



WORLD WIDE WORDS

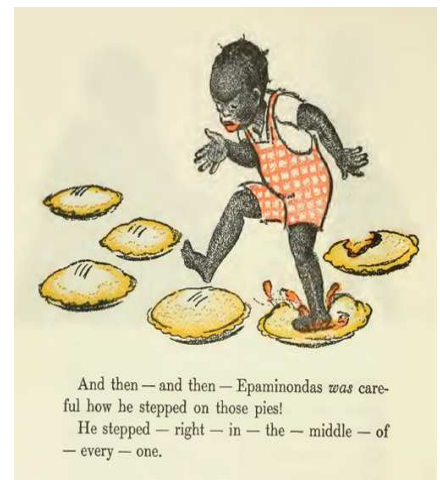
Investigating the English language across the globe

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Feedback, Notes and Comments

More on catchphrases

Patricia Norton emailed from New Zealand to solve the mystery of the catchphrase “Mind how you step over those mince pies!” It’s a misremembered phrase from by Sara Cone Bryant’s *Epaminondas and His Auntie*, a 1907 American children’s story now often regarded as racist or patronising. In the tale, about a black mother and her child Epaminondas, his mother tells him, “You see these here six mince pies I done make? You see how I done set ‘em on the doorstep to cool? Well now, you hear me, Epaminondas, you be careful how you step on those pies.” At the end of the story, as he had been told to do, Epaminondas carefully stepped on every one.



“I had to chuckle,” Judy Swink wrote from California, “when I read the catchphrase ‘I’ve arrived, and to prove it, I’m here!’ Many years ago, our aunt was expected to arrive by train in Norfolk, Virginia, from Boston. When my parents went to meet her, she didn’t descend from the train. My parents then went home and called her home in Massachusetts, where she answered the phone. When my mother asked why she hadn’t called them if she wasn’t coming, her reply was that she assumed that when she didn’t get off the train, they’d know she wasn’t coming. This has been a favorite family story since I was a child in the 1940s or 1950s.”

Ian Pike wrote, “Hearing about the old gent who would say, ‘I’ve come to tell you I’m not coming’ reminded me of my next-door neighbor from my childhood in small-town New Hampshire. He was a backwoods character with no education, no teeth, and a Yankee dialect so thick he was actually hard to understand. Whenever anyone knocked on his door he would holler, ‘You’re in or you’re out!’ as an invitation to come in. However, because of his toothless and accented speech, it sounded like ‘Y’in ya’out’.”

Beside oneself

“I liked your entry on being *beside oneself*,” H C Erik Midelfort emailed, “but I wanted to note the parallel usage of the term *ecstasy*, which derives from the Latin *ecstasis*. It meant literally being beside oneself or outside oneself, as in trance, ecstasy, or rapture.”

“You’ll probably hear from many others on this one,” wrote Don Neuendorf (as it happens incorrectly). “But a very common use of the Greek idiom for insanity is found in the gospel of Mark 3:21. Jesus is thought by his family to be *exeste* — from *ex histemi* — standing outside himself.”

Caucus

Current political events in the USA have again brought this word to the forefront of newspaper reporting. Its accidental similarity to *Caucasus* and *Caucasian*, the only other words in English that look anything like it, has sometimes led people up a false trail. The true origin of *caucus* has puzzled people almost from the moment it first appeared in the middle of the eighteenth century and attempts to solve the mystery have been notable for confusion, disagreement and misinterpretation.

The only fact that everybody agrees on is that its birthplace is the New England city of Boston. Its first appearance, so far as anybody knows at the moment, is under a different spelling in the *Boston Herald* of 5 May 1760:

[C]ertain Persons, of the modern Air and Complexion, to the Number of Twelve at least, have divers Times of late been known to combine together, and are called by the Name of the New and Grand Corcas, tho’ of declared Principles directly opposite to all that have been heretofore known.

Its earliest known use in its usual spelling was in a diary entry of February 1763 by John Adams, later to be the second president of the USA:

This day learned that the Caucus Club meets at certain times in the garret of Tom Dawes, the adjutant of the Boston (militia) regiment. He has a large house, and he has a movable partition in his garret, which he takes down, and the whole club meets in one room. There they smoke tobacco until you cannot see from one end of the room to the other. There they drink flip, I suppose, and there they choose a moderator, who puts questions to the vote regularly; and selectmen, assessors, collectors, wardens, fire-wards, and representatives, are regularly chosen before they are chosen in the town.

