

DICTIONARY OF WORD AND PHRASE ORIGINS

By William and Mary Morris



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AUTHOR'S NOTE

During the past quarter-century I have had the good fortune to be associated with several of America's foremost reference book publishers, first as a member of the educational department of the G. & C. Merriam Co., publishers of the Merriam-Webster Dictionaries. During the late 1940's I was editor-in-chief of *Words: The New Dictionary*, published jointly by Grosset & Dunlap and Henry Holt, Inc. In the past decade I have been successively advisory editor of the Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionaries and, currently, executive editor of a major encyclopedia-in-progress for the Grolier Society.

In each of these professional capacities I have garnered many of the facts that have gone into this book. Much more to the point, from my associations both within the companies named and with our friendly competitors, I have developed knowledge of and respect for the technical disciplines required in compiling a book of this nature.

Among my professional associates to whom I feel most obligated—not for any specific items, rather for the encouragement that has led me along the twenty-five-year road to this book—I should like to mention John P. Bethel, late editor-in-chief of the Merriam-Webster Dictionaries; Clarence Barnhart, creator of the famous Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionaries and many other great reference books; Jess Stein, editor-in-chief of the *American College Dictionary*; Charles F. Berlitz, editor-in-chief of the many Berlitz language books; William Roulet, executive vice president of Funk & Wagnalls; Henry L. Mencken and S. I. Hayakawa, whose enthusiasm for my early venture into lexicography, *Words: The New Dictionary*, was most gratifying; Harold L. Wentworth, author of the *American Dialect Dictionary* and co-author of *Dictionary of American Slang*, an old and valued friend whose books have been very nearly indispensable to me; and Joseph Vergara, my editor at Harper & Row, without whose appreciative and very practical encouragement this volume would not have seen print.

A few major contributions should also be noted. To the editors of *Holiday* magazine go thanks for much of adman's jargon; to Mitch Miller and Norman Paris for jazzmen's slang; to Joseph Kaselow, peerless advertising columnist of the New York *Herald Tribune*, for help in rounding up the language of Madison Avenue; to Charlie Rice and Stewart Beach of

This Week magazine for frequent, if frequently unwitting, contributions over the course of many conversations; to unnumbered government servants for examples of what has variously been called governmentese, pentagonese and gobbledegook; to William W. Vosburgh, Jr. of the *Waterbury American* for new light on the humor of our grandparents, Little Willie's "grues"; to Elmer Roessner, faithful and ever-helpful editor at Bell Syndicate, who, among many other leads, first touted us onto those confused and depressed beetles; lastly to Mimi and Evan, the youngest of the Morris offspring, who, though they seldom appear by name on these pages, left their imprint on virtually every one of them. If you don't believe that, just you try concentrating with two brilliant and highly vocal teenagers in the same house!

Most of all, of course, my gratitude goes to my wife and co-author, who has not only contributed at very least the inspiration and very often the content for many items, but has performed the far more onerous task of collating thousands of random items, indexing them assiduously, and editing them brilliantly.

WILLIAM MORRIS

INTRODUCTION

This *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins* is quite unlike any similar work. For one thing, it derives directly from research done over the past ten years at the behest of some twelve million readers of my daily column carried by more than fifty newspapers in the United States, Canada and Mexico. You would be surprised—as we have frequently been—at the difference between the real word-origin interests of people and what ivory-tower experts think should interest them. Many thousands of queries, suggestions and contributions have come from readers during the past decade—far too many to be acknowledged here.

Committing to print the result of years of research should be a serious business indeed. Yet we find a puzzlingly light-hearted mood upon us as we near the end of the long journey through the by-ways and back roads of the American and British Languages.

Perhaps the reason is that the task itself, though arduous, has been so rewarding. It's fun, believe us, to engage an old circus hand in conversation and learn, among other delightful things, that the bottom man of a human pyramid is called, with superb logic, the "understander." Or to quote Christopher Morley's word for one who sympathizes with the underdog, "infracaninophile"—and receive a spate of learned and witty letters proving that it should have been "infracanophile." Or to learn that beetles may be either confused or depressed, but never both at the same time.

