

**THE CRITERIA FOR
A CLASS OF JOCLAR WORDS
IN ENGLISH†**

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I EMBARKED UPON THE present study in order to answer the question, "How can you tell a jocular word when you see one?" The question involves several of my interests — a principal one being the scope of the play spirit in language. One of the chief motivations of language use, I feel, is the tendency to play, to experiment, just for the fun of it, to find out what happens when one puts elements together in a new way. A lively mind is constantly doing this. A working against the traditional constraints often produces innovations that can well be called "jocular."

More importantly, jocular words create a lexicographical problem. Much has been written in linguistics about "covert classes." Even without markers, do we recognize such classes? They are well known in syntax, but can they also be distinguished in vocabulary? This question was posed in 1956 by Floyd Lounsbury when he asked — ". . . whether there is to be found a componential structure of covert features in lexicon also, or whether a lexicon may not be an unorganized patchwork with no interesting underlying principles, something which can only be catalogued, as in a dictionary, but which cannot be analyzed structurally." (1) Lounsbury tackled kinship terms, which of all classes of words have the most accessible structural organization.

The question of lexical classes was opened up in a systematic way by Leonard Bloomfield in 1933 at a conference in Tokyo with a paper entitled, "The Structure of Learned Words." (2) He divided the English

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vocabulary into “three great types of words” — foreign, normal (mostly “native”), and learned (“semi-foreign”). As his examples of foreign words he gave *mirage*, *intelligentsia*, *jiujitsu*, and *alumnus*. But do English speakers think of *mirage* as a “foreign” word? If the stress is crucial, what about *garage*? A careful study of social backgrounds is called for.

What is “poetic” or “literary” will vary greatly in different cultural groups. The illiterate hillmen of the Ozarks in their ordinary discourse sometimes use words that have a strong “literary” flavor elsewhere. The folklorist Vance Randolph found many examples such as *ponder*, *cavil*, *clarify*, *peruse*, *reconcile*, *betide*, *exhort*, *diligent*. When these appear in substandard colloquial sentences, they create a peculiar effect: “You-all reckon I cain’t discern right from wrong?” (3) The attempt to set up a class of “literary” words runs into problems of great complexity.

Such problems are especially acute when we attempt to delineate a class of “jocular” words, for no one principle runs through them all. The ways of making fantastic words, or shall I say “fantasticated” words, are so various that they defy analysis and classification. The very word *fantastic* has been much played upon.

The combining of *fantastic* and *fabulous* into *fantabulous* has achieved considerable currency. A few years ago the ten-year-old whiz-kid Robert Strom, appearing on the CBS “\$64,000 Question” program, told the quizmaster that he thought the whole show was “fantabulous.” When the quizmaster told him that the word *fantabulous* didn’t exist, he replied: “Of course it’s a word. It’s made up of two words.” (4) The boy showed his good sense when he was not thrown by the silly statement, “The word does not exist.”

The adverb derivative is also documented. In a personals column of a New York weekly, a woman advertised herself as follows: “Fantabulously alluring honey blonde, professional woman, early 40’s, enhanced by incandescent warmth, wit and a radiant personality seeks a close encounter of the fourth kind.” (5)

A combination in reverse order is *fabtastic*, as when a showman was described with this exaggeration: “Don Lane mania is sweeping the city! — people simply can’t get enough of this fabtastic talent.” (6) Another performer, who was evidently quite callipygian, was described as “simply fannytastic.” (7)

Such jocular coinages are rife today, but the heyday of their popularity was in the 1830s and 1840s — the period that produced our ubiquitous expression *O.K.* They flourished both in rural New England and on the frontier as it moved westward.

