



# IS IT TRUE?

The facts behind  
the things we have been told

Author of *Who Said That First?*

# MAX CRYER

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# Acknowledgements

## The author thanks:

Geoffrey Pooch, Emma Sloman, Paul Barrett, Ian Watt, Graeme & Valerie Fisher, Robbie Ancel and Steve Jennings.

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# Introduction

Go, said the bird, for the leaves were full of children,

Hidden excitedly, containing laughter.

Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind

Cannot bear very much reality...

'Burnt Norton', T.S. Eliot

There comes a time, somewhere towards the end of childhood, when concepts previously believed to be true are gradually revealed as illusory. It isn't Santa Claus who brings presents or the tooth fairy who leaves money under your pillow...

But the capacity to believe survives these early reality-checks, and into adulthood many people accept what they have been told without examination. Several generations have been surrounded by advertising claims that beauty creams will banish wrinkles (they won't), that punch-n-grow hair transplanting isn't visible (it is), that a pill will make you slim (it doesn't), and that reality television shows are not contrived (they are).

But it's not just advertising. Besides the persuasive glamour that credit-card advertising offers without ever mentioning the payments required later, the capacity to believe has stayed in place from the time Grandma passed on something she'd been told by her grandmother ... and there is a strong fibre in the human DNA to believe whatever explanation one was told first. Alas, Grandma has sometimes been given doubtful information by her own grandmother, and one thing tends to lead to another.

Many people are convinced that the Bible is the origin of Herod's stepdaughter Salome dancing with her seven veils, when actually the Bible doesn't give her any name at all—and never mentions anything about veils. The world's pre-eminent rugby trophy is called the William Webb Ellis Cup—but there is no proof that Webb Ellis had anything to do with rugby. Many people have followed what human nature tends to do: they believe what they were told first.

Sometimes a familiar concept gains several widely differing explanations over time, not one of which can be actually *proven*. Several people will tell you quite different reasons for the origin of, for example: the whole nine yards; how the word 'cocktail' came into use; no room to swing a cat; the behaviour of brass monkeys in the cold; how the word 'Yankees' came about; who was the real McCoy (or was it McKay?). These have multiple 'explanations', each of which is believed by one group of people and scorned by those who believe one of the other stories.

On another level, there are often concepts and beliefs which somehow have become misbeliefs, but the original truth, when brought forward, may prove to be something of a surprise. Evidence shows that King Canute knew perfectly well that he could not command the tide. And when Queen Victoria's granddaughter asked her when she had said 'We are not amused', Her Majesty Grandma replied that she'd never said it.

The line can be very wobbly between what we are told, what we believe, and what is the fact. Oscar Wilde wrote of Lady Bracknell: 'She is a monster without being a myth – which is rather unfair!' In the hit musical *Wicked*, author Gregory Maguire has the Wizard of Oz say: 'The truth isn't a thing of

fact, or reason. It's simply what everyone agrees on.' That may be fine for a (fictional) Wizard, but not everyone thinks that way.

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In 1949, American writer Dorothy M. Johnson's story 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Vallance' introduced the character of a newspaper editor whose credo was: 'If the myth gets bigger than the man, print the myth.' For the 1962 movie of Ms Johnson's story, screenwriters James Warner Bellah and Willis Goldbeck adapted her line to: 'When the legend becomes fact, print the legend.'

But some of us don't follow that credo. Printing a legend certainly doesn't make it a fact...

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# The Things We Say

## ‘Just deserts’

*‘Just deserts’ means someone got what was due to them.*

Yes, it does—so long as you don’t say ‘desserts’, or rather spell it that way when you write it down (some people do). In the real expression, ‘deserts’ is the noun from the verb ‘to deserve’, so the person should be getting what they deserve. Not ‘desserts’—that’s a sweet pudding.

## ‘Curry favour’

*To ‘curry favour’ means to please someone with your cooking.*

Not at all. That curry has nothing to do with vindaloo, no matter how expert. It actually refers to currycombing a horse ... but not just any horse: this was a fictional horse in fourteenth-century France. His name was Fauvel, and he was believed to have mystical magic powers—and also an occasional bad streak. He was owned by a French Member of Parliament, a man of considerable influence. So, to keep on the right side of the Member, there was a constant chain of people offering to curry the horse and groom him with curry-combs, to make him feel good—thus pleasing both the horse and the MP, who was inclined to show favour to people who had been attentive to the horse. Over the following hundred years, the image of the horse Fauvel being curried and groomed—resulting in good things for the groomer—drifted into English, and very conveniently the name ‘Fauvel’ modified into the word ‘favour’: to curry favour!



## OK

*‘OK’ is an all-American expression.*

Amidst major scholarly confusion, the origin of the expression ‘OK’ has been variously assigned to several different languages and dialects: French, German, Greek, Finnish, Haitian, Senegalese, Choktaw Indian, Gambian, Ligerian and Burmese. Each of those cultures has a word in their local language which they equate with ‘OK’. Scottish people will say they’ve used it for centuries (och aye!). And there’s more: besides those above, there have also been nine *other* explanations arising from various usages and abbreviations in English.

