

WHEN YOU
CATCH AN
ADJECTIVE,
KILL IT

*The Parts of Speech, for Better
And/Or Worse*

BEN YAGODA

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*To Elizabeth Yagoda and Maria Yagoda
my ears on the ground*

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introduction

In the end, it came down to two potential titles. Number one, *When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It*. Number two, *Pimp My Ride*. I have to admit that I carry a torch for number two—which alludes, of course, to the popular MTV series in which a posse of automotive artisans take a run-down jalopy and sleek it up into an awe-inspiring vehicle containing many square yards of plush velvet and an astonishing number of LCD screens. Leaving aside the fact that it would have lent a faint aura of hipness to a book otherwise sorely lacking in street cred, *Pimp My Ride* illustrates a deep and wonderful truth about the parts of speech: they change like the dickens. *Pimp*—a noun meaning procurer of prostitutes—turns into a transitive verb, meaning, roughly, “to make pimp-worthy.” And the intransitive verb *ride* becomes a noun, meaning that in which one rides.

The nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill holds out a temptingly lofty rationale for consideration of the parts of speech, claiming that they represent fundamental categories of human thought. This is an attractive notion for any parts-of-speech fan, and certainly for someone (i.e., me) who has just devoted 2.7 percent of his life to the subject, but ultimately it doesn't hold water. For one thing, you find strikingly different systems in other languages, such as Korean, which does not contain adjectives as a distinct class. (You express the quality of a thing with verbs.) For another, even within a particular tradition, the lineup of categories keeps shifting. Writing in about 100 B.C.E., the Greek grammarian Dionysius Thrax, who invented the whole idea of parts of speech, counted eight: adverbs, articles, conjunctions, nouns, participles, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs. The Romans had to drop articles (that is, *a* and *the*), since such words didn't exist in Latin, and added—hot damn!—interjections. The early English grammarians started out by adopting the Latin scheme, and it wasn't until Joseph Priestley's *The Rudiments of English Grammar*, published in 1761, that someone came up with the familiar baseball-team-sized list that included adjectives and booted out participles for good. This is the list that most of us remember from grammar school, that people who were kids in the 1970s remember from the ABC series *Schoolhouse Rock!* (and who could forget the classic song “Conjunction Junction [what's your function?]”), and that I adopt here.

Broadly speaking, there are two groups of people who think, talk, and write a lot about language and the parts of speech give both of them *agita*. The “prescriptivists,” language commentators of the Edwin Newman/John Simon/Lynne Truss school, peer at something like *Pimp My Ride* and see the decline of Western civilization. The process in which nouns like *impact* and *access*, or a noun phrase like *fast track*, are verbed is called “functional shifting.” These shifts are indeed lame in a stiffly bureaucratic way, and Alexander Haig did indeed butcher the language when he said things like “I have to *caveat* any response, Senator” “Not the way you *contexted* it, Senator” and “There are *nuanceal* differences between Henry Kissinger and me on that.”

But shifting has been going on for a long, long time. In the words of Garland Cannon, the author of *Historical Change and English Word-Formation*, the process became “productive in Middle English

when the nouns *duke* and *lord* acquired verb functions, the verbs *cut* and *rule* shifted to a noun. Shakespeare was the past master of this kind of thing; he had characters say “*season* your admiration,” “*dog* them at the heels,” “*backing* a horse,” plus *elbow*, *drug*, *gossip*, *lapse*, and *silence*—none of the ever used before as verbs.

Nouns still get verbed every day, much to the despair of the prescriptivists. A very successful recent shift is that of the trade name Google from proper noun to a transitive verb meaning “to look up in a Internet search engine.” Google, the company, doesn’t fancy this either. In his book *Word Spy*, Paul McFedries writes that “violators are sent a polite note along with a document outlining some ‘examples of appropriate and inappropriate uses of Google’s trademark.’” An appropriate use, according to the company, would be: “I used Google to check out that guy I met at the party.” And an inappropriate one: “I Googled that hottie.”

Lots of other parts of speech can shift, too. Consider:

I was having a real fun time until I totaled my car, which was a rare make, a quality ride, and a collectible. Shoot! Then my parents started to guilt me. The whole thing weirded me out so bad that I couldn’t stop goddamming. I know it’s totally cliché, but I had to down a Scotch.

Real, bad: adjective to adverb. *Fun, quality*: noun to adjective. *Totaled, weirded*: adjective to verb. *Make, ride*: verb to noun. *Guilt*: noun to verb. *Collectible, Scotch*: adjective to noun. *Cliché*: noun to adjective. *Shoot*: verb to interjection. *Goddamming*: interjection to verb. *Down*: adverb to verb.

The real fun starts when a word shifts more than once. *Frame* started as a verb, meaning “to form a border,” then became a noun meaning “border,” and emerged as a new verb meaning “to put a frame around something.” In a similar way, the noun *wire* engendered a verb (“I wired him the news”) and from there turned into another noun (“He sent me a wire”). Despite being less than two centuries old, *okay* is commonly used as five different parts of speech: adjective (“It was an okay movie”), adverb (“The team played okay”), interjection (“Okay!”), noun (“The boss gave her okay”), and verb (“The president okayed the project”).

Especially in the realm of slang, the changes can be dizzying. The English newspaper *The Guardian* ran an item quoting a line from a novel called *Afterburn* by a writer called Zane: “No matter how hoochie I tried to be, she out-hoochied me every time.” Noting that the book was about to be issued in Japan, *The Guardian* took public pity on its translator.

