

You say Tomato.....

### A little linguistic archaeology

Our language, like our taste in fashions, is constantly changing and evolving. Words which have served us well for decades, even centuries, fade imperceptibly away, to be replaced by what at first often seem to be vulgar upstarts. In Holmfirth, (all of Yorkshire? All of England?) “**see you later**” has almost completely replaced “**good bye**”, whilst in the language of pundits and those who like to give freely of their opinions “**going forward**” has taken over from “**in the future**”. Everywhere a simple expression of thanks now evokes an inevitable “**no problem**”. (Not that there ever was one.)

Another new development, particularly popular with academics answering questions, is to replace the usual “**well**” at the start of the answer with “**so**”.

***Professor Noall, what is the secret of the universe?***

***So, I don't have a clue.***

I am now also told by a reliable source that if I were ever to go to Starbucks for a coffee the correct way to address the barista, i.e. the bloke in an apron who makes the Nescafe, is to ask: “**can I get a latte?**” not, “**I would like a cup of coffee, please.**” This latter is now apparently a social faux pas, (that's French for “false feet” or something.) Who would have thought that buying a cuppa could be so fraught?

Visiting our language a little farther back in time is more likely to lead to the occasional linguistic trip-up. In my exploration of the Diaries of Samuel Pepys I regularly meet the word “**divers**”. Now Sam is not referring to men in rubber wet-suits jumping into the Thames. For him and for everyone else in the 17th and 18th century it meant, as an adjective “**various**”, and as a noun, “**different sorts of people.**” It is a usage now completely lost. Thus the proclamation issued by Cromwell ordering the arrest of King Charles II becomes clear:-

***Whereas CHARLS STUART Son of the late Tyrant, with divers of the English and Scottish Nation have lately.....invaded this Nation....***

“**Fain**” is another once popular word which has completely vanished from our lexicon. How many, I wonder, now actually understand what this sentence means?

***I would fain have stayed in bed, but duty called.***

The meaning of **fain** is **gladly/willingly**. A useful word, so why did it vanish?

Like **fain** another word which has disappeared from use is **swive**, although perhaps it now ought to be called the **s-word** in order not to offend the sensitive, since it means copulate or **to have (illicit) sex**. It appears frequently in the many scurrilous verses that circulated in London describing the debauched life of Charles II and his flaunting of his many mistresses before the public gaze. In particular verses by the notorious Rochester are famous, but too scurrilous to quote in a family website like this!

And a little further back Shakespeare can also present the occasional linguistic misunderstanding. In ***Romeo and Juliet*** Capulet orders: “**Go hire me twenty cunning**

**cooks.”** It sounds strange and unexpected to the modern ear to describe cooks as “**cunning**”. But Shakespeare did not mean what we now understand by “**cunning**”. To him it meant simply **skilful** or **capable**. (German has the verb “**können**” = **to be able/can** and this relates closely to Shakespeare’s “**cunning**”) Modern English “**canny**” is perhaps closer to Shakespeare’s meaning.

The drastic impact that circumstances can impose on the meaning of a word is provided by another Anglo-German example. (The two language share, of course, a common heritage.) In both languages there exists the identical noun **Gift**, and in both languages it means basically the same thing, **something you give**, but after that their wider meaning stands at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. For the German word **Gift** has come to mean “**poison**”. One can speculate how this might have come about, but the well-known warning from the ancient world, “**beware of Greeks bearing gifts**” might suggest a clue. Accepting a glass of wine in medieval Germany was clearly a very risky business.

And what of the state of English in our own time? What new layer of linguistic usage is being created by the smart phone, Facebook and texting generation? A cause for concern, many might say, as more and more people under the age of 30 seem to have mainly given up on spoken and written communication in favour of the text message. And by its very nature the text message demands brevity, resulting in the compression of words into symbolic letters or actually being replaced by pictures, - the so-called emojis. The richness of language and its ability to offer nuance, irony and subtlety of meaning is rapidly disappearing. Jane Austen can be heard turning in her grave in Winchester Cathedral. This new form of language is now also beginning to make an appearance in essays at “A” and university level. Oh dear! -

*“Lady Macbeth is not a LOL. To many she seems all too*



As for the Twitterati thanks to President Trump the least said the better. Imagine Churchill issuing a Trump-like tweet in 1940:-

**We’re gonna fight em on the beaches! Go! Go! Go!**

One of the ironies of texting is that we are being taken back to the very origins of the written language, when pictures were used to convey meaning (China, Egypt). Are we spawning an illiterate generation which will only be able to sign, say, their marriage

certificate not so much with an X as in the illiterate past, but with a



David Cockman HDAS June 2017

