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Words for describing Australian Aboriginal Song

Dr Michael Walsh has recently retired from the Linguistics Department at Sydney University. A longer version of this paper was presented at the Australex Conference, 25 September 2007, University of Adelaide.

Whether you are a profess-ional musician, a music critic or "just" a layperson you will have developed a vocabulary for describing and evaluating songs. Songs can be portrayed in terms of emotion (a real tearjerker), of nostalgia (reminds me of Italy), of memories (our song) or of quality (insipid, powerful, sublime, worthless). But how does one evaluate and describe songs in an Australian Aboriginal language? This question has particular personal resonance as I have been engaged in a collaborative research project with a team of linguists and musicologists for some years now. While this project seeks to document the song traditions of one particular group: the Murriny Patha of northwest Australia (http://azoulay.arts.usyd.edu.au/mpsong/), it has made me wonder what lexical resources are deployed in other languages in this arena.

For the Murriny Patha, *kangunu* signals "tune of song" and "aroma" while *lurritj* is "loud (of words, music)" but can also mean "strong, powerful". So there is a strong association between words to describe song and the body.

This kind of association can be found in many other Aboriginal languages. The Bininj Gun-wok of the Northern Territory, for example, have a root, *kodj*, for "head" which also refers to "pitch melody" and "rhythmic mode of song". The same root appears in a number of other expressions: *kakodjwarre* (its *kodj* is bad) or *manmanjyak* (it has no taste) are used when the pitch of the didgeridoo doesn't match that of the singer; *kakodjmanjmakmen* (its *kodj* has a good taste) are used when the melody is right, lining up with the didgeridoo; *ngakodjborledke* "I bend the music, the melody" e.g. by adding an arabesque or other form of melodic ornamentation.

These music-body polysemies are also encountered among the Yolngu of north east Arnhem land: *yutunggur* "thigh" = song verse; *dhambu* "head" = melody. For the Pintupi (central Australia) we have such terms for "melody" as *mayu* "scent" and *yatjila/yankuntjirra* "taste". And for Kukatja (Western Australia) we encounter *ngurru putarri* "beautiful melody" (Moyle, *Balgo Music* 1997: 29). For the last mentioned it turns out that *ngurru* is "taste" and *putarri*'s primary meaning is "having much fat". For the Kukatja as well as other Aboriginal groups the stomach is the seat of the emotions, so the good feelings associated with the song are appropriately related to the good feelings derived from the taste of meat with much fat. For the Ngarinjin (Kimberleys, WA) the performance of a "good tune" is

IN THIS ISSUE

SCOSE Notes 3

Australex 2007 4

When did you last spend a penny? 5

Book Notes 6
Writing at Work
Elements of Style

From the Editor 8

Letters to the Editor 9

Feedback 30 10

Feedback Report 11

Rubicon 12

Continued from page 1

rendered by *marrarri buma* "you sorrow". This points directly to the strong feeling that pervades the interaction of living people and the spirits of their deceased relatives; both taste and sorrow are associated with fat in this language.

In the same language we find terms for melodic contour that are not unlike English in that we too can say "his voice went down": *yarrij* "to go down" = descending pitch; *burai* "lift, raise, lever" = "rise in pitch, both at the commencement of a new descent and within a descent". To describe voice range Ngarinjin has the 3 *langgan* "throats" or registers: *arrangun* "top"; *balaga* "middle"; *alya/alye* "bottom"; "big throat" for a singer able to perform in all 3 ranges. And it is intriguing to see meanings for some of these terms in non-musical contexts: *balaga* "50-50; equal share"; *alya/alye* "underneath, below". For Murriny Patha the speed of the song can be described in terms of clapsticks: *mirn'ga pandharryit* "cautious clapsticks"; *mirn'ga pirtpirt* "fast clapsticks"; *mirn'ga purrkpurrk* "dancing clapsticks"; *mirn'ga tjimardamarda* "waiting clapsticks".

Another area of interest is the range of meanings associated with the verb "to sing". In Yir Yoront (northern Queensland) the single verb root, *wung*, has this range of senses: 1. carry, take (to a place), 2. sing (a song), 3. drove (animals), 4. bring/take (people) to a place, 5. manage, supervise, carry on, be the boss for, 6. wear [e.g. of shoes]. In Murriny Patha, the verb root, *rel*, can be used for "sing" (Aboriginal song) as in *ngirelnu* "I'll sing (a song)" but also appears as "chant a curse (sorcery)" as in *ngirranyirelnu* "I'll chant a curse on you". This is a reflection of the English usage: to "sing" a person.

Although it is a little saddening I would like to conclude with some observations on the probable longevity of some of this specialized vocabulary. When I began fieldwork on Murriny Patha in 1972 the song traditions were still quite strong. At Port Keats (later, Wadeye) there were groups of Aboriginal people singing around campfires nearly every night. This was before TV was available and, as many houses were without electricity, other forms of evening entertainment like gramophones or radio were quite rare. When I returned to the community after an absence of about a dozen years in 1986 almost all houses had electric power, most houses had TV and/or radio and traditional singing had virtually ceased. Similar stories can be told for many of the other communities I have mentioned. However this specialized vocabulary of Aboriginal song perhaps differs from its counterpart in English and other western European languages where it is often separate from the idiom of the wider population. It may be that the vocabulary of Aboriginal song will continue even as the song traditions languish. Because the vocabulary is more integrated into everyday language it may end up being adapted to the range of new musical forms evolving in Aboriginal communities. □

Note

I am grateful to Linda Barwick for supplying some details about speeds in Murriny Patha. Relevant references can be found at http://www.arts.usyd.edu.au/departs/linguistics/staff/mwalsh.shtml

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SCOSE NOTES

Language researcher Irene Poinkin summarises recent discussions at SCOSE, the ABC Standing Committee on Spoken English.

