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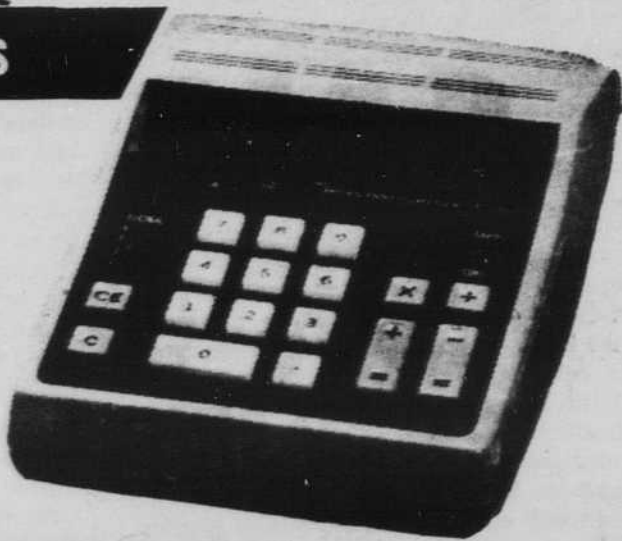
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By LESLIE HANSCOM
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Nobody who cares for the English language and who has kept his ears open in the last 10 years is going to pick up "The Barnhart Dictionary of New English Since 1963" (Harper & Row, \$12.95) in the hope of cheering himself up.

The listener who pays attention knows already that what is new in the language seems to reduce it in scope instead of the other way around.

People are talking more and using language less, as they parrot whatever cliché is current on television this week or surrender to the rote dialect of the youth culture, a lingo that is virtually useless for expressing human thought. Any dictionary that reflects the way things are going is bound to make dispiriting reading, and this one does.

For one thing, the number of words that have actually been newly minted since 1963 does not, as reported here, seem very extensive. The three editors of the dictionary—Clarence and Robert Barnhart and Sol Steinmetz—are able to make a 512 page book out of it because, to a very great degree, they are listing old words in new uses. Adjectives have become nouns ("ambivalent, N. A bi-sexual person"), nouns have turned into verbs ("bar mitzvah, to confirm a 13-year-old boy in a synagogue").

There are words that have appeared since 1963 which were clearly never intended to fit in a human mouth. I would cite the very "dysfunction" as a fair example. It means "to break down," and the normal instinct of flesh-and-blood jaws is to say that. But these days the way to

inspire confidence in your ability to fit into the system is to suggest by your style of speech that if somebody cut you open he would find nothing but a transistor hookup. Therefore "dysfunction" is a status word.

It isn't the worst one. Until I read the Barnhart dictionary, I didn't know anybody could be depraved enough to invent a word like "disambiguate" and I was happier for my ignorance. It means, by a great stroke of irony, "to clear up," and I gather that it has its origin directly in computer science, which is no surprise at all. Spoken by a computer it would probably sound entirely appropriate, but I predict you will soon hear it used by human beings and wish to God your native language was Finnish.

Some of the words that technocracy and bureaucracy have wished on us are offensive only for that metallic ring on the ear and their way of conveying that the speaker is an institution rather than a man or a woman. But there are others that one loves to hate for their built-in hypocrisy.

Take the word "dehire." Would it make you feel better, on being thrown out of your job, to know that you were "dehired" rather than fired?

Or when it comes to really intolerable avoidance of the issue, consider the undertaker's neologism "cremains," meaning funeral ashes. Anybody who would use that word ought to be chucked into the furnace the ashes came from.

Then there are those slightly more endurable (because pathetic) though no less foolish words coined by doers of menial work to dignify their trades. Two given in the new dictionary are "hairtician" for the barber and "garbologist" for the man who hauls off your potato peelings.

Some of the new words are depressing, also, not for their intrinsic lack of appeal, but for the dismaying period of history that they mirror. It took a decade like the last one to create a need for a word like "magnicide," the assassination of somebody big, to make the murderer feel important.

Even in colorful slang, however, the past decade has been uninventive, and this together with the spreading blight of bureaucratese suggests that the language of Shakespeare isn't going anywhere and maybe we aren't either.

Max Beerbohm once laid down the law that, if words lose their individual weight and precision, then thought becomes imprecise also and morality next. If you recall the language of the Watergate witnesses—a prefabricated idiom intended for mimeographed directives rather than for the expression of an individual man's thoughts and feelings—you are apt to think Sir Max wasn't talking through his straw boater. Which is another reason for finding this dictionary of flat and inexact speech a depressing document.

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