

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Anyone With Nothing to Say Can Say It

Sylvie · Thursday, October 11th, 2012

One of the things that really irks me as a writer is the increasingly careless use of language — often because it is used to say so little of value, most of the time because it is simply used badly, and sometimes because it is squandered entirely. We have entered the era of talking too much about too little, when subject-matter doesn't seem to matter and when we are drowning in a vat of meaningless utilitarian exchanges. Then there's the matter of spending whatever's left of our diced and shredded time attempting to correct and counteract the deluge of misinformation, disinformation and overinformation that floods all our new channels of communication. It's a dirty job, but someone always seems ready to do it, so hey, why not waste another several frayed and fractious hours trying?



Surprised? I didn't think so. We've now all—myself clearly included—been given a forum as well as a voice and everyone appears to be using both, 24/7. The more the merrier? More like much ado about nothing. I'll play Scrooge and say humbug. And the clichés stop here.

To be fair, the world we've created encourages overkill in general, literally and metaphorically. People are writing more than ever because there are so many available and indiscriminate outlets that everyone's a self-appointed pundit (now there's a really ugly word for you). In addition all this freedom of expression makes for a giddy sense of encouragement, because nobody needs to worry about whether it's good writing or bad any more. The new benchmarks are so democratic and the interest bar is set so low that anyone with nothing to say can say it.

### **Beep, Chat, Prattle**

We're encouraged to tweet, beep, burp, chirp, chat, jibber, jabber and prattle endlessly about anything: breakfast or nail polish or the latest bad-for-you food that three weeks from now will miraculously develop properties that get rid of belly fat and enhance your sex life.

Take those ads for new wonder drugs that form the bulk of everyone's empty-calorie TV-commercial diet. Abilify, Predaxa, Cymbalta, Cialis – they all pile it on until they don't. They promise to make you sleep like a log, have the best sex, remove pain in your joints, help you breathe as you've never breathed before—except for the 27 or so terrible things they also might do to you if you happen to have an allergic reaction—including kill you. My all-time favorite is the one that encourages you to “call this number” if you've died.

Really. I don't believe that's what they intended to say, but because they've used the language so poorly, that's how it comes out. Which is the next thing on my list: The increasing distortion of words and grammar. Have you noticed how “wreaking havoc” is being surreptitiously co-opted into “wrecking havoc”? I call this Creeping Extermination.

Apparently fewer and fewer people still know what wreaking means or that it even exists. So they make something up that kinda sounds the same but is more familiar and therefore must be right but isn't. The American Heritage Dictionary tells me that to wreak is to "inflict vengeance, punishment, express anger"; it does not mean to take a baseball bat to a stack of crockery.

### **And Then There Were None**

And have you noticed how using "none" in the singular (as in "none is"), which is correct, is rapidly being replaced by "none" in the plural (as in "none were"), which is not? I'm afraid that battle's been lost. Even the stuffiest and most venerable newspapers and magazines are capitulating. (It reminds me of a cartoon of two suits standing in the background, watching an older guy at a manual typewriter, with a green visor over his eyes and a cigarette hanging out of the corner of his mouth, as one of the suits says to the other: "We can't fire him; he's the only one left who can spell.")

I am not suggesting that language can or must never change. On the contrary. It just would be better if we changed it not out of ignorance, but out of some need or intent, however modest, to make it richer.

The reflex utterance of "you know?" every five seconds by the articulately challenged in our midst, and the terminal destruction of the word "like" by Valley girls and Facebook, do more to make my point than anything except texting and tweeting. (Oy, texting. Do we want to even go there? I mean no disrespect—well maybe I do—but BTW you may join me in LOL AYC. That alone could spell the end of language as we know it.)

### **Living Fabric**

Far from being a Language Nazi, I'm a great believer in language as a thrilling and indestructible living fabric, to be stretched and refashioned in some degree every eight to ten generations. My perennial irritation is with changes dictated not by creativity, but by a mindless and lazy kind of expedient borrowing, usually by bureaucrats and technocrats.

Language is probably flexible enough to survive this latest onslaught. It certainly has been flexible enough to accommodate reinvention born of the kind of necessity that forms its own fresh lyricism. Take black American speech: pure adaptation, accommodation and most often pure poetry. Listen to August Wilson's characters speak or Langston Hughes' verses. Sheer music. A lot of slang falls into that category as well. That kind of transformation finds language emerging newly minted, more vivid, with a new kind of vigor in its distortions. It does not just borrow an existing word for a duller purpose that does nothing to enhance it. It imbues it with a soaring and vibrant new life.

Fortunately, good writing and good writers have not disappeared. Poets have been language's white knights. Many are in hiding (a favorite haunt) and some manage to rise above the din we spin—the smart, exhilarating ones we love to read. But there are remarkable prose writers too and they work hard and well to keep the torches lit. So all is not yet lost. But make no mistake: the warthogs are prowling.

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