

# LANGUAGE MAVEN STRIKES AGAIN

William Safire



Doubleday

*Language*

You Could Look It Up  
Take My Word for It  
I Stand Corrected  
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On Language

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WILLIAM SAFIRE

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Maven  
Strikes  
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“Eureka!” cried A. M. Rosenthal, then editor of *The New York Times*, explaining to his colleagues that the Greek word meant “I’ve found it.” His inspiration: “Safire will do a language column.”

It was OK with me (or OK by me, as they say in New York). I had written a hefty political dictionary, contributed an annual “Vogue Word Watch” to the *Times Magazine* and fiddled with words all my working life. Why not become English-Speaking World Usage Dictator? Sure, what if I hadn’t finished college, or even studied Latin? In the language dodge, I figured, a cat could look at a king. Maybe the series could be strung out for a year.

That was in 1979. I have been riding this tiger ever since and am afraid to get off. This is the sixth compilation of “On Language” columns and, as always, it is enlivened by the roar and hisses, applause and emendations of the Lexicographic Irregulars—the legion of language lovers who seize upon this outlet for their frustrations (“Prioritize? Ugly!”) and questions (“How many words end in *gry*?”). In the newspaper column, I don’t have the space to let my readers expound; in books, however, I can let them blaze away.

This outlet for the literate led beyond usage and word games (*prioritize* is bureaucratic, but it has as much right to live as *finalize*, and you don’t need to know the words beyond *angry* and *hungry*) to the seamy side of semiotics: How do you address a letter in the post-“Gentlemen” era? Where is the graveyard of forgotten words like *knickers* and *sink stopper*? Which of the nonce words will stay with us beyond the nonce—the nuts-based *nerd* (nah) or the whimper-based *wimp*?

I used to feel like a jerk when a correspondent pointed out an obvious mistake. Now I’m in with Mayor Fiorello La Guardia—“When I make a mistake,” he would say, “it’s a beautiful mistake”—and when I make a linguistic misstep, it’s grist for a column.

Some people, probably conspiracy theorists, think that I make mistakes deliberately, as a mail-pull. Good; let them think that. It enhances respect for authority.

A note about Authority: In these pages, you will be given The Word about The Words. Here is what I think about what is correct and constructive, what is imprecise and destructive. You may disagree, as many of my articulate and scholarly (or plain ornery) readers do. It’s your language, too, buddy; if you want to abuse it and muddle it up, you will do that for yourself, not for me. If, on the other hand, you are willing to think about how we communicate, and to consider the words and the forms of grammar, then you are automatically a member of the Authority, entitled to a ring and a secret handshake and the thrill of membership. A word of warning: If you get hooked on the study of the language, you’re in that sorority, or fraternity, for life.

You’ll be watching, as I am now, for the word that encompasses *sorority* and *fraternity*, that turns sisterhood and brotherhood into familyhood. I don’t know what that word is, but not to worry—some reader will find it or coin it and send it in.



Style, in the literary sense, is the way we use words to express what we think or feel. To often, grammarians and less self-conscious writers limit the meaning of the word to the rules of spelling, punctuation or usage that can be found in a *style book* (or, as some style books direct, *stylebook*); but the elements of style, to use the name of the best-selling little book on that subject, include not merely the agreed-upon conventions of the writing tradition but encompass the strength, precision, grace and honesty—or lack of those virtues—that characterize the way we communicate.

The paragraph above is not written in my style. Readers of dictums in this space have come to expect a grabber of a lead—a quotation with some egregious misuse of *masterful* for *masterly* and other such solecisms in vogue, or a shout of outrage from some big shot come down to medium shot—followed by a deluge of erudition that sugarcoats a grammatical pronunciamento or pinpricks some political orator’s trial balloon. These readers know that I would die before lining myself up before the memorandums of the Squad Squad with redundancies like *agreed-upon convention*.

Why, then, have I reverted to the soporific kind of lead that you can read in any how-to book on writing for success, or dressing for writing, or writing and dressing to seduce impressionable young literary agents and take down megabucks? Nobody but a pedant, professional esthete or a language-book author would begin any article or chapter with “Style, in the literary sense....”

Such a la-di-da ringing of the belles-lettres, haughtily presenting such unmasked-facts information, causes the sensible reader to demand: “Why do I need to know this? Why is this man lecturing at me?” and to turn the page with the knuckle-to-the-lips satisfaction of an adult videogamer fast-forwarding past the tape’s opening credits to get right to the hard-core pornography.

My purpose in beginning with a let-go lead, opposite of a grabber, is to limit my readership to people who are really hung up on the subject of style, surface-variety. That means we are in no great lecture hall; we’re in a tight little seminar of the sort of elitists who grimly stick to *dicta*, *encomia* and *memoranda* despite the general preference for *-ums*. First comes the assignment of books for outside reading.

Publishers of language books have crowned me the Great Pooh-Bah of Plugsville because I happily blurb for books on how to write. I have been reduced to such encomiums as “Even this book of pedagogic pettifoggery may help.” For years, I have held that any decent book on plain writing will help the reader improve his style, because most people don’t pay any attention to style at all, and, as a result, banal words and stereotypes are chosen, sentences with passive constructions mar the literary skyline and paragraphs lurch on the page without benefit of topic sentences.