The perils of using a catchphrase without knowing the meaning of the words! Or using the wrong word in such a phrase. Or misspelling one of the words. We had some memorable examples.

ABC listeners were surprised when a broadcaster said it was time to *button down the hatches*. Nowadays few people other than sailors know what a *batten* is, or how it is used to tuck in the edges of a canvas cover over an open hatch on board a ship in bad weather (think of tucking in a bedsheet and you'll get the idea).

Another example is *hoist with/by one's own petard*, which was misquoted as *"hung" by his own petard*. If you use the phrase (it comes from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*) you may as well know what it means. You might imagine that a petard could be some kind of winching device, or perhaps a pikestaff with a hook on it that lifts you by the scruff of your neck. But no.

A petard is an ancient bell-shaped weapon made of iron which was filled with gunpowder and pushed against targets such as gates or walls in order to blow them up. If not properly handled, the petard could explode prematurely and kill the person who set it up. To be hoisted, or lifted, by a petard means to be blown sky-high. So a petard is not something you can get "hung" by.

ABC staff responded with a flurry of gleeful emails when they read an internal newsletter that said a journalist had shown her *"metal"* in an interview with a prominent politician. *Mettle* was the right word in the context. It is a variant of *metal* but used only in an abstract sense to mean resilience or the ability to cope well with difficulties.

ABC broadcasters were urged to be careful about using *Inuit* as a generic substitute for *Eskimo*, because it applies to only one of several native groups living in Alaska, Greenland, northern Canada and north-eastern Siberia. *Inuit* works for just one of the four Eskimo groups in Alaska, says Pam Peters, who researched this topic for her *Cambridge Guide to English Usage* (2004). She confirms that *Eskimo* is still the only term for the larger community there. In an email to the ABC, an Eskimo now living in Sydney shed further light on this issue:

"I was born in Nome and my family is from Unalakleet. Whenever someone in Australia finds out I'm from Alaska, they ask if I am Inuit. The Inuit are native people of present-day Canada and Greenland. From what I understand, in Australia and the UK the word 'Eskimo' is considered somewhat derogatory and 'Inuit' has come to replace it. Regardless, it is how Eskimos are always referred to … The native people in Alaska that are referred to as Inuit would actually be the Inpiat or the Yupik. They are the two broadest groups in Alaska incorrectly referred to as the Inuit. There are also many other native groups in Alaska that are more closely related to Native Americans, the most famous being the Tlingit.

Native Alaskans identify as 'Native Alaskan' but since most are in Alaska, we just say 'Native', without any negative connotations. Even 'Eskimo' does not carry negative connotations in US English. It is rarer in the US to hear Eskimos or Native Alaskans referred to as Inuit. I prefer being called Eskimo to Inuit because I feel compelled to say that I am not Inuit, I am Inpiat. They are distinct, and the languages are not the same."

Some reports predicting that Australia or New Zealand would "exceed" Kyoto emissions targets were considered misleading or ambiguous because they didn't make it clear that the goal was to *reduce*, not increase, emissions. For example:

"Australia will exceed its Kyoto greenhouse gas emissions targets within three years, according to..."

In fact, we're doing worse, not better than expected, but "exceed" (the target) suggests a better outcome. The clearest phrasing in such cases is (*will or will not) meet* (its goal or target *of doing*...). It's important to be explicit about the goal.

People tend to notice and object to particular errors of pronunciation and usage but seldom mention syntactic issues. A problem sentence in News Online escaped the notice of subeditors and readers alike:

"Dr Todd Fraser says while unconventional, the patient was given three standard drinks every hour for three days."

The statement reads as if it is about an unconventional patient, not, as intended, an unconventional treatment. Clearer would have been:

"Dr Todd Fraser says that, in an unconventional treatment, the patient was given..."

Trying to say too much in a single sentence can certainly land you in trouble:

"Police discovered the pictures of the artist's daughter Maya and his second wife Jacqueline, valued at 80 million dollars, in Paris."

Are Maya and Jacqueline valued at 80 million dollars separately, or together? This is a case where two sentences should have been used: one to report what paintings were discovered, by whom, and where, and another to report their total value. □

Specialist vocabulary and dictionaries AustraLex 2007

Yasmin Funk, of the Dictionary Research Centre, Macquarie University, reports on Australex 2007, held on 25 September at the University of Adelaide.

Australex 2007 took place at Adelaide University on September 25th in conjunction with the Australian Linguistics Society and Indigenous Languages Conferences as part of LINGAD 2007. Presenters came from near and far, as did their topics – from Kaurna place names of the Adelaide area to Arabic place names in Zionist Israel – and dealt both with broader macro-view issues in lexicography and with the detail of specific dictionaries.

The day was kicked off by Adam Smith (Macquarie University) on computer corpora and terminography in light of the TermFinder project. In his keynote address he examined the complementary use of computational and discretionary techniques in the selection of headwords for the development of a learner-centred online dictionary tool. Benefits and challenges associated with automatic analysis of corpora of both general language and specialised sublanguages (through comparative frequency data) were presented, and the variability of terminology between disciplines, specialised meanings of everyday words and the difficulty polysemy presents for automatic analysis were discussed. The resultant need for cooperation between lexicographers/linguists and disciplinary specialists to complement the automatic analysis was emphasised. Gilles-Maurice de Schryver (Ghent University and University of Western Cape) gave an introduction to TschwaneDJe Human Language Technology professional lexicographical software such as TshwaneLex. The TshwaneLex Ruler Tool allows the lexicographer to treat terms by semantic or lexical set as well as in alphabetical or frequency order and automates many aspects of data-entry. It enforces cross-reference integrity and continually provides statistical measurements of the database such as the relative distribution of terms across word-classes and the alphabet.

