INTRODUCTION

> "In the beginning was the word . . ."
> —THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SAINT JOHN

It is perhaps improper for a nice Jewish boy to start an introduction quoting from the opening sentence of one of the gospels. Yet I cannot resist, for, as with St. John, from the very beginning I have been enthralled with words. As a species, it is our unique ability to form words that has made us human. Every word we possess makes a difference because every word is a potential idea. Ralph Waldo Emerson said that "every word was once a poem," and it is astonishing that so many images, ranging from the magical to the saturnine, can be conjured up by words that are composed of only twenty-six atoms.

And it is the gospel truth that most of my ideas about language are a result of reflecting on a single word, a word that then germinates into an idea. Moreover, words are in a constant state of flux, forever being used in slightly different contexts. In fact, this is

one of the chief ways that words acquire new meanings. Often I will spot a word being used in a context where I have not seen it before, and this soon becomes seed for thought.

What's in a word? The answer is plenty. Although we use words primarily for simple day-to-day communication, few words are value-neutral. Moreover, the words we employ are used selectively to help us promote a particular point of view about our ideas. Take the first word I analyze in this alphabetically ordered book: ABORTIONIST. Although we can say that this word has a precise lexicographic meaning, a person who is opposed to abortions is more likely to employ the term. One who is pro-choice is more likely to use the term "abortion provider." Thus, employing the word ABORTIONIST says a great deal about one's attitude towards abortion and, therefore, the meaning of the word. Other good examples are the words ACTRESS, PARTNER and NIGGARDLY, terms which are full of all sorts of implications as to the beliefs of the user. In fact, employing the word "niggardly" (which some people connected to "nigger") immersed commentators in both the United States and Canada in hot water. Sometimes, in the name of political correctness, a term is used despite the fact that hardly anybody likes it. Such is the case with the word FISHER, the one-time Canadian Broadcast Corporation's politically correct term for people who fish.

Some words are interesting to examine because of their sudden and unusual origins. *Can I Have a Word with You?* looks at words such as BLURB and JAZZ, and how the term CYBER was created and has proliferated. Socio-political events can also prod a previously obscure word into the limelight. Such is the situation with the word CHAD which surfaced after the electoral debacle in Florida during the 2000 presidential election.

Often words come about based on a misunderstanding. When you read *Can I Have a Word with You?* you will find out why many people misconstrue the meaning of HOI POLLOI, and why the expression "the hoi polloi" is essentially redundant. The book will also explain how many people have come to "SCARF down" their food instead of "scoffing it down."

Sometimes words are just plain fun and you will see such whimsical entries as RETRONYM, MONDEGREEN and PORTMANTEAU. Particularly in North America, we sometimes forget that there are many flavours to our language, and in this context the book will look at some of these varieties, with entries such as COCKNEY, SPANGLISH and DIALECT.

Many words acquire other meanings in their odyssey through our language, sometimes to the point where the original sense is virtually co-opted, as with the word GAY. Similarly, *Can I Have a Word with You?* explores which of the meanings — ORANGE, the fruit, or ORANGE, the colour — came into our language first:. The book also discusses the process by which some words acquire secondary meanings, such as BUG and ANORAK.

Although many of the entries in *Can I Have a Word with You?* are culled from language columns that I wrote originally for my "Speaking of Language" column in the Montreal *Gazette,* most of them contain additional information written specifically for this book. I have centered my analysis much more on the word being discussed and have not had to deal with the bête noire of columnists — space constraints.

Words, I believe, are the revenge of the chronologically gifted. We oldies can't perform mathematical calculations as swiftly as we once did and, alas, our spelling and memories have deteriorated. On the other hand, we have a wealth of experience to draw on and can make connections between different ideas and words that we could not have made when we were younger. The unfolding of these hidden word connections has given me countless hours of pleasure and is the main reason that I have written *Can I Have a Word with You?* I hope you will find that a word is only the beginning of a wondrous journey exploring the English language.

> Orwellian, adjective — "Characteristic or suggestive of the writings of 'George Orwell,' especially in his satirical novel *1984* which portrays a form of totalitarian state seen by him as arising naturally out of the political circumstances of his time."
>
> — *OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*

"Orwellian" is the most widely used adjective derived from the name of a modern writer. It easily outdistances its closest rivals Kafkaesque, Dickensian and Proustian. The only writer who bests Orwell in adjectival activity is the Immortal Bard himself who enjoyed a 400-year head start.