Flip is now better known as eggnog.

Even as early as 1788, Dr William Gordon, in his four-volume work *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Establishment, of the Independence of the United States of America*, had to say that “All my repeated applications to different gentlemen have not furnished me with a satisfactory account of the origin of *caucus*”. He wasn’t even quite sure what it meant: “It seems to mean, a number of persons, whether more or less, met together to consult upon adopting and prosecuting some scheme of policy.”

He went on:

More than fifty years ago [that is, in the 1730s], Mr. Samuel Adams’s father, and twenty others, one or two from the north end of town, where all the ship business is carried on, used to meet, make a caucus, and lay their plan for introducing certain persons into places of trust and power.

This link to ships led the lawyer, philologist and scholar John Pickering to suggest in 1816 that it was a corruption of *caulkers’ meeting*, on the presumption that they were attended by caulkers and ropemakers, the former being responsible for sealing the

seams between a ship's planks with tar. (Incidentally, Pickering was no fan of new words from his native USA. He adds of *caucus*, "It need hardly be remarked, that this cant word and its derivatives are never used in good writing.")

Gordon's reference to the north end of town prompted a wild guess that it was from an obscure Latin word for the north wind, *caucus*. Some 150 years later, the *Century Dictionary* of 1889 sought another classical origin in the Greek *kaukos*, a cup, "in allusion to the convivial or symposiac feature of the club". Other suggestions make it a corruption of *circus* or *concourse* or of *Cooke's House*, the Boston mansion once owned by Elisha Cooke where meetings were held before they moved to Tom Dawes' capacious attic.



"All have won and all shall have prizes." With the caucus race in Alice in Wonderland, Lewis Carroll made fun of the term, not then used in British politics. That had to wait until the late 1870s, when it began to be used for disciplined party organisations rather than selection meetings.

Quite the most intriguing suggestion was put forward in 1872 by Dr James Trumbull, a lifelong member of the Connecticut Historical Society, who had made a study of the native languages of New England. He put forward the idea that it derived from an Algonquin word, *cau'-cau-as'u*, a councillor or "one who advises, urges, encourages". This had turned up in a slightly different form in Captain John Smith's *The Generall Historie of Virginia, New-England, and the Summer Isles* of 1624:

In all these places is a severall commander, which they call Werowance, except the Chickahamianians, who are governed by the Priests and their Assistants, or their Elders called Caw-cawwassoughes.

Trumbull argued that Native American terms were often adopted by clubs and secret associations in New England. It seems plausible but there's no direct evidence.

Several other descriptions in addition to Gordon's imply that meetings of the kind described, held behind closed doors in smoke-filled rooms for selecting candidates and controlling the political process, had been in existence for decades before the word *caucus* first appears.

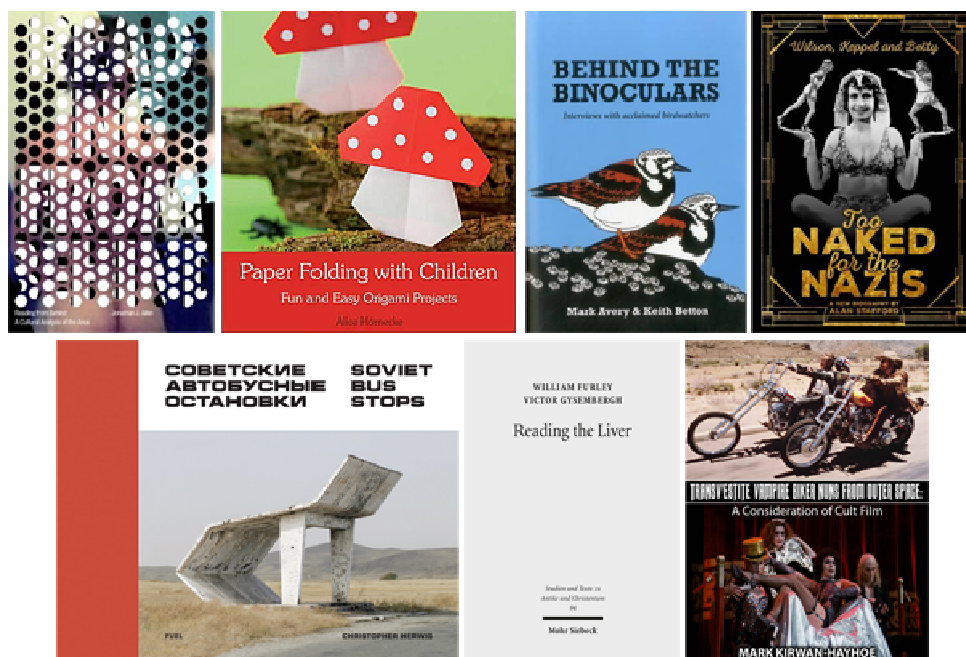
As so often with etymology, we have arrived at no very clear conclusion, but I hope you will agree that the journey to nowhere has been moderately entertaining. On the other hand, it's certainly possible that some earlier variant will eventually turn up, perhaps from as far back as the 1730s. With extraordinary luck, this might even give us a better idea of its provenance.