Complementing the discussion on technical details of lexicography were several papers treating dictionaries on technical subjects. Juliane Klein (University of Leipzig) illustrated the unequal status of South Africa's 11 national languages through the availability and standardisation of technical vocabularies. The importance of this work was highlighted in relation to doctor-patient communication and the legal system. A corpus-based approach, to reflect the speech community, was recommended. Lan Li (Hong Kong Polytechnic University) discussed Corpora and the Internet as resources for new financial terms in globalisation's "neological boom". Lexical changes in English and Chinese were exemplified by the financial sector and a combined internet/corpus approach was suggested to assess the longevity of current buzz-words and their implications for lexicographers. Maria Khristina Manueli (University of Malaya) investigated features of Malay and Tagalog dictionaries, addressing issues of difference and similarity in methodological and theoretical approaches to the making of dictionaries in both languages, and noting the importance of identifying both a dictionary's intended audience and its informants and sponsors. Jirapa Vitayapirak (King Mongkut's Institute of Technology Ladkrabang) analysed the needs of Thai ESP learners in the creation of bilingualized technical dictionaries. An investigation into the actual use of Learners' dictionaries by Thai engineering students and lecturers revealed a strong preference for bilingualization of the technical material of an ESP dictionary.

More playful aspects of language were the subjects of papers by Paul Sutton and Julia Miller of Flinders University. Sutton explored both the changing nature of wordplay between the Renaissance and the 18th century, and role of the OED in defining a lexicon with which to discuss punning. Miller spoke about the sense of cultural belonging given by idioms, their importance in the language-learning process, and their absence from English Learners' Dictionaries [see p.5].

In the afternoon we were joined by a larger contingent of delegates form the ILC for several papers related to Australian Aboriginal languages. Michael Walsh (University of Sydney) gave an introduction to the lexicon of Australian Aboriginal song (see lead article), while Rob Amery (University of Adelaide) and Vincent Kanya Buckskin (Kaurna Warra Pinyandi) explored some of the issues arising from the development of the Kaurna Place Names Database, one aspect of the Kaurna people's reclamation of identity through language. Having never been transcribed using any standardised orthography, Kaurna place names often have several variations and a series of intuitive spellings that do not always conform to the sound patterns of the language. A set of principles has now been developed to assist in codifying Kaurna names, with linguistic expertise complementing Kaurna knowledge. The day concluded – and the placenames went further afield – with Ghil'ad Zuckermann (University of Queensland) giving an insight into the Hebraization of Arabic toponyms in Zionist Israel. Analysing the 537 suggestions made by the Geographic Names Committee for the Hebraization of Arabic Toponyms in the Negev in 1950, a taxonomic exploration was made into the link between names and identity.

Next year AUSTRALEX itself moves further afield, with the conference set to take place in Wellington over two days in November as part of a larger Linguistics program. □

When did you last spend a penny?

When I first began research into English idioms in Australia and the UK, I naturally assumed there would be some overlap and some differences in use, given the extent of shared language and culture. I also assumed that the overlap would be between people in the same country and the differences between people in different countries. While I still think this is true to a certain extent, I'm beginning to realise that the differences might be more generational than regional.

A quick round of questions from an Oxford University Press dictionary workbook to friends and relations from either British or Australian backgrounds indicated that while some "older" people (aged 25 and above) recognised and produced expressions such as *pull your socks up*, this expression was unknown to the younger ones (aged 16 to 24). Is that because they don't wear knee length socks any more, or because their elastic is so sound that they don't need garters? "Don't need *what*?" they might ask. Does that mean that the expression *have your guts for garters* is now restricted generationally as well as regionally?

I am not suggesting that younger people do not use idioms. Many do. Some of these may have been learned from parents; others may have been coined more recently; and many may be from television shows. As yet, I do not know of a large corpus of speech by Australians in the 16 – 24 age group which would give me an indication of the kinds of expressions they use. However, I keep my ears open on the bus, and on the campus where I teach, and am surprised to hear utterances such as *I wouldn't touch it with a ten foot pole*, with its reference to a superseded measurement system replacing what it is, for me, another outmoded and regional phrase – the *barge pole*. While a mature age nursing student from Papua New Guinea told me unblinkingly, "I'll just go and empty my bladder", I haven't heard of many younger people *spending a penny*. Perhaps inflation has made it no longer convenient?

Another surprise has been in the use of expressions which I had assumed were Australian in origin, such as *up a gum tree*. Several Australian friends did not know this idiom, and some people who did know it, both English and Australian, felt constrained to add another phrase, such as *without a paddle* – useful for warding off bellicose koalas? Analogy from one idiom to another is obviously powerful.

My research now revolves around a questionnaire based on a collection of 100 idioms found in six major dictionaries for advanced learners of English. These dictionaries (apart from the now out of print *Macquarie learner's dictionary*) are published in the UK, and tend to reflect British usage. Given that many learners of English are studying in other countries, such as Australia, how useful will they find such expressions? While they may come across more common idioms such as *turn the other cheek* and *cry wolf* in their reading or viewing, it's no use trotting out *jam tomorrow* and *grasp the nettle* to their mates in Australia, if these contemporaries are equally unaware of the meanings and wouldn't touch such expressions with a stobie pole.

Idioms reflect the culture of the people who use them, and age is an important factor in culture. By distributing questionnaires to Australian and UK school and adult education students, I hope to elicit as wide a picture as possible of idiom usage by different age groups in Australia and the UK. This information could be used to update the content of learners' and other dictionaries.