A nearly infinite number of shifts can be effected by adding suffixes to words: the adjective *merry* for example, spawning the noun *merriment* and the adverb *merrily*. Less well known is the way the process can go in reverse. In 1897, James Murray, the founding editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*), was obliged to write a definition for *burgle*, which had appeared in print for the very first time just twenty-six years earlier and had gained popularity since. Murray surmised that the originator had shortened the old words *burglar* and *burglary* to create the verb, and he coined the term *backformation* to describe the process. Other back-formations generally follow the *burgle* model and create verbs; they include *edit* from *editor*, *televise* from *television*, *baby-sit* from *baby-sitter*, *diagnose* from *diagnosis*, *laze* from *lazy*, *beg* from *beggar*, *type* from *typewriter*, *donate* from *donation*, *emote* from *emotion*, and *grovel* from the adjective *groveling*. (Shakespeare came up with

that one.) *Greed* is a noun formed from the adjective *greedy*, and *difficult* an adjective formed from the noun *difficulty*. Of course, some attempted back-formations aren't as successful as the foregoing. A group of therapists once tried to float the verb *therap*; *enthuse* is pretty iffy; and English drawing room comedies always get a laugh at the expense of someone who describes the occupation of the guy dressed in black as *buttling*.

I'm with the prescriptivists on *enthuse*. By contrast, the "descriptivists"—the other group that obsesses about language—would go to their deaths defending the use of *hopefully* to mean "it is to be hoped that" simply because people *use it that way*. These are the linguists and academic grammarians whose motto, borrowed from Alexander Pope, is "Whatever is, is right." The descriptivists don't like the parts of speech either, because they're so, well, inexact. As far back as 1924, the great grammarian Otto Jespersen rather wryly remarked of them, "The definitions are very far from having attained the degree of exactitude found in Euclidean geometry." Writing at about the same time, Edward Sapir was more direct: "No logical scheme of the parts of speech—their number, nature, and necessary confinement—is of the slightest interest to the linguist." In truth, any parts-of-speech scheme leaves gaping holes. In the term *baseball player* is the word *baseball* a noun or an adjective? Reasonable people differ on this point. What about the word *to* in an infinitive like *to see*, what about the *there* in *there are*, what about numbers? If you're looking for definitive answers, you'll be looking for a long time.

Recent scholars have gone so far as to reject the very term "parts of speech" in favor of proxies like "word classes" and "lexical categories." A useful recent trend has been to accept the "fuzziness" of these categories, whatever you call them. The prolific writer on language David Crystal notes, "Modern grammars recognize that the largest word classes are convenient fictions, to some degree." Nouns, for instance, are often defined by having some or all of a list of features. Most notably: they can be the subject or object of a sentence or clause; they can have a plural form; they can display a suffix such as *-ish* or *-hood*. A word like *mother*, which does all three things, is thus a very "nouny" noun. *Parliament*, which satisfies only the first criterion, is on the fringes of the category.

Me, I like the parts of speech. One way to explain why is with a story about Harold Ross, the legendary founding editor of *The New Yorker* magazine. Among quite a few other things, Ross was obsessed with articles—the grammatical rather than the journalistic kind. For several decades, he ran a sort of one-man crusade against the word *the*, which he maintained should be used only to introduce a noun or noun phrase designating a unique entity. His position is not really tenable. We would say "I answered the phone" even if there were a half dozen extensions in the house, and we say "I went to the doctor" despite there being millions of M.D.s on the planet. But Ross's mania about the word went beyond logic, as manias tend to do.

It was all tied up in his feelings about a stylistic offense he called "indirection." This, his colleague Wolcott Gibbs explained in a 1937 memo titled "The Theory and Practice of Editing *New Yorker* Articles," probably maddens Mr. Ross more than anything in the world. He objects, that is, to important objects being dragged into things in a secretive and underhanded manner. If, for instance, a profile has never told where a man lives, Ross protests against a sentence saying, "His Vermont house is full of valuable paintings." Should say "He has a house in Vermont and it is full, etc."

The word *the*, in Ross's eyes, was the principal perpetrator of indirection; references to "the car," "the man," or "the overcoat" in a piece of writing were unacceptable unless the existence of said car

man, and coat had been previously established. Once, S. J. Perelman submitted to *The New Yorker* a humor piece that referred to “the woman taken in adultery,” without spelling out that this was a reference to John 8:3. Ross, not a devout man, penciled a query in the margin: “What woman?”

In the late 1940s, a not-yet-famous Russian émigré writer named Vladimir Nabokov began submitting to *The New Yorker* a series of autobiographical essays. One of them, “Lantern Slides,” concluded with a kind of montage of scenes of his youth in St. Petersburg. Nabokov wrote about the moment when a torrent of sounds come to life: voices speaking all together, a walnut cracked, the click of the nutcracker carelessly passed, thirty human hearts drowning mine with their regular beats.

Harold Ross was famous for queries such as the one he laid on Perelman—comments and questions he would scribble in the margins of *New Yorker* stories being readied for publication. The most celebrated, which Ross would insert whenever he felt a person was named but insufficiently identified, was “Who he?” On Nabokov’s galley he circled the *the* that came before the word *nutcracker* and wrote in the margin: “Were the Nabokovs a *one-nutcracker* family?” This mystified the author. His editor, Katharine White, explained Ross’s point: if in fact the family owned more than one such utensil, Ross was suggesting that the word *a* be substituted for *the*.

So here’s why I’m keen on the parts of speech: you cannot understand the difference between *nutcracker* and *the nutcracker*—and a momentous difference it is—unless you’re attentive enough to the language to understand just what an article is. And the same goes for a thousand other examples. As the anonymous author of a 1733 book called *The English Accidence* put it, the parts of speech are “the foundation upon which the beautiful fabrick of the language stands.”

I like that he or she used the word *beautiful*. Prescriptivists and descriptivists alike have recently sent forth a profusion of essays, books, and other volleys in the language wars, but they all seem to lack a sense of the beauty, the joy, the artistry, and the fun of English. The prescriptivists’ case is weakened, in addition, by the simple and unassailable fact that language changes. One example: a couple of generations ago, every grammar-school grammar teacher drilled into her charges’ heads the eternal rule that one forms the future tense in the first person by using the auxiliary verb *shall*. Today the only possible response to anyone who says, “I shall go to the store” is “And I shall call you a doctor till the end of your days.”

