

THE
FACTS
ON
FILE

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

WORD AND

REVISED AND

PHRASE

EXPANDED EDITION

ORIGINS

ROBERT HENDRICKSON

THE FACTS ON FILE
ENCYCLOPEDIA OF
**WORD AND
PHRASE
ORIGINS**

REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

ROBERT
HENDRICKSON

江苏工业学院图书馆
藏书章



Facts On File, Inc.

The Facts On File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins, Revised and Expanded Edition

Copyright © 1997 by Robert Hendrickson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage or retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher. For information contact:

Facts On File, Inc.
11 Penn Plaza
New York NY 10001

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hendrickson, Robert, 1933–
The Facts On File encyclopedia of word and phrase origins /
Robert Hendrickson. — Rev. ed.
p. cm.
Includes index.
ISBN 0-8160-3266-1 (hardcover)
1. English language—Etymology—Dictionaries. 2. English
language—Terms and phrases. I. Title.
PE1689.H47 1997
422'.03—dc20 96-22031

Facts On File books are available at special discounts when purchased in bulk quantities for businesses, associations, institutions, or sales promotions. Please call our Special Sales Department in New York at 212/967-8800 or 800/322-8755.

You can find Facts On File on the World Wide Web at <http://www.factsonfile.com>

Text and cover design by Cathy Rincon

Printed in the United States of America

QW VCS 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

This book is printed on acid-free paper.

F
or my son

Robert Laurence Hendrickson



To make dictionaries is hard work.

—Dr. Samuel Johnson



Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition

Since this workbook was published 10 years ago, I have received letters from readers all over the world providing additions, corrections, and suggestions for new entries. Most of these have been incorporated in this expanded revised edition, which has about 25 percent completely new material and now covers some 15,000 word and phrase origins, roughly triple the greatest number in any previous collection of its kind. Also included is a sorely needed index, which will enable readers to find interesting people, categories, information, and anecdotes difficult to

locate when just alphabetized entries are available. I hope that readers will have as much fun with this new work as I have had writing it, and needless to say would welcome any future suggestions from you for a *third* revised edition. My thanks to all of you, to my editors Susan Schwartz, Jeffrey Golick, and Hilary Poole, whose faith in this project made it possible, and, as always, to my wife Marilyn, who makes me possible.

R. H.
Peconic, N.Y.

Preface to the Original Edition

This book is, I believe, the longest collection of word and phrase origins in print.

In any case, I've tried to make all the selections as accurate and entertaining as possible and tried to use words illustrating all of the many ways words and phrases are born (words deriving from the numerous languages and dialects that have enriched English, echoic words, coined words, slang, words from the names of places, people, animals, occupations, leisure activities, mispronunciations, etc.). Yet in the final analysis any selection from such a vast semantic treasure house (the 5–10 million or so general and technical English words) must be highly subjective. Perhaps I have erred in devoting too much space to fascinating but speculative stories about word origins, but I don't think so, for the wildest theories often later turn out to be the correct ones. In any case, while no good tale is omitted merely because it isn't true, where stories are apocryphal or doubtful, they are clearly labeled so. I've tried to include as many plausible theories about the origins of each expression as possible and also attempted to show the first recorded use of a word or phrase wherever possible, something lacking in many word books but a great, sometimes indispensable, help to anyone using the work as a linguistic or historical reference. The only limitations I have imposed are those of importance and interest. Some expressions, no matter how prosaic the stories behind them, have been included because they are commonly used; on the other hand, interesting and unusual expressions have often been treated even if obscure or obsolete. No word or phrase has been eliminated because it might offend someone's sensibilities, and you will find all the famous four-letter words here (and then some!). I consider myself no judge of what is or is not obscene, and such self-appointed lobotomizers

of language remind me of Kurt Vonnegut's dictator who eliminated noses in order to eliminate odors. Though there has been a renewed general interest in word origins recently—thanks mainly to magazines like *Verbatim*, the work of Stuart Berg Flexner, Professor Frederic Cassidy's monumental *Dictionary of American Regional English*, or *DARE*, and William Safire's excellent and entertaining syndicated column "On Language"—etymology remains something less than an exact science. Scholars like Professor Gerald Cohen of the University of Missouri-Rolla do devote years and pages enough for a book in scientifically tracking down the origins of a single word, but a great number of the word derivations on record amount to little more than educated guesswork. I agree, however, with the late, great and "always game" word detective Eric Partridge that even a guess is better than nothing—even if it's just inspired fun, or if it merely stimulates thinking that leads eventually to the expression's true origin.

The debts for a work of this nature and length are so numerous that specific thanks must be confined to the many sources noted in the text, and due to space limitations even these are only a relative handful of the works I have consulted. On a personal note, however, I would like to thank my editor, Gerard Helferich, for all his herculean labors (just toting the manuscript about was a herculean labor), and of course my wife, Marilyn—this book, like every line I write, being as much hers as mine. Nevertheless, despite all the help I've gotten, any errors in these pages result from my own wide-ranging ignorance and are solely my responsibility. They cannot even be blamed on a committee or a computer.

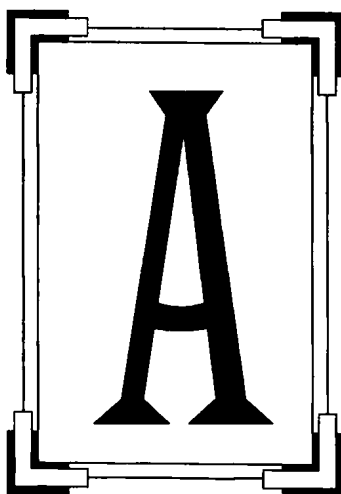
—R. H.