However, I have in my hand a letter from Alistair Cooke. A longtime social and political commentator who interprets America to the mother country on the BBC, he is familiar to many Americans as a man who sits in an easy chair in front of a fireplace and gives meaning and perspective to episodes of television series. Everyone can understand what he is saying.

because he is a life-long student of language who works hard on his writing and speaks the words easily but with care. He is the epitome of urbane renewal.

Mr. Cooke's letter chides my American-English bias in a recent piece on mnemonics—wrote of a way to remember the musical treble clef with “Every Good Boy Does Fine” which Britons say “Deserves Favor”—and he asks for the origin of the expression “start from scratch,” which I will look up when I get the itch.\* Then he writes:

“As for books that say—keep your sentences short, cut out all adjectives and adverbs, don't use dashes—I simply ignore them.”

Now that is breathtaking iconoclasm. Down the midway of the twentieth century, authors from Hemingway to Doctorow have championed the short, simple declarative sentence. The most memorable American literary sentence of the nineteenth century, precursor to the modern style, was Herman Melville's “Call me Ishmael.”

Every book on writing you can find these days says essentially the same thing: keep it short. Take it a bite at a time. Dispense with the adjectival frills. Put the punch in the verb and not the adverb (he added weakly). Edit, edit, edit, and avoid repetition. Less is more; spare is fair. Our taste in style matches our taste in corned beef: lean is keen.

Maybe we are going overboard. The burst of the business memo, the snap-and-spit of the television news “bite,” the mincing sentences of post-Hemingway novelists—all have led to the canonization of brevity. Introduce it, lay it out, sum it up. The dash is dead. It is not for nothing, as the Communists say, that the hottest word in communication is *briefing*.

I decry this trend. (*Decry* is a word used only in newspaper headlines; it is shorter than *disparage*, *denounce* or *complain about*, and editors are more interested in its length than the plain fact that the word is not used in the spoken language. Try it: “Don't decry, dear.” You never heard that anywhere; the vestigial verb's presence on front pages is a triumph over briefmanship.)

This is not to call for a return to long-windedness or a plea for studding sentences with redundancies and festooning them with modifying clauses, but I suggest this: You don't have to be flowery to love adjectives, and your judicious use of words ending in *-ly* adds color and nuance to the stark action of your trendiest verbs; although short sentences have punch—“decry this trend” makes the point mightily, if I may be permitted an adverb—too many crisis declarations leave the reader punch-drunk, reeling from incessant short shots, wondering where he can find a writer who can drop brevity's bludgeon and bedazzle with fanciful footwork; in this regard, cadence counts (your corporal was right), and while the sort of Churchillian prose that sweeps the reader rhythmically along may have no place in news reports or the bulletins of avant-guardhouse poets, it must not be lost to the arsenal of the artist or historian—lest we bend our knee to the staccato style book that barks “Be brief” and orders us to come to a full stop before we have finished saying all we have to say in just the way we want to say it.

Stop thinking about writing style as an outer garment with which to dress your thoughts. Style, in the sense I have in mind, is not the synonym of “form,” the antonym of “substance,” a fashion to be adopted and set aside. Style is not a mask, an image or a persona: upon his admission to the French Academy in 1753, Comte Georges-Louis de Leclerc Buffon said, “Style is the man himself,” arguing that style is essence. The way you write reflects the way you think, and the way you think is the mark of the kind of person you are.

In the second paragraph of this introductory discourse (no need to turn back the page, rarely misquote myself), I dumped on the first paragraph as not being in my style. You took that to mean “not the way I usually write,” an assumption quickly reinforced by comparison of grabber and let-go leads. (Better go back.) But that was a trick; you were misled by my seeming acceptance of the most common current meaning of the word *style*. What I really meant was more profound than “that’s not the way I write”; it was also “that’s not how I think,” and when you keep peeling that onion until you’re down where the tears are, “that is not the sort of person I am.”

You want to fix up your writing, parse your sentences, use the right words? Fine, pick up the little books, learn to avoid mistakes, revere taut prose and revile tautology. But do not flatter yourself that you have significantly changed your style. First, straighten out yourself so that you can then think straight and soon afterward write straight. Your writing style is yourself in the process of thinking and the act of writing, and you cannot buy that in a bookstore or fix it up in a seminar.

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\* To scratch the itch: in racing, one who starts from a mark scratched in the ground is without special advantages, contrast to one who races with a designated handicap.



## Access Gainin

**M**y son the hacker, trained at the knee of the superhacker Andrew Glass of *Computer* Newspapers, reconfigured the files in my personal computer—and for a frightening moment I didn't know where anything was.

“How do I get at the ‘On Language’ column?” I asked.

“You mean,” he replied coolly, speaking in a language he calls “Basic,” “how do you *access* it?”

That's the new magic word. Now that all the world's information has been “inputted,” the trick is to get at it, and the operative verb is *to access*. This is the shortened form of the old phrase *to gain access to*, and it has gained wide acceptance, much as *to make contact with* became *to contact* a couple of generations ago. Don't fight the verbifying: to make withdrawal from your grammar-friendly data bank, you must adopt the necessary lingo. If you don't use *access*, you won't get in anywhere.

That is also the message in the new vogue for the word as a noun. In Washington, for many years people in the lobbying business sold *influence*. This word gained a pejorative connotation in 1949, when a “five percenter” testified to Congress that “I have nothing to sell but influence.” Objection to this line of work led to the wide use of the phrase *influence peddler*, and now no opinion-respecting consultant in your nation's capital sells that word anymore. (The predecessor word, *pull*, derived from *wirepuller*, long ago fell into disuse.)