In the pages ahead you will find an unbelievable variety of language—from the "hush puppies" of Southern dialect to the "fine Italian hand" of papal secretaries, from the "ax" of hip musicians to the "slughgh-airm" (today's "slogan") of Highland chieftains. Without exception, these entries represent a query, interest in, or contribution to our language on the part of readers or associates, plus careful research on our part. Although the text in this volume is, for the most part, quite informal, we believe that you will find on close scrutiny that this careful research underlies every item.

Here, then, is your *Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*. Dip in and savor for yourself the wondrous varieties of the languages we call English and American.

WILLIAM AND MARY MORRIS

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A

abacus

This word comes from the Greek *abax*, a tablet for writing or ciphering. The bead-and-frame gadget that we call an *abacus* was originated by the Chinese and called *suan pan*. Amazingly fast and intricate computations can be made by skillful users of the instrument. All authorities agree that the correct pronunciation places the stress on the first syllable: AB-uh-kus.

aboard. *See* baseball jargon.

A.B.S. marks. *See* Plimsoll mark.

according to Hoyle. *See* Hoyle, according to.

acronym

Probably the most interesting and widespread recent development in our changing language has been the vast popularity of acronyms.

Acronym (pronounced AK-roh-nim) is the name for a word formed by combining the initial letters or syllables of a series of words, for example, *Jato* (Jet Assisted Take-off) or *Basic* (British-American Scientific International Commercial) English. It comes from the Greek *akros* (tip) and *onym* (name).

The earliest acronyms are not known, though some scholars claim to have located examples in ancient Hebrew scriptures. Acronyms are found among nineteenth-century British and American word coinages but their appearance in profusion dates from World War I, when *Anzac* (Australian-New Zealand Army Corps) and *WAAC* (Women's Army Auxiliary Corps) were coined.

The full tide of popularity of acronyms in America, however, came with the advent of the New Deal and World War II. The custom of referring to the "alphabet agencies," such as *WPA* and *NLRB*, by their initials undoubtedly accelerated the trend toward naming organizations and offices by pronounceable combinations of letters. The U.S. Navy was especially pro-

lific in coining acronyms, such as *Bupers* (Bureau of Personnel) and the ill-chosen *Cincus* (Commander in Chief, U.S. Fleet), which was abruptly changed after the disaster at Pearl Harbor.

During World War II, acronyms ranging from technical labels like *Radar* (Radio Detection and Ranging) to slang terms like *Snafu* (Situation Normal; All Fouled Up) became commonplace. During the years since World War II no single classification of word coinages has proliferated so rapidly.

Here is a list of the acronyms most commonly met today, together with a few (*Nabisco*, for example) that all of us will remember from our earliest childhood.

<i>Alcoa</i>	Aluminum Company of America
<i>Anzac</i>	Australia–New Zealand Army Corps
<i>Anzus</i>	Australia–New Zealand–United States Treaty
<i>ASCAP</i>	American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers
<i>AWOL</i>	Absent Without Official Leave
<i>Babs</i>	Blind Approach Beacon System (flying)
<i>Bad</i>	Berlin Airlift Device (military)
<i>Basic</i>	(English) British-American Scientific International Commercial English
<i>Benelux</i>	Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg
<i>Binac</i>	Binary Automatic Computer
<i>Biowar</i>	Biological Warfare
<i>BIPAD</i>	Bureau of Independent Publishers and Distributors
<i>BOMCOM</i>	Bomber Command
<i>Bosox</i>	Boston Red Sox (baseball team)
<i>Budocks</i>	Bureau of Yards and Docks (Navy)
<i>Bupers</i>	Bureau of Personnel (Navy)
<i>Caltech</i>	California Institute of Technology
<i>Cats</i>	Civil Affairs Training School (Navy)
<i>Cebar</i>	Chemical, Biological, Radiological Warfare
<i>Cermet</i>	Ceramic Material Bonded to Metal
<i>Chacom</i>	Chain of Command (military)
<i>Chisox</i>	Chicago White Sox (baseball team)
<i>Comintern</i>	Communist International
<i>Comseafron</i>	Commander Sea Frontier (Navy)
<i>CONAD</i>	Continental Air Defense Command (military)
<i>Contrail</i>	Condensation Trail (flying)
<i>Convair</i>	Consolidated-Vultee Aircraft
<i>COPE</i>	Committee on Political Education (AFL-CIO)
<i>CORE</i>	Congress of Racial Equality
<i>Dynasoar</i>	Dynamic Soaring (space flight)

