

THE^{^A}
DICTIONARY
OF MODERN
CONSTERNATION



BROOK McCLURG

PERMAFROST PRIZE SERIES

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If word meanings do exist, they do not exist as a checklist. The numbered lists of definitions found in dictionaries have helped to create a false picture of what happens when language is used.

Vagueness and redundancy—features that are not readily compatible with a checklist theory—are important design features of natural language, which must be taken into account when doing serious natural language processing. Words are so familiar to us, such an everyday feature of our existence, such an integral and prominent component of our psychological makeup, that it's hard to see what mysterious, complex, vague-yet-precise entities meanings are.

PATRICK HANKS, lexicographer for Oxford English Dictionaries and author of *Do Word Meanings Exist?* (2000)



No dictionary of a living tongue ever can be perfect, since, while it is hastening to publication, some words are budding, and some falling away.

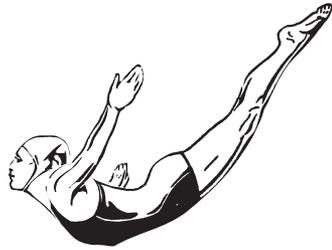
SAMUEL JOHNSON, Preface to *Dictionary of the English Language* (1755)

The^A Dictionary of Modern Consternation

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A



ABRACADABRA: A word to conjure by. Because words have magical powers.

Because we become blind, to magic and power both, through frequency. Because in our modern moment, we can be disappeared through words, sawed in half, handcuffed, drowned; or, conversely, reappeared, mended, released, and reborn. Because this incantation was once believed to make diseases go away. Like all magic, it requires belief.

ACCOMMODATIONS: That an ideal world makes room for us all.

ADVERTORIAL: An ad in an article's costume, a ruse, somewhere between product placement and propaganda—and, for a brief time, my job.

AGREEMENT, USER: Less agreement than imposed requirement to partake in aspects of modern life offered under the guise of choice. To pick one's poison when not picking isn't an option.¹

AGREE TO DISAGREE (PHRASE): A statement of entrenched position. Nonagreement.

AI: You've chosen to begin a human-simulated interaction. Your scheduled human interaction will begin shortly. Please read the following prompt to calibrate your settings and maximize the human experience. Sorry, I can't understand you. Please interact in Broadcast English or reload THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE program with your appropriate regional dialect patch. Please upgrade your program. Sorry, that program is no longer supported. Sorry, your region is not recognized, sorry your platform overlay is disabled, and I hate to bring this up when you have so much going on, but your connection—to all things, really—is unstable.

ALGORITHM: A non-neutral party.

ALL-PURPOSE: Indicator that the solution will be specifically good for none.

ALL THINGS BEING EQUAL (PHRASE): They're not, even in this intellectual exercise.

ANTIBIOTIC RESISTANCE: Coming soon!

¹ Alexa is the name of the disembodied woman who moved in with my family, late 2019, against my wishes. Sarah, my wife—a term that she prefers over partner, incidentally, though that is indeed what we are—thinks it will make things easier for us. Mainly, our new guest plays music while we are busy about tasks in various parts of the house. I worry about the government, but not in any serious way. Just a vague apprehension, really. Alexa, play Americana, she instructs. My son wants to know more about our new houseguest. At five, he is mainly worried about her emotional well-being. Alexa, do you have friends? he asks.

She only hears him when addressed properly. No, that can't be right. She must hear him all the time, I'm almost certain that we've agreed to this, somewhere; still, she only answers him when she feels sufficiently addressed. My son is still young enough that he has a lisp and a Boston accent that can't be explained geographically. It does mean, however, that she can't always understand him. It frustrates him to repeat himself, but he persists in the face of her obstinacy. Where are her legs, exactly, he wants to know, and Alexa, do you like rainbows?

ANXIETY: Primary feeling of the time.

APATHY EVALUATION SCALE (AEP): Because a simple questionnaire can determine it.²

APATHY MOTIVATION INDEX (AMI): Because all apathy is built the same. Also, potentially, a de-motivating scale. Is critiquing the scale itself an apathetic act?

