugly or inelegant. The soldiers were ordered to immediately shoot. However, if the result is not clumsy, there is no reason to so-arrange a sentence merely to avoid the split infinitive: Mr Howard would be advised to quietly drop his use of the phrase ‘The Aboriginal industry’.

What the pedant forgets is the fact that occasionally a split infinitive need avoids ambiguity. Listen to the difference between: He failed to entirely understand the issue and He failed to entirely understand the issue.

Indeed (pace grammarians and pedants), there are times when it is impossible not to split the infinitive. I defy anyone to unsplit the split infinitive in the following sentence: I wanted to more than match my rival’s bid.

The moral: The pedant opposes the use of the split infinitive under any circumstances. The pedant, in this case, is immoderately pedantic. The infinitive may be split with gusto if the result is stylistically pleasing and if the split avoids stylistic awkwardness, places emphasis nearby where the emphasis ought to be, and dispenses with ambiguity.

KILLER-METRES VS KILL-OMETERS

I always enjoy Ozwords, and often want to comment on an article or letter, but hesitate lest I am not as well informed as the writer. This time, however, I dare to offer the following in response to ‘Ozwords and Kilometres’ (Ozwords, July 1996).

As one of the team employed by the Federal Government to introduce the metric system to the Australian public, I was comforted to see that there are still people and places where the KILO-kilometre is not entirely forgotten.

When I worked for the Metric Conversion Board, I always held that for measuring instruments the OM-eter is correct: mile-OM-eter, speed-OM-eter, hydr-OM-eter, etc. In units of measurement, however, the unit prefix (in this case the one meaning 1000) has the emphasis: KILO-metre, KILO-litre, and KILO-gram.

The proof lies with the unit for 1000th of a metre, and with the instrument for measuring it: the first is a MICRO-metre and the second is a micr-OM-eter. QED.

Sheila Mason
NSW

Your argument is watertight and your QED triumphant. Unfortunately the development of language is never logical. But then would we really want it to be so? It seems as if the pronunciation kash-lom-uhtuh is destined to be the winner: the majority of speakers have voted with their tongues and lexicographers will have no alternative but to record their vote.

A METAPHYSICAL MESS

A while ago it was necessary for me to send an e-mail message to several people, to check that the e-mail addresses we had recorded for them were still valid. The system itself would alert us if the message didn’t get through to a particular address.

The message I sent was: ‘Please ignore this test message.’ Only one person sent a reply, which was: ‘I have ignored your message.’

What a predicament! Should I have thanked him or thanked the others?

Ian Odgers
VIC

The convolutions of this will give me nightmares tonight. Readers, please answer Ian.

JARRING JARGON

Recently I went to a conference of the Australian Society for Legal Philosophy and came home with two new words, ‘commodification’ (the process of turning things into commodities which aren’t really commodities, such as lawyers’ skills) and ‘majoritarian’ (which has nothing to do with a preponderance of Rotarians but is a needlessly enlarged word for ‘majority’).

Ian M. Johnstone
VIC

It is pleasing to think that the Australian Legal Philosophers will feel a warm inner glow when they say ‘commodification’ and ‘majoritarian’ to one another in mixed company: The majoritarian mentality, my dear Carruthers, is surely insusceptible to commodification. — ‘Yes, indeed, Smithers-Smithy. You’ve only to look at the non-legal Philosopher to be present to feel the force of your asseration.’ On such silliness, alas, is brotherhood built.

GENDER BLENDERS

I recently noticed that my thirteen- and fifteen-year-old daughters describe the male stars of shows such as Home and Away and Neighbours as ‘babes’. Males as babes? I always thought ‘babes’ were babies or young children (‘the babes in the wood’) or women who appeared in American pop-songs (‘I’ve got you, babe’) or were addressed as such by gangsters (‘Get lost, babe, or you’ll get the gat!’).

