



WORLD WIDE WORDS

Investigating the English language across the globe

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Feedback, Notes and Comments

Brexit. Martin Cleaver emailed from The Netherlands to add yet another derived form of *Brexit* to the set I gave last time: “I have recently discovered that I am a *Brexpatriot*. We are uniting under the Twitter umbrella @brexpatriots — Brits who live in Europe.” And another new compound met my eye recently: *Brexitism*, the concept or philosophy behind *Brexit*.

Caucus. Vance Koven pointed out, apropos of the early history of this term, that in the traditional Boston accent, the words *corcas*, *caulkers* and *caucus* would be pronounced virtually identically. This explains why *caulkers* in particular could be put forward seriously as a possible origin.

Oryzivorous. Terry Walsh emailed to explain that the genus name of the bobolink, *Dolichonyx*, means “with long nails or claws”. Jim Devlin added that my picture of the bird shows why the naturalist W J Swainson chose that genus name — it does indeed have long claws.

Kick the bucket. Carl Bowers asked about my use of *guyed* in this piece. It comes from the given name of the unsuccessful assassin Guy Fawkes, who tried to blow up the Houses of Parliament on 5 November 1605. He is marked in Britain by bonfires and fireworks every year. Originally theatrical slang, to *guy* means to make fun of or ridicule, originally in reference to his lack of success.

Bookseller Diagram Prize. Following up my note of this year’s contest, the winner of the oddest book title of the year was announced on 18 March: *Too Naked for the Nazis*, the biography of the musical hall act Wilson, Keppel and Betty.

Article update. The piece about the curious British word [kibosh](#) (as in *putting the kibosh on something*, to finish something off or put an end to it) now includes recent research on its history, including the plausible theory that it derives from a Turkish word for a whip.

Lie Doggo

Q. From Matthew Cutter: I recently came across this expression as the answer to a crossword puzzle, and then only by solving all the words running through it. While a quick web search tells me that it’s a British idiom — meaning to hide quietly or lie low — I couldn’t find any history on it. Can you turn up any further insight?

A. Though we assume that it's British in origin, Australians and New Zealanders know it, too, and it has turned up from time to time in the USA, though I don't think it's at all well-known there. Some of my reference works suggest it's old-fashioned — it may well be, though it's familiar to me from my childhood and is still part of my active vocabulary.

The usual supposition is that it's *dog* with an *-o* stuck on the end. It's often said that it refers to a dog pretending to be asleep, but I'm not so sure. The reference is surely just as likely to be to a dog that's lying still but alert, as dogs are able to do for long periods — my mental image is of a sheepdog in a field, ears pricked, quietly watching his charges.

The transfer to humans added the idea of seeking to avoid detection:

The house won't be safe once the ammunition has given out — and I know the country all round there like the palm of my hand. There are plenty of places we can lie doggo in until help comes.

Wild Honey, by Cynthia Stockley, 1914.

Some examples in the early days were spelled *doggoh*, as in one quoted by Dr James Murray, the first editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, in a puzzled enquiry to the scholarly journal *Notes and Queries*:

“DOGGO.” — What is it to *lie doggo*; and what is the history of *doggo*? Is it a mock Latin ablative of manner? ... An earlier instance differently spelt I have from *Society* of 7 October, 1882, p. 23, col. 1: “To-day's meet of the London Athletic Club will be remarkable for the resurrection of E. L. Lockton after lying 'doggoh' some time.”

Notes and Queries, 4 Apr. 1896.

No response came to his enquiry and the term didn't appear in the first edition of the OED, most probably because it wasn't then very widely known. Dr Murray's finding seems to have been mislaid and the citation wasn't included in the entry for the idiom that appeared in the *Supplement* in 1933; it's not in the current online edition either, though it's two years older than the first example in the entry. (I've told the OED's editors about it and it will be added when the entry is next updated.)

The term was given a small boost in the 1890s through its use by Rudyard Kipling in *Soldiers Three* and other writings. It became more common during the First World War and in post-war writings about the war, such as in the children's books of Percy Westerman. It has also had peaks of usage during and immediately after the Second World War and again in the 1980s. The reason for its popularity in the armed forces during periods of conflict is too obvious to need elaboration.

This *-o* ending is curious. It's much more characteristic of Australian word formation (*arvo*, *servo*, *ambo* and the like) than British. However, *doggo*'s first appearance in print in that country is dated 1895 (“Lie doggo, as the sailors say”) so transmission seems certain to be from Britain to Australia rather than the other way round.

Altogether, an odd little term.

Fewmet

“The fewmets have hit the windmill,” cried a character in Harvard Lampoon’s parody *Bored of the Rings*. Readers not familiar with archaic English hunting terms will have missed the joke.