From my reading

- News of the US presidential campaign has to share space in British newspapers with the forthcoming referendum on whether the UK should leave the European Union. This is rapidly becoming a lexicographical hotspot. I've commented before on *Brexit*, short for British exit, but February saw several appearances in more upmarket papers of the rather strained neologism *Bremain* for the opposing idea. Journalists have created *Brexiter* for a supporter of withdrawal (and *Brexitteer*, also; you will note the subtle negative associations of that extra *e*), but not so far its equivalent *Bremainer*. But I've started to see *Bremaineer* and *Bremainster* as well as the more conventional *remainer*. Suggestions of a partial return after a Brexit has been termed *Bre-entry*. There's plenty of time for more inventions, as the referendum isn't until June 23 and the campaign doesn't officially begin until 14 April.
- The word *averagarianism* is a bit of a mouthful and not one, I suspect, that will ever appeal to the public at large. Its related adjective and noun, *averagarian*, stands a better chance of acceptance. Both have popped up recently in reviews of Todd Rose's book *The End of Average*. He attacks the culture of making decisions about people in education and the workplace on the basis of what an idealised average person would do. "Nobody is average," he asserts. Most readers would assume, as I did, that Rose invented both words, but it turns out otherwise, with *averagarian* appearing first 152 years ago in *The Cornhill Magazine*, a famous British literary journal whose first editor was the novelist William Makepeace Thackeray. The word is in an article from the issue of August 1864, *Morality of the Doctrine of Averages*, which contains a critique of statistics not so far from that of Rose and comments, "a planet in which goodness was cast up in the total from columns of averages, and wickedness reckoned simply as so much in the hundred, would be a world unhumanised altogether."
- Drought many of us are all too familiar with, but I was slightly startled to see an article in *New Scientist* that referred to a *wind drought*. It seems that parts of the USA are experiencing a prolonged period of lighter than usual winds which have caused electricity generation from wind farms to fall by 6% last year. It's not the

only figurative application of *drought* I've seen; *energy drought* and *gas drought* have previously appeared, though uncommon, and *petrol drought* turned up in a British local newspaper report last month (the one filling station in Hexham in Northumberland was without fuel for a week). Let's hope these compounds don't become common enough that we shall have to start referring to *water drought* to make clear what sort of drought we mean.

- 'Tis March, and so time for the annual wordfest of titology that is the Diagram Prize for Oddest Book Title of the Year. The shortlisted titles, selected by Horace Bent of *The Bookseller* are, as listed in the press release: *Behind the Binoculars: Interviews with Acclaimed Birdwatchers*; *Reading from Behind: A Cultural Analysis of the Anus*; *Paper Folding with Children*; *Soviet Bus Stops*; *Reading the Liver: Papyrological Texts on Ancient Greek Extispicy*; *Too Naked for the Nazis*; and *Transvestite Vampire Biker Nuns from Outer Space: A Consideration of Cult Film*.



A check of the titles shows that the selectors have abbreviated a couple, thereby making them seem very slightly odder than they really are: *Paper Folding with Children* has the joke-ruining subtitle *Fun and Easy Origami Projects*, while *Too Naked for the Nazis* actually has the full title *Wilson, Keppel and Betty: Too Naked for the Nazis* (it's about a fondly remembered British music-hall trio's bizarre speciality act). Cast your votes on *The Bookseller's* website; the winner is to be announced on 18 March. *Extispicy*, by the way, is an ancient Latinism meaning the inspection of the entrails of sacrificial victims for the purpose of divination.