H. Anderson
SA

Women were babes in America, once upon a time, and many women found it demeaning to be so addressed. It now looks as if the latter-day American use of babe to refer to a male has come to stay in Aussie teespeak. I’ve called the following from recent editions of Australian teenagers’ magazines: BABE WATCH (a regular column on hunky boys), superbabes (the likes of Keanu Reeves, Brad Pitt, etc.), ‘If you’ve been wondering what Brad, Ethan, Keanu, Jonathan and heaps more mega-hunks are up to, check out our babe update’, ‘You’re at the movies with your best friend and she points out a die-for-babe sussing you out’, ‘leads of babetastic hunks’, etc. Interestingly, the reverse of the babe-process occurred with guy: it began its life by referring exclusively to males, but it is now used quite indiscriminately of both sexes.
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.

REGIONAL AUSTRALIAN ENGLISH

The article on regional Australian English in the last number of Ozwords and a follow-up article in the Sunday Age produced some interesting and useful responses. It is now clear that spider (‘a lemonade with a dash of icecream’) is not exclusively Victorian. Respondents from Rockhampton to Perth attested to knowing this concoction, especially in its most popular flavour — a lime spider. Shirley Loney of Perth, David Hutchison of Fremantle, and C. Richardson of Bunbury inform us that batters is not limited to Victoria and Tasmania, but is also the standard Western Australian term. Shirley and David tell us that mudlark is commonly used for the magpie-lark in Western Australia. They also point out that in Western Australia lackey bands is a common variant of luckey bands. Another respondent recalls lackey bands in the Pillbara; and another recalls it from Auckland in New Zealand. Our hypothesis that vonnie (also yonny) in the sense ‘a small stone; a pebble;’ Victorian was confirmed by responses. Richard Evans of Victoria opened up the issue of marbles (or allays to some):

When I was a boy attending the State primary school in Drysdale, Victoria, in the mid-1970’s, marbles were the big thing in playtime entertainment. There was a crime in marbles, similar in gravity to chucking in cricket and steroid use in athletics, called ‘frudging’. To frudge (pronounced fa-nudge) was to flick your marble at an opponent’s, not with an honest and unaided flick of the thumb, but with a dastardly and un-Australian forward jerk of the whole hand... I have since used the word on occasion to describe any sneaky attempt to gain an unfair advantage in any enterprise, but no one except my brother, who went to the school at the same time, knows what I mean. I have also been unable to find any reference to anything like the word.

Well, Richard, here is another Victorian who knows exactly what you mean! I attended Ashby primary school in Geelong (admittedly an Australian variant of British dialect Jannock meaning fair, straightforward, genuine; thus square Johnnich is synonymous with fair dinkum. A lug-hole is an English term for a deep pit from which clay has been excavated, but it seems that in Australia a water-filled lug-hole was a popular venue for children’s sports.

Other terms in this account are distinctively Australian. Bottler (meaning ‘something which excites admiration’) appears in Australian English from the late nineteenth century, but is of unknown origin. In general English a tank is a large receptacle or storage chamber usually for liquid or gas, and of course it is used in this sense in Australia. However, from the early 1800s tank is used in Australia to mean a ‘reservoir’ or ‘dam’ — and dam in this sense is also Australian: elsewhere it means ‘a barrier constructed to hold back water and raise its level, forming a reservoir or preventing flooding’. In Australia the dam is the reservoir itself. It is likely that the terms tank and dam have some regional distribution in Australia, but we have yet to complete our research on this matter.

Shanghai is an Australian term for a catapult (deriving from Scottish shangan ‘a stick cleft at one end’, and unrelated to shanghai in the sense ‘to force a person to be sailor on a ship by using drugs or other trickery’). Again, it is likely that there is some regional distribution of this term. Another Australian term for a catapult was ging. Is it obsolete? A connie was a type of playing marble, the word deriving from cornelian, a variety of chalcedony. Our last evidence for the use of connie comes from 1972. Perhaps it too is obsolete? But in the Broken Hill area it was more loosely used as a term for ‘a stone’ rather than ‘a marble’.

Perhaps the most interesting terms are toodlebuck and bully on a string.