Fewmets — also called *fewmishings* — are the excrement or droppings of an animal



A huntsman showing fewmets to Queen Elizabeth I. From *The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting*, by George Gascoigne, 1575

hunted for game, especially the hart, an adult male deer. For medieval hunters they were evidence that an animal was somewhere around; their condition gave a clue as to how near the quarry might be. Huntsmen would bring fewmets to their masters to demonstrate that game was there to be chased and that the hunt wasn’t likely to be a waste of time.

To make a proper assessment, the huntsman needed to know a lot about the ways of the animal:

You muste vnderstand that there is difference betweene the fewmet of the morning and that of the euenyng, bicause the fewmishings which an Harte maketh when he goeth to relief at night, are better disgested and moyster, than those which he maketh in the morning, bycause the Harte hath taken his rest all the day, and hath had time and ease to make perfect disgestion and fewmet, whereas contrarily it is seene in the fewmishyng whiche is made in the morning, bycause of the exercise without rest whiche he made in the night to go seeke his feede.

The Noble Arte of Venerie or Hunting, by George Gascoigne, 1575.

The word came into English during the fourteenth century and is from an Anglo-Norman French variant of Old French *fumées*, droppings.

With the decline in great landed estates and the hunting they offered, the word went into a decline, to become fashionable again in recent decades with the rise in fantasy fiction and role-playing games. These days, the animal producing the fewmets is more usually a dragon:

He's going to where my dragons were! Come on, Meg, maybe he's found fewmets!" She hurried after boy and dog. "How would you know a dragon dropping? Fewmets probably look like bigger and better cow pies."

A Wind in the Door, by Madeline L'Engle, 1973.

It has become a useful substitute in such literature for a couple of coarser words: "Oh, fewmets,' Schmendrick cursed" (James A Owen, *The Dragons of Winter*); "Speaking between friends and meaning no offense, you're full of fewmets." (Poul Anderson, *Satan's World*); "Caryo intends to be caught, so she can kick the fewmets out of him" (Mercedes Lackey, *Exile's Valour*).

The word has also been spelled *fumet*, which might lead to an unfortunate confusion with a concentrated fish stock used for seasoning, a relative of the ancient Roman *garum*. The source of this sense of *fumet* is a related French word, originally applied to the smell of game after it had hung for a while.

From my reading

The dead speak. Two scientists in Denmark propose the creation of the world's first national *necrogenomic* database. This would record the genomic sequences of all Danish citizens and residents at the time of their death, some 50,000 a year. By matching these to information about illnesses and ailments in life, helpful evidence could be gathered about the genetic origins of diseases, about potential drug targets, and informing treatment methods.

Work out what to wear. The trend toward informal leisurewear intensifies. My newspaper tells me that the highlight of this summer's fashion will be the tracksuit, suitably embellished in expensive fabrics and a price to match. This is an example of the trend towards *athleisure* (*athletics + leisure*), dressing as though you can't wait to leap up from the restaurant table to work out. The most recent linguistic creation based on this is *athevening* wear. Yes, Dorothy, now you *can* go to the pub wearing your tarted-up jogging bottoms.

Do what? Here's a term guaranteed to stop a reader in their tracks: *heteropaternal superfecundation*. It refers to the situation in which twins have different fathers because two men have had sex with the mother in close succession. It's assumed to be rare in humans, though nobody knows for sure and one can imagine a certain reluctance on the part of some mothers to have the matter investigated, but it's well recorded in farm animals.

Who are you looking at? One of the more daft temporary fashions online — and there's a *lot* of competition — is that of taking a photo of two people and switching their faces. Until you've seen a wedding-day picture of Rupert Murdoch and Jerry Hall reprocessed in this way you really haven't plumbed the full meaning of bizarre. The trick is, rather boringly, called *faceswapping*.

Here to advise you. A report this month said that the Royal Bank of Scotland is to shed 550 jobs as part of a plan to replace staff who offer investment tips. They are to be superseded by what are called automated investment portfolio services, though the newspaper preferred the colloquial *robo-advisers*. The term has been common within the financial services business for a couple of years.

Blasted breeding. A term in my Sunday paper sent me to the reference books: *atomic gardening*. It turns out to have been a scattershot space-age marriage of nuclear technology and plant breeding. Basically, you put a lot of seeds in a nuclear reactor or in your local hospital's x-ray machine in the hope that the radiation would induce genetic mutations instead of killing them. Then you planted them and waited for something interestingly new to appear. Surprisingly for such a random process, something often did, including new varieties of grapefruit and peanuts. Other names for the technique are *mutation breeding* and *variation breeding*. A related process involved placing a powerful radioactive source in the middle of a field, sometimes called a *radiation garden*, and growing plants around it.

Dingbat

Q. From Kelly Hogan: Thank you for the newsletter. I'd love to know the origin of *dingbat*, as in the ornamental characters used in typesetting.



Why are these called dingbats?

