



C h e l l i s
G l e n d i n n i n g

Et Tu, Bro?

A Memoir of the Making of American Language

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“To speak a language is to take on a world...” --Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*

“I think we’ve been joined by something.” --Eeyore, *Winnie the Pooh*

A curious epiphany occurred when I began a friendship with Polish anthropologist Kinga Tomczyk. She speaks very good English, and yet the quirky phrases with which we North Americans sprinkle our conversations would stand out like African elephants in Antarctica; I would spout them, and... she would have no idea what I was saying.

What is language anyway? Despite my exercise of it for near-on seven decades, supposedly fortified by an upper-level course in linguistics at UC Berkeley, I’ll be damned if I know. Some say it got going so that people could count and therefore engage in business transactions; others that it grew out of ritual and song; indeed, a multitude maintain that speech was delivered by God, the deities, the stars, the animals, the trees. We do know that the human brain is biologically scheduled to master speech from birth to age seven, perhaps even up to 12--not by educated explication but by imitation. And that it is constantly mutating into something else. Like during the latter half of the 20th century, and herein begins this memoir of idiom.

I was born into the Queen's English. The family consisted of a bunch of Anglophiles who sat on the veranda in Cleveland Heights sipping Ceylon, regaling themselves with stories about Winston Churchill, and spouting the Royal We. Needless to say, Tigger and Mr. Toad were my earliest teachers. And Dickens. Grandfather "Pipere" collected Charles Dickens memorabilia, and in 1953 my brothers and I were whisked to my grandmother's house at some ungodly hour to witness the coronation of Queen Elizabeth on the spanking new Magnavox. Diagramming sentences followed in Mrs. McCreary's 8th-grade English class—with Caesar's Latin, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and "The Hollow Men" fast on its heels.

All this was my education regarding language--and yet words were always mysteriously beyond comprehension. As Robert McFarlane puts it, "There are experiences... that will always resist articulation, and of which words I offer only a distant echo. Nature will not name itself. Granite doesn't self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject." At the same time, there is that irrepressible urge within us, as Ralph Waldo Emerson offered, to "pierce rotten diction and fasten words again to visible things"--and indeed, as post-World War II society changed, so new lingos were remodeling our description of visible things in the United States.

First, hustle-women-from-the-arms-factory-back-to-the-kitchen consumerism made its mass-mediated stampede, boasting such making and remaking of terms as "fridge" and "Tupperware," "station wagon" and "peanut gallery." As did geopolitical vocabulary like "Iron Curtain," "hydrogen bomb," and "developed/ undeveloped societies." Not to mention: "satellite" and "first-man-in-space" (Eeee-gads! A Russian!) Part and parcel with such signs of the advance of Ike's deepest apprehension—"the military-industrial complex"--emerged the inevitable mutiny, and it is this slant on the subject that I wish to explore.

To the rhythms of snapping fingers the Beats recited poetry in brick-walled basement cafés from Greenwich Village to North Beach, spouting such phrases as "Dig it, man" and "Like, wow!" Theirs was a language of wonder that penetrated beyond the going conception of reality and into cosmic possibility. Or maybe it was post-Hiroshima shock. Amid the black turtlenecks and tattered copies of *The Bhagavad Gita*, the moniker "hipster" turned up. Curiously, this noun goes back to the British Empire's opium trade in 19th-century China: in the smoking dens frequented by some 13.5 million Chinese (read: 27% of the adult male population), users languished on their sides balancing lit pipes against one

hip. Given that smack/junk/horse/*chiva* made its inevitable way across several seas and into the Negro jazz scene, “hip” came to describe a person who had seen the light beyond 1950s techno-consumer hypnosis, a person who was “with it” — soon extending its meaning to include white jazz musicians, then Beats, and finally the ‘60s generation. Like far-fucking-out pinko-freak me.

My first awareness of dialect as social divider emerged during the Vietnam War. While so many of our parents were still dreaming of a Bing-Crosby Christmas, we were unearthing such liquid philosophies as “do your own thing,” “hang loose,” and “make love not war,” just as we referred to our new mind-bending pastimes using words like “Clearlight” and “psychedelic.” With such massacres as My Lai plainly paraded on what was now maligned as the “boob tube,” clearly the shit was hitting the fan--which only emphasized that we Boomers were of a different ilk from our “straight” elders.

Too, increasing numbers of seekers swarmed to ashrams in India and zendos in Japan, and the influence of Asia bloomed through such concepts as “karma,” “bodhisattva,” and “beginner’s mind.” Not to mention the rejuvenation of ideas borrowed from political efforts sequestered on the dark side of US belief systems: “dialectic,” “means of production,” “change the system from within,” “fuck the system,” “participatory democracy,” “Diggers,” and “New Left.” Amazing to me is that, despite our utter naiveté, the ‘60s generation intuited near every facet of a world better than the one we were scheduled to inherit: peace, justice, sovereignty, ecology, Native wisdom, natural foods, organic gardens, communalism, home-grown clothes, furniture, and houses; holistic medicine, bodywork, gender equity, liberated sexuality, expansion of consciousness, spirituality, animism — all aspects of a collective healing of the mind-body, us-them, human-nature split that dominated Western thinking.