If you would like to be involved in my survey, either as a participant or as a distributor of questionnaires, please don't bury your light under a bushel. I would love to hear from you before my research runs out of steam. □

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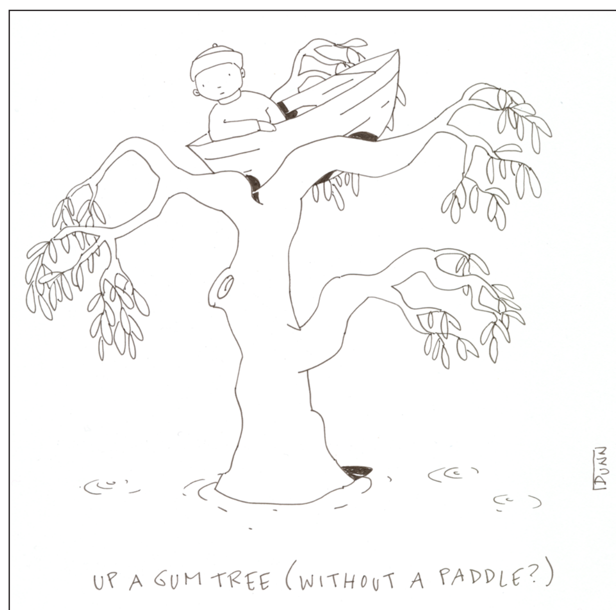
Julia Miller is doing a PhD on pedagogical lexicography at Flinders University, Adelaide. This is a short version of a paper she gave at Australex 2007.



Book Notes

Writing at work

Dr Alan Jones is a senior lecturer in the Department of Linguistics at Macquarie University. He reviews Neil James's Writing at Work: how to write clearly, effectively and professionally*, Allen and Unwin 2007, RRP $35.00.*

There is no doubt that *Writing at Work* will be a boon for many who struggle with the writing needs of the modern workplace. Written by Dr Neil James, Executive Director of the Plain English Foundation in Australia, the book builds on methods used by this organisation to train both professional writers and professionals who write in key strategies of effective authorship. It aims to empower the reader to do four things: a) to take account of specific variables (like readership and content) so as to be able to plan texts effectively, b) to structure texts clearly, coherently and persuasively, c) to express ideas in a style that is professional, clear and efficacious, and d) to review documents thoroughly before disseminating them. The methods have been developed and tested extensively in writing workshops, with thousands of professionals signalling their appetite for and appreciation of the "tools" (and the "power tools") that James provides here. They are designed to enable writers to produce more effective submissions, proposals, applications, reports, letters, memos and indeed emails. James does this not by dealing with these specific genres but by giving the reader generally applicable strategies.

Topics like grammar and punctuation, which cause so much head-scratching, are treated in exactly as much depth and with exactly as much reverence as they deserve. Both take on meaning and relevance in the context of real documents and needs. James uses examples from real life (like a letter from the bank) to show how his principles of effective writing make sense when applied to actual genres and real documents. While the book simplifies many aspects of the writing process in its aim to provide practical help to writers ("whatever your level of skill or seniority"), it also frequently acknowledges the need to balance some of the very general guidelines provided against an awareness of variable needs and specific contexts. James sometimes hints at complexities beyond the rules-of-thumb that will be so helpful to many. For instance, a (predictable) denouncement of the passive voice is followed by a partial retraction calling for judgment and balance (pp. 234-5). Meanwhile a blanket critique of "hidden verbs" (also known as "nominalizations") is left unqualified – a very impractical recommendation for disciplinary specialists, science communicators or technical writers, to name a few groups who might reasonably resist this piece of advice.

The book has four main parts: *Planning*, *Structure*, *Expression* and *Review*. Each part contains 3-6 sections. The first part, *Planning*, has sections devoted to Readers, Content and Structure. The second part, *Structure*, has chapters dealing with Focus, Persuasion, Coherence, and Design. The third part, *Expression*, has six chapters: Tone, Grammar, Words, Clutter, Verbs and Sentences. The fourth part, *Review*, deals with: Punctuation, Style, Editing and Proofing. Each chapter is divided into "The Toolbox," "The Living Language," and "Power Tools" (a section containing proven strategies to help readers put new knowledge and skills swiftly into practice). James notes that the structure of the book "mimics the writing process itself," and the fact that he deals with writing as a process gives the book great credibility in the eyes of literacy experts and educators.

Effectiveness is the watchword in James's philosophy of plain writing. The six criteria that James uses to define effective writing are precision, clarity, readability, efficiency, usability and persuasiveness. He notes that these represent challenges as well as goals (p. 3) and that there is some potential for conflict between them (e.g. between precision and clarity). The most inclusive goal is effectiveness – achieving the desired outcome. James has evolved his guidelines to be of optimal use for a contemporary audience - writers for whom communication mediates action and readers that want to cut to the chase and make fast decisions based on clear input. This means that the informative and persuasive functions of language are foregrounded. Those who see writing as a reflective or creative enterprise, or a medium for the negotiation of meaning, or for the exploration of conceptual knowledge, may need to look elsewhere for guidance, but for the targeted audience this book will be a godsend. The book reminds me of Dianne Booher's *E-Writing* (2001), which in a very similar way takes a fresh look at the requirements of professional literacy in the fast-moving technologically-boosted century we have just moved into, and develops new strategies and structural innovations to facilitate emerging communicative modes and genres.

There is a useful section on "Further reading" and nearly twenty pages of end notes (chapter by chapter) with information about sources. James has achieved a remarkably casual, empathetic and persuasive tone. This will encourage his targeted readers to adopt his guidance eagerly, and their writing will improve dramatically because of it. □

Elements of Style

Just in time for Christmas comes an illustrated (4th) edi tion of Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*. This is the compact style guide used by generations of Americans since its first appearance in 1919. It was self-published by William Strunk Jnr (Cornell University professor of English), with a small circulation until Strunk's student EB White (author of the children's classic *Charlotte's Web*), took on the republication of the book as coauthor. This was published by Macmillan in 1959, and a second edition in 1972. The third edition (1979),and the fourth (2000) appears under the Allyn and Bacon imprint. The fourth edition provides the text for this new illustrated version, with a foreword by Roger Angell, EB White's stepson.

