

*Here's an excerpt from the opening chapter in my Crazy English: the Ultimate Joy Ride Through Our Language (Pocket Books, 1989). If you see this floating around the Net unattributed, please suggest to the webmaster of that site that the material be properly cited.*

## **English is a Crazy Language (Part I)**

July 1, 1996

English is the most widely spoken language in the history of our planet, used in some way by at least one out of every seven human beings around the globe. Half of the world's books are written in English, and the majority of international telephone calls are made in English. English is the language of over sixty percent of the world's radio programs. More than seventy percent of international mail is written and addressed in English, and eighty percent of all computer text is stored in English. English has acquired the largest vocabulary of all the world's languages, perhaps as many as two million words, and has generated one of the noblest bodies of literature in the annals of the human race.

Nonetheless, it is now time to face the fact that English is a crazy language -- the most lunatic and loopy and wifty and wiggy of all languages. In the crazy English language, the blackbird hen is brown, blackboards can be green or blue, and blackberries are green and then red before they are ripe. Even if blackberries were really black and blueberries really blue, what are strawberries, cranberries, elderberries, huckleberries, raspberries, and gooseberries supposed to look like?

To add to this insanity there is no butter in buttermilk, no egg in eggplant, no grape in grapefruit, no bread in shortbread, neither worms nor wood in wormwood, neither mush nor room in mushroom, neither pine nor apple in pineapple, neither peas nor nuts in peanuts, and no ham in a hamburger. (In fact, if somebody invented a sandwich consisting of a ham patty in a bun, we would have a hard time finding a name for it.)

To make matters worse, English muffins weren't invented in England, french fries in France, or Danish pastries in Denmark. And we discover even more culinary madness in the revelations that sweetmeat is made from fruit, while sweetbread, which isn't sweet, is made from meat.

In this unreliable English tongue, greyhounds aren't always grey (or gray); panda bears and koala bears aren't bears (they're marsupials); a woodchuck is a groundhog, which is not a hog; a horned toad is a lizard; glowworms are fireflies, but fireflies are not flies (they're beetles); ladybugs and lightning bugs are also beetles (and to propagate, a significant proportion of ladybugs must be male); a guinea pig is neither a pig nor from Guinea (it's a South American rodent); and a titmouse is neither mammal nor mammaried.

Language is like the air we breathe. It's invisible, inescapable, indispensable, and we take it for granted. But, when we take the time to step back and listen to the sounds that escape from the holes in people's faces and to explore the paradoxes and vagaries of English, we find that hot dogs can be cold, darkrooms can be lit, homework can be done in school, nightmares can take place in broad daylight while morning sickness and daydreaming can take place at night, tomboys are girls and midwives can be men, hours -- especially happy hours and rush hours -- often last longer than sixty minutes, quick-sand works very slowly, boxing rings are square, silverware and glasses can be made of plastic and tablecloths of paper, most telephones are dialed by being punched (or pushed?), and most bathrooms don't have any baths in them. In fact, a dog can go to the

bathroom under a tree -- no bath, no room; it's still going to the bathroom. And doesn't it seem a little bizarre that we go to the bathroom in order to go to the bathroom?

Why is it that a woman can man a station but as man can't woman one, that a man can father a movement but a woman can't mother one, and that a king rules a kingdom but a queen doesn't rule a queendom? How did all those Renaissance men reproduce when there don't seem to have been any Renaissance women?

A writer is someone who writes, and a stinger is something that stings. But fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce, haberdashers don't haberdash, hammers don't ham, and humdingers don't humding.

If the plural of tooth is teeth, shouldn't the plural of booth be beeth? One goose, two geese -- so one moose, two meese? One index, two indices -- one Kleenex, two Kleenices? If people ring a bell today and rang a bell yesterday, why don't we say that they flang a ball? If they wrote a letter, perhaps they also bote their tongue. If the teacher taught, why isn't it also true that the preacher praught? Why is it that the sun shone yesterday while I shined my shoes, that I treaded water and then trod on the beach, and that I flew out to see a World Series game in which my favorite player flied out?

If we conceive a conception and receive at a reception, why don't we grieve a greption and believe a beleption? If a horsehair mat is made from the hair of horses and a camel's hair brush from the hair of camels, from what is a mohair coat made? If adults commit adultery, do infants commit infantry? If olive oil is made from olives, what do they make baby oil from? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat? (And I'm beginning to worry about those authoritarians.)

And if pro and con are opposites, is congress the opposite of progress?

## **English is a Crazy Language (Part II)**

**August 17, 1996**

Sometimes you have to believe that all English speakers should be committed to an asylum for the verbally insane. In what other language do people drive in a parkway and park in a driveway? In what other language do people recite at a play and play at a recital? In what other language do privates eat in the general mess and generals eat in the private mess? In what other language do people ship by truck and send cargo by ship? In what other language can your nose run and your feet smell?