Let us concentrate on this period and begin with New England. When the Canadian judge, Thomas Chandler Haliburton, described

the Yankee pedlar Sam Slick in 1843, he satirized the type by putting ludicrous words into his mouth, such as *hugeacious*. Sam Slick was supposed to say: "Heavens and airth! the fust time I heerd one of these hugeaceous critters come out with that queer idee, I thought I should a dropt right off of the ottarman on the floor." (8) And on another occasion: "'Why I was so conflastrigated,' sais I, 'I didn't think of it.'" (9)

The word *transmogriphied* can be enhanced into *twistimogriphied*, as was done in the *Boston Weekly Magazine* of March 9, 1839. In criticizing the difficult place names of Maine, an essayist said: "In a place where all the letters of the alphabet get so twistimogriphied, they have to ax what language on airth they belong to, how is folks to keep from fightin I should like to know?" (10) The *Salem Gazette* of January 22, 1839, had a paragraph entitled, "A New Word": "Some reprobate, without having the fear of breaking people's jaws before his eyes, but moved and instigated, etc., says, 'I see no reason why the world may not be circumballoonigated.'" (11) Here it was easy to change *circumnavigated* by making it *circumballoonigated*.

The *Boston Times* of April 9, 1838, criticized a public bulletin board by saying: "Briggs' Bulletin Board is getting too acid by half. We can stand its awful *punstrocityces*, but it had better crawl into a hornet's nest than attempt to show off its wit upon the editors." (12) In the *Yale Literary Magazine* of 1843 a backwoodsman hunter in southern New England is recorded as saying: "Beg your pardon, Miss Orrs, but I can't help it—conflabberin' away with a white man, never mind who that was." (13)

One of the best legacies from the New England jocular words is *pixilated*. The earliest citation so far discovered is from 1848. A political broadside, the only known copy, is preserved in the Essex Institute of Salem, Massachusetts, recording a campaign song for Zachary Taylor. Sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle, it contained the couplet,

You'll never find on any trip
That he'll be pix-e-lated.

A footnote was added to this: "A Marblehead phrase—'pitch-belated,' overtaken by darkness." (14) This is no doubt an erroneous folk-etymology. In the English dialects, particularly in Cornwall and Devon, where pixies are believed in, is found the word *pixie-led*, and the Marblehead contribution was the change to the Latinate ending *-ated*. Such a mock-learned form characterizes many jocular words.

The word was used again in 1886 in a historical novel with a Marblehead setting, and was collected into a glossary in 1891 when a folklorist listed "Words from the Dialect of Marblehead." But from this very restricted, local provenience, the word burst into national

attention in 1936 when it appeared in the film *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, based on the writing of Clarence Budington Kelland. Two elderly spinsters were portrayed as using it to describe all their neighbors.

The word caught on and has become a permanent fixture in the American vocabulary. A film review of 1979 states: "The movie wings along on a pixillated sense of the absurd." (15) I have even found the noun *pixillation* in 1981 in what appears to be a special technical development in photography: "Andrew Noren uses high-contrast black-and-white, macro close-ups, pixillation, and jagged bursts of imagery." (16)

One of my discoveries in doing lexical research was the finding of *ding bat* in 1838, thirty-three years before any other citation. And it had a special sense, not otherwise known, of a kind of alcoholic drink. A party of jovial Bostonians started for New York on the train, but stopped in Providence, Rhode Island, in order to imbibe a "ding bat." (17)

New York State too had its users of jocular words. In mid-state, at Utica, a weekly journal called *The Uticanian*, in 1842, had many examples. Some health advice informs us: "Early rising . . . promotes digestion, accelerates the circulation, and, in the *expressive* language of an eccentric friend, 'titivates the dianacle anigosity of the diaphragm momentarily.'" (18) In another passage we find: "Its utility, versatility, and *drollability* . . . will entitle it to the protection and confidence . . . of all the honest-hearted, laughter-loving people of Utica." (19)

From New York City in 1833 comes the record of the word *kiltniferous*, apparently meaning coins or specie. The *New York Evening Star* of December 21, 1833, told this story:

Some days ago a tall hardy looking character, with a pair of new boots under his arm, presented a check at the Right Honorable the Marquis of Caermarthan's Bank in this city; but . . . he was a little apprehensive of their notes; so he bawled out to the teller, "Give us the *kiltniferous!*" which having received, he filled both boots with the silver, and stalked out of the Bank with great gravity. (20)

The word *kiltniferous* seems singularly inept, as its elements have nothing to do with money; but sheer nonsensicality may sometimes intrude.