The text itself has changed little since 1959. The structure and segmentation of chapters of the 4th edition is the same as that of the 3rd edition, apart from the addition of a half-page chapter on spelling – said to have come from the first edition. There are two extra segments on using the dash and the colon and two on grammatical agreement in the first segment, and a glossary and an index have been added at the end. Otherwise the core recommendations of Strunk and White (1959) all remain. Roger Angell notes a few small updates to examples in the text, to improve the balance between the sexes ("Sylvia Plath has knocked Keats out of the box"). But he rejects the idea that email and its impact on language needs mentioning – essentially because it is conversation, and "we are all writers".

The addition of illustrations to the Strunk and White text is definitely a first. In fact they are not just line drawings, but full color paintings (57 of them), done by Maira Kalman. They embrace quite a mix of subjects, especially interiors, with and without people in them, generic portraits and some that represent known persons, and their pets. On the front cover is a full frontal portrait of a very svelte-looking basset hound, who seems to have been Strunks's companion animal (p.146), and on p.7 becomes the mouthpiece for one of the exemplary sentences: "Well, Susan, what a mess you are in!" – designed to show the use of parenthetical commas. From now on I for one will always associate paired commas with that dog's floppy but absolutely parallel ears.

The distinction between "I hope you won't mind me asking" and "I hope you won't mind my asking" is illustrated by means of contrasting full-length portraits on facing pages. The one for "me asking" is attached to a keen-looking man in shorts against a brightly colored background, whereas "my asking" goes with a tall impersonal figure in a long black coat, set against a white background and suggesting icy formality. The pictures provide a stylistic judgement on the choice between the two pronoun forms. Yet the text itself argues that they mean slightly different things. Inevitably, the pictures and their physical components make their own independent point.

Making pictures "say" something quite explicit is never going to be easy. Three rather stiff portraits are used with *would, should* and *could* to support a statement in the text that they reduce the authority of your writing, and should be saved for moments when you really want to express uncertainty. The three figures portrayed all look across or past the viewer, which might correlate either with "uncertainty" or "authority". In their stiff isolation, they project evasiveness and reserve more than particular verbal choices.

Faces are linguistically inscrutable, as are the relations between people pictured in a closed space. A set of six people (plus dog) all distanced from each other in an untidy room is meant to show how *none* takes a singular verb when "not one" is intended, as in "None of us is perfect". But the painting doesn't really settle the issue. It could equally well suggest that more than one of the people pictured are imperfect, in which case "None of us are perfect" would be fine. Again the slightly oldfashioned gear worn by the subjects (ladies in skirts, some with coats and hats) carries its own message – that this kind of issue belongs to an older, more conservative linguistic community.

Does a picture say a thousand words – well yes – but it speaks in multiple dimensions, not to a precise point. In this book the illustrations often pick up statements made in examples, rather than the stylistic recommendations of the text. Some are just not connected at all. You couldn't say that they consistently complement the text, though they are consistently decorative. They make this edition of Strunk and White a browser's book, a small item for the coffee table, rather than one for the professional library. □

Pam Peters is editor of Australian Style and director of the Dictionary Research Centre at Macquarie University. She reviews Strunk and White's Elements of Style, *Penguin Books 2007, RRP $19.95.*

From the Editor

First up, we must again apologise for contributing to the raised bloodpressure of readers who were tantalized over the solution to the Rubicon puzzle in AS 15:1. More about that on the backpage. We have pre-and double-post-checked the puzzle this time, to ensure that nothing is displaced by the printing process, and that receiving AS during Christmas/New Year will contribute to the relaxation!

One topic which hardly featured at all in the correspondence was the election – presumably because it didn't bring many new words to the fore. The one exception was *corflute,* noted by Laurie Wigney (NSW), which was associated with skirmishes in the suburbs over political advertising. In fact the word is a trademark for a stiff weather-proof sheeting wich can be printed on (*Macquarie Dictionary*, 4th ed. 2005) and is then typically mounted on an A-frame to stand on the street or in someone's front yard. It has been used for a few years by real estate agents, but much more so in the last few weeks by political campaigners.

Among the new coinings reported from "The Centre" by Dick Kimber (NT) came *grog-ban refugees,* for the perhaps inevitable byproduct of the government crackdown on alcohol in northern Australia. This extended use of "refugee" for those crossing from "the Territory" into South Australia echoes what happened in the wake of Hurricane Katrina in the US, when hundreds of thousands of "refugees" were displaced from their homes in New Orleans and had to move interstate for dry ground. The US government disputed that usage because of its political implications, but the language seems to lack a suitable term.

The use or nonuse of capitals with the word *government* was queried by Clare Burns (NSW), and it is a vexed issue for those who work in government agencies and institutions. The essential point is that the word is capitalised in formal references, e.g. to the *Government of Australia* in official publications. In non-official publications it can be left in lower case, and usually is, according to *Style Manual* (2002: 124). The word also tends to be decapitalised when (a) it's used adjectivally, and (b) in informal references to overseas governments, as shown in the previous paragraph.

Apostrophes came up in the correspondence from several *AS* readers, and their use is indeed hedged about with various not entirely consistent rules, especially when following a name ending in "s". (For some writers there are different rules according to whether the name has one or two syllables, whether it's a religious, classical or literary name, how it's pronounced, etc. etc.) The example of *Truss's,* used in an article in the last *AS,* was noted by Glen Marshall (Q). It embodies the simplest practice of all, which is to use possessive *'s* after any name ending in "s", whatever its makeup or cultural significance. It saves a lot of agonizing.

The use of apostrophes to pluralise names was also queried by Sue Levy (NSW) and Spencer Yeoman (QLD). They have sometimes been used this way in the past (not just at the greengrocers!) as in *the Kelly's*, *the Morrell's.* This is no longer recommended (*Style Manual* 2002: 82*),* and they should be just *the Kellys, the Morrells.* Likewise dates such as *the 1960s* now usually appear without an apostrophe.