Abbreviations for the Most Frequently Cited Authorities

- BARTLETT**—John Bartlett, *Dictionary of Americanisms* (1877)
- BARLETT'S QUOTATIONS**—John Bartlett, *Familiar Quotations* (1882 and 1955)
- BREWER**—Rev. Ebenezer Cobham Brewer, *Brewer's Dictionary of Fact and Fable* (1870)
- DARE**—Frederic Cassidy, ed. *Dictionary of American Regional English*, vol. 1, 1986
- FARMER AND HENLEY**—John S. Farmer and W. E. Henley, *Slang and Its Analogues* (1890–1904)
- FOWLER**—H. W. Fowler, *Modern English Usage* (1926)
- GRANVILLE**—Wilfred Granville, *A Dictionary of Sailor's Slang* (1962)
- GROSE**—Captain Francis Grose, *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (1785, 1788, 1796, 1811, 1823 editions)
- LIGHTER**—J. E. Lighter, ed., *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, vol. 1 (1994)
- MATHEWS**—Mitford M. Mathews, *A Dictionary of Americanisms* (1951)
- MENCKEN**—H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1936)
- O.E.D.**—*The Oxford English Dictionary* and Supplements
- ONIONS**—C. T. Onions, *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (1966)
- PARTRIDGE**—Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (1937; 8th ed., 1984)
- PARTRIDGE'S ORIGINS**—Eric Partridge, *Origins, A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1958)
- PEPYS**—Henry Wheatley, ed., *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1954)
- RANDOM HOUSE**—*The Random House Dictionary of the English Language* (1966)
- ROSTEN**—Leo Rosten, *The Joys of Yiddish* (1968)
- SHIPLEY**—Joseph T. Shipley, *Dictionary of Word Origins* (1967)
- SKEAT**—W. W. Skeat, *An Etymological Dictionary of the English Language* (1963)
- STEVENSON**—Burton Stevenson, *Home Book of Quotations* (1947)
- STEWART**—George R. Stewart, *American Place Names* (1971)
- WALSH**—W. S. Walsh, *Handbook of Literary Curiosities* (1892)
- WEBSTER'S**—*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language* (1981)
- WEEKLEY**—Ernest Weekley, *Etymological Dictionary of Modern English* (1967)
- WENTWORTH AND FLEXNER**—Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, *Dictionary of American Slang* (1975)
- WESEEN**—Maurice H. Weseen, *The Dictionary of American Slang* (1934)
- WRIGHT**—Joseph Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary* (1900)
- Many different works by the same authors, and additional works by other writers, are cited in the text.

Contents

Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition	ix
Preface to the Original Edition	xi
Abbreviations for the Most Frequently Cited Authorities	xiii
Entries A–Z	1
Index	745



A. Like Chinese characters, each letter in our alphabet began with a picture or drawing of an animal, person, or object that eventually became a symbol with little resemblance to the original object depicted. No one is sure what these pictographs represented originally, but scholars have made some educated guesses. *A* probably represented the horns of an ox, drawn first as a *V* with a bar across it like the bar in *A*. This may have been suggested by early plowmen guiding oxen by lines attached to a bar strapped across the animal's horns.

Adulterers were forced to wear the capital letter *A* as a badge when convicted of the crime of adultery under an American law in force from 1639 to 1785. Wrote Nathaniel Hawthorne in his story "Endicott and the Red Cross" (1838): "There was likewise a young woman, with no mean share of beauty, whose doom it was to wear the letter *A* on the breast of her gown, in the eyes of all the world and her own children . . . Sporting with her infamy, the lost and desperate creature had embroidered the fatal token in scarlet cloth, with golden thread; so that the capital *A* might have been thought to mean Admirable, or anything rather than Adulteress." Hawthorne, of course, also wrote about the *A* of adultery in his novel *The Scarlet Letter* (1850).

Perhaps only UGH! has been deemed by dime novels and Hollywood to be more representative of American Indian speech than the omission of *a* as an article. Willa Cather made an interesting observation on this American Indian habit (and there is no telling how widespread the habit really was) in *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927): "Have you a son?" "One. Baby. Not very long born." Jacinto usually dropped the article in speaking Spanish, just as he did in speaking English, though the Bishop had noticed that when he did give a noun its article, he used the right one. The customary omission, therefore, seemed a matter of taste, not ignorance. In the Indian

conception of language, such attachments were superfluous and unpleasing, perhaps."

aa. *Aa* for rough porous lava, similar to coal clinkers, is an Americanism used chiefly in Hawaii, but it has currency on the mainland, too, especially among geologists, or where there has been recent volcanic activity, mainly because there is no comparable English term to describe the jagged rocks. The word *aa* is first recorded in 1859, but is much older, coming from the Hawaiian 'a'a, meaning the same, which, in turn comes from the Hawaiian *a*, for "fiery, burning."

AAA. The AAA, standing for *Agricultural Adjustment Administration*, was among the first of the "alphabet agencies" (government agencies, administrations, authorities, offices, etc.) created for relief and recovery in the early days of the New Deal during America's Great Depression. The New Deal itself took its name from Franklin Delano Roosevelt's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention on July 2, 1932: "I pledge you, I pledge myself, to a new deal for the American people." Coined by Roosevelt's speech writers, Raymond Moley and Judge Samuel Rosenman, the phrase incorporated elements of Woodrow Wilson's New Freedom and Teddy Roosevelt's Square Deal. Among the many alphabet agencies spawned by the New Deal are the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), FCA (Farm Credit Administration), FDIC (Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation), SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission), and the WPA (Works Progress Administration).