Today, what lobbyists like to say they sell is *access*—that is, an open door or telephone line to the people in power. In an article in *Washington Dossier* magazine titled “Playing the Access Game,” Dom Bonafede writes: “Access—the very word is lovingly caressed simply in its saying by those who have it—is like a fragrant lubricant smoothing the way for political and social acceptance.”

Presumably, this *access* merely ensures a client a prompt and fair hearing, which the uninitiated citizen is less likely to get. The word is intended to strip from the activity the connotation of favoritism implicit in the noun and verb *influence*.

And yet, *access*, the insider's noun, is formed from the verb *accede*, based on the Latin *cedere*, “to yield.” That's what the government official is supposed to be doing, and it is the ability to induce such sweet surrender that the sellers of *access* are selling.

## Acronym Sougl

What's in an acronym? Plenty. In areas of great public controversy, propagandists seek to get a message into the name of the product or program, and when they are successful the "sell" appears every time the subject comes up.

We are not talking here of the old "Lux Radio Theater," which plugged the soap sponsor every time the program appeared in the newspaper listings. (The newspapers got wise and soon started calling it just "Radio Theater." I still miss the soothing sound of Cecil B. DeMille's saying "Good night from Holly-w-o-o-d.")

A good example of built-in message delivery is "right-to-work laws." Who can be against the right to work? Organized labor was, of course, because the laws, when passed, struck down the union shop; labor soon began referring to the legislation as "union-busting laws."

A more subtle escalation of the technique appeared in the controversy over abortion. Anti-abortion forces did not want to put themselves in the position of campaigning for a negative and chose "pro-life"; pro-abortion forces did not like to be identified with encouraging abortion, which is a harsh word, and countered with "pro-choice." That produced a "sloganary" standoff: what are you for, life or choice?

The Reagan Administration was alert in its early days to the need for a "fresh start" in arms-control negotiations and was aware that Mr. Reagan had campaigned against the second strategic arms limitation talks (SALT) treaty as "fatally flawed" (which many people still think is a description of improperly installed linoleum). They came up with a fresh acronym to replace SALT: the strategic arms reduction talks, acronamed Start. (When an acronym exceeds four letters, capitalize only the first letter.)

The trick in acronaming, by the way, is to find a series of initial letters that spell out a pronounceable word. M.B.F.R., the interminable negotiations in Vienna about Mutual and Balanced Force Reduction (which right-wingers remember in derision as "More Better for Russia"), is not an acronym. M.B.F.R. is pronounced as a series of letters, not a word, and these talks will not be immortalized in a word until someone starts calling them "Mubalfo" or some such.

Acronyms applied after the fact of naming an organization or program can ridicule the activity named. I was particularly sensitive to this in my political days, and closely examined the name of the Committee to Re-elect the President in 1972 for possible backfiring. C.T.R.T.P.? Comrep? Crepres? Safe enough, I decided; and so what later became famous as Creep was born. In the same way, the Law of the Sea Treaty advocates did not recognize the time bomb ticking in the treaty's name; when the selected initials came out LOST, the opponents who considered it all to be a power-grab by the third world had a handy weapon. (The ratification of the treaty by the United States was sunk in what Washington wags call "scuttle diplomacy.")

Imagine the chagrin of the Reagan people, so sensitive to the nuances of implanting "sell" in program titles, when the President announced his idea for a defense in space against incoming missiles and the notion was headlined immediately as "Reagan's Star Wars Proposal." The application of the movie title to the futuristic defense was buttressed by the President's earlier use of the phrase "evil empire" to describe the Soviet Union's imperialism, which seemed identical to the "empire" lined up against the good guys in the George Lucas film.

Grimly, Pentacrats jettisoned the phrase that had been used by the program's early defenders—High Frontier—which comes down to the acronymic Hifron, no competition for Star Wars. Instead, bureaucrats, in what can be charitably called a holding action, described the idea as Strategic Defense Initiative, or S.D.I.; this phrase has not really caught on, and the initials do not form an acronym. Some thought has been given to changing the counternaming to Strategic Initiative for Defense, so that it could be called SID (remembering that the Pentagon is on Shirley Highway) but this acronym has a nebbishistic ring.

What to do? The critics of the defense idea were having a field day with the built-in derision of Star Wars. The President complained: "I wish whoever coined that expression would take it back again, because it gives a false impression of what it is we're talking about." In his second Inaugural Address, he came up with a lame substitute: a "security shield," which, like "security guard," is redundant. The "shield" image was useful—a global or planetary shield describes the unaggressive weapon—but some of the President's advisers thought it promised too much. One of them bitterly complained that they were "up the last river."

In this linguistic pickle, the Administration, on deep background, is outreaching desperately. It is looking for suggestions for the antidote to the poison in the name Star Wars, which is what Andrei Gromyko, who has never even seen the movie, delights in calling our mind-boggling new idea.

It is in the tradition of *The New York Times* that a great institution turn to its public for help of this kind. Almost ninety years ago, when "All the News That's Fit to Print" was first suggested for *The Times's* slogan, a contest was conducted to come up with a better idea. Thousands of entries were submitted. The winning slogan was "All the World News, but not School for Scandal," a play on the title of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's 1777 comedy. As happened, the publisher kept the original suggestion, so the motto is still "All the News That's Fit to Print," but the involvement of the public always gives a nice sense of participation.

