

# **Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary**

**of Unusual, Obscure, and  
Preposterous Words**

Gathered from numerous and diverse  
Authoritative Sources

**By Josefa Heifetz Byrne**

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### Editor's Introduction

Incredible as it may seem, every entry in this book, even the most ludicrous, has been accepted as a formal or legitimate English word by at least one major dictionary. The dignity that goes with endorsement by lexicographers of trusted sobriety, however, was not enough for inclusion here—subjective criteria were applied as well. The words had to strike the author as unusual, obscure, difficult, unfamiliar, amusing, or preposterous. Thus Mrs. Byrne has created a new kind of dictionary: one based entirely on her own tastes.

A language like English, rich in synonyms and near-synonyms, leaves an enormous slag-heap behind it as it advances and evolves. Some nations appoint commissions to root through the ash pile and dispose of the worst clinkers.

The problem, of course, is that one man's clinker is another man's nugget. Applying the label is often a matter of personal preference. Mrs. Byrne made the choice several hundred thousand times during the ten years she spent researching this book. Working alone and without government support (or even comprehension) she managed to assemble the six thousand weirdest words in the English language. Nobody asked her to do it because nobody thought such a thing was possible. In fact, I asked her *not* to do it. Completed, the book stands as one of the most remarkable and peculiar feats of compulsive lexicography since Cawdrey's *A Table Alphabetical . . . Of Hard Usual English Words* in 1604.

Mrs. Byrne's *Dictionary* brings into view thousands of little-known curiosities that lie buried in specialized dictionaries and unabridged works too bulky for browsing. Mrs. Byrne exhumed many words from the boneyards of the obsolete and the nearly forgotten because in her judgment they deserved another chance to live. Words like *hieromachy*—*a fight between men or women of the cloth*, and *minimisfidianism*—*having almost no faith or belief*. Words like *furfuraceous*—*covered with dandruff*; *kakistocracy*—*government by the worst citizens*; *omphaloskepsis*—*meditation while gazing at one's navel*; and *gardyloo!*—*a warning cry made before ejecting slops from the windows of old Edinburgh*.





For years anthropologists have been describing certain Hottentots with the help of the word *steatopygia*—having too much fat in the buttocks. It is far too useful to be restricted in its application to the African bush. The American people need this word.

Medicine and law have many terms that merit wider currency. In these pages you'll find *deraign*—to settle a dispute by combat between the litigants, and *dharna*—an attempt to collect a debt by camping on the debtor's doorstep until he either pays you or you starve to death. Political analysts should find a use for *palilalia*—involuntarily repeating a phrase faster and faster.

Some words are included because of their odd mixture of meanings. For example, several dictionaries define *bismer* as 1. shame; 2. a disgraceful person; 3. a steelyard; 4. the fifteen-spined stickleback. My favorite in this group is *merkin*—1. female genitalia; 2. false pubic hair; 3. a mop for swabbing cannons.

In writing definitions, the goals were clarity and directness. *Edentate* is defined by one word: *toothless*. In contrast, the sixth edition of Merriam-Webster's Collegiate offers *destitute of teeth*. In addition to pomposity, most dictionaries are afflicted with an unfitting evasiveness when it comes to certain words relating to the human body. You'll find no frustrating delicacy or cowardice in Mrs. Byrne. When faced with words like *rectalgia* and *proctalgia* she comes right out and calls them a pain in the ass.

Some readers may complain that more than a sprinkling of slang should have been included. Others will claim that words are in that should be out, and vice versa. Such readers can only be invited to write their own dictionaries.

Although *Mrs. Byrne's Dictionary* has enough comedy in it to reward casual browsers, it is intended to serve as a supplement to a desk dictionary. A word not listed in either place is not worth having at your fingertips, unless, of course, you are an institution, a library, or a governmental body at the federal, state, or municipal level.

The author and editor apologize for the ammunition this book provides to bad writers.

ROBERT BYRNE



kõn'tyõõ-mə-lī

kõn'chə-mə-lē

First syllable accented in three-syllable version:

kõn'tūm-lē

kõn'tyəm-lē

kõn'təm-lē

kõn'chəm-lē

Second syllable accented:

kən-tū'mə-lē

kən-tū'mə-lī

kən-tū'mē-lē

kən-tõõ'mə-lē

kən-tõõ'mə-lī

My own favorite pronunciation, *kõn'tõõm-lē*, is not yet among the accepted ones, but the way things have been going I'm sure some day it will be.

Most dictionaries do not confront the browser with such a variety of conflicting pronunciations. *Charientism* (a gracefully veiled insult), a word I finally tracked down in the august pages of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, was bereft of pronunciation even in that grand panjandrum of lexicons. "If you don't know how to pronounce a word, say it loud!"<sup>1</sup> hence, *kär'-l-ən-flz"əm*, based on Greek roots and cold logic.

