



Dan Elek at the Cannon Beach Public Works Department saves me words and phrases that he collects. We share a mutual interest in turns of phrase and word histories. I guess we're sort of grass-roots etymologists. Etymology is the study of the history and origin of words. I love this stuff. Word-smithing is a fascinating process. Words are a darn sight cheaper to collect than antiques, and every bit as much fun. The English Language is a magnificent jumble of collectibles influenced through the ages by the gibbering of Danes, Celts, Norsemen, Frisians, Teutons, Normans, Picts, Greeks, Latins, and the good Lord knows who else. (Interesting word "gibberish," eh? It's related to jabber and chatter, and harks back to at least the 1600s). My observation is that we tend to use our language with little sense of the history of its terms and phrases. Oh, granted, once in a while we'll find some term and ride it to death. The use of the term "closure," currently in vogue, comes to mind. The Professor would like to pique your interest with a glance at a few examples of language at work. Join me if you can tear yourself away from that television for a few minutes.

Why "mad as a March hare"? Because European hares breed in March and become amorously addled. How about "harum-scarum," confusion and disorder? The term apparently derives from hare 'em-scare 'em. Can you picture those rabbits running and scampering when frightened? My friends tell me they're Blazer "fans." The word "fan" comes from fanatic. By their behavior I see the connection. How about "cute"? "Cute" is an aphetic form of the word "acute," originally meaning "clever," the initial "a" having been deleted. Somehow clever turned to pretty through the years. Interesting, huh? We speak of someone's "tacky" furniture or clothing. In a time gone by "tacky" referred to a "degenerate, weedy horse," or a poor white person in the southern states of America.

Maybe you think I'm "pulling your leg" when I tell you these things about our language. Do you have any idea where that phrase originated? My sources tell me that hangings in early England were often unpleasant events. Some folks dangled from the noose for long periods of time without dying. Hirelings hurried the process by pulling the victim's legs to ensure speedy death after the "bucket had been kicked" from under his feet. Hmmm.

Many terms have nautical referents. "Stem to stern" or "stem to gudgeon" means from the front of a vessel to the back, or to include the entire vessel. If a drunken sailor was "three sheets to the wind," he courted disaster, just as a sailing ship with too many sails flying begged for trouble. Drinking heavily might give him a "wobbly boot" and make him vulnerable to "shanghai" or a "mickeyed" drink.

A good number of terms describe behaviors or emotions. "Waffling," or vacillating, initially meant the movement of an object back and forth by the wind. "Wafting" originated here too. "Dawdle" (I love the sound of that word!) combines two terms: "daw," to come awake from a swoon, and "daddle," to walk totteringly. Isn't that a sweet word? In a recent past ladies got "gussied up." A gussie was a pigsty. The nasty little implications seem obvious. I recall a character from my childhood reading called the Flim-flam Man. He was a poseur and scamp. "Flim-flam" harks back to Old Norse, "flim" being related to lampoon as well as Old Norse "flimska" meaning mockery. The "haggle" in "haggling over a price," dates back to the 1500s when the term meant to "chop, cut, or mutilate." If someone asks you to deliver a message "posthaste," they want the dispatch quickly. In the 16th century that meant travelling with the speed of the king's post riders, or couriers, who were stationed at intervals along the king's highway much like our Pony Express riders. Recently a friend told me his brother had begun to slip "beyond the pale." "Palings" were fence slats in early England. The "Pale" indicated those boundaries that encompassed the realm of the English monarch—that imaginary fence enclosing English interests and civilization.

A limited number of terms and phrases appear to have just popped up like mushrooms. That fact certainly doesn't diminish their colorfulness or interest. "Quandry" is one. "Hoodlum" is another. Between the years 1870-1872, the term "hoodlum" cropped up in the San Francisco Bay area. A newspaper article of the time refers to "All the boys trained to be rowdies, comer-men, pettifoggers, idlers, polite loafers, street hounds, hoodlums, and bummers..." You've got to love a language with that much zest.

