

This is the sort of foolishness up with which I shall not put!

When does a word or a phrase that was once used every day evolve into a "dumb expression?" That's a good question. Since language is in a constant state of evolution, we can be certain of one thing . . . change. A word or a phrase that was universally accepted as recently as five years ago can fall out of favor quickly as each generation sets its own standards.

If you get a chance, read an old detective novel written circa the 1950s. I'd recommend any of the Mike Hammer stories written by "tough guy" author



Mickey Spillane

Mickey Spillane. In my opinion, his works were "pulp fiction" at its best. His writing style was characterized by short words, lightning-quick transitions, and colorful descriptions that would not make it into publication by today's standards. Here is the way he described Velda, his secretary: *"She kept her coal black hair long in a page-boy cut and wore tight fitting dresses that made me think of the curves in the Pennsylvania Highway every time I looked at her."*

This was an era when a police officer was referred to as a "flatfoot," and women as "dames" or "broads." Detectives like Mike Hammer solved "capers" instead of resolving open cases. In his novels, the gangster boss they were targeting was termed "the Big

Cheese," jail was "the Big House," if someone was killed, he was "bumped off," and when a victim's drink was poisoned, he was given a "lullaby cocktail." Stolen jewelry was "ice," and it was probably the result of a "heist" somewhere in the city. While it might seem strange to go back in time and revive some of these expressions, but at the time they were written, they were actually part of the working vernacular of detective work and thereby acceptable to society. Just reading those terms should bring a smile to your face.

Mickey Spillane was perhaps the first writer to arm his alter ego, Mike Hammer, with the methods and language of the bad guys in pursuit of justice. Today, he would be termed sexist and "politically incorrect," but back then, he did manage to get his points across to the reader. His first person narratives and fist-first approach to solving mysteries quickly became the model for detective speak both in writing, on the radio, and in the movies. As we know, you can't underestimate the role movies play in trend setting, whether it is in language, style, or fashion. If you want to start a trend, do it in a movie and watch the retail sales numbers soar.

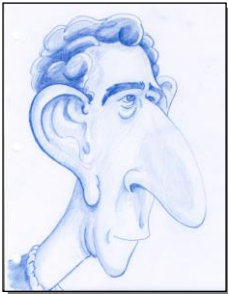


While those phrases were quaint and considered today to be well-worn and dated, those metaphors did make sense. Before Micky Spillane coined these creative expressions, they were nothing more than colorful descriptions of things that were previously described in ordinary terms. As a former English teacher, I can assure you that they were correct in their descriptive sense. It was easy to get the picture of what the author wanted you to perceive.

Dumb Expressions and Mispronunciations

So, is there a difference between words that are now considered dated and dumb expressions? Absolutely! Perhaps I should clarify what is meant by “dumb” expression. It is a word or phrase that literally does not make sense in the context in which it is used. Somehow, these expressions have crept into our daily conversations and have received a degree of acceptance among the lesser educated when it comes to proper syntax and grammar. Whether it is the misuse of a word, or a mispronunciation, somehow these words or phrases were used over and over until they gained acceptance among certain individuals who thought they were the correct way of expressing that notion. If you are like the majority of educated English speaking people, you’ll know one as soon as you hear one . . . or will you? No doubt about it, people can and do say the dumbest things.

From news accounts to commercials to everyday conversations, dumb expressions abound. The more I think about the nonsense our ears are forced to endure, the more I crave Mr. Barone, my ninth grade English teacher. He was a short man with a slightly balding head, and a nose that was far too large for a man of his stature. He was a strict classroom disciplinarian, so nobody dared to make fun of his appearance . . . at least not to his face. "Baron Von Beak," as we called him, would stare intensely at anyone who was not seated at the bell that signaled the beginning of class. It might have been our imagination, but his small, beady eyes seemed capable of boring a hole into your body. Yes, ninth graders *do* have vivid imaginations.



The reason I am bringing up the subject of my ninth grade English teacher is simple. Mr. Barone would *never* use a cliché. In fact, I can't remember a time when he used a contraction. With him, everything was “proper English.” Ending a sentence with a preposition was “the sort of foolishness up with which he would not put.” He would tell us that clichés are unnecessary shortcuts and that they distorted the true meanings of written and spoken words. (This guy must have been good for me to remember details like that after all those years.) Some of his writing assignments were a true test of creativity as well as the basic rules of English grammar. As part of our creative writing exercises, a typical "Von Beak" assignment would go something like this: “Write a 113 word description . . . no more and no less . . . entitled ‘String.’ In your assignment, you are not to use any

form of the verb "to be." Other assignments ranged from the "personification of an ice cube" to "the color red." All of these projects came with strict word limits as well as no form of the verb "to be." If you think this was easy, just try to talk about something for two minutes without using any form of am, are, is, was, were, will be ... get the picture? After a few weeks, we actually were turning out some pretty interesting stories. The "Baron" would read one or two of the best each week, and if yours got picked, you felt a sense of pride, strange pride, but pride nonetheless.