Toodlebuck (probably from tootle ‘to walk, wander’ + (th)eem + buck ‘a gambling marker’) was a gambling game played by children. K. Smith A Word from Children (Adelaide: 1960) describes it thus:

Another gay, carefree kind of toy, designed to develop the gambling instinct of innocent children, was the Toodlebuck. It consisted of a disc of cardboard mounted on a cotton reel and slipped over an old wooden meat skewer. The top of the disc was divided into segments with a horse’s name on each, such as ‘Spearelet’, ‘Carbine’, or ‘Heroic’. A pointer was fitted to the skewer and the disc was spun roulette-wise while the young bookie yelled, ‘Who’ll have a go on me old toodlebuck?’

It has been sometimes suggested that the game Toodlebuck was limited to Victoria, but here we have evidence of it being played in Adelaide and Broken Hill. How widespread was it? Is it still played? The game bully on a string baffled us, since we had no evidence of the term. Radio talkback callers suggested that it was (is?) a form of ‘conkers’, with seeds strung on a piece of string. Can you provide more detail?

BRUCE MOORE, DIRECTOR, ANDC

PAGE 4 OZWORDS, OCTOBER 1996
NEENISH, NIENICH, OR NEIN?

It is a tradition at the Australian National University that computers have names as well as serial numbers. The computers at the Australian National Dictionary Centre are named after Australian food items: king prawn, icypole, pavlova, lamington, floater — and neenish. The last named computer gets its title from the neenish tart. But are neenish tarts Australian? Many people believe that they are.

First, for those who are not of the cake-shop conglutination (aficionados of glugcogunk), what is a neenish tart? It is, it seems, a cake with a filling of mock cream, and iced in two colours — white and brown, or white and pink, or (occasionally) pink and brown.

In May 1995, Column 8 in the Sydney Morning Herald included some discussion of the origin of the term:

Wendy Kerr and Jenny Hawke, of the Forbes public library, found this in Patissier, an encyclopedia of cakes, by Aaron Maree: 'Thought to have been invented by cooks in outback Australia.' And that may be right. Leo Scholfield, writing in the SMH in 1988, said his mother made them from a Country Women's Association cookbook sold in Orange in World War II. When he asked for information, some readers suggested they had a Viennese or German origin. But a Mrs Evans said they were first made in her home town, Grong Grong. She and her sister, Venus, nominated Ruby Neenish, a friend of their mother's, as the originator. Mrs Evans said that in 1913, running short of cocoa and baking for an unexpected shower tea for her daughter, Ruby made do by icing her tarts with half-chocolate, half-white icing. From then on they were known as neenish tarts. That, said Leo, would account for the tarts' popularity in country districts and country cookbooks.

We have been unable to track down the eponymous Ruby Neenish, and some of the 'authenticating devices' in this account feel a little shaky — just how 'unexpected' can a shower tea be? The earliest reference to neenish we have been able to find occurs in a 1929 recipe for neenish cakes. This is in Miss Drake's Home Cookery by Lucy Drake, published at Glenferrrie in Victoria. The cases are made from: 8 ozs. almond meal; 6 ozs. icing sugar; 1 large tablespoon flour; essence almonds; 2 whites of eggs. The filling is made of: 1/2 oz. sugar; 1/2 cup milk; 1/4 oz. gelatine; 1 tablespoon sugar; essence vanilla. No mock cream here. The icing is half white and half pink.

The fifth edition of the Country Women's Association Cookery Book and Household Hints, published in Perth in 1941, has the following recipe, provided by E. Birch of Bayswater: 

Cream 2 ozs. butter and add 1 tablespoon sugar, rub in 3 ozs. self-raising flour and a pinch of salt and mix to a stiff paste with an egg. Knead well. Roll on a well-floured board till very thin, line patty tins with paste and fill with a good thick custard. Glaze the tops with thin icing. Use chocolate and white alternately'. This time, the icing is half chocolate and half white. And, of course, no mock cream. More interesting is the fact that the cakes are called niench tarts. This certainly has a Germanic ring to it, and the spelling continues to be used in the CWA Cookery Book as late as 1964.

So here is the challenge. Do any of our readers have a cookery book printed before 1929 which includes neenish or niench cakes or tarts? Can anyone provide evidence for a European origin? Are there any supporters of the pseudo-eponymous Ruby Neenish?
I was asked recently about the origin of the phrase all my eye and Paddy Martin! This surprised me, since I had always known a slightly different version — all my eye and Betty Martin! — and this is certainly the form most readers will recognise. The phrase means ‘all nonsense, rubbish!’: more colourfully, ‘a load of bull!’