The main flaw of the descriptivists is their own inconsistency. People such as Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker—whose book *The Language Instinct* contains a chapter roundly ripping the “language mavens”—and the editors of the jaw-droppingly comprehensive *Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary of English Usage* put forth an it’s-all-good philosophy, yet in their own writing *follow all the traditional rules*. That is, as much as he defends it, you won’t catch Pinker using *hopefully*. This school underestimates the difference in protocol between speaking and writing, unjustifiably applying the inherent looseness of the one to the necessary (to some extent) formality of the other.

Ultimately, the issue of correctness just isn’t very interesting. Given the inevitability of change, the only question is how long a shift in spelling, syntax, punctuation, semantics, or any other aspect of language usage should be in popular use before it becomes standard or accepted. Some people want things to move fast, some people want things to move slow (except they would say *slowly*), and none of them has much of an impact on the actual rate of change.

I realized some time ago that I have a tendency to divide all experience—buildings, people, movie songs, weather, roads, hamburgers—into two categories. The first category makes me happy to be alive. The other category makes me sad, or at best neutral. And, in the realm of language, *that's* the kind of Manichaeian division I care about, and that you'll find throughout this book. In taking such an approach I'm inspired by two earlier books, both published in the first decades of the twentieth century. One is more or less descriptivist, one is more or less prescriptivist, neither is subject to the extremism of today's language ideologues, and both are governed by the idea that language artfully used can make you happy to be alive.

The first is H. L. Mencken's *The American Language*, which he initially published in 1919 and kept adding on to for the next thirty years. Mencken catalogued the slang, neologisms, place names, and wacky spelling and pronunciation of his countrymen out of pure anthropological zeal; his enthusiasm seeps from his pages and makes the book still a pleasure to read today. His influence lives in all kinds of interesting and cool investigations: for example, a body of scholarship (described in Chapter VI of this book) dedicated to finding out whether the Southern second-person pronoun *y'all* is or isn't exclusively plural. The other book is the 1926 *Modern English Usage*, otherwise known as "Fowler's" after its author, Henry W.; it was invisibly revised (that's a good thing) by Sir Ernest Gowers in 1965 and quite visibly so by Robert Burchfield in 1996. Fowler is almost completely unconcerned with "right" and "wrong." What he cares about, in such classic entries as "Elegant Variation"—which eviscerates the figure of speech, still thriving on ESPN, by which a ballplayer is referred to as "the fleet-footed second-sacker"—is good usage and bad.

So what do *I* consider bad? Horrible clichés like "the language wars" (used by yours truly five paragraphs above, and permitted to remain in the text only to provide an object lesson), mind-numbing phrasing like "Not the way you contexted it, Senator," and, sure, *hopefully*. I dislike *hopefully* not because it's wrong—check out Chapter II for an explanation of its kosherness—but because people who use it in writing tend to be imprecise, muddy, solipsistic, and dull.

And what makes me happy to be a living utilizer of English? Words, phrases, and sentences that transcend their meaning—because they're smart, funny, well-crafted, pungent, unexpected, and sometimes wrong in just the right way. (It's no coincidence that the majority of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* taken from speech rather than writing aren't grammatical. Two of them come from one man, boxing trainer Joe Jacobs: "We was robbed" and "I should of stood in bed.") You'll find examples on just about every page of this book, and in fact you've already encountered "pimp n ride," "she out-hoochied me every time," "Who he?," and "Were the Nabokovs a *one-nutcracker* family?"

And by the way, it turns out they weren't. One of the charming things about Harold Ross's queries was that they were precisely that; he was proud of the *New Yorker* tradition of never imposing an editorial change on an author. Nabokov decided that he preferred the original *the*, and his essay appeared with it in the February 11, 1950, issue of the magazine. But here is the kicker. Nabokov collected his reminiscences in 1966, in a book entitled *Speak, Memory*. During the interim, he apparently thought a good deal about Ross's question, for at the end of the ninth chapter, after the mentions of the torrents of sound and the voices speaking all together and the cracking of a walnut, there are these words: "the click of a nutcracker carelessly passed."

CHAPTER I

Adj.

Look to the adjectives.

—*Virgil Thomson*

Kicking things off with adjectives is a little like starting a kids' birthday party with the broccoli course. Because as far as not getting respect goes, adjectives leave Rodney Dangerfield in the dust. They rank right up there with Osama bin Laden, Geraldo Rivera, and the customer-service policies of cable TV companies. That it is good to avoid them is one of the few points on which the sages writing agree. Thus Voltaire: "The adjective is the enemy of the noun." Thus William Zinsser: "Most adjectives are...unnecessary. Like adverbs, they are sprinkled into sentences by writers who don't stop to think that the concept is already in the noun."

And thus the title of this book, a piece of advice that Mark Twain offered a twelve-year-old boy who had mailed the author one of his English themes. (Twain continued, "No, I don't mean utterly, but kill most of them—then the rest will be valuable. They weaken when they are close together. They give strength when they are wide apart. An adjective habit, or a wordy, diffuse, flowery habit, once fastened upon a person, is as hard to get rid of as any other vice.")

Even the ancient Greeks seem to have been dismissive of the adjective; their term for it was *epitheto*, meaning "something thrown on." Such was the influence of ancient languages that the earliest English grammarians categorized adjectives as a subset of nouns. In 1735, John Collyer sensibly objected:

Seeing the Adverb, which signifies the Manner of the Verb is made a distinct Part of Speech, why should not the Adjective be so too, since it bears at least the same relation to the Noun, as that doth the Verb?