But while other cultures may say ‘OK’ and acknowledge its origin somewhere within their own history, the first known printing of the term in an English-speaking context was tracked down by language researcher Allen Read, who found it in the *Boston Morning Post* of March 1839. This was during a craze of the 1830s for amusing abbreviations and catchy word use—such as ‘ISBD’ (‘it shall be done’) and ‘SP’ (‘small potatoes’)—a somewhat similar practice to the use of text-messaging today.

abbreviations which arose in a future century. Within that framework, the *Morning Post*'s editor Charles Gordon Greene, wrote the article in 1839 in which he used 'OK'. It was about a jokey club called the Anti-Bell-Ringing Society ... known as ABRS. While Charles Greene's article did not explain the abbreviation ABRS, he did use the expression OK, and explained that as 'meaning *correct*'—a deliberately jokey mis-spelling.

Soon after this first known publication, there was an American presidential election, in which it was noticed that President Van Buren had been born in a village called Kinderhook. And since he was 57 when standing for re-election, the existing expression 'OK' morphed into the nickname Old Kinderhook for Van Buren. The abbreviated version of this nickname, OK, was used as part of his presidential campaign, and a club was opened called the OK Club.

The publicity of OK being associated with Martin van Buren settled into the wider American language from 1840 onwards, meaning 'all is well'. Later, a rumour surfaced about President Van Buren's predecessor, Andrew Jackson. A scurrilous story was circulated that, since he couldn't spell properly, he had marked Presidential papers with 'O.K.' because he really thought it meant 'Orl Kurrec'. But in 2011, after meticulous research, language expert Professor Allan Metcalf published *OK: The Improbable Story of America's Greatest Word*, which presented irrefutable evidence that President Jackson, who was a qualified barrister and judge, never wrote any such thing. So 1839 nails down OK's being first seen in print in English, courtesy of Charles Gordon Greene in Boston, and from there on it blossomed through association with 'Old Kinderhook' (and not through any earlier use by earlier President Andrew Jackson).



In time, the term became firmly established in the English language worldwide, although the other claimants—France, Germany, Scotland, etc.—had been using their own version for many years before in their languages.

So who actually invented it? Settle for the same solution as Agatha Christie did in *Murder on the Orient Express*: they all did it.

## Political correctness

*'Political correctness' was invented by the feminist movement.*

The term came into common use during the rise of 'feminism', but its origin dates back to over a century earlier. In those earlier times there was little or no connection with careful choice of inoffensive language.

Lawyer and jurist James Wilson (appointed by President George Washington as the Supreme Court's first Associate Justice) used the term in 1793, meaning to identify that which was in line with prevailing political thought or policy:

The states, rather than the people, for whose sake the states exist, are frequently the objects which attract and arrest our principal attention ... 'The United States,' instead of the 'People of the United States,' is the toast given. This is not politically correct.

The first recorded use in the twentieth century was in 1912 in Senator Robert La Follette's autobiography, where again he associates 'political' with 'correct' as an absolutely literal descriptive

of prevailing administrative policy: 'In those days we did not so much get correct political and economic views...'. But a slow change was taking place, and towards the second half of the twentieth century, 'political correctness' gradually eased away from actual politics, and became the province of sensitive vocabulary.

Defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'political correctness' is:

Conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion, esp. on social matters, in the avoidance of anything, even established vocabulary, that may conceivably be construed as discriminatory or pejorative.

By 1986 the abbreviation 'PC' was in use and in print, and a long list of substitutions was replacing hitherto commonly used terms: Chairman became 'chairperson' or just 'the chair'; firemen became 'firefighters'; airline stewardesses were replaced by 'flight attendants'; Miss and Mrs can now both be 'Ms'; crippled became 'disabled'. Blind people are 'visually impaired'; mental retardation can be 'special needs'; Negroes are 'African Americans'; and Hispanics became 'Latino'. Total confusion reigns over Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese and Vietnamese, who instead of their former classification as Orientals are now called 'Asians', whereas Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshi, Thai and Sri Lankans, who are also from Asia, are left in some sort of limbo.

The formerly common 'I now pronounce you man and wife' is sometimes replaced by the less divisive 'I now pronounce you husband and wife'. And with the growing legal acceptance of same-sex couples, gender reference can be eliminated altogether so that the decree is simply: 'I now pronounce you a married couple'. Some editions of the Bible have replaced 'brothers' with 'people', and amended 'God's right hand' to 'mighty hand'—lest 'right' offended left-handed people. The signature line from *Star Trek*, 'To boldly go where no man has gone before', was gently morphed into 'where no one has gone before'. In many circumstances 'Christmas' has been evaded—so as not to offend non-Christians—and is replaced by 'holiday', even 'holiday trees'.

With a preference for non-gender allocation, some actresses now prefer to be known as actors (which cuts their chance of an Oscar for Best Supporting Actor in half—since there would no longer be two categories!).



## SOS

*The SOS signal means 'Save Our Souls'—and the Titanic was the first to use it.*

'SOS' doesn't actually mean anything. It was established as an international distress signal by an agreement made between the British Marconi Society and the German Telefunken organisation at the Berlin Radio Conference, 3 October 1906.

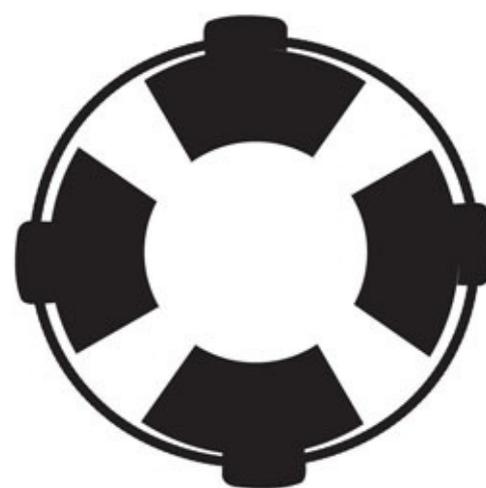
The Morse SOS was devised as a continuous signal of three-dits-three-dahs-three-dits without a break, devised as an easy sequence to remember. The signal was formally introduced on 1 July 1908 but not actually used until nearly a year later.