In that spirit, the Lexicographic Irregulars are called upon now to help the Administration find a suitable and catchy name for what, let's face it, everybody calls the Star Wars program. Here is the current state of play: the President is down for "security shield," no acronym. The Pentagon has its chips on the Strategic Defense Initiative, initials S.D.I. I like "global shield," no acronym. The Charles River gang, up at Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which pooh-poohs the program, prefers to stick with Star Wars. (They are also stuck with MAD, the acronym for Mutual Assured Destruction, which describes their strategy of deterrence. They now realize that MAD is even worse than LOST and almost as bad as Creep.)

Arms-control types within the Administration, who call themselves arms-reduction specialists, are toying with such ideas as the low-key Study of Protection (acronym: STOP) and the strained Security Assured for Each (SAFE). In a *New York Times* interview, the President floated out a play on MAD: "Why don't we have MAS instead—Mutual Assured Security." (MAS may not fly—it sounds vaguely Marxist and looks like an incomplete version of "M\*A\*S\*H.")

Here is one submitted even as this copy is being filed: ZYD, a legitimate acronym (because the Y can be a vowel sound) standing for Zap! You're Dead. Come on, now—no more of those. Space defense is serious business.

Your column triggered thoughts about what you term “built-in message delivery.” New York’s Welfare Law provides that a recipient is entitled to a “fair hearing” under certain circumstances, before benefits can be terminated. The Welfare Department, in creating a unit to implement this provision, entitled it “The Fair Hearing” office. Who can possibly complain of the decision issued by a “Fair Hearing Officer”?

Similarly, parents who disagree with the Board of Education about the services offered to a handicapped child are entitled to be heard by an “Impartial Hearing Officer.”

The message is the message.

*Paul L. Klein*  
*Judge of the Housing Court*  
*New York, New York*

Your column brought back to mind my years as a Confidential Assistant to five presidential appointment level bosses in D.C.

Seemed everything was either written, spoken or not-pronounced. For instance you would never pronounce the Civil Aeronautics Board (CAB). You said it. But most other things were pronounced. Even Federal Telephone and Telegraph, which is FFFtttt.

However, I stopped with one phone call—the changing of our military to the National Military Establishment. The minute I saw it in the *Aviation Daily* I called Stu Symington’s office—got his aide Grant Mason on the wire and said, “You can’t call it the National Military Establishment.” He wanted to know why, of course, so I told him to write down the initials and he would see that he was working for the NME—enemy. He howled into the telephone, slammed it down, and now we have the Department of Defense—or DOD to us all.

Thought you’d get a kick out of this true story.

*Helene du Toit*  
*West Hempstead, New York*

I was a bit startled to see your rather simplistic explanation of the terms used in the current abortion debate. The crux of that debate has never been whether one is “for” or “against” abortion, but rather whether one is for or against *legal restrictions* on abortion. Those who favoured the repeal of Prohibition are not “pro-alcohol”; those who would like fewer legal encumbrances on divorce are not “pro-divorce”; those who oppose censorship are not “pro-pornography.” Why do you insist that those who favour a woman’s right to choose (or not to choose) abortion are “pro-abortion”?

The pro-choice majority (no shudder quotes, please) have anti-abortionists in their ranks. Their view is that abortion is a problem, and that the solution to that problem lies in better, more available contraception, contraceptive information and sex education. Whether this non-coercive approach will in fact eliminate abortion may be open to question: but it hardly qualifies as a “pro-abortion” stance.

I agree with you about the use of “pro-life” to describe those anti-abortion forces who are also anti-choice. I’m pro-life. Also pro-choice.

*John Baglow*  
*Ottawa, Ontario*

***New Name for “Star Wars”***

We are a nation of acronymaniacs. A piece in this space pointing to the President’s unhappiness with the derisive nickname “Star Wars” and asking for suggestions of a ne

name for the global shield he intends to protect us from incoming missiles has elicited several hundred responses—not all signed “Best, Mirv.”

Many entries from opponents of the strategic defense system were uncalled-for personal attacks on the President. The “Governmental Inter-Planetary Program for Effective Response,” or Gipper, was the brainchild of Harold Emanuel of Morris Plains, New Jersey. Several irate citizens suggested “Ballistic Offense Neutralization Zone” or “Bulwark Order Negating Zealous Offensive” to come up with Bonzo, the name of a chimpanzee in an early Ronald Reagan movie. A subtler dig is Susan Rasky’s “Research Aimed at Yielding Greater Universal Nuclear Security,” Rayguns, which would quickly be remembered as “Ronald Rayguns.”

I refuse to send these along to the White House and have also censored the “Defensive Umbrella,” DUMB, as well as “Shield to Ultimately Provide International Defense,” Stupid “Wistful Attempts to Circumvent Killing Ourselves,” or Wacko. Such stridency stems from the old “Mutual Assured Destruction,” MAD, and triggered the ripostumous “Nuclear Universal Tactical Systems,” NUTS. It makes no sense to forward “Reagan’s Expensive Space Toys Involving Nuclear Proliferation and Evading Arms Control Enactments” (Rest in Peace) and “Fly Little Intergalactic Missiles for Love and Money” (Flimflam), which are overly long. “Western Intercontinental Missile Protection” (WIMP) is at least crisp. The derogation most frequently submitted is PITS, for “Pie In the Sky.”