How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same and a bad licking and a good licking be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites? How can sharp speech and blunt speech be the same and quite a lot and quite a few the same, while overlook and oversee are opposites? How can the weather be hot as hell one day and cold as hell the next? How can the expressions "What's going on?" and "What's coming off?" mean exactly the same thing?!?

If button and unbutton and tie and untie are opposites, why are loosen and unloosen and ravel and unravel the same? If bad is the opposite of good, hard the opposite of soft, and up the opposite of down, why are badly and goodly, hardly and softly, and upright and downright not opposing pairs? If harmless actions are the opposite of

harmful nonactions, why are shameful and shameless behavior the same and pricey objects less expensive than priceless ones.

If appropriate and inappropriate remarks and passable and impassable mountain trails are opposites, why are flammable and inflammable materials, heritable and inheritable property, and passive and impassive people the same and valuable objects less treasured than invaluable ones? If uplift is the same as lift up, why are upset and set up opposite in meaning? Why are pertinent and impertinent, canny and uncanny, and famous and infamous neither opposites nor the same? How can raise and raze and reckless and wreckless be opposites when each pair contains the same sound?

Why is it that when the sun or the moon or the stars are out, they are visible, but when the lights are out, they are invisible; that when I clip a coupon from a newspaper I separate it, but when I clip a coupon to a newspaper, I fasten it; and that when I wind up my watch, I start it, but when I wind up this essay, I shall end it?

English is a crazy language.

How can expressions like "I'm mad about my flat," "No football coaches allowed," "I'll come by in the morning and knock you up," and "Keep your pecker up" convey such different messages in two countries that purport to speak the same English?

How can it be easier to assent than to dissent but harder to ascend than to descend? Why is it that a man with hair on his head has more hair than a man with hairs on his head; that if you decide to be bad forever, you choose to be bad for good; and that if you choose to wear only your left shoe, then your left one is right and your right one is left? Right?

## **English is a Crazy Language Part III**

September 30, 1996

Has it ever struck you that we English users are constantly standing meaning on its head? Let's look at a number of familiar English words and phrases that turn out to mean the opposite or something very different from what we think they mean:

**I could care less.** I couldn't care less is the clearer, more accurate version. Why do so many people delete the negative from this statement? Because they are afraid that the n't . . . less combination will make a double negative, which is a no-no.

**I really miss not seeing you.** Whenever people say this to me, I feel like responding, "All right, I'll leave!" Here speakers throw in a gratuitous negative, not, even though I really miss seeing you is what they want to say.

**The movie kept me literally glued to my seat.** The chances of our buttocks being literally epoxied to a seat are about as small as the chances of our literally rolling in the aisles while watching a funny movie or literally drowning in tears while watching a sad one. We actually mean The movie kept me figuratively glued to my seat -- but who needs figuratively, anyway?

**A non-stop flight.** Never get on one of these. You'll never get down.

**A near miss.** A near miss is, in reality a collision. A close call is actually a near hit.

**My idea fell between the cracks.** If something fell between the cracks, didn't it land smack on the planks or the concrete? Shouldn't that be my idea fell into the cracks [or between the boards]?

**I'll follow you to the ends of the earth.** Let the word go out to the four corners of the earth that ever since Columbus we have known that the earth doesn't have any ends.

**A hot water heater.** Who heats hot water?

**A hot cup of coffee.** Here again the English language gets us in hot water. Who cares if the cup is hot? Surely we mean a cup of hot coffee.

**Doughnut holes.** Aren't those little treats really doughnut balls ? The holes are what's left in the original doughnut. (And if a candy cane is shaped like a cane, why isn't a doughnut shaped like a nut?)

**I want to have my cake and eat it too.** Shouldn't this timeworn cliché, be I want to eat my cake and have it too? Isn't the logical sequence that one hopes to eat the cake and then still possess it?

**A one-night stand.** So who's standing? Similarly, to sleep with someone.

**The first century B.C.** These hundred years occurred much longer ago than people imagined. What we call the first century B.C. was, in fact the last century B.C.

**Daylight saving time.** Not a single second of daylight is saved by this ploy.

**The announcement was made by a nameless official.** Just about everyone has a name, even officials. Surely what is meant is The announcement was made by an unnamed official.

**Preplan, preboard, preheat, and prerecord.** Aren't people who do this simply planning, boarding, heating, and recording? Who needs the pre-tentious prefix?

**Put on your shoes and socks.** This is an exceedingly difficult maneuver. Most of us put on our socks first, then our shoes.

**A hit-and-run play.** If you know your baseball, you know that the sequence constitutes a run-and-hit play.

**The bus goes back and forth between the terminal and the airport.** Again we find mass confusion about the order of events. You have to go forth before you can go back.

**I got caught in one of the biggest traffic bottlenecks of the year.** The bigger the bottleneck, the more freely the contents of the bottle flow through it. To be true to the metaphor, we should say, I got caught in one of the smallest traffic bottlenecks of the year.

**Underwater and Underground.** Things that we claim are underwater and underground are obviously surrounded by, not under the water and ground.