How did it happen?

Do you wonder where the true gift of the spoken and written word has gone? When I listen to people speak or as I read articles in newspapers and magazines, I find it amazing just how many cliches and really dumb expressions are used every day. It is also a disturbing trend among certain radio and television announcers. Does anyone proof read their copy before it airs? For the most part, our treasured gift of proper communication is dying.

Here is an interesting fact. In the broadcast industry, the Mecca of television and radio in the United States is the metropolitan New York City



"Yo Marta, dere's uh new guy on TV doin duh news."

market. That is where the best announcers in the country work. It is the largest market in the nation, and if you are in broadcasting, chances are that your ultimate goal is to be an anchor person on the six o'clock news in New York. That is also where the big money in that industry can be found. You have to be really good to get there. The irony here is that these people with perfect pronunciation and flawless diction are

speaking directly to an audience where a majority of the people who have the benefit of listening to these professionals have the worst pronunciation and speech habits in the country.

Joe Pesci and the news

Channel surfing is something we all do. If we don't know what is on television, this is great way to see for yourself. Since, we have already established the fact that the best broadcasters, news anchors, and media personalities work in New York City, how do we account for all of the mispronunciations and regional cliches that abound in our nation's largest city? Something surely is behind all of this, and it has to be a medium that is both visible and easily accessible to millions of "Noo Yawkers." When surveyed, a full fifty



percent of New York City's residents (those with at least a high school education) said that their choice for evening network and local news was evenly divided between the principal networks, ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox. The survey failed to reveal that the remaining fifty percent is probably watching Joe Pesci "duh-liva" their news on Channel "turdy-tree."

So, what should we do when we hear or read something that we know is really stupid? In extreme cases, we could simply arrange to have the guilty parties shot. The drawback to this solution is that would be a time-consuming chore, and would take way too long to complete. There are just too many "violators" out there. Others feel that this type of punishment should be reserved exclusively for individuals who have moved away from the "Big Apple" and still insist on speaking with their NOO YAWK accents. Isn't twenty years away from that place time enough to learn to put the letter "R" at the end of words that end in "R," drink coffee instead of "cawfee," and to pronounce the words "to" and "the" instead of "tuh" and "duh?" Shooting people can get pretty messy, and from what I am hearing lately, there would be too many bodies to dump afterwards. Besides, most of the people you would hire to do the shooting speak exactly like the ones we are trying to eliminate!



Vito "the Enforcer"

The ex-New Yorker in me says that instead of "rubbing out" the guilty parties, we should somehow bring to their attention the incorrect pronunciation or unfounded choice of words and expressions they use. Let them experience first hand how foolish they sound. For example, you don't take your dog to a "vet-uh-narian." There is no such word. A veterinarian (six syllables) is someone who is trained and qualified in the medical treatment of animals. That violation of correct pronunciation would result in an immediate contract for Vito.

Have you ever had a good cup of espresso (not **ex**-presso)? Well, have one now and make your self comfortable (four syllables not kumft-**uh**-bull), and ponder how many mispronunciations have crept into your life. When you go to the pharmacist to pick up your prescription (not **per**-scription), on the way home you can always treat yourself to an ice cream, and order it with caramel (three syllables, not car-mul) topping. Yum! When you bought your house, you dealt with a realtor (two syllables, not a real-**a**-tor) and during that process, you probably asked questions about the local elementary school (yes, it is just one syllable, not sku-**wool**). If you listened to the news later that evening, you might have heard about some renegade nation flaunting nuclear (that's nu-clee-ar not noo-**cue**-lar) weapons. Also, you might have awakened during the night with a great idea (not eye-**dear**) that suddenly came to you when that ever present light bulb flashed in your head. Now that you are aware of



these eardrum transgressions, I'm sure that you will eventually inquire about Vito the Enforcer's cell phone number. Well, I might as well give it to you now . . . it's 212 782-8688 (or 212 RUB UOUT).

A Box of Rs

Here's something I would like to offer free of charge to our "Pronunciation-Challenged" friends. I'm surprised that nobody has thought of this idea before . . . a box of Rs. Since many of their mispronunciation issues relate to the letter "R" (or the lack of at the end of certain words), perhaps we can give each of them a gift that their entire family (muth-uh, fath-uh, bruth-uh, and sist-uh) will all appreciate some day. No longer will they have to conserve their supply of Rs by removing them from the end of words. By having that box handy, they will not be able to use the excuse that they didn't have an R to put at the end of a word that should have one. This way, there will be plenty to go around!



Poor Choices

John and Mary are taking a vacation, but before they depart, Mary places a telephone call to her college roommate who lives in that city to let her know that she will be in town. As the conversation gets past the first five minutes of reconstructing the past several years of their lives, Mary's friend asks where they will be staying. When Mary says that they have reservations at Holiday Inn downtown, her friend replies, "Mary, you have to stay with us. You're *more* than welcome."