ARTIFICIAL PERSONAS: But what if being artificial is my persona?

ASTHMA: Breathlessness evokes something so much sexier than wheezing, but lately, moments that take my breath seem more likely comprised of particulate matter and other toxic debris than beauty, awe, or physical touch.

ASTRAL PLANE: The longing for another place, like this one, but not.³

² For each statement, circle the answer that best describes the subject's thoughts, feelings, and activity in the past four weeks.

I am interested in things:

NOT AT ALL

SLIGHTLY

SOMEWHAT

A LOT

³ As far as relationship deals go, you could make a worse one: I'd go anywhere in the world she wanted to teach, and then we would go wherever I got into school. That's how we ended up in Kuwait, then New York City, then Philly. That's why we are in Texas now. That, and a global economic collapse. That, and us both getting laid off. That, and losing the house we'd bought due to the recession. That and, that and . . .

We say *lost* the house, like it's beneath the rug or in an unexplored couch crevice, comforted by the distancing statement. Truth be told, we probably could have kept it if we just agreed to live on the knife's blade of over-extended risk for longer than the future seemed. We'd purchased a home in a neighborhood that was described as "could be great one day" but apparently wasn't yet. Not gentrification—revitalization! They say the bottom fell out then, a phrase in which a complex matrix of banking, gambling, and nonregulation hides. And we felt trapped in that way you can early in a career and a marriage. We were passing each other at the airport so often we'd just leave a car there for the other. That life required something of us that we were increasingly unwilling to give. We were considering breaking under the strain of it.

ASTROTURFING: Masking the sponsors of a specific messaging strategy. Notably, this book is a messaging strategy without a sponsor.

ATAVISTIC: The rising feeling that we are missing something that is, in fact, behind us; interconnectedness, on a gene-network level.

ATTENTION ECONOMY: I'm spent, busted, broke, and running a deficit.

ATTENTION-SEEKING BEHAVIOR: The only thing more cringeworthy than watching it happen is the awareness that you've done worse. Allegedly.

AUTHORITARIANISM: How will we know when we've arrived? Asking for a friend.



AUTOCORRECT: A technological anticipation. Really good at auto; rarely good at correct.⁴

AXIS OF EVIL: Cartographic justification for war: if a place is wrong, the people, too, must be wrong.

⁴ Perhaps a dictionary is a form of societal autocorrect, a means to keep the language of the people in line—and with language also their actions—at least in the prescriptive versions from which they originate. But instead of being chided by a red squiggle beneath a word, or some other textual prompt, it is more recently your know-it-all cousin or a frenemy from work passing along something they read once, in judgment.

This won't be that. Indeed, this can't be that. I am no linguist. I'm just one obsessed with a verbal undertow; the invisible power of words. Someone who twitches every time they pay a convenience fee or accept a user agreement under some form of low-level psychic duress; someone who laughs when discerning hidden meanings in particular usages, perks at their origins. Languages live and in living they change. There will be no argument from me on a line to hold.

I don't speak proper, nor often wish to, but it wasn't until I learned to that I could actually choose.

Sometimes, in academia, my own verbiage or linguistic fill-ins cause others/me to cringe. I code-switch like crazy. I get my connectors crossed. But I don't want to change, if I'm honest. I see, too often, how language is used to make others feel small when all I want is for it to be a door to a room with some seats by a fire, where words open us up, make us whole. Where they articulate the hidden corners of our hearts. So that by articulating, we can make all of the hard parts bearable.

My only wish is to pause long enough to consider words in this moment, how they affect us, how the leach and bleed of specialized language can draw us in as consumers, workers, bots, and push us away as people.

I never set out to write a dictionary; perhaps I've been successful in at least that regard. But I'm fascinated by what it means to live in this time; words like *post* and *fatigue* prick at my insides with each new iteration. After a long history, after so many advancements that were meant to ease our lives, we are after the development of the most complex societal tools in the most literate societies ever known. We are after so much, and we are tired. Exhausted, really.