<i>ENIAC</i>	Electronic Numerical Integrator and Computer
<i>Esso</i>	Standard Oil
<i>Eurailpass</i>	European Railway Passenger (ticket)
<i>EURATOM</i>	European Atomic Energy Community
<i>EUROMART</i>	European Common Market
<i>Fannie Mae</i>	Federal National Mortgage Association
<i>Fido</i>	Fog, Intensive Dispersal of (military)
<i>Flak</i>	<i>Fliegerabwehrkanone</i> (German for "antiaircraft cannon")
<i>Fubar</i>	Fouled Up Beyond All Recognition
<i>Fubb</i>	Fouled Up Beyond Belief
<i>Fumtu</i>	Fouled Up More Than Usual
<i>Jato</i>	Jet Assisted Take-Off (flying)
<i>Laser</i>	Light Amplification through Stimulated Emission of Radiation
<i>Maser</i>	Microwave Amplification through Stimulated Emission of Radiation
<i>MATS</i>	Military Air Transport Service (Air Force)
<i>Motel</i>	Motor Hotel
<i>Mouse</i>	Minimum Orbital Unmanned Satellite of the Earth
<i>Nabisco</i>	National Biscuit Company
<i>NANA</i>	North American Newspaper Alliance
<i>NASA</i>	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
<i>NATO</i>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<i>Nazi</i>	National Socialist (German: <i>National-Sozialist</i>)
<i>NICE</i>	National Institute of Ceramic Engineers
<i>OAFIE</i>	Office of Armed Forces Information and Education
<i>Panagra</i>	Pan American-Grace Airways
<i>Pan-Am</i>	Pan American World Airways System
<i>Paradrop</i>	Airdrop by Parachute
<i>Positron</i>	Positive Electron
<i>Radar</i>	Radio Detection and Ranging
<i>Radiac</i>	Radiation Detection, Identification and Computation
<i>Reo</i>	Ransom E. Olds Co. (automobile)
<i>Rif</i>	Reduction in Force
<i>SAC</i>	Strategic Air Command
<i>SACEUR</i>	Supreme Commander Allied, Europe
<i>SCAT</i>	Service Command Air Transportation (Navy)
<i>Scoop</i>	Scientific Computation of Optimum Procurement
<i>Score</i>	Signal Communications by Orbiting Relay Equipment
<i>Scuba</i>	Self-Contained Underwater Breathing Apparatus
<i>SEATO</i>	Southeast Asia Treaty Organization
<i>Slim</i>	Submarine-Launched Inertial Missile
<i>Smart</i>	Supersonic Military Air Research Track
<i>Smog</i>	Smoke and Fog

- Snafu* Situation Normal; All Fouled Up (military slang)
Snort Supersonic Naval Ordnance Research Track
Socony Standard Oil Company of New York
Stanvac Standard Vacuum Oil Company
Tarfu Things Are Really Fouled Up (military slang)

acrophobia

One of the most common phobias, *acrophobia*, meaning fear of heights, is derived from the Greek *akros* (at the point, end or top) and *phobos* (fear).

adamant

Adamant, a word that has been part of our language since Chaucer's time, has quite an interesting background. It was originally coined by the ancients from the Greek words *a* (not) and *damao* (I tame) to describe a mineral of incomparable hardness. For many centuries it was regarded as synonymous with "diamond"—the hardest of gems. The two words, indeed, come from precisely the same Greek root.

adman's jargon

In my column I have been known, from time to time, to view with stern and reproving eye some of the wilder excesses of the advertising gentry. The excessive and unsubstantiated claim of excellence, the open-end comparative ("Laboratory tests prove hot-shots *better*") and the calculated bad grammar designed to appeal to the "common man"—all these have drawn my fire on occasion.