As the frontier opened up, the constraints of conventional society were loosened, and Western characters developed a remarkable vocabulary of lawless coinages: *discombobulate*, *hornswoggle*, *squablification*, *explunctify*, *slantindicular*, *angeliferous*, *lallapalooza* — these are samples. (21)

One of the outstanding jocular words was *absquatulate*, in the sense of "to go away," "to vamoose," "to skedaddle." It was the subject of much discussion in many sources. Its treatment in the *New Orleans Weekly Picayune* of December 20, 1839, was as follows:

Among the new words which have been coined within the few past years, none have had greater runs than . . . *absquatulated*. We have always spelled the latter word *absquatulated* until corrected by the wag-gish editor of the New York Gazette who claims its paternity, it having been ushered into existence through the medium of a South Carolina paper, the celebrated Camden Journal we presume, while Mr. Daniels was conducting it. Now as the Gazette man fathers the creation by admission, and says he named it himself, we give it to him. . . . Here is the verb *absquatulate*, the derivation, declension, and definition thereof:—*squat*, to sit down; *absquat*, to get up; *absquatulise*, to be off; *absquatulized*, gone—gone, for instance, to Texas, or—the devil only knows where. . . . The public in general, and orthographers in particular, owe the editor of the Gazette and our humble selves a debt of gratitude for setting so weighty a matter at rest, and throwing so much additional light upon a subject which no one before us has dared to agitate. Give us a light gin toddy. (22)

The generality of its use is illustrated in the *Uticanian* of June 7, 1842: "Mormonism is not yet *absquatulated* (excuse the Yankeeism) but, on the contrary, is progressing with rapid strides all over the Union." (23)

A clever type of jocular word was the coinage by a newspaper editor of Vandalia, Illinois. In his *Free Press*, he used *intipsicated*, in which *tipsy* is substituted for the syllables *-toxi-*. This was appreciated even in Boston, for the editor of the *Courier* there, in the issue of June 7, 1839, bestowed the following praise:

A man who enriches our vernacular with new and important words is a real benefactor, and is entitled to the highest literary honors; and we commend to the favorable consideration of our colleges the editor of the Vandalia Free Press, to whom the public appear to be indebted for the word "intipsicated"—a term which needs no labored commentary to explain its meaning, or to set forth its value. It should henceforth take its place in all dictionaries. (24)

The British travelers who visited America frequently made comment on the propensity of using jocular words. Frederic Tolfrey, in 1845, in his book *The Sportsman in Canada*, reported this speech of a Yankee horse dealer: "May I be *catamawpously chawed up* if there's his *ekal* (equal) in all Canada." (25) In 1842 *Ainsworth's Magazine*, in an article on "Uncle Sam's Peculiarities," put this sentence into the mouth of an American: "You estimate, I'm flummuxed; but I swear I'll substaquilate you some when the day is hot enough for it!" (26)

The traveler Laurence Oliphant, in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1855,

recorded this comment on the platting of the city: "They laid out their plat in what one of the present citizens, in his account of the first years of St. Paul, calls 'little skewdangular lots, about as large as a stingy card of gingerbread broke in two diagonally.'" (27)

When Sir Richard Bonnycastle wrote his book *Canada and the Canadians in 1846*, published in 1846, he included a bitter satire on American English. With tongue in cheek he declared:

. . . there should be a special Act of Congress to declare that henceforward the words of the English language should be abolished and the American tongue substituted, under pains and penalties, omitting the aforesaid and all other similar *obnoxiosities* from dictionary, grammar, and book. (28)