The finer points of Latin loanwords in English were mentioned by two correspondents with strong classical training. Neville Cohen (QLD) noted that *per capita* (Latin for "[counting] by heads") did not seem so apt when the figure quoted was a ratio for the individual. It should be *per caput* (the Latin singular). His point of logic is taken, but unfortunately standard English idiom seems to have gone for the plural *per capita,* and it outnumbers the singular by 250:1 when you do a Google search of Australian internet sites.

The knowledge of Latin declensions has certainly faded in folk memory, so that loanwords ending in "a" are treated somewhat erratically, either as singulars like *larva* or plurals like *bacteria,* whatever their background. Una Gault (NSW) heard a radio discussion on human reproduction in which the speaker kept saying "a single ova", though strictly speaking it's the plural of *ovum* "egg". The opposite problem has turned up in our own research, where students and lecturers seem to be using *am(o)eba* (Latin singular) as a collective noun with plural agreement: "amoeba have no definite form".

Newspaper spelling in the main articles is automatically checked and reasonably reliable. Not so the classified ads and sports reports, as Maurice Dingle (QLD) found in the best-known Queensland daily. He included a clipping of school rowing results in which every reference to a *Grammar School* was spelled "grammer", and there were miscellaneous other misspellings of particular names, such as *St Aidan's* as "St Aidens" and Stuartholme as "Stewart-Holme". Placenames and the personal names embodied in them are a law unto themselves, and need individual care. I keep a mental list of variable ones always to check, e.g. *Stuart/Stewart, Geoffrey/Jeffrey, Matthew/Mathew, Philip/Phillip, Anthony/Antony* etc.

Finally, an interesting use of the noun *guest* as a verb, meaning "to perform as a guest artist". Neville Cohen noticed *Benny Goodman guests on clarinet* in the *BBC Music Magazine.* This C20 use seems to have taken over from its much older use to mean "to give or receive hospitality", recorded in the OED. □

Letters to the Editor

Dear Pam,
On 5th Sep., while at Gillen Sporting Club, a long-term acquaintance said to me, "Have a look at the Jimmy Woodser over there." He was referring to a mate, who was momentarily drinking by himself. I thought that the expression had disappeared from use, for the last time I heard it would have been in about 1976, when Bill Waudby, a legendary station-owner here (since deceased) for whom I left a bottle of "crinkly" (rum) when he was not at the homestead, later caught up with me, laughed and said something like, "What, do you want to make me a Jimmy Woodser, Dick?"

The acquaintance who used the expression on the 5th is 68 years old (I think), and worked his entire life on the railways. When I expressed surprise at him using the term, he said that he still occasionally used it, and believed others did too.

Best wishes,
Dick Kimber.
Alice Springs

Feedback Acknowledgements
Many thanks to the following, who sent in batches of FEEDBACK questionnaires on behalf of others.

Julia Trenchard Smith, VIC (64); Robyn Whiteley, VIC(45); Judy Allen, NSW (37); Stephanie Holt, RMIT professional writing and editing, VIC (24); Maggy Ragless, Mitcham Heritage Research Centre, SA (14); Jenny Rose, Mt. Barker Senior High School, WA (14); Ann Noble, SA (12); Joan Loudon, Writing workshop group, U3A Hobart, TAS (11); Rosemary Montgomery, Illawarra institute of Technology, NSW (11); John Ludbrook, VIC/SA (9); Maureen Brew, Masada College, NSW (6); Techwriter, NSW (4); A Muddle, NSW (4); Jan Knight, QLD (3); V Kreibig, NSW (3)

Dear Pam
My mother's eldest sibling and only brother was a schoolteacher before and after WWI. He habitually corrected his sisters' nieces' and nephews' grammar and spelling, though himself childless.

According to my mother, one of his favorite lines was, "How can a thing be different to?" The grounds, of course, being that difference implies away from, based on the latinate English grammar of his youth. How he would have castigated the now commonplace *different than*, I can only imagine.

While I accept that common usage eventually becomes correct, a recent observation set me wondering what we started in accepting *different to.*

In Overland 188 [Spring 2007] Associate Editor Kalinda Ashton wrote the following in her editorial: "...his increasing awareness of, and dissent to, much of what is accepted and acceptable in Australian political life."

Dissent has become grammatically analogous to assent, both taking the preposition *to*. I have to wonder, what next? Is *from* going to disappear so that we are moving towards *away to*, *apart to*, *distant to*, *divorced to*? And if I had written *heading for* will that [more rationally] end up as *to*, too?

Anne Gunter
(via email)

Dear Pam Peters
The suggestion in the latest issue of Australian Style newsletter that a good (in an economic sense, i.e. a commodity) cannot be used in the singular is intriguing – and flies against popular and scholarly practice. The singular is used all the time – I have been using it this way for at least 20 years. I enclose an excerpt from a US-authored/published book with the typical singular usage. [Weimer, D. and A. Vining (1992) *Policy Analysis: concepts and practice*, 2nd ed. Prentice Hall, pp32-35] I am sure that such would also be the case in any Australian microeconomics text in undergraduate courses at all Ozzie universities.

Incidentally, the use of the concepts of public good and private good (which adjectives refer to the nonexcludable and nonrivalrous characteristic of a good, not its "moral" character) has seen the perverse creation of the concept, a bad, e.g. a public bad. The use of bad as a noun ("a bad") is also something that is frequent in economic discourse and probably has been so since the distant 20th century – but is not registered in my revised 3rd edition of the Macquarie.

Best wishes
Mr Johnston
Darlinghurst, NSW

FEED BACK 30

VERBAL VARIANTS

Quite a few English verbs have more than one form for the past tense and/or past participle. The choice depends on a complex of grammatical and semantic factors, which may be triggered by particular sentences like those shown below. Please fill in the necessary part of the verb in the blank in each sentence. If more than one form would do, do give both.

