

Interesting Words assembly

I really enjoy adding new and unusual words to my vocabulary. A little while back I spoke in assembly about unusual words from other languages. Some of you may recall and use in daily life such words as 'tsuji-giri', the Japanese word meaning 'To try out a new sword on a passer-by'. Perhaps it was the Indonesian word 'neko-neko' that caught your imagination – it means 'Someone who has a creative idea which only makes things worse'. Of course there are many interesting and unusual words in our own language. I would like to introduce a few of them to you today.

Having a new word to use is always a great pleasure. I suppose that is so for three reasons: The first is the joy at knowing and using a word which might be unknown to someone else. We all enjoy possession of secret knowledge – after all, knowledge is power.

The second is joy in having the capacity to describe and define the world more precisely, using exactly the right word for the occasion. There is pleasure in precision and exactness. Perhaps the most difficult part of having to communicate in another language is the crudity of expression that is forced upon us by the limits of our vocabulary.

The third is pleasure in expanding our capacity to think – for language is thought made flesh. When we add a word to our vocabulary, we add to the mental toolkit we bring to unlock our thoughts and appreciation of the world.

So today I intend to offer some more words and expressions to you. I would be surprised if you had come across many of them before, but I am sure that if you remember them and use them, they will bring you both happiness and increased mental capacities. But only if you remember them.

Our language is full to bursting with extraordinary words that are criminally underused. Let us introduce some by means of a little story.

Imagine a young man who is a fanatical follower of a football team. He is not a glory hunter, and supports his local team, even though they are not very good. On Saturday he makes his way to the ground to watch his team. He very much wants them to win, but since they are playing a team packed with foreign talent, has no real hope that they can. In order to protect himself emotionally, he begins to decatsect. What is he doing? To decatsect, or to go through the process of decathexis, is to separate yourself emotionally in anticipation of a loss. It is a sort of internal stepping back – we do it when we say of our football team "Oh, we're rubbish anyway." Decathexis – an invaluable word.

After watching his team get massacred, our hero returns home, somewhat depressed. He doesn't quite know what to do to cheer himself up. But then some friends call and suggest that they all go out to a night club. Our hero is delighted – he thinks he has the solution to his problems. In fact, he is experiencing 'tarantism'. What is

‘tarantism’? It is the overwhelming urge to overcome sadness and depression by dancing.

But on the way to the club, the car breaks down. It rolls to a stop and won’t move. All our hero’s hopes are dashed. However, he might have expected such trouble. After all, he and all of the rest of us, have often been the victim of ‘resistentialism’. What is ‘resistentialism’? It is a wonderful word that needs wider currency. It describes an all too common problem in life, and is defined thus: ‘seemingly spiteful behaviour manifested by inanimate objects.’

After all this trouble, no-one would be surprised if our hero became an ‘onchyophagist’ – a person who bites his fingernails... or experienced ‘dysania’ – a state of finding it hard to get out of bed.

We’ll leave the story of the boy there, lest you begin to take pleasure in his misfortunes. There is, of course, a word for the feeling of pleasure we get when thinking about the misfortunes of others. The Germans have given it to us – it is ‘Schadenfreude’. A lovely word for a rather contemptible feeling.

So I had better move to a conclusion. It is this: We share a wonderful gift. That gift is fluency in one of the most magnificent languages ever spoken. English, our shared language, has been made rich through the addition of words from a host of other languages. Some of those languages, like German, Norse and French, influenced English when we were invaded by those who spoke those languages. Others influenced our language when we invaded them. The result has been an enormously rich set of words, which we treat all too casually. If we had to go to the trouble of learning English we might be more aware of the difficulties and the beauties of its vocabulary, grammar and idioms. After all, it cannot be easy to understand a language where the phrase ‘I’ve got him to thank for that’ can mean either praise or blame, without any change in words or tone of voice.

Since English has come so easily to us, it is easy to forget how valuable and precious it is.

Today, please respect your own language by using it precisely, elegantly and carefully. And - if you wish – I would be delighted to hear you remember and use some of the words I have mentioned today. There is nothing like having access to a rich and unusual vocabulary.