A Scottish traveler, J.F. Campbell, who was a cousin of the Duke of Argyll, fell in with the American spirit by coining a ludicrous word himself. While visiting San Francisco, he recorded in a letter of September 2, 1874, the following interchange with a local character: " 'Sir,' said a man to me; 'air you travelling for business or for pleasure?' 'Sir,' said I, 'I am travelling circumperambulatorically.'" 'That will do,' said the Yank, 'you bet.'" (29) Also in San Francisco, an American traveler, telling about the condition of the streets in January, 1850, reported as follows: "Some good Samaritan, with a heart overflowing with the milk of human kindness, erected at the corner of Clay and Kearney Streets the following warning to the unwary:

THIS STREET IS IMPASSABLE,
NOT EVEN JACKASSABLE!" (30)

Other jocular words supposedly result from the ingenuity of American Negroes. The contemptuous condescension of these reports is now unpleasant, but for the sake of the record I will give the following conversation, however factitious, as reported in a New York magazine of 1842, climaxing in *interestariety*:

"Look here, Sam Jonsing, is you gwoing to the theatre to night?"
"No— is you?"
"Dat I is. Don't you see de great 'traction dere on de bill?"
"Yes, I doos. Say, nig, what's de name of dat big piece down dere at de bottom?"
"Well, I can't zackly specemfy de name ob dat piece, but dey say it's one dat possesses de biggest kind of interestariety."
"Dat's enuff— dat last 'spression of yours conwinces me—I'm gwoin.'" (31)

Snollygoster is another word supposedly of Negro origin. It first turns up in 1862 in a theatrical production by Dan Emmett, entitled, *The Black Brigade*. In a "walk-around" used by the Bryant Minstrels in New York, he had this couplet:

We am de snollygosters
An' lubs Jim Ribber oysters.

Thereafter the word is not recorded until 1895, when an editor in Columbus, Ohio, in the *Dispatch*, had this to say: "A Georgia editor kindly explains that 'a snollygoster is a fellow who wants office, regardless of party, platform or principles, and who, whenever he wins, gets there by the sheer force of talknophical assumacy.'" (32)

At that time Harry Truman was just entering politics in Missouri, and he kept the word in mind over many decades. When he became president he used it again, and it had another short run in the late 1940s as a term of political abuse.

Some people are very precise in their usage of jocular words, insisting, for instance, on *pernickety* rather than *persnickety*. A lady from Louisville, Kentucky, wrote to the editors of *Life* magazine in 1965: "It may be *pernickety* of me, but I must tell you that there is no such word as "persnickety," which you used . . . in your article." (33) But on printing her letter, the editors triumphantly pointed out that the new edition of Webster III accepted *persnickety* as well as *pernickety*.

In this paper I have concentrated on the two decades of the 1830s and 1840s, when the jocular words had their finest flowering. The present day, however, has its own persistent examples. Contexts are rife for *pizzaz*, *spizzerinctum*, *copasetic*. A publicist for a movie starlet will call his client "bustaceous"; a critic of politicians will note the effort to "flamflooze" voters; a reviewer of poor Black shows will speak of their "jivasstications"; the prospect of an air journey being diverted to Cuba will put the passengers into a state of "highjaculation"; the approach of April 15th will cause taxpayers to suffer from "acute intoxication."

In the plethora of contextual material that I have presented to you in this paper, the boundaries of the class of jocular words may become fuzzily apparent. I say "fuzzily," because I do not believe that there are any exact boundaries. (34) I am willing to accept the stricture of Floyd Lounsbury that the lexicon of English, in the largest part of it, may be "an unorganized patchwork." The play spirit is so diverse and uninhibited that any attempt to find "underlying principles" would be forcing it into a Procrustean bed. Yes, there are tendencies and devices that can be catalogued; but we can best enjoy the flowering of the play spirit by leaving it in its untrammelled, untidy state.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. "A Semantic Analysis of Pawnee Kinship Usage," in *Language*, Vol. 32 (1952), pp. 158-94; quot., P. 162.

