

A PUN MY WORD

*A Humorously Enlightened Path to
English Usage*

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Robert Oliver Shipman

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With love and gratitude
To
my wife,
Jeanille Hadden Shipman,
who has put up with my words
longer and better than anyone I know,
to
our daughter,
Anne Shipman Brennan,
whose editorial assistance with this book
has helped straighten out some of them,
and to
thousands of students
who made my day and way
in sharing a classroom with me.

To misuse the Word is to show contempt for Man.
It undermines the bridges and poisons the wells. It
causes Man to regress down the long path of his
evolution.

DAG HAMMERKJOLD
Secretary General
The United Nations
1953-1961

Acknowledgments

The seeds of this book were planted in my childhood by my parents, Bertram Francis and Elydia Foss Shipman, who instilled in me a regard and respect, and a reverence, for the English language. They insisted that words be pronounced and spelled correctly, that sentences adhere to proper syntax, and that spoken and written English reflect clear, logical thinking. They also considered language to be a source of pleasure and enjoyment. Now as I look back to my earliest years, I recall how as a family we participated in word games during meals, on drives in our Model T Ford, and on other occasions, and how I acquired a feeling for words, a capacity to work and play with them—to savor their sounds, their shades of meanings, their power—even to make puns with them!

In the years that followed others enriched me with their knowledge and love of language. All are gone, too. Yet I remember with fondness and gratitude Ruth Deakins, who taught English at Foxwood School in Flushing, New York; Grace Thompson, my sixth-grade teacher at Hindley School in Darien, Connecticut, and Elsa Petterson and Helen Shaub of its high school, my English and Latin teachers; David Thompson and William Henry, my English and Latin masters at Brunswick School in Greenwich, Connecticut; Paul Nixon, dean of Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine, and professor of Latin; Robert Peter Tristram Coffin and Herbert Ross Brown, professors of English at Bowdoin; Theodore N. Bernstein, assistant managing editor of the *New York Times* and adjunct associate professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism; and Harry Hazeldine, chief copy editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*. The lessons

gleaned from these gifted, learned cultivators of language are an intrinsic part of *A Pun My Word*.

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Thus I can say with much pleasure that this book is the fulfillment of a lifetime love affair with the English language. To all those, especially my thousands of students, who in some measure or means helped bring *A Pun My Word* to fruition I am indeed grateful.

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Introduction

"Accuracy in the expresssion of ideas follows, not precedes, accurate use of language." These words, said to me more than forty years ago by Paul Deland, the then managing editor of the *Christian Science Monitor*, when I was a fledgling copy editor, have echoed in my mind ever since. His words not only inspired me then, they also have guided me in my personal and professional life ever since. They have served me well in my vocations as a communicator and as a teacher of writing and editing. And, most assuredly, they underlie the concept and content of *A Pun My Word: A Humorously Enlightened Path to English Usage*.

Language is a tool. It can be used precisely or clumsily depending upon the knowledge, competence, and caring of its user. Accuracy in the expression of ideas occurs when language is honed to the sharpness of a scalpel held in a steady, practiced hand. Yet honing of language makes demands on its user. It calls for knowing how words are spelled, what they mean, what their parts of speech are, and how they relate to one another. Accuracy in the use of language requires a disciplining of the mind. It calls for clarity of thought that precedes clarity of expression. It demands of one the ability to think in, through, and out on a straight line. And it insists that the speaker and/or writer use words, phrases, clauses, and sentences accordingly.

Ignorance, indifference, and illiteracy account in much measure for the inability of some people to express ideas accurately. As John Simon states in *Paradigms Lost*, "Language, for the most part, changes out of ignorance." Words can and do change in meaning because their users do not know their original mean-

ings or because they believe that they have come up with new words. Yet ignorance, as any teacher will tell you, is curable. Knowledge is its best antidote.

Illiteracy is a scourge in the United States that permeates all levels of our society. It is not confined to those people who cannot read or write at all. It can be found among so-called educated people who ignorantly or unwittingly mix the number of subject and verb in a sentence such as, "Anyone is welcome to the party if they want to come." A knowing, caring speaker or writer, one who is thinking clearly, would state, "All are welcome to the party if they want to come." Illiteracy can be lessened, and will be, when each of us takes the time to think about what we really want to speak or write, and to know clearly how to state our words and sentences accurately.