The choice of signal had no intention of representing any catch-phrase, though English speakers 'interpreted' the sequence SOS as an abbreviation of 'Save Our Souls' or 'Save Our Ship'. This was creative thinking to enhance a simple sound formula. (In the German language, 'SOS' does not represent the initials of 'Save Our Souls'.)

Prior to 1908, the signal for ships in distress had been devised by the Marconi company and the call was 'CQD', which was supposed to mean 'All Stations Urgent' but was popularly misinterpreted in English as 'Come Quick—Danger' or 'Come Quickly Down'.

The first-ever radio distress signal was 'CQD', and was placed in 1899 when the merchant vessel *Elbe* ran aground on the Goodwin Sands. The message was received by the radio operator on duty at the South Foreland Lighthouse, who was able to summon the aid of the Ramsgate lifeboat.

There has long been a belief that the *Titanic* was the first vessel to use the SOS signal after it was introduced in 1908, but according to maritime researcher Patrick Robertson this is a myth. Robertson nominates the first known use of SOS three years before the sinking of the *Titanic* ... in June 1909 when the *SS Slavonia* was in distress the North Atlantic, off the coast of Portugal.



## Dialogue

*A dialogue is when two people are talking.*

No, that's a *duo* logue. A *mono* logue is one person talking and a *dia* logue is a group of people talking—giving out information, conversing, discussing or exchanging ideas.

## Xmas

*In modern times, writing 'Xmas' is debasing the word 'Christmas'.*

Not at all, it is completely valid and not in the least disrespectful. The word 'Christ' was never part of Jesus' name—it is a title meaning 'the anointed one', or in other words 'the messiah'. In ancient Greece the letter *chi* was written with a symbol (X) which is very like a modern 'X', and the title assigned to Jesus—*Xristos*—was frequently abbreviated to just 'X'. So 'Xmas' can be translated as 'the mass for the anointed messiah.' The form 'Xmas' has been used in English (without disrespect) since 1551.

## Gild the lily

*The Bible tells us not to 'gild the lily'.*

Not so. An often-held impression is that the Bible says a lily is beautiful enough without any need for gilding. But the line doesn't come from the Bible, which never mentions gilding lilies. It comes close in Luke 12:27 when pointing out:

See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labour or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these.

But the closer source of the common saying appears to be a modified version of Lord Salisbury's line in Shakespeare's *King John*, speaking of unnecessarily modifying that which doesn't really need it:

To gild refined gold, to paint the lily,

To throw a perfume on the violet,  
To smooth ice, or add another hue  
Unto the rainbow, or with taper-light  
To seek the beautiful eye of heaven to garnish,  
Is wasteful and ridiculous excess. ( *King John* 4:2)



Somehow the Shakespearean image of ‘painting’ a lily and ‘gilding’ real gold became melded together in people’s minds—and then associated with Luke’s reporting that lilies don’t toil or spin.

## Son of a bitch

*John Wayne originated the insult ‘son of a bitch’ in the movie True Grit.*

He may have helped make it famous, but the insult long precedes John Wayne. A version of the term was known as early as 1606 and it may have been in use earlier. But its publicly used ancestor can be found in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* when the Earl of Kent describes Oswald the steward as:

nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch. ( *King Lear* 2:2)



## ‘Don’t change horses in mid-stream’

*The expression ‘Don’t change horses in mid-stream’ was invented by Abraham Lincoln.*

Alas, no. Mr Lincoln certainly said it in 1864 (he actually said ‘it is not best to swap horses while crossing the river’), but the saying was folklore long before that, and had been in print over 20 years earlier.

The *New Hampshire Sentinel* reported on 9 February 1840 that:

Mr. Hamer was very instrumental in bringing the meeting to his mind, by making a short speech, in the course of which he introduced the following anecdote:

‘An Irishman, (said Mr. Hamer) in crossing a river in a boat, with his mare and colt, was thrown into the river, and clung to the colt’s tail. The colt showed signs of exhaustion, and a man on shore told him to leave the colt and cling to the mare’s tail. “Och! fa honey! this is no time to swap horses,” was his reply.’

## Caesarean section

*A ‘Caesarean section’ birth is so called because Julius Caesar was born that way.*

There is serious doubt. The *Oxford Dictionary* (1993) covers itself by saying that the term comes ‘from the story that Julius Caesar was so delivered’. *Encyclopedia Britannica* takes a different tack, saying that the word ‘caesarean’ (sometimes nowadays ‘cesarean’) is the name of an ancient Roman family which Pliny the Elder claimed had originated from a birth incident giving rise to the nickname *caedere/caeso*—to cut. But some believe that this also is a ‘story’.

The operation of removing an unborn child by invasive surgery was certainly an acknowledged

practice long before Julius. Ancient Jewish law forbade the burying of a live child within a dead mother—which would be violating the sanctity of life—so the child was excised, post-mortem. In ancient Rome, a law stated that the child of a mother dead in childbirth must be surgically removed, and similarly a woman in an extended pregnancy—say 10 months—must be delivered surgically of her baby, since it was believed she would not survive the normal birth procedure.



An emperor of India is recorded to have been born similarly c.320BC, after his mother died in pregnancy.