Let's stop right there!

More than welcome? What would "the Baron" say about that phrase? He would probably challenge the statement's logic.

"If welcome is welcome, which I presume is the meaning of the intended word as listed in the dictionary, how can one be 'more than welcome' unless there is a negative connotation either implied or attached to your statement? Maybe the word *welcome* was misused in the first place. Perhaps you didn't mean to use the term welcome at all." The fact that Mary is welcome is good, but is there a caveat? Are you telling her that she is welcome as long as she makes dinner for you, does the dishes, takes the sheets off the bed, and washes them in the laundry before she leaves? Is that the "more than" part? Or was it that the word welcome wasn't really the proper term to use in the first place? Perhaps John and Mary were only partially welcome. Well, at least you see the absence of logic in Mary's use of that dumb expression. You can apply this line of logic with similar mindless statements as *more than happy, more than glad, more than willing, more than able . . . etc.*)



How about the use of the term "Mouth Watering?" Before I begin, try to create a visual for this expression in your mind. I'm sure you have heard this term used in numerous television and radio commercials for all types of restaurants, from fast food to high end establishments. Why? Since when does the building up of saliva until it gurgles and seeps out of your mouth enhance anyone's appetite for food? Did the copy writers for these commercials fail to get the visual of what the term "mouth watering" literally connotes? There are people I can't stand to listen to because you can actually feel the spray of their spit from several feet away when they speak. Sub lingual gurgling is one of the things I don't care to think about, see, hear, or experience in any way during my dinner.



A Russian research scientist named Ivan Pavlov had an idea that he called the *Conditional Reflex Theory*, and he proved it almost a century ago. He would announce dinnertime to his dogs by ringing a bell. Every night he would ring the bell and then proceed to feed his dogs. The dogs became so conditioned that they developed a reflex action, and just the sound of the bell caused them to salivate. Yes, I said salivate . . . drool . . . caused their mouths to "water." Have you ever watched a hungry bulldog shake its head? If not, you're in for a treat, and probably a bath as well. People who own bulldogs undoubtedly have slippery tile or soggy carpets!

So, who are these shortsighted copywriters for major steak houses and upscale restaurants that insist on including the phrase "mouth watering" in their

promotions? How did they sell this concept to the owners of these restaurants? Does this invoke an image of something that I have yet to grasp? Perhaps I am just that much more aware of the fact that I do not want to be reminded of the

PAVLOV'S
FISH



drool experience as I sit down to eat my \$50 steak dinner. Besides, if my steak is really that good and considered "mouth watering," how do I know that the chef who cooked it or the waiter who carried it to my table didn't get a case of the drools and accidentally "seasoned" my Porterhouse? The

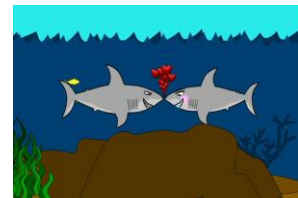
minute some waiter at the Capital Grille places a drool cup beside my table "just in case," I'm out the door!

The Malaprop

What is a malaprop? Perhaps you don't recognize the term, but you know malapropisms. They abound in conversations and usually bring a smile to everyone involved but the speaker. A malapropism is the mistaken use of a word in place of a similar-sounding one, often with an unintentionally amusing effect, as in "dance the *flamingo*" (instead of *flamenco*). The terms malaprop and malapropisms originally come from a Richard Brinsley Sheridan comedy *The Rivals* written back in 1775. His Mrs. Malaprop character habitually misused her words and as a result, created many unintended comedic effects.

There are many malapropisms I could list here, but these are some of the strangest I have heard.

- That monster is just a pigment of your imagination (instead of figment).
- She has a photogenic memory (in place of photographic).
- Magellan was the first person to circumvent (circumnavigate) the globe.
- He used a fire distinguisher (extinguisher) to douse the flames.
- The weather report said that there was a ninety percent chance of participation (precipitation) today.
- The water is infatuated (infested) with sharks.
- She just renewed her prescription (subscription) for *Cosmopolitan* magazine.
- Don't take life for granite (granted).



Sometimes children can come up with malapropisms that are just funny because they are so innocent.

- Sometimes I play chest (chess) with my grandfather.
- The equator is a menagerie lion running around the center of the earth.

Yes, some of these statements are cute while others show just how far our levels of education have slipped. In the case of children, there is still hope, but for the adults who have uttered most of the phrases you have just read, well, I'm not sure if Vito has enough time or resources to do the job. There have been rumors

of cemetery caretakers complaining that the bodies of William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Nathaniel Hawthorne and other masters of the written word turn over in their graves (yes, this is a cliché) each time a dumb expression is uttered.

In the mean time, I think I'll just find a quiet place to relax, pick up that Mickey Spillane novel I started the other day, and read a chapter or two. This way, I can slip back to a time when things were simple, and men were men, and women were . . . well. . . dames.



Dumb Expressions!