His reasoning could not really be disputed, and not long afterward the adjective became a fully fledged part of speech. The situation is not quite as simple as Collyer made it out, however. For one thing, "words that signify the Quality of the Thing," as he puts it, come from a lot of different sources. There are not only the run-of-the-mill adjectives like *good*, *bad*, and *ugly*, but also various verb forms (a *driving* rain, a *decorated* cake); words created from suffixes like *-ific*, *-ive*, *-ous*, *-ful*, *-less*, and *-i*; words that do double duty as nouns and adjectives (*green*); both cardinal (*two*) and ordinal (*second*) numbers; determiners or possessive pronouns like *the*, *those*, and *my*; hyphenated adjective phrases such as *high-quality*; and so-called attributive nouns, such as the first word in the phrases *company man*, *wedding cake*, and *motel room*.

Not all of these make the grade as full-fledged adjectives. One fairly reliable test is whether a word can be modified by an adverb—for example, *very*, *almost*, or *absolutely*. Colors certainly qualify and numbers are usually seen as doing so as well; we could say, “Susie is almost three.” But *the*, *those*, *my*, *company*, *wedding*, and *motel* (in the above examples) are not adjectives, despite the fact that they modify or describe nouns. Some words edge their way into the class over time, at which point they are looked down on by usage commentators. A classic example is *fun*, which started out as an attributive noun, in such phrases as *fun house* (in the circus) and Mayor John Lindsay’s much-mocked description of New York, *Fun City*. Fun was not a quality of the house or the city; the idea, rather, was that in these places one had fun (a noun). In the years since then, *fun* has stepped out into the footlights as an adjective, sparingly at first and now robustly. So you see and hear it modified by *very* and *so*, and used in comparative form as *funner* and *funnest*. (*Key* is traveling a similar road.) Journalist Barbara Wallraff quoted Steven Pinker as saying that he “can tell whether people are over thirty years old or under by whether they’re willing to accept *fun* as a full-fledged adjective.” I’m well over thirty but have no objection to *fun* being used this way, at least in speech. After all, the only alternative for “That was a really fun trip” is “That was a really enjoyable trip,” which is the kind of thing Edd Haskell would say.

But, to reiterate, I am not one of those whatever-is-is-right loose constructionists; some new adjectives make me Sad to Be Alive. When someone says, “That’s very cliché,” my reaction is “That’s very icky.” *Clichéd* is a perfectly good adjective that was already in the dictionary. Equally grating is the shortening of the phrasal adjective *high-quality* to just plain *quality*, as in “He’s a quality individual.” Unfortunately, the trend is clearly going the other way: a Yahoo search for the phrase *quality individual* yields more than 15,200 hits.

While we’re on the subject of Pinker’s “language mavens,” here’s their number one adjective-related complaint: the use of comparative or intensifying modifiers with supposedly “absolute” adjectives. The poster child here is *unique*. How would grammar geeks and English teachers spend their time if they were prohibited from tsk-tsking at *more unique* and *very unique*, or explaining that since unique means one-of-a-kind, there can be no degrees of uniqueness? But the mavens’ kvetching on this point won’t wash. The *OED* notes that since the nineteenth century, *unique* “has been in very common use, with a tendency to take the wider meaning of ‘uncommon, unusual, remarkable.’” The dictionary quotes Kenneth Grahame’s 1908 *The Wind in the Willows*: “‘Toad Hall,’ said the Toad proudly, ‘is an eligible self-contained gentleman’s residence, very unique.’” Other absolutes can profitably be modified as well. Orwell expressed his point perfectly when he wrote in *Animal Farm*: “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.” And the framers of the U.S. Constitution knew exactly what they were doing when they wrote, “We the People of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union...”

There are two main kinds of adjectives: attributive ones normally come right before the noun they qualify, while predicative adjectives come after *to be* or similar verbs such as *become* and *seem*. Most adjectives can serve either purpose: we can speak of a “happy family” and say “the family appeared happy.” But some work only one way. Take the sentence “Clergymen are *answerable* to a *higher* authority.” *Answerable* is exclusively a predicative; you could not refer to an “answerable clergyman.” And *higher* is strictly attributive; you wouldn’t normally say, “The authority is higher.”

Attributive adjectives sometimes follow the model of French and come after the noun, as when v

refer to accounts *payable*, something *important*, proof *positive*, matters *philosophical*, paradise *lost*, battle *royal*, the heir *apparent*, stage *left*, time *immemorial*, or a Miller *Lite*. And predicative adjectives appear before the noun when used appositively: “*Tall, dark, and homely*, he is a natural choice to play the part of Abraham Lincoln.”

That brings up another wrinkle. Attributive and predicative adjectives can both be listed in a series but they behave in different ways. In normal usage, predicative ones are separated by a comma and the last item is preceded by a conjunction, usually *and*, *but*, *or*, or *yet*: for example, in the title of Lorraine Hansberry’s play *To Be Young, Gifted and Black* or in the lyric “Three cheers for the red, white, and blue.” Attributive lists can conclude with a conjunction (“The stuffed, stamped, and sealed envelopes go on the table”) or not (“The quick, brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” “Stately, plump Buck Mulligan”—the first four words of *Ulysses*). The comma issue opens a can of worms. Some people have an instinctive sense of it. They are the lucky ones. The logic behind the usage, basically, is that adjectives qualify a noun in the same way, and if their order can be changed without doing any damage to the sentence, they should be separated by commas: “We had to cross a *wide, rough, freezing* river.” On the other hand, you don’t put commas between adjectives that modify each other before ones that are part a noun phrase: “We stayed at a *luxurious seaside* motel” “He is the *second happy married enlisted* man I’ve talked to today.” Sometimes there’s a mix: “Tiger Woods was the first righthanded [comma] brown-eyed [no comma] American golfer to win the tournament.”^{*1} The trusty trick you might remember from junior high school still works: if inserting an *and* between any pair of adjectives in the series sounds okay, use a comma. If not, don’t.

