



WORDS, WORDS, WORDS

by Bill Byrne

While we may have left our “point and grunt” days behind us when we emerged from the caves and started walking upright, we haven’t yet mastered so many elements of communication. At least that is what I’m beginning to believe. Several recent language oddities I’ve become aware of have led me down this path. If you continue reading from here on, we’ll take this path together.

Written communications are always fraught with officialness. That’s probably why we are often advised to “get something in writing” or its converse “don’t put anything in writing.” Each of those morsels of wisdom is invoked to prevent us from making fools of ourselves. Among upright men and women, verbal contracts are ethically binding. But more often than not, most develop amnesia on promissory things unless something is on paper. The path of paper is perilous, quoth the poet in me.

Despite the dangers, we do need to put words to use. Not having attained the status of gods yet, we need to form combinations of letters and create a language whereby we transfer ideas and thoughts. It’s a mortal task, in more ways than one.

Take for example a simple note on an invitation—“**Dress is casual.**” “Casual” may connote “comfortable”, but everyone’s notion of comfort lies anywhere northeast of over and southwest of hardly dressed. As the saying goes, “one man’s tux is another man’s t-shirt.” Was that the driving force behind those

ugly t-shirts printed over with tie and tails? I wonder. Malibu casual calls for tank top, shorts, no socks—never socks—with your high tops. Midwest casual requires a sweater over that golf shirt, except in July and August. “**Business casual**” may delimit the choices, allowing as it does for coat and tie and anywhere in between. “**Optional attire**” has its proponents—probably ultra-liberals asserting their rights to free expression. One thing I’ve always wondered though. If you took the word “optional” literally would that allow you to show up. . . . Nah!

Most of the rules about word usage allow for some options. But we’re also fond of saying that “rules are rules” unless, of course, they “were made to be broken.” Take for instance our inconsistent use of the suffixes “**ful**” and “**less**”. A situation can be utterly **hopeless** or we can be very **hopeful** that all will turn out well. A chance meeting can be largely **meaningless** (is that oxymoron?) or it can be the most **meaningful** event in our life. That repair of our car can be marked by **careful** or **careless** workmanship. **Doubtful—doubtless**, etc. It would seem that suffixiveness is a very easy process.

Oh, Yeah. Well what about **grateful**? What does it mean to be “full of grate” anyway? Can someone be a **grateless** wretch? Can someone’s actions be **hateless** or **spiteless**? Can an accusation against us be considered **groundful** in a court of law? If something is **chock-full**, can it be **chock-less**?

And while we’re at it, why can’t we carry this idea a little further? How about adding a new dimension to some of these words. When we’re on a supermarket line and can’t reach out to read the National Enquirer while we wait to checkout, why don’t we call the chance encounter with another shopper a **meaningleast** event. When you’ve jetted from coast to coast and rubbed elbows with another human being you haven’t said anything to except “excuse me” every so often, cannot that qualify as an **eventless** encounter? Even though it’s not over till the fat lady sings, when you’re down ten runs with two out in the bottom of the ninth, you really can be said to be in a **hopeleast** position.

I know that everything in life is perspective or, for the

hypochondriac, prescriptive. And that leads me to the message I see printed on our car's passenger side rear view mirror: "**Objects are closer than they appear.**" What is the point of that? To scare the heck out of you as you drive along and casually notice some twilight zone figure in the mirror? Is this an existential statement which translates as "disaster is always closer than you think?" Why make it closer? Why not give us the real story? Can we tell the state trooper the "mirror lied to me" and that is why I had this accident? I wonder.

Without trying to appear too **casual** about all of this, I'm **hopeful** that everything in life **is** closer than it appears. It's all there for us to touch. That is our tragedy for not recognizing it, but also our ultimate glory if and when we do.