

Word thieves

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As soon as somebody mentions to an Australian writer that their text will be edited, they are liable to rise up and say one of two things: 'the readers will understand what I have written' or that 'language is constantly evolving—you have no right to stand in its way'. Both these statements are suspect. *Honest* writers would rise up and say: 'I don't really care if the readers don't understand, because I am writing this to impress my peers' and maybe even 'as language is always evolving, you should be blessed for keeping the changes under control'.

We can do little to rein in the hubris that some writers display, especially many academics—often all we *can* do is comment, wait to be ignored, and take the money. But we can do something about the warning that we shouldn't stand in the way of the evolution of language—we should ignore it, and take steps to keep the evolution under control.

Copyediting is a bit like herding cattle. Cattle have to go from here to there, and you wouldn't want to change the general direction of travel, but you do have to bring back the ones that bolt, and keep an eye on those in danger of being rustled. Just as people steal cattle from herds, people steal words from English, and if somebody tells me that I have no right to stand in the way of a changing language, I reply that they have no right to steal words of which I am a part owner.

The problem is that people can't stop themselves from splurting out new words, or replacing time-honoured, accurate words by others that are not quite right.

There are three groups of 'new' words:

Group 1: *New new* words. We must welcome these when they supply a need. Let's look at one new word from each decade of the twentieth century:¹ *hangover, autism, penicillin, supermarket, bikini, modem, velcro, spin (slant), himbo* and *spam*. These words define something we did not have, or could not well express before.

Group 2: Show-off new words or terms. These show off the user's new-found 'perspicacity', or demonstrate cool familiarity with a celebrity or current event. They include *buy-in, going forward, transitioning, governance, yadda-yadda* and *cost-driver*.

Group 3: Stolen words. These are existing words that have been damagingly twisted to mean something different from what they meant yesterday. They include *altercation, protocol, issue, disinterested, crescendo, reticent, cohort* and *edgy*.

Some of the stolen words slide in under your guard, and all of a sudden they are entrenched and you'd be wasting your time trying to put things back the way there were. Do you remember how, in the late 1980s, we used to stamp and shout when people started *addressing issues* rather than dealing with problems? These days, even eminent editors address issues. The other day, a senior editor told me she wasn't ready for a relationship, and I had to tell her she was having them all over the place in full view of everyone. The best-educated reporters on Radio National

often report on a crisis coming to a crescendo, and shady politicians sometimes blame their shady cohorts when things go wrong.

I can help you keep the language under control by providing a list of words that point to danger. When you are editing, and you find these words, be bold and strike out dodgy uses! Stand up for your rights, protect your property, and startle the writer at the same time. The list is made up of just a few words either in flux or already completely fluxed, with the old use first and the new use second.

anticipate = be ready for something; *anticipate* = expect.

articulate = (phonetics) move the speech organs; *articulate* = say.

allude = casually or slyly refer; *allude* = refer.

altercation = verbal stoush; *altercation* = fight.

begging the question = the fallacy of founding a conclusion on a basis that as much needs to be proved as the conclusion itself; *begging the question* = to give rise to the need for a question.

corporate = connected with corporations, like the local council; *corporate* = business.

criteria = more than one criterion; *criteria* = one criterion.

crescendo = build-up to a climax; *crescendo* = climax.

cohort = large group of people; *cohort* = crony.

crisis = the point when an illness or event will go one way or the other; *crisis* = a serious event.

culminate = to reach the highest point; *culminate* = to end.

de facto = (adj.) in fact, though not in law; *de facto* = (noun) someone you live with as a spouse.

directly = very soon; *directly* = direct, with no intermediary.

disinterested = having no vested interest; *disinterested* = uninterested.

edgy = nervous; *edgy* = on the cutting edge.

enormity = grossness, badness or wickedness; *enormity* = large size.

fortuitous = accidental, without planning; *fortuitous* = probably unplanned but fortunate at the same time. (Leave this one alone! This is a fortuitous change of meaning. The new meaning is more descriptive and more useful than the old one.)

fulsome = overdone in a sickly way; *fulsome* = thorough.

issue = something of interest to people; *issue* = problem.

momentarily = in a flash of time; *momentarily* = soon.

offshore = just off the shore, like a drilling rig or an island; *offshore* = overseas.

oversight = a mistake resulting from poor supervision; *oversight* = good supervision.

presently = soon; *presently* = right now.

protocol = diplomatic procedure; *protocol* = any procedure.

relationship = how you relate to someone; *relationships* = how you sexually relate to someone.

refute = deny, with proof; *refute* = deny.

reticent = reluctant to discuss something; *reticent* = reluctant.

The reason for standing up to word thieves is to preserve precision. A well-read person should not be reluctant to differentiate between 'having a vested interest' in something and simply 'wanting to know something'. I want to talk about my relationship with my daughter without half the population raising their eyebrows. When I play my cello, I obey musical markings that ask me to gradually increase my volume until I reach the climax; I don't suddenly *fff* at the first sight of a hairpin. When my 92-year-old mother tells me she's feeling edgy, I should immediately get her a scotch and keep her calm, not be prepared to see her appear in skin-tight hip-huggers.

If we are not 'allowed' to stand in the way of the evolution of our language, why should wordmanglers be 'allowed' to rob our language of its one good feature? Why should *they* go unchallenged when their grossness plonks itself down in the way of precise, poetic phrasing? How do we explain our acquiescence when they drive their dirty-great wordHummers through our narrow and precise sentences, knocking our meanings for six, and scaring the homophones?

I'll not be reticent to beg this question: Please, writer or editor—whether you are uninterested or involved, at home or off-shore, edgy or old-fashioned—will you, in your work, promise to fulsomely utilise the *one* important criteria of oversighting a culmination of this crisis so that it will not reach a crescendo?

Endnote

1. Taken from John Ayto's *Twentieth Century Words*, OUP 1999.