Now you know what adjectives are, but you may still be wondering why so many people bash them. These words are clearly necessary in order to communicate many thoughts and ideas: how could we make our way in the world without saying things like the “other cup,” an “old man,” the “green door,” the “last day,” etc., etc.? Moreover, adjectives aren’t really used that much—they account for only about 6 percent of all words in the British National Corpus, a 100-million-word collection of samples of written and spoken language. The root of the problem is lazy writers’ inordinate fondness for this part of speech. They start hurling the epithets when they haven’t provided enough data—specific nouns and active verbs—to get their idea across. It’s easy—too easy—to describe a woman as “beautiful.” It takes more heavy verbal lifting, but is more effective, to point out that the jaw of every male in the room dropped when she walked in. And establishing that someone kicked an opponent who was down, stole seventeen dollars from a Salvation Army collection kettle, and lied to partners about having sexually transmitted diseases precludes the need to call him terrible, awful, horrible, horrid, deplorable, despicable, or vile.

Describing nature may be writers’ toughest challenge—and many face it by stacking up the attributive adjectives, with a sprinkling of adverbs. An adherence to this formula may in fact be the most reliable sign of bad poetry: each line seems like an unfunny game of Mad-Libs. “The ^{adj.} snow fell ^{adv.} on the ^{adj.} ground as the ^{adj.} children played ^{adv.}.”

Generally speaking, it’s the attributive adjectives that are abused; the predicative ones, coming after a verb, tend to encourage more thought and selectivity. Certainly, attributive adjectives are a feature of clichés and catchphrases. Have you recently heard of a bystander who wasn’t innocent, a lining that wasn’t silver, or a break that wasn’t lucky? This isn’t a new thing, either. In his 1930 book *Adjectives*

—*and Other Words*, Ernest Weekley noted that after an assassination attempt on Mussolini, “the President of the Irish Free State congratulated him on ‘providential escape’ from ‘odious attack,’ sent his ‘earnest wishes’ for a ‘speedy recovery’ from the ‘infamous attempt’ that had caused ‘utmost indignation,’ etc.” “There are people,” Weekley observed, “who seem to think that a noun unaccompanied by an adjective has no real signification.” A line of journalism quoted by Fowler in *Modern English Usage*—“The operation needs considerable skill and should be performed with proper care”—illustrates the point. The adjectives *considerable* and *proper* not only are unnecessary; they actually weaken the writer’s point. Yet one can understand the impulse to put them in, for it has been felt by all of us.

Finally, when writers commit the sin of showing off—of being flowery or obscure for no reason other than to call attention to themselves—more often than not the tools of the crime are NOAs (needlessly obscure adjectives). There is no reason to use *rebarbative* instead of *unpleasant*, *annoying*, or some other familiar negative epithet, other than to be fancy. (A glossary at the end of the chapter defines *rebarbative* and all the other unfamiliar adjectives mentioned.) T. S. Eliot made a fetish of using long-dormant adjectives like *defunctive*, *anfractuouse*, and *polyphiloprogenitive*; he apparently felt *piacular* (meaning something done or offered in order to make up for a sin or sacrilegious action) was too run-of-the-mill, so he made up a new form: *piaculative*. Senator Robert Byrd is justly snickered at for saying things like “maledicent language” and “contumelious lip.” Gore Vidal has been accused of excessive fondness for words like *mephitic* and *riparian*. In just one essay, James Fenton writes, “The element of the aleatoric may well be genuinely present,” and refers to “proleptic writers such as Ibsen and Strindberg” and to a “hieratic figure somewhat reminiscent of Ernst.” That’s too proleptic for me.

The best use for this kind of adjective is comedy. In *One Fat Englishman*, Kingsley Amis’s narrator expresses surprise that the cast of characters in a young American’s novel does not include “paraplegic necrophiles, hippoerotic jockeys, exhibitionistic castrates, coprophagic pig-farmer, armless flagellationists and the rest of the bunch.” S. J. Perelman made a career out of formulations such as “the evening a young person from the Garrick Gaeities, in a corybantic mood, swung into a cancan and executed a kick worthy of La Goulue.”

But some writers’ abuse of adjectives has led to the defamation of an entire part of speech. The resourceful and creative use of these words marks, more than any other single trait, a first-rate essayist or critic. It’s an indication of originality, wit, observation—the cast and quality of the writer’s mind. As Herbert Read writes in *English Prose Style*:

The necessity of epithets can be determined by a nice judgment, but to use them appropriately is to employ a more instinctive faculty. In simple cases there is no choice: the meaning to be expressed demands one epithet and no other. But in other cases an unusual epithet must be sought to express a subtlety of feeling.... The free use of epithets is a characteristic of a mature literature, of highly developed civilizations and analytical minds.

I agree—so strongly that I’ll admit, at the risk of being called a train-spotter, that I have been collecting outstanding or notable examples of adjective use for close to two decades. What can I tell you? It floats my boat. A recent addition to my thick file is a sentence from an op-ed piece that novelist William Boyd wrote for the *New York Times*. Talking of French TV weather people’s dom-

forecasts about the hot summer, he wrote, “The tone is minatory and worrying, and very infectious. *Worrying* and *infectious* are good, but what made me clip the quote was *minatory*, which I found defined in the dictionary as “menacing or threatening.” So why is it better than *menacing* or *threatening*? Well, the *-ing* ending of either would awkwardly echo *worrying* (itself a nice adj.), as well as incorrectly imply that the weathercasters themselves embodied a threat.