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Love does not consist of gazing at each other but in looking outward together in the same direction.  
-- Antoine de Saint Exupéry

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Time is a means of measuring change. Time can be measured by months, in rough approximations of lunar cycles. Or time can be measured in seasons. Elsewhere in North America they have four. For all practical purposes, we have two: the Season of Torrential Rains and an ever-expanding Tourist Season. For the native peoples of the northern Oregon coast, time was measured by the appearance of life, particularly that life which one could eat. The last half of April was "the time of salmonberry sprouts," when salmonberry bushes (*Rubus spectabilis*) burst forth with magenta flowers and soft young stems which, when peeled, could be eaten raw, or cooked and eaten like asparagus. The months of May and June were "salmonberry time," during which this plant's delicate orange and red berries were picked and eaten alongside stored, smoked fish. Late June to August was "salal berry time" when these purple berries would be picked and eaten, or pulverized, dried, and stored in oil for later use. Then the fish would arrive. Late August through September was "Chinook salmon season," October was "Silver salmon season" and November was "chum salmon season." As this issue of the Upper Left Edge is released, it will be the final moments of "steelhead season," a time of sporadic winter fishing which ran from December to early April. And, as spring returns and the salmonberries sprout once again, this will mark the final moments of the fishing seasons.

The final moments. Time marks change, and much has changed on this coast. One era of human history, several thousand years long, has passed and another is well underway - the transition between these two epochs has been marked by a radical change in the relationship between humans and the land they inhabit. The seasonal comings and goings of plants and fish would no longer serve as seasonal markers. Their arrival is no longer watched with urgent concern. Food is trucked in from thousands of miles distant -- if the salmon does not arrive here we can ship it from Alaska. Or simply eat something else. But, even if we were watching our local plants and the fish closely, we would be disappointed. Aboriginal berry plots have been overgrown by scrubby second-growth forest and bulldozed for development. The Oregon coastal steelhead, *Salmo gairdneri*, and the chum salmon *Oncorhynchus keta* are now under serious consideration for Endangered Species Act protection. So, too, is the "Silver" or "Coho" salmon, *Oncorhynchus kisutch*. From August to early April, time passes, but the fish do not. If we could bring back the people who lived at Ecola Creek's mouth 200 years ago, what would they call the seasons? What would they say?

Ecola Creek and other north coast streams have long been a stronghold of a small coho salmon population. During recent years, official coho counts on these streams were large enough to suggest the presence of a viable, wild coho population. Fish counts from the last year, however, suggest that the north coast coho population has dropped to alarmingly low levels -- averaging less than 3 fish per mile of stream during their peak migration. Something has changed. No longer does this appear to be a genetically viable population. Assuming that there aren't more coho hiding somewhere, unseen, this small number of fish will not be able to survive without inbreeding; but of course, they will not be able to survive long with inbreeding. By official National Marine Fisheries Service standards, runs of this size may qualify the north coast's native coho as officially extinct.

And, as the saying goes, extinction is forever. Every salmon run is uniquely adapted to its own maternal stream.

The home stream is embedded in their genes -- the timing of local rains and the speed of its water, the steepness of its climb into the mountains, its distinctive assortment of plants, insects, and predators, its temperature and chemical composition, the textures of its gravel. They have become adapted to highly localized environments through a gradual winnowing of the gene pool, carried out over several thousands of generations. Those salmon, returning too small or early for local conditions, might not be able to jump through certain chutes or over a particular small waterfall, and will not reach breeding areas upstream. Those who are genetically prone to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, entering the stream during very low water, severe floods, or momentary peaks in the number of predators, don't live to pass on their genes to a future generation (which would have possessed a similarly poor sense of timing). Salmon are finely-tuned organisms, the product of a million previous successes among a particular breeding population within a particular environment. We cannot reinvent an Ecola Creek salmon.

