

Our Bountiful Tongue Runneth Over With Synonyms

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I'm button-burstingly proud to announce that this installment of "Lederer on Language" is my 200th for the Union-Tribune. This is a good time, then, to consider the verbal abundance of our English language.

The other day I went to the bookstore to buy a dictionary. The clerk showed me a really cheap one. I couldn't find the words to thank her.

Then she directed me to a thesaurus. I thought that was an accommodating, altruistic, benevolent, caring, compassionate, considerate, courteous, decent, empathic, gracious, kind, magnanimous, nice, obliging, outreaching, solicitous, sweet, sympathetic and thoughtful thing to do.

The multitudinous choice of words in English offers both a delightful and daunting challenge to native and non-native speakers. In William Styron's novel "Sophie's Choice," the heroine, Polish-born Sophie Zawistowska, expresses mock horror at the infinite variety of English words:

"Such a language! ... Too many words. I mean just the word for velocity. I mean fast. Rapid. Quick. All the same thing! A scandal!"

"Swift?" I added.

"How about speedy?" Nathan asked.

"Hasty?" I went on.

"And fleet?" Nathan said. "Though that's a bit fancy."

"Stop it!" Sophie said, laughing. "Too much! Too many words, this English. In French it is so simple. You just say vite."

You should not be aghast, amazed, appalled, astonished, astounded, bewildered, blown away, boggled, bowled over, bumfuzzled, caught off base, confounded, dumbfounded, electrified, flabbergasted, floored, flummoxed, gobsmacked, overwhelmed, shocked, startled, stunned, stupefied, surprised, taken aback, thrown or thunderstruck by this overflowing cornucopia of synonyms in our abounding English language.

English boasts by far the largest number of words of all languages, 616,500 officially enshrined in the "Oxford English Dictionary." In fact, according to the Global Language Monitor, and supported by the analysis Google's Corpus, English passed the one-million-word mark in the middle of 2009. That's almost four times the vocabulary size of its nearest competitor, German; five times the size of Russian, in third place, and six times the size of Spanish and French, tied for fourth. As a result, English possesses a plethora of synonyms that allow greater nuances of meaning than are available in other tongues.

A much-lauded New Yorker cartoon puckishly celebrated our linguistic treasure trove. The cartoon's caption read "Roget's Brontosaurus" and pictured a dinosaur in whose thought bubble appeared: "Large, great, huge, considerable, bulky, voluminous, ample, massive, capacious, spacious, mighty, towering, monstrous. ..." If not for the finite capacity of thought bubbles, the artist could have added: "big, Brobdingnagian, colossal, enormous, gargantuan, gigantic, ginormous, grand, hefty, hulking, humongous, husky, immense, jumbo, leviathan, looming, lumbering, mammoth, mountainous, ponderous, prodigious, sizable, substantial, tremendous, vast, weighty, whopping."

Such a cartoon would be far less likely to appear in a magazine printed in a language other than English. Books like “Roget’s Thesaurus” are foreign to speakers of most other languages. Given the scope of their vocabularies, they have little need of them.

My fellow verbivore and tireless researcher Paul Dickson has uncovered 2,964 synonyms for the word drunk (making him a member of Alcoholics Synonymous)! The entries range from the euphemistic tired to the comical plastered, from the nautical afloat to the erudite Bacchi-plenus, from the elegant inebriated to the time-bound Boris Yeltsinned and from the terminal stiff to the uncategorizable zozzled. Surely a world record for synonyms.

I hesitate to conclude this song of praise to our bounteous English language with dark news. But I regret to inform you that yesterday, a senior editor of “Roget’s Thesaurus” assumed room temperature, bit the dust, bought the farm, breathed his last, came to the end of the road, cashed in his chips, cooled off, croaked, deep sixed, expired, gave up the ghost, headed for the hearse, headed for the last roundup, kicked off, kicked the bucket, lay down one last time, lay with the lilies, left this mortal plain, met his maker, met Mr. Jordan, passed away, passed in his checks, perished, permanently changed his address, pulled the plug, pushed up daisies, returned to dust, slipped his cable, slipped his mortal coil, sprouted wings, took the dirt nap, took the last, long count, pegged out, traveled to kingdom come, turned up his toes, went across the creek, went belly up, went to glory, went the way of all flesh, went to his final reward, went west – and, of course, he died.

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