I didn’t mind looking up *minatory* in the dictionary. That book contains some really good adjectives whose meanings more familiar ones simply can’t get at. Simple words are fine for broad brushstrokes but often not adequate for the intricacies and fine points and nuances of human relationships, characteristics, and situations. Nor is it necessary to carry *Webster’s* with you at all times. When the words are deployed skillfully, a reader can often infer or at least guess at the meaning from the context. Here are some nice examples, from my files, of the unfamiliar adj.:

“In those trusses I saw a reminder of a country-fairgrounds grandstand, or perhaps the *penumbrous* bones of the Polo Grounds roof.”—Roger Angell on the gridwork at the new baseball stadium in Baltimore

“She shook her head, and a smell of *alembicated* summer touched his nostrils.”—Sylvia Townsend Warner

“The Sunday’s events repeated themselves in his mind, bending like *nacreous* flakes around a central *infrangible* irritant.”—John Updike

“He had the surface involvement—style—while I had the deep-structural, immobilizing *synovial* ballooning of a superior mind.”—Nicholson Baker on Updike

“The great out-sticking ears that frame his face like *cartilaginous* quotation marks.”—Michael Kelly on Ross Perot

“Churchill is morally *irrefragible* in American discourse, and can be quoted even more safely than Lincoln.”—Christopher Hitchens

“...the *chordal* quality of a man who is simultaneously overbearing and winning.”—Stanley Kauffmann

“...a *fissiparous*, splintered artifact.”—Alex Clark on Ali Smith’s novel *The Accidental*

Some other nifty uncommon adjectives I’ve collected are *mordant*, *factitious*, *sentient*, *supererogatory*, *capacious*, *supercilious*, *sedulous*, *fustian*, *captious*, *supernal*, *noisome*, *baleful*, *phatic*, *liminal*, *nugatory*, *tensile*, *cumbrous*, *perdurable*, *refulgent*, *anodyne*, *tenebrous*, *bibulous*, *gormless*, *shambolic*, *panoptic*, *otiose*, *oneiric*, *bumptious*, *demotic*, *pharaonic*, *pertinacious*, and *ludic*.

Much of this is a matter of taste, to be sure. The words listed above work for me; you may find them show-offy and vulgar. And there are adjectives that, when I first encountered them, moved me enough to clip them but have since, in my opinion, become clichés. These would include *vertiginous*, *lubricious*, *snarky*, *febrile*, *sclerotic*, *priapic*, *cloacal*, *etiolated*, *twee*, *soigné*, *pellucid*, *perfervid*, *palpable*, *lambent*, *plangent*, *iconic*, and *pneumatic* (as in “Renoir’s pneumatic nudes”).

With the help of modern computer databases, it’s possible to look at this objectively. Consider *sclerotic* and *thrombotic*. Both originated as medical terms, the former referring to body or plant tissue that has thickened or hardened, the latter to the presence of artery-blocking blood clots. *Sclerotic* also has a metaphoric meaning, referring to people or organizations that have become rigid with age. This meaning has now officially lost any freshness or cleverness it once had. Keying *sclerotic* to the LexisNexis databases of fifty major English-language newspapers, I see that the word has been employed 199 times in the past twelve months, almost always figuratively. This from the *Financial Times* is typical: “the UK economy combines many of the US economy’s imbalances with productivity and demographic trends that look sclerotic even by European standards.” And *thrombotic*? It was used twenty-five times—but twenty-four of them were in the medical sense. The single person who used it imaginatively was Dan Mitchell, referring in the *New York Times* to a time not long ago “when local news outlets were still flooding the zone every time a new Krispy Kreme store opened (but generally ignoring openings of the vastly superior, if equally thrombotic, Dunkin’ Donuts).” Now that’s a good adj.

Of course, there are different clichés for different fields. Reviewers of all kinds are probably the most notorious abusers and overusers of adjectives, plugging them into sentences and relieving themselves of the need to think. The condition was nailed by a recent *New Yorker* cartoon, in which a man looks up from a book and declares, “Forceful, yes! But not lucid, as the ‘Times’ would have me believe.”

In his book *Passage to Juneau*, Jonathan Raban has a nice riff on how our perception of the world can actually be altered by clichéd adjectives:

Two centuries of romanticism, much of it routine and degenerate, has blunted everyone’s ability to look at waterfalls and precipices in other than dusty and secondhand terms. Motoring through the Sound, watching for deadheads, I sailed through a logjam of dead literary clichés: snow-capped peaks above, fathomless depths below, and, in the middle of the picture, the usual gaunt cliffs, hoary crags, wild woods and crystal cascades.

Raban is himself an adjectival virtuoso, and I call your attention to the pair of paired adjectives in the first sentence of the passage: routine and degenerate, dusty and secondhand. Not only is it difficult to extract just the right doozy of an adjective out of the hornbook, but the maneuver can be performed at most twice in the course of an article or chapter. Any more than that and you look like a show-off. A more durable and ultimately more satisfying strategy is what Raban is doing here: using the conventional adjective in an unconventional way.

And so here is a selection of more or less familiar adjectives, used to splendid effect in unexpected ways:

“His passes were very specific.”—Former basketball player Bobby Jones on his teammate Maurice Cheeks

“[T. S.] Eliot...would on occasion provide firm and worldly advice, even to unlikely and mutinous loners like Wyndham Lewis.”—Donald Davie

“The government of the United States, in both its legislative arm and its executive arm, is ignorant, corrupt and disgusting.”—H. L. Mencken

“Your old-fashioned tirade—/loving, rapid, merciless—/breaks like the Atlantic Ocean on my head.”—Robert Lowell

“[Andrew] Sarris’s prose was dense, balanced, aphoristic, alliterative.... [Pauline] Kael’s was loping, derisive, intimate, gag-packed, as American as Lenny Bruce.”—Richard Corliss

“The American anti-Communism of the Fifties was abstract, extreme, self-serving, and false.”—John Lukacs

“Society, in these States, is cankered, crude, superstitious, and rotten.”—Walt Whitman

“...the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”—Thomas Hobbes

“Housman is dry, soft, shy, prickly, smooth, conventional, silent, feminine, fussy, persnickety, sensitive, tidy, greedy, and a touch of a toper.”—Harold Nicolson on A. E. Housman

You’ll notice that there’s a different feel depending on whether one, two, three, or four or more adjectives are used. In an ingenious article called “The Rhetoric of the Series,” the composition scholar Winston Weathers argued that by forming series of various lengths, writers present greatly different tones of voice. Two parts suggest “certainty, confidence, didacticism and dogmatism” three parts, “the normal, the reasonable, the believable and the logical” (see *red, white, and blue*); and four or more parts, “the human, emotional, diffuse and inexplicable.”