Not all opponents of the plan chose acronymic abuse: to label it as a scandal, Christian Starpoli of Poughkeepsie puts forward “Heaven’s Gate,” which would probably be written “Heavensgate,” a celestial rip-off (and the most original *-gate* construction since the condemnation of an expense-account fraud as “Doublebillingsgate”). But most correspondents like Stuart Sheedy of Syosset, Long Island, stuck to words formed from initials: “Positive Interception of Far-Flung Lethal Engines,” Piffle, and “Incoming Missile Barrier Employing Concentrated Intense Laser Energy,” or Imbecile. The scandal angle can be covered with “Strategic Counter Against Missiles,” SCAM.

Other suggestions were flippant without being abusive. Combinations of letters using the undesired “Star Wars” will of course not be accepted, but that did not stop those who offered “Star Wars Aerial Technology,” SWAT, or “Star Wars Anti-Missile Program,” Sw or a colleague, whom I will identify only as Jonathan Frankel’s father, offers “Send the Arms Race Winging Around Rarefied Space,” and another writer likes “Stop the Arms Race, We Are Reasonably Sane,” both of which come out to Star Wars.

Timothy Perry of Syracuse, muttering “dee-fense,” suggests “Nuclear Intercept Capabilities Keeping Extraterrestrial Leverage,” explaining: “As any red-blooded football fan knows, the term ‘nickel defense’ was coined to describe the deployment of a fifth, or nickel, defensive back into the secondary to guard against the long pass, or ‘bomb.’ ”

Of the foreign-language acronyms, I liked “Allied Defense Initiative for Outer Space,” *Adios*, but the other Spanish entry, “Militarily Advanced Ceiling High Overhead,” *Mach* won’t fly.

All right, now, let’s get serious. The Administration needs a name, and its “Strategic Defense Initiative”—the S.D.I., or “Stradefi”—is a non-starter.

“Assured Independent Survival” is the suggestion of Lindsay Naythons of Hollywood, who cannot resist adding, “How about ACNE for ‘Arms Control Negotiations?’” His AI



pronounced “ace,” is countered by “Defense of Upper Space,” or DEUS, which might be pronounced “deuce,” from Albert Fener of Bellingham, Massachusetts. Nope.

Lots of entries on SANE. “Way back in 1983,” writes William Rusher, publisher of *National Review*, “I began trying to get General Dan Graham to promote the name Security Against Nuclear Extinction, with the acronym SANE. He passed the idea along to the White House, which apparently vetoed it because they feared confusion with the old Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy.... It didn’t take hold, so here I am, trying again.”

SANE, with its evident opposition to MAD, has also been used by proponents of “Strategic Anti-Nuclear Experimentation,” “Spacial Anti-Nuclear Effort,” “Shield Against Nuclear Encroachment” (a football fan offside there), and “Strategic Arms Neutralization Endeavor.” When Jim Guirard Jr. of Washington suggested his variant, “Shield Against Nuclear Extermination,” to Lieut. Gen. James Abrahamson, director of the Strategic Defense Initiative Organization at the Pentagon, the harassed general replied: “We endeavor to correct the misconception generated by the inappropriate name ‘Star Wars’ at almost every speaking engagement.... I see considerable merit in promoting Government use of an additional program description.”

Naturally, where there’s SANE, there’s SAFE: “Shield Against Fatal Encounter” and “Shield America From Everything.” Those strain too hard; Jorio Dauster of London prefers the plain “Defense in Space Against Russian Missiles,” Disarm, and Lansing Lamont of New York offers the simple “High Altitude Laser Targeting,” HALT. An acronym that is not already a word sent in by three people independently, is DANA: “Defense Against Nuclear Attack”; that’s one possibility.

HOPE springs eternal: from “Hostile Projectile Elimination” to “High Orbit Protection Echelon” to “Humanity Offers to Prevent Extinction.” DOME is a good image, but if I suggested words, “Defense Oriented Missile Employment” and “Defense of Mankind Everywhere,” are easily penetrable by criticism.

A word from the Greek that merits consideration is *aegis*, which was the name of the shield or breastplate, of Zeus and Athena. A half-dozen letters came in with this: Michael Wilson of Hoboken shapes it into “Atmospheric Engagement and Global Intelligence System” (adding “although I still like ‘Star Wars’ ”) and Dave Limebrook of Van Nuys, California, suggests “End Game Intercept System” or “American Earth Guard in Space,” also adding, “Frankly, I think ‘Star Wars’ says it all.”

The word *aegis* means “protection,” with a more modern meaning of “auspices” or “sponsorship”; maybe it needs no backup phraseology at all. Who says our space defense must have an acronym?

Maybe just a name is needed, like “Sam.” (No, that’s an acronym for “surface-to-air missile.”) Or a simple image: *shell* is out because it could be twisted into *shell game*, or *carapace*—the outer shell of a turtle, metaphorically projected to a hard covering for anything—calls for too much explanation.

There is one word that people keep coming back to: *shield*. Do we really need to fit it or mangle it with words to make it an acronym? If we have Stealth technology, why not Shield technology? I push “global shield” (already the name of an annual exercise of the Strategic Air Command) while the President tentatively mentions “security shield” (which Paul Lambert of New York thinks is “secshi”)—but could it be that the name is staring at us

needing no adjective or artificial devices?