A & P. These familiar initials have become the common name of the supermarket chain they were once an abbreviation for. The Great Atlantic *and* Pacific Tea Company began life in 1859 as a partnership between

George Huntington Hartford and George Gilman. The new company originally bought tea directly off ships bringing it to America and sold it to consumers, eliminating the middleman. Within 20 years the company became the first American grocery chain.

aardvark; aardwolf. Both these animals dig in the earth for termites and ants, the former somewhat resembling a pig, the latter looking a little like a striped wolf. Thus the Boers in South Africa named them, respectively, the aardvark (from the Dutch *aard*, “earth,” plus *vark*, “pig”) or “earth pig,” and aardwolf, or “earth wolf.”

Aaron lily; Aaron’s beard; Aaron’s rod; Aaron’s serpent. Numerous plants are named for the patriarch Aaron. Mention in the 133d Psalm of “the beard of Aaron” led to *Aaron’s beard* becoming the common name of the rose of Sharon (which in the Bible is really a crocus), icy-leaved toadflax, meadowsweet, *Aaron’s-beard* cactus, and the Jerusalem star, among others, in reference to their beard-like flowers. *Aaron’s rod* comes from the sacred rod that Aaron placed before the ark in Num. 17:8, a rod that Jehovah caused to bud, blossom, and bear ripe almonds. Many tall-stemmed, flowering plants that resemble rods, such as mullein, goldenrod, and garden orpine, are called *Aaron’s rod*, and the term is used in architecture to describe an ornamental moulding entwined with sprouting leaves, a serpent, or scrollwork. *Aaron lily* also honors Aaron, but the name derives from the folk etymology of arum lily. *Aaron’s serpent*, denoting a force so powerful as to eliminate all other powers, alludes to the miracle in Exod. 7:11–12, when the Lord commanded that Aaron cast down his rod before Pharaoh: “Then Pharaoh also called the wise men and the sorcerers: now the magicians of Egypt, they also did in like manner with their enchantments. For they cast down every man his rod, and they became serpents, but Aaron’s rod swallowed up their rods.” Linguists have found that the word *tannen* given in the Exodus sources really means “reptile,” but there is little chance that “Aaron’s reptile” will replace *Aaron’s serpent* in the language.

AB; able-bodied seaman. *AB* stands for an *able-bodied seaman*, a first-class sailor who is a skilled seaman and has passed his training as an ordinary seaman. The expression *able-bodied* dates back to 17th-century England, when apprentices or boys formed the other, inexperienced class among the crews on sailing ships.

abacus. Our name for this incredibly efficient instrument, which a skilled person can operate as fast and as accurately as an adding machine, is from the Greek *abax*, meaning a tablet for ciphering. The abacus was invented by the Chinese, but they call the beaded ciphering machine a suan pan.

abash. See *BAH!*

abassi. Though of interest primarily to collectors, the abassi is the first of many coins named after famous persons. It is a silver piece worth about 29 cents that was formerly used in Persia, and it honors Shah Abas II.

abbreviation. Deriving from a Latin word meaning the same and spelled the same, *abbreviation* was first recorded in the early 16th century. Unlike acronyms, abbreviations aren’t usually pronounced as words, but they do serve the same purpose as time and space savers. They have been popular since Roman times, a good example being SPQR, the abbreviation for *Senatus Populusque Romanus* (the Senate and People of Rome), the famous insignia of Rome. Most abbreviations merely suggest the whole word they represent to the reader (as Dr.), but many have become almost words themselves, with the letters spoken, as in *IQ* for intelligence quotient. A few are even spoken as words, such as *vet* for veterinarian or armed forces veteran, *ad* for advertisement, and *ad lib*. There are entire dictionaries devoted to the tens of thousands of abbreviations we use, and a complete list of abbreviations of government agencies can be found in the *U.S. Government Organization Manual*. See *AAA*.

Abderian laughter. Inhabitants of ancient Abdera were known as rural simpletons who foolishly derided people and things they didn’t understand. Thus these Thracians saw their name become a synonym for foolish, scoffing laughter or mockery. Though proverbially known for their stupidity, the Abderites included some of the wisest men in Greece, Democritus and Protagoras among them.

abecedarian hymns. See *ACROSTIC*.

Abe Lincoln bug. Anti-Lincoln feelings died hard in the South after the Civil War, as the name of this little bug shows. Even as late as 1901 this foul-smelling insect, also known as the harlequin cabbage bug, was commonly called the *Abe-Lincoln bug* in Georgia and other Southern states. See also *LINCOLNDOM*.

abet. *Abet* means to incite, instigate, or encourage someone to act, often wrongfully. The word derives from an old command for a dog to “sic’em” or “go get’em,” and owes its life to the “sport” of bearbaiting, which was as popular as cricket in 14th- and 15th-century England. In bearbaiting, a recently trapped bear, starved to make it unnaturally vicious, was chained to a stake or put in a pit, and a pack of dogs was set loose upon it in a fight to the death, which the bear always lost, after inflicting great punishment on the dogs. Spectators who urged the dogs on were said to *abet* them, *abet* here being the contraction of the Old French *abeter*, “to bait, to hound

on," which in turn derived from the Norse *beita*, "to cause to bite." Bearbaiting was virtually a Sunday institution in England for 800 years, until it was banned in 1835; Queen Elizabeth I once attended a "Bayting" at which 13 bears were killed.