But one aspect of life among the Madison Avenue cliff dwellers never ceases to excite my somewhat rueful admiration. That is the shop talk used by members of the advertising fraternity. As would be expected of craftsmen who deal daily in superlatives, it is characterized by fanciful, free-wheeling metaphor. "What this account needs is men who can plug the holes in the dike without getting their thumbs wet" is a sample. Or "Take it to the lab and see if it's a mushroom or a toadstool."

The problems besetting an agency copywriter are not really much different from those faced by thousands of other modestly creative people working at desks in other industries. But the language he uses to describe each predicament bears little resemblance to the triter observations of lay folk.

Situation: A program into which much thought and planning has gone is rejected by management. Adman's comment: "Bigdome just exploded our lotus blossom."

Situation: First client reaction to a new campaign is less than enthusiastic. Adman's comment: "Let's throw a blanket on this and keep it warm" or "We'll have to put this in a traction splint and hope it knits."

Situation: The hour is late and a crisis impends. Adman's comment: "Let's not open *that* can of peas."

And always there is the realization that man is seldom the master of his fate in today's business world. As the agency man says, "When you've got a bear by the tail, you have to go where the bear goes." Why? Because "that's the way the banana peels!"

The first presentation of a new campaign to the client might well call forth the tentative "Let's run up the flag and see who salutes." Or a cautious account executive—and who among them, behind the self-confident exterior, isn't pretty cautious?—might counsel: "Let's leave it in deep water overnight and see if it springs any leaks." Another version of this runs: "Let's drive it into the parking lot and see if we dent any fenders."

"Compound fracture" translates to "five account executives laughing at one client's joke."

A first attempt at copy for a campaign might well get this comment from the copy chief: "I see pinfeathers on this, but you're not flying yet"—or, in the common patois: "Nice try."

The era of "think big" is still with us, of course, but the boys on the Avenue phrase it differently: "If you're going to build a bridge across the Mississippi, do it lengthwise."

Admirable Crichton, the

Actually there were two "Admirable Crichtons"—one fictional and one real and it's hard to tell which was the more fascinating. One is the hero of James M. Barrie's play of the same name, first performed in 1902 and revived many times since. In it, Crichton, the very model of the typical British butler, serves in the household of Lord Loam, who likes to believe that class distinctions are silly stuff. To prove his point he insists, one day each year, on serving Crichton and the other servants at tea, an eccentricity that horrifies Crichton.

Later the household is shipwrecked on a desert island and Crichton, as the man best qualified to manage things, takes over and becomes the unquestioned leader of the group. He even proposes to marry his former lord's daughter. A rescue party comes to the island, however, and Crichton—again the very model of a proper British manservant—reverts to his former menial status.

The earlier, real-life Crichton was born in 1560 and was the outstanding physical and mental prodigy of his age. By the time he reached fifteen he had taken his Master of Arts degree and at twenty was reported to have

mastered a dozen languages and to be knowledgeable in all the then-known sciences.

The British Isles were obviously too small a theater for a lad of his gifts, so he went first to France where he dazzled the best brains of the Sorbonne, served a year or two with the French Army, then went on to Italy. There he became tutor to sons of dukes and princes, dazzling everyone with his beauty, brilliance and ability as a swordsman. While still in his early twenties, he was rash enough to steal the love of a prince's lady and was treacherously assaulted by three masked men. Thus he died—not wholly admirably, perhaps—one of history's most fabled prodigies.

adroit. *See gauche.*

aestheticism. *See ascetic.*

affluent

Affluent (pronounced AF-loo-ent) today usually means “rich.” Thus, “The mink-upholstered Cadillac belongs to an *affluent* newcomer from Texas.” Derived from the Latin *ad* (to) and *fluere* (flow), it literally means flowing abundantly—like the *affluent* oil wells which may well have made our Texas newcomer financially *affluent*.

affront

Affront (pronounced uh-FRUNT) means to insult or to offend by disrespect. It is perhaps more commonly met in the passive than the active voice, in sentences like, “The Congressman was *affronted* by the lobbyist's lack of respect.” *Affront* comes from the Latin words *ad* (to) and *frons* (forehead). Its original meaning was to confront a person face to face. Nowadays, however, it has the special meaning of to insult a person openly and deliberately. You may insult or offend another person in private, but you can *affront* him only in public. *Affront* is also a noun, in such a sentence as “Your action in snubbing me at the dance constituted an *affront*.”

afghan

It's curious but the way the name *afghan* came to be applied to the familiar knitted woolen blanket has not previously been documented in any standard reference book. That it is derived from “Afghan,” a native or product of Afghanistan, is obvious, of course. But it does seem odd that a name coming from such a faraway corner of the world, deep in Asia, should have been used for so long for such a homely item typically found in the American cedar chest.