The White House ought to take a hard look at Earth's sweet-flowing breastplate. If we are to pay for protection in space, we might as well buy the word that describes the first military defense against the sword: the shield.

I intend to place all the letters received on this subject into a large wastepaper basket and carry it over to the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. These letters represent the Voice of the People, at least the phrase-coining people, and as the old doggerel goes, "You tell 'em *populi*, you got the *vox*."

"Star Wars" is going to be as hard for Mr. Reagan to shake as "West Bank" was for Mr. Begin. But if he wants to try, my shield file is all his. The deadline for entries is past; send additional suggestions to the White House direct. The motto of my office is "Everybody No Undo Followups," ENUF!

May I suggest the following: "Space-based Anti-missile Defense," or SAD.

*Victor Wouk*  
*New York, New York*

Global Shield? Why, that's Glosh—a blend-word of golly and gosh. I say bosh! (I'm sure you realize it's an acronym for Ballistic & Orbital Systems Hegemony.)

*Stephen Patterson*  
*La Jolla, California*

## ***All Engines Full Retronym***

**A** retronym is a noun fitted with an adjective that it never used to need but now cannot do without. It is a throwback-compound, the new adjective substituting for an adjective that formerly brought the noun up to date.

For example, a *watch* used to be a *watch*. It had hands that went around its face. Then along came the *digital watch*, with numbers displayed; when that became the way most watches were, an adjective had to be affixed to the old watches with hands: hence, *analog watch*, the retronym. Similarly, when *baseball* largely became *night baseball*, the retronym was *day baseball*; when a *guitar* was replaced by an *electric guitar*, the old originals became known as *acoustic guitars*. This linguistic concept, and its name, was conceived and coined by Frank Mankiewicz, and is of greater significance to language students than his father's "Rosebud."

A recent retronym shows what sex has done to us. Daniel Schorr, just chosen in *On Cable* magazine's survey of cableniks as "favorite news personality of the year" (*cable television* has not yet spawned the retronym *broadcast television*), was perusing the classified ads in *The Washington Weekly*. What caused the CNN correspondent to turn to this reading matter I do not know and am not asking. He sent me the page that is headed "Massage," with its subheader "Advertisements in this section are for therapeutic massage only."

"Since the word *massage* has taken on the connotation of a sexual act," writes Mr. Schorr, "it now becomes necessary to speak of a *therapeutic massage* to mean what plain old *massage* used to mean." This is a special classification of retronym, in which the adjective replaces a

unwritten but newly understood adjective. That is what you hear when a Times Square sharpie hails you with “Check it out” and hands you a flier for what he calls a (heh-heh) “massage.”

From Georgetown, Massachusetts, comes this topper from John Riordan, enclosing an advertisement from *Retail Technology* magazine. The Pitney Bowes Company offers this label printer: “Monarch’s new Pathfinder portable (cordless), electronically controlled label printer produces UPC or EAN bar codes and/or human-readable information.”

Presumably, this retronym began with the old *readable*, which has been modified for the last few years with the mind-boggling *machine-readable* or *computer-readable*. All your supermarket items have markings that are *machine-readable* and make the cash register at the checkout counter go “Beep!” if the checkout clerk bangs an item down on the counter hard enough or runs it back and forth a few times over some cyclopic beam shooting up through the floor—before cursing and asking the manager how much he’s charging that week for a can of corn.

“*Human-readable* takes the retronym thing a bit too far,” says Mr. Riordan. “Unless, that is, the copy was written by an ad-agency robot.”

Re: retronyms and “cable television has not yet spawned the retronym *broadcast television*.”

Oh, yes, it has. Just see page 2 of “The Guide” section in *The Times* every Sunday. It’s been there for quite a while.

I can only conclude that you don’t have time for much television. Or you don’t read *The Times*.

*Marcia C. Spires*

*New York, New York*

“Natural Language” is used by a branch of artificial intelligence to refer to that which you and I write and speak. I first encountered the term while on sabbatical at the Naval Research Lab several years ago and was quite baffled when I first heard it.

*Michael Gaynor*

*Professor of Psychology*

*Bloomsburg University*

*Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania*

I particularly enjoyed your article on “retronyms,” as I had been searching for the word ever since “ice hockey” came to Southern California!

*Janet P. Brown*

*Temple City, California*

The digital watch, whose days may be numbered, makes me wonder if the day of the newspaper photo-caption direction *clockwise* may be numbered as well. Too, a new word is needed to describe the act of “dialing” a push-button telephone. “Punching” or “index-fingering” or even “digiting” doesn’t seem appropriate.

A couple of “phony” words need to be coined.

*Jerome Agel*

*New York, New York*

I would like to retrofit an addendum on your lucid and engaging piece on retronyms. The first portable chronometers fit into small pockets. They were simply called *watches* (a noun formed from the verb *to watch*). The watch worn strapped to the wrist came many years later, so it was necessary to dub it a *wrist watch*, to distinguish it

from its more old-fashioned precursor. As wrist watches became more common, the term *pocket watch* was devised to distinguish it from the newer style of timepiece. So the process of retronymic specification started even before the age of digital watches.

*Phil Nicolaidis*  
*Springfield, Virginia*

When I glanced at the theater listings in last week's *L.A. Times*, I could not help but think of your recent article on retrofitting words. I call your attention to Pacific Theatre's need to distinguish their indoor theaters by the epithet "Walk-in Theatres." This distresses me, as it has always seemed obvious that it would be hard to get an automobile through the doors of most of our local cinemas. Too much sun, I suppose, blinds the population to this truth.