abeyance. See BAH!

abigail. A lady's maid or servant is sometimes called an *abigail*, which means "source of joy" in Hebrew. Several real Abigails contributed their names to the word. The term originates in the Bible (Sam. I:25) when Nabal's wife, Abigail, apologizes for her wealthy husband's selfishness in denying David food for his followers—humbly referring to herself as David's "handmaid" six times in the course of eight short chapters. David must have appreciated this, for when Nabal died he made Abigail one of his wives. The name and occupation were further associated when Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's *The Scornful Lady*, written about five years after the King James version of the Bible (1611), gave the name Abigail to a spirited "waiting gentlewoman," one of the play's leading characters. *Abigail* was thereafter used by many writers, including Congreve, Swift, Fielding, and Smollett, but only came to be spelled without a capital when popularized by the notoriety of Abigail Hill, one of Queen Anne's ladies-in-waiting from 1704 to 1714.

able-bodied seaman. See AB.

A-bomb; H-bomb; the bomb. The atomic bomb was first called the *atom bomb* or *A-bomb* within a few months after it was dropped on Hiroshima on August 6, 1945. People were also calling it simply *the bomb* by then. Soon after the far more powerful thermonuclear hydrogen bomb or H-bomb was tested, in 1952, it was commonly called *the bomb*, too. Lighter cites a 1945–48 reference for *A-bomb* as a powerful mixed drink.

Aboriginal Australian words. English words that come to us from Aboriginal Australian include boomerang, kangaroo, dingo, koala, wallaby, wombat, and bellycan (water can).

aborigine. William Hone, in his *Table Book* (1827–28) says that *aborigine* "is explained in every dictionary . . . as a general name for the indigenous inhabitants of a country. In reality, it is the proper name of a peculiar people of Italy, who were not indigenous but were supposed to be a colony of Arcadians." Nevertheless, these people of Latium were thought by some Romans to have been residents of Italy from the beginning, *ab originie*, which gave us the Latin word *aborigines* for the original inhabitants of a country.

aboveboard; under the table. *Aboveboard* means "honest." The expression, first recorded in the late 16th century, derives from card-playing, in which cheating is much more difficult and honesty more likely if all the hands of cards are kept above the board, or table. *Under the table*, a later expression, means dishonest, and refers to cards manipulated under the playing surface.

above the salt. See SALT.

abracadabra. One of the few words entirely without meaning, this confusing term is still used in a joking way by those making "magic." It was first mentioned in a poem by Quintus Severus Sammonicus in the second century. A cabalistic word intended to suggest infinity, *abracadabra* was believed to be a charm with the power to cure toothaches, fevers, and other ills, especially if written on parchment in a triangular arrangement and suspended from the neck by a linen thread. *Abracadabra* is of unknown origin, though tradition says it is composed of the initials of the Hebrew words *Ab* (Father), *Ben* (Son), and *Ruach Acadsch* (Holy Spirit). When toothache strikes, inscribe the parchment amulet in the following triangular form:

```

ABRACADABRA
ABRACADABR
ABRACADAB
ABRACADA
ABRACAD
ABRACA
ABRAC
ABRA
ABR
AB
A

```

Abraham Lincoln Brigade. The famous military organization had nothing to do with the American Civil War. It was formed in 1937 to fight fascism in Spain and was composed of some 2,800 volunteers, mostly American Communists.

Abram; Abraham man; Abraham's bosom. *Abram* or *Abraham man*, a synonym for beggar, can be traced to the parable in Luke 16:19–31, where "the beggar [Lazarus] died and was carried into Abraham's bosom." But it may actually derive from the Abraham Ward in England's Bedlam asylum, whose inmates were allowed out on certain days to go begging. *In Abraham's bosom* is an expression for the happy repose of death, deriving from the same source.

absence makes the heart grow fonder; out of sight, out of mind. Whether you believe the first proverb or the contradictory saying *out of sight, out of mind*, the phrase does not come from the poem "Isle of Beauty"

by Thomas Haynes Bayly (1797–1839), as Dr. Brewer, Bartlett, and other sources say. Bayly did write “Absence makes the heart grow fonder, / Isle of Beauty, Fare thee well!” but the same phrase was recorded in Francis Davison’s “Poetical Rhapsody” in 1602. *Out of sight, out of mind* comes from the poem “That Out of Sight” by Arthur Hugh Clough (1819–61):

That out of sight is out of mind
Is true of most we leave behind.

the absent are always wrong. The saying is a translation of the old French proverb *Les absents ont toujours tort*, which dates back to the 17th century. The words suggest that it is easy to blame or accuse someone not present to defend himself.

absinthe. This alcoholic drink, not invented until about 1790, is made from various species of wormwood, *Artemisia absinthium*, the plant so named because it was dedicated to Artemis, Greek goddess of the hunt and the moon. Long prized for its aphrodisiac powers, the drink can cause blindness, insanity, and even death. For this reason absinthe was banned in the United States in 1912 and in France three years later. Still, many great writers and artists praised the drink, including Dumas fils, de Maupassant, Anatole France, Verlaine, Rimbaud, Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, Gauguin, Picasso and Van Gogh—the last artist reportedly drank it in a concoction of five parts water to one part absinthe and one part black ink!

absolutism tempered by assassination; despotism by dynamite. Count Ernst F. Munster (1766–1839), the German envoy at St. Petersburg, was referring to the Russian Constitution when he said this in 1800, but he claimed that a Russian noble really invented the phrase. Gilbert and Sullivan altered the phrase to *despotism by dynamite*.

