SCRAPBOOK

Gems, titbits, puzzles, foibles, quirks, bits & pieces, quotations, snippets, odds & ends, what you will

I once had some lessons to improve my French, and one of the tasks I was set was to write a short story in that language. So I naturally and dutifully set out to write a story involving a huge ten-foot rabbit (don't ask!). I thought – in English – of the expression that I wanted to describe this vast creature's progress along a road: *he thumped heavily*. I soon found that I couldn't do that in French (or in other European tongues, either), and I realised how lucky I was to use as my daily language one which allowed me to play with it in this way. I was brought up to appreciate words and playing with them; puns are second nature now, and 'adjusting' perfectly ordinary words to mean something else is something I do every day.

Twisted meanings

I did a stage performance about puns. Really it was just a play on words.

I meant to look for my missing watch, but I could never find the time.

Did you hear about that great new spade? It's ground-breaking.

Inspecting mirrors is a job I could really see myself doing.

Two antennas got married last Saturday. The reception was fantastic.

Writing with a blunt pencil is pointless.

I used to have a fear of hurdles, but I got over it.

I wanted to buy a camouflage shirt, but I couldn't see one.

The dead batteries were given out free of charge.

For sale: broken puppets – no strings attached.

Someone once told me a joke about amnesia, but I forget how it goes.

Never lie to an x-ray technician – they can see right through you.

His theory on inertia never seemed to gain momentum.

The grape didn't say much when it got stepped on. It just let out a little wine.

I once knew a man with one eye named Johnson – I don't know the name of his other eye.

The authorities complimented my driving skills. They left a ticket that read 'parking fine'.

Paraprosdokians

The term *paraprosdokian* comes from two Greek words meaning 'against' and 'expectation'. It is a figure of speech in which the end of a sentence or phrase is surprising – to the extent that the reader or listener has to reinterpret the first part. Here are some examples:

'If I agreed with you, we'd both be wrong.'

'To steal ideas from one person is plagiarism, to steal from many is research.'

'I didn't say it was your fault; I said I was blaming you.'

'Some cause happiness wherever they go. Others whenever they go.'

'There are three kinds of people in the world: those who can count and those who can't.'

'Knowledge is knowing that a tomato is a fruit: wisdom is not putting it in a fruit salad.'

Paraprosdokians are often used by comedians, writers and even politicians for comic effect:

'I've had a perfectly wonderful evening, but this wasn't it.' Groucho Marx

'He taught me housekeeping: when I divorce, I keep the house.' Zsa Zsa Gabor

'When I was a child my parents moved a lot, but I always found them.' Rodney Dangerfield

'I have the heart of a small boy – in a glass jar on my desk.' Stephen King

'People say nothing is impossible, but I do nothing every day.' Winnie the Pooh (in the book by A A Milne)

'If I had to name my greatest strength, I guess it would be my humility. Greatest weakness – it's possible that I'm a little too awesome.' Barack Obama

People say I'm indecisive, but I don't know about tha[illegible]' George H W Bush

Unintentional word play

The television is a rich source of interesting language, often producing wincing moments when a presenter or television reporter uses a word or phrase incorrectly. Recent examples I have heard include 'watching on' (instead of *watching* or *looking on*) and 'avert your attention' (used to mean averting or lifting your eyes so as not to see something).

Newspapers also make their contributions. Here are some headlines whose meaning has got lost along the way ...

Cows lose their jobs as milk prices drop

California state population to double by 2040; babies to blame

Breathing oxygen linked to staying alive

Murderer says detective ruined his reputation

Students cook and serve grandparents

Hospitals resort to hiring doctors

Malapropisms – words misused due to their relative closeness in sound to the intended word, and which get their name from a character in Sheridan's play *The Rivals* – are great sources of amusement:

'Having one wife is called monotony.'

'The flood damage was so bad they had to evaporate the city.'

'The event was a bit of a damp squid.'

'His account of the incident was a work of friction.'

'He was a man of great statue.' (Thomas Menino, mayor of Boston)

'We can't let terrorists hold this nation hostile.' (President George W Bush)

Circumlocution

As the word suggests, circumlocution is when people use language to go round and round the subject, either through tact, evasion, or squeamishness of one sort or another. For instance:

In George Orwell's *Animal Farm*, the pigs who control the farm decide to take more of the food for themselves and leave less for the other animals. In a classic example of political circumlocution, the pigs explain that: *For the time being it has been found necessary to make a readjustment of rations.*

In one episode of the American TV series *Firefly*, Captain Reynolds tells an enemy that he is 'not burdened with an overabundance of schooling', which is a circumlocution for 'stupid'. In this case, Captain Reynolds's circumlocution is designed to go over the enemy's head, thus displaying his enemy's stupidity in practice as well as describing it in words.

It's on the tip of my tongue

On the next page is a photocopiable worksheet to use with your students with a text about the mistakes native speakers make with the English language. This can also be downloaded from the *ETp* website at **www.etprofessional.com/media/37312/etp-133-onlineresources_scrapbook_ianwaringgreen.pdf**.

