

The Joys and Sorrows of Being a Word Snob

“Ballpark figure” is a nice, fairly new phrase meaning “rough approximation” (such as the estimates of attendance at a ball game). But it seems that America has entered the era of ballpark language where words are used *approximately*; they mean only roughly what we think they mean. So observes Joseph Epstein, singling out for disdain educators, heiresses, bureaucrats, TV anchormen, ecologists, and social scientists—among the many “quasi-semi-demi-ostensibly educated” Americans who now habitually use language that “leaves the ground but does not really fly.” Here Mr. Epstein bares his biases.

by Joseph Epstein

Mention to me that when you were young your parents were very “supportive,” tell me that before “finalizing” your plans you would like my “input,” remark that the job in which you are “presently” employed provides you with a “nurturing environment”—say all or any of these things and you will not see a muscle in my face move.

I shall appear to show a genial interest in all you say, but beneath the geniality, make no mistake, I shall be judging you—and not altogether kindly.

“Hmm,” I shall be thinking as you speak, “I see that I am dealing here with someone who has a taste for psychobabble and trashy corporate and computer talk and misuses the word *presently* into the bargain.”

I shall, of course, say nothing about it to you; I certainly won’t attempt to reform you. In fact, I rather prefer you

stay the way that you are. You allow me to feel that, in the realm of language at least, I am vastly superior to you; and the feeling of superiority—need I say it?—is what puts the lovely curl in the snob’s smile.

I’m not your run-of-the-mill language snob; I prefer, in fact, to think myself a custom-tailored snob. I like what I deem to be good new words. I like to toss in a neologism of my own every now and then, and I like what the linguistically prudish used to call Americanisms.

One of the few things I have ever disagreed with Henry James about is his fear, set forth in *The American Scene*, that immigrant groups in the United States would pollute the pure stream of the English language. I think the current in this stream is stronger than James knew. It can carry a great deal before it and still remain fresh.



A 1987 Doonesbury cartoon, by Garry Trudeau: Boopsie dabbles in psychobabble.

It was, after all, the grandson of an immigrant, H. L. Mencken, who made the English language do one-and-a-half gainers, back flips, and triple somersaults. A. J. Liebling, another scion of the immigrants, as Mencken might have put it, didn't do too shabbily either. But then I have a weakness for people who know how to play language for laughs. When the pro-basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, after dining at the home of a colleague, Julius Erving, was asked by the press if Mrs. Turquoise Erving was a good cook, Mr. Jabbar replied: "Yeah, man, Turquoise can burn." Henry James, I think, was too good-humored not to have enjoyed that.

The people I like to lord it over are the quasi-semi-demi-ostensibly educated, B.A., M.S., Ph.D. and degrees beyond. Few things please me more, for

example, than to see the novelists Norman Mailer and Joan Didion misuse the word *disinterested*. Or to notice the well-known scholar George F. Kennan use the word *transpire* as if it were nothing more than a high-toned synonym for *happen*. Or to hear more degreed people than I care to count use *intriguing* as if it meant nothing other than *fascinating*. (Take the verb *to intrigue* away from spies and you leave these fellows practically unemployed.) And, of course, I am death on people who use the term "bottom line."

I watch television ready to pounce; it is good exercise. One of the local anchormen hereabouts—a \$300,000-a-year man, I would estimate—made my day not long ago when, in connection with the Libyan embassy crisis in London, he asked a visiting expert whether

this might spell the possibility of a *tête-à-tête* for Qaddafi. "Coup d'état, you overpaid moron," I roared, leaping from my couch, "not tête-à-tête."

Or when, during the NCAA basketball tournament, the former coach and current announcer Billy Packer referred to "three or four Achilles' heels" that De Paul University's team had.

"Ah, dear boy," I whispered to myself, "one Achilles' heel was quite enough—even for Achilles."

But I am satisfied when one of the truly high-priced TV lads—Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, or Peter Jennings—misuses *decimate*, which means to kill a tenth, or calls something "rather unique," which is akin to being rather pregnant.

Do you take my point? Do you also think that what I've written thus far makes for "a good read"? If so, please clean out your locker, for you're done—I hate the phrase "a good read."

□

One of the things a language snob learns early in his training is that there is probably no word or phrase that someone of stature doesn't despise.