absquatulate. An interesting old expression, now obsolete, that may have originated in Kentucky in the early 19th century meaning to depart, especially in a clandestine, surreptitious, or hurried manner. “The vagabond had absquatulated with the whole of the joint stock funds,” George W. Perrie noted in *Buckskin Mose* (1873). *Absquatulate* is a fanciful classical formation based on *ab* and *squat*, meaning the reverse of to squat. Variants are *absquatilate* and *absquotulate*.

absurd. This word for ridiculous, foolish, or irrational comes to us from the world of music, as the original meaning of its Latin ancestor, *absurdus*, was “out of tune or harmony.” The Romans, however, used *absurdus* in the figurative sense long before it passed into English. In recent times the term *Theater of the Absurd* has been used to describe the plays of contemporary dramatists

that conceptualize the world as absurd, that is, irrational, meaningless, and indecipherable.

abundance. An overflowing of precious water—as in a wave breaking over the shore or perhaps as in a flooding river—suggested this word to the Romans, for *abundance* comes to us from the Latin *abundare* “to overflow, to be plentiful.”

abyss. *Abyss* is one of the few English words that derive from Sumerian, the world’s first written language, which evolved some 5,000 years ago in the lower Tigris and Euphrates Valley of what is now called Iraq. The word came into English in the late 14th century from the Latin word *abyssus*, meaning “bottomless, the deep,” but has been traced ultimately to the primordial sea that the Sumerians called the Abzu. Another word with Sumerian roots is *Eden*, the word for the lost paradise that came into English from a Hebrew word.

academy, academic. See GROVES OF ACADEME.

acanthus. There are at least two charming stories, neither verifiable, about how the spiny or toothed leaf of the Mediterranean blue-flowered plant *Acanthus mollis* gave the name *acanthus* to the architectural ornament resembling those leaves that is used in the famous Corinthian capital or column. One tale has it that the Greek architect Callimachus placed a basket of flowers on his young daughter’s grave, and an acanthus sprang up from it. This touched him so deeply that he invented and introduced a design based on the leaves. Another story, from an early 18th-century book called *The Sentiment of Flowers* tells it this way:

The architect Callimachus, passing near the tomb of a young maiden who had died a few days before the time appointed for her nuptials, moved by tenderness and pity, approached to scatter some flowers on her tomb. Another tribute to her memory had preceded his. Her nurse had collected the flowers which should have decked her on her wedding day; and, putting them with the marriage veil, in a little basket, had placed it near the grave upon a plant of acanthus, and then covered it with a tile. In the succeeding spring, the leaves of the acanthus grew around the basket: but being stayed in their course by the projecting tile, they recoiled and surmounted its extremities. Callimachus, surprised by this rural decoration, which seemed the work of the Graces in tears, conceived the capital of the Corinthian column; a magnificent ornament still used and admired by the whole civilized world.

Acapulco gold. First recorded in 1967, *Acapulco gold* supposedly means a strong variety of marijuana grown near Acapulco, Mexico. But no one is even sure whether it is really a special variety of marijuana grown there or

just any premium pot that dealers ask high prices for. Hawaiian *Maui wowie* is another well-known kind.

accidentally on purpose. Someone who does something *accidentally on purpose* does it purposely and only apparently accidentally—often maliciously, in fact. The expression is not an Americanism, originating in England in the early 1880s before it became popular here.

acolade. In medieval times men were knighted in a ceremony called the *acolata* (from the Latin *ac*, “at,” and *collum*, “neck”), named for the hug around the neck received during the ritual, which also included a kiss and a tap of a sword on the shoulder. From *acolata* comes the English word *acolade* for an award or honor.

according to Cocker. *According to Cocker*, an English proverb similar to the four *according* entries following, means very accurate or correct, according to the rules. *According to Cocker* could just as well mean “all wrong”; however, few authorities bother to mention this. The phrase honors Edward Cocker (1631–75), a London engraver who also taught penmanship and arithmetic. Cocker wrote a number of popular books on these subjects, and reputedly authored *Cocker's Arithmetick*, which went through 112 editions, its authority giving rise to the proverb. Then in the late 19th century, documented proof was offered showing that Cocker did not write the famous book at all, that it was a forgery of his editor and publisher, so poorly done in fact that it set back rather than advanced the cause of elementary arithmetic.

according to Fowler. Many disputes about proper English usage are settled with the words, “according to Fowler. . . .” The authority cited is Henry Watson Fowler (1858–1933), author of *A Dictionary of Modern English Usage* (1926). Fowler, a noted classicist and lexicographer, and his brother, F. G. Fowler, collaborated on a number of important books, including a one-volume abridgement of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (1911). But *Modern English Usage* is his alone. The book remains a standard reference work, though some of the old schoolmaster's opinions are debatable. Margaret Nicholson's *A Dictionary of American English Usage, Based on Fowler*, is its American counterpart.

according to Guinness. Arthur Guinness, Son & Co., Ltd., of St. James Gate, Brewery, Dublin, has published *The Guinness Book of World Records* since 1955. Many arguments have been settled by this umpire of record performance, which has inspired the contemporary expression *according to Guinness*. Few business firms become factual authorities like the Guinness company, which has brewed its famous stout since 1820, its registered name becoming synonymous with stout itself for over a century.