Mrs. Byrne's pronunciation guide is self-explanatory with the following exceptions: the long *i* (*ū*) resolutely maintained by the British is shortened whenever I think I can get away with it. The vowel sound in *care*, *fair*, etc., I do not consider to be significantly different from that of the short *e* in *let*, *mèl*, etc., when followed by an *r*. The act of sounding the *r* is enough to slightly alter the pronunciation. Therefore, I have not used a different symbol. (Care=*kèr*; fair=*fèr*, etc.) Like everything else in this dictionary, the pronunciation, though not necessarily authoritative, is decidedly authoritarian.

I wish to state plainly that this is not a book in which one may find romantic stories about word origins. Etymological books abound and proliferate like drosophilae. There is surely no need to add to that swollen list. I do include the etymology when it seems necessary for a complete understanding of the word, or when it is uncommonly interesting. As for definitions, I have written them after comparing those of the leading authorities. Any errors, however, are my own, and behind them I stand nervously.

JOSEFA HEIFETZ

(Mrs. Byrne)

<sup>1</sup>William Strunk: *The Elements of Style*, edited by E.B. White; The Macmillan Company, New York, 1959.



## Pronunciation Guide

main stress'	secondary stress"
hallucination	(hə-lōō'sīn-ā'shən)
paleontology	(pā'lē-ōn-tōl'ə-jē)

### Stressed Vowels

a	man	(mān)
a	made	(mād)
e	let	(lēt)
e	be	(bē)
i	sip	(sīp)
i	wine	(wīn)
o	hot	(hōt)
o	cold	(kōld)
o	sore	(sōr)
u	dull	(dūl)
u	fugue	(fūg)
u	burp	(būrp)
oo	good	(gōōd)
oo	food	(fōōd)
ou	out	(out)

### Unstressed Vowels

The *schwa* (ə) sounds like a cross between the u in dull and the u in burp.

balloon	(bə-lōōn')
omen	(ō'mən)
gallon	(gāl'on)
Saturday	(sāt'ər-dā)

The short i (ɪ) usually retains its stressed sound in unstressed syllables, though the lack of stress will soften it somewhat.

### Consonants

c	cat	(kāt)	th	thin	(thīn)
c	cent	(sēnt)	th	this	(thīs)
g	gender	(jēn'dər)	x	ax	(āks)
g	get	(gēt)	x	exhibit	(ēgz-īb'it)
q	quay	(kā)	y	year	(yīr)
q	quick	(kwīk)	z	zebra	(zē'brə)
s	so	(sō)	z	azure	(ā'zər)
s	is	(īz)			

## FOREIGN

1. The French nasal sounds: ent, in, on, un, are indicated by N as, *lent* (lōN); *vin* (vāN); *mon* (mōN); *un* (ūN). 2. The heavily aspirated h, as the ch in Bach; is indicated by h as, *Bach* (bōh). 3. The french u in *dur* and the German u in *für* are indicated by umlauts as, *dur* (dūr); *für* (fūr).

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mān; mād; lēt; bē; sīp; wīn; hōt; cōld; sōre; dūl; fūg; būrp;  
gōōd; fōōd; out; gēt; thīn; thīs; year; āzre; ō'mən; vīN; fūr; Bach





# A

**aa** (ä'ö) *n.* rough, crumbling lava (Hawaiian).

**aasvogel** (ös'fö"gal) *n.* the South African vulture.

**abacinate** (ä-bäs'i-nät) *v.t.* to blind by putting a red-hot copper basin near the eyes.

**abaction** (ä-bäk'shän) *n.* cattle-stealing.

**abasia** (ä-bä'zi-ä) *n.* inability to walk because of lack of muscular coordination.

**abattoir** (äb'ä-twör) *n.* a slaughter-house.

**abatvoix** (ö-bö-vwö') *n.* a sounding board or canopy over the speaker's platform (French *abbatre* = to throw down + *voix* = voice).

**abbey-lubber** (äb'ë-lüb"är) *n.* a lazy monk pretending to be ascetic; any loafer.

**abbozzo** (ö-böt'sö) *n.* a rough draft or sketch.

**Abderian** (äb-dir'i-än) *adj.* pertaining to foolish or excessive laughter (from *Abdero*, the birth-place of Democritus, the "laughing philosopher").

**abditive** (äb'di-tiv) *adj.* able to hide; hidden.

**abducent** (äb-döös'änt) *adj.* carrying or drawing away; abducting.

**abecedarian** (ä'bë-së-dër'i-än) *n.* a person learning the alphabet; a beginner; one teaching the alphabet or fundamentals of a subject. *-adj.* pertaining to the alphabet; elementary.