Edward Shils has kept up a running attack against the phrase "check out," as in "check it out." I know many people who hate *authored* as a verb, but I recently read that E. B. White didn't even like the word *author*. I can never hear or see the word *workshop*, referring to a management seminar or creative writing course, without thinking of Kingsley Amis's line, from his novel *Jake's Thing*, which runs: "If there's one word that sums up everything that's gone wrong since the war, it's Workshop." And

that's not all.

Many are the people who loathe the phrase "pick your brain," and I count myself among their number.

"I'd like to pick your brain," is a phrase my friend Dottie uses quite often. Dottie and I go way back. She is a good soul, large-hearted in so many ways. But Dottie is one of those people who seems to absorb whatever language is in the air, and the language that has been in the air in recent years has, I fear, driven my friend Dottie a bit, well, dotty.

□

Dottie has been going through a rough patch. Among other crises in her life, she has had a painful divorce and two job changes. She explained her divorce to me in something like the following terms: Her husband, she feels, "seemed just to want to do his thing." She no longer knew quite "where he was coming from." He used to be so steady, but, suddenly, he was so "off the wall." She supposed it was in part "a question of life-style," or maybe a "mid-life crisis." When I pressed her for greater clarity, she said: "Whatever."

"Whatever!"

Whatever may qualify for the category that H. W. Fowler, blessed be his name, called "meaningless words." Fowler wrote:

"Words and phrases are often used in conversation, especially by the young, not as significant terms but rather, so far as they have any purpose at all, as aids of the same kind as are given in writing by punctuation, inverted commas, and underlining. It is a phenomenon perhaps more suitable for the psychologist than for the philologist.

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"Words and phrases so employed change frequently, for they are soon worn out by overwork. Between the two world wars the most popular were DEFINITELY and *sort of thing*."

"One may suppose that they originated in a subconscious feeling that there was a need in the one case to emphasize a right word and in the other to apologize for a possibly wrong one. But any meaning they ever had was soon rubbed off them, and they became noises automatically produced."

Fowler also mentions *actually* and *you know* among the crop of meaningless words. (*Incidentally* is another meaningless word Fowler mentions, which, incidentally, reminds me that, a while back, I had a long bout of beginning most of my sentences, at least in conversation, with the phrase "By the way." Everything, in those days, seemed to me "by the way." It takes a big-hearted snob, don't you think, to admit to a small-gauge error.)

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A few years ago, *basically* was having a good run. "Care for dessert?" "Basically, I don't think I do," is a ridiculous but not unreal example. *You know* has had very long innings, and flourishes today, particularly among athletes. Of Patrick Ewing, the center for the New York Knicks basketball team, it has been said that last year he led the nation in *you knows*. It was said, obviously, by someone like me, a language snob.

The language snob must take his pleasures where he finds them. In bureaucratic prose, for example. Few samples fail to include the verb *implement*, which generally causes me to want to reach for an implement to smash the person who has used it.

Guidelines, too, has brought many a twinkle to these crowfooted and pouchy eyes. "*Guidelines* is a bastardization," I cry out to the walls. "It comes from *guy lines*, you idiot."

No question about it, bureaucratic prose writers need to prioritize, dichotomize, and finalize, at least if they are to be responsive and people-oriented. Is what I say here of any ongoing interest? If so, I shall keep on going.

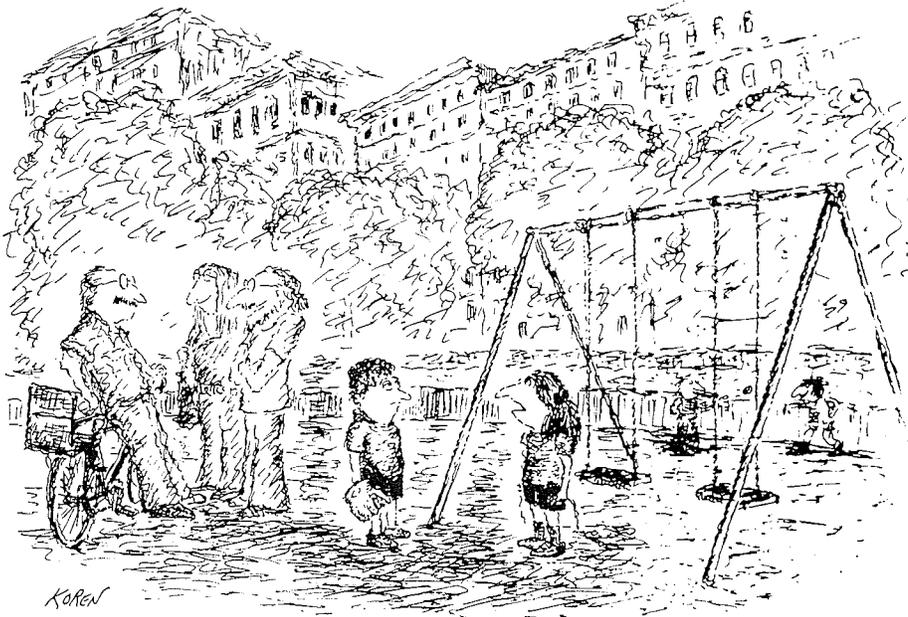
One must not fear descending to pedantry. I have had a good deal of fun, in this regard, watching people misuse the word *whence*, turning it into a tautology by saying or writing "from whence." But I have suffered minor setbacks. Recently I noted "from whence" in both Shakespeare and Edmund Burke. Shock and dismay is the language snob's lot. Believe me, I don't enjoy feeling superior to Shakespeare and Burke, yet what is a man of serious standards to do?