according to Gunter, etc. Many practical inventions still in use were invented by the English mathematician and astronomer Edmund Gunter nearly four centuries ago. Gunter, a Welshman, was professor of astronomy at London's Gresham College from 1619 until his death five years later when only 45. In his short life he invented Gunter's chain, the 22-yard-long, 100-link chain used by surveyors in England and the United States; Gunter's line, the forerunner of the modern slide rule; the small portable Gunter's quadrant; and Gunter's scale, commonly used by seamen to solve navigation problems. Gunter, among other accomplishments, introduced the words *cosine* and *cotangent* and discovered the variation of the magnetic compass. His genius inspired the phrase *according to Gunter*, once as familiar in America as “according to Hoyle” is today.

according to Hoyle. *A Short Treatise on the Game of Whist* by Englishman Edmond Hoyle, apparently a barrister and minor legal official in Ireland, was published in 1742. This was the first book to systemize the rules of whist and remained the absolute authority for the game until its rules were changed in 1864. The author also wrote *Hoyle's Standard Games*, which extended his range, has been republished hundreds of times, and is available in paperback today. The weight of his authority through these works led to the phrase *according to Hoyle* becoming not only a proverbial synonym for the accuracy of game rules but an idiom for correctness in general. History tells us little about Hoyle, but he enjoyed his eponymous fame for many years, living until 1769, when he died at age 97 or so. Hoyle is responsible for popularizing the term *score* as a record of winning points in games, a relatively recent innovation. “When in doubt, win the trick,” is his most memorable phrase.

accumulate. *Accumulate* means literally “to heap up,” from the Latin *accumulare*. (We also find the idea in “cumulus” clouds, billowing clouds heaped up in the sky.) One who accumulates wealth piles it up by adding money to the figurative pile.

ace; aces. *Aces* has been American slang for “the best” at least since the first years of this century, deriving from *aces*, the highest cards in poker and other card games. But *ace* for an expert combat flier who has shot down five or more enemy planes appears to have been borrowed from the French *as*, “ace,” during World War I. From there *ace* was extended to include an expert at anything. The card name *ace* comes ultimately from the Greek *ás*, one.

ace in the hole. A stud poker card dealt face down and hidden from the view of the other players is called a hole card. An ace is the highest hole card possible, often making a winning hand for the player holding it.

Thus from this poker term came the expression *an ace in the hole* for “any hidden advantage, something held in reserve until it is needed to win.” The term probably dates back over a century, and was first recorded in *Collier's Magazine* in 1922: “I got a millionaire for an ace in the hole.” *Hole card* is a synonym. See *an ACE UP ONE'S SLEEVE*.

aceldama. See *POTTER'S FIELD*.

ace up one's sleeve. Ever since crooked gamblers in the wild and woolly West began concealing aces up their sleeves and slipping them into their hands in card games, we have had the expression *an ace up one's sleeve* for “any tricky, hidden advantage.” Although the practice is not a common way to cheat at cards anymore, the phrase lives on.

Achilles' heel. When he was a baby, Achilles' mother, the goddess Thetis, dipped him into the magic waters of the river Styx to coat his body with a magic shield that no weapon could penetrate. However, she held him by the heel, so that this part of his body remained vulnerable. Paris learned of his secret during the Trojan War, shooting an arrow into his heel and killing him. *Achilles' heel* has since come to mean the weak part of anything.

acid test. This expression dates back to frontier days in America, when peddlers determined the gold content of objects by scratching them and applying nitric acid. Since gold, which is chemically inactive, resists acids that corrode other metals, the (nitric) *acid test* distinguished it from copper, iron, or similar substances someone might be trying to palm off on the peddlers. People were so dishonest, or peddlers so paranoid, that the term quickly became part of the language, coming to mean a severe test of reliability.

acknowledge the corn. Much used in the 19th century as a synonym for our “copping a plea,” this phrase is said to have arisen when a man was arrested and charged with stealing four horses and the corn (grain) to feed them. “I acknowledge [admit to] the corn,” he declared.

Acoma. A Native American tribe of New Mexico and Arizona. The tribe's name means “people of the white rock” in their language, in reference to the pueblos in which they lived. Acoma is also the name of a central New Mexico pueblo that has been called “the oldest continuously inhabited city in the United States.” The name is pronounced either *eh-ko-ma* or *ah-ko-ma*.

aconite; monkshood; wolfsbane. Aconite (*Aconitum napellus*) is a deadly poisonous plant, also known as

wolfsbane and monkshood. *Aconite* itself derives from an ancient Greek word meaning “wolfsbane.” Ancient legend says the showy perennial herb is of the buttercup family and that it became poisonous from the foam that dropped from the mouth of the monstrous hound Cerberus, who guarded the gates of Hell, when Hercules dragged him up from the nether regions. Some authorities say *aconite* derives from the Greek *akon*, “dart,” because it was once used as an arrow poison. See also *WOLFSBANE*.

acorn. *Acorn* is an ancient word deriving from the Old English *aecern*, meaning “fruit” or “berry.” Its present form *acorn* is due in large part to folk etymology; people believed that the word *aecern* was made up of “oak” and “corn” because the fruit came from the oak and was a corn or seed of that tree. Thus *aecern* came to be pronounced and spelled “acorn.”