Suggested answers to activity 1:

1 c 2 Because he had only *heard* the word *crustaceans* before; he had never seen it written. 3 temporary linguistic deficiencies 4 They both made up expressions to describe things for which they didn't know the correct term.

Linguistic curiosities

Some people clearly think that English is a curious language! After all, why do we have noses that run and feet that smell?

'Our language is funny – a "fat chance" and a "slim chance" are the same thing.' J Gustav White

'If the English language made any sense, "lackadaisical" would have something to do with a shortage of flowers ... and a "catastrophe" would be an apostrophe with fur.' Doug Larson

'Never make fun of someone who speaks broken English. It means they know another language.' H Jackson Brown, Jr

'My spelling is wobbly. It is good spelling, but it wobbles and the letters get in the wrong places.' Winnie the Pooh (in the book by A A Milne)

Mixed metaphors

It is sometimes fun to conflate two standard metaphors. 'A different kettle of fish' is pretty much the same as 'a horse of a different colour' – they both mean that something is very different from something else. I quite like using 'a kettle of a different horse'. Convoluted, yes, but it gets its meaning across! I also like 'spurious to requirements' – like superfluous, but stronger?

Homophonous fun

It is also quite fun to play with the *sounds* of words – homophones are always good:

Q: What did one homophone say to comfort the other homophone?
A: Their, there, they're.

Q: What did the ram say to his girlfriend?
A: I love ewe.

Q: What time did the man go to the dentist?
A: Tooth hurty.

Q: What do you call a man with a spade on his head?
A: Doug.

Q: What do you call a woman with a boat on her head?
A: Maud.

Q: How many members of a convent does it take to change a light bulb?
A: None.

Q: What do you call a deer with no eyes?
A: No idea.

Q: What coin smells?
A: A cent.

Q: Why couldn't the jockey speak?
A: He was feeling a little horse.

Q: Why doesn't the lion enjoy cooked vegetables?
A: He prefers them roar.

I once bet the butcher that he couldn't reach the meat on the top shelf. He refused to take the bet because the steaks were too high.

Scrapbook compiled by Ian Waringin Green

It's on the tip of my tongue

1 Read the article and answer the questions underneath.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there are 171,146 English words currently in use (plus another 47,156 words that are obsolete). With so many words to choose from, it is hardly surprising that we all make mistakes. And, though a good education tends to reduce the number of language mistakes a person will make, it is no guarantee that what they say or write will always be perfect.

Sometimes, it is only when people are forced to write things down that the gaps in their linguistic knowledge are revealed. Take, for example, the restaurant owner who sent a letter to a fish wholesaler enquiring into the price of 'crushed Asians' (crustaceans). The number of strange mistakes found in social media texts also suggests that people often use words that they have only ever heard – or misheard – and have never actually seen in their written form. It could be that the person from whom they first heard the word had unclear or imprecise pronunciation. This may have been the case when a high-school teacher's pronunciation of *euthanasia* led to a whole class of students producing painstakingly-researched homework essays on 'The problem of youth in Asia'.

We often associate the inability to remember words with growing older. However, 'brain freeze' – when your mind goes blank and you simply can't remember the word for what you want to describe – can occur at any age. A librarian, perhaps the person most likely to be able to remember the word *book*, once reported an instance of being unable to bring the word to mind and having to ask an assistant to put the 'thingies' back on the shelves. A university student found herself asking a friend 'Is the meat buying place open on Mondays?' when the word *butcher's* simply refused to come.

This last is an example of the creative ways in which we deal with temporary linguistic deficiencies. I remember being impressed by the ingenuity of a visitor from the former East Germany who had only had access to foreign language classes in Russian when he was at school. As a result, he had learnt all his English from computer manuals, and there were a few gaps in his vocabulary. This did not stop him talking non-stop on his first visit to the UK in the early 1990s. He just made it up as he went along from whatever language he did have, and it was surprisingly easy to understand him. He would often admire the 'tall plants' (*trees*) at the bottom of the garden and once told me about the 'flying diamonds' (*kites*) he had seen in a London park.

Children often make up names for things they have forgotten or which they have never been taught. One inventive five year old, unable to remember the word *rhino*, referred to what he was seeing at the zoo as a 'battle unicorn'.

So if you find yourself short of a word or two, don't despair. Just make something up. And who knows? Maybe your word will catch on and will become the 171,147th word in the English dictionary.

1 Which of these best reflects the author's opinion?

a Lack of education is the cause of the majority of mistakes made by native English speakers.

b Inability to remember words is inevitably a sign that someone's brain is ageing.

c Strategies used to compensate for our mistakes are more important than the mistakes themselves.

2 Why does the author think the shopkeeper used the words 'crushed Asians' in his letter?

3 What expression does the author use to suggest that mistakes in language may not be permanent?

4 What did the visitor from East Germany and the child at the zoo have in common?

2 Here are some nonsense words English speakers use in place of a word that they can't remember. What do you say in *your* language?

- *whatsit*
- *thingamajig*
- *whatchamacallit*
- *thingy*
- *doodah/doodad*

Does your language have an expression like *it's on the tip of my tongue* to describe a situation where you know a word but just can't produce it at that moment?