To go on, my very favorite euphemism over the past 20 or so years has been, without doubt, "student unrest." It was used to refer to the activities of radical students in the late 1960s and early 1970s. "Student unrest" implies a mild crankiness, the antidote for which was perhaps a few good afternoon naps!

I like, too, "Due to mature theme viewer discretion advised," which I take to mean "simulated fornication, extreme violence, and filthy language follow—get the kids the hell out of the room." I understand the word *interdisciplinary*, used by academics, to mean "I deserve a grant." I recall reading a grant proposal for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) a few years back in which the author wanted a grant for a course that would not only be "cross-curricular" but "interdisciplinary" and "interuniversity" as well. I suggested that NEH turn it down because it wasn't interplanetary.

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A language snob must be ready to outlaw words because the wrong people use them. *Charisma* is such a word. It once had meaning, but no longer. "He has charisma," I not long ago heard Bucky Walters, the basketball announcer, say of



A New Yorker drawing by Koren: "Ezra, I'm not inviting you to my birthday party, because our relationship is no longer satisfying to my needs."

a player. "He's got that smile." *Syn-drome*, too, must go. "This is a syndrome he had foisted on him," I recently heard one politician say of another. *Structure* is another gone goose. On television the other day I heard another politician, one of the zinc-throated orators of our day, affirm: "I have invested in activities that have gone to enhance this total city's overall structure." Does everyone out there know how to enhance a structure? While we are cleaning the closet, let's toss out *learning experience*, which was never any good to begin with. Besides, I have noticed that people who say "learning experience" tend never to learn from experience.

On the subject of experience, it was Walter Pater who invoked us to live intensely for the moment, to seek "not the fruit of experience, but experience itself." But Pater didn't live to see the word *experience* turned into a verb,

lucky chap. What would he have made of recent advertisements that ask us to "Experience Yoplait Yogurt," "Experience the St. Regis," "Experience Our 9.6 Interest Rate"?

Walter Pater was not notably—how to say it?—a fun person. I am not at all sure he could "wrap his mind around" what has happened to the word *experience*. Nor is he likely to turn up in a restaurant I noted the other day called The Corned Beef Experience.

I judge a person less by the cut of his jib than by his grip on the gab. Where the gab has no grab I see a certain mental—not moral—flab. When a prospective buyer of *The London Observer* remarks that he intends to make that paper's editor "toe the line of viability," I make a judgment that is not charitable to him. When I read the phrase, in a book by Alvin Toffler, "decisional environment," not one but both my eye-

brows fly up. When I read, in *The New Yorker*, about a Harvard Law School professor who refers to "a societal role not perceived as particularly helpful," to myself I exclaim, "Et tu, Harvard!" Can you *identify with* or *relate to* this? If you can, you're fired.

I recall first coming across the word *life-style* (from the German *Lebensstil*) in Max Weber's essays on social class, some of which I read as an undergraduate. I was immensely impressed with it; on Max Weber, an authentic genius, all words looked good.

□

In those days, I used it myself, slipping it into term papers and conversation whenever possible. (Those were also the days of *ambivalence* and *love-hate*.) Soon I saw *life-style* taken up by advertising agencies and low-grade sociologists. College students came next: "Queen Victoria lived a very different life-style than most of her subjects." Today the word carries something of a philosophical freight: implicit in it is the notion, which I, for one, don't believe, that life has an almost infinite plasticity—change your life-style, change your life, it's as easy as that.