Unfortunately, to modern eyes the primitive methods of surgery, infection control and dealing with haemorrhaging made it unlikely that a living pregnant woman would survive the invasive surgery, and it was extremely rare that one did.

This tends to throw further doubt on whether Julius Caesar was delivered by C-section. Not only there no record of its having happened, but also his mother, Aurelia, who was 20 years old when Julius was born (100BC), lived on until she was 66!

## Thomas Crapper

*The word ‘crap’ is derived from Thomas Crapper, who invented flush toilets.*

There is no connection. The English word ‘crap’ (generally designated as slang) was in use 300 years before Thomas Crapper was born. It comes originally from an old French word *crape* meaning ‘siftings’, which moved into English as ‘crappe’, meaning things not wanted and discarded: chaff and trodden-on grain, weeds growing in crops, dregs from beer, and—eventually—excrement.

What’s more, despite folklore, Thomas Crapper did not invent the flush toilet. Ancient civilisations had versions of them in the centuries BC. An early one in England was put together by Sir John Harrington in 1596. He made two—one for his own house, and one for his godmother, Queen Elizabeth I. Sir John called his invention the ‘Ajax’—a word play on the slang term ‘jakes’, which meant lavatory. One legacy of his invention is that etymologists believe the slang term ‘the john’ originated with the sixteenth-century jocular use of his name to mean the toilet.



Although Thomas Crapper (1837–1910) did not invent the flush toilet, he did invent the ballcock mechanism system to fill the toilet tanks. His plumbing firm, Thomas Crapper and Co., did contribute a great deal to the popularity and spread of flush-toilet usage, and his name appeared on much of his manufactured product. He promoted the world’s first bath, toilet and sink showroom. But the name of Thomas Crapper has no connection either with the old word ‘crap’ or with ‘sanitary plumbing’. The name ‘Crapper’ is a variation of the thirteenth-century ‘occupational’ name Cropper.

## Decimate

*‘Decimated’ means ‘considerable devastation’.*

Well, not exactly. The word derives from *decem*, which is Latin for ‘10’. When a quantity of things ‘decimated’ it means that 1 out of every 10 is lost or destroyed.

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## Blue blood

*Aristocratic people and royals are believed to have blue blood.*

Everyone’s blood is the same colour, regardless of their social station.

The concept of special people having a special colour of blood originated in Spain as *sangre azul*—‘blue blood’. In centuries past, some areas of Spain became home to many people of Arabic or Moroccan descent, and racial mixtures produced families whose skin was darker than that of people of pure Spanish blood. Along with that, there was a resistance from rich people, especially indolent rich people, ever to expose themselves to the harsh summer sun. Spain has very hot summers, and those who had to work outdoors to keep themselves fed and housed grew to be swarthy-looking. Grandiose people didn’t like this look, and went to a great deal of trouble to keep themselves out of the sun and keep their skin as pale as possible.

Skins which are very pale show the blood vessels beneath with a faintly blue tinge, but a darker skin precludes the blueness showing. Hence, Spanish people who (a) were rich enough never to have to work in the hot sun, and (b) were of pure Spanish descent, without any racial mix, were proud of their pale skin, through which faintly bluish veins showed.

So the description ‘blue blood’ arose in Europe to describe people of unmixed European ancestry who did not have to work on farms or building roads. And the expression grew and widened to indicate people of a privileged class.



## Ten-gallon hat

*The name of a 10-gallon hat is self-explanatory.*

It’s a nickname rather than a name ... and far from self-explanatory.

Stetson hats were originally made from beaver-fur felt which effectively repelled moisture. When Alonzo Megargee’s appealing painting ‘*Last Drop from His Stetson*’ showed a cowboy holding a Stetson hat full of water from which his horse was thirstily drinking, the image was used to advertise Stetsons from 1924 onwards. The style of hat became associated with ‘cowboy culture’ and movies thereof, and the expression ‘10-gallon hat’ gradually grew from 1925. But the hats do not hold anywhere near 10 gallons and never have.



Etymologists have traced background connection with two language errors between American horsemen, and horsemen from Mexico—which caused the ‘10-gallon’ legend. Win Blevins

*Dictionary of the American West* points out that the Spanish word for 'braid' is *galón*. Mexican *vaqueros* often decorated their Stetson hats with colourful braids, as many as 10, thus a '10 *galón*' hat which American cowboys mis-heard as '10 gallons'. And, on the same language trail, the Mexican sometimes referred to their decorated hats with the Spanish expression '*tan galán*' ... Spanish for 'elegant'. Again, mis-heard as '10 gallons'.

It isn't clear which of the two Mexican expressions morphed into '10 gallons'—possibly a combination of both. But either way the story absolves Stetson from advertising an untruth: the company never said that its hats held 10 gallons and, despite the nickname, the hats never did.

## His name is mud

*The saying 'His name is mud' originated in America from Dr Samuel Mudd.*

It's much older. In England the word 'mud' was being used to refer to things that were worthless or polluting as early as the 1500s. By 1700 the word had been extended to apply to people, and a low-life could be described as 'mud'—meaning a fool or a thick-skulled fellow. Over the following century the practice of describing a useless person as 'mud' had extended to describe just the *name* of a person.

John Babcock's *Dictionary of Slang*, published in Britain in 1823, has the expression 'his name is mud'. With the association of mud as being something worthless, its being attached to someone's name indicates that the person's behaviour has caused their name to represent something not desirable or reliable.