acqua tofana. *Acqua Tofana*, a favorite potion of young wives in 17th-century Italy who wanted to get rid of their rich, elderly, or ineffectual husbands, recalls a woman who peddled her deadly home brew on such a large scale that she has achieved immortality of a kind. Her first name is unknown, but Miss or Mrs. Tofana was either a Greek or Italian lady who died in Naples or Palermo, Sicily about the year 1690. Apparently she died a natural death, although five others headed by an old hag named Spara, who had bought her secret formula, were arrested and hanged in 1659. Tofana's poison was a strong, transparent and odorless solution of arsenic that she sold in vials labeled *Manna di S. Nicolas di Bari* (the “Manna of St. Nicholas of Bari”), in honor of the miraculous oil that was said to flow from the tomb of the saint. See *BRUCINE*.

acre; wiseacre. The Sumerian *agar* meant a watered field, a word the first farmers in Babylonia formed from their word *a* for water and applied to fertile watered land in the river valleys. *Agar*—related to the Sanskrit *ajras*, an open plain—came into Latin as *ager*, “fertile field,” and finally entered English as *acre* or *acras* in the 10th century. The word first meant any unoccupied land but then came to mean the amount of land a yoke of oxen could plow from sunup to sundown. During the reign of Edward I, it was more fairly and accurately defined as a parcel of land 4 rods in width and 40 rods in length (a rod measures 16½ feet). The area remains the same today except that the land does not have to be rectangular, that is, 4×40 rods. In case you want to measure your property another way, in the United States and Great Britain an acre equals 43,560 square feet, or 1/64th of a square mile, or 4.047 square meters. One old story says that Ben Jonson put down a landed aristocrat with “Where you have an acre of land, I have ten acres of wit,” and that the gentleman retorted by calling him

“Mr. Wiseacre.” Acreage doesn’t actually figure in this word, however. *Wiseacre* has lost its original meaning, having once been the Dutch *wijssegger*, “a wisemonger, soothsayer, or prophet,” apparently an adaptation of the Old High German *wizzago*, with the same meaning. By the time *wijssegger* passed into English as *wiseacre* in the late 16th century, such soothsayers with their know-it-all airs were already regarded as pretentious fools.

acrobat; neurobat. *Acrobat* comes from the Greek *akros*, “aloft,” plus *batos*, “climbing or walking,” referring of course to the stunts early acrobats performed in the air, which included ropewalking. The greatest of the ancient Greek acrobats were called *neurobats*, from the Greek *neuron*, “sinew.” These men performed on sinewy rope that was only as thick as the catgut or plastic used for fishing line today, appearing from the ground as if they were walking on air.

acrolect; basilect; idiolect. The *acrolect* (from the Greek *acro*, “topmost”) is the best English spoken, the KING’S ENGLISH, while the *basilect* means the lowest level of poor speech. Another unusual word patterned on *dialect* is *idiolect*, meaning the language or speech of an individual, which always differs slightly from person to person. These words were apparently coined toward the end of the 19th century. See DIALECT.

across the board. Around 1935, racetrack combination tickets naming a horse to win, place, or show—giving a bettor three chances to win—began to be called *across-the-board* bets. Since then, the term has been widely used outside the racetrack to mean “comprehensive, general, all inclusive.”

acrostic; telestich; abecedarian hymns. Acrostics can be any composition (poems, puzzles, etc.) in which certain letters of the lines, taken in order, form a word, phrase, or sentence that is the subject of the composition. When the last letters of lines do this, the acrostic is sometimes called a *telestich* (from the Greek *tele*, “far,” and *stichos*, “row”). *Acrostic* derives from the Greek *akros*, “extreme,” and *stichos*. The term was first applied to the prophecies of the Greek Erythraean sibyl, which were written on separate pages, the initial letters forming a word when the pages were arranged in order. Another famous early acrostic was made from the Greek for “Jesus Christ, God’s Son, Savior”: *I*esus *C*hristos, *T*heou *U*ios, *S*oter. The first letters of each word (and the first two letters of *Christos* and *Theou*) taken in order spell *ichthys*, Greek for “fish,” which became a Christian symbol for Jesus. There are even earlier examples of acrostics in the Bible. In Hebrew, for instance, Psalm 119 is an acrostic in which the first letters of each of the 22 stanzas descend in alphabetical order. Such alphabetical acrostics are usually called *abecedarian hymns*, or *abecedarius*, and

there are more complicated species of them in which each word in every line begins with the same letter:

An Austrian army, awfully array’d
Boldly by battery besieged Belgrade, etc.

actuary. An actuary is a highly skilled statistician who calculates and states insurance risks and premiums, but his or her title derives from the Latin for clerk, *actuarius*, for in the Roman army, during Caesar’s time, an *actuary* was no more than a payroll clerk.

act your age. Perhaps *act your age!* originated as a reproof to children, but it is directed at both children and adults today, meaning either don’t act more immature than you are, or don’t try to keep up with the younger generation. The expression originated in the U.S., probably during the late 19th century, as did the synonymous *be your age!*

Adam; human. Adam, the name of the first man in the Bible, is the Hebrew word for man, deriving from *adama*, “earth,” just as the Latin *humanus*, “human,” is related to the Latin *humus*, “earth.” For his sins, according to the Talmud, Adam was evicted from Paradise after only 12 hours. In addition to entries following, his name is represented by *Adam’s wine*, or *ale*, a humorous expression for water; *Adamic*, naked, free like Adam; *Adamite*, a human being or descendant of Adam; *the second Adam*, a biblical reference to Christ; *the old Adam in us*, a reference to man’s disposition to evil; and I DON’T KNOW HIM FROM ADAM.

adam-and-eve. This pretty North American woods orchid (*Aplectrum hyemale*), also called puttyroot, apparently takes its name from its two bulbous roots, which are joined together by a small filament about two inches long that suggested Adam and Eve, hand in hand, to some poetic soul. When the plant has three bulbous roots or corms joined together it is called “Adam-and-Eve-and-their-son.” The name *adam-and-eve* includes the dogtooth violet, because its plant bears a large and a small flower at the same time, and the common monkshood. It is said that when immersed in water one root or corm of the puttyroot sinks and the other floats—whether it is Adam or Eve who sinks is never told. Folklore also holds that adam-and-eve sewn together and carried in a bag on one’s person protects the bearer from evil.