Yes, indeed: hunches abounded as swirls and strata of linguistic archaeology materialized in our midst--with the consequence that US society became less oh-gosh and more real. In the 1960s-’70s what would later grow into post-colonialism, multiculturalism, and inter-culturalism was in its earliest stages--identity politics: everyday both well-used and newly-invented idioms of long-suppressed communities detonated into common jargon. Among women: “consciousness-raising,” “sisterhood,” “patriarchy,” “Ms.,” “moon goddess,” and “herstory.” Simultaneous with the “rap groups” held by Vietnam vets suffering from the psychological ravages of war, we “second-wave” feminists were busy uncovering the extent of physical violence/sexual violation against

girls and women—resulting in what came to be known as PTSD, or post-traumatic stress disorder.

One proclivity of single-group, identity politics is the rescue of words formerly used as put-downs—“What do you want? She’s just... a *woman*” —and their subsequent proposal of positive qualities like equality, beauty, power: “I Am a Woman!” Among Chicanos one such term was “Mexican,” previously uttered with such deprecation you could feel the dust of the grape field on your tongue; as a result of the Chicano movement, “Mexican” came to glow with the pride of identification with rich cultures and a rebellious history. “Aztlán” was the mythical land of the ancestors now united in the imagination with the territories lost to US aggression in 1848; “*Si Se Puede*” was its *grito de libertad*; “*carnal*” its certificate for membership.

I moved from San Francisco’s North Beach to a Chicano/Mexican-American/Indo-Hispano/Latino village in New Mexico in 1986, and I became initiated into a rich dictionary of words and their implications. I quickly learned that one could reconstruct history through language. During the 15th Century when the Moors were being expelled from Spain, many fled to the New World disguised as Catholics; scraps of such cultural ancestry live on in Arabic words assimilated into Castellan like *almuerzo*, *ajedrez*, *berenjena*, and *ramadón*. Jews were likewise cast out of Spain, and many escaped to Mexico; their hidden existence in what became northern New Mexico is verified by still present mezuzahs nailed to the front doors of the oldest adobes and in songs with Ladino tones and rhythms.

Due to the marvelously preposterous linguistic collisions common to the Spanglish-speaking community of New Mexico, I learned a great deal during my 24 years living there. One day while riding horses across the badlands, I asked fellow villager Snowflake Martinez how he understood the state of the planet. We rode for a long while as he contemplated. The saddles creaked, tumbleweed bounced by. Finally he answered: “The down-to-earth people are finishing.”

Holy moly! My spine straightened up like a wooden ruler. The adjective “down-to-earth” is usually used to describe a person--“she is down-to-earth” — meaning she is rooted in bodily experience, as opposed to airy-fairy or overly mental, perhaps in Carl Jung’s system of personality types a Sensate. To encounter the phrase depicting entire indigenous or land-based cultures lends a tilt of surprise: “down-to-earth” may be formally incorrect in Snowflake’s sentence, but its unforeseen appearance lends a resounding “Ah-ha!”

Even more splendidly, I could suddenly see that each verb comes at its action from a different angle, with a different time frame or agency, providing its own accent on action. "Finishing" typically means something akin to "wrapping up," implying a coming to a predictable end as of a homework assignment or a book. If we want to emphasize the process that is occurring without agency, words like "going extinct" or "vanishing" might do the trick. If we would rather assign agency, we could say "were massacred by the US Calvary." Each would be correct--but would lose the refreshing impact of astonishment.

Indeed, during the 1960s and '70s things were cookin' in the U.S. of A. The explosion of liberation movements seemed to know no bounds—and with it previously unknown, underused, or newly-invented lingo entered mainstream vernacular. From Latin America came "*desaparecido*," "dirty war," and "liberation theology." From Africa phrases like "anti-colonialism" and "freedom is coming" found their way into American consciousness. The 1969 gay men's mutiny against a police raid at New York's Stonewall Inn threw the closet door open for them as well as for lesbians, bisexuals, transvestites, and later, transgenders. Previously denigrating phrases like "queer," "homo," and "dyke" morphed into terms of endearment within said populations—but needless to say, you had to be a member of the cohort to use them. No competition, though: outside the group, heterosexual Americans had enough new words to wrap their tongues around: "gay pride," "drag queen," "LGBT," "Amazon,"--and finally "T-cells."

