

Commonplace reflections: ‘Do we need a table glove?’ The glorious world of misheard and mispronounced words

Bill Gent

For generations, particular people – for a variety of reasons – have kept notebooks in which they write and record poems, thoughts, proverbs and sayings etc. Anything, in fact, that takes their fancy. Some of these collections have been published; others have been used by writers as a source of ideas and recollections. In literary circles, such notebooks go by the technical name of ‘commonplace books’. Bill Gent has kept his own commonplace ‘book’ – beginning as cards and a variety of notebooks, but now digitised (and running at 56,000 words) – since the later 1960s. When asked to write a short, reflective piece, he will sometimes turn to his commonplace book for inspiration.

In his mid-nineteenth-century volume *Sesame and Lilies*, the English art critic and aesthete John Ruskin suggested that there were at that time ‘masked words’ abounding in Europe that wore ‘chameleon cloaks’ in that they changed their meaning according to the speaker. Fair point, perhaps (and one that we’ve probably been acutely aware of during the exhausting period of Brexit). But, on the other hand, let’s never assume that words have immutable, fixed meanings. Words and their meanings evolve, come in and out of fashion, disappear. And, the ‘misuse’ and mishearing of words, I want to suggest, can be both very amusing and sometimes fill us with an unexpected wisp of joy.

Like yours, perhaps, my own family tradition includes tales of how certain young family members bravely attempted to verbalise breathtakingly difficult ‘new’ words. I remember my paternal grandfather, born towards the end of the nineteenth century in a Durham mining village, telling us a story against himself about a memorable episode at elementary school. Reading out loud in class was a strong feature of classroom practice in those days, of course, and his turn came to read out a passage about French history. All went well until he reached an important person’s name that foxed him. So, he gave it a go: ‘NAP-OH-LEEN BONNE-APP-ERTY’ (i.e. ‘Napoleon Bonaparte’).

A generation later, his son (my father, born in 1918) faced a similar verbal dilemma when, in a scripture lesson at school, he was asked to read out loud. All well and good until he reached the word ‘psalm’. Again, in true Gent spirit, he gave it a go. The result: SPLASHM.

Skipping on several generations, I was recently laying the table with my nine-year-old granddaughter. While I was raiding the cutlery drawer, she asked me whether we needed a ‘table glove’ for the meal. I paused, I smiled. ‘A what?’ I asked. ‘Table glove,’ she repeated. When I explained to her that the ‘proper’ term was ‘table cloth’, she was both surprised and amused (and guess what we now refer to a table cloth as?). It reminded me of all the other words that, over the years, my two granddaughters had either mispronounced or misheard. For example: ‘ossopite’ (opposite), ‘burgerqueue’ (barbecue), ‘mapless’ (atlas), ‘psgetti’ (spaghetti) and ‘lightling’ (‘lightning’).

Several years ago, the BBC Radio 4 programme *Word of Mouth* devoted a whole programme to words invented by children. Three examples were: ‘I’m not allowed to say square words’ (i.e. ‘swear words’), ‘Dalek bread’ (‘garlic bread’) and ‘I love this house: it’s full of crooks and nannies’ (‘nooks and crannies’).

I am sure that you will be able to think of your own family examples, too. (And, of course, some of these neologisms stick as family members’ pet nicknames.)

And so too in the world of religion, the ‘wrong words’ often seem so much better than the unadulterated originals. What about the young church-going American girl who asked her new friend, ‘And what abomination [i.e. ‘denomination’] does your family belong to?’ From the history of British classrooms, there are so many more examples of young children’s attempts to make sense of the puzzling world of grown-up words. So, with the Lord’s Prayer, ‘Lead us not into temptation’ became ‘Lead us not into Thames Station’ and the Christmas carol ‘We Three Kings of Orient Are’ became ‘We Three Kings of Quarry and Tar’.

You must have your own tales from your classroom experiences. From my early days of teaching RE, I remember marking some Year 9 test papers that included a question about the Five Pillars of Islam. In his answer, one of my most talented and interested pupils – Stephen – turned in a fine answer on ‘the five pillows of Islam’. As a young teacher, that certainly gave me something to sleep on!

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