In 1865 Abraham Lincoln was shot by a man called John Wilkes Booth, and during the incident John Booth broke a leg, which was later treated by Dr Samuel Mudd. Many people interpreted this as treasonable—since Booth was party to an assassination—and as a result of Dr Mudd helping Booth afterwards, he was initially convicted of being a conspirator. Because of this, there is a vague belief (in America) that the expression 'his name is mud' originated because of the reputation of the infamous Dr Mudd.

But alas, no. The expression 'his name is mud' had been in use in England for a long time, and was published there over 40 years before the assassination of Lincoln and before anybody had ever heard of Dr Samuel Mudd.

## The @ sign

*The @ sign is called an 'ampersand'.*

This is a fairly frequent confusion, but is not true. 'Ampersand' is the name for the sign &, and is not connected to @ which in English doesn't seem to have a name at all.

Italian academics explain that the symbol has been around since at least the 1500s. In those days @ had a strong position in commerce, because grains and liquids were transported in jars which held a strictly measured amount. The jars were called *amphoras*, so the single letter 'a' signified goods to the weight or volume of one amphora jar, and the 'a' was written with Italian flourish—@. The sign eventually settled to mean 'at the price of', and was used that way in Europe and other countries for centuries. For example: '3 metres of fabric @ 500 lire per metre'.



The @ sign took a while to get onto typewriter keyboards, but it was there by 1880, and by the 1960s it began to be carried over to computers. Initially, electronic messages could only be sent between users of the same computer network. A symbol was needed to be the separator in messages between different networks. American technologist Ray Tomlinson devised a way of sending messages to users of other computers, but needed an ‘address’ which contained a trigger that was neither a recognisable letter nor a number. He examined a keyboard and settled on the @ symbol to separate the name of the user from the ‘computer address’ he was using. In 1972 he sent the first message in what is now known as email, and the @ symbol took on a whole new life. It has been so successful that even languages like Tamil, Japanese and Arabic have taken it aboard, despite not using Latin alphabet letters.

But what to call it still isn’t clear-cut. Most languages have their own version: Germans call it ‘spider monkey’; Danish, Norwegian and Swedish alternate between calling it ‘pig’s tail’ or ‘elephant trunk’. Finns call it ‘cat’s tail’, and in Hungarian it’s ‘worm’. In Israel it’s called ‘strudel’; French, Italians and Koreans call it a ‘snail’; and in Czechoslovakia it’s a word meaning ‘rolled-up herring’. The Greeks call it ‘little duck’, and the Russians call it ‘little dog.’

There are no rules about its name (except that it is not ‘ampersand’). English has turned out to be the most colourless—no elephants or rolled herrings or curly-tailed monkeys. In English it is just called ‘commercial at’ or ‘curly at’.

## Time immemorial

*‘Time immemorial’ is an indefinite period.*

It has drifted into meaning an indefinite period, but an ancient law actually defines the length of ‘immemorial’ time. It was originally entered into British law by a statute of Westminster in the year 1275. The statute decided to fix a time-limit for the bringing of certain legal actions, and that time limit was to be the reign of King Richard I. Anything which happened *before* then was said to have happened beyond legal memory—or in ‘time immemorial’. Richard I became King in 1189, so for many decades the strict meaning of the phrase time immemorial was anything before 1189. If you wanted to bring a legal action about something, it had to be something that had happened after that date.

Over the centuries, the legal aspect has faded away and the meaning has expanded somewhat, so that when people say ‘since time immemorial’ they mean that something has been in existence for a very long time. And when they say ‘until time immemorial’ they mean way into the future.

## ‘Flogging a dead horse’

*‘Flogging a dead horse’ means pointless activity—a horse is past its use-by date by then!*

True. But the expression seems to have crept into the language in



quite a different way—namely, referring to a person who had been paid for something in advance, and then spent the proceeds unwisely. In this form, it can be found in Richard Brome's play *The Antipodes*, first performed in 1638:

A country gentleman that fell mad—for spending of his land before he sold it;  
'Twas sold to pay his debts—all went that way for a dead horse, as one would say!

There is also a strong connection with a sea-going use of the term along the same line—spending money unwisely. Admiral Smyth's very comprehensive *Sailor's Word Book* (1867) explains this as:

When seamen ashore were engaged to be a ship's crew, before setting sail they were paid in advance for a month's work. Immediately they would spend that money.

Then when joining the ship and setting sail, for the whole of the first month the men had the (fairly unreasonable) feeling that that month's work was 'without pay'—it was a 'dead horse' month. At the end of this pre-paid month when normal wages re-start, the crew would make an effigy of a horse, drag it around the deck and cast it into the sea. The dead horse has been flogged.

Historian Alfred Simmons gives an excellent eye-witness account of exactly such a happening when he was a passenger on a sailing ship across the Pacific in 1879.

By then the expression was in use on land and in the public awareness. It surfaced in the British House of Parliament in 1859—Hansard records the term as having been used by the Earl of Wemyss. With rather more impact, it was employed in 1867 by MP John Bright, renowned orator (he coined the phrase 'Britain is the mother of Parliaments'). When Parliament dealing with the Reform Act seemed to be becoming bogged down, John Bright attempted to ignite the Members to more vigorous action by announcing that trying to get the matter activated was 'like flogging a dead horse and trying to make it pull a load'. Bright's speech, published in 1872, steered the now-common image when the term is used: that 'flogging a dead horse' refers to some project past its use-by date, or an activity which cannot result in any positive advance.