- We've long had predictions of *peak oil*, the point at which the maximum rate of extraction of petroleum is reached, after which it's expected to enter terminal decline. The term has spawned many imitators, including *peak coal*, *peak gas*, *peak grain*, *peak copper*, *peak lead*, and even *peak car*, a hint that the private motor vehicle is drifting down a long slope towards dissolution, and *peak startup*, meaning that the rate of new company formation is faltering. You may recall my mentioning *peak beard* a couple of years ago, the suggestion that hirsuteness is going out of fashion. The peak that has been featured in my daily paper this week

is *peak stuff*, the idea that people — at least in Britain — are falling out of love with material objects and are ceasing to consume so much. That's such a wide-ranging concept that we may hope we've at last seen *peak peak*.

Kick the bucket

Q. *From Fred:* Could you tell me where the phrase *kick the bucket* originated?

A. This is one of many idioms created down the years to avoid making too blunt a mention of the unpleasant subject of death by cloaking the idea in euphemistic, elevated or humorous terms. They range from Shakespeare's *shuffle off this mortal coil*, through the eighteenth-century's *hop the twig*, to George Eliot's *join the choir invisible*, many of which were guyed in Monty Python's famous dead parrot sketch.

The earliest unequivocal appearance of *kick the bucket*, at least so far as we know at the moment, was in a serial story in a British magazine. At this point the hero, a sailor, has recovered from a severe illness:

My old mess-mate, Tom Bowline, met me at the gangway, and with a salute as hearty as honest, damn'd his eyes, but he was glad I had not kicked the bucket; while another swore roundly, that I had turned well to windward, and left death and the devil to leeward; and a third more vociferously exclaimed, I was born to dance upon nothing.

The History of Edward and Maria, in The London Magazine, Aug. 1775. To dance upon nothing meant to die by hanging.

In the same magazine five years later, a writer confirmed the meaning of the idiom while commenting how opaque it was. It had turned up in a gossipy letter which a friend had received and passed on to him, which included the sentence “as to your enquiries about old Wentworth, poor man! he died extremely rich; his disease stuck so close to him that it has obliged him to kick the bucket”. The article writer noted:

I should have been at a loss also to have known the significance of *kicking the bucket*, but am told it is an expression used to inform us of a person's death, although I should no sooner apprehend it to be so than if I were told he had let fall his watch, or rapped at my door.

Observations on the Errors and Corruptions that Have Crept into the English Language, in The London Magazine, May 1780.

So much for the early history of the idiom, which does little or nothing to illuminate its origins. These may never be known for certain, though theories abound.

One story, hard to credit, is that the bucket is one on which a suicide might stand when hanging himself — kick away the bucket and the job is done. This theory only appeared long after a report in a Bath newspaper on 25 September 1788 of the suicide of a man called John Marshfield, who killed himself in just this way; in 1896 John Farmer and William Henley noted in *Slang and Its Analogues* that it had been claimed as the sad end of an ostler at an inn on the Great North Road.

Farmer and Henley place greater credence on a very different story, which was given rather more support than it deserved by being tentatively suggested as the origin in the first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* in 1888. An extended version of the attribution appeared 15 years later in a letter from the splendidly named Holcombe Ingleby of Norfolk, which he said was “one familiar to me from my youth up”:

When a butcher slings up a sheep or pig, after killing, he fastens to the hocks of the animal what is technically known in the trade as a *gambal*, a piece of wood curved somewhat like a horse's leg. This is also known in Norfolk as a *bucket*. ... *Bucket*, I may add, is not only well known in Norfolk in this sense, and commonly used, but with some of our folk is the only word known for the article in question. To "kick the bucket," then, is the sign of the animal's being dead, and the origin of the phrase may probably, if not indisputably, be referred to this source.

Notes and Queries, 21 May 1904. His *gambal* is usually rendered as *gambrel* or *gambril*, which is presumably why he say he couldn't find it in the *New English Dictionary* (the then name for what is the *Oxford English Dictionary*). Editor Henry Bradley had included *gambrel* in the F-G volume published in 1901.



Is this a bucket I see before me? No, it's a modern butcher's stainless steel gambrel.

The OED's editors suggested that the word might not refer to our modern *bucket*, but to the Old French *buquet* for a balance or a trebuchet, the medieval siege weapon for hurling missiles at the enemy.

It may reasonably be objected that the animal couldn't possibly kick the bucket, as it was already dead by the time that its rear legs were fastened to it. Advocates of this origin must also explain how a specialist dialect expression from rural Norfolk came to be so widely taken up at the end of the eighteenth century and why there are only indirect references to this sense of *bucket* and never any examples of its actually having been uttered.