*Christine M. Rose*  
*Visiting Lecturer in English and History*  
*University of California*  
*Santa Barbara, California*

Retronyms, from my classes in non-fiction writing:

reel-to-reel tape recorder  
non-filter cigarette  
flat iron  
manual transmission  
horse-drawn carriage  
steam locomotive  
hardcover book  
copper penny  
tin foil  
tin can  
straight razor  
silent movie  
one-speed bicycle  
legitimate theater

And my own contribution to the list:  
conventional war.

*Tom Miller*  
*Visiting Lecturer*  
*University of Arizona*  
*Tucson, Arizona*

The University of California at Berkeley's computing services newsletter contains what I think is a previously unchronicled retronym, "paper mail." This is a true retronym, like "analog watch" or "acoustic guitar," arising from the fact that the program by which one sends messages to another "user" on a computer network is usually called "mail" and is "invoked" with the command, "mail." (What a lot of jargon we seem to have here!) In a computer environment (everywhere?) the unmarked term is thus taken to be the electronic version of mail and a new marker is prepended to indicate non-electronic (i.e. "paper") mail. Paper mail presumably includes any non-electronic delivery of text, and thus telegrams, mailgrams and the like, though transmitted electronically at one stage, would count as paper mail rather than mail.

*Daniel F. Melia*  
*Associate Professor, Rhetoric*  
*Associate Dean, Graduate Division*

Perhaps thought should be given to the reverse construction—dropping modifiers and thereby narrowing the meaning of formerly broad-gauge words.

For example, you write for the “media,” which are no longer distinguished as mass communications media. What has happened to media of exchange, media of transportation, media of expression?

Purists lament this pre-emption of the term, and also the fact that the word is used only in the plural. The *Podunk Gazette* is “the media,” not a medium.

Sometimes it is the noun that is improperly dropped, not the adjective. Thus when transistor radios were introduced they quickly and improperly were called “transistors.”

Some modifiers are dropped, Victorian-style, to euphemize female bodily functions: a woman’s period does not refer to her period of meditation, period of activity, etc. A woman’s “change” is not a change of community, husband or lifestyle.

Sex begets other truncated modifiers. Intercourse not further defined now has only one meaning. What happened to social intercourse? Intercourse’s awkward synonym “to have sex” no longer is used to identify plants and animals with separate genders.

The latest example I’ve encountered is the program to stamp “Explicit” on labels of audio tapes with dirty lyrics. Explicit now means only sexually explicit.

You are waging a magnificent and no doubt losing battle to protect our language. Keep fighting.

Warren R. Dix

Athens, Greece

A toast to you for your article on retronyms. Bartender, a gin martini straight-up, please.

Ed Quinn

Pinole, California

## ***Arcane Brown Bag***

People who carry bottles of wine into restaurants that do not have liquor licenses are known as *brown-baggers*. When the New York State Liquor Authority decided to crack down on this widespread and not-all-that-nefarious practice, the teetotaling legislation introduced in the State Legislature was promptly dubbed “the anti-brown-bag law.”

Mayor Koch sided with the hordes of brown-baggers, where both the winos and the voters are. He denounced the state ban in these adjectives: “It’s archaic, it’s arcane, it’s stupid.”

Most of us know that *archaic* means “antiquated, no longer used” and that nobody who reads this column is *stupid*, but the meaning of *arcane* is often hidden. Elizabeth S. Stone of Rancho Palos Verdes, California, where the local wine is readily available in restaurants, circled the Mayor’s use of *arcane* and demanded an explanation.

I forwarded her complaint to Mr. Koch and received this reply: “My reference to that ‘anti-brown-bag law’ as *archaic*, *arcane* and *stupid* was intended to convey that the law was outmoded, obscure and mysterious in its origin and without question idiotic. I still brown-bag it!”

This example of civil disobedience is worthy of Henry David Thoreau, and we all look forward to that picture of the Mayor brandishing a brown bag behind bars, his acceptance of incarceration giving meaning to his beliefs, but the Koch definition of *arcane* deserves close scrutiny.

Hizzoner uses *archaic* to mean “outmoded,” which is correct, and finds *stupid* synonymous with “idiotic,” which is only slightly excessive, and defines *arcane* as “obscure and mysterious in its origin.”

He’s not wrong about *arcane*—some dictionaries will agree with him—but he’s not quite right. *Arcane* means “hidden, concealed, secret,” which can be stretched to “mysterious and obscure.” The origin is in the Latin *arcanum*, something hidden, as stuck deep into a chest or an ark; the philosophers’ stone was an *arcanum*, the secret by which base metals could be turned into gold.

But precise, he’s not: *arcane* means “secret,” and to use it to mean “hard to fathom” is a few degrees off. The Koch usage, I think, had more to do with rhyme than reason: *archaic* and *arcane* has a lilt to it, and I am the last to become a nattering nabob of negativism about alliteration or assonance.

Now to *brown-bagging*. One meaning, taken from the noun form spotted by Merriam-Webster in 1950, is “one who carries his lunch to work in a brown bag,” thereby exhibiting frugality toward both money and time. The citation is from a piece on campus slang in *Time* magazine: “The deskbound undergraduate has been variously damned as a *swot*, a *brown-bagger*, or a *mug*.” (We used to say *grind*; current campus slang for the genuinely studious is *work*, or “know” spelled backward.)