The erosion of language starts at the top of society, not at its bottom, and trickles down. When public leaders, media people, clergy, teachers, parents, and other alleged standard-setters mis-speak and miswrite English, the rest of us do likewise. Language at first is an imitative process that begins soon after birth and goes on and on. Literacy simply demonstrates one's ability to read and write, a minimal need in an age of instant and mass communication.

English is a beautiful language, rich and limitless in variety and opportunity for expressing ideas. Even so, English is not a simple language. It is filled with complexities and contradictions that confuse its would-be users as anyone who has adopted it as a second language well knows. To speak and write English accurately, one needs to be aware of and to understand its structure and composition, to recognize and respect its traditions, to be appreciative of its heritage as a means for conveying ideas from one generation to the next.

Edwin Newman, the renowned and extraordinary broadcast journalist and connoisseur of language, states it well in *A Civil Tongue*:

American English, drawing on so many regional differences, so many immigrant groups, and such a range of business farming,

industrial, and artistic experiences, can have an incomparable richness. Instead, high crimes and misdemeanors are visited upon it, and those who commit them do not understand that they are crimes against themselves. The language belongs to all of us. We have no more valuable possession.

A Pun My Word is not a cure-all for what may be ailing our society and its use of the English language. Nor does it contain all the answers to questions someone might have about using the language accurately. It is a simple guide in English usage that provides explanations, definitions, and examples of a variety of words and points of grammar and usage that are confusing, troublesome, misunderstood, ignored, misused, or abused. Numerous sources have been drawn upon for the items that appear in it. Books on usage and writing have been examined and studied. A number of dictionaries have been consulted. The media have been watched, heard, or read. Conversations, student papers, and classroom experiences have been recalled. I am indebted to all of them. They have helped to provide ideas and to reinforce my own.

Yet there are differences among some of these authorities. Dictionaries, for example, differ in their definitions and pronunciations of some words. Not all grammarians and scholars of language agree on how words should be used. Some are stricter in their concepts. Others are freer. What the user will find in this handbook is a compilation of items, as I have determined them, that represent a cross section, if not a consensus, of those points in verbal and grammatical usage that reflect modern standards of American English.

The distinguishing feature of *A Pun My Word* is its use of humor to inform, explain, and illustrate its many points in English usage. In this sense, it is a departure from most handbooks. Why not? Why should English, a language rich in nuances of meanings and in opportunities for play on words, be treated and used only seriously? A little enlightenment does ease the word and the way!

The book's organization, construction, and content have been designed with its users in mind. First, a word or words are explained in terms of their problem, difficulty, confusion, or misuse. Second, the word or words are defined, and their parts

of speech are given. Third, an example or examples are offered to illustrate the word's or words' appropriate use. Some words or terms require longer explanations, definitions, and illustrations than do others. Discussion of them does involve some grammatical terms but is done at a minimum. *A Pun My Word* is a handbook on usage and not a grammar. I have sought to keep my exposition simple and clear, and to let the examples show or reinforce the points being made. Even so, as an aid to the book's use, I have compiled a glossary of grammatical terms, and for those who desire further knowledge, I have included the titles of numerous excellent grammars in the Bibliography.

Throughout the planning, compiling, and writing of *A Pun My Word*, I have been motivated by a love for the English language that stems from childhood when my mother taught me to read and write at the age of three. I marvel even now, almost seven decades later, at the fact that I can read and write, that I can put words on a piece of paper or on a blackboard or on a computer screen, and make them come out right. I find immense pleasure in speaking and writing well, and in having helped countless numbers of other people to do likewise. In remembrance of them and to those people who do care about accuracy in expressing ideas and the accurate use of language, I present this book, taking sole responsibility for its presumptiveness, content, errors, good and poor humor, and whatever.

ROBERT OLIVER SHIPMAN

Mankato, Minnesota

February 1991

A

a lot / alot

A lot consists of two words, **a**, an article, and **lot**, a noun. It means a considerable quantity or extent. It also means many. Other articles and nouns like **a lot** are a number, a heap, a bunch, a few.

Alot is not a word. It is a misspelling for **a lot**.

EXAMPLES:

Politicians are known to make a number, a heap, a bunch, **a lot** of promises. A few they keep.

a while See **awhile** / **a while**.

abdicate / abrogate / absolve

These three verbs are a dangerous trio. Judicious review of their meaning can lead to their civil use.