The origin of the phrase is uncertain. Eric Partridge in A Dictionary of Catch Phrases (1977) inclines to the view that the term all my eye! (meaning ‘that’s nonsense’) appeared first, that Betty Martin was a notorious (but otherwise unrecorded) eighteenth century character who gave rise to the phrase it’s all Betty Martin (also meaning ‘it’s all nonsense’: there is some early nineteenth century evidence for this phrase), and that the two independently occurring phrases were then conjoined. Two nineteenth century writers, however, argue the case all my eye and Betty Martin! is a corruption of a Latin prayer O mihi, beate Martin! which may be Englished as ‘O for me, blessed Martin!’ or ‘Come to my aid, blessed Martin!’ The corruption may have occurred deliberately as a result of Protestant Catholic-baiting, or, as Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable suggests, it may be a British soldiers’ or sailors’ rendering of the phrase. (It is possible that this explanation of the provenance of the phrase is itself ‘all my eye and Betty Martin’, especially since there is doubt that any such prayer ever existed.) In these explanations, the Catholic Latin (because it was meaningless to soldiers and sailors, or abhorrent to good anti-Worship-of-Babylon-Protestants) was corrupted: ‘O became ‘all’, ‘mihi’ became ‘my eye’, and ‘beate Martin’ became ‘Betty Martin’. There was already (as we have seen) the phrase ‘all my eye!’ (or ‘my eye!’) with much the same meaning, and this served to enforce and support the corruption. Once the phrase had moved so far from the original Latin phrase, the significance of ‘Betty Martin’ was entirely lost, and so it, in turn, was open to further corruption — hence all my eye and Paddy Martin!

If we believe the soldiers-and-sailors story, the corruption of O mihi, beate Martin! to all my eye and Betty Martin! is an example of the linguistic phenomenon of folk etymology. This is the process by which a word whose origin has been ‘lost’, or which has been borrowed from a foreign language, is remodelled to conform to more familiar words in the language. Take bridgehorn, for instance. In what sense is this person the ‘groom’ of the bride? The word in the Old English period (i.e., before 1066) was byrg-dyguma where ‘guma’ simply means ‘man’. By the fifteenth century the word ‘guma’ by itself had disappeared from the language. It survived only in the compound bride-guma or (now) bride-gone. This second element of the compound by this time made no sense at all. It was remodelled, through the process of folk etymology, by substituting a similar-sounding word, the French borrowing groom which then meant ‘servant, man’.

Or take crayfish. Now a crayfish is not a fish, although it certainly lives in water. The word came into English in the Middle English period from French as creviche, and is in fact related to our word ‘crab’. In southern English dialects the second syllable became confused with ‘fish’ (since -vice was sometimes pronounced ‘vish’). The unfamiliar word, the desire to make some sense of it, led to a remodelling of the word through the process of folk etymology — thus a creviche became a crayfish.

Folk etymology affects idioms as well as words and compounds, and it is possibly the process of folk etymology which some centuries ago transformed O mihi, beate Martin! into all my eye and Betty Martin! The process is still alive and kicking. In the Canberra Times 31 August 1996, a reviewer said of the novel Night Letters by Robert Daughters, ‘Almost everything is sent up in this book; the absurd inherent in the serious. Daughters is “cooking a snoot.”’ What Daughters was purportedly cooking, of course, was a snook, not a ‘snoot’. Unfortunately, the word ‘snook’ (a gesture of contempt with the thumb to the nose and the fingers spread out) is as dead as a dodgem except in that one phrase ‘cooking a snook’. Quite unconsciously, I think, the reviewer replaced the senseless snook with the ‘senseful’ snoot, a colloquial word meaning ‘nose’ (snout is related to snout, and produces the word snotty meaning ‘supercilious, haughty, snobbish’).

Quite recently I heard a radio commentator assert that US Tomahawk cruise missiles, launched from warships in the Gulf, ‘homed in on’ air defence installations in Southern Iraq. (This, by the bye, was not just a one-off: I wish I had a quid for every time I’d heard or read the phrase!) It puzzles me slightly why the perfectly sensible home in on (‘make a beeline for’) should be altered so frequently to ‘honed in on’, an alteration which is becoming more and more frequent. What, I wonder, is the razor-connection in users’ minds? (It’s something to be thankful for that we have not yet seen the appearance of homing pigeons!)