There is something about caring for language that does not allow for moderation. How can you tell if you care about language? You care if it grates upon you to hear the word *impact* used as a verb. Next you begin to care if you see *impact* used to describe anything other than ballistics, car crashes, and wisdom teeth. You care if you find yourself wishing to flee the company of anyone who uses such words as *parenting*, *coupling*, *cohabing*. You care if it turns your stomach to see or hear a reference to "the caring professions."

You know for certain that you care if the last thing in the world you care to be called is "a caring person."

Today, it is people who have been to university who make the most gnawing

depredations into the clarity and cleanliness of language.

I cannot, for example, imagine any supposedly uneducated person using the word *supportive*. Who but a university student or graduate would refer to her mother as a "role model," or talk about "the gender gap," or say she wishes "to dialogue" with me? Who but a U person would fall back on so foggy a word as *values*? Wesleyan University, I note, has a course entitled "Touchstones of Western Values," and Jesse Jackson has said, "Values lead to values."

With the possible exception of politicians, bureaucrats, professors with weak ideas, and those in other trades where charlatanry is requisite, few are the people who scheme to use obfuscatory language. It's simply that Nietzsche was correct when he said that "general is the need for new jingling words, which shall make life noisy and festive." Language is still far and away the best tool we have for deceiving ourselves.

When a famous ecologist writes that, if we are to save the Earth, "we must enter into a creative association with our environment," I don't think the man is a knave or even a liar; I do, though, think, perhaps unbeknownst to himself, that he is embarked on the mental equivalent of whistling Dixie.

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When a young mother takes an active hand in a political campaign because she wants "this country to be a positive experience for my son," I do not impugn her sincerity, only her clarity. Was Russia a positive experience for Tolstoy, Germany for Bismarck, France for Proust? Do countries supply "positive experience"? One wonders whether this young mother isn't searching for something that is not available.

So the language snob persists. Sometimes he looks quite as much at the people who use them as at the words themselves. I have never, for instance, met a

professor in the humanities who called himself or herself a "humanist," without irony, whom I didn't dislike. I am extremely wary of people who go in for botanical metaphors in a big way to describe psychological states. "I feel myself growing" or: "It has been a growthful experience."

To the basic botanical metaphor of growth, further metaphors are often added. Abra Anderson, a Rockefeller granddaughter and a millionairess who lives in Chicago, recently told a journalist: "Right now I don't know where I am, except that I feel everything else is finished. The apartment's finished, I've got a wonderful man, my kids are fine, the bills are paid, the charities are OK. And I'm just *re-potting* myself."

Certain words such as *growth* seem to have a built-in squishiness; they grow soft at the touch. But, as any language snob will be pleased to tell you, good solid words, if sedulously misused, can lose their solidity, too.

The word *honest* applied to art—and for a long stretch it was the key word of praise for works of architecture—always merits suspicion. *Excellence* is nowadays all but drained of meaning, so often has it been applied to things that are scarcely mediocre. The word *complete*, when used to describe a collection of one or another kind of writing, usually turns out to mean merely "quite a bit of." *Literally*, in so many current usages, doesn't mean "literally"; it's literally a scandal,

so to speak. "Ballpark figure" is a nice, fairly new phrase meaning "rough approximation" (such as the estimates of attendance at a ball game), but it sometimes seems as if we are entering the era of ballpark language, where words are used approximately; they mean only roughly what we think they mean.

My biases ought by now to be clear; so, too, my snobbery. But I earlier referred to myself as a principled snob. Wherein lie my principles? All right, here they are: take out after all language that is pretentious and imprecise, under-educated and over-intellectualized. Question all language that says more than it means, that leaves the ground but does not really fly. Question authority only after you have first seriously consulted it; it isn't always as stupid as it looks. Never forget that today's hot new phrase becomes tomorrow's cold dead cliché. (What will we do, a writer in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* asks, "when the Baby Boomers get to Golden Pond?") Know in advance that the fight for careful language is probably a losing one, but at the same time don't allow this knowledge to take the edge off your appetite for battle.

The war may be lost, yet the skirmishes are still worth waging. Recall the words of that grand snob, Proust's Baron de Charlus: "I have always honored the defenders of grammar and logic. We realize fifty years later that they have averted serious dangers."