One characteristic of the *afghan* is that, in the words of the *Modern Textile Dictionary*, it is "made with a series of stripes, zigzag effects, or squares, varying in size and vivid colorings." This characteristic is shared, of course, with *afghan* rugs, which also feature geometric patterns and vivid colors. So the likelihood is that the *afghan* blanket was named for its resemblance to these Oriental rugs which enjoyed such a great vogue in America during the latter part of the Victorian era.

aficionado

Aficionado (pronounced ah-fee-shuh-NAH-doh) is a Spanish word, much affected in recent years by people who want to add a little highfalutin tone to their talk or writing. It simply means "devotee," especially an enthusiastic, amateur follower of an art form.

After me, the flood. See *Après moi le déluge*.

ailurophile

A lover of cats is an *ailurophile*, from the Greek *ailouros*, meaning "cat," and *philos*, meaning "loving" or "fond of."

airplane jargon

Here is a brief look at the private language of two phases of our newest industry, aviation. First, a few of the words current in the daily talk of our jet aircraft pilots.

"The jet was making mach 1.2 at twenty-two angels when the fly boy, all hunched up, made the break and, for a second, thought he'd have to hit the panic rack to avoid blackout."

This extraordinary gibberish, which sounds rather like something out of a twenty-fifth-century science-fiction story, actually is made up of slang and technical terms used by today's jet airplane pilots and engineers.

Mach 1.2 refers to the speed of the plane. Reference to the speed of a supersonic airplane in conventional "miles per hour" terms grates on the ears of a jet pilot just as much as the phrase "knots per hour" irritates a sea captain. Indeed, to a modern aviator "miles per hour" is nearly a meaningless term. He is interested in the ratio of his speed in the air to the speed of sound and this he expresses by a *mach number* (see SPACE JARGON). For example, a plane flying at precisely the speed of sound is flying at *mach 1*. Speeds faster or slower than the speed of sound are expressed thus: *mach 1.1* (or higher) and *mach .9* (or lower).

Twenty-two angels tells the altitude at which the plane is flying, an *angel* being a unit of 1,000 feet. This plane, therefore, is at 22,000 feet.

The *fly boy* is the pilot, though any member of the crew in a large plane can be so designated.

All hunched up means extremely nervous and the *break* is a sharp turn.

The *panic rack* is the special seat designed for jet pilots which, when a release lever is hit, ejects the pilot—parachute and all—into space. And *blackout*, of course, is loss of consciousness due to speed, air pressure, centrifugal force and other factors acting upon the pilot under such circumstances.

Thus the sentence in layman's language goes something like this: "The jet plane was going approximately 900 miles per hour at 22,000 feet when the pilot, nervous about the maneuver, made a sharp turn and momentarily thought he might have to eject himself from the plane to avoid loss of consciousness."

Now let's take a look at the behind-the-scenes language of commercial aviation. Do you know the difference between a *go-sho* and a *no-sho*? Can you translate *check rez*, *no-op* and *mechanical*?

The *no-sho* is the archvillain of the airlines. He holds a reservation, neglects to cancel it when he changes his plans and permits a plane to depart with an empty seat.

A *go-sho*, it follows, is a person who stands by at the airport—with ticket but without confirmed reservation—in hopes that a passenger on a flight booked to capacity will prove to be a *no-sho* and, by thus defaulting, supply a seat for the *go-sho*.

A typical response to a customer's query about a flight to San Francisco might sound like this, if phrased in the jargon the airline agents themselves use: "Now let's see. I could book you on Two-Six but it's unable out of Shy. Four-Six is no-op on Tuesday, so that's out. Seven-Three has a mechanical. Sorry, the only thing I see is a go-sho." All this after he has *checked rez*, that is, checked reservation control.