A. It's a rather splendid word, not least because it seems to have been considered useful for all seasons and situations. It is definitely American in origin and has been recorded as variously meaning a type of drink, a sum of money, a tramp or hobo, a bullet or cannonball (or generally any sort of missile), balls of dung on the buttocks of sheep or cattle, a foolish or insane person, student slang for a sort of muffin, an affectionate embrace, a term of admiration, or a vague and unspecified term for something or other whose real name the person speaking cannot bring to mind. The printing sense is a bit of a Johnny-come-lately within that jumble.

A note of warning should be uttered here. Several of these supposed meanings come from one source, a Mr Philip Hale of the *Boston Journal* in 1895. He had been collecting information on various senses, which was collated in an issue of *Dialect Notes* the same year. Several cannot be found in printed works. You may suspect Mr Hale of having been credulous or perhaps failing to check whether a speaker was using a real term or a temporary substitute for one he couldn't for the moment recall.

Most examples in the nineteenth century were references to money:

"Rich widders are about yet," said Nicky Nollekins to his friend Bunkers, "though they appear snapped up so fast." ... "Well I'm not partic'lar, not I, (replied Billy.) nor never was. I'd take a widder for my part, if she's got the ding-bats, and never ask no question, I'm not proud."

Spirit of Jefferson (Charlestown, Virginia), 25 July 1848.

A later appearance not only illustrates another sense, but also gives us an indirect clue to the genesis of the term:

At the Methodist school at Wilbraham, Mass, the name “dingbat” has already been applied to a large raised biscuit that is brought to the table and eaten with butter or molasses in the morning. It’s palatable to the hungry, but is about as indigestible as a brickbat.

Placerville Mountain Democrat (California), 31 Aug 1878, in an item reprinted from the New York Graphic.

Brickbat? Could *dingbat* be a relative? It’s usually accepted that the *ding* part is from the verb to beat, knock or strike a heavy blow. A brickbat was an offensive weapon (though nowadays the assault is more often verbal) consisting rather obviously of a lump of brick. The *bat* in both cases was originally a stick or a stout piece of wood, the same word as in the modern baseball or cricket bat; it might be used for support or to defend oneself by *battering* an assailant (which may remind you of the legal offence of *battery*, the infliction of unlawful personal violence on another person). (*Bat* is from an Old French word meaning to beat.) The missile sense of *dingbat* is rarely recorded and that mostly during the Civil War, though there are references to its having been used in New England for something to chastise a child with.

Adopting *dingbat* for a thing whose proper name eludes one, a thingummy or doodad, appears late in the century:

He had gone to the symphony concert expecting to hear “After the Ball” with variations and “Daisy Bell” without them, but when they turned a whole raft of con motos and scherzos and op. 27’s and appoggiaturas and other chromatic dingbats loose on him he began to wonder what he was there for.

The Daily Independent (Helena, Montana), 31 Mar 1894.

Matron Brennan had occasion to use her sewing machine and found the shuttle and other dingbats belonging to the machine missing.

Dubuque Daily Herald, 21 Sep. 1898.

We may guess that printers took over the term as a convenient way of describing the miscellaneous set of non-alphabetic type symbols that are strictly called printer’s ornaments (although borders and flowery ornamentals are often separated out under the name of *fleurons*). Here Joe Toye, writer of a humorous column called *What You May*, overhears his text being proofread with the printer:

Head in a box. On the top line “the” in caps. Next line. What You May Column upper and lower. Third line in the box upper and lower. By Joe Toye with an “e” on the end of it. End of the box. ... Then come three dingbat stars and the next paragraph.

Boston Sunday Post, 24 Jun, 1917.

This is the earliest I’ve so far found, though I suspect that a bit of whimsy a decade earlier by C H Lincoln in his *All Sorts* column in another newspaper in the same city may derive from the same idea of a printing character (as indeed does his column’s title, as a *sort* is one character in a font of type):

Neither is the precious Dingbat the most hated of animals. We knew a printer who loved a trained Dingbat better even than he did his dog, and who spent many hours daily catching type-lice for it to eat.

Boston Post, 7 Jun. 1907.

The sense of a stupid or crazy person starts to appear at about the same time, laying the foundation for Archie Bunker's affectionate nickname for his wife Edith in the American TV show *All In the Family*.

Sic

There's no tragic situation that clunky prose can't make sound ridiculous. A piece Neil Hesketh saw on MSN News online on 11 March reported that "Keith Emerson shot himself in the head in what's likely now a suicide investigation."

Russell Ball discovered an unfortunate typo on the *Sydney Morning Herald's* site on 7 March, in a story about the battle between Madonna and Guy Ritchie for custody of their son: "According to reports, the mum-of-four has conceded defeat, finally admitting that her son does not want to love with her."

More modern slavery. Alan Tunnicliffe submitted an advert he found in *The Press* of Christchurch, New Zealand, on 11 March: "The owner of GLN135 Audi S4 will be sold at auction under the Workers Lien Act if payment is not made within 30 days."

Useful information

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