Martin Amis is another contemporary adjective virtuoso (and, I suspect, a fellow collector), and here’s one sentence where, in describing a single, he uses a double and a five-spot: “The word ‘Larkinesque’ used to evoke the wistful, the provincial, the crepuscular, the sad, the unloved; now it evokes the scabrous and the supremacist.”

Raban and Amis are British, and I would have to say that adjective use is a bit more highly developed across the pond than it is in the U.S. But there are some standout American practitioners. One of them is *New York Times* popular music critic Jon Pareles, whose use of adjectives in his concert reviews is resourceful, invigorating, and fine:

[Ted Hawkins’s] voice was woolly and pensive.

[Thelonious Monk's] touch was blunt and unpretty, and his solos were droll and suspenseful.

...a groan that's jaded, long-suffering, cranky and shrewd. [On Walter Becker's voice.]

[Aretha Franklin's] voice was creamy, loving, humble, sassy and indomitable.

Frenetic and offhand, deranged and savvy, funny and brutal, crisp and wayward, the Pixies brought their calmly schizophrenic, firmly dislocated rock to the Ritz on Friday night.

Adjective difficulties often come when writers want to say "good" or "bad" in a forceful or stylistic way, but haven't thought enough about which word to choose. Kenneth Tynan's Oxford tutor wrote one of Tynan's papers: "Keep a strict eye on eulogistic & dyslogistic adjectives—They shd *diagnose* (not merely blame) & distinguish (not merely praise)." The tutor was C. S. Lewis, a smart chap.

There are more useful negative adjectives than positive ones; and some people deploy them with genius. George Orwell will often devote several paragraphs of relatively noncommittal description to something he clearly doesn't approve of. Only then comes the money shot, in the form of an adjective like *abhorrent*, *unspeakable*, or *disgusting*. Once I worked with a food critic named Janet Bukovinski and I have always treasured her description of a certain dish: "desiccated and nasty." Pop-lingo terms like *bogus*, *whack*, *lame*, *clueless*, and *random* still have a certain zing even though they're past their prime. I recently was privileged to be present when my daughter Elizabeth and her friends analyzed the subtle distinctions among *shady*, *sketchy*, *creepy*, and *skeevy*.

Praise is tougher, in large part because verbal inflation has taken its toll on *wonderful*, *great*, *fantastic*, *awesome*, *terrific*, *fabulous*, *incredible*, *remarkable*, and all the rest. As a result, the most effective kind of praise is often by understatement: having a certain kind of person say that something you've done is "decent" or "not bad" can put you on cloud nine for a week. With the exception of *cool*, which retains its effectiveness after well over half a century, slang words—*groovy*, *phat*, *radical*, *smokin'*—have a very brief life span in which they can be used to express sincere enthusiasm. Then they revert to irony or, at best, expressions of a sort of mild sardonic approval. The main rule seems to be, the simpler, the better. Robert Frost's most famous poem says, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep," and William Carlos Williams talks about plums that were "so sweet/and so cold." Huck Finn tells us, "I laid there in the grass and the cool shade thinking about things, and feeling rested and rather comfortable and satisfied"—and the four plain adjectives make us feel his pleasure.

Indeed, the most memorable literary adjective in the entire language is just four letters long. It appears in the fourth verse of the first book of the Bible: "And God saw the light, that it was good."

A GLOSSARY OF UNUSUAL ADJECTIVES

apocatastrophic: relating to luck, especially to bad luck.

ambicated: overrefined or oversubtle (said of ideas or expressions).

fractuosity: full of windings and intricate turnings.

odyne: unlikely to offend or arouse tensions; innocuous.

leful: threatening, or seeming to threaten, harm.

bulous: marked by the consumption of alcoholic beverages.

umptious: presumptuously, obtusely, and often noisily self-assertive.

acious: containing or capable of containing a great deal.

ptious: tending to find and stress faults and raise objections.

rtilaginous: composed of, relating to, or resembling cartilage.

acal: relating to, figuratively or literally, the common chamber into which the intestinal, urinary, and generative canals of many animals discharge; having to do with sewers or cesspools.

ntumelious: insolently abusive and humiliating.

rophagic: prone to, subject to, or characterized by the eating of excrement.

rybantic: wild; frenzied.

puscular: of, relating to, or resembling twilight.

mbrous: cumbersome.

functive: having ceased to exist or live.

motiic: characteristic of ordinary people, especially in regard to language and speech.

slogistic: expressing or connoting disapprobation or dispraise.

olated: pale; lacking in natural vigor.

logistic: having the quality of high praise.

ctitious: contrived or insincere.

orile: feverish.

siparous: tending to break up into parts.

stian: high-flown or affected in style.

rmless: stupid.

eratic: highly stylized or formal.

opoerotic: sexually stimulated by horses.

refrangible: impossible to refute, break, or alter.

resplendent: marked by lightness or brilliance.

insignificant: barely perceptible.

profligate: marked by wantonness; salacious.

playful: of, relating to, or characterized by play.

reproachful: reproachful (in speech); slanderous.

repulsive: foul-smelling.

scathing: biting and caustic in thought, manner, or style.

offensive: offensive to the senses and especially to the sense of smell; by extension, highly obnoxious or objectionable.

inconsequential: of little or no consequence.

dreamlike: of or relating to dreams.

useless: useless; futile.

tangible: capable of being touched or felt; tangible.

panoramic: presenting a comprehensive or panoramic view.

clear: very clear and easy to understand.

shadowy: shadowy or indistinct.

enduring: very durable.

ardent: marked by overwrought or exaggerated emotion; excessively fervent.

obstinate: stubbornly unyielding or tenacious.

colossal: enormous in size or magnitude.