Translated into everyday English, the agent's remarks run something like this: "I could get space for you on Flight 26, but it terminates at Cheyenne. Flight 46 does not operate on Tuesday. Flight 73 is grounded because of mechanical difficulties. The only thing I can recommend is that you go out to the airport and stand by in case a reservation is canceled or a reservation holder fails to appear at flight time."

alibi

In law an *alibi*—technically "being elsewhere"—is the plea that a person accused of a crime could not have committed it because he was someplace other than at the scene of the crime when it was committed.

In popular usage, *alibi* usually carries with it the implication that there is something spurious about the explanation given. We speak of a person trying to alibi his way out of an embarrassing situation. *Alibi* also, as

Webster's *Dictionary of Synonyms* puts it, "implies a desire to shift blame or avoid punishment."

Of course a person can give an "excuse" in his desire to shift blame or avoid punishment, and we often do exactly that. When, for instance, a child brings to school an "excuse" from his parents for an absence from school, he is surely doing so to avoid punishment.

But because *alibi* has been so long and so widely used in its legal sense and since it carries with it an odor of wrongdoing that does not normally attach to "excuse," there is a valid distinction between the two words.

Alibi Ike

Every outfit in the military services has its "operators"—the fellows who are just a little sharper, just a little smoother, just a little more glib than the ordinary GI.

Apparently the streamlined "new Army" is no different from the old, judging by this letter from a soldier. "We have a fellow in our outfit," he wrote, "who is always high man in poker and low man when any physical effort is involved. In fact he has managed to dodge duty so often, with such a brilliant variety of excuses, that he is known around our barracks as *Alibi Ike*. But he doesn't mind the nickname. In fact, he rather enjoys it. He says if we knew what *alibi* meant, we wouldn't use it for him. He claims it has some sort of perfectly good legal meaning, but to us an *alibi* is a phony excuse. What do you say?"

As it happens, they're both right. The company's "operator" is referring to the technical legal meaning of *alibi*, the plea that a person accused of a crime was actually at some distance from the scene of the crime when it was committed. When such an alibi is supported by appropriate evidence, it establishes the innocence of the accused. So, in this technical sense, there is nothing derogatory about the word *alibi*, and the *Alibi Ike* interpreted his nickname as an unconscious tribute to his ability to be occupied elsewhere when there was heavy work to be done.

In everyday speech, of course, *alibi* means simply an excuse—especially one which won't stand close scrutiny. And *Alibi Ike*—a nickname which Ring Lardner coined, by the way—would not normally be regarded as at all flattering.

alligator. *See* crocodile tears.

alumnus, alumna

Alumnus and *alumna* are simply the Latin words for "foster son" and "foster daughter." Though used in Great Britain to mean "pupil," in America they describe only graduates of a school or college.

Incidentally, the unusual plurals of these two words often cause trouble. They retain the original Latin endings, but the accepted American pronunciations of these endings happen to be precisely transposed from the classical Latin sounds. Thus, *alumni* (men graduates) in Latin was pronounced uh-LUM-nee and *alumnae* (women graduates) was uh-LUM-nye. However, present-day pronunciation throughout the English-speaking world is uh-LUM-nye for *alumni* and uh-LUM-nee for *alumnae*.

·ama (suffix)

Foodorama, *Bowlerama*, *Pizzarama*—the “ama-addicts” have gotten completely out of hand. As Wolcott Gibbs once wrote in another connection, “Where it all will end, knows God.”

But if no one can predict when the craze for such “nonce words” (words coined and used for a single occasion) will end, we can tell pretty well where it started. Specifically, though the coinage was in imitation of *panorama*, the first such word was *Wonderama*, a trade-marked name devised by the General Motors people to describe their “World of Tomorrow” exhibit in the New York World’s Fair of 1939.

Perhaps because most of us were too busy with the war to be bothered coining grandiose names, the suffix *ama* went into temporary eclipse for a few years, only to be revived in 1952 by Lowell Thomas when he coined the name *Cinerama* for one of the more spectacular wide-screen movie techniques. After that the deluge: *sporteramas*, *bowleramas*, *chicken-eramas* (where “bar-b-q” chicken is sold, of course) and countless others, each a trifle more distressing to lovers of language.

amateur

An *amateur* is—or was originally—a person who loves a game or subject. The word comes from the Latin *amare* (to love). Thus a painter like Sir Winston Churchill may properly be called an “*amateur* painter” for, though his works may indeed have genuine artistic merit, he paints them primarily for the sheer love of painting.