1. BEAT The mayor had never _____________ around the bush so much before.
2. BEAT How could the winning team be _____________ by such tactics?
3. BURN The fire had _____________ out of control for three days.
4. BURN Fifteen thousand hectares were _____________by yesterday's bushfire.
5. FORGET The problem was soon _____________ in all the excitement.
6. FORGET He had _____________ to tell her where the key was.
7. GET I haven't _____________ a hotel booking yet.
8. GET She had never _____________ so angry before.
9. LEAN He _____________ his tired back against the wall.
10. LEAN The tree had _____________ precariously over the road.
11. LEARN Despite all the warnings, he never _____________.
12. LEARN In the Depression they had all _____________ to do without.
13. SHINE He _____________ his shoes for the occasion.
14. SHINE The dancer had _____________ out from all the other performers.
15. SHRINK Nervously she _____________ away from the edge.
16. SHRINK The heat _____________ the plastic plate to a tiny disk
17. SNEAK She _____________ a chocolate bar into the lunch box.
18. SNEAK They _____________ around the back to avoid being seen.
19. SPOIL The strawberries had _____________ in the sun.
20. SPOIL They _____________ the child with expensive toys.
21. SPRING The ginger cat _____________ the mousetrap.
22. SPRING A kangaroo _____________ across the road.
23. TREAD An unknown visitor _____________ mud into the carpet.
24. TREAD The abandoned diver had _____________ water for three hours.

Would you please indicate your age bracket and sex:

10-24 25-44 45-64 65+ **F/M**

and the state in which you live:

ACT NSW NT QLD SA TAS VIC WA

Please return this Feedback questionnaire to:
Style Council Centre, Linguistics Department, Macquarie University, NSW 2109 Australia.
Alternatively, the questionnaire may be faxed to the Style Council Centre at (02)9850 9199.

FEED BACK Report

Responses to the Feedback 29 survey *A grammatical miscellany* came from over 480 helpful people and interested groups. We're particularly grateful to those who tried the questionnaire out on friends, family and students, and they are acknowledged separately, on the Letters to Editor page (p.9). Altogether there were 121 responses in Age group 1 (10-24), 44 in Age group 2 (25-44), 142 in Age group 3 (45-64) and 170 in Age group 4 (65 +). In the results presented below, Age groups 1 and 2 have been amalgamated. The data were carefully processed by Style Council research assistant Yasmin Funk, and computer-analysed by Adam Smith. [PP]

Pronoun selections

Three sets of questions focused on the choice of pronouns in contexts where they are know to vary. The results showed strong age-related differences for most of them.

1. *me* or *I* as the second coordinate at the end of a sentence, in dependent phrases such as *for my wife and me/I, by your line manager and me/I*. In these two slots the majority overall endorsed *me* (61% in the first case; 72% in the second). But underlying the first was a huge differential between the low 34% endorsement of those under 45; and the 80% endorsement of those 65 and over. Likewise, underlying the second, there was only 46% endorsement by the under 45s, and 91% by those 65 and over. In each case, there seems to be a watershed at 44/45, with the 45-64 group voting with their elders. The *Cambridge Grammar of the English Language* (2002: 463) notes that the "my wife and I" construction in dependent phrases is so common that it "has to be recognised as a [variant] of standard English". These *AS* results show that it's much more popular with younger Australians, and still resisted by those 45 and over.

2. *them* or *their, you* or *your* (accusative or genitive) before a verbal noun. With all four examples, *notice them/their talking, prevent them/their taking, concerned about you/your working, the idea of them/their staying*, the overall vote was for the accusative: 74%, 81%, 70%, 78%. Although the results across age groups suggest that younger people (under 45) are more comfortable with it than older people (see table below), it gained a majority in all age groups, and is therefore clearly established in Australian English. These results confirm those of a Feedback survey in 2003.

3. *its* or *their,* following collective nouns such as *panel* and *government.* In both cases the singular *its* was endorsed by the majority overall (70%, 71%), though there was a remarkable and quite consistent difference between the under 45s and the rest, with younger respondents giving majority support to the plural *their* in each case. Closer inspection of our Age 1 and Age 2 data suggests that the watershed for this distinction is age 24/25 though we have limited responses from Age group 2.

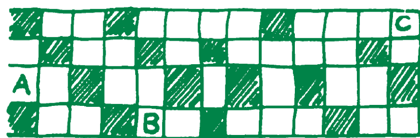
Although those last pronoun results show younger people less inclined to go by formal agreement with collective nouns, they clearly do respond to issues of grammatical number with verbs. Their responses on the two sentences testing verb agreement with collectives are much like those of older Australians. All age groups endorsed the use of singular verbs (*has, was)* after the words *committee, team* with overall majorities of 85% and 83%. This probably reflects the fact that the verb comes much closer to the collective noun than the pronouns discussed in section 3.

	Total		Age 1+2 (165)		Age 3 (142)		Age 4 (170)	
	I	*me*	*I*	*me*	*I*	*me*	*I*	*me*
for my wife and **I/me**	39%	61%	66%	34%	28%	72%	20%	80%
by your line manager and **I/me**	28%	72%	54%	46%	17%	83%	9%	91%
	Acc.	*Gen.*	*Acc.*	*Gen.*	*Acc.*	*Gen.*	*Acc.*	*Gen.*
notice **them/their** talking	74%	26%	82%	18%	69%	31%	66%	34%
prevent **them/their** taking	81%	19%	91%	9%	74%	26%	76%	24%
concerned about **you/your** working	70%	30%	83%	17%	68%	32%	59%	41%
idea of **them/their** staying	78%	22%	89%	11%	74%	26%	69%	31%

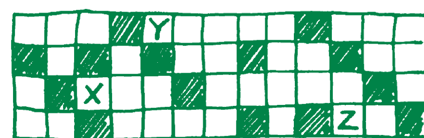
Subjunctives present and past

The choice between *should be* and just *be* in clauses following verbs like *ask, recommend, insist* and the noun *intention* shows us how far the present *(mandative)* subjunctive is still alive and well in Australian English. It certainly seems so, by the results of three of the four sentences that tested it. Following *intention,* a majority of 63% endorsed the subjunctive, following *recommend* it was 68%, and following *insist* 77%. The fourth sentence with the verb *ask* turned out to be slightly ambiguous, and there the subjunctive was endorsed by only 49%. That apart, it looks as if the use of the subjunctive correlates to some extent with the force of the mandation, it being much less strong in the noun *intention* than the verb *insist.* The results confirm those of earlier *AS* research (1993, 2004) which showed that use of the subjunctive was always greater following a mandative verb than noun. There were only small differences between age groups in the selection of the mandative subjunctive, suggesting that it's still relatively stable in the Australian community.