The year 2003 marked the centenary of the writer who arguably has had the most influence on our language in the twentieth century. Above all, Orwell believed that the primary purpose of language was to communicate, and he despised deliberate obfuscation. In his famous essay "Politics and the English Language," he set out his six rules of English usage:

1) Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.

2) Never use a long word where a short one will do.

3) If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.

4) Never use the passive where you can use the active.

5) Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

6) Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

Writing his essay in 1945, Orwell was well aware of the barbaric use of language. His two dystopian masterpieces, *Animal Farm* written in 1945 and *1984* written in 1949, are both constructed with an

awareness of the immense power that language wields. He was aware of how the Nazis had used euphemistic terms such as "process" to refer to killing people with exhaust fumes and "final solution" for their plan to exterminate all Jews. Orwell had also seen language manipulations by the Left in terms such as "liquidation" to defend "outright murder" by Stalinist supporters. In his essay, he explains, "Political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

For Orwell, the success of political euphemisms required an uncritical audience or, as he put it, one with a "reduced state of consciousness" that was "favourable to political conformity." At present, we would appear to live in an age that is not taken in by many political euphemisms such as "ethnic cleansing." If we do not now dwell in a totalitarian Orwellian universe, it is partly because we have been well-schooled by Orwell, although a number of writers, Margaret Atwood included, have glimpsed the beginnings of such a state. Moreover, the manner in which Americans followed George W. Bush to war after 9–11 reminds us that Orwell's *1984* scenario was hardly far-fetched.

Orwell's novel *1984* introduced a wealth of new words into our lexicon. In the novel, he describes how Winston's mind "slid away into the labyrinthine world of doublethink." About doublethink, he says it is "To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which cancelled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them; to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy. . . . ."

1984 also gave us the term "Newspeak," which referred to the artificial language used for official communications by the powers-that-be. This term has been generalized to any corrupt form of English, and specifically to the propagandist and ambiguous language of some politicians or broadcasters. Although not employed

as frequently, *1984* also provided us with the term "Oldspeak," which has remained in our lexicon to refer to normal English use as opposed to technical or proselytizing language.

Totalitarian regimes often deal with opposition by simply denying realities. Recognizing this trend, Orwell in *1984* coined the term "unperson," which the *OED* defines as "A person who, usually, for political misdemeanours, is deemed not to have existed and whose name is removed from all public records. In extended use, a person whose existence or achievement is officially denied or disregarded; a person of no political or social importance." This metaphor quickly caught on and by 1954 the *Economist* reported that "Beria [head of the Soviet Secret Police under Stalin] is already an 'unperson,' the record of his career 'unfacts.'" The *Guardian* in 1961 said that "the concentration camp was a factory for processing people into un-persons."

In *1984*, "Big Brother" refers to the head of state, hence, an apparently benevolent, but ruthlessly omnipotent, state authority. The term has virtually become the metaphor for the modern state. In Orwell's totalitarian state, he also unveiled the term "thought police," to describe the kind of police force established to suppress freedom of thought. This term has also gained much currency.

In the *Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins*, Robert Hendrickson credits Walter Lippman's *The Cold War* (1947) as including the first use of the term "cold war." Orwell, however, had used the term two years earlier. In an essay entitled "You and the Atom Bomb," written in 1945, he referred to "a State which was at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of 'cold war' with its neighbours."

It is small wonder then that the term "Orwellian" is so pervasively used to describe aspects of the totalitarian state, since we invariably describe these regimes by terms that Orwell created.

And I will give my heart to you,
If you will be my POSSLQ
That is unless you confess,
That you are really OTPOTSS.

<div style="text-align:center">(A POSTMODERN LOVE POEM
BY HOWARD RICHLER)</div>

Alas, in the post–"Leave it to Beaver" era, the nomenclature of relationships is thorny. Because many people involved in relationships have forsaken the institution of marriage, it is often difficult to know how to refer to this new type of "involved" person. And choosing the wrong term can be embarrassing. This is perhaps the reason the U.S.A. census of 1980 proposed the term POSSLQ (pronounced *possil-queue*) which stands for "Person of Opposite Sex Sharing Living Quarters." Unfortunately, this acronymic suggestion pleased only bureaucrats. Word maven William Safire offered the modified PASSLQ "Person of an Appropriate Sex Sharing Living Quarters" as he felt this term was more inclusive of those involved in same-sex relationships. Even this latter term might offend someone sharing living quarters with a piranha or iguana, instead of a human.