Those hard-working, studious *brown-baggers* soon turned the noun into the verb *to brown-bag*, and it has now become bargain-hunter chic: Bloomingdale’s year-round shopping bags are imprinted with “Big Brown Bag,” and a weekly staff luncheon at *The New York Times* Washington bureau presided over by the bureau chief, Bill Kovach (big sport), is called “the brown-bag lunch.” In the metaphor of the modern worker, the brown bag has replaced the lunch pail.

Meanwhile, the same phrase has spawned a distinctly different meaning, which is curious in slang, in which the dominant meaning of a phrase usually wins out early.

“*Brown-bagging* is the genteel disguise,” wrote Harry Golden in *The Saturday Review* in 1967, “adopted by a patron to furnish his own liquor when he dines at the local restaurant. That second meaning— “mock concealment of a bottle to satisfy the provisions of a liquor law”—is expressed in “New York’s anti-brown-bag law.”

The laborious exegesis of “brown-bagging” is disappointingly, uncharacteristically out of touch with life as she is lived. Simply put: (1) a brown bag is what a bottle *comes* in when one stops off at a liquor store on the way to a license-less restaurant (a rare vintage from one’s own cellar schlepped in a bag, though if Abercrombie were still on Madison you might be able to order up a smart little leather case for the purpose labeled, say, Le Porte-vin); (2) Harry Golden’s rather euphuistic “genteel disguise” is, moreover, naïve and unintentionally ironic given the circumstances of brown-bagging’s *usual* provenance—the Bowery bum’s way of hiding his pint of cheap muscatel, in a doorway or on a curb, from the eyes of the law. “Genteel” my, er, foot.

Oskar Anderson

East Quogue, New York

More than thirty years ago when I was a student at MIT, excessively studious students were called brown-baggers because they always carried their books with them, often in a shapeless brown bag which actually was sold at Harvard, our Charles River rivals. They also carried slide rules, which were a quaint precursor of the computer. When the MIT bookstore began selling a book bag it was identical to the Harvard one except it was green. So the grinds became green-brown-baggers.

I've recently gone back to school, at laid-back University of California at Santa Cruz. We carry our books in stylish backpacks, which make the entire student body look like an overage Boy Scout troop.

*Charles B. Johnson*

*Santa Cruz, California*

You originate *arcane* from the Latin *arcanum*. I'm not familiar with a Latin *arcanum*. *Arcana*, yes, as in: *arcana imperii* or *arcana caelestia*. I thought *arcanum* was more a modern form of *arcana*, already some 2,000 years strong before *arcanum* entered the language. However, be that as it may, you write: "The origin [of *arcane*] is in the Latin *arcanum*." I thought it was in the Latin *arcanus*.

*Bob Brody*

*Los Angeles, California*



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The Kremlin may be expert at encrypting missile telemetry, but it is helpless to decipher the latest American college slang. Our own Defense Intelligence Agency, monitoring a calls home for money, is wondering if some pernicious wax has clogged up its all-hearing “Big Ear.” Post-teen lingo is changing too fast for this generation of computers, and the harried snoops cannot hack it.

I have broken the code. Thanks to submissions to the Nonce Word Institute from moles on a dozen college campuses, some of the communications between yesterday’s *wimps* and today’s *squids* can now be analyzed. A new generation’s attempt to keep its data from prying older eyes is thus thwarted.

Consider the locution that has stumped code breakers from Langley to Dzerzhinsky Square: “*The rents will pay for the shwench’s za.*”

The key, or *pony*, supplied to the N.W.I. by Jon Pelson of Dartmouth College, is the elimination of first syllables in post-teen speech, which I refer to as *'guage*. As we learned last year, *'rents* are “parents,” with only the vestigial last syllable pronounced. This technique is used on verbal phrases as well as single words, as in the clipping of *parental units* to *units*. (To further clip this phrase to *'nits* would be the work of a louse.)

Let us use the same key to unlock the meaning of *'za*. What is the food most consumed by college students that ends with the syllable *'za*? Pizza, of course, with the *'za* pronounced “tsuh,” somewhat similar to the first sound in “Dzerzhinsky,” though bereft of its chickadee fricative.

Now we come to *'shwench*, its encryption infinitely more sophisticated. Obviously it is the last syllable of some college word, but there is no English word ending in *shwench*. A quick runthrough of all other languages led nowhere, though Serbo-Croatian looked promising for a time. But try a different tack: Let us assume that *wench* is a current sexist way of making masculine or neuter noun apply to women. We can hypothesize that *'shwench* is a feminine form of *'shmen*. From this breakthrough, we can then ask: What word used frequently by sophomores has *'shmen* as its last syllable?

Nothing to it: “Freshmen” is that word. (*Frosh* has long departed the campus scene, and is used now infrequently as a verb melding *fress* and *nosh*, meaning “to nibble or graze on junk food,” the collegiate form of sustenance.) We may conclude, then, that the feminine form of the noun *'shmen* is *'shwench*, and that the sentence “*The rents will pay for the shwench’s za*” decodes as, “My mother and father will underwrite the cost of providing this Italian pie for this first-year woman student.”

I should acknowledge that the men at D.I.A. were close to this breakthrough, the



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