Stories about "the salmon being so thick you could walk on their backs" during the late 19th century were exaggerations, but only marginally so. In the space of two human lifetimes, Europe's progeny have eliminated or nearly eliminated entire stocks of native salmon throughout the Northwest, salmon stocks that had supported native societies for several hundreds of generations before our arrival. There are many culprits on the north coast. Past logging practices are foremost among them. Clearing of the forest, for logging

or any other purpose, changes everything in the salmon's environment. Summer water temperatures skyrocket. Winters bring unprecedented floods and washouts as rainwater runs directly off the land, unimpeded by the forest canopy; with less vegetation to retain water during the dry season, summers can bring waters to a low level once seen only during severe droughts. Silts washed from deforested lands will bury "redds," gravel-lined nests full of salmon eggs, while other redds will be washed away. (In the 1950s and 1960s, logging operations behind Cannon Beach would drag downed trees, from stump to loading area, through the middle of streams with salmon spawning beds -- some of the most abrupt declines in fish population ever recorded on the Creek soon followed.) Reduced streamside vegetation can expose young salmon to predators, while the absence of large, woody debris (which used to "dam" sections of the stream, creating backwater pools) inhibits the development of backwater gravel beds in which some salmon breed. The bacteria which abound in our sewage and agricultural waste consume vast quantities of oxygen, and salmon will literally suffocate in their maternal stream. Some researchers suggest that the synthetic chemicals which we release into the environment, both intentionally and unintentionally, may inhibit salmon spawning by interfering with their finely-tuned hormonal cycles. Pollution and the filling of wetlands is particularly problematic near the mouths of streams, where coastal towns now develop at a breakneckpace; here, salmon must linger long to feed and to adapt to the changing salinity on their way out to sea or back to land. Certainly, salmon have also suffered from overfishing at sea by commercial ships from the United States, Canada, Russia, Japan, and elsewhere. But the biggest threats are on land -- generally, the longer a salmon species spends in the river during its annual breeding cycle, the worse it has fared in the 20th century.

Could our local wild salmon be replaced by hatchery fish? Genetically tied to some other stream system, hatchery fish tend to do poorly when transplanted to new streams with different sorts of environmental constraints. They tend to be smaller, less healthy, and return to spawn in lower numbers than wild fish. Spending their youth in big, featureless tanks with protective coverings and regular feedings, hatchery fish do not learn to hunt for local foods or hide from local predators. In such highly crowded conditions, hatchery fingerlings are extremely prone to disease. Moreover, in these featureless cells, they become nasty little thugs, gnawing on one another's fins while in the tanks, and acting strangely combative toward other fish once released into the wild. And every hatchery fish released into a stream with a remnant wild population raises the threat to native salmon, adding competitors to what may already be a severely overtaxed environmental system.

Local salmon may still survive into the future. Their continued presence, even in small numbers, might provide a window of opportunity. Local watershed organizations and other advocates of the wild salmon now attempt to improve the quality of the environment on which the salmon depend, planting trees along streambanks, placing large logs in the water to form new gravel bars, monitoring water quality downstream from logging operations, eliminating sources of chemical contaminants. It remains to be seen whether the population trends can be reversed, but it would be inexcusable not to try. Some things change in cycles, coming, going, and coming back again like the salmonberry shoots that mark the beginning of spring. Some things, like the displacement of Native Americans from this coast, cannot be reversed; they change forever. We are now in the final moments of the time of salmon, the fall and winter seasons, but we also may be the final moments of a much longer time of salmon, one that lasted for millennia and that will not repeat itself. What we do in the next year may determine whether the decline of our native salmon is a momentary change, or one that lasts forever.

If you are interested in getting involved with salmon restoration efforts on the northern Oregon coast, contact your local watershed council, or the Columbia River Estuarine Study Taskforce (CREST), a coordinating taskforce which can direct you to salmon and watershed restoration organizations in your area. CREST can be reached by phone at (503)325-0435, by fax at (503)325-0459, or by mail at 750 Commercial Street, Room 205, Astoria, Oregon, 97103-0435. People who are interested in reading a classic work on the causes of the disappearance of wild salmon (particularly in western Washington) should locate a copy of Bruce Brown's *Mountain in the Clouds: A Search for the Wild Salmon* -- an updated, University of Washington Press edition was published in 1995. A particularly good technical account of the different salmon species of the Northwest and their adaptations to local conditions can be found in Cornelius Groot and L. Margolis' *Pacific Salmon Life Histories* (University of British Columbia Press, 1991).

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