## The quick and the dead

*The 'quick and the dead' refers to those who move fast—and those who can't move at all.*

It's not quite that simple. In earlier centuries 'quick' in English meant 'alive'. It can be found as *cwif* as far back as the fourth century. Publications such as the King James Bible (1611) still use it with that meaning: 'Who shall give account to him that is ready to judge the quick and the dead' (1 Peter 4:3–5); and 'From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead' (the Apostles' Creed from the *Book of Common Prayer*). In both cases the reference is to judgment both on those who are living and those who have died.

But a slow change took place over many centuries, so that the image of being 'quick, full of life and lively' became associated with speed, and gradually the word 'quick' came to mean 'fast'.

It retains its old meaning in the biblical context, as above, and in rare uses such as:

- the quick of a fingernail—the tender fleshy live part which supports the dead nail itself
- quicksand—which 'moves' as if it has life, and

- the first movement of a baby within a mother's womb, the 'quickenings', meaning the fetus is demonstrating that it is alive.

Sometimes, the old meaning of 'quick' meaning 'alive' and the new meaning 'fast' seem to combine in a serendipitous way, such as with the 1959 western-outlaw movie *The Quick and the Dead*, which has the tagline: 'The quick and the dead—in this town you're either one or the other.'

## 'Going for a song'

*'Going for a song' means something valuable is available at a lower price.*

Curiously its historical origin was exactly the opposite.

The poem 'The Faerie Queene' was written by Elizabethan poet Edmund Spenser (left) to honour Queen Elizabeth I. Good Queen Bess was never one to swerve away from flattery, and Thomas Fuller reported in *Worthies of England* (1662) that she was so pleased with the poem that she ordered Spenser's effort be honoured in return with a gift of £100 to him, an enormous sum in the 1590s. On hearing about the Queen's wish, the Lord High Treasurer, Lord Burghley, exclaimed petulantly: 'What? All this for a song?' His remark was widely repeated and went into common usage, meaning a high payment for something of low value. Over the centuries, for no known reason, the term became both shortened and reversed in meaning—something valuable being offered at bargain price.



## 'Gone west'

*'Gone west' means broken or not working anymore—because daylight ends when the sun sets in the west.*

In its early days the expression didn't mean an unfavourable fate—quite the reverse. The expression emerged in 1851 when American journalist John Soule in Terre Haute, Indiana, wrote: 'Go West, young man and grow up with the country.' In the context of the time, it was intended as a message of hope—that enterprising folk should make their way west (in the United States) as pioneers and take up a new life of promise. So he didn't mean going west was heading for failure.

'Gone west' is still in use side-by-side with newer indications of failure and disaster: 'going south' (like a sales chart where the downward line indicates falling-off growth), and 'through the floor' opposed to 'through the roof'.

## Bimbo

*'Bimbo' is a slang term for an attractive young woman.*

Yes, in English it is; but unfortunately the word 'bimbo' actually means a young boy.

*Bimbo* is Italian, the abbreviation of the word *bambino*. The Italian language identifies the male gender by names ending in 'o' and the female by names ending in 'a' (for example, Mario and Maria).

Therefore a *bambino* is a boy and a *bimbo* is a little boy—as opposed to a *bambina* a girl, and a *bimbo* a little girl.

In 1964 Jim Reeves recorded a song called ‘Bimbo’, which was clearly about a little boy:

Bimbo is a little boy who’s got a million friends,  
And every time he passes by, they all invite him in.  
He’ll clap his hands and sing and dance, and talk his baby talk,  
With a hole in his pants and his knees a-stickin’ out,  
He’s just big enough to walk.

The catchy refrain helped the song become an international hit, and make Reeves a star:

Bimbo, Bimbo, where ya gonna go-ee-o  
Bimbo, Bimbo, whatcha gonna do-ee-o  
Bimbo, Bimbo, does your mommy know  
That you’re goin’ down the road to see a little girl-ee-o.

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But somehow, at least in English-speaking countries, the word ‘bimbo’ crossed the gender line (somewhat to the confusion of Italians). Someone even went to the trouble of inventing the word ‘himbo’ to indicate a young man, seemingly unaware that ‘bimbo’ already meant that.

## Onanism

*‘Onanism’ is a polite way of saying ‘masturbation’.*

The excuse for this doubtful definition is a belief that its provenance is the Holy Bible, where the reference to Onan’s seed is that ‘he spilled it on the ground’. However, closer examination of Genesis 38: 8–9 shows that when Onan’s brother died, Judah instructed Onan to marry the widow ‘and raise up seed to thy brother’. Onan did marry his brother’s widow, but was aware that he could not engender a son of his brother’s because any resulting child would be of his own seed. So: ‘it came to pass when he went in unto his brother’s wife, he spilled it on the ground’.

While ‘onanism’ is widely believed to be a euphemism for ‘masturbation’, the more logical meaning would be *coitus interruptus*.

A typically colourful Australian expression covers the same circumstance: ‘Getting off at Redfern’. The Redfern train station is the last one before Sydney Central, hence taking a journey but deliberately leaving the carriage before reaching the train’s ultimate destination. There is also a story told of a Londoner with a sense of humour who called his canary Onan ... because it spilled its seed upon the ground.

## ‘With bated breath’

*‘With baited breath’ means you’re waiting for something to happen and take the bait.*

It isn’t ‘baited’—it’s ‘bated’, which is short for ‘abated’, meaning ‘suppressed, becoming less’.

amount', such as 'By morning the storm had abated.' So 'bated breath' means less breath, suppressed breath. In other words 'holding your breath'. It's waiting with increased alertness for something happen—but more by holding your breath rather than by 'baiting' anything.