Adamastor. Vasco da Gama is said to have seen a hideous sea phantom called the “*Adamastor*,” the spirit of the stormy Cape of Good Hope, which warned him not to undertake his third voyage to India. Da Gama made the voyage anyway and died soon after reaching his destination. The Adamastor is first mentioned in the epic poem the *Lusiads* by Portuguese adventurer and

poet Luis de Camoens (1524–80), which was translated into English by Sir Richard Burton in 1881. The word *Adamastor* is probably Portuguese in origin, but its exact derivation is unknown.

Adam's apple. Adam never ate an apple, at least not in the biblical account of his transgressions, which refers only to unspecified forbidden fruit on the tree in the Garden of Eden. The forbidden fruit of which the Lord said “Ye shall not eat of the fruit which is in the midst of the garden, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die” (Gen. 3:3) was probably an apricot or pomegranate, and the Muslims—intending no joke—believe it was a banana. Many fruits and vegetables have been called apples. Even in medieval times, pomegranates were “apples of Carthage”; dates, “finger apples”; and potatoes, “apples of the earth.” At any rate, tradition has it that Adam succumbed to Eve's wiles and ate of an apple from which she took the first bite, that a piece stuck in his throat forming the lump we call the *Adam's apple*, and that all of us, particularly males, inherited this mark of his “fall.” Modern scientific physiology, as opposed to folk anatomy, explains this projection of the neck, most prominent in adolescents, as being anterior thyroid cartilage of the larynx. But pioneer anatomists honored the superstition in the mid-18th century by calling it *pomum Adami*, or *Adam's apple*. They simply could find no other explanation for this evasive lump in the throat that even seemed to move up and down.

Adam's apple tree. This particular tree is popularly named for Adam and the entire genus containing it was named by Linnaeus in honor of German botanist Dr. J. T. Tabernaemontanus (d. 1590), a celebrated Heidelberg botanist and physician who—despite the length of his patronym—also has species in two other plant genera commemorating him. Why the folkname *Adam's apple tree*? Clearly still another case of a claim on Eden. I quote from the *Encyclopedia of Gardening* (1838) by J. C. Loudon: “The inhabitants of Ceylon say that Paradise was a place in their country . . . They also point out as the tree which bore the forbidden fruit, the *Devi Ladner* or *Tabernaemontana alternifolia* [the species name has since been changed to *coronaria*] . . . In confirmation of the tradition they refer to the beauty of the fruit, and the fine scent of the flowers, both of which are most tempting. The shape of the fruit gives the idea of a piece having been bitten off; and the inhabitants say it was excellent before Eve ate of it, though it is now poisonous.” *T. coronaria*, a five-to-eight-foot-high tropical shrub with white fragrant flowers, is also called the East Indian rosebay, crape jasmine, and NERO'S CROWN, after the Roman emperor.

Adam's needle. Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness (Gen. 3:7). This led to

the belief that they used the spines of a plant as a needle. Most often the honor goes to the yucca (*Yucca filamentosa*), native to Mexico and Central America and grown in gardens all over the world.

Adam's profession. “There is a no ancient gentlemen but gardeners, ditchers, and grave-makers; they hold up Adam's profession,” Shakespeare wrote in *Hamlet*. The bard also said “And Adam was a gardener” in *Henry VI, Part III*. Much later, Kipling wrote: “Oh Adam was a gardener, and God who made him sees/That half a proper gardener's work is done upon his knees.” The phrase *Adam's profession* was proverbial for gardening long before both poets lived. No one has called it “Eve's profession,” even though she picked the first apple. See also FIACRE.

adder; auger. Many English words have changed over the years because of lazy or quick pronunciation—depending on how you look at it. *Adder*, is an example. *Adder* was originally “nadder,” but starting in the 14th century its *n* began to become part of the article *a*, making *an adder* out of “a nadder.” Much the same happened to the tool, *an auger*, during the same time, the auger having originally been “a nauger.”

add insult to injury. One of the oldest of expressions, this goes back to an early fable of Aesop, in which a bald man tried to kill a fly on his head and missed the fly, smacking himself instead. Said the fly: “You wanted to kill me for a mere touch. What will you do to yourself, now that you have added insult to injury.”

addisonian termination. See PREPOSITION.

adieu. *Je vous recommande à Dieu*, “I commend you to God,” was in times past said to Frenchmen who were going on a long journey and would not be seen for some time. Eventually the *à Dieu* detached itself (merged to *adieu*) from the phrase and came to mean the same kind of good-bye.

adios. Heard in the U.S. since about 1830, this Spanish word meaning good-bye (literally, “to God”) is now widely used throughout the country. It can also mean “get going, vamoose”: “You better adios before the law comes.”

Adirondacks. The Mohawk Indians contemptuously dubbed a tribe of Algonquin Indians *Adirondack*, meaning “they eat bark,” and the tribe's nickname came to be applied to the mountain region in northeastern New York that these Indians inhabited. The insulting name gives us, literally, “they eat bark” chairs, pack baskets, and even grapes, among many other items characteristic of the Adirondacks.