It was in this spirit of political correctness that the British Department of Trade and Industry a couple of years ago drafted new anti-discrimination laws because it felt that "homosexual" is "no longer the way forward in defining sexual orientation," and opted instead for the designation OTPOTSS, which stands for "Orientation Towards People Of The Same Sex." This is unlikely to catch on as people will soon realized that "otpotss" is an anagram of "tosspot," an archaic term for a drunk and one that has taken on the sense of a "rather unpleasant person."

While the English language has innumerable ways of expressing many concepts, it lacks even one suitable word to describe those partaking in a "mature" relationship. For example, consider

the options someone of the baby boom generation has to describe the person they are dating. "Boyfriend/girlfriend" sounds somewhat sophomoric for people whose adolescence ended before the moon landing. Other people opt for "partner" but this term is misleading for two reasons. First, it may not be clear if the partnership is romantic or professional, and second, it may not be obvious if one is talking about a heterosexual or a homosexual relationship, as the term "partner" seems to be the preferred choice among gay couples. (Incidentally, the word "partner" is first recorded in the thirteenth century, but its first citation with a love interest is British author's Tobias Smollett's *Regicide II* written in 1749: "What means the gentle partner of the heart.") Other options are also unsatisfactory: "lover" is too blatant, "friend" is fuzzy and "significant other" is too euphemistic (and in any case sounds like the subject of a sociology dissertation).

When a couple are actually sharing living quarters, the designation "boyfriend/girlfriend" sounds too weak to describe the relationship, but a term such as "cohabitor" is an antiseptic and ugly alternative. Some people opt for the term "mate" but others find that the term evokes a) the jungle, b) the high seas, or c) Australia. Many therapists have started referring to two people involved in a long-term relationship as "spouses," but to the layman the term still refers strictly to a husband or wife.

Other languages have paid more attention to this nomenclature dilemma. In German, *Lebenspartner* refers to "life partner"; if you have adequate breath, you can jocularly refer to your beloved as *Lebensabschnittspartner* ("lap," for short) which adds the idea that the relationship is only for a short time. Norwegian has the term *samboer*, "together liver," which derives from the verb *bo*, "to live, to dwell." It is a term used to describe a person of either sex with whom one lives but to whom one is not legally married. In Danish, this person is often described as a *samlever* and in Swedish as a *sambo*. Swedish also uses the term *särmo* to refer to couples who live apart.

Ironically, some languages have looked to English for relation-

ship-word inspiration. In Thai, the word "fan" (as in "enthusiast") is used to refer to a person with whom one is involved romantically, be it a boyfriend, girlfriend or spouse. The French language has at times been accused of dreading anglicisms, but, interestingly, in Quebec this problem of nomenclature has been somewhat solved by the importation of an English word. The term *chum* (sometimes spelled *tchum*) is often used to refer to one's love interest.

So if the French can use an English word, I think it is proper that we reciprocate and use a French term to describe someone in a romantic relationship. In a review of the movie "Personal Velocity: Three Portraits," the *Gazette* reporter John Griffin characterized the film's writer and director Rebecca Miller as the *conjoint* of the actor Daniel Day Lewis, but I suspect this word would only be accepted by speakers of Quebec English. In its place, I propose the word "co-vivant," because it works for a couple living in the same abode, and although it technically means the same as "co-habitor," it sounds more pleasant. Alternatively, we could opt for "co-amant," "bonami," or "belleamie."

If you have any suggestions, please send them to me at hrichler @canada.com and help give my partner/girlfriend/*chum* Carol a proper designation.

✎ PASTEURIZED

In response to an article I wrote in 2003 in which I mentioned that the American House of Representatives had stricken the word "French" from all its menus, reader Edward W. Barrett informed me that the White House had banned all French wines. He added that he hoped "for the sake of the President's health they don't ban pasteurized milk."

There is a further irony here in that the person who ordered all things French eliminated from White House menus was Repub-

lican Bob Ney, who turns out to be descended from Napoleon's famed Marshal Michel Ney. The central point, however, is that raised by Mr. Barrett, who dryly observes that if the Bushites are going to ban everything French, then they might have to avoid using words and consuming things that honour Frenchmen, such as Louis Pasteur.