The Negro/Civil Rights/Black/Black Power/Afro/African American/People of Color uprising delivered its own Big Bang, successfully infiltrating the dominant culture with its history, culture, and sensibility so profoundly that the English language was altered forever. Although the Black population had been openly struggling for equality and justice since the force-feeding of institutional slavery, the 1950s-'60s followed on the heels of the courage of Black soldiers/ vets of World War II protesting discrimination in and after the service. Foremost in this expression as it evolved were the recording studios of Detroit--and they were hot. Indeed, "Heat Wave" blared into city streets in ghettos across the nation. The Temptations, Smokey and the Miracles, and the Four Tops sat atop the music charts, and things only got hotter when riots reached fever pitch from Cleveland's Hough Area to LA's Watts District. In the process, "Brother-man," "hood," "the Man's technology," "non-violent action," "by any means necessary," and "burn, baby, burn" came to be known and used by everyone and anyone regardless of race or skin color.

The Black Power Handshake also entered the vernacular. SLAP-CLASP-SLITHER-BUMP!--indicating a tribal camaraderie pegged together by common knowledge of racism's irrationality and shared awakening to the need for solidarity. It originated among Black soldiers stationed in the Pacific during the Vietnam War after some "bloods" were reportedly shot by their fellow--albeit white--Americans. Traveling back to Black communities on US soil, the handshake came to represent commitment to a radical response to police brutality and racial injustice. Twenty years later in northern New Mexico, I found the same salutation popular among rural Chicanos, now deemed the Homie Handshake; word has it that they met up with Blacks in federal prisons like Soledad and Lompoc, learned the clasp, and upon release fed it back to their communities--where it spread as quick as a Free-Huey-Newton poster. Fast forward to the Bolivian *altiplano*, 2015: various renditions of the handshake are regularly used on the streets of El Alto as well as in mountain villages, and back in the US the mayor of Memphis, Tennessee, even extended the shortened version--the fist bump/dap/knuckle crunch--to, of all people,... the Dalai Lama!

In the 1980s and '90s, the ecology movement invited us to care about other species and the planet. Suddenly arising on the linguistic horizon were "oil spill," "Love Canal," "Bhopal," "global warming," "climate change," "the death of the oceans""--as well as "thinking like a mountain," "living as if the Earth mattered," "small is beautiful," "more-than-human," "inter-species communication." Meanwhile, Native Americans reminded a continent of concepts like "sovereignty," "Mother Earth," and "talking stick." I won't forget the Thanksgiving Dinner I shared with members of five tribes at Larry Littlebird's house in Santa Fe. As would be expected, the conversation turned to the meaning of the holiday--a thorny topic in this crowd--and quickly slipped into a discussion of accepted (albeit other-determined) expressions to describe the various groups--each of which, like "Navajo," could be translated to mean "enemy." As we uncovered one example then another and another, we came helplessly face-to-face with the absurd reality of the human condition. And we laughed until our deodorant burned out, our jaws ached, and we couldn't eat any more Indian Pudding.

Speaking of enemies: in the anti-nuclear/freeze/peace movement of the 1980s, our vocabulary expanded to include such concepts as "megatons," "nuclear winter," "cruise missiles," "Star Wars," "Evil Empire," "Three Mile Island," and "Chernobyl." Then, as the Trilateral Commission morphed into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and finally into the World Trade

Organization, the emerging anti-globalization movement raised consciousness about the centuries-long lunge toward resource take-over leading to these final nails in the coffin of human/planetary survivability. A then little-known meeting of Allied leaders held in 1944 at Bretton Woods became the by-now notorious gateway to Western-style capitalist monetary management and techno-corporate expansion, and by the '90s Americans were talking "IMF," "consumer society," "GMO," "Wi-Fi," "Peak Oil," and "planetary extinction." Not to forget: "A Better World Is Possible," "global justice," "Zapatistas," and "Occupy."

As the recipients of such rapid-fire additions to daily vocabulary, we might return to our questions about the origin and meaning of language. What I want to grok is how the hell is it that I can launch into a rap without even knowing where I'm headed, without sensing anything more than the presence of some vague arrangement of the furniture of imagery in my mind--and emerge with a coherent, grammatically-correct thought process?

And yet here I am, after all is said and done, using language to try to comprehend language--and that has got to be one unforgiving labyrinth. One thing we do know is that that which resides on the tip of our tongues is constantly being shaped and reformed by historical events, psycho-social structures, technological disseminations, migrations, and philosophies seeking to explain the resultant realities. If the United States is indeed the "melting pot" of the world's peoples--or at least fertile ground for post-postmodern interculturality--it can be said that this country boasts a linguistic tendency to mix and match, add and stir. And an openness to tolerating, even rejoicing in, fresh twists of the tongue.

The process marches ever on, of course. Despite the fact that "language is always late for its subject," this incessant desire to "fasten words again to visible things" keeps right on keepin' on.

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