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WEEKEND BREAK

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V O C A B U L A R Y

It's HUGE! Words are GREAT!

To handle a language skillfully is to practice a kind of evocative sorcery
 — Charles Baudelaire

By **GAIL HENRIKSON**
The Daily Astorian

Recent events have focused my ears on the fact that American discourse is rapidly sinking into an inky sea of inanity. It is not only that our discussions center on accusations and deflections, but also that our vocabulary has become pedestrian at best, and meaningless at worst.

We are becoming a nation of superlatives. Everything is the best, the greatest, the biggest — words that only allow the world to be seen in black and white, with no distinguishing shades of gray. Superlatives do not allow for nuance or complexity. Superlatives do not encourage us to read between the lines and to understand what is not being said.

Social media may be partly to blame for this. After all, limiting yourself to 140 characters is not particularly conducive to the use of multi-syllabic words and refinement.

Everyone has a vocabulary. Linguistic limberness, like a fit physique, can only be achieved through continuous training. In order to flex and grow our lexicon muscles, we must find ways to incorporate a variety of words into our daily discussion diet.

To that end, I proffer some everyday scenarios where we can begin to exercise our wordsmithing skills — think of it as the Jane Fonda workout for the dialogue challenged.

As everyone secretly loves the shocking changes evinced by the infamous “Before and After” tabloid pictures, each scenario is similarly broken into two parts — “BV” or Before Vocabulary and “AV” After Vocabulary. If we routinely replace a simple word with a more nuanced or appropriate word in our daily conversations, our verbal musculature will begin to bulk up.

So, let’s momentarily set aside our smart phones, iDevices and other forms of electronic candy, and retrieve the thesaurus from underneath the leg of the dining room table.

Dining Out

BV Scenario: While eating pizza at your favorite restaurant, your server comes to your table and asks you how everything is. You reply, through a mouthful of spinach and pepperoni, “It’s great!”

This is not the type of response that is likely to get one a gig as a restaurant critic. It doesn’t address what makes this particular pizza “great.” Is it the subtle blend of herbs and spices in the sauce? Is it the artisanal charcuterie from a local, organic, and sustainable farm? Is it merely the taste versus price factor?

This is important feedback that your server has been tasked with obtaining. Simply telling him or her, in a poor imitation of Tony the Tiger, that it’s “grrrrreat” won’t assist the chef or enlighten the restaurant manager. Thus, the next time you find yourself in this situation, try out the AV



Circus strongmen

Submitted Photo Graphic

Scenario instead.

AV Scenario: Indicate to your server that you’ll address their question as soon as you have completed your mastication.

Upon swallowing, proclaim to your server that “The gastronomic delight embodied by this fine pizza far exceeds the monetary outlay that I will be required to produce.”

Another possible response might include adjectives such as “succulent,” “culinary,” “savory,” “epicurean” or “salivating.” Try it. I guarantee that your waitperson will immediately go back to the kitchen to convey your response.

Shopping

BV Scenario: A salesperson tells you that you look “absolutely awesome” in that dress. (For non-wearers of dresses, substitute your object of choice and be assured that the salesperson will tell you that it is “absolutely awesome”.)

Everyone has been cornered by an overly zealous retail clerk. This is to be expected,

because many work on commission and therefore have to close the sale in order to provide basic necessities. It is in their best economic interests to convince you that the item you are considering is not only THE BEST but, by association, it will also make you THE BEST.

If you buy this item, everything you touch thenceforth will turn to gold, your children will become prodigies and all your ex-spouses will suddenly pay all their back child support.

Don’t fall prey to that Madison Avenue incantation. Instead, consider responding to your retailing assistant with the following:

AV Scenario: “Do you have documentation to verify the claim(s) you have just asserted regarding the virtues of this item? If so, would you kindly produce them for my perusal? Also, do you realize that casual misrepresentation or overstatement of the qualities of this item may result in future litigation?”

This finely crafted message will induce

your salesperson to quickly locate another patron to assist, leaving you in relative peace to ponder the wisdom of your potential purchase.

In the Workplace*

*Although entitled “In the Workplace” this scenario is equally suited for educational institutions, or, indeed, any situation which requires action in response to a directive from a figure of authority.

BV Scenario: At one point or another during our lives, most of us will likely encounter an employer who insists on tasking us with an assignment that is mind-numbingly mundane, pointless or both. These projects are often prefaced with phrases such as “Oh boy, do I have a job for you” or “Your mission, should you choose to accept it . . .”

We often meekly accept such tasks, because we have either been raised to not question authority, or we have learned in the school of hard knocks that resistance is futile. There is, however, an alternative path — thanks to the power of a strong vocabulary.

AV Scenario: Rather than grudgingly and dutifully undertaking said assignment, why not engage your employer in a discussion about the logic of the request.

For example: “That is certainly an intriguing assignment. However, in order for me to provide a final product that will positively reflect on your status as a leader and mentor, could you please explain how this task will increase the long-term resiliency, sustainability and fiduciary health of this organization.”

It is extremely critical that the above be politely stated with a very straight face and a slight hint of concern in your voice. At this point, your employer will likely launch into a corporate-speak diatribe, comparable in enjoyment to a Vagon poetry reading.

Alternatively, they may be so impressed with your erudition and obvious concern for the success of the company that a promotion is sure to be imminent.

Note: Each individual should carefully consider the possible ramifications of this course of action prior to proceeding.

All jesting aside, it is imperative that we remember that words have the ability to change a situation. We have all heard the phrase “The pen is mightier than the sword”. That power stems from the subtle, sometimes bordering on subliminal, connotations that words carry.

Marketers understand this. Careers can be destroyed because of a poorly turned phrase or inappropriate choice of words.

Unlike wealth, however, language does not belong to the 1 percent. We have the ability, and the right, to reclaim and elevate language. We need to become vocal about vocabulary.

Gail Henrikson is happily and gainfully employed as an ad designer at The Daily Astorian. In addition to previous contributions to the paper, her poetry has been published as part of the Hoffman Center’s Word and Image project; in the North Coast Squid and Rain magazine. She is the proud owner of two thesauri and several dictionaries.