If truth be known, there exists an inordinate number of words in the English language named after Frenchmen, and some of these words, I regret to say, reveal sordid pasts. The Napoleonic roots of Representative Ney also raises the question of whether Republicans, often accused of chauvinism both in the original sense of an unreasoning patriot and the extended sense of one with a sense of superiority, should refrain from this practice, since the original chauvinist was French. I am referring, of course, to jingoistic Napoleonic soldier Nicolas Chauvin. The *OED* relates that Nicolas Chauvin's "demonstrative patriotism and loyalty were celebrated, and at length ridiculed, by his comrades." After the fall of Napoleon, the term *chauvinisme* was applied to deride old soldiers of the Empire who professed an idolatrous admiration of Napoleon. In the last three decades, the term "chauvinist" in English has gradually come to refer to a male who believes that men are superior to women. At first, the phrase "male chauvinist" was used (or even "male chauvinist pig"), but then people starting dropping the word "male," and chauvinist was left on its own to carry the meaning.

Bushites might also have to refrain from mentioning the name of the previous dictator of Iraq. Saddam and sadism sound very similar. Indeed, Saddam is often called a sadist. Not only that but some wags have pointed out that his name — Saddam Hussein — is an anagram for "Has nude sadism." Of course, the mere fact that the original sadist, the Marquis de Sade, was French might be reason to avoid the word (or some might argue, to use it all the more). Perhaps the Americans' removal of the head of Iraq in 2003 was inspired by De Sade's contemporary, Dr. Joseph Ignace Guillotin who provided us with the divisive "guillotine." Guillotin

was not the inventor of this device but it was his idea that all Frenchmen, and not only noblemen, have access to this "humanitarian" form of execution. As Guillotin blithely put it, "The mechanism falls like thunder. The head flies off; blood spurts; the man is no more." After his death, Guillotin's children petitioned the French government to change the name of the guillotine to some other word, but the unsympathetic government refused and instead only gave the Guillotine clan permission to change their surname.

Also coming into the English language at the time that people were losing their heads in France was the "silhouette." This was named after French author Etienne de Silhouette. While serving a brief stint in 1759 as controller-general, his efforts at budget restraint proved unpopular, and hence the expression *à la silhouette* came to mean "cheap." How his name became associated with the partial shadow portraits we call silhouettes is a matter of conjecture. Some say the incomplete portraits are associated with his cheapness, or the brevity of his term. Others claim that Silhouette enjoyed making these portraits himself.

Monsieur Silhouette was also a good friend of Jeanne-Antoinette Poisson, the Marquise de Pompadour. In fact, he became controller-general as a result of their friendship. Once the Marquise de Pompadour abandoned her husband in the 1740s to become Louis XV's mistress, she became extraordinarily famous. By 1752 the word "pompadour" is cited in the *OED* to refer to her style of wearing her hair swept back high off the face.

There are other words of French origin that perhaps should be avoided by Bushites. One should eschew nicotine not only because of its pernicious nature but also because it is named after Jean Nicot, the French ambassador at Lisbon, who introduced tobacco into France in 1560. Ney and cohorts also are best to avoid leotards, named after French trapeze artist Jules Léotard who developed the tight-fitting outfit in the nineteenth century. Léotard was the star attraction in the Cirque Napoleon in Paris, at which he introduced his exciting innovation, the flying trapeze.

His name is memorialized not for his act, however, but for the audacious one-piece, skin-tight body suit, unveiled in 1859, a costume that revealed all his rippling muscles. In his *Memoirs*, Léotard inquires rhetorically, "Do you want to be adored by the ladies?" and answers as follows: "A trapeze is not required but instead of draping yourself in unflattering clothes . . . put on a more natural garb which does not hide your best features." Begonias and magnolias also should not be on the most-favoured congressional floral list as they were named after the French duo of Michel Bégin and Pierre Magnol.

And while George W. Bush should not give up pasteurized milk, perhaps the word should be changed since Pasteur's discovery did not arise from research the chemist was conducting on milk, but rather from experiments he was performing on France's national beverage — wine.

✤ PEDIGREE

Professor René Etiemble may have coined the term "franglais" in 1964, but the phenomenon existed long before this date. "Franglais" describes our mother tongue for the last millennium, for there exist more words in English that derive from French than words that come from the original Anglo-Saxon word stock.

After the Norman Invasion of 1066, the English language imported countless words from French, and in the process hundreds of Old English words disappeared from the language. No more than 20% of Old English words have descendants today. *Bleo* was replaced by colour, *lyft* by "air," *firen* by "crime," *anda* by "envy," *sibb* by "peace," *eam* by "uncle," and *wlite* by "beauty." Some Old English words took on secondary meanings. *Seethe* (to make hot) had been the definitive Old English cooking verb but was ousted by the more prolific French medley of "boil," "broil," "fry," "stew" and "roast." The boiling sense of *seethe* henceforth became meta-