## Awesome

*'Awesome' means you like it, and 'awful' means you hate it.*

Theoretically, they mean the same thing: 'inspiring overwhelming, admiration, or dread'—in both cases being full of awe. Over time, application of the two terms has separated to opposing ends of meaning, so that 'awesome' is now used to mean 'inspiring admiration in the beholder' and 'awful' means 'inspiring dread in the beholder'.

## Scot-free

*'Scot-free' has the implication that Scots people are very careful with expenditure.*

Getting off 'scot-free' has nothing to do with Scotland; the term does not involve Scotland or Scottish people. In earlier centuries there was an English word in use—'scot'—which was originally a Scandinavian word meaning 'payment'. The word was used in English as the name for a kind of British municipal tax, which was levied on people and businesses in a proportionate way depending on values of property, etc. One way of describing the scot tax (slightly inaccurately) would be 'means test'.

In parts of Britain the tax was in force up to the 1830s. Some people who should have paid the scot were able to wiggle their way out of it and yet not break the law—what is now called 'tax avoidance'. These people were 'scot-free', and gradually the term took on a meaning of someone getting away with behaviour which was doubtful, and yet not being in any way held responsible.



## Posh

*'Posh' was how rich people sailed through the tropics—Port Out Starboard Home.*

This old 'belief' has been discounted, since nobody could find any evidence of shipping companies ever using such a booking system or the abbreviation which went with it, allowing passengers to be on the shady side of the ship during very hot areas en route. But the right characteristics of the word 'posh' as we know it were lurking in the background, already carrying a whiff of signifying 'a dandy'.

George and Weedon Grossmith's satirical serial stories *The Diary of a Nobody*, published in *Punch* in 1888–89, created characters whose names generally gave a clue to their image. One such was Murray Posh—described as 'a swell'. Then along came P.G. Wodehouse's 1903 *Tales of St. Austin* in which he echoes university slang of the era, and has a character say:

he wanted to know if my master allowed me to walk in the streets in that waistcoat—a remark which cut me to the quick, 'the waistcoat' being quite the most posh thing of the sort in Cambridge.

Early printing of the story used the spelling 'push' which in later editions was considered to be

misprint, and the spelling was changed to ‘posh’.

By 1918, ‘posh’ featured in a *Punch* cartoon showing a young Air Force officer talking to his mother:

‘Whatever do you mean by “posh”, Gerald?’

‘Don’t you know? It’s slang for “swish”.’

And ‘posh’ was here to stay, meaning upper-level, polished, probably wealthy ... but without the benefit of shady cabins in a passenger ship.

Among gypsies, the Romany word for money was *posh*, which originally meant a half-penny—an unlikely ancestor to be applied to the Rothschilds or the House of Windsor.



## ‘What the Dickens!’

*The saying ‘What the Dickens!’ must refer to Charles Dickens.*

No, it has nothing to do with Charles Dickens. At times of history with varying respect for, or reluctance to name, major figures of Christianity or Judaism, people have invented substitute terms which can’t be called offensive, but everyone knows what they actually refer to. There are dozens of euphemisms for Christ and God which are considered less dramatic than saying the real word. A once-common example is ‘crikey’, which began to spring to international prominence in 1908 when Frank Richards invented the character of a British schoolboy called Billy Bunter, who said ‘Crikey!’ all the time. There were many Billy Bunter stories, and later a long-running TV series, and soon the word became very commonly used as one of many euphemisms for Christ. There’s also ‘cripes’ for Christ, ‘jeepers’ and ‘jumping jehosopahat’ and ‘gee’ and ‘gee whiz’ for Jesus. ‘Drat’ is short for ‘God rot,’ ‘heck’ substitutes for Hell, and God comes out as ‘gosh’ or ‘golly’. Even ‘goodness gracious’ is a substitute for ‘good God’.



‘Dickens’ is a substitute for saying Devil or Satan, so ‘what the Dickens’ and ‘what the deuce’ are actually referring to the Devil. Shakespeare uses it for one of the women in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: ‘I cannot tell what the dickens his name is.’

Sometimes ‘crikey’ doubles up as ‘crikey dick’. This is a curious combination, since ‘crikey’ signifies Jesus Christ and ‘dick’ (short for ‘Dickens’) signifies the Devil ... so doubling as ‘crikey dick’ is more or less having a bet each way.

## ‘As sure as eggs are eggs’

*‘As sure as eggs are eggs’ simply means that something is definite and sure.*

Yes, it does mean ‘sure and definite’—and seems to have arisen from mathematics rather than poultry. In basic mathematics the symbol  $x$  is taken to mean something variable and unknown. The exact configuration of  $x$  must be worked out—and until then, the unknown variable remains as ‘ $x$  is  $x$ ’. The *sound* of this appears to have moved into vernacular speech—as ‘eggs is eggs’—but in doing so has corrupted the original mathematicians’ meaning. Corrupted, because it has come to mean exactly the opposite from its mathematical forbear: when something attracts the

appellation 'eggs is eggs', it is being referred to as something absolutely certain, whereas 'x is x' means something unknown.

The transition from 'x' into 'eggs' came several centuries ago, but there has been dispute about whether the poultry version (plural 'eggs') should retain the singular verb of the mathematical version (x 'is' x). Writers have taken varied approaches to this. In 1680 a character in Thomas Otway's play *Caius Marius* speaks in dialect: 'Twas to seek for Lord Marius, as sure as eggs be eggs.' Much later, Dickens's Sam Weller character ( *Pickwick Papers*) in Cockney dialect, sings: 'Sure as eggs is eggs, this 'ere's the bold Turpin.' Whereas *Seinfeld*'s scriptwriter (1994) preferred the plural: 'Eggs are eggs.' So 'is' or 'are' becomes a matter of choice.