Not so the past subjunctive *were,* which is in decline. Neither of the two sentences with an *if* clause returned a majority for the subjunctive, and in the hypothetical *as if the world was/were crumbling around her,* it scored only 21% of the vote. □

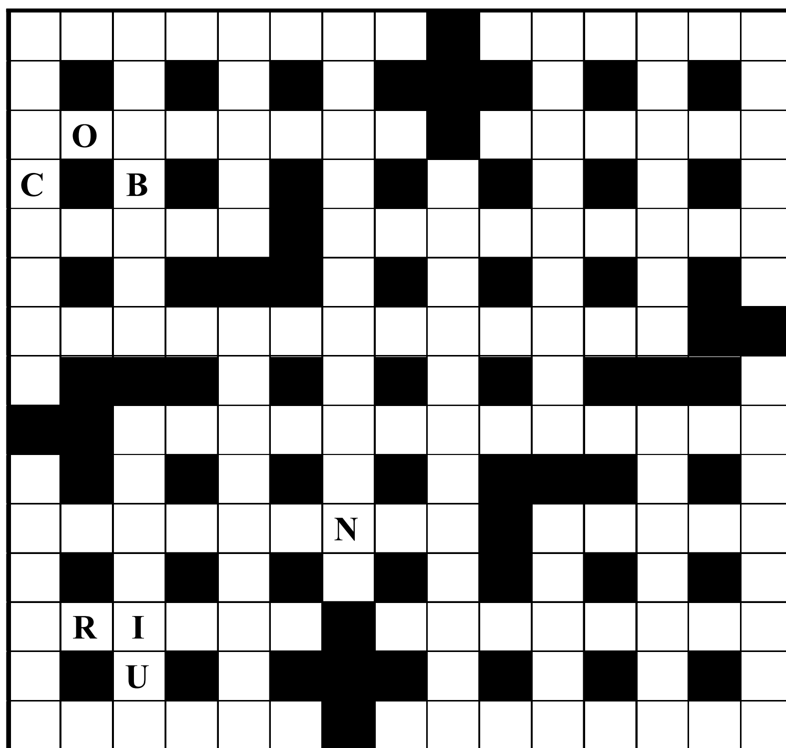


RUBICON

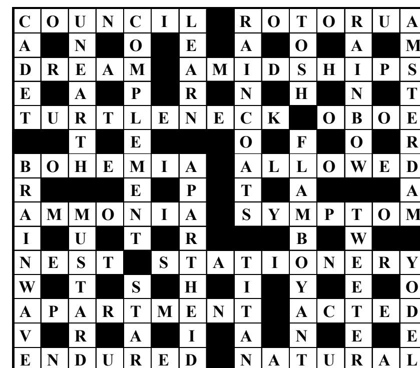


RUBICON, devised by David Astle, is a hybrid of crossword, jigsaw and acrostic. First, solve as many clues as you can and begin to fit the answers inside the grid. (The scattered letters of RUBICON should give you a toehold.) When the grid is completed, arrange the *clues* from the first Across to the last Down – their 28 initial letters will spell a category. As a bonus, which six of your answers belong to the category in question?

Aristotle-like (13)
Hub of South Australian wine industry (7,6)
'Ceiling' between the troposphere and ionosphere (12)
Foreign SPANDAU ORDER to disseminate? (6,6)
Omani cleric, perhaps (9)
Opposite of beefiest (9)
Take a quick shower, perhaps (7,2)
To OK (9)
It's a tie! (4,4)
Neither joyous nor inhabited (8)
Neologism for any fight-heavy film (8)
Rio Grande hat? (8)
Tell (8)
Wikipedia, essentially (8)
Barnum and Bailey employee (7)
Rank or grade (7)
Region's prevailing weather (7)
Top-level (7)
Appears (6)
Dent (6)
Eighty-eight factor (6)
Off-the-radar romance (6)
Old sailing ship to mimic setter, say (6)
Secluded (6)
Clutch (5)
Event likely seen in obstetric ward (5)
Large group of people (5)
Springfield dunce, Wiggum (5)



Solution to Rubicon in last issue
CAN YOU LOCATE HALF A DOZEN HOMOPHONES: Council, allowed, stationery, complement, mustard, titan



Apologies to all those who struggled with Rubicon in the last issue. An error at the printing stage led to an N *being misplaced at the bottom left corner of the grid. Congratulations to everyone who solved it despite the handicap.*

How to contact *Australian Style*

On editorial matters

Please contact the Editor at Macquarie University as follows:

By mail:
Please write to
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By Fax:
Call fax number 02 9850 9199

By Phone:
Call direct on 02 9850 8783. If there's no one in the Style Council Centre office, your call will be received on an answering machine and returned as soon as possible.

Concerning the mailing list

If you change your address, or need to alter your details on the mailing list in any way, or would like to subscribe to the list, please contact: Australian Style c/- Australian Government Information Management Office, Department of Finance and Administration, John Gorton Building, King Edward Terrace, Parkes ACT 2600 or by email: subscribe.style@finance.gov.au