persuasive: of or relating to speech used for social or emotive purposes rather than for communicating information.

heinous: requiring expiation; wicked or blameworthy.

plaintive: having an expressive and especially plaintive quality.

hyperproliferative: extremely prolific.

viapic: phallic; relating to or preoccupied with virility.

oleptic: anticipatory.

barbative: repellant; irritating.

fulgent: radiant or resplendent.

marian: relating to or living or located on the bank of a river or lake.

obtrusive: dealing with suggestive, indecent, or scandalous themes.

diligent: diligent and perseverant.

attentive: responsive to or conscious of sense impressions.

ambolic: disorganized or confused. snarky: sarcastically demeaning.

igné: elegantly maintained or designed; sleek.

percilious: patronizing and haughty.

pererogatory: performed to an unrequired or unnecessary extent.

pernal: superlatively good, as if originating in the heavens.

novial: relating to, secreting, or being synovia (the clear viscous fluids that lubricate the lining of joints).

nebrous: dark or murky.

nsile: relating to or involving tension.

ortiginous: causing dizziness, especially by being very high, literally or metaphorically.

CHAPTER II

Adv.

Every word, when a grammarian knows not what to make of it, he calls an adverb.

—*Servius, fourth century C.E.*

The adverb is like the adjective only more so. That is, it is disrespected so generally and so forcefully that numerous babies get thrown out with some admittedly skeevey bathwater. There is a long tradition of this. In the eighteenth century, John Horne Tooke called the adverb “the common sink and repository of all heterogeneous and unknown corruptions.” H. L. Mencken referred to it as “at best the stepchild of grammar.” More recently, Phil Phantom wrote in his book *The Guide to Writing Good Trash*: “Lazy, shiftless, slothful creatures without spines use simple verbs and then tack on an adverb to make sense. Because we are sentient beings with a brain, spinal cord, and opposing thumbs, we have the ability to seek out and find the precise verb that best describes the action.”

Noted novelists have thrown down the gauntlet as well. Gabriel García Márquez has announced that his book *Chronicle of a Death Foretold* contains but a single adverb—and that he has completely banished the part of speech from subsequent works. Elmore Leonard not long ago posted on the Web a list of writing rules to live by. Number 4 is “Never use an adverb to modify the word ‘said.’” Leonard continued: “To use an adverb this way (or almost any way) is a mortal sin. The writer is now exposing himself in earnest, using a word that distracts from and can interrupt the rhythm of the exchange. I have a character in one of my books tell how she used to write historical romances ‘full of rape and adverbs.’” Good one. Toni Morrison observed, “I never say, ‘She says softly.’ If it’s not already soft, I have to leave a lot of space around it so a reader can hear it’s soft.” And finally, Stephen King states in his book *On Writing*:

I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they’re like dandelions. If you have one on your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day...fifty the day after that...and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is **totally, completely, and profligately** covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they are, but by then it’s *GASP!!*—too late.

Even Hollywood scriptwriters have joined in the fun. In the thriller *Outbreak*, Kevin Spacey’s character picks on a word in a memo written by fellow scientist Dustin Hoffman: “It’s an adverb, Sam. It’s a lazy tool of a weak mind.”

The flaw in all this calumny is exposed in a final anti-adverb sound bite, this from the authors of a book entitled *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers*, who advise: “Cut virtually every one you write.”

bright fourth-grader would be delighted to tell them that in dissing adverbs, they used an adverb *Virtually*. And so did Phantom (*best*), Leonard (*never, almost*), Morrison (*already*), and King (*however, too*).

The root problem here is that the adverb is so varied and various. It accounts for less than 5 percent of the 100-million-word British National Corpus and none of the fifty most commonly used words in it (the top adverb is *so*, clocking in at number fifty-six), but David Crystal, author of *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, rightly calls it “the most heterogeneous of all the word classes in English grammar.” The adverb indeed can be a crutch and a peril, but it’s also a tool necessary for expressing a multitude of meanings; and it can be an indispensable tool in crafting strong and artful prose.

You can get a sense of the adverb’s potency by taking a glimpse at some titles that contain one. In each case the adverb rescues the title from blandness with a *je ne sais quoi* flavor:

Movies: *Thoroughly Modern Millie*; *Truly Madly Deeply*; *Johnny Dangerously* (which contains the immortal line of dialogue: “Did you know your last name’s an adverb?”); *And Now for Something Completely Different*.

TV shows: *Absolutely Fabulous*; *Fairly Odd Parents*; *Suddenly Susan*; *A Very Brady Christmas*.

Books: *Deeper into Movies*; *Bang the Drum Slowly*.

Plays: *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*; *Merrily We Roll Along*; *All’s Well That Ends Well*.

Songs: “Alone Again, Naturally” “How High the Moon” “Don’t You Love Her Madly” “This Was a Real Nice Clambake” “Helplessly Hoping” “Hopelessly Devoted to You” and at least three from Bob Dylan: “Queen Jane Approximately,” “Positively Fourth Street,” and “Absolutely Sweet Marie.”*²

Adverbs can be bad; adverbs can be good. But how do you tell the difference? A good way to start with an adverb taxonomy.

As recorded in the British National Corpus, the thirty most commonly used adverbs, after *so*, are *up, then, out, now, only, just, more, also, very, well, how, down, back, on, there, still, even, too, here, where, however, over, in, as, most, again, never, why, off*, and *really*. Unless you’re a grammarian I’m mistaken, you did a double-take when you read that list and muttered something along the lines “Those aren’t even adverbs, you twit!” But they are. It’s true that only the last one, *really*, takes the traditional, well-known *adjective+ly* form, and it’s true that some of these words do word-class double-duty (*in, on*, and *over* can be prepositions, *as* a conjunction, *still* an adjective). But they are adverbs nonetheless. They modify adjectives, verbs, or both. She is *so* happy. He went *up*. *Then* I did it. We went *out*. Don’t be *too* upset.

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