## Still waters

*'Still waters run deep.'*

This is rather selective, since if the water is truly still, a lake or a pond, it won't be running anywhere. Although Agatha Christie's Miss Marple did point out that there could be plenty of activity: 'Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool.' ( *Murder on the Vicarage*).

## Tabloid

*'Tabloid' is an invented word describing a certain style of journalism.*

The word is from the world of patent medicines. In 1884 Henry Solomon Wellcome, of the Burroughs Wellcome pharmaceutical company, invented the word 'tabloid' to describe a new kind of medicinal tablet which was concentrated—and small.

Over a decade later, the London newspaper *Daily Mail* was launched, describing itself as 'The Business Man's Daily Newspaper'. Its innovations included banner headlines, an economical, easily readable style, considerable sports coverage, and news specifically for women. Because the new newspaper style was compressed, compact, economical in size, with contents concentrated into an easily assimilated form, its proprietor Alfred Harmsworth referred to it in 1896 as 'tabloid'—like the Burroughs & Wellcome medicinal offerings in smaller concentrated 'tabloid' form.

The word rapidly faded from being associated with compressed medicines, and instead became firmly affixed to newspaper style. Initially it referred only to the size and accessibility of uncomplicated content, but the term slowly became associated with a particular style of 'sensational' journalism and took on a pejorative connotation.

## 'Black dog'

*Sir Winston Churchill invented the term 'black dog' to describe clinical depression.*

He didn't invent it. Referring to depression (or 'melancholy') as a black dog dates back to at least the

1700s. Earlier reference using the same term in the same way can also be found 50BC in the Roman poet Horace. In 1783 Samuel Johnson referred quite frequently to his own melancholy as 'black dog', and Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson used the same image throughout following years.



## Grandfather clocks

*They're called 'grandfather clocks' because they're tall and old.*

Their real name was (and still is) is 'long-case' clocks. But in 1876 a man wrote a song which caused the clocks to gain a new name—because of a misplaced apostrophe!

While visiting Britain in 1875, American songwriter Henry Clay Work stayed at the George Hotel in the county of Yorkshire. In the hotel, he was told about the long-case clock belonging to former owners, the Jenkins brothers. The clock's reliability began to fail when one of the Jenkins brothers died. The surviving brother lived to 90, and when he died the clock stopped completely. It never worked again,



but was left standing silently in the hotel foyer. Mr Work was told the story of the silent old clock standing in the foyer, and was intrigued.

Back in America he remembered the clock which had stopped at the death of its owner, and he invented a more fanciful scenario. The Jenkins brothers were replaced by a fictional grandfather whose faithful clock had been bought on the day of his birth, had celebrated his marriage, and then stopped short, never to go again, when the old man died. Work's song 'My Grandfather's Clock' was published in 1876 and the sheet music sold over a million copies. The song became so well known that it changed the name of the (formerly called) long-case clock, but minus Mr Work's apostrophe 's'. The long-case grandfather's clock became just a 'grandfather clock', and to many people the long-case clock is still known by that name.

## 'Bunch of fives'

*'Bunch of fives' is a twentieth-century slang term.*

In spite of its contemporary sound, the expression 'bunch of fives', meaning a fist, was current in the early nineteenth century, and can be seen frequently in Pierce Egan's 1832 *Book of Sports, and the Mirror of Life*. By 1837 Charles Dickens had picked it up. In *Pickwick Papers*, Vol.2, Orson Dabbs is said to be 'shaking his bunch of fives sportively as one snaps an unloaded gun'.

## 'Significant other'

'Significant other' was coined by Armistead Maupin to describe an unmarried partner.



He didn't coin the term, but he helped change its earlier perception. American psychiatrist Dr Harry Stack Sullivan used the term in his 1953 book, *The Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, a study of the relationship network of which an individual is the centre. He commented on situations which may cause 'the emotional disturbance of the significant other'. At the time his use of the term signified a sibling, fiancé/ée, parent, spouse, other family relation, or business colleague—any person who held importance in another person's life.

Later in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s, the term took on a slightly different connotation: the unspoken interpretation grew that a 'significant other' was a person's romantic lover, life partner, or in some way sharing a sexual and emotional connection (with no gender restriction). Armistead Maupin's book *Significant Others* (1987) brought wide and more accessible coverage to the term.



## 'Like a fish needs a bicycle'

*'(A) woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle' was the credo of Gloria Steinem.*

The image of the fish and the bicycle together originated over a decade before the word 'feminism' joined the language. American philosopher Charles S. Harris at Swarthmore College in 1958 observed in a college publication that 'A man without faith is like a fish without a bicycle.'

Some years later, across the Pacific Ocean, Australian author, editor and documentary film-maker Irina Dunn happened to read Harris's line. Being 'a bit of a smart-arse', as she later admitted to *Time*, she paraphrased the line into: 'A woman needs a man like a fish needs a bicycle.' In 1970 Irina Dunn boldly wrote the line inside two toilet doors—one at Sydney University, and the other in a Woolloomooloo wine bar. The expression spread widely and became a familiar part of the women's liberation movement.



It was often attributed to Gloria Steinem, but in 2000 Ms Steinem acknowledged that this was mis-attribution, by writing to *Time*, clarifying that Irina Dunn was the true progenitor.

## Mayday

*The distress call 'mayday' is English for the French term 'm'aidez'.*

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