**abecedism** (ä-bë-së'diz"äm) *n.* a word created from the initials of words in a phrase; an acronym (slang).

**abigeus** (äb-ig'ë-äs) *n.* a cattle rustler.

**abiogenesis** (ä'bï-ö-jën'-ä-sis) *n.* spontaneous generation.

**abishag** (ä'bï-shäg) *n.* the child of a woman and married man not her husband (from Hebrew = the mother's error).

**ablactation** (äb-läk-tä'shän) *n.* weaning.

**ablation** (ä-blä'shän) *n.* surgical removal; wearing or wasting away.

**ablepsia** (ä-blëp'si-ä) *n.* blindness.

**abligurition** (ä-blig'yär-ish'än) *n.* extravagance in cooking and serving (obs.).

**ablutomania** (ä-blööt'tä-mä'n'i-ä) *n.* a mania for washing oneself.

män; mädë; lët; bë; slp; wïne; hôt; cöld; sôre; düll; fûgue; búrp;  
gôod; fôod; out; gët; thin; this; year; äzure; ö'män"; viN; fûr; Bach

**abra** (ǝ'brǝ) *n.* a narrow mountain pass (Spanish).

**abraxas** (ǝ-brǝk'sas) *n.* a god worshiped by the Gnostics until the thirteenth century; the word carved on gems, which were used as charms or amulets.

**abreaction** (ǝb-rǝ-ǝk'shǝn) *n.* release of repressed ideas or emotions during psychoanalysis.

**abrosia** (ǝ-brǝ'zi-ǝ) *n.* fasting.

**abscothalater** (ǝb-skǝch'ǝ-lǝ'tǝr) *n.* one in hiding from the police (slang).

**absinthism** (ǝb'sin-thi'zǝm) *n.* a nervous or mental illness resulting from overimbibing absinthe.

**absquatulate** (ǝb-skwǝt'yǝ-lǝt) *v.i.* to leave hurriedly, suddenly, or secretly.

**absterge** (ǝb-stǝrj') *v.t.* to wipe clean; to purge.

**abuccinate** (ǝ-bǝk'sin-ǝt) *v.t.* to proclaim, like a fanfare.

**abulic** (ǝ-bǝǝ'lik) *adj.* pertaining to a lack of will power. also *aboulie*.

**acalculia** (ǝ-kǝi-kǝ'li-ǝ) *n.* the inability to work with numbers; a mental block against arithmetic.

**acanaceous** (ǝ-kǝn-ǝ'shǝs) *adj.* prickly.

**scapnotic** (ǝ-kǝp-nǝi'tik) *n.* a non-smoker.

**acarophobia** (ǝ'kǝr-ǝ-fǝ'bi-ǝ) *n.* fear of itching or of those insects that cause it.

**acarpous** (ǝ-kǝrp'as) *adj.* fruitless, sterile. -syn. *agenesic*, *apogenous*, *anandrous*.

**acataleptic** (ǝ-kǝt'ǝ-lǝp'tik) *adj.* incomprehensible.

**acceptilation** (ǝk-sǝp'til-ǝ'shǝn) *n.* the settlement of a debt without payment.

**accessit** (ǝk-sǝs'it) *n.* a prize for students in second place (British).

**accidence** (ǝk'si-dǝns) *n.* 1. a grammar book. 2. the fundamentals of just about anything.

**accismus** (ǝk-siz'mas) *n.* a phony refusal (rhetoric).

**accolent** (ǝk'ǝ-lǝnt) *adj.* living nearby; neighboring. -*n.* a neighbor.

**accubation** (ǝk-ǝ-bǝ'shǝn) *n.* reclining at meals.

**accubitus** (ǝ-kǝ'bi-tǝm) *n.* a crescent-shaped couch for five people used by ancient Roman diners.

**acedia** (ǝ-sǝ'di-ǝ) *n.* apathy, boredom, sloth.

**aceldama** (ǝ-sǝl'dǝ-mǝ) *n.* a battlefield (referring to the alleged "potter's field" near Jerusalem bought with Judas's filthy lucre. Acts 1:19. Matt. 27:8).

**acervuline** (ǝ-sǝr'vǝ-lin) *adj.* resembling small heaps.

**acescent** (ǝ-sǝs'ǝnt) *adj.* slightly sour; turning sour.

**acetarious** (ǝ-ǝ-tǝr'i-ǝs) *adj.* pertaining to plants used in salads.

**acetylseryltyrosylserylsoleucylthreonylserylprolylserylglutaminyphenylalanylvalylphenylalanylleucylserylserylvalyltryptophylalanylasparylprolylsoleucylglutamylleucylleucylasparaginyvalylcysteinylthreonylserylserylleucylglycylasparaginyglutaminyphenylalanylglutaminythreonylglutaminyglutaminyalanylarginylthreonylthreonylglutaminyvalylglutaminyglutaminyphenylalanylserylglutaminyvalyltryptophyllysylprolylphenylalanylprolylglutaminyserylthreonylvalylarginylphenylalanylprolylglcylaspartylvalyltyrosyllysylvalyltyrosylarginyltyrosylasparaginyalanylvalylleucylaspartylprolylleucylsoleucylthreonylalanyl-**

mǎn; mǎde; lǝt; bǝ; slp; wǝne; hǝt; cǝld; sǝre; dǝll; fǝgue; bǝrp;  
gǝǝd; fǝǝd; out; gǝt; thin; this; year; ǝzǝre; ǝ'mǎn"; viN; fǝr; Bach