Many Australians know the phrase a wigwam for a goose’s bridle (or its variant a wing-wang for a goose’s bridle), a snubbing or off-putting reply to an unwanted question, tantamount to ‘none of your business’: (SMALL BOY: Dad, what did you just hide under your pillow? — FATHER: red-faced: A wigwam for a goose’s bridle. Now scram!). The original phrase was a whigmam for a goose’s bridle, ‘whigmam’ meaning ‘a bauble, a trifling ornament of dress, a trinket’, and later ‘a fanciful or fantastic object’. The original phrase was deliberately absurd (no goose ever wore a bridle; no goose’s bridle ever needed to be decorated with a bauble), but it became obscure when the word whigmam disappeared from common use in the language towards the end of the nineteenth century, except in this phrase a whigmam for a goose’s bridle. Once that happened, it was inevitable that the process of folk etymology, of ‘Betty Martinising’, should begin. The variant wing-wang is a simple corruption of whigmam: the true process of folk etymology occurs with the introduction of wigwam. This word was borrowed from the Native American Ojibwa language in the early seventeenth century, and at some stage it must have been felt that whigmam is really a corruption of wigwam. This is all quite understandable — at least one knows what a wigwam is! Let that small boy wonder why a goose’s bridle should have its own tepee, and serve him right if it bamboozles him to bits!

In Macbeth Banquo expresses stunned disbelief when told about the murder of his wife and children by Macbeth:

What, all my pretty chickens and their dam At one fell swoop?

The phrase at (or in) one fell swoop has now become Betty Martinised to at (or in) one foul swoop because the meaning of fell has largely been lost. Fell originally meant ‘fierce, savage: cruel, ruthless: dreadful, terrible’ when applied to animals and men, or to their actions and their attributes. Thus in c.1400 in his The buke of John Maundeville being the
travels of Sir J. Mandeville knight 1322-56, the
good knight quite rightly gives that mass
infanticide Herod the Great the following
hefty serve: ‘Herode was a full wrickid man
and a fell’. And in 1688 Randle Holme in his
The academy of armory, or a storehouse of armory
and blazon tells us that ‘The... Ban-dog’ [i.e. a
mastiff kept constantly chained up because of its
ferocity] ‘...is fierce, is fell, is stout, is
strong’. A fell swoop, therefore, is a savage
and murderous swoop, a thoroughly beastly
swoop, a deadly swoop of the sort one might
expect from a felon. (Fell and felon would
seem to be closely related words.)

So much for a fell swoop. What would a
foul swoop be? It is unlikely, I think, that
users would have in mind a swoop that
‘causes disgust because it has an offensive
smell or taste’, or a swoop that is ‘morally
evil, filthy, or obscene’ (some of the
commoner senses of the word). Perhaps foul
in the sense ‘unfair, against the rules of a
game’ is uppermost in users’ minds. A foul
swoop would therefore be tantamount to a
guile stroke and Banquo speaking today
would probably complain that Macbeth’s
slaughter of his wife and kids was most unfair
and just not cricket!

Less understandable is the transformation (no
doubt by those who find the game of cricket
too tedious to make sense) of the phrase off
one’s own bat into off one’s own back. The
original cricketing term refers to the
number of runs made by a player, and by
extension means ‘something done by one’s
own efforts; unaided; unprompted’. ‘Off one’s
own back’ is opaque by comparison. The
term Parthian shot (‘a telling remark
reserved for the moment of departure’) is still
used, but it is now almost invariably
transformed into parting shot. The
Parthians (c.250 BC to c.230 AD) were skilled
horsemen, if put to flight, would turn
round and wreak havoc on their pursuers
with ‘parting’ flights of arrows shot while
they were in full gallop. But who would be
expected to know that? Parthian shot is
diminishing in the distance to a dot and
parting shot has dug its heels in, determined
to stay.