2. Reprinted in *A Leonard Bloomfield Anthology*, ed. Charles F. Hockett (Bloomington, Ind., 1970), pp. 252-56.
3. Vance Randolph, "Literary Words in the Ozarks," in *American Speech*, Vol. 4 (October, 1928), pp. 56-57.
4. *New York Post*, March 20, 1957, p. 3, cols. 1-3.
5. *Village Voice*, May 1, 1978, loose insert between pp. 96 and 97.
6. *Village Voice*, March 11, 1981, p. 57, col. 4, by James Wolcott.
7. *New York Post*, January 21, 1975, p. 42, col. 2, by Earl Wilson.
8. Thomas Chandler Haliburton, *The Attaché; or Sam Slick in England* (New York, 1843), p. 56.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
10. *Boston Weekly Magazine*, I (March 9, 1839), p. 215, col. 1.
11. *Salem Gazette*, January 22, 1839, p. 2, col. 1.
12. *Boston Times*, April 9, 1838, p. 2, col. 3.
13. *Yale Literary Magazine*, Vol. 9 (December, 1843), p. 76.
14. Fannie Hardy Eckstorm, "'Pixilated,' A Marblehead Word," in *American Speech*, Vol. 16 (February, 1941), pp. 78-80.
15. *Village Voice*, October 8, 1979, p. 57, col. 2.
16. *Village Voice*, April 8, 1981, p. 60, col. 2.
17. The quotation is given in my study, "The First Stage in the History of 'O.K.,'" in *American Speech*, Vol. 38 (February, 1963), p. 10. The quotation reads: "We can take a 'Quaker' before we start—apply a 'Ding Bat' at Providence, reach the half-way house on the Stonington Railroad" with another drink.
18. *The Uticanian* (Utica, N.Y.), April 13, 1842, p. 3.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 4.
20. *New York Evening Star*, December 21, 1833, p. 2, col. 4.
21. A rich store of such examples is found in Mody G. Boatright, *Folk Laughter on the American Frontier* (1942, in ed. New York, 1961), chapter "Free Speech," pp. 155-66.
22. *New Orleans Weekly Picayune*, December 30, 1839, p. 178, col. 6.
23. *The Uticanian* (Utica, N.Y.), June 7, 1842, p. 3, col. 1.
24. *Boston Courier*, June 7, 1839, p. 2, col. 3. Other similar words are given in my study of *O.K.*, cited above in footnote 17, pp. 22-23.
25. Frederic Tolfrey, *The Sportsman in Canada* (London, 1845), II, p. 22.
26. *Ainsworth's Magazine*, Vol. 2 (1842), p. 151.
27. Laurence Oliphant, *Minnesota and the Far West* (Edinburgh, 1855), p. 252.
28. Sir Richard Bonnycastle, *Canada and the Canadians, in 1846* (London, 1846), II, p. 226.
29. J.F. Campbell, letter of September 2, 1874, from San Francisco, in *My Circular Notes* (London, 1876), I, p. 89.
30. Samuel Curtis Upham, *Notes of a Voyage to California via Cape Horn* (Philadelphia, 1878), p. 268.
31. *The Uticanian* (Utica, N.Y.), June 15, 1842, p. 1.
32. The 1862 quotation was collected for the *Century Dictionary Supplement* (1909); later material in the *DAE*.
33. Margaret W. Ronald, in *Life*, April 30, 1965, p. 19, col. 4.
34. A good discussion by Hans Marchand, *The Categories and Types of Present-Day English Word-Formation* (Wiesbaden, 1960), pp. 276-77, is given of the clusters around *robustious* (*rumgumptious*, *bumptious*, *scrumptious*, *goluptious*, *sniptious*, etc.), and on p. 204 the many uses of *-ation*.