Love in tennis and other racket games is directly derived from this idea of amateurism. A person who “plays for love,” in the age-old expression, is literally playing for nothing—at least nothing in the form of a tangible reward. Thus the figure “O” has for more than two centuries been called *love*—and the person who remains on the *love* end of many sets of tennis must truly be called *amateur* in all the senses of that much abused word.

ambiguous

Ambiguous (pronounced am-BIG-yoo-us), an adjective, and the noun *ambiguity* (pronounced am-big-yoo-ih-tee) both come from the Latin

words *ambi-* (around) and *ago* (to go) and have the meaning of evasion or “going around” an issue. If you say that a person’s answer to a question is *ambiguous*, you mean that he has been evasive and that his answer has two or more possible meanings. He has been guilty of *ambiguity* in his reply to your question.

ambulance

Through most of mankind’s wars, men injured in battle were allowed to lie where they fell until, under cover of night, doctors or medical aid men could reach them. During Napoleon’s campaigns, medical men devised a quicker means of bringing help to the wounded—a light, readily portable, covered litter, fitted out with bandages, tourniquets and other first-aid equipment. This was called an *hôpital ambulant*, literally a “walking hospital.” Because of the speed with which it functioned—by comparison with earlier methods, at least—these portable aid stations became known as *ambulances volantes* (flying travelers). When the British Army adopted the system, the name of the vehicles was shortened to *ambulance*.

ameliorate

Coming directly from the Latin *ad* (to) and *melior* (better), *ameliorate* means to make better, to improve. See also UNUSUAL WORDS.

ampere. *See* volt.

ampersand

The sign & is called the *ampersand*, from the phrase “and per se and” or “& by itself means *and*.” The character is believed to have originated as an abbreviation of the Latin *et* meaning “and.” It is pronounced AM-per-sand.

anchor, weigh. *See* weigh anchor, to.

anemophobia

Derived from the Greek *anemos* (the wind) and *phobos* (fear), *anemophobia* is the dread of hurricanes and cyclones. See also PHOBIAS.

animosity

Animosity (pronounced an-ih-moss-ih-tee) means intense dislike, amounting sometimes to open hostility. It comes from the Latin word

animus, which originally meant “soul” or “driving force” and came in time to mean “passion.” Nowadays only one kind of passion is represented in *animosity*—the passion of hatred.

animus

Animus (pronounced AN-ih-mus) comes, of course, from the same Latin root as *animosity*. Although *animus* retains some of the original idea of the soul as a driving force, even here the more common interpretation today is of *animus* in the sense of “ill-will” or “dislike.”

ankh

Pronounced like “tank” without the “t,” *ankh* is an ancient Egyptian symbol of life, a cross with a loop at the top. See also WEIRD WORDS.

antic. *See* frantic.

antimacassar

A century ago, long before today’s greaseless hair tonics had been devised, it was the fashion for dandies to slick down their locks with fragrant pomades and oils, the better to charm their fair ladies. One of the favorite lotions contained a large percentage of macassar oil. In England, indeed, the word “Macassar” was trade-marked as the name of a proprietary brand of hair oil.

Here enters the practicality of women. Wishing neither to blight the vanity of their gentlemen callers nor to spend hours trying to remove hair oil from their upholstered furniture, they devised attractive yet practical lace coverlets and pinned them on the furniture to absorb the Macassar oil. Hence the name, *anti-* (against) *Macassar* (hair oil).

anzac. *See* acronyms.

A-O.K.

A-O.K. is one of the oddest terms in the history of language. Perhaps it’s indicative of how fast things move today, even linguistically, when we reflect on the fact that our space efforts have resulted in the creation of a phrase that died before it was born, a term which—except in the mind of a public relations officer—never existed at all.

In giving the oral report to newsmen and on radio of the first (Shepard) suborbital flight, Colonel “Shorty” Powers, NASA public relations officer, misunderstood Shepard and mistook a routine “O.K.” for *A-O.K.* He