Abdicate means to abandon; formally to give up power, office, or throne.

Abrogate means to abolish, annul, or repeal by authority; to do away with.

Absolve means to set free from an obligation or the consequences of guilt.

EXAMPLES:

Kings ascend and **abdicate** thrones. Parliaments enact and **abrogate** laws. What do people do? They **absolve** themselves.

abjure / adjure

These look-alike verbs are not a compatible couple but quite the opposite. It might be said they are at odds with each other.

Abjure means to renounce upon oath; to swear off; to reject solemnly; to repudiate; to avoid or shun.

Adjure means to charge, bind, or command earnestly and solemnly, often under oath or the threat of a curse; to warn or admonish solemnly; to beg, entreat, or request earnestly.

EXAMPLES:

Have you ever noticed how some spouses are quick to **adjure** their mates about their bad habits yet are slow to **abjure** their own? One might call it the battle of the prefixes.

above See **over** / **above** / **more than**.

abrogate See **abdicate** / **abrogate** / **absolve**.

absolve See **abdicate** / **abrogate** / **absolve**.

accept / except

Accept, a verb, should not be confused with **except**, a conjunction, in pronunciation, spelling, and usage.

Accept means to receive willingly; to give admittance or approval to.

Except, as a conjunction, means on any other condition than that; only. As a verb, it means to take or leave out from a number or a whole.

EXAMPLES:

Accept what you are reading now. Otherwise, you will have no one **except** yourself to blame if you mispronounce, misspell, or misuse these words again, unless you choose, of course, to **except** them from your vocabulary.

accommodate

This popularly mispronounced and misspelled verb is a sticky one. It means to make fit or suitable. And, like a well-known candy, it has two **m**'s in it.

EXAMPLES:

When pronouncing or spelling **ac-com-mo-date**, be sure to have more than one **m** on hand for making **accommodation** a noun suitable for gestation.

adapt / adopt

These look-alike verbs are different because of a single letter. It is the middle one, the second vowel. And the difference determines their spelling, pronunciation, and meaning. So if you are **apt**, you will opt for the right vowel for each word each time you use it.

Adapt means to make fit or suitable to requirements or conditions; to adjust; to make to correspond.

Adopt means to choose for or take to one's self; to take into one's family as a relation; to take as one's own child; to assume.

EXAMPLES:

Would-be parents **adopt** children sometimes. Children, however, seldom **get a chance** to choose would-be parents. Somehow they **adapt** to each other.

adduce / deduce / deduct

Reasoning and logic enter into the proper knowledge and use of these verbs.

Adduce (spelled with two d's) means to offer an example, reason, or proof in discussion and analysis. **Adduce** suggests to lead to.

Deduce (no double d) is defined as to determine by deduction; to infer from a general principle; to trace the cause of. **Deduce** suggests to lead from.

Deduct, like **deduce**, comes from the Latin word *deducere*, to lead away from. It is defined as: to take away an amount from a total, such as subtract.

EXAMPLES:

The lecture system falters when professors fail to **adduce** their subjects **clearly** and when students are unable to **deduce** the lectures' meaning. The net result is to **deduct** a zero in the learning process.

adjectives

The comparing of adjectives has fallen into misuse and abuse thanks to the ignorance and indifference of some indiscriminate people and their desire to intensify their communication. Most single-syllable adjectives take **er** in forming the comparative and take **est** in forming the superlative. Most **adjectives** of more than one syllable require the word **more** in forming the comparative and require the words **the most** in forming the superlative. There are exceptions to these formations. So check a standard dictionary whenever you are in doubt about the comparison of a particular **adjective**.

EXAMPLES:

Cliff Hanger, the **most** respected guide on the mountain, was **surer** than the other climbers where the **safest** footholds were. Being **more** familiar with the terrain than they were, he made **severer** demands on himself than on them to be sure that no one slipped and fell head over heels into oblivion.

adjure See **abjure** / **adjure**.

adopt See **adapt** / **adopt**.

adverbs

Adverbs, which answer the question how, not what, have come into hard times. They have lost their tails—**ly**, the ending most commonly used in forming adverbs from adjectives. For some strange reason, ill-users of language are omitting the **ly** and are coming up with such illiteracies as: He ran swift. She slept bad. She sang beautiful. He threw natural.