A parting shot: etymologically a, a forlorn
hope is not a hope but a ‘troop’ (as of
soldiers) and it isn’t in the least ‘forlorn’. The
phrase comes from Dutch verloren hoop —
a ‘lost heap’ (i.e. ‘troop’) of soldiers, ‘lost’ in
the sense ‘doomed’. When the phrase first
came into English, it referred to a body of
specially picked men detached to the front
to begin the attack. Thus in Leonard and
Thomas Digges An arithmetical and military
treatise called Stratificios (1579): ‘He [the
commander] must also order the Forlorn
hope in ye [the] front of his [his] Battayle
with new supplies’. So too in John Dymmom
A treatise of Ireland (1600): ‘Before the
vanguarde marched the forlorn hope’. (L.
de Gay’s Art of War (1678): ‘Called the
Forlorn Hope, because they... fall on first, and
make a Passage for the rest’. As late as 1874
Leslie Stephen in Hours in a Library uses the
phrase in this sense: ‘Compelled to lead a
forlorn hope up the scaling ladders’. In the
plural, the phrase referred to the men who
comprised this band of the doomed: Isaac
Tullie A narrative of the siege of Carlisle in 1644—
d5 (c.1645): ‘Toppam had ye honour of ye
forlorn hopes, and gave them a gallant
charge’.

It is altogether understandable that the
double Dutch of verloren hoop should have
been Englished into forlorn hope, words
which, in their pronunciation, are a spitting
image of the Dutch. OED’s earliest citation
for this Betty Martine sense is 1641: Josias
Shute Sarah and Ragair: or Genesis the sixteenth
chapter opened in xix. sermons: ‘If we sin, upon
a presumption that we shall conceal either
our actions or persons from God, it is a
forlorn hope; our iniquities will line us out’. And
so I suppose, they should.

I have given you only a small selection of the
many Betty Martines there are. My favourite
Betty Martine would have to be the Roman
grammainer Honoratus Maurus who did his
grammarizing at the end of the 4th century
AD. He solemnly declared that the Latin
word lucus (‘a grove or wood’; by definition a
shady place) was derived from Latin lucere (‘to
shine, to be full of light’) precisely because
groves are not full of light. Now who could
possibly out-Betty-Martin that?
Ozwords Competition No. 5

Competitors were asked to write a small advertisement offering the Sydney Harbour Bridge (or some other desirable piece of the National Estate) to first home buyers or small investors.

The winner is punster Barry Knight of Queensland:

BRIDGE FINANCE AVAILABLE


Ozwords Competition No. 6: COLLECTIVE NOUNS

In her Book of St Albans, Dame Juliana Berners (born c.1388), probably the Prioress of Sopwith Nunney, wrote thus of collective nouns: We say a congregation of people, a host of men, a fowlshypynge [flock] of yeemen, and a bevy of ladies; we must speak of a hoarde of deer, swans [swans], cranes [cranes], or weyrens [weyren], a sege [seige] of herons..., a muster of peacockes, a watche of mynytgleys, a foyghte of doves, a clatering [clatter] of thoughts, a prude of lyons, a sleuth of [sloth] of bears, a gaggle of geys [geese], a skull of foxes, a scull of freys, a skull of frays, a poffectybe of pryests, and a superfluity of nonnes [a superfluity of nuns]. A little more recently (1996), James Valentine asked listeners of his radio programme to invent a collective term for ferals: best offers were a faction of ferals and a fornication of ferals. One of the listeners to Matthew Abraham’s radio show (1996) suggested an amalgam of dentist. What would be an apposite collective noun for collective nouns — a colligation? a confusion? a coalescence?

Competitors are asked to invent (and that’s the operative word) a witty collective noun, preferably with a distinctively Aussie flavour or relevance (e.g. what might the collective noun be for Aussie Rulers, shiny burns, kangaroo?), there is no limit to the number of ‘collectives’ which may be included in an entry. The wittiest invention wins the prize: ($100 worth of books from Oxford University Press).


Ozwords is available free of charge on application to: Debra Burgess, The Subscriptions Manager, Ozwords, GPO Box 2764Y, Melbourne VIC 3001. Fax: 03 9666 3251. E-mail: db@upanz.com.au
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