**I lucked out.** To luck out sounds as if you're out of luck. Don't you mean I lucked in?

Because we speakers and writers of English seem to have our heads screwed on backwards, we constantly misperceive our bodies, often saying just the opposite of what we mean:

**Watch your head.** I keep seeing this sign on low doorways, but I haven't figured out how to follow the instructions. Trying to watch your head is like trying to bite your teeth.

**They're head over heels in love.** That's nice, but all of us do almost everything head over heels . If we are trying to create an image of people doing cartwheels and somersaults, why don't we say, They're heels over head in love?

**Put your best foot forward.** Now let's see. . . . We have a good foot and a better foot -- but we don't have a third -- and best -- foot. It's our better foot we want to put forward. This grammar atrocity is akin to May the best team win. Usually there are only two teams in the contest.

**Keep a stiff upper lip.** When we are disappointed or afraid, which lip do we try to control? The lower lip, of course, is the one we are trying to keep from quivering.

**I'm speaking tongue in cheek.** So how can anyone understand you?

**They do things behind my back.** You want they should do things in front of your back?

**They did it ass backwards.** What's wrong with that? We do everything ass backwards.

## **English Is a Crazy Language (Part IV)**

October 18, 1996

English is weird.

In the rigid expressions that wear tonal grooves in the record of our language, beck can appear only with call, cranny with nook, hue with cry, main with might, fettle only with fine, aback with taken, caboodle with kit, and spic and span only with each other. Why must all shrifts be short, all lucre filthy, all bystanders innocent, and all bedfellows strange? I'm convinced that some shrifts are lengthy and that some lucre is squeaky clean, and I've certainly met guilty bystanders and perfectly normal bedfellows.

Why is it that only swoops are fell? Sure, the verbivorous William Shakespeare invented the expression "one fell swoop," but why can't strokes, swings, acts, and the like also be fell? Why are we allowed to vent our spleens but never our kidneys or livers? Why must it be only our minds that are boggled and never our eyes or

our hearts? Why can't eyes and jars be ajar, as well as doors? Why must aspersions always be cast and never hurled or lobbed?

Doesn't it seem just a little wifty that we can make amends but never just one amend; that no matter how carefully we comb through the annals of history, we can never discover just one annal; that we can never pull a shenanigan, be in a doldrum, eat an egg Benedict, or get a jitter, a willy, a delirium tremen, or a heebie-jeebie; and that, sifting through the wreckage of a disaster, we can never find just one smithereen?

Indeed, this whole business of plurals that don't have matching singulars reminds me to ask this burning question, one that has puzzled scholars for decades: If you have a bunch of odds and ends and you get rid of or sell off all but one of them, what do you call that doohickey with which you're left?

What do you make of the fact that we can talk about certain things and ideas only when they are absent? Once they appear, our blessed English doesn't allow us to describe them. Have you ever seen a horseful carriage or a strapful gown? Have you ever run into someone who was combobulated, sheveled, grunted, chalant, plussed, ruly, gainly, maculate, pecunious, or peccable? Have you ever met a sung hero or experienced requited love? I know people who are no spring chickens, but where, pray tell, are the people who are spring chickens? Where are the people who actually would hurt a fly? All the time I meet people who are great shakes, who can cut the mustard, who can fight City Hall, who are my cup of tea, and whom I would touch with a ten-foot pole, but I can't talk about them in English -- and that is a laughing matter.

If the truth be told, all languages are a little crazy. As Walt Whitman might proclaim, they contradict themselves. That's because language is invented, not discovered, by boys and girls and men and women, not computers. As such, language reflects the creative and fearful asymmetry of the human race, which, of course, isn't really a race at all. That's why six, seven, eight, and nine change to sixty, seventy, eighty, and ninety, but two, three, four, and five do not become twoty, threety, fourty, and fivety. That's why first degree murder is more serious than third degree murder but a third degree burn is more serious than a first degree burn. That's why we can turn lights off and on but not out and in. That's why we wear a pair of pants but, except on ery cold days, not a pair of shirts. That's why we can open up the floor, climb the walls, raise the roof, pick up the house, and bring down the house.

In his essay "The Awful German Language," Mark Twain spoofs the confusion engendered by German gender by translating literally from a conversation in a German Sunday school book: "Gretchen. Wilhelm, where is the turnip? Wilhelm. She has gone to the kitchen. Gretchen. Where is the accomplished and beautiful English maiden? Wilhelm. It has gone to the opera." Twain continues: "A tree is male, its buds are female, its leaves are neuter; horses are sexless, dogs are male, cats are female -- tomcats included."

Still, you have to marvel at the unique lunacy of the English language, in which your house can simultaneously burn up and burn down, in which you fill in a form by filling out a form, in which you add up a column of figures by adding them down, in which your alarm clock goes off by going on, in which you are inoculated for measles by being inoculated against measles, and in which you first chop a tree down -- and then you chop it up.

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