ME AND THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE

Tom Nash

For grammarians, every day is Doomsday.
—Wiley Miller in Non-Sequitur

Maybe the most embarrassing moment of my academic life was the day I evicted from a local Safeway, not long after giving a reading at the library. I was guilty, of course. A black Sharpie was still in my hand when the manager tapped me on the shoulder and pointed toward the door. I maintain my crime was worth it.

There can be no justification for forcing apostrophes into simple plurals such as orange’s and potato’s. Even today in the Ashland store, I walk with my brim low over my brow. Not infrequently, I wear dark glasses.

For decades, I taught college-level linguists. I know well that language change is both natural and inevitable. Yet, some changes in language and usage have given me heartburn, such as the tendency to improve language. His research subjects carry sacks of forehead hoping that people would tread gently on the English language, at least dragging their feet when new forms appeared in speech and print. It was never thus. When the Vikings and the French Normans invaded merry old England, they forced violent changes on English, both in grammar and vocabulary. That was just the beginning. As English was evolved, it began to change ever more rapidly, so that today a new word (“Muggle”) or a different meaning (“unique”) will pop up in Los Angeles or New York, arriving somewhere near Topinka in a few short weeks, much to the confusion of English teachers, librarians, and Republicans.

This morning I went for coffee at a place with baristas. As near as I can tell, coffee that costs a buck or so is poured by servers. When the price hits three dollars, you’re negotiating with a barista. Anyway, today Bradley and Jeremy were working, and both firmly declared each order “awesome.” Somewhere, somehow, the word awesome (“creating a sense of awe”) has veered from its narrow semantic path and is now wandering loose in the world, free to mean damned near anything. Once upon a time, awesome was a view of the Grand Canyon or an eagle fishing the Rogue River. Today, according to Bradley, having exactly the right pocket change is “awesome.”

I listen to lots of sports talk on local radio. Unfortunately, most former line backers now working as commentators seem to enjoy punishing the language as much as they liked punishing quarterbacks. Me and my son went to the Eagles game the other night, and with the price of a beer hitting eleven dollars, we thought it was worth it.

In the twenty-first century, as in all previous eras, language is changing, with English evolving more rapidly than most, considering what it has become a lingua franca. Like many, I am not sure how I feel about being caught in the linguistic whirlwind. In many ways, I remain my grandparents’ scion, fascinated by the English language and appreciative of its rich diversity, but vaguely troubled by its headlong rush toward weirdness. As I wander through a tempest of words and forms, I wonder what is next. Klangon lexicons? Multiple gender pronouns? Verbs not agreeing with subjects? (Oh, wait, we have that one already.) A new tense, like past imperfect? An irritating new substitute for the verbal placeholder like? How about some unty new constructions, such as beforefor, as in “We drank beers before the game, not to mention during.”

Tom Nash

Satisfaction

I was in the express lane at the store quietly fuming. Completely ignoring the sign, the woman ahead of me had slipped into the check-out line pushing a cart piled high with groceries.

Imagine my delight when the cashier beckoned the woman to come forward, looked into the bag, and said, “So tell me, do I come here often?”

More advice from kids:

"Never trust a dog to watch your food."
—Patrick age 10

"You can’t hide a piece of broccoli in a glass of milk."
—Arin age 9

"Never try to baptize a cat."
—Eileen age 8
BOOJUM TREES
Frank Lang

Nature Notes just returned from a 4,000-mile drive from Ashland, Oregon to Cabo San Lucas at the tip of Baja California and back. We saw many exciting sights, botanical and otherwise, and drove over miles of exciting highways and back roads, where a few kilometers translated into hours.

What an otherworldly landscape. Fields of boulders decorated with cardon, the largest of the cacti, elephant trees, and one of the planet’s strangest looking plants, Fouquieria columnaris, known to native speakers, as Cirio, because of its resemblance to the slender, tapered wax candles used by the Padres in religious ceremonies. One web site thinks the plants resemble upside down slender, tapered wax candles used by the Padres in religious ceremonies. One web site thinks the plants resemble upside down slender, tapered wax candles used by the Padres in religious ceremonies.

The species’ tall, slender, succulent single stem can rise to over seventy feet where it often divides into flowering branches. Despite its height, it never seems reach three feet in diameter at the base. Its short, spiny branches clothe the tapered trunk from stem to stern. Leaves for much of the year, after enough rain, the leafless branches burst forth with leaves. The trees were leafless on our trip, but after enough rain, the leafless branches burst forth with leaves. The trees were leafless on our trip.

There is an Oregon connection with the Boojum. The person who first brought what we now know as the boojum to the attention of science, was the Texas frontier doctor J A Veatch. Veatch was a Jasper County, Texas, man, active in the Texas Revolution. Soon after, he went out west for the 1849 California Gold Rush. Veatch was a chemist, surveyor, botanist, plant collector, and teacher, who discovered borax deposits at Tuscan Spring near Redding California. Veatch also collected the plant specimen that the California physician Albert Kellogg used to described Idria columnaris, our boojum tree. Later Kellogg shifted the species to the genus Fouquieria. Most of us botanical types recognize Kellogg’s name as the specific epithet of California black oak Quercus kelloggii.

So, what is the Oregon connection? In 1868, Veatch was appointed professor of chemistry, toxicology, and materia medica at the Willamette University Medical School. He died two years later in Portland. His Oregon connection was brief. Makes you think of Louis Carroll’s mythical Snark and Boojum, a very special, dreadful, kind of Snark.

In the midst of the word he was trying to say, In the midst of the laughter and glee, He had softly and suddenly vanished away---
For the Snark was a Boojum, you see.

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