



Friday, Oct. 03, 2008

Hangman, Spare That Word: The English Purge Their Language

By William Lee Adams / London

For feminists examining [muliebrity](#) (the condition of being a woman), or soothsayers putting out their latest vaticination (prophecy), the available lexicon may soon get slimmer. The lexicographers behind Britain's *Collins English Dictionary* have decided to exuviate (shed) rarely used and archaic words as part of an abstergent (cleansing) process to make room for up to 2,000 new entries. "We want the dictionary to be a reflection of English as it is currently spoken," says Ian Brookes, managing editor of *Collins*, "rather than a fossilized version of the language."

Good luck with that. Here in Old Blighty, the birthplace of English, the dictionary's compilers face passionate resistance from language lovers who believe that any cull reduces the richness and variety that make language powerful — and leaves us all a bit dumber. "Newspapers are often accused of setting their reading level for 12-year-olds," one opponent wrote on an online message board. "Spare us dictionaries that do the same!"

Collins' editors know that old words die hard — and that some people will vilipend (regard with contempt) any execution without a fair trial. So they've offered the chance of a reprieve. They have made public 24 words that face deletion because editors could find no example of their use in their database of English-language books, newspapers, broadcasts and other media. If, by February 2009, a word reappears in that database with at least six "high quality" citations, it could be spared from the semantic dustbin. "We're looking to see if dropping a little stone in the pond of language actually does generate ripples," says Brookes.

A number of public figures in Britain have stepped forward to champion specific words, hoping to demonstrate they are compossible (possible in coexistence) with everyday speech. Andrew Motion, Britain's poet laureate since 1999, selected *skirr*, which refers to the rattling, scratchy noise that a bird's wings make during flight. "It's an appealing word with an onomatopoeic value and resonance," he says. Motion, an avid bird watcher, has already used the word on an evening radio program and hopes to include it in a poem if he can do so without "wrenching things around too much."

Stephen Pound, the Labour MP from Ealing North, will advocate *caliginosity* (dimness, darkness) on the floor of Parliament. "I shall be drawing the Prime Minister's attention in a fairly obscure and abstruse way to the word: 'Amid the global fiscal turmoil, we sought illumination but found only caliginosity.'" The exercise has already influenced Pound's speech: in the course of a 12-min. interview, he used the

word 15 times.

Collins warns that it will discount any artificial use of the endangered words, meaning Motion's readers and Pound's constituents must actually take them up themselves. There's certainly interest in doing so. The *Times* of London asked readers to vote for the word they most felt should be spared from oblivion and attracted more than 11,000 votes in a week. The word *embrangle* (to confuse or entangle) won with 1,434 votes, while *fubsy* (short and stout) came in a distant second. *Roborant* (tending to fortify) and *nitid* (bright, glistening) failed to shine; they finished last, drawing roughly 550 votes between them.

Despite his deftness at manipulating language, Motion believes some words should be sacrificed for their clumsiness. "Nobody in their right mind, unless they are taking the piss, is going to say, 'I went on an agrestic retreat,' " he says, "because you've got the word *rural* to do it for you."

But reaction to the potential axing of words has revealed specialized meanings that seem to have escaped the dictionary's compilers. David Pybus, a perfumer in London, says *agrestic's* alternate meaning should qualify it for preservation: "It is used," he says, "in the perfume and flavor industry quite extensively to describe an aroma note or type which is 'of the countryside,' such as hay, heather, forest depths or meadow." Who knew? Elsewhere, fantasy-game devotees have rushed to the defense of *periapt* (a charm or amulet), which they know from the popular *Dungeons & Dragons* game, and geologists have pointed out the utility of *griseous* (streaked or mixed with gray) in describing rocks and minerals. Apparently, one man's linguistic recement (waste, refuse) is another man's treasure.

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<http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1847038,00.html>



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24 Words the CED Wants to Exuviate (Shed)

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Here are a list of words the Collins English Dictionary wants to discard to make room for up to 2,000 new entries.

Abstergent: Cleansing

Agrestic: Rural

Apodeictic: Unquestionably true by virtue of demonstration

Caducity: Perishableness

Caliginosity: Dimness

Compossible: Possible in coexistence with something else

Embrangle: To confuse

Exuviate: To shed

Fatidical: Prophetic

Fubsy: Squat

Griseous: Somewhat grey

Malison: A curse

Mansuetude: Gentleness

Muliebrity: The condition of being a woman

Niddering: Cowardly

Nitid: Bright

Olid: Foul-smelling

Oppugnant: Combative

Periapit: An amulet

Recrement: Refuse

Roborant: Tending to fortify

Skirr: A whirring sound, as of the wings of birds in flight

Vaticinate: Prophecy

Vilipend: To treat with contempt

[To read more on the English purging their language, click here.](#)

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