A third theory also appeared in *Notes and Queries*, in 1947. It was in reference to a supposedly old custom of the Catholic church:

After death, when the body had been laid out, a cross and two lighted candles were placed near it, and in addition to these the holy-water bucket was brought from the church and put at the feet of the corpse. When friends came to pray for the deceased, before leaving the room they would sprinkle the body with holy water. So intimately therefore was the bucket associated with the feet of deceased persons that it is easy to see how the saying came about.

Or perhaps not.

[This piece is an updated and enlarged version of one that first appeared in this newsletter in February 1999. My thanks to the various members of the American Dialect Society who discovered the early examples, and to etymologist Professor Anatoly Liberman, who wrote about the expression in two issues of his blog The Oxford Etymologist in February 2016.]

Oryzivorous

Pronounced /ɒrɪˈzɪvərəs/.

Though *oryzivorous* appears in a scientific glossary in 1857, there is no example of its appearing in print before modern times and even then almost exclusively in works that specialise in strange and exotic words. This suggested that finding out why anyone bothered to invent it might be worth enquiring into.

The root is classical Latin *oryza*, rice. Add to that the ending *-vorous*, devouring or eating, and you get an adjective meaning “rice-eating”. This is common enough, both among people and animals, but nobody seems to have felt the need for a pompous Latinate formulation to describe it.



When I searched for it, I kept turning up the supposed scientific name for a small bird, *Dolichonyx oryzivorous*, which I was pleased to discover was a migratory blackbird which may be seen in North America in the spring and summer. This is commonly called the bobolink, an odd name that’s said to be from *Bob o’ Lincoln*, the way that English-speaking American colonists in the eighteenth century rendered the bird’s call. It does indeed eat rice, voraciously when it can get it, though it’s happy to eat seeds of many other kinds.

This happy encounter with a species I’d never heard of turned out to be the result of a common error, because its name is really *Dolichonyx oryzivorus*, without the final *o*. This scientific name was given to the bird by the famous Swedish naturalist Karl Linnaeus in 1766. However, he called it *Emberiza oryzivorus*, putting it in the same genus as 40 or so species of buntings. However, it was soon realised the bobolink wasn’t really a bunting and since 1827 it has been the lonely sole member of the genus *Dolichonyx*, a word that derives for no very clear reason from Greek *dolichos*, meaning “long”.

We may guess that *oryzivorous*, with that extra *o*, came into being in that glossary solely because Linnaeus had created the closely similar *oryzivorus*.

Sic

Hilary Powers found this in an Associated Press story dated 23 February: “Kelly said he’s not sure how long the next phase of the investigation will take. Scientists need to replicate the behavior of air bags over a period of several years, which will take time, he said.”

A *Sunday Telegraph* article on the late Harper Lee which Michel Norrish was reading quoted a friend: “She had this wonderful childish twinkle in her eye and she defied conventional morays.” Don’t feel out of the error, subeditors, try *mores*, as in the customs and conventions of society.

An even worse misspelling was committed by political activists in Alberta, whom Clyde McConnell pointed out had written on Facebook that they wanted a *kudatah*. It took a moment to connect it with *coup d’état*.

“Curtains for Swaziland?” emailed Nigel Johnson, reporting that the headline over a story on the website of the Anglican News Service dated 2 March read: “Swaziland declares national emergency as draught intensifies.”

Another misspelled headline, on the *Daily Telegraph*'s site on the same day, led Bob Hughes to comment that the action seemed a little harsh: “Judge scalds Madonna and Guy Ritchie for public custody battle over 15-year-old son Rocco.”

One of the weirder science-related headlines of recent times was found by Emery Fletcher on the *arstechnica* website on 12 February: “Potentially deadly drug interactions found mining FDA complaint bin”.

Slavery is still with us, Beverley Rowe suspects, having seen the headline “Owner of Pinewood Studios, home to James Bond and Star Wars, could be sold.” Rowe saw it in *The Guardian*, but it remains visible only on the ITV news website.

A report in the *Daily Mail* on 4 March read: “The Los Angeles Police Department confirmed the discovery of the knife to Daily Mail Online. ‘A knife was recovered on the property. We are currently meeting on it.’ ”

Useful information

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Email addresses: Comments on newsletter mailings are always welcome. They should be sent to me at michael.quinion@worldwidewords.org. I try to respond, but pressures of time often prevent me from doing so. Items intended for *Sic!* should be addressed to sic@worldwidewords.org. Questions for the Q&A section should be sent to questions@worldwidewords.org, not to the correspondence address.

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